

The Promise

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There might have been a dozen or more cigarette butts lining the curb. Marcus bent and selected a few that still held the promise of a few decent tokes. He always smoked the best one first. After dropping the others into his coat's left pocket, he fiddled around in the rest of his pockets until he found a crumpled matchbook. A couple of matches remained. He was lucky. Sometimes it's harder to find a light than a smoke.

A nasty wind whipped through the treads of his coat as he backed up next to the concrete pillar of an overpass. Cupping his hand, he lit the cigarette—used only one match too—and took a satisfying inhale. Heavy clouds were quickly edging over a red sky to cover the rising sun. Everybody knows that the old rhyme about a red sky in the morning and sailors taking warning was right. A storm was brewing. He turned his attention from the sky to the intersection.

As usual, the guy who claimed the stoplight at the off-ramp as his own was holding up a cardboard sign but today it seemed different. Marcus squinted—it kept getting harder to see. Finally, he made it out. *Homeless Need Help*. Yesterday the guy's sign read *Homeless Need Work*.

Maybe yesterday somebody had actually taken him up on the offer. Marcus scoffed. He had better things to do than to hold up a sign all day long. He tossed his spent butt in the dirt. A busy day lay ahead of him. Just like everybody else, he had to have food, drink and a dry place to sleep. *Big T's* would be his next destination.

It had been yesterday morning when Marcus had been looking around *Big T's* trash dumpster when a guy, carrying a bulky bag, came out the store's back door and saw him.

"Hey, you. Get out of here," he yelled.

"I'm leaving, I'm leaving." Marcus held out his arms, palms out and backed away.

"Make sure you do," the guy muttered as he began lifting the bag into the container. It slipped from his hands and dropped to the pavement. Good thing for the guy it didn't break open; maybe not so good for Marcus since there might be something useful in it he could use.

Marcus came back and offered his help and together, both men successfully heaved it over the rim.

"Thanks man," the guy said. "Didn't realize how heavy it was."

Marcus straightened his shoulders. "Not a problem." He turned to leave.

“Wait a minute,” the guy called out. “If you promise not to loiter around here, maybe I can get you a sandwich or something. Can’t see tossing food out just cause of the expiration date.” He began to pull a sandwich out of his pocket. “But you can’t tell anybody. I’ll get fired if they find out.”

“Sure, sure.” Marcus kept his eye on the sandwich.

“Now, I might not always be here, but you can check over there.” The guy pointed to a hole in the concrete wall near the dumpster. His other hand kept a tight hold on the sandwich. “Only around this time though. You got to promise, no loitering and if you tell any of your buddies, nobody’s getting nothing.”

“I promise. Cross my heart.” Marcus made the gesture and the guy handed him the sandwich. It was thick with ham and creamy cheese. He salivated at the memory.

It was hard to tell what time it was today, what with the clouds and all, but he was pretty sure it was close to the time when he was at *Big T’s* yesterday. He didn’t want to get there too early. After all, he had made a promise. He’d not told nobody about the food—he wouldn’t have anyway—but he might have gotten to the store earlier if he hadn’t promised not to. You got to keep your promises, everybody knows that.

Cars and trucks roared past him, anxious to reach their destination and to work. Marcus figured he already was at work. It consisted mostly of walking and looking. People were always tossing out stuff they thought was junk but he knew differently. Once, he found a real nice leather jacket with barely a tear in it. He got seven dollars for it.

He began a slow walk in the direction of *Big T’s*. It was getting harder and harder to ignore the pain that cut through his feet.

A rolled up newspaper lay under a bush. It could have fallen out of a paperboy’s satchel. Next to it was a Bic lighter. It looked almost new. He picked them both up. No sense in just testing the lighter to see if it worked when he knew of a place up the road where he could sit on a stump for a smoke and a read.

It took three tries but the lighter held to its promise. He opened the newspaper.

Thousands Die, the headline read. There had been an earthquake and then a tsunami. He studied the pictures of destruction. People and houses all gone, lost to a wild sea and a mountain of mud.

His cigarette butt flared, then burnt his thumb. Marcus didn't notice. He was staring at the road and the never ending tsunami of vehicles rushing past him. He stood; the newspaper fell to the ground. A semi-truck, pulling a trailer full of shiny, brand new cars, barreled past him. It took the loose papers with it.

Then Marcus saw it. A dog—a gray and white dog. It lay on the gravel next to the road. It had a fat belly, so he must have had a home or was good at catching rabbits. A limp tongue hung between sharp teeth. Unblinking eyes stared straight ahead, straight at him. Flies flew hungrily around the body.

Poor dog. He hadn't a chance.

A whisky bottle lay close to the dead animal. Maybe there's still some left in it. Marcus picked it up. His tongue felt deep into the bottle's neck for a taste. But there wasn't enough whisky in it. There never is.

The temptation, that terrifying idea—the one he feared the most—had once again begun its insidious dance through his mind. It danced alone, it needed no partner and would allow no opposition. It grew strong; then stronger still, until it became a thing into itself. It demanded to be heard, to be obeyed. It taunted, it teased. It would not stop.

It'll be easy. Just do it, it urged. What about that dog. Do you think it had any luck? Why would you be any luckier than all those people that died? You got no luck. You got nothing. It held fast as it tugged at him to walk forward, forward into the tidal wave just eight yards away. A moment later, just five yards, a few steps more, three. *Keep going, it demanded. Only one yard more and the pain will end.*

In front of him lay a penny. Could be a heads-up penny. Everybody knows a heads-up penny promises good luck, but you won't get the luck if you don't pick it up. He stopped and leaned over. A passing semi-truck blared its warning. Marcus barely heard it as he studied the penny. It was heads-up. He dropped it into his pants pocket. It jingled next to the lighter. Maybe he'd get another ham and cheese sandwich before the storm moves in.