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THE OLD MAN AND THE GUN

Forrest Tucker had a long career robbing banks, and he wasn't willing to retire.

By David Grann January 19, 2003



Illustration by Floc'h

Just before Forrest Tucker turned seventy-nine, he went to work for the last time. Although he was still a striking-looking man, with intense blue eyes and swept-back white hair, he had a growing list of ailments, including high blood pressure and burning ulcers. He had already had a quadruple bypass, and his wife encouraged him to settle into their home in Pompano Beach, Florida, a peach-colored house on the edge of a golf course which they'd purchased for their retirement. There was a place nearby where they could eat prime rib and dance on Saturday nights with other seniors for \$15.50 a person, and even a lake where Tucker could sit by the shore and practice his saxophone.

But on this spring day in 1999, while his neighbors were on the fairway or tending to their grandchildren, he drove to the Republic Security Bank in Jupiter, about fifty miles from his home. Tucker, who took pride in his appearance, was dressed all in white: white pants with a sharp crease, a white sports shirt, white suède shoes, and a shimmering white ascot.

He paused briefly in front of the A.T.M. and pulled the ascot up around his face, bandit style. He then reached into a canvas bag, took out an old U.S. Army Colt .45, and burst into the bank. He went up to the first teller and said, "Put your money on the counter. All of it."

He flashed the gun so that everyone could see it. The teller laid several packets of fives and twenties on the counter, and Tucker inspected them for exploding dye packs. Checking his watch, he turned to the next teller and said, "Get over here. You, too."

Then he gathered up the thick packets—more than five thousand dollars—and hurried to the door. On his way out, he looked back at the two tellers. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you."

He drove to a nearby lot, where he had left a "safe" car, a red Grand Am that couldn't be traced to him. After wiping down the stolen "hot" car with a rag, he threw his belongings inside the Grand Am. They included a .357 Magnum, a sawed-off .30 carbine, two black nylon caps, a holster, a can of Mace, a pair of Smith & Wesson handcuffs, two rolls of black electrical tape, a police badge, five AAA batteries, a police scanner, a glass cutter, gloves, and a fishing cap. There was also a small bottle of medicine for his heart. No one seemed to notice him, and he went home, making what appeared to be a clean getaway.

After a brief stop to count the money, he got back in the car and headed out again. As he approached the golf course, the bills neatly stacked beside him, he noticed an unmarked car on his tail. He turned onto another street, just to make sure. There it was again. Then he spotted a police car pulling out behind him. He hit the gas as hard as he could, trying to outmaneuver them, turning left, then right, right, then left. He went past the North Pompano Baptist Church and the Kraeer Funeral Home, past a row of pink one-story houses with speedboats in the driveways, until he found himself on a dead-end street. As he spun around, he saw that a police car was barricading the road. One of the officers, Captain James Chinn, was reaching for his shotgun. There was a small gap between Chinn's car and a wooden fence, and Tucker, his body pitched forward in his seat, sped toward it. Chinn, who had spent almost two decades as a detective, later said he had never seen anything like it: the white-haired figure barreling toward him seemed to be smiling, as if he were enjoying the showdown. Then, as the

car skidded over the embankment, Tucker lost control and hit a palm tree. The air bags inflated, pinning him against the seat.

The police were stunned when they realized that the man they had apprehended was not only seventy-eight years old—he looked, according to Chinn, “as if he had just come from an Early Bird Special”—but one of the most notorious stickup men of the twentieth century. Over a career that spanned more than six decades, he had also become perhaps the greatest escape artist of his generation, a human contortionist who had broken out of nearly every prison he was confined in.

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Not long ago, I went to meet Tucker in Fort Worth, Texas, where he was being held in a prison medical center after pleading guilty to one count of robbery and receiving a thirteen-year sentence. The hospital, an old yellow brick building with a red tiled roof, was on top of a hill and set back off the main road, surrounded by armed guards and razor wire. I was handed a notice that said no “weapons,” “ammunition,” or “metal cutting tools” were allowed, and then escorted through a series of chambers—each door

sealing behind us before the next one opened—until I arrived in an empty waiting room.

Before long, a man appeared in a wheelchair pushed by a guard. He wore brown prison fatigues and a green jacket with a turned-up collar. His figure was twisted forward, as if he had tried to contort it one last time and it had frozen in place. As he rose from the wheelchair, he said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you. Forrest Tucker.”

His voice was gentle, with a soft Southern lilt. After he extended his hand, he made his way slowly over to a wooden table with the help of a walker. “I’m sorry we have to meet here,” he said, waiting for me to sit first.

Captain Chinn had told me that he had never met such a gracious criminal: “If you see him, tell him Captain Chinn says hi.” Even a juror who helped convict him once remarked, “You got to hand it to the guy—he’s got style.”

“So what do you want to know?” Tucker said. “I’ve been in prison all my life, except for the times I’ve broken out. I was born in 1920, and I was in jail by the time I was fifteen. I’m eighty-one now and I’m still in jail, but I’ve broken out eighteen times successfully and twelve times unsuccessfully. There were plenty of other times I planned to escape, but there’s no point in me telling you about them.”

As we sat in a corner by a window overlooking the prison yard, it was hard to imagine that this man’s career had featured wanted posters and midnight escapes. His fingers were knotted like bamboo, and he wore bifocals.

“What I mean by a successful escape is to elude custody,” he continued, squinting out the window. “Maybe they’d eventually get me, but I got away at least for a few minutes.”

He pointed to the places along his arm where he had been shot while trying to flee. “I still have part of a bullet in me,” he said. “They all opened up on me and hit me three times—in both shoulders with M16 rifles, and with buckshot in the legs.”

His voice sounded dry, and I offered to buy him a drink from the vending machine. He followed me and peered through the glass, without touching it. He chose a Dr Pepper. “That’s kind of like cherry soda, isn’t it?”

He seemed pleased. When I gave him the drink, he glanced at the candy bars, and I asked him if he wanted anything else. “If it’s not too much trouble,” he said, “I’d like a Mounds.”

After he finished eating, he began to tell me what he called “the true story of Forrest Tucker.” He spoke for hours, and when he grew tired he offered to continue the next morning. During our conversations, which went on for several days, we always sat in the corner by the window, and after a while he would cough slightly and I would offer to buy him a drink. Each time, he followed me to the machine, as the guard watched from a distance. It was only during the last trip to the machine, when I dropped some money, that I noticed his eyes were moving over everything—the walls, the windows, the guard, the fences, the razor wire. It occurred to me that Tucker, escape artist par excellence, had been using our meetings to case the joint.

“**T**he first time I broke out of the can I was only fifteen,” Tucker told me. “At fifteen, you’re pretty fast.”

It was the spring of 1936, and he had been incarcerated for stealing a car in Stuart, Florida, a small town along the St. Lucie River which had been devastated during the Depression. He told the police that he took it “just for a thrill,” but as he sat in jail the thrill gave way to panic, and when a jailer removed his chains he darted out. Several days later, a deputy discovered him in an orange grove, eating a piece of fruit. “That was escape No. 1,” Tucker says. “Such as it was.”

The sheriff decided to transfer him to reform school. During his brief flight, however, Tucker had slipped a half-dozen hacksaw blades through the cell window to a group of boys he had met inside. “They hadn’t broken out yet and still had the blades,” he says. That night, after sawing a bar, he slithered out, helping two other boys squeeze through the tiny opening.

Unlike the others, Tucker knew the area. As a kid, he had spent a fair amount of time by the river, and it was in the river that the police found him and another boy, about an hour later, hiding with just their noses above water. The next day, the Stuart *Daily News* detailed his exploits under the headline “TRIO ESCAPE BY SAWING BARS OF CELL LAST NIGHT . . . SUPPLIED WITH HACK-SAWS, COLD CHISELS AND FILES BY BOY.”

“That was escape No. 2,” Tucker says. “A brief one.”

Like the outlaws he read about in dime novels who were forced into banditry by some perceived injustice, Tucker says that “the legend of Forrest Tucker” began that morning when he was unfairly sent away for only a minor theft. The story, which he repeated even as a boy, eventually spread throughout the town, and over time the details became more ornate, the theft more minor. Morris Walton, who used to play with Tucker as a child, says, “My sense is he spent his life in jail for stealing a bicycle and simply trying to escape. If he became bad, it was only because the system made him that way.”

What Walton knew of Tucker's upbringing reinforced that impression. His father was a heavy-equipment operator who disappeared when Tucker was six. While his mother struggled in menial jobs in Miami, Tucker was sent to live with his grandmother, who was the tender of the bridge in Stuart. There he built canoes and sailboats out of scrap metal and wood, which he gathered along the riverbank, and taught himself to play the saxophone and the clarinet. “It wasn't like I needed a father to order me around,” he says.

But as his reputation for cleverness grew, so did his rap sheet. By his sixteenth birthday, it included charges of “breaking and entering” and “simple larceny.” After he escaped from reform school and fled to Georgia, he was sentenced to “be placed and confined at labor in the chain gang.” Like all new inmates, he was taken to the blacksmith, where a chain was riveted around both of his ankles. The steel gradually ate into the skin, a condition known as shackle poisoning.

“The guards would give you the first three days to let you get your hands broken in with calluses,” Tucker recalls. “But after that the walking boss would punish you, hit you with his cane or fist. And if you didn't work hard enough the guards would take you in the bathroom and tie your hands behind your back and put a pressure hose in your face and hold it there until you'd sputter and you couldn't breathe.”

Although Tucker was released after only six months, he was soon convicted again, for stealing another car, and sentenced to ten years. By now, “we see a man who has been thoroughly cast out by society,” Tucker's lawyer later wrote in a court motion. “Marked as a criminal at seventeen years old and constantly railroaded through judicial proceedings without the benefit of counsel, Forrest Tucker was becoming an angry

young man.” Tucker himself says, “The die was cast.” In photographs taken after he was paroled at the age of twenty-four, his hair is cut short and he has on a white T-shirt; his once slender arms are coiled with muscles. His eyes are piercing. People who knew him say that he was extraordinarily charismatic—that girls flocked around him—but they also noted a growing reservoir of anger. “I think he had this desperate need to show the world that he was *somebody*,” one of his relatives says.

At first, Tucker sought work playing the saxophone in big bands around Miami, and he seemed to have harbored ambitions of becoming another Glenn Miller. Nothing came of it, though, and, after a brief failed marriage, he put away his sax and got himself a gun.

The outlaw, in the American imagination, is a subject of romance—a “good” bad man, he is typically a master of escape, a crack shot, a ladies’ man. In 1915, when the police asked the train robber Frank Ryan why he did it, he replied, “Bad companions and dime novels. Jesse James was my favorite hero.”

When Tucker was growing up, during the Great Depression, the appeal of bank robbers, fuelled by widespread anger over defaults and foreclosures, was reaching its zenith. After the F.B.I. gunned down John Dillinger, in 1934, droves descended on the scene, mopping up his blood with their clothes. At least ten Hollywood films were devoted to Dillinger’s life; one of them exclaimed, “His Story Is Written in Bullets, Blood and Blondes!”

Because the holdup demands a public performance, it tends to draw a certain personality: bold, vainglorious, reckless. At the same time, most bank robbers know that the society that revels in their exploits will ultimately demand their elimination, by incarceration or death. “They’ll get me,” Pretty Boy Floyd once said. “Sooner or later, I’ll go down full of lead. That’s how it will end.”

Indeed, by the time Tucker set out to become an outlaw, in the late nineteen-forties, most of the legendary stickup men had already been gunned down. Still, he began to imitate their style, dressing in chalk-striped suits and two-tone shoes, and he would stand in front of a mirror, pointing a gun at his own reflection. Finally, on September 22, 1950, with a handkerchief tied over his face and a gun drawn in the style of Jesse James, he strode into a bank in Miami and made off with \$1,278. A few days later, he

went back to the same place, this time for the entire safe. He was apprehended as he was trying to crack it open with a blowtorch on the roadside.

His career seemed even more fleeting than that of most bank robbers, but in the county jail Tucker decided he was more than an ordinary stickup man. “It didn’t matter to me if they gave me five years, ten years, or life,” he says. “I was an escape artist.”

He searched the prison for what he called “the weak spot.” One day around Christmas, after weeks of looking, he began to moan in pain. The authorities rushed him to the hospital, where doctors removed his appendix. (“A small price to pay,” Tucker says.) While convalescing, still chained to his bed, he started to work on the shackles. He had taught himself how to pick a lock using almost anything—a pen, a paper clip, a piece of wire, nail clippers, a watch spring—and after a few minutes he walked out, unnoticed.

He made his way to California, where he went on a spree of robberies, hurtling over counters, pointing his gun, and declaring, “I mean business!” He wore bright checkered suits and sped away in a flamboyant getaway car with tubes along the sides. He even talked like a character in pulp fiction. “This is a stickup, girls,” he once said, according to witnesses. “I’ve got a gun. Be quiet and you won’t get hurt.”

Hoping to improve his take, Tucker began to cast about for a partner. “I didn’t want any nuts or rats,” he says, adding, “I’m from the old school.” In the end, he found an ex-con named Richard Bellew, a tall, handsome thief with a high I.Q. and wavy black hair. Like Tucker, Bellew modelled himself on the stickup men of the nineteen-thirties, and he ran with a stage dancer named Jet Blanca. But Tucker chose him for another reason: “He always let me count the dough.”

They began to hit one bank after another. After one heist, witnesses said the last thing they saw was a row of suits hanging in the back seat of the getaway car. The heists, which continued for two years, dominated the local headlines, often preëmpting coverage of the 1952 Presidential election and the McCarthy hearings. Tucker and Bellew were depicted as “armed men” who “terrorized” their “victims,” but also as “dramatically attired” “hold-up artists” who “expertly stripped” the tellers of cash, leaving behind “only an impression of competent banditry . . . and one getaway car.”

On March 20, 1953, more than two years after Tucker's escape from the hospital, F.B.I. agents surrounded him as he was retrieving loot from a safe-deposit box in San Francisco. Then they went to search the place Tucker had listed as his residence. There, in a spacious apartment in San Mateo, they found a young blond woman who said she had never heard of Forrest Tucker. She was married to a wealthy songwriter, she said, who commuted daily to the city, and they had just moved into a bigger apartment to make room for their five-month-old son. Her husband's name, she told the police, was Richard Bellew. Yet when the officers showed Shirley Bellew a photograph of the bank robber and longtime prison fugitive Forrest Tucker, she burst into tears. "I can't believe it," she said. "He was such a good man, such a good provider."

She recalled how her husband would come home every night and play with their baby, whom they had named Rick Bellew, Jr. "What's going to become of our little baby?" she asked. "What's his name going to be?"

Let me tell you about Alcatraz," Tucker said one day as he sat in the corner of the visiting room, his walker resting against his leg. He had spread a napkin out in front of him and was eating a meatball hero I'd brought him and sipping a Dr Pepper. "There were only fifteen hundred and seventy-six people who ever went there. I was No. 1047."

Alcatraz, or "the Rock," had been converted from a military prison in 1934 as a way to confine the country's most notorious criminals, including George (Machine Gun) Kelly, Robert Stroud (the Birdman of Alcatraz), and Mickey Cohen. At least half of the inmates had previously attempted to break out of other prisons. Surrounded by the freezing San Francisco Bay and its deadly currents, it was built to be escapeproof. Al Capone, who was sent there in 1934, is said to have told the warden, "It looks like Alcatraz has got me licked."

Tucker arrived on September 3, 1953. He was thirty-three. He had been sentenced to thirty years. In his prison photo, he still has on a jacket and tie; his brown hair is brushed back with a touch of oil; he is slightly unshaved but still striking. Within moments, he was stripped naked, and a medical attendant probed his ears and nose and mouth and rectum, searching for any tools or weapons. He was given a blue chambray shirt with his number stamped on it and a pair of trousers, as well as a cap, a peacoat, a bathrobe, three pairs of socks, two handkerchiefs, a pair of shoes, and a raincoat. His

cell was so narrow that he could reach out and touch both sides at the same time. “It was so cold in the cellblock you had to sleep with your coat and hat to stay warm,” Tucker says.

As he lay in bed, he says, he thought about his wife and child. He remembered the first time he met Shirley Storz, at an event for singles in Oakland. He remembered how they skied at Lake Tahoe and were married in a small ceremony in September of 1951, how she sang in a choral group, and how he'd sit and listen for hours. And he remembered his son being born. “We loved each other,” Tucker says of his wife. “I didn't know how to explain to her the truth—that this was my way of life.”

Several weeks after he arrived, a guard roused him from his cell and led him into a tiny room that had a small window. Peering through it, he saw his wife sitting on the other side. He picked up the phone. “It was hard to talk,” he recalls. “We had to look at each other through a piece of glass. She told me she had to make a life for herself. I said, ‘The best thing you can do is make a life for you and our son.’ I told her, ‘I won't bother you no matter what, no matter how much I want to. I won't ring your phone.’ ” A few months later, he received notice that their marriage had been annulled.

By now, Tucker had developed several maxims, including “The more security, the more bizarre the method of escape must be.” He began to concoct elaborate schemes with a fellow-inmate named Teddy Green, an escape artist and bank robber who had once dressed as a priest to elude the police and had broken out of the state penitentiary by shipping himself out in a box of rags.

Along with another inmate, they started smuggling tools from their prison jobs, hiding them in the laundry, and planting pieces of steel wool on other prisoners to set off the metal detectors, so that the guards assumed they were broken. They carved holes in their toilet bowls and tucked the tools inside, putting putty over them. At night, they used the tools to tunnel through the floor, planning to go out by means of the basement.

One day, according to internal prison records, a prisoner in solitary suggested that guards examine the cell toilets; soon a full-scale search was launched. A warden's report summed up the findings:

The result of the shakedown of these toilets was the blow torch as I have mentioned, a bar spreader, a pair of side cutters, a brace and some bits . . . a screwdriver and one or two pieces of wire and a piece of carborundum stone.

All three prisoners were labelled “very dangerous escape risks” and locked in the Treatment Unit, better known as “the hole.”

“I remember walking in with no clothes or shoes on,” Tucker says. “The steel floor was so cold it hurt to touch it. The only way to stay warm was to keep walking.” One night, he heard a haunting sound through the window. He couldn’t see anyone outside, but he heard voices from below. They were the guards’ children, singing carols. “It was the first children’s voices I had heard in years,” he says. “It was Christmas Eve.”

As the time passed, Tucker began to teach himself the law, and before long he was deluging the court with appeals, which he wrote in a slanting methodical print. Although a prosecutor later dismissed one of his writs as pure “fantasy,” he was granted a hearing in November of 1956. According to Tucker, as well as court records, the night before his court appearance, while being held in the county jail, he complained of pains in his kidneys and was rushed to the hospital. Guards were stationed at every door. When no one was looking, Tucker broke a pencil and stabbed his ankle. Because of the wound, the guards removed his leg irons, strapping him to the gurney with his hands cuffed. As he was being wheeled into the X-ray room, Tucker leaped up, overpowered two guards, and ran out the door. For several hours, he enjoyed the fresh air and the sight of ordinary people. He was apprehended, still in his hospital gown and handcuffs, in the middle of a cornfield.

The brief escape, for which he was tried and convicted, enhanced his reputation as an escape artist. Yet it was not for another twenty-three years, after Tucker had been released and arrested again for armed robbery, that he made his greatest escape. In the summer of 1979, while at San Quentin, a maximum-security facility that jutted out into the ocean and was known among cons as “the gladiator school,” Tucker took a job

in the prison industries and, with the help of two other inmates, John Waller and William McGirk, secretly gathered together scraps of wood and sheets of Formica, which they cut into strange shapes and hid under tarps. From the electrical shop, they spirited away two six-foot poles and several buckets. Then, in the furniture workshop, they found the final pieces: plastic dustcovers, paint, and tape, which they stored in boxes labelled “Office Supplies.”

On August 9th, after months of preparation, Tucker exchanged nods with both of his confederates in the yard, signalling that everything was ready. While Waller and McGirk stood watch outside the lumber shop, Tucker drew on his childhood experience and began to fashion the pieces into a fourteen-foot kayak. “A hammer was too loud, so I had to use only tape and bolts,” Tucker says. He had just enough paint for one side of the craft, the side that would face the guard towers, and as the others urged him to hurry he stencilled on it “Rub-a-Dub-Dub.” Waller, who called the fifty-nine-year-old Tucker “the old man,” later told a reporter from the *Los Angeles Times*, “The boat was beautiful; I wish my eyes were as blue as that boat.”

They wore sailor hats and sweatshirts that Tucker had painted bright orange, with the logo of the Marin Yacht Club, which he had seen on the boats that sailed by. When the guard wasn't looking, they hurriedly put the kayak into the water. As they set out, the winds were blowing more than twenty miles an hour, and massive swells began to swamp the kayak. “The boat didn't leak a drop,” Waller said. “We could have paddled to Australia. It was those damn waves over the side. When we finally reached the edge of the property at Q”—San Quentin—“the son of a bitch sank.”

A guard in one of the towers spotted them clinging to the upside-down craft, kicking to shore, and asked if they needed help. They said they were fine, and, as if to prove it, McGirk held up his wrist and yelled, “We just lost a couple of oars, but my Timex is still running!” The guard, unaware that three prisoners were missing, laughed and went back to his lookout.

California soon unleashed a statewide manhunt. Meanwhile, police in Texas and Oklahoma began to report a strange series of holdups. They all had the same M.O.: three or four men would stroll into a grocery store or a bank, flash a gun, demand the money, and speed away in a stolen car. Witnesses invariably noted that they were all, by the standards of the trade, old men. One even wore what appeared to be a hearing aid.

The authorities compared them to the elderly thieves in the film “Going in Style,” and dubbed them “the Over-the-Hill Gang.”

“That was when I was really a good robber,” Tucker tells me. He is careful not to admit to any particular crime (“I don’t know if they still have jurisdiction”) or implicate any of his living partners (“Some of them are still out there”), but he says that by the age of sixty he had at last mastered the art of the holdup.

One day, while we were sitting in the prison visiting room, Tucker leaned forward in his chair and began to teach me how to rob a bank. “First of all, you want a place near the highway,” he said, putting on his bifocals, his eyes blinking as if he were imagining a particular layout. “Then you need to case it—you can’t just storm in. You need to size it up, know it like your own home.”

“In the old days, the stickup men were like cowboys,” he continued. “They would just go in shooting, yelling for everyone to lie down. But to me violence is the first sign of an amateur.” The best holdup men, in his view, were like stage actors, able to hold a room by the sheer force of their personality. Some even wore makeup and practiced getting into character. “There is an art to robbing a bank if you do it right,” Tucker said. Whereas he once cultivated a flamboyant image, he later developed, he said, a subtler, more “natural” style.

“O.K., the tools,” he pressed on. Ideally, he said, you needed nail polish or superglue to cover your fingertips (“You can wear gloves, but in warmer climates they only draw attention”), a glass cutter, a holster, a canvas bag (“big enough for the dough”), and a gun (“a .38 or semi-automatic, or whatever you can get your hands on”). He said the gun was just “a prop,” but essential to any operation.

There was one other thing, he said after a pause. It was the key to the success of the Over-the-Hill Gang and what he still called “the Forrest Tucker trademark”: the hearing aid. It was actually a police scanner, he said, which he wired through his shirt; that way, he would know if any silent alarms had been triggered.

He removed a napkin from his pocket and wiped the sweat from his forehead. “Once you’ve got your cool car parked nearby, you’ve got your radio, your hands are covered with gloves or superglue, you walk in. Go right up to the manager. Say, ‘Sit down.’”

Never pull the gun—just flash it. Tell him calmly you're here to rob the bank and it better go off without a hitch. Don't run from the bank unless you're being shot at, 'cause it only shows something is going on. Just walk to the hot car, real calm, then drive to the cool car. Rev it up, and you're gone.”

After he finished, he seemed satisfied. “I've just given you a manual on how to rob a bank,” he said. He reflected on this for a moment, then added, “No one can teach you the craft. You can only learn by doing.”

A forty-year-old sergeant on the Austin police force, John Hunt, was assigned to investigate the mysterious holdups of the Over-the-Hill Gang. “They were the most professional, successful robbers that I ever encountered in all my years on the force,” Hunt, who is now retired after a thirty-year career, told me. “They had more experience in robbery than we had catching them.”

Then a chain-smoker with a drooping mustache and a slight paunch, Hunt spent long days trying to catch the gang. With the advent of high-tech security, there were fewer and fewer traditional bank robbers; most were desperate drug addicts who made off with only a few thousand dollars before they were caught. The Over-the-Hill Gang seemed to defy not just their age but their era. “They'd get up every day and be on the job,” Hunt said. “Just as a welder gets good at welding, or a writer gets good over the years by writing, these guys learned from their mistakes.”

In a one-year span, the Over-the-Hill Gang was suspected in at least sixty robberies in Oklahoma and Texas—twenty in the Dallas-Fort Worth area alone. The gang was also believed to be responsible for holdups in New Mexico, Arizona, and Louisiana. “SENIOR CITIZENS STRIKE AGAIN,” one headline blared. “MIDDLE-AGED BANDITS PUZZLE DETECTIVES,” another read.

In December of 1980, Hunt and forty other law-enforcement officers from at least three states held a conference in Dallas to figure out how to stop them. “You can't say how many lives they altered by sticking a gun in someone's face,” a former F.B.I. agent told me.

Tucker seemed unable to stop, no matter how much money he accumulated. Although there are no official estimates, Tucker—relying on an array of aliases, including Robert

Tuck MacDougall, Bob Stone, Russell Johns, Ralph Pruitt, Forrest Brown, J. C. Tucker, and Ricky Tucker—is believed over his career to have stolen millions of dollars, a fleet of sports cars, a bag of yen, and one Sambo's wooden nickel. In the spring of 1983, he embarked on his most audacious heist yet: robbing a high-security bank in Massachusetts in broad daylight by pretending that he and his men were guards making a routine pickup in an armored car. Tucker believed the plan was “a breakthrough in the art.” On March 7th, moments before the armored car was scheduled to arrive, they put on makeup and mustaches; Tucker's wig had shrunk in a recent snowstorm, and rather than postpone the operation he decided to do without it.

The teller buzzed them in. Just as they were entering the vault, according to a police report, the manager noticed that “the dark mustache on one man and the white mustache on the other man were not real.” One of the “guards” patted his gun and said, “This is a holdup.”

Tucker locked the manager and two tellers inside the vault, and escaped with more than four hundred and thirty thousand dollars. But when the police showed the tellers a series of mug shots, they identified, for the first time, the leader of the Over-the-Hill Gang as the same man who had broken out of San Quentin in a homemade kayak three years earlier.

As the F.B.I., the local police, and the county sheriffs all tried to track him down, Tucker hid in Florida, checking in daily with Teddy Green, his old Alcatraz confidant. One June morning, Tucker pulled into Green's garage and waited while his friend walked toward the car. “I was looking at him,” Tucker recalls, “thinking, My, what a sharp suit!”

A man jumped in front of Tucker's car and yelled, “F.B.I., don't move! You're under arrest.”

Agents were everywhere, coming out of cars and bushes. Tucker glowered at Green, convinced that his friend had “ratted me out.” Although Tucker insists that he never had a pistol—and none was ever found—several agents said they saw one in his hand. “He's got a gun!” one of them yelled, diving to the ground. The garage filled with the sound of gunfire. Bullets shattered the windshield and the radiator. Tucker, who had been hit in both arms and in the leg, ducked below the dashboard and pressed the

accelerator, crashing outside the garage. He opened the car door and stumbled onto the street, his hands and face covered in blood. A woman with two children was driving toward him. "As I got closer," the woman later testified, "he started to look bloodier and bloodier—it was all over him—and I thought, This poor man has been hit by a car."

She offered him a ride, and he climbed into the passenger seat. Then, in her rearview mirror, she saw someone holding a rifle, and her six-year-old son cried out, "Criminal!" When she hesitated, Tucker grabbed the wheel and snapped, "I have a gun—now drive!" Her son began to sob. After a half-mile chase, they veered down a dead-end street. At a muttered "O.K." from Tucker, the woman scrambled out of the car and dragged her children to safety. Then Tucker himself stepped from the car and passed out.

A columnist for the Miami *Herald* summed up the capture of the longtime prison fugitive and leader of the Over-the-Hill Gang this way:

There is something vaguely appealing about Tucker. . . . Old guys are not regularly associated with high crimes. . . . Tucker must also be admired, in a twisted way I admit, for pulling off an incredible escape from San Quentin prison in San Francisco. . . . Tucker might have made a fortune selling the escape yarn to Hollywood and holing up somewhere. Instead he chose to resume the line of work to which he was dedicated. . . . The aging Robin Hood took from the rich, who were probably loaded with insurance.

Tucker's story had, at last, acquired the burnish of outlaw mythology. The battered Rub-a-Dub-Dub had been donated to the Marin Yacht Club and was later placed in a prison museum, and the Children's Hospital Medical Center in Oakland requested that Tucker be allowed to serve as grand marshal for its upcoming Bathtub Regatta. Amid

the clamor, the F.B.I. showed up at a fancy retirement community in Lauderhill, Florida, where Tucker was believed to have been living. An elegant woman in her fifties answered the door. When they asked her about Forrest Tucker, she said she had never heard of the man. She was married to Bob Callahan, a successful stockbroker whom she had met shortly after her first husband died. When the agents explained that Bob Callahan was really Forrest Tucker, a man who had broken out of jail four years earlier, she looked at them in tears. "I told 'em, 'I don't believe a word you're saying,'" she recalled, nearly two decades later. "But they had him. They shot him three times."

An heiress to a modest moving-company fortune who looked, in her youth, a bit like Marilyn Monroe, she remembers meeting Tucker at the Whale and Porpoise, a private club on Oakland Park Boulevard. She had never encountered anyone so kind and gallant. "He came over and asked me to dance, and that was that," she told me.

She recalled how she went to see him in prison ("still in a daze"), not sure what to say or do. When she saw him lying there, pale and bloodied, she was overcome with love for this man who, she learned, had been in a chain gang at sixteen. As he begged her forgiveness, she told me, "All I wanted to do was hold him."

At first, awaiting trial in Miami, Tucker tried to break out of jail, removing a bar in his cell with a hacksaw and climbing onto the roof with a homemade grappling hook. But after his wife promised—to the consternation of her family and friends—to stay with him if he reformed, Tucker vowed to rehabilitate himself. "I told her that from then on I'd only look at ways to escape," he says, adding, "She is one in a million."

He returned to San Quentin, where he was nicknamed "the captain," and where, for the first time, his seemingly impervious constitution began to show its age. In 1986, he underwent a quadruple bypass. Although guards stood by the door in case he tried to escape, he now considered himself strictly a legal contortionist. Years earlier, at Alcatraz, he had written an appeal that went all the way to the Supreme Court in which he successfully argued that a judge could not, at sentencing, take into account prior convictions received when the defendant lacked counsel. ("It is time we become just a little realistic in the face of a record such as this one," Justice Harry A. Blackmun wrote in an angry dissent.) Now, with his failing health, Tucker unleashed another flurry of appeals, getting his sentence reduced by more than half. "This is to thank you," he wrote one judge. "It's the first break I ever got in my life. I won't ever need another."

He began to pour all his energy into what he saw as the culmination of his life as an outlaw: a Hollywood movie. Tucker had seen all sorts of films that echoed his life, among them “I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang,” “Escape from Alcatraz,” and “Bonnie and Clyde,” and he wanted, at last, to see his story enshrined in the American imagination. He began to put his exploits down on paper, five pages at a time. “No one could have written this inside story of the Rock and what really happened there unless they had personally lived it,” he wrote. He devoted two hundred and sixty-one pages to “Alcatraz: The True Story,” while working on a second, more ambitious account, which he titled “The Can Opener.” In it, he described himself as a throwback “to the highly intelligent, nonviolent type of criminal in the Willie Sutton mold,” and, more grandly, as a kind of heroic underdog, pitted against a vast and oppressive system. “Tucker’s obsession with freedom and escape has transformed itself into gamesmanship,” he wrote. “This is his way of keeping his sanity in a lifetime of being the hunted. Each new ‘joint’ is a game, a game to outwit the authorities.”

In 1993, he was released, at the age of seventy-three, and settled into the peach-colored house in Pompano Beach, which his wife had bought for them. He polished his manuscript and set up a music room in the den, where he gave saxophone and clarinet lessons for twenty-five dollars an hour. “We had a wonderful life,” his wife said. Tucker recalls, “We used to go out dancing. She’d dress up real pretty, and I’d show her off.” He composed music for her. “He has all these talents that had been wasted all these years,” she told me. From time to time, he played in local jazz clubs. “I got used to being free,” he says. But his manuscript failed to captivate people as he had hoped it would —“I called Clint Eastwood’s secretary, but she said, ‘Unless you have an agent, he won’t read it’ ”—and the author of “The Can Opener” increasingly seemed trapped, an ordinary old man.

Then came the day in 1999 when, at the age of seventy-eight, he painted his fingertips with nail polish, pulled his white ascot up over his face, and burst into the Republic Security Bank with his gun. “He didn’t do it for the money,” his wife said. “We had a new car, nice home paid for, beautiful clothes. He had everything.”

“I think he wanted to become a legend, like Bonnie and Clyde,” said Captain Chinn, who apprehended him after what was believed to be his fourth recent robbery in the Florida area. A court psychologist who examined Tucker noted, “I have seen many

individuals who are self-aggrandizing, and that would like to make their mark in history . . . but none, I must admit, that I heard that would want to, other than in the movies, go out in a blaze in a bank robbery. It is beyond the realm of psychological prediction.”

After Tucker's arrest, the police put him in semi-isolation, fearing that even at seventy-eight he might somehow elude them. Despite his lawyer's pleas that his client could die under such conditions, he was denied bail. “Ordinarily, I would not consider a 78-year-old man a flight risk or a danger to the community,” the magistrate said, “but Mr. Tucker has proved himself to be remarkably agile.” On October 20, 2000, just before his case was scheduled to go to trial, and with his wife looking on, Tucker pleaded guilty. He was sentenced to thirteen years.

One day, I found a report that the Department of Corrections had compiled, detailing Tucker's life. After pages listing his dramatic holdups and daredevil escapes, it concluded with a different kind of summary:

The defendant does not know the whereabouts of [his] daughter. He stated he did not have an active part in this child's upbringing. . . . The defendant has no knowledge of his son's whereabouts. The defendant did not partake in the rearing of this child.

“I thought he died in an automobile accident,” his son, Rick Bellew, told me over the phone after I tracked him down in Nevada, where he was living and working as a printer. “That's what my mom told me to protect me.” He didn't know the truth, he said, until he was in his early twenties, when Tucker was about to be paroled. “My mom was afraid he'd come up to me on the street and freak me out.”

He said that after his father was taken away the authorities confiscated all their furniture and possessions, which had been paid for with stolen cash. They had to move in with his grandparents, while his mother worked in a factory to support them. “He left us with nothing,” he said. “He turned our world inside out.”

After Bellew read about Tucker's last arrest, he wrote him a letter for the first time. "I needed to know why he did it," he said. "Why he sacrificed everything."

Although Tucker could never give him a satisfactory answer, they struck up a correspondence, and in one of his letters Tucker told him something he had never expected: Bellew had an older half sister named Gaile Tucker, a nurse who lived in Florida. "I called her up and said, 'Are you sitting down?' I said, 'This is your long-lost brother.' She said, 'Oh, my God.'" Later, the two met, studying each other's features for similarities, trying to piece together a portrait of a man they barely knew.

"I don't have any ill feelings," his daughter told me. "I just don't have any feelings."

At one point, Bellew read me part of a letter that Tucker had recently sent him: "I'm sorry things turned out the way they did. . . . I never got to take you fishing, or to baseball games or to see you grow up. . . . I don't ask you to forgive me as there is too much lost but just so you know I wish you the best. Always. Your dad, Forrest."

Bellew said he didn't know if he would continue the correspondence, not because of what Tucker had done to him but because of what he had done to his mother. "He blew my mother's world apart," Bellew told me. "She never remarried. There was a song she used to sing to me called 'Me and My Shadow,' all about being alone and blue. And when she had cancer, and wasn't going to live much longer, I broke down and she sang that song, and I realized how bittersweet it was. It was her life."

When I visited Tucker's third wife this spring in Pompano Beach, she seemed to be still trying to cope. A small, delicate woman, now in her seventies, she had had several operations and lived alone in their house. "With Forrest gone, there's no one to fix things up," she said. She paused, scanning the den where he used to keep his musical instruments. "The silence is unbearable." She showed me a picture of the two of them, taken shortly after they met. They are standing side by side, their arms touching. He has on a red shirt and tie, and his wavy hair is neatly combed to one side. "God, he used to be so handsome," she said. "When I met him, he was a doll."

She turned the picture of him over several times in her hand. "I waited all those years," she said as she walked me outside, wiping her eyes. "I thought we had the rest of our lives together. What am I supposed to do now?"

One of the last times I met Tucker in prison, he looked alarmingly frail. His facial muscles seemed slack, and his hands trembled. Since his incarceration, he had had several strokes, and a cardiologist concluded that blood clots were gradually cutting off oxygen to his brain. His daughter told me bluntly, “He’ll die in prison.”

“Everyone says I’m smart,” Tucker said to me. “But I’m not smart in the ways of life or I wouldn’t have done the things I did.” After a brief flurry of attention following his arrest, he had been all but forgotten. “When I die, no one will remember me,” he said. His voice was almost a whisper. “I wish I had a real profession, something like the music business. I regret not being able to work steady and support my family. I have other regrets, too, but that’s as much as one man can stand. Late at night, you lie in your bunk in prison and you think about what you lost, what you were, what you could’ve been, and you regret.”

He said that his wife was thinking of selling their house and moving into a community where she could see more people. Although he and his wife still spoke regularly, Tucker said, she was too frail to visit.

“What hurts most . . . is that I know how much I disappointed my wife,” he went on. “That hurts more than anything.”

As he rose to go, he took a piece of paper from his back pocket. “I made this up for you last night,” he said.

On it was a list of all his escapes, neatly printed. At the bottom, there was a No. 19—one more than he had actually made—left blank. As the guard fetched his wheelchair, he waved him away. “I don’t need my chariot,” he said. Then slowly, with his back hunched, he steadied himself against the wall and, with the guard standing behind him, inched down the corridor. ♦

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