

## Trucker's Guide to Route 0

The lights always burn my eyes. Damn fluorescent bulbs, with that shitty hum that makes your ears bleed. Makes these types of places feel more alive though, ironically enough.

Walkin' in, you keep your head down an' eyes on the ground. It's better to learn to do that now while you can. Eventually, it just becomes habit.

Make the run quick. You learn the layout of the aisles over time, not really a reason to take creative liberties in pit stops like these. That an' the owners usually prefer it more generic, more typical. Makes 'em feel closer to our type.

I make my usual round: drink in the back, chips down the third aisle, sandwich at the front. That's one benefit to these stops in particular. Anythin' made fresh—the sandwiches, the salads, the bakery—it's always good. Honestly, I'd make less stops if it weren't for that. A good, hot meal on the stomach is always nice after a long drive, don't matter where you get it from.

These places are typically grimier than the usual ones, though. Most these folks can't help it, an' some'll get mad if you bring it up. Just treat 'em like you do any other gas station employee. Get in an' get out. Ignore 'em. Make shallow small talk if it comes up. Don't treat 'em any different. No better, no worse. They like that, trust me.

I drop the food an' water bottle down onto the counter, keepin' my eyes down. It don't matter how long you been doin' this or how 'tough' you think you are, it'll make your heart jump every time. Don't react to the pale hands, the flakin' skin, the hollow death-rattle.

“Anything else?”

“Pack of cigs. Any're fine, thanks.”

The attendant turns an' grabs a random pack, ringin' it all up. I trace my eyes over the edge of the counter, never liftin' 'em. Eye contact is taboo. I know a couple guys who made that mistake 'n had to quit. Good truckers too.

“These will kill you, you know.”

I shrug an' pull out my wallet. Always use cash, these places ain't gonna have the fancy card readers or digital payment or whatever you might be used to. Pay cash, 'specially the coins. Coins are good to keep on ya.

“So will a lotta things. They ain't killed me yet.”

The attendant stays quiet. They don't usually talk, 'n if they do it's usually only a handful of words. There's a beep as my stuff is scanned. The keys of the register clack as I drop a ten and a dozen random coins. That's somethin' I learned 'bout a year into this; the attendants of these places like countin' out the coins. If you were to give 'em ten bucks in pennies to pay, they'd be thrilled. 'Course, they ain't gonna throw a fit if you just give 'em bills. I always make sure to drop random coins on the counter when I pay, no matter what I owe. Makes 'em happy.

If you decide to do that, don't worry 'bout gettin' the right change. They like to be exact; they're *gonna* be exact. So naturally, they'll be a little peeved if you leave a tip. Heard one complain before that it 'throws off the scales'.