EDGAR KEERET: FLY ALREADY. STORIES. (2019)

GOODEED

A rich woman hugged a poor man. It was totally spontaneous. Absolutely unplanned. He went up to her and asked for some money for coffee. There were no homeless people in her own neighborhood, so he caught her completely unprepared. And he wasn't your typical homeless guy, either. Even though he had a supermarket cart and clearly lived on the street, he looked clean and shaven. The rich woman couldn't find any coins in her wallet, only hundred-dollar bills. If she'd found a ten-dollar bill, even a twenty, she would have given it to him without a second thought, but a hundred seemed to her like too much to give, and maybe a little awkward for him to accept, too.

There are clear rules governing the relationship between the homeless and the average person on the street: speak to each other politely; don't look each other in the eye; don't ask for names; and don't give more than twenty dollars. Anything up to twenty is still within the normal range of generosity, but

more than that is an attempt to attract attention, to impress, to force the recipient into saying, "Ma'am, you're a wonderful human being," or else to seem ungrateful. The rich woman didn't want to go there but didn't have any coins or small bills, either, so she said to the man with the supermarket cart, "Wait here a minute, okay? I'll just go into the grocery store and break this."

"He won't break it for you," the guy said. "He doesn't break bills for anyone. And he doesn't let you drink water or use the bathroom, either."

"Ah," the woman said. "But should I try anyway?"

"Don't bother," the homeless guy said. "It doesn't matter. You can give me something another time. What did you say your name was?"

The rich woman hadn't mentioned her name, but now she felt she had no choice, so she told him.

"You're a good woman, Dara," the homeless guy said. "You have a good heart. But I'm probably not the first person to tell you that."

"You are the first person to tell me that," Dara said. "I help my older brother a lot. Mainly financially. And my parents, too. My father, that is. My mother I can't help anymore—she's dead. And none of them ever said I have a good heart or even thanked me."

"That's shitty," the poor man said. "It's frustrating. Makes you feel invisible. Or like a slave. An invisible slave. Someone who gets noticed only when she doesn't give people what they expect to get."

The rich woman nodded. She wanted to tell the poor man that she used to love her family so much, that she'd like to love them now, too, but that she didn't seem to have the strength anymore. She wanted to tell him that when she first met her husband he'd said, "No kids," because it was his second marriage and he already had a fourteen-year-old daughter with issues. So they didn't have kids, and that was actually fine, because their life was good without them. Full. But what killed her was that she never even told him that she actually did want children.

The poor man said, "Let's go and sit somewhere. There's a bench on the corner and a take-out coffee place not far from it. The coffee's on me." But the rich woman didn't want coffee and she didn't want to go anywhere that wasn't her house because she knew it was the only place where she could close the door behind her and cry. She didn't want to hurt the homeless guy, though, didn't want him to think she was being condescending. What finally emerged from all the wanting and not wanting was a hug. A surprising hug, a hug that was giving, but also set boundaries. As if she were saying, "I'm with you," and at the same time, "I'm me." It felt good. Then she handed him all the cash in her wallet—seven hundred dollars—without giving the slightest thought to how it might look or whether it broke the rules. They'd already broken them anyway when she told him her name. The man said, "This is too much," and she said, "No, it's exactly the right amount." After he took the money, she gave him another hug and left.

She had planned to take a taxi in order to get home as quickly as possible. But now getting home quickly was no longer a priority; she just wanted to enjoy this special day. Besides, she had no cash left. So she walked all the way home, and every step she took in her red Jimmy Choos felt like strolling on a cloud.

Later, she told her friends about it. About that sensation of doing what you want, of allowing yourself to feel good. Of giving seven hundred dollars to someone who then said, "Thank you, Dara. You made my day, maybe even my week. You're so kind." When was the last time someone had said that to them? They all understood immediately. They wanted to feel something similar. They were tired of making donations at those dreary charity balls their husbands always dragged them to, where they ended up getting a gold pin and a generic thank-you from the mayor or an aging movie star dragged out of mothballs for the occasion. They wanted the look, maybe even the hug—if it felt natural—from a man whose life they'd rescued from the sewer. Or, if not rescued, upgraded significantly. They wanted to see him cry or thank Jesus for sending them to him, as if they were saints and not just very rich women.

Dara took two of her friends to the southern part of the city in her silver Mini Cooper. It wasn't an ideal car for three—Susan had to fold up her long legs to squeeze into the backseat—but they managed. When they found a homeless man, a guy with a dog and without a leg, Susan and Karen argued about which of them would give him the money. It was one of those arguments in which each person insisted on letting the other

win. In the end, Karen got out and approached the man, who was sitting next to a cardboard box with VETERAN written on it in black marker, and put twelve hundred dollars into his disposable plastic cup. The man saw how much money it was—maybe not the exact amount, but he recognized the hundred-dollar bills for sure. He didn't say anything, just looked her in the eye for a long moment and nodded a thank-you. That evening, as Karen lay in bed after everyone had already fallen asleep and pictured that nod behind her closed eyes, she felt her entire body quiver. It had been a long time since anyone had looked at her like that.

The next day, they found one for Susan. But it didn't work out so well for her. That is, the man took the money and even said thank you and gave her a toothless smile, but Susan realized immediately that he was an addict who would piss it all away on drugs, and that there had been no real moment between them. Which isn't to say it was a bad experience, either.

They tried it again a few times, and while they never felt the way they had the first time, they still felt good. And the people who received the money felt good, too, or at least better than before. It didn't take long for Karen to come up with the idea for the app.

It was brilliant. It took off. The software processed all the data about the homeless people or beggars that people uploaded into it, and then it would tell you, at any given moment, where to find the neediest person nearest to you. People just ate it up. *Time* magazine interviewed them about it, and all kinds of

people wanted to buy the company from them. They refused to sell, but eventually agreed to give it to Mark Zuckerberg—though only if he promised to donate any profits it made and not keep them for himself.

Zuckerberg looked offended when they said that. "You think I'm getting into this for the money?" he asked. "I already have enough money. I'm getting into this to do good." He said it so beautifully that Dara choked up. "This man is special," she thought. It was no accident that he'd gotten where he was. She told him she wanted a minute alone with Karen to discuss it, and before she could get a word out, Karen grabbed her arm and said, "We have to give it to him."

They'd called their app One Good Deed a Day, but Zuckerberg immediately changed the name to GooDeed, which was shorter and much catchier. Within a few months, it became an even bigger hit. Not WhatsApp, but big.

Six years later, right outside the mall, Dara bumped into the man she'd hugged on the street. She and her husband had signed their divorce agreement only a few weeks earlier, but when the man asked her how she was, she said that everything was fine. Part of her wanted to tell him that she and Walter had split up, and that for the first time in her life, she understood what it meant to be alone, but instead she told him about the app. He couldn't believe it. He knew about it, of course, everyone did, but he hadn't made the connection to himself and their first encounter. Before saying good-bye, she took out her wallet and offered him some money.

"I'm not homeless anymore," he said with a smile. "And you have a lot to do with that. After you gave me the money, I took hold of myself, stopped drinking, and now I teach classes at the community center. My aunt died a few years ago and left me a small inheritance. I used it to buy a small apartment not far from here. Hey," he said, waving his hand in front of her face, showing her the gold band on his finger, "I even got married. And guess what? We've just got twin girls."

Dara was still standing there with the bills in her hand.

"I don't need that anymore," he said, half apologetically. "I did back then, but I'm fine now."

"Take it," she pleaded, tears welling up. "Please, take it. For me."

She had a few hundred dollars in her hand—she didn't know exactly how much, she hadn't even counted it—and it wasn't till she began to sob that he took the money.