

“If I had a monopoly on washing machines...” murmured Allen. Such was the usual type of opening sentence in my lunch table conversations. Allen and David were my best friends; our adventures together went back to elementary school. In fifth grade, after months of meticulous observation and experimentation, we put forth a groundbreaking theory: grown-ups didn’t run the world. Money did.

By the time we were in eighth grade, this theory had already evolved into a fully-fledged philosophy, which we referred to as Qianism, because “*qian*” is money in Chinese. It wasn’t terribly complicated. The first and only principle of Qianism: earn as much money as soon as possible.

As devoted followers of Qianism, David and Allen were always trying to dream up moneymaking plots, because they wanted to make a lot of money early on, then retire early. Each new day that came along, they had some ridiculous scheme to make big bucks. And that day, it was washing machines.

In eighth grade, I had been just as invested in Qianism as they were. But now, I thought they were taking Qianism a little too seriously. There were more important things in life.

Allen sighed and muttered, “If I were a rich man...”

The next words from the song popped into my head: Yubby dibby dibby dibby dibby dibby dum...but I wasn’t sure that Allen would be satisfied with a “big tall house with rooms by the dozen.” No, Allen wanted to be a billionaire with a fleet of Lamborghinis and have rooms by the hundreds.

For a moment, the conversation stopped, and all one could hear were the noises of the lunchroom, like the lull of ocean waves, in the background. Suddenly, it seemed that Allen had had a eureka moment.

“Wait...WAIT! David, stop!”

“What?” David paused with his pencil in the air. He had been working on a science packet.

Allen’s eyebrows, comparable to a skunk’s tail, joined into a unibrow. “David, where’d you get your pencil from?”

“What?” David held up his pencil. It was a Uni brand pencil, meaning that it was Japanese, as shiny as a newly minted coin, had a soft gel grip, and was very expensive.

“Hmm...” Allen paused. “I think I see a money-making opportunity here!”

Emily came over to our table. Her best friend Samantha (Sam, as she prefers to be called) followed her. Sam smiled at me, her short curtain of black hair falling around her face. It seemed that the cafeteria grew much warmer. My face certainly did.

Allen took David’s pencil and presented it to Emily. “Don’t you think this is cool? We’re going to start a shop that’ll sell these for around twelve dollars.”

Emily was genuinely interested, as far as I could infer. But I remembered seeing her dad using one of those pencils, so I said, “You know, Emily, I’ve seen your dad take out one of those pencils before. Maybe you could ask him where he got it.”

“Really? Wow. I didn’t even know.” Emily walked away, with Sam in tow. Sam waved to me, and I waved back. I felt a kind of swooping sensation in my stomach.

As soon as Emily and Sam were out of earshot, Allen exploded, “Eric, what are you doing? That was our first customer!”

“Didn’t she already have one at home?”

“The point is that we could make profit.”

“But isn’t it kind of wrong, to have her buy a pencil when we know she doesn’t need to?”

“We’re making money!”

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and the cafeteria, which had been pleasant moments before, seemed kind of chilly. “Don’t all the proceeds have to go to charity though, Allen, if we’re going to sell them in school?”

“Well...about that. Why don’t we open our own charity? And say that we deducted a founder’s fee from the money we brought in.” Allen leaned in and lowered his voice, like a magician about to reveal his greatest magic trick, “Say we each got a share of the profits, like 33.3%?”

I felt like a parrot thrown into the Arctic, or an egg flung out from my protective nest. For once, I didn’t know what to do. Was I expected to defend moral values at fourteen years of age? It seemed too soon, too real. There was also the other thought that I had. What would David and Allen do if I refused? Would we go on being friends? All I can say is in the end, I convinced myself that I cared too much about David and Allen, and so I would stick around. I would stick around to convince them to stop lying. But somehow I knew that

it was just an excuse. I would stay for that moral purpose, and I would *happen* to reap the financial benefits. Afterschool that day, it was chilly, and I shivered despite my jacket. It looked like winter was approaching fast.

• • •

“Look at this, Eric,” Allen held up our newest item so that it glinted like a knife in the light. “You see this? This rotates the lead as you write so that it always stays sharp.” He pointed to a fixation right above the point. “They’re the newest brand of Kurutoga. I ordered 10 of them for \$12 a piece.”

“That’s great...” I sat by the radiator, hoping to warm my frigid hands, but instead of warmth, the radiator belched out some cold air. It, like all the other radiators in the school, had been malfunctioning for centuries.

David had been helping a customer, and upon making the sale, came back to where we were standing, clutching a fistful of dollar bills. A quarter fell out of his hand onto the ground with a clash of cymbals. “Another purchase for a charitable purpose,” he said. I winced a little, but said nothing. He gave the money to me to put away. I shuddered inwardly as I held the bills and coins. Not a penny of it was ours, I thought, but my brain quashed itself immediately. The cash box felt freezing and slippery, like ice. I couldn’t hold on to it for some reason.

Emily walked up to the table, and David went up to her, scooping up five of the Kurutogas (in assorted colors) along the way.

“Hmmm...I haven’t seen this before. What is it?” Emily had really helped the business by making a point of using our pencils; apparently, she had never asked her dad. She would buy new additions as soon as she saw them. Often, we would sell her pencils for more than \$3 higher than the price we bought them at.

“This is the newest type of Kuratoga. You see this? The lead rotates by 6° every time the pencil touches the paper so that it always stays sharp. You don’t get any of those annoying knife-edges.” Such technical descriptions were David’s specialty, and he excelled at ripping people off, especially Emily, who, as we all knew, thought David was *quite* endearing.

Another person came up to the table, a new customer. New customers were pretty rare now. In fact, it was rumored that teachers complained about the excessive glinting of

pencils every time they opened the blinds. Well, lucky me. The new customer happened to be Ivan. Not the first person I wanted to talk to, but I had to act the part of the gracious businessman.

“Hey Ivan! What brings you to our humble shop today? We have 15 different types of Japanese pencils, ranging from eight to fifteen dollars apiece. All of our money goes straight to ADE Charities, which is helping to build a school in Africa.” I tried hard to let myself seem enthusiastic, but I sounded more like a duck that was losing its voice. I handed him a booklet showing pictures of teens building a school in Africa (not us, obviously). The part about the charity was a required line for every new customer.

“I’m not here to buy a pencil,” drawled Ivan. “I’m here to tell the rest of the school about this collusion you have going on here.” Allen and David, who had come over, naturally had no idea what *collusion* meant.

“A conspiracy? What conspiracy?” I tried to scoff, but my heart wasn’t in it.

Ivan started screaming, “The charity is fake! Do you hear me everybody? It’s all fake!” That attracted a lot of attention, but everybody knew it was just another one of his crazy conspiracy theories. After all, the pencil shop was a reputed and trustworthy dealer of expensive pencils, the authenticity of which could not be denied.

Only three people knew exactly how right Ivan had been. Two of those people laughed it off with the rest of the crowd. The third person claimed that they had to go.

“What’s up with you?” asked Allen. The words seemed concerned, but his voice didn’t. The voice hinted of daggers hidden beneath cloaks. “You seem...off.”

There would be no comfort from Allen. He wouldn’t understand. Nobody seemed to understand how heavy lies were, especially when I was talking to Sam, and especially because we seemed to have a lot to talk about.

I left as soon as possible. The biting air outside seemed so much colder.

• • •

I was manning the shop when Emily came to the shop again, this time with Sam accompanying her. For whatever reason, Sam had neglected to buy a pencil until now, which meant of course, that I had to say the required words...I had to lie to Sam. A sharp pain reverberated through me. I looked around to see if David or Allen could replace me, but they were both busy. Allen kind of shot me a steely look, as if to say, *hurry up and get on*

*with it!* “Hi Emily. Hey Sam.” I kind of waved at her, and she smiled back. My hands started sweating for some reason.

“Eric, tell me more about your charity. How did you link it up with kids in Africa?” asked Sam. I didn’t want to talk to Sam about the charity, because it would entail quite a bit of lying. I shot a furtive glance at Allen, but he was still busy with his customer.

“Um...” I hoped my face wasn’t as red as it felt. Emily, seeing my situation, promptly excused herself.

“You know? I need to go talk to Ms. Higgins about that science project. Sam, why don’t you wait for me here?” She gave me a knowing grin and sprinted off.

That left Sam and me facing each other awkwardly, both of us blushing to the roots of our hair.

Sam was the first one to speak. “Eric, I want to help out.”

“What?”

“I want to help you with your charity thing! It seems very interesting!”

“Um...”

“I’m still kind of amazed that you guys just said you were going to do it, and you did it!”

Seeking more time, I said, “Sam, why don’t you call me? I kind of have to go right now,” which was somewhat true.

Sam turned pink again and said, “Sure.”

When I walked out the door, I was greeted by one of those winter days where the air is cold in a refreshing way, and the sun is out, and one feels warm...and suddenly, I realized. I had just asked Sam to call me. To *call* me. And she said she would!

When I got home, I called Allen and David. After I told them my dilemma, Allen laughed. A stab of hurt went through me. Was he not taking me seriously?

“Eric, you can’t be serious. Just tell her all the stuff we came up with! We’re still in charge of all the actual money. She can help out with the shop and stuff.”

“Yeah, but Allen, I can’t lie to her. I just...can’t.”

“Are we actually going to bring this up? Qianism, which *we*, you included, came up with, says that money runs the world! Look at this!” Allen showed me the numbers. Overall, we had pulled in over nine hundred dollars. It was quite a hefty sum; and every bit of it was

ours through our lies. “Eric, we could buy a used car on eBay with nine hundred dollars. Not that we would want to, of course, but we could! I know you think that you’re being noble and whatever in being oh-so good-goody to Sam, but you two aren’t even in a relationship. Even if you were, high school relationships are never things that last. Love over money is *so* clichéd, and between you two, it’s not even love!” Allen held up a fistful of cash. “Look at this! This is more important than whatever you have for Sam! What are you going to do? Tell everybody? You’ll screw yourself over as well as all of us!” At the end, Allen’s voice was cold and unforgiving, like the steel of an executioner’s blade.

Allen knew me well enough to strike in deep. But if anything, it only cemented my decision.

The phone rang. It was Sam. I picked it up on the first ring.

“Hi Eric.” Sam sounded flustered and excited. There was warmth behind her voice that broke a lot of glass in my heart. That warmth would probably be gone after this conversation.

“Sam...”

“Yes?”

“I need to tell you some things about the charity...”

“Um...” I imagined her frowning. She bit her lip when she frowned, and I always had to suppress a smile...

“Yeah, well, the charity...” In Disney movies, the characters are always able to fess up so fast. Why was this so hard?

“Yeah?”

I finally got it out.

I imagined her frowning harder than ever. She listened while I elucidated upon things. And then, she said, “Bye,” and hung up. The shards of glass seemed to pierce me every time I breathed.

• • •

I had originally planned on just telling Sam, but when I got to school, I knew that I had to complete what I had started. So I sought out an audience with the principal and told him everything as well. Unfortunately, the principal was a good listener. His poker face was

exceptionally good, probably the result of years of boring conferences. He jotted down some notes, and then sent me back to class.

During fifth hour, a counselor came in and said, "I need to talk to Eric." He led me out into the hall, where I was joined by David and Allen, pulled from their classes. The counselors escorted us to the main office.

I was starting to have serious doubts. We would probably be suspended, if not expelled, and go through with whatever consequences our parents had in store for us. I would go through with all of this without my two best friends. And without Sam: she would never trust me again.

The principal was waiting for us. "Do you three know why you're here?"

We looked at each other. Allen and David answered, "Truthfully, not at all." But I couldn't bring myself to say one more lie. Only two voices echoed in the office.

They noticed. David and Allen noticed the absence of the third voice. And the look they each gave me nearly cut me to pieces. There was anger definitely, a whole boatload of other things in the look, but worst of all was the hurt and the betrayal. We had been friends for so long, knew each other so well. I had hurt them. I had betrayed them. And though I knew it was the right thing, I was not proud.

The principal said, "You realize that what you have done is a severe violation of our school code. We could have you expelled, suspended at the least."

Then he said, "As your teachers and school staff, we have a responsibility as well. Honestly, we should've checked out your charity before anything else. I'm very proud that you've decided to be honest with us. I think, that since you have learned your lesson, we can lessen the consequences. There'll still be detention, of course, and I'll need to talk to your parents, but you won't be suspended or expelled." I think that all of us nodded so hard our heads almost fell off.

Having decided upon the punishment, and collected our parents' phone numbers, the principal sent us back to class.

I was relieved of my official punishment for the most part, but the worst consequence had not been lifted. The looks that David and Allen shot me in the hallways that day were unbearable. David and Allen didn't talk to me for the rest of the day. I saw

Sam once, but she passed by me too quickly for me to decipher her expression. It would be a miracle if she decided to talk to me again, but I was dreading the moment.

At the end of the day, David and Allen left without a word, leaving me without my two best friends, and without a ride home, because I was supposed to carpool with David.

I was wandering the lobby when a voice that I had never expected to hear again rang out. "Hey Eric! What are you doing? Everybody's leaving!"

I replied, "Well...Allen and David kind of ditched me..."

"Why don't you ride home with me?"

"Um..."

"Come on! Let's go. My dad's waiting."

Sam grabbed my arm and led me outside, into the sunlight. Her dad was waiting for us outside. He chuckled and wagged a stern finger. "Hi Eric. Sam told me everything, you know. You forgot the old Chinese proverb: 'Gentlemen love money, but obtain it in a proper way.'"

"Dad!" Sam nudged me, and I smiled, trying to keep my face from reddening again. The weather was warming up. It looked like spring was just around the corner.