

When it is What it is

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True to her default mode, Maureen Landers pulled when she should have pushed. The door shuddered but did not open. Maureen squared her shoulders, shoved the door and strolled with counterfeit confidence past the height markers on the door jamb of Ray's Kwik n' Save.

Maureen's heart slumped when she beheld the clerk who drooped behind the checkout counter. What could Life possibly have against a man so young and otherwise so lanky, that he should be burdened with so many chins? Briefly, wistfully, she contemplated the capriciousness of bone structure as she traced her fingers down her throat and caressed a small flap of flesh that, in her younger days, had maintained an inseparable bond with her neck. She nodded to the clerk but did not ask him where one might find the chilled beverages. It should be a small matter to surreptitiously stroll about and spot the refrigerated cases without looking like the kind of person she was — someone who does not shop at convenience stores.

Convenience store. The term had never sat well in Maureen's mind, yet for the first time in her fifty-six years she understood it. Overcome by a sudden urge for a diet cola, she had pulled an only slightly illegal u-turn when she spotted the market, which was conveniently located in a corner strip mall between Tienda La Raza and Thai Princess Buffet.

Two pre-teen girls loitered in the candy aisle of Ray's Kwik n' Save. The taller girl sported a khaki cargo pocket pants with a matching shirt and vest, the other wore a white polo shirt and navy blue skirt-shorts (Maureen loathed the hybrid term "skort," which she found vulgar). All items of the girls' clothing were emblazoned with the Girl Scout insignia. Evidently, uniform options had been updated since Maureen's Scouting stint in the fifth grade. The previous, mandatory attire — a stolid, short-sleeved, high-waisted, jade green dress — had the egalitarian effect of being unflattering to all body types, and thus served as a screening factor. Those who balked at wearing the uniform obviously weren't Scouts material.

"How much wood could a woodchuck chuck." Khaki-clad Scout raised a box of red licorice to her nose. "Dad says that's *the* classic tongue twister. But it's not difficult, just stupid."

"Like the snails one," Second Scout added. "'Six slippery snails slid slowly seaward.' Or, 'Betty Batter had some butter, but she said, this butter's bitter, if I bake this blah blah blah.'" She picked up a Butterfingers bar and sniffed the wrapper. "They're not that hard to say. Even if you did mess up, it's not like you'd say anything funny."

"Try this one, as fast as you can," Khaki Scout offered. "A slitted sheet, a sheet I slit, upon a slitted sheet I sit."

"Just say shit."

Two twelve year old heads swiveled in unison.

"The point is to get her to say 'shit,' isn't it?" Maureen shuffled past the girls, smiling at their befuddlement. She was reminded of the look on Drew's face, earlier in the week, when she'd informed her husband over their simple and sensible breakfast of

oatmeal and green tea that she was applying to the engineering program at the state university.

"The engineering program?" Drew had managed to keep his eyebrows level.

"It's an easy commute; the light rail has a stop at the university." Maureen did not want to sound defensive, and decelerated her voice. "I've always talked about going back to school. PSU is recruiting women and minorities to major in engineering, and for 'mature students' – that's what they call us, not 'older' or even 'returning' students – there are special..."

"I assumed if you went back to school you'd get your Master's. In Education."

"No, it will be an entirely new degree." Maureen tapped her spoon against her bowl.

"But, to major in engineering?" Drew sipped his tea. "It's hard work."

"Meaning, what? Sorry." Maureen shifted forward in her chair and tried to smooth the prickles in her voice. "I like working with my hands, my head and hands. When I fixed the last month toilet I realized I've always liked to fix things, to work with things."

"Ah, you didn't exactly 'fix' the toilet. It wasn't as if you had to rebuild it from scratch."

"It didn't work; now it does. That's 'fixed.' I figured out what to do with the materials on hand."

Drew reached across the table for his wife's hand. "You bent a paper clip and used it to reattach the wire doo-dad to the rod."

"It's called the lift chain, and it attaches to the float arm." Maureen pulled her hand out from underneath Drew's. "Our model uses a flapper cover, which is lifted by the chain. The newer models use a different setup. We should consider upgrading."

"What would you study? There's several kinds of engineering: mechanical, electrical, civil. Maybe even one for plumbing. 'Hydro-waste engineering.'" Drew paused. "I'm joking, about the last one. Remember when they started calling garbage men 'Sanitation Engineers?'"

Maureen studied the tea leaves that had settled to the bottom of her cup.

"What I meant was, how would you decide which one to major in?"

"That's what introductory courses are for." Maureen ran her hands through her chin-length, silver-streaked, cocoa-brown hair, watching as her husband reflexively fingered the thinning, yellow-gray strands that curled behind his ear. For the first time in a long time she was reminded of their seven year age gap, something she'd rarely thought about in their thirty year marriage.

"Drew, you'll be retiring in two years. I've never enjoyed teaching, not really. I have always liked fixing things."

"You like to putter. There's a difference."

Maureen glanced at her watch. She had time to kill before she met Drew for lunch. Cruising the aisles, she found that her soda craving had vanished. The store was not what she had expected. Perhaps that was because it wasn't a franchise, but was individually owned. It seemed that Ray's vision for his Kwik n' Save was to offer the essentials of life on a two-fifths scale, by stocking a small selection of a little bit of everything. You could find only one brand of cornflakes or chicken soup or dish soap or

aspirin, but if you really needed them you could find cornflakes, soup, dish soap and aspirin, perhaps even in the same aisle.

A corner section of the wall opposite the store's entry was covered with display racks of hardware and household items. There were small packets of nails and screws, duct tape, balls of twine, packets of shoelaces, cotton gym socks — even a fire extinguisher, so compact Maureen thought at first glance it must be a toy.

No, it's real. It could fit on the kitchen counter, or in the glove compartment. Smart!

Maureen picked up the extinguisher, which was surprisingly heavy for its size. She continued perusing the displays, and gasped when she espied a box that held several plastic pouches. Miniature sewing repair kits! No more than three inches square, each kit contained a needle, a teensy spool of white and an even teensier spool of black thread, three buttons and two safety pins. Maureen's mother had always carried a sewing repair kit with her, in her purse or in the first aid bag she took on vacations. Maureen considered the kit to be a talisman of sorts, for no one in her family had ever ripped a seam or popped a button when that kit was nearby.

Maureen transferred the fire extinguisher to her left hand, picked up a sewing kit and headed for the checkout. She turned the corner to the cereal and canned goods aisle and nearly tripped over the Scouts. Both girls were crouched low to the floor.

Poor kids, probably think I'm following them. "Here comes the crazy lady who says shit to Girl Scouts."

Khaki Scout, her eyes wide and intense, motioned for Maureen to get down, and Second Scout jabbed her index finger toward the front of the store. Maureen ducked low. She set the fire extinguisher, sewing kit and her purse on the floor, slowly eased herself back up, and peered over a row of generic brand cornflakes.

The store was deserted except for the clerk and a customer. The customer had erratically cropped, ash-blond hair, and wore a once-white long-sleeved shirt and baggy camouflage trousers. Legs splayed as if he was a cowboy straddling his steed, he leaned across the counter, and Maureen saw that the customer was no customer. The knife in his hand was hideous and menacing; Maureen was fascinated by its dark, jagged blade, even as she shuddered to think of its likely usage.

"Think I'm joking, fuck-face?" The man waved the knife in front of the clerk's face. "Gimme the fucking money now, or this shit comes down, understand?"

"I understand. I'd give it to you if I could, but I don't have the safe's combination, I *nyah!*"

The clerk's face blanched marshmallow white. Maureen glanced down at the Scouts and pressed her finger to her mouth. Looking back to the checkout counter, she hadn't time to marvel at her sudden composure. The clerk's right hand clutched his left and she could see blood seeping from under his fingers.

"I understand." The clerk's chins trembled in unison, yet his voice was surprisingly steady and measured as he repeated his mantra. "Please don't cut me again. I'd give it to you if I could, but I don't have the combination. No employee does. Only the manager."

Maureen quickly reached into her purse and gave her cell phone to Khaki Scout. "Call 911; stay down," she whispered to the girls. "If anything happens, get out." She pointed toward the red-lettered EMPLOYEES ONLY door by the hardware display.

"The till is emptied every hour. There's still time; you can leave now. I didn't press the alarm button. I don't have the safe combination. No employee does.... "

Maureen removed the safety pin from the fire extinguisher handle, straightened up and ambled toward the counter.

"It says 'Class K,' what's that mean?" Maureen blankly stared at the tag on the canister's label. "'For Kitchen fires, deep fryers'...I'm not sure if it's the right model for my car, but it's the only size you've got and it's small, but my glove compartment probably isn't big enough to..."

The man lowered his knife to the counter. He rested his right forearm and hand atop the length of the weapon, covering it from hilt to blade. With his left hand he reached into a jar by the cash register and dropped a fistful of mints on the counter. He hissed *shut up!* to the clerk and affected a casual demeanor as the clueless, babbling lady shuffled toward the counter.

"Oh, excuse me, I didn't know you were helping someone else." Maureen beamed a matronly smile at the clerk. "You finish up; I'll go grab a soda, some chips, maybe a..."

In one swift motion Maureen swung the extinguisher nozzle into the robber's face, squeezed the handle, then slammed the canister down on his outstretched hand. A blast of foam plastered the man's eyes, and he howled when the metal canister crushed his metacarpals. He fell to the floor, cursing and retching, flailing his injured right hand against the floor and pawing at his foam-filled eyes with his left hand.

"Scouts, out the back, NOW!" Maureen yelled. She whirled around at the sound of screeching tires; one by one, three black and white patrol cars pulled up to the front of the store so speedily she thought each vehicle in turn might crash through the glass doors.

"I lied! They're here!" the clerk screamed. He grabbed an ink-stained cloth from underneath the counter and pressed it against his own bleeding hand. "I pressed the alarm! You didn't see me!"

The clerk grabbed fistfuls of individually-wrapped gumballs and flung them down at the writhing man. He emptied the counter gumball display and moved on to the mints. Two police officers, service revolvers drawn, positioned themselves on either side of the front doors while two of their comrades burst through the entry to Ray's Kwik n' Save.

"I pressed the button! Who's got shit coming down now?! Who's the fuck-face *now?!'*" The clerk continued to hurl the non-lethal missiles at his stricken assailant. "I pressed it the moment I saw your fucking loser fuck-face! *I already pressed the button!*"

"He's a tweaker – that means he uses methamphetamines – isn't he?" Maureen grinned conspiratorially at the police officer. "None of the other cops, excuse me, officers, said anything, but I've read that eighty percent of crimes in Oregon are committed by meth addicts."

"Something like that, ma'am."

The corner of the officer's mouth twitched. Maureen found his manner patronizing, and wondered why she'd wasted five minutes repeating the same story to this cop who hadn't even bothered to introduce himself. She preferred the first one who'd questioned her, and not just because that officer was the lone female among the six who'd arrived. Tall, angular, with a long, elegant neck and a shock of red hair

peeking out from under her cap, Officer Kameron Adair had a model's slim arms and legs, although she looked a bit thick around the middle (that could be the effect of the bullet proof vest, Maureen conceded). Officer Adair projected competence and compassion, and had spoken to Maureen as if to a fellow citizen.

"Do you think she, your partner, is done questioning the girls, Officer...." Maureen scanned his shirt for an ID badge, "Officer Brent? It's some excitement in their day, isn't it? I let them use my phone; their mothers certainly wasted no time getting here."

The Scouts stood on the sidewalk outside the store, holding each other's hands. Their mothers stood beside them, talking with the female cop, who handed each mother something that looked like a business card. The girls looked back at the mini-mart, and saw Maureen through the store's glass walls. Maureen waved to the Scouts; the girls giggled and waved back.

"Should I call my husband and say I'll be late? I'm meeting him for lunch, at our health club. It's a mile down the..."

"I think we're through here. Just another minute, ma'am, while I check something."

Maureen eyes followed Officer Brent, who sauntered out the front doors of Ray's Kwik n' Save. He tipped his hat to the Scouts as they climbed into a silver blue mini-van. Arms folded across his chest, Officer Brent stood beside Officer Adair, and waited until the van backed out of its parking space before he conferred with his partner.

No wonder he looks so sour. She's a tad taller than he.

"Make my day – what a character," Officer Brent snorted. "That lady could be your mother. Officer Kammy's mommy."

"She's not old enough to be my mother." Officer Kameron Adair snapped her notepad shut and donned her countenance of abiding patience. "And she's not dumb enough to be yours."

"She *is* your mother, I can tell. When the adrenaline wears off she'll get her middle-age game face back: pinched and pissed-off at life, like her panties are creeping up her ass."

Officer Adair shoved her notebook in her trousers' back pocket and smiled sweetly at her patrol partner. "Fuck off, Officer Fuckoff."

"Why yes ma'am, Officer Kam."

"This smells *so* good. Salads aren't usually known for their aromas, are they? Anyway, I was surprised by how quick the questioning was. The short, rude policeman said that the store has security cameras hidden all over, and that the camera tapes matter more than eyewitness accounts. If it goes to trial none of us, not even the clerk, might have to testify – they just play the tapes! Even so, Officer Kam encouraged me to come to the precinct and check my statement. She said it can be difficult at the time to recall what seems so crucial later on. The other cop who spoke to me, the short, snippy one, didn't mention anything about it."

Maureen reached across the table for the pepper shaker. "What are you smirking at?" Thinking she'd been caught in *that way*, as Drew referred to her customary seated posture, Maureen zipped her legs together from thigh to knee. Then she realized that Drew could not see under the table, and let her legs splay out. Despite her I've-money-but-spend it-sensibly, Banana Republic pea coat and linen trousers, Maureen never had felt comfortable sitting like a lady.

"Was I smirking?" Drew sighed. "I didn't mean to, but you're so...animated."

"Considering the circumstances, that's to be expected."

"Circumstances, yes. But *you're* not how I'd expect." The leather booth seatback squeaked as Drew shifted his weight. "You talk as if describing something ordinary, as if you'd stopped by the post office to get stamps. You thwarted a crime. You saved a young man from an assault."

"I saw what was happening." Maureen raised her chin. "I figured out what to do, with the materials on hand. And the clerk is fine. The cut on his hand was superficial; he'll need a stitch or two, that's all. It looked worse, but that's because feet and hands bleed out of proportion to their injuries, due to...I'm trying to remember what the officer said. Due to the capillaries per square inch as compared to other parts of the body.' Something like that. Today certainly has been a learning experience for me."

Maureen took another enthusiastic bite of her salad. "I can't believe how good this is. You're sure you don't want any? Anyway, the clerk, Alex or Alec, refused medical treatment until one of the officers from the third squad car said he'd give him a ride to the fire department and the EMTs would check him out for free. Another officer accompanied the robber – the suspect? I wonder what they call him? – to the hospital."

She wiped her hands on her napkin and craned her neck, looking behind her. "We only come here for lunch. When's the last time we used the exercise facilities? They have scales in the bathrooms, don't they?"

Drew pushed his won ton salad around his plate with his fork. "It's just a salad. You haven't even finished it. It might give you an extra ounce, at most."

"That's not why I asked. Actually, I think I've dropped a pound or two." Maureen stroked her fingers down her throat. "Besides, if I gained weight I'd probably be escorted from the café, excuse me, 'Le Spa Bistro.' That would be in violation of the membership agreement, no doubt."

"No doubt," Drew chuckled. "Remember the look on the counter girl's face, the first time we ate here and I tried to order fries with my sandwich?"

"I know it's just a salad, a cucumber salad. But sometimes a cucumber salad is what you need. You bite into a cucumber, and it's chilly and crisp. At that moment it is the most satisfying thing in the world, yet there's nothing extraordinary about it. No distinct flavor of its own, but it soaks up the dressing, which, by the way, is exquisite. What did they call it?"

"Some kind of ranch." Drew picked up the menu that was wedged between bottles of salsa, mustard, and soy sauce at the end of the table.

"Simple cucumber slices, doing what they do," Maureen murmured. "Far superior to the over-grilled, chicken pillar-whatevers that are supposed to be the star of the salad."

Drew read from the menu. "'Mixed Greens with Chicken *Paillards* and Chipolte Ranch Dressing.' That's what you ordered." He frowned at his own salad. "Too many sprouts. One of these days I'm going to try that Thai noodle thing. I keep saying that, don't I?"

"Yes, you do. But I made the right choice."

Maureen picked up a sliver of cucumber and wiped it around the rim of her plate, gathering a thick coating of dressing on the thin green slice. This is what life should be like, she thought. A simple thing, being everything it needs to be. She glanced at the wall behind the café booth. She noticed that it had recently been repainted, and that the

Leroy Neiman prints that had hung by each booth had been replaced by posters of climbers rappelling down the club's indoor rock wall. She turned her gaze to Drew and wondered how he would look in a climber's harness.

"I'll try the teriyaki soba noodles, next time." Drew set the menu down and patted his stomach. "I've been good; I can afford a break from salads."

Merely reading from a laminated menu, he glows. But then, what's not to glow for? After all, he's married to a hero.

"I think I will stop by the precinct. It's downtown, across from the Wells Fargo. Officer Kam mentioned a reward; the county mini-mart managers set up a fund to encourage people to help solve robberies. Also, I think she wants to see me again. She was flirting with me."

"What do you mean, she was flirting with you?"

"I mean she was flirting with me. I'm married, not dead. She was attentive, almost overly so, and...it was a feeling. There was a certain vibe. Plus, her body language. I can't remember the last time someone flirted with me, but I can still recognize when it is what it is. I think she's a lesbian, and – what? You're smirking, again."

"Maureen. What evidence do you have that she's a lesbian?"

"What evidence do you have that she's not?"

"She was kind to you. You'd been in a stressful situation, and she was nice. That shows good people skills; that means she's a good cop. That doesn't mean she was flirting."

"We chatted about other things, other than the robbery."

"I doubt that on-duty cops engage in 'chatting.'"

"Well, this one did."

"That's just something women do – they're attentive to one another. That doesn't count."

"Of course it counts. Flirting is flirting."

For a brief moment Drew thought that if he were the one who'd arrived late to lunch he might not have recognized Maureen, sitting in the booth. Had she done something along the way, to her makeup or hair?

Maureen reached across the table and tapped the edge of Drew's plate. "You think it's far-fetched, that a young, female cop would find me attractive?"

"In all honestly, that isn't something I've given much thought to." Drew's smirk eased into a gentle smile. "Or, the thought it deserves."

"I'll be back in a minute. Don't let them take my plate. I really do want to weigh myself, but after I use the biffy." Maureen stood up and laughed. "That's what my Aunt Erva used to call it, remember? Even in her own home: 'the biffy.'"

Maureen leaned down and gave Drew a peck on his forehead. Her faintly musky scent reminded him of damp leaves, or mushrooms.

"The scales are in the locker rooms." Drew reached for her hand and ran his fingers over it, as if checking for damage. "No stitches for you; not even a scratch. It was a foolhardy thing to do, you know." He held on to her hand.

"I really am going to the police station, after lunch. I'd like to see a copy of my statement, to make sure it doesn't need to be amended."

Drew watched as Maureen walked down the hallway to the women's locker room. Perhaps a visit to the scale was in order. She did seem lighter, somehow.

"I don't need a reward, unless it's a scholarship. I'm going to study engineering. It's kind of you to remind me about the reward, but I wouldn't feel right about claiming it."

"The mini-mart coalition will insist." Officer Kameron Adair's smile was wry and gentle. "And, speaking on or off the record, frankly, Mrs. Landers, I think you deserve it."

"Please, call me Maureen. Really, it's sweet of you, but I couldn't take it, not for myself. I am thinking of donating it to a worthy organization. Could I do that?"

"There are no stipulations that I'm aware of, once it's awarded."

"I'll give it to the Girl Scouts." Maureen glanced at the gold braid on Officer Adair's shirt, above her name badge. "I could earmark it for their uniform design fund."

"I'm sure they'd appreciate a donation of any kind. And I appreciate you coming in to check your statement." Officer Adair closed the file folder she held and set it on the precinct reception desk. "You're certain there are no changes?"

"No, thank you, Officer Kam. You've done everything right."

Officer Adair leaned across the counter. Like all police officers, she prided herself on her aptitude for character assessment, but there was something in Maureen Lander's eyes that she couldn't decipher. "And, Mrs. — excuse me, Maureen, are you sure you're all right? You've been through quite an experience. If you'd like to talk with someone..."

"I am talking with someone." Maureen pressed her hand to her heart and dipped her head, as if humbly acknowledging a round of applause. "You are so kind, I can't say it enough, but I am all right. More than all right. You see, I'm married, happily, to Andrew, to Drew — oh, listen to me! Nobody calls him Andrew. What I mean is, it's not that I'm not flattered. And please, you don't have to worry about me."

"That's...good to know, Maureen."

"You are an amazing person, Officer Kam. You are competent, talented, attractive. You need be open to the possibilities. Police officers can become cynical and jaded, with all that they see. Remember, there *are* good people out there."

"Yes ma'am, there are." Officer Adair summoned her soldierly, officer-on-patrol demeanor, and reminded herself that she was not a rookie. She'd dealt with everyone from animal hoarders and drunken dumpster divers to child abusers; there was no cause here to display even a trace of bafflement.

Maureen felt the warmth surge from her lower abdomen up to her torso. She turned on her heel before the blush overcame her face, and waved goodbye to Officer Kam over her shoulder.

A buzz; this is a buzz. I have a buzz on.

She remembered how Andrew's hair used to smell when he was just out of the shower, or in the shower, during the shower. Like ripe apricots. How long had it been, since she had thought of him as Andrew?

I am going to go home and have sex, Maureen thought. I am going to seduce Andrew, in the middle of the day... it's no longer the middle of the day. It's 5:15; it's Thursday: he has one beer with Dave, at the McMenamin's pub. I am going to McMenamin's.

Officer Kameron Adair stared at the back of the woman who jauntily pushed the wrong way through the precinct's entry doors.

Jeeze Louise, she reminds me of my mother.

"Was that Maureen?"

"Yes." Drew flipped his phone shut. "She's on her way here."

"This is a first." Dave rested his forearms on the gleaming mahogany bar and inhaled over his pint of stout. "Two firsts, what with you on your second round. I suppose it isn't everyday your wife is a hero."

"I wonder if they'll nominate her for that award." Drew sipped his ale. "The one that goes to a local citizen, 'The Hondo Award.'"

"That award goes to a dog."

"No," Drew persisted, "it doesn't go *to* a dog, it was named in honor of a dog. A police dog. About seven years ago, Hondo..."

"Gotcha! Here's to the next winner of 'The Hondo Award for Valorous...Something.'" Dave hoisted his glass. "So, Maureen figures you're basking in her glory, and she'd better come be the designated driver?"

"She knows there's no need for that. I never even finish one pint." Drew dipped his finger in the ale and traced a line of foam around the edge of his glass. "She went down to the precinct. An officer asked her to go over her statement. Well, that was the excuse, to get her there." Drew loosened his tie. "I wonder when it will be in the newspapers?"

Dave popped a pretzel into his mouth. "What do you mean, the excuse to get her there?"

"A female cop, one of the officers on the scene, asked Maureen to stop by. A lesbian cop, flirting with Maureen." Drew grabbed a pile of coasters from the bar and shook them as if they were dice. "This lady cop comes charging in like it's the gunfight at the OK Corral and had the guy cuffed before her partner could check his fly." Drew drained his remaining ale in one gulp. "Made the other cops look like Girl Scouts, and they're all cream of the crop these days. They don't let just anyone become a cop, not anymore." Drew swiveled on his barstool and stared up at the stuffed moose head which hung above the pub's front door. "No dropouts or former MPs. You have to have a college degree to apply to the police academy."

"Yep." Dave patted Drew's shoulder. "Hell, I'd be crowing, too, if a skilled, highly educated professional woman – not your everyday, pink collar lesbo – was hitting on *my* wife."

"In college Maureen was noticed by everyone, men and women. I was in grad school; I noticed. Looking back, she could have gone either way, considering all the attention she got. Not that she was interested, but she could have gone either way. Could have gone any way."

Drew sat up straight and ran his fingers through his hair. "There she is." He pointed toward the entry way. Maureen stood under the moose head, looking eagerly around the pub.

"Did I mention she's going back to school? Ask her about it. She's going to study engineering at PSU. Hydro-dynamic Engineering. She might even get a scholarship."