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Robert Dart
“The Wallet Thieves”

It was Paul who reached into the pocket. The owner of the wallet, the former owner, had only taken three steps, was still in the room, when Paul, the ersatz owner, reached in. They were slick dark pants made of gabardine wool and the pocket parted ways with the wallet quite readily.

The guy didn't even use a lock. And yet it never occurred to Nelson, and never could have, to take the wallet himself. Paul, like nothing, with just one hand, reached back and popped the locker open, slipped his hand inside, and took it.

There wasn't much cash, only two dollars and a funny looking blue note. Paul and Nelson split the two dollars in the parking lot and, for a laugh, Paul tore the euro note in two and handed one half to Nelson.

“Why would you leave your locker unlocked at the f.ing Y?” asked Paul.

The AmEx card was the main thing. Paul passed it to Nelson.

“What is that?” asked Nelson. “A microchip?”

“It's not real, dummy,” said Paul. “It's just like any other card. My mom has one.”

The Dillard's store faced directly into the mall parking lot. The boys went inside and picked out things: running shoes, polo shirts, jeans, a belt, a watch, a pair of oversized leather boots, a sweater Paul had laughed at but, out of pride, Nelson could not put back. After making the purchase, the plan was to depart the store, fill up Nelson's car with gas, drive to Paul's house, and then fill Paul's car, and finally discard the wallet in a dumpster out behind the gas station.

Nelson walked to a glass pillar a few feet away. The check-out lady returned the card to Paul and smiled at him. She didn't ask for the birth date and so deprived Paul the chance to show that he'd memorized the numbers.

Nelson leaned against the glass pillar.

“Would you like to save twenty percent?” the lady asked, still smiling.

“Uh, what?” said Paul.

“Save twenty percent on any purchase when you sign up for a Dillard’s Mastercard.”

Paul knitted his brow. “That’s like another credit card.”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Yes. I’d like to sign up for one of those.”

“Twenty percent discount,” the lady repeated. Then she rattled off the other advantageous terms while Paul looked down at his fingers. She took out slips of paper from behind the desk. Paul filled them out. Then she took the papers and, still smiling, told Paul to have a great evening and come back soon.

Paul stood still for a moment. “Where’s the card?” he asked.

“Oh we’ll mail the card to you,” said the lady through her smile.

“Well can I get a temporary one? A, uh, loaner?”

“No,” she said, “No, we don’t work that way. What do you mean, loaner?”

“Uh, never mind,” said Paul. “Can I have that paperwork again?” Paul crossed out the address and wrote his own over top of it, picked up his bags, and walked to the exit.

Nelson walked ahead like a man with mechanical legs. “What the f.,” said Nelson, holding his voice down. “What the f.”

Paul took him by the arm and said, “Don’t be a f.ing moron—keep walking—here—don’t say anything—keep walking with me—here.”

They came to a fountain. From a distance, the fountain looked bronze, but it was made entirely from recycled milk cartons. The water made a lot of noise. A person standing right behind probably still wouldn’t hear what they said. “You—what did you do that for?”

“I did that,” said Paul, “to have a credit card.”

“What for?”

“To buy things.”

“What are you going to buy with it?”

“CDs,” said Paul. “Cigarettes, beer, and vodka.”

Nelson didn't say anything.

"Who's gonna find out?" asked Paul.

"This f.ing guy will."

"How's he going to find out?"

Nelson located the word for it. "Identity theft," he said.

"Bulls.," said Paul. "I'm not stealing anyone's identity."

Then Paul noticed an unfamiliar group of girls walking up on the second floor. "Fine," he said, "we part ways here. I'll find another ride."

A few minutes passed before Nelson left the bench. He didn't want to go home. He thought to go see a movie. But someone from school might see him out for a movie by himself. Then he thought maybe there was a security guard who'd seen it all, who knew everything, and it was only a matter of moments before the security guard would come and take him by the arm. The security guard was probably watching him now, watching and waiting. These were his last free moments. Then Nelson heard his name shouted from up above.

It was Paul, now directly above him, standing with the group of girls, hanging over the rail.

"Come on, dips.!" shouted Paul. "We're gonna get some food."

* * *

Nelson's family lived near a small park. The park itself was no great attraction. It was small and well-lit, and cop cars sometimes came in and out of its well-lit parking lot at night. But there was a decently sized wooded area between the house and the park, and a narrow dirt path connecting the two locations. Somewhere along the path, roughly half the distance between house and park, in a tiny clearing, stood two wooden picnic tables and four benches.

There they sat, now a party of four, a case of Natural Light Ice below the table, cigarettes on its surface, and inserted between Paul's broad white teeth, a short cigarillo. A foot into the underbrush, against a tree trunk, rested the unopened bottle of Aristocrat peach vodka. The credit card resided in Paul's shirt pocket.

Paul took a puff from the cigarillo and asked if Nelson desired to call his brother.

"Why should I?" he asked.

“He’s out with Summer.”

“He doesn’t come out much anymore, does he, your brother?”

“No, well, when he’s home from school, he’s out with Summer.”

“Knew how to live, he did, your brother.”

June was angling her decent chin in the lantern light, looking either bored or contemplative. Nelson suddenly wanted to touch her bare arm. “My brother Jason,” he said, “once jerked it five times in one day.”

“That’s gross,” said June.

“He knew how to live,” said Paul, “that man, your brother.” Then he tossed the cigarillo stub over his shoulder. “Where is he!” Paul shouted, “where’s he at! He’s disappeared!”

“How did you smoke that nasty thing?” asked the other girl, April.

“What thing?” asked Paul. “How do you smoke it?” he asked, laughing through the last two words.

“Smoke what?” she asked.

April turned to Nelson. “When are we going to start enjoying ourselves?” she asked.

“I always enjoy myself.”

“No, I don’t think you do,” she said. “Have a drink.” She disappeared into the woods and came out a moment later with the Aristocrat bottle in hand, a few strands of hair hanging over her face.

“Let’s all have drinks,” said Paul. “It’s time for having drinks.”

“What will we drink from?” asked June. “You guys don’t even have cups.”

The boys looked around at the table as though to find the plastic cups they’d neglected to purchase.

“Cups,” said Paul. “Look at you. Here, we’ll use the empty beer cans.” Paul poured drinks into the old cans and opened new cans for chasers.

“What will we drink to?” asked April.

“To our health,” suggested Nelson. “We are always doing things for our health.”

“To your brother,” said Paul, “who is lost to us, he’s gotten lost, and who knows if he’ll find this spot again.”

“Let’s drink now,” said June.

They took the shots. They sat for awhile, and then they took two more, to their health and to different people. Aside from the vile taste, Nelson didn’t feel anything. Then the darkness got even more dark and the pine trees even more like pine trees. Each thing on the table and the table itself were very much what they were.

Then Nelson said, “So what do you girls do for fun?”

“Umm,” said June. “We have fun.”

“Yeah,” said April, “you know, fun.”

“Yeah we both like fun,” said June.

Then April blurted out, “June’s mom is a judge!”

“No she’s not,” said June. “Okay, she is. But only a magistrate judge.”

Then Paul told June he thought her nails weren’t real. No, no, she protested, they were real. They went back and forth for awhile about the things they were wearing.

Nelson hadn’t said anything for awhile. He thought he should say something. “I got arrested once,” he said.

“When was that?” asked April.

“Yeah how did that happen?” said Paul.

“Well,” said Nelson, “you know, I was at this party, over in Murfreesboro. It was a huge party, last fall. Tons of people there—maybe you heard about it—and we were all out on this porch. To walk around, to get anywhere, you had to hold your hands up in the air and there were at least four kegs out there on that porch. Anyway, I heard there were four kegs, and all these people were out there, and they were smoking these fat blunts, I mean really large blunts, and it was all people, in all directions.

“Anyway, so there was this total f.ing meathead jock, this guy, just being a total jerk. But whatever, it’s a party. So this guy, this total f.ing jock, he takes his shirt off—just takes it right off and throws it over the deck—you know, showing off or something. Then he takes his pants off—does the exact same thing with his pants,

just throws them over the edge of the porch. And now he's just standing there in his—he's wearing tighty whities—and he's just standing there in his tighty whities, and people have backed away from him, made a little circle. And, you know, it was really crowded on that deck.

“So I'm thinking, well, I guess that's how they roll in Murfreesboro. I don't have a posse with me or anything. I don't want to start anything. Then this guy starts screaming—just starts yelling—‘I've got three rods!’ he says, ‘I've got three rods!’

“‘What's that?’ some girl says.

“‘I've got three rods!’ he shouts. ‘Three of ‘em!’

“Then he puts both hands down the front of his tighty whities—you know, to simulate three rods—and he starts running around, trying to bump into people. And they're all playing along, you know, like he's a bull or something, and they're all matadors or something, or like the running of the bulls in Pamplona. And they're all laughing. And I'm thinking, yeah, I guess that's how they roll in Murfreesboro. And I turned my back to it, because that's pretty gay. And I'm just standing there, minding my own business, drinking my beer, and the guy comes smack—hits me right in the back—with his crotch I guess—and I spill my beer all over myself.

“So, you know, we had to throw down. Someone—probably some neighbor—called the cops.” Nelson took a drag from his cigarette. “They had to pull me off him. Those big dumb a.hole jocks, they don't expect you to take their shins out first.” Nelson leaned back and took another long drag from his cigarette.

“I remember that,” said April.

“I remember it too,” said June, “only I thought—”

“—that was you?” asked April.

“—only I thought—”

“—yeah, I thought—”

“—only I thought—I thought they had to call an ambulance, was what happened.”

“That was you?” asked April. “That guy, he goes to my school. I mean, he used to date my friend. He seemed fine afterwards. We went to Taco Bell. But I remember they had to call an ambulance for—that was you?”

“No,” said Nelson. “That must have been a different party.”

“But I know who you’re talking about,” said June. “That guy, John, he goes to our school. I remember when John used to do that three rod thing.” She took a sip of beer. “That was you, out in the street?”

“No,” said Nelson. “No, you must be remembering a different party. This guy wasn’t named John.”

It wasn’t thirty seconds later they heard him coming up the path, a rustling noise, a snapping of twigs and acorns. They tossed out their cigarettes and hid the beer cans and vodka down under the table.

Then the flashlight hit them and they heard his voice. “I could see that light from out in the street,” he said. “What are you, advertising for juvie?” It was Jason. He was tall and his voice deep and satisfied.

“Back in my day,” he continued, “we made do with darkness.” He stepped over to the table. “Toss me a beer,” he told Paul. “Natty Light,” he said, sucking in air as he tapped the can, “you two sure know how to live.”

“Don’t know how they do it in Bowling Green,” said Paul, “but this is how we do it right here.”

Paul declared another shot on behalf of the new guest. It was bulls., Jason said, he’d be damned if he were called a guest in this spot. Paul demanded stories. Jason demurred, popping open another beer. Paul demanded a second time. No, no, said Jason, trust me, college is boring. He said that his brother should tell a story.

“He’s already told one,” said June.

So Paul told an old story about how those men from the north side had chased Jason. They’d chased him right down Center Street, across from the small ball park where they had all played Babe Ruth baseball. In fact, at that very moment, as the three or four men—it was really a mob—had chased him down Center Street, as they all were running, a game had been in progress and the fathers, who knew all the Babe Ruth baseball players, recognized Jason and said to themselves, boy, that Jason can run. And it was true. He could run in those days.

Had they ever caught him, asked April. No, said Jason, he came upon a tree house out in this kid’s yard, the yard belonging to this kid he used to know, and shimmied right up that tree before they saw him. He almost pissed himself, he was so scared, but those men from the north side knew not to intrude upon people’s yards. There was police in this neighborhood. Good people lived here. What was it about, asked June. Oh, you know, the north side.

And then Paul told a second story, about how they had lifted that grandfather clock right out of that old lady’s bedroom. She woke up just as they made it out the

window, but, somehow, she just rolled over. They'd almost pissed themselves again that time. Jason sat still as Paul spoke, back straight and neck craned ever slightly, as a thoughtful young person sits.

Nelson drank more beer and wondered if he sat like his brother. And he thought how it must have felt to lower that clock out the window, and then running with it down the empty street late at night.

Then Jason said, "Know what I've gotten into?"

"No, what?" said Paul.

"The harmonica."

"The harmoni-what?" Paul laughed. "You s.ing me?"

"No sir," said Jason, and he took the silver harmonica out of his shirt pocket, where it had been sitting, unnoticed, all along. "It's soulful."

"Soulful! Well then play that s.!" Paul shouted.

Jason raised the harmonica to his lips and out came a tune—random notes, mostly, but all in the same key—and Paul got up and danced.

Jason gripped the harmonica with both hands and closed his eyes and his expression was—yes—just the expression that a soulful person would have. Nobody knew any dance to go with harmonica music. So Paul just let his limbs move however they pleased. He stomped on the grass, twisted his hips, popped his elbows in and out. June clapped and laughed and, for greater attention, Paul jumped up on one of the benches—the one where June was sitting—and bounced from toe to toe in time with the clapping. It must have tired out his calves.

Then June stood on the bench, a game expression on her face, and, hands on her hips, turned her shoulders left to right in a snaky motion. She gave Paul a look over her shoulder. Paul, his hands raised, came at her, and she hopped off the bench, and looped around the tables, laughing, and Paul chased her.

Jason played his simple song. June took a moment to catch her breath. Paul mounted the table and, down on his haunches, kicked out his legs—one leg and then the other—his arms crossed at his chest, in a Cossack dance. Then June doubled over laughing. At this moment April leaned her head against Jason's soulful shoulder.

Nelson closed his eyes. In the dark the sounds were overwhelming. There was no distance to them. Each voice and the harmonica and the clapping hands came from the same place. And there were the crickets underneath those sounds. The

harmonica tune was no tune at all: just a silly random repetition of three or four notes. The stupidity of his brother's song didn't make him angry, but instead each simple note persuaded him that it would always end this way. He was tired.

* * *

Some time later Nelson raised his head off the picnic table. He was first aware of the familiar, vile taste in his dry mouth, second, how cold he was. Everyone was gone. Nelson felt only a drive to be home in his bed, for the night to be over.

The materials had all been tossed in the woods or some other place. The Dillard's bags—Paul's bags and Nelson's bags, both—were gone. There was no saying if the party continued some other place. It occurred to Nelson that Paul had taken both sets of bags and would return them for cash at the mall tomorrow.

Nelson stumbled down the worn path, his hands in his pocket, pressing his tongue to the roof of his mouth to produce saliva. He cursed himself, bitterly, about the bags. Then he noticed what a clear night it was. Each star was identifiable and the moon was bright.

Nelson thought about the man from the Y. He imagined the man opening his locker, patting the back pocket of his pants and then the other back pocket, searching the bottom of the locker, and then down on his knees, looking under a bench. He wouldn't find it in his car either.

Maybe he'd be half way out the front entrance and only at that moment discover it was gone. Maybe he'd be sitting at dinner with his girlfriend, and they would have just finished up eating, and probably have only a glass or so of wine remaining. His girlfriend would be very pretty with a drowsy, happy look from the wine. The waiter would bring the bill to the table and nod, ceremoniously, before walking away and only at this moment would the man discover that his wallet was missing. And he could see the disgusted look on the girlfriend's face and, yes, it was comical. Very comical. He couldn't see anything wrong with it.

No, he couldn't say anything against it. Some person who wouldn't lock his locker was simply asking to have his belongings stolen. His brother might be with June out in the woods, or April, and Paul might be with April or June, and he couldn't say anything against that either. What a great thing it would be, in fact, to have a girlfriend at school and, in addition, to meet girls from other schools and go with them into the woods. No, there was nothing to be said against it.

But how nice it would have been, to have risen first and danced with the girl, to have put his hands on her hands or on her smooth shoulders. And what a great thing it would be, to slip inside some rich old lady's house, to lower her grandfather clock out the window, and run with it out in the street!

**2012 Wood Coin: Already Okay with Little Brother and Big Brother Watching
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