

I was home from work only long enough to plop on the loveseat and take off my heels. Done, I just sat there. Sat and stared.

Friday night and nothing to do. Scratch that; I had people I could call, things I could do. I just didn't feel like it. I was tired. God, was this what being an adult felt like: Friday evening was still the culmination of the week, but instead of an opportunity to go crazy it was just a blessed chance to relax and unwind?

The neighbors' music started up. Early this week. It vibrated through my walls, making my framed prints bounce against the thin drywall. The floating sounds of laughter and yelling coming from next door was like breaking glass, so I grabbed my purse and got out of there.

I didn't really need anything, but the grocery store seemed a logical place to go. It was one of those hip places where dudes wore wool caps no matter if it was ninety-five degrees inside and where the employees wore shorts and Hawaiian shirts, even in the chill of winter. I guessed this was supposed to suggest a *laissez faire* attitude, that shopping at this place was as much about fun and proving you were hip than it was about groceries. After all, don't Hawaiians live in a state of perpetual paradise? Wasn't simply shopping here a protest against the cold and brittle outside air? Its very presence was one of the things that allowed local real estate agents to sell the rapidly gentrifying area to young people—presumed hipsters—like me.

I passed the orchids and cacti and made for the shopping carts. A twentysomething dude with a 19<sup>th</sup> century beard pushed a cart toward me. I said thanks. Knee deep in a phone conversation, he nodded his chin at me.

My cart began to fill. Items seemed to just appear, dropped there by hands that were mine but that felt oddly disconnected. Sulphured dried mango slices; tiny red bananas; Fair Trade cold brew coffee in adorable, highly stylized cans. I reveled in the fact that I could afford this stuff,

that I needed literally none of it and yet wanted it, wanted it in a way I wasn't even aware of when I arrived.

But I abandoned it all when I saw Coach Burch.

There he was, manning a checkout line, making small talk while he rang up items and then bagging them in threadbare reusables that every customer but me appeared to bring with them. Coach Burch's shirt had huge orchids on it, pointing their stamen like tongues. But his was tight on him and he wore it over another, solid colored shirt. None of the younger employees did this. It was as if he'd forgotten his and had to borrow one, or maybe he was making some point by keeping the other shirt visible. It peeped out at the collar, and the edges of the sleeves flared out from beneath the aloha.

We occasionally did this, too, back in the day, us girls arriving at a soccer game wearing our reds instead of whites, and Coach Burch would have to dig through his bag, rummaging through pinnies and first aid kits and his dry erase board until he found a spare uniform shirt, crumpled at the bottom, smelling awful. "That's your punishment for bringing the wrong shirt," he'd tease. "I will not wash that until the end of the season. Next time, you'll remember to bring both."

It was that way he had with us, that line between being authoritarian and yet always cheerful and non-threatening. So when he delivered a threat—we wouldn't start the next game, we need to do more sprints—he could do so with a smile and we knew he'd make good on it and yet somehow it was never a punishment.

And now here he was, a cashier at a checkout line, and it seemed he had no authority whatsoever. His manager, who came over several times to open a drawer or enter a special code, was easily twenty years younger than he was.

So I left my cart and fled, terrified that he'd see me, embarrassed for the both of us. When I knew him, he'd been an architect. It was possible, I guess, that he'd made a ton of money and retired but still wanted to do *something* and so took the grocery gig. But his face was too pinched and his movements too strained. There was no joy or pleasure whatsoever anywhere in his body. On the field, joy and pleasure radiated from him. Back then, he had to restrain himself from playing in every scrimmage with us.

I drove across town to the old grocery store, a behemoth anchoring a largely empty strip mall where few people ventured late at night. I got my groceries—cereal, bread, milk, eggs, that sort of thing. Elderly people floated through the aisles with a slow, unhurried ease. Not one of them clutched a phone. Not one of them was tethered to earbuds. The music piping through the speakers was full of strings, unlike the upbeat neo-pop stuff in the other place.

God, how he must have hated it.

I ate dinner alone that night, on my couch, the sounds of a roaring party pounding through the walls. I thought of Coach Burch all night long.

I just couldn't figure out if the tears I had to hold back were for him or for me.