

63 Cents

by Norbert Daniels Jr.

“Get your nasty-ass hands off of me!”

Eustace’s forearm burned under the homeless man’s grip. He was starting to think his “creative” way of refusing the request for change wasn’t as clever as he thought.

It felt like the fingers were burrowing down to the bone. Eustace looked his attacker in the face and saw death in his eyes. He was so angry Eustace could see the backwashed Pepsi steaming off his face. His name was Tito, and while he was mostly used to the indignities of living on the streets, Eustace went too far.

“I’ve had enough of people like you. It’s time you learned some respect.”

His fingertips smoldered into Eustace’s skin. But Eustace lost all strength to resist as he watched the black of Tito’s pupils expand. They ate the iris. Then the sclera. And then Eustace’s whole world became black. Nothing left in the world but Tito’s voice.

“Come back when you learn some manners.”

Eustace awoke from his trance an instant before his ass met the dirty puddle behind him. His arm was free, but the man left him five bruises to remind him of his grip.

Eustace skittered away to a safe distance before making a vague threat to the Tito, walking backwards until he felt safe to turn his back.

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“Why didn’t you just lie and say you didn’t have any cash? That’s what I always do.”

It might as well have been a rhetorical question, because Thea knew that her boyfriend never took her advice seriously. Eustace told her what

happened, but she knew him well enough that she could tell he left out some key details to make him look like less of an asshole. Some days she'd challenge him on it, but it wasn't worth it to pick a fight when he was dropping her off at the airport.

“Why should I have to lie? Unlike him I work my ass off for my money. I shouldn't need to make up an excuse if I don't wanna waste it on some fucking bum.”

He punctuated the sentence with a hard slam on the breaks when they reached the airport terminal. She glared at him for the rough stop. He looked at her for an instant before deciding to look the other way and pretend he didn't upset her.

“You'll still pick me up next week, right?” she asked.

“I said yes the last three times but maybe if you ask a fourth I'll change my mind,” he said.

“Very funny. While I'm gone, I think you should get that rash on your arm checked. It doesn't look very good.”

Red and puffy skin had already begun to radiate from the five points on his forearm.

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One week later, Eustace kept his promise and returned to pick up his girlfriend from the airport. An hour late, but at least he came eventually. If Eustace missed her while she was gone, he didn't let it show.

“Put your shit in the trunk and let's go,” he said.

Eustace didn't even look at her. He kept his eyes straight ahead and hidden behind a big cheap pair of sunglasses. She was used to him being cold, but this was a bit much after a week apart. She got in the passenger seat and decided to pick away at that wall until she could at least *pretend* he was the considerate, affectionate boyfriend her mom said she should get.

“Hey,” she said from the passenger side. Eustace grunted in acknowledgment without turning his head. She reached out to caress the side of his face with her left hand.

“I’ve been gone a week. Don’t you think I deserve to see my boyfriend’s face? Take off those dumb glasses.”

She turned his head towards him and removed the sunglasses. Eustace cringed when he heard her shriek.

His right eye was so red and swollen it looked like it could burst out of his skull. He never had a lazy eye before, but now it rolled freely as his head moved. What she could barely make out as his pupil was so milky there was no way he could see out of it.

“You’re overreacting!” Eustace dismissed her.

“What happened to your eye?”

“You know I have allergies. The weather’s just been changing up a lot while you were gone.”

“Why couldn’t he take anything seriously?” Thea thought to herself for the hundredth time in their relationship.

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After arguing for long enough that the other cars waiting to pick up their passengers started trying to them to death, Thea convinced Eustace to let her drive. They’d been moving for ten minutes and he hadn’t said a word to her. He just stared out the window smoldering with his head resting on his hand. In her peripheral vision she noticed the arm that the homeless man grabbed. She expected the bruises to be gone by now. but they ere still there. In fact, the five spots appeared to have gotten darker and deeper. It was hard to tell while she was trying to be discrete, but it appeared that each bruise had dug into his arm, boring holes into his flesh. Like if someone burned him with a cigarette, and kept pressing into the exact same spot over and over, burning away another layer of tissue each time.

She let him off with the “Eustace edition” of his story before, but this was getting serious. She needed to know the truth.

“Eustace, what really happened last week.” The car was approaching a tunnel.

“I already told you,” he mumbled.

As soon as they entered the darkness, a banshee screech filled the car. The dark interior became illuminated as a glowing spectral being materialized inside of it, filling the car with its presence.

The tunnel was short enough that they were only in the darkness a few seconds. Thea tried to stay in control as the banshee blew her ears out, and narrowly avoided crashing into the guardrail as they exited the tunnel.

After a moment to catch her breath, Thea realized that the ghost had disappeared and left nothing but silence behind.

“Eustace, what the fuck was that?!” she screamed.

“Don’t be a baby; it only comes out when it’s dark. You hungry? I’ve been in the mood for a burger all day.”

* * *

“I don’t understand how you can be so stubborn,” Thea pleaded as they waited in line. The fast food restaurant was packed but the drive-thru line was even worse.

“It’s the principle of the thing. What’s a man without his convictions? Might as well give up and be another lazy asshole flipping burgers.”

The unamused cashier overheard him and left on his break the moment the two of them reached the counter. He left behind a sign directing customers to use the kiosk to order.

“See what I mean?”

Eustace got about three taps into his order when a large zap formed between his hand and the machine. The power surge plunged the restaurant into darkness, inviting the unwanted guest from before.

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Despite the interruptions, the two finally made it back to Eustace’s house. After the restaurant, they made a pit stop at a grocery store on the way home. Thea insisted on Eustace stayed in the car while she ran in for some sandwiches and drinks. Eustace didn’t look a gift horse in the mouth when it meant less effort for him. He was too dense to notice that Thea was starting to see him as a liability and wanted to avoid his bad luck striking

again.

Eustace inhaled the last of his ham and cheese and washed it down with the last of his Gatorade before throwing the garbage in the back seat. Thea thought that if she could just hold out until they got home then things would magically work out. But the state of Dante's house broke that delusion.

Eustace was never much for yard work, but that didn't explain what his lawn had become. All the grass was dead and yellow, with dry, intimidating thorned vines conquering the space. The vines grew in large and curled knots that stacked into bushes almost as tall as her. It not only took over the ground, but started devouring the house. The siding cracked where the plants strangled it.

A path was haphazardly hacked from the sidewalk to the front door. Thea noticed the dried blood stains as the two of them gingerly navigated the walkway.

She braced herself for the horror she'd encounter when they opened the door. But thankfully, nothing immediate stood out. It had been a long day and once she had some food in her stomach she could start to make sense of it.

She sat down at the kitchen table and pulled her sandwich out of the grocery bag. It looked like it had been rotting for weeks. The sandwich that had seemed perfectly fine just twenty minutes ago at the store was now putrid. The bread was green and the meat was teeming with maggots. The cheese, mayo and vegetables all seemed to have melted into a bubbling pus that was rolling inside the plastic clamshell container.

"I told you to finish your food in the car. I swear to God you never listen," Eustace chided.

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The roof's been leaking into a plastic storage container in the bedroom this entire time. It had already long overflowed by the time she arrived. Eustace made her help him carry the full container to the bathroom to dump it. She thought she saw a mushroom growing out of the ruined carpet where the contents of the container had been spilling onto, but she chose not to investigate closer.

Nearly every sense was being assaulted. They kept the lights on to keep the ghost away. Which meant finding the right words to convince Eustace to wear a blindfold without admitting she didn't want that disgusting eye pointing down at her.

The room smelled like sweat and mildew. It'd been way too long since she'd eaten, and the pressure inside her head was threatening to roll over into being officially a headache. The leak wasn't a stream. It wasn't a drip. Water spat out of the ceiling in hard shots. Like short bursts from a squirt gun. It wasn't not raining outside. It hadn't rained in weeks.

Thea doesn't know if it's intentional or subconscious that Eustace is matching his thrusts to the rhythm of the leak. She just knew it's fucking annoying. When she tilted her head she could see the holes in his arm. If they get any deeper they'll hit bone. Then what?

"We're both so fucking stubborn," she thought. If she had any sense she would have left him months ago. Why should now be any different? It's easier to get used to a bad situation than to get out of it. What's it gonna take?

Thea was too tired to come up with an answer. She just wanted to get off and go to sleep. She told herself she'd handle things tomorrow, but she'd said that so many times she barely believed it anymore.

The leak stopped. So did Eustace.

"Did you cum?" she asked?

"Uh, no. I just... I didn't cum. I'm just... not hard anymore."

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1:00am. Tito awoke to the sound of screams. He recognized it as his banshee. It took a lot longer than usual, but his victims always made it back to make things right.

"Excuse me? Sorry to wake you."

He heard Thea's voice coming from outside his tent. He opened it and saw the man who'd accosted him the previous week, next to a fuming young lady.

“Is this him?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Eustace mumbled under his breath.

“Is there something you have to say to me, young blood?”

The three stood wordless for a moment. Wordless, not silent, because the ghost was still flying around and making a nuisance of itself. Eustace refused to look at Tito, his head cocked upwards and away like a defiant child.

Thea stomped on his foot to remind him of their agreement.

“I’m sorry I was rude to you last week. Will you please lift my curse?”

Tito smiled. “I appreciate that you’ve finally come to your senses and apologized. But words are not enough. Never enough. I’ll undo my hex, but there’s an additional price you must pay.

“What is it?” Thea asked, frustrated.

Tito stood up and came face to face with Eustace. He put his hands on the man’s shoulders and looked deeply into his eyes. Thea could tell this was making Eustace uncomfortable. She hoped he could control himself before he did something stupid and got himself turned into a frog or something.

Tito spoke: “63 cents, please.”

That’s all it took? Thea told Eustace that she wouldn’t break up with him if he got the curse lifted but forget that. This boy was too fucking dumb.

Tito removed his hands and gave Eustace space. Eustace groaned.

“Fine.”

He searched his pockets for cash.

“Do you have change for a \$50?”

The End