

If You're Paying

A monologue by Pete Malicki

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Contact:

petemalicki@gmail.com

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Philip: a young man in a wheelchair.

I know, I know. I saw it. I came through the door and every eye in the room was on me. I'm used to the stares and the open mouths but hey, you can't really blame them – it's not every day you see a young guy who... is *this* good looking.

Oh, I know what you're thinking now. "How can I get out of here without looking like a heartless bitch. Fake text message? My dog's been hit by a car. No, think big – my *mum*'s been hit by a car." You know how many times I've been on a blind date and the girl's loved ones have had near-fatal accidents? I actually thought the mafia had it in for me before I figured out what was going on.

Pause.

You don't care that I'm in a chair? That's sweet of you, though you *do* have to admit it'd be pretty hard to bail on me after all that. But look, we're supposed to be here on a sexy and romantic date so what I'd really like to do is give you my sales pitch. Okay?

Pause.

Okay. So here's how I want to play this: if we're going to date I want you to know exactly what you're getting into. Strap yourself in baby because it's going to be a wild ride.

Right, so, I got into the dating game a few years ago when the local church had this fun little Speed Catholics thing going on. To be honest, I only went for the free snacks and coffee. If I pocketed enough from the Arnott's family pack I could get three meals out of the equation: combined lunch and dinner plus brekkie the next day. I was working at McDonald's at the time and my hourly rate – as a teenager – was about ten bucks. Eating out costs fifteen to twenty and even takeaway is over ten, so every time I saved the cost of a meal that was one less hour I had to spend assembling burgers etcetera.

Pause.

No no, I could walk back then. Can you imagine flipping patties without the use of my hands? Like, put a spatula in my mouth and... (*moves head around as if struggling to flip a burger with a spatula in his mouth*).

As I was saying, my mum and my dad basically tried to murder each other when I was twelve and I ended up with the one I believed to be least psychotic. We weren't very well off so I had to avoid spending money wherever possible. I got into the habit of tightarsedness pretty quickly and habits are hard to break. Maccas wasn't cutting the mustard so after I finished school I went straight into a phone sales job, which is just a euphemism for being an annoying prick.

My hourly rate more than doubled overnight. I was earning almost fifty K. Life was pretty good; I even started dating one of the Speed Christian girls. Her daddy *loved* me and his number one passion in life was spending money on his daughter's boyfriend to sure up a marriage proposal. That was never going to happen, but hey, if you're paying...

Couple of months later someone tells me about employee rights and I wrangle a payslip out of my manager Darren. What the hell? I'm paying like a hundred dollars every week in tax. A *hundred*

dollars. That was two shifts at Maccas. That's ten meals. My favourite thing ever is TV series; that's like three DVDs per week they were taking from me!

I say to Darren, "Hey boss, why am I paying so much in taxes? I never signed up for that." Darren's like, "Mate, you hardly pay anything. You get taxed at like thirty percent once you start earning around seventy thou."

Thirty percent? What a scam! People work so hard to make ends meet and the government just helps itself? I tell Darren I refuse to pay tax and he says, "Calm down mate. Your taxes pay for everything: roads, hospitals, police, trains, museums, parks, public toilets. A million other things."

"But I don't use any of those things. Maybe just public toilets but I can use the bushes if I have to."

We argue back and forth but Darren says I can't not pay tax. "Death and taxes mate," he says. I'm inconsolably annoyed about this. What a bloody rort.

But then something happens. I come home one evening and find my next door neighbour screaming her head off. Lights are flashing all around us and smoke is coming out of her roof. Like, way more than the chimney spits out, unless she threw her horrible old lounge in the fireplace. Some men in orange uniforms pile outside and give some men in blue uniforms a big thumbs up.

Turns out Mrs Bird had a tea towel stuck in the grill when she was cooking and started a mini inferno. The fire brigade stepped in and saved it, after thankfully having the good taste to let that horrible old kitchen burn to the ground. Turns out they did this totally free of charge. She didn't pay one cent for like eight guys to come out to her house and put themselves in danger. Can you imagine how much eight plumbers would have charged for that? Or eight *lawyers*?

I have an epiphany. My problem isn't paying taxes, it's not getting value for money!

I google government services and make a list of things I can get for free. Start asking my dad to drive me around. We go *anywhere* so long as there's no tolls. You know what it costs me? Nothing. Not a single cent. Costs my dad a fair bit in petrol and he eventually gets mad and stops taking me out. Not to worry – I take a heavily subsidised train into the city and catch the free tourist bus. I go around and around all day, each time writing down the two dollar forty cost saving. Get off and pop into the Art Gallery and enjoy an eclectic mix of post-modern and renaissance art for free. Thank you, taxes.

I didn't do too badly in school but I could have done better, so I re-enrol in Year 12 and get like tens of thousands of dollars of free education. Score, right? Go out drinking one Friday and get *way* smashed. The police come and give me a free escort to the front door of the pub. Makes me feel like I'm in Underbelly. I catch the free night ride bus home. This is pretty sweet, so I start doing it every Friday. Eventually Senior Constable Eighties Tightpants gets me onto a counselling service, which – you guessed it – is completely free. The pub I drink at bans me so I get legal counsel and claim I'm being discriminated against as a white, heterosexual, middle-class male. The case doesn't go anywhere but the legal fees cost me nothing.

I go to the State Library to borrow some free books and DVDs. I do the maths on one of their computers and I reckon I've saved about six years worth of tax money by now. This is good, but it's not good enough. I want to make a *profit*. I try to think of more government services I can make use of. Corrective services? Prison is like the ultimate paid holiday. Or I could kick up a fuss about something at work and go to industrial relations.

When I'm done researching I head outside and wait for the free tourist bus. There's this kid across the road wearing an adorable dinosaur onesie. He's glued to his phone while his mum is glued to her tablet. Neither are watching where they're going. They start crossing the road perpendicular to where

I'm standing. Oh shit, a car's turning into the street they're crossing. They're totally not going to look up. "Hey! Look out!"

I step forward and wave my arms to get the driver's attention. I hear this banshee screech of brakes then SMACK!

Beat.

Turns out I gained a whole lot of things when I stepped in front of a bus to save a child from getting hit by a car. A pretty big lesson in irony, for a start. About seventy-five thousand dollars of tests and surgeries. Free accommodation and food in hospital for a couple of months. Free rehab; tonnes of free medical stuff, really. This neat wheelchair. Oh, and it was a government bus so they also paid a few grand for window repairs and panel beating.

Beat. Philip becomes introspective for a moment.

You... you know I'm not really serious about this whole free-stuff-from-the-government thing, right? At the end of the day, whether you're rich or poor, I just think we... we should always be grateful for what we've got. Other people out there have it way worse than people like you and me and we should remember to appreciate that.

Snap out of it.

Anyway, that's enough about me. Now that I've established I'm an incredible catch with an amazing sense of humour and the body of an Adonis statue, I'm going to hand the baton over to you. You want a cut of my lifelong disability pension you're going to have to make a serious effort to woo me.

Hit me with your best sales pitch.