

Judy's Big Score

By Patrick J Lambe

Judy had every right to be pissed. I wasn't supposed to stop at the bar after I'd cased it; especially not while the owner was there. But I just had to get a look at the loser we were gonna rip off. The other guy she was sleeping with.

She tapped her fingers on the bar, her arms spread out on either side of the beer, eyes narrowed, exaggerating the wrinkles that had started spreading from their corners since the last time I'd seen her - nearly seven years before the call out of no-where.

"Five bucks," she said.

I knew she'd be mad at me, but I hadn't expected her to actually charge me for a goddamned beer. It was a business expense as far as I was concerned.

A quick glance in both directions showed no patrons within hearing distance, besides my partner, Dell. Tipping the glass toward her, I said, "I didn't get a chance to pick up any cash on the way down."

"Don't look at me, I'm on the dole," Dell said when Judy switched her attention from me to him.

"There's an ATM machine right behind you." She chin nodded toward it. "You two idiots forget about it already?"

"Come on hon, can't you spring for a round?" I said.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," she said, picking up a bar rag from a sink under the cheap Formica bar-top. "Maybe we should call it off." She wiped the ring formed by my beer mug.

"Jesus Christ." I said. "I'll pay for the drinks."

Pushing away from the bar, I nearly collided with a guy maneuvering a hand-truck behind me. His close-cropped hair was a mix of dark brown and silver. Freshly touched up tattoos covered the parts of his thick arms exposed by his light colored t-shirt. One of the tattoos was a 'Black Flag' symbol. Old pop marks could still be seen poking through the fresh coat of ink. Hard to believe punk rock kids were pushing fifty nowadays

"Can you let me in hon?" he said, scurrying past me to the part of the bar that swung upward to let people behind it. He had to be Steve, the owner.

Judy worked her way down the end of the bar and lifted the top up to let Steve in with the beer-case laden hand truck. She was making too much of an effort to ignore me as I went over to the ATM machine and stuck my card in. I hoped Steve-O didn't pick up on it.

I watched them out of the corner of my eye as I waited for the machine to process my transaction. He effortlessly picked up cases two at a time and set them on the bar, then transferred the bottles one by one into the cooler, rotating the older ones to the top. His arms looked like they were outgrowing the tattoos. I guessed he'd traded in heroin for weight training as his addiction of choice. He certainly wasn't the pushover Judy had made him out to be.

"Something wrong, Judy?" he asked pausing, looking at her as she brushed past him to service another customer at the other end of the bar.

"We need more Jameson," she said, annoyed.

“What’d I do?” he said, catching a sympathetic look from Dell as she grabbed a near empty whisky bottle and poured.

Smiling, I hit my code, authorizing the machine to deduct a dollar fifty for the privilege of taking my money out of it. I guess Stevie boy wasn’t used to Judy’s moods yet. It’s taken me a while to get used to them myself, when we were together full time.

A small screen popped up on the ATM machine, telling me the price for taking money had gone up another fifty cents. Two dollars to take out twenty. Seemed like usury to me, especially since I’d only have thirty-eight dollars left in the account after the transaction.

I guess I shouldn’t complain. I’d be getting my money back from the machine tomorrow night, right after Dell and I rolled it out into my pick up truck after the bar closed.

She held a large bag from an art supply store in front of her when I re-opened the door to a professional and romantic relationship that had ended nearly seven years ago. I moved aside and let her into my apartment. I’d run out and bought outrageously priced air fresheners from the Indian running the Krausers, hoping they would make a dent in the musty stench my place had accumulated over the years. I wouldn’t have bothered with the fresheners under normal circumstances, but when an old flame calls after an absence it never hurts to put up a good front.

Judy wrinkled her nose, but she didn’t say anything as she put the bag down next to the front door and took off her coat. The crows feet that had begun to gather around her eyes had multiplied and her hair seemed a little faded since the last time I’d seen her. But otherwise she still looked pretty much the same, tight little body, grade-A ass and an expression that generally had nothing to do with what going on behind her pretty face.

“Been a while,” I said. “Make your big score yet?” I didn’t think so, based on the Wall Mart couture.

It was the reason she’d left. My lack of ambition. We had a nice little routine down. Minimal risk, but the return on the investment wasn’t generally more than enough to last us a couple of months, a half-year at best. I yessed her to death about pulling off something big: an insurance swindle or confidence scheme that would set us up for life, or at least net us enough capitol to start some kind of legitimate business. She finally figured out I hadn’t the fortitude to risk hard time for a scheme that big, and she’d moved on.

“I’ve been out of the game for a while, but I might have something.” She took a Corona I’d retrieved from the fridge. I’d given up Corona - bottled beer actually - since the money had become tight. Now it was whatever case of cans was on sale. My new partner and I hadn’t done anything significant in nearly six months, but I figured it wouldn’t hurt to spring for her favorite brand.

“It’d be good if we could work something out,” I said. “I could use some quick cash.”

“Heard you got another partner.” She sat down on the couch.

“Guy named Dell. He’s good, but he lacks your obvious assets.”

“We might be able to cut him in too. This job involves some lifting. Two guys should be able to handle it.”

“You can count me out if it’s your shot at the big times. I’m quite content being a nickel-and-dimer.”

Her eyes roamed around the apartment. “That’s obvious.”

“You know, you still look pretty good, a broad pushing forty,” I said.

Judy wasn’t one for flattery or idle conversation. Within minutes of finishing her second beer, she was moaning underneath me. Then, a half hour after the awkward act, she lay against me. We talked about mortality and darkening streets, the smell of sex permeating the tent we’d built from the covers over our heads.

We’d gotten our clothes back on and stared at each other over a pot of coffee as we discussed business a half hour after getting out of bed. She’d scored a job as a bartender a couple of years ago. A dive so low they didn’t even take credit cards. The owner, Steve, liked the way her ass played under her jeans. She said she let him touch it once in a while to distract him as she took a little out of the till to add to her tip money.

They’d sleep together occasionally, but she didn’t respect him. According to her, he was weak in both body and spirit, had less ambition than me. Figured it was time to move on to greener pastures in pursuit of the elusive big score, but she needed a little stake money.

She’d thought about just emptying the cash drawer one night after closing, but Steve was cautious. He’d bring the loot home with him and put it in a safe in his house at night after the bartenders finished counting out the evening receipts. In the morning, he’d deposit money into the bank on his way to work.

Steve had recently decided to bring his place into some semblance of the nineteenth century. He’d made a half-assed arrangement with a fly-by-night company to put an ATM machine next to the men’s room. He couldn’t be there the day they installed the thing, so Judy supervised the workman, showing a little more tits and ass and a little more curiosity about the project than the installers were used to.

Three bolts through the floor held the whole thing in place. Nuts on the other side of the planks secured the bolts. Drop ceiling panels in the basement hid it all from the public. The downstairs portion of the bar generally only saw weekend use by over-the-hill punk rock bands the owner was still enthusiastic about twenty years after anyone else cared.

An armored car drove by every Thursday morning and put six grand into the thing. Steve usually worked Thursdays, but he had a dental appointment this week for a root canal. Judy would put an ‘out of order’ sign on the machine as soon as it was filled - to ensure we would get our maximum return. Then she’d leave the back door open at the end of her shift and we could use the hand-truck in the storage room to wheel the machine into my pick up truck. After that, we could take our own sweet time breaking into it up in Dell’s parent’s garage

I had to say I was impressed. Judy might not have gotten her big score, but she’d made huge strides in her criminal repertoire. I’d done all of the significant planning during our time together. She’d served as eye candy and the bait on the end of the hook.

“What’s in the bag?” I asked just before she left.

She held it open. “I knew you’d ask.” I guess she knew me better than practically anyone. “Some pictures frames for my apartment.”

“Do you know how to hang pictures?” I asked.

“Sure, you just stick these into the wall and put the wire through it.” She pulled out a small packet of hangers from the bottom of the bag.

Laughing, I said, “You can’t just stick them in by hand. You need a hammer or something.” Maybe her planning skills hadn’t advanced as far as I thought they had.

“Are you sure? The guy at the store didn’t say anything.”

I grabbed a hammer from a drawer in the kitchen, and placed it in the bag she held open. “I’m sure. Just get the hammer back to me before we pull this job. It might come in handy.”

My partner and I stopped in on a Monday, their slowest night of the week, and checked things out. An alley ran along the back of the bar, between the rear of the place and a bail bonds office. Plenty of room to pull my pickup to the back door.

Dell was a little too distracted trying to burn an outline of Judy’s figure into the grey matter of his brain as she bent over the coolers retrieving beer. I wished he could have concentrated a little more on the casing, but I wasn’t too worried. It didn’t look like we’d be running into any trouble.

The front of the place was typical of the corner bars fast disappearing across America. A row of booths on the left side, the bar and stools on the right as you walked in off the street, a pool table in front of a juke box toward the rear of the joint.

Judy sent me down the stairs at the back when the bar was slow. I’d have liked for Dell to come down with me, but he said he had to use the bathroom. I stood on a chair under the place where I thought the ATM would be, lifted up the ceiling tiles, looking for the bolts with a pocket flashlight. The set-up was exactly like Judy said it would be. Just three bolts anchoring our cash in place.

A selection of ratchet heads downstairs, unplug the phone line and electric upstairs, a quick boost up into my pickup truck, a three way split and, if everything worked out right, we’d each be two grand richer. Not exactly Judy’s elusive big score, but enough to get her started on it.

Dell and Judy leaned across the bar from each other, talking, their foreheads almost touching when I came back up the stairs. Dell jerked away guiltily when he saw my reflection in the bar mirror behind him. He didn’t have to worry. I’d gotten used to it years ago, hadn’t ever let it bother me. Judy was naturally flirtatious, a quality that had opened up many doors when we’d worked together as a team.

Still, I was a little pissed. We were supposed to be checking the place out, and here he was goofing off. I didn’t say anything to him as we left. Dell was only twenty-two years old. I tend to make exceptions for youth.

I work at UPS every Christmas season as a temporary driver. I'm actually surprised that I'm pretty good at it. They ask me to stay on permanently every year, but I turn them down without an explanation. It'd be a little awkward telling them I only worked there two or three months a year so I can have something to show Uncle Sam during tax time.

Dell was assigned as my helper three years ago. He was giving community college a shot, and figured he could pick up some extra cash working through the break. He was a blond haired kid with a lopsided smile the women on the route went crazy for. One of the secretaries who worked at an architectural firm on our route once told me she had fantasies about Dell, dressed in the cut-off summer version of the uniform, bending her over the desk.

Caught him trying to stuff a case of IPODs in his uniform one day when I had to go back to check something on the truck.

I'd thought about turning him in. This had been a steady gig for me for years, and I could get in a lot of trouble if stuff disappeared from my truck. We talked it out, and I turned his natural larcenous instincts to our advantage. His way with the ladies opened some doors, but not as many as Judy's way with the men.

"You used to hit that?" Dell asked, rolling the windshield halfway down before it jumped the tracks holding it in the door-well. I'd have to unscrew the side panel and work it back in place before the next time it rained.

"Back in the day."

"I wasn't trying anything on her back there. Just being friendly." The guy had been riding in the passenger seat of my truck for three years now, and he still broke the window every time he touched it.

"Doesn't really matter to me. We're mostly business partners."

He stopped struggling with the window, said, "She still looks pretty good for an older chick. I'd definitely throw her the hammer."

"You've got a big heart."

"So, you think we'll get two grand each out of this?"

"That's what Judy says."

"I don't mean to complain. I mean, I could use the cash. But it seems like a lot of work for two grand each."

I looked over at him as I took a right turn. "We'll be in and out in like ten minutes, tops."

"Two grand doesn't go that far these days. I think we're in a recession or something. Maybe we should start thinking of the future. 'Specially you, you're not getting any younger."

I pulled the truck outside his parent's house. "You're sure your parents are gonna be away Thursday night?"

"I'm dropping them at the airport in the morning. They'll be gone till next Tuesday." He let himself out of the truck, wedged a pen between the window and the frame holding it in place.

"Forget about it. I'll fix it with a screwdriver later."

He put his pen back in his pocket. “If we made a big score you wouldn’t have to worry about fixing your window every week.”

“Let’s concentrate on this one job before we start planning on knocking over the mint.”

The bolts had come out easy, a couple of quick turns with the ratchet. I eased the washers off and pushed them up through the holes in the floor. Then I put the ceiling tile back in place and climbed up the back stairs to help Dell move the machine.

It was lighter than either of us imagined it would be. Still, we threw a heavy strap around it anyway. We were almost out the back door when Dell stopped the hand-truck, pushed it so it stood upright. “Did you hear that?” he asked.

We both stood still. I listened for a half a minute. “I don’t hear anything.”

Dell put his fingers to his lips and walked through a door separating the bar from the kitchen. I followed. “It came from in there.” He pointed to a walk-in freezer.

Opening the heavy metal door, he walked in. I heard him say, “Shit.” Then I followed him in. He moved off to the side to let me past him. Steve lay on his back, blood from the back of his head freezing up on the insulated floor. “Holy shit,” I said bending down to get a closer look. Then I heard the door to the walk-in close behind me.

There was a little sliver of plexiglass about eye level that I could see through. Dell struggled with the hand-truck for a second, then he put it down and turned around. I couldn’t hear anything going on outside the freezer, but it looked to me like someone had called him from his back. He smiled for a second, then the back of his head exploded over the face of the ATM machine.

Judy threw a pistol at Dell’s feet; put another one, the one she shot him with, on the bar. She went over to the phone next to the cash register and dialed three digits. I watched her lips move as she talked to the 911 dispatcher on the other end of the line. She turned away when she caught me eyeballing her through the glass. I doubt the shame on her face was what she really felt.

There was an extension in the freezer. I picked it up listened in on her conversation. She’d surprised two men robbing the bar she owned with her husband. One of them she’d locked in the freezer. The other one had pulled a gun on her, and she’d shot him with the pistol her husband kept behind the bar for security.

I bent down and looked at Steve. Fresh pop marks froze over on his arm. The hammer I’d loaned Judy lay on the side of his head, covered in gore. Judy’s ability to plan had come a long way since we were jungled up together. She’d really thought this one out, probably getting her man so nodded out, his oversized muscles wouldn’t do him any good once she started on him with the hammer.

She hung up the phone, turned a bar stool around and stared at me, holding the dead receiver in my hand. If this were a cartoon, her eyes would have turned into dollar signs as she counted up the insurance money dancing behind her expressionless face.

Part of me, a very small part, was happy she’d finally made her big score.

Every time Pat Lambe gets bloodied at Thug Lit, he spit out a few teeth, turns up the Theme From Shaft, and heads back into the fray. He’s had short stories in various web sites and magazines, as well as short

stories in the Plots with Guns anthology, Dublin Noir, and The Best New Noir Anthology due out soon. His short story Union Card was listed as a distinguished mystery story in The Best American Mystery Stories of 2005. He's currently writing several novels, while working as a telephone technician