

Halfhearted Objections

by Rudis Muiznieks

The boy, no older than twenty and wearing a sweater with the hood up, places one hand on the counter and leans in. His eyes dart side to side. The old man behind the counter recognizes fear and anxiety in the boy's face, and sees the brown paper bag clenched in his other white-knuckled hand. The old man glances at the security mirrors and sees that the two of them are alone in the shop. He steels himself. He tells the boy that he opened this shop years ago, when his wife was still alive and before they lost their only son to Afghanistan. He turns the picture that he keeps on the counter around so the boy can see. His wife had driven them all to the Sears portrait studio right before their son shipped out, he explains. Both he and his son had made halfhearted objections, but they had also both understood that this was important. That their lives together as a family were about to change forever, and that years from now they'd want to remember; to look back at the happy and wonderful life that had quickly slipped between their fingers like so much sand. A desert of fucking sand. He blinks some tears away and tries to compose himself. He tells the boy that he'd die to protect what's his. That he had nothing left in this world but his shop and the memories that its peeling walls, cracked flooring, and dusty shelves contained. The boy blinks a few times, and raises the paper bag. The old man straightens and takes a step back. Paper crinkles and metal clashes against metal as the boy dumps the bag's contents on the counter. It's two keys. "You, uh... you make copies here, right?" says the boy.

