

# The getaway

By Joseph Wills

Ned Giles awoke shivering as a sliver of sunlight poked through a tattered blind. He wondered how long he'd been asleep in the metal carport he'd brought and plopped down two years ago outside Alvin in a half-acre of cleared forest.

A memory flashed by of the day in May four years ago that U.P. Metal Builders delivered the 16x24-foot portable steel box and set it on a concrete slab. He'd ordered an enclosed unit with two windows and a door. The idea was to someday improve the \$5,000 structure and make it a private retreat. On this 6-degree winter morning, Giles did indeed retreat to the shed's poorly insulated confines, a place that could keep him hidden – at least temporarily.

Ned Giles, it seems, had crossed the wrong man.

He squinted and rubbed the back of his neck as he rose from his make-shift bed, a sheet of Styrofoam covered with his deceased mother's old living room drapes. Thank God he had a portable heater and some kerosene to fuel it. He slept under the same gray pinstripe Saint Laurent suit jacket and long wool overcoat that he wore when he first went on the run two days ago. He still wore his black Florsheim oxfords and as well as a stiff white dress shirt and no-wrinkle suit pants. A \$150 Pierre Cardin necktie hung loose across his shoulder.

Things had started to go badly on Monday, two mornings ago. By noon Monday, he was in full flight mode, making his getaway on the fly as he raced from New York City to this frigid little point in Northern Wisconsin. Just outside the Big Apple, he tossed his cellphone into the bed of a pickup traveling to parts unknown. He bought a final tank of gas with plastic and then hit an ATM, where he withdrew \$500 in cash, the maximum the machine would dispense. His credit cards were no longer of use to him. Swiping one would only spit out digital clues to his whereabouts. He avoided the toll roads and their cameras and drove through the night, reaching his destination late the following afternoon, scared and exhausted.

Giles threw on his suit coat and overcoat and headed out to his Subaru Outback. He needed food and a place to shave and shower. He also thought it would be prudent to scout the terrain for escape routes should the need arise to quickly flee.

He drove slowly down an old logging road as an inch or two of icy snow crunched beneath his tires. A mile or so on the left, he spotted a small silver mobile home set back about 50 yards from the road. He remembered now. This was the home of Wanda Hubbard – a.k.a. Wacky Wanda, widow of the late Mitch Hubbard, an eccentric logger who wore only plaid flannel shirts, bib overalls and black clodhopper boots. Mitch had taken casual dress to the extreme, but on solemn social occasions – like weddings and funerals – he made sure to pin a red rose to his left suspender. He lost his life five years ago when his logging rig hit a patch of ice on Highway 70 and careened into a stand of poplar trees.

As Giles slowly rolled past Wanda's mobile home, he heard a chime from the dashboard of his Subaru. He winced as he immediately remembered his situation with fuel; he had little to none. He glanced back at Wanda's place and spotted an old Polaris ATV parked near the house. He figured she might have a little gasoline to spare.

He knocked and waited behind the door. He heard the barking and snarling of a large dog that pawed manically at the other side of the door as if trying to tear through it. He rapped on the door again, harder this time. He heard a woman shout out "Just a minute" as the growling and barking subsided. Finally, the door swung open and Wanda stood in a gray sweat suit, looking quizzically at the stranger who, to her, looked as though he'd just walked off the pages of GQ magazine. If not for the bad case of bed head, this guy looked like he

could have come straight from a fashion shoot. But what, she wondered, was he doing out here?

"Hello Wanda," Giles said. "I was driving by and I noticed that my car's about out of gas. I was wondering if you might have a little gas to spare – just enough to get me into town."

He pulled out a wad of cash from his pocket and held up a \$20 bill.

"Do I know you?" Wanda replied hesitantly.

"Maybe, just in passing. I'm the guy who owns the metal carport thingamajig just down the road. I knew Mitch. He did some work for my mother a while back. I'd seen you with him a few times. I'm Ned Giles."

"Oh yes. Ned," she said, still having no clue as to who he was. "Come on in Ned; it's freaking freezing outside."

"Sure, thanks," he replied as he stepped into the living room with the vicious sounds of the dog now emanating from a closed room.

"Yeah, sure, I can spare a gallon or so. And it won't cost you \$20. Put that away. Let me get my coat and I'll be right back."

Giles gazed about the cluttered mobile home. On the couch was a pile of laundry, a jumble of towels, shirts, pants, socks and unmentionables. The curtains, he noticed, were shades of red plaid flannel, like one of Mitch's shirts. Three stacked snow tires formed the base of a coffee table with what looked to be the lid of a washing machine serving as the top. An empty wine bottle streaked with green wax held the stub of a candle. But all in all, her place still beat the metal carport.

Wanda emerged wearing a leopard spot coat and gloves and wielding a 12-gauge shot gun. She levelled the barrel at Giles's chest and looked him up and down.

"Who are you mister? What's some slick dandy like you doing out here looking for gas, which, by the way, I'm out of. What do you really want?"

He understood now why they called her Whacky Wanda.

"Really, I just need some gasoline," Giles replied. "Look, I'm sorry to trouble you. I'll just turn around and be on my way."

"I said who *are* you?" she repeated with a more menacing tone.

"I'm Ned Giles, your neighbor."

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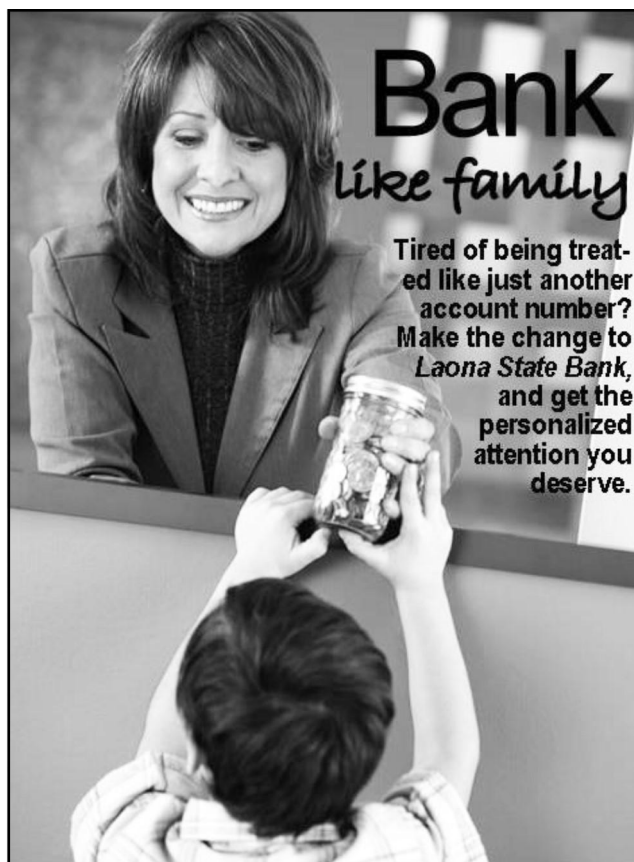
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