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The morning was hot, and moist, and thick, and it smelled like a foot. The sun's brutal rays scorched through the hazy atmosphere like a blowtorch, scalding the earth and boiling translucent ripples into the heavy air. This weather was beyond oppressive. It was outright *combative*.

In short, it was a typical summer day in Stillwater, Florida.

Somewhere on Bayshore Boulevard, lost within a creeping armada of tourists' rental cars and retirees' French-vanilla land yachts, was a rattling '83 Volkswagen Rabbit convertible. Years of exposure to the salty seaside air had turned its formerly gray paint job into a Jackson Pollock of flaking orange rust. Age and ultraviolet radiation had reduced the vehicle's convertible top to a useless, tattered mass of sun-bleached canvas and crumbling duct tape hanging mournfully over its trunk. The Rabbit's radio droned cheerily through tinny speakers as its sombrero-clad driver melted into the upholstery.

We've got two thousand films in each store, guaranteed in stock, all the time!

So Blockbuster's gonna party like it's nineteen ninety-nine!

The driver pulled off her thick, Buddy-Holly-style eyeglasses and ineffectually mopped her perspiring face with her perspiring palms. This girl was not unattractive, but at the same time she was not remarkable for her looks. Her face still retained the aura of youth, yet cosmetics companies had recently begun targeting her with "rejuvenating" formulas. If she had been a Hollywood actress, Vivian Gray would have been crossing the threshold between being typecast as "the nerdy eighteen-year-old high school student" and "the bitter thirty-two-year-old high-school teacher."

She shook her head and punched one of the factory radio's dated push-buttons, yanking its tuning needle to the next station with an analog squeal.

Hey, lose ten pounds in zero-zero—learn to help control when you dine!

With Dexatrim you're gonna party like it's nineteen ninety-nine!

Vivian scowled irritably. Enough already. This deluge of commercial parodies of The Artist Formerly Known as Prince's "1999" had begun the

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moment Dick Clark dropped the ball in Times Square, and it hadn't let up in the seven and a half months since. The ad executives of America had no doubt been salivating over this year's arrival for their entire careers, and now they were joyfully blowing their collective, uninspired marketing wad.

She punched the next preset button.

So Kotex goes in your panties like it's nineteen ninety-nine!

Vivian winced, but before she could change the channel the offending commercial was stomped out of existence by a cacophony of brass and slide-whistles.

"We're back and you're in the middle of another Wacky Wednesday with the Mooker and the Foz Morning Zoo!"

A doorbell rang, followed by the sound of a bugle, two gunshots, and a mewling cat.

"Whoops! Bad news for Fluffy, but good news for you! That sound means we're going to be kicking off another twelve-in-a-row megamix ...

(The word "megamix" echoed a dozen times, each iteration deeper and slower than the last.)

"... of good-time oldies for the Gulf Coast! But first let's check in with Art Anderson over in the WOSU News Center. Hey Artie boy, what's big news in Stillwater?"

"An oxymoron," Vivian muttered.

She scratched at the prickly contact rash that had developed across the center of her forehead. Her fair skin was no match for the coarse straw of the chain-restaurant novelty sombrero that was perched upon her head. But given the choice of spending her morning commute in a state of minor irritation or fatal sunstroke, Vivian reluctantly chose the lesser of two evils.

A different voice chirped from the radio, speaking in a calm, rehearsed monotone that sounded uneasily out of place among its jabbering companions.

"State health officials continue to urge those suffering from respiratory illness to avoid the beaches due to an unusually strong bloom of red tide. Researchers warn that this unknown algae produces a strain of potentially toxic bacteria. A temporary fishing ban has been instated in all Stillwater coastal areas until authorities can determine whether or not this bacteria poses a health threat."

With a struggle against the steering wheel that seemed more psychological than physical, Vivian eased her vehicle out of the creeping traffic and slowly crunched her way into a smoldering parking lot. As usual, the lot was populated with an assortment of barge-like seniormobiles, but today there was something different. A collection of tall, impossibly orange bottles lay scattered between the white and chrome street mausoleums like colored eggs on Easter Sunday. Some of them stood upright, and others rolled in slow, meandering arcs toward the storm drains. A few less-fortunate specimens had been reduced to nothing more than shards of glinting glass lying in pools of sticky orange nectar.

Vivian rattled her car into the first available space, ground the shifter into

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first gear, and turned off the ignition. She didn't bother to set the parking brake. Much like its roof, the Rabbit's brake had long since rotted into uselessness. As soon as the roar of the motor fell away, Vivian's ears were pummeled with an all-too-familiar melody. She instinctively punched at the radio, but it had silenced itself along with the engine.

*I keep dreamin' of a beverage, forgive me if I go astray,
but your body needs a boost, and your cells are all in disarray ...*

Vivian cracked open the rusted door and stepped out of her car. As her sneakers touched the scorching pavement, she could almost feel their rubber soles liquefying like sticks of butter being shoved into a hot skillet. In the lapping flow of heat pouring off the blacktop, the rippling silhouette of her body looked elongated and distorted.

In reality, the heat waves had nothing to do with it.

Although Vivian was decently proportioned, she somehow appeared just slightly taller than she should have reasonably been. Her slender build could accurately be described as "reedy," but it edged as close to "gangly" as it could possibly get without actually getting there.

Your body needs a tune-up, vitamins are runnin' everywhere.

Time to maximize absorption, and make your food do its share ...

The blacktop seemed to throb beneath Vivian's narrow feet, sending bass waves of vibration up her legs and into her chest cavity. She slammed the car door and turned to face her destination with a sense of stomach-knotting dread. She knew there was no turning back now. She had arrived.

And she had a job to do.

With a slouch of defeat, Vivian pulled on a powder-blue uniform vest and adjusted her nametag.

My name is VIVLAN - How may I serve you?

At the end of the parking lot sat a long, dreary fortress of weathered blue cement blocks that looked like a defunct prison, but without the charm. Across the front of the building, a series of pigeon-infested block letters spelled out the words "Boltzmann's Market."

They say two thousand calories a day is plenty for a slammin' time!

So Fusion Fuel will load and lock you like it's nineteen ninety-nine!

Vivian covered her ears as the booming jingle continued to thunder remorselessly through her skull. It was "1999" again, but this time rendered in a palette of rough guitar and angsty vocals. The music was almost grunge, but grunge reduced to a sterile, soulless formula.

This was marketing grunge.

"Oh no," Vivian groaned. "Not another one of these."

She peered through the lapping heat of the parking lot toward the store's front entrance. Flanking the doors were two huge stacks of speakers, and between them sat a highly detailed AM General Hummer. The glossy military

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vehicle had an aggressively promotional orange-and-black custom paint job, making it look like a jack-o'-lantern designed for a combat air drop. Vivian hadn't seen this particular setup before, but she knew exactly why it was there. If she was lucky, maybe she could make it to the front door before ...

"*Hola*, pretty *señorita*! Is it Cinco de Mayo already?!"

The voice was deep and booming, and the force of it hitting her square in the back almost knocked the sombrero clean off of Vivian's head. Her suddenly tensed shoulders drooped back to her sides as she turned and faced the orange-and-black-clad source of the thunderous voice.

"It's *August eighteenth*," she muttered indignantly.

"So it *is* Cinco de Mayo!" the stranger grinned, breaking into song. "So we're gonna have a *fiesta* like it's nineteen ninety-nine!"

Vivian groaned. This happened every time the soft-drink companies introduced some all-new variety of liquid sugar to push down the nation's insatiable gullet. The beverage industry's marketing departments assumed that Americans would unquestioningly drink whatever a pair of pretty faces standing next to an expensive car and an overblown sound system told them to.

Unfortunately, they were absolutely right.

Today's mouthpiece for Big Beverage was fairly typical of the genre. He was a glimmering Adonis of a man, standing about six feet tall, with a leanly masculine, muscular build and unnaturally pure, spiky blond hair. He wore a complete "extreme sports" ensemble that was to extreme sports what his theme music was to grunge. All of the elements of his outfit were empirically "extreme," but with a thick coating of corporate polish that negated the impact of the whole. Although he talked the talk of extreme sports, the salesmodel looked about as hardcore as a spa treatment.

"So where's the other one?" Vivian asked him.

"The other what?"

Vivian glanced around the empty parking lot.

"Usually your kind comes in two-packs," she shrugged. "You know, Ken *and* Barbie."

She tossed her sweaty sombrero into the back seat of her car, revealing a shock of fiercely red hair. Two ponytails the shape of cooking whisks dropped limply to the nape of her neck, and a curtain of long, uneven bangs cascaded over her glasses as if to say, "Closed. Please use next window."

"Whoa! Nice mane, Red!" the salesmodel beamed. "I think you're just the kind of grrrrl I've been looking for!"

Vivian looked into the model's flawless, powdery complexion as a drop of sweat fell from the tip of her freckled nose.

"*I'm* the kind of girl *you're* looking for?"

"You know it!" the salesmodel boomed. "Look at you—you're dead on your feet! Luckily for you, I'm here to kick a full-throttle recharge into your tired

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body battery with a hardcore blast of Fusion Fuel!”

Vivian pushed her glasses up her nose and frowned.

“Ah. I see. Well, I’m here to work a meaningless minimum-wage job in order to feed the hungry little mouth back home.”

The model blinked in surprise.

“Whoa! You have a *kid*?”

“I don’t,” Vivian sighed, “and that just makes the situation all the more pathetic, doesn’t it?”

Without further explanation, she stepped around the salesmodel and made her way across the steaming parking lot toward the front entrance of the store. A quick series of gazelle-like leaps landed the model in front of his Hummer five steps ahead of Vivian. She tried to keep her head down and steamroll past him, but he was too quick for that. This was, after all, his job.

Vivian dodged right, then left, but the salesmodel had become an unyielding orange-and-black barrier.

“Look, Heathcliff, I’m late for work,” she said.

“That’s cool; that’s cool,” he smiled, raising his hands in a show of innocence. “But I wouldn’t be doing my job if I let a superheated little fox like you into my store without passing off an ice-cold free sample of Fusion Fuel! Load and lock, baby!”

He pulled a bottle out of a cooler next to the Hummer and tossed it straight up into the air like a spinning juggling pin. With a well-rehearsed swing of his arm, he caught the bottle by the neck and pitched it under his knee, tossing it in a slow, easy arc at Vivian’s chest. She instinctively caught it. It was a tall and slender club of orange glass with a graphic of a spongy sort of molecule branded in bas relief on its face, identical to the dozens that littered the parking lot. She took the bottle by its neck and held it out toward the model.

“I don’t drink energy drinks.”

“*Energy drink?*” the salesmodel said with disgust. “It’s not an *energy drink*! It’s so much *more* than that!”

He put his large, square hand on the butt of the bottle and gently pushed it back toward Vivian before continuing.

“Fusion Fuel is a diet enhancer that makes your food work harder for *you*! It uses the hidden power of lignite and sulfated castor oil to increase absorption of nutrients by up to 110% for maximum power and stamina on and off the field!”

Vivian smirked.

“I don’t drink snake oil either.”

An overheated and red-faced old woman shuffled past the Hummer. The salesmodel rushed to her side, multitasking marks without missing a beat.

“Stop staring—they’re free! Haha! Just kidding with ya! Fusion Fuel piledrives vitamins into your hard-working muscles with an intense super-reactive catalyst-altered power punch!”

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The way he said “catalyst-altered power punch” seemed to hang a tiny superscripted “TM” in the air.

He shoved a bottle of the citrus beverage in the woman’s direction. She took a quick, panicked step backward and bumped against the Hummer’s gleaming chrome grille. His prey cornered, the salesmodel shoved the bottle into her trembling hands, then reached into the cooler for a six-pack.

“Take a sixer to pound down with your whole team! It’s an energy absorption explosion!”

Vivian took advantage of the model’s temporary distraction to attempt escape into the store, but before she had taken two steps he was done with the flustered oldster and back on her again.

“Seriously though, Red,” he said with a rich, velvety smoothness, “why don’t you take this bottle of Fusion Fuel now, and I’ll take you out for proper drinks when you get off work. I really think we ought to get to know each other better. Whaddya say?”

Vivian’s cheeks flushed as red as her hair.

“If I say I’ll think about it, will you get out of my way?”

“Now that wasn’t so hard, was it, Red?” the salesmodel grinned, stepping aside with an overblown sense of chivalry. “The name’s Nick, and I’ll be out here all day. Promise you’ll come back out and see me later, okay?”

Vivian opened her mouth to make an excuse, but before any words came out, another customer caught the attention of the ever-vigilant Nick. He pounced on the wrinkled old man like a cheetah taking down a Shih-Tzu.

“Fusion Fuel loads up on nutrients and locks them into your hard-working body cells! Load and lock, baby!”

Vivian was a quick study, and this time she didn’t waste a second leaping over the red-faced woman’s already discarded six-pack and bolting to the entrance. Her feet squeaked onto the worn rubber pad that opened the automatic doors, blasting her with a gale of industrial-grade air conditioning. No matter how fetid the hot, humid sponge of the outside air became, the interior of Boltzmann’s Market remained cool, dry, and filled with the sweet scent of dead fish.

Vivian sniffed curiously. “*Dead fish?*”

Adjacent to the front entrance was a display that had not been there the day before, composed of a pile of soggy wooden crates filled with ice. She stepped up to the crate and looked inside, and a foul smell seared through her sinuses. The beds of ice were populated with the corpses of the most pathetic selection of fish that she had ever seen. There was not a matching set of species-mates to be found among the ranks of intact bodies, and the remainder of the lot was little more than hastily butchered chunks of pale, sickly meat oozing a pink, briny gravy that reeked of rotting cabbage. Vivian covered her nose and looked at the chalkboard sign that hung over the massacre.