

THE CASE OF THE AIRBORNE BURGLAR
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On my door, a polished wooden sign with silver lettering says, "Mike Fang: Private Investigator". The bill collectors call me "Mr. Check's-in-the-mail". I don't know how many times I have to say that, since it's true. You'd think these guys have never seen the inside of a post office. The life of a private eye isn't anything like what you read about in the paperback novels. Mostly, it's full of having to listen to someone's miserable story about their personal problems and how they can't handle it themselves. Most of my cases have been things like chasing down divorced parents that fight over custody, vague suspicions of an embezzler in a business that turn out to be false, or following someone's spouse to see if their being faithful or not. With that last one, there's never a happy ending; if he or she is cheating, then I have to let the other one cry on my shoulder (not that I'm not compassionate, but my dry cleaner calls me more often than all the other bill collectors, complaining about how hard it is to get tear stains out of a coat). On the other hand, if I find out it's nothing, the spouse doesn't want to pay the full fee. But every now and again, I get something interesting; this is one such case.

I was sitting at my desk, dusting off a picture of my girlfriend, when my phone rang. Picking it up, my cropped ears were immediately assaulted by the voice of a skunk that runs the local gun shop. "Listen you flea-bitten mutt! If I don't get my money for those bullets, I'm gonna...." I flatten my ears back in aggravation and slam the receiver down. I had seen that guy's mailbox; it was overflowing.

The phone rang a second time. I hit the button on the call tracer. Seeing that it wasn't from anyone I owed cash, I picked up, "Fang." was all I needed to say.

"Mr. Fang, this is Jediah Bellow of Bellow's Jewelers," said a voice with a Cajun accent. "I have a need of your services. Last night, my most profitable shop was picked cleaner than a pork roast at a eatin' contest. You can see my dilemma."

"Mmm-hmm," I said, holding the phone to my head with my shoulder while fumbling in my closet for my hat. "Well, I think I'm available. Let me check my calendar." I threw a glance at the calendar that sported pictures of cars that I could dream about but probably would never even get to sniff the inside of. In all the day spaces, I had written myself the same note, "Get a job."

"Well this is a good day! I can get to work right away. Oh, I offer one of two rates: fifty bucks a day or a thousand bucks flat." The sound of someone gagging into a cup of coffee came over the line. "Er, I, uh, oh all right, a thousand."

"YES!" I thought to myself, punching a fist into my other hand. "Okay, I'll be over in a few minutes, what's the shop's address?" I copied down the address, and hung up. Jamming a tan fedora on my head, I threw on an overcoat. All right I know I said that real detectives aren't like the ones in novels, but I can dress like one, can't I? Holstering my revolver,

I took one glance in the mirror in my bathroom. My brown fur looked good with the coat, or so my girlfriend tells me. Tilting my hat at an angle, I headed out the door.

The front of Bellow's Jewelry had numerous glass display windows shaped like gems. Three story, orange plaster walls like a Mexican hacienda clashed badly with the green felt the jewelry was displayed on. Crime scene tape was around several pedestals that once displayed rings, necklaces, and other types of gaudy fashion accessories but now held only broken glass and bare felt. No one was there, except for Mr. Bellow. A fat otter, Bellow struck me as the type that had more stuff than he really needed. Given the surroundings, someone obviously shared my opinion.

"Finally!" Bellow said, "I thought you weren't never gonna get here!"

"Sorry, the traffic wasn't the best I've seen."

That's when I heard it. Holding up a hand to stifle Bellow, I quietly walked to the left of the coat closet behind me. Quickly, I flung the door open and yanked out the intruder by the back of his collar. A tabby cat a head shorter than me with black striped gray fur in a cheap suit glared at me. "Well well," I snickered, "Stu, you never call, you never write, fortunately."

Okay, brief back story. Before I became a P.I, I was in the police academy. While I was there I was constantly harassed by a punk named Stuart Yowler and his cronies. They were the kind of guys you expect that, once they get their badges, they'll be pulling people over in their cars for no reason except to harass them. It was when we had to take on an obstacle course designed to simulate chasing a criminal when he pulled his last dirty trick on me. He had been doing all sorts of nasty stuff to me, from stealing my clothes to framing me for cheating on tests. Anyway, we had been assigned as partners to chase down some poor shmuck that picked the short straw and had to play the bad guy. We were running through a building set up to look like a warehouse. Stu was in the lead and I was right on his tail. Just as we were closing in on the criminal, that son of an alley cat kicked a stack of barrels over on top of me! After he tackled the other guy, he went right up to the judges and said, "I would have got him sooner if lead butt hadn't slowed me down." That's when I blacked his eye, elbowed him, and said to the judges, "If this is the kind of trash I'm going to have to work with, I'm not going to waste my time!" I left the academy the next day.

Now back to the present. I dropped Stu to the floor. "Ya know, if I were you I wouldn't have used a camera that makes beeps every time you push the button." Stuart looked at me like I was a roach. "Fang this is police business, you don't have any...."

"Save the authority speeches for someone that would buy it from a bum like you," I huffed. "If Bellow called me because he can tell that you couldn't deduce who stole your lunch out from under your own nose, that's his business. Now this case is my business, so butt out!!" Stu brushed his own hairs off his coat and started for the door. "Why don't you go

chase your tail?" He snapped, shaking a finger at me with the claw extended. I bared my teeth at him as I snarled, "Why don't you go hack up a hairball?"

A small cough brought my attention back to Mr. Bellows, who was standing next to the counter of the shop, scratching his protruding stomach under a button up shirt. "Sorry," I said, "Where were we?"

"I was tellin' you 'bout this here robbery. Now, according to my employee, she was workin' late last night, around nine. She had to go put some things in our safe. When she came back out, she saw a figure taking things out of their cases! She yelled and punched the alarm button. An I tell you, that weird character don start gettin' bigger! The poor gal fainted, and when she came to, there wadn' nothin' left but what you see here." The otter gestured to the broken cases and empty display boxes.

"Interesting," I mused, looking around. This case was getting very strange. A burglar that grows, gets in without making any noise, and leaves without attracting attention. I glanced around the shop, looking for someplace that the burglar might have hidden before the cops showed up. "Did anyone see this thief leave?" Bellow shook his head. Very weird. Just then, I looked up. Above me, a skylight was letting in rays of sun. "Bingo!" I thought to myself.

The only way I could get to the roof was up a ladder on the back of the building. Looking down, I swallowed hard; heights have never been on my top ten list of places I like to be. Reaching the top, my boots crunched on the grit that covered the roof. I examined the skylight. It was pretty large, at least twenty square feet. Examining the edges, I found signs of a crowbar having been used to pry and edge up. "Well, this is definitely how the thief got out," I muttered to myself. I looked over the edge of the building. The parking lot went around to the back, eliminating the possibility of a hiding place back there. Beyond the lot was a long field, and then the airport. "There isn't any way he could have gotten out the front or the sides, and the police would have spotted him going across the field, so where did he go?!" I paced the roof, racking my brain for any ideas. Stumped for the time being, I made my way to the ground, told Bellow that I had some leads to follow, picked up a list of the items stolen complete with pictures, and said my goodbyes.

The sun had set, and my office was tinted with orange afterglow. Drawing the blinds, I flipped on the news on the small television that sat on my filing cabinet. I had run the scene over in my mind a thousand times, but I still didn't have any clue as to how a burglar could have gotten away scot free. Just then, there was a knock on the door. Having been jumped before by thugs, and husbands enraged at the idea of being followed to see if their cheating, I didn't get up. "Who is it?"

"Someone with a case," said a familiar feminine voice. "Well, my door's always open," I chuckled. Janet, my girlfriend, walked in with that seductive bounce she always had in her step. Janet was the kind of woman I had always dreamed about, but never thought I'd even get the privilege of sharing the same state with. Now, through what I figure must have been a gift from God, I was dating the most attractive gal I'd figure anyone could have seen in their life. She had everything a guy could ask for: sensitivity, humor (meaning she laughed at my one-liners), a brain,

and a figure I wish my bank account had. "How's life been treating you Mike?"

"Not bad," I shrugged, leaning forward on my desk with my head on my hand, "I got a decent case for once, that's the good news."

"Uh-oh," Janet hummed, "What's the bad news?"

"Well....." I began. Just then, the news reporter, a female iguana, made an announcement. "In other news, a local jewelry store was robbed of tens of thousands in jewelry. The police are working on the case. Detective Stuart Yowler had this to say." The screen was then covered with Stu's ugly mug. "Were working very hard to catch the scum responsible for this mess. And we would be a lot closer if certain private eye's would keep their snouts out of this....You hear me Fang?!" I flattened my ears back and rolled my eyes. "That."

Janet giggled. "Don't worry. If half of what you told me about that guy is true, he'll probably wind up arresting his own captain." She reached over and scratched me on the back of my neck. It always amazed me how she could find that spot on my neck that made me want to thump my leg on the floor. "The crime problem," Stu, meanwhile, was still running his mouth, "in this city isn't going to be solved by some two-bit rejects from dime-store novels, but by me, uh I mean us, the proud protectors of....." I sneered as I switched channels with my remote, "your own backside," I muttered. Janet shook her head, "I swear, that guy has the most inflated ego I've ever seen."

"You said it honey," I sighed. Then, something in my head clicked. My ears shot up. "Janet, I think you just gave me a BIG lead."

The next day I headed into the suburbs. I had connected Bellow's statement that the burglar seemed to grow with what Janet had said last night. There's a group of people called ballooners, although some people call them balloonies, that have an interesting, although very unusual hobby: they inflate themselves. Don't ask me why; I'm not one. Some people seem to think their weirdos; I say that's stupid. There not weirdos, they just have a unique pastime. (To be perfectly frank, it always cracks me up to see them do their thing.)

I pulled up to the first house on the left of a cull-de-sac. Banging on the door, I was met by a blue dragon wearing a tank top and shorts. "Hey Mike, what's up dude?!"

"Hey Jason," I said slapping him high-five. Jason was a guy I used to work with at a restaurant. He and I got along from the first day, our different attitudes meshing like gears in a car. I was the suave, debonair type (at least Janet says that's what attracted her to me first) while Jason was a California surfer dude. We both started as waiters and went on to become cooks. When I quit we still kept in touch. As far as I knew, he was still working there. More importantly, he was a balloonier.

"So, what brings you to my pad?"

"Well I've got a case, and I need some info."

"Really? And you think I can help? Cool!"

"You bet. Let me ask you, do you still meet with those people that balloon as a group?"

"Oh yeah you bet! Oh, that reminds me...." Jason reached into his closet and pulled out an air tank. "I need to work out to stay limber, ya know? Do you mind if...." he pointed at the tank. I figured I could use a good laugh. "Hey, your house, your rules."

"Great! I try to keep a schedule, ya know? I can't do it in here, though. Some of the neighbors are real downers." I followed him down the hall to a room with one of those couches that folded out into a bed. "Yeah, I know. Some of the other people in my apartment building keep trying to get me thrown out just 'cause I've got a revolver." Jason took a seat on the couch while I grabbed a chair and sat reverse style with my arms crossed on the back of the chair. It was getting kind of hot, so I rolled up the sleeves of my shirt. Jason, meanwhile, had taken up a bit of a slouching position, with his feet propped up on a telephone wire spool that he was using as a coffee table; the ultimate in single's apartment decorum. Jason stuck the hose in the corner of his mouth, reached over, and twisted the knob on the tank. At once, his belly began to poke up a bit. I quickly stifled a snicker. "So," I said, trying to keep a straight face as the dragon's stomach began to throb up and down, pushing back his shirt. He kept the air flow under control by occasionally letting out a puff of air. "I was wondering if you and the others still meet around nine?"

"Yeah.....That's right.....We get together.....down at that.....abandoned.....dance hall.....and empty some tanks....." Jason said, getting out the words when he exhaled. His stomach was getting bigger now, just about the size of a medium beach ball. I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing.

"I was wondering if anyone didn't show last night?"

"Oh yeah.....actually....." The dragon's belly was now the size of a big beach ball, big enough to hide his face, which was good, since I was now pressing my fist against my mouth to stifle the laughs. Jason had his arms laying open with the palms up, and his fingers and toes were now beginning to puff up a little. He also had the funniest look on his face. "Some.....guy named....Zack.....a real jerk, man!.....He's a.....black panther.....with an attitude problem....."

"BINGO!" I thought. Just then, Jason tried to reach over to adjust the knob on the air tank. Very quickly, he began to inflate faster, his belly bulging and growing a foot a minute. His toes bloated out and his arms began to swell. I couldn't stand it anymore. I let out a round of cackling. "Oh man, I'm sorry..HAHAHA....but you just look so funny!" The dragon continued to swell. Jason tried to spit out the hose, but it was caught in his teeth. "Oh, sorry," I said, realizing that he didn't mean to turn the knob the wrong way. I jumped up and turned off the air.

"Thanks man!" Jason said, breathing a sigh of relief, checking out his bloated form. His stomach was a huge blimp, his toes and fingers looked like they were the kind of balloons you see people tying into shapes. His arms and legs had swelled proportionately. He shifted a bit, and fell off the couch. I couldn't stand it any more. I fell to the floor, laughing uncontrollably and pounding my fist against the wall. Jason stared at me for about a second, then began to laugh too. We laughed so hard for about five minutes that if anyone had been walking past the shaded windows they would have thought someone had opened a tank of laughing gas; and in a way Jason had.

"I think.....HA....I need to find this Zack. Any idea where he.....SNORT.....lives?" I asked, finally getting myself under control.

"HAHAHA.....Ahhhhh. Hmm? Oh sure, he's got a shack down by the beach, 432 Gilmore, I think."

"Well, thanks....heheheh..for the info Jason. Do you need any help deflating?"

"Oh don't worry man!" He said, waving inflated hands, "As long as I'm this big, might as well enjoy it! Oh there are three things, though. One, could you help me back onto the couch?" "No problem," I said. I gave up trying to get my arms under his bloated ones, so I just pushed him back into place. Unfortunately, he just rolled back off. Choking back more laughs, I unfolded the bed in the couch and rolled him onto it. "Thanks, now could you get me the remote?" Jason asked, Pushing himself into a sitting position. Hunting around, I found the remote for the T.V in the corner. "Thanks, now just one more thing: could you scratch my stomach? I can't reach it." Throwing a quick, involuntary glance around to make sure no one was watching, since they might take a friendly favor to be some kind of bizarre love affair, I climbed up on the bed and scratched Jason on his yellow belly scales. "PHEW! Thanks, that's been itching ever since I started!"

"No problem, keep in touch Jason!" He waved a bloated hand as I headed for the door.

The moon was full, but I wasn't baying at it, since it would have blown my cover. I had found Zack's hideout easily enough, but I still didn't have any evidence against him. I had followed him around all day. Most of his hangouts were in drug houses and other places I hated. Still, a dog's got to do what a dog's got to do. I hated Zack from the first moment, from the backwards baseball cap he wore, to his jacket with "For an instant thrashing, just keep looking this way" on the back. Everything about this lowlife said "dirtbag." But that dirt must have been pay dirt, because the last place he led me to was a pawn shop! While inside, he pawned off several items on the list I got from Bellow. Unfortunately, he had given me the slip when he walked into a members only club. When I had approached the dragon bouncer, I tried to blend in with the crowd. I don't know what tipped him off, maybe because I was the only one without a tattoo, but he picked me out.

"YO! You in the coat and hat! Yes you! Get over here!" The dragon

was a big, yellow, ugly sucker. I had only fought a dragon once before, when I had worked on a kidnaping case. Dragons are extremely tough, but aren't invulnerable. Still, it took all my strength to knock him out, and I was in the hospital for three days. I also lost one of my canine teeth, and my gold replacement has been a conversation piece ever since. This one began with the usual questions and I answered with the usual responses (Hey, do you want your manager to know you threw out his biggest customer, just because he left his card at home? I guess you must not want to keep your job.) but they didn't work. I managed to leave without getting roughed up, but my quarry had given me the slip.

Now I was sitting in my car, waiting for him to come home. Hopefully Zack hadn't noticed how long I had been tailing him, and would be stupid enough to return. Sure enough, the panther came slinking up the street. He whipped out a key, threw a quick look around, and went in. "Ready or not, here I come," I snickered. I snuck across the street to his kitchen door. You learn a lot of skills jumping from one job to another. My stay at the restaurant had taught me how to cook, my job as an actor had taught me about costumes and makeup, and my job as a locksmith's assistant had taught me the art of lock picking. Snickering, I pulled a small lock tool out of my coat pocket. Quietly, I probed about in the lock, carefully twisting the knob, until finally, it turned all the way.

The room was dark. My canine night vision took a minute to kick in. When it did, I didn't like what I saw. Zack was standing by sliding glass doors on the other side of a large living room. "Well what do we have here? A cheap Doberman private eye wannabe?"

"Scratch the 'wannabe' pal, I'm the real thing. And this Doberman is going to enjoy watching you tough it out in a jail cell for grand theft!"

"Oh really? Then I guess you know how I stole that jewelry?"

"Well, once I figured you couldn't have run off, the last place to go was up. You just inhaled helium instead of air to be able to float."

Zack laughed "That's right, I took a helium tank like this..." The panther pulled a tank out from behind his back. Sticking the hose in his mouth, he quickly bloated as he spun the knob violently. I barreled across the room, but by then the black balloon had waddled to the door, and had bounced over the deck. He was quickly floating away, and the wind was carrying him towards the beachfront boardwalk. All he would have to do is deflate, hail a taxi, and he'd be miles away!

"I'm not giving up that easy, you zeppelin!" I shouted. Zack's laughter from about twenty feet above me echoed off the water of the ocean below. I looked around desperately. The panther's house was decorated in African decor, all done in bad taste. Tribal masks on the wall, wooden statuettes, and BLOWGUNS! Grinning, I grabbed one of the hollow tubes. I didn't have any darts, though. Frantically thinking, I yanked off my tie tack. Stuffing it in the pipe, I leveled it on Zack's hard-to-miss stomach. "Off you go into the wild blue yonder," I said, ramming the tack out of the blowgun with my breath. Zack seemed perplexed by what I was doing, then as the tack hit him, stunned surprise spread across his face. The hole wasn't big, but the helium rushed out of it extremely fast. "WHOOAOAOAOA....." the panther yelled as he zigged and zagged though the

air like an out of control kite. He made a very ungraceful splashdown. He popped to the surface quickly. "HELP I CAN 'T SWIM!!" I rolled my eyes. "Figures," I muttered, doing a cannonball, the only dive I know, off the deck. Grabbing the miserable thief by the collar, I towed him back to shore, depositing him in a heap on the sand. Looking at my sodden reflection in the water, a pained thought came to my mind, "Oh great! Now I'll smell funny for a week!"

Mr. Bellow was extremely glad to get back his jewelry, or so I guess from the fact that he included an extra forty percent in my paycheck. It took me a while to figure out how to spend the extra money, but I finally decided to use it to say thanks to the two people that helped me on this case: dinner for two for me and Janet at the most expensive restaurant in town, and a couple of air tanks for Jason.