

END CREDITS

By Patrick Tobin
Short Fiction

All morning Renee had tried to think of someone at work who would know how to hire a prostitute.

A shadow, she thought. That's what I'm looking for.

Renee was opening Checkstand 10 when she noticed Lyle. The produce manager was helping an old woman in a motorized wheel chair pick out a cantaloupe.

“This one is good,” he said to the old woman with a wink, “but I think we can find a better one.”

Renee felt her gut tighten: *Yes.*

Lyle was in his late thirties, blandly handsome like an airline pilot. He'd worked at the store for almost a month and he was exceptionally polite to everyone—he only needed to hear a name once to remember it, like he was a politician. He walked with his head up and his shoulders back, like he was in the military.

But he wasn't a politician and he wasn't in the military. Renee recalled the conflicting stories about why Lyle had transferred to Van Nuys from Portland. Some people said his wife had left him for another man. Others said he'd been an alcoholic, but that now he was getting his life together.

They all agreed that it didn't matter what happened because he was such a nice guy.

It bothered Renee, though, that no one really knew anything about Lyle. Nice but mysterious, that's the way people described neighbors after they committed terrible crimes.

During her break, Renee followed Lyle on his way out to the loading dock to have a cigarette.

"Hey there," he said, shrugging toward the cigarette. "My one vice."

I'll bet, she thought.

"I gave it up when I got pregnant," she said.

"That's right, you have a son. Kenny, isn't it?"

"Good memory."

"High school right?"

"Yeah. He just turned fifteen."

Lyle took a clipped drag off his cigarette.

"Such a beautiful day," he said. "Too bad we have to be inside."

"I have a problem, Lyle, and I was hoping you could help me."

"Of course."

"I need to find someone for Kenny. He has stage four cancer."

"My God. I didn't know."

"No one at the store does. I'd like to keep it that way."

"I don't really know that many doctors around here. Not oncologists anyway."

"We don't need a doctor. It's too late to do anything anyway."

Lyle put his hand on Renee's shoulder and it was all she could do not to flinch.

"I'm so sorry," he said.

"What I was hoping you'd help me with..."

"Yes?"

"...is finding a girl."

"I don't understand."

Renee was baffled by Lyle's innocent compassion.

"To have sex with him," she said.

A truck from an organic farm in San Diego County backed up to the loading dock, the warning beeps so loud they sounded like shrieks.

Lyle put out his cigarette. "Oh."

"Forget it," Renee said. "I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. I wasn't expecting to have this kind of conversation. You know?"

"Please don't tell anyone." She started to walk back to the break room.

"You're off at six, right?" he said.

"Yeah."

"You don't have a car, do you?"

"No."

"I'll drive us."

She felt herself grow suspicious again. "Why?"

He was such a nice guy, she imagined someone saying to a news crew. Why would he chop up his co-worker like a salad?

"I'm not promising anything," he said. "But I think I might be able to help."

Renee wanted to say no; she wanted to lie and say that she had other things to do after work. A fake excuse was forming on her lips when she saw a trucker bring out crates of bad produce from inside the store. Furry lettuce and oozing tomatoes that hadn't sold.

"I'm not a freak," he said.

"I'm not either," she said.

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After lunch Renee took over Checkstand 12, between Linda, who was saving money to go to Southeast Asia on a Bible mission, and Shirley, who always managed to bring up the fact that she was colorblind. The two women talked back and forth whenever it was slow, right through Renee, as if she wasn't there.

“You know what I heard last night?” Linda said to Shirley.

“What?”

“The people in Indonesia are *very* receptive to the gospel,” Linda said.

“What color blouse you got on today?” Shirley asked later.

“Robin’s egg blue.” Linda enunciated each word like a language instruction tape.

Shirley shrugged. “You know me. All I see is gray.”

“Oh Lord,” Linda squawked. “I look like death warmed over in gray!”

“But it’s a pretty gray,” Shirley said. “Especially on you.”

Renee wiped down her area with the generic paper towels that always fell apart after one wipe. She glanced at the clock on the wall. It was only 1:30.

Wasn’t there a TV movie about a dad helping his dying son get laid? Renee thought.

Didn’t it star that guy who used to be on that show with all the kids?

She couldn’t remember the name of the actor or the name of the movie. Then she couldn’t remember the code for the Fanta soda that was on sale.

On her last break she called Kenny.

“How you feeling?” she said.

“Fine,” he said flatly.

“You sound like you need a Percocet. Have a little applesauce and take one.”

“Maybe.”

She heard MTV playing in the background.

“I wish I could come home,” she said.

“It’s okay.”

“You know how much I love you.”

“Mom overdrive.” He made sounds like a car engine whining.

Renee tugged at the tag on her blouse, until the repetitive motion started to bug her. “I’m meeting with someone after work. About what we talked about.”

All she could hear was Kenny’s breathing. She pictured his face turning red.

“Kenny, it’s okay.”

“Do I know him?” he said.

“I don’t think so. He’s the produce manager.”

Renee was listening to Kenny’s breathing—her breaths syncing with her son’s—when she was suddenly aware of Linda right behind her.

“I’ll see you soon sweetie,” she said.

She put her cell phone in her purse. Linda sat with her back to Renee, tying the laces of her walking shoes.

“You going over to Lyle’s?” Linda said over her shoulder.

“Yes.”

“Did you know he’s gone to church with me a few times?”

“That’s nice.”

“I’m not saying we’re dating—we’re not,” she said with a sweet smile. “All I’m saying is he’s a good, God-fearing man.”

While Renee was waiting in front of the store, she looked for where Linda’s Acura was parked. She turned around and saw Linda talking to someone inside the store. Renee was about to walk over to the Acura and key it when Lyle pulled up. Renee tapped on his window and motioned for him to roll down the window.

“If you’re a holy roller trying to save my soul,” she said, “do me a favor and leave me the fuck alone.”

“Why on earth would you think that?”

“I don’t have time for bullshit.”

“I’m not trying to save you. I’m just trying to help you.”

Linda walked by and waved both of her hands, her fingers rising and falling like she was tickling someone. “Don’t stay too long in the parking lot you two. People start talking.”

Lyle waved back with a withering smile. “God she’s insufferable,” he whispered.

Renee got in the car and fastened her seatbelt. “Sorry I overreacted. I’ve got a lot on my

mind, that's all."

"I understand." He took his pack of cigarettes off the dashboard and put them in his pants pocket. "Please don't mention the smoking to Blake, okay?"

"Blake?"

"My boyfriend. He thinks I quit and I don't want to upset him."

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Lyle's apartment was in Sherman Oaks, on the north side of Ventura Boulevard. The lobby was full of mirrored tiles and a two-tier chandelier hung in the middle, too big for the space. Renee let out a whistle.

"I should apply for produce manager," she said.

"Blake made some money in real estate." Lyle shrugged. "Before he got sick."

The apartment was absolutely quiet even though it faced the Boulevard. So quiet Renee felt she might nod off. She waited in the living room, sipping a can of Diet Coke, trying to stay awake. Trying to keep from thinking of Kenny all alone watching TV.

Lyle helped his boyfriend out from the bedroom. Blake was basketball player tall, with bright blue eyes. His elbows and forearms were skeletal, just like Kenny's.

"Hi Renee," he said with an east coast accent.

The milky pallor of his skin repulsed her. "Nice to meet you," she said.

"Want another soda?" Lyle said.

"No, thanks." She reminded herself to smile.

"So what's your son's type?" Blake said.

"Acute lymphocytic leukemia."

"I mean girl."

"Oh." Renee blushed. "Do fifteen year old boys have types?"

"Cause the gal I'm thinking of is black."

"Oh."

"Is that a problem?"

“I don’t know. I honestly don’t.”

“You’d better find out before I make the call. Also, she’s HIV positive.”

Renee didn’t say anything.

Blake shifted in the chair to get comfortable—it was like watching a tree fuss. “Lyle explained the situation. My feeling is the HIV shouldn’t matter.”

The way he said this made Renee understand why he’d been so successful selling real estate. The quiet apartment began to feel like a crypt to her.

“But maybe it does,” Blake said. “You tell me.”

Lyle cleared his throat. “Valerie’s in Blake’s support group, she’s very sweet. She used to be a performer in adult films.”

“I’ll tell you this much,” Blake said. “Val knows all about heartache.”

“She sounds perfect,” Renee blurted out.

Blake flipped through his address book. “Now, I don’t know if she’ll want some kind of payment.”

Lyle took Renee’s empty soda can into the kitchen. “We’ll take care of it if she does.”

“There you go, like you’re running a charity,” Blake said.

“I’ll pay for it,” she said.

Blake winked at Renee and shook his head no.

“You’re leaving everything to me anyway,” Lyle said from the kitchen. “Why shouldn’t I spend it all, huh?”

“I guess you weren’t listening when I told you I’m outliving you,” Blake said.

Renee recognized the hollow laughter from the kitchen and it made her sick to her stomach.

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Lyle offered to drive Renee home, but she lied and said it wasn’t too far to walk. She lied because she didn’t want to have to say thank you anymore, but mainly she wanted to be alone with her thoughts.

“You sure?” Lyle said.

“I need the exercise,” she lied again.

She ran across Ventura Boulevard and waited at the bus stop. She tried calling Kenny, but he didn’t answer. She was ready to call her downstairs neighbor after the third try, but he finally picked up.

“Command central,” he said.

“Don’t ever do that again. I get nervous when you don’t answer.”

“What? I was doing my homework so I can go to the big dance tonight.”

There was a moment of silence.

“That was a joke mom.”

Renee tried to laugh but it came out sounding like she was clearing her throat.

For some reason she remembered the awkward meeting with Kenny’s principal, a morbidly obese woman who never revealed her first name to Renee. The principal had tried to be empathetic while Renee filled out the paperwork to remove Kenny from school, but it became clear early on that the woman had no idea who Kenny was.

“The band misses him something terrible,” the principal had said. “They’re really taking this hard.”

“Kenny misses the band too,” Renee said, even though Kenny had never played an instrument. “Please tell them he says hi.”

Afterwards, Renee had found the principal’s car in its designated spot and keyed it—so deeply she tweaked a muscle in her wrist.

“I’ll be home in ten minutes,” Renee said to Kenny. “Can I bring you something? Ice cream?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You have to eat.”

“I’ll eat later.”

“Okay,” Renee said. “Maybe we’ll go out for dinner.”

“Right,” he said.

After she hung up, Renee watched a group of teenage girls walk past her. All three were about Kenny’s age and they were giggling. It seemed to Renee that they were on drugs, until she remembered that this was the way normal kids acted when they had energy.

I forgot to ask him what his type was, she thought.

She tried to plot out the conversation she was going to have with Kenny later. She wanted to answer any questions he might have about women—maybe she’d have a glass of wine first, so she could be steady and calm and not panicky and desperate. She wanted to make sure he understood that sex involved things like tenderness and affection. Most of all she wanted him to know that life could be about something other than suffering.

Renee looked across the street and found Lyle and Blake’s apartment on the third floor of the building—all their windows were now dark, except for the kitchen. A few moments later the sliding door to the balcony opened.

Renee watched Lyle close the door behind him and light up a cigarette. After a couple of puffs he leaned against the rail. Eventually his head slumped down.

Renee remembered the last round of radiation treatment, when Kenny would wake up at night in a pool of sweat and diarrhea, moaning for Renee. She would clean him up, whispering soothing words so he wouldn’t be embarrassed while she gave him a sponge bath. She held onto his body—so skinny he looked like a prisoner of war—while she struggled to slip on clean pajamas.

Renee closed her eyes part way, until everything went dim and blurry. The effect was almost cinematic—the way a movie sometimes goes out of focus right after the final scene.

She closed her eyes all the way and everything went black. She heard the bus approach, but she didn’t open her eyes. She listened to the bus come to a stop in front of her—the door opened with a whoosh and she imagined the face of the bus driver, waiting impatiently for her to get on.

She wondered how long the driver would wait for her, and then she started counting to

herself.

One. Two. Three.

The door closed and the bus drove off. Renee squeezed her eyes shut even tighter.