

4.11.04 Lives



Too Close for Comfort

With three disabled siblings, I should be used to special needs. So why did one stranger's behavior unsettle me? By Debra Borchert

I spotted him at the checkout counters, bagging at No. 14. His arms juddered as he placed a carton of eggs into a plastic sack. His bottom lip was slick with saliva. He wore a yellow plastic name tag upon which he had scrawled "Jerry" in kindergarten penmanship. He was middle-aged, like my brothers, David and Chris, and my sister, Diane. They have similar difficulties with motor skills and coordination, but they can't write their names. My siblings are affected by fragile X syndrome, a condition that causes their mental retardation and makes them hypersensitive to sounds and touch. I spent my childhood drawing them out of their shyness and helping them communicate with others. I couldn't guess Jerry's condition, but his mental age must have been about 12.

Ever since I smiled at him the first time he bagged my groceries at my local supermarket, Jerry has followed me around like an adoring fan. He leaned into me as he pointed out the reddest Roma tomatoes, bumped me to find the freshest skim milk and stepped on my foot when he reached for the graham crackers on the top shelf. His lack of boundaries made me uncomfortable. I didn't know how to deflect his attention. I didn't want to speak to the manager — my complaint could get him fired. So I started avoiding him.

I can still remember the bewilderment and hurt I felt when I was 10 and our neighbor Mrs. Ward didn't respond when I said hello with David and Diane in tow. Instead, she scurried out of the market, leaving me holding my brother and sister's hands amid the cantaloupe. I realized in that moment that I hated Mrs. Ward's guts. Why, then, years later, was I acting as she had?

I searched the magazine rack and picked up Real Simple. The glossy photos of blue-willow decorating schemes did nothing to straighten out the knot of guilt in me. I was being ridiculous. The last three times I have seen Jerry, I rushed — grabbed romaine, salmon, garlic — and every time, I've forgotten orange juice. There are other grocery stores, but I chose this one because it employs people with disabilities. I want people like my siblings to have jobs. I don't want them to be ignored, the way I am shunning Jerry.

I turned around and drove my cart to Checkout No. 3, hoping he would not notice me and stay at No. 14. The bleeps of the registers were deafening. I should be able to deal with Jerry. My

siblings were forever bumping into me too; was it different because they were family?

"Find everything you need?" asked the teenage clerk. She slid a package of Muenster across the scanner.

I returned the magazine and said, "Yes, thanks."

"Paper or plastic, ma'am?" Jerry's soft drawl started me. I saw David's unfocused glossy eyes, Chris's lopsided smile.

"Paper, please." I noticed that the checkout stand created plenty of space between Jerry and the clerk. In this situation, he knew where to stand.

Jerry nodded. "Nice day." He separated a bag from the stack and pushed it open. He gripped the whole-wheat bread with both hands. "Mariners game today."

"You like baseball?" My voice was an octave above normal. His comment, though, was spot on.

"Yup. Those Mariners . . . try hard."

I cut short my smile because I didn't want to encourage him. The clerk pushed the cart toward Jerry and turned to me: "\$27.30, please."

I handed her my card, signed my receipt and stepped around the counter, where Jerry held the last sack.

"Want some help out?" He reminded me of an eager puppy.

I reached for the cart. "No, that's O.K."

His shoulders drooped. He came toward me, stopping an inch from me. He was too close. I wanted to dash out of the store and leave behind my calcium-fortified O.J. Instead, I stood with my hand frozen on the cart. His eyes looked lonely — I knew they'd haunt me long after I'd left the store. I wanted to apologize for my aloofness. Jerry was trying his best. But when I saw him, I wanted to take away his disability — just the way I used to want to heal my siblings.

His grip on the sack tightened. "It's my job, ma'am. I like my job. I like working here."

"I'm . . . I'm sorry." A tiny voice inside me said, Use the cart to make a boundary for him. I stepped back. I tapped my head with my hand as if I had forgotten something. "Forgive me. I'm from New York City. I'm not used to people being so helpful."

He laughed. I laughed. His eyes sparkled. He was strangling my bag of groceries, and I didn't care.

"I would like some help out." I angled the cart between us and pushed it toward him. "Would you like to drive it, Jerry?"

He nodded deeply. "Mariners play those Yankees tomorrow. Yankee fans better watch out." ■

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