A woman, red lipstick on her mouth and her eyelids, buys a twenty-five cent pack of peanut butter crackers, and gets change back from the five note in cash. She uses cash to buy penny and nickel candy — which isn't eligible as food.

I'm supposed to throw her out when she comes in, but mostly she circles the outside of the gas station, watches me through the full-length windows.

The Queen of Sweden came here, she tells me. *The Queen came and strung babies up by their toes on a line over the river.*

There is a Swedish historical site, next to the Native American historical site, by the river. The Queen did visit the stinking thatched huts and walk through the empty animal pens. Her flag flew over it.

I don't know what's true in the story about the woman burning her own house down.

+

Do you have a boyfriend? asks the retired cop.

Yes, I have one, I say. I have two: one who strong-armed me into dating him, and one I like. I never sleep with the one I like, and only slept with other one when forced to. It's easier than it should be to allow this.

Does he take you out to eat?

Sometimes, I say. Which is true, but more often than not, at my insistence, we go Dutch.

Your parents let you date?

I don't correct him with *parent.*

Yes.

You have a curfew?

Yes.

You ever break it?

No.

You've got class, he says. *Not like the other girls who work here. You've got something. You're a lady.*

I smile and look down, wish that I could pull my hair from its required ponytail and let it hide me. My hair is long, almost down to my waist. It's not pretty hair, but men like it. The retired cop especially. *Veronica Lake,* he says.

+

The owner of the Texaco is also a retired cop, but his severance didn't come with a pension. He makes me buy the coffee I drink on my shifts, and tape the receipt to the side of my cup.

I make coffee at 4:30 in the morning: the parking lot full of idling big-rigs, their headlights on, their cabins dark. I arrive before the guys who work the pumps. All of my prep work is done in the dark, without the store's lights. The men watch me moving in the lone gas station on a highway through South Jersey. The store a box of windows.

+

Can I take you to Atlantic City? I'll buy you a black dress cut down to here, he points to lowest point on his sternum, *and a slit up to here,* he points just below his hip. *I'll rent a limo and feed you oysters. I want to see you dressed up.*

He is red-faced. Drunk. It's the first time I've seen him this way.

I'm closing tonight and I have to open in the morning, I say.

The banned woman pushes through the door. He startles. She is wearing a grey sweatshirt and purple sweat pants, the kind with the elastic at the bottom of the legs. She has heavy socks and large white shoes. She goes for the nickel candy.

Get out of here, he says.

Her cheeks are rubbed with her lipstick.

It's for my daughter, she says, and reaches into the taffy bin. She places thirty cents on the counter and lays out six pieces of candy for me to count.

Out, he says to her. The woman collects her candy and leaves.

He says, *It's a good thing I was here.*

+

I run my hand over his leather bench seat, tracing the raised stitching. My hair is out and around my shoulders. I tug at the legs of my work shorts, try to make them cover more.

+

We pull into Caesar's just after midnight.

I'm eighteen, I say. *I can't drink.*

No one cares, he says. *I tip good.*

+

When I was eleven and my brother was nine, we sat at the edges of the casino floor while my parents gambled. I had books; he had games. We both liked the lights and the sounds of the slots. We liked that it was wrong we were there, that our parents were bad. There had been an expose about *Casino Kids*. The reporter showed blurry-faced kids lolling on the perimeter; security guards keeping watch to make sure the kids didn't enter the casino. My brother and I started to call ourselves casino kids, until our parents got bored and stopped going.

+

I sit at the black jack table with a Long Island Iced Tea. The cop is right; no one cares.

+

I have no idea how to gamble.

+

His hand finds the back of my chair. He rests it there awhile, and then starts to stroke the hair that falls at my waist. He pulls it through his fingers, twirls it and then smooths it down, over and over. It feels good. His hand at my waist feels good too. I become aware of how tightly I'm holding my drink.

+

Shining drunk, grinning at me like he's still my age, like he has a crush on me. He packs his cigarettes on the counter, an even eight taps, peels the plastic off the box and breaks the foil.

You want one? he asks me.

Sure, I say.

He hands me two and then puts one on his lip.

You think about what I said, about Atlantic City. Say the word.

He tips his hat to me, winks and leaves the store.

+

Even in that imagining, I'm passive. Maybe that's why it was convincing. I didn't set out to do that, to tell a half-true story.

+

I see her behind the dumpster, wedged between it and the fence, near my mom's mini-van. Without the protection of the counter, I'm nervous to be close to her.

The pump boys signal to me that they're done closing. Waving them on, I wait in the dark store.

The lot empties and she stands, looks to be sure everyone left. She starts off across the road, walking slowly. Even from a distance I can see the armpits of her sweatshirt are soaked with sweat.

The alarm set, I exit and lock up.

I follow her.

She stays to the edge of the road that circles the Japanese internment buildings. They are double-storied, made of white-washed cinder blocks and are now Section 8 housing. The buildings are mostly dark and quiet tonight; a patrol car is parked with its lights off at the end of one of the streets.

There are tiny individual homes further down the road. After people were released from the camp, they were hired to work in the fields. A farmer built the houses, houses smaller than trailers. These too became subsidized, after people were able to move away.

The woman continues her slow travel, and I continue to follow her. Mosquitos. Fat crickets. If she goes much further, I'll turn around.

+

Soybean fields start at the end of the last block, and beyond that are tomatoes. At the end of the summer, the water used for washing out produce tanks is sprayed over the fields. Rotting collects in the back of the throat, does not lessen the more you are around it.

She turns off the road and heads down one of the irrigation rows. The huge spraying machine stands alone in the field. I see her follow the pipeline and then she ducks into the metal opening of a run-off tunnel.

I had no real expectations.

My mom is waiting on me at home.

+

Half-way back to the gas station, I see a man walking on the other side of the street, walking in the direction of the fields. He has his head down and hasn't seen me. My pulse is readied to run.

The woman is out there. He's heading for the woman. I had no reason not to believe things I've heard.

I stand in the street and watch the man start to turn into the field. The crickets are loud beasts at my feet.

Don't, I think.

A low-rider rushes past, its headlights flash the man into color, throw a long shadow. He looks over his shoulder, up the road where the car came from, to see if others are coming. He sees me, pauses and then stops.

Since my father died, I know my pulse in a different way. It's become only sound, something abstracted. It fills the dark road.

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