

Surfaces

Elizabeth Shove

I don't suppose working in a carpet showroom is anyone's idea of a fulfilling career, but it was not a bad job. I had a desk over on the left, next to the laminate flooring and behind the sheet vinyl. It was a quiet life. There was a toilet and little kitchen area out the back where I made coffee – instant Kenco was my brand of choice. I opened the doors at 9.30am and closed at 5pm every day except Thursday when Ryan was in, and Sunday when we were shut.

Carpet World had a very distinctive smell and a hushed tranquility that I grew to like. If anyone came in, I went over to greet them. We didn't get much training, but when I started I was sent on a three-day sales course in Malden. The training manual had a list of opening remarks: 'How is your day going?'; 'Is there anything special you are looking for today?'; 'Feel free to look around, I'm here if you need me' – each tailored for a different segment of the market. I was good at recognising the five customer types and quick to adjust my style to suit.

To tell the truth there were many hours in which no one came in at all. At first, I was bored but after a few weeks staring at my surroundings I decided to learn about floor coverings. I hated school but I had a lively and enquiring mind, a good computer and time to spare. There is now nothing, but nothing, that I don't know about the subject.

In a locked cupboard beside my desk, I had a private supply of samples from companies whose products we did not stock. I just loved the colour swatches that they sent.



The hard wearing, non-slip vinyl with its speckled finish and tiny fragments of glitter – that remains my favourite. I enjoyed the feel of the plainer surfaces, the imitation granite, the oak-effect and the patterns on the so-called tiles.

I know it is all false but at the end of the day, I'm a bit of a purist – I think laminate should look like wood. Carpet is another topic. At Carpet World we specialised in the middle of the range, but my sample collection included very much more.

We were not allowed to keep any personal items in the shop and my boss, Sharon, would have been horrified if she knew what the cupboard contained. Sometimes I couldn't hold back from telling the truth about what we sold, and where to get a better deal. I didn't do it every time, but I liked to

share my knowledge. Sharon popped in maybe once a month, if that, and providing the sales figures were roughly in range no one bothered me at all.

That was until Lucy arrived. When we get customers, they usually come in pairs. Couples thinking about their kitchen, or their living room. Lucy was different. She entered alone and for a moment I was lost for words. She didn't fit any of the categories in the manual. Instead, she marched straight over to my desk. 'I know what you are doing', she said.

I stammered. 'Er, sorry, I didn't quite catch that'. I put on my best and most sincere smile: 'how can I help you today?'. Her response was fast and to the point. 'Cut the crap Colin'. I stared at her. How did she know my name was Colin? There was nothing in the training to prepare me for a situation like this.

'It's your real business I'm interested in'. I felt sick and sweaty all at once. My neck was going red. How did this woman know about my private collection, or about the people I'd sent on to other suppliers? 'It, ..it's just the colours... I like the other colours'.

'I don't know what you are talking about. We've been watching this place for over a year and we know all about your secret data centre.' She produced her police identification. Lucy Flint. I stared at her. What data centre?

Lucy pressed on. 'Open up the room next to the kitchen.' A huge wave of relief flooded over me. I was still in a state, but it dawned on me that this detective did not have flooring samples in mind. I had worked at Carpet World for long enough to know that there was no hidden room. 'You must be mistaken', I replied, 'there is nothing here but what you see'.

Detective Flint took no notice. She went over to the racks of sheet vinyl and peeled them back. To my amazement there was a door that I'd never noticed. Lucy knew exactly what she was doing. 'Fetch the keys' she said.

Ryan and I shared a small bunch of keys kept on a hook in the kitchen, just above the tea towels. I had removed the one I used to lock my private cupboard, but I had never thought about what the others were for. The key with the yellow fob fitted perfectly. Behind what I'd always thought was a solid wall of samples was a small office. There were three monitors, a lot of cables, an uneaten apple and last Thursday's newspaper. 'Ryan' I exclaimed.

'Ryan who?' asked Lucy. 'Ryan', I said, 'Ryan Sage. He works here when I have my day off. I've only met him once.'

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When Carpet World closed down, I was immediately offered a job at a rival firm nearby. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that I had built up quite a reputation. For the first time in my life, my expertise was in really demand.

Ryan and Sharon are facing long jail sentences for fraud. It turns out they'd been receiving credit card details from all over the UK and selling them on to an international dealer. I can't say I feel particularly sorry for them. Despite appearances, neither had a genuine interest in grades of laminate flooring or in twist and pile. Carpet World was just a front.