

My Life of Crime

By Ken McLean

My brief criminal career began in 1949 when I was 15 years old. I lived across the street from three tough kids my mother did not approve of. "Stay away from those three, they're bad boys!" she would warn. That made them all the more interesting and so I paid no attention. They went by their nick names -- "Slim", "Butch" and "Kayo" and they were my gateway to criminal enterprise.

Slim was only a year older than me but he seemed much older. He usually had a Camel cigarette tucked behind his ear under his long black hair which he combed around the sides of his head where it met in the back like a duck's ass. He carried his pack of cigarettes on his shoulder tightly rolled up in the sleeve of his tee shirt so the girls would take note of his bulging bicep. He knew a lot of useful things like how to siphon gas or sneak into a movie house without paying.

Slim's brother Butch was a couple of years younger and he struggled to follow in the footsteps of his cooler older brother. He was small for his age and had a pinched monkey-like face. He liked to talk tough but without much to back it up. He was like the Wilmer character in the *Maltese Falcon*, the blustering little thug who Sam Spade dismissed with the withering put down -- "the cheaper the hood, the gaudier the patter."

Then there was Slim's uncle Kayo, one year older than Slim but a lot stupider. He had a large square head, a petulant lower lip and a belligerent manner. He lived with Slim's family in the small bungalow along with his aging mother with whom he always seemed to be in trouble. She had a few missing lower front teeth and a wispy mustache. We often saw her chasing after Kayo in her babushka and tattered house dress with her sagging socks falling down around her black swollen ankles. "Kayo", she would yell, "you get back in the house right now!" As the oldest of the three boys and the uncle, Kayo thought that he should be in charge but Slim pretty much ran the show.

We usually hung out in Slim's garage, it's floor littered with empty oil cans and broken fan belts. A fraying pinup girl calendar, yellow with age, hung from a nail on the wall. Slim's mother wouldn't let us in the house during the day because his father worked the grave yard shift at a nearby factory and she didn't want us noisy boys disturbing his sleep. So we sat in the garage on orange crates and played poker with chips and smoked cigarettes that Slim had shoplifted from our local drug store. "They won't sell me smokes so I swiped them", he would say.

When we were a few years younger we had played cutthroat monopoly in the garage instead of poker. We started the game with extra money to make it last longer. Then we allowed for reciprocal side agreements where two players offered each other lower rents in order to squeeze out the weakest player. That usually turned out to be Kayo who would often upset the game board and send the tokens flying when he was declared bankrupt. A game sometimes ended in a fist fight.

We also played a lot of touch football on Spaulding Avenue which ran between our two bungalows. It was usually Slim and me against Kayo and Butch. We developed a play that couldn't be stopped. I would run out for a pass and then cut sharply in front of a parked car. Slim would lob a pass just over the car's

hood into my waiting arms. The car acted as a pick and prevented Butch or Kayo from getting to the ball. It was like the famous Packer sweep – the defenders knew it was coming but they couldn't stop it.

One day a girl from around the corner joined our game and got into a fight with Butch. She was a bit smaller but she was holding her own and actually ahead on points when Slim broke up the fight. Thereafter, we teased Butch about losing a fight to a girl and he became even more pugnacious. Another boy on my side of Spaulding, Wesley, would sometimes watch our football games but never joined in. He was a bit of a goody-two shoes and carried his supplies to school in a pencil box. Unlike me, he obeyed his mother's edict not to play with the quarrelsome bad boys across the street.

But I digress; we're back now in the spring of 1949 when I was 15. One day Slim announced he had a way for us to make some easy money. He knew a fence who would pay for a set of fancy hubcaps from a 98 Olds, the top of the line sedan from Oldsmobile. They were made of gleaming chrome with a ruby red coat of arms in the center as if to say they belonged to a duke or baron. All we had to do was to remove the hubcaps and bring them to the fence and he would give us the money.

Kayo said he was out, mostly because it was not his idea. I wasn't too sure. "What if we get caught?", I asked. "We won't get caught" said Slim, "Not if we're careful. We'll go at night when no one will see us." "Well, OK", I said in my best Humphrey Bogart gangster voice, "count me in." Butch was automatically in. He would do anything that Slim suggested.

A few days later the three of us set out into the cool spring evening like high way robbers looking for a carriage to plunder. We searched the neighborhood for a while before Slim said "There's one!", pointing to a dark blue 98 Olds parked in the middle of the block, its body glistening in the dim light and its flashy hubcaps just waiting to be lifted. As we cautiously approached the car, Slim pulled out two long screw drivers from his pocket and handed them to Butch and me. "You two get on either side of the car and use the screw driver to pry off the hubcaps on your side. Don't make any scratches. The fence won't pay if they're scratched. I'll be on the corner to warn you if anyone is coming. If I wave, stop what you're doing and hide in the bushes."

For a moment I wondered why Slim didn't assign Butch the lookout duties but then I lost the thought as we began our dirty business. I crouched down beside one of the tires on my side of the car while Butch worked the other side. I nervously looked around to make sure no one was watching and began to jimmy off the hub cap with the screw driver, taking care to avoid any scratches. It took a while but it finally came loose. I crawled up to the second tire on my side and this time I was able to get the hubcap off a bit quicker. I shoved the two caps under my jacket and joined Butch who was already standing on the sidewalk with his two caps concealed inside his jacket.

We could hardly contain our excitement as we met up with Slim standing on the corner. But before we could celebrate he held up his hand and whispered "Keep quiet, a car's coming. Head for the alley but don't run!" When we finally reached the safety of the dark alley we broke out into a huge laugh and ran for home using the alleys and avoiding streets. I thought about what I was going to do with the money I would get for the shiny new hubcaps clacking together beneath my jacket.

When we reached Slim's house we tumbled into the garage still chortling and giggling about the caper we had just pulled off. Slim turned on a flash light and Butch reached into his jacket and took out his two shiny hubcaps. Slim smiled and said "These are perfect." Then I handed him my two hubcaps. All of a

sudden Slim's expression darkened and he looked at me with disdain. "You asshole", he said, "you got the wrong goddamn car! These are Chevy hubcaps. They ain't worth shit."

I was devastated. I peered at the hubcaps in the dim light of the flashlight and Slim was right. They were from a Chevy! No wonder I didn't hear Butch working the other side of the car. How could I have made such a stupid mistake. After a few minutes I said lamely "Maybe we can go back and get the right ones." "Yeah" said Butch looking at me with a sneer. "Let's go back. I'll get the right ones." Slim thought for a moment and then said "No, we better not. The theft may have been reported and someone might be watching." I slunk back to my home across the street in utter disgrace.

A few days later we were playing poker again in Slim's garage when he casually mentioned he and Butch were going out that night to look for another set of the fabulous 98 Olds hubcaps. "Do you want me to help?" I asked hopefully, anxious to redeem myself. "Naw", said Slim, "Kayo's going with us this time."

And so my incompetent but brief criminal career came to an involuntarily end. Slim and his family moved to a different neighborhood soon thereafter and I lost track of them over the years. The last I heard, Slim had become an Illinois State trooper while Kayo was in the State penitentiary at Joliet for aggravated assault. I never did learn what happened to Butch. Maybe he became a hedge fund manager.