

Blue Jeans and Black Leather

by Steven McDermott

I lock the last of the beer and wine doors and head back to the cash register. Our clocks are not on bar time so I only have a few minutes. I check the till. A stack of ones and three fives. Enough to break a twenty, but looking bare. The parking lot's empty. The air conditioner rattles until the fan picks up speed and evens out. I rinse a sponge in the sink and start wiping down the counters. I took this job because I thought I could study at night. It's been six months and I've yet to crack a book. I swap filters and brew a fresh pot of coffee. The nacho cheese has crusted over in the dispenser so I stir it with a plastic fork. It's free for you, the manager said when I hired on, one of the perks. You couldn't pay me to eat this late-night favorite. Headlights sweep the inside of the store as the pickup truck turns into the lot and parks in the stall in front of the door.

I'm back behind the counter when they come through. The first one, judging by the measuring tape along the doorframe, is 5'6" tall, but he's wearing thick-heeled work boots. The blue is gone from his jean jacket, except at the seams, where the orange thread gleams in the fluorescent light. His jeans are ripped at the knee, one a white net, the other all flesh. His flannel shirt is blue and white. He's color coordinated. Blonde hair bunches around his collar like fur. He avoids eye contact and heads for the coolers. The door opens, buzzes, and the driver, a six-footer, steps just past the electric eye, takes a deep drag on his cigarette before flicking the butt through the gap as the door swings shut. Black leather jacket over a gray sweatshirt with the hood hanging out. Motorcycle boots with straps and buckles. Dirty jeans stained with grease and grass and mud splatters around the ankles. His black hair is shoulder length, thick and wavy. He might be part Indian, but not from one of the coastal

tribes around here. I haven't seen either of them before and glance at the truck, a black F-100. Out of state plate—Oklahoma. I wonder what they are doing up here along the border of Washington and Canada.

Blue Jeans is working the cooler doors against the locks. I keep my eyes on Black Leather and call out: It's after two.

?That's fucking bullshit, Blue Jeans says. He yanks hard on the door handle, metal clanking against metal, then turns and disappears behind the shelves. In the mirror I pick him up in the chip aisle. Black Leather and I lock eyes—he's all pupils. Blue Jeans is up front again and Black Leather is on the move. They converge on the other side of the counter from me. I'm standing just to the left of the cash register, open countertop between us.

?Blue Jeans has thick lips and the left side curls back unevenly, pulled toward the cheekbone by a ribbed scar. He's all pupils too.

?What say you unlock that cooler, Blue Jean says. Sell us a half-rack.

He's drunk plenty already, and it smells like he's been eating pepperoni sticks and those pickled eggs. Attitude's everything here, but I hope someone else pulls into the parking lot just in case. I keep my hands flat on the counter. Blue Jeans sways a bit. Black Leather is studying me, gears turning, calculations being made. I turn my own gears. I've probably been asked to sell more booze after hours than I've made legal sales before lock-up. Only agreed once, to a redhead who promised me an unbelievable blowjob and then delivered. Broke a guy's nose once, too. He ran into my fist and hit the floor faster than the two bottles of wine he was trying to steal. I can only see one of Black Leather's hands. The other is in his jacket pocket.

If it were up to me, I say.

Blue Jeans says: But it ain't.

I can take that either way. His eyes are drilling me now. I shrug, say: I need the job. They've busted me before. Next time it's a \$500 fine. I can't risk a sale. They keep an eye on me.

Do they? Blue Jeans says. He looks at Black Leather, who is impassive.

I feel a chill and don't like myself for what I'm about to do, but I do it anyway.

There's a Circle-K at the crossroads, I say, by the refinery. Less traffic out there. If you know what I mean.

?That so, Blue Jeans says. He laughs, sways.

?I'll take a pack of smokes, Black Leather says suddenly. Marlboro red. Box.

?There's nothing behind his pupils as I reach down for the carton under the counter. I grab a pack and look for the hammer. It's right there on the shelf, less than six inches from my hand. They are both watching me, but haven't moved, so I place the pack on the counter.

?Two-forty-five, I say.

Black Leather reaches into his jeans pocket and pulls out a wad of bills and drops them on the counter. His other hand is still in the jacket pocket. I uncrinkle the bills, take three and leave the fourth lying on the counter. I ring it up. Place the ones in the till and get his fifty-five cents. I leave the cash drawer open. Make sure they see it's light. Make sure they see the empty slots. I put the two quarters and the nickel next to the dollar on the counter. I close the drawer. Black

Leather leaves the change sitting there with the pack of smokes. His gears are turning again.

?Matches? I say.

He nods. I get him a packet. Set it next to the smokes.

Do you believe in God? Black Leather asks.

?Out of the corner of my eye I see Blue Jeans tighten up his swaying. The other side of his lip curls back in a sneer. So here it is. The ice cream case shudders as the refrigeration unit kicks in. I can smell the simmering nacho cheese and Blue Jeans' beer breath. The rotisserie grinds, winching the hotdogs around and around under the heat lamp. Black Leather's eyes are flat. I realize everything's at stake and lock my knee before it starts shaking.

?Been down that path, I say. Look what it's got me, I say, spreading my palms to encompass my chain store smock, the store, this situation, my life. So, no, I don't.

The hand rustles a bit in the jacket pocket. Blue Jeans smirks. I gauge my odds of getting to the hammer. Black Leather's brow pinches, then he picks up, one at a time, the nickel and the two quarters and puts them in his pants pocket. He picks up the dollar bill, holds his hand out palm up, and wads the bill tight. He stuffs it into his pocket. His eyes are locked on mine and I hold the gaze steady, give him nothing. He snaps his head toward the door and Blue Jeans laughs, turns, walks away. He shoves out against the door with both hands as the buzzer goes off. Black Leather taps the box of smokes on the counter half-a-dozen times, then out he goes, lingering on the buzzer for an extra beat. He gets in the truck, revs it, hits the lights, backs out, and they drive off.

?I go into the cooler, rest my forehead against a strut of the steel shelving. The cold metal bites my skin. I close my eyes and breathe hard. The Freon stings my nostrils. The quiver in my legs quiets. I pull a 22-ounce bottle of Heineken out of a cardboard box. I lean back on the cinderblock wall and slide down until my butt is on the concrete floor. I twist off the bottle cap and sniff the skunky aroma, then chug half the bottle, burp, and chug the rest. The door buzzer goes off. I peer out through the milk and juice and butter and eggs into the lit store. The light wavers as shapes move through it. I can't tell who it is.

?My chin sags towards my chest and I stare at the corporate logo stamped in a checkerboard pattern on my smock. Clanking reverberates off the concrete in the cooler as the shapes try to open the beer door. I bop the back of my head against the cinderblocks three or four times, then stand up.

