

The Stop

Sossna Shumet

The crispy chill of the morning air struck my cheek, stinging my eyes with unshed tears. Pulling the drawstrings of my hoodie close, I tried to contain what little heat I had left. Quickly, I jammed my hands underneath my armpits, desperate to keep them warm. In the corner of my eye I spotted the convenience store that wasn't far from my seven fifty am bus stop. Each time the wind became too strong, hitting me carelessly and causing a new series of quivers, I was ready to cave in and trek my way over. The store isn't that far...I could easily see the bus come from inside. Right? With a huff of resignation, I began to wade through the snow and make my way over, swatting the short wisps of black hair that escaped my hoodie away from my face.

As I got closer to the entrance my body began to hum in anticipation for the warmth. Pulling the door open my chilled face was instantly hit with delicious heat. As the door closed behind me I lowered my face down and caught my breath. I glanced up and made eye contact with what looked like the manager and almost scoffed in amusement. Since when were they hiring kids? With that long, shaggy, greasy hair covering his pimple-infested face he looked no older than fifteen years old. Looking around, I came to the conclusion that he and I were the only ones in the store.

It wasn't until his face started to twitch and redden that I noticed I had been staring intently at him the whole time. Recoiling, I averted my eyes and turned my back to

him, altering to stare out the window and keep a watch out for my bus instead. I cannot be late again. Rhonda already threatened me the last time I was late. After losing my last job waitressing due to pouring a pot of coffee on the lap of a too handsy customer who just happened to be the mayor's nephew, I found myself becoming the pariah of my small town. It never ceased to amaze me how fast scandal traveled there. Even though it was all lies. But honestly, what else would a girl do in that situation? He was lucky it was just the coffee I poured on him. So after moving to a new location, a new life, landing another job at Rhonda's shop so soon was a blessing.

Rhonda's flower shop would make it my third job this month. There's no way I could mess this one up. I mean, it couldn't be as difficult to keep since Rhonda had already deemed me worthy of a bonus on my last check. My first bonus. And with that bonus I bought a comfortable, thick gray hoodie and my very first smartphone. Though I had the cheapest plan, it was the most luxurious item I've ever owned, other than my home if you can even call that cockroach-infested apartment a home. I took up most of my time messing around with my phone on quiet days at the shop. Even though Rhonda was my only listed contact, I still manage to spend hours on that thing, imagining that someday I'd have a less measly list filled with people who weren't so quick to turn their backs. It wasn't until my phone was taken away from me a couple weeks after purchasing it that I realized how invested I was in that little fairy-tale.

❖ ❖ ❖

Mr. Norn wasn't buying his usual lilies today. I barely registered him at first because he was a regular at our store and always seemed around. But what grabbed my attention was seeing him divert from his usual path leading to our storefront display to an aisle hiding in the shadows found further in the back. I watched him walk straight towards the back, open the fridge, and grab a bouquet of roses. Red roses. I dismissed my confusion figuring it might be a spe-

cial day. Clearing his throat, he strode over and placed the roses on my counter.

“Oh, roses today Mr. Norn? Must be a special day,” I teasingly voiced my thoughts while setting down my phone on the counter.

“Mm hm,” he mumbled while grabbing his wallet out of his back pocket. After wrapping up the bouquet, I began to write up the card, like I usually did. But, pen in my hand, Mr. Norn stopped me.

“No, no...this isn’t for the missus.”

“Oh,” I paused.

“Yeah, write it out for a Kate instead”

“Ah, your daughter,” I realized.

“No,” he answered.

“Niece?”

“No.”

“...Granddaughter?” With each question, I tried desperately to believe that perhaps there was an innocent explanation. But each time Mr. Norn’s face darkened into a hateful, indignant mask at each rejected answer, I knew there wasn’t. And here I thought for once not all men were shady bastards.

“Look!” he exclaimed. “Just write it out for Kate!”

Taken aback by his tone, I tried to count to ten and reign in my growing anger. I didn’t make it past four.

“No,” I said as I slammed the pen down. “I will not let a disgusting, cheat of a man use our flower for his affair!” Eyes bulging, I saw his enraged gaze land onto my cell. Though I caught onto his train of thought, I was seconds too late to prevent Mr. Norn from swiping my phone into his grubby hands.



All I remember after that was screeching, flying bodies (possibly over counters) and a lot of rose petals scattering the floor—as well as the death of my precious phone. I’m sure the loss of that job would have been added to my list of failures if it weren’t for that fact that Rhonda had just recently divorced a philandering excuse of a husband. It also

helped that I was right about Mr. Norn. If it wasn’t for him, I could have passed the time in this convenience store with my phone. Now glaring through the door, I heard shuffling behind me and a faint voice. Turning back around I looked at the kid and stared questioningly.

“Come again?” I asked.

Clearing his voice he spoke again, slowly he crossed his arms, “Umm, if you’re not going to buy anything, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. Please.” he added.

You’re going to have to? With a smile pasted on my face I cheerily responded, “Oh, I’m sorry, but it’s just sooo cold outside. I’m only waiting here till my bus arrives.” For good measure I appealingly brushed my hair behind my ear. “You understand right?”

Taking his silence as compliance, I turned back around with a smug smile and continued to stare out the door. Almost giddy, I started to hum a random song until I heard his voice once again.

“Sorry lady but this is a 7-eleven, not a place for you to squat.”

My smile dropped off my face and I whirled around in disbelief.

“What did you just say?!”

“You heard me. Buy something or leave,” he pressed, his chin raised.

Still in shock, I stood there with my mouth agape. Did this kid really just call me a squatter? Looking down I took in my gray hoodie—which was still reasonably new—and my black jeans. Not even a stain. I took deep calming breath and tried to erase the idea of flinging myself across the room and throttling his scrawny little neck.

“Excuse me? Miss? Did you hear me?”

“Yes!” I spat. Startled, the kid lurched a few steps back. Trying to diffuse the situation, I asked, “Can you at least give me a heads up if you see a bus coming while I look for something?”

“Sorry, not my problem.” In awe of his cruelty, I stared at him incredulously.

“What?” he blurted.

Jeeringly, I mocked his response and walked through a random aisle. I hastily scanned different brightly wrapped candy packages on the shelf before me, contemplating what looked most appetizing. I spotted a Mars Bar and almost grabbed for it but I realized all I had on me was enough for my bus fare. Retracting my arm back, I began to stall and moved to the opposite side of the aisle, hoping to be able to see the bus coming while browsing. After peeking over the shelf for the third time, I noted a beat-up Honda struggle to pull up and park in the deep snow. Giving up, the driver recklessly parked awry and angrily got out, slamming his door shut. Seems like I'm not the only one having a shitty day. Turning back to the kid, I noticed him watching the stranger just as curiously. With the chime of the door opening, I looked back over and saw the stranger more clearly; his 5 o'clock shadow and blood-shot beady eyes weren't doing him any favors. I took in his thin long-sleeved shirt with questionable stains and torn up jeans. How is he not freezing with only that on? Staring longer, I dimly observed his right arm twitching and the ski mask in his hand. As if in slow motion, I watched him slip the mask over his face and reach behind his back. Oh, sweet baby Jesus. Frozen, I watched the gun appear from the back of his jeans.

"Okay everybody!" he shouted. "You know the drill. Follow my directions and nobody'll get hurt."

The drill? What fucking drill? Anger clouding over my fear, my frozen state began to thaw. As if sensing a storm brewing, the crook flickered his gaze over to my corner.

"You over there, come to the front with your hands raised," he ordered while waving his gun in the air.

This cannot be happening right now. I need to make that bus.

"Hey! Are you deaf, I told you to fucking move!"

Catching that last bit, I fully roused and raised my arms above my head while I shuffled my way up and ran through every foul word I knew in my head. I desperately wished for my phone at that moment. I wonder if the kid has one. Peeking at him as I made my way near the front, I was amazed he hadn't keeled over yet. Sweat dripped down

his face, drenching his uniform and he had grown as pale as the snow outside. When I finally reached the front, I turned towards the crook, arms still raised, and snapped, "Now what?"

Wincing, I chided myself for my damn mouth. Gun aimed straight at my head, he descended upon me furiously, "Now you're going to get onto your knees and shut your fucking mouth." I followed his directions stiffly, and perhaps with a little attitude as I raised my gaze towards his direction. With the muzzle of the gun, he nudged my hood down and brought his mouth to the side of my face and whispered, "Don't move and I don't shoot."

I grudgingly remained still as I jerked my head away from his rank breath. Approaching the kid behind the counter, the crook peered down at his chest. Squinting, I could see a name tag attached under the flap of his shirt pocket. Leslie? Oh...how unfortunate. The crook reached into his back left pocket and took out a mini laundry bag, shoving it into Leslie's chest.

"Okay now, Leslie, here's a bag. You're going to open that cash register and put everything in it. Do anything stupid and I'll have no choice but to blow your fucking brains out. Got it?"

Nervously, Leslie fumbled with the drawer and carried out the task. After placing everything in, the kid stepped back. Confused, the crook grabbed the bag and shook it wildly.

"What the fuck is this?" he snarled. Flipping the bag, he dumped the money onto the counter. Hastily he counted the amount and gave a large shout.

"What the fuck is this!" he repeated. Now a blubbering mess, the kid stood with his mouth opening and closing silently. Furiously, the crook slapped the bag into the kid's face.

"What the fuck am I supposed to do with forty-seven fucking bucks?" he growled. Scared out of his wits, the kid trembled mutely. I watched the crook heatedly churn by the second before he lunged over the counter to grab Leslie's collar. Bringing him to his face, the crook barked, "I asked

you a fucking question! Where's the rest!"

Though I had some resentment for Leslie in the beginning, he was still a kid after all. So I did what I knew was stupid and sprung up from my knees. "You got your money. Just leave before you do anything stupid!" I cried out. Shit, there goes my mouth again. As quick as my new found bravery came, it vanished. Wide-eyed, I watched the crook shove Leslie away and menacingly stalk towards me. Gun raised he spoke, "Didn't I say to keep still?"

Being this close to my face, I saw that his teeth were grotesquely yellow and lined by rot. Noticing my stare, the crook scowled. "What are looking at? Don't you know it's rude to stare?"

I scoffed quietly and averted my gaze. At least, I thought it was quietly.

Grabbing my cheeks hotly, he wrenched my face back towards his own.

"Why can't you people follow these fucking simple instructions? Do you want me to shoot?"

Wincing, I prayed the spittle that rained on my face was just my imagination and remained soundless. Squeezing my face harder, he mockingly jeered,

"Oh no, that smart mouth got nothing to say? You finally listening?"

Silent, I continued to just stand there. Lots. I have lots to say to you but I want to live to see the end of this day. Before he could say more, the chime of the door rung. Three heads and one gun turning, all three of us stared at the man gawkily standing half-way through the doorway. Standing at practically six feet tall with an impressively large frame, he appeared as if God-sent and I inwardly sighed with relief. Finally. Rescue. Time seemed to tick by as nobody moved. The staring match seemed to intensify with each one. Unbelievably, the giant began to gently step backwards his eyes remaining intently on the crook's gun.

"No!" I screamed. As if jarred awake from a spell, my rescuer stumbled back outside. The crook shoved me away and I watched him raise his gun towards the fleeing giant's back and fired.

Ears ringing, I gaped as I watched the giant tumble over onto the crisp white snow. Blood began to seep out underneath him and stain what was once white to a shocking red. Shaking, I turned slowly towards the cursing crook.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" Twisting back towards me he accused, "This is your fault!"

"This was supposed to be a simple fucking robbery! No one was supposed to get shot." Abruptly, he began to knock down items on the rack in front of the register.

"Stupid, stupid! Can't get anything done!" he shouted.

My body began to shiver as cold air wafted into the store. I glanced back and noticed that the giant's leg kept the door open. Wrapping my arms around myself, I stared at his fallen body, nearly a foot taller than my own and blocking the entrance. I was so distracted that the distant rumble went unnoticed at first. As the sound become louder I looked beyond the body and spied my bus come into focus in disbelief. Checking back, the crook was still berserk and a sparing glance at Leslie showed he was not too far away from unhinging as well. Another glance to the door affirmed my blossoming plan. A sudden burst of adrenaline fueled me as I sped out towards the tight opening. Please let me make it through. Taking a swift intake of breath, I leapt over the body and squeezed out into the frosty air. Ignoring the shrill shouts behind me, I ran as fast as I could through the rooted snow. Its depth seemed to drag on each step I took and with a sudden bang, I heard the sound of the gun firing behind me with another quick shot to follow. But I couldn't stop. I needed to make it. My heartbeat roared through my ears at each lunge.

I arrived at the stop as my body hunched over in exhaustion. Something foul coated my throat and I found myself unable to fight back the puke emerging up my throat. Rising back up, I wiped my mouth just as the bus came to the stop. Without a glance back, I staggered up the stairs and fell back against the pay toll as the bus began to move. "\$1.50."

Eyebrows scrunched, I raised my head. Looking up, I saw the bus driver quickly look back at me curiously before

returning her attention back towards the road.

“The fare. It’s \$1.50,” she repeated warily while her eyes narrowed suspiciously. Nodding, I attempted to reach my hoodies pocket for change but my hands trembled violently.

“Are you okay?”

Glancing up once more, I opened my mouth to respond but began to choke instead. Coughing out into my hand, I looked down and saw a red smear. Before I could wipe it away, another harsh cough ripped through my lungs and warm liquid started to course pass my lips. I looked down as a dark blot on my hoodie began to bloom right below my chest. Dazed, I touched the stain with shaking hands and slowly raised bloody hands up to my face in appall.

I wasn’t going to make it to work.

