

Underneath Calm Waters

By Maysoon Abdelrasul

Becky Mace knows her customers and the repetitive routine at the small grocery store and gas station where she works in Berlin Center.

Some would say that she has an easy job. She doesn't have to get up early. Her shift runs from 2 p.m. to 9 p.m., and she never has to work on weekends.

Some people say she's got it made.

Becky Mace would say they are all wrong.

Mace is a cashier at a grocery store/gas station in Berlin Center, a small town where everybody knows everybody else. Berlin Center is well known for Berlin Lake, a place to go to while away an afternoon with a fishing pole and some bait; a place where having a boat is a plus, but not a necessity.

Staring out at the lake that is starting to turn cold and angry with fall, Mace says, "Some days I wish I could fall in the lake."

The store doesn't get really busy. There are moments when there is a line, but for the most part, the business is steady.

She walks in the store at 1:59 p.m., wearing her old, beat up jeans and T-shirt. She says she can't wear any of her nice clothes because she knows how dirty she can get it.

Her first task is to dump two boxes of garbage in the dumpster at the back of the store. She walks out the front entrance and turns at the side of the building and tramples through mud, dirt and gravel.

"When it is a nice day outside, I don't mind doing it, but when it's cold and rainy, I despise it," she says.

After six years of working at the store, Mace says she's learned some short cuts. There are days when she just throws the garbage in a black bag and tosses it into the back room. "My boss doesn't care as long as it is clean in the front of the store, and he usually will end up dumping the garbage bag later," she says.

When she finishes the tedious tasks of wiping down all the orange counters, cleaning out the coffee machine and readying it for the 3 p.m. regular customers, she waits on customers.

She makes sure all of the gas pumps are cleared so no one screams at her for not turning on the pump.

“Sometimes I forget to press the clear button after someone has paid, and every once in a while I got those rude customers who honk their horn or scream at me to turn on the pump,” she says. “After a while, you get used to it and it doesn’t faze you anymore.”

Now, what is really annoying to Mace is when the same people come in at the same time everyday and ask for the same exact thing. At exactly 3:30 p.m., an older gentleman comes in, turns the coffee pot on and has a seat on the stool. The stool is right in front of the counter so he sees every transaction that occurs.

The man wears his well-worn blue jeans and a cut off plain T-shirt everyday, unless it’s cold; then he wears a coat.

“I can tell you everything about his life, because he just sits there and talks and talks. I try and zone him out sometimes, or I pretend I am busy doing something,” she says.

It’s at those moments where she says she wishes she had a T-shirt that says, “Does it look like I care?”

He leaves at 4:30 p.m. every day, and then sometime between then and 5 p.m., her step children call. “Becky what did you make for dinner? Becky, can I go over and play next door? Becky, what time is dad coming home?”

Her step-children are two boys, 11 and 9. Now, these boys are no little boys; they weigh between 140 and 180 pounds, she says. She makes them dinner before she comes to work and when she gets home, she knows there will be none left for her.

“When the boys are at their mom’s every other week, I make dinner for two, me and my husband, Barry, but when they are over, I make dinner for six and there is still no leftovers,” she says.

Every two weeks, she takes home \$500 which pay pays for some bills, and the rest is for groceries. She says she is lucky her husband makes decent money working construction because she can’t afford to keep up with the kids’ stomachs.

The highlight of her day, most of the time, is when her husband stops in on the way home from work. He says he likes to stop in and see her because by the time she gets home, he’s tired, and he doesn’t spend that much time with her.

“I am tired when she comes home, and she is tired when she comes home, so we usually stay awake for half an hour and then I kiss her goodnight,” he says.

Around 7 p.m., her boss arrives. For the next two hours, it is the two of them and their customers. Her nightly routine consists of filling up all the coolers and mopping the store.

She goes to the back room and gets the beer and milk she needs to fill up the coolers. She says she sometimes forgets what she needs but she refuses to write anything down.

Her boss says she gets everything done. "I am not a strict boss; as long as her duties are done right. I don't care how long it takes her," he says.

She says she likes her boss, and she is close with his family. "They make me feel like I am a part of their family and many employers don't do that," she says.

At 9 p.m. everything is done and they close up the store. She goes home and sees what is left for a snack, and then she is off to bed.