

Clarence Campbell was balding, slightly portly, and, in all of his forty-two years, twenty of which he had spent as a CPA for a semi-prestigious, middle-sized firm located in a semi-obscure section of Beverly Hills, he had never broken the golden rule. Aside from not ever breaking the golden rule, Clarence Campbell had never broken any rule. As a child he always did as his elders wished and everyone loved him. Thirty vacuous years later only his wife, two lovely children, and dog loved him. The cat was indifferent. To everyone else, Clarence Campbell was someone who arrived at nine every day, did some work, ate his lunch from a brown paper sack, did some more work, and went home at five. He never bent the rules, angered the boss, or spent long minutes chatting and flirting by the drinking fountain. Clarence Campbell was happy in his conformity and no one minded. In fact, no one cared. But one day, a Thursday to be precise, this would all change.

On this Thursday Clarence had a hard day at the office. He had to cut his lunch hour back twenty minutes to complete the day's prodigious workload. But that was to no avail. For the first time in his life Clarence left the office after five — five fifty-three to be precise. And Clarence didn't like that. He wanted to get home swiftly so that his dinner, which his wife always had ready at the stroke of six, wouldn't get cold. To do this, Clarence pushed down on the gas pedal of his generic, blue Buick a little harder than usual, and drove, for the first time in his life, four miles over the speed limit. But as always, when one is in a hurry on the highway, something is bound to get in the way.

In the way this time, an old lady was driving forty-two miles an hour in the far-left lane, affectionately known by Los Angeles speed freaks and the rest of the world as the fast lane. Clarence followed the old lady for several miles, hoping she

would change lanes and let him speed by. She wouldn't. Finally, Clarence couldn't take it anymore: people behind him were honking, it was already way past dinnertime, and he knew he already had a good chance of missing *Wheel of Fortune* if this went on any longer. Emotion took over where reason had always ruled. Clarence swung his Buick into the lane to his right, pulled next to the old lady and her battered, puke-green Toyota, then swung sharply left. He clipped her hard enough to force her out of control, out of the lane, and to a fiery death. The fast lane was clear and Clarence sped towards home, his adrenaline pumping.

But soon, very soon, the adrenaline stopped and Clarence realized what he had done. The horror! The horror! He killed a woman for no other reason than driving slow! Had anyone seen him? Surely someone was now calling the police. Or perhaps there had been an officer in his blind spot who would now drag him in for murder. What would Marge say? He would miss the dinner she had lovingly prepared for him. What would his children say? What would they do with a felon for a father? Surely now, their futures were ruined. No decent college would admit the child of a crook. Clarence didn't know what to do so he turned up the radio and continued north on the Ventura Freeway as if it never happened.

When a horn sounded to his right, Clarence almost lost control. The police! They witnessed the whole act! Clarence looked, expecting the worst, but only saw two young men in a fiery-red, convertible sports car. Earlier Clarence had seen them in his rear-view mirror. Now they were next to him, smiling and gesturing thumbs up. The passenger raised his arms and clapped his hands. Clarence smiled, gave the two young men a polite wave, then faced forward. The sports car accelerated and vanished into traffic.

"Those two young men approved of what I did," Clarence thought, "I wonder if anybody else noticed?" He looked around but all the other drivers were absorbed in their solipsistic motoring.

Clarence remembered the traffic report on the news station so he flipped the dial on his radio and listened, dreading mention of the 101 Freeway. None came. The announcer talked about an overturned truck in Santa Monica and lots of other accidents in places like Fullerton or Monrovia. He never mentioned the San Fernando Valley. "Maybe it's too soon for the news," Clarence thought as his exit swiftly approached.

At home, Clarence sat for a minute in the garage to regain his composure. He didn't want Marge to think anything was wrong. He wanted her to be happy. Once composed, Clarence left the car, crossed the lawn, entered his house, patted the dog on the head, and greeted his wife with a kiss and a hello.

"You're late," she said.

"Uh, yes . . . I had some extra work at the office. I was going to call but I didn't think it would take so long."

"You must be hungry then. Your dinner's in the microwave. The kids and I already ate."

Instead of eating in the dining room, Clarence positioned himself in his chair and watched the news. He watched until eight then read his evening paper. Nowhere was there mention of the old lady's fiery freeway death. It was as if no one noticed, or no one cared.

That evening Clarence had a hard time getting to sleep. For the first time in his life he broke a rule. Not only had he broken a rule but he committed a felony. His conscience bothered him. He contemplated turning himself in but he couldn't do it. He and his entire family would be disgraced. And besides, Clarence couldn't stand to miss work for a trial and jail sentence. He felt that the firm needed him. Maybe the morning paper would make mention of the accident. Maybe the police would think the accident was just that, an accident. Then he wouldn't be hunted like a common criminal. To be arrested in front of the neighbors would be terrible. Maybe it was all a bad dream and it would be over in the morning.

But Clarence knew it wasn't a bad dream. The car had dinks and scratches from the Toyota and Clarence knew it. He saw them in the garage. Clarence knew it wasn't a bad dream and in the morning scoured the paper in search of any mention of the accident. He didn't find anything, not even a word.

Friday, at work, Clarence couldn't get his deed off his mind. He had committed a felony and no one noticed. No, someone noticed. The two young men in the sportscar noticed but they didn't care. They found merit in what he did. Friday, at four fifty-nine, Clarence slipped a stapler into his briefcase and took it home with him one minute later.

Monday morning Clarence sent the office boy to the supply room for a new stapler. He didn't question Clarence, he only did his job. No one in supply came by to ask what happened to the old stapler. Nor did his boss come by and tell Clarence to find a new job because he wouldn't tolerate his employees stealing from the office. It was the most dreadful eight hours Clarence spent in one place.

After work, away from the rush hour traffic and on the side streets by his house, Clarence drove thirty-seven miles an hour instead of his usual thirty-five. And once, only once, he didn't make a complete stop at a stop sign. No one noticed, no one cared. Clarence started thinking.

Tuesday, during his lunch hour, Clarence went to Rodeo Drive and picked out a fancy-looking store. He went in and looked around. Racks and racks of fancy merchandise filled the store. Fancy ladies in fancy clothes looked through racks and racks of fancy merchandise and fancy clerks took fancy credit cards from the fancy ladies. Clarence looked at a fancy price tag and felt dizzy. Did anything here sell for less than three figures? Clarence thought not as he made his way to the men's department. There he looked at fancy ties, fancy suits, fancy cologne, and fancy accessories.

He was startled by a clean-cut, fancy young man who approached him from behind. "May I help you, sir?"

"No, I'm just . . . uh, yes, you can." In a glass case lay a gold and platinum pen and pencil set. Clarence pointed at it. "I'm looking for a birthday present for my son. I was thinking about that." It was the third lie Clarence ever told in his life. He enjoyed it.

The young man glided behind the counter, opened it, and pulled out the pen set. "A good choice, sir. This is one of our finest." He placed it on the counter for Clarence to inspect. On the PA someone was paged and the clerk looked up. "Excuse me, sir," he said, "that's for me. I'll be right back."

Clarence was alone at the counter. His palms were cold and sweaty. He looked around. The fancy ladies were still flashing fancy plastic at the fancy clerks and no one watched ordinary Clarence. He looked back at the fancy pen and pencil, looked around again, then, in a moment of great fortitude, slipped them into his pocket, and calmly left the store. No one stopped him.

Outside, Clarence felt as he did after he hit the old lady. But no one died this time. He went back to work and contemplated his deeds. How long could this go on? How long would it be before the police caught him and took him to jail? Eventually he would be caught. What would happen then? Clarence didn't want to think about it. Back in the office he hid his booty in the bottom of his bottom drawer and finished his work in his usual, nondescript manner.

He also tried to live his life in his usual, nondescript manner. But on Wednesday he went to a drugstore and managed to slip three ball-point pens, two ace bandages, and a package of prophylactics into his pocket before he left. No one noticed, no one cared. Even Clarence didn't feel the guilt he felt earlier. In fact, Clarence was beginning to enjoy his little life of crime.

Clarence was beginning to enjoy his life of crime so much that he never noticed the beginning of the changes. Thursday morning he tightened his belt one notch tighter than it had been tightened in the last seven and a half years. He attributed it to clean living and the health food kick Marge had been pushing on the family the past month.

Thursday before work Clarence committed what he considered to be his most daring crime to date. He went to a gas station, not his usual Mobil in the Valley, but a Chevron near Olympic in West L.A. He took care to pick a station devoid of customers. When he found this particular Chevron he edged his blue Buick next to the pump and filled his tank. The station's attendant was busy in the office reading a magazine. "Probably a Playboy," Clarence thought as he pumped gas. When he finished, Clarence got into his car and burned rubber onto Olympic Boulevard without any intention of ever paying for his twelve gallons of unleaded. "I bet he doesn't even read the articles," Clarence thought as he headed to work.

At work, Clarence took an hour and five minutes for lunch and even spent several minutes between accounts chatting at the drinking fountain. Several people were amazed, but it wasn't earthshaking. Not yet.

Friday, Marge asked Clarence what he had done to his hair. "What have you done to your hair, Clarence?" was exactly how she put it.

Clarence looked up from his granola and toast and said, "What was that you said, dear?"

"I said, 'What have you done to your hair?' Have you been using a new shampoo?"

"Why do you say that, dear?"

"Because it looks darker and fuller. It makes you look younger."

"I didn't notice."

"Well, I like it. Maybe I should use whatever you're using."

Clarence buried himself in the front page of the newspaper. "It's not a shampoo, dear. I think it's all that healthy food you've been serving lately."

Marge clapped her hands together in glee. "Oh, I knew it would do us some good. I'm so happy. Mrs. Smith at my bridge club says..."

Clarence stopped listening and read with interest an account of two youths who robbed a liquor store. "I wonder

if I could do that?" he thought. He thought he could. He looked up from his paper. "I might be home late tonight, dear, the boss wants me to do a special presentation on Monday and I want to do a good job."

Marge left the table to go to the kitchen. "That's OK. I'll keep your dinner warm. Just don't get home too late."

"I won't, I won't," Clarence thought.

And he didn't. After work he drove east on Wilshire, into Hollywood. In Hollywood he found a small, dingy liquor store and went inside.

"What'll it be?" the small, dingy clerk asked.

Clarence put his hand in his jacket pocket. "I'd like a fifth of Cutty Sark." He pointed his finger inside the pocket. "And all of your money."

The clerk, who had his back turned to get the scotch, was caught by surprise. He couldn't reach under the counter to get the forty-five he kept there for occasions like this. Most people who robbed liquor stores were poor teenagers or junkies in need of a fix. "Anything you want, sir."

Clarence remembered something he had seen on television. "And keep your hands above the counter. I know you have a gun down there. You can't fool me. Put the money in a bag."

"Anything you want, sir." The clerk started scooping nickels and dimes into a paper bag.

Clarence motioned threateningly with his pocketed hand. "Start with the twenties, I don't want spare change."

The clerk jumped, then shoved paper money into the sack. "Put the booze in there, too." Again he motioned with his hand. The clerk did as instructed. When everything was in the sack Clarence grabbed it with his free hand and swiftly backed out of the store. Once on the sidewalk he darted around the corner to his car and raced home.

In his garage, Clarence hid the sack in the trunk and went back to being a suburban husband and father for a while.

On Saturday morning, when the kids were off with friends and Marge was off playing Bridge, Clarence got the sack from his car and counted his loot: three hundred and twelve dollars and fifty-five cents. Plus a bottle of Cutty Sark. He drank and contemplated what to do. Finally, he decided to go to the mall.

At the mall Clarence shopped for a new suit. Lately, many of his clothes didn't fit well and it was quite a long time since he had bought a new suit. Such a long time that most of his clothing was far out of style. He looked and found, on sale, a pinstripe suit by one of the more popular designers. When he tried on the pants Clarence found his waistline had shrunk several inches. He found a new pair that fit, then looked at himself in the mirror. He could not believe that the man who stared out at him was himself. Not only was this man more thin and fit than Clarence had been in the last twelve years but he had a full head of dark hair. Not the salt and pepper gray with a few stranded wisps on top Clarence was accustomed to. Clarence pinched himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming. He wasn't.

And Clarence wasn't dreaming when he bought, for the first time in his life, a designer pinstripe suit. He wore it out of the store, feeling stylish for the first time in almost twenty years.

Back home, Clarence fixed himself a sandwich, drank, and thought about what to do next. He wanted to do some real crimes. The kind that got onto the ten o'clock news. He thought about robbing a bank. But no, that was too heavy, too big for now. Maybe a savings and loan. No, that too would have to wait for later. Clarence decided to practice on some more liquor stores and small establishments before moving on to banks and savings and loans. Yes, he would wait until dusk then go down to Hollywood and do some crimes. He would tell Marge he was going out to see a movie. Her PBS special was on television so she wouldn't mind him leaving for a few hours.

When Marge got home she commented favorably on Clarence's new suit. She told him it looked stylish and this annoyed Clarence because he already knew it looked stylish. He told her he was going to see a movie after dinner and she told him it would be fine because her PBS special was on and she didn't like to be disturbed while it was on. This also annoyed Clarence because he already knew her special was on PBS and she didn't like to be annoyed while it was on.

What didn't annoy Clarence was the pleasure he got later when he went to Hollywood and robbed four liquor stores, a gas station, a restaurant, and three people who just happened to be walking by at the wrong time. When Clarence got home that night he had more than a thousand dollars stashed in the trunk of his car.

Over the rest of the weekend Clarence found suburbia closing in on him. He found it too tame for a man of action and intrigue. First thing Monday morning he would do something about it.

First thing Clarence did was not go to work. He called in sick. Instead he went to Hollywood and looked for an apartment. After several hours of searching he found a small, one-bedroom place off of Fountain and Vine.

Clarence decided he would also need a moll. All the gangsters in the movies had molls, so why not Clarence? He was ready to go to the big time. But a problem arose. Clarence didn't know how to go about getting a moll. In the movies the pretty girls always seemed attracted to the hero. Nobody had been attracted to Clarence since he began his life of crime. He needed to think, so he went out for lunch and a walk. On Sunset, inspiration struck. Actually, Clarence looked up and saw a billboard advertising classified ads in the Los Angeles Times. He decided to advertise.

First he would need a phone in his new apartment, his hideout. He couldn't have beautiful young women calling him at home. What would Marge think? Work was also out of the question because people would get suspicious if his

phone kept ringing. The only person who called him there was his wife. Clarence went first to the phone company then the newspaper building. By the time he was finished, the rent, phone deposit, ad, and basic necessities for his apartment, took most of the loot from Saturday night. Clarence knew he needed more money. It was time for the big stuff.

He thought about robbing a bank — he would need a note and he would have to keep the teller from pushing the silent alarm. He wanted to make it fast and efficient.

Clarence spent Monday night in his apartment and Tuesday morning called in sick from a nearby payphone. His own phone would be turned on before noon and calls should be coming in from his ad. He would have to be back before twelve. That only gave Clarence about two hours.

The first hour he spent looking for an appropriate spot. It would have to be a bank far from the busy main streets. At eleven-ten he found his bank.

Clarence went inside, waited in line, then presented the teller with a note he had carefully written the night before. It read, "This is a stick-up. I have a gun. Do not touch the silent alarm or I will be forced to shoot. Please put all your money in a sack and hand it over quietly. Thank you." The teller read the note, looked at Clarence, then did exactly as instructed. Clarence's mother always told him as a child that if you can't be anything, at least be polite. It would always get you somewhere. Little did she know how her advice would be used.

Clarence left the bank in a fast walk, ran to his car, and drove back to his apartment. He had pulled his first successful bank job. It was a thrill unlike any he ever felt before.

Clarence counted out his money and waited for the phone to ring. His take was mostly in ten, five, and one dollar bills with a few twenties sprinkled in. This dismayed Clarence. It wasn't as large as he hoped. Next time he would specifically request larger bills. In the meanwhile he still had several thousand dollars.

At one-forty the phone rang and shattered the silence of the room. Clarence jumped. On the fourth ring he answered it.

"Hi, I'm calling about the moll job," a female voice said.

"Yes, this is the right place."

"Is this serious? Not just a publicity stunt for some studio or something?"

"No, no, this is a real job."

"It's not a prostitute job? I don't do that stuff."

"No, no, I'm a married man."

"That doesn't stop a lot of guys . . ."

"Don't worry, it's not that kind of job."

"So are you conducting interviews or what?"

Clarence gave the caller his address and arranged to meet in about two hours. At three-thirty Mary Ann Magruder arrived. Mary Ann was a pretty blond who had come to Hollywood from someplace in the mid-west. To be in the movies was her childhood dream and when people asked her what she did for a living she told them she was an unemployed actress. What she didn't tell them was that she waited tables to pay the bills. She was sick of shuffling food. Clarence's ad looked like an interesting lead. He offered her twice what she was currently making and she took the job.

"So what do I have to do?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing much. Just be a moll."

"Just be a moll?"

"Yeah, I'm going to be a big gangster and I need a moll. A life of crime can be a lonely one."

Mary Ann almost wrote Clarence off as one for the loony bin right then and there. "I don't know about this," she said.

Clarence told her his story, from when he had run the old lady off the road to his bank robbery.

"How much did you make?" she asked.

"Almost four thousand dollars."

"Four thousand, huh?"

"Yeah, I hope to make even more."

"When do I start?"

"Uh, how about tomorrow? Maybe about noon."

The future moll grabbed her purse and coat. "Oh, good, I always like jobs that let me sleep in."

"See you tomorrow, Mary Ann."

Now alone, Clarence felt pleased. He had a hideout, a moll, and enough money to keep him for a while. He knew he couldn't rob too many banks too often. Clarence felt on top of the world.

Wednesday, at noon, Mary Ann started work and for the next two weeks she and Clarence lived a life of excitement and adventure. But soon the excitement wore off. Robbing banks wasn't as thrilling as it once was. Neither was robbing savings and loans. Liquor stores ran dry. Drug stores became a let down. Restaurants became a stale idea and the gilt was peeling from fancy department stores.

One day Mary Ann showed up looking excited. "Clarence," she said, "I've been thinking."

"That's good." He was counting the money he stole from a McDonald's earlier.

"Clarence, have you ever done coke?"

"Sure, I've had Coke many times. I like it much better than Pepsi."

Mary Ann giggled. "Not Coca-Cola. Cocaine."

Clarence stopped counting. "No, I've never done anything like that."

"Look, Clarence, in this town cocaine is it. If you want to make a lot of money you sell drugs. Everyone in LA does coke and they gotta get it from somewhere."

Here was a crime Clarence had never thought of. "Tell me more," he said.

"Look, we got a few thousand dollars, right? Well, I know this guy that could set us up with some primo stuff. I also know people that would buy it from us. It's a lot easier and a lot safer than robbing banks. We could operate out of your apartment right here."

Clarence pondered. "OK, Mary Ann, let's do it."

They did it. On their first deal they bought a kilo of cocaine. Clarence was excited and intrigued by the white powder. He found it hard to believe that people could be so gung ho about it. But he did believe because the first kilo went fast, in almost three days.

With their second large shipment Clarence found himself rubbing elbows with Hollywood stars, producers, and famous members of the rock and roll industry.

A week later Clarence was having the time of his life and Mary Ann was making more money than she ever imagined. One night Clarence found himself with Mary Ann on the couch. They had just completed a big sale. The drugs and money brought out something base and primeval in them. The two kissed and smooched for a while then Mary Ann rolled on top of Clarence and grabbed the lapels of his shirt. She pulled and buttons flew like bullets. Mary Ann worked her way down, removed Clarence's pants, and squealed in delight. Clarence's hair wasn't the only thing that had grown.

Until his wedding night, Clarence remained a virgin. On that momentous occasion he made tender, bumbling love to his blushing bride. He had slept with no other woman until now. On this momentous occasion he made wild, passionate love to his ecstatic moll. Clarence completely forgot the job and family he long ago abandoned. He didn't need the mundane world anymore.

Soon Clarence was supplying half of Hollywood with their blow. Life for Clarence was better than it had ever been. But little did he know it wouldn't last long.

One day, a Thursday to be precise, while Clarence was busy counting Wednesday's profits and Mary Ann was busy measuring out the latest ten kilo shipment into ounces and grams a knock came on the door. Clarence answered it and two men burst into the apartment. Both were wearing sunglasses, pinstripe suits, and both were heavily armed.

The shorter of the two pointed a sawed-off shotgun at Mary Ann. The other pointed the largest handgun Clarence had ever seen at him and said, "Are you Clarence Campbell?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Good," the man said, smiling, "there's someone who wants to see you."

"Here?" Clarence asked.

The shorter man laughed. "Nah, you're coming with us."

"What about me?" Mary Ann asked.

"You too. C'mon, let's get going."

Where they went was a palatial home set far back from Sunset Boulevard in Bel Air. There was a guard at the gate and behind the gate a brick driveway at least a quarter-mile long.

"Who are we going to see?" asked Mary Ann.

"You'll see."

They saw. The two were hustled into the house, up a flight of stairs, and into an enormous study guarded by two men who had suspicious bulges under their jackets. Behind an enormous mahogany desk sat a powerful-looking man, respectfully graying, who wore an expensive black suit. He bore an uncanny resemblance to Marlon Brando. Clarence and Mary Ann were shoved in front of the desk. The man looked at them, puffed on his cigar, then looked at them some more. Finally, he spoke. "These them?"

"Yeah, boss," one of the gunmen said.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked slowly and precisely.

Clarence was sweating. He wanted to loosen his tie. "I think so."

"Good." His cigar went out and someone was immediately by his side to relight it. "Do you know what my business is?"

Clarence's clothes felt tight. "Cocaine?"

The man leaned forward. "Among other things." He leaned back. "I make a lot of money off coke in this city and you two have been cutting into my profits."

Clarence felt like he was suffocating. "I'm sorry."

"I don't like it when people cut into my profits."

A button popped off Clarence's shirt, then another. "I didn't mean to cut into your profits, sir."

"A lot of people get away with a lot of things in this city but when someone treads on my toes I find out."

Clarence's hair was falling out. "I promise I won't do it again." He desperately wanted to go home to Marge and the kids.

The man smiled. "You shouldn't count your chickens before they hatch."

One of the gunmen giggled.

Another button popped. More hair fell out. "I promise I won't ever do it again."

"I know." The man looked at his henchmen. "Take them away."

Clarence and Mary Ann were hustled out of the room but before they passed through the doorway the man in black said, "One more thing."

Clarence turned his head. "Remember this," the man said: "Crime doesn't pay unless you're me."

"Thank you, sir," Clarence said before he was hustled down the richly furnished hallway and back into the car.

"Where are you taking us?" Mary Ann asked once they were on the road. Night was falling over LA.

"You'll see," one of the gunmen said.

But as fate would have it, they didn't see. On the Santa Monica freeway something attracted the attention of a passing police car and seconds later they flashed their red and blue lights at the gangsters. The driver pulled over.

"What are you doing?" his partner asked.

"Don't worry," the first gangster said, "he's probably just gonna give me a speeding ticket."

The officers strutted over, shined their flashlights over the car's occupants, then asked the driver to get out.

"Don't say a word," the remaining gangster told Clarence and his moll. Clarence didn't. Neither did Mary Ann.

Clarence didn't intend to say anything. Every second ticked by like an hour as he watched the police conduct their business. They could save him from certain death but they didn't seem to notice. They didn't seem to care.

Suddenly, the police handcuffed the gangster and came back to the car for his partner. More police cars arrived and everyone was taken to the station.

Clarence was thrown into a cell where he secretly prepared himself to confess every crime he ever committed, from the day on the freeway to his latest dope deal. After several dismal hours, a guard opened the door and let Clarence out.

"Mr. Campbell?" he asked.

"Yes."

The guard led Clarence down the hall. "Your wife's coming to get you. It's a good thing she filed that missing person's report or we would never have captured those kidnappers. They might only have gotten a speeding ticket."

Worries of incarceration exited Clarence's mind. "Yes," he said, "it is a good thing. It's terrible to think that a law-abiding citizen like myself should have to worry about people like that."

The guard heartily agreed.

Out on the sidewalk, Mary Ann sat on a nearby bus bench. The rising sun was beginning to warm the air. Clarence sat next to her. "What are you going to do now?" he asked.

Mary Ann stared at her shoe. "I don't know. I think I'll go back home to the mid-West. All those movie people we supplied and not a single one of them offered me a part. Not even extra work. What about you, Clarence?"

Marge drove up in the familiar Buick. The dinks and scratches were fixed and the car sported a new, bright, blue coat of paint.

"I'm going back to my family," Clarence said, "and my job, I hope."

"Good luck. And keep in touch."

Clarence stood and went to his car. "I will, don't worry." He got in and closed the door forever on his life of crime.