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# Thieves

by Ron Savage

Nicholas began running toward the man who had left the shadow of the oak tree near the old woman and her small brown dog. The dog was sniffing the grass along the edge of the brick path. The woman said, Don't be fussy, Bunny. And she jiggled Bunny's silver leash. The man had thick arms and a blue short-sleeve shirt, and he moved behind the old woman and to her left. He grabbed the shoulder strap of her tan leather handbag. The woman dropped the silver leash and held her purse with both hands. Bunny barked, circled the man, and snapped at his legs. Nicholas understood thieves. His father used to tell him, You come from a family of thieves. Nicholas knew what thieves liked and what they didn't like. Thieves liked to finish their jobs and go home. They did not like complications. They liked to take a long hot shower and have a beer or a whiskey and watch television. Thieves were no different from anyone else. Nicholas was still running toward the thief and the old woman. The woman wore a gray silk shawl and a rust colored-pants suit, something tailored. She had a frail look, but her voice sounded strong. Nicholas thought she was good at keeping her fear to herself. You better stay away from Bunny! she said to the man. Her voice became louder and she said, Help. I need help! Help me! The trees in Maymont Park were black in the twilight, and the sky had started going orange and pink. Beyond the trees was the evening traffic. Downtown Richmond smelled of fast food restaurants and exhaust fumes. The man with the thick arms grasped the old woman's throat for leverage. As he pulled the tan leather bag from her hands, its contents scattered in the shadow beside the oak tree. By that time Nicholas was there and had hooked his arm around the man's neck.

Nicholas had been very rich and very poor; now he was very poor again and missed being rich. A skinny blond-haired woman at the table with him said, Worrying isn't good for you, Nicholas. Her

lips were dark red and small. Gold hoop earrings showed just below her hairline. That night, she'd had on the black dress Nicholas liked. Christina was thirty-two, his age. Her mother used to get Nicholas work. The mother retired last year and the daughter took over the business. The daughter graduated Sarah Lawrence in 1996. Christina was smarter, prettier, and got Nicholas more work than the mother. I can guarantee a hundred and fifty thousand for a half hour of your time, Christina said. Will that stop those worries, Nicholas? She was looking past him toward the bar with the bottles on the mirrored shelves. Nicholas had taken her to Paul's on Cary Street for martinis and business. He decided to dress for the meeting, his navy blue gabardine, a red silk tie. Nicholas was big in the shoulders, but his hands were slender like a boy's hands, and he did not think his hands matched his body. Paul's Bar smelled of tobacco smoke, cologne, and perfume. Brokerage types from most of the local houses came here to drink and brag about the day. They called happy hour The Power Hour. You let me know tomorrow, Christina said and lighted a black cigarette with a gold tip from the pack on the table next to her sunglasses. You think about it, she said. Nicholas stole jewelry for Christina, who charged a forty percent finder's fee. She knew where to go for the good pieces. Buyers talked to her and argued prices with her, and that was fine with Nicholas. Thank God for you, Christina, he liked to tell her. He minded the people more than he minded the stealing.

Nicholas had let the thief with the thick arms go. Neither of us want complicated lives. Nicholas whispered this to him. The man had crossed the field under an orange and dark-purple sky. A half moon was faint in the twilight. The man disappeared first into the shadows then into the woods on the opposite side of Maymont Park.



Things about the old woman had stayed with Nicholas. Dime-sized bruises were on her pale neck. The stink of urine and heavy gardenia perfume soured the air. Her breathing was like that of a runner right after a race. The small dog lay by her feet whimpering and looking up at her. Nicholas retrieved the tan leather bag from the shadow of the oak tree. His back was to the old woman while he gathered the items into the bag. Nicholas had kept her red wallet. Nothing is free, he thought. Every service has its price. What would have happened to her if I had not come along? The woman held the tan leather bag to her chest with both hands. Her gray silk shawl was wrapped about thin shoulders. Her fingers did not quit trembling. The woman's eyes got to him. Her eyes were large and dark and showed her fear and her new relief. Up close the woman did not look that old. Nicholas guessed early or middle fifties. She had silver-brown hair clipped just below the ear. Her face was narrow and flushed. Lines creased the corners of her eyes and mouth. Nicholas also saw the fear go from the woman's eyes. The fear changed to another feeling, a softer, more open feeling. No one had ever looked at Nicholas that way. The woman reached her hand toward his face. Her fingernails were manicured and painted with pearl polish. She touched her palm to his cheek. Her palm was damp and cool against his skin.

Christina was sitting at the edge of the unmade bed with her skinny legs crossed at the knee and a large bath towel wrapped about her body and tucked above her breasts. A black cigarette with a gold tip balanced on the rim of an ashtray by her bare foot. She was rubbing a second towel over her wet hair. Christina stopped and took a drag off the cigarette then began drying her hair again. You could probably have talked me into spending the night, she said. I could shower in the morning like a normal person. Nicholas had shifted to his right side to watch her. His upper arms were big and his chest was smooth. Ten minutes earlier, he

had put on the pants to his navy blue gabardine suit. Nicholas did not like being naked for very long. His bedroom smelled of lime bath soap, sex, and cigarette smoke. The walls had been lacquered gray, and the furniture was mahogany with chrome trim. It wouldn't kill you to talk to me, Christina said. She was drying her hair with the towel and didn't look at Nicholas. Freckles spotted her back. The bones of her spine were like a miniature mountain range. What do you want me to say? Nicholas asked. Christina quit drying her hair and looked over her shoulder at Nicholas. You could tell me what a great time you had tonight, she said, taking another quick inhale off her cigarette and blowing out the smoke in a thin line. She said, You could tell me what a terrific person I am and how we should try spending a whole night together. How about that? Nicholas looked down at his small hands, a boy's hands. He thought about the old woman touching his face. He could feel her cool fingers on his cheek. I am no good at this, he said.

Your mother stole everything. His father told him that after school. Nicholas was eleven then. In those days his father also had big shoulders but short bony legs and hair that was a dull wheat color. The woman didn't leave us a pot to piss in, his father said. You should at least leave a person a pot to piss in. Is that asking too much? Criminals have a pot to piss in. Serial killers. Nicholas looked into the empty living room. His mother had taken the furniture and left only the dents in the brown wall-to-wall carpet. She also left the still life once hidden by the chairs and the sofa. One palm-sized blue metal truck. Pennies and dimes, a quarter. A breath mint. Popcorn kernels. Two miniature Civil War soldiers. Dust had shaped itself into the bottom shadows of their stolen furniture. The television was gone and the walls were empty. Squares and rectangles a shade lighter than the walls had replaced the pictures. How am I going to watch my TV programs? Why did she steal our television? Nicholas wondered. His father was



looking out the living-room window with his hands in the pockets of his green coveralls. Why do women do anything? his father asked.

What do you mean you don't want to see me anymore? Christina said this while standing by the bedroom door with her hand ready at the doorknob. She had on the same skinny cocktail dress she'd worn earlier to Paul's. Her short blond hair was combed back and still damp from her shower. It's three-thirty in the morning, Christina said. No sane person knows what they want at three-thirty in the morning, Nicholas. Three-thirty in the morning is for cold sweats and crazy people. The bedroom stank of cigarette smoke and the perfume Christina had sprayed in the air and fanned toward her face. A small lamp on the mahogany nightstand beside the bed lit the room. Shadows blocked the corners and stretched over the gray lacquered walls like dark islands. Nicholas wanted to stop having sex with Christina. He'd told her this five minutes earlier but did not know how to elaborate on it. His father would have said that paying for sex was better than listening to a woman tell you what to say and do. Are we still in business together? Christina said. She was not looking at him. She knelt to rub her finger on the tip of her black high heel. Nicholas was lying in bed with one hand behind his head and the other hand



*Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall*

on his bare chest. His long legs were crossed at the ankles. A gabardine pant cuff had inched up to show a white calf. Nicholas had not thought about the business part with Christina. He would need money soon but did not know if he wanted to steal again. And if he did steal again, he did not know what he wanted to steal or if he wanted someone telling him what to steal. You are a very good thief, Christina said, standing and brushing out the front of her dress with a flat sweep of her hand. Mother and I have always enjoyed working with you, she said. I hope we can keep that arrangement. Nicholas was thinking about the red wallet he had stolen from the old woman. Each time Nicholas pictured the wallet, he felt the old woman's cool hand on



his cheek. He could see the woman's eyes. No one had ever looked at him that way.

Nicholas was across the street from Maymont Park by 6:50 PM. He had been driving to the same location for close to a month. He knew the old woman's schedule. Across the street was a brick walkway that curved around two ponds and through a wide field interrupted by oak and pine. Gold twilight outlined the tops of the trees, the Richmond skyline. Tall lamps along the curving brick path illuminated the park with spotlights. Nicholas lowered the window to breathe in the pine and the cut summer grass. The woman's red wallet lay on the seat next to him like a quiet passenger. The name in the wallet was Helen Tarnoff. Helen. Dear Helen, he thought. Helen with the cool hands. Sweet Helen with those eyes. There were two hundred and thirteen dollars, seventy-two cents, and three credit cards in Helen's wallet. Nicholas had not spent her money or used her credit cards. He had examined things. Each night before going to bed, Nicholas would look at her driver's license, her Richmond library card, her dry cleaning ticket for a silk blouse, her dentist appointment card, her voter registration card. He liked to count and recount her money. Nicholas had memorized her social security number. He often recited that number as he drifted to sleep.

Helen Tarnoff lived a block from Maymont Park on Georgia Avenue. Thick maples shadowed Helen's street. The gray sidewalks were narrow and uneven and had bits of grass in the cracks. Magnolia trees, boxwood, and dark-green ivy grew everywhere. This was an older neighborhood. Early nineteen-fifties, Nicholas thought. One- and two-story brick homes, small Cape Cods, older apartment buildings, Helen's street was a step back in time. What Nicholas noticed was how good he felt when he walked down Helen's street. The day's stress left his shoulders. A smile came to him whether he wanted it or not.

Sometimes Nicholas waited in his car for Helen

to leave her apartment building. She would look this way and that as she walked. Overhead trees speckled her with sunshine and shade. He also waited for her to return. Nicholas knew Monday was Helen's volunteer morning at the Maymont Senior Center. Tuesday and Friday afternoons were for food shopping at Mr. Kim's, the grocery store on the corner. Wednesday morning Helen's daughter dropped off her little boy, and Helen would babysit until five. Or maybe Helen and the young woman were not related. Nicholas did not know. But thinking about Helen that way pleased him. The boy was small and frail like Helen and had her narrow face. The mother always carried the boy to the front door of Helen's brown brick apartment. Helen would then kiss the mother and the boy and carry the boy inside the building. Nicholas imagined being that boy. He imagined his head snug on Helen's shoulder and Helen carrying him inside her apartment. He imagined the rooms scented with baking chicken and yeast rolls.

He stole from me, too. His mother said this twelve years earlier. Nicholas had been driving down Broad Street at night with snow blowing over the dark road like low, fluttering silk. Snow cut through the long white lights of the street lamps. His mother had called Nicholas on the new cell phone his father had given him for his twentieth birthday. Nicholas lived on his own now. The phone was supposed to allow the father to reach the son but Nicholas never picked up. His mother said she wanted to wish him a happy birthday and she was at a very lovely upscale bar and never mind where. And, yes, okay, an individual had bought her a highball. So what? she told him. Having a highball is not the end of the world as we know it, she told him. Her words were pressed together and unclear. Nicholas had the cell phone wedged between his ear and his shoulder. A slice of pizza in a paper napkin was balanced on his lap, and the car smelled of anchovies. He rubbed his fogged breath from the windshield with the cuff of his



sweatshirt. The rubber wipers were iced, snow was collecting on the glass, and it had become difficult to see the road. Nicholas asked how she had gotten his cell number. People owe me, his mother said. Don't think I am the only thief in this family, Nicholas. Your father is no saint. He is not an individual who honors his marriage vows. The man stole my trust. Do you hear what I am saying to you? Your father is a man who steals your trust. Nicholas rubbed the windshield harder, but the fog on the glass kept reappearing. He thought the fog and the snow might wrap around him until there was nothing to see. Why didn't you take me? he had asked. Nicholas could not hear his own question. Far off on his mother's end of the phone, there was music and people talking. You were older, his mother said. You didn't need me all that much. A woman with an older child doesn't have a chance, she said. You ought to know that. Don't you know that, Nicholas? You're a smart boy.

Nicholas was still in his car across the street from Maymont Park. The red wallet lay beside him on the passenger's side. His car had green-and-white plaid seats, and the backrests were worn through to a gray spongy material. The plastic seams on the seat where the red wallet lay had begun to unravel. Laundry was piled in the back. There were three pairs of chinos for the dry cleaners. There were jeans and underwear and balled-up tube socks for the laundromat. Wrappers from fast food restaurants lay dismissed and forgotten on the car floor. The car had an odor of burgers, dirty socks, and fries.

Across the street a small dog barked. Nicholas looked at his watch as if the barking dog were his alarm. Seven on the money, he thought. Helen had her routines. The small brown dog was trying to run into Maymont Park but could not escape the leash. Its paws were scraping at the sidewalk and not getting anywhere. Quit it, Bunny! the woman said. She had on mint-green slacks. Her beautiful silver shawl was draped about a blouse with

a frilly collar. You quit that and behave yourself! she said to Bunny. A street lamp and a bright moon surrounded Helen and her dog in yellow and white light. Helen kept stopping to shake Bunny's silver leash. She put a finger on her lips to shush the dog's barking. Helen and Bunny were walking next to the street instead of along the usual brick path inside the park. Cars and buses passed between Nicholas and Helen and the dog. The woman stopped and cupped a hand to her eyebrow. She looked into the moonlit park at the shadows near the oak and pine trees. The night had that city mix of exhaust fumes and fast food restaurants, pine, and summer grass. Nicholas stretched his arm out the car window, waved the red wallet, and honked the horn. He called to Helen and saw her back stiffen. She turned to Nicholas with her hand still cupped at her brow. You better stay away from me! Helen's voice was shrill against the evening traffic. Do you hear me? she said. You better stay away! Helen did not give Nicholas the time to talk to her. I'm the guy who helped you, he could have said. I'm not your thief. I am not that man. Helen had already picked up Bunny with both hands. She was holding the small dog to her chest and walking fast. Then she started to run.

Nicholas did not understand Helen. He looked nothing like the thief who had tried to steal her handbag. Now Nicholas needed a new plan. He would leave the red wallet in Helen's apartment. What else can I do? he thought. Nicholas knew all the best times. Monday morning Helen volunteered at the Maymont Senior Center. Tuesday and Friday afternoons she did her food shopping at Mr. Kim's, the grocery store on the corner. Nicholas had imagined her living room having burgundy curtains and a Persian rug. He imagined family photographs on a piano or along a bookshelf or mantel. Nicholas even imagined Helen might be waiting in the apartment to touch his cheek with her cool hand. He wanted to see the fear go from her eyes. He wanted the fear to change into a softer feeling.

