

Redemption

I sit here in my small basement apartment with the lights out. It's better that way. Across the room, on a corner of the threadbare sofa, my cat Charlie sleeps soundly. He is oblivious to my pain.

I'm thinking I should do something about Charlie. It won't be fair to him when I'm gone. I should let him outside to fend for himself. He'll survive, Cats always do.

A thin bar of light from the streetlamp outside my window falls across the floor, and seems to mock me with its presence, as if this tiny ray of light is urging me to look for some hope.

But there isn't any hope. There's nothing left. What's remains of my life disappeared when I lost my job. My wife was already gone, run off with some man who will no doubt treat her better than I ever did. And I haven't seen either of my sons in years. They gave up on me when I started drinking.

I can't blame any of them, really. I wasn't fit to live with most of the time. I'm surprised they stayed as long as they did.

I've discovered that once I made the decision to end my life, I'm much happier. Does that make sense? It feels like I'm free. Nothing matters any more. Not the rent payment on this miserable apartment, a payment which is three months overdue. Not the fact that there's no money for food. No money for anything. It doesn't matter any more. None of it matters

I used to have friends, back then, before everything went sour. Can you believe that? But I haven't heard from any of them in a long time. Not that they'd care. Nobody cares, really.

Once I made the decision, things seemed much brighter. No more worries. It will all be over soon. I wonder if Charlie will miss me?

I'm not sure yet how I'm going to do it. Nothing messy, at any rate. I have a whole bottle of Tylenol pills that I've been saving, just in case. Maybe that's the best way. Just go to sleep and never wake up.

No-one will miss me.

But just to be sure, I probably should have a bottle of wine to wash the pills down with, and to help me fall asleep quicker. Yes, that's what I'll do. I probably should go out and buy it now, before the stores close. I think there's still a few dollars in my wallet; just enough for a cheap bottle. Why not?

I leave the apartment and make my way up to the street. The liquor store is just over on the next block, so I won't be gone long. I'll put Charlie out when I get back, before I take the pills.

As I pass the small house on the corner, I smell smoke. It's the Corbett place.

Elizabeth, I think her name is. A single mother, she works nights, and leaves her daughter Cassie alone in the house. I know this because a few weeks ago we met in the small grocery store at the other end of the street. She asked me if I could fix a broken pipe under her sink for her, and I said I could. It didn't take much fixing ... just a turn or two with a wrench.

But we talked a little. She said she couldn't pay much, but she gave me a cup of coffee, and I got to meet Cassie. A very bright eight year old, and cute as a button. Elizabeth explained how Cassie was quite mature for her age, and how she looked after herself while Elizabeth was working. I didn't think that was such a good idea, but I didn't say anything.

The smoke was really pouring out of the upper floor windows. I could see flames behind the glass. No-one was on the street. The house was burning.

Cassie would be alone in the house. Her bedroom was upstairs.

I ran up to the door and tried the handle. It was locked. But it was a cheap lock; I twisted and pushed, and the door sprang open. I ran inside, into the hallway. I could hear coughing and crying from upstairs. Cassie.

As I made my way up the staircase, flames started to appear, running along the top of the walls like they were liquid. It was hot. How ironic would it be if I died here in the fire, before I could return home to kill myself. But I couldn't think about that now.

Cassie. I could hear her in the bedroom, still above me on the landing. Her coughing sounded weaker. She was crying.

The flames were all around me as I reached the landing. The smoke was thick around Cassie's bedroom door. I threw my shoulder into it, once, twice, until the latch gave way and I fell into the room.

I dropped to my knees to get under the thick layer of smoke that was filling the bedroom, and crawled toward the bed where I could hear Cassie, still coughing and crying out for her mother. I reached the bed, and pulled her down onto the floor. She wrapped her arms around me.

"Help me ... the fire ..." She started to cough and cough.

"Hold on to me, Cassie. Don't let go!"

With Cassie clinging to my neck, I crawled back toward the doorway. It was engulfed in flames. I stood up, and wrapped my coat around Cassie, and picked her up in my arms. Both of us stumbled through the doorway onto the landing. My hair was on fire, and I could feel the burns on my face, but we made it to the stairway, and we half ran, half fell down the stairs and out the front door.

We dropped to the ground and rolled around to put out the flames; my pants were blackened, and the pain from the burns on my face and head was intense, but Cassie, when I pulled her out of my coat ... Cassie was OK.

We crawled to the sidewalk, Cassie coughing and coughing and crying as she clung to me. I think I remember someone reaching down to take her out of my arms, and asking if I was all right. But I don't really remember much after that.

I've come to the conclusion, now that I'm up and around again and almost recovered, that I won't be killing myself today. Or not next week either. I'm not sure what happened, or why I decided that. Things are still pretty bad. No job. Not much money.

It might be because of what Cassie said when she came to visit me in the hospital. She climbed up on my bed, with Elizabeth looking on and smiling, and whispered something in my ear. I had trouble making out what she was saying at first ... the bandages made it a little hard to hear. But I think she told me "Thank you for caring about me".