

The Thief

"Give me ninety-four cents or your kidney's a gonner." As I heard these words I felt the man behind me jab a gun into my back, just behind my right kidney. At least I assumed it was a gun. Under the circumstances, I was inclined to believe him and to be agreeable. After a polite negotiation (exceedingly polite on my part) the man allowed me to turn around and face him so I could pull my wallet out of my hip pocket without my hand ever going near his gun. I could then see that he did indeed have a gun. A .45 automatic, by the looks of it. Actually, it looked much bigger than a .45, but it probably just looked bigger because it was pointed directly at me.

"If you don't mind my asking," I said as I very gingerly reached for my wallet, "why do you want ninety-four cents?"

"Because I don't want your crummy book" he replied.

"I don't understand. What does my book have to do with it?"

"I'm a literate kinda guy" he answered. "I looked up Amazon's publishing contract on the Internet. Based on the price of your book I figure you probably get about ninety-four cents royalty on every copy they sell."

"So you bought a copy, didn't like it, and now you want your money back?" I asked.

"Hell no!" he almost shouted. "I told you I didn't want your crummy book. I'm more into the classics. *Great Expectations*, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, that sort of stuff. If I'd been stupid enough to buy a copy of *Flaming Floorboards* I'd want the full purchase price back."

"So why do you just want the royalty?" I was totally confused.

"Jeezus!" he said with disgust. "I thought you writers were smart enough to figure things out for yourself. If I wanted a copy of *Flaming Floorboards* I wouldn't buy it from Amazon. I'd download a free copy from one of the pirate shops on the Internet. You'd be out ninety-four cents, and I'd be stuck with a copy of your book. We'd both lose. This way is better. You're out ninety-four cents either way, but at least I come out ahead on the deal."

"So you think I should pay ninety four cents to everyone who doesn't want a copy of my book?" I said in amazement. "I'd go broke!"

"You shoulda written a better book" he countered. "Then there wouldn't be so many people who don't want it. Besides, do you think it's fair that only people who *want* to read your book can steal from you? Get real! And anyway, you can afford it. You're getting royalties. How much did you rake in last year?"

"In royalties?" I asked. "About fifty dollars, I guess."

“Christ! You’re an even worse writer than I thought. I hope you didn’t quit your day job when you went into writing. Just give me ninety-four cents and let’s get this over with.” He raised the gun slightly, as if he thought I might have forgotten it was pointed at me.

“I would have earned more if it hadn’t been for all the pirated downloads” I said defensively. Then I opened my wallet. “Oh, hell” I said as I took out a twenty dollar bill.

The man looked offended. “Give me a break!” he said. “Haven’t you got anything smaller? I can’t make change for that. I just started!”

“That’s all I’ve got” I said. “Just take it and keep the change.”

“I can’t take twenty bucks for that book!” he protested. “Now if you’d written *Gone With The Wind* or something, maybe. But for *Flaming Floorboards*? No way! I’m an honest crook. If you ain’t got nothing smaller, I’m afraid I’m gonna have to plug you.”

“But that’s not fair!” I pleaded. “It’s not my fault you haven’t got change. Can’t you just let me go and we’ll leave it at that?”

“I dunno,” he answered. “Word could get around. Pretty soon every writer would hold out a twenty dollar bill just to get rid of me.”

“Maybe I could open a tab” I suggested. “Take the twenty now, and I’ll keep writing. Every time I publish a new book, you can take the royalty out of the twenty.”

“I guess that would work,” he said as he pocketed the twenty and put away his gun. “But remember. You owe me some books!”

Author’s Note: This story is fantasy, but piracy is real. Every time someone downloads a book, music, or other intellectual property instead of buying a copy, they’re stealing from the artist who created it. They may not be threatening the artist with a gun, but financially the net effect is the same. I just write as a hobby, but others depend upon royalties for their livelihood.

Epilogue: Shortly after I first posted this story, I did an Internet search for references to my book *Flaming Floorboards*. One of the first references listed was a new pirate web site offering free copies of the book. A download counter on the site indicated they had already given away more copies than I have sold during the entire six years my book has been on the market. While I wrote the book as a hobby, I did spend over two years’ worth of evenings and weekends writing, formatting, and publishing the book. It is more than a little frustrating to see pirates giving it away for free. This new pirate web site looked totally legitimate and advertised itself as an “Internet library.” It even had a form for people to contact them if they had any copyright

concerns. (Strangely enough, when I tried to use the form to tell them not to give away my book I received an “error – not transmitted” message in reply.)

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