

DAN LAVIGNE

Perch, 2016
Oil on Canvas, 16 x 20 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

RANDY FOWLER

The Homecoming

I'm thirty minutes from Louisville when La Grange comes into view, and the tension builds in my shoulders. I don't know why I volunteered to pick him up, but I'm already sorry.

As I pull into the parking lot of the Kentucky State Reformatory, the empty feeling returns. It's different this time; maybe I'm getting ulcers. I back into a slot for compacts. I get out and lean against the front fender as though I don't have a worry in the world, but when the nervousness peaks, I begin to pace. A half hour passes before I decide there is no way I'm ever going to be comfortable, so I get back in the car and turn on the radio. A moment later, I turn it off; I hate country music.

The silence is worse. I wonder if it's as quiet behind the walls as in the parking lot. The brochure that came with the letter announcing Jimmy's release said thousands of inmates are housed around numerous facilities in La Grange, and several times that number get processed through their doors every year; nearly half return within three years. I doubt it's as peaceful inside.

An hour later, I see him. I jump from the car and start to walk in his direction. Standing and waiting for his slow swagger to cover the last fifty feet, I barely recognize my own brother. The hardness I've seen before has crystallized into a hatred that scares me. I don't see my brother when I look into his eyes, only a cold, vacant stare.

He doesn't even look at my fist-bump gesture, sidestepping me instead and walking straight to the car, passing with only a glance.

He hits the front fender with the side of his fist. "What the fuck, J2? You drivin' my damn car?"

"Don't call me that," I plead.

"You been drivin' my damn car the whole two years, four months, and six days I been in this hellhole? You takin' advantage of my perdiciment?"

I don't answer. I've learned to wait and listen—and hope for the best.

"You even got a damn license? Gimme the keys. I drive my own damn car," Jimmy says.

"It's Mama's car," I say, which is true. He just took it when she died, without saying anything to anybody. I don't remind him I was too young to drive then, and the farthest our father ever goes is within walking distance, and that's only to the neighborhood bar and his sister's house. I leave

the details hanging like a pair of dirty underwear on the front porch.

“Somebody had to assume responsibility for the family.” He’s six years older than me and never lets me forget it for a second.

I want to ask why he doesn’t act like it, but again I don’t say anything. Timing is important.

“Did Papa see the letter?” he asks.

I shrug. “I don’t know. I don’t think so. I put it on the table, and it was there for a few days, but I don’t think so.”

“Gimme the keys, J2. I mean it.”

“I asked you to not call me that. And you don’t have *any kind* of driver’s license anymore. At least I’ve got a permit.”

“Say what?” His look is one of astonishment. Slowly, he gets in on the passenger’s side, staring a hole through me. I don’t stare back. I don’t want to jeopardize my rare victory.

“Anyway, I need to get to Jeffersonville,” he says.

“Jeffersonville? In Indiana?” I ask.

“Unless they moved it, J2.”

I think of correcting him once more, but I don’t.

“Take me through town first. Been here over two years and never got to see the damn thing.”

I follow the signs and my instincts, first to a highway that turns into Jefferson Street, then after a couple of turns we wind up on Main. I slow up as we pass the La Grange Police Department. A railroad track, running down Main, almost in the middle of the street, forces cars to parallel park on the right, with diagonal parking on the left. I continue slowly, through town—I don’t know what to expect—but not so slowly as to draw attention.

“Slow down. Damn it, I said, slow down. Stop here,” Jimmy says, opening the door and hitting the ground before I can come to a complete stop. He comes around to the driver’s side and gestures for me to lower the window. “I need some cash,” he says.

I want to ask if there isn’t a polite way to ask for it. Instead, I reach into my pocket and hand over a ten. Again he waits, holding out his hand. I give him another one. He leaves, and I pull into a parking space and wait. The wind picks up and blows leaves onto the windshield. Ten minutes later he returns with a sack held close to his chest.

I don’t dare ask what’s in it. I quickly pull into the street, feeling anxious when a police car passes just as Jimmy takes a gulp from the neck of the sack. Thank God

it’s only whiskey. Still risky for someone on parole, but at least it’s not a bag of money like last time. For all the hula-laloo about seeing the town, there is no indication he is looking anywhere except at the bag in his hand.

“How come you got out early?” I ask with as much indifference as I can muster.

“Cause I’m so damn good-lookin’, that’s how come.”

Off in the distance, some kind of storm has turned the sky a dark purple. Maybe a windstorm is blowing red clay and God knows what else. To the west, it looks like rain. The silence is broken only by Jimmy’s *glug, glug, glugging*, and then his lips smacking, which is really annoying. We finally reach I-71, and I take the south on-ramp.

“Was it tough in there? Did they give you a hard time?”

“Piece of cake. I can stand on my head for two years, nothing to it.”

I don’t ask why a person would brag about such a thing. “But I reckon you’re glad to be out,” I say, making it sound like a question that doesn’t need an answer.

“Need to go back—sometime in the next two years.”

“Why?”

“Asshole in there from Harlan County—I owe him.”

“Why would you *want* to go back?”

“Gonna slit his fuckin’ throat. He ain’t going nowhere for two years, and I owe him.”

I swallow hard. “Why don’t you just forget it?”

“Gave him my word I was gonna get him. Lots of guys in there from Harlan County, double-dealing sons a bitches. I owe him. Your word is your bond.”

I decide to drop it. The silence rises to an unbearable level and I can’t stand it. “Why do you want to go to Jeffersonville?” I ask.

“Cause that’s where Elliot is,” Jimmy says.

“Who’s Elliot?”

“My friend.”

I remove my left hand from the wheel to rub the back of my neck, as though something bit me there. I brush the imaginary pest aside instead of addressing the imaginary elephant in the car with us.

“Were . . . were you in there together?” I catch myself massaging the gearshift lever and try to remember how long I’ve been doing it. Embarrassed, I return my hand to the steering wheel and glance out the window.

“We were cellmates for almost the whole time, if you

must know. He got out before me. Three weeks before. We got history. You don’t know about these things. Jesus H., you’re nosy,” he says, sounding defiant, daring the next question.

Thank God I don’t; my throat goes dry thinking about how much I don’t know, where I would be if I knew what he knows. “Where does he live? I mean, where’d he come from?”

“He lives where he is. Never says he wants to be anyplace ‘cept where he is. His folks in Oklahoma don’t want him around. They run him off,” Jimmy says with a little too much sarcasm. “I invited him to stay with me for a while.”

“Is he going to hang around long, in the house I mean?” I try to imagine what having the two of them around is going to be like.

“How much time does Papa spend there?”

“He hasn’t been there much since the heart attack. Why does he have to stay with us? Can’t he stay somewhere else?”

“You can leave if you don’t like it. He’s my guest.”

I just sit there feeling stupid. After a long pause, I feel like crying. “I don’t have anyplace else to go. I’ve been there mostly by myself since you got locked up. I was hoping it’d be just us. Doesn’t seem fair.”

“Fair? Shit. Fair! Fuck you, J2.”

The transition from I-71 to I-65 and over the JFK Memorial Bridge is scary. It’s the first time I’ve driven to the other side of the Ohio and I’m certain I’ll make a mistake and hit I-64 instead. I prepare myself for the smirk I know is coming if I screw up. But I make it and Jimmy doesn’t even notice, too busy reading a little piece of paper he’s taken from his pocket.

“Okay. Take the next exit,” he says.

The motel we park in front of hasn’t been painted in half a century.

“Okay. You wait here.”

What choice is there? For a split second I consider driving off, but I can’t for the life of me bring myself to save myself.

I see Jimmy knock—then he knocks again. No one comes to the door. There is a God.

Jimmy waits a minute, then comes down the metal and concrete stairs three at a time and enters the motel office. He comes out, flies up two steps at a time, and tapes a piece of paper on the door of the room. He starts

back down the stairs and turns back sharply when the door opens. The greeting I witness could be greatly simplified with a standard handshake, but I suppose that wouldn’t demonstrate their “history.” I think they’re going to fall as they descend the steps, talking and sidestepping like two horses in a parade, but I have to admit they have incredible balance, arriving at the bottom by jumping the last three steps.

Elliot is wearing shorts and a sleeveless T-shirt; a pair of sunglasses hides his eyes. He is noticeably bigger than Jimmy and sports a number of tattoos. As he gets into the car, I notice his left arm is practically covered with obscure images; a cobra is the only one I can see clearly. There are no words I can make out; his fingernails are long and covered with a clear polish that sparkles and glistens in the sun. I turn to face the front because I don’t want to be seen staring.

They both get in the back seat and start taking turns with the bottle in the sack that must by now be almost empty. In the absence of any introduction, I say the most innocuous thing I can think of. “Well, where do you want me to take you guys?” With both of them still in the back seat, I feel like they now expect me to be their chauffeur.

“I need to go to the other side of Shively,” Jimmy says.

“That’s clear out on Dixie Highway. It’ll take a half hour or more in this traffic,” I say. “Besides, it’s starting to rain.” The “other side” of Shively could mean halfway to Fort Knox.

“Damn, J2, you’d make a hell of a detective.”

Jimmy sounds impressed by his own affirmation.

“Oooh,” Elliot butts in. “This must be your brother, Jimmy. Why didn’t you tell me how cute he is? You been holding out on me, bro.”

“I have to get to work.” I say that although I’m not really scheduled to work today, but I know they can always use me at the store. Besides, it seems a safe place to be, all things considered, and I really don’t want to drive to Shively. God only knows where else we’d wind up if I agreed to the first leg.

“Work, are you kidding?” Jimmy says. “Where you working anyway?”

“A supermarket,” I say.

“Tell you what we’ll do then, J2,” Jimmy offers. “We’ll drop you at your store, and we’ll take the car.”

“Jimmy, you don’t have a license.”

“You the fuckin’ police? Just go to your goddamned job, and don’t give me no lip, J2.”

I can’t think of anything to say, I focus on the sounds of heavy rainfall and try to ignore the two of them as they finish off the sack. A red light lasts forever and the slick streets slow me up a bit, but no one says anything. Finally, the grocery store is in sight. I stop in the back so no one sees us. I’ve worked there for the last three years. That was before Jimmy went to prison. He forged a birth certificate for me to get the job, but he doesn’t remember that either.

I watch Jimmy drive away. Maybe they’ll get stopped, get arrested; then I won’t have to deal with the abuse. You’d think after not seeing your own brother for two years you’d want to spend some time with him, but the brother I loved more than anything in the world when we were young doesn’t exist anymore. Just looking at him, he looks normal; but something’s not right. Two years in prison made it all worse, if that’s possible, and all because of some stupid robbery of a liquor store in New Albany.

It takes a while to find Mr. Burrows, the store manager. He’s been in his office overlooking the store like some Latin American dictator. The top half of his office is glass and he can’t see out when he sits at his desk, so he spends a lot of time standing and looking out at the customers and employees. I see him shut the door and come down the short flight of stairs looking like he’s now ready to rule over his realm. I head him off, and he looks at me like he’s never seen me before.

“Where have you been?” he asks.

“I wasn’t scheduled to work today. I just came by to see if you needed me.”

“Hell yes, I need you,” he says. “George called in sick this morning, and I’ve been trying to take care of the produce department all by myself.”

“I wasn’t scheduled to work today,” I repeat. From his face, I can’t tell if he heard me the first time.

“Yes. Well, it doesn’t matter,” Mr. Burrows says as he turns to leave. Turning back, he continues. “Trim the produce first—then restock the bread. We just got a fresh batch from the bakery.”

I take a deep breath and watch him walk away looking like he’s happy to have finally restored order to his universe. My head spins at the thought of there being

nothing beyond the store and a never-ending series of indignities. There has to be something more; I focus on small achievements and little pleasures while I wait for it to show itself.

Trimming the produce relaxes my mind. It’s quiet in the back of the store, back by the loading dock, behind the swinging doors with the sign that reads Employees Only. There are several sharp knives, each in their own slot in the rack on the wall, some with blades up to fourteen inches. I place the freshly trimmed vegetables in carts and roll them to the display area.

With the mirrored wet bar restocked, I take my bow tie from my pocket, put it on, and sneak a glimpse of it in the mirror. Situated strategically along the rows of vegetables are small black hoses with levered thumb valves, which I use to spray fresh mists of water on the vegetables with a flourish that makes a couple of customers smile.

That done, I place a watermelon from the display close by, and grabbing the big knife I keep stored under the bar, I whack it down the middle. I then place half of it in the space next to the celery, calling attention to its bright-red ripeness.

Suddenly, the air grows icy. In the mirror, over my shoulder, I see Elliot smirking in a menacing way as he takes a bite of the peach that he just picked up from the display table.

“Wow, you cut that watermelon like you hated it,” he says, flashing a robust smile that shows near-perfect white teeth. “My goodness—yes, yes, yes. I could stand here all day watching you cut those motherfuckers.” He speaks too loudly and stares for what seems like forever.

He moves in my direction and stands a little too close.

“I thought you guys were going someplace out on Dixie,” I mumble, backing away. I try to act interested, but I know my face reflects the truth.

“Jimmy decided he could handle it and I should come here.”

“How can I help you?” I ask. I have no desire to help him, and I’m glad to be still holding the knife. I stand without moving for a long moment, then turn slowly to put the other watermelon half on the counter. I take my time as I cover it with plastic wrap, hoping he walks away in the interim.

“I liked the way you looked at me this afternoon,”

Elliot says, taking another bite of the peach, winking at the same time.

“What can I do for you?” I ask again because I can’t think of what else to do.

“I liked how you smiled at me.”

“I was just being friendly is all,” I say.

“Friendly. I like friendly,” Elliot says.

I want to walk away, but fear of an overriding hint of destructiveness keeps me standing there.

“Come on, don’t be bashful.”

He continues eating the peach until it is gone and then throws the pit into the middle of the neatly stacked lettuce.

“I have to get back to work,” I say. My brain searches for a way to break free, but I still can’t think of any way that wouldn’t enflame the situation.

Elliot’s eyebrows go up. His grin, a smirk really, makes me want to kick him in the teeth.

“Jimmy wants me to ask, that manager over there in his little office, does he take the money to the bank, or does a truck pick it up?”

I should have seen it coming. “I don’t know. I generally work in the back, in produce.” I don’t say I’ve seen the armored truck arrive dozens of times around ten in the morning.

“Come on, now. Does he take the money someplace or not?”

“I already told you, I don’t know.”

“Jimmy’s gonna want to know. Find out for him. And do it today. We’re going to need the information soon.” He winks again.

God, how I hate that wink, it makes me want to throw up. As he walks away, he picks up an apple and takes a bite, a very large bite, then lays it back on top of the stack where he got it.

“You can pay for that apple on your way out,” I say, surprising myself and wondering if the knife still in my hand has given me enough nerve to get myself hurt.

Elliot laughs and sashays a few feet toward the front door. He turns his head toward me and mouths the words *money—truck*.

I try to not let my hands shake as I put the knife under the counter.

Relief is immediate; calm comes more slowly. I’m happy to be free from instant danger, but it suddenly occurs

I pick up my favorite knife, the thin, eight-inch-blade one, with its nicely balanced wooden handle, the one I rarely use to trim produce at all, and balance it on my index finger. This is the one I use for target practice.

to me that I always feel threatened when Jimmy’s around. The thought pisses me off; all the more reason that the anxiety I feel around Elliot gets all wrapped up with my feelings for Jimmy.

“Johnny, I need you to trim more celery and cabbage; put it in a cart in back and leave it there for later. Then you can clock out and go home,” Mr. Burrows says as he walks by.

I go through the swinging doors again, happy to be alone. When I finish trimming, I look around to see if anyone else is in the back area with me. I pick up my favorite knife, the thin, eight-inch-blade one, with its nicely balanced wooden handle, the one I rarely use to trim produce at all, and balance it on my index finger. This is the one I use for target practice.

On the three-inch-thick wooden door leading to the back dock, I long ago scratched two almost-vertical lines approximating the width of a man, a vague shape of ample width and indeterminate height. There are no legs or head except in my imagination. Some days the shape represents

*“So . . . you were in jail together, isn’t that something to be proud of?”
I say, almost absentmindedly.*

the five-foot-ten Mr. Burrows. Some days, it is my father, sometimes it’s the six-foot-two Jimmy. Today, it is Elliot. The door has been roughened and nicked in the area where I imagine the heart to be. As my best throw, the sixth one, sinks into the target with a thud, I hear the swinging door behind me creak. In my peripheral vision I can tell its Mr. Burrows. I jump and quickly move toward the dock’s door, away from Mr. Burrows, as though I don’t hear him. At the same time, I use my body to shield the knife from his sight, the one I just threw. I remove the knife from the door and move furtively to my backpack, which I generally keep in the corner of the back room, by the cooler next to the electrical circuit box, and slip the knife into a side pocket before he sees it.

I stroll to the swinging doors and he’s there.

“Johnny, can you work tomorrow morning?”

“Can’t, Mr. Burrows, got school tomorrow.”

“I know. But I need you till ten, maybe ten-thirty; then you could go.”

“Sorry. But I have a trigonometry test first thing.”

It’s five o’clock in the afternoon by the time I get home. For the first time in years, I hope no one is there. The street has the usual midafternoon quiet about it. Through the window with no shade, I can’t see anyone inside as I approach; the other window is boarded with plywood, and it looks like the house is winking at me. Mama’s car is parked in front of the house with the passenger-side front

tire up on the curb. There is no tread; it’s almost worn through in the center, white circles of the underlying fabric clearly visible.

Through the front door, I can see Papa and Jimmy. Papa is still sleeping—or sleeping again, I can’t be sure—on the couch. Jimmy is having a beer in the kitchen, but I don’t see that Elliot guy. I’m relieved, though leery.

I head toward the kitchen to where Jimmy is sitting. As I pass Jimmy’s room I see Elliot. He’s asleep in Jimmy’s bed, quietly, on his back, covering most of the bed, with no cover, spread-eagle, and naked. I want to get past the door before he wakes, but when I turn to leave, I see a metal box lying at the foot of the bed, barely visible, almost hidden by the sheet that hangs down to the floor. It is dark green, just like the discarded ammo box I found in the trash, the one I hid in a carved-out space under the back porch, where no one would think to look. I charge into the room without thinking and pick up the box. It’s empty.

I glance up, just as Elliot opens one eye. For a spell-binding moment, I look directly at him. He spreads his legs wider and laughs as he whirls his rising erection at me. I want to jump through the boarded-up window. He opens both eyes and props himself up on his right hand. I freeze. My heart races as I throw the box into a chair and leave the room. Recovering from shock, I walk, zombielike, to the kitchen.

I place my backpack on the floor next to me and take a chair on the far side of the kitchen, away from, but facing, Jimmy. He is at the table drinking his beer. I sit silently and stare out the window.

Jimmy waves a fly away with the beer in his hand without raising his eyes from the table. “What up, J2?”

“Who does he think he is?” I ask.

“Say what?”

“Your friend, the jerk in your bedroom.”

Jimmy looks up. “Did you say something to him?”

“Doesn’t he have someplace to go? Like maybe home—oh, I forgot—he doesn’t have a home.”

“No, wiseass, he’s my guest.”

“So . . . you were in jail together, isn’t that something to be proud of?” I say, almost absentmindedly. I suddenly realize I’m rubbing the edge of the chair. Flustered, I glance out the window, staring at a sick-looking tree doing a paltry job of swaying in the warm breeze.

“Do you want to get hurt, smart-ass? Now, what the fuck were you doing in my room?”

“Where did that ammo box come from?”

“What the hell were you doing in there?”

“Where’d it come from?”

“I found it under the house.”

“You took it? How’d you know it was there, and where’s the money that was in it?”

“Took that too.”

“Jimmy, that was mine, I saved it,” I say. “I had almost eighteen hundred in it. Money I was saving for college.”

“I found it, so it’s mine.”

“Don’t you still have the money you took that sent you to jail? The newspaper said it was never recovered. Why take mine?”

“Who would try to hide money under a house anyway? My guess is that it must have been there for years, maybe a century. That would be my guess.”

Jimmy rears back, balancing his chair on two legs as he speaks, trying to look like the mogul he isn’t. I wait for the legs to slip out from under him, hoping it will knock some reality into the situation, but it doesn’t happen. “I was saving for college,” I say.

“You don’t need to go to college. It’s a waste of time anyway.”

“I promised Mama I would. You can’t just take it.” I sound ridiculous.

“I’d be happy to lie to you about it; it would be easier that way. Wouldn’t bother me, and might make you happy.” Jimmy produces his fuck-you smile, swigs the last from his bottle, and walks to the trash can under the sink, touching my shoulder as he passes.

He used to do that when we were young, touch my shoulder as he passed, to help me recover from Papa’s reprimand for some trivial incident. His squeeze told me everything would be okay. But now I know it’s not and I suddenly hate myself for being grateful for the touch. I stay seated as he leaves the kitchen, contemplating what it means. Two birds sitting on the ramshackle railing of the back stoop just outside the window nod to each other in some kind of secret agreement. They peck consensus, then fly off.

Waking my sleeping father would be a waste—worse than having no one to talk to. I can hear his rumblings, his

overhydrated organs gurgling inside his deteriorating body, playing the score for a movie I’ve seen too many times before, one with no plot, the strength of the bass section revealing how much booze he consumed the night before.

I take my trig textbook to the front porch and sit in what used to be a swing. A half hour later, Jimmy and Elliot come out, move across the porch and down the three steps in one hop. They don’t look at me but go straight to Mama’s car and drive away, laughing their asses off. When I see the front tire leave the curb as it bounces onto the street, I can’t help but think they won’t get far, but they make it to the corner and turn right. God only knows where they’re headed, or why.

I finally have some quiet time. An hour or so later, I put my writing pad inside the trig textbook and lay it aside. A walk seems better than facing a house that’s empty except for a passed-out father. I nod to the early-evening gathering of neighbors who hover in the street, as they do on most muggy nights, ready to suck the nectar from any elegance like demented hummingbirds. I move quickly through them with the I-don’t-give-a-shit saunter I have practiced for the last two years.

A block later, I see old man Wilson on his way home from work. He nods in acknowledgement of my “Good evening, Mister Wilson,” which make me feel better than I have all day. The ice cream store I’m headed for seems all the more appealing. I turn from the street to take a shortcut running diagonally across the backyard of an abandoned corner house. Overgrown trees in the middle of what must have been a courtly lawn a hundred years ago, together with the bleakness of the broken windows and lifeless silence, evoke an eerie strangeness. I imagine, as I always do, children playing in the yard long ago under the watchful eyes of loving parents looking on from the porch or an upstairs window. I blame the accident of birth for putting me in the wrong place at the wrong time. I swallow hard.

I finish my ice cream long before I reach the house. I hope no one will be up when I arrive. I see Mama’s car is there, so I pick up my book from the broken swing that won’t swing and quietly enter the house. The minute I step in I can see Papa’s gone, but Jimmy and Elliot are in the living room. I can’t escape their attention.

“Hey, J2. C’mere a minute.”

“What do you want, Jimmy?”

“We know the armored truck gets there around ten in the morning. You need to be there when we arrive.”

I take another step in the direction of my bed.

“Hey, come back here. Goddamn it, you know when it gets there. According to your coworker you know. So don’t bullshit me.”

“Then you have all you need. You don’t need me, right?” I take another step.

“You move away again, and I’ll deck you. We want you inside to run interference, point us in the right direction, if we need it.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Help us. You know the lay of the land. Do what you can.”

“I’m not scheduled to work tomorrow.”

“We want you there anyway. If you’re there, and help us out, I’ll leave your fuckin’ college money where you can find it.”

“Just tell me where it is.”

“Not until you agree to help us.”

“I can’t be involved, I work there. Everyone knows me.”

“So what. You either agree to tell us what you know about the operation, or no money. And no bullshitting me either. If you help, then I’ll tell you where your money is.”

“I can tell you what I know. That’s all I can do. And I’ll tell you at the store tomorrow so you can see what I’m talking about. Not before, and I can’t be directly involved.”

“Okay. But you let us down and there’s no telling what’s going to happen, you got it?”

I try to sleep. Nodding off a time or two, jumping once or twice, I’m not sure if I have slept or not. At some point I close my eyes and clear my mind. All I can think about is the kid down the street getting shot by some gang member three weeks ago and bleeding out. For the rest of the night, I’m thinking it’s going to be me tomorrow. I don’t get to sleep until early morning, but then sleep comes like I’m already dead.

Jimmy and Elliot are gone by the time I wake up at eight thirty. I dress and step outside, feeling bad the whole time about missing my trig test. The muggy early-morning air ambushes me; I tug at my shirt collar for relief and head for the bus I usually take to work. But today, when I round the corner, there is no bus in sight. I’m late. I run two blocks to pick up a bus going in what is the right general

direction and run the final three blocks, getting to the store at twelve to ten. I jump up on the back loading dock and slide in without anyone seeing me.

Inside, I drop my backpack in the usual place and pass through the swinging doors. I see Jimmy and Elliot and motion for them to come to where I’m now standing.

“Two armored-car guys always enter the store—the third one waits in the truck—and they go to the door of Mr. Burrows’s office. If he’s not in there, they wait at the door for him to show up. When he does, he enters the code to trigger the electrified cipher lock and he enters with them. They take a minute or two to exchange the bags of money, yesterday’s receipts for today’s cash—they put the day’s cash in the safe right away—so at the right time, you enter the code to let yourselves in. By the way, I can see the handle—”

“Of course,” Elliot says, patting the handgun in his waistband. “Don’t go nowhere without it.”

I ignore him and focus on Jimmy. “Anyway . . .”

“What’s the code?” Jimmy interrupts.

“I’ll tell you, wait a minute,” I say. “Let me finish first.”

“Anyway, you enter not long after they do. The door does not have a handle on the inside. It has a button underneath the electrified latch. Push it and the door will buzz. After you leave, use the two-by-four leaning up against the wall over there,” I say, gesturing. “Wedge it under the outside cipher lock so they can’t get out.”

“What’s the code?” Jimmy interrupts, raising his eyebrows in excitement.

“Two conditions,” I say. “Call me Johnny and tell me where you put my money.”

“For Christ’s sake,” he says. “You’re a real pain in the ass. It’s at home, in the attic, three rafters from the access hole, on the left—*Johnny*,” he says with a smirk.

“In the ammo box?”

“No. Your money is in a shoebox: the ammo box is off limits. Now what’s the combination, *Johnny*?”

I let the insult slide. It’s the best I’m going to get. “It’s the street address of the store, twelve hundred, backward. Anyway, the armored car is in front. Mr. Burrows is not there yet, but he’ll be there soon. You guys should walk slowly to his office and get ready to pounce once they enter.

“You’re not as dumb as you look, J2—excuse me, your highness—*Johnny*.”

The guards approach just as Mr. Burrows enters the code. Jimmy and Elliot time their walk perfectly. The door closes, and I can see the torsos and heads of the guards through the glass upper portion of the office. Jimmy enters the code and opens the door. The guards look startled as Jimmy and Elliot enter. I see the third guard, who has been watching through the storefront window, enter through the automatic door, talking into a handheld device of some kind. I assume he’s calling the police.

I jump through the swinging doors and grab my backpack. In the excitement I can’t find the knife I put there yesterday. Finally I find it in a different pocket. I grip the wooden handle and cut into the cable coming out of the electrical box. Halfway through there’s a terrible sound and a flash of electrical sparks, which scares the shit out of me. The lights go out and the building goes quiet.

The guard from outside, who is now inside, crouches with his gun drawn and his eyes fixed on the people who are now trapped in Mr. Burrows’s office. Jimmy is desperately trying to get the door open. Elliot shoots one shot that could have killed somebody, but fortunately doesn’t, before he realizes the glass is bulletproof and the ricochet is just as likely to kill him as anyone else. Finally, I can see that Jimmy realizes the electrical lock won’t work without electricity.

Jimmy is staring straight at me through the glass. I recognize the I’m-going-to-kill-you look as I break the glass on the fire alarm and pull the lever. Jimmy appears confused; his gaze becomes one that is almost fatal by itself.

I fetch my backpack and slowly put it over my left shoulder as I take a last look at my brother. The sounds of sirens accompany my exit through the back door. My head spins at what lies ahead.

Randy Fowler was born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky. He received his Bachelor of Science in engineering from the University of Louisville, a Master of Science from Arizona State University, and a Doctorate in engineering from Stanford University. He lives with his wife, Karen, in California. They have two grown children and four grandchildren. He has a story forthcoming in *Chicago Quarterly Review*.