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TRUSTING A 'FRIEND' TEARS FAMILY APART

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MICHAEL is 42 years old. He's 6 feet 1, and he weighs a little over 200. Yet, there is an innocent expression to his face that reveals, even before he speaks, that he is really a little boy trapped in a man's body.

He is mentally retarded.

Like Benny in "L.A. Law," Michael works as a mail clerk. He has worked at a government agency for almost 25 years.

He lives with his mother, Dorothy. She is an old-fashioned person. For instance, she does not believe in banks.

Instead, she keeps her money in two boxes. At least she used to - back when she had money. One box was in the closet. One was hidden behind a panel under the sink in the bathroom.

Some of this money came from a lifetime of saving. Some came from the proceeds of her husband's life insurance policy. He died in 1989.

In 1991, the box in the closet contained a little over \$25,000. The box in the bathroom contained about \$10,000.

In October of 1991, Dorothy cashed a Social Security check and went to the closet to add some money to the box.

The box was empty.

As you can imagine, Dorothy was beside herself. She knew that she hadn't taken the money, and she knew that money meant absolutely nothing to Michael. She wondered if her daughter might have borrowed the money.

She went to her daughter's house. Her daughter, Nancy, is an officer at a bank.

"I had no idea Mom had that kind of money. If I would have known, I'd have insisted she put it in a bank," Nancy says now.

But Dorothy was convinced her daughter knew about the money, and had, in fact, borrowed it. She demanded the money be returned.

The discussion ended badly. Dorothy disowned her daughter.

Two months later, Dorothy noticed the panel under the bathroom sink was ajar. In a panic, she scrambled down to look at that second box. It was empty.

Now, all her money was gone. What's more, she realized she had falsely accused her daughter. Because Nancy had been forbidden to come into the house, the thief had to be her third child, Brian.

She went to his house and, again, the discussion went badly. Dorothy disowned her youngest son.

That Christmas was a bleak one for Dorothy, and for Michael, as well. A once close-knit family had become estranged.

In February of 1992, Dorothy was in a terrible state.

"I was ready to drink myself to death. I didn't know what was happening. I prayed for a sign, anything to help me," she says now.

Her prayer was answered. The phone rang. A teller from her bank called. A woman was trying to cash a check on her account for \$400. The check was made out to Daisy Williams.

"I don't know a Daisy Williams," Dorothy said.

The young woman trying to cash the check was arrested. Her name wasn't Daisy Williams. It was Felicia Moore. She worked with Michael. She

told police that she and Michael had been having sex, and he had been paying her.

Doesn't matter, said the police. There was still the deal with the check that Dorothy had not signed. Felicia Moore, who was 22, was charged with forgery.

Confronted by this development, Michael shamefully confessed.

Through a series of interviews with police and prosecutor **Bret Rich**, authorities pieced together what had happened:

She had been nice to him at work, Michael said. She had asked him for money, and he said he and his mother kept all their money at home. Then she came to his house when his mother wasn't home. She had asked where he kept his money, and he had shown her. The first time, he hadn't said anything when she took the money from the box. The next time, he had tried to stop her, but one of her friends had shoved him.

And yes, he told authorities, they had had sex.

It later turned out, by everybody's account, that they had not had sex. Instead, Michael had masturbated in front of her, and Felicia had told him that that was what sex was.

Eventually, Felicia Moore pleaded guilty to forgery and stealing over \$150. Both are felonies. Each carries a maximum sentence of seven years.

She was sentenced Friday morning. Dorothy and Michael both spoke. Dorothy talked about a lifetime worth of savings. Michael said he had thought Felicia Moore was his friend.

Judge Robert Lee Campbell asked Dorothy what she would do if she were the judge, and she said she would put Felicia on probation and demand that she pay the money back. None of the money was ever recovered.

Prosecutor Rich said he leaned toward prison time, but he was willing to defer to Dorothy's wishes.

So the judge put Felicia on five years' probation and suspended the imposition of the sentence. If Felicia successfully completes her probation, she will not have a criminal record. The judge also ordered that during her probation, 15 percent of her take-home pay should go toward restitution.

Whether that will amount to much is unclear. Felicia is unemployed, although her public defender, Matthew J. Savac, said she has been accepted in a six-week job skills program. Savac also said he thought the sentence had been appropriate. He pointed out that Felicia had never been in trouble before.

Incidentally, Dorothy and her other children have reconciled. Nancy and Brian were both at the sentencing.

Perhaps the most unsettling aspect of the proceedings was the conduct of the young woman who accompanied Felicia to court. She giggled through much of the testimony. And as Felicia left the courtroom, she seemed to try, unsuccessfully, to suppress a smile herself.

Caption:

Correction:

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