

FIVE MINUTES

by Eric Boyd

Her job was on Eighth Avenue, in Homestead. I hated it there, but working in Braddock, I couldn't judge. The place was sandwiched between an auto-body joint and the municipal court. The bus dropped me off a block ahead and I walked back down. I took a half-day at the mill just to visit. The boss was pissed because we already didn't have enough men on night shift; I left anyway. Once the bus was out of sight, I sped up, looked if anyone was around, and shuffled toward the splotchy blue doors.

Going down the hallway, it was the same as ever. A warm staleness mixed with cheap halloween fog; the air tasted sour. Red studio lights shined dust against the posters on the walls while dim fluorescent bulbs flickered within the ceiling.

In the lobby, Vanessa (not her real name, nobody had real names) was inside the cash cage. Her face was a harsh, brassy green like unwatered grass, from the lights above. Her cutoff David Bowie shirt glowed. Her lips, puffing a cigarette, were almost black. Eyes almost lost. She studied me while picking at a scab on her forehead. "Seein' Starla?"

"Don't call her that."

"Uh-huh," Vanessa moaned. "You know the deal: five bucks, five minutes, just like everybody else."

Like everybody else. Sure. I slipped a bill through the slot in the cage, she took it, threw it in the register. A red ticket popped up from the counter. She tore it and gave me half.

I shoved the stub into the pocket of my work shirt and waited near the booths, looking through the window of the door, but didn't see her. "Where am I going?" I called across the room.

Vanessa threw her finger in front of her pursed lips and looked over at Jerri, the bouncer. It was only Tuesday night, but he was still there with her, fat muscle sleeping most of the night and throwing people out when he could be woke to. She stood, walked past the

man-sized thumb nodded off on a folding chair, and winked at me.

"Remember the rules?"

"Just tell me where the hell I'm going."

"Y'know we give nicknames to all the regular customers," Vanessa said. "Yours oughta be 'Mr. Sensitive'."

"Ain't a customer."

"Whatever." She shrugged. "Booth eight."

I pushed against the door with my shoulder and went down the hallway.

The whole time I wondered why I was there. I knew the reason, but why bother? She didn't want to see me. I didn't exist to her anymore. Nothing and nobody from those times did. She knew I took two buses to see her. She could just talk to me. Instead, she played games. Hadn't always been that way, and I figured it was important to try seeing her anyhow. She had been there for me once. I believed in righteous dues.

Walking past the booths, I saw all the men's backs through the beaded doorways, until I reached number eight. I stepped through the beads and sat down on a fading yellow chair that might have been nice once. Everything there, once.

The room was tiny, black from floor to ceiling. A vent running through the booths weakly blew fresh air in from outside. I could smell my mill a few miles away. I stared at the glass in front of me. There was a slot at the bottom for the tickets. The entire place was just slots to reach through. I waited.

The smell was bad, ripped pieces of tissue flecked into the dark walls like snowflakes. It was too quiet. How could anyone stand it? Nothing but the air, the clicking of the beads, the embarrassed rustling of hands against denim, the dirty whispers of people who didn't like to talk much.

I started playing with the keys in my right pocket. What if she wouldn't see me? Vanessa might've told her. Twice I got up, started to leave, then went back in. Each time I passed through the beads, the rustling hands stopped before slowly starting again. Sick, but I had no choice.

I remembered when we were younger—everything—and wondered if she could recall anything before packing up and leaving? Maybe where a part of my life became still, hers was just starting. That sort of thing wasn't my call, but I couldn't just walk away when things had gotten so bad. My temples ached.

A few moments and I finally heard a door. Footsteps approached, and what sounded like a chair was adjusted.

"Got your ticket, baby?" 'Starla' said in a sultry, but strained, voice.

"Hey it's—"

"Na-uh," she cooed. "Lemme see *just* your ticket, baby."

I sat up and got my hand from my pocket, pulling the stub out. I flicked the goddamn thing through the slot. Her hand, under the curtain, grabbed around, eventually finding the paper. A moment passed and the stub was pushed back out to my side. Maybe some people kept them as souvenirs. I let it fall to the floor.

"Okay baby..."

I watched as her fingers peeked through the curtains and she tied each side back with red cord. She flipped a switch. A light faded up.

"Hii bab—oh, it's you." She closed her legs and bent forward, elbows on her knees, hands up on her neck to block her chest. At first, she wasn't even looking at me, just staring at the glass itself. A 60 watt hung over her like in an interrogation room. I touched the back of my hand to the glass. It was warm. She said, "Still pluggin' away in Braddock, huh?"

I examined my shirt. "It's honest work."

"Well, hey, I pay my bills. And anyways, I don't come see you at that dirtball mill, so why you bothering me at my job?"

"You won't tell me any other way to reach you."

Her fingers quickly rolled on her neck. The words came out like an exhausted cigarette puff. "That's because *I don't want you to reach me*, dumbass."

She looked sweaty, tired. Frayed twine hair. Hard to believe, but she was thinner. Gloves ran up her bony arms and I knew why she wore them. I'd tried to get her to kick more than a few times—I had

a rough patch with the same junk for a few years before, and she'd helped me—but she didn't want my help. She wanted to live the way she was and really looked like hell for it.

She didn't like my staring. She quickly spread her arms, laying her hands against the walls. I darted my eyes down.

"Let's talk in the parking lot?" I said to the floor.

"Nope. I don't feel like changing."

"I can't stand seeing you here, like one of your customers."

"Right now, you *are* one of my customers."

"You can move back in with me any time," I said.

"I don't want to. I'm sure your wife wouldn't like it, either."

"That don't matter."

"What would you tell her?"

"Quitting this skanky shit might make it easier," I said.

"That's it!"

She shot up and called for Jerri. I knew what was coming before I heard the beads jangling behind me. A hand gripped on my collar and I was on my feet in one swift jerk. I looked back at Jerri. His free hand was balled into a tree bark fist. "Alright, let's go."

He began dragging me out. I lunged at the glass and slapped on it. "Hey don't do this! It's important!"

She turned around and looked at me. She rolled her eyes and sat down again, nodding at Jerri.

"You sure, Starla?"

She nodded again and the huge bastard let me go as fast as he'd picked me up. I collapsed to the floor and he walked away, snickering.

"Better be real fuckin' important," she said. "I got more *skanky shit* to do."

"Okay, so..." I started, getting back up onto the chair. "I'm not sure how to say it, and I really don't want to do this at—"

"Just say it, dumbass."

"Look—"

"Spit it out!"

"She's gone."

Her face dropped. I'd never seen that expression before.

"She went last night," I said. "It was looking pretty good for a while, but she finally gave in. It was in her sleep, though. Really peaceful."

"I... I don't..."

"Dad wants you to come back home, Rach. We all do."

She looked at me. "Josh."

The light above her head went down by itself; almost by instinct she reached for the red cords and undid them. The curtains closed. Five bucks for five minutes. How many times had she gone through this routine? I sat there, waiting for her to say something, but I didn't hear a word. Just muffled, short-breathed sobbing. The kind I heard when Rach used to scrape her knees or fall down the cellar steps, the kind I'd heard when she got stung by bees or when that kid with the funny hair never showed up to take her to prom. It was a crying I hadn't heard from her since leaving home and it made my chest tight hearing it. How the fuck did this all happen? People lose their way. They try to forget things and, when it comes back to them, it comes back all at once.

She stopped. I leaned forward and whispered, "You there?"

No response. My eyes hit the floor, totally black, like I could fall and never stop. The only thing that stood out was the red ticket stub, folded and wrinkled and torn in half. It was barely recognizable; but in faded, bent letters I could read the word "ADMIT."

I took it, looked up, and pressed my hand on the glass. "Rach, are you still there?"

Behind the battered curtains, she coughed and said, "I really don't know."

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