

INDEPENDENCE NIGHT

by David M. Hamlin

Lily unlocked the back door of the thrift store using a key that didn't belong to her.

The back entrance was substantial, its metal frame and door thick and heavy. Lily tried to push it open, but it barely moved. She pushed harder and the effort sent a sharp pain up her arm, the fresh bruise and her wrenched shoulder throbbing. She winced and a small yelp escaped, but she recovered and leaned her back against the door until it opened just enough for her to slide through.

So far, so good.

When Lily asked her across-the-hall neighbor Clara to borrow the key, the request drew a quizzical look.

“What's up?”

“I'm kind of embarrassed,” said Lily, “but Donny and I are a few bucks shy on the rent this month, so earlier today I bundled up a batch of clothes we don't wear and some of my costume jewelry. I schlepped it down to your shop and the owner – “

“Len.”

“Yeah, I guess so. I was hoping you'd be there, but he said you were on your lunch break. Anyhow, Len bought the stuff. The clothes weren't worth all that much, but he really liked one necklace, said he'd make good money on it. I think I got a good deal.”

“He's a sweetheart, all right. So, what's all this got to do with my key?”

Lily sighed.

“Well, the thing is, a couple of Donny's old tee shirts were in the stuff I sold. Donny says one of them is his all-time favorite and he's pretty. . .well, he's seriously angry about it.”

Clara stared at Lily for a moment, not sure what to make of what she heard. While she pondered, she noticed for the first time that there was a welt on Lily's cheek, an inch or so below the left eye.

“You okay, girl? You run into a door or something?”

Lily blushed and winced. There was a pause before she answered.

“Kitchen cabinet,” she said, “I forgot to close it and walked right into the damn thing.”

“Uh-huh,” said Clara.

“So, the thing is, I promised Donny I’d rescue his silly shirt, but I wanna be sure somebody doesn’t buy it before I can get it back. I was hoping --“

“I get it,” said Clara. “Wait here, I’ll get the key for you.”

One side of the shop was lined with racks of used clothing on hangers. The women’s aisles held a wide variety of options – blouses, skirts, slacks, dresses, sportswear – while the smaller men’s section displayed mostly frayed jeans and used cowboy and tee shirts. Beyond the clothing, tables displayed all manner of discarded housewares, dishes, cookware, tools and collectibles; one table was devoted to used paperbacks. There were banks of fluorescent light fixtures hanging from the ceiling but when the place closed for business every evening, Len turned all but two rows of lights off, a compromise between security and cost. Lily thought it was a little spooky, but she was determined so she walked slowly and quietly down an aisle in the women’s section.

At the end of the aisle was a full-length mirror. Lily paused there, leaning in to get a better look at the welt on her cheek; it had blossomed, a purple contusion now large enough to dominate her face. She touched it lightly, as gently as possible, but even that hurt. She turned away, moving as briskly as she could to the rack of men’s tee shirts.

It wasn’t hard to find the shirt. The thing was hideously orange, a snarling neon green snake imprinted on its chest. She took it off the rack, replacing the hanger and draping the shirt over her sore shoulder. She walked to the center of the store and stood, her gaze drifting from one table to another.

She bent over, hunching down in hopes that anybody passing by the windows at the front of the store wouldn’t notice her, and made her way to the table chock-a-block with used tools. She quickly snatched up two screwdrivers and slipped them into a pocket. Still bent over, she scurried to the back of the shop, pulled the door shut with her good arm and locked it.

The apartment Lily shared with Donny was one of a dozen in a building a few blocks from the store. Lily parked her battered Chevy on the street and walked through the parking lot toward the entry doors. She stopped at the parking spot where Donny’s bright red, tricked out pickup sat, staring at it for a long moment before she moved on. She turned and carefully backed her way into the hallway to avoid any stress on her shoulder.

She walked down the hall toward the last two apartments and very gently tapped on Clara’s door.

“Hey, Lily. How’d it go?”

“I got it. Thanks.”

Clara held the door open and swept an arm toward the living room.

“C’mon in.”

Lily stepped in and Clara pushed the door shut. She turned to lead Lily to the sofa and saw the change in the bruise on Lily’s cheek.

“Lord, girl, that’s nasty.”

Lily sighed and nodded.

“Like I told you, he was furious when I told him I’d taken this thing over to the shop and sold it.”

Lily held up the shirt. Clara groaned.

“That’s almost as ugly as your shiner,” she said. “You told me he went all macho on you about it, I figured it would be something special. Only thing special about this thing is, nobody in their right mind would wear it.”

Lily reached in her pocket and pulled out the thrift store key.

“Here,” she said, “I hope you don’t get into any trouble, letting me use it and take the shirt back.”

Clara raised her eyebrows and chuckled.

“Not a chance. Len’s got so much junk in that place, he’ll never notice. Besides, even if he does notice, I’ll just tell him somebody bought it. Only thing that matters is, I got the key back so I can open up in the morning. Len doesn’t get upset about much, but he’s a real stickler for opening on time. I keep telling him the only reason he hired me was so he could sleep in on work days.”

Lily pulled the screwdrivers from her pocket.

“I hope he won’t notice these are missing, either. There were a bunch of them on the table, you know?”

“You swiped them too? What the hell for?”

Lily tried to smile, but it hurt and the smile disappeared instantly.

“They’re for me,” she said.

“How so?”

“I’m sorry to say so, Clara, but I wasn’t exactly straight with you earlier. I told you we needed cash to pay the rent.”

“And?”

“I’m not using the money for rent.”

“No?”

“No. I mean, it’s true we’re short this month. Donny’s payment on that damn truck of his eats up most of what he makes and he doesn’t make much to begin with. I told Donny what I’d done to raise some cash, but the only thing he cared about was his precious tee shirt. He went off on me.”

Lily pointed to her cheek and then held out her bruised arm.

“I’m hurting here, too,” said Lily, pointing to her midriff, “I think maybe I got a cracked rib.”

Clara stared at her friend.

“For a lousy tee shirt? Sonuvabitch! He done this before?”

Lily grimaced.

“Let’s just say it’s not the first time. Only reason I’m not in the hospital is ‘cause I swore I’d get the shirt back and he backed off.”

Clara let out a noise, a feral growl which made Lily jump a little. Before Clara could say anything, Lily held up her hand.

“But this is the last time,” she said. Her tone was confident and strong.

Clara tilted her head just a little, considering, and then she smiled.

“You’re leaving him.”

“Tonight,” said Lily. “On the drive over to break into the store, I made up my mind.”

Clara grinned.

“You didn’t break in, honey. You had a key.”

“If you say so.”

Lily picked up the snake shirt and spread it out on the coffee table. She carefully folded it. When the fold was just right, she centered it on the table and pointed at it.

“Next time you see him, tell him I kept my promise.”

Clara nodded.

“More than the bastard deserves,” she said, “but I’ll be sure he gets it. Along with a piece of my mind. So, I get it about the shirt – girl’s gotta do what she’s gotta do – but what’s up with the screwdrivers?”

Lily’s eyes flashed.

“Justice,” she said.

Clara gave her a puzzled frown, but Lily waved her off.

“You’ll see. But, right now, I gotta get going. He’s over at our place; too many beers and a couple of hits from his pot stash pretty much guarantee he’s passed out on the couch. Time he comes around, it’ll be too late for him to take another shot at me. Thanks for everything.”

Lily stood and moved around the table, using her good arm to give her neighbor a hug.

“My pleasure,” said Clara. “Listen, I got a secret stash, emergency money, keep it in the freezer. You need some extra, I can give you some.”

“No, thanks,” said Lily, “you’ve done enough.”

Clara opened her door and Lily walked out, turning to wave as she went down the hall.

Very slowly, fully focused, Lily surveyed the entire parking lot. Certain there was no one else in the lot, not even somebody sitting in their car, she approached Donny’s flashy red truck.

She went to the passenger side first, pulling gently on the door handle to confirm that it was locked. Satisfied, she took one of the screwdrivers out of her pocket and rammed it into the key hole. She wrenched it back and forth until the lock slot was well and truly mangled. She took two steps back and leaned against the car behind her for support and maximum leverage. She lifted her right leg, centered her shoe against the screwdriver handle and pushed as hard as she possibly could. When she lowered her leg, the screwdriver remained in place, deeply wedged into the lock.

She walked around to the other side of the cab and repeated the process on the other door. The second screwdriver was a bit longer than the first, so she drove it further into the lock.

She walked to the front of the truck and turned to evaluate her work. The truck looked like it had sprouted strange plastic appendages, one orange, one black.

“Gonna be a while ‘fore you come lookin’ for me, Donny,” she said. “If you even bother.”

She walked to the street, climbed into her car, checked her purse to be sure she had the extra cash from her earlier transaction and pulled away from the curb.

She drove all night. Her route was aimless. She had no destination in mind but with each mile she grew more confident that, all in good time, she'd end up in a better place.

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Independence Night originally appeared in Potato Soup Journal & Potato Soup Journal 2303 Anthology.