

Bad Ideas

t'Sade

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“Hey, Dan!”

Dan stopped a few feet shy of the elevator and turned around. His messenger bag swung around and almost hit one of the programmers trying to circle around him.

The man heaved a dramatic sigh and shielded his laptop with his body and continued past.

Dan resisted the urge to apologize but then didn't. There was a release deadline coming up and none of the coders were in a good mood. He started back to the elevator, but then he heard his friend Steve call out for him again.

“Dan! Wait up!”

Dan peered down the crowded hallway where Steve was trying to thread his way around a pair of ladies from Processing pushing carts heaped with papers. Steve made a dramatic sigh of his own before circling around. He was a large man, with balding hair and a sunburn on his neck. He had to bounce off the wall to get around them. In one hand, he had an envelope and the other was his empty coffee mug which dangled from two fingers.

Stepping aside, Dan waited opposite of the elevator until his friend caught up.

“You,” panted Steve as he stopped in front of him, “are like a ninja on Friday night, aren't you? I was listening for you to pack up, but one moment you were in a meeting and in the next your crap was gone. Happy birthday.” He held out the envelope.

Dan smiled and took the offered envelope. He started to open it when a pissed-off woman yelled down the hall.

“Steve Newfond! You're late!”

Steve gave a dramatic hurt look to Dan who smiled. He took a step toward the woman before giving Dan and apologetic look. "Sorry, I have my one-on-one right now. I just wanted to get that to you before you left. That and," he gave a wink, "I have no desire to talk about the Reinhardt Proposal right now."

The woman yelled out again. "Steve!"

Steve rolled his eyes and headed back. "Coming! Guess I'm talking about the Reinhardt Proposal right now," he finished with a mutter.

Dan watched for a moment, then stepped back across the hall to thumb the down button. He only had ten minutes to catch his train, so he shoved the envelope into his pocket and hit the button again.

—
Twelve minutes later, Dan sank into the seat along the top level of the train car. The rest of the occupants were still settling in place, but everyone appeared to be staring at their cell phones and tablets instead of each other.

He looked around with a sigh and considered grabbing his own phone. Ever since cells became popular, the train cars had turned into private graveyards. After a few seconds of blindly fumbling, he lifted himself up enough to dig out his phone.

Steve's envelope slipped from his fingers and landed on his foot. He stared at it for a moment before picking it up. With two fingers, he pried it open and tugged it outside. He found only a single piece of paper inside and pulled it out. A post-it note fluttered to his lap.

It took him a moment to realize it was a lottery ticket with ten plays. He flipped it over twice before scanning down the line of numbers. The first few rows had an occasional numbers circled in red. The second to last had all but one number circled, the multiplier number. Whatever that was.

Dan picked up the post-it note. It said "Happy Birthday!" in Steve's handwriting.

With a grunt, he set aside the note and looked at the ticket again. A nagging sensation twisted in his stomach and he felt a few droplets of sweat prickling his brow. He flipped over his phone and brought up a web browser.

He went to the lottery site and fumbled through the menus until he could find the winning numbers section. It took him a few more seconds until he could zoom in enough to actually read the

numbers; he really wished more companies would join the mobile era and make a phone-friendly site.

The first number was a match, which surprised him. Dan's disgust of the website faded quickly as he continued to read off the numbers with each one matching the website. By the time he reached the end, he was almost panting with excitement.

The ticket had everything but the last number. With a shaking thumb, he scrolled up and found the link for the payoffs. The seconds it took to bring up the page were almost excruciating.

Dan kept looking around to see if anyone had noticed him, but everyone was still lost staring at their own phones. For the first time, he was almost thankful for the grave-like silence. He glanced down and saw the page had finally loaded.

Holding his breath, he scrolled down until he found the line he was looking for.

He read it.

He read it again.

Dan exhaled hard. Five million dollars.

The woman next to him cleared his throat.

He jumped and looked at her.

She was glaring at him. When their eyes matched, she shook her head and returned back to the movie playing in her hand. He watched as the muscle in her jaw tightened before relaxing with some joke on the tiny screen.

Forcing himself to calm down, Dan stared at the ticket again, his heart beating a thousand times a second. He gulped and ran his fingers along the paper, feeling the tiny bumps of the letters.

He had a five million dollar ticket in his hand.

Trembling, he carefully returned it to the envelope and put it into his pocket. A second later, he moved the envelope to his jacket pocket and then back to his trousers.

He held his hand on his pocket and caressed the edge through the material, afraid it would magically disappear.

It was going to be a long ride home.

—

As the light continued to remain red, Dan fought the urge to floor the accelerator and blow through the intersection. There was

always a cop car a few blocks away and he couldn't afford to get a ticket. Not now, not with the other ticket in his pocket.

Reflexively, he pressed his shaking palm to his breast pocket. The ticket crinkled softly and he shivered at the sensation. Five million dollars. Five million would go a long way to giving Irene, his wife, the lifestyle they always wanted. A trip to the Cayman Islands? No, he was going to buy a house on the islands. Somewhere right on the ocean.

A smile stretched across his face. More importantly, it hadn't left since he got off the train. He let out his breath and wallowed in the dreams of how he was going dramatically to leave work.

The light turned green. He gasped and then jammed on the accelerator. As his truck lurched through the intersection, he remembered the police car and relaxed the pressure. The jerk of movement left him shaking as he stared straight ahead and focused on just getting home without hitting anyone or getting a citation.

The last few miles of his trip were excruciating. He wanted to speed, damn the laws, but couldn't. Instead, he was forced to drum his fingers on the steering wheel and keep the needle as close to five miles over the speed limit at possible.

When he finally he pulled into his driveway, he let out a loud gasp of relief. And then slammed on his brakes as he realized his best friend's car, an Honda Accord, was in his spot. The tires screeched loudly and he came to a halt only a few inches away from the cherry red bumper.

Dan didn't let that stop him. He turned off the car and bounded into the house. The door slammed against the wall, punctuating the first part of his call. "—rene!"

Tony, his friend, rushed out from the bathroom with his face red from washing. "Did you hit my car?"

"What? No, I had—" Dan had started to say something about the ticket before he realized . He had to shake his head before he understood what Tony was referring to. "Your car? No. Guess what!?"

Tony looked surprise. "What?"

"I won... no, wait." He blinked. "Wait. Where is Irene?"

"Um..." Tony looked around him. "She's in the kitchen."

Dan grinned and clapped him on the shoulder as he passed. "Come on, you'll want to hear this. Irene?"

But, Irene wasn't in the kitchen.

He frowned and turned around just as she came down the stairs behind Tony. "Honey!"

Irene's dark hair was normally kept in a thick bundle of a braid. Today, a few of the curls were out and framed her heart-shaped face beautifully. Her eyes were bright and shimmering, the green almost glowing underneath her long lashes. She smiled as she came in. "You're home early."

"I won five million!" All the ways Dan planned on revealing the news had disappeared in a flash with a single blurt.

Both Irene and Tony did a double take.

Irene's hand flew to her mouth.

Tony gasped. "Y-You did what?"

"I won five million! Five. Million. Dollars!"

A stunned silence filled the room. Dan shook as he yanked the ticket out of his pocket. The post-it clung to his sleeve as he handed the ticket over to his wife.

She took it with just the beginning of a quiver. Clearing her throat, she started to read it.

Tony came up behind her and looked over her shoulder as they both looked at the ticket.

Dan shifted from one foot to the other and tried not to blurt out more. When he saw both of them go for their cell phones, he brought his up and showed them the page with the winning numbers. "I swear! Here, let me read off the numbers."

Tony reached past Irene. "No, let me."

Dan almost didn't want to let go of the phone, but he surrendered it to Tony. He watched as Tony held the phone in front of Irene, his arms enveloping her as she whispered off the numbers in a broken voice. Tony held her opposite shoulder with the final number.

Irene looked up at Dan, her eyes swimming with tears. "H-How much?"

"Five million!" Dan hopped up and down. "We won five million!"

"Fuck," Tony said. His eyes shifted back and forth for a moment. "Let's celebrate."

Dan held up his hand. "We can't tell anyone."

“Of course not. Can you imagine what your brother—”

“No, I’m serious. I’ve heard some nasty stories about people who won the lottery. Some end up getting kidnapped or had it ticket. I even heard about this one time a guy’s girlfriend had betrayed him. He was never seen again, but she got away with the money.”

Irene jerked for a moment and looked at Tony.

Tony looked back and then to Dan. “Well, we won’t do that to you. But still, a little celebration?” He gave a brilliant smile.

Irene smiled at him. “Come on, I’ll make your favorite cake.”

“And I’ll,” said Tony, “will grab a couple good beers. Sam Smiths?”

Head swirling with excitement, Dan nodded. “Yeah... yeah! But, don’t tell anyone.”

Irene rushed up to him and gave him a tight hug.

From the door, as he headed out, Tony waved. “I promise. No one else is going to know. Oh and happy birthday.”

—

“To Dan!”

“To the lottery!”

“Happy birthday!”

The three sat in the living room and clinked their beers together. Still high from the revelation, Dan leaned back and held out his arm over the back of the couch, but Irene didn’t sink against him. Instead, she remained sitting up as she drank deeply from the bottle.

He shrugged and slugged down the last of his drink.

Across the coffee table, Tony drained his bottle. A fleck of foam clung to his lips before he wiped it off. It was a familiar gesture, one that Dan had seen ever since high school. Tony was half a foot taller than him and one of the star players of the school’s basketball team. Dan... wasn’t. But, they got to know each other during a school trip to Washington D.C. and their friendship had lasted ever since.

Tony’s eyes focused on Dan. “Got any plans already?”

Dan stirred his thoughts away from history. He grinned and finished his beer. “Pay off the house, of course, and the car and credit cards. Then, I’m thinking of a nice long trip to the Cayman Islands.” He turned to Irene. “Maybe to look for a place there?”

Irene nodded as she turned toward him. “That would be fun.” She was more reserved than he thought she would be.

Dan frowned. There was something different about Irene and Tony that night. He expected both of them to be thrilled, but the tone of their voices and something else gave a sense of something slightly off. He sighed and swirled the foam in the bottom of his bottle. After a second, he decided it just the late hour and drinks. “I’m going to get another, anyone want some?”

Tony started to get up. “No, I’ll get you one.”

Dan shook his head. “Don’t bother, I’m already up.” He waved as he turned and headed into the kitchen.

“No, I’ll—”

“I got it—” Dan’s words were interrupted when he slammed into the door frame. Stunned, he reeled back for a moment and then chuckled. “Guess I’ve had too many.”

Irene glanced at Tony.

Dan’s friend shook his head. “Na, buddy, you’ve only had two.”

Dan frowned for a moment and then shrugged. “Well, if I’m this tipsy, I better have one more. At least I don’t have to worry about driving home.” He grinned. “Maybe I’ll get a limo and a drive.”

Tony chuckled and settled back into the couch. “What about me?”

Turning back around was almost much for Dan. His head swam as he focused back into the living room. “Just stay on the couch like last time. Irene said you liked her pancakes.”

He wasn’t sure if it was the dizziness, but he thought he saw his wife and Tony look at each other sharply. Shrugging, Dan staggered into the kitchen and grabbed two bottles from the carton.

Before he could return, another wave of nausea slammed into him and he sat down heavily in one of the chairs to avoid falling. It creaked from the impact but held.

Dan groaned and closed his eyes for a long moment before opening them again. He took a few breaths before the haze eased and he could feel his fingers. “Wow, a couple beers never hit me this hard,” he muttered.

Afraid of falling, he decided to remain in the chair until he could clear his head. He chuckled and dug back into his pocket, pulling out the precious ticket and holding it in front of him.

Five million dollars. He had to decide if he wanted it all at once or spread it out over twenty years. Bits of advice drifted through his head. He needed to find an accountant, there was one that would easily be able to explain what he needed. It's just a lot of money, right?

He sighed and set it down on the table.

A new thought drifted through his alcohol-addled mind. If Steve knew it was a winner, why did he give the ticket to Dan? He was a friend, but not that good of a friend.

Doubt became to seep in his thoughts, spiraling his consciousness until he was gripping the bottle of beer and staring down at the page. He was missing something, he knew it.

Finally, he dug into his pocket and pulled out his phone. His fingers felt thick and swollen and he almost dropped it. With a groan, he set it down on the table and brought up the web browser. Automatically, he went over the numbers again but they still matched.

He sighed and dropped his phone on the table. That couldn't be it. He struggled to think through the haze that seemed to fill his thoughts. It was like digging through cotton candy, but without the sugary sweetness.

Looking down, he noticed one of the smaller links on the page had been updated. The "winners" had that night's date underneath it. Curious, he tapped at it and missed. Zooming in the page, he tapped again and waited for it to load.

It came up. It was an automated page of some sort, with a number of winners and the cities for the larger jackpots. He was stunned at how many people won even three dollars, but he wanted to see where Steve bought the ticket. He swiped the screen down to the last line.

No grand prize winner.

There wasn't even a winner for the top four categories.

"No," he said, "that can't be right." He flipped through the list again, trying to find the mistake. But, even as he was looking, he knew why. The only reason Steve would have given him a winning ticket. It was a joke. A fucking joke that Dan had bought hook, line, and sinker.

"Fuck," he finally said.

He stared down at the ticket. It was a good copy. Printed on thermal paper and had all the right lines in all the right places. But, then he remembered that work had a thermal printer for the processors. And Steve was dating one of the ladies in that division. The various pieces fell into place and Dan's heart dropped into his stomach.

For a long time, he stared at the ticket, berating himself for the obvious and grieving at how close he got to improving his life. He was going to take Irene to the islands and buy her a house. Maybe get something for himself. Now... nothing.

Grabbing the back of the chair, he levered himself up and scraped the ticket from the table with his fingernails. It took him a few steps to reach the kitchen garbage. He held it in his hand, wrinkled page reflecting the light and his head still throbbing, but then let it go.

The paper fluttered into the can and settled on top of broken egg shells and a drained bottle of beer.

A wave of dizziness rushed at him and he gripped the counter.

"Honey?" It was Irene. "Something wrong?"

Dan started to tell her about the ticket, but seeing her smile froze the words in his mouth. He would tell her later, when he could think clearly. Instead, he shook his head. "Nothing," he slurred.

"Maybe you had too much?"

Dan nodded and staggered back.

"Do you want me to get something?"

"Water, please?"

But Irene didn't seem to hear him as she came around and helped him to the couch. She sat down next to him. Her hand reached out to pat his leg, but she stopped him and put his palm back on his thigh.

Dan tried to listen to the conversation, but the fuzziness in his head only increased. Soon, there was nothing he could do as the darkness reach up and yank him down into oblivion.

—

Consciousness came slowly for Dan. It felt like he was crawling out of a pit of darkness, each thought clawing against his mind as he tried to remember what it felt like to open his eyes, to move his hands, or even how to breath.

He struggled with everything. His body didn't respond to his will, though he could feel the muscles straining and the creak of his joints. He couldn't manage to rub the sleep from his eyes or even open his jaw to take a deeper breath.

His throat was parched and he tried to swallow. Something foul ran down his throat and he gagged on the stench of sour sweat that flooded against his senses. He tried to exhale hard, but the only wind blew through his nostrils. His mouth refused to open to clear the foul taste that had tainted his throat.

It took him a moment to realize what the taste was: socks. It was someone's dirty socks. But, it wasn't the whiff of day-old socks but something more powerful, a funky smell of rotted eggs and vinegar that clung to the back of the throat like lichen. Or napalm.

As he became more aware of it, he realized he was crying from the smell. It burned his eyes from the inside and seared his nostrils. Every time he exhaled, more of the vinegar-like scent filled his nose.

Dan tried to pry his lips apart but then realized his mouth was already open. His lips were stretched around the thick wad jammed into his mouth, but the socks were too large to fit inside. Instead, the ends fluttered out of his mouth and bounced against his chin. He tried to work his mouth further apart, but layers of tape denied him freedom of the gag and its foul stench.

When he figured out it was tape holding the sock in place, he focused on trying to free it from his cheeks. The edges peeled back with his effort, but there was more than a single layer of the tape. He glanced over and saw an empty cardboard tube; it was the duct tape from the garage.

Desperate for freedom, he tried to use his tongue to eject the socks. It took him a moment of fuzzy thinking to figure out his tongue was trapped under the socks, pinned in place by the foul fabric. The stench and foulness continued to bring tears to his eyes as he shoved the socks to the side and forward.

And then he began to taste it. It was strong at first, but then it grew overwhelming. The foulness of the socks filled his lungs and tickled the back of his throat. He gagged with his effort to shove the fabric out of his mouth, but the tape kept it firmly in place.

Reflectively, he swallowed again. A small bit of saliva dribbled down his throat, easing the dryness but also bringing the sharp

taste of the foul socks. He tried to force it out, gagging violently again, but there was nothing he could do to prevent the taste from flooding down his throat and pooling in his stomach.

His gagging grew louder and more frantic, his senses sharpening with the very frantic heave of his stomach. He tried to force his mouth open, but it was held in place by tape. He thought it was duct tape. The pressure continued all the way around his head, plastering his hair to his skull and sticking to his cheeks.

Sniffing, he gagged at the smell and then tried to quell the spasms in his stomach. Unable to free his mouth, he started on his wrists and ankles. But it took him only a few seconds to confirm that they had tapped him securely in place. The pressure was hard to the point of cutting off the circulation, but he could still feel his fingertips.

Unable to free himself, Dan's concern turned into panic. He let out a cry and twisted around, trying to rip himself free again. He thumped against the familiar legs of his coffee table and rolled on his back.

A bottle of beer rolled off the table and bounced off his shoulder. He twisted his head to look up, but then froze when he saw Tony and Irene on the couch.

Irene had one of her legs draped over Tony's and her arms around his neck.

Tony's hand was on her breast and his mouth barely visible from the crook of her neck where he was whispering into her ear.

Dan froze, the whine catching in his throat. He remembered when he held Irene like that, back in college. The way she was biting back her giggles and the curve of her back as she ground her hard nipple into his palm. He knew that her thighs would be pressed tightly together, but ready to part with a single touch.

But it wasn't Dan on the couch. And they weren't in college anymore.

Irene stared at the ceiling as Tony whispered into her ear. Her smile grew and her body trembled.

And then her eyes flashed toward them and the smile froze. She pulled back with a whisper. "He's up."

Dan's breath came back with a rush and he gagged on the stench. He glanced at Irene's feet, but he already knew the source. It was

Tony's socks. The familiar smell when they were younger came back; there was no way he could ever forget that.

The smell brought back the horrid time when Tony, much larger than Dan ever was, had jammed his socks against Dan's face and shoved him into a locker. It was a moment of nervous laughing, but the horrid vinegar and cheese smell had burned itself into his memories.

And now it was gagging him. Dan's stomach heaved and he almost threw up. He gagged and gasped for breath, struggling to bring fresh air into his lungs with every tortured breath.

Tony pulled his head away from Irene's neck. "Sorry, Dan. We..." He glanced at Irene.

Irene looked away, not at Dan or Tony.

With a sigh, Tony returned his gaze to Dan. "It's for the best, you have to understand."

"We didn't mean for this," Irene said, still not looking back. "It just happened."

Dan whimpered, his throat still spasming on the stench of the socks gagging him. He struggled to understand their words. His effort was made more difficult by his effort to avoid throwing up. He didn't know what would happen, would it come out of his nose or suffocate him.

"It was a few month—"

"When we heard about the ticket—"

Both Irene and Tony stopped and looked at each other.

Irene gave a little nod to Tony.

Tony pulled her closer as he looked at Dan, his face distorted by the clear glass of the coffee table. "This is just how it's going to happen. If you scream out, it's just going to get worse. We talked about it and if you are quiet, we'll give you a cut. A smaller one, but not everything."

Tears ran down Dan's face. His entire body jerked as he fought a powerful spasm. Saliva brought the foulness dribbling down his throat, tickling the back of his throat as it ran into his stomach. It was torture but there was nothing he could do as it pooled in his gut.

He didn't know what Tony was saying. The words made sense, but why would his best friend tie him up on the floor? Was he talking about cheating with Irene?

His eyes flickered over to his wife. There was guilt painted on her face but she still clung to Tony tightly. He had seen that look before, but he never realized they were doing anything behind his back.

"Look, Dan," Tony said, "I'm sorry, but we can't back out now. We're going to take it and get out of your life."

And then it hit Dan. They were talking about the lottery ticket. The fake lottery ticket.

Moments later, he wondered if his concerns about betrayal gave them the idea in the first place. He had heard about the rumors of a ticket winner being tied up by his loved ones, but he didn't think that his fear would have ignited their imaginations.

Dan choked on the socks and tried to make a noise to tell them it was a fake, but his efforts only drew more of the cheesy stench into his lungs and he started to gag once again. He tried to slow down, but his breath came faster with his fear, wasting his precious air.

His eyes tearing up from the smell, he tried to blinking frantically while nodding his head.

Irene watched him with a blank look at first, but then one eyebrow raised slightly. It was the same expression she gave when she was baffled by Dan's actions. A tiny shake of her head confirmed it, she didn't understand how terrible the socks gagging him were causing misery. The pity and disappointment was almost as terrible as the foulness that seeped into his lungs.

Tony peered at him. "I think he's just gagging, right? Nothing more?"

Irene rolled her eyes. "He's just being dramatic, but... those are terrible things."

Tony grunted. "Dan and the others used to clear the locker room back in high school when I took off my shoes. I guess things haven't changed much."

"It's really bad." She looked over at Dan. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. "We couldn't find anything else to gag you with. And, my socks were too small. We didn't plan this, we didn't mean it, but we had to do something and I guess... you ended up with Tony's."

Dan wanted to scream out, but his stomach heaved again. The force of the twisting stomach muscles thrust Dan forward. He saw the leg of the coffee table too late and slammed into it.

With stars swimming in his eyes, he choked on the vinegar stench that filled his lungs. It seared at him and he sobbed with the efforts to get fresh air. No matter what he did, he couldn't clear the foulness from his breath or stop the tears from rolling down his cheeks.

Desperate, he tried to push the sock out of his mouth despite the duct tape sealing it in. His tongue squished into the soggy fabric which brought new sharp along his senses. The vinegar and cheese smell redoubled, somehow, and he could taste it smearing across his tongue.

It brought fresh tears to his eyes and soon they were pouring down his cheeks and splashing to the carpet. He sobbed for air, gagging violently with every inhalation but also barely managing to get a few bits of fresh air through his nostrils.

"Dan? Where is the ticket?"

Dan froze. Shaking, he looked up helplessly. He wanted to say something, but his jaw was taped into place. His entire world had focused on the socks. He could feel every fold at it ground against the roof of his mouth and around his tongue. It was gathering his saliva and becoming nothing more than a sodden, poisonous mass jammed in his mouth.

Neither Irene or Tony said anything as Dan struggled to breathe. The only sound was his labored breathing and the wet gagging that tore at his through.

He blinked rapidly to clear his eyes.

Irene squirmed in her seat but watched him carefully. He could see one eyebrow arching.

Tony leaned over the coffee table and tapped the edge. "Dan! They aren't that bad!"

Dan blinked to look up at his former best friend.

"Do you understand the question?" he slowly asked. "Or did you somehow forget English?"

Dan sobbed, fresh tears pouring down his cheeks.

Irene leaned over the couch, one arm over Tony's shoulders. "Maybe you should just try some yes-or-no questions. He's blinking. He can probably answer those."

Tony shrugged. "Fine... think you can stop blinking?"

Gagging on the socks that suffocated him, Dan forced himself to stop. Most of his tears cleared away, leaving him a slightly blurry view of his wife and friend.

"Okay, blink twice for yes and... wink for no. Okay? Blink twice." Tony's tone was growing more annoyed-sounding with every word.

It took all of Dan's effort to blink twice.

"You can follow directions. Now, do you know where the ticket is?"

Dan blinked twice.

"Is it in the living room? We couldn't find it on your—"

"One question, Tony."

"Oh, sorry. Is it in the living room?"

Dan shook his head. The movement caused the socks to slid further back, threatening to suffocate him. He had to use his tongue to push it to the front of his mouth, but every push forced more of the foul, cheesy saliva to ooze out.

He gagged and almost bent in half again, but Tony cleared his throat.

"In the living room?"

Desperate, Dan looked up and winked.

"Come on, it can't be that hard. The bedroom? No? Stop your fucking gagging, they aren't that bad. Did you leave it in your jacket?"

With each question, Dan winked and gagged. He caught sight of Irene, who looked uncomfortable.

Their eyes matched and Irene looked away.

"In the kitchen?"

Dan turned back to Tony and blinked frantically. He turned to blink at Irene.

Irene glanced at him and then away. "Tony."

Tony looked up. "What?"

She nodded to Dan.

Tony rolled his eyes. With a growl, he reached over and slapped Dan once on the cheek. "Listen, Dan, I know you and Irene were

married for a long time, and that was great and everything, but that changed. While you were working all those hours, I've been here for her. That part is over, just get over it."

Dan whimpered and glanced at her.

Irene held Tony's arm and shook her head again.

Tony cleared his throat. "Pay attention. Answer my questions, Dan. And," he looked at Irene, "stop looking at the woman I'm going to marry."

Dan froze, staring up at Tony. He knew there was shock on his face, but he couldn't believe it. Irene was his wife. His happy wife, he thought only a few hours ago.

Tony raised his hand again. "Dan, pay attention. It isn't that hard."

It took Dan's strength to look back at Tony.

"Kitchen, right?"

Dan blinked and then remembered to blink again. He tried to clear his throat, but it only brought more of the sock taste to his mouth. He gagged on it, hacking into his gag.

"Okay, stop with the fucking gagging. They aren't that bad! So, on the counter?"

Fighting the increasing waves of nausea, Dan choking on the cheesy stench that dominated his senses. He could feel the sock sliding into his mouth, but he was afraid of pushing his tongue against the sodden, foul mass. He tried to lean to the side.

"Dan, blink or wink. Even you can do that."

Dan blinked twice through the tears.

Tony grinned and looked at Irene. "Go checked the counter."

Realizing he made a mistake, Dan winked frantically.

Irene spoke up. "Wait, he's winking."

Dan wanted to look at her, craved to see his wife, but he could see Tony glaring at him. Instead, he stared at the ground and watched his wife with his peripheral vision. It was hard to fight the natural urge to look at her and the denial added to the sourness that was burning in his gut.

Tony sighed. "Not on the counter?"

Dan blinked.

"Where else in the kitchen... in a drawer?"

Dan answered while his throat spasmed. He could feel his stomach clenching and the taste of bile rose up in his throat. He frantically swallowed it down, but then gagged even more as the sock shifted to the back of his mouth.

The vinegar taste grew sharper and stronger, flooding through his throat and nostrils until his eyes blurred completely with tears. He sobbed as he built up the strength to push the sock to the front of his mouth.

Taking a deep breath, which whistled through his nose, Dan shoved his tongue into the soggy fabric of Tony's socks. The cheesy taste painted across his tongue, bringing a fresh surge of nausea welling up from his stomach. He frantically shoved it to the front, trying to pack it even as the intoxicating taste overwhelmed his senses.

"Dan! This isn't that hard!"

Dan gasped as he looked up. The sock shifted back toward his mouth and he sobbed at the vinegar-tainted liquid that dribbled down his throat.

"Dan, the answer? Did you put it in the pantry?"

Struggling against his heaving stomach, Dan winked. He spotted Irene in the corner of his eye. She was frowning as she looked over the back of the couch at the kitchen.

Tony looked up. "What else is there?"

Irene's frowned deepened. "The garbage?"

Dan blinked frantically.

"No, he couldn't have..." Her eyes flickered to him and then she did a double take. "Is it in the garbage?"

Gagging, Dan blinked again.

Tony stood up. "The garbage? Why the fuck would you put a five... million..." He scrambled around the coffee table and raced for the kitchen.

Irene followed after him.

Heaving, Dan slumped forward as he watched them head into the kitchen.

He couldn't hear them for a long moment and his world reduced down to struggling with the sock in his mouth. He tried to lean forward so it would stay near the front, but it was gathering his

saliva and filling his mouth. It tickled his throat and he couldn't stop his stomach heaving.

In the kitchen, he heard them knocking the can over and Tony's commands rising up.

Dan twisted in his bounds, throwing all his strength into breaking free from the overlapping strips of tape. But, he couldn't do more than dig the duct tape into his skin. There wasn't enough give for the adhesive to peel away.

He looked around through his streaming tears for something to rip the tape. Behind him, he spotted a rough edge of the fireplace hearth. They had never used it since they moved in years ago, but the brick still had a sharp edge.

Hopeful, he started to roll back toward it but then the sock shifted in his mouth. Gravity pulled it to the back of his mouth, cutting off his breath and adding more of the vinegary cheese smell into his lungs.

He rolled back to the coffee table and heaved for breath. The muscles of his stomach clenched violently and he almost threw up. He took a deep breath and bore down, desperate to avoid throwing up. The only place it would go is through his nose and he was afraid it would come back down to suffocate him.

The sounds in the kitchen were getting louder. It sounded like they were spreading the garbage on the floor and tossing everything aside as they looked for the ticket.

Dan steeled himself and tried again. Shoving his tongue deep in the sock to pin it in place, he forced himself to roll over. Every movement was agonizing. Without having full control over his arms and legs, every bump on his body was a mountain that he had to surmount.

By the time he reached the hearth, he was sweating. The sock was shifting around his tongue, loosened by his rolling. He tried to use the broad edge of his tongue to hold it in place, but the thought of drinking in more of the hideous stench was too much.

Tears pooling on the carpet, he tried to position his wrists against the brick hearth.

"Found it!"

Dan's head shot up. They were coming back into the living room.

Taking a deep breath, he backed up against the hearth and tried to discretely rub his wrists against the brick. But, from his position, he couldn't aim the sharp corner with his bound wrists.

"Dan, why did you toss... what are you doing?"

Dan looked up helplessly at Tony.

Tony shook his head as he stepped around the coffee table. He reached down for Dan who winced. Strong hands grabbed him by the shirt and dragged him back to the coffee table. "Sorry, Dan. Not yet."

Irene slipped around the couch and knelt on it. "Can we ever?"

Tony looked at her and then sighed. Holding the ticket in his hand, he returned to her and sat heavily down on the couch.

When Irene turned so her pert ass was pressed against Tony's thigh, Dan felt despair clutching his heart. They were really in love with each other. Irene sighed and leaned her head on the crook of Tony's shoulder, as if it is always belonged.

"Why did he throw this away?"

Irene shrugged. "I don't know. I mean it's worth five million, right?"

"Maybe he knew what we were doing?"

Dan winked, but it didn't matter. They were ignoring him. He slumped to the ground and struggled with the sock in his mouth. It had unrolled somehow in his movement and he could feel the tip of it, where the strongest smell came from, had flopped into the back of his throat. The constant pressure and stench forced waves of nausea to rise up in his throat. It mixed in with the bile which burned the back of his nose and added to his tears.

He didn't think he could take much more of it. The socks were inhuman torture. Every passing second brought more heaves from his stomach.

"Do you know what he was doing in there?" Tony asked.

"No, I think... he was on his phone!" Irene sounded almost excited. She got up. "I'll get it!"

Second later, she sat back down on the couch as she stared at the tiny screen. "He's a page with the winners. But, why would he..." Her voice trailed off.

"Babe?"

Irene didn't response.

Tony slipped his arm around her. "Babe?"

"He..." Irene's voice cracked. "H-He didn't... it isn't a winner."

"What?"

"No one won the jackpot. No one."

Tony snatched the phone from her. "Let me see that."

Dan's stomach was heaving even more powerfully. He could feel the bile swelling up. He tried to pull back, shoving down with all his might but it was a losing battle. Every breath of vinegar and cheesy stench was too much for him to handle. He needed fresh air, he needed to escape.

He looked up at the two, desperate for them to free him.

But, they were focused on the phone and ignoring him. Steve's note fluttered under Tony's index finger.

Sobbing, he curled up and tried to keep his stomach contents down.

Tony sighed loudly. "Fuck. It was a bum ticket."

"Why would he do this to us?" Irene sounded frustrated.

"Us? He obviously thought it was real. Otherwise he wouldn't be so happy. Probably this Steve friend of his, a joke for his birthday." Tony snarled, balled up the ticket and the post-it note, and tossed it across the room. "Fuck!"

For a long moment, no one said anything and the only sound was Dan's sobbing and gagging.

"W-What do we do with Dan?"

Dan looked up, barely able to see them through his tears.

Tony shook his head. "I don't know... I mean, I thought... I didn't really think this far."

Dan's stomach heaved again.

Irene clutched Tony's hand. "We can't let him go though, can we? He's just going to run to the police. We were going to let him go after we left, but if this isn't.... real, then we..." She let out a cry. "What do we do?"

Dan gagged as the sock slid firmly into the back of his throat. His breath became a desperate wheeze as it lodged itself into place. The stench of cheese and vinegar grew overpowering. He wished he could do anything to stop it, but there was no escaping it.

Every breath became a tortured gasp for air. He doubled over in agony as his stomach surged again, the bile rising up. He couldn't stop gagging, his entire body shaking violently.

"Tony... look at Dan."

Dan couldn't do anything as he twisted harder. His face was screwed up in pain and he fought his body, but it was too late.

With a terrifying burst, he felt the vomit explode from his stomach. It quickly filled his throat and spewed out his nose, but there was too much. As it flooded back to fill his lungs, he tried to scream.

But, there was no more air, foul or otherwise.

t'Sade

About the Author

t'Sade has been happily using third-person singular since the late eighties. Besides that strange quirk, they enjoy writing a brutal combination of sex and violence for decades. Most of their stories explore the fringe edges of sexuality in the epic quest of trying to write a story for every fetish and turn-on known to the human libido.

It's going to take a long time.

Their writing can be found on their website, tsade.com. Most of it is free to read and enjoy.

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About the Publisher

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