

Seizure Sundays

By Marianne Halbert

As soon as I heard the zipper, I knew what was happening. Then came the unmistakable sound of liquid spraying against the brick wall. I wasn't going to say anything. The guy hadn't said a word to me, and I wasn't about to start something with a guy I knew nothing about, other than the casual sound of his sneakers as they'd approached. Dewayne on the other hand, now Dewayne was a different matter. Just as I heard the guy zip back up, I also heard Dewayne saunter around the corner.

"Hey, Homie, I--" then he musta seen the guy. "Oh, man. What the fuck?"

"Oh, hi, I was just--"

"Yeah, I know what you was just." I heard Dewayne drop something. "You was pissing in my bedroom, shit-for-brains."

Their voices were close together. It sounded like Dewayne had grabbed the guy and slammed him into the wall.

"B-but, it's an alley, just an alley." He sounded like a white boy.

Dewayne struggled to maintain an air of patience, like he was talking to an idiot. Maybe he was, I didn't know.

"No. This is the bedroom. Even a rat knows better'n to piss where he sleeps. Hell, even Homer here makes the effort to go around the corner to the bathroom, and he's blind and only got one stump of a leg. You on the other hand, your legs don't look broke to me. Yet."

"I'm sorry, man. I didn't know. Really. My bad. Won't happen again."

"Damn straight it won't."

Neither of them moved for a moment, then Dewayne let him go. I heard the guy's sigh of relief. Dewayne wasn't one to hold a grudge. Now that he'd made his point, he'd leave the guy be. Wouldn't like him, never quite get past his pissing where we sleep, but he'd leave him alone. I heard the guy's footsteps exit our alley.

Dewayne picked up the bag he'd dropped and walked over to me. "Hey bro, brought you some breakfast. Half a McMuffin and some hash browns. Think fast."

I held up my hands in the direction of his voice, listened for the sound of the toss, and caught the bag. The food was cold. I knew he'd dug it out of the trash. But I was hungry. I didn't care.

About an hour later, the new guy returned. "Hey guys. I come bearing gifts." Dewayne wasn't yelling at him, which was a good sign. The guy approached me. "Coffee." I held my hands up to accept the cup. Styrofoam. Hot. I felt the rim – it even had a lid.

"Where'd you score this?" Dewayne asked him.

"Diner down the street."

"Moe's?" I asked.

"No, a place called the Double Nickle."

Dewayne and I both started to crack up. The peace offering must have done the trick. Dewayne's tone was good natured, but warning at the same time. "Dude, watch your back around there. That's a cop hang-out."

"Really?" the guy said. "I'm new to town. Thanks for the tip."

I took a sip. The early November air wasn't too bad, but cool enough. The coffee was the warmest thing I'd felt in over a month. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Logan."

"Logan. That a first name or a last name?" Dewayne asked, between long slurps.

"Just a name I guess," the guy said.

He hung around for a while. Asking questions about the city. About where he could find a job. Like if we knew that we'd be shacking up on the slippery side of Market Street. We didn't see him for a few more days. To be accurate, I can't say I ever saw him. But he came back. Apparently life on the streets wasn't being too kind to him. He didn't even talk the day he came back. Just found a patch of pavement up close to the wall and slept.

I woke up the next morning screaming. They call it phantom pain. It's what I get where they cut my legs off. One just under my hip bone, the other just above the knee joint. Diabetes took 'em both. And my eyes. The doctors warned me alcohol could cause "complications". I gave it up a bit too late. They never warned me about smoking pot though, so I keep my one-hitter in my pocket. Helps with the pain. Dewayne doesn't have diabetes, so he doesn't see the need to give up the bottle. Anyway, I woke up to what felt like someone stabbing me in the thigh, only that was the thigh that had been cut off me seven years ago. Dewayne was gone, but the new guy was at my side asking what was wrong.

All I could do was scream.

"What's the matter? Do you need a doctor?"

If I could have looked him in the eyes, with a "What fool?" look, I would have. All I managed was, "No doctor." And then another scream. It faded after a few minutes. In spite of the chill of the morning, I was sweating. Pain sweat.

The dawn doesn't greet me with its early light. I listen for the sounds of traffic. Including foot traffic. Hell, especially foot traffic. I tightened some scraps of cloth around my knuckles. Then I fumbled around for my empty Styrofoam cup, and held it in my teeth while I dragged myself to the corner of the alley. I leaned against the wall just outside our den, and set my cup on the sidewalk next to me. I could sense Logan watching me. I heard him fumbling around, and then he came over and stood near me.

"Excuse me miss," he said. "Got any spare change? Sir, help a guy out today? How about it?" He was shaking the damn cup, had put a few coins in it already.

"Fool, don't shake the damn cup," I said. "And you can't talk to them. You shake the cup, you get arrested. You talk to them, you get arrested. You sit quiet, leave a cup nearby, the fancy folk want to drop some in, cops leave you alone. Besides, you're cramping my style. Go find your own goddamned corner."

"Homer," he said, his voice pitiful. "Can I just hang out here with you today, til I learn this? Please?"

"Shit." Of all the alleys in town, why'd this guy have to end up in ours? How's about you just play it again, Sam. "Fine, but I get half of your take. And don't think jus' cause I'm blind you can fool me." I rubbed my thumb and fingers together. "These hands got a lot of practice countin' coins. I'm no dummy."

We sat there all morning. I could hear the *clink clink* going into my cup at about a ten-to-one ratio compared to what Logan was pulling in. I'd nod a thank you every time. Put my hands together, Praise the Lord. Logan was getting frustrated.

“Maybe I should make a sign. You know; homeless, willing to work.”

I didn't need a sign. I was the sign. People took one look at me and that said it all. I shrugged. I didn't give a rat's ass whether he made himself a sign or not. Since the donation boxes went up, our take was going down. Those boxes let the good folk feel better about ignoring us as they walked by. But lucky for me, some of those anti-establishment types didn't want no one, not even the mayor, maybe 'specially not the mayor, telling them what they could do with their own money.

I heard a lot of footsteps coming. Logan started panting like a dog hearing the can opener. He just couldn't contain himself. He started shaking the damn cup.

“Change for the poor? Got a quarter so I can call home? Come on, help a guy out, would you?”

Then I heard a set of unwelcome footsteps. Officer Plowinski. After the crowd passed, the cop started in with Logan.

“What's your name, boy? You new around here?”

“I, I was just trying to get a little spare change.”

“How's about you and me take a little walk and I can explain a few things to you, that is unless you'd rather have that talk down at the station.”

I just shook my head. At least Logan had sense enough to take the walk. And I was relieved to have my corner back to myself.

Logan eventually came back. He hung out, off and on, for the next few weeks. The first few days, he kept asking where a guy could score. Acted like he just wanted some crank. Just looking for a street pharmacist. Finally admitted he wanted to work for the gangbangers.

“Look, I'm new here. I need some protection. I figure, if I'm helping them, they'll look out for me. And I can use the dough.”

Dewayne got to laughing. “They'd see your whitebread ass coming a mile away.”

I started cracking up too. I made guesses about Logan. “He got those cute dimples?”

“And a fancy haircut,” Dewayne laughed.

“Blond hair?”

“With highlights. Not even one tattoo.”

We teased Logan a while, and finally he quit asking about the dealers. We introduced him to Maggie, our resident bag lady. I guess you could say Maggie had about the opposite problem I had. I couldn't see shit. Maggie saw everything, and then some. I knew her by her soft steps, and the *squeak squeak flop* of her grocery cart. It had a bum wheel. Dewayne said Maggie was crazy. I heard her talking to folks I knew weren't there. But she was alright. Even gave me a blanket once. It smelled of smoke and fire, but I kept it. Brought me scraps of cloth for my hands. She'd even wheeled me down one night to the liquor store, and waited with me til it opened at midnight, so we could treat Dewayne.

Anyway, like I said, Logan started hanging around off and on. He came back on Sunday.

Dewayne was talking out of his head. Logan asked what was going on. I explained to him about seizure Sundays. About our fine city's blue laws. How Dewayne's body was so used to his drink, that the last few months when he had to go without on Sundays, his body rebelled. He'd get touched in the head. Start shaking. His

skin would get cold. Came to be, the next few Sundays, Logan would show up with a bottle. Sometimes whiskey, sometimes cheap wine. Dewayne wasn't picky. Last Sunday we hadn't seen Logan, and Dewayne was sounding pretty scared. I was relieved when I heard his casual steps round the corner of our alley. That night, after Dewayne recovered, he finally gave Logan what he wanted, even though Logan had quit asking.

"You want to go to Haughville. Don't stop near the gas station. That's Little T's turf. Steer clear of that shit. Head past the pizza place and ask around for Jusby Cuz. Tell him Big D vouched for you."

I didn't know whether Logan had gone lookin for Jusby Cuz. He didn't talk about it. We didn't ask. It rained some that week. Tried to avoid the puddle that had formed in the spot where I usually slept. The air was getting colder by the day. One day Logan came back. It was a Sunday. He started hovering 'round Dewayne.

"He doesn't look so good." Logan started talking like a man on autopilot. "He's jaundiced. His abdomen is distended. He's got edema in his lower extremities so bad his skin is splitting."

I didn't know what the hell he was saying. I just knew he was talking about Dewayne, and it sounded bad. I hadn't missed my eyesight so much until now.

"Why don't you speak fuckin' English!" I didn't like the way my heart was racing.

Logan shook off the autopilot and took a deep breath. "OK. In my former life, I spent some time as an EMT, before I found myself in my current situation." He took one more deep breath before continuing. "Dewayne's skin is yellow. What should be the whites of his eyes are yellow. His belly's bloated, and he's got swelling so bad in his lower legs that the skin is cracking open. That all means his kidneys and liver are shutting down."

Shutting down?

"He needs a hospital, Homer."

Shutting down. No. No. No. He needs his bottle. "He get his liquor, he'll be alright. Least til tomorrow, then he can decide."

"Homer, he might not make it until tomorr—"

"He just needs a bottle!"

I heard the slinking sound of a chain dragging from someone's ankle.

I heard Logan step back. "Oh, shit," he whispered.

I huddled over Dewayne. He grabbed my hand. He started mumbling and shaking again. Logan took a step toward the street.

I heard the chain slink a few feet closer. I heard Logan approach the guy.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Let's talk, away from here—" Logan started to say to someone. Then I heard the sound of a switchblade flicking open. Feet scuffled, Logan grunted. Footsteps took off running, the chain bouncing and clanking down the street, fading.

Logan was choking, a sick, gurgling sound. I hesitated, but left Dewayne's side for a moment.

I leaned down toward Logan. I reached out, tremblin'. His front side was all wet, warm. He whispered, "Shake the cup. Shake the cup."

I figured he was delirious, but I also figured he was dying and deserved his last wish. I fumbled around and found the cup and started shaking it. Plowinski came

running. He began with his bad ass attitude, but then he saw Logan. A cry erupted from him. I heard men scream in anger, and in fear before. But I've never heard a scream like that one. I scrambled back toward Dewayne and huddled against him.

"Jimmy!" Plowinski yelled. I heard a clicking, then static, then he was yelling "Ten-double-zero, officer down, officer down! All patrols respond! Jimmy, don't you fucking die on me. Jimmy!" The sound of sirens was coming from every direction. Dozens of car doors were slamming and the next thing I knew, a herd of officers was in my alley.

Plowinski came over to where Dewayne and I were. Dewayne struggled to sit up. "Who stabbed Jimmy? Who stabbed my brother?" Plowinski growled.

"I didn't see anything," I said. Which was true.

"I'm not asking you, cripple. I'm asking him. Who was the perp?"

Dewayne coughed. "Maybe I saw something. Maybe I didn't. My mind's a little foggy right now. It usually clears up with a little help, if you'd be so kind as to run to the liquor store for me." There was a threat in his statement. Buy my liquor or you get no answers. But there was a desperation lurking there too. I think Dewayne knew he was in a bad way. It was Sunday. I think he knew he might not see Monday.

"Fuck you, asshole." Plowinski kicked my cup, sending most of the loose change into the shallow puddle along the edge of the wall. He kicked Dewayne, and I'm sure he would have done far worse, but an ambulance pulled up. I heard them saying things about no pulse, and he's lost too much blood. Plowinski wouldn't listen, just barked at them to get him to the E.R. They loaded Logan, or Jimmy I guess, into the ambulance. "I'm going with him to the hospital," Plowinski said. "But I'll be back in the morning, and you will tell me everything I want to know." The last thing I heard was the sound of rushing air coming for my face. Plowinski's shoe made contact, and I blacked out.

I don't know how long I was out. All I could figure was maybe Plowinski thought Dewayne would talk the next morning to protect me from a full fledged ass-whoopin. The side of my face was throbbing. I sat up and took in a cold breath. A cold front had moved in while I was passed out. I started shivering.

"Dewayne?" I croaked. I didn't hear anything. I felt around and moved toward where Dewayne had been when I'd been blindsided, so to speak.

I bumped into him. No movement.

"Dewayne?" I felt his face, his lips. Still breathing. What day was it? Was it midnight yet? Monday yet? I needed to get to the liquor store. First I needed money. I pulled myself over to where it sounded like most of the change had gone. The puddle. I felt around, and my chest tightened when my hand slipped on the cold hard surface.

Ice.

Fuck. The puddle had only been about a half inch deep. If that. But now it had turned to ice, swallowing the money I needed to save my brother. I started to panic, frantically trying to claw at it with my bare hands. After a few more minutes, one of my nails peeled back. Then I had an idea. I dug in my pocket for my one hitter, and used it as a miniature pick to break the ice up. My fingers were getting numb. I didn't know anymore what was ice, and what was coin. I just scooped up what I could into the Styrofoam cup. I clenched the cup in between my teeth and ventured out of the alley. I tried to remember the way to the liquor store. The night Maggie had wheeled me there in her rickety grocery cart. Three and a half city blocks. I heard some traffic, but not

much. It was either very late at night, or very early in the morning. I got into a rhythm, my hands on the sidewalk, my arms flexed, I would swing my hips ahead of me, support myself on my butt, then swing my arms ahead and do the whole move over again. Clenching the cup in my teeth the whole time.

When I did this move in the alley, I was always careful to move the stump of my leg slowly. I couldn't afford that now. I moved it as fast as I could, and it scraped along the sidewalk. Over and over. And over. I knew the scar tissue was probably tearing open. I could smell blood. After two city blocks, the cement was chewing beyond the scar tissue into live nerves. This was no phantom pain.

I was moving from the sidewalk down to the street level at what must have been a crosswalk. Only I didn't see it coming, of course. I went face down, the cup still in my mouth, but its contents spilled out around me. Instinctively, I'd put my hands out to catch myself and they pressed down into shattered glass. I must be getting close to the liquor store, I thought. I started feeling around again, trying to find my money. I was blubbering at this point.

"Dewayne, I'm sorry. Dewayne, I'm going as fast as I can."

I could hear a car coming. I didn't know if they'd see me in what was probably the dark, half a black man lower than the curb. I moved away, hoping some of what I had scraped up out of the gutter would buy Dewayne what he needed. I heard a car horn honk, and heard a window roll down, followed by some shouts of what they thought of me. I moved on.

The stench coming from the cup engulfed my nostrils. Street crap. Scum. Vomit. I felt my stomach clench, but forced myself not to puke. I crawled the rest of the way across the street, feeling for the difference in the surface.

When I got back on the sidewalk, I thought I was close, so I started feeling the doors of the buildings. I reached up as high as I could. All glass front. Not right. I moved down to the next store. Round handle. The next one wasn't it either. Then finally my hands felt along the wall, came to the trim of the door, and gripped the half heart-shaped hook that was the key to Dewayne's salvation. I tried it. Locked.

My heart sank. I started pounding on the door. I must have been out there for ten minutes, just pounding. It started out frantic, but turned into a rhythm. Strong and solid. Finally I heard a muffled voice from the other side of the door.

"Gotta wait til midnight buddy. Blue laws."

"But I really need it, I really need it right now."

"I could lose my liquor license if I sell to you before midnight."

"Yeah, and you gonna lose more than that if you don't!"

"You want me to call the cops on you? I don't need this kind of trouble."

That was the last thing I needed too. "No, man, I'm sorry. What time is it? I'll wait."

"It's 11:23 p.m."

So I waited. I passed the time trying to pull splinters of glass out of my palms. I couldn't get them all. I could feel them, just couldn't figure out the angle on some. Some were wedged in there pretty deep. My stump was throbbing. I felt down there. My pant leg, which I had tied, was in shreds. My skin was in shreds too. I was going to try to count how much I had in the cup, but the air had gotten even colder, and my fingertips were beyond feeling at that point. Besides, what did it matter? Whatever was in that cup was

in there. Coins, ice, broken glass, street shit, the whole thing was all I had to buy Dewayne another day.

Finally I heard the door open. I can only imagine what the guy must have thought when he took a look at me.

“Uh, we, we’re open now if you want...but our policy is no shoes, no shirt, no service. Um, I’m not sure what to, I mean I see you don’t have any shoes sir.”

“I don’t have any legs, sir.” Fucking moron. I held my cup up toward him. “I don’t want to come in. Just get me whatever I can buy with this.”

“I’m sorry, I’m really not comfortable with this situation—”

“And I’m not comfortable period. I’ve got a cop’s footprint on my face, I got glass in my hands, skin ripping off the little bit of leg I got left, I’m blind, and my brother’s dying. He’s going to die if you don’t sell me something. So give me whatever I can buy with this!”

I don’t usually think of myself as intimidating. But I think I really might have killed that guy if he’d said no. I think he must’ve heard that in my voice. He didn’t say anything else, just took the cup. I heard him toss the whole thing in the trash just inside the door. All that work, and he didn’t even count the money. He came back about fifteen seconds later and shoved a bottle into my hands. Then he closed the door between us, and I heard a loud click as he turned the lock.

I slipped the bottle down the front of my shirt and took off for home. I didn’t care anymore about the scraping sound my leg made, or the digging pain in the palms of my hands. I had succeeded. I was panting short, shallow, cold breaths. Along the sidewalk, across the street, back on the sidewalk. Again. And again. I got back to our den and dropped down beside Dewayne.

“It’s here, big brother.” I pulled the bottle out of my shirt and untwisted the cap. “Dewayne, wake up.”

I put one arm behind his neck to help him sit up. His skin was cold. Too cold. “Dewayne? It’s Homer. I got your drink. You just got to swallow some of this, alright?”

His head lolled to one side.

“Dewayne!” I shouted. I shouted it again and again until I was hoarse. Even when all I could manage was a whisper, I said his name over and over as I cradled his head in my lap. The wind tried to freeze my tears as they ran down my cheeks. I realized how cold I was and it occurred to me, then Dewayne must be cold too. I remembered when we shared a room as boys. I’d kick my covers off in my sleep, and he’d tuck me back in.

I reached for Maggie’s blanket. Shook it out. Laid it gently over my sleeping brother.

As I held him, I realized it was Monday. Plowinski would be returning with the dawn. I thought about sounds. The sound of Dewayne’s slow, confident footsteps whenever he’d round the corner. The shuffle of Plowinski’s shoes, having too much weight to bear. The clinking, slinking sound of Little T’s approach. He always wore that chain, one end hooked to his belt loop, the other dragging off the cuff of his pants. I couldn’t see it of course, but the sound spoke for itself. I’d been truthful when I’d told Plowinski I didn’t see who stabbed his brother.

He didn’t ask me what I’d heard.

I thought about whether I'd tell him it was Little T. I decided I wouldn't. I liked Logan well enough. Even if he was a undercover cop, he treated me good, and he took care of Dewayne. He didn't have to do that. Maybe he was right, and Dewayne woulda died soon anyway without a hospital. But maybe I was right, and if Plowinski woulda given Dewayne a drink, he'd have lived. At least to see another day. Either way, if telling would've been to help Logan, I probably would've told. But Logan was dead. I was sure of it. There was nothing I could do for him. Telling now would only help Plowinski, and Plowinski was an asshole. He coulda helped Dewayne out last night, but he kicked him instead. Kicked him when he was down. No, I decided. When Plowinski came back, he could question Dewayne for as long as he wanted. As for me, I'd keep quiet.

I'd been so focused on my own cup earlier, I'd forgotten about Logan's. As the morning arrived, the fancy folk musta thought it was mine. I heard the footsteps. I heard them slow down. I heard the *clink clink* of the coins. As the morning arrived, I held my brother and waited for the sound of Plowinski's footsteps.

Marianne Halbert has been a public defender for 13 years. Many of her clients are homeless and suffer from addiction. She helped found the first mental health diversion program in the country in 1996: the award-winning PAIR Program. She wrote this story after losing a client on a seizure Sunday. Marianne has published four short stories, and has 2 more forthcoming. This story is dedicated to the PAIR Roundtable, for their long-standing dedication to helping the most vulnerable of our society. See you next Thursday.