

Steven E. Domingues II
(805) 264-1263
Steven@stevendomingues.com

The Choice

By

Steven E. Domingues II

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Two people sat in a paint-cracked, turquoise mid-eighties car in a parking lot near a busy intersection. They held hands in the cold night air, pushed to make a choice that was larger than both of them.

No severance, no apology, and no money. He was wearing his lucky jeans and tee-shirt. The cold of the night and the dishonorable duty ahead forced him to wear a black hooded sweatshirt. The car had no heater.

She had debt; a lot of debt. She was the one behind the wheel. Her plaid skirt was over black leggings, to help with the cool night air. Her long-sleeved thermal shirt had a worn cartoon image of a cat staring at a cactus with the words "Scratching Post?" underneath. A yellow scarf wrapped itself around her neck.

"Are we really going to do this?"

"I don't think we have a choice."

The two were desperate. They had a growing stack of bills at their new apartment. Before they were jobless, their life had been looking up. They had moved, his old studio apartment and her childhood bedroom behind them. Unemployment checks came, but often too late. They were a sinking ship, but held onto each other; their love a buoy, a savior.

"Do you have the gun?"

"Yeah, in my pocket, with the mask. Car has gas?"

"Yes. I don't- yes, it's full."

The man leaned over and kissed his girlfriend. It was the sort of kiss that made him forget himself. It erased who he was and what he was doing. His responsibilities, his doubts, his unknown fate; all ceased to exist.

When he pulled away from her, he kept his eyes closed, reached into his pocket and pulled out the dark blue ski mask. He stretched it over his head and pulled up the hood to his sweatshirt. He reached into the right front pocket and wrapped his fingers around the .357 Magnum, acquired cheap from a pawn shop. His other hand dug into his jean pocket and wrapped around the unloaded bullets, they clanked together like worthless coins.

He took a breath and released it slow, opened his eyes and watched mist escape into the dark interior of the car. When the last customer left the store, he unclasped his hand from the gun and popped open the car door. He looked back one last time to his girlfriend.

"I love you Molly"

"I love you too, James"

He closed the door to the car, and peered back inside at the woman he loved. He watched her grip tighten on the hard plastic of the steering wheel. He pressed his hand to the glass, and turned away.

* * *

James shook his head as he walked to the door to the convenience store, attempting to calm his mind. A dozen scenarios, images from crime movies and tv shows that he had seen faded from thought. He had never stolen so much as a candy bar; he didn't know what to expect.

He had been on the receiving end of a few robberies at his old job at the grocery store. The one that stuck in his mind wasn't any more complex than some guy, his gun and money taken from the register. He got away with a few hundred bucks. It took less than a minute and as far as James knew, the thief was never caught.

James never forgot that, and when the time came, he remembered the simplicity. A small store like this had video cameras, so he wore a mask. There would be a call to the police, so he would be quick.

He gripped the gun in his right hand, reached out with his left hand and pushed the door open. The door's bells jingled and the old man behind the register looked up from his newspaper, a smile half formed on his dry and cracked lips. James pulled the gun from his pocket and pointed it at the man. "Hands up, hands up!"

The old man, whose name tag had more consonants than James thought should be allowed, raised his hands and glanced into the aisle. James followed his gaze to the worker he hadn't seen before. A young girl, perhaps high school age, had been sweeping the floor. Her mouth was a frozen "Oh".

"You, get over here. Now!" Trying not to let surprise get the better of him, James gestured with the gun. "Get on the floor. Don't look at me. You," He shouted at the man behind the counter, "empty the register into a bag, gimme everything!" The man, his face showing no emotion, took a deep breath and let it out.

"Quit stalling!" James cocked the revolver in his hand and took a step closer to the old man.

"Grandpa, why-" The girl on the floor had started to sob. James looked at the old man, who had tensed and squeezed his eyes shut. He had still not moved towards the register. James grimaced under the mask, and moved the gun from the old man's chest to the girl on the floor. He then spoke in a very slow and deliberate manner.

"Grandpa, put the money in the bag, or I'll shoot your granddaughter in the head. She won't have a face for her funeral. All I want is the money, and I'll go." The girl on the floor started crying harder.

* * *

The door's bells jingled again.

"James?"

Molly was standing in the doorway, her hands tucked into her sleeves. She had wrapped the yellow scarf around the bottom half of her face, but her blonde hair glowed in the fluorescent light of the store.

"No, no- get back in the car. Y-you don't- the plan!"

"You can't kill her James. You-" Her chin quivered through the scarf. Her eyes welled up. James knew he couldn't go through with it in front of Molly. He didn't know if he could do it at all.

"Mol, you have to leave. I-"

There was a sound that broke the relative silence of the store. The buzzing of the lights, the quiet music that wafted in from the back room, the humming of the refrigerators. All was drowned out by the racking of a shotgun.

"Go away from her." The old man behind the counter pointed the weapon at James. His calloused fingers held onto the gun with a steel grip. James looked from Molly to the girl at his feet, who was hiding her face in her shaking hands. The unfamiliar weight of the revolver was making his wrist hurt. He swung the gun back up to the old man.

"Just give us the money."

"Go away from her."

"The cash and we leave."

"I will ask you one last time. Go. Away. From. Her."

"Look, man- I don't know what to do, okay? I need money, I need-"

"You need? This is my store. My work, my life. You come in here and expect free? What is so hard you can not earn for yourself?"

"We got laid off, there's no work."

"No work? We live in number one country. I come here, escape from my home. In my country they want to kill me just because of my ancestors. I have no choice. You, you cannot make the choice."

"Choice? What choice? I didn't choose to be laid off."

"The choice to sacrifice. The choice to do what you must. Times are tough, for you, for me. But I do what I can, I help my family."

"We have bills-"

"You have bills for things you cannot afford. Give up your things."

"We can't-" James thought about their cell phones and the constant fast food visits. He tried not to think about the movie rentals and the visits to the yogurt shack. Could they

be doing more?

"No. You won't. That is the difference. You can choose to take away that gun, but you won't because you are lazy. Because you are afraid. I am not lazy. I am not afraid." The old man adjusted his grip on the shotgun. "Put down your gun. Give up your things. Live the life you can afford. If you have each other, what more could you need?"

James looked at Molly. She nodded, tears flowing free down her face. James tilted the .357, so the muzzle was pointed at the ceiling and worked his thumb, setting the hammer back down with a soft click.

"Now, please leave. I have not seen your faces. If you can give up the world you think you need, come back. I will forgive, but I will not forget. I will help you."

James stepped forward and placed the gun on the counter, keeping an eye on the shotgun still pointed at him.

"I'm sorry." James said. He turned and walked past the girl on the floor, "sorry" James said to her as he took Molly by the hand. They walked out of the store, the door bell jingling one final time.