

# Across the Check-out Counter

*by Darsi Bohr*

The two women looked warily at each other over two weeks' worth of groceries. On one side of the grocery-laden conveyer belt, a young housewife stood with her purse in one hand and a fistfull of coupons in the other. Her year-old daughter sat in the front of the grocery cart ecstatically chewing on the cool metal handle. Holly's teeth were coming in, and the cool metal felt good on her gums. Her mother's continual concern about what kinds of germs from millions of anonymous sweaty hands resided on the handle had repeatedly removed Holly's mouth from the metal. But now the housewife wasn't looking at her daughter; she concentrated on the cashier.

The cashier was shorter, fatter, and older than the housewife. Her orange polyester uniform jacket with yellow plaid trim didn't correspond with anything else she had on. But all of this was normal; these two women had often met in exactly these same circumstances. Only their faces had changed. Three months ago these women had talked about world events, the weather, new cleaning products and Holly (especially Holly) all while the cashier rang up the groceries, and the housewife hoped she had enough money in her purse to pay for them.

The cashier knew all about Holly's penchant for opening the potato chip bag. She knew what Holly was allergic to and when she would get hay fever.

The housewife knew that the cashier worked six days a week, four mornings and two evenings. She knew the cashier had two teenage sons who played high school football. She knew the cashier was divorced and unhappy about it.

All this information passed back and forth as friendly contact while the housewife and cashier made sure everything was rung up correctly.

The housewife thought the cashier's voice was too loud and her manners too gruff. But she admired her strength and helpful, friendly no-nonsense approach to her job, and, the housewife supposed, her life.

The cashier thought the housewife spent too much time wondering what to fix her husband for dinner, and what precise stage of development Holly was experiencing. The cashier also thought the housewife's abundant coupon clipping was fanatical. All that work just to save four dollars. She could have just left something off her shopping list. However, the cashier admired the housewife's innocent enthusiasm. She was the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval woman living and breathing in the real world.

The two women never saw each other outside of the grocery, but the housewife always went to that cashier's aisle. And the cashier always told her about the specials.

But three months ago Kroger's employees, including the cashier, went on strike. The Kroger employees — butchers, cashiers and stockboys — all stood in the parking lot carrying signs emblazoned with their union number. The housewife walked by and thought how ordinary they looked without their orange jackets. She walked with Holly on one hip, dragging her shopping basket behind her. As she walked past Kroger towards the double coupon sale at Lowells, the strikers cheered and applauded and yelled their thanks for not shopping at Krogers.

The housewife was startled, embarrassed and then pleased by this boisterous display. She patted herself on the back for helping the underdog.

That evening while washing the dinner dishes, the housewife listened to the local news on her kitchen radio.

The news announcer said, "Today is the third day in the Kroger workers' strike. A spokesman for Local 462 said that contract talks were stagnant."

She hated the news reports that assumed you knew all that had gone on before. As if you spent your life listening to their broadcasts. Why were they striking? Was Kroger taking advantage of their workers? Or did the workers just want more money? The housewife stood holding her dishcloth while nebulous memories of a sociology class labor union debate drifted past her eyes. Then her husband called from the living room, "Come see this unbelievable blooper Sax made at second base. They're going to show it on instant replay." The housewife shook her head and hurried to the living room wearing her baseball face.

For the next couple of weeks the housewife took Holly to play in the park and then on past Kroger to Lowells farther down the street. Each time the strikers would cheer as she walked past. She never looked at them or smiled but she felt she was doing a good deed.

Then her husband Mike decided he wanted boysenberry jam on toast for breakfast. Lowells did not carry boysenberry jam. None of the local groceries carried boysenberry jam. The only boysenberry jam she had ever seen was Knotts Berry Farm boysenberry jam, \$1.39 right between the Jiff peanut butter and the Welches grape jelly on aisle six at Kroger.

There were a million Kroger stores around. She would cross a different picket line. Mike needed the car on weekdays to make sales calls. She'd have to wait for the weekend. Holly had a hay fever attack that weekend so the housewife never left the house. She sent Mike out for groceries. She didn't ask where he went. He did not get the boysenberry jam.

The next Wednesday on finding no jam, Mike left for work without breakfast. She felt guilty. Often Mike was so rushed, he went without lunch. Surely she was adult enough to get him his stupid jam.

That afternoon she and Holly walked into Krogers. The strikers booed and jeered. She looked at them just in time to see the cashier yell traitor.

Inside Krogers it was dark. Darker than just being out of the bright



summer sun. Krogers must have been using this time to save on electricity. It was eerie. She was the only customer in the store. Before, no matter what time of the day, there was always someone turning out of an aisle as she was turning in it.

There wasn't much bread on the shelves and the milk had expired dates on their bright red cartons. But the boysenberry jam was there. She picked up two jars and walked to the checkout aisle. A strange man in a shirt and tie rang up her jam. Who was he? He didn't have the bug-eyed smile of the manager, whose picture was hanging on the office door. He must be some Kroger bureaucrat sent to man the front lines while others negotiated with the strikers.

When the housewife went out into the shining glare, the strikers started to boo again. The box boy who always helped her load her shopping cart yelled, "Thank you for not shopping at Krogers!" As she walked home the housewife was tired, and Holly felt heavy in her arms.

The next two months Mike ate boysenberry jam like a jam junkie. Every day he loaded three pieces of toast with enough jam to strangle a cat. The housewife, glad that he was getting something he liked to eat, did not mention the strikers. She was a wife and mother; she could handle anything. However she tried to buy the beloved jam at a different store on weekends. But often she would have to brave the picket lines and the cashier and go to her Krogers.

After three months the strike was over. An agreement had been reached. What it was all about the housewife did not know. The newsman had continued to talk as if everyone had been at the bargaining tables so he didn't bore them with details.

The housewife took Holly to the brightly lit and fully occupied Krogers. Holly lost her teething ring somewhere between the produce and the freezer section. The housewife pried Holly's mouth off the grocery cart handle and picked out a new pink chew bear.

The housewife and cashier looked at each other across the groceries. The cashier smiled a little, and the housewife beamed back. Neither one spoke. As the housewife walked toward the exit she counted her change. She was short three dollars.