

## Don't Let This Happen To You

By Chris Zell

I was in the grocery store the other day and a horrible thing happened. They were out of chunky peanut butter. No, I'm just kidding. Don't get yourself into a hoarding frenzy. Boy, you sure take your peanut butter seriously. But what happened was nowhere near as threatening. My car was stolen. But I really don't think that it was stolen by someone who understands his job description. Or there is a frightening trend afoot.

I was in the store wandering around trying to find this specific barbecue sauce for a friend who moved to a state where owning barbecue sauce is a felony. The only way I can smuggle it to her is to send it in a plain brown wrapper with arugula written on the side. Being in the store was frustrating enough because I don't often go into grocery stores, especially alone. Trying to find the barbecue sauce was making me dizzy. When did grocery stores start carrying greeting cards and exercise videos? What happened to the little old guy with that big stick with the claw that he used to get the dusty oatmeal box off the top shelf (and sometimes whack me in the head)? Why are grocery stores as well lit as interrogation rooms? What the hell is arugula?

As all these thoughts flip around my head, I start to black out and totally by accident find the barbecue sauce. I only had \$50 in my pocket so I had to leave one bottle behind. You should have seen the expression on the cashiers face when I unloaded all these blue labeled bottles onto the conveyor belt.

"Doing some serious cookout tonight?" She asked dragging one bottle across the bar code reader fifteen times before it connected.

"Cookout? No, I use it to trap roaches in my basement."

She thinks for a moment before she comes to her realization. "Yeah, I guess they would like this stuff." She clanks the bottles into the bag and I quickly leave.

I've never been good at finding cars in parking lots. They all look alike to me. Once I went shopping with a friend and couldn't find the car anywhere. So, after a short discussion on the relative merits of the car, we went into the bar to wait for the mall to close. We figured it would be easier to find the car when the parking lot cleared a bit. We were wrong. Six hours later we were drooling drunk and never did find the car.

So searching through the parking lot lugging sixty pounds of barbecue sauce was nothing new to me. But this time something was seriously wrong. I was positive that the car was gone. I was positive of this fact because in the place of the car was a note scrawled on Simpson's note paper that read:

'Stolen your car. Will be in touch.'

"That was nice of him." I said hoisting the bag higher into my arms to carry it back to work. I got back to the office to call the police and tell them what happened and about the note.

"That was nice of him." Said the desk sergeant as he took my information and told me to start looking into public transit.

When I got home that night there was a message on my answering machine that I assumed was from the alleged perp (I spent enough time on the phone with the police to learn what you call the slimy thief).

"If you ever want to see your car alive again you will follow my directions." Just as I'm trying to figure out if I missed the directions the phone rang. It was the alleged perp.

"Did you get my message?" He asked from his arch evil criminal lair.

"Uh, yeah, but I think I missed the directions."

"I haven't given them to you yet."

"Oh, good. This may be important and I wouldn't want to miss out."

"Shut up, chump." He barks into the phone. Obviously he's watched one too many episodes of Adam-12. "If you ever want to see your car again you'll get \$500 in unmarked bills and follow my orders."

"Excuse me, Mr. Alleged Perp, but I think I'm lost here. You're a car thief and, correct me if I'm wrong, you steal cars and sell them to other alleged perps, right?"

"No more questions or you'll never see your car again."

"Isn't that the usual result when someone steals something?" I'm beginning to wonder if this is really an alleged perp or just one of my so called friends. "Who is this really?"

"You don't believe that I have your car, do you?"

"Well, someone has my car. Wether it's you is still up for debate."

"You'll be sorry you questioned me." With that he hung up and I turned my attention to other pressing situations. Like trying to find the bottle opener.

A few days later I'm flipping through my mail and notice a plain brown package. At first I thought that it was the barbecue sauce coming back to haunt me. I have a tendency to forget to put postage on things. But I noticed that the word arugula is no where to be found. I tear the package open and feel through the crumbled up newspaper and find, to my horror, the ashtray of my car.

'This is a warning.' The note read. 'The next package won't be as pretty.' Thoughts of a carburetor crashing through my window are interrupted by the phone ringing.

"Does this guy live across the street from me or what?" I pick up the phone. "What?"

"Now are you taking me seriously?"

"I don't know if 'seriously' is the exact word that I'd use."

"Don't get smart with me. Remember, I have your beloved car." I can hear the smile in his voice. This guy really thinks that he's on to a great scam. "Now are you ready to deal?"

"What if I don't want to deal? Tomorrow I wake up with a hub cap in my bed?" I've been known to help people out with their businesses from time to time and I figured that if anyone needed guidance it was this guy. "Let me ask you something, are you new to the car stealing industry?"

"I'm serious here. Your car will be a piece of modern art if you don't follow my instructions. And because you're wasting so much of my time the ransom has just doubled. \$1,000 in unmarked bills."

"Buddy, the car's not even worth the \$500. Why don't you be a proper car thief and sell it to a chop shop and leave me alone."

"What's a chop shop?"

"Amateurs." I say hanging up the phone on the first carnapper in the world. A few minutes later the phone rang with his final offer.

"How about I bring the car by and you give me cab fare home?"