

## HAPLESS WALT

Walter Scofield has always been a salesman since his first job in high school making cold calls for a mail-order kitchen knife company. Since then, he's sold cars, natural cleaners, vitamins, face cream, vacuum cleaners, Hawaii vacations, even some weed now and then when times were tight. Now he works in a mattress store in town. Not one of those chain mattress stores that you see in the newer malls and shopping centers; no, this is one of those Mom and Pop stores that you see on what used to be the old main drag through every American town, before freeways and expressways came in. Now those roads are just sideshows, and these mattress stores are stuck out there with the swimming pool supply stores, car washes, repair garages, and mini-marts.

It's hard to tell Walt's age. He's old enough to have mellowed from his younger self, maybe fifty to sixty-five, still with a little hair on the sides of his head, and old-fashioned, gold-tone, aviator-style glasses. He's got a dissolute appearance, and indeed he's over-fond of lotteries and cheap bars, cigarettes, and a hit off the old bong he still keeps from his teenage years. He spends a lot of time alone.

He married too young, right out of high school, and never got any more education. Fathered a daughter. His young wife reached a breaking point one day when the girl, Lorna, was just out of that golden, sunshine phase of being five years old and into the whiny, troublesome year that is six. She – his wife, that is— said she'd rather be a single mom than have a useless boy-husband who couldn't pull his weight. If he spent more evenings in bars than at home, couldn't read a bedtime story or towel off a wet kid after her bath, or load a dish into the dishwasher now and again, what good was he? She was already a single mom for all intents and purposes. She didn't need him throwing a fit every time she asked him to do his share. He could take his tantrums and his complaints and his all-around worthlessness somewhere else. She sounded just like a miniature version of his mother; he turned on

the spot and walked out. He never walked back in except to collect his things, which his wife had helpfully piled on the front lawn for all to see.

By now his daughter must be older than Walt was when he left her. He hasn't seen her since the day he moved out. He always meant to, but his ex-wife was so angry with him, and Lorna was such a whining handful at the time, he was at a loss for what to do with her if he did take her out, and if the truth be told he wasn't sober much of the time back then. He's a nicer man now, and he's responsible enough to be a manager at the mattress store but not responsible enough to truly succeed at it. His sales lag behind his quota more weeks than not. He's often late to his shift, and one day last month he didn't show up to work at all. His district manager just told him earlier this week that if he doesn't shape up, he's going to be let go.

The mattress store doesn't get much walk-in business. They sell most of their product during sales events like Presidents' Day, Labor Day, and Black Friday. Otherwise, it's pretty quiet a lot of the time. They mainly sell cheap single mattresses to young parents whose kids have outgrown their crib and are ready for a real bed, but still wetting it so they don't want to spend much. These the store keeps in stock, along with the inexpensive metal frames, fiberfill pillows, and waterproof mattress covers. The better mattresses they usually order when anyone wants one. Most of their walk-in customers are going to shop for the best price they can find online, but they want to try out something similar first. Walt tries to explain to them that mattresses aren't like cars or books. They're different in every store even if they carry the same label. And he lays on them how there's nothing like real customer service from a local store, in case anything needs to be returned. Even so, traffic in the store is low and Walt usually doesn't have enough to do. He spends a lot of time looking out the big plate windows. But he keeps the display beds looking smooth and inviting with clean protectors at the head and foot, and dusts the knickknacks meant to make the display room look like a real bedroom, and keeps the rugs vacuumed.

One cold, overcast winter day he's finishing up a late lunch and watching an on-again, off-again rain falling outside. High winds and heavy rain are predicted later this afternoon, and Walt thinks there will be even less going on today than usual in the store because of the weather. He wonders how it can be worth keeping the store open on such slow days and thinks maybe he could pretend he's sick and close up early. He decides to get his records done now in case he does leave early. No need to make his case worse by shirking on his paperwork. He crumples up his sandwich wrapper and tosses it with a flourish into the wastebasket by his desk, folds over the top of his bag of chips and stows it in his desk drawer. The surface of his desk is tidy, but inside the drawers is a private chaos of snack bags, bars, and cookies to help Walt through the long, dull hours.

He's about halfway finished when he hears the doorbell chime. A girl enters the store. She's small, almost frail, and looks about twelve years old. She wears a school backpack that appears much too heavy for her, heavy enough to drag her shoulders down and cause her to hunch forward. Walt has seen her outside the store windows often enough to recognize her. She usually is around in the after-school hours, always alone, standing outside the mini-mart or on the corner as if waiting for a ride that never seems to come. He figures she must live nearby and take the bus to school, or maybe there's a school close enough to walk; he has no reason to know and even less reason to care. Her hair hangs limply to her shoulders and it looks as though it's been trimmed with nail scissors. Her clothes are limp, too, and don't fit her very well. Her coat is too light for the season. Her sneakers and the bottoms of her jeans are wet with rain, and so is the top of her hood, and the ends of her hair hanging out around her face.

Walt asks if he can help her and she says she's looking for a new mattress. To Walt's next question she answers that her mother has instructed her to choose one she likes, and then her mother will come in and buy it. Walt doubts this very much—what mother does this? But he asks her if she's looking for anything in particular. "I don't know," she says. "Something not too expensive, I guess."

Normally Walt would accompany a customer around the store, show them the different mattresses, give them a rundown of the springs per square foot and thickness of the topper, talk about warranties, and try to steer them to a high-side-of-middle product where most of the profit lay. But no way is he going to hang with an unaccompanied young girl. There are cameras all over the store and he means for every one of them to show him well-distanced from this girl. You never know what could happen these days. There isn't really any harm she can do. If she's planning to steal anything it could only be a home décor item or two, and he isn't too worried about those. He supposes for a moment that she might be planning to distract him while someone else comes in and robs him. There's rarely any cash in the store but she wouldn't know that. Maybe they would hurt him. But he dismisses these thoughts as being paranoid. This girl doesn't give off that kind of tension. Maybe she really is shopping for a mattress.

Walt points to a section of the store displaying the low-to-mid-range mattresses and tells her to have a look, and to let him know if she has any questions. "Can I lie down on them?" she asks. "Just to try them out." He says yes, as long as she keeps her feet on the protectors. He considers asking her to leave her backpack at the desk but decides against it. He just doesn't care that much.

Walt goes back to his desk and pretends to be busy finishing up his reports. The girl wanders from one display bed to another, sitting on the edge of each and bouncing a little, and sneaking sidelong glances his way. He means to watch her, but the phone rings and he has to turn his attention to a customer who has a long list of questions about a specific type of mattress. Walt can tell by the questions that this caller isn't going to buy a mattress from his store, but he answers her questions. When he hangs up, the phone rings again at once, and it's a delivery driver scheduled to bring inventory tomorrow but thinking he'll be late if the incoming storm drops too much snow on the passes.

Walt hangs up the second time and glances around the store. He doesn't see the girl anywhere in his range of vision. He gets up and circles casually around the store, carrying a notepad and making meaningless marks on it as he goes. He finds her toward the back of the store, away from the windows. She's lying on one of the beds with her backpack on the floor and her wet jacket draped neatly over it, and she's fast asleep.

He steps closer, still mindful of the cameras and his desire to remain fully at arm's length from her at all times. From here he can see that she's probably more like fourteen: she has fully developed breasts and hips. But she has the soft jawline and round cheeks of a child. Even asleep, he can see that she has dark circles under her eyes. One hand lies relaxed on the bed near her cheek, the fingers slightly curled, and he's reminded of his Lorna, how when she was very little she'd fall asleep with her thumb in her mouth, and how when she was deeply asleep, it would fall from her mouth and rest on the bed just like this. It occurs to him that Lorna is probably more than twice this girl's age. The thought stuns him for a few seconds, but only because he can't believe that he himself could be so old.

He turns away and goes back to his desk. Let the girl sleep a little if she needs to. She's not hurting anything. He finishes his work and waits. Outside, the wind picks up and the rain begins to fall from the sky in sheets, pounding hard on the pavement and on the store roof, blown by the wind into waving curtains of silvery white. The street gutters fill as the storm drains become overwhelmed. The clouds are so thick that the streetlights come on early.

He waits and waits. He makes himself a cup of coffee and finishes his bag of chips, then has a candy bar. No one comes in. At five o'clock he checks on the girl; he has to close up the store at six. But she's still sleeping. Her wet sneakers and jeans are no longer on the protector, and they've left damp blotches on the bed cover. She's oblivious to the loud drumming of the rain on the roof. Poor kid, he thinks. He'll wake her at six.

But at six she's still completely out of it. Walt doesn't know what to do. He could get in trouble if he were found here with her, even if the cameras prove he hasn't touched her. But what if she has nowhere to go? The storm is truly awful outside. What kid with somewhere to go shelters in a mattress store? He returns to his desk and waits, unsure what to do, while time passes minute by ever-lengthening minute. How long should he wait for her to wake up on her own? What if she wakes at ten, or at midnight? Does he turn her out onto the street in the middle of a cold and stormy night? And what about himself? Must he wait here all night? He can't leave her locked in the store alone. That's out of the question even for him. But he badly wants to go home. He wants to change out of his work clothes, open a beer, watch his TV. His tension rises by the minute. He begins to argue with himself.

By seven he's a mess of indecision and passive fury. What right has this kid to come in and force him into this situation? He was just minding his business, just doing his job, and she barged in on him pretending to be a customer, treating him like he was nothing, like she didn't care what impact she had on him. She shouldn't even be here. He should send her out, period. The voice of every person who's ever told him how useless he is, what a loser, how ineffective, how weak, loops endlessly in his head. The more he listens to them all, the angrier he becomes until he's afraid he might do something sudden and violent, even though he knows from experience that sudden, violent acts rarely help anything. He paces in tight little circles in his tiny office, feeling trapped. He fingers his pocket for the little tin mint box that holds a small travel pipe and a bit of weed. He carries it just to help him through the most boring days. Most days he doesn't use it, and now he holds it in his pocket thinking he won't use it; but he's simultaneously pulling it out and drawing his first hit right there in the office. That's how dissonant his thinking is.

Even the weed doesn't calm him for long. An hour later he can't take his inaction anymore, and he's made up his mind to wake her. Glad to have made a decision and full of nervous energy, he practically marches to the back corner of the store where she's still sleeping, only now she's curled up

tight like she's cold, and she looks pitifully small. He draws back. *Hey*, he says, but not very loudly. She doesn't stir.

He can't do it. Walt wasn't a dad for very many years, and of the years he was, he wasn't around much, so this girl doesn't awaken any paternal feelings in him or remind him of his own daughter in any personal way. He just feels sorry for her, and his anger dissipates. He pulls the comforter off of a nearby display and gently spreads it over her. A deep resignation settles over him, and although the critics that live in his head laugh at his weakness, resignation feels enough like mercy that he leaves it where it is, draped over him just like the blanket over the sleeping girl.

Back in his office he picks up his phone and orders a pizza delivered, and when it arrives, he eats half of it and puts the other half in the box on a small table which he draws close to the bed where the girl still sleeps. She must be warm enough now because she's stretched out on her stomach with her head pillowed on her arms, and she's even snoring a little. Walt locks the front door and dims the lights to night mode, and then he sits in his office with his feet up on his desk, smoking his pipe and staring out at nothing. After a while, he goes out into the showroom again and gets another blanket off one of the beds, takes it back to the office, and settles into his chair for the night.

He wakes up from an uncomfortable sleep. The clock on the wall says it's just before two a.m. The wind has died down and the rain has diminished to a light drizzle. This time when he checks on the girl, she's flat on her back with her arms flung out to either side. He's never protected anyone— not even himself – from anything, and he doesn't identify what he feels now as protective. He doesn't know what he feels. All he knows is that she's sleeping like she hasn't a care in the world when she clearly must have all kinds of cares in the world. If she didn't, she'd be sleeping at home. He deserves at least a small sense of pride at what he's done: he's sheltered a child in need. But all he feels as he returns to his office is tired. He still doesn't know how he's going to get rid of her before he has to open the store in

the morning, and he still needs to go home, sleep, shower, eat something, and change his clothes. He smokes another bowl and falls back asleep.

Walt wakes slowly in a fog of confusion. The clock says it's well past seven. His eyes feel grainy and his mouth is stale; he's aware of the stink of his own breath. Out in the lobby, the sky through the storefront windows is barely beginning to lighten through breaks in the cloud cover. Walt can see that the front door is unlocked. The bed in the back of the store, when he hurries back to check, is empty, and so is the pizza box. Gone are the backpack and jacket. Everything else seems untouched.

Walt sighs. He thinks to himself that he has enough time to go home, get changed, have some coffee, and get back in time to open the store. He can straighten things up after opening; no one ever comes in before noon. Not until he's in the shower at his own apartment does he remember with a shock that the district manager is due for a field visit first thing this morning. They were supposed to meet for coffee at eight-thirty—a friendly gesture that Walt dreads as a likely precursor to discipline — and then tour the store and view the inventory. Simultaneously Walt remembers that besides the rumpled and dirty display bed, he left his pipe and the borrowed blanket in the office, and he's not at all sure he remembered to lock the front door when he left the store this morning.

He's going to have some explaining to do to a manager who has already warned him he's on thin ice. He hastily dries himself as various stories whirl through his mind; excuses he knows will not help him. He dresses hurriedly and is about to head out the door, already late, when he remembers that he needs to brush his teeth, and he's just squeezed toothpaste onto the brush when his phone rings with what feels like a startling urgency. He stands there frozen, toothpaste tube in hand and water running in the sink, uncertain what to do next.