

The cans clank. Obnoxiously loud, as if it's their job to alert the whole town that Jonathan is there to return the cans. To announce that good old two shoes Johnny Beau threw a good ol' rage while his parents are gone and he's returned, in the safe security of night, to destroy some evidence.

He has no idea how much he'll make off the cans, but that's not what he's really interested in. Getting rid of them is his main goal; his father never gave a rat's ass for spiked lemonade or spiked tea, his mum's never had a sip of fruity daiquiri since the early 70s and God, Johnny be damned if any of these cans are found in his house. He figured he'd done a solid job cleaning up, but Lord knows he's slipped up before, and he's willing to bet another slip up is awaiting him around the corner.

The cans clank against the glass bottles and it physically makes Jonathan shudder. A few more feet, he thinks. A few more feet across the parking lot and then when he's in the store, on the linoleum, it'll be easy cruising. This rickety cart, with a twist in one of the wheels, will whisper and glide instead of screeching and limping across the lot.

It's dark enough that he figures maybe he'll have the bottle return to himself. Or at least find an empty machine for him to use. But then again, he can't be too sure; there has been enough nice weather recently for party after party. July was always the best month for a good party, and he knows he couldn't be the only one thinking tonight is the best time to return them.

His shoulders relax when he's finally in the store and the cans are silenced for once. The only telltale that he's got them now is the large, black garbage bags he's gotten them bunched in. He's gotten them taped off with some gray duct tape because God forbid, they fall out of the bag on the short drive over to the grocer and end up all over the back of his trunk.

He passes the fancy alcohol aisle and fantasizes about being able to step up and buy them for real. He's only got a year or two to wait before his ID will work but there's a delight in doing it before.

The bottle return is empty when Jonathan finally reaches it, all the way in the back of the store. He busies himself with cans first because he's certain that there are more cans than glass bottles and he'd rather get rid of the most first.

Johnny's pretty lucky at first. All the cans he grabs for the first three dollars are dry and the machine accepts every single one. It begins to get dicey when he crosses and adds the thirty fifth can; a trickle of beer dribbles out down his fingers and palm. He stiffens, because after all, the beer is really better when it's going down your throat and not when it's sticky and trailing down your fingers. He fights the urge to wipe his hand on his jacket and instead pushes his hand back into the bag.

Now the cans are starting to be too deformed, too crumpled to be worth any dimes. Jonathan surrenders and sticks them back into the bag, searching for another can instead. Usually he'd try to be persistent, and he himself would try to bend them and dent them back into shape. But tonight, he doesn't have that patience. And if his parents were to return home and wonder where he was, well, returning cans at ten o'clock at night would be very suspicious indeed.

Johnny really gets unlucky when he moves onto the glass bottles. The first time he reaches a hand in he withdraws it with a breathless squeal, blood already issuing from a small cut across his palm. He should've known some of those clashing glasses would result in a few casualties. He spreads the bag as wide as he can and ducks his head in to see if he can spot the broken glass.

It's hard to see because the bag is black, and the light from the little can return room is dingy but he fishes the pieces out using his uncut hand and he resists the urge to close his fist on

them when he goes to throw them away. On his way back to his cart he realizes he's no longer alone.

He must remind himself, internally, to stop staring. 'Never stare,' his mum's voice echoes in his head and finally Johnny pulls his gaze away and pushes his uncut hand back into the bag, shifting to get the rest of the cans.

The figure, a tall lanky form that no doubt the school yard kids would hail "stranger danger," grips his cart as if he fears it will be ripped from him. Though Johnny isn't looking anymore, he would swear to anyone that he could feel it. He can feel the stranger's eyes, with such precision on his hunched over back, and it makes him the slightest bit sickly that he tries to go through the cans slower, just so that he can hear behind him.

The stranger doesn't need any more cans, and that much Johnny can tell by another swift glimpse over. He almost wonders if its possible for a single person to consume that much on their own. But perhaps the stranger, like Johnny, is returning the remains following a party.

Johnny is grateful the bottle return has an extra space. He's grateful the stranger doesn't take the machine directly next to him. For whatever reason, Johnny starts to feel a little nervous.

The nerves stop when he finds a clear bottle with a red lipstick stain around the mouth. Jessica Nelson's. He can tell it's hers because although he doesn't remember too much from the other night, he would recognize that red pout. And he remembers her handing the same bottle to him, telling him to finish it off for her because she couldn't. He smiles.

It was a one in a million shot that Jessica Nelson would've even shown up to his party. And she had. Jessica Nelson: bright blue eyes, red hair, red lipstick and all had made herself present at Johnny's party. He remembers her perfume being overwhelmingly lovely, enough of it hung around

her skin and it was nearly suffocating but it was a pleasurable asphyxiation. And sure, she'd spent more time on Alec Bronson's shoulder than on Jonathan, but he figured 'you had to start somewhere'.

Johnny's wristwatch, a sweet sixteen gift that he'd favored more than any car at the time, begins to beep incessantly. He tries to grapple with it for a minute or two; maybe it's his nerves or the beer making his fingertips slick, but it takes a deal longer to turn the watch off. On normal occasion, he would spare an apologetic glance to the other patrons in the space. But on this particular night, he keeps his eyes down, locked on the watch face.

The beeping finally stops, but Johnny's in a pickle now. His parents are bound to be home in the hour and he still has an untold amount of glass bottles to be returned. He could simply throw them out; tie the bag extra tight with all the rejects and never look back. After a second of thought, Johnny decides this is what he ought to do.

He takes his little bottle slips and is pleasantly surprised; nearly twenty dollars. Makes him a little resentful to have to give away the remaining glasses for free, but Johnny reminds himself that the money wasn't the original gain. His job was to get rid of them and to get rid of them alone.

Johnny is sorting them all, shuffling the remainders and the rejects into the black bag. He's about to tie it tightly closed, tight enough that the only way to open would be through ripping, when he feels a hand on his shoulder.

He fights his body's instinct to flinch and turns maybe a little too fast. But the stranger doesn't seem to notice too much.

Johnny feels like he's in *Alice in Wonderland*. The stranger's grin seems more like a grimace, poorly hewn into his face at the very last minute. It reminds him of the Cheshire Cat. And the eyes too. Bloodshot and high off his mind Johnny suspects.

"Those cans, can I have those?" and Johnny finds himself nodding, unable to force himself to make words. He swallows.

"They're all yours," and boy is he embarrassed because he can't recognize his voice ever sounding like this. Not even when he stuttered at Jessica Nelson. It's like the voice isn't his. "Some of them the machine won't take, but a lot of them are good," Johnny promises, silently hoping the stranger will finally lift his hand off his shoulder.

The stranger does the opposite; he leans in further, putting enough pressure that Johnny releases a soundless squeal.

"That's good, that's good," and Johnny knows he can't resist the face he makes when the stranger's hot breath falls onto his chin.

"I'm glad I could help," Johnny chortles, attempting to shrug the stranger's grip off his shoulder.

The stranger nods thoughtfully to himself before finally relinquishing his grip. "Do me a favor and lift the bag for me, could you?"

Johnny would argue that the bag isn't that heavy, but he knows the faster the cans are passed, the sooner he can stroll into his front door, escaping his crime. So, he lifts the bag (in one hand) and goes to set the bag in the stranger's cart.

He's amazed by the number of black bags still sitting in the cart. Whatever cans the stranger put away, it doesn't seem to have been enough, because each bag is still bulging at the black, plastic

seams. He can't do the math that fast, of course, but a quick glance assures Johnny that this stranger probably has about thirty dollars in this large bag alone. And there are still two other bags underneath it, not even counting the five dollars Johnny supposes he's sacrificing.

He sets the bag on top, but the bag starts to slosh over, like gelatin.

"Go ahead, squish the bag down if you have to," the stranger says and Johnny decides to do as he asks, because he hasn't checked his watch in a minute, and time is of the essence here, it really is. Time is of the essence, determining if Jonathan will have an ass-kicking when he gets home, or if he'll break free with his crime like a bandit.

So, he tries to squish the bag down. He really tries. But there's something much too thick in one of the bottom bags. Something much too thick. But Johnny doesn't care, because time is of the essence, it really, truly is.

In his struggle to squish and push, contort and cram the bag down, there's a little too much pressure. The cart slips away from him, and Johnny is in awe to hear the cart slide against the linoleum. He's amazed because it's *silent*.

But not *silent* in the way that it was when he pushed his own cart, because that silence was a little molested; not completely quiet because there was just the little clanking of cans. It was more like a quiet with little twinkling sleigh bells on Christmas Eve. It wasn't the moaning, groaning clatter in the parking lot against the bumpy pavement, but there was still the littlest noise.

But this? It was *silent* and Johnny couldn't help but wonder how that could be? How could the bags, thick and full, not be clanking together? How could the glasses not ricochet against each other?

Johnny dodges forward, catching the cart at the last second, and then, then he is astounded to feel how *heavy* it is.

The stranger watches him silently, and Johnny doesn't bother to hide his confusion.

“How?”

The stranger looks at him bemused and offers not a word.

Johnny's watch, sweet sixteen, again begins to chime. His parents are due to be home in the next fifteen minutes, and the grocer's nearly half hour away. But he's intrigued.

“I've got to go,” Johnny says softly, though he knows his voice isn't strong enough to articulate that. But then he offers the cart one last look and notices all his very best efforts; the cramping and cramming, all for naught. His bag still sags on top, and Johnny reasons just another minute ought to be enough to straighten it out.

So, he steps over for a final exertion of effort, and tries a different tactic. He grips the bottom of the bag and with his hand, presses down on the top of one of the bottom preexisting bags. His hand slides against the cans, the forms he can feel steadily through the plastic. Until his hand slips just the slightest further.

He stops for a minute, unsure of what this means. It's not the neck of a glass bottle, it isn't the rim of any old aluminum can. It isn't a bottle cap, misshapen and crushed under fat knuckles. It's something else in the bag, something else buried in the plastic. Something larger, something heavier. Something he can't really identify and for some reason, he has a feeling that trickles down his neck and ears that maybe, maybe just maybe he doesn't want to know.

“Go ahead,” the stranger says and his voice, up against Johnny's neck, makes Johnny's skin pimple. “Go ahead and look inside if you want to.”

Johnny knows he shouldn't. Why does he care? But his curiosity begs this of him, and he peels back the black plastic, fingers of his cut and uncut hands shaking.

The wristwatch beeps. He feels his cellphone vibrating in his pocket. But he doesn't recognize any of that. The only thing that has Johnny's attention, in the last few minutes of his tragically short life is the red. Soft red hair he remembers feeling and could feel right now if he wished. Red lipstick that doesn't look as great against the gray flesh, but rather makes him feel a little ill. The sweet blue eyes he doesn't see because they've been carved, quite artfully, from the gentle face.

He just closes his eyes and lets himself scream.