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The Envelope

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“I believe in karma,” I told Jim as we walked towards Broadway on College Walk after midnight one Saturday night in early May. Jim was a regular featured performer at the college coffeehouse I managed, and we had become friends. We were on our way to a local bar for more drinks. “I believe that cosmic forces more powerful than any one of us combine to connect us in ways we never imagined. For example, I never pass up an envelope on the sidewalk. It might contain a whole shit load of money or some letter that provides a window into some person’s life. Suddenly, out of nowhere, you form an indelible connection with another life.” We were slightly drunk from too many beers.

Up ahead, I spied a white envelope. “Like, take this envelope right here.” I leaned down and picked it up without breaking stride. “It either contains a whole shit load of money or a

window into some person's life." The envelope felt hefty and thick. I looked inside. I saw a thick wad of bills. I pressed my index finger across the top. It felt and smelled like money. "It happens to be a whole shit load of money," I told Jim as we continued walking. I folded the envelope into my front pocket. Then my brain caught up to this sensory information. I stopped in my tracks.

"Damn!" I exclaimed. "I just found a whole shit load of money!"

Jim stared at me incredulously. He was lugging his guitar, and now he put it down. "Get outta here! Lemme see that!"

Suddenly I was scared. Was this some set-up? Drug money that some hoods or some cops planted? Were they now lurking in the shadows, in the corners of the buildings, waiting for some suckers like us to take the bait? I thought of Stevie Wonder's song, "Living for The City." I looked around. Jim did too. We instinctively moved into the darker shadows of a building. I took out the folded envelope and handed it to him. "Here," I said. Jim peeked inside. "Holy shit!" he whispered. We felt fully sober now.

"Let's look. Is there any receipt? Any address?" I secretly hoped there wasn't. Sure enough, we found a pink slip of paper. On it we saw a scrawled tally of numbers, a phone number, and an address. No name. "I mean, maybe some guy who works for a catering service or

a pizza place went to deposit this and dropped it. Maybe he's now frantically searching for it, or faces being fired." I pictured some poor, desperate Mexican immigrant.

"Then where is he?" Jim asked. We looked around. We saw a few late-night couples and revelers. The Walk was quiet and calm.

"This must've just happened," I said. "Should we call?"

"And what?" Jim said. "Ask: did you drop a whole wad of cash on College Walk? It could just as easily be drug money."

I stuffed the envelope back in my pocket. "I'll call my brother Mark. He'll know what to do," I said.

"Now?" Jim asked.

"Don't worry. He'll understand."

My oldest brother Mark was street-wise. He had made money hustling pool in college. He was savvy about unsavory characters.

Jim picked up his guitar and we headed down Broadway. We entered a local 24-7 deli to use the pay phone. I inserted a quarter and placed the call.

"Hello?" Mark answered. He sounded surprised, but still awake.

“Mark,” I said. “I need your help. My friend Jim and I were walking on College Walk 15 minutes ago and found an envelope with a whole shit load of money inside.”

“How much?”

“I dunno.” Boy, I felt foolish. I mean, for all we knew, the thick wad could have been all one dollar bills. “A lot...maybe a few hundred...”

“Any indications where it came from?” I told him about the pink slip of paper. “Not much to go with, is there?” he said.

“Should we call the cops?” I asked.

“What? Why?!”

“Well...turn the money in. You know, someone might be looking for it...It might belong to some honest worker.”

“Yeah, and it may not. It could just as well be drug money.” *Yeah, I thought, I heard that before.* “And then what? Suppose no one called it in? You think the cops would give it back to you? You know, finders keepers? After you leave the precinct, they’ll have a good laugh and thank you for the spending money.”

“Oh,” I mumbled. I guess he had a point.

“I say, find some place to count the money. Then figure out how you’re going to spend it.” That was the advice I wanted to hear.

“Thanks, Mark,” I said. “I’ll let ya know tomorrow.”

“No problem. Get some sleep.”

I hung up and turned to Jim. I could see from his face that he overheard enough of the conversation to figure out the outcome.

“Let’s head to Tom’s Diner for a late night breakfast special,” I said, as I shifted my appetite from beer to eggs, toast, juice, and French fries.

“Sounds good,” Jim answered.

At 1 AM, Tom’s Diner was still crowded. Most of the booths were full. The waiters and waitresses bustled about. Through the service window, I saw a short-order cook slap a cheeseburger special on the counter as he wiped the sweat off his brow with the side of his arm. The inviting smell of greasy eggs, hamburgers, and French fries lured us in. Jim and I found an empty booth. Jim tucked his guitar under it, and we slid in. We stared at each other, both thinking: now what?

“Let’s order first,” I said. We both glanced at the menu, even though we knew exactly what we wanted. The waitress came over. She poured the coffee. After we placed the order, I told Jim, “we need to count the money.”

“Definitely.”

“Not here. How about the bathroom?” I suggested.

“OK.”

I still felt scared. “Would you do it?”

Jim hesitated, then his face relaxed. “Sure.” I hunched down to pull the envelope from my pocket, and handed it to Jim under the table. He hunched down and stuffed it in his pocket. Then he slid out of the booth and went to the bathroom.

While I waited, I looked around. No frantic-looking people. No suspicious faces. No spying eyes. Just customers, mostly college kids, eating, talking, laughing. Just people hunched over their plates of food at the counter. Just bustling workers and the ringing of the cash register.

Jim returned and slid back into our booth. He looked me square in the face. “Twelve hundred dollars,” he whispered.

My mouth dropped. Definitely not a wad of one dollar bills. “Wow!” I responded.

“Here ya go,” Jim said, and he started returning the envelope to me. He looked disappointed.

“You take half,” I said.

“Half? Are ya sure?”

Once I said it, I was sure. “Yes. You were there with me...We both found it together. I want you to have it.”

“Wow! Thanks,” Jim answered. We hesitated. “I’ll go divvy it up.” So Jim returned to the bathroom. This time he had to wait. The waitress came by to deliver our food. “Anything else, dear?” she asked.

“Just the check,” I said. She scrawled the check, placed it on the table, and quickly moved away. I prepared my poached eggs and fries for eating: hot sauce, pepper, ketchup. Delicious.

As Jim returned to our booth, I noticed the bulges in the two front pockets of his jeans. He handed me the envelope under the table and I stuffed it in my pocket. “There’s your share,” Jim said, as he prepared his eggs and fries. “600 bucks.”

As we ate our breakfast specials, we speculated about the money: how someone may have dropped the envelope, how long before we arrived it may have happened, what may have happened once the person discovered that the envelope was missing.

“We should go back to College Walk after this,” I said, “and see who’s there.” Maybe we would find someone searching for the envelope now, an hour after we found it.

“I don’t think so,” Jim said. “I think the person who dropped it realizes that the money’s not coming back.”

Jim asked how I might spend the money. “Hmm...I don’t know...” I paused to think. I felt the greasy linoleum through the heel of my Converse. “I need new sneakers...” but nothing more immediately came to mind.

“I know just how I’ll spend it!” Jim couldn’t wait to share. “I haven’t seen my older brother in nearly six months, not since Thanksgiving. He’s out in Denver, working at my Dad’s warehouse. 600 dollars is exactly what I need for the airfare. It’s perfect.” Now that Jim shared his purpose, I felt embarrassed.

We paid our bill, said good night, and parted ways.

We never found out where the money came from or who paid the consequences (although I checked the newspapers the next few weeks). I hope no one suffered seriously: a beating, a maiming, a death. I do know that two weeks later, Jim flew to Colorado to visit his brother for two weeks. By the time Jim returned, a full month after we found the envelope, my share had evaporated like a deep puddle on a hot summer day. Gone. Just a circle of crusty mud to mark the spot: some sneakers, some shoes, some movies, some books.

Two months later, and three months after this incident, news arrived that Jim's brother died in a freak accident at his father's warehouse. A cable had snapped, a refrigerator went plummeting, and he was crushed underneath. He was 25 years old. I called Jim to offer my condolences. I know the power of the relationship among brothers. "I wish there was something I could do or say to ease your pain."

"Ted, you've already done more than you'll ever know. You didn't have to share that money with me. That 600 dollars bought the ticket that let me spend two great weeks with my brother. That's the last time I had with him on this Earth. I'll cherish those memories." He started choking up.

"Jeez, glad I helped," I said awkwardly.

After I hung up, I thought of money gained and money lost, pain and damage done on both sides of the envelope, and the inevitability that I would find the envelope with Jim at that particular moment on College Walk to unfold the known and unknown events in this story that we carry with us the rest of our lives.