

# THE WALLET

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When Elaine arrived at work the first thing she noticed was that Troy had left his wallet on the small shelf next to a half-finished cup of Coke. Troy left his food regularly, as if she were his maid, but he left his wallet less often—about once a month. The first time it happened was just her second night on the job, and she thought maybe he was testing her honesty, or, worse, that he had created some excuse to come back and see her. He had, in fact, returned half an hour later and deliberately rubbed his body up against hers as he retrieved his wallet instead of just standing at the door and asking her to hand it to him. They had made awkward small talk in the cramped booth before he finally raised his wallet in a salute, said good-bye and good luck and rubbed past her again.

Now, as she settled onto the stool for her shift, she could smell his lingering presence. She picked up the cup of Coke and placed it in the garbage can at her feet, careful to keep it upright. The cup had sweated out a puddle in the summer heat and she shook her head despairingly. She lined up her piles of quarters and dimes on the shelf in order to have something to do. Two booths down, Jose waved at her and gave her two thumbs up, a gesture he thought was cute. He was another lecherous type, always spending his breaks standing at her door looking her up and down and blowing smoke into her booth. She waved at him so he'd turn around.

In front of her now the highway was black. Every few minutes headlights would appear in the distance like slow trains but most of the time the drivers would pick the automatic lanes. Then three or four cars might come in a row and she'd be grateful to move into a rhythm—reach, grab, turn, gather, turn, reach, good night. It was annoying when people didn't bring their cars close enough, but at least it allowed her to stretch more. By midnight she had made change for twenty-six people. Several weeks ago she had started to keep track out of boredom. Her midnight record was seventy-two, her fewest, twelve.

At about three o'clock a car came toward her too fast, weaving like a firefly, before picking her booth. The brakes screeched, the muffler roared: it was a little yellow Chevette, an eighties car pocked with rust. Elaine leaned forward with her hand ready, but the driver, a young woman, made no move to pay her toll. She looked straight ahead, her face hidden by strings of brown hair, both hands locked tight to the wheel. Beside her in the front seat was a small beat-up suitcase overflowing with clothes.

Elaine said, "Good morning," and the woman said, "I need money."

Elaine hesitated. "You mean you don't have the toll?"

"No, I mean I need money." She turned now and Elaine saw her bleary eyes and splotted face. There was an ugly gash below one eye and the skin around it had swollen up and turned purple. There seemed to be an older scar on her nose, and dried blood in the corner of her mouth. Her stare was bitter and bold and it made Elaine look away.

She was about to raise the bar and tell her to go on ahead when she saw movement in the backseat. Looking closer, she saw there were two children, one about five, the other barely two, neither in car seats or seatbelts. Their eyes were wide and afraid and Elaine realized it was this that had drawn her attention to them in the dark. The little one held on to a gray stuffed animal, the older one was sucking her thumb.

José was watching her; he raised his palms and scowled. She had been trained to signal in a certain way if she was being held up, and José seemed to be waiting for this gesture. Instead, she gave him a thumbs up and surreptitiously reached for Troy's wallet. She opened the wallet to find ninety-two dollars inside. She pulled these bills out, wadded them in her fist and reached out to the woman, who took the money, gripped the wheel harder and sped away. The older girl's face, framed by the back window, receded into the darkness, her eyes like glowing stones.