

Five Bucks.

by Shan Shaikh

“For Chrissake! Just get me one of fucking Tony's half-assed, made in China bullshit, getaway cars. My plate is hot!” I had never hated cars so much before. Not so much the cars, but the sound the cheap ones made when they drove past my house. The pavement outside was so smooth and dark; it reminded me of the pavement I slammed into when I was 5. I had just learned how to ride a bike. Well, everything except how to brake properly. “I'm not putting my ass on the line just to get you out of a little Robin Hood gone bad. I've gotta lay low for a while.” Tracy was never really good at solving problems. Even if they were his. He'd just sit there and complain until someone found a solution for him. And even then he'd wait until they showed him why it worked. “Trace, I'm begging you. I don't wanna go down as the only member in this whole ‘clean-up’ charade game we're playing that gets caught. And for five bucks? Fuck that.” I was starting to feel the sweat spew out of my palms and run down the edge of my black flip phone. It wasn't the best phone. It was one of those old Razors. The one's by Motorola. Yeah, they were the shit when I was younger.

“Check it out, Dick. This is how I see it. You don't even need my help. The cops didn't follow you, right?” asked Trace, obviously stalling so he wouldn't fall under the category of aiding a thief. Or at least, that's what society calls me. Heck, who am I kidding? I am a fucking thief. “Tracy, would I be fucking calling you if I knew the cops weren't after me?” “First of all, don't call me Tracy, you little shit. It's Trace. It's been Trace since you met me. Now look, Richard-” I hated when he called me Richard. Then again he must hate when I call him Tracy. I dated a chick named Tracy once. She had a red 66' Mustang. It was definitely eye-candy. She had her nails painted the same color as the damn thing. Bright, glossy red. “-you were gonna call me anyways. How else would you let us know about this mission impossible?” He should've just slapped a sticky note to my forehead

that read "You're a Dumbass". He couldn't make it more obvious that I had screwed up big time. "Listen, Trace. I get that I screwed up. You don't need to make it obvious. I just need some-" The sound of a car pulling into the driveway made me jump, and I dropped my crappy Motorola Razor. I was only using my eyes to scan the room. My bedroom was right in front of the driveway. So, I could kind of see, through my curtains, who was pulling in. Especially because it was already dark out and the car lights crawled all over my walls. Thankfully, it was just some lousy driver doing the usual roundabout. People have no sense of direction. They just keep moving.

For a while I forgot I was on the phone with Trace. I kept thinking about the suitcase-and-tie-man I threw into a pile of trashcans. I must've given him a real scare. I'm pretty scary, now that I think about it; with my masculine jawline and my permanent stare-down eyes and eyebrows. Nothing I can change, really. That's just my face. I bent down to pick the phone up, and I continued packing my clothes. The plan was to head to Vinny's diner. That's where all our planning went down. Cliché, I know. But Trace's tree house was taken. "Trace, you there?" He stayed quiet just in case it was actually the fuzz. "Trace, it's me." Bastard had hung up. I should've said my name. That would've helped. I called him back. This time, I was already preparing to lay down my plan. He had to listen to me. It was full proof. I didn't have much in the house; just a couple of jeans and a few shirts. Okay, I had some more stuff, but nothing that would take a truck to haul out. I'd been living there since my pops left. Momma couldn't stand being alone. She never remembers anything. She always calls me by my brother's name. His name's Stewart. That's worse than Richard. And my brother is a schmuck. It's an insult when she calls me by his name. He's only six years older than me, but he sure acts like he's thirteen sometimes. Anyways, momma was never really interested in what it was Trace, Vinny, Tony, and I were up to. It wasn't like she'd remember if I told her anyway. She was out buying some more yarn from this arts and crafts store downtown. She sews a lot. She makes these nifty little

tissue boxes that have all these cool designs on them. I think that's the only thing that is keeping her alive. It's really the only thing she does that requires the most movement. I don't even know how she gets to the store. I never bother to ask, primarily because I don't want her to turn around while I'm in mid-sentence and yell "What did you say Stewart!?"

"Hello, this is Jacob." "Trace, you sack-a-shit, it's me Dick." He must've felt like an idiot. "Why did you hang up on me?" I was already done packing when I asked him that. The only thing left to do now was to go over the plan with Trace; get a car from Tony, head to Vinny's, and clear my name. I've never had to clear my name before. I've been mugging since I found out how stupid people actually were. The things people say when you hold them up against a wall. It always kills me. They'll say stuff like, "Please, just take my wallet!" Why else do you think I have you pinned against the wall? Moron. It's not like I want your fancy vest or blazer. Let alone your precious smartphone. I hate it when I see people sliding their fingers up and down their phones. They look like they're trying to get rid of a stain on the screen. It's probably because people are always yelling into those things. There must be thousands of spit stains on their screens. The last thing I want is to be them. People walking around in suits, parading with the scent of a newly purchased cologne or perfume they just dumped all over themselves. I'd rather be a thief. It's tough living, but life is tough. People behind counters and the people robbing them in front of the counter both know that life's tough. Heck, even my momma knows that, and she doesn't even remember my name.

"Dude, do you expect me to just be all buddy-buddy with the pigs? I don't think so." Trace would much rather rant than give someone the time of day. Although his schedule consisted of watching TV dramas with one hand in a bag of chips and another hand in his pants, he was far too busy to meet you in person and have an actual conversation. Most people prefer to have conversations away from each other's faces. I don't understand it. I hate when I have to speak

to you, and I can't look you in the eye. Every time I mug someone, I look em' dead in the eye and tell them what I want. They get my message because I'm looking straight at them. Well, most of the time, I look through em'. My point is that there's no miscommunication when you're talking in person. And there isn't a lot of room for false speculations because you can hear how every word sounds. That, to me, is very important. There's a million ways to say "Piss off."

"Whatever, Trace. Okay, this is my plan. I'm heading out to your place right now. Then I'm-" "You're not coming to my place, Dick." I love Trace. He's a brother to me. I've known him since the sixth grade. We've been through a lot together. But I've never met a more stubborn, self-centered prick in my life. You can only imagine what Tony's like. He's Trace, only hairier and he watches Reality TV. "Let me finish telling you my fucking plan, Trace. I'm going to your place. You're taking me to Vinny's in your car. You're gonna explain, with me, to Vinny what went wrong and ask what would be the best approach to solving this dilemma. Then, if he doesn't beat us silly, we'll do whatever he asks, and that's it. We're done. Think you can do that for me?" I was expecting the silence because, as stupid as Trace seemed, he thought twice before taking on any task. Especially one like helping out a friend he's known since grade school. I mean, he's not a saint. Neither of us are saints. We're all peasants playing a saint's game. "Fine. But you need to tell me, word for word, what happened." "Deal. Okay so-" I was already pacing back and forth in my bedroom, and chewing on my finger nails. The sweat was running down my face and spine. I could feel the shirt I had on stick to me like a large, wet napkin. The last thing I needed was another interruption. But, what would life be without interruptions? There was a knock at the door. I jumped again. "Hello?" "Shhh!" That's all I managed to get out of my voice. "What do you mean, 'Shh'?" "Trace, just shut up for a second. There's someone at the door." There was another one of Trace's iconic silent moments. I could hear his TV in the background. All I heard was

some guy about to beat up another guy for messing with his girl. Trace took notes while he watched TV. Notes he'd never use. Just wipe his ass with. "Get outta there now, man! Go through the backyard." I should've just listened to him. I should've just booked it to the backyard and hopped the fence. I would've been a quarter of the way complete with my plan already. But, I had to see who it was knocking at my door.

"I can't man. I have to see who it is." "Are you fucking kidding me, Dick?" The window in my bedroom could see to the door. But I had the curtains covering it, and it was dark out. I was slowly making my way to the window, while Trace continued his desperate attempt to keep me away from the window. As I slowly pulled the curtain, Trace's voice got louder. "Dick, I'm warning you. You get in too deep, I'm not helping. You're on your own." "Too late wise-guy. You already said 'deal'." He went silent again. He turned his TV off and I could hear him breathing into the phone. It sounded like the kind of thing you'd hear when you call someone during mid-jog. Trace wasn't an overweight guy. In fact, he was pretty fit. But I bet you all the money in the world that he was sitting so low in his chair that his chin was pressing against his chest. He couldn't be bothered with standing and pacing while on the phone. When I do that at home, my mom says it reminds her of my pops. I hate the guy, so that's something I need to work at getting rid of. "Dick? Dick, are you still there?" "Yeah, I'm still here." I could already see to the door. I totally forgot to switch the porch light off. Number one rule to keeping away the fuzz, and it completely slipped my mind. "Well, is it the fuzz?" A part of me really wished that it was the fuzz. It would make for a good story when I got older. But what I saw, I was definitely not expecting. "No. It's..." "It's what? What do you see?" Trace was sitting up now. I could feel it. "It's a kid." "A kid?" asked Trace. "Yeah, a kid." "Well, what the fuck does he want?"

This kid definitely looked prepared for something. He had a messenger bag going around his body, and a suitcase looking thing

by his side. He wore this beret thing on his head. Those things you see army generals wearing. Or any stuck up military boy scout, for that matter. They're always wearing those things. Thankfully, he didn't have any pins stuck into it, and after watching him for a while he didn't seem like the type to sell Samoas. "Well, I can't book it if there's a witness who noticed that my light is on. He'd tell the fuzz." This kid definitely didn't seem like the type that would go run off and tell the teacher he was getting bullied. He looked like the type of kid that would kick you in the jewels to get his candy back. I'd say he was about seventeen, maybe even sixteen. Regardless of who he was, he was in the way and I had to get rid of him. "So, get rid of him." Trace was starting to become a really annoying echo. His intelligence faded over time. You'd have to wait for him to replenish his thoughts overnight. He normally knocks out around nine o' clock. But that's only during Mondays through Thursdays. When the weekend comes, the four of us - Tony, Vinny, Trace and I - usually play poker or blackjack. We watch the sunrise, but it's nothing like a chick flick. In fact, it's annoying sometimes. The damn sun coming up, flashing its goods right in your face so you can't see Tony do that nose twitch when he's bluffin'. It gets to me sometimes.

"I'll call you back then, Trace." "No, don't hang up. Use the fact that you're on the phone to your advantage." He had a point. "Ah, you're right." I made my way to the door. I don't know why I was still a little nervous. Maybe it's because the neighbors might spot my, very unique, facial features and bring the fuzz over. When I opened the door, I took the quickest second you've ever counted to compare my height to this kid. He was about a full head shorter than me. A real big head. I like being tall. I'm 6'1". The kid was pretty tall for his age, though. "Hey kid, look I'm real busy right now. Mind coming by ano-" "Hello, my name is Eddy. I'm selling Daily News subscriptions to fundraise money so that I can go to college." This was going to be interesting. I was definitely not the first house he'd come to. He must've done this four hundred times already. You could see the boredom oozing out of his face. "Would you like to purchase

a monthly subscription?" He just went on and continued his pitch. "No. Like I said, I'm real busy kid. Maybe another time." "Sir, this is a great offer and you'll regret it afterwards. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity to gain access to interesting and entertaining news all at the small price of eight ninety nine." Once in a lifetime? He just pulled the "Once in a lifetime" card on me. "What do you mean, once in a lifetime? I'm sure you're not the only person on this planet selling the same thing. Aren't all your little high school friends doing this too? Or are they selling chocolate?" I'll admit I was a bit harsh, but the kid wasn't gettin' lost. And he pulled the "Once in a lifetime" card on me. Do I look forty or something?

My door wasn't open all the way. It was only pulled back just enough for me to fit my head through. That and my hand with that crappy phone that was shooting out XM radio sounding transmissions of Trace's choppy breathing. "No, sir. No chocolate selling. My school just sells Daily News subscriptions. It's for a good cause. With your support, you can help me become the first in my family to go to college." What's so good about college? You waste money to spend more time figuring what you want to do with your life. I can do that for free in the comfort of my home. It's all about making yourself look like a hot shot, that's all. Society won't take you in unless you become an idiot like everybody else. I refuse to pay for this kid's death wish. "Why do you wanna go to college, huh?" I could tell the awkward position I was in, physically of course, was starting to pull away from the actual conversation I was trying to have with this kid. And the fact that I was having an actual conversation with the kid was blowing my mind too. "You naked behind there, mister?" He said that like he had knocked on every pervert's door, in this damn neighborhood. "What?" I asked, opening my door much wider as to prove that I was not a pervert. I mean, I wear some pretty baggy clothes and I'll skip a shower sometimes - I'm a busy man - but I am not a damn pervert. I could even hear Trace ask "What?" from my crappy phone. "Sorry, it's just that it was kinda weird talking to a floating head, ya know?" This kid was having a laugh. I could give that to him. It was kind of funny;

floating head talking to you about college. Ha. That's actually hilarious. I'm gonna write that one down.

So, the kid was alright but that didn't change my situation. I was still on the run and the kid was a liability. "Look kid, I'm not interested. I hate to break your heart, but I got places to be and you're burning the clock." I was closing the door when the little punk put his size nine looking shoe right against it. "Wait! C'mon, man!" I'm fine when you ask me for something politely. I can say "No." to your face and sleep like a baby. But when you start begging, I lose it. Something about giving up your pride gets me. Makes me realize just how important your cause is. But I mean REAL BEGGING, none of that four year old garbage. That stuff will just piss me off more.

"You know how far I've come to sell these stupid subscriptions?" This kid was Hispanic. I mean, his accent was pretty polished, but it was there. I was curious now. "How far?" "East L.A., man. And you're my last house. I would normally just head back home, but I've been cut short on my funds because, I've been giving some of my relatives bits of the cash." The kid went on to discuss his family living in poverty and how difficult it was to get to this neighborhood in the first place. My momma pays the bills, but that's because she's loaded. I would never think about giving her any of the cash I steal. Lady walks around with bags of money, man. And the one thing she remembers how to do is how to keep her money away from me. Anyways, the kid's story was a downer but I wasn't about to believe it. "Wait, wait, wait, didn't you say this was for your school?" I knew I caught this kid in a lie, and he knew it too. "Shit..." "Look, I'm not about to believe any more of your sob story, nor do I want to purchase a Daily News subscription. So if you don't mind, I've got places to be." I always mean what I say. I might say it differently a few times, but every time I say it I mean it. "Do you know what my brother's gonna do to me if I haven't made enough cash?"

I probably burned about ten minutes talking to this kid. It was a lot more than I wanted. I thought I would've been done with him in two seconds; hello and goodbye kind of stuff. Trace already hung up,

and he was probably telling Vinny that instead of heading over there I'm chit-chatting with a four year old. "No, I don't know. But that's not my problem, kid. We all got tough lives. Life isn't easy, and it's better if you start learning that lesson now. You're welcome." I just shut the door. Of course I made sure his foot was out of the way.

I went back into my room and gathered all my belongings. I was thinking about calling Trace again, but that jerk was probably still yapping to Vinny. As I was heading out of my room, and towards the garage, I could see the kid's silhouette behind the door. I had one of those oval, glass things on the door. Those things that let you know someone's there, but you can't make out who it is. The kid hadn't moved since I shut the door. He was standing the same exact spot, where I left him. I remember thinking to myself that this kid was getting ready to break into my house. I'll be honest, I was a bit freaked out. Then I saw his silhouette, really slowly, move away from the door. I started to think about my dad. I hate the guy - a lot - which is why it was so weird, for me, to suddenly think about him. That's when it hit me. He said the same thing, I told Eddy, to my face before he left this crappy, run-down house. I remember the smell of the coffee he made right before he left, too. He used up our last carton of milk. As a kid, I couldn't help but ask momma why he left. But she would just say she doesn't remember, or change the subject and ask me to go fetch her some yarn for her sewing. I couldn't be like my dad, but I had to leave now or else the fuzz would catch up to me. I dropped my bags and took a seat on the couch in the living room. I'm not a dick. I mean I am, but I'm not. I was already pissed off and sweaty because, my life was on the line. But so was this kid's. He'd been up and down this neighborhood trying to support his family and eventually go to college. God knows what his brother would do to him. I couldn't even believe I was worried about the little punk. I mean, he lied to me anyways. Why should I believe him?

I went to the door and opened it. Eddy was a few feet away from the street. "Hey, kid!" I had forgotten I was a fugitive for a moment. "Come back here." He turned and looked at me with a face like the

ones you see in flicks where the scrawny kid sees his crush and the jock eating each other's faces. He made his way back to my porch. "I'll buy one of your subscription, things." "I'm not your problem, mister. I don't want your pity money." This kid was being a real hard-ass, but I would've been the same. "Look, this isn't pity money. I'm not educated and I need to know what's going on in our world. So, you gonna sell me a subscription or what?" I made the kid laugh. I'd be a great father. "I need to know your name so I can write out the subscription." "Dick." You should've seen his face. "Excuse me?" "Dick, my name's Dick." This kid must've thought I was a freaking comedian because, he was in tears. Tears! My name was never that funny to me. "Okay, Dick. You can make the check out to Eddy Servantes, for eight ninety nine." That's when I put on one of those funny faces. I forgot I didn't have more than five bucks. "Check? I can't write you a check." "Why not?" I had to spill the beans. I only had five bucks on me; the five bucks that I got from mugging that suitcase-and-tie man. I've never written a check in my life. "I don't have eight ninety nine and I don't have a checkbook." "How do you not have a checkbook? Don't you need one for your job?" What happened to the days where you paid everyone with cash? You get cash, you buy stuff with cash. Simple. "I don't work. Well I work, but I don't really 'work'." "What do you do?"

I stood there for a bit, with my mouth open. I just couldn't formulate a response. I've never told anyone, apart from the idiots I hang around, what I do for a living. It's my information, but I knew this kid already. He wasn't gonna let this go. "I mug people." "You what?" I was expecting this kid to walk away, but he stood there, right in front of me with his mouth open. "I mug people, and then I give half of the money to other people like me. My friends, Trace, Vinny, Tony, and I have been doing this all our lives. It helps us sleep better at night." I made the freaking kid laugh again. I was starting to wonder if I was really that funny, or this kid loved to piss me off. "You're kidding, right? You mean like Robin Hood?" "No, not like fucking Robin Hood. I don't live in a forest with those idiots. I pay

em' and I'm done." Everybody always ties me with Robin Hood. I never understood that damn concept.

"Look kid, don't you have something I can buy for five bucks?" He stood there for a moment, looking at the ground, before reaching into his messenger bag. He was shoveling through the mess in his bag for a while before putting his whole head inside. It was probably the most awkward moment in my life, and I mug people for a living. "Um, I have this coupon booklet thing. Is that fine?" "Perfect, that's great. I'll take that." I reached into my pocket for the money. "Here's your ticket to college." "Thanks, man! I really appreciate this." I don't do the whole heart-warming thing, so I stared at the kid until he got my point. "Now go use that to go to college and become a man with a suitcase and tie. Go make yourself someone and, whatever you do, don't give your family any of it. And don't be like me." He was a little out of breath, which was also weird, but comforting. "I won't, man. Thanks again." He gathered his things and returned to the street.

When I went back inside I took a look at the booklet. It was filled with useless coupons that I'd never use. I threw it away.

I got all my things together and put them in the backseat of my car. After five minutes of trying to start the car and dropping the keys about seven times, I was on the road. Sure enough, about eight blocks away from my house, I noticed I was low on gas. I must've cussed about three hundred times in that moment. I ended up pushing my car half a block down to the gas station. When I went up to the clerk I said, "Five bucks on number four." I reached into my pocket, and the only thing I felt was the poor stitching done inside. I looked at the clerk, and my mouth fell open. There was a silence before the clerk squinted and said, "Say, you look familiar."

