

# F E A R I T S E L F

A C H R I S T M A S S T O R Y

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

**T**HE STRANGER SAT DOWN at the other end of Robinson's bench, closer than strictly necessary. He wore a Navy blue pea coat and billed cap with earmuffs against the bitter cold. His complexion was ravaged, his eyes bloodshot, and Robinson knew the man meant to kill him.

It was long past dark on Christmas Eve of the worst year of Robinson's life. There was nowhere else for him to go. As he pulled the collar of his thrift store coat higher around his neck, he felt something sting his cheek and looked up. Specks of white flashed in the glare of the streetlight behind him.

Snow, Robinson thought.

Perfect.

**H**IS FALL FROM GRACE had been quick, if not painless; absurd, if not actually funny. He'd come home from the meeting where he'd learned that the company had gone belly up to find his apartment building in flames. The application for his renter's insurance was in his briefcase, ready to mail. His former CEO was headed for a minimum-security, tennis camp prison for having plundered the employees' benefits, including their health insurance premiums, and blown it all on the stock market.

He'd maxed out his credit card on the move to North Carolina so he'd had to pay cash for the motel that weekend. On Monday, while learning that his unemployment benefits were being held up because he hadn't worked the requisite six months in North Carolina, his car had been towed. The police were sure it had been towed, they just couldn't seem to determine where. He'd gone a little crazy then, but the cops had declined to jail him. Times were hard all over, and besides, it was almost Christmas.

Two more days had been enough to finish him. The three crumpled dollar bills in his pocket would not have gotten him through Christmas Day, even if this stranger had not arrived to deliver the final blow.

**“I** KNOW YOU'RE afraid of me,” the man said.

“It's nothing personal,” Robinson told him. “Put yourself in my position.”

“Unless I'm much mistaken, I pretty much *am* in your position. Cold, hungry, and broke. Yes?”

Robinson ventured another look at him. Snow crystals darted inside his collar and melted against the bare skin underneath.

“How much money you got?”

“Forget it,” Robinson said. “You can't have it. It's all I've got left. You can kill me if you want to.”

“I like it that you're brave,” the man said, “but I'm not going to hurt you any. Just looking for a little company.”

“I’m not gay, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“You should try not to worry so much. Everything’s going to be all right.”

“All right? Are you nuts? I’m waiting around to find out if I’m going to starve or freeze to death first.”

“Why don’t you go to the shelter?”

“It’s a long story. I got kicked out for something I didn’t do.” He pulled his hands out of his pants pockets and stuck them under his arms to try to warm them up. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Well, you got that much right.”

They sat for a while in silence. After a few minutes Robinson started to relax a little. If the man truly meant him harm he would have done something by now. “Look, I’m sorry,” Robinson said. “I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions.”

“It’s okay.”

“How come you aren’t in the shelter?”

“Claustrophobia. I can’t stand being penned up. You see what I mean? It’s the fear that does it to you.”

“That’s easy to say, but it’s being broke that’s doing it to me.”

The man didn’t answer, and when Robinson finally glanced over at him again he had a troubled expression, as if trying to decide whether to speak up or not. “What?” Robinson said.

“Nothing, really, just...well, that money stuff, that’s just what they want you to believe.”

“They?”

The man nodded. “As long as you believe money can keep you safe, you stay in the game. Trying to move to a better neighborhood, buy a safer car, get more insurance. People like you and me, we’re the ones that have a chance to get out.”

Somewhat reluctantly, Robinson asked, “Get out how?”

“Well, I never really understood that part. I think you just kind of go to another place entirely.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Once you stop being afraid. It changes everything.” The man fixed Robinson with an intent stare. “Literally, you understand what I’m saying?”

He’d had Robinson going for a minute, but now the wires were starting to show. “Don’t tell me, let me guess. We have to start by giving away all our money.”

“Once you stop being afraid, you don’t need money any more.”

“What do you eat?”

“Okay, see, there was this guy who told me about it, the way I’m telling you. Just like you, I was trying to imagine what it would be like. And I fell asleep and I dreamed about it. It was nice and warm everywhere, and you could eat the buildings.”

“Eat the buildings.”

“The white stone tasted like Vietnamese sticky rice. The red bricks were like Devil’s Food cake.”

The wind whistled and howled down the deserted city streets. It was so cold that the hard grains of snow weren’t accumulating, but were flying in front of the wind, scouring the sidewalks.

“So,” Robinson said, “what happened to this guy?”

“He disappeared.”

“While you were dreaming about eating buildings?”

“Before that. He disappeared right in front of me, while I was looking at him. I think he went to that other place.”

Robinson couldn't feel his feet any more, and he was starting to get sleepy in drugged sort of way. These seemed like bad signs. He stood up. “I got to move on.”

“Before you go,” the man said, “why don't you give me that last three dollars in your pocket?”

ROBINSON FELT A CHILL that had nothing to do with the weather. “How did you know that?” he said. “I didn't tell you how much money I have.”

“Sure you did. You said, ‘Let me guess, I'm supposed to give you my last three dollars.’”

“No,” Robinson said, hearing the tremor in his voice and not liking it, “I didn't. I didn't say that.”

The man shrugged. “Don't get all bent out of shape. Sit down, I'm not going to hurt you. I want to tell you a story.”

Robinson was starting to panic. Yet the weirder the conversation got, the more afraid he was to walk off into the darkness. “I'll stand,” he said. Sharp pains stabbed through his feet and he rocked forward onto his toes to keep the blood flowing.

“This guy dies and goes to Heaven, see, and right away he's arguing with St. Peter. ‘If I'm on the list,’ he says, ‘why was it so hard for me all my life? Why didn't you help me out? Why didn't you, I don't know, let me win the lottery or something?’ And Peter looks through his book and he says, ‘According to this, you never bought a ticket.’”

Robinson waited for him to go on, and finally said, “That's it? That's the wisdom you have for me?”

“I'm just offering you a chance to buy a ticket.”

At some point, without thinking about it, Robinson had shoved his hands back into his pockets. The three one-dollar bills, folded twice, were in the fingers of his right hand. What difference, he thought, did it make?

He threw the wad of bills at the man. “Go ahead. Take it. I don't care any more.” Then he turned his back and walked away.

HE DIDN'T GET three steps before the panic returned, and with it, shame. He'd let some nut case scam him out of his last three bucks. How stupid was that? And what was he going to do with no money at all? As long as he had three dollars, or two, or one, there was some hope. He still had his lottery ticket; he was still in the game.

He turned back, saying, “Look, I'm sorry, but—”

The man was gone.

The three dollars lay against the arm of the bench, pinned there by the pressure of the wind. Robinson snatched them up, trying to calculate how long he'd had his back turned, where the man could have gone in that amount of time.

It didn't matter. If Robinson stood there much longer he was going to freeze.

He started back toward the shelter, head down, walking into the wind, the cold squeezing tears from his eyes. His feet were on fire. They would have to

let him in. It would amount to murder if they didn't. But when he got to the entrance it was dark and silent, a metal grid locked across it. Robinson reached through the bars to pound on the door but the bitter wind blew the sound away.

He put his hand back in his pocket and felt the crumpled bills there at the same time that his gaze fell on the donation box bolted to the door. Beyond reason, beyond thought, he stuffed the money into the box and shuffled away.

The snow stopped.

The air was suddenly warm, and there was light. Robinson blinked. The golden brown fieldstone of the building beside him looked like the crust on a loaf of French bread. Slowly Robinson reached out to break off a piece.

His fingernails scraped against cold stone. He looked up and saw the streetlight, looked down and saw the grating that was blowing warm air from somewhere inside the building, with just enough force to push the snow away.

Slowly Robinson sat on the grating and let the warmth seep into him. He was afraid, but he was less afraid than he had been.

It was hard, he thought, not being afraid. But maybe, in time, he could learn.

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