

Miss Kenner and Me

By Nate Southard

I stand in Miss Kenner's living room and wait for her to make up her mind. It's a week after graduation. She shakes her head, dark curls swaying like the branches of a willow, and tells me we can't do what we used to anymore. I tell her I love her, but she just shakes her head some more, says I don't know what love is yet.

She's wrong. I know just fine, because I'm in love with her.

That's when she tells me to get out of her house.

I stare at her a minute, and I know I probably look like an idiot. I don't care, though. Right now I just want to know why she's saying we need to stop, why she wants me out like I'm some stranger who snuck in through a back window.

"It was fun," she says. She shrugs a little, and it makes her look younger than me. Not a lot, but a little bit. "You got your grade. It's just time to call it a day."

"Wasn't about a grade."

"If you say so."

"It wasn't, and I don't want to call it a day. I don't want to stop this."

"And what do you want, Jacob?"

"You," I say. I don't know what else she expects. "I want you, Miss Kenner."

She jerks away when I reach for her hand. "You need to go."

"I'm eighteen. There's nothing wrong with it."

"Keep telling yourself that, Jacob. Neither one of us believes it."

I do, though. I stare at her a little longer, keeping my eyes on hers. She's wearing glasses with wire rims, and I don't need to glance down to know she's wearing a peach T-shirt that's kind of baggy and a pair of jeans that's anything but. I prefer her in the clothes she wears to teach algebra. Without closing my eyes I can see the dark skirt that drops just past her knees, the heels of her shoes and the tan pantyhose. I can see the black dress shirt that she buttons except for the very top. She leaves that one open to show the hollow of her throat.

I've kissed that hollow a time or two. Done other things, too. I want to kiss it again right now, but I can't take my eyes off hers. Her look is cold, almost bored.

I need to kiss her. If I can touch her lips with mine it'll change her thinking. She'll see that I'm right. She'll wrap her arms around me, and she won't take them away until I pull that T-shirt up and over her head.

"Get out," she says. "Don't make this hard."

"Fine," I say a little louder than I mean. I make it to the Dodge Neon my mother lets me drive without crying. Even if I do love her, I don't want to waste tears on a bitch like Miss Kenner.

Now that school's out, I work at my Dad's pizzeria. Mario's isn't much, doesn't even have a guy named Mario, but it does a pretty good business from the high school kids and families who think it's some kind of expensive joint. Live in a town where

almost every place has a drive through, suddenly tablecloths are a big deal. I guess that's the idea behind it.

I do a little bit of everything. I make pizzas and bus tables, ring folks up on the register and even wash dishes when it needs doing. Dad pays me a fair amount, I get all the pizza and breadsticks I can swallow, and it beats the shit out of working for the county. Besides, I'm only doing this until I leave for IU in the fall. Then I'll find some other way to keep cash in my pocket.

The other guys in the back usually keep a few six-packs hidden in the cooler. They let me swipe a few beers so I won't tell my dad. They like me. I'm not a rat.

Late at night, I lay in bed with my yearbook open to the Faculty section. Miss Kenner has a great smile. Her black hair hangs in curls around her face. I look at the hollow of her throat and think about what she let me do there once or twice.

I miss her. I still don't cry, though. That's the sort of thing a baby would do.

I stand in the kitchen at Mario's. Heat pulses against my skin, and I think to myself that it's gotta be a hundred degrees in the cramped space. I drink iced tea straight from the pitcher. I decide I'll grab a beer when I'm done.

Clinton and Ryan work the ovens. Clinton makes pizzas and shoves them in; Ryan takes them out and cuts them. They talk the entire time. It's a rhythmic stream of syllables that doesn't stop. It only picks up speed as the dinner rush turns into the late night crowd. I try to pick up the rhythm, join in, but it's all just a bunch of syllables, something about movie directors and how much one guy rocks and another guy sucks. Or maybe it's all the same guy.

They talk so fast and so long, soon they just sound like static. I can't even remember which guy is which. I head to the back of the kitchen to see if the dishwashers need any help. They're fine, so I work on getting drunk.

After work I smell like grease and garbage and garlic. I wad up my apron and throw it in the Neon's backseat. Then I climb behind the wheel and drive into the darkness. I try to get lost in town, just put the pedal down and wander through the night. Instead I keep traveling through the fog of my own brain.

I find myself across the street from Miss Kenner's place. I watch the house, sitting in my car and smoking cigarettes. Most nights all her lights are off. Sometimes I can see a flickering in the upstairs bedroom, and I know she's watching TV. We did that now and then. Sometimes she'd put in a porno for us to watch before we got started. She'd ask if I thought she was as sexy as the girls with fake tits, and I'd tell her she was. I never lied. Not once.

No lights tonight. She's sleeping.

I wonder if she's dreaming about me.

I eye her front door, and I think about the time she answered wearing a plaid skirt like one of those Catholic school girls. I didn't let her take it off the whole night. I remember she laughed as I kissed the insides of her thighs. I thought my lips tickled her, but now I wonder if she was laughing at me.

When I'm sure the street is quiet and asleep, I climb out of the car and sneak onto her front porch. I piss on her doorknob and then leave.

Later, I steal a six-pack from the Super America so I won't sober up.

Lucy starts waiting tables near the end of June. She's cute, maybe five-six with blond hair and a little stock to her frame. Not much in the chest, but she's got a great smile, and the black pantyhose she wears to work keep me staring at her legs.

I joke with her sometimes when I'm bussing tables. She always laughs. Her second Friday, I catch her bending over to grab some silverware, and I slap a hand across her butt before I can stop myself. She jumps and whirls around looking mad. She smiles when she sees it's me, though.

"Don't start it unless you can finish," she says.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"If you can't figure it out, I'm not gonna tell ya."

Ten minutes later, I have her in the walk-in cooler. Her black skirt's around her waist and I've torn a hole in the crotch of her hose. I slap a hand over her mouth so my dad doesn't hear us.

Around ten o'clock, Lucy gives me a wink as she walks out to her Dad's car. She's fifteen and can't drive yet. There's a stain on the hem of her skirt.

On the way home, I throw a rock through Miss Kenner's living room window. I wait to watch the upstairs light pop on, and then I burn rubber out of there.

At home, I give myself calluses. I think about Lucy kissing Miss Kenner's neck.

Miss Kenner calls the private line my parents put in my room and asks if it was me who broke her window. I say it wasn't. She asks again, and I tell her I don't know who she is, but maybe she should leave me alone and stop being such a bitch. She says my name, and I hang up on her.

I sit on the edge of my bed for a long time. I think about stealing a whiskey bottle from the corner store. Instead, I call Lucy.

The Neon's backseat is just about the most cramped place on earth, but we make do. Lucy straddles me and rocks back and forth. I grab her ass like it's all I've ever

wanted. She cries out, and I know she's too young to fake it. Kids don't know that sort of thing yet.

Our sweaty skin squeals against the vinyl seat while the windows get foggy and the shocks creak. The whole damn world goes away until I'm done and Lucy pants against my neck.

"That was the best time ever," she whispers. I don't have the heart to tell her it was only pretty close for me.

I get quiet after that because I can't stop thinking about my best time, about the carpet in Miss Kenner's living room scraping my back as she bucks on top of me like a cowboy, how her fingernails tear at my chest, and she finishes with a scream before falling onto me. That's when I push her belly to the floor and start again.

Lucy asks me what I'm thinking about. I tell her I might be in love with her.

My dad asks me if I've been keeping Lucy out at night, says her father heard some things and came around asking. He says her father's pretty pissed off about his daughter and some older guy.

I tell him we're just friends, that I haven't seen her outside of work.

My dad thinks I'm full of shit. Says he knows I am.

I ask what difference it makes. It's the middle of July, and I'm heading to IU in five weeks.

"Just be careful," he says.

July melts into August. I haven't seen Miss Kenner in a couple of weeks. Drove by her house once, but there wasn't any sign she was home. I thought about stuffing something nasty in her mailbox, but I decided against it. Wasn't worth the hassle.

I still look at her yearbook picture some nights. Not as much as I used to, but I miss her smile. I look at Lucy's freshman year picture, too. She's got a mouthful of braces in it. I'm glad they're gone. They make her look too young.

The second Tuesday in August, my dad walks in while I've got Lucy on her knees in the cooler. He fires the pair of us and calls her father. I tell him not to bother, I'll drive her home, but he shakes his head and tells me to get the hell out of his restaurant, makes Lucy go sit in back with the dishwashers.

Clinton says something cute as I stomp toward the front of the restaurant. I shatter his nose with my knuckles, and his gurgling curses follow me out the front door.

I drive around town awhile. My balls ache like crazy because Dad didn't let me finish. I decide I hate him a little, maybe more, and then I find myself turning down Miss Kenner's street.

The light's on in the living room. She hasn't even gone up to bed yet. I sit behind the Neon's steering wheel and look at her drawn curtains and wonder if maybe this is stupid. She's taped black plastic, probably from a trash bag, over the pane I broke. A spike of guilt jabs me, but I shake it off and climb out of the car.

My heart pounds as I cross the street and climb the steps to her porch. I almost scream when I knock on the door.

I hear the squeak of old springs as she climbs off the couch. I try to keep the thoughts of what we've done on that couch at bay. I need to concentrate. I can make her love me again if I concentrate hard enough.

I hear a lock draw back. The doorknob clicks as it's turned, and then the door opens. It's not a lot, but it's more than a crack. Miss Kenner's entire face appears in the empty space between door and jamb.

"Jacob?"

"Hi. I needed to see you."

"What? No. That's a bad idea."

"But it's not. I've been thinking about it, and it's not. I bet you've been thinking about it, too. I mean, look at how long I waited before I came to see you. That counts for something, right? I wasn't desperate or crazy or anything."

She shakes her head a little. It takes me right back to that week after graduation, standing in her living room. I have some idea of what she'll say next.

She proves me right. "Jacob, you just need to go. Get on with things, okay? You're a sweet kid, but you're just hurting yourself."

"A kid?"

"I don't mean anything by it."

"I'm not a kid."

"I know."

"In your shower? In your bed? The floor? When I had you bent over the kitchen counter? You call me a kid then? No, you didn't. You didn't because I'm not one."

"Right. Jacob, I'm sorry."

And then I knew. She'd forgotten, so I had to show her again. Remind her. If she saw me again, if she touched me, she'd remember how great we were together. She'd remember how bad she wants me.

I put my shoulder against the door and push it open another foot. I fumble for my belt and zipper.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm not a kid, Miss Kenner. I'll show you."

"Go away, Jacob! Stop!"

"But I love you! And you love me. You want me!" I jerk open the front of my pants and pull myself out. I reach for her hand. "You touch it, and you tell me you don't want it!"

Her hands shove at my chest. I see a look of fear in her face, but I ignore it. I need her to touch me, to remember. I can't keep going without her remembering how bad she wants me.

"Please!"

"Go away before I call the police!"

Her words stop me a second. I wonder if she really would call the cops. Maybe it's just a game. Maybe she wants me to push my way inside, to take her rough and hard.

I blink, and when I look at her again I don't see anything that looks like love.

"Leave me the fuck alone, Jacob. You come back, and I'll call the police if I don't kill you first." She slams the door, and then I'm standing alone on her porch with my dick in my hand.

I blink again, and tears roll down my cheeks.

Well, after midnight, Lucy calls. She wants me to sneak her out of her house, so I oblige. I take a minute to wash my face and get some of the red out of my eyes. Then I drive to her house with my knuckles burning white against the steering wheel and shadows turning over in my head.

Lucy's waiting at the end of her driveway. She wears a T-shirt with a cartoon cat on it and shorts that just barely cover her ass. Her sneakers and fuzzy socks make her look like a kid. She might as well have her braces. She's got a backpack clenched in her fists, and I know that can't mean anything good. When she sees me her face lights up like I'm gonna save her life. I consider dropping my foot on the gas and hauling my butt straight past, but something makes me stop.

She tosses the backpack in the floor and jumps in after it. She cries as she wraps her arms around me, and I fight to stifle a groan.

"My dad says we can't see each other anymore!"

"So he's wrong. You're seeing me now."

She digs her face into my shoulder. "Take me somewhere."

It takes me fifteen minutes to reach a secluded spot on Taylor Ridge Road. In two more minutes I have Lucy bent over the Neon's hood with her shorts around her ankles. She moans something fierce, and it makes me mad that she doesn't sound like Miss Kenner.

I close my eyes and grit my teeth. I think real hard, and Lucy melts into Miss Kenner in my brain. She's got her hands stretched out in front of her and her black curls are bouncing and she's telling me she's sorry. She says she's only ever loved me and she wants me back forever. She asks me to stay the night, and she promises we'll get married in the morning.

Then I realize she's not promising, she's asking. And it's Lucy doing the talking.

"What?"

"Let's get married tomorrow, Jake. We can run away, head for Vegas or someplace where we can do it right away."

Her voice grinds like glass in my ears. I can feel it cutting into my brain.

"What do you think?"

I consider my words carefully.

"I think you're an idiot."

Her face goes all broken and damaged, like I just told her Santa Claus is a lie. I guess she'd stopped crying at some point, because she starts again, and then her hand cracks across my face like a belt across a kid's ass.

"Fuck you!"

"Shut up." I really want to get away from her. Watching her cry, it's just so obvious that she's a little girl and nothing compared to Miss Kenner, who's a woman through and through.

I stand there and watch her scream. I don't make out any words because it's all just sound, just white noise. I'm drowning in it, and I don't care a whole lot. The whole thing just bores me.

Her hands tighten into fists and come down on my chest. They strike again and again like tiny hammers, but they don't hurt me. Her blows only register enough to annoy me. They keep coming, though. Eventually, one of them hits my mouth, and I taste blood on my tongue. Before I know what's happening, Lucy's on the ground screaming and holding her face while I stand above her with my hands in fists at my sides.

"You son of a bitch!" Her voice is high and hurt. It tells me this isn't going to end well.

She leaps back to her feet and comes for me with her nails. I don't feel scared or angry or anything. Something's taken hold of me. It's a certainty. I know how this is going to end, and I don't care. I just want to get past it so I can show Miss Kenner how I feel.

Another punch puts Lucy back on the ground. Her shoulders hitch with pitiful sobs. I walk past her and pop the Neon's trunk. I move to the back and root through the space until I find the tire iron.

Lucy screams.

I end it.

I don't bother doing anything with Lucy. I just leave her crumbled in the grass off Taylor Ridge. Somebody will find her sooner or later.

I glance at the tire iron sitting in the passenger seat as I reach town. Streetlights cast yellow beams into the car, and I see blood and clumps of blond hair stuck to the metal.

That certainty tells me I won't get past this. It tells me I've known it for weeks now.

There's just that light flickering in Miss Kenner's bedroom. Good. I want her in bed.

A single kick sends her front door crashing in and coughing splinters. I stalk past the threshold with the tire iron cold in my fist. My eyes search the darkness, and my ears hear a startled cry at the top of the stairs.

I climb. I take my time because I want Miss Kenner to be able to call the police. When they take me away, I can tell everybody about the things Miss Kenner and me did. I can tell them how much I loved her.

The creak of the stairs falls in line with the calm throbbing of my heart. The world grows vivid, and I hear Miss Kenner's panicked breath. It sounds a lot like her breath when she bucked on top of me like a bull rider or scraped facedown against the living room carpet.

I step through her bedroom door. The TV casts moving shadows through the room, and it takes me a second to find Miss Kenner sitting on the bed, staring at me with wide eyes.

"Hey baby," I say. "I love you."

I try to look into her eyes so she can see I'm telling the truth, but she's holding something out in front of her, and it's blocking my view. I start to walk past the bed, and the scene on the television changes. White light glares through the bedroom, and I can see the thing in Miss Kenner's fist.

When did she buy a gun?

In the past, Nate Southard's work has appeared in such places as Cemetery Dance, Grave Tales, and various small press anthologies, such as PS Publishing's Darkness on the Edge. The past year has seen the release of his collection, Broken Skin, from Thunderstorm Books, and 2010 should see the release of his novelette He Stepped Through from Bloodletting Books and Focus, a collaboration with Lee Thomas, from Thunderstorm.