

Being Stupid

What evilness had risen from my hand? Once, when I and a neighbor friend, Rinehart, a true Okie and lover of gravy on cantaloupe, were on the front porch, a very drunk man in a brown overcoat staggered down our street in the middle of the afternoon. He reeled like those drunks in the afternoon movies—side to side, forward and then backward, all the while slurring words at himself and things that got in his way.

Rinehart and I watched him pass, thinking it was funny that he should have to lean against a car and hold on. Then the brilliant idea: Why not sell him a beer bottle filled with water? We beamed at each other and rushed off to find a bottle before the drunk escaped our scheme. Pulling one from the garbage, we filled it with water from the garden hose and then ran after the drunk who had not wandered too far. Rinehart was standing behind me, somewhat scared, when I yelled: "Mister, you wanna buy a beer? Look at this." I held up the bottle like a chalice and pointed at it. He turned slowly to show us his watery eyes. His stare drifted, and out came: "Whaaaat?" It was an ugly sound that scared both of us. Still, when the drunk took a dollar from his pocket, I snatched it from him and then set the bottle at his feet. He tried to lunge at me, but I sidestepped him and he fell to the ground, tipping over the bottle. He looked at the bottle, then back at me, and

whined from some terrible cavity of the heart: "You'll get yours, sonny." The words scared me. I was Catholic. I knew right from wrong and what he meant.

The drunk rose to his feet with difficulty and then bent down to pick up the beer bottle and raise it to his mouth. As he continued down the street, we watched in silence as he crossed the street into the next block. I turned to Rinehart and tried to be funny by crossing my eyes but his face had gone slack from bad feelings. I suggested that we cash the dollar, but he didn't want anything to do with it. He left me and went inside. What could I do? What was done was done. With the dollar I bought a Coke, potato chips, and a lemon pie, and rode my bike up and down the block, now and then staring at Rinehart's house and feeling bad.

I marched through life in evilness, and perhaps a low point that will surely send me tumbling into hell was when Scott, my best friend and still another lover of cantaloupe and gravy, begged me to break into his sister's house with him. She was on vacation in Yosemite, so it was a perfect time to undo a window screen, slither through, and come out smiling with the stereo, the color TV, the alarm clock, the antique silver, or whatever our hearts desired.

"Come on, Gar, no way are we gonna get caught," he beat over my head all night. "We could put the stereo in the closet, and sell the rest of the stuff. Fifty-fifty."

At first I was surprised at Scott. My mouth hung open, and when I closed it it fell open again. His own sister's house? His recently married sister? I would never have thought of stealing from family or, for that matter, stealing period. I was Catholic. I believed in evilness.

But then, Scott's arguments sort of made sense. Didn't we in fact need a stereo and wasn't it true that we were stealing from the rich? Surely no harm would result. His sister worked for the government and his brother-in-law

was employed as a surveyor. He made a killing, we thought, and there were benefits to boot.

"Gar, we could do it. No one will know," he argued for hours before I finally came around to agree with him. We planned our break-in for the following night, and then sat back in our beds bragging about what we would buy: Vienna sausages, cheeses, and assorted packages of Lipton soup, our favorite. Our imaginations narrowed to Cokes, Cheez-Its, and puffed bags of Chee•tos. Okie Heaven, we laughed.

Our circumstances were laughable. Mad at my parents, I had said "shit" under my breath and had joined Scott in renting a small room in a boarding house. We each had a bed, a chair, and one wobbly table where we fixed our meals. We lived like monks with bad eating habits: For breakfast there were Froot Loops and Sonny Boy orange juice; for lunch we slurped up a bowl of Lipton soup, along with a thin sandwich of peanut butter and jelly; for dinner, which I ate alone because Scott worked the night shift at a box factory, I often opened a can of Campbell's Manhandler. Great stuff, I thought at the time—a time when I was trying to become a poet. I had taped my poems (all three of them) to the wall near the window where I ate, re-reading them as I weighed each steaming spoonful of my Manhandler. When a breeze came in the poems fluttered and hung on the verge of pulling off the wall and coming alive. Good stuff, I thought, but the professor I would show them to that fall would think different. The poems died in his class, or limped like old dogs in the hallway, and when I tried to tape them back to the wall they slipped behind the bed where I left them, depressed.

Scott worked hard hours while I lived on social security. Ninety dollars every month. Thirty dollars for rent, twenty for food, and fifteen for gas. There were other expenses that might have amounted to five dollars, but I managed to save the rest for a rainy day.

But it was the end of a lean month, so we agreed to rob the house. The next night Scott called in sick and as we were about to leave, a friend of ours showed up. It was Ronnie in a baseball cap; Ronnie the biologist in lime green socks; the big creep who squeezed pimples at mirrors and laughed.

"Where you guys going?" he asked. "For a walk," I lied. He followed us downstairs and the three of us walked one block, then another, and then still another. We returned to the house and at that point we told Ronnie what we were going to do. His face was like an orange moon when he asked if he could come along. We shouted no and then told him to get lost. And that's just what he did. He got into his '57 Chevy, a car only a Mexican or a redneck looks good in. Ronnie was neither.

Scott and I jumped into my '49 Plymouth and raced to Scott's sister's place. By the time we got there Ronnie was waiting for us on his car hood with his long legs dangling and his socks showing under a street light. He called to us, and we shushed him.

"OK, you can come with us," Scott told him, "but don't be too greedy. Just take what you really need." Scott explained to us that he would climb through the upstairs window that he knew was open. I drove my Plymouth into the alley behind the house; Ronnie parked his Chevy on the end of the block. By the time Ronnie and I returned to the house, we could make out Scott's crouched figure waving for us to come in. We tiptoed past the spray of car parts and gardening tools, up the back porch, and into the house. In the kitchen Scott again warned us, Ronnie in particular, just to take things that we needed. He flicked on the flashlight and Scott and I went to the living room while Ronnie, who was offended by Scott's warnings, went upstairs to search the bedrooms. A match lit the way for him.

Scott and I unplugged the stereo and detached the

speaker wires from the receiver. I cradled the speakers one at a time, like babies, to the alley while Scott propped the receiver and turntable on his shoulders and followed me. Together we carried the 19-inch RCA, dropping it once on the lawn and again in the alley when we tried to fit it into the trunk. When the neighbor's dog snorted at the fence, we froze and tried not to breathe.

Meanwhile, Ronnie had brought down a tape recorder, some record albums, and a hat. "Don't be stupid," I told him in a low but angry voice. I slapped the hat from his hand and he said, "Oh."

The three of us returned to the house where we searched for small things: Fountain pens, loose change, a wad of bills sandwiched under a mattress. Scott's flashlight poked at the dark, and I followed it, looking desperately for something—anything—of value. Ronnie started upstairs to search the bedrooms again when we heard a car coming to a stop. The neighbors. We grew still and listened to the car door slam, a low voice, and then a heehaw of laughter as they climbed their steps. This frightened me and Scott, but Ronnie remained indifferent. "Don't worry."

But we did. I could feel that Scott was scared out of his wits, so I told him to stay calm while I took one last look around the house. It was then that I found a plexiglas bank of quarters, dimes, and nickels. I weighed it in my palm: At least twenty dollars, I thought.

When I returned to the living room Scott was peeking out the window. He turned to me and his voice was full of panic. "C'mon, let's get outta here."

At the stairs I called up to Ronnie to come down, but, a true fool to the bone, he said no. I climbed the stairs where I found him in a closet searching on his knees among the shoes. I grabbed him by the arm, but he tugged away.

"You'll get it later, punk," I told him. My mouth was

puckered with meanness and instead of waiting for later I jumped into the closet to fight him. Scott came running up the stairs to break us up. When I got up my lip felt warm and my back hurt where Ronnie had pounded me with a high-heeled shoe.

"Let's go, Ronnie," Scott begged, but still he refused to leave. "Listen, just give me some more time. Just ten more minutes."

We went downstairs without him and into the alley where we placed the stereo in the back seat of the car, jumped in, and began to drive slowly down the alley. A large branch, somehow stuck to the underbody of the car, scraped against the ground and got louder as we picked up speed: The neighborhood of dogs whined, then broke the night with barks, as a porch light came on. Out of the alley I drove madly hoping the branch would snap. But it didn't. We drove all the way home with the branch screeching and in my mind I prayed to God and confessed our evilness. "Baby Jesus, get us out of here. Save our asses."

Back at our room we sat on our beds trying to figure out the next move. Where would we sell the stereo? Sunnyside Swapmeet? Cherry Auction? Should we drag the stuff into our room? What if anyone saw us? We went round and round fluttering with fear like chickens. Scott paced the room, searching out the window now and then, while I lay on the bed, exhausted.

Then we made out the sound of Ronnie's car in the distance. It got louder and his tires skidded when he turned the corner to our block. He stopped with the screech of bad brakes, revved up the engine, and then shut it off. He got out of his car and I could hear the flipflop of K-mart sneakers climb our stairs. When I opened the door for him he was holding a lamp with a torn shade. I couldn't believe it. What had gotten into his mind to make him bring back a lamp?

Immediately we began to argue. I pushed him; he pushed me. I pushed him again and we started fighting, our arms flailing at one another as we banged against the table and the bed. Scott sat on his bed with his head in his hands and suffered in private shame, indifferent to our rolling about the room. A banging came from the wall, followed by a "Shut up in there." Ronnie and I let go of each other and got up breathing hard and pressing at the hurt places throbbing under the skin. I looked into the mirror that showed a long scratch from Ronnie's girlish fingernails. *Scarface.Soto.*

Ronnie dabbed at a bloody tooth with a napkin and gave me a dirty look. He looked in the mirror, his index fingers stretching his mouth open to show a yellow tongue.

The three of us then collapsed on the beds, with Scott and I in one and Ronnie lying face down in the other. Minutes later Ronnie got up, picked up his lamp, and left without saying a word. I got up and watched from the window as Ronnie roared off in his Chevy. I turned to Scott whose face was buried in the pillow. When I called to him he let out his fear: "Oh, man, are we in trouble."

He got up quickly and looked at me. "Gar, we're going to leave town. That's the only way. We'll say that we were out of town. San Francisco. My brother lives there."

We went on building an alibi as he changed his socks, readying for the bus ride up north. We got our toothbrushes, a change of clothes, and fixed sandwiches: Six of them slapped together with tuna and limp sheets of lettuce. We hurried into the car and drove off in silence, each of us gnawed by shame and fear. Why had we done it? Didn't we come from OK families? What drug had forced Scott to propose such deceit? It was the only time I had stolen, and guilt clamped my head like a football helmet.

Instead of going straight to the Greyhound Bus depot,

we stopped at Ronnie's apartment where we found him face down in a pillow. Incense burned in an ashtray on a nightstand, a thread of smoke unraveling. The lamp leaned like a rifle against the bed.

"Leave me alone," he moaned without looking up. I threw myself into a chair and Scott coaxed him to come to San Francisco with us.

"You gotta come, man," Scott whined. His hands were cocked on his hips. "Get your face up and let's go. Now, *menso.*"

Ronnie moaned into his pillow, "Leave me alone."

Scott and I left and drove near the bus terminal, where we parked on an unlit street with no meters. The "stuff" was still in the back seat, and this made us feel uneasy. What if the car were towed? For sure the cops would trace the TV and stereo, we thought. We sat in the car ripping up our fingernails with our teeth and thought deeply before we started off in the direction of the terminal, past a few winos who mumbled at us like drunk priests.

At the terminal we stood in a line of greasy people who were, in my imagination, fleeing from their own predicaments. What crimes had they committed? Burglary? Forged checks? Severe knife wounds? I studied their broken faces and the clipclop of their limps. I watched them play the pinball machines and slouch at the quarter-for-a-half-hour TV sets. Some sat in plastic orange chairs while others smoked and leaned on the wall with Cokes in their hands.

I searched the terminal and everyone looked scuffed up or worn to the bone, especially the ones in mismatched clothes: Flowered shirts with striped pants.

When the man behind the counter said six dollars and seventy-five cents to San Francisco, I searched Scott's face and he stared back because we didn't have more than twenty dollars between us. Still, we paid and waited in

another line that was slowly gobbled by the door. We passed through as the bus driver punched hungrily at our tickets. He pointed to a bus and we boarded, sitting stiffly as cardboard in cushioned seats.

I turned to Scott who was trembling and working on his fingernails again. "Do you think we're doing the right thing? I mean, we only got about five bucks."

He turned to me. His face was pale despite the dark stubble that rose like iron filings from his chin. "Let's get outta here."

Rising from my seat I pulled our six-sandwich lunch from the rack above our heads. Outside, Scott explained to the bus driver that we had forgotten our wallets at home; we couldn't possibly make the trip.

"Now why the hell didn't you think about that before you bought tickets," he asked in a gruff voice. He shook his head and slurred: "Jesus Christ."

We looked down at our shoes, then away, as the driver wrote something on our tickets. "Now go on," he waved. "Jesus Christ."

We stood in line again, but I noticed that the people who were milling around didn't look all that bad after all. Perhaps I had been hasty in my observations, a college snot. I again noted the man in the flowered shirt with the striped pants and he didn't look so bad. He was probably a homeowner, a two-car man with a Catholic background, a league bowler.

After a few minutes of arguing our case, we were re-funded our money and dashed from the terminal into the night to jog up Tulare Street back to the car. We leaned against the fender, bent over with our hands on our knees to catch our breath.

"We've got to straighten up," I told Scott, remorseful at our stupidity.

Scott, who had been locked in thought, proposed that we return the stuff; that the only way out was to get rid of

it because he was certain that his family would find out, if not in the coming week, then in a month or a year. His sister might show up at our hovel and, with our luck, the stereo would be blaring with The Stones and the TV glowing blue with the sound turned down.

We threw this idea back and forth like a football. It was in my hands when we agreed that the stuff had to go back.

We drove back to Ronnie's place where he was still face down in the pillow. When Scott called to him, he moaned, "Eeave me alone. We're fools." He threw his head back into the pillow. "Fools."

"Listen, *menso*, we gotta do something about this stuff," I told him. I took a sandwich from our bag and tossed one to Scott who tossed it back to me. "I ain't hungry."

I unwrapped the sandwich and listened to Scott explain to Ronnie our plan of returning the television and stereo and the rest of the stuff. Ronnie listened with his eyes closed while rolling his tongue over God knows what filth in his mouth. He rose up on his elbow and blinked his red eyes at us. "Fools!"

I threw the tuna sandwich at him and again reminded him that when it was all over, I was going to ride a bike up his back, make him hurt.

"Let's go," I told Scott. I picked up the lamp that Ronnie had taken and propped it on my shoulder. From there we drove to Scott's sister's place where we parked in the alley. For a few minutes we sat in silence, each of us mulling over in private our fears. The night was busy with crickets, a whole tribe I imagined, but when we got out they stopped. Everything was still. I was amazed at the clarity of the moon that had just cleared the telephone wires toward a new day. In the distance a dog started to bark, followed by another, and then still another. We leaned against the car and waited for them to stop their

racket. When they did, Scott turned to me. "I'll go first. Wait for me."

He pressed the flashlight against his palm: It showed blood red. He walked away and I sat on the car hood to warm myself against the late night chill. I thought of how stupid we had been. Of all people we stole from a relative. A sister. A recently married sister. I said a made-up prayer and assured God that if I got out of this one I'd be good. No problems from me—ever!

Scott returned to the car to help me lift the television that we carried solemnly like a coffin through the yard into the house. We set it on its side in the kitchen and returned to the car for the stereo, the alarm clock, the lamp, and the small things. We set them in the kitchen and rested there for a moment, our breathing like a saw going through wood, before we returned to the car. We drove home sweating but relieved, and instead of going inside we sat in the car wondering if we would be found out. Fingerprints? A dropped pencil with my teethmarks for the crime lab to work from? Anything was possible.

We sat in the dark, pensive but limp from the exertion of fear, and stared ahead up the street, mumbling the different versions of our crime. A dog crossed the street. A collie. What a lucky life, I thought, to chow down a bowl of Skippy dog food and trot off for an eventful night of dog fights and knocked-over garbage cans. What freedom from conscience. When we were kids of thirteen and fourteen we had done the same: Downed a bowl of Frosted Flakes and then met somewhere, in a vacant lot or a corner, to begin a day of wandering through the streets of Fresno in search of trouble. There had been no better time.

The dog trotted in our direction. Rolling down my window I called to him: "Come here, boy." He stopped still, his head poised beautifully under the street light, before he started to wag his tail. He came up to the car, almost

shyly, and I let my hand hang from the window. He licked it and made a whining noise. I opened the door to the back seat and the dog climbed in, his tail patting the upholstery as he whined to be scratched and loved. Unwrapping a tuna sandwich, I poked it at the dog's nose and he nibbled at it with more manners than most people I knew.

Scott was still lost in the vacancy of his own private guilt, so when I asked him if he wanted to go to Sambo's for breakfast because I knew we couldn't sleep that night, he mumbled, "Yeah, maybe, why not." Scott gnawed a fingernail of shame, and I figured a good stack of pancakes would do wonders.

I turned to the collie. "What do you think, baby?" The dog whined and pumped its tiny feet which made me love it. I started the engine, put it in gear, and started up the street while the dog's head hung over the front seat and washed the backs of my ears.