

CLOSING TIME

By Carlos Stanfield

Rachel sits behind the bar counter, tears stinging her eyes, and her chest heaving ragged breaths. The clattering of billiard balls and static over the radio struggle against the sounds of stifled sobs and the skittering of the creature outside. She clutches a pool cue in her hands, her nails digging into her palms with a sharp sting. The musk of old wood and sweat wafts through the air as Rachel slowly pushes herself up. The dim lights of the bar flicker as she sees it; a pale set of yellow eyes in the night, peering through the window. They dart about, the slick black body of the beast behind them completely invisible. She blinks, and the eyes are gone, sunk back into the darkness.

Rachel collapses to the floor. She looks to her side at Francis, her uncle, the man looking out for her, letting her live above his bar. Her eyes glance at his leg, at the red stain slowly expanding on the cloth tied around his thigh.

“Eh?” Francis says as he notices her gaze. “What’s with the look, kid? I told you this is just a scratch.” He grunts and shifts his body upwards against the bar. Francis’ forehead glistens in the dim light from his sweat. He rattles out a groan.

“Okay, here’s the plan, kid...” Francis says.

“I’m not a kid,” Rachel says, but Francis cuts her off.

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever. Look, we need to get out of here. That thing outside isn’t just going to wait all night,” Francis says, as he slowly lifts himself to peek outside.

Rachel did the same. The darkness was like a veil pressing against the window. She focuses and searches, but there’s no sign of the pale-yellow eyes. Still, it’s out there. The tightness in her chest screams that it’s out there.

“My van’s just outside. I get there, drive it to the door, you hop in, and we can get the fuck out of Dodge,” Francis says. He forces himself around the bar, limping as he goes.

Rachel looks down at his leg once more, and then to the door. She grips her pool cue tightly and swallows. She goes to speak, but her voice is little more than a whisper. Rachel shuts her eyes, takes a deep breath, strides forward, and places her hand on Francis’ shoulder.

“Give me the keys,” Rachel says with as much force as she could muster.

“Kid, I get that you’re trying to be brave, but let the adults handle this one. Just wait by the door. I got this,” Francis says. He fishes his keys out from his pocket.

In a flash, Rachel snatches the keys from Francis’s hand. She storms past him, trying her best not to think about what she’s doing.

“Kid! Hey, kid!” Francis says as he limps behind her.

“It’s Rachel, not kid,” Rachel says, rolling her eyes. She walks forward and throws the door open, stepping out into the dark cold of a New England night. Picking out Francis’ vehicle isn’t hard, even in this moonless dark. There’s only one van in the parking lot; painted electric

blue, with a unicorn and a tiger fighting on the side. It was tacky and ugly as sin, but right now, that van was the most beautiful thing in the world.

Rachel bolts over to the van door and flings it open. Just as she's about to enter, she feels hot sticky breath on the back of her neck. Even without looking, she knows what's there, waiting; pale yellow eyes and row upon row of small sharp teeth. Before she can think, Rachel whips around and slams her pool cue into the creature as hard as she can.

Rachel ignores the screech as she scrambles into the van, slams the door shut, and speeds over to the doorway. The second Francis was in Rachel stomps on the gas pedal. The squeal of the rubber tires drowns out the screeching of the creature. The van races off.

"Kid! Rachel! You pulled it off! I always had faith in you," Francis says.

Rachel doesn't respond. She can't. She's almost deflating as the tension leaves her body. With a flick of the finger, she turns on the radio to hear the news reports roll in. Francis takes the hint and begins searching for a station. They drive along in silence for a time, only the dim static of the radio in the background.