

Approximately 2900 words

"Stickup: Not Just Another Name for an Air Freshener"

Doug

Doug stared out his office window, the window he'd worked nearly thirty years to earn in the cubicle world of computer engineering, but he saw nothing. His true gaze was focussed inward, on his wife, a woman he'd thought perfectly sane and reasonable up until twenty minutes previous. He was at a loss, and he was not accustomed to such. Unnerved, he called his old college roommate who was also his attorney on those rare occasions when he needed one.

He did away with the pleasantries and got right to the point. "I need your opinion. In a professional matter."

"Alright," Travis said. "What is it?"

"Could we meet?"

"Sure," Doug could hear the click as Travis checked the calendar on his phone. "How about next Thursday?"

"This can't wait. Can you meet for a drink after work?"

"Yeah. It'll be late, though. Is everything okay?"

"No," Doug said. "I don't think so."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

"Yeah. When we meet."

They met at a tavern on Clough, shook hands, then, Travis pulled Doug in for a quick man-hug. Doug wasn't sure what he felt about that. That was Travis, though, oblivious of other people's personal space. He was attentive to their speech, though, so Doug just blurted out, "It's Irene."

Travis looked down at the napkin that was waiting for his drink. "You know I don't do Family law."

"No, no, it's not that," Doug said. "God, I almost wish it were."

Travis waited as the barmaid set down his Jack Daniels. "What is it, then?"

"Let's get a booth," Doug said and picked up his beer and settled in.

"Okay. I'm listening."

"Before I say anything, I just want to clarify. You are acting as my attorney, correct?"

"Sure. If that's what you need."

"And anything I say is privileged?"

"Yes. Of course."

Doug took a deep breath and let it out. "Okay, then."

Irene

Irene turned on the evening news every night while she made dinner not because she wanted to see the news, but because Wheel of Fortune came on immediately after, and she liked guessing the puzzles as she cooked. It was one of the many little rituals that made up her life. That night was no different.

The anchorwoman was the usual one, square shouldered jacket and hair helmet. Meant to look like armor, Irene supposed. She couldn't think what else it could be.

"Customers at a local Chase Bank were surprised today when a woman held up the teller."

Irene glanced up at that news.

"She wasn't even wearing a mask!" Jason Aldritch of Batavia, said, with an incredulous look on his face. Irene smiled. As usual, the news people had interviewed the biggest doofus they could find. She appreciated the consistency.

"When questioned later as to her appearance, descriptions were sketchy. The bank camera captured this image. If you can identify this woman, please call--"

*Blah blah blah*, Irene thought, as she examined the still they'd grabbed from the low quality tape. It wasn't very good. Grainy and blurry, the camera had caught her in motion.

She smiled. She was safe.

She was making curry for dinner. Not real curry, diet curry. Low carb curry. It was a mindless recipe, so she could let her thoughts roam.

They roamed to the old saw, "Why do you rob banks?"  
"'Cause that's where the money is."

The truth was, for her, both that simple and much more complicated.

Actually, when the thought first occurred to her, it had been a joke of the variety of, who would notice a middle-aged woman robbing a bank? I can't even get a hostess to seat me at Cracker Barrel. Then, she'd paid attention to her own non-descriptness: mouse brown hair, five feet three inches tall, 135 pounds. Alright, 145. Grey eyes. No scars. No tattoos. She could be anyone. She was anyone.

And then, like in that Walter Mitty story, she let her mind wander, imagined herself actually doing it, going into the bank and handing the teller a note. It would be as simple as cashing a check. You just hand over a piece of paper and they hand you money in exchange. Easy peasy.

The next time she needed cash, she didn't go to the drive up ATM machine, as usual. She went inside. The bank was a lot like the library, where she worked part time. Quiet. Pleasant. Cool. It would be possible to wear a sweater in there year-round, she suspected, and she found this soothing, somehow. Like seasons did not exist inside. Time was whatever you thought it was. There was no exterior reality, just this place with its moderately thick carpeting, blocky furniture, bright lighting.

Over the weeks of autumn, she continued the game, for it had become one, and visited over a dozen banks, paying attention to the ambiance of each. How comfortable were the employees? How relaxed? How slack? It was weeks before she admitted she was casing the joints, and when she thought of it that way, she laughed in delight. Her! In a Jimmy Cagney movie! Who would believe it?

It was such fun, and she felt so lively about it that she couldn't keep it to herself. So, she told her book group. She said it like it was a joke, and they laughed. *Oh, Irene. You're so crazy.* That kind of thing. All except for Beth. Beth was the intense one. Always so serious. She read every word of every book. After they'd digested A Reliable Wife, which Irene had loved and Debbie hadn't got, Beth came up to her.

"I've thought all that stuff before, too, you know."

Irene was pretty sure she knew what Beth was talking about, but she liked to be certain, so she said, "Oh? What's that?"

"You know. The whole invisible woman thing. Being able to get away with stuff."

Now, Lisa had hosted this month, and she always served wine at book club. Cheap wine, so they wouldn't feel bad about drinking a lot. And Irene always had a few glasses, so she looked hard at Beth, to see if she'd also had too many.

"I'm not drunk," Beth said. *Mindreader*. "Wanna do a little research?"

"What kind of research?" Irene asked, and she had to admit, she felt a charge run through her, then. This moment was real, it was important. And she felt it, literally, in her bones.

That day, at book club, she'd realized she was not alone. That night, lying beside Doug, she'd felt not like dependable, boring, old Irene, but like one of a powerful army, a member of the solidarity. I am Middle-Aged Woman, Hear me roar! she'd thought and then giggled a little, delighted.

"Huh?" Doug, not quite awake, not quite asleep, had huffed a response.

"Nothing, love. Go to sleep," she'd said. And he had. But she had lain awake 'til all hours, dreaming, scheming. And in the morning, she'd felt good.

Part of Irene's research involved seeing if people remembered her from one visit to the next. So, she went to a bank and ordered some checks. She didn't need any new checks and pretended to simply want something cute. She even made silly conversation with the teller, Benji. Then, the next week, she made a point of getting in Benji's queue to make a transfer from savings to checking and withdraw a small sum, and he gave her the polite, social smile, so she felt sure she was not familiar to him at all.

Beth reported similar findings.

Neither of them was surprised. Both were ready. They decided right around Christmas would be good. A busy time, people distracted, a lot on their minds. A good number of people would be out and about. Plus, well, to be honest, the extra money, that time of year, would be a bonus.

There was a good bit of talk about what they would wear. Should they intentionally dress for the occasion? Or would that spoil that magical invisibility of their real selves? In the end, they chose outfits that they'd worn the previous week to

work. Surely, they'd decided, they wouldn't feel conspicuous in their workaday duds.

Tuesday. Tuesday was the day.

Tuesday was partly cloudy. Cool. Highs in the upper 40's. Not bad for the week before Christmas. The bank was busy. They'd decided right before lunch would be about right. And, just like that, they'd gone inside.

Irene wasn't even really nervous. It all felt unreal, from the bright lighting to the modestly patterned blue carpet. She smiled at the teller, a woman, probably late twenties, early thirties. Dark blonde hair, green eyes. Slightly overweight. The kind of girl who had probably been overlooked all her life. In other words, a future member of The Solidarity.

Irene handed her the note and a Christmas tote and smiled sweetly. The note said: Fill this tote with bills. My comrade (they'd argued over that word. Irene thought it sounded communist. Beth had laughed and said, "Good. Maybe it'll scare 'em!") has trained a weapon on your head. If you comply, all will be well. If not, you will be dead before you hit the ground. ("That's brutal, Irene." "We're bank robbers, Beth. Not homeroom mothers.")

The girl smiled when she saw the Christmas tote. Probably, she thought it was a gift. The smile didn't fade as quickly as Irene had expected.

"This is a joke, right?" the teller said.

Irene just shook her head and pointed at Beth, who waved her big, old lady purse and wiggled her eyebrows.

"Okay. What denominations do you want?" the teller, whose nametag said, Kayla, asked. *Do you want fries with that?*

"All of them," Irene said, feeling quite the moll.

"Oh. Sorry. Right," Kayla said, flustered, maybe, but not frightened.

Irene stood there, calm, while Kayla filled her bag.

"Thank you," she said, when it was handed over.

It was bulky. Awkward looking. "Uh. I hate to be a bother, but, do you have something else I could use to maybe split it up?"

"Just a sec," Kayla said and bent down. "How about this library bag?"

"Oh, no. That's yours, isn't it?"

"It's okay," Kayla said, kind of shy.

"Well, great! That's perfect!" Irene said while Kayla dutifully split the haul between the two bags. She was helping them! Irene realized, stunned. She really was a comrade.

The whole thing took maybe two minutes, and then, she and Beth were outside, looking for all the world like lunching ladies.

They put the bags in the trunk of Beth's Honda because Honda Accords were everywhere. Then, they did actually go to lunch. But not at Cracker Barrel, where they could not get seated. They went to a nice Italian place and drank two carafes of the house red, then had to stay and have coffee and dessert so they were sober enough to drive home.

But first, sitting in the Honda in the early dark of winter, they counted their haul. Their earnings for the day? \$12,731. Total.

That night, as she assembled the ingredients for the curry, Irene felt no compunction. The bank was, well, everybody hated the banks nowadays. Besides, she'd only meant to make a statement. It wasn't a career, for heaven's sake. And then, she wondered. A career? And that was when she saw herself, grainy, blurry, on the six o'clock news. She made a note to drop the pants and sweater she'd worn in the goodwill bin at the Presbyterian Church near the library. Too bad. She really liked those pants. But, otherwise, her feelings about the day were pretty low key, considering. She felt exhilarated. And powerful. And clever. And hungry.

One small, frightening moment occurred that evening when the picture popped up on the late night news. Doug was sitting right there. They sat, side by side on their comfortable,

rickety, old sofa, touching, because the springs were bad, and all the weight was diverted to the center. She realized, after, that she'd held her breath, waiting. Because he had given her that sweater. They showed the video, but it was herky jerky, not much use. Then, they put the still up and left it while they recapped the story. All along, he didn't move, didn't say a thing, and she couldn't tell, without really examining him, if he knew or not. So they sat there, as they had so many nights, touching, but not together, as the truth, whatever it may be, washed over them. Separately.

Doug

"I saw her. On the news. She robbed a bank."

"You're kidding me," Travis laughed that good-natured laugh of someone who knows he's being put on.

Doug glared at him.

"Alright, alright. You're serious? Why would she do that?"

"Shit, I don't know. Mid-life crisis?"

"It's a defense," Travis said, and Doug saw the wheels turning. One hamster wheel, actually. He even knew it was a black guinea pig turning it.

"I hope it doesn't come to that."

"So no one has turned her in?"

"Not that I know of."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know. I think I just needed to tell someone."

"So you haven't talked to her about it?"

"God, no."

Travis nodded. "Listen, Doug. I gotta go. I'll take it to my grave, buddy, I swear. Let me know, you know, if you need anything." He stuck out his hand for a shake, but this time Doug used it to pull him close and give him an awkward man-hug.

"Thanks. I feel a lot better, now," he said, and he actually did. It took him some analyzing on the drive home to determine exactly what he felt. He was shocked when he figured out that what he felt was excited. He had no idea what she was capable of as he pulled into the driveway and the warm golden light of their home.

Irene

Two weeks later, Irene and Beth met for a late breakfast. At Cracker Barrel. It seemed only right.

"It's the strangest thing," Irene said. "I catch him looking at me, now. When he sees that I've seen, he looks away. It's almost like flirting."

"Do you think he knows?"

"I know he knows. And he knows I know. But he won't say."

Beth nodded, and Irene saw, then, that that was marriage. That was what it was, and everyone who was married understood that. Everyone except her. She felt the heat of this knowledge, so long hidden from her, or, more likely, rejected by her, and she wanted Beth to have something, too, something that had to do with that knowledge, something more than just the money.

"How about you?" she asked, meaning, have you noticed any major changes.

"Well, I didn't get my picture on the news," Beth said a little resentfully.

"True. Sorry about that," Irene said, in all seriousness, and they both laughed, then, at the utter insanity of what they were saying. Of what they had done.

"Have you spent any of it?" Beth changed the subject slightly.

"Nope. It's in a couple shoeboxes in my closet."

"Me, too."

"My dad, he was scrupulous, you know?" Irene signalled for a warm-up for their coffees. "Crazy honest. He had this jar of coins in his desk. I asked him if I could borrow some, once, and he said, no. They weren't his. So I said, why do you have them, then? And he told me that once, he'd made a phone call on a pay phone, way back before he was married. And when he hung

up, coins poured out, like a slot machine. He called the operator back and told her, then asked, 'What should I do with these coins?' And she said, 'Congratulations! Keep 'em.' And he did. But he never could spend them. They weren't his."

"That's a good story," Beth said, "But I'm planning to get some Ferragamos at the after Christmas sales."

Irene laughed at that, too. "You don't have to wait for the sales! It's free money."

"Well, there's no need to waste," Beth said, all seriousness, and they laughed again.

"We won't do it again, will we," Irene said and was surprised to hear that it came out less as a question than a lament.

"No. Probably not."

"But what a story for the grandkids."

Lying in bed that weekend, long after the holiday hullabaloo, and after Doug had made love to her again, like he used to, with fire and need, Irene remembered a conversation oft repeated as she walked her youngest son to school.

"If you could have any superpower, what would it be?" he'd ask, all earnest, as if he could grant her the thing. As if her answer mattered.

"I'd like to fly," she'd always said. He usually argued with her, how having laser vision, or shape shifting, was better.

She recalled how she'd thought for a time she'd gotten invisibility. It wasn't what she'd asked for, but, somehow, invisibility was what she'd got. But then, she'd used it, just that once, and it had disappeared. Doug saw her again. She had become visible, at least to him, again, and that, she realized, was all she really wanted anyway, that, and to hear the sweet, crackling sound of his rough hands on her silk nightie.