

Do Unto Others  
by Mark S. Meritt

I never understood under-the-cabinet appliances. You put your can opener and microwave and coffee maker under the cabinets to free up counter space, but you never use it. You just end up complaining that you have no more space under the cabinets.

But market research said the public wants counter space, and if I made a stellar presentation at the convention, I might be able to move into a new house with enough space under the cabinets for the whole product line. I could do that. This year's convention was going to be different.

It was.

Seeing the trite new merchandise lines, attending informationless seminars, and socializing with lifeless, undersexed salespeople until ungodly hours, the yearly week was always forgettable but, unfortunately, rarely forgotten. The little sleep I got was usually postponed by the arctic air conditioning. That's one thing about hotels. They have the best air conditioners and the worst blankets, unless it's summer. The conventions were in May, just when you wanted a little cool and got a lot of cold.

But I love staying in hotels. You don't have to make the bed. You don't feel guilty about late-night porn movies polluting the circuits in your TV set, even though they cost money. And you even get a mental challenge in every new hotel, trying to figure out how to work the showers. The challenge vanished, though, after my first stay at the Open Arms.

The Open Arms isn't a hotel, but it's close enough. It's one of those apartment complexes where companies put up their traveling employees for long business trips. Or conventions. I always thought the name was so pretentious. I guess a ritzy, traditional name wouldn't jibe with

the square, dull brown frame and peeling, off-white, pipe-lined hallways, but the Open Arms just sounded too much like a rest home.

Rest I did not get this year at the Open Arms.

The fraternizing and frigidity always kept me awake, but once I fell asleep I stayed asleep long enough to keep me on my feet the next day. Not that I needed to be awake and refreshed for the action packed seminars, but dead tired is never the greatest thing to feel.

Dead tired I did get this year at the Open Arms.

And dead pissed.

The Open Arms seemed normal, from the outside, when I got out of the taxi. As brown and square as ever. My room this year was on the third floor, the top, second from the end of the hallway. The paint in the hallways wasn't peeling as much as last year. They must have put on a fresh coat the day after we left, but by now it wasn't quite so fresh. But it was good to know that they did renovate once in a while. Painted walls and a pending presentation were enough to get me off to a good start for this convention.

Since the next day, Monday, was the first of the convention, there wouldn't be any presentation. Only the same introductory seminar they always held. And that was at three in the afternoon. Sunday night, I had a few drinks with some fellow salespeople on my floor, and didn't feel the least bit naughty about sleeping in. I woke up on the wrong side of the bed: the underside. I stumbled into the bathroom and looked at the blurred image of myself in the mirror. I had a hangover. And terrible breath. And it felt good. This was my only chance to have what little fun I could at this conference. There would be several late nights, and many more drinks, but I couldn't go all out after Sunday night, because I had to be in prime shape for my presentation, which would be on Friday. I'd had my fun, I'd had my sleep.

And they were barely enough to get me through that first endless seminar. I felt my jaw bouncing against my lap in boredom, and all I could do is wonder how many more years I'd be subjected to this. Maybe none, if the presentation went over. I decided to live for Friday. Everything they'd put me through, all the bullshit product lines, the meaningless lectures, the pointless conversations with people who saw each other just once a year, I would push, through, onward, and give a stellar performance on Friday morning.

The Monday steak I had for dinner was dwarfed by the flowery trim of its plate. It didn't fill me up, so I followed up with drinks and a seven hour long discussion about nothing that really filled me up. I remember thinking the little hand on my watch was pointing to the right, so I taxied out of the convention center to be welcomed by Open Arms.

My footsteps echoed throughout the metal stairwell as I hiked up the two flights to my floor. Step. Cling. Clang. Monotonous. Loud. Painful. The flaking hallway, blinding with fluorescent light, was longer than it was when the day started. But I was shortly in front of my door, second from the end. The bed rocked as I crashed on it. I was tired and buzzed, but I set my alarm clock for eight. I'd felt this way at this hour many times, and I'd learned to always remember the crucial alarm clock. So I nodded off in my freezing apartment.

A very loud Spaniard woke me up two hours later.

My eyes were pressed tight. My body ached. It didn't want to move. I wanted to move. I wanted to go tell the Spaniard to shut the hell up. But my body wanted to stay where it was. My eyes had no choice but to open. I never thought a solid white wall could be blurry. It was.

My ears wanted to shut off. A deep voice came through the wall. It spoke in Spanish, fluidly, slowly, repetitively, goddamn loudly. I didn't know what the hell was going on. Everything was sore, but I squirmed out of bed and shuffled to the wall. My ear up to the plaster,

I heard two other voices. Softer voices. Less confident voices. American voices. Repeating everything the Spaniard said. Repeating everything the Spaniard repeated. There was a Hispanic cult next door. A loud Hispanic cult.

I couldn't possibly go back to sleep, not with this bullshit next door. My breathing was heavy, through the nose, and my chest was going to burst, I was so pissed. But I was in no shape to go say anything. Maybe sticking my head in a tub full of water would drown out the sound. Yeah. And a whole lot of other things. I shuffled back and sat on the front of the bed. I shut my alarm off. A porn movie clicked on the TV.

The face in the mirror two hours later wasn't mine. It looked like shit. Its hair was a pile of hay, its face overgrown with five o'clock in the morning shadow, its eyes blood red, eyelids drooping and crusted. I sighed, and when its shoulders heaved in response, I knew it was me.

I felt like shit. Cold water splashed across my face and did nothing. The cold shower helped, though, especially since I stood in front of the air conditioner before drying off. I was awake. Bug eyed and numb, but awake. I left the room, Spanish still blasting through the walls.

Tuesday sucked. My head kept falling, front, left, right. I couldn't help it. The daily merchandise line dissolved into a mess of color and bullshit. Lunch was enormous. I always eat when I don't get enough sleep. I grabbed some toothpicks to prop my eyes open for the afternoon. They didn't help much. Neither did the seminar. There was no way I could be social that night.

For the first time since I'd started attending these damn conventions, I went back to the Open Arms right after dinner. And Tuesday's diminutive veal cutlet made the event all the more depressing.

After an awful three hour nap, two voices resounded in the hallway, growing nearer. I

eavesdropped, ear to the front door, but they spoke so loudly I could have stayed in bed.

"You don't have the key?"

"No. I don't. You do."

"Me? No. Check your bag."

"Fine, but I don't have it. Look in yours."

"Fine."

"See? Not here. I told you-"

"Shut up. I found it."

"See?"

"Shut up."

The lock clicked open, the knob turned, and they went in. Into the room at the end of the hallway. With the Spaniard.

Should I talk to them? Find out what the hell they were chanting with a Spaniard at half past five in the morning for? The answer could be freaky. The people could be freaks. Who knew. I didn't. I wouldn't talk to them that night. I'd talk to them the next morning.

At five thirty, right after they woke me up again.

I'd stayed up until two watching TV. I was dead tired, but my stupid eyes wanted to take in my scenic room. I turned on my alarm clock again, but it wouldn't matter, because the Spaniard seemed to boom right after I fell asleep, before the clock ever had the opportunity to buzz. I lay flat on my back, arms and legs spread out on the bed, staring at the ceiling cracks. Listening to three people speak Spanish.

I didn't need this bullshit. I had a presentation on Friday. I went, hair tousled, wearing boxers and a tank top, to their door. They spoke inside.

"Como se llama usted?" intoned the Spaniard.

"Como se llama usted?" The Americans sounded like Americans.

"Como se llama usted?"

"Como se llama usted?"

What the hell is this? They're asking themselves what their names are. If I was talking to a Spaniard in my room at five thirty in the morning, I'd hope he already knew my name. And I hope I'd know his. Knock knock knock.

"Me llamo Diego. Say your own name."

"Me llamo..." The two names melted together.

"Me llamo Diego. Say your own name."

Pound pound pound.

Silence. Footsteps. Two people answered the door. One towered over me, but he was very thin. A balding head and wire frame glasses made me think tweed was a big part of his wardrobe for some reason. The other was short, but also thin. They both wore pajamas. The tall one spoke.

"Yes?" Terse. Unlike a minute ago.

"Uh, I'm staying next door."

"Yes?"

"I was trying to sleep."

He just stared. His was the voice of the one with the key. The short one looked lost, empty, happy.

"What the hell are you doing in here?"

Suddenly, with a few quick head twitches, the tall one snapped into friendly, apologetic

mode. "Oh, I'm sorry. Is our studying keeping you awake?"

I gave him a blank look. On purpose.

"Our studying. Our Spanish."

"Spanish. Yeah. It's keeping me awake. What the hell are you guys doing?"

"Please. Come in."

I did. I probably shouldn't have. There was a record player sitting on the dresser. One of those old ones. Like the one with the dog on the record label. The short one sat on the bed. The tall guy was definitely the talkative one.

"I'm Conway Hunter, and this is my associate, Benson Neville."

"Jeff. Jeff Cross." I shouldn't have told them my name.

"Mr. Cross, let me explain. We're volunteers for a coalition to increase harmony between America and Latin America." Great. The body graduated college, but the soul stayed. I'll bet they're even college professors or something. I knew I smelled tweed. "This week, several organizations concerned about our country's relations with Latin America are holding a convention. Here." I'd never guess. "Though we are deeply involved in the cause, Mr. Neville and I haven't been around the language for years. Not since our trip through Central America nearly, oh, fifteen years ago. Mr. Neville and I are simply brushing up on our Spanish."

Hunter held up the vinyl that was spinning out my disturbance just minutes before. Berlitz. Two days in a row, I'm woken up by a fucking Berlitz record.

"Why so loud?"

"Oh! Mr. Neville is a little hard of hearing." Neville smiled at me. They were freaks.

"Why so early?"

"Well, our busy schedule this week doesn't give us much time to practice, so we've

decided to get a head start on each day by practicing our Spanish for three hours each morning. I have a scrapbook of our coalitions accomplishments. Would you like to see some of our memorabilia?"

Memorabilia is just garbage that hasn't been thrown away yet. "Thanks, no... Uh, I was wondering. I'm usually out late, and I don't get much sleep here as it is, so would you mind moving your practicing hours to maybe before you go to sleep?"

"Oh, I'm afraid that's out of the question. Mr. Neville and I have already conquered our jet lag. If we were to adjust our sleep schedules any further, it could be very unhealthy." Tell me about it.

I started out the door. "Look. I have a big presentation to give on Friday. I just want to get some sleep. So if you-"

Slowly, deliberately: "What we want, Mr. Cross, and what we get, Mr. Cross, do not always coincide. In fact, they are often entirely - different - things. Good morning, Mr. Cross."

The door slammed. I stared at it, head on.

Great. I'm dealing with an gabby anal retentive playing Berlitz for a fucking deaf person.

Back in my room, I shut off my once again unused alarm clock. I realized that my alarm clock wasn't digital. It was a face clock. And my watch had a face. Everything I had used to be digital. I'm going to open up my briefcase and find an abacus where my calculator used to be. I was going crazy. I had to be to think that abacus bullshit. Then, I stared at my alarm clock again, and realized that I was, in fact, going crazy, because I honestly wished the exact opposite of what I wished every other day of my life - that, just once this week, my alarm clock would wake me up.

I hate foreign languages. Whenever I'm in a restaurant, and people at another table start speaking anything other than English, I just want to punch their teeth in and leave them with

bloody snot dripping down their gashed lips. Every time, I get paranoid that they're talking about me, that their casual inflection is just an act.

"See the asshole American over there?"

"Yes. What a stupid, ignorant xenophobe."

"Let's keep talking about that asshole, shall we?"

"Yes. Paranoid American deserves to be put in his place."

I know they don't say those things, but if you have nothing nice to say, don't say it at all. As far as I'm concerned, anything foreign is nothing nice. Even accents. They're exclusive, rude.

Hunter was rude. And obnoxious. An obnoxious, rude, anal, concerned asshole is keeping me from sleep, and I have a presentation on Friday. Two days from now. Why did I let him slam the door? I guess I believe in the Golden Rule or something.

Wednesday passed hideously by, product lines and seminars blending onto an endless, fuzzy, splattered canvas. Tuesday night's nap helped to the point where I didn't have to try jabbing toothpicks through my eyelids. After the menial bullshit, though, the Wednesday chicken Kiev was fantastic, and got my spirits up so I felt like staying out. Until two. I climbed the stairwell painfully and passed out in my room, but not before I could turn on my alarm clock.

I almost went into a convulsion when the Berlitz record began, this time a half hour early. Five o'clock. Still dark outside. Still night. Not even morning. Assholes.

"Me gustan las naranjas."

"Me gustan las naranjas."

The pillows weren't thick enough to block the noise.

"Me gustan los huevos."

"Me gustan los huevos."

Jesus. Me gusta el silencio, dammit. I was trapped in the second room from the end. Nobody else was bothered by the Spanish lessons. They carried only through my wall. Only through mine. I was alone. I was dead tired. The torment lasted for two hours that morning. My body was losing control. I could envision myself from above, a sickly, sleepless, disgruntled, maniacal figure, body throwing itself from side to side, hands cupped hard over ears. The sound was getting louder to me, decibels upping by the second, echoing in my head, repeating, droning.

When I threw myself off the bed, I knew it was time to do something. Screw the Golden Rule. If you couldn't do unto others before they did unto you, you might as well do unto them after.

I got on my hands and knees. I was in control. I wore the same garb as the previous morning, boxers and tank. They both sounded so violent. I was in the mood for violence. I was dead pissed. Entering the brash, fluorescent lighting of the hallway, I approached their door. Knock knock knock.

"El lapiz es amarillo."

"El lapiz es amarillo."

*Knock knock knock.*

"Yo tengo una camisa azul."

"Yo tengo una camisa azul."

Pound pound pound.

"Manana es mi cumpleaños."

"Manana es mi cumpleaños."

**BANG BANG BANG, GODAMMIT.**

Scratch. The needle came off the record. Silence. Footsteps. Hunter and Neville

answered the door.

Neville smiled.

"Good morning, Mr. Cross." Hunter looked down his nose at me.

I stared at him.

"Mr. Cross?"

I stared.

"Mr. Cross, is there something we can do for you?"

"CALLATE THE FUCK UP! COMPRENDE?!"

I grabbed their doorknob and slammed their door in their faces.

The Berlitz record did not play again. I shut off my as yet unused alarm clock, showered, and went out for what was bound to be a very pleasant Thursday.

It was.

The daily product line, this time photographic equipment, was very new. Sure to sell. Even the seminar was good. Finally, a topic I hadn't studied in college. And Thursday's barbecue was delicious.

I only stayed out until one that night. I'd lost a good two night's sleep over the last week, so I thought an extra hour or two the night before my presentation would be a treat. Back in the Open Arms, I reviewed my notes on under-the-cabinet appliances for my ten o'clock speech. Even after that shitty week, I still remembered everything. Tomorrow would be wonderful. I'd give my stellar presentation, have a tasty Friday seafood dish, get my raise, buy a new house, and be a very happy man for a very long time. Once again, I turned on my alarm clock, which was still set to eight o'clock and would finally have a chance to wake me up. My wish would come true. Even the air conditioning didn't stop me from konking out right away.

The next morning I woke up. Not early to the sounds of Spanish. On my own. At four in the afternoon. The buzzer in my alarm clock was broken.