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Supermarket Box Boy

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He is seventeen. He had worked as a box boy at a supermarket in a middle-class suburb on the outskirts of Los Angeles. "People come to the counter and you put things in their bags for them. And carry things to their cars. It was a grind."

You have to be terribly subservient to people: "Ma'am, can I take your bag?" "Can I do this?" It was at a time when the grape strikers were passing out leaflets. They were very respectful. People'd come into the check stand, they'd say, "I just bought grapes for the first time because of those idiots outside." I had to put their grapes in the bag and thank them for coming and take them outside to the car. Being subservient made me very resentful.

It's one of a chain of supermarkets. They're huge complexes with bakeries in them and canned music over those loud-speakers—Muzak. So people would relax while they stopped. They played selections from *Hair*. They'd play "Guantanamera," the Cuban Revolution song. They had *Soul on Ice*, the Cleaver book, on sale. They had everything dressed up and very nice. People wouldn't pay any attention to the music. They'd go shopping and hit their kids and talk about those idiots passing out anti-grape petitions.

Everything looks fresh and nice. You're not aware that in the back room it stinks and there's crates all over the place and the walls are messed up. There's graffiti and people are swearing and yelling at each other. You walk through the door, the music starts playing, and everything is pretty. You talk in hushed tones and are very respectful.

You wear a badge with your name on it. I once met someone I knew years ago. I remembered his name and said, "Mr. Castle, how are you?" We talked about this and that. As he left, he said, "It was nice talking to you, Brett." I felt great, he remembered me. Then I looked down at my name plate. Oh shit. He didn't remember me at all, he just read the name plate. I wish I put "Irving" down on my name plate. If he'd have said, "Oh yes, Irving, how could I forget you . . . ?" I'd have been ready for him. There's nothing personal here.

You have to be very respectful to everyone—the customers, to the manager, to the checkers. There's a sign on the cash register that says: Smile at the customer. Say hello to the customer. It's assumed if you're a box boy, you're really there 'cause you want to be a manager some day. So you learn all the little things you have absolutely no interest in learning.

FOOTWORK

The big things there is to be an assistant manager and eventually manager. The male checkers had dreams of being manager, too. It was like an internship. They enjoyed watching how the milk was packed. Each manager had his own domain. There was the ice cream manager, the grocery manager, the dairy case manager . . . They had a sign in the back: Be good to your job and your job will be good to you. So you take an overriding concern on how the ice cream is packed. You just die if something falls off a shelf. I saw so much crap there I just couldn't take. There was a black boy, an Oriental box boy, and a kid who had a Texas drawl. They needed the job to subsist. I guess I had the luxury to hate it and quit.

When I first started there, the manager said, "Cut your hair. Come in a white shirt, black shoes, a tie. Be here on time." You get there, but he isn't there. I just didn't know what to do. The checker turns around and says, "You new? What's your name?" "Brett." "I'm Peggy." And that's all they say and they keep throwing this down to you. They'll say, "Don't put it in that, put it in there." But they wouldn't help you.

You had to keep your apron clean. You couldn't lean back on the railings. You couldn't talk to the checkers. You couldn't accept tips. Okay, I'm outside and I put it in the car. For a lot of people, the natural reaction is to take out a quarter and give it to me. I'd say, "I'm sorry, I can't." They'd get offended. When you give someone a tip, you're sort of suave. You take a quarter and you put it in their palm and you expect them to say, "Oh, thanks a lot." When you say, "I'm sorry, I can't," they feel a little put down. They say, "No one will know." And they put it in your pocket. You say, "I really can't." It gets to a point where you have to do physical violence to a person to avoid being tipped. It was not consistent with the store's philosophy of being cordial. Accepting tips was a cordial thing and made the customer feel good. I just couldn't understand the incongruity. One lady actually put it in my pocket, got in the car, and drove away. I would have had to throw the quarter at her or eaten it or something.

When it got slow, the checkers would talk about funny things that happened. About Us and Them. Us being the people who worked there, Them being the stupid fools who didn't know where anything was—just came through and messed everything up and shopped. We serve them but we don't like them. We know where everything is. We know what time the market closes and they don't. We know what you do with coupons and they don't. There was a camaraderie of sorts. It wasn't healthy, though. It was a put-down of the others.

There was this one checker who was absolutely vicious. He took great delight in making every little problem into a major crisis from which he had to emerge victorious. A customer would give him a coupon. He'd say, "You were supposed to give me that at the beginning." She'd say, "Oh, I'm sorry." He'd say, "Now I gotta open the cash register and go through the whole thing. Madam, I don't watch out for every customer. I can't manage your life." A put-down.

It never bothered me when I would put something in the bag wrong. In the general scheme of things, in the large questions of the universe, putting a can of dog food in the bag wrong is not of great consequence. For them it was.

There were a few checkers who were nice. There was one that was incredibly sad. She could be unpleasant at times, but she talked to everybody. She was one of the few people who genuinely wanted to talk to people. She was saying how she wanted to go to school and take courses so she could get teaching credit. Someone asked her, "Why don't you?" She said, "I have to work here. My hours are wrong. I'd have to get my hours changed." They said, "Why don't you?" She's worked there for years. She had seniority. She said, "Jim won't let me." Jim was the manager. He didn't give a damn. She wanted to go to school, to teach, but she can't because every day she's got to go back to the supermarket and load groceries. Yet she wasn't bitter. If she died a checker and never enriched her life, that was okay, because those were her hours.

She was extreme in her unpleasantness and her consideration. Once I dropped some grape juice and she was squawking like a bird. I came back and mopped it up. She kept saying to me, "Don't worry about it. It happens to all of us." She'd say to the customers, "If I had a dime for all the grape juice I dropped . . ."

Jim's the boss. A fish-type handshake. He was balding and in his forties. A lot of managers are these young, clean-shaven, neatly cropped people in their twenties. So Jim would say things like "groovy." You were supposed to get a ten-minute break every two hours. I lived for that break. You'd go outside, take your shoes off, and be human again. You had to request it. And when you took it, they'd make you feel guilty.

You'd go up and say, "Jim, can I have a break?" He'd say, "A break? You want a break? Make it a quick one, nine and a half minutes." Ha ha ha. One time I asked the assistant manager, Henry. He was even older than Jim. "Do you think I can have a break?" He'd say, "You got a break when you were hired." Ha ha ha. Even when they joked it was a put-down.

The guys who load the shelves are a step above the box boys. It's like upperclassmen at an officer candidate's school. They would make sure that you conformed to all the prescribed rules, because they were once box boys. They know what you're going through, your anxieties. But instead of making it easier for you, they'd make it harder. It's like a military institution.

I kept getting box boys who came up to me, "Has Jim talked to you about your hair? He's going to because it's getting too long. You better get it cut or grease it back or something." They took delight in it. They'd come to me before Jim had told me. Everybody was out putting everybody down . . .