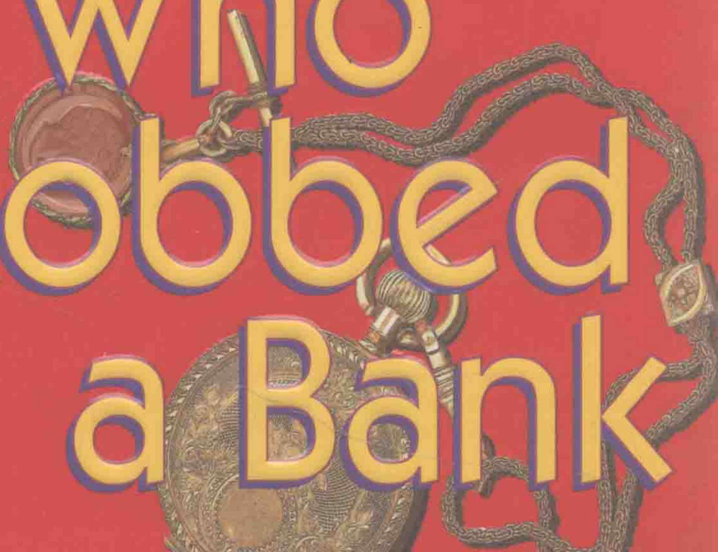
Lilian Jackson Braun

The Cat Who Robbed a Bank



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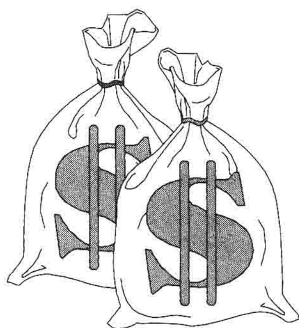

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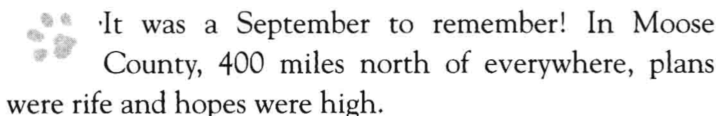

It was a September to remember! In Moose County, 400 miles north of everywhere, plans were rife and hopes were high.

First, the historic hotel in Pickax City, the county seat, was finally restored after the bombing of the previous year, and it would reopen with a new name, a new chef, and a gala reception.

Then, a famous American (who may or may not have slept there in 1895) was about to be honored with the city's first annual Mark Twain Festival.

Next, a distinguished personage from Chicago had reserved the presidential suite and would arrive on Labor Day, setting female hearts aflutter.

To top it off, the tri-county Scottish Gathering and Highland Games would be held at the fairgrounds: bagpipes skirling, strong men in kilts tossing the caber, and pretty young women dancing the Highland Fling on the balls of their feet.

The one unexpected happening was the homicide on

the Pickax police blotter, but that was a long story, starting twenty-odd years before.

As September approached, the good folk of Pickax (population 3,000) were quoting Mark Twain about the weather, suggesting ribald names for the hotel, and gossiping endlessly about a man named Delacamp; few would ever meet him, but all had something to say about him.

Jim Qwilleran, columnist for the *Moose County Something*, felt an air of anticipation when he made his rounds of downtown Pickax. When he went to the bank to cash a check, the young woman who counted out his fifties said, "Isn't it exciting? Mr. Delacamp is coming again, and he always comes into the bank. I hope he comes to my window, but the manager usually handles his transactions. Anyway, it's all so thrilling!"

"If you say so," Qwilleran said. After a long career as a newspaperman he was seldom excited and certainly never thrilled.

At the florist shop where he went to order a flowering plant for a sick friend, the wide-eyed assistant said breathlessly, "Did you hear? Mr. Delacamp is coming! He always has to have fresh flowers in his hotel room, and he sends roses to his customers."

"Good!" said Qwilleran. "Anything that helps the local economy has my approval."

While picking up a *New York Times* at the drugstore he heard a woman customer saying she had received an engraved invitation to Mr. Delacamp's afternoon tea, and she wondered what kind of perfume to wear. The pharmacist's wife said, "They say he likes French perfumes.

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We don't carry anything like that. Try the department store. They can special-order."

Qwilleran crossed the street to the department store, his newshound instincts scenting a good story with human interest and a touch of humor. Lanspeak's was a large fourth-generation store with new-fashioned merchandise but old-fashioned ideas about customer service. He found the two owners in their cramped office on the main floor.

"Hi, Qwill! Come on in!" said Larry Lanspeak.

"Have a cup of coffee," said his wife, Carol.

Qwilleran took a chair. "No coffee, thanks, but please tell me something. Explain the Delacamp mystique." He knew the couple were official hosts for the man's visit. "Why all the excitement?"

Larry looked at his wife, and she made a helpless gesture. "What can I say? He's an older man, but he's handsome—elegant—gallant! He sends women roses!"

"And kisses their hands," said Larry with raised eyebrows.

"He pays lavish compliments!"

"And kisses hands," Larry repeated derisively.

"Everything is very formal. Women have to wear hats to his Tuesday afternoon tea, and we've sold out of millinery. We sell the basic felt that women wear to church, but our daughter said we should gussy them up with feathers and flowers and huge ribbon bows. So we did! Diane is a sober, dedicated M.D., but she has a mad streak."

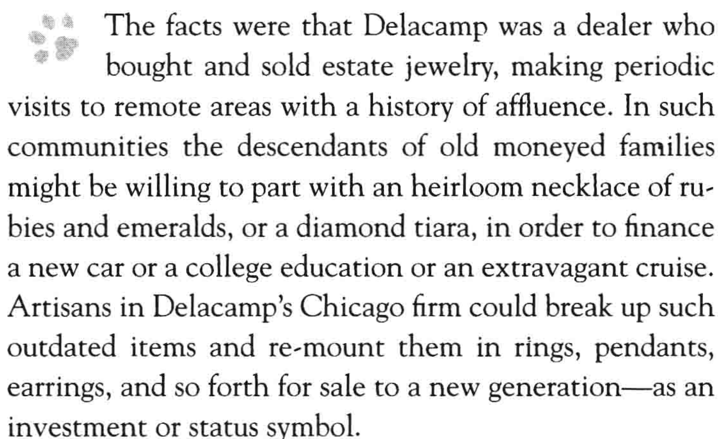
"Takes after her mother," Larry said.

"The results are really wild! Sorry you can't write it up,

Qwill, but everything is private, invitational, and exclusive. No publicity!"

"Okay. I'll forget it. No story," Qwilleran acquiesced. "But he sounds like an interesting character . . . You two go back to work."

Larry accompanied him out of the office and toward the front door, down the main aisle between cases of men's shirts and ties and women's scarves and earrings. "Old Campo is harmless, although a trifle phony," he said. "Still, his visits every four or five years are good for a certain element in our community—and good public relations for the store. It's Carol's project, actually. I stay out of it."



The facts were that Delacamp was a dealer who bought and sold estate jewelry, making periodic visits to remote areas with a history of affluence. In such communities the descendants of old moneyed families might be willing to part with an heirloom necklace of rubies and emeralds, or a diamond tiara, in order to finance a new car or a college education or an extravagant cruise. Artisans in Delacamp's Chicago firm could break up such outdated items and re-mount them in rings, pendants, earrings, and so forth for sale to a new generation—as an investment or status symbol.

Moose County fitted the picture, and Delacamp apparently had found his visits worthwhile. It had been the richest county in the state in the nineteenth century, when natural resources were being exploited and there was no income tax to pay. The old mining tycoons and lumber barons had built themselves mansions with large

vaults in the basement. They had sent their offspring to eastern colleges and had taken their wives to Paris, where they bought them jewels that would appreciate in value. When the mines closed in the early twentieth century, the economy collapsed and most families fled to the big cities. Others elected to stay and live quietly on their private means, going into business or the professions—or even bootlegging during Prohibition.

All of this convinced Qwilleran that Old Campo had a good thing going, and he enjoyed listening to gossip in the coffee shops. Blue-collar and white-collar opinions were freely expressed:

"He'll be puttin' on the dog and gettin' the old gals all het up."

"They say he drinks nothin' but tea, but ten to one he puts a little somethin' in it."

"Yeah, I was night porter at the hotel a few years ago, and he used to send out for rum. He was a big tipper, I'll say that for him."

"I know a guy—his wife drew ten thousand from their joint account and bought a diamond pin."

"I'm glad my wife's not on his list. Women go to that tea party of his and they're pushovers!"

"He always brings a female assistant, and she always happens to be young and sexy. She's supposed to be his cousin or niece or something, but you never notice any family resemblance, if you know what I mean."

Gossip was the mainstay of Moose County culture, although it was called "caring and sharing." Men had their coffee shops; women had their afternoon circles.

Qwilleran listened to it and nodded and chuckled. He himself had been the subject of gossip. He was a bachelor

who lived simply, and yet he was the richest man in the northeast central United States. Through a twist of fate he had fallen heir to the vast Klingenschoen fortune based in Moose County. Previously he had managed on a reporter's salary without any particular interest in wealth; in financial matters, moreover, he felt like a simpleton. He handled the situation by establishing the Klingenschoen Foundation with a mandate to give the money away judiciously to benefit the community.

Needless to say, "Mr. Q" had become an icon in the north country, not only because of his generosity. He wrote a twice-weekly column, "Straight from the Qwill Pen," that was the most popular feature in the newspaper. He had a genial disposition and a sense of humor, even though his brooding eyes gave him a look of melancholy. And he was his own man.

Pioneer blood had made the natives into a race of determined individualists, as a glance at the map would confirm. There were places like Squunk Corners, Little Hope, Sawdust City, Chipmunk, and Ugley Gardens. Qwilleran belonged in this environment. He spelled his name with a QW, lived in a barn with two cats, sported an enormous pepper-and-salt moustache, and rode a recumbent bicycle which required him to pedal with feet elevated.

There were other characteristics in his favor. Being tall and well-built, he had a distinct aura of authority. Being a journalist, he had trained himself to listen. Strangers felt they could confide in him, air their dreams, relate their woes. He always listened sympathetically.

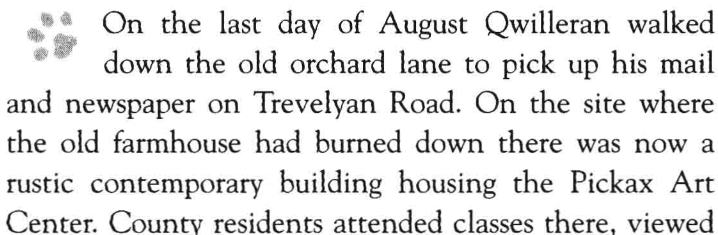
One of Qwilleran's quirks was his desire for privacy.

He needed solitude for thinking, writing, and reading, and his converted barn was effectively secluded. Though within the city limits and not far from Main Street, it had acreage. It had once been a strip farm extending from Main Street to Trevelyan Road, which was a half-mile to the east. Paving was unknown in those days.

Now Main Street divided into northbound and southbound traffic lanes, called Park Circle. Around the rim were two churches, the courthouse, a majestic old public library, and the original Klingenschoen mansion, now functioning as a small theatre for stage productions. To the rear of the mansion was a four-stall carriage house with servants' quarters upstairs. From there a rustic wagon trail wound its way through evergreen woods, ending in a barnyard.

The hundred-year-old apple barn rose like an ancient castle—octagonal in design, four stories high, with a fieldstone foundation and siding of weathered shingles. Odd-shaped windows had been cut in the walls, reflecting the angled timbers that framed the interior.

The property to the east had been a thriving orchard until a mysterious blight struck the trees. Now it was reforested, and wild gardens attracted birds and butterflies.



On the last day of August Qwilleran walked down the old orchard lane to pick up his mail and newspaper on Trevelyan Road. On the site where the old farmhouse had burned down there was now a rustic contemporary building housing the Pickax Art Center. County residents attended classes there, viewed

exhibitions, and—in some cases—rented studios. As Qwilleran passed it, he counted the cars in the parking lot. It looked as if they were having a good day.

The highway marked the city limits. Beyond it was farmland. He waved to a farmer chugging down the road on a tractor and the driver of a farm truck traveling in the opposite direction. His rural mailbox and a newspaper sleeve were mounted on posts alongside the pavement. There were few letters in the box; his fan mail went to the newspaper office, and official business and junk mail went to the law firm that represented the Klingenschoen Foundation.

A boy carrying a grocery sack was running toward him from the direction of the McBee farm. "Mr. Q! Mr. Q!" he shouted. It was the ten-year-old Culvert McBee. "I brought you something!"

Qwilleran hoped it was not turnips or parsnips from the McBee kitchen garden. "That's very good of you, Culvert."

The chubby boy was breathing hard after running. "I made something for you . . . I took a summer class . . . over there." He jerked his head toward the art center and then handed over the sack.

"What is it?"

"Look inside."

Qwilleran was dubious about knickknacks made for him by fond readers, and he peered into the sack with no great expectations. What he saw was a pad of paper stapled on a small board. The top sheet was computer-printed with the well-known saying *Thirty Days Hath September*.

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"It's a calendar," Culvert explained. "Every day you tear off a page and read what it says."

The second page had the date (September 1) and the day (Tuesday) and a brief saying: *Let sleeping dogs lie.*

"Well! This is really something!" Qwilleran said with a good show of enthusiasm. He flipped through the pages and read: *What's good for the goose is good for the gander . . . You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink . . . A cat can look at a king.* "Where did you get these sayings, Culvert?"

"At the library. They're from all over the world."

"They're all about animals!"

"Yep."

"Well, I certainly appreciate your thoughtfulness!"

"There's a hole in the board. You can hang it on a nail."

"I'll do that."

"I made one for my mom, too."

"How are your parents? I haven't seen them lately."

"Dad's okay. Mom has a sore hand from using the computer."

"How about the dogs?" Culvert had a shelter for old, unwanted dogs.

"Dolly died of old age and I buried her behind the shed. I painted her name on a stone. You can come and look at it if you want to. My aunt came and brought flowers."

"That was nice of her. Are you ready to go back to school?"

"Yep."

Then Qwilleran praised the calendar once more, and Culvert walked back to his farm on Base Line Road.

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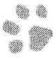

At the art center there was a familiar car parked on the lot, and Qwilleran went in to talk with his friend, Thornton Haggis. He was a retiree with a shock of white hair, now serving as interim manager until they could find a replacement for Beverly Forfar.

"Still holding the fort, I see," Qwilleran said. "Has anyone heard from Bev?"

"No. After the turmoil she experienced here, I believe she was glad to wash her hands of our fair city."

The former manager had written to Qwilleran, however, thanking him profusely for his farewell gift, little knowing it was something he had been trying to unload.

She had written, "It was so wonderful of you to arrange for me to have *The Whiteness of White*. It hangs in my apartment, where it is admired by everyone. You may be interested to know I have found a small job in Ann Arbor, Michigan, that could develop into something big."

Qwilleran nodded. From what he knew of that city it had the right climate for an esoteric intaglio. He had won it in a raffle at the art center, simply because he was the only one who bought a chance. He bought several, using the alias of Ronald Frobnitz. As the winner he was trying to dispose of it discreetly without offending the artist who had donated it. Luckily Beverly Forfar was leaving Pickax forever, and she was happy to acquire an artwork valued at a thousand dollars.

In a postscript to her letter she had written, "If you are in touch with Professor Frobnitz in Japan, please thank him for his generosity. I'm sorry I didn't meet him while

he was in Pickax. On the telephone he sounded positively charming."

Qwilleran asked Thornton, "Any good prospects for Beverly's successor?"

"They've interviewed a few applicants but can't seem to make a decision."

"You're doing too good a job, Thorn. Why hire a manager when good old Thorn will do the work free?"

"Don't think that hasn't crossed my mind! After September thirtieth, I quit! Meanwhile we're setting up the craft fair. Are you coming to the opening? I'll have a few of my own things on exhibit."

"Are you doing something creative in tombstones?" Qwilleran asked lightly.

Thornton was a retired stonecutter who had studied art history at one time. "You can kid all you like," he retorted, "but I felt the need for a manual hobby. I bought a lathe, and now I'm doing woodturning in my basement."

"That I've got to see!" Qwilleran said.

"Then come to the craft fair," his friend said. "Bring money."

When Qwilleran walked up the lane to the apple barn, he was approaching from the east. In its heyday it had been a drive-through barn with huge doors east and west, large enough to admit a horse-drawn wagon loaded with apples. Now the huge openings had been filled in and equipped with human-size doors. On the east side there were handsome double doors flanked by glass panels. These were the front doors, opening into the foyer, although they were on the back of the building. The back door was, of course, on the front, opening into the kitchen. (This kind of anomaly was common in Moose

County, where Pickax was referred to as Paradox.) Twice the Pickax voters had vetoed a proposal to change the names of streets. "Old East Street" was west of "New West Street," and there was confusion about "North Street East" and "South Street West." Only strangers were befuddled, however, and befuddling strangers was a local pastime.

As Qwilleran approached the double doors, two Siamese cats watched from the sidelights, standing on their hindlegs with their forepaws on the low windowsill. Entering the foyer he had to wade through weaving bodies and waving tails, circling him, doubling back, rubbing his ankles, and getting under his feet—all the while yowling in the operatic voices of Siamese. The tumultuous welcome would have been flattering if Qwilleran had not consulted his watch. It was feeding time at the zoo!

"What have you guys been doing this afternoon?" he asked as he prepared their dinner. "Anything worthwhile? Solve any world problems? Who won the fifty-yard dash?" The more you talk to cats, the smarter they become, he believed.

The long, lean, lithe muscular one was Kao K'o Kung, familiarly known as Koko. His female companion was Yum Yum—small, dainty, shy, although she could shriek like an ambulance siren when she wanted something and wanted it immediately. Both had pale fawn-colored fur and seal brown masks, ears and tails. Her eyes were blue tinged with violet, and their appealing kittenish gaze could break hearts. Koko's deeper blue eyes had a depth that suggested secret intelligence and untold mysteries.

They were indoor cats, but the barn interior was as big as all outdoors to a small creature weighing ten pounds or

less. The space, a hundred feet in diameter, was open to the roof. A ramp spiraled up the walls and connected the balconies on three levels. In the center stood a huge white fireplace cube with white stacks soaring to the cupola, and it divided the main floor into functional areas: dining, lounging, foyer, and library. The kitchen was under a balcony, half hidden by an L-shaped snack bar.

In the daytime a flood of light came through triangles and rhomboids of glass. Pale colors prevailed—in the bleached timbers, upholstered furniture, and Moroccan rugs. After dark, when a single switch activated indirect lights and artfully placed spotlights, the effect was nothing less than enchanting.

Qwilleran's favorite haunt was the library area. One wall of the fireplace cube was covered with bookshelves, and the shelves were filled with secondhand classics purchased from a local bookseller. A library table held the telephone, answering machine, and writing materials. In a capacious lounge chair with an ottoman Qwilleran liked to read aloud to the Siamese or draft his column on a legal pad with a soft lead pencil.

On the last day of August, before going out to dinner, he read to the cats from a book selected by Koko. He was the official bibliocat. He prowled the bookshelves and liked to curl up between the biographies and the nineteenth-century English fiction. At reading time it was his privilege to select the title, although Qwilleran had the power of veto. They had been reading Greek drama. Koko could sense which book was which, and he repeatedly sniffed *The Frogs* by Aristophanes.

"Okay, we'll do it once more," Qwilleran said, "but

this is the last time!" Both cats liked the froggy chorus that he dramatized so colorfully: *brekekekex koax koax*. Yum Yum's eyes grew wide, and a rumble came from Koko's chest.

"Those cats are just like little kids," Qwilleran said at dinner that night. "When I was three years old, I wanted to hear *Jack and the Beanstalk* over and over again. It was in desperation that my mother taught me to read so young."

He was dining with the chief woman in his life, a charming companion of his own age, whose gentle voice, soft smile, and agreeable disposition camouflaged a will as strong as Yum Yum's. She was Polly Duncan, director of the public library. She always wore something special for their dates, and this time it was a green silk dress with a necklace of long slivers of silver alternating with beads of green jade.

"You look lovely!" he said. He had learned not to say, "You look lovely *tonight*." That would imply that she usually looked unlovely. Polly was sensitive about the niceties of speech.

Pleased, she said, "Thank you, dear. And you're looking very handsome!"

He always wore a coat and tie, well coordinated, when having dinner with Polly. It was a compliment they paid each other.

They had a reservation at Onoosh's in downtown Pickax, a café with the exotic murals, lamps, brasses, and aromas of the Mediterranean rim. Ethnic foods were finally being accepted 400 miles north of everywhere, al-

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