

Highway Robbery

“Hey. Hey, bro,” Alec said. He inched closer as the industrial ceiling fan blades slowly cut through 1-Stop Kwik-Shop’s stagnant air.

“Manny. It’s almost time.”

Manny peeled his eyes off the glass windows.

“Time for what?”

“In about twelve minutes, those bad boys go off,” Alec said, finger pointed at the roller grill, “and then we’ll be in Weiner World.”

Manny’s eyes followed Alec over to the rollers.

“I can’t believe you eat that stuff still.”

“What? Manny, you love the free dawgs.” Alec always added emphasis to “dawgs” because he knew the store never supplied real hot dogs.

“Well, I did, four months ago. But Alec, I don’t think my stomach can handle anymore gas station food.” Manny said, his eyes fixated on the rollers. It reminded him of his friends and all their Fourth of July tans.

“It comes in waves. Once you’re here long enough, you’ll come back. I always do.”

Alec was only twenty – roughly five years older than Manny – but he worked here all throughout high school. Nowadays, he pretty much ran the place for \$12.50 an hour. It was all 1-Stop Kwik-Shop could afford as the least popular gas station among the five near Eugene, Missouri – an interstate town enroute between St. Louis and Kansas City. But it was a dead holiday weekend, and everyone had gotten their beer and gas to Osage Beach by noon. No one needed 1-Stop Kwik-Shop today, or any day really.

“I can’t believe it’s only three-fifty,” Manny said, his eyes glazed over.

“Only seven-ish more hours, but I bet we get a rush here soon.”

The door’s repurposed jingle bells rang as if Alec had summoned it. Missouri heat billowed in, bullied the stale air out of the store. Normally, the two wouldn’t have bothered to look at someone before they got to the counter, but this taller, unfamiliar woman caught their eyes. Alec noticed her Porsche outside first and Manny couldn’t help but measure her with the ruler glued to the doorframe as reference. His best guess estimated she stood about 6’4” tall in her heels. She approached the counter with a Coke and two bags of salt n’ vinegar chips.

“Hey, boys,” she said, leaned forward onto the counter, her snacks in hand, “do ya’ll have free gas here?”

“Free gas?” Manny asked.

“Yeah, for like the Fourth. Could you just throw twenty on three for me, please?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, ma’am, we aren’t running a promotion like that today.” Alec said as he stepped in front of Manny.

“Oh, well you never know if you don’t ask. Thanks anyways.”

She stood up to head for the door while Alec mustered up some courage.

“Well, I, uh, can still ring you out for everything else over here.”

“Oh, no,” she said, “‘Land of the Free’, or whatever. Happy Fourth you two.” She blew the pair a kiss, which Alec caught.

“Hey. Hey, bro,” Manny said. He snapped his fingers in Alec’s face as the bells rang. “Yeah.”

“Are we going after her to make her pay? Like, she just robbed us.”

“Hell no, what are you gonna do, catch her Porsche on your Schwinn?” Alec laughed.

“Dude, no. But we can’t just let customers rob us, like it’s our one job.”

“Well, first, we have a no chase policy. Second, we’ve talked about this man, they’re guests, not customers.”

Manny stood at the counter, dumbfounded.

“So, we have to work on the Fourth, no holiday pay, just so our first customer in three hours can rob us?”

“Well, that’s just out of our control, man. Some things just can’t be helped.”

Manny understood then Alec meant and was glad she hadn’t paid.

“Well, Alec,” he said as he took off his apron, “that makes sense, and I will catch you later.”

“Where are you going?”

“To the beach, with everyone else while the Sun is out still.” Manny tossed his apron softly onto the counter. “Just clock me out when you close up, alright?”

“Well, no I can’t do that because it’s wage theft –,” but Manny didn’t listen. The bells chimed again, and Alec watched as Manny hopped on his bike and headed West toward Osage Beach.

Alec sighed, grabbed the apron off the counter, and folded it. He looked down at the register. There were about three minutes left until the roller grill dawgs went bad.

“Fuck it,” Alec said to himself as he grabbed them early and ate behind the counter.