

HUMAN INTEREST / CRIME — A homeless shelter falls on hard times with little hope for needed cash. Then the money shows up. Many of these characters also appear in my mystery novel, *A Brother's Cold Case*.

The Gift

by Dennis Herrick



WILLIE figured it was his lucky summer day. He chewed the last of a hamburger someone had bought for him. And the owner of an Albuquerque souvenir shop had given him a T-shirt, size small, saying ECCENTRIC RICH GUY.

Willie climbed the three steps to the door of Mother Potter's homeless shelter where he often ate, slept and volunteered janitorial work. Beside the door she had placed a plaque quoting Mark 14:7, which read: *For ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will, ye may do them good.*

Good idea, he thought. He rang the doorbell.

Mother Potter filled the doorway with her ample girth and greeted him. "Well, you're lookin' good as gold in that new shirt."

"If I had any gold, I'd give it you."

"For those nice words, you come in. I confess I kept a couple pieces of pie from last night that I'll share with you, Mr. Willie."

Off the shelter's sleeping and eating area, Mother Potter lived in a one-bedroom apartment decorated in thrift-shop chic. She led him to a little round table and two chairs at one end of her

small kitchen, and she motioned to Willie to sit. She gave him one slice of cherry pie and settled herself into the other chair with the second slice.

A kitchen table. Willie hadn't eaten at a kitchen table in years. When was the last time? He couldn't remember. He picked up his fork and marveled. A hamburger without even asking, a new T-shirt, and now pie. Yes, a very lucky day.

"You'll never get it eaten if you keep takin' little bites like that." Mother Potter had already eaten half of her pie while Willie forked off nibbles.

"I'm in no hurry." He thought of his parents' kitchen table. How had he happened to end up living like this? It just happened, that's all. Perhaps he could have thrived in a different era, maybe even in a different society. But this world was too much for him. He wasn't sure why.

When the last nibble was gone, she carried the dishes to the sink and called out to him. "Are you comin' for prayers and dinner tonight?"

"I guess I could."

"Better come while you can." She grimaced. "I don't know if I'll have enough money to keep the doors open next week." He heard her voice crack as she turned her back to him. All he could see was her back, but he thought it looked as if she were wiping tears out of her eyes.

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That night, Johnny J. Johns sneered at the back of a client exiting the front door of Johnny's Payday Loans. Starting this business was the smartest thing he'd ever done. He charged fees equaling an annual percentage rate of about seven hundred percent, but the cost could go higher if the loan kept getting rolled over. His record was two thousand dollars collected on some schmuck's loan of two hundred fifty dollars. Sweet.

He snickered and added the latest rolled-over interest payment to the drawer. He used the

money there to cash checks, keeping one of every four dollars for that service.

He looked up when the door opened again, and he knew he had another live one. The hunched-over skinny guy wore a floppy hat two sizes too big for him, dark glasses and clothes that were baggy and soiled. The man better have a pay stub with him, Johnny thought. He didn't make loans to people unless he could garnishee their wages.

The man paused in front of the counter. "Do you cash pay checks?"

Well, now, this might work out after all, Johnny thought. "Sure. How much?"

"Five hundred."

"No problem." Johnny opened his cash drawer, pleased about the hundred-and-a-quarter he was about to turn for a minute of work. Pay checks. Very safe indeed.

Johnny looked up. "You got ID?"

"I've got a gun." The man announced it matter-of-factly. He showed a bulge in his pants pocket where he now had his right hand buried.

Johnny's eyes widened. He stared at the pocket.

"Give it all to me. Put it in this box."

Johnny's heart pounded. He thought of the convenience store clerk who had been shot to death next door by two gang members stealing cigarettes. Johnny stuffed a pile of currency inside the robber's box. It made him feel sick. A couple thousand dollars.

When the robber pulled his right hand out of the pocket and snatched the box, Johnny realized he'd been had. The pocket bulge had disappeared.

"You don't have a gun!"

The man ran for the door, and Johnny lunged after him. He would have caught him except he misjudged his leap over the counter. He twisted his ankle as he landed, sprawling in a heap

and spouting curses like a volcano erupts fire. He limped to the door and watched the robber flee across the parking lot and into the darkness with his money.

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Detective LeBron Jackson drove his unmarked car into the parking lot in front of Johnny's Payday Loans and parked between two squad cars. The business pulsed light into the parking lot each time the Johnny's Payday Loans sign flashed.

Some officers were better known by nicknames. The stocky officer waiting for Jackson beside one squad car was called Stony, although Jackson couldn't remember why and wasn't sure if he wanted to.

Stony doffed his hat and extended it upside-down toward Jackson.

"Hi, Stony." Jackson gestured to the upturned hat. "What's this all about?"

"Some of the patrol officers are taking up a collection."

"Okay, I'll bite. What's the collection for?"

"As soon as some detective catches the perp knocking down these payday loan hemorrhoids, we thought we'd pitch in and buy a public service medal for him. For the robber, I mean."

"I'll pass." Jackson took off his glasses and cleaned them by rubbing the lenses on his tie. "What's the story inside?"

Stony shrugged and put his hat back on, pulling the visor low over his eyes the way hotshot cops had done since Joseph Wambaugh's first police novels. "Robbing a payday office is like a pickpocket nicking a pirate."

Jackson couldn't argue with that.

"Anyway, we had a car here within a minute, and we're searching ten blocks in every

direction.”

“The owner still inside?”

Stony nodded. “What is this, the seventh or eighth one of these this year?”

“Seventh. But radio said there was no gun this time. Maybe a copycat.”

Jackson walked toward the front door with its neon words in red across every window. He thought of all the people in poverty who owed money here as he swung open the door.

Johnny J. Johns glared at Jackson as he entered. “You a cop?”

“I’m Detective LeBron Jackson. I presume you’re the owner.”

“Yeah. Wow, you sure did good detective work on that one.”

“I can see you’re upset, Mr. Johns.”

“You bet I’m upset. Payday offices keep gettin’ robbed, and you cops don’t do nothin’. Now I been robbed, too.”

Jackson leaned over the counter and looked at the empty cash drawer, which was still pulled open. “I’ve been told you estimate ten thousand dollars was taken.”

“Yeah. About that, I figure.”

Jackson looked Johns in the eye. “I find it hard to believe that ten thousand dollars in bills could even come close to fitting into this small drawer.”

Johns bit his lip and looked at the drawer. “Might have been a bit less than that. I don’t know.” He went on the offensive. “So what took you cops so long to get here?”

“There was a police car here in less than a minute.”

“Yeah? Well, it seemed a lot longer than that to me.”

“Do you think you’d recognize the robber if we showed you some photos?”

“Doubt it. He had dark glasses and a hat on. But in a lineup, no question. I’d recognize that skinny dude anywhere.”

* * *

Detective Milly Concord entered Jackson’s office the next morning, a worried look on her face. “We need to be careful about this.”

Jackson looked up from behind his desk. He slipped his thick glasses down his nose and peered over the top of them at her. It had the effect of making him look as if he were studying her more closely, but actually he couldn’t see her as well. It was a habit he’d developed before his eyesight worsened.

“What’s the problem?”

“For that Johnny’s Payday holdup, we were trying to think of skinny guys with records, and someone suggested the homeless guy, Willie. We can’t see a face in the surveillance video, so we don’t have much reason to pick him up other than his body type.”

“He’s got a couple of marks on a rap sheet. Did you find him?”

“He was easy to spot. He was wearing one of those red County Line Restaurant shirts saying EAT HERE. DIET AT HOME. I’m making him put a different shirt on for the lineup. It’s distracting.”

Jackson chuckled. “Mr. Johns said our usual photo arrays wouldn’t do any good, but he felt sure he could pick the guy out on general appearance in a physical lineup. An ID on that basis wouldn’t do us any good in court, but it might be enough to cause a suspect to crack. So, we’re going to have five other men standing there with Willie. I invited a few other characters we’ve dealt with in the past.”

Concord picked up a photo printed from the surveillance video at Johnny’s Payday Loans.

“I must admit, even though you can’t see a face in the surveillance photo, it sure does look like our Willie. Not many skinny old guys like him.”

Jackson shrugged and gestured for her to accompany him. “Let’s go. Time for the old-fashioned lineup. We can pretend it’s the nineteen-seventies again.” He laughed.

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In his office later, Jackson frowned at Milly Concord. “I can’t believe that idiot Johns didn’t pick Willie in the lineup. I have a hunch about Willie. He denies everything, of course. And any case against him just became a lot harder with a lineup rejection. But if he’s the one who did Johnny’s, his standard of living hasn’t changed. He hasn’t even rented a motel room.”

“Do we know where he was last night?”

“Mother Potter says Willie sometimes stays at her shelter, but last night he slept on the streets. Since he’s homeless, a judge is going to want more than that for us to say he was out knocking over payday loan offices last night. We’ll keep better track of him now, of course.”

“Whether he robbed Johnny’s or not, he doesn’t look like the holdup man in the previous robberies. The ones done with a gun.”

Jackson nodded. “You’re right. I’ll check out Willie when I have the time. But the perp with a gun is the one we need to prioritize.”

“Agreed.”

After Concord left, Jackson sat at his desk imagining himself on the witness stand. He visualized Willie’s public defender approaching him with a smirk and asking, “If this penniless, homeless man is the robber, detective, where’s all the money?”

* * *

Jackson went to the nearby casino to check for any recent, skinny big-spenders. The

casino's security chief handed Willie's photo back to Detective Jackson. "Nah, I've never seen this guy. He looks like a bum."

"He's a homeless guy, all right," Jackson conceded. "But he might have come into some money recently. This casino is the closest one to town. Let me know if you see him."

* * *

Mother Potter shook a finger in Jackson's face as she scolded him. "Don't you say nothin' like that about our Willie. He's a nice man. He helps me clean up 'round here."

"I'm not accusing him." Jackson blinked when her finger stabbed too close to his nose. "I'm just asking if he seems to have money all of a sudden."

Mother Potter scoffed. "Nobody's got any money here. Even I was broke and close to closin' until we got an anonymous gift for the shelter the other day."

Jackson cocked his head. "What kind of anonymous gift?"

"I went out for the mail. Bills. Nothing but bills, and I didn't have the money to pay them."

Jackson waited for her to continue.

"There was a box right there by the door. Looked like someone's trash. Well, sir, I picked it up and guess what. It was stuffed with cash. I had cried out for money to save the shelter, and nobody but Jesus heard me. So I bought some more food for the folks here and even paid some of those bills. Praise the Lord. He works in mysterious ways don't He!"

* * *

Johnny J. Johns scowled as he waited for Jackson to finish. "I told you who done it," Johns said. "I even picked him out in the lineup. How come you ain't solved this yet?"

"You fingered a police officer who was just filling out the lineup for us." Jackson was out of patience. "An officer who was at a traffic accident on the other side of town when you were

robbed.”

“He’s the guy, I tell ya.”

Jackson dismissed Johns with a wave of his hand. He walked to the door of Johnny’s Payday Loans, then stopped and turned back toward Johnny.

“I talked with your insurance adjuster.” Jackson smiled. “He agrees with me that there’s no way you had ten thousand dollars in that cash drawer, and your deductible doesn’t cover what was in it.”

Jackson pushed the door open, pleased to hear the sputtering noises Johns made.

* * *

It was five days later when Detective Jackson found Willie sitting on a park’s stone wall wearing a T-shirt saying I’M YOUR REAL FATHER. Jackson sat beside Willie, took off his glasses, and began cleaning them with his tie as usual.

“We caught the payday loan robber. The guy who did the armed robberies anyway. I thought you might like to know.”

“Congratulations, my man.”

“He’s a nasty guy. We found everything for a quick conviction. But I’ve got a problem. We still haven’t solved the last robbery done by a guy pretending to have a gun. The armed robber we arrested has a solid alibi for that one.”

Willie said nothing.

“We also learned that Mother Potter received an anonymous donation of about two thousand dollars in cash the day after Johnny’s Payday Loans was robbed. Too bad for us that she’d already deposited the money. And too bad the trash man took away the box the money arrived in.”

Jackson stood up and moved to the sidewalk. He put his glasses back on. He looked at Willie. “Did you give her that money?”

“Where would I get money to give her?”

“Don’t answer my question with another question.” Jackson paused and softened his voice. “I think you have a good heart, Willie, but it can get you in a lot of trouble.”

Willie sat on the wall, staring at the detective.

“This is your lucky day. But remember this. We don’t always catch a robber the first time, but we will if he ever tries it again because we’re watching him. Robbery is a serious crime. You hear me, Willie?”

“Yes, sir.”

Jackson sighed and pulled a twenty-dollar bill out of his wallet. “Here’s a donation for Mother Potter’s shelter. You give it to her, okay?”

Jackson knew Willie would.

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From the author:

I hope you enjoyed this story. If you have any questions or comments about it, you are welcome to contact me by going to my author’s website at dennisherrick.com, where you will find my current email address, bio, and other writing projects.

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SHORT STORIES (online, 99 cents)

- [The Woman with a Rain Pot](#) (19 pages, this story is dedicated to the combat veterans of the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.) An Iraq veteran who sacrificed a leg for his country returns, becomes a detective, and sets out to find the killer in a year-old cold case.
- [The Bullet that Saved Me](#) (17 pages) Fiction inspired by the author’s experiences as an infantryman in the Vietnam War.
- [The Ancestor](#) (16 pages, inspired by an archaeological dig near Albuquerque that discovered the skeleton of a Pueblo Indian killed by a conquistador back in 1540)
- [Shadows of a Lost Time](#) (3,300 words) An archaeologist on a team excavating a 400-year-old pueblo

in 1934 New Mexico has visitors from the past who make him rethink his career.

- [The Indian Who Defied Coronado](#) (4,000 words) Nonfiction. A Pueblo Indian leader mostly forgotten in history led America's first Indian war—the Tiguex War—against Coronado's expedition to the Southwest in 1540.
- [A Missing Tourist in Mexico](#) (17 pages, inspired by the author's vacation to San Carlos, Mexico and a policeman he met there)
- [It Only Cost Two Teeth](#) (41 pages, too long for most short story contests and magazines — a humorous mystery involving an eccentric newspaper columnist)
- [Missing](#) (10 pages, winner of the 2010 Society of Southwestern Authors Writing Contest and published in *Story Teller* magazine.) A Pueblo elder with cancer chooses to live out his final days in the mountains instead of a hospital.
- [Spirit Journey](#) (23 pages, published in the *Wapsipinicon Almanac* literary magazine—deals with today's illicit trade in Indian artifacts looted from Indian and public lands)
- [Hunting Season](#) (10 pages, winner of the 2004 Tony Hillerman Mystery Writing Contest and published in *Cowboys and Indians* magazine.) Was the Pueblo hunter's death an accident or was it murder?
- [Woman Without a Name](#) (20 pages) The refurbishment of the B61 nuclear bomb draws spies to Los Alamos, New Mexico. When a National Security Agent is killed, a woman NSA agent is sent to find out what happened and to stop nuclear secrets from being stolen.
- [To Steal What Is Sacred](#) (16 pages) An ancient katsina mask sacred to the Puebloan religion is stolen from a museum. An Albuquerque police detective from the Acoma tribe is assigned in this short story mystery to find the person who killed a museum guard in the robbery and took the mask.
- [The Final Farewell](#) (8 pages) A short-short story about a woman raised by her grandparents who keeps a final vigil at her grandfather's hospital bed.

BOOKS (forthcoming)

- ***Esteban: The African Slave Who Explored America*** (in-progress nonfiction) The true adventures of an African slave who crossed the continent in a 1528-1536 odyssey, and who guided the first Spanish exploration north into Arizona and New Mexico in 1539.

BOOKS (published)

- [Winter of the Metal People: The untold story of America's first Indian war](#) (historical novel) This book presents the first account of the Tiguex War of 1540-41 written from the Puebloan point of view. It follows a young Pueblo warrior who reluctantly takes leadership of his people in a time of crisis, overcoming self-doubt to lead Puebloans in successful guerilla warfare against Spanish conquistadors and their Aztec allies.
- [A Brother's Cold Case](#) (mystery novel) When the murder of Andy Cornell's brother is still unsolved after two and a half years, Andy enters the hidden worlds of cartel violence, street people, and Pueblo secrets to find justice. This is available as an e-book or as a paperback.
- [War of the Planet Burners](#) (science-fiction novel) Aliens from an unknown planet have suppressed Earth's electrical ability and killed 99.96 percent of the population. Fires ravage Earth and plant growth accelerates. But humanity wouldn't give up. How can humans without electronics or nuclear capability

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- [*Farewell to the Master*](#) — Reprint of the 1940 sci-fi first-contact novel by Harry Bates with my new introduction and a list of more than 200 first-contact novels, novellas, and short stories. This is available as a paperback or as an e-book.

- [*Guest Bedroom: Collected Stories*](#) (245 pages) Perfect for putting in your guest bedroom, this book is a collection of short stories that your friends can read a little at a time. In the book they'll meet detectives, American Indians, heroes, villains, and ordinary people striving to solve life's problems.

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- [*Media Management in the Age of Giants: Business Dynamics of Journalism*](#) (textbook, second edition) Okay, you're probably not going to be interested in this unless you're a college journalism student. It's a book about the takeover of local media by corporate conglomerates with tips for beginning managers on how to deal with the new face of media.

—Dennis Herrick