

Convenience

by angel readman

I drove all night, but there weren't nothing Roy Orbison about it. I'd been driving and around lunchtime thought I might stop by Shona's place. I'd eaten at a greasy little diner in nowheresville; the waitress brought my coffee. She was wearing a pink uniform and a lace cap that didn't seem to do much of anything. She waited for my order and crossed her arms, a little fold of skin like baby fat pinched from her sleeve. She was the kind of waitress I knew don't see a smiley face in the eggs and bacon no more, wouldn't see one even if that bacon mouth kissed her lips or jumped off the plate and bit her ear.

I remembered Shona, in that uniform of hers- how she'd come home, spark a joint, her lace cap still on as she draped herself over the air vent.

After, she'd open a beer, lounge on the floor, notice the lace cap as it slid from her head.

'Been wearing it so long, can't remember putting it on,' she smiled.

Shona knew about service with a smile, the extra tip on the counter she used for beers on the way home. She knew all about a stocked ice box, servicing her man with that little lace cap still on her head. I tipped the waitress more generously than she deserved, just by remembering Shona's place, but I woulda left more if there was anything about her that seemed like she was glad to see the face of *this* customer after his long drive.

'What you recommend?' I smiled.

'The club sandwich,' she said, 'and dessert in the next town.'

It was then I decided I'd detour to Shona's, it weren't far, would be easier than finding a motel vacancy; it had been a while, but last

I heard she was still working at the OK Diner. Girl like Shona would always be there, at the OK, not fabulous, diner, where the food was priced to move. She'd be pleased to see me, surprised. Get a big kick outta me saying I drove all night. I could take a shower, spend a few nights. Maybe take her dancing before I left, spend a few bucks buying her a dress she'd wear like it was a million.

The drive was less long imagining Shona's; the smell of fries in her hair as she let it fall on my chest, like my skin absorbed her day clean away. About fifty miles to go and I stopped at a gas station, knowing I had enough to get me to Shona's, but not wanting to roll in with an empty tank. I walked round the convenience store, choosing some snacks to go with Shona's cheap beer, looking at the bright packaging of everything. I picked up mints and those shiny plastic cherries that hang from the mirror and would take the smell of the journey away. Plastic cherries, sweet as pie smell, red as the stuff Shona would put on her lips as she'd say I shoulda called and messed with her hair. I thought of Shona and picked up a novelty window air freshner with a rose on the plastic, near as I got to buying her flowers. I remembered 'em stuck above her sink, a whole garden of 'em in a line like the place she'd have she used to say she'd have one day when the right truck rolled in. They were baked onto the glass, couldn't remove 'em if she tried, but she never did. There was still flowers she said, long after their smell had gone, flies had stuck to 'em and most of their colour was just what she remembered; she just liked knowing they'd once been flowers.

The convenience was like 'em all, bursting with artificial fruit flavour, shelves and novelties that need restocking a dozen times a day. It smelt like plastic, coffee and that 4am scent of a convenience store that must come in a bucket, called 'distraction.' A smell that won't ever really go away, like a stain on the tired lino that won't wash. The clerk behind the counter was a woman in her thirties with something about her face like a woman who woke up and found she was in her thirties, dumped in the middle of 'em, with no idea how

she got there. She smiled like it was a worn welcome mat she still had to put out coz it still said welcome anyway. But for a second I wondered if she was the waitress from earlier in the day, something about her, her face like it got tired to show hope but it might be somewhere the strip lights don't shine anyway. I decided no, her hair was different, but then there was no lace cap, and it'd be a bitch of a commute. 'Y' her name tag said, just y as in why, one letter left at the end of the badge, like she' rubbed the rest of her name away on shifts like these, selling rubbers to straw armed kids, hearing the life stories of guys who come striding in for coffee and something to crunch.

'You had a long drive?' Y said, 'you like these parts?'

In about a minute, I'd be driving I knew that, on the way to Shona's, feeling good with an armful of snacks and a full tank of gas. Y watched me, curious, looking at the shelves by the counter, like I do. She smiled at my arms full of bright and shiny bits of nothing that look good to a man who's been on the dirt road.

'Yeah,' I said, 'workin', off and on. Off when I can.'

I smiled like it was easy, because it was. But there weren't no need to tell Y about me.. She looked like she'd been here a long time, seen it all, like she could tell me my drive and where I was going just by whatever I handed over for her to ring up. She was in no hurry, neither was I.

'Nice to see a smile at this hour anyways' she says, 'where you been?'

I told her the edited highlights of my drive, she latched on.

'Lotto ticket?' she asked. I shook my head, and she seemed to understand.

'Yeah, you look like a guy what won't pay for another loss. You want coffee?' she asked.

She smiled at me like I might just be that guy who walks through the door with a mouthful of stories to show her what light is outside the flickering yellow within convenience walls. I could, I guessed,

kill an hour, hearing her worries, sharing her laughter, listen to a driving CD before I decided not to buy.

'You got long on this shift?' I said.

'An hour too long,' she said.

It's the point in the conversation where I was about to feel her out with a joke, say 'then you're off to Vegas for the beauty pageant?', or 'your man will be taking you out somewhere nice?' She'd know how to laugh, and make me feel like a man who can bring that, and I'd know she was single. It'd be that easy for us: grab a beer, dance one slow dance, but I didn't. There weren't no need to go no further, like I could tell a whole lot by how she looked me up and down and fiddled with her no name tag, with hands that could use the nails doing. Somehow, in the convenience, I knew this, the words I didn't say seemed old that that patch in linoleum that won't wash. I'd drive on, and she'd fasten her shirt, get out her mop to run it over that old stain, I thought, watch the door for someone to come in for plastic cherries and coffee. Someone who might find something in her to take away and leave behind. I placed a packet of gum on the counter and she rang up my stuff. Walking away, I turned and asked her something that wouldn't let me leave.

'Hey, what's your name? how come you don't get that old name tag replaced?' I said.

'Dunno' she said, 's'pose I leave it so someone will imagine it's something pretty, some just 'any.'

In the parking lot I toss the stuff on the seat, where it looks random and nonsensical outside the light of the convenience store. The yellow rose air-freshner fell to the floor as I pulled away. Shona's seemed kind of near and kinda far. She'd be sleeping. I drove all night, but it weren't nothing like Roy Orbison, not that night anyway.

