

Aisle Five

Veteran's Day 1978

by Brit

He was agonizingly slow.

It didn't help that his hands were gnarled and twisted like some demented tree branch clawing at the sky. That, and he must have been older than dirt. I often wondered why he kept on bagging groceries, why he wanted a minimum wage part-time job here at Redmond's. Maybe his social security check or whatever wasn't enough, I don't know. My grandmother gets hers and she seems to do okay. Maybe he was just bored. Still, it was embarrassing for my customers to have to wait on Bob to bag their groceries and I always seemed to be the one to take the brunt of their impatience. Maybe I should complain to Mr. Redmond...

I didn't hear the next person approach the checkout until he cleared his throat because I was watching Bob finally hand the last customer his grocery bags. My annoyance at Bob must have shown because the guy waiting for me lifted an eyebrow and looked at me funny. He was drop-dead gorgeous. I don't think I'd ever seen eyes that deep in color and his dark lashes were so thick I would have stood there staring at him forever.

Well, maybe not forever, but apparently I did stare at him long enough, because the next thing I know, old Bob's cackling away with what's suppose to be a laugh, and the really cute guy in front of me kinda grinned. Cute Guy looks over to Bob, nods, and says, "Hi, Bob. What's shaking?"

Cute Guy knows Bob the Gnome?

"Not much, Slick. How about you? Catch any whippos lately?"

Slick? And what the heck's a whippo?

Cute Guy—Slick, *whoever*—focuses on me and I realize that I should be ringing up his groceries, not standing there listening to their conversation. I felt my face burn as I grabbed his cereal box and punched the price into the register. Cute Guy turns his attention back to Bob. "We're holding our own, but it's still a toilet out there."

"And somebody keeps on flushing!"

Cute Guy laughs a bit then snaps his fingers. "Hey, I was going to ask if you were going down to the 'V' hall tonight for—"

The loudspeaker interrupts Cute Guy's question, requesting a cleanup in aisle five—probably another collision between a shopping cart and a jar of spaghetti sauce. Bob shrugs his shoulders. "Duty calls. You gonna be okay getting the groceries to your car, Slick?"

I looked at Cute Guy. There was only a six-pack and one bag that hardly had anything in it. I think he'll manage.

"You bet, Bob. I'll see you later."

Bob shuffles away toward the janitor's closet, but turned back before I could give Cute Guy his total. "Hey, Slick! You still driving that big, red Ford?"

Cute Guy snorted. "Heck yes."

Bob shook his head like it's the worst thing he's ever heard. "Buicks, boy—Buicks. What's it gonna take to convince you?"

Cute Guy's grin lights up his face. Man, you could get lost in a smile like that. Then, he gives The Gnome a kinda two-finger salute. "Happy Veteran's Day, Bob."

I thought that was really odd, but old Bob seems to stand a little straighter before he nods back. "You, too, Slick."

When Bob finally went on his merry way, I told Cute Guy his total and he counts out what's in his wallet, then starts digging through his pockets to come up with the rest. Since there weren't any other customers in line, I thought I'd try and make some time with him while he searched. Maybe I'd get lucky and get his phone number. "I forgot today was Veteran's Day."

Cute Guy looks up from counting the change in his hand. "A lot of people do."

"I mean, it's not like it's a 'Hallmark holiday' or anything." Cute Guy just nods and continues digging for change. I was losing him. "Uh, I'm really sorry about Bob. He can be pretty slow sometimes."

Cute Guy's still pleasant enough, but something about him subtly changed when he glances at me again. "Bob does fine. I don't mind waiting."

"Sure. I mean, it's just that some people don't have the patience to wait on an old timer like him is all."

"Yeah, well, some people need to give an 'old timer' like Bob a bit more respect." Cute Guy gazes past me to where Bob had disappeared. "That guy's a hero."

The Gnome? I glanced over my shoulder. "Bob?"

"How well do you know him?"

I couldn't remember anything more about him than that he usually had corn beef sandwiches for supper because they stunk up the entire break room. When I didn't respond right away, Cute Guy continues after handing me a fistful of change.

"There's a lot of things I don't know about Bob, either. But I know what's important. I know that Bob served during World War Two. I know that he received a Purple Heart. I know that he helped liberate people from a Nazi death camp. I know that he misses his wife after she died twelve years ago. I know that she used to hold him when the nightmares came. And that they still do."

I had turned away from him as he spoke and was staring toward aisle five. "I didn't know."

Cute Guy's voice was soft. "Now you do."

He was gone when I turned back around and placed the "Register Closed" sign on the counter. I had someone to thank down in aisle five.

~ Brit

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