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INT. POPCORN COUNTER. DAY.

SLOW FADE UP on a concession stand by the main entryway of Knight's Retail, a cut-rate Wal-Mart-style megastore.

The guy behind the counter, ROBERT BOYER, is in his early twenties, and could almost be a good-looking TV star type if it weren't for the unbrushed hair, the unshaven face, and the ridiculous uniform designed to humiliate all minimum wage workers.

A customer, TONY, who is a large, shaven-headed African-American male, couldn't care less about Robert's shitty minimum-wage paycheck. He came for corn.

TONY

Yeah, gimme a medium diet soda and a medium popcorn.

ROBERT

Butter?

TONY

'Scuse me?

ROBERT

Would you like butter?

TONY

Please.

ROBERT

Well, were you going to tell me you wanted butter?

TONY

Huh?

ROBERT

You didn't say "medium popcorn WITH BUTTER." When were you planning on informing me of your butter desires?

TONY

I just did.

ROBERT

But I had to ask you, so that doesn't count. I shouldn't have to ask you, you should tell me.

Robert fills the popcorn cup halfway up, and butters the middle.

TONY

But you people always ask.

ROBERT

"You people"? What's that supposed to mean? What are ya, rrrrRACIST?

TONY

Can I just get my popcorn, please?

ROBERT

Hold on a second. We're not done yet. Really, you got somethin' against white people?

TONY

Man, I don't care who I buy my popcorn from. Would you just give it to me, please?

ROBERT

What if I said, "You people always want butter"? You're saying you wouldn't have a problem with that?

TONY

Look, man, just forget the popcorn, all right?

ROBERT

Oh no. I've already put butter halfway down. I can't reuse this cup.

He fills the cup all the way, and prepares to add more butter, but Tony has already left.

ROBERT

Fuckin' guy.

Now standing beside Robert is GREGORY MATTHEWS, the typically pompous middleman assistant manager. His manner is reminiscent of a kindergarten teacher who secretly despises kids.

GREGORY

Ah, Robert? I, ah, hope I didn't hear what I think I just heard.

ROBERT

You didn't.

GREGORY

That's good. It wouldn't behoove you to use profanity in front of customers.

Robert dumps Tony's popcorn in the trash.

ROBERT

We got ourselves a spoil.

GREGORY

I'll take care of it. Can you, actually, go sweep up in the men's room? There's napkins all over the floor.

ROBERT

You serious?

GREGORY

Ah, yeah.

Robert shakes his head, and heads off in that direction. As Gregory writes down a number on a little clipboard behind the counter, another CUSTOMER approaches.

CUSTOMER

Can I get a small popcorn, no butter?

GREGORY

Actually, I'm the manager? I'll find someone to help you in just a second.

FADE OUT.

ROLL MAIN TITLES.

INT. ROBERT'S ROOM. SUNSET.

Scattered papers and CDs adorn the floor. Various Stephen King books and "how-to" martial arts texts have actually made it to the bookshelf, but the room still ain't pretty. Nor is it very big. Posters for Star Wars and Enter the Dragon cover up the larger holes in the wall, while spiders live in the smaller ones.

Robert is sprawled, face-down, on a futon mattress. A Darth Vader-shaped alarm clock stands guard near his head.

The clock turns to "21:00." Darth Vader kicks into gear, as the "Imperial March" plays.

VADER ALARM CLOCK  
Impressive. Most Impressive. But  
you are not a Jedi yet.

The Imperial March repeats. Robert reaches out, and knocks Darth over. The dark lord continues to talk, as Robert sits up, and slowly looks at his watch.

ROBERT  
Fuck.

Robert shuffles amidst the junk on his floor, and finds his "Right Guard." Reaching up under his shirt, he applies it liberally.

Offscreen, Robert's eternally ailing GRANDMA pipes in.

GRANDMA  
Robert! I'm hungry! Come make me  
dinner!

ROBERT  
I gotta go to work!

GRANDMA  
What?

Robert gets up and opens his bedroom door.

INT. HALL - CONTINUOUS

ROBERT  
I gotta go to work!

INT. FRONT ROOM - CONTINUOUS

He heads through the hall into the front living room/kitchen. Grandma is sitting in a comfy chair, barely noticing some mundane program on TV about UFOs.

GRANDMA  
You don't work now!

ROBERT  
I do this week. Need the overtime.

GRANDMA  
Well, what am I gonna eat?

ROBERT  
There's leftovers. Heat 'em up.

GRANDMA  
I don't want leftovers.

ROBERT  
Well, is that my problem?

GRANDMA  
Don't you talk to your grandmother  
that way!

ROBERT  
(heading out the door)  
Bye, Grandma!

Grandma sighs, and turns her attention to the TV.

GRANDMA  
Oh, not this crap again.

And yet she doesn't change the channel.

EXT. BOYER HOUSE. SUNSET.

The house is small, wooden, and run-down, with a porch that hasn't been used in years.

Robert runs down the front steps, and into his beat-up El Camino. The engine BELLOWS its presence.

And he's off, down the dirt driveway.

INT. ROBERT'S CAR. DUSK.

Robert heads down the four lane, occasionally singing (badly) along with the Native American chant music on his car stereo.

Up ahead on the left, he sees a wrecked pick-up on the shoulder.

EXT. WRECKED PICK-UP. DUSK.

The driver is keeled over, and bleeding from his mouth. He is a young guy, square-jawed with short, slightly curly hair. Not the sort of guy you'd expect to see driving a pickup truck, and especially not in this outfit of a blue Hawaiian shirt and tan cut-off short.

Robert drives right by. He's got no time for this.

EXT. MALL. NIGHT.

Off exit 56, in the middle of nowhere, stands the mall: a big, blocky, functional piece of work. All the stores look closed except for Knight's, which proudly sports a banner declaring "Now open 24 hrs."

Robert pulls in near the main mall entrance, deliberately parking some distance from Knight's. He gets out of the car, opens the trunk, and pulls out his crumpled work uniform. Slamming the trunk shut, he heads for the main entrance.

Sitting on the curb by the entrance, smoking a cigarette, is SHANNON CROWELL, 26, your typical small-town kinda guy: hair short on top and long at the back, mustache, blue jeans, pocket knife, cowboy boots, and a T-shirt bearing the statement: "If you can't run with the big dogs, stay on the porch." No doubt that nearby Chevy truck with the Confederate flag decal in the back window is his.

Shannon notices Robert's work uniform.

SHANNON

'Ay, man, you work at Knight's?

ROBERT

Yup.

SHANNON

Well shit, me too. You new here?

ROBERT

Not really.

SHANNON

Just never worked the graveyard shift, huh.

ROBERT

Correct.

SHANNON

Well, welcome aboard. We need all the help we can get.

(extending his hand)

Shannon.

ROBERT

Robert.

He shakes Shannon's hand.

ROBERT  
You coming in?

SHANNON  
I'll be in in a second. Gotta  
finish this cigarette.

ROBERT  
That shit's bad for you, you know.

Without even looking at Robert, Shannon flips him off. Robert laughs.

INT. MALL. NIGHT.

The stores in here are barricaded with steel shutters, save three: FUNLAND ARCADE, which is alive with artificial lights and sounds; MALL TWIN THEATERS, gradually closing down for the night, and currently showing the two most popular movies in the country; and of course KNIGHT'S, the shining light at the end of the hall.

There's a miniature "court" in the center of the mall, which boasts dirt, one tree, and a little coin-operated rocket ship for toddlers.

A CHILD sits at the edge of the soil, drinking from a large soda cup.

Robert walks past the arcade. No-one is playing any of the games, but as always, they have a life of their own. The owner of the arcade, STAN, wearing sunglasses (the over-the-glasses "Terminator" shades often worn by old people) and sporting a goatee, is sitting motionless in a small change booth, with purple light shining in his face.

ROBERT  
Hey, Stan.

Stan looks up, then down again. Robert accepts this as acknowledgement, then moves on.

INT. KNIGHT'S. NIGHT.

Knight's is the ultimate family store. Tools, toys, clothes, even groceries: you name it, they've got it stacked to the ceiling. At the main entrance is the popcorn stand, and a small hamburger restaurant is adjacent.

Cash registers are lined up at both this main entrance and the entrance from the mall, but these latter ones aren't used on the night shift.

Like all major mega-stores of its kind, Knight's has no windows, and is lit by unchanging fluorescent fixtures. If the clocks were to stop, there'd be no way of telling what time of day it was.

The lone cashier tonight is BRITTANY FOX, a female equivalent of Shannon: pretty, but hidden behind way too much hairspray and blue/green eyeshadow. She'll probably be overweight with three kids less than fifteen years from now.

Brittany is taking this quiet moment to carefully paint her nails green. She doesn't notice Gregory coming up behind her, until he lays his hands on her shoulders.

Brittany starts, and smudges the nail polish

GREGORY  
Hello, Brittany.

Brittany hits him.

GREGORY  
Ow!

BRITTANY  
Goddamit, Gregory, don't come up behind me like that!

GREGORY  
I'm so sorry.

He moves back in, and starts giving her a back rub.

BRITTANY  
What are you doin' here, anyway?

GREGORY  
Jeff called in sick, so I guess you're stuck with me for the night.

BRITTANY  
Goddamn it.

She pulls away from his back rub, and goes back to her nails. Gregory will not be denied. He tries another tack.

GREGORY  
So, Brittany. Have you seen that new Leonardo DiCaprio film yet?

BRITTANY

Not yet. I been workin' too hard.

GREGORY

Because I'm, ah, planning on seeing it Saturday. Maybe we should go together?

BRITTANY

I gotta work.

GREGORY

I could probably find someone to cover your shift.

BRITTANY

I don't know. My Momma might need me to help cook OH HEY SHANNON!

Shannon has just entered, in his work uniform. Brittany breathes a sigh of relief.

Shannon, not recognizing Gregory, walks right up in his face.

SHANNON

You givin' her a problem, Fagboy?

GREGORY

Actually, I'm the manager?

SHANNON

(beat; lets this sink in)  
You tellin' me Jeff up and quit?

GREGORY

Ah, no. He actually called in sick.

SHANNON

Well, shit. So you're the manager, huh?

GREGORY

Yeah.

SHANNON

You know her boyfriend could kick your ass, right?

GREGORY

Ah, I think I could take care of myself.

(MORE)

GREGORY (cont'd)  
But it's immaterial, since Brittany  
and I were only engaging in  
friendly conversation. Isn't that  
right, Brittany?

BRITTANY  
Sure.

Shannon turns away from Gregory, and gets closer to Brittany.

SHANNON  
So when you and me gon' fuck, huh?

BRITTANY  
You're DISGUSTIN'!

She tries to hit him, but he dodges quickly.

BRITTANY  
You're lucky my boyfriend hasn't  
KILLED you!

SHANNON  
Bring him on, man!

He flexes his arm, and makes a fist.

SHANNON  
How'd you like to see this in back  
of your boyfriend's face?

BRITTANY  
Yeah, as if.

SHANNON  
You'd probl'y rather see it between  
your legs, huh.

He takes off running before this insult even has time to register. It takes a split second, but Brittany soon turns red and runs off in pursuit.

GREGORY  
Ah, Brittany? Brittany?

Robert slowly ambles in from the mall entrance, uniform in hand.

GREGORY  
Robert? Are you on tonight?

ROBERT  
Yeah. Are you?