

My eyes wandered towards the wooden coffee table on which a mirror and razor lay crossed. I thought it quite strange how these gentlemen had copious amounts of the white substance lying upon the mirror but found it necessary to attract my attention tonight for the green substance in my pocket. I wasn't one to judge. I'm only here to help. I'd do anything for my friends.

Buck was happy to see me. He always was. He didn't notice that my eyes were still glued to the coffee table when he embraced me with his great bulk. Sweaty, fat Buck. He was intimidating in his own special way, but seemed so harmless with that toothy grin of his. Perhaps if I caught him on a bad day, I would find him frightening, but our interactions were usually jovial. Mostly because they involved transactions such as this one.

-How've you been, Steve?

-Fine, yourself?

-Can't complain. Been a busy night, running around.

-Round and round, up and down, the night is young and still you frown!

I could never tell if Buck was high when he spoke like this or if this was just his general mannerism, breaking into rhyme and song when the occasion didn't necessarily call for it. But it wouldn't surprise me if these were just the cocaine-fueled ramblings of an otherwise charismatic fellow since our interactions were somewhat limited to these transactions.

-I've been told I have a resting 'bitch face.'

-‘Bitch face’ is something reserved for the ladies, dear Steven. Or is it Stephen? The absurdity of it. The same name pronounced and spelled two different ways. Which do you prefer?

-Steve

-Have I offended you?

-No, sorry... I’m just tired. Been a long night. Like I said, I’ve been busy.

I wasn’t lying. This was my second stop for the night. I had one more. One more and then I thought perhaps a pint at Fat Jack’s would be a pleasant cap to the evening. The thing with this kind of activity is it takes way longer than you want it to, which is why I now stack as many targets as I can before gunning them down, so to speak. Before I got wise to this approach it was a long, arduous process that took up at least a few hours of my day, unpaid of course. It began with a text, and then a response, and then another text to my guy, my other friend who I knew had it, and then a response, and then a text to the original sender, and then a response, and then a horrible back and forth to establish a time and place, and then I would meet them there. I wasn’t the most efficient mule at the start of things, but I was honest, and I got everyone involved what they wanted. At the cost of only time on my part. Precious, precious time.

I was great at this kind of thing because I didn’t smoke the stuff. People could trust me. They all knew I didn’t smoke. I used to. Not sure why I stopped. I suppose I just don’t like it any more. But many of my friends do, and I have no problem with that. And I have no problem with my friends who sell it. And I have no problem creating a safe and anonymous bridge between the two.

-Well, shit man, do you wanna sit down for a minute. Hang out. Put your feet up. I mean, I appreciate you bringing the stuff down, but it doesn't mean I don't wanna hang out. Shit man, sit down, have a beer. You wanna line?

I thought he'd never ask.

Just because I don't partake in one substance doesn't mean I don't partake in any. And not liking the green substance doesn't mean I'm afraid to go inside my head like some people accuse me of. Quite the contrary. I love hallucinogens. Mushrooms are my jam. Salvia, DMT, Acid. No trip is too scary for me. Maybe that's why I dislike pot. It gets me close to that state of mind, close to opening up the mind's eye, but not quite, and then I just feel slow and hungry. Unappealing. Cocaine on the other hand, can't get enough of it. If I wasn't so broke, I'd be an addict. Good thing I can't afford it.

I tried to keep my eyes away from the wooden coffee table when he said the words. Instead I maintained composure and drew the plastic bag from my jacket pocket to let him know I was here to provide him a service, not the other way around.

-I mean, I won't say no, but weren't you interested in something else?

-Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. Of course man. I almost forgot. See and you think I just only think about business with you. Silly, silly, frowny, frowny Stephen. Or wait, Steven.

-Steve.

-Steve! Steve. Yeah, man, what were the damages again?

-Forty-five.

-Forty-five?

-Forty-five

-Odd number, not forty nor fifty, but forty-five. Making a fiver on top are we?

Can't blame you.

I actually wasn't. My guy always gave me a sack for forty-five even, every time. That's the money I gave to him and the money I got from the people I gave the sack to. I never took anything off the top. My guy even encouraged it. It was unsaid at first, but I think after a while he assumed I was muling for him for what was essentially nothing. One day he said,

-You know, I'll always charge you forty-five, but put whatever on top of that you want. Doesn't matter to me.

-Okay.

I never pushed the matter further. And I never charged anyone a buck over forty-five. Until...

-I'm pretty sure I texted you that exact number

I know that Buck wasn't disappointed with the amount, he was just making conversation.

-Just kidding, friend. Forty-five, here in my pocket, ready for you. You're never late. You're always early. Why would I even think to jerk you around.

I carefully collected the roll of bills before casually tossing the sack on the wooden table. The motion was fluid and eye contact between Buck and I remained unbroken. I've done this many times, but still it feels awkward. Instead of making the situation more complicated, I simply smile and go about as if it were any normal transaction. This time was no different. I didn't count it. I trusted Buck. He had no reason to short me since I was always there for him. I'd do anything for my friends.

-Seriously, sit down and have a line. Here, I'll cut one up for you.

I'm glad I didn't have to say anything. It's not like I have anything to hide. I'm not putting up a front for Buck. It's more of a personal thing. I need to convince myself that I don't really care. Of course I want a line!

-If you insist.

Coffee tables. Low and cluttered coffee tables bordered on two or three sides by unkempt couches. This is the common setting. Nobody does drugs in the dining room. However, it is not just the partaking of substances that calls for this backdrop, it is the entire lifestyle. This is where the night started. As though the exact same set were used with different actors.

Big Leo ate with sauerkraut a plump polish sausage. There were no substances on his coffee table when I set foot in his living room at the beginning of the night. I did not knock because I knew it was all right for me to come in. I had already texted him earlier and he had told me before I was always welcome. I was after all helping him more than he was helping me. I was getting nothing out of it, except I suppose piece of mind that I was technically committing no crime.

Big Leo and I had a relationship outside of these transactions. That is what made them easier. I was just helping a friend.

-How's it going, Steve?

-Great, you? How's business.

He laughed. Mouth full of sausage and sauerkraut.

-As good as it can be.

Big Leo had ambitions bigger than his time and money could provide. He stumbled upon this little venture as innocently as I did. We were not in over our heads, we were exactly as deep as we chose to be. Him for the money, and me for the...

-Just for future reference, it's always gonna be the same price. I only do sacks for 45 and you can tell people whatever you want.

-Oh, sorry.

-No, it's fine. Honestly I don't think I'm on anyone's radar. The guy I buy from is a different story. Cause he's not just selling weed. He's moving heroin, cocaine, all of it. He's definitely gotta be more careful than me, but you know, still. Not worth taking any chances.

-I had no idea. Yeah, I'll never mention numbers again.

With Buck I mentioned numbers. With all three of them I did that night. I chose Friday night to deliver to them all. If it's a rush situation I see if I can get Leo to meet up,

but usually try to respect his time. I told everyone 'by Friday' and then Leo agreed to meet 'on Friday.' It was easier for everyone.

Buck arranged two generous lines upon the mirror for me.

-One for each nostril. No fun to just burn the one.

When I was a child, it seemed normal that I was opposed to drugs and smoking and alcohol, or at least they just weren't part of my world. When they became a part of my world, when they reached inside my bubble, I was mostly afraid. But I always wanted to do them. Like any other child, and then adolescent, and then young adult, I just wanted to be cool. To be accepted. The easy way out would be to claim that I was straight edge. Several of my peers went this direction and put X's on their hands. They somehow managed to balance their natural fear of these substances with their desire to be cool. These kids annoyed the shit out of me. I balanced this fear and desire another way. I simply lied about doing drugs. And eventually the lies disappeared and were replaced with real experiences like benign little changelings throughout my youth. Its easier to think about the why and how of these things while I'm drunk or high, or something else. I overanalyze these ideas far more in a state of inebriation, not like when I'm sober when I mostly worry about life and such and what to do next and everything else. I don't think I'm an alcoholic or an addict. No one does. I go through days of sobriety and then days of binging. Neither of those has anything to do with these trips.

When you inhale the powder, first it burns, but then it grows numb. I always liked the sensation. And then the initial high. And then the drip, depending on how good the

substance is. And then the words come faster. And the thinking becomes circular and optimistic.

This was not my sin of the night. In fact it made the rest of my errands possible. It was late and I was getting tired, but I didn't feel like drinking myself awake. A gin and Red Bull would usually do the trick. But I didn't want to get sloppy. Perhaps later, I would reward myself at Fat Jack's. I'm sure some friends of mine would be there.

I can never tell if time slows down or speeds up. Sometimes it feels like it moves slower. Or I expect it to move faster because I'm high, and I check my phone and only a half hour has past.

-Sorry Buck, I gotta go.

-Of course, of course. I understand. You got places to be. Thanks for hanging out, friend. Please, please! Feel free to call me anytime. I don't want you to think I only hit you up cause of stuff like this. I'm not like that, Steven. I'm not like that at all!

-Thanks again. I'd stay, but I have to work in the morning, and I have to get to my last stop.

That was a lie. I didn't have to work in the morning. I just disliked Buck. I found him annoying and the white substance he so graciously offered me somehow reaffirmed that sentiment.

I feel like a good line is the perfect amount of cocaine. Yes, the perfect amount. Cause a bump will leave you unsatisfied and thinking only about how to get more and yes, two lines just means you had a weak night. Then of course there's the entire eight



ball up you and two close friend's noses, but I can't exactly call that perfect either. It is without question my favorite amount, but not perfect. No, a good line, especially if you have something to do, like I did that night, is perfect.

The third and final stop was only memorable because of my quiet little decision that haunted me for the rest of the evening. Other than that it was the most comfortable and least awkward.

The first stop was quite the opposite. I felt like I didn't even exist. I just nodded and smiled. It was a friend who somehow did not have a connection to the green substance I carried in my pocket and I was happy to oblige him. The transaction was smooth, casual, unobtrusive. And through a series of nods and faint verbal affirmations, I somehow agreed to mule for this gentlemen's copious supply of pain killers which he was only using some of. At first, of course, he asked me if I had need of any and I said I didn't and he asked if I knew anyone who did and that's how these things happen.

I'd do anything for my friends.

I charged him forty-five dollars for the sack, which is the exact same amount I paid Big Leo for it when I interrupted his feast of sausage and sauerkraut earlier that evening.

The third stop was different. I could say it wasn't my fault, but that would be lying. Forty-five dollars is a strange number and many are tripped up by it. I understand why Big Leo gives it to me for that. Five dollars seems like reasonable compensation for the service I provide to both Big Leo and the friends of mine who need these drugs. I am certain that Big Leo carefully calculates the cost of his little packages to compensate his

own time and labor, and perhaps even works it out so that I may make a miniscule amount of money myself. But this is not why I do it. It never was. Maybe it will be one day, when my artistic endeavors finally destroy my financial and emotional stability, I may have to turn to these tax-free, lucrative options. I always thought I would be above people like Big Leo, but it seems sometimes Big Leo is just an older version of myself, even if it is only by six years.

The drip finally happened as I was walking down the pleasantly-lit sidewalk to my third destination. A synthetic burn that finds its way past your mind, down your throat and into your soul. Maybe one line isn't the perfect amount.

I never said I wouldn't do drugs when I was young. I was just afraid of them, and each one I became unafraid of I did and the ones I liked I kept doing and the ones I didn't, I stopped doing. My mother once said to never pay for pot. Grow it or partake in it if it comes in your way. Maybe that's where it started. I always felt like I was above the culture in some way, like I was above the sin. I was above it all because I refused to skim a single cent off the top. Everyone can find a justification for everything they do and it is the hardest thing imaginable when you can't even fool yourself with that once rock-solid justification. Admitting your wrong is the equivalent of letting your universe shatter, because if our only connection to the universe is our perception of it and that perception is flawed in some way, then the rules of the universe change, the universe itself changes, and it is a terrible thing to experience.

My third stop was quick and painless and the beautiful older woman who probably had more connections than Big Leo himself simply ran dry and her normal

connection was out of town. This was the only stop that I arranged the night of and she texted me simply as an off chance I had some or might know somebody. Lucky her.

When I arrived we embraced and kissed each other's cheeks as old friends, family friends even. Outside a crowded club, not a few blocks from Fat Jack's. Onlookers would never know. It looked like one of us had been out of town and we were both delighted at the reunion. Her hand found her way into my pocket with the money and my hand found its way into hers with the bag.

-Fifty right?

I can't even remember if I said fifty. Maybe I did. But it was too late. And not that it was ever a real rule to begin with, but I broke it and decided that I should take the extra fiver. I'd of course put it right back into the ether by making my first pint at Fat Jack's 'on the house' as it were.

-As always.

I shouldn't have felt bad about it and I didn't. Maybe that's why what happened did happen. I didn't feel the guilt, the change in the universe. She was the one who said fifty. I simply didn't correct her. She didn't know any better and she probably thought I wasn't making a penny on the transaction. There was nothing wrong with this to perhaps all other eyes in the universe looking down on me, judging me. But it was wrong to me. The extra five dollar bill, whether it was physically in my pocket or theoretically existing as half of a tenner or a quarter of a twenty, viciously burned a hole in my pocket as I made my way through the residential blocks towards Fat Jack's. I walked away from the light of the crowded nightclub into the dark recesses of the unlit houses and towering

trees with my hands sealed within the pockets of my jacket, one clenched in a sweaty fist and the other clasped about the clumsy wad of bills that was exactly five dollars more than what I gave to Big Leo. The crime was committed. The crime was committed earlier that evening. The crime was committed even earlier when Big Leo bought a pound of the green substance from his guy. But the sin was in that moment, that very moment. There was the universe before the third transaction and the universe after and at the fulcrum, at that single instant after the moment's death, I had sealed my own fate. To the rational judging eyes of the outside world, I was simply walking inconspicuously through an unassuming neighborhood with as much money as I had begun the night with and no illicit substances on me. But this was not the case. This was not the sin. The sin was that it was not the same amount of money. There was more. Glaring pieces of silver that dragged me down into the world I thought I was better than. The unlit windows knew it and the trees knew it and everyone at Fat Jack's would know it, and the squad car behind me knew it.

I was young and afraid and high and superstitious in my own way, but I wasn't stupid. I only noticed the police vehicle because of the reflection of the headlights on one of the stop signs ahead. One turn of my head behind as any innocent would do to discover the source of the light and then I turned back and continued on. I walked through the ill-lit streets, fearing to stand still for a moment lest it might seem that I was afraid of the approaching justice. But those lights saw me and they agreed with the trees and the unlit windows and they all knew and they would come down with the full force of divine retribution that was the only appropriate compensation for this schism of my reality.

The rational mind made me take action and I diverted my course, casually down another block, away from Fat Jack's making no change in my pace or posture. Still, that theoretical five-dollar bill in my pocket shined brighter than any beacon of the heavens and the squad car appropriately made the same turn that I did down narrow and unassuming roads.

This was it. There were no second chances. I arranged the rules for my salvation and still I broke them, even if it was by accident.

Time is, time was, but time shall be no more!

I was never religious. My mother was but didn't let me know it and now that I'm so many miles away from her, she has apparently taken up the gospel all the more vigorously. Perhaps she was only protecting me from the crushing guilt that a Catholic upbringing provides so generously. Still, small words and innocent lessons will find their way burrowed into a mind of a child. Given time and energy they will grow into ideals, concepts and values that the now-grown child cannot quite explain.

I was never religious, but I prayed. I asked only for a second chance. It was a mistake and mistakes are common, natural, human. It wasn't fair. So many mistakes of mine, so many actions would be found unacceptable to God according to so many, but not me. This was the one thing. My one center that let me believe it was okay and I destroyed it.

-O lord. Old father. Old artificer. Forgive me.

The squad car flicked its lights on. A flicker of red and blue lights danced upon the reflective surfaces of the once-dark residential block.

This was truly it. The rational eyes of the universe must have laughed at me and my guilt, for I had nothing on me but money and a resting ‘bitch face,’ but my eyes that observed this slowly crumbling universe knew otherwise. All they saw was the sin that permeated the world around me, illuminated by the red and blue lights that grew louder as the distance between myself and the cop car closed.

-I swear to you, God. O God, I swear. I didn’t mean to. I could have said ‘no’ but I didn’t. I know that. I will not pretend it was an accident. It was on purpose. I could have said something. I should have. I should have not taken money for this. It is a sin. It is a sin. I have sinned. How can I make it better. I will do anything. Anything. I didn’t even want it. It was a mistake.

Maybe it wasn’t a mistake. Maybe when she texted me I did tell her fifty. Maybe I was sick of doing this work for free. Maybe I deserved a free pint at Fat Jack’s. Maybe. But I had already written the rules. And my imagined God knew I had broken them.

-Look, I don’t even want the five.

My rational body made the motion natural. I went for a pack of cigarettes in my jacket pocket. I reminded myself to look back at the red and blue lights as an innocent would do. Then I stopped as an innocent smoker would do and drew out a cigarette. The squad car was coming closer, but not speeding. No sirens, just the lights. I drew a lighter as well and lit the cigarette that hung in my lips and looked down at the open pack where a folded five-dollar bill lay nestled among the future smoke breaks at Fat Jack’s.

-Look, I won't even take it. I won't even take it. I'll throw it away. I am an innocent. I am above this. I will not sin. I will repent. Look, I will throw it away. Here on the street. I won't even use it to buy a pint. It is gone. It is not with her who bought the drugs, but it is not with me. I received no compensation for the transaction. Please God forgive me.

As I put the pack back in my pocket, my surprisingly nimble fingers retrieved the five-dollar bill from the pack, which I usually kept there in case I was short on cash for another pack. It would not be there for the next pack. I let the bill slip from my fingers as I put the pack back in my jacket pocket. I did this as I took what may be my last drag from the cigarette. I did not even look at the green piece of paper as it fell to the cold concrete sidewalk. It was gone. It was my last prayer.

I continued to walk as I smoked. The rational body soldiered on as the mental and emotional spirit cowered into an abyss of guilt as it awaited the squad car to pull up and expose my lies to myself.

-Oh God, please. I have paid my penance. Please.

The five-dollar bill was lost in the dark shadow of my past but I assumed it hit the ground as I walked and the squad car with its red and blue lights of judgment drove past me and then blared its siren and tore off past the once quiet neighborhood to aid in some much more important endeavor leaving me alone in the dark neighborhood, free of my sin, absolved from the evil I created. The beads of sweat that had accumulated upon my forehead, once hot and sharp pangs of punishment became the sweet drops of spring rain that evaporated in the cool breeze of absolution that washed over me.

And it was there and then that I walked on to Fat Jack's, my soul lifted from the depths of personal damnation, free from the hell I had created mentally and I was sure to be executed physically by the approaching blue and red lights. 'Yes' I said to myself as I grew happier with each step towards salvation and yes I will never break my own rules again and yes I will continue to do anything for my friends and yes I will take no money from this again and yes I will Yes.