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The Supermarket Play

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TEXT prose

Luke Johnson

The supermarket play

Ken was an oldish guy. Maybe he wasn't as old as he looked. The sun had made him look very old. He'd spent a good deal of his life working outdoors, painting houses and lacquering fence panels and earning money at the race track, and the sun had accompanied him throughout these years with a severe loyalty. It'd given him blotches on the backs of his hands and down his forearms and neck, and his face was mottled with atolls which looked light and tropical beneath the stark fluorescent bulbs of the supermarket aisles. It was in quasi-retirement that Ken had taken the job at the supermarket. He said there wasn't enough money in trackwork alone, and he'd been unable to climb a ladder for some time on account of his damned head spells. Ken didn't think there was anything remarkable about the way he said damned all the time, but I liked it very much and thought it made for a pleasant and decent character trait.

'Ken, I'm going to put you in one of my plays,' I said to him one night, while the two of us were standing together stacking tins of beetroot on the shelf.

'I don't want to be in no damned play,' Ken said back to me. It was a very Ken thing to say.

'But you're the lead role,' I tried reasoning. Ken said nothing (also very Ken). I went on. 'See, it's about this guy who paints houses his whole life and gets damned head spells from having been in the sun so damned much. He says damned a damned lot of the time and carries a pocketknife on his belt which looks like something a soldier might carry for slicing up rations of spam.'

Ken took his pocketknife out of its pouch and looked closely at its blade. He was the only nightfiller to carry a pocketknife like this. The rest of us used the disposable knives issued by management. They were galvanised three-piece jobs, with flimsy razor cartridges for blades. We carried them in our shirt pockets, and if we leaned forward too steeply they fell out and broke apart on the floor and couldn't be put back together again without being bent out of shape in the process. Ken's looked old and indestructible.

'And who else is in this damned play then?' He stuck the knife end into the top of the box and cut it from ear to ear. Inside a can gurgled.

'No one else. It's strictly a one-person play. You're the lead role and the supporting ensemble, Ken. And it's quite political in parts.'

It would need to be quite political to do Ken any real justice. Damned play and damned disrespectful, ain't it? Come into this damned country. Ken was himself quite a political man.

Shaking his head then: 'I thought plays were meant to be hell full of romantic guys called Romeo and Shakespeare and the rest of it? Never heard of no damned political play about a guy called Ken working his arse off in the sun all his life. What's he do when he gets bored?'

'Okay. Well, he congratulates himself on having lived a good and honourable life. When he gets bored of that too he masturbates. Sometimes in public. Though this is quite a rarity. Nevertheless, Ken. Okay?'

Ken shuffled awkwardly and hitched his pants. The masturbation thing worried him. I could see that it worried him. The name worried him also. Perhaps he was right to be worried about the name. I was a little worried myself. Ken may have qualified for a good and decent prose name, but who was to say it would make for a good and decent play name? The two were very different animals. You could get away with a lot more when you were writing prose. Especially when it came to names. A good

prose name was like an illustration. It had only to look nice and perform the occasional action, whether it be dancing between paragraphs, or stumbling drunk from margin to margin, and that would be enough to carry its reader throughout. Lolita was an exceptional example of what could be achieved with the right combination of phonemes and some professional typesetting. Lo-lee-ta: two ripened, plump legs parted beneath the bum cheeks and a rickety motel nightstand. (Or, at the other end of the spectrum: Humbert-Humbert: out of breath but persisting on with its awkward back-and-forth rhythm.) A good and decent play name, however, had nothing to do with action or syntax or the great Franco-American dream, a good play name was one which performed with dignity across all vocal registers. Stella, for instance. You couldn't take anything away from Stella. Shouted, whispered, deep-South or thick-Polack: Stella traversed them all with clarity and decorum. And if there was one trick to writing failsafe play names that I was aware of, it was to seek out the longest possible title which couldn't be broken into any shorter derivative of itself. Stella, good. Rosencrantz, better. Mephistopheles, bravo.

Ken piped up again then. 'Hell of a goddamned play that shows a guy talking to himself and playing with himself all day long. In front of everyone too, no doubt. Mothers and grandmothers and the lot. Goddamned no kind of play I've ever heard of. That what politics is come to, goddamnit?'

God was the mother of Ken's fucker, the cunt of his faced, the jolly of his good. A lower-case god in any event. And a god he inflected with spite and without recourse to the religious tattoo on his left forearm. (I say religious, it was a Ned-Kelly-in-the-image-of-Saint-George, and more related to Ken's sense of nationalism than piety, I'm sure.)

'If it makes you feel better,' I said, 'the masturbating thing is purely nostalgic. And mostly futile. It reminds him of his younger days. He's been to war, see. Watching other people die has made him very self-congratulatory. Have you read a great deal of Mailer, Ken?' Ken shook his head without shaking it. Ken could agree and disagree like this without moving a single muscle. It was the way he breathed, the source of his breath. A belligerent breath came all the way from his gut. 'Mailer's middle name was Kingsley.' Ken didn't respond, though he breathed easier and from the larynx. 'How do you feel about Kingsley, Ken? It's almost impossible to give Kingsley an undignified slant. Wouldn't you agree? The critics will read into it. Critics love names. Makes them feel politicised to talk about names in a creative and historical context. Kingsley—at the risk of King or Kingsy, that is.'

'Well, first of all, I ain't never been to no damned war and that ain't something you damned-well lie about neither,' Ken stated emphatically. 'And second—'

I'll stop you there, Ken. Always difficult for me to believe any old person who says they haven't ever been to war. Yes, but where did all those scars come from then? And why do you insist on saying things like, 'Come into this damned country...' and 'Damned disrespectful...'? Am I expected to believe you accumulated all those prejudices while swatting flies with paintbrushes and spoilt racing guides, while listening to silly girls laugh and drink champagne and say things like, 'Ooh, you missed a spot!' and, 'Oh, what a funny name this one has!' and, 'What's a gelding, now, darling?' Surely you must have passed at least one semester of your youth being drilled over the precision of your bootlace knots and the gradient of your morning hard-on? With a surname like Marsh too, for Christ's sake. What better name for shouting and bearing down upon than Marsh? It struck me then that maybe the play needed a second character after all. A drill sergeant. Someone to shout *Marsh!* whenever the audience looked tired or ready to leave. Certainly something very comical about the military and their drill sergeants.

'War is a liberty like any other,' I began explaining to Ken, who was looking puzzled and upset by this stage. At his feet a pool of blood had begun spreading slowly and outwards across the linoleum floor, the pierced beetroot heart in the box's chest pumping with supermarket fever and fear of its impending vacuous death. 'Very similar to sex in fact. Sex being the biggest of them all. Are you sure you haven't read any Mailer? How about Miller? Miller often uses liberties to make things seem truer. Although, I must admit, it's difficult to make sex seem true on the stage no matter what liberties you take. I think your character will need to use a lot of heavy language if he's to have any success with sex. Don't look so bothered, Ken. There are other tricks that can be used. And I'll see to it that the actor in charge of playing you knows his stuff. I'm afraid, however, that the war bit is an absolute must. No questions. Maybe even an injury—just to remind the audience. Could your character affect a limp for the sake of believability and bravery, do you think? It's very important that your character seem political and brave, and I think a limp is the best way of demonstrating both these traits. In the end, it's the details that make the thing seem true and believable.'

Ken didn't seem to understand too much of what I was talking about, with all the technical play stuff and so forth. Admittedly there were some long-winded ideas in there which would need simplifying if this thing was to work in front of an audience. A prose writer might get away with such sloppiness, such contrivances, though a playwright would be found out quick-smart. It was all to do with the collective mind of the audience. The collective mind was sharp and impatient. The collective mind would disappear for refreshments and never come back. The collective mind had no reservations in leaving their seats empty and the actors looking beyond the stage lights for encouragement from the house cleaners.

'Leave it with me, Ken. I'll make you seem entirely believable and heroic at once,' I said.

'Goddamned no goddamned hero here, boy. Forget it.' The false modesty was entirely Ken-like. While the pool of blood at his feet smelled sweet as pineapple juice.

A week later I'd finished a draft for the play. It was called *The Supermarket*. It wasn't a heroic play by definition, though there were some heroic parts in the middle when the main character took his pocketknife out and talked directly to the audience about how he'd been forced to kill a bare-chested Korean during the war. As he talked he used his knife to wipe sweat from his neck and this made him seem vulnerable and doubly heroic. The main character often addressed the audience directly and when he wasn't addressing the audience directly he was addressing the Kelly tattooed on his forearm directly. It was a post-Nolan Kelly and unlike Ken's lithe, romantic, horse-bound Kelly, this one rode shotgun in an army tank which was drawn onto his skin as squarely as the well-known head armour. The Kelly was a symbol of the character's sense of duty and religion, and when he chastised it he chastised himself.

'How do you get all this stuff about the tattoo just from listening to him talk? Is his forearm so big that people at the back of the theatre will understand and laugh along?'

I'd taken the idea for the play to a group workshop. I wanted to hear the other actors and playwrights say it wouldn't work. Which was largely the point of the workshop. It was a very successful workshop in this way.

'The tattoo is projected onto a screen,' I explained to them. I'd thought through the technical components in advance. It would be projected onto a screen the size of a beach towel. The audience would be able to see the hair follicles rising up out of the character's skin. His pores would glow with perspiration and ink, each one like a sweaty little porcelain eggcup.

'Popeye,' another of them jested. Everyone laughed accordingly and I felt pleased to be involved with such a successful bunch.

Several minor forearm jokes and some pleasant conjecturing later, it was decided that *The Supermarket* would be a suitable addition to the group's rehearsal schedule and, pending its ongoing appeal, the group's performance schedule later in the year. It was a small enough play that it could easily be performed between sets with the curtain closed, employing just the front open area of the stage, and this counted in its favour. Some concerns came to mind regarding the lead character's dislike for tight and confined places—a deal of which was a direct result of the months of his life spent locked inside a POW cell (being made to breathe the ammonia from his own urine was like holding his head over an opened tin of paint)—but I was eager for the play to go ahead and didn't wish to hamper its chances in any way by demanding extravagant props or greater floor space or any other unnecessary privilege that wasn't mine to begin with. The only suggestion I dared to make sprung from my belief that whoever was to play the part of Kingsley should first of all spend some nights observing the real-life Ken at work in the supermarket, to get a feel for his persona. The actors didn't like this idea one bit. 'Scorsese, take a chill pill,' they scoffed at me, while the other playwrights rolled their eyes at one another and smirked condescendingly. Nobody in that workshop group thought very much for field research and all of them were much older and more experienced than me.

After trialling the play with the group at the writers' centre I took it to the supermarket for Ken to read during his tea break. It'd been reduced to a one-act play as a result of some intense workshoping and much of what went on in the act wasn't written directly on the page but implied through discrepancies in the character's vision of himself. The workshopers were big on this kind of drama: character-discrepancy drama, they called it. Ken read the lines without reading through them and slurped lukewarm coffee and when he'd finished he handed me the copy of the play and remarked that he wasn't happy with the setting.

'Don't like where it happens,' he said.

'It happens here, in the supermarket,' I said to him.

'I know,' he said back to me. 'I don't like it.'

'But it's based on you,' I reasoned. 'It's called *The Supermarket*.'

'It's me, all right,' Ken agreed. He seemed almost pleased with himself at recognising and confirming this fact.

'And you work in a supermarket. I even changed the character of the drill sergeant to a department manager.'

'Eddie,' Ken said.

‘Eddie, yes. That’s Eddie calling you a lousy sack of shit and firing you.’

‘That’s Eddie making me cry in front of the juice aisle?’

‘Yes, Ken. Eddie Debbman. See how I changed the letters around so that I wasn’t using his real name? It’s a play on his real name. Eddie Debbman: Danny Beadman.’

‘I don’t like the robots either,’ Ken said.

‘The robots are not real, Ken. They’re a metaphor for youth, for foreign invasion, for technological consumption of the species, for hand-to-hand jungle warfare. It’s frightening. Just like Eddie firing you and giving your job over to a Japanese robot is frightening and at the same instant metaphoric for the way the supermarket treats its aged employees, for the way the government treats its war veterans. All of it’s connected.’ I waited for Ken to say something about his dislike of faux war veterans and Japanese robots in general, but he let this go for the time being. ‘Do you see?’ I implored him.

Ken looked at me. He was a man whose eyebrows gave the appearance of a frown even when he wasn’t frowning. ‘And I didn’t go much on all the talking. There was too much talking,’ he said. ‘All talking, really.’

‘Ken, it’s a play. If it was a prose story I could do away with a large part of the talking, I could just *say* things outright. But in a play that’s all you have, the dialogue. The dialogue and the setting. It’s very difficult. You can see how difficult it is. Look at the way I have you talking to your arm. Which is a sort of a metaphor too, Ken. Do you think the audience is going to be able to see what’s going on here? Imagine, I’m going to project the tattoo onto a screen the size of a beach towel and whenever you start talking I’m going to light up the screen and it’ll be a metaphor for God and for the character’s sense of self. It’s quite a religious and political play, Ken, and quite risk-taking. I told you it would be quite political and religious. Were you wondering how I was going to broadcast the character’s tattoo right across the audience, so that even the people in the back would see and be able to laugh along? Or did you think the character would need forearms the size of Popeye’s?’

Ken didn’t laugh at the Popeye joke. I considered that I’d been fooled by the workshoping group. Fickle, I thought. Fickle was a word I often pronounced in my head. Out loud I preferred the direct expletive. I imagined it was the opposite for Ken: *goddamn fool* out loud, *daddy-cunt-faced clit-clicker* in his head.

‘And it’s all double-meanings and that?’ Ken asked. ‘The robots and the setting and all of it?’

At last, you’ve turned the page, Ken: *metaphor, metonymy, mise-en-abyme!* Yes, this is you smack bang in the middle of the play discussing your wariness of appearing smack bang in the middle of plays, functioning yourself as a metonymy of yourself, as an infinite regression of yourself. Now you see! Clever, clever, clever. Do you not think? *You, Ken*: the ultimate metaphor of instruction and deliverance and futile masturbation. How about it? What do you say? Pat on the back, eh?

‘It’s better than I thought it would be,’ Ken conceded. It was a noble and difficult thing for him to say and he said it nobly and concedingly.

‘Ken, you must agree to play yourself,’ I said at that moment. I’d only just decided and it seemed right.

‘I ain’t no damned play actor,’ Ken scoffed.

‘What acting? You would be playing yourself, Ken.’

‘Too old. Besides, I ain’t got the time to be worrying about any of that business. Got to keep me greyhounds fed and looked after.’

‘But, Ken—’

I thought then to tell Ken the story of the ANZAC, something to rouse his self-belief. Not the story every Australian is familiar with, the one so often expounded through the medium of Television Miniseries (to date the most provocative means of communicating both the pragmatic horrors of war and the tenderness of masculine camaraderie at once), but rather my own personal account of the ANZAC, how eager to demonstrate my inborn and indebted respect, I’d leaned from the window of a first-floor apartment one 25 April cheering and clapping the houndstooth procession past Heiner’s Hair Salon and toward the town hall clock, when one of the processors, an old chap sporting every medal known to Caucasian man save the Western movie star’s shiny *Sherriff* badge, stopped the march dead in its tracks and pointed up at me and told me to stop acting like such a goddamned hard-on (*goddamn*, Ken—I swear I’m not making any of this up!) and show some goddamned reverence for the poor sons of bitches who hadn’t come back, and when his pals began patting him on the back and telling him good job, Smithy, well, I may as well have been the hard-on who’d

just leaned out his first-floor window to spit on the crippled widow of one of those poor sons of bitches, right in the wheelchair, the old grey-tooth!

But instead of telling the ANZAC story I said: 'Will you at least come to the play's premiere, Ken? To call "goddamned bravo" from the first row? For authenticity's sake? To show those other playwrights and actors how they got it all wrong.'

Ken

(walking off with a war-sustained limp)

Not my scene, boy.

Me

No? Okay, Okay, Kingsy.

(Curtain)

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