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about 1640 words

**CLOSING TIME AT MARTY'S**  
By Paul Lambrecht

Marty the shopkeeper sat up high with the safe so he could surveil the sales floor.

The shop sold assorted sundries, wine, beer, sandwiches and upscale boutique gourmet foods.

The shopkeeper ran the store with SS-like precision. So needless to say, he was incredulous when the man approached him with the curious complaint.

"My 40 ounce beer was missing about four ounces, I think. And it tasted flat."

The shopkeeper shook the beer causing bubbles to froth to the surface of the remaining 36 ounces of beer. "Looks like it's got fizz to me."

The complainant shook his head.

"Well, then I'm going to buy another 40 ounce beer, but then I promise I'm never coming back in here again. Probably someone in the shipping department is stealing swigs of other people's beers."

The shopkeeper descended from his tower and took the disgruntled customer by the arm. Then in a hoarse whisper, he demanded of him, "What kind of place do you think this is? I ought to take you out back and beat the piss out of you."

The man with the new \$3 40 raised an eyebrow at this.

"Yeah? I'd call the cops."

The shopkeeper clutched the man tighter by the elbow and stared into the man's eyes like a mesmerized cobra.

"Man. I am the cops."

"Yeah?" asked the man quizzically.

"Yeah," said the shopkeeper.

The man yanked his arm away. "Man, this is America, man. This shit ain't gonna fly, old man."

"Old man?" said the old man, scaling the steps to his aeyrie in the clouds again. "Pish."

The old man glared daggers at the patriot now from his roost, waiting for him to leave his shining-tiled sales floor.

This store had no use for clientele like that.

Next, the shopkeeper went to the back room to check on the shipper-receivers. They were loafing against the side wall of the cold back room, sitting on wooden boxes of dijon mustard, idly chatting.

He flew into a rage and reminded them that drinking on the job was grounds for immediate termination, which appeared to puzzle them.

"Don't let me catch you goofing off again," he said storming out.

"Lousy insubordinate clock-watching time-wasters," muttered the old fustian.

A customer was waiting outside his platform to ask him about cheese.

"Is feta goat cheese?" she asked.

The old man said nothing before he unlocked the partial door, regained his pinnacle, then looked at her slyly and wizened, nodding his head in his most world-weary put-upon way.

"Yes," he said.

"Good," she said.

The old man said nothing.

"Do you have plain old goat cheese or is it all feta?" she asked. She had a shrill grinding high-pitched ingratiating cloying voice.

"We have all types of cheese. Sweet cheese, heavy cheese, soft cheese, nutty cheese, herb cheese, spicy cheese, bitter cheese, Fontina cheese, stinky cheese. Stinky cheese smells like a tube sock wrapped around a piece of dung."

The woman opened her mouth in slack-jawed awe.

"I gotta smell this cheese," she said with a perverse grin on her face.

The old humped-over man descended from his tower again and took her over to the cheese display.

"This is super-potent extra strength Limburger cheese," he said, pointing to the long double-wrapped strings of cheese.

"Is it from a goat?" she asked.

The old man shook his head. "It is from a cow, madam."

She shook her head.

"No, I want to try goat cheese for a recipe. It's supposed to be better for you. Less fatty."

The old man shrugged his shoulders.

"These are all from a goat," he said, waving at one section.

"Do any of them stink?" the woman asked hopefully. "I want to really good and shock my husband," she added malevolently.

"This one," he said holding up a pink shrink-wrapped cheese, "smells like a woman after a bottle of Grey Goose and fifteen sweaty marines."

The woman gaped at him again, before quickly crumbling into a smile.

"My husband fought at Guadalcanal," you know, she said coyly.

"Your husband bores me," said the old man, a flinty jaded and disinterested glint in his eye.

The woman appraised the old man from head to toe now.

"You know, he's in Khartoum now. Separate holidays. I just hate getting clearances. I don't even wear a ring when he's gone."

She showed the old brown man her naked ring finger.

The man scowled.

"Do you deliver?" she asked mellifluously unprodded.

"Sure," said the old man. "I'll have one of my boys drop it over."

She frowned.

"Oh. Well I'll take the stinky pink goat cheese."

"Anything else?" asked the old man curiously.

"Have your boy bring me a Cobb salad, too. I might get hungry later tonight," she said licking her lips.

"Sure," said the old man.

He couldn't wait for the lecherous old woman to leave. Her ignorance of cheese was a formidable insurmountable turn-off.

The old man preened himself in his lofty perch. He paged one of his languorous stockboys to take the cheese, salad, and carton of condoms to the lusty kitten up the hill.

"And don't be there all day," he warned him.

The stockboy nodded dutifully.

"And don't smell the cheese. It reeks like a used feminine napkin baking in the sun for three days," he said.

The boy nodded greenly.

"What's the matter?" asked the old man.

"I just threw up a little in my mouth."

The old man smiled. "That's okay. By quitting time tonight, you'll be a man. Oh, that reminds me, would you mop the floors?"

The boy nodded meekly, abjectly defeated.

Next, the patriot was back. And drunk.

"How about that fight, Mister Old *Fuck*?"

The old man's eyes opened wide. He was calmly patting the panic switch under the lip of his desk in the elevated cubicle.

The old man smiled placidly, saccharinely.

"Can I help you?"

"Yeah. I was here before. Remember, you challenged me to fight. Well, now I want to fight."

"Oh yes. You're henceforth and retroactively banned from the store."

"Oooh. Big deal. I'm boycotting the store."

"Don't you know how boycotts work? You're not supposed to patronize the store you're boycotting."

"Don't patronize me. I know how boycotts work. Besides, I'm not patronizing the store. I'm here to kick your old *fucking* ass."

"Well then, please leave if you're not going to buy something. NO LOITERING," he said calmly, pointing to a crisply polished vinyl sign.

"Look are you going to fight me or not, you OLD *FUCK*?"

The bell sounded and a cop with a truncheon entered.

He sized up the situation and tickled the butt of his holstered firearm.

"What's going on here?"

"This man just tried to rob me," said the old man.

"Does he have a weapon, sir? Sir, do you have a weapon?" asked the cop in a loud monotone.

"I didn't come here to rob him. I came here to kick the old man's ass."

"Sir, one crime at a time, sir," the cop said, radioing for backup. "Do you have a weapon, sir?"

"No," cried the patriot.

"He had a banana pointed at me under his jacket," said the old man petulantly.

The young man cried out again.

"Where is the banana, sir?" yelled the cop. "Suspect is armed," he said into the radio.

"What banana?" implored the young man.

"The one you stole," said the old man.

The cop took advantage of the young man's disorientation and wobbly stature to judo chop him in the neck. The young man slumped to the floor the flaps of his jacket falling open.

The cop heaved a sigh of relief at the bananaless spectacle.

"He saw you coming and ate the banana," said the old man.

"Peel, too?" asked the cop.

"Peel, too," said the old shopkeeper sadly.

"My second wife slipped on a banana peel and died. That's why I became a cop," said the cop.

The old man nodded his tacit understanding.

"Look, I gotta go," said the cop guiltily. "I'm parked in front of a hydrant and I think I smell smoke. What do you want to do with this guy?"

"I'll take care of it. Thanks for all your help."

"Sure," said the cop, eyeing the produce display.

"Say do you mind if I take a banana home to my fourth wife? I swear, the way my wives go through bananas, I must be marrying monkeys."

They both laughed uproariously at this.

The patriot awoke to find himself lashed to a crate of eggs. He vainly struggled to free himself.

"Hey," said the shipper-receiver judgmentally. "Don't thrash around so much. You're going to break the eggs."

He took a calm swig from his 40 ounce beer, then set it back in its crate with the others.

This sent the patriot into an alternate universe of pissed off.

He could feel the back of his shirt seeping up thick yellow yolks.

The shipper-receiver back-handed the patriot across the face.

"Oh, you're going to pay for that," he threatened.

"Like hell I am," said the patriot.

Back on the sales floor, the discomfited stockboy had returned. The old man regarded him clinically.

"Did she violate you?" asked the old man.

The stockboy held back tears, nodding his head.

The old man handed him a rubber hose now, setting it down within his reach as if from the vault of the heavens.

"Only one way to get that shameful taste out of your mouth. There's a guy tied up in the backroom. Beat him with this rubber hose. Get revenge."

The stockboy dared to smile.

It was gonna be lights out for this bitch.

"Oh, and mop up afterwards of course," said the old man wearily.

Closing time had finally come.

**END.**