

My Right Arm

by Con Chapman

I meant it when I said it. I still mean it. And that smart-ass kid twists it and thinks it's funny. What the hell would he know, the punk. I'll show him--I'll push so much ice through the chute tonight the sweat will freeze on his ass. He'll see. Him and his smart-ass friends coming round here wantin' free ice for their beer coolers. I could fix their wagons so they won't roll around no more. One call to the Chief of Police and those kids would lose their license--that's all it would take.



She only comes up here once a week, around five o'clock on Saturday night. I know what she needs the ice for. She's got that grocery store with one of them little ice machines with the polar bear on the front. She buys twenty-five bags here and I'll bet she sells them out real quick Saturday night.

I could let that kid load 'em in her trunk but he don't do it right. Hell, he can barely bring himself to be polite. She's a customer, I told him. You got to treat her right--that's just good business, common sense. He says the fewer customers the better, as far as he's concerned. Means he doesn't have to work so hard. I told him, you take Mr. Cunningham's money, you owe him an honest night's work. He don't care, that kid. None of 'em do, as far as I can tell.



Anyway, whenever she comes in I load them ice bags in her trunk myself. If I left it to the kid he'd just line 'em up on the loading dock and let her do it. That's no way to treat a lady, I told him. Let me do it, I says and I bring 'em out on a pallet truck to where I load 'em in her trunk easy. She stands there watching. She don't tip but I don't expect it and she's not supposed to. I know it's hard running a grocery store. Hard to make money at it. She gives me a smile every week now. She appreciates it, she says.

She ain't married, I know. She owns that store with her momma. The father died, and they run it all by themselves now. That'd be a nice business--it would. Sure would beat pullin' ice on the two-to-ten shift Saturday night.

I'm gonna say somethin' to her tonight, if that damn kid isn't hanging around where he can hear me. I'll tell her straight out. I won't say I want to get her alone--that's not the way to start things. And I'll wear a shirt so my tattoo don't show. She don't look like the type that would like them. It ain't a girl's name, but it says "Born to Lose". I don't want her to think I'm a loser.

Maybe I'll strike up a conversation-I'll say "You sure buy a lot of ice" or something like that. Maybe if we ever start dating I can say I used that line as an "ice breaker". Then when she tells me, maybe I could offer to deliver her 25 bags at the beginning of my shift. That way she wouldn't have to drive clear over here from South 65. She'd appreciate that. I'd have to tell old man Cunningham he didn't have to pay me for the half hour it'd take. That would make him happy--him with silver dollars in his front walkway, too.

Or maybe I'll just drop in there, casual-like some night. Say, well hello! Fancy meeting you here! I'd tell her my name. The kid wouldn't be around to laugh at me then. That'd be good.

Hell, I ain't gonna do that. There's got to be people in and out of the store all the time. Maybe I'll become a regular-just say hi every time I go in, get to know her that way. Just mention my name at some point so she'd know who I was. Not just the guy down at the ice plant.

I could mention something technical, like about her freezer cabinets, or the produce section. Give her a money-saving tip, like "Did you know you lose a ton of refrigeration for every hour those doors are open?" Or something like that. She could probably save a lot on electricity just by putting in night covers.

Then I could say something like "I know a lot about refrigeration, but I'm hot for you." Naw, that's no good. "I know a lot about keeping things cool-would you like to have a cold beer with me some night." Maybe she don't like beer. Probably drinks wine. I could buy a bottle of pink wine for her in case she ever came over. I'd hate for anyone to find it in my fridge if she didn't.

I know what-I'll call out there some Saturday night around eight and ask her if she's running out of ice. That's just good customer service. I can pull the last load of ice out of the floor at ten and take off early if that damn kid will cover for me. Maybe if I offer to buy beer for him and his friends so they don't have to go over to colored town to get it. I wonder how much extra they have to pay. Maybe five bucks-I'll tell him I'll do it for free. He just has to close up, drop the key in the slot and keep his mouth shut. That ain't too much to ask, is it?

Aw, what am I talkin' about. That kid ain't gonna do me any favors. He'd probably tell on me, then where would I be? I'd be fired is where. Helluva marriage prospect I'd be then. No job, beat-up car, no money. Shit.

Maybe she goes to church. I could pull that off. I can be just as holy as the next guy. Although there's probably plenty of church-goin' guys who've already got their eyes on her. Or women who want to introduce their kin to her. That's the problem-church is always crowded.

Maybe I could slip when I'm puttin' the bags in her trunk one night and ask her to take me to the hospital. Then once I got in her car and we had drove away a bit I could tell her I just faked it so that I could get to know her better 'cause I think she's so pretty. She might appreciate that-think it's funny and all.

Or maybe not. It'd probably startle her when I told her. And Cunningham would want to know why we didn't have enough ice for the chicken plant in the morning. Naw, that's no good. I'll just have to tell that kid to take off some Saturday and I'll cover for him. That way it'll be just me and her when she drives up. And then I'll tell her what I want to say. What I told that kid that he thought was so funny. I'd give my right arm for five minutes alone with her.

