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The Fifth Year

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As the warm, orange sun was pulled to the horizon, Rich stared at the wispy clouds high above. The smell of rotten leftovers from the neighboring dumpster wafted into his cardboard box, making his eyes water slightly. After a moment his shaky hand crept toward the flap to shut out the deceiving clouds, which played at an existence they didn’t have. Just as his fingers grasped the cardboard flap, a piece of white broke from the passing clouds and fluttered out of the heavens. At first Rich just watched with his fingerless glove resting on the flap, his face frozen in the same expression it had worn when he lost his last job years before. As the small piece of cloud impacted the ground he jerked out of his trance and quickly closed the flap. His eyes snapped closed as he rested his stocking-capped head on a stack of newspapers, but his hand would not leave the cardboard opening. Involuntarily his wrist pushed outward, flinging the flap open. One eye came open and focused on the tiny piece of white, his face struggling to rid itself of interest. “This ain’t the time to start chasin’ clouds,” he muttered to himself. But his eye didn’t close.

Cautiously, he slithered out of his box with the sagging top and faded lettering. Warily eyeing the item that hadn’t moved in the last ten minutes, he moved closer. “You ain’t even a little cloud,” he whispered, as his expression returned to the glossed-over eyes and lifeless lips.

He picked up the small scrap of paper and examined it, fingering the worn edges and squinting at the black lettering. It was a newspaper, or at least a small corner of one, which must have blown out of the dumpster. It carried no identification except the date, which caught his eye. It was five years in the future.
Slumped again in his box, he pondered the scrap. Word by word, he reviewed what it said. It had room only for the date, some column headings, and a column of letters followed by numbers. The cryptic symbols were meaningless to Rich. "Gibberish. This little cloud is gibberish. . . . I knew it would be a liar."

An indifferent chuckle ran out of his cracked lips at his joke, but still they did not crack in a smile. Finally, he deposited the scrap into his pocket and went to look for some food. Perhaps he would get lucky at the supermarket tonight and they would be throwing out unsold produce again.

There was a freezing gust of wind that knifed through his ragged clothes as he stepped out of the alleyway. Dead leaves rocketed by, and he tucked his head down low into the collar of his thin shirt and focused his eyes on the ground in front of him.

"Blasted wind. You don’t do good for nobody, and I would know ‘cause nobody’s me. And I say get off me!"

He continued muttering as he trudged block by block towards the supermarket and the brown dumpster that was behind it, unaware of the children snatched out of his way and the young girls who crossed the street to avoid him. Passing a dark apartment building, he saw the glow of a TV. He glanced in as he passed, his whiskered face mirrored lightly in the large window. Two steps later he stopped, his mind fumbling at what he had just seen. The evening news had shown stock symbols, which looked strangely familiar.

Carefully, he pulled the scrap of paper from his shirt pocket and realized that the gibberish on his paper was really a list of stock quotes. His eyebrows furrowed and he turned the paper over looking for more clues about its origin, or about its contents—he wasn’t exactly sure what all the numbers were for and not one of them had a dollar sign. He resumed his march towards his dinner.

He did not sleep as he lay in his box that night. Rich stared at the wilting cardboard above him and thought of the paper. It was too dark to read it again, but he had already read it a hundred times. Now the chill of night was seeping into his cardboard home, and he was muttering again.

"God don’t float papers to people. He just watches folks to see if they’re good folk or bad folk, mostly. The devil might drop lying papers though; I think he’s done whatever he wants to make people be bad. I’m just me. The devil don’t own me and God don’t need me. So why’s this trash making me bothered?"

It was well into the night before he had decided what to do. Everyone knew that rich guys, like the ones who worked in the tall building by his dumpster, used stocks to make money. He had overheard them on their cell phones talking about their stocks as they came out of the buildings in their shiny shoes that clicked against the pavement, their suit coats buttoned up. They pretended he wasn’t there, but he would watch them out of the corner of his eye, wondering what those shoes felt like to walk in and where one
could buy a fancy suit coat like that. They liked to talk about how stocks made them rich, and after they got rich they got drunk, which made them talk about their stocks even more. Rich didn’t know what the little numbers and letters on the paper meant, but he knew he needed to find out.

The next morning, Rich stood on the uneven sidewalk in front of the library, his hair and beard a mess. He had not been to the library for a long time, because just as he knew to avoid the rich stock guys, he knew to avoid the book readers and the college students in the library. The librarian came to unlock the clear glass doors, but hesitated when she saw him. She looked uncomfortable, and her nose twitched as if she smelled something rotten. He watched as she glanced down to his feet, her face falling to see his shoes still intact. Her expression grew unreadable as she walked up and turned the locking mechanism. It clicked open.

Rich waited until she had walked back behind the big oak desk before entering. He walked straight to the periodicals and began looking through investment newspapers. The librarian watched him, but after a moment went into the back room to escape her discomfort.

The manager of the supermarket was staring at him uneasily. Rich removed his stocking hat and tried to tug his stringy dark hair behind his ears with his fingernails, which had dirt caked under them. The reading he had done at the library had been difficult, but it hadn’t taken him long to see the possibilities. His worn pair of Levi’s displayed numerous holes, with more in formation, but he had to come here anyway—he had to at least try.

He offered his hand to the store manager, his eyes never wavering. “I’m lookin’ for work, sir. I’m real good at collapsing boxes and could have a whole truckload o’ boxes nice and small for ya in no time.” The manager just stared, half unbelieving of the whole situation, and half unable to pay attention because of the smell of the man. The whole speech had sounded very disjointed, as if someone else had written it. The silence became uncomfortable.

“I can work real fast and do other stuff—anything really,” Rich added hurriedly, his eyes wandering a little towards the shiny tile floor. The manager looked to the ceiling, breathing deeply, his expression one of tortured compassion, but his words came as a surprise.

“You can sweep the back dock, outside, and we’ll see from there.”

The light in Rich’s eyes became a fire.

Four years, 362 days later, Rich sat behind the big metal desk in the office at the back of the supermarket. Sales were growing, and as a new manager, that would mean another bonus. He leaned back in his chair. The first day of his fifth year was only four days away, but he had worked an extra ten hours
last week, on top of his normal sixty, and it looked as if he would have all 
that he needed to capitalize on his opportunity. He had been sending three 
out of four of his paychecks to his stockbroker, making conservative trades in 
anticipation of his one big bet. Last week he had called his broker to deliver 
carefully crafted comments about changing his strategy and taking on a little 
more risk, and tomorrow he would call her again, this time to get her opinion 
on a few obscure stocks that had "just happened to catch his eye." He paused 
reflectively. Years ago he had decided that God offered him the chance of a 
lifetime by dropping a little paper in front of him, and he had picked it up. 
Now he was doing the best he could with his gift, and it was time to give 
opportunities to others. He went back to work, leaning over the cold desk, 
knowing that his overtime would be donated to the shelter across town. A life 
of plenty was before him, and he would not die a miser.

That evening in his small studio apartment near the store, Rich leaned 
back on the sagging mattress and closed his eyes. As he often did, he let his 
thoughts go, and for a moment he was walking on the beach, just at sunset, 
towards a table with white linen where a beautiful woman waited there for 
him. The next moment he was searching in a large bookcase for a certain 
 novel, in a house he owned, and just as he found his query and pulled it out, 
the same woman came in with ice-filled glasses and a pitcher of lemonade.

Sometimes as he dreamed of the future there were kids, and every once in 
a while a dog or a close friend, but always she was there. They would laugh 
together or cry together, but they were always together. Some things money 
couldn't buy, and now that his finances were about to be taken care of for 
good, those were the things that consumed him.

Each time he had returned to the library, the woman was there, for she 
was the librarian. She had been frightened, maybe even disgusted, that first 
day as she unlocked the door, but he had changed. Several times he had 
asked for her help, watching her carefully as she whispered to herself and 
touched each book, until she found the one she sought. He had planned the 
second day of his fifth year almost as closely as he had the first. Casually, as 
she helped him find a book, he would offer to buy her dinner. He would go 
slowly, carefully, just as he had with his finances, for she was yet another gift 
from God, and by now Rich knew what to do with an opportunity from God.

The next morning was bright and busy. There were only three days left 
until his fifth year, but he was determined to not slack off at the end. He 
munched on a single piece of toast as he left his small apartment, being careful 
to not get any raspberry jam on his white shirt or his new tie. The warmth of 
the morning sun on his close-cropped haircut seemed to give him a little 
longer stride on the short walk to the store. He had just about reached the 
back of the store when he felt eyes watching him from the side. Anxiously, 
he peered behind the store, towards the big loading dock he had swept so 
diligently so long ago...
There was movement, and finally his eyes locked on the homeless man. Dirty and ragged, the gray-haired man cowered behind the dumpster, a discarded stale donut in each hand. Immediately, Rich’s mind called up memories of the damp smell of cardboard in the middle of the night, the excitement of an overlooked head of lettuce still fit for consumption, and the stink of despair that follows hard times. For a moment, he was the old man, hoping for a treasure in other people’s garbage. Again he experienced the looks on the faces of scared children, taunting teenagers, and distrusting parents. He felt the shame of constant filth and the sting of worthlessness. These stimulants mixed within him, creating a powerful compound of gratitude and compassion.

He turned his path towards the old man. The man was unsure, but Rich did not speak until he reached the dumpster.

“You know,” he began, “this loading dock needs to be swept, but my stockers are all busy. Would you be willing to work for me today?”

Shock played into the man’s stony expression. A moment later he was stammering his acceptance, “Yessir, I could do that. I swept things before and got the dirt ‘n stuff offa there . . .”

As the old man carefully began sweeping, Rich saw something in his eyes. There was a bright spot, like a piece of a cloud lying on dark pavement.

Rich turned and headed around the corner, the excitement of the end of his fourth year building inside him. He stepped around the corner just as a black car shot down the alleyway. To Rich, the screeching tires did not mask the sound of his legs being crushed by the bumper or the tremendous thud as his head hit the asphalt and divided.

The first day of Rich’s fifth year was a beautiful day. The stock market soared, and most supermarkets saw record sales. As Rich was laid to rest, the homeless man back on the loading dock swept carefully, enjoying the tingling sensation of the wind on his newly shaven face. A razor and some soap had been bestowed on him by a co-worker the day before, and today he felt capable of sweeping this dock. At times his thoughts strayed, and he would start mumbling to himself. “That manager-guy was a good fella. I wonder if God sent him. But God don’t just go around sendin’ people to do stuff. He kinda watches us to see what we gonna do. But the Devil didn’t send him to do nothin’ either, not that guy . . . .”

His voice trailed off as he swept a little harder.