

Hundred Dollar Hit

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It was early on a Friday afternoon, and Cheryl stood behind the cash register counting and rolling her coins at the shift change when Glenn came in for his lunch break. She closed her eyes for a moment. Friday. Ham sandwich. 2-quart bottle of water. Payday bar. Maybe some smokes if he's out.

"Hey sis," Glenn said, digging his wallet out of his front pocket. She was wrong today. He had a burrito and a fried pie. And the water.

"And how is Mr. Glenn today?" Toni slipped a packet of matches inside his box of cigarettes after she rang him up.

"He would be pleased as all hell if Ms. Toni would ring him up five bucks worth of lottery tickets, too." He paused with his hands on the counter, stark white but for the grease under the nails. "I'm feeling extra-lucky today." Toni primped a little as if he was talking about her, but Cheryl saw his eyes angle over to watch her as she counted. Toni winked as she turned to the ticket machine, jerking her head secretively in his direction. Cheryl shook her head and continued counting. Cheryl dreamed of Glenn and her going places. But it couldn't happen with Toni around. He had to make the first move, so it would look right.

"My mother told me buying a lottery ticket is like burning your money," Cheryl said, teasing. Glenn smiled at her.

"Your ma is wrong," he said. "It's just a chance at something big. We all need that. Don't you want a big house on a hill somewhere, some kiddos running around? One lucky ticket, you're there, hip-deep in money." Cheryl smiled and turned back to banding her bills.

"What you up to tonight, Mr. Glenn?" Toni continued in her teasing voice.

"I imagine I'll be down to Woody's. Maybe I'll see you there." Glenn picked up his burrito and pie, dusted crumbs onto the floor with his other hand. "Maybe you too, Cheryl." He paused to make sure Cheryl'd gotten the point and walked out the door, let it slam behind him, bell ringing madly for an instant, then stopping.

"My god," Toni said, bending over and tapping her head gently against the counter in fake anguish. "His ass in those jeans. Jesus. I should be young and lucky like you." Toni tapped her cigarette ash into the coin tray. "Plenty of people made a mistake, you know. Don't hold it against the man if he changed."

"I don't know if he changed or not. I don't know what he was, really."

"It doesn't do any harm to show up there tonight, does it?" The phone rang, and Toni picked it up. Cheryl picked up her change drawer to take it back to the safe. "Hold on honey." Toni put her hand over the phone receiver and spoke around the cigarette in her mouth. "Go on. Go. If you spill something, he'll have it cleaned up before you know it." Toni cackled as she went back to the person on the phone.

Cheryl liked that about Glenn, that determination to be clean, to keep the things around you clean. She felt it too, in her three-shower-a-day habit. She could see him brushing sand off her thighs, covering her with long strokes of lotion. Italy, she thought, definitely Italy, or Greece, a stretch of islands where she could lay out in the sun. The problem with realized dreams was that she never knew what she'd be coming back to, and that was what prevented her from doing anything about it, like asking him out. What possible future was for her with Glenn? He stuck out in the community; he couldn't even own a gun, so he didn't hunt. He didn't go to church. He didn't work in Elmira. He'd been to prison. On the other hand, her future for the moment involved cashiering or waiting tables or working janitorial for Corning Glass like her mother, if she got lucky. It might not be prison, but it was a trap her mother had fallen into, and she didn't want to follow suit.

For the rest of the day, she thought about him, about standing with him on the deck of a cruise ship headed east into the horizon, his tattooed hand and clean-nailed fingers on her back guiding her, a pretty dress swishing against her legs as she and Glenn navigated their way through a press of people drinking champagne taken from waiters with silver platters, on a starlit night. She could see him taking her dress down off her shoulder, behind a lifeboat, or bending her over one of those cushiony chairs, she could see herself having a great time for a while, but what came after was just a mystery.

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Cheryl and Toni were in Woody's Woodshed, waiting for something to happen, to see if Glenn would arrive. They joked around with each other, high on adrenaline ordering drink after drink just to hear the bartender repeat the names: Singapore Sling, Sloe Screw, Sex on the Beach, Blowjob, and finally one that threw them both into a paroxysm of giggles. "I just want a Muff Diver" Cheryl said. "What's so funny about that?" The room began to move around her, just a little, and she put her hand in the ashtray trying to steady herself.

"God," Toni said. "I've been looking for a decent one my entire fucking life. Good goddamned luck."

"They can't be that hard to find." Cheryl saw Glenn come in through the front door and hang his hat on the poker machine, big and solid and real, no counter between them.

"There he is. Go get him." Toni nudged her and she almost fell over.

She went to the ladies instead, to prepare herself, but it was full with a line. She shouldered the women aside and went into the men's room. It had no paper in the stalls, and the toilets were beyond gross. She squatted over the urinal to pee, wiped herself with a rough brown paper towel. After Cheryl finished washing her hands and patting down her forehead with water, in the metal mirror, she saw Glenn.

"Hey," he said, laughing. "You ain't got the right equipment to be in here."

"The ladies was full, so I came in here." Cheryl felt her face going red. "I'll be out in a minute."

"Nobody's gonna mistake you for a guy." Glenn walked over and took himself from his pants, and she stood in the doorway and watched him roar his pee into the tin urinal, rock up on his heels once, shake it and tuck it back in. She wished she'd seen his penis, but the angle was bad. She couldn't quite believe he'd pissed in front of her. Her face must have showed her shock. "I know you've been watching me."

"I didn't mean anything by it." An old man came staggering through the door and into a stall without noticing her. She heard his pants go down, his long groan.

"It's OK. I'm, uh, flattered. Can I get you a drink?" Glenn motioned her to the door.

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Later that night, early that morning—dark, stars overhead, a still roar in her ears—she and Glenn were feeling each other up in the alcove of her apartment, a goodnight kiss that went elsewhere, but she didn't mind. Cheryl was not quite drunk-drunk, she thought, but on the edge of it after that awful muff diver thing Glenn had eventually convinced her to really try. She fumbled her keys from her purse and let them in. They made it as far as the couch before he was on his knees in his sock feet, between her legs, reaching under her skirt and pushing her panties aside, poking at her, but gently, and she willed herself into relaxing, shifted down so he could reach her better. This is just a step, she told herself. Just let it come, see what happens.

"You got a rubber?" She could feel him breathing more heavily as he looked at her body. She didn't want to ruin it, but the question was there to be asked, and he had been in prison.

"Nope," Glenn said. "Girl your age must be on the pill, though."

"It's dangerous." She kissed her fingers and put them on his lips.

"Don't worry. I didn't do any rolling up the Hershey highway, y'know." She decided it was probably safe, and watched him reach into his pants for the second time that night. "Man. Aren't you

something." He pushed at her a little with his penis and groaned. She spread her legs a bit more, then sat up, fumbled with his belt and zipper. He giggled, and she did too as he stumbled maneuvering himself out of his jeans. She leaned back, pulled him by the shirtsleeve and the back of the neck down to her and into the apex of her spread legs, anticipated him sliding into her, wanted it, and she felt his arm stiffen. He reared up above her, arms quivering now, and he grabbed at himself, a look almost of pain on his face. She felt warm drops fall into her crotch, a rush of disappointment.

"Oh. It's OK, Glenn. Really." She felt as if she had to say it.

It was impossible to see what his eyes looked like in the dark. She wondered what was next, if she should pull out her cigarettes and offer him one. Instead, he dropped to his knees in front of her, pulled her legs roughly apart and began to lick at her, grunting in his effort. She put her hands on the back of his head, and she thought she understood a little, that this was payback. She hadn't really done anything to deserve it, yet. He licked at her for a long time, cleaned himself off her, and her body responded, though she wondered what she had done even as she pushed his head to the places she thought it ought to go, that he would want it to go, to every wet and warm-but-cooling spot she could find with her hand. At the end he brought her off with his fingers, and he sat back and looked up at her.

"I'm sorry, Cheryl. It's been a long damned time." Cheryl knew what he meant, she just hadn't expected it.

"Is it your first time since then?" He stretched beside her on the couch, and she rolled over and got his cigarettes, lit one for him and held it to his mouth. The smoke curled endlessly above them. She had visions now of how it might be, and they weren't pretty.

"More or less." He leaned over her and tapped ashes into the tray. His arm felt heavy on her chest.

She was soberish now and puzzled. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing really. I picked up a woman the first night back." He sighed. "She wasn't exactly a prostitute, but I treated her like one,

trying to get off, and it was hard to do since it'd been a while, just jerking off into my sock. She laughed at me."

"Why did she laugh?" Cheryl curled her legs up under herself, turned to face him.

"It's just been a long time and I don't want there to be misunderstandings." He put his hand on her bare thigh, running his rough fingertips along her the way you might scratch a dog. He stubbed out his cigarette. "She laughed at me, this woman I was fucking, and I busted her one in the mouth."

"Jesus. You didn't." Cheryl covered her crotch with a throw pillow. The water in the pipes began to hiss as the heat came on. "What happened to her?"

Glenn put a finger to her lips. "There's a sound you never heard in prison. Never quiet enough. Always people noises around, guys farting."

"What happened to her?" Cheryl drew away from him.

"I paid her two hundred bucks to shut up. I told her I'd be back the next day with more, and I never went back."

"God," Cheryl pulled her arms together around her knees. "I wish you'd said something, Glenn. How do I know you're not going to hit me too?"

"I just reacted to her. I didn't mean it. I'm sorry about it, about her. But I don't want to go back to jail for it either. I'm not going to hit you. Why would I hit you? Christ." He stood up and pulled on his pants, then stretched his arms out and held the pose, like a man by a river in the woods, who knows no one is watching him, and can tighten and relax at will, then turned back to her. "You know what she said to me after? She said she was sorry for me." He rebuttoned his shirt and tucked it into his pants then pulled out his wallet and tucked something under the napkin dispenser on the kitchen table, shrugged on his coat.

"What is that for?" Cheryl stood up as he opened the front door to a blast of frigid air. "I don't want that. Take it back. It's what you're supposed to say. She was trying to be nice to you, you idiot." The door clicked shut gently behind him, and she heard the crunch of his

feet in the gravel, the start of the truck, the noise fading into the night. She looked under the napkin dispenser, and found two scratch tickets. One was nothing, but one was a hundred dollar hit. She tossed it down. At least she hadn't been smacked around. So much for dreams. Even if you never had much hope of them anyway.

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Cheryl woke on the couch early, her head on the arm, cigarette ash in her hair. She couldn't remember when she'd gone to sleep, but one of those old Frank Sinatra movies—well-dressed men smoking in a bar in some city, talking about women, about casinos, their next big score—had been on, and she felt compelled to watch it through. She peeled her clothes off and threw them into the hamper, showered the smell of him off her. They should know what kind of man he was at work. She wondered how Toni would react when she heard the news.

When she got to the Dandee-Mart, there was a note on the time clock. Glenn had called in for the day, and the mechanics were backed up into the third bay as a result. She had to make a parts run into Elmira for them. On the way down route 328, she noticed Glenn's truck pulled off the side of the road near an open-air vegetable market. She pulled in next to his truck and got out. She'd let him know where she stood, right now, since he couldn't face her. He couldn't get away with cheapshit like that.

He didn't have tinted windows like everyone else, and she saw him lolling there in the driver's seat, head back, mouth open, obviously passed out, with his coat thrown over his body like a blanket. Cheryl made as if to knock on the window when she looked inside. The passenger's seat had a half-empty jug of water, and the floor was littered with empty soda and beer cans, paper bags from fast food places, a plastic bag from Marshall's Department Store. The ash tray held a toothbrush and a new tube of toothpaste. There was a rolled-up towel pillowing his head. Glenn shifted in his seat to face her, and his eyes opened just a crack, and widened when they saw her; he hit the door locks and turned away. She thought about it for a minute, and not knowing what to do, got into her car.

He had been looking for a place to stay, she thought. He probably picked up a different woman in a different bar every night, told them the same story. They all felt sorry for him, she was sure, let him stay with them. She made the turns into town and picked up the parts—a starter solenoid, a case of spark plugs—without thinking, except of how badly it could have turned out. She was lucky she didn't get hit herself, or worse. But he'd slept outside last night while she watched movies. She remembered the weather channel saying it was the bitterest cold in years, in decades. She remembered being on a sledding run once when she was a kid, how her fingers had turned red and stiff inside her mittens. How they didn't feel right for days.

When she got back, Toni was in early, stocking shelves, her hair still wet from the shower. "You and Glenn make out?" Toni paused with her hands in the cardboard box of cereals, a big smile on her face. "You did, didn't you? Tell me tell me tell me, you lucky dog."

Cheryl paused for a moment. "We did. We surely did it." She felt in her jeans pocket for the scratch ticket, handed it over to Toni to cash in. Toni winked at her as she took the ticket.

"Well you go girl," Toni said. "Some people have all the luck."

