

On The Program
By Eric M. Witchey

Harmon had a program. Even if he got caught, he'd only be up small time, what with state budgets being what they were.

The Rockville Forage-and-Fuel would be number twenty-seven on his daylight quickie store spree. He was young, and the future was bright. Thank god for the bad economy that put him back on the street after two years of two-to-five for B&E. He'd learned a thing or two on the inside. His roomie, Eddie, taught him that a guy needed a program. "Like car racing," Eddie said. A guy on a program showed initiative and brains. He could work his way into an upscale sponsorship.

Harmon was that guy, and the Forage-and-Fuel was going on his resume.

The program was simple. Simple was best – thirty quick shops in thirty days. Make the news. Never get caught. Quit at thirty. His sponsorship would be in LA, New York, or Vegas. Eddie gave him a couple names.

The program started as a game to pass time in their cell, but when it was a sure thing Harmon was going streetside, Eddie got serious: Fake weapon. Scare hell out of 'em, but if he got caught, it wasn't armed robbery. Quickies because small money meant small time. Jack a car on the spot. Always say, "May I have your keys?" A good shyster could make the car look like a gift. Harmon smiled. He'd been given twenty-six cars in a month.

Ditch the car quick before the cops made him by plate, make or copter. Quick and slick to a second car. Change clothes. Drive twelve hours in a random direction. Sleep eight. Make the next hit inside twenty-four hours. Do it all in daylight for publicity.

He was so on the program when he walked into the Rockville Forage-and-Fuel with his sunglasses on, sweatshirt hood up, ball-cap straight - this time the cap was a fishing cap he bought from a strip mall fly shop a few doors down – and baggy levis cinched tight at the waist so he could run in his thrift store tennies if he had to.

The counter help was a woman: five-two, overweight, black pony tail, and looked bored and under the weather. It was all good. No truckers. Truckers were trouble. No bikers or local men. A boy-teen pushed a broom. He checked for the normal cameras in the corners, some maybe dummies, some not.

Strolling the aisles, he made sure the cameras saw him. It was all about the press. The layout was perfect. All he needed was his ride. As if he'd conjured it up, a Subaru wagon pulled up outside. A Levis-and-flannel soccer mom with a bouncy, blond bobcut got out.

That was his ride. He was on the program.

Mom pulled a baby strapped into a bomb-proof, combination child seat, carrier, roll-cage out the back. Babe on arm, she came in and headed for the coolers.

Timing was everything.

It went down clean. Mom bought a gallon of skim and headed out. He screamed at the teen and the counter lady. He waved his toy. Teen-with-broom pissed himself. Heavy-at-the-counter was too scared to hit the alarm button. He scored fifty bucks, loose. The money wasn't the point. The point was The Harmon show and the program.

Out the front. Touch his cap to the camera. Fake pistol where blond-bob can see. Cool, and quiet, he asked, "May I have your keys, ma'am?"

He was in the car and out of the lot before her first tear hit her cheek. In the rear-view, he saw her jumping up and down and screaming.

Six blocks to car two. Easy drive. Keep it under the Rockville township twenty-five mile-an-hour limit. He stopped at a red light. Now was the time to be cool. Blend in for six blocks, and he was gone.

Somebody honked. He glanced at the turn lane on his left. A guy in a forest green Ford Explorer was pointing at him and mouthing off.

Road rage. What a waste. No percentage in that.

The light turned green. He flipped off Mr. Ford righteousness and headed on his way.

A telephone company van coming the other way flashed its lights and honked.

"Asshole," he said. It occurred to him that in such a small town, people might know the car and the blond. Didn't matter. The program could handle that.

He slowed for the next light.

Right on red. He pulled up to the curb. His car, a little white Toyota, invisible in town or highway coast-to-coast, waited at the curb around the next corner. A quick trot, a change of clothes, and he'd be off to number 28. Two more days, and he was a legend.

The cop came up behind him fast. The lights were on. The siren barked once, quick, just to get his attention. The Ford and the phone van were behind them.

It was no problem, he thought. None at all. He'd be cool and talk his way through it. He hadn't done anything to Mr. Ford or Mr. Phone Company. He stood up in the street and started toward the cop car.

Two blue-bellies were out of their car, guns drawn, doors open as shields.

"Hands up where we can see them!"

"What's the problem officers?"

"HANDS!"

A chill went through him. They weren't doing traffic cop polite. He put up his hands.

"Turn around!"

He did.

"Kneel!"

He did, and that's when he saw it. The damn bomb-proof baby carrier was on top of the car, wedged up against the roof rack. Blue blankets in the carrier surrounded a pink, round face. The baby blinked at him, smiled, and laughed. Its fat little fists went up and down in excitement.

From behind, someone grabbed his wrist and slapped a cuff on it. "You're under arrest for kidnapping," the cop said. "You have the right to remain silent. . ."

Harmon knew that he'd need a new program for the twenty-five to life that the kidnapping alone was going to net him.

Or maybe he should fuck programs altogether.

Eric M. Witchey's fiction has appeared nationally and internationally in magazines and anthologies. He has published in multiple genres under several names. His novel, *Fighting Mother's Echo*, is currently out in Polish. His How-to articles have appeared in *Writer's Digest Magazine*, *Writer's Northwest Magazine*, and

Northwest Ink. His fiction has won recognition from Writers of The Future, New Century Writers, Writer's Digest, and www.ralan.com. When not teaching or writing, he restores antique HO locomotives or terrorizes trout with small bits of feather and pointy wire.

For information about his upcoming appearances and teaching schedule, refer to www.ericwitchey.com, www.creativedevelopmentnetwork.org, and www.write-in-crete.com.

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