

Store Security

None too bright in the head, that's what they said of him, that's what he thought they said, him standing there in the supermarket, on one foot and then the other. Store security, that's him. Mondays to Fridays 8.30 a.m. till 5.30 p.m. Keep an eye open for shoplifters, the manager had said. Although he'd not seen any, any evidence of any, in all the two years he'd been turning up for work five days a week. Got a job though, his old dad says. Got a job, lad – him calling him lad, and him forty-three. Count your blessings, lad, his dad says. You're fortunate. In my day.... in my day.... off he goes, his dad – got a job though. Only it's nothing to shout about. Standing on one foot and then the other, watching the customers load their trolleys, select their purchases, load their trolleys.

The woman with the beret, the red and blue scarf, the watery eyes, it's baked beans every time. Comes in twice a week, it's baked beans, it's Cyprus potatoes, courgettes, the bananas, the not quite ripe bananas in the cellophane wrapping, the smaller ones. Takes her time choosing. Time on her hands, that's what he reckons. Picks up one bunch, puts it back, then another, looks at it, intently at it, puts it back, picks up the first she picked up, puts it down. Same with the courgettes – he himself doesn't eat courgettes, never has – it's the same with them. They look all alike to him. What's she going to do with a courgette? he says to young Tim stacking shelves. You wouldn't want to know, young Tim says, and bursts into laughing. All morning, every time he sees him, bursts into laughing.

Jenny works Tuesdays to Thursdays. She always has a cheery word. A big smile. How are you, John? she asks. Every time. All right. I'm all right, he says to her. That's the job, she says. Keep the flag flying, she says. Keep the flag flying, he says to her, calls over when she passes, when he takes a walk up and down the fruit and veg aisle, comes across her stacking shelves. Keep the flag flying, he says over to her, her back to him as she stacks, stretches up or bends down to 'refresh the stock.' She's refreshing the stock, young Tim calls over, and laughs. He likes to laugh, does Tim, that's for sure, no doubt about it. John can't think why he laughs, has to laugh, the way he's always laughing. Keeps him going, John supposes. Jenny's married. He overheard her tell the Pole who works Tuesdays and Thursdays. I'm married, she told him. I'm married, thank you, she said to him. John heard her say it. I'm a married woman, thank you very much, she said.

John's place is among the shelves, in the aisles. Start the one end of the aisle, he was instructed when he first started, keep your eyes open. Keep your distance, John, don't impose yourself on the customer, don't intrude yourself, John. Then change your position, walk up and down the aisles from time to time, he was told. Keep your eyes open. Nothing doing, he tells his old dad. Nobody tries to steal nothing without paying, he says. That's because you're there keeping your eyes skinned, his dad says. If you weren't there, they'd be at it, getting away with murder, his dad says. You're holding down a responsible position, John, he says. Be proud. Not everyone has a job, not a job like what you got, John. Keep the flag flying, dad, John says. What's that? his dad says. Keep the flag flying, John says.

On one foot and then the other. Keeping criminality at bay. Jenny, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays. The courgette customer is here, making herself a deep study of the bananas. Young Tim is cheerful, whenever was he not? The mid-afternoon young women with their kids, little kids. They're middle-class, them who come in there, his dad says. Young women with their little kids, well behaved, little boys and girls in good clothes. There's the old man with the stick, one foot after another, stopping now and then, every few feet, with his wire basket, two apples, two bananas, a ready meal at the ready-meal shelves. They say he's famous, Tim tells him and laughs. An intellectual. A professor. Seen him on television. Archaeology. Roman remains. An international authority. Look at him, waiting to move again, mustering the resolve, the impulse to arrive at the ready-steady-go meals. Jenny helps him. John would go and help him himself, but he's not supposed to fraternise with the customers, has to keep his distance, he was told. The professor is known here, in the supermarket. He passes by. Stops. Walks on, his mind on Roman remains, bygone history, his books, his lectures, his hesitant, studied seeking out of the ready-steady-go meals, and Jenny at his elbow, one step forward, then another, Jenny's arm in his, like they're married. I'm a married woman, thank you very much, she told the Pole.

The courgette woman is in again. Must be Thursday. She's selecting the courgettes, one by one, pack by pack. It'll be the bananas next. You like courgettes, he says to her. She looks up at him, her eyes are watery. She doesn't seem to understand. Them courgettes, he says, you always buying them. You got to like them. I don't eat them myself, he says. The woman says something he can't understand. She's foreign, he tells Tim who goes off laughing. She's foreign, he says to Jenny at the apples. Oh, she says and stacks the shelf with the apples. She's foreign, he tells his dad. The courgette woman, I speak to her about the courgettes,

she's foreign, she doesn't speak English, he says. You don't want to speak to the customers, John, Dad says, foreign or otherwise, that's not your job, John. Store security, that's what you are, John.

Next time she's in, the foreign courgette woman, she smiles at him, a small smile. A smile definitely, without showing her teeth. He doesn't know what to do about that. He wonders if he ought to say something about it to Jenny, to Tim, only he doesn't want to make a mountain out of it, doesn't want to bring attention to himself in relation to a customer, foreign or otherwise. Next time she's in, he nods, he nods but she doesn't respond, so he's lost the chance, the opportunity, he tells himself. He had an opportunity and he's lost it, cos when she smiled just that bit, he hadn't said anything or smiled back or acknowledged the smile, her smiling, so she'd given up on him. He was back where he started.

When she's in next, John thinks he'll have a word, then as he is about to do so, he sees the manager looking in his direction, so he doesn't. He doesn't say anything. He'd like to, but he doesn't. He was going to say something to her, he says to his dad back home, but then he sees the manager looking. You don't want to say nothing to the customer, Dad says. You're store security, John, he says.

The following week, she's there again at the bananas. She looks up and see him. Keep the flag flying, he says to her.

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