

Clean
by
Steve Totland

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Dramatis Personae

Cyrus. . . early-20s
Kenny. . . early-50s
Ron. . . mid-30s
Sonya. . . early-20s

Time: Mid-week; middle of the morning.

Place: The employee break-room of a small, high-end grocery store.

The characters all wear themed shirts that identify them as employees of an upscale grocery store.

[The employee break room in an upscale grocery store.

A swinging door leads to a hallway that connects to the sales floor. A second door, marked with a female/male icon, leads directly into the employee rest room. A rack of time cards and a time clock near the swinging door.

The calm between the early-morning and lunch-hour rush.

Cyrus sits at a small table. He eats a burrito, drinks coffee, reads a section of the newspaper.

Kenny, sitting in an old, arm chair, works a word-search puzzle. Kenny looks up from the puzzle; regards Cyrus; returns to the puzzle. After a moment,

Kenny stands. He picks up his mug; crosses to a coffee-maker; picks up the pot.]

KENNY

[Extending the pot.] You want some?

[Cyrus, reading, does not answer.]

KENNY

Cyrus?

[Cyrus looks up.]

KENNY

More coffee?

[Cyrus shakes his head, "no;" returns to reading the paper.]

KENNY

[A woeful situation.] I shouldn't either. [Setting down the pot.] Blood pressure. Clair wants me to quit coffee altogether.

CYRUS

She would. Always wanting everyone to tow the hard line.

[They share a knowing smile.]

Cyrus returns to the paper.

Kenny stands; searching for a way to continue the conversation. Coming up with nothing, he returns to his seat; picks up the puzzle book; returns to searching.]

KENNY
[His head in the book.] What's the news?

CYRUS
Nothing.

KENNY
They print that whole paper and nothing's news?

CYRUS
No, there's news, it's just. . . this is not the actual; the. . . It's not the section with the actual news. It's the, uh. . . [Looking for the section's front page.] with the homes. . . and the gardening. . .

KENNY
Ah.

CYRUS
[Reading the banner.] HomeStyle. It's the HomeStyle Section. [Picking up the only other section of paper on the table.] This is obituaries.

KENNY
Ah.

CYRUS
I'm not reading obituaries.

KENNY
No.

CYRUS
Not while I'm eating. Not that I'm really all that. . . interested. . . in HomeStyles. Mostly it's to keep me from obsessing about restocking butter.

KENNY
You see we got the yoghurt?

CYRUS
Got it out.

[Small beat.]

KENNY
So. . . If it's not news, then. . .

CYRUS

Oh. It's uh. . . it's about lace.

KENNY

Lace?

CYRUS

Rules, I guess you'd call it, for using lace.

KENNY

Rules for lace?

CYRUS

This whole. . . [Turning through several pages of the paper.] section, practically, is about right and wrong things for lace. How big it should be. What rooms you can put it in. What colors.

KENNY

Really?

[Ron enters. He stands, half-in and half-out of the swinging doors, holding a snack bag in one hand.]

RON

Anyone seen. . ? [Seeing Kenny.] Oh, there you are. [Stepping into the room.] Kenny. [Holding out the bag.] I got a customer wants to know is this kosher?

KENNY

What is it? I can't--

RON

Vermont Organic-white-cheddar Air-popped Popcorn. 5 ounces; no nuts.

KENNY

[Putting on his glasses.] Does it say kosher?

CYRUS

[Being helpful.] Kosher's got a sign. It's got that K. Or that U. . .

RON

[Searching.] I know.

CYRUS

Sometime's there's a C. In a circle.

RON

[Pointing near the bottom of the bag.] It's got this.

CYRUS

What?

RON

A-F-P.

CYRUS

[Getting up to see.] A-F-P?

RON

They're in a circle. [Showing.] A-F-P. See?

CYRUS

A-F. . . [Working through possibilities.] American. . .
Federation, American. . . Amalgamated Fraternal. . .
Alliance of Fraternal. . .

KENNY

Kosher things are stamped.

RON

I know.

KENNY

They're explicitly identified--

RON

She says she knows that.

KENNY

Did you give her the list?

RON

She already has the list.

KENNY

Is it on the list?

[Ron shakes his head, "No."]

CYRUS

It's not, maybe, R? A-F-R? Associated Fraternal Rabbis.

RON

It's P.

CYRUS

Associated Flock of Rabbis.

[Kenny and Ron give Cyrus a hard stare.]

CYRUS

I'm kidding--

RON

[To Kenny.] It's not marked. So it's not. . . It's not officially sanctioned. That's obvious. That's not the point. What she's getting at, I think, is. . . 'Cause a thing, even if it's not sanctioned, it can be kosher, right? Like. . . you grow your own carrots. Even though they're not sanctioned they can be kosher. You grow them the right way. So, what she wants is, I think, what she wants to know is, is there something in here that makes it. . . Like, is there an ingredient that makes it just. . . clearly. . . over-the-line? Just out-and-out, not-kosher.

CYRUS

Like, what? Like bacon? Like it's popped in lard?

RON

Cyrus, please.

CYRUS

Sorry.

RON

Would you pop popcorn in lard?

CYRUS

You're right.

RON

With the cheese. Is there something in cheese that could make it un-kosher?

KENNY

It's organic. The whole product is certified--

RON

Organic is not, I don't think, necessarily, always kosher.

KENNY

And she wants, specifically, that? She doesn't want something that's marked? You show her the crisps?

RON

She's got a thing for this.

CYRUS

Is she cute? 'Cause if she's cute--

[Kenny raises a hand; Cyrus stops.]

KENNY

If she knows enough to ask, then she knows what kosher's about. And if she knows what it's about, then she knows enough to read the ingredients.

[The bathroom door opens. Sonya enters; closes the bathroom door behind her. She is four months pregnant.]

RON

Hey, Sonya.

SONYA

Hey, Ron.

[Sonya walks to the time cards.]

KENNY

If it's not stamped, then we can't say, one-hundred per-cent, that it's kosher. She's got to decide on her own. That's what I'd say.

[Sonya punches her time card in the clock.]

RON

Thanks.

[Ron leaves.]

Sonya sits at the table; picks up the HomeStyle section of the paper.]

SONYA

What's he so worked up about?

CYRUS

[Returning to sit at the table.] Some lady asking if the cheddar-corn is kosher.

SONYA

Does it have the sign?

CYRUS

It has A-F-P.

SONYA

That's not one of the signs.

CYRUS

I was reading that.

SONYA

Oh.

[She hands him the paper.]

CYRUS

You want the obituaries?

[Sonya shakes her head "No."]

Cyrus reads.]

SONYA

[To Cyrus.] You finish the walk-in?

CYRUS

Still got to rotate the two-percent.

SONYA

You getting a cold? [Reaching for a backpack that sits near the table.] You want some of my enzymes?

KENNY

[To Sonya.] You headed back out? Sonya?

SONYA

What?

KENNY

Are you, uh. . . You're going back on the floor?

SONYA

Trey said I could take an early break.

[Kenny thinks.]

KENNY

Didn't you just punch in?

SONYA

I punched out.

[Kenny thinks as,

Sonya looks through her backpack for enzymes.]

KENNY

[Pointing towards the rest room.] Weren't you just. . .

SONYA

I was freshening up.

[Kenny nods his head; thinks.]

KENNY

Excuse me. Sonya.

[She looks up from her searching.]

KENNY

[Apologetic.] You're supposed to punch out first. As soon as you come off the floor. Then, after you're off the clock, that's when you can wash up.

SONYA

Okay.

[She returns to her search.]

SONYA

[Pulling a plastic baggie from her bag.] Ah!

KENNY

Because, now I'm in a really awkward situation. I'm union steward, right? I'm supposed to make sure the store lives up to its provisions in the contract. So, when I know there's an employee not keeping up our end of the agreement, that puts me in a sticky situation.

SONYA

I understand. [To Cyrus. Doling out lozenges into his hand.] You suck them. And nothing to drink. Not for at least thirty minutes.

[Cyrus pops the lozenges into his mouth; sucks.]

KENNY

Not that I'm going to write you up.

SONYA

You want to tell Trey? If telling Trey would make you feel better--

KENNY

You're not hearing what I'm saying.

SONYA

You're making a point about punching out.

KENNY

Exactly.

SONYA

Trey said I should take a break.

KENNY

Yes.

SONYA

I was in there two minutes. Washing my face. It's not like I was in there all morning.

KENNY

No. I'd say it was more like. . . [To Cyrus.] I came in here, when? Twenty-after? And it's now, what? [Looking at his watch.] And I didn't see you go in. [To Cyrus.] Did you see her go in?

CYRUS

[Between a rock and a hard place.] I've been reading--

KENNY

So, you were in there when I came in. Which means, already, you've been off the floor, probably, fifteen minutes. Your entire break is only supposed to be thirty.

SONYA

Say I'm stocking mints and I need to go to the bathroom. And I take time to do that and it's not my break. Would that be okay?

KENNY

That's not the point.

SONYA

Can I use the bathroom?

KENNY

Nobody's trying to keep people from going to the bathroom.

CYRUS

Unless you're at a register. When you're at a register you call someone to cover. You sign out on your bank, and the other person--

[Sonya gestures for Cyrus to concentrate on the lozenges.]

SONYA

[To Kenny.] Why not just think I was stocking mints, which I was, and I took a few minutes to go to the bathroom, which I did, and now I'm starting my break.

KENNY

Because that's not what happened. The bathroom is one thing; your break is another. You don't get fifteen minutes and then your break. You get your break. The union worked a long time to get breaks built into the contract. We didn't always get breaks. And we certainly didn't always get paid for breaks. It seems, lately, that your attitude--

SONYA

[Standing. To Cyrus.] I'm going for a walk. Want to come?

[Ron comes through the swinging doors. He carries a quart of chocolate milk.]

RON

Oh, my God!

[He pulls his time card.]

RON

You'd think the kosher-ness of popcorn was a subject for Congressional debate.

[Ron punches out on the clock; puts his card back in the rack.]

RON

I told her what you said. I explained everything and, still, she's going on about how her kid wants to take the popcorn to this party, and since it's only popcorn and cheese that should be okay, right? But what if it's not? And some other mother finds out, and finally. . . I just said you know what? There's one other place I can check. So I went, and I stood at the service desk for, like three minutes, and I diddled with the keyboard, and then I came back and I said I'd checked on the computer and, guess what, it is kosher. It's not on the bag because the company just got final approval but it is. We got a special, blast e-mail and the popcorn's kosher. And that did it for her. Because she bought, like, six bags. And now, I'm having this entire chocolate milk. Even though it's probably a thousand carbohydrate and fat exchanges, because, you know what? After that, I get what I want.

[Ron begins chugging the milk.]

CYRUS

Remember the guy who kept asking if we had the soup?

[Ron nods his head, yes.]

CYRUS

She sounds like him.

RON

Worse.

[Ron returns to his chugging.]

SONYA

[To Cyrus.] You coming?

[Cyrus checks his watch.]

CYRUS

I got to get back. [Gathering his things from the table.]
I've got the two percent. . . and the puddings. . .

[Sonya gives Cyrus a long look; then turns.]

CYRUS

Sonya. Don't be. . .

[She's out the swinging door.]

Cyrus looks to Kenny. He's torn: between going after Sonya and punching-in on time; between cleaning up the remnants of his lunch and leaving a mess on the table.]

CYRUS

I'll clean this. . . I won't be. . . Anybody wants this extra burrito, they should feel free . . .

[Kenny and Ron watch Cyrus scuttle after Sonya.]

RON

She's got him so wrapped around her little finger. [Pointing to an untouched burrito on Cyrus' plate.] You think he was serious?

[Kenny shrugs his shoulders.]

Ron finishes the milk; goes for the burrito.]

RON

I keep asking does he think they're going to get married.

KENNY

What's he say?

RON

He says they talk about it.

[Ron takes a big bite of the burrito.]

KENNY

He's still never even told me the baby's his.

RON

Really?

KENNY

Makes sense, I guess. Clair says he's got his heart set on getting married. Still. What a kid tells his mom's not always the same as what's really going on.

RON

It's a step in the right direction, though. Baby's going to need a father.

KENNY

Baby's already got a father. Question is; does the mother need a husband who the only thing he's got going on is part-time at a grocery store and Sundays playing soccer? She should be setting her sights on something better.

RON

Clair know you talk that way?

KENNY

Hey. He's not my kid. Makes it easier to see the truth.

[Silence.]

RON

[A sudden recollection.] Oh, shit! I promised I'd pick up a prescription. My neighbor's got this cough. . .

[Hurriedly finishing the burrito.]

KENNY

You shouldn't have lied.

RON

What?

KENNY

About the popcorn. You should have told her the truth.

RON

That's not what she wanted. What she wanted was ammunition in case some other mother threw a fit. Soon as I gave her that; she was buying popcorn

KENNY

But if she wanted kosher. . .

RON

You're just like her. Like a snapping turtle--

KENNY

What?

RON

You get this idea in your head and you won't let go. Kosher wasn't the issue. The issue was that she wanted me to say what she already had in her head she wanted to hear. That's why people keep pestering like that. So people will satisfy their own expectations.

[An uncomfortable silence.]

RON

You be here later?

KENNY

[Shaking his head, "no."] I did the receiving. I'm going home.

[Ron stands for a moment, then
is out the door.]

Kenny looks around the room; walks into the rest room.

A moment. Then,

Sonya and Cyrus return through the swinging doors.

Sonya goes to her backpack, as Cyrus punches in on the time clock.]

CYRUS

You need me, I'll be in the walk-in.

SONYA

When you off?

CYRUS

Two-thirty.

[Sonya nods her head.

Cyrus out through the swinging doors.

Sonya rummages through her backpack.

Kenny returns. He wears the same pants and shoes, but has changed into his own shirt.]

KENNY

[Seeing Sonya. Surprised.] Oh.

SONYA

I'm punching in. I just need to. . .

[Sonya applies lip balm she's pulled from her backpack.]

KENNY

About earlier. What I was saying about punching in--

[Sonya turns; her gaze meets Kenny's.]

KENNY

I, uh. . .

[Sonya continues to return Kenny's gaze.]

KENNY

I. . .

[Sonya waits.

Kenny stands; deer in the headlights.

A long moment. Then,

Sonya turns; puts the lip balm in her
backpack.]

KENNY

[To Sonya's back.] Ron says I'm like the woman with the
popcorn. That I pester people until they do what I expect.
I was thinking about that--

[Sonya turns; faces Kenny.

A short moment, during which Kenny staves off
a nearly perceptible faltering.]

KENNY

My dad had this idea that if a bathroom connected directly to
a kitchen it made the kitchen unclean. [Pointing to the
bathroom door.] That bathroom opens right into the break
room. So my dad, if he'd been here--

SONYA

[Cutting him off.] Ken. . . . I don't listen to this kind
of stuff from my own parents, let alone the guy who's hooking-
up with my boyfriend's mother. [Pulling her time card from
the rack.] So why don't you just--

[Kenny steps in; grabs the time card from her
hand.]

SONYA

What the. . ?

KENNY

My dad wouldn't have eaten here because he'd have thought it
was unclean. Which is nonsense. I eat in here. You eat, we
all eat in here. However, Cyrus--

SONYA

[Reaching for her time card.] You are a loon.

KENNY

Listen. [Holding the card out of Sonya's reach.] One minute. Please.

[Sonya, recognizing a note of desperation in Kenny's plea, stops reaching for the card. She steps back; eyes him warily.]

KENNY

I have no kids, right? I'm one of those people, love comes to late in life. But it comes. So, Clair and I, we're making this relationship. And it's wonderful. And I'm thinking not only am I finding a wife, but Cyrus will be, like, my son. Not a real son. But someone who could be, for me, like a son. But then, before he and I can even start at learning to have that kind of relationship, there's your baby. And so. . . I have this feeling, it's not rational, I know this, but I have this feeling you and the baby will pull him away. You will prevent me from having someone who is, even a little, like a son. So the expectation, this is what I just realized, the expectation I keep trying to satisfy, is that you are a threat. So I find reasons. And I press. Because you and Cyrus doing something I will never do makes me want, at some level, to be mad. . . at you. And I just realized that.

[Silence, as Kenny waits for a response.]

KENNY

And I want you to forgive me.

[Small silence.]

KENNY

Because I should get over how I feel. For the peace of the family. And for Cyrus. And you, and the baby. And that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to change the way I feel.

[Kenny holds out Sonya's time card.

She takes it.]

SONYA

You tell Cyrus you feel like that?

KENNY

No!

SONYA

Good. Because, Cyrus hearing you say that, that would put him off. Cyrus is not the kind of guy--

KENNY

I'm not telling Cyrus.

SONYA

Good.

KENNY

I don't even think we need to, really, talk about it. Already things feel better. You feel that? You feel like things are getting better?

SONYA

[Unsure.] Some.

KENNY

Good.

[She punches in on the clock; puts her card into the rack on the wall.]

KENNY

You working tomorrow?

[Sonya shakes her head, "no."]

KENNY

Thursday?

SONYA

One to ten

KENNY

I'm six to two.

SONYA

Good.

[Sonya walks to the swinging door; stops.]

SONYA

Having a baby's special, but it's not the only thing a person does. It's not something you should beat yourself up about, that's what I'm trying to say.

[Kenny nods his head.]

SONYA

See you Thursday.

[Sonya out through the swinging door.

Kenny sees his mug; picks it up; goes to the
coffee pot; begins pouring himself a cup; as,]

END OF PLAY