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Almost

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Daniel Anderson

Almost

The man behind me seethed.

The lady behind him
Kept sighing, clicking her high-heel on cold
Linoleum, and scowling at her watch.
The checkout boy was making change—*Snap! Snap!*—
One dollar at a time. He popped
Each bill between his chubby fingertips,
Glanced two times at the till, then smoothed
His singles, fives and tens down on the countertop.
Each time. *Snap! Snap!* Glance twice and smooth.
The line was long and getting longer.
Two guys in John Deere hats showed up.
A mother and her infant. *Good gawd,*
I heard somebody say. *Jesus, kid.*
One woman slapped a pack of frozen peas
Against her cheek. The line
Was getting longer. A plumber. A cop.
Three busty girls with magazines and Diet Cokes.
Did his mother have any children that lived?
The man behind me laughed. The lady
Just kept clicking her high heel.

What happened next?

I set my basket on the belt.
I said, *It's Kevin, right?*
He thumbed his nametag. He nodded yes.
Hey Kevin, let's get out of here.
Forget these jerks. Forget this crappy job.
I tried to coax him out the way one might coax
A bashful, beaten dog to come.
It's just a job, I said.
I may even have whispered this.
C'mon. It's just a job. He looked at me

As if he didn't understand. *It's just a job.*
And he refused at first.

All I could hear
 Was someone cracking gum. Light music
 Overhead. The *click-click-clicking* of a heel.
We'll find you something else.
 After a lengthy pause, he scanned
 Those fierce, exasperated faces in the line,
 then finally he relented.
 Someone clapped. Another whooped, *Hell yes!*
 And *Praise-the-fuh-cking-LORD!*

He closed
The register, stripped off his smock, then we,
We stepped out into seventy degrees.
Viburnum bloomed and honeysuckle bloomed.
Young parents strolled their baby down the street
And kids played wiffle ball.

A frail, teetering man
Clipped rhododendron blossoms from a bush.
On my front porch, Kevin sipped ginger ale.
I drank good bourbon on the rocks.
It's just, he started to say then paused.
A cheerful *bird! bird! bird!* insistence sprang
Throughout the leafy branches of my oaks.
It's just, I didn't want to disappoint my dad.
I almost called him "son." I almost said,
Your dad, who surely loves you very much,
Will understand.

I almost—*almost*—cupped
A gentle hand across his shoulder as he wept.
Except. Except he didn't weep.
He started ringing up my things,
Then Kevin told me what I owed.
He bagged my tonic water and my chips,
And he, before he counted back my change,
Apologized. *It's just this thing I have to do.*
Walking to my car, I only heard
The chiming clapper of a welcome bell, the sound
Of gravel crunching underneath my feet.