

Holiday
for
Fools©

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Three men hunched in a booth at a roadside saloon. One of them, Tony Caldera, stared vacantly with dishwater-gray eyes at the slowly rotating ceiling fan. Its four blades cut through a cloud bank of cigarette smoke permeating every corner of the bar. On his best days the expression on his wide, fleshy face registered sullen. This was not one of his best days.

The second man was Bernie. Round faced with a slight twitch at the corner of his mouth, wore a black-knit cap, covering his head to the top of his crumpled ears. Tufts of gray hair stuck out from the edge of the cap. The other man, hatless, sported a ragged pepper and salt mustache, which was too big for his pinched features.

Tony hoisted a shot glass of whiskey, chasing it with a gulp of draft beer. On cue, the other two followed suit. A flicker of disgust at the pair's doglike fidelity crossed Caldera's face. "I figure if I jumped off the Washington Street Bridge, you two would--yeah, try to hit the water before me."

"Hey, Tony, don't know what you're so riled about," knit-cap said.

"The last bank job, remember Dominic? You missed the guard coming back from his break.

We didn't get a dime after his call for the dicks--"

"Could've got us ten to twenty," thin-faced joked in a lame jibe to lighten the atmosphere.

"Bushwa, Bernie," Tony said, "You weren't no genius, either. Just lucky to get that getaway junker started. Next time steal a better car. Hear."

Bernie shrugged. "So we're here 'cause you got a new job nagging the back of your mind."

Tony waved a beefy arm, signaling the waiter for another round. "Yeah, one right out of Chapter Two of 'The Philosophy of Crime.' Yeah, I know, you lame brains said--I overheard that one--said I never read a book after I left the adventures of the eighth grade for good."

"Jeez, Tony, we was just joking," Bernie said. His twitch danced faster.

Tony downed the new whiskey, smirking while the others stood pat, still smarting from his bridge-jumping crack. "Okay, I'm gonna take you on one more time. But this better go down right or we split for good. Got me?"

"Sure, Tony," Dominic promised.

"Yeah, Tony, ditto, ditto," Bernie threw in. "But me and Dominic noticed Eddie's not along on this trip. We always did four."

"Eddie was too big a screw-up. On a single job came back with paste, fake jewels, not what I sent him for. Not good. Not smart."

"Eddie know about this new job?" Bernie ventured.

"Some. Not enough to get in the way."

"Eddie won't like this," Dominic said.

"I don't give a hang. Eddie's like draggin' an anchor. Only if this was a ship hijack, I'd deal him."

Tony described the layout, making it sound like one of those perfect crimes. The payoff--only a guess--might hit fifty to one hundred grand. Even split three ways not bad, a calculation the other two sagely nodded their approval of. What was needed was attention to detail and acceptance of the odd fact that the job called for breaking out of a bank, not in.

This revelation clicked Bernie's twitch into high gear, and deepened the furrows that cut like corn rows across Dominic's narrow forehead. Neither of Tony's henchmen you might say, if you were being real kind, strained their limited reading abilities to keep up with the daily news. So surprise turned into real bafflement when Tony unfolded the basics of the "Bank Holiday."

Worried state governments, along with the Feds, figured the whole country teetered on the brink of bankruptcy, what with frightened depositors yanking out their savings and burying the cash in Mason jars in the backyard along with hoarded gold jewelry. Before these gutless sheep emptied every till in the nation, President Roosevelt decided they needed to cool off. With the banks closed for four days, even dimwits would have time to think about the situation. Maybe even turn in their gold as the Feds demanded, since America was off the gold standard.

For every loser's bad day, as Tony reported, a golden opportunity opens for the quick and the smart. Bankers in hundreds of towns and cities already could write their names in the dust on the floor of empty vaults. But not in Monroeville, where several branches of the Farmers' Union Community Bank figured it out before the President. A little smooth talk, a lot of promises convinced pushover customers they'd be better off withdrawing just portions of their deposits, leaving the bulk in the bank for better days just around the corner. That was the phrase. Making hayseeds feel good about having their life saving locked up beyond reach for four days was the tricky part. But it worked.

"You might say when one door closes another opens," Tony said, stubbing out a Camel in the overflowing ash tray on the scarred and ring stained tabletop of the booth.

Bernie, often a shade quicker than co-felon Dominic, said, "Yeah, you mean the bank. The vault doors. Huh?"

Tony's crooked grin let them both know this was the right answer.

"But that part about bustin' out of the bank, not in," Dominic protested.

"Yeah, you do need to understand that," Tony said. "Our go-for-the-booty branch of Farmers' is the one at Ninth and Cedar."

"Yeah," Bernie chimed in. "The wooden one. Old as the Ark."

Tony coughed behind a newly-lit cigarette. "That's the one. Been there maybe seventy-five years. They got window bars and a metal door, but the rest is plain old wood. Nothin' bad's ever happened there, so it's stayed that way, just wood. Bankers being what they are, no use spending extra to brick it up. Huh?"

Two days before its planned start, March 4, Tony Caldera pinned down the timing of the national bank holiday. No one, inside or outside the Big House, ever doubted Tony's malevolent foresight. Or you could call it ingeniously devious scheming. Not every plot worked to perfection, as his police record duly noted, for those who cared to look it up. But for a shady career, his days in the sun remarkably outnumbered those in the shadows.

Attention to detail. His motto. He found the maxim easy to follow, not a quality

easily duplicated among the grifters he had to deal with. He had come to believe Bernie and Dominic almost seemed brilliant compared to a few of their dimwit predecessors. Not that he planned to let down his guard simply because they were at his side.

Casing the Farmers' Union branch demanded a cagey eye, a practiced ear, a brain wired to expect the unexpected. On that day two days before the national declaration, and decked out in denim coveralls, straw hat--every accessory of a true hick, everything, that is, but a strand of hay between his teeth--he ambled into the bank. Mingling among unsuspecting customers, fretting about their own bank accounts, Tony caught only a cursory glance of interest from the single armed guard.

No need to size up the second floor of the ancient building, he figured, since plenty of alcoves and small unoccupied rooms lent themselves to his purpose on the first. Natural hideouts after staff and customers would soon obediently leave the bank, faithful to the President's patriotic instructions. Like an explorer returning from the seven seas--an image of Eddie the anchor crossed his mind--Tony brought back the news to Dominic and Bernie, holed up in the cheapest room of the Monroeville Arms.

"But that break-out part." Dominic wouldn't let it go. "We'll be locked in there for four days when they close up the joint. I don't see no plans for food."

Bernie flashed a knowing look of confidence. He spoke almost without the twitch. "Don't strain your brain. Tony's got a plan, sure as that ugly schnoz on your face."

Tony silently sized up Dominic again, wondering if he'd been too generous in giving him the benefit of the doubt. "Nobody's spending four days in there. We'll take care of the guard. Grab the cash. Be in and out in maybe half an hour. Soon's the coast is clear outside, where Bernie will be idling in the getaway car." He stared coldly. "By the way it better be fast with a tankful."

Now it was Bernie's turn. "What about the guard?"

Tony shook his head, jiggling his drooping cheeks. "I'm disappointed. Jeeze, one job last month goes bad and you guys forget the basics. The guard. Our hostage. What else? Our ticket into the vault and out of the bank."

On March 3, near closing time, Tony and Dominic, dressed as farmhands, lum-

bered into the Farmer's Union branch. A mile away Bernie warmed the powerful engine of a '33 Packard Coupe, studying his cheap pocket watch and rehearsing the time Tony had ordered for the getaway. Dominic had strapped to his leg a sawed-off shotgun, which caused a seeming limp. Tony's baggy coveralls concealed the holster and Colt .45 beneath the outfit. With zero hour near for the bank holiday, long lines of customers snaked toward the teller windows, which suggested a run on the bank, the last thing Tony wanted. But when he picked up the drift, his gut unknotted, because most of the crowd, patriots to the end, cashed out only small emergency sums. There'd be plenty in the vaults for the taking.

A bell rang, signaling the end of business and a warning for customers to hit the exit. The oily bank manager, whose relatives loaded down the bank payroll, stood Mussolini-like, on a second floor railed wooden balcony running wall to wall above the teller cages. "Okay, everybody out--we'll be open for business in four days. You're in good hands." His smile was thin, squinting through eyes like slits of ice.

Tony tugged Dominic's sleeve, pulling him aside and herding him to the end of the now-empty corridor he'd scouted out two days earlier. Tony swung open a door to a small room, sparsely furnished with a couple of file cabinets and a worn wooden desk. A triangular name plate rested on the desk. It announced the work station of a Miss Wilma Gruber, Accountant, who leaped from her chair in horror. Tony clapped his hand over her heavily lip-sticked mouth in half-scream. "You shoulda left with the others when you had a chance, gorgeous. Now you add up to extra trouble. Scream and you'll know what I mean."

Like twin searchlights, Dominic's eyes ran up and down Wilma Gruber's deliciously curved, firm figure. "I'd say here's an accountant with the right numbers," he said with a leer. "Can we take her with us?"

Tony's eyes flared with anger until the heat in them died. Distractions, he didn't need. Finding a dame left behind in the bank wasn't in the cards. Engrossed in her work, she'd missed the earlier cattle call to leave. Tony reached behind a file cabinet and pulled out a length of rope, assorted pieces of cloth and a hacksaw. Under the straw hat, Dominic looked more puzzled than ever. Tony sensed a quick explanation was

in order. He told Dominic he knew ahead Wednesday was Wilma Gruber's day off. That's when he'd snuck in and stashed the gear.

"Now bind and gag the nousey Miss Gruber, then do a repeat job on the guard." Tony said all this while removing the Colt from his coveralls and watching while Dominic unstrapped the sawed-off shotgun and slipped a cartridge into the chamber.

The guard's hands flew skyward at the sight of the menacing pair, pushing a bound and gagged Wilma ahead of them. The guard cried out, "But there's no--"

"Just pipe down and turn around," Tony rasped, flinging his head sideways as a signal for Dominic to tie up and gag the guard, whose pitiful eyes widened like saucers.

Tony flipped through the keys on the guard's ring, trying each one in the inside lock of the heavy front door. None worked. Tony cursed and gritted his teeth in annoyance. Dominic swung the shotgun back and forth dangerously between the guard and Wilma Gruber, crouched in terror on the floor. Tony held up the hacksaw, a contingency for the scenario in progress. "Yeah, I know, it'll take longer to saw through a window with bars, but we got loads of time. Count on it, Bernie will wait us out if he knows what's good for him."

Dominic shuffled nervously. Half moons of sweat darkened his underarms. "I-I thought I heard a noise upstairs--"

Tony stopped himself from pulling the Colt's trigger in anger. "I'll do the thinking around here. This old, wooden building is nothing but creaks and groans. Now hoist the guard on his feet and march him over to the vault. I'll escort our surprise guest, Miss Wilma." He waved the Colt in the direction of the vault.

Fixing a threatening gaze on the frightened guard, who looked like a Halloween version of security, Tony said: "Okay, your keys maybe don't let us out the front door, but you gotta know how to open the vault. Behind the gag, the guard mumbled.

With gun in hand, Tony used the other to slip the ropes off the guard's arms, and nudge him toward an eight-foot high steel door supporting a wheeled locking mechanism. "Go ahead," Tony instructed gruffly, "do what you gotta do. But open it pronto."

The guard managed a shrug, spun the wheel to the left and swung the steel door open.

"They didn't even bother to lock it," the dummies," Tony said with a meager smile, the only kind he could muster. Instantly, the sullen face encored. The vault was as empty as a car salesman's promise. Deep furrows lined Dominic's forehead.

"They've hid it somewheres else," Tony insisted. Beads of sweat formed on his brow. He spun around, leveling the Colt at the guard, who desperately shook his head and pointed at the gag with a gesture meant to ask if he could take it off. Tony saved him the trouble. He ripped off the cloth.

"Okay, what's the joke? The dough--fifty grand, maybe a hundred--is supposed to be here--"

Dominic cut in. "I figured it. They stuffed it in the teller drawers--I'll take a gander. He pulled open one drawer, then another. The drawers coughed up small amounts of cash, maybe \$1200 or so, reserves from the day's business just before the bank officially closed.

The guard sputtered. "I tried to tell you right off--but you didn't listen. The manager's was gonna leave the money here. But his nephew talked him out of it. Said the old wooden building was sitting duck, closed like it is for four days. They up and moved the cash to the central, brick branch down on Foster Street, certain most customers would go along with the bank holiday."

A louder creak and groan sounded from the steps leading to the corridor they'd just left. A moment later, a shrill voice commanded, "You're covered. Drop the guns."

Dominic looked hopelessly at a wild-eyed Tony Caldera. "Yeah, whoever you are," Tony said, pulling Wilma to her feet and thrusting her in front of him. "Show us where the cash is or you'll be looking for a new accountant."

The voice came from the wooden balcony. The barrel of a rifle thrust through the thick balustrade. "I'm the manager's nephew. And it's like the guard said, the real money was moved downtown."

Tony mulled the bad news for a few seconds. "Okay, maybe we go without the dough-ray-me, but Miss Wilma looks like she wants you to figure out how to let us out of this chicken coop excuse for a bank--and fast."

Suddenly, the wail of police sirens sounded in the distance. Tony's grasp tightened

on the gun. "How the hell did the cops get wind of this?"

"Eddie, I bet Eddie ratted," Dominic said with voice cracking

"He wouldn't have the guts."

Tony bullied Wilma ahead of him to the window and looked out. A glance upward revealed a telephone wire drooping from the roof line and connected to a telephone pole. "Damn it to hell," Tony said. "A phone upstairs. Nobody but the guard was supposed to be here. But now we got a special family hero."

Through the window Tony saw a nervous Bernie in the idling Packard. Tony glanced around in panic, taking his eyes off the unbound guard too long. "Okay, one last chance," he shouted at the walls. "There's an escape hatch here somewhere."

In an instant the guard made a move for Tony's gun. "Damn fool," Dominic cried out, leveling the shotgun at the pouncing guard. One shot blew the guard off his feet. A muffled scream squeezed through Wilma's gag, as sirens outside wailed louder.

A pool of blood spread on the floor from under the guard's body. Dominic turned the guard over with his foot. Shotgun pellets had made hamburger of his back. Tony held the Colt to Wilma's head and forced her face against the window for the cops to see. Safe to one side lurked the bank manager in a big Buick. Bernie raced the Packard forward away from the trap for about twenty yards until a shot rang out from an upstairs window. Bernie slumped and the Packard careened out of control into a light pole.

Then behind Tony a shot exploded. Dominic crumpled to the floor, still clutching the anemic cash haul from the tills. The rifle barrel quickly withdrew from the balustrade opening like a cobra recoiling as Tony let off two shots. "You, you up there. Hero. Get on that phone you've got. Call the headquarters cops. Tell them to relay a message to the dicks in the squad cars out front. Send the bank manager to open the door or I close the books on your accountant. Then I'm coming after you."

Tony heard a key in the lock and he watched with blank eyes, as the large front door swung outward. Side-walking Wilma along so he could keep an eye on the assassin in the balcony, he inched forward to the opening. Outside he blinked in the pale March sunlight. No, it was the pressure. It couldn't be Eddie, standing there safe in the dis-

tance right beside the bank manager. Dominic got it right.

"Throw down the keys to the manager's car," Tony commanded in a sandpaper rasp. "Don't follow me--"

The barricade of squad cars suddenly looked like Army artillery. Tony's gun hand shook--a distraction taking a second too long. Wilma twisted and snapped her knee into his groin. His vice-like grip fell away from her neck. With catlike instinct, she spun away, her eyes averted as dozen guns flashed, sending lead into the reeling Tony Caldera, who dropped to the dusty pavement like a gold brick.

THE END

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