

# RUN FOR IT!

By Tom Bender

## ONE

(Forest Oaks, Illinois, June 23, 1939)

“Off!”

Robert moved an arm, another arm, his legs. *I'm alive.*

“Off!”

He rolled off of Merwyn and felt soft, cool grass under his stomach. *A robbery, he thought. A Brinks job. They didn't look like Brinks guys. "I must have fainted."*

The possibility that he'd passed out was so astonishing that the idea came out aloud.

“I pulled you down, jerk!”

Hearing this, both the assertion and the tone, Robert felt a little better about himself.

*Okay, okay. I didn't faint.*

The air stank. A line of black smoke went straight up from the burning tires of the armored car.

Things were coming back: The careening armored car just missing them, knocking the mower away. The Packard at the curb. The ball of fire exploding with a *whoosh* under the armored car. The neighbor lady jumping screaming from her maroon LaSalle.

Looking now, he saw her lying on his front stoop. *Is she dead?* He knew from his father that her husband ran some labor union.

Robert saw Merwyn get up and run toward the driveway. He got himself up and followed. The man lay still, with open, unmoving eyes, the back of his head flat on the concrete, blood and streaks of gray oozing out of his nose and ears.

Robert turned away and puked. He remembered seeing the guy running with the other two, hauling the big green bag, then like he was dancing. *That was it, dancing.*

Turning again to look, Robert saw Merwyn reach down into the grass, pick up a tan leather wallet and put it in his pocket.

Robert tasted bile, spit. “What’re you doing, Merwyn?”

“Those guys tried to kill us, Bob.”

“So? Leave it.” He remembered the guy jumping out of the Packard, grabbing the bag from the guy on the driveway, pulling him up. The *plop* as his head hit the driveway.

Merwyn’s eyes said, *You are so naive*. He beckoned Robert to follow him back to the tree, felt around the chipped bark and scraped at a hole. “Feel it.”

Robert reached up and put his finger in the hole. Buried in the wood was a slick, warm substance. With his fingers he traced four more lead-filled holes.

The big memory of impending death came to Robert: the Packard backing up, the red-faced guy bringing up the tommy gun. The burst of noise. The tree had saved them.

“Why’d they shoot at *us*?” Robert said, amazed.

“We seen ‘em, that’s why.”

Robert tasted bile, spit. He felt a chill, felt the intense heat from the armored car. “Why’d you take it?” He spit.

“Now we got leverage.”

“What are you talking about?”

Merwyn sighed. “It’s like insurance, Bob. We got something they don’t know we got. We got control.”

“Control?” Robert was losing what control he had. “Who says?”

“My dad, that’s who. ‘Find the leverage.’ One of his little sayings.”

“We should give it to the cops.”

Merwyn shook his head. “Oh, no. Then *they* got the control. And we *do* get knocked off.”

“They who?”

Merwyn shrugged. He took off running, heading toward the back of Robert’s house.

Robert followed, right into the outstretched arms of his mother. She pulled him to the

back porch.

She looked to Robert as pale as a catfish belly.

“There’s a dead guy on your neighbor’s driveway,” Merwyn said to her.

“Dead? Did you say dead?” She led the boys into the living room and peeked out the window. “Oh!” She put her hand to her mouth in horror.

“Mrs. Friend’s on the porch,” Robert said.

“Dead? She’s dead too?”

Robert eased the front door open. Mrs. Friend’s head, which had been propped up by the door, slipped across the threshold.

Red lights flashed and a fire bell clanged. Stinking black smoke hazed the neighborhood. Robert saw people sneaking up on the scene like so many deer coming out of the woods. He scanned the wreck to see if he could make out what might be left of his lawn mower.

Snapping out of her trance, his mother said, “Are you hurt, Mona? I’m so sorry.”

The woman on the doorstep looked up. “You heard me banging on your door but you didn’t let me in?”

A man in a tan suit stepped up onto the stoop, looked down at Mrs. Friend and said, “Can you get up? You sure?” He gave her a hand up. He looked at Robert, his mother, Merwyn. “Detective Lieutenant Quinlan, FOPD,” he said, displaying a wallet with a badge.

He was squat and square, bald with a ring of white hair. Robert figured the bulge under his coat was a shoulder holster.

Mrs. Friend said, “My car! Where’s my car?”

Ignoring her the detective said, “Anybody see this happen?”

“We saw the whole thing,” Robert said. “We were under that tree. They--” He felt Merwyn’s eyes boring into him.

“May I sit down?” Mrs. Friend said.

“Yeah, go sit down,” the detective said. “I want to talk to you – “and you” – he pointed at Robert’s mother. “Stay here. You two come with me.”

The boys pointed at themselves. “Me?”

“Yeah, you.”

“Where are you taking them?”

The detective picked Robert’s mother’s hand off his sleeve. “Down to the squad car. Ask ‘em a few questions. Then we’ll have a few for you.”

At this point Robert got back to Mrs. Friend’s question. “They took it,” he said.

“They took it?”

He nodded.

“Come on you two,” the detective said.

As Robert and Merwyn walked with him to the squad car, men hauled a stretcher to an ambulance.

Robert’s stomach hurt. *Why’d they have to kill the guy?* He was reading Merwyn’s signals: *keep your mouth shut!*

## TWO

Looking into the police car, Robert saw a colored man in uniform. *A colored guy*, he thought.

The detective bent down and spoke to the cop. “Williams, talk to this kid,” he said. He whispered another thing, which Robert overheard anyway: “His father plays poker with the chief. So you’re on a tight leash here. Got it?” Then he led Merwyn a distance away.

The policeman unfolded himself out of the squad car. “What’s your name, young man?”

“Robert Bell.”

“So. Let me ask you a few questions, Robert. You saw this happen?”

Robert nodded. As the questions came at him, his mind was somewhere else. He was thinking about getting killed. “I didn’t see much,” he said. “It happened so fast.” In fact, the whole scene was playing in his head like a movie. This brought back the nausea.

“You okay?” the policeman asked. “Here. Sit down.” He closed his notebook and squatted down beside Robert. “Put your head between your legs. This happens, you see something like this. You’ll be okay. Just take it easy.”

As Robert sat in the grass the policeman handed him a card: *Officer Henry Williams, Forest Oaks Police Department.*

“You feeling better? Good. Call me if you think of anything else.” He smiled. “I’ll be in touch.”

Robert got to his feet and shoved the card into his pocket.

A burly man with a flash camera came through the police barrier. “Where’s the stiff?” he

said to no one in particular.

“You’re too late for blood and guts, Joe,” the balding detective said. “And stay back of the tape.”

The photographer looked at Robert. “Hey, kid. You live around here?”

“That’s my house.” Robert pointed.

“Com’ere. Let’s get a shot of you looking at the truck.” The photographer positioned Robert so his house would be in the background of the picture. “Just look at the truck,” he said. “That’s it.” The flash popped. “What’s your name?”

“Robert.” His head was still spinning, his stomach still churning. He felt compelled to get things straight. “It’s an armored car.”

“Robert what?”

Robert was thinking about the two men who escaped the gunmen. “What? Robert Bell.”

Merwyn came running up. “Are you nuts?” He grabbed Robert’s arm and pulled him away.

The photographer glared at Merwyn, then headed for the bloody driveway.

Walking toward his house with Merwyn, Robert looked down the street and saw his father’s new car stopping at the corner and being waved through. Pulling into the driveway, his father, inscrutable in his aviator’s glasses, looked toward the mess.

The car’s startling color was “canary yellow,” his father had told him. It featured lots of chrome, headlights hidden in the fenders, sidewalls white as milk. No running boards.

“Bob,” his father said.

Merwyn walked up with Robert, looking the car over. The dashboard was polished cherry, the seats’ leather the color of cream.

“What the heck’s going on?” Robert’s father took off his fedora, his eyes still hidden, his gold wristwatch glinting in the light. “The cop said a guy got shot.”

“Yeah.”

His father looked at the steaming vehicle, firemen still hosing it down. “You see it

happen?"

Robert nodded.

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

"Good. I better go see your mother." With that, the car shot down the driveway toward the garage in back of the house.

"It's a Cord," Robert said, eyeing Merwyn.

"I know."

"We just got it Monday."

"Yeah. Well, I seen it in your garage." Merwyn popped his eyes at Robert. "Let's see what's in the wallet."

Robert looked around at the firemen and policemen. "Here?"

They ran behind the garage, where Merwyn slipped the wallet out of his pocket, unfolded it, and pulled out paper money. "Sixty bucks."

They looked at the driver's license: James L. McGinnis, 11 Creek Road, Blue Lake.

Merwyn pulled out a business card. "Acme Electrical Contractors, Thos. O'Bannion, Prop." The card listed several towns, including Blue Lake.

"Give it to the cops," Robert said.

Merwyn looked at him. "Not a good idea."

"Then just drop it back in the grass."

"You kidding?" Merwyn said. "They been looking all over around there." He tucked the wallet into his pocket.

As the boys came out from behind the garage Robert's father came out the back door of the house, his eyeglasses in his hand.

"Nice car, Mr. Bell," Merwyn said.

"1938 Cord 812 Supercharger," Robert's father said.

"What'll it do?"

Robert's father smiled, showing even teeth, two in back capped with gold. "Over a hundred." He scrutinized their faces. "And don't get any ideas."

Eyes wide, Merwyn held up his hands.

Robert's father answered this look of innocence with a knowing look of his own. "Look, Bob," he said. "I was just coming home to get some papers. I have to talk at Rotary." He looked bemused. "But I'll come right back after that." He glanced at his watch.

"They killed the guy, dad."

"Look, I'd stay with your mother but I can't. Go in and stay with her, okay? I'll be back as soon as I can. Maybe an hour." He paused, taking in the scene again. "Oh, yeah. You two are coming in to work tomorrow with the clean-up crew, right?"

Robert looked at Merwyn, who nodded assent. "Yeah, Dad."

"Wear old clothes. Eight o'clock. Be on time. Pack a lunch."

"Okay, Dad."

"Gotta go. Go in and talk to your mother."

The police moved a barricade to let his father through. Steam was still rising from the armored car. The firemen were wetting down the grass. Everything stank.

Most of the first wave of gawkers had gone, but other people, including a mother with a baby in her arms, kept showing up at the barricades.

Robert headed in to see his mother.

She was crying. "I didn't let her in," she confessed to Robert. "I thought it was a union killing."

"It's okay mom. Dad'll be home in a few minutes."

### THREE

At six o'clock the next morning, Saturday, Robert went out on the front stoop to get the milk. The sun was coming up. The air was hazy. The armored car had been hauled away, but Robert could still smell burning rubber. The yard looked like the leftover battlefield it was.

He picked up the quart bottle in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Then he set the milk back down to look more closely at the paper.

A banner headline across the top of the front page said, "Gangs at War!" A smaller headline underneath said, "Mobster Slain in Ambush on Armored Car."

The story said:

*"A gangster was killed in broad daylight Friday in the tree-lined suburb of Forest Oaks in front of three witnesses.*

*"The dead man, Joseph Pisciatto, was believed to have once been a member of the notorious Al Capone mob.*

*"An armored car in which Pisciatto had been riding went out of control in the incident, cut across two yards, hit a tree, and caught fire.*

*"A detective at the scene, Lt. Adrian Quinlan, Forest Oaks PD, said two gangsters ran from the wreck and escaped in a commandeered maroon LaSalle sedan. The sedan had been abandoned only moments before by a Hill Street resident, Mrs. Aaron Friend.*

*“Pisciatti, the third man who ran from the wreck, was gunned down as he tried to get into the LaSalle by a man firing a tommygun from a black Packard sedan.*

*“Robert Bell and Merwyn Peterson, both 16, also witnessed the slaying.*

*“Sources speculated that the attack on the armored car was either a ‘hit’ aimed at members of an opposing gang, or a ‘heist,’ aimed at stealing money or other valuables. Police had the vehicle hauled to an impoundment garage.*

*“If the incident was connected to Capone’s gang, it may mean that his influence still prevails, although he remains in prison. After a murderous career as a Chicago gang leader he was sent up in 1932 for income tax evasion, having failed to pay taxes on ill-gotten gains from bootlegging and other criminal pursuits.*

*“Since then, a number of his associates have met their ends through gang violence or at the hands of G-men. But some are believed to be still active. The incident on Hill Street may have involved these elements.*

*“But no one, sources believe, has yet emerged to take the role of the notorious Scarface.”*

A picture beside the story showed Robert looking at the smoking armored car. The caption said:

*“Robert Allen Bell, 1400 Hill Street, Forest Oaks, looks at the armored car he and a friend saw destroyed just before they witnessed what appeared to be a gangland slaying.”*

Robert looked up from the newspaper. *They know who we are*, he thought. *Joseph Pisciatti? That’s not the name in the wallet.*

Picking up the milk bottle, he went back into the house. He’d show the front page to his parents and tell them what he knew.

But his father had already left for the plant, his mother was upstairs getting dressed, and the cleaning lady was in the front hall waiting for instructions.

After moping around the hall for a minute Robert went upstairs to put on his clothes. He and Merwyn had to get to the dairy.

They coasted on their bikes down Hill to First, turned right, pedaled the three blocks to Locust, crossed the street, and leaned the bikes against the wall at the side of a one-story cement-block building with a red-brick façade. Gilt letters high on the wall said *Bell & Koenig Creamery Co.*

“This is weird,” Robert said. “The paper said the guy’s name is Pisciatto. So who’s James McGinnis?”

Merwyn shrugged. “Maybe the guy that grabbed the bag dropped his wallet.”

“Dropped it there?” Robert said. “I’m scared, Merwyn.”

“You oughtta be, with your picture in the paper like that.”

“Your name too,” Robert said. He led Merwyn into the building. Passing through an office into the dairy manufacturing area, they were enveloped in sweet smells of flavoring, cheese, milk, and ice cream.

The handful of other workers eyed them. These were the kids that saw the armored-car job.

The boys went to the locker room, pulled on rubber gloves and boots and paper caps, then scuffed out into the plant to help with the tear-down-and-clean operation.

Merwyn discovered he could bend the nozzle of a pressure hose and squirt a powerful stream of water thirty feet. The other workers rolled their eyes and kept their distance.

At lunchtime Robert and Merwyn went outside into the warm sunshine.

“Let’s say this guy dropped it,” Merwyn said. “Would he know it, or would he think maybe he lost it someplace else?”

“What are you getting at?”

“If we get rid of it, we oughta put it where the guy might think he lost it. That way he wouldn’t be thinking of us when he found it.”

Robert considered Merwyn’s shifting position. “Like where?”

“I don’t know.”

Robert did a double take as they passed a black Packard parked next to the building.

“You think there’s a lot of cars like this?”

Merwyn stared at the car. “You remember the license?”

Robert shook his head.

They walked around the Packard, studying it. Nothing resolved, they went back into the plant and helped the crew put the newly cleaned pipes back up.

At quitting time, Robert led Merwyn to the back of the plant and opened a steel door. As they entered the room they could see their breath. Pints and quart boxes of ice cream were stacked up in pyramids. Five-gallon ice cream drums were lined up along the walls.

“Ali Baba’s cave,” Merwyn said. He helped himself to a pint of vanilla. “Okay?”

Robert reached into a box on a shelf for a wooden spoon and handed it to him, then helped himself to a pint of strawberry.

“We shoulda had this for lunch,” Merwyn said.

Robert led him to a door with a big handle at the back of the room. “We can go out this way. Goes to the shipping dock.” The space where the Packard had been stood empty. The boys were busy with the ice cream and weren’t paying attention anyway.

Before supper, Robert listened on the radio to *Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy*. But his mind wandered. He thought about the man’s head hitting the driveway.

When his program ended he went into the living room. His parents were having a cocktail, talking about the killing. Robert ducked out. He’d worked all day at trying to keep it out of his mind. He’d also decided he didn’t want to rat on Merwyn. Maybe they’d find a way to ditch the wallet. He had the cop’s card, too. Maybe they could talk to him.

After dinner his parents went out to play bridge, and Robert walked across the street to Merwyn’s house and showed him the card. “You think we should call him?”

“They’re all on the take,” Merwyn said.

“How do you know that?”

Merwyn cocked an eye. "My dad says."

"Your dad? You told your dad?"

"No. But he deals with 'em, Bob. He knows. Besides, we got time to figure this out. They're not gonna just shoot us down in the street, a couple a' kids."

"They already tried to do that."

Merwyn squinted at Robert. "They were jumpy. Now they're reading the papers, thinking it over."

"That makes me feel just great," Robert said. "Let's give it to the cop."

"You read the paper every day," Merwyn said. "You ever see a story where ratting on the mob was helpful to some guy?"

*The mob.* Robert thought about pictures he'd seen in the *Tribune* of dead hoods, their bodies riddled with bullets, lying in the dirt and weeds along various rural roads around Chicago.

"Who else would it be? You got guys in an armored car, right? Guys in a Packard. A guy packin' a tommygun. The mob."

Robert despaired. "I have to tell my mom and dad."

"Don't do it," Merwyn said between his teeth. "First your mom will go nuts and then your dad'll drive us down to the police station. The mob will get wind of that, don't kid yourself." Merwyn made a throat-slitting motion with his index finger. "We gotta figure this out, Bob. You and me."