

Lyle's One-Stop-Shop

By Madi Keyes

It was a miracle Madi's 2005 Dodge Neon made it out of the driveway, so the fact that it died after a ten-hour road trip wasn't a big surprise.

"Told you we should have taken the Blazer," commented Jessi.

"Yeah, well, who would have thought that my car, that can barely make it to school, wouldn't do well in the rocky mountains," Madi snapped with a sarcastic tone.

"Calm down, at least we're at a gas station," Kylee added from the backseat. "Maybe we just need to let the car rest for a bit."

Kylee was right, the vehicle was old and hasn't run this long for at least a decade, stopping at a gas station for a bit didn't seem like the worst idea. The girls stood corrected. It was ancient, the gas pumps looked older than the group of girls. The once vibrant paint was yellowed and peeling. The actual building looked like it was one strong gust of wind from collapsing. An old man sat by the door, smoking a cigarette and rocking back and forth on a creaky rocking chair.

"We're in the first five minutes of a horror movie," Madi scoffed, "this is just great."

"I think I'm going to stay in the car," Kylee added, already locking the car door.

"I'll grab you some chips," Jessi assured as she walked with Madi towards "Lyles' one-stop-shop," according to the faded sign nailed to the front of the building. As the two girls passed the old man, he reached out and grabbed onto Madi's wrist.

"You girls by yourself?" he asked with a raspy voice, probably thanks to years of smoking.

“You Lyle?” Madi snarked back, pulling her wrist from his grasp. The skin was red from how hard he held on.

“I’m afraid I can’t answer that, sweetheart,” he replied with a slimy tone. He offered a sleazy smile, but the only thing the two girls saw was his yellow and rotten teeth.

“Then I guess I can’t either,” Madi said, pulling Jessi with her into the building. The store matched its attendant. The floor was dirty and the lights flickered. The snacks one would typically find at a gas station were nowhere to be seen. The shelves were a few chip bags from being bare. The smell was the worst though, it seemed to seep from the walls and into you. Just standing there made you want a shower.

“What is that smell?” Jessi asked Madi in a hushed tone, not wanting any more attention from the man out front.

“With the way our luck’s been today, it’s a dead body,” Madi replied. “Let’s get in and out.” The girls grabbed what little the store had to offer and walked to the register, but no one was behind the counter. Madi rang the bell, thinking they were on their break and didn’t notice them walk in.

“What are you ringing the bell for?” the old man nagged, walking into the store, “He’s behind the counter.” The two girls looked at each other, trying to decipher where this invisible cashier was.

“Don’t believe me,” he smirked again, “take a look.” He took another step closer. As the old man stepped closer and closer, Madi decided to look over the counter, hoping it would appease him and they could leave. Madi didn’t take the time to answer the old man, she didn’t say a word. She grabbed Jessi’s wrist and ran out of the store, pushing past the creepy attendant.

“What’s going on?” Jessi asked, confused about what could have been what was behind the counter, what could have been so bad to get this reaction. Madi didn’t answer, only banged on the car window, getting Kylee’s attention so she would unlock the car. Once they heard the locks click, Madi ripped it open and tried to start the car, only to get a sputtering noise in response.

“What going on,” Kylee questioned Jessi, “did you guys get food?”

“No, I don’t know what happened,” Jessi replied. “She saw something and ran out like the place was on fire.” Madi hasn’t said a word, she was prioritized on getting the car to start. She only stopped when something outside caught her eye.

She looked over the counter, expecting to find nothing. At first, she saw the usual things behind a counter. A landline, some cigarettes, and a half-eaten lunch. Then she looked down.

“If you were wondering about the smell, that’s my fault,” the old man laughed, “I forget how fast they go bad.” The old man stood by the gas station door, waving at the car with his creepy smile. Madi responded by locking the doors.

As the old man retreated back into the store, the car sputtered to life. Madi pulled off into the main road, pushing the neon as fast as it could go. After three hours, Jessi found her courage to speak up. She felt that it was time for some answers.

“Madi, what was behind that counter?” Madi didn’t stop the car, she didn’t even slow down. In fact, she seemed to speed up. She looked in the rearview mirror and replied,

“Lyle.”