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FLASH JACK

Goodwill was a happy little town. The folk who lived there were kind to each other, and especially to anyone who visited. So, on this particular day when someone new came to town, many of them were out on the street to welcome whoever it was; and no-one imagined today would be any different to any other day. How wrong could they be?

The first sight of the newcomer was something pretty smoky topping the hill and driving down the road. A car of some kind? Coming closer, it was clearly bigger than a car; more like a van. And it wasn't just chuffing out clouds of smoke; it was also noisy: clattering and rattling along, letting out the occasional bang. As it drove into town, the people lining the main street were able to see there were words and pictures painted in bright colours on the sides of the van. There were bottles and flowers and smiley faces; and words like: tonics, medicines, facelifts; and also Cheap Prices and Bargains. Painted in the biggest letters right across the top on both sides of the van was **FLASH JACK'S WONDER FIXER-UPPERS**. What could all this mean...? The people of Goodwill were soon to find out.

Flash Jack stopped his van in a small parking bay in the middle of town. Climbing out, he waved and smiled at the people, then got busy doing something on one side. Unclipping some latches, he lifted up the complete side, raised it to form a roof-like shelter and locked it in place. Inside the van looked to be the counter of a shop, which apparently it was. Jack slid through the door and appeared a moment later behind the counter. Spreading his arms wide he sang out: "Roll up, roll up to Flash Jack's shop of miracles. I have wonderful things to offer one and all – medicines for ailments, household fixer-uppers and much, much more." He looked around the crowd that had gathered in front of his shop, spotted a man with a bald head and pointed at him. "I can see that you, Sir, may be in need of this." Putting a hand under the counter, he brought out a bottle and held it up for all to see. "This potion is guaranteed to grow hair on a billiard ball, and I can let you have it for just five dollars – a real bargain price."

Stroking a hand over his bald head, the man dipped in a pocket for his money and handed it to Jack who gave him the bottle of potion. Jack looked up. "Anyone else?" He waited, and when no-one came forward, he brought another bottle from the under the counter. "Here's something everyone needs from time to time. This pleasant-tasting medicine is excellent for colds and flu." Next, he placed a number of jars and bottles on the counter top and touched each in turn. "Cream for back and muscle aches; this solution for stains on carpets and furniture; here's an oil that will fix squeaky door hinges and stiff locks forever." He paused for a moment and was pleased to see the looks of amazement on the faces of his soon-to-be customers. "And for the outside," he continued, and tapped a small box, "This package is a true miracle that will have your house repainted in minutes. And last but not least," Jack held up a little paper packet, "What's in here can transform your garden with a host of beautiful, colourful flowers that will grow overnight."

As people began to move towards the counter, Jack announced: "Because I can see that you're such good people, I declare a one-day-only sale. Everything on offer is at the low price of five dollars per item. I think you'll agree that's an opportunity not to be missed."

Nearly everyone in town bought something, some more than one item; and by the end of the day Flash Jack had made a lot of money. His last customer was a policeman who was hoping the bottle of oil would fix up the creaking door hinges of the police station. "I assure you, officer," said Jack. "One drop on each hinge and they'll never creak again. Oh, by the way," he added, "Is there by any chance a cafe or restaurant where I can get an evening meal?" Apparently there was. Jack shut up shop by dropping down the shelter and clipped it to the side of the van before walking to the cafe he'd been told about. A few people he met along the way asked him how long he would be staying, to which he replied: "I'll open the shop again tomorrow morning in case anyone needs something; and I plan to leave after midday."

While eating his meal in the cafe a couple of his customers spotted him and came over. One was the bald man who pointed to his head. "I rubbed it on like the label said, but nothing's happened."

Jack smiled. "Give it time, Sir." He turned to a lady who had bought a packet of flower seeds and said: "Yes, Madam, you've done it right and tomorrow you should have a wonderful display of flowers wherever you've spread the seeds, just you wait and see." Left to enjoy his meal in peace, when he'd finished he tried to pay for it; but the waitress told him that, because he'd brought such joy to the folk in town there was no charge. "Thank you," said Jack, "Very kind of you. Goodwill is certainly the right name for this town of yours."

His bed was in the van and Jack slept soundly that night. He was, however, woken early by a thumping as someone hammered on the side of the van. Jack rolled out of bed and went to look out of the window at the front. Quite a few people were there, including the policeman; and none of them seemed at all happy. Thinking he might be safer staying in the van, Jack rolled down the window. "Erm..., is there a problem?" he enquired.

"I should say so," growled the policeman. "That oil you sold me was supposed to stop my door hinges from creaking."

"And did it?" Jack asked.

"You bet it did!" snarled the policeman. "I put one drop on each hinge like you said and they stopped creaking alright because the hinges seized up and I couldn't open any of the doors! I had to break a window to get out of the police station!"

"And look at my head!" said the bald-headed man. "Your potion doesn't work – not a hair in sight. You lied about it and I want my money back!"

"Er, wait a minute," said Jack, "I didn't lie."

"You said it was guaranteed to grow hair on a billiard ball," insisted the man.

"And did you try it on a billiard ball?" asked Jack.

"No!" growled the man, "Because I don't have one!"

Next came the lady who had bought the packet of seeds. "A display of beautiful flowers it says on the packet. It doesn't say those flowers are weeds..."

"But you have to admit that they are still flowers," explained Jack.

Another annoyed customer complained that the solution for stains didn't get rid of them, but instead just added more and bigger stains. And three people had bought the package for a more-or-less instant repaint of their houses. One declared: "I went by the instructions and pulled the tab. Next thing, a huge cloud of smoke billowed out and drifted right over the house; and when it had gone everything it had touched was painted bright pink; including the glass on all the windows of the house and my car; and I've now got a pink dog!"

Never before had there been such an angry gathering in Goodwill. Everyone seemed to be complaining. Anyone who had taken the cold and flu medicines caught colds and flu. "I never claimed it was a cure," said Jack, "And those of you who rubbed on the cream and have now got aching backs and muscles; well, that's just what you paid for."

"You're a cheat and a fraudster," snarled the policeman, "And I demand that you do the right thing and give these good people their money back."

"Oh, no," stated Jack firmly. "I have been perfectly honest. Everything I sold did the job it was supposed to, so I'm not giving any refunds. What I will do, though, is leave this ungrateful town right now!" And with that, he climbed into the driver's seat and started up the van's engine. Clouds of black smoke belched from the back as he began to drive forward.

"Stop!" ordered the policeman. "Cars and vans making smoke is against the law and carries a..." He paused to think, then continued: "...twenty-dollar, on-the-spot fine. And you're not going anywhere until you've paid it."

Jack grumbled and argued, but the policeman wouldn't budge, so he had no option but to pay the fine; after which he asked: "Am I right to go now, officer?" The policeman stood to one side and waved Jack on. The van hadn't gone far when the policeman ran past and stopped it again. Jack groaned. "What now?"

"Going too fast," stated the policeman. "Walking pace only within the town limits. That's a thirty-dollar fine, payable immediately."

Jack paid up, and once he had been allowed to leave, he began crawling at a snail's pace through the town. He had only just made a left-hand turn when the policeman stopped him yet again. "This is a one-way street," he declared stonily.

"But I'm only going one way," pleaded Jack.

"Which is actually the wrong way," chimed the officer. "Another forty dollars, if you please; plus twenty dollars more for stopping in a no-parking zone."

"But *you* stopped me!" droned Jack. "I don't believe this! You're not going to let me leave this miserable town until you've taken all my money, are you?"

"Well," said the policeman thoughtfully. "I might consider being more lenient on you, provided you refund the money you took from these people; under false pretences, I might add. It's your choice, *Sir*."

It didn't take Jack long to decide. In half an hour he had returned everyone's money and was hoping this would satisfy the policeman; so he asked him: "Now I've done what you suggested I'm almost broke. I don't suppose you'd consider giving me back some of the money I've paid for your unreasonable, trumped up fines?"

"No, I don't suppose I would, *Sir*," said the policeman. "Now, I recommend you be on your way before you commit any more unlawful acts."

Jack snorted in despair. "Very well, I'm going, right? At walking pace, right? Not stopping where I'm not allowed to, right?" He began driving away and leaned out of the window to snarl: "And I won't be coming back!"

A huge cheer and lots of clapping erupted from the crowd in the street. The policeman saluted Jack and called after him: "A very wise decision, *Sir*. You have a nice day. I know we will... now."