

The Scholarship

By Pamela Slea

Two days after I applied for the scholarship, I received an answer, an email, as cryptic and exciting as I had hoped, telling me where to meet, and when:

“No funny stuff, just yourself and a copy of prior work experience. Don't bring anybody and don't be late.” It was exactly what I had imagined.

This all happened because of my academic probation. It had left me without the funds to complete my final two years, and so there I was at the beginning of the year, trying to dig up scholarships that would help me get through my last few semesters of college. I was looking for a scholarship that would just give me a lot of money; one of the ones that I didn't have to send a current transcript to - the Lutheran ones want all the specifics. One where I could just write a convincing essay about what an honor it was to reflect upon my Native American grandparents and all their wisdom and struggles...

Not that I have any Native American grandparents, but you get the picture. What were they gonna do, anyway, card me? I had a one-track mind. I needed money and a ticket out of Minnesota, away from this tiny little pond where everybody knew all my business; somewhere where I didn't have to study church music anymore. I thought maybe I'd go into acting or film making, you know? Something exciting. Something on one of the coasts.

So there I was, squinting in front of the bright screen of my computer in the

dark room, scanning every search engine I could find, looking for the magic scholarship that could take me away from all of this mundaneness. Because really, at this point I'd had enough. Did I seriously want to train myself to be a perfect wife to some pastor and have that be my primary identity? Was that my true calling in life? Hell, no. I rocked back and forth in my swivel chair, yearning to be my own woman – who not only followed the path right in front of her nose, but her instincts! A woman of power and character, who would not be the fish without the bicycle, or however that goes when you don't have a husband.

But then, right after a special midnight showing of “Tupac: Thug Angel” on VH1, I found it. Like the star of Bethlehem, beckoning me, there was the title of the perfect scholarship, the one that would free me from Minnesota forever: “What Would You Do For a Life of Crime?” It was like Tupac had led me there.

Maybe someone less astute would've just dismissed it as a hoax or one of those sites that you think are real and then you click on them and it's just another porn site, but there was something about it that just gave me this feeling... I kept reading:

“Are you a student looking for more cash? Not opposed to working unconventionally in the business and marketing sectors? If you're smart and looking for lots of college money and some not too shabby extras for the weekends, write us an essay. You don't have to be Italian anymore.

We'll think about it.”

That's it. No transcripts, no pictures, no copies of tax returns.

I swiveled around and told my roommate about my good-fortune. She was napping but it was only nine-thirty or something, so I just pretended I didn't notice her sleeping.

“Oh my God, guess what?”

She didn't even open her eyes. She wheezed out, “What, did Ben write you an email wanting you back again? Do you have to send another batch of wedding invitations now?”

I couldn't believe she would bring that up. Every time I try to extend an olive branch she whacks me over the head with it.

“Why does everyone assume that everything I do has to be about him? Is that all I am to you people? An extension of someone I didn't get married to? I have other things on my mind, thank you. There are other things in the world besides holy men.”

I didn't even tell her about the Italians. I mean, screw her.

Three and a half weeks before, I was engaged to be married to a man named Benjamin Fitzpatrick, a senior in the pastoral program. And he broke up with me. Middle of the summer, no adequate explanation – he just said he wasn't sure he loved me anymore! But I think he must've been a little bit off his rocker because jeezoman, I'm sure he loved me three days before that, and then bang! It's over forever.

There should be a word for when your fiancée breaks up with you. I mean, it's different from just “breaking up.” You break up with your boyfriend in junior high, for God's sakes. Maybe “relinquished.” I was relinquished at the age of twenty. And my

entire university knew all about it.

In the cafeteria lunch line the next day I knocked trays with someone while I tried to communicate through the glass to the lunch lady the precise piece of fried chicken I wanted. I didn't think she spoke English, so I just continued to tap on the glass harder and harder in the same spot until she understood that I wanted the good piece. I think she knew all along, but she wanted me to give up. I never give up.

The girl next to me bumped again. I looked over at the bumper girl. She was lanky with stringy blond hair that was falling in her face so she had to lean to keep it from impeding her vision.

She leaned in to me, “Everyone knows you're too good for him anyway,” she whispered to me, like she was my friend or something. I think I had a class with her my freshman year, and everyone who's ever had a class with me feels like they're friends with me afterwards because I talk so much. She scanned my eyes with concern, and noticing the circles under them from my late night composition and she said delicately, “Are you ok? Do you want to talk?” Oh yeah, ever since the rumor has spread to the entire school that I got dumped (relinquished), everyone wanted to know my pain.

I shot her a look that said “I didn't ask for your opinion so stay out of my life” but she must've interpreted it as “please console me” because she put her arm around my waist (who does that?) and continued talking into my ear as I poured my milk, put vinaigrette dressing on my salad, and found a seat without ever looking in her direction or doing anything to suggest that I'm even mildly interested, let alone listening.

“...You haven't been in the Ladies' Choir lately so I suggested we all pitch in

and get you, like, a get well soon card but that got voted down because, ha, you're not really *sick* anyway, but what an asshole, you know? To just leave his fiancée like that, after all the invitations were out!”

And then I just lost my Minnesota control altogether. I flung my tray down onto the table and almost spilled my milk all over her ugly flowered shirt.

“Ok, first of all, you have no idea what happened, so don't go around calling people names just to try and make me feel better. Second of all, I don't even know your name, so your advice or consolation or whatever it is that you're imposing on me right now means absolutely nothing to me. And you know what? By saying that he wasn't ever good enough for me in the first place at best insults every iota of my ability to judge character and at worst means that I've spent two years of my life on a love that means nothing! That I can never trust my instincts again! So please do me a favor and keep your consoling words to yourself!”

And with my last squeak of fury the whole lunchroom watched my face throb in pristine silence.

Then the bumper girl suddenly transformed her grimace into a stern-faced reporter and raised her voice so that the lunchroom could hear.

“Is it true that you've had a crisis of faith and you don't even believe in God anymore? Because of a *man*?”

She smirked and I turned around and made the slow procession past the staring round faces of the lunchroom and sat at one of the outside tables, with the flies. I looked at my tray and realized I forgot ketchup. Damn.

I was determined to land that scholarship. It was my only hope. My one chance to get away from all these rumors and churches and organs. I came to the meeting that night prepared. I was wearing all black (what the sophisticated people on the coasts wear) and carrying a small briefcase (not black exactly, but very dark brown, I don't think they noticed it) that I took from my folks' house the weekend before.

I walked into that room like Julia Roberts - triumphant, confident. And four large, dark men with five o'clock stubble on their faces slowly crept out of the shadows to conduct the interview. Ok, there weren't really any shadows or any creeping; it was an office with fluorescent lighting and a bunch of empty chairs around the meeting table, but I'm sure if we'd been in New York there would have been a warehouse for sure. But hey, Minnesota and all, there aren't too many of those that are unoccupied, and we don't want the New Yorkers to be getting wheat on their expensive suits, right? Anyway they all stood up shook my hand, and I think I must've pumped a little too hard or something because the first guy kind of lifted his eyebrows up and looked to his colleagues like, "Hey watch out for this one." I knew that look well from years of public education.

I didn't bother waiting for them to talk. "Well," I put the briefcase on the table in front of me, and unlatched it. "I brought you guys some donuts." I laid my gifts in front of them and took too many breaths in through my nose. I bet my nostrils were flared. Sooo unprofessional. They sat back in their chairs with what must've been very expensive suits to be sweating like that in, and crossed their arms.

I looked up and straightened my glasses. I didn't actually wear prescription

glasses, but I thought I might look smarter if I wore them. Plus they were black and went with my outfit.

“I know I probably don’t look the part of your average new recruit candidate, but I think that this could actually work to your advantage. You see, you need someone who will do anything you want without asking questions or making any trouble. Since I have no friends to speak of, virtually no ties anywhere, and I can keep a secret better than a deaf mute, I am your ideal candidate. And I look like little Bo Peep. Who is going to accuse me of anything, right?”

I took a deep breath, and then looked up at them sweetly and blinked a few times, for emphasis. They could have been playing a freaking poker game, these guys. All three of them just stared at me, with their arm crossed over their guts, waiting for me to get uncomfortable and say something - but having grown up in a household with three brothers, I certainly knew how to win that game. I stared right back. I didn't even blink.

The one in the middle with the greatest number of chins spoke first. “We are to understand that you have been very religious in the past. We are concerned that the things we might have to ask you to do might hinder you in some way from your conventional church life.”

Silence again. Oh jeez, here I go.

“Ok, yeah, I used to believe in God or whatever, but believe me, that part of my life is over. Now I'll do anything you guys ask me to do. I’ve changed. Really, ask me anything!”

I smiled and waited. They watched me like I was a television.

This was the time to tell them about my plan. I cleared my throat.

“What you guys need is a new direction for the business to go in, which is probably why you put the ad out in the first place. Here’s what I envision.”

I rolled out a poster onto the table. I had decorated it with glitter and markers, one of the things that I learned really well after running for student council every year and being an R.A. in the dorms.

“The Fe-Mafia.” I said. “Females control the economy of middle America, where the housewives call the shots, so what we need is to get a hold of them: the weight loss industry, cosmetics, the magazines, Good Morning America, *Oprah’s Book Club*, Tetris!” I had created a flow chart I was enthusiastically pointing to.

“Didn’t she stop doing that recently? I thought Oprah’s Book Club was over.” I was so shocked to hear his voice, my roll was halted for a minute.

“Umm, I don’t know, but I do know that with Dr. Phil and Oprah alone we could control congress and take over most of the living world.”

There was another static pause. I leaned over the table and looked them straight into the eyes.

“So my final offer is this: you put me through college, anywhere I choose, and I’ll do whatever you want me to do. Just get me out of here.” I smiled again and gave a little nod for emphasis. Then I straightened my glasses again. “Thank you gentlemen, we’ll be in touch.”

And I walked out of the office and outside into the unbearable heat, dreaming of NYU and Columbia, where I would never have to come back to this God-awful place and

see these God-awful people or God-awful frilly invitations ever again.

And I knew they'd call. They'd call.