

PUSHING DOGS (PART ONE)
by Richard S. Crawford

"Sorry, kid, law of the jungle. Drop the dog, buy a new one." Thelma took the money from the little boy's father and put it in the cash box.

"Ma'am," said the boy's father, "he just dropped his hot dog. Can't you just get him a new one? I haven't got enough money to buy him another one."

Thelma shrugged. Once upon a time, maybe, she would have felt sorry for the kid, but not today. "Law of the jungle," she repeated.

The little boy's father glared at Thelma for a moment, his jaw working as if he were getting ready to let loose a self-justified tirade. Thelma simply glared back at him until he backed down. "Fine," he said, and he and his son headed off.

"That was cold," said Nigel from beside Thelma.

"Whatever," Thelma said. She glanced to the left and to the right. No more customers. Not at the moment, at least. She turned to Nigel and took out her notebook. "You owe me money."

Nigel took a long drag off his cigarette, then let out the smoke in a long breath, right into Thelma's face. "Fine. How much?"

Thelma tried not to grin too broadly as she double checked her watch. "They were up there for ten minutes before they started screaming," she said. "Five dollars a minute for each minute past five, plus the original five, you owe me fifty dollars."

Nigel leaned against the fence surrounding the Ferris wheel and crossed his arms. "What if I don't pay?"

Thelma smiled as sweetly as she could, a smile that said she could bake a batch of cookies and feed them to you because you were her favorite grandchild and she loved you more than anything else in the entire world. Except, of course, Thelma had no grandchildren. "Sweetie," she said, "you don't want to go there."

For a moment, Nigel said nothing. Then, perhaps sensing that there was something more predatory behind Thelma's friendly smile beyond a simple batch of cookies -- perhaps they would be poisoned cookies -- he took his wallet out and counted out four ten dollar bills, a five, and four ones. "Can I owe you the buck?" he asked.

Thelma felt the corner of her mouth twitch. She needed fifty-five dollars to pay off Hank, and at the moment she only had four. She had counted on the kids on the Ferris wheel to be left up for at least fifteen minutes before they started screaming, and the fact that they had wimped out before then had set her back. "You sure you don't have it?"

Nigel sighed theatrically, then dug in his pockets. A moment later he produced some coins and handed them over to Thelma. "I need something to eat with," he said.

"Nothing here you could afford." Thelma took the coins from Nigel's grubby hand and counted them out. Five cents over a dollar. She handed the nickel back to him. "But I'll let you have a dog on credit later on."

"Fine." Nigel turned away from Thelma and started attending to the line that had built up in front of the gate.

Thelma put the money in her handbag and turned back to her cart. A line of hungry customers had started building up. And she knew the kind of ugly that hungry fairgoers could get.

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"I've wasted my life," Thelma said to Maureen.

Maureen -- a skinny young woman with greasy hair but surprisingly clear, if somewhat sun-worn, skin -- lifted the edge of the garbage can and grabbed the thick plastic bag inside. The bag dripped stale Coca Cola and other, less pleasant fluids from the seam at the bottom. Maureen sneered and tossed the bag onto her cart. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, do you ever get the feeling that you could have done something... I don't know, something *real* with your life?"

"Yeah. Sometimes I think I could have finished school and not ended up working as a garbage maid for the damned fair."

Thelma scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous. You've got your entire life ahead of you. You're only, what, thirty? Thirty-five?"

"I'm twenty-two, Thelma." Maureen got back into the driver's seat of the cart and shifted into gear. The cart lurched and Thelma put her hand onto the dashboard to stabilize herself.

"Well, then," she said. "Twenty-two. See? Even younger. But me, I'm sixty-five."

"Really? I had you pegged at seventy."

"Don't be a wise-ass. The point is, here I am, at a point in my life when I should be retiring, and I'm working the god-damned hot dog stand at the Fair."

"At least you're not cleaning up garbage."

"Don't change the subject." Thelma reached into her purse and took out her cigarettes. She lit one, took a long drag. "The point is, what should I be doing with myself? Surely just peddling hot dogs at fairs isn't what I'm supposed to be doing."

Maureen stepped out of the cart and went over to another garbage can. "Maybe you ought to go to one of those career guys. Someone who can help you figure out what you're supposed to do with your life. You know?"

"Did you see one?"

"Yeah. He told me I had an aptitude for landscape design." She lifted the lid of the can and took out the bag within, then replaced it with an empty one. "Maybe he was right."

Thelma tapped the cigarette over the edge of the cart, letting the ash drop down onto the asphalt. This was getting her nowhere. She'd won a bet with Maureen a few months ago, and getting free rides all over the fair was part of what the young woman owed her as payment, but Thelma wasn't sure it was worth it. Maureen chattered a lot, and she never really said anything that was useful. "So what do you think?"

"About what?"

"If I went to a career counselor, what do you think he'd tell me?"

Maureen paused just before tossing the full garbage bag onto the back of the cart and stared at Thelma thoughtfully. "I think," she said slowly, "that he would say

you should have been a bookie."

Thelma sighed and crushed her cigarette out on the side of the cart. "Thanks, Maureen. That helps out a lot." She climbed out of the cart and made her way to the front gate without even bothering to see if her sarcasm had been noted.

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Thelma pulled her car to a hard stop in front of her apartment building. The building, a low squat affair made of brick, lurked at the edge of So Low like a broken down carousel. It was threatening, but it was home, and Thelma was used to it.

But there was something different about the place tonight. Thelma sat in her car for a few moments, staring up at the building and trying to make out what was wrong, but nothing came to her. It looked the same to her as it always did.

She hesitated a moment longer, then switched the engine off decisively and got out of her car. She stomped upstairs to her own apartment, making as much noise as she usually did, but also paying extra attention to any sounds.

The lights wouldn't turn on.

Thelma gripped her purse tighter and flipped the light switch up and down several times. Even when she knew it wasn't going to work, she couldn't stop herself.

"That won't work." The voice rumbled low and throbbed in the floorboards under her feet. "I cut the power."

Thelma took a deep breath. "Hank," she said. "I knew you'd come."

"You owe me money," Hank rumbled. He stepped forward, his face emerging from the shadows like the moon from behind storm clouds. "I intend to collect."