My Good Friend, Fa navigates true events framed by a zealous professor, a chaotic government program, copious amounts of coffee, self-prescribed medicinal booze, and Murphy’s sympathetic third law. These singular elements formed a crusade; a holy-economical war so justified by experience, that a higher power deemed a candid college kid and his imaginary friend fit to pursue the one true question: What the hell happened with my Financial Aid?

My mind, with some reluctance, rummages through fragmented memories of emotions, settings, and detrimental thoughts of little ivory teeth and unhinged smiles. All due, in part, to a small white room containing thirteen chairs, ten students, and a professor while the walls, decorated with two white boards and an assortment of gaudy colored fliers, are lifeless and neglected. My professor, a towering man with a white beard and rectangular frames, correlates real-life misfortunes to the craft of writing.

The clock displays the same mistaken time from yesterday while my professor breathes words that trifles the air, tantalizing my orientation towards university finances with abandoned optimism. My eyes wander from the black spiral notebook, defaced with amateur doodles of eyes and chicken scratch notes, as I allow the words projected from Peter Chilson to sink in.

“We all know that one person, the type of person who never shuts the hell up.” This statement to define a source of benighted frustration: “that one person.”

While a few faces flash across my mind, I realize... I know him all too perfectly. With strings of sounds by varying voices without prose, he leaves questions unsettled. He steals my certainty with a smile and trembles it to the core. His eyes extend to my hardships while his hands guide me off cliffs.

Condensation crawls down my plastic Starbucks cup with dark
brown liquid cradled undisturbed. My hands drape off the side of my chair with four wheels rolling back. The other students dart into the conversation, raising their hands and endowing personal experiences of “that one person.” Their stories resonate around me. I am trapped in the metamorphosis of “that one person,” the core of all my prior stresses of college that congeal into a shadowy form with a single, tangible name:

Financial Aid; “Fa” to his friends.

I had my first encounter with Fa as a freshman at Everett Community College. My first semester I worked forty hours a week stocking cosmetics at the local WinCo while being a full-time student. My life was consumed by school and work with repetition of long hours and homework. Psychology 101, stock the eye liner, American Sign Language 201, face the soaps and deodorants, Macro Economics 103, toss the abandoned warm steaks, Accounting 101, work the graveyard shift.

Still, knowing that my year would be unforgiving, I filed for FAFSA, a program that delegates financial aid scholarships and loans for future and current students in the United States. I was promised fiscal support by the first day of school but when the start of school came and went, I was left penniless.

I had to pay for three crisp and four semi-wilted textbooks, reaching a bit over $350.00, along with the $80 parking pass, and a non-negotiable $50 gym bill with what little savings I had. Two weeks passed when I was entrusted with my loan. The experience was a minor inconvenience at worst, that repeated four out of my six quarters at Everett Community College.

Near the earlier months of 2011, I applied to a single university and was, with great joy, accepted by Washington State University. I transferred as a Hospitality Business Management major and once again, I utilized FAFSA with great optimism.

Then, Zzusis happened.

Zzusis, as defined by Washington State University, is a “web-based student information system [that] has features to help student’s complete online University business quickly and easily.” In essence, Zzusis is a tool of pooled resources that has been crafted to enrich students’ experiences with things such as signing up for classes, viewing varying types of finances and bills owed, as well as important notifications and, most importantly, the status of Fa; among other things. Zzusis was implemented March 28th, 2011, in time for the new school year and my first year at WSU.

The launch was an absolute failure.

I spent hours each week in line. The queue rivaled the length of a football field. Students poked at their phones, their ears engrossed with music, and their butts flat on the floor. The bodies inched forward as our classes came and went. Fa marched up and down the halls, a voyeur to his own catastrophe. The calendar weeks digested each other as these concerned bodies kept reappearing. Each time my foot crossed the taped blue line at the very front, I received the same response: “we have everything needed for your aid and are just waiting for it to be processed, no more than a week’s time.”

While I waited in these lines and went to classes and ate cheap noodles and borrowed money and sat in my room, I still faced the costs of university:

- $987 for eighteen semester credits worth of books,
- $203 for a low-level parking pass,
- $230 for the “Student Matriculation Fee,”
- $400 dollars down payment for my living quarters,
- $X in daily food expenses.

My savings account, which had dropped to roughly $400 after the trip to WSU, was instantly used up leaving a modest $1,420 in fees which I had no money for.

One week turned to two, two to three, three to five, five to eight,
and eight to twelve. I waited twelve weeks during a sixteen week semester while I burdened my family and friends and myself with palatable stress. After twelve weeks of hearing “by the end of the week,” a financial advisor finally looked with intent into my pleas. Zzusis, to everyone’s surprise, had nothing to do with my issue. Fa was there the entire time. He was waiting with the resolve to properly introduce himself.

A signature, one single signature on a piece of paper that could be printed out for $0.09 at the local Cougar Copies and addressed in three minutes, was missing. I had borrowed money from people who cared to endure heavier financial adversity on my behalf. It was twelve weeks of stressing about food and of relying on friends for any real substance and when they went away during winter break, I chose isolation in the vacated Pullman. I couldn’t dare ask for another dollar for gas; for anything. The thought of asking, begging, soured in my blood, so I stayed in my room with Fa as company.

We became close during the twenty-three and a half hours a day in a dorm room over Christmas break. I ventured out long enough to get ice from the basement and taste fresh air while bodiless voices echoed amongst the hollow atrium and winter winds howled against my window. Twenty-one nights nursing 59.2 ounces of liquid bitterness called Vodka while my voice conversed with unresponsive infomercials. Fa watched in silence, another shadow dancing along the walls. I cooked dehydrated noodles in my water stained coffee pot, flavored with vinegar and salt. It felt good – the heat in my stomach. We became buddies in those days of holiday cheer, the three musketeers: Fa, Jesse, and Jesse’s bottle. All wondering how it was allowed to happen. How long Fa schemed, what design had been implemented?

It was never isolated to a single year, no.

Two weeks into my current year at WSU, I watch my boss, the Assistant Hall Director, prop his arm against the inner door frame and say, “I’m going to have to let you go.” He is hesitant and his composure shifts slightly. He wears old fashioned blue jeans and a pullover grey sweater with the zipper half way down his throat. His glasses, a dark charcoal with “Joe” crafted on the side grace his eyes. My feet hover under the old splintered table, lifeless and I hear Fa at the piano, two dozen feet away.

“What… what happened?” I drop lower into my chair, pressure burrowing into my neck. My ears soak up each syllable and I try to decipher what it all means. A mild breeze sneaks through the partially open window and crawls over my hot skin as I begin to welcome dismay.

He gives a vague response; irrelevant while my tongue drives out another question, “Do I have any options?” My fingers pick at each other.

“I don’t know, but I can’t afford to pay you and the other desk assistant,” he says with effect. “I’ll try and figure something out, but we’re all pretty much screwed.”

Soon after, while I sit at home, an email appears. The contents conjures confusion, unrequited, for any response eludes me.

“You are eligible to receive a work-study award,” Fa typed with faceless hands, “however, if you choose to accept, a bill will appear on your account.” My cheeks flush fully as disbelief settles bitterly. The bastard.

I had hoped this year would have been different. My boss, months before the school year, offered me a job as a “Desk Assistant.” It was perfect, paying $10.46 an hour through work study – a need-based system of Financial Aid.

So, why is it, as the dust hangs in forgotten ceiling corners, I’m told it’s a sham – a lie – a conspiracy against my financial stability? I had just gotten a name tag – a rectangular piece of metal with my name
etched on a canvas of crimson – the WSU logo validating my employment through the school. I spend the following moments still, lost in my mind. I fantasize thoughts and scenarios rather than ask my boss. If I ask the one pounding question that drills at my frontal lobe, it would mean I’m back to reality. Reality being a cold shit storm of confused expressions and awkward gestures of reassurance, I hesitate. “So, I’m fired?”

After work, I sit at home glaring at the red numbers of my bank account. I recall each expense made in preparation of future checks I was promised. Othello – a crème colour classic rock styled guitar with nylon strings that turn fingertips black, sits in the far corner, mocking me.

Othello was a purchase acquired at a local music store with a coalition of muffled practice rooms, hushed voices, conflicting harmonies of guitars and pianos, and mechanics of registers mimicking handmade bells as they print black ink alibis that swarmed freely. All agitated the air, all suspended in my ears as I picked Othello up from the glass counter and walked out with my new $457.83 child.

It’s irony really, the name. Othello, the Moore of Venice, was one of Shakespeare’s plays. The terrific irony was said by Emilia, “I am glad I found this napkin,” her finest line for it inspires Fa, his mantra and his muse. The casual waterfall of tension upon tension; an item not significant in itself, but sets a story of tragedy, of stress, of avoidance, of Fa and the unforeseeable future he dictates.

Even without Othello, I spent my nights in the natural habitat of drunken college students: scratched felt pool tables, neon signs that laminate walls, and thunderous bass that nullifies off-key acapella sing-alongs. My peers, students too drunk to sit, women with napkins for skirts, men too self-conscious to dance, and the occasional dry humping couple, all consumed my prophesized budget for their companionship. A few good nights at a college bar: $80.

Even the impulse buy of a 48-pack of strawberry and brown sugar Pop-Tarts for $9.98 becomes a grumbling regret.

I recollect the taste of winter; the sensation of salt and disappointment, a sharp memory of frustrating wants when five dollars was meant to last a week. I finish my bowl of top ramen and egg with soy sauce, costing a rough estimate of sixty-seven cents and my brain pictures the weeks of wintry sequestered nights, eating this exact meal while secluded in an abandoned dormitory, a frozen memory to avoid. It’s all incentive for war, an incentive to act.

I scurry to the financial aid office before closing time. Their office resembles the sterile disconnect of an emergency waiting room – posters of encouragement and helpful information decorates the walls while a small cubicle holds residence in the middle.

The secretary shuffles papers in practiced repetition, noting my presence. I observe her with an awkward approach.

She’s cute.

A fluster of thoughts occupies my focus. Notions overlapping emotions as I try to think of words to ask; what magic syllables could solve my issue; what definition to give my thoughts valid meaning?

I panic.

“Hi, I got an email about work-study and have a few questions,” a fifteen degree difference between the outside and the office starts sweat down my back. A television of at least fifty inches draws school adverts too quick to read.

“Do you have an appointment?” she asks. A sustained glance around at the twenty-some empty chairs that cluster one half of the room.

“No,” I say, half asking.

“I think the scholarship office down the hall might be able to help you quicker,” she delegates me away.

The corner is sharp as I see three advisors deep in discussion, no students to help. I later learn they are barred from walk-ins, to address me. I make eye contact with one of the advisors: a dark blue
dress shirt and heavy dress pants with a face containing a goatee and rampant eyebrows. I convey my craving to be seen with a glare, with a blame behind my retinas that searches for my friend, Fa. Trust begins to chafe away with each stride from the one place I should find help.

The metal ting of a hotel bell expands outwardly into the back halls of the scholarship office, drawing out a forty-something suit pant woman. “Hi! Financial aid directed me over here,” I say. My arms rest on the counter next to colorful papers that silently scream “Scholarship information! Look at me!”

Slight eye contact is made before I begin my journey of discovery with this unknown woman. “I’m trying to figure out what happened to my work-study. Would you be able to look that up for me?” My neck tenses in cynical frustration.

“Oh, yes,” she smiles with an eastern European accent. She moves to the computer, my I.D. card in hand, and slams precisely into the keyboard as seconds dawn into minutes. “So, you don’t have work-study. If you want to use though, we will charge your account.” She speaks with the same knowledge of my email, with Fa’s words. To pay myself to work for the school or to not work at all. Trying to find out why I was given work-study aid to begin with, we consume five minutes.

It’s frustrating, tiring, and redundant. I trudge away none the wiser.

A few days have passed in foolish indiscretion since my epiphany for action. I sip sweet discount orange juice when my phone briefly rumbles on the side table. Two posters, a shirtless Ryan Gosling and a mostly nude girl my roommates and I call Cindy, mirror the wood-paneled wall of my townhouse I share with two women. Sand color tables with grey tops socialize among the impossibly dense couch and chair. I swipe open the text message from my boss.

“Hold off on getting another job… I may just be able to keep you. I’ll let you know once I find out more!”

I have grown accepting of being jobless, having a work week of a couple of hours at most, but now this. I lust for the definite, unquestionable knowing of where I stand. Having a job is resplendent in numbers, but this constant change… it’s unnerving. Nothing about financial aid or work-study has been clear or precise and I’m tired of being lifted and dropped like a ball in Fa’s game.

I’ve had enough of this. I fortify my resolve with emotions of deranged fluctuation.

I gather my supplies: keys, wallet, books, and bag for the day’s classes. The annoyance, the irritation, the exasperation and vexation, displeasure indignation – it chews moistly into my thoughts. My focus abstracts as I sit through the first class. I give my absent opinions on peer reviews, mostly noting the drafty windows to myself with inner dialogue, incubating a nameless vendetta.

My focus sharpens and narrows in the second class as eleven students and one professor discuss “that one person.” It strikes a source of motivation, vexed blood thick as oil. The class is released and I’m unleashed with intent to hunt.

I make my way to the financial aid office, requesting a meeting with whoever is in charge. I sit in the empty waiting area, resolve brimming dangerously, surrounded by cold seats unpopulated. No cute secretary, no distractions. A few minutes pass and Texas, a soft spoken woman in a baby blue suit comes over. A quick explanation of my desires then our pens mark the same dates.

One week passes and I take a seat across from Joy Scourey, the assistant director of scholarship services and athletic aid compliance – a conspirator with Fa. Her room is bestrewn with decorations of motivational pictures, sticky notes with mild reminders, and a few frames of faces I’ll never see move. Scourey, with her dark brown hair, a navy blazer, and a red sweater with a floral pattern near her colla-
bone, collects the questions I sent in preparation.

I sit nervous, unsure of due process in an interview, only knowing this woman has answers that I crave. Perhaps she took pity on me, an understanding that I am a chihuahua among eagles, as I thank her yet again for seeing me.

“Let’s start with question one,” she said to my relief. “We use to have work study only for a small population of students but wanted to change and revamp it to where, those who file the FAFSA on time could get extra help. It is a first come, first serve system, but helps more students now.” My pen strikes letters into my paper as Scourey speaks at a difficult tempo. I should have borrowed a tape recorder.

“So, did students receive false notifications of work study this year?” I ask.

“What happens is that employers hire students before they get verification of work-study, which they are addressed specifically not to do, and are left without the required financial means.” Joy continues while her explanations interchange between comprehensible and bewildering.

In my collected summary, I gather that dormitory halls are a large unit of work-study utilizers that Financial Aid wants to support, not penalize. The plight, as she progresses, is with students, employers, and the financial aid office’s ineffective communication.

I can attest to that.

As the interview comes to an end, I’m left with a gun on a mantle, robbed of a target. Questions of where the burden of fault lies plague my mind. Perhaps I missed an important notice for work-study, skipping over the part where it gives a step-by-step procedure.

“Thanks for your time,” I say across the threshold. My thoughts cave on each other as I instinctively find the closest exit. Internal dialogue erupts as notions and theories converge.

Can I blame the hall and my boss for premature action? My boss gave me a job position that needed to be filled by a certain date. He is unable to wait for verification and most likely assuming the Zzusis notice of work study was good enough and hired me. Perhaps then I can blame the financial aid office, claiming them as complicated monsters set out to play with my micro-economy by dictating unrealistic rules.

Perhaps I can blame Fa, my relentless companion.

“Conceivably, in blunt truth, I realize that blame won’t solve my problem.

My amateur questions were met adequately, yet my fingernails suffer as I bite them in nervous contemplation. I walk home, passing other students and wonder if they have met Fa. I wonder if they know him as intentional or belligerent in his schemes. Perhaps they are Fa’s favorites. They are the special few that receive his blessing every semester and every year without trial. I question my own bias as I fell into a witch hunt and realized the one person who is supposed to have solutions spent the last half hour stating what I knew first hand: Fa is terrible at communicating. But is that an answer? A decomposing venture of communication; lines rusting while phones evolve into paper weights?

Financial Aid helps the worthy, or so the dictionary definition states. Annually, I find myself pushing buttons, checking this box and that box, defining my area of study, race, and ancestry with cascading menus, and then moving to the empty space where I attempt to describe my merits all while shining the bright light of grandeur upon myself in fewer than 500 words; compelling a faceless individual I never met before to serve sweet fiscal support right into my pocket, completing the entire process in under thirty minutes. I can’t help see convenience in the term worthy. Is Fa’s tyrannical reign just another bitter pill to swallow?

At times, other causes of worthiness come from being one of the first people to complete and submit their loan needs, not necessarily
an inquiry of aid, yet being seen as merit-based for a thousand dollars. I question the parameters of worthy set by Fa while simultaneously reaching my hand out, asking for a promise of help from hands that dance nimbly amongst the hours and days.

Hypocrisy.

Another Desk Assistant hired on false assumptions of work study support sits next to me in our office. The floors rasp with every movement as we sit in front of our boss. He discusses the situation. It’s of little reassurance, for our boss lacks as much understanding of why it happens as we do. Again, the beauty of communication, or perhaps, the lack of understanding was brilliant. The end result is of disbelief that swells around the walls of the small office, a haunting addle of why. Fa wraps his arm around my neck.

Now as the year nears its end, the other Desk Assistant and I talk in tampered passing and I feel the commonality of annoyance towards Fa. It’s an annoyance without hope of justification. We talk above traffic that streams beneath our feet on Stadium Way with frigid air that dyes my fingertips blue. He confesses, “I was going to quit when this all started. I was looking for other jobs in town that I at least could count on.”

“Yeah, I remember you saying something about that in the office.” We side step towards the bridge’s rail as a group of three pass. “Do you know if you’re working next semester?” I know the answer was irrelevant, they can’t afford to pay us out of pocket anymore but… I still feel the need to ask.

“Nah, it cuts into my study time too much anyways.”

Seeing him experiencing the same game with Fa, I feel the compelling push to at least ask. “Do you know why you lost your work-study?”

“I had initially got work study on needs-based financial aid,” he pauses as the winter wind picks up, adjusting his orientation slightly.

“The reason why I was later denied work study was I had accepted the full amount of aid that I was allotted, so the funds that normally go towards paying for the work study program, I had already taken that full amount. I had nine hours left over to pay for the work study hours.”

“That uh… that sucks.”

After a few more minutes of talking, we part ways with a “see ya later.” With the iced coffee now frozen to my hand, I consider carefully what he said. Was that what happened to me? I make my way back home, mentally reviewing the process of accepting loans and applying for FAFSA and the notice of a work-study award. Perhaps I accepted the wrong money, negating what work-study could do. I don’t want to think that perhaps I am the cause of my own troubles. That I’m the misfit cog in the machine that is Financial Aid. I feel Fa walking behind me, mimicking my steps.

I get home and power my laptop. A click after a few strums on the keyboard, I come across the Washington State work-study page. The description of “need-base” hangs on the grayscale background. “Students are eligible for work-study if they have at least $1000 of unmet need-based eligibility.” A mixed sense of relief and further confusion rests on my spine. I never met this major requirement for work study, a single elimination of possible cause. The question as to why I received the notification remains.

I still sit behind this splintered desk, underneath a ceiling light that rarely turns on. For a few more weeks I am expected to hand out ping pong balls and vacuums or help the occasional locked out student, with a pay cut to $9.18. I spend my hours enamored with little understanding of what has occurred. My rounds to various people of the Washington State University hierarchy, high and low, are rewarded with impalpable answers. I’ve scouted the internet for understanding. With some luck and persistence, answers were found; answers of triv-
ial importance, minor battles for footholds in a larger war.

I’m left to believe that this incident is a symptom of a persistent communication breakdown. It makes sense to the point where I can’t question it. Though, I’m still left with a feeling of a greater issue. I tried to fight for my job, which came to its own conclusion independently and regardless of my actions: next semester I will once again be jobless.

I taught myself on the basics of Financial Aid, I have spent my time of isolation with Fa, and I realize I have never known college without knowing issues with loans orchestrated by him. Perhaps that is how it’s meant to be.

I still look for a hint as to why I almost lost my job. Why I was able to go twelve weeks without seeing a dime during my first year at university. How it becomes acceptable to expect Financial Aid to be late, when, according to a new Wells Fargo study, “which surveyed 1,414 millennials between the ages of 22 and 32, more than half of them financed their education through student loans.” Fa exists to help, or torment, at his leisure through either merit or need-base aid, orchestrating a system that communicates through Dixie cups and strings. I will pursue it, this accountability. Until then, I try to focus on what college is meant for: teaching.

A lesson of life, and of choosing your friends..

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**INTERVIEW WITH WRITER REBECCA BROWN**

How did you get your foot in the door of getting published? Any advice for writers trying to get started?

I guess my experience was, getting published was a way to make the work public someway, right? Whether through reading it or Xeroxing it and printing chapbooks with friends or making small magazines or a small book publishing house among friends or community. And then those thing eventually branch out, and then you meet other people doing big presses and by the time it gets to where you’ve got a community that’s interested in your work. So to get published is like a long process of engaging in creating a publishing community of which you want to be a part.

**Quote from Rebecca’s story “A Ventriloquist”**

“She is behind me, underneath. I’m on her lap and hollow and her hand is up my neck, that hole. She’s got her hand -- it’s firm and stiff -- around the wooden end of my wooden tongue. It’s painted black with that special spiffy waterproof paint that makes everything look shiny and wet. She’s got her fist around that stump and she is tugging it, she’s wagging it and saying things that I would never say.”