

Meet Me at Register Five

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I stood in ShopRite's condiment aisle one summer morning two years ago, scanning the shelves for sugar-free salad dressing and thought, I hate grocery shopping.

Every week it's the same drill: Load the shopping cart, find the shortest checkout line, empty the cart's contents onto the conveyor belt, pack my own reusable grocery bags, shove the bags into my decade-old Honda Pilot, unload the bags back home, and stock the kitchen amid questions from my husband and two kids: *Didn't they have blueberry yogurt? Why did you buy grapes? You forgot tissues?* (For years, I'd harbored this question: Why don't you guys get the groceries and I'll interrogate YOU when you get home? At some point I'd started saying it out loud.)

Standing blankly in the condiment aisle, a wave of defeat washed over me.

I yanked my glasses off and pulled a bottle of Italian dressing so close to my face I could feel my breath on it. It's the only way I can read the nutrient label.

"Hello, Miss."

A kind, familiar voice I hadn't heard in ages sliced through my apathy. It was Nazrahi, the cashier who used to work on register five. I hadn't seen him for months. I had assumed he was long gone, and he had taken the last ounce of joy I felt at the grocery store with him.

Before I met Nazrahi, I'd been an impatient shopper, incensed by customers who blocked the aisles gossiping with neighbors and who later stalled the checkout line. Couldn't they see that my Popsicles were melting on the conveyor belt while they carried on with the cashier?

By contrast, I was a checkout line rock star: I never delayed fellow shoppers. I never quibbled with the cashier over alleged markdowns. My coupons were always valid, and I placed each one atop its corresponding product. I practically packed my items faster than the cashier could scan them.

But I only impressed myself. Until I met Nazrahi.

Nazrahi worked at the new ShopRite in my neighborhood. Register five quietly mocked customers like me, because it bordered a series of express lanes. Dizzied by the store's unfamiliar layout, I couldn't figure out where register five fit. I wasn't about to be the fool who unloaded a week's worth of groceries in an express lane.

"Is this lane only for orders of twelve items or less?" I'd finally asked Nazrahi, the cashier at register five, a few weeks after I'd started shopping there.

"I take all orders, Miss. Come on down," he said. He sounded like a game show host.

I unloaded my haul, displayed my coupons, and tossed my canvas bags toward the bagging area.

"You're a great shopper," Nazrahi said. "Everything is in order."

I nodded and felt my cheeks go warm. All I'd wanted was to get out of the store. But now this kind stranger was making small talk.

A thirty-something brunette behind me mumbled to herself, but I heard every word:

"Unbelievable, bringing this huge order to the express line."

My heart thumped with anger. Kill her with kindness, or throw my iceberg lettuce at her head?

"Good morning," Nazrahi chirped, shattering my dilemma. "Do you see those four registers?" He motioned to the four miniature conveyor belts. "Those are express. They'll be happy to help if you are in a hurry. This line—never express."

I couldn't help myself—I smirked at the brunette. I paid and, eager to finish, simply thanked Nazrahi. After that, I became a regular on his line.

"There she is, my best customer," he'd say, beaming at me each week. "Did you find everything you needed? Any coupons today?"

While he scanned and I bagged, we'd continue the previous week's chat. *Did your husband like the new almond milk? I'm glad your son is feeling better. What did you cook for the holiday? Now that your kids are getting older, will you go back to work?*

In bits and pieces, he came to know my story, and I came to know his. He was from Nigeria, but his family, as he described it, had been "kicked out." They'd lived in Italy for a short time, then came to the United States. I don't know whether his family arrived as immigrants or as refugees, and I wasn't sure if he had children. Somehow those questions always felt too personal to ask.

"Are you happy in this country?" I asked him instead.

"Yes, very happy," he said. "We are so lucky, Miss. I like this job and this beautiful store. It's good for customers and for me." The register pinged as he scanned. "I keep meaning to ask your nationality. I can't figure it out."

I considered his question for a moment. It would be so easy to say "American," but there was more to my story, too.

"I was born in New Jersey," I finally said, "but I have family from Puerto Rico and a few other places."

As I waited for the card reader to process my payment, the barrel-chested man in line behind me checked his watch and sighed.

The checkout line rock star in me wanted to skedaddle to give the man his turn. But during the short time I had gotten to know Nazrahi, he had reminded me that connecting with the folks we see as we drudge through our routines was more important than rushing toward the exit.

"What are the other places?" Nazrahi asked, handing me my receipt.

"Italy and Algeria."

"Oh, that's an interesting mix."

The man behind me inched closer and held out his loyalty card for Nazrahi, who gave me a knowing look.

"Have a good day," I told him. I gave him a thumbs up. "We'll talk next week."

"Next time we'll talk food," Nazrahi said. "I want to know what kind of Puerto Rican food you cook."

Except that conversation never happened. Just like that, Nazrahi vanished. He must have taken a week's vacation, I thought. When two weeks became three, I started to worry. I changed my shopping routine, even swung by on a few evenings in case his shift had changed. But he was nowhere to be found.

One idle Monday morning at the store, more than a month after I'd last seen Nazrahi, another cashier, a redhead with a voice like Rosanne Barr, shouted across two lanes to her coworker as I searched for an open register: "The paper bags run out because Nazrahi isn't here. He's the only one who restocks them on morning shift."

I lingered at a candy rack feigning interest in Tic Tacs, hoping she'd say more. When she didn't, I decided to pay at her register and

ask about him. I rehearsed innocuous questions in my head as I emptied my cart: *Is Nazrahi on a long vacation? Was Nazrahi transferred to another store?* I'd even invented a lie because I didn't want her to think I was a stalker: *Say, there was a cashier who was going to give me a recipe. His name is Nazrahi. Do you know when he works?*

The redheaded cashier was bubbly in a self-deprecating way. She joked about not slamming my laundry detergent on top of my eggs and said she wanted to inhale my crumb cake. I couldn't find an opening for my burning question in what sounded like her stand-up comedy routine. I'd blown it.

Deep down, I'd been afraid of the answer.

So when I heard Nazrahi's voice again as I stood in the condiment aisle months after he'd vanished, I nearly gouged an eye shoving my glasses back on.

"Nazrahi! Where have you been?"

Even as I spoke, regret twisted my gut. A filmy gaze had replaced the expectant gleam in his eyes. He shambled toward me with a woman who appeared to be his wife.

"I have been away from work," he said simply, his voice cracking. He glanced down the aisle at no one, then turned to the woman, who was supporting him with one arm. "My wife is helping me with the sickness."

What sickness? I'd wanted to ask, but the question seemed too intrusive. Whatever it was, it had made him frail. It had to be serious. A lump loomed in my throat.

"I'm sorry you're not feeling well," I whispered. I swallowed hard and turned to his wife. "You are so lucky. Nazrahi is a hard worker and very nice man."

She grasped his hand tighter.

"Thank you, dear," she said, touching my shoulder.

I willed her to say more, but she turned to Nazrahi and stayed quiet.

"Very good to see you, Miss," Nazrahi said after a long moment. "We must finish the shopping now."

"Okay," I said. All my energy was focused on bridling tears. "You have a good day, and I'll pray that you feel better soon."

Nazrahi and his wife thanked me and shuffled away.

Wait! I wanted to call out. *Don't go. When will you come back to work?*

Will I ever see you again?

But this wasn't a movie. There was no happy reckoning before the closing credits. I said nothing as they picked up a jar of olives and tottered out of sight.

A cart rattled past me, and a customer huffed.

I'd been blocking the aisle.

For weeks I vainly scanned the checkout lanes for Nazrahi's raven hair and breezy smile, hoping he'd emerge from behind a sale rack and say, *There she is, my best customer.*

Sometimes I'd imagine what he might have said to the harried customers who reminded me of the shopper I used to be before I'd met him: *It's a beautiful morning! Tell me something good!* Once, as I waited in a stalled checkout line, I laughed, remembering an encounter Nazrahi once had with an extreme couponer who'd been ahead of me in line. The conveyor belt was heaped with what had to be thirty bottles of body wash:

"Miss, did you see that stack of coupons?" he'd asked me, leaning theatrically over the conveyor belt. "I thought my register would explode! Who needs that much body wash?"

Now, I toss broccoli crowns and salmon fillets into my cart every week, but I feel bereft despite the bounty. I haven't seen my kind stranger in two years, and still, I search for him every time I shop. I wish I could tell him that my older son got his driver's license, and that I learned how to cook Korean beef bulgogi using the shaved steak I found in the meat department. I wish the questions swirling inside my head weren't so personal, or I'd pull that redheaded cashier aside and ask:

Why was Nazrahi sick? How is his wife? Do they have children who take care of them?

And, who restocks the paper bags now?