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CONVERSATION WITH A BURGLAR

This is how it happened.

My flatmate was away for the weekend. It was Saturday evening. I had originally intended going to a party but the guests were not my scene, yuppie types with big mouths and narrow minds. As well as that, it was raining fit to bring out Noah with his ark and pairs of animals, so I decided on an early night.

A noise awoke me. There were soft footsteps in the next room and stealthy sounds of doors opening and closing. It was very dark, and I could see nothing. After the initial feeling of panic had worn off, I carefully turned on my table lamp, removed the bedcovers as quietly as I could and let my feet sink into the carpet. The floor creaked. I froze!

If anyone comes into this room now, I will scream and someone is bound to hear me, said Logic.

Not necessarily, whispered Emotion.

Imagination chose that moment to fill my mind with stories of housebreakings that led to gory murders, and hapless victims covered in blood splattered across overturned chairs.

Fortunately, Courage in The Face of Adversity took control of my body and right arm, grabbing a shoe. Armed with this "lethal" weapon, I crept to the door.

You're not going to face him are you? screamed Emotion. For God's sake, he may be a raging psychopath. He's hardly likely to listen to words of wisdom from your big mouth anyway!

Imagination showed me a snapshot of a sinister figure in black stabbing a girl looking remarkably like me while the shoe she carried waved helplessly in the air.

If I don't confront him, he'll find me anyway. Best to be prepared, said Courage in the Face of Adversity.

Cowardice nearly knocked my trembling legs from beneath me.

I listened to Courage even though the other voices were stronger. As gently as possible, I stepped out of my room into the hallway.

The light in the other room was on. I took a deep breath, flung open the door and marched in.

A figure in black was kneeling in front of the cupboard in the kitchen, emptying it of its contents which were pans of various degrees and sizes. As I entered, he jumped in surprise, then span round balletically while getting to his feet. I expected him to point a pistol or a knife at me. Instead, he just stood there and stared. He looked as frightened as I felt. The hand brandishing the shoe sank to my side.

He was a middle aged man with grey hair. He had a nice face and looked like someone's father. It turned out he was.

He was the first to speak.

"Do you live here?"

"Yes."

"I thought everyone was out."

"No. You wasted your time breaking in here. There's nothing to steal!"

He blushed, and looked at the floor.

"You must think I'm awful!"

"Well – you are a thief, aren't you? Thieves aren't usually very nice, I mean, as a rule, are they?"

"I don't normally do this sort of thing. This is my first time actually! You can probably tell! I must have been making so much noise it woke you up. Not very good really is it?"

"Have you got a gun or anything?"

"Hell, no!"

"And you won't try and beat me up or kill me?"

"Of course not!" He sounded genuinely shocked. "I hate violence!"

His shoulders slumped. "If you want to call the police, go ahead. I won't try and stop you!"

"Have you taken anything?"

"No. All I found was kitchen stuff!"

"That's because it is the kitchen! People normally keep valuables in their living rooms or bedrooms!"

"I know." He gave a sheepish grin. "I would have tried them next. I was just checking, in case you had anything stashed in a cake tin or something like that. I read a book once about an old lady that kept a fortune in an old margarine tub. It got me thinking!"

We were still standing opposite one another, both rigid and scared. I felt my legs trembling, but this time with relief.

"I'm going to sit down," I said, moving to the kitchen table and pulling up one of the chairs. He looked as if he could use a seat too but I was hardly prepared to offer him one. "You scared me shitless!"

"I'm really sorry!" he said contritely. "I thought you were out. I've been watching your flat all day and I saw you leave around lunchtime. I must have missed you returning."

"Why did you want to rob me?"

"I didn't choose you specifically. This is a fairly wealthy area, and your flat's easy to break into, being on the ground floor with that window with the broken catch. You ought to get it fixed, you know. Someone may break in, someone else, I mean!"

Now that the initial shock was over, I felt like bursting into hysterical laughter. As it was, I could not restrain a giggle as I said:

"It could get really crowded in here, couldn't it? We could have a Burglar Ball!"

"Just giving you some sound advice. He took a step towards me and I instinctively raised the hand containing the shoe. Halting guiltily, he continued:

"I'm sorry! Don't be frightened of me, I won't hurt you! I'm not even going to steal anything now!"

"Very charitable of you!" I replied tartly.

"In fact," he continued glumly, "I'm not going to try this again. I must have been out of my mind. Even though I'm suffering, it's no excuse to make other people's lives a misery. Look, call the police. I'm not going to make any trouble."

"Is this honestly the first place you've ever robbed?"

"Yes. I've never done anything against the law before and won't again. If you don't turn me in to the police, I'll go away and rack my brains for a more honest way of making money."

"You could try working, other people find a wage a useful source of income!" I said sarcastically, beginning to feel, in my relief, rather superior. This guy was a wimp!

"I've already got a job! I'm a truck driver!"

"Oh! Then why...."

"Never mind about that! Are you going to ring the coppers?"

"I don't know. Would you tell me why you decided to rob my place?"

"It's none of your business!" He gave me a guarded glance.

For the first time I saw how ill he looked. He was very thin and pale, and his hands twitched. Incredibly, I felt stirrings of pity.

“Do you want to sit down?” I asked, hardly believing my own ears.

He look at me incredulously.

“What?”

“You don’t look too good! You can sit down if you like!”

“Thanks.” He took a seat warily opposite me.

Close up, he was even more pathetic. His eyes were teary and tired, and his skin looked like recycled paper.

“Aren’t the truck drivers on strike?” I asked.

“What’s it to you?”

“Well, is that why you decided to break in, because you’ve run out of funds?”

“You’re very nosy, aren’t you? Still, I have trespassed on your property so I’ll tell you! We truck drivers have been on strike for the past two months. My wife was working but she – well, she’s had to leave because shes not very well. We’ve had to pay out a lot in medical bills, and with me not getting a regular wage, money’s been short. We’ve got a couple of kids too who are still at school! I thought if I could get away with nicking a few jewels from rich people who could always claim on insurance, they wouldn’t lose anything and I’d be able to flog the gems and make some money. End of story.”

He spoke in a clipped tone of voice that forbade pity or sympathy.

“You don’t look brilliant yourself!” I said.

“I’m O.K.!” he replied roughly.

“Would you like a cup of tea?”

“Are you joking or something?”

“No. I’m desperate for a cup and I’ve been brought up to always offer any guests a drink, even unwanted ones!”

“I wouldn’t say no!”

“O.K.” I got to my feet and put the kettle on.

“What are you going to do now?” I asked.

“How do you mean?”

“You’re not going to steal from anybody else are you?”

“No.”

“Good!”

“I don’t know what I’ll do!”

“You could try and get another job!”

He shook his head. “I’d get nothing worth a cent! All I can do is

drive a truck. I'm too old to be employed in a factory, and other jobs pay badly. It'd be fine if we could go back to work, but I don't know how long the union's going to hold out on this strike. It's tough, that's for sure!"

"And your wife – is she very ill?"

His face crumpled and for an awful moment I thought he was going to cry. I put his tea down in front of him, resisting an impulse to touch him on the shoulder.

"You don't have to answer that," I said. Before, I had half believed he was spinning me a false tale, but his expression of grief now belied such a theory.

"I won't call the police either," I continued, desperate to reassure him

"Idiot!" Logic scolded. "The man has broken the law! He deserves to be punished!"

"Well done!" applauded Emotion.

"Thanks!" said the robber. "I appreciate that!"

"What's your name?"

"Jack, Jack Thomas!"

"I'm Wendy Dyer!"

"In any other circumstance, I'd say: "Pleased to meet you, Ms Dyer," but it's not really appropriate here, is it?"

"I suppose not."

We sat in silence a while, drinking our tea. My mind was formulating a preposterous idea which Logic kept repelling and Emotion encouraging. I listened to Emotion.

"Mr Thomas, this sounds odd, but it's a genuine offer. I'd like to lend you some money to tide you over until you go back to work."

He spat out a gulp of tea, as he rose to his feet. It splattered over the table.

"Excuse me! Is there a cloth anywhere?"

"Don't worry about it!"

I motioned him back to sit down and flung him a cloth from the draining board. He mopped up the tea viciously, frowning.

"I may be in a sticky spot," he said, "But one thing I don't need is to be patronised by do-gooders! I'll manage on my own, thanks very much!"

I realised that maybe I was being condescending. Did I really want to lend this stranger money? Logic said no, Emotion yes. And if so, why? Did I fancy myself as some sort of latter day Robin Hood, a sickly sweet Florence Nightingale? God only knew!

“I don’t think I’m playing a power game with you,” I replied slowly. “I don’t really know why I want to help you. I think it may be because if I were in the same situation as you I’d have done exactly the same thing!”

“Now look here, one thing I don’t need is for a kid like you to take the piss out of me! What do you know about money problems? Leave it out!”

“I’m not mocking you! I genuinely think if I loved someone and saw them suffering I’d be tempted to find any way I could of getting money for them. Maybe I wouldn’t have the courage to steal! I’m rather a coward! But you – you won’t go against your union and work anyway, even though you need the cash, and you’ve also put yourself in a risky situation where you could get into a lot of trouble, to help your wife! That’s why I’m offering a loan.”

My own words seemed alien to me. The whole situation had taken on the strange sepia and orange tints of a Surrealist painting and the bizarre twists of a Kafka novelette. I felt totally unlike myself, and yet in a way I had never been more myself. I surrendered my confusion to the situation and awaited his reply.

He gave a wry grin.

“You sound as if you admire me!”

“Maybe I do!”

He looked at me sharply.

“You’re not setting me up?” he asked slowly. “You’re not going to lend me the money then ring the cops and say I’ve stolen it?”

“No. I give you my word!”

“How do I know I can trust you?”

“How do I know I can trust you to repay me?”

“True! This is bloody weird, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is. Don’t worry though, I never do sneaky underhand things! I won’t set you up.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“The way I see it, you haven’t much choice. I guess there’s no-one else you know you can borrow money off!”

“No, there isn’t. My mates are truckies like myself! There’s the wife’s brother, but he and I don’t get on. All the same, I don’t think I can accept your kind offer. Thanks, but no thanks.”

“You’d steal it but you won’t borrow it?”

“Don’t get smart with me!”

“O.K. Just think about it!”

I finally persuaded him to accept a thousand dollars. I gave him a cheque, which he took in a dazed way. Then I showed him to the door.

“There no need to go out the same way you came in, unless you enjoy climbing through windows,” I said. But I phrased it jokingly, not nastily.

“I just don’t know what to say!” he replied. “This is probably the oddest thing that’s ever happened to me!”

“Same here! Well, goodbye. I hope your wife is better soon.”

“So do I. Goodbye, Ms Dyer. God bless you! I’ll send you the money back as soon as I can.”

“O.K.”

The night swallowed him up. I went back into my bedroom, hardly believing what had just happened. Already, it was taking on the quality of a dream. I lay in bed reliving the strange encounter, and did not sleep that night.

A few months later, a letter came through the post addressed to me in a shaky hand. Inside, there was a postal order for a thousand dollars, and a note.

“I am back at work now, and my wife is much better. Thank you more than anything. If you ever need a favour, ring this number. I owe you more than money!

Regards, Jack Thomas.”

I wish he had been my father.