

Supermarket · *Kenneth Bernard*

I FEAR I have permanently alienated my chosen cashier at the supermarket. Not that she has ever really noticed me enough for me to boast. To put it most precisely, my only act to claim her attention also gained me her alienation. Thus our actual relationship spanned several seconds. To understand this in its full context requires a few words.

My district's supermarket is much like a well-run laboratory. Every square inch is brilliantly lit twenty-four hours a day, the aisles are wide, every surface is clean, the air is controlled to a constant coolness, products are totally enclosed and germ-free, damaged goods are swiftly removed, the merchandise is strategically dispersed and logically grouped, and so on. Quiet music induces relaxation, and the packaging and colorful displays are diverting. Seasons and holidays are observed—chicks and eggs at Easter, old Santa at Christmas, green for the Irish, and so on. The help are polite, clean, and accommodating. One waltzes in and waltzes out with hardly a ripple.

Hardly, I say, for of late there has been some unquieting of the waters, although I seem alone in my perception of it. I shall focus on the cashier, since that is where my little tale leads. There are normally ten to sixteen cashiers. They are also responsible for packing. Since they have the most modern technology and have mastered it, they are quite chatty with each other as they rub the merchandise over the automatic price and item scanners. I usually find their chit-chat amusing as well as lively and colorful. But, as I say, there are ripples in the process, akin, I suppose, to the cracking of test tubes in the laboratory or the escape of a significant rat or two. Let me list some of them:

1. My cashier never says thank you anymore, although I always say thank you when she gives me my change. This might seem slight, but it is, in fact, a major shift in an unrecognized war (declared by me). I try, lately, to hold back my thank you, as a kind of statement or protest, a counter-offensive, so to speak, but I cannot. Indeed, I sometimes feel vaguely guilty, as if I am buying the wrong things or buying insufficiently. On one occasion, I shrugged, as if to say,

“What can I do?” Mind, I do not *need* a thank you from the cashier. But I do think it would be decent and correct of the management to encourage her to do so, as a formal token of appreciation for my patronage. The idea that my patronage might not matter is somehow devastating to me.

2. Neither does she smile anymore. If she interrupts her chatter to cast her eyes over me, it is a cold, expressionless, almost hooded stare. If I were to have a heart attack on the spot, I think it would bother her because I would be blocking the aisle. Is it possible I am invisible?
3. These days we have a return-bottle and return-can system for beer and soda. It keeps the environment cleaner. I approve of the system. But I have no doubt that she resents my returning the cans and bottles (even during the designated days and hours), that she would prefer I simply threw them out and lost the money. They make her hands sticky, unless she wears a disposable surgical glove; she has to count; and several times I had included a brand they did not stock, purchased elsewhere, which she had to return to me. I do not keep a filing system on this matter, or separate bags in my room. Perhaps this is why, although she asks others how many returns they have, takes their word, and puts the bag aside for later distribution, she asks *me* only by error and *never* takes my word. I am secretly convinced that some people whose word she takes include wrong bottles and cans and, further, that she doesn't care. Why am I different?
4. She feels that her obligation to me as a customer ends at or near the rim of the bag. Therefore, she *drops* my merchandise in from that point (including my fruit). To *place* or *set* anything into the bag would be an affront to her professional dignity and apparently compromise the commercial transaction. Thus far does she go and no further. Were she to place, say, my fruit gently into the bag, who knows what further intimacies might be possible? Snatching the fruit myself to be placed in the bag last or packing entirely myself is a poor tactic. I do her no particular favor, for she merely gets to her next customer faster. She also waits impatiently for her money while I am packing. In my haste I make errors, like putting soft objects below cans, and waiting customers think I am delaying them since the cashier is free but not serving them. Further, if I am packing I cannot check to see that she is not cheating me at the register.

(Why do I think that she, or her machine, might cheat me?) And if I have a large order, she does not pause in her processing to help me or give me time to pack as I wish. I rush because my purchases pile up on one another otherwise, sometimes falling off the counter or damaging each other. Once rung up, my purchases are immediately on their way to becoming garbage. Sometimes I think I should immediately drop everything in the waste bin and start over again. This, I think, might please her. Anyway, for this reason I try to shop for smaller amounts but more frequently—which only of course increases the risk of other nuisances. Finally (if such a subject can ever be exhausted) I do not like subsidizing the corporation that controls the store. In compensating for the cashier's poor packing technique, I am forced into the position of unpaid labor for the store, thus lining someone else's pocket to no appreciable gain to myself, when all is counted and measured, as it surely is, somewhere (but where?).

5. Sometimes there are unofficial packers working with my cashier. Occasionally they are children but usually they are men. Never are they females. My suspicion is that the men, sometimes, are seeking, or have gained, her favors. Since they are unemployed and unrecognized by the store, they make a basket of a bag and place it on the counter, the idea being that one should drop one's change into it. Usually they are even worse packers than the cashiers, this being more of a pastime than a job or a skill. (There is no question that *packing*, generally, has declined as an art as *packaging* has advanced.) Also, even when they pack two or three items, there is still the expectation of a tip, which, if not forthcoming, might be the occasion for a hostile look from one or both or for a knowing laugh as I walk out (a marked person). I admit to tipping now and then, especially if the packer is dirty and has the true look of the needy, feeling it is, after all, a mild, even if coercive, form of charity. Nevertheless, I do feel it is somehow *imposed* on me, a surcharge by the management, who are pressuring me to administer charity for them. They are derelict in their duty in not forbidding such hangers-on, some of them drunkards or worse. But then, I might not properly be assessing the power of cashiers, who, after all, gain the most, perhaps even sharing in the paper bag gleanings. Or per-

haps it is *their* way of securing the *men's* favors. I don't know. I feel, in any event, I am being cheated of my proper services, which include proper bagging by the cashier or a paid assistant. On the occasions that I do not tip—most—I try to walk by and out indifferently, but I know that I fail. A tabulation has been made and I have been found wanting in some scale. Eventually, some punishment will follow, e.g., they will see me knocked over by a well-oiled cart or a delivery truck and not call an ambulance. And someone will steal what I have paid for.

6. They frequently give me a shopping bag without asking whether I want it and charge me for it. This sometimes happens even when I have half a dozen or fewer items. I do not say anything because I think it is possible they do this because they think I am feeble and the shopping bag will be easier to carry. I am not feeble. However, to protest might injure their pride in being considerate and cause them to pack my things in a regular bag worse than usually. It is simpler to pay for their possibly generous impulses. On the other hand, it is possible this is a procedure calculated to increase profit. It might even be laziness—an unwillingness to choose the right-sized bag to contain my purchases—or an inability to match bag size with purchases. Again, I don't know.
7. I combine two things here. The first is milk containers with wet bottoms. Unless the cashier wipes the bottom with paper toweling one cannot be sure the container is not leaking. And whether or not it is, to put it unwiped into the bag only assures that the bag will become wet, weaken and break, thereby causing a spill as often as not on the way home. There is also the wet counter to take into account. Unless she wipes the counter, all my groceries are slid over a puddle. The second is the custom of putting frozen products and meat into a small plastic bag before putting them in the larger paper bag. Sometimes this is not done, and the wetness from both has the same results mentioned above. Also, meat thus enclosed can also leak juices into other items, like cracker boxes, fruit, napkins, and so on, causing additional nuisances. Again, I usually say nothing for fear of even more unpleasant repercussions. Some stores have switched entirely to small plastic shopping sacks for everything. However, in addition to their being uncondusive to good packing

(they do not stand upright), there is often a pool of liquid collected at the bottom, with all the usual bad results.

8. When I shop, I have a choice of a cart or a basket. It depends on how much I am buying, sometimes on how tired I am. If I choose a cart, I wheel it to the counter line and eventually unload onto the cashier's conveyer belt. If I choose a basket, I place it on the belt, expecting the cashier to empty it. This she frequently will not do. She indicates this either by word or by not activating the belt, so that I must either push the basket forward myself or empty it. Sometimes, even when I have emptied my purchases onto the belt, she does not activate it to bring them forward to the register. On these occasions, feeling the pressure of customers behind me, who want to get started loading their groceries onto the counter, I myself move my things forward. She obviously feels it is my responsibility to empty the basket onto the counter and then neatly stack it in the appropriate spot. (I say appropriate because I have been spoken to for putting it elsewhere.) This refusal of hers is similar to the rim-of-the-bag barrier cited in #4. I do not agree with this, and we have had a few stare-downs over it. On the occasions I have won, it was because I somehow communicated that I would simply walk out of the store, buying nothing. I have paid for this, of course, in the packing and probably elsewhere. And it is the thought of this "elsewhere" that has gradually made me empty the basket more often. I have no difficulty in imagining a stock clerk grabbing me by the neck and throwing me out of the store on sight. I know I would have no recourse. Other supermarkets would be closed to me. Soon I shall empty my basket regularly. The cashier knows this and is patient. Sometimes I detect the sliver of a smile, even when *she* is unloading the basket. She knows she is winning. Everything is on her side, especially time.
9. The handing back of the receipt and change is a complex matter. First of all, it is my right to receive them. I think it is also my right to receive them politely and efficiently. That is not the case. Usually she thrusts the coins, bills, and receipt into my hand all at once. It is easy for her but awkward for me. Sometimes I drop something. The proper manner would be to count and place the coins in my hand first, with the bills on top of them. She does the reverse, not count-

ing at all. The receipt can be with the bills or coins or tossed in a bag or on the counter or forgotten entirely. If I take the time to rearrange and count my change, I am made aware by her or others behind me that I am holding up the line. What I am supposed to do—and what I usually do—is thrust my fistful of money into my pocket and get out. Of course, when I do that there is no way to ascertain that I have received the right amount unless I have deliberately kept that pocket empty, which I try to remember to do. But even if, outside, I discover I have the wrong change, there is nothing I can do about it. To achieve fairness, comfort, or politeness means that I must make a spectacle of myself and risk more. I am at a stage in life where I must minimize my risks or suffer bodily and psychically. Unfortunately, as my capacity to absorb risk decreases, my awareness of new risks all about me increases. It is a bad equation, whose solution I contemplate only with despair.

Now of course there are many more ripples (and ripples within ripples) than these, for example the failure of the express line cashiers to observe strict and clear guidelines (Are twelve cans of tuna fish one item or twelve items? Is a *dozen* of one thing one item but eleven of the same eleven items?—This is important because of the limit on items in these lines), the failure to correct line-jumpers, favoritism (as when someone goes to the *front* of the counter to purchase a pack of cigarettes), and the failure, when opening a new counter, to see that the waiting customers are realigned fairly rather than accepting a mad Darwinian scramble. But I think I can forebear going into such matters to get on with my tale. My reader (should there ever be one) can, I am sure, supply his own further perturbations. I think I have sufficiently established a point. I will, in sum, say only that shopping is exhausting. My mind and psyche and body are on duty on a dozen fronts, and neither music, nor bright lights, nor wide aisles, nor constant air, heat, and smell compensate sufficiently for it. Since I am compelled to eat to live, however, I must do it. (I forebear to mention *other* matters, like a visit to a clinic: suicide is better, and more approved, than illness.)

Be that as it may, what about *my* cashier, the fourth from the right in her shift? Does she have a lover, children, money in the bank, a home, a dog or cat? How old is she? I don't know. But I do know what has been excit-

ing her lately. She has been saving her money. And over the weeks of waiting in line, I have discovered what for. Just lately I heard her boasting of its possession and use. And what is this object? What is this thing that has so stirred her imagination? It is the latest technical advance for the screening of films on her television set. She calls it, with great style, her VCR and talks constantly about it, although I am certain she does not know what the initials represent. For her, they are sufficient in themselves, a magical incantation, like MVP or GNP or SPNF or ASAP, that promises future pleasures as well as stimulates memory of past pleasures. I myself have gone to the trouble of discovering what the acronym means, namely *video cassette recorder*, and I thought for a while I might startle her one day by saying something like, "And how is your *I see cassette recorder* these days?" She would, of course, be nonplussed on several grounds, possibly even seeing in it some sexual innuendo, or ethnic or racial slur. But it would be a revolutionary moment, in any event, an absolute paradigmatic break, as if I had said, say, "I were being to speak, please, thank you, Miss Cunt." However, its consequences were too unpredictable, and I contented myself with listening to her recapitulations of films she had seen in the total comfort of her room. One in particular excited her, entitled *The Basket Case*, about a Siamese twin who remained the size of an appendage or small dog while his brother grew, was in adolescence brutally severed from his brother by an animal doctor, and tossed by his father in the garbage as dead. Predictably, he was not, and because of a continuing psychic bond with his now fully normal brother, he is rescued and transported in a basket on a mad odyssey of revenge and rape. The tale has many novel twists and turns, such as the time when, after murder, he escapes detection by hiding in a toilet bowl. The film ends, I believe, tragically, and my cashier had some sober and sympathetic words to say about the disenfranchised of the world ("Poor little runt"), about which I wanted very much to engage with her.

Again I forebore. But it was all too much for me. I could feel myself edging up, over the days, to some exchange. Somehow, everything I have been describing required this exchange, like a transfusion of blood, to re-adjust the balance a little, to create more space, perhaps to put my neck more firmly into the noose. I broke down, finally, because she brought up a new pleasure connected with her VCR, namely that she no longer had to

forego watching her favorite afternoon drama but could set her machine (or machines—I was never too clear about this) to record every moment of every episode, which she could then screen at night. I don't remember the particular program except that it was about a group of handsome people, many of them doctors and lawyers, in a beautiful suburb, who were particularly prone to adultery, tragedy, violence, and illness. She followed their destinies with a deep commitment, and this one technological breakthrough alone made her joyous to be alive in the modern world. Just a few days ago (or is it months—I still reverberate, but from what?) she was babbling contentedly to the right and to the left, as she processed me, about how she now never missed her half-hour episode. "I watches it whenever I wants," she bubbled. "In bed, if I like. Any damn place. Bath-tub. Eating. Save it up all week, watch it Saturday morning even. *Don't miss nothing.*" She evidently had her apparatus on wheels. I was opposite her, taking it all in, and suddenly, quite without thought (How else could I have spoken?), I said, "And is there somewhere a tape of what you would have been doing had you not been watching what you missed mid-noon?" Her hands became still. Silence ruled at the other counters, also, as she quite literally goggled at me. I was obviously an old imbecile, and for a moment it could not have been stiller had I pulled a pin from a grenade or put my hand casually in her pants as she rang up my charges. Then the work resumed, my cashier still covertly watching me. I added, I fear, insult to injury by a muted heh-heh shortly after my interruption. She pretended to examine my groceries carefully, as if they might reveal trickery on my part or give some further inkling, even proof, of some dark idiocy. I am sure she felt I had cast some aspersion on her character, perhaps robbed or cheated her of something. She was not sure what, but it aroused a smell of hostility in her, as if confronted with an unwholesome, rotting, and troublesome object. I cursed myself for a fool and have done so every visit since, during which I smile obsequiously whenever I catch her glance. But she rarely looks at me, although she is constantly aware of me, no matter how long her line. And she always ceases immediately her happy VCR talk and remains grim until I have passed all barriers. I suppose they talk of me when I am not there. I have thought of changing cashier, even super-market, but it seems pointless. You might, at this late point, wonder why this woman is in any sense my "chosen" cashier. Well, I can't answer that. Perhaps it is my destiny. I can point to some characteristics I have noticed,

for example, her bright clothes, a dashing way of wearing two or three sweaters simultaneously. Her backside is a trifle too large, and she is gat-toothed. Her earrings are large, dangling, and outrageous, and her hair is cut mannishly short. She has a slight lisp. Her thick glasses make her eyes (brown) seem larger than they are. Probably these have nothing to do with it. Probably it has something to do with my tendency to move to the right, or the left, or to stick to pattern. Fate is impossible to know or understand. Who knows all the consequences of cutting one's own toenails at an early age? I have just recently discovered that my cashier is married, although separated from her husband, and that she has a male child, aged nine, whom she dotes on. He has a medical problem. I am hoping one day to catch a glimpse of him.