

The Chain – Flash fiction

A Metaphoric Tale

Location: Caltex gas station somewhere in Middle America – circa 1970 – and the ubiquitous red naugahyde sofa

Slim and grungy in her stained overalls, the gas attendant punched the time clock. End of shift. Off to hang out with the gang at Reilley's and shoot some pool.

She reclaimed the bolt cutter she had casually laid on top of the reception desk, winked at Liz who looked more squashed than usual behind the cash register and strode towards the door that separated the waiting room from the pump area. Liz saw her stop in mid-stride. The car attendant swallowed hard to ease the sudden tightness in her throat. The blond woman had returned.

Trapped in the corner of the attendant's eye, the woman was more aglow in a demure black suit than the Coca-Cola neon flickering on the wall behind her. Although a regular at the Caltex pumps, corner of Smith and 3rd, it was only last week that the station attendant had glimpsed the woman's name.

Denise. The woman had paid for gas as she always did, by holding the bills between long, manicured nails, as she might a cigarette holder and, as always, the station attendant took the bills with grease-stained fingers. The gold band on the woman's finger twinkled as it always did.

That particular day, just as the attendant began wiping the windscreen with ever enlarging strokes of the chamois, the woman had stepped out of the black Camaro. Eagle-hard eyes soft on the woman, she watched her sashay towards the reception desk. From deep within her breast rose the sigh of the one who wants but cannot have.

So, eyes trained beyond the glass door, she began rubbing her fingers with the greasy bandanna that dangled from her back pocket in a vain attempt to remove the grease that had settled inside the creases of her skin.

A few minutes later the blond woman had returned, a small box tucked under one arm. She resumed her place behind the wheel, but the Caltex invoice Liz had written up for her fluttered to the ground. Blink quick, the attendant handed it back to the driver. Denise.

The name had dissociated itself from the rest of the black print. Denise. It had all happened too quickly for even one more detail to come into focus. Denise. Only Denise.

That night, the gas attendant had calligraphed the name inside the rainbow heart she had drawn with wax crayons and pinned to the curtain that shielded the kitchen window. She smiled at it while assembling her meagre dinner and Neil Diamond rocked inside the cheap tape deck she had won at Reilly's.

Bolt-cutter solid in her hand, unflinching and proud in her stained overalls, the gas attendant noticed the woman now seated at the edge of the red vinyl sofa. She had come to have a tire repaired and was flicking through a magazine while she waited.

When she noticed the overalls, the woman's mouth curled up at the corners, hesitantly at first, but smile she did. The station attendant's heart ached, as if from a fresh bruise.

Blond hair tinted pink by the red flicker of the Coca-Cola sign on the wall behind her, the woman silently beckoned her to come closer. She moved close enough to feel the woman's knees hard against hers. She held out a hand and the woman took it.

In the woman's touch was the invitation to sit. In the station attendant's touch was the invitation to stand, to walk through the door and into the world beyond.

The blond woman did stand up, her hand tucked inside the attendant's, but a chain that held her captive clinked – the chain links of good wifely behaviour, of motherhood, of what-would-the-neighbours-think, didn't allow her anywhere near the door. She sat down.

Bolt-cutters jaw already hard against a thick link, the gas attendant grinned a cocky smile. The blond woman shook her head. She gathered the heavy chain protectively to her breast with the one hand while, with the other, she gently muzzled the steel jaw and eased it away.

The gold band on the woman's finger twinkled as it always did.

The gas attendant understood. She set the bolt-cutter carefully on the woman's lap and, for a brief moment, she watched it glint dully, heavy, foreboding almost, against the black cloth of the woman's skirt.

As the wolf backs away hungry but undeterred, the attendant moved away, past the desk, past the vending machine, past the glass door that led to the pump area. Once level with the black Camaro, she lifted one of the windshield wipers. Out of her back pocket, she pulled the grimy bandanna she always placed there.

She laid it flat against the glass and let the wiper snap back.

End of shift. Off to hang out with the gang at Reilley's and shoot some pool.

The Chain© C.C. Saint-Clair, 2006