

Checkouts by cynthia rylant: a short story



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

They moved her to Cincinnati, where for a month she spent the greater part of every day in a room of beveled glass windows, sifting through photographs of the life she'd lived and left behind. But it is difficult work, suffering, and in its own way a kind of art, and finally she didn't have the energy for it anymore, so she emerged from the beautiful house and fell in love with a bag boy at the supermarket.

Of course, this didn't happen all at once, just like that, but in the sequence of things that's exactly the way it happened.

She liked to grocery shop. She loved it in the way some people love to drive through country roads, because doing it she could think and relax and wander. Her parents wrote up the list and handed it to her and off she went without complaint to perform what they regarded as a great sacrifice of her time and a sign that she was indeed a very nice girl.

She had never told them how much she loved grocery shopping, only that she was "willing" to do it.

She had an intuition which told her that her parents were not safe for sharing such strong, important facts about herself. Let them think they knew her. Once inside the supermarket, her hands firmly around the handle of the cart, she would lapse into a kind of reverie and wheel toward the produce.

Like a Tibetan monk in silent meditation, she calmed to a point of deep, deep happiness; this feeling came to her, reliably, if strangely, only in the supermarket.

Then one day the bag boy dropped her jar of mayonnaise and that is how she fell in love. He was nervous first day on the job -? and along had come this fascinating girl, SST ending in the checkout line with the unfocused stare one often sees in young children, her face turned enough away that he might take several full looks at her as he packed styrofoam bags full of food and the goods of modern life. She interested him because her hair was red and thick, and in it she had placed a huge orange bow, nearly the size of a small hat.

That was enough to distract him, and when finally it was her groceries he was packing, she looked at him and smiled and he could respond only by busting her jar of mayonnaise on the floor, shards of glass and oozing cream decorating the area around his feet. She loved him at exactly that moment, and if he'd known this perhaps he would have fallen into the brown depression he fell into, which lasted the rest of his shift.

He believed he must have looked the fool in her eyes, and he envied the sureness of everyone around him; the cocky cashier at the register, the grim and harried store manager, the bland butcher, and the brazen bag boys who smoked in the warehouse on their breaks. He wanted a second chance. Another chance to be confident and say witty things to her as he threw tin cans into her bags, persuading her to allow him to help her to her car so he might learn just a little about her, check out the floor of the car for signs of hobbies or fetishes and the bumpers for clues as to beliefs and loyalties.