

We all think we can commit the perfect crime. Movies and TV make it look so difficult, if not impossible, but in reality, the perfect crime is not difficult and we all know it. It's all about planning and execution. The planning, in fact, is the easy part. The far more crucial of the two, though, is the execution.

I knew I could pull it off, and I was not alone. I had many friends who, while watching crime shows or movies during our youth, would dissect the action occurring on screen, pointing out the characters' obvious flaws. "This guy's an idiot," Bill would say. "That's a sure way to get caught." Jim would add, "Yeah! And you never use a Ford for a getaway. This guy's an amateur." I hung out with some very smart guys who, no doubt, now have nicknames like "the brain," "bookworm," "blueprint" or the simple, yet elegant, "smarts" in their respective cell blocks. I, however, am still on the outside looking in wondering where I would have ended up had I gone right.

Now, it's not that I come from a long line of nefarious types - Thieves, bootleggers, what have you - who handed down their surefire ways of staying out of the big house. In fact, quite the contrary. My father was a brilliant guy who, unfortunately, never reached his true potential as he never tried to commit the perfect crime, though I'm sure he could have had he let his true self override his good Christian upbringing. When my father made a joke about your picture ending up on the post office wall, it was just that, a joke. He was a big believer that a man's actions bespoke his character, thus, a life of crime was never an option for him.

I, however, decided otherwise. I knew that I could commit a crime while keeping my picture off the wall of the local postal station. All I had to do was be smart, plan it right and, above all, run really fast. They can't take your picture if you don't stand still long

enough for the camera to snap. The basics were in place, so, in my fourteenth year, I set to planning the crime that would start me on my road to success outside the bounds of the law. My all too regular lack of cash would no longer be a deterrent to my having what I wanted as I would walk in and take whatever struck my fancy from whatever sort of business fell on my bad side that day.

I knew something that others seemed to have overlooked: I knew that if I was going to be successful in my quest, I would have to look at it clearly from both sides of the fence. In addition to boning up on criminal activity, I studied the law enforcement side. I read. I watched movies. By far, the best education I received was from watching reruns of crime shows on local TV. I watched the criminal elements of these shows, took notes and I learned. The most important lesson taken from these viewings of *Barnaby Jones*, *The Rockford Files* and any other seventies cop shows I could find was that all of the criminal-types had overlooked some detail. One detail. Sometimes a major detail, most times it could pass as a rotten piece of luck, but they all suffered the same fate in the end: winged by Barnaby or beaten down by Jim Rockford. I decided mere planning wasn't going to be enough. I was going to have to over-plan to have any chance at beating the curse of the slipped detail.

I plotted. I schemed. I plotted some more. It took me the better part of an hour, but when I looked at it objectively, I knew I had created the only perfect crime. I did dry runs in the garage. When I was satisfied I was ready, I ran it again. First, into the store. Second, on to the object of my desire. Then, out again. By dinner the night before, I knew I was ready. I was ready to take my first step on the road to a stable future on the lam. I had the tools necessary for the job. The plan was firmly in my memory and the written records

eaten, making dinner a rough prospect that night as I had gorged on an appetizer of yellow legal pad pages. The plan was solid. It was built on the concept of the magician's misdirection. Classic! Simple! So simple, in fact, that it was foolproof.

I was nabbed in the local Thrifty Drug. Nailed dead to rights. What hurt the most was that I was seized taking something I desperately needed: Sunglasses. See, I played trumpet in the school orchestra and we were going to be playing the commencement on the last day of school. Late afternoon, mid-June. In the San Fernando Valley. Facing West! I not only wanted the ridiculously large Aviators with the blue lenses I had talked myself into, I needed them to avoid the obvious ocular damage that would be inflicted upon me by the deadly team of the administrators of Madison Junior High School and Mother Nature. Necessity guided my hand. I was locked in silent battle with an unfeeling system. I was the Jean Valjean of the eighth grade.

I arrived, like most days with rehearsal in the afternoon, as the sun was setting in the alley behind the store. Before I entered, however, I unzipped my duffle bag half way. No turning back now. I walked to the sunglass display, found my coveted eye wear, then set up camp at the magazine rack, which was out of sight of the cashiers. They could see my head, but nothing below the shoulders. It was there, hidden by the oversized Rolling Stone magazine that I bided my time. I was summoning the courage for the next part of my plan. After what felt like a respectable amount of time, I nonchalantly dropped the Foster Grants into my waiting duffle bag, easily slid the zipper closed, and headed for the exit.

Tunnel vision set in as I made my way to the registers. Once there I picked up a candy bar to further solidify my alibi, the misdirection: My purchase of an Abba Zabba would instantly turn their suspicions. I would buy this and they would, no doubt, say,

“Oooooohhh, he was just buying candy. I thought he was up to no good, but all he really wants is a tasty, nougaty snack.” They’d be putty in my hands.

I tossed my sugary excuse on the counter, ponying up the appropriate amount in the small change that signaled my arrival to the cashier. I barely broke stride as I scattered the change across the counter while swiping my candy bar in one fluid motion. In no time I was walking purposefully, *innocently*, toward the front doors when I realized what I had done. I stopped dead in my tracks, a cone dispenser with its fifties style artwork of round-headed kids enjoying oversized, frozen treats grinning down at me. I heard a distant voice in my head asking questions for which no one had answers, “What are you doing? Are you crazy? You could have had a triple cone of double chocolate malted crunch! And you settled for an Abba freakin’ Zabba?!” This only prompted me to start asking lame questions of myself: “What made me choose an Abba Zabba? Not a fan of the Abba Zabba. In fact, I hate these things. What possessed me to buy such a thing?” No idea. On all counts.

As I stood there giving myself the third degree in front of the ice cream counter, I realized that all of this was beside the point, really. It became quickly and abundantly clear that this was the flaw in my planning. Especially when you consider how long it usually took to get ice cream at Thrifty. When you approached the counter, you had to wait for the cashier or manager to call someone up, then wait as they made their way from wherever they were hiding out. When they finally arrived, they had to figure out the lock to the ice cream counter door - This was something I never understood: They had \$20 bottles of liquor out in the open, but the ice cream was better protected than most banks in the area. After unlocking vault o’ treats, they had to wash their hands which took the better part of an hour. That was the young guy. If you got the lifer from the stock room,

settle in, the process could take a week. That's what would have made it so perfect, though as no criminal in his right mind would wait at the scene of the crime for that amount of time. I would have gotten away scot-free. At any rate, it was too late. I was stuck. The Abba Zabba was my Ford. At any rate, I was committed at this point, so I recomposed myself for my getaway.

The automatic door ground its way open when I stepped on the rubber mat, the sweet smell of a free, shaded future blanketing me. Soon I was outside being confronted by a barrel-chested, mustachioed man who requested the pleasure of my company. Well, not so much requested, as demanded. He was eight feet if he was an inch and I, being only about half his height, thought it better to follow as he snatched my duffle bag with one of his meaty paws, my left arm with the other. He dragged me back into the store, past all the employees who seem to have been summoned from their hiding places through some Thrifty tribal communication system. Some kind of a call they put out over the speakers mixed in with the specials. Somewhere between announcements for sale lipstick and the latest offerings for the As-Seen-on-TV crowds, there would be some message that required a code book included in the new hire packet: "All Thrifty employees - Alpha, alpha, epsilon, beta, virgo," which really meant, "The discount gods shall be appeased this night my tribal bothers and sisters. A sacrifice has been procured. Witness the virgin as he passes into the next life in a selfless act to spare us Chapter 11." At this point, two truths reared their ugly heads: First: this was not going to end well; Second: even though I had passed it three times, the ship had now officially sailed on my ever seeing an ice cream cone.

I was dragged in to his “office,” which was in the back of the store and did little to up the authority of his position. It was a room beside the dairy case with the same heavy, hanging, plastic strips covering the doorway, allowing for the same conditions as its neighbor. The cinderblock walls merely amplified the temperature flowing through the open dairy case. There was a card table with two folding metal chairs. It was all very classy. I was in shorts and once I sat down I knew my parents would finally have the two daughters my mother had always wanted. As I sat, shivering, a Polaroid was taken of me holding the “evidence.” It was tacked to the wall next to the other hardened criminals, many around my same age, holding up their attempted booty. I recognized a kid from school on the top row. He was in the far left position which led me to believe he was the first in my captor’s burgeoning crime-fighting career, but also made me wonder where he was as I hadn’t seen him in a couple of months. I quickly flashed through mental images of his solidly frozen body leaned against a wall in the freezer still clutching the Penthouse magazine displayed in the photo. They would, no doubt, find him some years from now, a fourteen-year-old holding a magazine open to the centerfold, his face frozen in a garish grin.

He gave me a stern notice that I was never to darken the doorway of, not just this, but, any Thrifty Drug Store in the future, then he sat down to write out the report that would, no doubt, dog me forever. No job interview would be safe from the fact that I now had a record. I watched him scrawl the particulars of my crime in handwriting that rivaled most third graders’. It gave the whole affair a sort of Little Rascals feel lending me a glimmer of hope about the whole affair. Alfalfa, Spanky and the rest of my ragamuffin pals would spring me using a plan built around Petey as a decoy. He’d come running through

the store drawing my Keystone Kop here away. This would allow me to sneak out dressed as Darla, wearing the sunglasses, wheeling the kid from the freezer out on a hand truck.

When he finished, he stood, tossing the pen on the table where it bounced off the Naugahyde covered cardboard table-top, ricocheted off the cinderblock wall and skittered behind a stack of empty pallets. He stood for a second staring in the direction of the pen's new home, then told me that he had to call my parents to pick me up. He had to go to the manager's office though, since, apparently, he was important enough to rate this spiffy office, but not to shell out the cash for an extra phone line. Before he left, he handcuffed me to my chair. My *folding* chair. God knows what other trouble I may have caused had this precaution not been taken.

Given my situation I would have much rather preferred my father be called as he was the rational parent in our little carnival of souls. All I could do was pray, with my one free hand, for him to answer, or, in the case of my mother being home alone, swift, sweet release. Considering my luck, the latter was most likely.

My mother arrived displaying her usual grace as she shoved her way through the polyethylene drapes into my sub-zero cell. I tried to ask the nice man (a relative term considering present company) if I could just go to jail instead and save us all the trouble. He shook his head as my purse-lipped mother looked at me, then to the polaroid, then back to me, eyes funneling to pinpoints as she cocked her jaw for what would, no doubt, be a personal tirade in defense of the merits of her parenting skills, or against the perceived lack thereof. She did not disappoint. She turned on me like a B-Movie stoolie. "I knew he would do something like this some day. I honestly don't know what his problem is. I have tried. I have tried and tried to straighten this kid out. Maybe I should just let him

go to jail. Maybe, then, he would learn. Maybe that would fix him.” He assured her that this last request was not in the cards. “ Oh, well, his father will take care of him when he gets home then. He’s the one who handles these types of things anyway.”

These types of things? There was no precedent for this. I didn’t really break out of my shell until high school. Up to this point, I was fairly shy, undersized, afraid of various shadows, including my own. I got by on wit, a quick bob-and-weave, and, when these faltered, an uncanny ability to clot. To hear her talk a teenage Capone with two strikes waiting for that third with its requisite free trip up the river for three squares and a cot until God, in his infinite wisdom, saw fit to send me to the hell I had built for myself through my diabolical pursuits.

I stared at her in disbelief as she listened intently to the future mall cop. He recounted my afternoon’s activities capped off with the details of my future exile from the land of cheap ice cream and a well-stocked magazine rack. This hurt no one worse than it did me as this was going to put a serious crimp in my ability to shop properly. Without a 45¢ triple cone I didn’t see how I was ever going to survive the grocery demands of my mother who had a keen knack for forgetting items when she sent me on an excursion with one of her novel-length shopping lists. This, then, required my swift, numerous returns, on foot, to the Ralph’s supermarket throughout the day. The record by that time was six return trips. Three was not out of the question. Less than that was likely to be observed as a local holiday in the future.

Spared the volcano, we left, with me in the lead so she could “keep an eye on me.” When we got home she said only one thing to me, “Sit on your bed until your father gets home.” I sat there for a couple of hours, the sound from the television bleeding softly

through the wall, until I finally heard the familiar slam of the front door followed by the sound of my father's footsteps through the living room. He wasted little time before coming into my room and when he did, he closed the door, pulled my desk chair out, and turned it sitting directly in front of me. We sat in silence for the better part of a sit-com segment, the laugh track punctuating the futility of anything I thought to say.

"You gave away your good name for a pair of sunglasses." That was it. No yelling. No hitting. No threats. He was very matter-of-fact as he stared, his eyes boring through my forehead - I could not make eye contact. A few more minutes passed before he got up, put the chair back at the desk and left the room, closing the door softly behind him.

Unbeknownst to me, my Summer was taken from at that moment. The sentence, handed down the next day, called for my lock down, with the exception of work and, of course, the grocery run for my mother, for the duration. Every time I passed the Thrifty I had to fight the compulsion to chance my incarceration for an ice cream cone. Seemed like a small price to pay for that sweet, sweet double chocolate malted heaven, but I won out. I knew I would never again attempt to steal from there, or anywhere else, but I also knew that getting them to believe me on that fact would be no easy feat and, ice cream or no, the last thing I needed was the calm storm of my father's disappointment a second time. When he left my room that night, regardless of all we had been through up to that point, a part of our relationship died. My father felt he could not trust me and that felt worse than any ramifications from some scribbled police report, frost faded polaroid record or physical punishment my mother could have ever inflicted.