Matthew Vollmer
Checkout

The old woman, rummaging through her purse, asks, "What was that again?" and the cashier—a frog-eyed gum chewer with dreads, a Live Strong bracelet, and a nametag-less green apron—says, "Eighty-eight, sixty-six." Old woman says, "Okey dokey," whips out a faux-leather booklet, asks cashier for a pen; he hands her a flat white plastic slab with a ball-point tip at one end and a phone-cord-like cable at the other leading to the underside of a miniature counter, but it's out of ink, so the old woman returns to her purse, rummages some more, extracts a pen of her own. In line behind her, another customer—an unshaven guy with bloodshot eyes and a ratty tee shirt spelling out the words *Guided by Voices* and a chin that looks as though he's dipped it in beard, a guy who's holding a six-pack of Coors and a shopping basket stacked with three packages of pre-formed hamburger patties—shuts his eyes and lets his head fall backward, as if to say, "Please God, no." The old woman, who looks approximately the same age as the price of her groceries, begins writing—with gnarled, age-spotted, thick-knuckled hands—the name of the grocery store on the "to" line, which means that she, unlike those super-prepared shoppers who've filled in everything but the total before they've set foot in the store, has failed to think ahead. At any rate, the old woman, who's just had her hair done so it's extra fluffy—a mass of white curls that might be mistaken, at a distance, for some kind of extravagant confection—is wearing slacks with an elastic waistband. She's got the slacks pulled up high enough to make her plaid-bloused torso appear freakishly short, a fact that doesn't seem to meet the approval of the beer-and-hamburger guy, whose frown the old woman's failed to notice. This guy,

who's clearly perturbed, attempts to distract himself from the interminable wait by glancing disinterestedly at tabloid headlines concerning meth-snorting actresses and politicians who've texted pictures of their junk to much younger women and washed-up actors whose ballooning and probably rotting-from-the-inside guts give them the appearance of being heavy with child. "Too bad," the old woman might've said, supposing she'd taken the time to glance at these photos or their corresponding headlines, because that's what she usually says—drawing out the word "bad," so that it's two syllables, like "bay-ud"—when she gets wind of other people's misfortunes, never muttering "serves them right" or "guess they shouldn't have done *that*" or "what were they thinking?"—always bypassing judgment altogether and heading straight for the "too bay-ud," because that's how she is, how she's always been. Sure, she cherishes some pretty romantic, if not traditional, Judeo-Christian ideas about how we humans arrived on this planet ("in six days God created the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that in them is") and where we'll end up afterward ("for if I go to prepare a place for you, I shall come again, and receive you unto myself"), and it's true that she may be a little bit racist without really knowing it ("those little black boys sure can dance, can't they?"), and may prove startlingly naive about modern warfare and global warming and the wonders of the internet and problems inherent in genetically modified foods, but if one thing's for sure, if there's something she *does* know, it's that she doesn't like to see other people—no matter who they are or where they came from—suffering.

The old woman's writing down the first eight from her total then the other eight then the dot and the six and the other six, followed by the letters of this number with a line extending almost to the word *dollars*, where she then draws two number 6's on the left side of a diagonal line and a 100 on the other—all of which is pure, unadulterated agony for the beer-and-hamburger-patty guy, who's now gritting his teeth behind closed lips as a way to contain and suppress his rage, a guy who should now be halfway to his apartment, where he'll fry up the burgers in an ungreased, Teflon-lined pan with the burner on too high, thus scorching the bottoms and setting off the smoke alarm, after which he'll watch *Pardon the Interruption* on ESPN in the smoky haze of his living room, dipping each bite of his naked burgers into a puddle of ketchup or mustard or a mixture of the two, following every fourth or fifth bite with a sip of beer, foregoing the lone clementine in the crisper of his fridge because he had one yesterday and going a day without fruit isn't gonna kill him plus he's too lazy to peel this one, later smoking a bowl and masturbating to the thought of his neighbor, a woman endowed with a sizeable rear and

an upturned nose and mottled cleavage who's studying prelaw and is dating a guy a decade older than herself, a guy with long gray hair who wears a trench coat and tucks his pant legs pirate-style into his boots. Right now, though, the beer-and-patty dude's stuck in this line, reading the words *ROLO* and *Reese's* and *Watchamacalit* and *Zero* on the terraced shelves beside him, infuriated by this old woman's commitment to not-moving-forward-with-the-whole-card-swiping-movement.

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Meanwhile, in the bottom-right-hand corner of the check, the old woman—perhaps still hearing the echoes of an elementary-school teacher, the voice of a long-dead woman whose pendulous arm flab wobbled every time she wrote on the chalkboard of a rural Indiana schoolhouse, that "a man's penmanship is an unfailing index of his character . . . a criterion by which to judge his peculiarities of taste and sentiments"—writes her own name, in cursive, taking the time to make each letter clearly legible, not having mastered an alternate or less readable signature to be used in situations where one finds oneself pressed for time, because the truth is that the old woman's never been in much of a hurry, hasn't necessarily been slow, but understands that if you want to do anything well, you should avoid getting into a rush. The old woman caps her pen—the same cheap Bic she'd purchased in a pack of twenty-four for $2.99 at Family Dollar and which she'd used earlier today to write a letter to one of her grandchildren, filling up three pieces of blue stationery with reflections on the weather and any news she can think of concerning the grandchild's cousins and questions about the grandchild's own well-being, a little stack she'd folded and placed, along with a *Family Circus* cartoon where Dolly says to Billy, "Cameras shrink us so Grandma can keep us in her wallet," and some other newspaper clipping she'd deemed cute or relevant or otherwise day-brightening

into an envelope, which she'd sealed by wetting the glue along the flap with a wet dishrag because she hates the taste of glue and, frankly, imagines envelopes, like most things in the world that haven't just been recently washed with soap and hot water, to be swarming with bacteria. She'd stuck a stamp commemorating the old cowboy and actor Tom Mix (whose white, marshmallowy hat she had not found dopey but sort of cute) on the upper-right-front corner and a Chiquita banana sticker to the back, a finishing touch that she'd been adding—for nigh on three decades—to every envelope she'd ever sent to any of her grandchildren, a practice she would be unable to explain, really, except maybe that she—whose impoverished conditions, as a child, had inspired her to save and make do—was happy to find a use for something that would otherwise be tossed out, especially when the sticker, which bore the smiling outline of a beautiful young woman—perhaps she hailed from Costa Rica? from Panama?—balancing a fruit basket upon her head (an impressive and appealing sight in and of itself), thus earning the sticker the right to be used once again.

The beer-and-hamburger guy makes a show of looking at his watch, an old digital thing that's been stuck on military time for over a year because he's forgotten how to set the alarm (the one occasion he tried he ended up switching the time), and despite the fact that he's told himself a hundred times to Google "Armitron" and "instructions," he either forgets or is simply too lazy to follow up. Meanwhile, the old woman now enters the name of the grocery store into a cell in her check registry and "88.66" into another. The guy shakes his head, thinking things like *This is unbelievable* and *holy fucking shit* and *Of course, I have to pick the one line with a stupid, godforsaken, old, check-writing woman*, refusing to expend the time and effort to consider why, maybe, she still clings to such an archaic payment type or that it's easier to keep track of her money, that she's responsible, doing her duty as a citizen of the human race to keep track, because if she doesn't, who will—especially since she doesn't have much money, despite the fact that most people would probably leap to the conclusion that if one's husband worked fifty years as a dentist in a mid-size southern city that one would definitely be loaded, but they aren't, not even close, partly because they never believed in playing the stock market or diversifying portfolios, and partly because they were overly generous and ended up giving away the majority of money they'd earned to their church, to various societies that claimed them as members, and to their children and grandchildren. Furthermore, this man—this retired dentist, the old woman's husband—is supposed to be dying of congestive heart failure, at least that's what the diagnosis had

been a year and a half ago, when Dr. Powell had explained that, best-case scenario, the old man had anywhere from three days to three months to live, but here he is, still shuffling down the hallways of his 1950s-style ranch house, still drinking coffee from a mug that looks like it's been carved out of sandstone, still watching Fox news and talking smack about Democrats, all of which surprises nobody who's ever known him, least of all the old woman, because that's how he's always been: a man who—like an improbable prizefighter—has never once given up or backed down, a man who, at age three, had placed his hand on a chopping block and held it there even after his sister warned him that she was bringing the ax down and that if he knew what was good for him he'd move his hand. Yes, she, the sister, at age six, had indeed been holding an ax aloft, as this was occurring during a not-so-long-ago time period when children were trusted to do things like wash clothes and weed gardens and chop wood with actual honest-to-God axes. In the end, though, because the boy was stubborn, because he had refused to move his hand, and because his older sister—who knew a bit about stubbornness herself—had let the ax drop, the blade slammed through the flesh of the boy's left hand, straight through the bones, a clean shot right across the tops of the knuckles of his last three fingers, fingers that were later gathered—such sad little things, so sweet and so tiny and now so cold and dead!—by his mother and placed inside a matchbox and buried in a hole underneath a sycamore tree. And who knows, maybe that was a defining moment for the then-young but now-old man: he'd lost the halves of three of his fingers, but he survived, refused to think of himself as diminished or handicapped, didn't let the fact that one of his hands had three half-fingers—little nubs he'd rub together absentmindedly, perhaps as a way to show the world he wasn't afraid to call attention to the disfigurement—stop him from doing whatever the hell it was he wanted to do, which included shipping off to a Christian boarding school, where he worked as a masseur in the school's sanitarium and wooed a pretty, demure girl from Indiana, then put himself through dentistry school—where he had to hide his nubs for fear they wouldn't let him practice—by driving a taxi in Washington, D.C., studying chemistry books at red lights, reciting chemical compounds in his head, the names of which, when repeated over and over, resonated like incantations. A few short years later, he was a dentist, a husband, then a father with four kids. A man who'd never worn shorts, no matter how hot, who always wore—no matter what the season—slacks and a button-down shirt with a collar. For underwear: boxers and a wifebeater. And, though he considered himself a fighter and had loved nothing more in his youth than a good fight, often regaling children and grandchildren

with tales of whipping boys much older and bigger but less quick than himself, the old man had never beaten his wife, never so much as laid a hand on her in anger, though he did frequently complain, as he sat at the kitchen table, that she was taking too long, would say things like, "We gonna eat tonight or not?," would point out in the presence of family members and friends that she—the old woman—had gained weight, that she ate too much chocolate, when in fact the old woman had never been fat, had always been in great or at the very least okay shape, mostly because she never overate, drank nary a drop of alcohol, and worked hard, if not constantly, never seeming to stop moving. At mealtimes there was one more thing to retrieve before she could sit down, would anybody like a carrot with their dinner, would anyone like a little broccoli, how about some butter for your bread, and if you said yes, she'd pop out of her seat to retrieve whatever it was she'd suggested you might need, along with a little dish for it to sit in, because she never served anything in its original container, meaning that all foods would be taken from their garish store-bought tubs or wrappers or bottles and set into pretty little bowls, so that ketchup would have its own dish, as would mayonnaise and sour cream and butter, and furthermore milk, supposing it was served, would always be poured from its jug into a ceramic pitcher embossed with flowering grape vines.

The old woman does not hear the whispered curses of the beer-and-hamburger guy, remains in the dark as to his expressions, would be not so much horrified as simply hurt by the thoughts he is now thinking, which may or may not include *hurry the bleep up* and *bleep you, you bleeping old bleep*, and *why don't you just do us all a favor and bleeping die*, as she carefully separates the check from its book. Instead, she stands there with a smile on her face, a smile she wears when she is not whistling or singing one of a thousand happy little melodies and ditties sung by crooners that got stuck in her head half a century before.

The cashier takes the check, eyeballs the address, identifies the woman as a local since the city on the check is the same city as the one in which they're now standing, but fails to recognize or even register the name of the road that the old woman lives on, has no idea that Glenwood Road's just around the corner, no more than a mile away, and that if you were to turn off East North Street and glide down the hill, you'd arrive at the old woman's address, where a gate—called a Kentucky Gate, bearing a Beware of Dog sign, despite the fact that the Doberman Pinschers, who lived in a cavernous concrete space beneath the back porch and liked to chase the garbage men, have been dead for twenty years, buried underneath a sycamore tree at the lower end of the big field, the same one where the old man's fingers had

been interred—could be opened by yanking on a piece of old garden hose, elevating the inner ends of levers that, in turn, would raise a link and lift a counterweight, permitting the gate to swing, thus gaining the person entrance to the largest undeveloped piece of property in this section of town, land that includes a sprawling field, a three-acre pine forest, a garden, raspberry bushes and fig trees and glossy leafed magnolias that drop grenade-shaped seed pods, a once-glorious swimming pool whose concrete has cracked and whose water—now clotted with leaves—has turned green, a slow-moving creek, the ruins of a house where the old woman's husband and his siblings—one of whom, on a ride to a movie theater in Italy in order to celebrate the end of World War II, had been killed when the jeep he'd been riding in flipped over—had been raised, and which, before it'd been torn down, had been vacant for years, a place where grandkids went to explore rusted bikes and old mattresses, where they'd look out of the kitchen window and beat against the wood and watch bees—who'd built a massive hive inside the wall—erupt into the air outside. In one of the front rooms in this house, the old woman's husband would come to retreat from the rest of the world, to eat cookies and brew pots of coffee and light fires and read old cowboy novels. The old man had spent a fortune collecting first editions of novels by Zane Grey, an all-but-forgotten author who'd written, in the 1920s and '30s, a slew of books about rustlers and outlaws, all of which the old man had read as a boy and now continued to reread, Zane Grey existing for him as a kindred spirit, not only because Zane had also been at one time a dentist but also because the old man had always fancied himself a cowboy of sorts, had once owned, in his youth, a horse named Buddy, who the old man rode not only bareback but bare*foot*, climbing onto the mare and burying his face in its mane, the coarse hair fragrant with the tang of horse as he yelled *giddyap!*, and as the horse began to trot and then to gallop, the old man—who was

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then only a boy—gripped that mane-hair with one hand, steadied himself with the other, easing from a sitting position onto his knees, the horse fishtailing a bit and snorting and shaking his head but failing to buck or slow, the old man crouching then, like a surfer, he'd stand, whooping.

Of course, the horse would die and the old man would grow up and most of the fields he'd ridden the horse through would be sold to neighborhood and apartment builders but the old man wouldn't outgrow his love for horses, for riding horses, for wearing boots and shirts with pearl button snaps and cowboy hats, and for vacation he'd take trips to Arizona and Nevada, where he'd spend weeks on a horse without suffering saddle sore—or at least claiming not to—trotting through deserts and into canyons under a blazing sun, sleeping by a fire and eating beans from a can and on the last night a steak blackened to beyond well done (it was, in fact, how he preferred them) over crackling flames, though that time is now long gone, and more or less irretrievable, since the old man's now more or less immobile, sleeps most of the day and afternoon and all through the night, wakes at seven, gets dressed—enters a walk-in closet whose door triggers an automatic light that illuminates rows of cowboy shirts and a shelf of hats and at the back wall a poster of Sylvester Stallone as Rocky Balboa, a droopy-lidded dunce whose never-say-die attitude the old man will forever admire, since, in addition to being a cowboy enthusiast, he'd also always been a fighter, always liked to watch a good fight, whether it be Louis or Marciano or Ray or Tyson—then makes his way to the kitchen for breakfast (a naked banana—peeled by his wife—sitting upon a plate, a cup of coffee, a slab of coffee cake or bowl of cereal), after which he goes to the living room and opens a book he's read a hundred times before and falls asleep for the rest of the morning.

Neither the old woman's phone number nor her driver's license number appear on the check itself, so the cashier asks her for her driver's license, needs to write the number on the check, not because he thinks that she's a criminal—which, who knows, maybe she is, can't be too careful these days, or any, ever—but because it's protocol. The old woman should know this, should've had her license ready, should've maybe had the license number printed on the check itself, but it's one of those things she can never remember to do, so she snaps her fingers and digs again through her purse, smiling as if to assure anyone who might be looking that this is a pleasant thing she's doing, even though the beer-and-hamburger guy is now about to totally lose his shit, can't believe that he's being subjected to a torture of this magnitude, has by now watched two other open lanes dispense with lines that had each been two people longer than this one, and though he'd considered bailing on this

one—telling himself: *now watch it, she won't have her license or the check won't go through or the spool will run out of paper and she won't have a receipt printed*—but he's too proud to switch, has invested too much time in this line, and to abandon it would be an admission of defeat. He doesn't know and probably wouldn't care to know even if the knowledge could be made available to him that in the house of the old woman there's a guest bedroom that used to belong to the old woman's eldest daughter and that in this guest bedroom there is a closet and that in this closet there is a tiny hole that leads from the closet and through the wall and into the other side, into the cupboard of the bathroom where the old man and the old woman brush their teeth and apply their creams and eliminate their waste and take their baths, in a tub whose bottom is plastered with petal-shaped decals made of rubber and stuck there to prevent slippage. Nor does the beer-and-hamburger guy know that—years ago—the old woman's youngest daughter, who is blonde and petite with a baby doll face and a personality that dictates that she laugh every thirty to forty-five seconds, used to stand in that same bathroom and slide mint-flavored floss through this hole, and that the old woman's eldest grandchild—the youngest daughter's nephew—would sit in the closet, on the other side of the hold, and would receive this string, a strip of green and waxy thread sneaking out of a hole in the wall, through a spot of light in the darkness, as though it were a magnificent and miraculous gift.

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Of course, it's not the beer-and-hamburger guy's fault he doesn't know about this hole or this thread. Nobody's told him, and nobody will. Nor could he possibly be expected to imagine that—less than a mile away—the old woman's husband is, at this very minute, standing in a garden, rivulets of sweat snaking down his arm, searching thorny branches for raspberries. The tangled bushes are bare; the pronged tentacles claw at his hands, biting his skin. Blood leaks dark and purple and he sucks at the wound. A handful of withered drupelets sit bleeding in the cup of

his palm. Dark red, they fail to approximate the incandescent berries upon which he'd gorged, both as a youth then later as a distinguished guest at the Ritz-Carlton during trips to Chicago for the American Dental Association's annual convention, where, for breakfast, a stout Egyptian named Lazar fetched heaping bowls of fresh, velvety berries and cool sweet cream. Years before, the old man and his sons-in-law—also dentists—would pile every February into a 1979 Chrysler New Yorker and drive from South Carolina to Chicago in one night, often through blizzards, the snow blazing at them like starbursts.

What time is it now? The old man doesn't know. His watch has fogged. If it's morning, it might be possible that Lazar, assuming he's still employed by the hotel, is fetching another man berries and cream. The old man pushes the current berries into his mouth, chews their nipply flesh. Sour! He coughs, then retches, spits into the grass, blinks at the muck. Above him, on a pine branch, a massive crow rearranges its feathers, squawks brazenly. "You old bastard," the old man says. He reaches for his pistol. His belt's holsterless. He doesn't remember that they—his progeny—have taken away his guns, that months before, he'd shot a gun in the house, and even though it had been loaded with a screamer, it'd filled the hallway with smoke and had scared his wife and caused everybody to worry about what he might do, since he was losing his mind, which meant that his youngest daughter—the one with the baby doll face—had afterward gone out to purchase for him an Old West Shooting Gallery, which had plastic bottles and cans set up on a plastic saloon-style bar, the point of which was to aim a plastic gun at the bottles and pull the trigger, thus producing a recording of a blast, simultaneously dispatching an invisible laser, which activated a nodule that popped up and toppled the bottle, thus granting the shooter the illusion that one's marksmanship was still viable. How pathetic! This shit, the old man had thought, was for kids. Still, he'd tried to like it. Old men, they hardened their hearts against innovation. This was what dying was. A hardening of the heart. A drying up. So he shot and he shot and he shot, even after his daughter had left, cursing the gun when he missed and the pleasure when he didn't.

And this is what the cashier doesn't know, what the beer-and-hamburger guy doesn't know, and what the old woman doesn't know but soon will, after she returns to her house and struggles to carry the groceries up the back steps: that as the old man turns toward the direction of his home—a brick, ranch-style edifice whose blueprints the old man had drawn up himself, a place where he and his wife had raised four kids, on property that he'd tended to his whole life, planting trees

and pruning their branches, blowing leaves from the yard and driveway, weeding gardens and mowing grass—he will grip an arm with the same hand his sister's ax had defingered and, grimacing, fall first to his knees, then collapse onto his back, where, presumably, he will look up to the sycamore tree and see its leaves flapping indifferently in the haze. His eyes will bat wildly, then stop blinking altogether. For a moment, his face will grimace, as if he's seen something terrifying. Then it'll slacken and remain motionless.

The old woman doesn't know any of this, but she will. She will be the one to call his name, to search first the rooms of the house, to grip the black metal railing as she gingerly descends the back steps, and where, once she rounds the place in the yard where a statue of a stone cupid holds his tiny penis—a fountain that hasn't been hooked to a hose in more than a decade—she'll see her husband on the grass, his dead eyes staring expressionlessly toward the heavens.

But for now, the beer-and-hamburger guy mutters a "fucking finally" as he swipes his card, hoping for a conspiratorial smile or at least a sympathetic roll of the eyes or nod of the head from the cashier, but he receives neither, because the cashier—a tall, wiry guy who just wants to finish his shift and go back home to play *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*—couldn't care less about how long it takes an old woman to write a check, since he's going nowhere until his shift ends and gets paid the same no matter how many people he checks out. He shoves the guy's groceries into a sack, guy takes it, lugs it to ancient Subaru, drives home, unwraps burgers, pours blood into sink, gets some on hands, curses, washes it off, cooks burgers, lets them cool while he packs a bowl of the last of the Northern Lights he bought from a kid, eats burgers stoned, flips channels, lands on a movie about a dog dying that he can't ever not watch because he had a dog—an obedient and protective hound rescued from the Humane Society, a dog that he let lick his face despite the fact that his parents forbade it—blows his nose afterward into a paper towel because he's out of Kleenex and toilet paper, decides to pay his ex-girlfriend a visit, despite the fact that she's told him that she's with someone else now, figures that at the very least his weepiness will get him through her front door, so he climbs into his 1987 Subaru wagon and flies down I-85 toward Spartanburg—Subaru maxing out at 84 MPH, the entire car vibrating as though it might, at any minute, explode—and when he sees the gnarled strip of metal he swerves, but too late, whomp, he hits it, pulls over on the left-hand side of the highway—into the median—and sees that yup, it's a flat all right, and fuck fuck fuck, he's high and he feels like he's getting higher, in part because he is, having not five minutes before sucked in a lungful of Northern Lights

from a one-hitter he now tosses out the window, worrying that with his luck a cop will stop to help and smell the weed or note his bloodshot eyes and ask to search the vehicle, the thought of which causes him to proceed with the tire changing as if it did not feel as though his eyeballs were getting ready to pop out of their sockets, a chore he's pretty much able to complete until he discovers that, because of the angle of the median where he's parked, he can't slide off the flat, not even with the jack extended to full capacity, which means he ends up using the end of his lug wrench to dig out a trough in the grass, all while suffering the winds of cars blowing past him at 85 MPH. Needless to say, he won't drive to Amanda's—by the time he finishes dealing with the tire, he'll be way too freaked out. But he'll think of her on the way back to his apartment, of the way she'd always curled her toes up self-consciously when they smoked on her patio, how he'd never get to tell her again how much he loved them.

Cashier glances up. Doors open. Old woman rolls her cart out into the day, raising a hand to shield her eyes from the slanting afternoon light. Cashier thinks maybe she could use some help, that somebody should make sure she gets her stuff to her car without falling or being run over or losing control of her cart. But then another customer—a ponytailed, college-aged girl wearing a tank top and running shorts—places her basket on the conveyor belt, begins unloading produce wrapped in plastic sacks. The cashier notes the way her breasts shimmy in her snug top, distracts himself by palming an unbagged avocado and spinning a wheel and placing a finger under the four-digit number he needs to ring up the fruit. He can feel the leathery peel in his palm. He can smell the girl's perfume or lotion or soap or whatever. That smell, it works a number on him. He breathes it in deep, forgets all about the old woman, and will not think of her again.