

The Supermarket at Night  
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At 4 am, is it night or morning? The sky is absolutely dark and the usually jammed roads and parking lots along Providence's North Main Street are empty. Stores are closed; people are asleep in quiet, sleeping houses. But the Super Stop & Shop on Reservoir Avenue, the city's only 24-hour supermarket, is wide awake. At 4 am, the store is not entirely different than during the day - the buzz of the vegetable coolers, the generic tiled floor, the slightly cool temperature. But something *is* different: the lights are half-off; there are no clerks in the bakery, flower-shop, or deli. Boxes are strewn in the aisles, and there is a 30-foot line of shopping carts parked in the greeting card aisle. The ice beds in the seafood section are bare, but the lobsters and crabs are awake in their tank. At 4 am on the day after Valentine's Day the seasonal aisle is bare except for a few jars of pickles, salad dressing, and the remnants of a random sale on preserved Jewish items (Gold's Borscht, Lieber's kosher dish soap, Streit's gravy and Matzo Ball soup mix). The red-foiled candy has been moved next to nearly hidden promises of Easter - pastel colored children's books proclaiming that Spring is here in February. Every label faces forward perfectly, square shouldered boxes lined exactly next to their neighbors.

And the aisles are still, deserted except for an occasional shopper and eight overnight employees. These eight workers spend all night getting the store ready for day, restocking popular items that disappeared the day before. They stock the same stuff every night - mostly sale items, says an employee named Jerry. Sebastian, who stocks in the frozen food section, says he's always restocking three things: frozen pizzas, mozzarella sticks, and hash browns. Sebastian has only worked at Stop & Shop for a month, but this isn't his first night job - he used to work nights on the assembly line for Texas Instruments. Sebastian, who is African-American and in his mid-twenties, works at night so he can spend time with his 7-year-old son, Sebastian, Jr. After he gets off work (at 7 or 8 am), Sebastian drives his son to school and then usually stays awake

until 10 or 11 am. He takes a nap and runs some errands, picks up "Little Sib" from school, and sleeps a little more in the evening before returning to work. Working at Stop & Shop is only temporary, he says, just until things get settled. He was in college for two years, studying business administration and technology, and he wants more for his son. "I don't want him to say, Yeah, my dad works at Stop & Shop."

Other employees have made careers out of overnight work. The manager of the store has been employed by Stop & Shop for 20 years, and has been on the night shift for eleven (four at this location). He likes it, he says, because he has all day to himself while other people have to be at work. Sebastian agrees that a nighttime work schedule is helpful in managing his life. He can take care of his son and still run errands during the day. There are other perks, as well - in the summer, he can go to the beach on weekdays. In response, another employee says, "If you believe that, then you're cheating yourself, because you will have to work while everyone else can sleep. It really doesn't make no difference."

Jerry doesn't like overnight work, though he's been on the night shift for five years. At 45, Jerry's hair is entirely white, and his eyes are tired. He longs for a day job, like "normal people" have. He says overnight workers get paid more and don't have to clock out for lunch, but he doesn't care too much about the money - he's working for benefits. "It's hard to sleep when the sun's up," Jerry says. "I go to a neurologist, he gives me a pill. But then sometimes you still can't sleep. Finally you just die somewhere."

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Is it unnatural to sleep when the sun's up? After all, before electricity we spent the daylight hours hunting and gathering, and then planting and plowing, and spent the nights asleep in caves. But if it were dark for 12 hours every night that is not how long we would sleep. We wouldn't go to bed at dusk; we would make fires and tell stories. Perhaps the 24-hour supermarket is a

modern adaptation - it's our new campfire, our light-bulb, an embracing of the things technology always promised to offer - daylight when there's none, and food at any hour. It's an accompaniment to the illicit life that dominated night before: drug dealers, strippers, and partygoers walk awake beside people in more mainstream jobs. "This is your wake-up call," Anna Muoio writes in an article for Fast Company Magazine. "The night shift isn't just for power-plant operators and assembly-line workers anymore. It's also for software developers, Web producers, stockbrokers, and customer-service reps. The sun never sets on knowledge work. The new economy is open for business, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week." There are all night supermarkets, gyms, hardware stores, superstores, car washes, even childcare centers and late-night body shops. And the internet, of course, is always awake. We can communicate, research, bank, and shop at any hour of the new 24-hour day.

But what Jerry said probably still resonates, and it's not just because your mother always told you to get a good night's sleep. We are biologically programmed to be diurnal creatures, active in the day and resting in the night. Furthermore, sleeping at night is part of a natural circadian cycle that scientists observed in the 1960s, studying humans in environments without natural light and clocks. The study showed that a good deal of our chemical and social lives (including sleep habits, hormone and gastric secretion, blood pressure, sexual arousal, anxiety, metabolic rate, and work performance) follow a natural rhythm similar to the ebb and peak of sine waves. This means not only that each individual component has its own amplitudes and period, but also that the components have important phase relationships with each other. Our bodies have an internal clock, and when our blood pressure rises unnaturally at the time we are our most tired, for example, the disruption of the circadian rhythm sends our bodies into confusion. This disruption, caused by lack of sleep and irregular sleep patterns, puts shiftworkers at risk for health problems like gastrointestinal distress, depression, and cardiovascular disease. On a much

more basic level, workers are five percent less productive at night than during the day. Workers are also more likely to make mistakes at night because we suffer a drop in alertness from 2 to 4 am that corresponds to a nadir in circadian rhythm. As our productivity and alertness drop, our actions can even become dangerous: accidents like Three Mile Island, Bhopal, Chernobyl, and the Exxon-Valdez oil spill all happened between midnight and 4 am.

In March of 1987, the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission sent surprise inspectors to Peco's Peach Bottom nuclear power plant in western Pennsylvania and found every operator asleep. On average, American pilots, who are not technically allowed to nap during flights, fall into micro-sleep (a brief period - one second to one minute - during which the body slips into sleep state, regardless of its activity) roughly once per minute during the crucial last 30 minutes of flight. It's our nature, it's scientific: humans get tired. So how do we perform superhuman feats of awakesness? How did British and American forces march on to Baghdad for 40 hours, sleep for eight, and repeat the pattern, cycle after cycle? With the help of eugeroics, or awakening drugs, which allow us to overstep our natural, circadian limits. Modafinil, the most popular of these drugs, was developed in France ten years ago to treat narcolepsy. But the drug, which controls sleep-wake generating sites in the hypothalamus (rather than amphetamines that control the dopaminergic side of the brain), has far surpassed its original use by narcoleptics: modafinil was prescribed to more than 250,000 Americans in 2004 --- there are only 150,000 narcoleptics in the country. Modafinil does not eliminate the body's need for sleep, but it regulates sleepiness effectively. The army endorses modafinil - it's certainly better than the previous use of amphetamines, which made soldiers alternately jumpy and then depressed. "If it works for the military, who else could it help?" writes Julia Llewellyn Smith in a January article for the Sunday Telegraph. Students, truck drivers, medical residents, new mothers, stock traders - overnight workers like Jerry and Sebastian. Eugeroics allow us to

control sleep the way we control depression, appetite, sex-drive - and this control is very appealing to some, particularly in our never-sleeping economy. "We spend one-third of our lives asleep," says Leon Kreitzman, author of the book 24-Hour Society, in the same Telegraph article, "If we eliminated that we'd have another 25 years to do things."

Mostly without the help of eugeroics, the new 24-hour day has been met with relatively little opposition. It's not expensive to keep open large stores that already employ night stockers, and companies hardly have to hire extra workers to accommodate the relatively few customers in the stores at night. Most of these customers, an employee named Berhane explains, have to shop at night because of their work schedules, like emergency room doctors, postal workers, and strippers. But a few customers simply like it better, and it is easy to understand why. The store is less imposing at night, with employees wearing regular clothes - Berhane wears a knit cap and Tommy Hilfiger sweatshirt; Sebastian wears a METS jersey over a t-shirt and jeans. At night, shoppers are working people among working people, and this lack of pretense somehow makes the supermarket a more comfortable place to be. During the day, the items on the shelves have no origin - they appear magically but unsettlingly for consumer convenience. At night, reassuringly, the boxes that the items come from are present in the aisles, and the people who place the items on the shelves are present, too.

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Berhane, who most people call "B," is 26 years old and has lived in the United States for six years. His name is African, but B is from Italy and came here with his brother when he was twenty. He was curious about America, he says, and wanted to spend some time here. He plans to go back sometime, he says, but he's not really thinking about it. Did B think he'd be working nights when he first planned his trip to America? "No, of course not," he says. "I

was going to be a movie star," he jokes, "Just kidding. Well, not really, I mean, who didn't think that."

B has no idea what Italy is like now, but when he left there were not many 24-hour conveniences, not even in the big cities. Aside from clubs there were only small convenience stores open, and certainly not any supermarkets. 24-hour supermarkets emerged internationally in the last decade, and on a more widespread scale only in the last few years. While America charged through Puritan blue laws in the mid-80s and early 90s to lobby for 24-hour life, other countries were reluctant to join the bandwagon, protecting small businesses and the standard workday. The past few decades have witnessed the establishment of the 24-hour society, a society more than 100 years in planning, a society finally made possible in the late 90s by the internet and globalization. Cities like London (in 1998), Ottawa (in 2000), and Singapore (in 2002), proclaimed themselves as having joined the ranks of New York, Hong-Kong, and Las Vegas as cities that never sleep. And it's not just the big cities - with the help of Wal-Marts and supermarkets, 24-hour convenience has spread to suburbia. It seems like just about everyone has promised to never turn off the lights.

But is this such a good thing? Small business can hardly compete with large corporations that never close - hell, we can hardly compete with them as individuals. In 1998, Liz Stuart wrote for The Guardian: "The week is becoming shapeless, an amorphous mass of work time spreading out before us. Weekends are merging into working days - Saturday is another Friday, a day for winding down, and the Sabbath now feels like the start of the weekend." With everything available at every hour of every day, when we can buy the same thing at 3:00 AM that we can buy at 3:00 PM, when we are forced to compete at such a rate that we miss out on our eight hours of circadian mini-hibernation - - - at that point, we've passed up the song-filled campfire for a day that never dies. We have conquered the seventh day, the night, and every restful moment in between. Today we are young, and Sebastian and B can embrace all 24-hours of day. But

will we become too tired to enjoy it? Will Sebastian's son see his father get older until, like Jerry, he has to take pills to sleep in the morning and smoke cigarettes to stay awake at night?

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Even supermarkets that don't sleep have to wake up. While Sebastian, B, and Jerry have spent the entire waking night facing labels just so, a lot happens to make the informal warehouse disappear and coax the giant buzzing beeping uniform-clad creature out of his cave. A new shift of workers arrives. Lights come on in the bakery, cash registers jolt into action at the Dunkin Donuts, doors swing open and closed in the fish section, and meat slicers and grinders come to life. There are hints of daylight in the sky as two large floor cleaners (that must be started, like cars, with keys) clean and polish that generic tile floor, bleaching away every memory of dropped milk bottles, cracked eggs, busted jars. The cleaning cars start on opposite sides of the store, first on the perimeter and then slowly inch toward the center where they will meet each other for a brief romantic moment before they are guided by their drivers back to the store room.