

Too old for McDonald's, Too Young to Die
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Could be that, like everyone else on earth, you figure that you've got the worst job on earth. You haven't. I've met one of the people who has, and it wasn't you.

Not unless you're Karl, a 20-year-old university student who works alone on the counter at a late-night, self-serve petrol station.

Karl is a keen, bright-eyed kid, intelligent and articulate. Said he's studying architecture or horticulture or whatever, I forget. There's a suggestion of family money in his bearing, but even if that's so, Karl seems to have inherited only the resolve to pay his own way. If his pride means that somebody's occasionally going to take swipes at his head with a gardening axe, well, that seems to Karl an acceptable effort for a uni degree.

He usually covers 14 or 21 hours a week on the five-till-midnight shift. They're seven-hour shifts because operators would have to start paying overtime beyond eight hours. As it is, Karl makes about 10 dollars an hour. A lot of his friends at uni also work at late-night petrol stations because, he explains, "you're not always serving all the time, so you can fit in a bit of study. The owners also like to have somebody with a sense of responsibility and commitment. But mostly, we were too old to work at McDonald's."

His fellow uni students will appreciate the statistics. Most servos, Karl says, make about one cent per litre of profit on the fuel they sell. (Sometimes, during price wars, they'll sell fuel at a loss just to keep up the traffic for snacks and accessories). Apart from the money made in the workshop and lube bays, the whole business hangs on volume. Karl says the big stations, with 12 pumps on the forecourt and one operator on the counter, have to turn over about 30 cars an hour.

Working on a conservative estimate that just one per cent of our society would account for squids, geeks, smart-arses, acid burnouts, con merchants, violent slime, peer-pressured teens, satanic ritualists, hillbilly inbreds, cause-driven minorities, benzo-crazed homebodies, sporting shooters, spittle-flecked lunatics, doddering imbeciles, armed-and-dangerous prison escapees and psychopathic arsonists in need of petrol, it calculates that Karl and his kin get to meet one of the above every three-and-a-bit hours.

Usually it's the "drive-off", where a customer fills up and fu-uhh, departs quickly. The larger stations will average one of these *per night*. Karl says the average haul is probably \$20 worth of fuel. "They don't like to hang around at the pump too long, or they're more likely to be noticed," he explains.

The operator – working alone, remember – has to try and scrawl down the car's number plate, or hope that he gets a clear picture on the constant-loop video. Some of the modern stations with video screens hold their operators responsible for such losses. Either way, everyone loses. "The profit margins are so slim," says Karl, "that one drive-off can just piss away a week's work for the business."

A lot of ordinary people just seem to suffer a temporary lapse in honesty when they get to the counter. Having failed to notice the number on their pump, they'll wave in the direction of the dual-bowser. The attendant asks, "Were you the eight dollars or the 30 dollars?" A few minutes later he gets an ear-bashing from the real eight-dollar customer, who was still over there washing his windscreen.

Often, a devious customer will send in a decoy to ask for a petrol cap or fan belt off the back wall, which is guaranteed to distract the attendant long enough for all kinds of mischief. One time, two guys in a Ford Transit pulled the petrol cap ruse. Karl kept an eye on the pump through the front window, over the shelves full of chocolates and potato chips. What he couldn't see was the rack of 16 new four-litre oil containers along the front window, and the Transit's driver crouched down and wheeling the whole thing into the back of the van.

There's the odd win, of course. Karl jots down suspicious cars' numbers as they come in, and can out-draw Wyatt Earp with his Bic when a car's pulling away without paying. He calls the cops immediately after a drive-off, and claims a recovery rate of eight in 10.

And sometimes, people in older, leaded-petrol cars will pull over to the pump in the darkest corner of the forecourt, glancing over their shoulders as they fill their tanks. Then they'll take off, getting maybe a hundred metres up the road before their petrol engine gets its first slurp of diesel ...

Karl's heart did the same thing when the station was held up for the first time. Near midnight, he was stowing the oil racks and rubbish tins in the lube bay when an axe swung past his ear. Karl wheeled around as the robber, wearing a calico money-sack over his head, slurred a torrent of abuse that seemed to end in "gizzuv arggen money!"

The guy pushed him into the office, Karl sneakily squeezing the remote alarm dog-tag he wears around his neck. Some 30 seconds later, Karl was shaking and nauseous, lying face-down on the floor, the robber standing over him with \$300-odd in a shopping bag. "I was trying to imagine the worst kind of pain, something that would be worse than having an axe in my head," Karl said. "I couldn't come up with one."

Next thing he knew, he heard a tink-tink-tink as the robber made his escape on a stolen vehicle. The Police turned up within four minutes and interviewed Karl for an hour and a half. They eventually caught the thief, though Karl never got his pushbike back.

"I did get overtime for the extra hour and a half", he brightened.