

The First Two Pages: “The Cough” by Lynn Chandler Willis
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An Essay by Lynn Chandler Willis

If there is one thing I know, it’s small towns. I was the owner and publisher of a small-town newspaper (circ 10,000) for thirteen years. I have sat through more town council meetings than most mayors, covered volunteer fire department’s board meetings, and attended more pumpkin festivals than I care to remember.

Setting my stories in small towns is as natural to me as breathing. It’s what I know. Within the first two pages of my short story, “The Cough,” the reader knows this is set in a small town without the need to identify it as such. Our two protagonists, Marty Ludlum and Dwayne Shelby, have been friends since elementary school and are trying to plan a bank robbery in the time of the coronavirus. Although the setting is never identified as “a small town,” one way to convey it was the use of the word “the” in describing the local Walmart.

Small town folks have a habit of going to *the* Walmart or *the* McDonald’s. We never go to *just* Walmart.

When Dwayne can’t get into *the* Walmart because he’s not wearing a mask (this is during the pandemic, remember), the hapless heroes move on to the next

small-town thing—the Sav-A-Lot store. Like Dollar Generals, these budget-friendly stores scream small towns, and often, small *southern* towns.

While Dwayne's inside shopping for toilet paper, Marty's analyzing the whole mask thing. Obviously the brains between the two, which isn't saying much, Marty runs the numbers of how much cash the Walmart might have in the self-check-out area. Everyone has to wear a mask now anyway, right?

What could go wrong?

Where Marty Ludlum is concerned, it's more like what could go right? Nothing. The poor schmuck just wants one thing in his life to go right. And he'd like a little extra cash to stuff in his pockets and to keep his girlfriend Sharon happy.

Marty, bless his heart, is relatable. Despite his criminal way of thinking, he's a decent guy. He's your neighbor. He's not showboat fancy—he drives an old Buick LeSabre and eats Sharon's burnt pork chops because he loves her. He's the kind of guy whose pants are always a little too short, allowing a glimpse of his white tube socks.

And despite his gruffness with Dwayne in the beginning, he drives him first to the Walmart and then to the Sav-A-Lot without pause. Because that's what small town friends do.

See for yourself in this excerpt if you think it has that small-town feel.

The First Two Pages of “The Cough”

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 Shelby 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.”

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Award-winning author Lynn Chandler Willis was the first woman in a decade to win the Minotaur Books/Private Eye Writers of America's Best First PI Novel Competition with her Shamus-nominated book, *Wink of an Eye*. Her traditional mystery series featuring newspaper publisher and reporter Ava Logan kicked off with *Tell Me No Lies*. The series continued in 2019 with *Tell Me No Secrets* and *Tell Me You Love Me*. Her first published novel, *The Rising*, won the Grace Award for Excellence in Faith-based Fiction. She lives in the heart of North Carolina with Finn, a rescue border collie, and hopes to one day retire to the Appalachian region she often writes about.

