

THE COUGH

Lynn Chandler Willis

Marty Ludlum scrutinized the bank manager stringing up the yellow tape. The fat sumbitch draped it through the front door handles like he owned the damn place. He'd already posted "Lobby Closed. Please use drive thru" signs on the glass doors; now he strung the barrier to make sure people got the message.

"We ain't using the damn drive-thru," Marty mumbled.

Dwayne Seeders stirred in the passenger seat of the Buick. "Say what?"

"The drive-thru. How we supposed to rob a bank using the drive-thru?"

Dwayne laughed 'til he coughed. He scratched at his spotty beard. "Well, we'd already be in the get-away car so there wouldn't be no need for Benji."

He had a point. Marty had a strong dislike for Benji, even if he was Dwayne's first cousin. He was a snot-nosed kid as far as Marty was concerned.

"So, what are we gonna do?" Dwayne said. "I mean if they've got the drive thru open, someone's gotta be in there, right?"

Marty didn't answer. Instead, he sat there in the driver's seat and stewed. Why couldn't just one thing in his life go as planned? Just one thing. That's all he asked.

Marty waved his hand at the red brick building with the yellow tape strung across the front. "You do see the tape, right? You think they're just gonna open the door for us?"

Dwayne stared at the doors like he fancied himself a genie and they would open by mental telepathy or some shit. Marty turned the engine of the LeSabre and slowly pulled away from the parking lot across the street from the bank.

"So what are we gonna do?" Dwayne said.

Marty didn't answer right off. He had to think.

Dwayne lit one of those cheap cigarettes made from leftover tobacco, and the stench nearly gagged Marty. "Roll the damn window down," he grumbled.

He didn't want to go home reeking of cheap cigarettes. Sharon would gnaw his head off and his only goal in life was to keep her happy. That and stuffing his pockets with some extra money.

Dwayne cranked the window halfway and blew a stream of smoke through the opening. "So what are we gonna do?" he said again.

Marty gave the Buick a little gas to make the light. "We're gonna go home and think, Dwayne. That's what we're gonna do."

Dwayne coughed again. He took one last pull from the smoke before flinging it out the open window. "Say, before we go home, you mind stopping at the Walmart? I told Ramona I'd check and see if they had any toilet paper yet."

Marty gave Dwayne a side-eye stare. He sure was coughing a lot more than normal. The guy wasn't real healthy to begin with. "You ain't got the virus, do you?"

Dwayne took a swig from his travel coffee mug. "I hope not. Wouldn't want to expose you to it. Your diabetes and all." He hocked a loogie then spit out the window. "Just smoker's cough, probably."

Marty had no doubt about that. More likely lung cancer. He drove into the Walmart parking lot, carefully navigating around the multitude of cars. The town only had so many people in it and Marty'd bet half of them were right here at the Super Center. He dropped Dwayne at the front doors then circled around and parked near the end of a row.

From there he could see shoppers moving through the parking lot. Everyone wore a mask of some sort. A bandana or something hand sewn. One woman even wore a winter scarf wrapped tight around her face. And here it was springtime.

Marty studied the cart guy who rounded up the buggies. He, too, wore a mask. *Interesting.* Thoughts began circulating through Marty's head and he figured the day may not be a total loss.

He jumped when Dwayne opened the passenger door. Empty-handed. "What happened?"

"They won't let you in unless you got a mask. Never heard of such a thing." Dwayne buckled his seat belt and settled his skinny ass in the seat. "Mind swinging by the Save-A-Lot?"

Marty pointed the Buick east and headed to the other side of the small town. Population two thousand. He'd bet money that right then, at that very minute, a thousand of the town residents were at the Walmart. Spending money.

Quite the opposite, the Save-A-Lot's parking lot was near empty. Four lonely cars and two trucks were the only vehicles occupying spaces. Marty pulled into the fire lane and Dwayne hopped out.

While Marty waited, he ran numbers in his head. How many customers pay with cash versus plastic? He figured at least half. It was a one-bank old mill town. People always carried cash.

Dwayne slid back in the car, a four-pack of top-quality toilet paper clutched in his hands like a

prize. "Jackpot," he said and laughed. He coughed again.

Marty tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, happy like, as he drove down Main Street. He didn't even get angry at the old mill where he used to work. Prick bastards sent his and two-hundred others' jobs over to China and closed up shop five years ago. Where the hell was he supposed to get another job? He was fifty-eight years old with high blood pressure and diabetes. And he had bad knees. "I got an idea."

Dwayne turned to him. "Yeah?"

"We're gonna rob the Walmart."

Dwayne scratched at his beard, head tilted, left cheek raised high.

This pissed Marty off. "What? You got a better idea?"

Dwayne started to say something, stopped. Began again. "There's a bunch of people there, Marty. Some of 'em probably know us, too."

"Masks, Dwayne. Everyone has to wear a mask." Marty shook his head, pissed that he had to explain the obvious.

Dwayne's leathery face remained scrunched up. "You can wear one of those bandanas all day long and I'm still gonna know who you are, Marty."

"I ain't talking about a bandana, Dwayne. We use the hunting masks we got for the bank job." Every male in the state owned a hunting mask, Marty figured.

Dwayne stared at Marty while his face slowly returned to the normal wrinkles. Finally, he said, "That might work."

Not that Marty needed Dwayne's blessing on the heist because Dwayne usually did what Marty asked, but he liked knowing he was on board.

"Maybe you can come over tonight and we'll plan it," Marty said.

Dwayne nodded. "Yeah, sure. 'Round seven?"

Marty pulled into the dirt driveway leading to Dwayne and Ramona's single-wide. They lived in the middle trailer of five, all lined up back-to-front. A row of mailboxes across the dirt road had corresponding numbers. "Sounds good."

Dwayne hopped out and Marty watched him carry his toilet paper to his lovely Ramona. A potted plant long ago dead sat on the front steps looking bleak. A sign of things to come? As he turned the big Buick around, Marty wondered if plants could catch the damn virus. Everything else was dying from it. Why not plants?

When he got home, Sharon was in the kitchen fixing supper. He went to give her a peck on the cheek but she pulled away. "Oh gag. You've been with Dwayne again. Go change clothes before

supper." She waved her hand like she was shooing away a fly.

Marty did as he was told and for a brief moment, wished she didn't boss him around quite as much as she did. She was a good woman. Bossy, but good.

They ate supper in the living room on TV trays while watching the news. 1,456 new cases of the virus in their region. Was that confirmed or suspected? Marty looked down at his supper plate. He'd rather look at the burnt pork chop and sad potatoes than the news. With all their fancy graphs and statistics and medical talk, no one knew what was going to happen. He'd never admit it to Sharon or to even Dwayne but this shit scared the hell out of him. He was one of the *vulnerable* ones according to the news.

The next day, Marty carried two camo hunting masks to the car then left to go get Dwayne. During their planning the night before, they'd decided the lunch hour would be a good time to make their move. And here they were, getting ready to do it. Elephants stomped around in Marty's gut, not because he was scared but because it was lunch time. He cursed himself for forgetting to eat a little something before leaving the house. Keeping his blood sugar regulated was important. And not having his stomach growling like a grizzly during a heist was equally important.

He parked the Buick as close to the front as he could then killed the engine.

Dwayne coughed into his fist then wiped his hand on his worn-through jeans. He looked a little flushed. "We gonna do the self-check lanes, right?"

Marty nodded. "Right. We wait 'til there ain't that many folks checking out, then we act like we're buying a pack of gum or something."

"Can it be some Tic-Tacs? I can't do gum with my teeth and all."

Marty lowered his brows, scrunching his nose like he got a whiff of shit or something. "Don't matter what the fuck you buy, Dwayne. The point is to get the little gal helping in that area to come over there."

"What if it's that battle ax who thinks I don't know how to ring up my own bananas? I'd like to show her a banana." He coughed again, this time forgetting to cover his mouth. He tried to suck in a deep breath but stopped mid-gasp.

"The battle ax don't work on Thursdays," Marty said. He knew her schedule and purposely avoided shopping those days. "So, we call the little gal over and that's when we make our move. Got it?"

Dwayne nodded. Coughed again. Marty was growing a little concerned. He handed Dwayne a mask then pulled his own down over his face. He reached into the glove box and took out the .22, slipping it into the waistband of his jeans. Just in case. He pulled his shirt tail out and let it hang

loose.

"It's Showtime," Dwayne said.

They walked together to the entrance of the store. Yellow tape roped off sections of the sidewalk so foot traffic could only go one way in and one way out. None of the entering through the exit shit. A gal with a blue vest and a notepad stood between the entrance and the exit. When someone would come out, she'd let someone go in. Just as he was ready to step in front of Dwayne, the girl motioned for Dwyane to go in.

Dwayne jerked around and stared at Marty. "What do we do?"

A fat lady behind Marty said for Dwyane to move on. Then she said, "You his emotional support animal or something?"

Marty wanted to knock her over to see if she'd bounce. Instead, he motioned for Dwayne to go through and prayed the idiot would wait for him.

The gal in the vest said, "You going in?"

Dwayne gave Marty another panicked look then shuffled on through.

Five minutes passed. No one came out. Marty eased forward a little, just to see inside, but the girl in the vest shooed him back. "Six feet, sir. Step behind the blue arrow."

Marty took a step back and cursed under his breath. Sweat beaded on his scalp under the mask. For a moment, he started to take it off while just standing there but thought better of it. He glared at the girl in the vest.

Ten minutes. The fat lady behind him leaned against one of the cement poles. Huffing.

Marty spoke to the vest girl. "Can I just go check on my buddy? He don't do too well by himself."

To Marty's surprise, Dwayne came out the exit toting a plastic Walmart bag. He motioned for Marty. "You ready?" Dwayne wasn't waiting for an answer. He made a bee-line for the Buick.

Marty stumbled past the fat lady and hurried to catch up with his partner. "Dwayne—what's going on?"

"Hurry up, Marty. I 'magine the cops gonna be whipping in here any minute." He coughed so hard Marty knew he broke a rib. Dwayne doubled over, clutched his knees for support.

Marty rushed over to him and helped him the rest of the way to the car. He opened the passenger side and eased Dwayne into the seat then hurried around to the driver's side. Two black-and-blues skidded into the parking lot just as Marty pulled away.

He ripped his mask off, laughing more than he laughed when ol' Dwayne got sprayed by a skunk. Driving with one hand, he opened the bag and peered in at the mounds of cash.

"Good God! You did it! You did it, man."

Dwayne peeled his own mask off. Marty did a double take. Dwayne's face looked like it was on fire. Sweat rolled over his cheeks. He coughed so hard, Marty thought his eyes were gonna pop out of their sockets.

"Ah, shit, Dwayne. You got the virus, don't you?"

Dwayne nodded, wheezing, gasping for breath.

Marty slammed his hand against the steering wheel. "Damnit! Ah, fuck, Dwyane. Why'd you have to go and get sick?" His heart hurt so bad for his partner. They'd been together since third grade. The dumbass didn't have sense enough to do anything on his own. Except rob the Walmart.

Marty pulled to the side of the road. He put the Buick in park and turned to Dwayne. "What do you want me to do?"

"Hos...pit...al," Dwayne said, struggling for every breath.

Marty patted Dwayne's shoulder. "Ok, buddy. Ok. I'll drop you off at the E.R. I'll call Ramona and let her know."

Dwayne nodded, his head moving in a herky-jerky motion. Marty floored the gas, heading to the hospital. He then thought better of it and eased off a bit. He didn't want to get pulled with a bag full of stolen money. Dwayne reached over with a shaky hand and turned the heat on full blast. His whole body shook with the shivers.

What seemed like two hundred miles was actually only five as Marty turned into the E.R. side of the hospital. He pulled to the patient drop off as someone in what looked like a Hazmat suit came out with a wheelchair.

"Dwayne Seeders," Marty told the spaceman as they wheeled Dwayne into the hospital. He felt bad about not hanging around but from everything he'd seen on the television, they wouldn't let him, anyway.

He peeled the tires against asphalt as he got the hell out of there. He knew Dwayne had the damn virus. He knew it. The cough was different. He slammed his hand against the steering wheel, cussing. One thing. That's all he asked for to go right.

Dwayne was a tough 'ol bird, though. He'd pull through. He didn't have the *underlying conditions* that Marty did.

Marty drove home and was relieved to see Sharon's old Toyota was gone. Not that he didn't want to see her, but he'd prefer to count the money when she wasn't around. He carried the Walmart bag inside, impressed with the weight.

He sat the bag on the table then poured himself a glass of sweet ice-tea. After the first wonderful

sip, he sat down and started counting. There had to be a couple thousand in the bag. Sweet Jesus. Maybe just once, something did go right for him.

Marty coughed.

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*Logic clearly dictates that the
needs of the many outweigh
the needs of the few."—
Lieutenant Commander Spock*

WRITERS CRUSHING COVID-19: An
Anthology For Coronavirus Relief
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AN ANTHOLOGY FOR CORONAVIRUS RELIEF

WRITERS CRUSHING COVID-19

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