Speak No Evil

Carter Steeves

 As I sit out on my porch steps, I realize that ice cream for breakfast is probably the best idea I’ve ever had. I nod to myself as I take another bite of my fudgesicle and look up the street for Nathan. That bum could be the damn Flash and still manage to show up late. I’m starting to think he does it on purpose. I swallow and let out sigh. The sun’s coming up now, turning the sky a milky gray that spills over the cracked and ugly buildings before pouring onto the cracked and filthy street. I’ve gotten used to the sight of gray, so much so I can pick up on all the different shades. Turns out there are way more than I’d first thought.

 The rumbling of an engine breaks my depressing thoughts and draws my eye to the blue Dodge Stratus peeling towards my apartment. It shrieks to a stop almost taking out my mailbox—again— and I finish off my chocolaty breakfast before standing up and walking down the street, pulling the door – it was half duct-tape really – open and climbing inside.

 “Yo, Sweet Tooth, got diabetes yet?”

 I give Nathan my ‘not amused’ look and buckle my seat belt. His, of course, is undone as he speeds off down the street, little traffic to get caught in his warpath. He turns on his stereo which I immediately turn down because six in the morning is way too early for Skrillex. Nathan gives me a puppy dog pout.

 “Buzzkill,” he says as he turns the street corner onto 22nd.

 I elbow him in the arm, making him wince. What a drama queen.

 A Nathan tears through the neighborhood, I scowl at the slimy dealers already standing their corners, waiting for today’s wave of suckers to pay them to wreck their lives. They don’t even care either; they couldn’t give half a damn about what they’re doing to these poor saps, or to their families. We’re on 7th now, so Nathan finally slows down to a crawl as we snake our way through the parked cars. We stop at the end of the street behind the 7-Eleven and Nathan puts his baby in park as I unbuckle. Before he gets out, I tug at his leather sleeve, causing him to look at me over his shoulder. I arch an eyebrow at him and he’s smart enough to get it.

 “Same as usual, I gotcha.” He gives me that crooked grin of his, the one that could make a train wreck seem like no big deal, and he climbs out, leaving me to follow. As I walk through the parking lot, a high splintering sound hits my ears from the busted bottle I just stepped on, making me jump. The scattered shards send a shiver up my spine and I hurry after Nathan.

 We head inside, the little bell announcing us. Nathan heads over the Monster Energies as I set my sights on the chest chock full of frozen treats. I look up to see the clerk, a guy who looks way too old to still be working in a dead end dump like this, reading this morning’s paper while glancing up every now and then. I look back down to consider my dilemma. Drumstix are always nice, although I haven’t had a Klondike bar in a while. Ooh, maybe that Snickers ice cream bar? Nah, that’s probably dumb.

 “Shit!” A piercing clang and hissing noise assaults my ears as I turn to Nathan, standing there with a Monster all over his jeans.

 “What’re you doing, son?” The old guy gets off his stool and stretches his neck over to see what happened. He already sends 200% done with today.

 “I’m sorry about that, man. I’ll pay for – whoa!” Nathan steps towards the counter only to pull a Charlie Brown and fall flat on his ass. On top of that, when he tries to catch himself he grabs the drink rack, and promptly yanks a good 30 pounds of cans down with him.

 “Jesus, kid! You alright!?” The old guy drops his paper and moves shockingly fast over to Nathan’s side as I choose a Klondike bar as my next victim.

 “Yeah, I’m alright. Listen, bro, I’m really sorry.” Nathan takes the guy’s hand and tries to stand, but the slick tile is making him slip around like a newbie ice skater.

 “No, that’s fine just, just, come on, boy get on your feet already!”

 I zip around the counter and open up the register, pressing my palm against it to keep it quiet which isn’t hard thanks to Nathan kicking those cans around. I start shoving bills into my pockets, my sticky fingers well-honed from years of practice.

 “I’ll pay for these, bro. I mean they’re all shook up you know and I wrecked your floor and shit, I’m real sorry.” Nathan’s talking a mile a minute now, my cue to hurry the hell up, as he starts trying to pick up the cans he dropped.

 I’m almost done, stuffing the last of the cash into every pocket I’ve got, except my right jacket one as that’s reserved for my Klondike bar. Wouldn’t want our loot to get all damp now, would we? I slide the drawer closed and make to bug out when a picture on the counter makes me pause. There’s the old guy, an old lady who looks like she belongs in a Martha Stewart catalogue, and a little girl around eight maybe.

 She’s in a wheelchair.

 And she has no legs.

 I taste my fudgesicle making a comeback, but I can’t stop staring at her smiling face, at the stumps where her knees should be. I’m stuck and it’s costing me.

 “That’s okay, son. Just get up, you hear? I’ll get some towels.” He turns and it’s enough to break the spell I’m under. I dive behind the counter.

 “No wait!” That’s Nathan, not sounding so chill anymore. “I got some right here. I was gonna buy ‘em anyway.” I peek around the edge of the counter to see Nathan with a fresh roll of paper towels, the old guy kneeling down to help him. Our eyes meet and he glances at the door. ‘Go dumbass!’

 I dash to the door, opening it just enough to squeeze through, but not enough to make the bell go off. I run full speed around the store to Nathan’s Stratus, throwing myself into the passenger side where I sit gasping for breath, my fumbling fingers jamming the seat belt into it’s buckle. By the time I get my breath back, Nathan is in the car, turning the engine over and gunning out of there.

 “Whew! I almost thought we were made there!” He’s grinning again, that crooked grin of his, and it’s pissing me off. I punch him hard in his shoulder, enough to make him swerve a bit and clip a mailbox. At least he only got the lid.

 “Ow! What the hell’s that for?!”

 I point behind us, then back at myself, a scowl painted on my face.

 “What? You mean the camera?” Nathan reaches over, still driving way over the speed limit and opens the glove box to reveal an old school VHS tape. “I pulled it last, there ain’t nothing on that feed, but static. Besides that guy’ll never see us again.” I shake my head, pointing back, then to me, then back, then to my legs as I shake my head again. To anyone else it’d be complete gibberish, but Nathan gets it. After a minute his eyes go soft and his tone changes.“Jesus, I’m sorry, Sweet Tooth. This must suck for you. Look, it’s a messed up world. You either step on the other guy’s fingers, or you’ll get kicked down into the dirt. You and I both know how it feels to be the one getting kicked.”

 I turn away from him, my hand drifting up to touch the jagged scar that stretches over my throat. I know he’s right. Nathan’s always been right, but I still feel like shit.

 “Why don’t you eat the ice cream you boosted? It’ll make you feel better while I get us some real breakfast.”

 I nod, pulling out my Klondike bar. It’s still cold. I take a bite, but it’s not as good as I expected. I’m thinking maybe something’s wrong with it so I look down at it. Huh, that’s one more shade.