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“Profile of a Recidivist”

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It was a March-like morning in January; perfect, under different circumstances, for brunch at Buckhorn Lake's Westwind Resort. It was, to be a day for no spoken good-byes. I sensed that this might be my last contact with Gina and Tia. I hoped my premonitions would be wrong; there was no point in alarming them. Furthermore, what I was about to do could be shared with no one. If things went wrong, I'd miss them both terribly. We had grown close. Gina the bright, winsome single-mom of thirty, Tia her bubbly, super-amiable daughter of eighteen months. We had sort of adopted each other, platonically. That little girl loved me, and didn't care that I was a parolee. And I deeply respected her mother, a woman of incredible courage and fierce independence.

Weekend outings were not unusual for us. They often invited me to dinner; we took long walks on brisk autumn afternoons; engaged in deep philosophical discussions about life and its promises. Now, I was about to betray the trust they had placed in me; about to betray the ideals I had espoused; about to violate the conditions of my parole; about to break the law, again.

This pernicious decision had not been easily reached. I had worked diligently to change my behaviour, develop some moral fibre and prepare myself for a productive life after prison. But my release had not been a smooth transition. Barriers obstructed me at every turn: employment, finances, divorce. People handle stress in different manners. Most handle them appropriately with adaptive coping skills and old-fashioned gut determination. Some people, however, do not cope as well. Alcohol, drugs, illicit sex, credit over-extension, family violence, and chronic depression are a few manifestations of dysfunction. I turn to "scams" - an illegal and socially unacceptable means of dealing with life's problems. That makes me a criminal and a member of a cultural sub-class that is difficult to escape.

Gina understood my struggles. She had faced more difficult ones resourcefully and with resolve. Emptiness engulfed me as we ate in the lakeside dining room. The rugged beauty of the Canadian Shield, the rustic ambience, the exuberance of Tia, the confidence of a trusted friend could not disguise my sense of doom. Memories of other failed relationships haunted me: I had been here before, in other settings, with other loved ones - pretending all was normal - when clearly it was not. But I am a professional at wearing a mask of pretence. Training since childhood has taught me to effectively hide my emotions; fear of failure causes me to withdraw in reticence. By conditioning, I am a great pretender.

Paradoxically, I am also a compassionate, talented human being capable of sustaining "normal" relationships under most, but not all, ordinary conditions. I am capable of love, honesty, loyalty, trust. I have integrity, albeit of a standard not recognized in most conventional circles. And it was integrity that was causing me to make this fateful decision. I owed a debt, a substantial escalating debt, to people with no patience for hearing excuses about a recession. I owed a loan shark and I was obligated to honour my debt, by both integrity and the threat of physical reprisal. I was indigent. Without money to repay the loan plus sizable interest, and loath to return to my old trade of robbing banks, I had bartered a solution. In exchange for acting as a courier and taking a package across the border into the United States, I would be released from my obligation and would earn some badly needed cash to boot. In the under-world, an agreement is one's bond. Any deviation from the terms of the agreement can result in torture and/or death. I was not told what I would be carrying and did not ask. One does not have to be a Rhodes scholar to imagine. I had no experience as a smuggler, but my middle-class appearance and criminal seasoning made me a suitable candidate. It would be a milk-run, I rationalized. By Monday evening my immediate problems would be resolved; I'd bring Tia a Teddy Bear back from Buffalo; next weekend we'd plan another outing - perhaps take in a Celtic music concert. Tia loves music and is, like her mother a natural dancer.

From Buckhorn, we drove to Apsley before heading home. Gina needed to practise driving and handled the rented Voyager van, that would soon cross the border, with ease. Tia played

quietly in her car seat" such a delightful, happy child. We'd make this trip again in Spring, I mused, observing the breathtaking winter wonderland with growing uncertainty. I was depressed. The risk was enormous, but calculated as the only acceptable option. Soldiers risk their lives in battle for patriotic reasons; my allegiance was to money. It left me cold and feeling very alienated.

The National Parole Board had assessed me as being a manageable risk suitable for reintegration into the community. Obtaining parole had not been easy. I had served approximately six years of a 14 year sentence for bank robbery. Physical violence had not been involved in my offences. My criminal record dated back to 1969, but was sporadic and mostly fraud related. There had been stretches of several years between offences, when I had lived, worked and behaved in a socially acceptable manner. I had extensive entrepreneurial experience and a background in advertising and marketing.

During my incarceration, I had used my time productively, earning a BA in sociology and doing some post-graduate course work. To finance my education, I wrote and sold magazine articles and short stories, and invested my prisoner's pay in course materials. It was not necessary for me to apply for bursaries or other tax-supported resources.

My commitment to adult education was passionate - believing that low self-esteem and lack of education crippled many offenders and increased the likelihood of recidivism. MacArthur College, at Queen's University, accepted my application to earn Bachelor of Education. Competition was fierce. Only one of every two hundred applicants was accepted, in 1990. I felt proud that I had earned the chance, under difficult circumstances. However, the Parole Board saw fit to deny my application for parole. It was too early in my sentence. The opportunity was lost.

Eighteen months later, circumstances had changed. My father was gravely ill and I had an opportunity to go home to join the family business. My parole application was given grave consideration and delayed several months. During that time I underwent intensive psychological evaluation and was declared a suitable risk for conditional release from prison.

In both cases, months of intensive preparation had gone into developing release plans; plans that would grant me the opportunity for a firm economic and social foundation. By the time the ponderous bureaucratic decision had been made, however, the windows of opportunity had closed. Opportunities cannot wait indefinitely. Conditions change, deadlines pass. In June of 1992, I was released to a halfway house, on day parole without prospects for a job.

As much as I had invested in myself during my years in prison, I was ill-prepared for the reality that faced me. Long lines of unemployed professionals queued daily at employment centres. Undaunted, I put out a stream of resumes, believing that my education and unusual life experience could be built upon effectively. Surely in the social services or alternative education fields, there was a niche for me - a place where I could make a contribution and earn a living. My aspirations may have seemed lofty, but work ought to be an extension of one's soul: creative, challenging, meaningful.

In the interim, I took a job, renovating a friend's house. Phil is a prominent member of the community and owns a holistic health clinic. It was under-the-table work, for less than minimum wage. Nevertheless, I was grateful and needy. Handyman skills are often exploitable. As weeks turned into months, I grew discouraged that my efforts to find employment had not produced a single interview. Then my marriage failed. Had it not been for the support of a psychologist, those supervising my parole, and some Quaker Friends, I might easily have strayed from the narrow path at that point. But, they sustained me, and showed confidence in me that strangers would not.

In September, Phil saw an opportunity to use my skills in his health business. Among other services, he envisaged an expanded role to be played in employee assistance programs. EAPs are generally insurance covered and thus lucrative. The clinic had much to offer those suffering from the chronic effects of work-place stress: counseling, physiotherapy, nutritional guidance, oriental healing techniques. My currency lay in marketing and counseling. It could be capitalized on to our mutual advantage. He offered to train and certify me as a colon therapist, a somewhat controversial alternative health technique. In exchange, I was to devote energy to marketing our services. I wrote

brochures, arranged workshops, set up direct mail advertising campaigns. This was unpaid work, with the promise of a golden egg at the end of a rainbow.

I developed a religious-like fervour for our cause and witnessed healings that bordered on miracles. People who had suffered from chronic conditions, despite years of standard medical treatment, got better naturally, without drugs or surgery. Finally, I had found my niche! A meaningful existence was at hand. Success would surely follow.

Phil and I were philosophically poles apart, but I was too naive and perhaps desperate for acceptance and security to notice. A friend tried to warn me, but I would not heed her caution. My vision was one of vocation; his was one of mega-bucks in an avant garde health fad. Phil wanted to develop a LaCosta-styled retreat centre, where wealthy hypochondriacs could be pampered into a state of well-being. I just wanted ordinary suffering people to find abundant health. I thought I could make a difference and do some good. My self-esteem needed to feel that I was of value.

Two fears are excessively problematic for me: failure and being broke. Both conditions instill shame, emotional baggage left over from childhood. It is a conundrum that I have never solved. When confronted with shame-provoking conditions, I crumple in self-loathing, and will do virtually anything to escape perceived torment: lie, cheat, steal, abscond.

My cognitive skills are sufficient to understand that this is irrational behaviour, but it does not resolve the gut terror that reduces me to making illogical and cunning decisions. Under such conditions, my decision making is greatly hampered and my capabilities are significantly reduced. Rationalizing illegal and immoral behaviour seems to become an ego imperative. Like an alcoholic who needs a drink to face certain realities, I need success and money to feel okay. The less successful, I am, the more money I need: to buy prestige, buy friendship, buy the trappings of success.

With hindsight, I see now that I had once again stumbled into a self-defeating trap, almost certainly designed to fail. But, I was blinded. Neither my parole officer nor psychologist recognized the danger signals. Indeed, I probably

represented the least of their caseload concerns. I didn't fit the needs profile of the average parolee and I displayed the pretensions of success. I believed in it, could taste, could smell the sweetness of success! Soon, I would make my shame-weary family proud of me. Soon I'd rid myself of the "ex-con" limitations.

Those expectations were tempered, however, with the reality of being financially insolvent. The halfway house excused me from paying board, much to my embarrassment. People loaned me their cars, gave me hospitality, loaned me money. My self-esteem quickly eroded. I needed to pay my own way, to cease feeling like a burden. Success was just around the corner; not a lot of money, not the kind Phil talked of, but sufficient to meet my needs, sufficient to live modestly well.

Parolees are not viewed as credit-worthy clients by financial institutions. Desperate for enough money to meet my living needs, I turned to a loan shark. Ex-cons know such people. Prison contacts introduce us to an assortment of underworld goods and services, usually to our detriment. I was looking for bridge financing, a short term loan for three or four months. My word was my collateral; it was received with conditional goodwill.

Meanwhile, at the clinic, my three month training period was nearing completion. Phil announced his intention to spend the winter in the Caribbean, on the tax free island where he is developing real estate interests. He passed me an exhausted client list, gave me an inspirational pep-talk that included assurance of a future partnership, and instructions to sell, sell, sell. Then he was gone. When paltry pay cheques started to flow in, some as low as \$25 a week, I began to feel cheated.

Canadians resist paying for health care services. The EAP market was going to take months, perhaps even years to develop. Most of my clients were receiving free treatment, so that I'd be able to gain the treatment hours necessary for certification. Each week I told myself and others that next week would be better. It never was. Then the phone calls started, reminding me of my rapidly increasing debt. Twenty percent interest calculated monthly on a \$2500 loan, became \$4300 in just three months.

It was such a small sum of money to risk my life over. However, when one is destitute, it is a fortune. I refused to rob a bank; approaching my family had too many shameful riders attached. Had I believed I had any other resource available, I'd have used it in the first place. So, I accepted the courier assignment, then took some money from the clinic, in case of an emergency. I rationalized that it was owed to me, anyway. If things went as smoothly as I hoped, I'd return it at the beginning of the week, and patch things up with the administrator. I rented the van and made the brunch date.

Tia and Gina hugged me good-bye, expecting to see me again within a day or two. The weariness in my soul, suggested that their expectations were unrealistic. I sucked up courage from a reservoir deep in my psyche, expelling emotional attachments from my conscience. One's savvy cannot be diluted with sentiment or moral prerogatives, when one is about to face the tiger.

Was I a habitual criminal, reverting to a pathological predisposition, or a victim of circumstances, whose conditioning prevented him from making proper choices? Readers can decide for themselves; clearly the experts don't know. There can be no question that I made choices, deliberately, without wrestling with severe ethical concerns. We may reason with our heads, but so often respond to impulses from our gut. So much of the essential me is a contradiction; I am both a healer and a crook - both genuine and fake.

I was in violation of my parole well before I attempted to cross the border. A rendezvous with known criminals, or anyone suspected of criminal activity was sufficient grounds to have me returned to prison. There is little need to dwell on the events that followed. Suffice it to say, my plans fell apart at United States Customs and I was forced to crash the border. A chase ensued. I managed to evade both the Border Patrol and New York State troopers, making me a fugitive in both countries.

Almost anyone can commit a criminal offence. Virtually no one can live successfully as a fugitive. It is the loneliest existence in the world, where polished pretension cannot assuage an alien heart. Fifty-eight days later, I was captured in an aborted bank hold-up and was subsequently dealt with severely in the courts.

There will be no parole eligibility for at least another eight years. At least that much of the future is secure.