

The Alibi

Gary had just sat down to dinner with his wife Patty when the doorbell rang. He got up to answer it, his jacket still on but his tie loose and his top button undone. Two uniformed police officers stood on his stoop. One asked his name. When he gave it, the officer told Gary he was under arrest. He didn't resist. The police officers were surprisingly gentle, one even apologizing for having to handcuff him. It wasn't anything like what he'd had seen on TV shows like *Naked City* or *The Detectives*. No doubt, the officers were more used to dealing with thugs in t-shirts and leather jackets or weed smoking beatniks than a mow-the-lawn on Saturdays, go-to-church on Sundays bookkeeper.

Patty stood in the doorway, hands to her mouth, watching as they escorted him into a waiting patrol car. Neighbors gathered, drawn by the black and white Ford Fairlane's flashing lights, looking on from the opposite curb. From the back seat, Gary couldn't help but notice the crossed arms, the shaking heads, the I'm-not-surprised looks on their faces even though they were no doubt surprised. He stuck his tongue out at them as the car pulled away. He'd have stuck out more than that if not for the handcuffs.

The Alibi/2

The officers sat Gary down in a room in the station house and left him. It wasn't the Spartan, windowless space with a one-way mirror he'd expected, but a shared office. Four desks arranged perpendicular to one another, all but one cluttered with papers, filled ashtrays and stained coffee mugs. A coffee maker next to a small radio sat in the corner. One wall was all windows, shuttered by blinds that blocked out the evening light. On the opposite wall hung a bulletin board tacked with notes, lists and mugshots of grim men staring straight at the camera. He looked at the faces of those men and wondered if soon he might be one of them.

The wall clock ticked away the minutes, the occasional footsteps could be heard from beyond the shut door. The cuffs were beginning to dig into his wrists. Almost a half hour went by before the doorknob turned and two men walked in, silver badges clipped to their suit jackets.

They introduced themselves as Detectives Raleigh and Joseph. Raleigh seemed young for a detective, a full head of perfectly coifed blond hair, a dimpled chin, smokey eyes. He wore a well-tailored navy suit with a matching checkered tie and polished black wingtips that clicked when he walked.

Joseph was older, maybe fifty, with a slight paunch. He tried to hide his thinning gray hair with a comb over. His plain gold wedding band fit snug on his sausage-like finger. As he sat

The Alibi/3

at the most cluttered desk, he checked the time on his watch, which he wore military style, facing the inside of his wrist.

Raleigh leaned against the one clean desk directly across from Gary. "You know why you're here?"

"No. Do I need a lawyer?"

"If you want, but we were hoping to clear all this up without that kind of hassle."

Gary shrugged. "Can't really afford one, anyway."

Raleigh twirled a pen between his fingers as he spoke. "That car in your drive, the Galaxie 500, yours?"

"Yeah."

"Almost new. Must have cost you."

"I get a lot of overtime. April is the busy season."

"Bookkeeper, right? You do taxes."

Gary was surprised at how much Raleigh knew about him but didn't say so. "Among other things."

Raleigh tucked his pen behind his ear. He went to the coffee maker. The coffee had been sitting in it since Gary arrived, giving off a slightly burnt smell. Raleigh poured it into two of the plain, cream-colored mugs that sat beside it. stirred powdered creamer into one. "Tell me, where were you this afternoon?"

"At work, of course," Gary said.

"But you took a long lunch."

"I had an appointment."

Raleigh set the coffee with the creamer in front of Joseph. Joseph hadn't said a word since introducing himself, instead taking notes on a yellow legal pad. Raleigh leaned against the desk again, his own mug cradled in both hands. He didn't offer any coffee to Gary. He would have refused in any case. He couldn't stand burnt coffee.

"What kind of appointment?" Raleigh asked.

"Personal. Look, I'd like to know what this is about."

Joseph paused in his note taking, drank his coffee. A pack of Pall Malls sat amongst the clutter of papers on the desk. He took one out, lit it with a zippo lighter he produced from his inside breast pocket. He offered one to Raleigh. The other officer waved it away, instead putting his pen in his mouth, letting it dangle from his lips as he spoke.

"You know East Central Bank?" Raleigh said.

"On Tanning and Coolridge? Sure, not my bank, but I know it."

"Someone robbed it this afternoon."

"You think I robbed a bank?"

"Guy worked alone. Came in with a shot gun wore a bandana over his face like it was some kind of Western. Knocked the security guard to the ground, had the tellers empty their tills."

"How much did he get?" Gary said.

"I thought you could tell me."

"I'm not your guy."

"One of the tellers, she tries to ring the alarm under her counter. Guy fired into the air, scared her so bad she pissed her panties. Had he shot at her instead, he'd be looking at the electric chair. As it is, it's still about twenty years. We could knock some of that off if you came clean."

"It wasn't me," Gary said.

"No one saw the guy's face cause of the bandana. Still, he had your build. He took off in a Galaxie just like yours. The plates match. So, you want to tell me where you really were this afternoon?"

Gary said nothing. Beads of sweat formed on his brow.

"I got to take a leak," Raleigh said to Joseph. He left, taking his coffee with him.

Gary sat in silence with Joseph, watching him take notes.

"Why are you still writing?" Gary dared ask.

Joseph put down his pen. He tapped his cigarette into a nearby ash tray, left it to smolder there. "I looked you up. Korean War Vet. No record. Mortgage, loan on that car of yours, no other debts. Decent job. So I ask myself, why would this guy rob a bank?"

"I wouldn't." Gary said.

"Look, the FBI will be here soon. Robbing a bank's a Federal offense. But we aren't too crazy about the Feds around here, hoped to crack this ahead of them. Once they get here though, they won't be as nice as us."

"If you were nice, I wouldn't be in these cuffs."

Joseph got up, went behind Gary, unlocked the handcuffs, tossed them on the otherwise clean desk. Gary rubbed his wrists. "Aren't you afraid I might try to get away?"

Joseph laughed. "I doubt it. You don't look the type."

"I'm not the type that would rob a bank, either. Though your partner disagrees."

Joseph returned to his chair. "He's young. Thinks that car of yours is all the evidence we need. Me, I think you were somewhere else this afternoon. What was it, a woman? You don't want your wife to find out? Don't worry, your secret's safe with me."

Gary looked down at his feet. "It was, I mean, it wasn't a woman."

Joseph folded his hands across his chest. "I see. And you think, you give us this guy's name. We'll bust him."

"It's what you do."

"It may be a crime, but we've got a robbery on our hands. That's bigger to us than a couple of faggots getting it on the park."

Gary wanted to tell him it wasn't a park. It was Eric's apartment, fresh sheets, sun coming through the windows, cigarettes and whiskey afterwards, but Joseph didn't look like the type who'd appreciate the romance of it all.

"Look, you just give us this guy's name. We ask him if you two had lunch, that's all. He says yes, we move on. What do you say?"

Raleigh returned at that moment, leaving the door open behind him. "You're free to go."

Joseph started to speak, but Raleigh cut him off. "When they went to impound your car, they recorded your plate number. Standard procedure. Found the plates aren't yours. Somebody with the same make and model swapped them out. So it wasn't your car used in the bank robbery after all.

Gary got up slowly, as if unsure they would really let him leave, that this was all game. "I'll need a ride."

Joseph rose. "I'll give you one."

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"I've met a lot of queers in my line of work," Joseph said. He had just pulled up in front of Gary's house. The porch light was on, but other than that, the house was dark. "Used to work vice. Had to bust up the bars down on Cumberland Avenue, take guys in. Husbands, working stiff, guys like you."

Gary sat in the back seat. He wanted to hop out of the car, hurry into the safety of his own home, but Joseph kept talking.

"You know what, I've changed my mind. I think you did rob that bank, license plates or not. No alibi, so you figured you'd make up this story about being with someone. Make it a guy so you have an excuse not to tell us who it is."

"Why would I do that? I'd think it would be worse being in jail for being a homosexual than a bank robber."

Joseph put his arm on the front seat, turned his head so Gary could see his face in the light of the dashboard. "True, but I think you're taking a chance that we wouldn't bust you for it. You're right, by the way. Times are changing. The chief himself told us not to waste our time when we have real criminal to deal with, crime or not. What's another pervert more or less?"

"Lucky me," Gary said. Now that he seemed free and clear, he allowed himself a hint of sarcasm.

"Look, it's none of my business. If you aren't, and you did rob that bank, well, we'll catch up with you eventually. We know where you work, where you live. We'll be watching. And if you are, well, you got a wife in there and it ain't fair to her, living like you do." He nodded to the house.

"That all?"

"Don't drive that car until you get new plates."

Gary got out of the car and walked up the front door. It wasn't until he'd gone inside that Joseph drove away.

He almost didn't notice Patty in the dark of the living room, lit only by the porchlight coming through the picture window. She sat on the sofa, legs curled up under her, a vodka tonic in hand. On the coffee table sat Gary's old army duffle, unzipped. Inside, Gary could just make out the packets of crisp tens and twenties under his license plates.

"You're terrible at hiding things," Patty said. "If they'd have searched the place, they'd have found this in minutes."

"I thought the bottom of the freezer was as good a place as any," Gary replied.

"You mean where you keep those magazines of yours? It was the first place I checked," she replied.

Gary settled into his reading chair, the bag on the coffee table between him and his wife. She hadn't found the shotgun in the garage attic but wasn't about to mention it.

"So, you going to take this money and run off with that friend of yours?"

"Actually, I was going to give it to you, so you wouldn't have to worry about money when I leave."

She emptied her glass of all but the ice. "You think that's what I care about? Money? All I ever wanted was you. I love you."

"I love you, too. Just not like that."

"No, you would rather be with some boy you met in some seedy Cumberland dive." She sucked an ice cube from her glass, crunched it in her teeth.

"I thought I could have both."

"I never should have married you. My sister told me so. No, I can change him, I said. Idiot."

"You going to turn me in?" He asked.

"Now, where would that get me? Names in the papers, me a laughingstock. You already saw how the neighbors came out to stare."

"Really, I was hoping -"

"You were hoping you could sneak out without having to talk to me. You better go. Your suitcase is on the bed. Found it packed and ready in the closet. Terrible hider."

For the second time that night, he got up out of a chair, wondering if he could really leave.

He went to his car, still sitting in the garage. He had taken the plates, but left the money, told Patty to be careful how she spent it as she poured herself a new drink.

Eric would be waiting for him at his apartment. A new roommate. People might talk, but nothing would be for sure. Confirmed bachelors. A secret life. A dream life.

He shifted into neutral, let the car roll down the drive. He didn't start the engine until he was in the street. He drove carefully, so as not to draw attention. Despite Joseph's warning, the stolen plates were still on it. No time to change them. They would cause new problems if he were pulled over.

The real plates sat on the seat beside him. He had memorized the series of numbers and letters when he first got the car, but now could not recall them. He looked down at the plates but couldn't make them out in the dashboard light.

End

Biography

Manfred Gabriel's short fiction has appeared in over two dozen publications. He lives and writes in Western Wisconsin. He works with people all day long and writes each evening to keep his sanity.