

“Regret”

By Dave McClain

Dealing with customers who have had too much to drink is a personal challenge for the man who pours drinks at a local wine bar, but he'd rather face that challenge than other realities in his life.

“My name is Tim Matthews. I work at The Good Life Wine Bar on Church Street. We have a patron here who has had too much to drink and he’s trying to drive home. We cut him off, served him some water and offered to call him a cab, but he insists on leaving. He’s holding car keys and stumbling toward the door right now.”

Tim gave the 9-11 operator the rest of the information she needed and watched as the red and blue flashing lights sped past the window just seconds after the drunk man drove out of the parking lot.

Tim thought about another night when a similar scene played out. That time, Tim hadn’t called the cops – and that police car wasn’t the only emergency vehicle which raced down Church Street. That night, there was an ambulance right behind the cop car. The man who became belligerent when his waitress cut him off was drunker than he seemed. Tim misjudged the situation and someone else paid the price.

Tim quickly turned his head away from the window to break the power of the visions in his head. He locked the front doors and turned around, looking at the empty bar. The music from the live jazz band had long since faded, his last few customers had all shuffled out (or stumbled out, in the case of that last one) and Tim had already cleared off most of the tables. Then he noticed something at the far end of the room. It was a stuffed animal sitting in one of the chairs. He started to step forward to get a better look, but then he stopped. He realized he had seen the toy before. It was a small brown teddy bear. The same one he had seen in his dreams for the past year. The same one that he had often seen while awake... in a parked car, or riding past him in a grocery cart, or in a store window, whether that store sold stuffed animals or not. That teddy bear was always around, but was never within reach, never to be touched.

A small group of 20-somethings walked past the bar, talking loudly. Their sudden appearance on the otherwise quiet street stole Tim’s attention from the toy bear in the corner. He heard the laughter of a young woman. It was a familiar sound. It reminded him of his wife’s laugh. He hadn’t heard that laugh in quite a while. Not since the accident. Tim had ignored that belligerent, drunk man leaving his bar. A few minutes later, that police car and that ambulance flew past his window. When the hospital called, he raced to get there, only to learn that his wife would never walk again.

Tim pounded his fist down on the table next to him. Then he remembered the teddy bear and looked back towards that chair. The bear was gone. He angrily walked across the room, slowing down only when he turned to walk behind the bar. He still had to mark the dates on the bottles that he had opened that night but not emptied. He paused after writing on the first one. October 10th. One year to the date since the accident. Tim’s vision grew cloudy. He sniffed hard, wiped away a tear and continued marking the bottles.

When Tim finished that task, he automatically moved on to the next. He walked back to the cleaning closet to grab a broom. As he opened the closet door, the light from the hallway illuminated just enough of the inside of the closet that he thought he saw that teddy bear on the shelf right in front of him. It was about an arm's length away. Closer than it had ever been before. He quickly reached around the door frame into the closet and turned on the light only to see that the bear had vanished. He paused briefly, before slowly lifting the broom out of the corner and sweeping behind the bar.

A few minutes later, Tim traded the broom for a spray bottle and a fresh bar rag. He glanced up at the shelf, but all he saw was cleaning supplies. He returned to the bar, sprayed it down and began wiping the bar until it looked like glass. He glanced up at the TV. It was still on mute, but he could tell he was watching a commercial for a local funeral home. He thought of his son. Jake would've been six years old last month... if only Tim had done something to stop that belligerent, drunk, selfish bastard from getting behind the wheel of his car one year ago.

Tim was hanging his head over the freshly polished bar and he noticed water droplets forming on his reflection.

“Daddy?”

Tim jerked his head in the direction of the voice which had just broken the silence.

“Why are you crying, daddy?”

Just to his left, he saw that teddy bear sitting on the edge of the bar and he heard his son's voice again.

“Don't be sad, daddy.”

“Jake?” Tim was barely able to speak.

“I miss you, daddy, but mommy needs you more than I do now.”

“Jake, I'm so sorry. So very, very sorry.”

“It's not your fault, daddy. I love you, daddy. I have to go now, but I love you.”

“Jake! No! Jake!”

Tim reached for the bear with both hands and grasped its plush sides. He pulled it to his chest and sank to the floor. Tim hugged that bear as tightly as he wished he could hug Jake again.

Tim cried a year's worth of tears that night. Hours later, he awoke to the ringing of his cell phone. It was his wife, Emily.

“Yes, I'm okay,” said Tim, pausing briefly. “I'm going to be okay. We're going to be okay.”