

Among Thieves

I'll die in prison. I'm sixty-seven, with a bad ticker. They let me out to say goodbye to Sandra. She had been moved home from the hospital. She recognized me, even though she was on a heavy dose of morphine. Sometimes she drifted off. I sat by the bed and held her hand. What was there to say?

Suddenly she squeezed my hand urgently, with surprising strength, and her eyes opened wide.

"Lew. Remember the Blue Room?"

"Yes, baby, I'll always remember that."

She smiled, and her grip relaxed. In moments she was in a deep sleep. I held her hand for a while longer, wondering at what time had done to us, then left the bedroom.

They let me out to attend her funeral. When I leave these walls again it'll be in a wooden box. The newspaper article on the third page will read "Ex-Insurance Commissioner Wheeler Dies in Prison." People will nod and think that the old wheeler-dealer got what he deserved. And they'll be right. I chose a path, and I always knew it could end up in a jail cell. I don't mull over grievances. What I do these days is remember the past. It's like falling into a peaceful reverie. Maybe it's partly the medication I'm taking. Or a way to escape where I'm at.

It's always the distant past that I recall, when I was a boy, and then later, when I first knew Sandra. Which includes the Roosevelt Hotel and that evening in the Blue Room. The memories — or at least the ones I replay in detail in my mind — always involve crimes I committed, but I look back at them with nostalgia, not regret or remorse. Which is part of my problem, I guess, this lack of remorse.

First off, though, I need to say that my parents are not to blame for how I turned out. They brought me up with the right values. For some reason the criminal life always attracted me. When I was eleven, twelve years old I'd get fascinated by an account in the newspaper about some big heist, where thieves got away with millions in cash or diamonds or a priceless painting. These anonymous men were my secret idols.

I didn't want the life of my parents. My father was an electrician. Most of his business involved home repairs, climbing around attics and under houses. He worked hard and provided well for us. In fact, I had the idyllic small town boyhood, back in the innocent fifties. I had plenty of friends, I was good at sports. At school I got A's and B's without really trying. Every night the family had a dinner that Mom cooked, a meal with meat, starch, vegetable and dessert — maybe an apple pie made from scratch, often with a scoop of vanilla ice cream on top. I think Mom liked to say "a la mode" because it made her feel cosmopolitan. In the evening we'd listen to the radio — Mystery Theater and Jack Benny — then, in later years, watch TV — Uncle Milty, the Honeymooners. It was all good, I have no complaints.

But I wanted the luxuries of life, and I wanted to get them dangerously. Not by hitting someone on the head and taking their money. Violence never appealed to me, and I never in my life resorted to it. I never even used coercion. I always dealt with people who knew exactly what they were getting into. No innocents were taken advantage of. But, looking back — back to a time when I couldn't even put it into words — I can see that I had a desire to use my abilities against the world. It was in my nature to be that way.

I wasn't afraid of hard work. As a kid I had chores around the house, and for two years I had a morning paper route. Then, when I was fifteen, I had my first real job. After school I

worked at Smitty's Sporting Goods. Monday through Thursday and all day Saturday. Unpacking boxes, shelving merchandise, helping customers find things, cleaning up. The store was in a house that had been converted into a business. A whole street had been re-zoned to commercial about five years before. The houses were old and were on brick piers, raised about three feet off the ground. That's how they built houses in our part of Louisiana, where flooding was common.

Smitty was a good guy. He would blow up easy, but there was never any meanness to it. One afternoon he was in the bathroom — just a toilet and sink retained from the original house — when he shouted for me and Ed Colbert to get our butts in there. Smitty was kneeling in the space between the toilet and the wall; in front of him was a section of linoleum he had just peeled back — he said that it was like tearing wet cardboard. The wood flooring underneath was badly rotted. And why the hell, he demanded, struggling to his feet, hadn't one of us spotted how wrinkled the linoleum was there? Why was he the one who had to notice everything? Ed, a sales clerk, a guy around forty, didn't say a word, just turned and gazed up at the fifteen watt bulb that Smitty insisted on using in the ceiling light, to save on the electric bill. It was kind of funny, us standing around in the half-darkness. Smitty rubbed his chin and grumbled, "Okay, so go get a flashlight, Mr. Magoo." Turns out the shutoff valve for the toilet had a slow leak. Luckily there was a slight dip in the floor that had led the water away from the walls, so the problem was confined to a small area. Ed knew carpentry, and he said he'd patch up the floor. That day he put a hundred watt bulb in the ceiling and replaced the shutoff valve.

The next morning he arrived fully prepared, carrying a toolbox in one hand, a jig saw in the other, and under his arm a steel carpenter square. I was off from school for Thanksgiving vacation, so I was at the store. I had to unpack boxes of fishhooks and sinkers and arrange them on displays, though when I heard the whir of the jig saw I broke off from what I was doing and hurried to the bathroom. I watched as the rotted flooring dropped off, board by board, onto the crawlspace under the house. After Ed was done I looked through the hole. I could see the pieces of wood lying on the ground.

I returned to work, and about half an hour later I heard Ed's circular out in back. He came in carrying a piece of 3/4" treated plywood. No customers were in the store at the time, and there was a bell that rang when the front door opened, so both Smitty and I joined him.

Ed had made the hole in the floor a perfect rectangle. He was so proud of the precision of his work that he took the square and showed us that all four sides were straight and at right angles to one another. On the two sides where the joists were he had used a chisel to cut back enough so that there were ledges, about two inches wide, for the plywood to rest on.

The first time the plywood wouldn't go in, it was a little too big. "It's like a haircut," Ed said, "you can always take some off, but you can't put it back on." With a thick pencil he marked the places he needed to shave down. He used a small plane; then, when it was close to fitting, he switched to a rasp, using the coarse and then the fine side, taking off a little more, here and there. Finally he placed the plywood over the hole and eased it into place — it only needed a few raps from a mallet to set it solid. We knelt, admiring how the edges on all four sides were snug as could be. Finally Smitty got up. "Hell of a job, my man. There's some of this linoleum in the storeroom. Just cut a piece to cover this and you're done."

I lay in bed that night, looking out the window, past blue curtains and through the branches of a hackberry tree, watching the moon, which always seemed to be deep in thought. I was deep in thought too, thinking about the routine at Smitty's.

Saturday was the day when Smitty made his profit for the week. He'd open at five AM, to get the business of the hunters and fishermen before they headed out to the woods, bayous, lakes and rivers. He had a pot of coffee for them, and many would make a pit stop in the john. The most expensive items he carried were rifles and pistols, locked in glass cases, and Saturdays were when he sold them, probably because men had plenty of time to make their decision. This was before plastic money, and men didn't tend to be check writers. If they planned to make a big purchase they'd stop at the bank on Friday and have enough cash in their wallets. I figured that, on a good Saturday, Smitty could take in over five hundred bucks.

We lived in a small, peaceful town. Everybody knew everybody else. We had a wrong side of the tracks, but the problems those people caused were mostly among themselves, which is where the police intended it to stay. Back in the fifties cops had no compunction about stopping someone who wasn't where he belonged, and they didn't use kid gloves on anybody they viewed as suspicious. The upshot was that we hadn't had a break-in of a house or business in years. This had lulled people into complacency.

Still, Smitty had firearms, so he took precautions. He had an alarm system for the front door and the display window, and he also had a metal grill that he rolled down over the window; it had two big padlocks at the bottom corners. The back door, where we took in deliveries, was steel and had a heavy duty deadbolt lock on the inside. You'd need a bazooka to get through it. All windows in the house were covered by metal grills, screwed to the inside wall studs. Smitty's little fortress.

When we closed at six, Smitty took the money tray from the cash register, leaving the drawer open, and went into his office; he closed the door behind him, to avoid any distraction. Ed would take off, but I stayed, putting away loose stock, emptying trash cans, sweeping up. I could hear Smitty tapping away at the adding machine on his desk. When he emerged he carried a zippered money pouch. "Let's call it a day, kid," he'd say, and I'd get my bike from the storeroom. Sometimes I talked to him as he set the alarm, rolled down the metal grill. Then he got in his car and drove off. I knew he'd stop at the bank on his way home and put the money in the outside deposit box.

This was the routine — except on Saturdays. Smitty was in his fifties and enjoyed the creature comforts. One look at his belly, hanging over his belt, could tell you that. He had a camp on the Pearl River, with a house built up on stilts. He loved that old place. Every Saturday he'd head there after work and stay all Sunday. He'd describe what awaited him: A kiss from his wife as she handed him a cold beer — which he'd drink on his screened-in porch, sitting in a leather armchair with his stockinged feet resting on a hassock, looking over an expanse of river, watching the fish jump. And he'd smell of a couple of thick Porterhouse steaks on the grill. He was in hog heaven.

The bank was about eight miles from his store. He had to pass it when he went home, but it was in the opposite direction from his camp. On Saturdays that trip to the bank meant a thirty minute detour on top of what was already a long drive. Smitty had been at work since five in the

morning, and he was tired. So on that one day he emerged from his office without the money pouch. He headed his car straight for his little paradise.

Every afternoon I emptied the trash can in the office. I knew that the only place the money could be in that room — the only thing in the room with a lock on it — was a four drawer metal file cabinet.

Yeah, I realized that I could get caught. Five things could go wrong. But all were unlikely. None of them were deal breakers.

Looking back, what impresses me about my fifteen-year-old self is that I never contemplated getting a partner. It would be natural, especially for a kid. A partner to share the excitement, someone to bolster your courage. I knew guys who would jump at this plan. But I also knew there would be risks with an accomplice. Such as him bragging. Also, I'd have to share the money. That was bad enough, but what if he went on a spending spree? No, this would only work if I did it alone. I thought of myself as the Lone Wolf.

I looked over Dad's tools in the garage and found the two things I needed. One was a crowbar, the other was a screwdriver. Most screwdrivers I wouldn't trust to be strong enough, but this one had been my grandfather's. It was built to last forever. The slotted end was wide enough for the largest screws, and the thick metal shaft extended all the way through the wood handle.

The black leather aviator jacket I was wearing that winter had deep zippered pockets on the inside. The screwdriver and my flashlight could fit in those pockets, but I had to rig a way to carry the crowbar. I took some rope and made a sling that hung from one side of my neck and went under my arm on the opposite side. I made a loop that I could slip the claw end of the crowbar into and then tighten. There it would hang by my side, under my coat. If I happened to meet someone when I was going to or from the store I wouldn't be seen carrying anything. Though I didn't plan to meet anybody, not by the route that I'd take.

I cut out a piece of red plastic to fit over the beam of the flashlight, so it wouldn't be so bright if I had to switch it on outside. I got some duct tape to wrap around the part of the crowbar that I'd use to pound the screwdriver, in order to muffle the sound. I selected the clothes I'd wear — all dark. Night after night, lying in bed and looking at the moon, I planned my actions to the minutest detail. The only thing left was to wait for a Saturday when Smitty did a lot of business.

That Saturday came two weeks before Christmas. It started with an early morning customer buying a Marlin rifle. Three men bought .22s that day, probably gifts for their thirteen-year-old sons — thirteen was the accepted age for a boy to get his first rifle in our part of the country. And so it went. Rods, reels, handmade knives. It was such a haul that I started to get uneasy, afraid that Smitty might change his routine and make the deposit at the bank.

At closing time, with Smitty in his office tapping away at the adding machine, I did an especially good job of sweeping the floor. No tracks would be left *this* night. I was twisting a tie on a plastic trash bag when Smitty emerged. No pouch.

“Come on, kid, let's call it a day. I don't know about you, but I'm plumb tuckered out.”

I wheeled my bike from the storeroom.

“So long, Smitty,” I said, as he rolled down the metal grating.

“So long, Lewis.”

When I got home I went to the garage, stuck the two tools I needed under my jacket and hustled them into my bedroom.

It was a Friday night like all others at the Wheeler house. After dinner we settled down to an evening of TV, sharing a bowl of popcorn. At nine we headed upstairs. My little brother was asleep and had to be carried. I slipped the flimsy barrel bolt on my door and made my preparations. At eleven I went into the hall and listened for a few minutes. The house was still. Everyone asleep.

About five feet under my window was the roof of our back porch. I lowered myself onto it, leaving the window open a crack, then moved to the roof's edge, grabbed a branch of the hackberry tree, worked my way down it, then dropped to the ground. I passed through the backyard to where there was a line of woods. A narrow but much-used path — used by me — led to the train tracks. A half moon on this cloudless night gave me the little light I needed. I walked on the gravel and weeds between the rails. No train had used these tracks for years. After about four miles I was in town, right behind Smitty's Sporting Goods.

I crouched at the edge of another line of trees, looking and listening for any sign of life. The houses were dark. No traffic passed on the street. No people lived here, and none of the businesses — a beauty parlor, a hardware store, a seed and feed store, that type of place — were open at night. I put on a pair of leather gloves and scooted across the open space and crawled on all fours under Smitty's.

After I had gone about ten feet I was disoriented. I got out my flashlight — it gave off a muted red light — and located the brick foundation for the fireplace. That told me where I needed to be. I moved along and into a spider web. I dropped the flashlight and pawed at my hair. I'd probably get bitten by a brown recluse spider and swell up to the size of a blimp and then die. Or get bit by a snake. Pitfalls I hadn't planned on. The crawlspace was a labyrinth of hanging pipes and electrical wires. I remembered how Dad complained about jobs where he had to work under an old house. But he did it in the daytime. I moved on to the general area where I knew I had to be, often stopping to shine my light. Finally I spotted them — the rotted boards still lying where they had fallen.

I got underneath the plywood — the secret trapdoor into Smitty's fortress — and pushed it and the linoleum aside. I stood up and sat on the ledge of the opening. I decided to take off my sneakers — they might leave muddy tracks. When I left the bathroom it was in a crouch. The main part of the store was dimly lit by a streetlight on the corner of the block, so I stayed below the level of the counters until I got into the office. I closed the door behind me. The room had one window, but it faced another house and had a black shade that was always down.

I switched on the flashlight. On top of the desk, next to the adding machine, was the cash register tray, with only coins inside. I opened all the desk drawers — as if someone were looking for the money there. Then I tried the file cabinet. Locked, of course.

I took off the red plastic disk and propped the flashlight in a desk drawer, to give me light to work by. I took out my tools. Which drawer? Not that it mattered — all were probably controlled by the same lock. I decided on the top one — Smitty didn't like to stoop, not with that belly of his. I fitted the screwdriver into the space between drawer and frame, then rapped it with the crowbar — it made a dull sound, thanks to the duct tape. But progress stopped where the screwdriver shaft widened. That file cabinet was built rugged. It took about ten minutes of hammering the screwdriver and working it from side to side, then repeating the whole process a few inches higher, before I had a big enough opening to get the claw of the crowbar in. I pounded

it with the heel of my gloved hand, wedging it securely, then braced myself and pushed hard, using my weight. There was a loud snapping sound and the door banged open.

The leather pouch was in my hand, fat and heavy.

I unzipped it, took out a thick roll of bills. Smitty had arranged them by denomination. I saw three hundreds, more fifties, a lot of twenties and tens. I tossed the pouch, with some checks inside, onto the desktop. I slipped the money, tools, the red plastic disk and flashlight inside my jacket, zipped up, then darted through the store and into the bathroom. I put on my sneakers and dropped through the opening. I slid the plywood back, but couldn't get it to settle into place. What did that matter? No more than the mess in Smitty's office did.

I retraced my steps along the train tracks. I crossed my back yard and was up the hackberry tree and on the porch roof in half a minute. Once in my room I put the money under my pillow and hung my clothes in the closet; I hid the tools in there too. The next morning, long before anybody was awake, I'd put them in the garage and give my clothes a good brushing down. And that was it. I would be done, except for the lies. The police would probably question me. Also, I'd have to put on an amazed act for Smitty, Ed, my family, friends. But I was an expert liar.

I got into my pajamas and pulled the bolt on my door, stepped into the hall. The house was still silent, as I had left it.

Now for the best part.

I took the money from under the pillow and spread it on the bed. I counted it — twice.

\$716. It took my dad weeks to make that much. I'd made it in less than two hours. And I made it in a way that was . . . What? Though danger was the most important element, it was potential danger. This robbery hadn't been thrilling, not in the way they use that word for rides at the amusement park, like the Whip, where there was a lot of screaming. This was entirely different. I had been fully concentrated in thought and action. I had been fully alert and alive.

I lay on the bed, the money on my stomach, and relived it. Everything had gone as planned. I had met no one as I came and went. I was almost positive that no one had seen me. Well, the next days would tell. As for now I savored the weight of that roll of bills.

Finally I took the money to the hiding place I had prepared for it. In my closet I had pried a short section of baseboard loose, nails and all, and cut away some Sheetrock behind it. I put the money in a plastic bag, put a tie around it, then put it in another bag and sealed that too. I wedged it into the opening, then fitted the baseboard back. By lining up the nails I only had to press it into place and tap the nails gently with the sole of my black Sunday shoe.

I turned out the lights and again lay in bed, looking out the window. The moon, my thoughtful companion, had passed out of sight.

All that money. Of course I would have to spend it a little at a time. A few luxuries every week. Little indulgences. And the large denomination bills — the hundreds and fifties — they'd have to wait until I was making a decent salary. Which wouldn't be too far in the future. I was going to work full time for Dad when school let out in the summer. In four months, when I was sixteen, I could get my driver's license. Life was opening for me.

When I arrived at the store on Monday afternoon, the uproar had subsided. Smitty had calmed down when he learned that his insurance would cover most of his losses. The police had come and gone, shaking their heads. As Ed explained it, their thinking was that the thief could be

anybody. Because anybody who used the bathroom could spot that piece of linoleum over the plywood. Anyone, with the latch on the bathroom door to give him privacy, could lift the linoleum and see that the plywood wasn't nailed down. And this anyone with a robbery in mind would have the intelligence to do a bit of casual surveillance and note that, unlike most days, Smitty left the store on Saturdays without the leather pouch, which meant that the money was somewhere inside. Once the thief came in through that piece of plywood — carrying some tools to break into whatever he'd have to break into — and found the cash register drawer open and the money tray gone, he would head right for the office. He'd see that there was no safe. Only that file cabinet.

I nodded in amazement at the logic of Ed's words. Yeah, it made sense. Now it did. Strange how none of us had ever thought of that piece of plywood as a secret trapdoor.

Anyway, the police said they'd keep their eyes and ears open. And that was it. Mostly, Ed told me, they seemed relieved that the pistols and rifles had been left intact. I was never even questioned.

That day Ed got three inch nails and hammered them at an angle through the plywood and into the joists. His beautiful piece of workmanship was no more.

There were other changes. Policyholders who had insurance with Smitty's company probably had their premiums raised by a tenth of a penny. Smitty became more suspicious. And, of course, he took Saturday's deposit to the bank.

But the most dramatic change was that Smitty began carrying a pistol when he made his evening deposits. He slipped it under his belt, next to where the buckle was.

"That makes me nervous, Smitty, how you carry that gun," I said. "Why don't you get a shoulder holster?"

"The safety is on." He turned to Ed and winked. "Hey, Ed, hear that? Lewis is awful concerned about my privates. Strikes me as mighty suspicious."

Yeah, I was mighty suspicious. Good old Smitty. When I quit the job, to work for my dad, he gave me a hunting knife as a going away gift. A nice one too, with the pearl handle carved into the shape of a ram's head. I kept it as a sort of memento — though I'll never see it again.

They only leave you with memories in this place. Nothing you can touch.

"Lew. Remember the Blue Room?"

"Yes, baby, I'll always remember that."

Our stay at the Blue Room was actually my second job. Though I call them both "jobs," what happened at the Roosevelt Hotel was different from Smitty's. Maybe Smitty's remains so vivid in my mind because it was the only time in my life when I was a cat burglar, like my boyhood idols.

Actually, I got more cautious after that robbery. Even shoplifting a thirty-five cent James Bond novel didn't seem worth the risk of getting caught. Working for my father I saw a few opportunities, things that seemed like sure bets, but I didn't follow up. I wouldn't pull off anything that had to do with him. He was honest.

I wasn't, but part of me was a product of my upbringing. I couldn't escape respectability. I couldn't be an outlaw. And as I grew up — as I stopped thinking like a kid — some things became clear to me. I realized that those glamorous idols of mine, those men who pulled the sensational heists, were usually caught a week later, to continue their lives in prisons, right along with thugs who robbed convenience stores. It was a losers' game, high stakes or small.

At the same time I read — history, biographies, newspapers — and it dawned on me that the most successful crooks were the ones who operated from a position of power. Mainly business leaders and politicians, using their leverage to manipulate things in their favor. And they didn't go to prison; they got buildings named after them instead.

Of course not all of them went scot-free. We had a local school board member who was caught taking kickbacks from a contractor. But I knew that for every person who got caught (and this guy was stupid) there were thousands of tax-financed construction jobs going on around the country in which money was being skimmed off the top, with all participants in the transaction happy as clams.

I thought about this sort of life for me. Not that I saw myself as a high-profile politician. I had no presidential or gubernatorial ambitions. But I could see myself being elected assessor or appointed to the levee board or a regulatory body. From this type of position, while diligently fulfilling my duties, I could play all the angles. I'd enjoy the fruits of my cooperation with lobbyists — maybe a stay at a Caribbean beach resort, or skybox accommodations at LSU football games. Any businessman willing to pay for a favor — a zoning change or a low assessment on land — could present his case to me at some out-of-the-way restaurant. Every move I made would be as carefully planned as Smitty's had been.

Instead of a cat burglar's outfit I'd wear an expensive suit and tie. Instead of pulling jobs I'd make deals. I could walk the edge, but with my feet securely planted on the side of respectability. I'd be the fox in the henhouse, but one who wasn't noisy, reckless or too greedy.

At least, this was an idea that was slowly taking shape in my mind. Meanwhile, in the years before I went to college, though I had no adventures like Smitty's, in another way I lived dangerously.

When I was a senior in high school I was six feet two and had to shave every day. I looked like a man, and my secret life was a man's life. I was friends with some characters a few years older than me, guys who worked offshore, on the oil rigs. Two weeks on, two weeks off. They rented a big house in the country. During their weeks off they celebrated. For them celebrating meant sex. Since they had a lot of spending money, and were willing to throw it around, they did well. They knew girls in a forty mile radius who liked a good time. I got to be part of those good times.

I sowed my wild oats. Did I ever. My parents knew something was going on, but they gave me a loose rein. I got top grades, I worked for my dad after school whenever he needed me — thus giving up sports — and worked with him full time in the summer. In that sense, I was a man. If I stayed out to the early morning hours, they accepted my explanations. They accepted my lies.

Though by the time I left for LSU I had grown weary of that scene. Those girls who liked to carouse — they weren't what I wanted. I was different from the guys I was running with. Again, my upbringing surfaced. I wanted a relationship like the one my parents had. Yet the

problem was that I intended to live a certain kind of life, and how could I ask a woman to be part of it? It was similar to working for my dad — he forced me to be honest.

At eighteen I had been living inside myself for too long. Though I enjoyed the company of others and they enjoyed me, I never showed an important part of myself to anybody. Besides the members of my family, to whom I was a son and big brother, there was no intimacy in my life. And I needed it. The need was starting to eat at me.

The Lone Wolf. That's what I still was.

Then along came Sandra.

What follows is a love story, people. One that lasted more than forty years. Because of that I can't say that life treated me badly. Even in prison, I can't say that. And though I don't dwell on how I wound up here, I want to set the record straight. It started with me believing an old friend, someone I owed a favor. It was a favor from years ago — I'd been clean ever since Sandra first got sick. This friend sat on a couch in my living room and wept. His tears were the only thing that was real; they'd thoroughly broken the poor bastard. All the rest was carefully rehearsed. He talked about the old job, in detail (that should have rung a warning bell); he told me about his financial crisis; I offered my help. That was important, because he was wired that day: He didn't ask; I offered. So I helped him, negotiating the granting of some nursing home licenses; money was exchanged. But my mind, my heart, was not in it; I was sloppy, like I'd never been before. The upshot was that I got nailed for two jobs — the first one, in which Sandra had been involved, and the payback favor, which she had nothing to do with. Of course, we were all pawns of the new federal prosecutor, who wanted to boost his reputation as a fearless crusader for justice (and from there move on to the Senate). He realized that I was at most a medium-sized shark, now in retirement, but he thought that he could use what I knew to get at some big boys. I was called to his office, and he informed me that Sandra and I were to be indicted. He covered the evidence he had, even playing snippets of the wiretaps. Then he offered me a deal: He'd arrange shorter sentences for us — in my case four years instead of ten or twelve — in exchange for information; he slid a sheet of paper across his desk with three names on it. What he didn't know was that Sandra's cancer had spread. Four years or twelve, it didn't matter. Either way she'd be gone. Still, I had to protect her. I said that I needed time to think it over.

I returned to his office a week later. I told him that, regarding those three names, I simply had no information to give (which we both knew was a lie, but I damn well wasn't going to make my exit from political life as a snitch). Then I laid out my own terms. I'd forgo a trial, confess to everything in both indictments — but only if Sandra was absolved of any culpability. I covered a few points to help him in his decision. I made it clear that I could tarnish the white knight's armor a good bit by making sure the public learned, in detail, how his tactics were as dirty as any back room politician's. I also asked him to consider what it would look like to put a dying woman on trial, sentence her to prison. He stared at me in silence. I knew he was swallowing a bitter pill. Turns out he had cornered two people who had nothing to lose, and one of them could still bite; he had to do what was expedient. He told me he would drop the indictment that involved Sandra; he also informed me that I was going to get the maximum sentence for the other one. "It's a deal, counselor," I said, and walked from his office.

At least Sandra got to die in our home, before it was sold and everything in it was auctioned off — we got hit with fines in the millions. Still, let me say this, because she would

want it said: We were a team. In a way we complemented something in each other. Maybe it was for the worse — we moved each other on the same path. But I regret nothing.

Though it occurs to me now, thinking about the word “path,” that things could have been different. Three years after we were married, when I was in law school, we had a daughter. She was born with a heart defect, something she struggled with for the five years she was ours. We had no other children. Maybe, if Anne had lived, I wouldn’t be where I am, writing these words. Sandra and I would have taken another path, for her sake.

But that’s not the way life worked out.

It was at the beginning of my second semester of college when I met Sandra. We took a Humanities course, one required for freshmen. She was a looker, in a dark, Cajun way. Turned out she was from Lafayette, and her father was French and her mother Scottish.

Though this was a class for first year students, she was no coed. She seemed older, more self-assured. The class met in a big auditorium, with the professor speaking into a microphone on a stage and projecting slides of ancient statues and buildings onto a screen. I took a seat in the row behind her, off to the side. One day, during an exam, I noticed something that struck me as suspicious.

When she left Gibson Hall, I caught up with her. She was open, pleasant, direct. We began to sit on the bench outside the building where she had her next class. Over the week we gave versions of our life histories. I learned that she was older than me. For two years, after high school, she had worked as a surveyor’s assistant. She had traveled around Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, living out of motels. She said she needed the money for school; but, still, this seemed a strange thing for a girl to do. Adventurous, even dangerous. It wasn’t skydiving dangerous — but being the only female on a surveying crew? Not something every girl would attempt. Yes, she was different. She knew the world.

After about six days of walking together, sitting on the bench, I decided to break the ice.

“On that exam last week. You were cheating.”

She turned to me. It was the first time those gray eyes had been so close. Instead of surprise or concern or an offended look, there was curiosity in her expression. She smiled. “How?”

“I couldn’t say exactly. But there was something going on with your left hand.”

“Really . . . Interesting.” She stood up. It was time for her class.

“Let me take you to dinner tomorrow,” I said. “Someplace nice. I have a car, we can get away from campus. You can tell me exactly how you did it.”

A long, appraising gaze.

“Okay to the dinner part.”

We both lived in dorms — that was a requirement for first year students. Naturally, I didn’t like it; I considered its hall monitors, curfews, and rules an affront to my independence. I didn’t need supervision. But I soon learned that there were ways to get around all of it. A piece of cake, as my roommate liked to say (it was important to have a roommate who was a co-conspirator). Basically, I could do whatever I wanted, which sometimes included staying out for nights in a row.

I also rebelled against the dorm system by organizing a group that gambled. Playing cards, pool, ping pong were part of dorm life, but betting money on it — definitely against the

rules. I played with five other guys, and we kept tabs. We settled accounts twice a week in a campus bar, over a pitcher of beer. I usually came out a little ahead, at least with poker and pool. I lost money at ping pong, but that was good — one couldn't be a winner all the time, with the others losers. There had to be equal success among all participants. A loser was discontent, a possible source of betrayal. Keep everybody happy. A cardinal rule.

I took Sandra to a steak and lobster place in downtown Baton Rouge — no pizza joint for us. We ordered real drinks before dinner, a gin and tonic for me, a margarita for her.

We beat around the bush for a while, then she leaned forward, elbows on the table, resting her chin on her two fists, as if she were getting down to business. Her attitude was bold, amused.

“I want to know more — about what's wrong with my technique. I don't want one of those test monitors to nab me.”

“Like I said, I don't know for sure. I was on the wrong side of you. But there was something odd about the way you held your left hand. Most people lay it on the table when they write. But you held it up, or rested it on your brow, almost the whole time.”

“Like this?” And she demonstrated. She wasn't a bit rattled or defensive.

“Yeah. Now I was watching you a lot, so I noticed it. The monitors never would. Anyway, it's the type of thing I pick up on. Others wouldn't.”

“So — you watch me and you pick up on dishonest acts. Interesting.”

She opened her purse, took out a rectangular piece of paper, about an inch by a half inch. She handed it to me. The paper was actually an accordion. It was folded again and again and again, maybe ten times, but when closed it became flat and inconspicuous. On all its surfaces, front and back, in tiny print, were facts about Greek and Roman art and architecture.

“Here, let me show you,” she said.

She placed it on the inner side of the middle finger of her left hand. She demonstrated how, with her thumb, she could flip through the folds of the accordion.

“With practice you get very adept at this. And you can close your hand over the paper in a flash if you need to. I've been doing this since high school, whenever a teacher expected me to memorize a lot of meaningless names and dates. Never been caught. Then you come along and tell me that I'm cheating. But I sensed something different about you.”

I signaled the waiter for two more drinks.

She again contemplated me, chin on fists.

“Are you going to turn me in to the authorities? Or blackmail me — force me to go to a motel with you?”

“No. No such horrible fate awaits you. There's honor among thieves, you know.”

“I thought there wasn't. And you said ‘thieves.’ Plural. Does that mean you're one too?”

“Well . . . Let me tell you a little story. A story no one else has ever heard.”

I told her about Smitty's. It took us a third drink for me to finish, because she asked questions. Good questions. Her eyes actually glittered.

“Over seven hundred bucks! Quite a haul for a fifteen-year-old kid. You make me feel like small potatoes, with my little cheat sheet.” She paused. “Though maybe you'll be interested in something I did last month.” Her voice took on the glitter of excitement that was in her eyes. “You know how the bookstore is a madhouse at the beginning of the semester, when everybody has to buy texts for their new classes? And how the guards won't let anyone come in with books,

unless it's to take them directly to the counter where they buy used texts? It's an absolutely stupid system. People have to leave their books on the shelves in the lobby. And when the shelves get packed, the books wind up piled on the floor. Anyway, I walked into that lobby, looked around at the mess and confusion of it all, and an idea hit me. I mean, I had sold used books before — I knew the routine. I knew there were no questions asked. So I waited until a guy in a frat jacket came in with some thick texts and set them on the floor in a corner. I watched him go into the store, pass through the turnstile, disappear in the crowd. I waited a bit, then scooped up his books — three economics texts. I went inside and straight to the trade-in counter. Where they bought the books. I got \$55. Took me ten minutes. When Joe College came out he probably thought someone had taken his books by mistake. Or stolen them. But that someone had just sold them? I bet that never occurred to him. Anyway, those frat guys have plenty of money.”

“Nice. Very nice. But my advice is don't do it again. You can't repeat something like that.”

“I know. I won't. Hey, I'm hungry.” She grabbed the menu. “I want the lobster. You're the one who's going to get robbed tonight, Lew. I'm going to stick you with a big bill, and all you'll get for it is a measly little kiss.”

I got more. We had an affinity for each other. With her I felt satisfied in a new way. There was contentment mixed with the passion.

As I learned about her growing up years, which were tough, I felt protective. One night I called her “baby.” She rose on an elbow and looked down at me; there was a touch of defiance in her expression. Then she seemed to relax, soften. She lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

“ ‘Baby’ . . . I've been called that a lot, by strangers. Especially those two years I did the surveying. Or other words of casual endearment. Sweetheart. Honey. My standard comeback was ‘I'm not your baby.’ But with you I can't say that. Maybe confession was good for our souls, Lew. Made us pure, at least with one another. But just don't call another girl that. Okay?”

“I won't.”

It was a promise I kept.

I wanted something better for us than cheap motels. Also, even more, I wanted an adventure we could share.

One day I asked her: “How about staying at the Roosevelt Hotel?”

“In New Orleans? The most expensive hotel in the city?”

“It won't cost us a penny.”

I told her my plan. She listened intently.

“Sounds good, Lew. I think it would work. Hell, I'm game.”

“Think it over. Try to spot any weaknesses. We need to anticipate every angle.”

A week later Sandra was waiting for me by the fountain in front of an insurance building. I pulled up to the curb, watched as she rose from a bench and walked toward my car. High heels, big sunglasses. Her black hair was wound in a coil. Gray overcoat, fitted at the waist, flared at the bottom, open at the neck. She carried a leather purse hanging from a strap over her shoulder. It was huge, almost a valise.

She stowed it in the backseat, then took off her overcoat and laid it over the purse. She wore a black silk blouse and matching skirt. She got in beside me.

“Well?” she said.

“Perfect.” She looked exactly like she needed to look: mature, sophisticated and affluent. “You’re pretty spiffy yourself.”

I wore a tweed sport coat over an open neck blue shirt. Tan dress slacks. I had borrowed a camel wool overcoat from my roommate, and it was also lying on the back seat.

“Here,” she said, handing me a simple gold wedding band. It was her father’s; a widower, he had died when she was thirteen. It was then, when she and her brother were sent to live with her mother’s parents, that her life had gotten rough. Unlike me, there were reasons why Sandra turned out the way she did.

I slipped the ring on the third finger of my left hand.

“Now it’s official,” she said.

“Frank and Judith McPherson.”

It was three o’clock on a bright, cold Thursday afternoon in January. I drove to the interstate and we headed toward New Orleans.

“You got the luggage? Any trouble?”

“No trouble. They’re beauties.”

The idea for this job had first occurred to me when I saw someone go into the luggage storeroom at the dorm. It was the moment — like looking through the hole in the bathroom floor of Smitty’s — when a lightbulb went on in my head.

This storeroom was located in the basement of the dorm, attached to the recreation area where the ping pong and pool tables were. Almost every resident of the dorm came with a suitcase or two; my own battered one was in there.

One evening I was at a pool table, lining up a shot, when I saw a student exit the elevator, go directly into the storeroom and emerge seconds later with a suitcase. He got back in the waiting elevator and was gone. Bing! — the lightbulb.

Why wasn’t this room locked? Because too many students took trips home for someone on the staff to be constantly bothered for the key.

When nobody was around — there were times in the day when the recreation room was deserted — I investigated. There were at least fifty suitcases, and almost all I tried were unlocked, most with the keys inside.

You could leave the recreation room by stairs. On the first floor was a door opening directly onto the parking lot for students with cars.

Around 7:30 in the morning of the day that Sandra and I became Frank and Judith McPherson, I had gone to the basement and taken the two suitcases that I had pre-selected — the most expensive matching pair I could find — and went up the stairwell. My car was backed into the space next to the door. I put the suitcases in the trunk, which was piled with newspapers. I drove to a secluded spot. I made the transfer, locked the suitcases, pocketed the keys and closed the trunk. All the rest would be bluffs and lies.

When we got to New Orleans I headed for Audubon Park. A car could sit undisturbed for days on the St. Charles Avenue side. I certainly didn’t want any of the hotel staff to see my battered old Chevy.

I showed Sandra the inside of the overcoat. Pinned to the lining in the back (it had taken me dozens of safety pins and over an hour to do it) was a change of clothing — shirt, pants,

windbreaker; also a silk tie. They hung there neatly, as if arranged on a hanger. I put the overcoat on and Sandra inspected me from behind.

“No bulge with it unbuttoned. Nobody could notice a thing.”

I took the suitcases from the trunk while Sandra got her overcoat and purse from the back seat.

“Here, feel this,” she said, holding the purse out to me with both hands.

“God, it weighs a ton.”

“You’ll see, it’s incredible how much I fit in there. Including an iron, to touch up the wrinkles. You forgot about the wrinkles, Lew.” She slung the strap over her shoulder.

Soon a St. Charles Avenue streetcar rattled up. We sat on the wooden-slatted seat and rocked jauntily along. We got off downtown, on Canal Street. We turned the corner to Baronne and headed for the Roosevelt Hotel, whose entrance was midway in the block.

A doorman caught sight of us and motioned to someone inside. An elderly black porter appeared on the sidewalk and immediately set off toward us in a stooped trot.

He took both suitcases from me.

“Do cabdrivers in New Orleans always drop people off at the corner?” I asked, jovially.

“He did? Dropped you at the corner? Now that’s just plain wrong. No way to treat a guest to the city.” He shook his gray head.

“He saw a fare up ahead, waving at him, and I guess he didn’t want to miss it.”

“Still, it ain’t right.”

We came to the hotel entrance, where the doorman stood — a stately figure in a gold-braided jacket with epaulets. “Some cabbie dropped ’em at the corner,” said the porter, indignantly.

“Sir. Madame. I apologize. That’s not how we do things. I assure you, at the Roosevelt you’ll receive unmatched service.” Meanwhile the porter put the suitcases onto a cart. The door was held open for us, and Sandra and I sauntered into the lobby.

It was sumptuous, even flamboyant, but with a hushed dignity. We walked on rugs that alternated with dark, polished wood flooring; high, high above us hung a row of ornate chandeliers; art deco pillars rose to the ceiling, each fronted by a planter containing a tall, outreaching fern; we passed seating areas with deep, upholstered chairs and glass-topped tables.

At the Reception desk a dapper, middle-aged man awaited us. He wore a gray pinstriped suit; but, like the lobby itself, he had added a touch of flamboyance: a dark blue handkerchief in his lapel pocket was splayed like a flower in bloom.

“Welcome to the Roosevelt. A room for two? Reservations?”

“Yes and no. We didn’t think we’d need reservations.”

“That’s true, not at this time of year. Just, please, fill out the registration form.”

Sandra had done research. There were no conventions in New Orleans this weekend; the tourist trade went into a lull between Christmas and Mardi Gras. People were back on the nine to five treadmill, kids were in school. We knew there would be plenty of vacant rooms.

“What’s the best view you have?” I asked.

“From the upper floors on the Canal Street side you can see the rooftops of the French Quarter. Or we can give you a room overlooking the inner courtyard of the hotel.”

“Let’s get a French Quarter view, Frank,” said Sandra.

“I can give you a lovely room on the twelfth floor. With two double beds.”

“That’s fine,” I said, sliding the registration form, filled with lies, across the marble counter.

Sandra looked around her. “Oh, the Blue Room,” she exclaimed, and walked toward it.

“I see you’re from Houston, Mr. McPherson. I assume this is a pleasure trip, rather than business.”

“This is a spur of the moment vacation. My company is transferring me to the west coast office, and we decided to visit New Orleans before we moved out of the area. So, yes, we’re tourists, and open to suggestions.”

“Where do I begin? You’ll find this to be a city of unique charms. I see that you’ll be leaving Monday. Good! That gives you sufficient time. Really, New Orleans simply cannot be experienced in a weekend.” He reached for a booklet, handed it to me. “This will give you some ideas, and it has a map of the French Quarter. Of course, the Vieux Carre is a short stroll away, and that’s a world unto itself. The Quarter is the birthplace of jazz, and I urge you to see the old musicians jamming at Preservation Hall. Also — did you drive here, by any chance?”

“No, we took the train.”

“Well, I recommend that you take a streetcar ride to our aptly-named Garden District. And while there, I suggest lunch at Commander’s Palace. The city is famous for its cuisine, as I’m sure you know. Dinner at one of the grand old French Quarter restaurants — Galatoire’s or Antoine’s or Arnaud’s — is most definitely an experience not to be missed. And breakfast at Brennan’s is a tradition. But I could go on — ”

Sandra had returned to my side.

“Actually,” I said, “as for dinner tonight, we’ll be eating in our room. Right, honey?”

“Absolutely. The only place I’m going tonight is to bed.”

“Our restaurant, the Sazerac, is one of the premier hotel restaurants in the country. James,” he called to the waiting porter, “get a dinner menu.”

James hurried off.

“By the way, if you’d like cocktails, may I suggest a pitcher of our famous Ramos Gin Fizz? A drink invented here.”

“What’s in it?”

“Milk, gin and orange essence.”

I frowned.

“Oh, let’s try it, Frank. We’re in a new place, *New Orleans*, we should try new things.”

“Do that — try it — and if you don’t care for it, we’ll bring you another drink of your choice. At no extra charge, of course.”

James returned with a large, tasseled menu. The desk clerk opened it. “I recommend an oyster appetizer — the Bienville or Rockefeller — or the oyster and artichoke soup. And some lovely flounder came in just this afternoon, so the Flounder Nouvelle Orleans will be one of our specials. Will you be having wine with your meal?”

“No wine. The cocktails will do it. We have a full day of touring tomorrow.”

“The Blue Room,” said Sandra, motioning toward it. I turned. There was a placard set up next to the door, with the photograph of a middle-aged man; he resembled Tony Bennett. But it wasn’t Tony Bennett, nor anyone famous.

Truth to tell, I not only don't recall his name, but the conversation between Sandra and me and the room clerk is only an approximation of what was said. Its essence. I've tried to recreate it because it was the first time that Sandra and I were in action together, as a team. Or maybe I'm doing it just for the pleasure it gives me.

"You're not booked up tomorrow night, are you?" she said. "Because I'd love to see an act in the Blue Room."

"Oh, we can accommodate you. I'll make a reservation — for the eight or ten o'clock performance?"

"What do you think, Frank? Ten seems too late for me. We'll probably be tired."

"Eight," I said.

"Done," said the room clerk, making a note for himself, and he handed a key and the menu to James, who looked at the number on the key tag, put it into his jacket pocket, placed the menu on top of our luggage, and started toward the elevators.

"Thanks very much for your help," I said.

"My pleasure, Mr. McPherson. Don't hesitate to call on us for anything. And do enjoy your stay."

Sandra gave him a smile and a little wave, and we walked away.

That was it. No money exchanged hands. This was back in 1959. In those more innocent, gracious times the guests of a hotel, who looked respectable and brought luggage, were not asked to settle the bill until they checked out. And the McPhersons — Frank and Judith of Houston, Texas — were not checking out until Monday. On their tab would be all their expenses — the cost of the room, meals, the Blue Room.

But on Sunday evening, dressed exactly as we were when we came into the Roosevelt, Sandra and I would stroll out, never to return. We would take the streetcar to where my car was parked and drive to Baton Rouge. The bill would never be settled.

Left behind in the room would be two locked suitcases. It would probably be Tuesday when the house detective forced them open. And found them filled with newspapers.

What would the Roosevelt Hotel do? Not a thing. It wouldn't be worth the time and effort. They had been taken for a couple hundred bucks. Those things happen.

Sandra and I had gone over all aspects of this plan, and we saw potential problems. She was more reckless than I was. I wanted to stay only two nights, not three, and I thought it was okay to have a room service dinner and breakfast on our tab. But I was wary about the cost of the Blue Room. Could there be someone on the staff who red-flagged accounts that got too high? And would our lack of clothes, in closets and in drawers, be suspicious to the maids? As for the last worry, Sandra said that we'd have *some* things in the closets and drawers — what we weren't wearing, what she brought in her purse; plus, in the pockets of my overcoat and jacket I had distributed toiletries, shaving gear, underwear, socks. Anyway, she believed that maids in hotels just wanted to get their job done and go to the next room. A lot of guests probably lived out of their suitcases, and kept them locked.

We decided that, if we were challenged about the bill, for whatever reason, we would have enough cash with us to pay it, haughtily, and then leave the hotel, haughtily.

"But, Lew, they won't bother us, not if we get past the front desk without a hitch. It all depends on how that goes. And that'll go fine."

Riding up the elevator, we exchanged little elbow nudges of delight, kids playing behind the solemn gray heads of James and the elevator operator.

James put the two suitcases where I asked him to — on one of the double beds — and then showed us around the room with personal pride. He finished off the tour by going to the window and dramatically drawing heavy blue drapes, then white frilled ones. Past the buildings on Canal Street we could see the slate roofs and plant-festooned balconies of the French Quarter.

After James left (with a generous but not ostentatious tip), I latched the door behind him. Sandra and I shed our clothes and hung them up neatly (how could I not have thought of the wrinkles?) and then we jumped onto the bed and hugged and laughed. We had pulled it off, both playing our roles perfectly. We felt we could do anything.

Later, satiated, we gazed around the room. It was getting dark, and lights began to wink on outside. “I love luxury,” said Sandra, dreamily.

It was a crowded room, dominated by a huge cherry armoire. The beds were covered with brocaded spreads. There were two armchairs by the window and a little dining area — two chairs around a table (where, over the next four days, we would eat Oysters Rockefeller, turtle soup, flounder, prime rib, asparagus, pecan pie, eggs Benedict, western omelette, Canadian bacon, etc.). All the tables in the room, including the night stands, had vases with fresh flowers. There was a ceiling fan. Wallpaper with a fleur-de-lis design. Dark-patterned rugs on dark, polished wood floors.

The large bathroom contained an old-fashioned tub with lion claw legs. Sandra took long, scented baths. She would let out groans of pleasure. “This sure beats the dorm shower room,” she called.

What do I remember of those days and nights? Mostly the times before we drifted off to sleep, the two of us on our sides, my arms around her. We faced the window, whose curtains were open, and gazed at the lights of the city and the sky.

Days we walked and walked and walked, eating and drinking at joints — not at Galatoire’s. Sandra wore khaki slacks and deck shoes and a tan jacket, all of which had been in her purse. She looked as trim and efficient as a yacht. I wore the shirt, pants and windbreaker I had pinned to the lining of my overcoat. Hanging in the closet at the hotel were the clothes we had arrived in.

Saturday we took the streetcar to where my car was parked. We drove about the Garden District, stopping frequently to get out and wander. We looked at the opulent houses whose huge yards were beautiful even in winter.

“We’ll live in a place like this someday,” I said. And we did.

We drove past Tulane University.

“I’ll get my law degree here,” I said. And I did.

I know I spoke those words. But our stay is not something I can recall in detail, like I can Smitty’s. What I retain is a feeling, one that has lasted longer than any mortal deserves.

I can feel it now, in this cell.

Yes, it was golden, those four days and nights. Except for the evening in the Blue Room, where it was tinted blue.

The singer — the man who looked like Tony Bennett but wasn't — delivered. He had his own accompanist, a piano player, and, with a rough purity, they gave us the love songs of the Gershwins, Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hart.

I held Sandra's hand on the linen-covered table and watched her face, young and beautiful. Eager for life.

Which brings me, I realize, to the end, for I am tired.

The end: Holding her hand, feeling it clutch mine, suddenly urgent.

“Lew. Remember the Blue Room?”