

Peter Calafiura

The Shaker Job 1977

THE PERFECT JOB

“It’s the perfect job.”

“I don’t know man...”

“Why not?”

The silence hung in the air like the space between needle drop pops of vinyl as it turns, a slow thirty-three rotations per minute.

“We’re not burglars, man!”

That much was true. Sure, we agreed on a few things. We loved Dirty Harry, though who knew which side we’d be on; every Al Pacino movie that came out was great; and, Mona Scott, the sexy Channel 3 newscaster was the bomb of the bombshells. In our minds we were tough guys, but we weren’t burglars. Shit, we didn’t even dump our empties in some wayward spot. Hell no, we threw them in the garbage where they belonged!

Summer of 1977 in Cleveland Ohio, and things were amiss. The lovely Mona Scott told us all about it on the 11 o’clock news. “Bomb City, USA” they called it. Danny Greene and his Celtic Club blew up, you know, the ‘good mafia’- the Italians. And back and forth they went.

Boom, gotcha.

Boom, gotcha.

Boom.

Rodin’s “The Thinker” had already met its fate earlier in the dark decade and now stood as a reminder of Cleveland in the ‘70’s. Yea that’s right- don’t fix it, just let it sit there for years on end so we all remember when Cleveland was Bomb City. Sheesh. The Indians had already bombed out by mid-summer even though the team shoulda stood tall with the likes of Ray Fosse, Andre Thornton, Buddy Bell, and of course, Dennis Eckersley. The crazy Eck, our star pitcher with a 14-13 season, would get traded to Boston the next year and chalk up a 20-win season. By that time even The Ghoul- the goateed, half- sunglass wearing madman- had stopped blowing up his rubber side-kick Mr. Froggy on channel 61 every Friday night. All revved up and no place to go.

“Look, it’s the perfect job- no one gets hurt. And what can the owners do? They can’t go the police and complain! Besides, I know all the back alleys...” it started to sound like a plan from me, more than a plea. “Tell you what- work with me next week and you can scope it out.” Not only would this

be a chance to put more eyes on the heist, it would help Seda grab some quick cash, and maybe pay me back the \$40 he owed me for last month's Springsteen tickets.

MRS. (RUTH) COHEN

"This rose is in the wrong place!"

On my knees, in the dirt, my eyes darted up to her, "I'm sure that's where you showed me, Mrs. Cohen."

"Come here- come here" she wagged her wiry, wrinkled finger at me, and pointed to the spot, shaking. Her garden boots sunk in the soil from her 98 pounds, soles disappearing from sight. "Right here." She pointed with great effort. I thought she might throw out her ancient elbow as it snapped back. "Right here!"

"But it is right there." I sensed this wasn't what she wanted to hear. I didn't get it. Show me a 16 year old that would have understood, and I'd have shown you a boot licking kid that didn't know the difference between The Beatles and Three Dog Night.

"Dig this rose up now. And move it exactly one inch in that direction." I saw that she had entered into her gardening gloves as she pointed an inch towards the garage. "Do you understand?"

"Yes ma'am". There really was no excuse for my shitty gardening skills. Mrs. Cohen certainly had shown patience with me, as she tried remaking me in Jack's mold. Jack was my older guy friend- a friend of the family really- moving on to a better summer job, the perks of being a college guy. But set me up he did- this was a great gig. Twenty bucks for a regular 2-hour job maintaining some old Jewish lady's sweet Shaker Heights cottage, where he had meticulously planted and maintained beds of hardy lily buds and daylilies and mulch and ivy and of course, those damn roses. Truth be told, I always liked gardening. Both my grandfathers had gardens, at least what an old Italian would call a garden: 2 types of tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, basically anything you can eat. Not Mrs. Cohen- she had a flower garden and bushes and beds and those beautiful redcedars and hawthorns of Shaker Heights. No edibles here, just beauty for beauty's sake. The rich really do live differently and some say better, but to me there is nothing finer than chomping a ripe tomato straight off the vine.

Static crackled Kid Leo through my little transistor tuned to, of course, WMMS and the opening chords to Born To Run blasted through the airwaves like a lightning strike- time to go! End of day! End of week! Quitting time! I kick started and revved my Honda CB 100 to life, the powerful little single cylinder jumping quicker than Duane Kuiper turning two.

THE STAKEOUT

It was quite easy convincing Mrs. Cohen to hire Seda for the day. It was her idea to construct a fence between her garage and the neighbor's. Yes, ma'am, that's only way to keep those damn kids from running between the garages at night. Otherwise, they just won't stop. Yes, ma'am. Now it was just a

matter of how. People think when you've been accepted to architecture school, that you should know such things. Truth is, I had no better idea of how to install a fence from my schoolwork than I did to build a rocket ship. But I can figure most things out, at least that's what I believed at 16. So we grabbed a ladder, stakes, poles, and fencing and went to work it out.

"Climb the ladder, and look over there, 2 garages away" I directed Seda, as my eyes automatically shifted around to see if anyone was listening. Guilty already.

Seda wasn't really a 'ladder climbing' kind of guy so I wasn't sure this was going to work. But I soon heard "Holy shit!" as he looked down from the highest rung, head just above roof line. "That is some lush greenery! More than we could ever smoke." He climbed down: "Yea, let's do it."

And so we built the fence. A Beautiful New Fence. Stop those damn kids.

THE PLAN

"Do you know what it's like
All revved up with no place to go"

Meatloaf

"Frank's got the best car. Besides, we don't want the Torino dying on us as we get away" Seda explained as we popped the top of a cold Stroh's at the end of the long day. Well, long day for Seda, typical day for me. And he was right, his Gran Torino's best attribute, other than its two-tone olive paint job, was the killer 6 x 9 coaxial speakers in the rear dash.

Frank was the logical choice and would buy in. And Seda was right, my brother did have the best car, which wasn't saying much. But Frank liked the action, and once he heard about the rooftop full of weed, he was in. Now for a plan.

"Look, we don't need some big plan to pull this off" Seda offered: "we just need to go by there any late night, climb that Beautiful New Fence, and jump over a couple roofs. Grab the planters, and poof- we're outta there."

He's right, I did have a tendency to overthink things. Probably hurt me less in baseball, than, say, golf, but golf's a game that's easy to overthink and that'll just kill your game. But baseball? With baseball you plan and react. But this was a crime, burglary to be exact, so maybe a little more planning and less reacting would be a good idea. Like for starters, where would Frank pull the car and which way is the getaway? I mean, even the beautiful and brilliant Mona Scott had a script every night. So I put together the plan- a way-too half-assed plan but it was a plan nonetheless. Frank would drive, full tank of gas, and we'd make sure the hatch was empty before we go. Smoke no weed beforehand. Leave 2AM Saturday night (it would be a lot easier explaining a late night to the parents when it's a weekend). Take Miles over to Lee Road, and snake in from there to Fenway. Frank will drive through the back alley. We'd climb the Beautiful New Fence onto Mrs. Cohen's roof, and jump over the neighbor roofs to collect our duly owed bounty. I mean, it was just sitting there, right?

THE JOB

“I think we should smoke this fatty” Frank said as he lit and pulled on a joint all in one motion.

“No, no, no, man” the first words out of my mouth “we gotta be on our game...”

“What better way to be on our game than to smoke a little weed before we rip off a little weed?” He chuckled and passed me the doobie and I hit it. Seda joined in, and we were on our way.

The red VW wagon had decent rear cargo space, we figured it could fit 8 plants in the back including the planters. The idea was that each of us could carry one under each arm, so that’s six. If we could somehow grab a couple more, we’d fill the back. I remembered to clear the wagon of Frank’s life- dirty work pants and shirt with his name tag, some tools for the car, and old speakers from his last car, just awaiting new wire and an install job. The good news was his car always started; the bad news was its top end was 70 mph. Didn’t matter, we weren’t going to be getting into a high-speed getaway. No, our mantra was “be cool”, so that’s what we’d do if the shit came down: Be Cool. Besides, it was a late summer Cleveland Saturday night- cool, just like us. Perfectly cool. A little stoned, but perfectly cool.

The little red wagon pattered down Lee Road catching every green light and things were looking up. Turning into the neighborhood of classic Shaker mansions, the huge cedars loomed over the street, forcing the street lights to cast long blackened shadows. Frank pulled the wagon into the dark alley, slow and deliberate.

“Right up ahead” I whispered and pointed; he pulled right up.

“No, no- we should back in so we can load and drive straight ahead” Seda whispered, and I nodded. Smart move. Frank maneuvered carefully around the aluminum trash cans, just missing them one by one. An alley cat scattered and snarled from her hideout, disturbed.

My left thumb depressed the latch of the cold metal door handle, it was go time. I looked over at Frank, then glanced back to Seda. Without a sound we all opened the doors at the same time, stepped out into the cool, quiet summer night. Holding the thumb handles and silently closing the car doors shut, my heart heaved again and again against my black Doors’ tee shirt, trying to break on through to the other side. Seda and Frank followed me to the Beautiful New Fence. We had built it out of chain link, with round metal post set in concrete footings at each garage, about three feet apart. Now the fence would serve as a ladder with perfect toe holds to get to the roof. My Pumas fit perfectly inside each chasm, and I shimmied to the top, hopping onto the roof. Piece of cake.

I turned and took in the sight of the reefer, sixteen potted plants of beautiful herb. Right there. For the taking. Within grasp. All revved up.

Seda was next. The darkness sat like a dry blanket upon the night, muffling the air. Frank helped Seda secure his first toe into the fencing, and he pushed off. Frank could easily climb the Beautiful New Fence, so he went last. A good athlete, he’d have no problem getting to the roof. But Seda? He needed a little help and I reached down for his hand as Frank helped from below. The fence shook and rattled, and I yanked Seda to the roof as he stumbled over the standing seam roof.

UP ON THE ROOF

The first bark broke the silence of the night. My eyes shot in direction of the mongrel, but it was pitch black. The startled hound then turned his bark into a long howl at Seda's rooftop dance like a jazzman's crying sax solo. Then another bitch, less certain, but no less loud, began her tirade and soon the neighborhood chorus took off and every dog between Coventry and Shaker Square was singing the praise of the Beautiful New Fence. Or rather, the fools that climbed it that cool August night in search of a flower, a flower so wonderful that the boys risked it all just to take it in.

I froze, assessing the volume and situation. Then quickly turned Seda's shoulders back to the fence. Go! C'mon! Let's get the hell out of here! Hearts in our throats, he slid down the Beautiful New Fence, his feet never entering the chain link's openings, straight to the ground. Frank was already in the wagon's driver seat, lit cigarette shaking between his fingers on one hand and fingernails between his teeth on the other, motor running and the doors unlocked. I turned and took one last look at the gorgeous plants sitting on the neighbor's roof, all proud and shiny in their clay pots, mocking me from afar.

"Let's go. Calm and slow" I suggested to Frank as the hounds filled the night air with their agitated refrain. Back alley lights began to flood the scene. Seda was in the back seat, firing up a dooby. There was nobody on the road at 4am and we began to giggle with relief as the tension released like a factory horn at end of the shift, even if we did come away empty handed. Or maybe it was the weed we smoked.

Now we just wanted to get out of there, back to Solon. With no one on the roads, we started to ease through the intersections. When we caught a long red light at Van Aken, we crept up closer and closer.

"Should we just go?" Frank leaned over the steering wheel of the little red getaway wagon

"Yea man, let's get out of here. Ain't nobody out at this hour" I suggested.

THE 4AM SATURDAY NIGHT GETAWAY

Frank's Audiovox pushed the limits of its volume as WMMS blasted Golden Earing:

No more speed, I'm almost there
Gotta keep cool, now gotta take care
Last car to pass, here I go
And the line of cars go down real slow, woah

Frank's neck reached and stretched forward, left then right. Peering. Longing. Everything thing was 4am still. No cars moving. Ears ringing with rock and roll and the patter of the wagon's little engine.

As we pulled into the intersection the interior of the car was lit up by flashing red lights.

"Oh shit". Frank sat back in his seat putting the wagon into park.

“Be Cool.”

“Fuck the cops.” Sure, Seda, of course.

There’s always silence before the storm, it’s true. I could hear the blood pumping into my ears.

“Late night, huh boys?” he let us stew for a moment too long. “License and registration.” Frank had rolled down the window before the cop even walked up, we and the car needed the fresh air. “And what are you boys doing out here at 4 am?” Frank handed the paperwork over with a shaking hand and a lit cigarette.

Blinded by the cop’s flashlight, the beam thrust into the front set, I raised my hand by instinct. Seems he wanted some action.

“Just trying to get home, officer.” Frank shielded his eyes, following our Be Cool mantra his own way.

The cop’s nostrils danced up and down as he snorted like the little piggy we all thought he was in the moment. “You boy’s been smoking something in there? Perhaps a little mary-gee-wanna?” he looked back at Seda, sprawled in the rear bench seat.

“Just a cigarette, sir. Marlboro Lights.” Frank held up his butt, almost to the filter now. Fingers shaking, smoke climbing.

“You boy’s been drinking, too?” The light jumping from my eyes to Seda and back again, finally settling on Frank’s license.

The quiet stretches are what wrecks your heart. That and the damn flash light.

“All right- outta the car!” Busted. “Place your hands on the roof and spread those legs”

I risked a glance back before exiting and saw Seda slyly slide a nickel bag between the seat and back, as he slid himself out of the car.

“Sir, we’re just driving...” Be cool, Frank.

“I’ll do the talking here!” He walked around the little red wagon, shining that damn flashlight back and forth in search of contraband. When he didn’t see what he was looking for, his anger turning into a rough pat down. Nothing.

He looked down at Frank’s license. “Calafiura? Any relation to Mr. Bill, the old bull with the grocery store on Lee Road, in Maple Heights?” Frank and my eyes met in unison over the hood of the red wagon. The slightest smirks invisible to the naked eye, but to each other a billboard.

“Why yes sir, he’s our grandfather- we’re brothers” Frank tipped his thumb back and forth towards me.

The flashlight’s beam- we really couldn’t see the cop’s face- danced from Frank’s face to mine.

“Damn fine man. Best sausage I’ve ever eaten. You Italian’s- you sure know how to eat. Here’s your things. Now get the hell out of here, and drive safe.”

“Yes sir” as we all shuffled in, held back smiles, and exhaled quietly.

The cool late summer air flowed through the open windows as we drove in silence along the rolling suburban roadway, each of us our long hair flowing in the winds of freedom. Another night out, another close call with the law and life and guilt. I should have been thinking of the close call, the police station, what story we would have told the police, our parents. But my mind drifted and all I could think about was how it would be told on the 11 o'clock news by the beautiful, sexy, talented Mona Scott. Lovely Mona.

All revved up with no place to go.

THE END