

Caper

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There may be a reason no one seemed overly concerned with the break-in, the vandalism, the loss of a storeroom-sized cache of some of the least expensive booze money could buy. The incident was reported to the police, even made the newspapers, but little else was done to apprehend the perpetrators. And maybe that's because the victim didn't necessarily cotton to the idea of finding out who done it. This was after all, the Knights of Columbus. And what better organization than the Knights when it came to being insured against anything that could possibly cause them harm or worry or the need to do much more than clean up the leftover mess and go on from there.

You see, the Knights were founded by a Catholic priest at a time when Catholics and immigrants, especially Catholic immigrants, were prone to suffer all kinds of indignities. And the worst of these was the inability to secure the kinds of insurance against the kinds of loss that labor unions, fraternal orders, and other non-Catholic, and sometimes anti-Catholic, social groups provided their members. Forget about help—are you kidding?—from the government. This was 1882. So suffice it to say that by 1971 the organization had grown to such a size worldwide that there was ample insurance to cover many kinds of setbacks. Even the kind of calamity that the Knights' temporary council office in Scottsdale, Arizona, encountered late one Saturday night when a car came rolling to a stop just outside the front entrance.

Inside the car were four unlikely thieves, guided to the site by the youngest among them: one Toothpick Charley. Well, that wasn't his real name, but, if you've ever seen the movie *Some Like It Hot*, you get the idea. Well, let's call him Tootpick instead—for no special reason.

Tootpick was in the company of three upperclassmen from high school, let's call them Curly, Larry, and Moe,¹ and excited to be in the same car and suffering, as were they, a common teenage malady. Let's call it boredom. It was Saturday night, for Chrissake! Sorry, sorry. I'm getting ahead of the story.

Let's back up a little. Driving around Scottsdale was getting nowhere. Someone, not sure who—whom?—complained about the driving, about the boredom, about the company he was keeping, about other things as well when Tootpick, forming a kind of grin on the side of his mouth and sucking through the exposed teeth as though he really did have a toothpick, had a brainstorm that he was sure would change everything.

"I know where we can get something to drink," he said.

Moe was not impressed. "I've got a bottle in the back if you're really thirsty," he snarled. "It's got a nipple and everything."

That sparked laughter among the four. No one, of course, wondered aloud why Moe would admit to having a baby's bottle in his car, especially not Tootpick.

"No, I mean booze," Tootpick grinned, exposing all his teeth this time without sucking, convinced he was having a good time.

His idea we could call historical. It touched a good deal on the history of the building they were about to enter.

Long before the thieves arrived that night, decades longer, even before the Knights moved in, the building had been known as Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church. As many as 14,000 adobe bricks, 50 pounds each, handmade and put in place by volunteers from the largely

Mexican-American community went into the making of the structure. A local artisan and member of the parish handcrafted the 15 stained glass panels that adorned the place.

Now, before anyone starts getting in a tizzy, it wasn't a church anymore. There's no good history in that. The church vacated the premises 15 years prior to Tootpick's idea. By the time our story begins, even catechism classes had moved away; boy scouts moved in; then K of C.

And Tootpick was right. There was now a stockpile of booze and a wet bar to boot, but the door to the building was inexplicably locked and . . . I'm joking. Of course, the door was locked and our thieves flummoxed. Larry then had an idea.

"Maybe we can get in from the roof," he proposed. His voice nearly cracked with the excitement of a possible solution.

"Maybe you can get in from the roof," Moe said, emphasizing 'you', being a glass half empty kind of guy as far as Larry was concerned. "Shit, I'm not going," he continued, "to climb up the side of a building and fall off a fucking roof."

"Maybe I can get on the fucking roof," Larry protested, emphasizing 'I', this time with a tad bit of bravado in his voice. Having already gotten out of the car, he quickly disappeared around the side of the building. The others listened to his footsteps until they also seemed to disappear. They watched for him, expecting him to come back around. When he didn't return after an ungodly long time, perhaps as much as a minute or two, they exchanged glances, the kind that say, "Should we just leave him and get the hell out of here!"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute, Moe," Curly at last said, looking around to make sure they weren't spotted by any officers of the law, who, of course, were busy across the street

in Scottsdale's only downtown police station handling the more pressing issues of late night skullduggery that always, they were perhaps too quick to assume, had a way of happening only where their patrols were scheduled to go. And across the street was obviously not on the schedule.

"I see him!" Curly laughed. "He's got the fucking door open. Look!"

Larry's head was peering sideways from behind the door, which he had just pushed part way open. Grinning and nodding with the giddiness of utter victory over an easy and none too deserving foe, he waved at the other three thieves, then quickly swung his hand and arm as if tugging at the air in a sign for them to get their asses out of the car and join him inside.

How Larry got there is the stuff of legend. Being the smallest of the four thieves, even smaller than Tootpick the Younger, and having acquired some acrobatic strength and contortionist skills, not to mention a little *je ne sais quoi* elan, from his experiences on the wrestling mat at school, he easily squirreled his way up the backside of the building and into the bell tower.

I forgot to mention the bell tower. Remember, the original purpose for this adobe was everything church. A bell tower had to be included and a bell to boot and, of course, someone to stand on the floor below and pull the rope that would ring the bell. That someone was long gone and so was the bell and its rope, but not the tower or the opening down to the floor for the rope.

Once Larry was inside the tower, he saw that opening, his opening. It was plugged by a flimsy sheet of wire mesh, presumably to keep pigeons and squirrels and maybe children

out, but certainly not Larry. He braced himself by grabbing hold of the tower's parapet and stomped on the mesh until it gave way and opened the passage he needed to descend to the floor. Easy. All he had to do after that was open the front door.

Soon they were all inside. They were laughing.

"Holy shit!" they all repeated, one after the other—or perhaps it was in unison. The details are none too clear for all the amazement they were experiencing in having reached this level of Dante's Inferno.

They wisely left the lights off. Truth be told, they hadn't yet found the light switch. Still, there was no point in needlessly attracting attention from across the street. The street lights and flood lights attached to the outside and to nearby buildings shone through the stained glass and illuminated the room enough to see in the darkness. The thieves were standing in what had been the nave of the church. Although it didn't strike them as terribly ironic—in fact, it didn't strike them at all—they now comprised the entire congregation. The bare floor still showed the marks where the pews, now long gone, had been. Where there had been a chancel and altar now stood the bar, behind which were shelves meticulously and neatly arranged with various sizes and shapes of glasses obviously in place to accommodate multiple kinds and combinations from the assortment of whiskey, vodka, bourbon, wine, and even liqueur bottles somewhat incoherently bunched on the counter behind the bar.

Their eyes bulged in that general direction. Uncharacteristically timid, Moe moved cautiously to a nearly full bottle of Jim Beam. Removing the top, he pressed the spout to his lips and sampled.

"Yeah, it's the real thing," he grinned and passed the bottle to Curly.

Curly concurred and soon all four had had a taste and then another and another as the bottle continued to make the rounds. But whether from a sense of decorum or proper etiquette or as novitiates to a shrine, something took hold of the four thieves, and, the rounds the bottle was making began to slow as they began to gravitate in perpendicular fashion to the wall adjacent to the bar. There the accoutrements of K of C ritual were carefully laid out in an enclosed and, as it would turn out, unlocked cabinet. Behind its glass doors, the four spied several swords and baldrics, sashes and badges and other sorts of bling dangling from hooks. On hangers bunched together were black capes alternately striped by a glint of the red or yellow or purple inner linings. On a shelf above, also visible through the glass, they could see an array of white and yellow and purple panache-adorned black hats shaped like oversized feathery tacos.

Quickly, the now near-empty bottle was set aside as awe gave way to an uninhibited stupor and swords were snatched from their perches. Moe and Tootpick brandished theirs in wild and clumsy attempts to strike at one another's blades as they choreographed as quietly as possible, we can only presume, a deadly skirmish between two corsairs. For his part, Larry grabbed a taco hat and pulled it like a sock onto his head, turning it until the front and back jutted sideways just above his ears. He then snatched a sword, a large golden medallion, and a cape that he turned inside out so it punctuated the red. Curly rested the point of his sword on the floor while he rolled the hilt in his hands, twirling the blade and producing a faint strobing of light on his legs and across the room.

Unsatisfied with the meager results, he let go and winced at the sight and the sound of the sword slamming onto the floor.

Everyone froze and listened. Nothing. The street outside, particularly the police station across the street, was still quiet.

“Fucking A,” Moe laughed, breaking the silence. “Nobody even fucking heard that.”

In his best swashbuckling persona, he lurched toward the bar and, as the other three would swear if ever asked to do so, he flew through the air and was soon standing above them flailing the sword menacingly and none too carefully. With a giddy cry of delight, he spun around and began swiping at the shelves, smashing with every stroke one, then two, then nearly all the glasses. The floor behind the bar, the counter, even the bar itself and the shelves were soon strewn with the resulting shards and fragments.

Moe’s delight was tempered slightly, when, suddenly sober, Curly, grinding the words through clenched teeth, snapped, “You stupid sack of shit, ‘oe!” The ‘M’ was lost in the transmission.

“Somebody’s gonna fucking hear that,” Curly nonetheless continued in his protest. “Let’s grab some more booze and get the hell out of here.”

At the same time, Larry, to Moe’s bull in a china shop, prancing lightly like the toreador with sword and cape, swooshed and sashayed himself over to a door marked ‘STOREROOM’. Opening it, he noticed stacks of cardboard boxes sporting labels similar to the ones on the bottles by the bar.

“Whoa!” he involuntarily shouted. “The mother lode. Guys, you gotta see this.”

Moe hopped down to the floor and, stumbling just a little, weaved his way alongside Curly and Tootpick to the door where Larry stood.

“Fucking A,” he said again, putting the bottle, which magically had replaced the sword in his hand, to his lips. “Let’s do it.”

“Yeah,” agreed Tootpick. “Yeah. What?” he added, not exactly sure what he was agreeing to.

“Jees-us,” Curly laughed, having recovered sufficiently from Moe’s exuberance. “How the fuck many cases do these guys need?”

“Let’s do it,” Moe persisted.

Larry turned to the others and laughed, too. “Yeah, we gotta get some of this. This is way too much.”

Curly pulled a case from the stack and motioned with his head that the others should do likewise, which Larry and Tootpick did. Moe had ambled his way back to the bar and with sword magically back in his hand swept his way through the broken glass to another bottle of Jim Beam.

“Moe,” Curly called to him, this time with the ‘M’ firmly in place, “Let’s go. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Moe dropped the sword, magically noiselessly, and, cradling the Jim Beam in his arms, followed Curly and Tootpick outside to the car. Larry had already lugged his case outside to the trunk and was busy tearing off a flap of cardboard from the box. He then quickly rushed back to the others, who were filing out with their loads.

“Don’t shut the door,” Larry insisted.

“We should just get the fuck out of here, Larry.” Curly’s excitement for the plunder and urgency for a speedy departure resonated in his voice.

“Shit yeah.” Larry waved the cardboard at them. “This will keep the door unlocked if we come back. I don’t wanna have to climb the tower again.”

Curly and Tootpick laughed. Moe was smiling that Cheshire smile of his, holding his bottle dearly, lovingly, but not necessarily holding his liquor as well.

Larry slapped the piece of cardboard over the door latch while carefully and slowly closing the door. He then pulled on it gently, testing whether it would stay put. It did. He tugged at the door; it opened, so he secured the cardboard once more and slid the door back in place, shut up tight.

In a moment he was in the car with the others. They all, with the exception of Moe, looked across the street at the police station. Still quiet. No one stirring. Curly, Larry, and Tootpick simultaneously nodded, laughed, and, with a passing glance at Moe, who was comfortably nestled in the back seat, still cradling his bottle and glowing in self-satisfaction, acknowledged their mutual sense of accomplishment and job well done with knowing looks.

After bandying about the failure to have a concrete plan—they indeed needed a plan for getting the booze out of the car and into a safe haven. Driving around the streets late at night was neither safe, nor a plan, and not even very smart. That’s what they all said, except Moe. Curly had an idea. This is where Peggy Sue¹ enters the picture.

They headed for Peggy Sue’s home. Curly knew that her parents were away for a few days and argued vehemently—well, that’s the wrong way to put it. He was undeterred in his confidence that she could easily facilitate the storage of their booty, at least through the weekend, and he was willing to drop everyone off right here and now who disagreed, including

Moe.

Peggy Sue is perhaps misnamed. She should probably be a Sawnee Peterson. Biker Mama without the bike and without the Mama. She could be dark or funny. Most times she was funny being dark. She was not to be messed with, but she was okay if you tried, as long as you knew she was going to mess with you. Her hair was long, blonde and wavy. And she could be sexy. She even aspired to be a dancer, dreamed of scantily clad gigs in Vegas and late-night trysts with rock stars, even Elvis, so long as they knew—yes, she was only messing with them. Peggy Sue excelled at typing and calculus and knew that, even though she could have been better for Joe Namath on the back of his bike in his “CC” movie, her crystal ball was telling her to settle for riding off in the style of Janet Yellen with Rogers Hornsby.

“Yeah, yeah,” she shrugged.

She’d passed around at school that her parents were out of town and she and her younger sister were going to “part-EE.” She said it with such ribald enthusiasm. Curly and Moe had been there earlier that night when the two sisters were popping popcorn and getting ready to watch “The Mary Tyler Moore Show.”

“Maybe later,” Moe suggested and they were gone.

“Yeah, yeah,” Peggy Sue had said without even looking over her shoulder.

Having seen the car pull into the driveway at such a late hour—well, Peggy Sue was already outside by the time they doused the lights. She crouched over, hands on her knees, peering in at the four thieves. Curly opened the door and started to climb out.

“Fucking A.” This time she said it. Well, she thought it; she really only laughed. “What’re you guys doing?”

“You wouldn’t friggin’ believe it.” Curly thought it best to clean up his language.

“Fucking right,” Moe added, the first words he’d spoken since leaving K of C. He was still lovingly cradling the bottle in his arms.

By this time all four were standing in the yard with Peggy Sue and her younger sister, who had come out to join the party. Everyone was laughing and the thieves were like puppies climbing over one another vying to tell the story of that evening’s adventure. Peggy Sue sensed there was more than a story here, and finally waved her hands in the air in the universal language of “break off and try again, it’s not working right now.” She was leery of attracting the attention of the neighbors and suggested they all go inside.

Eventually, once in the house and everyone had flopped in a chair or on the couch, the story was told and the reason for the visit. Peggy Sue was game, her sister, too. Her parents wouldn’t be home until Monday or Tuesday and they could hide the stash in plain sight until then.

Not a problem, the thieves insisted. They’d have everything out of here before her parents returned. They were confident they’d find a better hiding place.

This is fun, and everyone is so cute, Peggy Sue was thinking.

The following night, it was at last agreed, would be a repeat.

The car rolled to a stop outside the K of C. The police station all quiet. The cardboard still there. The four thieves inside like lightning. They laughed at the mess they’d made.

Moe grabbed another bottle for himself. It didn’t matter what it was. More bling for Larry. Curly hightailed it to the storeroom. No messing around. Tootpick, too. Cases to the car. Two trips this time everybody. Done. What else? How ‘bout we leave the cardboard in the door? Larry chuckled. Naaaa . . .

They did eventually get everything out of Peggy Sue’s garage—just barely. It took two cars. For the next few weeks at dances and basketball games, out of the trunks of those two cars, Curly and Moe and Larry—Tootpick didn’t have the patience or pluck for business—sold the contents of their booty to anyone under 18 for \$5 a bottle. And these weren’t your average run-of-the-mill bottles. These were nearly half gallons of the stuff. In all the annals of youthful entrepreneurship, never was there a better bargain for both buyer and seller, or so we’re told.

Nor was anyone ever the wiser—although we’re not sure what that means. A week after the break-in, Curly stopped at Shemp’s house to borrow a physics book or return one or to see whether he had any pot. The details are a bit fuzzy. As they stood in the kitchen clarifying exactly why Curly was there, Shemp’s dad happened in.

“What’s your take on the criminal element in Scottsdale?” He laughed that deep barrel laugh of his. Shemp’s dad was more like Santa Claus than anyone else, rotund and jovial, and he loved a playful tease with Shemp’s pals. This particular evening he was even done up in black and red regalia. Curly’s impulse was to run. He froze instead. He had not known this Santa Claus was the Deputy Grand Knight, but recognized immediately that the outfit matched perfectly

some of the regalia on display from the other night.

“What?” he nervously replied.

“Thieves broke into the Knights and stole some supplies. They made a mess of the place,” Shemp’s dad was still laughing. “Gonna get ‘em,” he playfully added twisting his sword in Curly’s general direction.

Shemp and Curly both managed to laugh, and Shemp’s dad passed on through the room, bumping Curly’s shoulder with his fist as he left.

Curly was laughing almost hysterically by then. Shemp knew better.

“I thought you’d like that.” He needled Curly.

“Fucking A!” Curly at last gasped.

NOTES:

¹ If you don’t already know the real names or haven’t already guessed them, then perhaps it’s best you don’t know.