

A Family Tradition; by Calvin Beam, 2020

The day I turned eighteen, my parents told me to go steal my birthday present.

First, you should know this wasn't a surprise. It was more of a rite of passage, a family tradition if you will. My father is a thief, his father was a thief, his father was a politician and his father was a thief. It's in our genes.

Second, I wasn't supposed to hot wire a Corvette or knock over a liquor store. The birthday theft is trivial, like swimming in the shallow end of the pool.

A card propped on the breakfast table read, "Today You're a Man; Happy Birthday," which was a heartwarming touch. Inside, it told me to go to Luckman's Greeting Card Store and there was a picture of a rubber duck.

To be clear, even the deep end of the family business does not involve mugging, robbing, or violence of any sort. My relatives enter buildings they do not live in and take things they do not own, mostly expensive stuff from rich people. It provides us with a comfortable life, although it can involve improvised relocations in the middle of the night. It's also how my cousin Joey wound up with the nickname "Inmate."

Back in my room, I sat at my computer and solved the Purdue math problem of the week in 14 minutes. That's well off my best, but I was having trouble focusing. My acceptance letter from Princeton was pinned to my bulletin board, and I wondered if they'd expel me for petty theft before I enrolled. I sighed. Obligations, like kissing Aunt Imogene's stubbly cheek every holiday, are part of life.

I shuffled back to the kitchen.

"We'll have cake when you come home," my mother said. She kissed me on the forehead.

My father dropped me at the Luckman's entrance. "I'll be waiting out back," he said.

It literally took one minute to case the store. Except for the cashier and me, the shoebox-sized room was deserted. The ducks nested on the top shelf in the rear, just above the gnome figurines and next to a door with an "Employees Only" sign taped to it.

I reached up and took a duck. You know that angel and devil who perch on your shoulder when you have a dilemma? The angel said steal it and the devil said put it back. Logic dictated a compromise.

I put the duck on the counter and the cashier rang up \$17.50. "That's an awfully expensive duck," I said.

He didn't look up from his full-time job of texting on his cellphone. "It's European." He put the duck and the receipt in a Luckman's logo bag.

"Can I go out the back way?"

"I'd be embarrassed too if I just paid \$17.50 for a rubber duck," he said and nodded.

The balled-up bag and receipt went into a trash basket in the Employees Only room. My failure as a thief was nothing compared to my failure as a liar.

"Take it back and then steal one," he said.

A walk around the block later, I was in front of the still-texting cashier.

"I want to return this." I put the European duck on the counter.

"Why?" he said.

"Does it matter?"

"Not really," he said. He pushed aside a styrofoam coffee cup and a half-eaten orange-glazed doughnut on a napkin to reveal a sign taped to the countertop. "No

Receipt, No Return.”

“I bought this five minutes ago.”

He tapped the sign with his index finger.

“The receipt is in the trash can in the back. I’ll go get it.”

“You can’t go back there; it’s just for employees. I’ll get in trouble.”

A mix of anger, frustration and desperation bubbled inside me.

“I was just in there,” I said.

He shrugged.

I wanted to roll the duck in the orange glaze and force-feed it to him. Instead, I said, “Here, you keep it.”

He did, secreting it somewhere behind the counter.

I returned to the duck shelf and tried to shield the cashier’s view with my body. I picked up two ducks and looked at them.

“Are you starting a flock?”

I jumped at the cashier’s voice just behind me. It was the first time I knew he had legs.

“I’m looking for an American duck,” I said.

“They’re all the same.”

Frustrated and desperate, I tossed one duck into the air and stuffed the other in my pocket, then turned to flee. But he didn’t buy my misdirection. He tripped me and I fell chin first.

A few moments later, my father and the cashier were standing over me.

“That didn’t go very well, did it?” my father said. A warm blush bloomed on my face.

He offered me his hand and pulled me to my feet. “It wasn’t supposed to,” he said. “I told Ricky here what was going to happen, and I slipped him a twenty to make it hard on you.”

Ricky nodded and went back to the cash register.

“You wanted me to fail?” I said.

“I wanted you to learn the lesson everyone in our family learns,” he said. “When the going gets tough, the tough go to jail. The smart ones back off and live to be free another day.”

“You’re not disappointed?”

“Nah,” he said. “I knew your heart just wasn’t in this. Go to college. Do your math. Watch the subtraction though. You’re not very good when it comes to taking stuff away.”