

The Lady Who Pays the Going Rate

By Y York, 22 July 2020

You can't pay that much. You have to pay the going rate. They talk, you know. If you pay that much, they'll all want a raise. You pay the going rate--Or less, if you're clever. If you're clever you can always catch them out at something.

I caught Fiona red-handed. Literally, red-handed. My keen sense of smell directed me to her travel pouch. She hangs it on the hook in the mudroom. I found hidden leftovers from the last night's dinner in little baggies. "I was afraid it would go bad before you got to it, ma'am." Fiona doesn't lie any better than she dusts -- Caught red handed stealing food, not that I care, about the food, but it gives me leverage, you see? How dare you? I say. "But you have so much."

Then she says, "It's for my son." Son? Invented on the spot. Finally: "You pay me starvation wages!"

She knows I pay the going rate. The very definition of the going rate is that it is sufficient. I was careful to find out the exact going rate and pay that amount, as we all should. I hold on to her wrist; the other hand holding the phone, like I'm going to call the police. She's pulling away and the twisty phone cord is stretching out—she says, "You don't know—you have never known hunger." She presumes to know what I have known and have not known. And as it turns out, I have known. The twisty phone cord brings it all back.

You'll like what I tell her next.

As a baby, as a child, as a little girl I was renowned for my ability to clean my plate. And every other unfinished plate at table. Other people say the phrase, "I am full."

I never experienced that sensation. I ate like a bird--in other words, constantly during all daylight hours. The one time my parents denied me food, I looted the garbage pail in the garage, resulting in my childhood nickname, "garbage belly." (proudly) I pictured myself as a truck, barreling through the urban streets, dumping huge bins into my truck-mouth and compacting the contents in my truck-belly to make room for more. Garbage Belly forever!

You look as amazed as Fiona. Well, it gets better.

In school, they let me sit in the back with my containers packed with all the food groups, chewing and learning. One day during indoor-recess a Boy sits next to me, he's staring at my food. "I know magic," he says. There's no such thing, I reply. "I'll bet you your lunch" he says. I know that I'll win the wager and think of a worthy prize. "If I win you must give me the shirt off your back." I'd heard the phrase "shirt off your back" and liked the idea of the Boy going shirtless for the rest of the cold afternoon. He hesitates, but my food is too tempting. He agrees to the terms.

His magic trick. He shows me a skinny strip of plain white paper and asks, "How many sides?" Two, I say, thinking I've won. "Show me," he says. (Pointing) One, two. He connects the two ends of the paper and holds up the twisty circle. "How many sides?" he says. Two, I say, as nothing has changed. "Show me, he says." I start on one side, run my finger along, searching for its end only to find my finger back where it started. One side from two with no minus-ing. Magic. The Boy takes my food and leaves me the strip. Straight-two sides. Fastened, one twisty side. (to Listener) Twisty, which is why the phone cord reminded me.

Midway through the afternoon...I am overcome by anxiety which I blame on the Boy and his confounding paper strip, but then I realize ...I'm starving.

I am starving. I start to scream. The teacher sends me to the nurse; the nurse calls my parents; the parents send the car. Once home, I knock down the cook on my way to food.

So. And this is the point: I have known hunger.

I expect some reaction to my story, but Fiona says “What if there had been no food, and no money for food? If there had been no food and no money for food, you would steal.”

I would rather die.

“You wouldn’t die. You would steal. I bet you couldn’t last a single day.”

...You bet? You want to bet? (to person) You see, this is my opportunity. What do you propose? I ask. She decides the contest, “A fast. A day-long fast.”

“And when I win, you shall work for less than the going rate.”

“But what if I win?” she asks.

She won’t win, but I must put something on her side of the wager; I hold up the phone— “If you win, I won’t report your theft.”

Her eyes widen in fear. Although I’m not sure the police actually come when it’s leftovers. I don’t really care about the dollar—or however much I reduce her pay. It’s the principal of the thing. And the thrill of victory, of course.

The clock strikes noon and we agree to start immediately, even though I would prefer to start after lunch.

She gathers my hidden power bars and sits down. She doesn’t trust me! I glance at the clock. ... No minutes have passed.

Well, so what? I had a mighty breakfast at eight, a substantial second breakfast at ten, and two power bars at eleven thirty, but I mustn't think about food. I must think about something else. Let me think about...

Fiona, my opponent. What do I know about her? Her name. Her first name, her second name is writ down somewhere, not in the checkbook as I pay in cash, so that I don't have the bother of income-tax forms. Her age? Now that I look closely, as we seem to be engaged in an adolescent staring contest, she's not as old as I thought. Nor as plain. There's light bouncing from her skin and her eyes have flecks of gold. She could be pretty if she dressed with a little flair, but no, she's intentionally drab to draw pity from her employer. I think I see a smirk on her face—but no, not a smirk, a trick of the light. Her eyes are not smirking, they are in fact, spiraling, spiraling down. Well, I have nothing better to do, I dive in, I spiral down down the rabbit hole, not into darkness, but into a kind of sun-lit well, where a movie is projected on the well walls. A movie starring Fiona. Fiona the young mother and her adoring little...son living in what looks to be a large closet or small shed. A clean and tidy squalor. No. Meager, that's what it is, meager. Yet they are singing a joyous song. They are about to break into dance, when Fiona, the real Fiona in the room with me, turns away, taking her eyes and the movie with her. I want to see the dance! But the dance is in the movie and the movie is in the well and the well is in her eyes and her eyes are looking over there.

Fiona has turned quite pale. I don't know what she's got to be pale about – I'm the one who is starving.

But I have more pressing concerns than the well-being of the maid. I'm jittery, I can't get a deep breath, my tongue searches inside of my mouth looking for food because IT IS HUNGRY.

I look at the clock. Twelve oh six? We're six minutes into a fourteen-hundred-and-forty-minute contest.

I exhale and it sounds like the last gasp of a dying wolf.

"Ma'am? You alright?"

Except for being starved to death, I'm fine. I say nothing.

"Do you want me to get you something?"

Oh, she'd love that. Get me food so that she can win? No. I must win. Me. But explosions begin. I can't tell if they're in my head or in the room. I stagger into the standing lamp. Fiona catches the lamp before it hits the floor and settles me back into my chair. I'm keening.

Twelve-fourteen.

My eyes tear, my nose runs, drool pours out of my mouth. Our eyes connect again, a chance to see the dance in her movie--but my eyes are too wet to see a movie, I can barely make out the expression on her face as she stumbles backwards looking as if she's seen a monster—I don't know what sort of movie she's watching--she fumbles in her pocket.

"Ma'am, let me give you a snack. I have them right here."

She's trying to steal victory like she stole my leftovers. She begs me to eat—eat and lose! I won't lose. I drool, scream, pant, spit when I hear her say:

"You win, ma'am."

I keep screaming – I want her to say it again.

"I concede, Ma'am. You win."

I win?

“You win, Ma’am. Just eat.”

I win. I eat. Only Twenty-six minutes in, and I win.

I don’t report her theft. I do reduce her hourly rate. Fair and square, I call it.

All is as it was. Almost. I still want to see the dance in her movie, but whenever I try to catch her eye, she turns pale and averts her gaze.

(pause).

But does that really matter? I have a housekeeper for less than the going rate. Who else among us gets to say that?