

The Invisible Woman Goes Shopping

It's like shoplifting, only not. Though I could shoplift if I wanted to. I'm sure I could do pretty much anything I felt like, without anyone paying me the attention. This is what happens to females past a certain age, especially if they have grey hair and dress conservatively. As far as you're concerned, we're transparent.

Not that I'm complaining. Life on the margins suits me. I'm an observer, a people-watcher, and it's easier to do that if you look unremarkable. See me now down this supermarket aisle – I'm here, by the shampoo, in the pale fawn mac. No, don't let your eyes skid over me; I know there's a pair of teenagers enjoying a fascinating embrace by the DVDs, but never mind them. You stay with me. We have a job to do.

There: the woman wearing the purple vest top, two straw-blond infants in tow. You can hear her before she comes properly into view. *Put that down! Leave it! Will you stop that? Get up off the floor. I shan't tell you again. You're going to get a slap in a minute, you are.* Lovely, isn't it? And those little boys of hers are looking up at her with the faces of confused and gloomy angels.

This paperback's what I've got in mind for her: 'Release the Sunshine Inside: How to Wake Up Every Morning With a Smile on your Face' by Professor J M

Katzenberg. I did consider a relaxing jazz CD, but I've been following this woman for twenty minutes and I can tell she's beyond anything a chilled saxophone can address.

I'm not one to judge people – Lord knows, it's annoying enough when others do it to me – but for this caper, I really have to. Mostly it's something insignificant I plant, a single item that I'm hoping will make a small, positive difference to a day. Say, a pot of dark chocolate mousse inserted into the carrier bag of a weary-looking nursing assistant; luxury body lotion for the old lady struggling with a basket of own-brand basics; a packet of glitter pens for the sad little girl whose baby sister's getting all the attention.

I have been caught out a couple of times. On these occasions, though, I simply pretend I've made a mistake: dotty old woman getting her comestibles mixed up. Ha ha, bring on the HRT. I suspect, too, there've been times when my deposit's been noted, but the owner's kept quiet out of embarrassment. Luckily, I've got to that stage in life where I don't care what people think of me any more. And if a store detective ever challenged me, what would he say? I arrest you on suspicion of gratuitous gifting?

There've been occasions I've got it wrong, of course. That's the hazard of extrapolating someone's life out of a handful of groceries. Last year, near Valentine's Day, I was gazing at the huge display of Treats for your Loved One, when I spotted a pair of joke handcuffs. They were pink and fluffy, and looked about as substantial as pipe-cleaners. Potentially interesting, though. I took a pair off the shelf, zipped them through the till, then cruised around till I lighted on a thin, drab-looking woman who I'd been seeing around the store for a few months. Usually she did her shopping with her partner, a serious, bespectacled man who favoured corduroy jackets and who always spent an excessive amount of time reading food labels. Both of them looked to

me like people who badly needed more excitement in their lives. So you can imagine my surprise when I got to the checkout and saw her unload her *own* pair of handcuffs onto the conveyor belt. Evidently business in the bedroom was sparkier than I'd imagined.

I took my handcuffs home; well, I'd paid for them. What else was there to do?

Once, I kick-started a romance here. This young woman in a blazer used to come in after work, and at the same time there'd be a man in a tracksuit, off to play football or visit the gym. I watched them sneaking glances at each other for weeks. In fact, he took to hanging around in the car park till he'd seen her go in. Neither of them wore wedding rings, and I never saw them with partners, so the field seemed open. But still they wouldn't actually speak: too shy. And I know what that's like, I've been there myself. Lingering looks butter no parsnips, unfortunately.

So this is what I did. The store was quiet, and he was, as usual, half an aisle behind her. As she was scrutinizing a jar of pesto, I trotted past the trolley and deftly flicked her bag of cherry tomatoes so it upended, emptying over the floor. Tomatoes rolled away in all directions. 'Oh hell,' I heard her say, and when I sneaked a look behind me she was on her hands and knees chasing fruit. Just then, Mr Tracksuit rounded the corner and – well, what would you expect a gentleman to do? By the time her shopping was rounded up, the ice was broken. I know they got it together because I spotted them buying bed linen in town six months later. Not that they noticed me, of course.

—And there goes Moaning Mum in front of me now, delivering a resounding smack to the older boy's legs because he's accidentally knocked a box of teabags off a shelf. There's no harm done, for goodness' sake, nothing's broken; she should just pick the box up and move on. Instead she's got the bigger boy howling, and here's his

brother joining in with a wailing descant. ‘Look,’ I’d say to her if I thought she’d take any heed, ‘if you yell at your children non-stop, then as soon as they’re old enough, they’ll start doing it right back at you. Just be grateful you’ve got two bonny kids. Some women would give their right arm for that.’

I nip across to the self-service till, swipe my card, and I’m back at her side before you can say Ritalin. I’ll keep her in my sights now till she goes to pay.

Another character who sticks in my mind is Mr Walters. I only know his name because, after his wife died and he was dragging himself round the shop, a busty woman hailed him and asked him how he was coping. I could have told you that, I thought. Just look at him. He’d gone from being a plumpish, jolly retiree with a white-haired merry wife, to a hunched, hollow-cheeked old man, in the space of six weeks. He said, ‘I’m all right,’ which was a patent lie. Then he said, ‘If I could believe she was still around me somehow...It’s daft, but I keep thinking I hear her round the house, and then I remember she’s not there. I make two cups of tea and then it dawns on me, I’m on my own. It’s that, you know? I talk to her, but I don’t get an answer.’ Busty Woman had put a comforting hand on his arm, and he’d covered his face, overcome with grief.

What he needs, I thought, is a sign.

The next time he came in – always Wednesday 2pm, he was very regular in his habits – I simply added a can of lavender furniture polish to his bag. That’s the type she always bought, because I remembered her scolding him once when he tried to put in the ordinary stuff. There’d been no cleaning products in his basket at all since she died. I could understand that, because the temptation is not to bother when it’s just for yourself.

I like to imagine the scene when he got home, unpacked, checked his till receipt. Did he speak her name into the quietness? Perhaps he sprayed the polish round the room and walked about, breathing her in.

Occasionally, instead of adding, I subtract. There used to be a middle-aged couple who'd always moan and tut when they arrived at the shelf of Polish goods. 'I don't see why we should be pandering to their foreign tastes,' was the gist. Sometimes the woman would stop and poke the products critically. 'What's that meant to be?' she'd announce, pointing at a box that quite clearly contained mackerel fillets. Her partner would roll his eyes, as if the Cyrillic writing signalled the verge of some great moral decline. Then they'd both do this dramatic shudder. So next time I wandered past, I spirited away their Daily Express. Three separate times I managed this – oh, the joy of being invisible – but then they got wise, and started checking at the till. Shortly after that, they disappeared off my radar; I suspect they started patronizing another supermarket. I like to think I made my point, though. Perhaps even now they're cooking beetroot soup and golonka.

There've been other cases where I've performed a switch. I remember a lumpy teenage girl from last year who would come in and pore hungrily over the fashion magazines. 'Why are you looking at those airbrushed celebrities?' I wanted to say to her. 'They only make you unhappy.' But she was addicted. Her young brow would crease as she flicked over the pages, hopelessly. Later I'd catch her in the clothing section, sucking her stomach in and turning her head this way and that, while her dad grumbled in the background. So just the once I took away her Heat magazine, and in its place slid in a set of slinky underwear – I pride myself on being pretty good at estimating bra sizes, as it happens. There was no doubt about it, this girl needed a boost of some sort, and in my experience, nice knickers never fail to make you feel

better about yourself. Beneath this print blouse and the navy slacks, I wear *la Senza*. Bet you wouldn't have guessed that, would you? Well, there you go. Appearances can be deceptive.

There are some people I watch, but can't help. The one who's been bothering me a lot this month is a thin young man, sixteen or seventeen, who trails round painfully with his parents and sometimes on his own. His eyes rake the shelves for something that isn't there – answers to who he is, where he's headed, why he doesn't fit in with his mates. I recognize that look. I wore it myself till I was in my twenties. Till I told my mother what she didn't want to hear, then packed my bags and left.

You get them all in here: so many lonely, troubled, displaced people wandering the aisles, I sometimes want to gather them all up into a great group hug and tell them it's going to be all right, that things always work themselves out in the end. You might have to go away from the place you grew up and start again somewhere new; you might have to cut certain people out of your life. It might be a long road you have to travel and you'll need to be brave and resolute and true to yourself – but if you are, I promise, the sun will shine again. That's what I'd tell these people, if they'd listen.

When you're as happy as I am, you want to spread a little love around.

Because what you have to appreciate is, I haven't always been invisible. Thirty years ago, I was a fox. Swinging brown hair, narrow knee boots, long leather coat: I drew my share of glances. I played a version of the supermarket game then, too, but in those days it was mainly for devilment, scooping up whatever was handy and plonking it any old where. Might be sparkly pink hair bobbles, Arctic Roll, a lone banana, Ajax, Vesta chow mein, gin. Totally pointless as well, because the action was all pre-checkout. So nine times out of ten the victims would just get to the till, spot the odd item out, and dump it.

What kept the game interesting was knowing someone was watching me. We'd been eyeing each other for weeks; little half-smiles across the sliced bread, bumping into each other every second or third aisle aisle. Though I was always too shy to speak, I found myself looking out for her deliberately. Her bright curly hair made her easy to spot. She wore long skirts, peasant blouses, waistcoats, beads. I thought I'd never seen anyone as lovely.

Then, one dull Saturday, I was doing my own weekly shop and she waltzed past and dropped a cassette tape into my trolley. I scrabbled it out and read the hand-written label: *Come Up and See Me, Make me Smile*, it said.

I left my shopping where it was and walked out into the car park where she was waiting.

'I thought you looked like fun,' she said.

'I am fun,' I said.

'Excellent,' she said. 'Do you want to come back to my place? Listen to your tape?'

So I did.

Moaning Mum is still busy tearing a strip off her sons, so it's an easy task to slide Dr Katzenberg's self-help book into her bag. One of the boys stops snivelling long enough to give me a searching look, but as usual, the mother doesn't even register my presence.

So my work is done. I gather up my own small collection of items, and head for the exit.

And here's my own mop-headed girl standing by the exit, the long hair shorter these days and grey, like mine, but still mischievously curly, still that sparkle in her eye. Here's a person to whom I'll never be invisible.

'Hello, you,' she says. 'Finished putting the world to rights?'

'For today,' I tell her.

She bends over and peeps inside my carrier. 'Ooh, grapes,' she says. 'And wine, and posh ice cream. That's what *I* call a successful shopping trip.'

Grinning, she plucks one of the grapes off its stalk and pops it in my mouth. The afternoon stretches ahead of us.

We link arms, and head for home.