

Una Selva Oscura

Contributed by Dave Breithaupt

Una Selva Oscura

Not long after I started going out with my friend Meg, I decided it would be good for her to meet some friends of mine. It's an important part of the early romantic dating phase, where you bond by sharing the bounty of your cohorts, so I took her to meet a couple of guys I did time with in federal prison. You see, my parents were deceased so I couldn't take her to meet them, not that these guys were any substitute for mom and dad. I had to start somewhere and I thought this would be a good pass/fail test. So off we went to my jailbird reunion. I really didn't put much thought into this.

In 2005-6 I served a year in prison for the "illicit sale of archaeological artifacts," a separate tale I won't go into here except to say that it left me with "a miserable, weary, split-up feeling" such as Kerouac described regarding the dissolution of his first marriage in *On The Road*. The friends we were to visit were released after me, having served sentences for varying lengths for various crimes of differing natures. Meg and I headed north to Cleveland from our home in central Ohio, to see Phil who was back with his family while trying to work some shifts in the local steel mill. Phil had been doing time on drug charges for his latest stint but also clocked some serious stretches earlier on for burglary and manslaughter.

Phil is best known for the record holding amount of money he burgled from a bank in California during the 70s (approx 30 million), which was chronicled in the book *Superthief* (with Rick Porrello). I remember watching 60 Minutes with him in lock up, a segment about some professional robbers. Phil turned to me and said, "any pussy can rob a bank, it takes a real man to burgle a bank."

Indeed, I still have the wire diagrams he drew for me to explain how to jump an alarm system. It's a thinking man's crime but unfortunately Phil was the only robber with this MO and his cross-country sprees were soon connected and he was captured. It was a good run though and I had to admire his artistry. I wondered now, if he finally had it all out of his system.

Joining us at Phil's was Marino, another fellow from our federal squadron who did a dime for milking our federal government of huge sums of money. Marino created fictional characters for his scam. This wasn't identity theft, it was identity creation. He drew benefits for dozens of his created characters in a plot so detailed that I thought it would have been easier to work a straight job. But Marino was a writer in his own way, making a cast so real, they breathed and expelled liquids and collected SS and health benefits as well as tax returns. Now we were all to meet at Phil's house for the reunion and for them to meet my beloved.

It was our first time together since our release. Phil's place was in an Italian neighborhood in Cleveland and we found it by following MapQuest. It was strange to see my old chums in street clothes after months in the same old, drab prison-issued garb. I saw a side of them I wasn't aware of in the Big House, their flair for Italian dress-ware side. How, I wondered, could Italians make great art through the ages, forge unique venues in cuisine and wine and then dress like shit? They were flashy shall we say, but not over the top, in that low-budget, b-movie, mafioso get-up genre sort of way. People really did dress like this I had to conclude. I'd led such a sheltered Methodist upbringing.

Phil's house was filled with with at least three generations of Italian ancestry. Conversations cross-hatched each other from the moment we walked in. Arms were waving, introductions made and food delivered to the tables. I tried to remember the names and who belonged to whom, all the while trying to check Meg's reaction. We had, it seemed, just walked into a set of the Sopranos. It was a lot to take in, hands were shook and backs were slapped. It was the extreme opposite of a sensory deprivation tank. I had a year to get used to these people but Meg was getting a crash course. I wondered suddenly if this might have been a bad idea. Marino's story about Phil and how he killed a pimp in Cleveland came to mind. I guessed it was too late to back out. Besides the food looked wonderful and was plentiful. We sat and broke bread. We absorbed the pasta and wine. Phil and Marino looked good, the outside life favored them.

Phil wanted to do a screenplay of the *Superthief* book. I was to give him some advice on the format, not that I knew anything about screenplays but I had looked it up. Soon we were listening to Phil reminisce about his life of crime capers. The man had served more than half of his life in the clink, things hadn't turned out the way he hoped. The kids mingled with us and Meg, with her background in elementary education, began to focus on them. Phil gave us his "best of" list of failed jobs, such as the train he robbed after hearing rumors of pharmaceutical stuffed cars which turned out to be Tootsie Pops instead, but which he took anyway and left on the nearest school playground. Then there were the hijacked FedEx trucks which turned out to be filled with federal agents hip to their heist when they opened the doors to exam their booty. The stories continued and Meg looked nervously at the kids. I could tell she didn't want them exposed to such cultural exchanges. She distracted them with games and kept trying to change the subject but my cohorts were hell bent on the stories of their downfall. I thought of a line from Genet's *The Thief's Journal*, "Yet, thanks to such guys, tragedies are possible."

Meg was growing antsy by the second and even had me wondering if we were witnessing a petri-dish for criminal breeding. What lessons would these kids take from their elders? That it was OK to rob a bank if you put some thought into it, no problem to kill people society as such, wouldn't miss? This really wasn't my milieu either. I was just an artifact

seller. We struggled on, Phil talked about some crazy scene he wanted to add to the Superthief book. Our stomachs grew full. The kids seemed immune to the Grimm Fairy Tales of their parents. The chatter became a dull hum.

We began a series of parting gestures, untangling and dismounting. The wheels were in motion in that household, who knew what would spring out of it? I hoped all the cannolis would take the edge off of Meg's lament. Later, on the ride home, I would attempt to do damage control.

"They are really nice people," I said. "Honest, they got my Walkman back when the Jamaicans stole it." Really, what could I say? She was right. The kids. What about the kids? "Don't worry," I said, "crime usually skips a generation." She wasn't convinced. We drove home in long stretches of silence, our bonding somewhat thwarted. Marino had given me a silk shirt that was too small for him. I promised Meg I wouldn't wear it and that seemed to patch things up. If only my parents had still been alive.