

The Ones Who Don't Say They Love You

You on the sidewalk out front of the convenience store. The sun beat down like it do every morning. The street cleaner pass by spraying lemonade-smelling water. It get your tennis shoes, shoes that's coming loose at the heel, so your socks get wet, too. Soapy water drip down the curb. Not like this street stay clean long.

Mr. Jellnik round the corner like he being dogged. He ain't much to look at. They never is. He like the other men who come down for foot-fixing conventions and brain-fixing conventions. He got a fat neck and skin like old peaches. His wallet fat too; that all you care about.

Jellnik eye you from crotch to mouth. He pull out a pack. He smoke. You pull one from the pack and light yours with his.

"Why are you the only one out here this morning?" He cover his eyes halfway. The sun glare off the Mississippi River Bridge like I SEE YOU BOY.

"I'm the onliest one you need," you say.

"True enough."

The other tappers already off to work, probably almost done with the men they left with. They left you with the tip box. The box is for your protection. You wear bottle caps on your soles and dance so people think you and the others are cymbal monkeys.

A police car roll up the street. The lights flash *blue white blue*, but the car don't slow down even though the cop lean over to get a eyeful of your faces. Jellnik's butt cheeks tense up. You could tell him don't sweat it, but you like seeing him squirm. If you didn't like seeing him squirm, you would tell him cops never arrest johns, especially not johns from Ida-fucking-ho. What you do probably make the cops puke. It's easy to lock up dudes for shooting dudes. That's good business. Putting a junior high slut in jail is bad business. If they hear all about what you do, people stop coming to town. You all starve then.

The stoplight turn green. The police car pull off. Jellnik's ass relax. You don't really need to tap-dance to stay out of jail. But if you don't fake it, what else you got?

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Jellnik the only one who buy you food after he do his business. Now, you sore inside and out, but you starving, too. The queenie cook behind the

counter flipping pancakes. Maybe the pancake take your mind off how rough Jellnik handle you.

Jellnik's toast and runny eggs come out first. He squirt ketchup all over. He gulp coffee, get a refill, gulp that, too. He don't give you none. Your stomach growl. When you bring food to the corner, the other tappers take most of it, leave you the scrap. Most days you don't eat till you go home. But today you hungry. What the shit is the holdup? The queenie cook went in back and your pancake sitting on the cold side of the grill like a Frisbee that just stop spinning.

Jellnik been here all week. The first day he show up, he take Pink and Quincy first, one in the morning and the other round lunch. He come back for you after noon time rocking up the street with hair stuck to his forehead. After he take a piece of you, he never buy what Pink and Quincy selling again. That's a plus on top of the money. It's the only time you won out when they around. You too dark and your hair ain't wavy and good like Pink hair. But now you can laugh inside when you see them, but don't laugh out loud. They punch you if you smile.

Jellnik break out a roll of cash. He put down two twenty-dollar bills. One for the food and one for you. Twenty won't cover the food, so that'll come out of what you earn.

"When I leave tonight," Jellnik say. "I want you to come with me."

He pour sugar in his coffee. His finger got ketchup on it that he don't see. He stir his coffee with that finger.

"I'll get you a plane ticket, and I have a storage unit you can stay in until we find you something more appropriate."

"Man," you say, "I ain't going to nobody Idaho."

"Listen to me," he say, "you can do better than this place. It's not safe for you."

"Nobody mess with me round here," you say.

He put a hand on your face where you bruised from when Pink hit you the other day. You like to flinch away, but you don't 'cause his hand feel warm.

"You don't know anything," Jellnik say. "I've been visiting New Orleans for over twenty years. You think you're one of the first boys to stand on that corner? What do you think happened to the boys who were there before you?"

You could tell Jellnik about Pink's brother, Simmy, who went puff like match smoke last month. Simmy was the first one you met when you came out here. He looked out for you, but now he gone. You know he ain't go to Idaho.

"Why you care about what happen to me?" you ask.

“Just be back at the corner around six p.m. with your personal belongings. I’ll be in a gray sport utility vehicle.”

When Jellnik get up, the stool squeal like it being stabbed. Your pancake black and crusty, still dying on that grill.

The queenie cook wearing mascara and hoop earrings, so you know he a full-on Mary. He flip the pancake to your plate. He smack the plate down. Sound like it crack, but it don’t. He shake his head at you like he better than you. You want to jump over the counter and stomp his face on the grill. Or make him suck your junk. You want to make him say your name like he mean it. But he grown. He break you in five pieces, if you try. You be on the wrong end like always.

The pancake darker than you. You don’t touch it.

You snatch all the money and run. The cook yell after you, but those just words.

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Lorraine don’t have no legs. When you go into the house with a box of chicken and biscuits, she back early from the casino downtown. She in her spot in front of the TV. You bought toilet paper and chocolate milk, too. She don’t look up. She eating a bag of orange puffs. Her lips orange. She keep them on her lap so the little kids won’t get none. None of you like to get close to her. She grab too hard.

You go to the kitchen and put the chicken down. You yell out the back door for the little boys rolling in the grass by the flat-tire pickup truck. The boys are foster boys like you. Lorraine get a check every two weeks for keeping y’all. You don’t get any because she call it rent. She take rent to the casino. If she win, she don’t tell you.

“You better find your own,” she always say. But she eat what you bring home. Her cut she call it.

You go back to the kitchen. You open the box and a roach in it. The little boys come in the back door, screaming and smacking each other. You can’t let them see that roach because then they won’t eat. You don’t have money to buy more, and the little bit of chicken you brought ain’t enough for them anyway. You pop the bug in your mouth.

Jellnik’s storage shed must be pretty big. A big man wouldn’t have a small shed. A big man would have a shed big enough to do cartwheels in. His condo in the French Quarter is small. But everything in the French Quarter small. If everything was big, it would be the French Dollar. When he put you in position, you stare out the window. There’s a tree outside with heart-shaped leaves. You count those leaves. You

never get past fifteen. In all the times you done business with Jellnik, he never say he love you. That's the only reason you listen to him at all. The other ones always love you.

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You don't want to see Pink and Quincy at the corner, but they tap-dancing extra fast. They trying to ring the last little bit of pocket change out of the tourists before it get dark. The cops won't take you in for hustling johns, but they don't stand for curfew-breakers. It don't look right for tappers to be on the street after dark. What don't look right is bad for business. Bottle caps scraping concrete make you sick like you ate a crate full of bottle caps. You wonder where Jellnik at. It's after time. You wonder if you feel better when he come around.

"Where you been at?" Quincy say.

"Not making any, I bet," Pink say. "Ain't never got his shit together, this baby here."

You tell them to suck a horse and they howl.

"You a salty little bitch today," Pink say. "You slow?"

You tell them you ain't slow. You tell them you about to get paid. You tell them you leaving with Jellnik as soon as he get here.

"Humpty Dumpty?" Quincy frown.

"That man ain't bringing you nowheres, boy," Pink say.

A gray SUV down the block. It look like it going to turn before it make it to you. You stop looking.

Quincy pinch your shoulder. "You're serious, ain't you, baby?"

"He coming for me," you say.

"I bet you twenty he ain't," Pink say.

Pink wrestle you and snatch your last from your pocket. It's only a five. Pink say that'll do until you get more. You tell him you ain't lost yet. Pink say he good for the night and leave with your five.

You only have one bottle cap for your shoe, but you going to pass some time tapping. Make some change to buy a cold drink because your mouth taste like funk. You dance until that cap break loose and roll into the gutter.

Something flash. A police car creep your way. The lights beep slow, but the car speed up. You can't see the cop driving, but hands in cuffs press on the backseat glass. Jellnik face behind those hands.

You step in the street like you going to follow. But you don't.