

SMOOTH SAILING

Lyle Cullen was back at work. It was Tuesday, mid-morning. This was his busiest time. Everybody was rolling into the gas islands, looking to buy ten or twenty dollars of gas. Then they'd come into the mart to buy junk food, and completely empty their wallets of whatever meager change they had left. He couldn't understand why people did that.

Everybody was buying American Spirit cigarettes, beef jerky, and gummy worms. New millennium health food, he called it. Lyle also noticed that he was selling a shitload of an energy enhancer called Instant Energy. It came in a little plastic bottle that had a bright red-and-black wrapper. It was small, like a nip of bourbon. He kept a twenty-four-count box of the bottles right at the check-out, next to the cash register. His boss, Frank, the fat fuck, called them an impulse purchase. Lyle knew that Frank got that name from the sales rep that came in every week. Frank was too dumb himself to come up with that scientific term for the stuff.

"How ya doin'?" Lyle said to the customer who eased up to the register.

"Not bad. Twenty bucks of regular. And this stuff, too," the young, heavysset man said as he pushed three items across the counter at Lyle. He figured the customer was a construction worker or something, owing to the size of his gut and his rough hands.

"Can I get a pack of Marlboro Reds too?" the roughneck said.

"Huh?" Lyle returned. The ringing in his ears this morning was incredibly bad. The worst ever. He could barely hear. He was feeling flushed, too. He'd been feeling this way for the last week or so, and didn't know what the hell was going on. He vowed to make an appointment at the walk-in clinic over on South Street next week to get checked out. Ever since he started taking his pills and getting on the straight-and-narrow over a month ago, he started feeling shitty. So much for good habits he thought.

If he kept feeling this bad, he was going to stop all the medicine and shit and just abuse himself. At least he felt good then.

"Reds. Marlboro Reds. Up there to the left," the fat man said.

"Oh, yeah. No problem. Here you go." Lyle reached up the giant cigarette rack behind him, and pulled down the pack of cigarettes for the customer. He had to grab the side of the counter as he reached—he was feeling so dizzy.

"You okay?" the man said to Lyle as he handed him his Credit One credit card. "You look a little flushed."

Lyle moved back to the stool and sat down to get his sea legs. "Yeah, I'm fine," he lied. "I just have this cold or flu, or something. I can't seem to shake." "Try one of these energy things. They taste like garbage but they pep you right up," the customer said, as he pulled a 5 Hour Energy vial out of the crate to show Lyle. "I take 'em all the time for
h a n g o v e r s .

Maybe I will," Lyle smiled as he gave the card back to the customer. "Credit?"
"Yeah."

"Hit cancel for credit," he said.

The construction worker fingered the electronic key pad, punched it a few times when prompted, then swept up his goodies in the plastic Mini-Mart bag that Lyle gave him.

"Later, man," he said as he walked out the door. "I hope you're feelin' better"
"Yeah, me too," Lyle said to himself as he leaned over the counter and picked one of the little red energy supplements from its display pack. He read the label. No sugar and no carbohydrates and loads of instant energy. What the hell, he thought. He ripped off the cellophane wrapper at the top, and unscrewed the cap. He felt flushed as hell.

He fished into his pants and pulled out his pill bottle. He took out his Tundra RX prescription for Tenata, and shook out two pills. Lyle was only supposed to take one pill a day because they were the maximum strength. Screw it, he thought. A double dose with the little energy drink was just the ticket to feeling better. He'd juice himself up with a little extra medicine. His own Rx for good health. Screw the doctors.

He put the two red pills on his tongue and washed them down with the 5 Hour Energy supplement. The liquid tasted sickly sweet—he almost gagged. When he finished the little bottle, he had to go over to the refrigerator case and snag a container of Gatorade—lemon lime flavor, his favorite—to wash down the bad taste in his mouth.

He settled in on his stool, and went back to reading the Sports Illustrated he had pulled from the rack to pass time. An hour quickly passed as he hawked gas and packages of Swedish fish and salted cashews. He didn't know how people could eat all the shit he sold in the store. Most of it was disgusting.

About mid-afternoon, a mini-crisis occurred out at Pump 7, the gas island farthest from the mini-mart. The intercom next to Lyle on the control board crackled to life, shaking him out of his daydreaming. He wasn't feeling any better. In fact, he felt worse, like he was going to faint at any second. He decided he was going to the walk-in clinic on the way home today, not next week, and get checked out. He needed to see a nurse.

"The pump won't turn on here," the woman's voice boomed over the speaker.

Lyle leaned over and hit the red reset button on the master control panel. "Try it again."

Silence for a minute.

"Nothing's happening. I have to get to work. I'm running late already."

"Let me reset it again, ma'am," Lyle said as he pushed the green Start button and then the red Reset button again in sequence.

"C'mon, man. I gotta get going."

Lyle looked out over the pump islands and could see that the young woman was having trouble with the pump. Typical. People had no patience with these mechanical issues, Lyle thought. This happened all the time.

He lapsed back into his best customer-speak. "Ma'am, you're not putting the pump nozzle back in its cradle to reset the machine. It won't work if you don't do that."

He heard the rattle of the aluminum pump nozzle through the speaker on the front of the gas pump as the girl struggled with the hose.

"Aaarrh. Shit. The damn hose is in my way and I can't get it in. I need some help! Can you come out here for Chrissakes?" the girl shouted out into the air.

The ringing in Lyle's ears was intense. Like a steam valve going off in his brain. He shook his head to try and clear it. There were two people in line in front of him to buy drinks and cigarettes and other shit, and he was still dicking around with the pump at

station 7. He was stressing out. So much so that he could barely hear the girl yelling into the intercom.

“Can you please help me out here?”

Silence over the intercom. Lyle made a decision. He needed to go out to the pump and reset it himself to get it working again. And probably punch the girl in the head, he thought for, being so fucking dumb. But he couldn't do that, he needed the job too much. He thumbed the intercom button.

“I'll be right out, ma'am. Please be patient.” He quickly rang up the two customers in front of him, then fished under the counter and found what he needed.

He plopped a plastic sign with a Camel cigarette ad and the words “Back In Ten Minutes” onto the counter. Lyle swung off the stool as he locked the cash drawer, and then headed out around the display area and through the door.

It was crazy. Lyle felt extremely lightheaded as he walked out of the store. His heart was starting to pound like a jackhammer as he approached the shiny pump island. He was starting to sweat. He was having an out of body experience.

The girl waited until Lyle was close.

“This thing just won't work. And I'm late for work. Can you fucking fix it?” She was clearly frustrated.

Lyle was starting to drift. He heard the girl talking way up high in his head but he couldn't hear himself answering. He was having trouble breathing. He felt faint.

“Let me try the pump, ma'am.”

Lyle took the aluminum pump handle with the long black hose from the girl, and tried to wrestle it back into its cradle in the pump. It was stiff and hard to move, and it kept getting stuck under the tire of the car. He leaned down to move the hose from under the tire. The blood rushed to his head. All of a sudden, he was incredibly dizzy. He stood up, and quickly realized that he needed to sit down.

Too late. As Lyle Cullen leaned back onto the car to stabilize himself and take a deep breath, his eyes rolled back in his head and he started to fall over. As the world started to go black, he heard the words “I'm late for fucking work!” rattle around lazily in his skull.

The last thing he remembered was the angry face of the girl yelling at him as he toppled over backwards into the tub of red plastic geraniums next to the gas pump.