



# Paying for College

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Cover design by Kenneth R. Szulczyk

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Here I am sitting in the bushes.

It is mid-March, and it is still cold. The rain is pit patting lightly on the leaves. My clothes are damp from the rain penetrating my jacket.

I begin to shiver; my teeth are clicking together, making me sound like an old mechanical typewriter. I glance down at my watch. It is around 10 o'clock. I gaze across the street, looking at Mike's Garage, and observing all the signs of life.

The lights are still on, and the mechanics are still working inside. They must have many cars to work on. They are working late tonight.

Here I sit, wondering what the heck am I doing here? Am I really this crazy? This desperate? No harm was done. I can get up now and go home. I would suffer no consequences, but I remain glued to the spot. With tears almost flooding my eyes, I remember the financial-aid letter that arrived in the mailbox yesterday.

The university gave me two weeks to pay the remaining balance on my account. If I do not pay, the university automatically withdraws me from class. Of course, I would not finish my course work, and will lose my scholarship for next year. I only owe the university a meager sum of \$660, but it is a king's fortune to a student on financial aid.

Those dirty bastards who work in the financial-aid office. They are bureaucrats with horned rimmed glasses, and wear cheap polyester suits. They have no people skills, and their neat little formulas determine how much every student can afford. One financial-aid officer prides herself on being known infamously as the Dragon Lady. It seems that they are more interested in getting rid of students; not helping them pay for school.

CLANNNKKKK! One of the mechanics drops a wrench, bringing me out of my somber.

I am nervous. I have never done anything like this before. I sit here in these bushes, shivering in the rain. I can see a faint mist rising from my body as my body's warmth evaporates some of the dampness off my body.

Although I am crouching low and against a building, a light breeze pushes the rain in my direction.

I search around, looking for a new spot, but this spot gives the best view of Mike's Garage and the surrounding area. I can see

any approaching traffic, which surprising is very little on Saturday night.

Mike's Garage sits one block south of Lincoln Way West, the busy thorough fare in town. However, on this street, it is like I am in the country with no souls around.

I sit here glued to this spot. My intentions are clear, pushing the cold and wetness from my mind.

A good friend, Brian, told me Saturday was Mike's Garage's best day. My friend should know; he spent two years suffering in that garage. Many people bring their cars in on Saturday, on their day off, to service their cars. The garage manager hides the day's proceeds in his old, metal desk in the far, back corner of the garage in his dingy little office. The money is locked in a metal box in the bottom drawer on the left-hand side of the desk. If my friend only knew what I planned to do with this information. Of course, he hated that job, so he probably would want a piece of the action.

Even though Mike's Garage is surrounded by towering, massive oak trees that cast heavy shadows over the property, Mike's Garage has a clearing in the back, surrounded by a 7-foot tall chain linked fence.

As I glance around my surroundings, one of the cars in the garage suddenly fires up to life. A red, 1996 Toyota pulls out of the garage and drives through a gate behind the garage.

Then the night falls silent as the car's engine is turned off. A tall, bearded man appears and subsequently closes the gate. Although it is dark, the man is covered from head to toe in filth and grease.

The padlock snaps close with a large click that echoes a 100-feet across the street to my spot in the bushes.

The bearded man walks to the front of the garage and waves good-bye to the other guy inside, "see ya later, Chad." Then he climbs into a rusty old Buick.

The Buick's engine roars into life. The car has a severe case of rust-leprosy, and the exhaust was rattling badly, as if the car is ready to fall apart. Then the car pulls onto the street and drives away.

I am still sitting in the bushes, waiting. I could not see the other occupant, but this is good news. Chad is the son of Mike, who

runs the garage. Mike is permanently on vacation and rarely steps foot in his own business.

A few minutes later, the garage lights click off. Then Chad appears, and pulls the two heavy garage doors shut. The closing doors sound like the rumble of a thunderclap; as Chad slams the doors shut, and the sound reverberates off the surrounding buildings. Chad is a tall, muscular man with rugged good looks. He gets into a new, Ford F-150 and drives away.

I still am sitting in the bushes. No other cars are in the front parking lot of Mike's Garage. The traffic is dead, and I have not seen another car drive on this street in at least half an hour. I sit here for another 15 minutes. Just in case, Chad or the mechanic has forgotten something, and returns to the garage.

Looking at my watch, I see it is already 10:26. In the background, I can hear a couple of drunks arguing. They must be on their way to the bar already drunk.

I rise slowly from the bushes, shaking the sleepiness from my legs. Although my legs are weak, I creep across the road. I walk briskly to the fence gate at Mike's Garage, acting like I belong to the place.

Then I walk around the side against the fence, scanning the area and making sure no traffic or pedestrians are coming. If anyone could see me, the tall trees and my dark clothes would hide me in the shadows.

Satisfied, I pull the gloves out of my jacket pocket, put them on, and quickly climb up and over the fence. The rain and coldness make the fence feel like ice, even through the gloves.

Once on the other side, I duck behind a car, again scanning the area for strangers.

Crouching low, I slowly hobble to the corner of Mike's Garage.

Unfortunately, the garage building has no windows in back. Creeping low, I approach the window on the side.

The window is old, and is divided into two sections. Each section has nine panes. I push up on the window, hoping it would open, but the window would not bulge. My next strategy is to push in on the panes.

At first, the panes would not bulge, then CRASHHHHHH! The window implodes inward with shards of glass crashing onto the garage floor.

I quickly run to the back, and hide behind a car. My heart is racing, as the adrenaline is coursing through my veins. I sit here in the back, crouching low, looking for any signs of trouble. I did not hear a peep.

After 10 minutes, I jog to the window and climb through.

My eyes adjust to the dim light as I quickly glance around the garage. I could not see any blinking lights or other indications of a burglar alarm. I meander my way to the back of the garage to Chad's Office.

I open the door with no problem.

Walking around the desk, I open the bottom drawer and remove the metal lock box. The box is old and cheap with a heavy layer of dirt and grease.

I carry the box out of the office into the garage, searching for a crow bar. Just in luck, I see a crow bar lying the bench.

Holding the box firmly with one hand against my body, I use the hand to work the crow bar into the crevice of the box. As I apply a little force on the crow bar, the box screeches and moans. Then it pops open.

The gods must be looking favorable on me tonight. The box is full of money. I remove the bills and spread them on the workbench. There must be over a \$1,000 here. In the dim light, I could see several checks.

I sort these out and place them to the side. I will leave the checks behind. There is no way I would try to cash these.

I fold the bills and slide them into my front jean's pocket. The gloves made the task a little difficult, but I could feel the wad of money sliding down the pocket.

The box also contains about \$5 in change, so I tilt the box, emptying the contents into my eager glove. Then I slide the change into my other jean's pocket.

Thinking to myself, I have to be smart. I return to Chad's Office, and then open all the other drawers in his desk, spilling the contents onto the floor. I also meander around the garage, opening other drawers on the workbenches and tool boxes.

I want to ensure this job looks random. If only one drawer was disturbed, then the police would know this was an inside job.

A smile swept across my face, as I look at the mayhem and mess, I caused. I felt like a two-year old who was left unattended in the kitchen for an hour.

I return to the broken window, and slowly peer out onto the street, looking for any signs of life.

It is still dead. The rain stopped, and a foggy mist hugs the landscape.

I quickly jump through the window, making my way to the fence. I hastily climb up and over the fence, and jog to the street.

I continue to walk down the street. As the distance from Mike's Garage widens, the strong thrusts of my legs soften into joyous skips.

After two blocks, I pull the gloves off, and slide them back into my jacket's pocket.

I am flabbergasted and confused. This was way too easy.

I do not have a car, so I walk directly to the busy street, Lincoln Way West. Then I turn left and walk to the closet bar, which is six blocks down the street.

I could not walk directly home, because the police have a K9 unit. If the dog picked up my scent, it would immediately lead them to my dorm room. Maybe the dog would have trouble discerning my scent from all the drunks at the bar.

I approach Mad Murphy's.

Mad Murphy's is a rustic country bar with country music thumping out of the jukebox. The building is old and appears to be an oversized shack surrounded on all sides by a dirt parking lot. The parking lot is full of rusty, broken-down Ford and Chevy trucks.

As I walked through the door, I cannot believe my luck. One bar stool is empty. The gods must really be looking favorably on me today. Plopping myself onto the stool, I order a Corona, using the change in my pocket.

Behind the bar, a 3-foot high mirror follows along the wall. In front of the mirror are several wooden shelves, brimming with an assortment of liquors.

Then I see the reflection of the dirty bearded mechanic standing in the corner of the bar, holding a cue stick in one hand and

a Budweiser in the other. A tinge of guilt sweeps over me, as I see the mechanic place his beer on the table to take his shot.

My conscience begins to cry. Maybe I should have not done this. I had no right to steal another person's money.

Then another thought, probably from my id, penetrates my mind. My grandmother took her car to Mike's Garage two years ago, and they screwed her. The mechanics changed her oil and spark plugs, and charged her \$550. Anyone with a little mechanical knowledge can go down to Wal-Mart and buy these parts for \$30. Thus, they stole from my grandmother and all I am doing is stealing her money back, plus interest and penalties. This idea aided by alcohol helped assuage my guilt.

Occasionally, I glance at the mirror, and observe the dirty mechanic with cold intent. I would mumble "thief" under my breath.

The dirty mechanic with the beard never recognized me. He never turned to look at me or even approach me. We are complete strangers, although for one instance of time, our worlds collided indirectly.

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Waking up in my dorm room the next morning, the activity of last night was surreal. It seemed like a dream. Jesus, how much did I drink last night? Did I really break into a garage and steal money?

Sliding out of bed, I pick up my pants. I could see a bulge in the front left pocket.

After dumping the contents onto the bed, I counted \$1,225 in bills and \$1.25 in change. I guess I really did break into Mike's Garage.

Then I glance at the clock; it is 8:30.

"Oh crap," I holler. I have political science at 9.

I quickly dress into new clothes, and pull a ten-dollar bill out of the stack of money, sliding it into my jean's pocket.

Then I hid the remaining money at the bottom of my clothes hamper. Even if I had a roommate, another man is not going to go through another man's dirty laundry. Men have phobias about touching other men's used, smelly undergarments.

I place the clothes that I wore last night, including my old sneakers into a store plastic bag.

On my way to class, I stop near the cafeteria's dumpster, and toss the bag of clothes into it.

I slyly look around, and could see the other students did not show one ounce of interest. It is not unusual for a person to throw garbage away, even though the dormitory has ample trash facilities.

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I scan the local newspaper daily, looking for any evidence of my crime.

I noticed one short story on Monday, tucked on the last page of the newspaper.

The police are investigating the vandalism at Mike's Garage. They believe some rowdy high schoolers broke into the place, creating a large mess. The article did not mention anything about stolen money. That was it!

I still did not pay my student account. However, I felt that a large weight was removed from my chest. I felt ease in class, and could concentrate and study. Sometimes guilt flashed through my mind, but then I thought about my grandmother getting taken by those thieves.

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A week has passed, and I have two more days to pay my student account.

I retrieve the money from the hamper, and organize the stack of cash by denomination. Then I head to the administration building.

The administration building is a 7-story, steel and glass edifice. The steel was painted a dark brown, and the windows appear blackish in the sunlight. The administration building glares over the university campus like an ominous black tower, making sure that anyone in the vicinity knew who was in command.

I approach the looming tower, and enter the first floor to the cashier's office.

Only two students are in line. It is late March and most students already paid their accounts.

The line moves quickly, and it becomes my turn.

I slowly approach the counter, and say, “Hi, are you doing? Here's my student ID. I'm here to pay my account.

The cashier is an old, middle-aged lady with thick horn-rimmed glasses. Her face seems frozen in a frown. The joy of life left her centuries ago.

She takes my ID and keys in my student number, and replies mechanically, “You owe \$690.”

“What do you mean? I thought I owed \$660?”

“Well sir, the university assessed a \$30 interest fee on your account”

Instead of arguing with her, I pull the wad of cash out of my pocket. Subsequently, I count out \$690 using the largest denominations, and hand it to her.

The woman grabs the bundle of money, and recounts it.

I felt a little nervous. As if the simple act of touching the money, the woman would know it was stolen. I scrutinize her, searching for any hidden expressions, or any acknowledgement about my misdeeds.

The woman places the money in the drawer, and hands me a receipt.

“Thank you,” I said, sticking the receipt into my pocket. I turn and quickly leave.

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It is May, and I completed my last final exam. Returning to my dorm room, I am speechless. I cannot believe it. I made it through my third year of college. I earned a B- in English Composition, but A's in everything else. This was a terrific year!

As I am walking along the sidewalk, a campus squad car quickly stops next to me.

My heart starts to race, as the police car squeals to a stop.

Ah Jesus, as I think to myself. Have I been caught?

The campus officer climbs out of his car with a clipboard in his hand. The cop quickly glances at me, and then heads over to check the parking permits of cars parked along the road.

Beads of perspiration form on my forehead, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

As I walk in the foyer of the dormitory along a wall of mailboxes, I notice a letter in my mailbox.

I quickly retrieve the letter, and notice it was from Financial Aid. I mumble, "Great, those bastards again!"

I hastily tear the letter open and scan the contents.

The Financial Aid Office is pleased with my progress, and they decided to continue with my scholarship. Next year's tuition, room, and board are estimated at \$16,600, and the scholarship covers only 10 grand.

I utter, "Great, I have to find another \$7 thousand for next year."

As I crumble the letter and thrust it into my front pocket, a smirk creeps across my face. I remember a Mexican restaurant downtown. I heard the restaurant owners hire illegal, undocumented workers. The restaurant owners pay these workers less than minimum wage and mistreat them badly.

My smirk broadens into a wide smile. Stealing is not stealing, if it is from thieves and criminals. Right? Especially if the money is going to a good cause?