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Warkin

Geddy Gibson

2008

Back cover copy:

This is only temporary.

Jim Crayson pulls the work vest over his head. As his first shift begins at the backwoods convenience store he realizes things weren't supposed to turn out like this.

Sick of teaching logic at Midwestern colleges, Jim had taken his chances at starting over in Northern Florida. But that was many months and many resumes ago. For now he just needs cash while he keeps looking for something permanent.

The possibilities seem endless. Jim feels certain that any day now his degrees and experience will land him writing work--or at least a job with benefits. Maybe his book will finally get published. And then there's that shot he has at winning thousands on a quiz show.

But it's no picnic dealing with this job and the people it involves. Will Jim watch his hopes dissolve into the seedy, violence-prone world he encounters at the store? Could his last sight be a customer pointing a gun at his head?

Geddy Gibson's bleakly comic novel is an unflinching portrayal of the real prospects for many who attempt to change careers and pursue their dreams. Warkin takes an insightful and often witty look at being overeducated and underemployed.

Paperback edition available at <http://www.createpace.com/3344166> and Amazon.com.

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Chapter 1

I must have looked like an idiot.

The District Manager came out of his office. There I stood in front of a beef jerky display, sweating, wearing a suit and tie. To an interview with a chain of convenience stores. He was surely accustomed to seeing T-shirts, jeans, flipflops... everything else, but not dresses or suits.

But I'd been doing "real" interviews for a couple of months. It was an afterthought. And, of course, just like most other forms of inane etiquette, it seemed to make a good impression.

"You must be Jim Crayson," he said.

"Yes," I said, as he smiled at the suit.

"You might have overdressed a bit," he said. "We do some lifting and moving here, boxes and stuff. People usually wear jeans and short sleeves to work."

No shit. I've done C-stores haven't you looked at the application? This is the interview, not a shift.

"No problem," I said.

"I'm Don Volker, the District Manager. Jolene here--she's an assistant manager-- she's gonna get you set up on the computer. Everybody that comes in for an interview has to do a pre-screening employment test. Pretty basic stuff. You shouldn't have any problem."

I glanced at the woman standing near the counter. She had been about to sip from her day-glo orange, 64-ounce travel mug of soda. She tipped it toward me instead. She wore a filthy green vest issued by the company. Her bright red company cap was slightly cleaner. She looked exhausted.

I nodded at Volker, sucking a deep breath through my nose. Trying to suppress the sudden urge to bolt.

Easy there Sparky. You swore off dignity quite a while back.

I followed Jolene behind the counter to the computer workstation. She was a little bit flirty. She half-grinned at me, flipped her hair. I smiled faintly. Tried not to send any signals.

She left my side after getting the software running. I scooted up close to the computer monitor, trying to look like I was taking it very seriously.

The "screening" was the usual crap. You have to assure them you won't rob them blind. Also admit some imperfections, some past mistakes. Otherwise they'll think you are such a liar or nutcase as to claim you are perfect. One of the biggest C-store chains in the Southeast, and they were using this pop psychology detritus.

"SIR?! SIR! JUST INSERT YOUR **CREDIT**

CARD AND WITHDR--!"

"WHUH... !? HOW DO I... ?

Jolene was leaning toward the big plate glass windows that formed most of the front of the store. She was shouting into a microphone. A guy was out front yelling back through the speaker, making large gestures of

confusion. The volume of the speaker was insane.

"I CAN'T GET THE PUMP TO WORK!!

"JUST REMOVE YOUR CARD QUICKLY AFTER--!

"IT WON'T TAKE MY CARD!"

"SIR! IT--!"

"IT JUST SAYS 'TRY AGAIN!'"

"Ya moron," she said under her breath. "JUST A MINUTE, SIR!"

Then she glanced at me, faking a smile. Half-smile, anyway.

"I need go out and help him get his card to work."

I nodded. Turned back to the computer screen.

"Sometimes using physical force on people at work is necessary. How strongly do you agree or disagree?"

I frowned.

Well, there's the Heimlich maneuver, after all...

Looked like my having taught logic wouldn't help me get through this very quickly. I tried not to think too literally. I knew with these questionnaires they were basically just looking for consistency.

I got through it after a few minutes. I looked out front. Jolene was near the door, smoking. She was watching the same dolt out front trying to get the pump to print out a receipt for him.

I let Don know I was done with the screening. He looked surprised. He printed out a report, had me follow him back to his office.

"Most people take closer to half an hour to do this."

"Well, it, um, I just tried to be honest. Not over-think it."

I pulled up a chair from the 1970s while he looked over my test results. I checked out the cramped room that housed his desk.

This is the DM's office?

It was obviously a converted utility closet. About four-by-eight square feet, bare cinder blocks for the walls, shelves pregnant with unnecessary piles of paperwork.

Don was tall, middle aged. I stared at his hideous peach colored shirt as he perused the printout.

"I notice you answered 'Strongly agree' to the statement 'I get angry when others take credit for my work,'" Don said. "Tell me about that."

Fuck.

I surmised that I had been thinking about something like plagiarism. Or maybe I had equated "Strongly Agree" with "Is intuitively obvious." But I guessed that Don was just looking at this as an anger management issue.

"Well, taking false credit is something I feel strongly about cheating, plagiarism, stuff like that. Stuff from school," I fumbled.

Don looked at me. Waited for more.

"It's not something I can't control or anything," I said.

He visibly relaxed at that.

"Good, good."

Don began to look over the laser-printed resume and cover letter I had clipped to the official Grab-n-Go application. The app was filled out in pen.

"So, tell me why you'd want to switch from teaching logic to working for Grab-n- Go."

"Well, you'll notice I actually worked part-time as a bookkeeper and clerk with a C- store over the past couple of years, while I was still teaching. I eventually figured out that the... um... practical nature of business suited me more than the academic world," I answered.

I had added a hint of a sneer at the word academic. Betting on the chance that Don hadn't been big on college back in his late teens.

"Well, tell me a little bit about what you did at... what was it?... Parkway Powergo."

An arm appeared over my right shoulder holding a sheaf of papers. I jumped slightly. It was Jolene. Don gave her an annoyed look.

"Tater chips guy can't leave 'til you sign these."

Don snatched the pages, started flipping through them. While he looked them over, I imagined the honest answer I wished I could give him about why I was applying:

I've never really fit in with any group, so the social game of academia was not my forte. Not enough to climb the ladder, anyway. So I ended up teaching at schools you've never heard of. Regional schools. Local schools. Thinking maybe I could still make a splash someday as an outsider with irresistible ideas.

Turned out that teaching was a good way to cure myself of interest in the whole pursuit. I despised trying to keep the attention of rich brats who would rather be at home in front the TV with a bong. The ones who hate reading, who see education as a vapid ritual for buying their way into better digs.

I thought "Well, I can't be STUCK in this career. I'm no idiot, I have some skills. Career possibilities seemed to abound--"

Don reached toward me, handed Jolene the pages.

"Okay, then, ah... Jim," he boomed. "Let's get--"

Don's cell phone rang.

"Jeez! You believe--? Sorry, I gotta--Yay-o! Don here!"

His side of the conversation sounded annoyed. Seemed to be talking to a manager at one of his stores.

As he talked, I watched his double chin wiggle under his beard. My mind continued writing my real cover letter:

So, my girlfriend Katie and I moved down here from Missouri. I intended to find writing work in a warmer climate. This place, Doctor's Landing, is small, but Kingsboro, FL is nearby city of two million people, three military bases, tech industries on the rise. Figured at least I could get some tech writing work, freelance the rest of the time.

Cut to two months later. The bills are piling up. I've sent out nearly one hundred cover letters and resumes, but can't get more than a couple of interviews. One of the only offers was from a non-profit. They offered me nineteen-K a year.

Don's face kept getting redder as he listened to the person on the line. His eyes kept darting in my direction, never quite reaching my face. I stared at him. In this closet of an office, averting my eyes would have looked more stupid than polite.

"Yeah, well you tell him if he can't be there on time, there's plenty of people who'd be happy to stand behind that counter in his place."

So, anyway, Mr. Volker, here's how I ended up here. One day I was here in this store, getting an iced coffee. Noticed the Help Wanted sign. This store is near the river landing, and I live within walking distance. That, and I figured this gig would offer me a sure-if-pathetic paycheck while I kept pumping out resumes.

The minute I find something better, you'll see smoking tread marks where you last saw me standing.

Sincerely--

"All right, do what you have to!"

Don closed the flip phone with a bit too much force than he seemed to want to.

"Sorry about that," he said. "Aaaallright. So... "

He shuffled my application papers some more. Trying to think of another paint-by-numbers interview question.

"SIR! YOU NEED TO MOVE YOUR CAR CLOSER TO THE PUMP! DO NOT TRY TO STRETCH THE HOSE TO YOUR CAR!"

Jolene's voice boomed from the front of the store again. Don rolled his eyes.

"So... " he began, chuckling, "Tell me about some of the things that would make you a good manager at Grab-n-Go," he said.

Don nodded as he listened to me. Don was a nodder. He nodded to look like he was paying attention while

you talked.

Despite his nodding, Don looked a bit skeptical about me. Made sense. Don was smart enough to worry that my resume meant possible trouble. On paper, I didn't seem desperate enough, for one thing. Degrees, experience. Or, if I really were desperate, it could be because of something bad that you couldn't tell from the resume.

I stopped talking suddenly. Both of us had heard a low, deep thump. Felt it, actually. We stared at each other for a beat.

"DON!!!"

Jolene sounded frightened.

Don jumped up. My chair was between him and the door so I jumped up too. We fast-walked toward the front of the store.

"DON!!!"

Jolene had rounded the front counter. She was running toward the doors.

"HE KNOCKED OVER THE GAS PUMP! HE RAN INTO IT!"

We could see one of the pumps on its side out front. The car was poised behind it. A huge puddle of gasoline was spreading around the downed pump.

I began running behind the counter as Jolene reached the front door. I had noticed the emergency shut off valve behind the counter while I was doing my "screening." A large red panel near the window.

"HIT THE SHUT-OFF VALVE!" Don yelled toward me. But he had already deduced why I was back there.

"GOT IT!" I yelled.

Out front the old codger who had hit the pump was opening his car door. He set his left foot in the pool of gas.

"SIR! DON'T GET OUT. JUST SHUT OFF YOUR CAR!"

He didn't hear Don's advice. He got out, turned to stare at the pump. He put both hands on his forehead. Just stood there swaying.

Don looked in at me and held his hand to his ear like a phone. I nodded and reached for the phone, dialed 911.

While I talked to the dispatcher, I watched the scene outside. The old man had started walking around in circles. The gas fumes weren't helping his confusion.

Jolene ran toward him, tried to guide him away from the puddle. Don carefully walked through the inch of gasoline and turned off the car. Then he went to the edge of the street. Started waving off traffic.

A few minutes later things were settling down. Don and I were standing on the walkway in front of the store. We watched the firemen trying to clean up after the spill. Jolene and the old man were talking to the cops.

"I can't start you off in management immediately," Don said.

He registered my surprise, smiled, then continued.

"That's not way Grab-n-Go does it. This store is kind of our management trainee store. Jolene and Marta work here. They are both assistant managers. There is no actual manager. The assistant managers get a feel for running the store on their own.

"Uh-huh," I said.

"So you'll do that for a while. You'd probably be up for management in four or five months."

My bullshit detector went off with this last statement. There was something about the way his eyes locked in on me when he said it.

"This is a good store. Not our busiest one. We get some good weekend traffic here from Doctor's Landing. Beer, ice, girls in bikinis... "

Don snorted, chuckled. His eyes narrowed into a mild leer. I did my best knowing nod.

"Rest of the time it's pretty sleepy. Y'know, small tourist town... "

"Sure. Good place to learn the ropes, though."

You are such an ass-lick.

Don nodded in approval.

"Assistant managers come in at five a.m. and do the book work for the previous day's take. Then you open up the store at six, and run the store until second shift comes in at two p.m."

I did some nodding of my own, glassy-eyed.

Did he say five a.m.? FIVE A.M?! Hot fudge shit! What am I DOING here?!

Nine a.m. had been the standard start time for the stores in Missouri. I half wondered if Don was joking.

"We send you out to our novice training store in Pine Trail for a couple of weeks. Ben is the manager out there. He'll get you trained as an assistant manager. Then you can come back here to work and we'll bump you up in pay. Sound like something you want to do?"

FIVE A.M?!

"S-sounds good," I answered, not sure whether I had managed to smile.

"Alright, well let me just get the forms we need you to sign... "

I paused out front for a moment. It was blazing hot from the Florida sun. But I stood there, staring at the store. The lurid signs for milk and beer. The rubber welcome mats, filthy from the soles of thousands.

Damn it, we NEED this money.

It bugged me that the C-store biz was sucking me back in. It felt like giving up. Like shorting out on all those possibilities. But I just couldn't seem to move into something better. Not so far, anyway.

Jolene was still out in the parking lot. The old man was now sitting on the pavement. A female cop was supporting him from behind. One of the firemen was kneeling in front of him, checking vitals. Jolene was smoking, watching.

Out by the street another cop was taping off the entrance to the parking lot. Too many people kept trying to turn in, even with the flashing lights and all the foam coating the gas spill. His partner was arguing with a couple of guys in a pickup truck still trying to enter the parking lot. I could hear one of them yelling something like "beer ain't the same as gas."

The pickup peeled away from the cop. Cop looked pissed but turned to wave the other cars along. I watched the pickup drive up to the side street a bit further north. It turned onto the side street. It disappeared behind some palmettos, then reappeared across the sand lot to the north of the store. Parked.

I watched a dude exit the passenger side. Jeans, stars-n-bars bandana on his head, tank top with beer logo. He slammed the door, started making his way across the lot. He was headed for the store.

The cop on the street spotted the guy when he was about halfway across the sand lot. Cop started running toward him. The female cop saw the traffic cop running. She left the old man, joined the run.

Redneck froze in his tracks, held up his arms. Cops plowed into him. Hard. Jammed his face in the sand, started cuffing him. When they jerked him to his feet, I could see that one of his ears was bleeding.

Okay, you need the money. But THIS place? Why?

I found myself imagining how I could sell it to Katie.

"It's only temporary. And what about doing management for a while? Even if I could not find something better, pretty soon I would be looking at a decent salary, benefits. I can do my writing on the side, in the evenings..."

Figured I'd wait 'til later to mention waking up before five in the morning.

I turned and opened the "in" door. Walked back to Don's office. Still not quite sure whether I would sign the papers, or tell him to forget the whole thing.

Chapter 2

Some form of self punishment? Is that the idea? Is that why you are doing this?

4:30 AM. On my way to the Grab-n-Go training store in Pine Trail. I was fuming. I had accepted the job and regretted it since. I had spent the few days before my first day--today-- thinking about what I had settled for. "Only temporary" seemed like too much. The feeling of trying to get up and drive to work this early was not helping.

Am I still asleep? No, I am awake. Fuck... FUCK. This is REAL.

My stomach was grinding from having coffee when I was usually asleep. I hadn't managed to get to sleep before one a.m. or so, my usual time. I shook my head. I was scheduled for a full 10 hour shift. I couldn't imagine how I was going to stay awake the whole time. Much less train for a new job.

The road was black along this stretch. Hardly any other cars out. I turned up the radio to try to wake myself. I couldn't stop thinking about the fact that this was not just a one shot deal, getting up like this. Not just something to power through temporarily. I would be doing this for weeks, maybe months.

I was headed out to Pine Trail. It was considered to be the armpit of the area. A hiccup of shitty hotels and junk lots on an obsolete highway. The kind of road that used to be a main artery southward through Florida, but that had been made obsolete decades ago by a nearby interstate.

This didn't make for much of a "town." Pine Trail was a place where nobody would want to move unless they had kin there, were hiding out from something, or needed the absolutely cheapest land to park a trailer on. The result was a series of Trailer Forests undeveloped wooded areas along the highway that were shot through with dirt roads and lousy with mobile homes.

Katie and I had heard locals in Doctor's Landing constantly mock Pine Trail. She had given me a hell of a look when I told her I would supposedly be doing management training there.

I spotted the Grab-n-Go logo ahead. It was dim, but pretty much the only light along the road. The Pine Trail Grab-n-Go.

Five minutes early, I pulled into the dirt area next to the main parking lot. I sat and looked at the dank old building. I sighed. The place looked filthy. Ancient. A better candidate for a feed store for livestock than for humans.

It actually reminded me of a store where my family had stopped on the way through some one-caution-light town somewhere in Georgia. I had been about twelve. I bought a yellow Moon Pie from the place. A snack I'd heard of but never tried. I ate the whole pie, though it had an oddly tangy taste. I had already thrown away the package, but I guessed it must have been a crappy lemon flavor. A few hours later, I was puking violently.

I glanced at my watch, then dragged myself out of the car. My eyes stung from lack of sleep. I glanced at the piece of paper I pulled out of my shirt pocket. "Ben," I had written on it. I was supposed to go in and find this guy.

Don, the District Manager, had told me Ben was the district's Grab-n-Go trainer and the manager of the Pine Trail store. I imagined some overbearing, dynamic character. A guy with the four extra inches of shin bone that triggered everyone's daddy reflex- -what I called execu-height.

Some guy was standing outside the main door as I shuffled up the walkway. I paused since he was wearing the green Grab-n-Go vest. He was smoking a filterless. Thought maybe I'd ask him where this Ben was.

"You Jim?" he asked.

"Yes."

His mouth was a crag in a leathery face. No visible teeth. I wondered if he had those stubby, baby corn teeth. I could not see them. Easily could have been toothless instead. When he talked it looked like a guy turning the head of his cock to the side and using it as a puppet.

"Hey. Name's Ben Charles."

He led me into the store. Ben had only just arrived himself. The long-haired guy behind the counter stood a bit straighter when we walked in.

"Mornin' Ben. How was your day off?"

"Mornin' Gil. Good, good... Uh, Jim here is new. Gonna be training today." Ben turned to me. "Gil works the overnight."

Gil was looking at me without smiling. He just stood there giving me this hard look. One of those looks that makes you wonder whether you cut the guy off in traffic without remembering him. Maybe killed his dog as a kid, or something. I gave him a nod with a dash of "what-the-fuck?" in my eyebrows.

Ben walked behind the counter. He set down the files and papers he was carrying. I followed him. I found myself in the pathetic, crowded little area that arbitrarily set employees apart from the public.

"Here, put this on," said Ben. He held out a new Grab-n-Go vest. I tried to take it, but he held onto it. He locked his eyes on mine.

"Employees must wear a vest at all times while on the clock."

He said this in a more resonant voice than he had used so far. I almost laughed. It was hard to tell whether he was joking. Maybe even making a face. His glasses were big and the lenses were for farsightedness. Ben's eyes looked like small brown fish in a bowl.

His continued silent stare at my smile told me he wasn't kidding. Ben had been getting into trainer mode, trying to sound official. He just blinked at me. I looked down at the bright green vest in my hands.

'At all times.' Right. What if the vest gets a couple of 16-oz cups of coffee spilled on it when some clumsy idiot dumps them across the counter?

I pulled the vest over my head as Ben watched with approval. I was official, now. One of them. I felt dumb.

Gil interrupted the pathetic little induction ceremony to tell Ben something. He muttered a few insider statements and names that I didn't care to try and make much sense of. Something about someone doing something wrong on Thursday night. Gil seemed to be "telling on" someone, as school kids might put it. Sucking up to the boss at someone else's expense.

I stared at Gil as he spoke. Somehow his eyes seemed to be blind even as he looked at Ben and me. He reminded me of turtles when they have retracted into their shells. You can still see their faces, but they look

pinched and two-dimensional. Closed off.

Ben listened to him, nodded.

"Uhn-kay," Ben half mumbled.

Gil paused for a second. Ben continued shuffling through his papers. Gil looked slightly annoyed. He went back to the cash register.

After a bit more straightening and fidgeting, Ben took me back to the training room. He said he would be starting the "bookwork." We would be counting the receipts from the previous day and filling out the related paperwork.

Ben shut the door behind us. The training "room" was essentially some plywood and thin decorative paneling that enclosed a corner of the store. Ben made a bit of a show about pad-locking the door behind him.

"This door must remain locked at all times while counting the receipts," he says in his by-the-book voice. Ben seemed to lose some of his deep Southern accent when he was playing the rules/regs guy.

"Guy came in here while one of my former employees, Linda, was doing the countin," he said. His voice had returned to its normal sound. "Guy locked her in the beer cooler, told her if she tried to get out he would come back and shoot her."

"What happened to her?" I asked.

"She wasn't hurt or nothing. Later she quit. Said she couldn't be here alone anymore."

I glanced at the padlock again. Ben watched me. He nodded in silence. Guy didn't seem to notice when staring became awkward.

I rolled my office chair up to the desk where we would be doing the bookwork. I had done about nine months of this kind of work within the past year, so no problem, I figured. I was fucking tired, but I thought the work would be doable.

Ben handed me a paper sack full of little yellow envelopes that he got from the store safe. They were about the size and shape of paper currency. Each little envelope usually held two or three large bills in it a 20 or 50. Some of the envelopes contain odd amounts, or a sheaf of singles. There were about 100 of these envelopes in the bag.

"Them are your safe drops for the previous shift. You go through and count the money inside, check against this shift sheet."

He set a piece of paper on the desk. It was covered with grids and numbers, with tiny hand-written initials by each number. It must have been typeset by one of those guys who paints Spanish galleons on rice grains.

"These here is the amounts the cashiers say they put in them envelopes. You let me know if the money in the envelope doesn't match the amount written on the shift sheet."

I dumped the envelopes onto the desk. There were nearly a hundred of them. Thousands of dollars.

I started in on them. Shake out the money. Count it. Check the shift sheet. Group the bills by denomination. Place the envelopes on a stack. Get next envelope. It began to become clear how long this was going to take.

What difference does it make if someone wrote down the wrong number or miscounted the drop? This is pointless. POINTLESS.

Shake, count, check, stack. Rinse, and repeat. Until your mind bails and goes stomping off to do something else. That, of course, is when you miscount and have to start over.

A fist bangs on the training room door.

"Unlock the fucking door man! I got a gun!"

I freeze with fear. My view of the door visibly pulsates as my heart verges on exploding. The bleat of a hick female customer breaks the silence.

"He ain't lyin'. Yew bedder open it."

The blast of a shotgun punctuates her plea. A wreath of splinters surrounds the baseball-sized hole that appears near the lock. The next shot shatters the lock, sending hot metal chunks into my left eye.

Ben cleared his throat. That snapped me out of it. I realized I had just been staring at the stack of envelopes. Doing something this mindless had allowed my mind to slip back into a sort of half dream state.

I looked at the stack of ones in both my hands. I tried to resume counting where I had left off.

"Um... twenty-two, twenty-four, two--... Shit. One, two, three, four... "

Ben sat next to me, curved like a vulture and just as still. Now and again I got unnerved and focused on him without actually looking. That threw off the counting too.

I finally got to the end of the count. Over three thousand dollars. Incredulous, I called out the figure and slowly turned toward Ben. His urethral mouth widened into a proud smile.

"See, this is a high volume store."

I looked down at the stack of money again. Enough to make a huge difference in the lives that played out in the trailers surrounding the store. The image of the shotgun blast ripped into my mind again for an instant.

I felt a flash of fear at the thought of a month of ten hour shifts here. Three grand on a single shift. The store where I worked in Missouri never pulled in more than two grand cash a day.

We walked back out front to the cash register area. By this time it was around 7 a.m. I looked for Gil. Wondered if he would still be giving me stink eye. He seemed to have left. There were a couple of customers at the register. I looked around wondering who was supposed to be helping them.

"New guy, huh? Is he gonna figure it out, Ben?"

The voice came from behind us. It was an alto marinated in probably 35 years of nicotine. I turned wearily toward the owl-eyed leprechaun trying to get past us to the register. She hissed an expectorating laugh at her own comment.

"I reckon he'll do alright, Billie," Ben chuckled. "Jim, this is Billie."

She shook my hand. She gave me a wink through bangs of her homebrew haircut. Dyed blond. She seemed

okay.

"Well, we could use somebody around here who knows what they're doing."

Billie headed for her register. Ben told me we weren't done with the management duties. He led me to the computer system managers used for data entry. It looked to be about ten years out of date.

Ben began to drone instructions as he walked me through the daily data entry. He stood behind me and looked over my left shoulder. He watched every keystroke, registered every grunt. Same unnerving stare that had watched me count probably 300 singles.

After maybe an hour of this I was starting to see things. None of the arbitrary keystrokes and sequences made much sense. I gave up the expectation that I would remember any of this. I repeatedly stared unfocused for several moments. Strained to break the trance. I saw these little shadows moving in the corner of my eyes. Tiny imps that skittered under the shelves of macaroni and toilet paper.

"YOU SON OF A BITCH!!!"

Both Ben and I flinched and then turned slightly toward Billie's register. She was barreling toward us.

"A RUNNER! I GOT A RUNNER!"

I tried to squeeze forward so she could get by. I glanced out front. There was a blue truck turning onto the highway. The driver was leaving the fuel pump without paying. Too far away for me to make out the tag number. Billie was running out front to see if she could read it. I could tell there was no way she would make it out in time.

A couple of Billie's regulars had exited the store moments before. They were climbing into a truck. They had paused to check out who was peeling out of the parking lot. The driver glanced toward the store just as Billie opened the door.

"DAVIS! THAT SON OF A BITCH AIN'T PAID FOR HIS GAS!"

Davis waved and said something I didn't catch. He was in his early forties. His passenger was a decade or so younger. They both looked like they worked outdoors. Dirty, faded clothes, heavy boots. Couple of shit kickers. They peeled out of the parking lot in pursuit.

Billie stayed out front. Good excuse for a smoke break, I guessed. After the first drag or so she leaned her head in the doorway.

"I thought that bastard looked suspicious, Ben. Shoulda made him prepay."

"Thought you was gonna go tackle him, Billie," Ben said.

"Davis'll take care of that for me."

She closed the door, continued smoking. Ben shook his head.

"I wish they'd just get his license plate number," he said.

"So, the, um, cops are pretty good about tracking runners down around here?"

"Well, not really. Most of the time we don't get anything but a description. It's too far to see out there from the registers. Takes too long to run out there. Like with Billie."

I nodded. We both just stood there for a moment. Seemed strange to continue with the training.

"So, after we are done with this, uh, the computer stuff, am I... do you want me to get on the other register up here with Billie?"

"Ain't nobody allowed to work on them registers without going through all the training programs," Ben said in his managerial voice. "You will be viewin' a series of training videos after we are done up here."

Billie came back in. Bitched some more about the gas thief. Then Ben and I started back in on the data entry. It looked like we were nearly done. I thought maybe the momentary excitement might keep me awake, pull me through to the end. Then maybe I could catch a snooze during the videos.

About ten minutes into it, Billie erupted again.

"HA-HAAA!!! They GOT 'im!"

"We look out front. Davis was pulling up in his pickup. There was a figure slumped in the seat between Davis and his buddy. Billie wheeled around the counter again to go out and meet them.

Ben and I watched as Davis' partner yanked the gas thief out of the truck. My stomach turned and my chest felt tight. The guy's face was a mess. A flap of skin was hanging over his eyebrow. He was breathing through his mouth since his nose was basically a red blob. Davis was leaned over. He was wiping his boots with a handkerchief.

§§§

I don't know whether it was during the visit from the cops, Billie's incessant crowing about catching the gas thief, or the mid-morning rush. Somewhere along the line Ben decided to just finish the data entry himself. Fine with me.

But first he led me back to the training room to watch the videos. He sat me in front of a PC and video monitor.

OK. So now I can sit back here by myself for a while. No way he's going to sit through these videos.

He selected a video and turned on the machine. Fiddled with a couple of dials. Then he stared at me for a moment. He looked managerial again.

"Now, be sure you pay attention," Ben said, " 'cause the computer training programs have questions about some of the stuff on them videos. You gotta get at least 80% right on them computer tests, or you gotta do it all over again."

I glanced at the computers. More retro equipment.

I smiled at him. I tried not to look too glad that he was leaving. Tried to think of something to say that would make him leave.

"I will do my best Ben. I'll shoot for 100%."

He seemed impressed with this. Too easy. He paused, just long enough to make me worry he was staying. Then shut the door behind him.

I let out a breath. I could hear the beep-beep-boop of the register. Voices muffled enough that I can only pick up the sense unwarranted self-pride. The attitude most country music conveys.

Might as well get it started.

The video crackled to life. A fill of electronic drums kick-started the decade-old soundtrack by some studio guys with too many synths.

"Welcome to the exciting world of the convenience store industry. Give yourself a hand, because you have made the right choice in selecting a career in this bustling service industry..."

I looked up at the ceiling, with its yellow-brown leak stains. I could see the bloody face of the gas runner. I felt sick again. Tried not to think of him at the hospital getting sewed up.

I shut my eyes, leaned the chair back. For a moment I considered using the padlock on the door. That would buy me time if Ben came back. Maybe I could even curl up in the corner on the floor. Tell him his robbery story worried me.

Through the compressed wood panels came the sound of Billie's cackle. It quickly devolved into a wet hack that went on for at least a minute.

I settled for putting my feet up. I wished I could have sneaked in a beer.

Chapter 3

I think I drove home after work.

Yeah, I must have, because I found myself parking in front of the house boat. I sat there for a moment in that silence after the engine goes quiet except for a few pings. My eyes were wide and unfocused. Hypnotized from the drive and lack of sleep.

I checked my watch. 4:15 PM. I had left home nearly twelve hours ago. Pay for the day, after taxes, would be about 70 bucks.

That snapped me out of the trance. I clenched my eyes shut, tilted my back and groaned.

One day down. One fucking day.

I got out of the car and felt that general ache. I was running on about 4.5 hours. I lost my balance as I shut the car door, and grunted.

Ahead the house boat was only a bit steadier than I was. It rocked slightly in the wake from a passing speedboat.

The house boat was anchored on the Timacaw River. We slept about half a mile upriver from a big recreational boat landing. Other tourist attractions surrounded it. As I walked from the car I could hear the whoops of rednecks playing putt-putt and/or dumping beer and ice into their styrofoam coolers.

The Grab-n-Go where I interviewed was on the road to the landing, about half a mile inland. I would be working there once they decided I was skilled enough to ring up cigarettes and beer.

The house boat actually belonged to Katie's family. Her dad had agreed to let us squat there while we "got on our feet" after our move from Northern Missouri. He owned a couple of car lots up there. Thought of himself as a real high roller.

He had parked the houseboat on the Timacaw twenty years ago. Came down every year or so to fish, get drunk, and generally pretend to be single. Katie had never been here, but through the filter of her father the place had become Shangri-La.

I opened the door to the low-end blaring of commercial TV. The twins, my step-kids, were home from school. Each occupied his/her own depression in the well-loved couch.

"How'd it go?" Katie asked.

I looked at her from under my eyebrows, shook my head back and forth. I tried to think of a dry remark to lighten the issue. Nothing. I had not spoken for about 40 minutes during the clock-out and the drive home. It was like the speech centers of my brain had gone back to bed already.

She squeezed my arm, pressing her head against it. She looked a bit guilty. But maybe I imagined this. At work I kept picturing her just lounging in the house boat all day. Said had she was waiting to see where I would be working before she got her job. Or something.

The twins were staring at the tube. There were Doritos bags and crumbs on the table in front of them. A passive giggle erupted here and there as they watched cartoons.

The twins had come when Katie was only eighteen. Fraternal twins, a boy and a girl. She had finished her senior year in high school with a couple of screaming babies in day care. Then it was off to do service writing at one of her dad's car lots. The secretarial pool hadn't cut the owner's girl much slack.

I became an instant dad when I Katie and I got together. The twins were decent kids, so step-fatherhood hadn't been much of a shock.

Except for the noise. The constant fucking noise.

Looking at the twins, I suddenly became aware of my surroundings. The prospect of the next few hours stretched out in my mind's eye. The space seemed smaller. It complicated the choice of deciding what to do next.

The only thing I really wanted to do was sleep. My stomach still churned from too many coffees. Somehow, though, they had not managed to penetrate the fog. But here were the twins, TV blaring. No way to sleep through that.

"You guys been outside since you got home?"

"NO," Katie bellowed in their direction, answering for them.

They looked mealy-mouthed for a moment. Then the boy, Tim, spoke up.

"There's nothing to do outside."

"Yeah," said Jillie, his sister.

"What if Newton had said that, or Aristotle?" I asked, wearily.

"Whooo?" they said at the same time.

"Really smart people are never bored," I said. "Aren't you kids interested in finding out about nature?"

"That's what we go to school for," Tim answered. "We're done with school today."

"Don't be so sassy," Katie said. "Enough TV. You kids go outside and play."

I watched them perform their mime of the oppressed. They moved jaggedly, pouting, and huffing. They made a show of putting on their shoes. It occurred to me that they would probably stay outside for about fifteen minutes. Then they would get into a fight or cause some trouble in order to prove that they were better off in front of the TV.

"Listen, you think you can keep them quiet?" I asked Katie. "I really have to get some sleep."

"Sure, no problem."

She seemed a bit disappointed. I was gone all day and then I came back only to disappear into the bedroom alone. She was still touchy about moving so far from Missouri. She had never lived anywhere else.

I tried to push the drama out of my mind. I fell out of my shoes and pants. My shirt reeked of the store, but I did not have the strength to change it.

When I hit the bed, I involuntarily whimpered quietly. Made me chuckle. Felt like I had worked out too hard and then jogged five miles after staying up all night. Sleep came on hard and fast.

§§§

About two hours later, my consciousness was dragged back online by the banging of pots in the kitchen. The kitchen kitchenette, whatever was just outside the door of the main bedroom.

"Jillie! Enough!" bellowed Katie.

Katie had either forgotten or just didn't care that I was trying to sleep. My head suddenly felt compressed, like I was under 20 feet of water. I lay there listening. The dispute over which twin should have to put the clean cups away instead of the plates and bowls.

I felt a flash of anger that Katie was allowing it to go on. At this volume level, anyway. I felt myself about to yell at them to shut up.

Then I reminded myself of Katie's feelings about relocating. Florida was alien territory. Relatives that had been a constant source of annoyance to her suddenly seemed too far away. It was like she was being weaned.

At night she would silently convulse with tears in the bed next to me. That, or she would slime the shoulder of my sleep t-shirt with her nose. I would lie there feeling like the guy who shot the Easter Bunny. Like it had been all my doing.

So instead of screaming at them, I just stumbled out of the bedroom. I figured it made sense to get up anyway. I would have to try to force myself asleep again in about three hours. Another 5AM clock-in tomorrow.

"I was wondering whether you were going to sleep all night," Katie said.

She was stirring some sort of ground meat and pasta concoction. Something out of a box.

Words still failed me. Still tempted to bitch about the wake up. But I just looked at her. I seemed to be moving like an opossum or a sloth. My body still had no idea what the hell was going on. The twins were setting the table. They giggled at my slow, blank stare. Thought it was a put-on.

"I... have to-to work. Again. Tomorrow."

Katie looked a bit concerned. "Are you okay?"

I dumped myself on the couch in response. Maybe some tube would wake me up. No more caffeine I felt poisoned from it. Didn't want to touch the stuff. Caffeine hangover.

Don't think about the store.

I looked around for the remote control. Not finding it, I felt the skull compression looming again.

"Where is the re-MOTE?!"

I knew the response almost as soon as the question came out.

"It wasn't me!" said Jillie.

"You were watching TV last," Tim said.

"Yeah, but I turned it off with my finger."

"That's 'cause you lost the remote after you switched to the cartoon channel."

"Did not!"

"Did t--"

"Just get over here and find it" I hissed. "Both of you!"

I watched them search. I wondered if TV had stunted their brain growth. They seemed incapable of the simple act of placing the remote back in the spot where they had found it. It always ended up under an unlikely blanket on the floor, or behind a lamp on the other side of the room. Most often, it burrowed its way beneath the couch cushions like a chigger into scrotum meat.

What seemed to work best was my solution at our last place in Missouri. When the kids weren't looking, I would put the remote on top of a blade of the ceiling fan. No one could reach it or spot it but me. It had kept them in suspense for weeks.

After the remote turned up under the dog's bed, I sat flipping through the channels.

I need to be in there writing. Or at least working on some cover letters.

This thought made my stomach seize up. I had already worked ten hours. The thought of getting keyed up about another job... I figured I'd get to it on my day off. Or, some nights, maybe I wouldn't be as tired. I'd get used to this schedule. The other people at the store were still alive. Somewhat, anyway.

Katie brought me a plate and sat on the couch beside me. We watched a video bloopers show and had ourselves a salty, lower-middle class supper. The kids were on the floor in front of us.

After I set my plate aside, I looked at Katie's long, firm legs curled up under her while she stared at the screen. Somehow after two kids there was not an ounce of cellulite on those legs or on the tight little ass above it. In the evening she liked to wear these microscopic terry-cloth shorts with no panties. I could see a good portion of her rump pressed against the cushion.

Katie caught me looking at her. She knew my expression instantly. She stretched a leg along the couch. She burrowed her toes behind my back. Then, staring forward to make sure the kids weren't looking, she slid the crotch of her shorts to the side.

Instantly the calculations begin. How soon 'til kiddie bedtime? Would they leave us alone if we went in there and locked the door? If they stayed up much later would she get out of the mood? Should I do the dishes as a bribe?

The cloth crotch snapped back into place. Katie turned to flash me a coy smile. She held the cards and was not letting me see them. She knew it was safe to play these games when I couldn't immediately maul her. I hardly ever got the pussy peek when we were in the bedroom reading or home alone during school hours.

"Mom?"

Katie turned to look at Jillie.

"Can we make cookies now? You promised."

Katie turned back to look at me. She smiled.

"Okay, we can make cookies."

Katie leaned over and put her arms around my neck. She wet my neck with her lips. The promise to get back to me later.

The girls headed to the kitchen. Tim started playing with his card collection. I flicked off TV. Food, the nap and an hour at the tube had not much changed my brain state. I was not thinking of sleeping, but I was somehow stuck with that same zombie brainlessness.

I decided to do a little housekeeping on the computer. I had a website with some of my stories, stories other people sent me. I also had self-published a small collection of fiction stuff for sale. A feeble attempt to pick up a few dollars online.

I trudged off to the bedroom, fired up the laptop. I opened up the front page to my website.

There seemed to be some interest in the website. It featured short short stories. Stories that were 250 words or less. I had gotten into them in grad school. An outlet for ideas that didn't cost me much time. Something about the economy of words meshed with what I liked about logic.

After I had started putting the stories online, other people started sending in their own stories. I posted them. The thing became sort of an electronic journal. Pretty soon I had amassed a fair amount of stuff.

Schemer that I was, I decided maybe I could get a book out of it. An edited volume. Maybe get publishers interested. I wrote up a proposal to one of the smaller New York houses. Clytemnestra Press. They had actually responded that they might be interested. They would consider it. I was blown away.

That had been months ago. No word since. I kept wondering whether to write them back.

I stared at the front page of the website. My eyes were unfocused.

"TOME THUMB: A WEB COMPEDIUM OF SHORT SHORT FICTION."

I was staring at the title, top of the page. Trying to figure out what to do. Write a story? Tinker with the layout? The title started to seem stupid. It seemed to mock me.

Short Short. Who wears short shorts? She wears short shorts.

I decided I was staring at it too long. Getting nowhere. I decided to search for affiliate links instead. Other people with websites that would link to mine. Supposedly this would draw web traffic to it. Eventually money. Supposedly.

I heard the twins begin powering down around 9:00. They were probably still on Midwest time, somewhat.

"Brush your teeth guys," said Katie.

They pouted through the ablutions, stomped off to bed. Tim stomped, anyway. Jillie would pretend to protest, but on her own she probably would have slept at 7 or 8.

One last half-hearted fight over whether X had really brushed his/her, and whether Y was a tattletale, and then it was silent time.

The crotch flash Katie had given me appeared in my mind. I shut off the laptop, went back to the sofa. Katie jumped onto the couch and hunched against me like a big toad.

"Shiver," she said.

She always got cold at night, except during the summer. This was one of the reasons she didn't mind getting out of Missouri.

She stuck her icy fingers under my shirt, partly to warm them up, partly to get me to jump. I did. My nipples got all goosed up. I tended to stay warm too warm but this was like setting ice cubes on my chest.

We had the TV just for background noise. A kind of foreplay, really. A delay of the inevitable. She continued to snuggle up to me. As a Seinfeld rerun went to yet another commercial, we started to kiss. After a few minutes of this I didn't hear the TV anymore. She set her hand on my tented shorts, and squeezed.

People on a date probably would have finished up right there on the couch. But we had been together for a while. For us, the fucking could wait for the usual nightly rituals, albeit sped up. A trip to the bathroom, checking to make sure the door was locked, having the dog take her final piss of the night. The hard-on would return as soon as Katie stripped down.

Once we were at it, I kept it slow. I wanted to build up to one of those orgasms where you feel like you are going to faint. The ones with the threat of a charley horse in your stomach muscles. If I could have fallen asleep right then, at 10, I would still only manage to get about 6 hours of sleep. And I was not sleepy at all. I figured if I didn't come hard, I might not get to sleep for another hour or so.

It was pitch black in the room, so I could picture anything. I barely moved inside her, stirring it around from side to side to just enough to keep her interested. I started to picture the Pine Trail store. I figured if any place would keep me from thinking what was happening to my groin, Pine Trail was it.

I pictured the dusty floors, the toilet bowl stained orange from the rusty pipes. I saw customers stooped over lottery tickets, furiously scratching the plastic paint in hope of scoring a fiver. Felt like it was working. I was still hard, but not about to blast.

Then I panicked. What if I pictured the wrong person and it made me start to come? What if I accidentally blew it while thinking of, like, Billie the chain smoker coughing up one of her oysters? Or Gil, the night-shift troll? A rip-off orgasm. No way that would help me sleep.

The worry actually helped me back off of the plateau phase even more. It brought myself back to the present. I got the feeling of starting over, and began thrusting harder. Katie grunted in front of me, pushed back against me. She had long since come, and was ready for something to reignite her interest.

Staying in her, I reached over to switch on the lamp for the coup-de-grace. Her real, living image obliterated the visions of Pine Trail. She was leaned forward, her back to me. A perfect arch of bronze and white flesh, rippling ribs, toned back, moving against me and in time with me. Her long blond hair splashed across the pillow in front of her.

I came so hard I nearly passed out. The spasms went on for over two minutes. We fell forward once I stopped bucking. I just had to lie there for a couple of minutes more, panting into her neck.

Eventually, I rolled over to turn off the lamp. I flopped on my back and stared into the orange afterimage from the lamp. I had the feeling like I had melted away from navel down. It was perfect. Katie burrowed in next to me, still nude. She touched my ribs, her fingers now warm.

I knew I had my six good hours of sleep locked. All for the good of Grab-n-Go, of course.

Chapter 4

It never seemed to get old to them. One of them always fell for the trap, and the other always thought he was the cleverest joker around.

First guy. A working man, blue collar. Construction, usually. He stands at the register, completing his transaction.

Second guy. An acquaintance of the first guy comes into view. Another worker. He enters the store or gets in line at the register.

First guy: "Hey there buddy! Wha-choo doin,' man?"

Second guy: "Warkin'!"

It was more of a sound than a statement. Something like the squawk of a macaw. The local dialect made the normal "or" of "working" sound more like "are."

"You were just stating a standard greeting, but I responded as if you were actually wondering what I was doing today." Funny? Hardly. Hear it three or four times per shift for a couple of weeks, and it becomes like an ice pick in the temple.

Warkin.' Warkin.' Warkin.' Ha-fucking-ha-ha-ha.

I glared at the morning's offending pair over the top of the cheap computer monitor. It was 7:50 AM at the Pine Trail store. Day Two. I had already observed this bit of redneck theater twice in the past fifty minutes.

Ben was watching me do the daily data entry. I could hear his nose whistle intermittently behind my left shoulder. Whenever it did my eyes would defocus on the text on the screen and look at the reflection of Ben's head on the monitor glass.

"What are the CRIND totals?"

"Uhn-kay," Ben began. It was if I had pressed play on some ancient tape machine, a reel-to-reel. "Your CRIND totals are gonna be found over here on page four of the print-out, down on line 45."

"Yeah, but what are they? Maybe that'll help me remember where to find them."

Since I had taught for several years, aimless training techniques centered on rote memorization really got on my nerves. It was hard to believe that anybody at these stores had actually learned the bookkeeping procedures.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Shelly looking at me. While Ben bumbled through his definition of CRIND totals, I glanced Shelly's way. She turned her head away as I turned mine in her direction. She stared forward like she had not been watching us.

Shelly was the other overnight shift worker, besides Gil the troll. She was here today instead of Gil. Shelly was also an Assistant Manager.

Why she would want the overnight shift I had no idea. I looked at her. Attractiveness can be a very relative thing. The girl you talk to on the bus might be the one you would completely avoid at a swanky bar. In the milieu of the Pine Trail store, Shelly was Aphrodite.

SHE works third shift? Did she piss off the District Manager?

"... on page 4 of the print-out, down on line 45. Uhn-kay?"

"Uhn-kay."

Ben probably thought I was an asshole. I kept making comments about the Byzantine bookkeeping processes, the ludicrous data entry interface. I wasn't much trying to impress him like new hires are supposed to. Figured I'd only be here as long as I needed to be. I did not feel like trying to fit into this grimy little world at Pine Trail.

Something about Ben seemed to invite it, anyway. He was turtle-like, like a very old man, even though he was not so old. Not an alpha male by any means. He never seemed to get aggressive with the other Pine Trail employees, yet somehow seemed to wield authority over them.

I glanced over the monitor at the line of about ten customers. Third shift usually got off at 8 AM. I was supposed to finish most of my bookwork by then. What I didn't finish, I was somehow expected to do in my "spare time" while manning the cash register. But Shelly had had a pretty steady stream of customers since Ben and I finished the cash count.

The top of Shelly's Grab-n-Go vest was stuffed to the breaking point. I kept sneaking glances at her. She was about average height, and filled out her jeans just a bit more than she probably cared to. Tried to keep my mind on the data entry while I pictured taking her to the back room, fucking her between those tits.

Ben's nose whistled again. Like it was commenting on the image in my head.

Two more screens to go. I need to get through this before I start trying to run the register.

I pecked at the keys, wrote down the sequences. I tried to make myself a "cheat sheet." Otherwise I knew I would never recall it all while trying to run back and forth to the register.

"Mr. Jim..." Shelly drawled loudly.

I glanced over the monitor. Shelly had dispatched her line of customers quickly. This was the first she had spoken to me since her "Hey" when Ben introduced us at 4:55 AM.

I looked at her, smiling slightly, hoping I had misread the seeming confrontation in her tone. She looked bored. Her eyelids stayed so low as she faced me that it made her look slightly cross-eyed. Her lips were stiff, and encircled with a halo of wrinkles.

"You the one rollin' up them ones in the safe tubes?"

One of my morning duties was stocking up the timer safe with plastic tubes of change. Rolls of coins, tubes containing four fives, two tens, twenty ones, etc. Cashiers would trigger the safe to drop these tubes as needed. For some reason I had decided that the twenty singles were supposed to be rolled into something like a cigar instead of folded and rolled like a newspaper.

"I guess so." My smile slackened.

"You guess so," she said, with a faintest Pharoahing of her neck. "Well, it ain't easy getting 'em out of there when they're all rolled up. I have to stand there pullin' most of them out the tube one-by-one."

Well. Nice to meet you too.

"Ya fold 'em, then you roll 'em. Like this."

She held up a properly rolled sheaf of bills, and inserted them into a tube. She looked at me over the tube. Lids still heavy, eyes still dead. Soul closed for business.

I glanced at Ben, who had looked on in silence. There was neither a look of approval nor disapproval on his face. Pretty much nothing. I suppose he might have been glad that she had saved him from having to be the heavy.

I went back to typing. Imagining Shelly's car on fire. Thinking about how the wrong people get killed by drunk drivers, get cancer. Hating myself for having looked at her bulging green vest.

§§§

"Anything else for you?" I asked. The scanner booped the last item on the counter.

"Hey Ben," the customer drawled over my shoulder, ignoring me.

Ben was seated behind me on a creaky barstool. Looking over my shoulder again. Guy was like my fucking parrot at this point. He was gumming a sandwich as he observed my cashiering techniques.

We had finished up my second go at doing the bookwork for the store about an hour ago. I still had little idea of how to finish it on my own. I might as well have worked in the circus instead of doing bookkeeping at those stores in Missouri.

Registers I could deal with, though. Money. Ben had already commented on my speed.

"Hey Miss Carol," said Ben. "How them boys doing?"

"They alright," Carol projected through my skull. "Jason's still always getting into some kind of trouble. But Chris is doing alright in school. Doing pretty good in metal shop. He's good with a sodder'n iron, you know."

I look out the front windows toward the gas pumps. A man's head was visible over the top of the pump as he filled up his tank.

"Uh-huh," buzzed Ben's tar-coated voice box, in agreement. Miss Carol droned on about something I didn't want to hear.

"... so I told her if she wanted me to bring the breakfast to Bible study it wasn't gonna be any fancier than a tin o' cinnamon buns from Ben's store..."

The man filling up his tank was wearing those pitch black, wire-rimmed sunglasses like the Rev. Jim Jones wore. His head was still, like he was watching the numbers rise on the gas pump. But those black lenses seem to stare right at me. I felt colder. Those shark eyes seemed to bore through the plate glass separating us.

"How much?"

I turn back too slowly to look at Miss Carol.

"Fourteen-twenty-three, please," I announced.

I said it in my cashier voice. The voice states things clearly and with a whiff of positivity. It is something like those voices that tell you which button to press to speak to a customer service representative. I only used it sometimes. Usually to avoid being accused of rudeness even while showing no respect. The inappropriately upbeat and formal tone was intended to remind them that our interaction was impersonal. That they weren't "getting to me," even when they tried.

It also implicitly requested that they finish up and get the fuck out of my face already.

Miss Carol let her glance linger on me a bit longer than it needed to as she reached into her purse. I had not been sufficiently put upon by her conversation with Ben. I had not, literally, "waited on her" as she spoke. By looking out the window, I had not allowed myself to experience the discomfort of being spoken through. She didn't like these results.

By now another customer had appeared behind Miss Carol. I glanced at him as she rooted through her leather purse. He seemed bemused by her deliberate slowness, for the moment. But I noticed he had to shift the weight of the 20-pack of beer in his arms.

"Well, I ain't got enough cash. Reckon I'm gonna have to write a check."

Tonk!

The 20-pack of beer made its way to the floor a bit more loudly than its carrier would have liked. It drew the attention of Miss Carol. She shot him a glance over her shoulder. Then recognized him.

"Oh, hey Harry. Didn't see you there."

"Hey Miss Carol," Harry says, attempting not to sound annoyed.

"Is Mavis doin' alright? She wasn't at Bible study last Sunday."

"Oh, she's doin' alright. Her ankle was bothering her a little on Sunday. She did some waterskiing on Saturday."

Jim Jones Sunglasses had now come in from the pump. He stood behind Harry, arms crossed. He peered around Harry. His shark eyes now bored into Miss Carol.

"Oh, shoot," she said, turning back to me. "How much you say it was?"

My cashier voice repeated the price. She looked for emotion in my eyes. Then she began laboriously writing out the check. Harry fidgeted. I stood stock still. Another customer lands in line behind Jim-Jones sunglasses.

Over the sound of Miss Carol's slowly ripping out the check, Ben intoned in his manager voice:

"Un-kay. Do you know the procedure for running a personal check?"

"I believe so," I said.

I rubber-stamped the back of the check for deposit. I slid it to Miss Carol. The stamp printed several lines on which she was to print her information.

"Un-kay. Now you have her fill out her Drivers License number, address, and phone number, and then have her sign on the line. Then you run the check through this here machine."

Miss Carol was already familiar with the process. She began dig out her I.D. But all this was too much for Jim Jones.

"Ten dollars for pump 3," he said.

He slammed the cash on the counter next to Miss Carol's checkbook. This, of course, was cause for her to interrupt her writing.

"Hmmpf," was all her brain could muster. She shook her head at Jim Jones as he walked away. How dare he have somewhere to go?

He stormed out the door. I glanced at the gas readout out to make sure he was covering his bill. I had seen him replace two candy bars on the impulse rack before he bailed from the line. This insidious check policy was costing the company money. I savored the realization that I did not give a shit.

Eventually Miss Carol left. I felt a momentary wave of relief. A flash of empathy for the guys in line who had endured all of this. At least until the next came up to the counter and glared at me. All my fault.

I finished up with the other customers who had come in during while Miss Carol ruled the line. Ben had watched me the whole time. He had a stillness that left me a bit on edge. I could feel the psychological distance between us. I could not grok the mindset of a person who could just stand like a coat rack, staring at someone who knew you were watching them.

Maybe you have to be insane to be a manager. Or maybe it makes you insane.

I glanced at Ben. He was moving behind me. He ambled back to the computer screen. He shuffled through a few papers. He stapled some of them together. Some things he would stack in piles. Others would go into those cheap tan folders. None of it seemed to make much sense. It was like watching a line of ants carrying inedible objects for which they seemed to have no use.

I tried to imagine him before he became a manager. Tried to imagine him being like most employees, hating to be at work. Ben never seemed to have his mind on anything besides what was going on in the store. And that seemed perfectly fine to him. He was not giddy about being here. Not like some glad-handing bumblebee trying to inflate morale. He was just here, doing the thing. More like a pod person. A shell.

§§§

It was a pretty slow afternoon. I was lucky. It was the middle of a work week. Most people were still at work in the early afternoon. Kids were not out of school yet, scavenging for sugar.

A few women like Miss Carol would come in for bread, milk. Beer for their husbands. Beer for them. They probably drove to the big box stores on the weekends to stock up. But the Grab-n-Go was perched like a vulture at the edge of a pine forest full of cheap homes. It knew that the families would run dry on supplies, soon enough.

But mostly it was the painters, the sheetrock guys, the framers. They must have wanted to leave the worksites during their breaks. Just get away, go somewhere. Grab-n-Go was about the only somewhere around.

"Whassup brother?"

I blinked the glaze from my eyes, and looked at the smirking phantasm at the counter. He glowed white, even though his frumpy work-clothes managed to convey their dinginess. He worked in sheetrock. They were

always dusted with the fine white powder.

"Hey there," I said. I scanned the barcode on his 12-pack. His teeth were probably smoker-normal, but they looked brownish-yellow beside his whitened skin.

I wondered what he was smiling at. The way he was grinning, I thought he might be making fun of me somehow. Had I picked my nose or something, and not realized it? Fly open?

Then I caught the odor. Dude had just burned one in his truck. High as the fucking Hancock building in Chicago. Weed coming down the river from Drennon, Georgia was supposed to be primo.

"Just the beer, sir?" I asked. "No powdered doughnuts with that?"

He actually considered my offer for a second. Then a smile stretched across his face. He started snickering with this repeated soft-palate buzz. There was a cartoon dog in the 70's that laughed like that. Mumbly, I think he was called.

"Dude, that was cold, dude."

He finished up the transaction, carried the beer out to the truck. There were two other sheetrockers sitting in the cab of the truck.

The beer buyer got in the truck. He was still smirking, talking to the other guys. They were looking at me through the plate-glass window. Listening to their buddy tell the tale.

Then they started laughing. I smiled and watched this silent film of stoner humor for a few seconds. Then I felt my ears turning red and I had to look away.

No other customers were in the store. Ben was on the phone behind the counter. I pretended to straighten up the crap around the register.

"Un-kay, Jim?"

My neck hairs suddenly prickled at Ben's voice. Manager voice. I froze for a second.

Shit! I probably was not supposed to sell those guys beer, since they were high!

I turned slowly toward Ben. I felt momentary relief. Ben was standing there holding the phone toward me.

"Don Volker wants to talk to you."

Volker wants to talk to me? The District Manager?

I had not heard from Volker since the first interview. He had given me my schedule and that was it. Off to the Pine Trail store for training. I thought things had been going okay so far. Ben said I had passed all the training tests and whatnot.

Oh! Must be time to let me know about my schedule at the Riverside store.

I took the phone from Ben, giving him a little nod of thanks. I was ready to kiss the Pine Trail store goodbye.

"Hello?"

"Mister Crayson... " he began.

He was sounding a bit too much like Shelly to suit me.

"Mister Volker... "

"When you entered the store gas prices for today, you did not include the nines."

"Sir?"

I was merely stalling for time. I knew what he was talking about. Gas prices are officially posted as normal dollar amounts plus another ninth of a penny. Instead of \$1.79, gas stations charge \$1.799. Everyone ignores it, and nobody cares. I figured why type the extra nine into the books, when everybody who gives a shit just assumes it's there?

Don Volker cared.

"When you enter the gas prices in the morning, you have to type in the extra nines at the end of the numbers. Gotta have the nines."

Had I done an okay job otherwise? How was I doing in the training? Was Ben telling me everything I wanted to know? Fuck all that. Gotta have the nines.

"Uh, okay, I will be sure to type, type in the nines next time. Sorry."

"Good."

The line clicked as he hung up. I stared off for a minute, thinking about reality. About when and how I could, maybe, get back to it.

"Hell-lo-o!"

I looked down. Some kid was waiting for me to ring up pork rinds and a 44-ounce tub of soda.

Chapter 5

I ambled toward the house boat again. End of day two at Pine Trail. I had managed to assassinate another day of my life, standing behind a counter selling cigarettes and beer.

Running on about five-and-a-half hours of sleep, just like the night before. But I didn't feel like taking a nap this time. I felt like I had been released. Too many possibilities. It almost seemed sacrilegious to go unconscious now that the shift was finally over. Or maybe it was just that my circadian rhythms were already going screwy.

Katie was reading a book on the couch. She looked tanned, rested. She smiled at me.

"Another tough day hanging out at the river, huh?" I said.

Her smile straightened a bit. Most would have come back at me hard, found something. She just looked a little hurt.

I'm such an asshole.

I moved in next to her on the couch. She felt warm. I could tell she had been sunbathing, because her bare brown legs gave off the pleasant aroma that her skin does in the sun. I gave her a long kiss, but she broke it off.

"The kids will be getting home on the bus pretty soon."

I kept kissing her neck, enjoying her smell. I thought about talking her into it.

We sat there for a moment together. Though the sliding glass doors, we looked out over the Timacaw. I listened as a fishing boat buzz-sawed down the river, out of our sight.

"Did you give D.L. Grille's a call, see if they have any openings?" I asked.

D.L. Grille's was a mid-priced restaurant nearby. It could have been called the Doctor's Landing Grill, but it was going for the kind of name that ineffably called out to different type of crowd than your average local bar and grill: boomers with money.

Katie was not thrilled at the question.

"Well, no, I didn't," she said. She was taking the question as an accusation. "I mean, I don't know how long we're going to be here... "

The pit of my stomach registered the swipe at my uncertain career position. I registered the iffy assumption that she would need to think of her job as a permanent one. I wasn't thinking of mine that way.

"Well, however long we are here, it would be, you know, worth it to pick up some extra cash. Tips should be pretty high there."

Katie looked away from me. She stared at the river.

"You said you weren't going to work at this... store for very long. I thought you were going to look for something in Kingsboro," she said, finally.

"I am, but... I... "

"There are craft shops down there. You know? Or I could run a kiosk at a mall there, maybe," she said. "I thought you were gonna get a job down there."

Katie made beautifully intricate costume jewelry. The kind of stuff you see at the better craft fairs. When she had worked at a bank the year before, customers and coworkers were constantly nagging her to make something for them.

I gave up. I could see that the situation had not gotten real enough for her yet. I was too tired to bring out the heavy artillery, like credit card statements or a budget. Besides, she was zeroing in on all my Lousy Breadwinner buttons.

I stood up. Started walking toward the bedroom.

"Well, I'm going to do some searches on the internet. For a job."

I was about to shut the bedroom door. Then I remembered the kids.

"Try to keep the kids quiet when they come in. Try to get them to go outside. Beautiful day."

I fired up the laptop. I stared at the meaningless parade of logos and hourglasses as the machine booted up. My eyelids suddenly felt like orange rinds, rubbing across my eyes when they blinked. Nothing like trying to do something productive to summon fatigue.

The room was quiet, except for the steam-jet-like sound of the modem connecting. I felt strange sitting there. The surroundings were not triggering the usual familiarity. It was like I was distracted by wallpaper in an unusual setting. Parts of my brain were still in bed.

I stared at the screen for a moment. Wondering if I should just take that nap anyway. Then I thought of Katie's swipe about working in Kingsboro. I started pecking at the keys.

Checked my email. Nothing good. One with a question about my website, the short short fiction site. A request for an affiliate link from some online casino. When I first started doing affiliate links, I let a couple of these outfits squat on my website. Never made shit from them.

I noted that, as usual, there were no notification emails from BankBuddy. No surprise. My little e-book of short short fiction was available for sale. Cheap. People could deposit \$2.50 in BankBuddy and download the thing. This probably happened only once every five weeks. But it was often enough to keep me stupidly hopeful every time I checked my email.

Suddenly I heard air suck between the bedroom door and its frame. The front door had been opened. A muffled giggle. The kids were home.

I sat back from the keyboard for a moment. Might as well wait for it. I knew Katie was going to have to argue with the kids about going outside. Possible yelling, whining.

I glanced out the bedroom window. It was still sunny, breezy.

Maybe they would go for it.

Would have been nice to go outside myself to do the computer work. But I knew the battery would not last

long enough. Fucking computer companies made it so that you had to buy a new one every year or so.

Muffled voices from the other room interrupted each other. Little bursts of annoyance, conciliation. Then I heard them in the kitchen. They had convinced Katie to let them have a snack.

It didn't sound like they were going out. I steeled myself to go out and do the yelling. But after a few moments the voices quieted again. Soon there was only the low burble from the analog TV speaker. The occasional quack of sibling rivalry, too.

I leaned forward to the laptop again. I knew I needed to get started on the job searches, but my hand clicked over to a message board. For me avoiding message boards online was like trying not to listen to the conversation in the booth behind you at a restaurant. Even if it isn't interesting, you have to tune in just for a second to hear what they are talking about.

Besides, I told myself, I was going to the message boards of AltaMent, the club for people with IQs over 150. This was research. Figuring out what really defines intelligence. This supposed gift that supposedly set certain people apart.

That, and I enjoyed watching schoolyard spats play out with Jesuit intricacy.

I had long ago figured out that many people in these IQ clubs couldn't get past a big illusion--that scores define what you deserve. Your true social rank, if society were run the way it should be. By and large, these were people who were waiting for everybody to at long last recognize them as the geniuses they were.

I had been prey to similar thinking when I was in graduate school. But teaching had helped me discover that I just sucked at some level in terms of likability. I would never be a social operator. And that was as important for social status--if not more so--as smarts. For better or worse.

Many of the people in AltaMent just had not discovered such things about themselves. Maybe they never would. But damned if they didn't spout off some occasional gems. I couldn't risk missing out on those.

I glanced through some of the discussions. An argument that the periodic table is best understood when organized as a mandala. A letter excoriating another discussant for some misquotes.

A couple of clicks down, a familiar photograph appeared on the screen. This guy was supposedly at the one-in-a-million level of intelligence. But he hadn't managed to upload his picture properly. It elongated his face. Exaggerated his look of disdain toward the photographer.

I clicked open his message of the day. As usual, he was in the middle of an extended online slap fight with another member. I skimmed through his lengthy defense of his recent remarks. He argued that calling someone a "pussy" is not necessarily a personal attack. He included a lengthy and technical reinterpretation of the ad hominem fallacy.

Suddenly I could see myself hunched at the screen, reading this crap. One of the few people on Earth giving this guy an audience. It was enough to make me exit the site.

Alright, goddamn it. Time to see if I can find a REAL job.

There were a couple of job board sites I visited regularly. They were slightly better than most. Nothing had panned out in the past two years from looking at them. But somehow that didn't stop me.

I typed in "Writer" and clicked the search button. I knew this was something like expecting to find a

legitimate job posting seeking men to service nubile women who want to become pregnant. But I always started with this search anyway.

The screen was blank for a moment. Then the lines of text trickled down.

Search Results:

Displaying results 1-6 of 6.

Service writer needed for Blevens Pontiac

Experienced reporter for Kingsboro Times, journalism degree required

Quit your day job now!!!

Human resources reports software expert, 6 month contract

Office manager/report writer for busy cancer clinic

Get your real estate license, sell for us in 2 months

The usual crap. I didn't have the journalism degree for the only relevant posting, the reporter job. And a search for dishwasher repair would have returned the "Quit your day job" entry.

Time to think of a better search term. Maybe "analyze" would work? I figured that's what I do best, really. And if a company needed someone to analyze something, maybe they'd let me do it.

I typed in "analyze," and hit the search button.

They might let me do it, that is, if my resume could somehow get past the dumbfucks in the Human Resources department.

I felt my face get hotter, as I waited for the search to go through. I had sent out hundreds of resumes and cover letters over the past few months, but scored only one or two interviews. I had started to blame HR workers.

There was a rationale for this. The vast majority of HR workers had no graduate training. Much less an inkling of the precise analytical thinking that it took to get a graduate degree in logic. And, lacking these thinking skills themselves, they would be ignorant of how portable such skills were among a vast range of job titles. They didn't understand my qualifications.

Then there was my job history. There was an employment gap while I was in graduate school, living on loans. The jobs after that pegged me as a "teacher." Teachers, according to them, were only qualified to teach.

There was this stupid bias out there, that the best choice of applicants was someone who had already been doing the job somewhere else. Yeah? Just ignore the suspicious fact that they were interested in a horizontal move? And just ignore the superior qualities of other applicants who didn't already happen to have the same job somewhere else?

I threw my head back and stared up at the ceiling. Hot breath hissed through my clenched teeth.

I pictured myself running through the entrance into some grey office building. Tossing a grenade behind the security desk as I run by. Heading for the Human Resources department. Spraying bullets randomly at the

cubicles. Watching the pattern of gray holes dot the burlap, or whatever material it is on those cubicle dividers. The frantic HR workers clawing at each other to escape.

Out of the corner of my eye I caught my reflection in the dresser mirror. Hissing in an empty room, like a lizard. Visions of mass murder. Maybe I had finally lost it. I hoped Katie would not walk in the bedroom door just then.

Fuck this. Enough with the mind games.

I straightened myself up and looked at the screen again. The search was done. I glanced through the list of jobs that supposedly had something to do with "analysis."

Search Results:

Displaying results 1-8 of 8

Software Analyst

Data Administrator

Credit Clerk

Patient Safety Coordinator

Quit your day job now!!!

Manager Trainees wanted

Project Manager

Paralegal

I sighed looking at the screen. There was the usual tech stuff. I knew that tech job market was flooded with people who had ten times the computer background I did.

Credit clerk. Yeah, deep analysis there.

I resisted the urge to click on it just to see how they managed to incorporate the word.

Why not a listing for Landscaper, too? "Analyze whether the amount of debris on the driveway calls for the use of leafblower or broom."

I looked at the job descriptions for a couple of the other white collar gigs. I could tell my resume would surely end up in the shredder bin.

The only job title that promising at all was "Manager Trainee." Same title I supposedly held with Grab-n-Go. I sighed. Clicked open the description.

The ad was concise. That was good. There was no resume-style fluff. It described the company rather than just the employee they sought.

"Advertising firm with Fortune 500 clients needs people to run our branches in Kingsboro. Background in

management, publishing, advertising or education a plus. We will train the right people. Learn the ropes at one of our current locations, analyze potential in untapped areas, and then run your own location. \$500-\$1000 per week to start. Click here to submit resume."

Advertising?

I looked at my reflection in the glass frame on the wall in front of me. My eyes had dark circles under them.

Advertising...

I was no fan of commercials, I thought, but there was potential for me in the field. My training in linguistics and logic, after all, had led me to think of sentences as little contraptions, tools to accomplish particular tasks. Whether or not I cared about the products, I could see myself crafting just the right sentences to get people interested in them.

There was something about this job. I pictured myself setting up my own office somewhere in Kingsboro. Having a house down there. Spending hours strategizing, organizing. Writing clever copy for our ads.

The idea of marketing, I thought, was different when you were working for yourself. Not standing behind a counter in a ridiculous green vest. Selling someone else's stuff. Having no say.

I smiled at my attempts to convince myself. After a few minutes of this, I found myself tinkering with my resume. I would need to change a few details. Get it ready to paste into the submission form.

I rewrote some of my job descriptions on the resume. I played up some of the marketing aspects of my non-marketing jobs. I played up my forays into online advertising, the links I put on my fiction site. Unpacking boxes of candy at the C- stores became "designed and implemented in-store product displays." I pushed the academic aspects further down the page.

After one last read-through, I hit the submit button.

"Your resume was uploaded. We will contact you shortly."

I stared at the words. More advertising. Didn't mean I would ever hear from them. This contraption was designed to keep me from calling them the next day, or maybe for the next week. It basically said: "Ok, you've done your part, now go do something else, please. Let us handle it from here."

I complied. I felt myself hoping something would come of this one. Didn't want to dwell on it anymore.

Sat back in my chair. One resume, emailed. A step toward flushing this turd of a job at Grab-n-Go.

Chapter 6

My next shift at the Pine Trail Grab-n-Go was on second shift, three to eleven. This was not only a switch from day to night, but also to merely clerking. No assistant manager duties occurred on the second shift. I would be manning the register and doing the nightly clean up.

Their reason for the switch was that I needed familiarity with what the evening was like in the stores, how it differed from the mornings. Supposedly this would make me a better manager. Right.

It was 2:55 p.m. I stood waiting for Ben, the training manager, to finish up on the PC. I needed to clock in, something we had to do on the 'puter.

I felt well-rested, but the extra sleep and midday clock-in time had been throwing me off all afternoon. I kept having to figure out what day it was.

Ben finished his hunting and pecking. He set a crumpled shift report on a pile that looked fit for an incinerator. Then he turned my way, blinked at me through his heavy lens.

I stared back at him for a moment. I felt my lips spasm into a question mark.

"There was something I was supposed to tell you," he said. "Lemme see... "

I guessed that the District Manager was somehow involved.

"Volker?"

"Yeah... "

What does the micro-managing fuck want now? Did I leave off another nine somewhere?

Ben continued to use my face as a mnemonic device for a few more seconds. It was starting to get uncomfortable so I looked out toward the parking lot. A couple of guys with mullet haircuts were chomping on heat-and-eat burritos. I recognized them from the worksite nearby. I tried not to think about what might happen if they used our toilets later.

"Well, I reckon it'll come to me," said Ben, looking back toward the computer screen.

"I'm sure it will. I, ah, need to go ahead and clock in, right?"

"Oh. Uhn-kay."

We traded places. Ben, of course, watched my fingers as I typed in my access code, logged on for my shift. I wondered whether there was really nothing better for him to do.

I guess I'll have that kind of free time when I get to be manager.

A man was at the register by then, waiting for me. He had his hand on the top of the bottle of orange juice he wanted to buy. I made my past Ben and to the front counter. Steeled myself for at least eight hours in this spot.

"Good afternoon, sir," I said, logging onto the register.

"Mm-hmm."

I chuckled lightly as I rang up the juice. He plopped his cash on the counter. I picked it up without telling him the total.

"One-twenty-three is your change," I said. "Thanks, and have good day."

He picked up the juice, turned to leave. Said nothing.

"And so it begins," I mumbled to myself, as the juice buyer ambled out the door.

I glanced around the store to see if anymore customers were there. I could tell that sleeping in for the morning had left me ten times more alert than I had been at this job so far. Without the fog of fatigue, the colors in the place seemed brighter. Not more cheerful, though. More lurid, with a film of rural dirt. Gaudy fixtures and displays. The place had the chicken-broth-and-confetti look of fake rubber vomit. I stood there for a few minutes, hypnotized by it all.

Ben returned from the back room and stepped behind the counter. He had his street clothes on. Maybe dirt road clothes would better describe them. His toothless slitmouth was open. He seemed to search for words for a moment.

"Billie ought to be coming in at four. She'll be on 'til twelve, when third shift comes in. You leave at 11, after you do the shift change."

I feel a rush of blood to my face. The shift change was as arbitrary as all the other administrative duties here. Trying to remember it was Ebbinghausian. Like trying to memorize a random string of 70 numbers.

Worse, you had to do it between customers. People came to C-stores for quick service. But with these shift changes they had to stand there for five-to-ten minutes while the cashiers rush around counting dimes and scribbling down lottery numbers. They got pissed off. They glared. They tried to get people fired.

"Uh, Ben," I said. "I have only done a shift change once. And that was with you going through it step by step."

"Billie'll answer any questions you have," he said. "She's been here a long time and... "

"Can you ring this up?" drawled a voice from the register.

A couple of customers had come in. I ignored the lack of respect. Headed over to do my duty as a live vending machine.

As I cashiered, I watched Ben out of the corner of my eye. He poked and prodded in his workspace. He straightened a few stock items. He did not seem to be waiting to talk to me. Instead, he seemed to be delaying leaving.

I thought about the times so far I had worked. There were days where I clocked out late. But that was because I was not through learning how to do the bank deposit. Or I was waiting for the second shift person to get there. If I could leave on time, I was out the door. Time to return to life.

What is the matter with this guy?

I knew I would never take any longer to leave a store than I had to. The choice between life and store was no choice to me. And if managers were supposed to end up like Ben, I knew I could never pass muster. Not that I

considered it an option anyway. This was all temporary.

Ben finally walked out of the store talking to a customer he knew. They stood in front of the big bay window for a while. Looked like they were trading jokes or laughing about people they knew.

I was busy with customers, so I did not catch exactly when he left. I figured it couldn't have been before 3:45. That was when I noticed that he had disappeared from the bay window. He had nearly put in an eleven hour day. A routine eleven hour day. Sure, lawyers and executives do that--and more--all the time. But this was a fucking convenience store.

Noticing that Ben was gone gave me an odd feeling. I realized it was the first time I had been alone at the Pine Trail. Suddenly I was the guy. The dude behind the counter at the corner store. I imagined all these people riding by in their pickups and seeing or picturing me behind the counter. It felt a little too much like being in a display window. I didn't like it.

I also knew I was under-trained. Too much worthless customer service theory on the videos. Too many little machines that could get a paper jam or go blank without notice. What would I do with a line of angry rednecks if the register or lottery machine broke?

"Where's your Crimson Light?"

The voice honked from over the racks of over-priced groceries. Couldn't see the guy. Must've been short, I guessed.

I was running lottery tickets for a leathery couple in their late fifties. They looked at me expectantly over the machine after the guy yelled from the back. Their yellowed eyes asked "Whatcha gonna do about that?"

A scowl crossed my face. I wondered why these customers always seemed to side with each other. Here this guy was basically trying to break line in front of them, and these shit-for-brains thought it was amusing to see how I handled it.

So much for them, then.

I let Beer Boy simmer a second longer, so that I would not appear to be his handmaid. Then I acknowledged him.

"Hang on a sec, I'll check the cooler for more."

"You gonna ring us up?" gurgled the wrinkled male half of this ill-conceived mating, as he flapped his lottery tickets.

"Yeah, yeah... "

My patience had given. So that was it. They had spotted the trap. If I didn't make Beer Boy mad, they would get mad, and vice versa. I guessed it beat a usual afternoon of alcohol-fueled dramatics back at the trailer park.

But they hadn't counted on Billie.

"Hell-ooo!" Billie chimed, as musically as her smoker's voice could.

I looked up from the register. She was gliding in front of the counter, smiling. She was carrying her green smock, draped over a plastic food container. I smiled and nodded. I knew Mr. Crimson Light would hit her up

for his fix.

I finished up extra slowly with the leather twins. While I punched in the numbers, I tried to figure out how I could avoid giving them the last word. At the last second I decided to go with the "I'm no longer thinking of you" approach:

"ThanksandhaveagoodafternoonHEY BILLIE!"

I saw them hesitate before turning to leave. Then I knew that it had worked.

"YEAH?" came Billie's voice from the cooler.

"DO WE HAVE ANY MORE CRIMSON LIGHT?"

"I'm putting it on the rack now."

And so we got both the leather people and Beer Boy out of our faces.

§§§

Billie was cool to work with--a Grab-n-Go rarity. She was in her late 40's and pure Southern rural working class. She was less judgmental and abrasive than most of her peers in the C-store biz.

"Hi, how are YEW?" she would say when she first saw you for the day. Her alert smiling eyes put people at ease. Most of the customers knew her. They would ask her for personal details, she would ask them for theirs. Billie was in her niche. She was suited for no job as well as that of cashier in a neighborhood C-store.

This was our first full shift alone with each other. She was on register A and I moved to register B. That way Billie could handle most of the scratch off lottery. It was located next to register A. Many of the regular customers were there for scratch games, and would want to talk to Billie anyway.

I was happy to oblige. It was tough for me to disguise my disdain for scratch games. They were obviously rigged to lose. I had thrown away a few bucks on it in Missouri. My girlfriend at the time thought it would be fun. About ten dollars later I knew I had been had. Just another way for losers to lose.

A guy walked past my register. I leaned back against the rear counter. Watched him walk up to Billie.

"Hi Billie."

"Hell-oooo Mr, Bailey! How are YEW?"

"Good, good. Old man hangin' in there?"

"He's still doin' alright. They got him on half time at Container. Back bugs him, but he's done got used to easing off when he needs to."

"Good, good. Gimme two of them 'Today's the Day' tickets. The two dollar ones. You keepin' yourself busy?"

"Heck yeah. You know me. Here most of the time."

"Ben workin' ya pretty hard?"

"Yep. Keeps me busy. How's that wife of yours doing?"

"Well you know she's got her bursitis. She don't get out much as she used to... "

I listened as Billie dueted with this scratch jockey. In most cases I would go into a conniption fit having to listen to conversations like the one Billie and Bailey were having. But I liked watching Billie work. Billie let people talk, even let them vent. If people needed to talk, they could talk with her.

In between sentences, the guy would take a few swipes with his "lucky" quarter. Little flakes of the latex or non-stick paint whatever it was that covered the losing numbers gathered on the lottery display case. Scratch jockeys rarely brushed it off the counter for us. Especially when they lost. Which was most of the time. Bailey was good for at least \$30 a day for the store.

After Bailey walked out, Billie turned to me.

"His wife is in a pretty bad way. He's a good old guy. He ought to be spending that lottery money on his wife, though. She ain't too long for this world, if you ask me."

I made one of those tight, no-lip expressions with my mouth and nodded. Billie looked around the empty store, and then glanced at the parking lot.

"Hey. You mind if I go out for a smoke?"

"No, of course not."

"You smoke?"

"No, but I don't mind. You go ahead."

I had smoked heavily in the past but no more. Kelsie, a girl I lived with in Missouri for a couple of years, was a chimney. She got me smoking by something like osmosis. Pretty soon we were both doing about a pack a day. But a year after I quit Kelsie, I quit smoking too. It had nothing to do with will power and everything to do with a hardcore case of flu in January.

Billie must have thought it would be rude to leave me standing in the store alone. She stayed inside to smoke. Lit her cig, then cracked the door and stuck her cigarette hand outside. She looked back at me.

"So... you like it here pretty good?"

"It's... okay," I said. "I've done this stuff, this kind of work before."

"Where?"

"Up in Missouri. Figured it would be about the same down here."

She nodded. She looked at me openly when I talked. But her eyes showed no evidence of scheming. Not like the people I knew from graduate school. When she asked a question, she was just asking a question.

"I've, ah... actually... This is just between us... "

She nodded.

"I've been looking for a better paying job for a couple of months," I continued. "I still am."

Her large eyes were fixed on me. I looked down at the register.

"BoxCo has some openings," she said. "You tried them?"

The pain in my stomach went away.

"No. I'm looking at, y'know, office stuff. Managerial, bookkeeping, publishing... "

She nodded. She leaned toward the crack, took a long pull on the cigarette.

"You tried the newspaper? Reportin'?"

"Yeah. No dice. No journalism degree."

My eyes glazed over for a moment. I thought about Tommy Rosana, the head editor at the local rag. I had practically begged him for work, even as a stringer for school sports. Never returned my calls or emails.

"Hell-oooo!"

Another customer was walking toward Billie outside. She stepped out front and let the door shut. They started gabbing. The store suddenly seemed dead silent. Nothing but the hum of the beer cooler and slush machine.

I watched them from behind the counter. It occurred to me that when I worked with Billie, I could stay in the background. Her personality would shield me from the public. It would dispel their default negative attitudes. Maybe they would not notice me at all. I could just ring things up, keep the money straight, brew the coffee. Be efficient.

Billie crushed out her cig. She and the customer erupted into the stillness of the store. I figured I'd let her keep the person all to herself. She'd had her break.

"Hey Billie, I'm gonna step into the back for a minute or two."

"O-kay!"

There was nothing in the back room to do. I just didn't feel like hearing another "How ya doin'" one-act. I felt like just disappearing for a few minutes. Neither hearing, seeing, nor being seen.

The back room was just fine for this. One of those bare cinderblock rooms that you'd see if you ever went to the stock-area restroom in older grocery stores. Mops. Oversized boxes. Crates. Usually 10 or more degrees cooler.

Why do they always stink?

I was still pissed from thinking about the newspaper editor. No writing work for me, apparently. Instead it was back to this kind of work. Fading into the wallpaper, like I did in the shit jobs I took during college. At the movie theater. At the coffee store.

Here I was again. Now 35. Hiding next to a yellow garbage can on wheels, in the back of a convenience store. Avoiding people. Like none of the years of schooling, the degrees, the teaching--none of it--had ever happened. I was like a roach hanging out behind the refrigerator, waiting for the kitchen light to go out.

Maybe this is my lot.

I noticed something white next to the mop bucket across the room. I leaned forward, trying to see what it was. A cigarette. A whole one. Someone had dropped it. Probably while changing the mop water.

There was only a little dirt on it. I picked it up. Looked it over. I smelled it, breathed in that pungent tobacco smell.

I thought about walking out front, taking it to my car. It had been a while since I'd had one.

Chapter 7

"We have reviewed your skills and experience and we would like to set up an interview."

My heart had started going when I saw the source of the email. I felt some of the pores on my cheeks engorge, like I had taken niacin.

"Please give us a call at your earliest convenience."

For a sec just a sec I wondered if using the word "convenience" was a dig. I had included Grab-n-Go on my resume.

Oh, shut up. It's just a form letter.

"Ask for Angela."

I wondered why they used her first name only. Seemed kind of unprofessional. More like I was calling to make a hair appointment.

The doubts kept trying to bubble up. But now I felt something else. I looked away from the computer screen. Outside the window I could see the cursive white shape of a wading bird, across the river.

This is it. This is IT! I found a way out!

"Hey Katie! C'mere!"

I could hear her smooth legs slide across the sofa fabric, then the thump-thump of her approaching heels.

"What's up?" she asked, through a mouthful of apple. She leaned against the doorjamb. Probably expecting me to show her some dumb altered photo from the web.

"I scored an interview!"

Her mouth flopped open. A chunk of apple fell out. She caught it without looking down.

"Who with?!"

"Oh, ummm... "

I had to glance back at the screen. I had scarcely thought about the company since I sent off the resume. Job search books recommended doing all this research on companies. You were supposed to be positive and expect an interview. I had dumped that habit after about my ninth application ended up on a milk carton.

"Paladin Ad Solutions," I said.

"Cool! What kinda job?"

"Title of the job is Manager Trainee. I'd end up running one of their offices."

"In Kingsboro?"

"Ye--I guess so. Yeah. Kingsboro has all those different sectors. Beaches. Pipedale. Northside... "

Katie nodded. Her long legs looked especially brown in her pale yellow shorts. She liked to lounge around reading in these short little fucking shorts. Made me want to bend her over the armrest of the sofa every time I looked at her.

"Ready to move to the 'big city?'" I asked her, smiling.

"Oh... " Her face slackened. "We have to leave Doctor's Landing?"

"Well, we don't... we can't stay in the house boat!"

I was somewhat amused. Not sure whether she was serious.

"Well I know that..." She looked at her apple.

"And... You don't... I mean, and we wouldn't be able to afford here. All this... waterfront property here. A-a place on the river--"

"The kids like it here. I like it here."

"But Katie, most of the affordable houses around here are shit. Look-look at all those moldy trailers, out behind Raft Ridge. Y'know? And most of the places downtown are like shacks."

"C'mon. There are some decent places. You just have to look."

"Listen, let's... I found a way out of Grab-n-Go, let's... You're right! We will look! Let's look!"

"Well, you have to get the job first... "

"You're right! Let's get the job! Whatever! Get me out of that store!"

Katie grinned at me, her teeth gleaming from their apple scrub down.

I glanced at the clock. 1:45 p.m. I was due in for the Friday evening shift at Pine Trail. I would need to set up the interview, eat, dress and leave by 2:30. No problem.

"Okay... Okay... Well, let me uh, let me give them a call. I'll see if I can go in for the interview on... what?...Monday."

I glanced at the screen again. I picked up the phone and dialed in the first ten of the eleven numbers. Then I remembered to clear my throat.

"Ah-hom! Ah-HOM!"

Katie gave me a weird look, left the room. I coughed once more. Needed to make sure my voice didn't sound scratchy, sleepy... weak. Then I poked in the last digit with a flourish.

The pit of my stomach started squirming.

No! Be confident. 'I deserve this.'

One ring. Two.

Yeah? You deserve whatever you GET. Look where you ended up.

Three rings.

Just shut THE FUCK up and do what you need to do. If not for you, for Katie. You got too lucky finding her. Don't repeat the Alone Years.

"Paladin Ad Solutions. How may I direct your call?"

"Hello, Jim Crayson here. May I speak to Angela?"

§§§

Having a job interview scheduled was almost enough to make the Pine Trail store bearable. Almost as good as having turned in my notice. Something to pull me through that eight hours.

I walked through the dirty glass door. There was a bit more purpose and confidence to my stride. The place was as overwrought with color and clutter as ever. Signs and logos trying to out-scream each other. But today it looked temporary. It was the waiting room after "next" had been called.

It was 2:55. I went ahead and clocked in. I was not going to leap behind the register with five minutes to go, but it was best to use the computer before Ben reappeared to peck at it.

I tapped my password onto the keyboard. My peripheral vision was pulled toward the commotion of the clerks already at the registers.

"So I'm like WHUT-EVER! You ain't got I.D., you ain't getting' no beer here!"

I glanced at the source of this bellowing tenor voice. He was about 25, tall with that overgrown body type, like a toddler magnified by five. A live action Fred Flintstone.

"I mean I don't give a flip whether you get your drunk on, buddy. It ain't my problem."

The young blonde he was talking at giggled. She was hottish, but also looked kinda corn-fed. The type who always made me wonder what hormones they were putting in milk.

"Then he wanted to get in my face about it? I mean, un-Uhh! It don't work like that. I don't play dat."

I started to imagine him not shutting up for eight hours. The shift started to feel a little bit longer.

"So he goes: 'Hey, y'know, I know where to find you, man.' An' I was like: 'Hey anytime, bro' any-TIME.'"

"No you didn't!"

"Yeah, girl! I ain't scared of these rednecks. Shiiiiit."

More giggling.

A local worker in his fifties had sauntered to the counter. His visible skin was stained with a gray-black sheen of decades working on engines. He stood there staring at the blonde's tits.

"Good afternoon, sir," said Flintstone. "Find everything you need today?"

"Um-hmm."

"You wanna buy a Super Digits ticket? Jackpot's up to sixty-two mill."

"Naw."

I rolled my eyes.

Guy insults the customers then tries to upsell them. Probably angling for store manager.

Ben returned from the training room/office during the beer sale. Finally done with the bank deposit for the day. Ben waited until the transaction ended to speak.

"Uhn-kay, Jim, this here's Jay," Ben said, pointing to Fred Flintstone. "He's gonna be here with you 'til eleven."

"How's it going," I said.

"Hey Jim," said Jay. He had leaned back against a chewing tobacco rack. He looked me over, arms folded on his chest.

"Uhn-kay. An' this here's P.J. This is her first day. She's new. She'll be here 'til six."

"B.J. was it?" Jay said, grinning at her.

"Shut-UP!" she said, smiling and slugging him on the shoulder.

"Aw'ight, ya'll," grumbled Ben. "Simmer down." He turned and gave me a look over the top of his glasses.

"While Jay's working with P.J., I'm gonna have you put out the supply order. Stores receive the supplies for the week on Fridays."

I looked at the grocery aisles toward which Ben gestured. The aisles had barely enough room for customers. Stacks and stacks of colorful plastic boxes lined the middle of the aisles. These were called "totes." There were also stacks of cardboard boxes in the aisles, leaning against the coolers, the walls...

"Try to get as much of it out as you can. Jay's been doing some of it."

Yeah, really looks like it.

"Ben, can I talk to you outside before you go?" asked Jay.

"Oh, uh, uhn-kay."

They headed toward the door. I looked at P.J. She gave me a smile. It was a pleasant, honest smile. She seemed okay.

"Well, I guess I'd better start on those groceries," I said. "At least while Ben is watching."

P.J. giggled.

I chose a green tote, felt its heft. Probably weighed over thirty pounds. There were about twenty of the things

waiting for me. Then there were the cardboard boxes. This would take a while.

As I opened the tote and picked out the merch, I looked toward the big glass front windows. Jay was facing Ben, towering over him. Jay was animated, talking with his hands. I could not tell what he was saying. His facial expressions were not very revealing. He was all voice. The lips simply parted and he blew.

Shelving groceries was the usual familiar bullshit. Same as working at stores in Missouri. You always have to remove the older merch from the shelf first. The new stuff is supposed to go behind it. Rotating stock, they call it.

People who do the ordering always overestimate how much will sell. They see two cans of chili on the shelf, with room for three more. They order five, thinking the other two will sell before the order arrives. Almost never happens. So you have to "cram and jam" the new stuff. That's what I called it. Fitting all this crap on the shelves when there is no room for it.

The worst thing was the toilet paper and paper towels. The anal-retentives who got management jobs were always over-ordering T.P. And there was never extra room for it. You could cram and jam maybe one extra package. Then you had to figure out in the crowded store where the hell these extra packages were gonna go.

Soon the totes had me running all over the store, trying to figure out where things belonged. It occurred to me that if Ben had planned this, maybe he was a good manager after all. I would be forced to gain a good knowledge of where stuff was.

After a while, one of the totes had me hanging up cellophane tape dispensers near the register. I noticed that my body was trying to appear straight and trim. My peripheral vision had locked in on P.J. I chuckled at myself.

Jay, the fat fuck, was on the phone. Once Ben had left, he had not yet resumed shelving the grocery order. I had been looking at him expectantly while I made like Mercury whisking items all over the store. So far he'd been oblivious, yakking to P.J., yakking to customers. Now he yakked into the phone.

P.J. finished up with a customer, looked my way. I looked up and gave her a grin. I had a handful of daytime camera film. I was wearing a borrowed green Grab-n-Go smock I found in the back room. It was an XXL.

"You ever worked at one of these stores before?" I asked her.

Real smooth. The new co-worker version of "Come here often?"

"Yeah. I worked at one in Kingsboro for a while. A Zip Foods."

"Are they a, you know, a pretty good company?"

"They're okay. Most of their stores are newer. Not like this old place."

I nodded. Then I noticed I was putting 200 ISO film on the 400 ISO rack. I started fumbling to correct the mistake.

"My dad wanted me to quit at the Kingsboro store, and move back up here near home," P.J. continued. "The Zip Foods up here was not hiring, though."

"Why'd he want you to quit?"

"Said it was too dangerous. My dad's a deputy sheriff, so he got kind of antsy about something that happened down there."

I nodded. I paused with the film for a moment, looked at her. Waited for her to continue.

Ray hung up the phone. He sauntered toward P.J. with that dumb, fat, smug look on his face. Then the serious looks on our faces dawned on him. That kept his mouth shut, for once.

"One afternoon this skinhead guy was in the store buying beer," P.J. began. "A black guy came in the door. Young guy. You know, dreads, baggy pants... They looked at each other. I was thinking, like 'Oh shit.'"

"Naw, both them types are all show," Jay piped in.

Well, that was a short respite.

"Well, not this time, I guess" P.J. said. "The skinhead said something to him, not sure what. He turned back to me, y'know, to pay for his beer."

"Prolly called him a nigger," said Jay.

"Yeah. So, the black dude finishes with me, starts walking for the door. Skinhead comes up to the counter. Big grin, you know, like he'd--"

"Like he'd scared the nigger off," Jay said.

"Yeah. But while the skinhead is paying, all the sudden I see the n--the black guy coming at him from behind. He's holding one of them... um... racks where they keep the hats for sale?"

"A hat rack?" asked Fred Flintstone, smirking.

How do I hate thee?

"Yeah, one of them metal hat racks. He whacks the skinhead on the back of the head with it. Cuts the guy's head open."

"Holy shit!" said Jay. He had a huge, open-mouthed grin.

"Exactly, that's what I was thinkin.' Didn't knock him out, though. So the two of them are going at in the store. I'm dialing 911. Nobody else was in the store, so I'm just alone with these guys beating the shit out of each other."

Jay started guffawing. He accompanied it with that slow, deliberate, fucking fake clap people do when they are watching sports on TV.

"It seemed like it took forever for the cops to get there. The place was just... wrecked. They knocked over all the, you know, all the racks and shit. They knocked off, like, half the groceries on the shelves. And later on I had to lock down the place and mop up the blood."

"Ho-o-ly shi-i-it," Jay keened in a high, put-on chuckle. "I wish I coulda seen THAT!"

I resumed cramming film onto the metal hangers. P.J. was still looking at me. I hoped I had not turned white.

Fights had always made me sick. People running to see a fight, smiling, eyes wild with excitement as they surrounded the fighters. It seemed so alien. No, so animal. I would start to panic. Hoping I could get away, not have to see any of it. Not have to smell the blood or see the ruined faces.

I tried not to think about being stuck in a store like that, with a fight going on. It had been bad enough seeing those shitkickers bring that gas thief back to the store on my first day.

I didn't feel like talking to P.J. anymore. My body felt limp and slightly achy.

I finished stocking the pegboard hangers up front. I headed back to the stack of totes. Jay was yakking again. I looked for some way to shelve out of earshot of him. I noticed a stack of juices and colored liquid treats for kids. They needed refrigerating.

The cooler!

You had to go into the cooler to stock it. The drinks were stocked from behind, not from the front. The sound of the cooling fans blocked out all the sound from the store. Fairly dark in there, too. Just lit by a single bare bulb. The racks blocked much of the light from outside, so it was hard for anyone to see inside. Nice way to escape.

I went in there and worked slowly. The dry cold dug into my clothes and skin. Felt good. Felt like it took away the nausea. Gave me a brisk energy. Like being back up North.

This was good stuff. On the clock and in relative solitude. Nothing but the clink of bottles of juice and beer as I shelved them. I smiled and thought about the job interview I had lined up. Couple of days away. It was almost enough to make me feel like I wasn't working at all.

Chapter 8

My neck looks too fucking fat.

My face looked back at me from the mirror as I adjusted my tie. I was looking puffier from too many tall boys of malt liquor. There was something about selling, stocking and staring at beer all day that had been making me apt to buy it.

I look like a monkey.

It was the morning of the interview. I had to turn myself into a "Manager Trainee" by 8:30. If I was out the door by then, I'd easily make the 9:30 appointment in Kingsboro.

This meant trying to make wearing a tie look good. I craned my neck, trying to keep the skin from sitting like a blob on the collar. Around my eyes the skin was a greyer brown than usual. The swing shift schedules were doing a number on my ability to sleep properly. Even with naps I was managing only about six hours a day.

This is hopeless. I just don't look like a business guy.

I noticed that my gaze was open-lidded, intense. I knew this was wrong. The "winners" of the world do not have this demeanor. I remembered flipping through my college yearbook, looking at the pictures of frat guys. They all seemed to do this thing with their eyes. This asshole look. I knew it was the right look for business. Every prick in a suit I'd ever seen had that look.

I squared up my shoulders. I tried for the expression in the mirror. I narrowed my eyelids slowly, feeling for the right width. This was one of the most noticeable things about the look, the sort of squinty thing.

It looked wrong on me. I was still just an academic in a monkey suit. Only now I was squinting at myself. I scoffed at myself and shook my head.

"You're an idiot," I said, under my breath.

But just then I saw the right look on my face. The asshole look. That was the thought I needed to have. You're an idiot.

I tried it again. I smiled with a slight sneer, nodded at myself in the mirror.

"You fucking idiot. You turd-sucking frat dick."

That was it, I decided. I just had to remember to think of everybody else as a pathetic loser all day. If I could somehow keep that up, maybe I wouldn't remind them of some professor they hated. Instead, I'd be another "righteous" pledge at the kegger.

I tried the look again. Swaggered in place.

"Oh, that's where you went to college? Pfft! You gotta be--"

"What are you doing?"

My guts went down to my shoes. I saw Katie's expression in the bathroom mirror. I was not sure how long she had been watching me from the dim light of the bedroom. I glanced back at the reflection of my reddening face.

"Oh, just messing around," I said.

I did a nervous laugh at first. Then I started chuckling for real at the absurdity of it.

She still looked confused. I did not have time to explain. I splashed on a bit of aftershave, running my wet fingers through my hair.

In the kitchen I downed a piece of wheat toast with peanut butter on it. I leaned over the sink as I crunched into it. One dollop of peanut butter on my tie would cost me a whole wardrobe change. Bad enough I already had to mix and match jackets and pants, since I had no suit per se.

"Fuck... Katie! Do you know where my travel mug is?"

"Check the dishwasher."

There it was. Among the dirty dishes. I grabbed it and switched on the hot water. It was the only mug with a lid. I could not risk driving and drinking from an open coffee cup on the way to a job interview. Katie helped get the door open to leave. My hands were full of stuff—coffee, cover letter, resume, leather-bound folder, cell phone. My mind raced to remember whether I was forgetting anything.

I looked at Katie. I wished I could crawl back into bed with her.

"Well, this could be it," I said, smiling. "A real job. No more convenience store."

"Good luck!"

I headed for the car.

§§§

When I finally pulled in at the Paladin offices I was sweating. I had underestimated the morning traffic in Kingsboro. Big city. We had come down a few times for shopping, movies, and such, but never during the morning rush. I was fifteen minutes late for my interview time.

I had called "Angela" again en route via cell phone. I lied that I was stuck in accident traffic. I doubted they would check my story. I was given a new time, but I hated the tincture of disapproval I heard in her secretarial voice.

The parking lot was packed. Paladin was not the only company in the building. There were various doctors, investigators, CPAs... The usual denizens of the older, less pricey office strips.

It was still morning, but the Florida sun was already blasting down. I found a place with a sliver of shade from a bush and pulled in.

Inside the office, the waiting area was packed. I introduced myself to the woman at the desk. She handed me a clipboard, and asked me to fill it out.

"Just like at the doctor's office, huh?" I said, surveying the room full of applicants.

She gave me a polite scoff, went back to answering phones.

While I looked for a seat, I noted that the receptionist's voice was the same as the one I had heard both times

on the phone. The name plate on the desk read "Brie." In the background, my brain started working on what all this "Angela" business was.

One look at the clipboard and my shoulders collapsed in resigned annoyance. It was an application. Why the fuck should I fill out an application when they already had my resume? Plus, I had another copy of the resume with me.

So this was another company that worshipped at the file-cabinet altar. Paper work. Busy work. Anything with tiny grids to fill in, lines to sign. The veneer of the official, of legitimacy.

I copied verbatim from my resume with the cheap ballpoint. Boring work. Between filling in boxes, I took quick glances at the other applicants. At 35, I had to be among the oldest there. Most of them looked excruciatingly young.

Did the ad say no degree required?

Hoping I would not have missed that, I glanced at my printout of the classified. It didn't mention education. Not all ads do, so it had not put me off. But it explained all the baby fat I could see in the chairs around me.

After a long few minutes a door creaked open. All eyes in the waiting area turned.

"Clara Mixon?"

One of my competitors stood. She was a creamy-skinned redhead in a beige suit. She walked up to the man who'd opened the door. Flashed a world-weary smile. Beautiful.

Besides Angela/Brie, the man who called Clara was the only Paladin rep I had so far seen. He was close to my expectations for the experience. He was about my age and looked something like a TV sportscaster with expensive glasses. I straightened myself in my seat. Tried to put on my Frat Dick Face.

Hey you! Mister... glasses-over-payer. You suck, idiot face.

I froze. As he shook Clara's hand, the sportscaster guy glanced over her shoulder at me. For a second I wondered if I had been thinking aloud. But he and Clara turned and disappeared into the internal offices of Paladin.

That's right, you four-eyed puss. You'd better run.

I looked back down at my clipboard. I tried to keep the smirk. It was hard to read the form while squinting.

§§§

Five years later Mr. Sportscaster came out again and called my name.

"Jim Crayson?"

I lurched out of the seat and headed toward him. Frat Dick Face was in place, but I could feel that my left leg had gone to sleep. I was walking toward him like a cat with a wet paw. He tried not to look at my leg.

"Nice to meet you," he said, attempting to crush my hand in his. "I'm Mike Honchak."

"Heya Mike."

We headed back to Mike's office. He circled his desk and scooped up a sheaf of papers. The conversation began with the inevitable "so."

"Sooo... " said Mike, continuing to peer in silence at the hard copy of my resume for another good thirty seconds.

"You've done some teaching."

"Yes... " I started. I gave him the run-down of my academic career.

"That's good. We are looking for people who can train and lead a marketing group. Who can motivate people."

I thought back to the waiting area. The competition. Some of the others might have been teachers.

Seeming to read my mind, Mike continued.

"Some of the people out there are interviewing for other jobs, not part of our marketing group. You'd be one of the ones we'd look at for eventually running an office like this one."

"Okay... " I said.

Sensing my uncertainty, Mike set down the resume.

"I'm sorry. I haven't really explained the set-up here. Did anyone else describe what we do here yet?"

"No."

"Okay. We have two main lines of ad services that we offer here: Print and online. I see here you have some experience online, doing websites, stuff like that."

I nodded.

"So we'd prolly put you in the Web Division. Okay. So we send out our reps to meet with business owners in the area. We score some of the biggest partnerships around."

"Fortune 500, the ad said."

"Right, that's right. Um... but most businesses are smaller than that, of course. The one's that really need our services. Businesses that don't have an online presence these days are gonna get left in the dust, right?"

"S-sure. Most likely."

"Right. So we meet with them, we offer them an online package. We offer to get them online, set up a website just for their business. It's basically... we set up an online billboard for them."

"I see."

One of those junky ad pages that litter the internet.

"They pay us for setup, a monthly fee for the online space... nothing to it. Money rolls in. Everybody's happy. Got me?"

"Yeah, sure," I said.

I tried to hold my smirk. It felt blank, like a mask.

"Now, at first we start everyone out there meeting clients, marketing the websites to businesses. You know... we need managers to be familiar with the territory, with the product... Basically to improve your understanding of the marketing team you will lead."

"Right, sure."

"So, we do want our guys to be strong marketers. You pull in good numbers out there yourself, the better you're gonna be at getting your own people to rope in the clients. Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"So we start you off on commission. You make a percentage off of whatever sales you make."

"On top of a salary?"

"No. We do salary only once you run a marketing team. Before that it's commission only. But don't worry: our worst guys are pulling in \$500 a week. Most make about three times that per week."

"Uh-huh."

"Any other questions about how that works?"

Am I in? This is sounding like I'm in. Don't screw it up with some dumbass question.

"I, uh, I don't think so."

"So, does this sound like something you'd want to do?"

"Definitely."

"Cool. Yeah, I think you will fit in well here." Mike smirked at me. I smirked back.

"Soooo. What we'd do today..." Mike shuffled through some sticky notes, apparently looking for a name. "What we'd do today is we'd let you go out on marketing calls with a team leader. He'll show you how the process works, give you a look at the basic talking points."

"The basic pitch."

"The basic pitch, yeah. You go out with him, meet with potential clients. He shows you the ropes. Maybe you help him drop a couple clients... you get me?"

"Yeah, sure. Great."

"He reports back to us. We talk..." Mike made a rolling motion with his forearms. "If everything is copasetic... y'know... we go from there. Right?"

"Right."

"Alright," Mike said.

He picked up the phone. Began dialing an extension.

"Hey Ben-ny! Mike, here... s'up man?"

I looked at the walls of the office. No pictures. It didn't look very lived-in.

"Yeah? Cool... So, hey, you headed out today?"

Mike looked at me, tipped his eyebrows.

"Yeah? Good, good. Hey, I got a good candidate in here for your team... Yeah... You wanna show him the ropes today?"

Mike was staring at me the whole time he was on the phone. I leaned over to brush some dust off my pants. Tried not to show uncertainty on my face.

Mike finished up with Ben-ny, hung up the phone.

"Let me go over and check the conference room, see if we can get in there. Introduce you guys. Be right back."

So, is this IT? No more C-store?

I couldn't sit still. I started jiggling my legs. I imagined handing my Grab-n-Go vest back to Volker, the District Manager.

Mike popped his back in the door.

"Okay, Jeff. Let's go see the man himself."

"Jim."

"Right. Sorry. Long day of interviewing. And it's only 10 o'clock!"

I followed Mike into the conference room. It smelled musty, like an old hotel. I looked at the whiteboards hanging on the walls. They were covered with scrawled numbers and crude maps. Beside them were posters with expressions like "Achieve!" and "Bushido!"

"Ben-ny," said Mike extending his hand. "The man, the myth, the legend."

Benny was young, swarthy. Hair slicked back, gold chain. Looked like he might have seen the inside of a metallic linen suit or two. His face sported a smirk as he shook Mike's hand. He turned and looked me over.

"Benny, this is Jim."

"Good to meet you," I said, smirking.

I glanced over Benny's shoulder at another smirking guy standing behind him. Mike did not acknowledge the man. He seemed to be observing us.

"Jim's ready to go out and see how you work. Learn from the master."

"Sounds good, sounds good."

Benny kept looking me over. Seemed skeptical.

"You gonna show him your stuff?"

"Well, I'm not givin' away all my secrets."

They laughed. I tried to look amused.

"Alright Jim, let's do this, man," Benny said.

Benny picked up his briefcase. I glanced once more at the silent observer. He really had the asshole expression down. Clearly calling me a loser with that face.

Mike stayed behind with the observer. I followed Benny out to the parking lot.

Well, I guess this IS it, then.

Chapter 9

Benny and I walked out of the Paladin Ad Solutions office and stood on the sidewalk. It was hot. Benny took off his suit jacket, slung it over his shoulder.

Mike, my interviewer, had given Benny my resume. Benny propped his foot on one of those outside ashtrays with aquarium gravel in it. He perched my resume on his knee and flipped through it.

"You taught college classes?"

"Yes."

"Why did you get out of that area?"

Uhhh... Why are we having another interview? Why am I repeating myself?

"I worked in business part time, liked it better. Also, you know, I like the money a heck of a lot more."

Benny seemed more skeptical than Mike had been. He furrowed his brow and went back to reading.

I tried to determine Benny's age. He looked young. Not young like some of the kids in the waiting room. But mid-twenties young. Younger than me. I decided this whole re-interview overkill was probably an attempt to establish dominance. Had to put the old guy in his place.

"I see you have some web design experience. Why don't you tell me a little bit about that?"

Why don't you read the fucking resume?

I explained my website work for school courses and business. Benny seemed to soften a bit. He nodded and a slight smile appeared.

"What type of web publishing software do you use?"

I gave him the name.

"I do a little web design myself. I do straight coding in HTML, though. I just type it into a text file."

I had to suck up my cynicism and make the appropriate indications of someone who is impressed. It seemed like every other person I had met who had done web design tried to one-up me with the HTML thing. I had better things to do than dick measuring with code nerds.

I seemed to have passed whatever test Benny had in mind that he was giving me. He asked me to come along to the car with him.

"What is your degree in?"

"Logic."

"Logic circuits, electrical engineering?"

"No. Logic like reasoning. Proofs, arguments... "

Benny got a quizzical look on his face. Walked in silence for a sec.

"What kind of job can you get with that?"

I gave him the "Don't I know it" look. It helped me avoid rolling my eyes at the question I had been hearing since I was eighteen.

"Pretty much teaching, like I did. You study all this high-flying stuff in graduate school, but you end up teaching the same students you would have if you were a shop teacher."

Benny snorted.

"But, you know, logic improves your strategic thinking. That's useful for business."

"I went for an MBA."

"Ah-ha. Where?"

"At the university here. Finished up a couple of years ago. Signed on with Paladin right away. Here's me."

Benny stopped behind a Ford Escort. It was at least 10 years old. A piece of junk. Dents, rust, broken trim, Bond-O... the whole nine.

I stopped still, looked at Benny. I thought he might be trying to pull one on me. But he was standing there clinking through his key ring.

You gotta be fucking kidding me.

"Hang on," he said, climbing in. "I'll have to open your door from the inside. The handle on the passenger side door is broken."

Benny looked out at me through the crack as he opened my door. He was hard to read, but the Frat Dick Face was gone. He peered at me round-eyed, mouth set, eyebrows frowning. I was too incredulous to remember to keep wearing my smirk as I got in.

I kicked a couple of fast food cups out of my way in the floorboards. The seatbelt worked, at least. I noticed that I was barely moving, looking shocked. I tried to get settled into the seat, look natural. Give myself time to think.

As we pulled into traffic, Benny was making small talk. I tried to process it, but my mind was racing.

Tell him to pull over. End this now. This is bullshit.

"All right," Benny said. "We're movin' now."

Quitting now would be crazy. So the guy has a shitty car. He's a couple of years out of school.

"We're gonna hit Sandbar Boulevard today," said Benny. "Some good leads there."

I knew the area. It ran perpendicular to the Timacaw river. Lots of newer developments, strip malls.

"Nice area," I said. "Where are the meetings set up?"

Benny looked at me for a moment. Then he looked back at the road. He drove for a moment without response.

"So, did Mike... You understand the training process for managers with Paladin, right?"

"What do you... ? I think so."

"It's like... You gotta pay your dues, selling. Everybody starts out doing basic production. Getting out there and marketing. Pulling in the numbers."

I felt my face lose its feeling.

"Yeah... ?"

"You really have to have... you know, vision. You have to be able to see past the direct marketing."

I nodded.

Pull him over now. You can get a cab back to your car.

"A lot of guys come out here the first day, we get out there, pound the pavement... " Benny said. "All they can see is the, uh... the meetings. With business owners. They say, like, 'This is just door-to-door sales. I'm out.'"

YOU get out. Now!

"But, see, Paladin is not looking for guys to just, just do cold marketing. They are looking for people who want to run their own business. The managers, see, like Mike, they work independently. Have their own marketing group. That's not door-to-door."

"Uh-huh."

My voice sounded like someone was pinching my larynx.

"You gotta keep your eye on the prize. You gotta be driven. To, to get out there and earn your own shop."

We drove in silence for several moments. Benny had not turned on the radio. I wondered if it was broken.

"So... talk to me." Benny said, with a touch of an edge.

"Hmm?"

"What do you think... are you getting into this?"

I was supposed to be selling myself more. This was an interview. But I could feel my willingness to play nice dissolving in the acrid heat of the Escort.

"Here's something I... I don't get... " I began.

"Okay... ?"

"Paladin makes money off of the websites and print ads. The stuff you sell door-to-d- -The services your clients... purchase. That's where a lot of the, most of the revenue comes in, right?"

"Yes."

"So wouldn't it... wouldn't it make more sense to have people out there selling... who, who are good at selling? People who want to do that, and are, you know, dedicated to that?"

"Well... "

"I mean, you are essentially saying that the sales are done by people who really want to be managers. Right? People who want to run a marketing group... a sales force, I guess, really. And, and not guys who want be in that sales group. Like you, right?"

Benny drove for a few more moments, silent. How far away were these businesses? My turn to break the silence.

"Does that make any sense? You see my question?"

"No, no, I see what you are saying," Benny said. The edge in his voice was gone now. He held the steering wheel more loosely.

Benny maneuvered the car into a strip mall. He remained quiet as he turned.

"I mean, I'm just not... I just not sure that is a sound business plan," I said.

"Uh-huh... "

We pulled in among the rows of cars parked at the shopping center. Benny thought. I looked at the shopping center, visually searching for a suite of offices, a headquarters.

Then it hit me. We were going to be selling door-to-door at retail stores. Straight, cold, door-to-door soliciting. Fucking flower shops, nail salons.

Fortune 500 clients? MEETINGS with business owners? What a load of horse shit!

I sat there scowling out the window. Benny cleared his throat. He had figured out his reply to my doubts about Paladin.

"I see what you mean. But see, we get out here and sell because we are motivated. "

"Yeah, motivated to get out of it. To not be a salesman. I mean... somebody who wants to sell is motivated to sell. They exist. I've met 'em."

"Yeah... "

"And if somebody was good at selling, why would you, why pull 'em out and put 'em behind a desk?"

"Well, but... yeah--"

"I mean, I'm not trying to... y'know. I don't wanna be... "

Why NOT? You SHOULD tell him to fuck himself.

"No, no, I understand--"

"You know, I'm just trying to make sense of this."

"Sure, I follow."

Benny paused. He glanced toward a storefront. We were parked nearest a shop called "Heavenly Baskets."

"Well look, let's go in and talk to these people," he said. "We can talk more strategy later."

I looked at him. My mouth opened. It was fucking hot outside. It dawned on me that maybe if I played along, maybe he wouldn't mind taking me back to my car so soon.

"I've done an initial pitch to them. So this is a follow-up. They have had, like, a couple of days to look at these brochures."

Might as well see what he does. We are miles from the car now.

Benny handed me the full color flyers. The graphics looked kind of cheap. Kind of looked like a menu from some run-of-the-mill strip mall restaurant. Maybe they were trying to appeal to their audience.

"So, we're gonna try to close the sale today. C'mon."

Inside the store, we were surrounded by frilly gift baskets with a religious theme. The place looked like a wedding shop. Flowers, lace, lots of white and pink. Enough crosses and angels to kill a guy who merely had long-ish canine teeth.

Benny and I milled around looking out of place in our suits. The manager had spotted us. He took his time ringing up a sale. Then Benny pounced.

"Good afternoon. We are with Paladin Ad Solutions. How are you?"

"Fine, thanks."

The guy recognized Benny. Nice guy who wanted to be polite. His wheels spun as he formulated a way to get rid of us. I felt like apologizing and running out of the store.

"How's business this afternoon?" Benny asked.

"Mmm... Okay. Listen, I, uh--"

"Have you given some more thought to how Paladin can help you increase your sales? Did you get a chance to read the literature I left you?"

"Yes, I did."

"So, which business website package can we sign you up for today? The Executive, right?"

"Actually, I, uh... I already... I have a guy working on a website for us."

Okay, then. End of story. We'll just be leaving now.

"Oh? How many hits does it get per day?"

"Well, we, uh... we actually have not gone live with it yet."

"We can have a website up for you by tonight. Plus a minimum guaranteed traffic."

The owner shook his head. Walked back toward the register.

"Sorry, guys. No can do. I have already paid to have the site developed."

He was lying, but I didn't care. His basic message was "Please leave." I was more than happy to accept that request. Benny wasn't.

"What about hosting? How much are you going to be paying to have the site placed on the intern--?"

"I'm-quite-happy-with-that-now-if-you'd-please... gentlemen, really, I have quite a bit of work to do."

I angled for the door.

C'MON Benny! Shut the fuck UP!

"Here, keep my card," Benny said. "You really should change your service to Paladin. Give us a call when you get fed up with this other guy."

We walked toward the car. My face was burning. I wanted to shrink into my shoes. I hoped I never saw the shop owner again. I felt like taking a shower.

No WAY I'm doing this.

During graduate school I had spent about four years living alone. No women, little human contact besides family and my closest friends. It was tough sometimes, but it was a cleansing experience. It left me with an acute sense of how I ticked, what I wanted, what I could do. What I would do.

Cold-call, door-to-door, direct sales was not it. I could tell I would die during every pitch. Walking to the door would be like walking to the gallows, every day, every hour. A month of this and I would need a head transplant.

Benny and I got back in the car. I loosened my tie. I was through with the charade. Time to just start figuring out the best way to get back to my car.

Benny kept glancing at me as we drove to the next lead. Looking at my overly relaxed position in the seat.

"See, it's not that hard. I mean, we didn't make the sale... But people are pretty good about the whole thing."

I wondered how any of these people could make any money. Who would want to buy a website package from some guy off the street?

We turned off of the strip mall strip and drove under a canopy of live oaks. I was looking for cabs. Trying to remember whether a bus route ran back toward the Paladin office. We were in a more residential section. The neighborhood was lowermiddle class. Looked like it was put up in the late '60's.

"There are some businesses tucked back here," Benny said, maneuvering through the narrow streets and sprinkler sprays.

Benny pulled up to a tall structure sided with corrugated steel. Letters hung on the siding that read "CURTIS Smal Eng ne Repa r"

I looked at Benny in disbelief. I chuckled slightly and shook my head. He furrowed his brow.

"I found a guy in this neighborhood just last week. He was doing lawns. Took me ten minutes to drop him. Hell, that's 30 extra bucks a week."

Fortune five-fucking-hundred. Right.

I couldn't resist seeing how this one went. I followed Benny to the building. Place was set up like a garage. Three men filthy from combustion smoke and grease huddled around a riding lawnmower. I stood by the opening of the garage watching Benny try to pitch to them.

"Ah whut?"

"A website. On the internet."

The guy just stared at Benny. One of the others started to snicker.

"An online ad for your business. It lets people know about your serv--"

"Naw."

"Lotta potential clients out there with computers, y'know--"

"Naw, man... naw, naw."

The three men turned back to the lawnmower, their backs toward us. Benny paused for a second. Then he wisely chose to keep his trap shut and head back to the car.

We got in, started driving. Benny was silent again. Expressionless. He pulled back onto Sandbar, the main drag, and headed for the next bank of shopping centers.

"Listen, uh... Benny, I think I'm done."

"Hmm?"

"This is not for me. We might as well just stop."

"But... You mean take you back now?"

I nodded.

"But, I need to finish this area. It would take a long time to drive back to Paladin and then back out here."

I frowned.

"How long... Maybe I... How long were you planning to be out?" I asked.

"Well... we were, I was supposed to be out here all day."

I knew there was no way I was spending the day driving around with this guy for nothing. That would be beyond stupid. I had to think of something else.

"Shit... Okay, uh... Okay. You know the public library on Fourth? A few blocks from here?" I asked, pointing.

"Yeah?"

"Just drop me off there. I'll make my way back to my car."

I knew there would be phones at the library. I could check bus routes on the computers. Cab prices. I could figure something out.

We drove in silence for a few minutes. I wondered if Benny was thinking about what he would say to Mike. Mike, or whoever his boss was. They could use this against him. If they were out to fuck him over, this would be ammo.

Then I glanced at Benny's face. He was wearing the smirk, the Frat Dick Face. Probably laughing at the fat, old, piece-of-shit academic loser he got stuck with today. Fine with him. He didn't need any dead weight along for the ride.

Benny pulled up to the library. I got out of the car. It was around noon. The air outside hit me like blast. Before shutting the door, I leaned down, looked in at Benny.

"Look, man... Do you really think they plan to set up with your own branch?" I asked.

"Why wouldn't they?"

"Well, if you are out here, you know, you are pulling in sales for them..."

"Naaah... "

"No, seriously. Aren't they just stringing you along? Two years was it? And when they deny you one of their cushy management jobs, you get fed up... what happens? Another manager wannabe takes your place."

"No, no, man. I-I can make this work. The market here is wide open. Plenty of management jobs to go around."

"Al-ri-ight... See ya."

I didn't watch him drive off. Too hot. I took off my jacket and headed into the library. Time to cool off, figure out how the hell I was gonna get back to my car.

Chapter 10

It was mid-afternoon and I was behind the counter at the Pine Store. Just clocked in. It was weeks after the promise of a fast track to Grab-n-Go management, but I was still paying dues. Helping fill shifts while the "brass" at Pine Trail took a few days off.

I was slightly hung over from too much cheap beer and too much sleep. Knowing today was a second shift day I had gorged on sleep. Didn't get up until 11:30 a.m.

Even if I hadn't gotten drunk or overslept, it would not have made much difference in my demeanor. After the Paladin debacle, I hated this place even more. This job. This... everything.

No decent job leads had emerged since then. I was treading water. No idea what my next move would be.

I was at the register, ringing up an orange slush and a candy bar for some pinwormspreading scion of Pine Trail. Ben was on vacation. Don Volker, the DM, was in Ben's office/training room, doing... whatever. DM crap. Shelly the Assistant Manager was crouched near me, fiddling with the contents of the safe.

All cash and coin at Grab-n-Go stores was supposed to be either in the register or in the timer-locked safe. Most cash was supposed to be in the safe. During their shifts, cashiers were supposed to do "safe drops." Large bills, from twenties on up, were to be logged and deposited in the safe through a one-way lever contraption. The lever system kept the fine Grab-n-Go staffers from fishing out the cash with something like a coat hanger.

Shelly was digging in the safe, collecting the drop envelopes from first shift. I gingerly dropped change into the young customer's filthy hand. I heard Shelly sigh dramatically.

"P.J. is still dropping loose bills in the safe," she bitched. "You're supposed to do your drops in the drop envelopes. I don't have time to be feeling around in here for loose bills."

I was idly paralyzed, fishing for a response. Wondering if I gave enough of a shit about her or the comment to say anything. I decided to change the subject.

"Has Volker mentioned anything about when I'll be working at the Doc's Landing store?"

"How would I know?" Shelly grumbled. "Why don't you just ask him?"

You'd know because you have ears?

I gritted my teeth. Shelly was one of those people who just spewed battery acid out of her soul. Nearly every statement was a call-out. Every time her mouth opened you'd find out whether you were the type to just take it, or one who'd would bark back. Just a fucking bitch.

"Hey Buddy."

I looked up. A local working guy was walking past the counter. Headed for the door. He struck me as a meth-head, in the early stages. Skin pulled tight along the cheekbones, dark circles under the eyes, intense.

I gave him a "Yeah?" nod.

"You might want to check that men's room. I kinda messed it up."

He was fast. Meth-y fast. He was out the door before I could process the situation. Shelly's sat up so that her head looked puppet-like from across the counter.

"What'd he say?" she asked.

"Oh, fu--Cover the register a minute. I better check this out."

"I'm... I can't... I'm doing the first shift count!"

"Just let me take a look," I yelled over my shoulder.

I opened the men's room door. A horrifically familiar, slightly vinegary, stifling stench hit me.

"Agglilk!"

I gagged. Not just the kind you do for comic effect around kids. I nearly puked.

The guy had had diarrhea. He shit the toilet. Missed the bowl with a lot of it. Sprayed the seat and the forward face of the tank. Probably didn't quite make it on the sitdown.

Shelly looked up as I stormed out of the back room. I felt like kicking something.

"The dude shit the toilet! What the fuck?! Wha--Where did he go?"

"He did what?"

"Where is he? Is that his truck?"

I ran toward the door. There was a truck sitting out front, but a guy was getting out of it. I looked around quickly, scanning for Meth Man.

"Damn it! Fucking fuck it!"

I pounded my fist on the metal frame of the glass door. The customer-alert dinger dinged.

"Whoa there, slim. Need me to come back at a better time?"

I glared at another customer walking toward me from his truck.

"Just don't use the toilet. Last guy sprayed it down with diarrhea."

Guy started cracking up. I gave him a "Gee, thanks" nod.

"Man, no!" he said between cackles. "Man, that is cold."

"Actually it is still steamy warm."

"Too much information there, slim. Whew! Just let me get my beer!"

I followed him back into the store, scowling. Shelly's puppet head was looking at me across the counter. Actually, her eyes were a bit deader than those of most puppets.

"Jim, I need you to come on back here. Now."

She was always overly nervous about having the safe open. But it was hardly ever open the same time of day. What were the odds that some customer, finding out it was open, would decide on the spot to rob the place? Maybe in Kingsboro, not in Pine Trail.

I stepped around her, stood behind the counter again. I stared across the tops of the shelves, arms crossed on my chest, grinding my teeth. Seeing the Meth Man's face.

Mother FUCK-er! You fucking FUCK-er!

"How bad is it?" Shelly asked. She sounded a little too bemused to suit me. She clutched a brown paper sack full of money and checks. She kicked the safe shut.

"Well... he shit the toilet!" I said, exasperated. "The fu--y'know, the toilet is sprayed with shit."

My cheeks and ears were warm. She turned, started walking around the counter toward the office.

"Well, put the out of order sign on the door for right now. I've gotta get this deposit done."

My brain raced with outrage, taking in what was going on. Fucking bitch was smirking. Smirking. Why? What was the assumption there? That's right: that I would be the one to clean it. It happened while both of us were working, so why was it my problem?

Because it could be. Because she could make it my problem. She was the Assistant Manager, I was the Trainee. She "had" to do the deposit. I obviously needed the job. And the clincher? The thing that would mean she would not even have to argue with me about it? Volker was here. The big boss man. Backup.

And so she smirked. She might as well have shit that toilet herself. Or shit on me.

"Yeah... heh, heh, heh... shit the toilet, huh?"

The guy from the truck set his beer on the counter.

"Yep. Pretty funny, huh?"

Suck it, dirt boy.

I rang up the beer, not smiling. But I realized this was just making it better for him.

"Heh-heh, yeah... Makes you wonder about people, don't it?"

"I guess. That's \$9.62, please."

"Yeah... Guess you got your work cut out for you tonight, huh? Heh-heh."

I made change, gave him a brush-off spiel, then made like I was straightening stuff under the counter. He grabbed the beer, started heading for the truck. Then he paused, turned.

"Hey, brother, don't let it getcha down, now!"

Ah! The smell of blood. He cannot tear himself away.

"Um... Okay?" I said, slapping my hands on the counter in a "what more do you want from me" gesture.

Just as the guy is leaving Volker emerges from the office. He is smiling too. He bellows across the store at me.

"So some guy messed up the toilet?"

Fuck ME!

"Yeah. Go see for yourself, if you can stand the smell."

"What did he look like?"

I described the guy. Volker nodded as he listened. I started thinking he knew the guy, maybe we could track him down. I had forgotten that Volker was just a nodder.

"Think you can remember what he looks like?" he asked.

"Y-yeah?"

"He comes in again, you ask him to leave."

"Uh... Okay... "

No shit...

"Tell him he has to leave, or you will call the cops," Volker declared. He said it as if he were making the cleverest declaration he'd made in weeks.

He walked toward the back room, where the men's room was. I heard the door squeak open. Long pause. Then it shut. I heard Volker rummaging around in the back room. I heard the hollow tonk of the mop hitting the plastic yellow mop cart.

My heart started to beat faster. I could hear the whine of the industrial sink as Volker filled the mop cart with steaming hot water. It sloshed as he rinsed the mop, wringing it in the mop cart's squeeze clamp.

I decided maybe Don was one of the good ones. One of the people others delight in destroying.

The water went off. Volker wheeled it to the doorway leading to the back room. He looked at me, holding the mop handle. He was smirking.

"Made you a mop bucket. I'll watch the counter."

The whole time I mopped it up when I wasn't gagging I pictured holding a gun on Volker and making him eat the scat with a spoon. Making Meth Man give Volker a rim job while Volker ate his shit with a spoon.

§§§

Later that night. Still on the second shift. The shit shift. The sun had set and Shelly was long gone. Volker too.

Volker the Fucker... Folker?...Fulker? Yeah. Mother Fulker.

I looked over at Brenda, in her green vest. She was behind the counter with me. Yammering on the phone.

Brenda was the other "Trainee" on the second shift that night. She'd been on the job a couple of weeks. That meant I wouldn't have to deal with basic "how to" questions. That was the idea, anyway.

We were both on until eleven. She was talking on the phone to someone about money.

"Well, we're still staying down at the Pines Motel... Yeah... Um, I think, let's see... Fi Six weeks now."

She listened to the guy for a few moments. I could hear a faint Peanuts Adult version of his honking drawl buzzing on the line.

The store was in a lull. 9-10 PM. Prime tube-watching time. Every ten or fifteen minutes I would wince. I swore the diarrhea stench had somehow burrowed into my nose. It would go dormant for a while, then suddenly strike.

"I know... Ye--... Yeah, well that's why we's trying to move out of there. But see... yeah... but see, down at the apartments they want a \$400 deposit."

I wondered if she was angling for a loan. I hoped she wouldn't ask me for any money.

"Well, we ain't got it, though. Mark just found his job this week, and don't even start 'til next. I've just been here two. So, I told, 'em, y'know..."

She put her hand on her hip. Listened for a moment.

"Yeah... You'd think they'd want to go ahead and rent the thing to us, 'stead of leaving it empty."

I looked around to see if the coffee needed brewing. I wasn't sure I wanted to listen to this anymore.

Coffee was okay. I started pouring more of the sandy powder mix into the "cappuccino" machine. The shhhhhh of the powder muffled Brenda's voice, disguised the meaning. For a few moments anyway.

"But I'd just be, y'know, it's just for a week, 'til I get paid... I mean... Ya'll know where we live! Heh-heh...Uh-huh... Uh-huh..."

Sounded like it was winding down. I moseyed back behind the counter. Stupid move. I realized the mistake as soon as she hung up the phone with an "Ah-ight, then."

Phone clicked down. Brenda's eyes came up, meeting mine. I was the first and only sounding board to be seen.

"Well SHIT!" Brenda hollered, throwing down her cigarettes and lighter. "Don't that beat... ? I don't know how they expect, how we can get ourselves, y'know, situated. House and feed their own grandchildren. They won't even give me a loan for a damn week?! For us to get situated in a decent apartment?!"

I shook my head in mock disbelief. Let her talk. I knew all I had to do was let her bitch a little, and it would be over soon.

I looked Brenda over while she talked. She was solid, wide. Looked shorter than she was. Something like a wrestler. Her fingers were fat and it made her fingernails look more like claws.

There was just a trickle of customers as we stood behind the counter. Earning money for standing there was about a third of the job on second shift. It was shaping up to be a slow night.

I was never much for chatting. After a while Brenda got tired of hearing her same old stories and comments. She suggested we work on Ben's list.

Ben had left us some "if you get a chance" instructions. There was a store inspection coming up. Company bigwigs and regional management rode around to the various stores in the area. They strutted around with clipboards. Basically lifted their legs and marked territory.

For proles like Brenda and me, this meant cleaning, polishing, that kind of shit. Tonight it was dusting the shelves. Picking up all the grocery products and wiping underneath them. Crucial fucking stuff.

Brenda wanted the radio on while we worked. Sang or hummed along. When she didn't know a song, she talked. We started talking about other employees.

"Yeah, Billie is great," I said.

"She's been here forever, I heard," said Brenda. "But just as an employee...I mean, just as a clerk? Not even assistant manager? I figure... it's... There must be something off about her."

"She--no--she mentioned that to me. Back when I first, um, worked with her. When she found out I was training for management. We talked about that. It's not... "

I picked up some cans of cheap chili to put on the floor while I dusted their spot on the shelf. Tried for too many. I almost dropped two of them.

"Well, what'd she say about it?"

"She said she didn't want the, uh... responsibility. Said it was too much work. She said Ben was running himself into an early grave for this... place."

Brenda squinted and wrinkled her nose at me. She set three boxes of cat food back on the shelf.

"But seven-fifty an hour? Well, that starting, but come on."

"Yeah, but ask Billie how much she works a week," I said

"But it's still--"

"No-no, I mean... She works a lot. Billie said that she gets overtime almost every week. Usually, like, fifty hours. Or more. She said after overtime--that's what does it--she makes more than new managers."

"Well, SHIT!" said Brenda. "I wouldn't be a manager either if I could get that deal."

"And she's been here long enough to... She like trained just about everybody. So, y'know, nobody's going to... even somebody like Shelly doesn't ride her. Give her shit."

"Yeah, yeah! I kinda got that feeling."

We polished shelves. Nothing but the click of cans for a few moments. Brenda had the radio tuned to "classic" rock. Some piece of Steve Miller fluff was on, probably for the fiftieth time that week.

"You worked with Jay, yet?" she asked me.

"You mean Fred Flintstone?" I asked.

She leaned over laughing. Kind of overplaying it. She snorted when she laughed.

"Dude, that is wrong," she said, gasping. "He looks exactly like Fred Flin-stone."

"What do you think of him?" I asked.

"He's my bud. We been working together on Sunday's. Prolly pulled about six shifts with him. We hang."

I shuddered at the thought of the utter abuse of sonic space this must entail. I set some canned peaches back on the shelf. Then I looked at Brenda.

"Is he gay?" I asked.

It didn't make much difference to me, one way or another. I'd had plenty of gay coworkers at my college jobs in Atlanta. I just wondered if my gay-dar still worked.

"How'd you know?" she asked.

I shrugged.

"Are you?" she asked

"No. I was just wonder--"

"Oooooohhhh!" she cooed.

I looked up from the scraping off some rust rings. Brenda was looking toward the door. The customer alert bell dinged. Two working men ambled in.

"There's my boy," she said excitedly, under her breath to me. "Gotta go help 'im."

She boogied her way behind the counter. One of the men swaggered up to the counter in front of her. The other looked a bit sheepish. He headed for the beer cooler.

Brenda looked up at him, her pupils dilated. He was a good foot taller than she.

"Wha-chall up to tonight?" she asked.

"Warkin."

Brenda giggled. I figured he looked the part of her husband--Mark, did she say his name was? He looked like a bit of a redneck player, taking nothing seriously except beer and weekends. Then I remembered that she'd said on the phone that Mark was not "warkin" until next week.

I tried to look like I was counting cans of peas on the shelf in front of me. I noticed that Brenda's accent was getting thicker when she talked to the guy.

"Not gettin' your tin of honey buns tonight?" Brenda asked.

"Naw. Them thangs about had me going up a size in my jeans," Non-Mark said, smirking.

"Shi-ut," said Brenda. "You ain't got no fat on you."

She reached across the counter and poked at his stomach. They both laughed. Non-Mark said something guttural that I didn't catch. His sidekick walked up with the beer. Two sixes settled with two clinks on the counter.

"When you gonna let me ride in your new truck?" asked Brenda.

"When you want to, girl?" he asked.

I could tell he was playing her. Maybe hoping to keep her on the side. Seemed like he enjoyed letting her pursue him. He was tall, fairly fit. Had all his teeth. Probably saw himself as out of her dumpy league.

"Well, hell. If they'd give us a decent break around here... " said Brenda.

She suddenly looked more nervous than flirty. Non-Mark spotted the out in her hesitation. He and his sidekick exchanged smirks.

"Well, I reckon we oughta get on outta here, then." Non-Mark said.

Brenda wasn't quite ready to let him slip away. She rang them up. Yapped the whole time. Then she followed them out to the truck.

Across the shelves, I watched the men back out of the parking place. They looked out of the pickup cab, both smirking at Brenda. She was standing on the sidewalk, bathed in the headlights, trying not to look uncomfortable.

Aware of herself, she patted her vest for smokes. She lit up, looking across the flame at Non-Mark's tail-lights leaving the lot. She stood with a hand on her hip, in her best "I was gonna come out here anyway" pose.

After working with Billie I had quickly learned to scoop up as many breaks as she did with her smoke breaks which was a lot. Seemed only fair, even if I didn't have the excuse of nicotine addiction. So I stepped outside to join Brenda.

I walked over to her, leaned back against the big window frame. I folded my arms across my chest. I didn't say anything. Just gave her a searching glance.

She blew a stream of smoke, then shouted "Whooo-weee!"

I laughed.

"Mmm-mm-mm," she said. "Brenda, Brenda... "

She took another pull on her Light 100. Watched the long stream of smoke she blew out.

"I'm gonna end up fuckin' that man," she said.

Chapter 11

... Thirty-eight, thirty- nine, forty...

"Hey Jee-um!" Knock-knock-knock.

Wha... ?! Uh... f-forty-two, forrr... , f... God FUCK it!

I threw down the unfinished strap of singles I was counting.

"Yeah?!" I yelled.

"Phone for you. It's Volker."

Perfect. My nerves were already raw from being up at four for a first shift. Drinking a whole pot of coffee had somehow merely made me more of a zombie. Now Billie was banging on the office door while I was counting money. Great time to talk to Volker.

I extended my hand out the doorway. She handed me the cordless.

"Hello?"

"Jim. Don Volker here."

"Hey, Mr. Volker."

"How are the numbers looking for Pine Trail? You working on the deposit?"

"Um... yeah, fine. I mean, uh, yeah, yesterday's take was like, thirty-one hundred. This morning, first shift, we did... eighteen, maybe? I haven't finished it yet."

"Good. Not bad. Well, listen: The Riverside store is still in the busy season. People are still out skiing, tubing on the river. They are pulling those kinds of numbers, too."

"Okay... uh, that's goo--"

"Casey over there wants to work at store 58, in Pebbleton. So we're moving her to 58. Jolene wants to manage store 20."

"Uh-huh," I said. The names and numbers were not registering, but I waited for the punchline.

"So we need you at Doc's Landing, Riverside. Seems like Ben has plenty of people to cover the shifts now at Pine Trail. No more vacations and what-not. You've been there long enough anyway."

I paused. I felt a surge at the thought of getting out of Pine Trail. But I didn't want to let Volker feel like I owed him.

"Well... good. So I'll be at Riverside as--So, I'll be an Assistant Manager over there?"

"You and Marta will both. Both be AMs there. You met Marta?"

"No, I don't think so... "

I thought about a hideous creature I had seen when I picked up an application at the Riverside store. Wizen, short. Radiated darkness from her perch behind the counter. Had one of those über-mullets that went half-way down her back. She glared at me the whole time I was there, as if she suspected me of shoplifting. Actually made me think twice about whether I'd want to work there.

I hope that was Casey.

"Who'll be the manager?" I asked.

"Well, remember, the AMs there perform the major managerial functions. So there is no full time manager. My job is to, you know, dot any i's and cross any t's that need to be done."

"So... does, is there--Are there any classes I need to go to before? Or, like, videos... ?"

"No, no. The stuff you've been doing on first shift is what you... that's your AM training."

"But I haven't... The grocery orders, stock orders... I haven't done any of that stuff."

"Marta already knows all that. She does those things. You'll pick it all up."

"Okay... I mean, it seems like I have just been counting the money over here. Ben and Shelly pretty much--"

"No, it'll be a little bit different, yeah. You'll get it, though, no problem."

"Okay... So, is that, is there a salary fo--"

"Nooo, no, no. AMs are still hourly. You guys are full time, but, you know, the hours are more flexible, when you leave the store you actually leave it... Basically like you are now."

Now THERE'S a selling point. Same shitty job, different job title.

"We'll bump you up to nine," Volker said.

I am not sure how long I was silent. Somehow hearing the number, the wage, made it hit home. In my job search I had figured I needed at least fifteen an hour for us to be able to get out of the house boat, get a place of our own. Instead, I would do half the duties of running a store a store that pulled in over \$3000 a day on weekends for nine lousy bucks an hour. No benefits.

Everything around suddenly looked strange. It seemed like the world outside Ben's training room/office had dropped away. It was hurtling through empty space with me in it.

Where the fuck am I? How did I get in this room?

"That work for you...? Jim... ?"

"Y-- I... Hold on a sec. I dropped something."

I felt like I was swallowing a pitch, being suckered into buying the Extended Warranty. Should I bargain for more money? Would the switch require me to put more thought into the job, have less energy for the job search?

For some reason I went through the motions of leaning over in the chair, as if I had actually dropped

something. On the straighten-up, it hit me.

I'm planning on quitting ANYWAY. I'll find something better any day now.

"Okay... yeah, no, it sounds fine. I mean, thanks for the offer. I'm glad to be getting out--It's, ah, good that I'll be in Doc's Landing. I live near there, y'know."

"Oh, really? Out by the Landing? Too pricey for my blood. How do you swing that?"

"No, it's... we live in a house boat."

"You own a house boat?"

I paused for a moment. I hated letting people at work know anything about my financial details.

"No... uh, we... Katie's family owns it. They are... we rent it from them. While we, uh--"

"Oh, oh, I see. Not a bad deal there."

"Yeah... I, uh... yeah."

I just sat there for a moment. Let him know it was time to move along.

"So... " Volker said. "Okay, good. So, you'll finish up this week's schedule at Pine Trail. I'll make up the schedule for next week, with you at Riverside."

We finished up the call. I looked at the plywood room. The money was sitting on the desk in front of me, waiting to be counted. The rest of the afternoon was waiting to be used for more job searches.

I glanced at my watch. I'd already been there nine hours and twenty minutes. I took a swig of coffee. Lukewarm. Started counting again, faster.

Twenty-seven minutes later, the money was all counted. Six bucks short. I could give a fuck. I knew that wouldn't raise any complaints. That I could let it slide without double-checking my count.

Maybe that's why you'd be a shitty manager.

Yeah. Guess I'll be condemned to a real job. Poor me.

The deposit bag I had to take to the bank was clear plastic, sticky-sealed. It was wrapped around the big brick of strapped cash and checks. If customers didn't recognize it as thousands of dollars in unmarked bills, it could be mistaken for a big brick of contraband.

Either way it made me nervous to walk around with it. Some employees stuffed it in their pants, under their green vests. That was about all the help Grab-n-Go provided for this problem. I'd never heard about a holdup on the way to the bank. Doesn't mean it never happened.

Since my waistline was already sufficiently full, I just stuffed the thing in my armpit. I eased the door open, peered out at the store for customers. An old man was standing in front of Billie at the counter. From behind, he appeared to be furiously masturbating. But I knew he was doing scratch lottery. I recognized him as a regular. No one else around.

The door squeaked as I tried to close it quietly. Billie peered over the scratcher's shoulder at me. I walked quickly through a grocery aisle, along the back wall. I tried to look natural.

"Well, Jim, how did the money come out for first shift?" Billie honked with her smoker's voice.

"Just fine," I said, walking toward the safe behind the counter. "Got it all squared away."

The scratch addict looked up absent-mindedly, but with a relaxed expression. He spotted the money brick under my arm immediately. I nudged the safe door shut with my foot, started reaching down to lock it for the night.

"Are you about to leave?" Billie asked.

Fuck! Here it comes...

"Uh, yeah... I, uh--?"

"Would you mind if I took a quick smoke break? It'll be another couple of hours before P.J. gets here... "

"S-sure. Go for it."

I liked Billie. Few people don't try to make you feel like you are constantly on trial. Billie was not just "friendly" in that artificial way, where you see Eye of Scorn peering out from behind the smile. Where every statement sounds like it just might be sarcastic. Figured I could spare her five extra minutes.

Billie was out the front door in seconds. With a fluid flick of her wrist, she made a couple of smokes jump up, protrude from the hole in the top of her pack. She slid out the one that stuck out the farthest. A look of relief already relaxed her wrinkled face.

I watched her start to desperately work her lighter in the breeze. I noticed the feel of the bank deposit under my arm. I quickly crouched, swung the safe door open, tossed it inside. With a loud clank, I shut the safe door again.

For a moment I tried to decide whether to lock it. It was on a timer. It would take ten minutes to unlock it again. That would keep me here longer.

I noticed the scratch man looking at me. A faint smile was on his lips, almost like he knew my dilemma. I looked back at the safe, twisted the lock closed with a squeak. I stood up, and glanced out toward Billie.

"Can I get another one of these Penny Papas?" asked the scratch addict.

He tapped an ugly yellow claw on the glass. Like I didn't know where they were located.

"One of those, and a \$2 Ultra Cash."

I tore off the cards, handed them over. He tossed three bucks on the counter. Into a black hole. These cheap cards were made for morons. All of the scratch lottery was a rip-off, but the cheap ones were a complete waste of money. People would proudly bring back an occasional "winner" for a couple of bucks or, more often, a free onedollar card. Total rip-off.

Through the window I saw the profile of another old timer, ambling toward the door. One I recognized. He held his upper body stiff as he walked. When you couldn't see his legs it looked like he was gliding on a

skateboard or something. Like a ghost floating along. He was always bitching about something. I hoped Billie would finish smoking before he got to the counter.

"Ha! Got a free one!" said the scratch addict. He flipped the card toward me.

"Today's your lucky day," I said flatly.

I took the card to the lottery machine. I looked at the Ghost as he glared at me across a chewing gum display. Even with the dollar cards, we had to go through this red tape process of scanning the barcode on the back, entering a code, and waiting for the machine to register it.

"I'll take another Penny Papa, another Ultra Ca--"

"Hold on a sec. Gotta run this, uh, winner through the machine."

"You know, Billie is a very patient cashier. She keeps all my winners 'til the end, then runs 'em through," he said, sounding petulant.

"Well, Billie'll be back any minute now."

"Hey..." croaked a voice from the back of the store. I was not sure whether it was just a comment. I kept trying to scan the dollar card.

"HEY! YOU!" said the voice again, yelling this time.

The lottery machine booped again, not recognizing the winning card. I wheeled around.

"Yes sir, how can I he--"

"This coffee is not hot! Who brewed this goddamn cof--? THIS COFFEE IS COLD!"

"Alright, let m--"

"This coffee is cold! Who brewed this coffee? How long has this coffee pot been sitting here?"

I glanced out at Billie. She was still in nicotinic peace. Her poisonous happy place. Firmly out of earshot of all this.

"I'll jus--I... Hang on just a sec," I said, glancing at the scratch addict.

"Did you leave this coffee on this cold burner?! This burner is not even turned on! This coffee is cold! What kind of..."

His upper lip quivered. The bottom one was fat and slightly purple. What caused that, poor circulation?

"Sir, Billie will be right in, let me fini--"

"Well, what is she doing outside?! Does she work here or--"

"Sir! Let me just finish with this gentleman, then either I or Bi--"

"Shit!" he hissed.

He took off his trucker cap, tossed on the counter next to the coffee pots.

You fucking walking corpse. I'd like to slash your head open with--

"I'd like to get another Penny Papa, another Ultra Cash, and two, no three... what does that leave me?"

Scratch addict was leaning toward me slightly. Digging in and asserting his priority in the customer food chain of the moment.

I let him hang a moment, the lottery junkie. For effect. Also to allow time for my mental image of choking him to death to complete itself.

"You have one free dollar card," I said, nearly growling.

"Okay, I'll take a Penny Papa. No... two Penny Papas... "

I kept trying the "winning" card on the machine. I glanced at Billie outside. She was doing that deep drag thing, bending over, where a smoker intends to drop the cigarette, but can't bring herself to do it. Has to get that one last drag, no, just oooone more...

Fuck! I should have already set the safe to reopen. Ten more MINUTES of this?!

Billie swung the door open, smiling. Recharged and ready. But her face slackened a bit when she saw my desperate look. I frantically nodded my head in the direction of the coffee service area.

"BILLIE!" croaked the Ghost. "Can't you see this coffee is cold!? Who brewed this godda--COUGH-COUGH-COUGH!!"

"Now, Mr. Winslow," Billie cooed, "Don't get yourself all worked up. You know that ain't good for you..."

Billie went to work on the Ghost. I stood at the lottery machine, scanning and rescanning the winner. Finally the machine accepted the card. I tore off the new cards the scratch addict wanted, slapped them down on the counter. He started scratching, glancing up now and then at the backwoods psychotherapy session going on near the coffee pots.

Twisting the double keys, I set the safe to release. Ten minutes and counting. I just needed to stay away from the fucking public for ten more minutes.

"Hey Billie," I shouted, "I'll do the trash for you."

Custodial work. Perfect. She never wanted to do it. Always begged me to during second shift.

Hey, and you can add that to the "Skills" section on your resume.

I gathered the bags from the various spots inside the store. I made sure to avoid the Ghost. I saved the trash can by the coffee pots for last. Didn't want to give him another verbal shot at me.

All the bags went into the big yellow canister. The one with wheels. The canister would cart them to the big dumpster on the side of the store. I steered it out the front door.

Assistant manager. The big "promotion" at last.

I wondered what Katie would say. It would probably just remind her that I was supposed to be getting a better job. Especially when I told her how much the "raise" was.

The stench of the dumpster hit me. It seemed worse in the heat. I wanted to fuck around outside, wait for the safe to open. But the smell was almost too much. I tried to wheel the canister upwind of the dumpster.

I stood there for moment. A few cars blew by on the highway out front. I wondered whether I should give up on Kingsboro. It had seemed hopeless lately. Maybe I could at least find a better retail company locally. Start the management track there. Back on the bottom rung.

Something buzzed on my leg. I jumped away from the canister. It felt like some huge fucking bee. Or maybe a rodent. Then I remembered I had my cell phone on vibrate. I looked out at the road to see if anyone had seen me jump.

I pulled the phone out, glanced at the display. Unknown caller, it read. It displayed a number from the 213 area code.

213... ? Los Angeles? Fuck, this is probably a telemarketer.

"Hello?"

"May I speak to Jim Crayson, please?"

"Go ahead."

"Hi, this is Craig Fillbeck in Los Angeles. I'm one of the producers for Quiz Slam. We talked to you earlier this year."

Sweet Buddha's Bunghole.

"Oh... H-Hi."

The soup of memory chemicals in my head was roiling. Quiz Slam, the TV game show. I had tried out for it seven months prior. Aced their general knowledge test, did well in the test taping. But time had gone by with no call-back. Then there was the move... I had completely given up on them.

"Well, we were very impressed with your audition. We wanted to find out if you were still interested competing on Quiz Slam."

My mouth dropped open, my eyes were huge. I slapped a hand loudly on my forehead, holding it there. Felt like my skin would slide off, otherwise.

"Oh my G--Are you ser--Yes, yes, abso-lutely I'm still interested."

"Great! Okay then..."

Fillbeck started going into some standard information, some routine questions. I listened and responded, but my brain was exploding. I was grinning wildly, kind of flailing around as I listened. I watched a truck pulling into the lot. The driver stared at me.

Seven months ago seemed like two years ago. Everything had changed since I had even thought about appearing on national television. We had given up on Missouri and moved. It was total luck that I had decided

to keep the same cell phone. They'd have never been able to contact me otherwise.

I suddenly remembered my book proposal. This was huge. HUGE. Clytemnestra Press was just sitting on my proposal to make an edited collection of short short fiction. To them, maybe, I had just been some nobody at a tiny mid-west college. Not even in an English department. But if could get my face on the tube, the public's reality maker... It was just undeniable. A no brainer. They would have to publish the book.

This is IT! This is IT!

With the phone still in hand, I threw head back while I listened to Fillbeck. I clenched my fist and held it out to the side. I didn't care if the guy in the truck was staring at me.

"Are you somewhere where you can receive a fax?" Fillbeck asked. "We need to send you some information to fill out. We need to go over the standard agreement."

My head came back down to the horizontal. I looked around frantically. Did the store have a fax machine?

"I'm actually... Uh, no, I'm going to need to... um... I'm at a store. I need to get the number for a fax place. A-a place that has a fax machine."

"Okay. Call us back as soon as possible with that number."

"Uh... okay. W-wait... wait... let me--"

The phone suddenly seemed like a tiny spider's fiber that stretched from me to California. The number was displayed, but I could not trust it as my lifeline. Too easy for something to go wrong. The battery would fail, the circuit chip would fail... What were the odds I could track down a public number to a television studio and get them to connect me to one of their many producers.

"Should I give you a direct line to call me here?"

"YES! Yes... let me... " I fumbled with my pen and a receipt carbon. "Okay, go ahead."

He gave me the number. My hand was shaking as I wrote it.

We hung up and I couldn't help myself. I thrust my arms out and up in victory chops, wanting to yell, wanting to laugh from my gut. Months worth of fear, doubt, anger, self-loathing, and such got painted over quickly inside of me.

I looked around quickly. The guy in the truck was grinning. I gave him a wave. I started pushing the big yellow trash can back toward the store.

I hoped the safe was unlocked. I had to get out of there. Find an office supply store, some place with a fax machine. That, and somehow get the deposit to the bank.

Chapter 12

I rushed through the door at the house boat. The twins were parked in front of the TV. The rollicking soundtrack of a "Tom and Jerry" blared from the speakers. It was the episode built around Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue." I loudly scatted along with the familiar melody. The kids turned to look at me, grinning.

Katie peered around the corner from the kitchen. She Spocked her eyebrow at me. I held the fax from Quiz Slam above my head with both hands. I flapped it in the air.

"You'll never guess. Never."

Her face softened into a quizzical smile. "Wha-at... ?"

I leapt in front of her, thrust the pages in her face. She winced, but I watched her eyes start to click over the text like a metronome. Her expression started to go blank. The fax was mostly in legalese. She wasn't getting it.

"I MADE it! Quiz Slam! They want me to be on the show!"

"Shut up!"

"That audition was back in January, in Missouri! I mean... I had given up on the whole thing, y'know?"

Katie's face was in disbelief. Then she jumped toward me, grabbed me around the neck.

"What is it?" yelled Jillie over the Gershwin.

"Hey, turn that down a minute," Katie yelled toward them. Tim reached for the volume button, clicking it several times quickly. They sat still, stared at us like a couple of meerkats.

"Jimsy's gonna be on TV! He made it onto Quiz Slam!"

When we had first started dating, the twins spent weekends with their father. As we started living together, Katie tacitly faced the problem of what to have them call me. This diminutive version of my name, Jimsy, was her solution. I tried not to gag whenever I heard it.

Jillie's mouth dropped open in. Tim squealed and started flailing on the sofa cushions near the television.

"Are they coming here to film it, to the house boat?" asked Jillie. "Are we gonna have enough room?"

I laughed, looking at Katie.

"No. I'll be going out to L.A. That's in California."

"Oo, Oo," said Tim, sitting up from his supine flailing. "C'n I go? I wanna go there, I wanna go to California."

"No, I can't take anybody with me," I answered. "Besides, it's only for a couple of days, and I'll just be at the studio."

"But we wanna goooo..." whined Jillie. "We wanna see the studio. We'll be good."

"Quiz Slam is paying for the tickets," I explained. "They are only sending one for me... But c'mon guys... you'll get to see me on TV!"

Tim was now backed against the foot of the sofa. He sat in his patented "I'm angry" position. His arms were crossed over his chest. His head was thrust forward and downward. His face was a scowling mask. Katie told me that Tim's father often used that position, even as an adult. "That's his dad," she would say, when Tim assumed the posture.

Jillie did a quick assessment, and saw the opportunity to be the Good Twin. She ran to me and embraced my thighs.

"Yay!" she shouted. "Jimsy's gonna be on TV!"

Katie took the bait and went after Tim.

"Tim! Quit that sulking! Jimsy told you that the show can only fly him out to L.A."

"I wanna GO!" Tim snapped.

"Oh, he'll get over it. Tim, I'm sure we'll be able to go out to visit California sometime."

I pulled Katie toward me. I held her for a moment, her eyes close to mine.

"I mean this... this could... who knows what this could turn into."

Katie nodded. She still grinned, but the expression seemed to be merely draped across the bones of her face.

"The book deal! Just think about that! Those sons of... those... people--the publishers--have had my proposal for... what... nearly a year now. Right?"

She nodded.

"How can they just let someone... I mean, these fu--these editors... just, just let someone sit and wonder for... take a year out of their lives... "

I shook my head for a moment. Then I felt it again. The feeling of a reprieve.

"But this! Jus--They just can't deny the-the... exposure! I mean, they can't say 'Oh, we're not gonna be able to sell this book.' TV! How many books do you ever see on TV?"

"Well... " Katie started. "... those morning news shows have books... people come on, pitching their books."

"Exactly! That's where the publishers go, you know, when they want to sell a book. They send the authors out to be on these, these stupid A.M. talk shows. TV!"

"But... Quiz Slam, that's n--I'm mean, it's not like a talk show--"

"Of course! It's not... I-I'm not saying it is the perf--They talk to the contestants, though. They announce them, ask them what they do... The point is, I get to mention the book on TV. Hardly anybody gets a shot like... This... this is... "

Jillie looked up at me. Gap-toothed, she was throwing me her best school picture grin.

"I better get rolling with this. I need to... I need to fill out this agreement, get it signed. I have to fax it back to them."

I extracted my legs from Jillie's grip. I looked at Katie, flapped the pages at her.

"I have to be smart about this. I need to... y'know... think... get it right. Strategy... Strategize... I need to make sure... "

She smiled again. "I know, I know... This is so awesome... And you don't have anything to worry about."

"Okay, bu--Okay. Okay. I'm getting cracking...I mean, I'm gonna get cracking. You know what I mean."

I shut the bedroom door. I plopped onto the foot of the bed. The relief in my legs reminded me of how long I had been on my feet that morning. I stared at the bedroom door, enjoying the lack of motion and sound around me. Then I began to hear the clipped murmurs of argument. Katie was not letting Tim continue his sulking routine. At least I couldn't hear Tom and Jerry.

I thought back to the audition, when I had made the initial cut. There had been hundreds of people there. You could say that practically nobody had made it. The odds then were just...

I remembered thinking then that it was surreal that I was there, trying out for quiz show. I had only been into quiz shows for a couple of years. Before grad school, I had never watched them. Always seemed dull.

Something about having two years of serious thinking and writing under my belt changed that. I had started to want to know everything. To actually realize how little I had learned from high school. It began to seem as if I cared whether I knew, say, what the battlefield in Henry V was called.

I had also noticed that the ability to retrieve the answers quickly seemed to be like a muscle. The more I forced myself to answer in the allotted time, the faster I became. It seemed obvious to me that this was a good skill for a grad student and future professor.

Quiz shows, then, took on a greater significance. I began to think of them as part of an ideal system for thinking. To most they seemed like bits of fluff, a way to show off in bars. I took them seriously. The possibility of getting on a quiz show stayed in the back of my mind. Winning a ton of money, becoming able to support writing and research without teaching...

I chuckled as I thought back, seeing myself staring intently at the TV screen. I spent a lot of time alone in those days. It's the kind of thing takes on significance during four years of celibacy.

A lurid green caught my eye. I glanced down at the vest in my lap. I was still carrying my Grab-n-Go smock. No more academic career to fall back on. The stakes had changed. This wasn't just about retiring early anymore.

I got up from the bed, walked over to the "desk." Actually, it was a wicker chest of drawers with a flat wooden top. We did not have room for a desk. I used it as my workspace, sitting with my legs jammed against the drawers.

I spread the fax from Fillbeck on the desk. I spent a good 20 minutes poring over the pages, making sure I signed everything, read everything.

After the last signature, I pushed the papers forward. California was three hours behind us, so I had a good two hours' buffer for faxing the paperwork to Quiz Slam. I needed to think clearly, start figuring out exactly

how I could exploit this. Such potential on so many fronts. Might as well think of it like a new job.

From the ink jet printer I grabbed a fresh sheet of paper. Across the top of it I wrote "Quiz Slam: pre-departure plan," and drew a line under it. I knew I needed to make a list. With the constant flood of ideas I had going through my head, there was no way I would be able to remember them all. Much less schedule all the preparation I would need.

For about 20 minutes I alternated between staring at the wall in front of me, and scribbling on this piece of printer paper. Then I picked up the piece of paper, re-read through all the bullets:

Call Clytemnestra Press: tell them about Quiz Slam appearance

Study materials: Almanac, online encyclopedias, Celeb Magazine's yearbook, watch at least 3 quiz shows per day, ???

Make up business cards with my name and website address (or book title?!) to hand out in Cali

Make up T-shirt with website logo and address. Wear on show--- at least around hotel, studio

Write more stories for website Upload older unpub'd stories

Write out talking points for contestant chat on show (jokes, snappy comebacks, etc.)

Notify local media interviews? "Local man" story angle?

Query mags about writing a "What's it like to get on a Quiz Show" piece

High-protein diet--camera adds 20.

Start taking B-vitamins, Lecithin, Huperzine regularly

That was enough for the time being. I had satisfied my desire to get something in writing. To feel like I had a plan, a schedule. I decided I'd better get that fax off.

I was about set down my list when it struck me.

Fuck.

Grab-n-Go. I needed to call and ask them if I could have the time off. I would need three days cleared up. That shouldn't have been a problem, since I usually only worked three or four in a row. But Don Volker had called me about switching to the new store. I was not sure what my usual days would be, the number of days per week, what my hours would be...

I sat back with a smile. I propped my hands behind my head, interlacing my fingers. I realized I didn't much care whether they let me off. This really was it. I had an out, finally. I let that feeling wash over me.

Suck it, Volker.

I put my feet on the desk. I looked at the toe of my sneaker. The leather part was starting to separate from the rubber sole.

'Course, this show isn't really a JOB...

It hit me that I probably shouldn't quit Grab-n-Go unless they forced me to. This TV exposure was a gigantic coupon for the future. But I probably needed to hang onto the Grab-n-Go gig. Play it safe. A quiz show appearance, even if I won, might not buy groceries for months.

I moved my legs down, let the chair whack back to the floor. I looked at the phone.

Volker.

I didn't want to make the call. One of the best days of my life, and I had to think about this fucking store, this fucking shit job.

I snatched up the phone, whacked out Volker's digits.

"Boop-boop-beep... We're sorry... This number cannot be completed as d--"

I clicked off the phone. I had botched the entry. I tried again, with less abandon. The phone rang.

"Don Volker here."

"Hey Don. This is Jim. Crayson."

"Jim. My new Riverside man. What can I do ya for?"

"I, ah... What kind of schedule am I gonna have over there? I haven't... at the Pine Trail store, you know, there's not a real... I've been doing whatever shifts he needed... Ben."

"Right, right. No, at Pine--at Riverside... out here, you're gonna be on a more regular schedule. You and Marta will be switching off, working days and nights."

"Uh-huh. So like... "

"Probably two days, three nights on some weeks, then opposite on other weeks. Three, two."

"Weekends?"

"Of course. Prolly alternate those, too."

"Okay... So, do you... is next week already set in stone?"

"Well, not... I mean, I just checked with Marta about the switchover, but, ah, the shifts don't have... there are shifts that need to be filled. Once you are an assistant, it's, you know..."

"Listen. If there is any way... Let me explain...I, ah, I have this once-in-a-lifetime thing... this... you ever heard of, you ever see Quiz Slam?"

"Qu... Quizlam?"

I rolled my eyes.

"Quiz. Slam. On TV. It's on around here at abo--"

"Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh, right, right. I think I... is that were they have, like, the tag team... like the

wrestling-looking--?"

"Yeah, that's it. The quiz show."

"Okay, yeah... What about it?"

"Well... I'm, I'm gonna be on there. On the show--"

"Really?"

"Yeah! They called me today, after work. I auditioned waaay back in January, and--"

"That's awesome."

Volker was a Boomer. The religion of The Tube had obviously infected his childhood home. I could hear awe of the medium infect his voice. His baritone had lost its lower partials, gotten breathier.

"I know. So--"

"What did you do? Did you fly out to... where? To Hollywood?"

"To try out? No. It was in... it was up where I was, back in Missouri."

"Well, hell, why don't they ever come here?!"

"Yeah, you'd think they'd do auditions here... er, in Kingsboro, anyway. Never did, huh?"

"Not that I know of. Sounds like fun. I prolly woulda tried it."

"Hmm... "

This conversation was weird. Don and I had never discussed much of anything. All shop talk. I supposed this was a side he had chosen to keep hidden from his employees. Slightly more human, more enthusiastic. Not very corporate.

"So, would that be okay? The time o--Not putting me on the schedule for next, um... Wednesday through Friday?"

"Sure, yeah... I can swing something. Switch some people around. Should be no problem."

"Great. Yeah, this is... really, um... This is something I've...I really appreciate that, 'cause this chance is, like, beyond... "

"It's a big deal, man."

"Right... So, you know, thanks."

"Well, hey... Don't forget us little people, if you go out there and win the big bucks!"

Wince.

"Ha-ha-ha! You got it Don... And hey, y'know... Thanks again, bud."

Ugh. I disgust myself.

I set the phone down, looked at my favorite blank spot on the wall again. The call had gone much more easily than I had expected. And no need to quit. No big blowout on the phone, no having to hang up on some cheesy lecture on responsibility.

Leaning back in the chair, I interlaced my fingers behind my head again. I actually had an escape hatch, here. If I won, I'd quit, of course. If I did not win, I could string the store along until the national exposure bore fruit.

Yeah! Meantime, I just have to avoid getting shot by some crack head robbing the place.

With that thought, I thumped the chair back to the floor. Time to head out and fax my contract to Quiz Slam.

Chapter 13

I rubbed my index finger along the edge of the business card.

Clytemnestra Press New York, NY

Jack Borden Acquisitions editor

I had stared at that name for... probably hours if you added it all up. Every time I looked at it, I recalled pounding out that damned book proposal.

It had taken days to put it together. Detailed plan for the entire book, chapter by chapter. Sample chapters. Description of my ideas for promoting it they wanted you to do all the marketing work for them, too. Over 50 fucking pages.

Borden had requested the proposal on the basis of a letter I sent him, describing my idea for the book. It seemed to fit right in with their catalog. Seemed like a no-brainer to me. He had mailed back my letter, with a hastily scrawled note across the top, like a little poem:

"Interesting/Send me a proposal/Jack L Borden."

After I had sent it, two months went by. Nothing.

I sent a letter to ask if he had any questions about the proposal, or needed any additional information. Nothing.

Month after month. Meanwhile, I quit teaching at the college, still thinking that surely I'd be able to fit into some niche in the writing world. That's where most grad students ended up, after all, right? And, after all, I had managed to draw the initial interest of a publisher.

By the time we moved to Doctor's Landing, I had pretty much given up on Borden and Clytemnestra. Too much time had gone by. Close to a year. I figured decisions could be made faster than that. Those autobiographies puked out with ghost writers by people having their 15 minutes of fame those sure as hell got quicker decisions than what I was getting.

But now I had the Quiz Slam news. Something that could make a difference...

So, here I was, the day before my trip to Los Angeles and an appearance on national TV, looking at Borden's name again. I'd had to dig it out of a box. They hadn't sent me the official "No" letter yet. Figured I might as well take a shot.

They'd be STUPID not to. I mean, this is on a PLATTER.

I cleared my throat a couple of times. Started testing my voice for the call.

"This is Jim Cr--"

More bass. Sit up.

"Mr. Borden, this is Jim Crayson. I sent--' what is with this phlegm?"

I got up and walked toward the kitchen. Katie was lying on the couch, reading. She had a blank expression. She gazed at me over the book, her eyes searching. I registered that she looked somber. I tried to stifle my

concern. No time for it now.

I filled a glass with water and stirred in some vitamin C powder. Pounded half of it. Hawked a couple of times. Pounded the rest. Walked back into the "office" to make my call.

Borden's line rang a few times. Then his voice mail clicked on. I felt a wave of relief. I hadn't really wanted to talk to him. Conversation was not my forte. I preferred carefully crafting written messages and letting them do the work.

"Hi Mr. Borden, this is Jim Crayson. I sent you a proposal last November for Tome Thumb, my micro-fiction collection. I wanted to let you know about a new development that might affect your decision on the book."

You sound too much like you are reading.

Phlegm was back too. I cleared my throat and continued.

"I, ah... I successfully auditioned for the television show 'Quiz Slam.' I am headed out to the studio tomorrow. Taping takes place the next day. I thought it would be great if I could mention on the show that I have a forthcoming book with Clytemnestra Press. You, ah, you have my contact information, so, um, just send me an email, give me a call... let me know what you think. Okay, thanks. Bye."

I sat back in my chair. My breathing started coming back to normal.

It seemed ridiculous that I'd had to do this at all. The book was the same whether I was on TV or not. Did nothing matter anymore besides marketing?

Ah! But YOU! You live a life of purity! Selling cigarettes, beer, and petroleum products.

I stood up. Focusing on tomorrow seemed like a better idea. It was Borden's move, as always. I needed to move on. Carb up on trivia questions.

My laptop was on the desk in front of me. I felt pretty comfortable in the chair for now. Time to fire up an online encyclopedia.

I looked down at the screen. The login screen was up. The cursor blinked, waiting for me to sign in.

First I need to check my email, though. Could be something important.

Half way through my password, the phone rang. I paused, then finished filling in the password field. The phone rang again.

Maybe I shouldn't pick it up. What if it is Volker telling me to come in? I have to study tonight, pack, get extra sleep...

Another ring.

So tell him no. What do YOU care?

One more ring, the last one before the answering machine would click on. I snatched the phone off of the cradle.

"Hello?"

"Hi, this is Jack Borden from Clytemnestra Press. May I speak with Jim Crayson, please?"

I froze for a moment. I had to force my mouth to move, speak.

"Oh..h-hi... Jack. Yes, this is m--this is Jim Crayson."

"Got your message about the television appearance. Congratulations."

He said the word "congratulations" in a way that meant "I am making the standard overtures." Sounded like one of those people who were always ready stop talking to you and get back to ripping on you behind your back.

"Thanks... I--"

"You should know, though... There won't be much, if any, promotion you can do on the air. The network won't let you mention the book during the show."

Something stinks here. People on that show are CONSTANTLY...

"I mean, you can say you are an author," Borden continued. "But they won't let you say the title, or anything like that."

"Um... Okay, that's--"

"I was actually on another OBC game show. '23 Quizoo?'"

"Um-hmm--"

"So, I am familiar with their contracts for the shows."

"I see. I was just--"

"But your book is... We still have it under consideration. We haven't finalized a decision on it yet."

"Oh... Okay... Well, about how long... "

"Give us about another month or so, and we'll be able to send out official word."

"Alright... I, ah... Th-thanks."

"Thanks for the update. And good luck on the show."

"Thanks."

I threw the cordless phone in the air a couple of feet. Caught it on the way.

"Well, FUCK ME!!"

"Potty mouth!"

Katie's voice echoed from the other room. Ever since we started living together she had started semi-playfully reminding me not to curse in front of the kids. The kids were not at home, but her habit kicked into play

anyway.

"Guy at Clytemnestra? You know, the one I sent my proposal to?"

"Yeah?"

I walked into the common room. Katie was still on the sofa. The late afternoon sun was coming in through the window. She was sitting in a shadow. She set her book on her tanned thigh.

"Bastard has ignored every letter... how many have I sent now? Three, four? ... Three, if you count the one with the proposal--"

"Un-huh?"

"Yeah, so... He has just let me sit here, just ignored me... Like, 'Gee, I wonder if I will ever hear from Clytemnestra? Should I write to another publishing company? Should I blow my fucking brains out?'"

"Potty mou--"

"Just waiting on this a--this jerk. No information...I mean, shouldn't... couldn't they at least... I don't know--"

"Let you know what's going on."

"Yeah. Is that asking...? Doesn't that seem like the professional thing? Am I crazy?"

"No!"

"I mean, to me it just... That just shows you the attitude. The power they see themselves as having... I mean, you see this... it's the usual human bullsh--games. Primate games."

"But maybe... I mean, he asked for the proposal."

"Yeah, but when he saw it, with his little... Editors have this Princess and the Pea attitude... 'Oh, this just doesn't suit me today!'... After I had put so much... "

"That proposal took a lot of work--"

"Exactly! I mean... the sense of entitlement they seem to have. Once that sense of struggle, that everyone has... That goes away when they get a sense of the power they have. They get to weed people out. They feel they have arrived... The fuck with everyone below them... "

"Or--Potty!--or just fear. Maybe, you know, they get in trouble if they pick things that don't sell."

"Well, maybe... But it seems more cynical than that. This guy... just--"

"So, what was this phone call?!"

"Oh. Well... Yeah, that's just it. So, I leave him a message about Quiz Slam, he calls back in like... I don't know... five minutes?"

"Nooo."

"He calls me back... You didn't hear me on the phone? He call back, but then he tries to talk it down... downplay it."

"Huh... That doesn't--"

"Yeah, he's talking about how I can't promote the thing on air, can't this, can't that. I've heard people on these shows. You know? You always know what people do, their careers--"

"Right."

"So, why even... ? I'm thinking, if it's no big deal, getting on the show, but yet, you call me back after five minutes... "

"Doesn't make any sense."

"I swear these people are driving me crazy. They're either diabolically... diabolical, or just... crazy."

"Mmm... "

"Or they just don't care. They only want to deal with known commodities. People they know. Insiders."

Katie didn't respond.

"Well, anyway," I said, "the fact that he called tells you something about... TV is a big deal. Getting known. People take it seriously. If he wants to be stupid about this... "

I looked out the window. There was a boat going about 50 yards out. I could see a girl in a bikini. She was sunning herself on the bow.

"There's just so much that could... It doesn't even bother me so much, now. That they are acting this way. I really feel... I'm gonna meet people. People in the entertainment business. This is... .important."

We were both silent for a few moments. Katie looked down. She stared at the book on her leg.

"What are you reading, anyway?" I asked.

Katie didn't respond. I moved closer to her. I could better see her face. Her eyes were red and wet. I tensed up.

"What is it?"

She was still looking at the book. But her eyes were just staring.

"What's the matter?" I asked, sitting on the floor next to the sofa.

"I don't know... "

"C'mon... "

Nothing. A sniff.

Fuck. Game time.

"Come on, tell me what... what's the matter?"

I placed my hand on her thigh. I waited.

"I don't want to you to go."

Is she saying she'll miss me or... No... Not THIS...

"I-I'll... It's only for a couple of days... "

I took my hand off of her thigh. My head felt light.

"Well, what am I supposed to do here?"

She flipped onto her stomach. Her book dropped on my leg, a corner of it jabbing my calf. She buried her face in the pillow and began sobbing.

This can't be happening.

My scalp seemed cold, like the blood had rushed out of it. I could only stare at her shoulders, for the moment, as they shook with her sobs. It almost seemed like a joke. It seemed too stupid.

"But this... I mean it's just a couple of d--"

Her contorted, slimy face tore off the pillow. She scowled at me.

"I don't have anything here! You drag me down here from Missouri, and now you're going off to California?"

I felt a line of red crawl across my cheeks and nose, like war paint.

"We agreed to come here... We talked about this--"

"Don't you think I miss my family?" Her voice was gravelly now, choked. "This was your idea!"

"No! You know you wanted... you liked the warmth. You liked the idea of moving to a warmer climate!"

"You knew this was a big move for me!" She was yelling at me now. "I have never lived anywhere else! I DON'T KNOW ANYONE HERE!"

She jammed her head back in the pillow, scream-sobbing into it. I sat there paralyzed. I thought about the hundreds of dollars for the moving truck, the gas to fill it up. For the storage of all the things that wouldn't fit in the house boat. Months of life squandered, trying to get back up to speed. Now it was all a fucking mistake?

"But... this show will be a good thing. I don't know, maybe we won't end up staying here... but, see... this will give me a cha--"

"I'm not talking about the show. What I am supposed to do here? I never go anywhere! I'm just stuck here while you work! I never get to go on any trips! You're just going to leave me here alone."

"I can't believe this," I muttered.

I stood up. I'd had it.

"I'm only going to be gone for a couple of days, Katie! I've gone out of town before. I don't know why you have to..."

"YOU BASTARD!" she screamed.

Her face was a mask. She hardly ever showed her teeth like that. Somewhere below the anger I was sickened that the whole scene seemed so cliché.

"Why don't you just leave me ALONE?!" she yelled.

I walked back into the bedroom. I was shaking from the adrenaline. I clenched my fingers into a choking shape, then into fists. I squeezed them against my temples. Hissed through my teeth.

I imagined unmooring the house boat with her in it. Kicking it. Watching her float down the river.

My anger was so white-hot that I suddenly became more self-aware. The room looked slightly gray colored, blurred at the edges. I stared across the room in front of me, at the door-frame into the bathroom. The visual images seemed to detach from reality, so that the room looked like it was floating. I looked at my empty suitcase on the bed. Wondered how long before I'd feel like packing it. Like doing anything.

Chapter 14

"I'll bet that any place now that does well, any business that makes people feel at home, that makes people feel like they are getting their money's worth, etc. does so by recreating the television-watching experience."

I was on the plane to California, writing in my notebook. Surrounded by my fellow passengers and the microbes they wheezed in and out. I had my elbows crooked in some awkward way, to avoid sticking them into the personal space of the people next to me.

The thought I was logging in my notebook was spurred by the in flight "entertainment." Somewhere over Mississippi, the monitors, like rising monoliths, had slowly opened from the bulkhead. My fellow primates had become notably excited.

But what had made me particularly grumpy was the selection of films. A comic book adaptation, of all things: "Quickknife."

"Quickknife?" I wrote. "Okay, obviously we can all accept the fact that we prefer to sit in front of glowing monitors and soak up their narratives. But a COMIC BOOK movie for a plane full of adults? What, is this a chartered plane headed for Disneyland?"

I set the notebook back on my lap, relaxed my elbow contortions. I looked across the torso next to me, and out the window. We were among the cumulous clouds, giant mountains of fog. They became a landscape as we moved beside them.

I faced forward again. Tried to relax in the narrow seat. I shut my eyes.

Images of the night before were still fresh in my mind. The middle of the night. I woke up to the feeling of Katie's wet lips tightly wrapped around my shaft. Her head started to bob. I groaned a sleepy groan, then started to get into it. The room was pitch black, quiet. Wet sounds and guttural vocals punctuated the silence.

Then I heard her legs swooshing across the sheets. She mounted me. We had avoided each other all evening, and now she was fucking me. Fucking the shit out of me. She did it with a kind of desperation that practically brought out an extra seam in my erection.

I listened to her panting, grunting, slamming that blessed cervix against the head of my cock mercilessly. As her strokes began to quiver and lose their rhythm, I felt her temperature rise a telltale degree.

I held my breath, clenched my teeth. I arched toward her. My body shook and sputtered like some old truck that won't shut off immediately. The sensation was indescribable, one for the books.

"I'm sorry," she breathed into my neck.

"Me, too," I panted.

Aware of myself in the airplane again, I put my hands over my crotch. Just in case. I peered through my lids. Checked my peripheral vision to make sure no one was staring at me. Then I closed my eyes again.

Katie and the kids had seen me off at the airport. Pleasant, sweet. We didn't speak about the episode of the previous afternoon. I liked that about her she was very intuitive, non-verbal. We had understandings. There was not always this need to sit through a fucking speech.

I couldn't quite shake that sense of betrayal, though. I knew that Katie could feel me eyeing her with suspicion at the airport. I wondered if she had really meant all that I had read into her complaints. But I was happy she had been willing to let it go for the time being.

Thinking about the fight got my heart rate up. Made me feel tense again. I opened my eyes. I looked down at my notebook. Tapped my pen on the page.

"Get something for Katie and the kids."

I scribbled the reminder on the page, but I wouldn't need it. My father had gone on business trips once or twice a year. He always brought us a souvenir. A t-shirt, a toy, something like that. I would smell the t-shirt, or whatever, and try to imagine what my father had seen. I figured maybe I could give the twins similar memories.

I looked up again. Eyed the string of monitors, scowled at its images of cartoonish heroes. I noted with satisfaction that headphones were needed to hear it. I could hear some tire squeals and such from nearby headphones, but this provided no continuity.

At least I can't hear the accursed soundtrack. Danny Elfman, no doubt.

I looked at the notebook again for a sec. Then I shut it. I decided to try to sleep. Maybe I could meditate, I thought, make myself drift off.

I leaned my head "back" and to the side on the headrest. I had the sense that my body was ridiculously positioned. Like some photo of the elephant man. I felt it was immoral to lean my seat back, and further diminish the space of the person behind me. This left me having to figure out how to relax while sitting bolt upright.

Somehow I must have fallen asleep in that state. The monitors were keeping the others quiet. That probably helped. In any case, the next thing I was aware of was the blaring of the intercom.

"LADIES-AND-GENTLEMEN-THIS-IS-YOUR-CAPTAIN-SPEAKING."

I gasped. I looked around, confused. Tried to straighten myself in my seat.

RRRR WE RRRR CURRENTLY ABOUT 10 MINUTES AHEAD OF SCHEDULE NOW.
[CLICK-SQUINK] AND RRRRR WE SHOULD BE AT THE GATE IN ABOUT 20 MINUTES."

Quickknife had long since vanquished his foe. The monitor junkies were still glued to their screens, however. They had been soaking up outtakes from hideous-looking sitcoms. After the captain finished his update, the monitors went blank. The passengers looked dazed. Stiff necks began to turn, eyes looked around.

"Well, that didn't seem like such a long trip," said a male voice behind me.

"No, no," said a female voice. "I thought the movie was cute."

Pause.

Please leave it at that. Don't say "so."

"So... you headed out to L.A. for a vacation?" asked the man.

Christ fellating a dog! Here we go.

"Mainly to visit my mom. But I am on vacation."

"So, are you originally from L.A.?"

"No, my mom moved out here about ten years ago. She had visited a few times... "

I squeezed my eyes shut, wishing I could shut my ears. I could always control my eustachian tubes by moving muscles in my throat. This helped with the ear pressure you feel on planes. But now I opened them up just then because of the rushing, underwater sound it created. I hummed a little, trying to drown out the trite, intrusive conversation behind me.

How could they not realize we can all hear every sibilant, every plosive?

Perhaps some people enjoy the chance to glimpse into the life of someone else by listening in on them. For me it created something like a chronic ache. I felt I had heard all the variations of chit chat hundreds of time, but I could not tune them out. Maybe by some neurological quirk. It made plane rides tough.

Then, as we landed, and rolled up to the gate, the coup de grace.

"Well, it was nice meeting you."

"You too."

The tinny sound of a brief electronic musical flourish arises from behind me.

Sweet Idi Amin Fisting Hitler, no. Please, no.

Pause.

"Hiya, Mare... Yep, we just landed... Good, good... No, no problems, on time... There was a movie, too... Yep... 'Quickknife'?... 'Member that, from a few months back?..."

It was too much to bear. I grabbed my pen, flipped open the notebook to the day's entry.

What is the point of calling RIGHT when you land on a plane? I mean, what significance can there be to that? 'Oh, Jim has JUST LANDED. Okay, let me get my camera. I am going to take a snapshot of the digital clock. We can keep the picture on the fridge.'

I got lucky as we disembarked. There were several other passengers between me and the chit-chatters.

§§§

"Hi, name's Jim."

"Sup, Jim. I'm Kevin."

"Hi, I'm Clara."

The limo driver watched as we shook hands. He looked a bit skeptical. Kevin was in his early twenties. Still wearing clothes from his college days, cheap buzz haircut. As usual, my attire was Dollar Store

Conservative--super cheap and designed not to draw attention. Neither of us looked likely to end up getting in a limo. Clara was better off. Late twenties, eye for fashion, probably upper-middle income.

Kevin was smart. You get a feel for such things after years of exposure to enough bright people. Nothing to do with looks, location. Could be a guy who cracks you up with a passing quip in the park. A woman selling muffins at some farmer's market. You sense the intellect behind the reaction patterns.

Neither Kevin nor I needed to size each other up... much. We both got it, and quickly. Our interaction was freewheeling, peppered with facts drawn from our broad interests. Fun. Clara tried to keep up.

Clara was a security camera planted in a mannequin. Well-spoken, well-manicured. She had the kind of "pretty" face that looked good in its current financial state, but which would have looked plain, or even ugly, had things gone worse for her in life. Money-pretty. But those eyes were waiting for you to fuck up. They informed you that you were this close. That they would be watching.

"You know, I actually met Russell Crowe once," said Kevin.

"Oh, I'm jealous," Clara said, clasping her naked knees.

"Oh, you shouldn't be," he said. "I haven't wanted to see one of his movies since."

"How'd you meet him?" I asked.

"He... well, that's the thing. You might say I tried to meet, tried to talk to him," said Kevin.

Clara shot me a knowing glance. I looked at her blankly. I detected no intent on Kevin's part to tell a fish story.

"I was working at this radio station at my college in Philly," Kevin continued. "This was not long after his movie 'Gladiator.'"

"His first Oscar win," I added.

"Right. Only one, actually. Anyway, you know he had a band, had that album out, right?"

"Oh... um... um..." Clara snapped her fingers, searching for the name.

"30 Odd Foot of Grunts, wasn't it?" I asked.

"Yeah, yeah. What a fucking stupid name for a band..." Kevin said. "S-sso... Anyway, they play... the station manager let them play a couple of... play on the air, live."

"Sounds like a cool college station," Clara said.

"Yeah, but... have you heard them? Heard him sing... his songs?"

Clara and I shook our heads.

"It's just... so baaad! He sings just like he talks. Horrible. Maybe like Gordon Lightfoot with a poor sense of pitch."

"Ewww... what's that old song of his?... Um... 'Tusk?'" asked Clara.

I looked at her blankly, pausing for effect.

"No, that's an album by Fleetwood Mac," Kevin said.

"Oh... yeah," said Clara.

"So, I'm in the engineering booth listening, just hating this shit. But I'm, y'know... there's the Gladiator in there singing, right? I mean, it was Russell Crowe, man."

"Little star struck, were you?" Clara asked, smiling broadly.

"Well, yeah... I mean, yeah, wouldn't you be?" he said.

Thoughts of big shots I had seen popped into my head. It had always been a letdown to me. They always looked like they were on the make. If they faced at you, it was with a searching look, like they needed a fix of approval from your glance. It was all too tempting to throw them an eye-roll, a sneer.

"So, after they were done," Kevin continued, "Crowe kind of... like, hands off his guitar to some underling... some dude in his posse, right. Then, he's... he starts... he's gonna take the back way out, right?"

"Through... the... where you were, right?" I said.

"Yeah... so, here comes fucking Russell Crowe, walking right past me, y'know... And out of my mouth... my mouth starts to say it... "

"Oh no... " I said, grinning.

"What?" asked Clara.

"I really like your music Mr. Croooooowe... ' Woosh! Guy walks right past me. Not a word."

Clara gasped theatrically, her mouth the expected gaping "o."

"O-o-o-oh, no... What a prick!" I said, laughing.

"NOT A FUCKING WORD!" shouted Kevin, smiling.

"But he's just... I mean, he must get people all the time... " Clara said. "I mean, can you imagine?"

"Well, but--" Kevin began.

"He's just so hot!" Clara said.

"But, like, Jack Black, he played there too, and he--"

"Who?" asked Clara.

"Guy from 'Shallow Hal?'" I told her. "He has a band--"

"Oh, right... Oh! You met him too?!"

I looked out the window at L.A. passing by, as Kevin continued his story. I had never seen the place before. I

wanted to absorb the landscape.

The houses in L.A. were closer together than I would have ever imagined. People could reach out of their windows and into their neighbors' houses. I wondered if anyone had ever had an affair through one of those windows. You could easily give a handjob like that.

Kevin seems like an honest guy. Maybe an ally. Not sure if there is much I can do about Clara.

Quiz Slam was a competitive game. It wasn't just trivia questions. It involved teams, and people could be voted off those teams. There were alliances, betrayals. Just knowing a bunch of facts wouldn't save you if everyone turned against you.

I glanced at Kevin and Clara. Kevin held my gaze for a second as Clara asked a question.

There is a reason they put us in a limo together.

It dawned on me that the game had already begun. I had spent all that time doing trivia work, memorizing facts. Now here I was, at least 24 hours before the taping, already playing the game. Already trying to make friends, size up the competition. Maybe even turn people against one another.

Suddenly I felt as confined in the limo as I had in the plane.

Am I being paranoid here?

I looked at Clara. I couldn't see her as a studio plant. Make-up job she learned from her sisters. Clothes you could find at any of the thousands of suburban strip malls littering the nation. No, she was definitely from one of the "flyover states."

Clara caught me looking at her. We were from different planets. She had us pegged, Kevin and me. She was the "normal" one here. We were--how you say?--weird. Clara was already ready to take us down.

I gazed out the window again. Scenes I recognized from TV and movies flashed by. A slideshow. We passed Mulholland Drive. It looked smaller than it did onscreen. Camera adds 20 square yards, I supposed.

A group of high-rise hotels appeared as we rounded a curve. Clara's voice suddenly became more than background chatter.

"Oh, I think that's it. SIR, IS THAT THE HOTEL?"

"Yes, ma'am," said the limo driver. "Next stop the Global Studios Henson Hotel."

Time for the endgame.

I knew the ride from the airport had already tipped our hands too much. I didn't want to end up in some fucking party setting and get written off before we even got to the real game. Social jockeying was not my forte.

I needed to make sure I didn't get invited to something I'd have to refuse. I knew Clara's social operating system was likely to elicit discussion of social plans for the evening. Worst case? Dinner.

Okay, how can I--

"Oh, I need to let Bill know we're here," said Clara, partly to herself. She rifled through her purse, and soon located her cell phone. Her mall manicure began clicking against the buttons as she dialed.

Ah... A Deus Ex Cellular.

I sighed. Now I just had to make sure to grab my luggage and get out before she finished the call. I knew Kevin might try to hang with me. But turning down an invite from him would not have the potentially negative impact that it would with Clara.

\$\$\$

Quiet.

The room with its hotel smell. Dark wood furnishings, thick expensive comforter and drapes. The elegant but artificial feel of a apartment display unit that gets cleaned and sanitized every day.

Travel always made me more self-aware. More introverted. Reality became like a film I was watching.

I had managed to get through the check-in process quickly. Kevin had helped Clara with her luggage. She stayed on the phone the while he did so. By the time they headed for the check-in desk, a couple of families had queued up behind me. I was able to escape to my room with a friendly wave toward them as they waited in line.

With the world now at a halt, alone in my room, it hit me that I would be doing a TV show the next day. I stood up, walked around the room a couple of times. It seemed too small. I decided to look out my window. I walked to that side of the room. I pulled open the massive curtains.

Ahh! So this is what TV network money will get you.

From the 16th floor, I gazed out at a mountainous vista. This was second only to certain ocean views I had seen in the past. I drank in that sense of stillness and selfimportance that open landscapes can give.

The limo, the posh hotel, the view. I saw it all on a balance sheet in my mind. I began to feel that may it all reflected something about me. The value of my mind, maybe. These surroundings were the return on the investment I had made in myself, my intellect. All of that alone time, all of that study. The obsession with selfdevelopment. All of it was an elevator that had opened upon this panorama of Los Angeles.

Yeah? How does Grab-n-Go fit into that scheme?

I turned from the window. With so much at stake, I thought I'd better study. There was my trusty notebook computer sitting on the mahogany desk. It looked a bit sad among the nouveau riche décor.

I had brought along my "DiskFo Electronic Encyclopedia." It was a CD-ROM that had come free with some electronic doohickey or other. Not very thorough, but it was good enough for my purposes. Just some raw info for my brain to munch on. Hell, if I read one new fact that happened to come up during the actual game, it could be decisive.

I reached for the notebook bag to get the disk. I looked at the big, empty, king-sized bed. Maybe it was the sight of that bed, the hotel-smell of the room triggering deep memories of fuck-a-thons from my college years. Whatever it was, something evoked a question. A faint peep from way down in the reptilian lobes...

I wonder if there is porn on the cable TV system in this place?

And then my legs began moving. My hand picked up the remote. After all, I was just curious of course. I was going to start studying the DiskFo, but I was just wondering whether a swank place like this...

Yeeesss.

Carefully engineered images of women pouted out at me from the screen. Porn galore. And it was the good stuff. Two-to-four hour compilation tapes. You could mainline all the suck-and-fuck scenes without wading through some costume drama or pathetic attempt be an oiled-down version of "Top Gun."

I had developed a taste for the stuff during my four years without female contact. A couple of years into the dry spell, my dick had dragged me into a porn rental shop. I just knew a current student would spot me. But the need to see writhing female bodies was too powerful to resist.

There in the hotel, alone, the temptation had come back. I could not turn down the temptation of seeing a couple of hours of hot naked women getting fucked. The promise of four or five orgasms. Plus, the room had complimentary scented hand lotion in the bathroom.

Yeah, this is gonna happen.

I nudged up, lay back on the bed, clicked the appropriate menu buttons. I was already getting hard from the anticipation.

Seconds later, a lithe blonde gyrated on the screen. She rode her partner in a reverse cowgirl. I zoned in on her navel and toned abdominal line. Her labia gripped his cucumber-like shaft as she bounced up and down. The lotion went "splat-splat-splat" in my palm, increasing in tempo. It seemed like the camera stayed with that shot, just for me.

Well, I'll be getting this first one out of the way quickly...

Chapter 15

Mid-morning. We were on the hotel shuttle to the studio. This one was a van. My fellow contestants and I were belted into its bench seats.

Conversation was sparse, somewhat tense. Case of the jitters all around, probably. We were soon to appear on the Almighty Picture Box. A million heads would be turning in our direction, if only to stare at us for a few moments.

I had an orgasm hangover. I had cranked out four the night before, and fallen asleep going for five. Porn'll do that if you haven't seen it in a while. Next day, your brain feels something like your groin does after a good long fuck. Hollowed out like a cavern. You aren't good for much. Maybe some shopping or a couple of hours at a café.

I sighed, glanced out the window. Didn't seem like the best state of mind for competing on a quiz show. I figured I'd better start getting my shit together.

Okay... TV shows, name some actors in a TV show... Barney Miller... who's that old guy?... That old... Fish... Yeah, but, what's his... ABE!...Abe... what?

I stared out the window. Signs next to the road, rushing by. Billboards farther away, cruising by. There were ads for movies everywhere, and stars shilling on most of the others, too. I forced myself to connect names to all the faces, associate films and shows to the names.

ABE VIGODA!!

Okay, this is good. This is working. The rest of them are probably not practicing like this. I'm the only one. I'll be ready.

Right. You took, what, about five minutes to come up with Abe Vigoda? Good luck, Brainiac.

We got waved through the guard gate, suddenly found ourselves riding through grounds of Global Studios. The van's interior went dead silent. The scene was already written thousands of times in celluloid. The rows of nondescript buildings with huge garage doors. The surreality of painted backdrops and out-of-place props leaning here and there. We were watching it on a screen.

"Hey, look," someone whispered.

The forearm of the woman next to me drew across my visual field and pointed toward a car outside the window. We were stopping at one of the buildings. A sign identified it as "Global Lot 12."

"Doesn't that parking spot say 'Budd Morton?'" the woman whispered to me.

"Oh! Yeah!" I whispered back. "Hah! Check out that car."

Morton was the host of Quiz Show. He was known for his penchant for collecting unique vehicles. That day, he had apparently come to work in some lemon yellow Italian job.

"My name's Sarah," she whispered

"Jim," I said shaking her hand. "Why are we whispering?"

She was a plump strawberry blonde with creamy skin. She had green, intelligent eyes. Easy to gaze at. I wished she had been in my limo from the airport.

"I going to get a quick shot of it," she said, holding up a tiny camera phone.

As the camera clicked, a fit middle-aged man tore open the van's side door from the outside. After the quiet ride, it sounded like a drill sergeant banging on a trash can at 5 a.m.

"Alright, folks. Let's get your game faces on. You're not tourists here. This is serious business."

I recognized the voice immediately. It was Craig Fillbeck, the Global Producer who had set up my contract and travel arrangements. I glanced at Sarah, wanting to roll my eyes at her in solidarity. But she already had her backside to me, crawling out of the van. Our "moment" was pushed out of her mind.

As I stepped out of the van I noticed Kevin looking at me. He lifted his head in a nod, smiled. Clara was still behind me in the van. I smiled at the realization that they had not sat together. I hoped Kevin still saw me as a possible ally.

"Okay, folks," boomed Fillbeck, "Let's gather around here just a minute.

Back in Florida, Fillbeck would have been in a band, or maybe on a construction site. He was wearing a relatively dingy grey-black T-shirt and jeans. Wiry midforties body. Rockin' one of those Kenny G/REO Speedwagon 'do's.

"Okay, so we're doing two tapings today. We're gonna divide you up into two groups, pretty much randomly. The A group is gonna do the first taping, head back to the hotel. The B group is gonna do the second taping. Alright?"

People nodded automatically, as if they somehow had a say in this.

"There's gonna be one green room for A group, one for B group. You're gonna hang out in your green room for a while. We'll be doing practice games, you'll get your makeup for the show, and so on. You follow?"

"Sir, yes sir," boomed one guy above the chorus of mumbled "yeahs." I glanced at the guy. He was now grinning at his own sarcasm and audacity. A wag. Another potential ally.

Posed on his spindly glam rock legs, Fillbeck started reading the groups off of a list. I was pretty near the beginning of the B list. I watched Whispering Sarah walk toward A group. I stared at her, hoping maybe she would look at me. But she seemed nervous, distracted. She would glance at her fellow contestants, then glance down.

My stomach jumped a bit as I heard Kevin's name called for my group. He smiled at me and began walking toward me. Then Clara's name was called.

Random my ass.

The odds were against our being grouped together again. One of the three of us should have ended up in Group A. Just as I had suspected, the limo ride had been the start of the game. I realized that maybe that was why Sarah was looking so nervous. Others too. Trouble on the ride from the airport?

After the roll call, we began to file into the building. We tried to keep up with Fillbeck a fast walker while staring at all the oversized portraits of famous OBC shows and stars. No wonder Fillbeck had given us shit

about taking a tourist's attitude. The place was a fucking museum of television history. For a bunch of pop culture nuts like us, it was tough not to ogle.

Group A headed off in some other direction, and those of us in Group B reached our "green room." It was basically a big rec room. Card tables, metal chairs. There were classic board games and decks of cards to pass the time. A decent spread of waiting food covered a couple of card tables near the wall. Cheeses, breads, grapes, crackers. Stuff to make it seem like something was happening besides the passage of time.

We stashed our handbags and other stuff we had carried with us. Then we sort of gravitated back toward Fillbeck. He had set himself up as dictator, so no one yet felt comfortable deciding what to do with themselves. He seemed to be backing off of his drill sergeant demeanor, though.

"Oooo-kay," Fillbeck said. "Well, we, uh, have some time before taping, so... just make yourselves at home. Interact. Get to know each other."

Silence. Nobody moved yet.

"C'mon guys. Make this fun. Every one of you got picked to be here because there was, y'know, something unique... interesting about you. This is a unique situation. Enjoy it while it lasts."

Some light chatter began. We all smiled awkwardly, some laughed awkwardly. We knew it was all easy for him to tell us to relax. He was gonna get paid today no matter what he said or did. Only one among all these contestants would get any money.

I looked around as the crowd around Fillbeck broke up. Suddenly it seemed like a party where no one knew anyone else. Brains whirled as they sized up the others. I felt like I was looking too unconfident. I headed for the snack table.

Clara was already at the table. I noticed this too late to act like I was headed elsewhere. She looked up as I approached. Gave me that vaguely self-satisfied glance of that cheerleader, of the popular girl. Pretty and composed, but, on some ineffable level, as cold and menacing as a spider.

"Oh, those shoes are cool," I said.

She was wearing an expensive-looking pair of leather ankle boots. They were perfect for her petite legs and feet.

"Thanks," she chuckled.

I felt the chuckle in my stomach. In Soc Speak, of course, she had meant "Nice try, dork."

We chatted for a few moments. We had to pretend that we didn't both already know we were enemies. I glanced around the room, looking for Kevin. Talking to Clara increased the need for a more comfortable conversation.

Most of the others had paired up too. Everyone seemed to be looking at all the other pairs. Paranoia. We were all convinced that the other pairs were obviously colluding to win the game.

Kevin was paired up with a middle-aged guy with thin blond hair, buzz cut. I could tell Kevin was off on one of his stories. He was talking with his hands, and the other guy was smiling. Another woman walked up to the food table and said something to Clara. I saw my chance and headed for Kevin's side.

I worked my way into the conversation easily. The other guy was a dentist, Sim Blevin. The conversation among the three of us became this easy collective riff that kept shifting shapes but stayed aloft. We were like a jazz trio. Jokes, pop culture, some politics. For a few moments we actually seemed to forget where we were. That we were essentially competitors.

The board games eventually came out. Poker games started. People moved from group to group, feeling each other out.

A couple of hours into this waiting game, I was folding a losing hand of poker. I was bored with the game, and with the group of people at the table. I glanced around for Kevin or Sim. I spotted Kevin alone, doing these slow karate chops. I walked over.

"A little Tai-Chi?" I asked.

"Yeah. Helps me focus."

I watched him moving in slow motion for a second. Suddenly he broke his form and came closer to me.

"Listen... " he said, glancing around the room. "Clara... you know, the uh, wom--"

"Sure, from the limo," I said.

"I think she's... She said she and another woman, um, Lucy, were... y'know, that they were going to try to get the thing, the game, to be, like, women versus men."

I nodded. I had seen this on the show before. During a round, players from the opposing teams went into the ring to answer questions. Whoever answered correctly first got the point for their team. Then the players had to tag other members of their group, ringside, to take a turn in the ring. It was supposed to be somewhat like tagteam "pro" wrestling. I had seen women and men only tag members of the same sex, so that the others had no chance to score points by answering questions.

Between rounds, things got even nastier. The groups had to lose one member of their tag-teams. Team members held up signs to say who should go. The rational, fair thing would be to get rid of the people who answered incorrectly or too slowly. The points for correct answers translated into the jackpot that the winner finally received, so you wanted a strong team. But this was where human bias and greed stepped in. Where you saw the alliances and the back-stabbing.

I looked Kevin in the eye, concerned. "Well, what do you think we ought to... I mean, should we--?"

With a loud metallic squeal, the door swung open. Fillbeck clapped his hands a couple of times for attention, back to his sports coach persona.

"Okay people! We're moving to wardrobe now! Time to suit up for the game!"

My stomach knotted. This was it. I quickly turned to Kevin again.

"Let's talk again later," I said. "I'll think about... I'll try to figure something out--"

"C'MON people! Let's MOVE!" yelled Sgt. Fillbeck. "We gotta stay on schedule!"

\$\$\$

I'm standing in the dark being felt up by a Hollywood producer. This is just...

It was moments before the show taping, and I was backstage. The female producer was attaching microphones to my body. However, the amount of groping going on suggested that she had another motive. Not a flattering one, unfortunately. Seemed more like she was checking for other electronic devices that could help me cheat or record the show. Also for weapons, maybe. Things could get a bit tense when the stakes peaked somewhere above \$100K.

We started to file onto the sound stage. I noticed Clara walking next to me. Her eyes were wide and fixed straight ahead. I wondered if she was thinking of her pact with Lucy.

"Lions and tigers and bears," I said to her.

She glanced nervously at me. She managed a smile, but did not complete my film reference in the expected way.

Legal Eagles... No, no... From the Hip. With Judd Nelson, and... who was the female lead? Demi? No, um... Anyway, John Hurt as the psycho killer, and--

"Good evening ladies and gentleman... "

The booming voice of the announcer interrupted my internal practice session. He went into his spiel for the show's opening. We were surrounded by an audience in stadium seating. According to Sim, the dentist, the audience was basically a bunch of sightseeing tourists who had gotten free tickets from kiosks on the street. Sim had done some tourism of his own the night before, while I was in my room cranking out a few.

I took my place at the side of the ring. Some of the familiar background music for the show was playing in the background. All the contestants had to stay in place, standing still. The crew was finalizing light and camera adjustments.

On my side of the ring with me was my tag team. Kevin, Sim, Clara and Lucy I knew, or knew of. There were a couple of other people I had not really talked to or sized up. I felt my hands start to sweat. I realized I should have spent less time with Sim and Kevin, sized up more people. Too late now.

My team was to be known as Team Ruckus. We were all wearing outfits made to look like wrestling costumes. I was in a purple unitard with gold trim and a shiny gold cape. The tights were pretty tight. I sucked in my gut. I glanced down at my crotch to make sure it didn't need fluffing up.

I could feel them looking at us on the monitors in the control room. Looking for flaws, I thought. Probably giggling and making snide comments. Make-up people rushed out every few minutes. They mopped sweat and touched up foundation.

Finally the music began to swell. The opening theme started playing. With a flourish of applause, the show's host, Budd Morton, took his place near the center of the ring. He was wearing his trademark shiny referee outfit. The show was starting.

Budd looked around the ring at the contestants, smirking. He looked at me. Suddenly I caught myself looking at an image that I had seen hundreds of times on my T.V. But now it was brighter, alive. It was like I had moved inside of the television set.

The thought made me dizzy. I felt my blood pressure exploding as the theme music played. I began to wonder whether I was dreaming. Not in that idle way that you do when reading Descartes' Meditations. I really wasn't

sure whether I was asleep at the moment.

I could tell it was a panic attack coming on. I felt a growing urge to yell for them to stop. I wanted to tear off the microphone and run back to my hotel room.

C'mon, c'mon. Chill the fuck out. This is just some lactic acid in your blood. You are NOT going to lose it. You were made for this show. C'mon... Think of some questions... What other movies has John Hurt been in?

I took deep breaths. Forced myself to smile. After a moment or two of this, my selfconcept magically clicked back into place.

Just in time, too. The sudden glare of the spotlight hit me. We were doing intros for the show's opening.

"Jim Crayson," I heard my mouth saying. "Doctor's Landing, FL. Gas station attendant with a Master's in Logic."

I listened to the intros. Everyone else seemed to have some cushy life. The dentist, the real estate lady, the college student, the doctor's wife... My sense of competition flared again. I was here to win a load of cash. I was here to claw my way out of my shit job at Grab-n-Go. I was the one who deserved to win.

"Ok, teams!" bellowed Budd. "Let's play Quiz Slam!"

Ding-ding!

The bell rang as the first round began.

Sim was up first. He leapt into the ring. He and a dumpy housewife faced each other across the buzzer. They were supposed to crouch in a wrestler's stance. Both were relatively pear-shaped. They looked like the caricatures the producers wanted. I thought about my waistline again.

"The assassination of which European leader sparked World War One?" Budd boomed over the music.

Sim and his opponent both slapped at the buzzer. She hit it first.

"Napolean!" she shouted. The audience erupted in laughter.

"Wrong!" said Budd, smirking. "Sim?"

"Archduke Ferdinand?"

"We'll accept that!"

Sim and the housewife bounded back to their corners. My team members and I waved our hands at Sim, hoping he would tag us. I caught my breath as I saw and felt his hand slapping mine.

I seemed to go into autopilot. I saw myself bounding over the ropes, as if I had been in a ring before. I was into the game, into the character. I snarled across the buzzer at my opponent, who owned a car wash chain in Cleveland.

"What playwright wrote 'The Cherry Orchard?'"

I stared into the eyes of Car Wash Man. He looked blank. In the lower periphery of my vision I could see my

hand darting toward the buzzer.

"Chekov!"

"Correct!"

I whirled around. I bounded toward the ropes. Kevin was in my sights the whole way. I slapped his hand and let out a whoop. I shot Clara a glance as I tumbled over the ropes.

So much for Girl Power!

Kevin got his question right. We were three for three. I cheered and jumped. I held my hand out for a tag, but I figured he would tag someone else. We were encouraged to give everyone a chance in the early rounds. Playing favorites could come later, as the stakes got higher.

Kevin picked Lucy, Clara's accomplice.

"What ocean lies off the coast of California?"

I rolled my eyes. I wondered if they eased up on the questions for certain types of players. Lucy buzzed first, but she began stammering.

"Um... um... " Lucy stomped her foot. "Ooooooh--"

"Times up!" yelled Budd, grinning. "Agnes?"

"Pah-CIFIC!" yelled the college student, her opponent. The California audience cheered.

A few questions later I was due a turn. Clara had missed her question. She rushed toward the ropes and seemed to randomly slap toward our outstretched hands. I aimed my hand toward hers, snagged the tag.

"What was the name of the ship in the novel Moby Dick?" thundered Budd.

I saw my hand striking the buzzer again. I looked at Budd. The name was not in my head yet.

I waited for it. Waited for the right neurons to fire. Budd smirked back at me.

"Um... "

Don't stare at him! Look around quickly from side to side. That's supposed to help with retrieval.

"Time is running out... !"

"The Whaler?"

I heard a guffaw from the control room. A few snickers echoed from the audience. My opponent smirked at me across the buzzer. I gave her a gesture that said "Go ahead, you answer it, smartass." She didn't. Incorrect answers subtracted a point for your team.

"The correct answer, you geniuses," said Budd, "is the Pequod!"

Ding-ding!

"And that ends the first round, combatants," said Budd in his heavily-coached baritone. "The score is 5 points for Team Ruckus, 2 for Team Stormbringer!"

We cheered. The audience cheered. The other team looked sullen.

"Team Ruckus now has a team jackpot of \$5000, and only \$2000 for Team Stormbringer. But only one member of either team can take home that team jackpot. When we come back, both teams will vote to send home their wimpiest member!"

During the pause in play, we all had to write a name on a little placard. When our time came, we would hold it above our heads and say the name of the team member we wanted to send home. Completely up to us. Whether they had won much for the team or not.

I hoped Kevin had been straight with me. We had discussed strategy quickly during a trip to the bathroom. He had said we should vote to keep the team strong, not do the men versus women thing. I had agreed, but couldn't quite read him. We had both been cock-out and pissing at the time.

I looked at the magnetic pen trembling slightly in my hand. My peripheral vision was in focus. I tried to get a sense of what the others were writing.

Soon the spotlights blared on again. The theme music started and Budd Morton stepped to the center of the ring.

"Welcome back to Quiz Slam! So far Team Ruckus has dominated our tag team ring tonight. They now have a jackpot of \$5000. One of their team members could take home the gold, but the rest of them... HAVE GOT TO GOOOO!!!"

This was Budd's catch phrase. It had caught on. People in offices across the nation had started saying it on the way to the restroom. The audience hooted and clapped.

"Let's see which member of Team Ruckus the others think is holding them back. Team Ruckus, show us your choices."

The cards came up. We could all see everyone's cards. There was an awkward moment as people looked at the cards, sizing up the damage. There was a mishmash of names. Almost everyone had voted for someone different. Except for two people. Clara and Lucy stood next to each other. Each of their signs read "Jim." I felt my face getting hot.

"Clara and Lucy, you voted for Jim." said Budd. "But Lucy did not even know the name of that greaaat big body of water just west of us."

The audience giggled.

"Do you two really think Jim is the wimpiest member of the team?"

"Well, I know he has a graduate degree and all that," answered Clara. "But I figure that's just the type of person who should have known the name of the ship in Moby Dick."

There were a few chuckles from the audience. I glared at her.

"I mean, people read Moby Dick in, like, high school, right?" she continued.

"Alright, ladies," Budd said. "All the other team members seemed to disagree with you, but hey... "

He turned to me. "Jim: with two votes against you, Team Ruckus has decided. You've GOT TO GOOOOO!"

The theme music boomed in my ears as I walked off of the sound stage. I was seeing things as if they were in movie again. A producer indicated that I should follow her. She seemed to be whispering. We walked back toward the exit from the studio. Every face searched mine. They could smell blood. They all sought to relish what utter defeat looks like.

The producer took me back to the green room. I sat in one of the metal folding chairs. She sat down across from me. Rigid and muscular. She could hear instructions from the control booth through her headset. She kept an eye on me but tried not to look like she was.

I stared at a wall. My body slumped like a spent cock. For two days I had been up. The constant internal preparation. Playing at extroversion. The emotional countdown. Now it was over. Like that. In the silence, it began to sink in.

That was fucking IT?! TWO FUCKING QUESTIONS?! THAT WAS FUCKING IT?!!!

Now there was nothing. I was in the middle of nowhere, on the other side of the country. No jackpot. No publicity for my book. Nothing.

Except a green vest, with a nametag on it. Waiting for me in Florida.

Chapter 16

You gotta be kidding me.

The show was over. Apparently, someone figured proper closure would be to load us back on the same van. All of us. To go back to the hotel. The winner and all the losers. The backstabbers and all the backstabees. All of group B, that is. I never saw group A again. Seems they did their taping and got the hell out.

It was like sitting in a waiting room at the dentist and seeing the guy to whom you gave the finger out on the freeway. A fucking long ride back to the hotel after a cutthroat competition. People digging for small talk that would inevitably come out sounding strained and hollow.

Not that I had to worry about all that. I was gone. I had already checked out in my head. A door had slammed shut. I had seen the situation too clearly. My life was a gaping fuck-hole all over again. There was nothing more for me here in L.A. In this van. Solar system. Wherever.

I sat in the back of the van. I looked at the backs of their heads. The anger started seeping back, underneath the exhaustion. These people were worthless to me. Worse than worthless they had helped to defeat me. They were my escorts back to the store. Small talk? Not fucking likely.

"Guys, how fun was that?"

It was Clara.

A couple of voices acknowledged her, trying desperately to match her forced tone of excitement. She had not pulled any of this work-the-crowd shit in the green room. There she had worn her judgmental half-smile. The ever-present weapon of her social class. No one impressed her, her eyes said. Now suddenly we were her kindergarten class.

I looked out the window in disgust. I had watched the remainder of the taping on a monitor in the green room. Clara had survived three more rounds in the game. Her words about others, as she eliminated them from the team, had been the most caustic in the game. All said with a smile.

Thank God she didn't fucking win.

"Congrat-tu-LAY-shuns, Kevin," Clara said to our winner, mustering about as much sincerity as we had all come to expect from her.

I was boring a hole in the back of Kevin's head with my eyes. He had been staring straight ahead. His head jerked around to face Clara, like she had startled him.

"Oh... heh-heh... thanks, Clara," he responded.

Smelling blood, Clara continued facing him as his head jerked back into place.

"So... any idea what you're gonna do with the money?"

"Heh-heh... I um... "

Kevin's head and eyes darted quickly at the vanquished sitting near him. The ones I could see maintained pleasant veneers. But their eyes narrowed when Kevin looked away. He was not owning his victory well.

Well, let's hear it, fucker. What are you gonna do with my 37K?

"Well, I, you know, I prolly won't have to add any more debt to my student loan next year. Or, um, maybe I should pay off some of the...the principal."

"Well, that's not much fun," Clara said slowly. She was deliberately contrasting his nervous clip. "Don't you want to... I don't know... take your girlfriend to Europe or something?"

"Heh-heh-heh... .Shhhh!" he said, with a finger to his lips. "I can't say I'm gonna enjoy the money in front of everybody."

He continued chuckling nervously. He quickly glanced at the other faces around him, hoping someone else was laughing.

"Otherwise, I'll be lucky if I don't get, like, stabbed."

At the word "stabbed" his eyes finally caught mine. He had actually glanced toward me when he said it. He would get no reassurance from me. I was in no mood to do anything but rid the planet of infestation of humans. I held his eyes with the gaze of a shark. At the same time I had to stifle a smile. I enjoyed the subtle victory afforded by the fact that he had looked at me when he "joked" about fearing for his life.

He fidgeted and giggled another moment or two, as Clara let his statement hang out there. She was not about to let up. She engaged him in small talk for a few more minutes. A couple of lesser jackals prodded with brief questions and threw in "goodnatured" cheap shots here and there.

I stared at him for most of it. I held my stygian expression in case he looked at me again. He didn't look at me directly, but I could see his eyes hold fixed, tracking me in the periphery when he glanced behind him.

The more nervous he seemed, the more I thought about that little tidbit of "information" he had let drop. The one about how Clara and Lucy were going to make the game a gender thing.

Maybe he had been the one who talked Clara into voting against me. Maybe he had told her that the three of them--

Fuck this. What's the point? You LOST. It's over. This whole thing was a waste of time.

I was too emotionally spent to micro-analyze anything. For once. Even ire seemed like too much effort. I turned and looked out the window. I settled into the seat. I let my body sway imperceptibly with the movements of the van.

Must be, like, 1:30 a.m. back home.

There was little traffic, since it was late on a weeknight. We pulled into the hotel after about fifteen minutes or so. Mercifully short ride, but Clara had managed to maintain her jabbering during most of it.

I felt a wave of relief when I heard the doorman open the van doors behind me. I would be able to grab my stuff and slip out without having to talk to anyone. I knew that nothing good could come of anything that was said. I grabbed my bags and headed for the revolving door.

"Jim... "

Unfortunately I had underestimated Clara again. She could not let me, her first kill, retreat without the tacit

victory dance of addressing me. Her voice was a shower of dry ice across the back of my shoulders.

"Jee-um!"

No chance they could think I didn't hear THAT.

I turned. Most of the contestants were out of the bus or stepping out of it. They all looked at me. Some of them were unloading their bags. They moved in slow motion, waiting to see what Clara would say. She held her camera in the air in her left hand.

"I got some photos... "

"R-r-right... ?"

We had all posed in the Green Room before the show. A producer had taken photos using our cameras if we requested it. I had given them my camera. I had wanted to bring back some shots for the fam.

I was half turned toward Clara. I cocked my head to the side in an "I'm waiting... " stance.

"Well, I was taking up people's email addresses. So that I could, um, send 'em a scan of it... But... Oh, did... ? You had your own camera, didn't you?"

I turned and resumed walking.

"Yes," I tossed over my shoulder.

If she said anything or made a face, I neither saw nor cared. I was through the revolving door in seconds. Back for some well-earned solitude. I hoped it was the last I would see or hear of any of them.

§§§

It was dark. My eyes were wide open. I was looking for anything that would get me a visual cue. Something to fill out the scene. Orient myself. There was nothing. Nothing but black.

Those drapes must be thick.

I was wide awake. It must have been, like, 3:30 back home. Several floors below, even L.A. was probably winding down for the night.

My mind was not winding down. I went over the whole game, the whole day. I could remember every moment of it. It had played back in what seemed like real time in my head at least twice since I went to bed. Like a really long song stuck in my head.

Some of the parts of the parts of the day that particularly bugged me would repeat themselves. Every word. Every emotion. Now overlaid with new cring-worthy emotions and the anger of having suffered the outcome.

Many of the events would play back in slow motion, and with special emphasis. The ticking seconds as I tried to think of an answer, for example, would now seem like an hour. Or the playback would pause as I substituted vivid images and sounds of what I should have said and should have done. There were variations galore. The alternate worlds in which I won the prize money. Or was it asking so much? in which I was not the one humiliated by elimination in the first round.

I drank in the blackness in the room. I had temporarily gotten the instant replay part of my brain to SHUT UP by opening my eyes wide. My eyes had nothing to focus on. This seemed to keep away the images of the game, at least for the moment.

For a few seconds it looked as if I were hurtling through space. Or maybe that the dark was falling down on me like a waterfall of ink. My eyes kept trying to get a handle on what they were seeing. Strange patterns began to emerge.

I began to feel calmer. I decided I could use the utter darkness to meditate. What better way to focus my thoughts on my own consciousness? I would keep my eyes wide open and meditate on this abyss in front of me.

And so I lay there. Already my body began to relax. It was familiar with the drill. I stared for what must have been, maybe, thirty seconds.

Then there was her voice again. Clara's

"Whaler?"

"I mean, people read Moby Dick in, like, high school, right?"

I sat up and threw off the covers. I had been lying in bed for well over an hour. Maybe close to two. Too long. I was catching the bed curse. That state where the feeling of the bed itself is keeping you awake. I needed to distract myself in some way. Do something to flush this game out of my head.

Light seemed to explode from the lamp when I switched it on. Instant eye-ache. I stood there for probably a minute trying to see.

On the desk I saw my notebook. I had not written since the previous night. When I saw it, part of me instantly melted at the thought of the therapy of it. So often writing had been my way out of some cognitive or emotional corner into which I had painted myself. I always seemed to forget about it in between these episodes. Something would finally lead me to the keyboard, and that ended the problem.

But as I started toward it, I hesitated. I knew what I would be writing about. There was no question. There was also no way I wanted to think about any of it anymore. I didn't care if it might make it better. I was probably two hours into agonizing over already. I didn't want to hear about it anymore.

It did not take long to choose my alternative. Perhaps even more than in home life, hotel rooms center around the television. They occupy relatively more of the tighter cubic footage, they are positioned in front of the bed. I hadn't brought a book. The choice was obvious.

I flipped around looking at the dismal late-night fare. Infomercials. Reruns of horrific, half-forgotten shows. The 1970s horror series "The Night Stalker," for example. And cartoons.

Is there really sufficient demand somewhere for cartoons in the middle of the night?... Okay, but one that is NOT cannabis-related?

After a few clicks, I felt my chest nearly cave in. Budd Morton appeared on the screen. It was an episode of Quiz Slam. Sure it was in the middle of the night. But apparently they reran the evening's show then. Not our episode--that wouldn't be on for a couple of months. But it was Quiz Slam.

I looked up at the ceiling. Was it real? Was the ceiling like a mirror with someone looking in from the other

side?

I felt that feeling that cropped up now and then. The sense that everything--my whole life--was some kind of absurd hoax. That whoever was behind it all would occasionally slip up and leave these clues. Clues that it was all a trick. That everything was set up ahead of time. Like I was a pawn in some incomprehensible game. A pawn suffering with the illusion that it had control over anything.

Maybe they weren't slip-ups, I sometimes thought. Maybe this puppet master, or whatever, just liked throwing its signature into the mix occasionally. That would be part of the torture of it, wouldn't it? For the pawn to suspect that it was a pawn. 'Cause you couldn't tell anyone you suspect this, right? They'd just think you needed lithium, or were just trying to be funny, or philosophical. Besides, what good would it do? If you were right, you were just talking to other pawns, or automata, or whatever. Hopeless.

I lay there shaking my head in disbelief, thinking about the odds. I had happened to be awake. I had happened to decide to get up. To watch TV instead of writing or surfing the net. Then, further, I had happened to decide to channel surf, instead of, say dialing up more porn or an actual movie. All these little steps, these dominoes, fell into place to put Budd Morton on my screen. And back into my head.

I looked down from the ceiling and at the TV screen again. I knew at that moment that that was not Budd Morton smiling his dumb populist smile at me. That was the puppet master. Laughing at me.

I switched the channel. I actually left it on "Saved by the Bell" for a bit, not seeing it. I gazed blankly at the wooden actors. None of it seemed real for the moment. On a good night nothing much seems real in a strange place in the middle of the night at a quarter 'til four.

After a few more channels I found some news. Parts of southern California were experiencing wildfires. That always managed to make the news. Scenes of helicopters dropping hopeless tons of water that immediately vaporized. The flames were kind of hypnotic.

After a few minutes of vacuous mainstream news, sleep began to seem possible. I left the TV on while I readjusted myself on the bed. I turned the sound down so that I couldn't quite make out what was being said. After a few seconds I closed my eyes.

Sometime in that twilight of consciousness, just before sleep, there was something else. A twitch. Two, then three. I felt the wiggle deep in my rectum. Just the itch from too much caffeine maybe? But there was a certain aliveness about the movement.

This better not... this BETTER NOT be fucking what I THINK it fucking is.

I swung my legs off of the bed and trudged into the bathroom. I looked around for the lotion I had used the previous night. There was still a little left.

I dropped my shorts and sat on the toilet. I smeared the lotion quickly onto two adjacent fingers on my left hand. I reached under my balls and shoved those two fingers deep up my ass.

I pulled out the fingers. There they were. Two little white strings of puppet mastery. Each about two millimeters long. One lolled lazily on the fingernail of my index finger. The other was less happy about being ejected from his warm, putrid abode. He wriggled frantically at the bend of my second knuckle.

I had pinworms. An insidious form of intestinal parasite. Very contagious. Mainly transmitted by their microscopic eggs via surface-to-mouth contact. Children, with their questionable sanitary habits, are most susceptible to them.

They are not particularly dangerous, but they are extremely irritating. Besides the constant awareness they create that there is a fucking live worm in your butt, they cause that butt to itch. And they can be bloody hard to get rid of. One infected family member means the whole family has to take the medicine.

I panted. I was fully awake again. My anger was back in full force. I snatched toilet paper off the roll and wiped my greasy fingers on it. I wadded the paper and hurled it between my legs into the toilet.

"Dirty fucking shit eaters," I said between my clenched teeth.

Then I reached up and plunged the fingers back into my rectum. The wipe had taken much of the lotion away, and the penetration was a bit more aggressive this time. Hurt.

Two knuckles deep in my own shitter, I swirled my fingers to try and capture more worms. I had to check if there were there more of the hideous freeloading creatures. A trip back to bed with them dancing around would simply keep me awake.

As I dug around I wondered how I had gotten infected. I had known them all too well as a nail-biting child. I was still a nail biter. And now I was around kids everyday. My own and the ones at the store.

Another worm appeared on my finger. I wiped it off. I added some more lotion this time before impaling myself again.

I wondered for a moment if the twins had infected me. Or maybe it was the dirty little fuckers buying candy at Pine Trail. Then I remembered one night seeing Jillie itching her pajama-ed ass. I was reading when I saw it. I recalled vaguely wishing she would go wash her hands at the time. But I hadn't told her to.

Great. So now I have to not only PAY some quack like 75 bucks just to get a prescription, then I STILL have to shell out for medicine for everybody in the family.

I pulled my fingers out and examined them for the fourth time. No more worms. But here was a thin sheen of blood on my fingers from the small anal tear I had caused.

There were also a couple more of the small, clear gelatinous masses that I had been wiping off of my fingers. I suspected these might be what the worms ejected in and around the anus to spread the eggs. Perhaps it was what caused the itching. This, in turn, allowed the eggs to hitch a ride on the fingernails of filthy little urchins and nail biters like me.

I continued to angrily dig until I had cleaned out the rest of this egg jelly. I held the vague hope that if I broke the egg cycle I might avoid the embarrassing and costly trip through the healthcare wringer. We had no insurance.

Finally I flushed all the wads of parasite-infested TP down the toilet. I got in the shower. I paid particular attention to soaping up my ass. I also scraped the soap across all my fingernails. It took about five extra minutes to get all that soap out from under my nails.

After the shower I looked at my watch again. Close to 5 a.m. Florida time. I was now wet and exhausted. My rectum felt like I had reluctantly spent the evening underneath a couple of gay-porn actors. I shuffled back to bed, fell onto it.

I closed my eyes. The images of Quiz Slam did not seem to be coming back. That part of my brain was too tired. I felt like I was stapled to the mattress. Sleep started to come on at last.

Somewhere, though, in those moments before oblivion, I saw an image of my airplane. The one I was taking the next day. I imagined it flying across a map, like they did in old movies. Slowly. Across the country.

And glued to the map, at the top of Florida, was a little plastic replica of a Grab-n-Go store.

Chapter 17

My face in the glass. Green-ish from the fluorescent bulbs buzzing above my head. No other sound.

Behind the face the parking lot was mostly dark. Not yet dawn.

My eyes looked wild. I felt it. I had opened the store not long before. Everything had started to crowd in on me. The colors. Having to talk to customers. I was staring at myself so that my mind had something to latch onto. To keep me from feeling like I was losing it.

Someone at the register cleared his throat.

"Mornin' sir," I heard myself say.

"Paper."

I paused for the briefest instance. His answer brought me back to the present. The familiarity of anger. "Rudeness" always seemed to set me off.

I looked at the slack, expressionless face of the retiree in front of me. He was poking in his leather change pouch, digging through pennies. He glanced up with an "I'm waiting" look.

We'll just dispense with the pleasantries then.

"50 cents," I barked.

With that, of course, he gave me a stare. His index finger continued to stir the coinage.

"I thought it was 53. What about tax?"

I looked at him, let his question marinate. I figured there were only two people who tried to suggest a higher price than the one you had quoted them: imbeciles and assholes. I was pretty sure I knew which one he was.

"No tax on newspapers."

"Marketland charges tax on papers."

Don't I WISH you were there.

"I wouldn't know, sir. But we--Grab-n-Go--here, there's no tax on newspapers. Magazines, yes, newspapers, no."

He looked down again, digging some more in the change purse.

"Well, that doesn't make any sense."

"Mmm," I yell-grunted, both as a response and to express disbelief that he was actually continuing this line of conversation.

He didn't catch my drift. He still stood there sifting. He glanced at me as he carefully selected coins. I reached above my head and started pretending to count the cigarette packs in the hanging racks.

"I don't see how one place in the same county would have to charge tax but another place wouldn't."

With that he decided, apparently, which two quarters in his collection he hated the most. He tossed them onto the counter. One circled for a moment before smacking the side of the cash register.

I managed to avoid glaring at him in the hope that he'd just leave. I imagined grabbing the back of his head and smashing it repeatedly against the counter. Pausing to look into his dazed, bloody face and scream "Why can't you just hand the change to me? Why do have to masturbate your own ego by pretending that I am beneath your dignity?"

He left, finally. He walked out shaking his head. Obviously disgusted with the terrible service you get these days from simply trying to buy a newspaper.

I immediately abandoned the cigarette counting and leaned back against the counter. I looked at the clock on the register's monitor. 6:22 a.m. I shook my head. About eight hours of work to go. No lunch break, nor any other break.

Grab-n-Go massaged the lax Florida employment laws about breaks. They claimed we had sufficient de facto breaks between customers. Never mind the stocking we were supposed to do. Probably cost them more to pay the fucking lawyers to figure out the loophole than they would have paid for the breaks.

As usual, the moment of solitude was welcome. This was my first day back on the job since Quiz Slam. I had officially graduated from Pine Trail. I was now an official assistant manager at the Doctor's Landing store, Riverside.

I had arrived at 5 a.m. at the dark building. There was no third shift at the Riverside store. I had let myself in and looked around. It was difficult to believe I was really awake, really back at this job. Apparently there had been some part of me during the whole Quiz Slam experience that really believed I would not have to come back to this job.

Quiz Slam still had me in a headlock. My appearance on the show had probably played back in my mind a thousand times. I was hung over. The only way I had been able to get any sleep since I came back was by getting nearly blackout drunk. Usually scotch. Didn't want to risk waking up during the night to piss beer, having to start all over again.

The store had looked strange when I came in. It was backlit by just a couple of fluorescents from the storage room and the restroom area. The usual lurid colors of the signage and packaging were dulled. Plush toys hanging from the fixtures looked more like hospital specimens or bad taxidermy. It was dead silent in there, except for the buzz of the cooler compressors.

By now I had gotten pretty familiar with the process of counting down the safe from the previous night's work. Tons of twenties in those numbered envelopes. If the take this morning had been any indication, the Riverside store was earning far less than Pine Trail. I had actually finished the deposit long before it was officially time to open.

I looked out the front window again. No one was coming. A few cars whooshed by on the road out front.

The store had not been very busy after I opened it, pre-dawn or not. Fine by me. I thought about the prospect of having more stand-around time at this store. It would mean more time to do what I had always enjoyed doing most at any McJob: staring off into the distance and daydreaming.

Somehow, though, this thought wasn't exactly re-inflating my bubble. I was back in that green vest again. I

looked at it. Stained across the belly from leaning over dusty boxes and spilling coffee. It smelled slightly sour. I never wanted to take it home to wash it.

A couple of headlights appeared outside in parking lot. I watched the car slowly come to a stop out front.

I rubbed my ass against the cabinets. My asshole still felt a little bit itchy. Probably from the damage of trying to dig out the pinworms. I had only felt one or two since the rectal search-and-destroy mission in Los Angeles. I had found a cheap herbal medicine for them at a health food store. So far it was holding.

"Meep-meep-meep-meep... !!!"

My stomach twisted at the sound of the door alarm, the obnoxious notification that customers were entering. The damned thing was loud and incessant. Nothing like the quiet "ding-dong" at Pine Trail. It sounded like a smoke detector, with only slightly less of a piercing quality. I had noticed a couple of customers freezing at the sound of it, thinking they had set off some kind of anti-theft device or metal detector.

The customer walking in seemed not to be phased by it. She held her head slightly downcast, but her eyes looked at me with a calm and searching expression. She was tall and middle-aged. Seemed to glide to the counter. Her ghostly stride was somehow menacing. The sun was on its way up, but it was still dark outside. Still the middle of the night, basically. The time when waking life is on a continuum with nightmares.

"Haven't seen you here before," she said.

She set her purse on the counter. I noticed her mannish hands. Tanned and thickly veined. This highlighted the fact that there was much about her that was masculine.

"No, this is my first day... here. I, uh, we train, get trained out at the store in..." I gestured west. It was too early for the memory to kick in yet.

"Pine Trail?"

"Yeah."

"Mmm..."

Her eye contact was somewhat unnerving. One of those people who look at you like they are reading a fortune cookie strip glued to your eyebrows. But she held a faint smile that, along with her pattern of wrinkles, gave her the harmless look of a young chimp.

"I need a pack of Phelps Menthol Light 120's," she said in a lower voice. "D'ya like it?"

"Phelps, Phelps..." I said, scanning hanging racks above my head for the obscure brand.

"It's usually right up here..."

She reached too near my forehead and pointed upward and to the left of where I had been looking. I stared at the hand pointing at the packs. It was like looking at Robert Mitchum's hand wearing press-on nails.

"Oh, of course... thanks. Do I like it? The, ah, working here? Well, I, ah... I guess it pays the bills. You know."

She nodded. She resumed her simian, soul-searching look. I looked down, began tapping the purchase into the register.

"I work down at the Acreage," she said, tossing her head slightly in its direction, but maintaining the stare. "Name's Helga. I stop in here most mornings."

The Acreage was a new golfing resort about twelve miles south of Doctor's Landing. Big-time conferences, big-time attitude. Prices that kept most of the public at more than arms reach. The commercial version of the gated community. You occasionally heard about the Names that choppered-in for a weekend.

"Oh... well... how's that working for you?"

"Stopping in here?" she asked with a hint of a smirk.

"Ha-ha, nicely done..." I said sincerely, raising an eyebrow. "No, I mean--"

"I manage the housekeeping staff. It's a good company. Two sixty three, right?"

"Wh--? Oh, ye--" I glanced at the register. "Right, that's right. \$2.63. Nothing else, then?"

She shook her head. She gingerly counted out three ones. Some vague pragmatic part of me realized somewhat apprehensively that it might be good to network with her. But the thought of sending her the wrong signals was frightening.

"Yeah, I, uh... I've kept an eye on th-the, uh, job announcements down there..."

The stare was merciless, inscrutable. I made change.

"You know, looking for something that, um... f-for the right opening..."

I handed her the change. Incredibly, she let another beat pass.

"Well, I'll could give you some advance notice if I hear about something coming up in... what? Retail, sales?"

"Oh, that'd be... or management. Would be what I would, um, hope for. Thanks. That would be nice of you."

"Alright, then, ahhh..."

She broke the stare to lean toward my nametag.

"Oh, sorry... Jim. Nice to me you."

"Jim. Nice to meet you."

"Meep-meep-meep-meep... !!!"

Another customer swept into the store, made a bee-line for the coffee. This seemed to disrupt Helga's Stare.

Thank you!

"Ok, Jim. You have a good one."

"Thanks. You too, Helga."

I watched Helga as she glided back to her teal Mustang convertible. I'd probably see her several times a week.

I had noticed at Pine Trail that these stores tend to have regulars. Missouri too. People on their way to work mostly. You saw them every day around the same time. They'd stop in every day for a pack instead of buying a carton. A single beer instead of a 20 pack. Stuck in a mindless routine. Grab-N-Go's bread and butter.

I suspected that Helga would never deliver on a job lead. It was the same with all the regulars I had encountered. Our conversations would have a mind-numbing, Sisyphian sameness every day. Neither of us would continue to think of the other person outside of that fleeting moment at the cash register. So we would tacitly settle on a script to relieve the awkward silences. It wasn't much, but it was better than the barely-subdued hostility many customers spewed.

"You're out of decaf."

I looked away from the window, at the dude now standing at the counter. He had set a styro of steaming coffee on the counter. He wasn't looking at me. He was looking through the bills in his wallet.

"Oh, I'm sorry about that," I said, honestly. I hated to find coffee pots dry and baking on the coils when I went to buy a cup. "Could I fix some for you? It only takes a couple--"

"No," he said, slapping a single onto the counter. "Can't you see I already got some?"

"Well, that cup could have been for someone else." I felt my cheeks tingle, reddening at the confrontation.

"Who?" he asked. He looked around the store, hamming it up like he was searching for someone.

"You could be taking it home to someo--oh, never mind. What's the point? One-ohnine!"

My face was fully red. My aggression had slipped out. He glared at me while digging in his pockets for change.

"How long have you been working at this store, bud?"

"Forever."

"Yeah? Well I ain't never seen ya," he said.

He "pharoahed" his head when he said it. Something rednecks had picked up from Black culture. I had always thought it ironic.

I shrugged. I wasn't sure how far I should take this on my first day at the store. My brain started weighing the possible damage to my employment history versus the joys of telling an asshole to fuck off.

He leaned in. He had a look of sadistic glee. I looked at his brownish-yellow babycorn teeth.

"I'll let Don know about how things went for me here this morning."

My stomach twisted. Something must have shown on my face.

"Uh-huh. That's right, I know Volker," he said. "Ask him about ol' Charlie next time you see him."

Still the grin. Then he leaned in again. "You gotta watch that smart mouth in this town, buddy."

He grabbed his coffee, started to walk toward the door. He kept his eyes locked on mine. Dancing in the end

zone. I just scowled at him. Figured the damage was already done.

After the beeping of the door alarm subsided I kicked a box of styrofoam plates as hard as I could. The box was light, and took wing. My legs suddenly felt numb as I watched it arc through the air toward the hot dog grill. I hadn't meant to kick it so far.

The light box bounced off of the metal grill, doing no damage to it. But a couple of dogs bounced on the floor. They rolled in hair and other detritus. Left a trail of grease.

"FUCK this fucking job! This... LIFE!"

I leaned back against the cabinets again. I looked out the wall of windows again. The sky was etched with the pastels of sunrise against a deep blue. But I would have none of it.

You just HAD to vent on the guy who knows Volker, didn't you?

I mule-kicked the cabinet behind me with my right leg. I stopped myself from checking to see if it cracked, or if I had left a mark. What difference did it make now?

It sickened me to realize the power that customers held over me. I could put in my time for months, maybe a couple of years. Dragging my ass out of bed at 4:30 to start counting the money by 5. Putting in 10 hour shifts, stocking the shelves. All of it. Then some redneck fuck comes in here and decides he wants to make trouble. Bait me into it, then goes crying to the boss. Next thing I know, my job is toast.

"Who? I don't see nobody here... "

I pictured myself knocking the cup out of his hand, coffee spraying everywhere.

I folded my arms, shook my head like there was something inside it. So now it was time to edit the replays. More l'esprit d'escalier. Quiz Slam was not enough. I knew that I was now in for a good hour or more of replaying this store scene. Seeing "Charlie" wag his ugly head at me. And that grin.

The store was quiet, empty again. But it looked horrific at that moment. The signs and chintzy merchandise, hanging everywhere, stacked on nearly every surface. Nearly all of it shat out of abysmal Chinese sweatshops and shipped here to dangle in front of my eyes for ten hours a day.

The contents of my mind were just as bad as my surroundings, I realized. There was the image of the inbred trailer trash who had found a way to fuck with my thoughts. Then the fact that I gave a shit about what he thought at all. And having to endure my own private screening of the episode for who-knew how long.

I thought about how far I had sunk. From the perfect hours of solitude in university libraries. Writing. Living a quiet and relatively content life, preparing for an academic career.

And now this place. These people. Stained. I had done it all to myself. Ruined myself, perhaps.

I spat at my own leg. It missed and splattered on the cushion mats on the floor. I was sick of myself. If it wasn't the constant replaying of the Quiz Slam humiliation, it was this. I wanted to crawl out of my own mind.

Above me in the racks were hundreds of cigarettes. Nearly all the brands you could ask for. The big names, the ones you've heard of, of course. Then there were all these other exotic names. Hold-overs from decades ago that had not quite killed-off their loyal customers. Many of them were cheap, generic crap.

Fuck it. Fuck my lungs. Fuck me.

I grabbed a pack from the rack. The brand my ex-girlfriend Kelsie had smoked.

I looked out front for cars coming up. Nothing. Most of the people with crazy early hours had already stopped in. Most everyone else was just getting up. It was the perfect time to light up out front. Just like Billie always did out at Pine Trail.

I pulled out a cigarette. Smelled it. The odor was kind of artificial, but I caught that pungent sweetness of tobacco. The flame on the lighter crackled as I lit it. I sucked in the smoke, feeling the familiar burn in the throat and lungs. People don't cough like they do in the movies on the first pull. It's a smooth burn unless you suck in too much.

Sun was starting to come up. I watched the blue cloud snake out of my nose and mingle with the cool dawn air. This was where I belonged. I had proved it. This was the job I deserved. I had found my place in the world. My own little black hole in reality.

I smiled, leaned back against the storefront. Then I felt the nausea coming on. Maybe I was dragging too deeply.

Chapter 18

Shift changes suck.

Customer comes into a C-store. Wants to buy a pack of gum or a pack of smokes. Maybe grab a beverage for the drive home. Leaves the car running, 'cause how long could it possibly take?

Then he sees the dude behind the counter. Standing there with a cash drawer, waiting to put it into the register. Watching the other worker frantically counting the money while a line full of customers waits. It's like being in the grocery store line behind the old lady looking for her coupons and checkbook.

So the customer stands there glaring at the clerks. Gets pissed off. Maybe starts giving them shit about the wait.

At the Riverside store, I was the only guy behind the counter. Having to do the whole shift change myself. That's the way some fucktard thought it made sense to do the shift changes there. Solo.

At least at Ben's store in Pine Trail the training store there was always someone to cover a second register during the shift change. Sure, the clerks still had to run totals from all the little machines, too. The check approval machine, the machine for diesel gas purchases, the electronic lottery rig, etc. But that was nothing compared to fielding customers and doing all that other shit at the same time.

It was 1:50 p.m. Still my first day at the Doctor's Landing store. Seemed like it had gone on forever.

Marta worked second shift. She was due to arrive at 2. I wasn't looking forward to meeting her.

I kept waiting for customers to leave. Hoping for the perfect five minutes to get it all done without interruption. If I missed running a single total, it would throw off all the totals in which case I might as well not have done a shift change at all. At least that's probably what Volker would say to me when I got the stern phone call.

The thing that took the longest was writing down the I.D. numbers for all the scratchoff lottery tickets. I'd already tried to do it five times. Each time I got about halfway through the scratch lottery tickets before three customers would come in.

I was getting antsy. I was going to look like an idiot in front of Marta. She was now my co-assistant manager. That meant she was one of my tacit competitors for whatever managerial positions might open up. Plus, she had been at this store for a while. I figured the last thing I wanted to do was give her even more hand in the situation.

A customer Hank, he said was talking to me at the counter. A regular, he said. Introducing himself to me. Nice enough guy, but I couldn't stop glancing out the window. He had talked for 30 seconds, 45... A minute ticked by with no other customers. Time I could have spent doing the shift change. It was like I was holding my breath while crossing a bridge. But I nodded at him, smiled.

"Yeah, me an' an ol' boy I go out fishing with, we are looking to start a bait shop. We figure down there at the river bend, y'know, down where the big bridge to Kinsboro is? We figure that'd be a... that'd be the best spot for it."

"Uh-huh?"

"'Cause, y'know, all you see down there, on the weekends... People's always fishing off that bridge. Hunnerds of 'em."

"Yeah, I've... I have seen 'em. Hey listen--"

"Yeah, you cain't miss 'em. They all over that bridge. Shit, I got to slow down to 25 ever time I go over the dang thing. Cain't never tell if one o' them young'uns is gonna jump out in the road."

"Uh... ri--Listen, Hank. You know Marta, right?"

"Sure."

"Yeah, well, she's gonna be here in the next couple of minutes. Expecting me to have this register open for her. You know, gotta do this stupid shift-over thing... ?"

"Oh, oh, yeah. I reckon it is about that ti--"

"So, yeah, so I hate to run you off. It was very ni--Thanks for coming in, introducing yourself."

"Nice to meetcha Jim."

We shook hands. His palm felt something like what I'd imagine a man-sized lizard's would. My academic's hand probably felt like a child's to him.

Hank walked out. At least he had not bought a scratch ticket. I grabbed the clipboard to finish writing the numbers. I got them all down in another minute or so. Half the battle.

Then I heard the thump of a car door.

"HRRRRNNGH!" I growl-moaned.

I stood from my crouch and looked out the window. It had just been Hank getting into his truck. He waved at me through his windshield. Must have finished a smoke first, made a call, or something. Still no other cars.

I threw the clipboard on the back desk, leapt for the freestanding machines. I started furiously dialing in the little codes. Soon I had a cacophony of printers going all at once. The A.M radio was still blasting classical music. All these sounds together sounded like a John Cage piece.

No time to listen to it. I started keying in the shift change codes on the main cash register. It would take a while for the shift report to print. I cursed myself, realizing I probably should have started the register first.

Sure enough, as I was keying in the launch codes, I saw it in the corner of my eye. A worker's pickup up careening into the parking lot. Pickups always seemed to careen into the parking lot. It made the passengers bounce and sway in the cabin, as they stared straight ahead at the store.

I looked back down. Typed in some more codes. If I could get the changeover going, I should be able to have the register open by the time they thumped their selections onto the counter. Probably beer. It would take them a few moments to retrieve from the cooler at the back of the store.

The main printer began rocking on its mesh platform. Dot-matrix piece of crap. Matched the outmoded software the stores used for accounting.

A second later the "IN" door swung open. The customer alert device shrieked its shriek. I scowled toward the door.

Two filthy workmen were bounding into the store. One of them broke off his banter with the other guy. He squared his shoulders and glared back at me.

"Whoa, now, don't be giving me that hard look!"

I snapped out of my solipsism. Snapped back into the animal world of testosterone and boundaries. It occurred to me to sidestep the issue. I gestured toward the top of the "IN" door.

"That door alarm has got to go," I said. "It's rough on a hangover."

"Oh. Aw'ight. I gotcha bubba. I thought you was tryin' to start some shit."

His buddy laughed, headed back toward the beer cooler. Mr. Sensitive sauntered toward the counter where I was.

Great...

"Little too much beer last night, huh?"

"Yeah. Long day."

How far will I have to take this lie?

"I hear ya, bubba. You gotta learn to roll with it, man. Know what I mean?"

I forced a smile. My ego was only surviving this because my mind was stuck on finishing the shift change.

Clink!

I glanced down toward the timer safe. It was now unlocked. When Marta got here I could remove the drop envelopes out of it, take them to the back. Start counting the money.

Mr. Sensitive craned his neck. He looked over my shoulder at the smokeless tobacco.

"Ya'll got any Bearcat?"

"Yes."

"What's the date on it?"

I turned my back to him, reached up toward the cans of snuff. I gritted my teeth and widened my eyes. It felt like lightning was shooting out of my temples. I knew what was coming.

"Let's see... This was made, ahhhh... the 24th of last month."

Wait for it...

"Whut? Ya'll ain't got nothin' fresher than that?"

You put a turd in your mouth, and you want to make sure its fresh?! IDIOT! DOLT! I HOPE YOUR TONGUE ROTS WITH CANCER!

"No sir," I said. "We get it in every week. We have to sell what our distributor sends us."

I felt heat creeping up my neck to my face.

His buddy had now arrived at the counter. He set two twelve packs of cheap-shit Dicker's Lite on the counter. He grinned at me moronically.

"Well, how come ZiPantry up the road there don't have trouble gettin' fresher Bearcat than that?"

"I'm honestly not sure. It's a conundrum."

"A who?"

The door alarm began shrieking again. It was Marta. Mr. Sensitive glanced toward her, then back at me.

"You do the ordering here, or what?" he asked me.

"No, this is my first day actually," I said. "At this store anyway."

"Well, bubba, you need to get up to speed," he said.

I squinted at him and my lip curled up in a "Are you an idiot?" expression.

Marta was behind the counter, at this point. She was placing her belongings here and there. She had come in wearing her vest, instead of donning it at the store like most clerks did.

"Like I said. I didn't do the order."

Marta had listened to the exchange so far. Her eyes peered from behind small wire frames. Her expression was severe. All the sun damage didn't make her look any more pleasant. Her gigantic mullet was a frayed, partially bleached mess.

"What's the problem, sweetie?" Marta asked Mr. Sensitive.

Nice. Forget trying to establish backup for your co-worker.

He reiterated the "problem," calling the person who ordered the tobacco an idiot. Turns out that was Marta. Her face tightened.

"That's the freshest they sent me. I can't make it myself--"

"Well, but how come up at ZiPantry--?"

"Sir, that's what they sent me." Louder this time. More of a bark "Now, if you can get it fresher at ZiPantry, I don't know what to tell you."

The men looked shocked. I looked pleased.

"Well, I reckon I'll just buy it there then. Shit. You got some attitude, lady."

They walked out, leaving the beer on the counter.

I shook my head in disbelief. "Thanks. I can't imag--"

"You got register two open?"

"Um... no. Those guys ca--"

"Register two is the second shift register. You're sposta have it open by the time I come in."

It hit me that she was trying to act like she was my manager, rather than co-assistant manager. I stood taller, put a hand on my hip.

"Uhh... I know that. At the Pine Trail store, there was always another person cl--on the clock, during the, you know, the shift over. It's harder to do with one person."

"Well, this ain't Pine Trail. And it ain't rocket science."

I stared at her for a beat too long, for effect. She held her chin juttied forward. Almost a caricature of aggression. Her mullet, with its "party in the back" running halfway to her rear, seemed to be an extrusion of her misshapen personality.

The heat had returned to my face and neck. I continued to stare at her. I calculated whether it made any sense to try putting her in her place.

Suddenly my legs made the decision for me. They had been standing all day. It felt good to sit down on the floor in front of the timed safe. I started raking the drop envelopes out of it. Time to count the first shift take and do the bank deposit.

I knew Marta probably felt like she had proven herself to me. That bothered me. But a wiser part of me thought about the universe outside the building. And of getting the fuck home. Do you go to the zoo and get bent out of shape during a stare-down with a bobcat?

I walked back to Don Volker's office with the money. That's where we did the paperwork, the counting. I sat in his chair for a moment. Happy to be away from the customers, from Marta.

There was a monitor on, color. It was a quad-display of the video feed from the security cameras. I looked at screen that showed Marta at the register from the side.

I watched her finish counting her cash drawer, checking to make sure I hadn't shorted her. She slammed the register shut. Then she stood with her right fist on her hip, looking out the front windows. She had switched the radio to a country music station. She started tapping a foot. Nothing about her seemed feminine except for her stature and skinny build. She was like an angry little man whose dick had dried up and fallen off years ago.

I stared at this creature in amazement. This was what I would be stuck with nearly every workday. So much for a pleasant--or even tolerable--working relationship. Of all the people in the Grab-N-Go corporation. The dumb bad luck of it pissed me off.

The phone rang. I jumped. Back in the moment.

I glanced at the monitor. Marta was headed toward the phone. I snatched it off the cradle.

"Grab-N-Go, Riverside."

I smiled at the monitor. Marta had frozen in mid-reach, waiting for the second ring.

"Hi hon," said Katie.

It was good to hear her voice. She asked about how the first day had gone. She was wondering what time I was supposed to get home. The twins were clamoring to get out of the house for the afternoon. Maybe grab a game of putt-putt. Was eating out a possibility? I told her I'd probably need a nap first.

I knew the nap would be tough to come by. The kids had been antsy for entertainment even before I had traipsed off to California. We had not gone out for dinner since I had returned. So, if Katie gave them the affirmative, it would renew their excitement. Loud TV and petty kiddie arguments would ensue as I attempted to rest.

"Could you guys maybe... go for a walk? When I get home? Like down the river or something?"

"I've already done that today."

"Well... whatever, but I'm bushed, okay? I need to sleep for a little bit. Otherwise I'll be a zombie when we are out. Remember? Like on your birthday... ?"

Her birthday had passed since I was doing the 5 a.m. clock-ins for Grab-n-Go. We had all gone out to T.J. McFrosty's in Kingsboro to celebrate. I had spent most of the evening in a near daze, staring at the knick-knacks on the walls of the theme restaurant.

She agreed, but sounded put-upon.

"Thanks. If I wait 'til later to nap, you know, it'll be harder to sle--to get to sleep tonight."

"Right... Oh yeah! Listen: the new weekly paper came out today. I looked in the job section, and I-I think there might be... it sounded like something you might like."

I suddenly felt more awake.

"What is it?"

"It has something to do with education. A State of Florida thing. But it doesn't sound like a teaching job."

"Well... what--?"

"I don't have the paper right, here... I'll have to--"

"No, it's okay. I'll ju--Wait til I get home."

I liked the "not a teaching job" part. I decided I might as well use the anticipation to keep up my inner drive, get me home.

I hung up with Katie. Started counting down the money, balancing totals. I was only \$1.34 over for the shift. I thought briefly about keeping a buck out of the deposit. But I decided maybe the overage would balance out shortages later on. If anyone was paying attention, anyway.

A last glance at the security monitors. Marta was changing a couple of the small cans of garbage. No customers. Looked like a good time to head out. I stuck the bank drop bag in my armpit. Headed out of the office.

I passed Marta. She gave me a suspicious look.

"You ought to stick that deposit bag under your vest," she said. "I wouldn't trust any of these customers as far as I could spit at 'em."

Oh, working with you is just going to be grand.

"I think I'll be alright. Thanks so much, though."

She seemed unfazed by the heavy sarcasm.

"And next time you need to get these trashcans done before I get in. I don't wanna be doing 'em twice on my shift--"

I let the door shut behind me before she had finished. Incredible. If she was not going to afford me civility on our first meeting, I decided, no point in trying to hold up my end.

I headed to the car. I stared toward the river, in the distance. I pushed Marta out of my mind and thought about that job lead.

Chapter 19

Instead of going to the bank to drop off the daily deposit, I stuck it under the seat in my car. It was just a little brick of money in a plastic bag, barely noticeable. I wanted to go on home, get that nap. We were going out later, Katie, the twins and I. I had a key for the deposit drop at the bank. I could do it then.

It felt good to get out of the store. Dank little cinder block building. From the store window I could look at the sun shining all day, but getting out in the breeze was different. I could breathe. It didn't smell like mop water and cardboard. Okay, it smelled like river water instead, but that was somehow better.

I rolled down my window for the short drive to the houseboat. My hand reached out and cupped the air like a kid. Heads in passing cars nodded. Probably thought I was waving. But I was not thinking of them. Not thinking much at all, really. The radio was off. I listened to the rhythmic patterns of white noise my arm was making in the wind.

After a couple of moments, I noticed that I was still wearing my green vest. I alternated arms for steering, wriggled my way of it. As it passed over my head, I noticed that it still smelled like cigarette smoke. My throat tightened. It struck me that Katie might figure out that I had smoked. I lifted the collar of my shirt and sniffed. It seemed okay.

Pulling into my parking spot at the houseboat, I made a mental bet: Katie had not taken the kids outside. I stuck the deposit in my belt, and got out of the car.

Before I made it to the door I could hear the TV blasting inside. I opened the door. Tim was splayed on the floor, two feet from the screen. He was slurping noodles out of a giant bowl of ramen. He turned to look at me. A huge, yellow-white mass of pasta hung from his mouth. He looked like Cthulu.

"MmSehhmm!" Tim emitted. His eyes smiled.

I attempted a smile. The color of the noodles reminded me of pinworms. I wondered if Tim had been the one who had given me my little dose of parasites. Maybe both twins.

Katie came out of the bedroom in a towel at that moment. She looked at the dripping mess Tim now attempt to stuff in his mouth.

"Timothy! You are eating like a pig!" she shouted. "You should be eating that at the table anyway."

Tim always seemed to me to have three basic moves: playing video games, watching TV, and rooting in the kitchen for food. These were habits that he seemed to have been allowed to cultivate while staying at his Dad's place, back in Missouri. The visits seemed to be non-stop binges of screen time punctuated only by visits to the fridge.

I had tried at first to break him of the pattern. It was a cold war. Getting him to do anything besides the Big Three was a sales job. We would bar him from the games as punishment. But then he'd always manage to get into more trouble.

After I figured out that he was probably conditioning us by causing trouble away from the Big Three, part of me gave up. I got tired of being the bad guy. I got tired of making his father seem like the hero. Tim's weekends at his father's must have seemed to him like trips to Disneyworld.

Tim had not taken Katie's "subtle hint" about eating at the table. She yelled at him again. She switched off the TV for good measure. With that, Tim stomped to the table with his bowl. He did not resume eating. Instead,

he donned his trademark pout. Head down to his chest, arms crossed.

Katie padded up to me in her towel. She smiled a heavy-lidded smile, put her arms around me. I could feel her body under the towel.

She kissed my neck. Then I heard her start sniffing. I felt myself tense up.

"You smell like smoke," she said.

"Oh... I was talking to one of the co-workers, b-before I left," I said. "Marta, her name is. She was standing right outside the front door. Y'know, so customers would have to walk right through the smoke."

"Hmmm... "

I wasn't sure whether she believed me. It mattered. Smoking to me was always something to keep hidden. Didn't know why. I'd never felt the same about drinking. It must have been the way parents and other adults had always acted about it. There was a certain stigma. "Smoker" was something of a pejorative term. This was long before they started using cartoon characters in cigarette ads.

'Course, that only kept me from smoking out in the open. I had still done it. Off and on, anyway, through the years. Same with sex, I guess. Maybe that was the pairing the tobacco companies had installed in the lizard part of my brain.

Also, Katie hated it. Early on in our pairing she had said that she could never imagine herself with a smoker. But I didn't plan on becoming a smoker now, anyway. I just wanted smoke whenever I felt like it.

I had a good reason to change the subject, keep her mind off of the smell. I whispered in her ear about taking the kids for a walk. That way I could take a nap, I reminded her, "since we were goin' out, and all."

"Well... okay... " she whispered, looking frustrated. "But I just took a shower... "

"Well, send them out... something... " I whispered more of a rasp, really. "Just make sure they aren't in here making noise. Remind them about later."

I shut the door to the bedroom. I started closing the blinds, shutting out as much light as I could. Back in another daytime tomb. It reminded me of seeing my Uncle Joe's bedroom when I was a kid. He worked as a Deputy on graveyard sometimes. His room was an ominous pit into which the cousins and I would sometimes peer. Anger bellowed out when we got too loud.

The kids cheered in the other room at Katie's announcement. Telling them about our planned outing had worked. This would buy me at least forty minutes of compliance, experience told me. I didn't want to nap for more than an hour anyway.

I stripped to my underwear and stretched out on the bed. The sheets were cool. Lying down felt almost alien. Sometimes when you jog hard for a long time you don't realize how intense the run has been until you stop. I felt my heart finally begin to slow. My constant background headache began to subside.

The house boat got quiet as quiet as it ever became. When the building itself was nearly emptied of sounds, fainter sounds usually filtered in. It was basically a floating mobile home, after all. But these external sounds weren't so bad. The lapping of the river water underneath. Cars whooshing by on the main road. The occasional motorboat.

But then a voice...

"I mean, people read Moby Dick in, like, high school, right?"

Clara was back. She was like the Cheshire Cat. Only in her case, the voice appeared first, and the face faded in afterward.

Then the familiar sequences began. I went through the game, round after round. I remembered every nuance of all my thoughts. Every facial expression. I did not quite remember all the questions. The reactions, and the emotions, though...

Lying on the bed had seemed to trigger it. I don't know how little sleep I had gotten since the game. Every night it was this. This fucking Zapruder film playing in my skull.

I got up, walked to the window. I looked through the blinds at the river out back. The sun was reflecting off all the ripples and waves. I remembered I had read that apes would sometimes travel for miles to be able to sit and stare at these flickering lights. Supposed to have a hypnotic, calming effect.

This reminded me that I should do a little meditating. I sat with my back against the bed, legs crossed in the usual position. I breathed in deeply. Thought about nothing but the breath. Tried to let the other thoughts fade away.

I probably managed to do fifteen minutes or so. It felt good, but the relaxation was hard won. There is jogging meditation and then there are uphill sprints. The tensions nip at your heels the whole way up. The constant reminders not to let the other thoughts come in and take over.

I opened my eyes slowly. Sat blinking for a couple of minutes. So much for sleep, I figured. Maybe the meditation would hold me.

I got up and went to the closet, put on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. I felt somewhat more ready to come out of my isolation tank again. I walked out of the bedroom.

Katie was sitting on the couch reading. It was a warm day and she was still in her towel. She looked up at me and smiled. I snuggled up next to her and breathed in her soapy-clean smell. We kissed and I ran my palm over a nipple bulge in the terry cloth.

I felt an erection begin to strain against my zipper. But I knew the kids would be back any minute. Katie knew it too. I could tell by the way she broke the kiss and gave me one of those "That was nice, let's do it again sometime" giggles.

"You been reading most of the day?"

"Yeah, pretty much. I did some laundry before lunch."

I looked around the room. She liked to rearrange the furniture. She was probably bored. I wondered how many times a day she thought about moving into a real house. Probably as many times as she felt frustrated with my job outlook.

"Oh..." she said suddenly. She got up and headed for the kitchen. "I wanted to show you that job announcement in the paper."

I felt a little charge of excitement. In the process of trying to settle down and lose consciousness, I had

forgotten about the job lead.

Katie flapped the classifieds page into my lap. It was the Doctor's Landing Clarion. Katie had circled the ad in the education section.

"I know you, uh, want to get out of education," she said, "but take a look at this. It is not a teaching job."

The job was a three month contract job in Kingsboro. They were looking for college graduates who had some experience as teachers.

The state had implemented standards testing for its community college students. There were several of these in the Kingsboro area. There had been a scandal a few years back when it was discovered that some of the graduates could not read or write. Employers had started anonymously going to the local press and talking about graduates who couldn't fill out applications. Within a couple of years the COM-CAT standards test was born.

The tests included a written portion essays. They needed people to score these essays. Florida had farmed out the contract out to Pellton. It was a national outfit that did standardized testing, workplace testing, all that. Pellton was hiring the scorers and organizing the scoring sessions. 16 bucks an hour, they were paying.

"Ohhh... This is good," I said to Katie, grinning.

She smiled and bounced a little with excitement.

"This is perfect," I said, looking at the ad again. "I mean... the work is perfect. High level conceptual work, essays... And no students to deal with... "

I paused, sat back in the chair. I stared at the ad.

She nodded. "But... ?"

"It's a short-term contract, though, you know... so, so... but it's good money. I just don't--"

"But you wouldn't have to quit the job you have, right? Doesn't it say they have an evening shift."

"No, no, you're right. They have a 6-10 shift. Whew! That would get me home late."

"So, if it didn't pan out... If it didn't turn into anything else... "

"Right. The fallback job would still be in place. Grab-n-Go to the rescue again."

Katie went into the bedroom to get dressed. I sat there for a few minutes, thinking over the job ad. It seemed like a good lead. A good way to network, too. Something good for the resume.

But I was getting sick of The Promise of a career, of real money. That's the bullshit that keeps people paying tuition. That's the shell game that keeps assistant managers doing a manager's job for five or six years on an hourly wage.

Katie came out of the bedroom in a pair of denim cutoffs. She pulled a tank top over her head. She adjusted it at her waist, looking down at her stomach. Then she looked at me.

"You should at least put in an application," she said. She was headed for the front door. "You can stew over it

during that whole process. I'm gonna go round up the kids."

She knows me too well.

"You're right, you know. I should... " I called toward the door. "And thank you for finding this! I love you!"

She winked at me. The door shut.

§§§

I sat back from the computer screen and sighed. It was late, 11:33. Too late. I was due at the store in the morning for first shift. That meant if I somehow lost consciousness right then I could get five hours of sleep.

Normally I would have already been in bed about 10, 10:30. Six-odd hours was better than five. Before this job I never would have thought there was much of a difference.

We had done the family thing all evening, and I had wanted to apply for the job scoring essays. So that meant less sleep. It wasn't that I was worried about being able to do the store job I could probably stand behind that counter for a day on no sleep. It was the pain of it. It builds up after days and weeks of living like this.

I looked at the cover letter on the screen. I proofread the opening paragraph for a third time. Then I looked at the second paragraph:

My passion is for analyzing information and explaining it in clear and accurate written formats. Earning my M.A. degree allowed me to hone these abilities, and gave me the professional-level language and research skills that I can bring to your COM-CAT scoring project.

It was horrifying to keep reading it. There was nothing worse than cobbling together such puffery hour after hour to market myself. I stewed over every word. After a while the words became nearly meaningless. They sounded ridiculous.

Yet, it seemed to be the kind of thing they expected. The absence of any step in the expected process provided a reason not to hire. So did a typo. Given the volumes of applicants, they needed reasons to weed people out. That's what it was all about.

I sat back from the keyboard. I couldn't read the letter again. Fuck the typos and grammar. If I had missed something after two passes it was probably too obscure for some HR dimwit anyway.

I printed out the cover letter and the envelope. I signed the cover letter, going for boldness in the signature, but avoiding extravagance. I tested my signature twice on the back of a catalog. Made sure the pen worked.

After I prepped the envelope for mailing, I sat back in the chair. I looked over the computer screen at my reflection in the wall mirror. The screen of the computer gave the room a slight deep glow. I looked old, tired. Felt it.

There were a couple of centimeters of scotch in the juice glass next to the computer. I downed them. Katie's parents had sent me a low-end single malt for my birthday a couple of weeks back. This was the last of it. Good stuff. Good enough for me, anyway.

I felt the thick peaty taste fading on my tongue. Fastest I had ever gone through a bottle. It used to took me about a month to finish one. I had been pounding it lately.

My head always felt hollow from lack of sleep, caffeine, and long hours at the store. No need nor hope anymore of being sharp enough for...anything really. What did I ever do anymore? The Quiz Slam thing had just been a brief, illusory fluke.

I decided I'd probably grab another fifth after work the next day. Bring home some more beer, too. For variety. And to help kill the thoughts of Quiz Slam, of course.

The kids had enjoyed the evening out. We sampled the kind of tourist-centered pap that Florida towns serve up for families. Miniature golf. Ice cream. A game room that eats quarters by the handful. Waterfront walks.

It was an odd place to live. Stuff like that the kind of things kids dig was only for vacations when I was young. That probably kept it exciting. I figured in a month or two such outings wouldn't mean as much to the twins. They'd be bored again.

Katie had enjoyed the outing too. She'd loosened up. She needed to get out of the houseboat. She could go out anytime she wanted to, of course. She was an adult, mother of two. But she didn't. Most days she just stayed in, doing stuff around the house or reading. And if I did not come up with an idea for going somewhere most nights I was too tired to she'd stay in all night too.

I looked toward the bed. She was on her side facing the lamp. Nose in a book, as usual. My kind of woman. Not that I ever read much anymore.

Katie saw me looking at her. She shut her book. She rustled in the covers and sat up. She smiled at me.

"Shouldn't you be in bed?" she asked.

"Checking my email one last time. I'm about to, um, power down. Shut it down."

I clicked on the keys louder than necessary, for her benefit. I had several email addresses. I compulsively checked my "business" box. That was the box that delivered the good stuff. Registration fees for the short story site, job leads. Money.

Katie watched me for a moment. Then she got out of the bed and walked toward me.

I looked up at her. Beautiful, taut brown skin. Nothing like what I had seen on myself in the mirror. I smiled at her. She started to climb into my lap. I moved the chair back so she would have room.

She was wearing a long T-shirt, tight teal panties. I watched them land on my right thigh. I glanced up at the screen, and away from the inviting outline of her vulva below the fabric. I knew I had better close out the computer before I got too distracted.

But then I noticed that Katie was staring at my face. Searching. I closed the lid of the notebook. I looked at her. She only held my gaze for a moment. Then she ducked her head and wrapped both her arms around my neck.

It felt desperate. It felt like she was partially hugging me, partially restraining me. Her lips were at my ear.

"I... " she whispered.

I winced, and sort of squeaked. Her breath had tickled my ear.

She leaned close again. Got it out this time.

"I'm pregnant."

Chapter 20

It was 5:10 a.m. I was sitting on the toilet in the ladies' room. No pants. I was smoking my first cigarette of the day.

I would never have taken a dump in the Men's room. We had no janitorial service at the store. I was the janitor. And I didn't do shit.

When I closed the store at night, the most I'd do was spray the seat in there with this noxious all-purpose cleaner they ordered in bulk. On the day shift I would only clean in there if someone made a mess. Anything out of the ordinary. But otherwise, I figured people knew about gas station bathrooms, and wouldn't complain.

After that first smoke a couple of weeks back, I had kept the pack. Too stingy to throw it away, I guess. The things were expensive. Especially in Florida with the extra taxes. Some people drove up to Georgia every couple of weekends and buy several cartons. No tax up there. Gas was cheaper, too.

After smoking one or two a day for a while, I was hooked. I'd usually only smoke in the early in the morning. It seemed to help wake me up. Somewhere I'd read that they have caffeine in them. Also, I'd hoped that during the day the smell would wear off. By the end of my shift Katie wouldn't be able to tell.

I stared at the walls, and the blue smoke snaked toward the exhaust fan. Everything looked strange. Nearly the whole bathroom was solid white. I looked at my left hand, holding the cigarette. It vibrated slightly as the nicotine kicked into the system. It looked alien to me, sitting their quivering on its own.

Was I dreaming? The situation seemed absurd. How could I be in some store at this time of morning, pants down, sitting in the Ladies' room, smoking a cigarette? Why was it I had started smoking again?

I'm gonna quit smoking before the baby is born.

It warmed my stomach to think about the pregnancy. Katie had been terrified to tell me she was pregnant. She had had the twins when she was in high school. Pregnancy was a touchy subject.

But when she told me I was genuinely happy. It was a complete surprise. But I felt instantly happy at the thought of having my own child with Katie. In that moment I knew that what I thought I felt for her was real. There was no secretly sinking feeling of being stuck, or a sense that I had made some terrible, irreversible mistake.

I looked at the cigarette in my hand. I took one last drag, a deep pull. Then I lifted up my cock and balls and flicked the stub between my legs, into the bowl. It hissed like a fart.

It was about time for the timer on the safe to have clicked. I pulled up my pants. Time to actually start working.

It may not have been perfect timing for a baby. I was still looking for a real job. Well, one I could stand, anyway. Living rent-free but not managing to save any money. I was still working on an hourly wage. About eight bucks an hour. But none of this seemed permanent. There were ways out.

I had been accepted for the job scoring the COM-CAT in Kingsboro. That started next week. That would be good extra money. And no telling what it might lead to. At the very least it seemed like a perfect opportunity for networking.

And there was my book of short stories. Maybe my persistence with the Quiz Slam thing had impressed Clytemnestra Press, even though the show had been a disaster. I had not heard from them, but they hadn't rejected the book. To me that meant there was hope. Things were looking up.

Counting the take from the previous day had become routine. I sat back in the office, with most of the store lights off. Counted strap after strap of cash. Half dreaming, having had no coffee yet.

The only thing that awoke me from my near slumber was annoyance. Someone on second shift was dropping all these clumps of ones. They were not bothering to remove wrinkles and folds, nor "facing" the bills. This was not something I really had time to do in the morning. I knew it was just done out of laziness. I always had plenty of time on my evening shifts for it.

I considered writing a note to tape to the safe. This would be my first sort of administrative act. I was, after all, Assistant Manager. Well, co-A.M., but still...

Maybe later, I thought. It was time to open up, turn on the lights. Stand behind the counter while the early birds shuffled in.

There were always five or six customers during the first half hour after I opened the doors at six. Usually the same faces every day. Buying coffee, sometimes a pack of smokes.

A couple of old farts always walked over from some condos nearby. They bought the local paper. We made two cents off of each paper. Seriously. I could count the pennies the store made as the papers dribbled out the door in the mornings. They were supposed to attract customers for sales of more lucrative items, but I don't think it worked. I was a glorified newspaper box.

Like most days between 6:30 and maybe 7:20 it got pretty slow. People who had to be at work at saner hours were not out yet. I was lucky to have this lull. It was the only way I was ever able to key in all the accounting crap on the store computer.

I set my coffee on the desk. The register counter was to my left. The computer took up most of the desk. However, the computer was arranged so that I could peer out at the store between these two spinner racks. It was like a two foot window from where I sat. I couldn't see the door when the door alarm went off unless I sat tall and craned my neck.

Somewhere around 6:50, I heard the door alarm. I was sitting there pecking in the gas prices for the day. Making sure to include the precious "nines." Usual stuff. I figured the customer was a coffee buyer. No need to look up.

Suddenly, between the spinner racks, in my little window on the world, a figure hovered. I looked away from the computer monitor. I froze.

A tall man was standing in front of the desk. Tied around his face below the eyes, he had a silk scarf with a floral print on it. Something an older woman would wear over her hair. Looked like a parody of an Old West bandit.

"Give me all your money," he growled.

He was wearing a short-sleeved button-up shirt. One of the buttons was undone. He had his right hand stuck in the shirt. There was a shape protruding forward underneath the shirt.

I wasn't sure what to think. He looked ridiculous. Customers joked around with me often enough. Halloween

items had started appearing in drugstores. The spirit of pranks was in the air. I intuited that I would look like a fool if I overreacted to this obvious joke, this silly mask.

"Are you serious?" I asked.

"I'm dead serious," he said. The shape under his shirt further protruded.

Jesus Fuck Piss. This is how it happens. This is how it ends.

I raised my hands quickly. Probably too quickly. Should have eased them up. I slowly rose from the stool at the desk.

"Okay, okay. No problem, man. Y-you'll get no problem from me."

Fuck this place. The money's not worth my life.

I crab-walked to the register. My eyes were locked on his. He had the deep black irises and yellowish "whites" of a dark black man. He moved parallel with me on the other side of the counter.

"I'm...Okay, I'm going to open the register now."

"C'mon man! Let's make it quick!"

His voice was louder, now. More assertive. I was fitting the proper victim role. Not posing a threat, despite my size.

I tapped at the no sale button. The drawer didn't move. I started woodpeckering it.

"No problem, man. You can have wha--... a-all the money in here."

The register drawer opened, mercifully. I started peeling out the bills, tossing them on the counter.

"ALL of it man! C'mon! Faster!!"

He was raking up the bills on the counter with one hand, his left. The right stayed hidden under his shirt. He was stuffing the bills into his pants pocket. Wasn't going so well. He was probably half yelling at himself to speed up.

I tossed down the last chunk of ones and held my hands up again. It looked like he was only getting about 40 bucks, tops. He stuffed the last of the bills in his pants, then looked at me. The shape under his shirt stuck out some more.

"MORE! ... Where's the rest of it, man?"

"That's-that's all. I swear! It's early... "

Shit shit shit shit shit...

There was plenty more money where that came from. I had the second shift register ready to go, so that was fifty bucks. Then there was the tube from the timer safe that provided change for hundred dollar bills. Plus, I had another forty or so in cash in my pants.

Somehow, though, neither of us thought of these facts. He and I were both out-ofour-minds nervous. We were reluctant participants in a "Robbery." In a "Robbery," the money comes out of the register.

Suddenly, the masked man ran for the "Push" door. He slammed it open. He bolted past my display window. Gone. The door alarm meep-meep-meeped hopelessly.

I saw why he had run. He had glanced behind him, toward the parking lot. Walking out front, from the other side of building, was the customer. I recognized the face.

Oh, you are shitting me?

It was... what was his name? ... Charlie. The guy who had busted my chops on my first day at the Doctor's Landing store. He had bitched about the coffee. Didn't like my attitude. Told me he knew Don Visser. Said he would "let Don know" about how I talked back to him.

Charlie's mouth was slack. I could see that he was watching the robber run away. Charlie swung open the "Push" door.

"Did you just get robbed?!" yelled Charlie.

"Holy fucking shit!" I yelled. I felt no inclination to subdue my feelings. It felt good that someone else was actually in the store. Someone not threatening to attack me. Even if it was Charlie.

"Did you push the panic button?" he yelled.

"The what?!"

"The panic bu--What, nobody ever... ?"

Exasperated, he reached across the counter. He started feeling around on the side surface of the counter, the part facing me.

"There shou--... Do you see a button on this side? A switch of some kind?"

I spotted it. It was a small black button, smaller than a door bell. I had never noticed it among all the wires and other perceptual litter.

"Yes!"

I pushed it. The registers powered down. Some background motor noise from under the counter whined into silence.

"That shuts down your systems. Prevents the safe from being opened. It has a direct line to 911. Nobody ever told you about the panic button?"

"No! Great! That's just great! How did you--?"

"You should call the cops. Just in case the connection wasn't working."

My head was spinning. He could have told me to do anything. I grabbed the phone. Dialed 911.

"911. Whut's yer a-merncy?"

"I just got robbed. I'm at the sto--um, um, Grab-N-Go, the one on... "

"Okay, the one on Fetzer? We already got the auto-signal." Her voiced softened. "Is everybody okay?"

"Ye--uh, yes. Ma'am."

"Can you give me a description of the assailant?"

"Tall black guy. About six feet. Skinny."

"What was he wearing?"

"A-a mask! I mean, he had a silk scarf over his face. Like a... a short-sleeved shirt! Buttons down the front... uh--"

"What color was the shirt?"

"It, uh... It was light... It had a print pattern. Mostly a print pattern. Not sure what, um, c-color the pattern was... Maybe beige background?"

I could see the guy in my mind. But it was like trying to look at someone in a dream. Your eyes don't cooperate. Or you are only able to see their face.

"Any other description?"

"Um... dark pants!...And, um... skinny, he had skinny arms. And, an' his skin was ashy. You know what I mean? Like dry, not clean?"

"Okay, hon. Thank you. An officer is on the way."

I hung up the phone.

Charlie still held his mouth open. He was looking nervously out the doors. He tried to see the corner of the building, where the guy had run.

"Did he have a gun!?"

"I think so... He had something under his shir--.... "

"Dude! Lock these doors! He might come back."

I ran around the counters and sped toward the doors. I started locking them. I tried not to touch them, in case there were finger prints.

I was standing next to Charlie. He looked shocked, but excited. He was breathing shallowly, like he had been running.

Charlie looked to be in his late thirties. He had the hideous musky look of a 70's porn guy. Dirty blond pin-curls in need of a haircut. Mustache. His features were thick. Close-set, like a Pekingese dog.

"Man, I can't believe this! I was just... I been up most of the night. Had a fight with my old man. Was over at the folks' house. I was just comin' in here for some more beer."

I then realized he was probably half-drunk. It was still dark outside. He had probably been drinking all night.

I looked out front again. The parking lot was still empty. Where were those cops?

"Oh my God! I can't believe I just got robbed in this fucking place. This FUCKIN' STORE!"

"Man, don't get all, you know...just--Hey! Here come the cops."

There were two cruisers pulling into the parking lot. Lights on. No sirens. One stopped out by the road. The other charged up to the building at high speed. I winced right before its tire whacked to a stop at the sidewalk.

A big black cop got out of the car, maybe six-three. He strode toward the door. He kept his eyeballs locked on me. He tried to open the door. He broke his drill sergeant mask with a brief frustrated look, put his arms akimbo.

"SORRY!" I yelled through the glass. I started unlocking the door. He yanked it open with the keys still in it.

"Which way'd he go?" asked the cop.

We both pointed. He let the door shut. He yelled something to another cop getting out of the cruiser by the road. Then they started running toward the side of the building.

The driver of the other cruiser got out, too. He started stringing up the yellow tape across the entrance to the parking lot. "Police Line: Do Not Cross." A couple of cars eased by on the road. One started to turn in, but the cop waved it off.

"They'll never get him," Charlie scoffed. "He was prolly parked on that dirt road out back. Long gone by now."

Another pair of headlights flashed through the window. A sedan pulled up next to the cop car. The headlights went off. I could see Don Volker's fat head behind the wheel.

"Oh, there's Don," Charlie said. He fidgeted.

Don walked in. He had kept his eyes on me since he parked. At first he was probably looking for some sign of guilt, I figured. Many of these "robberies" could be set up by employees. Have a friend come in, disguised. Give the cops a red herring description. Split the money later.

"You okay?" he asked me.

"I'm... you know... Yeah, I'm okay. How did you know?"

He was looking at me searchingly. But his eyes began to soften.

"The panic button is wired to call me same time it calls the cops."

Don turned to Charlie.

"What are you doing here this time of morning?"

Charlie continued to look uneasy. It was obvious that Don didn't think much of him. The vibe between them

was manager/employee, not friendly.

"I-I was just coming in to get mo--some beer... "

Charlie launched into the whole sequence of events. He played up his importance in the whole thing. Emphasized how he told me about the panic button and such. Don looked back and forth between us. He had me fill in the details that Charlie didn't know about.

"Okay, well, they only got away with about 40 bucks. That's good, good job," Don said to me. Then he turned to Charlie. "And thank you for sticking around as a witness... "

Don tilted his face down. He looked over his glasses at Charlie's face.

"... even if you are half drunk."

Charlie laughed nervously. He began fidgeting again.

"Alright, I need to go dig out the official paperwork for robberies," Volker said. "You're going to need to fill out a report."

He headed for the office. Charlie looked after him. He sneered.

"He is such an asshole," he hissed. "I can't believe I put up with him here for-- what?--like, seventeen months?"

I stared at him, said nothing. I thought about how he gave me shit on my first day. Acted like he was all buddy-buddy with Don. But somehow I didn't feel too angry at him. It had been such a relief to see another human being after the trauma. Maybe I had been like a newly-hatched duckling, imprinting on the wrong mother.

The big black cop came back in. He called Charlie outside. They were going to interview us separately, make sure the stories matched. I watched Charlie through the window, waving his hands around. The cop took notes on a clipboard. Charlie looked proud. I could tell he felt like a "somebody."

I was next. The cop came up to me with his clipboard. I went through the whole thing again. Everybody asked the same questions. Things I was unsure about initially began to seem like real memories.

Meanwhile a lady cop drove up, came into the store. She had a fingerprinting kit. She had me point out the places the guy might have touched. I played the scene back in my head, watching his hands. Soon the counter was covered with a white powder. The door he exited, too.

Don walked out of his office with paperwork. He looked at dust the cops were leaving all over. He made a face. Then he handed me a form. At the top it read: "INCIDENT REPORT: STORE ROBBERY."

"I need you to fill this whole thing out. This will be used as evidence in court if he...if they catch the guy. So, you know, try to be thorough. And accurate."

I rummaged through the desk for a pen that looked fairly new. Don looked at the front door covered with fingerprint powder. Charlie was standing a few feet from it.

"Is that door locked?" Don asked no one in particular.

Charlie walked up to it and started pushing it.

"No-no-no-no-no... !" the female cop yelled. She walked toward Charlie.

"JEE-zuz, Charlie!" Don said. "You're gonna ruin the fingerprints!"

Charlie turned red. His eyes were wide.

"I ju--I-I... "

The female cop glared at him. Then she walked over and peered at the door frame where the powder was.

"The palm print is still here," she said. She looked at Charlie again. "Sir, can you step away from the door please?"

Charlie moved to one of the grocery aisles. He glanced at Don, then looked down at his feet.

I sat at the desk and started filling out the paper work. The writing helped me continue to calm down. I had already felt safer with all the people around, the cops. I tried not to think about whether I would have to stay for the rest of the shift.

There was a section in the paperwork where I was supposed to write a description of the events. I felt like really digging into it. I wrote it like a detective story. Maybe it was more like a screenplay. I included direct quotes and went for punchy descriptions of the action.

Charlie sauntered over to the desk while I was writing. He leaned in.

"What did he think I was going to do?" he said under his beer breath. "Somebody says 'Is that door locked,' you check it, right? What an asshole."

I gave him a wry what-can-you-do look, shrugged. Then I dove back into my screenplay to escape.

Once I finished I gave it to Don. He looked it over while the cops were finishing up. I noticed his facial muscles relax once he started reading it. I started straightening up behind the counter. For some reason I felt a little embarrassed.

In a couple of minutes Don flapped the page at me, smiling.

"Hey, Jim. I appreciate all the detail. Good job."

I smiled back, said thanks. I felt a flash of pride.

Oh, cut the shit. So your writing impresses a guy who prolly reads half a mass market paperback per year while on vacation.

The cops had started packing up to leave. The big one came up to me at the counter.

"Okay, we got records of these prints," he said, gesturing at the powdery mess on the counter. "You can clean this here stuff off."

Can I? Gee, thanks so much.

He ignored my expression and continued.

"We think this the same perp robbed the 24-hour Fletcher's. One out on Berger Parkway? Hit 'em this morning 'bout 4:30."

I felt the back of my neck tingling. Two hours in between the robberies. This was not a big town. Had he been waiting outside when I opened up this morning? How long had he watched me through the glass? I was in a fishbowl here.

"Good news is, is that we got video here, an' one from Fletcher's," he said, patting the store video tape. It was in an evidence bag. "This could help bring 'im in. Definitely'll help, thing goes to trial."

I nodded. He stared at me for a beat. Then he slapped the counter with his big palm.

"Ah-ight, den," he said, more loudly. "Ya'll can open 'er up. Stay safe, now."

I looked at Don. He was shaking hands with Charlie.

The female cop replaced the big dude at the counter. She handed me a brochure.

"Here's some information about being the victim of a crime. State requires we give these out."

I glanced at it. It was plain, printed in dark blue ink. On the front there was the Florida seal and the name of the local police department. Below that it said: You have been the victim of a crime in Florida. Now what?

"There's a number in there. Call it if you have any questions."

She headed out the door. I frisbee'd the brochure into one of the cubbyholes under the counter. The one were all the user guides and other dust bunny bait lay.

Everyone was leaving me. I started to feel it. Don went back into the office to handle loose ends. After that he was probably heading out to do his rounds of the stores. I found myself hoping that he could just work from the office for the rest of my shift.

I looked outside. The morning sun was brightening. Most of the regulars had given up and gone elsewhere for their newspapers, smokes and coffee.

I thought about going out front for a cigarette. I needed one. But the sun was out. Katie could already be up. She might drive by. I needed to call her and tell her what had happened, anyway. That would make it more likely that she'd come in, smell the smoke on me.

During the rest of the shift I probably described the robbery ten or fifteen times. I didn't care much. I was never more happy to see the customers come in, chat. After Don left, I went into extra detail to keep them in the store longer. Like I was running a fucking barbershop.

Most of the people that came in that day didn't even know about the robbery. The town wasn't nearly that small. To them it was still just a convenience store. Everything looked the same.

Me, I was sitting on a spring for the rest of the day. Every car that pulled in the parking lot was the masked man coming back to finish the job. Every face that suddenly appeared at the window or at the counter, just for an instant, was the one behind the silk bandana. My heart was syncopated all day.

I just knew he was coming back. He had heard about the timed safe full of money. Realized he forgot about all the lottery tickets, smokes and beer. He had heard that I told the cops he looked "ashy."

I felt like a worm on a hook, sitting behind that counter. What did Grab-N-Go care if he killed me? The store would live on. They'd wash the blood out of my green vest, repair the bullet hole. Then some other rube with a spiraling career history could wear it.

For the rest of the day, when I wasn't worried that I was about to be shot, I was pissed.

Chapter 21

On the dashboard the blue digits said 4:58. Pitch black outside. My guts burned with acid. Nothing in me but a mug of coffee and a metric fuck-ton of sleep debt. First morning shift after the robbery.

I didn't just pull into the parking lot the way I had in the past. I drove around the back of the building first. My headlights streamed yellow on the litter-covered the back lot. I peered at the bushes, behind the HVAC unit. Looking for figures that might be waiting for me.

I drove slowly around to the front. Kept my eyes on the side of the building for someone changing positions, any sign of movement. I drove diagonally across the parking lot, lighting the shrubbery on the sides, and the front of the dumpster corral.

The back of the dumpster was out of view in its little fenced-in area. I could not see it from either side of the building. Somebody could easily be waiting back there. Perfect hiding place for an ambusher. All mt checking behind the building had been pointless.

I sat there with the lights trained on the dumpster for a moment. I realized there was really nothing I could do about it. No way to be sure. If I got out of the car they could come after me. And I couldn't just leave--not and keep my job. This was it, one way or another.

I pulled the car into my spot. I cursed myself for having gotten into this dilemma. Taking a job for which I really should be carrying a gun. I imagined my ghost rising from my dead, gunshot body in the parking lot, screaming "I knew it! You idiot! How could you take such a stupid chance for a convenience store?!"

Keeping my eye on the dumpster, I headed for the door. I had the keys out and ready. I wished they would stop jingling. As if whoever was back there hadn't already heard me get out the car and slam the door.

The wind was blowing. Every leaf that rustled sounded like somebody coming out from behind that dumpster. It had never felt better to get into the store. I made sure both doors were locked tight. Then I got the hell away from that those front windows. I couldn't bear to look back and see someone looking in at me.

I ran behind the counter and set the keys to open the timer safe. I moved in a crouch behind the counter, raced across the spaces that were visible from the front windows. I weaved through the grocery aisles. Headed for the women's bathroom.

Inside the tiny bathroom I was out of view. Felt safer. I dropped trou and sat on the toilet. I pressed the heels of my palms against my eyes. Tension against tension.

This is a joke. What IS this?

For a couple of minutes I just sat there, breathing. I chuckled at the fact that I had thought getting up and coming to work was bad before. I thought about what I was being paid to risk my life for this place. Ridiculous. I was a fool. The robbery had made that clear.

Checked the watch. Already off schedule from all the pointless searchlight shenanigans. Screw it.

I tapped the morning smoke out of the pack. I needed to make this one last. There was no way I would have time for another smoke later. I dragged deep. Felt the nicotine hit that sweet spot in the upper lungs. The click.

Half drunk from the deep drags, I stumbled to the counter area. I crouched behind it again. Worked my way to the timer safe. My brain screamed when I saw the pile of cash inside. I knew if someone were peeking

through the window, they would kill for all that cash.

It felt safer again once I was in Volker's office. I locked the office door, just for a little extra buffer. I sat at the desk with the pile of cash.

The video monitors were on. One of them had a view of the front doors. Part of me tried not to look at it. I knew I'd shit if I saw someone peering in those doors. But then again I could call the cops before the perps managed to get in. Maybe.

While I went through the accounting routines, I thought about Katie. She had been shocked about the robbery. She couldn't believe it had happened to me. But that was about as far as it went. I thought aloud about not coming back here. Just walking away from the job. She didn't have so much to say at that point. "Yeah... ?" was about it. Her wheels were turning.

Her reaction was understandable, thinking about it later. It would just mean more uncertainty, what with no replacement job. More worries about where the groceries were coming from. Hard not to think about such things.

However, I felt the gap at that moment. She could not grasp the clarity with which I had come to see how dangerous this job was. How the company used us as cannon fodder. The clerks protected someone else's pile of cash for almost nothing. I couldn't fault her, because I didn't really get it until the robbery. But still...

As I stuffed the bank deposit into the bag, my peripheral vision jerked my eyes over to the video of the front doors. Headlights. The time code said it was 5:48. Still too early for a customer to sit out front, wait for us to open. People hardly ever pulled up when all the store lights were still off.

I felt my heart start jumping. This was it. He was back. I knew they hadn't caught him yet. He probably recognized my car. He knew I was in here alone.

I glanced at the office door. Still locked, of course. Then I looked around frantically for anything I could use as a weapon. The extra windshield squeegees? Yeah, right. Unscrew the handle from that old mop? I pictured it shattering across his shoulders, almost worthless.

On the monitor the driver's door had swung open. I couldn't see anyone yet. Now he knew how long the cops took to get here. He had gotten away once, and knew he could do it again.

Someone had tipped him off about the previous day's take that we had out of the safe before opening the store. Maybe laughed at him for only getting 42 bucks. He was going to blast his way in here and take this bank deposit. Then he was going to kill me for not giving it to him the first time.

I grabbed a squeegee. I snapped it through the air a couple of times to test its heft. I pushed against the handle to see how much force it could take.

The video showed the outline of a figure, out of the car now. I could not make it out. They opened the book driver's side door. They appeared to be doing something in the back seat.

I dropped the squeegee, and flopped back down into my seat. I had realized what this was. The driver made his way around the car doors. He tottered into the beam of the headlights. A twenty pound bundle of newspapers swung from each hand. With a thump that I could hear back in the office, he dropped them in front of the glass doors.

Another cigarette. I tapped it out of the pack. Fuck it. I didn't care if it stank up the office. Don could fellate

himself. This whole company could. The deposit was nearly done, and I still had a few minutes before I opened the doors. I felt too frazzled to care anymore.

I kicked back at the desk. I blasted a blue cloud at the monitors on exhale. I thought about what I was going to do about all this. No use in pretending anymore. Even if I made manager, there was no way I was staying in this company. No way was it worth the risk. So why even try? Why continue to try to impress anyone, worry about all their little rules?

Um, references, dumbass?

I scowled, took another deep drag. I tried to rationalize my way around this rebuttal. Who would be impressed by my working below management-level at a C-store anyway? But I couldn't deny that removing it from the resume would leave too big a hole in my work history. And they always wanted to call the most recent employers.

My chair thumped back to the floor. I spat on the desk, dipped the hot end of the cigarette into it. After it hissed out I scooped up the mess with a paper towel. The monitors said it was 5:57.

Time to do the thing.

After I unlocked the office door, I peered around the corner at the front doors. No one was there, of course. But now I had to go unlock them. I would suddenly be vulnerable again. Anyone can walk in those doors. That's what it means for a store to be open.

The store was still dark. I started walking toward the glass front doors. I kept my eyes locked on them, straight ahead, hoping he wouldn't suddenly appear in the door frame. I dreaded unlocking those doors.

Halfway there it hit me. I should just turn on the store lights but leave the doors locked. I would watch for customers, and unlock one of the doors when they arrived. That way nobody got in unless I wanted them to. I would have to leave it unlocked while customers were inside, but I figured robbers didn't want to come in when there were people in here, anyway. It all made sense.

With the lights up, things seemed more normal. Slightly less ominous. But only slightly. After all, the guy had robbed me in the full glare of the fluorescents. I kept my eyes locked on the parking lot.

At first I took my usual place behind the desk. It was the time when I normally sat at the computer and keyed in the dailies. I looked between those spinner racks. Remembered how the masked face had appeared between them. My heart kicked up again.

I glanced at the computer. It would have to wait. I didn't give a shit if it would be harder to do the accounting later, when there were more customers. Having to juggle later compared with lying in a pool of blood? A no brainer. I was going to stand and watch that door.

A second later a head came into view in the front windows. I sucked in a gasp through my teeth. I died in that split second before my brain recognized it as a regular. A paper buyer. I started toward the door to unlock it for him.

Oh goodie. Here comes our fucking two cent profit.

Guy stood there pushing on the door as I walked up. Trying to get in. I held up a "one moment" finger.

"Sorry, sir. Forgot to unlock this. You are the first customer."

"Hmmpf."

The stacks of newspapers were still bundled out front. I cut the string and handed one to him. He set in on the counter. I had a long walk back around the desk and down the long counter to get opposite him at the register. I realized this routine was ridiculous. Customers would get impatient with all my running back and forth. My solution was looking pretty annoying. But it still seemed better than a gunshot wound.

I handed the man change. No comment from him. He turned to leave. The two glass doors in the front opened in opposite directions one swung out, the other swung in. I had let the paper codger in using "in" door. Naturally, he started trying to leave by pushing the "out" door, still locked.

"Oh, shoot. I, ah...J-JUST A MINUTE, SIR!"

I raced around the counter once more. Showing that he had at least half a brain, he switched to the unlocked door before I got there. He shot me a look as he swung the door open.

Instead of going back behind the counter, I stayed on the floor. Might as well not have to do that initial run around the counter. I also put up a handwritten sign on the "out" door: "PLease USe OtHer Door." That way I would just have to lock and unlock one door.

It was deadly quiet. I usually turned on the AM classical station. This time I kept it off. I wanted to keep my ears just as alert as my eyes. No surprises.

Doors locked or not, I didn't feel very safe. It was still dark outside. Anyone could be out there watching me from the bushes. When people were outside near the front they were illuminated well enough. But the outskirts of the parking lot were a swath of black.

My mind started in on me. I imagined the robber emerging from the bushes. He has on his bandana. I see him glancing around and running toward the glass doors. He has a huge fucking gun. Glock Nine. He points it at me, gestures toward the door. He yells that he will blast me through the glass if I don't unlock it.

I whacked myself on the forehead a couple of times, as if this would help get rid of the image. But my imagination made me realize that there was no point in even having the doors locked if I were in view. I was a sitting duck. I was wasting my time.

The store was visually cluttered. There were plenty of ways to stay out of sight. I glanced at the shelves around me. Piles of stuff animals, multicolored stacks of candy, chips hanging all over. I looked at my bright green vest. In this setting, it was like camo. If I stayed still, I could hardly be spotted from outside.

I moved toward one of the grocery aisles. They ran parallel to the front windows of the store. I decided if I stayed on one of them, I could duck out of sight before bandana man made it to the door.

That's where I spent most of the early morning. Between customers, I peered out at the windows from between the legs of a lime green plush tiger. I was determined to stay there at least until the sun lit those bushes out front.

§§§

Don strolled in a little after eight. He saw me frantically typing figures into the accounting software.

"Still doing the paperwork? What, something not balancing?"

"I'm n--I, uh, got a late start... so... "

I reached behind me and hesitantly turned down the radio. One of Scribian's works for solo piano. Hardly ever on the air. But I hadn't been able to listen closely anyway, what with the accounting.

He stared at me for a beat. Waited for me to finish my excuse. I looked back down at the sales page in my hand, pecked at the keyboard.

"Hey, uh, again, I... You did a great job handling that robbery the other day."

I looked back up at him. Nodded thanks, but said nothing. I knew I was supposed to say thanks, maybe smile. I couldn't do it. It hit me again. This whole thing was a deal-breaker for me. I just didn't care anymore whether Don could pay me more, promote me, whatever.

"You did just what you were supposed to do. You complied with the guy." Don was going into his lecture voice. "Worst thing somebody can do is to try to be a hero. Just give 'em the money."

I nodded. I must have looked detached. He waited for me to speak again. I didn't.

"You're not letting this, uh... This-this... robberies come with th--"

"No, I... I, ah... "

I quickly realized there was no point in giving him a heads up at this point. No point in getting him thinking about replacing me. Forcing my hand. I still had a couple of days before COM-CAT scoring began. Then I was out of here.

"My, uh, my wife got kinda upset about it," I lied. "She's worried I'm not safe, or... whatever."

"Uh-huh... "

He suddenly looked more closed off. I suddenly realized I was taking the wrong tack. He was probably thinking she'd pressure me into quitting. I needed to recover.

"She's a little..." I looked at the door. "We just found out she's pregnant."

"Ohhhh...!" He started nodding. His face loosened again. "Gotcha... gotcha... "

"So, no... me, I'm fine, but, you know... "

"No, right, right... "

We both nodded together for a beat.

"Well, hey... " He slapped me on the shoulder. "Congratulations, my man, huh? Good news."

"Thanks, Don." I forced a smile.

"Living large in your riverfront property and a baby on the way," he said, smirking.

"Ha! Ha! Yeah, well it's... right."

Another awkward pause. I looked at the paper in my hand. I started to punch in more figures. I was ready for him to go back to his office and leave me alone.

"Oh, hey," he said. "I almost forgot. I have some big news myself."

I looked up again. I looked passive and only raised my eyebrows.

"We are making some management changes in the local district. Making some promotions, moving some people around... "

Oh no. He's not going to ask me--

"You know Shelly, of course, Ben's Assistant Manager at the Pine Trail store... "

I nodded slowly. Wondered where this was going.

"She's ready to take on management, now. We are going to move her to this store. So, starting in a couple weeks, she will be the new manager here."

I cocked my head slightly to the side. "O-kaaay... ?"

"So, that's the main change for you guys."

I looked at him blankly. Waiting. Trying to figure out what this would all mean.

"Moving some other people around, too. Jay you met him at Pine Trail, right? he's going to take over a store out in River South. And then... "

Don rattled off some other details. Mostly lateral movements among stores I had never been to.

But the main reason I stopped listening was the disbelief. All that crap about the "fast track to management" when I signed on. Fucking Jay was getting his own store? Big-mouthed Fred Flintstone motherfucker? Shelly I could understand. But Jay had not even been an Assistant Manager, as far as I knew. He was nothing but an ass sucker. Certainly had his nose up Don's.

The worst of it, though, was that that fucking harpy Shelly was coming over here to lord over me as manager. Marta and I were supposed to be here learning how to run the store ourselves. Now Shelly would come in and start doing everything.

After Don went back to his office I fumed over it for a few minutes. Did they not think I could handle this job? A guy with graduate degrees? Or did they just not like me? Just see me as somehow "not with the program?"

And what about Marta, I thought? She was one of the most horrific human beings I had encountered in any form of customer service setting besides the DMV. But she had paid her dues for a lot longer than Jay had.

The door alarm started beeping. It was some landscaping guy. He was covered with a sheen of green fibers, the detritus from running a weed trimmer for hours. I sold him a pack of generic cigarettes. He stood there smiling at nothing the whole time. The grass dudes were always high.

I slammed the register closed. I leaned against the back counter. Stared out the window.

Aw, what do I care, anyway?

The internal heat of being implicitly insulted started to fade. I started recalling that I was out of here. These people made no difference to me anymore. In a few days being dissed by Don, dumped on by Shelly... none of it would mean anything.

Shelly...

My stomach burned again. She was the only thing that would be tough about this. I would have to deal with her through the last of my days here. Like eating shit for dessert after an already shitty meal.

I started thinking maybe it was just time I walked. Fuck giving notice. Just walk.

Chapter 22

It felt good just to be moving sometimes. The car seemed like the high-tech device it is. I ignored the marks on the seats from the kids feet, the crumbs from bags of chips, the stains in the carpet. This was my vessel.

It would be the first day of the job scoring essays from the COM-CAT. That was the test that the state of Florida used to determine whether its community colleges were keeping up their standards. A bit more high-profile than selling cigs and beer.

I felt like I was finally getting my career somewhat back on track. The store would soon seem like merely an ugly detour. All the ugliness would fade. Essay scorers don't get robbed, threatened.

COM-CAT... What is that again? Credential Order... No... Criterion Organization Management... Um...

It was around 5:10 p.m. I was headed toward Kingsboro, the big city south of Doctor's Landing. I had left about an hour and a half early for the thing. I had nearly missed interviews over the summer due to underestimating the amount of traffic in the city.

A cigarette burned in my left hand. I had the window cracked just enough to suck the blue trail of smoke toward the opening. If I kept the cigarette near the crack, it wouldn't stink up the car as much. Katie would never know.

Criteria Oversight... Measurement?...No METRIC! Yeah...

Traffic was streaming along reasonably well. People were probably just getting their cars moving in the parking lots at the office parks. They had not hit the interstate yet. I stayed in the middle lane to avoid mergers from both sides.

Some Bob Seger song started in on the radio. I snapped it off so that it would not infect my mood. Kingsboro had too damned many Classic Rock stations. Funny how these "classics" all clocked in at about five minutes or less, and got played nearly every day. Where were the ten minute Yes songs, the Rush epics the length of an album side... ?

At work I kept the classical station on. They only played music in the a.m., then it switched to news. The day before I had heard "Carmina Burana" the whole thing, not just that intense segment they always play in movies. Great stuff.

Criteria Overview Metric-Curriculum Assessment Test. THAT'S it. It merged two earlier tests.

I spotted a sign that said the exit for Kingsboro State University was ahead. Five miles to go. I glanced at the time. Good. This would leave me time to pick up some grub, maybe do some writing.

My writing had fallen off a bit since I had moved to the Doctor's Landing store. On the days off I wrote some. Tried to, anyway. It was pretty distracting with the kids around in the house boat. Seemed like every time I started working on some story I'd get interrupted. I hadn't updated my short-short stories website in a couple of weeks.

I gripped the steering wheel hard. Someone green compact car from the early 1980's was hovering in my blind spot, not passing. I eyed them nervously. I lightly drifted in their direction, hoping it would make them pass. I imagined holding up a sign that said "Shit or get off the pot!"

Sometimes I wrote at the store. I carried a spiral bound notebook with me. I was always thinking of things while I stared out the front window. Might as well not waste them. But lately I had not been doing that either. Didn't think of much at work besides being robbed again.

I rounded a hill and there was the exit for Kingsby State, as the locals called it. I fought my way across a couple of lanes, made it off the interstate in one piece. On the exit ramp I flicked the cigarette butt out the window.

My stomach tightened a little when I came into view of the University. This was my way out, sure. But I was back in the world of higher standards. One thing about working among the unwashed of Pine Trail: they didn't expect much of anyone. These people would.

I glanced at my face in the rearview. I had missed a couple of spots shaving, needed a haircut. My clothes looked a little wrinkled, a little drab. Probably from the shitty old pipes at that laundromat near the house boat. I looked okay for C-store work, but education?

Signage was good on the campus they were on every block and had arrows for directions. It was easy to track down the Elbaum Conference Center where the training session was to be held. I pulled into the parking lot, glanced at the clock. Still half an hour early.

I checked my reflection in the glass of the car door. I still looked too dumpy in my blue blazer. I guessed I was okay for academic standards. But I looked forward to having time to start hitting the gym again once I started pulling reasonable work hours.

Once I got to the lobby of the conference center, I stopped worrying about looking the part. I had been expecting a crowd of underemployed former grad students like myself. It looked more like a cattle call for substitute teachers. Everyone looked "dressed up," but in that big-box-retail, clip-on-tie sort of way. You could smell the polyester.

This "lobby" was basically a big hallway adjacent to an auditorium. There were close to a hundred people standing around like carpet-grazing cows. The ceiling was as high as that of the auditorium, so it did not seem quite as crowded as it was.

There was a line of people in front of a long table. Some official-looking people were sitting behind the table. They were checking IDs and handing out badges. I queued up behind a large woman in a gold lamé blouse. Her perfume made me wince.

So much for networking.

While we slowly sauntered forward, I watched the Pellton officials behind the desk. "Name?" they would say when a person stepped up. I found it sort of disturbing how they held the glance of the person before looking down at the list. Seemed tacitly aggressive. And they seemed to compare the ID photo with the face with a bit too much care.

Some part of me began to feel like I had made another mistake. This attitude of the Pellton officials wasn't helping. I was never much for institutionalized "authority" and "security." I tried to ridicule it and subvert it whenever possible.

I had my I.D. out and ready when it was my turn.

"Name?"

The woman's tight, thin lips were like a straight pencil line below her nose. Redhead with a bowl cut. Dead eyes. She had definitely drunk the Kool-Aid. I paused for a beat, flipping through a rolodex of possible responses.

Watch the mouth, home-slice. You don't QUITE have the job yet.

I raised an eyebrow and pointed out my name on the driver's license I had already been holding in front of her face. She snatched it, maintaining my gaze. Then she ran it along the list of names, looking for a match. She found me. Handed me an I.D. badge.

Out of the line, finally, I checked the time. Still had seventeen minutes. I still hadn't eaten anything.

I looked around the big conference center lobby. There was an area that looked like small commissary. It was dark and had its security screen drawn down. But I spotted the glow of corporate colors coming from a nearby corridor. Vending machines.

A few minutes later I was parked against a wall with my vendo meal. Most of the other chairs in the lobby were taken. I sat on the floor. A couple of the other badge wearers slightly smirked when they looked at me, sitting on the floor with my sausage biscuit and soda. I gave them an insouciant nod.

I was feeling cocky. Pellton had a lot of information on their website about the COM-CAT scoring program. There were other systems in the region with similar tests. Pellton hired coordinators who moved from region-to-region running these scoring sessions. They recruited out of the pool of scorers for local sessions like this one. Good jobs. Salary, benefits.

The ad Pellton had placed announcing this gig, I remembered, had only required a Bachelor's degree and some teaching experience. I looked around the lobby as I ate. I suppressed a sneer. Didn't seem like there were many graduate degrees in this crowd. Figured I had to have a decent shot at landing one of those coordinator slots.

My little spiral notebook was in my coat pocket. I chomped the last bit of sausage biscuit and whipped out the pad. I decided I should consider getting really focused on this job, try to stand out. I started strategizing on paper. Brainstorming things I should do to angle for the promotion.

I was interrupted.

"Alright people... "

One of the Pellton "security" people had stepped out of a pair of doors to the auditorium. You could tell she was "security" because she was beefy and wearing an ugly burgundy polyester blazer. Walkie-talkie too.

"We are going to enter the training area at this time. ALL bags and other enclosed personal items must be left outside the auditorium. HERE... With US. We will keep them secure."

She indicated a table behind which another burgundy blazer sat. He scanned the crowd of substitute teachers like a bird of prey.

"We have to leave our purses?!" asked a middle-aged black woman near the doors.

"This is a security-sensitive area, folks," said the redhead who'd signed me in. "We have to preserve the confidentiality of the COM-CAT essays and our scoring protocols."

The woman with the purse looked unimpressed. She tsked and handed her bag to the guy at the table.

"We can't risk anyone bringing in any recording devices, cameras, or anything in which these sensitive materials could be concealed. So yer gonna have to just leave yer bags outside."

Yeah. That'll solve everything.

I watched people dutifully placing their bags on the table. Anyone could just as well put things in their pockets as in some of these purses. Small cameras, small recording devices, test materials... My suit coat was certainly big enough, and had like six pockets.

This was the usual "security" bullshit. Humiliate people mostly the women by confiscating their personal items. Meanwhile, you don't solve the problem at all. It's all about the way the "security" freaks get to think of themselves in the moment.

I tucked my little notebook tightly into my armpit. I wasn't about to kowtow to this bit of fascist theater. There were two burgundy blazers standing at the doors. They were looking everyone over, looking for "contraband." I would give them notebook if they asked, but there was no way I would voluntarily put it on that table. It contained months worth of journal entries, ideas, lecture notes... Who the fuck were these people?

Eventually I passed the visual inspection. Kept my notebook stuffed in the armpit. We filtered in and found places to sit. The auditorium floor was lined with long desks. They were set up for three people per desk. The chairs had us facing a big display screen.

After checking for onlookers, I set my notebook in my lap. No point in drawing attention to it by setting it on the desk. I sat back in chair, looked straight forward. I settled into a daze to wait for the festivities to begin.

After a long while, a well-dressed woman approached the podium. She smiled beatifically at us as she attached a microphone to her blouse. The benevolent leader tack.

"Good evening."

There was that pause where everyone had to figure out whether she was the type that expects a response to such greetings. She waited. There was a ragged, mostly mumbled reply from the crowd.

"I am Anne Kelloren. I am the Scoring Session Coordinator for this Kingsboro administration of the COM-CAT."

I watched her carefully as she described the overall plan for the sessions. She had the job I eventually wanted to get. We were near the same age. I wondered what made the crucial difference between us. Why was I standing behind the counter at a convenience store while she was flitting from city to city addressing groups of educators?

She was a decent public speaker. She used her hands for emphasis, but didn't go overboard with them. There was that constant smile, too. Even when she was warning us about not discussing the essays with our families and friends. I wondered if she had formal training in Public Relations.

This is good, I thought, to get a look at her, how she operates. I sat up a little straighter in the chair. I could do this, it began to seem to me. Talk to big groups, state directions clearly...

That's essentially all there was to teaching, right? Not that I had exactly relished teaching. But these were people who wanted to be here. Not like the surly late-teens I had encountered at colleges. Who saw college as

just a way of paying their dues in order to be handed a cushy job. And this Coordinator gig wouldn't require doing speeches all day long, like teaching had.

I looked around at some of the other scorers. Most of them just looked sort of dazed. Half-paying attention. Waiting for the action to begin.

Fine by me. Just means less competition.

I looked back at Coordinator. I would smile and nod when she looked at me. I had my game face on.

Kelloran turned it over to the Assistant Coordinator. Another woman. Caitlin something. She occupied the local version of Kelloran's job. The step below. A once-a-year assignment with no traveling. No salary or benes. But I realized I would likely need to work at that level before moving up to Kelloran's level. Once again I would be looking ahead to a series of rungs on a ladder. Paying my own dues.

The local lady started ripping into more specific stuff. She talked quickly. People fidgeted in their chairs. It was a bunch of details. Procedures, contact numbers, stuff we needed to write down.

There were pads of paper on the desks, and pens. I looked around as the crowd began frantically scribbling on the notepads.

I smiled. Then I reached into my pocket and pulled out my electronic organizer. Much more professional-looking than scribbling on paper, I thought. It was actually just a cheap imitation of a handheld computer. It basically stored addresses, numbers, and a few notes. But I figured it would show that I took seriously the virtue of being organized something that would be important in a Scoring Coordinator.

The local lady was displaying the emergency switchboard number on the big screen. If we were going to be absent, or late, or anything like that, we were to call that number immediately. I tapped it into the organizer with the little magnetic stylus. I checked it against the number onscreen, nodded, and smiled at the Assistant Coordinator.

Then I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"Sir, are you using a Handata?"

One of the burgundy jackets was leaning close to me. She held her walkie-talkie at the ready. She spoke in a low voice, just above a whisper.

She was referring to an expensive type of handheld computer popular among business execs. I wasn't sure whether she was using the term generically or not. Was she just making conversation, curious about the brand... ?

"I... This is an electronic organizer, yeah."

"I'm gonna need you to come with me, sir."

"Wha--? I... I don't... "

"Sir, please step over to the entrance here with me, please?"

I stood up. She said something in her walkie-talkie I couldn't make out. There was another burgundy jacket hovering beside the first. His feet were planted wide and he was sizing me up. The eyes of the other graders

were on me now. I felt my ears turning red.

We walked over to the double doors. The way we had all entered. The dude in the combat-ready stance stayed four feet to my left and watched me the whole time. The chunky one that was coordinating the purse seizures was waiting at the doors. She and four other "security" geeks surrounded me.

"Sir, this officer informs me that you are using a Handata."

"No, no, this is just... Look... "

I quickly held up the cheap plastic gadget. The guy keeping his eyes on me flinched a little.

This is just an electronic organizer. Okay? I was just... Look at it!...I was just using it to enter the emergenc--"

"Sir, using a Handata is just like bringing a video camera in here. Someone could use it to transmit information from these scoring sessions wirelessly, in real time--"

"No, no. Noooo. This... This is nuts. No!... I was only typing in the contact numbers. See?"

I held the screen of the organizer toward her. She exchanged a doubtful look with one who had accosted me. She made no move to examine the organizer.

"See? Look at it! This... This thing can't transmit--"

"Sir, you need to take that item out to your car. Leave it in your car and then come back. Handatas are not permitted in Scoring Sessions or during any of the associated training sessions...

"This isn't a Handa--... Look, this is just--"

"Sir! You were to leave personal items at the desk when you entered. We asked everyone to do so."

"Alright, alright, Jesus! I'll take it out."

They held the doors open for me. After they closed them behind me, I shook my head in disbelief. I strode through lobby. It was now empty, and darker, since the sun had gone down.

Fucking PIGS! Fucking WANNABE pigs! Fucking MORONS..."

I hurried out to the car. At least they were just going to let me put it away. I opened up the trunk and pitched it in.

It was still warm and very humid outside. The walk out to the car raised a sweat. I wiped my upper lip as I jogged back toward the building.

FUCK-wads!

I opened the glass doors to the lobby again. Up ahead I could see a figure waiting. I just walked fast instead of jogging. Didn't want to look threatening.

As I got closer, I could see that the figure was Anne Kelloren, the coordinator. She was standing about fifty away from the double doors to the auditorium, closer to the parking lot. Over her shoulder I spotted the male in the burgundy blazer who had taken up purses. He was standing behind a large column, trying to look

inconspicuous.

I held out my arms as I walked toward her, palms open. I smiled.

"No more organizer, see? I put it in the trunk."

Kelloren smiled her P.R. smile. But this time she cocked her chin down, signaling pity.

"Sorry, sir, Mr... " She peered at my nametag. "... Crayson? We're not going to be able to let you continue."

"Wha--No!... I-I don't... what do you--?"

"We just can't have anyone participate who would pose a threat to security like this. I mean, with a Handata you could be transmit--"

"It wasn't a Handata! It was. Just. An. Organizer. Okay? I mean it-it was no more able to transmit data than those... pads of paper everyone else was writing on. I can show you. Let me just show you--"

"Well, it may not have been the same brand as a Handata--"

"Look, look... Don't you get it?"

Her eyes narrowed.

" Don't you see that-that... anyone could just walk out of here wi-with a piece of paper, write down the numbers you gave out... and it would be the same, just the same... as much information... as-as I could put on that--"

"Sir, you were asked to leave personal items at the collection table when you came in."

I knew it was over. I was tainted. Suspicion was enough. Logic didn't matter anymore. Facts either.

"So... that's it, huh? This, this... this is jus--"

"You'll be paid for the time you were here. We have all your application materials on file with your address."

I smirked mockingly at her. I shook my head in disbelief.

"That's jus--You people are... "

The P.R. smile was gone now. Her eyes seemed much emptier without it. She turned stiffly. I watched her walk toward the backstage entrance of the auditorium.

I stood there, reeling. My head felt like an acetylene torch that had been lit. I felt like doing some fucking damage. I felt like wrecking the place.

The "security" guy stared out at me from the shadow of the cement column. His feet were set wide apart.

Chapter 23

The morning had flown by, somehow. I got the accounting done in a daze, as usual. There hadn't been many customers. Just the way I liked it.

Guy was standing at the counter. He was craning his neck to get a look at the skin mags we kept behind the counter. I tried to act nonchalant. Last thing guys want is attitude when they are trying to buy porn.

I was on my third mug of coffee. I had let it go lukewarm, working on it for an hour. I got a steady string of bumps that way, instead of a single jolt. I sipped it casually while the guy browsed.

He was wearing painter's coveralls. His hands were spattered with Landlord White. It was late morning. Probably on an early lunch.

"Lemme see that issue of 'Googly Moogly,'" he said.

I pulled it out of the wire rack. I had seen the issue when it came in a couple of weeks back. I had turned off the security VCR and looked through it. Slow day.

"Good issue," I said. "Check out the one named Daphne. Second pictorial."

He flipped to the appropriate section. I watched as his eyes widened.

"Oh, Daphne!"

We both chuckled and I rang him up. He zipped out to his car, peeled out of the parking lot. Not much time to get down before his break ended, I supposed.

I leaned back on the counter, looked out the window. I felt my body ask for a smoke. I still mainly smoked in the early mornings, but addiction was trying to stake out more territory for itself.

Out front the sun was bright. I glanced out at the road. Cars were passing by. I would be in full view if I went out for a smoke. Katie could come up for a visit.

I looked at my watch. There wouldn't be a real lunch rush for a while yet. I considered going in to walk-in cooler for maybe half a smoke. I didn't feel like trying to stave off this craving for however many more hours.

The desire to smoke had been picking up during the past couple of weeks since getting shit-canned from the essay scoring gig. Nothing else was coming up in job searches. I was running out of ideas. I was running out of the feeling that I gave a shit anymore.

Mornings were still the worst, too, for thinking about the robbery. Coming in when it was still dark. I sucked down those first cigarettes of the day. Needed that sense of satisfaction to offset the dread of unlocking the doors. Of standing here just waiting for that masked face to appear again.

I shivered, picturing the face again with the bandanna. There was no way I wanted to stand around thinking about that all day. I let my breath go. Looked around the store for customers, though I knew none were there. I felt in my pocket for the pack of smokes, and got ready to make a dash for the cooler.

A car entered the parking lot. It was as if I had pulled a lever when I grabbed the lighter in my vest pocket. Like I had turned the car by remote control. I stared at the car and let the lighter drop back to the bottom of the pocket.

The car was one of those wide 1970's models that look like barges. It was some bygone greenish color, probably called "avocado" or something like that. I could hear it chugging as it neared the front glass.

It parked. The two shadows in the front seats sat there for a moment. I could tell from the way they sat there that they were looking at me. My stomach squeezed and I could feel my heart start to kick at my ribcage.

The passenger door opened. First thing I saw appear under the door were these shins. Long and smooth, they tapered into a pair of high-heeled sandals. Rope soles, slightly dirty, with a few stray strands. The toes looked clean, with a fresh coat of dark gloss.

After the legs appeared, things got slightly less impressive. Her long, thin fingers curled over the top of the open door and at the edge of the roof. She pulled herself awkwardly out of the car. Her hair appeared first. It was mousey brown and gathered in a clumsy semblance of a bun on top.

As she emerged her eyes locked on mine. Her face was young, and there was an innocence about it. But it seemed to be frozen into an unintentional scowl. It made me think of faces that had just been slapped. Angry but on the verge of tears.

Oh, great.

I steeled myself for a confrontation. I knew I would have remembered that face if I had served her and pissed her off. Figured she was probably coming in to complain about something Marta did or said the night before. I'd heard it before. I usually just gave 'em the District Manager's number to get them out of my hair. But I always had to hear the whole litany.

She walked to the door of the store. She couldn't have been older than eighteen, nineteen. Her legs wobbled a bit on the heels. It made her look something like a young deer. One wearing an extremely short denim mini-skirt, anyway.

"Hi," she said.

Her voice was warm. That feminine semi-whisper.

"Hello."

I must have looked confused. Her voice did not match the face. She was not smiling. Her eyebrows were natural and thick, not penciled-in. But they pulled upward at an unusual "angry" angle.

She kept looking at me as she walked parallel to the counter. Her mouth softened somewhat, but not her eyes. They looked like she expected pain, confrontation. She didn't blink. I felt a bit of a chill. I waited.

"I'm getting some gum," she said, finally.

"Oh, i-it's--Keep heading that way. Then down that aisle."

"Thank you."

She made sure I watched her start down the aisle. That I could see the wiggle in her denim skirt. She was skinny and thin-hipped. But she kicked those hips side-to-side with a practiced rhythm.

I patted the pack of smokes in my pocket. Looked at my watch. She was more interesting than the usual customers any day--drywall jockeys and framers. But a nicotine infusion awaited.

In a moment she was at the counter, staring at me again. I started ringing up the gum. Then I noticed out of the corner of my eye that the big boat she'd arrived in was pulling out of its spot. We both turned and watch it drive out of the lot.

I looked at her and cocked my head slightly. Her eyes were darker than they'd seemed at first. And they looked slightly unfocused. Like she wasn't quite seeing what was in front of her. Like she was preoccupied with some disturbing thought.

"He could only bring me this far," she explained. "Somebody else is supposed to pick me up. I'm gonna wait out front."

"Oh... you ca--Okay."

I had almost invited her to wait inside. But in a flash I had predicted that the forced conversation that would keep me from getting my smoke.

She held my gaze for a moment. She seemed to be waiting for something. I didn't know what. After a moment, she looked slightly disappointed with my failure to react. Or something. I just wasn't sure.

She walked out to the front sidewalk. She parked herself just my side of the propane tanks. She stood with a wide, firm stance. I noticed that it emphasized the musculature of those long legs. I let my eyes follow the curve of her calf slowly down to the sandals. Out to the manicured, symmetrical toes.

I shook my head to break the spell. In a few minutes she'd be just another long-gone customer. Besides, she seemed like kind of a nutjob.

There were no other cars out front so I made a dash for the cooler. I position myself so that I could look out at the front. I peered through the plastic bottles of milk and lit up.

The cold air made the smoke taste funny. But I could feel the drug hitting my lungs like I needed it to. I inhaled as deeply as I could in the cold. I felt the edge of tension dissolving.

Out front the girl was smoking too. I could see the blue smoke curling around her head. She was just standing there. I wondered why she would want to wait at a C- store. There was a restaurant up the road. A bar a bit further down.

I crushed out the cigarette on the floor of the cooler. I walked out of the cold. Head rush. The combination of the nic and the temperature change made me feel drunk for a moment.

Back behind the counter I glanced out at the girl. Still standing there. Still no cars.

My spiral notebook was lying on the computer desk. I had brought it along to jot down story ideas. Figured it was time I started making better use of these long stretches of morning. Maybe I could even manage to write a short short story or two. If I was going to be stuck in this job for now, at least I could make the best of it.

I picked up the notebook and grabbed a pen. Brought them up to the counter so I could keep an eye out for cars. I tapped the cover of the notebook for a moment, thinking. Then I flipped it open. Started writing.

After maybe five minutes I happened to look up. The girl outside was staring at me over her shoulder. A cigarette was burning in her right hand. Her eyes held mine with that same chilling gaze. It was only when I looked down at her mouth that I detected an apparent attempt to smile. She turned forward again and took a drag.

A small pickup pulled in from the road. The girl seemed to straighten her stance. At the same time she swayed slightly. Looked somewhat like she was listening to music. I figured this must be her ride.

The guy that got out of the car had been here before. Mid-forties, blue collar. Usually came in for a twelve pack. I wondered if this was his daughter. But after I saw their mouths exchange a hello, he kept walking into the store.

"Sup," he said, nodding at me.

He went back to the coolers. I watched him get his beer. On the way back to the counter, he was looking out the window at her. When he got to the counter, he grinned as he set down the beer. He gestured out front with his head.

"She been out there long?"

"No, not really. Fifteen minutes?"

"They had to run her off from The Tides last night."

He kept grinning. My first thought was that he meant she had gotten too drunk at the local bar and restaurant. Or been kicked out for being underage. His grin somehow didn't jibe with that interpretation.

"Hooker. She stood out front there, too. Manager noticed she kept getting into cars with guys as they left the bar area. They'd ride out to Shaftoe's Point. Fifteen, twenty minutes later she'd be back."

I let my head slowly tilt back as understanding set in. His grin got bigger.

"She was wearing that same getup last night. She must know what she's doing, 'cuz I didn't see one stray shot o' jizz on her clothes. An' that's after ten guys jus' that I know of!"

He paid up and walked out front again. He had more of a swagger on the way out. She glanced at him again with an open expression. She stiffened after he said something to her. He was laughing as he got back into his truck.

She turned her head my way again. The mixture of pain and anger were directly on the surface this time. I looked down and started reading what I had written in the notebook.

I could still see her in my peripheral vision. I tried to reread the short short story I was working on. I had written a couple of paragraphs.

It was based on a smart girl I had known in high school. She was beyond all of us. She took lecture notes in Social Studies while reading novels but still got perfect grades. Oddly, she was also in the ROTC, a foray into military enlistment for high school kids.

In the story the protag wants to track her down years later. Wanted to find out what becomes of someone that bright, how far they made it out our Podunk town. But she turns out to be with the Special Ops. Trying to look her up puts the guy under suspicion.

I read the last sentence I had written. Waited for the next line to form in my head so I could write it down. Nothing. So I read it again. But as I read the sentence, I pictured those long brown legs out front. I pictured them up the air in the back of a car. The high-heeled sandals against the roof, bracing her ass against the seat. Leaning out the window moments later, spitting a white mouthful. Tucking cash into her bra on the drive

back.

The door alarm started beeping again. She was coming back in. My legs moved and I could feel that my groin had gotten swollen. I hoped she wouldn't walk up to the counter just then.

She went back to the candy aisle. I could see look back at me from the aisle. I pretended to write, but I could see her waiting for me to look up. I didn't.

My heart was beating. I stared at my writing on the notebook. Instead of seeing the words I saw myself walk to the glass door and lock it. I taped up a sign that said back in 5 minutes. The one the female workers used when they went on a bathroom break.

Then I imagined myself walking to the candy aisle. I took her hand and led her to the Volker's office. I kept my eye on the video monitors and unzipped my pants. She knelt in front of me and I fed her my cock. I watched those monitors for customers as she bobbed it deep and slurped.

I jumped when I heard her thump against the counter in front of me. I looked up from the notebook. The crotch of my pants had tightened again. I pushed it forward against the back of the counter to hide it. I felt myself turning red, though.

"No, uh, no sign of... your ride? Your-your... whoever's picking you up?"

She didn't answer for a beat. Gave me a searching gaze. No trace of the smile this time.

"Not yet."

I looked down at the candy bar and sucker she had selected. It hit me that this was a way of covering for herself, all the cheap candy. As long as she kept making purchases, she could claim she was just a customer.

I swiped the items under the scanner. I looked at her neck, her shoulders this time. I thought about telling her that she wouldn't have to keep making all these little purchases. That I could be "talked into" covering for her.

Then I looked up from her chest to her face. There were those coal-black eyes. Eyes that had seen a very different past from mine. They were looking straight through my skull, through to the wall behind me. I imagined losing my erection as those Manson eyes looked up at me from waist level.

I handed her change again and then looked down at my notebook again. She paused for a moment, hoping I would look at her again. I could see her arms kind of go limp, then she walked back out front.

After a moment I peeked up from pretending to write. I watched her working on that sucker. I shook my head and looked back down.

Part of me wanted to kick myself for not taking advantage of this. But I knew I just wasn't a lock-the-store-and-extort-a-freebie-blowjob-out-of-a-hooker guy. At some point during it I'd be imagining the sores in her mouth.

And later I'd invent some way that the cops would find out. Maybe the guy who just bought the beer had called them, and they were on their way already. They would arrive just as I got my pants down. They'd see us rushing out of the back and know. Then they would tell Don and I'd be fired.

Even if none of that happened, I didn't think I could hide it from Katie. I didn't want to hide it from her. It would be in the back of my mind forever, like a tumor. I'd have to worry about never drinking so much that I'd

end up giving some tear-soaked confession.

Out front she lit another cigarette. I moped over to the desk with my notebook so I wouldn't have to see her. I felt a combination of horniness and self-disgust.

I stared at the notebook again for a moment without writing. Then I picked up the momentum of the story again. Started back writing.

In less than five minutes the front door alarm started in again.

This is getting ridiculous.

I stood up. I was scowling this time. Ready to give her a look.

My face softened when I saw that it wasn't the prostitute. It was Blunt Girl. That was how I had come to refer to her. She came in every few days to buy the small cigars called "blunts." The strawberry-flavored ones.

She was eighteen, I think. I had ID'd her once. She looked so young I had figured she was sent by the cops to sting me for underage tobacco sales.

Since she wasn't a narc, I knew she was a stoner. Anyone young from Doctor's Landing buying blunts was into weed. Nobody smoked those stinking rolls of cardboard for enjoyment. They used 'em to disguise the odor and appearance of marijuana. Blunt Girl obviously had a thing for the good weed sold along the Timacaw.

Stoner or not, she was nice to see. The thing about Blunt Girl was her smile. It was beautiful. I would just keep staring at it when I saw her. Sometimes it seemed to invite me. Sometimes after she left I imagined it beaming at me from a mattress below. But I knew she was probably just high.

It was warm out, and Blunt Girl came in wearing a bikini top and cutoff jeans. Her clothes were old and river-stained. But Blunt Girl made them beautiful. She was beautiful, in that semi-rural, compared-to-what-else-I-see-all-day way.

She walked up to the counter. I lifted my eyes slowly from her partially-exposed breasts to her face. I was already horny, and it made me not care whether she knew what I was thinking. There was the smile, as always.

"Hi." I said.

I turned and reached for the strawberry blunts before she said anything. I wanted her to know I knew her.

"Headed down to the river for the day?"

"Yeah."

I pushed the pack of five blunts across the counter until it touched her hand. She held my gaze, smiling. I felt the swelling in my pants again. I struggled to think of something else to say to her.

"Anything el--How about some water? You want to... You don't want to get dehydrated. Out there in the sun."

She leaned toward me. The smile was closer than I had seen it before. Her teeth looked clean, but not that fake bleached look.

"We got stuff to drink," she said with a wink.

"Ah-hah... "

Again I looked at her breasts. A nicely-shaped B cup. I hoped maybe the top had loosened as she leaned forward. It had not, but from the new angle I could see the profile of her nipple.

The extra blood in my groin felt warm. I was at about half mast at this point.

I quickly began to ring her up. I had several hours left on the shift. I didn't want to sit around horny for the rest of the time. Made it too hard to concentrate. I wouldn't get any more writing done. Not with this hooker standing out front. I needed to head to the office in back.

I dropped her change in her hand with a short thank you. She was still smiling, but it weakened a bit at the corners. Her eyes looked a little hurt. I flashed a smile to reassure her. But I quickly began to scan the parking lot and road to see if there were other cars.

She began walking out. I drank in a last look at her tall frame. I imagined playwrestling with her in bed, naked. Trying to hold her down. The erection got firmer.

No cars. Check. The prostitute was watching Blunt Girl walk to her car. She seemed to look at her lustily. Sex was swimming in the air. I started for the back office.

I looked at the monitors. Still no cars visible out front. I kept my eyes on the screens and undid my pants. They dropped. I felt the weight of my erection. The sudden nudity and the cold of the air conditioning helped complete the hardening.

One of the cameras was pointed toward the front doors. The prostitute was visible out front. I spat in my palm and began to stroke.

The onscreen image of the fuck pro was not very good. I could see her shift her weight, take drags on her cigarette. I wanted a good look at those legs. I focused on her exposed upper back instead. I had seen one of her shoulder blades when she took a drag.

Nothing in the parking lot, according to the other monitors. I zoned in on those shoulders, that back. I was behind her on the bed. Fucking her tight ass. I was looking at her shoulders up close.

I was diamond hard. I stroked faster, feeling the transaction about to take place.

On the monitor a car appeared. It turned into the parking lot and approached the store. I felt the plateau pull back. But I knew I couldn't go out there with this erection anyway. Unless it was a cigarette buyer, I would have at least another minute to finish and get behind the register before the customer got impatient.

I closed my eyes to avoid seeing the new customer get out and start walking in. Blunt Girl appeared in my mind. First the smile, warming me again. Then I honed in on the fresh image of the outline of her nipple. She undid the bikini top for me. Her brown, quarter-sized nipples fully hardened in the cold air of the store.

My prostate started spasming just before the door alarm shrieked. I looked down and watched three white arcs splatter in succession against the office floor. The first shot looked like it went four feet. My knees buckled but I caught myself in time. I felt my face and ears go hot and red.

I looked at the monitors. The car was still sitting in the parking place. The hooker had come in again. She was

in the medicine aisle this time.

I watched her in the monitor as I pulled my pants back on. The front of my pants was still a bit tented out, but it was deflating. I waited for her to head to the counter before I came out.

She was standing at the counter with a pack of condoms. The crazy eyes were still there, but her slight smile had returned.

There was a shadow visible in the driver's seat of the car out front. Waiting. I rang up the condoms. Neither of us said anything. She walked out and got in the car. I noticed that her legs and her walk didn't get to me this time. I was done for the afternoon. The guy in the car soon would be, too.

§§§

I set my notebook aside and sighed. It was early afternoon. Time for the shift change.

The prostitute hadn't come back after I saw her leave with the john. In my flaccid frame of mind I realized that it was probably a good thing. Marta was due in for second shift. If the hooker had stayed most of my shift, word may have gotten around. The regulars may have mentioned it to Marta. She lived for raising a stink about such things.

I was relaxed. It had been a slow shift. I'd spent the time between customers fine tuning my stories.

I started running the shift change reports. I had started trying to do the switch just before Marta came in. That way I could take all the money and paperwork to the back office as soon as she arrived. Good way to avoid Marta's damage.

This time she was early. I hadn't finished writing down the lottery numbers yet. I saw her car driving up as I was ringing up a couple of beer and ice customers.

They were some guys headed out for an afternoon of fishing. I was glad the guys were there when I saw Marta arriving. Maybe they knew her. They could chat with her and I could slip to the back without hearing her usual list of grievances.

I had underestimated the gentlemen. Marta kicked open the door. Her long mullet freshly brushed. Looked like a horse tail. The fishermen's chatter stopped and they glanced at each other knowingly. They paid in silence and quickly left.

I quickly scribbled down the remaining lottery numbers. Marta was putting her meal in the cooler. I started gathering accounting stuff to take to Volker's office.

Marta blocked my way to the back. I stood in front of her with my arms full of paperwork and a bag of money from the safe.

"Did ya hear from Shelly today?" she asked.

"No... Why?"

"Well, she's s'posed to take over as manager tomorrow."

"Rrrright... ?"

"Well, I thought she might come by today."

I didn't hide my look of annoyance and scorn. Marta was impervious to civil treatment. She invited war and got it from nearly every human interaction. Mine included.

"I tell you one thing... " she started. "Hold on."

The door alarmed sounded. An elderly man stepped up to the counter.

"Hello, sir. What can I get you today?"

The only time I ever saw her attempt to be pleasant was when she served customers in my presence. I could tell she was faking, and I constantly heard from regulars what a troll she was to everyone. Best I could figure she wanted to prove to me that she was a kinder and more gracious customer servant than I. As if I gave a fuck.

I noticed myself pausing, acting as I would had a normal human asked me to "hold on." I kicked myself internally. I started toward the office again as she sold the old man a pack of sweet cigars. I didn't quite make it.

"I tell you one thing... "

I stopped walking but did not turn around.

"If Shelly thinks she's gonna come in here and start throwing her weight around, she's got another thing coming."

Another THINK coming, you moron.

"Gotcha," I replied.

I zipped into the office.

I thought about Shelly as I prepared the deposit. I was due to work second shift the next day. As manager Shelly could stay as long as she wanted to during second shift. She could come back after taking the deposit to the bank. There might be a lot of overlap. A lot of tension.

I shook my head as I sealed the deposit bag. I wasn't sure how bad things might get, working with two horrible shrews. One of whom held my job in her claws.

I vowed to do some extra job searches that night.

Chapter 24

Next to the computer screen sat a lukewarm cup of coffee. I had never cared much about the heat, just the caffeine. I knocked it back. Third mug of the day.

It was a second shift day. I had gotten up late, as usual. Wasted some time sitting in front of the tube. News channels. The kids were at school. Katie spent most of the morning reading and exercising along the river.

I had told myself I wanted to log on and update my website. I had a couple of stories to upload that I had written at the store. Maybe there would be some stuff that other writers had sent. Something good enough for the book?

I checked all the inboxes. Still nothing from Clytemnestra about the book proposal. How long had it been now? I wondered whether they were still waiting to see if my TV appearance would create any buzz.

Buzz. That thought made me aware of myself sitting in the old houseboat in Nowhere, FL. I looked around me. Scowled.

My chair creaked as I readjusted myself in it. Time to do my work. I navigated to the fiction site. I wanted to lose myself in tinkering with it. Links, editing, grammar checks. Little annoyances, but it felt like I was doing something for myself, at least.

Soon enough, I started watching the clock. Waiting for the arrival of The Shift. I knew Shelly had been at the store all morning. Her first day as manager. Soon I would be at her mercy.

Katie returned from outside. Stood at the door pulling up her left ankle sock, looking at me. She was panting.

I closed the lid of the notebook computer, looked at Katie. She had in a pair of earbuds. She saw my lips move.

"Wha--?" she yelled, pulling the stopper from her left ear.

"Did you go for a jog?"

"Yeah."

"Didn't run across any snakes?"

"Shut your mouth!" she said, smiling. Then she acted out a case of the willies at the thought.

Katie despised snakes. When we saw them at the Kingsboro zoo, even from behind the glass of their herpetaria, she had had to leave the building.

"Have lunch with me before I go to work," I said.

"Okay. Let me take a shower first."

I went into the kitchen and made us some sandwiches. She and the kids had talked me into going to chain restaurant the night before. Some overwrought Italian place. It was okay until we got the check. Dinner for four had cost us what I made during a whole shift at the store. That had pretty much soured it for me. I was sullen most of the night.

Katie sat at the table in her bath towel. I didn't make any moves. We pretty much stayed silent through the meal. Katie was tired from the run. I was distracted by the feeling of dread about going work with Shelly. I imagined various ugly scenes that could play out. Traps she would set for me to get me fired.

Katie wondered what was distracting me. I told her, but it didn't really sink in. She made a few sympathetic noises about it. But it seemed like she thought I was overthinking the whole thing. These clashes of egos could be hard to grasp from the outside, I supposed. Or maybe Katie just wasn't trying very hard to see it from my perspective.

After I finished my sandwich, I leaned back in my chair. I looked at Katie sitting there in her towel. Her legs were shiny from baby oil. Probably smelled nice. I realized I had just been sitting there thinking about the store with these legs a couple of feet away.

I got up from the table, looked at the clock. I had time to jump online for one last round of job searches before work. My job away from job.

§§§

The only other car in the parking lot at the store was Shelly's. It was a green SUV, probably five years old. I sat in my car for a moment reading her bumper stickers.

Southern Galz Raise Hell

I Brake for Big Packages

If you see my finger, it probably ain't a thumbs up!

I checked myself in the mirror. My cheap haircut looked orderly enough. I didn't want to give her any petty ammo. Grab-N-Go had a dress code buried somewhere in the fine print, even though no one usually paid it much attention.

I opened the door and heard the music blaring immediately. I had forgotten that the big boom box at the Pine Trail Store was Shelly's. She had moved it here. Our little beach radio obviously wasn't going to cut it for her.

She was rocking to some post-grunge band I didn't know. Sounded okay, not worth buying. I was just glad it wasn't the country crap she had usually blasted at Pine Trail.

"Mister Jee-um!"

Fuck me. Here we go.

"Yes?"

"How you been?"

At Pine Trail she had never bothered with the social graces. I wondered whether this was a wind-up.

"Um... good. You?"

"Good."

She was counting money at the desk. She was one of those fast counters who seem to like the crinkly sound of

the bills. She quietly huffed the numbers aloud as she counted.

I walked behind the counter and pulled my vest over my head. The music was loud back there. I glanced at the box. Thought about turning it down.

"You can turn that down a little bit if you want to," she said.

"Oh, that's o--Okay, maybe a little."

I didn't turn it down much. No point in inviting conversation.

Shelly strapped the last of the loose bills. She snapped two big rubber bands around them. She shoved them into the plastic deposit bag. I noticed she had some kind of fancy nail job. There were tiny, intricate designs painted or maybe glued on each nail.

The door alarm started shrieking. A guy walked up to the counter. A regular buying smokes. Loud guy from up north. Shelly looked up.

"I'll get him," she said.

The regular looked at Shelly. Then he looked at me. Raised his eyebrows slightly.

"Who have we here?" he said to Shelly.

She was unfazed.

"I'm the new manager here, sir. How can we help you?"

Shelly looked like she had lost maybe thirty pounds since I had last seen her. Her upper arms were actually a bit loose from the weight loss. Her rack was still impressive but not quite as hefty as it had been. Loud Guy drank her in.

"Oh, so you are gonna be bossing around Mr. Television over here?" He nodded his head my way. "You seen this guy on Quiz Slam?"

"I heard about it," she said.

I waited for some backhanded remark. Would have been too easy. But she simply waited for the guy to speak again.

"Freaked me out when I saw it," he said. "They pay you big time just for appearing, right?"

"Well, I still work here, don't I?" I answered.

"True, heh-heh, true."

He looked Shelly over again.

"Well, it certainly will be nice seeing you here... Miss... ?"

"Call me Shelly," she said, with slightly more of that edge I knew from Pine Trail. "Now, what can I get for you?"

While she finished up with him I headed back to the restroom. The aisles looked cleaner. Shelly had swept, maybe mopped, I guessed. Sure as fuck wasn't Marta's m.o. Unless maybe Marta had done it just so she could say she had done it.

In the can I watched my piss stream hitting the newly scrubbed bowl. Bright yellow from a dose of B-vitamins. I thought about how the guys around here would probably appreciate having Shelly around. Even if she would shoot them down. Much better to look at than Marta.

Shelly was back at the desk. I eyed her as I walked back. I wondered what her game was. She didn't have that baleful expression I remembered from Pine Trail. She had always looked like one of those people who loathe every millisecond of existence, but stick with it anyway so they can make everyone else just as miserable. But now she looked almost... content.

I took a chance.

"So, you still live out in Pine Trail?" I asked.

"Oh, hell, I never did live out in them woods. I lived about twenty-two miles north of there."

"You were driving that far every morning to get there at five?"

"Only when I worked days. 'Member, most times I was on graveyard. But yeah. It was about an hour round trip."

"Whew!"

"But then I moved. I got divorced and moved. Now I live out on sixty-seven. You know, where the dog racing track is?"

I nodded. I wasn't really sure, but I had a general idea. It wasn't such a great neighborhood.

"Did you, uh, like Pine Trail?" I asked. "The store, I mean."

She paused to type some figures from an invoice. I recognized it as the order for potato chips. As she typed I guessed what the total probably was. It occurred to me that I had typed it in far too many times.

"Well... it was a little hectic sometimes, guess... I like Billie, Ben... "

She turned and looked out the window for a moment.

"I kinda associate the place with... my hus--with my marriage, though. I guess."

She looked at me. It was weird. The same physical face I had come to despise at Pine Trail was staring at me. But it was like her body had been possessed. I had never heard her talk about anything personal. It had been nothing but nasty comments, points of procedure, complaints.

"How's Billie doing?" I asked.

"She's fine. Just as cheerful as always. I can't believe how many years she's been at it."

"Yeah. The contrast between working with Marta and Billie is... You met Marta?"

"Oh yeah. Whenever Ben would forget to bring by her paycheck on Friday mornings, she would always drive out there, to Pine Trail, instead of waiting 'til the next day. She's a... Yes, I do know Marta."

I chuckled when she caught herself. She smiled.

"How do you and Marta get along?" she asked.

"I avoid her like... what? Uh, like an armless proctologist who works with his feet."

She did one of those lip-buzz chuckles.

"You're so crazy. That good, huh? Well, even so, y'all have managed to keep this place... I mean, for a store that hasn't had a real manager for two years, its... "

"I gotcha. Thanks."

I suppressed the urge to point out that Don certainly didn't seem to have much faith in us. Marta had been here far longer than I had, and was still on A.M. hourly pay. Shelly was the only one getting the promotion to Manager. Marta and I had essentially been demoted, now that Shelly would be doing all the work of actually running the store.

"I'm not saying it doesn't need work. I can't believe how Don has let it go. And this would be stuff ya'll weren't aware of, so I'm not, you know, sayin'--"

"N-no, right, I--"

"I mean, he must have really fudged the numbers somehow to, uh, to get this thing to pass quarterly inspection. Or he knows somebody?"

Shelly began to talk about aspects of store operations either unknown to me, or with which Marta and I never dealt on a regular basis. Shelly assumed I understood her, but my eyes began to glaze from the alien details.

I got a breather from it when Shelly took another customer. Some old guy who couldn't get his credit card to work out at the pump.

It began to dawn on me how little this "management training" had really amounted to. Don never did any training. Once Ben had trained us to do the basic daily paperwork, we became glorified cashiers. Marta at least had been trained to do the inventory orders for the store. Not I.

Of course, I realized, I had been content to trade my time for a paycheck while I looked for something else. I had not sought training. It would have taken away from daydream time. But I was feeling a bit duped. Especially now that the Pellton gig had fallen through and nothing else was on the horizon.

"Speaking of bad management," Shelly said after the customer left. "You remember Jay, right?"

I cringed internally at the thought of his big Fred Flintstone face, his faux redneck drawl. I rolled my eyes and nodded.

"He was always sucking up to Don, you know. Talking about how good he was with customers, how much he did for the store... "

"Yeah, I remember that. Did he ever... I didn't ever see him counting the cash, or doing the paperwork or--"

"Well, he was always... He would A.M. at all kinds of other stores. He was always Don's go-to guy for filling in when somebody didn't show, or an Assistant Manager quit, that kind of thing."

"Ooohhh. So he was, okay, okay... "

"He--" Shelly started.

"That's right. I remember he told me he mainly worked at the Bayview store. That he was just filling in at Pine Trail."

"Right. So anyway... He's always workin' on Don to make him a manager. 'If I had my own store... ' That kinda shit. Y'know?"

I grinned.

"Don, when you give me my store I'll... da-da-da-da-da... ' He was on this shit day after day."

The monitor for the gas pump beeped, meaning someone had finished pumping. She glanced outside to see if they were coming in to pay. It was the old man she had helped. He gave her a wave.

"So, anyway--" she continued.

"So Jay was angling for a store--"

"Right. So the manager out in Bayview up and quits. Just like, one weekend decided she'd had enough of it. Wasn't showing up the next day. Or walked out, or something."

"Flaked."

"Yeah. And here I am, I've been AM-ing for Ben for almost three years now?"

I raised my eyebrow. She seemed oblivious as to what that might say about her.

"But does he give me the Bayview store? No. That frickin' fag Jay gets it."

I cringed internally. She threw the paperclip she was holding. She sat there for a moment, shaking her head.

"I had half a mind to think that he and Don--" she started.

"Nooo--"

"Well, shit, I mean--"

"No, not Don. I don't see that."

"But... Oooo! That pissed me off! You know? I just couldn't... I was so mad at Don... ."

"That makes... I can see--"

"I mean, I don't know if he would have even... I don't know if I woulda got this store, y'know, been promoted to manager, if it wasn't for the new Regional Manager. Guy looked over my employment record and made Don move me up. I don't know that Don wouldn't of just left me to, to... rot out there at Pine Trail."

I had heard from Marta that a new guy had taken over as Regional Manager. Don's new boss. His name was Tony something. Vasquez? Something Latino-sounding. Marta was all up in arms about it. I didn't see that it mattered. I had never once laid eyes on the old RM.

Shelly crossed her arms. She turned away from me and looked out the windows again. I eventually broke the pause.

"So, is Jay still out there? Or--"

"Oh, oh, right. That's what I was... I got sidetracked there. Thinking about how Don- -"

"Understandably." I said.

"But, yeah, that's the thing of it. That's... Just guess how long Jay lasted out there at Bayview."

"I... I don-... Lasted?! You mean he's--?"

"Five days."

"What?!"

"He's like, 'I can't take these people, Don.' Can you believe that? Same people he's always dealt with, working out there... "

"Who, the employees?" I asked.

"No, the... well, maybe. I always thought he meant the customers. 'These goddamn rednecks,' he said. 'Where do these people get off?' And da-da-da-da-da."

"Five da--Did he ever, did you ever hear about some kind of... incident? Any particular event--"

"No. 'I can't deal with these people.' That was what Don, you know, relayed."

"What is it about that place? Bayview. I've heard other people mention it."

"But, no, see, he had already worked out there. So, he sucks Don's ass for months, constantly works on him. Then when he gets what he wants... what he thinks he wants--"

The door alarm started shrieking again. A bald black guy walked in. Thirties, fit. I glanced out at his van. He was a plumber. I remembered him buying lottery on other days. He always traded his "winning" scratch tickets for new ones. Never took the cash.

He set a small stack of tickets in front of Shelly. Instead of looking down at the display of new tickets, he gave her a flirty grin. Her expression was slightly more open than it had been for the Loud Guy. They went through the whole introduction thing.

I put my hand on my hip. I looked Shelly over. I looked for that "zap." With women that constantly attract men, you can usually feel this charge of sexual thoughts when you look at them, or interact with them. The lizard brain kicks in. It doesn't always come across in photos, and sometimes it only comes across in photos.

I didn't know exactly what the other guys were gravitating toward maybe a combo of her relatively stylish hair, relatively decent face, the tits...

Or maybe the general sense that she was looking, yet bored with the vast majority of men. Available but unavailable. I had never seen her get hit on at the Pine Trail store. Maybe now they could see that ineffable new something about her. The same change that was making it possible for us to actually talk now.

I found myself walking to the box of trashcan liners while they talked. Figured I might as well look like I did some work while I was there.

I walked out front to the big container, the one most customers used. I lifted the plastic lid. I held my breath and slid the big bag out. It was heavy, but I did not want to suck in the foul air from the filthy can. A couple of big metallic-green blow flies buzzed out of it.

My breath hissed out between my teeth from the weight of the bag. I tried to breathe through my mouth as I worked it out of the can. Took a minute or two to pull out.

The bag was about 40 pounds of trash. I started waddling toward the side of the building. There was a big dumpster on the side. The bag thumped into my leg with each stride. I started to feel a wet spot on my leg. Tried not to think about.

I chuckled at myself as I walked. All that time I had wasted before coming to work. All the worrying about what Shelly was going to do to me, how she was going to act.

There was a big shaded area at the edge of the parking lot. I looked toward it. A car was parked in the shade. I could just make out a shadow inside. Someone looking at me.

I kept walking, but slowed. There was something familiar about the silhouette.

Is that... ?

My stomach knotted as the driver's door opened. A tall figure emerged. Still in the shadow of the large tree. I felt my heart kick into gear.

I hurled the bag into the dumpster. Tried to look strong. I turned and faced the guy, wiping my hands, my shoulders puffed out. But I felt the adrenaline starting to kick in. The shakes. He was walking into the sunlight, toward the store.

No bandanna, at least...

He nodded at me, wondering what I was staring at. I nodded back, slightly.

I wasn't sure. It still could have been him. It was hard to be sure anymore.

Chapter 25

"Did he just ask for 'Monocally?'"

The door alarm was still blaring as the door shut behind the guy leaving. Shelly was looking down with her lips pressed together. When the beeping stopped, she burst out laughing.

"Isn't that what he said? 'Monocally?'" I asked.

"Don't you ever... " she sputtered. "You coulda have at least waited 'til he left bef--"

"I mean, does he actually think the scratch ticket is called 'Monocally?' Wait, wait... is the character on the tickets wearing a monocle, or something?"

I peered into the display case at the "Monopoly" scratch tickets, feigning a serious investigation. Shelly was leaning over and bracing herself against the counter, trying to catch her breath between guffaws.

"Stop... " she gasped.

She punched me in the arm. I glanced outside to see whether the guy had left. I wondered if he had seen her laughing.

Shelly had been manager for a couple of weeks. I still opened the store a couple of days here and there. Marta and I were supposed to alternate opening on weekends. Mostly, though, we did nights. Between us, Marta and I covered nearly all seven nights. There was a part-timer scheduled for a few nights a month.

It was a lot of hours. We were still doing overtime. But I was already feeling the extra sleep from not doing days all the time. Being able to sleep in on the days after second shifts felt like a miracle.

Having Shelly there was cool, too. Most days I worked with her, she stayed longer in the afternoon. We joked and talked while she did paperwork and merchandise orders. She seemed to be trying to whip the place into shape.

Shelly stopped laughing and returned to the computer desk. I watched her trying to read the printing on an oil-stained invoice.

"You know what Marta said to me yesterday?" I asked her.

Shelly looked at me and rolled her eyes. Shelly had become about as much of a fan of Marta as I was.

"She said... I mentioned, somehow it came up that the day before, you had stayed later in the afternoon, you know, when I was coming on for second shift."

"Unh-huh... "

"So she goes... " I put on the gruff smoker's voice I used to imitate Marta. "'She don't never stay here when I come in. She takes the deposit to the bank, then she's gohn for the day.'"

Shelly scoffed.

"Well, shit," she said. "Every time I walk in the door she's in my face, telling me... I have to hear about every little thing that goes on during her shift. And tellin' me 'We need this,' and 'We need that,' and 'You oughta do

this,' and da-da-da-da-da."

"Oh, I dread when she shows up for work and there aren't any customers," I said.

"Yeah! I mean, I can't get any work done, so I might as well go home."

"What does she... ? It's like she carries around a list of-of... Or remembers every little--"

"No, yeah. Everything, anything wrong, she remembers. Every little thing. She's gotta tell me about it," Shelly said.

"She must have... " I looked out the window to check on a guy pumping gas. "Can you imagine being her sister? Does she hav--I mean maybe, maybe her parents rewarded her, or something, for being, like, a snitch... ? You know?"

"Always telling on the brothers and sisters, the kids in the neighborhood. Yeah, definitely."

"Right... maybe some teacher was in on this too, making her like she is," I said.

"She was the hall monitor."

"Yes! This is what happens to hall monitors. The kids that take names. That is really what she... I mean doesn't that seem like--?"

"Yep."

"She needs a boss, an authority figure. She bitches about them, but--"

Shelly quickly looked up from her work. She stared at me intently.

"But... um, but she has to have someone above her, to complain to," I continued more quietly.

"So, she bitches about... So, what does she say about m--? Uh oh."

Something outside had caught Shelly's eye. Her expression changed. I turned toward the window.

"Brass," Shelly said.

Two cars had parked in front of the store, next to each other. One I recognized as Don Volker's car. I could see him behind the wheel. He leaned toward the passenger seat. He moved a stack of papers to the back.

At first I had assumed that Shelly had just meant Don. But, from the car next to Don's, two middle-aged figures emerged. They didn't seem like customers. The driver, a male, was looking up toward the façade of the store. Seemed to be checking out the signage.

"That's Tony," Shelly said. Tony was the new Regional Manager. Don's boss.

Tony's passenger, a woman, slammed her door and stood with her fists on her hips. She glared through the storefront glass. The sun was bright, so she probably could not see much inside due to the reflection. But she looked determined to stare down whatever met her gaze.

Tony looked at his passenger and said something. He started pointed at the awning above them. The woman

looked up at it. She was wearing the kind of mirror shades that are supposed to make you look like sporty--they were angular and sort of menacing. She made some comment to Tony about the building. The set of her mouth made it clear that it was a snide remark.

She looks like a cop.

All three of them made their entrance, the door alarm screaming its usual fanfare. Tony was the type who affected a stiff-legged swagger. Always looked like he was trying to keep his balls from sticking to his thighs. He shuffled into place about five feet in front of the counter, the other two in tow. Shelly and I waited for the show to begin.

"S'up guys? Shelly, good to see you again," said Tony.

"This is Jim, one of my Assistant Managers," Shelly said.

Tony and I shook hands. He, of course, tried to squeeze too hard.

Shelly and I looked at each other, then back at the three of them lined up in front of us. We were waiting to hear what this was all about. There had been no announcement of a visit.

"Shelly, are Jim and Marta showing you the ropes as manager, here?" Tony asked with a chuckle.

"Oh, they're just... Everything has gone very smooth here," Shelly said.

"Well, they have done a fine job here of managing the place without official training as managers," said Tony. "And with so little supervision."

With the last statement, Tony's gaze stayed on us, but went unfocused. He was monitoring his peripheral vision. Don shifted on his feet and looked toward the floor.

"Well, Shelly," Tony said, "your move into management, and to the River store here is, ah, part of, one of a number of changes we're putting into gear. Making some positive changes, here in our district. Moving things around a little bit. We're doing some fine tuning. You know?"

We nodded. I went cold. I wondered if I was about to be shit-canned. Or maybe this lady cop was here to take me in for something they had seen on the videos. Maybe there were cameras hidden back in that office.

"The biggest change will be your District Manager," Tony continued. He stepped slightly to the side. He angled his shoulder toward Don and the lady.

"Don here has done a, ah... a fine job as your DM for... what...?"

"Six years," Don said. Head still down. He looked at Tony over the top of his glasses.

"Six years. The district has cruised along. But Don has informed us--"

The door alarm started screeching. Two construction guys started in. They stopped in their tracks. The one in front looked over the business-casual trio addressing us.

"We can come back later, if ya'll are--"

"No, no, gentleman," Tony said. "Come right in. What can we do ya for?"

He led the yokels back to the beer section. He "helped" them find some 40-ounce bottles of their favorite brands. Chatting them up the whole time. He led them back to the front.

"Jim, here would be glad to ring you up," he told them.

The yokels set their beer bottles on the counter gingerly. They looked at me with raised eyebrows and slight smirks. They had bought into Tony's whole lah-di-dah, royal treatment game.

I glanced at Tony to see whether he expected me to play along. He had leaned toward his passenger and talked with her under his breath. I gave them the assembly line treatment to get rid of them. Didn't want to spend any more time waiting to hear my fate.

"So, ah, back to Don... " Tony said.

He glanced to see if the parking lot was clear, then continued.

"Ah, Don, here, has informed us that he wants to make a change in his career path. He will be taking on an opportunity in the drugstore business. Managing for, ah... "

"Spelchmann's." Don said. There was a slight edge to his voice.

"Spelchmann's, right. Great company. Don is taking over their store on 14th St."

I stared at Don. His face looked dark. I tried to see out of the corner of my eye what Shelly was doing. Whether she was reacting to Don's ending up at basically her same level. Couldn't tell.

"And to my left here... I'd like you to meet Vera Coogan," Tony said.

We looked at Vera. She didn't smile, but tilted her chin up slightly.

"Vera is going to take over where Don left off. She's your new District Manager."

Tony gave us the rundown on Vera. Said she had managed stores in Kingsboro for a different C-store company. Tony told us she was ready to kick the District into high gear, blah-blah-blah.

It was hard to read Vera. She had not taken off those shades, which seemed inappropriate. But, then, their distancing effect may have been her intention. Her mouth turned up slightly at the corners as Tony puffed her up. Otherwise she looked like a robot.

Presentation mode shaded into shop talk mode. Tony started asking Shelly about what the store needed. He threw in little comments there about his "vision for the district." How he wanted Shelly's input, wanted us all to "work as a team." All that shit you see in the business section of a bookstore.

As this went on for a bit, I started to breathe easier. It seemed like this had been just about the change in DMs. Everybody else's jobs seemed to be staying the same, teamwork or not.

Vera stayed fairly quiet as Tony went on. But she threw in a question here and there. Follow-up questions mainly. She wanted details on some of our sales numbers. When Shelly told her our average monthlies for tobacco and beer, Vera scoffed.

"Store I worked at in Kingsboro, we went through that in a week," Vera said. "I worked down at the corner of Fifeman and Billings. In the Hood. Looked out on the store from behind bulletproof glass."

I glanced at Shelly. She had a strained semi-smile on her face. Unimpressed, somewhat offended.

The door alarm started shrieking again. I recognized the couple coming in and groaned to myself. Both of the woman's arms were in full casts. Her boyfriend opened the door for her. He was around fifteen years her junior. He was decked out in a neo-Rockabilly outfit. Flames, tats, sideburns. She still had hair like the singer of Heart.

I was glad that the brass were still here. The woman didn't walk up to the counter to chat like she did when I was here alone. Always telling me about her medications, how tough it was with the casts. I had probably heard five times how she had broken both arms in a car accident. Driving plastered, natch.

The boyfriend set a couple of twelve-packs on the counter. It gave me a moment away from the "meeting." The whole surprise visit thing struck me as slightly pathetic, unprofessional. Keeping the major management shift under wraps until the last second? Smacked of mind games. Fear of "the natives becoming restless." Maybe they expected employees to try getting away with more shoplifting in the face of management instability.

While I waited on the barflies, Shelly and the others left me at the counter. She went do a walk-through of the store with Tony and Vera. Before she left my side, Shelly privately shot me one of those wide-eyed, do-you-believe-this-shit looks. I smiled, glad to be merely a spectator.

Don had not spoken to either of us. He headed back to his office. After a few minutes I saw him emerge briefly to set a cardboard box of his papers outside the office door.

I watched the others saunter around the aisles for a few minutes. Then Tony and Shelly went back to look at the "stockroom." It was a glorified closet at the back of the store that housed everything we had not been able to cram on the shelves. Vera looked in behind them, but there was no room for her to enter with them.

After a moment Vera glanced at me. I had been staring toward them during the customer lull. I suddenly felt myself thinking that I should be doing something. Busy work.

My stomach sank as Vera began to saunter toward me. She stopped at the coffee station. I smiled a little. Shelly had brewed a new pot not long ago. But Vera managed to find something.

"Where are your napkins?" she asked me.

I told her. We had these two-sided, diner-type napkin dispensers in the hot foods area. The front sides were empty. Vera could have just turned them around, since the back openings were stocked full.

I resisted the urge to look for busy work while Vera fiddled with the napkins. She finished and walked behind the counter. Stood next to me. I looked at her and waited for her to say something. She still had the mirror shades on. I stared at my homunculus in her left lens. She extended her hand. So did my miniature self in the lens.

"Good to meet you, Jim."

"Yes, yes, uh... Welcome aboard."

She turned and put her back against the back counter. She crossed her arms and leaned against it. She was matching the stance I had held before she walked up. I tried not to chuckle.

"So, how are you and Shelly getting along?"

"Oh, uh, everything's going... just fine?" I tilted my head slightly to the side.

"Ben wasn't sure whether you two would get along. He told me he was a little worried about moving her over here."

I felt that slight pang of nausea I get when I learn I am the subject of gossip. I wanted to change the subject. Gain some leverage.

"So, you didn't want to keep working in the Big City?" I asked. "What company were you with down there?"

"SuperSonic. They don't have a great track record for management. Five years and I was still pulling most of the weight at my store."

"That sounds f--That makes sense."

I had caught myself before saying "familiar."

"Hard to keep employees in that area of town," Vera said. "We didn't pay more than the other SuperSonic stores. Plus, the risk of getting shot was higher."

"You didn't feel... How could you work with the, uh, with that feeling of danger?"

"Oh, I wasn't really in much danger. Long as I stayed in that bullet-proof booth. Nothing's getting through that. Somebody tried something, all I had to do was call the cops. They responded pretty quickly there."

I looked skeptical.

"No, seriously," she said. "I used to sit back there and watch the shoplifters. They'd do it right in front of me. There was this guy who'd come in almost every night I worked. He'd walk in, go over to the beer cooler. Then I'd watch him stick a forty in his pants. Just some drunk. He'd always be gone by the time the cops got there. After a while I stopped calling. Just wrote it off."

"What did... I mean, why didn't--"

"The company just took the loss. The trade-off for stuff like that was well worth it. The company was pulling in thousands a night from those people. Beer, beer, beer. Cigarettes. Lottery. Big lottery numbers."

She nodded, agreeing with herself. Then there was an awkward pause.

"So, Don tells me you are interested in management. You handled that robbery very professionally, I heard."

"Y--I, uh, thanks. Management, yeah, uh... I have been... "

My mind started doing flips. I wasn't sure whether how much I wanted to commit to at this point.

"Don says your wife is expecting?"

I looked quickly at Vera. In the mirror of her shades I saw my face start to screw into a "how-the-fuck-did-you-know-THAT" expression. I loosened it. But I was flummoxed. Who was this woman to know that my wife was pregnant?

"I don't, yeah, she is, but--"

"And you guys live on the riverfront, huh? Must be nice. Being able to walk out your door, go fishing, take a dip..."

My mouth opened to answer. It waited for my brain to supply one. She stood there expressionless. The mirrors revealed nothing. I suddenly felt like I was talking to the security video camera.

"Listen, this is... I'm not sure what you, um, what Don told y--"

We both looked in the direction of the door to the back area, where Don's office and the stockroom were. Tony's hard-soled shoes drew our attention. He had shuffled out of the doorway, and was standing with his legs in a golf stance. We could hear Sherry moving large boxes in the stockroom.

"Jim. Can I get you to come back here for a minute?" he called.

I looked at Vera. I opened my mouth to speak again. Then I shut it, pointed toward Tony.

"I gotta--"

"I'll watch the register," Vera said.

I headed toward the stockroom, expecting to do some grunt work or other. But Tony drew me into the office. Don was standing near the desk. I felt a rush of panic. Perhaps I was not off the chopping block after all.

"We got some good news from the Sheriff's office about the robbery. They picked up a man driving with an expired tag. One of the officers thought he looked like the guy who robbed the stores, killed that other cashier."

I looked at Don. His face was pretty slack. But when our eyes met I could detect a glimmer of the overbearing demeanor with which I was familiar.

"They want you to come in to come and take a look at him, Jim," Tony continued. "Don handled the investigation for the company, plus he has studied the video tape. He is going to take you there. He'll take a look at the line-up, too."

Tony gave me a whack on my upper back. He studied my face for a moment.

"Good work, guy. Looks like we may be able to bring this bastard in."

Chapter 26

I opened the passenger door to Don's car. Waited for him to move a couple more papers and magazines from the seat. He hadn't said anything to me yet. Tony had walked us outside. As usual for big brass, Tony had dominated the conversation.

When I got in the car a smell hit me that made me catch my breath. I looked around at the interior. It was a mixture of charcoal-colored upholstery and fake wood finishes. Usual mid-range company car. It was well used. When Don sat on his seat the odor was explained. His seat cushion had apparently soaked up a constant supply of fast-food farts.

"So... " Don began as he backed out of the parking spot. "How have you been?"

"Okay, I guess."

"Fair to middlin'?"

Don glanced at me, smiling. He was a northerner. Minnesota, was it? No, Michigan. He got a kick out of using southern phrases.

"Right," I said. I didn't return the smile.

We drove about a half a block. Awkward. The whole subject of his leaving, of Vera taking over as DM... I wasn't sure where to begin.

"Look... " Don began again. "Let's... I know you must be, you know--"

"Yeah--"

"Wondering. About why I am quitting."

"Yes."

"I mean, the new job. Manager with Spelchmann's. Store manager. It sounds like a step down, right?"

I shifted in my seat. I nodded.

"Not in terms of job quality, though, lemme tell ya," Don said.

"I mean, they are paying me almost as much to manage a store as I made running this whole district. Can you believe that?"

"Sounds, ah... That sounds like a pretty sweet deal."

"I'd be crazy not to take it, right?"

I glanced at Don. He was actually waiting for me to answer. I shifted in my seat again.

"I uh... I gue--"

"There's just no comparison, really. Store manager or not," Don said.

Don nodded to himself for a moment, then stopped. We rode for another couple of blocks in silence.

"Do you... uh... ?" I started, hoping to move on.

"I mean, I don't relish the thought of being stuck in the same store for eight, ten hours a day. Not after, you know, having a certain amount of freedom. A District Manager has a certain... mobility."

"Um-hm."

I recalled that Shelly had mentioned here and there about Don's being hard to track down sometimes. Marta had also made some noise about his being off the radar for a couple of hours most days. Managers would call around the stores, thinking he'd be at one of them. Marta speculated that he was golfing. Or maybe at a bar. Or taking a nap.

"But that was gonna be over anyway, with Grab-n-Go," Don said. "what with Tony in the picture, now."

"Yeah?"

I looked at him, waited for him to continue. He glanced at me. I could tell he was considering whether to elaborate.

"Guy wanted to..." Don began. "He was basically gonna put me on a f--on-on a schedule. You know? Make up an itinerary for me. Wanted me to visit the stores, certain times, fill out daily reports on the stores..."

"Whew..."

"Yeah. Can you imagine how long... ? Busy work, right?"

He started to turn toward me in his seat, like we were at a bar or something. My eyes jerked toward the road. He caught himself and grabbed the wheel both hands.

"Sorry... I uh... But basically, you know, have me, basically have me on a leash. Right?"

I nodded.

"Oh, and I was get this he wanted me to call in to him."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Like every couple of hours. In case he had wanted to make any changes. To my itinerary."

"So it was... So you'd call in? Almost like he couldn't, you know, if something big came up, as if he couldn't make the calls himself," I said.

Don grunted agreement. He was getting more agitated. He leaned slightly closer to me. This time he kept his eyes on the road. Mostly.

"You don't do that," he said, almost in a whisper. "That's not what a DM...A DM is not just another employee. Y'know? You have to have a certain amount of freedom. That's the professionalism. That's what makes it a professional job. White collar."

I was holding my green work vest in my lap. I glanced down at it.

"I mean, you know," Don said, glancing at me. "You had a teaching job at a college, right? Did anyone, did you have, like a schedule?"

"Well, there were class times, and, um, office hours, but I--"

"Yeah, but I mean, like, for between classes, or after class--"

"Right, no, I know. No, of course not."

"See, that's the professionalism," Don said. "The nature of the job. An itinerary? C'mon."

I scoffed.

"I just don't... I thought to myself, 'You're not gonna own me.' You know?"

"Mm-hm."

"I will work for you, but you don't own me. It's a job, for chrissakes."

We sat a red light in silence. Once we started moving he glanced my way again.

"So, what do you have... I mean, are you still interesting in doing management?"

"Well, I uh... I've... "

I was tempted to let my real outlook on things hang out. Vent to him about how in limbo I felt. My anger at the job market and the idiots who made hiring decisions. At the whole shining lie that my degrees were worth a damn.

"'Cause, I mean, you probably... I could have 'em on the lookout for your resume at Spelchmann's."

"Oh... I, sure, thank you. I, but yeah, I was still expecting to... I mean, I thought I was still on the management track with Grab-n-Go. Is that... ?"

I looked at his eyes. I wanted to see if there was any flicker of guilt. Had he been stringing me along about a promotion?

"Yeah, no, you really should think about Spelchmann's," he said. "'Cause, you know... a convenience store? You know? What d--how far do you, can you get--?"

"I know, believe me--"

"You've seen it by now, right? The stores don't really make much of anything off of the gas. It's all markup on the merchandise. That's why we have, like, how we can sell cold, shitty hamburgers for four bucks."

I laughed.

"Am I right? It's the oil companies that make the killing on the gas. The whole industry. We are just like those, ah, what are those fish that swim around with sharks?"

"Oh... ah... "

"The one's that clean their gills, and, you know... "

"Remora?" I said.

"Is that it? I thought it was... Well, whatever. The, you know, the point is that we ain't gettin' none. Right? It's the gas. That's the golden egg. Or the goose, or whatever."

"Yeah."

"You gotta have... the only way anybody makes it in a business, see, you gotta have something that people have to have."

"Have something they want," I added.

"No, but, see, it can't be just something they want. That changes too much. That's, that's just a whim. A fad."

"I... I guess--"

"No, I mean, think about what people pay the most money for. The big costs. House. Food. Car. Right?"

"Yeah."

"But, guys like you and me, you think we get a shot at managing those big businesses? You think they'd give you the time of day if you sent in your resume?"

I laughed.

"They don't even advertise those jobs," Don said. "You ever see one in the classifieds? Hell no. Those positions kept within tight circles. Right? Only those with certain connections. Families, the big money schools... "

"And they, uh, the heads, the execs just move from company to company, too," I added.

"Right, that's the connections. You and me, we have no shot at any of that, the big BIG bucks."

"Nope."

"So we have to, down here at the ground level, we have to, y'know, follow the needs, not the fads, see? As best we can. Something like a business selling T-shirts? Coffee? Waste of time."

I looked at him. I wondered how long this had been building up.

"You get in with the companies that are satisfying the needs. The big ticket ones, anyway."

I looked out at the road for a beat.

"So... but gas, that's a big ticket item. A need. Right?" I objected. "So, the C-store business--"

"Yeah, but no, that's the thing, see? We are only selling the gas for somebody else. We never see that money. Do we? In fact, what happens when the oil companies raise the prices? Do we make any more?"

"The customers get... I see where you're going with this... The customers get pissed at us, and actually buy

less of our stuff."

"So, this whole convenience business, I mean... Getting out of it is really the best thing for me, see? I've just been, you know..."

"You got comfortable?"

"Exactly," Don nodded.

We had reached the police station. Don pulled into the parking lot, found a spot. He put the car into park but left it running. He looked at me.

"See, but pharmaceuticals... Right? Another one of the bigger ticket items. Not huge, but big. Not just something people want."

I nodded. I didn't hold his gaze, but instead looked toward the station. I was getting tired of helping Don convince himself he was doing the right thing. I realized it would be a waste of time to point out that Big Pharma wouldn't be giving him much of a cut either.

"So, you really should think about applying at Spelchmann's," he said. "You could prolly make more, just as a cashier, compared to Grab-n-Go."

"Thanks, yeah, I'll, you know... keep it in mind."

"Seriously, do," Don said.

He cocked his head slightly more toward mine, looked serious for a moment. Then he broke the gaze and looked toward the station.

"Well, let's get in there and get this over with," he said.

§§§

It was pretty much like you see on TV and in the movies. I was standing in a room, and the lights were off. I was looking into a brightly-lit room through something like a large window. It was a one-way mirror, or two-way... whatever you call those things. No one from the other side could see me.

Don was waiting outside. He had already had his turn. When I walked past him through the door, he gave me a look. He sort of raised his eyebrows, jerked his head slightly toward the room. He looked to see whether the detective was looking at him. Seeing that he wasn't, Don gave me a thumb up, nodded.

Sometimes on TV you see the detectives in the room with the witnesses. Talking to them, saying stuff like "Are you sure?" "Take a closer look." Not in this case. The cops had informed us that they were strictly prohibited from influencing us in any way. Everything seemed pretty scripted.

"Go ahead and bring 'em in."

I looked at the detective who gave the order. He was seated near the door with a walkie-talkie in his hand. Next to him a stenographer was scribbling away. She was there to record everything that went on. She was plain, forgettable. I glanced at her thick ankles.

A red light from a corner of the room caught my eye. I could make out the shape of a video recorder on a

tripod. It was getting a wide shot of me and my view through the window. They seemed to be leaving nothing to chance.

Six guys walked across a platform. Behind them on the wall, there were marks for height comparison. I would be able to tell how tall they were to the inch. As if that mattered.

One of the guys already had my attention. Number Four. He was tall, skinny. There was something about the way he moved that made my scalp prickle. He definitely looked similar to the guy who had robbed me.

I looked at the other guys. Most of them had probably come off the street outside. Probably off-duty construction guys, landscapers. I knew that was how they usually selected the fillers.

Number Four was looking straight ahead. His eyes were a deep black. I could imagine them looking at me over that bandana that covered the robber's face. Number Four was pretty much expressionless, but I knew the eyes looked right.

"Mr. Crayson, are you able to identify any of these men as the one who robbed you on the date in question?"

I looked at the detective. He waited for me to answer. The stenographer was sitting next to him, looking at me. She waited too.

"I think... ah... "

I looked back at the eyes. The ones I had imagined so many times since the robbery. But now the eyes were framed by a face. A nose, lips. A scraggly beard. The bandana was gone.

I had expected to feel sure about it. I had replayed my own memory of it over and over in my mind. The guy standing in the lineup was not a memory. He was just some guy with a face. The same eyes as the robber in my memory, but...

"Take your time," said the detective.

"I, uh... thank you... "

Number Four's eyes seemed to glaze over. He looked tired. He looked like he had been up all night.

In jail? Or pulling a double shift somewhere?

"Should we have them turn to the side?" the detective asked.

"No, that's okay... " I began. "I just... "

"Are you able to identify one of these men as the one who robbed you?"

"Identify, no. That, identify... the word implies certainty. I just, I am just not certain that--"

"Do you believe that one of these men was the one who robbed you on the date in question?"

Fuck.

I knew I had set myself up for that. They weren't going to let me off the hook with philosophical word games. Number Four was about to be fingered for a robbery, and possibly a murder. That, or I was going to say I

didn't recognize Number Four and risk letting a murderer get away with it.

I felt wind coming through my throat and out of my mouth. It seemed to move on its own, like someone was stepping on my diaphragm. Then I heard my voice.

"Number Four looks similar to the robber but I cannot be sure whether he's the one who robbed me."

A pause. The detective and the stenographer looked at me.

"Do you believe that Number Four was the man who robbed--" the detective began.

"I just... I'm not sure. Okay? He reminds me of the robber, that's what I know. But I'm not gonna send--"

I broke off and looked at Number Four again. Some guy with a face I had never seen. Some guy in a room in a police station.

"I just don't know," I mumbled.

The session wrapped up in a blur after that. After the line-up marched out, the stenographer quickly packed up her materials. The detective shut down the video camera and flicked on the lights. I thought I saw the stenographer looking at me like I was crazy, but she looked down before I could catch her eye for more than a blink.

"Thank you for coming in Mr. Crayson," said the detective.

He looked at me over his shoulder as he walked out. Leathery testosterone face. I couldn't tell whether he was disappointed.

"We will be in touch if the need arises."

When the detective ripped the door open, Don was in view. He was looking into the lineup room through the door. His fat bearded face was bigger than usual because of this ridiculous grin.

But his smirk immediately began to go slack as he watched the police officials file out of the room. He looked at their faces, then at mine. We stood there for a beat, looking at each other through the door.

"So, it was him, right?" Don asked.

"The guy, the robber, was wearing a-a... thing over his face."

"But that was the... they had the guy, right? You told 'em. Right?"

Don stepped through the doorway of the lineup room.

"What I told 'em, I said I wasn't, couldn't be sure," I said.

"Couldn't be sure!?"

I felt my face go red.

"That's correct," I said.

"Couldn't be s--are you... ?" Don sputtered for a moment. "A'right, a'right, lemme, jus-jus--Lemme... You tell me--"

"The guy had a disguise, Don. Okay? He-he had a... I could only see his eyes--"

"You tell me... Was there, or wasn't there, a guy in that lineup, who you thought... who reminded you of the guy?"

"Yeah, but, see, the rob--"

"Which one was it?"

"Number, um, Four," I said. I knew the number right off, but I glanced up like I had to think of it. I immediately felt stupid for doing that.

"Number Four!" Don nearly yelled, pointing at me. "That's the guy!"

"But the guy--the guy--had his face covered."

Don waved his hands dismissively, shook his head as I spoke.

"Then--tell me this--then, why did we both think it might be Number Four, then? Huh? Was that just a-a... coincidence?"

"Well... he reminded me of--"

"He the same build, same race, same little... pea-shaped head... I mean, c'mon! You got two witnesses who independently think... you know? It's the guy!"

"But nobody else up there looked like... had a build like that. No, think about it! There are other guys out there. Who are, you know, who have, are skinny, tall black guys."

"But not in this lineup, there weren't!"

"Well, that's it, see? What if you were trying to pick the guy, the robber, out of, you know, five, six, skinny black dudes--?"

"Oh, this is just, just this is... What are you, his lawyer?" Don asked. "Do you want him to get away? He killed a cashier!"

"Number Four?! Number Four killed a cashier? Or was he just picked up for, for, what was it--?"

"Is this just a mind game for you--?"

"An expired tag?"

"Is this, just... Is this what they teach you in grad school? To sit around gazing out at the rest of us, from your waterfront property... "

"Oh, come on--"

"No, no, no, to be, to... 'cause you need to wake up to the real world--"

"Right, right. Look, Don, it's a fucking house boat, okay?"

"No, seriously. Okay? House boat, whatever. You think these cops jus'... They picked the guy up! Okay? They know these people... Where do you think most of their calls come in? They spend their time down there. In those neighborhoods. Alright? So, don't, don't--"

"Don, the guy, the robber, had on a bandana. A'right? I didn't see his face. Bottom line."

"Bottom line is, just answer me this, alright? Will you feel safe, working in the store, coming in every morning in the dark, and-and knowing that guy is on the loose?"

"No, but that's--"

"Alright, then. Now we're talking. So, let's call the--"

"No, no, listen, that's not... Don, I wouldn't feel safe either way. Okay? Because I don't know whether that's the guy!"

"It is the g--Alright, whatever, man. Whatever. What's the point? You just keep telling yourself... Jus' forget it, what's the... let's just go."

We started to walk down the hall. Out to the parking lot. Don grumbled one parting shot.

"You just better be, you should be glad there are people like me willing to testify against scum like that. Keep 'em off the streets. Couldn't be sure. Sheesh!"

I let it drop. Along with my prospects for an interview at Spelchmann's.

It was a long, silent drive back to the store.

Chapter 27

4:40 a.m. I sat on the couch in front of the TV. On a saucer I had a piece of bread folded over a big dollop of peanut butter. My usual breakfast. I'd read a few years back that morning protein, unlike sugar, activated the excitatory neurotransmitters. Edible version of coffee.

My back felt worse when I sat down. It had been bugging me before bed the night before. A twinge in the small of the back. It was a constant buzz of pain if I sat in the wrong position. I moved my ass around, feeling for the right angle.

I flipped on the TV to see a couple of minutes of news before I had to go open the store. It was Wednesday. Shelly usually worked the weekdays. She'd had to go out of town to handle something or other with her dead mother's estate. This was really going to fuck up my sleep schedule.

On the screen was some statistic about jobs. The worst year in a quarter century for this year's college graduates. I shook my head. I pictured HR staffers sharpening their fangs upon hearing the news. It had to raise their sense of power. Applicants would be clawing each others' eyes out for lower salaries and fewer benefits.

I took another bit of the sandwich, tried to enjoy it. I had sent out five more resumes the night before. But it was looking like I might be stuck working for Grab-n-Go for a while yet.

I switched over to local news. Couple of faces were splashed on the screen. Mugshots, with dull, cruel expressions. Another shooting in Kingsboro. I scanned the eyes, feeling for that sense of recognition. I did that automatically now. Ever since the robbery.

I groaned, feeling the back of my mind start to bring up the line-up again. It had been a week. No word on any developments. No idea whether they would run with Volker's reaction to the line-up. Maybe even call me in as a witness. I had been imagining being on the stand all week.

"Is the person who robbed you in the courtroom today?"

Last bite of the sandwich. I washed it down with water. I always fixed coffee at the store. A perquisite. No point in using my own stash.

As I got up, the back twinged enough to make me grunt. I'd have to remember not to do any lifting at the store today. Not much bending over, either.

I stood up straight. I twisted my torso at the waist from side to side. The stretch felt okay, but the pain just throbbed as I moved.

The back had been yelling at me since I started the job. The stretches of ten hours, mostly on my feet. Near the end of the day I could always feel it in the lower back. I always figured I could just power through it.

I climbed into the car, trying not to bend over too much. As I flopped down in the seat, though, it actually hurt. It felt like I compressed something. I reached for some aspirin I kept in the glove box. Felt like maybe some tissue was swollen down there.

No one on the road on the way to the store, as usual. I tried to think back to the night before last. I had closed the store. Had I lifted anything unusual? Seemed like I moved around a lot of the crates in the cooler. Those crates of sodas were heavy. But I was used to them. I couldn't recall any hinky lifts or twists during the shift.

Inside the store, I set the timer lock for the safe, then headed for the ladies room as usual. Morning nic ingestion. I wondered if maybe the vasoconstriction from the smoke would help the back ease up. When I didn't get the morning dose like yesterday I sometimes felt it along my spine.

I eased down onto the toilet seat. The spot in my back was now a constant sharp pain. I took deep drags on the cigarette, trying to make sure the nic hit hard.

When I finished the dump and smoke, I leaned forward to get up. The resulting twinge was deep. It sat me back down. The area in my back that felt compressed in the car now seemed like it was being squeezed by a pair of pliers. I had to get up, but I didn't feel like I could make it with the harsher pain.

The toilet was in a tight space between the sink and wall. Not much room to maneuver. I needed to try to stand in a way that would minimize the use of my lower back muscles. I put my right palm on the sink, and braced my left forearm against the wall. The wall was bumpy but slick. It had that surface designed to minimize graffiti.

I didn't make it. Halfway up, my back went into a spasm. All the muscles in the lower back seized up in a charley horse. I lost control of my balance, my legs, as I tried desperately to get the cramping to stop. I fell to the floor with my pants still around my ankles, yelling with each spasm.

There were about thirty seconds of panic while the intense muscle seizure continued. I aware of myself lying on the bathroom floor, my cock and nuts against the cold, grimy floor. No idea whether I was going to be stuck there for hours, unable to move.

Finally, the muscles let up. The sharp ache had spread. I was panting and sweating. I lay there for another minute or two, afraid to move. The cool floor felt like relief, filthy or not.

Somehow I made it back to my feet. I braced myself in the frame of the bathroom door. I stood there breathing. The inside of the store, as usual, looked dead in the half-light of the fluorescents.

The insanity of the way the stores were run became suddenly clear. I couldn't stay there, working for the rest of the day. But, it was practically the middle of the night. Not even the District Manager was up yet. There was no one to call. It was so early that I couldn't call anyone besides other managers who were stuck opening stores of their own. They might not even answer the phone.

Locking up and going back to bed was out. I couldn't just leave. Closing a store and leaving without a replacement worker was immediate grounds for firing. I was in no position to just dump the job. I had had no other bites on the resume.

I monitored my body. There I was, standing. Maybe that was enough. That was the biggest part of the job. I tried a few test steps. I seemed to be able to walk okay, although it didn't feel very good.

I decided my best bet was to go ahead and open. Take it slow until finding a replacement became more feasible. Wednesdays were slow, anyway. There would be a few coffee and gas buyers. No sweat. Then I could get out of here, figure out what to do about the back.

My usual shift suddenly played itself out in my mind. Bending over felt like the only danger. I tried to map out the number of times I would be forced to bend over. Getting the money out of the safe. That was the worst one. Most other things I could avoid.

I shuffled to the area behind the counter. The twinge was there, but the muscles stayed relaxed. It was feeling more possible to pull this off by the minute.

The safe sat directly on the floor. All the way down. I recalled seeing Ben lying on the floor to remove the cash. His knee had been injured in a car accident. I didn't mind being on the floor. I just wasn't sure how I could get down there.

I decided to slowly lower myself by bending my knees. I kept my back as straight as I could. I held onto the counter for balance.

Easy... keep it slow...

My head slammed into the linoleum cabinets next to the safe. My back had gone into a spasm again. This time the pain was worse. I stretched on the floor in front of the safe. Screaming. Wondering when it would stop.

It subsided after about a minute. I had flipped over, now lying on my back. I looked up at the security camera pointed at the register above. The eye of the company peering out at the employees it was convinced were out to bleed it dry. I showed it both middle fingers.

"Enjoying the show, mother-FUCKERS?!!!"

I lay there just breathing for a few minutes. I managed to get on my side. The safe timer had cycled back off during the bathroom ordeal. I would have to lie there and wait ten minutes for it to unlock again.

I looked at my watch. I was supposed to open in 25 minutes. I'd need to have the money counted and back in the safe by then. That would be a second a bend-over I'd forgotten to count.

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Somehow I managed to get the deposit ready by five after six. I was moving much more slowly. Even when I took steps, I could feel the threat of a spasm.

There was a guy at the door waiting to get in, of course. I shuffled to the door. I braced myself and reached down to unlock the door. I was breathing hard. He gave me a weird look.

"Back trouble," I panted.

I managed to move very little as the first hour or so of customers came and went. I stood stiffly at the register. Sweated and made faces from the effort. Nobody said much, as usual. Probably just assumed I was tired.

The pain from standing was starting to feel oppressive. I thought about how hard standing was on the back, the back muscles. I wondered if maybe I should sit instead. I could go ahead and do the accounting at the computer. Maybe get my mind off of the twinge.

I positioned my ass over the stool at the desk. It suddenly seemed a long way down. I gripped the top edge of the desk and started to lower myself down.

Another spasm hit. I was close enough to standing that I stood bolt upright this time, instead of falling. I braced myself against the desk. The pain was white hot. I screamed. Some part of my mind wondered whether any customers were still in the store. The rest of it worked on getting the back muscles to relax.

By the time it stopped I was drenched in sweat. I made my way to the register areas where the counter was higher. I tried my best to lean against it. To see if I could relieve any pressure on the compressed area. Keep those big lumbar muscles relaxed.

Some older construction guys came in for coffee and beer. They saw me leaning oddly and panting. I was writhing with the tension of trying to avoid another spasm. I didn't know how many of these episodes I could take before I would be incapacitated. Stuck on the floor with customers traipsing in.

The construction dudes walked up to the counter with their coffees and a cheap twelve-pack. I breathed heavily and punched the items into the register.

"Anything else?" I asked through my teeth.

They exchanged looks. The door alarm starting shrieking. Another old-timer was coming in to buy a paper. After the construction guys paid, the one holding the twelve-pack hung back to watch me ring up the newspaper.

The paper guy was a regular. He looked at the sweat dripping down my cheeks.

"You have a big night last night?" he asked.

"No-No-Nooooo. Nothing like that, man," I panted. I was now having to take shallow breaths. "My back keeps going into spasm."

"Ohhh..." said the construction guy, now smiling. "I thought you'd done come to work drunk."

The regular chuckled as the guy bopped out carrying his beer. I bared my teeth at him.

I could feel myself getting ornery with customers. They were making me move, causing pain. I was ready to start calling around, looking for a replacement. It was taking so long to ring people up that I hadn't had time yet.

There was no answer at Marta's. But I knew she was fucking there. It was not even eight yet. I knew she either had the phone off the hook or caller ID.

Fuck you, you rat-faced bitch. So much for the easiest option.

I managed to get Vera, the new DM, on the phone.

"Vera, this is Jim," I puffed. "Listen, my back keeps going into spasm. I can't bend over. I can't do the job. Somebody is gonna hafta take over here."

"Where is your manager?"

"Shelly is out of town. That's why I'm working today."

"Did you call Marta?"

"Of course! She doesn't answer the phone."

Anger and difficulty breathing were giving an edge to my tone. These were stupid questions.

"Well, I'll have to see who I can find. I'm stuck out here at the Bayview store. There is no replacement yet for Jay."

"Okay, okay. Just, just let me know. Soon."

I slammed the phone down. All the big talk from Tony about improving things in the district, and here we were with the District Manager pulling shifts at some store out in the sticks.

My back went into spasm again about twenty minutes later. I had started another pot of coffee, and was trying to ease back toward the front counter. I screamed for nearly a full minute. The muscles wouldn't let up.

This is it. I'm stuck.

When it stopped my torso was draped over the display of scratch tickets. I panted and watched a car pull into the parking lot. I realized I couldn't do anything if someone wanted to reach into the cash register. Or walk off with as much as they could carry.

The guy came in and walked up the counter. I managed to walk my torso up using my elbows. That way I could at least look at him.

"Dude... " he said. "What happened to you?"

I recognized him as a regular purchaser of blunt cigars. Stoner. From his condition it looked like he had a morning pot habit.

"Back keeps... going into spasm," I huffed.

"Why are you still here?"

"Fucking company... doesn't have a... replacement for me... yet."

"Dude, that's fucked up. Well, um, listen... can you get me a pack of blunts, though, dude?"

I looked straight in his eyes. He held my gaze. I wondered if realization was going to penetrate the bong resin lining his skull.

"I might not be... able to make it... without it spasming... The back."

I was right. It hit just after I lurched back to the rear counter, where the blunts were. I started screaming. I was barely holding myself up against the counter.

Suddenly I felt the guy's hand on my forearms. He had run around the counter. I struggled at first. I thought he was trying to subdue me, maybe rob the place.

"Hang on, dude," he said. "Don't fall over."

He helped me stand up. It felt strange having a customer touch me. Helping me stand, like I was some old man. The muscles started to stop seizing up, though.

"Thank... you... Thank-you." I said between puffs.

"You want me to call an ambulance?"

"NO!... No... I don't have health insurance... I can't afford one."

"Well... who--?"

I held up a finger. I thought for a second.

"Listen... Press redial... on the phone... " I said. "That's my... boss... Then... then put it up... to my ear."

Vera answered after several rings. I could hear the chatter of customers in the background.

"Vera... this is Jim... Is someone coming... to take over here?"

"I don't have anyone available today," she said.

She was nearly shouting over the voices. I knew she was lying. That she had not tried to find anyone.

"This is... I can't even help customers... I can't stand up... my back... I need to go to the hospital... "

"You'll just have to keep trying Marta. I'll let you know if someone returns my call."

I slammed the phone down. My rescuer watched at me for a moment. I had noticed him listening to her shouts emanating from the earpiece.

"Dude, that is fucked up," he said.

I nodded.

"Listen... Call my wife for me... She'll come pick me up."

I gave him the number. I felt a wave of relief when Katie answered. I told her what was going on. I told her I needed to go to the emergency room.

The stoner asked me if I would be okay until Katie arrived. I thanked him again. I told him to take as many blunts as he wanted to. That I would just tell them we both forgot to ring them up in the commotion. But he glanced at the surveillance camera. He just left with the pack that was already in his pocket.

Luckily there was another lull in the customers. Katie arrived after a few minutes. I had her try to call Vera again to tell her I was going to the emergency room. The call went to her automatic messaging system.

We locked up the store. Outside, it took several tries to get me in the car. My back went into spasm twice on the way out.

Some landscapers pulled up while I was lying on the cement next to the rear door of the car. I was screaming. They stared at me as they pulled on the locked door to the store. Katie yelled to them that it was closed. They seemed annoyed.

§§§

In the receiving area of the emergency room I was lying on a gurney. Katie was answering some questions. Nurses were staring at me and then looking away when I looked at them. They had heard me screaming as Katie helped me inside.

I could see myself in one of those half-globe mirrors hospitals have in their hallways. My face was extremely pale. The hair was plastered to my forehead. My body was in the contorted position it needed to be in order to avoid another spasm.

They wheeled me to a room. There was only one nurse with us. I had to mostly move myself into the bed. The back went nuts again during the process. I could tell the nurse didn't want my yelling to alarm the other patients.

"Try to relax," she yelled over my voice. "We'll get something to control that pain."

It was easier to relax since I knew help was available. The attack subsided more quickly this time. There was also less of a sense of panic. I no longer felt trapped, like I had in the store.

The nurse started prepping my arm for an intravenous drip. I groaned. It had always made me cringe to see those needles stuck into people's arms. So medieval.

"We're going to give you some morphine, do something about that pain. N'kay?"

That made me nervous. I looked over at Katie. I was thinking about the time when she talked me into trying marijuana. It was one of the worst experiences of my life. Almost total loss of control. It was like I had to confess everything I would normally keep to myself. Every thought I had, I was compelled to state it.

"I hope I don't start babbling," I said to Katie.

"We're going to learn about all your little secrets," said the nurse. She and Katie giggled.

I was also nervous because this was morphine. The hard stuff. I recalled reading about some jazz guy, some sax player, talking about his first time shooting a heroin. He said he knew at that moment he would be doing it for the rest of his life.

In a moment the nurse pushed the plunger. Seemed like I felt it in my chest as it hit. Like it had some effect on my heart. I let out this low groan. A sort of growl.

I felt it wash through my system. It didn't feel particularly good. Not like I had found some new friend. It just seemed like everything slowed waaay down.

I looked at Katie. I smiled at her.

"I love you," I drawled.

She squeezed my hand.

"Do you feel better now?" she asked.

"Yesss. Thinkyew. Frelping me."

The doctor came in at some point. It felt like I was looking out at her from a fishbowl. Talked about a cortisone injection. Prescriptions. Said some other stuff. I hoped Katie caught it.

After the doctor left I looked at the long fluorescent bulbs on the ceiling. For a few seconds it occurred to be that it would be tough for us to pay for this trip to the emergency room. But the thought didn't have any feeling to it. It didn't take over my brain. It just walked away.

The last thing I thought about before I drifted into sleep was that I had done it. I had gone and gotten myself fired from Grab-n-Go. I smiled. It felt like the start of something new.

Chapter 28

Eleven a.m. I had managed to sleep through most of the first night after my back went nuts. Even squeezed in a little extra. But that probably had a lot to do with the morphine and the prescription pain-killers the doc sold me. The kind with those little yellow "Controlled Substance" warning labels.

I was lying on the couch. A nice stack of DVD rentals was on the end table. I had given Katie a list to take to the video store. The tube was on, but I had not put in one of the movies yet. I was just staring at the TV.

The doctor had told me to stay out of the store for a solid seven days. I got a good laugh out of that when Katie let me know. Way I figured it, the job was toast. Looked like I'd probably stay out of work altogether. And for who knew how long.

At the hospital I had been so out of it on the morphine at the hospital that I couldn't now recall much about the diagnosis. Katie told me the doctor had said the back problem did not seem to be a serious injury. They had taken X-rays. Katie remembered something about a pinched nerve. It caused the large back muscles to go into spasm as they tried to adjust to the erroneous signals the pinched nerve was sending. Add some pain from the muscles, plus a dash of agony from the pinched tissue. A recipe for writhing on the floor.

Sounded like they understood what was happening, anyway. Whatever. The upshot was that I had been standing for too many hours at work, and bending over too often. I needed to stay off my feet and thus away from work for a while. As if I had a choice now.

I clicked through a couple of channels, looking for some news. Nothing but commercials. I lay my head back on the armrest. Sighed at the ceiling.

Whether or not this back thing would now dog me for the rest of my life, I realized, it had pretty well zonked me for now. I picked up my bottle of pain-killers. I looked at the skull on the warning label. I realized that this stuff was probably the only reason I wasn't wiggling out about what the fuck we were going to do for money.

I set the bottle back on the end table. I didn't feel as drunk from taking it as I expected. More of an absence than a presence. I couldn't figure out why people were addicted to these narcotics. There was no pain, but it didn't give a rush or general feeling of numbness. Not nearly as fun as a decent bottle of scotch. No peaty taste either. Plus, it was, like, five times as expensive. And there was the whole threat of prison.

I reached for my glass of water on the end table. I remembered that the cordless phone was lying there near it. Katie had set it there for me. She thought I should call Vera, the District Manager. Find out whether they were firing me. Try to reason with them if they were.

We had gotten into a little tiff over the whole thing. She had left the houseboat in a huff.

I listened for her outside. I kept thinking I heard her moving around on the river bank. She had slammed the door when I refused to call them. Well, more specifically, when I told her she didn't know what she was talking about.

She wouldn't believe me about the whole closing-the-store thing. Everybody that worked for the company knew it was the ultimate sin at Grab-n-Go. Katie insisted they would understand that it was a medical emergency. That they wouldn't want to lose a good, well-trained employee. Especially over something that wasn't my fault. I countered that these people were anything but reasonable.

Besides, I pointed out, who was I going to call? Don was gone. Shelly was my manager, but she was still out of town, probably. Only the DM or higher could actually hire or fire, anyway. And I didn't really know Vera

or Tony.

Every time I imagined talking to them, I just kept picturing Vera. She was giving me that cold stare from behind those mirrored shades. Shaking her head no.

I took a sip of water and then set it carefully back on the table. Maybe I should call, I thought. Just so I could say "I told you so" to Katie.

Or, better, just to appease Katie. She had been my nurse. Helping me walk, bringing me stuff. No sense that she was begrudging any of it. Just concern.

But I had also seen a flash or two of something else. When she'd look at me draped on the bed like an invalid. Or when I was lying on the floor groaning, waiting for a muscle-seizure to subside. She'd get quiet. Her look of concern would fade to a blank stare. She'd look off to the side for a long time.

I forced the image of her fixated eyes out of my head. I reached back over the arm rest of the couch. I moved the glass of water aside. I felt around for the phone. My hand tapped randomly on the table.

If I can reach it from here, I'll call.

I jumped when it started ringing. For a second I thought I'd pressed some button on the phone. A test for the ringer or something.

I twisted my shoulders around to find the damned thing. I did it a little too quickly. I paused, took a slow breath. I had felt a slight twinge, but the muscle relaxants held. I moved again and picked up the phone in the middle of the fourth ring.

"Hello."

"Is this Jim?"

I recognized Vera's voice. The pain pills didn't prevent my stomach from twisting.

"You have reached the Crayson residence. We can't take your ca... "

"Hang on a second Vera, the machine picked up."

We waited until the outgoing message finished. Then the beep.

"So. How you feeling, Ji--" Vera began.

There was a squealing sound. Feedback from the answering machine.

"Hang, hang on. We have to wait until it--Wait for the other beep."

Hasn't she ever gone through this before? Isn't she like 45?

She made some noise on her end. This delayed the beep further. It arrived after about ten long seconds.

"Are we ready now?" she asked.

"Yes. Sorry about that. I can't get up to turn it off."

"So, how are you? We could see on the video tape that you were... that you seemed to be in a lot of pain."

Seemed????!!

"Yeah, actually. It... it was horrible. Like I had tried to tell you, you know, on the phone?"

"Yes. Quite honestly you didn't sound all that bad on the phone." Vera said. She sounded unfazed by the accusation. "Sorry about that. But there really was no one I could send to, ah, take over your shift."

"Uh-huh."

"But how are you now?"

I wondered where she was going with this. I explained that the spasming was somewhat controlled by medication. I told her about the doctor's recommendation to stay out of work for a week.

"And, ah, what do we know about the cause of the inj--... about what causes the pain?" Vera asked.

"Well... it's kinda... It has something to do with one of the nerves being pinch--"

"No, I mean... was there a specific incident? Something that happened?"

Ohhh... So this is the OFFICIAL call, is it?

My mind tried to go into Decision-Theoretic mode. It didn't feel quite natural, in my medicated state.

I realized they were worried about a worker's comp suit. If I said it was workrelated, would they be scared to fire me? Did the fact that they were worried indicate that I might have a good case against them? If I said it wasn't incident-related, would they reward me by keeping me on? Or would they just use that answer against me in court and fire me for closing the store?

"Jim? You still there?" Vera asked.

I hadn't realized how slowly my mind was working on this. I cursed myself for not having worked this out. I stalled.

"Sorry, I, uh, dropped something... Ah, are you, are you asking... ?"

"Was there an incident at the store that caused your condition?"

"I don't recall lifting anything really heav--uh, out of the ordinary. Like, twisting it, you know, or bending over to lift, or anything like that."

"So... no?"

"Well, I don't recall anything like that. I'm not an expert on these things, so... I mean, I just have to say I don't know what caused it?"

"Well, did the doctor say anything about that? About what may have caused it?"

Nice try.

"Well, she just explained how it... "

I almost explained how they had said it was related to being on my feet for so many hours. But I quickly realized that it may sound like I would be unable to continue on the job, if they were thinking about that option.

"Yes?"

"She, the doctor, explained the, uh, the physiology of it. And things I shouldn't do. Mainly."

"Mm-hm."

There was a pause. I considered whether I should further elaborate.

"Well, listen Jim: we are sorry this happened to you. That you had to stay at the store through... all that," Vera said.

"I, uh... Thanks."

"I must say... you caused quite a stir yesterday," Vera half-chuckled. "Tony had to have a guy come in with a blow torch to get the safe open."

The back of my neck prickled at this. I pictured the store filled with smoke and the strobe-like flashes of an acetylene torch. All this going on while I was poppy-ed out in the hospital bed. Good thing I hadn't known.

"But, the keys to the safe," I said. "they were, they were right there in the drawer, next to the safe."

"Well, we had no idea where they were. Shelly was out of touch. We couldn't reach Marta. The hospital wouldn't let us talk to you."

"Oh. That's really... Wow... "

"Yeah. We are going to need to get everybody up to speed on safe key policies as soon as Shelly gets back in town. Also, people need to be accessible by phone on their off days.

I felt my body suddenly relax. This was sounding like I was still employed.

"Actually," she continued, "there seem to be a few... bad habits... that Don, ah, allowed to go on. We--Tony and I--need to straighten out some of these... misunderstandings."

"Yeah... uh, that makes sense," I said.

"So... seven days, huh? That's... I mean, is it... if you feel better before then, is it possible... ?"

"Well, the doctor said I need to give it seven days. To stay off my feet that long--"

Shit. They might think of setting up some kind of chair or something.

"That I need to stay, um, to lie down as much as possible for that long," I continued quickly. "To, to prevent further injury to my back."

"Okay, okay... Well, Shelly and Marta are going to be hurting, trying to cover all the shifts. We'll have to

rotate people from other stores to do some of the second shifts over there."

"Um... well, I can't--"

"I know, I know... I'm just thinking aloud here. You get your rest, Jim."

I tried to ignore the smidgeon of condescension in her tone.

"Thanks. So, uh... when should I, uh--?"

"Just get in touch with Shelly later in the week. Work out the schedule."

We hung up. I dropped the phone on the floor. I let my arm fall off the edge of the couch. My right wrist and hand rested on the floor while I breathed.

Part of my relief was from getting off the phone with Vera. There was something about her that just made me tense. Made talking to her a chore.

But I hadn't realized until just then how worried I had been about being fired. Even with the narcotics. The job sucked. But we needed that paycheck. And my luck in finding anything else so far had been a joke. And add to that the uncertainty about my whether my back was ruined...

"KATIE!" I yelled.

I hoped she could hear me outside. I felt better. Good enough to eat some crow.

§§§

Next day I was sitting in a waiting room. Katie was next to me flipping through a celebrity gossip rag. I was sitting there taking shallow breaths. Trying to stay calm.

I had called my brother-in-law, Parker, to ask him about my back incident. He was a chiropractor a couple of states away in South Carolina. Since this was a back injury,

I figured he'd have an insider's take on it. Could tell me what I was looking at, healing time, all that.

At the hospital, they'd told me to make an appointment with a "real" doctor for follow-up. But I figured if I went back to the folks with \$10K mortgages and oceanfront property, they'd milk me for thousands in long-term therapy. That, and they'd poison my liver with overpriced, over-marketed chemistry experiments--the kind that come in little brown bottles. They'd already taken me for a couple of grand, not counting the X-rays.

According to Parker, the injury was not that big a deal. Familiar stuff. Just a misalignment of the vertebrae. It was causing mixed signals and pressure on the soft tissue. Pretty much the same as what the "real" doc had said. Except for the part about the drugs and expensive therapy, of course. Parker's solution was for me just to get that misalignment back into place.

In the waiting room, the walls had a bunch of colorful posters. Pictures of the human spine with a lot of trouble spots labeled. I chuckled at the shots of guys wearing hardhats, hunched over and grimacing. More marketing than I was used to seeing in a waiting room.

Place seemed okay, I thought. I wished Parker could have done the job. He didn't know any of the chiros

around Doctor's Landing. He told us to look in the phonebook and avoid the back crackers who focused on personal injury litigation, auto accidents and such.

But I had been nervous. Nervous about getting off the couch. Katie had helped me limp in here. My back had almost gone into spasm in the car on the way over. I was lying on the back seat, just in case. That way I would not have gotten stuck sitting up if it seized up on the way over. And now to have someone torquing on my back? I pictured some guy pressing hard on my spine like he was doing CPR. It seemed insane.

I looked up. Some hugely overweight guy hobbled out of the hallway to treatment rooms. He was wearing this big back brace. But he gave us a grin. Looked peaceful.

He went to the sign-in desk. The secretary put down her mystery novel, looked at his chart.

"Okay, Mr. Hemphill," she said. "It'll be \$35 for today."

I looked down at my lap, trying to hide my smile. I didn't want to look too pleased at hearing the price. The bill from the emergency room had made me consider suicide.

Another guy came out from the same direction Hemphill had. He held a chart. His head was thrust slightly forward. He looked at me over the lenses of his reading glasses. I felt like someone was shining a flashlight at me.

"Mr. Crayson?"

I lifted my chin in response as I began to the process of lifting myself out of the chair. The man quickly made his way to my chair. He held out his hand.

"I'm Dr. Gleick," he said. "Relax a second."

I stopped trying to get up. I sat back and we shook hands.

"Let me give you a hand up," he said.

We made our way to a small examination room with a high ceiling. One end of it had a place cut out for faces. With the disposable paper around it, it reminded me of a toilet seat.

Gleick told me to lie down on the table. I started to lean over in order to make my way onto it. I felt the back starting to seize up. I let myself drop onto the table with an "Oof." The back really started to dig in with that. I started groaning.

"Just relax. Relax!" Gleick said. "When you start panicking, that makes it worse. All your muscles tense up."

I stopped groaning and tried to take deep breaths. I could only take shallow ones, as if the wind had been knocked out of me.

"Just keep in mind that your back is not going to get any more injured just from the spasms. The muscles just try harder and harder to straighten your spine. Then they give up."

"Oh... Okay," I puffed.

"The faster you get them to give up, by relaxing, the less they tend to go into a cramping phase."

I looked up at Gleick as the intensity began to subside. He was standing over me in a taut stance. Ready and alert, but non-threatening. He held me in that spotlight gaze. His jaw muscles pulsed as he chewed on some gum. It struck me that he was one of the few people I had ever seen who did not look vaguely stupid chewing gum.

"Yes?" he asked me.

"Uh... Okay. I think it's... over."

"So, the doctors... What did they want to do? Put you on therapy? Did they mention surgery?"

"I... um, they didn't... I don't remember... physical therapy, I think?"

"Morphine?"

"Yeah," I said.

"See, that's just a temporary cover. Right? It only masks the problem. Did it feel good?"

"Well, uh ... It didn't feel bad!"

"But look where you still are, right? Look how you had to come in here. Temporary. You see?"

"Yes."

"And their form of physical therapy would not move that subluxation back into place. They move your legs around, get you to twist at the waist... Meanwhile the drugs work on the inflammation, so it gets easier. Yes?"

"Uh-huh."

"But the misalignment remains. So guess what happens when you go back to work. When you get off the drugs. Hmm?"

"I get it, I get it," I said, nodding.

"So now: we will begin the process of getting those misaligned vertebrae back into its proper place. Okay?"

"Yes."

"You'll be coming in three days a week to start. We can taper off once you begin to show improvement."

I tensed at the thought of shelling out a hundred bucks a week. I tried not to show it. Much easier to take than going into debt for thousands.

"Okay," I said. "Sounds... good."

"Okay. Let's do this."

He started in on his therapy process. I tried to stay relaxed. I tried not to imagine he was humping me when he was doing this one side-twist move.

All of it felt... okay. I didn't feel any great sense of relief or improvement. At least it didn't hurt. Didn't seem

like it was making things any worse.

At one point I almost asked him why I needed to come back three days a week if he had already moved the problem vertebrae back into alignment. But just then he had my head in his hands, about to crack my neck. I decided maybe it wasn't the best time.

Chapter 29

My skin was warm. Flushed. I switched on the car's air conditioner, but I knew it wasn't the afternoon heat. It was the massage and hot towel treatment from the chiropractor. Third visit this week. The sixth in two weeks.

For, like, a second I felt my mind start its usual routine about the cost of the visits. The numbers stacked up, visually. Two stacks with three thirty-fives in each. But the image dissolved, melted into back fender of the car in front of me. None of the usual pain that accompanied such thoughts.

It was worth it. It was a deal, really, for THIS.

The back problem was fading into an occasionally sore spot. And I was high. Endorphins I guess, from all the massages and adjustments. I was on the way to the store. Looking at another mind-numbing second shift in the middle of the week. But I actually didn't care.

The lines of pine trees on both sides of the road seemed to have parted to make way for me. Like the crowd on either side of a parade. I leaned my head back against the head rest and gazed at the scene that opened before me.

A plumbing van ahead of me suddenly surged closer in the tableau. I felt my leg tense to brake. Part of me labeled it as some asshole redneck making a left turn without signaling. But instead of the usual accompanying stomach-burn of hatred, there was a feeling of sorrow for the driver. His lack of courtesy seemed more a deformity than a threat.

I imagined going to sit on the riverbank for the afternoon. Watching the sparkle as millions of gallons of light brown liquid slid by. But the memory of our need for a paycheck kicked that vision off my inner screen. The store awaited.

My pack of smokes was in my front pocket. I straightened in the seat so I could fish it out without crimping the cigs. I had hardly noticed the week without them, what with all the prescription analgesics. Those, plus the generous tumblers of poor-man's muscle relaxant. Together they helped stave off any withdrawal issues.

Once I went back to work, though, I was smoking again. Nicotine addiction, I guessed, was all about context, patterns. Plus, the evil little genius in my brain that handles addiction reminded me that I oughtn't risk withdrawal problems while my back was healing. Might complicate things, he said.

I pulled into the alley behind the store to finish my smoke. I still didn't like people knowing I smoked. Somehow that would have meant I was a "Smoker." I looked at the store and took a final, deep drag. I felt the capillaries clench up. My massage flush began to fade.

Somehow the cigarette made me feel even better than I already had. High. In the parking lot I hummed as I pulled the Grab-n-Go vest over my head. I looked at the day-glo colors of the signs in the window. Milk. Bread. Beer. They seemed cheerful. I smiled at them as I passed them.

I opened the door to a blast of country music above the shriek of the door alarm. Marta was behind the counter. I looked at her. She was glaring at me from between two cigarette displays. Arms crossed over her nearly concave chest.

"Hi Marta! How are you this afternoon?"

She looked at me for a beat like she was trying to figure out my angle.

"I'm fine," she said. "What I want to know is what Shelly thinks she's up to."

I laughed. She had deflected my tacit offer to interact positively by raising a negative issue about someone else. Normally this would have made me cringe. Instead it just seemed funny.

"I come in here yesterdee for second shift? You know how many of them totes was left?"

Marta was referring to the plastic boxes in which the stock orders for the store arrived. Guys from the distributor off-loaded 30-40 of these things every week. They stacked them in the aisles for us to shelve.

"Um, let's see..." I smiled and squinted toward the ceiling. "I'm gonna say... five."

"Eleven of 'em," Marta said. She jutted her spike of a chin forward when she said it.

"Mmm!"

"Can you beat that?"

"Well, was first shift busy?"

"Hell no. \$600 bucks."

"Well let's see. Maybe--"

"I told her them totes is supposed to be done on first shift. They ain't no reason why you ort to leave 'em for second shift. First shift ain't never busy. 'Cept maybe during the River Boat Festival."

I felt a pang of sympathy for Shelly for having endured this speech. But my attitude toward Marta just then was as if I were listening to a brassy little girl explain how she had asserted herself.

"And what did she say?"

I began walking around the end of the counter. I thought perhaps this would remind her that the shift was changing. That she had stuff to do besides stand around and bitch.

"She tried to say she's busy ordering some kinda fixtures for the store. I knew that was a buncha..." Marta looked around for customers. "... B.S., 'scuse my French. The D.M.'s the only one orders fixtures. You know, shelving, stuff like that."

"Did you say that?"

"I asked her what kind of fixtures. She said some kind of new racks for the sweet rolls, new coffee pots... Hell, I don't know."

"Well..." I shrugged.

"They still shoulda been time for her to get them groceries put away. She shouldn't expect me just to... I mean, we got stuff to do on second shift."

I smiled at her. I thought about how often Marta had not so much as flushed the toilet in the men's room by the end of the night. Instead of mentioning this I just chuckled.

"Well, I guess the store is looking a lot better than it did, you know, when Don was supposed to handle stuff like that."

"Pshhhh! It don't look that much better to me. 'Sides, Don left ever-thing for me an' Jolene to do, so... "

She trailed off, catching the self-incrimination in that line of attack. She waved her hand dismissively. Started unloading money from the safe.

I found myself staring at her from the side. Wrinkles radiated away from her eyes. Her eyes seemed sunken. They peered out from far behind the brownish tint of her glasses. I thought of a moray eel.

The door alarm started. I looked up. Some guy in his fifties, wearing painter's whites. I threw my arms open in a welcoming gesture.

"Hello, sir!" I bellowed. "Welcome to our store!"

He looked at me surprised, then smiled.

"H-hidee!" he said.

My attitude was ridiculous, but the innocence of it was apparently disarming. The man grinned, and suddenly he had a sprightly air. This made me feel even happier.

I took a deep, satisfying breath. I looked out at the parking lot. I could scarcely believe this mood from the chiropractic had lasted. That it had stayed so strong.

I looked at Marta again. She was carrying a big pile of cash from the safe.

"Wow!" I said to her. "You really earned your paycheck today."

"I always earn my paycheck."

I laughed again. This time I felt something in me react negatively to this Marta-ism. But it failed to trigger the usual fugue of seething hate.

I wondered how long this mood of mine could possibly last. Then I realized that it didn't matter much. I knew how to get it back if I needed it. It could serve as a kind of failsafe. Maybe. As long as I could afford the chiropractic.

§§§

Marta finished prepping the bank deposit. She always came out of the back office as soon as she could. Never hung out back there like Shelly and I did. Marta always stormed back out quickly to recite her daily list of concerns and to relay annoying encounters.

I smiled at her when she walked out of the office. My mood was still up.

"Did you see this latest memo from Vera?" Marta asked.

"Hmm. I don't--"

"She delivered it this morning."

"Well, no, then, I haven't. I've only been--"

Marta snatched a piece of paper from the side of the computer monitor, where it had been taped. Thrust it toward me.

"Here. Look at it."

I acted like I was reading it. I waited.

"She wants us to I.D. ever-body who buys a pack of cigarettes," Marta said. "You believe that? Says ever-body, no matter what you THINK their age is."

I looked up from the page. I make a skeptical face, still smiling.

"One of my regulars was in here today," she said. "Guy's prolly forty-something. I told him they was makin' me card him. Well, lo and behold, he didn't have his I.D. with him. So I told him I couldn't sell him no cigarettes."

"But, that's... You don't have to card people you already know... "

"... Ever. Body. That's how Vera told it to me when she brung it by. Ever-body. My regular told me that if I wanted him as a customer, I needed to sell him them cigarettes."

"I don't blame him."

"Me neither! But I says, hey, you got to understand that my job's on the line here. I showed him on the memo where it says 'Failure... ' What's it say... ?"

She snatched the paper from my hand. My smile faded slightly.

"Failure to comply with this policy is grounds for immediate dismissal."

She waved the memo in the air between us. Then she slammed it down on the desk.

"If that's the way they want to run things, fine!" she said. "If they want me to run off all the customers, I will. I get my paycheck either way."

I leaned back against the rear counter. Inwardly I shuddered. I thought about all of the people who would be frustrated while merely trying to buy cigarettes. People who would have their general sense of unrest slightly elevated by having to encounter Marta. I imagined her spite spreading through the population like an infection.

"Oh, and lemme tell you the other big news for today," she said.

She looked around the store for customers. Seeing none, she tucked the deposit bag underneath the computer monitor. She moved closer to me. Put one fist on her right hip.

"Vera offered me management of the village store," she said.

I felt my stomach drop. She saw something in my face.

"Yep," Marta continued. "Lisa is leavin.' She's the one runs it now, you know. Vera didn't say why."

She glanced toward the parking lot again, turned back to me looking conspiratorial.

"I figure it's 'cause of Vera, though. Lisa told me last week she pretty much hated Vera from the start."

So, they passed me over AGAIN. And for Marta?!

"So, um, when do you start?" I asked. My throat sounded tight.

"Never! I told 'em I didn't want the job!"

She wagged her head slightly as she said it.

"What?!"

"I don't."

So much for the silver lining.

"But... Then, but why are you, why are you training to b--D'you just want to be an assistant--?"

"I don't want to work at that store," she said. "Yeah, I want to be a manager, just not at the village store."

"Really? But, I mean, it's just downtown. Right? Just a few miles away from here."

Marta folded her arms across her chest. She smiled like she was amused by what I was saying.

"Just a few miles away, huh?" she said. "Lemme tell you something--"

A couple of smoker's hacks suddenly took hold of her voice. She held up a finger. She took a long swig from her soda cup. Kept the finger in the air during the five second ingestion.

"I worked over there for a couple of weeks, alright?" she continued. "Back when one of the girls there--this was a couple years back--one of the girls there, the assistant manager, she was out for some... operation, I think it was. Knee problem...?"

Marta frowned. She tried to recall the details for a moment. I shifted my weight onto a different leg. Looked out the window. I hoped she'd get the message.

"Anyway," she said. "I filled in over there. First day I was there was a second shift. And there's these nigras over there, regulars, who come in to buy them dollar scratch tickets. They'd buy one, then scratch it off. Then another one. Then another one. One at time. Always them dollar tickets. You know?"

I nodded.

"Then if they won something, they'd want me to immediately cash it for 'em. No matter whether somebody was in line or not. They'd just hand it to me, say 'Gimme three more,' or whatever. Wouldn't even give me time to run the thing through the machine... You follow me?"

"Yeah, sounds--"

"So, yeah, so, I said to 'em, I said 'Ya'll ain't gonna be runnin' me back and forth up here all night like this.' I said 'Ya'll need to pick out the tickets you want, an' buy 'em all at once. Then come back if you won

something.' Alright? 'Cause I was fed up, at that point. After, you know, like an hour of this... So... they left."

Marta looked around the store again. She leaned toward me.

"Hour later, I had a store full o' nigras. A whole mob of 'em, all the way to the back of the store. Ever one of 'em come and set one item up on the counter. Like a pack o' gum, or a candy bar. Or a dollar scratch ticket. Ever one of 'em glaring at me."

"Holy shit! Was it... how did--?"

"They'd brung out the whole neighborhood, see? All them houses around the village store, 'til you get a couple blocks over, where the village proper starts. All them's nigra homes."

"Ohhh... "

"And, lo and behold, the last ones in line--and this lasted for like an hour, store just jammed full, non-stop--and the last ones in line was them regulars. The ones who'd been buying all them dollar tickets. And guess what they said to me."

I shrugged.

"They had these smug smiles on. And they said 'You better get your attitude straight, or else it's gonna be like this ever night!'"

"That's... wow. I don't know what--"

"So, no, I don't want to manage the village store," Marta said. "They can have... They can find somewhar else to put me. I don't want 'em stickin' me down there in the 'hood."

Amazing. She actually believes she can make demands.

Marta stood there in front of me. Staring at me. She had her chin jutted forward. I shifted on my feet, fidgeted with my keys.

"Hm... " was all I managed.

"Yep. They can just put me somewhere else."

Marta snatched the deposit bag from under the monitor. She lifted her green Grab-n- Go vest. She sucked in her stomach stuffed the bag into her waistband.

"So, anyway, consider it to be fair warning," she said.

"What to be a warning?"

"They'll probably ask you to take over the village store next."

"I don't... Maybe, I guess... "

"Well, either way, you'd be crazy to work down there. It just ain't safe, ya ask me."

I watched Marta gather her stuff from the desk. I noticed that my good mood had pretty slipped away. I would

have continued to discuss the issue with just about anyone else. But as usual I found myself just hoping Marta would leave. Besides, I knew she was no good for discussion. Everything was absolutes. She would never admit to uncertainty about anything.

Having had her say for the day, she headed out for the bank. We were stocked up on change, so I knew she would not be returning from the bank.

I looked around the store. The overstuffed shelves, the loud colors of the advertisements. The place looked as cloying and depressing as ever. It looked like I needed a cigarette. But this was the wrong time of day for it. I felt too "on display" out front. And I didn't feel desperate enough to try the trick with the cooler. The smell problem.

Marta had left a big bag of trash in the can near the soda dispensers. As usual. In a flash my mind showed me an image of myself smoking behind the fence that held the big dumpster for the store. It would hide me from the street. The breeze outside would minimize the smell of the smoke from my clothes and hair. Problem solved.

I glanced outside to see if any cars were pulling up. I kept my eye on the parking lot as I removed a smoke and readied a match. The trick was to start smoking inside and then rush outside with the bag. That way I got in more smoke time but I wouldn't have to try to light it in the wind.

Just as I was about to light it, the phone rang. It was Vera.

Marta had been right, for once.

Chapter 30

There it was. In the mailbox. Along with the usual stack of introductory credit card offers. The letter from Clytemnestra Press. It had to be about my book proposal.

My chest suddenly felt full. I looked up toward the houseboat. I blinked a couple of times. I breathed in deeply. Thought maybe that would release some of the tightness.

The envelope feels thin.

I looked back down at the letter. I studied the New York return address. I looked out across the river. Pictured the pathway that placed the letter in my hand. The mail truck, the sorting machines, the trip by air, or maybe a bigger truck. Did people actually drive letters all the way from New York to Florida?

I felt myself starting to open the envelope. I looked down and watched. I watched the tri-folded paper flutter open. I took another deep breath.

No way could I read it through, from the start. Too much to take, whether it was a Yes or No. I couldn't bear to absorb all of the letter writer's emotions and rationalizations at once. I let my eye flutter over the text, looking for key words. Just to get a sense of it. A few leapt out:

"at this time"

"pass"

"patience"

I let the arm holding the letter fall to my side. I started walking toward the houseboat.

Katie was sitting on the floor in shorts. She leaned toward her outstretched left leg. Stretches. We had planned to go for a walk. I'd told her I had something I wanted us to talk about.

"No," I said. I fluttered the letter above my head.

I watched her eyes. She studied my expression. I knew it would take a couple of seconds. But she would know. I liked the reassurance of the link between us.

"The book." she said.

"The book. 'No.'"

"Shut up!"

"Are you really surprised?" I asked. "They've been avoiding me for months. How long--"

"But, th-the guy... the editor. He was, he called back about the show. The TV thing."

"Yeah, well... I lost, remember?"

She drew her feet back toward her body. She dropped my gaze, looked toward her feet.

"I mean, that probably gave him the excuse he was looking for," I said. "They always look for an out. The perfect chance to-to... send me this."

"Well, it just--"

"He probably... that's why he even responded about the show. He knew, you know, what were the chances? Right? That I would--"

"Nooo... "

"No, seriously. That I would win? Touched base with me just to hedge his bets. But he knew this would-would... could be his excuse."

"Mmm--"

"That I'd, you know, feel like a loser, and be more likely to... just accept the rejection."

She sat there for a second. She looked up expectantly. But she wasn't sure what to say.

"Come on, let's go ahead and walk," I said.

She leapt up. She walked up to me. Looked into my eyes closely. I wondered if she was running through the list of things that are said in such situations.

She encircled my neck with both her arms, pulled me close. We stood there for a moment. I gave her a quick hard squeeze to end it. We headed outside to start the walk.

There was a nice dirt path along the edge of the river. It ran a couple of miles north of the houseboat. These walks along the river were something Katie and I liked to do together.

I looked across the café-au-lait surface of the Timacaw. It was brightly lit by the noon sun. We were in the shade of the tall trees along the bank.

"What was it you wanted to talk about?" Katie asked.

I looked at my shoes. Left, right, left, right.

I had been planning to tell her about the phone call from Vera the day before. It was the offer. Management of the village store. I suspected Katie would treat it as good news. Now, with the rejection letter, I knew she would. And that it would seem like she was only trying to compensate for it. I wouldn't be as sure about how she felt.

Too late now. You have to tell her.

"What would you think about... " I began. "Do you think I ought to accept a, ah, management... be a manager? At Grab-n-Go?"

"Well, they, don't they seem to be... Haven't they been dragging their feet?"

I realized that my phrasing had made it seem hypothetical. She hadn't realized it was an announcement. This would help.

"But, I mean, if they, if I could. Like if an opening came up. Do you think I should go ahead and take it?"

"Well... "

She paused long enough that the crunch of our feet on the gravel became synchronized.

"I mean, we have the baby on the way," I said. "The pay would be more... There would be health insurance, there's always that to worry about, you know... "

"True."

"The birth. And my health, too. 'Specially now, with the back thing. You know, who knows if it might come back, hit me again."

I waited a beat for her to respond. Nothing.

"And, um, I think they have some kind of, like, 401-K... thing..."

She looked at me. Waited for me to look at her.

"Do you... ?" she began, "You don't have any other... you aren't waiting to hear back from any--"

"No, no. I just... There's nothing else out there. In Kingsboro. I just don't..."

She was still looking at me.

"I feel like I've given this a good shot. The job search. Y'know? I've tried. But I just keep looking..."

She was looking ahead again. Staring.

"I'll keep looking, of course. At the classifieds and what-not. There's always... the possibility."

"Well, if it seems like...I mean, it's up to you."

"But... Doesn't it seem like a good thing to do? To you? I mean, I need to do this, don't I? I should do it."

"What... ?" Katie studied my face for a moment. "Did they ask you about it, or something?"

"They offered me management--"

She gasped.

"At, uh, at the Village store. Downtown."

"That's great! Congratulations!"

I couldn't help smiling. She punched me in the arm.

"When were you gonna tell me?" she laughed.

"Well, I jus--Today!...No, but, you know, I wanted to talk to you, see what you thought about it..."

"Well... like I said, it's... I mean you were, originally... weren't you looking at this as temporary? When you first got it?"

"No, I know. But that's, that was when, before, you know, before all this--"

"Mmm... "

"All this time. All these, all this time with no prospects. And then, now the book is, has gotten rejected... "

"Only by, you only submitted it, the proposal, to the one company, though," Katie said.

"But, I know, but, that was, it just... It just starts to all add up... You know? And-and again, there was the scare with my back. I mean, even if I could wait it out, wait for something better, should I risk it, at this point?"

"Well, there's--"

"I mean, after a while, you start to realize, you know, who am I? I'm obviously not bowling anybody over. With my resume, my ideas... Right? Maybe I just need to... admit it to myself, deal with it. Take what I can get."

"Well, now, there's no, you shouldn't get, be discouraged."

"No, no, I know. I think it's just, I'm just being realistic. You know? I mean, anybody else would just jump at this opportunity."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far!"

"Eww, funny!... No, I just mean, somebody who... who didn't have all these... Without my background, degrees, all that. Who didn't expect to be able to find something better."

"Well, I still think that seems... that it is reasonable for you to expect that. Something better."

"But-but, see, after a while, you... I mean you're only worth what the market says you are, right? And after months and months and months, this seems to be the only... Why should I think I'm any better than this job?"

"But aren't you? Nobody else there has... do they even have college degrees?"

"No, but, a few, but if it doesn't add anything to what we do there... Or, at least, to what they will let me do... See? I might as well not even have the degrees."

We walked for a moment. Katie was frowning.

"Doesn't this make sense?" I asked.

"I just... I... "

"C'mon. This is a good job." I said. "It's management. A salary. I mean, it's not that I like it. Anymore than I liked having to take the job to begin with. But, I just think doing this... just makes the most sense right now."

Katie stopped and faced me. She looked at me. She looked as if she were waiting for me to grasp what she was thinking.

"What?" I said, finally.

"What about the robbery? The robber?"

"I... "

She had caught me off guard. She saw that. Her eyes softened. But it didn't matter. She had made her point. I turned and started walking again.

"I know, I know... " I said. "I don't know."

We walked for a while longer. Mostly silent. I was due for second shift that night at the Doctor's Landing store. I wanted to get some writing done before I went in. We turned back a bit sooner than usual.

I struck me that it was my hobby again, writing. Just like it always had been, actually, delusions aside.

§§§

The dirt road behind the store. I was sitting in the car finishing up my cigarette. Shelly was inside. Good. I'd had my fill of Marta the day before.

I had developed a cigarette pattern for second shift. I'd have one before I went in for the afternoon. Then, much later, one at the end of the night before I did the mopping. Smoked it in the bathroom. I'd blow the smoke up into the exhaust fan to absorb the stink. Just in case Shelly, Vera, or whoever stopped by late. On slow nights, if I could sneak a drag or three in the cooler, I would. That was rare, though.

I hadn't been able to do much productive writing before it was time for work. Katie had been quiet. Reading, rummaging around in the kitchen. Probably silently replottting our future based on my accepting the job.

In my case, I had tried to focus on a short story idea I wanted to write up. But I couldn't stop thinking about Katie's remark about the robbery. I kept weighing that problem against all the reasons to take the job.

Instead of writing the story I ended up just writing down scattered thoughts. Trying to capture whatever came into my head. Time-coded, dated. Something I had done off and on for years. Just trying to keep a record for myself, for the future. A snapshot of my mind. Maybe something to help me make sense of it all someday.

End of the cigarette. I started driving around to the front of the store.

Writing down my thoughts had made me feel a bit better about taking the job. Didn't look like I'd be able to quit anytime soon, anyway. And I could just as well get robbed as an hourly assistant manager. No reason to turn away from all the extras that would come with management. Especially the pay.

Last night, in bed, it had been different. Lying there, plagued by images and memories. Where I was ending up, compared to where I had wanted to end up when I was in grad school. I kept seeing the pages of my logical formulas, my proofs, my critiques. And my visions of the original logical system I had hoped to construct. One that would revolutionize how reasoning was taught.

By the light of day, it was all bullshit. This was what I was, sitting here waiting for my shift at a store. Smoking a cigarette. This was the true worth of my degrees. This was where they had put me. Those academic minotaurs who protected themselves inside mazes of symbols and thesaurus words. Leaving me with little more than student loans to pay off. Not even able to publish a lousy story collection. The sooner I faced up to the reality of all of it, the better off I'd be.

I parked the car in the usual spot. I pulled the green vest over my head. I could see the top of Shelly's head over the computer monitor in front of her. I knew she would ask me about the job. I sat there for a moment, in the car.

My confidence about the thing seemed strong. Strong enough. I had slept on this, I had thought it through. Katie was okay with it. As soon as something better came up, I'd quit. Just like always. This was not a real change in the job. It only sounded like a big deal. This was not some permanent decision. It just meant I was taking on a little more work, but a lot more money and benefits.

Shelly had the music going, as usual. Some kind of aggro rock. Cookie monster vocals. Didn't recognize it.

"You never seem to have anyone--"

"WHAT?"

I opened my mouth to start again. Then I closed it and cocked my head to the left slightly. Shelly reached back to turn the boombox down.

"I was just gonna say," I said, "that you never, there's hardly ever anyone in here when I come in. And you're here. On my shifts I always have to juggle through the shift-over."

She tapped her finger on her temple. Wry smile.

"You got to know the public. Predict the perfect time."

I turned and started walking around the counter.

"Lucky," I shot over my shoulder.

"No, no. You gotta learn these things, Jim. If you're gonna be a manager."

That was quick.

She was seated, but she had her whole torso turned my way. She studied my face for the reaction.

I set down my plasticware bowl of rice and beans. She kept staring. I raised my eyebrows and did a "let's do this" gesture with my hands.

"So, do you wanna take it?" she asked.

"I kinda do, yeah."

"Well, I mean, did they, are they planning on training you?"

"I di--I haven't said 'yes' yet, so, so... I assume, I think they'll, Vera will talk about that, when I do."

She looked at my eyes. Studied them for a moment. Her expression wasn't particularly pleasant. This was the first time she had confronted me about anything since she took over the store. The dusty odor of the Pine Trail store suddenly seemed to be in my nose. Sense memory.

"I don't think they gave Jay any training before they made him manager, though," she said.

Great. So she thinks I'm going to crash and burn like THAT asshole.

"Yeah, but, remember, that was Don," I pointed out. "Jay had him, like, Jay had Don bamboozled into--"

"Jim, I don't know that Vera's going to do anything any different. That's the company, the way the stores are run. They don't have any kind of, you know, special training classes, or anything."

I shrugged. I waited a second for her to grasp the implication.

"Well... then I'm in the same boat as anyone else. Right? Anybody, everybody who takes a management offer. So, what's, so, why should I worry about it?"

"But most of the others are ready for management Jim."

She lowered her chin when she said it, drilled her gaze at me. She held the gaze.

"Gee, thanks!" I said, laughing.

"Most of 'em have trained under a manager. You didn't. You and Marta have been here, and there's, there hasn't been any manager. Until, you know, recently. With me."

"Yeah, but we, Marta and I--"

"And I haven't shown you anything. Marta used to do the stock orders, right? And what about the weekly store reports on Thursday? Do you know how to do Thursdays?"

I crossed my arms in front of me. I bought a few seconds to think.

"But that's... so I mean, they won't put me over there wi--that's why they must be planning on doing some training first, right? Not just, you know... "

"I worked for Ben for two years as an assistant, Jim. Before they moved me over here."

So THAT'S it.

I let that simmer. I hoped she would hear herself. She picked up a stack of delivery invoices. Started flipping through them.

A guy came in and walked up to the counter. I went over to wait on him. He ordered a pack of cigarettes and a skin mag. Then he caught sight of Shelly sitting at the desk. He turned red. Kept his head down. I tried not to embarrass him.

As he left I looked at Shelly again. She was now staring at me. Looking like she had something to say.

"So, why do you want to accept this offer, anyway?" she asked.

"Well, there's the money... and--"

"No, I know that. I mean, why take the position at... at the village store?"

"Well... that's the one they are offering, for one thing, and... and, I don't know, the downtown area. I kinda, I wouldn't mind being more part, more a part of the business community down there. All those other shops."

Lying in bed the night before I had seen myself talking to a group of business owners. Maybe doing a newsletter for them. That might be yet another foray into writing, politics... something. Another way out.

"I don't think you... Have you ever been down there?"

"Ye--Well I've, I've been by there. I know where it is."

"I mean, you're not gonna be, it's not really part of that downtown area. That main street section downtown."

"Well, it's only a block or so, what, east of it, though. Right?"

"Yeah, but... "

She stared at me again for a moment.

"That store is... " she began, "It's surrounded by... "

"Yeah, yeah. Marta told me about some of her, um, experiences. Down there. Butbut, I... I just... I guess I just want to... give it a shot."

"Hey, suit yourself."

She started typing information from the invoices into the computer. She held her jaw set. Typed faster than usual. Louder. Or at least it seemed that way.

Between a couple of the entries she spoke to me again without looking at me.

"Just don't be surprised when... "

I waited. She didn't finish.

"What... ?" I asked.

"Nevermind... Just... Whatever."

She didn't say much else to me before she left for the day.

Chapter 31

I looked into about 30 cubic feet of pure darkness for about two minutes. Pitch black, to the left of the store. Sat there staring at it from the car. I thought maybe my eyes would adjust. Maybe I would see the burning tip of a cigarette. Nothing.

There was no way to feel safe about getting out of the car at the village store. Anyone could have been waiting in that pit on the side. Much worse than at Shelly's store bad as that was.

I had shined the headlights into the pit when I pulled into the lot. I could tell, though, that there was enough space for someone to hide behind the building. Someone who'd wait back there to hear a car door, then come around with a gun.

This was my first morning at the village store. Five a.m. as usual, salaried or not.

Vera had waltzed into the Doctor's Landing store the day before. I was on first shift. She handed me keys for this store. "My store," now. I held them without moving for a moment, waiting for her to explain.

"Uh, aren't you going to meet me there tomorrow?" I had asked. "You know, walk me through the procedures for that store? Show me--"

"You'll do fine," she had said. "You know what you're doing. Pretty much the same deal from store to store. I'll check in later to make sure things are running okay."

My ego had not allowed me to protest. And so here I was. Manager. No training. Same guy, different title, different paystub.

I glanced toward the side of the store again. Could have sworn I saw something move in that pit of darkness. Maybe word had gotten around the neighborhood--new manager, first day. Maybe someone figured they could exploit mistakes I might make. Like not knowing to check behind the building.

You have a salary now. Health insurance. You run this store. Your wife is pregnant. Suck it up.

In a flash my body made a decision. Let 'em kill me. Fuck it. I got out of the car. No point second-guessing. It was either take the gamble or sit in the car until the sun came up.

First thing that hit me was the stench of the water treatment plant next door. Sulfur. I scowled at the huge maze of pipes and gigantic pill-shaped storage structures. I wondered who could possibly have thought to open a store next to this farting monstrosity.

I rushed for the door and inserted a key. Somewhere in me there was a sense of recognition. Too many movies. Of course the key wouldn't turn. I torqued it until I could feel it against the bone in my thumb. I glanced toward the black hole at the side of the store.

Lifting up on the door seemed to do the trick. Frame was bent, I guessed. I had only figured it out by luck. It was like the place was booby trapped.

I got inside and locked the door behind me. I wished I could just leave it locked. Maybe crawl behind the counter and pretend like the place was closed for the day. Make 'em go somewhere else to get their lottery tickets.

I looked around. Compared to the Doctor's Landing store, the place was a shithole. It was more in the vein of the Pine Trail store. Filthy floor with chunks of tile missing. Almost enough webbing on the fluorescent fixtures to make them look like Halloween decorations. Along the back wall were 5-foot stacks of overstock mostly boxes of gallon water bottles, covered with dust. Someone had over-ordered on a hurricane scare.

Maybe it was the time of day. Maybe it was the look of the place. The smell turned me off... I don't know. But this was feeling like a mistake. I felt it in my gut. I had really fucked up this time.

I shook my head to break the spell. I tried to scrape together a sense of ownership. This was going to be my store. I was going to be the one held responsible for it. When someone said "I'd like to speak to the manager," that would be me.

I sucked in a deep breath. Dusty smell. At least I didn't detect any sepsis. That was a start.

Brain began to run the usual subroutines. The five a.m. sequences. Set the safe. Get the coffee brewing. Have a smoke in the bathroom. All that.

There was a fat dead roach in front of the safe. I kicked it out of the way. A hind leg broke off and skittered next to the rubber mats behind the registers. I suppressed a gag and sat down where the roach had been. Nowhere else to sit to set the safe timer.

I got up and felt for my smokes and lighter. On the way back to the bathroom I grabbed a packet of coffee. I dumped it in a filter and clicked on the brewing machine. I inhaled deeply with my nose in the coffee wrapper. Couldn't wait for it to brew. Adrenaline was already kicking in, but I was ready for the buzz. Seemed like I'd need it for the day.

Once I hit the back room, my sense of routine hit a wall. I got a look at the men's john. Even at the other store, it was no place for a sit-down. But I had been unprepared for the chamber of unknown stains this one was. With its low ceiling, screeching fan, and bare lightbulb, it was something like the Bates's basement in "Psycho" --only this time Norman Bates was into scat instead of homicide.

The women's room was no better. My guts grumbled at me, but I didn't much feel like sitting on that mossy porcelain. I decided I'd have to train myself to shit later in the day if I was going to run this store. There was nothing even a thorough cleaning could do here to reassure me. The stains and stench were tattooed onto these fixtures.

I smoked my cigarette among the wooden supply shelves outside the bathrooms. I figured the odor of smoke would not stand out here, anyway. I blew jets of bluish smoke toward the alien objects around me. Everything looked wrong. Smelled wrong. I was in someone else's house. Make that someone else's mobile home.

On my last pull, I could feel the heat of the cigarette on my lips. I was sucking it deep. No telling when I might get another one around here. The routine of the day was a big, stinking unknown.

I swung open the men's room door. Stupidly, I flicked the burning butt toward the toilet. It missed. Bounced to the other side of the throne. I rushed in to get it before it melted the flooring or sparked whatever trash might be back there.

I looked at my thumb and forefinger after I scooped up the butt. There was some kind of oily brown-black liquid on the tip of my thumb and on the filter. I suppressed another gag. I washed my hands, tried not to breathe in.

The safe was unlocked by the time I got back to it. There was a ton of cash in it. I felt stiff all over as I began

to scoop the money out. That feeling of not wanting to touch anything. Even the cash seemed filthy. Seemed to smell like old beer.

I glanced at the big plate glass window. Anyone could have stood out there, looking in on me gathering up all this money. I clutched the big smelly pile of cash against my chest and stood up. Somehow I managed not to drop a single bill on the way to the office.

Fuck, "office." This was, like, half a kitchen table bolted to the wall of a converted restroom. Most of the room was piles of boxes of shit the company didn't even use anymore. Weird blue mailing envelopes for who-knows-what. Sleeves of drink cups from old movie promos. Fucking "Tango and Cash?" Looked like there hadn't been a manager here for ten years who had bothered to clean the office out.

The most ridiculous thing about the office, I thought, was its "door." It was really two wooden panels of slats that covered the upper third of the opening. Almost like the swinging doors of a saloon in some old Western. Oh, and they had one of those metal hooks from a screen door, for a little "extra security."

I left the pile of cash on the makeshift desk and walked back toward the front counter. I had forgotten to run the totals on the registers. That would leave me with nothing to compare against the cash, to see whether we had brought in was what the cashiers had entered into the registers.

Before I got to the registers I stopped short. I looked at both of them for the first time. The hair on my neck stood up. They were completely different from the computerized registers I had used at the other stores. They were an older kind that printed a running total on a paper roll. It wound around a spool that had to be removed each day.

I had no idea how to use the spools from these registers to do the accounting for the store. I had been trained on the arcane and arbitrary procedures for the computerized registers. Could do it in my sleep. But for these spools, I had no fucking idea, and no time to figure it out. Somewhere among the yards of data printed in purple ink lay the figures I needed. I had no idea how they might be labeled, how to find them.

I looked at my watch. Still way before six. For a second I thought fuck Vera. She was the one who put me here with no training. She deserved the wake-up call.

But I felt the desire to impress kick in. The desire to look like I could handle things. I didn't want the company to think they had made a mistake in promoting me. My ego threw out a name for me. A possible solution.

Shelly.

I pictured her across town. In that nice clean store. Where I could be sitting, empty bowels, tapping numbers into the calculator. I snatched the phone off its cradle.

She answered after a couple of rings. Sounded tired. I realized I never usually talked to her this early.

"Hey Shelly. It's Jim."

"Yeah?"

She still sounded miffed with me. I tried to ignore the sense of doubt this caused.

"Hey, listen, Vera didn't show me--"

"Aren't you at store 20 today?" Shelly asked.

"Yeah, I--"

"Whatta ya think?"

I picked up the gloating tone.

"It's... uh... Let's, let me tell you what's--"

"Pretty shitty, huh?"

I paused. Considered admitting how disgusted I had been.

"Listen, do you know anything about these registers over here? How to, how to, you know, get the figures off of them? I mean I don't see a printer, or--"

"You ain't never run the tape on one of 'em?"

"No. Where? Ben didn't have one of these, right? Or at least he didn't--"

"You next to the thing?" she asked.

"Hold on... okay, yeah."

"Alright... first you pull out those keys on the top. Look for the one marked with a "Z... "

She walked me through the rest of the sequence. Another mindless set of incantations to clutter my brain. The registers began clucking and squawking. They began to extrude long paper tapes covered with the minutiae of the day's sales.

"Alright, good," I said. "So, um, do you know if they have any kind of manual over here? For, like, getting the... how am I going to find the figures to, to, put into the computer?"

Shelly sighed heavily. I waited.

"Look, you're just gonna have to wait and let Vera walk you through that. I can't possibly tell you over the phone."

"This is ridiculous," I said. "How does she expect me to--"

"Jim... Didn't I tell you?"

"How am I going to do the paperwork for the day if I can't even... Alright, Shelly, listen, thanks for the help. Really. You're--"

"Just call her," Shelly said.

"I will. See ya."

I slammed the phone down. The registers kept squawking and printing. I looked through a few stacks of papers, binders. Hoping for something. Then I threw up my hands. The clock on the wall said 5:45. I had fifteen minutes to count all that money and get it back in the safe. The accounting would have to wait until later. If I could do it at all.

Stacks of money littered the desk. I dove in.

I kept glancing the phone as I counted. I wanted to roust Vera out of bed. Marta would have. Shelly would have. It was what the power structure called for. Instead, I just kept kicking myself.

\$\$\$

"YO!"

The voice came from the back of the store, by the beer cooler. At least I thought so. I handed a box of smokes to the guy standing in front of me at the counter.

"Caspian hundreds, box. That be all for you?"

"YO!"

The voice again. The cigarette buyer searched my face for a reaction. I had scowled at the second shout.

"BE WITH YOU IN A MINUTE! That'll be four-seventeen, please."

"Chee-sus! For Caspians?"

"I know, they just keep--"

"YO!"

My face turned red. I looked back at the line behind the cigarette buyer. Six deep. Most of them in coveralls or dingy water plant uniforms. All of them looked pissed.

Guy paid the \$4.17, of course, instead of walking. I handed him his change. Then I looked over his shoulder at the line. I held up a "give me a minute finger," began moving from behind the register. They all bummed.

I moved to the side of the counter. There I could see the guy at the beer cooler. He was wearing a baggy civilian version of some basketball team's getup. Some flashy chains. I addressed him over the rows of shelves between us.

"Help ya?"

"Yo! Ya'll got anymore Mamba?" he asked. He was holding up what was apparently the last 40-oz. bottle of the cheap malt liquor.

"I, ah... "

I glanced at the line of customers again. They glared back. I decided against going back to check in the cooler's stocking area.

"That must be... if there isn't anymore in the rack, that's it."

He cocked his head to the side and made some kind of sound like pshttt. I moved back toward the register to continue with the line.

"Man, this is BOO-SHIT!" came the voice again.

I waited on the customer in front of me. He looked for a reaction as the Mamba King continue to vent. My face was feeling hot. Three other customers came through the door as the one in front of me left.

"MAN, I CAN SEE SOME MORE BACK THERE!"

My blood pressure felt like it was going to pop a blowhole out of the top of my head. The next guy in line stepped up with a smirk on his face.

"Can of dip," he said. "Buckchaw."

I heard the squeak of the stock door to the cooler. It led behind the cooler racks so that they could be stocked. There was a huge "Employee's Only" sign plastered on its glass panel. And yes, that inappropriate apostrophe s was factory-installed.

"Goddamnit... I'll be, sorry, I'll be right back," I said to the tobacco buyer.

By the time I opened the stock door, he was already headed back toward it with an armful of Mamba bottles. I glared at him.

"Ya'll need to keep them racks stocked up, son," he said. I couldn't see his eyes from behind his black shades. He reeked of blunt cigar smoke. Cherry.

I opened my mouth to say something about how he needed to stay out of the stock area. But my mind flashed an image of what Marta had described to me. A store flooded with angry locals. I didn't want to fuck things up on my first day.

I rushed back to grab the can of Buckchaw. Mamba King made his way to the end of the line. It was now seven deep.

It was not even lunch yet. I was accustomed to having a lunch rush, of sorts, at the Doctor's Landing store. But here it had been pretty heavy since about ten.

In fact, the store had not been empty more than about fifteen minutes total for the whole morning. I had had no time to try to familiarize myself with the store, check stock, make a to-do list. Nothing managerial. I had been stuck at the register practically the whole time.

I was feeling it. The concentration starts to go. The foot and shin pain I was used to, but not the constant juggling. Reloading the coffee, restocking cups, napkins. Couldn't remember when I had last taken a piss.

The man at the counter was buying two sausage dogs from the roller grill, chips, several packs of gum. I glanced at his water plant work shirt as I rang up the pile of junk food.

"Do ya'll get a break at eleven or something?" I asked. I searched his face for any trace of empathy. He looked at me blankly for a beat, then shrugged.

"Can't speak for the whole plant."

"Fine. Six-eighteen's your total."

He handed me a twenty, natch. I gave him his change without making eye contact. I slammed the drawer of the register. He remained in front of me.

"You gotta problem?" he asked.

My guts twisted and my face became still hotter.

"Sir, I'm just trying to help this line of people behind you."

"Well, you don't need to have no attitude about it."

"Hey, buddy! Some of us back here need to get back to work!" said the fifth guy back. A couple of the others grunted agreement.

The water plant guy looked back toward the voice. He squared his shoulders at the man, took a couple of steps toward him.

"Hey buddy yourself! Wait your damn turn!"

I crooked my finger at the next guy in line. The water plant guy and his critic continued to exchange words. I felt relieved not to have had to continue to dig myself out of that hole. But now I had to worry about whether a fight was about to break out in the store.

As I rang up more cigarettes and beef jerky, I imagined the eruption. Heads smashing through the plate glass. The long, blood-smeared wait for the cops to arrive. The sickening smell of iron.

Out of the corner of my eye I spotted I masculine figure with long hair opening the front door. I looked. Vera had finally arrived. I had avoided calling her. She was checking up on me.

She stood at the entrance for a moment, looking at the men arguing in line. Then she gave me a long suspicious look through her giant wraparound shades. I tried to stare back, but I felt the twinge of self-doubt she was hoping for.

"Two five-dollar scratch cards. Anything else?" I asked the guy at the counter.

Vera said something to the water plant guy I didn't catch. He gave her a once-over. He glared at his critic in line. Then he turned and plowed through the out door. He shot me a parting glance but I had already resumed counting out a customer's change.

Vera headed for the office area. She set her handbag down on the desk and began looking through papers. I stood there staring at her for a beat, hoping to catch her eye. Hoping she would see that I expected her to help out at the other register.

She didn't. The line stayed about four deep for the next fifteen minutes. That was when Vera came out of the office. She stood to my right, as I waited on a customer. I didn't acknowledge her until I finished. Then I looked at her.

"Jim, you didn't enter the itemized sales from yesterday into the computer. Why?"

I let it hang for a moment. I gave her an "are you kidding me" look.

"I don't know how. Ben trains everyone on the new computerized registers? I have no idea how to get the totals from these, these...rolls of paper."

She held my stare. I looked at my reflection in those damned shades. I tried not to look away again. But I did.

Dammit.

"Can I get a pack of Caspians, here?" said the customer waiting at the counter.

"Just a moment, sir," said Vera. "Well, it's not rocket science. Come back to the office and I'll show you how to get the figures."

"When?!" I asked.

I swung my arm out toward the store. There were five people in line. Several more ambled among the shelves. She seemed to process the situation for the first time.

"Just... whenever there's a lull," she said.

"Four-seventeen, sir... But it's been like this since, like, around ten. And lunch is coming. Is-is it always like this?"

"There'll be a break."

She'd said it over her shoulder as she returned to the office. I shook my head in disbelief at the next guy in line. He just gave me a blank stare.

After about fifteen more minutes of this, I called Vera out of the office. I asked her if she could take over while I went to the restroom. I did have to piss, but I wanted her to get a sense of the store traffic. She walked behind the register without a word.

As I walked toward the back I glanced back at her at the register. She left her big shades on. She looked like a tanned leather praying mantis hunched over the register.

The smell in the bathroom was sickening. I closed my eyes once I started peeing. I tried to imagine I wasn't there. After a moment of darkness, I started to see the bluegreen LED numbers from the register.

For a second, I thought about a smoke. I knew Vera smoked. Maybe she wouldn't mind, I thought. But then I realized that it was against the rules to do it in the building. And out front, on the sidewalk, there was always the possibility of Katie's showing up for a visit.

I quietly stepped out of the filthy restroom. I was not ready to get behind that fucking register again. I leaned forward against one of the wooden shelves in the stock area. I folded my arms on the shelf and rested my head on them for a moment. The intermittent shrieking of the door alarm made it a pointless attempt to recharge my nerves.

Once I slowly began to walk out of the back, I saw Vera beginning to help the last remaining customer. I stopped dead in disbelief. Then I chuckled and shook my head.

She looked up at me once she finished up with the customer. She gave her hands an exaggerated wipe.

"See? Nothing to it," she said. "There's always a break."

I cocked my head skeptically at her.

"What, did you set up a, a, what, a roadblock to keep more from coming in?"

She began walking back to the office. I turned to follow her. The door alarm began shrieking again. An elderly black woman walked to the counter, began looking at the scratch tickets.

"I mean, I just don't see how I can ever, how I can do any management duties here, if it is always this busy," I said.

Vera didn't respond.

"Are there any, uh, do you have any plans to, you know, schedule a second person during the day?" I asked.

"Can I get one of each of these dollar tickets?" asked the woman.

"You will be the one making out the schedule," she said.

I began tearing off the tickets. Processing Vera's answer.

"So, I can do that, then?" I asked. "Schedule someone to work with me on days? So I can, you know, get this place, get myself up to speed?"

"I'll take a two dollar ticket too," said the woman. "Green Thumbs."

"I don't have anyone to spare right now, for doubling up like that," Vera said.

I handed the woman her scratch tickets. I gave her a "can you believe this" look. She looked back at me suspiciously.

"So it's a Catch-22, then," I said.

"A what?" asked Vera.

"Never mind," I said.

"Besides," Vera continued, "Lisa never needed a second cashier on first shift. And you gotta keep your costs down."

"Seven dollars, please ma'am. But how do you, how could anybody have time to... Don't forget that I still need training, you know. On most of the, um, managerial stuff."

The old woman took her scratch cards to a tall stack of soda twelve packs near the front windows. She began her Pavlovian swipes with a coin.

"You'll pick up the patterns of the traffic at the store," Vera said. "You'll learn to fit in the paperwork, the ordering... All of it. We all learn to adjust."

I looked around the store. The filthy floors, broken shelves, the dust. The lack of care the store had received seemed to undermine Vera's claims. I thought about whether to bring it up.

"Besides," Vera said, "I am bringing in an assistant manager for you. She will be able to take up some of the slack."

"Who?"

"I think Ben said y'all had worked together before."

"Who?"

"Brenda."

I nearly doubled over. Brenda's voice played in my mind: "I'm gonna end up fuckin' that man!"

"She's an assistant manager?"

"Will be. You know her?"

"Yeah... "

I almost said "the mouth of the South." That was Billie's unoriginal but accurate name for her.

The old woman threw away her losing seven dollars' worth of tickets in disgust. She ambled up to the counter and started looking for more. I stared blankly through her forehead, my eyes unfocused. I shook my head almost imperceptibly.

Chapter 32

A third guy entered the line. Another one from the water plant across the street. Holding a 32-ounce soda refill. All these water plant guys seemed to have nasty soda habits.

I ground my teeth and looked back down at the pile of overpriced junk groceries on the counter. I tapped in the price another pop-top can of chili.

"Love that stuff when I'm out fishin,' you know? Chili?"

I looked up at the guy. One of those craggy late-middle-aged faces that had worked in the southern sun for thirty or more years. I narrowed my eyes as a question. My mouth opened, but only air came out.

"Yeah, that and a tray of them cinnamon buns," he continued. "The kind plastered with white icing over the top."

I glanced back at the two men behind him. Both had their heads cocked, shifted on their feet. They alternated between staring at me and boring their eyes into the back of the fisherman's head. I was too tired and resigned to speed things up like they wanted me to.

It was still the first day at the new store. My first day as manager. In the office the cordless phone started to ring. I shook my head slightly, rolled my eyes at the guys in line. Their expressions did not change.

"Thirty-eight forty-six, sir, is your total," I said to the fisherman.

I glanced toward the office on the third ring. Vera had left just after the lunch rush. Said she had other stores to visit, terrorize, whatever. She liked to have her "inferiors"--including myself-- screen calls for her when she was in. I knew it was probably yet another call for her.

"You need to get that?" asked the fisherman.

He was slowly fingering through the bills in his wallet.

"I... " I began, glancing at the line again. The phone rang a fourth time. I gave the guys in line a "one sec" finger. "Lemme just grab... I'll be... it's a cordless..." I grabbed the phone from the desk and spun around to jog back to the register. I heard the phone's docking station clatter to the office floor. There was a crackle on the line.

"Grab-n-Go-store-20-this-is-Jim-can-I-help-ya?"

There was a pause on the line. The fisherman handed me his cash.

"Anybody there... ?" I asked. I sounded bored. I would have already hung up, but both my hands were busy putting the bills in their proper slots in the cash drawer. Still no answer. The fisherman was locked in on my eyes. At least this was keeping him from talking. I decided to roll with a charade.

"Yes, I'm still here," I said. I feigned listening as I mouthed counting change into the fisherman's hand.

"Yes, ma'am, I... thank you, sir... I... yes ma'am, uh, was this a tall woman, long straight sandy-colored hair, mirrored sun glasses?"

The fisherman took his change, winked a thanks at me. I waved the next guy to the counter.

"Yes ma'am, that's the district manager," I continued.

No point in hanging up, I figured, and inviting snide comments from these guys. Why people think a phone conversation is sacrosanct I'll never know. But I started to feel like I should do this fake caller thing more often.

"Box of Caspian Menthols," said guy number two in line. I nodded and reached for the pack in the rack above my head. I had concluded that the phone line had gone dead when I knocked its charger base to the floor. But just then I felt the hairs on my neck prickle. Someone had quietly exhaled on the line. Fuck a nun!

I nervously keyed in the cigarettes. The guy at the counter was waiting for my next words, probably trying to figure out why I had gone white.

"Um... four seventeen, please," I said. Then, into the phone: "Ma'am?...Ma'am?" He searched my face as he handed me a five. I clicked off the phone and shrugged at the customer. I handed him his change.

The soda guy only took a few seconds to ring through. I looked around the store as I handed him his change. Alone at last. At least as long as this guy would just leave and not try to tell me about what he liked to eat on fishing trips. I leaned against the counter and looked out the plate-glass windows. My usual pose. It had been a long first day. And I had been playing cashier pretty much since I opened. The second shift person, Susan, was due in... when?

I slapped the counter in anger. I had forgotten to ask Vera what time Susan's arrival time was for second shift. The earlier she came in, the more overlap we could have. More chance for me to maybe do some management, instead of register work. Little stuff, like keeping the fucking store in operation. My skin prickled again as I thought about the nearly-silent caller. Something about being a sitting duck guarding cash for low pay made calls like that seem more sinister.

I shrugged my shoulders and walked back to the office area. I picked up the phone's base, shook it next to my ear. Something that sounded like a screw rattled inside. Nothing major. I put it back on the desk.

It started ringing.

I stared at it for a second, thinking I had hit some test button on the front. It rang again. I walked to the register, where I'd left the handset.

"Grab-n-Go... "

The line was silent again.

"Hel-lo?...Katie, is tha--?"

"Aren't you supposed to identify yourself when you answer the phone?"

My guts clenched at the sound of Don Volker's voice. Then the realization hit me that he was no longer with the company. Didn't matter what he thought.

"Can't let it go, huh?" I answered. "How's it going Don?"

"Hello, Jim. I just wanted to, ah... well, to give you a heads up."

"Uh... okay?"

"They let your boy go," Don said.

There was a pause. I had detected a slightly mocking tone. I started running through all of names of employees whose firings might be supposed to matter to me somehow. Weren't many left.

"Gil?" I guessed, thinking of the grumpy third shift guy from Pine Trail.

"Wha--? No, no, no, man... the guy who robbed you?"

For a moment, Don must have wondered whether the line went dead.

"He's--?" I began.

"Not enough evidence to hold him. Major witness who disagrees with the secondary witness... Yeah. This is what happens. He's out."

"Well, like I said then, Don: I couldn't be sure--"

"C'mon, seriously? You still... ? C'mon. Level with me."

"No, I... Without being sure, I couldn't just--"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever... I just... Listen... "

Don paused. I waited.

"This guys out, he's free. And, and he may know there was, y'know, that one of us fingered him, an' not the other, y'know? I'm not sure if he'll, ah, know who was which, or whatever. Or, if it matters to him one way or another. I'm just saying... " The door alarm started shrieking. I tried to respond Don, but my mind was racing. Then I absent-mindedly nodded at the middle-aged black couple ambling in.

"Well, anyway, listen," Don broke the silence again "I know you're busy. I just... Just keep your eyes open, okay?"

"Alright, um... okay, tha--"

Dial tone.

I set the phone down slowly. Tried to figure out what to do with Don's information. I must have stared at the register longer than I realized. I jumped a little when I noticed the man standing at the counter, staring at me.

"This your first day, huh?"

He had a glassy, medicated stare, like he was looking at me from behind a dirty window. Except for the absence of sideburns, his look was probably a holdover from the 1970s. Medium afro, bushy sideburns, glasses with electro-plated rims. Liquor had clearly made a large contribution to his demeanor.

"Oh, sorry, hi. I, uh... What can I do for you folks today?"

He continued to peer at me. One of the lenses of his glasses was set about a centimeter further forward than the other. There was a strange moment when it was unclear whether he was angry and trying to figure out what to say, or just not quite there. His wife leered at my visible discomfort from over his shoulder.

He then looked down at the lottery display.

But of course.

In my mind's eye, I saw the transaction stretching in time like one of those hallway shots in "The Shining." I shifted on my feet and looked toward the parking lot. Two more cars pulled in.

Traffic had picked up on the road out front. I saw a few smaller kids at a crosswalk about a block away. I realized the earlier grades of school were probably letting out. Another customer rush, all that.

Where the fuck is Susan? What, does she only do a seven hour second shift?

"Here, we need you to run these, see if they won anything."

The wife reached over the hubby, who was still gaping at the lottery display. She had gray streaks in her mass of hair. She peered through the hair, looking for signs of weakness in my expression. The kind of woman who seemed like she might begin clawing your face in an instant, for no apparent reason. That, or throw folk magic powders at you.

I looked at the pile of scratch tickets she had handed me. A stack of maybe twenty. All dollar tickets, all unlikely to win more than another dollar, if at all. I looked back at up her. Maybe she was kidding. Her Manson eyes said she wasn't.

The door alarm shrieked, and three people were on the way in. The starting gun. I rushed to the lottery machine. I knew there was no way I could avoid getting a big line at this point. The lottery machine sucked. Even when it beeped like it had scanned the tickets, you still had to type in the codes for each ticket at least twice. Ten minutes later the line was ten people deep. Mommy vans kept pulling into the parking lot. Brats and bitches coming in for gummy bears and milk. Plus it was looking like yet another break, shift change--whatever--at the water plant. But Fro-man and witchy stuck with me. Usual horseshit. They kept scratching off the dollar tickets and handing me the winners. By the time I scanned them in, they handed me another. Every few customers they stepped aside, but they never went to the back of the line.

Whole time I was hearing Don's voice in my head. "He's out."

The absurdity of it started to get to me. I knew these two freaks would never stop picking up their petty wins and turning them in for new ones. Plus, I needed to stop and fully process what Don had told me about the perp. How long was I supposed to put up with this?

I felt myself turning red. I was ready to tell the couple that they need to go to the end of the line instead of continually breaking in front of other customers. But again I pictured what Marta had told me about. Getting mobbed by the neighborhood customers after she was rude a couple of them. That was no way for me to start off my first day as the new manager.

I looked out at the line of irritated faces. Maybe, I thought, one of them would get fed up, do the honors of telling the couple where the line started. But they were apparently all waiting for my move as well.

At some point, witchy lady inexplicably had a bout of self-consciousness. Fromeister was hunched over the counter, scratching in oblivion. She snatched up his remaining tickets and pulled at his elbow.

"Hey. HEY! We holding up the line," she said. "Let's take the rest of these with us." A visible wave of relief swept the faces in line. But it still stretched about halfway the length of the store. I felt a couple of rivulets of sweat on my skin. One dribbled from my left armpit, the other snaked through the hairline along my ass crack.

At some point during this seemingly endless grind, I saw a green vest walking through the doors. Susan, the second shifter.

Just in time for nothing.

She was young. Brownish-blond hair in a cheap straight cut. Thick glasses. Shapeless mouth with thin lips.

As she walked in, she was staring my way. Monitoring my mood. I felt myself intuitively adjusting itself to her body language. She expected authority from me, instead of looking to challenge it. That would make things a bit easier for me. I saw her set her things on the back counter. I glanced her way when she ventured no greeting. My face stayed stony from the effort and frustration of the last ten hours. "Susan, I presume?"

She nodded.

"That register is set up to go. Why don't you ask if anyone has lottery."

"Um, can I go to the bathroom first?"

I chuckled to avoid screaming.

"Yeah, sure."

She started to head back, but one of the customers had heard my request. He reached toward her over the lottery machine and handed her a stack of tickets.

"Can you just run these for me, thanks," the man demanded.

She gave in and began trying to scan them. I couldn't resist giving him a wink of thanks.

§§§

"So what time of day do you normally come in?"

Susan and I faced each other. The door alarm was shrieking but there was a lull at the two registers. She seemed fast enough on the keys.

"Like, three?" she said.

I looked at her dull eyes behind her lenses. Her right eye looked significantly off to the side. I thought she was looking at the door at first, then I noticed the left eye looking at me.

"Since that seems to be in the middle of a rush, I might, uh... Do you think 2, or 2:30 would, um, could you make it then?"

"I think so."

"I mean, it is usually like this, right? I mean the rush we just finished."

She looked out at the floor. There were about four people in the aisles. "I guess so. Yeah."

I cocked my head slightly to the side. I looked at her profile, her elfin chin. Mouth open. She really seemed to have no idea of the daily patterns she encountered.

"He may know one of us fingered him as the robber."

I shivered noticeably at this internal voice. Susan looked quickly at me. I played it off into a glance above my head at the cigarette rack.

"I guess Caspians are the big seller here, huh?"

"We sell a lot of them. I don't know how many, though."

Susan watched me retrieve four cartons from the cabinets below. I opened them and began sticking the packs in the displays.

"You like being manager?" she asked.

I decided to deflect the question. To not accept the attempt to go personal. I preferred to keep the chasm of authority between us for now.

"Sure I do... Oh, I just remembered," I said. "The coffee. Haven't changed it, changed the, y'know, the filters. Could you? While we have a lull?"

The four shoppers were taking their time. I kept stocking the cigarettes. Susan walked to the coffee island.

I thought about Don's call again. Why would the perp think I was the one that picked him? Maybe because you were the witness, the one he actually ROBBED. But wouldn't he look for me at the other store? Yes, at first. But why would he think to check this store? Well, it IS the same company, the same town. Yeah, but would he even remember me? Probably, yes. YOU had no mask on.

The door alarm started shrieking. Inside my head, the answer to that question shrieked in time with it. I was staring down at the empty cigarette carton in my hand, not really seeing it.

"Earth to cashier! Earth to cashier!"

I looked up. The beer delivery guy was backing through the door. He had dolly stack with Red Mamba malt liquor. He was smirking at me.

"Manager," I said.

"Ooooh!" he mocked.

I kicked myself for turning red. He brought the dolly to rest for a moment. He leered at Susan.

"Sup, Susan?" he yelled toward the coffee station. "You lookin' fine in that green vest today."

She smiled weakly, said hi. Generally looked flustered. Beer dude looked at me to see if I was in on the joke. I scowled.

My face slackened as the door alarm shrieked again. I saw afro-man and the scratch witch coming back in. Their faces were locked on mine. One of the four other shoppers was just coming up to the register, but the witch seemed to have an agenda.

"Excuse me!" she boomed. "Excuse me!"

The customer turned toward the hideous couple. He moved slightly to the side. They marched up to the register.

"Tell him," said the witch.

Her husband became aware that he was in the spotlight. It took a moment for his liquor-soaked neurons to fire properly. He finally managed to form a stern expression.

"You... We didn't... You turned in, we turned in more tickets. Than you gave us for. Um, we shoulda won more."

"Wha--? I--Wait, wait, what--?"

"You didn't credit us for all that we won!" the witch said. "We counted! You didn't give us enough! "

"How many--I don't... But I ran them all through the machine. You watched me."

"We counted! We know how many we had!" said the witch.

Her frenzied look was becoming more intense by the moment. I glanced at her thick, claw-like fingernails.

"We come here every day," her husband added, mustering outrage. "Lisa never did this! She always got things right."

"What are you going to do about this?" yelled the witch.

The beer guy leaned on his dolly, smirking. The customer next to the angry couple had forgotten about his circus peanuts and energy drink. He stared at me too. I knew a test when I saw one. I knew they were probably lying. The machine ran barcodes, and either gave no response at all, or registered the amount of the win. No real room for error. At best the couple had added incorrectly but had been too quick to attribute the discrepancy to the "new guy."

But it suddenly hit me that this drama may have played out here before. With many employees. This may have been the exact incident that led Marta to have "gotten short" with customers. I seemed to remember that it was something lottery related. Maybe it was these two.

"Look folks... ," I began. I spoke slowly. "I can assure you, let me assure you that if I made a mistake, it was unintentional. Okay? I am a good man. I'm an-an-an honest man. I don't rip people off. I would never... I wouldn't do that. Okay?"

I could feel that the day had gotten to me. Too much. This latest incident had just taken things too far. Having to lay things out like this was making it worse. I felt my eyes welling up a bit as I spoke. I was embarrassed by this, but it seemed to work for the husband. I saw his face soften. Witchy-poo retained her scowl.

"What you gonna do?" she said. "We counted! What are you gonna do about this?"

"Well, let me get my associate... Susan, she will... Susan!...I need her to help this gentleman at the register. And then, I will get you folks straightened out with lottery. Okay?"

\$\$\$

Before I walked out of the office, I switched off the light. I peered out of the dark over the pair of wooden

saloon doors.

Outside the front windows the sunshine and shadows had that near-horizontal look of late afternoon. I had a couple thousand in a deposit bag stuffed into one of the big pockets of my cargo pants.

Don's call still haunted me. I scanned for figures waiting in the cars out front. Maybe the robber had driven right out looking for me. I squinted into the shadow of the big oak on the west side of the parking lot. No sign of bandana man.

I unlatched the swinging doors and exited the office. I let my green vest drag on the floor from my left hand. Susan was busy at the register.

I had spent thirty minutes digging through the trashcan, looking at torn up lottery tickets. Trying to seem honest, but firm. Making the crazy couple wait for the free tickets they knew they were scamming anyway. All that before I gave them the free five dollar ticket I knew I had to. My way of avoiding a store full of angry residents from this run-down neighborhood.

I had just managed to finish the deposit. It was like four-forty. I had been in the store almost twelve hours. I still had not been to the bank. The tellers would not be happy to see me arrive with a deposit fifteen minutes before closing.

My guts burned with hatred. My eyes burned across the panorama of the store. I wished my eyes could shoot flames wherever they gazed.

The beer guy was hovering in front of Susan, smirking at her. He was done restocking. He held his invoice up at her, even though she had a line of three customers.

I walked up next to Susan. I snatched the invoice from him. His smirk faded. "Hey, don't be snatching stuff out of my hand."

I just scowled at him. I felt myself actually hoping he would try something. I scrawled some name on the signature line. Left it on the counter.

"Okay, Susan. I'll be back in about fifteen, twenty minutes."

She nodded. I turned, then stopped and looked back at her.

"Oh, before I forget... "

I locked my eyes on her until she looked up again.

"It's against policy to give out employee, um, information to anyone. Schedules, phone numbers, anything like that."

She searched my gaze.

"I didn't--" she began.

"No, no, I know," I said, waving my hand. "Just, if anyone calls... "

She looked confused for a moment, but nodded. I turned again and pushed open the Out door. The sulfur stench from the water plant hit me.

I locked my eyes on my car, tried to walk straight. I stared at it as I made my way toward it, never looking away. I don't even think I blinked.

Chapter 33

Katie and the twins banged through the door of the houseboat. Back from a walk, something. I had gotten, maybe, twenty minutes or so alone after coming home from work.

Katie looked at me lying on the sofa, my arm across my forehead. Trying to read my mood. Her expression went blank when she spotted the tall tumbler of scotch on the carpet next to me.

"So...uh, how...how was it?" she asked.

I continued looking at her from under the visor of my arm. Wondering where to begin. Whether I should bother.

The twins had headed to the fridge. They began arguing over who had "dibs" on the last orange soda, who had drunk most of them to begin with.

"Could you try to keep them quiet tonight?" I half mumbled. "It's...I just can't deal with the usual bull--um, noise level right now. Tonight."

Katie started dealing with them. Hustling them into their room. Talk of snacks to be delivered. Of a cartoon on the portable video player.

I stared at the ceiling again. Susan appeared on it. The second shift employee. My last sight of her as I left. Looking small behind the counter as she faced a throng of customers.

I picked up the cheap blended scotch. I looked through the glass at the kitchen light. The liquid sugars in it swirled. They looked like the palm fronds in a hurricane I had seen on the news over the summer. The storm had just missed us.

Katie walked back into the room as I was wincing from a big belt of the scotch. She pinched her lips into a pale horizontal vulva, one of those non-smile smiles. She stuck her butt out over my legs, waited for me to give her room on the couch.

"Is... ? Did something..." she began.

I shook my head to reassure her. I looked back at the ceiling.

"The place is like..." I said. "It's like ten times as busy as the Doctor's Landing store. Just, almost non-stop with customers. And it's still just me. During the day. I mean, at the other store I could, you know, I could see being able to--"

The phone rang.

"Oh fuck! I knew it!"

I sat straight up on the couch. Too fast. The scotch made the room seem to tilt. "What?!" Katie asked. She looked at me like I not been forthcoming about what had gone on at the store.

The phone rang again.

"That's... I'm on call now with the fucking place, see? That could be Susan. Something goes wrong, someone wants to speak to the manager..." I jabbed my thumb at my chest a few times.

Katie picked up the phone just as the fourth ring began. She gazed at me as she said hello.

"Oh, hi! Dad! Hold on, let me turn off the machine."

Her face relaxed. She gazed at me as she carried the cordless phone into the bedroom with her.

§§§

I hit the down arrow key again on the computer keyboard. My guitar pick clattered across the touchpad. I managed to pry it from the smooth plastic surface with my thumbnail.

I continued reading the paragraphs on the screen. Proofreading an email I was sending off in response to a job lead. Online essay scoring. Somewhat similar to the COM-CAT scoring gig that had imploded a while back. Thankfully, that company-- Pellton--had nothing to do with this gig. And this one involved no driving. I could sit in my underwear and do the work. 'Course, there was no health insurance, so it was not a total replacement for Grab-n-Go.

My guitar playing sounded amateurish in the background of my inner reading voice. Then I caught myself again imagining Susan calling from the store. Her shift was still going on, there was still time...

Enough.

I hit the send button in my email. I leaned back from the screen and set the guitar aside. I had come into the bedroom to escape the TV. Or maybe to escape the sense of futility of trying to relax with the family. Katie kept staring at me whenever I looked at the phone. Which was often.

I reached over and thumped the guitar strings as I stared at the wall in front of me. They pinged atonally. I felt the numbness from all the scotch. It made everything seem slightly like I was watching a movie. But the store and its denizens kept making cameos.

On the phone, Katie's dad had said they were coming down next week to visit for a couple of days. This would mean giving up our bed. Kids would get the floor or sofa. Such were the wages of borrowed housing.

Katie had asked if I could take one of the days off from the store. Hang out with her folks, maybe go with them to sightsee at nearby Fort Yublee. I just stared at her. She didn't seem to get it.

"There's only... I don't just work there anymore, Katie," I had said. "I have to run the store."

"But, c'mon... You're not the only employee, for God's sake!" she had said. "Plus, you're the boss, right? Just schedule someone el--"

"No, I'm the only one that... I don't even know whether Brenda can... I mean, she's, this will be her first time working as Assistant Manager. If she doesn't know... if she screws something up--"

"Then what?! It's just a convenience store, Jim! If something goes wrong, the-the customer goes down the street. Right?"

"Yeah, and the place down the street gets the money. That's the way, you know, the brass look at it. Looks at it. Vera. Tony. The other guy gets the money, and it's my ass."

"I don't believe that," Katie had said.

But then she had backed down. Sulked. Because she backed down I decided not to go into the ominous call from Don, the release of the robber, all that. Shortly afterward I had come in here to the bedroom to get away.

The wall was blank in front of me. Quiet. But even the wall was connected to the telephone, and telephone to the store. And if I just turned off the phone, said the fuck with it, they would just hire some other cipher to stand behind the counter and hand out cigarettes. Then what? Start over with hourly pay at another C-store chain? I pictured blowing my brains out. Didn't have a gun though. Too expensive. And that whole waiting period thing. I imagined stepping in front of a truck instead. Bystanders cringing as my head popped under the wheels. The truck driver telling the cop "He stepped right out in front of me, looking at me the whole time, like he knew what he was doing."

But then I remembered the baby on the way. It made my stomach knot up. I couldn't leave him to these wolves, this fucking... life. Take Katie out too, then, while she was still pregnant? My brain began to torture me with that image. Sneaking up on her. Doing it with a knife. I cringed at the thought of the pain she would feel. I pictured the faces of the twins, screaming, knowing they were next. I grabbed my hair in both fists and pulled until it felt like my scalp was being sliced by a razor. I felt sick with myself. That my mind could produce these thoughts. At how far I had sunk.

I punched myself hard in the right cheek a couple of times. It made a hollow tocktock sound. The physical pain felt good. I sat and felt the cheek throb for a moment. Time to take a piss. I stood up, swayed slightly on my feet. The combination of the scotch and the punches made the walls turn like a blank little carousel for a few beats.

In front of me, the computer emitted a bell sound. I looked in the lower right corner of the screen. A request for a chat session faded into view. It was my friend Colin from Missouri.

He wrote that he had sent off a couple of CD copies of some new music. He knew I was in a shitty area for buying the kinds of obscure music we were both into, so he liked to share his new stuff with me. Said he had mailed some Derek Bailey solo stuff, some live Shaking Ray Levis, something new from the Joe Morris Trio. Colin asked me how things were going. I told him about the management position. I implied that I had taken it because Katie was pregnant and we needed the insurance. I wrote about how much it sucked to be "on call." How I felt trapped.

There was a pause.

: All due respect man...

I waited for the next message to appear. Colin worked at a cheese factory. When I first met him at a Luc Houtkamp show in Missouri, he was wearing his all-white work uniform. He had come to the show straight from work. He reeked of curdled milk solids.

: With yr bckgrnd, yr degrees, all that sht

: Just feel lucky u don't know what it RLY means tobe trapped by a job.

: Don't tkae this the wrong way

: But u have an out. Long s u don't seriously fk up with the law, get committed or smthing , u ain't trapped.

: Me with the dropping out college, then the pot bust... I fkd up. Only so many places 4 me 2 go. No vertical. Plus u can't quit the shitty jobs. Do that 2 many X then yr job history looks bad. Got u by the balls, the bosses.

: So here I sit, stinkin of cheez

I didn't have much to say after that. Too awkward. I thanked him for the CDs, told him I'd send some DVDs soon.

I looked away from the computer screen and stared at the window. I pictured Colin at the cheese factory. Sweeping up cheese cloth in his whites, black headphone wires hanging down from his ears. I pictured Susan behind the counter at the store. Her standard blank expression. I imagined her aging twenty years, standing behind that counter long after I was gone.

Then I shifted my feet and heard something crinkle. I had them propped on the dresser. I looked down at the sound. My feet were crossed on top of my Grab-n-Go vest. I reached down to move it out of the way, so it wouldn't get wrinkled. I pulled it from under my feet and heard the crinkled sound again. The vest was lying on an open package of resume paper. About half of the pages were gone. Used. Mailed. Probably round-filed. My list of degrees and experience smeared with yogurt or something.

I stared at it for a moment, smiled. I slammed the lid of the computer closed. So many opportunities. Right.

§§§

My coffee steamed up the windshield directly in front of me. I wiped it with my jacket sleeve. It was one of the few colder mornings in North Florida. That and the insomnia had led me to make my own coffee instead of waiting for freebies at the store.

The slight hangover wasn't helping me wake up. Even with all the scotch the night before, the headache caught me by surprise. I was drinking enough lately that I hardly noticed it in the morning anymore.

A single car passed me going the other way. I wondered what percentage of Doctor's Landing was up before dawn like me.

Twenty years of this? Thirty? I tried to fathom it. Back and feet ruined beyond repair. Decades of sleep debt. The gradual fading away of things "temporarily" set aside. Great ideas, unwritten novels, screenplays. Unrecorded albums and unplayed concerts. A new system of logic, never quite worked out.

I fished out a cigarette and cracked the window by about an inch. Thought maybe it would help wake me up. By now coffee was just baseline stimulation. I took a good long drag. The cold air coming in through the crack made it hurt a bit. I looked at the orange tip of the cigarette.

This is one way of paring down those thirty years, I guess.

I reached the store parking lot and made the turn. My headlight beams swept across the panorama of the store and my heart skipped. I jammed the brakes and held the headlights on the alien shape near the entrance to the store. Someone waiting. I was still about 50 yards away. I couldn't make out much besides the shape in a brown hoodie. Jeans.

My mind raced. Was this the robber? No, no. Looked too short. Someone he sent to do the job for him? I still had room to peel out of the parking lot and go to the police station. But what if it was just a regular customer? Someone who thought we opened at 5. Was I supposed to be cool with a situation like this?

In the split second it took for my indecision to gather a head of steam, the figure pulled a hand out of the hoodie pocket. Right hand. Small. Feminine. It went up and waved.

Brenda!

I felt the pressure drain out of my chest. I had forgotten that Vera had told me Brenda was coming in today. Maybe she hadn't said Brenda was coming in at 5 a.m., I wasn't sure. She would be pulling her first Assistant Manager shift. Vera had told me to "show her the ropes." I had pictured the two of us wandering the aisles in dark shades with red-tipped canes.

I surreptitiously dropped my smoke onto the pavement as I got out of the car. Crushed it with my heel.

"Well, well," came Brenda's drawl from the dark of the hood. "Look who's climbing up the corporate ladder."

"Brenda. What's been going on?"

"Not much. I figured Jay was the type to go into management. Hearing about you kinda threw me, though. I thought you was looking to get out."

I struggled for an instant with whether to stay in this vein of equals, or try to establish some semblance of managerial authority. I decided to go with shifting the focus.

"Not all of us have the luxury of crashing and burning the way Jay did," I replied. "Walking off the job like that? C'mon. Wasn't he, like... was he still living in his mom's trailer?"

Brenda chuckled. The Jay saga was just her type of poison. "Yep. Doin' the Peter Pan thing."

"So, Vera didn't give you, y'know, make you a key?" I asked, unlocking the door for us.

"She's supposed to drop it off later today."

"Oh, good. So we have that visit to look forward to."

Brenda didn't laugh. I ate the silence. I wondered if she might be a Vera toady. We stepped inside in the dark. She stood next to me as I locked the door behind us. I realized I had always done this alone, opened the store. It felt almost too intimate to be there in the dark with her. I headed to the back to get some lights on.

Once the lights were on we looked at each other from across the store. She looked slightly bored, as usual. Same mousy hair I remembered. I resisted the urge to ask her if she had ended up "fucking that man."

I started getting the coffee station stocked and ready to start brewing. I told Brenda where the safe keys were.

"Just start going through, you know, the usual Assistant Manager opening routine," I said to her. "doing it yourself is, is, that seems to be how people learn best."

"Alrighty-dighty, boss-man," she said.

I tried to suppress the feeling that she had rolled her eyes as she walked behind the counter.

I decided to take advantage of the second set of hands. I set about trying to straighten things up. Some of things that looked like they had festered for months. There were stacks of boxes with cobwebs on them. Sodas and candy that had long gone out of date. How the place ever passed the biannual inspection I had no idea.

I couldn't blame the previous manager or anyone else who had worked there. There was no time to deal with it. As long as Grab-n-Go refused to pay for double coverage, we would all be pinned behind those registers.

Raking in cash for management with the threat of food poisoning suits dangling above our heads. There was a box of cappuccino mix at the back of one of the cabinets. Deep. I reached back there and hauled it out. Old, old box. The cardboard had grease spots on it, broom debris, other appetizing things.

I opened it to see if any product was salvageable. Three roaches bailed from the depths of the box. One of them skittered across my hand.

"Augghh!" I yelled, dropping the box.

Brenda leaned her head out of the office.

"You ah'ight?"

"Ye--I just--yeah... some roaches came, ran outta that box. Spooked me. Blech! You know?"

She held me in her bored gaze for a moment. Touch of disdain. Probably picturing me getting beat up at one of the bars in Pine Trail.

"You wouldn't want to try to clean up my trailer, that's for sure," Brenda said. I faked a laugh. I looked down at the box, wondered what to do with it. I kicked it to see if moving it again would enliven more vermin. Nothing. I picked it up to take it to the big janitor's can in the back room. "Hey, Jee-um... "

I paused. I looked nervously at the hole I had torn in the top of the box. "Yeah?"

"Could you walk me through these different screens on, uh, this--the computer? You know, what to enter where, and what not?"

I let me head drop forward limply. I remembered that she wouldn't have been tried to work with these ancient cash registers either, with their paper receipt rolls. So much for getting twice the work done. Plus now I was going to lose hand by admitting to her that I didn't know how to do it either.

"Hang on just a minute."

I carried the box to the back room. I tried not to think about how long it might be before Brenda could open the store without having to sweat it. Without having to expect a call from her between 5 and 6 in the morning.

I leaned over the can, feeling like I might puke. The smell wafting from it didn't help.

§§§

Where are those fucking rubber bands?

I rummaged through the top drawer of the desk for the second time in two minutes. I needed one that would fit around the veritable brick of cash that needed to go into the bank deposit. We were open, and I was getting nervous that the money was still out of the safe. I glanced out at Brenda standing behind the register.

I found a big rubber band behind the printer. I banded the money and started cramming it into the deposit.

"GET THAT CANDY OUT OF YOUR PANTS, YOU LITTLE FUCKING NIGGER!!! I SAW YA STICK IT IN THERE!!!"

I felt the blood drain out of my face in an instant at the sound of Brenda's voice. I stood up to look over the

office's saloon doors.

I recognized the kid from the day before. He was about eight or nine. He had come in while Vera was here. She knew of him from working the store. She sent me back to "straighten up" the candy aisle while he was there. He gave me stink eye the whole time. Pissed that I was fucking up his free candy game. Not a trace of selfconsciousness in that young glare.

Now Brenda was pointing at him and moving quickly from behind the counter. He dropped a handful of candy and bolted for the door. Brenda was closer to the door and ran toward it at an angle.

"OH NO YA DON'T!!! GIT BACK HERE!!!"

She looped a finger into the collar of his shirt. It stretched a bit and then jerked him back toward her.

"Brenda!" I yelled.

She was pulling him toward her face by his collar. I heard the fabric tear slightly. The kid scowled at her, but there was a flicker of fear.

Brenda looked over at me. Her eyes were wild. She seemed to be running on autopilot. Maybe reliving some scene from childhood, her aggression at last given a chance to erupt. He breathed heavily, waited for me to speak.

"Brenda. You can't... Listen, don't, don't..." I began.

She wasn't supposed to be touching the "customer," much less doing so aggressively. Even worse, it was a child. It was against company policy, probably the law. But I realized I'd better not say so in front of the kid. He might get ideas. Make everything go to shit.

"I, ah, I think you've... you scared him enough, don't you? Brenda?" I said.

She hesitated. Her face softened slightly. She was about to speak. Just then the front door burst open.

"GITCHO FUCKING HANDS OFF MY BABY, YOU WHITE BITCH!!!"

Brenda let go of the kid's collar. She turned to face the woman charging toward her from the door. Brenda bent her knees slightly.

They looked fairly evenly matched. Both around five feet tall. Solid and heavy. Both pushing two hundred, a fair amount of it muscle and bone.

"NO-NO-NO!!!" I yelled.

I stepped toward them with my hands out, but I knew it was too late.

They both throttled each other. They glared at each other for a moment across the four arms. They both had that animal look in their eyes.

"STOP!!!" I yelled.

I ran toward the counter. I grabbed the phone, dialed 911. I looked back at the struggle. The mother gurgled as Brenda clawed at her neck. The mother risked letting go of Brenda's neck for an instant and grabbed a handful

of Brenda's long brown hair. Brenda screamed.

I told 911 where we were and what was going on. The dispatcher heard Brenda's screams. Her voice developed an urgency.

"We'll send a patrol car there immediately."

The women were still standing, locked in a sickening grapple. The mother still held the clump of Brenda hair in her right fist. With her left arm she was now trying to stop Brenda's hands as they raked across her face. The mother began a piercing shriek of her own. Part of a fingernail broke off as Brenda clawed downward. It was lodged in the skin just above the mother's eyebrow.

"Fuck her up, Mama!" yelled the kid. He jumped up and down excitedly.

I felt sick. Store policy was not to interfere with a fight. The corporation protecting itself. Part of its exoskeleton. The fighting customer might sue, after all. And if the employee got hurt trying to break up a fight, the employee could sue. I was expected to just stand there and watch one of my nightmares play out in front of me. That or get fired. I felt like running, but there was no where to go.

Brenda was getting the upper hand. Blood from the claw marks on the mother's forehead had begun to seep into her eyes. Brenda took advantage of the partial blindness and began pounding the woman's nose and mouth with both fists. I heard the nose snap and the mother screamed again. The nose began to pour red.

The mother bent at the waist, finally letting go of Brenda's hair. Her hands went to her face in attempt to protect it from Brenda's blows.

"MAMA!!!" screamed the boy.

"BRENDA!!! LET IT GO! IT'S OVER!!!" I yelled.

Brenda lurched forward and they toppled to the floor. Brenda struggled to keep her weight on top of the mother who was trying to keep from being mounted. Brenda managed to get her left knee pressed on the woman's chest. Then she began trying to land more facial blows as the mother flailed and grabbed at Brenda's arms.

"BRENDA!!! GET OFF!!! THE POLICE ARE COMING!!!"

The pain, blood loss and partial blindness were taking the fight out of the mother. Using her knee, Brenda pinned the woman's right arm across her chest. Brenda clutched the mother's throat with both hands. The mother's face was smeared with blood. I could smell it. Her eyes rolled frantically from side to side.

"LET GO OF MY MAMA, YOU WHITE BITCH!!!"

The kid slammed both fists down on Brenda's back. She didn't move. He kept at it. Brenda placed her left palm on the mother's cheek, anchoring her head to the floor. Slowly Brenda began to plunge her left thumb into the corner of the woman's eye.

"NOOO!!! STOP IT, YOU STUPID FUCKING CUNT!!!" I screamed.

Brenda's thumb was up to the first knuckle in the mother's eye socket. A long, horrific scream began to emerge from deep in the woman's chest. The eye looked warped and blank. White bits of sclera floated in the blood that began to seep from around Brenda's thumb.

I walked next to them, desperate to make it all stop. My head was a cloud of anger and nausea. The boy continued to beat on Brenda's back to no avail. I looked at Brenda's ribcage, below her arms. I felt my face draw into a mask of hatred. I drew back my right leg and prepared to kick her as hard as I could in the ribs.

"STOP!!!"

Two cops ran through the front door, hands on their weapons. The piercing screech of the door alarm melded with the mother's shrieks. I regained my balance, stepped back. One of the cops pulled the boy away from Brenda. The other began prying Brenda off of the woman.

I couldn't look anymore. I stumbled to the front door. I opened it and began to puke onto the sidewalk out front.

Chapter 34

"So, do you... do you want me to drive by th--?"

"No, no. Hell no, just--"

"Well, I'm just... "

Katie looked at me. She kept her eyes off the road just long enough to make my stomach twitch. "Hey, hey will you look at the r--?"

She turned back to the road just as I started. "Well... if you don't think she's going to show up for work... You know?" Katie said. "Shouldn't you... I mean you are the manager... "

"Right, so why should... so, so that means I don't get to have a life? I'm supposed to be working there 24-7? Every time someone, you know, any time something... ? It's just, it's jus--"

"Well, if no one else--"

"Vera. Okay? Vera is the one who, I mean... she created this situation. She picks all these, these, all the fucking psychos that wor--"

"Jim!" Katie snapped, jabbing her head toward the twins in the back seat. "Like Susan, who can't seem to... you know she was, like, seventy bucks off when I counted up her safe drop yesterday? And now this, this Brenda... "

"Well, maybe she... what if she was shaken up by the whole thing? The fight."

I turned slightly in my seat and sat there staring at her. The suggestion of pity in her voice had done it. I had to remind myself that she hadn't been there. Hadn't seen the brutality. "What... ?" she asked, unnerved by my gaze.

"She was going to kill that woman, okay?" I hissed. I glanced back at the kids. "She, she was trying to jam her thumbs into her brai--"

"Okay, okay! Enough with the details, already."

"So, no, she didn't seem particularly shaken. Okay? And she... I don't think she, she was... "

"So, maybe she came into work, like she was supposed to, then," Katie stated. "Right? Is there any other reason? The cops?"

I thought about Brenda standing there the night before. Giving her statement to the cops. She had a couple of scratches here and there, but she seemed fine. I even thought I saw a glimmer of pride in her face when they were loading the mother into the ambulance, the kid screaming for her. I had just stood there, still feeling sick. Hating Brenda. Feeling like we couldn't be the same species. There was no way. To act with that kind of animal rage. Who'd maim another person like that. Not just defend herself, but cripple, kill, just because she could. "Jim? You said... what? That the cops just... " Katie glanced at me again. "That they didn't see any problem with--"

"It was disgusting. The minute they pulled Brenda off, she was screaming 'You shoplifting bitch! Thief!' and all this shit. Stuff."

I glanced back at the kids again. Tim was grinning. "And then she, the whole time, she just had this attitude of outrage. Of, of indignation. She made it seem like... I mean she told 'em what happened. Played up the fact that the woman attacked her. And, and, the woman, the mother, she's just screaming and moaning from the pain. No shape to defend herself."

"I thought you said the kid, that Brenda was rough-handling the kid..." Katie said. "Yeah, I even pointed that out, I even said that. I told 'em."

I remembered how that moment was the only time Brenda broke her mask of aggression while she was talking to the cops. Her face had softened and she looked at me somewhat pleadingly. Somewhat.

"But, oh, she looked over at me with these wide eyes and, and said 'I was just trying to see if he had anymore candy stuffed down his shirt, an' then his Momma come in after me. Jumped on me.'" I said in a mock drawl. Katie glanced at me. She was frowning. "And the cops, they, you wouldn't have... They gave me this look. Like I should be... what? Ashamed. For, you know--"

"No--"

"No. Yeah, I'm not kidding. Some of these fucking cops around here just--"

"Jesus!"

"Yeah. So, they, so, no, they didn't take her in for questioning, didn't arrest her for aggravated... something. Inflicting grievous bodily injury, or whatever, there's some kind of statute they apply to fights, I think. Or for attempted murder... Anything."

"The kid, what did... Did he go with her?" Katie asked. "No, no. That's, he went with the cops, see? They said he, he, that they were taking him to Family and Childrens Services, Department, whatever."

"Oh, come on!"

"No, seriously, 'cause the mom is like, this, you know, not supervising him. Letting him go in and steal candy. Like, Ooooo! Y'know? 'Cause nobody ever, like these fucking pigs never stole anything when they were kids."

"That won't stick, there's no way they'd take him, take away custody..."

"Well, they took him there, anyway."

We rode in silence for a few moments. The highway back from Kingsboro. It was still late morning. Not much traffic. I had gotten us out of the house boat early. I woke up expecting the phone to ring any minute. To hear Vera's voice on the line, telling me Brenda wasn't coming in. Telling me to go in and work on my morning off. "Promising" that she would try to get someone to come in and cover second shift so I wouldn't have to pull a double. Me knowing it was a lie.

I got us out of the house. Told Katie that we ought to go for breakfast at this cool diner in Kingsboro. Maybe do some shopping. I didn't confess to her 'til later that I just couldn't stand waiting around in my own home again. Waiting to hear the phone ring. "So... why don't you..." Katie glanced at me again. "Why don't think she opened the store? I mean, if she got off scot-free...?"

"It's just... I--A million things. Like, what if Vera gets the police report about the incident, and, and, reads that Brenda did touch the kid, which is against Grab-n-Go rules... Or, y'know, Brenda just decides she doesn't want

to work in the "dark" side of town anymore... Or, or she's mad at me for, for... "

"What, did you say something to her?" Katie asked. "No, no. I didn't say much of anything to her until she left. Nor she to me. Her clothes were dirty and sort of ripped, and she just, she said she just needed to leave. Didn't say much else. And, like I said, I had told the cops about her grabbing the kid... "

"Mmm... " Katie said.

"It's really just, just a gut feeling. Plus it's just how things seem to work out for me. Lately. With this job thing, anyway."

I glanced at Katie. She was just staring out the windshield. She always looked tense when she drove. Her knuckles were white. She kind of hunched her shoulders up. I looked down at her belly. It seemed like she was starting to show a little bit. Then an image flashed in my mind of Brenda on top of Katie. She had her knee on her pregnant belly, pressing down hard. Trying to cause a miscarriage. I shivered, shook my head.

"What... ?" Katie asked.

"Nothing, I, uh... "

She glanced at me.

"We might as well, you might as well drive by there," I said. "If we go home, I'll just be waiting for the phone call anyway. Whether I have to go in or not. This way I can just relax. Maybe. If the place is open, at least."

§§§

I kicked open the door to the house boat after I unlocked it. It whacked against the closet next to the door.

"Take it easy, will ya?"

Katie rubbed a spot on the closet door where the door I kicked had hit. I waited for the twinge of guilt I expected. It didn't arise.

Instead I just kept walking toward the phone in the bedroom. Waiting for the number on the answering machine to come into view. The indicator of how many calls we had gotten so far about the empty store. About why the almighty downtown Grab-n- Go wasn't open for business. About how many hours I would be expected to work. Nine messages, read the machine.

I hit the button and flopped onto the bed. Stared straight up. Beep!... Ka-chunk-chunk... .Chunk... Beep!... Ka-chunk-chunk... .Chunk... Over and over. They were all hang ups. All nine. The caller was trying to catch me on the line. No message. Bad sign. Nobody leaves a message when they don't figure you'll call them back.

Katie stood in the door jamb listening. Staring at me. She paused for a moment after the last one, waiting to see what I would do.

"You think you should just... try calling? Go ahead and call Vera? Let her know at least, at least you... you know... "

I just lay there staring. I hadn't said anything all the way home in the car after we drove past the store. I had just leaned the seat back and sat there. Feeling like it, all of it, was just... enough, already.

"You're starting to scare me," she said.

I felt like rolling my eyes, but they didn't move. I tried to will myself just to dissolve into the bed. Just rot away. Quick, though. Like one of those sped up films of natural decay.

The phone rang. I lay there. Katie stood there in the doorway, looking at me. It rang again. She made some sort of exasperated noise and walked toward the phone. There was something in me like a twinge of anger but it felt disconnected.

"Hello? Yes, he's right here."

She tossed the phone onto the bed. It bounced and then lay diagonal next to me shoulder. Katie walked stood in the door jamb again. I didn't move. Then I could hear Eva's voice on the line. Saying my name to see if I was there. I picked it up. "Hello?"

...

"I know."

Katie was looking at me. Listening to my side of the conversation. She looked angry at me. "Because I just got back in. I think you already know that. You must have called like twenty times."

...

"So, what, she's fired, then?"

...

"Well, I'm already scheduled to work second shift. Don't you have anyone who--?"

...

"Well, what about, can you get someone to do sec--"

...

"No. Susan is off. She's out of town."

...

"Yeah, well, you are the one who hired these fine individuals to work at "my" store... "

"Jim!" Katie stage whispered at me. I frowned at her.

"Yeah... Yeah... Yeah. I said yeah..."

I clicked the phone off. Katie stared at me for a beat. She looked incredulous.

"Oh, so now you are trying to get fired?"

"She won't fire me. That'd mean she'd actually have to go work in the store herself."

"Well, it certainly can't do any good."

"Well, I'm not sure I care at this point. How much has that gotten me so far, Katie? I mean, I'm about to have to go down and work for, what, eleven hours in that store? I've worked all week, either there or at Doctor's Landing. I'm already into overtime, and I don't even get paid any extra for it, now that I'm on salary."

I sat up. Katie looked like she was registering what I was saying. Or at least she wasn't frowning anymore.

"You know I'm not just being... I mean, I work hard when it's... in a fair situation. When I am not... when I'm respected. Right? You know that."

She nodded.

"But this... does this seem like a sustainable situation to you? Think about when the baby comes. How can I... You'll need me to help... "

Katie had the faraway stare again. She had one hand on her belly.

"This whole thing is just... I know I said this was the right thing for us. I thought it was. But this is just... this is getting... "

I brushed past her in the doorway. I went to the kitchen, opened the fridge. If I was gonna be stuck down there eleven hours, I sure as shit wasn't going to buy food from the place.

§§§

"Well, no one fire bombed the store, anyway."

Tim giggled. I pulled into my usual spot down by the propane tanks. I was relieved to see that no one was waiting to get in, or anything like that.

I looked over at Tim. He smiled back at me. He was excited to be coming to the store to "work." I had asked him if he wanted to come with me for a few hours. For once I couldn't stand the thought of being alone in the store for that many hours. My nerves were just too raw. I wanted someone with me I cared about. The father/son work thing would suffice.

We got out. I took a sip of my coffee and looked at the front of the building. If the company insisted on pushing me to the brink, I was just going to have to push back. A matter of my sanity. If they were exploiting my salary status, then fuck their rules. So, yeah, I brought Tim along.

Katie had bristled at the idea. But I pointed that he would only stay with me for a few hours, anyway. That she could come pick him up at dinnertime. Also, Tim lobbied hard. She gave in.

Tim and I went inside. I locked the door behind us. It was nice to be able to see the daylight through those windows, instead of the usual pitch black.

I showed Tim where the coffee supplies were, had him start brewing. I made up a sign saying when we would be opening. I didn't want people yelling and knocking to get in while I tried to do the accounting from yesterday.

We had taken our time coming here, and now it was just after one p.m. I felt more alert this time of day. That made it easier to try to follow the set of instructions Vera had sent over explaining how to do the data entry

from the receipt rolls.

The time of day also seemed to help repress the thoughts of the fight, and of what the fuck I was going to do once I quit the job. I listened to Tim pretending like he was a race car speeding through the aisles. Or asking if he could try various kinds of candy. Oblivious to the whole situation.

I finished up after about thirty minutes. A jolt went through my chest when I came out of the office with the bank bag. There was a face pressed against the glass of the door, just above the sign I had made. It was still fifteen minutes before what the sign said, but I gave the guy a "five" sign. The guy nodded and starting milling around out front.

"Okay, buddy," I said to Tim. "Should we open 'er up? You got the coffee ready?"

"Yep."

"Hot dogs on the roller?"

He pointed at them and smiled.

"I wanna sell the lottery tickets," he said.

"Okay, well, you can come back and sit behind the counter. Just stay back there with me, okay?"

I went to the door. I looked out as I fished out my keys. There were two regulars watching from the front walkway. One I knew was there for his cheap beer, the other for scratch-off lottery. I turned the key. I felt sick.

§§§

There were five guys in line. The one at the counter was ordering his second round of scratch-off tickets. Tim tore them off and I took the money. The guy sauntered over to a stack of 12-pack sodas, waist high. Started scratching. Next customer set his stuff on the counter. I noticed one of the guys near the back of the line. Seemed to be giving me stink eye. Didn't look like a neighborhood guy. I ignored it.

Customer at the counter started looking over the display of scratch tickets. The guy behind him sighed, shifted on his feet. I did too.

I looked out the display windows to my left. It was now close to six. The sun was nearly down. It was starting to get where you couldn't see much through the windows because of the reflection from all the florescent bulbs inside. Katie would be picking up Tim soon. I tried not to think about how many hours I'd be here alone after that.

"Gimme a "Royal Straight Bucks," said the man at the counter. Guy in his fifties.

Skin like a lizard's. It was a ten dollar lottery card.

"All right, big spender," I said.

He just stared at me without smiling. Tim tore off the card and I took the ten. Guy near the rear--the one I had noticed--was still boring a hole in my forehead. I kind of knit my brow at him this time, held his glance a moment longer. I rang up the beer of the next guy in line. I glanced back toward Mr. Attitude during the transaction. He was not letting up. One more guy in front of him. A couple more customers had joined the line

behind him now.

Finally, it was the staring guy's turn. He had not looked away from me yet. I had been trying to place the face to no avail. Someone I'd pissed off? White guy in his twenties. Not the tats and piercings type. Not a monster-trucker either. Just blue collar. But what was with the anger? A million possibilities had swept through my mind for why this dude was giving me a hard look. Nothing clicked.

He set down his 12-pack of cheap soda and chips. Still staring. I didn't greet him or anything. I just started ringing up his stuff and staring back. After a moment of this, he pointed at Tim. "He's not supposed to be selling lottery tickets," he said. "It's against the law."

I feel the blood head toward my face. "He's not selling the tickets," I said. "He's just tearing them off."

He had this look now, the look of a zealot. My response made his eyes narrow a bit more. "He's not supposed to be touching those tickets. No one under eighteen is allowed to sell or handle those tickets in this state."

"Hey, c'mon, huh? My son is just sitting back here trying to help me out. Y'know? See what his father does for living. You know how kids like to--"

"Great, so his father has him in here doing something illegal. Is that what you want to teach him? How to break the law?"

"I think you need to lighten up a little bit," I said. My face was starting to get hot, probably red. "Oh? Well, I wonder if the police would agree with you about that. What if you told them to 'lighten up' about your son selling lottery tickets?"

"He's not SELLING lottery tickets! Okay?! He's only TEARING them OFF!"

"He's not supposed to be TOUCHING THEM!"

I slammed both my fists down onto the lottery display. The guy flinched. I felt my eyes starting to water, my face was so hot. "Well, this is just GREAT! WHAT ARE YOU!? HUH?! ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?! IS THIS WHAT YOU CARE ABOUT?! IS THIS HOW YOU SPEND YOUR TIME?!"

I saw just a hint of hesitation for a sec. He tried to recover. "Yeah, I care when people BREAK THE LAW!"

"LOOK AT YOURSELF! OF ALL THE THINGS IN THE WORLD YOU COULD BE THINKING ABOUT, OR DOING! MY GOD! AND HERE YOU ARE, GIVING ME SHIT! 'CUZ MY SON IS TOUCHING THE LOTTERY TICKETS?!"

"Why don't you look at YOURSEL--!"

"NO, NO, NO, SERIOUSLY, MAN! WERE YOU, LIKE, DROPPED ON YOUR HEAD AS A CHILD OR SOMETHING?!"

The other guys in line snickered at that. The guy glanced back at them. I felt months of anger finding its way out. Both my hands were shaking like crazy. "WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU?!" I continued. "YOU COULD BE OUT DOING ANYTHING! YOU COULD BE WITH A WOMAN--MAYBE-- HAVING A DRINK! BUT HERE YOU ARE GIVING ME SHIT?! ARE YOU NUTS?! WHY DON'T YOU GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY STORE, HUH?! GET THE FUCK OUT!!!"

He stood there sneering at me. He was shaking too. Both of us were breathing harder from yelling. "Oh

yeah?" he said, leering. "Well, we'll just see what the cops have to say about THA--!"

"GET THE FUCK OUT!"

He whipped out his cell phone and began dialing right in front of me. I pointed over his shoulder toward the door. "GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY STORE!!!"

I screamed right in his face, careful not to touch him. My throat began to hurt. The other guys in line had looks of amusement on their faces. "GET THE FUCK OUT!!!"

"Hello, 911... ?"

"GET-THE-FUCK-OUT-GET-THE-FUCK-OUT-GET-THE-FUCK-OUT-GET- THE-FUCK-OUT... !!!"

He couldn't hear the operator. I saw him telling her to hang on. He looked at me over his shoulder and walked back to the back room of the store so he could hear to call the cops on me.

I looked at the other guys still standing in line. All of them looked surprised but smiled slightly. They almost couldn't wait for it to end so they could start telling people what they had seen.

I waved them forward, started ringing them out. We were listening to snippets of the little fuckwad telling the cops his version of what was going on. Trying to make it sound like it justified calling 911.

My hands shook as I rang up their crap. Now that I had stopped screaming, reality was starting to regain its stranglehold on my brain. The fucking police might be here soon. Maybe the same racist cops who were unimpressed with me the day before. I was ringing up the final guy in line. The other two were hanging out by the door, not leaving. Hoping to see a fight. But we all hear the guy going into the bathroom in back.

"Probably going to clean the shit out of his pants," one of them said. The others laughed.

The door alarm started shrieking. I nearly shit my own pants when I looked at the door.

He hesitated at the door for a moment. I looked at his eyes. The eyes. Looking at me from above a bandana again. Yeah, it was the same eyes from the line-up, I could now see for sure.

This time he didn't just have his hand in his shirt. He stood there at the door, pointing a huge fucking handgun at the customers still milling around.

"Move up by the counter, mother fuckers," he said, waving the gun at them.

I kept my gaze locked on the eyes. Without looking I pushed Tim's head down. I felt him lie on the floor at my feet. He tried to squeeze into a ball behind the counter. The gaze turned to me again. Somewhere inside my head I felt a note of relief. There was no sense that when he looked at me he was seeing what he came for. This was just another robbery.

"Gimme the money! Empty out that register!"

He walked toward the register. He kept the gun on me, but his body was diagonal to mine. It was facing the men now leaning against the counter. A line of asses to my right. He glanced at them every second or so. "Hurry up, mother fucker!"

I raked the cash out of the register. I had not done a drop in a while. Lots of running back and forth to the

lottery machine, as usual. Looked like he was getting a couple hundred this time. I didn't give a fuck. I just wanted him not to recognize me and get out.

I felt me legs shaking. It looked like I was standing on a trampoline or something. But my head felt clear. Everything looked clear. I pushed the cash toward him. "Put it in a bag! Put it in a bag!"

He glanced at the men. They weren't moving. Then back at me. Then I saw him almost glance at the men again, but his eyes flitted back to mine. An idea formed. No.

"Well, well... "

NO.

"Ain't you the faggot I robbed a while back? Out to that other store?"

My mouth opened, but nothing came out. My legs felt like they were buckling. I thought about Timmy down at my feet. I felt tumblers falling into place in my brain. My mind beginning to think about this being it.

"You the one fingered me in the line up?"

This time my mouth worked.

"No-no-no-no-no, man. It wasn't me. It was Don Volker. My boss. He... he was the one that said it was you. He claimed he could tell from the video. It was all on video and--"

"Bullshit, mother FUCKER! Had to be you! You was the only one saw me. We was standin' just as close as THIS! How could you NOT have been the one to finger me?"

He pushed the gun toward my face. His fingers writhed on the grip, on the trigger. I saw him thinking about it, knowing its part of his code, wanting it. I couldn't take a breath.

Pop-pop!... pop-pop-pop-pop!... My eyes darted behind the gunman just as his head started to turn. Someone was rushing him from behind. Mr. Lottery Police had picked up a metal spinner rack of single-serving kids' cereals. He was charging toward the robber, trying to raise the thing above his head to get a good smack. The cereal containers--little cardboard cups mostly containing air--were flying off the racks and hitting the floor with a pop. The robber spun around. He saw this giant fucking coat hanger swooping toward him, the festive cardboard cups flying off of it like chunks of confetti.

BLAM!

The cereal hit me first. Then part of the spinner rack that broke off when it and the gunman hit the register. I covered my face, waiting for the metal to stop clanging. I smelled the gunpowder, and uncovered my eyes. The Lottery Cop wannabe had dropped to the floor immediately after the shot, face down. His head was too flat on the floor where his face should have been. A large pool of blood radiated quickly from his head.

"Shit, man," said the robber, under his breath.

The clanging of light shiny metal began again. The robber began knocking the flimsy thing off him. Stumbled to his feet. No doubt he was merely stunned from tripping backward and falling against the counter.

I froze. So did the three customers to my right. I felt Tim stir at my feet. With my shin I jammed his leg against the back of the counter to keep him still. The gunman wasn't seeing us. He glanced at his arms and

torso. No blood. Not hurt. Still holding the gun. He looked at the body, the blood.

"Shit!" he hissed.

He whipped around in my direction. I felt my breath suck in involuntarily. But he didn't look up at me. He saw the bag of money. Snatched it. He wheeled again. Out the door in a couple of seconds.

We stood there, staring. The sound of the door alarm blended with the ringing in our ears from the gunshot. It seemed to be signaling that we were still alive.

Chapter 35

I sat there in the car for a moment. Stared at the houseboat, barely visible with all the lights still off. Then I chuckled, shaking my head, and turned the key. Sluggish start. Typical for a cold morning.

5:05 a.m. Got, what, two hours of sleep? I knew I had been awake to see the clock at 2:45. The red LED of the digital clock had made me think of the dead guy's blood. The pool of red that spread where his face used to be. The theme of my tossing and turning all night.

Vera had gotten her notification of the robbery last night when I pressed the "panic button." After I managed to find it, of course. The cops had not responded at the time of the 911 call about Tim's "selling" lottery tickets. Dispatcher scolded the guy for using the emergency number for such bullshit. But they arrived soon enough after I pressed the button.

No way to hide the lottery issue from Vera anyway, though. The other guys--the witnesses--surely weren't going to lie about it. The responding cops knew already. It had been a slow night for them. The dispatcher had asked a squad car to stop by the store some time to see what was up. If they were not busy. Vera hadn't seemed very pleased when she read the police report. She just gave me this long look. I couldn't quite read it. Just stared at me for a long moment. I waited for her to upbraid me, but she stayed silent. I was ready, too. I was ready to just tell her to go fuck herself at that point. Just leave. But after a moment she looked down again at the paper. Then she signed it, handed it back to the cops.

Everybody had been concerned about Tim at first. Everyone wanted to know how he had handled it. He told them it was the coolest thing ever. He described what had happened, how I had "told the guy off," how loud the gun was. When he described the robbery, he made his hand like a gun and did sound effects.

There had been something in his voice though, and the way he looked. It was like he was trying too hard to show how he got a kick out of the whole thing. Like the tears would start pouring later on. As they had.

So the store had been shut down early for the night. The police taking pictures, measuring, scraping. Vera just told me to go home and get some sleep. Come back in the morning. It was originally supposed to be another Brenda day shift, as if that mattered anymore.

When Vera implied that we were opening again the next day, I just stared at her for a moment. She didn't see the question in my expression, or she ignored it.

"Are you ki--... ? You-you can't be... You don't expect us to be able to--"

"The police will be done with it as a, uh, a crime scene tonight. We should be able to open up tomorrow."

"Actually, ma'am... "

One of the detectives standing nearby had stopped scribbling on his notepad. Vera shot a glance at him over her shoulder.

"We can give you the number of a crime scene cleanup crew down in Kingsboro," he said. "Private company. We, ah, wouldn't recommend you try to clean all this up yourselves. And I don't know as they'll be able to get here before morning."

I looked at the huge stain on the floor. Now dried, black. Other flecks, spots and clumps were on the merchandise, spattered on the front of the counter, etc. Vera turned to face him.

"I thought ya'll did that," she said. "That it was part of the... "

The detective chuckled quietly, shared a glance with his partner. "No ma'am. 'Fraid that's another part of the downside of... this kinda thing."

Vera looked annoyed. She turned back toward me. She wasn't wearing her shades, for once. I could see her eyes. She looked toward the stain for a moment. Thinking. "Well, I'll be here too. There's stuff we can work on while they clean up all the... while they do it," Vera said. "We'll do some inventory. Lisa didn't keep good records. This place is due for a stock overhaul."

I just kept staring right at her, disbelieving. Wondering whether it would force her to think about the situation. What I had been through. See it from my perspective. She seemed to pick up on the meaning of my expression. "C'mon, Jim. This is old hat to you by now isn't it? I mean, you've been robbed before... "

I shook my head slowly at her. My mouth hung open. "Didn't you read... ? Vera, the guy was going to... I was this close to-to... "

My voice shook. I stopped because it felt like it was about to crack. Vera was smirking at me. "And you think that hasn't happened to me?" she asked. "I can't tell you how many times I've had a gun in my face. You made it. We made it. You move on."

"The guy's still out there, Vera. He wanted to blow my head off. I can't, I can't just come in here and--"

"So... what? Do you expect us to just close the store while you sit at home--"

I breathed out loudly in frustration, shaking my head. "--sipping on a beer? While, what, while we wait for the police to maybe catch the guy?"

I placed my hands on my hips. Looked at her mocking eyes. I felt like a zombie, fried from everything that had happened. But anger was sharpening my focus. It's time. Do it. "Actually, you know what Vera--?"

The detective who had interrupted us before caught my eye.

"We, ah, excuse me," he began. "We are actually planning to place an unmarked patrol car in the parking lot, anyway. For the next few days. Guy's a double murderer. We want to be here if he comes back."

Vera crossed her arms at her chest, looked at me. She seemed slightly annoyed. But she cocked her head slightly to the side. She waved one hand in a way that asked "What more do you want?"

Not sure why I hadn't just finished quitting right then. Maybe it was the fact that the cops, at least, were taking my side of the thing somewhat seriously. The prospect of police protection made coming back to the store seem possible. Or maybe it was the fact that I couldn't think clearly. It felt like something like I was on autopilot. Then, of course, there was still the question of what to do next, life-wise. Of what I was going to do next if I just up and quit. Suddenly having no money coming in.

Things were now pretty much the same as when I had decided to return after the initial robbery. And nothing better had come my way since then.

So... that was it. I had just looked at Vera for a moment and then given in. Told her I'd see her tomorrow. I knew it would buy me some time. Time to wait for the numbness to go away. Wait for my brain to come back on line, figure this all out. And so here I was. On the way to the store, as insane as it seemed to go back there. The drive seemed to be taking longer than usual. Even with nobody on the road. The reptile part of my

brain reminded me I could use a smoke.

I patted at my shirt pocket for the cigarettes. As I pulled one out, I brushed the piece of paper next to the pack. My two weeks' notice. I had written it up at around 11 p.m. the night before.

Katie had been furious at me when Tim and I finally got home. Earlier, she had driven to the store to pick up Tim, seen all the cops, the lights. They wouldn't let her through, but they told her we were okay. They wouldn't let her see Tim either. Tim was talking to the investigators, doing a good job. They thought having Mama arrive in tears might disrupt his ability to give a clear statement. And since he was already with me, they sent her home.

Not long after we got home, though, she and Tim had just gone off into the twins' room and cried together. I started hitting the scotch, hard. There was no way my nerves could handle more drama. I sat there on the sofa, trying to dull my dread of the moment when Katie would come out, start raking me over the coals for endangering her son.

She hadn't, thank goodness. Must have just fallen asleep along with Tim. Probably the relief of having us home safe.

I had put in a couple of hours of drinking and binge eating. I kept reaching the point at which I felt like I was too drunk to control what I was going to do. Feared I might do something crazy. So I would cram down a bologna sandwich or too. Some potato salad. Try to absorb the alcohol.

Once it had become clear that Katie wasn't coming out, and my head cleared at bit, I let myself think about the job decision. I decided there was no way I could stay in that store if the cops weren't sitting out front. Not with the gunman loose out there. One of the cops had said he probably wouldn't return, since he had managed to escape once again. But the iffy inductions of some former jock didn't seem good enough for me to bet my life on.

But I'd decided that in the meantime I needed to pick up whatever scratch I could get my hands on. I'd pick up the Grab-n-Go pay for however many days I could manage. Take it day by day, be prepared to walk away the second it seemed unsafe. Hope it would stretch into the almighty two weeks. That way I'd be on record as having given notice.

In the off hours, I'd decided, I would furiously search for jobs. Look for anything. Hell, maybe even another C-store gig. At least at another store the robber wouldn't know where to look for me.

So I had had written up the notice. Kept it brief, the reasons vague. I figured Vera wouldn't be too pleased, but that was the least of my concerns.

5:20 a.m. Late for work. I pulled into the parking lot. The lights in the store were already on. I had seen them from the road. I spotted Vera's car parked near the propane tanks.

The patrol car was parked out closer to the road. I could see a couple of silhouette's etched in the amber street light. I drove slowly in front of the car so they could see my face.

The shadow on the passenger side leaned toward the window and a man's face and right arms appeared in the street light. He waved me over.

"Mornin'" he said after I rolled down my window.

"Hey guys. Thanks for being out here."

"You're the one from last night, right? The clerk who was here?"

"Yeah."

"Good news. They caught the guy over night. Went to his cousin's place. Same cousin who came in to visit him when we had him before. Real rocket scientist, this guy."

I felt myself breathing deeply as he spoke. It felt like a light was spreading through my chest.

"Oh man, oh fuck! That is so great! I can't even tell you."

He smiled, nodded.

"So we're actually just out here waitin' for the clean-up crew to arrive. A buddy of ours--retired cop--it's his business. Thought we'd stop and say hey."

"Yeah, well hey: thanks for lettin' me know, huh?"

"You stay safe in there, now."

I pulled up to my usual spot. I turned off the car and lay my head on the steering wheel. Just feeling the wave of relief. And the wave of fatigue. I felt like going home. Sleeping for a million years.

After a moment, I started slowly getting out of the car. I remembered the notice in my pocket. I wondered for a moment whether I should bother to submit it. Now that they had the guy, things were actually safer than they had been. But I chuckled at the thought. There were plenty of other psychos out there ready to step in and take the gunman's place.

I dropped my keys at the door. I grunted and bent over to retrieve them. On the way up, I saw that Vera had heard the jangling from the office. She started walking over to let me in.

"You're late," she stated as I walked in.

I frowned and opened my mouth to respond.

"But it doesn't matter, anyway."

"Um... okay? What do you mean?"

"Jim, we're going to have to let you go," she said. "I would have done it last night but I had to confirm it with Tony. He couldn't return my call until later last night, after you had already gone home. I needed you come on in this morning so you could turn in your keys."

I stood there. I searched her eyes for a moment. The mirror shades weren't on yet-- pre-dawn. But there was no indication that she was putting me on. "What, because of, of... just... what?!"

She gave me a "don't play dumb" look. Then she held a yellow carbon copy up to my face.

I read it. A fine. The fucking cops had fined the store. They were citing us for having a minor involved in the sale of lottery tickets. Turned out the dead guy had been right. It was against the law. To the tune of \$500, first offense.

"Having your son selling lottery tickets?" she asked.

Through the haze of my couple hours' sleep, I felt the familiar heat of anger. "He wasn't 'selling' the tic--Look, Jesus Christ, are you people insane!? Huh?! Do you realize what we went through last night? Here? For this, this... company?!"

"AND... AND..." Vera tried to shout me down. "Besides that, it is totally against store policy to bring your children to work with you!"

She was unfazed by my protest. Matching my heat. "And to have them working behind the counter with you? Jim? Sell any beer last night?"

"Aw, come on that's, that's--"

"That's what?! Huh? Against store policy ain't even the half of it."

"That's, yeah, like people don't have beer in their homes? Where their kids live. Ooooo! Liquor! So, so, what, are you saying they, like, suddenly get too sensitive to see it? Be around it? Just because they are, what, behind the counter at a store... ?!"

"Well-It-Is-against. Company. Policy. Okay? Whatever you happen to think of it, whatever you think is okay for your kids, we do not tolerate it."

"You are, I think..."

I peered at her eyes more closely, making a bit of a show of it. "Yeah... Insane. You, you, so that's it, huh? For Tim's good, supposedly, you put us on the street, huh? That makes a fucking hell of a lot of--"

"As I understand it--"

"--sense... That'll protect him. Make sure he turns out all ri--"

"As. I. Understand. It..."

I paused.

"Your housing situation is well taken care of."

I looked at her, blinking. Then I couldn't help the slight smile that tickled across my lip. That look of triumph on her face. And something else in the eyes that I hadn't noticed before.

So it was the house boat. She had been hoping for something like this lottery thing. A violation of the rules. An official reason to get rid of me.

But the house boat. Don must have told her about it. The house boat had been the real thing. The thing that made me other. The thing that told her I wasn't supposed to be here, that I didn't belong. That I didn't deserve anything I had. That I hadn't ever worked for anything. That I shouldn't have the same titles and positions she had worked for. Usual thing everyone thinks about everybody else.

I relaxed my shoulders. I was surprised to note my anger sinking back below the numbness and fatigue. Mostly, anyway.

Over.

I just stood there looking at her, shaking my head slightly. Feeling the bolt slide into locked position, closing off my sense of possibility. Of control.

I felt something in my hand, looked down. It was the bright green Grab-n-Go vest. I lifted it up, even with her face. She took it from me.

"Keys too."

I fished them out of my pocket, looking into her black shark eyes. I tossed them at her, turned, and walked out the door.

Out front, I sat in my car for a moment. I pictured myself rolling around in bed the night before. Lying awake in a fetal position, trying to make my big decision. Suffering from my own delusion of control. Vera, miles away, sound asleep. Mirror shades on her dresser. Knowing exactly how it would turn out.

My eyes were locked on the hood of the car, not seeing it. They started to water from the need to blink. I looked up, blinked, took a breath.

I thought of that job scoring essays online. Part time, no insurance. But it seemed like maybe it could lead to something. Maybe.

My hand reached up to start the car. The engine purred. I opened the window for some air.

I could see Vera through the big glass windows. She was standing behind the counter near the register. She was folding up the green vest. Her thin, leathery arms, almost in a prayer position, held it up in front of her as she got the fold right.

Still staring at Vera, I patted my shirt pocket for smokes and lighter. I pulled the pack out, started to tap one out. I paused for a moment. Stared at the pack. After a second or two I crushed the pack with my left hand. I leaned my left arm and shoulder out the window. I underhanded the pack toward the big trash can near the propane tanks. Two points. Then I put the car in reverse, started pulling away.