

Parking woes can be counted on your tows

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Call this the ode to a lost neighborhood, to a disappearing generosity of spirit. Or the gentrification blues. Or the riff on how I got caught doing what everyone else does. Or a love song to the Women of Walgreens. Or a ballad about Lincoln Towing. Or just a lament looking for land.

Whatever you call it, here's how it all started almost a year ago.

I was in my Saturday Soccer Mom mode, zigzagging between errands. In the lot at Broadway and Belmont Avenue, I made a fateful decision: I turned left for what I thought would be a quick stop at my cleaners before heading over to Walgreens, where I was pleased to discover Kellee, my favorite, at the makeup counter.

Now, Kellee fits right into my "Beloved Women of Walgreens" category. These kind souls rescue botched photos. They let slightly expired coupons slide. Kellee's sweet, amusing manner, and her willingness to call over a manager and stick up for the customer, only amplifies such kindnesses.

That Saturday, Kellee and I discussed the relative merits of different versions of hand sanitizer and whether there was really any difference between the 99 percent and 100 percent fat-free chicken broths. I left our typical exchange in a fine mood, happy to have found Kellee and pleased to be still on schedule.

But alas, my car was not in the Walgreens lot.

At first I thought it was stolen. It wouldn't even have occurred to me that Walgreens, where I've shopped for decades, would have had my car towed. Kellee called the manager, who confirmed that my car had been towed. I showed him my Walgreens purchases, told him I was a regular--Kellee backed me up--only to be met with a stone-faced "You were spotted leaving the premises," complete with details of where I'd headed--due, no doubt, to newly hired Homeland Security spies in the lot.

He was steadfastly and rudely immune to my horrified reaction, to my argument that I--along with the rest of the world--had done this for years. No reaction either to my threat to take my business elsewhere. It was getting ugly. He gave me his manager's name but said I would be wasting my time. He did allow me to use the phone.

I called home, where I got no spousal sympathy, and I called Lincoln Towing, which was even worse. This man made the Walgreens manager look like the late Cardinal Bernardin. Before I left, I appealed to the Walgreen's manager one more time. It was fruitless, but the shocker was one of his defenses: that he'd been towed four times. You'd think that would make him sympathetic. It didn't.

My cabdriver immediately launched into his own Lincoln Towing tale. It was nearly my story, except that he emerged just in time to see his car being hooked up and, after displaying his Walgreens receipt and pleading, talked Mr. Lincoln out of the tow.

The line waiting at Lincoln Towing was rich and poor, black and white, Pakistani and Hispanic, male and female, young and old. All were united by two things--their mistreatment by the gentleman behind what must surely be bulletproof glass and their hatred of Lincoln Towing. No one seemed chagrined by what they had done. That's life in the big, busy city.

To make matters worse, the Lincoln man cheerily informed me that their credit card machine was broken. He pointed to the ATM machine, which charges you \$4 to withdraw cash, but I didn't have a card. Our exchange included such gems as his sarcastic responses to my disbelief that he wouldn't take a check or a credit card imprint--"Why don't you fix it?"--or to my query about a warm waiting place--"We don't have to heat the public"--or his refusal to give out any information about Lincoln, although he demanded everything but my firstborn's birth weight.

All comments were delivered in a disdainful tone saved for the evil criminals who broke the parking laws--"It wasn't murder or rape," I noted at one point--or a snarl for those who dared question his authority. He referred us to the Illinois Commerce Commission if we had a problem.

We made a pact to report him ASAP. His tone only changed with his falsely sweet goodbye, which disappeared when I wondered whether he had trouble living with himself. He said he didn't.

Meanwhile, I needed \$125 to liberate my car. A friend came to the rescue, and his sympathy at the mention of Lincoln Towing made me realize that I was now in a special, but hardly exclusive, club. A dear friend even e-mailed me the late Steve Goodman's song with the cryptic subject line: "A souvenir ..."

Here are selected lyrics from "Lincoln Park Pirates" for those who want to sing along:

To me, way, hey, tow them away,

The Lincoln Park Pirates are we,

From Wilmette to Gary, there's nothin' so hairy

And we always collect our fee!

So it's way, hey, tow 'em away,

We plunder the streets of your town,

Be it Edsel or Chevy, there's no car too heavy,

And no one can make us shut down.

Pondering this costly lesson, a few truths emerge: While I will never patronize that Walgreens again, my honesty and principles remain intact. About Walgreens I am heartbroken. This, of course, means big savings for me and big losses for Walgreens.

The several-times-weekly visits are over. More than 16 years of developing family pictures and filling prescriptions have walked out the door.

Mind you, I'm not a dishonest person. In fact, I'm the type who stuns my local IHOP staff and embarrasses my daughters by bringing in the difference on a too-small tip they unwittingly miscalculated. For decades, I've shocked salespeople by returning extra change and correcting mistakes not in my favor. I've even had to fight to return money more than once. So that's not what this is about. It's about much more.

What really breaks my heart is the loss of a sense of neighborhood and a stamping out of those people who create it--like the Women of Walgreens or the Africans who sing at the checkouts at my Jewel late at night.

I find myself mourning the disappearance of those small urban moments of joy that make you thrilled to live in this city. That's a song sadder than I know how to sing.

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