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Product Code A0877-SP

STRANDED TRAVELER

A Short Play by
Eric Thomas

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Stranded Traveler

by Eric Thomas

CAST OF CHARACTERS

EARL: *Middle-class man; any age over 30*

JACKIE: *Possibly homeless; any gender, age*

BUS RIDER: *Person at a bus stop; any gender, age*

TIME

The present

SYNOPSIS

A man is approached at a bus stop by someone asking for money because their wallet has been stolen. Rather than giving money or saying he can't help, the man engages in a challenging conversation, revealing each person's dishonesty.

Stranded Traveler
by Eric Thomas

AT RISE: *EARL is standing at a bus stop at night.
JACKIE enters and approaches EARL.*

JACKIE

Excuse me. I'm really sorry to bother you but my wallet was stolen, and I just need bus fare to get home. I'll get your address and I swear I'll mail you the money back.

EARL

(Laughs)

I know what this is.

JACKIE

Huh?

EARL

I know what this is. It's the "Stranded Traveler" scam. It's like, famous.

JACKIE

The stranded...

EARL

Stranded traveler. You're in a bind because – for example – you ran out of gas on the way to your uncle's funeral. Blew a tire and had to pay to get it fixed. Or your wallet was stolen and you need bus fare. The taking my address so you can mail me the money thing? That's new. Nice touch.

JACKIE

Look, sir. I don't know what you mean. I really have been—

EARL

Stranded. Right. I get it. The scam has been used for centuries. I bet there were people in covered wagons doing this. So, what is it? Why do you really need the money?

JACKIE

Sir, it's exactly what I told you. I had my wallet stolen and—

EARL

Is it heroin?

JACKIE

Sir, I—

EARL

You can be honest with me. It's heroin, isn't it?

JACKIE

Look, I—

EARL

(Deliberately)

Why not just be honest? Is it heroin?

JACKIE

(Beat)

You want me to be honest?

EARL

Lying to me is not going to get you any money. Maybe honesty will.

JACKIE

Man, if I was honest, I'd never get any money.

EARL

I knew it. Heroin.

JACKIE

I didn't say that.

EARL

You didn't have to. Addicts lie. And I called you on your malarkey. You know I can't give you money for drugs.

JACKIE

Uh huh. So, let me ask you. Which is worse, giving money to an addict, or not giving it?

EARL

This sounds like a trick question.

JACKIE

Look, if an addict needs a fix, they're gonna get it. Know what I mean? If someone like you doesn't give a little money, like this right here, what are the other options?

EARL

(Puzzled)

What are the other options?

JACKIE

Yeah. I'm not saying it's me. But if you're calling me on my "malarkey", I'm calling you on yours. Know what I mean?

EARL

(Laughing)
Oh, I can't wait to hear this.

JACKIE

You're probably the type to say addiction is a disease, right? A disease like any other disease, right?

EARL

I guess.

JACKIE

Lou Gehrig's. Irritable Bowel. Restless leg.

EARL

Whatever.

JACKIE

Sickle cell. Krohn's disease. The heartbreak of psoriasis.

EARL

Okay! I know what diseases are.

JACKIE

A person suffering from those diseases can't control their symptoms. Know what I mean?

EARL

Right. I guess.

JACKIE

Same with the addict. They have withdrawal symptoms. The only difference with their disease is that the drug that makes symptoms go away, is what causes the disease in the first place! So, they're stuck. They use the... Stranded...

EARL

Stranded Traveler.

JACKIE

Right. Or if relying a kind handout doesn't work, then breaking in, stealing stuff, or... or something worse.

EARL

Look it's not that simple. I'm not making someone do anything. They got themselves into this mess.

JACKIE

If you don't give a little money you could be pushing that addict to something more desperate. Pushing them to something that could hurt someone.

EARL

Pushing. Right. I'm pushing them. Now I'm the pusher?

JACKIE

Look, the drug's gonna get used either way. That part don't change. But you can play a part in how it goes down. How the symptom gets treated. Know what I mean?

EARL

Well, they could get help. There are clinics, county services, there are—

JACKIE

And so, by not giving them a little money, the person will see the light and go looking for help? Is that your plan?

EARL

My plan? I don't have a plan—

JACKIE

That's some powerful money you got there. It can help someone by staying in your pocket. That's like magic. Are you sure you're not the addict here?

EARL

Please?

JACKIE

Addicted to your ego, your fancy status. It feels pretty good to sit around and judge doesn't it? Know what I mean?

EARL

I know what you mean. But I'm not judging—

JACKIE

I bet you call yourself a Christian.

EARL

What?

JACKIE

(Deliberately)

Why not just be honest? Is it Christianity?

EARL

Well, I like to think of myself as a good—

JACKIE

I knew it. Christian.

EARL

What?

JACKIE

You Christians should wear long black robes because you do love to judge. You only open your wallets if you can change someone. You can't just give. You have to judge, preach. Know what I—

EARL

You don't have to ask if I know what you mean. I know what you mean. But I'm not like those hypocrites on TV or whatever. I'm not perfect. I'm just trying to be a good person. I'm not the preachy type, I—

JACKIE

You sure are the judge-y type, though. Judged me pretty quick.

EARL

What?

JACKIE

“I knew it. Heroin.”

EARL

Am I wrong?

JACKIE

Does it matter?

EARL

Of course it matters. I need to “judge” whether I should help someone. If I give money to an addict, that just keeps them going down a bad path. I have to “judge” if... if...

JACKIE

If they deserve your help? What's your man Jesus say?

EARL

Um, when? Where do you mean?

JACKIE

Visit prisoners. Feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. Do this for the least of the brothers.... Know what I mean?

EARL

Yes. I know what you mean. I'm familiar with that passage.

JACKIE

The hungry, naked people. Why are they hungry and naked? It's probably their own fault, right? Visit the prisoner. What did that prisoner do to get locked up? Nothing good. Probably beat up an easy mark like you and took his money.

EARL

What?

JACKIE

Your man Jesus don't care. Give. Feed. Clothe. Visit. Help them all. He'll sort them out later.

EARL

(Beat)

So, what's this scam called?

JACKIE

What?

EARL

I know the Stranded Traveler scam. But what should we call this one? Maybe the "I Know Four Bible Verses to Make You Feel Guilty" Scam. Or the "Angel of Light" scam.

JACKIE

Come on.

EARL

The "Homeless Prophet" scam. Oooh. I got it. "The Prophet for Profit" Scam.

JACKIE

Man, you're unbelievable.

EARL

I'm unbelievable?

JACKIE

You're just selfish.

EARL

You're just lazy.

JACKIE

A hypocrite.

EARL

A druggie.

Elitist. JACKIE

Freeloader. EARL

Stingy. JACKIE

Addict. EARL

Ignorant. JACKIE

Vagrant. EARL

Heartless! JACKIE

Crackhead! EARL

Cheap Ass! JACKIE

Hobo! EARL

JACKIE
You think you're so great! Living up in your ivory tower looking down on us – wait. Go back.

What? EARL

Did you just say “hobo”? JACKIE

Um, maybe. I don't know what I said. EARL

Oh my God. “Hobo.” JACKIE

EARL
What?

JACKIE
(Laughing)

You said “hobo”!

EARL
Um, I guess that wasn’t— *(JACKIE continues laughing)* I mean I guess that isn’t the right word for.... I was running out of things to say and – it just came out.

JACKIE
Like I’m riding the rails or something carrying one of those sacks on the end of a stick.

EARL
A bundle.

JACKIE
Right! Like I’m in a cartoon or something.

EARL
(Starts to laugh)
I guess it is a stupid word.

JACKIE
Boxcar Jackie. Riding the rails. Headed to Wichita to meet up with Shoe-Leather Wally. That’s hilarious. Know what I mean?

EARL
Oh, for crying out loud! You’re speaking English words that I can perfectly understand! I know what you mean!

JACKIE
(Stops laughing; beat)
Right. Of course you do.

EARL
Jackie? Your name is Jackie?

JACKIE
Yeah. I’m Jackie.

EARL
(Offering hand)
Nice to meet you. I’m Earl

JACKIE

(Shakes hand)

Um. Okay.

EARL

Jackie. Can you tell me what the problem is? If you need help, I want to help. But I don't want to be scammed.

JACKIE

Does it matter?

EARL

It does. It matters to me.

JACKIE

Okay. How's this. Imagine you had a bad week. Bad stuff happens. For you, a minor car crash, laid off, pneumonia. Whatever. A bad week. It sucks, but you could get through it and come out with a scar and a story. Right?

EARL

Sure. I guess.

JACKIE

You can manage. You can get back up. Know what I... sorry.

EARL

(Very deliberately)

Yes. I know what you mean.

JACKIE

But me? I have no backup. Nobody to turn to. No savings. No credit. Just nothing. So here I am.

EARL

So if I give you money, what are you going to do with it?

JACKIE

Tell you what. You get to pick. That's my gift to you. I pick what I do with the money. You pick what you think I did with it. That's fair, right?

This is Not the End of the Play
Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes

