

THE BATS DIE OLD

by

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Two aging criminals have concocted a plan to retire together, in style, if they can just pull off one last job before they're separated by a well-meaning daughter.

It's never easy admitting you have a problem. So, I don't. I always choose the next logical approach, which, in this case, was to hustle and deceive. Both came easy to me. Always had.

"Hey, Midge," I whispered, tapping my cards on the table. Beneath a veil of cinnamon-colored bangs, my oldest friend's eyes fluttered, then opened.

"What?" she said, voice low.

"What about him?" I whispered, flicking my eyes toward the group of people streaming through the lobby. It was 5 o'clock. Pick up time at the day care.

Midge considered him and passed me a card. I flipped it over. Jack of spades. I laid my cards face down on the table and stood.

"Oh, excuse me!" I said, falling into the stranger in the expensive, well-tailored suit. His body was firm and reassuring. He moved his hands gently to my elbows.

"No bother," he smiled. "Are you okay?"

His eyes were the color of the sky just before a downpour. I cleared my throat and smoothed my dress.

"Better, now. Thank you."

"Have a nice day," he said, moving away, back into the crowd.

I took my seat and fanned out the cards. Midge nudged my leg beneath the table and I met her gaze. Neither of us smiled. This wasn't about that, though it had been, at one point, long ago. This was about survival.

We went on like that in the afternoons, between 4:30 and 5:15, until the flow of caregivers picking up their aging relatives trickled and ceased, and Midge's handbag was overflowing with watches, bracelets, rings, wallets, and cash.

It took patience. The kind you develop over a lifetime. There was a danger in the monotony of it, but what choice did we have? Time was running out.

We waited until bedtime to pour over our take. In the small room we shared in the elder day care facility's long-term resident hall, we slipped on white cotton gloves. Midge moved from one item to the next, appraising.

"When's your daughter coming?" I asked, tilting a gold watch against the light. Counterfeit. I tossed it into a cardboard box.

"What's tomorrow?" Midge asked, her face enlarged behind an oversized magnifying glass. "Del, honey, does this say PLT 999?"

I took the ring and examined its stamp. "Tomorrow's Tuesday."

"The date. What's the date?"

I put down the ring. "950."

"What kind of date is that?" Midge looked confused.

"The ring. It's *platinum*. 950's fine," I said. Midge took the ring and worked it into a blue velvet box. She placed the box into a metal case.

"So, when will she be here?"

"Who?" Midge opened a billfold, extracted the bank notes, flipped out the plastic cards into a neat pile, and discarded the rest into the cardboard box. The whole series of motions took seconds.

"Your daughter, you old bat."

"Oh," Midge paused, a pair of gold cufflinks in her hands. "What's tomorrow?" Her blank face slowly shifted, changed, until a mischievous smile appeared.

We went on like this for an hour, sorting and examining, keeping and discarding, until the metal case and cardboard box were full and it was dark outside. A nurse popped their head in to say goodnight. If anyone ever wondered about what we did, stashed away in our room, alone, they never asked.

After the last of the staff had gone for the night, it was safe to cart the cardboard box to the lobby. I lifted a permanent marker from the front desk and wrote “Lost and Found” on the box.

In the morning, we went to the lobby café and sipped cappuccinos so we could watch people inquire about their missing items at the front desk. The clerk would shrug and present the “Lost and Found” box. Sometimes, this went on all morning, but if anyone ever suspected us, they never said.

“Hi, girls!” A tremulous voice echoed. A middle aged woman dressed in grays and browns lumbered toward us. She came up behind Midge and planted a dry kiss on her cheek before pulling over a chair and taking her place between us.

“And who are you?” Midge’s face tightened.

“Piper,” the woman said, the smile fading from her face. She placed a hand on Midge’s arm, her face creased with what looked like concern.

“Who?” Midge’s eyes narrowed and widened. She frowned at me, her thin eyebrows drawing together.

“This is Piper, you old bat.” Midge’s face remained blank. The woman turned to me. It was like seeing Midge thirty years ago. She’d been beautiful, even then. When some women of a similar age had begun to wear thin, Midge was hitting her stride. “Your *daughter*.”

“Oh, no,” Midge smiled. “That’s not possible. I don’t have a daughter.”

“Has she been like this long?”

“Just having an off-day, dear.” I sipped my coffee. “We all have them.”

“Right, well, all the more reason, I suppose. Listen, I’ve just been speaking to the manager about mom’s transfer—”

The transfer. The reason for our recent return to a life of crime. Though, in order to be considered a “return,” I suppose we would’ve had to have stopped, at some point.

She turned to Midge, and raised her voice, as if it were all just a matter of volume. “Just a few more days.”

“Wonderful.” I bit my lip.

“It’s a memory care facility in Montana. You’ll have round the clock care.” She fished out a brochure from her jacket and unfolded it. “I never would have known about it, but the agency sent over these examples, for a project, for a competitor. They want me to write the copy—”

“I see.”

“They’re top-notch, Delores. Five stars, all the way. Nothing held back. Gourmet food. On-site doctor. Activities. Fresh air.”

What did she want, a gold star?

“Like I said, I never would have known if it weren’t for the agency.” Her attention remained on the wrinkled brochure which laid between us, untouched. “You can visit, of course.”

It was only 20 hours by bus, but, yes, I could visit the woman I’d loved for more than thirty years.

I felt sick after Piper's perfunctory visit, but there were things to do, phone calls to make, appointments to keep. I locked the metal case and kissed Midge's forehead. Gone were the days of walking through a cloud of L'Interdit to kiss her Revlon-rouged lips. She smelled now of persimmons, but her lips were just as soft.

George licked his lips when he saw something he wanted. He'd tap the table with his thumb when he saw something he had to have. If he couldn't be bothered, he'd tell you. When I opened the metal case and spun it around to him, he did all three.

"Impressive," he grinned. "Even for you."

"Turns out, no one suspects little old ladies."

"It's going to take a while to move."

"So, you'll front some," I said over my shoulder. I busied myself making an Aperol spritz.

"I don't know—"

"Seeing as how I never asked you for alimony, it's the least you can do."

"No, the least I can do is tell you how crazy you are. Taking Margaret out of the country—"

"I'll take 25G now," I said, sipping my drink, bubbles tickling my nose. "You'll forward the rest."

George sat back in his chair and fiddled with his goatee. His eyes moved from item to item. They lingered a beat too long on a watch which lay half-in, half-out of a green velvet bag. I sat at the table and picked it up.

“You know,” I began, feeling the cold metal in my hand. “Patek Philippe were the first to create a Swiss wristwatch. Designed for royalty, but it was a bit...” I sucked on my lip and exhaled. “Gaudy. This, however,” I said, framing the watch in my cupped hand. “*This* is not that.” I paused for effect. “*This* is the world time model. Self-winding. Look at that perfect cloisonné center. Platinum casing. Sells for—”

“Quite a hefty sum.”

“You do this for me, George, this one, last time,” I held out the Patek Philippe. “This is yours.”

“What’s the catch?”

“No catch. A parting gift, for your years of service.” We smiled at our old joke. George licked his lips and drummed his thumb.

“Oh, go on, you,” I jiggled the watch in the air, grinning.

“Gentle!” He said, taking it from me. “It’s a work of art.”

“How long do you think it’ll take?”

George fastened the watch’s clasp and extended his arm. “Oh, that’s lovely.”

“George?”

“Need it piecemeal or can you manage until it’s done?”

“Whatever draws the least scrutiny.” I put on my jacket. “Use the normal channels. Pad their fees, if need be, but keep everyone happy.” I took one last look at the dingy back office where we’d spent innumerable afternoons. We met one another’s gaze and nodded. We’d not see each other again.

I picked up the money at the front of the restaurant. The hostess handed me a takeaway container and placed a fortune cookie on top. I hurried back to Midge and found her at the café, in our usual spot, several coffee mugs spread across the table before her.

“Hello, darling,” I bent to kiss her cheek. “Thirsty?”

“Oh, good, you’re back,” she said, sliding her hand up my arm. “How’d things go with George?”

“All’s well.” I took up a half-full mug and finished the dregs. “We leave in an hour.”

“Oh, good. I did the packing.”

“What a sweetheart you are.”

“Have you called us a cab?”

“Let me worry—”

“That’s them,” said a voice from across the lobby. I tensed and looked up, as did everyone else. An angry man’s voice had occasion to do that to a crowd. “Right there. I’d recognize them anywhere!” I looked to my left, to my right, but, of course he was talking about us.

“What’s all the ruckus?” Midge asked. I put my arm around her shoulders and pointed her attention to a collection of framed Georgia O’Keefe lithographs.

“Aren’t they lovely?” I asked, peeking over her shoulder toward the lobby where the man had pushed past the manager and was storming toward us.

“Her!” He shouted, pointing down at me. “I’d know her anywhere. She must’ve lifted my watch yesterday when I was on my way to pick up Mother.”

“Sir,” the manager said, out of breath. “Please, lower your voice. You’re creating a scene.”

“Me?” He said, shrugging off the manager’s hand. “Surely this isn’t the first thing to go missing around here. You must have suspected. Or are you in on it? Dear God, you *must* be. Why I oughta have the three of you arrested.”

“Ms. Goldstein,” I said, laying a hand across my chest, feigning shock. “What’s the meaning of this? You know loud noises upset Midge’s condition.”

“Forgive us, Mrs. Sanchez. This is Mr. Loubechek.” The manager pushed damp hair from her forehead and straightened her blazer. Her gold nametag was askew. “He seems to have misplaced his watch—”

“For the love of...” Loubechek sighed, his face red. “It’s not a watch. It’s a Patek Philippe. It belonged to my late father. Why, it’s priceless. And she stole it!” He shook his finger in my face.

I laughed (because that’s the only thing you could do with a man like Loubechek) and studied Midge’s face. Her eyes were soft, unfocused.

“Well?” He asked, giving my shoulder a shove.

“Excuse me,” I scoffed. “Control him, Ms. Goldstein, or I will have the authorities here on account of elder abuse.”

“Now, please, there’s no need to get the authorities involved. I’m sure there’s been a simple mix-up,” the manager said.

“She did it. I am *telling* you.” Loubechek put his hands on his hips. “Search her room, goddammit.”

“That would be highly inappropriate. The residents of the Roosevelt Center have gone through a very rigorous process—”

“Search her!”

And indeed, I relented to a search. Not only of my person, but of our room. I would not, however, consent to anyone—man or woman—touching my Midge. Thankfully, it seemed to all involved, that doing so, given her condition, would have been inappropriate.

Thirty minutes later, finding no sign of his precious Patek Philippe, Mr. Loubechek was inclined to offer an apology.

“Just words,” I said, shaking my head. “You’ve upset our Midge, embarrassed us in front of friends and neighbors. And, if that wasn’t enough, you’ve made us late for dinner.”

“Please, allow me to pay for your cab,” he said, fishing out his wallet. He even held the car door for us. Pity. A pickpocket needs but a moment, a fleeting distraction. I stashed the remainder of his cash in my bra.

As we sped toward the train depot, I slipped my hand into Midge’s jacket, feeling around.

“What are you doing, darling?” She said, eyes twinkling. She seemed to be back from wherever her mind had taken her. “The driver will see us.”

In the hidden panel of Midge’s coat, I felt the hard edges of a brick of cash, then another, and more. The money was safe and, by extension, so were we. I kissed Midge and pulled her in for a cuddle. It started to rain. Light danced in puddles. Couples rushed from store to store. Night had fallen and we had slipped away, at long last.

“Do you remember what you said, the night we met?”

“Is that your hand in my pocket or are you trying to rob me?” Midge giggled. I swatted her playfully and nuzzled my cheek against her forehead.

“You said ‘only the good die young.’ Remember?”

“How horribly morose. Was I drunk?”

“Possibly,” I laughed. “And do you remember what I said?”

Midge looked up at me and smiled. “I do.”

“So tell me, you old bat.”

“You said, ‘if the good die young, what does that say about the rest of us?’”

I pulled her closer. “You deserve some sun. Did you pack our bathing suits? No matter. We’ll streak. Why, we’ll run right out into the Gulf of Mexico—”

“No one wants to see that,” she chuckled.

I pressed the fortune cookie into her hand and the cab filled with cheerful crinkling as she worked the wrapper. I munched on the cookie while she twisted the fortune in the light. A look of surprise decorated her face.

“1.8 million?” she whispered.

“The number of reasons I love you. And,” I grinned. “Our retirement fund.”

“We’re really done? No more stealing?”

It was easier not to answer. Instead, I chose the next logical approach. I kissed her.