

WE ALL HAVE THEM

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PROSE CONTEST FINALIST

Why doesn't the radio station talk about the pot holes that have yet to be fixed from this past winter? It's May. I swear someone will pay for my popped tire, if it happens. INDOT will be met with all of my fire and fury. I light a cigarette at a stop light. Take the firstdrag as I press back on the gas.

As I drive from West 10th Street toward the east side of Indianapolis, my eyes are met with more of the new and modernized homes that line the streets. *Revitalizing*, my ass. I take another inhale. Gentrification at its finest. I turn the dial with a little bit of hope that someone is talking about something worthwhile.

"Andrew Luck out for..." I turn the dial again. Another inhale.

"Three dead and one in critical condition after last night's shooting. Police say the suspect is black, stands at a..." I leave the station here at a low volume.

I arrive at one of the local convenience stores on the east side, which happens to also sell fresh fruits and vegetables. Carl, the store owner, was keen on changing the name from "East Side Convenience" to "Carl's Conveniently Fresh." The store also happens to be my place of

employment.

I hop out of my rusty '98 Ford F150 and start walking around the building. When I turn the corner of 34th and Emerson, I see Carl has a new sign up. As one of few local black owners, he is well-regarded by Indy natives. The sign reads "Carl's – Voted #1." Hell if I know who voted and for what. Leave it to Carl to make some shit up to get more customers.

I decide to light another cigarette.

"Baby, you know that them there cigarettes gonna kill you some day," Mr. Marcus says as I round the corner. Wearing his usual: plaid button down, slippers (rain or shine), and Southpole jeans. Everyone calls him Mr. Marcus. He sits at the same card table every day, right along with Auntie Bertha.

They both grew up in this neighborhood and hate to see any wrongdoings happen to it. I assume they think that them sitting here, at the same store, from the butt-crack of dawn till the store's closing, is them protecting the block. No matter how bad the neighborhood gets, this block remains secured. No one messes with Auntie Bertha and Mr. Marcus. They've lived here their whole lives and know nothing but this city. Locals show respect where respect is expected.

Mr. Marcus and Auntie Bertha are siblings. Their family owned the convenience store before they sold it to Carl's family in the late 90s. They've been sitting on the side of the entrance ever since. Carl has the ownership papers; they have the credence.

Plus, they have nothing better to do than to bother me and talk shit about each and every person that walks past the store. Both are easily pushing eighty, but act as if they're still in their twenties, with the occasional rays of knowledge that shine through.

I don't really feel like engaging, so I just look down and wait by the front door for my cigarette to get down to a butt. I take another inhale.

"Marcus, leave the child alone." Auntie Bertha swats at him. "Everyone has their vices, now."

"Yeah, you'd know a lil' somethin' 'bout that, hm," Mr. Marcus says while focusing on his next chess move.

Auntie Bertha chuckles.

“Eh, I’m just saying, man. She’s too doggone pretty to be inhaling that there nicotine,” Mr. Marcus says.

“I appreciate the compliment, Mr. Marcus. But I don’t live to be pretty.” I wink at him and throw my cigarette down. I walk through the doors and hear their laughter as they continue their game. They’ll be arguing over who won the first round by lunch time.

“Yo, Carl!” I say, walking through the front entrance. I know he’s here somewhere. This store is basically his home.

Carl appears from the break room. “You look like shit, Zora,” he says.

I look down at my ripped jeans, brown-supposed-to-be-white tennis shoes, and frumpy sweatshirt. I could either accept this rhetoric as true, or I could go on to lecture Carl on why me not wearing makeup has to do with claiming my own femininity and body back from societal standards – but I decide it’s too early and go with the latter. Plus, I do look like shit.

“My job isn’t to look good, Carl. It’s to get people rung up as fast as I can while simultaneously asking them how their day is going. Add acting like I care to the equation, and I’m basically growing grey hairs already,” I explain. “I’m exhausted just thinking about the amount of shits I have to give as soon as we turn the open sign on.”

Carl is all about looks. But he rolls his eyes at me and smiles. “Remind me why I keep you around?”

“I work the shifts no one else will,” I say as I grab the box he is carrying and place it in the aisle behind me. “Also I tell you what you need to hear.” I shrug matter-of-factly.

“Okay, Miss Know-It-All.” He chuckles.

I walk to the front of the store to open the register and start the rest of my opening side work. Auntie Bertha stumbles in on her cane. Probably to go to the bathroom like she does fifty times every day.

“You wanna know the most interesting part about my date last night,” Carl shouts from the break room.

“Not really,” I shout back.

“She actually talked *super* ghetto.” He stopped moving boxes and stood under the doorway to see my reaction.

I think my reactionless face said it all. When I said nothing and continued working, he walked behind the counter to join me, “Zora?” Carl pleaded.

Even though black himself, Carl prefers his women not to be of the same race as him. He’s a good man. Just as shallow as they come. That or traumatically stressed. He was basically traumatized from being bullied his whole childhood and being used during his undergrad by the black women on campus for his wealth. Although he’ll never admit it directly. According to him, he doesn’t have to worry about *anything* being fake with white or Hispanic women.

“How about you worry about the steady rise of black-on-black crime in this neighborhood instead of your shallow dating antics.” I say. I punch this morning’s numbers into the register.

Auntie Bertha must have left the door open when she came in because the first voice I hear is that of Mr. Marcus’.

“Mhm. Listen to the young lady Carl. Yousa disgrace.” I can almost see him shaking his head, if there wasn’t a wall in between us.

I look up and smile really big. A “haha” at the fact Mr. Marcus is on my side.

“Remind me to fire you when you clock out,” he says, walking away.

“Can you do it now? Because I would really prefer to be in my bed right now.”

“I’m going to the cooler, smart ass.”

I chuckle as I turn around to count the cash that is in my hand.

I hear the front door shut again.

“Aye Ma,” a severely dense voice says behind me. I roll my eyes because he must have thought we were open. I prepare myself to stay turned around, ignore him, and wait for Carl to tell the patron we’re not open yet. I’m still waking up.

“Bitch, don’t you hear me talking to you.”

I turn around in preparation to give this asshole a piece of my mind.

Fight or flight. The moment your body inherently decides to stay or run.

My arms flail out in a rush to press the panic button directly in front of me.

“Step the fuck back!” the guy across the counter yells at me as he comes as close to the counter as he can, arm extended.

My eyes clench shut. I take a step back with arms held up. I force my eyes open. My vision is met with the barrel of a gun staring right back at me. I breathe before speaking.

“You—you don’t have to do this.” I inhale. “If you’re that hard pressed for money, I can give you fifty dollars, in cash, from my own wallet,” I say.

“You know, aside from the money that I *will* be taking from that drawer”—he points his gun toward the cash register—“I’ll take that too.” He laughs.

“You know places are hiring almost everywhere right? Maybe try a fucking job before robbing one of your own,” I blurt out before I can even stop myself.

“You think I give a fuck about that nigga?!” Despite not being able to see his face due to the ski mask, the robber visibly gets mad. His arm starts flailing as he thrusts curse words my way. His skin is brown, and he’s wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt, leaving his neck tattoos visible. I force myself to remember the script—“No Regrets”—that lines the front of his neck. He’s from around here. I faintly recognize him.

“He ain’t one of us. He don’t know anything about the life you and I live,” he says. His eyes bore into mine, intent on getting me to understand his reason.

Speaking of Carl—where the fuck is he?

“Why? Because he actually left to make something of himself? And came back to help his community? Get out of your own fucking pity party, *nigga*.”

Fuck. Carl always said my mouth was going to get me killed one day. I didn’t think he could possibly be right until this very moment.

The robber hands me his black book bag and visibly moves his fore finger from the trigger guard to the trigger itself. He looks me dead in my eye. “*His* community?” His voice lowers.

“Fill the bag up.”

I start to turn around. Tears threaten to run down my face. I can't believe this—

Bang!

I feel my legs. My feet. How am I still standing? Adrenaline? My eyes are slammed shut, and it takes everything for me to pry them open. Fight or flight.

I turn around. My eyes meet the sight of a new barrel. Carried by a new hand. A new set of eyes stare back at me.

Auntie Bertha is the figure standing across from me. She lowers her gun and takes a step back. Blinks. Crouches down toward her cane to pick it up. The gunman is crouched on the floor gripping his right upper thigh with an intensity. His piercing cry with an even higher urgency. Blood starts to fill the space around him.

Carl comes running from the back. “What the fuck happened?! Holy shit, Zora, are you okay?!”

I stare at Auntie Bertha's every move. I blink. I keep blinking. She limps, cane by her side, and walks to the front entrance, then pauses. She turns slightly. “Young man, stop all that yellin’!”

His cries instantly lower to more of a whimper.

“You got five minutes. Go on young man. Get outta here. But look here first.” She bends forward to force his eyes on hers. “Don't you *ever* forget this face.” Time seems to slow as the robber takes his ski mask off, and Auntie Bertha continues. “Take the second chance I just gave ya. Get lost before the cops get here.”

She presses her cane down and turns to walk out. The robber struggles to get up. Finally does and attempts to limp himself out.

Seconds, possibly even minutes, pass before I feel a slight touch on my arm. I turn to Carl's face looking into mine. His lips move, but his voice seems far away. I walk from behind the counter and head outside.

I take out a cigarette.

I look over at Mr. Marcus and Auntie Bertha while I light the cigarette. They're sitting at their card table, resuming the chess game. Talking and joking. I'm looking straight their way. Mr. Marcus must notice my look of confusion when he speaks up.

He looks from my face back to the game at hand. Perusing his

fingers around his players, configuring his defense. “Baby, we all have our vices,” he solemnly says, without looking at me.

I take a shaky hand and draw my first inhale.

Auntie Bertha yells out, with her fist in the air and a smile on her face, “Checkmate!” As siren sounds whirl our way.

