

Late Fees

by Ryan Armenta

Tuesday nights were always the weirdest in the store for Pedro. Weekend nights were busier by far, but Tuesdays were when the freaks came out: tweakers, closeted husbands from Los Feliz, has-been actors, never-would-be actors, city councilmen, members of the philharmonic, twenty-year old twinkles and their sixty-something sugardaddies, lawyers, body-building couples from the gym nextdoor, go-go dancers from the bar down the street, and every other flavor that makes up the gumbo of Silverlake. It was like a Lou Reed song had collided with a David Lynch movie and the result was an entire neighborhood. Porn, it turns out, is a great equalizer. It also ensured that Tuesdays were never boring. Once, a homeless man walked into the store, presumably to get out of the cold, walked between two aisles, unzipped his pants and proceeded to urinate on the store's already dingy carpet. When Pedro walked over to ask just what the man thought he was doing, the homeless man--who was clearly stoned out of his mind--replied, "It's a statement about Hollywood, man. This is all just one of Man's futile attempts to ward off impending decay and oblivion by making these films that will endure long after we're all gone. It's all bullshit, man", he said while

holding his penis with one hand and staring off into middle distance.

Pedro had been working four nights a week at the video store for the past six months. He needed the extra income, but he'd come to enjoy his nights renting out porn far more than his nine-to-five office job. The front third of the store was a normal video store, renting and selling non-explicit films: mainstream Hollywood releases, hard-to-find cult films, TV series, foreign flicks, and indie movies. But the store's bread-and-butter was its enormous, diverse collection of porn. If it existed—and it was legal—the store either had it, or would find it for you upon request. The store also did a brisk business selling poppers and glass bongs. There was a small section for dildos, lubes, and other assorted sexual accoutrements, but they served mostly as dusty decoration, since hardly anyone ever bought them.

Pedro arrived at five-thirty, as usual, to relieve Terri Sue, the seventy-four-year-old radical faerie who'd hired and trained him.

"Hey", Pedro offered, his standard greeting. He saw Terri Sue was wiping down DVDs and instantly recognized she'd be in a bad mood.

"I swear, these bitches need to learn how to clean up after themselves. Like I got nothing better to do than wipe your fuckin' baby batter off a DVD", Terri Sue snapped, prompting the three customers in the store to turn and look at her. "That's right, I'm talkin' about you, motherfuckers. Clean up after yourselves if you're gonna spew man gravy all over my DVDs", she said, glaring disapprovingly over her bifocals. They all just smiled and went back to browsing. Everyone in the store had gotten an expletive-filled dressing down from Terri Sue, employee and customer alike. It was a rite of passage of sorts.

"Alright, kiddo, the store's all yours. I gotta get to the bus stop because that asshole bus driver won't wait for shit. I swear that bitch has it out for me, y'know?", she said as she gathered her things and sauntered out the door.

At seven-thirty, Pedro knew the AA meeting from the church across the street would be letting out soon. The men from the group would start trickling in around eight o'clock, to seemingly replace their old vice with another. Pedro knew he'd have to grab dinner before they came in, because it'd be a good two hours before the last of them left--they were all talkers--so he put the "Be back in ten minutes" sign in the window and made his way to the taco stand down the street.

This particular stretch of Hyperion was every bit as eclectic as the people that inhabited it. There was the video store, the taco stand, a pizza-by-the-slice place, a private gym, a pair of women's dress shops that were almost never open, a Vietnamese fast food joint, a Trader Joe's, a Unitarian church, a mom and pop hardware store, and a very active gay bar—all accompanied by the constant hum of traffic and air that smelled like a mixture of fabric softener, Eucalyptus trees, and urine.

"Hey baby", Deborah, the drag prostitute, was in her usual spot, leaning against the taco stand with a handful of other prostitutes.

"Hey, Deb. Got any weed on you, by chance? It's Tuesday and the store's weird on Tuesdays—I need something to help me cope."

"Mmmhmm."

Deb whipped out a fat joint from her knock-off purse, lit up, took a hit, and passed it to Pedro. He bought her a taco plate and horchata as payment.

She took one last puff before passing the rest to him. "Baby, you know if you ever want anything more than weed, you just gotta ask. You get the friends and family discount."

"I'll ask my girlfriend."

"Ugh, bi guys." Deb made air quotes around the word "bi".

Pedro rolled his eyes. "Be safe", he said as he walked off, his buzz starting to kick in.

As he walked past the gay bar, there was a couple out front in the middle of a very loud argument. Pedro overheard the smaller of the two complain that his boyfriend had gotten a little handsy with one of the go-go boys. They were both clearly drunk, and there was an audience, so drama was guaranteed. Pedro tried to slip by as innocuously as possible, but was struck by one of their flailing hands, which also happened to be holding a lit cigarette. Pedro winced in pain. He grabbed his arm, turned and glared, expecting an apology. None forthcoming--they were too wrapped up in their own drama to notice their faux pas-- Pedro turned and walked on with a small, round cigarette burn on his forearm and his buzz ruined. *It's just not my night*, he thought.

When he got back to the store, the AA crowd was already milling about out front. Among them was someone new, a young woman. She looked to be about twenty years old, with fair skin and hair dyed blood red. She was wearing a form-fitting hoodie, a pleated skirt not nearly long enough to cover her rear, and ripped leggings that were virtually see-through. Pedro couldn't

help but try and steal the occasional glance. Girls were a relative rarity in the store.

The rest of the group eventually made their way to him at the cash register, carrying on about their various ailments, hard-luck tales, and neighborhood gossip. Trying not be too obvious, he kept tabs on Ms. Red's whereabouts. She made her way through the new releases, and cult films, and eventually back into the porn. Every so often she'd offer a coquettish glance his way, prompting him to awkwardly look away. He would always try to look busy, which just made it all the more obvious.

As the last of the regulars left, he saw on the security camera that the girl had made her way to the back of the store, where all of the more obscure porn was—testicle torture, BDSM, trans truckers, people sitting on balloons, etc. It was after ten and she'd been browsing for more than two hours. *She's probably shoplifting*, he thought. Since there was no one else in the store now, he walked back and asked her if she looking for anything in particular.

"Just browsing", she replied distantly.

He tried to look over her quickly to see if she was possibly stuffing anything in her pockets—and he realized that she really didn't have any place to put anything. If she'd tried to conceal anything in her mostly form-fitting clothes, it would

be immediately obvious, and she was only carrying a coin purse. He could see keys and cigarettes tucked in her hoodie pockets, but that was it.

"Let me know if I can help with anythi-,"

He never saw where she pulled it out from, but the knife was pointed at his throat before he could finish his sentence.

"You can empty the register and put it into one of those bags for me."

He put his hands up and walked in front of her back to the cash register. He walked slowly, trying the entire way to think of a way to get the knife from her. He briefly thought of grabbing one of the larger dildos on display and swinging it at her in hopes of hitting her in the head or the hand wielding the knife. But something stopped him. The image of news headlines began flashing through his head: "Porn-peddler Subdues Would-be Robber with Ten-inch Rubber Wang". Or worse, "Porn store clerk has throat slashed in robbery and dies clutching a rather large dildo, film at eleven." No, he decided, if he was going to get his Warholian fifteen minutes of fame in this lifetime, it wasn't going to be because he brought a rubber dick to a knife fight. And though he was at least six inches taller, and outweighed her by at least forty pounds, he decided to just cooperate and keep his jugular intact.

"There's not a ton tonight, a lot of credit card receipts", he said, hoping not to piss her off.

"Put the poppers in there, too. Is there a safe in the back?"

"The owner's the only one with that key, and anyway I don't think there's much in there either." He kept glancing out the window, hoping someone would walk by and see him being held at knifepoint, but this was the slowest Tuesday in recent memory.

"You got a cellphone? Put it in the bag. And your wallet. That watch, too."

"Can I at least keep the ID and two dollars for the bus?"

"I'll give you a ride."

"Wait, what? Uh...that's Ok, I, uh...", he said doing an almost comedic double-take.

"C'mon, you're closed now. Let's go", she said as she raised the knife.

"The store's open until midnight...I'm pretty sure I'm already gonna get fired...please, just let me..."

"Are you deaf? I said you're fucking closed. Let's go. What's in the box?"

"Leftover tacos."

"Bring 'em."

"The hell do you...?"

"BRING. THEM. I'm hungry", she said, gesturing with the knife for emphasis.

"Look, you have at least five-hundred bucks worth of stuff here, and someone is gonna call the cops eventually regardless..." She lunged over the counter and slashed his forearm and stomach with the knife. He leapt back, but there was nowhere to go, he just flattened himself against the wall, still well within her reach, if she so chose. She crawled back off the counter and resumed her threatening position, now smiling.

He felt the wound on his stomach, and though bleeding, realized it was only superficial. He stared at her, more stunned than scared.

"I said let's go, faggot", she said as though she were coaxing a friend to go for a drive.

He grabbed his backpack and leftover food and walked towards the front door. As he walked he saw her take the tape out of the CCTV. She then turned the lights off, put the Closed sign in the window and told him to lock the door. The street outside was eerily empty.

Still holding the knife in plain view, she unlocked the passenger door of an old, beat-up Toyota Tercel. She tossed the bag of cash onto the backseat and told him to get in. Seeing an opportunity, he realized he could toss his backpack and leftovers at her and start running. He looked around to see if there was anything that might obstruct his getaway, but there were nothing but open sidewalk. He turned his head back towards her and saw for the first time that her eyes were bright green. They almost glowed in the amber streetlight. Pedro tossed his backpack into the open car door and climbed in, setting the leftovers on his lap. The cut on his stomach stung sharply as he sat. She closed the door behind him, walked around, got in, and drove off up Hyperion towards Riverside Drive.

Ten minutes later, the no. 195 bus pulled up half a block from the storefront. Terri Sue got off, mumbling to herself about having forgotten her medication at the video store, and what a bitch it was having to come all the way back to get it. When she got to the store, she noticed that the lights were already off and the door locked. "What the fuck?", she shouted.