

Thieves

By Bernie Kirstein

Don was ravenously, deliciously, lost in the present. With the zeal of a Calcutta rag picker thrown into the rich refuse of a midwestern American city, pug-nosed Don gluttonously scavenged through buzzing alley trash cans, fetid store dumpsters, and rusting junk yards. Don's eyes gleamed as brightly as his greased hair, rutting out wood, metal, fabrics, machines, electronics, furniture, artwork, and books.

What Don sought was not treasure, but time. People had spent the fleeting moments of their lives creating the unwanted, unvalued, throwaways that Don collected. His own parents had spent the best of their lives making forced metal shapes that others now threw away. He valued that time and the creativity it took to create something out of nothing. Out of his collections, Don created a small magical urban fortress, his, and our, idea of home, the "Hut".

Don at seventeen, (older than most of us by a year or two) took pleasure in making himself, (and us) more comfortable, more entertained, and more settled, in our jagged, gray, working class neighborhood. While the rest of us were absorbed in the future, working towards it, or at least dreaming of it, (college, career, crime), we admired Don's energy and enthusiasm, (although often in a skewed amused way) and helped cheerfully with his creations.

Off a junction of broken glass alleys, between massive 100 year old brick apartment buildings and the garages of two-story Graystones, next to Don's parent's house, was a bleak, peeling, white, wood storage shed that had once been a coach house. After unrelenting persistence, Don wore down the owner of the shed into

letting us use it as a clubhouse. The owner, a good hearted alcoholic plumber, whose yard and house backed up to the shed , had spent his youth in the same alley himself .

In the time that preceded the Hut, we had met and hung out in a cove in our alley, on broken sofas against towering brick apartment walls. There, under a street light, during weekends when school was in session, and during the entire sweltering summer when it was not, we sloshed down quarts of brown bottled beer and fruit wines, while singing acapella - until windows in the apartments above screeched open, and torn t-shirted tenants bellowed threats of calling the police, which they sometimes did. When they did, we scattered like roaches at the first sound of the squeaky brakes of the police cars as they turned into the alley from the street.

We were allowed to use the storage shed under the condition that we remodel it into a livable space; that included bringing in heat, water and electricity, and paying for them. We were also not allowed to drink in the shed, (no problem for Don, as he was the only one of us ten who did not drink, ever) . After laboring for three sizzling, dripping, July weeks, under Don's inertia our Hut was complete. We had found piping and wire. We dug trenches, and brought water and electricity from the owner's house, who also helped us with the connections. Don found a rusting kerosene stove, and black stove pipe that we ran through the roof for the coming sub-zero winters.

We also pieced together a wonderment,(to us) of an entertainment system. We found a huge broken black and white TV, in which we replaced tubes and rewired fused circuitry . We assembled a bastardized stereo system with four amplifiers from dissected TV's, radios, and phonographs. We mounted a collection of 32 speakers,

(giant basses, oblong mid ranges, tiny tweeters) on all four walls and on the ceiling. The resulting deluge of sound was so massive as to allow Don to dance purely to vibrations in the floor with his deaf girlfriend Sharon .

From a carpet store dumpster, we dragged in multicolored remnants to make a rug three layers thick; soft enough to sleep on, which we did . From the alleys we also dragged in couches, tables, lamps, and shelving for books.

We spent our summer weekends in the Hut, supine on sagging couches in the squeaking breeze of window fans. In the winter we huddled around the red metal glow of the kerosene stove . We played cards, talked about the girls in the neighborhood, (and occasionally coaxed them over) and most of all, watched TV - baseball, football, and Don's beloved detective and secret agent shows .

It was now in the middle of December, on a bitter frozen night . Twelve inches of snow had accumulated in drifts as high as six feet in ferocious gales. We had scraped the snow off the sagging roof of the Hut from the ground, with an extended shovel Don had devised. The snow in the alley had frozen to a luminescent crust, reflecting crystalline in the street lights fastened high above on telephone poles .

Kerosene smoke billowed upward in the moonlight from the Hut, as Don and I watched a Christmas television show inside. There was a pounding on the door . I jumped up and pulled it open . It was Greg, whom I'd known since I was six. He knocked the snow off his boots on a mat outside, and heavily dragged in a five gallon can of kerosene . I slammed the door shut on an uninvited gust that brightened the

flames in the stove. Greg set down the sloshing can and went to rub his hands over the stove .

"Man! It's cold enough to give Frosty the Snowman a hard-on!" yelled Greg. He asked Don for a cigarette, got one, and plopped down on a couch .

Greg was of medium height, athletic, with a pot belly . Girls considered him roguishly attractive . He was intelligent , but totally without ambition . He had dropped out of High School in his freshman year . Greg didn't pursue anything with sustained effort, not even girls or drinking , as we did, although he enjoyed both . Greg was happiest when involved in some drama - a marauding north woods fishing trip, crashing a party, a gang fight. He owed all of us money, and this shielded us from his borrowing further. He was selectively philosophical . He was dismayed at the injustice around him, while creating his own. He lived at the Hut virtually all week long , while most of us only spent weekends there, except during the summer .

Andy Williams was singing Christmas carols on TV, fed through the stereo system. Gorgeous women in elf costumes looked on admiringly . Would they look at me the same way if I produced those same sounds, I thought . The elves began dancing around a huge sparkling Christmas tree .

"Man! That's what this place needs ." said Don , "A tree!"

"Yah, that'd be nice," agreed Greg, "But how are we going to get one . You know what they're going for ?"

"For more than you owe me ," I jabbed .

Greg snickered.

I got up and checked my boots behind the stove . Their cracked

construction boot leather was now warm and dry . I had recently moved with my mother to an apartment some three miles out of the old neighborhood . It was now a long hard walk to get here . The walk back, after a night of weekend adventures, was even worse. I saw it as penance .

My pants on a chair next to the stove were almost dry too. They had been frozen solid up to the ankles and had crackled as I had taken my boots off. In the heat of the stove, the frozen numbness in my feet had turned to burning pain, then a rosy warmth . I slipped my warm pants on over my long underwear.

"I know where there's a tree we might be able to get," Don said pensively.

"What? Saw one down in the Forest Preserve?" joked Greg. "Remember last year when some guy roped off an area of the Preserve at "Thatcher Woods" and had a sign, "*Cut down your own Christmas tree!*" He had dozens of people hacking away, until the cops came !"

"Nah, I mean at that lot up on Ashland," said Don. They've got trees for display wired to the outside fence of their yard . Those are the rejects they can't sell. They'll only burn em later anyway . I went by there to take a look , an it took nearly fifteen minutes before the fatass running the place would even come out of his trailer to see me ."

"Yah, what if he's got a shotgun in that trailer !" retorted Greg .

"If he had one, he wouldn't fire into a busy street like Ashland," I added half seriously .

"Yah, that's right," added Don, in total seriousness . "I think we could do it. I'm sure we could !" he added with conviction.

Don walked over to the sink and opened the cabinet underneath. He began rummaging around in a cardboard box of tools until he found a pair of wire cutters . "See these ? I'll cut a tree loose from the fence, while you guys watch the trailer from across Ashland . OK? Then I'll run across, and drop off the tree if there's anybody following me . They'll chase me , while you guys take off with it. It'll work!"

Greg shrugged thoughtfully . "Yah, that might work."

I resented being automatically included in something this risky . I had taken risks before, but rarely just at the spur of the moment, and never purely to steal something . Out of reflex I had a sharp flash of guilt, as I thought of my self sacrificing mother . With a chill I remembered the only time I had ever stolen anything. I was ten, and I had gotten caught .

I had been on my way home from school with a friend . We had been bragging to each other about risks we had taken, our voices getting louder and louder. He had asked me if I had ever stolen anything . I had said , "Yah, sure !" with false bravado . "Me too," he had said , "All it takes is guts! Hay! Let's get something from here," he said as we walked by a large grocery store.

"Sure!" I agreed boisterously, with adrenaline immediately throbbing hard in the veins of my temples. In a jarring instant, I felt powerless and in danger, like on a rollercoaster slowly clattering up to the precipice while looking down on people the size of ants. I couldn't back down.

As we had walked into the store I was greeted by a cashier, a young blond Polish woman who always greeted my mother and I. My mother knew some Polish and often exchanged pleasantries with the woman in her language. I had felt a red hot flush

and hoped she didn't notice . We walked around the store stealthily checking for store employees. We stopped at an aisle for school supplies . My friend looked up and down the aisle. No one was around. He took a package of pens from a display rack, lifted up his plaid shirt, and stuck it in his pants . I was taking short forced breaths.

"Your turn !" he said to me with a smug smirk .

I walked to the end of the aisle to the fruits and vegetable section . The rollercoaster was going over the precipice, gathering speed , and screaming down to the asphalt below. I looked for something I could put into my pocket . I saw some plums . I didn't even like plums . I picked up two, pretended to squeeze them for softness, and only returned one , the other I hid in my hand , then put it into my pocket .

"Let's get out of here, " my friend whispered .

We went down an empty aisle towards the front of the store. I heard footsteps echo to a stop behind us .

"Eh ! You two ! came an Italian accented voice I recognized instantly as the store manager.

My friend and I froze. I looked over to him. His eyes were beginning to turn red with tears. He was shaking . He didn't return my look . I was alone .

"Turn around !" the manager ordered angrily . We did . His heavily browed eyes were wild but had a tinge of sadness . He recognized me . But I knew, I would get no , "That's ah nice boy you've got there " , today . His resolve was determinate . He stood there huge with his hands at the sides of his apron. He appeared to get darker as the florescent lights buzzed above. There would be no talking him out of this one, and I didn't have the strength to try.

My legs quivered so badly they didn't seem part of me . My breathing came hot and deep and my head ached . My friend began to sob. I had never seen him like this . I looked over to him in sympathy, forgetting momentarily that my plight was as bad his own .

"You in the plaid ! Lift up your shirt !" he said sharply to my friend. He did as told, and took the package of pens out of his pants. He handed them to the manager, who put them in his apron pocket. "And you ! What did you steal! he said in a guttural tone .

I looked up at him, hoping for a glimmer of recognition. I hoped at least that he would see this as a personal offense that the two of us could resolve between ourselves, and not involve more powerful omnipotent others - the owners of the store, my school, the police, my mother ! I saw nothing but cold rock-hard resolve . He recognized me, but he didn't know the person I had become.

I lost the strength to look him in the face. I forgot about my friend . I looked down at my shoes , where tears were splattering in stars on the floor . I felt a deep primal force grow inside me that I couldn't stop by holding my breath . I bellowed forth with a wail so loud and so forlorn that it must have startled even the manager . I couldn't lift my head to say anything but could only sob deeply, hopelessly . I reached into my pocket , and without looking up, offered the plum.

"Anything else !" the manager growled . I shook my head , spraying tears.

"Come to my office he ordered . We followed him meekly to the front of the cash registers, and up some steps to an office platform with half height glass walls- from which most of the store could be seen . The store had become silent. Everyone was staring up at us .

"I want your names and phone numbers !" said the manager sitting down behind his cluttered desk . He didn't offer us a seat. In drained, mournful, voices we told him what he had requested. The clatter of the cash registers resumed . The cashiers and customers , now avoided looking at us in shame . I saw the blond cashier gaze at me, and look away sadly.

The manager spoke briefly on the phone to both of our mothers. Within a few minutes I saw my mother through the glass storefront, hurrying down the sidewalk. She briskly shoved open the door. Her eyes were red. She avoided looking at me . The manager addressed her with respect , as if I was a problem they both had an equal interest in solving . My mother only nodded sadly .

On the way home, my mother sadly, slowly, repeated , "How could you have done such a thing ." I cried all the way home and howled about how sorry I was .

At home my mother sent me to my room, but gave me no other punishment . She didn't have to . Her look of disappointment made me shudder with a sorrow deeper than any I had ever felt before.

"Well , how about it, are you with us ?" Don asked impatiently of me. Don's voice sounded a loud discordant tone in the steady Bach rhythm my life had become, (school,drinking, carousing,school,drinking,**burglary !**).

Greg stood next to Don with his eyebrows raised quizzically. He was going to go along with whatever Don would do , but hoped that I would go along as well . With only he and Don doing something this risky, it would feel too close to his being involved alone.

I didn't want to do this. It didn't feel right. But, if Don and Greg pursued this alone, the chances of them getting caught would be much greater. They wouldn't have the head start of a diversion. Both of them would just have to take the tree and run . If they were seen while they were cutting the tree loose, they could be caught on the busy street by bystanders, and the police would be called . I would be responsible. I didn't want to be responsible. I was irresponsible enough .

What tipped the scales for me however, was the irony of stealing a tree to celebrate the birth of the son of god. This was an opportunity to test unseen forces .

"Alright . I'm in . Let's do it !" I affirmed, my words sounding hollow and foreign to me . I felt like something electric and mechanical had taken control of my destiny . I would have to rely on that force to get me through this . I wanted to return as quickly as I could to human warmth and security.

Don tucked his pair of rusted wire cutters into his pants like a gun. I pulled my frayed, bulky green sweater, that my mother had knitted, off over my head. Greg nodded in agreement and took his off too. The bulk of our clothes would slow us down . Speed would keep us warm.

The three of us stepped out into the stinging cold, and trudged through snow drifts to the alley in back of the Hut . The alley looked like a railway tunnel, in the eerie blue mercury vapor lights overhead. Ice grooves that had been compacted by cars, ran a half a mile west, transversed by humps of intersecting streets, to the bright lights of Ashland boulevard beyond. On Ashland, in the distance, we could

see car headlights and red tail lights flicker by , and neon signs blink blue, yellow, and green in staccato rhythms .

The snow compacted in squeaks beneath our boots as we walked towards Ashland . Don went over his plan . His voice hushed from the windows of the apartments above, but in a jovial mood. We crossed one iced side street, two more , and then we stepped out of the alley onto Ashland. Cars sprayed salted water as they roared by. Across the street we could see the Christmas tree lot .

Trees were wired to the outside of a chain link fence and lit with festive Christmas lights . White smoke rose from a shack in the middle of the flood-light lit propped up forest. The pine smell of the trees mixed with street salt drifted across to where we watched, at the mouth of the alley. We shared cigarettes, stomped our feet to keep warm, and waited .

An old woman pulled up in front of the lot in a rusted out sedan and parked next to a fire hydrant. She got out, lifted her fur collar up around her neck and waddled over to the trees. Within seconds the shack door slammed open . Out came a huge bearded man wearing a Navy coat and a Russian fur hat . He was in his forties and walked as lightly as an athlete, even in battered construction boots . Greg and I looked at Don with accusatory skepticism .

"This guy doesn't look like a lardass to me," Greg said to Don. "He looks like some fucking Rasputan !"

"Relax . He's big, but he's the only one there. You think he's going to leave his lot alone and come after us ? No way!"

"I don't know." I said . Let's at least make sure he's alone. "

While the man in the lot lifted up trees in each hand for the old woman to see, another car drove up next to the lot and parked. A heavysset matronly woman in a brown plaid coat got out . No one else came out of the shack to help her.

"I think he is alone , " I said .

The two women picked out their trees and Rasputan put them in their car trunks, tying the hoods down with twine . He went back into the shack.

"Yell if he comes out while I'm cutting loose the tree , " Don rasped before we could say anything. See yah later !" Don dodged cars and ran over to trees furthest from the entrance of the lot .

I still felt comfortably detached from what was going to happen . It was still all on Don's shoulders, and Don should have been more forthcoming about the attendant. Greg and I studied the shack intensely. Don was looking over the trees as if he were a customer . We hadn't done anything yet . We were still innocent rubes right out of a Norman Rockwell. I saw a reflection of something shiny as Don reached into his coat . Cars continued to spray by. I noticed that Don cast a shadow from the street light across the lot entrance. I noticed that the top of the tree which Don was working on was shaking and was tall enough to be seen from the shack . The shack door slammed open . Rasputan charged out .

"Eh, you ! I yelled across at Don," as if I too had seen him attempt to steal the tree.

Don jerked his head towards me , then looked towards the crackling of boots in the crusted snow from the lot . He cut the last wire and heaved the tree free, leaving a gap through which he could see the lot attendant running towards him. Don took off

with the tree. With each step Don took, the consequences grew. The scene was as unreal as in any movie . We watched fascinated and frozen.

"Drop that tree you fucking thief !" screamed the lot attendant.

Don was now a criminal, hated, hunted, vulnerable to the righteous wrath of everyone around him, in particular the enraged attendant, who was now gathering speed clumsily on the snow and ice of the sidewalk, not 50 feet from Don . If the attendant caught Don, he could shatter his head bloodily open with one blow from his mallet fist. We would hear the breaking of bones from where we watched across the street. The attendant would not only be forgiven, but praised as a pillar of order in a dangerous land. Don was now an outsider among people he had spent all of his life with. He had the sympathy of no one, but us.

Don balanced his grip on the tree then ran between parked cars, out into the street, directly into the path of a car not 30 feet from him. The car , a battered Mustang hit it's brakes and slid with a wet rubbery sound on the icy street. I could see the driver, a heavily jowled man of about fifty desperately turn his steering wheel, but without response . The car slid sideways and with a loud hollow boom hit a parked car. The driver held the steering wheel for a second in shock, then slowly got out of the car, unhurt, and looked around for Don. With the crash, cars stopped on both sides of the street and Don ran safely across. The attendant, stunned temporarily, gave chase again with renewed vengeance . "Stop you son-of-a bitch !" he screamed .

Don ran directly towards us wild eyed and gasping . He threw the tree down on the side walk and continued running up Ashland. The attendant ran past heaving like a madman. Don without the tree was pulling away from him .

Greg looked at me with uncertainty . We both hesitated . Don had risked a great deal. I picked up the back end of the tree. The sap was still sticky. The pine smell was strong and sharp.

"OK !" Greg hissed. He picked up the front .

"Put it down you assholes," came a yell from the attendant behind us. He had given up on Don, and was now walking slowly back to the tree.

As we took off, so did the attendant after us. The tree shook in rhythm as we bolted into the alley, out of the bright lights of Ashland. It took us a few seconds to balance the tree and get a good running rhythm over the ice . Our boots echoed harshly between the buildings of the alley. We could hear the pounding echo of the attendant behind us. In the windows of the apartments above, window shades were being pulled up, and rays of yellow lights pierced the dim blue white of the alley.

Suddenly there was a loud crack behind us and then a howl of pain. The attendant had slipped on the ice and landed on his back. I grimaced . We had caused this . We sped up. I lost my footing , fell forward on the tree, and knocked Greg down. We both slid across the alley with the tree, hitting a cluster of trash cans hard. More window shades went up. I looked back and saw the attendant struggling up.

"Let's go!," Greg yelled . We scrambled up and took off again. Over the pounding of our boots and over the blood roaring through my ears, I struggled to hear

the attendant. I desperately hoped for silence behind us, but feared it as well. Silence could mean the attendant was dead. Again we heard the hollow desperate clomping of the attendant behind us . He was again gaining on us

"Through the school yard !" I wheezed hoarsely to Greg as we came to the intersection of a side street.

We turned right, slipping on thick ice and nearly falling, and ran down the middle of the street . There were no cars . There was another crash behind us as the attendant fell again and raged curses . If he caught us he would show no restraint. He was beyond just getting his tree back. A rational man would not have left his business alone. This had become a personal vendetta to right a wrong way beyond the one that we had caused him. His animal rage was from another world.

My lungs were exploding in pain as we skidded left at the next street. Again we heard hollow thuds of boots closing on us. Just ahead was the elementary school we had both attended. A new brick one-story addition faced the street, and a gloomy Gothic four story building loomed behind it .

We ran around the addition and between it and the old school . We were briefly out of sight of the attendant . Ahead lay a vast dark snow covered school yard, covering nearly a square block . I looked back to the school addition and it's landscaping . We could hear the attendant's mad snorting, seconds from us.

"What are you waiting for!" shrieked Greg.

"Let's leave the tree here I !" I gasped .

The school addition was surrounded by small pine trees, and a waist high chain link fence. I lifted the tree over the fence and rammed it down into the snow next to other trees .

"Great ! Let's split up . I'll meet you at the Hut!" stammered Greg with newfound hope .

We both ran across the school yard in different directions. Greg across to a busy street beyond, Southport, and I running towards an alley bordering the school yard. I plunged over a short fence into the alley and ran down the concrete steps of a gangway. The gangway, a narrow corridor between buildings, led down to a basement door, and continued up again to a street beyond. I hid in the dark at the bottom of the stairs and listened. I could hear the wild struggle of the attendant through the snow echoing across the school yard, but away from me . He was chasing Greg.

I crept to the top of the stairs and looked out over the school yard. Greg was a quarter of a block ahead of the attendant and pulling away.

Maybe the attendant hadn't seen where I went. Maybe he believed that I had the tree. I saw Greg dive over the school yard fence and fall into the snow on the other side. He ran across the street into a gangway between apartment buildings, and disappeared from view .

The attendant stopped running. He went down on one knee to catch his breath . He picked up a lump of ice and slammed it to the ground. He took off his fur hat and ran his gloved hand through his hair. He slowly got up, and slowly he began to trudge back.

I watched in darkness, desperately trying to keep still, as the attendant came within 30 feet from me. But he continued on. He walked back between the old and new

school buildings where we had come from. He continued past the Christmas tree next to the other trees and on out of sight. I exhaled.

I could hear the attendant's footsteps echoing between the old and new school buildings, then suddenly stop. ***Maybe he had seen the tree, and was waiting for me to retrieve it !*** I froze again. I heard the sound of a car

swishing by, out of sight, behind the school addition. Finally, gratefully, I heard the footsteps of the attendant continue, getting softer and softer in the distance. I listened till there was no sound, but the soft patter of snow which was beginning to fall .

I began to shiver uncontrollably . I shook myself and stretched out of the crouch I had been in. I crept up the steps of the gangway, and over the fence to the school yard . The moon reflected off patches of ice in the snow all across the yard. I looked around slowly. I was alone. I took a long deep breath and felt an exhausted sense of peace.

I crept over to the tree and pulled it out of the snow . With my eyes closed I inhaled it's wonderful deep rich pine smell. The tree felt much lighter now as I carried it back across the school yard and back to where I had been hiding. I dragged it up the gangway and out into the street beyond.

On the street I looked up at Christmas lights in the bay windows of the rows of Graystone buildings. Along the sidewalks were winter barren trees that had been decorated in small white lights. The greens and reds and blues from the windows reflected out onto the surgery sidewalk snow. I saw a figure at the end of the block coming towards me. As it came closer I saw that it was an elegantly attractive woman in

a fur. She passed by me smiling, as I labored with the tree . I felt wonderfully safe and alive .

Down another street, then down an alley and I was at the door of the Hut. I knocked. The door flew open before I could knock a second time . I was greeted by cheers and pulled in by Greg. Don handed me a bottle of wine, which he had never before allowed inside the Hut. Greg and the others dragged in the tree . A place was made for me on the coach next to the stove .

I watched as the others hung scratched Christmas lights on the tree and plugged them in. We cheered when they lit up. I got up and walked over to the tree. I took a green light bulb into my frozen red-white hands. The bulb became warmer and warmer, its green light escaping between my fingers and making my hands glow a translucent blood red. I let go of the bulb when it became too hot, and sank back into the coach. I looked over to Don. He was wedged into a recliner, tapping his feet to a Christmas song on the stereo. He gave me a wink and a grin.

In the warm multicolored glow of the tree, the chill of the guilt and alienation I had felt so deeply just minutes before, subsided. I unscrewed my wine, took a deep drink, and passed the bottle around. The depth of the friendship I felt flowed warm like the wine, through every vein .