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New Fiction

THE TOP HAT BANDITS AND THE COLONEL MUSTARD CONSPIRACY

by Robert John Miller



They used to keep the money in a pouch attached with Velcro to the inside of the toilet tank, but they had to change things after they'd been caught once by a neighbor when the toilet clogged and he took off the lid to prevent an overflow. That night he simply took what they had left and kept quiet, but once he knew that they knew, he came clean and used the information to blackmail them for a few thousand every time he came over, an agreement they accepted and honored, and as long as he didn't get greedy they thought of him more as a silent co-conspirator than as a blackmailer. Of course, they also assumed that he would assume that they wouldn't stop their scam, so they had to continuously find new locations to hide the money, as they were certain he would be searching for new spots every time he used their bathroom.

Eventually they came up with a rotation of four spots — behind the washing machine, inside the washing machine, in the hamper with the dirty laundry, and in the pile of freshly folded clothes — and one of them would check the money and move it to the next spot soon after every one of the neighbor's bathroom pit stops. This method guaranteed their knowing should he ever take the money, and added an extra layer of security since he probably wouldn't waste time searching old locations twice in one night. It was all just a precaution; they hoped that he was happy with his couple grand every month and would eventually give up looking altogether.

Getting the money into circulation was another issue. Although their bills were absolutely identical to the regular currency, the bank tended to notice situations that just didn't fit. Large amounts of larger bills almost always created a hassle, so they carefully selected a mix of smaller bills to hand off in small, casual transactions. For their bigger real estate projects — turning vacant lots into condos, turning condos into resorts — they would make sure everyone was drinking during their discussions and make sure the cash was quick and exact. As long as the count was right then the banker couldn't issue any complaints without also exposing himself as a slightly drunken incompetent. They had plots to get someone on the inside of the bank, but they were also afraid of being more easily exposed, and generally the income generated from their early real estate investments kept them legit and on the books.

They hadn't created a completely clean and airtight situation, though, because of all the variables that weren't related to money: location, for example, or the strategies of the competition. Or suppose you just have a string of bad luck and fall into a bad situation: if you're on the losing end of things, an endless supply of cash will only make the winner much richer than he should be, and possibly suspicious. Sometimes the wisest thing a crooked businessman can do is go bankrupt.

Every month, if Charles and Maggie won the neighborhood Monopoly tournament they hosted (which was the result at least 10 times annually for the last 3 years), they would wait for the last guests to leave, uncork a bottle of Champagne that had been waiting for them in the back of their refrigerator, cheers themselves, congratulate each other on any small detail they noticed in the other's play that was particularly advantageous — a palmed bill here or a distraction at just the right moment there — and generally delight in their banditry. In their fantasy, the Top Hat Bandits — the name they called themselves privately because of their consistent choice of place marker, though not openly as the term "bandit" combined with a winning percentage so far above average might arouse the wrong kind of attention — didn't conceive of themselves as white collar criminals robbing from the man on the street and driving their competition slowly into bankruptcy, nor as counterfeiters devaluing the purchasing power of the dollar through inflation, nor as developers buying an entire city with ill-gotten financial gains, nor even as common thieves. No, the Top Hat Bandits were criminal masterminds of the people, loved and admired for their rebellious, anti-establishment spirit, monopolizing for the greater good.

MINI MAYHEM:
TALES TOLD BY
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New Fiction

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They were romantics, like the film versions of bank robbers from the 1930s; for them, it wasn't about the money. And after they fucked those nights, they often wept together out of sheer exhaustion.

If they didn't win — or rather, if they lost even despite the great odds against it — they took the loss hard. They drank straight bourbon, no ice, and sometimes picked a bit at the other's performance — an obviously ("I can't believe no one saw") palmed bill here or a distraction that was almost too late ("seriously, that was almost the end of it") there -- or they just turned on the television. To lose after an earnest attempt was virtuous; to lose after having such wild advantages seemed pathetic. On these nights the thrill of everything was gone for them, like having a panic attack on a roller coaster. They might have sex, but if it was ever memorable, it was for the wrong reasons.

It was after one of these nights that Charles decided he wanted out.

* * *

— What do you mean you want out?

— I want out.

— When you're a Top Hat Bandit, you're a Top Hat Bandit all the way.

— Maybe we could just split up. I'll play as the old shoe. I'll keep quiet.

— But this is our thing, it's what we do. You're the one who came up with the name! You're the one who bought the second Monopoly set for the fake bills! You're the one who tried to bribe our neighbor Daryl before he blackmailed us for more money!

The argument continued, turning one way and then the other, until it was Maggie convincing Charles to stop their banditry, and a sudden reverse — a nostalgic word, or a memory tied to a funny catch phrase — would bring the argument full circle again. Finally, the following day, the Top Hat Bandits came to a decision. At midnight, dressed in black, they tossed a chunk of raw steak (infused with liquid tranquilizer via a flavor injector that came with their rotisserie) to their dog, moved his dog house, dug a hole six feet deep, dropped in a lockbox full of one Monopoly set's worth of treasure, covered the hole, moved the doghouse back, spit on their hands, shook on it, took a shower, made love, and slept deeply.

* * *

At the next month's tournament, Daryl was the first to arrive, as per usual. He ducked into the bathroom, relieved himself, checked the pouch, and walked back out before he had even finished fastening his belt.

— There's no money in the pouch.

— I know. We're out of the game. We're going straight. No more counterfeiting.

— You can't just go and do that without even a warning.

— This is your warning right now. The money's already gone.

— I don't believe this.

— We've talked it over, and we're prepared to not use the bathroom all night if you really don't believe us.

— I need that money.

— It's gone. We buried it.

— You buried it?

— Yes.

— I don't think you understand the implications of this.

Daryl explained how every month he plays as conservatively as possible, slows the game down if he can, just to last until the intermission. Then, he goes to the bathroom, opens the pouch, takes out the few extra thousand dollars in small, clean bills, and sells them to Brando for real dollars. Brando only buys from him if he's still in the game at intermission because he needs clean bills — people would start to notice if the bank was suddenly empty and the wealth was suddenly redistributed. People make their bets to win, place, or show when they arrive, and during intermission Brando slips extra funds into different players' accounts to help stack the odds in his favor. No one ever notices because no one's counting their money that carefully and no one's touched the bank. He always loses a token percentage but mixes his own money in with the rest and comes out with a book showing nice, clean, neighborhood party winnings. After all, what's cleaner than neighborhood board game tournaments? He comes off looking like a pillar of the community, supporting local entertainment projects while keeping neighborhood dues low. Good enough for the IRS, and everyone has a good time.

— We're talking about Brando, the retired math teacher?

— Except he's Brando, the money launderer. Mafia.

— So we've been unwittingly running a black market gambling hall and helping the mafia launder money.

— Yes.

— And this is why attendance is so high when we invite people to come over and watch us play Monopoly.

— Exactly.

— And he knows why we always win.

— He's convinced you're former Mormons, intuitively good at board games after lifetimes of experience.

Charles and Maggie had lost the tournament the last two consecutive months, unprecedented in three years of hosting, and Brando was calculating the odds of a third loss at 50:1, against. And yet, their loss now seemed almost inevitable, and the rumor that they thought was in jest — that they had thrown the last two games — suddenly seemed especially disconcerting. And now, in full awareness of their entire situation, it became impossible for either of them to act naturally.

Brando was set to lose a small fortune, and his bosses would surely be none too happy.

The doorbell rang. The party was starting.

* * *

Long ago, Brando learned not to talk about his private business affairs in public places — even in the residences of trusted neighbors — and this lesson paid more dividends than even Brando knew about. For example, what Brando did not know about this particular evening — nor did any of the other guests — was that the FBI was listening. Having tracked Brando for years, a man with links to even the most distant revenue streams of his family's business, the investigators were permitted by a federal judge to turn on a bug as soon as Brando entered the home of Charles and Maggie.

With the exception of the unusually large crowd cramming into Charles and Maggie's small living room, the evening started out the same as any of the other evening tournaments. Charles manned the snack table; Maggie greeted guests; the room buzzed with chatter. Brando, who the couple had been subconsciously avoiding, offered ominous words of encouragement: "Make sure you win tonight. I'd hate to see your bad luck continue."

* * *

Daryl had contemplated rushing out to the 24-hour store and picking up a new Monopoly set and arriving just slightly late for the tournament, but he thought the new bills would stand out and look too obviously new. Charles and Maggie's money all looked the same; it all had the same amount of use. That option gone, he decided to play aggressively (or, as he later termed it, "Trump style, my new strategy"), trying either to win a distinct advantage early on and have the normal amount to sell to Brando, or otherwise lose early on and have a valid excuse as to why he didn't have anything to sell that evening. He was successful in implementing the latter half of his plan: after some bad early investments on and around Virginia Avenue, Daryl ran into some trouble with the tax people, sold most of his property at a loss, shacked up for a night on Baltic, and went bankrupt soon after a few nights in jail and an expensive on-location survey of the land near the St. James lot. So it goes.

Then, about halfway to intermission and after a tight roll that almost went off the table and moved the top hat just beyond a bankruptcy-inducing stay at a luxury Boardwalk hotel (and instead into a \$200 cash bonus), Charles called a timeout. Most of the crowd thought that calling a timeout was a bit odd — indeed, none of them had ever recalled another case of interrupted game play before intermission — but they were also convinced that Charles knew the rules better than anyone else and no one wanted to look like a fool when proven wrong with references made to the official rule book, so they let it go. With a secret wink and a casual ear-pull to acknowledge the wink and a nose scratch to acknowledge the acknowledgement, the Top Hat Bandits called a secret meeting in the closet of their bedroom.

The secret meeting was called to order in proper form with the usual singing of the "Top Hat Bandit Anthem" and the usual taking of the Top Hat Bandit Oath but then immediately descended into general panic. And during this panic, in addition to trying to calm each other down, ideas for game strategy, and suggestions from both sides to look more confident and stop sweating so much, they each uttered multiple incriminating phrases such as "I can't believe we've been running a black market money laundering ring for the mafia for the last three years," "We never should have buried those counterfeit bills," and "You're a Top Hat Bandit. Now start acting like one." The meeting adjourned after the decision to delay the game as long as possible to ensure they lasted until at least intermission and hope Brando also bought phony bills from someone other than Daryl, and (obviously) after the singing of the "Top Hat Bandit Anthem (Closing Ceremony)."

* * *

On the verge of insolvency, already beginning to liquidate their underperforming properties, no one was happier to hear the intermission bell ring than the Top Hat Bandits. And when the FBI, having listened to the wire hidden between the shared wall of the kitchen and the back wall of Charles and Maggie's closet, decided to raid the home as a now-or-never opportunity to catch red-handed the Top Hat Bandits (who until this evening weren't even on the FBI radar), no one was more relieved than Brando, satisfied that a tournament so interrupted meant all bets were off and certain that he, serving as President of the Neighborhood Association, was legally permitted to keep a book for a community party. And when the federal investigators demanded that the "Top Hat Bandits" come forward, and when Charles and Maggie, stunned, tried to explain that they were just hosting a Monopoly

tournament, that they were "avid Monopophiles," most of the guests were laughing, assuming this performance was an elaborately staged joke, this tournament (coincidentally) being hosted on the first of April. But no one was laughing when the local newspaper printed a front page story headlined "Top Hat Bandits Go Directly To Jail."⁽¹⁾ a story filled with information leaked from one of the investigators detailing the secrets of the Bandits' counterfeiting and money laundering ring, or later when the same paper printed another front page story headlined "Top Hat Bandits Get Out Of Jail, Free,"⁽²⁾ a story detailing the release of the Top Hat Bandits and the confusion caused by the earlier story.

Although the Mafia, convinced that Charles and Maggie knew overwhelmingly less than they first assumed, largely ignored them (but did cover their attorney's fees as a gesture of goodwill), and even though they were acquitted from all charges and served no jail time, Charles and Maggie still lost most of their friends after the local paper elaborately explained how they had cheated at a family board game for three years running; of those friends who remained, none (with the exception of Daryl, who, recently married and moved across town, was now scarcely seen) would indulge them in a single game of Monopoly. And so, the Top Hat Bandits officially, and permanently, disbanded.

Of course the lives of Charles and Maggie continued, without Monopoly. Once, they tried to play each other, Charles picking the old shoe and Maggie choosing the dog, but they knew each other too well; they might just as well have stayed on the same team and played against no one. For months they were plagued by a vague, confused, empty feeling.

Until, one evening, skimming through the local paper, Maggie noticed a small, classified ad for a local, ongoing, monthly Clue tournament. She read the ad again, three times, then four, stared at it, studied it, furrowed her brow, tapped her fingers a few times on the Monopoly table. "Oh, Charles," she called.

And, under assumed names, the Colonel Mustard Conspiracy was born.

1. This story proved to be one of the most controversial in the paper's recent history, evidenced when the following day's editorial office was flooded with letters expressing confusion and consternation, sent in by various members of the local haberdashers' unions and calling for immediate dismissal of the headline writer.

2. This story also proved to be one of the most controversial in the paper's recent history, evidenced when the following day's editorial office was flooded with letters from those same haberdashers, complaining of not enough coverage of a real hat bandit who had recently begun burgling their shops and who (they claimed) was inspired by a recent, poorly worded headline in this very same paper.

*Robert John Miller thought of this story while considering the best ways to hide money in a toilet. His work has recently appeared in *Bartleby Snopes* and *DOGZPLOT*.*

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