

nights

I work the night shift at 7-Eleven- just for the summer, you understand. I've been doing it two and a half months now. Most high schoolers my age refuse to drop by because they think it's creepy. It is sort of out of the way, and barely anyone comes after 10- and I work 11 to 7- but I'm used to it now, and I like how empty it is. It's sort of nice, being alone for hours like that. I like looking at the headlights of cars passing by. I usually only see a couple a night, though, Barley being a small town and all.

The only thing I can't stand about working the night shift is the sound. You wouldn't think it, but everything gets louder all of a sudden when the sun sets. The way the machines buzz and the cars woosh past and the windows creak and the cicadas shrill drove me crazy for the first week, so now I listen to music with my headphones as loud as I can without busting my eardrums. It doesn't matter what it is- it's my personal belief that you have to listen to music as loud as you can. On nights I have to go through expired stuff and restock, I listen to Japanese Breakfast. I listen to The Smiths while I flip through the various dirty magazines my boss keeps in the back. 7-Eleven must have stopped selling Playboys some 20 years ago, but he still has a stack of them, crispy with overuse- and I don't want to know what else. I like to blast Dolly Parton and Shania Twain and other leading ladies of country while I mop the floors and spray Windex on the counters. And every morning, I listen to Chopin's Nocturnes during the last hour and a half of my shift. This is usually when people start finally entering the store. I keep my headphones on during my whole shift, even when people check out and stuff. They're usually so tired or distracted or just generally bummed out from living a life that found them at a 7-Eleven at 1 am that they don't even try to talk to me. Our interactions are designed to keep the amount of time we touch each other's lives to a minimum- no eye contact, possible grunts, and a cursory head nod is the best it gets before 6 am.

The first night she came in, it was 3 am and I was listening to a vaguely incestuous playlist of Elliot Smith and Phoebe Bridgers and feeling awfully wistful for something I'd never experienced. She had on this dark, dark purple lipstick. Like obsidian, I stared at it a beat too long and then turned away. As she disappeared behind stacks of Flaming Hot Cheetos and Doritos, I kicked the Playboys littering the floor around me under the counter, forgetting that the space under the cash register was empty. She walked up with her order- a bottle of godawful ginger ade kombucha and a slim jim- and glanced down at the 1977 Sondra Theodore edition of Playboy magazine that I'd just catapulted at her feet, raising her eyebrows in amused surprise. Then I made my first mistake- I made eye contact, even a sheepish grin. I scanned her things, silently judging her choices- I mean who actually eats slim jims? Not to mention the kombucha. She paid with a ten, I handed her back her change, she left. I hopped over the counter, picked up the offending magazine, and chucked it in the back room where it belonged.

After she left, there wasn't another customer for two and a half hours. I sat and thought about her lipstick. I swiped a dark red lipstick from the makeup section and spent thirty minutes in the bathroom looking at my face, pale from sleeping all day and working under fluorescents all night, small dark brown eyes, squished nose, lips I covered in layer after layer of dark, dark lipstick, in the mirror. Then I wiped it off and didn't think of anything much until it was time to turn on Chopin and check out the morning customers, mostly consisting of migrant workers who harvested the fields on the outskirts of town during the summer and the occasional nurse coming home from work. Usually during these times, I think about how easy it would be to automate my job. Like, this whole store could just be a vending machine with a bathroom attached.

I'm allowed to eat whatever we make in the store for free during work, like the hot dogs and slurpees and stuff, but I have to pay for anything packaged. I haven't paid for anything since my first

week though, since I'm the one who takes inventory anyways. I like Funyuns and M&Ms, but I try not to eat them too often or I feel bad. But what makes you feel even worse is trying to eat healthy at a 7-Eleven. They have salads and fruit cups and stuff, but the lettuce is always so soggy and the fruit cups are always so mushy and sad that it makes me depressed to even try them. It always makes me so sad whenever I check someone out who's buying a prepackaged salad from here, usually one of the nurses. I don't know why. Maybe it's just that they're still trying so hard after working like a fourteen hour shift, and it still amounts to nothing, really, because at the end of the day, they still live in Barley. So I make this instant ramen while I'm at work whenever I get hungry, usually around three or four hours into my shift. You have to boil the water in the coffee maker, but once you add crushed Whisps cheese puffs and crack in a raw egg to cook, it makes a pretty good meal.

The second night she came in, about three days later, again at 3 am, I was distracted by the coffee machine boiling the water for my instant ramen, leaving me open to make my second, fatal mistake. She came up, I tried not to make eye contact, but I had to check if she was still wearing the lipstick. She wasn't, to my disappointment. She wasn't wearing any makeup that day, and she seemed tired and there were dark circles under her eyes that had definitely not been there before and I wanted to put cucumbers on them, I wanted to know what was wrong and I never wanted to see her again. She was wearing black jeans, an Eagles jersey, black vans, a grey and green flannel around her waist, and she was buying kombucha again, sour cream and onion chips, and barbeque twist Funyuns. I was listening to Jubilee by Japanese Breakfast- I'd just restocked our sodas. She made eye contact, smiled effortlessly despite her evident fatigue, her lips moved. Then came the fatal mistake, the Trojans letting in the horse- I turned down the sound of my music, leaned in, lifted my eyebrows- "Sorry, what?"

She put her things on the counter, her smile was so disorienting, "Oh, I just said, no Playboy today?"

"Haha, yeah, no," I laughed in that way you do when you have no breath in your chest, it's really little more than an exhale and a smile, and immediately wished for the coffee machine, still pouring boiling water, to explode, setting fire to the store and ending the conversation. But of course, it didn't, because nothing ever goes my way.

I could hear the buzz of the machines over the music. She paid with a ten again, and I counted out her change as she sipped from her kombucha. I tried to think of something to say, anything. And then she left.

I turned on 100 Gecs to drown everything out in a haze of hyperpop and to stop myself from regretting ever speaking- Haha, yeah, no? Have you forgotten how to speak English?- and jumped up and down in front of the bright lights of the Snapple tea refrigerator until I crashed on the floor, sweaty and gasping for breath. I jerked up at the smell of rancid burning and ran to the front of the store to remove the coffee pot from its burner. After pouring the water into the instant ramen, cracking in one egg, sprinkling random toppings, I took my noodles and a can of Monster energy I grabbed out of impulse to the back room.

She started coming in every day that week, every day at 3 am. I started to put one headphone in the pocket of my work smock once I started to figure out when she'd be in. Always eye contact, sometimes a smile. A small exchange of words, more than I'd said to another person in a week. On top of

her various flavors of kombucha- her favorites were the trilogy flavor and the ginger ade- I learned she also liked Arizona green tea, which I approved of much more than fermented yeast. Some days she got snacks. More slim jims, barbecue twists, and a lot of peanut butter Reese's bites. She always paid with a ten and I liked to imagine she lingered as I counted out her change.

The ninth day she came in, she asked me what I was listening to. It was Bjork. She smiled as I handed her back her change. She was wearing a Joanna Newsom tour t-shirt, and I wondered if she'd traveled to Philly or Pittsburgh for the concert. I didn't ask her, though. That day, I spent the hours before I played Chopin listening to Divers, following Newsom's harp and wandering vocals through lyrical journeys. Then I went home, falling asleep to The Milk-Eyed Mender melting into Ys.

Slowly, she became the person I saw most often that summer. I'd get home at 7:30, too late to see my family, a father who never spoke anyways and woke up at 4:30 every morning to join the migrant workers in the summer and fix the farms around us in the winter, a mother who was always too cheery for a town like this, who believed her two jobs and long shifts at the hairdresser's and the nail salon would pull our family into an Americana portrait of white picket fences and two cars, despite the past 15 some years proving her wrong, a sister who took the train into the city whenever she could and couch-surfed with her friends who didn't have to take a gap year to save up for college. Around 8 in the morning, I'd fix myself a bowl of rice with a fried egg, kimchi, and dried seaweed, which my mom had to drive two hours to buy in bulk at the nearest H-mart every 3 months, and then take a nap. The first month of summer, my friends and I kept our promises of hanging out after my shift and before their jobs at the diner near the highway and fields. We'd go to an early movie or sneak up onto the roof of the high school to tan in our bikinis, flip through old paperbacks from a church flea sale, talk about our future and pretend we'd still see each other in college. Eventually, like everything, it stopped. And one day, maybe after we got sunburnt on the roof again, or I fell asleep in the theater for the third time, it was just over, just like that.

Her name was Jenny Le. She had long, thick black hair, which she never put in a ponytail or bun, and she owned and regularly wore a plethora of Philadelphia-based sports jerseys. Sometimes she wore glasses. She was obviously older than me, sort of a lot older than me depending on who you ask, I guess. Firstly, I didn't know her or know of her, which meant she was at least six years older, since we didn't go to the one elementary school in Barley together, and she had to live a little out of town or else I would've seen her someplace other than the 7-Eleven. She was maybe one of ten other Asian people I knew existed in Barley. She was also the only other lesbian I'd ever met. I never thought we looked alike, but one time at a gas station someone thought we were sisters, and it was weird for the whole day after that.

My favorite days were when she would wear her lipstick, because that meant she was in a good mood. She started picking me up after work, and we would park off a dirt road somewhere, surrounded by yellow wheat as far as the eye could see. She would watch me as she played me her CDs, and I'd pretend like it was my first time listening to Liz Phair. I don't know, maybe she was pretending when she believed me. The first time we kissed, it felt like all the buzzing in the world had stopped. I couldn't hear the crickets anymore, or the hum of the fridges, or the shouts of the field workers, because I was finally a part of something out of myself. It was just, silent.

We'd watch Tarantino on my phone in the back room, and I'd say I hate Tarantino just so she'd get a little mad. Jenny said he was the ultimate student of film or something, whatever that means. I don't really mind Tarantino, but he's not my favorite. She'd roll her eyes because the only movies I liked were either 90s rom coms or starred a classic Hollywood actress. I never asked what she did because it was clear that whatever it was, it wasn't what she had wanted. She called movies films and read think pieces

on the implications of this and that, but she still lived in Barley, she was at least 25, probably closer to 30, she never had to be at anyplace remotely resembling work. I'd roll my window down whenever she smoked and threaten to get out of the car if she didn't stop, to which she'd drop her cigarette in her half-empty kombucha bottle, grin and tease, "You're still just a baby." I would always look at that bootleg ashtray after we were done, the soggy ashes drifting slowly around the bottom of the glass, and think about how easily our interactions could be automated. How we could both be under the covers at home with a phone and a vibrator instead of cramped in a front seat or hunched over in the flatbed of her truck, gasping, paranoid of any passerby, embarrassed by and for both of us.

We didn't talk about where I was going to college in the fall, or when, or Barley, our parents, or anything else even close to reality, really. She didn't meet my friends, I didn't know if she had any. I never suggested we go to my parents' house, even though it was empty most of the time, and I didn't know where she lived or who she lived with. Honestly, she could've lived in her car for all I know- there was always plenty of trash on the floor to prove it, and she kept blankets in the back. Our interactions were limited to the imperfect world of the 7-Eleven and her beat up Ford Ranger, parked haphazardly in the lot behind the shut down ice-skating rink or in some random farm away from town. We'd pretend we lived far far away, away from a town that churned out human wheat harvesters and eventual opioid addicts. We'd talk for hours and fill in the rippling fields of wheat around us with visions of living in the city, with a flower box on a fire escape and a cat and a desk with a typewriter at a window, or a garden and a chicken coop in a cottage in the woods, Thoreau and his house at Walden pond. She said I love you first, after like three weeks of knowing me and a six-pack of beer on her own while we listened to the soundtrack for *The Graduate*. I looked at her. I really saw her. Drunk, vulnerable, confessing her love to someone who was essentially a high schooler. Lost.

"I love you too." "You do, really? You promise?" "Of course I do."

That day, I drove us back into town while she slept off her upcoming hangover in the back of the truck. I asked the sky if I would ever come back after I left. If I should. The sun didn't answer me.

Here's my favorite memory of her, written down so I never forget. Faye Wong's Cantonese cover of *Dreams* by The Cranberries coming out of tinny speakers. Light rain, barely a sprinkle, tapping on the roof of the car, while she drove us out to the ice rink. There were three cigarettes floating in the kombucha bottle, crumpled up McDonald's Quarter Pounder meals on our laps. She looked over at me and laughed. She had that throw your head back, crash your car, all teeth, Julia Roberts laugh.

"What? What is it?" I wrinkled up my face and wiped at my mouth, thinking I'd smeared ketchup on my face or something.

She grabbed my hand and brought it to her mouth, leaving a light kiss, still chuckling, shaking her head. "Nothing, nothing, it's just-" She stopped the car suddenly in the middle of the road, wide-eyed excited at something I couldn't see. She jumped out of her seat and ran to my side of the car, tugging me out, shaking some fries onto the ground.

"God, what are you doing?"

Without saying a word, she put both hands on the back of my head and tilted it up to see a double rainbow. We stood there, in the middle of the road, for what felt like hours. Just looking at a rainbow in the rain, until a car passed by and honked at us. We startled, then looked at each other, slightly hesitant, until, for some reason, we just started laughing.

And that's how I'd like to remember her, how I'd like to remember *us*. A drizzle and a double rainbow above us, music still drifting from a car speaker, laughing hysterically for what seemed like no reason at all, a sea of yellow grain the backdrop to a mundane, glorious, ephemeral, everlasting moment. If there's one thing I'd like to remember from this summer in a hundred years, I hope it's that.