

Ron, I think

The thing is, I can't remember his name. It makes me doubt the veracity of my own story. I should be able to remember his name if all this really happened. Every time I attend a social gathering and people are telling outlandish stories I wait impatiently to tell the story of my manager at Blockbuster. I've told it so many times that even I can't be sure of how much of it is true. I mean, I don't want to build it up too much. What a horrible way to start a story.

When I was a sophomore in college, I worked at Blockbuster just around the time that DVD rentals were starting to be available. You wouldn't believe how many times a day I had to explain that DVDs won't play in a VCR. My manager, Ron, was a very large man. His head was fully twice the size of mine. Tall (6' 5"?) and broad shouldered with a heavy brow and a resonating Hulk voice. This is one part of the story that I have trouble being truthful about. 6 feet 5 inches isn't freakishly tall, so sometimes I just gesture well over my 5'2" head and roll my eyes. His giant head was no joke. In reality I got used to it quickly, and he was nice to me. We got along in our shared drudgery. His physique is only relevant in so far as the confession that he would make to me.

It could get really slow in the middle of a shift before people started getting off work, and I don't know what prompted it, but one day he told me, "I'm actually only fifteen." I didn't believe him. He had hired me. "No, really. I suffer from gigantism, and I ran away from home. Got a fake license, and I've worked here for eighteen months. I just got my own place." He took his license out of his wallet. Personally, I didn't have a driver's license and couldn't afford a car. I rode a bike everywhere. It looked real to me. I wish I could remember how old his license declared him to be. It's another detail that I should be able to recall. I actually felt kind of embarrassed inspecting his fake ID. I got the sense I was supposed to praise its realism. He was looking at me kind of expectantly.

“Gigantism?” I asked. Handing back the plastic card.

“Yeah, like Andre the Giant. I’ll probably die young.”

Looking at him, I believed that his growing bones might actually hurt him. If it was true that he was only fifteen, how much more could he grow? His khakis were swollen at the thigh and his blue polo was always coming untucked already. Obviously, I had questions, but I felt shy about asking. His situation seemed bleak to me, and I was starting to see him as a friend. He was almost the only person I knew that wasn’t associated with the college, an environment where I still felt hickish and out of place even though most of the kids were just from Dallas. Coming from a rural, small town my accent twanged more like that of a townie.

I’m pretty sure I said something along the lines of it being pretty cool that he was doing such a good job taking care of himself. He scoffed, and I realized how patronizing that must sound. In an instant, I infantilized the guy that I just learned was two years younger than my little brother. We didn’t talk about it again, and none of the other workers ever gossiped about it. I realized that he had confided in me alone.

I may have started to feel like a big sister, but Ron was outspoken. He could be rude to customers. Blockbuster customers were, admittedly, the worst. Everyone always asked you to check if the movie they wanted had been returned but wasn’t on the shelf. At busy times the book-sized boxes would pile up at our feet as the return chute overflowed. No one wanted to wait in line, but they wanted you to verify that none of the boxes surrounding you were the film they had selected. They literally expected you to turn over every box while they watched you.

“Are you sure you don’t have *Stir of Echoes*? No one has brought it back?”

The customer glances suspiciously at the tapes we have managed to stack title facing out on the counter behind us. This is the system. Start to sort during any down time, but no re-shelving ever happens from 5-8 pm.

I see my manager sweep his hand under the return chute catching an errant box. He looks at the spine. I can see from his face that it's the Kevin Bacon thriller, but he stands up and says, "Sorry, man." He presses the box into my hand at the neighboring cash register. The customer in front of me is asking:

"What's that Kevin Bacon film? I heard that was good. You know everyone is related to Kevin Bacon by six degrees of separation."

Did this guy think that everyone was descended from Kevin Bacon? Like he's Genghis Khan (16 million men alive in 2013 were found to have his DNA). Six degrees of Kevin Bacon (a play on six degrees of separation) was a parlor game for movie nerds and an early internet thing. You can connect Kevin Bacon to any other actor in Hollywood by six films. The prolific actor has starred in so many movies, you can connect his co-stars back to him easily. You get bonus points if you don't use big films like *A Few Good Men*. For example, Sarah Jessica Parker... just kidding! There is only one degree there. They acted together in *Footloose* in 1984.

"*Stir of Echoes*. Yeah, I have the last copy right here."

I've still never seen *Stir of Echoes*. There are several movies from that era that were either spoiled by people complaining about the plot, "He's dead the whole time!" quoting from it in every situation, "The first rule of pizza parties is we don't talk about pizza parties," or in this case, I heard the name *Stir of Echoes* so many times it just sounded moronic.

One day a lady came in looking frantic. She asked to use the restroom. We don't have a public restroom, but Ron relented. "Don't try to steal any candy! I know exactly what's in there!" He yelled after her. Followed by a muttered, "Wow, that lady reeks." And a loud, "Change your pad!"

I didn't think this kind of hygiene shaming was called for, and I found it gross that we stored so much candy in the employee bathroom. I gave Ron a big sister scowl. I don't know why I bothered. I was never able to shame him. He delighted in being somewhat of a rogue. He seemed to have secret dealings with some customers, huddling with them in the *100 must-watch* section. I suspected him of eating candy during his bathroom breaks.

In retrospect I realize that it had never occurred to me to admit that I could smell another person, let alone pass judgments about them based on their smell. My standard of polite behavior didn't allow me to acknowledge another's aroma. Is it possible that 15-year-old Ron had taught 19-year-old me that people have odor?

The yellow walls of the store reminded me of Simpson flesh, and in my blue polo shirt I imagined my own appearance jaundice to sad cartoon levels. I've never felt as ugly as I did within those walls and in that uniform. I had recently allowed my neighbor to shave my head, thinking that it would make me look cool at last, but anarchists don't wear khakis and polos.

I enjoyed giving rental recommendations to customers, because, so sadly, I valued having anyone seek my opinion. I didn't have time to watch all the movies though, because I had discovered *The X-Files*. I watched it alone, developed a crush on both actors, and identified with both characters. Considering that Mulder and Scully represented two conflicting world views, I should picked a side, but relativism won the day.

The cloud cover grew more ominous as the afternoon waned, and by nightfall the sky was black. When it rained, I could get stranded. The nice thing about not owning a car is that pretty much everyone else – at least in Texas- does own a car. I was usually able to get a ride. The last night I ever saw Ron I rode my bike to work, but by the end of the evening it was pouring. I couldn't even see my bike parked outside through the sheets of rain.

“I'll take you home. I've got an errand I need to do, and it would be nice to have you along.”

Shit. A ride would be nice, but I didn't want to go complete his to-do list. And where did he need to go? Blockbuster was one of the last businesses to close at night. What could he have to do? I just wanted to go home. People sometimes interrupt my story here to point out that Ron must be a lying sex offender who tricks women into thinking he's really a little boy. Truth is, I knew Ron wasn't attracted to me.

A few days prior I told Ron I had a date after work when he asked me about my weekend plans. A guy was picking me up at the end of my shift to take me to a party at his fraternity. “Ew, frat guy. Don't get raped.” When my date tapped on the glass store front near the return chute, Ron and I both turned from our posts at our respective registers. My date was wearing a tiny sequin dress, towering stilettos, and his own curly hair in flirty ringlets.

“It's a cross dressing party,” he shouted through the glass. “I forgot to tell you.”

My date shivered involuntarily when he caught a glimpse of Ron's hulking mass.

“Loser,” said Ron shaking his head and looking at me with contempt.

I knew he was referring to me.

I didn't end up going to that party. Not only did I not have a better man costume than my Blockbuster uniform (khaki's and a polo shirt- complete with buzz haircut). I also had to track down a missing advance copy of *The Sixth Sense* or I was going to lose my job. The regional manager encouraged us to take home copies of movies when they arrived at the

store on Tuesdays and watch them before they became available to the public on Fridays. They really thought that our customers valued our insights into the cinema.

When my friend Debbie found out that I had access to free rentals days before the release she begged to borrow movies, especially M. Night Shyamalan's masterpiece. I took a break to explain to my date that he was two hours early to pick me up, and he should just go on without me. I had been trying to call Debbie every hour or so, but no one answered at her boyfriend's house. She was supposed to be living in the room that was connected to mine in the dorm, but she was never there. I went to her boyfriend's house after work, and no one was around.

But on the night of the rainstorm, I didn't have a choice but to accept the ride from Ron. If I tried to ride my bike in the flooded street, I faced certain death. People in that town were blind to cyclists in the best of circumstances. In the rain with no lights, I would be better off carrying my bike over my head and cutting through people's lawns. I could convince him to drop me off first.

"I'm just five minutes away. On this edge of campus."

"Oh. Ok, but I'd really appreciate it if you came along with me. It won't take long, and it would be nice not to be alone."

I have to admit that I was curious. Ron didn't strike me as the type that sought out company. We got along fine at work, but we never socialized outside of the store.

His car was impossibly small and low to the ground. I got into the passenger seat easily, but he had to insert himself, sliding his hips all the way back into the seat before he could pull his huge head in. The process took so long, he and his side of the car were drenched by the time he managed to close the door.

“So where are we going?” I asked immediately.

“I just gotta drop something off to a buddy. Won’t take long.”

He filled the car with chatter about Blockbuster customers as he proceeded to a road that seemed to take us straight to the middle of nowhere.

“Can you believe how many people ask us what they should rent? How am I supposed to know your weirdo taste? What’s good this week? I don’t know, probably the video we have 100 copies of. Whoops. I guess we’re out of that one. Get *Boondock Saints*. No one realizes it’s actually good. Maybe I am actually good at making recommendations.”

The small-town lights only extended for a few blocks of businesses, and we were plunged into a dark back road with no streetlights. Visibility was nil. I started to think that we’d hit a tree before he’d even have a chance to rape, murder, and dismember me. He got quiet, and I was relieved to see that he was concentrating on staying on the road.

Only a few minutes later the interior of the car was lit up by flashing police lights, refracted by the rain splattering the windows, and I realized that there was a police car pulling us over. Ron put on the hazards and grinned at me as he lifted a brown paper package from beneath my seat.

“Be back in a jiffy.”

I launched myself onto his extended forearm pleading, “Don’t get out of the car! That’s not what you are supposed to do when you get pulled over by the police. They’ll shoot you... what’s in the package? Please don’t open the door!”

He patted my hand like a much older person would have to comfort me, chuckling. "It's ok. This is part of the plan," and disappeared into the rain. Well, after a soaking rocking back and forth to extricate one limb at a time. His head was the last bit out of the car. Part of the plan? Did he really say that? I think so. As I stared out the back window trying to see anything, I came to the realization that Ron (if that was his real name) was not a child. He had tricked me, probably for his own amusement, or to make me feel protective of him when he was really a criminal mastermind- a con man. This could be part of a long game scenario. He was grooming me to be his confederate. He needed me to believe he was a minor, so that I would never guess that he was selling drugs. To a cop! I strained to hear any of the exchange going on in the dark behind me. Tears of frustration welled up in my eyes, and I realized that now that I hadn't heard the police shoot Ron in his giant target of a chest, they were probably arresting him for... what? Pretending to be a teenager? Then I worried that the cops would expect me to drive his car out of there. So embarrassing that I would have to explain that I didn't know how to drive to yet another person, a police officer, who would probably roll his eyes as he realized he was now responsible for me and the car. And what was in the bag? I was like a lunch bag, maybe bigger. Wouldn't that be a lot of drugs. Was the cop his "buddy" that he needed to deliver to?

Moments later, "OK. Let's get you home."

I was grateful that the sound of the rain muffled my miserable hiccupping as I stifled sobs of rage and self-pity.

My next shift two days later, the sky a cloudless blue expanse, the regional manager (let's call her Peggy) was unboxing new cases of DVD's when I arrived. The store was in the best shape I had ever seen. The return box empty. The candy stacked to impossible heights. Ron was nowhere to be seen.

"Hey, Peggy. How's it going?"



She answers by forcefully blowing air out in an exaggerated sigh, shrugging, and offering me a slight, lopsided grin.

“Where’s Ron?” I asked as I realized that Peggy is exhausted and sweaty. She’s clearly been frantically cleaning and stocking. I guiltily assume she’s frustrated with the state of the place, but the complex series of emotions that pass over her face gives me pause.

“I had to fire Ron yesterday. He was stealing from the place. Taking cash from customers for movies and pocketing the money. He didn’t even cover it up, and I’m just so hurt, honestly. I always liked that kid. I know I shouldn’t take it personally, but... also, did you know he is only 15? I can’t believe it. He had a fake ID and was using his dad’s social security card. I shouldn’t go into it, I guess. Also, you gotta bring in that *Sixth Sense* tape tomorrow. We need every copy. People are crazy to watch that movie.” In the window behind Peggy a cumulus cloud of cartoonishly perfect proportions had bobbed into view.