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R. Roberts: The Price of Everything

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THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Just past midnight on a July night in Havana, the woman wakes and hears the tap, tap, tap at the window. She opens the door and the man, her brother, comes in and scoops up the sleeping boy, carrying him on his shoulder like a bundle of sugarcane. They head out into the sweltering streets. The woman carries a string bag and a blanket. Can a string bag contain a life? It must. It's all she can take with her. The boy sleeps on as they walk into the night.

Getting to the outskirts of the city and to the beach beyond seems to take an eternity. They wade out to the small boat waiting for them in the shallows and climb aboard.

The boy opens his eyes. The woman hugs him back to sleep. When she thinks back on that night, she remembers clutching her son, prayer after prayer, and the boat, endlessly rocking, heading north.

“Sold out.”

Sold out? Home Depot sold out of flashlights? It was impossible. How could they be sold out?

“What do you mean?” Ramon Fernandez asked.

“Sorry,” the clerk replied. “This place has been a madhouse for the last two hours. I wish I could tell you there are more in the back. But there aren’t. They’re gone. Every one of them. Come back in a few days.”

Earlier that evening, Ramon and Amy had been making dinner when the floor began to shake. The earthquake seemed to go on and on, the glasses and plates rattling and tinkling on the kitchen shelves and two pictures crashing off the wall. Then the lights went out. Ramon lit the candles he had already set out for dinner and they enjoyed the meal rather than rushing out. Evidently a few hundred people had beat them to Home Depot in search of flashlights.

“Hey, wait a minute,” the clerk said. “Aren’t you Ramon Fernandez?”

Ramon just smiled and moved on. He was used to people recognizing him. The best tennis player at Stanford since John McEnroe, he had won the NCAA singles title for the last three years and had made it to the finals of Wimbledon last year. He was probably the best-known twenty-year-old in the Bay Area. Maybe the best-known twenty-year-old in the country. Even people who didn’t care about tennis or sports knew the story of how his mother had fled Cuba in a small boat and somehow made it to Florida when Ramon was a kid.

“Do you think we’ll have better luck finding milk or ice for the cooler?” Amy asked once they were back in the car. “Or should we just give up?”

“How about Big Box in Hayward?”

“Big Box?”

“That new chain—combination Home Depot, Sam’s Club, and Border’s. They say the back of the store’s in a different time zone than the front. Or at least another zip code. It’s probably our best chance to get milk and maybe they’ll have a flashlight. Or a lantern. Or a laser. Or something. They’re supposed to sell everything.”

“Alright. I’ve got a full tank of gas. Let’s give it a shot.”

Big Box’s beginnings in the Bay Area had been rocky. A referendum kept them out of San Francisco. Berkeley residents marched against the store that had tried to open there. So far, the only store that had made it was in Hayward, just south of Oakland.

Amy and Ramon fought their way across the San Mateo Bridge to the 880 and up to Hayward. Big Box made a Home Depot store look like a 7-11. The Big Box parking lot was so large that shuttle buses took shoppers from their cars to the front door. Once inside, most customers rode mini-shuttles, custom-designed oversized golf carts that took you to the different regions of the store on mechanized routes, like little trams or trolleys. Some families took their kids just to ride the mini-shuttles and try the free samples scattered throughout the store. Or parents could drop off their kids in the giant Legoland in the center of the store while they shopped.

Ramon and Amy arrived just after midnight. The parking lot was crowded but they had no trouble finding a place and boarding a shuttle. Getting into the store proved to be the problem. An angry mob surged around the main door, yelling and chanting. Amy and Ramon couldn’t figure out what was going on. They pushed forward and then they saw it. A large sign had been posted just inside the entrance: **TONIGHT ONLY, ALL PRICES, DOUBLE THE MARKED PRICE.** An anti-sale! And from the looks of it, a public relations disaster was also in progress.

An employee with a megaphone stood on a pile of bags of mulch, trying to calm the crowd. The decision had come out of Omaha, he explained—there was nothing he could do about it. In his hand was a set of postcards, comment

forms that he was eager to give out to defuse the crowd and preserve his health. The group milling around the front door didn't seem very interested in the postcards. They were looking for a more visceral and immediate form of feedback and customer satisfaction.

Beyond the mob at the door, the store looked like it always did. The trams were busy and crowded with people shopping despite the surcharge. "Unbelievable," Ramon muttered under his breath. "Want to leave?" he asked Amy.

"I want a flashlight. And I wouldn't mind getting some milk if they have it. We're here. I know it's a rip-off, but I'm scared. I don't have any candles. We don't know how long it'll be before things get back to normal."

They stayed. They had no trouble finding the milk and the flashlights. They also picked up some extra batteries just in case. Only three checkout lanes were open, but Amy and Ramon didn't mind waiting a little longer than usual.

They always found plenty to talk about. They had met freshman year at a meeting for athletes on scholarship to help them negotiate the labyrinth of NCAA rules and regulations. Ramon asked to borrow a pen from the tall blonde volleyball player sitting next to him. They started talking and found they had almost nothing in common. She was the daughter of a U.S. senator. She had grown up in Georgetown and had attended an exclusive private school. She was majoring in biology and planned to go to med school. Ramon grew up in poverty in Miami. His mother was a cleaning woman. He was studying political science. She was blonde and he was dark. She played volleyball. He played tennis. At least both of their sports had nets, he joked. They kept talking, despite their differences. He asked her to a movie that night and

soon they were spending a lot of time together, whatever time they could spare between working out, practices, class time, and homework.

Standing in line at Big Box, Amy and Ramon's conversation was interrupted by a wild cacophony of noise coming from the front of the line. A woman was screaming in Spanish. In one hand she held a jar of baby food. With her other hand she held a baby on her hip. Both items looked dangerous to the cashier, who had her hands up in defense and whose entreaties in English were getting nowhere. Then, the woman stopped yelling and burst into tears. The baby, cued by the mother's crying, began to wail. The checker stood there mutely, trying to figure out what to do.

Ramon came to the front of the line, put his hand on the woman's shoulder and spoke softly to her in Spanish. The woman stopped crying. Then the baby stopped crying. The checker smiled, hoping that the impasse was over.

Ramon explained to the people waiting in line that the woman had \$20 but the bill was \$35. How could she have known that Big Box would gouge her with doubled prices? When the cashier had suggested that she do without some of the items, the woman had gone berserk. How could she not bring home food and diapers for her children?

Ramon took off his Stanford baseball cap, put \$2 in and asked if anyone else in the line could help out. In under a minute, the other people in the line had come up with the \$15 to close the gap. At first the woman refused to accept the money. But Ramon kept talking quietly to her and finally, she took the money and finished checking out. Ramon told Amy to check out without him. He stayed with the Mexican woman, talking all the while.

When Amy got outside, she found Ramon up on the stacked bags of mulch in front of the store. Next to him was the Mexican woman with her baby. Next to her was the same Big Box employee they'd seen before at the front of the store. He looked as if he wanted to run away. But Ramon was using the megaphone that belonged to Big Box. The employee felt he ought to stay close to company property. The crowd had grown a lot larger and a lot quieter. Seeing Ramon Fernandez up on a mulch mountain with a megaphone at one in the morning made people stop to see what was going on.

“What kind of store decides to profit off of hungry children and a caring mother? We need to send a message to Omaha!” The crowd roared back its approval. Amy marveled at Ramon's initiative and style. He looked as relaxed and natural as he did on a tennis court. Ramon went on for a while and got the crowd good and angry. If he had given the word, they'd have smashed every window at the front of the store. But he had a different plan. Instead, he lowered his voice and slowed his cadence. He spoke about the desperation of poverty and the need to restrain corporate power. The people in the crowd looked up at him, transfixed. When he was done, they applauded and started filling out the complaint cards.