

Jordan Hamel – Open Division, 3<sup>rd</sup> Place

### **Unexpected item in the bagging area**

‘Pistachios are nothing like peanuts and everyone who says they’ve confused the two is a fucking charlatan,’ I muttered to Brayden as we wiped down the self-checkout machines, filthy with fingerprints and meat resin after another hard day weighing legumes and Pick N Mix.

‘Shit, I don’t know Ingrid, peanut is pretty close to pistachio on the screen, it’s not impossible that people just get flustered because they didn’t write the code down and touch the first nut they see,’ Brayden said on his knees, not looking up, scrubbing furiously at a pesto stain.

‘Sure, I’d act flustered too if it saved me \$3.99 a kilo, also there’s a dick joke in there somewhere, but I’m too tired to make it.’

‘All class, girlboss.’

‘Shut up, I make \$1.35 more an hour than you.’

‘Ooooh that’s pistachio money right there, must be nice.’

I threw a sponge at him and watched as it briefly got tangled in his mullet. ‘You probably get tips from all the old divorcees who come through your checkout buying shiraz, quince paste and crackers for one. I see how charming you are to them.’

The sponge came flying back at me but missed by a half a metre. ‘You leave my regulars out of this, I can’t help being such a nice young man.’

I like working pack-down with Brayden, even though he smells of Lynx Africa and has a tattoo of Misty from Pokémon dressed in BDSM gear for some reason. He’s only a couple of years younger than me and much easier to supervise than the others. I hate having to ask people to do things every day and it’s even harder when you’re asking someone who was alive when the USSR was still around, especially when it’s something I used to hate doing like throwing out the pre-packed surimi or handing out wine samples, but Brayden’s never fazed, he just does it. Meanwhile Kim, who’s been here for 30 years and clearly hasn’t come

to terms with the fact that toddlers and freshers spew in public sometimes, just stares through me and mutters something about the internet making everyone feel special.

When I asked Brayden why he left school before Year 13 to come work here he said he'd been "called to move" back when COVID was around and the people on Twitter were calling supermarket staff "heroes". He also said he got pulled in by the Seek ads that said *Run your own business!!* Not realising the "business" for legal purposes was the checkout station and it was part of the organisation's new policy of only hiring contractors. I later found out he'd got caught with a backpack full of nangs he'd stolen from the hard materials room when the teacher was showing the enrichment kids how to make balsa-wood racing cars and was politely asked not to come back after Year 12 exams.

We made our way to the deli counter after reports from the butchery boys of 'a weird flappy noise' coming from the roof. Despite it becoming a mandatory part of my job description ever since the promotion, there's still something calming about walking around an empty store late at night. No weaving through school-kids and stoned second-years in the confectionery aisle, no rude interruptions from customers asking why coconut milk isn't with the other alternative milks or my workmates asking whose turn it is to restock the Vogel's. It's the one hour a day I have the peace and quiet to actually think, not that I can think about much after ten hours on my feet, but sometimes the space to think is precious even if it isn't filled.

'I think I saw you at my school once,' Brayden said like some minor accusation while balancing up a ladder I was loosely holding behind the deli counter, trying to dislodge a dead sparrow that somehow got trapped in a skylight. 'Some of the Seniors put on a skit about why we shouldn't buy Kronic from the dairies and you were in it.'

'I was dressed as the purple joint, yeah, not my most convincing performance.'

'Yeah you didn't sell it. What was your Oscar role?'

'Oh easy, playing Kevin Bacon's character in a gender-swapped *Footloose*, I spent 14 hours dancing in Logan Park overnight because I'd watched some YouTube clip about the Stanislavsky method.'

He reached deeper into the skylight, his legs starting to shake a little. 'I dunno, sounds pretty derivative, hand me that broom handle or something, I can't quite reach.'

I fished for the mop while keeping one hand on the ladder. 'Bold call from you considering I have your life in my hands, you little shit.'

'You don't have the ovaries to do it, OSH would have a field day and Kim would be supervisor in no time. OK got it! Catch!'

I slowly let go of the ladder as his feet resettled. 'Hold up let me move back a bit, at least make it a challenge, you OK up there alone?'

'Yeah, if I come off the bin full of ham off-cuts will break my fall, don't worry.'

I backed away until I was next to the pre-mixed tropical salad, which seemed like a reasonably difficult distance, and held open a reusable bag.

'Kobe!'

The dead sparrow took one last flight and even though I had to jump to the right it landed with a rustle in the bag. 'How do you know who Kobe is? Aren't you 12?'

'Go fuck yourself, I'm 18 and two-thirds, also there was a TikTok dance trend based on him for a while after that helicopter crashed a couple of years ago.'

We wandered back to the checkouts via the canned goods aisle, dead bird bag in hand, and he told me about the five hours of Counterstrike he had planned with his mates when he got home. We took the bins out to the skips, the dead bird somewhere in a sea of receipts and expired Edam, a special treat for some dumpster-diving flat of students who went feast or famine at the casino thinking they'd dine like kings.

I decided to let Brayden go for the night.

'You sure you're alright to lock up by yourself?'

'Yeah I know it's past your bedtime and I don't want your dad calling me again worried about his little boy.'

‘That’s funny, your dad calls me most nights.’

‘Stop joking about fucking my dad, it’s weird! Now get out of here before I make you change lockers with Kim, I know she’s been eyeing up one next to the water fountain.’ I wave him off as I try to break down a particularly stubborn box.

‘Can you actually make me change lockers?’

‘Honestly, I dunno, feels like more of a Marty-level decision, but I can make you work the butcher section with Gaz.’

‘But he never shuts up about the time he met Jim Bolger! Fine, I’m gonna grab my shit and head off, see you in the morning girlboss.’

Brayden disappeared, I padlocked the overstuffed cardboard skip and sat on top for a few minutes, the automated neon letters went dark and for a second the car park was still and empty, a fleeting bubble of calm, away from the sensory overload of the indistinct symphony of customers and disembodied self-checkout commands that even the dubstep from Vault 21 around the corner couldn’t burst.

When I walked back into the store, down past the empty checkout stations into the back rooms to grab my stuff, I heard some song from *Breakfast in America* and I realised Marty was still here. He only ever played Supertramp when he was stressed or had some insane deadline, otherwise it was normally Matchbox 20 or Shihad. I knocked loudly to cut through the instrumental solo.

‘You all good Marty?’

The music quickly disappeared.

‘Ingrid, come in!’

I opened the door and maybe it was the long shift or still being distracted by the pigeons, but his onslaught of Marvel and DC posters and paraphernalia startled me more than usual.

‘Have a seat, sorry if the tunes were too loud, just gotta bang out this staff forecasting for the next quarter, you know how it is.’

‘Uh, sure...’ I replied, despite definitely not knowing how it is. In the past few months Marty had made a few comments about how ‘this will all be yours someday’ while vaguely gesturing at various aisles as we did the rounds together, mumbling something about finally getting to walk the El Camino now that the borders are open again and he’s got a 20-day Spanish streak on Duolingo. But despite the vague inferences that I was meant for slightly bigger things, he’d never taken much interest in sending me on any management courses or teaching me what was required to please the ‘big wigs’ as he calls them, which as far I could tell was a formally dressed woman named Trudy who turned up in a RAV4 once a month smelling like ranch dressing and printer cartridges.

‘How were things out on the floor today?’ Marty asked without looking up from his ThinkPad screen.

‘Pretty good, no dead bodies or coups to report, although Kim has been threatening to call the Employment Relations Authority if Gaz tells her his Ruth Richardson story one more time.’

‘Nothing out of the ordinary then, that’s what we like to hear. Actually, while I’ve got you here, I know you’re probably dying to go join your friends for a boogie at Gardies or something, there is something exciting I wanted to talk to you about.’

Despite not having any friends that ‘boogied’ and Gardies having been shut for thirteen years I did want to leave, but I should’ve thought about that before I knocked.

‘So, I’ve been on the phone with the national office procurement team most of the day and it turns out they’ve just finalised a contract with a new supplier for self-checkouts.’

‘Thank God, the ones we have are so slow and they’re always glitching when people try to weigh potatoes.’

‘Well these new ones look pretty great, they’re much bigger actually, they have huge bagging areas and a little bay to park your trolley into which is pretty neat. Also, they have a scanner for IDs and a camera so they can identify veggies and nuts and stuff, it’s some real *Blade Runner* shit, they’re gonna revolutionise our day-to-day. But because of that I’ve been told there’s going to be a bit of a reshuffle in the checkout area.’

‘What kind of reshuffle?’ I started picking at the skin between my thumb and index finger like I do whenever I get a bit restless or bored.

‘Well because of the size the new units are going to need their own aisles, so we’ll be cutting back a bit on our manned checkouts. Which will actually be fine because these machines can bloody do it all anyway haha.’

I pulled at my skin harder and even though my eyes were now firmly fixed on him I knew it had gone completely white. ‘How many are we losing exactly?’

‘Well... It’s looking like most of them at this rate. We can maybe keep the express lane and obviously the help desk, but I think that’s about it.’

‘Wow, OK, that’s going to be a change but if it makes rush hour less chaotic then awesome.’

‘Oh yeah it will cut down queues for sure.’ Marty had shut his screen and was looking over at his Captain America poster.

‘So you’re gonna spread the checkout operators around the other areas?’ I knew the boys in the warehouse had been whining about needing some more people on nights.’

Marty put his reddened, hefty hands on the table, his Fitbit barely visible through the black arm hair, and looked at me for the first time since I came in the room. ‘We’ll have to shuffle a couple of them around because they’ve been here long enough they came in under the old structure, so they’re technically still employees, much harder to let them go, plus odds are one of them would take it to court and the legal fees would come straight out of our store’s budget.’

I felt like my thumbnail was going to slice through my skin as I finally realised what Marty was getting at. ‘Marty what the shit, you can’t just fire like ten people, what are they going to do?! They work hard, most of them anyway and they’ve put up with so much recently!’ I could feel my face heating up and I was struggling to hold my thoughts together as they spun faster and faster, I was sure Marty could hear my panicked short breathing.

‘They’re contractors Ingrid, they knew this could happen and yeah it’s not ideal, but the machine order has already been placed, they’ll be here in a week. We can probably justify

keeping them on to help with setting the units up and getting them ready but after that there's an expectation that our staffing costs will come down a lot.'

'You realise that's the retail equivalent of literally digging your own grave! What happened to our staff being "heroes" and the lockdown clapping and hero appreciation day and all that stuff?' My voice was somewhere between begging and fury, I couldn't decide whether to throw one of his Aquaman figurines at him or scream into the desk.

'Ingrid you either die a hero or live long enough to see yourself become a villain.'

'What the fuck does that mean!'

'Oh sorry, I watched *The Dark Night* with Nadine and the kids last night, I thought it might be appropriate. Anyway, I'm obviously just as riled up as you are, but we'll be OK, clear heads, steady ship and all of that. Also, this is unfortunately just part of the job when you're running the show. Try to think of it as a learning experience.'

I wanted to beat him with his ThinkPad but my hands wouldn't stop trembling. 'I already know this company doesn't care about us, how is this a learning experience?'

He opened his ThinkPad backup, more as some imagined barrier between my anger and him than anything else. 'Well as the line manager for the checkout operators it'll be your job to tell them their time in our special family has come to an end. It's a stretch opportunity for you, a chance to put some of those people capability tools we've talked about in practice. Anyway, it's really late, we should both go home, you've got a rave at The Cook to go to yeah?'

My voice and my brain were starting to give up for the night so I mumbled something about The Cook being Uni housing now and left as quickly as I could.

I walked outside and sat on one of the benches to try and collect myself. After ten minutes the impending frost became too much so I started walking home, detouring past the Courthouse then cutting across Queen's Garden and Rattray St before starting the climb up to Mornington. It was necessary to avoid the Octagon on nights like this; it was Fresh Fridaze at Mac's Bar and I didn't need the queue of tipsy Commerce bros looking at my uniform and asking me if I was going to some sort of red card or lock in.

The flat was dark when I arrived, everyone else was out or at work except for a neighbourhood cat sleeping on the sofa on our porch. I boiled the jug for a hot-water bottle and a chamomile tea to try to calm down. I didn't know whether to be angry at the store or Marty or myself. Lying in bed, trying to be as still as possible to avoid the cold, unexplored regions, I couldn't stop thinking about working pack-down with Brayden. Spending half the time indulging in two-way workplace bullying to make the mundane pass by a little faster, I kept remembering breaks spent eating my Sub of the day in the smoko room, staring at the OSH guidelines half-awake, only to be interrupted by him bounding in with some unknown energy, armed with another insane question he'd spent half his shift perfecting: 'Would you rather have three rows of teeth or one big tooth?' 'How much would you have to be paid to get a Jeff Bezos tattoo on your neck?' I thought about the time we shared a bottle of Scrumpy sitting on the skips at 1:00am during O-Week because neither of us was ready to let the thought of another day find its way in and we only talked about how the ginger Scrumpy was the best one and somehow that was enough.

I arrived at work the next day later than usual, tired and nauseous with fear. Most of the team were already there, ready to relieve the day shift. At first, I couldn't see Brayden or hear him over the general disgruntled murmurs of how cold it was for this time of the year and did you see that dried pile of vomit by the trolleys, and I was almost happy.

Then from behind me, like a stone through glass, 'Sup girlboss, how's your old man today?'

I mustered the last ember of brevity I had been nursing to laugh and smile in a way I wasn't confident I would again any time soon.

'You need me for pack-down tonight? I'm keen for an early one but no stress either way?'

I looked deep in my locker, pretending to be searching for something that wasn't there.

'Actually, could you stick around, I could use some good help, but I'll settle for you.'

'Sweet as, should I grab us a Scrumpy for after?'

I couldn't bring myself to pull my face out of the locker, I couldn't bring myself to let him see me. 'Sure, why not.'