

A DEBT

by Eric Boyd

A rose and two dollars. Where did they come from? I didn't know anyone who had visited my parents' grave recently, yet that evening I saw a white rose on my mother's side and two bucks on my father's. I took the money and placed my own flowers with the rose. It had to have been recent. Besides the rain and the wind all week, money doesn't just sit around like that; I've seen plenty of kids cut through the cemetery to get home after school. The more I thought about it the more uneasy I became. Walking back to my car, I looked around to see if anyone was around.

The next morning I got a call. I didn't get to the phone but the caller left a message. A man said he knew my parents a long time ago and wanted to meet me 'for old time's sake.' He gave an address—an old dive bar I remembered growing up—and said he would be there in the afternoon. Maybe it wasn't so odd, I thought. After my divorce and everything people were more likely to call me about such things—relatives and family friends would sometimes reach out to see how I was getting along. My parents knew lots of people around town, so it didn't seem that strange to me. I hadn't seen anyone leave flowers in years, though. Nobody had ever left money.

The bar was empty. I had the feeling it always was. Even after the bartender gave me a beer he went into a backroom and didn't return. The place was old. The walls were a deep amber from decades of smoke. Only one of the three ceiling fans above worked. There was a small corner stage piled with kegs.

I sat around for a few minutes before an old man entered. He looked as ancient as the bar but in much better shape. Bald on top and gray on the sides, a thin, heavily-lined face. He sat down beside me and smiled with kind eyes. "You Bernadine's son?"

"That's right," I said. "Brent." I extended my hand.

"Mine's Foley." He shook my hand. "I'm sorry about your folks."

"That's okay, but thanks. Just got older."

"Oh don't say that!" Foley shook his head. "Your mother was only a few years older than me back when I knew them."

We laughed. "You know I haven't been here since I was a kid," I said. "My dad used to come here; he'd leave me in the car for a few minutes and, whenever he came back, buy me a candy bar from up the street to promise not to tell Mom."

"Why'd he do that?" Foley grinned.

"He was probably having a drink before dinner."

"Maybe."

"What's that mean?"

"Your mother would've been mad, but not for drinking. Maybe he never left the old life."

"The old life'?"

"She used to run numbers here."

I'd heard the stories about back then. "Lottery numbers?"

"The oldest racket there ever was," Foley said. "All the old timers came here and played. You'd get off work at the mill, stop in to have a beer, check your numbers... Hell, they even had cock fighting in the basement."

"I don't buy that," I said. "Not for a second. My mother was a saint. She hated..." And then it made a little more sense to me. Mom didn't even allow scratch-off tickets in our house; if we got one in a Christmas card she would tear it up.

"Gambling?" Foley finished my thought. "She hated gambling? From the look on your face I'm sure she did. I suppose you just never wondered why."

"It didn't seem strange until you just said that."

"Yeahhh," he stretched like he was yawning, "she ran the numbers, minded the phone; your old man collected the bets and paid out the wins."

I stared at him for a moment. We were silent for some time.

"Let's get out of here," Foley said. He held the door open for me and we went around to the back parking lot. I was trying to figure out the point of this meeting, why some random old man would want to tell me these things. "Foley, it was a pleasure to meet you. I guess I should thank you for letting me know about that stuff. It was interesting to learn that about my parents, definitely. But," I thought for a second. "Why didn't you ever just visit them?"

"Never had a chance," Foley said. "I'm pretty disappointed to hear they passed."

Disappointed seemed like an odd word choice to me. "So I'm guessing you're the one who visited their graves yesterday?"

He smiled widely. "You took the two dollars, didn't ya?"

"Well," I paused. "If you want it back—"

“Oh no, no,” Foley waved his hands side to side. “I owed your old man that money. Since he ain't around, it's yours. It belongs to you. That's how it works, right?”

I tried to chuckle. “I suppose so, yeah. I just didn't know if you felt some type of way about it, you know what I mean?”

“I think I do.”

Slowly my eyes opened. My head hurt. “What happened?”

“I tried to catch you,” Foley said, “but the roll of quarters in my fist busted open after I socked you so that threw me off,” he laughed. “Like fat, heavy snowflakes they looked! It took me twenty minutes to pick all that up.”

“What in the hell are you talking about?” I tried to get up but couldn't. I was tied to a chair, arms behind the back, secured at the wrists. Whatever I was bound with had some give to it, but I couldn't get free.

Foley noticed my struggling. “Trash bags,” he said. “Those damn things are about the most useful things in the world. I learned to make everything with those. Window shades, handcuffs, nooses... I'll even tell you this: one time I seen a guy's cell get shook down and the guards found a blow-up doll made of trash bags inside. Surprisingly lifelike.”

My skull was throbbing. I tried to think of something to say.

Foley circled around me a few times. He eventually faced me and sucked air in through his teeth. “Your folks owed me some money, Brent.” His eyes were no longer kind.

“That doesn't have anything to do with me.”

“It's not your fault, no— but it is your problem.”

I tried to shoot up from the chair all at once, with all my strength, but only managed to collapse myself forward and onto the floor. It seemed like we were in some long-abandoned building. It was very dark. With every breath I kicked up dust and took it in; I sneezed a few times. “Why do you think I owe you money?”

“Your folks just let me bet on a number one night. I won and they wouldn't pay.”

“That's it?!” I shouted. “This is for some penny bet?”

Foley rung his hands nervously. “There's more to it than that.”

“You should be locked away in som—”

For an old man he kicked hard. “It wasn't just a penny bet,” he leaned down toward me. “I had it rough growing up, know what I mean? My parents died when we were young; my sister tried to take care of me, but I ended up alone by 15. I worked where I could, even tried to lie my way into the army, fight in Korea. All I really had to live on was the numbers, Brent.”

“LET ME GO!” I screamed. The room echoed slightly.

Foley ignored me. “I saved up all my little wins over a few months and put down a fifty dollar bet one day. Do you know how much fifty dollars is worth today? Almost five hundred now. The average payouts back then ran around 600-to-1. Pretty good, huh? So one of those little penny bets could get you fifty big ones. Well, fifty is what I had to put down that day, and I won. Thirty thousand, Brent.”

He stood up and began pacing the room. The seat of the chair had cracked after my fall; when I moved my legs I could feel it ready to break.

"But your folks wouldn't pay out, son," Foley said from across the room.

"I'm sorry, Foley," I tried buying myself time.

He stopped and stared at me. "I begged for the money, and you know what your old man did? He offered me a job. I had to work for my money," he tapped his chest. "And trust me, I earned it."

"I believe you," I said and sneezed again. I felt the chair give. I started faking short coughing fits while trying to bust the chair. Foley didn't seem too concerned with me.

"Brent, one day your mother calls, says to come down to the bar and they'll pay me what I was owed. At that point I actually owed them! That's where that two bucks came from; your old man gave me it to help get the rest of my rent that month.

"Well, I went down and ended up surrounded by cops. They set me up on one of the jobs I did and, Brent, I been thinking about that since they let me out a week ago."

I said between coughs, "I can't believe that."

"Hey, I'm not doubting that they were in deep, too. The people they were working for, not nice people... But a debt's a debt."

"So you want, what? Thirty thousand dollars?"

"That'd be a nice start," Foley said, "but I would have wanted that back when I won. Thirty large is worth a quarter-million now."

"I don't have that kind of money," I said. "You can't really think I do."

"No," he looked at me. "Single fella your age, I wouldn't expect you to have it." He stepped towards me.

I broke free and kicked his legs; he fell down. I pulled the plastic ropes off of my ankles and ran for a door in the corner of the room. My hands were still tied behind me, I had to face away from the door to try the knob. I could see Foley getting to his feet, then quickly a shot hit close to my head. He started walking towards me.

I panted, "This has nothing to do with me."

"Then you shouldn't have taken that two dollars," he said. "Take from me what I owed them, I gotta take from you what they owed me."

The door wouldn't open. He was only a few feet away.

"A debt's a debt," he said. "It goes beyond you and me."

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