

7-Eleven

by

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3:45 a.m. The graveyard shift. I am not being paid enough to be here. 3:45 a.m. and the *7-Eleven* I work in is lit up nice and bright. Mind-numbingly bright. It's company policy. Tonight though, as I punched in at 12:30, I noticed a single moribund fluorescent flickering over the refrigerated dairy section.

4:23 a.m. It's quiet, which makes it even harder than usual to stay awake. My college books are under the counter, but who can think at this hour? *Crime and Punishment?* *Death in Venice?* *Being and Nothingness?*

Yeah . . . right.

Usually there's a steady trickle of customers, although I can never figure who is roaming the streets at an hour when most people are on their third R.E.M. cycle. But tonight customers are notably scarce, with only the occasional trucker stumbling in from the darkness for a carton of *Camels* and a dollar twenty-five jumbo Styrofoam cup steaming with heart-attack coffee. I take the crumpled bills from fingers stained with nicotine and diesel oil, avoiding eyes that have that long-distance, interstate stare. They wander the *7-Eleven's* burgeoning shelves like sleepwalkers shaken from their dreams, ravenous as vampires for light and life and human company. Usually they'll catch a few minutes of a movie playing on the video rack, or thumb through a skin mag, ogling with dulled interest the airbrushed nymphs inside. Then they'll mumble their good-byes and shamble back into the night with their coffee and smokes. I watch them stride across the parking lot, flattened down to two dimensions by the gaunt yellow glare of the sodium lights. Their rigs shake awake with a sneeze of air brakes, headlights blinking on, then rumble out the lot and grind toward the nearby freeway.

5:05 a.m. The newspaper truck noses up to the door. The driver is Hampton, a black man in his late fifties with a shaved head and a shock-white goatee. Hampton beams a smile crammed with teeth, cracks jokes with me, palms me blurry photographs of his grandkids grinning at the camera, eyes red-shot from the flash. When he punches out as a delivery driver, Hampton punches in at his other job at the Ford stamping plant. Now he bustles in and out of the door wheeling a cart laden with newspapers, slaps down stacks of the morning *Detroit News* next to my counter, black ink bleeding into the fresh-cut paper, 72 point headlines screaming death and murder. He leaves, as always, with a wink and a toothy grin, his heavy laugh hanging in the air long after the door has closed on his back. With Hampton gone, the *7-Eleven* shrinks, tightening in on me.

5:25 a.m. I doze intermittently, standing up. In the store's four corners, convex mirrors catch insouciant shoplifters five-finger-discounting the merchandise. I should do something, but chasing shoplifters entails leaving the cash register unguarded. Anyway, loses due to theft, along with my wages, have been factored into a profitability algorithm, a ghostly parade of ones and zeroes that spit out a spreadsheet when some sunlight-deprived accountant hits the *Return* key.

Meanwhile, shuffling between the aisles, the Strange Old Lady with the grey babushka and the fine brown moustache mutters to herself in some ancient dialect of Polish. Perhaps she is complaining about the price of the loaf of *Wonderbread* she mercilessly squeezes.

5:34 a.m. The shoplifters have stolen and vamoosed. The Strange Old Lady remains. She grabs a fresh loaf, squeezes it in both chubby hands until it's flat, then puts it back on the shelf and takes down yet another one. All the time she chatters in Polish. Above the refrigerated dairy case, the fluorescent throbs like a dying man's pulse.

5:42 a.m. The door chimes and Three Dudes swagger in: a hoodie, a baseball cap turned backwards and a beanie pulled waaaaay down below the eyebrows. As they troop past the cash register one flashes a gang sign in my face.

Uh-fucking-oh.

I tell myself these guys aren't real gang-bangers, just suburban wiggers out for an evening's mischief. The faces beneath the purple acne and pubescent breard bristle are doughy and unformed, an anonymous smudge of stupidity. As though rehearsed, once in the store they split up and disappear down separate aisles. Again, I feel that familiar tightening in my guts.

5:46 a.m. The weasel-faced one has skinny arms wallpapered with tattoos and a face full of metal. He nukes a chile dog in the microwave and curdles my stomach by slavering it down in front of me, chewing slack-jawed and open-mouthed, masticated food rolling around on his tongue. Then he shoves a fistful of grubby bills across the counter and belches in my face as I take the money. His pals, meanwhile, are dry-humping the video game machine and he slouches over to join them. It's one of those first-person POV slaughter-fests where the hero offs his opponents using automatic weapons, throat-ripping karate blows, and Tarantino levels of über-violence. Above the staccato chunka-chunk of machine guns, I hear them giggling as the electronic body count soars into triple digits.

5:53 a.m. The door chimes and Trouble strolls in wearing sprayed-on jeans, too-much eye makeup, and a hair color not found in nature—another Britney Spears-replicant in a midriff-baring halter top, sparkly belly button piercing and the obligatory Tramp Stamp advertising the curvaceous ass below. She has borrowed the keys to daddy's *Lexus*

and is making a night of it, running needless errands to the 7-Eleven. Trouble flashes me a coquettish smile as she sways past on her perilous stilettos, dragging a vapor trail of Teen Spirit cologne.

This is bad news. This is not what I need right now.

Weasel-face sees her first. Then heads snap around like wolves in early Disney cartoons. She pretends she's oblivious to the effect she's having, checking out her booty on the surveillance monitor as she clip-clops past the *Cheetos* rack. The cartoon wolves rip themselves away from the video game and gallop after her, slobbering and drooling. I lose sight of them behind the *Big Gulp* machine, but in the furthest convex mirror I see them corner her by the refrigerated dairy section.

I stop looking. Listen. I hear them talking. Not words, just tones. I hear her laugh. Then the voices dive down low, out of hearing. Suddenly there's a loud crash and a shriek. Or a shriek and then a crash—in my rising panic it's hard to tell which happens first. Someone's knocked a display over. I'd like to move, but my feet are superglued to the tiles. I wait to hear a cry. A struggle. The sound of ripping denim.

Through the big window I can see the lights of the donut shop a half-mile up the road. There must be dozen cop cars parked outside, each one with a shotgun racked to the dash. There's an alarm button under the counter, but it's loose and dangling and hasn't worked since before I started working here.

For a moment I'm possessed by visions of leaping over the counter and judoing these jokers into pulverized heaps of broken and contrite flesh. But then I see the three of them surrounding me, outnumbering me. They have knives, of course ... and guns ... and the girl has already been raped and strangled anyway.

Then the door chimes open. A man. A very tall man. A very tall man in a long, expensive coat. A very tall man in a long, expensive coat carrying a briefcase. He could be a lawyer or a doctor—his face has this calm strength to it. No, he could be a detective,

an undercover cop. Shit, he looks like he could be the Chief of friggin' Police. Relief elbows in through the door with him. I'm not alone anymore.

But just as he walks in, the Dudes are walking out, each one tossing me a scummy smirk as he swaggers past. The door chimes shut after them. I rubberneck around the store just as the girl steps from behind the *Cheetos* display. She apologizes, mumbling something about being a klutz, and sets a broken bottle of *Monterey Bay Margarita Mix* on the counter in front of me.

My laugh comes out in a jittery screech.

The girl debit cards for an eight pack of *Diet Coke* and leaves. (I don't charge her for the busted mix oozing sticky green syrup onto the checkout counter.) The Dudes still loiter in the parking lot, sprawled across the hood of their pimped-out Civic—the kind with the fart can exhaust and brain-pureeing subwoofer. She flutters them a girly-wave and they whistle and howl as she drives off. Then they clamber back into their ride and the exhaust makes a brrrrraaaaaaapp! noise as they peel out. Even after their tail lights fade into the night, the subwoofer's dull percussion nags like an incipient migraine.

6:02 a.m. Now that it's over I feel suddenly chilled. My armpits are sponges. I drop the bottle in the trash can at my feet and wipe sweaty palms down the legs of my jeans. No doubt about it, they are definitely not paying me enough to do this job. Still, it's over. All I have is a puddle of goo to mop up on aisle five.

A polite cough pulls my attention to someone standing in front of the cash register. It's the lawyer. I smile, but then my smile caves in as I notice he is holding a sawed-off shotgun with a cut-down stock. He pushes the muzzle into my face and tells me that he wants all the money in the cash register. That he needs it for a sick friend. I goggle at the face above the twin barrels and realize the expression isn't strength or calm, but emptiness, a void. The money. Now, he says in a voice higher than Mickey Mouse on helium.

My knees quiver as everything goes slack inside.

He lowers the shotgun slightly. I don't even twitch as he reaches across the counter and punches the register key. The cash drawer slams out and his long surgeon's fingers scoop out fifteen dollars in ones. He doesn't seem disappointed by the meager amount, and for this I am profoundly grateful. But then he flinches and swings the shotgun up. I know what's coming, but his expression foreshadows nothing. No anger. No fear. No hesitation. As though it could make the slightest difference I begin to raise my hands defensivley. Then the world leans forward and guffaws in my face: ONE BIG HOT LAUGH.

An iron door clangs shut in my head and the ringing goes on and on and on. For a moment the screen goes blank. Dead air. Then the signal surges back, blinked into teary-eyed focus. Powder burns sting my face. White smoke curls from the twin barrels. I realize that my head is still more or less where I left it.

Then I notice that the lawyer is gazing at something over my shoulder. I turn to look just in time to see the Strange Old Lady reeling backwards. The blast has caught her square in the face, and now there's nothing but a Halloween shock mask peeling away from the skull. Everything happens in underwater slow-mo. She stumbles into the chips rack, bounces off, then half-spins and topples over backward. As she hits the *Cheetos* display, it collapses under her weight and she folds, almost gracefully, into a field of golden puffed kernels.

6:04 a.m. The door chimes open as he leaves. On the way out, he swipes a *Twinkie* from the basket next to the cash register. For some reason this final act of callousness breaks me, and what's left of my self-esteem trickles hot down my pants leg and puddles in my sock. The door chimes shut behind him.

I look up at the security camera above the door and know exactly how I must look from this wide-angle, god's-eye view: a tiny figure standing behind a tiny cash register,

trapped on an endless tape loop that plays over and over. I think of what kind of headline this will make tomorrow morning, when they deliver a stack of newspapers to *7-Elevens* everywhere, just like this one.

And I realize that no one is paying enough.

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