



The Rancher's nephew

"01 Farewell to Code"

By Drake Koefoed

Frank James walked up the stairs. He came to the second floor, and went into his lawyer's office. Robert and Katie were there. The lawyer, Al Goodman, came out. "Come on in, Frank."

"Can Robert and Katie come, too?"

"If they do, you do not have confidentiality as to whatever you say."

"I don't see that I need it."

"Let's all go in."

They went into the office.

"Frank, we have what I think is the best we can do. It's not right, but it leaves you with something, and gets you out of all this."

"OK."

"You know that Central owns that ranch in West Texas. So the deal is, you will be given title to it, you will give up your rights to all the code in

question, in other words, everything you have ever written, and you will be released by all the parties to the lawsuit. Since they love to sue people, I can predict that Westlake will go after you if you write anything at all, whatever language. I've reduced my fees to get you out of this, but if you start any new programming venture, I will not do that again. In other words, you will have to give up your profession.”

Katie talked through her tears. “Frank wrote a lot of that stuff years ago.

Libraries. Some of the stuff they claim, they disassembled out of shareware he wrote before they even were in business. They have source code that looks like some kid hacked it. You look at Frank's code, and it's like a textbook on how to program in assembler. Some of their comments are plain wrong.”

Frank put his hand on Katie's. “It's a rip off, Katie, we all know that. But I can get out with a little bit. Anyway, the stuff I could prove is mine the easiest is DOS libraries that are not worth much any more, anyway. Al, this will help Robert and Katie, won't it?”

“Of course it will. Without you, Robert and Katie can say they didn't know about any infringement, and they can even show how Westlake ripped you off. Bill Coleman can call you as a witness. This release is for any and all, and etc. The only way I can see for them go at you would be slander, and if you say it in court, they can't do that.”

Robert's jaw set. "So all I have to do is throw my best friend to the wolves, and everything will be fine."

"You're letting him through the fence, Robert. Maybe we should get Bill on the phone. He has waived contact, but..."

"Let's not worry about it."

Frank took up the pen. "Robert, this will help you and Katie. Once I am out of the case, any infringement would have to be proven against you.

Katie can read assembler with lots of comments and sort of know what it's doing. You can do about the same with C. You put me on the stand, and I start talking about the interrupt vector table, stack relocation, binary arithmetic, and all kind of shit. The jury will say we have this nice couple who wanted to start a business, and then they got connected with this programmer who dreams in hexadecimal, don't doubt for a moment that I do, and if they want a few hours of testimony about machine language, I am up for it. We can give Bill five thousand questions that I can answer, and you cannot. I can talk for a week without saying one thing the jury understands. What's going to happen when I start talking about re-entrant code?"

"They will say it's irrelevant."

"Bill makes an offer of proof, and shows the judge that the very part of the program we were talking about *is* re-entrant."

“Al, do you think this could work?”

“Oh, yes. Technical evidence often mystifies juries. Bill could go on as long as he wanted. He could call in an expert to explain recursive routines, and that would be about it.”

“What is recursion?”

“See recursion.”

They laughed.

Al said, “Before we even get that far, Bill can call him in for a deposition, and sit there with Frank, and grind him down for a few days. Or possibly, we could get Aaron Miles to do the depos.”

“Aaron Miles?”

“Frank knows him. A programmer with a law degree. Aaron could be difficult.”

“He could.”

Frank signed. “I think this will help you guys, because you can blame everything on me.”

Katie shivered. “God help me if I do that!”

“Katie, please, as soon as I am released by all parties, blame everything on me.”

“I could never say that.”

“Katie, as soon as they sign, everything is my fault. You didn’t know, you thought it was right, nobody told you.”

“I can’t say that.”

“You didn’t think anything wrong was being done. It was not, and it has not, so just say that. You are certain that I didn’t do anything wrong, which is true. Westlake can’t code his way out of a C:\> prompt, which is a fact. You have faith in me, and you know I didn’t steal code from those clowns.”

Frank signed each of the marked spots. “Robert, once this is done, you can go at them with whatever you want. Am I right, Al?”

“This agreement does not admit anything. It merely says Frank is out of the game with the little ranch. 221 acres. Space to stretch your legs.”

“This one is the attorney fee thing. I’m getting 5% of the stock, and my wife is getting 3%. We have to have an annual stockholders’ meeting, but we can have more if we like. We’ll talk on the phone, and she will take the minutes. On the list of oddities, they left \$14,000 in the corporate account.

You can spend it on the ranch, but not on personal stuff. We’ll discuss corporate formalities at the stockholders’ meetings.”

Frank signed that one, too. “Robert, you might still beat these guys. Bill can still call me as a witness. There is a little airstrip on the ranch for crop dusters. That’s how I got in and out last time, when I looked at the place. Pretty easy to come here if you need me. And pretty easy if maybe you

want to vacation next spring. We have a little boat, rooms, maybe you could hunt if you wanted.”

Katie hugged Frank, and Robert shook his hand. Dave left, and took the old Buick to the garage he had done business with for years. There he picked up a 12’ trailer that had been checked out. They had bought two spare wheels for the trailer, but the tires were not much. He left his new number at the ranch and paid his bill. He went to the apartment, and with the help of his next door neighbor, Steve, and Steve’s brother in law, Allen, they put everything in the Buick and the trailer. Frank gave Steve the key to return it to the landlord. Steve and Allen would take the stuff they wanted, have St. Vincent de Paul take what it wanted, and then clear the place out. The landlord had rented to Frank with a worn out carpet, and an apartment ready for a repaint. Years later, it looked pretty sad. The landlord would give Frank his security deposit and pro-rate the last month’s rent if Frank would leave the place ready for the construction guys. He did so, making himself as rare as a coelacanth. The decent landlord.

Frank had checked his fluid levels, and so he was ready to go. He took I-5 to Bakersfield, and I-40 east to Texas. He went through the Mojave and on, sleeping at truck stops. At Amarillo, the car started hissing and steaming.

Frank pulled into a run down service station with stacks of used tires in

front. He stopped as far out of the way as he could. He opened the hood, and saw where the steam was coming from.

“Just a hose, cowboy. If I don’t have it in stock, I can get it in an hour or so.”

“Let’s look at it.”

The mechanic, actually the owner, popped the lever on the radiator cap. It hissed. He put a large wet towel on the radiator and broke the cap loose.

He looked at the hose. “Don’t have that one.” He got on the phone and asked about one. “She has a Gates for \$18.45 or some Chinese junk.”

“Gates.”

“She will be here in half an hour or so. We need to let this thing cool anyway. You could crack a block putting cold water in it now.”

“Have you had lunch, Don?”

“I’m Ralph. Don used to work here, and I inherited the shirt. I am about ready for lunch.”

“How is that place across the way?”

“Not great, but all right. A little more expensive than it should be, but it’s there.”

“Can I buy you lunch?”

“That would be right southern of you.” He banged on the door. “Mom, will you watch the station for lunch?”

“Ya.”

Frank and Ralph went across the street and into the restaurant. Ralph said,

“Get the number one. It’s kind of a one trick pony thing here.

A waitress who was only about 25 but already looked like she had seen better days came with menus.

Ralph said, Tina, could you get me the double cheese #1 with fries and a chocolate shake?”

“I imagine I could. And you?”

“#1 cheese. Jalapenos if you have them. Onion rings if I can, chocolate shake.”

“We can do it.”

She took off.

“She doesn’t seem too happy.”

“She married her high school sweetheart, had a baby, and then he died in a rodeo.”

“Oh.”

“It’s one of those ones you don’t get over. She had, what to her was everything, and now she and her mother have this baby to care for, and she isn’t going anywhere in life now.”

“One third of her actuarial life expectancy, and she’s already expecting nothing good in the future.”

“It’s pretty bad.”

“I have some idea what it’s like. My own problems may not be so bad.”

“What are yours?”

“I’m a computer programmer who can’t write code any more because of how I had to settle a lawsuit. So I’m moving to take over Jack’s Big Bird Ranch.”

Tina brought their burgers. They ate quietly. “Frank, that is a little place by Big Bird lake?”

“Yeah.”

“I met Jack once a long time back.”

“Working on cars?”

“Yeah. He bought some tires from me once.”

“I might want some if there are better ones in your pile than on the Buick.”

Frank paid the bill, and they went back. Ralph put the hose on, and Frank only had to give him \$20 for the part, the labor was lunch. Ralph found two wheels that would go on the Buick, and threw them in the trailer. “\$15 for both.”

Frank paid it. He got back in the car and headed down the road. Late that night, he got to the ranch. Jeremy opened the door for him.

“Frank?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m Jeremy. Your ranch hand so far.”

“I will have some work for you. I need to sleep for now.”

“Do you want some stuff unloaded?”

Frank went to the library, where there was very little. “This is going to be the study/office same as it was. I want to put the office stuff here. My desk looking out the window with my chair behind it and the file cabinets over there. Probably you will want me to help with that.”

“Got a hand truck and a dolly, so I can do that if it won’t keep you up.”

“OK, if you want to.”

“The rest of this stuff?”

“Kitchen stuff in the kitchen. If you have inspiration about how to organize it, do so, and put post it notes on the doors and drawers to say what is in them. Tool boxes in the tool room. We don’t want them out in case it rains.

Put all the bedroom boxes in the bedroom across from mine. You are using the 3rd one, right?”

“Yes.”

“So things you don’t know what to do with, put in the living room. Al has you on worker’s comp and all that?”

“I just call in my hours.”

“OK. I’m going to sleep. Don’t be too noisy, and we will figure some things out in the morning.”

Frank hit the shower and went to sleep.

* * *

In the morning, Frank went to the kitchen still wet from the shower, and made omelets, pancakes and cinnamon rolls. There was no bacon or sausage so he just had to make do. He got in the little loader, and ran around the perimeter. He went inside, and found the mail, a garbage can full, and the phone, which had a full mailbox of 200 or so messages. He sorted through the mail, throwing out bulk rate mail unless it came from Caterpillar or Victoria's Secret. Many of the messages referred to the web site, so he got on Jack's computer to see what he could see. The first screen was a batch file called by autoexec.bat. It told Frank where everything was. The first pick on the menu was 'Read Me First.'

"Nephew, I am assuming if you started here, I must have died unexpectedly. There will be a lot of loose ends. I have left you extensive information on how to run the ranch, who you can trust, and who you cannot. There are customer lists, suppliers, and all kinds of things like that. This is a very hard part of the country to make a living in, but I have done so, and so can you. You must take care of my obligations. A man to whom respect is due always does that, please do not let me down."

Frank sorted through the mail. He threw out the junk mail, put the catalogs from companies like Cabella's and Caterpillar in a box, and sorted the

personal mail alphabetically. He began listening to the voice mail, determined to clean it out.

“May I speak to Joseph Ralls?”

“Speaking.”

“Sir, my uncle died several months ago, and left some rock orders unfilled.

I am trying to fill them as fast as possible. Would you still like the petrified wood for rock tumblers?”

“I would.”

“I’m not sure how long it will take me to pick the banks for quality material, but I will fill your order if that is what you want.”

“I would like that. We like to do lapidary work.”

“If you have a slab saw, I might find you a piece or two for that sort of thing.”

“If I could cab some of it, that would be really nice.”

“I will note your envelope, and see if I can find you something nice.”

The something nice was a lovely piece of moss agate and petrified wood that barely fit in the box. Joseph Ralls would probably not live long enough to cut all the cabochons.

Frank called some more customers, and then went to the hillside and collected the things they wanted. Jeremy wanted to go get some beer, so Frank gave him some money, and went up on the hillside and collected as

much petrified wood as he could. It got very hot, so he came back down, and called some more customers. About half just asked to have their checks shredded, but even some of those said they would consider buying from the ranch again. Frank had put a couple of loader buckets of rock on the iron table in the shop. He sorted through those, throwing the junk out a little chute that led outside.

He filled boxes for the customers who wanted rocks, and sent back checks to the ones who were unhappy. When you got a check back, it came with a discount card that said the ranch was sorry, but Jack had died while their order was pending, and they could have 20% off if they chose to order again.

By the second day at the ranch, he had made his peace with everyone on the list, and shipped 200 boxes of rocks. He got the answering machine cleared, and most of his stuff stowed in good places.

“That little outdoor cooking area outside the kitchen will do you well, nephew. It doesn't smell up the house, and it doesn't make a mess you have to clean up.”

Frank went through the contacts list. He called some of them. Rocks were very popular. He got orders, and filled them. He picked through piles of rocks, and found some he could sell.

“eBay is pretty expensive compared to our web site, but it will do some volume if you want to turn rocks into money. Just up the price to cover the fees, and when

they get their order, they will have our web site's address, so they won't need to go to eBay again. Some of them do. So what? Let eBay make some money."

Frank moved some rocks around. He put a few in the little air conditioned work area. He boxed up some that were not even ordered yet. He went out to the barn and saw the horses. Clyde, the Clydesdale, he already liked.

Rastafarian, the bronc, he did not. He called his next door neighbor, Freddie, on his west side.

"Freddie, could we sell Rastafarian at the auction?"

"We could, but I can do better. Give me 10% to sell him on the rodeo market?"

"I will."

"Jan, on your east side, wants to buy those cows. She would give you what you could get at the auction. You have like 100 acres of pasture. You can make a little bit on cow/calf if you want to learn, but really, they are just big pets if you don't have a couple sections. Jack knew it all, and he did make some money at it."

"You think I should get out of cattle?"

"Probably. Want to go to the auction tomorrow?"

"I would like to."

* * *

The auctioneer spoke some beszeebedob. A steer came in.

“A thousand pounds. That is what we count in a unit of cattle is a thousand pounds. I’ll buy him for 1220 but I won’t get him.

There were several bids, and Freddie stopped at 1220. Another rancher bid 1260, and Freddie let go.

“They are going to go a little high because people think they will get some rain, and make out. Your best bet is, you get the rain, and then let Jan graze your pasture if it comes. If it doesn’t rain, you have no grass, you have nothing to sell, and no cattle to feed.”

Another steer came in, 1250.

“The packers will have him. I want a few in the 500-800 pound range if I can. Jan is land short. She knows all you need to know about cattle, but she only has 550 acres. She will give you a thousand for stripping your pasture to dirt if it’s a good year, and 500 in a bad year. You don’t know cattle, and there is no reason for you to learn. If you want to make money, learn about oil. I’d let Jan use that pasture if I was you.”

Another steer came in, 665#. Freddie did some waving, but then he stopped. “I can’t see him at that price.”

“How do you decide?”

“Well, the gamblers think it will be a wet year, whatever. I expect an average year, which is not very good. So I work the projected profit from that, and if I cannot buy for less than that, forget it.”

A cow/calf pair came in. 1423#.

“Pay attention, Frank, this is what you are selling.”

The bids went past Freddie pretty fast.

“You might do better here than selling to me or Jan.”

“I would have to pay for hauling, also.”

“I would charge you fifty bucks. I bring my truck whenever I come here anyway.”

“What should I get for those cows and calves?”

“About 20 thousand. Now, you are into the rock thing. The hill there is worth nothing to a cattleman, which is Jan. It grows a blade of grass a week in a good spring. Get yourself out of the cattle business and sell rocks if that is what you do.”

Frank called and inquired. Jan wanted to sell the hill. She wanted a 20 year grazing lease on the pasture. Frank would still be able to cut firewood there. He could hunt and fish. Jan would get the grass. Clyde could be out there, but no beef.

Frank talked to Robert, who talked to some other people, and a corporation was formed to buy a gravel sorter. The machine itself was a piece of junk, but the investors didn't care, because they were looking to lease it for a few years and sell it to Frank. The hill itself became less than a hill at the workings of Lincoln Seismographic, a company that knew quite a little bit

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