

Retail

Soon after we opened, the Brooklyn Borough President and a number of City Council members and their staff people started shopping with us, in part because we have a fantastic cellar and in part to thank us for choosing a frontier block in a gentrifying neighborhood. One Councilman was a particularly affable chap. He said to me, “Look, I grew up drinking the best Chianti that six or seven bucks could buy and now I want you to sell me a Barbaresco or a Barolo that a guy who grew up on the best cheap Chianti in the world will really like.” He was, to be sure, more sophisticated than he pretended to be and I liked him a lot in any case. “You want a Nebbiolo that has a claret-like body,” I told him. “There’s a region in the Piedmont called Lessona, and something called Tenute Sella that I can let you have for \$20.” “Sold!” he exclaimed. “Excellent,” I said. “It is a fairly rare bottle, and a bargain for sure.” Naturally, I wanted to cultivate these politicians, but it was a pleasure doing so. I’m not a snob in the usual sense. If customers really know what they like, I’m all the more pleased to be helpful regardless of whether or not they’re knowledgeable. Of course, we sometimes do get customers that I can only best describe as unfortunate. One man came in with his mother on a day we had some Riesling set up for tasting. “It’s too dry for me,” said the old lady. “Ma, it’s a sweet wine,” he said, exasperated. “Tastes awful dry to me,” she said with an embarrassed smile. “Ma,” her son said, too loud, “you think sweet wine means Manischewitz. That’s not sweet wine.

That's grape juice they stick sugar in!" He was so ashamed of her, he was well-nigh apoplectic. Most unfortunate!

Not to mix metaphors, but it was the big book of life at the crossroads of the world. You were lucky if you worked the night shift, which began at three pm, because Berry seldom stayed later than five and either went home or across the street to sit at the bar of the Chinese restaurant next to the Fisk Building where he and his friends played Liar's Poker. Berry leaving the bar one night actually caught Schon pilfering an armload of remainders but he was too tipsy to actually know what was going on. No matter, he'd soon fire Schon anyway for not ringing up credit card purchases on the register and pocketing the cash value of the sales after putting the charge receipts in the drawer. I called him "Mr. Berry" once, as a casual endearment, and he bristled, he said, "Don't ever call me that. That's what people call my father, and he's nothing!" Oh, ok! Yes, Berry was a zany and he did get on everyone's nerves but people loved him, I certainly did, because his humanity just dripped down his shirtfront. "Mike has a lot of heart," said Jill Davison when Peck brought up the subject of Berry's apparent impotence, and that was all she would say. It was an exciting place for me, in part because I was well-liked, in part because I had just been out of work for months, in part because of all the celebrities who came in, what with Carnegie Hall and the Russian Tea Room just down the block. A lot of minor celebrities and literati came in too, whom I'd recognize if I saw their names on their credit cards. "I

love what you wrote about Ornette Coleman, that his music is all blues,” I said to A.B. Spellman. I doubt he’s been admired like that by a total stranger before or since. But it was the coming and going of the other clerks that really enlivened the place, and not just because of the sex. There wasn’t much else to do except read, talk, and flirt, and in my case get drunk from time to time. I loved a lot of the other employees, including a couple of girls I fucked along with one I was nuts about but who wouldn’t let me do her even though she was cheating on her boyfriend with other guys, including a choreographer who ran the company she danced in – the neighborhood was lousy with dancers, dance, both ballet and modern, being really in vogue at the time – and some guys I got to feel very close to, including Paul Lopez who was a cokehead and who set the place up for a professional hit. But he set it up for a night I was off, or at least I like to think that’s what he did, out of respect to me and because, as it turned out, these guys used very big guns. Also, some of the customers who were just customers, not celebrities, became part of the family. One mother and son came in around once a month, I don’t know why they aroused my interest; he was a pretty quiet guy, or at least he never said much when they were in the store, maybe because he was embarrassed by how his mother always talked a blue streak and would single out clerks like Miller to chat up because they looked Jewish; she was one of those Jews who do the Jewish bit every time they can. She should only have known, Miller was one of those Jews who like to seethe out their souls over the alleged misdeeds of the Israelis. It was only a few months after Moynihan’s “Zionism

is not racism” speech and the problem was that guys like me didn’t always have the courage to say what we thought, so for all intents and purposes Moynihan was alone. That’s how liberalism, the old New York Roosevelt sort of liberalism, started to die, because guys like me who agreed with guys like Moynihan weren’t usually eager to say so. One woman used to come in, a fat woman with a pretty face, I’m guessing a very lonely woman, but she had her job to focus on, and a pretty interesting job it was, as special assistant to the Manhattan Borough President. She’d stop off and talk to me about him almost every day; for some reason she used to call me “D” instead of “Dale,” which I thought was kind of cute. Then there were the junkies we’d chase out and one bald loon I remember who walked around the store measuring the scalps of bald authors like James Beard on the covers of their books. You tell people you work in a bookstore and they think that’s pretty dull and unremarkable, but the three years I worked there were the best years of my life. We had this one clerk, she was a drunk and would puke in the toilet almost every night; for Ryan, a black guy from Panama, the nightly crucible was having to ride home with her on the IRT. He couldn’t avoid it, he hated to be rude, but he also hated thinking the other passengers would figure him for one of those black guys who’ll fuck anything that’s white. I could go on...

I’ve worked many places in New Jersey, mostly Hudson County and one station in Bergen too, but I never liked a job more than when I worked for

Ray Delvecchio who had the last station I was at before I signed up at junior college. There was a bigger garage at the BP just down the street from us, so it worked out that most people, except for a few regulars, had their lubes and things done over there and most of our traffic was just for gas. Ray is a fine gentleman who appreciated Indians, he said we're very, very dependable men, so that's mainly who he hired, Raj and Rhit and Amit, besides me. They're fine fellows and sometimes we'd all hang out together at the station, even when we were off duty, which Ray had no reason to mind, we liked to chat and play games, card games and checkers, and sometimes we would play games, a little silly but fun, that had to do with our fantasies about the customers. When a pretty girl would drive in, and maybe Rhit was filling her tank, we'd look at her face and one of us would say, "Does she grunt or whimper?" and when she left and Rhit came back, we'd say to him, "Grunt or whimper?" If his choice made it 2-2 or 4-0 for either grunt or whimper, that would be a draw. But if it turned out 3-1, the minority guy – in other words, the only man who said grunt or the only man who said whimper – would have to put \$1 in a bottle, which we'd spend at a restaurant or something after the pot grew. It wasn't as complicated as it sounds, and it was great fun indeed. But even more fun was when we, we being as many of us as happened to be there at the time, alternated customers and we'd pretend that whoever was putting the nozzle in the tank was fucking the driver from behind, maybe in the behind – because, when you think about it, it does look that way a little, if you use your imagination, especially if the attendant

stands close beside the car while it's filling up – and as soon as the customer drove off, we'd ask our friend to describe the experience and we begged him for details about what it was like. It really was sort of a game in the sense that the winners were the ones who would get the pretty girls while the losers might get a fat old sow or a disgusting old man. That happened to me once.

“Sundar, it's your turn, it's your turn,” crowed Raj and I found myself giving the pump to some old man who spat out the window and who looked like he had leprosy or something, his face was all pocked. I must have had a really distressed look on my own face as I stood by the car, because the other guys were I swear going to die from laughing so hard. One time a mother and son drove in, or at least we assumed that's what they were, and Raj gave the son the nozzle, he was the driver. “Was he tight?” I asked him. Raj just waved his hand at me. “The old lady had a funny look on her face while you were fucking him,” said Amit, and Raj asked, “How so?” “Hard to explain,” said Amit. “I noticed it too,” said Rhit. Nobody ever had it better in this game than Rhit who once got a woman who was not only very gorgeous but who leaned back in her seat and curled her outspread arms around the seatback while her tank filled. She really did look like she was getting a good wonderful fucking and Rhit was in his glory, he kept grinning like a boy at a birthday party with his hand not just on the hose, but clutching the hose for dear life. I only remember one Indian customer, an older woman in a sari – no pleats, so I guess she was Bengali or from Odisha – she came by and Amit

pumped her. There were Koreans, of course, and people from the Middle East, Iran I guess. No Pakis I knew of.

The only customers on the floor were this young man and his mother. I certainly didn't figure them for big-sticker buyers but the guy kept fingering his way through the import racks while the old lady chatted me up about how much the Island had changed, how the sense of a real neighborhood was gone, how her friends from Valley Stream were either in Florida or nursing homes, how young people like her son, she called him Sunshine, only came out these days for holidays or events, and so forth. "I'd like to try this on," he said, fingering an Armani, but it hung badly on him so I suggested a Pal Zileri, which was actually a few hundred dollars more. He didn't blanch at that. In fact, Sunshine really beamed when he tried it on and announced that he'd take it. I was surprised, they just didn't act or look like people who made sizable purchases on clothing or had much reason to. But I finally got it figured out when the mother paid with a shiny new credit card. He had a look on his face of someone who was thinking ahead and I'll bet you the old lady was just about ready to get packed up for Assisted Living. He'd pay minimum on her monthly bill for as long as he had to and, after that, arrivederch...Not my problem; if they give credit cards to batty old women, they get what they deserve.

It was the most degrading time of my life, possibly, and yet I look back on it fondly. First, there's just the sheer absurdity of it, when I tell friends I used to be a security guard at a Burger Palace in Queens. Second, there were the kids, the sweet (as I'd come to realize) kids with nowhere else to hang out, and whose fault was that? Every night it was a struggle kicking them out if they weren't going to buy a Biggie or fries or something. The manager, Tony Maiano, would nod in their direction as a cue for me to go into action, He could have gotten them out a lot easier himself, he had twice my street savvy, he was built like a truck, and the kids respected him. But shooin' adolescents out of fast food restaurants was beneath him and, besides, what was I getting paid \$3 hour for? He really only wanted them out so the District Manager, Harry O they called him, wouldn't break his chops about it during one of his unannounced visits. "Joey, I've lived a very sinful life," Tony said to me. "This," he said, surveying the restaurant with a glance, "*this* is my penance."

I did learn a little about the business, I learned how it was the kind of business where you don't want to waste the little ketchup packets or give away seconds on Coke for free, because it all adds up to immense dollar volumes. I learned how even here everybody scrabbles for turf, the Biggie Board where the hamburgers were assembled being the choicest assignment, for which assignment one girl was even willing to fuck an Assistant Manager, Frank Something. I learned to make deals here, and I got Tony to sign on to an arrangement whereby the kids could stay if they weren't too noisy, that they'd leave if we had to ask them to, and order something right away if

Harry O showed up. The turning point for me was one drizzly night I was kicking them all out when Walter Ludz begged to use the bathroom first. He must have been in there twenty minutes when I started pounding on the door. Walter emerged, wearing nothing but his overcoat and holding an open umbrella. That broke the ice, I laughed a lot so the kids started figuring I was a decent enough guy and it really would be a shame if I lost this job, crummy as it was, on their account. I really got to like them. There was a kanook named Pete Decasse who, every time he saw me, would put his hand between his legs and call out, "Hey Joey, mangia, mangia!" There was Mehmet, he was a really dumb Turkish kid who'd sit in the restaurant reading the World Wrestling Federation magazine out loud. One night he was reading an interview with Jake the Snake Roberts, and I was so goddamn bored I said, "Hey, I'll read the part where it says 'Q' and you read the part where it says 'A.'" The customers were the easiest part of the job. A couple of them were fairly picturesque, including this mother and son combo who came in from time to time. The doting mother would ask him how his burger was, and he'd say, "It's a hamburger in a fast food joint, how the hell do you think it is?" My guess is, they had fallen on hard times. Another guy was wolfing down his sandwich when the "hostess," a bright-eyed thing who didn't last long (neither did the job title), asked him how everything was, and he said, "Everything is awful." "Is there anything I can do?" she asked. "There's nothing you can do," he said, with a vicious emphasis on "nothing." Son of a bitch if he didn't come in the next night for more, and the night after that as I

recall. One night I got this idea about writing a book about the Biggie tracing every ingredient and all the farmers and farmers' daughters and processors and packagers and distributors who had made every ingredient possible, the tragic and comic human stories behind the onions and cheese and lettuce and the meat itself. That would be quite a saga.