

# The Way the Money Goes

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Ian's basement had smelled like weed and alcohol since we were about six, but Ian had only ever drunk or smoked at swim team parties. Which means he had no excuse for spouting off philosophical hypotheses while I was trying to read the Navy's recruitment website.

"Sandy, would you sell your soul?"

"Nah."

"What if I offered you all the money in the world?"

"That's a big responsibility," I replied.

"Is it, though?"

"If I had all the money in the world, I'd have to redistribute it. I'd have to make sure everyone was on an equal playing field. Of course that would mean giving more to some than others, and the others wouldn't like that."

"You don't *have* to redistribute it."

"I'm not evil."

"Just because you're a pacifist doesn't mean you're not evil."

Ian threw his legs up over the couch with the pink, blue, and purple swirls. When we were eleven, he claimed his older brothers stole it from a dentist office that was abandoned in the eighties. It wasn't an unbelievable story.

I looked at the website but didn't really read it. It was hard to focus with the commercial blaring in the background.

"Does your body look like this?" The commercial showed a woman with an inch or so of fat sticking out over her low jeans. She looked a little like me. "Stop by New Life Cosmetic for a consultation! At New Life, we'll do our best to transform you into a completely new person! Get rid of all that unsightly fat, and start your New Life!"

"You have to be able to swim to join the Navy," Ian said from across the couch. His legs were kicked over the arm of the couch, and his curly dark hair was laid back against the cushion.

"I'm not seeing that anywhere," I told him, "and I thought I was the best swimmer you knew."

"What about Eric?"

"The best living swimmer, then."

"You want Chinese?" he asked. My brain flashed a blue screen as I processed the change in topic.

"We had Chinese last week."

Ian's eyes rolled under his eyelids. When we were nine, he'd tried to show me how to roll my eyes as dramatically as he did. I never got the hang of it.

"It's the only thing around here that's cheap and actually worth eating."

"What about Holloway's?"

"Last time I went there, there was blood on my pancakes."

“I know,” I said, “you’ve mentioned that every time anyone mentions Holloway’s.”

“Then why do you keep bringing it up?”

He punctuated that with a scoff that sounded more like he was trying to force his vocal chords out of his mouth. I slammed my laptop shut, hit the power button for the TV, and followed him up the stairs.

“Turn the TV off, man, you’re burning money.”

A set of keys flew at my face from across the kitchen.

“You drive,” Ian demanded. Last time he drove at night, I had to help get him out of a ditch.

An outdated jingle for a car commercial greeted us when the old truck roared to life. It played the same chorus six times and the drum line buzzed Ian’s speakers.

“Girls don’t like boys  
who drive old jalopies.  
Trade in your car.  
Come on to Poppy’s!”  
I lowered the volume.

The drive to Summer Garden took us past our old school. A cheap banner hung over the outside gym wall. The late October wind was blowing it around slightly, and you could see the mural that it was covering.

A girl in my sister’s class had commissioned the mural as a memorial for the people whose houses had been torn down to build up the school and the area around it. They had been forced out of their homes, and most of them had never been compensated.

“Litening Boltz.” Ian read the banner. “Energy all day, every day.”

“Was that the stuff that gave you a panic attack?”

“It didn’t *give* me a panic attack. It just made my mind move fast.”

“It didn’t help.”

“I’ll bet they make you drink that in the Navy.”

“I think cocaine would go easier on the body.”

He snorted. He hadn’t seen himself in an energy drink-induced-spiral on the floor of the chemistry classroom. He barely remembered the whole thing. The company said that he’d drunk too much, and it was his fault he’d had a panic attack. I looked up a proper serving. It was a quarter of a can.

Ian glared at the glowing green and white sign for Holloway’s.

“Don’t even think about it.”

Inside Summer Garden sat some bright red plastic booths and clay colored tiles. The yellowed drywall was decorated with some old pictures of the neighborhood alongside some generic shots of Chinese landmarks and a signed photo of a Chinese film star.

Ian always got the curry chicken, and he slid in front of me so he could order while I read the menu. It was faded and yellow like the wall. An ad for Zoeng Lawn Service hung above it, covering the name of a dish that sounded like Hunan Beef. The description seemed good.

“What if we had a picnic?” Ian asked. The cashier had told us it was about a fifteen minute wait, and we’d settled in one of the booths. This was after explaining to the cashier that Ian wasn’t paying, and that it was okay that he wasn’t paying because we weren’t dating.

“It’s dark out.”

“It wouldn’t be so bad. The weather is so nice, and I know a great spot.”

“Whatever you say, man.”

In the car, Ian switched the station to my heavy metal preset. On Saturday nights they apparently had an anarcho-punk segment.

“Shop at Ader for 20% off your holiday essentials,” the radio shouted. “Holiday dresses, ties, snow boots, and all the gifts you can imagine! 15% of all proceeds go to Home for the Holidays. Help our soldiers see their families this Christmas. Visit Ader today!”

“It’s October,” I muttered.

Ian rummaged through the brown paper bags.

“They got us some of those noodle chips.”

“Ooh.”

“And an exorbitant amount of duck sauce. Turn right up here.”

“Into the woods?”

“Yeah.”

I turned. The car heaved and bumped along the dirt path.

“There should be a clearing up just a little ways. There. There! *There!*”

“I got it, jeez.”

I swung into the white gravel parking area. Three stone benches faced the creek. Ian and I grabbed our bags and sat on the center bench.

About a year ago, this clearing had been empty save for a couple of stray plastic bags and water bottles. After the neighborhood got rich and the property values went up, the older, poorer residents tried out less legal ways of making money so they could keep living here. They usually met in the clearing, easy to find but often abandoned. That night, it had rained heavily. The creek had been high and fast. The night had been cold.

Conrad—the news never gave his last name—had met up with someone to sell something that night. A product or a service, the news never said that either. Whoever he’d been selling to had become irritated, and shoved him in the water before running off.

The kid had grabbed a weak root and screamed like a mourning mother until Eric had come running out of his nearby house. Eric Graza, who broke records on the swim team, had jumped into the creek without even taking off his shoes. He’d hauled him onto his back and swum with him to a bank that Conrad could climb onto. Conrad had managed to crawl his way to safety. Swimming in cold water with a 180-pound high schooler on your back is exhausting however. Eric had lost strength and was swept from the bank. He drowned.

The county had set a memorial for his heroism and fenced in the area around the benches. A bunch of us from the swim team had been drafted to build it. We hadn’t even been invited to the memorial dedication. Ian had ranted about

it for a literal week. Various signs, like the sort you see in people's yards, were nailed to the fence we'd built.

"Is that a goddamn Holloway's sign?"

Ian was squinting in the darkness to try and read a green and white sign. You'd think that they'd made the fence out of signs with the number that there were. They surrounded us.

"This is your spot?"

"Yeah." Ian sighed. "The signs weren't here last time, though. Still, it's got these nice benches, and you can see the creek real well. And hear it."

We stopped talking for a moment to listen to the creek babble. It was low now.

"What'd you get?" Ian asked me.

"Beef egg foo young. You?"

"Curry chicken, you know that."

The creek and the wind filled the silence again as we ate and read the ads. I saw one for glasses and another for a surgery that would make you not need glasses. One for an injection that would get rid of wrinkles. There were a ton of realtor signs. It was like they were trying to sell Eric's memorial.

"There's one for the Navy," I pointed out.

Ian didn't look up from his little, white rice box.

"Are you really gonna join?" he asked.

"Maybe."

"Why? You were a hardcore pacifist until, like, this year. You smoked Skylar Gadzinski in that war debate. Do you really want to leave town?"

"College money." I held up a second finger. "And not really."

"Sellout."

Ian threw a fortune cookie in my lap.

I opened it. The side facing me was an ugly, energy-drink green.

"Crypto Mortgage: Make your fortune!" I read aloud.

"Man, I have never wanted to scan a QR code less."

I flipped it over and read the message.

"What's it say?" Ian demanded.

"A life choice will soon bring you financial security. What does yours say?"

"You will soon discover easy ways to make money," he sighed. "I never put much faith in fortune cookies anyway."

"Must be a tough year for the fortune cookie companies, if they need to sell ad space."

"They just want to make more money. Everywhere you go, you're just a product. Nothing is sacred."

Ian's sigh came out high and forced. I wondered if Eric knew how many campaigns he wound up in. Or if my sister's classmate knew her mural was used in every school ad, even though it painted the town in a bad light. I wonder if she knew they did that, then covered it up again. I wondered if Sandy from two years ago could have been paid any amount of money to pick up a gun.

“You know that community college?” I asked Ian.

“Arthur St. John’s?”

“Yeah, that one,” I nodded. “I’ll bet they have a good swimming scholarship.”

Ian’s shoulder shook next to mine. So light, I wasn’t even sure it was moving.

“They have a great pool,” he said eventually.

“Yeah.”

“Please don’t leave.”

“I’ll do my best.”