

The Thief

G R E G G H U R W I T Z

Momma came into the living room and asked where I got the Power Rangers pencil case and I didn't say anything. I just scrunched my eyes shut tight and pretended I'd gone away.

She said, "Tommy, you're a teenager. You can't keep stealing stuff from the kindergarten kids. If I call Mrs. Connelly and she says something went missing, you'll be in big trouble and you'll skip dinner."

The last part about skipping dinner floated in through my scrunched eyes and settled in my stomach and made it hurt. "I'm sorry," I said.

She sighed and pressed her hands to her curly brown hair. "I can't trust you, Tommy. And that's a awful thing."

When her mouth got like that it meant I should get out of her way for a while, so I went back to my room and sat on my bed. My dad left after I was born. I don't have a picture of him in my head. Just the picture on my bookshelf next to my comics. My favorite is Wolverine.

No one knows how strong he is inside. He's got a skeleton made of adamantium. You never see it, really, just bits and parts, except one time he got in this plane crash and he burned down to his skeleton and I didn't like that at all. He looks like a normal guy, but I like that he's stronger than he looks, way stronger, beneath his soft skin. I'm fat. Momma says the proper term is "heavy," but I know what it's really called from the kids outside Mrs. Connelly's classroom at school. They aren't special, those kids, but I'd trade not being fat for not being special.

I could smell the pot roast from the kitchen and it made my stomach hurt some more thinking about not getting any because of a tin pencil case that you can see your reflection in even if it's wavery.

Momma says she can't trust me when it comes to stealing things. But that's not true, at least not always. Like I know that she keeps a shoebox full of money in her closet and I've never stolen that. And she has this pearl necklace and a CD of Frank Sinatra and I don't want those either. It's just some things I have to have. Like the long, shiny shoehorn I took from the Foot Locker. Or glowy green bubble gum people leave on sidewalks. We have a problem with the salt and pepper shakers from Momma's work, and she searches me before we leave just like the cops do black people on TV. And the cook at the diner just laughs and says, "Let him take 'em," and she says, "You have no idea what I put up with, Frank."

There was a knock at my door and she came in and sat next to me on the bed and I closed my eyes again, tight. She said, "It's okay. I forgive you."

So I said, "Can I keep the Power Rangers pencil case?"

Momma said, "No."

I opened my eyes. I said, "I thought you forgive me."

She sighed again and said, "Help me, Jesus."

So I said, "Okay. You can give back the pencil case," because I don't like when she brings Jesus into it.

The doorbell rang, and she said, "Oh, that'll be Janice."

Ms. P works with Momma at the diner and they go to movies sometimes and do each other's hair and drink pink wine out of the skinny glasses. I followed Momma out to the front door. Ms. P said, "Who's that handsome fellow there?" like she always does even though she knows it's just me. Ms. P wears pretty magenta lipstick like in the sunset I drew in Mrs. Connelly's class. I like sunsets.

I didn't say anything about not eating pot roast and Momma must've forgotten because I took two servings and even had grape juice. I liked the sound of Ms. P's voice in our kitchen. We don't have people come over to our house much. Usually, Momma goes out and leaves a TV dinner in the micro wave and the numbers already put in so I just have to push the green button. I watched Ms. P's magenta lips all through dinner. They crinkled and smiled. Magenta is my favorite color.

After, Momma said, "Why don't you go read your comic books?"

And I said, "I don't read them. I look at the pictures."

And Momma said, "Well, what ever, same difference."

I never know what she means by "same difference" since the two words don't really go together and they sort of cancel each other out if you ask me, but no one ever asks me. So I went to my room. But I didn't really go to my room. I opened and closed my door and then I tippy-toed down the hall again so I could listen to Momma and Ms. P.

That wasn't very nice of me, but I'm home alone most nights so when I can hear other people talking in the house, it's a treat.

I hid behind the little half table at the end of the hall. Ms. P's purse was there, right by my head, and her keys, which had more key chains than keys, which made no sense.

Momma kept saying, "It's so hard, Janice."

And Janice kept saying, "I know, honey. I know. But he's a sweet kid."

And Momma said, "I feel so alone," which made me feel weird because Momma's not alone, since I live with her.

Momma said, "Sometimes I just miss grown-up company, you know?"

And Ms. P said, in a different kind of voice, "I know." Then she said, "There was that salesman I fixed you up with last year."

Momma said, "He was nice and owned a house, unlike the jerks I used to date. Maybe that's why it didn't work. He wasn't enough of a loser to interest me."

They laughed about that. Then Ms. P said, "I heard he met someone, moved to Cleveland."

"Maybe I blew it," Momma said. "He was very nice. Plus he wasn't hard on the eyes."

Then Ms. P said something in a low voice and they both laughed.

My shin itched so I reached to scratch it and I hit the table and Ms. P's keys jangled and I said, "Oops."

Momma said, real pointy-like, "Tommy!"

And I said, "Uh- oh."

And Momma said, "Come out here, Tommy."

And I didn't say anything. I just hugged my knees and squeezed my eyes shut but then I heard some rustling and opened my eyes and Momma was standing right there.

I said, "I'm sorry."

She said, "Remember the guest rule when I'm in the living room?"

And I said, "Oh yeah," like I'd just remembered it, but I don't think she believed me.

As I went down the hall, I heard Ms. P say, "You're too buttoned up in all this. You deserve something for *you*. A warm little something on the side."

But Momma just gave a giggle and said, "I can barely remember."

I went into my room and closed the door, which made me sad because I couldn't have their voices keep me company, but a closed door was part of the guest rule. So I played for a while and then read *Batman* until I got to the Joker, who always scares me too much because he smiles all the time but he's not happy. And someone like that you can't trust. And that's an awful thing.

After a while, I heard the front door close and then I heard Ms. P's car drive off and then Momma came in my room and stared at me and said, "You look ridiculous. Where'd you get that lipstick?"

The next night I walked home after school alone. The fourth graders followed a few blocks like they sometimes do and threw rocks, but they didn't mean anything because they threw little pebbles not like the real bullies. The fourth graders were just jealous because they weren't in the special class. At least that's what Mrs. Connelly says.

And they never throw real rocks because they know if they do I'll sit on them and they don't like that very much at all.

I got home and ran into the kitchen and checked the microwave, like I always do first thing. But it was bad news. There were numbers punched in already, which meant that Momma was working a night shift and she wouldn't be home until after dinner. That made my stomach go all achy, but not big achy like when I ate all those hot dogs and threw up in the back of Ms. P's Mustang named Coop.

The doorbell rang and I ran over, excited, and opened the front door even though Momma always tells me not to. A guy stood there. He wore overalls with stains on them and he had big shiny arms and black tangly hair down over his eyes. A silver pen stuck up out of the bibby part of his overalls. In front of our house was a beat-up brown truck.

He said, "Is your dad home?"

And I said, "I don't have a dad. I live with Momma."

And he smiled a real toothy smile like in the soap operas and said, "I fix driveway cracks. I finished the house up the street a bit early today and I noticed you had some in your driveway. Cracks."

I said, "I didn't do it."

He stared at me sort of funny, then said, "Is your mom home?"

I said, "No."

He ducked his head a little to look past me into the house and said, "It's just you and your mom living here?"

I said, "Can I have your pen?"

He pulled the shiny silver pen from his overalls and turned it so it caught the light. It sparkled a bit. He said, "This pen?"

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "This one right here?"

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "You won't tell your momma I gave you this pen?"

"Oh, no," I said. "No sir."

He handed me the pen and walked back to his truck. After a few tries, his truck started and he drove off.

I went into Momma's room and played in her closet. She's got this one shirt that I like to pet that's all shimmery like snakeskin. I took it a few times but she always notices right away so I don't take it anymore. I wasn't supposed to touch it neither but Momma wasn't home and what was I supposed to do? Next I took the lid off the shoebox and looked at the rows of green bills. Momma gets paid a lot in cash—her tips, she calls it, but the tips of what?—and if she keeps it in the shoebox instead of a bank then she gets to keep more of it instead of the damn government stealing it, which is weird because I thought it was harder to steal from a bank. It's the only time Momma says "damn" except when she's talking about her damn life insurance which she has so she'll know I'll be taken care of if something ever happens to her. The damn life insurance costs her an arm and a leg and I don't even know where to start with how many ways that doesn't make sense. If something happened to Momma she'd go to heaven and I'd go to the home where some

of the other kids in Mrs. Connelly's class live and they get movie nights and chocolate ice cream if they earn points by behaving well. If I behave well I don't get any points. But every Wednesday Momma buys me a comic book so I guess that's something.

A couple nights later, Momma came in my room. She was wearing her shimmery snake shirt, and makeup, which was weird since it was her day off work.

She said, "Tommy, listen. I have someone coming over for dinner, and I'd really like it if you could behave."

"Is she a waitress, too?"

"It's a *he*, actually."

"I don't want him to touch my comics."

"He won't touch your comics."

"Can we have pizza?"

"Sure. We can have pizza." She stopped in the doorway and her eyes looked a bit tired, even with the makeup. She said, "This is important to me, Tommy," and I wasn't sure what that meant so I didn't say anything.

I read *Batman* again, but still couldn't get past page eleven where the Joker comes in smiling that smile. So then I read one of my *Wolverines* and that calmed me down so much I didn't even notice Momma was at my door until she said, in a stiff voice, "Tommy, I'd like you to come meet someone."

So I got up and followed her down the hall. Who do you think was there but the guy in the overalls who'd given me the pen! Except he wasn't in overalls now. He was wearing jeans and a flannel shirt and a leather jacket and he smelled like cologne.

Momma said, "Tommy, I'd like you to meet Bo."

I remembered about the pen and about how Momma wasn't supposed to know, so I said, "Nice to meet you, Bo."

And he shook my hand and said, "Good to meet you, Tommy."

He came in and was all nice to me, slapping my knee and asking if I like football (no) or baseball (no) and saying he betted the girls were just crazy about me at school (no). Momma watched and smiled except when I said, "no," then she stood behind him and gave me that angry scowl, which was weird because Momma always taught me not to lie. But she also taught me not to talk to strangers and now here she was wanting me to lie to a stranger. It was very confusing.

The doorbell finally rang and Momma said, "Oh, that must be the pizza," and got up.

Bo said, "No, please, let me," and he pulled a cool wallet out of the inside pocket of his jacket. The wallet was leather with pretty Indian- looking stitching on the back that showed a sunset, the sun all yellow and wobbly going down into the ocean. Bo took out a twenty- dollar bill and handed it to Momma and she bit her lip and smiled at him then went in the other room.

I said, "I can eat eight slices."

Bo said, "I bet you can, chief," and then Momma came back in with the

pizza.

Momma put the pizza on the kitchen table and said, "Thank you."

Then she looked at me and said, "Say 'thank you.' "

I said, "Say thank you."

Momma hates when I do that but I pretend I don't know any better.

She smiled at him and said, "He doesn't know any better."

He said, "I completely understand."

We ate. I ate a lot. Momma excused herself to the bathroom. Bo got up and looked around a little, peering through the door to the garage and into the closet door and the little den, checking out the rooms like he was gonna buy the place. When the toilet flushed, he sat back down in a hurry.

Momma came back in. She said, "I just need to clean up and read Tommy his story before bed. Unless . . ."

And Bo said, "What?"

Momma said, "Unless you want to read him his story. Then we could be done quicker and, you know, alone."

Bo smiled extra- wide and said, "I'd love to."

I went back and got in my jammies and he watched me while I changed, and smiled but it wasn't a nice smile. It was like the Joker's smile.

The water was running down the hall in the kitchen and Momma was humming to herself.

I climbed into bed and I said, "I want *The Hardy Boys*. The one about the missing gold. Momma and I are on chapter three."

Bo said, "Tough luck, retard. I'll read you *Goodnight Moon*."

I think he picked that one because it's the skinniest.

I said, "Goodnight Moon? You think I'm a baby?"

And he said, "No, I think you're a retard."

I told him he was jealous, but he just laughed.

He read it real fast, not even turning it so I could see the pictures.

Then he put the book down on his knee. I could hear Momma putting the dishes away in the cupboards. He said, "This is a nice house. A real nice house."

I said, "Uh- huh."

He said, "I could get used to living in a house like this."

Then Momma walked down the hall and leaned against the door and said, "How *sweet*."

And he said, "It was nothing at all."

He walked out and she stayed behind and whispered, "Remember the guest rule." And then she closed my door.

But I didn't want to sneak down the hall and listen to them. I didn't like listening to him the way I liked listening to Ms. P.

The next day at breakfast, Momma said, "Do you like Bo?"

I said, "He's mean."

She said, "He's not mean. He read you a story, didn't he?"

And I said, "He's mean."

She said, "You're just jealous."

I said, "*He's* jealous."

She looked at her coffee cup for a while, maybe checking for cracks. Then she said, "Sometimes grown-ups keep company for different reasons."

"Than if someone's nice?"

"Yeah. You know when you get lonely?"

"No."

"How lovely," she said, and got up to go to work.

That night when I walked home from school I saw Bo's truck outside. But when I went in, the numbers were punched into the micro wave anyway, so that meant they were going out to dinner. They were sitting on the couch together and Momma's hair was wet, which was weird since she only showers in the morning. They were all smiley and their faces were red. Bo pretended to be nice to me but I went back to my room to read comics.

I heard Momma say, "Let him go."

They went out. Momma came in to give me a kiss first and she held my head and said, "You know I love you, right?"

And I said, "Me, too."

I ate alone. They got home late. I was watching TV. Momma opened a bottle of her pink wine so I hid in my room because when Momma drinks her pink wine she gets louder and her voice sounds different. She never gets mean, but I don't like her voice getting different. It's sort of like this one time when Wolverine was in the plane crash and it burned away all his skin and, well, you get the idea. I went to bed and got up later to pee and I heard them kind of grunting in Momma's room and I thought they were moving the bed because Momma likes to redecorate sometimes.

At Mrs. Connelly's the next day I drew a big pumpkin head with a mean, fake smile like the Joker's. Or like Bo's.

Momma was supposed to work because it was Tuesday, but there weren't any numbers on the micro wave when I got home. I stood there for a long time, staring at the blank micro wave, getting that hurt feeling in my stomach when I think there's no food. A toilet flushed.

And then Bo came out.

He held out his arms like a scarecrow. "I'm your babysitter tonight," he said. "Your mom's working the night shift. Ain't I a nice guy?" And then he laughed but it wasn't like he thought something was funny. It was a Joker-smile kind of laugh.

I stayed in my room until I got too hungry and then I came out and said, "Will you make me a sandwich?"

He was watching a football game and he didn't look over at me. He just said, "No."

So I got the Salisbury steak TV dinner from the freezer and said, "Will you punch the numbers into the microwave?"

He said, "What numbers?"

And I said, "I don't know."

He said, "Retard," then he got up with a groan and shoved the box in the micro wave and hit some buttons and after the ding went off the steak was all rubbery. I ate it anyways.

I didn't see Momma that night, but I saw her the next morning, dressed for work again. Bo was there, too. I think they had a sleepover. Momma's mouth got the way it did when I was supposed to leave the room, but I think Bo got it that way, not me, and besides, I wasn't done with my Corn Flakes.

They kept talking in quiet voices like I couldn't hear but I was sitting right there.

Momma would say, "It's too soon."

And then he'd say, "It could save you some money, too, having me help out."

And she'd say, "Not in front of him." Or, "He doesn't do well with change." When she said, "Plus, we're still getting to know each other," he frowned and Momma looked like her stomach hurt.

Then he said, "Maybe that's how *you* feel."

She said, "I'm off at two. He doesn't get home until three. We'll discuss it then." And she went to put her hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged it off.

When I got home from school, the lamp by the couch was knocked over and that made me stop inside the door and scrunch my eyes shut. I was pretty sure I didn't do it, but you never know when you're gonna get blamed. In the dark, I said, "Momma?" but she didn't answer me.

When I opened my eyes, I saw that Bo's leather jacket was hung on the back of the kitchen chair. I went over and looked at it. It felt smooth and had lots of neat hidden pockets and stuff.

I said, "Momma?" again, but no one answered me. That almost made me forget how hungry I was.

I walked down the hall past my room and checked the bathroom.

No Momma. I went in her room.

Momma lay on the floor with her mouth open. I thought she might be dead.

I said, "I want a sandwich."

But she didn't say anything back. Then I held out my toe and shoved her shoulder and she moved a little, but stiff, all at once. It was like the hamster babies in Mrs. Connelly's class, who also went to heaven.

When I turned around, Bo was standing in the doorway behind me. He looked at Momma, then at me. He said, "What'd you do?"

And I didn't answer because I didn't know what I did.

He shook his head and made a tut-tutting sound. He had a book in his hand. He said, "You like stories, right?"

I nodded.

He said, "Come on, let's get out of here. Away from what you've done."

And we went in my room. He pushed me onto the bed and sat in the chair like he did last time when he read me *Goodnight Moon*. He took out this skinny book and said, "Here's a book about a guy like you, retard. He's a

stone- cold killer.”

He read some then skipped a bunch of sections because there were no pictures and he probably got bored, too. There were these two guys who talked funny and one was tall and then there was a huge imaginary talking rabbit and someone died in a barn. That’s all I figured out. I would have rather watched *Pokémon*.

He closed the book when he was done. “Did you get it?” he asked.

And I nodded because people get mad at me when I don’t get it.

And he said, “Every story has a moral. And the moral of this story is that people like you can’t be trusted.”

He walked out into the other room. After a while, I followed. He was wiping off doorknobs and the glasses in the sink with a rag.

He said, “People tell you you think different, right?”

I nodded.

Now he was wiping off the kitchen chairs. “I’m not really here, retard. I’m in your imagination, you hear? You ever seen *Pinocchio*?”

I said, “I want to be a real boy.”

“That’s right. I’m like Jiminy Cricket. Or like that big rabbit in that book. I don’t exist. I’m a voice in your head. Got it?” He put on his leather jacket and walked out, using the rag to open the front door and close it behind him.

I stood there for a while. I went back into Momma’s room and looked at Momma. There was blue around her eye. Then I went in my room and read *Batman* again, up to page eleven. I checked the micro - wave but there were no numbers and I wasn’t sure how I would eat so I called 911.

The cops came in and looked in Momma’s room. Then they patted me down like Momma does at the diner after her shift when she’s looking for salt and pepper shakers. They sat me down on Momma’s bed and asked me some stupid questions. Then another guy showed up who I knew was a cop from the shiny badge on his belt even though he was too lazy to wear a uniform.

He came into Momma’s room, looked up, and said, “Holy Christ.”

I said, “You’d better not say that in front of Mrs. Connelly.”

He said, “Who’s Mrs. Connelly?”

And I said, “She’s Irish.”

He said, “Let’s get him out of here, Eddie.”

Eddie said, “Okay, detective.”

He and Eddie took me into the living room and I sat on the couch.

Other cops were putting dust all over the glasses and the doorknobs and using makeup brushes to wipe it off, which didn’t make sense because why put it there in the first place? They kept shaking their heads. I didn’t blame them.

Eddie said, “Why’d you kill her?”

I said, “I don’t know.”

And the detective said, “What were you feeling?”

I said, “I wanted a sandwich.”

Eddie said, “There’s our headline.”

I said, “I don’t know why I would’ve killed Momma because I love her

and she makes me sandwiches and I'm real hungry."

The detective said, "Aren't you sad?"

I said, "She's in heaven now."

And he said, "Well, there's that."

Eddie said, "You're gonna go away. To a different place."

I said, "I'm in a different place now. I ride a van to school and sit in a different classroom."

Eddie frowned and said, "Not like that, exactly."

One of the other cops stopped in my doorway and said, "You never know with these types."

The detective said, "I guess not."

The other cop said, "Hit her pretty good first. The black eye. Maybe it was accidental."

Eddie said, "Naw, the bruising needed some time to come up before he twisted her neck."

The other cop said, "He's got the weight for it," and then he walked off.

I said, "I must be stronger than I think. Like Wolverine."

The detective said, "What do you mean?"

I said, "He heals fast." I held up my hand. "No owies."

The detective took my hand in his, then my other, and looked at my fingers. His hands were warm and they felt nice.

I said, "I punched Sammy White once when he tried to put Jenny Little's head in the toilet and it hurt my knuckles and the skin came up and Mrs. Connelly had to tape up my hands and put orange stuff on it that smelled funny and I cried. But not as loud as Sammy White."

The detective said, "I'll bet."

He let go of my hands and said, "Not a mark, Eddie."

I said, "Momma said she couldn't trust me. But she *could* trust me. I never took her Frank Sinatra CD or the shimmery snake shirt or the shoebox in the closet."

The detective said, "Shoebox? What's in the shoebox?"

"Momma's tips."

"How many tips?"

I held up my hands, like showing how big the fish was I caught.

"About that many."

Eddie walked out. He came back a few minutes later and shook his head.

"There's no shoebox," the detective said.

"I guess I took that, too," I said. "I can't be trusted."

"Is that true?" the detective asked. "That you can't be trusted?"

"I think so. That's what the voice in my head told me."

"A voice in your head told you to do this?"

"Yeah. He's like Jiminy Cricket. He doesn't exist."

They looked at each other like when people say, "There you go."

I said, "But know what's weird about it?"

The detective was watching me closely now, with wrinkles in his

forehead and his mouth a little open like I sometimes keep mine before Momma reminds me to close it. “What?” he said.

“I have a picture of him, even though he’s just in my head.”

The detective said, “You do?”

“Uh- huh.” I stood up and they followed me down the hall. I went into my room and dug beneath my pillow and took out the wallet with the pretty Indian stitching on it and opened it up and there was a little driving card with Bo’s picture on it.

I said, “I stole it from his jacket and I’m sorry.”

The detective smiled and said, “That’s okay. You did just fine.”

I said, “Can I have a sandwich?”

GREGG HURWITZ is the critically acclaimed, internationally bestselling author of ten thrillers, most recently *They’re Watching*. His books have been short-listed for best novel of the year by International Thriller Writers, nominated for the British Crime Writers’ Association’s Ian Fleming Steel Dagger, chosen as feature selections for all four major literary book clubs, honored as Book Sense Picks, and translated into seventeen languages.

He has written screenplays for Jerry Bruckheimer Films, Paramount Studios, MGM, and ESPN, developed TV series for Warner Bros. and Lakeshore, acted as consulting producer on ABC’s *V*, written issues of the *Wolverine*, *Punisher*, and *Foolkiller* series for Marvel, and published numerous academic articles on Shakespeare. He has taught fiction writing in the USC English Department, and guest lectured for UCLA, and for Harvard in the United States and around the world. In the course of researching his thrillers, he has sneaked onto demolition ranges with Navy SEALs, swam with sharks in the Galápagos, and gone undercover into mind-control cults. For more information, visit www.gregghurwitz.net.

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