

The FasMart Sodality

Emily Shipman

I'm a creature of habit with an addiction for cheap caffeine, so I start my day mostly the same way every morning, and the end goal is always the FasMart gas station and its mostly endless stock of various energy drinks. The FasMart sits as a kind of sentinel for my rundown neighborhood on the West Side of Indianapolis. You make that turn onto Morris Street, and it's kind of like you gotta ask the FasMart permission to go any further. Not that many people just passing through have any interest in crossing that proverbial gate. Settled almost perfectly between Haughville and Mars Hill, two infamous and named neighborhoods of West Indy, sits my neighborhood; so forgotten and dilapidated in nature that it doesn't even have a name, which is kind of shitty when you realize it means the people living here are forgotten and nameless too.

It's the kind of neighborhood that will have most people making some kind of ugly face when they talk about it, lips curling down around words like "low-income" and "inner-city". They pass on through, taking one glance at old buildings with boarded-up windows and groups of homeless people gathered under awnings on rainy days, and they press their gas pedal just a little bit harder. To put it simply, if you don't live here, then it's the kind of place you hope to god you have enough gas to drive past. Yet, despite all of this, I've made a place for myself under the obnoxious, buzzing fluorescent lights of the FasMart gas station.

Just like the neighborhood, the FasMart ain't nothing special to look at. I'll be quite honest with you, it's actually kind of a shithole. It's not really impressive on its best days and kind of gross on its worst. Don't get me started on the time the bathroom was caution-taped to all hell for the better part of a year, and there was a slight lingering scent of human shit that reached every corner of the FasMart. When the bathroom issues are cleared up, though, it's indiscernible from any other downtown-ish gas station, with its once white tiles that are perpetually sticky despite the constant presence of a wet floor sign and its smell of burnt drip coffee that is permanently ingrained in the drop tile ceiling. But if you take a

second to glance around, you'll start to notice the things that make the FasMart this cornerstone watering hole; much better smelling things than the above-mentioned bathroom catastrophe of '23 that is. Like the kerosene tank fill station that is right next to the front door. Which wouldn't normally be a defining feature for a gas station, except at the FasMart, it sits at just enough of a bent angle that I worry about spontaneous combustion when I walk past it. Or the fact that every year, the staff decorates for Halloween, a homemade "scary-good sales" sign above the register and all, in the middle of August. And every year, I get scared shitless by the crappy werewolf animatronic they put in the corner.

I could describe how the FasMart is uniquely its own every which way 'til Sunday, but it's the FasMart locals, the people I've met between the rows of candy and beef jerky, that truly define the FasMart for what it is. I didn't realize how many people you could meet at the gas station, it truly caught me off guard; as a certified talk your head off if given the chance kind of person, I had never even said hi to anyone at a gas station before I moved over to West Indy and started going to the FasMart.

You see, a morning stop at the gas station has been a part of my routine for as long as I can remember. Growing up, when I still lived in the outer-suburbs of Indianapolis, my gas station of choice was the BP that was just up the road from the housing addition where I lived. I was able to start the habit young because the BP was accessible by way of a bike trail that my quaint little town was littered with. I don't have to think very hard to remember that the BP is basically the Ritz-Carlton compared to the FasMart. It boasted many amenities the FasMart could never, like white walls free of mysterious brown stains, a brand-name slushee machine, and always being stocked to the nines. But I never met nobody in the 19 years I went to the BP.

I don't want to say I was resistant to the idea of FasMart locals and knowing people in the gas station; it was more just like I didn't know I needed to know them or that I even could. But, after so many visits, it almost becomes impossible *not* to meet the people of the FasMart. I've come to know many people for just moments over the years.

There was The Mom who had a crying toddler at her feet and an uninterested baby in her arms, and she was desperately trying to get her wallet, pay, and get the hell out of there. I was feeling all kinds of stressed for her, but also trying to politely divert my attention because, well, I don't think anyone should feel shamed for having a screaming baby. So, I was intensely analyzing the scratcher ticket display on the counter instead. I think I was considering whether *Wild Cherry Crossword* or *Electric 7s* would be a more lucrative bet when, before I could fully comprehend it, The Mom turned and said "Hold him?" without even looking me in the eye. My first immediate concern was that I hadn't held enough babies in my lifetime to be trusted with this task; my second immediate concern was a baby vomit situation, which would immediately lead to a me vomit situation, so maybe that should have been my first concern.

Either way, the stress and adrenaline of being given a baby with no prior mental preparation or proper arm stretching had the words "Oh, fuck," tumbling out of my mouth, shortly followed by "Shit, I mean. Wait. Um...Sorry?" because something will always feel wrong about dropping the f-bomb in a 6-month-old's face. It didn't seem to bother The Mom, though; she gave one of those "what can you do" shrugs over her shoulder in the way only a mom can. I stood there dumbfounded as she now, with great ease, got her wallet from her purse, tapped to pay, scooped one baby from the ground and the other from my arms, and went on her merry way.

Or there was this one morning when I walked outside of my house and found a flat tire on my car. This is a usual occurrence; the roads over here are shitty and littered with nails, and I have tires on my car more worn and bald than my grandfather. But that day, I was almost ripping my hair out because I had negative dollars in my bank account, and FasMart's biggest downfall is that it makes you pay for air. I dug out all the change I could find, hoping it would be enough as I wonkily rolled up to the air pump on the edge of the parking lot of the FasMart. There was this total JDM Guy already at the pump, ya know, the kind of guy who thinks him *and* his car are gonna be cast in the next Fast and Furious movie. I anxiously waited my turn, neurotically counting my quarters as if that would make more appear and staring this dude down in a way that was honestly

probably terrifying to witness. I was pretty damn certain I could hear the air leaking out of my tire by the second, and I was grateful in the fact that this guy seemed to be practicing for an audition for a NASCAR pit team, considering the speed he was filling his tires.

He stood up, and I waited for him to wait for the pump to turn off and then drive away. He didn't wait the pump out when he was done, though. Despite my stalkerish stare, he waved me over. There was just enough space for me to pull up next to him. Before I could even open my car door, this guy was bent down filling my flat tire; on his dime. I remember I put my hand out the window, brandishing my measly handful of quarters as some kind of thanks. JDM Guy just shook his head, waved me off, and left.

Despite my seemingly constant state of shock and awe, somewhere along the way, I became a FasMart local myself. Looking back on it now, it's clear to me that I was always a FasMart local from the second I moved on the block. But it wasn't always so obvious what being a FasMart frequent flier meant. My first summer living in West Indy, the first hellishly hot day in July to be exact, almost feels like my initiation into the FasMart locale. I remember temperatures peaked above 100 degrees that day, and I felt like a hunk of meat in a pot of sweat stew. With no AC and no pool pass to my name, I was desperate to cool off by any means necessary. I don't remember deciding to go to the FasMart, but suddenly there I was. Standing below that cracked, half-lit open sign felt like finding an oasis in the desert. I nearly ripped the door off its hinges, racing to get inside. I was stopped in my tracks by that beautiful, blissful, cool air that was lying in wait for every new customer. I turned my face to the source, inhaling deeply, trying to get as much as I could in the small amount of time I had in here. The Cash Register Lady laughed as I marched further into the store towards the soda fridges, clearly on a mission for further respite. I nearly flung myself in with the Arizona Teas, face pressed as close as politely possible to the can I had no intention of buying. I felt the sweat beginning to cool and recede from my brow, and my clothes began to feel less sticky and askew. I was in 99-cent paradise.

“AC out for you, too?”

The sentence broke me from my icy bliss and was a jarring reminder that I was, in fact, in public. Prying my nose out from between Mr. Arnold Palmer and Diet Green Tea, I saw a man who was also all but pressed up against the Dr. Peppers. I didn't recognize him, sure in the fact I didn't know him, now I can't even recall much of what he looked like. But he was only a stranger in technicality because, in that moment, we were brethren on the same quest for cool. I had never felt more seen.

"Don't actually have one," I responded to this kindred spirit.

"Damn, yeah, a lot of people over here don't. You got a box fan and a bathtub?"

"Uhhh....yeah?" I was cautious in what those two things could mean, but curious and desperate nonetheless.

Fridge Man proceeded to walk me through a trick that required a box fan, a bathtub, and a bag of ice. According to him, it would cool off the adjacent area, and I told him if it did, then he must be my fairy godmother or something. Just a few moments later, I returned to the Cash Register Lady, surely looking less erratic and now with salvation gripped between my two hands. She rang me up and checked me out, all while nonchalantly chomping on gum the same way she does any other day.

"You're all set. Stay cool, honey."

Stay cool, honey. It was a twist on her usual *stay safe, honey*. Just like the AC moments before her words stopped me in my tracks. Metaphorically, of course, I didn't actually stop walking. But I did think about her words a lot that day and afterwards. I mean, it's basically the same thing, only made different by one word. But it was just different enough for me to realize that even though I didn't know her name, the Cash Register Lady saw my struggle. Hell, Fridge Man saw my struggle, too. He could have sat in his fridge door next to me, quietly inhaled his air, and then left. But he didn't. He helped me. Just like JDM guy helped me. And Cash Register Lady saw me. Just like The Mom saw me.

It used to get into my head, all these people I met, and I didn't know their names, but somehow, for a moment, I knew them. I remember I sat on that thought for the rest of the week. A little while later, still locked within the same heat wave that set me straight into the path of Fridge Man, I made a visit out to my old suburbia. Believe it or not, that's where the closest full-size Walmart is. I made a stop at my old BP on my way out of town. I had paused for a second in front of the Redbulls, breathing in the cool fridge air. I quickly learned to appreciate any moment I could get in front of a cold blast of air before returning to my heat-trap of a house. I looked up from my momentary oxygen-filled place of zen and connected eyes with a BP patron. I passed him a knowing smile, the kind that says "Gotta get it while you can, amiright?" and he passed me a look of discontent, the kind that says "You look fucking crazy". I immediately felt myself stick out like a sore thumb, because at the FasMart, Fridge Man would have never. The people of the FasMart would have never. We would have reveled in our momentary camaraderie. I left the BP in a hurry, realizing that the privileges I once held there, to exist with strangers in passing faces and anonymity, were gone.

After that, I didn't feel bad about not knowing any of the FasMart locals' names, instead assigning them momentarily descriptive nicknames. And I didn't feel weird about all the people I would meet over a selection of Skittles. The stark difference between the FasMart Fridge Man and the BP fridge man, made me realize that FasMart locals don't have the same privileges as those who frequent the BP. Back when I was a BP person, I never had to wonder if the people I was passing on the way to my morning caffeine were surviving; you kind of just knew that they were. But at the FasMart, the honest to god reality is that most of the people are barely scraping by. No one's survival is easily assumed, and the only people remembering us in our little nameless neighborhood are us. I've been down on my ass, and someone from the FasMart has metaphorically scooped me up by the armpits and told me to keep fucking going. I didn't realize how many people I had in my corner just because we all frequent the FasMart together.

It was an easy transition after that, finally falling into the role of actively participating FasMart local. I began holding doors open

for what would end up being the entire Brady Bunch filtering back out to their car. It sucked in the winter, but I didn't mind. From time to time, when I'm not counting the pennies to get by, and I end up behind someone whose card declines on a Big Gulp, I throw my card down without question. I'm as local as they come now.

One time, just a bit ago, I was leaving the FasMart to go about my day. There had been a deal on Red Bulls inside. I don't remember exactly how good a deal I got, but I was holding more than I could carry. There was a young couple parked next to my car, talking in hushed and panicked voices. I don't know if they were from around here or not; they were still pretty green around the edges if they were. It was pretty easy to see their tire was flatter than flat, and the air pump wasn't gonna do nothing. "Gotta spare?" I asked them. They had a spare but no jack. I told them they were in luck because I had a jack, a tire iron, and no time constraint. I put down my armful of Red Bulls and we changed their tire, before I directed them to a used tire place up the road that would patch their tire for cheap. As they drove away, I decided to refer to them as The Newly-weds and wondered what they might call me. Probably Short Red-Bull Fiend or something along those lines. It didn't matter, though, what they decided on. At the FasMart, the guardian of a nameless neighborhood, it's not about names anyways.