

THE MOOSE BEND GENERAL STORE

He stood over me. He wheezed. He coughed. Then I felt the belt. (Miserable) I don't scream anymore. (Lousy) I won't cry. (Worthless) My eyes dried up years ago. (Fat) With one hand I hold my glasses to my face. (Bitch) I curl up into a ball and let him do it. You forgot whore. He'll get tired. He did. He's panting. He's wheezing. One more. (Whore) I flinch. Good I wore you out. I find my rag and begin to wipe the floor.

The door opens then slams shut. I mop the floor with big hurried circles. I hear the grind of the starter of Cutter's truck. The truck starts with a thundering pitch. The muffler or something is broken. I snuff. I feel my heart beat in my head. I rub the floor faster. He's probably guzzling another beer. I hear stones and gravel as they bounce off the walls of the store. The truck roars as the wheels spin. I hope *I know it's wrong*, I hope he's drunk enough to run off the road and kill himself.

"Hi, Jenny. I'd like some chain saw oil. Got any?" It was Jake's voice. His always friendly voice seemed mono tone, slow, persist and control ed. He stepped closer with one soft step followed by a labored low thump step.

I had one hand on a shelf and the other one on my knee. I was about to pull myself up when he pulled my hand from the shelf. He held my one hand first then reached for the other. He pulled me up. His hands were ablaze, hot and he was trying not to tremble.

"Are you OK?" He asked. Had he seen Cutter and me a minute ago. I ignored his question.

"You know where I keep that kind of thing." I was standing. I walked two isles over down two steps. Turned right. I reached out returning with the oil. My back stung from the strap. "This is what you always get."

"Thanks Jenn. You are a peach."

"I've got something else for you."

"Oh, Did my bullets come in?" Still not his voice too control-ed. Slow robo like.

"Well, NO. I'll show you." I held his arm as we made our way to the cash register. I backed and pulled myself up onto the stool. I fumbled my right hand over some papers under the counter until I felt the card. "Here it is. I think this is it." I handed it to him. I try to swallow the last of my dry throat. I'd like to reach around to rub one of the welts on my back. It stings. I stop. I don't want Jake to notice.

"Mr. Townly." I start to talk. "On around the lake road. It's all right there. He wants a couple cords of wood. Some odd jobs done. Minnie died you know. Anyway." How I want to rub that spot on my back. "Anyway Tom wants to try to stay the winter in his

cottage. He doesn't want to go back to the city without her. You can do that for him can't you?" My goodness I'm talking fast.

"Sure. I guess."

"That will be three thirty eight." I put my hand out."They always wanted to stay the winter but than she took sick. You'll like the Townlys. I mean, now, Tom Townly."

"Here is a five.' He places a bill in my hand. I put the five it it's place. I pull out a one and the change. I turn his hand up placing the change in his hand. The bell over the front door jingles announcing another customer has entered.

"Your bullets should be in on Friday."

"Hi, Jenny." It is Brenda Parker. She is the city clerk. Lots of times she will pick up a few things on her way home from work a can of beans a frozen pizza or a couple colas.

"Don't mind me. I know where everything is as well as you do." She said. Jake had left without much of a good bye. Brenda hurried over to the counter. She sat down three cans. I was checking the price and pushing the buttons on the cash register.

"That isn't, the Jake is it?" She said in an excited whisper. My face got warm. I slowly nodded my head. I couldn't hold back my grin.

"You know if I wasn't a married woman." We both fell into a loud girlish giggle. The cash register said six twenty one.

"Six Twenty One Brenda." She put a bill in my hand.

"That's a twenty. OK?" Brenda said still giggling. I put the twenty in the twenty slot and pulled out a ten and some ones out of their slots. I counted out her change.

"I mean it Jenny I'd give you a run for your money." I heard her laugh again as the door closed.

Hostess deliveryman always came on Friday mornings. Fresh Hostess Twinkies Ho Ho and Razz a Dazzles. I sat on my stool at the cash register pushing a Ho Ho into my mouth. The bell over the door tinkled. Boys came in. It was a little difficult to tell how many at first. One had a loud mouth, a bragger. His voice over powered the others. There was one that sounded more like a girls voice. I could tell one was heavier than the others. They went up one isle and down the other. Laughing Everything was funny.

One of the boys, the one with the girls voice, came up to the counter buying a cola and a bag of chips. The other boys walked out with a cola each some chips and a hand

full of Twinkies.

After they left I walked the store. Putting things back where they belonged. I got a case of soup out of the back and was labeling the cans as I put the cans on the shelf.

I was reaching a can in the back when the door bell tinkled. I heard the familiar clink click click of quick tiny feet scratching on the floor. I felt something cold touching the back of my leg under my dress. I stand. The dogs little paws press on my thigh.

“How’s my doggy? How’s my doggy?” I reach for his head. I stroke it back. “Hummm. How’s my doggy?” I turn quickly to Jake. I half scolded. “You gotta quit bringing him in here. This is a grocery store the health people will have my ass. How’s my doggy?” I continue to stroke his head. “OH, Does Jenny have a treat for you?” I reach into the pocket of my apron. I slip the second half the Ho Ho out. The dog grabs it eagerly, and jumps down.

“Hey, Don’t feed my hunting dog that stuff.”

“Come on Jake, he likes it. Don’t you boy? Yes, Your bullets came in.” I said as I made my way to the front of the store. I turned to my side to side step and slid behind the counter. Oh where did I put them I say to myself. I hear a crinkle as my hand goes over the nearly empty family size bag of potato chips. Then I remember and reach further to the right. I feel a small box. As my fingers go around it a realize it is heavy for it’s size. I grip down.

“Cutter was mad. He said I was wasting money. I’d never sell these. I didn’t tell him they were for you. He doesn’t like you.”

“He’s never met me.” Jake said. There was something in the way he said that that cramped my stomach. “I never met him.” And you are not going too if I can help it.

“How was your day?” He tried to change the subject into something light. My face makes a slight tightness.

“O K, I guess. You know, just another day. Cutter’s been gone a couple days now.”

“I saw that look on your face. It wasn’t Cutter. It was something else.” He had seen right through me.

“Au, Something happen today.” I didn’t want to talk about it. I hate being taken advantage of. “O K, Some boys came in today. I don’t know three or four. One brought a cola and some chips. The other ones just stole what ever they could.”

“Those bastards.” He scared me. I thought he was going to tell me I shouldn’t be trying to work this store alone. I like my store. I’ve done it for years. Cutter has never been around much. I didn’t need hear this garbage from Jake.

“Every store has their shoplifters. I’m no different. I have a lot of good customers you know.” I tried to make light of it.

“I’ve got a check from Tom Townly. Do you want it?” Jake asked.

“Of course.” He handed me the check. I held it to my nose. I could almost smell Minnie Townly. I bounced pulled on it a couple times.” How much is it for?”

“Two hundred dollars.”

“And who is it made out to?”

“You.” I was his banker. He dealt only in cash. I don’t know why but he wanted to remain unanimous. That was OK with me. I’d help him. Everybody needs some help at some time or an other. Maybe he was wanted by an “X” or something. I didn’t know. I didn’t want to know. I liked him. He seemed like a good person. Cutter didn’t like him. That was all I needed to know.

“O K.” I sighed. “And after today’s purchases the bullets and all, I call us about even.”

“Thanks Jenny. I owe you one.”

“No.” I said. “You owe me three. I got you a job.” I held up my finger. “I’ll cash your check.” I held up a second finger. “And I got your bullets.” I held up the third finger. “But I’ll let you off the hook. If.” I took a deep breath. The air was still. He waited as if, I don’t know. I’ve got to keep going. Here goes nothing. “I haven’t eaten all day.” Did that come out too fast. My mouth fell open as if the world stopped in the middle of my sentence. Don’t stop now. “Could you, I mean would you. If you’re not too busy.” Boy these words are falling out of my mouth so fast. “Take me across the street for a burger? Maybe some fries.”

“And I’ll be off the hook?” He said with a laugh. “Is that all?”

“You don’t mind? I mean you will?”

“Let me put these things and Snoopy in the truck. I’ll be right back. What about the store?”

Cutter had gotten into an argument or something with Mr. Marvin, the owner of the bar across the street. Cutter forbade me from ever going there. Now Cutter had to drive to Flak to buy any beer. I was going to take my chances.

“I’ll close up early. It’s my store.” Jake and Snoopy went out. Jake always parked in the back. I didn’t ask why. He would be a minute. I wanted to wash my face change my glasses and grab my shawl. I was fidgeting with the front door lock as Jake rounded the side of the building. I heard him come up the steps.

The front of the store scares me. There is a cement front porch, high like loading dock, without any railing. I hate it went I fall off. The stairs are to the side. I’m fine once my hand is on the old pipe hand rail. If I get there I’ll be O K.

“Do you need any help with that?” He was asking about the lock. It was tricky sometimes.

“NO, I’ll get it “ I say as I pull the key from the lock. I feel a hand on mine. He places it on his upper arm. He walks me to the stairway. He puts my hand on the old water pipe railing. I slowly step down. He is beside me, again. I take his arm again. We start across the gravel parkway. I stop and tilt my face up. Gentle somethings, speckles like kiss my face. Jake stops.

“Is it snowing?”

“Yes” He said.

“Is it beautiful?” He didn’t say anything for a moment. I waited.

“Yes, It’s very beautiful. Thank you. I might not have noticed.”

“Your welcome.” My hand closed tightly on his arm. He waits.

I hear music and voices. Jake took a step back turned to one side. He was holding the door. I got a good smell of greasy food. There was also B O, smokes and other less pleasant scents. Jake let me enter first.

“HI, Jenny. “ I heard Mabel Parker. Mabel came into my store once in a while. “Find a table I’ll be with you in a minute.” Mabel paused to look at Jake. She probably thought I wouldn’t notice. I held Jake’s arm. He pulled out a chair and helped me into it.

“Would you like a beer.”

“Yes” I answered maybe a little too fast.

“Anything particular?”

“No, What ever you have will be fine.” Mabel brought us mugs. She placed my hand on the handle. She knelt down beside my chair and whispered into my ear.

“Where did you find him?”

“I didn’t.” I answered almost bragging. “He found me.” I whispered back.

“Well, When you’re done with him, I’ll take what ever’s left.” It was a hoot.

Honestly I don’t know much about beer. I poured it down like water. I asked for another.

“What is it like in here? I’ve been in a long time.” I asked.

“Well, We walked past the bar when we first came in. There are two guy sitting there one is wearing a suit.”

“He smells of Old Spice.”

“Looks like a salesman. And the other one wears a cowboy hat and boots.”

“Hasn’t bathed in a day or two.”

“I don’t know. He is probably the guy that drives that truck out there.”

“I heard one idling when we came in.”

“Yea, To your right, my left is a small dance floor.”

“Really?”

“I don’t dance.”

“Your leg?” He paused a minute. Didn’t answer.

“ And behind me more tables mostly round four people tables. Behind that up a couple steps a pool table. There are a couple big guys playing pool. Some kids sit at a table behind me.”

“Can a bother you?”

“You don’t bother me.”

“Where is the ladies?”

“Its Its It might be better if I walked you.”

“You won’t mind?” I heard his chair slid back. He was helping me from my chair. He placed my hand on his arm. We walked past other patrons I heard a few fat girl jokes. I heard a voice and stopped. It sounded like the voice of one of the boys that was in the store earlier today. Jake turned. He didn’t say anything. Some how he knew. He pulled. I continued.

I heard the light switch click on. He stepped back.

“Would you wait outside for me?” I asked timidly.

“I’ll be here.”

Jake took my hand placing it on his arm. We walked past a table of boys. They sounded like the boys that came in the store today. Then I heard one of them say. “Do you think the Good Year blimp can bounce.” I heard something scrap the floor but it was too late. I tripped. I grabbed Jake’s arm. I’m too heavy. I fell to the floor pulling Jake with me. I heard a rip and my dress was loose in the front. I had lost my glasses. I slapped my hand over my face. I went to my knees. I swept the floor with my free hand.

“My glasses. My glasses.” I pulled air through my nose. I let it out my mouth. “My glasses.” I pulled in air in gulps “Au Au Au.” I knew what was going to happen next. I couldn’t help it. AAAAAaaaaaaaaa I gulped air again. It was coming again. I couldn’t

stop it. AAAAaaaaaa.

Mabel was there. She pulled my front closed.

“Better cover up. Your glasses are broken, Jenny.” She said sternly. “Hold this. I think I have some in my purse.”

“ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?”

“Jake. I’m O K.” I’m pulling big gulps air in again.

“I think that young man owes you an apology.” His voice stern and cross.

“NO Jake, Don’t.” I swung for his arm with the hand that held my front closed. I didn’t care. I caught his sleeve. He jerked it loose. “Please Jake don’t. Don’t get hurt for me.” I heard him stomp off.

“I think you owe that girl an apology.”

“OH YEA. And who’s going to make me.” The kid gulped for air. Jake must have had him by the throat.

“I am.” I heard Jake foot steps getting closer. They were heavy. He was breathing through his nose. Someone was gagging for air.

“HEY MISTER, LOOK BEHIND YOU.” The warning came from the bar area. I held my breath. I could hear the whoosh of a pool cue. I heard it hit something with a thud. It snapped. The small part rolled on the floor.

“JAKE.” I heard his foot steps again. Step thump.

“Listen pal, It’s not your fight.” Jake’s voice.

“Is now.” A deep heavy barrel voice. Must have been one of those big guys that had been playing pool. I heard a table crash as if someone had been thrown on it. “Jake” I pulled air through my nose again. I stood up. “Jake” A hand caught my arm pushing me back into my chair.

“Stay back, Jenny.” It was Mr. Marvin from behind the bar. “That friend of yours is taking care of himself.” I heard another table crash.

“Hold still Jenny.” It was Mabel. I felt glasses rounding my head.

“Jake? Is he alright?” The room was quiet. Step thump step thump.

“Jake.” I put out my arms forward and stood. “Oh Jake.” I wanted to touch him, to know he was all right.

“Hey Mister. You better go. You could be in deep trouble if you’re here when they wake up. They fought among them selves didn’t Mabel?” Mr. Marvin yelled toward the

bar. "Hey you, What did you see?"

"Yea, That's what I saw." Voices came from the men at the bar.

"Listen Mister. I don't know who you are, but I know I guy like you is better to have as a friend than a foe. Go Just Go I'll clean up around here."

"I'm sorry. I'll pay the damages, when I can."

"Don't worry about it. They'll be back. This community is close. They will want to get even. They'll bring their friends and their friends will bring their cousins and I don't know who. Some will want to help take you. Some will come to watch. This place will be packed for a month or two."

"Come on Jenny. I'll take you home." I felt Mabel's warm arm curl around me. "Come on."

"Jake. Where is Jake."

"I'm right here. I'll see you soon O K?" I pushed the top of the burger off. I found the beef patty.

"Take this to Snoopy. I can't eat now."

"Give it some time." Mr. Marvin's assuring voice. "You know for things to cool off. Go Mister Go."

Mabel walked me across the street. My hands were shaking. I went inside and locked the door. I hurried to the Twinkie's display. I picked one up. I put it to my teeth. I ripped it open. Auuh I grabbed another. I went down stairs to the light box. I knew right where it was. Cutter was always adding another cooler here another there. And I was constantly resetting a breaker. I flipped the main. I went back up stairs.

Cutter's old double twelve leaned in the corner. I broke it open I needed to know if it was loaded. I loaded it with OO buck shot. I carried it to the front of the store. I had to walk right past the Hostess display again. This time a grabbed a Ho Ho and a Razz-a-dazzle. I snuffed. I thought about a bag of chips and decided not. I might choke. I slid into my space by the cash register. I backed myself onto my stool.

I had the gun in my right hand. My hand a tight grip on the pistol part. My finger through the trigger guard. I swung it up beside the cash register. I didn't let go. With my other hand I removed Mabel's dark glasses laying them down on the other side of the cash register. I crossed my arm in front of me. I laid my head in the crook of my arm. I pulled a couple time through my nose. I picked up my head and blew out all my air a couple times. Here it comes. I began to shake. I couldn't stop it. I put my face back in the crook of my arm and it started all over.

I awoke. The front door rattled. Click. Then I felt a blast of cold air. My hand closed tight on the shot gun. With my other my fingers searched frantically until I found them. I placed Mabel's glasses on my face. I heard the door close. I heard click click, click click of the light switch.

"Damn it all to hell. The cooler lite is out too. When I get my hands on that girl."

"I'm right here. I've got old Bessy. Don't move." I pulled hard on the hammers. I couldn't pull them both at once. I moved my thumb to the one on the right, click. Then the one on the left, click. I bet he heard them click back.

"THE LIGHTS ARE OFF" His breath, beer and cigarettes, blew in my face. I knew exactly where he stood. He wheezed. He was staring at me.

"Yea I know. How do you like the dark. We're on even ground now." He was silent a moment. Then SSSccccrrrrraaaattch. I felt slight warmth on my lips. I smelled sulfur and smoke. He had struck a match.

"You're pointing that thing right at my head." He moved. I moved, pointing the barrels still at him.

"Aut Aut Aut Don't move so fast. I got scatter in'er. She might not kill you. Only pop your eyes out if your lucky." He said (Ouch, Damn it.) I smelled more smoke. The match was out.

"Don't try that match thing again. I might have to, You know." My head nodded to one side.

"It's me Honey, Your Daddy." My finger tightened on one trigger. I felt for the other trigger, right there. I started to tremble. My nose was beginning to run. My heart pounded. He's going to beat me if this doesn't work. I'll never get another chance. I felt the sting on my back from the last time. If he wins he'll beat me like never before.

"I want you to go away. If you come back I could tell the cops what you did to me when I was little."

"I.. I.. I.. Your mother left me. I was lonely." My face burned. I could feel more weight on the trigger.

"You weren't lonely. You were angry. You banged around the store breaking things for about a week. You were drunk all the time. A woman had stood up to Francis Parish." I emphasized FRANCIS. I knew it would burn him up. He hated his given name. "You took it out on me. I was just a kid. It hurt like anything. I thought I was going to die. You passed out. All you did was pass out. "

"Your just like your mother." He growled. Wheeze.

"No I'm not. Mom left. This time your the one that's leaving."

“I’m not going any where.” Defiant.

“Suit your self.” I said with all the confidence I could muster. I took a deep breath. I let it out with a big whoosh.

“You’ll never get away with it.” He said real fast. I had him.

“Yes I will. You broke in. I mistaken you for a rapist or something. A blind girl trying to protect herself. Look my dress is already torn. Oh that’s right. You can’t see. I couldn’t tell the difference. Pow Pow.” I sighed. “Oh, I lied about the scatter. It’s double O buck. This close, I could take you head right off.” I said without sympathy, cold like a hired killer. “Still wanta play games?”

“What do you want?” He said triple fast.

“I want you to go away and never come back. If you come back, I’ll do what I should have done years ago.” I said flat without any emotion as best I could. “Or maybe just pull the trigger. Day or night. All the same to me.” I was just about to bust.

“Jake. Jake put you up to this.”

“No, I did it myself. He showed me I had value that’s all. I’m worth something.” My arms were beginning to shake. Doubt Go away. “Aut Oh this thing is getting heavy. What do you say we get this thing over with?”

“I’m going. I’m going.” Wheeze.

“Oh, And the key. I don’t need you coming back and trying to hit the cash register at night, then again if you do, I might not feel like talking first.”

I heard him holding his breath. I heard the key hit the floor. The door opened and I felt the cool air again. It slammed closed. He was out. I sighed. I lowered the gun, but still pointed it at the door. I tried to catch my breath. I heard Cutter out on the front porch.

“YOU’LL PAY FOR THIS JAKE WHO EVER YOU ARE. PREPARE FOR THE WHOLPING OF YOUR LIFE. I’LL DO IT. I WILL. IF IT’S THE LAST THING I DO OR I’M NOT CUTTER PARISH.”