

The Rich Man

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Carissa sat down at her usual table in Jeanne's Coffee Shop, ordered a cup of black coffee, and promptly buried her head in the Home Section of The Times. She lifted her head only when she heard his name. Many years had gone by since she last saw him. The man she stared at bore little resemblance to the Eddie she once dated, to the man who had once proposed to her.

"That'll be two dollars and fifty-five cents, Eddie."

The man standing beside the register reached into the back pocket of his almost threadbare, patched jeans and pulled out a grease-spattered, creased envelope. Tossing some coins onto the countertop, he carefully counted; "Ninety, a dollar fifteen, a dollar eighty-five, two, two fifty-five."

Nervously shifting from one foot to the other, head cast downward, with an almost jerky motion, he carelessly shoved the envelope with its remaining contents back into his pocket. A couple of dirty, ragged fingernails snagged in one of the many holes of his oft mended sweater. As he struggled to free his nails from the frayed bits of wool, he tugged at the crumpled, bunched up sweater riding up his back, picked up the brown paper bag on the counter, mumbled something incoherent to those standing on line behind him, and walked out the front door.

"Damn shame," said Ken as Joe and Tom nodded in agreement.

"Could've held the world right in the palm of his hands," said Ray. "Try and figure it!"

As the four whispered and snickered among themselves, Carissa felt tears well up in her eyes and lowered her head. Although she and Eddie stopped seeing each other long ago, hardly a day went by that she didn't find herself thinking, "If only he hadn't started with the drugs, hadn't decided to give up on society and drop out." She never doubted the wisdom of breaking up; she just couldn't deal with it.

After the breakup, drained physically and emotionally, Carissa left her job as a successful investment and financial planner in the city, went on vacation, and, when she came back made what many friends thought was a drastic change in her life. She remembered their mouths dropping in wide astonishment and the saucer-like look in their eyes every time she mentioned she had become a secretary at St. Christopher's. She felt compelled to devote and spare time and energy to helping those who had fallen on hard times. Being around such an atmosphere made her even more determined to "reclaim" Eddie. "All he needs is a helping hand. If I could just find a way of slipping him some money; a way that wouldn't injure his pride."

As she walked up to the register, an idea suddenly came to her and a smile crept over her face. The numbers on the chart stared at her. "Six, ten, fifteen, twenty-two, thirty, forty-one, supplementary--fifty." She whispered each Lotto number as though reciting a magical incantation. She needed a paper a few days old—just to be sure. The possibility of winning something put a bounce in her step as she left the coffee shop.

As she walked the few short blocks to the rectory, the warmth of the winter sun radiated through the chill morning air and warmed Carissa. She pushed open the door and the brilliant sunlight flooded her room and seemed momentarily to blind her. Suddenly, she heard the squealing and screeching of car brakes and the honking of horns. She cupped her left hand over the glass window and watched as Eddie and his "family" casually but somewhat erratically crossed the street. Once on the other side, the threesome turned the corner and headed- toward the back of Norma Jeane's.

Although she couldn't see Eddie, Carissa could guess what he was doing. One day on her way to lunch, she saw someone in an alleyway and became so spellbound by his ritual that she never ate lunch that day. After seeing Eddie this morning she had no doubt the stranger was he.

"Well, boys, time our work day started, don't ya think?" He lifted the front of his grimy, dirt-encrusted sweater, spread apart the button-less shirt and pulled out a large, black plastic bag.

He shook it open, and then, as if to mock the delicate movements of a skilled surgeon, he set about collecting bottles and cans. Every so often, he'd find a half-filled can of beer and take a swig or two. "No sense letting good beer go to waste, eh boys?"

He worked well into the afternoon and soon his bag was filled to the brim. Beads of sweat dotted his brow, and, in the creases of his face, perspiration mixed with dirt. He lifted the ragged edge of his sweater and wiped his face with it, then pulled it back down. As he slung the bag over his shoulder, he looked like an over-burdened, down and out Santa Claus.'

As he stood on the corner of Main and Grand, he watched the streets clogged with people bustling about. Everyone seemed in a hurry to get somewhere and yet their faces were expressionless.

"Society kin do that to ya. Sure glad we don't have to punch no time clocks. We're lucky. We can take all day if we like to fill up this bag and not worry that someone's gonna run us down for not meetin' a deadline. I sure pity those saps who wear themselves out and fer what?"

Putting the last folder in the file cabinet drawer, Carissa decided to eat a late lunch at her desk.

Absentmindedly nibbling on a turkey sandwich, she flipped through the pages of a Newsday from a few days ago. Her eyes widened as she read the winning lottery numbers. Her hopes had been confirmed. Today, she needed to follow Eddie. She picked up the phone.

"Father? I need to run an errand. It shouldn't take more than half an hour."

"That's all right, Carissa. We're pretty well caught up with our paperwork. Why don't you take off the rest of the day?" A wave of relief mixed with unvoiced gratitude washed over Carissa as she placed the receiver in its cradle.

She closed up her office, and, just as the key turned in the lock, Carissa saw Eddie turn the corner, heard him give a whistle and watched as the bizarre looking trio set off.

A fair number of people walked along the streets, yet Eddie had the uneasy feeling he was being followed. Every now and then he glanced over his shoulder. Imitating the movements of a private detective, Carissa avoided being seen by skillfully slipping in and out of doorways.

Finally, Eddie reached the bottle redemption center. "Now, you two wait right here 'till I get back, hear? Don't go chasin' after no pussy or there'll be hell to pay when I come out!"

Bismark, a tawny colored but somewhat undernourished Dane, yawned and sat at attention while Mason (no one could determine his ancestry) stretched out upon the pavement, resting his head on his two front paws. With upraised eyebrows, the eyes of both followed Eddie as he disappeared through the door.

"Looks like you had a good day," said Buddy as he peeled off and handed five crisp, clean dollar bills to Eddie.

"Yeah it'll hold me." he called out as he waved the grimy envelope above his head like a flag.

"Me and the boys is off ta celebrate tonight. See ya 'bout the same time tomorrow!"

Looking something like a piper, Eddie and his little troupe continued his hike. Although her breaths deepened and became a little labored, Carissa managed to keep up. A sigh of relief escaped her lips as the band halted under some shade trees that lined the grassy knolls along the parkway. A breeze lightly kissed the perspiration on her forehead. She gasped inwardly as she watched Eddie disappear into some kind of dwelling. She remained almost rooted to the ground, transfixed by what she saw. After a few minutes, he emerged wearing a different sweater. He whistled to his dogs, and they went off to celebrate. Dried out twigs crackled beneath her as unsteady steps carried her closer to his home. She stooped as she entered. Hunched over, her eyes gradually adjusted to the semi-darkness. Muffled sobs arose in her throat, and tears trickled down her cheeks as she looked around. At last, unable to bear anymore, she turned to leave when she spied his envelope on the orange crate. From her pocket she withdrew one hundred dollars—monies she was paid for holding a winning Lottery ticket.

It was late Sunday night and Carissa hummed softly to herself as she checked and made sure the church was secure for the night. Since the church had been broken into before, she decided to empty the poor boxes before going home. Lifting up the wooden lid of the last poor box, Carissa found a creased and grease-spattered envelope. Gingerly she lifted up its frayed flap and found five twenty dollar bills and four crisp new singles.

Outside the muffled yelping of dogs and babblings of a man momentarily diverted her attention. She leaned over slightly and, peering through the small leaded windows, she could see both dogs leaping up and kissing the bearded face of Eddie.