

...anything but love...

by Michael D. Brown

Jesus Christ, she's going to kill me, is what I'm thinking, as I walk down our street kicking a can out of my way and smelling the semi-fresh bagels coming from Sammy's on the corner. They are warm and fresh in the early morning when I'm going to work. I'm usually not walking here just after noon.

"Have some gumption," Margie said, "Tell Burckhardt you need a raise."

I knew she was right.

We're living in squalor, well, not squalor, but we could be doing better. If I was making more, I thought, we could look for something uptown.

"Take a chance, Bill," she said, "Like Eddie across the hall did. Tess told me he marched right into his boss and demanded a raise. He pointed out how much they needed him and they gave him twenty-five dollars more a week. That's a hundred dollars a month."

On the radio, someone was singing, "I can't give you anything but love, baby..." It helped me make up my mind. I wanted to say more than that to Margie.

This morning I walk into Burckhardt's office with a couple of account books. I start going over them with him and he's really not interested, like he has better things to do with his time. In fact, he says, "Bill, I leave these things to you. I don't have time to go over this now. I have a big lunch in half an hour."

"There's something else I wanted to discuss with you," I say, and then I go into how Margie and I are finding it a little difficult to scrape by, what with me trying to take care of my mother since my dad died two years ago and how I sure could use some more money. I thought I could get him with sympathy. Then he flips out on me and tells me it's not in the budget. I should learn to manage my own budget and if my mother is a hardship, I should look into state aid. Suddenly, I see him for the heartless bastard he is and I start raising my voice. He starts hollering. We're trading insults. He calls out to

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his secretary to bring him some coffee. She's not at her desk. I'm thinking she's probably hiding in the ladies' room. He starts banging on his desk and saying how everyone is letting him down. "Where's the team spirit in this goddamn place? You know, if you don't like it here, you can get the hell out."

The upshot is I quit. I go downstairs to have a smoke and cool off but I don't cool off. I stub the butt, go back upstairs and quit.

Now I'm walking down our block trying to think of ways to explain to Margie how I was trying to make a stand. I didn't mean for things to turn out this way but sometimes they just do.

When I reach our door, I knock instead of just walking in like I would on a normal day. I don't want to scare her. There's no answer. I try the knob but the door's locked so I let myself in with my key, something I haven't had to do since the time we had our big argument and I stayed at my mother's place for the night.

The apartment's empty. I mean the furniture is there but there's no Margie. The radio is off and there's an eerie silence.

On the table is a note.

Bill, I've gone. It'll be better this way. You only have your mother to worry about. Please don't look for me. I don't want you to. I'm sorry, Marg

Before I have time to think about what I should do next there's a knock on the door. I open it to find Tess standing there crying. "I thought I heard you come in," she sobs, "Oh, Bill, Eddie's gone. He left this note when he went out this morning. He's not coming back." She's holding up a wet piece of paper for me to look at. "I've been knocking on your door all morning because I wanted to speak to Margie. I don't know what to do."

