

A CONVENIENCE STORY



BY JEFF KAY

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~The Fine Print~

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you in advance for reading **A Convenience Story**. I appreciate it, sincerely.

For a long time I wanted to offer a free eBook at the site, something that would give new readers a clear idea of what we do at The West Virginia Surf Report (www.thewvsr.com). And I think this is a good place to start.

The article originally appeared in a magazine called Crimewave U.S.A., and was later reprinted at the site. It's always been a reader favorite, and is one of my favorites as well.

In fact, I removed it from the internet a few years ago, with plans to include it in a larger, expanded project based on the same premise. However, that idea never got off the ground... It's currently interned at the Cemetery of Unfulfilled Promise, where I'll someday end up as well.

In any case, the article has been out of circulation for a long time, and is something I'm asked about regularly. So, old-timers should like it, and hopefully the new readers as well. I think it does a good job of encapsulating the whole Surf Report vibe (maaaan).

A Convenience Story is the tale of my last six months in West Virginia, where I was born and raised. It takes place outside of Charleston, in the mid 1980s. I changed the nickname of one character, because I'm a little afraid of him, but the rest is completely true.

I hope you enjoy it, and will develop a daily Surf Report habit. [Here's](#) where you can sign up for the RSS feed, to get you started on the road to dependency.

Thanks again for reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jeff Kay'.

Jeff Kay

The West Virginia Surf Report!
<http://www.thewvsr.com>

A CONVENIENCE STORY

BY JEFF KAY

When I left West Virginia at the age of 23, I wasn't exactly the King of Accomplishment. I was a two-time college dropout and beer-swilling redneck in denial. And I was up to my Electric Light Orchestra afro in confusion and desperation, because of the rapidly unraveling six-year relationship with my first girlfriend.

To round out the impressive resume, I was also still living with my parents and earning the emasculating sum of \$3.50 per hour working the overnight shift in a convenience store/gas station at the foot of an interstate exit ramp.

Yes, I was a regular Appalachian Orson Welles.

During most of my final year in the Mountain State I was angry and hopeless, and certain something bad was about to happen. I felt doomed, and never hesitated to shift the blame. I secretly schemed to run away from all my problems, and head to the West Virginia version of the land of opportunity: North Carolina.



But, before I made my escape, I witnessed a real-life illustration of all that I had become. For six months I was Scrooge with a squeegee,

my life flashing before me, there amongst my convenience store coworkers (my professional colleagues, my peers), the most amazing menagerie of misfits and small-time criminals I've ever been associated with.

It was my own personal slow-motion epiphany...

The owner/manager of the place had two sons that worked at the store, and a wife who co-managed and did the books. It was a modern-day Mom and Pop grocery, but this was no small-time operation. It was a high-volume, brightly-lit filling station and convenience store that served the many road-stoned travelers who used the freeway that ran through the middle of our town.

I worked at night with another cash register engineer, from 11 pm to 7 am. I expertly managed the gas pumps from an elaborate control panel behind the counter, filled complicated cigarette orders with the precision of a chemist, and made change for people too stupid to appreciate my obvious talents. And each week "Mom" would smile and hand me (the genius) a check for one hundred three dollars.

But none of my colleagues appeared to share my feelings of despair. In fact, they all seemed perfectly happy with the situation. I quickly dismissed them as dumbass wood-hicks.

It wasn't until later that I learned they were stealing as much stuff as they could carry, and using the place as a sex parlor and ongoing party site. They were running scams on the customers, committing acts of violence and vandalism, and smoking large bags of weed on company time.

It's no mystery now why they seemed so content: they'd found their dream job!

Indeed, I eventually began to appreciate their energy and inventiveness, and started to join in on some of the fun. It didn't take long before I was a genuine Molly Hatchet aficionado, and able to

see the beauty in a freshly-waxed bigfoot truck at dusk.

I mean, these guys were alive, and I was now a pillar in their little community. Looking back, it's kinda scary how fast I fell into step, and how easily I was accepted...

Although it wasn't in the employee handbook, everything sold in the store was absolutely free to the staff. It wasn't something you wanted to flaunt in front of Mom and Pop, but it probably would've been OK if you did.

We consumed candy bars and sodas like World War II had just ended. We devoured bags of chips like each bag was an individual chip. We drank quarts of beer from white Styrofoam cups while flipping through the latest issues of Penthouse and Hustler Horny Amputee Special Edition. Before I knew it, I was in a frenzy of convenience store excess. I even briefly considered taking up smoking, so I could make full use of every theft opportunity available to me.

Mom and Pop seemed oblivious to it all. Their semiannual inventories must've been a fiasco ("How could this be? A million dollars short in Frito-Lay products alone?!"), but nothing was ever said about it that I'm aware of. Their own sons were two of the biggest offenders, so that might have had something to do with it. Perhaps they didn't want to know what they would find once they started looking?

The "boys" would routinely load cases of beer into their matching Camaros and screech away with various and sundry camouflage-covered criminals hanging out of their windows, hooting and hollering. I found it ironic that they drew so much attention to themselves while wearing camouflage, but never mentioned it to the guys. The guys weren't big on ironic observation.

And both of them smoked dope in the store. They would do it in the cooler, behind the soft drinks and milk. Whenever a customer would



open one of the doors to grab a Dr. Pepper or a Yoo-Hoo Lite, the whole place would instantly smell like an REO Speedwagon concert. And Pop would just stand there, drinking his coffee and talking about the rabbits in his yard: "They're fascinating, just fascinating."

One of the sons was your garden variety good ol' boy: Billy's Drywall Services cap, hunting license, outline of a Skoal container in his back pocket, etc. But the older of the two was something more. He scared the hell out of me. He was big and moody, and carried an air of potential violence. His eyes were like those of a wild animal. I always had the uneasy feeling that if I said the wrong thing to him, he'd kill me. And I learned that a prolonged and sustained threat of a beating death, whether perceived or real, tends to detract from the overall work experience.

The few times we worked together at night were excruciating affairs. He didn't joke around like everybody else, in fact he didn't say much at all. He just brooded, and paced, like he was struggling to control himself from doing something crazy. I was flat-out terrified of the guy.

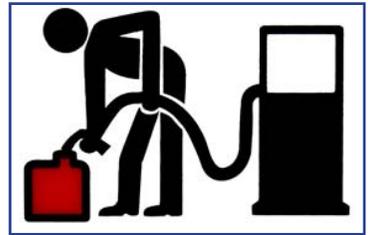
I was told that he once got into an argument with a customer at the full-service pump, who was attempting the old "Why'd you fill it up? I said five dollars, and that's all I'm going to pay!" scam. Supposedly he deposited a few cents worth of gasoline into the customer's lap, then held up a butane lighter as subtle encouragement for him to pay up. And I don't doubt for a second that it happened; the dude was a ticking time bomb.

Of course, he was running a successful gas scam of his own the entire time...

For some reason stealing gasoline from this place was taboo. It was perfectly OK to drink a hundred dollars worth of beer every week, in fact it was encouraged. But it was socially unacceptable to take three dollars worth of fuel. Indeed, the other employees would shun a person if they were known to be stealing from the pumps. Repeat offenders were threatened with bodily harm. I never learned why this was so; I was never able to crack their intricate moral code.

But stealing gas from the customers was another thing altogether. That was something to be admired. My spooky friend kept a five gallon can on the full-service island, where he always worked. And several times during each day a “yuppie faggot” would pull up in an expensive car and bark the demand, “fill it up with premium” before disappearing into the store. A gallon or two would inevitably make its way into the can before a drop went into the car, and the customer would unknowingly pay for it with his plutonium card.

And my buddy would smile and wave as the guy drove away, while muttering a string of crackpot obscenities under his breath. Then he’d pour five gallons worth of yuppie gas into his own car’s tank at the end of every shift.



In the spirit of efficiency and shared services, we would sometimes engage in an employee-theft exchange program with other local businesses.

One night I was working with a big Hoss Cartwright-like gentleman who immediately upon arriving proclaimed himself “hungry as shit.” He milled about the store grumbling for an hour, eating this and that, but was clearly not satisfied.

Finally he picked up the phone and called a friend who was a dishwasher at a high-dollar restaurant a few miles away. An hour later the friend showed up with two thick bacon-wrapped filet mignon steaks which he had obviously stolen from his employer.

After “paying” the man with beer from the cooler, Hoss hollered, “Hell, yeah!” and retrieved a small charcoal grill from the shelf. He took it outside and began preparing the steaks on the sidewalk by the door. Every once in a while he would come in to get a bottle of steak sauce or salt and pepper, and it wasn’t long before we were eating delicious thirty-dollar steaks off paper plates with plastic utensils.

And Hoss moaned a low guttural, “goddamn this is good...” while wiping the grease from his face.

A few of my business partners also had frequent sex with the sizable local skag population, while on the clock. I never took advantage of this particular perk, mostly because none of the young ladies offered to be my co-conspirator. But a couple of the guys pumped more than gas while they worked. Yes they did. And this is yet another of the mysteries of the place I don’t think will ever be solved.

Both of the gentlemen who were most encouraged to freely scatter their fluids over the landscape, like Johnny Ampleseed, were hideously ugly. Yet the gas station groupies just couldn’t get enough of them. Even though they were the kind of women who would seemingly swing open whenever a man got near, like the doors of a grocery store, it was still puzzling to me. I understood why I wasn’t involved, but why were these guys?

Maybe it was their dinner plate-sized belt buckles that appealed to the women, I don’t know. But nearly every night a different cigarette-puffing hussy would show up and begin flirting with my co-worker, and before long I’d find myself alone behind the counter again.

Eventually they’d climb down from the giant truck, flushed and glassy-eyed. And after the woman left I got to hear all about her oral acrobatics, about how it was a virtual Suck du Soleil. I alternated between being insulted and proud they never looked my way.

Of course, life at the store wasn't always a bed of cheap tube roses. There was the occasional altercation between employees, which led to the requisite posturing that always follows.

One of my regular late-night partners had a big problem with a guy on the evening shift, and was bent on getting him fired. I can't remember what they were arguing about, but I think it had something to do with auto parts or possibly venison. He sat there and ruminated about a way to set up his nemesis, and make him look like a thief. While sipping stolen Budweisers.

A few nights later I came to work and he pulled me to the side and showed me a cruel-looking three-pronged hook and a ball of string. "You're not going to kill him, are you?" I asked. And he just snickered like a backwoods Boris Badenov.

At the end of every shift the cashier was required to zero out the cash register and print a report, then pull the money and stuff it all into a bank bag. The bag was then shoved through a mail slot in the manager's locked office door.

My partner's plan was to feed the hook through the mail slot and fish out the evening shift's bag. Then he'd remove some of the cash, and return the bag to the office, thereby implicating Mr. Evening Shift in either dishonesty or incompetency, or both.

He worked on the project for a long time, and it didn't go as well as expected. He came out every so often to give me a nervous update. At one point he was in a state of panic because the hook was stuck in the manager's desk chair(!), and he couldn't work it loose. As he manipulated the string, the chair started rolling away from the desk and toward the door. "Fuck, man!" was his critique of the situation.

But he finally solved the problem, and snagged the bank bag. I think he pocketed \$136.

When Pop came in the next morning to do the previous day's paperwork, we held our breath. We just knew he'd fly off the handle

and probably fire the evening worker over the phone. Pop didn't really like him to begin with, and this was going to be the straw that broke the hillbilly's back.



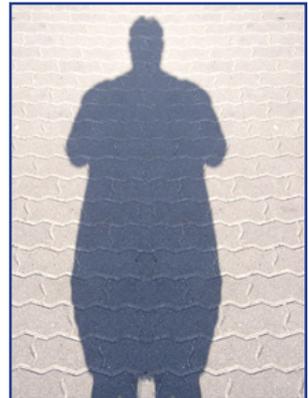
Or so we thought.

After a half-hour Pop came out of the office, poured himself a cup of coffee, and said, "Yep. I was out watchin' the rabbits in the yard this morning, and they're just fascinating. There's this one little frisky fella..." And not a word was ever spoken about the \$136.

In addition to the staff, there were several non-employees who hung out at the store most evenings as well. Most memorable was a gigantic fat boy, called Tugboat, who was literally the same length across as he was up and down. He ate constantly, usually junk food from alternating hands. He would move his head from side to side, switching between various Hostess products and a 6-ft Slim Jim Meat Whip.

He also talked trash all the time, about how he was "going to" do this, and how he was "going to" do that. He was a repo man and part-time bouncer at a trashy strip club way up in some holler someplace. But he was only bidding his time, you see, because he was "going to" get on at the Volkswagen plant real soon.

His grandfather would stop in to buy gas every once in a while and Tugboat would be standing there in all his glory, packing food in at an alarming rate. The old man would just shake his head and mutter, "If I had another grandson like you, I'd shoot two of 'em."



Of course, everything that goes in eventually has to come out, and Tugboat spent a lot of time in the bathroom. While he was “in the office” one evening, a coworker produced a handful of bottle rockets from his jacket and lined them up in front of the bathroom door. He then lit the fuses, one by one, and kicked them under.

Tugboat started shrieking like a woman as the fireworks ricocheted around inside the tiny room, each eventually exploding like a stick of dynamite. When he emerged, coughing up clouds of sulfur smoke, with his gigantic pants twisted violently to one side, everybody in the store was laughing hysterically -- including the customers.

It was one hell of a summer. After starting out so miserably, I was actually having fun again. I even considered staying. I remember standing outside under the stars early one morning, absent-mindedly shooting Lemonheads candy at the old folk’s home with a high-powered slingshot, thinking that life was pretty sweet after all.

But the euphoria was short-lived... The very next day I found myself involved in an argument about who would win a fist fight between Van Halen and The Rolling Stones, and realized with horror that I had real and passionate opinions on the subject. The Stones, you see, had five members and Van Halen only four, but Van Halen was so much younger...

What was happening to me?!

Then I heard that the guy with the three-pronged hook had been arrested for “spotlighting” deer, the disgusting and illegal practice of going into the woods at night and shining a bright light in a deer’s eyes, then blasting it with a rifle after it froze in its tracks. That was just a tad over-the-line, I thought.

And then, to make absolute sure I wouldn’t miss the point, the gods sent me a drunken hick with a silver pistol to seal the deal.

He pulled up directly in front of the doors at about 3 am, in a souped-

up piece of crap that was vibrating and smoking badly. The stereo sounded like a clock radio hooked up to a 500 watt amplifier, and was completely maxed out. The windows in the store were rattling and I could feel the music of Rush in my teeth.

“Sounds good, huh?” he slurred as he made his way to the beer cooler.

“Sounds like shit!” my coworker blurted, “And if you don’t get it out of our front door, I’m gonna call the police.” Then he added, “And it’s too late to buy beer. Besides, you’re drunk already.”

The guy’s face passed right through red and went directly to a rich maroon color. Then he started yelling all sorts of nasally belligerence that we couldn’t make out, and left. We were buckled-over in laughter as he fish-tailed across the parking lot, and on down the street.

But we weren’t laughing when he returned ten minutes later...

“You don’t fucking respect me?!” he screamed as he busted through the doors waving a handgun. “You both fucking tell me my stereo kicks ass...Right now, motherfuckers!!”



I couldn’t believe what was happening before me. The guy was shaking and wild-eyed and EXTREMELY angry. I seriously thought I was going to die on the sticky linoleum floor of a convenience store in North Horrible, West Virginia, because of a tossed-off remark about some guy’s car stereo.

We both began heaping on the praise of the amazingly rich and vibrant sounds that were emanating from his vehicle. We assured him it was quite obviously the best car stereo we had ever encountered, and could not foresee any car stereos of the future surpassing its superior quality.

“You better believe it’s a kick-ass system, motherfuckers,” he said, a little less agitated. Then he was gone.

And so was I. A couple of days later I was in North Carolina, and a short time after that my girlfriend finally did what I didn't have the guts to do: turn off the lung-blower on our dying relationship.

I had officially entered a new phase of my life. And while it would be easy to dismiss those final West Virginia months as a colossal waste of time, it's not the way I feel about it now.

As crazy it probably seems, I look back with a certain amount of respect. Sure, those guys were wild and corrupt and probably capable of, you know, murder. But they were also far more creative than most of the people I deal with every day at my adult-style office job. And they were sure as hell a lot more fun.

My friends and I spent a big part of our teenage years laughing at the many hicks and rednecks that inhabited our hometown (behind their backs, of course), but it wasn't until my final days there that I realized I wasn't too far removed from the targets of our ridicule. My filling station colleagues weren't known for their tolerance, yet they tolerated me easily. And talk about your rude awakenings....

It was a valuable experience. It pushed me to finally make an important decision, and caused me to ask some new questions. Like: when you ran away to North Carolina, smart guy, who exactly were you running from?

And because of the obvious answer to that question, I don't make fun of the hicks and rednecks with my friends anymore. ...I think of it now as more of a tribute, a celebration if you will.

Behind their backs, of course.

Thanks for reading!

If you enjoyed ***A Convenience Story***, please help spread the word about it. How? Well, I'm glad you asked. Here are two suggestions:

- Write about it on your blog, at Twitter, at Facebook, or other social networking sites. Please link to **this page**, which helps explain things.
- Attach the PDF document itself to an email, and fire it off to your friends. ...Or enemies, I don't care. You might also want to include **the link**, to avoid confusion.

Thanks for your help! It's very much appreciated.

Also, if you're new to The West Virginia Surf Report, please consider:

- Subscribing to the **RSS feed**.
- Subscribing to the **mailing list**.
- Following me **at Twitter**.

Thanks again, and have a great day!

Jeff Kay, **The West Virginia Surf Report**