

“Put down the controller and get up,” I heard in a familiar contralto, “Game over, Spy.”

When the PlayStation went dead, I grudgingly walked over to the garage sale dinette. “OK, fine,” I said, kicking the chair out and parking. “Doom can wait. What’s our assignment?”

“Cleveland.”

“Again?”

“It’s been two years, Spy,” V-7 said as she spread out a sheaf of MapQuest queries. “We tested the market for female-friendliness, with dismal results. A lot has changed in MI in that time—and the Cleveland market has changed as well. Stores have closed, opened, moved, and changed hands. It’s still one of the densest store clusters outside of the coasts. But is it still as dense between the ears? Everyone gives lip service to the growing number of female MI customers—how has Cleveland responded?”

“What’s our angle this time?” I was curious, warming to the prospect of a market that also had a high concentration of boutique ice cream parlors.

“I’m a hobbyist drummer, and I’m ready to upgrade cymbals from the ones that came with my entry-level kit. This isn’t about price, though. You can’t listen to cymbals online, so the store experience is important here. Selection matters, but the defining trait will be how much help I’m given.”

“So what do I do? Sit in the car like last time?”

“No chance, slug-boy, and no handheld games, either. You’ll be going in too, disguised as an old guy. We’re doing preliminary research, because old guys want to shop at MI stores too. We’ll start testing how they’re treated while we’re at it.”

“Do I have to wear a beard?” I said, dreading a hot afternoon covered in spirit gum and fake hair.

“No—people might think you’re Billy Gibbons, and that would throw everything off. I’ll be applying your disguise and providing the wardrobe. It’ll take about an hour, and then we’re off.”

Sam Ash, Lyndhurst

Cleveland’s Ash unit is immense,



SEARCHING FOR EXCELLENT CUSTOMER SERVICE IN THE CLEVELAND, OHIO AREA

more than 30,000 square feet. I think you could dump a busload of middle schoolers in there and never notice them. “Vee” went in and headed toward the drum department. I finished my East Coast Custard double-twist cone and decided to test my disguise in the guitar department.

As I headed over, I was surprised at the sparse traffic, and even more by the piles of...keyboard thrones? Multiple piles dotted the floor, plus stacks of keyboard stands. It felt as though they were trying to fill the vast space with anything they could muster—but I didn’t notice the sea of guitars on stands that impressed me the last time I was in town.

The guitar department fared better, filled with a maze of amps. A sales dude said “hi” and went back to talking with two guys noodling on guitars. Maybe it was the khakis, I thought. I noticed a lot of empty hooks, and a surpris-

ing amount of disarray for what seemed to be an off-peak hour on the floor.

I made my way into the acoustics, startled as I entered by my reflection in the glass of the door. “Dang!” I thought, “Vee made the disguise pretty convincing!” After a minute or two I was buttonholed by another guy who asked if I was looking for something. I trumped up a story about a graduation gift and told him I was trying to stay under \$300. After showing me a couple of Takamine models, he suggested a Yamaha that was \$399—but I could save some if I bought it *today*. I chuckled. He actually thought I had money. *Great* disguise. Time to check on the drummer.

Vee was in the cymbal room, alone. “The lad said ‘hi’ to me and went on to other things,” she said. “I’d try to get him to answer questions, but there isn’t anything

here I’d want if I were our cover-girl. I’m a little surprised.”

“Vee, don’t you think some of these cymbals would do the trick?”

“Spy, you should know that I *am* a drummer. It’s not just a dodge. There isn’t anything I’d recommend to anyone in the market for a simple step up—and the better cymbals are all specialized. Let’s move on.”

Guitar Center East, Mayfield Village

Located in view just down Mayfield Road, GC was busier, although it seemed the middle schoolers had landed here. I walked in behind Vee by a few feet, was greeted by the Barbie in the lookout post at the door, and melted into the scene. Or rather, I became invisible. People were milling around, shredding on guitars, and the sales staff was

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