
A FRIDGE FOR THE WIFE

The fridge was ideal for his wife. It would be snug in the vacant corner of her kitchen. Its colour matched the faded paint-work at home. And the price was just right. Man-Man was satisfied. He cast a final look at it then raised his eyes to the sales-clerk.

"Nothing to worry about," slurred the clerk, the interest of Bookers rooted deep in his heart. "Electrolux give at least five years trouble free service. And you get eighteen months guarantee on this."

Man-Man nodded. He has travelled all the way from the Pomeroon to buy a kerosene Electrolux, and he was satisfied.

—Gee me couple minutes mo to think 'bout it—, he said nevertheless, —I want look 'round a little mo'.

—Go ahead. Go ahead—, said the clerk pushing away his receipt book reluctantly.

Man-Man withdrew into a secluded part of the store. In a nook between some tall refrigerators he pretended to be examining one.

This was where he must take out the money, he said to himself.

Man-Man was in his late forties. He was a small frightened man with stumpy hands that would rather carry a fork

than cash. For several yaers he had not come to Georgetown and now the city rattled him. He feared more than anything the ubiquitous choke-and-rob. Since the evening before when he set out from his home they began to loom ghost-like and dangerous.

By eight Man-Man was dressed. There was no moon, but the stars had a polished lustre and they reflected on the black water, giving enough light for him to paddle down river.

—Go bring the money—, he said to his wife.

—You gon put it in you pocket?— the wife asked apprehensively.

—Why else?— Man-Man said. —It gon be safe.

—If choke-and-rob pick you pocket?

—Pocket deep. Man-Man snapped. —And I can handle meself. To convince himself that his pockets were safe he dropped his hands into them. His fists rolled down like a cricket ball for his trousers like the rest of his clothes was amply cut in a style when full pleated clothes were fashionable. His fingers brushed his knee-caps. Into one of his pockets he had already an envelope containing toilet paper for emergencies. —Georgetown is like country to me—, he added.

His wife brought the money, a bundle of twenties, folded, shoved neatly into an old envelope.

—One thousand?

—One thousand—, the wife said, —unless you tek out any.

—No.

—Well it right. I get them chil'ren to count it again yesterday. So be careful.

Man-Man pushed the envelope into his other pocket. —This fo' the fridge. What 'bout me passage?

—It got another twenty in the canister.

—Bring it.

—Is the last money we got till market Monday.

—Go bring it—, Man-Man said irritably. —You don't expect me to walk to Georgetown? Or if you prefer, let we don't bother with the fridge.

The wife hurried into the house. —Try, don't drink—, she warned when she returned, —and loss that money.

Man-Man drew his teeth and climbed into his corial. At midnight he boarded a bus ah Charity for Adventure Steamer Stelling. By nine the next morning, after several other stages of travel, he would be in Georgetown.

While on the Essequibo Coast, or even across the Essequibo River, he had no dread. But at dawn when he boarded the train at Parika, despair and apprehension sneaked subtly into his bones. It made him wary as more and more people flocked around him traveling to the city. With the throng the chances of choke-and-rob increased. His hands hovered around his pockets and he scrutinized the faces of people on the train, feeling their eyes X-rayed his pockets for the thousand.

More and more people crowded the carriage on its way to Vreeden Hoop. Man-Man searched the masks, trying to ferret out the recessive intention beneath them. They were sun-burnt country faces, determined, sometimes grim from private pre-occupations. They hardly turned to Man-Man. He was to them an object occupying a volume of space. He sought an ally among them, someone to whom he could shout for assistance in case his thousand was threatened; someone in whom he could confide that he was going to buy a fridge for the wife. But not one of the masks betrayed a soul beneath. Man-Man felt terribly isolated and lonely. He cringed into his corner to exercise greater guard upon his pockets. The crowd pressed him and he saw how futile it was to avoid being touched. And he could not keep his hands near his pockets all the time. They were needed to push and to brace. His thousand was in dire danger. Better he returned home than loose his hardearned savings, he thought. Better no fridge than no thousand. It took him nearly ten years to save that amount cultivating

his small vegetable holding, battling the river salt water in the dry season, flood tides in the rains.

But he has come this far already. Georgetown was just another hour traveling. In five to ten minutes the train would arrive at Vreeden Hoop. Another ferry crossing then Georgetown. He would go directly to the store. There would be guards there to protect him. If only he could swallow the money and vomit it out again, he thought. If only he had not been so hard-headed and sewn it into the waist of his trousers. If only he had stuffed it into his shoes. If only... He should have done that, Man-Man thought. He should have hidden it into his shoes. He should have done so at his leisure at home. Certainly he would have to do it at Vreeden Hoop and stand on the envelope the rest of the way. A short distance remained, but it was the hardest. It was like a gauntlet, that he must pass. From here the real torture began.

He heard so much about these choke-and-robs that he would rather employ an army of bodyguards than risk his thousand. In broad daylight people have been mugged in the streets of Georgetown and the bandits made good their escape in cars or on motor-cycles. Others have had their pockets picked without realising a thing. Pockets were what they were after.

His shoes would be a safe place, and it was now or nothing. Passengers were already boarding the steamer. He must act at once before he grew more scared.

Man-Man retreated behind a steel upright and squatted upon his heels. He untied his shoe lace, pulled his foot out of the shoes and pretended as if he were massaging his cramped toes. His fingers were trembling and difficult to control. Sweat welled up upon his face. He glanced around and in the same nervous motion slipped the envelope out of his pocket into his shoe. The shoe became tight and uncomfortable. He stepped into it then retied the lace and lumbered into the steamer. Soon his heel and toes would be blistered. But Man-Man was noticeably relieved. He

was prepared to limp for one thousand dollars. He was prepared, if necessary, to carry home his shoes in his hands.

Across the river Man-Man inspected ocean going ships at anchor without a qualm. In Georgetown he would stare into shop windows as he limped down Water Street. His savings under his foot was a salve to his sore thoughts.

Out of habit, because he was accustomed to keep money in his pockets, his hands brushed over them. A cold fear like an iron claw clamped around his throat. He felt nothing in his pockets.

Strange, he thought, he hadn't used the toilet paper. He plunged his hands into his pockets again. A fat smile now beginning to spread across his face. Which pocket was it? he asked himself. Left? Right? Man-Man searched both. The envelope was much too thick to escape his fingers. It could mean one thing only - he was picked.

Man-Man was inclined to laugh out loud but he desisted because the other people in the shop would first wonder where the sound was coming from and then if he were mad. Still, he couldn't help marvelling at the skill of the thief. He tried to visualise the face of the person when he peered into the envelope. Man-Man felt a morbid pleasure in his heart. It was some trick to crow of when he returned home.

He untied his lace, pulled his foot out of the shoe and extracted the envelope. He hooked his foot into the shoe and dragged it back to the counter. The clerk looked at him mysteriously. Man-Man would tell him later on what happened. For now he nodded to him and pointed to the fridge. While the clerk made out the receipt he would retie his lace. He must pay the money first.

An oily smile rolled around his face as he shook the envelope into his hand. Then the smile died and instantly festered into a grimace.

A thick wad of neatly folded toilet paper fell into Man-Man hand.