

To Please the Heart

Eddie tended to drift into whatever jobs were available that would pay the rent.

He thought he had it made in this last job working for old Miss Williams in the apartment across the hall. She tossed him a twenty every time he walked in the door, whether it was just to change a light bulb, or take out the garbage, or jiggle the toilet handle to keep it from running.

Once a week she handed him a list of things to buy at Angelo's Market across the street. He'd double check the items with her, scratch his head, and say, "Yes ma'am," even though she requested the strangest combinations of food: orange juice and potato chips, or eggs and marmalade, or sauerkraut and peanut butter.

Often he'd sneak in a few extra items like cornflakes and milk or chicken pot pie and a ready-made salad. Those times he'd stay to make her breakfast or supper, washing up the dishes she had piled in the sink.

She'd smile sweetly and say, "Frankie, what would I do without you!"

"My name is Eddie, remember?" he'd reply.

"No matter." Then she'd shuffle over to her Cherrywood buffet and pull a hundred-dollar bill from the drawer. "Here.

Take this. You earned it. I don't need all this money anyway."

Eddie worried that someone might take advantage of Miss Williams, her leaving money around loose like that. He'd grown fond of the old lady and didn't want her harmed. But it

seemed she never had any visitors, at least none he'd seen coming or going. The only voices he heard in her apartment were those on the TV, often a bit too loud.

The last few weeks Eddie noticed that the woman seemed more agitated and confused, always misplacing things, and often scolding him or barking at him about what he didn't do right. It was getting harder for him to help her out, and he didn't like accepting her money. He'd thought of calling Social Services, but it really wasn't his business.

Then a couple of days later, she began accusing him of taking stuff—first her favorite teacup, then her enameled hand mirror, and finally, her gold heart locket and chain.

“Miss Williams, my dear, I don't have your locket.” He leaned down to pat her hand. “You're wearing it. It just slipped under your collar.”

“Well, why did you put it there where I couldn't find it?” She waved her hand toward the door. “Now go. Leave me alone and don't come back.”

“I'm sorry, Miss Williams. I won't bother you again. I'll get you some help.”

Eddie first met Miss Williams when he was leaving his apartment and heard her cry, “Help, help!” He knocked and her door unlatched. As he pushed it open he saw a white-haired woman on the floor.

“Ho, thank God,” she moaned. “Please help me up. I fell over my own feet. Stupid woman!”

That's when she began enlisting his help for little chores. Now, Eddie couldn't assist her anymore. What if he were accused of misusing her or robbing her? He stepped into his own kitchen and dialed 911.

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From the time he was little, Eddie liked to please people, but he hadn't done so well with old Miss Williams. Now he had to find another job.

His place nestled in the front corner on the fourth floor of a West Side rent-controlled complex, but it still wasn't cheap. Before his parents were killed in that awful smash-up on the George Washington Bridge, they'd given him ten thousand dollars for him to get a start in life. He'd never quite gotten a real start, and after three years, that money was gone for rent and food. He'd never wasted any of it on drinks or drugs or movies. One time he did splurge on a concert ticket to Carnegie Hall. The orchestra's emotion touched Eddie's heart, and since then, he longed to play an instrument. The thought of a violin or clarinet sitting in his living room brightened his day.

Forget it. Without money for extras, it was just a pipe dream.

Squeezing out enough cash to pay for bus fare, he checked newspaper ads and flyers posted around the city. But to no avail. He was either too young or too old, too tall or too short, too inexperienced or undereducated for any job he sought. As friendly and polite as he was, he just couldn't please his would-be employers.

One sunny May day, Eddie wandered down from his West Side digs toward the theater district, thinking soon he'd be living outdoors on one of these grimy streets. Especially now that the last one of Miss Williams's precious hundreds lined the bottom of his pocket.

People hurried along bumping into Eddie from both directions. New York. People were always in a hurry here. As he ambled along, he pressed close to the buildings to avoid being trampled. Money or not, it refreshed him to gaze into shop windows and imagine he owned a pair of Italian leather shoes, a Rolex watch, or a pair of Christian Dior sunglasses. Wouldn't that

be ritzy though—just the stuff to wear to Carnegie Hall. Oh, and a suit, too. A pin-stripe suit fitted to him by an expert tailor with a measuring tape cascading from his shoulders.

Eddie smiled as he moved along, imagining himself a fancy dude, perhaps with a lady on his arm.

And then he sat it! Stopping dead in this tracks to get a better look, he knew he had to have it. But how? He put his hand over his eyes to reduce the glare and pressed his face to the window glass. The sign next to the blond acoustic guitar read:

Barely Used Guitar
reduced for quick sale
\$75.00 firm
includes 3 introductory lessons

Wow! Lessons too. Why would such a beautiful instrument not cost a lot more? He fingered his last thin one hundred at the bottom of his pocket. If he bought this amazing instrument, He'd likely have only ten or fifteen dollars left after the tax.

So he can't pay the rent. So what? He'll sell some of his furniture and move out. Eddie opened the jingling door to the shop and stepped inside.

"May I help you?" The young man leaned over a counter strewn with guitar picks, replacement strings, shoulder straps, lesson books, and even harmonicas. His long black beard reached nearly to the counter top. Smiling, he extended a hand to Eddie. "Looking fot something special?"

"Um, well, maybe. That guitar in the window. I've never played, but I'd like to. Lessons some with it?"

"Yeah, man. I'll give you three good one-hour lessons. I'll even throw in a strap and a lesson book."

“That’s amazing. Why is the price so reasonable?” Is there anything wrong with the guitar?”

“Not a thing. It’s in perfect condition, made of good Sitka spruce—doubt it’s ever been played.”

“Really? I wonder why.”

“Don’t know. Somebody from some welfare group brought it in—said they didn’t know what else to do with it. Seems some old lady died when she went to a nursing home. They found the guitar and some other stuff in her apartment.” He reached under the counter. “Hey, you want this gold locket? It came in with the guitar. If you’re buying, I’ll throw it in with the rest.”

Eddie gasped. His heart pounded like it wanted to exit his chest. Miss Williams’s locket! He’d never seen her with a guitar—must have been stowed away in one of her closets. Now he knew he had to have it. He tried to appear casual. “Um, sure, I guess I could use the locket—maybe for good luck.”

“Don’t know how much luck it’ll bring ya. The old bag who had it died, after all.”

Eddie put his hand to his mouth in thought. “Problem is, the only money I have left is this.” He pulled out the hundred. “And it’s supposed to go toward my rent. Don’t suppose you could—”

The clerk placed his long-fingered hand on Eddie’s wrist. “Hey, man, I’ve been there. You can have the whole shebang for fifty bucks. Didn’t cost me nuthin’ anyway. Fifty’ll cover the lessons. But you must promise to come once a week for the next three Wednesdays. Be here at 2:00.”

“Deal.” Eddie let go of the bill.

The young man threw it in the register. He handed back the change and then took the shiny guitar from the front window. “I’ve got an old case here somewhere. You can have that too.” Fumbling around behind him, he pulled a scuffed up case from the bottom shelf and blew the heavy coat of dust from its surface.

The young man with the long beard and the long fingers moved with precision, snapping the case shut over the guitar and its accessories. “There you are. All set. By the way, my name is RB—short for Remington Brown.”

“Glad to meet you. I’m Eddie Alvarez. See you next Wednesday.”

Swinging the guitar case with this right hand, Eddie practically danced down the streets to his apartment.

He opened the case on a side table and stared at the precious instrument. It was his, really his, and he would be taking lessons! Carefully removing the gold locket and chain from the neck of the guitar, he placed it around his own neck. For good luck. What were the chances that Miss Williams would still be giving his things, even after her death? He would repay her. He would work hard. He would use his gift to please other people. That’s what he did best.