

[This story is composed of one-syllable words.]

A MAN OF FEW WORDS

by Michael Boyd

“Shut your fat mouth!”

I’m a man of few words—short ones as a rule.

“Oh, blow it out your butt,” she said in a low voice.

“What was that? What did you say?”

“I told you to blow it out—”

“Oh, I heard what you said.”

“So you’re not deaf—good. Then why did you ask?”

“What I meant was *why*—why did you say it?”

She shrugged. “You were rude to me first. I don’t think you love me at all, Ray. You just love to be mean to me.”

She might have been right.

“I’m a Class A jerk. What can I tell you?”

Tess wiped a tear from her cheek. “Why did we have to come here? First the snow, now this . . . If we had a grain of sense, we’d be in bed.”

I winked at her. “You want to kiss and make up?”

She shook her head. “I don’t mean for *that*. I’m so ticked at you.”

“Well, what can I do to fix it?”

“Go get me a drink. Scotch, neat. And make it a big one. I want to be good and sloshed when the cops get here.”

“*If* they get here, you mean. That’s some storm out there.”

“Oh, they’ll get here,” she said. “You can count on it. And we’re stuck here ’til they do.”

I got up off the stool and limped to the back of the bar, stepped past Red and Butch Banks, who lay dead as dog food on the wood slat floor, and looked ’til I found where they hid the good stuff—Grouse malt, 12 years old. I poured two drinks and slid one to her. She tossed it down in a big gulp and held the glass out for more.

“Hit me.”

“Don’t tempt me.” I filled it to the brim, then topped off my own.

She grinned and flipped me the bird. I blew her an air kiss.

“You know what, Ray? You’re such a jerk when you want to be.”

“Gee, hon, I wish I’d said that. Oh, wait—I just did.”

I came back to her side of the bar and sat down, and we sipped our drinks and watched the snow pile up in the street. I could hear a plow at work, but it was a long way off.

“I want to know one thing, Ray. Why would you try to stick up Red’s in the first place? He was your friend.”

“Yeah. Bad move on my part.” I had to give her that. “But a man has to eat, right? We don’t have a pot to pee in or a front door to throw it out of, and no one wants to hire a con. You know that.”

“And look at this place,” she went on. “It’s a dive. How much did you think you’d find in here?”

It was my turn to shrug. “More than I *did* find, I guess.”

“How much was there? Tell me.”

“Nine in the till, three more and change in the tip jar. Plus Red’s watch.” I held out my wrist.

“So you’ve screwed us good for twelve bucks, huh? Sweet.”

“And the watch. It could be worth a grand, at least.”

“The watch is a fake, Ray. Get a grip. Look at the name on it. The real one just has one X. My God, you’re dense.”

I sighed. She had that right, too.

*

We’d gone in at ten ’til two, just as Butch went to lock the place up.

“Where is it?” Tess asked as we neared the door. She meant the gun, a big 12 gauge with both ends sawed off short.

“Shoved down my pants leg,” I told her. “That’s why I walk like this.”

“Huh. Don’t blow your nuts off.”

“Don’t get your hopes up.”

“In fact, why don’t you just ask Red for a loan—for old times’ sake? Don’t take that thing out. Please say you won’t. I’m scared.”

“Then go wait in the van.”

“I’m scared to do that, too. And it’s too cold.”

Once we were in, things turned to worms. Up and out came the 12 gauge, smooth and fast. Red’s jaw dropped. “You dumb punk,” he said, real soft like, and went straight for his bar gun, a Glock 9 mil. I had to do him, you know? Gawd, what a mess. Then Butch got brave and called the cops, and of course that was the end of him, too. I swear, you can’t trust no one no more. Am I right?

I grabbed what there was and we hit the street. We tried to move fast, but the deep snow slowed us down. When we got to the van, that’s when I saw I’d locked my keys in it.

“You got yours?” I asked.

Tess shook her head and stamped her feet to warm them. “Can’t you use the gun to break in?” she asked.

“I—uh—think I might have left it on the bar.” She gave me a look that would peel paint.

“Don’t sweat it,” I said. “Help me find a rock or a brick.” But all we could see on the ground was snow and more snow. I made one try with my foot, gave a big kick, fell on my ass, and wrenched my knee just for the hell of it.

“Do you think Red or Butch might have a car?”

Two points for Tess! “Let’s go find out,” I said. “Here, help me up. *Aaaaaah—jeez!*”

We made our way to the bar once more and searched a long time for car keys, but there were none. So we did what seemed like the next best thing at the time. We sat there and got drunk.

*

I know, I know—the real next best thing would have been to find the 12 gauge and head back out to the van. By the time that thought came to me, though, we were in jail.

That was ten years back. Now Tess is locked up for life and they've got me tied down to a board with a tube stuck in each arm. I look up at the lights and tiles and the tops of the green walls, not at the three men who are here to kill me, and sure to Christ not at the rows of geeks who sit just past the glass and wait to watch me die. My eyes sting a bit—I don't know why. And I wish I could wipe my nose. But I won't ask for help.

A bald dude in a bad suit steps up real close and reads from—I don't know what you'd call it—some kind of court thing. A black guy checks the straps one more time.

“You got some last words, Ray?” the one in the bad suit asks.

I don't say squat.

He looks at the clock on the wall by the phone. “Come on, son. We ain't got all night.”

I just grin at him and blow him an air kiss.

“That's it, then?”

“I'm a man of few words,” I say and close my eyes.