

check-out at the super saver center

by Melissa Corliss DeLorenzo

It starts with a gnawing hunger you can't do anything about.

Bonnie works at the Super Saver Center. It's a bit of a ride from home, but she doesn't mind. It gives her time to think. In her old car, all alone, the tires on the road, talk radio turned low, a whisper. The heater only works sometimes and it never had any A/C to begin with, but there's no money for a new car. She likes to think she'd keep it even if there were. They have a long history.

Bonnie has a face like the bones are right beneath the skin. As though she is too busy to eat, or does not matter enough to nourish herself.

(You can't satisfy it no matter what you try.)

On her cigarette breaks - although they don't call them that anymore - she drinks the weak coffee they make in the break-room. Cheap and watery, a burnt tinge on the back of the tongue. They use the dented cans of coffee that can't go on the shelves. There is powdered cream and packets of sugar to go in it. But everyone gripes. If they had nothing, they'd complain. If they had everything they'd find something wrong with that, too. But not Bonnie; she thinks it's ok. It could be less.

People wouldn't necessarily guess, but Bonnie likes to read. She reads a lot. Everything in the library practically. Novels. She eats them up. In books, it's either a lot better than you got or a lot worse. Either way, it makes her feel good for a little while.

What people usually say about her is *Bonnie is so nice*. Bonnie knows they think she is harmless in a safe and bland way. The way

you might think of a person who has no consequence or whose movements do not make ripples.

Running a cash register takes more imagination than it may seem. Stand in one place all day, except for a couple of short breaks, and you had better come up with some ways to keep your mind right. Bonnie likes to think of connections between customer's purchases. She thinks of a theme, maybe a cookout, and then looks all day for all the things she would get if it were her cookout. A lawn chair, a bottle of ketchup, hamburger rolls. The usual stuff. But then something surprises her — a thing or two she would not have thought of herself. A little mesh tent that gets placed over a plate, colorful paper lanterns hung from a string of lights. A candle that shoos away bugs. By the end of a day sometimes, she can almost pretend she is having a cookout.

She can imagine that bright little flame.

Bonnie does not wear a watch. The clock is unfriendly when you run a register. Bonnie counts twenty-five customers before she seeks out the clock that hangs on the wall in the customer service booth. Twenty-five customers means an hour and a half. It's best when she gets a few elderly customers who take their time. They always have change to count out, even if it's ninety-eight cents. Or, even better, argue. This eats up a large chunk of time, especially when Bonnie has to call over the front-end supervisor.

Bonnie witnesses the small meannesses people use to quell, to dampen their own internal fires. Bonnie thinks that no one could say it works, but they still will keep on trying it, out of habit or stubborn persistence.

They will keep on.

For this reason, Bonnie has learned to keep close to herself. She is there, but deeply, beyond the gloss of her eyes, the gray of the surface of her skin, past the crackle of her words in the fathoms there is the place where voice originates. She reveals enough and

places the real words behind the small insignificant words. Behind her slow ugly smile.

The one she hides behind her hand or tucks into her neck.

You have to have a good memory to be a cashier. The boys on the floor don't always tag all the items. They don't have those scanner things yet at the Super Saver Center. Bonnie can't imagine them ever getting them — this is strictly an old-fashioned operation. So, she must remember how much everything costs or she'll be calling for price-checks half the day, which, although a good time-killer, is not worth it since it makes everyone involved mad. Bonnie is glad for her good memory which not all the other girls have. They turn to Bonnie all the time *How much is this? How much is that?*

They sell just about everything at the Super Saver Center. It's all cheap stuff. It is the kind of stuff that Bonnie, and the others who work there, too, can afford themselves. When a new item comes down a cashier's belt, something especially good, a cute pair of shoes or a knick-knack for the kitchen, they call out to each other.

"Look at these pants! Only seven ninety-nine!" one of them calls out.

Bonnie notices the customer whose pants these are as she stands there, helpless, smiling as much as she can.

Bonnie would never do this.

When the other cashiers put themselves on display like this, Bonnie smiles and nods her head, just enough. It's not that she doesn't like the girls. They're fine and good company. Bonnie doesn't like to call attention to herself. Because she knows that's part of it for the other girls. She wonders why they need that. And at the same time she knows. It's just a hunger.

Everyone is starved for something.

But she wouldn't tell them that.

They wouldn't believe her.

There is truth you can't escape or say any other way and expect it still to be truth.

