

Silicon Valley Shopping

Decision time at Safeway. I scan the checkout lines. This is how it works: if there's an empty checkout, or a line with only one person being served, I choose that. There never is, even now at 11:30 PM. So instead I look for an attractive cashier. Safeway doesn't seem to employ them though, not at this branch, not since Rachel (sweet Rachel!) disappeared. OK, so who's in line? I'm confronted with the usual array of late-night supermarket monsters. Where do these people come from, these grossly overweight women with their Chips Ahoy! and six packs of Bud, their mintchocchipcookiedough ice cream and bad complexions?

But at lane 8 an attractive Indian girl (woman, what do I know?) starts to unload her cart. She has those looks. You know: almond-eyes, dazzling white teeth, skin you want to caress to experience its teak smoothness, and a forest of jet hair. Western clothes, too, not a figure-hiding sari, but tight, tight jeans. I join the line behind her.

I feel a familiar welling in my stomach, and, to tell the truth, a tightening of my sphincter. How do you casually sound casual? Self-awareness tugs at my vocal cords. I've read the books (and the magazines), and they make it sound so simple, so natural. Two people, a place, a conversation, the start of a beautiful relationship (this is code for sex, but that's not what I tell myself).

Luckily our wonderful President has given me a reasonable opening shot. His picture is plastered over the news weeklies at the checkout, and earlier this evening I saw his confession on TV.

"What a guy!" I say, wondering if she'll pick up on the irony in my voice. "What a leader!"

She smiles, with mouth *and* eyes – dark brown oceans of kindness and understanding. I allow myself a faint hope.

"Well, maybe now he can get on with being President, at last."

How can I relate the hypnotic, liling quality of her accent? Those twelve sweet words enter my ears and travel as a shiver down my spine. In the, what, half a second before it's over, I can see it all: chatting in the line, she hanging on while my Lean Cuisine is checked so we can walk out together, coffee at Starbucks, and then, who knows?

Do I see the ring first, or her husband? He squeezes between us and places some onions on the conveyor. He mumbles something in their own language. Shit. Normally I remember to look for the ring. She looks at me, expecting another pearl of political wisdom. My throat is sand paper, and I'm sure my face looks like a sweaty red ball. I manage a strangled "Don't you believe it; they're still out to get him."

There's a fat guy in front of the Indians, waiting for his groceries to be bagged. Our eyes meet, and I know from his studied casualness that *he* knows. He sees it all: the longing for connection, the fruitless attempts at starting something (anything), the sweetjesuschristi-wanttodie hopelessness of it all. He averts his eyes, afraid that pathos is catching.

I have to prove him wrong – I was just making conversation, for God's sake, that's all. I start to babble, feeling like a madman but unable to stop. I glance alternately at the girl and her husband, but mostly address the floor. My voice sounds as though I've been castrated, and the words *clintonhillaryimpeachstarrguiltmoniacdressapology* compete with the voice in my head telling me "Shut up. Shut up! Shut the fuck up!" By now the Indians are ignoring me, busying themselves with swiping ATM cards, entering PIN numbers, the things normal people do when they go shopping.

I force myself to calm down. José, who's been proud to serve me since 1993, asks me how I'm doing tonight, but I spare him the truth. As he hands me the receipt, he looks at it and says "Thank you Mr..." He doesn't finish, they never do. I wouldn't either.

Outside the store, the fat guy from the line is getting into his car. Our eyes lock again, and again I feel compelled to act out this charade that I'm just a sociable kind of guy. I start talking to the Filipino nun collecting for whatever it is they collect for. I don't suppose she cares much about Clinton, so I ask her how much money she's collected. Holy Jesus, I can't even talk to a nun without sounding like a moron. This time, I notice, fat boy can't help himself, and he grins. I silently wish him a speedy and painful death.

Starbucks would be too depressing, too many people *hanging out*, chatting cheerfully with their *friends*, leading *normal lives*. Occasionally while I'm waiting for my coffee at Starbucks, I fantasize about collapsing on to the floor, pretending I've fainted. Just to get some attention. Sometimes I think the only reason I don't do it is because I'd never be able to show my face in there again. But tonight I just might do it, so I drive home instead.

The air in the apartment is sultry and oppressive, as though it's aiming to match my mood. The Lean Cuisine tastes like shit. It takes me thirty minutes of channel hopping to discover there's nothing on TV. I lie on my bed in the dark, pressing my forefingers into my eyes and creating weird orange kinetic patterns. The strange shapes and heat of the apartment makes me wonder if I'm not actually in hell after all. I spend a while thinking about jerking off, but don't have the energy. And anyway, none of my usual fantasies, replays of past encounters (yes, there have been one or two, dear reader, please don't think me *infinitely* pitiable), does it for me tonight. I hate the subjects of them too much, for they are women, and tonight all women are hated.

As sleep overtakes me, I remember to recite the mantra I heard a counselor on some radio show for losers suggest: "Tomorrow will be better, tomorrow will be better..."