

“Locker Junkie”

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It ain't "getting in trouble" if you don't get caught.

Zach repeated the phrase to himself again as he glanced at the numbers scrawled on the piece of paper clutched in his hand. As long as he kept his cool and didn't look suspicious, he would be fine. This would be easy. It had been easy the first several times he had done this, and it would continue to be easy for as long as kept his cool.

He scanned the hall with his eyes as he approached the locker. A furtive look behind him told him it was empty in that direction. He saw another student, some stupid preppy girl named Jersey, walking in the cross hallway, but she was heading away from him.

The locker was coming up on his right. It was just past the crazy German teacher's room who kept yelling at her class with words he didn't understand. Being near her class always made him think of the Nazi's in the Indiana Jones' movies. 'Achtung!' this, and 'Mein leben' that.

He spun the dial on the locker a few times to clear out any numbers or settings that may have remained in its memories. He didn't want to have to fumble with the lock and have some courteous teacher offer to help him. Wow, he mused, that could be bad. Bad enough that he didn't want to think about it.

Locker number 417. Turn fifteen to the right. Three to the left. And Forty-five back to the right. What an easy locker combination. This guy was so lucky. It almost sounded like an easy math equation. He envied people who had locker combos this easy to remember. Some people had all the luck in life.

Ok, now was the time to keep cool. He felt the tickling in the base of his skull again. The tickling feeling like he was a little kid on Christmas morning and he could see an acre of presents surrounding a huge tree. It was the tingle of excitement that came from knowing you were about to get something new that you didn't have moments before.

He never knew what he would find when he opened a locker, but he was always happy to find money. Maybe it would be a twenty dollar bill that some kid's mom had given him to use for lunch that week. Or a ten dollar bill a girl had squirreled away in a coat pocket from babysitting a younger brother.

Or once he had found a whole cup full of quarters in some girl's top locker shelf. That had been a tough one to sneak back to class. But it was the excitement that made it fun. The knowledge that he was doing something wrong and getting away with it.

But money wasn't what he really wanted to find. Money was always good; you just couldn't go wrong with it. But, money wasn't fun when you found it. It was only fun when you spent it. And he wanted the finding to be fun. What he really loved finding were the forgettable things. Stuff he could take, and the kids would never remember they had it.

He wanted to find cool pens, or a bag of candy, or a pocket laser or any other random thing he might come across that would just be neat. Something that would make his eyes light up. He referred to these things as 'stocking loot'. Whatever he found in his stocking on Christmas was never worth much money, but it was always fun to play with. It would entertain him, and that was what was important.

Zach closed his eyes and slowly opened the locker. He had just recently started opening the lockers with his eyes closed. It made it more fun. Then he could open them and get a view of the locker all at once. It didn't really change anything, but it made it fun. And that's pretty much why he did this. It was just fun. In two months and fifty some lockers, he had yet to be caught. Or even suspected. Kids usually had no idea he had even been in their locker.

He blew out his breath and opened his eyes at the same time. A red and black jacket was the first thing that caught his eyes. It was hung on one of the hooks and looked to be in really nice shape. He could see a label on the back collar, something like Black Dot, but it didn't really mean much to him.

His eyes traveled downward next and he saw all the books piled in the bottom of the locker. Well, piled was too neat of a word. These books had almost been arranged by some kind of deranged artist to look like they were about to fall out without actually dislodging themselves. He recognized a math book sticking up in back, and he could see a blue binder near the front, but the rest was just a tangle of white sheets of paper battling each other to escape the frenzy of pulped madness.

Zach was tempted to touch it with the toe of his shoe to see what it would do, but he thought better of it. If he triggered its release like some kind of a school-supply bomb, and it disgorged its contents in the hallway in a papery explosion, then he would be stuck for sure. He wouldn't be able to waste time

trying to stuff everything back in. He would either have to leave it in the hall with the door open, or risk a teacher coming up to him while trying to cram it all back into its metal home.

This was actually the best defense against his 'lockering', as he liked to refer to it. The neater a locker was, the easier it was to pilfer stuff without the owner knowing it. He could open the door and see what was good for the taking with only a cursory glance. But a messy locker would often cause him to give up and move on to the next. It just took too long to dig through piles of nasty to find anything worth taking. He figured it was best to just leave whatever was there and go on to the next one.

Zach reached over to close the locker with his left hand, and as he did he checked his watch. Good! Only four minutes had gone by since he had left Mrs. Franklin's room. He'd be able to get back in plenty of time.

And he almost missed it. A shiny cellophane package was sitting behind some shoes on the top shelf. His eyes caught it just as the door was closing, and he managed to stop it in time.

He had gotten so distracted with the mess at the bottom that he had nearly missed the prize at the top: a silvery, see-through package of possible goodness.

He opened the door a bit wider and reached in to see what kind of reward today's efforts would produce. What delightful fruit would this metal tree give him?

With a smile he lifted the package out from behind the shoes, and then felt the smile grow even wider. Gummi worms! Sour gummi worms, even. What a score. It wasn't his favorite brand, or even one he recognized, but it was still a nice thing to get.

In a swift, easy move, Zach pulled the worms off the top shelf and crammed them into his jeans pocket. He had to be doubly careful with this particular contraband. Unlike a cool eraser, or a new pen, he had to be cautious with candy. Students weren't allowed to have candy during the school day. But this candy was even more dangerous than normal candy; it was stolen candy. And that would make it taste even better.

Before he left, he pushed the smile from his face so that no one would question his happy mood, and then he gently closed the metal door. Now he only had to return to class and plan out when to eat his delicious new treat.

The halls were still empty as he headed back to social studies. He didn't see a single student or teacher in the halls. It was almost like lockering was something he was meant to do. If it was wrong, then

he wouldn't be able to get away with it like this. Surely some force in the world would stop him if it was wrong. But, the world seemed to be smiling on him.

With all this good luck, Zach decided to hit one more locker before returning to class. The first one had been completed so quickly he still had over five minutes before his doddering old teacher would even realize he was gone.

"One more locker and then back to class," he told himself. "If its not an easy job once open, then I just close it and go on. Simple as that. No need to push my luck." He smiled with the wisdom of this last thought.

He pulled out his 'master' list for this hallway and checked it for an easy combination he could remember. He always made sure to memorize the combination before he got to the locker. Even he was smart enough to know it looked bad to be opening a locker while looking at a piece of paper for the right numbers. Especially now that school had been in for almost a semester and only an idiot wouldn't have their combo memorized. And he didn't want anyone to think he was an idiot.

With a quick scan of the list, locker number 833 popped out at him. It almost jumped at him, he thought. It was a perfect choice. Luck was definitely with him today. He actually wasn't sure why he had never noticed this locker before. It was a perfect choice for a lockering.

It appealed to him because 833 was the first three numbers of his phone number and the combination was the exact same as the rest of his number: 9 to the right, 43 to the left and 7 back to the right. It was a perfect choice for a lockering.

"Man, why hadn't I chosen this locker before", he wondered as he strode down the hall towards it.

As he approached the locker, Zach remembered why. Victoria LeMure. The weirdo. The freak. The girl in the all-black clothing with black fingernails who never smiled and whose mere glance creeped him out. The locker was her locker.

There was a large 'A' scrawled on the locker door in thick, black sharpie that reminded him whose locker it was. The large A with the almost too tiny circle around the upper triangle of the letter. The symbol meant "Anarchy!" Vicky had that same symbol etched into everything she owned.

Zach laughed to himself as he stepped closer to the locker. Well, this was the freak's lucky day. She was about to experience a little lockering.

"Let's see if this cheers her up," he thought to himself. "It'll sure cheer me up."

He had always avoided her locker in the past, but now he decided luck was on his side. Besides she wasn't even here today. She hadn't been in either his third period P.E. class or at lunch. She was the kind of person that was hard to miss at school.

With a quick glance down the hall to make sure no one was around, he allowed himself a small chuckle at the thought of her in her P.E. outfit. Grey school shirt, and green school shorts over long black longjohns that went all the way down to her ankles. Black stringy hair that fell about her ears, black fingernails and lipstick. The overall image was of a strange dying tree with a green top and decrepit, rotting trunk.

Spinning the numbers on her locker, he allowed himself to wonder what odd little treat he might find in Vicky's school-supply tomb. As he hit the final digit of the combination and opened the door, he closed his eyes again.

"I've got to be quick with this one," he told himself. "I can't piddle around digging through stuff. If someone comes by and sees that "A" on the outside of the door, then they'll know this isn't my locker. Open it, give a quick scan of the inside, and grab the first thing that looks cool or valuable."

"I wonder if it will be as messy as her life," he wondered as he opened his eyes.

But it was spotless. Perfect. Completely organized. Everything was put away, stacked, and even...labeled. Books were organized by subject (no book covers on them, he noticed). Folders were put next to their corresponding classes. Her gym uniform was neatly folded and laying on top of the upper shelf. Every single item was exactly where it was supposed to be. Nothing was out of place. But something was wrong.

Zach glanced at the locker again from top to bottom. There was an envelope tied to the middle coat hook, but that wasn't what was bothering him. It was something else. He had never seen a locker this neat and tidy. And he had seen quite a few lockers. He had even lockered prissy Karina Furthing, and her locker had been the most organized he had ever seen. Even her magnets had been organized by...

"That's it," Zach whispered aloud not even noticing he was making the sound. "She has nothing to take. Nothing worth lockering. There's

actually nothing of hers even in here." He had been expecting to find a treasure trove of fascinating items to choose from. But there was nothing. Not a single picture taped on the inside for him to laugh at, no cool magnets of crazed monkeys or punk bands for him to filch, not even a crappy old pen for him to take. There were...

"No personal items," he finished in that same hushed whisper. This is weird. And not the kind of neat weird he was expecting. This was a creepy, Twilight Zone kind of weird. The only non-school item in the entire locker was that envelope on the hook.

The envelope! Money came in envelopes. Sometimes other good things came in envelopes. Maybe there was still a chance of this turning out okay for him.

He snatched the white paper rectangle off the hook and glanced at what was written on the outside. "To Whomever Finds This" was written in small, girlish letters on the front. And that was it. Nothing else was written anywhere on the entire thing.

"Well," Zach thought, "this is just more good luck. The envelope is obviously for me, since I was the one who found it."

Running his fingers along the paper, though, it didn't feel like any great find. It felt like it was just a letter. Maybe only one sheet of paper at that. But the letter had him curious at least, and that was better than getting nothing for his efforts.

Actually the curiosity was stronger than he expected. He knew he should be getting back to class, but this was all just so...dreamlike. It almost didn't even seem real to him. Plus, he really wanted to know what was in the letter. Why was this the only personal thing in the entire locker? And why was it addressed like that?

Another glance over his shoulder, showed him he had the next few moments alone. He ripped open the edge of the letter and pulled out the single sheet that was inside. Same handwriting as the outside, and only a single paragraph.

I have done it. I am not sorry. I will not miss anybody. I will leave no mess to be cleaned either here or at home. You will never know I've gone, just like you never knew I was here.

Goodbye. Victoria

Zach read it a second time. Then a third time. Finally he just stared at the letter. What was this crazy

chick talking about? What mess? Gone where? What did she do that she wasn't sorry about?

"Geez, man. Whatever," he mumbled as he closed the locker and turned back towards class. He would just have to watch her later, and see if he could figure out what she was talking about.

As he walked slowly back to class, he still couldn't believe how clean her locker was. It was so organized. So unstudent-like. How could anyone actually use a locker like that. Why would anyone keep a locker that tidy unless they didn't plan to ever use it?

His feet stopped moving as his brain raced ahead. "She didn't plan on using the locker," he realized. "She's never coming back to it. Or to school. Or to..."

His hand suddenly felt very heavy as the realization of what he was holding in it dawned on him. This wasn't just a letter. It was a note. A suicide note. And he was the only one who knew about it.

Standing in the hall, his mouth hanging open, Zach read the letter again.

Now his feet were moving as fast as his brain. He ran down the hall towards his class. Mrs. Franklin would know what to do. She was a teacher. They were trained for this kind of thing.

Maybe Victoria hadn't done it yet, he hoped. It was still early afternoon. Maybe she was lazy. Maybe she was scared. Maybe there was still time. Just maybe.

Tearing around the final corner he saw his classroom door. "Have to get help," he told himself. "We have to help her."

He hit the door hard. Too hard. The crashing sound of his impact was ringing in his ears, but it hadn't opened. He stepped back, stared at it, and realized he had forgotten to twist the handle. He slammed the handle down, and burst into the room.

"Mrs. Franklin, we have to...", he started to say and then stopped. She was staring at him. No, that wasn't right. His teacher was glaring at him. He could almost feel a growl in her eyes as she spoke next.

"What Mr. Suppen? What do we have?" She hurled the questions at him in a near rage. "An interruption of class? A student out causing trouble again? Do you even remember what Mr. Crenshaw told you?"

And then it hit him. The implications of what he was about to say. What the principal had told him the last time he had been sent to the office. "Next time I see you in this office, you're gone young man. You've

had your warnings. You will finally be expelled from our building!"

He was getting ready to tell his teacher what he had found while breaking into lockers. That's not something he could hide with a lie. He had the evidence clutched in his hand. He would get kicked out of school for this. That was it. His parents would send him to military school. His future was about to be ruined because some psycho girl couldn't handle her life. All these thoughts raced through his head during a single beat of his heart.

He gripped the paper tighter, crushing it into a useless wad. Now he had to throw away his life because of some girl he didn't even know.

"Well?" his teacher asked again. "Do you remember, or shall I send you down to his office so that he can remind you in person? Now do you want to continue making a disturbance of my class, or would you like to sit down?"

The paper wad was still clutched in his hand. It felt like a wad of lead now. But maybe he was wrong. Maybe it wasn't suicide. Maybe she was just a tidy person and didn't like messes. Maybe she wouldn't actually go through with it. Just maybe...

And with that final thought, he made up his mind, relaxed his hand and opened his mouth to speak.