

Get Out of Jail Free

SUMMER 1975

The desert heat was scorching. We were working sixty to ninety hours a week in our yet-to-open store. The days were long and the nights short.

After working until ten o'clock one evening five of us managers decided to relax and have a beer at a local bar. Gary wisely opted out. It was only the second time I had gone to a bar since turning twenty-one, a year earlier.

My first time was the afternoon I graduated from Grossmont College. Mike drove me home and suggested we stop at the Navajo Inn for a beer. Unbeknownst to me, Mike prolonged taking me home so my parents and friends could get to my duplex before we arrived for my surprise party. My parents presented me with a twelve-gauge Winchester shotgun for my graduation gift.

At the El Centro bar, I quickly downed two beers. I turned to Mark, "Let's go I'm exhausted." I was driving and Mark didn't have a choice. We got into my car and hit the divided highway north to Brawley. Four miles up the road, I was lighting my pipe and swerved slightly. We were a mile out of the small town of Imperial.

I hadn't seen the highway patrol car until he turned on his flashing red lights and pulled me over. The patrol officer and his partner, the first female highway patrol officer in California, instructed me to exit my vehicle and proceed to the shoulder of the road. It was a soft sand shoulder similar to all desert road shoulders.

The lead officer asked me what I had been drinking. I answered, "I've had a couple of beers." Police agencies teach their personal that all criminals lie and whatever they're told to multiply by four. I learned this from the patrolman years later after we became good friends and socialize together frequently.

They conducted a field sobriety test. I thought I had passed. So did my future friend. The women thought otherwise and insisted on taking me to jail. She had something to prove.

The officers asked Mark what he wanted to do. They offered to call him a cab or drop him off at the bus depot. Mark opted for the bus.

Mark was an obnoxious, sarcastic individual. We got along fabulously.

He relayed his story to me the next afternoon. Mark knew he had twenty dollars. But at the bus station, he checked his wallet and pants pockets and couldn't find the bill. He went to the counter and asked if he could take the bus to Brawley and pay when he got there. Of course, they refused him.

Not knowing what to do, he decided to look for a taxi outside. As Mark was walking across the empty depot, he arbitrarily stuck his hand in his coat pocket. Sure enough, he found the missing twenty-dollar bill.

He marched back to the counter and slammed down the bill, "Give me two of those God Damn tickets!" They obliged, took his money, and printed out two tickets. He immediately asked where to board the bus. They explained only two buses a day go Brawley and the next one left at seven-thirty in the morning.

Mark repeated the slam down with the tickets, "Give me my damn money back! I have to back in El Centro by seven." He found a cab and went home.

In the meantime, after a breathalyzer test, I was booked into the county jail. I passed on my one allotted phone call. I had no one to call. My wife was staying with her parents in El Cajon. She spent most of our first three desert-living months there.

They escorted me to a cell. I was alone and beyond tired. I instantly fell asleep and slept soundly through the night.

A guard aroused me at six o'clock the following morning. I went to the mess hall and ate breakfast with the rest of the criminals.

After my meal, they took me to a small office manned by another officer. A man walked down the hall past the open door. The officer asked me, "Have you talked to him yet?"

I replied, "No. Who is he?"

He told me he was the bail bondsman. "If you haven't talked to him how do you plan on getting out of here?"

Gleefully I answered, "I staying!" Mark was a good mentor.

At that moment, a commander entered the office. He picked up my file and looked it over, "Get him out of here!"

I signed the appropriate forms and released. Before I left I demanded, "Who's giving me a ride to my car?"

"Nobody. Now get out of here!"

"Protect and Serve? Where's my service?"

The officer stood in an intimidating stance and repeated, "GET OUT OF HERE!"

It was after eight and already hot. I walked miles to my car and drove home. After a shower and clean clothes, I went to work.

Later that morning I called my new friend, Mayor Alex. "Good morning Alex."

"Good morning. What can I do for you?"

That was the right question, "I have a problem..."

The mayor cut me off, "Was it a city cop or a highway patrol?"

How did he know what I wanted? I guess he has many friends. I told him, "It was the highway patrol."

He went on to say, "That's too bad. If it had of been a city officer it wouldn't have been a problem."

After a few of seconds of silence, "Let me know what day you're scheduled for court and I'll talk with the judge and see what I can do."

I gave him the information and thanked him.

Court day arrived. First called were all the drunks. We formed a line across the courtroom in front of the bench. I was shocked there must have been twelve or more. I was last in line at the far left end.

This court proceeding was a preliminary hearing and no lawyers were present. The judge started at the right end, "How do you plead?"

"Not guilty."

He proceeded down the line with the same question. Everyone pleaded the same. They needed to retain attorneys for their trials. It seems I was the only first-timer.

Finally, the judge arrived at me. The fix was in. "How do you plead?"

I was the only defendant wearing a coat and tie and I confidently stated, "Guilty!"

The shocked judge looked up from his papers, "What did you say?"

I had not been coached on what to say. Maybe I had blown it. I mumbled softly, "Guilty...I think."

The judge retorted, "Do you mean you want a trial right now?"

This was getting confusing. Where is good buddy Alex? I responded, "Yes?"

"OK." The judge started reading my file.

He finally looked up, “Why did they give you the breathalyzer test three times?”

“Because I wasn’t drunk?” I eked out.

He excused himself from the bench, “I’m going to call the jail. I’ll be right back.”

Later I found out his dilemma; it is illegal to give any suspect the test more than twice.

The judge came back and fined me \$195.00. He told me to go to the clerk’s window in the hall and make arrangements; I could pay in full or make payments for up to three months.

“Wait a minute! If they illegally arrested me and performed illegal tests, why am I getting fined and not just found innocent?” I thought but refrained from voicing. Quickly I decided not to press my case. It was the right decision.

I paid my fine at the window. My case closed and I left. My insurance company never notified.

Without delay, I called Alex to thank him. He didn’t have time to ask me what had happened but starting right in apologizing to me.

Apparently, the judge he talked with was called out of town on a special case and Alex forgot to notify me. He probably never talked to any judge.

I had been standing “balls out” in front of a stranger.