

Tare Weight

By Stephen D. Rogers

“Hey, Bro. What’s with the glasses? You’re not getting old, Eddie, are ya?”

My straight job was working the supermarket deli. I planned it that way so that witnesses could be tarnished with reasonable doubt: “Perhaps that’s where you saw the defendant. At least I assume that you eat.”

When you weigh a container of product, you subtract the weight of the container, the tare weight. Customers don’t mind paying for the tabouli, the coleslaw, the three-bean salad. Customers just don’t want to pay for the container as well.

When you measure the weight of what you’re carrying on your back, the burdens you shoulder, you subtract the weight of family.

Assuming you can’t subtract the people themselves.

The teller stopped putting twenties into the cash withdrawal envelope and glanced back and forth between Billy and me, wondering perhaps if he was going to be stupid enough to introduce himself.

Not sure of the answer, I took my brother’s arm and steered him towards the door. “Calm and steady.”

“Bro, you forgot your money.”

“Outside.”

“I’m not in a rush, Eddie. I could have waited until you finished your transaction before we talked.”

“Outside.”

I pulled him through the doors. “Meet me at Leo’s in fifteen minutes. And whatever you do, never go back to this branch.”

“But this is my favorite branch. They put out free donuts on Saturday morning.”

“Just listen to me for once.”

* * *

I sat close to the kitchen, my back to the bulk of the restaurant and the windows beyond.

My coffee was cold by the time Billy arrived.

“Sorry I’m late.” He slid into the seat across from me. “You buying?”

“Sure.”

Billy waved over the nearest waitress, who placed the dirty dishes she’d been carrying on the table next to me. Billy skimmed the menu. “I’ll take a large orange juice, a farmer’s omelet, extra bacon, extra ham, and coffee as fast as you can refill the cup.”

She turned to me, still making cryptic notes on her pad. “And you, sir? Are you ready to order?”

“I’ll stick with the coffee. Thanks.”

Billy leaned forward. “Been a long time since I ran into you twice in one day.”

“Too long.”

“I’m glad to see you stopped wearing the glasses. Contacts, bro. Glasses don’t look good on you. So I still don’t get the thing at the bank.”

“Don’t worry about it. Just don’t go back.” I returned his menu to the holder. “So there’s something you wanted to talk about?”

“This is embarrassing, but I’m a bit short on cash.”

“What’s a bit?”

“Thirty-seven hundred dollars. And I need it today.”

“Maybe you should have ordered a smaller breakfast.”

Billy sat back and laughed. “Bro, I need energy if I’m going to chase that money down.”

“And just how exactly do you intend to chase down three thousand and seven hundred dollars?”

He waved his arms as though I’d asked a stupid question. “I came to you, bro.”

“What makes you think I have that kind of money just sitting around?”

“You have a job. You don’t have a family. What would you spend your money on?” His face soured. “I’ll pay you back.”

“I don’t mean to burst your bubble--”

“So I can have the money?”

“I’m not sure I can afford this meal.”

Billy laughed again. “You’re a funny guy, bro. But the important thing is you always come through. Right?”

The waitress placed his orange juice in front of him, filled his coffee, and asked if I wanted my mine warmed.

“Please.” This might take a while.

Billy chugged half his orange juice. “It’s not my fault, you know. The guy said it was a sure thing, and you know me. I like to spread the wealth. Maybe I sold the deal a little too strongly, but it’s not like I made people invest.”

“What happened?”

“Does it really matter?” He frowned before sipping his coffee. “What’s important is that I owe people some money.”

“Three thousand and seven hundred dollars worth of money.”

“Most of my investors easily met the five-hundred buy-in price.” He nodded as if pleased with himself. “I knew who to approach.”

“Too bad you didn’t know the best way to handle other people’s money, which is not at all.”

“I’m telling ya, it was a sure thing.”

“Yeah.” Perhaps I should have switched to decaf. Or skipped this meeting altogether. “You can’t hit up any of your investors for the thirty-seven hundred?”

“Most of them I owed before they bought-in. That’s how I sold it, that I needed the five bills to get them their money back.”

“People burned twice aren’t likely to stick their hands in the flame a third time.”

Billy smiled. “That’s why I came to you, bro.”

“Like I’ve never--” I shook the thought away. “You say you need the money today?”

“I had guaranteed their investments. I made promises to people who take promises very seriously.”

The waitress swung by with Billy's breakfast.
Having grown up watching him eat, I turned away and used the time to think.

* * *

"The way I understand it, you have two problems. You need to pay off your debt, and you need to learn from your mistake. I can only help you with one of those."

A burp disfigured his grin as he dropped his napkin on the empty plate. "I knew you'd help. Mom and Dad knew what they were doing when they didn't stop at one."

"Are you capable of learning from your mistakes? There's no value in pulling you out of this mess if you're just going to jump headfirst into another."

"Do you want me to swear on the family oath?"

"Since we don't have one, that would be less than impressive."

The waitress picked up Billy's dirty dishes and asked if we wanted anything else. Billy took the offered refill.

I held a hand over my cup. "Thanks, but just the check, when you have a minute."

She slipped the check out of her apron pocket and onto the table. "No rush. I'll come back to see if you need change."

Billy waited until she was out of earshot. "Do you want me to beg? Do you want me to grovel? Is that what this little lecture is all about, kicking your older brother when he's down? But then nobody waits for me to be down. It's always, 'Why can't you be more like Eddie?' Eddie, Mister Perfect."

"I never said I was perfect. I'm just trying to make a point."

Billy pushed his coffee away. "Well, you made it. I hope you're happy."

"I'm not."

Shrugging, Billy adapted. "Forget what I said. So what's the plan?"

* * *

Two hours later, I dropped Billy off at the back of the building and then pulled around front and parked up the street, giving me brother time to get into position.

I didn't know whether I'd been too hard on him or not hard enough. I didn't know whether anything I might say would make the least amount of difference.

Nothing ever had before.

Could Billy follow my simple instructions? He would if he wanted this plan to succeed.

I watched the clock tick out five minutes.

The waiting would do Billy good. He might even learn some self-control, although I thought it unlikely. After all, I'd known him all my life.

I left my car unlocked and walked towards the bank.

When the employees saw me, they'd focus on my entrance, leaving Billy free to target the teller nearest the rear door. What I hoped was that they'd be so busy watching me that they didn't even realize they'd been robbed.

Then Billy and I would go our separate ways.

I walked into the bank and stopped just inside.

Billy was standing where I told him to be standing, although he had a strange smile on his face.

Muted conversations slowly faded until the bank was silent, the staff staring at me, and the customers glancing back and forth between us.

As Billy moved towards the teller nearest him, I strolled into the center of the bank.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Billy pass the note over the counter. I just needed to keep everybody's attention until his teller had a chance to collect the thirty-seven hundred.

Whistling, I strolled over to the sign listing the current rates.

The manager quietly and calmly edged customers out the rear door. Billy joined the exodus, again with the strange smile.

I turned and marched towards the entrance to the bank, breaking into a run at the last second to see if anybody would follow me.

Flew through the doors and slid to a stop.

Two cruisers blocked the street.

Guns pointed at me from behind defensive positions.

When a voice rang out telling me to raise my hands, I finally understood that smile of Billy's.

I guess my brother had used the five minutes to decide that I was the monkey on his back, the tare weight he wanted to subtract.

And then he'd called the cops.

Over five hundred of Stephen's stories and poems have appeared in more than two hundred publications. His website, www.stephendrogers.com, includes a list of new and upcoming titles as well as other timely information.