

BEGGAR-MAN or THIEF?

Prologue

[1983]

The tingle in my right little toe is growing more annoying by the minute, so I pull over quickly. When I kick off my black leather Florsheim, reach down and pull off my black silk sock, I think [*Holy shit*] because my little toe ain't tan anymore, its fucking blue!

Now I know shit like this happens when something substantial drops on your foot unexpected but I didn't do any heavy lifting today. As a point of fact, the stuff I got in my trunk is light, because it's made of paper.

I raise my foot up to rub my toe and something in the rear view mirror attracts my attention. It's the car that's pulled over behind me ---- a Buick LeSabre, 1970/1971, I'm thinking. One thing I know is cars.

The Buick is a ways back, granted ---- but it's not next to anything important. My pull over was unplanned and random. My brain is telling me the Buick's wasn't.

Fuck the shoe and the sock, I tell myself as I put my foot back on the gas and pull away. Son of a bitch if the Buick doesn't start to follow again.

There's no doubt I got a tail, no doubt at all.

I pass by the guy I'm supposed to be meeting and the fool has to see me, [*Son of a bitch!*]

I try to give him the high sign, fist folded, thumb back so he can spot the tail.

The idiot waves at me.

When I don't stop as planned, the silly bastard starts up his car and follows along. Now he's behind the Buick, and he's fucking clueless.

[*You got ta' be kidding me,*] I'm thinking. [*Where'd this goumba learn his lessons?*] It certainly wasn't the same school as me.

The I95 entrance ramp is up ahead, so I take it in toe. I need ta get away from the Buick and the screw-up.

I don't know where I'm heading but normally, when I'm this far off my game, I head south. Nothing different today, seeing as the south ramp is the one that comes up first to my right.

I decide, then and there, not to let fear rule the day. I put my foot on the gas pedal and do just light of ten-over-limit.

When I cross over the state line from Connecticut to New York, I realize I've been spanked hard.

Lights are flashing. Cops and feds are dashing.

[*Fuck me,*] I think as I realize. [*Now I got interstate trafficking on me.*]

[*Son of a bitch,*] I say to myself.

Sometimes you can yell at yourself and it helps. This time when I yell at myself it doesn't.

I have to stop. The roadblock is designed for that purpose.

"Get out of the car," a cop-sucker yells.

When I decide to put my sock and shoe back on, the process almost earns me a bullet.

I jump out fast as I can at the sound of the clicks.

I'm quickly handcuffed and manacled.

"Frances, me boy, where's the list?" A big burly red headed Irish cop with a badge that reads O'Carroll, asks.

"List," I repeat, wonderin' whether my six foot long carpenter's folding rule might be able to measure the length of his ear hairs accurately.

"Frances, with nary an acceptable answer we're bound to pull your car apart."

"And if I give you one, you're not?"

O'Carroll grins. We both know he's pulling it apart no matter what.

Two guys start in the front. Two guys start in the back. In the process of ripping up stuff, one of the younger gazones says, "I found a list!"

"Read it to me loudly," O'Carroll bellows.

I am in a really bad spot in my life right now. The economy is in a slump and construction is down. I need the money from this run to support my wife and five kids. I won't be getting the money now, though. Instead, I'll be getting something more like prison time.

Even in my bummed out mood, I can't help but laugh when the stupid young prick reads from my wife's grocery list: "two loaves of Italian bread; three cloves of garlic; five ripe tomatoes."

The situation is insane and I must be getting there too, because now I'm in hysterics.

That's when I feel someone kicking me hard in the foot and the pain is shooting directly into my bad toe.

"What the fuck?" I say whipping my eyes open.

"Frankie, you are having those nightmares again. I cannot *stand* when you have them. Like I've told you, I need complete silence to get any rest."

"Bernie?"

"You got another name for the poor sucker stuck in this dungeon with you?"

I look across at his cot and damn if Bernie's not foaming at the mouth again. I wonder why all the background noise ain't bothering him but I'd just be wasting my breath if I brought that up. Bernie's a seriously spoiled guy and he can't get over it.

"I apologize, pro-fus-es-ly," I say. "But I just gotta ask again, how *poor* of a sucker are you?"

Bernie rolls his eyes at me.

Maybe he thinks I'm a cop.

[*Yeah right*].

Maybe he thinks I'm a planted informant, of which that possibility would also be never.

Anyways, Bernie always straddles the question.

Could be because he's a pretty famous guy for the times ---
- what the papers call a "white collar" criminal.

I don't know much about that first hand, because my color of choice is black, but from what the articles say, Bernie is a big time penny stock manipulator. They say he's scammed millions from the rich and the poor.

Now I'm lying in the bunk trying to be quiet but I can't sleep. I got ta' wonder for the um-teenth time, how I got here.

When I can't sleep, that's what I do. I think about my life and I always swear it all started that summer when I just turned ten.

Bernie, the penny stock thief in the bunk below me, who just kicked me awake till my toe turned blue ---- someday I might want to understand his scam.

For now, though, while I'm still figuring my own self out, *he's* got ta' be another story.