

Exacting a Price

Recently paroled after 15 years, Willy puts his plan into action and succeeds, but as his debts come due, he has to scramble to appease or avoid his debtors until his rewards arrive.

Five till 11. The chirp and hum of tube TV turning on fill the room as the picture and sound warm into focus. A man plops into a well-worn recliner, his lunch sitting on a nearby TV tray gives a giggle, the ice in his amber beverage clinking softly. His routine had been hard-set during the last 15 years and a few weeks on the outside in that wood-paneled living room – where the very air carried the noxious beige of stinking domesticity – held no sway over it. He lived through pain and solitary by grit, guile, and this one fantasy. Eleven o'clock and the happy horns ring out:

Here it comes, television's most exciting hour of fantastic prizes, the fabulous 60-minute Price is Right!

Now he could eat. Sinking into his chair and kicking up his feet, he pulled out his notebook. The episode for the day was tepid affair, but there a number of new items to add to the catalogue. Just over halfway through, the mail slot clinked open, a few letters pushing through. At the commercial break, he, having finished his sandwich and chips, rose, deposited his plate in the kitchen, and grabbed the mail from the welcome mat. As the commercials droned on, he looked through the envelopes. Junk. Junk. Bill; he set that aside. Coupons. Then he stopped. This battered piece of mail held multiple postmarks and redirects. It had bounced around in the postal service for weeks

and only reached him just now. He leapt from his chair and ran to his room.

His mother did not have the heart to change anything after he was put away. The *Easy Rider* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* still clung to the walls – they were good movies after all – and his trophies and medals cluttered the shelves. He did not feel right changing anything himself either. He closed the door behind him. First shift still had hours left, but his mama did come home for lunch on occasion. He pulled off the sheet from the end of his mattress, carefully fingered open the cut at the seam, pulled out the folder, and flipped through the pages. Fred Samson. Mitchell Upton. Jeb Fields. Lenny Westerfield. That one actually sounded fake. Finally. William K. Barton.

William, who went by Willy, pulled out his packet: driver's license, social security card, and birth certificate. Then, he actually opened the letter. Sure enough. A single ticket to the greatest show on earth. He beamed at it as though it was pure gold. He savored each inch of it and read it slowly, but then he came to the date. One week. One week from yesterday. Wednesday. A pit dropped in his stomach and ran to the phone in the kitchen. He called the bus station.

"To LA? They're back down to normal prices since the 'lympics are over, so \$57.95."

Willy sighed some relief. His mama kept some dollar squirrled away in her room, but not much.

"When's the next leavin' that way?"

"The bus to Austin leaves at 2. You should be able to hitch a ride to LA from there..." The man on the other end held onto the word as the sound of rustling pages crept through the earpiece. "Yep. You'll hafta have an overnight layover, but one leaves for LA tomorrow. It'll take two, maybe three days, probably not four, that line got maintenance for the summer from what I heard..."

Four days. That cuts it close, but doable.

"...some other places along the way that--"

"No thanks. That's fine. Thank you. Bye."

Willy clicked the receiver and dialed again. No answer.

"Hey doll. I've got the tickets. They're for William K Barton, but they're for next week. Got lost in the mail or sumthin, uhh, but I'll make it. I've got a bus leaving soon and should be there this weekend sometime. I'll try to give you a shout at the last stop 'fore I get there. Talk to you later, sweetie. *mwah*"

Willy hung up and took a deep breath, steadying himself against the racing in his head, when the front door opened.

"Hey hun. Forgot my lunch again, hehe." His mama came through the front door. Willy moved out of the kitchen quickly, trying to avoid meeting her eyes. He was about to reply, but she continued, "Good thing though! I found a friend of yours that knew your street, but not your house. What's'yer name again?"

Willy turned on his heel. His mother was a sturdy woman, nearly six feet tall before you accounted for her gaudy blonde perm, and obscured the whole doorway so that Willy could not see the squat miscreant behind.

"Luther, ma'am." She moved into the kitchen, revealing Willy in the hallway, and Luther's eyes flashed as brilliant blue as his fresh Canadian tuxedo. "Luther Roscoe Sullivan."

"Luther." Willy pitifully exhaled.

"Been looking for you for a while there, buddy," A wide, creeping smile stretched the corners of Luther's thin goatee, his line of crooked, yellow teeth snarling. He ran his hand over his slicked back long hair, stopping to run the back of his neck. "A mighty long while."

Willy stammered.

"Let's have a talk real quick ou'chere, huh?" He gestured to the front stoop.

Willy walked forward. "Mama," he whispered, "stay in the kitchen."

She looked out from around the fridge door with two piece of bread in her mouth. "Huh? I'm heuh to eat lunch, ain't I?"

Willy did not respond as he stepped outside and shut the door.

"So?" Lester held out his hand expectantly.

"You think I wouldn't have paid you if I had the money?"

"You think I'd trust you to be honest? You're the guy who owes me for all those names and papers you got!" Lester jabbed his fat pointer finger into Willy's chest to accent certain words. "And your bill came due a long time ago."

"I've got something in the works, and it should make us better than good, Lester"

"Oh! Something in the works?" Lester lightly slapped Willy's with mocking playfulness. "You know, I've got something in the works too, and now that I know where to find you, I've got a feeling it will go off just fine."

"Just give me a few weeks. I'll... I'll..." Willy struggled to stop himself from saying what he was. "I'll pay double."

Lester stepped back, aghast at either the audacity or the desperation. "Double? And how could you pay double?"

"Like I said, I've something in the works."

Lester looked him up and down, the greed working on his anger. "Fine." He turned away, waving his hands at Willy as he walked across the lawn. "Fine, fine, fine." Then he whipped around like a flash and pointed his finger again. "But! If you don't pay double at the end of the month, well, I'll just say that since I know there's two of you, it will be double the punishment." And he continued to his rumbling Buick. As he got in, he called back, "Say bye to your mama for me!"

Willy caught his breath after the hulking machine turned off his street and onto the highway and hurried back into the house.

"Mama," he called out moving past the kitchen towards the bedrooms in the back. "I've gotta go out a town for a bit. I'll be back for my meeting, but can't say how much earlier."

"Where'r'ya headed?"

"I'm seeing a friend about some work."

"That's great, hun! That's just what I was saying. You'll feel so much better getting out of the house and getting something done."

Willy stayed silent. He was back in his room, restoring his bed to proper order, shoving some clothes in a briefcase, and

counting the seconds until she left to return to work. She came to his room a few minutes later and said her goodbyes for the day and for the trip. As soon as the front door closed, he ran up and locked it. He did not want any other unexpected visitors. He then walked down to his mama's room and raided her hideyholes. \$23.47. It was a start, but not even halfway. He returned to his room and looked it over. His state championship ring? Some sort of low karat gold, good. His record stereo? Too awkward for the walk to the pawnbroker. His walkman? Needed it for the trip. He tore through his closet. Lo and behold. His old piggy bank! He smashed it on the ground and there was much more than he anticipated, another \$18.55 in small bills and coins. That should be enough. Willy finished packing and took off for the bus stop, by way of the pawnbroker.

The house was a few miles from town and the warmth of the September sun made the walk unpleasant. Still, he made it to the pawnbroker and got another \$25 for the trip. He would have to bum off Betty for the ticket back, but for now, the bus was on time and so was he. He paid his fare at the counter and boarded, storing his suitcase in the luggage racks. He took his seat and popped on his headphones. On the drive to LA, Willy reviewed his notebook of items and prices endlessly, serenaded by the scores

of tapes that Betty had secretly recorded in the past few months.

To be a contestant on *The Price Is Right*, you first need a ticket. Done. Next, there is an interview that audience goes through to determine who will be the nine contestants for that episode. Betty, his highschool sweetheart who owed him, had become one of the show's models, something that caught him by complete surprise one day on the inside. He began writing her fan letters hoping that they would reach her, but having already been inside for a few years, he figured that nothing would happen. Then he got a letter back from her and the plan hit him like a bolt. Some convincing and weasly words were needed, but over the next few years, it all came into picture. He was not really cheating at the game at any point, just the system. He would know all of the prices by rote, work out all the best strategies for the games, and figure out the best responses for the interview by listening to these clandestinely recorded sessions of the contestants. The only fibbing, beside secretly recording the interviews — which would be on Betty anyways — would be in his name and when to make his bid. When a game with a car prize was next and he was at the podium, Betty would “accidentally” come around the corner of the stage too early and scramble back out of sight, looking as naturally mortified as

possible. He would then win the One Bid game, trying to get the \$100 bonus if he was comfortable, and win the game and the car. At that point, the only variables were if and when he was chosen to be a contestant at all and the Showcase Showdown. He could be prepared outside of that. If he got into the Showcase, he would risk it all and try to get within \$250 range for a double showcase win. It should not be too hard.

The next few days of bus travel were bumpy and uncomfortable, but unassailable his focus held firm. He must have looked like strange mashup of hillbilly and scholar to the other passengers, but no matter. They made good time, but a wreck between Tuscon and Phoenix stretched the trip to three days. The last stop before his destination, he rang up Betty and let her know when she could pick him up. She was there, gleaming in the California sun when they pulled up.

"Well, ain't you just a picture, sweet girl."

"It's good to see you..." She made a face. "William K. Barton."

"Good. No drops til we're clear." Willy opened the driver door of her cherry red convertible. He whispered to her as she got behind the wheel, "But I do go by Willy." She smirked a little. Willy rounded the car, and hopped in the passenger side. "Oh, by

the way," – he did not look at her – "I'll need some help getting the ticket for the way home." Her smirk faded sadly.

The next day, Betty went in to shoot, leaving Willy at the apartment to do more prep, but the pace of the day ground to a halt as his new arrangement with Lester weighed on him. The Showcase wheel was too big a chance at this point. He needed to do something to get a feel for the spin. He needed to net as much money as possible now. He took a city bus to the studio right as the final show wrapped and waited at the cast door for Betty. She exited about 45 minutes later.

"Betty." Willy said in a coarse whisper.

She almost jumped out of her skin. "Willy!" she exclaimed before dropping to match him, "What are you doing here? I was coming to get you from the apartment."

"I have to get in some spins on the wheel."

"No. Out of the question. That's not part of the plan."

"It is now. I need to get a feel for it."

"How? There's no handle to get back in."

She was right. The door out of backstage had no handle for reentry.

"Just grab the door from the next person out. Say you forgot your purse."

"But—" She began, but the door opened just then. Willy shrunk against the wall behind the door, snatching Betty's purse away. It was another model from the show.

"Oh, Betty!" she shouted out, catching her breath. "You scared me half to death."

Betty stared at her blankly for a moment, then her brain caught up with her. "I'm so sorry, but you're a lifesaver. I forgot... my purse in the dressing room and I didn't want to have to go back by Jerry again, if you know what I mean."

"Mmm. I hear you. Dude's a creep. Happy to do one of the girls a favor. See you tomorrow." She turned away and waved.

The two stole inside quickly and darted around a corner.

"See? Smooth as silk, you were."

Betty was gulping down air, wide-eyed, and said nothing.

"Where's the wheel?"

She composed herself again. "It's just down the hall. On stage obviously."

"Ok. Just keep the purse gag running. If you see a guard or anyone coming, just shout out their name and ask them to help find your bag. I'm only trying a few spins."

The two took off to the stage, splitting at the door with Betty staying outside and Willy going in. He immediately spotted the wheel and took some spins. He made sure to reset to the proper place each time so that it would help his muscle memory. He got the 100 locked in surprisingly quick, but it occurred to him that he should only spin that on the bonus spin. He decided to spin a 25 and then a 75 on the show. He was getting the 25 dialed in when he heard one of the doors rattle into the studio followed by Betty shouting out. Willy did not wait for her to succeed or fail. He took off back to the stage door and waited in their same alcove for Betty to arrive. Some breathless minutes later she arrived.

"Where were you?" he hissed.

"Saving you. You left me out there holding my purse in my hands. How could I ask someone to find something I was literally holding?"

"Oh." He said sheepishly.

"I had to take off to the dressing room to throw this somewhere and then get back. You're lucky with my timing. Jerry"

— she shivered — “was walking in right as I got back. I had to deal with him “helping” me while you did your thing.”

He did not say anything.

“Let’s get out of here, now.”

The rest of the evening was tense, but productive. They went to dinner, where she paid, and picked up a reasonable suit for a good discount, where she paid again, before returning to the apartment for the evening.

The day came for the show. He would be in the second recording of the day, so Betty left first and he would follow later. Probably for the best. He showered and prepped and dressed and prepped and ate lunch at 11. He left after the episode was over and arrived for his taping. The trip to the studio and even getting to the building was all a blur. He suddenly found himself in front of the interviewers answering questions. It was all auto-pilot. He navigated through it essentially plagiarizing answers he pulled from Betty’s recordings. He had never asked her how she got them. And suddenly he was done. He could not even remember what he had said as he was herded into the studio room and took his seat. It was just a matter of waiting now.

There was a countdown and the happy horns rang out:

Here it comes, television's most exciting hour of fantastic prizes, the fabulous 60-minute Price is Right!

The first four names were called and his was not one of them. The first item, a dishware set from Germany. \$26.75 from an episode from May. The four playing made their guesses, but he was exactly right. Some middle-age woman from Minnesota or Wisconsin won by guess \$1. She failed *Five Price Tags* terribly and got nothing. The second item, a motor scooter. \$343 from an episode last November. Exactly right again. A man Oregon got it pretty close and managed to win a prize from *Hi Low*. And so it went through the next *One Bid*, *Master Key*, the first *Showdown*, the fourth *One Bid*, and *Money Game*. Willy's palms were sweating now. He was running out of time. He had to get in or he was... Well, he was not sure what he would have to do. He thought about his mama and what was going to happen if he—

William Barton, come on down! You are the next contestant on The Price is Right!

Willy barely even heard it over his own thoughts spiraling, which helped garner a naturalistic reaction as he woke from his stupor and stumbled down to his podium. It was like a dream really and now Bob Barker was about to talk to him.

"William Barton! How are you feeling today?"

"I'm— I'm great, Bob," he stammered. "You can call me Willy."

"Ok. Willy, good to meet you why don't you start us off with your bid on this fantastic item."

It was a set of golf clubs from their summer vacation series in August. *They didn't go back very far for this one.* Willy looked to the right of the stage, but his queue did not come. *Ok. Bid over to be safe.* He did and another contestant went through to *Barker's Bargain Bar*. It was the last game. His last chance. He looked over to the right of the stage desperately when a dark shadow fumbled into the stage lights before recoiling into the shadows with as much fake grace as possible. A concoction of feeling washed through his skull making him swim for a moment. The item was a lady's watch from an episode from over a year ago. He could not remember when exactly, but the price stuck in his head.

"\$847, Bob."

The others guessed something, but he knew he was right, and he was.

"The price of the watch is... \$847! Willy, you've got it exactly right and have earned \$100 bonus. Congrats! Now come join me up on stage."

Willy cautiously made his way to Bob.

"Now take your place right here and take a look over to that door to see what we have in store for you."

It's a brand new car! A Pontiac Firebird Trans Am

Willy listened attentively as they went through the options to make sure it was the car he recognized. *A Thunderbird. Ok. I got this.*

"What do you think about that, Willy?"

"Oh, pretty sweet, Bob."

"I'd say so. Now follow me over here and take a look over here. Today, you're playing one of our newer games, *On the Nose.*"

Willy's heart sank. A new game was not part of the plan. There was no strategy in place for this. He listened to Bob explain through a sort of static.

"All you've got to do Willy, is guess which of these four prices matches that car. If you get it "on the nose," you'll get four chances to show off your sporting skills in our game of choice and a \$1000 bonus. Guess the closest and you get three shots, but no bonus—"

Willy tuned out again. Just when his luck had failed him, it picked him right back up. He already saw the right price out

there, so now he just had to do some physical feat. Unexpected, but doable.

"I'll take \$11,103, Bob"

Of course, it was right. The box in front of the number opened up and something started rising from within, a tray of four footballs.

"Willy, you've got it on the nose. That's \$1000 in your pocket and four shots to throw a football" – Bob made a grand gesture to some contraption on stage that was being opened by Betty and the model who had held the door yesterday – "into the hands of our receiver like this."

Bob was handed a ball and he made a fine attempt for a man his age.

"Oh, Willy! Did you feel that breeze come through here just now? Keep an eye out for that on your throws."

Willy was feeling cocky now. "You know, Bob? I won a QB on a state championship team back in the day."

"No kidding! Well, then this should be an actual breeze for your Willy. Have at 'em."

It was a sinch, even after all these years, Willy had not totally let himself go. He was thrown off by the foam style

balls on the first throw. Then, second through bounced off the edge behind the figure of the receiver's outstretched hands. Willy stopped himself on the third and took a moment. He breathed and rolled his shoulders, trying to loosen them up. Turns out that a jacket and tie were a bad choice. The third throw missed badly.

"Oo. Tough luck, Willy. One more throw for the car. Take your time."

Willy stepped back, loosed his tie, and took off his jacket.

"Could you hold this for a second, Bob? It's a little warm in here."

Bob chuckled. "Sure thing, Willy. Now rip that ball right down the hole."

And just like that, he did. It was a huge relief. Bob handed him back the jacket and patted him on the back.

"Great job, Willy. Now walk over there and take your spot for our Showcase Showdown, right after this."

The break for commercial was longer in person than in the show. Willy took his place at the end of the line. It was really the optimal position and, once they went live, the first two did not do very well. As for Willy, practice did make perfect. He

spun a 25 on the first, meaning he had to spin again, and landed it smack in the middle of the 75 on the second.

"You've hit a dollar. Congratulations, Willy, you're playing for a showcase and you get a \$1000. Now, give it another spin for your bonus and see if you can get it on a dollar."

He spun again and it worked like a charm.

"Wow. That's a \$10,000 bonus on top of your car, the \$1000 bonus from here, the \$1000 from *On the Nose*, your watch, and the \$100. Now, let's see if you can wrap it all up with your showcase as well."

Being the top earner, Willy got to choose between the two showcases. The first was get-away themed with a sailboat, and trip to Hawaii, Fiji, and Tahiti all included. A great showcase, but trips were always tricky and seldom repeated.

"I'll pass on this one, Bob."

His opponent, the lady from the Midwest with vacant eyes bid way too low. The second showcase was perfect. Three items, all from previous shows, including a Nissan 300ZX. Willy ran the numbers in his head and knew he had it.

"I'll say \$22,700."

It was \$22,726. The other one was \$15,198.

"Well, Willy, you are now one of our very few double showcase winners! You'll be getting all that plus your previous winnings. Congratulations. That'll about do it for us today everyone. Thanks for watching and this is Bob Barker reminding you to help control the pet population: Have your pets spayed or neutered. Goodbye, everybody!"

It was over and Willy now had over \$60,000 coming his way. He was caught up by one of the producers suddenly and whisked away to an office. There, they carefully explained that this episode would be coming out in about six weeks and that Willy had to sign a non-disclosure agreement to not say a thing until then or all his winnings were forfeited. Now he was swimming again. *Forfeited? Six weeks? How am I supposed to hold off Lester for six weeks?* Looking over the papers, he elected to take his car, the boat, and his showcase as a cash out, but keep the trip and the watch, leaving him with \$50,000 in cash. He signed at the dotted line and walked out of the studio and back to Betty's apartment. She walked in much later and raced over to hug him, but stopped when she saw his face.

"Honey, what's wrong?"

"You never said anything about a waiting period."

"What waiting period?"

"I don't get a cent for six weeks."

"Aw. Is that so bad? It'll pass in no time."

Willy looked at her with hard eyes. "Betty, I've got debts coming due and six weeks is too long."

"Well, I'm sure if you explain—"

"I can't explain because then I lose it all."

"What d'you me—"

"There's an NDA! I'm sure you have one too. It's the same for me, but instead of fired, I lose everything!"

"Oh." She said sheepishly.

"Just give me \$60 bucks so I can get home."

"But—"

"I don't want to talk about it anymore."

And so the next day, Willy left LA for home on the same bus route from just a few days ago. He was a winner, but the victory would be coming six weeks too late for the world. When he got home. His mama picked him up from the station. He did not say anything except hug her tightly.

"Aw. What's the matter, baby." she cooed.

"I can't tell you, mama."

"Course you can."

"Not this time."

She pulled him to an arm's reach. "It's not like the last time, is it?"

He said nothing. Just looked at his shoes.

She shook him. "Is it?!"

"Not exactly. No one's hurt. I just don't have time."

"Well, make time. You've got your meeting tomorrow, then you best get on to fixing whatever you've done."

They got in the car and started for home. Then it hit him.

"Hey mama, I've got someone I want you to meet."

"Oh? Is it a girl?" She seemed to have been totally distracted from what just had happened.

"Actually, yes it is, but she's in California. That's actually where I was. Seeing her."

"You got all the way out to California? On the bus?"

"Yeah, it took a few days, but I think I'd like you to meet her. She free this next week. Why don't you go see her?"

What? Right now?"

"Yeah. I've got some money saved up. Why don't you go see her and stay out there a few weeks?"

"A few weeks? How'd I manage that?"

"Oh, you've got the time saved up at your job, plus they love you there. Just let them know that you going to take off for an extended trip after this week. I'll meet you all out there after I tidy some things up here." His voice was emotionless throughout this whole exchange.

"Well, let me sleep on it first."

The next week passed slowly, but he kept working on her and eventually got her to agree. She left for California and Willy got busy making arrangements.

Mama had been in California for about ten days, getting acquainted to Betty and finding a rhythm and some things to do when she had to shoot, when a letter arrived for Betty from Willy. Mama didn't ask who William K. Barton was, but thought she recognized the handwriting. Betty open the letter and collapsed into a chair as she began reading it.

"What's wrong, darlin'?"

Betty opened her mouth to respond, but the phone rang as Betty tearfully continued to eye the letter.

"Hello? No, but she's right here." Betty handed the phone to Mama absentmindedly.

"Hello?... Yes, this is she..." Betty watched as her face dropped hollow and the light went from her eyes. "Oh no..."

Another letter arrived about three weeks later. It had been redirected a few times from a PO box belonging to William K. Barton from the production team of The Price is Right.