

The Crime of the Century

By Michael Danese

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Josie Grecco, PhD was on top of the world. After having a long and rewarding career, her research team was on the verge of developing a drug that was sure to be a milestone in the battle against cancer.

The phone rang in her office and the tall, thin woman with long brown hair answered it. “Doctor Grecco.”

“Josie, can you please come to my office for a sec?” said the voice on the other end, Dr. Bill McAdams, Josie’s department head.

“Sure Bill, I’ll be right there. Is everything OK?” Josie asked.

“Yes, excellent, actually,” he replied.

“Be there in a sec,” said Josie. She slipped into her white lab coat, stepped into her heels and adjusted her navy skirt before heading down the hall to Bill’s office. He was on the phone and waved her in, motioning to shut the door and have a seat. McAdams, also a PhD, was about her age, and had been in charge of the research unit since it was started 30 years ago. He was wearing a blue tie, white shirt, blue jacket and gray pants. His gray hair was short and combed back.

“Yeah, that is fine. We’ll discuss the release at the board meeting. I’ll talk to you soon. Bye,” he said as he hung up the phone and looked at Josie. “That was the Comm department. They are preparing a press release for your work.”

“A little early, isn’t it?” she asked.

“No, our investors are anxious to get the word out. Are you doubting your work?” he asked.

“Of course not! The work is sound!” she exclaimed.

“I know. There’s more. We’ve received a request from CNN to interview you after the release is out!” he said, barely able to contain himself.

“Oh ...well ...” she said, almost in a whisper.

“Oh, well!? This is CNN! You will be a star!” he said.

“That’s great, but the work is the story, not me,” she said.

“The *story* is whatever the press wants it to be! Is there a problem?” he asked.

“No, no, not really. It’s just that, well there is something I should tell you about,” she said.

“Okay, what could you possibly tell me that would put the brakes on this?” he insisted.

“No, nothing like that, it’s just that I feel I haven’t been completely honest with you, about my past, my family. And if the story came out, it could possibly overshadow the work,” she said.

“Oh, okay. Go on,” he said.

“Well, everything I am, I owe to my grandmother, Josephine. Yes, I was named after her. I need to mention that I never told this to anyone before, at least no one outside of my family,” she said.

“Okay, you know that you can trust me,” Bill said gently.

“I know. This is how it all happened, at least what I heard from my mother and what I remember...” Josie said.

The story starts in the mid-sixties, in Louisville, Kentucky. My grand, Josie was at the doctor’s office, and had her daughter, my mother Maddie, with her in the waiting room. There were eight comfortable leather chairs and two tables holding several magazines; Look, Life, Photoplay and Redbook, along with the day’s newspaper.

Josie’s hair, once auburn, was gray by then, pulled back into a bun. She was still quite attractive for a woman in her late sixties. Twenty years earlier she was told she looked like Rita Hayworth. Maddie actually looked more like Rita Hayworth, she was tall woman around 40, with long wavy auburn hair, and a winning smile. Her smile has been a bit dim for the past year, since her husband, Mack, was killed in Vietnam.

Suddenly Josie started one of her coughing fits. She reached for her ever-present handkerchief when it fell to the floor. She substituted her hand over her mouth as she coughed. A man in the next chair, about her age, with longish gray hair, picked up the monogrammed cloth and handed it to her with a smile. She nodded her thanks and stuffed the hankie back into her purse.

A minute later she was called into the doctor’s office. It was a modern office for the time. Josie was sitting in a large leather chair and Dr. Alberto was sitting across from her. Her eyes were scanning the diplomas on the wall when Dr. Alberto said, ‘I’m sorry dear, but it doesn’t look good. I’m afraid that the cancer has spread throughout your lungs.’”

Josie coughed, like she always seemed to be doing. She looked into her handkerchief that was covering her mouth a second ago and saw spots of blood. “I figured as much. How long do you think I have?” she asked the doctor.

“A few months, maybe more, maybe less,” he said as he rose to round the desk to hug her. ‘I’m so sorry my dear. It’s the cigarettes, as we’ve said.’”

She hugged him back saying, “I know, I know. Please don’t say a word to my daughter. I want to tell her myself.”

“Josie left the office and met her daughter in the waiting room. As soon as they were outside they both lit cigarettes and Maddie asked, “So what did he say?”

“He said all is fine, I have post-nasal drip. He wants me to gargle with warm salt water. He said that should help with the coughing,” she lied.

“Thank God!” Maddie exclaimed. “I can’t take any other bad news night now.”

“Go on ...” said Josie.

“Well mom, I don’t like to complain, as you know,” Maddie said, almost in a whisper.

“But ...” said Josie.

“But... since Mack died, things have been tight. Josie has been doing really well in school, and her teachers said that after she graduates next year she should go to college, and she is raring to go, but I don’t have the heart to tell her that I simply can’t afford it,” said Maddie.

“Of course she’s smart! She was named for me after all!” said Josie.

“You’ve got that right, mom!” she said with a laugh.

“And, she and Gary seem to be getting serious. I know he is going to ask to marry her, and how will I pay for that?” she said as she started to sob.

“Listen dear, these things have a way of working out. I’m meeting the gang for lunch and I’ll give it some thought,” said Josie.

“Oh mom, I know you have enough going on right now, I’m sorry to burden you with this. You’re right, it will all work out,” said Maddie.

Maddie pulled in front of the facility where Josie lived. Back then it was called an “old folks’ home” but today it would be a “retirement home”. It was a modest facility for people that can’t afford a fancy home. Josie leaned over and hugged and kissed her daughter saying, “thanks for the ride, dear, and don’t worry, I’m *sure* things will work out!”

Maddie hugged her back and held it extra-long, “I love you mom!”

Josie walking into the vestibule and into the sitting room. The flowery wallpaper was cheery but dated. There were three couches with people sitting and reading. The TV in the corner was playing The Mike Douglas Show, and three women with print dresses and hair that needed attention were watching.

“Look at Shelly Winters! Boy, she is getting fatter!” the largest woman in the group spouted.

“You should talk, Erma!” said another.

“Girls, let’s just watch without the constant bickering!” said the third.

Josie continued on into the dining room. There were nine tables, some with six seats but most had four. The walls were covered with the same type of wallpaper that matched the worn, drab rugs. In the corner near the window were two couples that were glad to see her. Hugs and salutations were shared, and Josie took her seat and lit a cigarette.

Seated next to her was her best friend Judy, then her husband Richard. They were about Josie’s age. Before Josie’s husband died four years earlier, the couples were inseparable. They vacationed together, and they had a son about the same age as Maddie. Also at the table were George and Sandy. They were several years older but still pretty spry. Sandy’s hair was in a tight perm and George was completely bald.

“How did it go with the doctor?” asked Judy.

“You know, quit smoking, walk more, blah, blah, blah,” said Josie.

They all laughed, and George said, “The derby is only two weeks away! Do you gals have your hats yet?”

“Wow, already!” said Sandy. “I’m just gonna wear the same one as last year!”

“I have an idea on how the derby could be really memorable this year,” said Josie.

“It’s *always* memorable!” said Richard.

“Let me ask you each a question,” said Josie. “If you had all the money that you would ever need, and then some, what would you do?”

Judy said, “We’ve talked about that for years. Cayman Islands! It’s beautiful, and you can live very cheaply!”

“What about little Ricky?” asked George.

“He lives in Seattle, it isn’t like we see him a lot anyway. Besides, if we were rich, we could give him money for flights a few times a year,” said Richard.

“You have it all worked out!” said Josie.

“It’s funny, but our thoughts are similar!” said Sandy, “only we always said Aruba. We would help out in a little hotel or café and just enjoy our time together. We don’t have any family to keep us here. Money changes everything, but at least we could dream!”

“Well, what if it wasn’t a dream?” asked Josie.

There was a chorus of “get outs” and “knock it offs” from the table.

“I’m not kidding. It wouldn’t be without risk, but if you want to take a chance, I think we could pull it off,” said Josie.

“Pull *what* off?” asked George.

“I think we could rob Churchill Downs during the Kentucky Derby!” said Josie, almost in a whisper.

They all laughed at her.

“I’m serious! Hear me out and then decide. It could be the answer to all of your dreams,” said Josie.

“Ok, go on, we’re all ears!” said Judy.

“Okay. As you know, my father played the ponies all his life, and the derby was like Christmas to him. He would drag me there all the time. He knew the track like the back of his hand, and so do I. He was friends with the people that worked there, the employees and the volunteers. He knew them all. A few years before he died we went on a behind the scenes tour. Behind the betting counters is a maze of tunnels where they bring the cash to a room on the lower level. There is a breakroom right down the hall from this room. During races, this room is always empty, especially during *the* race, Josie explained.

“I think I see where this is going,” said Richard. “We’ve all been there many times and know the place pretty well,” The others nodded.

Josie nodded and continued, “First we go to the derby party right here. We wear our hats, we get loud, we mingle with everyone. Then one by one we sneak out, but before we go, we each make a fuss with Martha and Erma. They will have their instamatics and will be taking a lot of pictures. We will need to get in some pictures.”

“Ah, alibis!” exclaimed Judy.

“Right,” said Josie, “We meet out back at George’s VW bus. But, before that, we load two large baby carriages into it. We also bring our best “old granny and grandpa” clothes. We bring two pairs of worker’s overalls and tool bags. We enter in our granny clothes from different areas. Sandy and Judy will push the carriages, slow and steady, and we will meet in the breakroom at

post time. When the trumpets sound, me and Richard will put on the overalls and head and face covers and head to the money room.”

“Why me?” asked Richard.

“Because you have that little shotgun and a pistol, and you know how to use them!” said Josie.

“I’m not gonna shoot anyone!” said Richard.

“Of course not!” said Josie. “I’m sure that none of these accountants want to die for the money either!”

“What about the guards?” asked Judy.

“There are two at the beginning of the hall. They won’t question grandparents pushing carriages or workers, especially at post time. More than likely, they will head to the grandstands to watch the race anyway!” said Josie. “So, we go in and wave the guns around. Richard yells something like: “Do what we say, and no one gets hurt! Now fill these bags with the cash!”

“Why do I have to say it?” Richard asks.

“Because you’re a man! They will obviously think it’s two men! Afterwards they will be looking for two men in coveralls!” retorted Josie.

“Smart! This could actually work!” exclaimed George.

“Can, and will!” said Josie.

“Ah, I don’t know,” said Sandy, “will there be enough time to pull all of this off?”

“We’ll be done before they know what hit them. You know how they call the race the fastest two minutes in sports? Well, we will be done and out before the winner crossed the finish line!” Josie said.

“So how do we get out? Still sounds risky ...” asked Judy.

“Yes, of course it’s risky We could spend our last years playing bingo around this table, or place our bets and win the trifecta!” proclaimed George.

Josie added, “And getting out will be a cinch! As soon as we leave with the money we will duck into the breakroom and stash the coveralls in a locker and throw the guns and bags in the carriages. Then George and Sandy push a carriage one way and the rest of us will go the other, nice and slow, like the old folks that we are. The place will still be going crazy from the race as we meet at the VW and drive away!”

“Well Josie, old girl, you obviously put a lot of thought into this!” said Richard. “Tomorrow I’m going to the travel agent and buy some round-trip plane tickets!”

“Round trip?” asked Judy.

“Sure! Yes, round trip!” said George. “Let them think we will be back, until it is too late!”

“You guys are already thinking like criminals! I love it!” said Judy.

Josie lifted her coffee cup for a toast, the others did the same, “To a better future!”

“A better future!” the others repeated.

The days raced by, and soon it was Derby Day! The dining room was all decorated. The activities committee always goes all out for the derby. There were flowers and streamers and horse iconography everywhere. Pitchers of mint julep were on the tables. Since the race is local, almost everyone in the room had been there in person at least once, some numerous times, so it's certainly a special day.

George and Sandy entered the party first and were greeted by several of the others. George was wearing his mint green jacket and Sandy wore a hat that looked like a nursery erupted on it. Josie strolled in wearing her flowery hat, and soon Richard and Judy entered, also decked out in the appropriate attire. They all ate from the buffet lunch and had some drinks. They all avoided each other, but were sure to mingle, pose for photos and socialize with all of their friends.

Late in the afternoon they each slipped out and assembled at the van. They drove to Churchill Downs and parked in the handicapped area. On the short ride they outlined their plan one final time. They were sure that they had thought of all of the possible roadblocks. They decided that if they felt that things were going wrong before they got to the breakroom, they would abort the scheme.

They climbed out, Josie stomped on her cigarette butt and her, Richard and Judy headed towards one gate as Judy pushed the carriage. Sandy and George pushed their carriage towards another gate. They smiled as they bought their tickets and slowly proceeded towards the hallway with the breakroom.

They walked through the concourse as the crowd jubilantly sang "My Old Kentucky Home" led by Doris Day. When the trumpet sounded to announce post time, one by one they walked down the hall. The two guards, engaged in conversation and scanning their betting tickets, nodded and smiled as the couples pushed their babies down the hall.

They quickly turned the corner and slid into the breakroom. Although they were nervous, they proceeded like clockwork. Josie and Richard pulled on their coveralls and head covers. They grabbed their bags containing the guns as Josie lit a cigarette.

When the gun sounded to signal the beginning of the race they heard the crowds cheering. The geriatric Bonnie and Clyde covered their faces and quickly walked down the hall and entered the money room. Everyone was facing the small television screen and cheering with their backs to the door.

"Stick'em up!" yelled Richard.

A few people turned around and a woman laughed. Richard pointed the shotgun at her and the small woman with short curly hair let out a scream. "Hands in the air or I'll shoot!" he shouted. "All the cash in these bags! Now!"

The three men and two women were petrified. Josie handed the bags over and they began to pour cash into them. Josie began coughing and grabbed her handkerchief to cover her mouth. The man in the middle quickly darted his eyes towards her. Josie recognized him as the man from the doctor's office. She pointed her gun at him and he quickly dropped his eyes and continued to fill the bag.

When the bags were full, the robbers grabbed them and backed out of the room while still pointing their guns at the terrified people. They shut the door and ran to the breakroom. They

could hear the announcer calling the race, “Heavenly Heart by a length, Scamper is next but Doggie Donut is coming up along the rail!”

They quickly removed their coveralls and head covers and stashed them in a locker while the others loaded the bags and guns in the carriages. They rushed to leave the room and move along the hallway. They passed the guards who had their backs to them as they were watching the race.

“Doggie Donut by a nose! It’s Doggie Donut!” screamed the announcer.

The group split up and headed in two different directions as they sauntered along like caring grandparents. People immediately started to stream into the concourse. Three policemen ran by Josie and company as they moved the other way.

They all met at the VW Bus. They quickly stashed the carriages and bags in the back and climbed in. No one spoke for several seconds. They Josie yelled, “We did it! We did it! You all shoulda seen Richard, he was like Dillinger in there!”

“I still can’t believe it! What have we done, we are criminals, we broke the law, oh, God, we are all going to Hell!” said Judy.

“Ixnay on the hells-nay stuff, old girl. This ain’t no time for your holy-roller bit. Besides, it’s all gambling money, which is a sin anyway!” said Sandy.

“Ok girls, let’s all just take a deep breath. Let’s just let this sink in. I still can’t believe we did it. This will make the front page, national TV, everything.,” said George. “I won’t rest until we’re on that plane in the morning!”

“We’ll be in the air by the time the first additions are even printed!” said Richard. “I can already feel the sand between my toes!”

“Yes, I’m so proud of us. Now let’s go back to the party, have some drinks to celebrate our big win at the track!” said Josie.

Josie entered the party first, a few minutes later, George and Sandy entered, then after a few minutes Judy and Richard joined. They all joined in the hugging and celebration and they were sure to pose for pictures. Josie poured a tall drink, lit a cigarette and collapsed into a chair. A few hours later the crowd thinned out and the five friends all hugged and kissed, said their goodbyes and wished each other luck. Tears were shed, both of joy and sadness.

The next day Maddie and her daughter, Josie came to have lunch with Josie. “Did you hear the news about the big robbery? Hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash! A few years ago, some of that woulda been dad’s money! The nerve of people robbing a national institution like the derby!” said Maddie.

“Yes, dear, I saw it on the news last night. Terrible!” said Josie.

“I heard a news bulletin this morning that they have a witness. One of the clerks in the office said that he thinks he recognized one of the robbers - a woman! And she pointed her gun right at him!” said the younger Josie.

“Really!?” asked the grandmother.

“That’s what they said. Apparently, he gave a description and everything! I hope that woman gets the chair!” said the young lady.

“That’s not a nice thing to wish on anyone, they didn’t hurt anyone from what I heard, right?” said Josie. “Can we just drop it and enjoy our lunch?”

“Sorry, Grand.” said the young Josie.

Maddie could tell that something was up. “You okay, mom?”

“Of course, dear, just a little sour stomach. I’m going to take a bromo and lie down for a while,” Josie answered.

The next morning two police cars and some detectives came to the home. They took Josie to the station for custody.

“Where were you on Saturday?” asked Detective O’Malley. He wore a sports coat that barely contained his girth. His pants and shoes were also challenged to maintain their stitches. He had a mostly bald head and a bulbous red nose.

“Saturday, well that was Derby Day! We always have a party in the dining room. It was so nice, with little horse decorations, flowers and lots of mint julep!” quipped Josie.

“We have a witness that says you robbed the racetrack! He is sure it was you!” he snapped back.

“Ha! Really? I wish! Now tell me, don’t you feel just a little bit silly?” she said with a giggle.

“Not at all!” said O’Malley. “Do you want to call your lawyer?”

“My *lawyer!* Like I have a lawyer, how do you think I can afford to pay a lawyer?” she said.

“Put her in a cell and we’ll check out her story!” he said to two officers that were standing next to Josie.

“Can I please call my daughter? I’m sure she is worried and upset,” asked Josie.

“Sure, let her make a quick call,” said the detective.

“No dear, I’m fine, it’s all some kind of misunderstanding ... I’m sure this will be over soon and they will bring me home ... no, please don’t tell Josie, at least wait until it blows over ... okay dear ... yes, I love you too ...”

Josie sat in the cell for several hours. They brought her tea and she smoked her cigarettes.

In the meantime, O’Malley and his team searched her room. There was no evidence to be found there. They interviewed all of the residents and got a blurry picture of the party. Almost everyone was drunk by race time. Two of the women said they were sure that they had photos of Josie. O’Malley confiscated their unprocessed film with a half-promise to return the photos. Many remembered Josie being there, some didn’t, some said she left, others said they were standing next to her during the race.

They didn’t have enough evidence to hold her, and the witness’s statement probably would not hold up in court, especially with the party people contradicting it. O’Malley said, “I’m not convinced that it wasn’t you, so don’t leave town! This ain’t over yet!”

“Kind sir, I have no plans to go anywhere. I know that you are just doing your job. Good luck in your hunt. Can I please get a ride home?” Josie said meekly. She then had a coughing fit.

When she got home she was almost a celebrity. The other residents bombarded her with questions, “What was it like?”

“Where is the money?”

“Did they use a rubber hose?”

“Were they mean?”

“Did you do it?”

Josie just smiled, lit another cigarette and enjoyed the notoriety for a while.

Her coughing got worse in the coming weeks and she ended up in the hospital after coughing up a lot of blood. Maddie and Josie were both with her as she squeezed both of their hands and slipped away. It was a sad day, but they agreed that it was better to have her pain finally gone, not that she ever complained. One good thing about it was that Maddie quit smoking that very day.

“After the funeral Maddie received a card from Richard and Judy,” the younger Josie said to Bill as she continued to tell the story.. “They apologized for missing the funeral and ended their note with a phone number and asked my mom to call, collect. She called, and they told her the whole story. They also said that there’s a bank account in the Cayman Islands that contained a fortune, enough to keep our family comfortable forever. They said that there will be “gifts” from them coming in the mail on a regular basis. The checks started to come right away. The amounts were small enough to not attract attention, and they never did. We never had to ever worry about money. I was able to attend college and grad school and my mom was comfortable until she died a few years ago.”

“I remember when she died. She was a wonderful woman, and you are the evidence of that,” said Bill. He was Googling “Kentucky Derby Robbery” as she spoke. “I see what you mean.” he said while looking at the computer screen. “They called it “The Crime of the Century” at the time. They never caught the robbers, and after that, security was enhanced at all stadium events around the country. Today there are obviously security cameras and most people pay by credit card, so there aren’t large piles of cash around. But it was a different time then. I appreciate that you shared this story with me. And, I gotta ask, what happened to your boyfriend, Gary?”

“Ah, Gary was the sweetest boy! He wanted to marry me and have a house full of kids, but I had my heart set on college ...” she answered.

“His loss, our gain!” said Bill.

“Thanks. Do you see why the press makes me nervous?” asked Josie.

“Well, between you and me, it is probably more built up guilt than anything. I can’t see any way that anyone could connect you with the robbery,” said Bill.

“Okay. I needed to hear that,” said Josie.

“However, if the press ever got wind of it, imagine the story – a cancer ridden grandma risks her life to pull off a robbery to secure her family’s future, and her criminal act ends up with a possible cure for her cancer!” exclaimed Bill. “An incredible good karma story!”

“Well, let’s just keep that karma between us! Now, about the CNN interview, what would you like me to highlight?” asked Josie with a smile.

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