

# I have a big problem with 'no problem'

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**I**t used to be that it was the occasional deranged employee of the U.S. mail service who went postal. Any day now, it's going to be me.

I loathe the mail. I loathe its bulk, I loathe its regularity, I loathe that neither rain nor hail nor blah-blah-blah shall deter it from arriving. If I must have a postman, I want Newman, the slothful letter carrier from my beloved old *Seinfeld* series. I want a big, fat letter carrier who would rather stay in bed, eating bonbons and nursing grudges, than get up to throw unwanted paper in my slot.

It is all tripe now — bills, triplicate notices from the bank every time someone there takes in a breath, periodic cheques for .0007 cents each from something I apparently once invested in (and brilliantly too, judging by the divi-

dends), two copies of the same charity pitches every month (one addressed to Blatchford, the other to Baltchford; Baltchford, oddly, never gives, the cheap cow, and you'd think someone might have noticed by now), parking tickets issued because like anyone else of merely low to average intelligence, I have been unable to decipher from the 3,245 conflicting notices on Toronto streets when the precise 10 minutes are on alternate Thursdays when I might legally leave my car and not be deemed the worst criminal.

One thing — and one alone — may have deferred the inevitable, and its attendant carnage.

On Tuesday, Jan. 20, 2004, I got a little card in the mail from my new best friend, Steven.

This was three days after I bought a pair of boots — long, lean black ones, of waterproof Gore-Tex — from a midtown shoe shop whose name shall remain secret because it is a rare jewel and, pig-like, I am going to keep it to myself.

The boots are gorgeous, and not inexpensive, but then, as I always loudly announce upon arriving in any store, "I prefer to pay more than retail." I do, too; it comes

from being the daughter of a largely impecunious, but very proud, man who routinely paid more than necessary in order never to be seen to be seeking a break.

But it was not that the boots were \$500, or some sum that would have in any way warranted the card Steven sent me.

This is what he wrote, the dear boy, in a touchingly childish pen: "Dear Christie: Thank you for your recent purchase from our Ara collection. I know that you will love them. If I can help you with anything else, let me know. Thank you. Steven."

I do love them, but I love him more.

I loved him immediately. I loved him because he opened the store on time, without sighing heavily as though it were a surprise to see customers there at the posted opening hour, and because he was not attached to a cellphone, upon which he was not talking in an overly loud voice to an unseen mental midget.

But mostly I loved him because not once, in our half-hour together, did he say, "No problem."

He said, "Can I help you?"

I said, "Yes, please, I'd like to try

these two pairs of boots on."

He said, "Great. What size do you need?"

I said, "A nine, probably; for I have big flat feet and am descended from a race of potato crushers."

He returned with the boots, which I tried on. I would have bought a pair anyway — it is my belief that if one actually enters a store, one is obliged to buy, which is how once, years ago, I almost purchased a car I despised, merely because I had taken it for a test drive — but I really liked the long ones.

I said, "I'll take these."

He said, "Excellent."

He said, "May I clean your old boots for you?"

I, upon recovering, said, "Yes, please."

He said, "You're welcome."

I left, reluctantly for I could have remained in his presence forever, and on my way out, said, "Thank you."

Steven said, "You're welcome."

He had, by my count, at least three opportunities to say, "No problem." He did not utter it once, and twice he actually used the right words, the ones that used to be said on such occasions.

I have a problem with no problem. Everyone, everywhere I go, says that to me, and it is becoming a huge problem.

I take in stuff to the dry cleaners, interrupt the clerk having a smoke outside, and apologize. "No problem," she says. In a boutique, I ask to try on jeans, and the salesgirl replies, "No problem." I buy two pairs, thank her, and again she says, "No problem." I run for a bus, catch it, and thank the driver for waiting, or at least for not pretending to wait until I got close and then pulling away. He says, "No problem."

One night this week, I phoned The Globe's news desk, to make sure there were no questions about the story I had written, and the editor who answered made the appropriate inquiries, then told me there were "no problems."

It was not exactly the same usage, but it was close enough that I nearly wept. In the curiously restrained culture of this newspaper, wherein stories of Dog Bites Man and Man Bites Dog and Man Mounts Dog and Conrad Black Pays \$8-Million to Buy Bitten Mounted Dead Dog are all greeted with the same determined equa-

nimity, this sort of gritty neutrality makes me crazed.

While I would prefer to be told, "Smashing piece; you are brilliance!", I would rather hear, "Actually, the story sucks, you old bat" than be told there are no problems.

"No problem" is not the equivalent of "You're welcome." It is not only not in the same family, it is not even a distant and defective relative.

"You're welcome" is the standard acknowledgment of what went before it, which is almost always, "Thank you." "No problem," and its inbred cousin, "No problems," are non-sequiturs that imply there *are* indeed problems, but that the person, being of exceptionally noble and long-suffering character, rose above it and lethargically engaged anyway, sort of.

Therein lies the story of my new boots, my new best friend, my new favourite store (where I will now be purchasing all my shoes, boots, bags, polish, sprays and shoe-ly gewgaws) and the explanation of why, for one more week, I did not go postal.

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