

Making Money

It is a hot night in mid-July and my A/C unit hasn't worked properly since I moved in. I can't sleep because of the noise coming from the motel parking lot. There is loud music playing, dogs barking, two little kids running around unsupervised. It seems like everyone is out on the street tonight. There is a massage parlor, a pawn shop, a liquor store, and several fast food restaurants, all within walking distance. I sit in my room and watch the drug dealers standing on the corner. When a car pulls up it is quickly surrounded on all sides by hungry men looking to make money. I recognize a few faces out there. My neighbor, Shelley, is out there; one of her friends has a golf club in his hands. It won't be long before he tees off on someone's face.

I've been at this motel three months. I have a job, but I don't have enough money to rent a place. Most places want first and last months rent plus a security deposit. They want references. They want to know my credit score and my work history. That's a problem. I've never been able to hold a job for more than six months and I never stay in one place because I always run out of money. I didn't graduate high school, so the only jobs I'm offered are the low paying shit jobs that no one else wants. I'm currently working as a breakfast cook at a nursing home. The pay is a little better than McDonalds, but like McDonalds they offer no real benefits.

I'd quit my job tomorrow if I could, but what would I do? I've tried everything— and I've failed miserably. My resume is thirty-six pages long. I have no aptitude for math, science, art, literature, or music. Nothing makes sense to me; I'm socially awkward and I can't remember shit. I had a teacher in grade school who called me a "hopeless idiot." She said this in front of the entire class. I don't know if I became a hopeless idiot because of her suggestion or if she was merely pointing out something I hadn't considered, but it wasn't long before everyone held the same opinion of me, including myself.

I ride my bicycle to work Sunday morning. I hear the phone ringing in the office before I turn the light on. The chef and the supervisors have weekends off. The ladies in the front office aren't here either. The B team is here on weekends, it is a team of idiots. None of us make more than \$13/hr.

When I turn the kitchen light on, the mice scatter and run under the stove. I pick up the phone:

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“St. Anthony’s kitchen. Shane speaking.”

“Hey, Shane, it’s Glen. I can’t come to work today.”

“Okay...”

“Bye.”

“Okay, later.”

I leave chef a note for Monday morning; there’s a form I have to fill out. Then I fix myself a bacon, egg, and cheese on a croissant. The prep cook comes in at 5:30. Her name is Christie. She lives in a dilapidated trailer and commutes thirty miles from Roundup, a town with a population of 500. Her chef coat is covered in dog hair; her teeth are jagged brown stumps; and she’s got black gunk under her fingernails. We don’t hate each other, but we’re not friends. We say hello and work without talking. She makes her soup with whatever leftovers are on hand and adds a generous helping of Tabasco. I try not to watch but I am equally fascinated and repulsed by her technique, the way she uses the tip of her knife to remove mold from zucchini before dicing it and tossing it in the pot. It’s like she’s making soup for prisoners of war and this moldy zucchini is all we have.

The phone rings and we both look at each other and groan. Every time the phone rings it means we’re going to be shorthanded. I answer it. “St. Anthony’s kitchen. Shane speaking.”

“Hi. It’s Sara. I can’t come to work, my grandma died.”

“Oh, that’s terrible. I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah.”

“I hope she didn’t suffer.”

“No. Not too bad.”

“Okay, good. And you’re going to bring chef a copy of the death certificate, right?”

“Ah...I wasn’t planning on it.”

“Sara, I think you’d be better off telling chef you were abducting by aliens.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s a lot more believable than this bullshit story about your dead grandma. This is the second time in two months that your grandma’s died. No one’s going to believe you.”

“Ah...this is the other grandma.”

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“Oh, okay. That’s better. The *other* grandma. That makes more sense.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re an idiot, Sara.” I hang up the phone. I write chef a note explaining the alien abduction.

I draw a picture of a flying saucer and an alien with big eyes.

“Who was that?” Christie asks.

“Our dishwasher isn’t coming in today. She was abducted by aliens.”

“What?”

“Her grandma died.”

“Oh. Again?”

“That’s what she says. And Glen’s not coming in either. He called. I forgot to tell you.”

“What’s with him?”

“He didn’t say, just said he wasn’t coming in.”

“You didn’t ask?”

“Why bother? If he can’t work, he can’t work.”

“They hire the most messed up people they can find, ever notice that?”

“Ya know, now that you mention it—”

“It’s like they go out of their way to hire people who can’t perform their job.”

I remove a tray of bacon from the oven. I say, “St. Anthony’s should re-write their job application so that there’s only one question on it, make it real simple: ‘Are you willing to work for less money?’ Because that’s all they really want to know. They don’t care how many felonies you have. They don’t mind if you’re abusing prescription pills or if you’re a kleptomaniac. If you like to set animals on fire, that’s fine. Physical deformities, neurological disorders, multiple personalities, bed wetters, cry babies— no problem. Welcome aboard. We salute you. As long as you’re willing—”

Before I finish my thought the phone rings.

“There has to be an easier way to make money.”

When I get home from work, my neighbor is sleeping on my doorstep, using her purse for a pillow. I give Shelley a gentle kick in the ribs, just to make sure she’s not dead. Her eyes open slowly.

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She looks awful; her face is bloated and sweaty. This is a woman whose diet consists of beer, fast food, and cigarettes.

When she sees me standing over her I say, “What are you doing?”

“I’m locked out of my room.”

“Shelley, this is my room. That’s your room.” I point to her door.

“I know, but I lost my key again.”

I unlock my door and wheel my bike inside. She follows me. “Why don’t you see someone at the front desk and tell them you lost your key?”

“Cause they’ll charge me money to change the locks.”

“Well, you’ll have to tell them sooner or later. You can’t move in with me.”

“I don’t want to move in with you, I want to find my fucking keys.” She sits down on my bed.

I turn the TV on. There are two beers in the mini-fridge. I pull one out and sit on the bed.

“You’re not going to offer me a beer?” she asks. I hand her mine and grab another one.

“Hey, can I take a shower?” she asks.

“You don’t have any clean clothes.”

“I’ll wear these clothes. I just want to take a shower.”

“Yeah, go ahead.”

She takes her beer with her. I wait until I hear the water running. While she's in the shower I go through her purse. She has a pipe, cigarettes, lipstick, receipts, twelve dollars, and liquid methadone. Her son is trying to kick a heroin addiction and Shelley borrows it when she’s feeling depressed—which is pretty much all the time. They’ve been getting high together since he was thirteen. Shelley’s childhood was just as awful as her son’s, and she’ll tell you all about it when she’s had too much to drink. In fact, it’s all she wants to talk about when she’s drinking: the physical and sexual abuse she had to endure as a young girl. She’s attempted suicide twice; she’s been in rehab. She’s almost forty years old, but looks older. Her drug of choice is alcohol, but she dabbles in everything. She can finish a twelve pack of beer with no problem. On a bad night she’ll drink to the point of blacking out and then go on a rampage that would make Keith Moon proud. But she’s the only friend I have so I don’t like to lecture her. It wouldn’t do any good anyway.

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She comes out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her head and no clothes on. This isn't the first time I've seen her naked. She gets into bed and pulls the covers up to her chin. "What are we doing tonight?"

"I have to work tomorrow."

"I'm bored," she says. "I wanna go out."

"Shocker."

"Let's go have a beer."

"I don't have any money."

"I'll pay," she says.

"You don't have any money."

"Yes, I do. I got a new credit card."

"A credit card is not money."

"Sure it is. Same thing."

"You're going to spend money you don't have and then you're going to pay it back at 20% interest?"

"Pay them back?" she laughs. "I'm not paying them jack shit!"

We're sitting in a casino called the Lion's Den. Thanks to a spare key, Shelley drove us here in her Pontiac Sunbird—the biggest piece of shit car you've ever seen. The backseat is filled with garbage. The car has numerous dents, peeling paint, a broken sideview mirror, and a warm, fetid stench that reminds me of Stilton cheese—even with the windows down. But we're here now and Shelley's buying so I won't mention how we were followed by a flock of seagulls who mistook Shelley's car for the town dump. That would be uncalled for.

The casino is almost empty. Jen, the bartender, is working a Sudoku puzzle. Shelley sits at one machine and I sit two seats away. We're discussing ways of making money.

"I think we should rob the mailman," says Shelley. "That mother fucker never locks his truck. It would be so easy. You should see all the packages—"

"And what do you think would happen if he caught you in his truck?"

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“That’s why I need you to be my decoy, keep him occupied for a few minutes.”

“Forget it. Why don’t you just get a job at St. Anthony’s? It’ll look good on your resume if you can hold a job for three weeks.”

She laughs. “Yeah, right. I can’t live on \$13/hr.”

“You’re going to end up in jail. You ever spent time in jail?” She says she has. She tells a story about getting in a bar fight and spending a weekend in jail. “A weekend is nothing,” I tell her. “If you get caught stealing packages you’re looking at years in jail. Not a couple days.” She says I’m wrong, that she’d get off with a slap on the wrist. Shelley moves to a different machine and feeds it another five dollar bill. Neither one of us are winning. I ask her, “If you could choose your profession, what would you choose? And don’t say, ‘career criminal.’ That would be too obvious.”

“Hmm, I’d like to be an artist.”

“Why an artist?”

“Because artists are lazy. They just paint pictures and chill.”

“Oh my god.” I start laughing as I try to imagine how someone like Vincent van Gogh would respond to this. An old woman yells at me, “Will you two shut the hell up! I’m trying to win some money over here!”

Shelley and I turn around. It’s a feisty old lady, maybe seventy years old. She’s got a raspy smoker’s voice. I can tell with one look that she’s a woman who grew up on the farm. Her hairstyle hasn’t changed in thirty years. Her husband probably wears Wrangler jeans and cowboy boots. I can picture them eating biscuits and gravy on Sunday morning before church. She’s still grumbling, “... trying to win some damn money over here.”

“No one’s keeping you from winning,” says Shelley. “Not my fault you’re a loser!”

“Who can concentrate with you two idiots talking so much?”

The bartender comes running over with a complimentary drink for Grandma Joad.

“Hey, where’s my free drink?” Shelley asks.

“It’s at the bar,” says Jen. “Come on.”

I cash out with \$14 and join them. Shelley looks like she wants to take this woman outside. “Let it go,” I tell her.

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“She’s lucky I don’t beat her ass.”

“Calm down. She’s an old woman.”

“I don’t give a fuck.”

“If this old lady was in a wheelchair, you’d be the first one to push her in the pool.”

“Damn right I would.”

“That anger isn’t good for you. You need to let that shit go.”

Jen says, “She happens to be one of my best customers, and she’s up \$1,200 so don’t make trouble.”

Shelley is staring at the woman and smoke is coming out of her ears. I try to engage her in conversation but it’s not happening, she’s gone to the dark side. I turn my attention to Jen. “If you could choose your profession, what would you choose?”

“I like tending bar.”

“There’s nothing else you’d rather be doing?”

“I can’t think of anything.”

“Wow. I’m impressed. I’ve never had a job I liked. I always end up working these shit jobs.”

“Are you sure it’s the job and not you?”

“If I could raise my IQ to 150, I’d like to go to Harvard. That way I could do anything. Imagine the kinds of job opportunities that await a Harvard graduate—”

Grandma is still winning money. She shouts at the machine; bells ring, whistles blare.

I tell Jen, “It’s not fair that some should have so much while others get nothing.”

“You don’t need an IQ of 150 to be successful. What about emotional intelligence?”

“Emotional intelligence? I don’t even know what that is. I want a high IQ. I want money. And women.”

Jen rolls her eyes. She pours me another beer without asking. “I’ll be right back,” she says and walks over to the prickly old woman and whispers in her ear. Shelley and I watch as Jen and Grandma go outside to smoke, leaving us alone inside the casino. Shelley leans over the bar and refills her beer.

“Probably not a good idea,” I tell her. “There are cameras everywhere.”

“Like I care.” She gets off her barstool.

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“Please don’t rob the register.” I watch as she walks over to where the old woman was sitting and puts something in her drink. “What did you do?” I ask when she returns to her chair. “What was that?”

“Shh. Nothing.”

“Did you put something in her drink?”

“No.”

“Was that methadone?”

“Hey, shut the fuck up.”

“I’m not a part of this.”

“I didn’t ask you to be a part of this.”

“I’m washing my hands. You kill this woman, it’s on you.”

“Relax, It’s just a little something to make her go night-night.”

“Yeah, and what if she goes night-night while driving home?”

“She’s not gonna get that far. I’m gonna snatch her purse before she even gets her car door open.”

“You’re crazy, Shelley. Go pour that drink out.”

“No.”

“Pour it out.”

“No. Don’t touch that drink.”

“You’re gonna end up in jail one of these days.”

“Not tonight I’m not.”

“Yeah, you’re welcome.” I take Grandma’s drink outside and pour it out on the steps. I hand Jen the empty glass without saying anything. Then I begin the four mile walk back to the Executive Motel. It gives me time to ponder other ways of leveling the playing field.