

## Hope

The lawn needs cutting, thought Ben. I should do that...tomorrow.

Ben looked out the patio door from the kitchen, where the dishes needed washing, and the floor needed sweeping. He butted out his cigarette in the garish orange *Playboy* ashtray, stolen from some night club in the 60's.

There was always something that needed doing, and never enough time to do it. He leaned back in his chair and ran his hand across his head, slicking his greasy hair back. He lit up another cigarette. The day's newspaper lay in mixed up sections on the table. He shoved section by section away until the classifieds were revealed.

No...no....hell, no...the ads were either nothing he could do, or jobs that kids half his age would get before even considering him. It wasn't that he couldn't do them, and it wasn't even that he didn't have a degree, but there always seem to be an expectation that they would do it for cheaper than he would, and that these were young men's jobs, not for men who wouldn't see fifty again. One clown even said it to his face: "*it's not that I don't want to hire you, but the team are all young guys. I don't know if you would be a good fit.*" It shocked him at the time, and all he could do was say that he would fit in. It wasn't until later that he realized that shock had somehow taken the place of anger. That's when he got anger. Of course, by then, there was no one to say it to, and smacking the bar top with his hand only earned him a bruise and a sore hand.

It had been a year and a half. That was when he was still hitting up the job fairs, when there were still job fairs. It was a tight little group, at the beginning, those who had been laid off with him. Everyone was helping everyone else out, giving out leads, reviewing each others resumes, going out for a beer when one of them landed something good. It had been a long time since that email went out.

What was the use? The house was long gone. The banks, so goddamn eager to take his business when he wanted a mortgage, didn't hesitate to repossess after he missed a couple of payments. The newspapers were all talk about how hard this collapse had hit the banks, like they deserved the pity. The banks got what they deserved, but it didn't stop the fat cats

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from walking away with millions. Even those bastards that lost their jobs over it could afford to retire wealthy. Not him...fifty-two years old and having to move in with his mother. Karla couldn't handle it. They were already arguing about money, the mortgage, having to sell the car to keep paying for the house for a few more months. "Sell the SUV?", she had almost cried. Damn. It wasn't like it was her kid or something, and since he wasn't working anyways, it was just too much. If he got something decent, he'd buy a beater and get around in that for awhile. Losing the house was it. She had always said that she would never move in with his mother. I guess she really meant it, Ben chuckled to himself.

The phone rang. He considered letting the machine take it, but he did have a couple of potential jobs that might be calling. Nothing big, odd jobs, cash jobs, buddies who hired him on help for doing home renovations, plumbing, that kind of thing. No electrical, though. After almost burning down a retirement home, and electrocuting himself in the process that one time, word gets around. Hard worker, that Ben. Don't let him do electrical, though.

He got up and answered the phone.

"Hello?" Dead air replied.

"Hello?" Still nothing.

Damn telemarketers, he thought. He gave them another second, hoping to hang up on them just as the auto-dialer connected them, but the line remained quiet. He hung up.

Can't even slam down a phone anymore, he grimaced. Now it's just a button. Doesn't matter how hard you slam a button, it doesn't translate the intended anger like an old fashion handset crashing down on the hook did. His mother was damn near eighty-five. You'd think she would have kept one of those things around.

Where the hell was his mom, anyway? It wasn't the first of the month. That was last Monday. The first was typically when she'd be up and out before he rolled his ass out of bed. This was over a week later, Thursday. At least she made coffee, even if it was weak, and stale. She

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kept the ground coffee in a flour jar with a cracked and broken lid, and always used not much more than half the coffee that she should. When he made the coffee, it was still stale, but at least something he could drink. All she would say about it was that he was wasting it by making it too strong.

Damn. Fifty-two and he couldn't even keep his mother in line. No wonder Karla left him a year after losing his job. No wonder it had been a month since he'd seen the kids. He hated what they saw in him, hated that he couldn't provide for them, hated that she was doing a better job at that than him, working at Wal-mart full time and putting in part-time hours at a local grocery store, hated that his kids felt embarrassed to be around him when they went out. The first time that their mom had given him the money to take them for lunch on his bi-weekly, he saw a certain disgrace...disgust, maybe, from Claire. She was the elder of the two, and understood more of what was going on. Frankie called it "his allowance" once. He didn't mean it in a bad way; it was just the only way that he could relate to it. Ben still snapped at him for that, and told him never to say it again. After that, when Karla gave him money, Ben made sure that they were alone or at least out of sight from the kids.

Absently, Ben walked from the phone cradle back to his cigarette, still burning in the ashtray. Instead of sitting back down, he took a long drag and then carefully laid it down into the ashtray again.

He opened the pantry and felt around on the top shelf. After a few seconds, his hand closed on the stock of a revolver, and he pulled it down. The gun was his dad's, a double action Smith & Wesson. Ben had found it in the attic the first month he moved back in with his mother. It was a bit rusty, but otherwise still serviceable. Ben had cleaned it up, bought a box of ammunition for it, and tucked it all away on the top shelf of the pantry. His mother didn't cook much, and she couldn't reach the top self. He didn't tell her he had found it.

Maybe this was better, he thought. He still had at least one insurance policy that was paid up. The money came out of their joint account. For whatever reason, he and Karla had not closed it out, and in fact, they used it when they needed to move money around. Mostly it was her lending or giving him cash, and rarely, it was him paying her back. She was paying all the

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premiums on the policy, so it made sense that she got everything that was coming to her. He had read through the policy a few months back. Suicide was only not payable in the first two years of the policy. After that, it didn't matter.

Ben put the gun to his right temple and started to squeeze the trigger, until the hammer moved to the point of almost cocking.

Maybe I won't do it, Ben thought, if the phone rings, and it's Claire, wondering if I'm coming over this weekend. Or if it's a job, even just an interview. Or if it's Karla, just calling to ask how I am.

He looked over at the phone. Nothing. He waited, three breaths. Still nothing. Three more breaths. The phone remained silent. Ben squeezed the trigger a little tighter and heard the click of the hammer cock back and felt the cylinder roll and stop in place. Another three breaths. It's not going to ring, is it? Ben's question was rhetorical. One long breath, and Ben squeezed the trigger all the way. The hammer released and fell forward with a noisy clatter.

Ben put the gun down on the table as he pulled back the chair and sat down. He took a long pull on his cigarette, almost burned to the filter now, and tamped it out in the ashtray, before scrounging a pen from where he had left it next to the half-finished Sudoku, in the comics section. He slowly circled the "hell, no" entry in the classifieds, along with two others. He winced as he took a sip of the weak coffee, now lukewarm, and then picked up the phone.