

Her Again

Jenny Baker

First prize, Fiction: 2025 Marysville BookNest writing competition

Oh no, it's her again. Please don't come to my checkout. If I have to hear another word about your flamin...

'Good morning, Lisa. How are you today?' The carefully painted lips stretch into a smile as she begins to unload her basket. 600ml of milk, a small tin of cat food, two frozen dinners (on special this week) and a packet of home-brand corn flakes. She passes over a well-used plastic carrier bag, waiting eagerly for my answer.

'Good thanks.' I return the smile and begin scanning the items into the bag. No idea what her name is. I wear a name badge so everyone knows me. To me she is 'Lipstick and Bunions' or 'Lippy' for short.

'I think we are in for a change of weather.' *Aaaaah Here it comes.* 'My bunions are playing up again. I could hardly sleep last night, they were throbbing so badly. In the end I had to get up for a glass of warm milk. I always add a sprinkle of nutmeg to it. So delicious. Then I read a chapter of my book and was off to sleep in no time.'

'That's great,' I reply, '\$11.75 please.'

She carefully puts her handbag on the conveyor belt and begins to look for her purse. The faux leather strap is cracked in places. Out comes an assortment of throat sweets, nail file, comb, tissues, old receipts and letters, until finally the missing object is located. Her fingers shake slightly as she undoes the press stud on the notes side. Carefully she pulls out a ten-dollar bill. I notice it is the only one in there. She passes it to me with another smile. I can't help but smile back, she does have kind eyes. Time passes and I age gracefully as she does up the press stud. Now for the coin zip. The silver teeth part

reluctantly, and the coin section opens to reveal its meagre contents. Knobbly fingers sorts through the few pieces of silver shrapnel, pulling out a fifty-cent piece and three tens. Again, she hands them to me with a smile. This time it is apologetic.

'Sorry, bit slow today,' she mumbles as she hands over the coins. Her skin is warm and dry as her fingers brush mine in the exchange.

'No problem at all. It's not like we're busy today.' We both look around the store. Even for a Tuesday it's quiet. The only person down aisle 2 is Maeve the Rave, who is blatantly texting her latest boyfriend, while stacking the jars of pickled gherkins on the shelf. I hand her the five cents change.

'Much on for the day?' I enquire politely as I pass her the bag of shopping. I am not really interested but it is very quiet.

Her face lights up. I regret asking already. No doubt I am in for twenty minutes of union, bladder and bowel movement stories under the guise of 'interesting topics of conversation to share with the bored checkout chick.'

'Well, I am catching up with a friend for lunch. I haven't seen her in over 30 years. We've kept in touch by letter for all this time. Her husband passed away last year and she has moved into the new retirement village. You know the one, it's just off the highway, about 20 minutes from here.

I have some vague recollection about a building project but I don't have any reason to go that way. Still, I smile and nod knowingly. My stomach rumbles reminding me that morning tea isn't far away.

'That sounds nice,' I say using my 'thanks for sharing but you can leave now' voice. There is another customer hovering near the checkouts, but he decides that he isn't finished yet and heads off to the bottle shop. There are several good specials this week.

Lippy sees my attention wandering and decides she must be boring me. The clouds come over her smile and she organises herself to leave.

'Thank you,' she says politely as she turns away towards the door. Why do I feel guilty? It is then that I realise she underpaid me. My guilt is assuaged.

Wednesday is busier than Tuesday. This week's specials start today. It's also pension day. My line is filled with old folks in cloth caps and knitted scarfs, either chatting or complaining. The new mums with their precious little darlings swaddled in quilts and blankets, fuss and flap. Nappies and formula are on special this week, so they are stocking up. The oldies coo and cluck over the newbies. The mothers preen with pride. One toddler chucks a huge tantrum when his yoghurt sachet is taken away for scanning purposes. Fortunately, he cools it when it is returned. Another reminder of why I don't want kids.

I catch snippets of gossip and news. One has a new grandchild, one is finally on the list for a hip replacement and another mentions something about her neighbour having an affair. Sadly, she is not in my queue and I don't get to hear the end of the story. Smokin Joe is in my line. His whiskery face leers at my chest and smirks. Don't know why since it is chilly today and I am wearing a skivvy under my uniform as well as a cardigan. There isn't much of a show at the best of times let alone today!

'Two packets of Winfield Red forties love,' he grunts. *How is this man still alive?* He only buys smokes and whisky, and he comes in every day.

'Have a good day,' I smile as I hand him his change. *You probably don't have many left!*

A brief lull follows and I spy Lippy pushing her small trolley through the bread section. Dora Dodgy Dentures bustles up to my checkout. Her basket is full of chips, chocolate, lollies and Diet Coke. Seriously. There is also a single carrot wrapped in a plastic bag.

'You going on a diet, Dora?' I joke with her waving the carrot. She is my neighbour. I know her well. Her booming laugh causes a few heads to turn. Her ample bosom bounces as she chuckles and snorts. The dodgy dentures clack repeatedly and threaten to leap out onto the counter. She is still giggling as she heads for the door.

Lipstick and Bunions has finished her shopping. She surveys the queues. Mine is the only one that is empty. Reluctantly she begins to unpack.

'Have you got your bag today?' I ask. She whisks it out of her handbag and drops it on top of the shopping.

'How was your lunch yesterday?' I enquire politely.

'It was very pleasant, thank you.' Her reply is minimal.

'How did you meet your friend, if you don't mind me asking?' Do I really want to know? Why am I pursuing this conversation? I'm not that bored today. Maybe it's the fact that she kept in touch with someone nearly twice as long as I have been alive.

'We were a little older than you when we first met.' Her face softens as she looks back in time.

I try to imagine her wrinkled face young and unlined. It's made easier by the fact that her eyes have a fierce spark of intelligence. I think she would have been beautiful.

'We joined the Australian Army Nursing Service together back in 1941. We served in the same hospital till the end of the war and were there when they bombed Darwin. She saved my life.' I can see her eyes are misting over.

A rattling cough brings my attention back to earth. My empty line has filled up and Smokin Joe is next with his extra-large bottle of Johnny Walker Red. His eyes go straight to my chest.

I hand Lippy her change. Something prompts me to grab her hand. She looks up enquiringly at me.

'I would like to know more...Please.'

'Two packets of Winfield Red forties love.' Smokin Joe has taken the opportunity to state his demands. Lippy looks at him and follows his eyes. Her look of disgust is enough to shrivel most souls, but Joe is made of tough stuff and he doesn't even notice.

Lippy heads towards the door. I head to the Smokes cupboard. The day rattles on as usual. Dora Dodgy Dentures come in for another sugar hit and a carrot. Turns out she has bought herself a pet rabbit. He is named Howard after her favourite prime minister. No accounting for taste.

Thursday is my day off. I spend it sleeping in, doing laundry and generally bumming around. The few friends I have are all at work or uni, so my time is my own. I briefly contemplate popping in to see my mum, however it's a 40-minute bus ride away. Can't really be bothered. Besides, I can live without another lecture about 'what am I going to do with my life'.

Friday dawns bright and sunny. Spring must be on its way, thank God. The change in weather brings a lift in the mood of the customers. They laugh and chat as they fill their trolleys with the essentials and a few treats thrown in as well. We are flat out all morning. There are many tourists (or terrorists as we rudely refer to them) in town. The surrounding area is beautiful so many people come for a weekend to hike, camp or fish. The campers are easy to spot as they always buy bottled water, firewood and toothbrushes.

Sheila, the shift manager, pulls me aside as I return from lunch. She hands me a pale lavender envelope.

'That old chook with all the lippy on, dropped this in yesterday, when you were off.'

'Thanks,' I reply, shoving it in my pocket, as I head back to my register. The afternoon is also busy. Terrorists everywhere. Turns out there is a big car club gathering and swap meet not far out of town.

It is not till I am undressing for bed that I find the envelope. My name is on the front in slightly shaky capitals. The paper inside is an invitation with a pretty floral border.

'Lisa,.. is cordially invited to... Afternoon Tea... When: 3pm Sunday 23rd.... At: 7 Gilmore Close. Regards E. Burgess'

The phone number is a landline. Not really surprising. Means I can't text a reply. Too late to ring now. I'll worry about it in the morning.

I oversleep on Saturday morning, completely forgetting about the letter. I manage to clock in one minute before my shift starts. Trolleys full of bottled water, firewood, fancy cheese and slabs of beer, roll endlessly through my checkout. Everyone is smiling, the sun is out, they are enjoying their weekend. I'm stuck behind the till. There has to be more to life than this. Maybe my mother is right (God forbid) and I should 'do' something with my life.

'What was your letter about?' Sheila asks as she locks up the sliding doors at closing time. Shit! I forgot all about it. It's probably too late to ring again. Old ladies are no doubt tucked up in bed with cocoa and the cat by now. Looking around I spy the greeting card rack. Hastily I grab one with a cute puppy on. Sheila isn't looking so I shove it inside my cardigan. I'll pay for it next shift. I borrow a pen as well.

Outside, I sit on the seat beneath the streetlamp. In my best handwriting, I write a quick acceptance note. I'll drop it in her mailbox on the way home. At least she'll know I am coming even if it is very short notice.

Sunday comes and I manage to arrive in time to pay for the card I nicked the night before, without anyone noticing. Time drags. The clock hands must be covered with glue. Finally, Sheila starts the closing process. I grab an orange poppyseed cake and a packet of Tim Tams and pay quickly before she logs off the register. Can't turn up empty handed.

In the locker room, I change into my favourite shirt and run a quick comb through my hair. Can't believe that I am actually really nervous!

It's a ten-minute walk to Gilmore Close. I arrive five minutes early. Should I knock? I hate it when people are early. I decide to do a slow lap around the court. As I pass number 6, the door opens at number 7.

'Are you lost?' Lippy enquires.

'No, just didn't want to arrive early,' I babble.

'Nonsense. One should always arrive at least five minutes before one is due. Come on in. I'll put the kettle on.' She marches off down the hall leaving me to follow in her wake.

The hallway is lined with photos of all shapes and sizes. My eyes are drawn to a stunning portrait of a young woman sitting under a tree.

'Yes it's me,' sighs Lippy gazing fondly at the portrait.

'I was about your age then. Turned a few heads in my day would you believe!'

We wander slowly down the hall and she tells me a brief story of each of the photos. Many of them are of groups of women in nurses' uniforms, in locations all around the world.

By the time we get to the kitchen, I am totally overawed, and the kettle needs re-boiling. How could one person have done so much and been so many places?

The rest of the afternoon flies by as we consume all the cake and most of the Tim Tams. It is dark outside by the time I leave. I still have more questions, but I can sense Lippy is getting tired.

'Can I come again?' I ask, hoping I don't sound pushy.

'You are welcome anytime, especially if you come with cake and Tim Tams. Get the double coated ones next time. They're the best!'

As she opens the front door, I realise that I don't actually know her name. In all our talking, the subject never came up.

'Sorry,' I ask with great embarrassment, 'I don't know your name.'

'It's Elizabeth, but you can call me Libby.' Her warm smile lights up her face.

Can't believe I was almost right!

'Thanks Libby. It has been an awesome afternoon. One last question ... How are your bunions?'

I hear her chuckling as I walk down the path.