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Sunshine on Groundhog Day

by Janie Reynolds

The whole room was yellow. They said it was a bright and cheerful colour and worked on the happiness part of the brain. But she hated it. It was miserable and sickly, like white when it's dirty or milk when it's gone off. She felt like she was being factory-farmed. Thick glass screens divided the call centre into tiny, individual cubicles. In each, a person spent 10 hours a day answering calls.

Four red lights were flashing. She so badly wanted to ignore them, but didn't think she could face the consequences. So, she flipped a switch and a red light turned to green.

"Good morning and thank you for calling First Electric," she said. "How can I help you today?"

"I've been holding for 20 minutes!" came an enraged, male voice down the line.

"I'm so sorry, Sir," the girl replied. "May I take your account number?"

"This bill is ridiculous," ranted the man. "I couldn't have used that much electricity. It's only a one bedroomed flat for fuck's sake."

The girl winced and closed her eyes. Customer swearing was not permitted at First Electric so she was allowed to transfer the call to a supervisor. She flicked a switch and the green light turned to orange. Nauseating hold music played, of which she knew every note.

But then everything went dark. All was silent. She looked around. The system was down. Tears of joy welled up in her eyes. Maybe she could go home.

And then a rush of sadness consumed her. How she wished she could be with her young daughter, Phoebe. Phoebe was nearly 5 and would be starting school next month. These were precious times. And, her mum had cancer.

She stood up and fumbled in the darkness through the maze of cubicles until she found some light peeping through an outside door. She ran home. Little Phoebe was playing with dolls and her mum was cooking lunch. She hugged them both and told them how much she loved them. She thanked her mum from the bottom of her heart for looking after Phoebe so she could work. But her mum didn't look well. The cancer was sorely visible.

"It is lovely to have you home," said her mum. "But you need to catch up with those bills on the table, Vivien. There's two red ones. Looked awfully high to me. I don't see how you could spend that much on electricity. It's only a one bedroomed flat."

"I'll do that, Mama," Vivien said, taking the bills from the table and calling the number.

"Good morning. Thank you for calling English Energy. How may I help you today?" came a female voice down the line.

"And a very good morning to you, too," smiled Vivien. "My name's Vivien, what's yours?"

"It's Lesley," said the other girl.

"Do you have yellow painted walls in your call centre, Lesley?" asked Vivien. "I work in one, too, and we have yellow walls. They say it's a bright and cheerful colour but I hate it."

"God, I hate it too," said Lesley, and the two girls chuckled for a while before Vivien paid her bill.