

THIS STORY ORIGINALLY APPEARED IN MYSTERY MAGAZINE WEEKLY

(www.mysterymagazineweekly.com), A TERRIFIC SOURCE FOR ENTERTAINING SHORT MYSTERY FICTION.

THE BEECH BOYS RUN AMOK

by

David M. Hamlin

"Thing is, why go to all the trouble of using a shim or a coat hanger, maybe give up and just smash the window? You still gotta hot wire the thing, right?"

Donald Beech sat across the table from his younger brother Jimmy, his feet sprawled out into the kitchen where Jimmy's wife Liz was scraping furiously at the cooked-in egg Donald had left in the frying pan.

"Plus the car alarm," said Liz.

"Don't mean a thing," Donald said. "We're in L.A., right? Probably a couple hundred car alarms going off in this city right now, they don't mean jack unless there's a squad car on the block. And then it's a false alarm, some loud truck set it off."

"So what's your bright idea?" Jimmy was staring out the window at the tiny back yard where despite the bright spring sunshine two dying rose bushes were the only sign of life.

"Simple," said Donald. "We get them to hand us the keys."

Liz snorted. Jimmy swung around in his seat and aimed his best raised eyebrow at his brother.

"Really. You say 'Hey, me 'n' my brother here, we need to steal your car could you please hand me the keys? Thanks so much.' Like that'll work."

"Your problem, you got no imagination, Jimmy."

"Okay, smart ass," said Liz, turning to face him, the sponge in her hand dripping egg-tainted droplets on her bunny slippers, "give."

"What we do, we scope out some junk yards, scrap metal places, we find an old Valet Parking sign."

He paused, shifting his focus from one to the other, waiting.

"Yeah, so?" Jimmy flipped an open hand in the air. "That's it?"

Liz snorted and went back to scrubbing.

"Y'all don't see very far, do ya?" said Donald. "We get this sign, we cruise around all those neighborhoods on the west side, got a half dozen restaurants on every block, see?"

Liz stopped and turned.

"You're gonna set up like a valet operation, any restaurant doesn't have one, steal the first car pulls up?"

"Bingo."

Jimmy frowned. "And then what? Can't sell it, we got no title or anything. Could drive it around, but you got a car and I got the van, Lizzie's drivin' that Chevy beater her mom gave her. What're we gonna do with another car, a hot one we can't sell?"

"We could forge papers," said Donald.

"You two? Not a chance." Liz took off her apron and moved to join them. She faked kicking Donald's legs out of the way and he moved them to let her pass.

"Besides, anybody you morons could hustle into buying a car off you will already know who you are. Guys down the block, high school pals aren't in jail or the army, that bunch at that bar you never, ever visit" – she shot Jimmy a look – "they'd all know right where to find you, the deal blows up. And you two don't want that, seeing as how everybody in this neighborhood knows the Beech boys aren't fighters, they're lovers."

"Don't call us that," said Donald. "Damn high school snots gave us that, Beech boys. Hate it. Hated them assholes even more. Anyhow, the answer is chop shop."

He rapped the table with his knuckles several times so they'd get it.

"We find a good chop shop, sell it cheap, they turn the thing into spare parts. Case closed."

"That might work," said Jimmy.

Liz got up and added some hot from the pot to her coffee.

"You want to be smart about it," she said. "Find a shop wants in on the deal first."

"I got an idea," said Jimmy. "That body shop a few blocks over, down the street from Normandie on Washington."

"I know that place. Whatsis name, Jorge Sanchez?" Donald pronounced it George.

"Not anymore," said Jimmy. "Place is Korean now, something like Park Body Shop, I think. Last time I noticed, guy's working on nothing but Hondas, maybe a Hyundai here and there."

"That's perfect," said Liz.

"How come?" Donald was sitting up now, paying attention.

"It's what everybody drives, Doo-Bee." His nickname forever, curse the old man for that one. "More of them on the road, anything else. Somebody's always gonna need a bumper, a fender, trunk lid they get rear-ended. What you do, you shag your tails down there and introduce yourselves to Mr. Park, all polite, pay him respect, you ask him how many more cars he could work on, he had a whole lot of spare parts at dirt cheap prices."

"You're telling me what to do?"

"Bet your ass I am, Doo-bee. You tell this guy he can make a whole lotta cash he hooks up with you two."

"Yeah," said Jimmy, "show him what's in it for him. This could work, Donald."

"Unless you two find a way to screw it up," said Liz, staring right at Donald when she said it, warning him not to mess up her gig with his brother.

The only Valet Parking sign they could find was on the lot of a large Hollywood memorabilia shop on Highland. The man in the shop wandered over while they were checking it out.

"A superior example of its type," he said. "Pristine condition, probably 1970, no later than '75. A collectors' gem, this one, a perfect conversation piece. I'm frankly amazed it's still on the lot. Are you gentlemen interested?"

"How much?"

"Seven fifty."

"You got change for a ten?"

The man laughed but the laugh wasn't funny.

"You misunderstand, my friend. Seven hundred fifty dollars, I can let it go for seven even."

"Not to us you can't," said Jimmy.

The next night, they drove down Pico and sat in the empty lot in front of the closed car wash just up the street from Factor's Deli. They waited until the deli closed and the valet crew shut down their portable stand, locked its doors and wheeled it and the valet parking sign up against the restaurant wall. When all the lights in the place had been dark for half an hour, Jimmy pulled the van up. Donald jumped out and wrestled the sign in to the back. It took maybe a minute.

"Quick and easy," said Jimmy. "We're in business."

Donald rifled through the racks at the Goodwill Store in Hollywood and found himself a pretty slick red waiter jacket, cut like a tuxedo, brass buttons. The thing was a size too big for him so he couldn't get that sleek no-waist-at-all look, but when he checked it out in the mirror in his small apartment, he gave himself a salute, looking sharp.

Their first strike worked just the way Donald had said it would. The boys unloaded the sign a half block from a store front Italian place in Culver City. Jimmy drove the van away and Donald remained with the sign. The first two cars to pull up were not suitable to Jon Park's trade, an ugly Taurus and an ancient Olds, so Donald leaned over and told the drivers he was sorry, their private lot was full. He directed them to the public parking lot down the street.

A young man with a weak goatee and thinning hair pulled his grey Honda Civic up to the sign, climbed out of his car and handed the keys to Donald.

"Dining alone, sir?"

"No. My girlfriend is meeting me."

"Romantic dinner, eh?" Donald flashed a smile. "We'll be here late, you enjoy yourself."

"Thanks."

Donald watched the guy go into the restaurant and made sure that he was seated before he opened the back door of the Honda, tossed the sign in and drove away.

He motored down the street and turned right, drove past Jimmy's van and honked twice. He and Jimmy drove back to their neighborhood. Jimmy had a key to the huge padlock on the heavy chain on the gate through the barbed wire fence protecting Jon Park's body shop lot. They drove the Honda in, pulled the plates and buried them in an oil drum overflowing with metal scraps. They grabbed the envelope taped to the shop window and locked the place down again when they left.

They were enjoying a beer, sitting on Jimmy's front stoop, when Liz drove up wearing her Burger King uniform.

"Well?"

"Just like I said," Donald raised his beer to her. "The guy handed me his keys." Jimmy held up the envelope.

"Got paid, too. Made a couple hundred bucks, girl. We're goin' out to dinner, you and me. You got a shift, Saturday night?"

"Did you remember to ditch the plates?"

"Course," said Donald.

She looked at Jimmy.

"You're taking me to that Italian place, the fancy one over at Farmers Market. Magano's, something like that."

Jimmy smiled and nodded happily.

She shifted her gaze to Donald.

"You're not invited."

The scam rolled right along. They'd go out one or two nights, later in the week, find a suitable location, set up and swipe a car. Now and then, Jon Park would give them a special order – "I need a right front fender, rocker panel, navy blue Accord" – and he'd pay them extra for that. They were careful to avoid the same neighborhoods and they never repeated a location.

Jimmy and Liz plunked down cash for a new living room suite. Donald began spending time with a woman he'd met in a bar who was always ready, willing and able to get hot and heavy "as long as you got the cash, sweetie."

One night they targeted a barbecue joint a little north of Wilshire in Koreatown. Donald was pleased that the first arrival was a Honda minivan in excellent condition. The driver was a middle-aged fellow sporting a jaunty driving cap. The lady in the passenger seat was fairly attractive; she wore a lot of makeup and for a moment Donald thought she looked familiar.

Sporty Cap handed Donald the keys and when they went in, Donald found Jimmy and they delivered the Honda to the Park lot.

When the man in the cap and the attractive lady came out of the restaurant and couldn't find the valet guy, they went back into the restaurant and struggled through a discussion with the restaurant's owners, a husband and wife who were clearly horrified and ashamed but had very little English. Their son appeared and things got sorted out – no, they didn't have a valet service and no, they didn't know somebody was stealing cars from their customers, but please come back again, the dinner will be our gift to you.

The man in the cap pulled out his mobile phone and made two calls.

The first call was to the area LAPD station, which dispatched a squad car carrying a young Latina and an older black cop whose hair was greying.

The second call was to KTLA's news department. Mr. Sporty Cap was a senior producer for the station's evening newscasts. His companion was a KTLA reporter and the two were on their meal break, having left the station for dinner planning to return and go back to work.

One of the station's mobile broadcast vans drove to the restaurant and while it was on its way, the reporter took a table and prepped her script while the producer interviewed the two cops and made a couple of calls to some LAPD detectives he knew.

At ten o'clock that evening, KTLA News led with an "alarming exclusive report" about a car theft scam "plaguing L.A. restaurants." The reporter told her audience about the scam and related breathlessly her fear and shock as the "victim of a horrible

crime." She interviewed the young Latina officer, getting safety tips, and then worked straight to the camera.

"KTLA has learned from LAPD sources that similar car thefts have taken place in numerous locations, predominately on the west side. As Officer Morales just told us, we all need to be careful and smart even when we're out for a good time. Maybe especially when we're out for a good time. For KTLA news, direct from this crime scene, I'm Karen Morrow. Back to you in the studio, Jim. . ."

"And a very personal crime scene at that, Karen," said the anchor. "Our prayers are with you."

"Son of a bitch! That dopey guy, his stupid hat, he's TV news? I figured he was a dentist. I made her for an escort, all that makeup."

Donald was sprawled at the kitchen table again.

They'd left the living room after watching KTLA's Morning News for the entire time it was on the air which was, Jimmy said, "like forever." In the early hours, the station re-broadcast the report from the previous night. At seven o'clock, they had Karen Morrow sitting at the anchor desk, recounting her "scary ordeal" and at eight and nine they brought the producer on set, too.

"Guy was wearing one ugly necktie," said Donald. "He don't look like he belongs on the air."

Liz gave him a look which caused him to shrink down in his chair a little and cross his legs for protection.

"Sure, Doo-bee, the bad tie's gonna make everybody forget to ask for ID from valets, like they been saying all morning long. Face it, you boys are going on vacation."

"No way," said Donald, his jaw set. "Gig's too sweet and I need the money. We'll just move over to the Valley, work Van Nuys, Burbank."

"You'll be on your own," said Liz. "My man's not in the game for at least a couple of weeks, I don't care if you go to Bakersfield."

Donald started to say something and then saw the look in her eyes.

"Okay, Liz. Two weeks and we're back in it."

"Two weeks and we decide then," said Liz. "You two pulled the cops into it. They're going to be all over this."

"For one lousy minivan? I hope they got better stuff to do, catch real criminals 'stead of chump change like us."

"Think, Doo-Bee, think. The minivan doesn't mean diddly squat to the cops, but having the whole city hear they can't catch a couple of guys running a valet parking scam, *that* puts 'em on the streets with a mission. You two are prime beef."

"I got my rent to pay, Liz. I got bills, I got child support, way behind on that. Other stuff, too."

"You been making decent money, close to a month now. You don't save nothin'? Moron."

Jimmy intervened.

"So, we lay low. Lizzie's right, it's smart. How about this? Liz's brother's workin' a job demolishing some old apartment building down on Third. I bet he'd take us on, we can smash dry wall or something a few days, make a little coin."

"You go right ahead and do that," Donald said, sneering.

"Oh, he's going to," said Liz. "You don't want to work for my baby brother Bobby, you're on your own, but the valet thing is down 'til I say otherwise. Got it?"

Donald didn't nod, but his shrug said he wasn't going to fight her.

Liz made Jimmy hose himself down in the back yard every night for two weeks, the drywall dust and grime pouring off his clothing. When he was hosed off, he was sent straight to the shower before they ate.

Donald lasted one day and quit. He'd been dodging a growing list of people putting bites on him for what he owed ever since. He showed up for Saturday breakfast exactly two weeks and one day after their vacation had begun.

"I stopped by Park's place on my way over," he said, popping two slices of bread into the toaster. "He's got a special order for us."

"What?" Jimmy was still on his first cup of coffee.

"Needs a new hybrid, one o' them electric things."

"Honda?"

"Course, Honda. I'm thinkin' we go way west on this one, out there where those hot shot lawyers and movie types get all creamy you talk about saving a bush or adopting some damn bird in Af-freak-a. They drive crap like that, right?"

Liz said, "How far west?"

"Westwood, maybe," said Donald. "Go there, we get the college crowd too."

"Not far enough," said Liz. "You want to get out of town."

"Just what I was going to say," said Jimmy. "We go to Santa Monica. Whole different police department out there, that bimbo on the TV hasn't poked them in the eye. Park say how much more he'd pay for this one?"

Donald grinned. "Five Franklins"

"Not bad," said Jimmy.

"He's in," said Liz. "But only if it's Santa Monica."

"Place'll be jumpin', Saturday night. I'll fall by here around 6. What's for dinner, Lizzie?"

"Whatever's in the bag you gonna carry in here, chucklehead. Make it chicken, I can't stand the sight of burgers. The smell either. Get enough for all of us."

"Come on, Liz. I'm damn near broke."

"Pay day this evening, pal. You mooch around here all the time, this time we mooch, you pay. You wanna tussle over this, Doo-Bee?"

He didn't.

Over dinner, Liz told them that there was a show on cable she liked, featured celebrity couples leading their own real lives and that "cute actor Bobby, his wife the model, Janey K., the one who's had a whole lotta work done, her lips and all" were on it and they loved to go to some vegan place on Montana.

"You have to figure vegans drive hybrids, right?"

"You know some weird stuff," said Jimmy, but both he and Donald thought she had a good idea.

Jimmy's van was not starting consistently so they were in Donald's funky Dodge.

"What we'll do," said Donald, "we'll leave the Dodge behind, go straight to Park's and get paid, both of us in the 'lectric thing, pick the Dodge up tomorrow. We can walk

to your place from Park's. Safest thing to do, no hanging around. Less time we're dick-in' around, less chance we get popped."

Jimmy didn't much care for changing their established routine, but he was already edgy about this deal, the first since they'd become TV stars, and he didn't want any additional stress, going up against Donald. He kept his mouth shut.

Megan's Vegan was so popular it had its own valet operation and that messed things up a little.

Donald was mostly annoyed and argued for moving on to another spot. While Donald ranted on, Jimmy noticed that nearly all the traffic to the restaurant was arriving from the east, driving down Montana toward the ocean.

"What we do, Doo-bee, we set up at the top of the block, they pass us before they get to the valets down there in front of the joint. You wave the ones

we don't want down to them other guys and snag the first Honda hybrid we see."

"What'll we do, those guys down there spot us?"

Jimmy thought.

"Tell 'em we're there's a party just down that side street there. We're sending their people on down to them, we're just working the guests at this party up here."

"See?" said Donald, "didn't I keep tellin' you don't be like me, finish high school, you'll be prepared for life. And here you are, thinkin' smart. Let's give it a go, see what happens."

Donald took the first shift while Jimmy drove the Dodge to a residential street a few blocks away and hoofed back, sitting back from the street in shadows so nobody could see him. For close to an hour, all Donald did was wave useless cars off. During a lull, he walked over to Jimmy and shed the red jacket so Jimmy could put it on.

Jimmy waved another ten or twelve along and was beginning to think they were not going to score when a brand new Honda with hybrid badges shining in the street lights pulled to the curb.

The guy who climbed out was so tall that when he rolled out of the driver's seat, Jimmy felt for a second like he was back in third grade, defending himself against the sixth grade bully. But the guy turned out to be rail thin, so he wasn't very menacing and he had a great look, beautiful flowing hair. Jimmy thought the guy was a little too pretty.

"You're with that vegan place, right?"

"Yes, sir," said Jimmy, surprised to hear a big deep voice coming out of that skinny frame. "You enjoy your meal, the rest of our crew down there in front of the restaurant will bring this fine car to you at the door."

"Perfect," said the tall fellow. He slipped Jimmy a ten spot. "Take real good care, okay? I just took delivery and I'm real proud of her."

"You got it, sir!"

Donald was in the driver's seat before the guy turned into the restaurant. Jimmy waited until the guy went into the restaurant and then tossed the sign in the back seat and they drove away.

Brent Bonner, the tall guy with the pretty hair, was the star of a network series which was a hit with teens, notably teen girls. The show, *Rick & Rack*, featured a super smooth private eye and his extremely busty secretary *cum* sidekick. Bonner's contract was up for renewal and he and his agent were meeting to outline a very handsome new one.

He had wanted to go over to Morton's for the meeting, scarf down a medium rare steak, but his agent had insisted on this place. His mood was sour when he walked in and it grew worse when he waited for nearly half an hour and she didn't show.

He called, more annoyed by the minute. His agent answered and told him her daughter had brought the measles home from school. She couldn't make the meeting. She was real sorry she hadn't called but, you know, a sick kid, you lose track of stuff.

Donald and Jimmy had a stash of used valet stubs. When Bonner gave his to the valet manager on the sidewalk, a heated exchange among the manager and his crew ensued. Two of the drivers were sent racing around the neighborhood. When

they reluctantly told Bonner his car wasn't in their keeping, he lost it for just a minute until people inside the restaurant began to notice. Bonner walked down the street to chill a little and then pulled out his phone.

He called his publicist.

Bernie Rose had chops going all the way back to Gleason. He'd managed his share of sex scandals; he'd schmoozed every columnist and Hollywood beat writer a thousand times.

Rose listened to Bonner's story.

"Kid, we're going to drive the price of that new contract through the effin' roof! You're gonna be a hero, time we're done, network's gonna beg you to back a truck up to the bank.

"First, tell me, I'm beggin' you got this right, tell me you got that anti-theft package I told you about. NeverBoost? GPS tracking, kill code, the whole she-bang?"

Bonner said he had.

"Okay, kid. Listen to me very carefully now. Here's what we're gonna do."

Five minutes later, Bonner made another call.

"Hey, Karen, it's Brent Bonner. You interviewed me a couple months ago, we were promoting the sweeps arc for *Rick and Rack*. Remember?"

"Sure," said Karen Morrow, "what can I do for you?"

"I have a story for you. My publicist Mr. Rose says that if you move quickly, you can get helicopter coverage."

"They live for it, kid," Rose had said. "They go to the sky, their numbers spike. You tell her you got a chopper story, she's all yours."

It took the Beech boys twenty minutes to drive to the western end of the Rosa Parks freeway running from the beach east to downtown.

The KTLA helicopter picked them up as they pulled onto the freeway ramp. LAPD's aerial patrol unit joined the news bird moments later, its massive laser giving the roof of the Honda an eerie extraterrestrial glow.

Two cruisers, lights flashing, pulled in behind the stolen car and at the first entry ramp they passed, two more pulled out from the shoulder and took positions in front of the Beech boys.

"This isn't good," said Jimmy.

"You think?"

"What're we gonna do?"

"Shut up."

"No, seriously, Doo-Bee, what should we do?"

"I'm thinkin'. Shut up."

The traffic was moderate so Donald made a move, sliding the hybrid two lanes over. The cruisers before and behind him moved with him and the laser from above danced on the hood.

"We're screwed," said Donald.

"What are we gonna do, Doo-Bee?"

"I'm thinkin'."

Karen Morrow anchored the coverage. While Donald was thinking and the helicopters floated above – there were four of them now, as two more news birds joined the spectacle – Morrow interviewed a former LAPD deputy chief who analyzed possible tactics to end the chase, guesstimated the top speed of the hybrid, speculated about the two men in the car and wondered, without cause, what sort of weapons they had in the car. Brent Bonner heard it all, holding on the line to be interviewed.

"So, we've learned this isn't just any old car," said Morrow to the camera. "It is a brand new hybrid which the star of *Rick and Rack*, Brent Bonner, purchased this week. We have the handsome and talented young man on the line, an exclusive here at KTLA.

"Brent, you must be devastated. I've been a victim just like you, I know how shocking this can be. How do you feel?"

"I'm good, Karen, thanks. I'm sorry my car has been stolen, but I'm pleased to know that wherever they go, they won't be adding any pollution to our air. Our trees

will be healthier and so will our kids, so at least I'm doing what I can to save our planet."

Just the way Rose had coached him, smooth and sincere without hamming it up.

"That's just so noble, Brent, really."

"Well, I try to lead by example, Karen. But I do have to say that I'm troubled by one aspect of this."

"Tell us."

"Well, my car is super clean, but the police cars aren't. They're chasing these criminals with fossil fuels. I'm sorry for that."

"Let's make a run for it," said Donald.

"Are you nuts? In this thing? It doesn't even make any noise, for crissakes, how you gonna outrun all those cruisers, the 'copters? Just pull over."

"Like that gets us anywhere? No, I'm going back our 'hood," said Donald. "We open it up until we get to Arlington, jump off real quick like and zip around all those mansions, Jefferson, Adams. We know those streets, we can cut through alleys and stuff. Find a big old tree, park under it and run like hell."

"You're nuts. Just pull over. They're gonna get us, Doo-Bee. You know they are."

"Probably so," said Donald. "But I'm sure as Sunday gonna give 'em a show."

He floored the accelerator and the hybrid picked up some speed as Donald began weaving in and out of the lanes. Jimmy scrunched down in his seat and silently begged not to die.

"Ah," said the TV analyst, "they're making their move. CHP will stay in the lead, but if they take an exit, you can expect LAPD to assume command and control. It's much easier to execute a pit maneuver on surface streets, so we can watch for that."

"Karen?"

"Yes, Brent, what did you want to say?"

"I think it's time we put an end to this, don't you?"

"Excuse me?"

"We can take action. Give me just one second – "

The text message to Bernie Rose was already in place in Bonner's phone, so all he had to do was hit the Send button.

"— okay, we're all set. So, Karen, I need you and your audience to help me save my car and our planet. Are you ready?"

"I don't understand."

"I need you and your audience to count down from ten. Here we go: Ten, nine, eight. . ."

Karen Morrow and the analyst both looked a bit befuddled, but they chimed in at "five."

Donald Beech had the Honda roaring along in the left-most lane. He was looking ahead to find a path across all the lanes to the exit he wanted.

". . .three, two, one!"

The Honda shut down. The engine stopped, the headlights and the dash board went dark, the steering wheel didn't steer. The car rolled silently to a stop.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"I didn't do nothin'" said Donald. "The damn thing just stopped."

He started punching buttons on the dash, jamming his fingers into everything from the starter to the stereo buttons. Absolutely nothing happened.

"Son of a bitch!"

"There you go, Karen," said Brent Bonner. "Please let your viewers know that I really appreciate their help and support. Together, we truly can clean the air."

The minute Bonner disconnected from the station, his phone buzzed and Rose's name appeared on the screen.

"You are the man, my man! I'm tellin' you, you're gonna be the hottest thing in town when you bring your team to the table. We're going to kill them, kid. Great job."

"The car shut down, right? The kill command worked?"

"Yes indeedy-do, it did. I used your code, worked like a charm. Timing was a little off, my fault, I shoulda sent the signal right when you said 'one,' but I skipped a bear. I didn't think of 'Mission Accomplished' until after, we shoulda used that, either, but still, kid, we hit the jackpot."

Donald and Jimmy did the L.A. stolen car perp dance, backing up to the cops hands on heads, spread-eagling on the pavement one at a time. The helicopters stayed around until both men were poured into the back seat of a cruiser.

"What you think, Jimmy? First offense, maybe we get a little county time and a buncha probation? Maybe community service, nobody was hurt or anything."

Jimmy didn't say a word.

"I can handle county time," said Donald.

"County or state, won't make much difference."

"Sure it will, Jimmy. County time's easier."

"Not what I meant," said Jimmy. "What I meant, county or state doesn't make any difference 'cause it's the least of your problems."

"How you figure?"

"Think about it."

Donald sat silent.

"No matter where they send us, bro', it's going to be a damn sight better than the other problem you got."

"Oh, no," said Donald, turning to stare at his brother.

"That's right, Doo-be," said Jimmy. "You gotta deal with Liz."

#