Malice Without Thought

By Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

Before he drank for a living, Roger Staley Gidmore was highly regarded as our area's least competent criminal. Well, the term "criminal" connotes a certain professionalism that forever escaped poor Roger. It was more that he bumbled about in a never-ending series of miscalculations, many of which were bound to put him in contact with law enforcement officials across the region.

It's not lost on you, I'm sure, that effective criminality requires some degree of organization and planning. At least you should contemplate the possibility of getting caught so that you might take some form of evasive action. You don't have to be a genius to gain some status as a thief or embezzler. But a little anticipation can make for fewer vacations in the Johnsville Penitentiary.

The requirement that consequences be considered was the stone that always tripped Roger Gidmore. No, it wasn't so much a stone as an angry wasp that followed his every move and stung him without mercy. Had he only developed a piddling capacity for prediction, Roger's life would have fallen within the cushy confines of normality. He certainly wouldn't have been the subject of oft-told stories.

While you'd be right to fault Roger for lack of forethought, you couldn't indict his consistency. Indeed, Roger Gidmore was flawlessly consistent in his behavior, not just day to day or month to month. We're talking consistency from the very beginnings of his life. If you sat with his mother, she'd tell you that Roger was hard to manage in utero. Wherever she'd put a hand on her swollen belly, Roger would kick and kick again. The older he got, the more difficult it was to handle him. His years in elementary

school were so disastrous that a description of them would alone fill countless pages.

Nowadays they surely have a rash of psychiatric terms for Roger Staley Gidmore's affliction. They probably have some diagnosis with official criteria and suggested clinic procedures for its identification. Experts must fly from city to city lecturing with great authority on current research and practice in the management of severely impulsive behavior. Odds are that bookshelves overflow with books for parents, teachers and, heck, even the brothers and sisters of the Roger Gidmore's of the world.

But this story isn't a case history about a psychiatric entity. It's about a colorful character whose colors tended to run because his brain never stopped to consider a consequence. You have to promise, though, not to lapse into the popular habit of confusing the desire to understand with an act of forgiveness. It would seem that one can account for why someone errs without that explanation being construed as an excuse or legal maneuver or the hemorrhaging of a bleeding heart. But you decide.

Now I admit it would be tempting to spend this entire story simply regaling you with accounts of Rogers ill-considered exploits. The sheer stupidity of some of his ventures would engender mild amusement and perhaps a degree of hilarity. His antics sure have entertained some in our community for years. People still can't believe that he wrote a holdup note on the back of his own deposit slip or that he tried to steal a computer from the office superstore even though a bright red sign in front warned that it was connected to an alarm. In a non-criminal act of impulsiveness, he tried to make a u-turn on a road that was being repaired. It took two tow trucks to pull his car out of the ditch the crew was digging in preparation for a new center island.

But I'm afraid that a narrow account of Roger's many blunders would too easily lapse into yet another gang that couldn't shoot straight tale or grist for one of those mensa reject bits on a late night talk show where the host holds up newspaper headlines and mocks the erstwhile criminal's poor judgment. And besides, what's more compelling to me is how Roger's singular incapacity for looking two steps ahead broke my sister's heart.

You've got to know from the start that Carol is just about the last person in the world you would expect to link up with a Roger Gidmore. She's as shy as they come and always has been that way. Carol's the sort of person you can forget is around because she almost never talks unless spoken to and doesn't do much of anything that will draw attention to her existence. Like my mother and her mother before her, my sister is the wallboard behind the wallflower, hardly ever venturing beyond the safety of anonymity. It's as if she figures you need a license to be at all assertive and that God never got around to issuing her one.

Carol's a paralegal downtown in a medium-sized law office where she spends most of the day dotting I's and crossing T's. She's the person who makes sure that all the documents are in order for complicated real-estate transactions or that the proper forms are filed when one of the local businessmen wants to incorporate another venture. She works in a cubicle just to the right of the plush, cherry-wooded office of a middle-aged attorney who forever dumps accordion files of legal documents on her Formica desk so that she can organize and process them.

While Carol's reserved and cautious by nature, I don't want to give you the idea that she's so afraid of her shadow that she's forever shrinking from worldly contact.

She goes out to lunch with the other staff, never misses the holiday parties, sings in our church choir, and will converse freely as long as she's comfortable that you want her to talk and don't mind hearing what she has to say. She'll almost never initiate a conversation but is perfectly capable of interacting without averting her eyes or wringing her hands the way some desperately shy or anxious folks might when pressed to engage. And, as best I can tell, she was a generally content young women until she fell for the likes of Roger Gidmore.

Here's how it happened: As was her habit, Carol took a quick break from her job at 10 am so that she could grab a coffee to go at a little coffee bar about a block from her office. She stood behind this fellow who had just ordered a hot chocolate and was turning to leave. Carol caught his eye and, without any apparent contemplation or respect for good manners, he blurted out, "Wow, you've to great eyes and wonderful skin. You wanna help me pick out a shirt next store so I'll have something nice to wear for my interview?"

Carol was all set to take some form of evasive action but for some reason she thought better of it and actually responded to him. No one had ever approached her so boldly and I suppose she was just curious what kind of person would walk up to someone and without a scintilla of self-consciousness invite her to go clothes shopping. She admitted to me later that she was also taken aback by Roger's good looks. And Roger was and still is despite everything a handsome man. He has the chiseled features, wavy dark hair, and gleaming teeth of a fashion model like you see in ads for pricey men's colognes and clothing. What everyone notices about Roger, though, are his eyes.

They=re a deep blue, very intelligent looking, and somehow warm and inviting, not in a bedroomy way but more like they broadcast an absence of guile or evil intent. When you look at Roger he would never strike you as slick or conniving or more likely than most to become incarcerated for running afoul of the law. I think most people would find him appealingly boyish and harmless.

And so she asked him what sort of interview he was preparing for and he told her that he wanted to get a job at the new computer superstore that was opening up at the mall but that he didn't think he'd have much of a chance because he's never held a job for more than a few weeks without screwing up. He said all of this matter-of-factly, as if it were a foregone conclusion that Carol would be interested in his occupational history and unfazed by his candor about past failures. He prattled on as the clerk poured her coffee into a paper cup and handed her the two sugars and creamer that she always requested.

Roger said that he knew a lot about computers, at least how to install software and fix common problems so they should hire him, but you never know because most businesses didn't want to hire someone with his background but it's too bad because he likes fixing things and helping people with their problems. He did need to be well-dressed, he figured, and at least show up in maybe a nice silk shirt but he didn't have much money although when he was walking by Sammy's mens shop he saw some good looking ones in the window and what did she think of the new pasta restaurant they put in right next store and maybe next week they could have lunch there if she wanted although she'd have to pay probably unless something good happened at this job

interview this afternoon, or was it tomorrow morning?

As they headed out the door Roger asked her again if she'd come with him because he could really use the advice, but Carol said she'd have to get back to work and wished him luck. He seemed surprised she didn't volunteer to join him but flashed a bright smile anyhow and said good day as he turned to head down Kennedy Street toward the mall, in the process bumping into a traffic cop by the curb and spilling his hot chocolate on her already brown uniform.

Had Carol been much of a conversationalist she would have gone back to the office and told one of the other staff about this cute but goofy guy she met at the coffee shop. She probably would have alternated between commenting on his appearance and guessing that he was a big-time loser and wasn't it a shame that all the good looking guys were always married, gay, or bad news. Instead, Carol put down her coffee, checked her spindle for phone messages, and prepared a power of attorney form for the wife of an ailing husband. But she did stop for a few minutes to pull out her makeup compact just to judge for herself if she did have nice eyes and beautiful skin.

And that would have been the end of it if chance encounters didn't have a funny way of disrupting the easy flow of a person's life. You must have wondered at times how different your life would have been if you hadn't happened to run into your old house painter at the hardware store where you went because you ran out of deck sealer and you find out that he has tickets for tonight=s baseball game and so you go along and meet his sister and two years later you're exchanging I do's. Or when you find out about a job opening not because of any organized search but because you break your

foot playing touch football at the park and you overhear the nurse in the ER complaining that there will never be any letup in the stress unless they can find another x-ray technician. You know what I mean. I guess I've always had this feeling that people never give credit to where credit is most often due and that's usually to the good offices of Lady Luck.

It was just this kind of chance encounter that ensnared my sister in the frenetic and hapless life of Roger Gidmore. Carol was running an errand for her boss which took her to the mega mall on the north side of town. She had to buy a new modem for the office computer and it turns out that the best buy was at the new computer superstore that had just opened. As she was winding her way along the aisles she was stopped in her tracks because someone had built a wall of software boxes across the floor.

Carol made her way back out that aisle and down the next so that she could get toward the modem section. At the end of that aisle, she turned the corner to see why she had been blocked and there she saw Roger in a blue clerk=s vest patiently building an end cap of accounting software. It was obvious that he had started out just fine, making carefully indented rows, but that he had continued building the stack clear across the aisle, obviously not paying any mind to what would happen if he obstructed the path. To those of us who came to know Roger, this was vintage Gidmore. Once again he had failed to stop, look, think, and plan accordingly.

Carol recognized Roger immediately and, in her most considerate tone, said hello and asked him how the job was going. He bounced off the floor and gave her a big hug, said that he liked the job because of all the gadgets but that they were only

letting him stock because they already had salespeople and, besides, they didn't want to trust him with handling money given his past problems with cash registers. Roger pointed proudly to his architectural marvel but was swiftly deflated when he realized his construction error. He slapped his head none too gently and then jammed both fists into his side out of frustration, "Damn," he said in exasperation. "I always do dumb shit like this and it pisses me off. What an idiot." At this point he kicked at the left side of the display, causing all the boxes to scatter on the floor.

Spontaneously Carol bent down to pick up some of the cartons, at least to clear the aisle. She felt badly for Roger who was decidedly irritated by his error. She also couldn't figure how someone who seemed of at least average intelligence could be so unconscious. Meanwhile Roger had settled down enough to regain his composure and join Carol on the floor as they both tried to rebuild the tower of gold and white boxes. Just in time, too, because the manager was working his way down the aisle to inspect what had happened.

When he saw stock boy and customer rebuilding the end cap, his expression changed from concern to curiosity. He asked what had happened and, for some reason Carol felt the need to cover for Roger. She told the heavy set manager that she had bumped the display this nice fellow was constructing and that she had just stopped to help him reassemble it. The manager, in his best customer relations tone, said that it wasn't necessary but thanked her for her concern. He also asked if she found what she was looking for and she said that she did.

Roger waited until the manager had left and then darted toward Carol. In machine gun fashion he told her that he wanted to thank her and that he really wasn't

stupid but always did stuff like this and then felt like a fool afterward. He said that his parents took him to a psychologist when he was in second grade thinking that he was retarded. Everyone was stunned when they found out that Roger actually scored in the gifted range on the intelligence tests. So then they figured he was just lazy and irresponsible which he pretty much was but how the hell can it be that even when he wanted to do well he ends up doing something stupid? The shrink told the school that Roger could have quite a future if he applied himself. And here he was working as a stock boy who couldn't arrange some stupid boxes without messing up.

The soliloquy over, Roger gave Carol's hand a squeeze and, on yet another impulse, kissed her cheek and walked away. Carol followed him, tugged at the back of his vest, and told him in her quiet way not to worry because everyone can make mistakes. He smiled half-heartedly as he stooped down to pick up some more fallen merchandise.

Carol continued on to buy the modem and was just leaving the store when Roger loped up behind her and asked her if she'd like to grab a sandwich in the food court. She hadn't had lunch and figured it wouldn't hurt and there was something appealing about Roger that transcended his good looks so she agreed. Somewhere between ordering two turkey sandwiches and sipping the last of their sodas, Roger and Carol made plans to attend a free concert downtown that evening. And from that point they became friends and, at a pace far quicker than Carol would have ever imagined she'd allow, they became lovers.

If you believe in the yin yang theory for what brings partners together, the case of Roger and Carol could stand as your irrefutable case in point. Here were your

consummate polar opposites linking together for whatever benefits might accrue from their complementarity. You have Roger the impulse-ridden connecting with Carol the obsessive. He would run off to a concert without a second thought while she would only do so with proper planning and exploration. He would buy (or if his funds were low shoplift) the latest CD just because the cover was cool while she would first listen to as much of it as she could in the listening booth and then shop around for the best price, even if that meant ordering it over the internet and waiting for two weeks. He never thought farther ahead than a day at best and she already had the Christmas presents purchased, wrapped and marked by September first. He might see a steamy episode on TV and immediately get it into his head that Carol and he should make love right then and there even if it weren't a good time for her, while she would muse at her desks over days for how she'd hope over the weekend that they might rent a video, watch it together snuggled up on the couch, talk for awhile, and then lapse slowly into tender lovemaking.

As best I can tell, Carol found her early months with Roger to be thrilling, like a wild ride on a Harley or on a river raft crashing though the rapids. He took her careening to just this side of being out of control, a refreshing experience for someone as cautious as my sister. He made her feel somehow more alive and sure of herself and less concerned about having everything just so. And I suppose she was also deriving the short-lived joy inherent in committing the cardinal sin of relationships: thinking that you can change somebody enough to make him a suitable partner. Nothing matches the grandiosity of the poor fool who thinks that love can transform a person from irresponsible to responsible, from uncaring to caring, from thoughtless to thoughtful,

from unfocused to focused. But Carol always did have this Mother Theresa side to her. She forever was trying to salvage stray cats, wounded birds, and inadequate men from painful fates. Even someone high in the running for sainthood would find poor Roger a daunting project.

Indeed, despite his charm, good looks, and exuberant attitude, life with Roger was packed with downsides. He was pervasively irresponsible, impossibly disorganized, and forever unsettled. But the worst for Carol was that she never had his full attention and the part that was focused on her didn't hang around for long either. While I know this is a complaint commonly lodged against men by the y-less gender, Roger was in a class by himself when it came to inattention. Carol confided that once, smack in the middle of lovemaking, Roger suddenly pulled out of her and off the bed because it just came to him that he hadn't put in the CD he bought for the next time they were together. Often he would bolt abruptly from conversations because he saw that the neighbor had just driven home in a new car or because he suddenly remembered he was supposed to call a friend. No "Excuse me" or "Sorry, but how about we go check it out." Only a blur of Dockers hurtling across the room.

When you came down to it, Roger's life was directed by whatever stimulus was most compelling to him at any particular moment. And Carol wasn't all that successful in maintaining a high degree of salience even though she had no doubt that he loved her as dearly as he could. She once described him as an agile and lightning-fast sports car that had no brakes to stop the momentum. And when I met him I had the same sense of him. He had the attention span of a gnat because he couldn't stop himself from responding to what might seem most gratifying to him at the moment. Carol could get

thrills and chills from Roger, but not a slow steady love that might flow across the years.

The scariest part about being with Roger was his hair-trigger temper. Most of us can delay a moment to make sure that the guy in the bar really did put us down or knock one of our friends intentionally. We can hold off a second and make sure we've got it right. But the membrane between fact and emotion was microscopically thin for Roger because emotions usually swept him away. Carol often needed to calm him down, explain to him the realities, and let some reason prevail.

Carol woke up one October morning and called Roger to see if he'd meet her for coffee at 10 am at the same place they'd met that summer. But there was no answer, just the foreboding of an unanswered phone. On the way to work she took a detour and stopped by his parents' house where Roger's dad was sitting in the family room munching on a sweet roll.

The two had met several times before so they said hello and Carol asked him where Roger had gone and his dad looked at the floor for a few seconds before telling her that his son had heard that there were some good jobs open as roadies for some damn rock band and that, on the spur of the moment, he took the friends advice and offer of a ride and headed for California without thinking about his job at the mall, or the appointment he had at the dentist tomorrow, or that there was plenty of raking to do around the yard or that he should at least call his girlfriend who's been awfully damn good to him. He started to tell her that Roger was always like this and that he could never just settle down and maybe it was best for her in the long run. To Carol he seemed weighed down by guilt, resigned to his son's failures, and yet desperately ashamed.

And so she apologized for barging in, slumped into the vinyl seat of her compact car, and inched away.

Roger must have been gone for about six months before returning home. Within a few weeks he began getting into more serious trouble: he was picked up by the police several times for petty theft but was put on probation by an overburdened judge. He got involved with various drug dealers and narrowly escaped getting caught in one of the stings that the sheriff's department ran routinely. And then he tried to pull off the bank heist I mentioned earlier, with disastrous results. He was sent to prison where he served too light a sentence because he was out within a year or so and back into no good.

After several more years of hair-brained schemes interlaced with abortive attempts at normal employment, Roger no longer looked innocently impetuous, but sullen, angry, and drunk most of the time. My guess is that he figured that if he were intoxicated enough, he wouldn't be so likely to act on every silly whim. And the frustration of never being able to amount to anything despite what had once been good intention and ample smarts eventually tore him apart and left him scattered on the sidewalk by the Rescue Mission.

And that's where you'll see Roger Gidmore if you walk by that brown-bricked building today. I know, because Carol just called and said she saw him on the way to lunch and that he looked so sad and dirty and how could she have ever loved someone like him and would I like to come by tonight because she's making that stir fry I like with the pineapple and shrimp and maybe we could talk and I said that I would for sure. At the point she'd normally say a chipper "See you then" she fell silent for a second

then sighed a mournful sigh before saying goodbye in the saddest of tones. And that's how I know Roger Gidmore broke my sister's heart.