

Gene McCormick



The Unrequited

As he pays for his morning coffee at the 7-Eleven, the Indian-from-India cashier looks at him furtively when she thinks he is putting his change away or adjusting the lid on the hot cup, maybe figuring morning sun through the smudged windows has affected his vision but he has caught her twice in the past three days looking at him and then smiling, and he smiles back.

The following day he is a half hour earlier than usual; she is mopping the floor behind the lottery machines. He gets his coffee and goes to pay but she has taken the mop and bucket to the back of the store, out of sight, and her brother, or is it her son,

takes his money, nothing furtive about it.

Her feet must get dirty, and tired, by day's end,
he thinks.

After work she goes home and plays her childhood flute.

He watches TV.

The house in which she lives has no dripping faucets.

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The next day, a Thursday, he is again earlier
than usual and finds her sweeping the floor
near the entrance, the dust mop reaching
her shoulders while the business end
takes wide swaths across the worn linoleum flooring.
She pushes past, not acknowledging him, pushing
to the seclusion of the rear of the store, Employees Only.

He notes there are only two cars parked nearby:
his KIA and a Lexus, which could be hers
or her brother's, or son's, or husband's and
he wonders how many of them share the same car.

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On weekends a younger and less attractive
girl works behind the counter.
Maybe it's her daughter, or younger sister.
She never seems to mop or push a broom,
and he pays no attention to her,
nor her to him.

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He knows now to go to the 7-Eleven at midmorning
Monday through Friday for coffee when
her mopping and sweeping chores are done
for the day and she stands behind the
counter to take his money and smile and
look at him when she thinks he is not
looking at her.

He makes it a point to never have
exact change, prolonging the transaction.
If the change includes pennies
he gives them back to her.

Once her fingertips touched his outstretched palm
as she gave him change.

Her skin is rough, worker's fingers.

She speaks functional English and has an androgynous body which he would like to know better. To touch her. It's an addiction. He doesn't know her name.

Each day when he drives off another customer comes in for coffee and she accepts the stranger's money and smiles and looks at him furtively.

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On days when it rains hard or when he sleeps in late he doesn't go to the 7-Eleven.

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Her name is Shriya.

Her demeanor is quite reserved.

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After several weeks of infatuation, the passion dissipated.

Shriya sashes the mop around his feet while he stands at the coffee machine and neither of them give a furtive glance.

A Void Of Indifference

In a seldom opened drawer, underneath yesterday's culture clutter, a forgotten 12-page business card file booklet is picked up. Utilized long before computer "address books," it holds four cards on each side of a page with clear plastic pockets allowing cards to be inserted back-to-back totaling eight cards to a sheet adding up to 96 cards in the shiny transparent folder. Several cards fall out as it slips from unsteady fingers, cards of businesses and businessmen no longer in existence. Most of the cards are printed with a single color, occasionally two. The cheapest cards are embossed, raised black letters on white card stock; nowadays cards are printed in full color for next to nothing. A ringing cell phone is ignored as the cards are studied, toting up dead companies and people. Of seventy-three cards tucked away, only eleven businesses still exist with restaurants being the most frequent casualties. Of seventy-three names on the cards, eight are known to be dead. The rest, strictly don't-call-me-I'll-call-you business acquaintances, exist solely in a three-decades-long void of indifference. All have now been disposed of in time-honored tradition: tossed in the trashcan.

Poolside, Fremont Country Club

Care has been paid to the coiffures of the club women, complemented by finger- and toenails equally well tended, shaped and colored by the unspoken social coda that nails must be real as opposed to add-ons which is not applicable to other parts of the anatomy That's the way it is, the main reasons that the swimming pool is an amenity not meant for swimming.

French doors, painted white with a Napoleonic gilt stripe running along the outer edges, open from the pool to the dining area where mid-morning breakfast eggs, soft- or hardboiled, are served in a Wedgewood pattern Royal Daulton egg cup with a small sterling knife aside, its blade able to crack through the egg's shell with a slight tap.

Beyond the French doors at the pool there is no need for additional towels beyond those neatly folded on each lounge chair although a supply is stacked in the cabana: big, too big, terrycloth white towels with the FCC monogram in script. It would be easier to rub oneself dry if the towels were half their dimensions although the abundance allows a sunbather to cover up sun-reddened legs or shoulders. The size of the towels would never be on the agenda at the monthly board meetings, which may be a mistake. Since nobody ever actually enters the water it might be a good idea to replace the terrycloth towels with French linens, a topic befitting the agenda. Languishing on a well-filled chaise, legs stretched out, drinking another Lime Rickey, Mrs. Harrison Lanta likes to pull her towel up high, its edge brushing beneath her nose, covering her mouth and in fact the entire lower portion of her face and upper half of her body. When she adjusts the towel, vermilion fingernails offer a striking contrast with the white terrycloth. Mrs. Lanta heads the ladies' auxiliary and any of her late husbands could have gotten the towel situation to a vote.

It is the unwritten practice in the dining room for a table entirely of women to be served by a male waiter and a table of men to be attended by a female waiter, and the servers are Caucasian, practices which don't make it onto the club agenda either.



Black & White

An elderly interracial couple are unloading their Walmart shopping cart into the back of a late model SUV, expressionless blank faces neither smiling nor frowning and there is no conversation.

The packages are of little interest: bottled water, two six-packs of Miller Lite, two green plastic webbed lawn chairs.

The task complete, the man purposefully returns the cart to the cart stall, clattering it between the rails the final three feet.

The woman waits for him to return and then gets in the SUV driver's side as he gets in the KIA parked alongside the SUV.

Her hair is still black, flat to her head and slicked shiny, his is gray, short and unkept.

Her clothes fit a size small, his are loose.

He is white, she is black.

They drive off apart but together,
as it has been for their past half century.

Gene McCormick's latest poetry collection, *Big City Nighttime Stories* (Middle Island Press, 103 pp, \$16), is available on Amazon or direct from the author at Genebiz@att.net.