

Steal Big

By Allan C. Kimball

Yeah, I stole the money. So what? It's not like I was dishonest or something. Don't tell me you never stole anything. Everybody does. We start young and don't stop. Most of the time we steal small stuff and that never even seems to count. You know - a pen from an office, nibbling candy in the grocery store, a couple bucks from your girlfriend's purse, a DVD from Wal-Mart, driving off without paying for gas, meds from your grandma's bathroom cabinet. You know the drill. You've done it. But when we think we can get away with it, when we think no one is looking, or when the score is just so big we can't let it set on the table and walk away from it...that's when every one of us will steal big. That's what I did and I'm glad. You would be, too.

\$789,345. I counted every dollar. More than once. And I've got almost all of it right here, within my reach if I need it or want it, and nobody else is going to get it.

Buddy of mine once said that a buddy of his inherited \$100,000 from a dead aunt and he said that kind of money was "life-changing" money, and it's got to be. Go from a nickel-and-dime wage slave to having that kind of spare change, and your life just has to change. Get that new Hummer, get some new threads, get the latest techno gadgets, get a new girl. Life changing, sure enough, and look what I've got. 789,345 life-changing bucks. Well, I still got \$763,994 left after I bought all the stuff I needed. I would have stole all that stuff, too, but it's pretty difficult to steal a house, you know.

I stole the money and everybody knew. I didn't try to sneak around or something or make things up, not like those big shots at big companies who steal employees retirement funds, or lawyers, or politicians. They sneak around and pocket more money than I ever did, and they hurt lots of people, too. I stole the money, sure, but I never hurt a soul. Hell, nobody will ever miss that money. And like I said, I wasn't dishonest about it. Never told a lie in my life and I ain't about to start now. And I'm not an ungrateful sort, either. In fact, I'm very thankful and I want to give thanks to the two people made this all possible. Lupé and Uncle Sam.

Lupé was my best friend in Rusahfah. Man, could that Indian play poker. I'll bet he cleaned out everybody in the company. He's Navajo, you know, but skinny for a Navajo. Real quiet though, and I think it was that deal of being like a cigar-store Indian where their face never even twitches that got him along so well playing poker. Dude had no tells. Anyhow, we did two tours over there, playing MPs, which is not the kind of duty you really want, but we were grunts, you know, so we couldn't do anything else. We hit it off - me being from Arizona, too, and I never had anything against Indians. So, like a year after I get discharged, I looked him up because, you know, I just couldn't keep a steady job. Hard to keep your interest up working as a painter or a roofer or whatever the hell else I tried once I'd done time in Iraq. I even thought about joining up again, but, you know, why would I do that once I knew what the war was really like. And since it wasn't over, well, I figured they'd just send me back there. Maybe Afganistan. Or Pakistan or Iranistan - one of those 'stans. What's the difference? It's all dirt. That was the real bad part, how brown it all was. Oh, Lupé was always trying to be positive about things and when I'd say it was all brown he'd just shake his head no slowly, in that way he had that kind of said you didn't pay attention quite like he did. No, he'd say, it's not

all brown. It's tan and beige and sandy and khaki and dusty and coffee and chocolate and russet.

What's russet? I say.

Like a potato, he explains. He says you have to see the nuances. Like I knew what nuance meant. He explains that the Eskimos, they've got 100 different words for snow because it's so important to them and they're around it all the time. And he figures the Arabs they must have 100 different names for sand.

OK, he impressed me, but, I ask you, what do Eskimos have to do with the desert?

Anyway, I looked Lupé up, mainly hoping for a place to crash for a while since that last girlfriend had tossed me out. They all seem to do that after a couple months when I get tired of this job or that one. I called his cell phone, and there he was in Houston of all places. I expected him to say he was back on the rez, but he said he went to a job fair in Flagstaff and the Fed - that's the Federal Reserve Banking System - had this great deal and he signed up to be a canine security officer.

Can you beat that?

Exactly what he did with Uncle, walking dogs and wearing a weapon and a badge. After some training, they sent him to the Fed in Houston. He tells me they had two openings I might be interested in. Security officers. Lupé says they give preference to vets, and my experience fit right in, just like his did. I wasn't doing anything in Winslow at the time - cops wouldn't even let me stand on that famous corner, you know. Called it being a vagrant. And my bankroll was getting thin, so I hopped the Greyhound to Houston and got the job.

I think Lupé put in a few good words for me. We'd saved each other's butt more than a few times scrambling around Rusahfah. His dog would smell an IED and, bang, everybody tried to light up everybody else. You know those ragheads would plant those Improvised Explosive Devices in all sorts of places - mostly in the back seats of those tinny little cars they drive, but sometimes on camels and in carts and bicycles and once even in this kid's backpack. Girl couldn't have been more than 10 years old. If the sand monkeys didn't care, neither did we. We lit everybody up. I mean, you got to before they light you up.

The job was OK. No heavy lifting and I was pretty much inside in the air conditioning most of the time. You've got to appreciate that in a place like Houston where your head will melt if you're outside in the summertime longer than a half-hour. It was routine, pretty much the same thing day after day. Check this, check that. Walk around and check some more. Watch people off-load this and that. Watch them count money. I never realized just how much money comes through a Fed. Before I went to work there, I never gave the Fed a thought. I'd just hear about it on the news, and I thought it was just some government agency that pushed paper around with suits telling real banks what to do with their money, you know? Who to lend it to and for how much vig. Man, was I wrong. Turns out each Fed is loaded up with money, even a branch like the one in Houston. Turns out each regular bank has to keep some percent of their money in the Fed vault.

Hell, one day I'm working around the basement and walk by this table with bills piled on it. I stopped and looked, of course. Just stared. I must have been standing there drooling on my shoes because at some point one of the supervisors sashays up and makes a comment to me, laughing, saying all the new people stopped and stared at first, until

they got used to seeing so much money just lying around. She asks me did I know how much money was right there. On that table. Within arm's reach. Turns out it was a few million bucks. I don't remember the exact amount now - \$20 million - but she told me then and showed me a "ticket" that listed the amount and the signature of clerks who had verified the amount. Brand new, crisp \$100 bills that were scheduled to go out to the regular banks. Just sitting there. I could've picked up a few bundles, slipped them into my pockets, and just walked away. Of course, I'd have done that on Candid Camera. You probably figured out the Fed has cameras all over the place, even in the toilets, even night-vision cameras in the janitorial closets. But I couldn't stop thinking about all that cash.

I saw the inside of the vault, too, helping push carts of money in and standing guard while clerks put it all in its proper place. Cash, cash, and more cash. Lord, how much cash was in that vault? More than you or I could count in a lifetime. Then there was the money we burned. Oh, yeah, that's right, that's something they don't tell people in the street. The Fed burns money. Millions of it a week. Turns out that when bills get old and worn out, the regular banks ship them to the Fed in exchange for some of those crisp new bills. It all gets delivered by armored trucks, gets logged in by guards like me, gets brought down to the basement in what looks like one of those big laundry carts you see in motels, and gets counted a couple more times then gets run through a shredder and then dumped in our incinerator. You can see what a waste that is. Perfectly good money going up in smoke. I couldn't stand it. Sometimes it was my job to stand there and watch a couple clerks slide those bills into the shredder and I cringed every single time I watched it. What a waste. I thought about those wasted bills all the time, even dreamed about them. Which is where the idea came from.

I planned it for a full year. I ran all the ways I could do it over and over in my head all the time, figuring the ways this way would work and the ways this way wouldn't. Usually they wouldn't. Too many of those checks and balances. Too many cameras. Too many guards like me. But I figured one way, the honest way. Just take the money and go. But I had to plan every little detail or they'd catch me right off the bat. I figured I wouldn't worry about them seeing me. It'd be on camera. I needed just a few minutes to get out. Then I'd run off to the last place they'd look for me and change what I looked like and I'd never have to work a day in my life again.

The key was the loading dock where those armored trucks brought in checks and cash in big fat manila envelopes. The cash I was looking for was the cash that was going to be burned. I figured that cash was so old and so random they couldn't have any record of serial numbers. You know, that always trips up the robbers in the movies. They can't spend any of their loot because everybody knows the serial numbers, so the key is steal bills that don't have their numbers recorded. So I focused on the burn cash.

We rotated jobs around, and about once a week I'd be out on the loading dock helping the armored truck guys off-load their packages. I'd sign them all in, we'd dump them in the appropriate cart and off the truck would go. Now, the way it worked was; another security officer was inside a locked room and he controlled the big gates and watched the cameras outside over the gates. He opened one gate and the truck drove in and he closed the heavy gate behind them, that way they'd be trapped in the dock just in case crooks had hijacked the truck. They'd get in to the dock but they'd never get in the bank, and they'd never get out of the dock area since it was a drive-through deal. So

they'd off-load the packages, I'd sign them in, then the guard in the control room would open the other gate and the truck would drive out. We had a camera on the loading dock too, but the guard in the control room, his job was to open the gates and keep an eye on the cameras outside. He had a bulletproof glass window so he could watch the off-loading, too. But after a few weeks I noticed there was a kind of blind spot on the dock that he couldn't see. Oh, you could see it on the dock camera, but see, he wouldn't be watching that.

And I had to take up smoking, too, that was all part of the genius in the plan. That thinking ahead part. The loading dock was where the few guards who smoked came out to feed their filthy habit, and there was a standup ash can for the butts. There was also a trash can because, you know, that dock area could get pretty dirty with trucks coming and going all night. And that was another thing, they only came in at night. I guess things at the banks, even ours, were busy doing other things during the day. OK. Now, we also had a regular door next to each gate. The security officer working the dock that night - that would be me, remember - his or her job would be to check those two doors every hour and make certain they were locked. Well, that was a simple matter to unlock one of them. When we were off-loading trucks, I waited until I saw a burn package, then I waited until the truck guard had his back turned and I just dropped that package into the tall trash can. The nice thing about banks is that they like to keep everything in order - each package was marked with what denomination the bills were, so I only dumped the ones marked as \$100s or \$20s to-be-burned. Then, around four in the morning, when everyone was pretty sleepy anyway and the trucks had stopped coming, I just went out on the dock for a smoke, lifted off the top of the trash can, lifted out the big plastic bag and slung it over my shoulder like Santa Claus and walked out the door by the gate.

See, now, I wasn't greedy, either. I suppose I could have figured out ways to get more money than the \$789,345 I ended up with, you know? Like that \$20 million just sitting on that table, but I figured to do that I'd need help. And having help only creates problems. Somebody always gets greedy and lifelong buddies can start lighting each other up because, you know, \$20 million is thicker than friendship any day. Plus, if one guy gets caught he'll snitch on the rest. You know it. First guy collared always snitches because he's the only one who gets a deal. So, better to run the deal alone and you'll probably be ahead anyway.

I figured I had about five minutes or so before the control room security officer blew the whistle on me. I drove my car down to a Vietnamese restaurant a few blocks away and switched into a used Toyota FJ Cruiser I'd bought a couple months earlier under my fake name. I figured I'd need the four-wheel-drive, plus the bright ugly blue would help me to hide in plain sight. I mean, what cop would think that a car that stood out from the crowd was going to be the one with the fugitive in it. Right? Of course.

That fake name was another key to all this. More of that planning ahead. I was at this flea market in Pasadena one day and I noticed one of the booths was selling fake IDs. They'd didn't look too real, but they might pass if an average person was looking at them. The guy even took my picture and laminated the card right there while I waited. Most of his customers were wetbacks, you know? I was surprised he could sell this stuff right out on the open, but he had this big sign that said *For Amusement Only*, so I guess that had him covered legally. He sold things that said "Official Texas Identification Card" mostly. But for \$20 more you could get a "replacement" driver's license, you

know, in case you had lost your real one. So I got an Arizona driver's license under a fake name. Well, it wasn't really a fake name, the name belonged to a friend of mine I went to grade school with back in Winslow. I figured - see, this is where all the planning helps - that since I was from there, if anyone asked me any questions I could answer honestly and they couldn't trip me up. I know the city. Hell, I even knew my friend's family. Plus, Texans don't know what an Arizona driver's license really looks like, so it didn't matter that this one didn't look anything like the real thing. Just obey all the traffic laws so a cop doesn't get a peek at it.

That was one of the first things I did, just about a year before I stole the money. Next thing I did was thanks to watching TV. Saw some show on the Travel Channel about the big world championship chili cook-off every year in Terlingua, Texas. They spend maybe half the show on the chili stuff, then on Terlingua. What impressed me was how remote the place was - the perky news reader gal, she called it "the end of the world" - and that's what I was looking for. I figured you stole money from the Fed, you'd have everybody and his brother-in-law out looking for your butt, your picture would be everywhere. But at the end of the world? Out in the middle of nowhere? What better place to lie low for a while? So I drove down there on a week's vacation about six months before I stole the money and was real impressed. It was even more remote than I imagined. So I bought some land, using the fake name, of course, and I was surprised nobody ever asked me for any ID. You know, they didn't when I bought the Cruiser, either. Most people are so trusting. Land is cheap in Terlingua, so I bought twenty acres, off on a hill, maybe a mile down this gravel road from the main road. The real estate lady made me a few contacts and I had the house built. Now, all of this took every cent I had saved up, but it was worth every cent. I certainly paid myself back.

First thing I did in the Cruiser that night was shave my head. Then I headed to Galveston State Park to sleep out on the beach for a week or so. I figured, the cops - they'd all be looking on freeways leaving town and the airports and bus station and train depots, all that. So I just hung out on the beach and let my beard grow out more. Made like I was fishing during the day. Slept in the Toyota at night. Sure enough, the radio said the cops had checkpoints set up all over the place, stopping traffic heading east or west or north, the places you'd run off to if you were anxious to get out of town. South only led to the Gulf. But they had to stop the check-points after a couple of days because people bitched so much about traffic being all snarled up and this in a place that already has terrible traffic. So that stopped. After my beard began to get bushy and I'd gained a few pounds and had a real deep tan, I headed west to Terlingua on the interstate, stopping every couple of hours to grab a couple hours sleep then back on the road. I had sandwiches and drinks with me, so I didn't have to stop at a grocery store or restaurant. I did some shopping then turned south at Fort Stockton and spent a couple days south of Alpine at a campground and let my beard grow out even more. I had always been pissed my beard grew out red when I had brown hair, but now it was a good thing because the cops were looking for a skinny, pale, clean-shaven brunette who drove a Chevy Malibu. And here I was, a very-tanned, chubby, bald guy with a red beard in a Toyota four-wheeler. Perfect.

Once I settled in to the new place, I cut through the wooden floor in the bedroom and dug a hole in the ground and put that old plastic bag in it. The bag loaded with all the money. Then I put a wood door in the floor and covered that with a thick rug and my

money was safe, right? I keep out some for when I need stuff, stashed it in different places like inside a green pea package in the freezer and behind the silverware tray in a kitchen drawer and some just in a coat pocket in the living room closet. Just to have some handy, you know?

I'm sure you know I had to be careful meeting folks, and I was. I avoided women like the plague. Last thing I needed was a girlfriend. They all eventually want to move in and run your life, they all snoop around trying to find out things about you that you've avoided telling them. No, man, I didn't need any woman around the house. I told people I was recovering from cancer and, you know? People will believe what you tell them until you prove yourself wrong, so that worked. It kept people at a distance, like cancer is catching. Got me sympathy, too, and I started putting on more weight on purpose - about 65 pounds so far - because that would also help with the disguise. Even ol' Lupé, if he were standing right where you are looking at me, wouldn't recognize me unless he'd recognize my voice. Nice thing about this place is people pretty much leave folks to themselves. And cops? You know, in three years I've never seen a one.

Of course, I don't get out much. I figure I don't want to be away from the house, you know, because you just never know someone might have figured something out and think I have money and come looking for it. If they found it, why, I'd just have to kill myself. How could I live knowing someone had ripped off all my hard work like that? Yeah, yeah, I know I stole the money first, but, see, I didn't take that money from anybody. I didn't harm a soul. That money was just going to go up in smoke. I just...what's the word we used to use in the Army? I just...liberated it. Now, if someone were to steal it from me? Why, that would be totally different, because they'd be doing harm to me and they certainly didn't work hard for it like I did. So I had to be careful. I had to stay close to home, which was hard when the nearest grocery store was up in Alpine, 100 miles away.

So, I make up a grocery list every two weeks and I got this guy Sammy who drives up to Alpine each week anyway - making pharmacy and store runs for lots of folks who either can't get out or don't want to, and so he gets stuff for me. I buy him a case of Old Milwaukee and pay him \$50 for gas and his trouble. I'm no cheapskate, you know. But I figure it's better to do that than go my own self. First off, there's that Border Patrol checkpoint you have to get through every time you drive north from here. I mean, last thing I needed was to have someone checking me out every couple of weeks. Sooner or later, some wise guy is going to recognize me because I'm sure they have my picture on the walls of every cop shop in the whole country, Border Patrol included. And second - I mean, it's a 200-mile round trip from here to the city, and I just can't leave my money alone in the house for four hours. Five if you count the time I'd spend shopping. Five hours, and who knows who could tear this place apart? And they'd find the money. I know...I got it buried and hidden, so they'd have a hell of a time getting at the money, but somebody could get lucky. Only \$750,000 even is in the hole right now, and the rest is scattered around where I can get at it quickly if I need it. But anyone who would break in would probably find that, too. So I don't go out much. Well, hell, I don't go out at all, really. But I don't need to. I have all I need. I've got that satellite TV system that comes with an Internet system, too. I had Sammy buy me a nice 64-inch plasma HDTV up at the Alpine Alco, and I've got a great surround sound system I bought at the Wal-Mart before. Bought my computer at a Best Buy in San Antonio on my way out here. I

subscribe to about two dozen magazines. And I get whatever else I want on the Internet, like these great house slippers with the sheepskin lining and my favorite T-shirt that says, "I reject your reality and substitute my own." That's from a TV show. All I did was set up a Pay Pal account and put enough cash in my bank account here to cover purchases. I keep the account balance low so as not to attract any attention. I put in a little every month so it looks like I do odd jobs or something to get by. That's what most people do down here, so I fit right in. People here think I do computer consulting, which is why I never leave the house. Three years, no problems. Don't expect any.

Yeah, I know you don't understand much of this. I mean, you're a rat. What was it kind of rat that Sammy called you? A kangaroo rat. Yeah, that was it. Don't look much like a kangaroo, though. Hell, you don't even hop around. He said to get rid of you, but I figure you don't eat much you're so small and I don't mind the company.

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