

**POCKET CHANGE**

by R. T. Bowersox

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For further information, contact TheatreXP, Inc. at 302-540-6102 or [theatrexpphiladelphia@gmail.com](mailto:theatrexpphiladelphia@gmail.com)

For Paul,  
For the continual inspiration of, and belief in,  
his older brother

# PROLOGUE

*The newspaper hit the table hard enough to rattle the silverware and bounce an eggroll off the hexagonal, pale-green plate in front of him. Another two inches to the right and it would have hit the matching saucer and flipped the coffee cup into the big man's lap.*

*"What the fuck?" he said, more displeasure than question. His eyes hardened as they rose to fall on the dark thin man standing in front of him, his arms crossed on his two-thousand-dollar double-breasted pinstripe.*

*"Look at the picture," the thin man said.*

*"What picture?"*

*"The only fuckin' picture on the page." The thin man reached down and vigorously tapped the paper with his forefinger. "That fuckin' picture."*

*His lack of discretion or decorum drew unwanted attention from nearby diners. The big man looked around the pagoda at the eyes he could feel drilling him.*

*"Mind your business," he said to all of them and none of them at once. His size, cutting tone, and sharp stare were enough to turn their heads away. He pulled his napkin from his lap, wiped his mouth, and set it next to the green plate. He lifted the paper from the table, looked it over.*

*"Yeah, so? Bunch of people standing in a line."*

*"Look real close," the thin man said.*

*The big man pulled the paper closer, squinted at the picture.*

*"See anybody you know?"*

*After a moment, the big man let a soft whistle escape through his teeth. "Motherfucker," he said, looking up at the thin man. "That's her, isn't it?"*

*"That...is her" He threw his chin at the paper. "Look again."*

*The big man took a longer look this time, interested now. He then dropped the paper into his lap, and looked up at the thin man.*

*“Kid’s with her.”*

*“You bet your ass she is. Know where that is?” the thin man said.*

*“Yeah. The little storefront food place off of Broad, near that big plaza. Greek guy runs it.”*

*“Then what are you waitin’ for?” the thin man said.*

*“Gonna finish my lunch.”*

*“No. You aren’t. I ain’t payin’ you to eat. That guy might know where she is.”*

*The big man sniffed hard, sucked his teeth, exhaled a sigh, then shook his head and stood.*

*“You’re paying for this,” he said, waving his hand at the table of food in front of him.*

*“Fuck it,” the thin man said. “What are they gonna do? Call a cop?”*

*“Wasn’t you ordered it,” the big man said. He looked around for a waiter, then shrugged. He pulled a roll of bills from his pocket and peeled off a fifty-dollar bill and tossed it on the table.*

*“Let’s go,” the thin man said, his tone like that of a man calling his dog.*

*“Yeah, yeah,” the big man said under his breath as he followed the thin man out of the pagoda.*

# 1

“What is it with your Reubens?” Charlie Taunton said.

He was leaning back in his chair, the last bite of his sandwich in hand, a drop of Russian dressing on his lower lip. He was calling out to Leo Stein, who was slicing tomatoes behind the counter of his deli, his chef whites covered in the colors of that day’s menu.

“What about ‘em?” Leo said.

“They never taste like the first one I ever had here,” Taunton said. “Like you forget to put something in it every day just to see if I’d notice.”

“It’s a memory thing,” Leo said. “Like your first real love, know what I mean? Nobody will ever be as good as her.”

Taunton turned to us. “Not that I would know,” he said, smiling. “I married her.”

Taunton, Jay Fitch, and I were at the back table of Leo Stein’s, stretching a late lunch as far as we could into the afternoon. It was a Tuesday – a typically slow news day – so we weren’t particularly pressed by a deadline or short space. The story I’d been tracking on a shadowy religious cult rumored to have set up shop on Petty Island in the middle of the Delaware was taking its time developing, and wasn’t due until Friday anyway. Fitch had filed his photo assignments before we left the *Examiner* building, so we were on journalistic free time.

And besides, we were with Charlie Taunton, the city editor. Kind of like having the blessing of the Pope.

“Margie was your first?” Fitch said.

“First and only. High school sweethearts and all that sappy stuff.”

“A vanishing breed,” I said.

I sat forward with the mock enthusiasm of a rookie reporter. “Hey. You should let me do a story on you two. ‘Tough as nails newsman claws his way to the top of the vicious newspaper game with the wise and loving support of his high school sweetheart’. We can run it in next spring’s bridal supplement.”

“Not a chance, Nick,” Taunton said. “Margie’d kill both of us.”

He wiped the dressing from his chin with his paper napkin. “And I’d make sure she’d kill you first. That way, maybe she’d get it out of her system, and I could sweet-talk her into letting me continue serving her in fealty.”

He tossed the napkin on his empty plate. “And on that note,” he said, sliding his chair back, “it’s time I get back to my perch at the top of this vicious walk of life and crack the whip on the likes of you two.”

He stood. “Who’s got this?” he said, waving a hand at the table.

Fitch and I looked at one another. Fitch shrugged first.

“I guess I do,” I said. “But I’ll be expensing it as a working lunch, just so you know.”

Taunton laughed as he and Fitch headed for the door. “Of course you will,” he said over his shoulder.

I went to the counter, and dropped a couple of twenties in front of Leo.

“Put whatever’s left in your kids’ college fund,” I said.

“They both want to go in the Navy,” he said. “You want a couple lottery tickets instead?”

“How much is it worth?” I said. I never bothered with such things as a rule, but if the win were big enough, I wasn’t above bending the rules a little. Not that I didn’t bend most rules with regularity...as a rule.

I sniffed a quiet laugh at my Escher-like thinking as Leo walked to the end of the counter where he kept his cash register and lottery machine side by side. He squinted at the digital readout.

“Eh...too bad,” he said. “Back down to forty million. It was four hundred twenty-five mil’ last weekend, but somebody musta won it.”

“Lucky somebody,” I said. “You keep it, then, my friend. Slide me a cup of coffee sometime.” We waved at each other and I pushed the door open to the street.

Fitch and Taunton were waiting for me at the curb. Fitch had lit a cigarette and hung it on his lip, his back against a tree. He was playing with the settings on a camera. I don’t remember him ever being without a camera – in his hand, around his neck, in one or more pockets of the khaki shooter’s jacket he lived in. The inside joke around *The Examiner* is that he emerged from the womb holding a light meter. He’s never denied it.

Taunton was nearby, checking his phone for messages. I joined them and we headed up Market Street

toward City Hall. It was cool for September, the kind of cool that made the air crystal clear and crisp in your nose. My light suede jacket was just enough. We didn’t get many of those days in Philadelphia, but we treasured them when they showed up.

“Leo just told me somebody won the big KeyBall on Saturday,” I said. “Four hundred million and change.”

“Wasn’t me,” Fitch said.

“That why you didn’t buy lunch?” I said.

Fitch just laughed his rattly laugh.

“That kinda money is more trouble than blessing,” Taunton said. “Most times, people win that kind ‘a money, their lives go to shit. Ran a story on that a few years back. Phil Hardings wrote it, if I remember correctly. Which I do.”

I didn’t doubt it. Taunton had been a newsman’s newsman for nearly forty years. Copy boy, stringer, beat reporter, columnist, layout man, editor – you name it, he’d done it. He could never give blood, because all they’d get was ink. All of which means he never forgot a story, a headline, or a byline, especially if he had a hand in it. He was the kind of resource every reporter hoped he’d get as an editor, because he could save you hours of research time. Give him the subject, and he could tell you where to look in the stacks for the article, more often than not by month, year, and author.

“Remember the headline?” I said.

“Sure,” he said. “‘Sliding From Heaven to Hell: Big Wins and Bigger Losses’.”

“You write that?”

“Course I did,” he said. “Hardings hated it. Thought it cheapened his piece.” He gave it a beat, then said, “As if that would be possible.”

We all laughed as we turned left onto Penn Square, walking around City Hall to Broad Street. The *Examiner* building sat a block down on the right, a wide plaza of paver stones, tree planters, benches, and a fountain in front of it. Traffic was light, which allowed us to cross Broad without taking our lives in our hands.

As we started to cross the plaza, the wide brass and glass doors of the *Examiner* building suddenly flew open. Two security guards emerged, one on each side of a tall woman with long, dark hair, wearing a long wool overcoat with a fur collar. She had a purse slung over her shoulder on a long strap. The guard on her right had her arm firmly in his hand. On her left, she held the hand of a small child – a girl I guessed was about five or six years old. The woman was screaming.

“Let go of me! Get your fucking hands off of me!”

She twisted and yanked her arm from the one guard, and turned to face both of them.

“You keep your hands off me, you hear?! You sons of bitches!”

Fitch, Taunton, and I all froze in our tracks. We were about fifteen, twenty feet behind her. It was one of those moments where time seems to slow down. You don’t necessarily want to look, but you’re riveted by what’s happening in front of you.

Fitch turned to me.

“What the hell is this?”

I shook my head, then turned to Taunton.

“You know her?” I said.

“No.”

The woman was crying now, digging into her purse. The child was crying too, looking up as she clung to the woman’s coat. Whimpered cries of “Mommy” could be heard from where we stood.

“You have no idea what you’ve done,” the woman said.

She pulled something from her purse. I couldn't see what it was at first, but then she threw it in the direction of the guards. Or maybe it was the building she was trying to hit.

"You bastards! You killed me, you fucking bastards!"

When it hit the building, the object fluttered open. It was a rolled-up newspaper. It fell open when it hit, and the wind in the plaza caught the pages and pulled them up into itself, blowing them across the front of the building.

The woman picked up the little girl, turned, and started running. I don't think she could see all that clearly through her tears, because she ran directly at me. I stutter stepped to try to get out of the way, but she barreled right into me. The force of the collision knocked the little girl from her arms. She fell flat on her back next to us and immediately started crying.

"Oh, my God," the woman said. "I'm so sorry."

She bent to pick up the girl, but I had already dropped to my knees beside her. I helped the child up and brushed off her coat.

"You all right, honey?" I said, as the woman knelt beside me. "Your mommy's right here." I turned to the woman. "She's okay. Just scared a bit. How about you? You okay?"

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I just...I'm fine, yes. You're a kind man. Thank you."

"Do you want me to—" I said, but she stood quickly and picked up the girl.

"I need to go. But thank you again. Thank you."

She strode quickly toward the street, but stopped at the curb. She looked one way, then the other, as though not sure which direction she wanted to go. After a moment, she turned and moved up Broad at a half run, toward City Hall.

As I was about to turn back to Fitch and Taunton, a large, black Escalade with black tinted windows roared up Broad, screeching to a stop in front of the woman. Before she had a chance to react, the back door flew open and someone inside reached out and grabbed at the little girl. From where I stood, I couldn't see who was in the car, but it was obvious they were trying to take the girl from the woman.

Fitch and I immediately turned and moved toward the street. The woman was screaming – "No! You can't have her!"

No!”. The child’s shrieks added to the cacophony of confusion unfolding in front of us.

Suddenly, a loud shot echoed across the plaza. I could see the muzzle flare from just inside the car door. The woman jerked, her arms pulling upward as if on a marionette’s strings. A second shot and she fell directly backward, her head bouncing off the paver stones as she landed.

The little girl kicked and screamed, squirming free from the hands trying to hold her. She fell to the ground, then began crawling to the woman. Her terrified cries of “Mommy! Mommy!” were no longer whimpered.

The door on the Escalade swung shut and the big SUV jerked forward, burning rubber as it sped up Broad away from us. Fitch ran to the street, camera held high and aimed in its general direction, the motor drive whirring.

Taunton and I dropped to the woman’s side. The little girl was draped across her mother, crying. When Taunton pulled the girl off the woman, I could see blood pumping from two

wounds to her chest. She was gasping for breath, her eyes searching the sky, as if trying to understand what had just happened. I leaned over her.

“You’ll be okay,” I said. “Hang in there. They’re calling an ambulance now,” referring to the two guards, one of whom was on his phone.

Her eyes found mine, looking hard at me, then focusing. She seemed to smile, as if in recognition. “You...,” she said, before coughing on the blood welling up in her throat. One of her hands came to my coat, grabbing the lapels. I didn’t notice the other sliding into her coat pocket.

“You...” she whispered between gasps for air, “...You...take care...of my girl....Don’t let him get...”.

Her free hand had come from her coat pocket. I felt it find my jacket, pulling on the side pocket. It felt like she was trying to hang on and pull me closer.

“Take...it’s her...”

“Yes,” I said. “Don’t worry. We’ll take care of her. You just hang in there.”

I lifted the woman slightly and laid her across one leg, my arm behind her shoulders. I thought it might help her breathe. But the color in her face was disappearing, a cold grey

replacing it. I kept talking to her...lying to her, telling her she would be all right. I didn't hear the wail of the ambulance arriving, or the sound of the paramedics' boots running toward us, dragging their gurney. But then they were there, pushing me aside, taking control. I remember moving aside, sitting and watching them work, trying to staunch the flow of blood pouring from the woman's chest and pooling around her on the pavers in front of me.

Reality ceases to exist in moments like that. The shock, the horror, suspend it. Your senses lock down. Time and space coalesce. There is only that moment, but in a surreal way, there is every moment. You exist there, but you're also somewhere else, outside of it. For me, I was on another street, another time.

Images of Carlito appeared in my mind. It was involuntary...I didn't call for them. They just flashed on, like slides projected on a screen. He was the headstrong young writer I'd sent into a drug lord's headquarters for a story two years before, a lapse in professional judgement I will carry with me to my grave. Suddenly it was Carlito lying in front of me in a lake of blood, shot dead by the man I was trying to build a story on. I looked away from the scene in front of me, and shook my head in an attempt to force the guilty memory from my consciousness, and hoping what I was looking at now would not become another nightmare like Carlito that would wake me in the middle of the night. But I knew it would. They always do.

The next thing I remember was Fitch touching my shoulder, asking if I were okay, and trying to help me stand. The paramedics had the woman on the gurney and were rushing her toward the ambulance. For some reason I smiled at Fitch and nodded, not even thinking that if there were one thing that had no place in this in any way, it was a smile.

A uniform cop took the crying child from Taunton and jogged to the back of the ambulance, climbing in behind the paramedics and the woman. Another uniform closed the doors, and smacked the side of the red and white bus, and it took off, the muted wail of the child's screams mingling with the ramp-up of the siren.

"Jesus Christ," Taunton said to no one in particular as he watched the ambulance disappear up Broad.

“Jesus had nothing to do with this,” I said.