

Steal Away

Era: Early 1990s

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"It's terrible," Hector moaned to Jeff. "You can't imagine the devastating feeling I had when I pulled into my driveway and saw those policemen swarming all over the place."

The two of them were standing beside Jeff's drafting board, shooting the breeze. I'd just finished checking one of Jeff's drawings and was trying to return it. When the two of them ignored me, I took it as a compliment to my gracious personality. They knew they didn't have to cow-tow to me, I told myself, because I always treated them with respect, no matter how rotten they were.

"You probably felt just about as bad as I did the day Old Horn and a Half mutilated my ultra-light." Jeff pushed his glasses up his nose and sniffed.

I decided maybe these guys needed some perspective. "But not nearly as bad as I did. You know - the day I ripped my cashmere sweater down in the shop."

Jeff looked at me with raised eyebrows. "Lois, sweaters don't even begin to cut it when we're talking ultra-lights."

"Oh, that's okay, Jeff," Hector suggested. "Lois likes her sweaters and women don't understand these things. But you know? I think having your house robbed is even worse than losing an ultra-light."

"So, was your house cleaned out?" I asked hopefully, since I felt a little piqued for the sake of my cashmere sweater.

"Well, actually, the house wasn't broken into - but only because the alarm went off when the crooks took a crowbar to the door between the house and the garage. We have an attached garage. The alarm scared them away."

"Then what's your problem?" Jeff asked. "Replacing a door's no big deal."

"It wasn't just a door. Unfortunately, they hit the garage and the barn before they even tried the house. And the van was in the garage. They stole it."

"If the alarm hadn't gone off, they probably would've loaded stuff from the house into the van. Nobody would have seen them - holed up in your garage," Jeff suggested. "They could have cleaned the whole place out."

Hector nodded his head. "Yeh. I guess I should consider myself lucky. But before they tried to break into the house, one of them must have noticed the curtains in the barn and figured the barn was a house, too."

"Do you think so?" I asked. "I mean it's not normal for people to live in the same building as their cows, is it?"

"It's just because of the curtains," Jeff explained to me patiently.

"Maybe not just the curtains - because they ended up stealing stuff out of the barn... which actually upset Mildred more than anything they might've taken from the house."

"Like what?" Jeff asked.

"Well, like that wildlife portrait of Topsy - the one done by Bobby Bateman."

"You mean the one of the cow," Jeff laughed.

"Not THE COW. That's Mildred's favorite cow. And that's an expensive, original portrait done by a famous wild life artist. It cost us a fortune."

Jeff looked repentant. "Sorry, Hector. I didn't mean to make fun of Mildred. Say, you should tell Lois how come Mildred named the cow Topsy."

"How come Hector?"

"Well Mildred is into Trendy Bovines, she calls them - sort of designer cattle. You know. Like Mildred increased the amount of poly and mono-unsaturated fat in their milk by feeding them safflower seed. Then there's the steers. She feeds the steers a lot of canola oil because it increases the ratio of unsaturated to saturated fat in the meat. Everybody wants lean beef these days."

"Yeh, but tell her about Topsy," Jeff prodded.

"Mildred figures that Topsy is the leanest of them all. It's like that joke. What do you call a cow that has only two legs?" He leaned over on one leg and flailed about kicking the other leg in the air. "You know. You call it lean beef."

Jeff was waiting for a reaction from me, so I tried to give him my best by rolling my eyes into my forehead. In the end, I couldn't help laughing which pleased Hector.

"Is that all they took?" Jeff asked. "Just the painting?"

"No. They took the TV sets that Mildred set up for the cows and two of the milking machines. God only knows where they'll sell those."

"The milking machines, you mean?"

"So, just like that? They got away?" Jeff queried.

"Well, not quite 'just like that'. When the alarm went off, they took off in such a hurry they backed my van into the next door neighbor's car. He was high-tailing it past the door of the garage."

"You're kidding?" Jeff squeezed his nose to maneuver his glasses back into place.

"No. No. I'm not kidding. I guess the two vehicles really lambasted one another. My neighbor's car is totally written off but the van managed to hobble down the road, dragging the muffler and a few other things."

"Well, that's good," I suggested. "Sounds like your neighbor actually saw them."

"Well, yes and no. My neighbor said that there were two of them and they did a good job of shaking their fists and swearing at him but he couldn't really describe them."

"Was anybody hurt?" Jeff asked

"My neighbor's fine but he thinks one of them had a bleeding nose and the other guy's arm looked like maybe it was broken. Of course, my neighbor was more concerned about his hit and run than he was about my break-in. But he heard the alarm and told the police about it when they came. That's why a couple of RCMP were waiting for us when we got home."

"And you've got insurance?" I asked.

"Yeh, for sure..."

"Doesn't sound to me like the whole thing is so serious then. You're a lucky man. My cashmere sweater wasn't insured."

Hector frowned. "Lois, that wasn't even funny. How am I going to retire by the time I'm forty-five if you keep laughing when people rob me?"

"Buy shares in the stock market? I know a company that makes lean beef sandwiches."

"Have you started an advertising agency all of a sudden?" Hector asked.

"No." I smiled as sweetly as I could. "I just need to give Jeff his drawing so he can back-check it and send it down to the shop."

"I don't want the drawing," Jeff stated.

The following day, Hector arrived at work, looking like a tennis racket with a few broken strings.

"How goes it?" I asked him when we met at the coffee machine.

"Could be better, I guess."

"Any sign of your van?"

Jeff must have heard us from his board, because he came sauntering around the corner with his coffee cup in tow. "Yeh, any sign of your van?" he seconded.

"Actually, the police picked it up last night. They found it in the backyard of a guy who does body work on the QT. Even better, they say they've found one of the thieves."

"Great," I countered. "Where did they pick him up?"

"At the Foothill's hospital. He has a concussion."

"That must really make you feel a lot better."

"Nah that didn't make me feel better. He and his partner had already dumped the painting of Topsy - and the milk machines - probably the TVs too, because they weren't in the van." He lifted the corner of his lip in a lopsided grin. "But I'm determined I'm going to keep smiling - even if Mildred is impossible to live with. I'll tell you. And I've decided the insurance company is going to have to go the extra mile to compensate me for that painting and Mildred's foul temper."

"I thought it was Mildred's painting?"

"Compensate Mildred, I mean. You know what else? The police haven't laid any charges yet. Because he's got a concussion, they say. They say there's plenty of time when he's feeling better."

"Well, you can sort of see their point. I mean the guy does have a concussion."

"Yeh but they don't even have him under supervision. I went over to the hospital because I wanted to find out what that twit did with the painting of Topsy and I just walked straight into his room."

"So what did you find out?"

"Not much," Hector admitted. "He slammed me in the jaw and my neck is killing me today."

"What do you mean he slammed you in the jaw?" I asked. "How could he?"

"The nurses wouldn't believe me either. They figure he wasn't even conscious. Told me I probably walked into the corner of the cupboard in his room and didn't remember doing it."

"And you know what else?" Hector went on. "This isn't his first brush with the law. He was picked up a few years ago for stealing another van. That job wasn't any more successful than this one." Hector chortled obviously enjoying his own story.

"Apparently the last van he stole was a bread truck and when he drove away, he left the back door open. So the police just followed the trail of bread he left - right across town - and picked him up on the highway a half hour later."

"I hope this guy isn't into ultra-lights. He'd kill himself for sure."

"This has been the worst ordeal. And you should see Mildred. She is absolutely devastated by what her cows have been exposed to. She's driving me crazy - doing screw-ball things."

"Like what?"

"Like taking my TV out to the barn so the cows can watch it. She tried to tell me that I didn't need it nearly as much as her cows because I was only home in the evenings and they were bored ALL day."

"I'll bet you didn't let her get away with that," Jeff laughed.

"You're darn tootin' I didn't. I told her."

"What did you tell her?" Jeff prodded. He seemed to get a kick out of marital bliss by proxy.

"I just told her where it was at. You know. 'Little Dumplin', you wretched thing... How can I watch TV if you take my television out to the barn for the cows...?' ... that sort of thing."

"And what did she say?" Jeff was determined to hear it out.

"'Easy,' she says, 'you come out to the barn with me and the cows and watch TV out there. Maybe you'll work some of those kinks out - the ones you can never get rid of.'"

I had visions of carrot red hair bobbing up and down and blue shorts covering shapely legs as Hector imitated his wife shouting at him over a milk machine.

"What did she mean by kinks?" I asked.

"Oh, she figures I don't get enough exercise. You know? The walk to the barn would do me good? So you know what I did. I showed her a thing or two, I went out and watched TV in the barn - just like she told me too."

"That must have pleased her."

"She wasn't happy at all. She kept complaining about my boots. Said they were okay in the house but she didn't want them in her barn. And she didn't like the shows I was watching - said they weren't good for the cows."

"You can say that again," I told Hector. "They aren't good for people either."

"How can you argue with a woman?" Hector looked at Jeff. "I ask you, Jeff. No, on second thought, I tell you. Never get married."

"Yeh, that's fine for you to say. You don't have to cook every night."

"Don't knock having to cook. At least you can watch TV while you're doing it. One thing I'll tell you for sure. If I have to watch TV in the barn again tonight, I'm going to move the couch out there. Sitting in the hay just doesn't cut it."

"Hector, it sounds like you're moving into the barn."

"Not yet. I'm still sleeping in the house."

"And he will," Jeff explained, "as long as Mildred still sleeps in the house."



I made a point of visiting Hector at his board the following day.

"How's it going Hector?"

"Today I'm just livid."

"You've heard from the insurance company already and they're giving you a bad time?"

"Not the insurance company. It's the police."

Jeff noticed that we were engrossed in the continuing saga so he sauntered over, trying to look cool and uninterested by moving slowly.

"That crook," Hector continued, "the one with the concussion? His name is Ken Whittzel. He just up and walked out of the hospital. I asked the nurse on the desk and she said there was no problem. 'Absolutely no problem,' she says. 'Mr. Whittzel had a class to teach so we let him go. It's a night school class he's teaching - at City College.'"

"Wow," Jeff ogled. "I'm not even a crook. Maybe they'd let me teach a course one of these days - flying ultra-lights."

Hector's eyes were burning. "I had trouble swallowing that one," he continued. "So I said to the nurse, 'What do you mean he has a class to teach. He's not a teacher. He's a petty thief.' So she looks at me with those big baleful eyes of hers. 'Well, I did think it was a bit strange when

he told me that his course was called Welfare Fraud. And that he teaches every Monday and Friday on one of the city transit buses. But I believed him in the end because he explained to me that people don't have time to go out again in the evening so why should they be forced to lose all that valuable time while they're riding the bus."

Hector stood looking at the two of us waiting for our reaction. He'd dropped a bit of a bomb alright. "Is this for real," I asked. "I mean to teach people how to beat the system? Did you phone City College and ask them?"

"I did. The course does exist. It does take place on a city transit bus. The college says that the course is intended for Social Workers and other Public-Sector Employees. It's not intended to teach people how to beat the system."

He looked at me. "Close your mouth Lois. That's what they told me."

"So this Ken Whittzel still hasn't been arrested?" Jeff pursued.

"Obviously! Do you think I'd look this mad if he was?"

"Well, you would look that mad if the insurance company was giving you a bad time."

"I'm not worried about the insurance company. I've put in a claim that's so good I should turn a bit of a profit on the deal."

"Hector!" I said.

"What's the matter, Lois? I've had enough of this. I deserve anything I'm going to get out of the robbery. I'm putting in a claim for Jeff's ultra-light too. The wreck is still out in the field. I'll tell the story just like it happened. One of those thieves tried to take off in the ultra-light and Old Horn and a Half stomped the plane to pieces before it got off the ground."

"Yeh and how are you going to explain all the rust on the frame?" I queried as I staged a hasty retreat. "That thing's been sitting out in the field for six months now."

"Don't you worry, Lois," Hector reassured me. "I'll have all the explanations ready. Besides, they probably won't even come out to look at it."

"I don't think you should do this, Hector," Jeff suggested. "I've almost saved enough to buy a new one."

"Oh - I wasn't intending to give the money to you, Jeff so don't feel guilty." He draped his right arm across Jeff's left shoulder. "And just think. In another couple of years I'll be able to teach a course too. "Insurance Fraud" - how does that sound for a title? It'll be open to any insurance investigator that wants to take it. I wouldn't want to teach the average guy how to beat the system. We have enough crooks as it is."

Toward the end of the week, Hector was missing for two days. When he reappeared Monday morning, Jeff and I both watched him skulk past the coffee machine, then we followed him to his board.

"How's it going, Hector," Jeff asked, scrunching up his nose to get his glasses into a more comfortable position, stirring his coffee with the index finger of his left hand.

"I don't feel like talking about it," Hector responded.

"That mean the police still haven't arrested the guy?"

"As a matter of fact, they have. But it wasn't until late yesterday. That son of a wiener is a nephew of one of the big wigs in the police department."

"No kidding?" Jeff sort of asked.

Hector let out a big sigh and tried to slump into his chair. The chair was mounted on castors so it rolled. Hector lost his balance. He dropped his brief case and flailed at the air until finally the chair ran into his drafting board. "See. This whole thing is blowing way out of control." He growled, sat down on the top of his desk, said, "Oh what's the point. Here. Take a look."

He pulled a folded sheet of 8-1/2 x 11" paper out of his breast pocket and handed it to Jeff. I slid behind Jeff's shoulder so I could read it with him.

Subpoena was written in bold black letters across the top of the page, then something about section 247 of the criminal code and 'traps likely to cause bodily harm'.

"What does this mean, Hector? What's going on?" I asked.

"Just like it says. I have to go to court. I managed to get a lawyer on Friday and he phoned Ken Whittzel's lawyer. Apparently Whittzel not only had a concussion, he's also having back problems. He's walking around with one of those neck collars. Whittzel's lawyer is maintaining that by installing an alarm, and leaving a van in the garage, and building my garage so close to the street, I was setting a 'trap with the intent' of causing bodily harm to anyone who happened to rob my place."

"You've got to be kidding," I stated self-righteously. "They can't get away with that."

"Well, maybe they can't get away with it, but Whittzel's threatening to try. And I'll have to pay for a lawyer if nothing else."

Jeff was busy reading the subpoena. "But that's not the total of it from the looks of this," he stated. "He's also planning to request compensation."

"Yeh - according to my lawyer, compensation for time away from his night school teaching duties, loss of self-esteem, loss of confidence relating to his driving ability, extra costs for bandages, chiropractic fees - You name it. My lawyer said Whittzel the pritzel is asking for 20,000 bucks."

"Wow," said Jeff. "This could cost you a bundle. Do you think you can get the insurance company to pay this too?"

"I don't know but I'm sure going to try. I'm not interested in making a profit myself but I've sure got to look after Mildred's interests. Her cows are really suffering."

Five days later, Jeff sauntered into my office and dropped the first page of the City section of the Herald on my desk.

"Did you see this?" he asked.

"What?" I looked at the paper with dubious interest until a headline caught my eye:

INSURANCE COMPANY SUES FOR FRAUD, CALGARY-

Provincial Home Insurers have issued notice that they are suing Hector Bonniface of Rocky Mountain Municipal District and Ken Whittzel of Calgary for fraud relating to an incident in which Mr. Bonniface's home was robbed.

According to Mr. Bonniface the robbery was perpetrated by Mr. Whittzel. Mr. Whittzel agrees that he robbed the house and is suing Mr. Bonniface for damages resulting from his burglary of the Bonniface residence and barn.

A spokesman for Provincial maintains that the burglary did not actually take place but was part of a fraud planned by Mr. Whittzel and Mr. Bonniface with the intent of defrauding the insurance company.

The principal evidence presented by the insurance company relates to an ultra-light which supposedly crashed during the robbery, but had obviously lain in the field for some lengthy period of time.

Provincial maintains that the insurance company is being defrauded by agreement between the two men and that Mr. Whittzel's attempt to sue Mr. Bonniface is part of this joint fraud.

"Ooh." My air escaped in a long moan. "Is Hector here today?" I asked Jeff.

"Yeh, he's here. Actually, he's the one that told me to show this to you."

"I don't know whether to laugh or cry. I mean - is Hector okay?"

"Well Hector's self-esteem is still intact, so don't worry about him. He's just plain mad at the insurance company. He decided to take a page out of Whittzel's book. He's hired a lawyer and tells me he's suing the insurance company for a few things – like breach of contract, intimidation, defamatory libel, fabricating evidence - I think the fabricated evidence is supposed to be rust - he means they fabricated the rust on the plane. Also, he tells me there's something in the criminal code about interfering with saving a wrecked vessel – section 438 - I think that's what he called it. He figures he can sue the insurance company for interfering with the saving of a wrecked vessel."

"Oh!" I thought for at least three whole seconds. "Then he's okay?"

"Sure is."

"Got your cup?"

Companionably, we headed for the coffee machine.

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