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First rights

Holding Up the Egyptian

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It wasn't a big gun at all. Just a cheap little .22 automatic. It fit perfectly in the front pocket of my hoody, even with the ragged collection of Poe stories in the same place. Sometimes, if you dug under the Bibles and gossip mags, you could find something worth reading in The Mission's donation bin.

I pulled the sweatshirt's hood down low over my face and made my way to the store on the corner, the only store in probably ten blocks.

The sign over the front door read "Discount Beer Cigarettes." The old Egyptian that owned the shitty little place had probably painted it himself. He did everything there himself. The shop was open from 10:00 am until midnight, and for 14 hours everyday the Egyptian was the only person working in the store.

Maybe he wasn't really Egyptian. But he definitely looked middle-eastern, and his English language skills seemed to be limited to "dollars," "you pay," and "stupid mother fucker." The barely literate jackass couldn't even spell "discount" in English.

The store was filled with cheap tobacco, piss beer, some fortified wines, scratch tickets, and empty calories in colorful wrappers. There was no reason for anyone with a strong sense of self-worth to ever set foot in this store.

I pushed open the only door, a door with iron bars over it, and entered to the sound of a rattling bell. The store always smelled the same. There was the whiff of old and unidentified spills. The unpleasant body aromas of the unwashed customers lingered, an odorous record of years of visitors. There was probably some mold. Above all, there was the accumulated scent of thousands of finished cigarettes. The

Egyptian was a chain smoker. He'd been blowing that stinking cancer into the store everyday for years. It was amazing that he hadn't been done in by emphysema or lung disease years ago. Everything was stale and the walls were yellowed. The place could have used a good disinfecting, or at least an occasional spray of Lysol.

Some drunk was at the counter, asking for menthols. I couldn't see the Egyptian right away, but I'd have to wait for the boozer to leave with his cigarettes anyway.

All I needed was 20 bucks, and I needed it that night. But, by this time, no one would loan me that much. I didn't even have anything worth 20 dollars to hock. All I had was donation bin clothes and a Poe book. Together, they had a street value of about a single. True, I did have the little pistol. It was probably worth about 30. But I couldn't sell that. I needed it to get 20 dollars.

I headed to the back of the store to check for witnesses. There was no one back by the beer coolers, or in any of the four aisles.

The place got robbed a lot. Still, there never was a police car in front of the store. The damn Arab probably didn't trust the authorities enough to report any of the robberies.

The people here were poor and uneducated, but they weren't stupid. Once it became obvious that there would be no police response, the place got robbed a lot more. Probably once or twice a month. No one got a lot of money, but it was so damn easy. As long as no one got killed, the five-0 stayed away.

"About fucking time," The drunk at the counter complained. I couldn't see him from behind the shelf piled high with cheez puffs, cheeze balls, and chees curls, but I had no trouble hearing his slurred speech. When the bell dinged I knew he had stumbled out.

It was time for me to get 20 dollars. The pistol was cocked and ready to shoot, but I kept it in my pocket. I really had no intention of firing the gun, but I'd blast into the ceiling or something if the stupid old fuck needed some convincing. I might have been a low life thief, but I was no killer.

I put myself in the aisle facing the front counter.

But the Egyptian wasn't there. Instead, a beautiful young woman stood behind the counter, organizing the cigarette packs above her head. I stepped back behind the cover of the shelf. She hadn't seen me. I spied around the snacks at her again, this time giving myself some time to really look at her.

She was absolutely striking. Her skin was smooth and young. It was nothing like the pockmarked and beaten leather of the locals. She wasn't white or black. She was something else entirely. Was she Egyptian, like the old man? Maybe, but I didn't think so. Her hair was a shimmer of black, like an exotic sea at night. Middle eastern women had curly hair, didn't they? Not curly like the Africans, but still a little curly. This woman had really straight hair, like those hot Asians. But she wasn't Asian. Her eyes were dark, like the Asian girls, but they were large and round. Huge brown eyes that could make me blush if they looked at me too long.

She didn't dress like a Muslim woman, either. This woman was wearing an old flannel open over a ribbed tank top. An old line of hemp tied a ruby set in gold to her neck. Maybe it wasn't a genuine ruby or solid gold, but both looked real enough to me. It was way too elegant for the ratty string that held it to her. It was probably once on a matching gold chain, brilliant and expensive. But that had broken. She wouldn't give up the stone so she secured it with whatever would hold. It was that important to her, something with a lot of sentimental value. In that moment, I wanted to hear the story behind this piece of jewelry more than any other story ever told.

Below the ruby her chest rose into cleavage. Incredible breasts. Round, not so large they would sag but not so small they looked underdeveloped. There was too much of them showing for her to be Muslim. All of that exposed skin. Skin like one of those expensive coffees with the ideal balance of light and dark, sweet and creamy ingredients.

Where the fuck was the Egyptian? And who the fuck was this? She wasn't supposed to be here.

I pretended to check out the candy display. Bubblegum. Who the hell came into a place like this and spent a dollar on bubble gum?

The beautiful clerk smacked a pack of Camels against her palm four times, then peeled off the cellophane, tore out the foil, and freed a single cigarette. She put it to her unpainted lips. She stole a 99 cent lighter from the counter display and touched a fire to her cigarette. She exhaled. Smoke circled around her face in an almost mystic quality.

While I watched, she only smoked. She did not smile or speak. There was no emotion in her face, except maybe a little boredom. Suck smoke in, blow smoke out. The lips were used for that one practical function. Still, they were an inspiring work of art. Full, maybe even a little puffy, but not overinflated like the current collagen trends. Just a shade darker than her skin, tints lighter than her hair.

Then she saw me. Her eyes tilted in my direction and looked at me through the stir of burnt tobacco. She gave me no other acknowledgement. I turned away, back towards the beer cooler. I opened a glass door and acted as if I were considering the selection. Oversized cans. 22 ounces. 40 ounces. Six packs. 12 packs. 18 packs. 24 packs. Fucking 30 packs. Moderation was not encouraged at Discount Beer Cigarettes. All of it was shit, but I'd sampled heavily from each and every variety at one time or another.

I turned my head and pushed my eyes to see her through the foggy door. She wasn't supposed to be here, smoking cigarettes and taking money from derelicts.

I imagined her walking on a Mediterranean coast, a breeze tossing a soft, clean white gown around her body. The sea flooded over her naked feet, dancing when it reached her. It had traveled the whole world just to feel her toes. The sun set on this beach only to make the scene richer. Maybe some birds took into the sky. They were quiet, not like those loud trash eating seagulls by the docks. She belonged in this place, where artists made beautiful paintings with more colors than I'd seen in years. Where food was served fresh and nothing tasted like cheez. Where music made people feel like dancing. Where it was never too cold or too hot. Where a sea breeze scattered the scents of wild flowers that grew just beyond the sand.

Where life was lived, not just survived.

I considered buying a big can of piss beer just to have an excuse to talk to her. I wanted to hear her voice. Would it match the rest of her? It must.

But I had no money to purchase anything. I needed the money in her register. I was not here to fall into unrequited love. I was here because I couldn't leave without 20 dollars.

Where the fuck was the Egyptian? Why did he put her here tonight? I needed 20 dollars. I mean I really fucking needed it!

I dug into my pocket and felt the pistol, then I pushed my eyes shut so tight I could see colors on the lids. Goddammit!

I thought about shoplifting, just quietly sneaking out without a word. But I knew I couldn't fit 20 dollars worth of cheap beer under my sweatshirt. I also knew that I couldn't threaten this woman. I wanted to be able to come back in here everyday just to admire her.

I finally closed the clouded door.

The bell dinged. The misplaced clerk and I looked simultaneously at the door.

A tall and too skinny brother in a black leather jacket had entered. He was probably in his twenties, but he looked forty. His eyes were heavily veined in red like the webs of a smashed window. He focused the center of those bloodstains on the clerk without even noticing me in the back.

A black revolver was in his right hand, pointing directly at the woman as he pounded towards her.

"The money, ho! And all of it!" The gun was now inches from her perfect face. This fucking fiend didn't seem to recognize the beauty before him. If he had been able to see with any sort of undrugged mind, he would have aborted his robbery. Instead, he was spitting on her while yelling angry instructions and profanity. The gun bounced and jerked in his erratic hand, threatening to discharge with the next jolt.

The clerk visibly shook as she opened the cash drawer and scooped out the cash. I was too far away to know for certain, but I estimated his take at somewhere under \$100. The thief harshly grabbed the wad of bills from her hand and gave it a quick inspection.

"What the fuck is this?" He shoved the money into his jacket pocket. "Where the rest at?"

Didn't he know this spot was a cheap mark? Fucking moron.

Tremors ran through the clerk's hand when she swept a handful of quarters from the drawer and put them into the thief's expectant grip.

"You playing wit' me, bitch?" He pitched the coins into her face, leaving several chips of pink in the perfect coffee. She began to cry. That really pissed me off. I stepped back behind the snacks. I didn't want to see anymore. I wanted to be out of the store. But there was no way to get out without drawing the aim of the fiend. I hid myself as best I could while continuing to keep an eye on the action.

She was not supposed to be here. And she was not supposed to cry.

"Gimme that muthafuckin' necklace!" He spat more degradation onto her.

Her tears intensified, but she raised a hand and covered the ruby. It was almost as if she was attempting to hide it, even though we all knew it was much too late for that.

"Bitch, you stupid?"

She shook her head. What was it about this rock?

"You fuckin'..." He pulled the gun up over her, drew back the hammer, and pointed it down into her temple.

I stepped out, into the aisle, and marched forward. He was right in front of me, his back towards me. He still had no idea I existed. I brought the pistol out of my pocket, extended it in my arm, and got it a couple inches from the back of his head.

It was a quiet little pop. Almost like someone had dropped a hardcover book flatly onto a table. There wasn't any big mess. A hole appeared in the back of his head. Smoke bit at my nostrils. The guy dropped straight to the floor. His eyes stared up, towards the door, the blood still lacing them like lava running from an angry volcano.

The clerk had jumped when I'd fired the gun, but she made no sound. She watched as I stepped over the dead man. I reached into his pocket and took the wad of bills. I had been wrong. It wasn't even close to a hundred dollars. Probably around 50.

She stared at me, terrified. Tears glistened in gentle rivers down her face. Her body shuddered with pent cries. She was too beautiful for this place.

I couldn't hold back a wide smile. Just so fuckin' gorgeous. One would never expect something so exquisite.

I pushed the cash and the gun into my pocket, crowding the Poe book. The door with the bars on it rattled the bell loudly when I threw it open. Then I fled the scene as fast as my legs would work, zigzagging through the streets and alleys, amongst the addicts, thugs, whores, and all the other kinds of vermin.