

LISA JADE



FORTUNE 5000



This was my first round entry into the NYC Flash Fiction Challenge, 2016.

I was tasked with writing a maximum 1000 word short story with the following details:

Genre: Suspense

Location: A Parking Garage

Subject: Fortune Cookie

Synopsis: Synopsis: One's value in society is based on a monetary amount – their Fortune. Those who fall below the Threshold are recycled for the benefit of humanity, but there are always those who'll find a way around the system.

“Hello?”

The voice echoed strangely across the empty parking garage, bouncing off the concrete walls until it reached her. She glanced up at the sound, tensing her fingers against the edge of her laptop and tapping open a new tab. Showtime.

The speaker was a stout man in his thirties, with a balding head that seemed to gleam even in the dim moonlight. He gazed around himself with apparent trepidation, rubbing his stomach as though to calm it. She smirked. He’s nervous. How cute.

Her eyes traced the lines of his body as she recalled their earlier discussion and her subsequent research. He wasn’t particularly handsome. IQ of 126. Some genetic disposition for heart defects and a mildly increased likelihood of stroke. From her research, she figured the man was worth 4,000 credits at most – and plenty in the organ industry wouldn’t even pay that.

Finally, he noticed her and took a hesitant step towards where she sat, in the open rear of a black van. The woman cut a diminutive figure in the darkness. Only the tip of her cigarette glowed.

“A-are you the one I spoke to on the Telecoms system?” he asked.

“Yeah, that’s me. Call me Beth.”

“Is... Is that your name?”

She chuckled.

“Of course not. Take a seat. Norton, right? Norton Castleford.”

He gave a short nod and sat on the rickety stool that had been set out for him. Sweat broke out across his forehead and he swallowed hard, unable to meet the strange woman’s heavy-lidded eyes. She watched him for a moment, then let out a small, mirthless laugh.

“Let’s hear your story, then. Why do you need to increase your Value?”

He hesitated.

“I... I recently lost my job. I didn’t think it was a problem – I’ve always been well above the Threshold – but I turn forty next year, too. I’m convinced my Fortune level will have dropped.”

“I can see that. Hitting forty means you’re beyond your reproductive prime, Mr Castleford, and losing your job? You’ll take a hit for that, too. A young, healthy person has an average Fortune of 7,000 credits for their body alone, but with your deficiencies, as well as no economic contribution, you’re definitely looking at being below the 5,000 credit Threshold this time round.”

He gasped, and for a moment their eyes met over her cigarette smoke. It was clear he knew how risky this was; if the cops found out what he was doing, he’d be recycled immediately. His skin, bones and organs would be harvested for use in better, more valuable human beings and not a soul would bother to try and save him. Society no longer cared for

imperfect beings, and those with too many flaws were seen as a weakness to the species – and all weakness had to be destroyed. But falling below the Threshold practically guaranteed that same result. She – Beth – was part of a sick, seedy underground, and clearly not the type he normally consorted with. But without his Fortune, he didn't stand a chance. The more perfect among their Society, the rich, the healthy, the beautiful... they would live lives of luxury. But a man like him? He needed something more.

“Please help me,” he croaked, “I'll do anything.”

She pulled back, eyeing him with a renewed sense of curiosity. It was common in her line of work to see ordinary people turn desperate, but Norton seemed just a little too squeaky clean. There were plenty of sting operations going on in the city lately – and she wasn't about to take any chances.

“You understand the pay? I expect the whole amount within the space of two years. If I don't get it, or if you run away, I have people who'll find you – and then we'll find out how much your organs are really worth.”

He fought the desire to run, instead gripping the sides of the stool hard with both hands. He could feel his heart in his throat.

“I understand.”

“Good.”

Beth began to tap away at her computer, eyeballing Norton every few seconds. The Government system was almost impervious to attacks, but

she'd figured it out a long time ago. Cookies. Simple strings of code that travelled in their trillions through the database every minute of every hour of every day. She'd formulated her own individual string, disguised it as a harmless Cookie, and used it to access their systems. Her fingers glided across the keyboard, instinct taking over as she tweaked the values on Norton's profile. A hundred credits here, two hundred there – small enough increases that nobody would notice. Years in the business had taught her how far to push things.

“How are you doing that?” Norton asked.

“I'm using a Fortune Cookie.”

“What?”

“...Don't worry about it. Looks like you're all set, Mr Castleford. It's a small, incremental increase in your Fortune, but it's just enough to cover the losses from your age and unemployment. But listen to me. I don't want to see you here again in two years. Get your life together. I'll expect the first payment next week, too, so don't let me down.”

“I won't. Thank you! Thank you.”

With that he stumbled back, still afraid to turn his back entirely on the stranger in front of him. She stared back with all the kindness of a viper, then tossed her cigarette butt at his feet.

The two maintained eye contact until Norton vanished from her sight. Beth glanced at the screen, tapped a key, and up sprung the tab she'd been looking at before Norton's arrival. Staring back at her was the bright, cheerful face of one Elena Smith, Fortune 2,000,000 credits.

Reported missing five years ago. She couldn't help but laugh at the ridiculous sight, the wide smile, the clear eyes, the overwhelming sense of naiveté. Valuable to a fault, bored as all hell, desperate for change. All things considered, she didn't miss it all that much.