

5th Avenue, New York

Matt's mind was racing as he walked home in the chilling air. A breeze was coming off the Hudson. He pulled his New York Jets beanie down over his ears, and his scarf up around his neck. He was wishing he had on more than a leather jacket. He couldn't believe he was running from the FBI once again.

No amount of experience with this task gave him even a shred of confidence. Their resources were immeasurable. They had offices across the country and in every major city. They also had access to every type of record that could be imagined. Worse yet, they could assign hundreds of analysts to scour through millions of gigabytes of data, day after day after day.

Just the thought of what would take place over the next couple of months made him sick. He wasn't sure if he needed a stiff drink or electric shock therapy. He should have been used to such stress. He had been through it most of his life.

As an orphan child, living in Queens, there were many lonely days, when there was no one to play with and nothing to do. So, he would go to the library and spend his days learning about the world.

He would start by reading encyclopedias. When he found references that he wanted to understand better, he would find two or three books on the subject. When he was confident that he understood the subject, he would move back to reading the encyclopedia.

He also had an unnatural ability to remember places and dates. Details that others struggled with were always right there in front of him; it was as if he could see them. Whenever one of his teachers couldn't remember a place or date, she would ask Matt, and he could blurt it out. His knowledge of world events gave him newfound acceptance from the teachers, but not so much with the students, especially the boys.

Then he found a new talent, making people laugh. He remembered in 5th grade, when Reese Musky didn't like the way this new, skinny, redheaded kid was getting so much attention. With both hands he grabbed Matt's collar at recess and said, "I just want to tell you what I'm feeling. You're gonna understand."

Suddenly Matt started bobbing his head to the rhythm of Reese's berating

and joined in. “Never gonna lose your smile, Never gonna dim your light, Never gonna tell you why and forget you.” Reese let go and started laughing, “You’re crazy man.” But Matt continued singing and some of the other boys joined in, dancing together.

“Never gonna break your trust  
Never gonna beg you stay  
Never gonna fumble down and forget you  
Never gonna eat your fries”

In the last line Reese joined in.

“Never gonna lose your smile  
Never gonna tell you why and forget you?”

That was the beginning of a fun friendship. It turned out Reese lived at the same orphanage as Matt. They were so caught up in their own problems that they hadn’t even noticed each other. But afterwards they were inseparable.

Reese had learned to play the guitar and sing so he taught Matt how to do the same. Together their creativity knew no bounds.

That night, they climbed out the dorm window and sat on the roof under a sky too big for a place like that.

The air smelled like old concrete and burnt cafeteria food. Matt had stolen two sodas from the staff fridge — flat, warm, and perfect.

The guitar sat between them, missing its B string. Reese strummed anyway.

“Still sounds like garbage,” Matt said, staring into the city haze.

“Better than silence,” Reese replied. “At least this lets me pretend I’m somewhere else.”

They sat for a while, just letting the chords float up and disappear into the noise of car alarms and distant sirens.

“You think we’ll ever get out?” Matt finally asked.

Reese didn’t look up. Just kept strumming something that was almost a song.

“Not unless we hack our way out,” he said.

“Hack our way out?” Matt grinned. “You saying we’re gonna code our way into freedom?”

Reese shrugged. “Or music. Or lies. Or whatever works.”

A beat passed.

"I'm not gonna rot here," Matt whispered.

"Then don't."

"You think we're good enough?"

"No. But I think we're angry enough. And that might be better."

The chords got louder. Reese closed his eyes.

"Let's never be like the people who left us."

"Deal," Matt said. And meant it.

They stayed until dawn, whispering plans they couldn't afford to believe in, mapping out the first lines of the code that would one day carry their names through servers, startups, and federal watchlists.

They loved playing the Beatles' songs. Reese was a dead ringer for Paul, and while Matt was no John Lennon, the two of them could turn any depressing day into a lot of laughter.

Reese was also pretty good at writing software. He had spent a lot of days in the library too, only he spent them over in the software section. In the fifth grade he had already written a number of kids games. Consequently, whatever Reese liked, Matt liked too, soon they were writing software together, combining the exercise with their playing music. Putting the task to rhythm made their minds think clearer.

They continued playing in bands and started learning about how to train a computer. Machine learning fascinated them. To them it appeared to be the wave of the future. If you could get enough data, the potential appeared limitless. After high school, they took their friendship to Kingston Canada. At Queens University they met the third member of their band, Elon.

Elon was way ahead of them in machine learning, or artificial intelligence is what he called it. He also understood the ins and outs of what was needed to write banking software, and the three of them wrote a program to pay bills online.

Going to school, they continued to develop talents for machine learning. However, staying in school was much too difficult for both Reese and Matt. They didn't have the money.

Reese applied for a job with Google. The day Reese left Kingston, he knocked

on Matt's dorm room door. It was three in the morning. When Matt answered, Reese was wearing his coat and had his suitcase under his arm.

"I didn't want to tell you that I applied with Google. They hired me. I thought it would be too hard to say goodbye so I was just going to leave, but I couldn't. It's a been a really good time. If you get to California, look me up. We'll catch up." He then put his fist up and gave Matt a fist bump.

Before Matt could react, Reese was gone. Two days later, Matt's Uncle Stan showed up. Uncle Stan asked if Matt was ready to earn some real money, that's when he started to learn the Con Game and how to run from the FBI.

Playing the Marks was a blast! It seemed like he was made for that type of work. Uncle Stan insisted that in order to be successful you had to have an abundance of charisma, honesty, and trustworthiness. "You're a Confidence Artist," he would say. It was a real paradox, and if you couldn't distinguish the difference between making a play on a mark and managing the morals of your personal life, you could not be successful.

You could not judge the morals of the role you had to play. You played it to the best of your ability with no judgement of the character. NONE! Likewise, the traits of your con could not leak into your personal life. There had to be a wall. Going over the wall was a recipe for disaster. They had to remain separate. Those lessons served him well in the past, but there was one more important lesson Uncle Stan taught him. When the FBI got to close, it was time to move on, the farther, the better!

It was time to move on from New York, the farther the better!