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4 000 words.

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THE LAST JOB

by Anders Pantzar

It's been a long time since Gustav had a problem with a lock. During his sixty-year career, he had never experienced such a complicated lock. New technology in security was invented all the time. New alarms and new monitoring methods. But the locks had not changed much. All locks were built on the same several hundred year old technology. So why did he have a problem with this particular lock?

Was it the nerves? This was a big job, Gustav had personally been commissioned by Madame Violet. Few got the honor of working for her, even fewer got to meet her in person. With Gustav's reputation and long experience, he was

not surprised when he received the letter with an exclusive invitation from Madame Violet. And he could not refuse. The reward from this job was the largest he had ever seen, enough to retire. This was going to be his last job, Gustav was sure of that.

A click was heard from the lock. The last safety pin fell into place and the core could now rotate freely. Gustav gently turned the lock and a new loud click was heard as the door was unlocked. Gustav stood up. Sitting in front of locks all day had worn on his knees in recent years, but burglars did not really have a work environment representative to complain to. Gustav's flat cap had fallen at an angle from the sweat. He corrected it, picked up his lock picks, and put them back in their proper places in the work belt. That was the easy part of the job done.

The door was large and heavy in dark wood with hand-carved details, it fit perfectly with the rest of the building. Classic luxury of the older model. The building itself was in light polished stone, with dark wood details full of carved ornaments. Even the back door that Gustav had unlocked was adorned with masterful carving. Those who lived here had both money, style, and a sense of quality.

Madame Violet had assured Gustav that the alarm was turned off tonight, something about contacts with the security company. Gustav was still careful when he turned the handle. The door slid open surprisingly easily, despite

its size and weight. It caused no sound. And no sound was heard from the alarm. Madame Violet's contacts had done their job. Gustav threw up the sports bag on his back, turned on the flashlight, and went inside.

He was in a kitchen. The theme from the outside continued here; light polished stone and dark wood. Faucets and handles were gilded in gold. The appliances were in stainless steel with the house's emblem engraved in silver. But Gustav was not there to steal food. He quickly crossed the kitchen to a door at the other end. This door was in the same style as the front door, but smaller and lighter for indoor use. The lock was simplistic and seemed to be mostly for show. Even this door slid open without a sound.

Gustav stepped into a large room with high a ceiling. A faint light from the night sky shone through a skylight. The room was full of paintings on historical figures and former owners. The floor was covered with carpets and animal skins. Along one of the short sides, a group of armchairs stood in front of a large fireplace. Had it been lit, it could have given the room a warm atmosphere. Now it sat gray and sad and testified that no one was home. In the opposite long side Gustav saw what he was here for; a large round bank vault door in black metal that did not fit into the rest of the building's style. It could not be missed. The vault looked like it belonged in a bank rather than a private home.

Gustav stretched and went to the bank vault door and inspected it carefully. It was a strong construction that would take days to weld through. Not that he would drop to such a level. No, Gustav had refined the technique of getting through seemingly impossible locks without leaving a trace. This door had a digital number plate, but all digital locks always had a physical lock to fall back on in case the power went out. As expected, an impressive physical lock sat just below the number plate. This would take a while.

Gustav had just started to pick the lock when he heard something squeaking behind him. He froze and listened intently. There it was again, a squeak, as when opening a door or window that has not been oiled for a long time. Someone was on their way in.

Gustav barely had time to turn around when a rope fell from the skylight and a youngster rappelled himself into the hall. Gustav recognized this particular boy. Camouflage pants with far too many pockets, long hair that should have been cut a long time ago, and a stubborn grin as if he owned the world. Yes, this was Nicklas, the annoying brat that always got in Gustav's way.

Last spring, when Gustav was going to steal a painting from a museum, Nicklas had been there playing with the swords from a neighboring exhibition, which caused so much noise that the guard was there five minutes earlier than planned.

At a high-risk job when Gustav was going to snatch a pearl necklace from a bedside table with the owner sleeping in the bed next to it, Nicklas had dug among the clothes in the closet and would of course try everything he found. Clothes that he had later tripped over which had woken up the whole house.

No matter what job Gustav took in the last year, no matter where in the world, Nicklas was always there.

"You again," said Gustav, "what are you doing here?"

Nicklas did not seem to hear him, or he just ignored him. Nicklas detached himself from the rope and skipped with easy steps to the vault door. He now stood next to Gustav and inspected the door. It might have been dark in the room, but there was no chance he had not seen Gustav.

"What are you doing here?" Gustav repeated, tapping Nicklas firmly on the shoulder. It caught the boy's attention.

"Oh! Hello there the old man, nice to see you here." Something in Nicklas' voice got Gustav boiling. Such a nonchalant and unprofessional brat.

"I thought you might need some help." Help? Hah. Gustav snorted at the thought. He needed no help, especially not from such an inexperienced puppy as Nicklas.

"Oh I forgot, as old as you are, you probably have full control of how to get past a two hundred and fifty-six bit

encryption algorithm, and can easily unlock the digital lock." The arrogance in Nicklas' voice was total.

Gustav grunted and pushed Nicklas aside with a slightly too powerful push. He sat down in front of the physical lock and began to pick. He would not let Nicklas get into his head, not this time, not on his last job.

For once, Nicklas left him alone. Nicklas walked around the room, fiddling with everything he could find; the mantel above the fireplace, the handles on the doors, the frames on the paintings, the nose on one of the animal skins. Gustav sat focused in front of the lock.

There was something special about this lock. It had many safety pins, which was expected, but once in a while some pins fell back to the locked position. This often happened to beginners, but Gustav was far from inexperienced, he did not make such mistakes. It was as if the lock had its own will, and it did not want Gustav to enter. Each time he was about to secure the last pin, something else fell back. Frustration rose. Breathe. Try again.

"Is this your brother?" Nicklas' voice broke Gustav's concentration and he dropped all the pins. Gustav swore loudly.

"What in damnation do you really want? Huh?" Gustav had had enough. "Why are you here?"

Nicklas looked a little scared. "I..." he began, "I was

just wondering if this is a relative of yours?" he continued with a grin. Nicklas pointed to a painting with a stout older gentleman wearing hunting equipment and a similar flat cap that Gustav wore. Gustav snorted.

"Oh, have you already given up?" Nicklas peered over Gustav's shoulder at the vault door. He took a few quick steps towards the vault and picked up a small gadget from one of his many pockets. Was his question about the painting just a trick to get Gustav away from the door?

"Calm down, this is not going to take that long." Gustav was unsure if Nicklas said that to him, himself, the vault, or the gadget. Not that it mattered, Nicklas would never be able to get in through that door. If Gustav could not do it, no one could.

Gustav took this opportunity to calm down. He sat down in one of the armchairs and watched in amusement as Nicklas failed repeatedly.

"If you pat the pistons and ask nicely, maybe they will give in." Gustav chuckled when Nicklas threw a gadget on the floor for the eighth time after a failed attempt. "How many of those gizmos do you have anyway?" Not that Gustav cared about the answer, just to see Nicklas frustrated amused him.

Nicklas stopped and considered something. He got the kind of look only mischievous kids get when they know they are about to do something they really should not. A look full of determination and laughter. But also a small dose of

fright. Nicklas dug deep into his pockets. He pulled out a small black box, no bigger than a thumb. A small antenna protruded from the box. Nicklas kissed the box and said a short prayer before placing it with a piece of tape above the digital number plate. A small red light flashed on the box.

Several seconds passed without anything happening. Nicklas tapped impatiently on the floor. Ten seconds, nothing. What was he waiting for? Fifteen seconds. Seventeen... click. The lamp on the box changed color to green and shortly thereafter the number plate did the same.

"Yes!" Nicklas made a small gesture of victory. Gustav raised his eyebrows, somewhat impressed that Nicklas' trick worked, whatever it was he had done. Nicklas grabbed the round handle and turned, but it did not want to move. He put all his weight behind the wheel. Nothing happened. The door was still locked.

"This is not happening," Nicklas said desperately, "I got past the encryption. Everything is green. So why do not you want to open up?" Nicklas started fiddling with the box and the number plate again. Gustav got up from the armchair, it was time for a professional.

"Have you finished playing now?" Gustav pushed Nicklas aside. "Let me show you how it's done." Gustav sat down in front of the lock again, picked out his faithful picks, and got to work.

This time the pins did not quarrel with him, but it was still a complicated lock. Multiple safety pins and false settlements made it a challenge. A challenge, but not an impossibility. It would only have taken a couple of minutes, if not for the constant panting in his neck. Nicklas was leaning over Gustav and following his movements closely. Gustav stared questioningly at Nicklas.

"What do you want?" Gustav asked in an annoyed tone.

"You said you would show how it's done," Nicklas replied quickly, "I just want to learn from the best." Something in his tone of voice said he actually meant it.

"Fine. But do not stand so insanelly close," Gustav's tone was softer now, "I can not focus." Nicklas took a step back but continued to closely follow everything Gustav did.

It took only a few minutes before a clear click signaled that the lock had been defeated, faster than Gustav had thought. He rotated the lock core and then backed away. He looked at Nicklas and nodded at the round handle. Nicklas grabbed it and turned. The pistons came loose and released the valut door from its grip.

It took Gustav and Nicklas' combined strength to pull out the door and expose the inside of the vault. Stacks on stacks of gold bars on one side, pallets with banknotes on the other. The back wall was full of small safe deposit boxes that probably held securities and other important documents. In the middle of the vault lay a diamond the size

of a fist on a small cushion in a glass cage on a pedestal.

Gustav stepped forward and looked at the glass cage. No locks, it did not even appear to have an alarm. Nicklas did not seem as interested in the diamond. He looked at it a little now and then, but for the most part he entertained himself by seeing how many banknotes and other valuables he could get into his pockets. Gustav glared at him as he picked up a gold bar.

"What?" Nicklas asked when he noticed he was being watched. "There's nothing wrong with earning a little extra on the side, is it? Also, you seem to have the diamond under control." Nicklas pushed the gold bar into a pocket. How much could those pants really hold? Gustav grunted a little and returned to study the glass cage. When he felt confident that nothing was wrong with it, he stretched and got ready to lift. Nicklas looked up from his attempt to open one of the safe deposit boxes and looked expectantly at Gustav.

The glass cage was heavier than it looked, Gustav needed to take a new grip to adjust for the weight. He needed to wiggle a little to get it off the pedestal. Once it was loose, it was easy enough to lift it off. Gustav carefully placed the glass cage on a pallet of banknotes. He turned back and saw the diamond exposed. There was his ticket to retirement. All he had to do was take the diamond and hand it over to Madame Violet. This was his last job.

Gustav slowly lifted the diamond with both hands, more

out of reverence than caution. He had just put it in one of the outer compartments of the sports bag when he heard an insane wailing and ringing. The alarm!

Several loud thumps echoed through the building as the windows one by one were blocked with iron bars. The skylight that Nicklas had entered through was also blocked, the rope came loose and fell to the ground. With a squeak, the vault door began to close.

With a few quick steps, Gustav arrived at the vault door and managed to squeeze out at the last moment. Behind him he heard Nickla's desperate scream.

"Do not leave me." Nicklas was still far inside the vault. With his pants heavy with gold bars, he stumbled towards the door.

The gap in the door was now so small that it was doubtful if Nicklas could get out. It would have been so easy to leave Nicklas inside the vault. That would solve so many problems for Gustav. Not only would he avoid being constantly followed by this kid, it would also give him a scapegoat. Gustav would get away. He turned around. Nicklas must have seen what Gustav was thinking.

"Please," cried Nicklas from the floor as he emptied his pockets of gold, "don't do it, help me."

No matter how much Gustav wanted, he could not bring himself to leave Nicklas. He was just a little boy. Gustav grabbed the round handle on the outside of the vault door

and pulled with everything he got. His muscles tensed and the motors in the door screamed. It had previously required their combined strength to open the vault door, and then the door was helpful. Now Gustav was alone against a door that was actively fighting against him. It took all his strength just to hold on to the heavy door, how would he be able to pull it open? It tore at his body. Every single muscle had to fight to keep the door open. The vault door had stopped. However, the gap was not big enough for Nicklas. With a scream, Gustav mustered extra strength. A strong jerk widened the gap a few centimeters. Not enough, but almost there. Another jerk. The muscles in one of his shoulders pulsed. With a roar of pain, he got the vault door open enough for Nicklas to slip out.

Nicklas fell down on all fours on the floor outside the vault. Gustav sat panting with his back to the vault door that closed behind them. He massaged his shoulder in pain, something was damaged. They were out of the vault, but not yet safe. All windows and exterior doors were sealed with iron bars, and the alarm was still ringing. Soon the police would be here.

After a few minutes of recovery, Nicklas crawled to the rope he had used to get inside. He stood up and looked up at the skylight.

"We will not get out that way." said Gustav with a short painful moan. He stood up, but could not lift the

sports bag with the diamond. The shoulder was in worse condition than he thought. The bag had to be dragged along the floor.

"There must be a way out." said Nicklas as he desperately shook the iron bars that sealed one of the windows.

"There." Gustav moaned briefly and nodded at the kitchen door. The pain in the shoulder sent out shocks throughout the arm. Nicklas ran to the door and began to push it open. The kitchen door had lost its helpfulness. The lock was still mostly for show and Nicklas was strong and healthy. He opened the door just in time for Gustav to arrive.

In the kitchen, Gustav sat down on the floor and leaned against one of the counters. He was too old for this. Nicklas was young and strong, but Gustav had been doing this for far too long. His shoulder ached more than before and he saw how his hand lost color. Nicklas arrived quickly at the back door.

"It's locked." stated Nicklas.

"But unlock it then. Use one of your little gizmos." said Gustav as he massaged his shoulder to get some blood back in his arm.

Banknotes flew in all directions as Nicklas dug into his pockets. He stopped and lowered his head.

"It will not work."

"Why not? It worked at the vault door."

"This door has no electronic lock," Nicklas said. He was right, the kitchen door was locked with a normal honorable physical cylinder lock.

"Today's youth..." Gustav sighed. He moved his arm and bent his fingers. He had regained some mobility, but not enough for the precision and control required to pick this lock. He untied his lock pick set from his belt and pushed it over to Nicklas.

"I...", Nicklas stammered, "I do not know if I can do it." A mixture of fear and despair filled the boy's voice.

"You can do it," Gustav assured, "it's an easy lock." That last part was a lie. Gustav had found it unusually difficult to get in through the kitchen door, but Nicklas did not need to know this. The only thing that stood between Gustav and his retirement was that a scared little boy could pick a lock.

"Breathe," Gustav said soothingly, "relax, do not push too hard and take one pin at a time. You can do this."

Nicklas closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened his eyes again, he had a determined look in his eyes. He pulled out the lock picks and sat down in front of the lock.

Nicklas mumbled and swore as he picked the lock.

Several times he lost everything and had to start over, each time Gustav was there with supportive words. After the fourth try, the alarm went silent. Gustav's and Nicklas' eyes met. They both realized what it meant. The police were here.

Nicklas' hands shook as he frantically tried to pick the lock. Stress did not help. The clinking sound from when the lock picks fell to the ground echoed through the kitchen. Footsteps from several pairs of heavy boots could be heard from the great hall. Gustav groaned in pain as he stood up. Was this how his career would end? Not in retirement but in prison? He knew there was always a risk in his life choices. Not that he had that many years left anyway. But Nicklas had his whole life ahead of him. Gustav could not let him get caught.

Nicklas' head sank and he sobbed rhythmically to hold back the tears. Through the door to the great hall, they could hear that the police had arrived at the vault. Now it was not long before they would discover that the diamond was gone.

Gustav put his healthy hand on Nicklas' shoulder, "You can do this." he said calmly.

"No, I can't," Nicklas sobbed, "it's too hard, I can't get past the third pin."

Gustav sat down next to the boy. "Then we do it together." He picked up the lock pick from the floor and

gave Nicklas one of them. "You handle the tension and I will take care of the pins."

Nicklas wiped the tears from his face. "Okay".

With careful work, Gustav and Nicklas got one pin after another in place. The third pin was indeed tricky. Gustav needed to ask Nicklas to release the tension a couple of times so they could get past it. When they only had one pin left, they heard tactical commands from the great hall.

"The diamond is gone."

"Spread out."

"They're still in the building."

Nicklas froze for a brief moment but managed to keep the tension in the lock. Gustav got the last pin in place. "Now" he said and Nicklas turned the lock core. The door to their freedom was open. Gustav gave the sports bag to Nicklas. Even without the bag, Gustav was not very fast, and now they did not have much margin. Nicklas grabbed the bag and together they rushed out the back door.

When Gustav and Nicklas rounded the corner of the house, they could hear that the police had entered the kitchen. Nicklas was much faster than Gustav. He had already thrown the bag over the high fence that surrounded the house when Gustav caught up. Gustav gasped for breath. It was only a short distance but it had taken the power out of him. Nicklas knelt down and locked his fingers together, he

signaled that he would help Gustav over.

"Not a chance." said Gustav when he saw how high the fence was. He would never be able to do that, not with this shoulder.

"You can do it." said Nicklas.

"No, I can't." Gustav said firmly, he pulled Nicklas to his feet. "You have your whole life ahead of you, do not throw it away on me". Gustav took off his flat cap and placed it on Nicklas' head.

Nicklas looked tearfully at Gustav. "I've always looked up to you." Nicklas gave Gustav a quick hug.

"Yeah yeah." said Gustav, trying to stay strong. "Off you go".

Nicklas let go and with a strong jump he pulled himself over the fence.

Gustav sat with his back to the fence. There was not much more he could do now. Police came running from both sides of the house. He was surrounded. This was not how he had intended his retirement, but one thing he had been right about. This was his last job.

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