

immunity

They would send me in because the music did not get to me. I had discovered this as a teenager hanging out in malls when my buddies would leave as soon as we were hit with Mozart. I would tell them that they were being suckered, made the victims of trivial preferences, but they told me it was not at all trivial. This music was horrible and they could not stand it. I would leave with them so they did not think I was a jerk, but sometimes I would sneak back later just to listen. Still, dangerous friends are dangerous friends and here I was at twenty-two breaking into businesses with much the same group of guys and going for the safes and cash registers and credit card machines. But the businesses must have seen what happened at the malls because they started using the same music, except more of it — Beethoven, Brahms, Palestrina, you name it — and my team was paralyzed with aversion before they could even start to work.

We knew there were particularly rich pickings at *Il Babbeo*, an upscale Sicilian restaurant. (Babe's, most people called it.) They stayed open late, like to two in the morning, and the staff drank as much as the customers, so they were in no shape to take the cash away at the end of the evening,

but just left it all, cash, checks, credit card data, stuffed in a drawer till the following afternoon. There was only one problem. They had particularly off-putting music playing all night. Madrigals! No one but me could go anywhere near the place.

The solution was obvious when we thought of it. They would congregate in an alley a safe block away and I would go in through a back window with wire cutters and assassinate the music. I told them it was a complicated job and would take me half an hour or so. But in fact it only took five minutes and the rest of the time I was sitting at the bar having a glass of wine and listening to the singing. Then I cut the wires and let the guys in. We grabbed what we could and left. When we reassembled several hours later we emptied our collective pockets and added up the total. \$320.26. We could have made more putting our hats on the sidewalk and looking threatening. And whistling; the guys would have liked that.

My pockets had produced more than anyone else: three cheques to a total of \$98. But it would not be a trivial matter to turn them into cash. When I dumped them on the table there was a little leaflet that had got slipped between the cheques. It described the opening of a few-questions-asked business loan outfit. It sounded like a scam. If your business was in such trouble that no reputable bank would extend you any finance you could go

to these people who would inspect your workplace and then lend you a large sum at a surprisingly reasonable rate. With your business as collateral, of course. It seemed obvious to us, being in the business of getting easy money out of people, that the documents you signed would not say what you thought they did and before you knew it the loan agency would end up owning your business. I proposed scamming the scammers.

After scouting out a number of possibilities we settled on a medium-sized machine parts outfit in a rundown part of town. Just large enough that it would be worth a fair amount of money and just small enough that it could plausibly be run informally out of that location. We took a lot of photos of the outside of the building and of their products, then faked up some letterhead paper and some accounts. Next we got in touch with the loan people. Of course they responded with truly remarkable haste and proposed to inspect our business and decide how much they could responsibly loan us.

And equally predictably we could not let them visit the business. They would meet the real owners. The photos and the paperwork would have to be enough for them. It did not seem likely that it would be enough for them, familiar as they were with the deep philosophical difference

between appearance and reality. But I knew what to do. We told them to come at 6 PM the following Tuesday.

By six the real staff had gone home and the building was deserted. We met their taxi in the parking lot and led them into the lobby of the building. It had been easy to get in. Conversation became harder inside, against the background of music coming from speakers on the walls.

Music? Schoenberg, Ligeti, Stockhausen, even a bit of Xenakis. All from that time between 1930 and 1980 when composers thought they could best continue the message of Bach, Brahms, and Debussy by giving listeners the sentiments of life death and love plus the need to concentrate really really hard and perhaps an impulse to run away and hide. People who have paid for a ticket will usually make themselves listen, if they have not been warned in advance, but these were not concertgoers or music lovers or people worried about their cultural failings. They were honest crooks, and so when they had the urge to run away and hide their impulse was to run away and hide.

We kept talking to them, until we saw the signs of suppressed screaming. "Well" we said "we see you are in a real hurry, and it is all in the paperwork. So here are some extra copies and we can make the inspection as quick as you like." They liked it very quick. They seized the

papers out of our hands and left the building in something resembling a waddling sprint to the bathroom. My colleagues were only a few steps behind, though I was quite content to stay a little longer and disconnect the speakers.

They sent the loan offer the next day. We had made a key to the mail room, so we could intercept their letter and reply with the signed contract. Two days later the money arrived. It was one of the more alterable cheques we had ever seen: you would think that they of all people would have known better. Then we left town.