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# Check Out

by Toni Houston

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"Next," I call out.

At the end of my aisle I can see an old couple with their trolley full of food. They're locals. I see them a lot. They might even live on my street. They come into my supermarket all the time. But they don't come to my checkout anymore. Just watch them for a second...see? They know I'm free. They can hear me call out. But they're pushing their trolley to Lindy's checkout.

Maybe it's because they don't like movies.

A young teenager with lots of pimples is coming to me now. She's only got a basket. In it there are three cans of cat food and one stick of deodorant and two packets of condoms. "Good morning!" I say cheerfully. "Seen any movies lately?" She looks at me and her cheeks go red. She gives me a crumpled twenty dollar bill and I open the till and it hits my belly. It always does that. I'm big, and I have to squeeze into this tiny space to do the checkout. If I take in a big breath I get totally wedged in this space, and can't move. It makes me feel like the hero in an action flick, cornered in an alleyway as the bad guys move in.

The girl doesn't answer my question. She takes her change, and almost runs out. Maybe she doesn't like movies either. Or maybe she's embarrassed about the condoms.

I don't care about condoms. Or tampons. Or horse meat in your dog food. Or whether you buy free-range chickens or frozen pizzas. It's all one big blur by the end of the day. One big blur of plastic, packaging, paper and tin cans. Sometimes I wake up at night screaming. Every dollar I earn here I spend at the movies. But it's not the blood and gore of the silver screen that gives me nightmares. It's Lyall's voice in the deli yelling out queue numbers. Or being buried alive by a big pile of granny smith apples. Or being locked in the huge cool room at the back of the supermarket where our butchers work, surrounded by sheep carcasses.

The big clock on the wall above the coke fridge is ticking very slowly. I look for my next customer. I can see my superintendent staring at me. He's in his favourite position, a bit higher up than us, in the tobacco counter near the main door. He can see all of us from there. He took me aside the other day to remind me that I had to be cheerful for the customers. There's only one thing that makes me cheerful.

“Good morning!” I boom loudly to the old lady who is pushing her trolley quickly my way, “Seen any movies lately?”

The old lady looks like she’s in a hurry. She’s reaching into her trolley and banging down her goods and she hasn’t even looked at me. Her hands are covered in sunspots and her fingernails are bright pink and her lips are thin and straight like the grey line of the horizon that I see when I walk along the beach, heading home after a movie. I can smell the starch of her shirt and the chemicals of her hairspray. After a day working in the supermarket, I often feel sick from all the perfumes and body odours and hair products that pass under my nose. That’s another reason I like going to the movies. I like the simple smells in there; vinyl seats and popcorn butter and dust burning on the projector.

“I saw a good movie yesterday,” I tell the old lady. The superintendent is watching me again, and I smile. Cheerfully. The old lady stops unloading her shopping and looks at me. She has hate in her eyes. Little sharp blades of hate, like you see in horror films.

I’ve seen those blades in my Dad’s eyes too.

The worst I saw them was when I flunked out of school and told my Dad that I wanted to be in the movies. That’s right, in the movies. He was tearing up my report card and I was telling him that it didn’t matter that I was no good at school and had no friends and couldn’t think like other people because I was going to be a famous actor. And he said “in your dreams” and he drove me down to this supermarket and took me in to meet the superintendent and they talked about me as I waited quietly near the newspapers and then Dad walked me back to the car and told me how lucky I was to get “a real job”.

The good thing is that I can walk to the cinema from here. It’s just out there, to the left. See the sign? Cool huh? So that’s not so bad.

“The movie,” I continue with the old lady, “was a Western but it had no horses in it and...”

“I don’t have time to discuss films with you,” the old woman hisses. That’s right, a hiss, like air coming out fast from a puncture. Or a snake.

“Oh,” I say. Then I’m not sure what to say. I look up at the superintendent. He has a frown on his face. “So,” I try to continue, as cheerfully as I can. “Have you seen any other movies lately?”

The old woman seems to have frozen. Her eyes are bulging a bit, and her lips are quivering. Her lip-line reminds me of the horizon again, but this time it’s the way the horizon looks just before a storm, when you can see waves building and breaking outside the bay.

She has a carton of eggs in her hands. Without taking her eyes off me, she puts the carton down on the conveyor belt between us.

“Please,” she says, and this time her voice is thin and metallic like a robot, “shut up, and do my eggs.”

I take in a deep breath and my body wedges itself against the till. I take her eggs and put them on top of the last bag I packed.

“No, you imbecile,” she says loudly, snatching the eggs back out of the bag. “Not in there. They will get broken. And you must not break them. I have a soufflé to make. I need every one of those eggs. Put them in another bag. Quickly.”

Confused, I place the carton in the bag with her toiletries. I know the eggs are safe in there. The carton has the same square shape as the tissue box. I was trained in how to match shapes like this. So I know it’s right. But she snatches the egg carton out again. “NO!” she now yells. “Another bag, you idiot. An empty bag!”

I can see my superintendent opening up his little gate and marching my way. I can see the fluorescent lights of the icecream freezer flickering. I can smell bubble gum and floor cleaner and my own sweat. My belly is still wedged against the till and my belly button is aching and it’s hard to fill my lungs and my head is sucking me down into a strange space like that quicksand I once saw in an arthouse film about cannibals. I can hear the vegetables dying in their trays and the barbeque chooks clawing to escape their hot plastic bags and the sheep carcasses kicking in the cool room. I can feel everyone pressing the pause button on their boring life stories and taking their seats in the front row and staring at me. Even Lindy in the next checkout. Even Lyall in the deli.

And suddenly I know exactly what that means.

I’m famous.

The lights in the shopping aisles go down. A spotlight pools around my feet. An old film camera whirs, and from somewhere near the tobacco counter the director’s voice yells “ACTION!”

I pick up the old lady’s eggs and throw them against the wall, splattering the bricks with yolk and blood and flowers and stars. Animated monsters duck for cover. Robots run from the scene, blowing fuses. Heartthrobs gather in the shadows, smirking. Even black and white stars from the silent movie era are there, mouthing ‘Bravo! Bravo!’ and clapping soundlessly.

With a new rush of energy, I pull my belly free of the till, and step away from the checkout counter. I take a deep bow, and saunter towards the sliding door marked “Exit”.

I get the strong feeling that outside the supermarket there will be a crowd of fans, waiting to get my autograph. All my customers will be there.

And hopefully my Dad too.