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I Keep Finding Myself At Ralphs After Midnight

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AFTER midnight the crowd at my local supermarket on Sunset Boulevard leans toward Fellini. Mostly in black, the shoppers glide like leather and spandex shades through the fluorescent nether world of Ralphs, its aisles garish, its produce shining easily in the hard white light.

Where I live, this procession is the 3 a.m. of retail's soul, the bleary wee hours of long-haired and stilleto-heeled customers. If you work like a maniac at a job all day, struggle to care for your children, keep up your house or get to the gym, I have occasionally seen you in this haggard emporium: a fellow bourgeois, happy the store is open and wishing it sold postage stamps. Maybe you saw me and felt like Robinson Crusoe spotting footprints.

I don't have to go to Ralphs in the middle of the night anymore. Now that I work at home and make my own schedule, I have learned that there is a kinder, gentler Ralphs, a Ralphs of the early afternoon in which people are friendly and optimistic, in which the aisles are uncluttered and the checkout clerks have time for banter.

Finding this pastoral, daytime Ralphs was an awakening, like walking around my neighborhood and discovering that the world looks completely different from the pavement, in slow motion. You can do that, if you work by night sometimes and spend a little daylight walking around.

Working at home changes your life in a lot of ways. You do more work - assuming you have a quiet place to sit. I am convinced that the advent of the large business office, with its attendant meetings, memos, phone calls, and coworkers, has done more to retard productivity than anything else.

On the other hand, working at home raises procrastination from avocation to art. Distraction is more varied, but more nakedly frivolous (at the office it masquerades as work), and the struggle against it verges on the epic.

Working at home, every tool is a double-edged sword. The dictionary offers endless diversion, the kitchen is always too close, and the computer is an implement of Satan. Bored? Stuck? Plan a macro. Or prune back that directory tree. When you get lonely there's always electronic mail.

Computer maniacs abound among us work-at-homes, but all technology is beloved. I pore over ads for phone machines, handheld copiers, scanners, dialers, and other workplace exotica. In Santa Monica, a metallurgist I know works mainly at the dining room table and loves his brand-new fax machine.

I can't wait to get one for myself. The telefax these days is the businessman's equivalent of New Age crystals. To many people who work at home, fax is the final leap to freedom, a substitute for commuting and antidote to loneliness. I have high hopes that mine will solve all my problems.

Houses are just computers writ large. Working in an actual house, as opposed to an orderly little apartment, makes all manner of home improvements not just possible but irresistible. Unlike television, which is passive, computers and houses offer endless possibilities for compulsives bent on actively wasting time. Even the neighbors can improve their houses, because suddenly there is someone around to let the electrician in. I accept deliveries, too.

Working at home makes you realize that vast stretches of urban America, including prime territory where houses cost a fortune, are depopulated every weekday morning. House after house stands empty, as if the neighborhood had hosted a neutron bomb attack. The Cheever character who swims eight miles home through all the neighborhood pools, only to find his own house empty when he arrives, would have a field day on Los Angeles' west side.

When I quit my regular job, I decided to establish some rules to keep from sliding into wild-eyed destitution. I imagined that a month at home would leave me so slack and disheveled that no one would recognize me. People in restaurants would stare. Friends would recoil in disbelief. To avert all this, I vowed to shave every day, eat regular meals, and continue sending my shirts out. I even toyed with wearing a necktie, but this is Los Angeles, after all. I'd have to take it off to go out to lunch.

Mainly I uphold the eating part. But I discover that if you start the day with a three-egg omelet of Gorgonzola, sun-dried tomatoes, and basil, you will be hungry again by 11 a.m. and embark on a cycle of ingestion that can't possibly be matched in an office or factory.

Working at home is not, of course, for everyone. Job and family circumstances seem crucial at first, but temperament is really what counts. People I know who work at home fall into two categories.

The first group has experienced a revelation. The workplaces they left behind look in retrospect like the inside of an ancient Roman slave galley.

Members of the second group are about to go crazy. They can't stand the isolation, the lack of structure, or the absence of paraphernalia that they associate with business. They miss the other half of life. Before there was home and office. Now there is just home.

I like working at home, but not everything has changed. Last week I found myself in Ralphs after midnight. It turns out that I am just as pressed for time during normal waking hours as I always was. My dreams of at last reading the Bronte sisters have turned to ash. I suspect I had confused working at home with not working at all, a fatal error in the all-important category of expectations.

At Ralphs that night I buried myself in the tabloid Sun - the only kind shining at that hour. The lead headline was, "Fax Machine Receives Photo From Heaven."

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