

The Perfect Crime

by Todd Maupin

I had committed the perfect crime, and I had left nothing to chance; my best strategy was chancing nothing. Prudence and planning were my only allies, and these are the best allies of success.

Four days ago, my friend Ward Crenshaw picked me up at my house in Bethesda. That's right, Crenshaw. No "h." Everyone spelled his name with an "h" and it infuriated him. Ward was a detective in Bethesda, where we both lived. Bethesda was spelled with an "h." I had asked Ward to give me a ride to Washington's Reagan National Airport. Several weeks earlier, I had purchased my ticket to fly to Pittsburgh International Airport. Normally, I do not check bags for short trips, but to more fully establish my footprint, I checked a mid-size SwissGear suitcase. There was nothing neutral about my intentions for the trip, however. The extra space in the checked bag also allowed me to take some extra clothes and items to discard.

Upon my arrival in Pittsburgh, I hired an Uber to take me to the Pittsburgh-North Shore Hyatt Place. The hotel is within striking, bunting and hitting distance of PNC Park, where the Pirates play. I checked into the hotel for my two-night stay, and once I had dumped off my luggage in my room, I descended again and left the hotel to walk around a bit in the city. Naturally, I had a purpose in mind, and after a bit of ambling and backtracking, in the likely event that someone was monitoring my movements, I walked straight to Thropp Street. Almost diagonal from Our Lady Queen of Peace, there was a dubious rental car storefront. My motives and morals were dubious so it was fitting. Describing the storefront itself as "sketchy" would have been kind. This is the kind of place that only accepts cash (including an enormous amount upfront, in addition to an outlandish deposit) and does not ask questions. They do not answer questions either so as to complete the circle of mistrust.

In short order, I had a 1999 Oldsmobile Cutlass at my disposal for 24 hours. Truly, this car should have been disposed of years earlier, but I supposed they were holding onto it sentimentally due to the connection of the Cutlass to the Pirates. Most cars were also made of steel but I suspected they would not be very receptive to my suggestion so I did not bring it up. I left the Cutlass parked a few blocks away from the hotel so as not to draw attention to it, or embarrassment to myself.

Returning to the hotel, I went back upstairs to my room, changed my clothes, gathered a few things from my bag, and went downstairs again to the hotel bar. I drank a few club sodas, then took the elevator up just one floor, and then exited the hotel via the exterior stairs on the west side where there were no cameras. As soon as I was out on the street, I mixed in with the fans who were walking in disorganized mobs to watch the Pirates play. (Go Padres!) I also had a ticket for the game, even though I had other plans. Proceeding in an orderly fashion with the mob of not yet disorderly fans, I passed through the turnstile and had my ticket punched, subjected myself to the security wands and was inside PNC park for only a few minutes before I left through another gate and returned to the Cutlass.

Though it was almost a historic vehicle, the Cutlass still ran rather well, and performed as necessary for my drive. My route, by necessity, was more circuitous than direct in order to avoid I-70's toll cameras. By choosing to take I-79 and I-68 to rejoin I-70 in Maryland, I saved money on tolls and saved face, as a point of pride and as a point of not having my face recorded in the records of a costly photo booth. From there, it was just a jaunt to Frederick, Maryland, where I picked up I-270 and followed it to Rockville. Mrs. Pequod lived on Beall Avenue, not far from the infernal traffic circles that MDOT has placed everywhere to exacerbate traffic.

Mrs. Pequod also died on Beall Avenue. I killed her, and I got away with it. This was simple. She knew me and opened the door to let me in when she recognized that it was me knocking at the door. She was surprised that I was visiting her on a Thursday evening but even more surprised when I ended her life.

I will spare you the gory details but I assure you that she did not suffer, and it was all very quick. The AED pads I had used on her made it all look like a heart attack, and essentially it was. I am not a monster; I am a lawyer. Go ahead, make your joke. I have probably heard it before. Not all lawyers are bad. Yes, I know that is a setup for another joke. Carry on. Laugh it up. You should be ashamed of yourselves, but I wasn't. Mrs. Pequod had something that I wanted and so I had orchestrated a way to take it. Then I arranged her body on the kitchen floor to make it appear as though she had collapsed. I dropped a half full cup of tea which shattered and splattered. I even dropped a small plate with a couple of Belvita cookies on it, just for effect. She also had Velveeta in her refrigerator but I will not touch that stuff. I may be a murderer and a thief, but I have standards.

All told, I was in and out in twenty-five minutes. I knew where she kept the collection of rare coins because I had watched her intently while she retrieved the case when I had been to visit her before. There was no official record of us knowing each other and I had not even told her my true name. I had met her outside of a gold and coin dealer's shop in Chevy Chase, and had persuaded her that I could advise her of the collection's value. We returned to her home for a closer look. They had been her husband's and she had forgotten about them until she uncovered them cleaning the day before our first meeting. At the risk of further rambling, I will just tell you that what she had was worth millions. Naturally, I convinced her otherwise and my self-serving assessment was the only appraisal she had.

Leaving Rockville, aside from a quick diversion to my house in Bethesda to drop off the coins, I retraced my steps and took the same route back to Pittsburgh. I had stopped off at various points along the way back to nap for 30 minute intervals and was back in the city shortly after dawn. I had also refueled the Cutlass in Hancock, Maryland. She was a thirsty vehicle with an insatiable tank, even for a car built like a tank. The car had been running on fumes when I picked it up so I could return in it the same condition without drawing any ire. And so I did, but not until the following morning, because I did not want to raise eyebrows by returning to the hotel so late. At that time, it was easy to mix with early risers and people shuffling in and out of the hotel. I returned to my room, showered, and enjoyed a leisurely breakfast in the lobby with the other guests. After brushing my teeth, I headed out again, returned the car to the site on Thropp Street. To avoid any unnecessary follow up questions and to entice them to forget me, I allowed them to retain the excessive deposit.

The rest of the day was just me enjoying Pittsburgh. I visited the Carnegie Science Center and napped in the planetarium as soon as the lights dimmed and the show started. Twice. I took the Monongahela Incline up to the Mount Washington area and walked around, before I had a late lunch at a diner up there. Not the most touristy behavior, but I also discarded my clothes from the night before, along with fragments of the AED pads I had smashed to bits, at various points around the city. Ridding myself of these, I was in the clear, but I did recall ruefully that I had never shouted out "Clear!" before shocking her with them. I returned to the hotel to shower again - both for a second wind, and to wash off the Cutlass stink from me. Then I went to PNC Park, and watched the Padres dispatch the Pirates 6 to 3. Throughout the game, I paid handsomely for a hot dog, peanuts, Crackerjacks, and two beers. God bless America.

That night, I was in my room to sleep for real, and was well-rested for my flight back to Reagan in the morning. Again, I enlisted Ubers to take me to and from both airports. Certainly, I could have asked Ward for a ride again, but I did not want to interrupt sleep, cartoons or whatever he does on Saturday mornings. By 11am on Saturday, I was home and absolutely and completely in the clear to enjoy the incredibly valuable coin collection I had so carefully made my own. The rest of that weekend, I spent examining my new treasure, patting myself on the back, and recovering for the next week. Committing the perfect crime may be exhilarating, but it is also exhausting.

A week later, on Saturday, I had dinner with Ward. He is a detective, as I said before. As I mentioned earlier, I am a lawyer, but not the type that deals with crime and that nastiness, so I did not know Ward in professional environs. We had grown up together, frequenting the same schools, teams, circles of friends. He had gone on to establish a career fighting crime while I had focused on lawyerly pursuits, and committing the perfect crime, most recently.

Ward and I met at our favorite spot for dinner, Pizzeria Da Marco, on Woodmont. The wine and beer flowed freely, and we enjoyed munching our thin crust with along the upper crust that filtered in from the city and points beyond. Our server had just returned with our first round of drinks and we had just placed our orders. Aside from the airport ride, it had been two or three months since we had last met up so we had some catching up to do. I asked Ward what interesting cases he had been working on lately.

“It had been pretty slow lately actually. Maybe the post-summer lull, if there is such a thing.” Ward said, almost seeming a bit wistful, as he took a sip from his Lucas.

“Being busy at work is always better than the alternative, but I am always relieved to hear that you are not, Ward,” I observed,

stirring the Sbagliato I had ordered. It looked different than usual, but I could have been mistaken.

“Oh, Kyle, there is one thing that fell into my lap this week,” Ward recalled, his eyes lighting up. My name is Kyle, by the way. No “h.” “I am investigating a possible homicide in Rockville. Normally, this would be out of my jurisdiction but I am doing the guys over there a favor.”

“You don't say. Well, that's something. What happened?” I asked, feigning disinterest and projecting successful aloofness, hopefully. Rockville was not a small town; it was actually a bit larger than Bethesda. You will certainly understand my selfish reasons for desiring that someone else who was not Mrs. Pequod had been killed in Rockville last week.

“It's the strangest thing. For all intents and purposes, it does not even seem like a homicide. An elderly woman, Pamela Peapod, had a heart attack at home, the week before last. She was 89 years old so it all seemed fairly cut and dried but her daughter who lives in Montana claims that it was a homicide,” Ward explained, shaking his head in mild disbelief.

I almost choked on my Sbagliato, but managed to swallow with some strain, and only a small cough. “Ha, Kyle, do you remember when we were kids, at lunch, you could never keep a secret and always used to spit up your milk when you were trying to keep a secret?” Ward laughed, thinking of the memory.

“Oh, yes, heh. Those were good times,” I replied, feigning a laugh and trying to smile. Needless to say, I was taken aback and quite unnerved, but I was holding it together rather well. I displayed the piqued interest of a concerned friend and citizen but not the mortified guilt of a murderer. To avoid showing any inadvertent trembling, I moved my hands beneath the table.

"A homicide, though! That's awful! Why does she think that there was foul play?" I asked. "Naturally, if you are not at liberty to discuss details of the case, Ward, please do not tell me anything." How was that for nonchalance? This would have been textbook "chalent" behavior, but unfortunately that was not a real word.

"Okay, so get this, Kyle. When EMS forced the locks and entered, they found Mrs. Peapod in the kitchen, with a mess of a late-night snack on the floor next to her. Tea and cookies did not seem unusual to anyone. Not to anyone but the daughter, that is," Ward was telling the story with a little bit of theatrics, a twinkle in his eye.

Inwardly, I was tearing myself to shreds and falling apart, but I maintained my courtroom composure, even though I was not that type of lawyer either. Ward had no idea that he was being insensitive to my anxious feelings. He was just telling a story.

"How so?" I asked, after possibly too long a pause to say so little.

"Well, according to Miss Montana, her mother would never eat Belvita cookies at any time besides breakfast. Mrs. Peapod was very much a creature of habit and would not divert from her routine. Mother and daughter talked each day, in fact, and had spoken that afternoon, so her daughter was adamant that the cookies could not have been dropped that morning. She believed that the entire thing was staged," Ward revealed. He was warming up now. He had always enjoyed a good mystery and this was one. For him, anyway.

"But why?" I asked, more quickly this time, but maybe too quick?

Ward raised an eyebrow that I tried not to take personally. "Not too long ago, old Mrs. Peapod had rediscovered her late husband's coin collection and had shown it to some collector she had met by chance on the street in Chevy Chase. This was a highlight of that

day's mother-daughter phone conversation on the day that it happened. Anyhow, the daughter has been back from Montana attending to estate matters and has told us that she cannot find her father's coin collection anywhere in the house."

"That's interesting," I said weakly. Yes, that was a lame thing to say, but could you have done any better?

"This is where it gets interesting, Kyle. Mrs. Peapod had told her daughter about meeting the coin collector and had told her the name of the fellow, a certain Roger Jamison. We have done enough checking, double-checking and cross-checking to determine that this was a false name. Wait, sorry, cross-checking is something they do in hockey. Anyway, you get the idea," Ward finished, straightening himself up in his chair expectantly as the server arrived with our pizzas.

This welcome interruption offered me a little bit of time to think and breathe. We each ordered another drink. I needed one, direly.

"Kyle, I was thinking, you're still interested in coins, right?" Ward asked, mercifully while cutting up his pizza and therefore he missed my immediate horrified reaction.

"I was in Pittsburgh, Ward. You know that," I clarified, stupidly. Seeing the rightfully confused look on Ward's face, I continued. "While I was in Pittsburgh, I checked out some of the coin dealers up that way. They did not have anything new, but then that would defeat the purpose of rare coins. They are usually not new." I was babbling now, and had not recovered as well as I had hoped.

"Funny, you should know that, but this did happen the same day I took you to the airport," Ward spoke slowly, measuring his words carefully like a chemist measuring substances. He paused to ruminate, and the pH scale took him from acids to bases. "Okay,

good, I thought maybe you went only for baseball. I considered telling you, but I did not want to spoil your trip. The Padres are in town to play the Nationals at the end of the month. If you had only just waited..." Ward did not appear to be scrutinizing my story more than necessary. It was true, after all.

"Oh, so, about the coins. Could you maybe ask around, some of your contacts, and have them keep their eyes open for that coin collection? Whoever this guy is, I'm sure he will try to unload some of these coins soon enough." Ward studied his second Lucas in the light, used his knife to remove some floating particle from it; he frowned at the tiny interloper but then shrugged and took a drink anyway.

"Roger," I said. "I mean, yes, okay, I can do that." I was such an imbecile. Some mastermind.

Ward studied me suspiciously for a moment then laughed and saluted me with embellishment. "Aye-aye! Thanks, Kyle. Just keep me posted."

"I sure will. So, cookies, and coins, is all that Mrs. Pequod's daughter's theory is based upon?" I asked, trying to sound curious and conversational.

"Well, Mrs. Pequod was also a stickler for setting the deadbolt on her door, and the security system each night, and neither of these were in place. The door was locked but had just been pulled shut. No fingerprints unfortunately," Ward said, shaking his head. Suddenly, he ceased shaking his head. Full stop. "Huh. Have I been saying Peapod this entire time? But, you're right, her name is Pequod. How did you..." I dropped my fork.

We both watched the fork fall and clatter when it hit the floor. In a series of whip pans, we looked at each other, and then back at the

fork, as though it were a hand grenade. Then we looked back at each other again. "Oops. It must be the second Sbagliato," I said meekly. It was a poor excuse for an excuse.

"Kyle, how did you know that her last name was Pequod and not Peapod?" Ward studied me closely as he asked the question. Suddenly, this was an interrogation. I had to think quickly.

"Ward, you know me, I am always reading, and *Moby Dick* is one of my favorite books, so I guess I just misspoke," I replied, reaching over to the next table, which was vacant to take an unused table setting in order to glean a fresh fork. Not that I was hungry - I had all but lost my appetite - but I wanted to interfere with Ward's scrutiny.

"No. No, it's not. No one's favorite book is *Moby Dick*," Ward said coolly, gazing at me sternly. The intensity wavered and his face softened. "No, I distinctly remember you praising *The Shadow of the Wind*, and telling me all of the reasons why it was your favorite. I have read it and can see why you like it." Ward took a drink of his Lucas and then a bite of his pizza, without ever taking his eyes off of me.

"Yes, of course. You have a good memory, Ward. *Moby Dick* is just my pretentious favorite book answer, like when I tell people that *The Seven Samurai* is my favorite film," I explained, not really even convincing myself.

"Okay, Kyle, well, in any case, it was just curious is all that you corrected me on the name, even by accident," Ward reasoned, still measuring the gravity of the revelation in his head.

"*Jurassic Park*," I blurted out, unsolicited, immediately wishing I could be extinct.

“Right,” Ward said, briefly confused. There was nothing right about this at all. “Oh, so, in addition, to the cookies and the coins, it turns out that Mrs. Pequod” - he stared at me as he enunciated the name as if he were savoring it like chewing a chunk of whale wax - “had a defibrillator, so a heart attack was quite understandable. However, her defibrillator was programmed to send regular updates wirelessly, of the readouts of her heartbeat,” Ward noted.

At this point, our server came to the table. He looked at Ward, then me, tennis match style, and decided that he preferred not to interrupt whatever tension we were experiencing. He shuffled away, without uttering a word. That traitor. I stewed quietly but also succeeded in remaining emotionless.

Ward continued, “Because her daughter was so insistent about foul play, we did some checking into these readings. The spike at the time of death, while tragic, was also within range of an actual heart attack, however, instead of hitting on her own wi-fi network, the reading was transmitted via a wi-fi hotspot on an iPhone, according to the MAC address.”

My iPhone, on the edge of the table, had just chirped a notification. I quickly and deftly stowed it away in my jacket pocket. “Twitter is so obnoxious,” I remarked apologetically.

“So, Kyle, that's what I have been working on. We're on the lookout for alias Roger Jamison, those coins and trying to track down that phone. What else have you been up to?” Ward asked, knowingly. Or did he know? Testing the waters or not, this was very much a test of my nerves.

“Oh, you know, work, Pittsburgh, stuff,” I said feebly, fighting the primitive urge to throw back my chair, and run out of the pizzeria and never look back.

We continued eating and drinking in silence for several minutes. Truthfully, I consumed little of my pizza, but continued cutting and halving pieces into smaller pieces, as though I were reverse engineering a matryoshka pizza doll.

Our server returned and deemed it was safe to speak. Ward looked hopeful when dessert was mentioned, but in spite of his sweet tooth, realized that a budino would be inopportune that evening. We split the check, as we normally did.

“Ward, I'm sorry that I have not been the best of company. I should not have had that second Sbagliato, or I should have chased it with more water. I am starting to feel unwell,” I confessed, the only confession I was prepared to provide at that time. And it was true, I did have a headache. I could not stress that enough and it was certainly due to stress and duress.

“It's okay, Kyle. I hope it passes,” Ward placed his hand on my shoulder and squeezed warmly. I flinched a little. Did he notice? Probably.

We collected our jackets, pushed in our chairs and started to walk to the door. The Da Marco employees thanked us and wished us well. Suddenly, Ward stopped. “Oh, Kyle, I almost forgot. I have your book to return to you. *Crime and Punishment*. For Raskolnikov, living with that guilt, how awkward and nerve-wracking,” he said, laughing discretely. Or was it discretely? I really did have a headache.

“You can keep it a while longer, Ward. I'm in no rush,” I assured him, although I was in a rush to get as far away as possible, as soon as possible.

“Don't be silly. I have it in the car. It will just take a second,” Ward insisted. He opened Da Marco's door and we walked down the faux-

stone, but actually concrete steps to Woodmont. "I'm parked just over here," he gestured to the left, and started walking in that direction. I followed him.

"I had to work today and was in a hurry so I took one of the cruisers. Anyhow, your book is in the backseat. Thanks again for the loan."

And there we stood. I waited for him to fetch the book for me, and he waited for me to... I do not know what.

"Kyle, would you mind? I tweaked my back a few days ago, and I think reaching around in there would aggravate it," Ward said, holding his back, but not holding back a wince of discomfort.

I opened the back door of the cruiser. The book was almost on the other side of the car. Those Ford Crown Victorias were behemoths! I could not reach the book without climbing into the back seat of the cruiser, and sliding over. Just as I had the book in hand, I heard Ward talking to someone. He was on his phone, and mentioned something about a MAC address.

I had committed the perfect crime. I had been unable to ward off chance, and chance had put Ward onto me, and I was my own worst enemy. The enemy of my enemy was my friend, Ward Crenshaw. No "h."

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