

The First Two Pages of “The Artisan-Cheese Incident” by Michael Hock
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An Essay by Michael B. Hock

Don’t lie, you’ve thought about what it would take to rob a bank. Sure, most of us would never actually do it, but you’ve stood in line waiting to cash that check, and maybe your eye went up to where the cameras were. Maybe you looked at the vault itself and wondered how much you could grab before the bank security figured it out. Maybe even looked at that ATM and wondered just how all of those numbers worked, and just how you might hit the right sequence like you were a master hacker or at least one proficient enough to rob an ATM. For most of us, I’m sure that’s where it ends. By the time we’re outside of the bank, very few of us are timing yellow lights or trying to figure out how to book a flight to a country with no extradition treaty.

It’s fun to pretend.

That’s how the premise of “The Artisan-Cheese Incident” started in my head. I thought it would be fun to take a look at how ordinary people might find themselves at the center of a bank heist, even if it’s a very generous definition of the word “heist.” None of the characters are malicious, they’re all justified in robbing a bank in their own way. Well, they are insofar as they might justify a bank robbery.

The opening section of the story itself is a big ask. It's a short story, but the first two pages are focused on two characters, and you as the reader won't be spending much more time with them. This is a story that spans multiple perspectives and characters, all with one common goal of robbing a bank. Just not robbing it with each other. It's not an easy task to put all of the whimsy I was trying to capture across the story with just one section, as each one has its own feel while being part of a bigger story. By that I mean I'm asking the audience to play along, knowing full well that the rug is about to be pulled out from under them, cleaned, folded, driven across town, and then laid out again to be pulled out from them again. And I'm asking them to do the driving.

I love stories that involve a bunch of characters who may or may not interact, all thinking they're the main character of the story. Think Dave Barry's *Big Trouble* and sort of *Game of Thrones* but without the beheading and dragons. So, I needed to start the story with two characters everyone might enjoy reading about, but with those readers realizing that if they don't like a particular brand of bank heisting, not to worry, there's plenty of other bank heisting to go around.

I felt the best way to do this is to focus on our wannabe Bonnie and Clyde as they plan a bank heist. But for some reason, I went with a Romeo and Juliet reference when titling it. Although this is meant to be a craft essay, here's where

I'll admit: I don't know why. Please feel free to make up your best reason and apply that to this part of the essay.

Regardless, these two are planning their bank heist rather speedily and mostly based around what they've seen in the movies. I wanted to keep the idea of "what we see in the movies," and it's a motif that I repeat in this section, because that's where a lot of our understanding of crime comes from. I threw in that fun what-if scenario before, and I'm sure most people, when planning their bank heist, envision themselves in cool suits and sunglasses while a getaway driver is geared up to a greatest hits soundtrack that sounds very similar to the music you would play should you be planning a getaway. This is instead of what a bank heist might actually look like which would be through grainy video.

This section also introduces us to the other little plots that are going to pop up to the rest of the story, particularly the bank manager who's running late, and of course the titular Artisan Cheese Incident, which doesn't come into focus until much later. I won't be posting spoilers here, so the best place to get your answers will be *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine's* November/December issue. But one of the biggest things you need with a good heist is a good getaway. That's the one thing that I always wondered about in crime stories: How does one get away, particularly in this day and age when everyone has a camera on their phone and social media has made it so almost every piece of history is documented? So, I

wanted to create a place where people would normally be and then remove people from it in the weirdest way possible. I can't remember in which draft it ended up being artisan cheese. And I'll be frank: I'm not even sure what artisan cheese is, as most of the cheese I've had in my life is pretty good. But I figured when it came to creating a fake disaster to decimate a fake restaurant, might as well go big and take down the folks at the artisan cheese industry.

If there even is one.

Mostly, though I wanted to write a story that was fun. At the end of the day, that's one of the more important parts to me. I think this first section encapsulates that What made James and Shelby so interesting is that they're a young couple, currently trying to figure it all out much like the rest of us. And they're ones who've seen all the movies, so they know how bank robberies work insofar as movie bank robberies are accurate. They're not bad people, they're like us: They have dreams, and they want to achieve them.

I like these characters. I just knew they couldn't sustain an entire story, so I'm glad I put them introductory scenes of the story. They're fun characters to write, and they're fun characters to introduce the story the town of Quadell's Creek, and the best diner in town until it was shut down.

This is my first published work of fiction. I'm very excited to share it with you all.

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Romeowed and Julietted.

James and Shelby had been married for less than twenty-three hours, and the honeymoon was not going well.

He sat in the front seat of his dad’s now stolen pickup truck. He wasn’t really sure at what point it went from “hey dad, I’m going to borrow the car” to “hey dad, I’m leaving the state with my girlfriend and never coming back so I guess the car is stolen now” but since he was about to rob a bank, this seemed like as good a time as any to commit to his life of crime. He steadied himself in the front seat and turned to his new wife Shelby who was in the bed of the truck, preparing for the heist.

“Are the guns done yet?” he called out, louder than he thought but not loud enough to justify Shelby’s response.

“Say it louder, I don’t think they heard you at Chef Yi’s!” she hissed back.

Chef Yi’s breakfast was legendary, until last week when a bad batch of artisan cheese sent everyone who had the ham and cheese omelet special to the hospital. Since that fateful moment, the diner, which was a staple in the town whether it was owned by Chef Yi, Chef Caroline, Chef Bart, or Chef Billy, was almost empty with the exception of the Wednesday morning cook, the newest waitress, and a lone man sipping his coffee in a manner that could only be described as “conspicuous”.

Of course, when committing a bank heist, everyone had an air of conspicuousness about them.

She crouched in the back of the truck with a can of black spray paint and two Nerf dart guns that sort of looked like pistols, unless anyone looked at them. When they stopped off to buy them, she swore she’d seen this in a movie once.

“I don’t know why we can’t use your dad’s guns!” she hissed again.

“He’s already going to kill me for stealing his truck and getting spray paint in the bed,” James replied.

“Well it’s going to be easier for him to do that with the guns you didn’t steal!”

James thought about it for a minute while she let out another puff of spray paint. Or stream of spray paint. He wasn't really sure what to call it, and he was too nervous to care.

Yesterday before the Lord, two appointed witnesses, and the judge of the First Quadell's Creek Courthouse – he loved telling people passing through it was the first and only Courthouse – James and Shelby were married. It was a fairytale romance: they met in homeroom freshman year, then four years, twelve breakups, and eleven reconciliations later (that one time at Ryan's party when they broke up didn't count so it didn't require a reconciliation) they got married right after graduation. After realizing that James' idea of becoming a professional e-sports champion while Shelby's rock band took off wasn't going to pay the bills immediately, they needed a source of income. The idea of bank robbery came up at some point during the wedding planning phase, most likely over breakfast at Chef Yi's before the artisan cheese incident, so they went with it. Thanks to a better than average summer because of tourism generated by notable Instagram Travel Blogger Madeline Madlynne, they knew the bank would be flush with cash today.

To this day no one knows how they came up with it, nor how they knew the bank was going to be flush with cash today, but it strangely wasn't the worst idea either of them had.

“What time is this place supposed to open up?” James called back, once again louder than he thought but not as loud as she thought. Shelby was now fanning the plastic guns, willing them to dry faster.

“Eight” she replied, “and shhh!”

James looked at the dashboard of what he was now considering his truck. “It's eight ten.”

“It's that lady bank lady,” Shelby said, “she's always late.”

They took this opportunity to get together their black ski masks and gloves. They took a moment to make sure they could still kiss each other successfully in the ski masks, because their first full day as a married couple was going to be romantic. James wasn't sure what was making him more lightheaded, love, the fact that it was August and he was wearing a ski mask, or the paint fumes. He was about to comment on it when Shelby slapped him on the arm.

“Here she is!”

“Now remember, small bills,” James said, not quite sure why. He had seen it in a movie.

They watched as she walked down the street, putting the coffee cup in her teeth so she could fish out the keys in her purse while talking on the phone. James looked again the dashboard and observed the time.

“Let’s give her a minute, then when she’s all relaxed, let’s do it!” James picked up the Nerf Gun and accidentally fired a dart into the windshield.

They kissed. This bank heist was going to be so damn romantic.

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Michael B. Hock graduated from George Mason University with an MFA in Fiction in 2021. He also graduated with an MA in Literature in 2016, and an M.Ed. in Secondary Education because there was a period where he wasn’t 100% sure what he wanted to do with his life. He’s still not. He currently works at Mason as an Academic Advisor in the Honors College and is a part-time Instructor for the Honors Program and University Studies.

“The Artisan-Cheese Incident” is his first work of published fiction. His previous work has appeared in *Cracked*, where he wrote an analysis of Spider-Man, and *Points in Case*, where he wrote a short joke about selling people Fairytale Weddings that involved actual wizards.

Some of his essays can be found on his personal blog, badshakespeare.com which he absolutely swears he’ll get back to writing one day.

When he’s not plotting bank heists, he loves movies and is occasionally welcomed into his own house by his wife, Marissa, and his three cats, Hamlet, Ophelia, and Lex Luthor.