

## Grocery Store

By: Brandon Fries

The year was ending, which meant the sunset was earlier—the day stretched on, with no end in sight.

The five o'clock whistle blew—not that I was a prisoner to the proverbial whistle, but it had been a long day. I jumped in my car and headed home. The lights flashed around me as I whizzed by the streetlights. The low hum of the car and the methodical rhythms from my stereo eased my nerves. Miles passed by in a flash—I awoke from my trance.

Home.

I parked the car.

I turned the engine off—for just a moment—and took a deep breath in.

Eyes closed

HOLD IT—one, two, three, four,  
five.

LET IT OUT—one, two, three,  
four, five—

(feeling a little faint)

six, seven—

(the song is good, repeat it to stay  
in the mood)

eight—

(not much air left)

nine—

(push out the last bit of air to make  
sure there isn't anything left)

and ten.

(I'm purified)

I repeat this four times, as prescribed by my life coach. You've met him before. He's on social media. The life coach of the stars. Sharing all his tips and tricks for a measly two grand—the cheap seats—three-days—five thousand of his closest friends—or suckers, but since I was one of them, I'll go with friends. For me, that's only one day of pillaging.

One last deep breath.

Release.

I opened the door and the cold air rushed in. My left foot found the pavement and crunched down on the fallen leaves. I walked the pathway to my sanctuary, my mouth watered just thinking about what cocktail I would partake for today's happy hour.

The classic Manhattan with Antica Formula vermouth?

A gin made with authentic Indian tonic?

A simple, fresh margarita with agave?

I grabbed the door handle and checked it.

"It's unlocked," my beautiful bride shouted from beyond the door.

I smiled at the way she cares for me.

I pushed the door open and her homemade bolognese punched my nose and flooded my mouth with saliva. I made a quick left to the kitchen and wrapped my arms around her.

"Damn," I said, "what did I do to deserve this?"

"We have company tonight, remember?" She said as she turned her head and pecked my cheek. "Before you get comfortable, can you run to the store real quick? I forgot the pasta—maybe grab a dessert too?"

"No problem. I'll be right back."

We met later in life. Her dad was a preacher, and my dad was a thief. Her first marriage was a disaster, I vowed to never be committed.

But here we are.

Living life together.

(You are one lucky bastard)

People change.

We had been pinching our pennies—paying off our old debts—so I drove past the normal market. Bright lights and an overly friendly over-staffed establishment—ensuring a glorious experience and a quick check out—but also priced significantly higher than the

large discount store that was a mile down the road.

I arrived at the dimly lit parking lot and drove through the labyrinth of abandoned shopping carts. I found a spot near the back to keep the cheaper cars away from mine. Minimizing scrapes from kids zealously exiting their family cars.

I had a short list, so I knew this was going to be quick. I wove my way through the entry displays and searched the produce department for something that could resemble a dessert. Berries were always popular, so I grabbed a couple of different cartons and the powerful smell of fresh tortillas lured me into the bakery section where I picked up a loaf of bread to sop up the sauce—the best part of dinner.

I grabbed two packages of pasta, then went to the dairy aisle and picked up a round plastic container of mass-produced, prepared whipped cream for the berries. I took two steps when I remembered that she hates the already made whipped cream, but would prefer to make it herself.

"Don't rob yourself from the taste and calories of real whipped cream." She would say—and she's right. Dad always loved the plastic container stuff—old habits die hard.

On the way to the register, I perused the wine selection. This store didn't normally have a broad selection, but there was one bottle of chianti left, so I gingerly placed it in the cart.

It was a busy day at the store, and the lines to check out were long. I had to find one that would move quickly.

- Check the carts to see if one is spilling over with stuff.

- Is there an old person in the line, they take forever to check out.

- Does anyone have a handful of coupons they are going to use?

I chose my line and took an inventory of where I'm at compared to the other lanes.

A couple of minutes pass, and I am in the lead. The 3 other lanes haven't budged.

At minute six, I fall behind and 2 other lanes are moving past me.

A trickle of competitive sweat races down my cheek.

Minute eleven—I'm in second place, but it's a two-way tie and we have one person in front of us. The cart in front of me only has two items.

I still have a shot.

Minute twelve—first place was announced.

I lost—but second place wasn't too bad. I unloaded my cart. The cashier is new, and she's cute—not that I'm available. I'm happy—plus she's probably jail bate.

The chirp of my purchases.

She smiled.

It's \$27.

I pulled out a hundred-dollar bill—I always have cash on hand.

I paid.

I grabbed the bags and put them in my cart. I was ten steps from freedom when the wine clinked against the metal cart.

Shit—I forgot to pay for the wine. It wasn't intentional. An honest mistake.

I turned around to make it right.

"I'm sorry, I forgot to pay for this," I said.

"Oh," she gasped, "you could have just kept going. Not too often you get that kind of honesty these days."

"Integrity," I replied. "if you were to put a price tag on it, would a bottle of wine be fair compensation?"

She smiled.

I beamed with pride.

The doors opened for me.

A guy approached me asking for a dollar—

"Sorry bud, I'm broke."