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Bipin Aurora

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Aurora: A small Market

A SMALL MARKET

Bipin Aurora

The woman with the baby carriage came to the register. She used the carriage in different ways: to carry the baby, to carry the baby and the groceries, to carry only the groceries. Today, since the baby wasn't there, it was used—probably—only for the last purpose.

"So what do you think?" said the woman. "Are you scared?"

"Of what?" said Kim.

"You know," said the woman.

"No, I don't," said Kim.

"The other day. Wednesday night. You mean you really don't know?"

"No, I don't," said Kim. His heart sank.

"The holdup, the robbery. Everybody knows."

"Oh," said Kim. He was barely audible.

The woman paid for her goods. "I don't know how you can put up with it," she said. "You should go back to school, get another job."

The man from the liquor store came. He was muttering. Kim rang up his Coke and cupcakes. "Thank you," Kim said. The man said nothing and left.

It was always busy at this time: three-thirty in the afternoon, four. The children were coming home from their schools. Also, it was the change of the shift.

Dale, the manager, was in the back room. He was making the deposit, filling out the vendor sheets. Kim wanted to talk to him, to ask him. He had said nothing when Kim had come in an hour earlier.

Mike, who also worked there, came in through the store doors. He winked at Kim; Kim smiled. The line was long and, instead of walking past the customers, Mike made an immediate left turn. He went past the sodas and past the ice cream, making a right and going along the detergents and the eggs and the cheeses. In this way he walked to the store room—and to the small office there—in the back.



Kim had begun at the store eighteen months before. He had learned a lot. But the customers? They were not nice.

“Are you married?” they said. “Do you work here?” they said. “I would never work here,” they said.

They were proud people. “Are you Chinese?” they said. “Are you Japanese?” they said. “You did not finish high school—why don’t you go back and finish high school?”

In fact, Kim was in college completing his second year. But they were busy and important people. What did they care?

But, yes, Kim had learned a lot at the store. He ran the cash register and he stocked the shelves. He stamped the prices. He swept the floors and he mopped them. He checked the vendors when they came in with their deliveries and made sure that the store was not cheated. He reconciled the receipts at the end of the day.

He had learned a lot about food. He had learned about tuna fish and sardines and kidney beans. He ate kidney beans at home, but, before, he could not tell the beans apart. Now he could even tell a kidney bean from a lima bean. He had learned to tell apart the vegetables as well. The fruits. The different sizes of milk.

So much.

But the customers—.

Mike came up to the cash register. He had put on his green smock, tied in the back with a string. “You want me to relieve you?” he said.

“Sure,” said Kim. “Only ten minutes.”

Kim slid up the narrow aisle between the two cash registers. He made a left and walked towards the store room in the back. There was a lock there—newly installed about two weeks before. Kim used his key to get in.

Dale was in the small office next to the room. He was a man of medium height with short black hair—almost a crew cut. He was

licking the seal around the afternoon deposit. Kim wanted to ask him, but he did not want to seem too obvious. It was a sensitive and unpleasant topic.

Kim took a shopping cart and began emptying some cans into it: peaches, peas, dried milk. He was pretending that he was filling the cart to take up front and stock the shelves. He made only enough noise to let Dale know that he was there, being careful not to seem too obvious.

“So what’s new?” said Dale, glancing over his shoulder in Kim’s direction.

“Not much,” said Kim.

“How’s school coming?”

“It’s all right,” said Kim. “Not good, not bad.”

“You passing everything?” Dale swiveled in his chair to face Kim.

“Too early to tell,” said Kim. “We haven’t had exams yet. First exams are next week.”

Kim stood on his toes and peered at the higher shelves, as if to make sure that he had not missed anything.

“You’ll do all right,” said Dale. “Just study hard.”

“I’ll try,” said Kim.

Kim turned the cart to face the door. He slowly pushed the cart as if to go back out.

“I guess you’ve heard,” said Dale, when Kim was almost to the door.

Kim stopped.

“When it rains, it pours, I guess.”

He knew what Dale was talking about. Of course he knew.

He pulled back the cart and retraced his steps. He stopped at the office archway, next to Dale. “What happened?” he said. “Was it very bad?”

“At least a little funny,” said Dale. He laughed softly. “There were these two black guys—niggers, I say, they’re always the same. They

pulled out a gun and said, 'This is a stickup.' So Mike—he was behind the counter—he says, 'Hell, no.' They slapped him and asked him a second time. 'Before I give it to you,' says Mike, 'I'll put it in my own pocket.' So they grabbed him by the throat, pushed him down. Then they took the money. All of it."

"Was anybody else in the store?" said Kim. His heart was pounding.

"A young couple—I'm sure you've seen them before—but they were by the egg section. Didn't see a thing. An old man was by the frozen foods but he didn't see a thing either. He's too blind anyway. The old man walks up with his purchase and gives Mike a \$10 bill. When Mike couldn't change it, 'What kind of place is this?' says the old man. 'You can't even change a measly ten.'"

As he spoke, Dale imitated the speech of the old man. He laughed.

"Is Mike all right?" said Kim.

"Oh, he's all right," said Dale. "Only next time, I told him, don't be such a hero. Give the guy the money."

Dale laughed again, but it was not a funny laugh. It was short and choppy and unnatural.

There was a long pause. Dale had spoken. What was there to add?

"Well, I better go up front," said Kim at last. "Mike is waiting for me."

"I'll walk out with you," said Dale. "I've got to make this deposit."

The safe was in the front, to the right of the second register and near the beginning of the produce section. It was a funny place to have a safe, in the open like that.

Kim walked up to the front, stocking along the way the few cans he had brought. Then he went back to the register.

The lines at the register were getting long now. Mike was fast but

not as fast as Kim. Kim could, if he wanted, add the totals in his head even before the register. In the early days, to impress the customers, he had sometimes done just this: tax and everything. But that was so long ago. The customers were not so important now—he had given up the habit.

Kim took over at the register. Mike helped with the bagging for a while. Kim rang, Mike bagged. Kim rang, Mike bagged.

At last the lines got smaller. Mike left and went to restock the drinks cooler. It had been a busy hour. A lot of people had bought cold things.

The cooler was in the middle third of the store. As you came in you had to walk up about fifteen feet and go left about five. It was a fairly big cooler: five sections, each separated from the outside by a glass door, and each with three shelves. On the left two sections were the milk cartons; in the middle two sections were the fruit juices and fruit drinks; and in the extreme right section were the miscellaneous milk products.

Kim liked the cooler. It was here that he had learned to visualize, for the first time, the different sizes: pints, quarts, half-gallons, gallons. He had learned also about half-and-half milk and—during the Christmas season—about eggnog.

Seeing that Kim was watching him, Mike began to make faces from inside the cooler. Kim smiled. Mike was a middle-aged man, about 40, with short, graying hair. He was a little chubby, but not fat, and Kim liked him. Mike did not think that Kim was handsome, but he was nice to him as well. He told him jokes. Sometimes he played pranks.

Two girls from the Catholic school came into the store. They were dressed in light blue uniforms. They walked towards the cooler. When they saw Mike making faces, one pointed to him: “He was the one who was slapped,” she said. “A real case study,” said the other.

Seeing the girls, Kim’s heart began to pound again. He cleared his

throat so as not to get a lump there.

"Hello," he said to the girls as they came to the counter. They smiled but did not say anything. Kim began to blush. He put their milk and bread in a bag. "Thank you," he said, but the words stuck in his throat. The girls took their bag and left. Outside, as they closed the door, they began to laugh.

"Proud girls," said Kim.

As Kim's eyes turned towards the cooler, he saw Mike again. Mike smiled, making a face. Kim smiled and, this time, made a face in return. Mike laughed.

Two more girls came in from the Catholic school. They were not in their uniforms. They were with their male friends, and they were talking loudly.

Again, Kim's heart began to pound.

"Hello, amigo," said one of the girls when they finally came to the counter.

Kim smiled and nodded.

"Bonjour, amigo," said one of the friends. "You no speak?"

"I speak," said Kim.

The friends and the girls all laughed.

"Are you Chinese?" said one of the girls.

"Japanese? Korean?" said the other girl.

Kim was ashamed, not so much of being Korean but of looking like one. "Korean," he said quietly.

"Are you married?" said the girls. "Do you have a girlfriend?" they said.

Kim was ashamed of his looks and the questions made him blush. He did not answer.

"Rouge," said one of the friends, and they all laughed.

When they left, Kim's face felt warm. His heart was pounding even more.

"Proud people," said Kim. "They do not know that I also speak French. That I go to college. And how do they think that I am

married? I lied about my age even to get this job.”

“Proud people,” said Kim again. “I do not like them.”

The time passed. A few minutes after six, Dale came to the front. He had taken off his smock but he was still wearing a tie. He always wore a narrow tie, usually black, sometimes blue. It was a clip-on tie, not the type you knot yourself. “Those knots are a nuisance,” Dale said.

Dale limped as he walked. The limp seemed to be getting worse. It was an old disk problem, but the company would not pay for it. “It is a chronic disease,” they said. “You had it before you joined us.”

Dale had been with the company for some time now, almost eleven years. When Kim began he thought—because the person who got him the job had told him—that managers made a lot of money. But Kim did not think that Dale made a lot of money. And he thought that Dale was always working: six days a week, seven days. Ten hours a day, eleven.

One day Dale had explained it to him. “It is the budget,” he said. “They give you so much money—so many dollars—for the employees. After that, it comes out of your own pocket.”

“But it is not fair,” said Kim.

“I guess not,” said Dale. “In the smaller stores it is all right. But this is not a small store—there is so much more work. It is like a small market.”

Kim had gotten so upset that he had sent a letter to the District Supervisor. Six handwritten pages, maybe seven. “It is not fair,” he had said, “making a man work like a slave.” He had sent the letter through the company mail.

The District Supervisor had made a special trip and come to see Kim. “I appreciate your comments,” he said, “I really do. But it is not like slave labor. Just a budget, a management tool. Even I am under a budget.”

Dale had appreciated the letter, or so he had said to Kim. But

nothing had happened, nothing had changed.

“Everything okay?” said Dale, coming up to Kim and standing in the aisle between him and the second register.

“Sure,” said Kim. “Everything okay.”

Mike also came over. “Everything’s fine, boss,” he said. He saluted.

Dale made a mock fist at Mike, as if to hit him.

Mike covered his face and ducked.

“Carry on, troops,” said Dale.

Kim smiled.

“Ciao,” said Dale, and walked out of the door.

Friday nights were always busy—always people going in and out. Kim remained at the register. The people came, they came.

Mike restocked the drinks cooler. Then he unpacked boxes, stocked the shelves. Then he emptied the register for the eight o’clock deposit.

When Mike left to go to the back and make the deposit, Kim became nervous. It was dark outside now. “But it is all right,” he said to himself. “Nothing will happen: too many people.”

By nine o’clock things had begun to settle down. Mike came up to the register. “You want to take a little break?” he said.

“Sure,” said Kim.

Kim walked around the store and collected himself a sandwich, a bag of potato chips, and an orange drink. He went to the register, paid for these. Then he walked to the back room.

The employees seldom paid for their goods. Kim was different. Sometimes the employees even took things home at night.

Kim went to the office in the back. He sat in the simple wooden chair, he ate his food. In ten minutes he was back.

It was 9:15 now, and the store was almost empty. It had begun to rain outside.

Mike was leaning back against the second counter, smoking a cigarette. He was a chain-smoker—up to two packs a day.

“Feel better?” said Mike.

“Yes,” said Kim. “How do you feel?”

Mike took a deep puff and blew out the smoke. “I’m okay,” he said after a pause.

Kim also paused. “Were you scared?” he said finally. He spoke carefully, timidly. “Wednesday night?”

“So you want to know, just like the rest,” said Mike. He laughed.

“No, not like them,” said Kim.

Kim took his right hand and rubbed the back of it across his face. At the same time he cleared his throat. He did not want Mike to see the lump that had gathered there.

“I wasn’t scared then,” said Mike. “But a few minutes later I was shaking.”

“And where was Gustavo?” said Kim. Gustavo also worked at the store.

“He was in the back, resting. Sleeping probably.” Again Mike laughed.

A customer came and Mike rang up his goods. “Thank you,” he said. The customer said nothing. He opened his umbrella and hurried out of the store.

The rain had become much harder now. Every few seconds, thunder could be heard. Mike exhaled from his cigarette, looked at Kim. He smiled.

“The people,” said Kim, looking more at the floor than at his companion, “are they cruel to you? Do they ask you questions? About the holdup? Laugh at you?”

“You think that they are cruel?” said Mike.

"I think so," said Kim. Again he spoke carefully, timidly. "They—like the man who just left—they do not even say 'thank you'."

"They're all right," said Mike.

"No, they are not," said Kim. "Not even the neighbors are nice."

"You mean the man from the liquor store?" said Mike. "I wouldn't worry about him."

"But I mean the others, too," said Kim. "The dry clean man, the drugstore man. The barber. Two weeks ago I went to the barbershop and he asked me if I liked getting robbed. I asked him for a haircut—he looked offended. I got the haircut; I even gave him a nice tip. He got even more angry—he did not even look at me."

"He's all right," said Mike.

"They own their stores; we don't. We just work here. We are low-class people. Is that it?"

"Oh, they're all right," said Mike. "Here comes a customer."

Mike rang up the goods. The customer said thank you, commented about the weather. Then, covering his head with a newspaper, he hurried out.

"See?" said Mike. "Now he said 'thank you'."

"He does not live here," said Kim. "He is the exception."

Kim tried to laugh, but he was getting emotional now; his voice started to crack. The thunder had increased and streaks of lightning could be seen across the sky. The store was empty.

"This is our home now," said Mike. "Noisy out there, quiet in here." He took a long puff from his cigarette. He smiled.

"Yes," said Kim. His voice fell. And then, slowly, quietly: "Tell me, Mike, why do the people not like us? Why are they always rude?"

"I don't know," said Mike. "Not rude, maybe just negligent."

"What does that mean?" said Kim.

"That means that they don't mean to be rude; they just don't know better. They're too busy with their own lives."

"But that is no excuse," said Kim.

“Maybe not,” said Mike. “But they’re not all bad.”

He dropped the cigarette butt and crushed it under his foot. He looked at the rain—a few drops had sprinkled inside from the door opening when the customers went in and out.

“I don’t know about the neighbors either,” he said. “Maybe it is because, as you say, they own their stores. They are a part of the community. We—we are just employees. We just work here; we’re open late. And we get robbed.”

“People enjoy that? Us getting robbed?”

“Maybe,” said Mike. “It’s human nature. It’s exciting. You might enjoy it, too, if it happened to someone else.”

“I don’t think so, Mike.”

“I don’t know, Kim. You say people are rude, but how much attention do you pay to the employees when you go to another store? When you get on a bus? When you go past a toll booth? It takes time and effort to be kind. It is easier to be, well, negligent.”

Kim did not say anything. He looked at the floor.

“Forget about it,” said Mike. “You go to college and get your degree. I’m the old man—gray hair, 40 years.”

Mike lit a second cigarette and took a deep puff. He looked at the rain outside. It showed no signs of letting up.

The days passed. Kim went to school, he came to the store. He went to school, he came to the store. He worked four days a week—sometimes in the daytime, sometimes at night. He minded the day shift less: he would work with Dale, and it was broad daylight. He felt less nervous.

Dale was a nice man. Sometimes he got angry at the employees and he lost his temper. “You work for me, or I work for you?” he would say. He never lost his temper at Kim, though. He let him work any hours he chose: full-time in the summer and whatever hours suited him during the school year. Dale said that Kim was a good worker and that he never complained.

One time Dale asked Kim about taking computer classes. "You think that I could take them?" he said. Another time he said that he might leave this small place and go work for a supermarket. "The aggravation here," he said, and his voice trailed off. Kim encouraged him to quit.

"But I won't be manager," said Dale.

"Not at first," said Kim, "but you can work your way up."

"I don't know," said Dale. "I don't know."

Kim wanted to help Dale, but he did not know what to do. He did not know what to say.

Dale was the manager, but most of the time Kim worked not with him, but with Mike. Kim liked working with Mike as well. Mike was a funny man. Sometimes Kim would say the Buddhist chants, and Mike would try to copy him. They would both laugh. Kim especially liked Mike when he counted the money for a deposit or at the end of the day. He made sure that the bills all faced the same way. He licked his right index finger with his tongue to prevent the bills from sticking. And he counted the bills—again and again, again and again. Sometimes, as he counted, beads of perspiration gathered on his forehead. Even his lips moved silently.

"I get goose bumps watching him," said Kim one time.

One day as they were working two customers came in. They were well dressed, middle-aged. They were arguing with each other. They argued and they argued. Kim looked at them for a long time.

Other customers came. One was an old woman, she walked with a cane. One was a boy—about ten years old, perhaps eleven. He had come to get ice cream. Customers and customers—from where did they come?

One of the customers dropped a carton of milk. The carton broke and the milk splattered all over the floor. Kim hurried to the back and got some paper towels. He also got a bucket and a mop.

First he got on his knees and tried to clean as much as he could

with the paper towels. The paper towels he had brought were all soaked. He hurried to the back and got more towels.

There was so much milk, people were walking in it, stepping all around it. Then he used the bucket and the mop. It took a long time—20 minutes, almost 25. But at last it was all done. He was pleased that it was done.

“Success?” said Mike.

“Success,” said Kim. And they both laughed.

The days passed. There were small successes, and Kim was grateful. One day passed, nothing bad happened. One day passed, nothing bad happened. If nothing bad happened, was it not for the best?

Kim worked at the cash register, Mike bagged. He worked at the cash register, Mike bagged. When it slowed down, Mike went and restocked the drinks cooler.

Sometimes, for a change, they switched around. Now Kim did what the other had done.

One day it was the day shift, and Dale and Kim were working together. Dale was not feeling well. “You go home,” said Kim. “I’ll take care.”

Dale protested, but Kim would not hear of it. “You need your rest,” he said. “You need to get better.”

“But the others won’t be in for another few hours.”

“That’s all right,” said Kim. “I’ll manage.”

At last Dale agreed. It was drizzling and business was slow. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad.

Dale left and things were indeed not so bad. Customers came, they left. They came, they left. Kim was a good worker. He could take care of them.

It was two o’clock in the afternoon. A group of teenagers—all black—came into the store. Maybe five of them, maybe six. They roamed and roamed around the store. Kim locked the register and kept his eyes on them. They asked him prices and then put back the

goods. They asked him prices and then put back the goods.

They roamed around the store for almost ten minutes. Then they came to the register and formed a semi-circle around Kim. One of them was wearing a blue jacket. He had his hand in the jacket pocket.

"This is a stickup," he said.

"You're kidding?" said Kim.

"No kidding," he said. He pointed to the register: "All of it, chinko."

Kim opened the register and gave him all the money. His hands were shaking but, for some reason, his heart was not pounding—not at all. He remembered that detail later—he remembered it many times.

The teenager removed his hand from his pocket, showed a gun. He waved the gun around, and then threw it up in the air. The gun bounced on the edge of the counter and then it fell to the floor.

The gun was plastic.

The teenagers laughed. They took the money and they ran out. Kim called the police. When he spoke, they had difficulty understanding him.

Two days later Kim was given a lie detector test. Dale objected, but the company insisted on it. It was "company policy."

It was Kim's 18th birthday. He told Ahmed, one of the other people who sometimes worked there. He told him the occasion—not the age.

"Happy birthday," said Ahmed. Was there irony in his words?

A few days later, Kim went up to Dale. Dale was in the back room, preparing to take the trash to the dumpster. He had put on his leather gloves; he was standing next to the canvas trash cart with wheels. The cart was overflowing, and it had begun to smell a little.

"I have to leave," said Kim.

"Leave?"

“I have to leave.”

There was a pause. Dale understood. Of course he understood. Kim did not like the place. And he was afraid—he was always afraid.

“I might leave, too,” said Dale after a while. But there was no conviction in his voice. There was only sadness. Only resignation. Only that.

Many months passed—six months, maybe seven. One day Kim got a call at home. It was Ahmed. “Dale got his operation,” he said. “The company paid for it.”

Kim was happy, and he sent Dale a get-well card. He thanked him for everything. He said that he had, after much looking, finally found another job. He also said other things.

But he did not want to sound too sentimental. So he signed his name backwards.

A few days later Kim picked up the phone. It was Dale. “Is Mik there?” he said. He put a special emphasis on the word. They both laughed. They talked for quite a while—for over half an hour. They promised to keep in touch.