

“the money”

An essay on the one time my family apartment was broken into while we were away on vacation and how I solved the Mystery of the Stupid Morons. Appeared in The New Yorker, June 13, 2011

All the Dominicans I knew in those days sent money home. My mother certainly did. She didn't have a regular job outside of caring for us five kids so she scrimped the loot together from whatever came her way. My father was always losing his forklift job so it wasn't like she had a steady flow ever. But my mother would rather have died than not send money back home to my grandparents in Santo Domingo. They were alone down there and those remittance, beyond material support, were a way, I suspect, for Mami to negotiate the absence, the distance caused by our diaspora. Hard times or not she made it happen. She chipped dollars off from the cash Papi gave her for our daily expenses, forced our already broke family to live even broke. In those times when nobody gave a damn about nutrition we alone among our friends never had juice, soda, snacks in our apartment. Not ever. And you can forget about eating at McDonald's or having clothes with real labels. The family lived tight and that was how she built the nut that she sent home every six months or so to the grandparents.

We're not talking about a huge amount either. Two, maybe three hundred dollars. But in Santo Domingo of those years, in the neighborhood in which my abuelos lived, that 300 smackers was the difference between life with meat and life without, between electricity and stone age. All of us kids knew where that money was hidden too—our apartment wasn't huge—but we all also knew that to touch it would have meant a violence approaching death. I, who could take the change out of my mother's purse without even thinking, couldn't have brought myself to even look at that forbidden stash.

So what happened? Exactly what you would think. The summer I was 12 my family went away on a 'vacation'—one of my father's half-baked get-to-know-our-country-better

sleep-in-the-van extravaganzas—and when we returned to Jersey, exhausted, battered, we found that our front door unlocked. Stuff was knocked over, including the empty Presidente can my mother considered a decoration. My parents' room which was where the thieves had concentrated their search looked like it had been tornado tossed. The thieves had kept it simple; they'd snatched a portable radio, some of my Dungeon and Dragon hardcovers and of course: the remittances my mother had kept hidden back in a drawer.

It's not like the robbery came as some huge surprise. In our neighborhood cars and apartments were always getting jacked and the kid stupid enough to leave a bike unattended for more than .1 seconds was the kid who was never going to see that bike again. There was no respect. Everybody got hit; no matter who you were eventually it was your turn.

And that summer it was ours.

Still we took the burglary pretty hard. When you're a recent immigrant and you've put up with a lot of bullshit because of it, it's easy to feel targeted. Like it wasn't just a couple of assholes that had it in for you but the whole neighborhood—hell, maybe the whole country.

I felt that for certain and shame too, wondered if it was something we'd done, but I was also pissed. I was at the stage in my nerdery when I thought Dungeons and Dragons was going to be my life so the loss of those books was akin to having my kidney nicked while I slept.

No one took the robbery as hard as my mom, though. My father for his part shrugged it off, wasn't his money or his parents after all; went right back to running the streets but my mother stayed angry in a Hulkish way none of us seen before. You would have thought the thieves had run off with 10 million dollars, how she was carrying on. It was bad. She cursed the neighborhood, she cursed the country, she cursed my father and of course she cursed us kids, swore that the only reason that the robbery happened was because we had run our gums to our idiot friends and they had done it. Something we all denied of course. And at least

once a day usually while we were eating she'd say: I guess your abuelos are going to starve now.

Just in case we kids didn't feel impotent and responsible enough.

Anyway this is where the tale should end, right? Wasn't as if there was going to be any CSI style investigation or anything. Should have been bye-bye money, bye-bye Dungeon Masters Guide. Except that a couple of days later I was moaning about the robbery to these guys I was hanging with at that time and they were cursing sympathetically and out of nowhere it struck me. You know when you get one of those moments of almost mental clarity? When the nictitating membrane obscuring the world suddenly lifts? That's what happened. For no reason whatsoever I realized that these two dopes that I called my friends had done it. They'd broken into the apartment while we were away and taken our shit. I couldn't have been any more sure if you'd shown me a video of them doing it. They were shaking their heads, mouthing all the right words but I could see the way they looked at each other, those Raskalnikov glances. *I knew.*

Now it wasn't like I could publicly denounce these dolts or go to the police. That would have been about as useless as crying. Here's what I did: I asked the main dope to let me use his bathroom (we were in front of his apartment) and while I pretended to piss I unlatched the window and then we all headed down to the community pool as usual. But while they dove in I pretended to forget something back home. Ran back to the dope's apartment, slid open the bathroom window and in broad daylight wriggled my skinny ass into his apartment; his mom was of course at work.

Where the hell did I get these ideas? I have not a clue. I guess I was reading way too much Encyclopedia Brown and the Three Investigators in those days. What can I tell you—that's just the kind of moron I was.

Because if mine had been the normal neighborhood this is when the cops would have been called and my ass would have been caught *burglarizing*—oh the irony—imagine me trying to explain that one to my mother. But no matter: mine wasn't a normal neighborhood and so no one called anybody. The dolt's family had been in the US all their lives and they had a ton of stuff in their apartment, a TV in every room but I didn't have to do a great amount of searching. I popped up the dolt's mattress and underneath I found my AD&D books and also most of my mother's money. The dolt had thoughtfully kept it in the same envelope. Walked out the front door and on the run back to my apartment I kept waiting for the SWAT team to zoom up but it never happened.

And that was how I solved the Case of the Stupid Morons. My one and only case.

The next day at the pool the dolt announced that someone had broken into *his* apartment and stolen all of *his* savings. This place is full of thieves, he complained bitterly and I was like: No kidding.

Took me two days to return the money to my mother. Truth was I was seriously considering keeping it. I'd never had that much money hand and who in those days didn't want a Colecovision? But in the end the guilt got to me and I gave it to her and told her what had happened. I guess I was expecting my mother to run around in joy, to crown me her favorite son, to at least cook me my favorite meal. Nada. She just looked at the money and then at me and went back to her bedroom and put it back in its place. I'd wanted a party or at least to see her happy but there was nothing. Just 200 and some odd dollars and fifteen hundred or so miles — that's all there was.