

## The Vagabond

I saw the vagabond lying on the sidewalk and decided to avoid him by crossing over to the other side of the street. But just as I stepped down off the curb he saw me and called out, "Help me." His voice was feeble, just barely audible. I hesitated for a moment, telling myself it would be better to simply walk on. I had actually started to cross the street when the voice called out again, more urgently, "Help me. Please!"

I turned back and went over to the man. He had his head propped up against the wall of a building, his face in the shadows.

"What do you want?" I asked impatiently. "I haven't got any spare change."

"I don't want your money. I don't need your money," the man said.

"What is it then?"

There was a pause. "I'm dying," he said quietly.

I stooped down and pulled the man into the light. He wasn't that old, maybe forty. He had a stubbly beard and a worn, tired-looking face. He was breathing heavily. He wasn't drunk, but his breath smelled of alcohol.

"I'll call for an ambulance," I said.

"No, no! There's no time for that!" the man said, gasping. "I've got to get somewhere. Could you take me?"

"You need to get to a hospital."

Ignoring me, the man reached into the pocket of his tattered trousers and handed me a piece of paper. "This is where I want to go."

An address had been scribbled on the paper. The place was in an exclusive, upper-class neighborhood on the other side of town.

"Whose house is this?" I said.

"My father's," he answered.

"And who might your father be?"

I was surprised when he told me his father's name. His father had been the president of a large bank, the city's largest in fact. I'd done business with him, had even gotten to know him a little. One night at a charity event he'd told me all about his wife and two daughters, but he never once mentioned having a son.

"Your father's been dead for years," I said. "I think your family sold the house."

"It doesn't matter," the man said. "I've got to get to that house!"

"You're dying!" I exclaimed.

"Have a look at the other side of that paper."

I looked at the paper and saw a number written lightly in pencil on it.

"That's a bank account number," the man said.

"It looks like a telephone number."

"No, it's a bank account number. And I'll give you all the money that's in that account if you'll just take me to this address. There's enough money there for you to retire on if you want."

"You don't really expect me to believe this little story of yours, do you?" I said skeptically.

"It's true," the man said. He told me the name of the bank. It was the same bank that the person he was claiming to be his father had been president of.

"If you've got so much money, then what are you doing living on the streets like this?"

"What use have I got for money?" he said. "Even if you don't believe me, couldn't you do just one little favor for a dying man?"

I stood up and went over to the street to hail a taxi. By the time one finally came, the man was breathing even more heavily. He could barely keep his eyes open. I dragged him over to the car and lifted him inside.

"Where do you want to go?" the taxi driver said. "The hospital?"

"No, take us to this address." I showed him the piece of paper. The taxi driver set the meter, put the car in gear, and started out.

The vagabond was lying with his head on the backseat of the car. After a few minutes he said,

“Make out a will. Make it out to yourself. I’ll leave you everything.”

I laughed. “You don’t really think that such a will would stand up in court, do you?”

“It’s got to,” he said.

He looked at me with weary eyes.

“Could you stop the car?” I said to the taxi driver.

The driver pulled the car over to the side of the road.

“I suppose you overheard our conversation,” I said. “You’ll be a witness to this?”

“Sure, for what it’s worth.” The taxi driver turned around and watched as I pulled out a pen and wrote on the piece of paper beneath the account number, “I will everything in this account to —.” I put down my own name.

“Let me see it,” the vagabond said. “Yes, that’s fine. Now help me up.”

I got him sitting upright. He was just barely able to scrawl his name on the bottom of the paper. “You sign it, too,” he said, handing the paper to the taxi driver.

“Don’t forget your address and telephone number.”

The taxi driver signed the will and wrote down his contact information.

“Now, let’s get going,” the vagabond said, collapsing back into his seat.

The taxi driver pulled the car back into the traffic. He drove on for a while, finally turning the car down a wide, tree-lined boulevard.

“This is the place,” the taxi driver said, stopping in front of a huge, Victorian-style mansion.

I looked over at the vagabond. He didn’t move. His mouth was wide open. He didn’t seem to be breathing.

I shook him. “Here we are!” I shouted. “This is the place you wanted to me to take you.”

The vagabond shuddered slightly and slowly opened his eyes. Without raising his head, he looked out the window of the car. “Yeah,” he said in a whisper. “This is it. This is home, isn’t it? This is where I grew up.”

A smile crept over his face and there was a strange, happy gleam in his eyes. He pulled himself forward and suddenly looked like he might have the strength to get out of the car and have a look around the place.

He grabbed me with his hand and said, “I can’t thank you enough.”

Then his hand fell away and he looked one last time out the window. “It’s been a good life,” he said. “Absolutely marvelous.”

I was the only one at the funeral. I had notified the man’s mother and sisters. They didn’t come to the funeral but they said they would meet me in court.

After the vagabond had been buried, the priest came over and asked me, “What are you going to do if the court awards you all that money?”

Across the cemetery there was an old man curled up on a bench. I took a good, hard look at his tattered clothes and the empty wine bottle on the ground beside him.

“I dunno,” I said. “Maybe give it all to that man over there.”

And that’s exactly what I did.