



GREGORY GALLOWAY

"A sucker-punch noir that is also a powerful and haunting allegory of work, debt, and power."
—RICHARD PRICE

JUST

THIEVES

A NOVEL

Just Thieves

Copyright © Gregory Galloway, 2021

All rights reserved

First Melville House Printing: August 2021

Melville House Publishing

46 John Street

Brooklyn, NY 11201

and

Melville House UK

Suite 2000

16/18 Woodford Road

London E7 0HA

mhpbooks.com

@melvillehouse

ISBN: 978-1-61219-937-5

ISBN: 978-1-61219-938-2 (eBook)

ADVANCE READERS COPY

In times of terror, when everyone is something of a conspirator, everyone will be in a situation where he has to play detective.

Walter Benjamin

The criminal is the creative artist.

G. K. Chesterton

ADVANCE READERS COPY

1. THE HORSE

We didn't know how it happened, but when we woke up there was a dead horse in the street in front of the hotel. The sun wasn't up but it was light out, that part of the day I like best, not quite day but no longer night. It feels like the start of something. You can go out and see the world and not be bothered. Usually. But now there was a large dead animal in the street, and a small crowd, five or six people with nothing better to do than stand around and take pictures. "Don't look at it," I told Frank, knowing he wouldn't listen. There was no saddle, no bridle, and no blood, nothing but a large gray horse dead in the middle of the road. It must have just happened too; there wasn't a cop or fireman or any official-looking person around to deal with a corpse in the street. Just people like us, headed out for the day with things to do, never expecting to have a dead horse literally thrown right in our way.

We were supposed to be on our way to work, but this would change things, alter the entire day, if I knew Frank. He'd have to think about it. He'd have to think about it a lot. We should have stayed there, in the street with the horse, maybe, in retrospect, so he could take a good look at everything. Let him take it all in and work it all out right there. That's what we should have done. Maybe the whole day would have gone different; maybe the whole thing. In the moment, though, I thought the sooner I got Frank away from the horse, the sooner he'd stop thinking about it. It wasn't the first time I've been wrong like this. "Let's go," I said, and Frank didn't seem to want to stay anyway, so we walked into the nearest diner and took a booth in the back.

At times like this, Frank tended to see omens in the smallest accidents. He wasn't exactly a superstitious sort, not the black-cat, broken-mirror, bad-luck type. He was worse than that in a way. He thought the world operated with an efficient underlying malevolency; it all operated according to a specific set of rules, and if you paid close enough attention you could avoid its damage. He didn't believe in surprises or

coincidences; each event was a gear in a large machine that rolled on and on, rewarding those who paid attention to its inner workings, and punishing those who ignored them. Once, when we were on a job not unlike this one, we were getting ready to go out in the middle of the night when the hotel's emergency lights began flashing and alarms sounded in every hallway. Frank wanted to stop right there and get back into bed. He refused to leave the room. He didn't want me to leave either. I went anyway. We had a job to do. The elevators weren't working and I had to walk down eight flights of stairs. There was a man in a wheelchair on the seventh-floor landing and he asked if I would help him.

"I can't do it by myself," I said. He was a big guy. "You can't leave me here," the guy said. So I stood and waited for a stranger to come along. Our good intentions were quickly overtaken by our incompetence. We struggled with every stair, negotiating the man and the chair carefully down and down, the uncooperative weight of him getting worse and worse every floor, while he complained every inch of the way.

"Watch it," he'd say, convinced he was going to tip, but we had him. Unfortunately we had him. "What are you stopping for," he said as we caught our breath on the fourth-floor landing. We looked like death, me and the stranger, in the harsh emergency light, and the pulsing of the alarms only made everything worse. My ears were ringing and my heart was pounding against my chest like it was trapped and I thought I should be the one in the wheelchair. But we went back to work and got the guy down. By the time we reached the ground level, the lights were back on and everyone was headed back to their rooms. The guy in the wheelchair was pissed off. At us.

"You should have left me up there," he said. "I knew it was nothing."

I wandered off without saying a word. I went back to the room and didn't tell Frank anything about the wheelchair. He didn't need to know about that gear of his machine. "The whole block was out," I told him. "Twenty minutes, tops." It went out again, flickered then went black before the emergency lights kicked on and the alarms

sounded again. We went back to bed. The job had to wait. Frank could wait, wait for the gears to move smoothly again.

“We’re engaged in criminal activity,” Frank liked to argue in regard to his superstitions. “Criminals get caught because they don’t pay attention, don’t plan enough, don’t see the problems until it’s too late. I don’t want surprises. We need to avoid them.” That’s why I put up with him. Besides, you couldn’t argue with our success. We’d never been caught. But then, Frank had luck on his side, more than he’d ever admit.

We were thieves. We stole anything, paintings, cars, coins, guns, houseplants, it didn't matter. We stole a pair of sneakers (only twenty-three ever made, Frank said); they were just laying around the guy’s closet, tangled with slippers and flip flops. “The rich always get what they want,” Frank said afterward, “but they usually don’t want it once they get it.” That’s where we come in.

We never stole anything for ourselves. It was all strictly by request. A guy said, “I need this,” and we went and got it. We were small timers with small jobs. I’d been doing it for a while before I met Frank, but business was better once he joined. I knew what I was doing, but Frank had an expertise in things. Plus, Frank had a good face for it. Good looking without standing out. He had a calm, friendly way about him. Pleasant. People wanted to like him. Frank could walk into a bakery and walk out with twenty loaves, unnoticed. He could stand across the street from our target and no one would think twice. “I’m going to rob that house tonight,” he could have told them and they’d nod and say, “That’s nice.” Because of his face, and the way he had about him. People trusted him. I trusted him for a long time.

People look but they don’t see. You can have twelve people looking at the dead horse in the street and ten will give you ten different descriptions of the same thing. And the two people who agree are most likely to have it all wrong. One thing I’ve learned is that if someone is staring at you, you’ve got nothing to worry about. They’re fixated on one thing, your hair or your nose, maybe a freckle on your ear—who the hell knows—but they’re not seeing you, they’re only seeing some small part, and when they have to

recall the whole person, they can't. More times than not, they can't even accurately remember the thing they were staring at.

I let them stare. Or if I think they're doing more than looking, actually taking notice of what I look like, then I stare back. Look right at them. They almost always look away, and the minute they look away, they stop remembering. It all goes away, or gets changed around in their minds.

I have a bland face anyway. Tough to remember, harder to describe. Not good looking at all, but not so bad. Indistinguishable. That was my gift. No one could describe me with any accuracy. I'm fortunate with youthful features, and a mobility of expression which baffles all observers and provides a great strength and chief safeguard. By what signs can one hope to identify a face which changes at pleasure, even without the help of makeup, and whose every transient expression seems to be the final, definite expression? People can never remember what I look like. I was even questioned once an hour after stealing a woman's jewelry—she'd gotten a good look at me and then standing right in front of me at the police station she didn't recognize me. By the time the cops had found me, I'd already ditched the stuff, so I stood there and let her look. "It's not him," the woman said, and I was free to go.

I go through life as I please and no one pays me any mind. That's a good life, as long as it lasts.

Frank had a cup of coffee, then he had another one, without saying anything. It wasn't good. He could sit like that all day. He was like a chess player who looks at the board and figures out how every piece got where it was, looks at the board for as long as it takes, with the clock spinning hurriedly beside him, then figures out how to move from there. Frank would think about the horse and the people who were out on the street when we arrived, and then he'd try to figure out where they came from, what they were doing, where they were going, and why. There was no point in telling him that it had nothing to do with us. We saw it, were part of it, Frank would say, so of course it has something to do with us. But what does it have to do with us?

That's what Frank had to figure out. He'd get there, I knew he would, but it could be a while. It was times like this I wished I still drank. Or smoked. Anything to pass the time while Frank figured it out. Until then we were both stuck. Frank drank his coffee and I watched him, trying to stay out of his way as long as possible. But we didn't have all day.

"We had a plan."

I knew it was a mistake the minute I said it.

"Every day starts with a plan," Frank said, "and then it all goes out the window. We think it's going to behave according to the way we want it, according to our plans, but why should it? Why should we be surprised that there are a lot more things going on in the world than the things we want out of it?"

"We've done all right."

"We have. Which is amazing, isn't it? Failure should outweigh success, that's the way the world has to work. You know that. You see that. Just look at today. Most days are nothing more than barely contained accidents."

On a different day I would have argued with him. I would have told him that it's not the accident that's important, it's the reaction to the accident. You can't let it affect everything; you can't let it derail everything. I know what he would say; he'd said it many times before. "Everybody thinks they're in control, but there are forces in the world that control us. All we can do is try to navigate through those forces."

He had another saying that I liked, but didn't necessarily agree with. "Everybody's autobiography should be told in the passive voice," he said. "Our lives are shaped more by things we can't control than those we can. We are worked on by the world, not the other way around. All we can do is react." Frank was reacting to it the best way anyone could. He was recalculating everything, working to get us back on track. I let him work.

He went back to his coffee and thinking about the horse and how the world took apart our plans as if they were nothing, which they were, of course. Frank knew the way the world worked, more than most, which is why I stayed with him, which is why I was

sitting in a diner staring at a cup of coffee when we should be out working, when we're expected to be out working. I knew we'd have to answer for it. I'd have to answer for it. Frank never dealt with that side of things. This made me impatient. That's what Frank tolerated, but he wouldn't give in.

"So what do you want to do, Frank?"

"That was a cop's horse," he said.

"Could be from one of those carriages. Could be anything. We don't know these things."

"It's not good," he said. "Somebody should have been with him, not just left him in the street like that. It's not good."

"What do you want to do?"

Frank had another cup of coffee, but not another word. I sat and waited for him. What else was I going to do? I couldn't do anything without him.

We'd been hired to come and grab something. We got a call from my usual guy, Froehmer, who gave us an address or the name of the guy and then what we should take from him. It's easy, Froehmer said, the way they always do. If it's so easy, I said, then you don't need us.

I'd done a lot of work with Froehmer. He'd helped me out when I needed it, back when I was just starting out. Froehmer didn't pay well, but he always had work. Everything was easy for him. For as long as I'd known him, it was all easy for him. I had to remind him that it wasn't so easy for the rest of us. He didn't mind. Just get it done, he said. Don't wait more than a couple of days. The item might be on the move.

So we drove all the way here and got our room. We didn't know anyone, weren't supposed to do anything except find the guy and take what we came for. We couldn't even do that. Frank wouldn't do anything now, not until he figured out the horse. The day had started out one way and now here we were wasting time while Frank figured on the dead horse. It wasn't a sign; he didn't think that way. Frank was a smart guy, maybe the smartest guy I knew, but that was part of the trouble. He could think himself into things that weren't necessarily so. Maybe it was a cop's horse, so what? It doesn't

mean the cop knew anything about us. But the cops will be all over the street outside the hotel, Frank argued. Maybe they'll want to talk to everybody around, talk to us. We'll check out then. Move to a different place. That's the worst thing we could do, Frank said.

"So what do you want to do?"

Maybe I started this the wrong way. You might have the wrong idea about Frank and me. I have no complaints with him, in fact, just the opposite. I wouldn't be where I am without Frank, wouldn't have anything if it wasn't for him. He has his faults and eccentricities, but fewer than most, really. He's made his share of mistakes, but made fewer than I have, and has kept me from making plenty more. He brings more to the job than I do and doesn't expect more of me than I can give. What more can you ask from someone?

Frank's a thinker, by nature and by choice. He can sit and think through about anything, taking it apart and putting it back together in his mind until he's got it all figured out. It has helped us get at stuff no one thought we could. He could pull off one of those heists you see in the movies, complicated jobs that require all sorts of knowledge and planning and perfect timing and only work in the movies. I'm sure he could do it. He doesn't want to. Leave it alone, he says. "If it's that much effort, it's too much trouble." Frank could sit at home and steal stuff from all over the world if he wanted. He can figure out most hacks. I've seen him break into banks and corporations and government sites. He did it just to see how it was done, but it doesn't interest us, not as an occupation. We like the small stuff, get into a house, an office, someplace you walk into and out of, not running your fingers over a bunch of keys. Where's the fun in that? Frank would rather do the jobs we do, grab and go. He doesn't want much, and he doesn't need much. We get by all right and he never complains. I get the work and we do it and that's all there is to it.

I loved him, I suppose. He drove me crazy enough. We'd been partners for a while, knew how to work together. That was the important thing. I didn't have any secrets with him. Well, fewer than most.