

Marc Hummel

"Blank Spots"

Of all the places a man must shop, Ivan fears the grocery store the most. He's never sure of the best time to go, if he has the right cards, if there'll be enough room in the parking lot. And he doesn't like to park too close to the entrance because that's where parents park, and he knows how careless little kids can be.

Always attentive to the silver lining, Ivan would admit to a few close friends that he likes the produce aisle the best. He especially likes how they stack the fruit and vegetables in huge, precarious piles. He sometimes tries to get an apple from the very bottom of the stack, testing his ability to toss it into his basket without causing the whole pile to come toppling down. He wonders how many pears each worker bruised during their training.

He envies the shoppers around him who seem so natural in their movements, so confident that they're doing the right thing, so sure that they're purchasing the right products. They seem so content in their moment, in their lives, in their decisions. And while he admires their confidence, he questions their judgment and motivations. What is their secret? Do they really have it together so well?

Then there's the vexation of shopping itself. He's aware that grocery stores hide the cheap versions of the more expensive stuff on the bottom shelves, and he knows why they put junk food on the end caps and how they'll give you a coupon for a dollar off something that was two dollars cheaper last week. He's confident he has their game figured out, but deep down he knows the store will get the best of him no matter what.

He can manage these relatively trivial concerns easily enough, but his apprehension

of the checkout line is the most effortful to overcome.

The clerk is dressed in a standard pair of black slacks and her Wednesday copy of the company-issued polo shirt, the collar tucked neatly outside the straps of her apron. Her curly red hair is rigorously pulled back in a delicate sequence of bobby pins – a secret equation which only she can unfurl. Her feet hurt, she has to pee, and her vision is a blur of surly expressions and bar codes.

Ivan knows what's expected of him. He has worked, over the years, to perfect the balance between assuring those behind him that his time is as equally important as theirs, while signaling to the apron-clad clerk up front that he is humble and not in any particular rush. Her job is a monotonous one, he sees, and it takes a man of a certain intellectual capacity to empathize with all kinds of people. He aims for a pleasant stance that encourages the clerk's confidence and her perceived control of the situation. Please, notice for the first time the way the photograph on the frozen pea bag is cropped *just* short of the horizon. How it suggests an endless supply of healthy vegetables on the inside. By all means, take a few deep breaths and shake out the tension in your shoulders.

Do your job like the special individual you are.

He also wants to convey to the shoppers behind him that while his stance is certainly relaxed, his mind is never still. He tries his best to maintain a stern look of reflection, so the clerk knows that he, too, is baffled by the way marketers spend countless hours researching little details on a pea bag. They both know that the best packaging embodies what the customer wants to think he is buying, not the perfectly measured clump of microwave-safe carbs which lie inside. The only serving suggestion the piece of garlic bread in the picture next to the peas offers is a quiet dinner for one.

He's not just a customer, he is a friend.

The last part of this carefully calibrated show is also the most difficult to predict. His reputation to the clerk lies completely in the hands of a magazine rack. This is his last chance to show the clerk he truly isn't in a hurry, that he has good taste, that he is different.

"How's it going today, sir?"

"Er, pretty well, thanks! Can't seem to shake this headache though..."

"Aw, sorry about that. Whatcha readin'?"

"Ah, it's nothin'," Ivan shrugs, casually tossing down a copy of this week's *The Economist*.

"Ah, OK sir, well your total is... \$18.59. Do you have your ClubRite card with you today?"

"No, thank you," he mumbles, as he swipes a credit card across the top of a flimsy display. He wonders if she's using this part of the transaction to eye him up, surprised about his payment method, concluding that he really looks more like the debit card type.

"OK, that's it! Thanks for shopping at RiteWay."

He musters one last smile and walks toward the door, a paper bag in each hand. He meanders past the balloons and flowers, wondering why they position all the cheery things by the door. His head is pounding.

Just as he's about to put his left foot on the corrugated mat to trigger the automatic door, the bags simultaneously tear open, sending an unsealed pack of bamboo skewers, two boxes of candles, three pounds of apples, and a couple bags of peas straight to the ground. In a helpless gush of failure, Ivan shrugs and walks back to his car with a pair of mangled paper bags. He starts up the car, wondering

"I feel like I have the ingredients to this life – an apartment, a phone full of numbers, a job – but no idea where it all came from or how they go back together. I know the words to songs I don't think I've ever heard before. I have rows and rows of battered DVD cases containing movies I've never seen. While everything I do feels completely new and amazing, I get the feeling I'm stuck in a b-movie, reliving the same scene over and over again."

Ivan was in his doctor's office, plopped in the middle of a big black leather couch flanked by two vacant easy chairs. The walls were painted in a subdued honeydew green; little framed watercolors of potted plants lined the walls. The doctor was perched on a wooden stool opposite the couch.

"What do you mean, Ivan?"

"I was cleaning up around the house the other day when for a moment it seemed like that's all I've ever done my whole life, scrub the windows. But at the same time, I had the impression I've never been there before and was totally enchanted by the streak patterns, how long it took them to dry... It probably sounds wonderful, like a toddler watching the leaves fall from the trees for the first time, but..."

This was Ivan's third visit to the psychiatrist since the virus attacked his brain. He was recovering well – all things considered – but still had trouble recalling things outside of the immediate moment. His recollection of events from before the illness was spotty, and the virus, sort of like an all-ages Alzheimer's, severely hampered his ability to record new memories.

"How do you get out of that mindset, when everything seems so surreal, Ivan?"

"Well I go online, watch a movie, look at old photographs. Anything to distract

myself. I occasionally get the feeling of déjà vu even then. It's as if what I see myself doing isn't actually taking place in the physical world. Or that it already has, and I'm merely acting it out again for kicks. I just want this thing to cut me a break, I don't need to be reminded of it all the time."

"You said last week that you wanted to take up journaling, as a way of connecting to your past. How's that been going?"

"Yeah, I'm slowly getting into the habit of it. I started by looking back, trying to pinpoint the last memory I could recall from before the blank spot. The only thing I could come up with was a random visit to the grocery store. I have bits and pieces of other memories, but they're incomprehensibly truncated for the most part. For whatever reason, the grocery store stands alone. I know where I went to college, who I hung out with, what I was studying. I have the résumé version of my life, and that's about it. The tangible stuff – like my twenty-first birthday, what me and my roommate talked about freshman year, the song that was playing when I flipped over my car – is all gone. The knowledge I have about my own life is like a less distinguished version of the story we tell ourselves about Columbus or Abe Lincoln. We brush over the messy little details and focus on the easy fairytale.

"Last night I was sitting on the floor, trying to get through the David Sedaris book I was reading right before the illness struck, trying not to get a headache from concentrating too hard, wondering why the fuck I got sick, why me, what did I do today, what did I do yesterday, what if I don't get any better, wondering every time I get a headache if it's the encephalitis coming back, what would I be leaving behind, what's the point?"

Ivan checks over his list one last time: pasta, milk, tomatoes, turkey patties, cheese, vitamins, apples. The first thing that came back to him was the smell. Although grocery stores are among the most sterile environs outside of a hospital, they manage to retain their unique scent surprisingly well – from the aroma of the floor polish to the cardboard scent of the cereal aisle. He remembered his last memory even more vividly now – how awkward he felt, how rushed he was, how self-conscious and judgmental he was about everything. He wandered the aisles, marveling in the huge selection, delighted by the colorful packaging, and energized by the prospect of cooking with spices he'd never heard of before.

As he made his way through the store and approached the checkout line, he was overwhelmed by a sense of sentimentality. It's the same feeling he gets when passing by an apartment he used to live in – a faceless range of emotions and the vague aura of a past he can't fully connect to. Ivan wasn't sure what he expected to get out of his trek to the grocery store, what kind of closure a store full of packaged goods could possibly provide. But it was