What I’m really thinking

A The checkout girl

Of course I judge you by your shopping. It’s the only diversion I have. The work isn’t that intellectually demanding – the till does all the maths – and it does become robotic. Having identical conversations every day quickly gets wearing.

You get to know types of customers. The stressed-out mum, feeding her kids on the way round and thrusting the empty packet at me to scan. The sweet older couple, carefully packing cat food and biscuits into a trolley. The woman in a suit who buys a bottle of own-brand vodka, then puts it in her handbag. Sometimes I like to channel my inner Sherlock. Dark circles, nappies and aspirin? New baby. Rice cakes and spinach? The diet starts tomorrow.

Older women are very polite and chatty, but watching a queue build up as they count out pennies does my head in. Usually I take a deep breath and try to treat them as I would my own grandma. And I don’t mind when people have to stay on their phone, but it is rude.
People assume you’re an idiot. The fact is, I’m studying for a history degree. But that’s irrelevant; neither I nor my colleagues are stupid, and people have no right to look down on us.

B     The university lecturer

I look at the 23 of you in the room – a small group this year – and wonder if you’re even aware of me as I teach. Might it be that because you’re not talking directly to me, you forget to adjust the expressions on your faces? Or is it that you imagine, in a crowd, you are somehow invisible? Your expressions and bodies reveal far more than you know – sneering, eye-rolling, yawning, you can barely stay awake sometimes.

Your indifference bears no relation to my hours of preparation. The university asks you to comment, anonymously, on the quality of my teaching. I would like the chance to comment on the quality of your listening. When you are really disengaged and disconnected, I see hands reach for phones in bags. You connect, but it’s usually to someone outside this room. Sometimes you even pass notes, giggle, and whisper.

Yet I also see you when you laugh at my jokes. When you are concentrating hard, I can almost hear your minds working. Some of you take notes so intensively, fighting to keep up with my words, as if it’s life or death if you miss something. I see your faces light up when you want to say something, the eagerness to comment, to take part. You are relaxed, smiling, enjoying the moment of understanding. We connect. Now I see you and you see me.
C The 999 operator

The hardest part of my job is also the simplest – getting the address. Often when someone calls, they go blank. Or in the case of a road accident, they don’t know exactly where they are. But the most important element is the address, because that’s what brings the ambulance. I have to ask for it twice, which infuriates people.

It still surprises me to hear my voice during a call. It changes, becoming deeper, almost authoritative. I have to take control of the situation. I suppose that’s why I wear a uniform. I have a script, but I refuse to be a robot; hearing people at their most vulnerable makes me add to it. When the caller is hysterical, telling them, ‘I’m going to help you’ and ‘I know you’re frightened’ calms them down. But it breaks my heart when they’re in pain or their loved one is dying; I have to take a ‘stress break’ after harrowing calls.

Although it is not my place to judge, I get frustrated sometimes. The man who rang because his toothpaste was burning his mouth; the mother whose baby was afraid of a fly. Don’t they realize they’re taking up precious time when a life-or-death situation may be needing help? But the moment I call them time-wasters is the moment I should quit my job.