

For TheWritingBridge.com March Challenge

Theme: Something you hope you never have to do.

Length: 600-1000 words

My total: 993 words

CHOICES By Ray Dillon

“It’s your choice, Mr. Pelzer.”

Jordan’s mind exploded with an anger and fear so thick it choked him. He had no choices. This wasn’t fair. He and his wife had never done anything, not to anyone. They were good people and they’d worked hard to be together. They’d worked so hard to have a family against all odds.

They’d paid their dues.

This wasn’t fair.

“Time is wasting, Jordan.”

Jordan pulled his face up towards the gravelly baritone voice that had been hacking away at him for several hour-long minutes since he’d been awakened. But, he still couldn’t find the words. He couldn’t make himself answer.

9 minutes earlier...

Jordan sat on the ripped and stained hotel mattress, breathing in the cigarette smoke that permeated from the walls, anxiously awaiting the chime from his laptop. His eyes hurt from the lack of sleep and staring at the screen. The thud of his heart hurt now. Part of him felt like dying. Part of him thought he was.

He reread the last instant message received:

#Mask# says: MAKE YOUR CHOICE!

And his message before it:

J_Pelzer9 says: Don’t hurt them. I’ll do whatever you want!

He didn’t recognize himself. The jerky image from the webcam display looked much older. He’d gotten a bloody nose from the dry air, but hadn’t stopped it from dripping down his face and onto his blue dress shirt. Who was watching him on the other side? Could his wife see him?

A rapid knock at the door forced him from his trance and off the bed, breath escaping him, and the painful rhythm of his heart completely disrupted.

He saw the shadows of feet underneath the hotel door.

The loud chime from the laptop startled him and stole his attention back. His eyes didn’t want to focus:

#Mask# says: FOLLOW HIM.

Jordan glanced to the door and saw the shadows disappear. He looked back hoping another message would come, knowing it wouldn't, then to the tire iron on the bed. He picked it up and lifted his shirt. The cold, rough iron scraped his gut and snagged on his slacks before finding an uncomfortable spot where he thought it wouldn't fall out. He grabbed the envelope of money, praying it would be enough. He'd cleaned their savings, but the man on the other end never said what he was after.

He went to the door, hesitated, then saw a flash of his wife and daughter, and opened it.

No one was there. No cars were parked out front. Instead, a raggedy teenage boy stared directly at him from the road.

Then, the boy ran across the old highway, without looking for traffic. He passed through the high beams of an approaching semi, which blared its horn, then disappeared into the darkness seconds before the truck passed.

Jordan's mind processed all of this and finally his loafers took off. He sprinted to the edge of the highway, looking both ways, and, thankfully, not seeing headlights in sight. He focused forward again and saw a dark shaped running towards the pitch horizon of the cold plains.

He followed.

And he was gaining on the boy who soon darted around the side of a large, rusty shed. Jordan tripped and felt a gash open in his ankle, but righted himself and kept going.

Around the corner of the shed a large door slammed shut exposing a printed sign that said ENTER. He stopped and pushed the door open. Deep within the dark building an overhead light shown on his soul mate, tied to a pole and gagged. The yellow beam cut across a tall man who blended into the shadows, only exposing his right side, a lifeless mask, and the baby he held in his arms.

Jordan felt the tire iron being pulled out of his pants and before he could get turned around, the boy hit him across the side of the head.

Now ...

“Let them go! I have money. I brought—“

“I know. Ten thousand. It was all you had wasn't it?” the masked man didn't need that question answered; he knew all about the Pelzer's. “But, I didn't ask for money, now did I?”

“Just let them go. Whatever you want, I'll —“

“I want you to choose. NOW!” The masked man hoisted the baby above his head. Her cry was deafening. “Your wife or your daughter? CHOOSE!”

“Oh, god! Stop! Wait!” Jordan looked to his wife whose eyes were wide and bloodshot, and they pleaded with him not to choose her, but ... “Okay! Okay! I choose our daughter! Oh, god! Please, give her to me!”

The masked man let his arms relax and brought Jordan's screeching baby girl to a safer distance above the ground.

“But...” The masked man said as he leaned into the light. “But, you could have more children?”

“Please, give me our daughter,” Jordan pleaded through sobs.

The man was quiet, just staring at Jordan through the hollow mask's eyes. Then, he handed Jordan his daughter, and backed out of the light. Jordan cradled her and watched the man, uncertain as he finally snatched up his laptop, pulling cables out of a wall socket, and fled the building, leaving Jordan with his daughter and wife unharmed.

Three Weeks Later ...

Jordan read the article headline again:
MASKED MAN FOUND DEAD!

The paper explained that this man who had held his families life in his hands, was captured in another state after killing himself in a hotel bathroom. They found the word "CHOOSE," scrawled in blood on the wall. He was wanted for several murders and kidnappings.

Since they'd left that shed, Jordan had quit his job and hadn't slept. This wasn't going to change things. His family had almost been taken from him while he was on the road. He wasn't going to leave their side again.

Never again...

THE END.

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