

Lawson, a Trucker From the Country

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I cross the industrial side of an island on a narrowing sidewalk until I come into the road. In the pitch black I feel like an iron bar. Freight cars are stacked high in the distant orange of the port. I turn away before I can make out the names on the containers.

I am jarred by a blue shock on the opposite side of the street and glance over to see a vending machine trembling naked in an enclosed lot. I lose my balance and skid to a halt on the pavement before pivoting on my heels for a better look. Suddenly a door slams shut in a nearby alley. I realize that the machine has been humming all along. Smoke rises from a cigarette bin near the machine as a silhouette flickers behind the chain-link fence, and I turn to my immediate right where an identical machine stands six steps away. The humming is suddenly much louder than it had been before. I flinch as the silhouette whips by on this side of the fence, but I apprehend only the burning tip of a cigarette bouncing away in the dark.

As I pass the nearer machine I look at the glowing sold out signs through the front window when in a single instant my eye is yanked to a tall sign broadcasting the name of a convenience store between the pillars of an overpass. I am pulled through the tunnel beneath the bridge and immediately awaken in the parking lot of the store, where eleven lines mark nine parking spaces wrapped tightly around the right angle of the building. On the far side of the lot a tractor trailer bends against itself like a dying snake. A man is asleep in the cab.

I approach the sliding doors of the storefront and a moped parked in an employee cell is covered in cats. One of the animals has an ear missing. As I cross the lot, they turn their heads in a single silent motion, and I turn on my heels toward them proportionately, briefly making eye contact before jerking back to proceed through the entrance.

Suddenly fluorescent lights land a blow to my face and an electronic bell penetrates the air. Directly to my right, three booth-style tables jut out of the wall immediately, the nearest one wrapped only by a single seat facing the entrance. Initially I am captured by the setting but quickly glance over the counter to see a teenaged clerk

leaning forward on the balls of his feet. He greets me with a half-formed and practiced facial expression, his mouth left hanging open as if forgotten. I move out onto the balls of my feet, and as if by a lever he leans backwards.

"Good evening," I say at a whisper, causing him to sink away in silence, nearly disappearing behind the countertop. I step silently to the last aisle of the store, and his eyes peek over the surface, following me closely the entire time. I look about the individually-wrapped pastries on a shelf, beginning to reach for one before looking back at the clerk, who glares at me with extreme caution. At this I straighten my back taught and crawl around the corner and down the next aisle before changing my mind. I return to the first aisle, walking sideways on my tiptoes, face out, and watch the drink cooler stand flesh against the wall before me. Like a secret mission I reach out to touch a milk carton. I peek over my shoulder to see that the clerk is still looking at me from the floor behind the counter and I quickly spin to gaze aimlessly at the sweets for some time.

The electronic bell rings again. Over the top of the shelf in front of me I look at the clerk, who is now gazing at the palm of his hand lying face up on the counter, his fingers wrapped around his cell phone. I glance at the doors but they have already slid closed. I hear the rustling of paper down the aisle and see the trucker from before has by now walked the length of it. He stands passively fixated on something in his hands, and his face is framed by a wide variety of adult magazines. I lean slightly forward on the balls of my feet, which causes the plastic wrappers to crinkle. Instantly I lock eyes with the trucker, but we both refuse to acknowledge the other and return to our business.

There is a silence. I look at the row of pastries on the shelf. I look at the clerk, still looking at his phone, and back to the pastry. I look directly into the security camera pointed at me, hanging to my right. Once again I look at the pastry. Slowly, I bring up my arm, and I plunge a finger into the pastry.

"Well, how about it?" Someone whispers into my ear. "Would you like to go out for a smoke?" Startled, I spring back and look in the direction of the voice. The trucker is leaning over the rack opposite the baked goods, parting the bags of chips on the top shelf with his two hands.

"I'm sorry," I say without pause and after a moment repeat myself. "I'm sorry, but I can't go out with you tonight." I realize that I am looking at the scone that I have vandalized.

The trucker pulls his hands from the shelf and steps sideways along the rack. "Why do you say this now?" He inquires, suddenly concerned, resting a hand on my back and attempting to meet my lowered eyes. I look away from him.

"Well you see..." I trail off. "I do not smoke, especially not with strangers."

At this the trucker throws his head back to unleash a mighty laugh. A little embarrassed, I look over the rack at the clerk, who is still looking down at his hand on the countertop. "You don't need to smoke," the trucker slips in quickly before inhaling. "To put things simply, my daughter was born today. I am from a city far to the north, and I have no one to celebrate with." In a single motion he reaches over the shelf, takes the defiled pastry from beneath my hand, and squeezes it to mush until his hand quakes for the effort.

Backing away from the rack I say, "I will smoke with you."

He grasps my arm and pulls me to the stoop where he takes a bare cigarette from the pocket of his windbreaker. Claspings it with one hand, he lights it with the other, and a cloud of smoke hangs heavy around his eyebrows as he releases his grip. The cigarette disappears.

"There is some trouble." I look at the cats on the moped, who are staring back. "I am in that cab," he says as he brings his arm furthest from me across my face to point at the crippled truck. The tip of my nose brushes the warm nylon of his arm and I follow his finger through the window of the cab. The soles of his feet are draped over the steering wheel as he speaks to me. "And I have not been in the world for three days." His arm moves away and he bends backwards. He is halfway into a second cigarette.

"I am nothing much. I am a simple truck driver, and my family has little money," he says in three sparse breaths. Between words there is a humming sound. "We work hard, and my boss cares for us deeply." He exhales another puff from his cigarette, and the thickening smoke coils tightly around his head. The humming mounts to a crescendo through which I must strain to hear. "But me, I have already been forgotten." His hand on my shoulder, we peer again into the cab of the truck at the feet dangling over the wheel, and together we look back into the dark of the parking lot before us.

By now the humming has grown almost unbearable. I look in the direction of the moped, now quaking like a violent tremor, and the cats glare back and purr furiously as a single consciousness. "Is it any wonder," he yells, now on the opposite side of me,

cigarette gone, “that we have met here, in the black of tonight?” The roar cuts off suddenly as I steal a glance at him over my shoulder. He swings open the door to the convenience store. The clerk from before stands at attention with his mouth ajar, looking out the open door at me, now joined by another much older clerk who gazes at his palm lying face up on the countertop.

“Go.” The trucker motions for me to enter and I oblige. I hear the lock shift behind me and the clerks spring up from behind the counter.

“Take hold of this man,” the older clerk commands firmly. The younger clerk sighs, and before I know it the two are dashing toward me. Much to my relief they pass me, but instead they grab the trucker, who has entered silently, taking him by the shoulders and the ankles. They hold him up against the blinding fluorescent lights, which now rattle throughout the store, and the entire room goes dark. They pat down his body and strip his clothes as if peeling away a lid, and suddenly they begin to shake him violently. They produce the carton of milk that I had touched before. The drink cooler behind me begins to hum angrily over his screams and pulls away from the wall, to which it is chained by a single taught electrical wire.

The humming grows in intensity, and I look out the window to see the cats peering listlessly into the dark room. Through the glass I can hear them chanting.

*He is only a trucker,
He will not work
His haul is over
He must go at once
Hoist him and strip him and let him go
And he will drop like a metal bar*

Suddenly the crushed pastry falls from his naked body. The adult magazine rains down and so does the cell phone of the first clerk.

*If he does not take to the highway
He must be killed
It is your duty;*

*Every man a king
He is only a trucker*

The entrance snaps open and the cats fall away in silence. As if heaving a log, the clerks vault the man out the sliding doors, and he drops to the ground with a dull thud before scrambling naked on all fours into the cab of his truck. I expect to hear the engine roar to life, but I do not.

I creep to the drink cooler, which has returned to the wall, and peer up at the security camera from before. The deck hangs empty and unfastened, as if the tape is under review in the back of the store. I turn on my heels and glance at the clerks, who are now both silent behind the registers and looking at their palms lying face up on the countertop, fingers wrapped around their cell phones.

The doors struggle open as I glide through the exit, and I see that the window of the cab has fogged up in thick beads, though the feet still dangle lifelessly over the wheel. Over my shoulder the lock snaps closed like before, but this time when I peek back the clerks do not budge. As the cats leave the moped to follow me from the parking lot, I know that I must never return here again.