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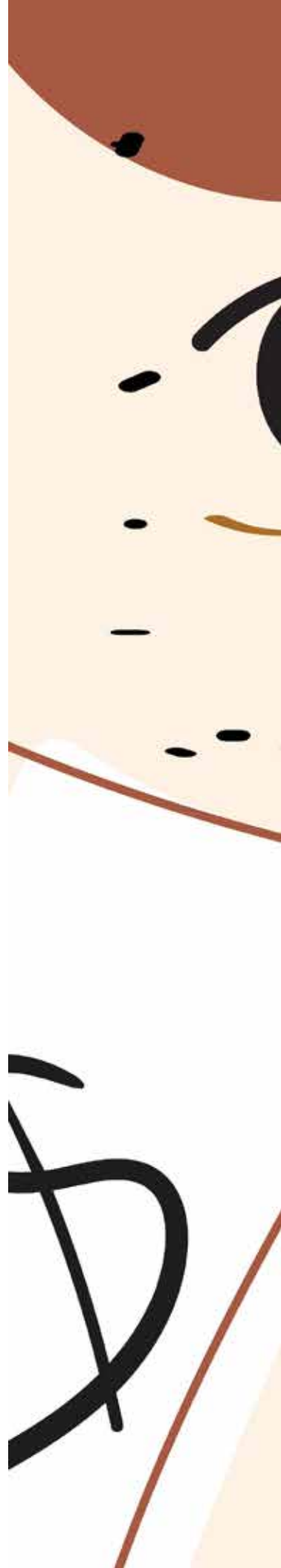
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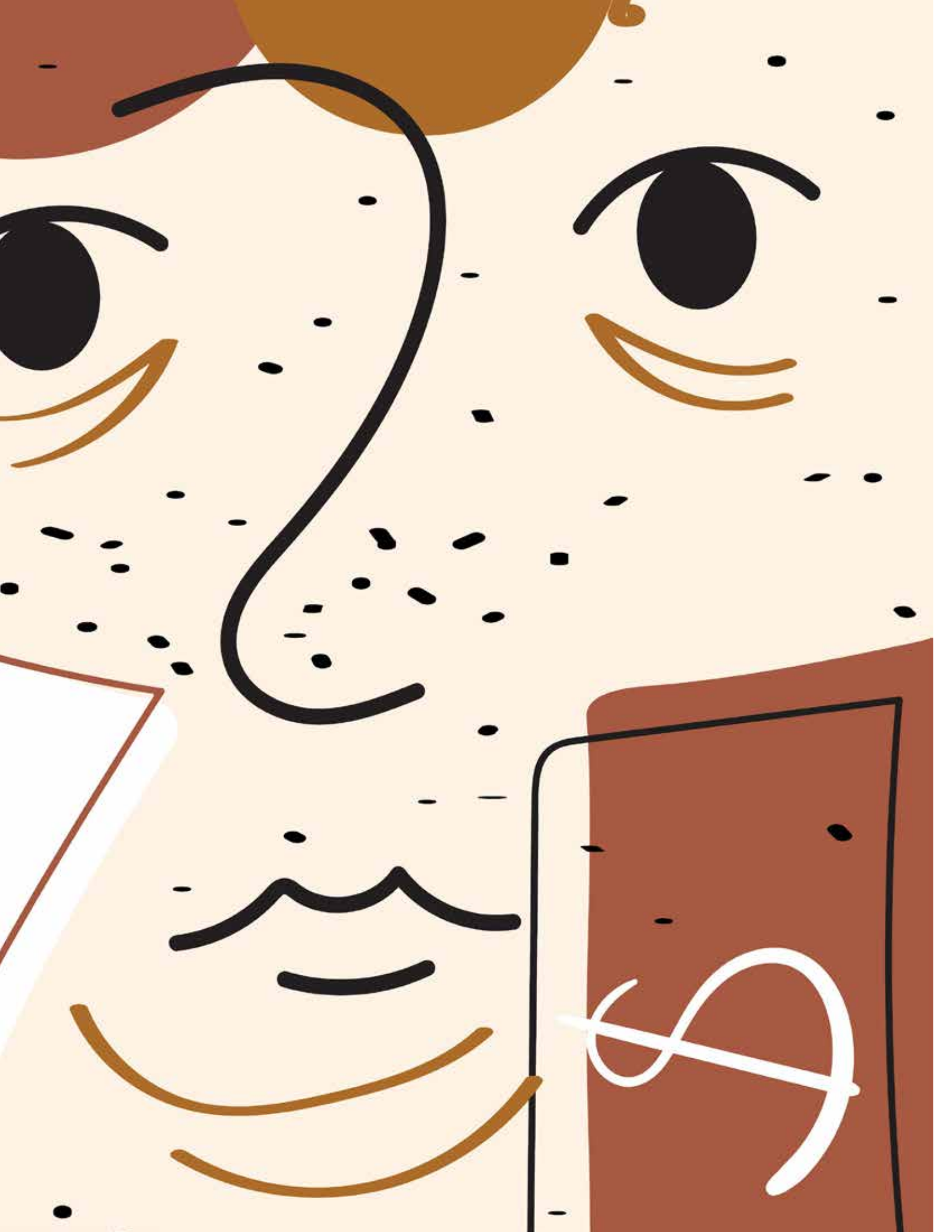
CRIME BY WILLIAM BURKE

The bus door swooshed and I stepped onto the kerb. The morning sun splashed the storefronts with goodwill and optimism. It was a morning to glory in the Lord! The exclamation burst free from the book I was reading, *And Quiet Flows the Don* by Mikhail Sholokhov. Good old Mikhail. Stalin's favorite epic novelist. He escaped the gulag but was consigned to the remainder bin of literary history. I had spent the night reading Sholokhov, and craving dumplings with sour cream. I headed into the pub to finish off a chapter.

The Corrib was a real Irish pub full of real Irish bartenders, fair-faced young men and women newly arrived from Kerry, Cork, or Dublin. Their signature trick was to draw a shamrock in the foam of your stout.

I took half the pint in one long thirsty pull, and looked around at the dark wall paneling, the dartboard and Guinness posters, steel kegs stacked in the hall, and a few other graveyard shift-workers.





I pulled out Sholokhov but let it lie like a doorstop on the counter. I realized I had no will to open it.

I was going to lose my job. I guarded a warehouse full of laptop computers, tablets, and phones and this morning I had fallen asleep on the job. I missed the hourly check-in.

The salesman for Vice Lock Security Temps had convinced the owner of the warehouse he needed top-notch security. Me.

I had presented as a wandering scholar-errant to the hiring manager at Vice Lock. She had red hair escaping her ponytail in three directions at once and sipped coffee from a “Number One Mom!” mug with a chip on the rim. She made the criminal history check and I was in.

At the Corrib this morning I took off the last of the Guinness. The bartender already had a second pint for me. I would be all right. I had not been at Vice Lock long enough to have to account for a gap in my work resume. Everything was going to be all right.

“You looking for a job?” a man asked. His face held no expression, and that is not easily done.

“I already have a job,” I said.

“Maybe you have time for another?”

“Maybe.” I was asking myself yeah why not?

“Let’s talk out back.”

“Sure.”

Beyond the back door of the bar, we tucked up beside a dumpster.

“So what is this about?” I asked.

“It’s a house. Lots of cash.”

I thought what the fuck? At this point in my life I was into drugs and my judgement was not so good. But did I look that desperate?

“What’s the cut?” I asked.

“Seventy-thirty.”

“Go forty?” I figured a professional would bargain.

“Thirty-five.”

“Okay. And we count together.”

He gave me a look then. He even stepped back to widen his perspective. Of course we would do the count and split together. Specifying that was as good as telling him I was not in the union.

“Sure. We’ll order out for pizza,” he said. “Make a party.”

“Okay then. I’m in. My name’s Ken.”

“Yeah. And I’m Daffy Duck. Meet here tonight at nine.”

Staring at the mirror in my bathroom with a joint burning my fingers I took stock of my existence. I had just agreed to commit a felony.

I was going to lose my job. I guarded a warehouse full of laptops, tablets, and phones and this morning I had fallen asleep on the job.

I arrived a half hour early. I smoked a cigarette, looking over the world with a newly hatched criminal's eyes.

The alley was barely lit by a hooded lamp that hung over the back doors of the Corrib. Across from the alley was a car body shop. The local car thieves could grab a pint while their prize was chopped up.

Daffy Duck came over to me with a duffle bag hanging from his shoulder. "You ready?"

"Yeah. I'm good."

"Okay."

He led me to a silver-grey sedan and we headed up into Chestnut Hill. At Skyline Terrace my partner brought the car to a stop. Trees blocked the street lights. We worked our way along a hedge of hydrangea bushes to the back door of a house.

My partner in crime laid the duffle bag on the ground. We waited, only the chant of crickets and the howl of a night bird. Once I went through the door of the house I would deserve every bad thing that would ever happen to me.

"Okay." He pulled a crowbar out of the bag, the wicked old-fashioned kind with a hook and double-pronged blades.

He handed me a steak, sealed in a store wrapper. The sell-by date on the tag still had a few days to go. "Get rid of that. I never risk there being dog."

He dug through the litter of leaves and rocks under the shrubs and picked up a plastic case. He popped it open and took out a key.

"When we get in there, hang back and listen. The old folks sleep upstairs. I'll work faster if I feel safe. That's your job. Got it?"

"Yeah."

We crept down the hall, one foot planted while the other settled into place, until we reached a door.

Daffy Duck opened the door to a library and started pulling books out. He flipped through the pages and his hands filled with bills, fifties and hundreds. "They hide it in the books," he said.

I stood on guard in the hall. A car swished by on the road. A tree branch tapped on a window.

Something thumped onto the landing at the end of the hall. Soft padding of feet towards me. An enormous orange tabby cat. It took a seat in front of me. I reached down and it purred and rolled its back against my hand. It arched and arched its back and then lost its balance and flopped upside down onto the floor at my feet.

"Hey!"

"What?"

"I need you in here. This is fucking amazing. Every freaking one! This is too good."

He pulled out a handful of plastic grocery bags and handed me one. I went to work. Some books held a dollar or two and some held a few hundred. A five-volume Shakespeare had two hundreds and a fifty. A copy of Raintree County with the original jacket art, the hills of south Indiana birthing a shape curvy as Marilyn Monroe, had a lump in the middle that had stressed the binding but only yielded 23 dollars.

I settled into a harvest worker's rhythm. Steady. Never hurrying, never pausing. I thought of a summer that I spent painting a picket fence. I painted every board. Two coats. A pleasant summer with an achievable task. I could do three sections before the sun got too hot. Everything made sense.

The light came on in the hall. Footsteps coming towards us. Not thinking of consequences, I stepped out into the hall. A woman hurried to me.

"You're here. Come quickly," she said. Her kerchiefed head and thin neck sprouted from a floral print dressing gown, flowers dark in the dim light swirled amidst tangles of leaves and stems.

"Come." The woman tugged my arm.

The special committee that had convened in the back of my mind to debate what was going on reached a conclusion. She had not called the police. She had some trouble and wanted me to help with it.

"Okay," I said.

I gave a discreet thumbs up sign to Daffy Duck hiding behind the door. He turned back to the shelves and pulled the next book. Apparently a confused elderly woman was just something to manage.

The light came on in the hall. Not thinking of consequences, I stepped out into the hall. A woman hurried to me.

The man in the bed had died. His eyes stared at the ceiling. "He's getting cold. I better call an ambulance," the woman said.

"No. We don't need them. Let's just let him lie."

I imagined the look on a paramedic's face when I tried to tell them I was the overnight caregiver. My prospects in life would not be advanced by a midnight conversation about what I was doing here.

"We'll check in with the doctor in the morning," I said.

"Are you sure?"

"It's what's best."

On the bedside table was a copy of *Finnegans Wake*. I opened the book and there it was. The great trickster's signature. A first edition. Really. The new-born criminal in me realized this book was worth more than all Daffy Duck's trash bags of cash.

"Could you bring me a tea?"

"Certainly."

"Simon was always so kind to his students. I hope some of them will come," she said, settling in to a recliner.

"I'll get the tea."

Daffy Duck had gone. Should I follow him out the back door? But the old woman wanted tea. I found two bags of blackberry spice.

"Here you go," I said.

The bedside lamp cast warm tones. She sipped the tea. I sat down in the caregiver's chair. I told myself I am the caregiver. For a while at least.

"When did you meet?" I asked. I had read somewhere that people who have gone down the road into dementia mostly lose the here and now; the there and then is often just waiting for a chance to be reborn into words.

"We were children. Just little children dolled up for a dance. He was so tall."

"Where was that?"

“Connecticut. I was at a school. You slept there. In rooms with a few things you brought with you so it would feel like home. I had a friend. Anna Salmstrom. Her parents had come here from Sweden to build a factory to make small rubber contraptions that helped automobiles go. I only wanted to study. I was reading Homer. Really reading it in Greek, but Anna was a livewire. She got us tickets to the Poacher’s Ball. Simon was down from Dartmouth for the weekend.”

“And you stayed together?”

“Every single day. I minded the babies. When they were children I calmed their wriggling by reading to them. Our first son went through a time of calling himself Achilles. Then when it was time to meet girls he went back to Walter. Simon was always with his students or in his study. We were all so proud of him. So proud.”

I wanted to ask her name. But the caregiver she thought I was would know her name.

The house sighed and settled around us with small creaking sounds in the walls and the distant swishing of wind along the eaves. We had all the time in the world. We didn’t. We never do. But it’s nice to tell yourself that sometimes.

The dark was losing its hold on the sky. The woman drifted into something like sleep.

I walked down the hill and settled into a bus shelter. I had taken the the Wake, pulled it out and opened it. It had been read until the binding was loose. The river ran on and everything one man thought and felt flowed into a story that was all stories. This way to the museum we make of our days. The book reads you, my Joyce professor had said. She had a collection of yellow scarves and a fountain pen she kept full of green ink. She said she wanted her notes on our papers to encourage us. Embark into the book, she would say at least once a class. It is a night voyage, your experience of the text will be shaped by the memories and associations you have gathered along your way. Like any book, but more so. Just connect and flow.

But what point literature? I asked my memories. No future for us. Chunks of ice the size of Delaware falling into the ocean and spoiling the news cycle. Why do anything? The last time it all fell apart, as the Visigoths, Ostrogoths, and all the other Goths pushed through and turned the Roman slave plantations back into farms, as the holy and apostolic Catholic Church set about burning every book filled with wisdom and knowledge it could find, a few hundred Irish monks sat out the centuries copying those last books.

They believed books were how heaven spoke to us. How we would build everything again. Maybe better next time. Rising at dawn to accept my bowl of porridge and hurry to my desk. Something would be preserved. Or even if not. I would go on in the face of impending doom. We all would. Those of us that cared. Those of us who wanted to hold onto some of the beauty. Maybe somebody somewhere somehow would know we tried.

Ex Libris Library of Simon Woolheart was embossed on the title page of the book I had stolen. I could steal a rare book, but tearing a page from it was a river I would not cross. A bus came to the stop. Its door swooshed open. I handed the book to the driver.

“I found that on the bench,” I said. “Can you take it to a lost and found?”

“Sure. Whatever.”

So ended my life of crime. I begged my way back into the tower. Each working day I slip into a tweed jacket and stride into my classroom like it is the only place on the planet that matters. Sometimes at night I dream I have lost all my lesson plans and committed an unspeakable, unknowable, crime. I sit up and listen to the house, to the night, to everything I will never know. Soon it will be time to go to work. That is the thought that lets me sleep again.



WILLIAM BURKE

I live and write in Portland, Oregon. I tell people I meet from other parts of the country that my city is not a hellscape or warzone as some would have it, although some of the coffee shops are assailed by long lines and competition for seating. I wrote this story after a man approached me when I was waiting for a bus to work. We chatted a bit and he tried to recruit me for a breaking and entering job. Noting his neatly clipped mustache, collared shirt, and poplin jacket, I guessed he was a somewhat ham-handed undercover cop using this tactic to suss out shady characters like me. I did not take him up on the job, but I did start shaving more often and wearing slightly neater clothes to my caregiver job.