

# Steven's Checks

by A. E. Ivey

They used to send Steven a check in the mail every 2 weeks. It was the only thing he looked forward to, it was the only mail he ever got. When it stopped a month ago he thought maybe it was just a fluke, got lost in the mail, something like that. He called them, but they had no record of him. Said they had just redone their entire computer operating system, new platform, a bunch of fancy words, things like that. The lady promised she would look into it, maybe they had a paper file sitting around somewhere still for him. She would call him back tomorrow. That was a week ago, she never called back. But Steven patiently waited for the phone to ring.

Sometimes he would wait by the window, sitting in his green arm chair. He had to live up on the top story of the building because it was the cheapest apartment, and the Company cut costs where they could. He didn't mind though, at least up high no one could see him clearly enough that it would matter if he looked out the window down at the street. There was a park across from him, he enjoyed watching the kids chase the squirrels and playing on the swing sets.

Other times during the day he would sit at his dining room table and do crossword puzzles. He used to leave a dollar out every morning for the paper boy to bring him the paper with the puzzles in it, he had a whole stack but it was getting low since the Company hadn't sent him any more checks. The paper boy didn't stop to ask why he had quit taping the dollar to the door though. *"Oh well,"* Thought Steven, *"He's probably very busy."*

Usually every second Sunday of the month the Company would send him an agent to get a grocery list and cash his check for him. They would run his errands, but he only had them for 2 hours, so Steven could never get them to go very far, it would take too long and then he might not get his groceries. Some Sunday's he would try to make his grocery list shorter so he might have a few minutes to chat with the agent the Company sent over. It was usually a one

sided conversation, but Steven enjoyed talking out loud. His voice was probably the only thing that hadn't been changed by the accident 8 years ago. The agent would never look at him though, but Steven tried not to notice. He couldn't blame them really, some days after 8 years he still scares himself when he sees his reflection in the mirror.

He asked the Company to send him a cat once, he had been reading in the paper about the cats at the shelter down the street. He was lonely, and a cat he could at least talk to. They were easy to take care of as well, and it wouldn't be that much more to add cat food and litter to his grocery list, he would just stop drinking coffee and milk. He already calculated what he would have to change in his diet to be able to afford it, and he had decided he would name the cat Jimmy. When he submitted his request he had called, the lady said he'd have to submit a written request to the agent and they would relay the message to Steven's representative, Tom Hubbard. Steven had known Tom for 12 years, he was sure Tom would approve it.

But a month went by and he never heard from Tom, he asked the agent if Tom had received his request, when would he have his answer? The agent didn't know, said he'd have to call and talk to someone else regarding the matter. So he called, spoke to a lady, tried to get her to transfer him directly to Tom. She wouldn't listen, said she would take a message and send it to him, Steven argued with her for over 10 minutes telling her that he had already left messages for Tom through her before and Tom wasn't calling him back. She apologized, but said there was nothing she could do.

Steven dropped the matter after that day. He figured no answer must be just that, a no. He tried to focus on his crosswords but for days afterwards found his hand shaky and unsteady, and his mind confused and lost. He cried alone in his little apartment, holding a pencil between his fingers and sitting at his dining room table, slightly bent over his crossword. He couldn't believe how much he had wanted the companionship of...a *cat*. He wasn't even sure that that was what he was crying over.

But that was a while ago, Steven had forgotten how long ago that was. He thinks maybe a year, but he didn't have a current calendar so it was hard to keep track of the days when he couldn't cross them off. It was one thing to not hear from Tom regarding the cat situation, but not receiving his check? This was a big deal; Steven had nowhere he could go, nothing he could do. The Company had to take care of him; after all it was their fault he was like this now. He tried not to think about what would happen to him if he didn't get the checks anymore from the Company. When he hadn't heard from anyone after a week had gone by he called them again.

*"I haven't received my check in over a month though, how can you not find any record of me? Where's Tom?"*

*"Sir, Tom no longer works in this department; he's been transferred to the Los Angeles offices."*

*"What?! Since when? No, no, no. I need Tom he's in charge of my file; he's been my contact in the company for the past 8 years. Who is doing Tom's job now?"*

*"I can't give out that kind of information, I'm sorry sir."*

*"Well...I need my check you see, I can't go outside, they won't let me, it's in my file. Just find my file you'll see, I'm not allowed to go outside they have to send me a check and an agent. I haven't seen anyone in a month, I don't get to talk to anyone, I can see the children playing across the street but well you know it's not the same. Can you send someone over? I asked Tom if I could get a cat to keep me company but he never answered my request, I don't think he ever got my message. It's not like Tom to just ignore me--"*

Steven swallowed the lump in his throat over and over as he slowly pulled the receiver away from his ear, the sound of the dial tone resounding from the ear piece. A few hot tears tripped down his cheek. Not knowing what else to do he shuffled slowly into the kitchen to make some coffee and afterwards sat down and worked on his crossword puzzle. He finished his puzzle and did the dishes, went to bed early. He still had a pretty good supply on his sleeping meds; he only took them when he really had to. He took two that night, just to be sure he wouldn't wake up with nightmares.

The next morning he woke up to the sound of his phone ringing. He hadn't heard it ring in so long at first he couldn't figure out what it was, or where the sound was coming from.

*"Hello?"* He said timidly into the receiver.

*"Steven? Steven! It's Tom! Steven the offices up there in New York said you had been calling a lot for me, said they lost your file — something about you aren't receiving your checks anymore?"*

*"No, I—"*

*"Listen buddy, I told them all about your relationship with the Company. They're gonna send an agent over this afternoon to get some groceries for you. I'm really sorry for this misunderstanding, they just redid our entire system, and we lost a lot of the information from the old administration. But I'm gonna re-enter you in the system today so they should get a rush check out to you soon. That mailman still dropping your mail off at the door for you?"*

*"Well see Tom—"*

*"That's great Steven! I'm happy to hear it. Listen buddy I gotta run, if you need anything give me a call ok? My number is 555-670-3333, got that?"*

*"Oh let me get a pencil I just—"*

*"Awesome, I'll give you a call in about a week to check up on you and make sure things have gotten back on track. You ever get that cat?"*

*"No, no I didn't. What was that num—"*

*"Damn, Lisa that blonde receptionist we had a few months back was really bad about entering my notes into the reports. I'll send the New York office a memo and have them send over a specialist to talk that over with you. Take care Steven! Talk to you soon."*

Steven gently set the phone down. His pencil shook in his hand, the confusion clouded all his thoughts to the point that he couldn't figure out what was going on and for several minutes he just stood there. Perhaps Tom couldn't hear him clearly; maybe there was a bad connection...static on the line. It was nearing lunch time so he

got dressed and made a sandwich. He waited all day for the knock at the door, but by the time he was washing his dishes from dinner he had given up. He would call the Company tomorrow, maybe they were just really busy with switching everything over from the old administration.

When Steven couldn't get through to anyone the next morning he began to panic. He hurriedly got dressed, put his old worn windbreaker on and a hat deciding he would just go down there in person. But he stopped short of the front door, his hand resting on the knob. He hadn't been outside of that tiny apartment in 8 years. What kinds of changes have happened in the world since then? His heart raced and he was so incredibly terrified of the idea of going outside he almost lost his resolve to go. But his stomach was growling, and he had run out of bread and eggs yesterday. He had no more lunch meat; even the coffee was getting low. The peanut butter ran out last week, he had a can of green beans...but...

He took a deep shaky breath, his hand trembling he turned the knob and slowly opened his front door. The hallway was dim and empty, but he heard a door slam somewhere in the upper part of the building; its echo bouncing off the walls. He nearly shut his door but stopped short of the frame. He was hungry and worried, and if he didn't get this mess with his checks sorted out he would have to just swallow all his sleeping pills and kill himself so he wouldn't have to starve to death. He clenched his teeth down, there was no other option but to just go down to the Company and sit there till they sorted things out. He was going to ask them about the cat too, and was going to continue to bother them about it till they agreed to let him go and get one on his walk back home.

The bright light of the sun nearly blinded Steven as he stepped out onto the quiet New York street. It was 9 am, all the kids were in school, and all the parents should be at work. He hoped it would be an uneventful walk, he knew he had about 7 blocks to go to get there. Shouldn't be too bad, he would just walk with his head down and his hat pulled low. He was sure to put on gloves over his hands, and zipped his jacket all the way up so his neck was nearly

covered. Steven had made it four blocks, four short blocks, before it happened...

He had passed by a woman on the street that glanced up at him and saw part of his face. *"Oh my god!"* She said with a tone of disgust. Steven didn't look back at her, but then he was forcibly grabbed from behind and a bag shoved over his face. He was pushed and forced into a car. His heart was racing so fast he could barely breathe, but he immediately had started sobbing in fear from the moment he was grabbed.

*"Oh please! Please, what do you want? My name is Steven, I live right up the street, please don't hurt me!"*

His hands had been bound, but he was allowed to sit up comfortably on the seat. There were no voices, just the sound of the car. Moments later it jerked to a stop and Steven was dragged from the car by the back of his jacket. He was taken up an elevator and down a long hallway. Finally keys shook and a door was unlocked, Steven was pushed in and down onto the floor. The bag was taken off his head. Steven sat up blurry eyed; he was in his own apartment. The door slammed shut and Steven looked around, he was alone.

Then the phone rang. Steven jumped to grab it off the table; the base clunking to the floor.

*"Hello?"* He said shakily.

*"Steven! What the fuck! What were you thinking? You know you can't leave your apartment. It's in your contract! You could have blown everything, are you trying to make a scene? You want reporters at your door, terrorizing you, laughing at you? Making a mockery of all the work you did, all the research!?"*

*"Tom? I never-"*

*"Thank god one of our agents was nearby and noticed you walking down the street, you know you've been tagged, and now you're going to be put on high alert — there's NOTHING I can do to stop that either. They will be watching you day and night; you won't even be allowed to look out your window anymore to watch the kids playing at the park."*

Steven's blood ran cold at the mention of him looking at the kids across the street. Chills spread from his spine to the top of his head. He was so paralyzed in fear he couldn't speak, he tried, he opened his mouth to try to talk to Tom, to explain himself. But instead unwillingly tears slipped from his tired eyes.

*"Listen Steven, the Company is already fighting with me to drop you. They don't feel they should continue being responsible for taking care of you anymore. They have put new representatives on your case and they are combing it for mistakes, they're looking for an excuse to pin this on you! I know...I know, it wasn't your fault. I was there I remember, ok? You're going to have to lay low for a while though. You absolutely cannot leave your apartment EVER. You hear me? They're looking for a reason to get rid of you, you're being considered a loose end for the old administration and loose ends have to be taken care of. You know what that could mean for you. Stop fucking around here!"*

The line went dead. Steven dropped the receiver. His hands were still bound so he awkwardly got up off the floor and got a knife from the kitchen. He threw the rope in the trash. He had enough coffee left for one more pot; he put it on to brew and sat down with his crossword puzzle. Perhaps tonight he'd take 3 sleeping pills, he was so shook up he didn't think he would be able to make it through the whole night without suffering nightmares of what had just happened on the street. But for now his crossword distracted him, and he passed most of the morning and early afternoon. By the afternoon though the tears had started slipping slowly from his eyes again, he couldn't stop them. He decided he'd take a nap, so he did the few dishes, ran the dishwasher — put the trash out by the front door.

Beside his bed was the bottle of sleeping pills and he swallowed 3 or 4 - maybe more he couldn't remember, dressed himself in his night clothes and put on his favorite song on the record player. Lying in bed he began to drift off, but then suddenly he heard the sweetest sound over the music, the softest sweetest voice.

*"Meow."*

Steven looked over at the window above his bed. On the ledge there was a tiny kitten peaking in at him, it pawed at the window. Slowly he sat up and crawled to the window; opening it he picked up the little kitten and laid back down setting the kitten on his chest where it curled up and began purring gently. He fell asleep dragging his rough hand across the kitten from its head all the way down to its little tail.

