

Max Kimbrough

(Untitled short story)

“Sir, can ya spare a dollar?”

Usually, I would pass the homeless man without paying him any money or any heed. However, today I was in an uncharacteristically good mood, so I reached into my pocket and handed the man a crumpled and worn dollar. He eyed me and the bill suspiciously, as if we were trying to trick him, and asked cautiously, “I don’t suppose you have another to spare?”

They were always pushing and prodding, trying to get more money out of unsuspecting passersby. Give them an inch, and they’ll take a mile; give them a dollar and they’ll demand two. Or three. Or sometimes even five. Now, while I am by no means against helping out the homeless in theory, I’m much less willing in practice. I’m sure that they all see me and imagine Mr. Monopoly—and maybe I am, compared to them—but I can assure you and them that a video store clerk making six dollars per hour does not usually have much money to hand out.

It was Monday morning and I was opening. Video Plus opened at 9 on Mondays, but fortunately my apartment was only a few blocks away. Close enough that I could walk; and close enough that I was always harassed by the homeless guys. There were about five of them in this neighborhood, and they each staked out one street as their own. The man closest to the store was short and haggard. He had a long gray beard and his dirty hair flowed wildly. His crusty overcoat reeked of rotten eggs and spoiled milk, and his fingernails were short and uneven, as if he’d been gnawing at them. About a year ago,

a co-worker of mine, Vince Bellows, had dubbed him “Scruffy Pete” as a joke. The name had stuck.

I’d been working at the VP for three years, and every day I would pass Pete. At first, he would lethargically hold out his cup of change. The cup was never very full, and often it only had pennies and nickels. Feeling sorry for him, I once gave Pete a few dollars in loose change. This seemed to ignite a fire in him, as for the next few weeks he would aggressively ask people for change. It seemed to work, too, as eventually Scruffy Pete got a larger cup to hold out, and it was nearly always full of change and assorted bills.

However, something changed about a year ago: people simply stopped giving Pete money. He went back to his smaller cup, but still rarely had more than a few coins at any time. The light that I’d seen in his eyes for over a year was gone; it was replaced by an empty and lifeless stare.

As I turned the corner, I could see the driveway for Video Plus on the right. Sitting on the bench next to the exit of the parking lot, I saw Pete. His shoulders were slumped and he was staring blankly at the ground. The coffee cup he used to collect change was held lightly in his limp hands. Even without seeing inside the cup, I knew it was empty.

Avoiding Pete, I cut through a row of bushes and went into Video Plus through the back. Inside, I turned off the alarm and made my way toward the front. On the counter I saw a piece of paper, with a note written on it in dark red ink. In the note, Vince, whose shift was supposed to begin after mine ended at 3, informed me that something came up and that he wouldn’t be able to make it in to work today. *Well, I*

thought, at least “something” was nice enough to give Vince enough notice to write me a note last night. I crumpled up the paper and threw it into the waste bin. I looked at my watch. It was only 8:25. Thirty-five minutes until opening.

Time ran slower that day than it usually did, but I was able to counter it by zoning out during the monotony that is a Monday morning at a video store. The only customers who came in were senior citizens asking where the musicals section was. One elderly couple came in and immediately rented *The Sound of Music*. They didn’t care that they’d already seen it dozens of times, or they didn’t remember. Either way, they left the store happy. I wished I could’ve done the same.

Now you play a pretty good fiddle, boy  
 But give the devil his due  
 I'll bet a fiddle of gold  
 Against your soul  
 'Cause I think I'm better than you

At noon, the mailman came in. *The Devil Went Down To Georgia* was blaring through the headphones that were hanging from his neck, and I could clearly make out the lyrics. His gruff hand extended out to me a half dozen letters. Credit card application, coupon, coupon, credit card application, church solicitation, credit card application. They were all addressed to me; apparently, video store manager was now the lone qualification for giving them your money. I was in charge of ordering the movies from the distributor, and they must have sold my name and place of work to the vultures.

I opened the Visa application on the top of the pile and took out the pre-paid envelope. I then stuffed it with the coupons, and even put a few pennies in there for good measure. The pennies would increase the weight, and therefore the price, of the letter. I hoped that Visa would understand my message, but something made me doubt it.

The day dragged on. Mondays were never busy, so we only ever had one person working at a time. I didn't mind. All of the other employees were either recovering alcoholics or high school students too cool to care about being apathetic. God only knows how they viewed me. As three o'clock rolled around, I stood motionless, hunched over the counter. Vince fell into the "recovering alcoholic" pile, with a strong emphasis on "recovering." He was five years older than me, but had the will power of an infant; the "something" that he mentioned in his note was probably a good, long session of binge drinking and assault on mailboxes. I hoped for his sake that he didn't get arrested, because I meant to stick to my vow to never bail him out again.

Around eight, a kid who couldn't have been more than twelve years old came up to the counter and delicately placed *Hellraiser*—fun for the whole family!—in front of me. Now, Video Plus didn't have an official policy against renting gory movies to minors, but I had to draw the line somewhere.

"How old are you?" I asked Tiny Tim suspiciously.

Voice cracking, he replied, "Seventeen."

Right. "I'm sorry, but you don't look older than twelve, and it's store policy to not rent R-rated movies to minors."

Confused, Tiny Tim sulked out of the store, but came back a minute later with a burly mountain of a man. I couldn't help but crack a smile, as it reminded me of those old cartoons where the mob boss is some little guy and he has bodyguards twice his size, and half his intelligence.

"You the guy who said my kid was twelve?" the giant grunted.

"Yeah, what of it?"

“My son told you he was seventeen. Are you calling him a liar?”

“I’m afraid I don’t recall uttering those words.”

“Smartass,” he seethed. “Where’s your manager? I wanna talk to him.”

“He’s in the back. I’ll go get him for you.” Walking toward the room in the back of the store, I hoped that Tiny Tim and the giant would rob the register, just so I could call the cops on them. I turned the corner and was out of their sight; slouched against the wall, I exhaled deeply. *What I wouldn’t give to not have to deal with this anymore*, I thought.

After what I determined to be enough time for them to have robbed the store and for me to have spoken with the manager, I forced myself to walk back to the front counter. The two were milling about. *Damn*, I cursed under my breath. I really wanted to call the cops on them. The giant saw me and demanded, “Well?”

“I’m sorry, but my manager told me I was right,” I said matter-of-factly with a shrug. Tiny Tim became even more confused and the giant’s thick eyebrows interlocked to form a unibrow. I imagined steam shooting out of his ears and his face turning beet red.

“Son of a—. That’s it. Let’s go, Andrew.” He grabbed Tiny Tim’s hand and they stormed out of the store. Good riddance. I went back to my spot at the counter and hunched over it again. I stared up at the clock; the hands moved so slowly I could have sworn they had stopped altogether.

Hours passed and not a single customer came in. Outside, the parking lot was deserted except for a few random bags dancing in the wind. Pete was gone, but his cup remained, as if saving his spot. The cup didn’t move in the wind, so there must have been

something weighing it down. I hoped that none of the other bums would steal Pete's money while he was gone doing whatever he was doing. A car shot by outside and I saw the moon's reflection on its roof. It was nearly full and had a yellow glow about it. Dark clouds would obscure the moon for a moment, but they quickly passed, as if afraid of incurring the moon's wrath. A cold shiver wound its way slowly up my back.

I glanced at the clock again. The red hand raced around his black cousins. *Why are you in such a rush?* I thought. *You'll get there eventually.* But the red hand paid me no heed and kept on speeding around the face. It was almost midnight. Almost time to check out.

With a sigh, I picked up the remaining videos on the counter and turned to put them back on the shelves. *Dogma* was on top of the pile. *D*, I thought, trying to remember, *where's the 'D' section?*

"Excuse me. I wonder if you could help me?"

Startled, my shoulders shot up and I nearly dropped the tapes. *Another customer?* I thought. There were always a few who waited until the store was closed to come and rent something, and they were always the ones who wanted whatever was out of stock. I turned around and eyed the man. He was tall with thin, sloping shoulders, and wore a heavy, black overcoat. His dark hair was beginning to thin at the top, and was turning gray at the temples, but his face gave nothing about his age away. The man was standing in front of a large window near the entrance to the store. The moon's yellow light encircled him, and I could imagine it following him around like an obedient puppy.

"I'm sorry, is the store closed? I was hoping to get something tonight, but I'm afraid I was running a tad late." Each word was carefully enunciated and ended as sharply

as a dagger. The man raised a thin eyebrow as if to put more emphasis on the question. He measuredly took off his leather gloves and held them behind his back in a sign of acquiescence. He wore navy blue slacks and black wingtips that looked as though they'd been recently shined. The fluorescent light above him shone off of the black shoes. He gave me a smug, patient smile, and waited for my answer.

“N-No,” I stammered, “we’re still open for a few more minutes.” I put the stack of tapes on the floor beside my feet. The pile came up to my knee and looked like it would tumble at any moment. I gave the tapes a slight kick to test their stability; they didn’t wobble at all. I could put them away after getting this guy out of the store. We stared at each other, giving non-verbal signs for the other to speak first.

“Well then,” he gave in. “I’m looking for something in particular, but I don’t seem to be able to recall its name. Perhaps you could help me.” His eyebrow climbed his forehead again, but he was clearly not asking a question this time. I gave an inaudible sigh and led him to the counter. I opened the movie search program on the computer.

“Do you know what the film’s about?” I asked impatiently.

“It’s about a man who has nothing and suddenly gains everything,” he answered calmly.

“Can you be a little more specific than that? What genre is it?”

“Oh, it’s *certainly* a drama.” A wry smile crept across the man’s face and was gone as quickly as I noticed it.

“Do you know who’s in it?”

“His name is always on the tip of my tongue. I’m certain you’d recognize him if you saw him.” There was that smile again.

This was clearly going nowhere, and I was beginning to grow frustrated. “I’m sorry sir, but I don’t think we carry the movie you’re thinking of. Is there anything else I can give you?” The man smiled smugly and gave a quick snort of air from his thin, beak-like nose.

“It’s not so much what you can give me,” his eyes were fixed on mine, “as what I can give you.” The end of his sentence was at the same time the most wonderful word I’d ever heard, and the most repugnant. I closed my eyes to regain my composure, and when I opened them the man’s eyes were staring into mine. His dark pupils were like holes that seemed to extend infinitely, and there was a light about his eyes that gave me an... uneasy... feeling.

I suddenly realized what he was trying to do; and as my frown grew, so did his smirk. “This is a place of business, and I would appreciate it if you would go solicit elsewhere.” Trying to control my budding rage, I spoke slowly and in measures.

“If you’ll but listen to me, I can assure you that you will be interested in what I have to offer.” With that, the man reached to take out a manila envelope from the breast pocket of his dark overcoat. The envelope was sealed on one side and had my name and the address of Video Plus on the other. *What is this, I thought, coupons or credit cards?*

My eyes were fixed on the envelope. The man tore open the sealed end, and it broke my trance. My eyes once again met his, and I could suddenly see wrinkles and crows’ feet around his eyes, as his grin pushed and molded his face.

Placing his hand inside the envelope, the man began to slowly take out the paper. He stopped when an inch of the document could be seen; I saw part of an elaborate watermark in the corner, but nothing else.



“ Throughout life, we are taught that we must be fair. No one wants to be at a disadvantage; it’s humiliating and, for lack of a better term, unfair.” The corners of the man’s long, thin face crept up into a sneer. “People are deathly afraid of being in an unfair situation. They strive to be equal, or better, than the competition.” I nodded slowly. “But what people forget is that life *is* unfair!”

The man’s speech seemed to me to be the most profound thing I’d ever heard. Even if I’d wanted to, I couldn’t have moved my eyes from his. He continued in his measured, almost lyrical tone:

“There are some people in this world,” he began, “who are privileged from birth. They are born with silver spoons in their mouths, and live their lives without knowing a single day of honest work. Why? Is it because they are somehow ‘better’ than everyone else? Is it because they somehow have the ‘right’ to a privileged life? Are they in some way ‘special’? Why?”

“The Declaration of Independence says that all men are equal. How can that be the case when it is so obvious that it is untrue? Perhaps it meant that all men *should* be equal. That, I can understand. That, I can accept. That, I can do something about.”

The man in black once again noticed the confused look on my face and sneered, as if in pity. He began to explain again, this time with a much smoother tone, and a much more gentle mien. “If you had the power, would you right all the wrongs in the world?” I nodded yes. “If you had the power, would there be any injustice in the world?” I nodded no. “If you had the power, would you put the underprivileged on equal footing with the fortunate?” I furled my brow and nodded yes once again, this time with some conviction.

This seemed to satisfy the man. He smiled warmly at me, but there was now a darkness about his eyes that sent a cold shiver down my back. He began to speak again in the same warm tone as before. “Now, if you knew someone who had the power, would you want him to right the wrongs, to undo any injustice, and to make everyone equal?” I paused to consider for a moment, and this seemed to agitate him. He collected himself and smiled. “Come now, what objection to this *hypothetical* question could you possibly have? You already made it clear that you would use your powers in such a way if you were in charge; what does it matter that someone else would be doing it? The outcome, after all, would be identical.”

I chuckled under my breath. My father had been a philosophy professor, and would always spout out knowledge in any given situation, whether I wanted to hear it or not. “Let me play Devil’s Advocate,” I said, and the man gave an amused snort. “What if the outcome could only be reached by doing something terrible? What if everyone could only be made equal by getting rid of anyone inherently unequal? I’d say the negatives outweigh the positives.”

With that, the man guffawed loudly. It was the first time since he arrived that I’d seen any real emotion from him. “You make a good point,” he said, trying to stifle his laughter. “A very good point. A little misguided, perhaps, but a good point nonetheless.” He then grew grim again and said, “For a moment, let us forget about everyone else and what they care about. Let us focus on you, and what you care about.

“If you had a magic wand that could change your life for the better, would you use it? No one else would be affected by its use; it would not ‘get rid of’ the less

fortunate, nor would it bring down the privileged. The only one affected by the wand is you, but you would be better off for using it. Surly, this cannot be a bad thing, can it?”

“I guess it depends on if there are any strings attached.”

“How could there be?” the man said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Magic wands don’t actually exist, so how could there be strings attached to something that isn’t real?”

I considered the man’s words, and the more I thought about them, the truer they seemed. Hypothetical situations could be made as perfect as one would ever want them to be; in a perfect world, good things would befall those who deserved it, and there would never be any unseen clauses or unknown negatives.

“So are you telling me you have a magic wand that you’re just going to give me?” I deadpanned.

“In a sense,” he said with a wry smile. He then pulled out the document from the envelope and placed it on the counter in front of me. “What I’m offering is an opportunity. Take it, and your life will improve dramatically. Decline, and you will continue to eek out a meager living here.” The man waved his arm in an arc, sarcastically displaying the downtrodden video store. The lights in the back room were off, and the shadows were dancing with the light from the moon, as clouds continued to cross it.

I tried to think about the offer a bit, to weigh the pros and cons, but my mind became clouded and I had difficulty concentrating. I kept thinking of the stack of tapes I had to return to the shelves. I remembered that I had to drop off that night’s money at the bank. I realized that I would have to activate the security alarm before leaving. I looked at

the simple piece of white paper and all I could think about was the last time I saw a really good movie.

The man in black took out a gold-plated pen from his coat's breast pocket and extended it to me. I reached out to take the pen, but stopped short. "Go on, take it," the man urged with a warm smile. Without thinking, I took the pen and signed my name on the paper. The black ink flowed smoothly from the tip and dried on the page immediately. Satisfied, the man delicately placed the document back in the plain manila envelope, and returned the envelope to his breast pocket. He bowed slightly and said, "It was a pleasure doing business with you," and then turned to leave. His shiny black shoes made a loud clicking sound with each step, and there was a loud swooshing noise each time his hands brushed by his side. Pausing for a moment at the door, the man looked up at the moon through the window, and he was again bathed in a slight yellow light. I noticed a smile stretch his mouth ever so slightly, and he then opened the door to the Video Plus and left. I looked up at the clock. The red hand had just passed twelve, and his larger cousins sluggishly followed.

As I turned to finish putting the tapes back on the shelves, I noticed a quarter on the floor. It was reflecting the moon's light, and as I reached down to pick it up I could see the eagle perched on a branch. I was looking sideways, as if to avoid my gaze, but its wings were spread open in a welcoming manner. I turned the coin over and read the date. The quarter was from 1998, but didn't look more than a day old. I placed it on my thumb, flipped it up in the air, and caught it all in one motion.

Finishing my duties, I quickly left the store and walked home. There, I slept like the dead, and, fearing for my mental health, resolved to take a week off from work.