

Jewelry heist on Jupiter Island

“Have I told you the story about the famous jewel thief, Henri Beaumont?” Peter asked me one day.

“I don’t believe you have,” I replied.

“Oh, it’s one I think you’ll enjoy,” he said. “Do you have the time?”

“Yes,” I said, glancing at my watch. “Nothing that can’t wait.”

I had just finished having lunch with my friend, Peter Harlow, and he was about to reveal another one of his fascinating stories involving the wealthy families he has had the privilege to rub shoulders with during his lifetime. Over the years Peter has divulged countless stories about his family and families far wealthier than his, and I must admit I find them captivating even though they could be considered idle talk. He undoubtedly feels he can trust me with these tales. If he only knew that I harbor a secret desire to turn one of the juicier ones into a novel or short story.

Peter is an intriguing friend whose company and intellect I admire immensely. I have known him for thirty-some-odd years, and there has never been an unpleasant word between us in all that time. We often get together for lunch twice a month during the season, and they tend to be these long, drawn-out affairs where we invariably anger the waiters we occupy the table for so long. The conversations are never dull, in large part because I could sit and listen to these narratives for hours on end.

He is retired now, for the most part, and resides during the winter months in the guest house on his family’s Jupiter Island estate. The Harlows are a legacy family on the island, dating back to when Joseph and Permelia Reed purchased the original property in 1934. They were one of the first families to winter on the island with the Reeds. Peter’s cousin, Walter, who inherited the Harlow fortune from his father, now owns the estate and permits Peter to live in the guest house during the season. While Peter did inherit an ample trust fund from his family, he didn’t acquire the vast wealth that Walter did and therefore lives comfortably on the periphery of opulence, not immersed in it.

Peter is still a part-time professor of history at Williams College in the Berkshires of Massachusetts and goes up there every summer for three and a half months to teach and escape the oppressive South Florida heat. He was born and raised in the Northeast and still considers it home, even though he has been a full-time resident of Florida for quite some time. As someone who has never lived anywhere other than Florida, I can

understand how his lifelong allegiances to the Northeast are hard to break. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't envious of the man. Not that I harbor any resentment; quite the opposite—a bit of jealousy more than anything else. It's hard not to be. He is a striking man, fit for someone his age, with degrees from prestigious universities, a near photographic memory, a pilot's license, and enough money to do what he wants, whenever he wants. Lucky guy... he doesn't seem to have a care in the world. Although he never married, I have no idea what his personal life is like and would not dare ask. It has never been a concern of mine and never will be. Just as mine is of little concern to him. Oh, he asks how my wife and girls are all the time; it's just that we aren't going to get together for egg nog on the holidays, if that makes sense. Enough about Peter and back to the story, because I think you'll find it as engaging as I did.

“You know the history of the island almost as well as I do,” he continued, “so there is no sense covering well-trodden ground with Permelia Reed's controlling nature. It's relevant to the story here only because there were social events that were considered mandatory, meaning attendance was compulsory, and this soiree was one of them. These elaborate affairs were held at the club and included dinner, an orchestra, dancing, and cocktail socializing—a fashionable thing to do in the seventies. It's important to note that only residents of the island were invited.”

“What year is this?” I asked.

“Early seventies, somewhere around then. The key point is that the entire island is in attendance at this event. And what is a commonly accepted practice for events such as these—even today—is to allow your essential staff to have the night off. So on this particular evening, all of these large estates are unoccupied. Remember, this occurred at a time when burglar alarms were rarely used and people on the island did not lock their doors. There was no reason to; there had never been any crime to speak of, except for a missing golf club here or there. It was one of the safest neighborhoods in America.”

He pauses to take a sip of iced tea and gather his thoughts, then continues. “Nothing unusual happens at the event itself, and the guests begin leaving the club sometime around 11:00 p.m. This is where the turmoil begins. Several residents return home to discover they have been robbed while they were out. When inventory is taken, it is determined that jewelry and cash are the primary items missing. We are not talking about cheap jewelry here. These are some of the wealthiest people in the country who own the finest and most expensive jewelry in the world. Priceless pieces. Family heirlooms. Irreplaceable stuff. Besides, they had been busy dressing for a formal evening out and many of these baubles had been tried on and left out. It could not have happened at a more vulnerable time.”

“Do they call the police?”

“No. At first, they are reluctant to report the crimes. Their initial thoughts are that it must be someone on their staff, which is a logical conclusion. They were not at home all evening; the staff would know this, of course, and have intimate knowledge of the valuables, know where these items were kept, and so forth. They also feared embarrassment—having to admit to their neighbors that a member of their staff had robbed them. Mind you, multiple families are experiencing this same heartache and struggling with the same emotions. For those who are violated, the initial reaction is the same. Interrogate the staff and try to get the items returned with no word escaping of what had happened. And this is the course of action these families take the following day.”

“Were the items insured?”

“Yes and no, as I understand it,” he replies. “Many of the items were insured, but that doesn’t influence their decision to handle this discreetly, if possible. Some items were not insured, which created a different set of obstacles. Again, the early plan is to say nothing and hope that the items can be recovered. When this approach bears no fruit, the affected residents are now confronted with a dilemma. Do they report the crimes to the police, submit claims for some of the items, and accept the notoriety and publicity that comes with it? Or do they say nothing and lick their wounds privately? One phone call changes the course of history and the eventual conclusion of this story. I’m not boring you yet, am I?”

“Not at all; you have me hooked now.”

“Very well... Before notifying the police, Mrs. Strathmore calls her closest friend, Mrs. Windermere, and reveals the ugly truth. ‘I’ve been robbed by my staff,’ she confesses in tears. ‘I too,’ a sniveling Mrs. Windermere replies, and the two soon realize they share identical stories. Was there collusion among their help? To find out, the two women begin the unenviable task of phoning their neighbors and soon discover that a total of twelve homes were burglarized that evening—the Harlows were not among them. It’s quickly determined that these crimes cannot be attributed to staff and that something far more threatening has taken place. They have fallen victim to some kind of criminal enterprise that has targeted them. They must go to the Reeds immediately, explain what has happened, and decide collectively how they should proceed.”

“Before going on,” Peter suddenly announces, “I’m in the mood for a cappuccino and some biscotti; how ‘bout you?”

I thought it was an excellent idea and motioned for the waiter to revisit our table. This, as I indicated earlier, is done with some reluctance. But the waiter finally makes it over to our table and accepts our order. I should mention that these lunches we enjoy twice a month at some of the more expensive restaurants in town are rarely paid for by me. I attempt to snatch the bill from his nimble fingers, but he always insists on paying. Occasionally I am successful, and he allows me to pay for one. I appreciate his generosity, and I understand that we have vastly different income levels, but—. He waves off this subject when it's brought up, often saying that only luck brought him to his position in life. That may be true; birth did favor him, but that doesn't mean that I don't desire the payment of our lunches to be more democratic.

Our cappuccinos and biscotti arrive, and after settling into the backs of our chairs once again, Peter continues, "Where was I? Oh yes. So the two women have uncovered a most troublesome development. These were no simple, run-of-the-mill burglaries. Far from it. The Reeds are now aware of the situation, and a meeting of the twelve families is convened for the following morning at the club, two days removed from the eventful night. At this meeting, the information being shared amongst the residents starts to sink in. This was a coordinated assault on their precious little enclave. The jewelry and cash—very little cash is taken—are estimated to be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, which is a great sum of money at the time and not something you could easily write off. It's a dreadful predicament, and they discuss what can be done about it. Did someone on the inside play a part in the crime by revealing to the criminals that the entire island would not be home? Is there any connection between the twelve families that were violated? Do they open their private doors to public scrutiny by involving the police?"

"Why the hesitation in involving the police? I don't get it. Without a police report, they cannot file claims with their insurance companies," I offered.

"The wealthy value privacy second only to money," he replied. "It was after this event that the island established its own police department, which continues to this day. There are many theories to your question. Privacy is certainly one of them. The other is that some of the stolen items could not be insured because revealing their existence would bring to light that they had been acquired illicitly. One popular inheritance strategy is to pass on your expensive jewelry to your heirs without reporting these gifts to the IRS."

"That makes sense."

"The group decides that this must remain a private matter for reasons I have just mentioned. Rumor has it that the club was willing to reimburse the members for their losses. This has never been substantiated, of course, especially when you consider the

impossible task of determining what was stolen and what the value was at the time. But the fact remained that they did not report these burglaries to the Hobe Sound police department, and no one outside of the island was aware that one of the largest jewelry heists in the country had just taken place. That is until the Reeds received a letter. A letter that promised the safe return of all the jewelry taken that fateful evening for the princely sum of one million dollars in cash and assurance of complete anonymity.”

“Did they have any idea at the time who sent the letter?”

“No. The letter was typed and unsigned.”

“Did you ever see the letter?”

“No.”

“So, it could have been sent by a staff member.”

“That is doubtful, and I’ll tell you why. The jewelry that was taken was very specific. In each burglary, the thief knew exactly what to take and what the most valuable pieces were. A petty thief would not possess that kind of knowledge. He’d take everything. You’re getting a bit ahead of yourself; please allow me to continue.”

“You’re right, sorry.”

“So the letter is received and another meeting is held. All sorts of legitimate questions are raised. Is this some kind of ploy to steal a million dollars from them? Pour salt on a fresh wound. What kind of assurance do they have that they will get the jewelry back if they pay the ransom? They have valid concerns and are wary of dealing with sordid individuals.”

“How could they possibly trust that the offer is legit?”

“That’s the dilemma, of course. They are willing to pay the million dollars. That is not the problem. But they are business people. Captains of industry. And they want some kind of guarantee that all of the jewelry will be returned and that the promise of confidentiality will be honored.”

“Absolutely.”

“They reply to the letter explaining their conditions and demands. They want to know how the jewelry will be returned to them and what sort of arrangement will be made to pay the money. They want details of the proposed transaction.”

“How did they know where to reply to the letter? There couldn’t have been a return address on the envelope.”

“There was a Palm Beach post office box provided in the letter.”

“Risky for the thief. If they did decide to go to the police, they could easily find out who opened the post office box.”

“They aren’t interested in going to the police!” he answered me somewhat sternly. “They want their family heirlooms back, and they want this breach kept out of the newspapers. Publicity is the last thing they want. Same as the thief. He picked Jupiter Island for a reason. He knew that if he tried to fence these items, he would be taking on a great deal of risk. It could easily be tied back to him; he doesn’t want that. Plus, he knew he wouldn’t get the proper return for what the items were actually worth. He knew the provenance of many of these items was suspicious, and that played into his scheme. He planned from the outset to sell them back to the people he stole them from. He reasoned correctly that they could afford to pay the ransom and would willingly pay it to avoid the exposure. And of course, they would insist that the crimes remain confidential.

“What’s astonishing is that he knew how they would react.”

“True. An inventory is taken, and arrangements are made to send a delegate—one person whom the thief has agreed to meet in a mutually agreed-upon location—in disguise, of course—to hand over the jewelry in exchange for the one million in cash. And this is the transaction that was ultimately consummated. Where it took place remains unknown. Some say he came to the club; others say it took place somewhere in the Everglades; others claim the two met for dinner at Joe’s Stone Crab. It’s not important where they met.”

“Rumor is often stronger than fact.”

“Indeed. It’s also never been revealed who it was that went to rendezvous with the thief—some claim it was Permelia Reed herself—nor has it been confirmed that the mastermind behind it was the notorious jewel thief, Henri Beaumont. But my source assures me that it was Beaumont, that the residents took pride that it was him, and that of all the places in the world, he chose their little hamlet for this cunning, lucrative heist. Beaumont was asked about it several times, but, like the gentleman he was, he denied any involvement and said he was in Europe at the time. Most agree that if it was

Beaumont, he had to have help from someone on the inside. If that is true, the person or persons have never been revealed. And that, my friend, is the story of Henri Beaumont and the jewelry heist on Jupiter Island.”

“Remarkable story. And no mention of it ever in the media?”

“None that I am aware of.”

“Amazing. He walked away with a cool million! What’s that worth in today’s dollars?”

“Nearly \$25 million, I believe.”

“Good God!” I said. “I’d love to have been a fly on the wall when he came up with that one. Ingenious!”

“It certainly was,” my friend replied coolly. “You have to tip your cap to Monsieur Beaumont for devising such a masterful plan.”