

HOT WIRE

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What you want and what you get don't always come on the same bus. This was what my mother told me as a child, whenever I wanted something. Mothers are too often right. What I wanted wasn't coming in at all. What I was getting was burned toast and fried rice for breakfast, cold hamburgers for lunch and dinner.

I had gone to so much trouble, come so close to achieving my dream, that I could hardly believe I'd failed to grasp it. Yet here I was back in the hole, killing time in the Ottawa County Jail in Madrigal, Oklahoma. It's probably more accurate to say that time was killing me.

I paced inside my cage. I paced inside my socks on the concrete floor. The other thing my mother said was, "Wish in one hand and crap in the other, then see which fills up the fastest." What I wished was that I could fly.

Mom was right again. After three days the galvanized pail in the corner was filled almost to the top. I considered throwing it in the round, red-scrubbed face of the deputy who doubled as my jailer, but I didn't care much for hospital food. Especially when you had to eat it without teeth while fractured ribs kept you from sitting up in bed.

I'm Alton Benjamin Franklin, G.E.D. I was named after a hundred-dollar bill. I received my diploma from the McAlester State Correctional Institution in Oklahoma, class of '76. I lost a wife and a baby daughter in pursuit of my education. I was a busy young man. I had a business card once. It read: *No Reasonable Offer Refused*. You'd be surprised how few reasonable offers came along in a given decade. What I actually did for a living was steal things. I'd also sold

paintings for a while. They were my own original Matisses.

If you're ever thrown in jail, use your allotted phone call to talk someone into bringing you a radio. Stabled horses are often kept with goats or cats to play with. They should have done as much for us.

I tried to sing but couldn't remember the words to anything, sitting there in my cage, so I made up the lines as I went along. Country songs, pop songs, rock classics.

I couldn't just sit there and brood on the old unknown world while the dark fields of my republic rolled on to the sea. So I danced around, practicing the variations of a fast-beat two-step. There would be plenty of time for brooding once I got out of that stink hole. Once I located Rosalinda. She was out there now, and I had the sinking feeling that she wouldn't wait forever. I danced faster.

The idea, as I figured it and as my mother would probably have told you, was that jail was supposed to give you time to reflect on how you got there. You got there by screwing up, and I'd already given that all the thought the topic would bear. It seemed a much more industrious mental exercise to use my time planning what I would do once I got out. Or perhaps thinking of a way to get out. When you're a thirty-year-old convicted felon, they no longer call your mom to come round and pick you up.

Sooner or later, I'd get free of the entire population of the great state of Oklahoma and start my new life as a success. All this, once I located Rosalinda. I'd never met her, but Rosalinda was by far the most important person in my life.

She was the remaining clue to the location of my missing four hundred thousand tax-free American dollars. It could have been more than four hundred thousand, much more, or a little less. I liked to think of it in round numbers. I liked to think of it as my future. I'd have new cards printed up: *Alton Benjamin Franklin, S.A.* This was me, self-actualized.

61 For the time being, though, I was in isolation with my unactualized self. A metal cot, a mattress. A cold-water lavatory sink on the back wall and my galvanized bucket. There was no pillow, no window. I wore my socks and jeans. And a clever tattoo of a colorful rooster on my left breast.

They'd taken away my shirt, along with my shoes. I'd been in and out of a few jails, and this had never happened to me before. Perhaps there'd been an article in *Jailer's Monthly* that described how an inmate had committed suicide by swallowing his shirt buttons. Not only was I without shirt and shoes (a state of existence that would keep me from being served in most restaurants), I wasn't allowed the comfort of bars to wrap my anxious hands around. Bars to look out through. My cell was a free-standing cage of interwoven iron slats forming even rows of four-inch squares. There was a wall at my back. I spent some of my time sticking my fingers through one of the square gaps to touch the crumbling, chalky plaster. It wasn't sable, but it was better than feeling nothing other than stale air.

The cage was erected over a drain in the concrete floor. I couldn't begin to describe the smell. When I'd first examined the drain, I'd made the mistake of placing my face directly over it. My knees buckled from the strength of the toxic odor.

"It could be worse," the deputy had told me when I complained. "They could of caught up with you in Texas."

They couldn't have caught up with me in Texas. I hadn't been in Texas. The car I was in, however, when I'd stupidly stopped for a set of flashing red lights nine miles south of the Kansas border, bore Texas plates. I'd actually stolen it from in front of a motel room in Sallisaw, just inside the Oklahoma line from Ft. Smith, Arkansas.

I tried never to take a car across state lines. In Ft. Smith, I'd abandoned a comfortable Buick I had previously picked up in Hot Springs. I hitchhiked across the

state line. It was my method of operation. And it usually worked.

An outer door opened and closed. A familiar squeak walked in with the deputy's polished leather shoes. A ring of keys *jingle-jangled* his approach, sounding like a wind chime tossed by the breeze of freedom.

"Mail?" I asked, not standing.

"Supper," I was told. "Spread 'em against the back wall, you know." He inserted the key into the lock.

I didn't move. "I don't like hamburgers."

"Now, don't go gettin' moody," my Okie jailer advised. "Hamburgers is good food."

"Those damn things are neither hamburgers nor food."

"What you want and what you get don't always come on the same bus," he said, surprising me. "What you don't eat for supper you get for breakfast."

I quickly decided that I could tear the two burgers into tiny pieces and force them down the sink. I had begun to look forward to the burned toast and fried rice for breakfast. Somebody in that town knew how to fry rice. There were tiny bits of green onion among the flakes of rice. Tiny bits of ham. And just enough grease to warm the heart of a captured Confederate soldier on a cold train hurtling north. You didn't get rice like that just anywhere.

My mother was frying green beans in bacon grease when I decided to come out and get some. This was the way she told it. She called the doctor after reaching down from her skillet to feel my two feet sticking out. Breech.

I preferred to think that I hit the world running.

I stood up and faced the back of the cage, the plaster wall. I spread my legs and placed my hands over my head, palms against the lattice. The overweight Okie opened the cage door and set down my two hamburgers, welded to the paper plate, on the

concrete floor. I relaxed and turned around to catch his shit-eating grin.

He stepped out of the cage, then turned to face me again. "Come tomorrow we'll bring out the hose to wash you off some," he said. "You're beginnin' to smell worse than a dead horse too many days in the sun." The door banged shut.

"Hey," I called after his fading steps. "You know all the words to any songs?"

Much later, I lay on my cot dreaming of the beautiful and unknown Rosalinda. "I'm coming to get you," I told the light bulb burning inside my cage. "That's right, Rosalinda, I'm coming to get you. And I'm coming soon."

You say something often enough, it makes it come true.

In the Ottawa County Jail in Madrigal, they turned the lights out at night. That and the fried rice were the two decent things they did.

I undressed for bed by taking off my socks. The cot was too short for my six-foot body and my feet stuck out over the end. Lying back on the thin mattress, hands under my head, I thought of the huge black roaches feeding at the open floor drain each night. I'd stepped on one the first night, Friday night, barefooted. And every time I ran water in the cold-water sink a couple of the big black babies came shooting up from the drain making a mad scramble for safety. I hoped they enjoyed the burgers.

In the sudden darkness of my cage, I swear I could hear the small beasts masticating their meal. A far-away door opened and closed. The building groaned. All I needed for a good cry was a whistling train to go rattling by; a Merle Haggard song.

I wiggled my toes, realizing that I smelled nearly as foul as the open drain in the floor of my cell. Nearly as awful as the contents of my galvanized pail. I hadn't shaved in four days. Tomorrow I'd ask for a bar of soap.

I'd also ask for a shirt to wear, warm from an iron and neatly creased. I'd ask for a pillow and a window

and a moon in that window. I'd ask for a friend to be in there with me. A dog or a goat or a cat. I'd ask for what I wanted and then hang around to see what I got instead.

"Rosalinda," I sang out loud to the darkness "you're first on my list. You're mine, beautiful baby sweet baby, and I'm coming to get you." There was no place that woman could hide.

Chapter 1

It began the day I bought a suit. I hadn't owned a suit in years, hadn't worn one since my parole hearing in 1976. May 4th, 1986 the day before I turned thirty, I was sitting in my clean jeans and tennis shoes, my unpaid, button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up, in my five-year-old Datsun pickup truck.

I watched a young man from the suburbs park his car in a crowded lot just off the Country Club Plaza.

Maybe the kid was in college. He wore a white tennis outfit, a light sweater, cuffed and creased shorts over the tan muscles of his upper thighs. I wondered how in the hell a guy got so tan so early in the year. He carried his racket with him as he left behind a charcoal-gray Mustang.

There were a couple swishy places on the Plaza to eat breakfast. This guy was headed for one of them. The other shops didn't open until later. Gucci's and Seymour Marcus and Kansas City's own Saks Fifth Avenue. I made myself dislike him. I decided that carrying a tennis racket into a tourists' restaurant was asking to be taken advantage of. I always looked for a reason. It made me feel better at the end of a workday.

I climbed out of my truck into the light of a beautiful spring morning, carrying a brown paper lunch bag, and fed change into the parking meter. There was a two-hour limit. Plenty of time. I walked in the opposite direction of the parking lot I'd been watching.

I lived in an apartment on the Kansas side, but I preferred doing my work in Missouri. It basically was a

very decent job. I made a living. Like just about everybody else in America, I had to regularly get out there and push a little money around. Carry a little money from place to place. Moving money around is the way we make our country work. I shouldn't have minded working for a living. I named my own hours, which were relatively few, and I didn't pay income taxes. I never had guts enough to write in *car thief* as my occupation on a 1040. So I quit filling them out altogether.

I stole cars, but never red ones. Red tended to catch a person's eye. And contrary to the way they behave, police officers generally fall into the category of persons. Red or gray, however, the Mustang meant green to me. My slim-jim opened the door's lock with more ease than had I possessed the key. You just had to love Ford Motor Company, if you were a thief.

I slid in behind the wheel and opened my lunch sack. I removed a paperback book and held it open against the steering wheel with my left hand. This was the tricky part, getting the car started, and I wanted to look as if I belonged where I sat.

While I read a few passages of *Burglars Can't Be Choosers* by Lawrence Sanders, my right hand was busy. My starter tool was no bigger than a two-inch lug wrench with an adjustable ratchet. I locked the mouth of it over the Mustang's ignition switch, working the handle like a pump.

Piece of cake. Before I knew it, I was listening to the irritating buzz of the seat-belt warning system. I turned the handle in the other direction, starting the engine. Quickly I removed the tool from the ignition.

While starting the Mustang, I never once took my eyes from the paperback to see what my right hand was doing. My right hand knew the ropes and needed no guidance.

I removed the ring of keys from my lunch sack. Each car key was filed to the point of being useless and would slip into any ignition switch. Totally ineffective, the keys provided the appearance of normalcy.

Sam Geolas told me I was paranoid to go to such lengths.

"What's it matter, Rooster?" he asked. "Either you get stopped or you don't."

But I believed you couldn't be too careful when you stole things for a living, especially cars. Maybe a turn signal didn't work. Or maybe the muffler dragged. I didn't want to end up in jail if some well-meaning traffic cop stopped me to let me know the brake lights weren't functioning. Police officers tend to notice things like a car running without a key in the ignition.

I pulled the Mustang onto the street and tuned into Kansas City's oldies station, WHB. I checked the odometer. I nodded at a fountain fashioned in the shape of a large carp with water gushing out its mouth. It was my favorite fountain in Kansas City.

The Mustang was last year's model and there were fewer than fifteen thousand miles on it. I was driving a five-hundred-dollar bill to market and I should have been pleased.

Instead it occurred to me that my entire life was a litany of loss. Other people's losses as well as my own. An unknown father, a dead mother, a high-school-sweetheart wife and a nine-year-old daughter. I'd made some friends along the way, but where the hell were they?

I was small potatoes. A guy doing good at being small potatoes had a porch by now, a woman, a dog, or at least a cat. There were small-potatoes vacations and retirement plans. I had none of that. And it came to me that I was small potatoes because I was afraid of being anything else. I was just getting by.

Turning thirty made me think about it. I didn't mind being thirty. I did mind the things I hadn't accomplished since I'd walked out of prison in 1976. I suddenly and very deeply minded that very much.

Something happened as I migrated north on a street one block east of Broadway.

There was a girl in a yellow dress, waiting at a bus

stop by herself. She looked at me and I snapped. Flipped. Crossed over. Came around. Hot tears filled my eyes. It wasn't a nervous breakdown exactly. It was more like a revelation. The woman looking at me had broken the camel's back of my mediocre soul.

I'd simply, at that moment, had enough of me the way I was. Things had to change. And it was up to me to change them. The thing I put my faith in was myself. I was now responsible, I knew, for my own salvation.

All this from a girl's looking at me. A girl in a yellow dress at a corner bus stop on the day before my thirtieth birthday. A girl who was a woman.

She tilted her lovely head and looked right at me while I waited for the light, and my life, to change. She almost smiled. I would gladly have donated my last pair of shoes to the Salvation Army to have known what she was thinking. The girl held her mouth as if to speak. I would have given up a high-paying career in avionics to water her plants.

The light turned green and the car behind me honked.

And I couldn't get caught in a stolen car. So I drove on.

Kansas City has plenty of trees and boulevards and parks. It has a decent zoo. There were baseball and football teams. Indoor soccer. There are skyscrapers and top-of-the-Crown restaurants. There is high-rent and low-rent. There are fine museums and burned-out tenements. It is a great town if you like to drive. So I drove on.

There were also two places in Kansas City that provided heart transplants. In case you ever needed one. I just drove on.

As with a woman, you never know a city until you've wintered with her. And not always then. Kansas City is a wonderful city in many ways. But I had been there too long. I wanted to move on. I wanted to leave behind all the excellent barbecue and move south for the next winter . . . with the girl in the

yellow dress sitting next to me on the passenger's seat. But she was gone now.

As with all the other women in my life, I'd lost her. I couldn't remember my own daughter's birthday. She'd been born while I was in the McAlester pen. Her name was Avery and she was either nine or ten years old. And she, like the girl in the yellow dress, was gone.

I eased the waxed nose of the Mustang to within an inch of the garage door of the Good Buy Tire Store in the 1600 block of Broadway. I tapped the horn three times. The dented garage door lifted with a bang, and I drove inside between two racks of tires that were stacked to the top of the eighteen-foot ceiling.

A thin man they called Baron closed the garage door. I stepped out of the running Mustang, taking my useless set of keys, carrying my paper sack, and left the door open. Baron approached the car. He had dark, greasy hair that fell in his face. He nodded toward the small office at the back of the garage and climbed in behind the wheel. Baron floored it, listening for bad rings or valves.

I'd been inside the Good Buy Tire Store dozens of times and not once had anyone asked me if I wanted to buy tires. I walked to the back of the garage. Not hearing any problems with the car, Baron turned it off and followed me. I knocked on the open door of Sam's office and stepped inside.

Sam Geolas stood up from behind the cluttered wooden desk and arched his thick eyebrows. He was a large man with a large belly. His hairline had disappeared years ago. What hair remained he kept well oiled and combed behind his fatty ears.

"Mustang," Baron said. "I'd go five on it." He was standing right behind me, talking to Sam.

"Six," I said to the man behind the desk.

Sam Geolas nodded. I always asked for more than the initial appraisal. And I always got more. I brought in clean cars and was never followed.

There were a lot of kids out there who brought in some classic sports number after a hundred-and-eighty-mile-an-hour race on the freeway. I took care not to have a description of the car I was selling radioed over the police channel before I got there.

There were guys, too, who'd use the car for a date, planning to turn it over to Geolas the next day. They never lasted long.

Baron left. Sam sat back down in his chair with an audible grunt and lighted a cigarette.

"Rooster," he said, "when are you going to bring in the big one, eh?" He talked without looking at me and I saw no cause to reply.

"A Rolls or a Jag?" Sam brought out a plastic bank bag from a drawer of his desk. He unzipped the bag and removed a packet of hundred-dollar bills. Slowly, carefully, he counted out six C-notes. He replaced the remainder in the bag, zipped it, and returned it to its drawer. I figured there was a gun in the drawer as well. Sam left it open, his hand resting on its wooden edge.

"Maybe tomorrow," I said, considering it.

A Rolls is as easy to start as most other cars, just a little more difficult to locate in Kansas City. Sam lifted his gaze from the six bills he'd laid out for me and exhaled a cloud of blue smoke. We looked into each other's eyes as the last of the smoke drifted lazily from the nostrils of Sam's flat nose. I'd always tried to act as if I didn't hate the overweight, bald man with unfriendly eyes. It was getting tougher all the time and was particularly difficult today.

I almost didn't want to take my money.

"You know I go seven, maybe eight grand on a Rolls? Four or five thousand on a decent Jag?"

I nodded.

He studied me for a moment more then glanced away. I leaned forward, retrieved the money, and shoved it into my lunch sack. I was too busy thinking of other things to put much energy into shoptalk. Sam

was right, though; it was time I did something different.

"There's an Excalibur driving around town. It's white. Has personalized tags. Kansas, ninety-nine. That's what the tags say, Rooster, ninety-nine. Know what that means?"

I shook my head. The Big One I had in mind wasn't some crappy car with personalized tags.

"Nah, neither do I. But I tell you what, mister, I'll go five grand on that one."

I nodded, said, "I'll see." I turned to leave.

"You're going to get caught. You know that, don't you? You guys always get caught."

Sam was laughing as I stepped out of his office. It sounded like someone coughing up concrete slabs.

"Hey, Rooster," he called after me. "Get you a big one sometime, before you get caught."

Outside the Good Buy Tire Store, the sun was shining and I tried to put the echoes of Sam Geolas's laugh out of my head. There were more important things to think about. My wardrobe, for one. If I was now going to take control of my future, my fate, and score the Big One, I would have to start out with a proper set of duds.

The kind of project I had in mind always began with a woman. And the one thing women still admired in this world was a man who spent money on himself, a man well dressed. I caught the Broadway bus, rode it back to the Country Club Plaza, and was in my pickup with nearly an hour left on the parking meter.

I drove to Oak Park Mall in the Kansas suburbs and selected a suit at one of the larger department stores. The suit was the same shade of gray as the Mustang that had paid for it. It was a tweedish number with proper lapels. A 42-long jacket, 34-by-34 slacks. I also found a pair of reddish-brown leather shoes. A couple of baby-blue shirts and a couple pairs of socks. A narrow red tie. It all came to just over \$350. I paid cash.

I ate lunch sitting next to two large shopping bags

in one of Oak Park's fast-food places. It was crawling with young teens and preteens. Tomorrow was my birthday and being amid all that jabbering youth did little for my appetite. The food didn't do much for me, either.

I plotted my course of action as I drove.

I was a born driver. Motion cleared my thoughts, eased my soul. It wasn't uncommon for me, during times of anxiety or stress, to drive circles around the city I happened to be living in. My favorite drive in Kansas City started out by heading north on the Paseo, swinging over to Broadway once I was downtown, and then crossing the big Missouri River on the Broadway Bridge and heading out of town. At a convenient point I'd turn around and drive back. Crossing the Broadway Bridge at night going south provided you with a view of the city on the hill, lights dancing across the wide, dark water.

The way to rob a bank, I decided, was not to rob a bank. Of this much I was certain. A bank is designed to thwart successful robbery, right down to the exploding ink-packs they hide between the twenties at the bottom of the trays. A successful robbery is when you don't get caught. Then or later.

No one would try to stop you when you flashed a gun. It was the silent alarm that tripped you up. The marked bills. The cops waiting one block away to follow you onto the interstate, broadcasting your license plate to the highway patrol.

Like the rest of us and our lousy paychecks, banks moved money around. It wasn't all done by computer. Not yet anyway. Day in and day out, someone was out there moving the bank's money, federally insured money in staggering amounts. And it was already packaged for easy carryout.

I knew this from having met a girl from High Point, North Carolina. She'd been visiting Kansas City with her cousins. I'd joined them at their table at a bar in Westport. When she told me she worked in a bank, I