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Big Bad Dale's Big Bad Day

by Liz Lydic

Dale should've thrown in the towel before lunch. He'd had a typical morning assignment: a hit for some broad mad her husband cheated on her. She had a limp and no discernable ankles, so Dale related more to the husband than to the angry woman. But his boss said the split was 20k, and the woman was organized and communicative, so Dale was grateful. He was working on being more grateful for what he had, writing in the little Moleskin he took from the start-up kid he'd burglarized last week.

"Not too much juice," he'd written in the first entry, referring to the surprisingly low amount of blood from three gunshot wounds on a guy his client caught embezzling.

He consistently wrote for the next three days ("Grateful for the rainstorm; less traffic on kidnap job."

"Boyfriend of Client had X-box. I played before he came home and I lobbed him." "Nailed signature for Client forgery job."), but was far from journaling being an out-and-out habit.

Maybe that was why the day was going so badly. After the ankles lady, driving to a strip mall robbery with a set start time, he'd gotten stuck in a traffic circle loop. He was late, obviously, and compromised the job's start time. Shortly thereafter, he'd gotten a gnarly case of diarrhea from a Chipotle burrito that rendered him physically weak during a drug pickup as a bag man, and he sharted his pants in front of the connects, who, in turn, taunted him and fired a gun in his direction. In the mid-afternoon, Dale tried to clear out a Laundromat so he could steal the change machine coins, and a guy with OCD refused to leave the premises until he'd finished folding his dress shirts.

It'd taken Dale two hours to calm his fury about the guy and his pathetic repetitive motions, so obviously born out of his own wiring, not his defiance to Dale. He planned to write 'Didn't hit the fucked-up guy' in his gratitude journal. It wasn't much to be grateful for, to have resisted the urge to hit a man doing laundry, when he himself was about to reach his arm up into a machine to steal seventy bucks.

Late that night, he was preparing for a house raid job on a vacationing family. He was to focus on jewelry, sports equipment, electronics, and cash that was in a safe in a closet. Passing his journal as he walked to and from the front room of his home to his bedroom where he was getting dressed, Dale couldn't help but see it. Normally this preparation time would create in Dale electricity, an energy he wished he could bottle for non-crime moments of his life. But on this day, he felt nervous and scared, and the scared-ness scared him more. He took several swigs of a bottle of Evan Williams he normally drank post-job, until his mind was light. In this state, he was able to finish getting ready, see the journal as less ominous, and drive to the target home in relative peace.

Typically in home invasions, Dale looked at the house with disdain, sickened by all that it was and all that it enclosed which he knew nothing about and would never have for himself. The home was the enemy, and so the intrusion of it was simple and necessary.

This home, though, seemed not to offend him. It was a two-story situation with a deck in front, one he assumed was grossly underused but which held a friendly comfort nonetheless. The lawn was near immaculate, but the abandoned soccer ball and too-tall sprinkler heads gave it a human feel.

As he touched the doorknob to enter the house, a warmth drew Dale's focus down, down from the door, the knob, the window to the right with the shades pulled tight as promised by his boss. Down past his coarse-haired middle-aged arm, farmer-tanned from the job in Key West, down past his old jeans, faded at the knee like a teenager. Down past his pathetic Reebok low tops, to the Welcome mat below him, its message simple but terrifying, for, in its audacious invitation, Dale saw his own home, twenty years from now, a home all his. He, in this moment, either hallucinatory from the bourbon- or spiritual, a result of his gratitude-culling - saw a moment of his life: stepping on to a mat like this, happily dragging his feet to spare the home's inner beauty from the soil of the outside world, the bottom-shoe stuff he could acquire but leave so smoothly behind. And then he was undoing a wristwatch that could have symbolized recognition as Employee of the Year. And then he was kissing his future wife, and from what he could tell in this vision, she was a good woman. And soon, they were lifting forks to their mouths in this someday version of him, and he and his wife were full of good, real food with which he nourished his body, and the plates were the kind that required washing. And so they were washing them, Dale and this wife he didn't recognize but appeared real and true, and he was telling her

that the meal was delicious and she was smiling at him, shifting her head to and fro to get better looks at him, as if she could not believe all that he was. And he looked at her back, unable to keep himself from smiling.

The next thing he'd say to her - "Thank you" - was something he said to her often.

Twenty frantic minutes later, Dale was back in his car, a nag in his arm from where he'd struggled opening the safe. His hand was bleeding from the slit his careless maneuvering of a ski had caused. But, wrapped up carefully and delicately in a box was a set of porcelain plates, the kind that required washing, which he'd bundled up separately, that he would keep.

Liz Lydic is a mom, writer, and local government employee in the Los Angeles area. She also does theatre stuff.

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