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The Guard

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The Guard

She wants paint. She wants a garbage can. She wants extension cords.

We have a garbage can, I say. We have three garbage cans. One of them's unseemly, she says.

I know what she means without knowing the word. It got unseemly. Someone spray-painted a tag on it. She suspects it was me. Plus the lid doesn't fit anymore. And someone bit off the handle.

What kind of paint? I say. She says yellow. What kind of yellow? Michigan yellow. And blue, she says. Penn State blue.

She sends Buck, our son, with me to make sure I don't slide. She defined *slide* for me and made a list of what constitutes *sliding*. Buck is four, but he knows what sliding is already. He knows what's on the list. Donuts. Candy. Ice cream. And he's programmed to report back anything he sees or smells or feels.

She slaps the credit card on the counter and says, No fags, either. That's sliding, too. She doesn't mean British cigarettes.

Honey, I say.

She says she'll believe it when she sees it. I say how can you see it if it doesn't occur? She crosses her arms. Anything else? she says. I say yes. I say there is something else. How are we going to throw out a trash can?

At seven, Buck and I drive to the hardware store. Buck reviews the list. Two cans of paint, Michigan yellow for the kitchen, Penn State blue for the chest in the garage. One garbage can, Spartan green. Two extension cords, Illinois orange. She keeps things Big Ten for us so we remember.

The extension cords are for Buck's room, which is another battle I lost. Buck's room has only one outlet. It wasn't a problem until Buck got a computer for Christmas. So now we're moving the bed. None of this was my idea. Initially we had the bed by the outlet. Now she wants the desk by the outlet. I say hell. He isn't tall enough to reach the desk. She says he will be. She says the room isn't very Feng Shui without the bed by the window. I say don't know who that is. She says: Brad . . .

She's good. She sends us out with only an hour to spare before the hardware store closes. She says she'll clean up. She'll do the dishes. She'll make lunch for tomorrow. We're going to see the river otter at the Findlay Zoo, and she'll show the world how fast she can walk.

We're not supposed to be at the drugstore. We're supposed to be at the hardware store. But it's Friday after dinner, and I need a candy bar. I leave Buck in the car and give him something to do. I tell him when I get back I want to hear a song, an original song. I push a button and the car chomps locked. Buck whacks his palm on the window. He says he wants to know what the song should be about. I say: You pick. He says he doesn't know. I tell him to make a song about what we need at the hardware store, and he sings, Penn State blue, Penn State blue. He bangs his palm on the window again, and I don't turn around.

The magazines tonight all feature the same dead movie star on the cover, every one—and then, in a sidebar, the same alive movie star. I stuff a hand in my coat pocket and massage the squares of gum. She stocks my pockets with the whitening stuff because she thinks my teeth look yellow. She's not wrong.

I used to be a pretty good football player, though, which is how we met. We both went to Mansfield, where I played guard. People say I look like a guard. I tell these people I played for the Buckeyes. I didn't, though. I played for OSU-Mansfield, the Mavericks. In high school I played both ways, guard and nose guard, *and* I punted. Punting I liked a lot. But people got weirded out seeing number sixty-one in the backfield with his hands flexed, ready for the snap. In my dreams, though, I'm number eight, and I punt, and that's all that I do.

Twix are on sale two for a dollar. I stuff one in my coat pocket and chew the other as I walk the aisles of the drugstore. I let the caramel stick to my gums—I'll fish it out with a finger later. In the pharmacy bathroom I flip through a *Mademoiselle* the employees left. I lean forward and lock the door. I flip the switch on the air vents and turn off the light. I pop two squares of gum in my mouth.

When I leave the drugstore I have two things going. One, I regret chasing the Twix with the gum. I shouldn't have done that. I should've let it sit. The caramel mixed with the mint too fast, and the flavor got lost.

Two, the hardware store closes in ten minutes, and it's five minutes away, and it takes more than five minutes to buy paint not to mention mix paint not to mention get Buck out of the car and up to the store.

I stand on the curb to the parking lot and cud over that. I take out the pad and pen Dr. Tan gave me. He says to use it when there's a choice I can't make. I hold the pen and pad in separate hands and close my eyes. I count ten-Mississippi. I open my eyes. I close them again and count five-Mississippi. Dr. Tan says try for alternative solutions. He says look to the pad. Look to the pad, Brad. But my pad's full. I filled both sides already. She writes her comments in the margins. *Boring*, she writes. But here's what I would write if I had any room.

I'd write, I am not supposed to be here tonight. I'd write, The hardware store closes in eight minutes and we'll have to rush and I'll drive poorly and Buck will tell her about it, if not one then the other—if not the drugstore then the driving. And what if the hardware store closes before ten minutes, the way stores do on Friday nights? That means that by the time I park and get Buck out of the car, they're closed already. They're in there, trolling around. The lights are on, but they're closed. I don't blame them.

But if I get home and tell her that, that the hardware store closed early, which will have been true, Buck will tattle anyway. He's obligated. I could bribe him with an ice cream cone. I don't want to. I could. I could trim the cone's edges. I don't have the energy. Why bribe my son? She'll make me lie by asking where we went and what for. She'll smell my breath and it'll smell like gum and she'll be suspicious.

I'd write, too, how maybe things end before they end. I wonder, I'd write, if this all didn't end a long time ago.

I've been watching Buck across the parking lot. He's rocking his head side to side in song. The drugstore man comes and locks the door behind me, and I turn to see him and he sees me. I blow on my hands. I press a button to lock the car, but it's locked already. Buck freezes. I dip behind the drugstore and sit down on the curb between Dumpsters. I take out the other Twix and kill one side of it. My watch beeps. The hardware store is closed. I figure I can bang on the drugstore window and ask if he'll take me back. I can buy extension cords there—they have them. I saw them while I was walking the feminine aisles, chewing the Twix, eyeing the Revlon girls. And that would solve one of my problems tonight. The paint? Screw the paint for the time being.

I stand up and walk around the front of the drugstore again. I'm one of two cars in the parking lot. I think about what Dr. Tan calls *needs*. All the lights are turning Michigan yellow to Buckeye red as I cross the street these days. I'm done hustling to make them. Where

are Buck and I headed tonight? I'm counting ten-Mississippi when the drugstore man comes out from the Dumpsters, the *Mademoiselle* in his armpit.

He says, Is that your kid?

I say, Is what?

Is that your kid?

Which?

One-Mississippi. Two-Mississippi.

He says, We can sort this out by the Dumpsters.

I say, What?

He says, I think I left something back there.

And I lose count. What about the kid? I say.

He says the kid stays in the car.

As we walk, I reach for him and come up with a fistful of belt. The cold tonight smells like violet. The brick is glorious. One-Mississippi. Two-Mississippi.

Blitz on five.

This story first appeared in the 13th Annual Writer's Digest Short Story Competition Collection, Writer's Digest Books, 2013.