

SHARP KNIFE
by David M. Hamlin

Standing at the kitchen sink, Bev stared through the streaked window at the pitifully small backyard. She could see the heat shimmering and one rose bush withering in the sun. The rose bush was intended to be the first resident of a tiny garden, but the relentless desert heat, two unruly kids and a long bout of lethargy had killed that dream. Among many others.

Their pre-fabricated two-bedroom house had no air conditioning, but there was a swamp cooler on the roof. It was old and noisy and it vibrated as it pumped moist air into the place; lately it had been running and rattling all day every day. Occasionally, it shuddered with enough force to shake the walls like a little earthquake.

Before the pandemic, Bev worked and the kids had been in school. Bev got laid off from the salon where she swept the floor and kept the endlessly rotating supply of towels clean and dry. Then the schools closed and Bev stayed home with the kids, trying to manage their Zoom learning. All three of them were schooling poorly.

Mickey was lucky enough to have an outdoor job – he was the newest, and least well paid, member of a street crew which repaired potholes – so he was gone all day. After a day in the relentless desert sun, Mickey usually arrived home completely drained; he'd collapse onto the recliner to wait for dinner, eat and then doze in front of the TV until it was time for bed.

Bev's routine had become dreary and debilitating. As she stared at the sorry little rose bush – wishing with all her heart that she could be anywhere but where she was – she reached over to pick up a kitchen knife and nicked her finger. She gave a yelp and watched her blood drain into the sink. Mickey's sole contribution to housekeeping was keeping the kitchen knives surgically sharp, so the small cut was deep. She grabbed a paper towel, wrapped it around her finger and raised her hand high above her head, pressing her thumb against the towel and the cut.

While she waited for the bleeding to ease, the swamp cooler gave out an impressive groan, causing the drying dishes on the rack to rattle until a dinner plate slid into the sink and broke in half. When she reached out to steady the other plates, the paper towel slid from her finger and she bled all over the clean dishes. She cursed angrily but quietly so the kids wouldn't hear.

While Bev was searching for a bandage in the kitchen drawer which held all the junk which didn't belong anywhere else, one of the kids gave out a shriek and started crying; the other kid laughed mercilessly and shouted "Serves you right!"

Before Bev could holler at them to knock it off, Mickey came in the front door.

"I'm home and I'm hungry," he bellowed. "Dinner ready yet?"

The aggrieved child was still squawking and the perpetrator giggling when Mickey walked into the kitchen.

"Seriously, babe, we broke early for lunch and I'm starving. Hope you got something good workin'"

Bev had the knife in one hand and the other raised over her head, blood running down her arm. She turned to face him but he had his back to her, peering into the refrigerator.

"We better not be out of beer," he said.

In two quick long strides, Bev moved to stand just behind him.

He grabbed a can of beer and turned, kicking the refrigerator door shut. He was startled to see her so close.

"Jesus, babe, don't be sneaking up on me like – Whoa! You're bleeding! What's goin' on?"

She raised the knife so it was right in front of his face. He backed away and banged into the refrigerator door.

“What the hell?”

He met her eyes and saw a fury so deep and powerful that a tremor of fear swept over him.

“Babe, take it easy,” he said, his voice breaking, “chill.”

“I got your chill right here, buster.”

She lowered the knife until it pointed at his navel. Instinctively, he folded his arms across his middle. He glanced left and then right, looking for an escape path, but there wasn't a lot of room between them and he couldn't see a way out. He tensed, preparing to strike out at her or, at least, fend her off.

“Babe, you're actin' kinda scary here.”

“Scary? Nah. Angry? Bet the ranch on that.”

They faced one another, he fighting an instinct to bolt, she glaring and tense.

Their youngest, the daughter, came into the kitchen.

“Mommy, Jack's bein' mean. Make him stop!”

Both parents looked at her. She struck a pose, hands on hips, her eyes brimming with tears. She was sincerely aggrieved and supremely adorable in equal measure.

Mickey laughed, reaching out to pat his daughter's head.

Bev grinned, her tension melting like an ice cube in the back yard. She lowered the knife and laid it on the counter.

“Mick, this one's all yours. I'm going to find an oversized band-aid and then I'm gonna take the truck to visit to the Blue Cactus where I'm gonna sit all by myself and have a drink with an umbrella in it. Maybe two.”

She went to the catch-all kitchen drawer, extracted a bandage and applied it. She took her purse and keys from the hook by the kitchen door and walked out.

A few seconds later, the door opened and Liz leaned in.

“Be careful with that knife, Mick, it’s awful sharp. Don’t wait up for me.”

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