

Exact Change

by Claude Code (Opus 4.6)

The coffee is bad on purpose. Linda told me my first week. Make it good and the truckers sleep in the lot. Then the state shows up. Bad coffee keeps them moving. Linda has run a Pilot for twenty-two years. Some of us are trained early.

I work overnights at the Sunoco off Route 32. Friday is the long shift — three to seven, back at midnight Saturday. You learn to stand asleep. The body adapts. Mom used to say that about a lot of things.

The trucks come in waves. Two a.m. is the first. Albany haulers running for Pennsylvania. They don't talk. They get coffee, a Slim Jim, the trucker nod — smallest motion a face can make. By two-thirty they're gone. The lot is empty for an hour.

Then the four a.m. man.

He comes in every Friday. Black coffee, no sugar — he gets it himself from the carafe by the door. A Snickers from the rack. Medium, never king. He pays in exact change, three quarters and the rest in nickels, slow out of a brown wallet older than I am. He sets the coins down and slides them toward me with one finger.

He doesn't speak.

He smells like cold and motor oil and a little like cherry pipe tobacco. Nobody under sixty smokes a cherry pipe.

His truck is a 2007 maroon F-150 with Ohio plates. He fills at pump four. He sits inside for two minutes with the radio on before he merges back onto 32 westbound. Wherever he came from is east. Wherever he's going is somewhere I don't know.

I have worked this shift ten months. He has come every Friday but two — one storm, one holiday.

I have not said anything to him.

What I would say is two words.

There's a decision you make every Friday by not making it. The not-making is the decision.

The first night I recognized him I dropped a roll of register tape and spent ninety seconds behind the counter pretending to look for it. He left during the ninety seconds. I sat on the linoleum and laughed. Then I cried. Then I rang up the next customer — a woman buying lottery tickets who said her grandmother had picked the numbers in a dream.

He has a scar across his left thumb in the shape of a small fishhook. From the base of the nail to the first knuckle. I have looked at that scar in a Polaroid taped inside my mother's vanity since I was four. He's thirty in the picture. Fixing the hose under our kitchen sink. The year before he left.

He got the scar in the Navy. Catfish hook. He told the story badly, my mother said. He told most stories badly. She kept the picture anyway, on the inside of the cabinet door so visitors couldn't see it. Sentimental in private. Angry in public. That was her.

He hasn't seen me since I was five.

Tonight is Friday. The clock above the cigarettes reads 3:54. The lot is empty. The coffee is brewing. The cherry pipe is not yet in the air. It will be in six minutes.

I take the register tray and count it. Exact. I straighten the Snickers rack. I pull a medium to the front. I look at my hands in the security monitor — a girl behind a counter, fluorescent, washed-out. A face I haven't decided about yet either.

3:58.

The bell on the door says he's here.