

The Wallet

“Hey, Buddy. Wanna buy a wallet?”

Roger Johnson ignored the shabby looking man who had walked up to him as he waited for the shuttle bus. Roger hated airports, especially when they were infested with panhandlers. He would have walked away, but the shuttle was due at any moment and he was in a hurry to get home.

“Hey man, I’m talking to you. It’s a very special wallet.”

Roger was afraid the man would get violent if he ignored him any longer, so he decided to answer. “Sorry,” he said. “I’ve already got a wallet. I’m not interested.” He was careful not to turn his head or make eye contact as he said this.

“You haven’t got a wallet like this!” the man said. “I can’t explain it, but this wallet makes money. Put a dollar in it, leave it overnight, and there will be two dollars in it. Leave a five dollar bill, and you’ll get two five dollar bills in the morning.”

“Oh, great,” Roger thought. “The man’s a lunatic.” He gave into the temptation to look at the man as he replied, because he wanted to see what the lunatic looked like. He didn’t look deranged, but he certainly didn’t look prosperous. He was wearing a worn flannel shirt, tattered jeans, and a greasy baseball cap – the kind car part stores give away for free. One of his tennis shoes was split along the side, and the laces were knotted in several places. He looked and smelled like he hadn’t bathed in a long time.

“If that wallet makes money, why are you selling it?”

“It doesn’t work for me anymore. I, I got greedy.” His voice lowered with shame and guilt as he said the last part.

“OK, I’ll give you a buck for it.” Roger didn’t want the wallet, he just wanted the man to go away and stop bothering him.

“I can’t let it go for a buck, man. It makes money!”

“You said it stopped doing that.”

“Just for me. It will work for you. I promise.”

“I’ll give you ten bucks if you’ll promise to go away and leave me alone.”

The man looked crestfallen. He thought for a long time before he spoke. “Tell you what I’ll do. I’ll sell it to you for a thousand dollars. Give me ten bucks now, and come back and pay me the rest if it works for you. If it doesn’t work for you, forget about the rest.”

“OK. Whatever.” He was glad he’d placed a ten dollar bill in his pocket to tip the bus driver, as he didn’t want to pull out his wallet. Always a chance the man would grab it and run. He gave the man the money and the man handed him an ordinary looking brown leather wallet.

“You won’t regret it, man. Best investment you ever made. When you come back just ask any of the guys hanging around the terminal for Dennis. That’s my name. Dennis. They’ll know where to find me.”

The man pocketed the ten dollars and walked into the airport. Roger guessed he was going to get something to eat. Roger tossed the wallet into his briefcase. A few minutes later, the bus showed up and took him to his car.

That night he gave the wallet a cursory examination. It was completely empty. No ID, no photos, not even an insert to hold photos or IDs. Just a folding leather wallet with a place to hold bills. He couldn’t even find a manufacturer’s logo. On a whim, he put a dollar bill in the wallet and placed it on his dresser.

The next morning he was stunned to find two dollar bills in the wallet. He took them out and examined them carefully. They looked real to him. He put them back in the wallet and the next morning he found four dollars in it. He replaced those bills with a five dollar bill and got two five dollar bills the next morning. When the wallet successfully “generated” a twenty dollar bill he got suspicious. He made a slight mark on one of the bills and put it back in the wallet. The next morning there were two twenty dollar bills, one marked and one unmarked. Whatever was happening, the wallet wasn’t making exact copies of the bills he put into it.

He took the unmarked twenty, since he knew that one had been generated by the wallet, and carefully placed it in an envelope. Then he took the envelope to a bank.

“I found this twenty dollar bill in my wallet, and something about it made me suspicious,” he told the teller. “Do you think it could be counterfeit?” This led to him showing the bill to several people, culminating in his showing the bill to a vice-president in a private office. The man carefully examined the bill with a magnifying glass. “It looks real to me,” he said, “but I’m not an expert. I could send it out to be examined. If someone is passing counterfeit money in the area, the authorities need to know about it. Where did you get this?”

“No idea,” Roger said. “I just found it in my wallet. I often use cash when I’m shopping, and I get bills like this in my change. I just noticed this one this morning, and something about it seemed wrong.” He hoped this sounded convincing. He convinced himself it wasn’t really a lie, as he had found it in his wallet and he had no idea how it got there.

“It doesn’t look wrong to me,” the vice-president said, “but I’d like to send it out just to make sure. I’ll give you a receipt for it.”

Roger took the receipt, and decided it would be best not to use the wallet again until he found out if it was counterfeit. If for some reason this examination led to a raid on his house, it wouldn't do to have a stack of counterfeit bills lying around.

It took about a week, but the bank vice-president called Roger and told him the bill was legal tender. He could pick it up and spend it however he wanted.

Roger carefully experimented with increasing the amount of money he placed in the wallet, conscious of the fact that the lunatic had told him it stopped working for him when he got greedy. The wallet successfully produced a \$50 dollar bill and a \$100. He tried two, \$100 bills, then three. When he placed ten \$100 bills in the wallet and found ten more in the morning, he decided not to press his luck with larger amounts. After all, he could get \$1,000 overnight, which amounted to a guaranteed annual income of \$365,000 per year. He'd even get an additional \$1,000 every leap year. No sense getting greedy about it. As a safety measure, he put \$1,000 in a sealed envelope and hid it behind a loose piece of paneling in his closet. Whatever else might happen, he had "start-up" money which he could quickly build to a small fortune.

Roger continued working at his normal job for a few weeks, but it bored him so he soon quit. He didn't need the money, and he wanted some free time to explore other options. He began day trading in stocks and discovered he had a knack for it. With a little bit of research, mostly discovering which online blogs he could trust, he was able to pick winning stocks more than 50% of the time. The key was not to get greedy. Sell a stock as soon as you made an acceptable profit – don't hang onto it until the inevitable decline. And accept the fact that you make mistakes sometimes. Sell losing stocks as soon as possible and limit your losses. Don't hang onto them in the hopes they'll turn around. Buying on margin amplified his earnings, so what he earned on the winning stocks more than made up for any losses he suffered.

Roger lived alone and had few friends. Evenings had always been boring. Cooking dinner by himself (often a frozen dinner at that), eating in front of the TV, then watching insipid sitcoms and talk shows until he dragged himself to bed. Evenings seemed especially boring now, compared to days spent buying and selling tens of thousands of dollars' worth of stock. He could afford something better now, so he began going out to restaurants.

One evening he decided to try eating at a casino that had just opened outside of town. A local food critic had given it good reviews, and Roger discovered his review was spot on. He had an excellent meal at a surprisingly reasonable price. After dinner he spent a little time at the roulette table, figuring he could afford to lose a few bucks, and he was surprised to find that he enjoyed it. The people were friendly, they served him drinks, and he seemed to have a knack for placing winning bets. "Just like picking stocks," he thought.

He enjoyed his night at the casino so much that he went back a few more times over the next couple of weeks. The staff soon got to know him as a "regular," and his drinks at the roulette wheel came "compliments of the house." As he walked to his car in the parking garage after one of these evenings he realized he'd had a few too many complimentary drinks. "It would be really stupid to get arrested for

DUI," he thought, "just when everything is going so well." He turned around and walked back to the registration desk. They had a room available, and he got a good night's sleep, followed by a wonderful room service breakfast the next morning. After that he always booked a room when he went to the Casino for dinner.

One week the stock market got a little shaky, and he lost much of the money he'd accumulated over the months since he began day trading. He studied the blogs trying to pick the right stocks, but still nothing worked. He hung onto a few stocks longer than he usually would, but they still didn't rise. The market rallied slightly on Friday, but he still spent a nervous weekend. On Monday he got his rhythm back. He began picking winning stocks again, and dumping the others before he lost serious money on them. The market was gaining too, but he was beating even this bullish market. By the time the closing bell rang on Friday he'd had his best week ever. He decided to treat himself to an entire weekend at the casino.

He didn't remember much about that weekend. Actually, it was more than a weekend as it was Wednesday morning before he finally checked out of the hotel. He remembered the weekend had started off well, as he was having as much luck at the roulette wheel as he'd had in the stock market the previous week, but he also had hazy memories of times when his luck failed him. He remembered that the casino staff had been very understanding, and they were willing to give him credit since the stock market was closed so he didn't have ready access to cash. He was dumbfounded when he saw how much he had borrowed. His bill for room service was pretty astounding, too. Once again, though, the staff was very understanding. He paid off as much of his bill as he could with the assets he had readily available, and they gave said he could pay the rest over the next thirty days.

He had a miserable drive back to his house. He was even more miserable when he logged into his computer and saw that the stock market had tanked on Monday and Tuesday. He'd missed several margin calls, and the brokers had sold his stock and were clamoring for the difference between what they sold it for and what they'd loaned him to buy it. He spent a thoroughly depressing day sorting through his portfolio, salvaging what he could, and adding up his losses.

That night, he pulled out the \$1,000 he'd hidden in his closet. He was glad he'd had the foresight to set that money aside. It was going to take time, and he'd have to stave off his creditors with partial payments for a while, but he could work his way out of this mess. He put the money in the wallet and went to bed. "Best investment I ever made," he thought as he drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, when he looked in the wallet, it was empty! The \$1,000 he'd put in it the night before was gone, and there was no matching \$1,000. Instead, there was a note:

"You never paid Dennis the money you owed him for the wallet. That was greedy."

Desperately he gathered all the cash he could find and headed for the airport. Maybe if he demonstrated good faith by giving Dennis as much as he could as a partial payment, the wallet would start working again. Then he'd pay Dennis the full amount. Plus a bonus. He promised.

He talked to several people who seemed to be wandering aimlessly around the shuttle bus terminal before he found someone who knew Dennis.

“Oh, yeah. It was the craziest thing. This morning he wakes up, feels a bulge in his pocket, and finds a bunch of hundred dollar bills! I think he said it was a thousand dollars. He had no idea where it came from, but he didn’t wait around for someone to come looking for it. He took off. I think he bought a bus ticket to California. Said he wanted to go someplace warm before winter set in. Maybe it was Florida.”

Roger Johnson surveyed the people in the terminal who were waiting for shuttle busses. One man in particular looked friendly, and he looked like he might have some spare cash on him. Roger approached him.

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