

**A QUARTER, TWO DIMES AND A PENNY**  
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Honorable Mention, Short Story

By midnight he was dead. He tried to kill himself that afternoon but woke up around ten that night naked and wet from peeing himself. He was crying on the bathroom floor because he wasn't dead already. He'd figured he'd choked down enough Seconal to do the whole thing peacefully but somehow he just slept and his heart kept beating.

He called to me from their bedroom at around 11:30 that night. I was in the office on the back porch of their house, posting entries into a reworked ledger. We'd been in the process of creating a new set of books for an upcoming audit, an abridged manifestation of the fiscal truth. In the last year and a half my job description had evolved to include not just the bookkeeping for their store, but childcare, dinner preparation and the skills of a dispassionate sounding board. I pushed my chair away from the desk and nudged the cat from my lap; loose hairs floated in the whispered turbulence he left behind.

From the doorway of their room Ray said, "Find Donna and give her this. Handing me an envelope he said, "Take the boys." He looked undone, emptied and hollow. I rocked on the balls of my feet, my knees loose, wondering if the worst was over. I floated like a cobweb in a cold draft and it was from this place he pushed me away with a flat, "Go. Now."

I woke the boys quickly. The smallest one, Troy, slept tangled in his sheets beside a stuffed gray rabbit and a red Stingray matchbox car. In the other bed, under the window, Donny rose quickly feeling the nightstand for his glasses. He pushed his long arms into a T-shirt he found on the floor and pulled it over his head.

"Hurry up, baby," I murmured to Troy and smoothed his ruffled hair. He clutched the bunny's leg and we slipped from the room. I grabbed a blanket off the couch and piled them in the back seat of my car. These two were not new to midnight flights from warm beds. They'd held a long acquaintance with dodge and duck and hide.

"Where we goin'?" the little one said under his breath.

"We're getting your mom. Now lay down and close your eyes," I said, "Cover up. Stay warm."

Donna and Ray had warred throughout the house that morning and she'd finally ended the tirade, no longer fed well by his threats and rage. She snatched her keys off the kitchen counter. The kids and I watched Ray thunder up behind her as she stormed out the door, "You walk out of here and I'll do it, I swear to God," he shouted at her back. She turned at him, coiled and spat, "You promised that before. Go ahead. Do it. Blow your Goddamn head off. "

It took about fifteen minutes to drive to the acre of land they'd bought at Pinnacle Peak and Cave Creek Road. I knew she'd go there after the fight, that's where she always went. The property was a piece of raw land at the base of the hill there. I turned at the unmarked entrance where her tires had pressed the loose desert.

My headlights found her camper and I honked urgently. Dust rose around the car as it ground into place. She opened the door squinting with her hand up, shielding her eyes from the lights. Her clothes hung on her thin body as if still on the hanger. Her faced deeply etched and creased in the hard light.

I gave her the envelope and while she read, she said, "He is trying to scare me."

We locked eyes as she weighed and measured his intent. In three loud beats of my heart she pulled the door closed on the camper and got in the front seat of my car. We flew home, the Cadillac floating, skimming the road. From the rearview mirror I saw the boys staring out the windows, street lights swiping through the car. They did not speak. The oldest chewed a thumbnail and the youngest stared with wet eyes.

When we arrived we found the door locked. She could produce no key. We went to their bedroom window and pushed the screen in and I climbed through with Donna close behind. The boys stood outside the window in the night, ridged and mute.

It was dark except for the light from the bathroom. He lay on his back, spot lit there on the bed. The pillow was covered with blood on the right side of his head. It was very dark and heavy, like oil. His hand with the gun lay in the black pool. Donna slowly lifted it off the pillow, his finger slipped from the trigger.

The blood had the elasticity of drool. It clung to the barrel and stretched, like a web, for a few inches before slowly sliding off the end.

"*Oh my God,*" she breathed, her eyes growing wider. I watched as the facts muscled their way into her mind.

The bullet Ray had blown behind his face had moved things. The eyes were strangely uneven, one lid lifted higher than the other. The head was distorted, more a fist than a face. Its coloration shadowed and bluing, the lips dark. The jaw hung loose. I was keenly aware of the smell of wet blood and gunpowder. There was no other sound but the screaming.

Soon, the four of us stood in the kitchen all hunching our backs, stooped by the weight of it all. Emergency lights shot through the windows and bounced off mirrors reflecting quick, disjointed streaks of blue and red. The house was full of big men and equipment. Hushed tones and some loud directions were issued during the attempted resuscitation. A gurney too big for the hallway banged into corners and walls before Ray's body was fed into the back of an ambulance, the sheet yet to cover his face. Sirens followed and we proceeded to the hospital, leaving behind us the house dark and empty.

After waiting, all of us cold on the blue plastic chairs, the doctor came in with Ray's watch, his wedding ring, a quarter, two dimes and a penny. Donna began to growl and the sound grew louder, with her head slung back we huddled over her-ready to catch the pieces when she blew apart.

Two days later, at the funeral we walked across thick pile carpet into a room, more empty than full. A smattering of flowers and a long, high-gloss mahogany casket headed the room. The coffin had an open lid inviting observation of this stark,

inanimate thing. The mortician had applied makeup and had plugged the bullet hole with flesh colored putty leaving only a hint of evidence at the top of Ray's right-hand sideburn. They'd brushed shiny, clean hair over it so no one would notice unless they knew exactly where to look. He was dressed in a brown polyester western cut suit Donna had found stuffed in the back of their closet.

I stood next to him, staring at that plug and whispered how sorry I was. Sorry I hadn't stayed. Sorry I hadn't known the words to change things. Sorry I hadn't saved his life.

For months, flooding into my mind, came the bluing face again and again. And that voice that kept repeating: *Why didn't you stay. You knew what he'd do.*

Of all the things he was and did, all he really left behind was this haunting reverie and his watch, his wedding ring, a quarter, two dimes and a penny.

