

A THIEF'S WAGES

MARTY CORREIA

"YOU THINK YOU COULD DO SOMETHING other than sit there, huh?" Kelly asked Dave. As she whisked by him to grab the beer can from his hand she added, "With this?"

She flung the beer can into the kitchen sink. "You know, Max needs help with his homework and all you do is watch this crap all day," she shut off the television on her way back through the living room.

Dave sighed and looked down at his grey-but-once-white socks then back at the blank television screen. In the television's reflection Dave saw himself sitting on the couch and, behind him, Emma staring at the television from her crib. Living less than twenty feet from the TV for her first three years of life, she never had seen it powerless.

Dave wanted to turn it back on but went into the kitchen. Max slumped with his head resting on the kitchen table holding a fistful of his hair.

"If it's that tough, I'm not going to be much help, you know?" Dave said as he lifted the can out of the sink. He felt the weight of a slosh of beer, nodded his head and smiled.

Kelly hollered from the bathroom, "Well, maybe you can teach him ten or twenty years' worth of lessons tonight. He'll be needing them."

Max bounced his knees as he drew thick lines across a page in his schoolbook. "Hey, hey! What are you doing there? They'll make us pay for that shitty book if you mess it up like that. Cut it out," Dave grabbed the pen out of Max's hand and then tossed it back at him. The pen made a long blue arc on his white t-shirt before it fell to the floor.

"Hey, little man, we're onto something here," Dave said as he picked up the pen. He crept toward Max with the pen held out like a sword. Max giggled and wiggled in the chair while Dave pulled the bottom of his t-shirt down.

"Hold still. It's going to be a masterpiece," Dave pushed back one of Max's

shoulders as Max caved in his chest. "Come on, be a soldier, just let me do it. You know this may be it for a while, so come on."

Max pulled his shoulders back to puff out his chest and said, "Make it good, dad, and I'll wear it to bed all the time." Dave clutched the bottom of the shirt to make the fabric taut and drew two circles above the arc.

"You draw the kid a sad face?" Kelly stood in the doorway to the kitchen. "What kid wants a shirt from their parent with a frowny face?" She shifted her weight, raising her other hand in a stop sign, "No wait. I think I want you to answer this instead, Dave . . . what kind of loser wants to draw on their kid's clothing, and, number two, then have it be a sad face? Really?"

Dave sipped from the crumpled beer can as he leaned on the kitchen counter. Max crossed his arms to hide the pen marks on the shirt and hunched over as if he were reading his book. From the corner of his eye he watched her shadow rush toward his dad. He didn't look up as he heard Dave say, "Hey! What the hell?" at the same time Kelly said, "Didn't I take that beer? I swear." Hearing the fizz of the beer pouring into the sink, Max raised his head just enough to see which one was emptying it into the sink. He looked back down quickly after he saw it was his dad pouring it as he gave his mom the middle finger.

"Good for you. Maybe you'll manage to get there tomorrow without getting a DWI too," Kelly said, adding, "just maybe."

The apartment felt larger and hollow without the television on. Dave thought everything sounded decided like it does in the movies, even him taking the plastic bags out of the trashcan and the diaper bin. After he slipped his flip-flops on over his socks, the soft thuds against his heels were drumbeats joining the ripping tape sounds of Kelly changing Emma's diaper.

Dave dragged the bags and let them thump down each step, then chucked them into the dumpster from five feet away. The fresh night air made him want a smoke even though he hadn't had one for over a year.

In the hospital his father told him, "This ain't no way to go, kid," while fluid filled his lungs. At the funeral, Dave and his sister Joanie told people about how their father joked about going to straight to heaven since he already lived through hell working twenty years at the glass factory's giant blistering furnace.

Dave's mother made him promise to quit smoking that day and he stopped cold turkey. He couldn't have done it without the bottleful of Percocet his best friend Roger gave him at the burial.

About to head back up the steps to the apartment, Dave shook his head and sat on the third step and looked out onto the small dirt parking lot. He shrugged his shoulders at shreds of plastic hanging out their car's window. When the rear left window of their Impala wouldn't go up Dave covered it over with tape and a plastic bag from Foot Locker. It only took a highway minute to ruin the patch-up. Everything felt like that over the past year. No matter what plans he made, it took just moments for everything to not just collapse but to then stay crappy and stare him in the face.

He closed his eyes and ran his hands through his hair. He made a fist and hit it against his forehead, spitting out at himself, "Stupid, stupid, stupid."

Why did he do it? He knew it was reckless. But his father was gone and had always given him a little money here and there and nothing was going right. The week before the robbery Kelly cried a lot. First, she showed up at the Vincennes Grange Hall on the wrong day to get free groceries so they didn't have any food, and then the landlord threatened to kick them out since they were two months behind. He had called Roger about a job at the tire shop where he worked on weekends, but instead Roger told him his idea about going over to Lebanon to hit a bank.

Dave got up from the step when his neighbor Norma drove into the parking lot. She rushed out of her car and caught Dave before he could escape.

"Just coming home from taking care of the grandkid. He's a nightmare," she said, shaking her head. Dave half-smiled, threw her a nod and scuffed up the steps.

The apartment seemed like it was on mute. He had been outside much longer than it seemed. The cable box glowed a blue 11:17 while he picked up the remote. Emma and the TV both seemed relieved it was off. Bent over the crib's side he put his head close to her mouth to feel her breath on his cheek. Even an inch away her soft puffs were barely detectable. To avoid waking her he hovered his hands over her as if she were a campfire. He passed the couch Kelly made him sleep on since the arrest.

Their bedroom door was open. He tiptoed over to the bed and crawled on top of the covers. He put his arm around Kelly's waist, pulled close to her and smelled her hair.

"Don't even think about it," she warned.

"It's not like that . . . I just . . .," he started to sob.

"I know," she whispered but did not move.