

## High School Money

By Patricia Atkins

Thomas stood in front of his bully. Out of his entire high school career, he had never been more afraid of a single person in the whole school. Not even the counselor, who students were forced to talk to when they were caught smoking cigarettes or that one math teacher that ruthlessly failed just about everyone had the same effect on him. Adult scrutiny didn't compare to that of someone his own age. His bully's opinions of him bled out onto the other kids.

His name was Alex, and typical with high school bullies, some kids were **blissfully unaware** of his existence, meanwhile, others worshiped the very ground he walked on, and the rest were left out in the open, unshielded from his unpredictable but inevitable wrath. Unfortunately for Thomas, he was one of Alex's favorite subjects.

The two of them stood in the alley just before the right turn that led to the safety of the street and Thomas's house. The alley was part of the shortcut that Thomas walked every day to get home from school. He had never encountered Alex there before because their meetings usually happened within or very close to the school grounds. Thomas was incredibly alarmed that Alex was so close to his house.

“I have something for you,” Alex slung his backpack off of his shoulder and dropped it onto the ground between them.

The air was dry and still, and the sagging sun in the sky was still hot enough to make Thomas’s top lip sweaty. Thomas looked at the bag and nudged it gently with his foot.

“There’s money in there. A lot of it, too,” Alex said.

Thomas jerked his head up but was unable to speak.

“It doesn’t matter where it came from, but it’s yours now.”

Thomas knew that Alex came from a rich family, which meant that the money was likely from his parents and was not stolen. But then again, he didn’t really know all that Alex was capable of, and that still didn’t explain why he would give Thomas money.

“What is this?” Thomas gestured to the bag.

“A bribe, Thomas,” Alex grinned, “Go ahead, take a look.”

Thomas bent down and zipped open the bag. Inside were a few stacks of what appeared to be one hundred dollar bills. Thomas knew there was a lot he could do with that money. He also knew that he really needed it.

Thomas zipped the bag closed and stood up.

“Okay, what’s the catch? What do you want from me?”

“I don’t want you to hang out with Elijah anymore. I don’t want you to even talk to him.”

Elijah was his best friend, and like Thomas, Elijah was also one of Alex’s special targets. They were often bullied by Alex together, but lately,

Thomas noticed the abuse was focused more and more on Elijah. He didn't think there was a reason in particular, nothing had changed, but he never thought too hard about the logic of bullies anyway.

"That's it?" Thomas asked.

"That's it. It's up to you whether or not you want to keep your friend."

Thomas thought about this. He wondered how long it would have to last, which might have been forever. He could take the money and spend it on whatever he wanted. He could take the money and still be friends with Elijah. They would just have to figure out a way to hang out without Alex knowing, which surely wouldn't be that hard. This wasn't him giving up his friend, this was him taking an opportunity. Heck, they could even share the money.

Thomas picked up the bag, "Okay. Your bribe has been accepted. I, as of picking up this bag, am officially no longer friends with Elijah."

Alex smugly crossed his arms, "Nice to see where your priorities lie."

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At first, Thomas's priorities did lie not as Alex saw them, but in line with him somehow finding a way to remain friends with Elijah and split the money with him. That lasted for what was the most peaceful week of Thomas's life. He went to school the day after the bribe took place and sat in a seat on the opposite side of the classroom from his usual spot next to Elijah. Every day at school Alex and his band of bullies used to harass Thomas, but that week, nothing happened. No one bothered him. No one

shoved into him in the hallway and kicked the books that he dropped down the hall. No one followed him out of the school and beat him up in the parking lot. No one called him names or made fun of him. He didn't even see Alex a single time.

By the end of the week, Elijah seemed to have gotten the message that Thomas didn't want to talk to him anymore. He also had a new bruise on his face. Thomas knew that without him, Elijah must have gotten more attention from Alex.

Up until the point that Thomas saw Elijah's bruised face, he had thought about what to spend the money on. There were things he wanted, things he needed, and there were things his family needed even more. His family didn't have a quarter of what Alex's family had. For a week, everything seemed possible to him, but that was until he saw that swollen and festering, yellow and purple bruise on the face of his "ex-" best friend.

Once the weekend had come, Thomas put on the backpack with the money and walked to Alex's house. He always knew the address of where his bully lived and had even gazed disdainfully at the horrid-looking house while seated in the back of his parent's car. He had, obviously, never been inside, and the only time he was in that neighborhood were those times that they drove by.

Thomas knocked on the door and was greeted by a woman who wore a dusty white apron. She asked Thomas if he was one of Alex's friends and when he awkwardly said yes she let him inside. Thomas looked around wearily for any sight of Alex's parents but the house was empty. The

woman led him up a wide, glossy wooden staircase and down a hallway to a closed door. The door had a nameplate on it that read "Alex." Thomas looked around but none of the other doors had names on them.

The woman knocked on the door and walked away, which caused Thomas to panic. He realized just where he was and what he was doing. He realized it was stupid.

Alex opened the door and looked surprised to see him, "Thomas! Why are you here?"

"I'm-" Thomas stumbled over his words and looked back down the hall.

"Well, don't just stand there," Alex grabbed Thomas's shoulder, "Why don't you come in?" Alex pulled Thomas inside the room and closed the door behind them. He stared at the backpack before he looked back at Thomas, "My, my, what's that doing here?"

"I'm giving it back to you."

"Really? I'm afraid that wouldn't change anything. Haven't you had a nice week?" Alex sat down at his desk.

The room was larger than Thomas's but somehow felt cozy. On the desk was a computer, notebooks, and what looked like their math homework for the week. Thomas was surprised to see that Alex actually did his homework. The bed was neatly made and the sheets were red. Everything else in the room he tried not to look at, like the middle school basketball trophies on a small white shelf, or the bookcase that held some of

Thomas's favorite books. He didn't want to know Alex or what kinds of things he liked.

Thomas set the backpack on the floor, "You can't bribe me to not be friends with someone. It isn't right and I don't want your money."

Alex laughed, "But Thomas, you already took the money. You can't give it back now."

Thomas turned to leave. Alex grabbed the back of his shirt by the collar and yanked him backwards so hard that Thomas fell onto the ground. His throat stung and he swallowed hard.

Alex towered over top of him, "Take the money, Thomas, and get out of my house."

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Thomas never felt more like a kid in his entire life. He found it was ridiculous how someone who wasn't supposed to worry about money so easily got caught up in it. He was supposed to be a kid and go to school, and he wasn't supposed to be bullied for it.

Perhaps he made a mistake and did a bad thing. Perhaps he learned his lesson. He most certainly regretted what he did to Elijah, but he couldn't quite convince himself he regretted not getting the crap beat out of him for a week.

He didn't know what would happen the next time he saw Alex, or if the fact that he tried to rescind the bribe meant that he was once again free

game for bullying. He did know that his conscience would never come clean and he would never get his friend back.

Now all that was left was the money. He thought about leaving it on the side of the road. But that wouldn't be worth it, and it almost felt like more of a disservice to his ex-best friend.

Instead, he went to his favorite burger place. He wanted a distraction, he wanted to be a kid.

Before he went inside he took out a single one hundred dollar bill from the backpack and put it in his pocket. The bag felt heavy on his back as he placed his order.

Thomas smiled meekly at the cashier, "Do you have change for a hundred?"