

I wouldn't have started thieving at all, if I'd had a better agent.

I mean, what kind of an agent doesn't even remember your name when you call? This guy, he pretends for a while, then says anything just to get me off the phone. Sure, he's anxious enough to snatch his commission off my few paying gigs, but he always makes it sound as if he did all the work.

I guess I should have known. I could tell by the way he looked at me when I first signed with him that he didn't think I was good-looking enough to model. The tiny crease between his eyes was a twitch away from being a laugh in my face. But he managed to smile and assure me there was a niche market for ordinary guys. Commercials, mostly, some print ads. Need a forgettable neighbour? Here's my number. A clueless Dad for kids to run rings around? Call me.

What could I do? It's not like I could be offended. I know I'm not pinup material. On the other hand, people don't flee in terror either, so I figured, why not? Believe me, you get some really twisted phone calls if you take out an ad in the paper offering freelance modeling, so I got an agent. Only later I found out I could've chosen better – maybe by pulling someone at random from a police lineup. This guy threw me a few jobs and I got a few paycheques, but as time went on, it wasn't enough to keep me in rent and groceries.

That's when I joined the criminal underworld. It has its moments.

Actually, turns out I'm not too bad at it. Thieving. I like choosing a site, planning out the details. The old movies call it 'casing the joint' but that sounds so dated. Reconnaissance, that's the word for today. Like the army does: scout ahead, check out the landscape, plan a strategy.

No one remembers an ordinary face. People look right through me. I can loiter around a building for hours and no one questions me. They figure I'm someone's clueless dad, or the forgettable neighbour, and the rare time someone talks to me that's exactly who I am. They nod, satisfied, walk away. I can come back the next day and do the same thing all over again.

So I can pick a place and get to know it. I choose a condo building and find out when the doorman shift changes, spot which one is most likely to sneak off for a coffee. I watch for people loading luggage into a taxi and know they'll be gone for days. I read a paper on a park bench and notice when the armored car stops at the jewelry store, how long it takes for the guards to carry stuff in and out. That's me waiting outside the bank when all the saleswomen scurry over from the mall, clutching their little deposit pouches and giggling about hairstyles. Don't these women realize that traveling in packs multiplies the potential haul? Not one of them would be willing to risk her manicure to save that money pouch.

I resist that temptation, though. Working too close to a bank puts you in view of an awful lot of security. I mean, it helps to be chronically unnoticed, but with all the video surveillance now, you've got to be cautious. At least some of those places might actually have to look at their tapes once in a while.

I was very security-conscious until about mid-September of last year, when I got the shock of my life walking down King Street.

The twist is, I'd had warning, but hadn't made the connection. A few weeks before I'd been surprised to get a cheque from a company I didn't recognize. It had come through my agent's office, so I phoned him up. As usual, it took him a while to remember who I

was and find my file, grumbling the whole time. Eventually he managed to recall that he'd submitted my headshots in a stack of others to this company, About Face, and they'd chosen me as their model.

“But what do they do?” I asked.

“Some kinda acting thing.”

“Why didn't they call me?”

“Why do you care? You got a cheque, right?”

So I hung up and shrugged at the cheque and was able to pay the rent that month. And it completely left my mind.

But then I passed my own face in a costume shop window.

If you've ever been startled by your reflection in an unexpected mirrored surface, you might have a small idea what I mean, but until you've seen your actual face hanging on a pedestal, you can't understand how truly creepy it is.

It must've looked really odd to anyone passing by: me, after the double-take, standing and staring slack-jawed at the me beyond the window. A perfect likeness, except for the darkness where the eyes should be. It was on one of those black velvet display heads, and even had a wig of hair that was close to my own colour.

The sign next to it said 'Bland Man', which, after my heart-stopping moment of shock, kind of added insult to injury. The store had spread clothes on the display floor in front of the mask: a pale plaid short-sleeve shirt and colorless Dockers pants. The overall effect was as if someone – namely, me – had his body deflated and his eyeballs sucked out, but apparently it didn't put anyone else off. Lots of people were browsing in there, though

it was more than a month until Halloween. I didn't go in. I couldn't get past the mask in the window.

In the next month, I must've walked past a dozen times. Sometimes I'd even go out of my way to walk past. It didn't get any less eerie.

It didn't take much to find out that About Face was a mask-making company. They were well-respected in their field for some special new interior coating that molded itself to the wearer's skin, making the mask move realistically as the real face did. The company was doing well in the movie industry and was trying a public release of some mass-produced models just in time for Halloween. Mass-produced! So my face – the face of Bland Man – was all over the country. Suddenly, “creepy” just wasn't strong enough a word.

Here's the real kicker: it was a best-seller.

I have no idea why. I mean, God (and my useless agent) knows my face hadn't made me any real money for years. Why everyone would rather look at me – would rather look *like* me – instead of, say, Batman or Cinderella or one of the Clintons is a complete mystery.

But gradually it dawned on me that maybe this thing could work in my favour. Halloween is the one night of the year when security cameras would be recording a parade of masks and made-up faces, most of them innocently going about their business. The way sales were going, guards and sensors were going to be seeing my face all over the city.

Who's to say I wasn't one of those masked men?

Faint circles around the eyes and lips with an eyebrow pencil to show where the edges of the mask would be, and a poorly-fitting wig to hide the lack of seam. Only a few minutes' work, and suddenly I'm bland enough to fool a camera.

In this city, Halloween really picks up after the kids finish trick or treating. People either leave their homes dark to go out partying, or leave front doors open for guest access.

It was like discovering an all-you-can-eat buffet. A free one.

I must have hit a dozen different places, private homes and condos and shops. Once or twice I met my own face coming toward me, and we'd always point to each other and laugh – though the sight of that mask still made me queasy. Overall, it was a good night. I was able to pay off some debts and be sure of rent for the next few months.

The thing is, I got bored.

It's not as if my lump of an agent was getting any work for me, and even though I had money in the bank I couldn't just sit around all day. Now I had a perfect disguise. I didn't risk a lot of daylight activity, but at night I figured if I happened to get caught on film, I was just one of the hundreds of people who'd bought a mask and a cheap wig at Halloween.

It took months for the media to get involved. I guess it was inevitable that they'd label me the 'Bland Man Bandit'. Yesterday the police appealed to the public for information, but even the press release sounded as if it didn't expect much.

Eventually some video wizard is going to get a clear shot of me and realize I'm not wearing a mask, even one as realistic as Bland Man. It irritates me that they'd even go to the trouble. It's not like I'm emptying millions from banks. It's not like I'm depriving

someone of their life savings. I don't take enough to vacation on Maui every month. Still, I'm a cautious guy, and that inevitable surveillance genius is a real risk.

So here I am, in my useless agent's office, lifting my file. Not like that's an effort: it's pathetically thin. He doesn't trust computers, so there's no danger of backup data. My name isn't even in his Rolodex. And I figure if he doesn't remember me when I call, he won't remember me if the police call. Still, better safe than sorry.

Some of his clients are doing much better than I am, their files crammed with work. I was thinking of transferring my publicity photos into someone else's file, but decided that wouldn't be very fair. I had a much better idea when I found the office cashbox and the couple thousand dollars he had taped to the back of a drawer. I figure there's a good chance some of it is rightfully mine, anyway.

And after all, I wouldn't have even started thieving if he'd been a better agent.