

Paul Tanner

the lesser spotted customer

she pointed at the spot on my nose:
bad, that, she said.

I didn't say anything.
I just carried on
scanning and packing her groceries.

there's no need to get offended, she said.

whatever, I sighed

and you probably heard
her resultant cries
for the manager
from wherever the fuck
you were.

you hated me first

I get in early BECAUSE I'M NOT ENTITLED TO BENEFITS. I do the job of three or four men BECAUSE THAT'S HOW I PAY RENT. I work through my lunch break BECAUSE THE TAX MAN ISN'T GOING TO PAY HIMSELF. I stay after closing BECAUSE THE GOVERNMENT NEEDS A PAY RISE. I let the boss give me the store keys even though I'm on a sales assistant wage BECAUSE I INSIST ON NOT STARVING TO DEATH. I mop up and lock up then get in early again the next day BECAUSE I'M NOT ENTITLED TO BENEFITS. repeat, but never rinse.

boogie up our flail

it was during all the covid stuff.

I was manning the door of the shop
when she came over to me:

what's this queue for? she said.

to get in, I told her.

yeah, I know THAT! she said. OBVIOUSLY!
I mean, WHY are people queueing? she looked over my shoulder.
you don't seem to have many customers in there.

maximum capacity, I said.

you're telling me that if I wanna come in your shop,
to spend my money – which pays YOUR wage, by the way –
that I have to queue up for the privilege?

yeah, I said.

well, good job I wouldn't be seen dead in your shitty little shop, then,
she said. isn't it?
and she stood with her hands on her hips, waiting for me to answer.

yeah, I said.

yeah? well, hope you'll be happy when the shop goes broke
and you lose your job! she said, walking away.
cos I know I will be!

finally: we were in agreement.

won't want

he comes up to the counter.

can I help? I ask him.

I don't know, he said. CAN you?

I'll try, I said.

EXACTLY! he points. you don't KNOW if you can help me or not,
because you don't know WHAT I need yet, DO you?

message received:

offering help is offensive, apparently.

message received, but he continues to elaborate:

you wait for ME to TELL you what I need,
and THEN you can make your promises to help, ALRIGHT?

I hold my hands up...

ok, he sighs. now then. do you do Flamin' Hot Cheetos here?

nope, I say.

nobody *needs* Flamin' Hot Cheetos.

I'd point this out

but he's already left the shop

and anyway I suspect he knows the difference:

he's stopped to chat to someone outside.

he's smiling.

he seems fine now.

bagged up

wanna bag? I asked.

yeah, he said.

10p, I told him.

no, he said. it's 5p.

no, I said. it's 10p.

thought it was 5p, he said.

curses!

he's cleverly deduced

my grand scheme

to defraud the

general public

by charging everyone for a bag

twice!

and it was all coming to fruition

until he exposed me.

obviously.

hence me still working

here.

bastard's row

not a line of the unemployed
or the throng for your nearest public toilet
or the lemming voters
or an NHS waiting list
or a football crowd
or the string of punters outside your mother's bedroom
can compete with
the queue
at this checkout:

look at their faces
smell those breaths
hear them cries
submit to their demands
feel their fear
fear their pent-up sporting spirit:

it's more or less
all of those queues
and more,
for:

what if the two for one offer
doesn't go through?

my god, what then?

WHAT THEN?

co-shirker

you hate how he does this:
you hate how he
doesn't do anything,
how he lets you unload the pallet
and bring it out onto the shop floor
by yourself
while he just arses about on his phone.
you hate how
he puts you in a position
where you have to tell him: look,
the sooner we get all this out, the sooner we can go home
and you hate how
he looks up from his phone
just long enough to show disgust:
long enough to make you feel like a fool.
you hate how he makes you
hate yourself
before he goes back to swiping at his phone screen
and you start unloading the pallet ...
and then
when management wants to know
why stuff's not getting done,
he tells them
that you
are the one not pulling your weight.
cut to a year later:
now he's your supervisor
and you can hate him
instead of
or at least as much as
you do
yourself.

dec. 2666th

there's a crowd outside the shop.

they're blocking the entrance:
banging on the windows,
tugging at the handles of the locked doors,
making the building rattle.

you can't get near it.

you go sit on the bench opposite,
watching those zombies clawing to get in ...

the shop finally opens.
they spill inside ...
you follow them in ...

the supervisor is waiting in the middle of the shop floor
still
amid the noisy blurs,
cool
surrounded by the rabid rampage
and she glares at you, tapping her watch ...

she won't discipline you yet –
she lets you do the shift first
and waits until you've closed the shop
before writing you up a warning for being late

and you know all these people
who kill themselves at Christmas?
is it really out of loneliness
or for the exact opposite reason?

journey

... AND I CAN'T BELIEVE HOW MUCH THAT HAS GONE UP!
she goes on. THAT, she points, THE PORRIDGE!
CAN YOU BELIEVE THAT?
CAN'T YOU SAY SOMETHING TO THEM?
OH, I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE
GOING TO SAY! YOU'RE GOING TO SAY
YOU DON'T DECIDE THE PRICES!
BUT YOU TAKE THE MONEY OFF US, DON'T YOU?
YOU DO THEIR DIRTY WORK FOR THEM!
DID YOU EVER CONSIDER –

ok, freeze frame.
look at this old woman.
just look at her,
leaning over the counter at you:
her eyes bulging out,
her jaw jutting out,
somehow even her forehead and nose
out,
everything out – all of her features
reaching away from her skull,
the face of a hand puppet
being pulled off a hand.
decades of hurt,
of being used
and cheated on
and cast aside,
of paying taxes
and fruitlessly voting
and deteriorating for the privilege,
a lifelong addict of the bitter pill
only to end up

here,
now,
leaning over your counter
at you,
the guy who scans and packs her shit
at her local supermarket,
believing YOU
are somehow responsible
for it all,
hoping YOU
can either validate
her wasted existence
or at least give her
another bitter pill
to chew on.

you're the guy who scans and packs her shit
at her local supermarket:
you can barely validate yourself
so you it'll have to be
the latter:

piss off, you bored sow, you tell her

and finally she smiles,
she smiles a pinched dotted line
of a smile
as she swallows your bitter pill
and demands to see your manager

...

now the coal eyes sparkle with gratitude
and it's about
damn time.

off the edge

there's always that one prick at work

who has to get all heavy

and bum everyone else out.

like when the rest of the staff are like

"finally, quittin time, let's go the pub!"

he theorises "yeah ... but THEN what?"

pointing out that alcohol is just

a destructive temporary solution,

like a right edgy philosophical poser.

it's usually me.

now I don't get invited to the pub.

which is just as well

since I don't work there anymore.

the hike and the hike

after the eighth customer
kicks off
because the most popular brand
of biscuits
has doubled in price

it's easy to go
the misanthrope route.

but I try to think of
the goodness
in the human:
I consider the NHS.
I try to remember
that there's some barely paid trainee nurse somewhere
working her fingers to the bone
so she's allowed to save a kid's life one day.

I try real hard.
I try real hard
to always be aware of such things.

but sometimes
I don't want to have to think about
dying kids
or the unappreciated angels among us.

sometimes
I just want you to
not threaten me,
you know?