

The Produce Business

by Garth Porter

It sounds stupid now but, on my last day in the produce department, I thought I could hook my boss up with one of our regular customers.

Ken was a widower. He had a son my age and they lived together in an apartment. I worked for him when I was an awkward twenty-one year old. I struggled with conversation, and Ken wasn't great at it either.

The first thing we ever talked about was football. It was six in the morning and I was putting bananas on the display. Ken walked up and started moving bunches, two at a time, from the box on my cart to the black rubber riser. We did this in silence while Bruce Hornsby's *The Way It Is* played over the store speakers. I'd worked there for about two weeks.

Ken looked up from the bananas. "You follow football?"

I shrugged and tilted my head like I needed to think about it. "No, not really."

Ken turned to the display then looked out over it. "I'm a Dolphins fan."

He adjusted an over-ripe bunch near the bottom then started toward a display of garlic. He had a bad knee so every step with his left foot looked like it hurt.

Once, I overheard him venting to another manager about horse racing.

Ken and Rich, the grocery manager, stood in the back room. The fluorescent lights in the rafters flickered and cast strobe shadows on the dingy gray walls.

Ken hurled a trash bag into the compactor door.

"A filly won the Belmont!"

He looked at Rich and his beady, dark eyes pulsed with annoyed confusion.

Rich shrugged and threw a cardboard box into the baling machine.

"A filly won the Belmont!" Ken repeated. He took a box of rotting cauliflower and threw it into the compactor.

Rich shook his head and pulled the gate down on the baler.

Ken looked at his cart, found it empty, and cursed in frustration. He pressed the button on the compactor and stomped past without acknowledging me.

Rich turned the baler on and walked away.

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We had a regular customer, Mrs. Oravetz, who came in every Thursday afternoon, just after three o'clock. She bought one cantaloupe every week and asked to have it cut in half and wrapped in cellophane.

"I just like to know what I'm buying," she told me. The other produce clerks thought she was annoying but I didn't care. I let her come into the back room and watch as I sliced the melon and wrapped it.

It took less than a minute, but then she would stay and talk for about ten. She was polite, though, and always apologized and went on her way when I told her I had to get back to work. I learned her whole backstory.

Before retiring, she'd been an art teacher at the local community college. She loved *Dancing with the Stars* and *Family Feud*. She had one child, a son, who lived out west and never called. She had long, gray hair that she would never cut short. "Because then," she said, "I'll have completely turned into my mother." She'd been married but her husband passed after a failed lung transplant. The most interesting thing, though, was that twice a year, she went into the city with her girlfriends and spent a weekend at the casino.

"At first, we just went to see the shows," she said. "But they wanted to try playing cards and—"

"Wait a minute," I said. "You play poker?"

She blushed. "It just came natural to me!"

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When I put in my two-weeks notice, I told Ken I was dropping out of college and moving to the city. School wasn't going well and I had a friend down there looking for a roommate.

"I don't think my son is learning anything over there," Ken said. "I think all he does is drink."

His son and I went to the same piss-ant state school in rural Western-PA.

"Yeah," I said. "That's what most people do."

Ken stood in front of the bagged salad display.

"I remember I used to study for tests. And cram." He made a note in his ledger. "My son, he doesn't do that."

He turned back to the bagged salads.

I went to the back room where Bill, my night shift partner, was already putting his apron on.

"Did you tell him?"

"Yeah," I said. "He barely cared."

Bill straightened his apron. "Did he change the subject to Brian?"

I laughed.

"*My son,*" Bill said, mocking Ken's voice. He threw a crate of bananas on a cart. "*My son's gonna drive me to an early grave!*"

* * *

I saw Ken, once, hiding behind a pallet of russet potatoes when Mrs. Oravetz was in the store. I followed his gaze over to where she was standing at the leaf lettuce, then looked back at him. He saw me and scurried off to the back room when he realized he'd been caught.

When I went over to see why Mrs. Oravetz was here so early, she told me her son was in town and might be stopping for dinner but hadn't confirmed the plans yet.

"Do you have any more romaine lettuce in the back?" she asked. "This all looks fine but," she paused and took a breath. "He was always a picky eater, and I want it to be perfect if he comes over."

That *if* killed me. I still think about it sometimes.

I went to the back to check.

Ken stood at the stainless steel bench that he used as a desk. He flipped through a spreadsheet, looked up and shrugged.

"Even in my old age," he said, "I haven't lost my sense of direction."

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So on my last day, I decided I would try to introduce them. I didn't have much of a plan. Ken worked five in the morning till three in the afternoon every day. Mrs. Oravetz showed up every Thursday right after Ken clocked out. I figured if I could keep him around talking, maybe Mrs. Oravetz would walk by and the opportunity would present itself.

At three o'clock, I wheeled out a cart with melon halves, already cut and wrapped, and positioned myself by the cut fruit display, right at the front of the department where everyone had to walk by when they came in the store.

I moved melons, one at a time, from the cart to the display. After a few minutes, Ken came down the aisle.

He smiled wide and shook my hand. "It's been a pleasure."

"Thanks," I said. "I really appreciate the opportunity."

“Well good luck,” he said, releasing my hand. “Don’t forget about us.”

He turned and started for the time clock.

I asked the first question I thought of. “How do you think, uh, Brian’s going to do at school this semester?”

Ken stopped. “Eh, I just hope he focuses more.”

I glanced over toward the entrance but didn’t see Mrs. Oravetz.

“Maybe if he takes a class that he’s interested in, or something, that’ll help,” I said.

Ken shook his head and started to complain about how his son would never apply himself at school.

I looked up at the clock above the leaf lettuce. This bought me about five minutes. I looked over at the entrance. Still no Mrs. Oravetz.

Ken looked at his watch and shifted his weight from his good leg to his bad leg.

“Well hey, good luck with everything,” he said again. “I got a thing tonight I really gotta get to.”

I tried to think of something else. I considered asking him about gambling but I didn’t even know where to start.

“Thanks again,” I said. He took off for the time clock. I checked the clock again—fifteen minutes after three.

Mrs. Oravetz was a no-show.

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