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places and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination
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YOU walk into the bookstore and you keep your hand on the door to make sure it doesn't slam. You smile, embarrassed to be a nice girl, and your nails are bare and your V-neck sweater is beige and it's impossible to know if you're wearing a bra but I don't think that you are. You're so clean that you're dirty and you murmur your first word to me—*hello*—when most people would just pass by, but not you, in your loose pink jeans, a pink spun from *Charlotte's Web* and where did you come from?

You are classic and compact, my own little Natalie Portman circa the end of the movie *Closer*, when she's fresh-faced and done with the bad British guys and going home to America. You've come home to me, delivered at last, on a Tuesday, 10:06 A.M. Every day I commute to this shop on the Lower East Side from my place in Bed-Stuy. Every day I close up without finding anyone like you. Look at you, born into my world today. I'm shaking and I'd pop an Ativan but they're downstairs and I don't want to pop an Ativan. I don't want to come down. I want to be here, fully, watching you bite your unpainted

nails and turn your head to the left, no, bite that pinky, widen those eyes, to the right, no, reject biographies, self-help (thank God), and slow down when you make it to fiction.

Yes.

I let you disappear into the stacks—Fiction F–K—and you're not the standard insecure nymph hunting for Faulkner you'll never finish, never start; Faulkner that will harden and calcify, if books could calcify, on your nightstand; Faulkner meant only to convince one-night stands that you mean it when you swear you never do this kind of thing. No, you're not like those girls. You don't stage Faulkner and your jeans hang loose and you're too sun-kissed for Stephen King and too untrendy for Heidi Julavits and who, who will you buy? You sneeze, loudly, and I imagine how loud you are when you climax. "God bless you!" I call out.

You giggle and holler back, you horny girl, "You too, buddy."

Buddy. You're flirting and if I was the kind of asshole who Instagrams, I would photograph the F–K placard and filter the shit out of that baby and caption it:

F—K yes, I found her.

Calm down, Joe. They don't like it when a guy comes on too strong, I remind myself. Thank God for a customer and it's hard to scan his predictable Salinger—then again, it's always hard to do that. This guy is, what, thirty-six and he's only now reading *Franny and Zooey*? And let's get real. He's not reading it. It's just a front for the Dan Browns in the bottom of his basket. Work in a bookstore and learn that most people in this world feel guilty about being who they are. I bag the Dan Brown first like it's kiddie porn and tell him *Franny and Zooey* is the shit and he nods and you're still in F–K because I

can see your beige sweater through the stacks, barely. If you reach any higher, I'll see your belly. But you won't. You grab a book and sit down in the aisle and maybe you'll stay here all night. Maybe it'll be like the Natalie Portman movie *Where the Heart Is*, adapted faithlessly from the Billie Letts book—above par for that kind of crud—and I'll find you in the middle of the night. Only you won't be pregnant and I won't be the meek man in the movie. I'll lean over and say, *"Excuse me, miss, but we're closed"* and you'll look up and smile. *"Well, I'm not closed."* A breath. *"I'm wide open.* Buddy.*"*

"Hey." Salinger-Brown bites. He's still here? He's still here. "Can I get a receipt?"

"Sorry about that."

He grabs it out of my hand. He doesn't hate me. He hates himself. If people could handle their self-loathing, customer service would be smoother.

"You know what, kid? You need to get over yourself. You work in a bookstore. You don't make the books. You don't write the books and if you were any good at reading the books, you probably wouldn't work in a bookstore. So wipe that judgmental look off your face and tell me to have a nice day."

This man could say anything in the world to me and he'd still be the one shame-buying Dan Brown. You appear now with your intimate Portman smile, having heard the motherfucker. I look at you. You look at him and he's still looking at me, waiting.

"Have a nice day, sir," I say and he knows I don't mean it, hates that he craves platitudes from a stranger. When he's gone, I call out again because you're listening, "You enjoy that Dan Brown, motherfucker!"

You walk over, laughing, and thank God it's morning, and we're dead in the morning and nobody is gonna get in our way. You put your basket of books down on the counter and you sass, "You gonna judge me too?"

"What an asshole, right?"

"Eh, probably just in a mood."

You're a sweetheart. You see the best in people. You complement me.

"Well," I say and I should shut up and I want to shut up but you make me want to talk. "That guy is the reason that Blockbuster shouldn't have gone under."

You look at me. You're curious and I want to know about you but I can't ask so I just keep talking.

"Everybody is always striving to be better, lose five pounds, read five books, go to a museum, buy a classical record and listen to it and like it. What they really want to do is eat doughnuts, read magazines, buy pop albums. And books? Fuck books. Get a Kindle. You know why Kindles are so successful?"

You laugh and you shake your head and you're listening to me at the point when most people drift, go into their phone. And you're pretty and you ask, "Why?"

"I'll tell you why. The Internet put porn in your home—"

I just said *porn*, what a dummy, but you're still listening, what a doll.

"And you didn't have to go out and get it. You didn't have to make eye contact with the guy at the store who now knows you like watching girls get spanked. Eye contact is what keeps us civilized."

Your eyes are almonds and I go on. "Revealed."

You don't wear a wedding ring and I go on. "Human."

You are patient and I need to shut up but I can't. "And the Kindle, the Kindle takes all the integrity out of reading, which is exactly what the Internet did to porn. The checks and balances are gone. You can read your Dan Brown in public and in private all at once. It's the end of civilization. But—"

"There's always a but," you say and I bet you come from a big family of healthy, loving people who hug a lot and sing songs around a campfire.

"But with no places to buy movies or albums, it's come down to books. There are no more video stores so there are no more nerds who work in video stores and quote Tarantino and fight about Dario Argento and hate on people who rent Meg Ryan movies. That act, the interaction between seller and buyer, is the most important two-way street we got. And you can't just eradicate two-way streets like that and not expect a fallout, you know?"

I don't know if you know but you don't tell me to stop talking the way people sometimes do and you nod. "Hmm."

"See, the record store was the great equalizer. It gave the nerds power—'*You're* really *buying Taylor Swift?*'—even though all those nerds went home and jerked it to Taylor Swift."

Stop saying Taylor Swift. Are you laughing at me or with me?

"Anyway," I say, and I'll stop if you tell me to.

"Anyway," you say, and you want me to finish.

"The point is, buying stuff is one of the only honest things we do. That guy didn't come in here for Dan Brown *or* Salinger. That guy came in here to confess."

"Are you a priest?"

"No. I'm a church."

"Amen."

You look at your basket and I sound like a deranged loner and I look in your basket. Your phone. You don't see it, but I do. It's cracked. It's in a yellow case. This means that you only take care of yourself when you're beyond redemption. I bet you take zinc the third day of a cold. I pick up your phone and try to make a joke.

"You steal this off that guy?"

You take your phone and you redden. "Me and this phone . . ." you say. "I'm a bad mommy."

Mommy. You're dirty, you are.

"Nah."

You smile and you're definitely not wearing a bra. You take the books out of the basket and put the basket on the floor and look at me like it wouldn't be remotely possible for me to criticize anything you ever did. Your nipples pop. You don't cover them. You notice the Twizzlers I keep by the register. You point, hungry. "Can I?"

"Yes," I say, and I am feeding you already. I pick up your first book, *Impossible Vacation* by Spalding Gray. "Interesting," I say. "Most people get his monologues. This is a great book, but it's not a book that people go around buying, particularly young women who don't appear to be contemplating suicide, given the fate of the author."

"Well, sometimes you just want to go where it's dark, you know?"

"Yeah," I say. "Yeah."

If we were teenagers, I could kiss you. But I'm on a platform behind a counter wearing a name tag and we're too old to be young. Night moves don't work in the morning, and the light pours in through the windows. Aren't bookstores supposed to be dark?

Note to self: Tell Mr. Mooney to get blinds. Curtains. Anything.

I pick up your second book, *Desperate Characters* by one of my favorite authors, Paula Fox. This is a good sign, but you could be buying it because you read on some stupid blog that she's Courtney Love's biological grandmother. I can't be sure that you're buying Paula Fox because you came to her the right way, from a Jonathan Franzen essay.

You reach into your wallet. "She's the best, right? Kills me that she's not more famous, even with Franzen gushing about her, you know?"

Thank God. I smile. *"The Western Coast."*

You look away. "I haven't gone there yet." I look at you and you put your hands up, surrender. "Don't shoot." You giggle and I wish your nipples were still hard. "I'm gonna read *The Western Coast* someday and *Desperate Characters* I've read a zillion times. This one's for a friend."

"Uh-huh," I say and the red lights flash danger. *For a friend.*

"It's probably a waste of time. He won't even read it. But at least she sells a book, right?"

"True." Maybe he's your brother or your dad or a gay neighbor, but I know he's a *friend* and I stab at the calculator.

"It's thirty-one fifty-one."

"Holy money. See, *that's* why Kindles rule," you say as you reach into your Zuckerman's pig-pink wallet and hand me your credit card even though you have enough cash in there to cover it. You want me to know your name and I'm no nut job and I swipe your card and the quiet between us is getting louder and why didn't I put on music today and I can't think of anything to say.

"Here we go." And I offer you the receipt.

"Thanks," you murmur. "This is a great shop."

You're signing and you are Guinevere Beck. Your name is a poem and your parents are assholes, probably, like most parents. *Guinevere.* Come on.

"Thank you, Guinevere."

"I really just go by Beck. Guinevere's kinda long and ridiculous, you know?"

"Well, Beck, you look different in person. Also, *Midnite Vultures* is awesome."

You take your bag of books and you don't break eye contact because you want me to see you seeing me. "Right on, Goldberg."

"Nah, I just go by Joe. Goldberg is kind of long and ridiculous, ya know?"

We're laughing and you wanted to know my name as much as I wanted to know yours or you wouldn't have read my name tag. "Sure you don't wanna grab *The Western Coast* while you're here?"

"This will sound crazy, but I'm saving it. For my nursing home list."

"You mean bucket list."

"Oh no, that's totally different. A nursing home list is a list of things you plan on reading and watching in a nursing home. A bucket list is more like . . . visit Nigeria, jump out of an airplane. A nursing home list is like, read *The Western Coast* and watch *Pulp Fiction* and listen to the latest Daft Punk album."

"I can't picture you in a nursing home."

You blush. You are *Charlotte's Web* and I could love you. "Aren't you gonna tell me to have a nice day?"

"Have a nice day, Beck."

You smile. "Thanks, Joe."

You didn't walk in here for books, Beck. You didn't have to say my name. You didn't have to smile or listen or take me in. But you did. Your signature is on the receipt. This wasn't a cash transaction and it wasn't a coded debit. This was real. I press my thumb into the wet ink on your receipt and the ink of Guinevere Beck stains my skin.