

After graduating from nursing school, my daughter found herself in a brief financial predicament. Since her 18th birthday, she had largely been surviving with the help of a small trust fund she was awarded from the State of California as the result of her father's death.

It paid rent for a modest apartment, groceries, and her tuition. At graduation, she had enough to cover the rent for two months if she signed up for food stamps.

I could help her write a resume and cover letter and offer her the couch in my living room, and she knew I sometimes donated plasma; when she became curious I could also provide her insight about the process.

Just to get through that rough patch, she decided to sign up and donate the five times required to earn \$50.00 for each donation. As part of the new donor screening, the med tech asked her profession. She said, "None yet, just graduated from nursing school and looking for a job." Like that, she was introduced to the center director and received her first job offer. When she took the job, the med tech said, "No offense, but I'm gonna kick your butt if you stick around here too long. We'll definitely understand if you find something better."

A day or two later, she had another job that paid a little bit more and she started receiving phone calls to set up interviews from all the major hospitals in town she thought would never call...

She called the plasma bank to cancel the orientation and tell them thank you for the offer.

It wouldn't have been a terrible place to work. I could see that the employees had a good rapport with one another, but I was surprised to learn that the benefits were decent. Alongside a generous insurance package, if she wanted to go back to school, they would pay her tuition.

If she worked for them, she could earn \$50.00 every time she donated plasma-not just on the second donation. She tried to follow through with the five new donations; she earned \$100 for her two attempts in spite of not completing the entire process. The first time, they disconnected her when her heart rate shot up too much and the next time it was because she nearly passed out. Both times, she said she felt like she had a hangover for the next two days.

During her brief relationship with the plasma center, she'd come to the conclusion that it can't be that healthy. She told me that the United States is one of the only countries besides Russia, China, and Germany where it is legal for people to donate plasma for money.

When I first donated plasma, I was a teenaged mother dealing with the sudden death of my baby's father, just trying to get some diaper money. I made it through a couple of donations, but barely grazing the minimum weight limit I later experienced fainting spells. I would not donate again nor be desperate enough to do so until my daughter had briefly enrolled in the nursing college at Arizona State University, and I found myself back in Arizona.

Being caught in a perpetual state of economic recession, I've found myself somewhat complacent with the practice. Once in a while during a thin spot between paychecks, it's not that bad; if the line isn't too long and I have my smart phone and a set of headphones. I've since completed all of the Duolingo lesson series in French and Italian while having the plasma extracted from my arm.

With the center nearby, it's almost too easy. I do it once or twice and start thinking I will use it to fund an escape attempt from the USA, when Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton becomes the next president. At the beginning of June, out of no imminent desperation, I decided to do it a couple of times.

Upon the first donation of the month, the screening tech told me they were running a promotion. Usually, I get \$20.00 on the first donation and \$39.00 on the second, but if throughout the month of June, I donated eight times, on my seventh donation I would earn \$35.00 and \$99.00 on the eighth in addition to another \$15.00 along the way.

I thanked the tech for letting me know about the special, but said I probably wouldn't do it because I can only do it so many times without feeling like crap. But then, I went home and thought about it. Among other expenses, our apartment building was undergoing a gentrification process, calling for a \$200.00 rent increase.

Maybe I could put the extra money towards a medical marijuana recommendation? One month wouldn't kill me, right?

I went so far as to request PTO, leaving work early so I wouldn't be donating plasma after a full, ten-hour day. It wasn't that bad until the fourth donation when my body said, *fuck you Lindsey.*

Without much boasting in lieu of karmic repercussions, I am an uncannily healthy individual who could probably be exposed to the Ebola virus without experiencing any ill effects; unless I'd been donating plasma prior to the encounter. All this within consideration, I proceeded with the fifth donation, even though I felt that along with the plasma, they'd sucked out some of my bone marrow and part of my brain.

Throughout the month, the lines grew longer and longer, full of people trying to earn the bonuses. Even though I left work two hours early on the Tuesday of my fifth donation, it took twice as long as usual. By the time I made it through an hour-long line for the health screen, my heart rate registered as 105 bpm. They told me to go sit down for ten minutes and then wait for the next available booth so they could check it again.

My heart rate had dropped to 85 bpm the next time, so I was cleared to wait in the next line for a seat on the donor floor. I collected the \$20.00 on my prepaid Citibank card issued by the plasma center. Given the three-hour wait, I might have cleared minimum wage after taxes were deducted. Usually, once I've done my \$20.00 donation I'm fairly adamant about returning for the additional \$39.00 + any bonuses. Besides forfeiting the Thursday donation, I gave up on the 7th and 8th donations for the month, and \$173.00.

Unashamedly, I called in sick to work that Friday.

The Professional Donor isn't just about donating plasma, it's about what happens when two people with over \$200,000.00 in combined debt say *fuck it, let's move to Arizona*. The circumstances sound like a direct trajectory to divorce but in 2011, deeply impactful life decisions weren't that important because according to the Mayans, the whole planet was doomed.

The Professional Donor is a story about survival and resourcefulness. It's about living in a flophouse that rents by the week, about Mesa, about seven other people who won't pass the background/credit checks required to get into a place where roommates are less likely to be axe murderers. It's about smoking Spice instead of weed, not only because it's cheaper, but because you don't have a local weed dealer, and Spice hasn't quite gained status as the new crack cocaine.

-Lindsey Thomas. Author: *Blind Date at the Glass Eye Disco*.
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(photo by: Seth Elkins)