



MAILED

by David Deaton

I hate shopping. So do you, I bet. Ever wonder why?

Consider the Quinpool Shopping Mall, a half-mile trot from Dalhousie. It's not a real mall — not one of those newer palatial emporia — but it will do.

Two stores, certainly, qualify for mall status. At opposite ends of a cluster of shops (the most famous being Jumbo Video) are a fair-sized IGA and Canadian Tire. It isn't their physical dimensions that elevate them into the commercial empyrean. No, size has nothing to do with it.

It's their PA system. Greeting you as you enter each store is music. Of a kind. Canadian Tire plays a surprisingly decent selection of lite-rock. IGA serves up muzak.

One should be inured by now to this kind of noise pollution but is one ever?

Whoever conceived the idea for Canadian Tire was a genius, albeit an evil one. Imagine simulating an AM radio station, substituting Can Tire commercials for DJ patter. Brilliant!

Mind you, some people may not *want* to hear their most cherished songs while they're browsing for garbage bags. Or hear "Here Comes the Sun" followed by an announcement for jumbo bags of Kitty Litter. Such moments become memories.

Worst of all, most every song is interrupted by someone being paged at end-of-the-world volume levels. The illusion of a radio station dies pretty quickly.



On to IGA. From Scylla to Charybdis. This is where the mall can be experienced in its purest form. Muzak instead of music.

Ironically, the endless audial Valium that flows through the speakers does nothing to lessen the intensity of the store. As in airports, Muzak's cloying coziness heightens the alien, surreal immensity of such a space.

What gets you first, though, are the lights. Brilliant! You think you're on a Hollywood set.

A certain timelessness obtains in a supermarket. The lights burn so brightly, it could be any time of day. The external world disappears. Hypnosis sets in.

The mighty fluorescent flicker

of the tubes overhead induces a somnambulistic trance. Watch how people move, slower than usual, in time to the Muzak. Why aren't all zombie movies filmed in supermarkets?

Here, you're not just watching television, you're *living* it. All the world's a commercial, and there's no mute button.

Just to make the noise pollution a little more toxic, IGA has introduced The Voice. No one who's heard it can ever forget it, no matter how much one tries.

Behold, out of the blinding lights not God but a human Care Bear speaks, the oozing unctuous sap of blandness, a voice like white bread.

But even The Voice must bow to the exigencies of the shopping line. Every few seconds it cuts out as if it were being censored for uncontrollable profanity.

Between the Muzak, The Voice, and the constant check-out pagings, your consciousness ends up like a song playing at Canadian Tire.

"Well, you lucky shoppers, today at only \$1.49 a kilo" —

— Price check line one —

"... can't beat the taste or the price of —"

— Susan Arklie Stairs, please report to the manager —

"... still a very special place to shop."

Oh, really?

If you don't like it, of course, you can *leave*. This is *their* space and they'll play with your head as much as they bloody well *want* to. They'll slice'n'dice your consciousness, turn your favourite songs into canned mush, and dribble your brain from one super-special to another if you let them.

Unfortunately, you do.

Anyone with an iota of honesty will admit the effect of all this. Within five minutes you feel numb, dumb, and unaccountably dispirited. Ten minutes, and you begin to feel guilty for being there.

After all, there's this *show* going on. Just for you. The least you can do is BUY SOMETHING. Desperation sets in.

Inside half an hour you'll be ready to buy things you didn't even know existed. Kiwi yoghurt, phosphorescent hockey pucks, marshmallow fluff, plastic duck decoys, bumbleberry pie, ALF ouija boards, maraschino pickles, Brian Mulroneyn lawn jockeys, it

doesn't *matter*. So long as you can get out. Now!

And, indeed, once you've emptied your pocketbook, you're free to go.

Could the creepy, calculated effect of shopping malls be one reason why so many random slaughters seem to take place there?

Every mood-altering device a mall will deploy reassures the shopper: "Everything's fine. Life is beautiful. Go ahead and blow it all."

The wild-eyed man with the Canadian Tire rifle disagrees. Everything is *not* fine. Life has been cheapened. Go ahead and blow 'em all!

If there's one thing worse than shopping in a mall, it surely must be working in one. Imagine dealing all day long with hordes of store-crazy customers!

Mall workers are the ultimate victims of subliminal technology. How must *they* feel after being subjected to eight hours of non-stop inanity, sleazy nattering, narcoleptic mind-drive! Five days a week!

They may be the only people in the world who don't instantly turn on their TVs when they get home from work.