Tinker

9/22/2025

“So, what’d’ya wanna do for forty-five minutes?”

“What do you have in mind?” I asked. We had just finished lunch and, as usual, Tinker was restless. We got an hour for lunch but since he and I brought ours we usually had forty-five minutes to kill. Tinker couldn’t just sit and talk; it was above his pay grade. He was like a kid, always looking for something with which to tinker—hence his name. Now, at the phone company, he enjoyed tinkering with the equipment to see what he could make it do that it wasn’t designed to do.

Tinker should have been an engineer but college was out, since he didn’t finish high school. He excelled in physical sciences because he had an off-the-charts mechanical aptitude. The problem was, he didn’t know when to stop. He didn’t get thrown out of school for rigging the fire alarm to go off when the principal turned on her light; it was, however, the last straw.

At the phone company, the by-the-book guys hated him; the problem solvers loved him. He could often figure out a problem that wasn’t in the repair manuals because he didn’t think like the mundane engineers who wrote them. Tinker could think as if he were the system itself, as if he became a part of it. He understood why a switch wouldn’t work when every law of physics said it should. Tinker knew there were laws of physics engineers didn’t yet understand.

When Tinker got into mischief, I was his co-conspirator. The bosses learned it was a mistake to let us work together, but they couldn’t keep us from hanging out at lunch. We both reported to the same supervisor, Mr. McQuirk, who had told me early on to stop hanging out with Tinker because “it will get you a reputation.” When he told Tinker the same thing about me we decided we would have lunch together whenever possible. Sooner or later we would be transferred to different outlying offices, so we had to make hay while the sun shone, and today was a very sunny day.

“Let’s go over to the Okay Music Store, browse around a little bit,” Tinker said. He smiled his crooked grin and cocked his head slightly to the left like he always did when he was restless.

“I’m not sure the owner will let us in. The last time we were there you managed to wire that bass guitar into every speaker in the store. You shattered the glass in the front window when you shredded the start of ‘Satisfaction.’”

“He can’t prove I did it.”

“No, He thinks I did.”

Tinker laughed out loud. Tinker always looked innocent. I, on the other hand, was born looking guilty.

“The music store it is,” I said, standing up. “It’ll be fun to see if we can talk our way in.”

We passed a car lot on the way to the store, and glanced at the new cars, but we had checked out all the 1964 models a few weeks ago, and didn’t even slow down.

When we opened the door at the store, a bell rang, and a man we’d never seen before turned toward us.

“Where’s Bill?” I called out, using the owner’s first name as if we were good buddies.

The new guy seemed relieved we were apparently regulars since we were on a first name basis with the owner. Little did he know.

The sound of a guitar being played very poorly wafted from the back of the store. I glanced back and saw a big man with a very muscular build and a tattoo of a motorcycle with flames coming out of it on his left forearm. He was wearing oil-stained jeans and a wife beater shirt. His hair was long and dirty. I guessed his age at about thirty.

“Bill had to go to Lexington to see his mother. She’s not doing well. My name’s Chuck. Can I help you?”

“Just killin’ time. Mind if we look around?”

“Not at all. Let me know if you need anything.” He cringed at a particularly sour chord coming from the fellow in the back.

“You worked here long, Chuck?” Tinker asked. He always wanted to know the players.

“About a week. I’m going to the university, so I work part-time, mostly at night. Since Bill, uh, Mr. Aronson, needed to see his mother today, he asked me to come in early.” Chuck seemed to be a nice young man, eager to do a good job—gullible.

We browsed for ten or fifteen minutes, all the while being serenaded by some of he worst guitar playing I had ever heard, and that included the two years my tone-deaf brother took guitar lessons. Chuck hovered nearby.

When Tinker had seen, and heard, enough, he scowled at me and said, “Let’s get out of here.”

On the way out, Tinker turned to Chuck, who looked like he didn’t want us to leave. “What’s with the guy and the guitar?” he asked.

Chuck’s eyes widened, his eyebrows raised, and he shook his head. “I wish I knew. He came in this morning about five minutes after I opened, didn’t say anything to me, just walked back there and picked up that guitar as if it belonged to him and started playing. He’s been here all morning, playing that guitar. It’s the most expensive one in the store and Mr. Aronson *never* lets anyone play it. I wish he’d leave. He gives me the creeps.”

“Hmm,” Tinker muttered.

While we walked briskly back to the phone company, Tinker asked, “What do you think’s up with the guy playing the guitar?”

“I don’t know, but he was rough as a cob.”

“Yeah,” was all Tinker said. He was deep in thought, his hands shoved way down in his pockets.

When we reached the telephone company, Tinker said, “I’ve got to make a phone call. Come listen.”

“Tinker,” I said, “we’ve only got a few minutes and I’ve gotta take a leak. Go make your call. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“You’re gonna want to hear this,” he cackled evilly.

He slipped into the phone booth in the lobby, leaving the door open so I could hear what he had to say to whoever he was going to call. He flipped through the phone book, all the while muttering, “Okay, Okay, Okay.” He ran his finger down the column of names, until he finally said, “Here it is, 555-7470.”

Tinker let the phone book swing down, picked up the receiver, dropped a dime in the phone, and dialed the number. When he spoke into the phone his voice was deeper. He called it his “big boy” voice.

“Is this the Okay Music Store?” he asked. He hesitated a moment, then continued. “This is Dr. Patterson from the Central State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. I’m calling all the music stores in the area to warn them about a patient who escaped early this morning. He’s a real bad actor, slugged an orderly, stole his keys and left in his car about seven this morning. We’re calling music stores because he fancies himself a guitar player. Actually, he’s pretty lousy at it. Let me describe him. He’s about thirty, wearing jeans and a wife beater top. I believe the young guys call them muscle shirts. Oh, yeah, he’s got a tattoo of a motorcycle with flames shooting out of the the back of it on his left forearm.”

Tinker paused again, and I could hear a very excited voice on the other end of the line. Then Tinker spoke just above a whisper. His voice sounded conspiratorial. “What, he’s there right now? How long’s he been there?” Pause. “That long, huh? He must have come straight from the hospital. Listen, don’t talk too loud. Can he hear you?” Tinker listened. “Well, then, talk quietly. Tell me what he’s doing.” He held his hand up, palm toward the phone. “Stay calm, young man. What’s your name?”

I imagined Chuck’s eyes bulging out, his Adam’s Apple bobbing up and down nervously.

“Okay, Chuck. I don’t want to upset you, but this man is no good and, well, you probably figured that out since he was In a hospital for the criminally insane.”Tinker’s voice rose

on the last two words. “Listen, whatever you do, don’t make him stop playing the guitar. He becomes violent when anyone interrupts his music. I’m calling the police right now. They’ll meet me there in ten minutes and we’ll take care of him. And Chuck, don’t let him leave. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Tinker reached to hang up the phone, then put it back to his ear and said, “You’re a good man, Chuck. If this plays out right you might be in line for some kind of good citizen’s award. Stay calm.”

Tinker hung up, looked at his watch, and said, “Damn! We’re late and I’ve got to take a leak.”

“I do, too. We better hurry or McQuirck will write us up. Don’t forget bowling tonight.”

“Oh, that’s right. Thanks. See you then.”