



# Scenes From Behind The Counter At 7/11

by James Seidler

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It's a cliché, but working in a convenience store you get to know the people who come in. *They* generally think themselves invisible, secure in the flood of comings and goings, all of the different people that make up a shift. And sure, there are a lot of people, but it doesn't take more than two late-night runs to be known as the condom guy, or mister macaroni, or someone who, based on the regularity with which they buy the big bottle of Ex-Lax (\$8.99) should really consider adding more fiber to their diet.

With the regulars it reaches the point where I could ring up what they came in for before they even reach the register, but doing that would rob them of the anonymity that people come to convenience stores to find, sending them, slightly spooked, to the Walgreens down the block where they can find a cashier with the decorum to properly ignore them.

It's another truth about working in the convenience industry that learning a little about the people who come into your place inevitably leads you to assume you know a great deal more about them. Before long you're sure not only about the fact that wine-lady will come in every Thursday around eight-thirty for a bottle of seven-dollar Merlot, but you know the glass she drinks it in, the meal that accompanies it, and the man who shares it, whom you visualize right down to the rimless frames of his glasses. It reaches the point that when you spot some small verification, such as a muffled man-form slumped patiently in his seat in the parking lot, you begin to trust that all your other assumptions are right as well, leaving your lotto junkies and Slurpie enthusiasts to proceed through the clockwork lives you've established for them.

All of this I say by way of explaining how I came to fall in love with someone I didn't know at all.

Those who work in the convenience industry won't be surprised to hear about my predicament. After all, in the five months I've worked at the Seven-Eleven at the intersection of Waveland and Broadway I've engaged in no less than seven marriages of fancy, some complete with children and tearful deathbed farewells, as well as four-hundred significant long-term relationships and 3,700 hasty trysts in the employees' restroom, for which I hold, Excalibur-like, the single key.

Still, this particular romance was complicated somewhat by the thing she came in for: the newspaper. This was notable for several reasons. First, it meant she came in every day, allowing for the regular contact necessary for chance infatuation to deepen into true love. Second, it allowed her to remain a complete mystery. Every day, she paid for her newspaper with exact change, two round quarters, which she plopped on the counter in one smooth motion as she picked up the paper and left, placing her in the store for three seconds per visit,

far short of the time necessary to lure her in with my counterman's charms.

Every day she'd come in right at the same time, five after eight. Shortly before she was due to arrive I would scan the skies outside the store to be as up-to-the-minute on my weather talk as would be necessary to win a woman of this caliber. But, even as she continued to reel me in with her brisk pace and business casual wear, which, like a blue-wool cocoon promised ever greater future beauty, her gruesome efficiency served to keep us apart.

Day by day I waited, hoping this would be the day she happened to chance upon the true love that pined for her behind the counter, helpfully nametagged "Ken." Day by day, she left me disappointed.

Eventually, waiting was no longer enough and I became driven to take the action that would make her mine. My first thought was to move the newspaper rack from its typical position by the door to a spot right in front of the counter, reasoning that might give us enough face-to-face time for Cupid to work his magic. The shortcomings in this plan were immediately apparent the next morning when, failing to find the newsstand in its regular place, she dashed right back out again without a moment's pause. For twenty-four hours I trembled, sure I'd lost her to Walgreens forever; it was only when she came back the next morning and completed her transaction in her typical brusque manner that I could breathe easy again.

My initial attempt foiled, I moved on to something more thorough. The panic that had followed her initial disappearance had led me to take a critical look at my surroundings, and I wasn't impressed with what I saw. No woman with class wants to be wooed in a place that lacks it, but here I'd been, chasing after a woman accustomed to the finer things in life in a place where the floor sat shadowed beneath a thick layer of grime and the grease on the hot-dog machine streaked three-fourths of the way up the glass.

I began to clean, not with the willful negligence of my enforced duties, but with the enthusiasm of a man driven. Digging out the franchise handbook I pored through it for tips, learning that adding soap to the water in the mop bucket worked better than water alone, and that, even more importantly, the whole process works best if the old water is dumped out each time instead merely being topped off. Another surprise was that what I'd always taken to be a dessicating agent in the popcorn machine was actually a spider's nest, which I took care of by running the machine at its highest setting for three hours straight.

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Within a week the place gleamed. Empowered by the new cleanliness, as well as the fresh flowers and springtime air freshener I put out every morning at 7:45, I was sure I was in. But she still didn't talk to me.

Finally, I hit upon my best idea yet. Instead of moving the newspaper rack over to me in one fell swoop, which had been disastrous, I resolved to move it bit-by-bit, day-by-day, until it finally arrived at the desired position.

It worked perfectly. Every day she was drawn in a little further by the gradual movement of the stand until finally, one day, with the rack in its final position, she picked up her newspaper, then looked up to speak.

Time froze. Her face shone before me like a fine pearl, its smoothness only intensified by the emerald cut of her eyes. Waving her paper in my direction, and hopefully taking note of the fresh peonies I'd picked up that morning, she pinched the supple expanses of her lips together before saying her first words to me.

"You know," she said, "this newspaper rack didn't used to be so far from the door."

"I love you," I replied.

A disgusted look crossed her face, and she tossed her fifty cents onto the counter and left, never to be seen again.

That's how it goes sometimes in the convenience industry. Relationships turn bad. But, instead of getting bitter about it, I just like to count my blessings: a flexible work schedule, all the hot dogs I can eat, and, of course, the steamy sex in the employee restroom.