

## Easy Money

I didn't have much time to weigh out options. I only had eight days left. Actually, only seven, on Sunday's- there wasn't much of a way to make money. The bills were still piling up from last month. Priority 1 was the rent, a total of \$977, added on utilities made it \$1177, along with my phone bill, which was an extra 70.

I owed a total of \$1240, which I did not have and couldn't borrow.

I was strapped for cash. I had been laid off from my job a month ago. It was happening to everyone. Men and women were losing their long term pay outs to a struggling economy. My company decided to pack up their office and lay off hundreds of hard worked paychecks to save a few pennies moving to another state. It was frustrating and I had to eat.

It felt strange looking for a job. Everywhere I applied, they gave me the same series of rejections. A combination of, "I'm sorry Mr. Samuels..." or "We regret to inform you Mr. Samuels..." were the recurring answers to my inquiries. I was either overqualified or did not have enough experience.

I never really understood those sayings, "Overqualified" or "Not enough experience". How are you overqualified to do something? How do you get experience, if no one is willing to give it you?

Time was running out.

The landlord kept his secretary calling with her shrill voice; she always left a message, "Mr. Samuels, this is Megan from your Landlord's Office. The rent is late; again, failure to pay

five days after the due date will result in an eviction.” I always found myself thanking Megan for a fact I already knew. I liked my cell phone company’s automated approach better.

I could always hang up on it.

I was struggling to make ends meet.

I wasn’t sure where my next meal was going to come from, yet alone my next paycheck. It was day one and I was really out of options. I was 25, working full time, obtaining my Master’s, and had received my undergraduate degree. I had been away from home since the age of 18 and had already asked my parents for too many monetary bailouts.

They were strapped for cash too. My father hadn’t worked in almost a decade and my mother still had my younger siblings to support. I was on my own, because I couldn’t bear to hear her on the other end of the phone, “Jackie, baby, it’s fine. I don’t have much, but I’ll send what I can.” No not this time. I had to do this on my own.

I knew of a couple of ways to make quick cash, at least to keep the bill collectors at bay and my phone partially connected in case I got any unlikely callbacks from interviews. The blood bank on Tumblin Ave was my first stop on day one. I hated it there. I had only been a few times before, when my funds were low and I needed an extra 20 or 25 bucks for gas. I couldn’t believe that’s how much they paid the first time I went. It seemed somewhat cheap. I was the one going through all the pain of having a needle poked in my arm and having a tube wrapped tight around my bicep like some junky.

I hated everything about it. From the junk food box littered parking lot, to the bleach and ammonia aroma filled rooms. It was a place where you could find every bottom feeder, fresh

faced con man, and probation convict. Half of them were bums looking to get a cheap pint of alcohol for their late night festivities. I didn't feel like one of *them*. I was a nine-to-fiver and a young black college student. I didn't belong there.

The trick to the blood bank was to arrive early. The doors opened at 7 am, I was there at 5:30. Once inside, the customary punch of personal information into a computer. No time to use the bathroom or grab a snack. They always made people read the chart on HIV prevention and the checklist of things a potential donor couldn't have done before you arrived:

*Ever shared needles?*

No. Of course not.

*Have you ever, at any time since 1983, paid for or solicited sex?*

What? How about before 1983?

*Have you ever had sex with a woman from the following countries? Rwanda, Kenya, the United Kingdom?*

I don't think so. I never thought to ask where they were from.

*Have you visited an area where Malaria has been found within the last year?*

Well, I sure hope not.

It felt like an unlikely game of 20 questions.

I didn't like being there with all of those mouth breathers. It seemed like they were all eying me as if I were the one who was in the wrong for being among them. The few times I had been there, I managed to give a few people names.

There was Man with Orthopedic foot problem who always hobbled in right before I was called to the back. Stained Shirt Guy, he had a different colored shirt with a stain in the exact same spot. I couldn't tell if it was deliberate or he had the luck of spilling things in identical places. Frizzy Redhead Woman and Toothless Lady gossiped onward in the waiting area about their children.

Ghetto Guy always had a snare on his face and there was a scar above his right eye. He wore a bandanna and had braids twisted tightly in his head. He walked with a limp, I wondered if he had been shot in the past. Wannabe Singer Chick sat and listened to her music on full blast. She sang an audible note or two on occasion. Sometimes I wondered if they had names for me. Like "Black Guy Who Thinks He's Too Good for Us" or "Headphone's Dude".

"Number Five." The nurse would call, "Oh, hey Jack, long time no see."

"Hey, Ms. Martha," I would mumble to the nurse. I was always embarrassed to see her. She had helped me several times before and it didn't help that she was extremely cute. She checked my blood pressure, then my weight, and poked my finger for blood to check the cells. She would send me out with bag in hand to lay on the poor man's Lazy Boy. The hardest part was getting the needle inserted. I wasn't afraid of them at all. I never had been, but that didn't make them hurt any less. I laid there for an hour, while the vampire machine sucked my blood

through a tube, down a filter, into a bottle, and then reversed pumping cold saline fluid back into my arms. I guess that part was cool.

It was done, 25 bucks would be subtracted from the \$1240 I owed, and I could come back in 2 days and get 25 more.

I was still short. Really, I had two options for day two. One, I could go down to the sperm bank and masturbate into a plastic cup for \$100. Not being much of a fan of the act like most guys, even if it did help some poor moms and dads gain a chance at having a kid, it was debasing and demoralizing. I had tried once. I remember catching the number 4 bus to the Orange Line Downtown, switching to the Red Line, than getting on the Green Line trolley going up town near Boston University. I walked ten blocks, up to the doors, and chickened out. I couldn't go in. The entire way there, I kept thinking about the feeling of having a kid run around town that was partly mine.

I first came across my second option when I searched the internet want ads. It was a sly, strange, and lucrative business. I was willing to do what others were not. I searched the Science section on a classified ads website.

Science was usually cool. I had done it several times before. All you had to do was call the number, then travel to one of the local Universities, usually Boston or Harvard, because students there were always looking to have a human guinea pig. They paid \$35, sometimes \$50 to \$100. Easy money if I got there first.

Sleep studies were the true jackpot. All I had to do was sleep in a room with a bunch of other people and let the Sleep Scientists survey my sleeping habits. I enjoyed it for the most part; sleeping for money was a no brainier.

Loud chuckles and shouts of Spanglish twisted the corner of the waiting room lobby and traced its way to my ears as I stepped off the elevator. I knew they belonged to the short Puerto Rican bald guy. He was loud. "...And let me tell you Papi, this guy had *cojones* the size of tomorrow. The doctor tells him. Listen to what he tells him! He tells him that the only way he could fix em was by cutting em." He wheezed. He was chubby, sweaty, with pit stains that yellowed his T-Shirt. He spit when he talked.

At first, I tried to avoid eye contact. I always had one of those faces that made everybody feel like I could be talked to. My ex-girlfriend always said it was because I stared, even though I didn't think I did, but he caught me right away.

"Amigo, you here for the sleep study." He said nodding his head toward me.

"Yeah."

"What's your problem?"

"Nothing, just money."

"Me. I snore." He said.

An understatement.

They dressed the six of us in all white. Benny was to my right. The beds weren't plush, but they were comfortable at least. I laid there counting ceiling tiles and then I heard it. At first, I

thought the Sleep Scientists were running a test, but I looked to my right. Benny had his mouth agape and out of it came the most horrible sound. A thundering rumble, a rusty train churning on old tracks, a roaring F15 jet. It was a snoring shout. I wondered how he was able to sleep through the sound of himself. I had to listen to this for a full 6 hours. There was no way I was going to sleep through it. I eventually had to ask the Sleep Scientists for earplugs. They affirmed. I may have dozed off once or twice, but I'm not sure.

\$150. \$1090 left and 5 days to go. Day 3 was my temporary workday. I called a number every morning and connected with my agent Agnes. She worked for a temp agency that filled various job positions including receptionists, data entry clerks, and even custodians. She was a woman I could only describe as round. Her eyes were circular blue globs sticking out of a rotund face. Her red smeared lips sunk into a grin when she spoke. She had a chin that did not end or begin; it just sunk into her chest. I didn't like her and I assumed she wasn't too fond of me. I called when I wanted.

Today's duties were as an undercover agent for the ABC store. It seemed to be a Godsend. It paid 11 dollars an hour. I had 25 stores to visit. At each location, I had to try to solicit Alcohol or Tobacco and get the cashier to provide it without asking for my ID. If they did, I had to inform them of my identity and let them know to do so in the future; I then allowed them to sign my form. Twenty-five stores, 1 hour each at 11 dollars an hour. By the end of the day, I would have 275 dollars. Easy money.

I read the list as it printed out. I had locations from Boston to Cambridge, Hyde Park to Summerville. If I took the train and hit those furthest away, I could be back to the office for the

check before 7pm. I couldn't wait. I hopped the Orange line first. It went through downtown. The train system was okay as long as it wasn't late at night. I had a backpack full of documents for verification of my location. I had heard from friends it was easy, but the storeowners could turn into real jerks. They were mostly Indian people known for their "Buy something or get out." accents and wary of any outsiders in their store. They only wanted paying customers.

Luckily, the job was just a temporary position. I couldn't see myself doing this forever. Pretending to be something I was not, helping stop teenagers from drinking and smoking. I was one of them, once upon a time, a college freshman trying to impress a girl with alcohol and cigarettes. Where would I be without the store clerk who looked the other direction?

The first 10 stores went perfect. They were relatively close to one another in good suburban neighborhoods. The people in the streets smiled, the sun shined, it seemed like a scene from a movie. I enjoyed the work. I'd place a pack of beer on the counter and then would ask for cigarettes. The clerk would ask for my ID and I'd identify myself. I'd let him know who I was and then have him sign.

My next set of stores would present the most problems. Their owners were old Asian men who had been in the United States for 3 decades and still only spoke enough English to tell you the price after they rang it up on the register. "Fye Forty Fye." They'd say with a scowl, their slanting eyes angled awkwardly. I walked into the last of nine shops, which all seemed to be clerked by the same Scowling Chinese man. Hair slicked back, eyes watching me as I entered afraid I'd "Grab & Go" like the neighborhood hoodlums. I picked up a case of beer and set it out on the counter.



“Marlboro Lights, please,” I asked.

“Ah,” he turned, searched his shelves, and whispered, “Malboro Lyes.” He pulled them off the shelf and handed them to me, “Fowe Aydee Fowe” he said reaching his hand toward me. I looked at him and tried to give him a chance to ask for my ID. He did not.

“I’m with the ABC Store;” I said slowly, “Your store is in violation.”

The man’s face instantly turned sour, his slant eyes opened in anger. I watched as he reached under the counter and his hand appeared with a large walking stick. “Fif time dis month.” He shouted. I felt stuck in place, maybe a little nauseous from the blood I had given. The man swung and somehow it only caught my shoulder. I looked at him and thought I should kick his ass, but decided against it as he winded up to swing again. I ran, I looked back to see him as he shouted something in Chinese behind me. I turned into an alley and caught my breath. Luckily, I hadn’t left much more behind than my pride and still had the forms with me. The problem was I had to get all the signatures in order to get the money. It was the one stipulation that could deny me the full amount. I looked at the form:

**Name:**

**Store Location #:**

**Time of Day:**

**Purchase:**

**Owner:**

**Vendor:**

*Signature:*

I cursed to myself. I was halfway there. Five more stores and I would have the money.  
275 dollars. Easy money.

I walked slowly back toward the store. Chinese Stick man had retired inside. I wondered if I could talk him into just signing and I wouldn't report him. Maybe it was cheating, but I needed the money. I peaked in the store window. The Chinese man had returned to his perch, sitting atop a stool behind the counter. I entered with hands raised, he reached for the stick.

“Hold on man, maybe we can talk this over.”

He stopped and glared, “What there to talk about?”

“Maybe I can help you. I'm going to have to report this if you don't sign.”

His eyebrows angled into a thought. “No tell?” He asked.

I paused, “No. Just sign.” I said and asked myself if I was doing the right thing,

He reached underneath the counter as if going for the stick again, but instead he pulled out a dusty cigar box, “How much? Fitty Dollar?” he asked.

“No.” I answered, “Just Sign.”

“Sitty Dollar. You not tell.” He offered.

I looked at him. With that additional \$60, I would only be closer to my goal. “Alright,” I set the form down, he signed and pinned the money to the top. I pocketed it and walked out the

store feeling uneasy. I don't know why I cared so much. Maybe it was some sort of loyalty to the temp job I hated so much or I was bothered about cheating a store clerk out of money that he didn't need to give me for a duty that I didn't even like doing. Nevertheless, I needed the money.

After the last five stores, I returned to the temp office and turned in my forms to Agnes. She was chomping down a double cheeseburger. I watched her eat as her chin chest jiggled and gagged back the compulsion to vomit. "I see you did your job today Mr. Samuels." She said spitting chunks of bread on her desk.

"As always Agnes, a loyal slave to the temp office." I said sarcastically and she scowled.

"Here," she handed me the check, "Did you have any problems?"

"The normal craziness." I answered as I headed for the door with my check in hand.

Day 4. I got a reminder call from my buddy Jules the previous night. He was a friend of mine who ran a side business. The only true problem was that he had a knack for ending up in the wrong place at the right time. He was a smart guy. It was rumored that he spent most of his infancy in the college classroom with his single mother and when the professors asked a question he would always gurgle a yes or no. He was a whiz kid protégé.

Jules walked to the beat of his own drum, and his intelligence mixed with a tad bit of ADD, often put him on the path to some place not good. Either way, he was really my last option. He had called a week ago, "How's it going Jackie?"

"Things have been better. What's up?"

"Well, I was wondering if you'd like to do some work with me."

At the time, I didn't need the money or the extra work so I turned him down. Jules was primarily a landscaper. He had his own business going in the local area. His slogan was, "THERE ARE NO BUT'S, YOUR GRASS NEEDS A CUT.", the name of the company was Total Solution Landscaping. He was number 2 in town and fast approaching number 1. Still with Jules ability for finding trouble, I wasn't sure what exactly he had in mind for me to do. It could be any number of things, but at this point, I was actually willing to do anything just to make the money I needed.

He arrived in a faded blue taxicab van that screeched when he drove. It was his mother's business vehicle, but she loaned it to him to run his errands. Occasionally, he doubled as a fill in driver at night. It had a ladder strapped to the top, which he kept up there even when he had a taxi fare. Imagine calling for a cab and a 6 ft. black man, with uncut hair and a hardened face mumbles out, "Where too?"

He had a pair of bass speakers in the back that you could hear from blocks away as he approached his location. Jules was dangerous behind the wheel at times. He had been stopped on several occasions for speeding over the limit and driving on a suspended license. Last year, he had accumulated eight in total. Most suspended, some came with a short stint in jail. It seemed each time Jules was about to go legit, a cop would pull him over.

"Two-hundred dollars," He offered. "For an honest day's work."

I smirked, I didn't care what it was, I needed the money, but I asked, "What exactly is an honest day's work for you Jules?"

“Like it says on the sign, landscaping.” He answered pulling out of the driveway with me in the passenger seat. He hit the gas immediately just as I expected. We tore down the street and hit the corner at a slight skid. His music blared and he mumbled so I had to listen closely, “There’s a pile of mulch behind the Wal-Mart. We’ve gotta get it stored in the truck and to the owners house before the day is out. You think you can handle it.”

I answered, “Yes,” unsure of the situation, “Why is the pile behind the Wal-Mart?”

“Because it’s theirs.” He answered.

“Who’s?”

“Wal-Mart’s.”

“Do they know you’re taking it? Does the guy work for them or something?”

He sped along without an answer.

The moment we arrived, I felt the situation was very sketchy. The pile was between two trees. “Grab a shovel.” Jules called.

I hesitated. I knew what he had in mind was not exactly legal. He was technically stealing from Wal-Mart to save him the cost in purchasing it himself. “I don’t know Jules.”

“Jackie, I do this all the time.”

I was still skeptical, but it was easy money. We began to shovel with a hurried effort not wanting to be caught. Every time I heard a car, I would look up anxiously wondering if it was a cop. I shoveled until my arms hurt and Jules said, “Alright, I’m going to start the truck, we’re

almost done.” I shoveled the last bit in, and then took a sip of water while Jules pulled out of the grass. He drove forward then looked at me with a blank expression, he turned to the right and I followed his gaze. Two police officers approached. I watched and felt the thoughts of “Fight, flight, or freeze arise.”, but I couldn’t move.

“Freeze!” The cop yelled.

Ironic, I was already doing as he said. I put my hands up. They put cuffs on us both and tossed us in separate vehicles. “Why are you here?” one of them asked.

“Just doing work for my buddy’s landscaping business.”

“Do you know who owns this mulch pile?”

“No,” I lied.

“The company, they saw you guys back here and called us out. Do you know the charge for stealing from private property?”

I swallowed hard, “No, sir.”

He grunted, “You will.”

“I didn’t know it was stolen, my buddy said he had a job. I came.”

“So you follow everything your friend says?”

“He’s my boss today sir, I’m broke,” I answered as he eyed me, “It was Easy money.”