**An Absence of Pearl**

In the desolation of the desert, the hardened dirt was visible only by the flashing neon light that radiated from the gas station’s sign.

Tonight, the desert rolled on unperturbed, and the only audible sound came from the hum of an electrical current illuminating the scattered brush and tumbleweeds below. The rocky plateaus in the distance divided the horizon, barely visible in the light of the crescent moon.

Inside the station, The Attendant stood erect behind the counter. No television, radio, or computer occupied his attention. His glassy eyes stared vacantly in front of him. Somewhere to the left, an empty refrigerator groaned with age.

The Attendant’s mind was static. No thoughts plagued him tonight. Every so often, his pale face would turn a bright hue of green as his skin reflected the flashing neon sign outside. He could almost hear the contact that the photons made as they glided through the windows. Click. Click. Click.

A faint rumble caused The Attendant to break his trance. A red sports utility vehicle had just pulled into a gasoline pump in front of the station. The headlights of the vehicle washed out the green light, and the engine engulfed the sound of the protesting refrigerator. Abruptly, the rumbling muted, and the headlights extinguished. Out stepped a man and a woman from the vehicle.

They entered the station, their wary eyes flitting to and from different details on the inside. No bell announced their arrival, but The Attendant acknowledged them regardless with a slow blink.

The man looked around the nearly-empty building, his fingers tapping erratically against the side of his leg. The woman looked to be in a constant state of confusion, with her brows knitted tightly together and her hands clasped, pink from what could only be an exhausted wringing.

The man swallowed and faced The Attendant, tugging at his dirty flannel shirt as if he was too hot. “Um, hello. Do you mind helping us?” He cleared his throat, and his ears turned a shade of crimson. “We’ve, uh, we’ve been driving for a while—my wife and I—” he nodded to his wife, the woman, in an awkward sideways manner, “and we haven’t really seen any towns or anyone else on the road for what feels like forever. Could you tell us—where exactly are we?”

The Attendant gave another slow blink, and then replied monotonously, “You are exactly where you need to be.”

The woman gave a small cough, took out her handkerchief from the breast pocket of her faded green dress, and said in a mousy voice, “Excuse me?”

Her husband, who’d straightened up to his full height by now, said “What does that mean?”

The Attendant looked at the woman, and then at the man. “You are exactly where you need to be. You have come a long way.”

The man clicked his tongue once, and shifted his weight from foot to foot. “Yes, exactly; which is why we need you to tell us where we are so that we can get home the right way.”

In the back of the station, a bag of chips fell off of the shelves and onto the white tile floor.

The Attendant showed no emotion. “Where is your home?”

“I—” the man stopped suddenly and closed his mouth so hard his teeth clicked together audibly. The muscle in his jaw jumped.

After a breath of silence, the woman whispered, “We don’t remember.”

The Attendant’s expression didn’t change, but his voice raised in pitch ever so slightly. “You don’t remember?”

The man emitted a short, clipped sigh. “We don’t remember anything. We just remember driving.”

“All we know is that we have to get home,” the woman added weakly. Pools of hopelessness flooded her eyes, and she gave her husband a quick, pleading glance.

“That sounds frustrating,” The Attendant replied.

The man abruptly rolled his eyes, grabbed his wife by the shoulder, and turned back towards the door. “Let’s go, woman. It’s obvious that this prick isn’t going to help us.”

From the woman’s throat came a strangled sound of protest that was almost too quiet to hear. The green glow from the window reflected in the moisture of her wide eyes.

The man’s heavy work boots thumped against the ceramic as he headed towards the door.

“You have to keep driving,” The Attendant said suddenly, and the man stopped and turned to look at him again.

“We were going the right way?” the woman inquired, pressing the handkerchief to the back of her neck to wipe the sweat away.

The Attendant nodded once, at glacier pace. “Later, there will be a fork in the road. Depending on where you are going, you will have to choose eventually.”

“We don’t *know* where we’re going,” the man huffed.

The corner of The Attendant’s mouth curved upwards microscopically. “No one who comes through here does.”

“You must be high on something,” the man said, and then looked at the woman. “Pay him ten and then meet me at the car.” With that, he left the station, the glass door shutting sharply behind him with a loud thud.

The woman approached the counter and paid The Attendant with shaking hands. A large purple bruise, just halfway visible, emerged from beneath the three-quarter sleeve on her right arm.

The Attendant moved to place a palm on her wrist. “There will be a crash, and you both will be separated.” Ignoring her shocked expression, he continued. “This, I will do for you. Neither of you will be harmed.” The urgency of the situation could not be found in his tone, but it sparked through the air like the presence of lightning before thunder. “You will not see him again. When you reach the fork on foot, go right. He will go left.”

The woman did not seem struck by this. She nodded slowly, mimicking The Attendant. The money she had placed on the counter did not get put away in the register, nor did it get withdrawn into her purse.

She turned wordlessly and exited the store. The Attendant watched as she climbed into the car with her husband.

The engine revved to life, and the headlights flickered on once more, filling the station with a harsh yellow light. The car pulled out of the parking lot and continued down the road, taking the obnoxiously growling muffler with it.

Silence consumed the store once again. All was still. Click. Click. Click.