

## Melissa Llanes Brownlee

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### Conbini Blues

She stands at her counter staring into the oden pot filled with eggs, tofu, daikon, and seaweed, bubbling in dashi, when the store's incessant jingle pierces her brain. She automatically calls out welcome in the high-pitched voice all the female clerks were trained to use. She hates it. The sound pushing through her nasal passages, a cloying greeting that must be repeated every time someone comes through the damn automatic door.

She pretends to be busy, shifting the candy on display in front of her, while the customer, suit jacket ruffled, tie askew, briefcase dangling from his left hand, walks to the glass wall of fridges filled with drinks at the back of the store. He pays no attention to the racks of magazines and manga as he shuffles past. Turning the corner near the bathrooms, he completely misses the covers filled with lingerie clad, wide-eyed women, and high school uniformed long-haired girls, white underwear peeking out from beneath short skirts.

It's late enough for that last drink before heading home. She watches him browse the beer and chuhi selections. She knows he'll pick the chuhi. They always do. So much alcohol in a much too sweet and sour package. He'll probably end up puking it and his last meal, most likely ramen, in the parking lot, and she's not looking forward to having to clean that up.

She never really wanted to end up working in a convenience store. What can you do, really, when you can't get into a high school? Can't even get into a trade school? Every time she went to take the entrance exams, no matter how easy she knew they would be, she'd go blank. Couldn't recall a single calculation, a proper sentence structure, a particular fact, just a void where all the knowledge she had acquired through the years had been stored. She couldn't understand how she had been fine taking tests throughout junior high school. All of her teachers thought she'd definitely get into her top choice school, but on the day of the exam, a wall went up.

Everyone was so disappointed in her. Her teachers. Her mother. Her friends were simply shocked. They had all made plans to go to the same high school, to grow their hair long, to wear their uniform skirts short, to get boyfriends. After two years of trying, she just gave up. And they did as well. No one messaged her. No one emailed her. She had been thoroughly and irrevocably cut off from them. No one wanted to be associated with a girl who couldn't get into high school.

Every night, working the late night drunken salaryman shift as she liked to call it, she let the time pass her by. Let the boys with the loud bikes and the men with the smelly suits and drunken faces look at her and leer. Let the late-night truck drivers use the bathroom before crashing in their cabs for the night. Rice balls and fried chicken, steamed pork buns and beer passing through her hands into waiting plastic bags. Chopsticks and hand wipes placed next to gum and cigarettes. Her smile forced and bright. And between the customers, she'd gaze at the hot food case, rows of American dogs, chicken skewers, and frankfurters slowly disappearing throughout the night. Or, sometimes, she'd look at the cars as they drove by, their headlights flashing across the front windows. She'd imagine their lives. A mother driving her sick child to

the hospital. A couple heading to a dark spot because they couldn't afford a love hotel. A family leaving early to beat the holiday traffic on the expressway. These daydreams consumed her.

She can smell the booze and cigarettes before he even makes it to her counter. She welcomes him again, but he ignores her. They all do. He starts fishing in his pocket for some change. He's young. Younger than she thought when she first saw him come in. Clean cut hair. Not long and permed. Not a wannabe, from a host club on pink street, trying so hard to look like a member of a famous Jpop group. She never understood the fascination of her friends. Pictures of boys with perfectly styled hair stuck to pencil cases. File folders decorated with images of sweet smiling faces. She always preferred strong, clean cut athletic guys like Kenichiro, his lean body running around the track on sports day, but she always pretended to like the same groups, the same stickers on her own pencil case and folders.

He weaves as she tells him to push the button on the screen to confirm his age. She wonders if he chose to be this drunk. Sometimes at her work parties, the older clerks would make her drink too much. Always filling her half-empty glass with more beer or shochu. Ame-chan drink more. You can handle yourself. You're young and strong. And she would insist that she wasn't but still they kept pouring. Their smiling red faces imploring her to join them. She would try to walk around and fill other people's glasses to avoid this, but they always insisted she join them in kanpai.

She gives him the price of his lonely can of chuhi. He throws the coins down on the counter. She counts them carefully, putting them in the register and asking if he'd like his receipt, but he's already opening the can and staggering to the door. Please don't vomit in the parking lot. The annoying jingle plays again as the next customer enters the store.

**Melissa Llanes Brownlee** is a writer born and raised in Hawaii. She graduated from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, with an MFA in Fiction. She then moved to Japan to teach English, where she continues to do so. Her work has appeared in the Waccamaw, The Jet Fuel Review, Crack the Spine, Booth: A Journal, The Baltimore Review, River River, and The Notre Dame Review.