

Praise for Love is the Coldest Whore of All:

"Reading Kirk Alex is like listening to your best friend, your oldest friend, confide in you after you haven't seen him in a long, long time."

— MARK SAFRANKO, author of *Nowhere Near Hollywood*

CHANCE "CASH" REGISTER WORKING STIFF SERIES

Paycheck to Paycheck

BOOK ONE

A NOVEL

KIRK ALEX

Blue-Collar/Working Class

If the late, great Maxwell Perkins, who worked with the likes of Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe, F. Scott Fitzgerald and James Jones, and was often referred to (rightly) as “Editor of Genius” were still around, or even someone anywhere near his integrity and ability, I’d have opted to go that traditional route myself (submitting with lit agents and/or major publishing entities).

Sadly, editors of his caliber are far and few between or even (closer to the truth) do not exist these days. It’s mostly (if not all) about *ka-ching*, the bottom line. Alas, lots of soulless sh*t gets put out there that lobbies of chain bookstores are crammed with and that I (and others who feel as I do) do our very best to avoid and sidestep.

Mr. Maxwell was one of a kind. Yes, it mattered that a book racked up numbers, generated funds, but art, as in heart-and-soul in the prose was just as integral/mattered as much—if not more so.

My option? And other writers who love and believe in books and how dire they are to our continued existence as civilized beings? These days? Only option? To go it *our* way. Yes, peeps like me, pay for professional proofing, cover design and topnotch formatting. Other than that, we put out the books: whether they be thrillers (or dabble in other popular genres), or what is considered not as in demand: Lit-Fic. Books about work. Blue-collar sweat and toil.

There are scribes out there who can’t wait to label tomes of this nature as “navel gazing,” while eagerly promoting their plot-driven/blatantly commercial tales as the only valid product (with actual worth), when in reality—far as I’m concerned—most of it is and will be deemed (in time/eventually) as downright worthless and without merit.

Are there exceptions? Of course. Too few to mention. The late Derek Raymond’s *I Was Dora Suarez* (and the rest of his crime factory series) being it. There is also Horace McCoy’s excellent noir tale *They Shoot Horses, Don’t*

They? Not many others come close or are even worth mentioning. Yes, peeps buy ‘em, airport book racks are bloated with ‘em, but so what? I equate this crap with the ever-popular hot dog. Folks consume ‘em, not for their nutritional value, merely to keep the belly from grumbling—until they can get a chance at a real meal.

These tomes, like *Paycheck to Paycheck*—in my not-so-humble opinion—is (pretty much) the only type of “fiction” that has real worth and is about *what matters to most working peeps* across the board: survival, in a world rife with *sick-with-greed, dog-eat-dog shortcut experts*, who not only break the rules every day of the week, but have the means to avoid being taken to task for it.

Not saying that this type of prose, dealing with manual labor (or even any type of 9-to-5 dead-end gig), should not be, or need-not-be interesting and keep the reader engaged, merely that classics of this nature, as in Tom Kromer’s *Waiting for Nothing*, or Jack Black’s *You Can’t Win*, or Knut Hamsun’s masterpiece *Hunger*, or George Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London*, way too often, are dissed (as stated above) as “navel-gazing,” by certified hacks who excrete their McTales the way certain fast-food chains crank out their lame-ass/pathetic burgers. K.A.

HIGH PRAISE FOR KIRK ALEX

**Throwback & Backlash:
Love, Lust & Murder Series**

“Kirk Alex gets right down to it. There’s not a wasted word. If you don’t know his work, you should.”

—Mark SaFranko, author of *Lounge Lizard*

Hush-Hush Holiday

“Good read.”

—Hidden Gems

Lustmord: Anatomy of a Serial Butcher

“Great book. Dark—yes. Grotesque—certainly. Sexually explicit—without a doubt. And the writing is excellent. Character & dialogue, is as real as it gets. A terrifying, non-putdownable horror.”

—Jeff Bennington, *Kindle Book Review*

Zook

“**Zook** was a zoo ride! All of the characters were well written and you find yourself unable to put the book down! You might even find it a little sad. ***** out of 5 stars.”

—NetGalley

Ziggy Popper at Large:

**14 Tales of General Degeneracy, of Mayhem & Debauchery – for the
Morally Conflicted & Borderline
Criminal**

“Gruesome, violent, awesome! I absolutely LOOOVEEEE Kirk Alex. I am always ready for his next book!! Extremely entertaining. A whole lot of violent, and just what I was looking for. Private detective Felix “Choo-Choo” Buschitsky and Ziggy Popper are now my two favorite characters. ***** out of 5 stars.”

—NetGalley

**nonentity
–A Rant For Those Who Can’t–
Presented as a Novel**

“This is a quick read and engrossing. I found myself wanting to know what happened. Many of the situations were funny in the way they were presented. Fast, easy read.”

—NetGalley

**BLOOD, SWEAT and CHUMP CHANGE
L.A. Taxi Tales & Vignettes**

“After reading BLOOD, SWEAT AND CHUMP CHANGE — L.A. Taxi Tales & Vignettes by Kirk Alex you understand why the American Dream needs liposuction. It’s all here: Hate, poetry, sadness, hope and the ache of an aloneness that never goes away. Belly up!”

—Dan Fante, author of Spitting Off Tall Buildings

BY KIRK ALEX

Crime Fiction:

Throwback: Love, Lust & Murder – Book One

Backlash: Love, Lust & Murder – Book Two

Ziggy Popper at Large – 14 Tales of General Degeneracy, of Mayhem & Debauchery – for the Morally Conflicted & Borderline Criminal

Horror:

Lustmord: Anatomy of a Serial Butcher

Zook

Chance “Cash” Register Tucson Working Stiff Series:

Paycheck to Paycheck

Loopy Soupy’s Motley Crew

Journey to the End of the Week

A Confederacy of Mooks

nonentity

You’re Gonna Have Trouble

L.A. Cab Exploits:

Working the Hard Side of the Street – Selected Stories/Poems/Screams

Blood, Sweat & Chump Change – L.A. Taxi Tales & Vignettes

Eddie “Doc” Holiday Contemporary Mystery Series:

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Hard Noir Holiday #4

Hammer-Slammer Holiday #5

Free Verse:

Ballad of the Red Bag Man

Love is the Coldest Whore of All

Overlapping Contradictions

PAYCHECK TO PAYCHECK

Chance “Cash” Register Working Stiff Series
Book One

KIRK ALEX

Tucumcari Press



Tucson – 2020

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ISBN: 978-0-939122-82-0 (6x9 pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-939122-83-7 (ePUB)

“A word is not the same with one writer as with another. One tears it from his guts. The other pulls it out of his overcoat pocket.”

—Charles Peguy

CHAPTER 1

Rode bike down to Labor Access on Grant, east of Stone. Heavy wrought iron bars across front window and door of the stucco bungalow. I chain the bike up, go in. Shabby inside. High counter up to my chin. Huge sign on wall:

RULES AND REGULATIONS

They tell you how to dress for the construction jobs (that pay a mere \$4.75).
What?

You saw it right. \$4.75.

That's not even minimum wage. It's less than.

You saw it right, friend.

Forty-six years old and facing this. What gives? Nothing changes. Freedom? Where? I don't see it.

There is a woman with brown/curly hair seated at a computer keyboard inside to the left. I glance at her. She doesn't notice me standing in the lobby. I look across, see a Latino construction worker-type or handyman/odd-job type of dude sitting in yet another waiting room on the other side of this room in the middle. I notice wrought iron bars there as well. What gives? Place is fortified like Ft Knox. Why? It's a dump.

"Can I help you?" the woman says, walking up.

"I'd like an application form."

"Sure," she says. Hands me one. Only I really don't want the application or anything resembling one, not for the wages they're offering. It's a temp outfit. Daily work for daily pay. What their ads say in the classifieds. Doesn't make it any easier to take. What to do? Bro's been buying the groceries since December (and I wonder if he's tired of it by now). He must be.

Do I want to work for nothing?

Woman hands me the application form. I notice a healthy backside on her. Couldn't be helped. She's tall, too. Not glamorous in any way, but the enticing *culo* is there. She says I should finish reading the sign on the wall.

I nod. Thank her. She returns to the other side to talk with the Latino worker through the barred window. A second Latino joins in and they talk about something.

My head is swimming, dizzy feeling. Frankly not feeling too good, the prospect of having to work for a nothing wage like \$4.75 in 1997. So rode the bicycle back to the house. Heated up some stew. Pulled on the hammer (out of boredom).

CHAPTER 2

Fifteen after 10 in the a.m. Waiting for Bro to show. Stays with his old lady most of the time. Kid likes to sleep-in. Does not like to get up before 9 or 10. And without a bike (at least) to get around I don't get around.

When I got here there were three old bikes in the small front yard, in sorry/beat-up shape, but I was able to get around on one of them, a mountain bike (creaky, old; wobbly wheels, all that; they all have wobbly wheels), but you do the best you can. Well, finally the seat comes off and, not having any money coming in, I thought I'd take the seat off one of the other bikes, a girl's bike, but that didn't work, tried the other; that didn't work, either. Problem with posts: too small or too thick. Had a bolt break on me as I attempted to tighten the thinner post taken off the yellow bike, etc., and so now I can't get around until that is replaced. It would take but a couple of bucks to buy, but when you don't even have that. . . . Bro offered to go to the bike shop with me and pick one up. Okay, but here it is going on 10:30 and still no Bro.

So much time is wasted this way. Get a late start like this and there goes the day, baby. Lazing around is one thing, perhaps not such a bad thing when you're young, but at 46 I don't have that many days to throw away. Do I?

The need to find work remains. Should be/must be the priority. And it is. Think about finding a job, all else is secondary. Got to find some kind of job, got to rent my PO box and pay the \$16 owed the typesetter—and not only that, finish up with the final correction. Start saving up money for the printing. Got to think about it this way—or else it ends up a pipe dream. Tunnel-vision. The only way. It doesn't matter what others think (or don't). You're on your own, with your agenda to get things done. Chandler's old lady never thought much of his writing. Remember this: It's always your immediate family, your friends, who are not going to think much of your work. The way it always goes. Not that it matters, as you have dealt with it your whole life. It goes on/will go on.

You are on your own. Always have been. Do your work, do your best—and forget the rest. Do the kind of work that you'll be proud of.

Having said that, I must admit it always amazes me when I see the low-grade crap people go for: Bruce Willis movies/the *Star Wars* idiocy/*Jurassic Park* crap/*Beverly Hills Ninja*—stuff that makes me want to puke. But there it is, enough idiots will plunk down their hard-earned money for the tripe.

Go figure.

Like Bukowski said: They want lies. Beautiful lies. Give them their beautiful lies. They don't know any better.

Bro said to me: "Why don't you write something like the *X Files*?"

X Files? That shit? *It's shit! Don't you know it's shit?* It's grade school stuff. It's written for 7th graders, you *nitwit*! Can't you see that?

And then: "Why don't you write something like *The Usual Suspects*?"

What? It's hack writing. The guy who wrote it couldn't create art if his life depended on it. Plot-driven/formula writing is hack writing. None of it is believable. But how do you explain it to the moronic public? Just like Tarantino writing about hardcore criminals. Can't believe a word of it. I walked out on *Reservoir Dogs*. *Pulp Fiction* I saw only because a friend of Bro's from his art class (whom Bro put up for a while here because the dude had no place to stay) had a copy and I was, more or less, *goaded/pushed* into seeing it. Out of politeness, and to get the young alkie fool off my back, said: "All right. I'll watch it."

Bullshit. That's what Hollywood is. Idiots and assholes peddling their *sleight-of-hand crap* to the moronic audiences.

And then you've got the ones who like to walk around saying they'd like to write (as a hobby). What? *What was that?* Hobby? Never heard of it. *Love it, or get the fuck away and shut the hell up.* Even crap tv shows have hard hours behind them. It takes a certain skill to be a hack even. And then I see the crappy/mindless videos they like to watch. They don't read (but want to write; talk about it). Watch the worst mindless garbage around. They can't even discern quality from dreck, but have deluded themselves into thinking they know exactly what they are talking about. They know what's good/know quality—but never bothered to delve into it.

It takes a bit of patience to sit through Akira Kurosawa or Vittorio De Sica or Truffaut, or even (some of) Peckinpah. . . . (Note: with a few exceptions, movies aren't worth the time. Not much holds up, not much works.) Give me a choice between a so-called well-made flick or the novel it was based on—I will, always, take the novel. Case in point: *Leaving Las Vegas*. Not a bad film, but could not touch the book/*could not touch John O'Brien's words*.

Kinda at the mercy of Bro here—in that I can't get the hell out of the apartment without transportation. He's got the only car, and he's usually over at his old lady's.

Did manage to replace the seat on the mountain bike, did manage to also find a bolt (on the yellow bike) and use it to tighten the seat post. Then it was on to attempting to fix the flat tire. Got the inner tube off. Filled a bucket with water and ran the tube through. Took about thirty damn minutes to locate the leak. Dug out the patch kit to discover that the cement glue was dry; *the tube containing it was dry*. Thought about using Super Glue, but nixed that idea. Phoned Bro's old lady at her place to find out he was out. So she said.

6:03 p.m. as of this writing. So that's the way the day went, wasted. Did take a nap earlier in the afternoon, read (re-read actually) *Hank: Life of Charles Bukowski*. Nothing left. Killed two fleas. Discovered two fleas on the sofa beside me and crushed them. Sons of bitches are tough. Yessir. Crushed them. Flicked them into oblivion.

But yes, without wheels this guy ain't goin' no place, *Señor*. So here I sit and sit. Sometimes I pace and pace. Heat finally dropping at this point. Dropping slowly. Was close to one-hundred today.

So that's how the days are spent in the "Old Pueblo." Will I get used to this mid-size town? We'll see. I could use a place to hang out, some activity. In Venice there was the Boardwalk (even though the locals, the LA a-holes were everywhere), but at least during the winter months the place was terrific. No one around. Solitude. You could ride your bike for miles and miles without hassle. Here . . . here there's a park one can go to and rollerblade or ride a bike, only it's a few miles from the house. Can't keep hanging around Bro's friends (the kid is 12 years my junior and his friends and I don't always relate). I don't

always relate to people who walk around being “positive,” when they don’t have an inkling *what truly being positive* means. Peeps who walk around putting a swell spin on everything I just don’t get. Sometimes life is good, sometimes it isn’t. Face it in an honest way, or get the hell off with the BS. Some don’t get it.

Any chance of being in a relationship with a woman in this town? Don’t know. Too many people with problems, too many divorced chicks, too many leftovers. I don’t care for leftovers. Someone else’s leftovers, someone else’s scarred females. Never interested me. The one and only time I set foot inside a bar in Tucson was last week when Bro and I stepped into the Red Garter at noon-time to inquire about the impending **Tyson/Holyfield** re-match. We were told, by the barmaid, that they hadn’t planned on ordering it. Too expensive. Not enough people show for these things.

What?

And then later on in the day we find out that the fight had been postponed for a couple of months. But yeah, the only time I set foot inside a bar in this town. Could be I ought to try it more often (as soon as I start working). If I can get a job.

Am I ready to write this place off? This soon? No. Do have a library card at this point; have been checking books out. Read Ava’s (Gardner) autobiography. A pitiful life and a pitiful person. The writing so bad I was tempted to fling the book at the farthest corner of the living room. Enough to irk. You got the feeling she was one troubled woman. Not much there. That face, and she was beautiful, was all there was to her. Too bad. There it is. On the other hand, read an excellent book on Stephen Crane by Mark Sufrin.

Somehow I always end up with other people’s dogs. Back in the late ‘80s I took care of my friend T.’s three dogs. And here in Tucson I’ve got this mixed chow/basset hound with short legs belonging to Bro’s girlfriend’s daughter.

CHAPTER 3

Spent the day hanging vinyl banners for minimum wage. Hopped on the bicycle this Saturday morning at 7 a.m. and rode the bike up Speedway to Alvernon, and then over to Broadway and up to Kolb. Say about 8-miles from here. These white vinyl banners were 3' x 10'. There were three hundred of them. The shop owner: flaky but decent Born-Again type in his 20s named Philo, ran the printer, while the rest of us: a Nam vet named Ry, Philo's brother-in-law Indio, who was from LA and looked like a banger (with the short hair, cutoffs, gray wifebeater and prison-made tat across his chest), and I hung them on wires strung across the ceiling.

Then I got to meet Philo's father: tall, Hispanic gent. Lean/weathered. Former construction worker. All good people. Also Philo's Mexican wife showed with their 2-year old son.

So we hung wire across the ceiling, like so many clotheslines. Had clothespins hanging from the lines and this was how we hung the signs to dry. One guy would be on the ladder, another guy would carry the freshly-printed sign from Philo's printer to the guy on the ladder, who would hang them. We switched off every twenty-minutes, took turns. Philo even let us have over an hour for lunch; the guy had ordered a couple of pizzas and sodas for us. Like I said, these are decent gestures. So, no complaints on this score.

How many employers would have done that? Later on in the day he was also telling me about his Born-Again status. It's okay. Whatever gets you through the day. When he asked, told him the Ten Commandments suited me. The Golden Rule made sense. When he pressed what I was raised as, I declined to comment. Don't know why I refused to go down that road, but I did. He said it wasn't that big a deal for him to know anyway.

Truth was, we hadn't been raised as anything. Truth was, I'd spent most of my life thinking I was agnostic (when I didn't lean entirely toward being

atheist). Most of the time I wasn't sure about any of it when it came to religion and just plain didn't give a damn. If the "Almighty" existed, that was fine (didn't quite explain the reason behind all the heavy misery and pain that went on in life, but okay), and if the Big Honcho had never been there to begin with, that pretty much suited me as well, only because it explained all the shit that has been going on since the beginning of time and further fortified what I felt all along: *There was no such thing as Mr. Big*. But why go into it with a Born-Again dude like this and cause trouble?

Christianity? Had nothing against it, or Judaism or Islam or Buddhism—or even anything against the other world's great religions. People needed their crutch, just as I needed mine: Books and writing. With some it was therapy that kept them going, with others it was running or pumping iron or cycling, raising rabbits or bee-keeping, gardening or boating. So be it.

All three of my sisters believed in Christ. Nothing the matter with it. JC's tenets made good sense to me, but I was making a couple of bucks and didn't want to rock the boat by getting into it. And besides, I kept my mouth shut when it came to religion most of the time. It was a good topic to stay clear of, politics was the other one. Bottom line? *You can have 'em both*.

This guy prints ball caps here/T-shirts/sweatshirts, etc., banners. The only drawback, and it could be on the serious side: paint fumes/paint thinner fumes/lacquer thinner fumes were incredibly strong—and we were not getting any fresh air at all, no circulation—unless we left the garage door open in the back, but due to the wind we could not for most of the day. Ended up with a real bitch of a headache as a result. There's got to be a mask that I can buy; got to be something. He'd like me to be here at 7:30 tomorrow. I told him fine.

As dark clouds roiled overhead, I jumped on the bike and sped on home. And here I am. As soon as I reach the gate, walk into the front yard, Nellie the dog goes wild, excited to see me. I pet the dog. She's rolling on her back by now. Play with her. Check her water. See that it could be cleaner. Empty it, replace it with fresh water from the yard hose, and I go in.

Kick the sneakers off. Get the tight-fitting socks off. It feels freeing to have them off. Drink a cup of cool purified water, and here I sit at the typer. The print shop gig ends Monday. Okay. They did say it was going to be *temporary*.

Fine. At least I'm working. Even though I'm aching all over: feet/back/shoulders, but it's a good feeling that one gets from putting in a full day's work.

And now to heat up some of that good ol' stew and wash down with milk a couple of doughnuts afterwards and I'll be set. Meant to stay clear of effing doughnuts, especially after they landed me in the hospital in the early '90s in LA: doughnuts and lack of sleep during the six-month period while driving the cab in order to scrape together enough of a budget to make a second flick—that fell apart in the end: the project, as well as my own health. Did get my health back eventually; returned to running and doing weights, ab work.

Sweet tooth has been an issue my entire life, though, real problem, even when jogging and lifting weights to stay fit; pastries/ice cream/candy. The “monkey” on my back. We got it from our mother. All five kids got it from her. Genetics. Only why blame her?—when all I'd had to do was stay away from it.

No denying it feels good to have a few bucks coming in; hopefully enough to rent that PO box and send the typesetter what I owe her. Amen.

CHAPTER 4

Got pink-slipped Tuesday. Worked eight hours. Girl and I were cut loose. Job was done. No longer needed us. The way it works in business. Instead of showing me how to print, the guy hires someone with experience and I'm out the door. *The way it is.*

Monday we had worked twelve-hours, Hoss. Twelve long hours. By the time I reached home every bone in my body was aching. For that I was paid \$60. Cheap-ass state if you're the employee. On the other hand, if you're the employer you've got it made. Arizona is an employer's heaven. It's fucked if you have to work for five-bucks an hour (and some places don't even pay that), but a measly four-bucks and seventy-five cents per.

So now that the gig is over, where to next? Not sure. I do have enough to rent a PO box for six months and pay off the typesetter. But what do I do in the near future? Need to find my own place to live. Time will eventually run out for me, I'm sure of it. Sadistic Sadie has mood swings every week—and a convenient way of pointing the finger at others and blaming them for her unhappiness. Have been tolerant for Bro's sake. (Moodie Sadie is Bro's GF, who does not live here with us, but has a strong tendency to pull his strings). Bro loves her and takes it.

OK, is my consensus on this. Take it. Because you have to, but I sure as hell don't and won't. I'm not the one emotionally attached to her, homie. Been there once, years before; lived with a controlling, *know-nothing/know-it-all ballbuster*, and refused to take it and it damned near decimated me when we (both) shat all over the relationship and flushed it away—as that is all you can do when love turns to excreta. Flush it. It's painful. It's excruciating. It's agony like no other. You either (see it for what it is) and expel it—or it crushes you.

I'll keep looking for work, but this place, Tucson, may not be the place (ultimately) for me. Not sure yet. Will give it a fair shot. I need rain, wet

weather. Too much sun fries people's brains; too much sun is draining (just ask any LA loon about that one).

So much for my career in the screen-printing field. On to bigger and better endeavors. One thing I did do last night on the way home from work to lift my spirits was to stop by the ABCO supermarket and pick up a steak, a slice of French garlic bread, tub of Breyer's ice cream, and a box of dog biscuits for Nellie. Got home and had a feast. Filled the belly with choc chip ice cream afterwards. Behave like a glutton at times, to compensate for the measly peanut butter (and banana) lunches I had during the last few days.

It's back to moderation now. Got to get my head together and find a job, something. Keep looking. Hold on to the confidence. This last place at least might be used as a local reference.

CHAPTER 5

You've got some women, certain types who seem to get the PMS-attack every goddamn week. With women, plenty that is, they have their crankiness once a month, and with others it's every damned week; unhappiness, etc. It wouldn't be so bad if they didn't take it out on people around them, but of course they do. Ready with the finger-pointing, ready to blame *you* for their unhappiness. Like Sadie, couple of days ago. Couldn't wait to dump on me.

The phone rings. I pick up. It's the moody twat with the mental issues. Had to do with Bro spending time with our folks, being there on Mother's Day, etc. We were born poor. Old man was a cabinet maker his whole life; old lady did blue-collar work here and there, when she had to, but was stay-at-home usually. Family was from Sarajevo originally. We'd emigrated to the US from Belgium back in '61.

Folks, and my Bro had left LA for Tucson back in the mid-80s, as it was cheaper to live. Our sister Z. was married and living in the Midwest by then. Folks were living in a bungalow in (rife with crime) South Tucson, because it was all they could afford.

Sadie was on my case because I never bothered to go down to see them, in that it was always my brother, bla-bla-bla. Maybe she had a point; and maybe, just maybe I had my reasons for not wanting to have anything do with the folks. Take thirteen years of brutality from him, years of mental abuse from her —and what have you got? Defective kids who grew up to be defective adults. That's our lot; my present state. And if it hadn't been for the writing and books, I'd have ended up a loose-cannon psycho: OD'ed or in jail. But now, *this shrew*, Sadie, who hasn't got a clue, is telling me how to live my life and what I should do; and me feeling like picking up a pile of dog waste and just shoving it down her throat for being so overbearing and easy with the advice and answers.

I ended up in Vietnam because of the old man; ended up with all sorts of problems due to *what we were put through*, and this bitch (on meds, no doubt) was there, on the phone, yelling at me and telling me what to do and how I should live my life.

It took me ten years to get over losing a woman I loved, a woman I lost because I couldn't get my act together; could never ever make a dollar with my words, or get anything going creatively; all those years of suffering and dues, struggling and starving, dealing with night-flies, pimps and their stoned hookers while hacking at night; all of it, dues, years of dues. Am in my mid-40s and can hardly see a light, a flickering candlelight at the end of this dark tunnel, and this mentally unbalanced overbearing cunt was going to tell me what to do? ***Fuck no! You don't tell me shit, bitch!***

But I bit my tongue. For Bro's sake. Bitches like that are ballbusters, emasculators. You let them get away with that bullshit and before you know it you're no longer a man. It wouldn't have been any skin off my nose, but I kept from telling the shrew where to go for M.'s sake.

How does a man put up with this kind of moody behavior month-after-month? Year-after-year? I don't get it. Why would any man subject himself to this kind of insanity, mistreatment? Why? Like Russ Meyer said: *Got to ask yourself if the **fucking you get** is worth the **fucking you get**?*

Have your mood swings, baby. Just don't lay it on me. Because I don't need that noise ruining *my* day. Walk around being unhappy all you want, just don't fuck with my mind about it. I don't want it. Have no use for it.

CHAPTER 6

Got the radio blasting rock while I polish off a 6-Pack of *Frugal Joe's Ordinary Beer*. Bro bought it Friday at Trader Joe's. Went up there with him, but Bro paid.

So drinking this brew by my lonesome this Sunday, smoking a cheap cigar, while sitting on a flimsy, green plastic crate on the patio in the front yard. The dog is napping, the sun is out. A bird or two about. One of the birds swoops down and I watch it swallow (one after another) four chunks of the dog's dry dog food I had tossed out there (as the dog likes to go after the chow that way, but not this time). She dozed, while the birds had a feast.

It's a small front yard, with a five-foot wall all around, broken down bicycles in evidence, broken old mirror frame (from a dresser, I imagine), and some cardboard boxes falling apart (due to rain last week), with the usual junk in them: old bicycle tire, roach powder, etc., and me sipping beer and pulling on the stogie and thinking: *Hell, nothing ever changes*. Forty-six years old with an old bike that isn't mine, an old dog that isn't mine, a small room—that isn't mine, in a duplex apartment in someone else's name. Ten years ago it was the same thing: Toby's place in North Hollywood. And ten years *before* that?

What's it about?

Can't even get interested enough to hop on the bicycle and take it around the block.

New kid in town. . . . The Eagles. The one I lived with and had my heart shredded by years ago loved the Eagles. It's on right now. Of all the times for them to play the song. Actually, it's one of the few things of theirs I liked. Always thought they were overrated. But, as I said, she loved the band.

Man, the blues are creeping up on me. It's times like this those suicidal thoughts are not far behind. Could it be the beer? Not entirely. I know what it

is: no one to love, no woman in my life (and not just any woman would do). No moody man-hater. *Thanx, but no thanx*. Could go for a warm-hearted female with a bit of intelligence. A good soul. Asking too much.

There aren't many women left like that (as mentioned above) in this world. Way too many have a chip on their shoulder, or worse: are on meds/got the roving eye/are juicers/pill-poppers/sluts/manic-depressives; it goes on. So you *pine*—you're not sure for what. You pine. Yearn. The yearnings are there. Forever there. This is what had finally killed Margaux Hemingway. Loneliness. No one to love. No one to trust, to feel safe to be with.

Was she a juicer? Not easy to live with? It was implied in that doc I saw. Am I judging? Do I have the right? *No—and no*. All I know is when I first laid eyes on her years ago in a lame flick entitled *Lipstick* did my jaw drop, and I thought: *My god. What a knockout. What a gorgeous woman. What a babe*. Why can't I meet and fall in love with someone like this?

And then the truth comes out: all the problems/ups and downs. No different from Elvis and his troubled existence. Reminders in both cases: Don't judge a book by its cover. Not always easy to do, is it?

Sad, is how I'd finally felt upon reading of her demise. Heartbroken. *How could it be?* How could it have ended so tragically for someone with so much going? The height/the curves/the glorious smile and all that natural athleticism—plus the *Hemingway name*. *How?* Troubled childhood. Family issues. Look at the way it ended for Ernie. Shotgun blast to the face.

Take another pull (of brew).

Sure.

CHAPTER 7

Should see this room of mine (was actually a bedroom of mine). Bro said I could have it. “Make it your own.” And I have. Got a small white dresser Bro picked up for me for \$5 (yes, five dollars; at a yard sale). And there’s my writing desk: 3 & 1/2 feet long, foot-and-a-half wide. Picked up at a garage sale for \$20.

There’s another white dresser against the far wall (particleboard, the cheap crap, but it serves a purpose). Three drawers, two book shelves above the drawers. And to the left a large space about four-feet long. I’ve got part of my book library in there, cassettes: video as well as music.

Used goods. The kind of life it’s been. But, no problem, as long as one has a place for one’s typewriter, the way I see it. The way it’s always been.

Should see my walls here: got all sorts of newspaper clippings taped up, late success stories (like Mem Shannon, the New Orleans cabbie who is doing fine as a Blues recording artist). Got items on the Bosnian war up. One heading reads: RETURN TO SARAJEVO SHOWS FEW WINNERS IN WAR. One story on Haris Pasovic: ENSURING CULTURE SURVIVES AMID THE HORRORS OF SARAJEVO.

Some framed photos above that (taken years ago back in LA at the LAX Hilton during a horror film convention). One is of Chubby Elston in *Bloodsucking Geeks* blood-stained garb, asking Roddy McDowel to autograph a color flyer from said flick.

Photos of Bro M., sister Z., her young daughter J. feeding ducks at the arboretum in LA. Photos of Z., her hubby W., their daughter J. taken at the South Gate place.

Honestly, this feels like the end of the line for me. Running on empty. So help me. It isn’t that I have lost interest in writing, but simply loss of interest in

life itself. Have been functioning on Auto Pilot for so many years now. So many years.

CHAPTER 8

By myself as usual this Friday night. What else is new? Thought I'd mention it. What else did I expect? Can't relate to Bro's friends/associates/acquaintances. Would rather spend time working on the *Streets of L.A.* cab book.

My office is this bedroom. Got my papers all over the floor, scattered. Like to see where everything is. Will have to do for now—until I can find larger quarters, more space, add shelves, all that.

Jazz station on. They play the best: Dexter Gordon/Miles/Paul Desmond. Love Desmond's smooth alto sax. Chet Baker's cool trumpet playing has a way of soothing the soul. It helps to pass the time. Sure would be nice to have that old Cordova with me now. What can you do?

I'd driven out of LA with it, pulling a rented trailer. Engine blew outside of Palm Springs. Had it towed to Banning, where I'd had to relinquish the chronically troubled gas-guzzler and traded the rented trailer in for a small van. Got rid of a large pile of revisions of a horror novel, as well as the second PI novel that I had spent 2 1/2 years on and ten drafts. I do regret destroying the pages, because sometimes that stuff can come in handy. If for no other reason than proof, such as: "Yes. I wrote them. Created them from scratch. It's all original material. Take a look at the various versions."

Stopped by here on the way to Bowling Green via Texas. Spent a couple of days in Bowling Green. Found it too provincial/confining, and made it back to the Old Pueblo. Ended up owing the rental company a couple of bucks. Bro knew the manager and it got resolved.

It was a relief. The Cordova had been the worst used car I'd ever owned. Bought for \$800 back in South Gate, CA from my brother-in-law's mom before she and her common-law-hubs left for Ohio to live near her son W., my likable bro-in-law that I had always gotten along with and love like a brother.

With the gas-hog Chrysler it had been one thing after another: steering column/window on driver's side wouldn't roll up/computerized system under the hood, et al. Just a pain/serious drain on my wallet. Left it with the truck rental place and let the young woman who worked there keep it. Looked like she had one of the male's there lusting after her (and it was evident she'd be able to get the engine repaired without having to spend a dime). Felt good to be able to gift the car to her, it did. But here I am, missing it, or rather the wheels to move around in.

Car or no car, still need to find work. A job. Something. Buy a used short down the road a bit. Received letter from Elston. Elston was the friend I'd driven out to KY to visit with, him and Byford and his wife Edna. Good friends (from the time they all lived in LA). Miss some of the good souls. My friends. Don't get around much, unless it is on the bicycle. Sounds familiar. Have been down this road before.

Have I not?

What else is new?

You're 46 and still haven't got a pot to piss in. The old story.

CHAPTER 9

Got up, showered this morning. Filled the dog's water tray. No bucks for dog food and so fried her some potatoes. The dog loves potatoes. And then later on in the day also let her have some pasta. Went crazy for it (although I suspect the stuff might give her the runs). Like I said, no \$\$\$ to buy dog chow.

Spent the day working on the taxicab ms. When do I stop tampering with this damned book? When is enough simply ENOUGH (ALREADY)? Want to do my best, that's all. The book will be \$14.95 after all. Shouldn't it be the best one can possibly do?

Yes.

But you've got other books to work on. Well, the others won't be as problematic. . . .

You sure about that?

Certain.

We'll see. . . .

CHAPTER 10

6:30 p.m. Got a jazz station on. Chicago Bulls playing Utah Jazz for the championship up in Utah and me not giving a rank fart. Do I care whether Jordan will leave or stay? Do I care if millionaire Coach Jackson will leave or stay?

Don't give a damn what these over-paid athletes do. Sick and tired of the NBA/baseball/football/tennis. All of it. It's about \$\$\$! *Theirs, not mine.*

Rode the bicycle out to the park on Alvernon earlier. Huge park. Went around twice. Hardly any people out there on the bike path. Tennis courts were busy.

Like I said, quiet out there. Where do the women go in this town? The venice boardwalk in LA would have been packed. What gives?

That's Tucson. You wanted it quiet. You got quiet.

Fried more potatoes, onions. Fed the dog. And so here I sit in my room (study?), curtains parted. Nice sunny day out there. Am at the typer. Unable to finish up the cab thing. Blocked. BLOCKED. It's a bitch. Have very little left to do on the book and I CAN'T BUDGE. DON'T GET IT. Would love to finish it.

They're playing blues on the same station. The loneliness follows everywhere you go. It was like this in La La Land, and it's the same here in Tucson, AZ. It was like this in Chicago; Junction City, Kansas; Vietnam; LaFayette, Ind. No matter where you go, loneliness follows.

Bought the Sunday paper. Went over want ads. Nothing in there for me. And I mean I went over the classified section carefully. Nothing. Other than dishwasher that am qualified for. Some qualification. Nothing changes. Here I am at my age staring at dishwasher as a possible career move. After all the dues, after all the goddamn dues: **DISHWASHER.**

So much for promise and potential.

CHAPTER 11

Received a postcard from my Danish friend Inga yesterday. (Wrote about my too-brief meeting and falling for my gorgeous friend back in LA in '93 in the *Gimme My Change* short story and free verse collection.) Postcard was a photo of Inga skiing in France. Was happy to hear from her (after months of nothing). Am always thrilled to get word from good ol' Inga. So sat down and wrote her a long letter.

Re-wrote resume. It's at two pages presently. Was forced to put one together. Have not been able to land a job and thought I had better compose a good resume. Will have to polish it for yet a third time. The way it goes. A must. Got to find work, or else *Streets of L.A.* never gets off the ground.

Going on 8 p.m. as I sit in my room at the typer. Remained blocked regarding final fine-tune regarding the anthology. Got other manuscripts to get going on as well. Must get on with it. Lack of funds is holding me back. The way it's always been.

Got Trisha Yearwood on the cassette. Love the sound of that voice. What a voice. Enough to make a grown man cry. That's Trisha Yearwood for you.

CHAPTER 12

Re-wrote the resume for the fourth or fifth time (can't recall). Not only that, may need yet another re-write. And after all that still unable to land a job in this town.

What gives?

Don't ask. Don't know.

Got a jazz station on. Soothing. Nice. I like it. Did not go out today. Sometimes I stay in this room and write and read so long and hard that the eyeballs begin to ache, while other people are out there having a blast, living.

Saw a bit on Lucy Lawless, that charismatic beauty, who'll be doing GREASE on Broadway. She sang a bit on *Entertainment Tonight*. Pretty voice. But those eyes, those blue eyes . . . can't say enough about those eyes and face. What a gorgeous lady. (Does remind me of Inga.)

What's my point? Life and living: those who are out there participating, and those (like yours truly) who aren't. Lucy seemed to be having fun, the best time of her life. Then watched an entertainment show on 52. A Latina singer named Jessica, another looker, came out and strutted her stuff, sang her heart out—and, she too, was having a blast.

What's my point?

I spend too much time in this here damned room typing and reading—when I should be out there living, laughing and doing something. No car. No way to get around. You still got access to that bicycle. Could have gone out to the park. Yeah.

I'm 46, and at 46 do enough bike riding. Went up to the Bookmark yesterday, did I not? And that guy was there with his publisher, that cowboy writer named B., signing copies of his reissue, a book about a cow horse. And then rode the bike over to Reid Park on Alvernon. Went around the park—in the

sweltering Tucson heat—and came home. So, I do get out some. Yes, but you don't mix, don't talk to anyone but Bro and the dog.

It's a lifestyle. Lived this way for years. How can I change at this late stage of the game? Ain't much for socializing like some folks. Just don't like mixing it up that much.

The damn dog is barking again. She barks at anything. Other dogs may bark across the street and this dog here will bark back. And it goes on, back-and-forth—over nothing. This dog here, Nellie, sleeps during the day, and then at night when it's my turn to get some shuteye she gets frisky and starts making noise. The way it is around here. But she's well taken care of, fed, all that. First thing in the morning I check her water bowl, make sure there's water in it. Look at the food bowl. She's taken care of—only I just wish she'd ease up on the late night and early-morning barking. What can you do? That's the way dogs are. They like to bark.

CHAPTER 13

Last day & 1/2 worked for that young guy up at the screen printing shop. Going out of business. The overhead (and toot) did him in. Yes, plenty of what money he took in went up his nose. Dude had a habit of going out and staying away during working hours quite a bit, and returning with the sniffles. *Nose-candy problem.* His bag, no doubt; his business—only I did feel bad for the father who didn't seem to have a clue that his son was squandering his funds this way. The old man, spent decades working construction, backs his son on this print shop venture and all for naught. Pissed away by his young offspring. Yep, the guy who was always on the brink of discussing religion, could not wait to convert peeps. *Born-Again.* Wonder what his pastor might've thought of the kid's cocaine *jonze*. Hey, neither here nor there. Like I said.

I spoke with his father for a bit toward the end. Light bill/phone kicked their ass; overhead (according to the dad; never aware that his son had a drug issue).

"We should have shut down two months ago," says his father to me. I understood. Philo has sold off most of the equipment. He may still do iron-on T-shirts out of his apartment with the wife. The way it goes. I understood. Have had a couple of setbacks myself, you see? I surely did understand. And so I helped clean up the large shop.

For Monday I was paid \$27; for yesterday was given \$40. And for today (worked about 3 hours) was given some T-shirts. Was glad to have the shirts, as am out of clothes. So, OK. That was that. While there yesterday, at the guy's apartment met his wife (their 2 & 1/2 year old son running around: kid was whacking away at the coffee table in the living room with a spatula). Hey, if you ever attempted anything like that in the family I was raised in you would've been left black & blue. Just sayin'.

Anyway, we moved his computer and some related furniture to his apartment near 1st. and Ft. Lowell. They live on the second floor. The flight of

stairs that we go up is outside, along left side of the building. He brings out bottles of Miller High Life. Hard to resist free beer. But then shoves this tape on the Crucifixion into the VCR. Out of the blue. Both are constantly talking about Christ.

Okay. Fine. I respect people's religious beliefs—but how about respecting mine? I'd mentioned I was not religious. Hoped that would've been the end of it. With reasonable and relaxed folks it would've ended there. But not with these two. *Proselytizing every second of every minute of every hour*. Let an opportunity go to waste? God forbid. This type was on your back like skunk stench. And just as impossible to shake.

I don't like being rude, will go out of my way to keep from being impolite. So help me. Granted, there were times assaults like this were tough to take. I find it difficult to believe that anything like an *omnipotent being* ever existed; that someone/anyone could be powerful enough to have created not only this planet and its insane and unstable beings, but the entire universe—a universe, mind you—that goes on *forever*. But I prefer to keep this notion to myself. I got no proof either way, and never claimed to have solid answers. All I say is this: ***Live and Let Live***. Your beliefs make you happy? Keep you going? *Fine*. Don't bend my ear and try to convince me to accept your *fairytale*s. Only that's not how it works with certain peeps.

He can't seem to get off this religious kick he's on. And then his wife (not as bad as her hubs) brings it up. Give me a break. Please.

And so out of politeness I sit there watching this thing on the Crucifixion. And what bugs me totally, these people have no regard/respect for other religions. Only *their religion* is *valid*. *What the fuck?* This kind of attitude irks me, baby. Even with the free beer. Then mamma's-boy starts complaining about a headache after only *three beers*:

"Imported beer never makes me sick. It's only domestic beer that does it."

We'd been drinking Millers. What gives?

"Never got sick from Miller beer," he says.

Crybabies. Man, I'm tired of it. Sick of this bullshit. I'm out two grand/out a car/most of my belongings; ain't got a pot to piss in and here I am still holding

my head up. *What gives?*

So this morning rode the bike up. Eight goddamn miles to Kolb and Broadway to the shop. Got there at a quarter of ten (said he wanted to start at *ten*). I make it a point to show up on time. *He's late*. Is it any wonder the guy went out of business? But he likes to make like he doesn't care much (you see, his parents footed the bill; but his lack of organization fucked it all up—and so now he's like me: *out of work and looking for a damn job*).

He comes in, says he doesn't feel like working much today (since it's his wife's day off at the Circle K). Great. I didn't feel like cleaning those damned screens anyway. Dangerous chemicals—and lack of proper protection. Man plays it loose with safety.

Am I being harsh? Not really. I always go in with an open mind, but when people screw up . . . and appear like fools, I can't help but call a spade a spade. So be it. And then those goddamned mood swings of his. Gotta be he never got off the cocaine. One minute he's happy, and the next he's gloomy and down and cranky. Reminds me of someone's old lady.

Hey, if you're going to be *pissed off stay pissed off*. If you like to put on this *happy-go-lucky* act you best stay *happy-go-lucky*, or buddy, am out the door and I ain't coming back. Can't tolerate that kind of neurotic behavior.

Since I hadn't been paid for yesterday's toil and sweat I bring it up.

"What are you going to pay me for yesterday?"

"Forty-dollars," says he.

I nod. Only he hasn't got it on him. What a businessman. And then the UPS truck shows up with a very important spray gun (without which screens cannot be cleaned). You get no water pressure without the spray gun. The one we attempted to use on Monday was defective. (Philo had called up the company on Monday and ordered a new one.)

So now the UPS truck is here with the gun and couple of other items and they need fifty bucks (which Philo hasn't got on him, nor a check) to pay the guy with. He tells the driver to return the following day. *It's a piss-poor way of doing business, amigo*.

The UPS truck leaves.

We load up a crappy looking bookshelf onto Philo's battered pickup (with camper shell), my bike/some computer-related materials/a dictionary, etc., CDs/cassettes. I ask what he wants for the T-shirts in the front.

"One buck," he tells me. "For the regular ones." For the quality shirts he's asking three-dollars.

I nod. "I'll buy some from you."

We agree: He'll let me have 4 or 5 shirts (one quality shirt with a collar, the rest are regular T-shirts with various logos, etc., and a couple of ball caps) in exchange for labor.

Fine.

We drive down to his place. Get the stuff out and carry it up the stairs. Am handed a beer.

Now, I'm gracious/thankful for the hospitality, but would like to pick up my forty-beans because am in dire straits. I need the money. Philo goes in the bedroom and reappears with two twenties.

I polish off the bottle, stand, thank them both for all. I walk to the door. He asks me if I'd like to come in in the morning and clean the screens.

"Not really."

"No?"

There isn't enough protective gear for the chemicals that need to be used (one of which is acid), not enough air comes in through the small window in the room that is left open just a crack. Besides, I need to go look for a real job. And I just can't take the mood swings and this little 26-year old daddy's-boy (once "heavy into drugs—until he discovered Jesus"). Man, I can't relate. Why do people have to find Jesus in order to keep clear of goddamn drugs? *WHY?* What happened to common sense?

I hop on my bike. Got a long ride ahead of me. Due east, amigo. East; South-East. I haul ass up Ft. Lowell, make it to Country Club—head south until I get to my street. Throat dry, DRY, lips parched—the Arizona desert heat. Been averaging one-hundred-degrees around here lately.

I make it to the duplex. I open the purple gate and the dog starts barking, as usual. I drop my pack on the carpet, walk back out into the yard. Hose the dog

down. She likes it. Don't know how she takes the heat. Don't know. I drink some cold water, sit a moment to catch my breath—get back out and make it to the post office to check my PO box.

Nothing. How can that be? It be.

I buy a ten-dollar money order (copyright fee for *Gimme My Change*), a large manila envelope and am back out in the heat once more. Unchain my bike and ride it on up to Reay's health food store. Buy half a watermelon/pound of dog biscuits (she's lucky Cash Register has got some money in his pocket), and some other items. I ride back to the duplex.

CHAPTER 14

Just went over the map, took a second look at the distance I'd been traveling on the bicycle up to Kolb and Broadway. Well, it looks like *ten miles*. That's one way. Surprised? Shocked? Am I? You bet. *Ten damn miles* in 101 heat. At age 46.

The people who print the *Arizona Daily Star* (and one other Tucson paper) had an opening (for a week now). *Entry level*. Fine. Problem is that (also) is miles away. Down south. Not easy to do on a bicycle when it's over a hundred. What it's been around here.

I buy the paper every day looking for work. And nothing. No luck. Got to get my own damn phone line. Problems with Bro's moody old lady (who jumped in my personal shit on Mother's day, simply because it made her feel good to do so).

This is the woman's MO. She has these moods on a weekly basis and likes to take it out on other people. Which, in my book, is utter bullshit—and have told Bro so the other day. I had kept it in for two months. I would not have even brought it up. . . .

How did it come about then? I had simply inquired of him: "How do I call over there (at his old lady's) to talk to him—without having to speak to her?" (I'm through, I have decided, with his friends/associates/acquaintances.) Tried it, and it just didn't work. I've had enough. We'd had more than our share of verbal (as well as physical) abuse at home while growing up. I don't need it from some 42-year-old chick I'm not even married to.

I have treated this woman with nothing but respect during the seven years I have known her (met her years before when the two of them lived in Venice, CA, a mere mile or so from where I had a one-bedroom at the time at Lincoln and Venice). I guess familiarity breeds abuse. Rudeness. She had been rude before (not often, as she knew better), and I had taken it in stride out of love

and respect for Bro. However, this last time she had gone way out of line, unloaded both barrels (over the phone), and then had the audacity to hang up.

I said to my brother: “*What the fuck is that? Is that civilized behavior? What the hell is going on? You want to be a Whipping Boy? That’s your business. I don’t take it because I have no use for it.*”

Wish I had the means to get the hell out of this place and situation. Stuck. Without a job or a car. Yes, Bro’s been helpful. Without him I’d be under a highway overpass right now.

Joe Cocker on the cassette. *High time we went . . .* Good ol’ Joe Cocker. A great rock tune. He belts ‘em out from the gut. Always liked Joe Cocker.

Couldn’t sleep at all last night (due to nerves, the no-job, the not knowing anyone around here; Bro’s old lady and the snide remarks). First thing I did this morning was to go out and buy a paper and a 12-Pack of *Miller High Life*. Warm. Was all they had. Beer’s in the fridge. Going to have a couple of hard-boiled eggs and then a few beers. It’s Friday.

Heard from Grunt Press. “Send a few stories,” the letter said. To what purpose? So they can turn them down (like everything else)?

CHAPTER 15

Got up this morning determined to ride out to the *AZ Star* and leave a resume. Yes, the place is ten miles away, but so what? I need work, right? Showered, got into a nice/clean blue dress shirt, clean walking shorts, etc. Combed my hair, all that. Clean shaven. Got it? Threw the orange pack on, swallowed a couple of peanut butter sandwiches (can't seem to get away from these goddamned peanut butter sandwiches). My lot, baby.

Hopped on the bicycle and rode it on down to Country Club Rd. Took that south. And it's hot out; I mean over one-hundred-goddamn-degrees—on a bike, mind. Got that? Ain't no picnic, but I figure I'm tough enough, right? Besides, got no choice. Bro's been carrying me for too long by now. Got to get on my own feet. Stand up, boy, be a man. You're a man, ain't you?

Well, yes. Get a job.

I try—but it don't work, Hoss. Tougher than hell to land a job in this burg.

I'm on Country Club, taking it south, and it's hot. Too hot, baby. But I figure I can last the ten miles out to 4850 S. Park Avenue. So I'm hustling/pedaling my ass off. Sweat pours. Throat dry, better yet: parched. Tough to breathe. Lips chapped. It's a bitch. Did I state it was over a hundred? I'm doing my best—and then hit a dead-end: Barraza-Aviation PKWY.

WHAT?

Railroad tracks, Hoss. No way to get across. And no way to go down this Parkway (because the damn thing is like a freeway). Get me? There is a bicycle path of sorts that I am forced to take that slants north-bound, which means am going North-West now. What the hell? What gives? What makes it worse, due to the heat am not exactly sure where I am exactly. The heat by now is frying this man's IQ. And no place to stop for a drink of water or to buy anything to quench this thirst. Not only that, *not only that*: for some reason, actually, same reason mentioned above, I think I'm at Interstate 10, instead of this Barraza-

Aviation Parkway. It's fucked and confusing and I don't realize any of this until I end up on Highland at Broadway.

WHAT? WHAT THE HELL?

BROADWAY? I've gone that far north now? I don't get it. And I've already covered a good ten-miles. My brain is cooking. I spot only two other people on bikes out here; everyone else is in air-conditioned cars. No one is dumb enough to be caught in this frying heat—but this out-of-his-mind scribe.

I do find Park finally, take it south for two blocks and run up against another dead-end. GODDAMMIT! Another highway, construction crew—and no way to get across. And still six miles from the AZ Star (according to the map).

No way to get across without a car.

I've had it.

Make it up Broadway, stop in at the first 7-Eleven, buy water, gulp half of it outside while leaning against the bike. I stay on Broadway, east, take it up to Kino Parkway and go north. I stay on Kino (which turns into Campbell at some point). This is part of the effing problem: the streets don't always run in a straight line, and the times they do they change names. A street might start out as one name, then become another, and go back to the original name. *WTF?* Whoever heard of such a thing? Never, in any city I've ever spent time in, have I seen this kind of lunacy.

I reach Speedway, head east.

Stop in at the post office to check my mailbox. Find a catalogue from a fancy label printer in Newport Breach, CA. Stuff that in my backpack, ride the bike to the duplex. And just barely make it. And when I reach the purple gate the dog starts barking.

She's nuts. This dog is nuts. She barks when you leave, she barks when you return. And won't stop. Dammit, I know she's happy to see me, but I'm drained/can't breathe/the heat—and she's barking. I *shush* her to shut up, but she won't hear of it. Finally, she calms down. I figure the heat must be kicking her ass as well (although she's got shade to keep in). I turn on the hose to water her down, provide a bit of respite from the sweltering temperature. She used to fear water, used to dread it, now she likes it.

After that, I go inside, turn the cooler on, drink half a tumbler of ice water, pop open a bottle of Miller High Life and bring it to my room here and sit in the chair to unburden myself to the machine.

CHAPTER 16

Once again attempted to get down to that 4850 S. Park Avenue address.

Went west on Broadway to Kino, took Kino south. Got past the railroad tracks (it's 106, mind; hot, goddamn hot). Dry throat. DRY, BABY. And not one market/liquor store around. Nothing. No way to quench one's thirst. Like being in the GD desert; and I'm pedaling along, everyone else is in air-conditioned vehicles, mind—but not me, not this individual. I need a damn job. What else can I do? Me and Bro don't hang out that much. We love each other, we're brothers after all; just don't get along too well, don't see eye-to-eye on too many things (the man doesn't appreciate literature and likes shoot 'em up mindless action films that sicken me).

I see that tripe as a waste of time, just to name a couple of things where we differ, not to mention his lady getting into my personal business two months ago, laid on the moody blues on me, let me have it; unloaded on me simply because she felt shitty. My attitude is: I ain't *married* to you, bitch; ain't the one in love with you. Take it out on someone who is. Got enough problems just trying to exist in a place where min. wage is adhered to. Yep. Go figure. They expect you to bust your ass for \$5.50. Crazy. They have got to be nuts out here (and am talking about employers and/or temp agencies). *Loco* asses. You bet.

What if you ended up starving? Homeless even?

So what, pal. That's Tucson. No wait: That's Arizona. They need to wake up in this here state. Someone is getting the mud-end of the goddamn stick here.

Where the hell was I?

By now it feels like I've been riding the bike for about eight goddamn miles, baby—and no respite. Nowhere to hide for a bit of rest, no shade, no stores to buy something for the dry throat. *Nothing*. But I'm determined to make it this time. You bet. Work. Got to find work. So I can get out of Bro's hair, get away from his "family." Don't feel like I belong with them anyway/can't relate. But

that's okay. I've got my own friends—even if they are two-thousand-miles away (some are; others are back in La La Land).

Feels like I'm about to pass out. The sidewalk is no more, by that I mean there is no more cement, am on dirt and gravel now. Glass shards/thorns/rocks; that's what this "sidewalk" consists of. But I keep right on truckin', baby. Got to make it. Could be a drinking fountain on the other side of the goddamned freeway—and that's where trepidation begins to set in. . . . Kino is an overpass now. I look below. Appears to be a freeway down there. Or is Aviation Pkwy? Feared I wouldn't be able to get across. But I do. The cement sidewalk keeps going. I go another quarter of/half mile and the sidewalk is no more, but instead dirt and gravel now. The sun is at its zenith, about to turn me into a prune. Sweat is pouring: down my back/chest/armpits. Sweat gets in my eyes. I wipe away with the T-shirt sleeves, try to; it stings.

I asked for it, didn't I? You wanted to get out to Arizona, didn't you? Well, you're here—and you're being fried alive.

I get off the bike. Gravel too rough to ride on. I-10 Interstate onramp is up ahead and guess what? There is no more sidewalk, cement or gravel. *Period.* Nothing. No way for me to get across, unless am ballsy enough to ride in the car lane and take my life in my hands. The cars through this stretch are doing 60-miles or more per, easy.

What now? What do I do? I came all this way, all this work and sweat and now I can't go any further, can't make it across—unless I want to chance getting run over by a car or truck. *Son of a bitch.* Twice it's happened to me now. *Two goddamned times.* All I wanted was a low-entry-level job at the paper.

I walk as far as I can, make it to the end of the cliff (even though it's more like a hill, a steep hill to my right; to me it's more like a cliff, because the drop down there goes on forever. There is the freeway down there, cars whizzing past.)

WHAT TO DO NOW?

I'm sick of it all. I'd come across all this way for nothing. A waste of time and energy. I'm starting to hate things about this town. If you don't have a car you ain't gettin' where you need to go. How different from LA was it? Wasn't this supposed to be a "*bicycle-friendly*" city?

I stand there a while, contemplating my situation: *the hopelessness, stupidity*. . . . Who *designed* this road anyway? And why didn't they include a sidewalk? WHY? GODDAMN THEM.

I turn the bike around and walk back along the guardrail (about a sixth of a mile), walk back to the intersection, wait for the light to change there at Ajo Way, cross Kino, head south once again on Kino, hoping I can make it across on this side of the street. Of course it isn't going to work. Same thing. I stay on the gravel and dirt until it narrows and narrows and there is nothing but a long drop down there to my left at the bottom of the I-10 and speeding cars.

And if I climb over the guardrail and attempt to ride the bicycle in the lane I risk getting crushed by a hooptie (as that lane veers off and curves south-east and the freeway below).

Do I have the guts, the crazy kind of guts to do that in order to apply for some janitorial job at the goddamn paper? *Fuck no*. I stand there to collect my thoughts, catch my breath and turn around, walk carefully to avoid a thorn bush, glass shards; to prevent losing my footing and possibly end up tumbling down to the bottom of more thorn shrubs and rocks, etc. Another shitty/useless effort. Mindless. That's what this is.

I make it back to the Ajo intersection, climb back up on the bike and ride it north, staying on Kino until I reach Broadway. I head east on Broadway, go a mile or so, find a 7-Eleven, chain the bike to a pay phone, go in. Buy a bottle of Arrowhead water and *Tucson Citizen*. I drink half the water outside.

I stay on Broadway, get to Country Club. I take Country Club north all the way to Speedway. I make it east on Speedway, get to a crossing light in front of the health food store, cross north.

It's 3:15 p.m. now. Working on my second Miller High Life. As far as job ads in the paper: not much. Must keep looking, though. Keep looking.

CHAPTER 17

7:20 p.m. Same day. Tuesday. July 1, 1997. There's a bed in here now, in this room. Not big, big enough—to take up one fourth of the space in this here small room. Will have to find space for the books and press items somehow. It's a bed made of iron, a cheapo \$250 job. Bro brought it in. He was at one of his “adopted” daughters (Sadie's married kid M.). She'd bought another bed evidently. And so the two-fifty job is here now for my use. Until I get ready to move on. Needs to be assembled. Bolts not here. Still at the other place.

Say I get lucky, the bed might come in handy. Don't know. We'll see. As always: We'll see. . . .

Was thinking earlier about “the move” out here, at the way I got myself out of one trap to get myself stuck in another. And am talking about no car, no job; being stuck. And my brother suggesting earlier: Bus Pass. And before that, made another one of his brilliant suggestions: Get a job at a car wash. This he had suggested a couple of months ago.

Car wash? What was that? I'm going to be fifty years old in four years. You got that? *Car wash?* Are you serious? Are you all there?

CAR WASH? Hey, I love my brother when he makes sense—but some of his ideas indicate the guy could have a screw loose. Yes, I hate being supported by him, and that's exactly what is presently happening. He's been carrying me ever since I got here in January. What to do? Had two grand before I left LA and a used, but decent-running car—to end up penniless and without wheels (not to mention having had to discard two-thirds of my belongings way back in Banning). Try it sometimes. Break down in a hick town like Banning without credit cards and see how it feels. It sucks.

CHAPTER 18

Can't sleep lately.

Finally dozed off at 2:00 a.m. last night. Leave tv on. (#1.) Hoping it will induce numbness. It doesn't. All it's good for is turning one's brain to *mush*. And #2: If the bolts for this iron frame in my room were here I'd be able to put it together and then spend most of my time in the bedroom instead of in the living room, where the tv is. Bro likes to keep the tv on, so it stays on—and since I'm here, nowhere else to go, am exposed to it.

And so am watching *Dateline* (on at 9 p.m. in this part of the country), and they're doing a segment on air purifiers. The false claims the head of *Pure Air* is pushing, the false claims all of their sales people are selling: Purifiers cure asthma; purifiers will rid you of allergies, will make your hemorrhoids go away and make your dick grow. Ozone will improve (tremendously) the quality of your life, etc. A bunch of bullshit, but this is what they're telling the gullible suckers out there.

And why even bring it up? Because Bro's had this used/rusty purifier in the living room for a couple of months now. And these goddamn things are hazardous to your health. I taped the show for the single purpose of showing it to him. OZONE is not good for you. And that's what these purifiers do: create ozone. *Dateline* interviewed a scientist at Tulsa, OK; another scientist from somewhere else, the US government, and people at Johns-Hopkins. They are all in accordance: those things should not be placed anywhere near people. Of course, they are talking about the new ones now, the brand-new-purifiers. And as far as a piece of crap, total junk this used one is humming in here that my brother picked up at a garage sale for two-dollars goes? Absolutely *worthless*. Nothing but a joke.

So Bro finally gets in around 11:30 p.m. and I show him this tape. And his response is: “I don’t use it for all those reasons they mention. I don’t have allergies or asthma; I use it because it produces purer air.”

I love my brother, but logic doesn’t work with this guy.

He adds: “Anyway, we shouldn’t take that program’s word for it. We should try to find out what someone else has to say about it.”

I don’t get it. And I don’t say much. This is Bro’s personality. Can’t admit to being wrong. I ask if he’s got any literature that came with the purifier? No, he doesn’t. So why even bring the thing into the house without proper data? I don’t get it. Can people be this stubborn? Is it any wonder his “wife” opted to find a place of her own to live, and only allows him three (perhaps four) day stays with her at a stretch?

People have good qualities, this goes without saying—but OZONE IS GODDAMN DANGEROUS. This is from Johns-Hopkins Medical Center. Not to mention the Tulsa scientist doing experiments at this very moment saying the very same thing.

Pure Air’s people claim the government has backed their air purifier—when, in fact, the government has denied it emphatically. Some people don’t get it. And I don’t mind Bro using this thing when he’s around—only he isn’t around much, and guess who’s exposed to this thing? Me. That’s right: ME.

You can be sure of one thing: Am going to shut it off whenever he steps outside.

Let me get on to other things, please. Yes. Hopped on the bike at 10:30 this a.m., rode it down to Circle K, bought a copy of *AZ Star*. Went over job ads. No luck. Nothing for me. Other than: dishwasher and janitor. At 46? No, thanks. The way it usually is. And the printing jobs usually require experience.

What to do?

Been asking myself that question a lot lately. I want to work, I’ve always wanted to work . . . need to have my own money and need, as well, to get the hell out of the house. Can’t always stay here in this room writing. Only nothing gives. How about when that copper mine opens up in Ajo? Maybe. How do I get to Ajo without transportation? How do I get around?

Did I mention this before? Got myself out of one trap (LA), only to get myself stuck in another (here in the Old Pueblo). The Old Pueblo going to reach a high temperature of 108 today. One finds it difficult to breathe in this kind of dry, DRY heat, baby.

The 12-Pack of *Miller High Life* all gone. What do I do to pass the time now? 4th of July around the corner. What will I do? Anything? The usual: stay here with the dog, listen to my music, read, maybe jot a few words down. Don't know if I should send the taxi book to Grunt Press. If they accept, that means no press of my own. If they turn it down: another rejection (as if I needed another rejection). Don't know. Best get up and go over the want ads one more time.

Phoned the employment agency, told them I was still looking for work. They suggested I check out Prelude Press at two thousand something 34th Street. Bro happened to be here and I got him to drive me out. You climb in the car and it feels like being cooked alive, even though the windshield reflector has been up all night. It does no good.

We head out toward Alvernon, take that south. We find 34th and Prelude. I walk in and a gray-haired, pleasant lady appears. I hand her a copy of my resume (for what good it will do). Believe you me, my attitude is one of being realistic. Done this too often by now, too many years. Before and after the taxicab. But like I said, she's sweet enough, polite.

"Would you like to fill out one of our applications?"

Man, I hate applications. Done too many of them, too-damned-many. It's close to torture—and *all for naught*. My feeling is: Let my foot in the door, give me a job to do and I'll get it done. The trick is to get hired.

Why should it be so damned tough? Good question, albeit pointless, but a good question just the same. It's always tough to get hired. Has been this way for me anyway. Don't know why. I work hard, busted my ass for five bucks an hour for that Philo clown, hadn't I?

Neither here nor there.

I wonder if she wouldn't mind if I took the application with me and filled it out at home? She nods with a smile.

"That would be fine," she says.

The interior of this place is neat/clean/air-conditioned. I like it. The smell of printing is strong, STRONG. But I would like to try working here. Would they have me? On every application where it says: Position—I say OPEN. Where it says salary: I say OPEN.

No prima donna here. Just get me a damn job. I mean this is ridiculous. No sham here, no panhandler; no conman or sponger. Willing to work and can't find a goddamned thing. What is this? When does the bullshit end? Got news for you: It never does, pal. The BS never ends. Remember starving in North Hollywood, no work and no food to eat. Same old, SAME OLD, BUDDY. The only difference: there is food to eat (because Bro's been footing the grocery bill).

I get up, turn the cassette over. Tricia Yearwood, a favorite voice, is soothing the air. . . . *Thinkin' 'bout you*. . . . Sing it, Tricia, sweetheart. Sing it, hon. . . .

What now? What's the next step? What did you expect it to be like in good ol' Tucson town? Didn't know/had no idea, pal. Winter weather is perfect here. Summers you fry. . . .

CHAPTER 19

Got the bed assembled (with Bro's assistance). So am now (at last) able to sort out/place my belongings within these cramped quarters. It'll be okay. Have to make it work. At least I can lie down on the bed and read/or nap (while Bro watches tv or some horrible video) in the living room. Yes, it's cramped, but cozy—as they say. Somebody said it, I imagine.

Still and forever attempting to rewrite *A Poem for C.* (having to do with the blond-haired/freckle-faced girl in my 5th-grade math class I'd had such an impossible crush on) in Chicago. This was the girl responsible for my paying attention to the way I parted my hair and the way I dressed in the morning before leaving for school. This was the girl I'd gone around in the neighborhood seeking whatever odd jobs I could find so that I might be able to buy a book like Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* at our school fund-raiser (where her mom would be tending one of the tables).

This was the girl I was always too nervous to approach and talk to because I thought she was the most drop-dead gorgeous angel I'd ever laid eyes on; and the only way I could reach out to her (finally) was to buy a Valentine's Day card, write down a few heartfelt words and hand it to her, should I be able to find the nerve. It just so happened, while in the corridor, outside our math class one day, her younger sister happened by, and I thrust the card out to her. Urged her to pass it on to Christine.

Christine was also the girl I unintentionally humiliated soon after when our teacher devised a scheme that would have brought us closer together—if I hadn't botched it by unwilling to be unkind to another/less-attractive girl there who sat to Christine's left.

It had been down to two students: myself and another girl student, who would pick team members for an eventual math contest of sorts. She went first, I chose next. It had been worked out by the teacher so that I would have every opportunity to pick Christine when it was, alas, down to two classmates:

Christine, and a Hispanic girl who did not have much going at all. She had a skin problem, bad teeth, lackluster/mousy hair, and was not much of a looker; in fact, she had nothing in that department, whereas Christine had it all: blue eyes/blond locks (that she wore in a ponytail), and that face that took my breath away.

It was down to the two of them, sitting there by themselves among an otherwise sea of empty desks. It got tense. Pressure was on for me. I needed to choose, while the teacher waited (with anticipation), as did the other students in back of me by the blackboard.

And I knew I needed/should have chosen Christine. I had wanted to so badly, but by doing so, I'd have been unkind to the homely girl. I couldn't, and just did not have it in me to be this cruel . . . and ruined my chances of getting together with the one I wanted to be with so bad it hurt.

I hoped, only hoped/could only hope, that Christine understood, that someday she would get it somehow, when I picked S., the wallflower. I never knew if she did. There was nothing for me to say, but choose the other student, and by doing so I destroyed my chances of being with the one I ached for.

Several years later, at age 14, (give or take) I ran with a real troublemaker, a jerk of a kid, who was always into mischief, things I never would have gotten into if not for this congenital asshole. He was the type who'd always come up with "bright ideas" after dark like: Let's go throw rocks at school windows; break into cars/beat-up punks/smoke dope/drink beer. The beer part was fine and I was all for, but the other things went against the grain for me. All of it: the dope/vandalizing cars/assaulting strangers who did nothing to me/breaking school windows. By then the love for and of books was evident. I saw no future in running with other jerks like him, which at this point he had been hanging around with.

I wanted to write, even though I had yet to develop a vocabulary or even knew how to go about describing anything to my satisfaction. But I felt and knew, deep down, I already sensed what it was I wanted to do with my life: something creative/having to do with the arts and to contribute in a positive way. *Either paint, or do something with words.* I didn't know squat about anything, but was aware enough to sense that to pursue both would be next-

to-impossible. It took a lifetime to excel as either a painter and/or writer, a lifetime. I knew as much even at fourteen.

The violence at home had stopped by this time, at least for me. I was already bigger than the old man, and he was smart enough to know he'd eventually get his ass handed to him if the mistreatment didn't cease. And so it did—*for me*. The others, younger than me: three sisters and a brother, were still receiving their daily dose of abuse whenever I wasn't around, and by then I was hardly around anyway. I'd been busy running with Gunter. I was either in school, or else getting into trouble, as mentioned. In fact, he and his toking clown buddies was the reason I got into a mindless/totally inexcusable street brawl and ended up in Vietnam later at 18 to avoid a jail stint.

Gunter was the *certified a-hole*. No other way to put it. There is always that one, in most peoples' lives, like this one, with a knack for stirring up trouble.

CHAPTER 20

We were at a payphone inside the pharmacy at the corner of Armitage and Halstead. He knew I was crazy about Christine, dared me to call her/talk shit. I dialed. My original intent had been to say something nice, explain why I had acted the way I had in that math class that day. She answered at the other end. Instead of apologizing for my behavior and getting into why I had made the decision in Mrs. K.'s class that time, I blurted out a bunch of vulgar crap:

"Christine, I want to fuck you! That's right: I really want to fuck you, Christine! You're hot and I want to fuck your pussy!"

Gunter stood nearby and had been laughing his butt off. The harder he laughed, the ballsier I got. Never mind that I didn't know the first thing about *shagging*. But I blurted out the words, and hung up. Not even aware, at the time, how crude and repulsive what I'd just done was. It was crass, and more: *Obscene and uncalled for*. Totally effing stupid and juvenile.

This was a decent girl, calm and wonderful in every way. She'd never done anything to me (or to anyone else, either) to deserve what had just taken place. The times I saw her with her girlfriend R. at the neighborhood library (that I visited practically daily) to teach myself the language by reading books by the likes of Dr. Seuss and others, or on school grounds didn't matter, Christine had never been rude or had ever done anything untoward to me. **Nothing. Ever.** She had class, as did her younger sister, and it was easy enough to tell they were being raised by loving, German immigrant parents.

And I had behaved like a belligerent *dip-shit* and should have been ashamed of myself. Only I didn't know better. It would take a few years for it to sink in, years, how goddamned unfeeling and uncouth and just plain vulgar I'd acted.

No doubt; yes, maybe, if we—Christine and I—had been older and known one another, it might've been accepted as nothing more than a harmless prank-call and joke, (but not then; no way then). The girl hadn't expected it and had been (understandably) thrown, which I was soon to discover, when minutes later

Gunter and I rode on over to her street on his Schwinn bicycle: me pedaling, and Gunter balancing himself atop the handlebar.

The true and baffling irony is I had *hoped* to *get yelled at*, *wanted it to happen*; because, at least, I'd be the recipient of some longed-for attention from her. *Anything, no matter how I'd gone about it to instigate it, not only would have been acceptable, but readily welcome.* This is how *juvenile* and *pathetic* my take on the situation was. Instead, just the opposite happened: the girl had ignored me entirely, and jumped all over Gunter.

As mentioned, we had headed to where she lived one street over, east of Howe. Gunter and I lived on Howe St. Christine and her family lived one street east of us. We reached her block, and were outside her apartment building, with my dickhead friend carrying on. Gunter, thoroughly amused, found the whole thing hilarious and continued to direct disparaging remarks at the building.

No denying at this point, we had breached the line and I felt plenty awkward and knew that we were being not only stupid, but reckless and way out of line. *It was uncalled for, but I couldn't get him to tone it down.* I just wanted to see her. I wanted Christine to talk to me; hopefully put her arms around me, tell me she liked me, and that she was as mad about me as I was about her.

Hey, I was a young idiot with rocks for brains. Just a total young *jerk-off* who didn't have a clue. All I knew was Christine was on my mind night-and-day during this period. It was love. Had to be. I may have been too green to know what love was, but what else could it have been? The need to be with her wouldn't go away. The crush had developed into something deeper by then evidently. I wasn't wise enough to describe it, let alone understand it.

Gunter carried on; was gesturing from where we were in the street at Christine's first floor apartment windows. Feeling pretty awful about it all, I did what I could to get him to curb it some, at least, *to no avail*. My asking the fool to taper off only managed to *egg him on*. Gun was like this. This was the dude's MO: kicks at someone else's expense. Always.

It was soon after that she ran out, with fire in her eyes and glaring daggers at him. Since she assumed I didn't know enough of the language to have

committed the deed on my own, she must have been convinced that Gunter, not only had put me up to it, but coached me every step of the way.

With clenched fists, she went at him: attacked and pummeled, hitting him in the face and belly, not that she was able to do any damage. Far from it. Blows were taken as nothing more than a joke by my so-called pal. He was enjoying himself, giggling. The giggles soon turned to all-out laughter. In fact, he was howling so hard at one point that he folded and was on the ground. What a joke. Funny shit; far as he was concerned.

Yes, the fucker was lying on his back in the middle of the otherwise quiet residential street, clutching his stomach and howling with laughter. And I was jealous, *thoroughly and absolutely jealous*, because I had *wanted this to be me*. I had so wanted and needed and desired Christine to be lavishing *me* with all this *attention*, instead of him. I was the one who had feelings for her, not Gunter, who was not interested in this girl (beyond toying with her and using her for kicks in this infantile manner).

What kind of sense did it make? How did the thing get all turned upside down like this? But the bastard was having a blast. What comedy. And his reaction did nothing but fuel her anger. Christine was fuming, red-faced. It was (quasi) understandable at this point to me (simply because I was not mature enough to get it).

This went on for a while, the girl landed blows to his mid-section, not that it phased him any. Clearly, there was no way she could do anything to him, let alone get the message across. Seeing that the situation was utterly hopeless and getting her nowhere, she suddenly stopped, and walked back to her building. *Never, not once, having so much as glanced my way during the entire episode.*

CHAPTER 21

A month or so later, my folks were visiting Anton, a German carpenter friend of my father's from work. Anton and his family happened to live across the street from where Christine, her sis and their folks resided.

My two younger sisters, it turned out, had gone over with this German gent's daughter to celebrate Christine's birthday by the time I showed at Anton's. And when later it was time for our family to leave, someone was needed to go fetch my siblings. I, of course, did not waste time volunteering, and hoped for a chance to say hello to the girl I had these incredible feelings for.

I crossed the street. Entered Christine's building. Nervous as heck. Her family lived on the first floor; door was on the right. I knocked, and Christine's mom answered. Hausfrau. Smiling. Pleasant. I recognized her from the time I bought that Daniel Defoe book from her a while back in the school gym during the fund-raiser. She said something in German that I didn't get. Closed the door, and was gone.

I stood there. Waited nervously. Wondered if I'd get to see the girl I longed for. Christine, I kept thinking, please come to the door so that I can look at your face. *Please. Just a glimpse.* I loved the girl, so help me. Wished to be with her. Anxious as hell I was; I waited.

When the door opened again, this perfect dream stood there looking at me. I let her know why I was there. She hadn't heard, or maybe she did, but had a tough time accepting that I actually spoke the language.

"What was that?" said Christine, taken aback. Perhaps even shocked upon realizing that I spoke English.

I repeated my sisters' names and that I had come by to walk them back to Anton's. Christine appeared to be absolutely stunned upon realizing that I knew enough to be able to communicate in this manner. Evidently, all along,

she had assumed that I couldn't speak a word of English. And, of course, this was partly right. I hadn't been able to (hardly) convey two words way back when I'd presented her sister with that card of friendship to pass on to her in our school corridor. But this was a year or so later now.

Christine, so thoroughly astonished by this revelation, that her jaw dropped and she soon dropped back herself, while (simultaneously) slamming the door shut.

I'd had no real idea what was going on. *Had she fainted? And would she recover and be able to fetch my sisters?*

Christine must have figured it out. It had to have dawned on her just then: It was I who had engaged in the offensive phone call (with next-to-zero help from Gunter). I had blurted those foul words into the receiver (without my friend feeding me a single syllable). My guilt and pain rose. I felt lousy. I'd hoped for an embrace (on the way to her apartment and at the door when she opened it and saw me), a kind word, some sign of affection from her, but no way. I was heartbroken and needed to be at one with with this girl (more than I could articulate or knew what to do about it).

Were my chances shot completely now? I had so wanted to be with her. Even at this young and stupid age I knew it; in my heart and bones: Christine would be my *Dream Girl*. Here. Now. And forever. And there was no way to do anything about it. It was impossible; and so difficult. Hurt went deep. I had wanted to apologize, say I was truly sorry, and could she ever forgive me for the asinine behavior that time with the phone call?

Nothing doing. I did not have the way or means. Had no idea how to behave. No clue how to communicate what I felt.

CHAPTER 22

My sisters appeared—sans Christine—and, feeling glum and basically depressed about it, I walked them back to Anton’s building. I think I asked my sister E. where she knew Christine from. She didn’t, she said. Christine’s mother, being German, and having known Anton and his wife, had invited their daughter to celebrate Christine’s birthday. My sisters, simply because they happened to be there, had been invited as well. My other sister Z., a mere toddler, had been too young to go with them.

I could not string enough words together to figure out how to make amends with Christine, *then or later*. Lost; I was lost and in emotional turmoil. This was the first girl I’d ever fallen so hard for . . . and what I felt for her would never go away no matter how old I got to be.

Life was impossible at times, and this was a perfect example. There were missteps and mishaps we were incapable of doing anything about, and so we lived with it. We endured. And for many years afterwards, I would be drawn to any woman who reminded me of this girl.

Not only was it hopeless, but *hopelessly pointless* to go on about any one person like this. And yet we did it. Not only I, am guessing, but plenty of us—of both genders—would find it easy to relate.

Should add: This quirk of mine, being drawn to blond hair went on until—at age 29—when another German-American (this one a controlling type) with blond hair (only hers came out of a bottle) shredded my pitiful heart and soul to bits. It was then, finally, at last—that I began to LOATH *yellow hair*, and found myself realizing that the world’s true beauties were *brunettes*.

Jet-black hair was/is the kind of hair I found not only fascinating, but to represent the meaning of genuine beauty. Dark hair and/or a shade of auburn was the type of hair that I noticed after that. Alas, as stated, this was *later, years later*. Women of color, I realized, were the true hotties.

It was not long after that visit to Anton's that Gunter and I got into a scuffle over something else entirely. Somehow he'd gotten it into his head that the reason I was hanging around him was due to his access to spending money. His parents had divorced a while back and his biological father sent the usual child support every month. Gunter got one of our buddies to pump me for information with regards to friendship one afternoon in our pal's basement entertainment den (while Gunter remained hidden and out of sight) and this friend and I were shooting pool.

Gunter emerged eventually from his hiding place, realizing how chickenshit this game he had been playing was, and asked me to forget it had ever happened. He'd felt sheepish about it.

Offended? Was I offended? It stung like a bitch. I didn't befriend people for what I might get out of them. I'd been put off that someone I regarded as a real friend would even suggest something of this nature. All along I'd been convinced our association had been genuine. How little did I know.

Friendship? Friends are usually the ones to stab you in the back (when you least expect it). Just as he would stab me once more several years later. Live and learn.

Gunter had wanted to let it go. I couldn't. It bothered me. The scuffle happened, over something else, or maybe it was the accumulation of things. I loved Elvis and James Brown, Martha Reeves, the Supremes (and Motown in general), and resented the Beatles. Gunter was the other way: obsessed with the Fab Four and had started smoking weed, which I hated as much as the Mop-tops.

We mended our differences eventually. Then at 18, his doobie-taking/speed-dropping misguided buddies caused a situation that ended in a street brawl. We were arrested. Taken in. I joined the army to avoid doing a possible stretch.

While I was away in Basic, I got wind Gunter was seeing a girl I'd been keen on. Nope, this was not Christine. I had no idea where Christine was at this point. Had had to let her go and did my best to forget.

While on leave, before being sent off to AIT (Advanced Infantry Training) and shipped to Southeast Asia, I go to visit Gunter where he worked as a kitchen helper at a hospital in the old neighborhood (my family had moved

North by then, Clark and Wilson area), and he was seeking my consent to date the girl I had feelings for. This was the same Gunter who had helped ruin my chances with Christine. Yes, I know: *Welcome to Life 101, brother.*

But I'd stayed calm. Given my okay, without ever revealing that it was killing me inside and left me heartbroken throughout my tour in 'Nam. He'd appreciated the gesture. Was happy that I'd taken it in stride. This was *two chicks* this wormy cocksucker had cost me. *Two of them.* Both lookers that I had fallen head-over-heels for.

Best buddies? Sure. Fact is, your "*best buddy*" will ***fuck you over*** quicker than you can say: ***true friendship is a lie.***

CHAPTER 23

Couple of years went by, I was 21 by this time (give or take), made it through 'Nam (unaware that I had a bad case of PTSD—not that they even had a name for it at the time). Was at a beach, possibly Foster, with my two sisters, E and N. (the folks had already moved west with the other two kids).

We'd spread our blanket out on the sand. I happened to look up. Out of nowhere, Christine walked toward me. Seemed determined. There was but three-feet of space between us when she stopped. What a beauty. Grown woman by then. She had filled out. Was in a one-piece swimsuit and voluptuous in every way. All that (*real*) golden hair and the gorgeous face. I was thrilled to see her. Had been taken aback by such total surprise by her presence, that I couldn't open my mouth to speak or so much as utter hello.

I'd wanted to say: It's so good to see you, Christine. I still love you. *You're the one for me.* Always would be. It was you I had so desperately wanted to choose in Mrs. K's math class that time. But I'd felt so sorry for Sarah, and just could not hurt her feelings by not picking her instead of you. I figured—no—I *hoped you'd understand.* I'd also hoped to be able to explain it to you someday. I have never seen a girl as breathtakingly beautiful as you.

Only words failed me. *I could not, for the love of me, get anything out. Nothing. Tongue-tied.* Frozen/frozen/frozen. My mouth was not working. Christine's beauty and sudden/unannounced presence did this to me. I was on the spot and knew it. Yet could not do a thing about it.

I would have welcomed any possibility to connect and spend time with her, but it never happened. She stood there, quite possibly wanted/intended to give me a piece of her mind/chew me out for the vulgarities spewed over the phone that time. Instead, she looked at my sisters—and out of respect, I imagine, not wishing to make a scene in front of them—without saying anything to me, turned, and walked back in the direction she had come from.

My heart was at the bottom of Lake Michigan. Felt like it. I'd been tempted to call her, say her name; plead with her not to go. Let her know that the phone stunt had been so idiotic on my part; that it had been the behavior of a knucklehead who just didn't know any better, not that I was even certain this was the reason she had walked up (as I'd pretty much forgotten about the deed by then). If I might have recalled it, I would have rushed after her to apologize. This was that *one-of-a-kind/special girl* I'd wanted to spend my life with. *This was the one (that got away)*. All others were *second- best*, no matter who they were. **Second-best**. Always would be.

I couldn't budge. *Not able to speak*. I was not able to say anything or do anything, but watch as she disappeared in the busy parking lot crowded with beachgoers.

But I had blown it. Forever. *Words, once unleashed, can't be rounded-up—like so much livestock—and herded back inside the barn for the night.*

That was the last time I would ever see her. Here it is, decades later, and I still think of this girl, woman really, and the way I had botched it. My poem/this poem, was my effort to *make amends*, put the entire/ever-so-uncomfortable and embarrassing fiasco in some sort of context that made sense (if to no one else but me).

Granted, women, certain women, refuse to believe/accept that men think about this stuff: **lost love/missed opportunity**. Guess what? We're not made of stone. Quite a few of us believe—when it comes to matters of the heart—in love and being supportive—of the gal we believe in. *You'd be surprised*. Just because we find it difficult to talk about, does not mean that we are not aware of what it means to be **at-one-with** and its merits.

What's the point in dwelling on something that took place in grade school? Fifth grade? And then the subsequent misstep at age fourteen (or thereabouts)? It may as well have happened a hundred—*or even two-hundred—years ago*. Furthermore, what would any of this matter to anyone—but the lovelorn sap who is unable and/or unwilling to let go of the past?

It's like this: I write about life/people/matters of the heart and all that kind of shit that leaves us scarred and that we're forced to take a closer look at/deal

with—eventually. *One way or another.*

I can't be the only one who's gone through something like this. I can't be the only mofo who lost out at (quite possibly) true love/the real thing—by making *not one*, but *two goddamn blunders*. And yet, not so sure (if I had it to do over again and was put in that similar type of classroom situation) that I wouldn't refuse to be unkind to the lesser of the two girls.

And the phone call? *I never ever would have done*. Instead, would've thought of and opted for a civilized and heartfelt way to communicate how I felt about this one-of-a-kind gem.

What ultimately was the point to all of this (other than the need to decipher it for my own sake), by putting it down on paper? Who knew where Christine was these days? What her life was like—or even if she were alive? Had ever married? If so, had kids? Was she a grandmother? Weighed two-hundred-plus pounds?—or ended up a spinster?—cat lady, with 50 felines in a dingy dwelling that reeked of cat waste? Does it matter? Should it? No.

Because that perplexing misstep (for lack of a better phrase) has been with me like forever. And it ain't going away anytime soon. Like I said: I hoped Christine would understand/figure it out eventually—or that I'd get a chance to explain one day—which I never was able and hoped this poem served that purpose—both: as *explanation and long-overdue apology*.

Forgive me for beating a dead horse. *Can't be helped, Hoss*. I get on a thing: be it story/free verse poem/script/novel/play—and do my best to stay with it until it's finished. Ain't always a cakewalk, but this is how things get done. And then need to send it off to my typesetter. . . . And then what? Not sure (as of yet). Mail it to Morgan E. at Grunt? Don't know. Just don't know.

What if he turns it down? Well, that would make it easy, would it not? Nothing to sweat about, eh? Rejection is rejection. Been there/done that. How does one react to rejection?

Simple.

Take it. Accept it.

And then—on the other hand: What if Grunt is interested?

What then? Depends.

On what?

What else? The deal. The deal, pal. Money. Advance. Because you may never see a dime once you get past the advance.

Am I right? Could be. Yeah. Could be.

Hell, I wish now I hadn't mailed the letter to them. Life was simpler (when I was penniless).

Still have a few papers/fax machine/odds and ends on the floor. Will straighten it all out tomorrow. *Mañana*. Is that how that's spelled? (No, that was a Peggy Lee song.)

Got a few things in Bro's storage space. Just some other manuscripts/paperbacks, etc. The regrets linger and LINGER over having given up most of my book library in Banning. My weights/weight bench/ten-speed bike/china/silverware/dictionary—what else? Most of my things. Kept the manuscripts, thank god, socks/underwear/white shirts/some slacks/pair of walking shorts. This scribe travels light—only because he don't own anything—and never did. You always wanted it this way, didn't you, *gunslinger*?

Well, you got it. Always thought you might end up in Australia/New Zealand, some place like that. Figured you ought to be prepared to travel light. Well, light it is, hammer-slammer. Yer light. Want it or not. I better get off it.

Hear the dog barking out there. Good ol' Nellie. Only fun she has around here. Got a jazz station on at the moment. Not too good. Best get up and shove an *oldies* tape in. Let me.

Now that I have this bed here all I need is a woman, a big-assed hot mamma to do the nasty with, a hot-to-trot sexy/ well-built/stacked/juicy chick to get down hard and heavy with.

YES.

WHERE? HOW?

GO FIND ONE.

Ain't goin' to no bar, that's for sure. Not I. How then? Keep your eyes open. Keep 'em open. Keep tryin'.

CHAPTER 24

Was pouring over this Magic Mountain flyer earlier while lying on my back (between re-reading Ernie's *A Moveable Feast*), and it made me think of AMV. I'd driven us out to the amusement park north of LA, circa '78. One of our very first dates. We'd even gone on the monster rollercoaster they called Colossus. I'd held on to the flyer. After all these years.

Sweet AMV. (In the beginning she had been that.) What a sweet/wonderfully precious face she had (while asleep that morning). Was going over that face earlier, remembering. . . . *Remembrance of Things Past* is right. . . . Her favorite cartoon character was Yosemite Sam.

I recalled having gotten up earlier than she one morning (in that crappy bungalow a stone's throw from Hollywood PD) while she slept, and I happened to look down at that pretty face and noticed the slightest trace of a smile that had crossed her lips. And me not being able to turn away; just taking it in, sitting up and *taking it in and wanting to remember it forever. It was priceless. She seemed angelic. And was. At the time.*

Some things lost are lost forever. You said plenty.

I'd given everything this heart had to give. And it hadn't been enough. Star-crossed? What an understatement. Incompatible? With a capitol "I." Personality-wise and other-wise. Those Double-Ds didn't keep her from being a bum lay. She'd learned to give amazing head (after I'd patiently spent a couple of months showing her how), but that pussy was loose and she didn't know what to do with it. I'd be pumping away down there, never feeling a thing, while she held a vibrator against her clit. She'd be lying on her belly, always, her favorite position, while holding the vibrator against the clit. I'd be driving it in from behind. It always seemed to take her forever, felt this way for me, but *get off/blast-off* she did. Every time.

Me? I'd needed her to move her hips (or at the least learn to tighten her cunt) to help me out, which she never could do. Even while lying on her back

afterwards, she couldn't grip me down there, or knew to move her pelvis. I mean, I'd never heard of it. I'd been with other women (not many, mind), and they either had the tight/sweet box, or at the least, were good with the hip action. AMV's lack in this department was *baffling*—and had lasted the entire two years we'd stayed together.

How could a woman not know how to move her hips in order to help her lover out? I learned to live with it; as frustrating (as well as physically taxing as it was). But it was okay, because I loved 69-ing it with her. I'd have my face buried in her cunt and butt, while she licked the knob at the other end, played with it with her able tongue, took her time teasing, and would finally go all out, vacuuming the nut-sack chowder that felt like a *great number of 4th of July explosions all-rolled-into-one*. Those blowjobs were out of this world. It had been tough to give up the BJs when the split happened, but relinquish it I did. No choice.

What really hurt and was the major cause for the split (other than my just barely being able to bring in enough working as a cabbie to pay my share of the bills, other than my spending just about every spare moment on the writing) was her being convinced that I'd been cheating, which I never did. I flirted with women/liked to talk to women—still do, that did not mean I was stepping out. I was *monogamous* by nature, remain so to this day. *There was no way to prove it*.

I'm flowed in plenty of other areas, but am no *philanderer*. That didn't matter to her, because, you see, all those guys where she worked in downtown LA were salivating to jump her bones, had been after those humongous hangers that she possessed.

I'd gotten her to workout, got her into running (that she was able to shed the bit of a spare tire around her waist). Like I mentioned, having a degree in fashion design and having her nose stuck in all those *anti-male feminist publications* that she was always reading (that ended up poisoning her thinking in a certain way), she knew how to dress, and the attention those tits of hers drew went to her head.

And to clear up a thing or two here: No one, but no one is against the true type of feminist/capable women/intelligent women/doers (that is a type of

woman who likes and appreciates and gets along with men). *We are not anti-independent females.* Far from it. We praise and admire and support women like this. Instead, am talking about the *hateful feminist, the male-hating/ball-busting confused and angry bitch with daddy problems.*

To be sure, some of those are lesbians, but not all by a long shot. Some, yes; some are heterosexual females, but what they have in common is the animosity they feel toward all males, any human with a pair of balls and penis. The hatred that they tote (and project) can be spotted rather quickly, as they reek of it. One glance at a hateful chick like this and you know it right away. It's there. In the eyes—as well as every pore in their skin. The aura that surrounds these warped emasculators is thick, heavy and rather as repulsive as a polluted swamp—that their cunt is often made up of.

The true feminist? The exceedingly capable lady, be she a commercial airline pilot/ brain surgeon/dentist/teacher/auto mechanic/race car driver/astronaut/rocket scientist/senator/kick-boxer/maid/factory worker/barista/author/painter/showgirl/investigator/linguist, etc., etc., etc., we support one thousand percent.

Bottom line, though: AMV was one (of many), who'd reminded me—to a certain extent, at least in the face—of Christine, and the real reason I'd been drawn to her initially. At five-foot-nine, she had the height and Christine's hair (though AMV's came out of a bottle). Christine had been German-American, so had AMV (on her father's side, at least). But AMV was a pale version. *Always would be.*

Her *best friend* was a girl she'd known since grade school, and I never would be allowed to fill that slot. It was bound to end as flop. And did. That did not mean that the resulting breakdown and pain was any easier to deal with. To say I hated blond hair for years after is to put it mildly. Never again would blond hair be a deciding factor when it came to my being attracted to a woman. In fact, I did a complete *one-eighty*: It dawned on me that dark-haired women were the *true great beauties* (as stated earlier). I'd never known it until the breakup happened. Never ever would've looked twice at a good looking woman if she had dark hair (**until after the split**).

Silly? Absurd? You bet? We live/we learn. Things happen to us that change us and alter the way we perceive this world we're in.

Blond hair? ***Fuck blond hair.*** *Blond hair meant nothing after that.* Most of the time it was fake anyway. Paid for. Bought at the local Thrifty Drugs or Walgreens. But that breakup with AMV opened up my eyes to all the beautiful women with *non-yellow* hair: brunettes, and so many gorgeous women with various shades of brown hair. There was nothing golden/magical/special about hair the *color of egg yolk*.

CHAPTER 25

Still here in Tucson.

Made another attempt to get out/look for work. Rode the bike about three miles east on Speedway and the heat kicking my ass. *One-o-nine today*. That's right, *one-hundred-and-nine-degrees*. HOT, BABY; HOT. Only this time I made a smart move, took a plastic tumbler with. By the time I reach Office Depot and uncap the tumbler and take my first sip the water is warm, WARM; *way past warm*. It's that hot in this city. On the windy side, but the wind only made it feel like being slapped around by a wall of pure heat coming from the ovens of hell—or something like it.

I chain the bike up, go in. Since am still trying to get used to people being polite around these parts I almost don't notice the girl in the blue uniform say hi with a smile. It takes me by surprise. Man, they don't behave this way in LA; not this civilized. It's nice. I nod in her direction, try to respond, but can't. Throat too damned dry. DRY as dirt. Can't seem to smile for some reason. Hope she didn't take it the wrong way.

I walk up to the photocopying machines, make copies of my resume and application (I had picked up at Prelude Press yesterday). I make eight copies of each (double-sided), notice the cute brunette behind the counter, maybe eighteen, if that; too young for this out-of-work scribe. I pay, find out there's a water cooler in back somewhere. I walk back there for a drink. Only the water is not cold at all. So be it. Better than the warm water in my plastic jug.

I'm back outside, sweat rolling off. Incredible. I sling the pack over my shoulder, unchain the bicycle and pedal west on Speedway. Christ, it's hot, unbelievably hot. Will I be able to make it out to 34th? Don't know. DON'T KNOW. . . .

Tucson, far as I can tell, is a wonderful medium-size town—but, my god, the heat is a killer, a debilitating, incredible force that chokes the very breath out of you. There's nobody else out here on foot or on a bike; I'm the only fool, looks like, the only middle-aged bozo on a bicycle in this town of over half a million people.

I make it to Alvernon and go south at the traffic light. Man oh man . . . got to make it. Not only do I need a job, but if I don't get out there it may appear to Bro that am not doing my best to find work if I don't make it to Prelude Press, etc. All that.

All right; I'll do my best, the best that I can—if I don't pass the hell out. . . . Stay with it. I stay on the west side of the street, pedaling south-bound on Alvernon. I notice the six foot or higher stone wall up ahead and trees overhanging. Shade. Some shade for me to stop under and uncap that warm, WARM tumbler of water and take a sip, wet the lips/throat, enough so that I can keep going.

I do that. Pause to catch my breath, and move on. Some of these tree branches hang real low, way too low. If one is not careful one could end up losing an eye, or getting cut across the brow and face.

I do what I can to stay alert, duck when necessary. I pass a doughnut shop on my right. Doughnuts. I always loved doughnuts. In LA, during that one six-month period I averaged 80-hours a week in the cab that landed me in the hospital, my breakfast was usually a large cup of coffee and a couple of maple bars.

Recall that doughnut shop at Pico and Sepulveda. Every damn morning, like clockwork: maple bars and coffee. And recall that incredible tall blond—with the legs and hips—in that tight salmon pink skirt and blouse that stepped out of that black Ranchero SUV that morning and went in. I could hardly breathe (in that doughnut shop full of bothered dudes like me who found it tough to contain ourselves).

But we stood beside her, worked hard at *pretending* that we weren't stealing glances at all that *booty* that we so desperately wanted a taste of. White dudes like me, and Mexican construction workers and landscapers: all *hungry and lusting* after the same thing. My god, the power of a *well-built/statuesque woman*. Cannot be put into words. Other than to say she was a sight to behold.

But then so had AMV been when all dressed up and in heels. But what a letdown as a lay. Did it matter?—while looking at something like the blond goddess who'd pulled up in the SUV? No. Because you wanted to believe when a woman looked this fantastic she had to be fantastic in bed as well. And even if she wasn't, it would've been something to be able to taste her; it would have been enough just to get a peek at that gorgeous beaver and luscious butt crack down there.

Were we not fools? I admit it. And don't tell me women don't carry on in this manner whenever they see a guy they're convinced is pure stud-muffin.

All right, forget the blond and the damned doughnuts. You haven't got the money to spend. You're down to twenty-three dollars. Total. That's it. \$23. You'll buy a newspaper for the want ads today—and that's all the money you'll be spending. I got it.

Fine.

Just realized there was a beer left in the fridge. Let me get up and go for the brew. I uncap the bottle of Miller and take a pull. Do it again. Where was I?

I'm on Alvernon, heading south. Can I make it to 34th to drop off this job application? Got to. *GOT TO, BABY*. They might hire me. They might. Just who are you kidding, pal? You can't get hired in this town. No way. No luck. There must be something I'm doing wrong. What the hell is it? I can't even land a low-level entry position at a print shop? *What is going on?*

I roll into (finally) Alvernon Industrial Park (or something or other), keep pedaling until I reach the familiar building. Chain the old bike to a tree. I go in, and a cowbell of sorts goes off. I walk past an open door on my right and an attractive blond with thick eyebrows who looks up just then. I take another step or two down the hallway and the same gray-haired smiling/gracious lady appears from a door on the left at the far end of this corridor. She meets me halfway. Recognizes me. I hand her the application.

On my way out I stop to fill a paper cup with water—cool water; take it with me outside. I drink the water, savoring every bit. There is a bench under plenty of shade in the dirt in front of the office building windows. There is a large

coffee can full of sand on the picnic table, makeshift ashtray. I leave the empty cup in the sand, unchain my bicycle and head out of the industrial park.

CHAPTER 26

Made the trip, for what it's worth. Made it. Now the trick is to work my way back. I pedal. At 5th Ave. I stop in at the 7-Eleven to buy a copy of the *Tucson Citizen*, walk up to the counter and ask the woman if the "*LA Weekly*" is in. You see, it's Thursday; it comes out every Thursday. I get a blank stare. Correct myself; laugh and say: "I mean the *Tucson Weekly*." It's a free rag with hardly much in it.

"If it's not on the rack, sir, it's not in." Snide, but polite.

I pay the thirty-five cents for the other. Walk outside.

I pause under a type of shade tree to gulp down some more warm, WARM water. I'm back in the saddle and a few feet later notice a dead bird on its back in the gutter, the stiff legs in the L position. Maybe the dry heat got to it. Lack of water. Death gets us all.

Jimmy Stewart (the actor) died yesterday. I recalled years before while driving a cab in Beverly Hills, getting sent to this mansion. Rang the doorbell, and who should answer, but Jimmy Stewart. I'd always liked the actor. He was quite old by then. And just like in the movies: stuttered. I mentioned that I was a cab-driver and asked if someone had called for a taxi. Mr. Stewart, World War II hero, was a likable sort all the way through, but he had no idea that anyone had called a cab.

"I believe the maid called us, sir."

He nodded, and pointed out the side entrance to the property. I thanked him, walked to it just as the Latina maid was stepping out.

He was gone. No longer with us. Just like Robert Mitchum. Passed the day before. Death spares no one. Not the rich and famous, not the gray-feathered bird (that no one had been aware of while alive), nor were they aware of it now that it was stiff.

I stay on Alvernon, pedaling north. *Gotta get indoors. Soon.* At the corner of Speedway, while waiting for my light to turn green, I uncapped the water bottle once again, down some of that nearly-hot water. My light turns and I make it across, and then head west on Speedway. I stay on it all the way, two blocks past my turn, in order to pick up a copy of the *Tucson Weekly* at the Circle K. Get it. Pedal to the domicile.

And once again the minute I have the gate open the dog starts a ruckus, barking like mad. Where does she get all this energy? How does she do it? I tell her to shut up, but she won't hear of it. Some kind of crazy dog. Kept me up all night last night. It takes me a long while to fall asleep. Thirty minutes later into this wonderful/peaceful/restful slumber she starts barking loud enough and long enough to wake me completely. It takes me another 20/25 minutes to doze off. Thirty minutes later she starts up again. Goddamn. It went like that all night. Almost felt like going out there and slapping her but didn't. Had to restrain myself. What will I do when I start working? Violence is usually a bad thing. Self-defense is something else, otherwise no good. Once you start in with violence it can become habit-forming, so I refrain from getting up and slapping the damned mutt.

But it went on and on like that all night long, dammit. The last I heard her was around 5:30 a.m., and that was because I could not—as badly as I needed to—go back to sleep. Could not doze off again. Tried. My best. Remained awake, cursing the damned dog under my breath. . . .

And so I open the gate and she's at it, barking. Just too damn dumb to shut up and conserve her energy in this oven-like temperature. What can you do? Am too weak even to keep telling her to shut up. This dog is nuts, I tell ya. NUTS. BONKERS. CRAZY.

I engage the kickstand at the glass doors. She settles down a bit. I take her by the collar, turn the hose on. Make sure to let the hot water run long enough. Yes, it's hot, hot. Hose has been sitting out all day, you see? Then when the hot water has run out I spray the dog all over, head and all. Leave the hose on her. She likes it. Got to do something for her. This was how Dixie had died back in '90 in North Hollywood. Heat had got to the Boston terrier. Bad. That was

another case where I had ended up taking care of someone else's dogs—and fallen for them: a Lhasa apso, German shepherd, and a Boston terrier, but especially the latter: loved her as though she were my very own. Which had been a total surprise, because I'd never gone for such small dogs, ever.

My type of dog? Dobies/pit bulls/boxers; nothing like a Boston terrier or even this mixed breed half-hound/half chow with the short legs.

When I'm through hosing her down, I refill her water tray. Turn the water off, and go in. I crank up swampy full blast. Sit on my bed in my room and read both papers. I see something in the classified section I may be able to go for: Pool Cleaner. *No experience nec.* That's what they all say. I circle it with a Sharpie. I go over the *Tucson Weekly*.

Not much, as usual, other than mention of various bands coming to town for the 4th of July. Won't do me any good. No bucks to make it anymore. Some things happening downtown. Art things/poetry readings. A couple of places looking for poetry submissions.

Do I submit? For what?

I close the paper. Get up in search of something to eat in the kitchen. I find a frozen chicken enchilada in the freezer that Bro had picked up at Trader Joe's the other day. I heat that up in the flimsy microwave. I chow down on the enchilada and shortly after get the *trots* for my trouble.

CHAPTER 27

July 4. Damn dog had to bark again/wake me again—at 4 a.m., mind. *Son of a bitch!* I got up this time. You bet your ass. Got up, went out and turned the hose on and hosed that goddamn mutt down. It's in the 70s and the water's warm, so no real harm done. Better than hitting the damn animal—which is something I have never done. I don't hit dogs. Anyway, water her down but good, and she shuts the hell up. I return to bed—and trouble is I can't fall asleep now. Went to bed at 12:30 this a.m., and wide awake now at 4 a.m.

Finally, I doze off an hour and a half later.

How could I not have remembered the 4th of July? Get up, take a shower, ready to ride the bike up to the barber shop for a cut, even though am down to but twenty bucks, but without a haircut it seems impossible to land a job around these parts. I need work. I best go on up and get that haircut. I figure the barber shop is open. It's about two miles east of here on Speedway. I get there: no cars in the strip mall parking lot. The sign on the barber shop door says: CLOSED.

What now?

The ABCO supermarket is just a stone's throw east of there and I decide to ride over and pick up a few provisions. Yes, I know—money is scarce, but I could use some chow: peanut butter/pasta/tuna/scallion/Oreo cookies. I check out. Just under ten bucks. I ask for a double plastic bag and ride on back here.

I eat a tuna on toast, eat three or four green onions. Wash down a handful of Oreos with milk. Turn the set on. Not much on. I try the Spanish stations. I love Latinas, gorgeous—and happen upon some type of beauty pageant: Miss Mexico. The women are incredibly gorgeous. But was a bit late: no bikini segment.

The pageant over; I leave the set on just the same. Sit at the typer in my room to write for a while.

Got the heavy blues lately. Lethargic. Keep misspelling certain words. Anyway, my feeling is since I get the blues and feel lonely on occasion that the dog might too—so I go out there and give her some attention, play with her for a while, pet her, etc. Check her water bowl. There's water there and it is not warm.

It's going on about 8:00 p.m. this Sat. Was cleaning/straightening this room. Got Linda Ronstadt on; her *Lush Life* tape. The dog would like to go for a walk, but just don't feel like it. Have not felt ebullient about anything lately. Don't feel like doing a thing. Wish I did, but don't. Wish I could wrap up this poem about Christine and finish up the *Streets of LA* manuscript and send it on to June, but can't. Can't budge.

Don't know what's wrong with me. Blocked. That's it. BLOCKED. A psychological hurdle, they call it—or I call it. Linda is singing. I like the voice. She's from Tucson, they tell me. There is a square downtown named after her family.

Dreamt about Chi-town earlier. Homesick for Chicago again. Feel out of place here in AZ, in the desert. Ain't no desert rat, is my feeling on it; my take on the topic. MY TAKE ON THE TOPIC.

MY TAKE ON THE TOPIC

(I like that for a title.) *My Take On The Topic*. Yessir. Now, what topic would that be? Not sure. Let me try to sort out the rest of these papers 'round here in this room. Bit cramped, so every inch of space counts. Yep.

CHAPTER 28

Turned down by Tucson newspapers. Received rejection in the mail. Don't have anything for me. I don't get it. Their ad said they were looking for someone to fill an entry-level position. What gives? Why is it so difficult to land a job in Tucson? A print shop owner showed Bro and I around his print shop. Bro was having them do some work for him, a scanning job, etc. No openings. Later, we stopped by my post office, checked the PO box. No mail. Stopped by a supermarket and picked up some groceries. I sat in the car reading want ads while Bro did the shopping.

How do I find a job in this place? (He's got about two months left on his unemployment), and then we're up the creek. What's left for me to do? Dishwasher? Cab-driver? Back to that? *I can't drive a cab again.* Anything but that. ANYTHING. Janitor. Did that, too, years ago. Would rather find something else.

Some writer.

The only offer is the Grunt Press one (if you can call that anything solid). You can't. I could send them something, only to have it rejected. Back to the original plan: Self-pub. But to self-pub I need to have money coming in.

Free enterprise is just FANTASTIC, AIN'T IT? A law-abiding working stiff looking for WORK and can't get a damned thing. Free enterprise is great if you already happen to be fat and established; otherwise, you're screwed, my friend. SCREWED. STRUGGLE AND MORE STRUGGLE AWAITS. . . .

CHAPTER 29

Temperature hovered up around 110. Hot. You bet! Too hot to get out there on the bicycle, so I stay in—until when Bro can come by and give me a ride in his junker. Did go down Monday to the state re-employment center for half a day. Took a test, filled out forms, etc. They'll call in a week for four more half-days of consultation to see whether or not am eligible for some type of training program. Trying to get training as a printer, all that. We'll see. They make \$14 an hr. Not bad. It's a lot better than \$5 or \$6 (the norm around here in AZ).

Yesterday got a ride with Bro down to this manufacturer of window blinds. Was too late. Had already hired someone. The way it goes. Just too hot to ride the bike, Hoss. Left application with a cute brunette secretary just the same.

Bro and I drove up to the East Side of town, stopped by the Hoagie House where I bought us a couple of their excellent hoagies. Picked up *Tucson Weekly*, and a regular paper.

Was going to have him drive me to see about another job today, but he had to drive his old lady to her mother's (to buy her mother's car). Minutes after Bro left the apartment the phone rings and I don't pick up because I know it's his old lady and I just don't care to talk to her these days, tired of her mood swings. I was no longer interested in being at the receiving end. I figure that's Bro's job, since he's the one in a relationship with her. So the phone rings and I don't answer it. Ten minutes later I pick up the receiver, dial our service to see if there is a message.

There is: "*I'm sorry, but where the fuck are you? I've been standing out here for twenty minutes,*" says Bro's old lady.

Sweet person. Class all the way. He's being *hen-pecked*. That's exactly what is happening. He takes a lot of crap off this woman. Again, that's his business if he wants to take the abuse. Me? Got no use for it. Life gets all of us down at

times, we all have bad days—that does not mean you use that as an excuse to take it out on those around you. In my book that simply is PURE BULLSHIT.

CHAPTER 30

One-thirty in the morning. Sitting here in this room listening to Tom Jones as he sings “. . . *the green, green grass of home* . . .” And where would that be? Where would home be?

The song over. Thank god. They play something else, something by Sinatra; Frank, that is. What difference does it make? Bought the Sunday paper earlier. What difference does it make? Not much in the job section, but one keeps trying.

Can't sleep. Going on 2 a.m., and can't sleep. Can't write. I need a beer, or two or three. Make it a 6-Pack. Yeah, that would do me fine. A couple of 6-Packs. Yessir. Why not? Had the tv on earlier. Had to shut the goddamn tube off. Nothing on. Dull, DULL DULL, BABY. DULL. Infomercials and some Argentinian black and white soap/horse opera made in the 40s. Tried to read some here in the room. Couldn't concentrate on much.

Keep leafing through the *Gimme My Change* ms . . . and can't get with the needed polish. Got to finish the damn thing—and just can't get with it. And then there's the *Streets of LA* ms. All I need to do is re-write a poem, for crying out loud, AND CAN'T DO IT. And then they have to play a song I hate, JUST FUCKING ABSOLUTELY HATE: *Singing in the Rain*. . . . Goddamn, I hate that movie, anything to do with it; that one and *IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE*. It is? Did you say it was a wonderful life? Flashback about forty years and I'll show you just how wonderful it was. To hell with it. What does any of it matter?

Had to shut the radio off until the song is over. *Wonderful life? Singing in the rain?* Talk to the thousands mindlessly slaughtered in Bosnia about it. Give me a break. Hollywood dreck.

Spend all my days indoors now. The only time I get out is when Bro shows up in his car and then we run a couple of errands. The way it is when you're

stuck in a town you don't know (without a car).

Can I follow up on this self-publishing thing? Can I do it?

Twenty minutes to 2 a.m. Something about a wind called Mariah. None of it interests me in the least, but there is nothing else on the radio. It's a small town, remember?

CHAPTER 31

3:15 a.m. Can't sleep. Doing some writing. *A Poem For Christine* taking forever. Looks like it's going to be an eight or 9-page poem. A long one, the longest I've ever written. Couldn't be helped. The way it turned out. Also did some polishing on the mystery.

Went out earlier in the afternoon with Bro in his car to look for work. The search goes on, the endless search for a job. Bro still drawing unemployment. This is what feeds us/pays rent. I need to find something. So we drove out, about ten miles east of Wilmot. They make trinkets, etc., from plaster. Dropped off resume. Leave it up to them to contact me. We took a break from all the driving at Burger King. Picked up a couple of Whoppers at 99-cents each, water. Stopped at some bakery. They were looking for someone to work nights: 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. I like the hours. Can't sleep at night anyway. I went in, met the guy. Gave him a copy of my resume. For what good it does. Bought a newspaper. Went over the want ads. Not much in it. Got to keep doing it. Came back here. Watched tv for a bit.

CHAPTER 32

Down to potatoes and peanut butter. Bro's unemployment gets us only so far. Both looking for work. Bought Sunday paper yesterday for the *want-ads*, went over them. Not much in it. Did find a couple of things to check out, but Bro had to run some errands, so that was off. Some places are just too far to get to on a bicycle. All I can do is sit here and type, work on the ms until Bro becomes available to take me around in his car.

We've been feeding the dog baked potatoes. Other than that, things aren't so bad. Weather has been fine. Keep polishing/revising *Gimme My Change*. Not easy going. . . . But I stay with it. Believe to be something there. I'll send it on to Grunt. If they turn it down that means I've got two books to publish myself for Tough Enough Press. Which is okay by me. All I'd need is a JOB.

Continue to be stumped on the free verse tale entitled *A Poem For Christine*. I took a poem that was a page and a half and turned it into an eight-page epic. How did that happen? Had not been my intent. But what can you do? It isn't that the 8-pager isn't good, or better (because *it is good and better*), but it's just a bit on the *longish* side. Had never written a poem THIS DAMNED LONG. Well. . . .

CHAPTER 33

Stopped by the Spanish tv station the other day. Left a resume. They were looking for someone to work in the video control booth. Fine. I can do that. Someone called back the next day. We hit it off. Both 'Nam vets. He liked my resume. This is the guy whose position will be available soon, as he is planning on moving back to Seattle (where he's from). He likes it up there, etc. Told me the guy who does the hiring would phone me today, but Bro and I stepped out to see about another job. When we returned, there was no message on the answering machine. So I wonder if the tv station lost interest.

The other job we went to see about was at a bakery. Entry level: wrapping bread, loading it onto a truck. Maybe doing some delivery, etc. Bakery run by a brother and sister team. Nice people. Gave me a brief math test to take. Asked me some questions. The usual. Do I do drugs? Did I have a car? No. Was I married? No. The usual. Was I reliable? Of course. If hired I'd be working nights. Twenty-five to thirty-hours to start, could evolve into a full-time position. Okay. Days off would alternate—and that was a concern for me, as it might pose an obstacle in getting a second job. Looks like I'll have to work *two jobs* to survive in this town.

There's always the blood bank. Could give blood. Bro low on money. Spent \$37 on groceries couple of days ago and he's low on bread. Gotta watch his dimes, etc. All that. I can understand, but it's been tough landing a job. Even stopped by a sign making place this afternoon, left resume. If they want me, I'm here. Ready to go, baby.

There's always the towing job. Working around the clock is not easy. What else is there? There was a mail order house with an opening, but they are way down south, at 4000 Country Club. Not close (and ain't got no wheels yet). I'd be able to buy a car if I could only land a job. Keep trying. Need to move out of

here and find a place of my own. Am just in the way of Bro and his old lady (even though she does not live with us). Got to have my own place. Been here long enough. Six months is LONG ENOUGH. Man's carried me long enough, I say. Am grateful, but time to move on. Got to get back on my feet. Got to do something/find something.

And, ironically, now at 46 the tune am singing is no different from the blues I sang twenty-five years ago while struggling in Chi-town and then later LA. Nothing changes. The struggle goes on. The way life is.

The Christine poem is impossible. *Gimme My Change* is just as impossible. Nothing working right. What I get for trying to be a perfectionist. Why does every poem and every short story in both collections have to be so damned perfect? Because it's the only thing left I believe in anymore; the only thing I've got left to cling to, to carry me over. No wife or kids to love and cherish . . . just words . . . WORDS.

It's late. 1:08 in the a.m. LATE, BABY. I said that already, didn't I? Got some easy listening sounds on the radio, while Bro watches Conan O'Brian in the other room on the tube.

CHAPTER 34

About ten-thirty. Friday, in the p.m. Raining outside. Had a row with Bro's old lady several days ago (on the phone), and so it's tense around here. Gave the chick a piece of my mind. Gave back what she gave me that Mother's Day (3 months ago).

Hey, like I said, when she's nice and sweet and civil and courteous she's good to be around, but that only lasts for about three days out of every week. The rest of the time she's moody and testy and nasty and rude. I took the abuse for about two years back in LA from her and her teen daughter (while they were all living out there in Venice)—and finally had to get it off my chest.

Bro says: "Why didn't you bring up the times before?"

My answer: "I didn't want to make waves." (I had wanted to get along with her for his sake.) And also I didn't want a big blow-up with the ballbuster (like the kind we had several days ago).

But even so, I still said to her: "We can start from a clean slate, forget what happened and move on."

She gives me: "I'll have to think about that. I need to decide if it's worth it for me to do."

I snapped back, had to: "*Fine! Do whatever you want!*"

Handed the phone to Bro, who sat sleepy-eyed on the bed. Like I said, it's happened before, where a woman has come between brothers, between friends, etc. Nothing new. The difference between us is that he takes a lot more than I am willing to subject myself to. And have said as much to him:

"Okay; that's your life. You're in love with the woman. It's different for you. You have to take it. I don't. AND I WON'T."

And so now the idea is to find a place of my own. HOW? HOW DO I GET TO WORK? Without a car? Good question. Can't very well get around on a bicycle in the rain. Was it a mistake to move to Tucson? It's not the city I have

anything against, but my stifling situation. Being stuck is no fun. What is annoying, you go out for these nothing minimum-wage-jobs and got to get through the third-degree EVERY TIME. The stupidity of it, the IDIOCY.

Gimme a break. They're *shit-jobs* any moron can do, but there you are filling out a three-page (usually more, a lot more) application and then are given a math test to take on top. What gives? I SAY WHAT GIVES, PEOPLE? They look at you and ask questions as though you were applying for a top security position with the White House.

Elvis on the cassette player. Good ol' Elvis. Look what happened there. Look what happened. The man who had it all, everything—and nothing. ZIP. HE HAD NOTHING. LOST. A LOST SOUL DANGLING. Not unlike so many of us.

Bro likes to read Jane Roberts and Edgar Casey. Yeah, you're going to find your answers there. Right. Peeps like J. Roberts are laughable and E. Casey might have meant well, but knew zip about anything. Like so many humans. Period. Lost; we're all lost and confused. Preoccupied with fighting off THE BIG FEAR.

Raindrops tapping the roof above. I like the rain. At least Tucson gets more rain than Tinseltown. It never rained in La La this time of year. In fact, once we went six years without rain. SIX YEARS.

Orbison on. The Big O. The best. *In Dreams*. . . . Love that voice. Had his share of troubles. Some self-created. What else is new?

CHAPTER 35

Man, got the blues. Trying to lift the GD blues from my shoulders . . . and just can't. Been trying to land a job for months now. Can't say as I tried very hard in the beginning, during the first two or three months . . . and since then have gone all-out. Buy the paper every day and keep looking, to no avail. The Sunday paper is a buck-fifty; during the week it's 50-cents. The other paper: the *Tucson Citizen* is thirty-five-cents, but not as good as the *Arizona Star*. So it adds up, my friend. It adds up.

Told Bro yesterday, if he's willing to drive me down to the Blood Bank am willing and ready to give blood. It's come down to that. His unemployment check can only be stretched so far. He's been looking for work himself without any luck. What's left? Good ol' blood bank.

Their ads say you can earn up to ninety-dollars by the end of three visits. Not bad. That's BIG MONEY where I am sitting. Big bucks. NINETY-DOLLARS. *Forty-six-years-old* and I've got to *give blood* in order to buy food and have money for newspapers and have money for postage, enough to xerox the two manuscripts. If that's the way it is, that's the way it is. My life/this life of paying dues.

My typesetter will need more money for the latest rewrites. Got to put it all together somehow. GOT TO. It gets like this sometimes and the EXIT, THEE EXIT starts to appear more and MORE ATTRACTIVE. Am speaking of THE EXIT, BABY—THE EXIT. WAS IT EVER THAT FAR OFF? FAR AWAY?

What a question. Looming overhead. There it is. NO REFUNDS/NO RETURNS. ONE WAY TICKET TO RIDE. IS THAT WHAT THAT SONG MEANT? Never thought much of the Beatles, but I do remember that one line: *A ticket to ride*. . . . They couldn't have been talking about that. They weren't that clever, not that intelligent.

Mitch Ryder singing *Devil with a blue dress on*. Always liked ***Mitch Ryder & the Detroit Wheels***.

A beer would be nice, *a cold one or two or three*. A 6-Pack, maybe two 6-Packs. I'll have to give blood to get the beer. So be it. All I need is a ride down there. Might be too weak to ride the eight miles back after they drain me of the crimson, otherwise I would go down on my own.

CHAPTER 36

Got Ottmar Liebert on the cassette this afternoon. Like his guitar playing. Never tire of it. Do get tired, however, of looking for work. Never much in the paper. You go out and spend a *buck-fifty* on the Sunday Edition to find not much.

The bakery has two other positions open.

Did find something appealing, though: Blood Bank is now offering \$105 (that's one-hundred-and-five-dollars for three visits). Not bad at all. Can I lower myself to the level, baby? Did I ever before? Yes—to that rhetorical question. But will need pocket money. Bro is broke. Just spent my last buck-fifty for the paper.

Went through the want ads—and the usual shit jobs. Car wash/dishwasher/security guard . . . everything pays minimum. The jobs that pay a little more you got to have bullshit degrees for. The jive/the con/the endless stream of BS. It goes on.

Reading Kerouac's *Big Sur*. Have been doing a bit of reading lately between work on *Gimme My Change* (and the forever poem for Christine that I can't seem to nail down), but yes, reading: some Buk, some Carson McCullers, Nat West, Jim Northrup. . . . If I had the money I'd go out and buy a few more used books. So I read and write, some tv, between search for work, the endless search for work.

And they always give you the THIRD DEGREE when you go out on these interviews: too many questions, too many. It's a menial job, for Christ's sake, a crappy/nothing job that pays five-fifty per hour. But you do it, you do it—because you could use the measly wage. Either that or the blood bank.

Al Green on now. *So tired of being lone*. . . . Have heard the tune thousands of times (I must have) and never tire of the voice. Never. Al Green had it (or still

does on tape).

Stay up until five a.m. every night. Can't sleep. Insomnia. Something. Do a lot of thinking (it isn't good to think too much—about anything), but you reminisce, you do it . . . for what good it does. Never did anyone much good. But you do it. You go over your childhood, the painful/confusing teen years, your 20s, your 30s—and now the 40s—and it's a *bog, vast bog*. Where did it go? Where did they go? The years. Where? What was accomplished?

Somewhere over the rainbow about to go on again and had to shut it off. Goddamn tune makes me want to bang my head against the wall. Just sick of it. *There ain't squat over the rainbow, baby*. So quit singing the pathetic song.

Watched some tv earlier. Not very good. Breaks up the monotony. Worked some on *Gimme My Change*. Not much. Read some more. Hundred pages into Kerouac's *Big Sur*. Charley Rich on: *I keep on rolling with the flow*. . . .

About all that can be said. We keep on rolling with the flow. . . . Yep. Sunday just about over. What are my plans for Monday? More job hunts with Bro? Probably, if he's got gas money. Would like to move out and have a place of my own. I don't belong here, not the way things have turned out/or not turned out. Too much friction with his old lady. Woman has a Jekyll and Hyde personality. When she's sweet she's fun to be around (about several days out of the week), and then the Hyde aspect of her personality kicks in. Just grumpy and bitchy and moody and rude. The way she is. Can bring you down in no time flat. Who needs it? Why I say—even though Bro's been the greatest—gotta get out. Need my peace of mind.

CHAPTER 37

Got the blues, got ‘em bad. Feel lousy. Can’t think/move/do anything. Would like to extricate myself from this situation here with Bro and his old lady (although she does not stay here and rents a place at 6th and Country Club). Fucks with my head. Would like to get something done—but can’t. CAN’T BUDGE. CAN’T.

Showered this morning, ate a peanut butter sandwich, washed down with 2% milk. Went over want ads. Got a ride. First place was another agency. They want you to fill out their forms on the premises. Didn’t like it. Too much hassle and BS. Dropped off my resume. Said to the blond lady I’d be back some other time; had a brother waiting in the car. Place was on East 5th, forty-four-hundred-something. Then Bro wanted to see about a job for himself further North-East, while I waited in the car. Both feeling shitty, SHITTY. He was pissed because somebody actually doesn’t like his old lady. Well, that’s life. He can’t understand that I could get bent out of shape over “one thing.” I tell him it’s not just one thing; there have been other times, other zingers and mood swings and I don’t take it, not from her. Don’t need it and won’t take it. But, I say, am willing to be civil—at least until am out of the apartment. Am trying very hard to land a job and get a place of my own. But that doesn’t seem to be enough. HOW MUCH WOULD BE ENOUGH WITH PEOPLE?

He asks if there is another place I want to go. Yes/possibly/maybe—the mail order house down south, on Country Club.

“Going to be a real bitch to get on the bicycle—might as well check it out,” I say.

Fine. He drives us out there—and it’s far, baby—something like EIGHT-MILES, or more. But what to do? Until I can buy an old jalopy this is the way my life is going to go. MY LIFE. THIS LIFE, THIS EXISTENCE—BETTER YET:

THIS NOTHING EXISTENCE. THE WAY IT HAS BEEN, MY LIFE; THE WAY IT HAS BEEN . . . PAL.

He parks in front of the adobe office building. I walk over, and prior to entering the door I notice a brown, large beetle kicking its legs, on its back on the cement and kicking. I stop, bend over to do my good deed for the day, and help to turn it over by flicking the edge of the resume. One try, two tries—and finally on the third attempt all's well that ends well. The beetle takes off. Something accomplished for a change. Something done.

I go in and a pleasant Hispanic lady tells me the door I need, the PERSONNEL entrance is around on the other side of the building.

“As you go out make a left turn,” she tells me. “There will be someone there.”

“Thank you,” I say, step outside. I enter the other door. See a brown-haired woman there, hand her a copy of my resume and application form (already filled out). Entry level job pays five bucks an hour. What else is new? Others pay more; about six, for pre-press, etc.

She suggests I ought to take one of their forms sitting in a tray on the small desk against the wall in this small reception area. I do, thank the woman, and go back out.

For all the good that does me.

Later, Bro drops me off at the house, says he's got errands to run, and drives off. And I lie awake on my bed, no longer able to read *Big Sur*, a dumb book by a nutty, messed-up alcoholic like Kerouac, feeling if I had a gun I would place it in my mouth and blow my brains out. Just feeling depressed, so goddamned depressed in this nowhere life and situation—and I'm not even a heavy boozier or take drugs—just feel so SHITTY. . . .

Berlin (the singing duo) on, singing one of my ALL-TIME FAVORITE SONGS EVER: *FLY AWAY*. . . . I listened to this song (back in LA, after the split with AMV) over and over AND OVER AND OVER AND OVER AND OVER AND OVER . . . AND NEVER TIRED OF IT. EVER. NEVER TIRE OF IT. But with it it brings on this sadness, deeper, ever deeper sadness that I cannot shake. . . .

Recall sitting in the cab, years before, after breaking up with my girl, playing nothing but this one tune all day long every day, seven-days-a-week, for months on end . . . for months . . . and then playing nothing but Michael McDonald's *I Keep Forgettin'* all day long; day in/day out . . . week-after-week, month-after-month . . . like a lost-cause loon, which I was. And then there was that song by Four Non-Blonds called *What's Going On?* But the first two, primarily *Fly Away* . . . I played more than anything else. . . .

To have escaped LA and end up in another gloom here in Southern AZ, a different type of gloom. My gloom that follows like my shadow, is in fact my shadow, my forever-shadow.

Can't budge this *Gimme My Change* mother, can't move it . . . can't fix/polish *Poem For Christine*. What it's about, anyway. If not for the manuscripts (the fact they have yet to be completed) I wouldn't be hanging around right now; I wouldn't be here—or anywhere.

CHAPTER 38

Finally a break. Ad in the paper for AB Dick press operator. Only I don't have the experience. *What to do?* I dial the number and talk to a decent-sounding man on the other end. His name is Franz Jens. I tell him all of it, the truth: No experience; my age; how long I've been here in Tucson; staying with Bro. All of it. He says come in.

Bro drives me out. Am given the usual forms to fill by the receptionist. I sit in the conference room, do that. Hand the forms back and wait fifteen/20-minutes until this white-haired guy my age appears. Mr. Jens. We shake hands. Have a long talk. Am asked questions. Why did I leave LA? I wanted to get married and couldn't find anyone I wanted to marry, plus the overcrowding/stress/etc.

He understands. He asks if I'd ever been arrested. I tell him about that street brawl when I was a teenager back in Chicago. He understands. He shows me around, and the place is huge in the back; so many presses everywhere. He tells me they will be knocking out the back wall as they have so much business coming in and need space.

I like this guy.

I tell him I'd be willing to work without pay if only to learn what I need to know, etc. Mr. Jens says he wouldn't allow that. He says: "You have to live, too."

A good guy. This is why I left LA. To be around people with some heart. Am asked to have a seat, as he would like to introduce me to another guy there, the print shop manager. Jesse-Butch Lipworth. About ten years older than me. Southerner. Not sure what part of the South.

Jens says: "Is that your brother waiting out there in the car?"

"Yes it is."

"Have him come in and wait in here. It's too hot out there."

In all this nervousness I hadn't thought of it, poor Bro cooking in the heat. I call out to him. He comes in. Waits inside in the cool/air-conditioned waiting area.

I talk to the other man, Mr. Lipworth. Seems decent enough. Receptionist appears nice as well. After five minutes, Mr. Lipworth tells me they will call me.

Bro and I drive home. Two minutes later the phone rings. It's Franz Jens.

"Can you start tomorrow at 8 a.m.? We'll start you off at five bucks an hour for a two-week trial period."

I thank the man, and we hang up.

The gig runs from 8 to 4:30 (with plenty of overtime). Am grateful to have a job, to be starting somewhere. It only took seven months. My god—seven months of looking (even though I was hardly diligent in my quest during the first three months). And so I say a little prayer to the gods for this break. Happy to be given a chance. Amen.

CHAPTER 39

The toughest part (for me) is being taken around, introduced. The manager walks me through the premises and has me meet the employees: about a dozen or so. Sheer torture. Shock to my system. Not saying that the peeps weren't all right, it's having to meet so many at once that got to me. Very uncomfortable.

Jesse-Butch Lipworth speaks with a heavy Southern drawl. Appears to be an okay gent, just as the owner struck me as a good guy, likable. Rutley, the guy am left to work with on the encoder, a machine that prints payroll checks, is in his mid or late-50s. White dude. Bald (with a shaved head). The man is a good instructor and I liked working with him; the machine, however, was a different story (in that it was a real challenge to keep running smoothly, even for a seasoned pro like Rutley).

The encoder consisted of three separate parts that you had to keep in sync. There was the encoder itself, which was more than enough trouble, then you had the roller in back, and you've got the machine/roller in front: the feeder.

The checks are on a roll (about two feet wide, give or take) that weighs well over a hundred pounds (and is in back of the encoder). And these checks are perforated—and say, there is not enough slack/too much tension from the feeder to the encoder—and you've got a tear problem. Now you've got to stop everything and splice it all together, plus adjust the digits that were forfeited due to the tear, as the numbers must stay and run in sequence.

And say, you've got these two machines running smoothly, now you've got the take-up roller at the end to worry about, in that it does not always take up evenly and will easily overlap: either to the left or to the right.

Front end would tear and Rutley would fix it, get it going, and then the back end would tear—and he'd fix that, and then the red tape would run off the mark. So now instead of printing six digits on the checks, you're printing only five. No good. You've got to stop the whole operation, search for the exact time

it went askew, tear the defective paychecks off, splice/reset the black digits, reset the red.

I watched him handle it, between sips from a huge bottle of Mountain Dew. Had it under control. Sort of. It was daunting. Did I get in over my head? How was I going to master this printing machine and stay hired?

Evidently today is Rutley's birthday. On or about 10 a.m. his wife showed with pizza and cake. Invite had been extended to me to join the group in the break room. Since I was new and did not really know anyone there and felt out of place, I chose to pass.

At lunch time, I found a spot to sit outside the rear exit door and ate my peanut butter sandwich and wondered if I would make it. Last how long? There was another guy sitting nearby. Gray-haired. Front teeth missing. He was in his 40s, smoking a cigarette. He'd been at the company three weeks. In binding. We didn't say much.

The encoder had me worried. Was I even cut out to learn the printing trade at this stage? This was the type of work one needed to get into at a young age. Most of these guys had learned printing while in the joint. Spent years at it. Me? I didn't know a damn thing about printing presses, unlike Rutley, who used to teach printing. I went back in. Turns out Rutley had worked in the field for decades.

"Retired five years ago," said Rutley. "Then my wife and I bought forty acres up in Snowflake. Plan was to live in a trailer, but then my wife decided she wanted to have a house built on the land, so I returned to work."

Tells me he could live off his retirement.

We printed checks, lots of them. One \$1,200 order, I noticed, was for the Tohono O'Odham Nation.

It's involved work. Rutley expects me to be able to run the machine by Friday. I'll try. Keep my eyes open. The last guy lasted five months before he got fired. He kept screwing up the digits across the bottom of the checks (that the encoder prints). The unlucky dude kept transposing the "on-us" mark with the other mark.

CHAPTER 40

Second day. More of the same. Only difference: Rutley let me set up the machine by myself (with some help from him). Trying to do my best. Would like to stay on if they'll have me. We'll see. It all depends on my not screwing up. You botch a printing job and it costs the company lots of money and you're out, pal. So get this.

I step out of the house. Got my lunch in the pack: peanut butter sandwich and banana. Got my small container of (tap) water. I look up at the sky. Appears overcast, but okay. Didn't check with weather on tv, so am not sure what to expect—and even if it rains, even if I get caught in it I got no choice but to get out there. I check the dog's dish. Rinse it out, and fill it with clean water. She gives me that look, that LOOK that says: Take me for a walk. Get me out of the yard.

How can I? She doesn't get that I've got a job to get to. I wheel the bike through the broken down wooden gate (hanging by a single hinge), close the gate after me. The dog goes on a barking tear, as always. Whether you're coming or going—she has to bark.

I hop on the bike. Ride it on down to Country Club, take it south. I ride it the five or six miles to Aviation, where it dead-ends. I cross Aviation, make it through the opening there in the fence, ride the bike on the dirt road along the railroad tracks. I carry the bike across 8 or 10 tracks to the paved road on the other side and I ride the rest of the way on Dodge.

I reach the warehouse at 12 to 8. Chain the bike to a tree outside, go in. I clock in, drop my orange pack at one of the work tables. I say good-morning to Rutley and the day begins. We print the numbers that you see across the bottom of your check, as well as the numbers in the right-hand corner that are in red. These are mostly payroll checks and receipts.

At lunch time I take my thirty-minutes to eat my peanut butter sandwich outside in back by a huge dumpster; chase it down with water. I eat the banana. It's a hot mother out. Feels like it's way above ninety. Return to work.

Our day is over at 15 of 5. I hear someone say it's raining outside. After I have clocked out I take the garbage bag I had brought with, tear a hole at one end to stick my head through and wear the black garbage bag this way (like a sleeveless vest)—but it does me absolutely no good.

I get maybe a hundred feet before I am *soaking wet*. Am one soaking wet pigeon. There is water in my sneakers. My underwear is wet, my walking shorts. My upper body is relatively dry, with the exception of my head, but am not so concerned with my shirt. Nothing I can do but pedal on. I take the same route back: carry the bike over the railroad tracks, keep a sharp eye out for traffic on Aviation, run across, lugging the bike across eight lanes. When I have reached the other side I am back in the saddle and ride it in the rain.

I pedal west, down toward Country Club, the rain pounding the top of my skull and face. I look up through squinting eyes and see someone else, another poor bastard on a bike pedaling my way, only this guy has no shirt on, is wearing sunglasses and a baseball cap. In shorts. We exchange greetings as we pass one another: couple of lost fools in the rain. Mind you, even though it's raining and raining hard, it is hot, *the air is hot*.

When I reach Country Club I take it north, riding through puddles, slosh through puddles and water. Lots of water shoots up from my front wheel and hits me in the face: water and dirt and gravel. Nothing to do. I ride in this storm for approximately three miles and it stops. *No more rain*. It's overcast, but it has stopped raining. Great. I'll take it.

I reach Speedway, head east. I stop in at Circle K. Pick up two copies of *Tucson Weekly* (one is for Bro), and take it on to the house. Made it. Tired. Legs aching. Throat dry. Hungry. One peanut butter sandwich a day for lunch ain't much fuel. But I'm back at the house.

The dog is excited, barking, BARKING. Wants to be taken for a walk. She has a small front yard to run around in, but it is hardly enough for her. And I get it, surely do. The kid needs to stretch her short legs. I sympathize, I do. I try to talk to her like one would a human being (well, it's habit).

I tell her: “Just let me go in, get a drink of water, and we’ll go for a walk. I promise. Just give me two minutes.”

She’s too worked up now. She knows what the word “walk” means. You betcha. She’s thrilled. I speak to her softly, but it hardly ever works. She’s thrilled and happy and can’t wait to go outside. I reach in the refrigerator for the jug of cold water, fill my small container, grab a peach, rinse it under the tap. I have some water, grab the leash and we’re off.

I eat the peach, a great tasty peach, on our walk. I take her out there for about two miles, return.

Later, Bro and I went out to see if we could find a raincoat to buy. At a thrift store on Broadway, I come across a tan green raincoat that looks like something that Peter Falk as Columbo would wear that I liked, nylon sweat pants that might keep me from getting wet in a rainstorm—all for about six bucks. Not bad. Didn’t want Bro to spend his money (as the dude is on a budget). So that worked out. His old jalopy of a car was over-heating once again. Found a gas station, filled the radiator and drove back here—by then it had stopped raining. Storm over. So now, at least am prepared should the rain pick up tomorrow. It’s monsoon season around here, you dig?

CHAPTER 41

Nice and sunny this Friday morning. I hop on the bicycle (not mine, Bro's) at about 6 minutes past seven and pedal the six miles south of Speedway, as before. I like the shop, the people; all pleasant, so far. The worry is there, there is always room to screw up, make a bad error, and there goes the job and out the door, amigo. The way it feels. It never is personal, but the man has a business to keep afloat and you know the rest. But spent plenty of time on the encoder by myself even today.

The owner appears to be a good sort. Always lots on his mind as he walks a sure walk through the building, from station to station, checking on things, making sure jobs are correct. Pats me on the back, says: "Good to see you."

We shake hands.

"Good to see you, too," I say, and we both mean it. I like it when people treat one another with this kind of courtesy and respect.

Said to him: "I hope I can do a good job for you."

"That's what we got you here for," said Jens, and strolled on to the inner bowels and offices in front.

Toward end of the day the shop foreman, Lipworth, walks up, says:

"You'll be paid Tuesday. We get paid weekly here."

Good news. Very good news. I like that. Yessir. Then he says that come Monday, if there is no work for the encoder, they'll put me in the shipping and cutting room with the tall dude named Malin. I nod my head. Okay. The cutter does concern me, though. Since I was done on the encoder, helped Rutley out on the three-color press, 14-inch. The damn thing is long, LONG—one LONG PRESS.

At fifteen of I clock out, and step outside. It's overcast once again and looks like imminent rain. I've got to make it back to the house before it starts to pour.

I pedal like a maniac, cut across the railroad tracks where a train is moving in reverse. At the tail-end two guys are communicating with the engineer up ahead in the locomotive via walkie-talkies. They are trying to hitch another caboose to it. I make it across the tracks. Feel a raindrop or two on my face, but nothing heavy. I am going gangbusters on the bike, baby. It stays overcast and gloomy all the way, but it doesn't start raining until I get in.

CHAPTER 42

Feels good to be back. Take the sneakers and socks off, unwind. Bro asleep on the water bed in the living room when I step through the sliding glass door. The dog is barking. Bro sits up, sleepy-eyed. Lately, since his old lady and I had our big falling out he never leaves in the evenings. Is that why? He used to spend four or five days out of every week at her place, now he stays here. She must have put her foot down. This is the way it is: You are not to see me until your brother is out of the scene. Got that?

So Bro is bummed. Why she would make such a demand, insist on such an ultimatum (even though she does not live here), is beyond me. But I get the feeling am mighty close to what is going on. She calls the shots, he obeys.

Well, the way it is. My beef is not with him—the kid’s been great and we’re brothers, we’re connected. I told him earlier:

“Look, we’re different, that’s all, you and I. When I move I’d like to see us part on good terms. We just can’t work together. We are too damned different.”

He can’t understand why I don’t do things his way, and vice versa. I told him: Hey, you’ve got some great qualities, etc., all that. Grateful for the help.

He watched tv for a while. *Seinfeld* is his favorite show, then he dosed off again. Like I said: depression, because he’d rather be over at his old lady’s, but he can’t be, so he sleeps. When he’s depressed he sleeps. Life, baby. Ain’t it a bowl of cherries? The chick says to him: Jump, and Bro says: How high?

GO FIGURE IT OUT (if you can).

Ten-12 now. Sitting in this bedroom by myself and listening to Barry Manilow. Something about *Daylight . . . memories; our stay in the sun. . .* I like it. I like Manilow, even if certain types think he is square and can’t wait to put

him down. Music is music, and if it does what it should, move you in some way, helps you get through the moment, it serves its purpose.

My day in the sun . . . as the song goes. A tune from *Cats*, I believe.

Yep. So that's what's on this "transient's" mind: to move out, find a place of my own and try to survive in good ol' Tucson, amigo. Rent a small house with a bit of a yard that allows pets. I'd like to go down to the animal shelter and pick out a pup and take care of it. It would be nice to have a dog of my own, as opposed to taking care of other people's dogs.

Two days of rest. Will I ever finish these books? Will I ever get them published? (and if so. . . .)

CHAPTER 43

Weekend over. Yep. Monday here already this morning. Ready to leave for the job. Prepared my lunch last night: boloney sandwich/one apple/carrots.

Did some more work on the cab manuscript. Went to bed at midnight (after watching a bad Roy Scheider movie called *52 Pickup*, written by Elmore Leonard). How does this guy get this shit made? It's beyond me. Anyway, went to bed after the flick, but then could not fall asleep. Tossed and turned, the usual, thinking about work, the encoder. The nerves; got 'em. Should train my body to get to sleep at 10 p.m.

All this over five-bucks-an-hour. A waste, I know, but what can you do? Let's see if my wage goes up or not. I can always think about finding a second job. After the move is made and I can buy a used car.

What to do about Grunt Press? Not inclined to send them anything. Feel like doing it all myself. Too many rejections over the years have left me fed-up/tired of being at someone else's mercy/beck-and-call. AND WHY? WHEN THERE IS NO NEED FOR IT. NONE AT ALL.

Ten to seven now. I leave here at about seven a.m. As mentioned before, it takes me forty minutes to reach the shop. Manager did tell me I could be working in shipping with someone named Malin. Tall dude, wears walking shorts. In his 20s. Sense of humor tended to be juvenile. Otherwise seems okay. They all seem like reasonable people. So far. This is what you want to believe: peeps just trying to make a buck, earn a living, exist somehow. Did pick up on the fact more than one was a former con, did time. Where else to learn how to work a printing press? No problem. The other hard-to-ignore truth was all of them knew more about this stuff than me.

CHAPTER 44

Another day on the job. This time worked in bindery with the Malin dude. Everything seems to upset this guy. I didn't talk much, just listened and let him vent. Went about my business, getting the work done.

The toughest part of the job today (tougher even than having to listen to Malin's bitching) was going in the rear of the warehouse and moving around these huge, HUGE ROLLS OF PAPER that weigh three-hundred-pounds. (There were some that weigh six-hundred pounds, yet others a thousand.) Incredibly LARGE rolls of paper there for the presses. They come in on these pallets and Malin and I had to DOWNLOAD these things for the pressman. We straightened out the rollers so that it would be easier for the pressman to go to. Then we returned to shipping in the front.

I stapled parking tickets together. Yes; we print parking tickets for TPD. I also trimmed thousands of medical forms, boxed them, etc. Swept up at 4:20, and it was time to go.

Those boloney sandwiches I make for myself to take to work taste pretty darn good. I make one, add mayonnaise/mustard/lettuce/tomato, etc. Brought an apple, carrots. Stuff keeps you going, gives you the much-needed energy. I keep drinking the foul-tasting tap water, but what else? They need to bring in a water cooler at work, or else I ought to pick up purified water over at the store near home.

And so unchained the bike (at tree on the grounds), hopped on, and steered it north on Dodge. Reached the tracks. And just as I am about to cross said tracks, idling freight train engine starts to move. Well, I figure I'll wait . . . only the waiting drags on. These freight trains go on forever.

I ride the bike west in the coal-like black gravel between the tracks for half a mile, sit there, wait for the train to get on through. Finally it does. I ride across

the tracks, wait at Aviation Parkway for the traffic light to turn green, ride on across.

I ride west on Aviation down to Country Club; and you know the rest. Hot. Sun bright. Some traffic. People on their way home.

I reach Speedway, head east to the corner where the Circle K market is, go left, and on over to my street. I reach the house. The dog, Nellie, goes crazy. Barking, BARKING, happy to see me. I pet her, go inside. My body is aching. Feet, back, etc. Dump the orange pack on the carpet, sit down for a spell. I get up, make a sandwich and wash it down with ice cold water. Later have four oatmeal cookies with milk. News on tv. Doesn't interest.

I go in the bedroom and plop down on the bed and nap until 8 p.m. I leave the set on, but nothing really on. Finish up working on *Streets of LA* taxi stories.

At 9 p.m. *Deadline* is on. Interesting segment on computer repair shop ripoffs; and then something on Elvis. *Private Home Movies*. His former "Memphis Mafia" promoting video, still living off the King of Rock. Pathetic. Yes, Elvis had his problems—but, my god, what a voice. What a voice. . . .

Jay Leno had the World's Strongest Man on (and his girlfriend, also a lifter), from Denmark. Then John Fogerty did a song from his latest album. Bill Whore's *Politically Incorrect* comes on and Deepak Chupacabra, the idiot, and I simply cannot stand Deepak Chupacabra—the biggest A-hole ever. And go in my room and here I am and it's 2 min. after midnight and still do not feel sleepy. That nap earlier did help.

I get up at 6 a.m. these days with the job and should think about hitting the sack earlier. I should. Somehow it is not easy to fall asleep. Not easy.

Have just about gone through that ream of typing paper already. Will need to pick up another. Will need to open a checking account, too. Send ms to Colorado; find an apartment and/or house to rent, etc., possibly with a yard, in order to have a dog.

And then there's the other book: *Gimme My Change*. Do I send anything to Grunt? Ignore them altogether?

CHAPTER 45

Received my check from Lorine, the office manager, an attractive blond lady in her 20s, albeit on the plus-size. Pleasant woman. Never cared for the thin type anyway. There is another babe in there, Latina. Long/dark hair down to her backside (and what a backside). Could be spoken for. Anyway—the check was for all of \$111.00. That’s it; one-hundred-and-eleven-bucks.

This kid is going places. This forty-six-year-old-scribe is destined for greatness. That was for 25-hours. At this rate I’ll have to seek out a second job. The *Telemundo* people never called back. So much for the compliments Mr. Crabapple pitched my way over the phone that time.

I’ll have to hang in and see, wait and see. After all, I did just start as a printer. Spent time in “Bindery” with Malin. 6’3” or 6’4,” dark-haired. Earring in left earlobe. Always whining about something: too hot outside/floor too dirty/somebody took his pen/the printer prints out too fast. He’s the type who’s always got to make some kind of inane comment about everything. Other than that, he’s innocuous. It’s just that if you’re focused on what you’re doing you don’t need to hear this guy constantly complaining and griping about shit. It can be distracting enough and can throw you off, especially if you’re operating the cutter—and that is one mean looking blade on that cutter.

It seems everywhere you turn in the shop there are machines that can do you in, crush a finger or take a hand right off. Was stapling parking tickets yesterday—and the way this thing comes down with the stapler—one wrong move, a bit of inattentiveness, and the thing will crush your thumb. In the morning was doing what they call “scoring.” Fed more ticket book covers into rollers that creased it in selected places. There, too, one slip and the thing will flatten a finger or two.

Was glad to be out of the shipping room/bindery and by myself back on the encoder. A roll of paper that easily weighed a hundred and twenty pounds had to be rewound. The printer had printed it backwards, and so before encoding could be done the roll of checks had to be reversed. That took well over an hour—and by then it was time to go home. So tomorrow that's the first thing I'll be getting on, printing those checks for a Mexican company.

Was overcast all the way home. Not a drop fell, though. Maybe tomorrow. If this happens, if it rains, I will have to wrap my feet in plastic bags in order to keep the socks dry. What other way? Am not about to wear galoshes (like you had to in Chi-town). Not in AZ, baby. Got that raincoat and pants in case it came down.

Took a nap right after arriving from work. It takes its toll, this standing on your feet eight hours a day. Will wait for the second check before I make a deposit. This present amount is just too small to deposit now.

CHAPTER 46

Letter “N” sticks.

Caught in the rain again today on the way home. Started to rain no less than a mile from work. I stopped, jumped off and got into the raincoat and nylon pants. Flimsy stuff, I found out. But it did help. Shoes, top of my head got wet. Should buy a real raincoat and pants.

Anyway, that’s not what’s on my mind presently. Had the worst day at work since I started. They put me on the encoder. And the damned thing kept malfunctioning. And why not?—when you’ve got three machines to keep running in sync. A real bitch. Impossible to keep running smoothly. You’ve got the encoder, which is more than enough trouble, then you got that roller in back, and you’ve got the machine/roller in front: the feeder. The checks are on a roll that weighs well over a hundred pounds. And—like I said— these checks are perforated. Say there isn’t enough slack (*too much tension from the feeder to the encoder*) and you’ve got a *tear* problem. Then you’ve got to stop everything and splice it all together. And say you’ve got these two machines running smoothly, now you’ve got the take-up roller (in back of the encoder) to worry about: it does not always take up evenly. It will easily overlap: *either to the left or to the right*.

My god—it took until noon to set up this job. Just frustrating. FRUSTRATING. And the manager, Lipworth, walks by. Can’t wait to quip:

“How’s it going, Ace?”

And what can you say? He sees what a tough time you’re having, and opines: “You’re frustrated, huh?”

No need to respond on my part.

And the whole day went like that. Front end would tear and I’d fix it, get it going, and then the back end would do the same—I’d fix that, then the red tape would run off the mark. So now instead of printing six-digits on the check,

you're printing *only five*. Thus, you've got to stop the whole operation, search for the exact time it started to happen, get rid of the defective checks, ***splice/reset the black digits, reset the red.***

The whole damned day went like this until about three, when Lipworth said, at the point the front feeder ripped (on its own) to forget that and get ready to start another order, new checks/different company.

Rutley comes over and helps me set up. We get the damned thing going at four (not using the rear roller or the front). We place stacks of new checks on the floor, feed them up into the encoder. They pass through, up and over and land in a neat stack on the back shelf. This is much easier. This way. Rutley turns for a brief second to show me something and the red tape slips and two hundred or so checks have to be destroyed. He's red-faced, but says nothing. AND HE'S BEEN DOING THIS FOR *THIRTY YEARS*.

If it can happen to him, why shouldn't it happen to someone like me?

We get her rolling. At least a thousand of these Greyhound payroll checks must be ready by the time we leave. We get them printed/boxed/etc. Tomorrow we do some more, and then another job will be waiting: the Romanowski order.

I wash my hands, clock out. Eager to get the hell out. ESCAPE. MY GOD, WHAT A ROUGH/ROUGH STRESSFUL DAY. Don't know how long I will last here. I was so behind on everything that I didn't even stop for lunch. It's a tough way to make a buck. *Tough*. Knowing that we were backed up, running behind on every order there, did not help.

CHAPTER 47

Showered, dressed. Made my sandwich for work. Had a banana for breakfast. Washed down with ice water. Fed the dog. Cleaned out her water dish and refilled it. And at the moment preparing mentally for the bicycle ride out.

Day before they said 20% chance of rain. We'll see. Sky looks bright and blue out there. We'll see. Did make it a whole week on the job, didn't I? I'm even starting to feel like I could master the encoder. But who knows? Things can go wrong—and you're out (just like that).

Could use a new typewriter ribbon and another ream of paper. And what happens once I find my own place and get laid off and cannot draw unemployment and/or find work? It's a possibility. Will have to take that chance, I suppose. Can't stay here, don't want to stay here. Atmosphere no good. Too many differences. People help you out, then can't wait to direct your life; can't wait to jump all over you. Everybody has opinions on how you should live. It's nothing but BS, but there you are. You owe them to THINK THE WAY THEY DO—when they can't even straighten out their own life. Flakey people and flakey demeanors. Pissants and their pissant behavior. Where is the logic and where is the sane and sensible behavior?

Bro the other day referring to my writing as “a waste of time; not work. Laziness.” I work hard on my writing, but others do not see it as work. They spend hours on their computers drawing and doodling and “sampling” photos from mags (even though the clip art is paid for) but that, NOW THAT IS CONSIDERED “WORK.” Small minds that need to be led around like sheep, à la Heaven's Gate (the Suicide Sect); Applegate crowd.

Go figure.

Seth Speaks? Sure. I say: Seth *Excretes*. (Re: the book by that silly little broad named Roberts.) But the lambs need to follow somebody, need to be guided by SOMEBODY, and it might as well be Seth, or Edgar Casey. GO FIGURE, BABY.

Ten of.

I have to ride. Have a bicycle ride ahead of me. Not that I mind it so much. Gives me a chance to mull things over, “meditate,” etc. Well, at least the women are pleasant at work. They talk to you; say good-morning, hello. It’s nice.

Getting better on the encoder. Trouble is when I have to print checks that are on a huge roll it is very difficult to set up. The roll is on a different machine, on casters, with an electric eye—the eye allows the roll to move by itself, feed into the encoder. The thing also has air brakes. Just a pain. It would either feed into the press (encoder too slow or too fast), and that was the least of the problem; it kept tearing checks at the perforated line, etc. And when that happens you’ve got to stop everything and splice the ends together. And every time you’re stopping the machine to do this the shop supervisor walks up and gives you the look. He likes to “hear noise” in the shop: presses running/collating machines running/my encoder running. When they are running that means the company is making money; and when they are not. . . .

So, it is no longer me that is the cause. I believe I’ve got the encoder nailed down, can run it. I can set it up and run the damned thing. I’m learning. It took a while. Many tries (with Rutley’s help; good ol’ Rutley). Before I left today Jesse-Butch Lipworth walks up, leans in:

“Come in tomorrow morning at 9 for more training.”

I say: “Let me get this right: Instead of coming in at my usual time, which is 8 a.m., you want me to come in at 9?”

Lipworth nods. I have nothing against the guy, retired US Air Force major, pleasant, etc. Southerner. He says:

“Right. That is, unless there’s encoding to be done, then come in at your usual time.”

I nod.

First paycheck was for \$110. Wonder what the next one will be for? (For a forty-hour week.)

Some rain predicted for the next five days or so.

CHAPTER 48

Thought I'd try and open a checking account today. Wondered if Bro felt like tagging along, for that and maybe pick up a couple of cigars.

Well, Bro likes to sleep in. Won't get up until ten or later. I wanted to get going and it was just about eleven and Bro's sitting in the chair in front of the tv watching the Homebuilder Show sleepy-eyed. I mention we ought to get going. He says:

"Let me get cleaned up, shower. . . ."

He's in there for twenty minutes. I tap on the bathroom door and tell him:

"Never mind; I'll ride the bicycle instead."

He calls out from the shower:

"Are you sure?"

"I'm leaving. See you later."

I check the dog's water, feed her. Hop on the old bike and ride it on up Grant to the supermarket. They have a bank in there. I get a young, new teller. Clean-cut kid. Only he's not sure what to do.

They have me fill out the usual forms. Ask for two IDs. All I've got is my driver's license. The other teller there knows what he's doing. Says a passport would be good, as long as it's not expired. I nod.

Ride the bike back to the house in the blistering sun. Should have worn a visor. I dig around for my passport and can't seem to locate it. Finally, at last, find it between the box the fax machine is in and a plastic carton, beside the bed.

I'm back on the bike, hauling ass. It feels good to be strong enough to be able to do this, especially in this kind of heat. Feel a lot better than when I lived in LA. I wait in line. Walk up. This time all goes well. I deposit one hundred and get eleven and change back. Am happy. Got my own ATM card, etc.

I walk over to the liquor cooler, pick out an 18-Pack of Red Dog Beer at 7 bucks. Not bad. *Eighteen beers for seven dollars*. Rode the bike back to the duplex. Cracked a can. Turned the tube on.

CHAPTER 49

I get to the shop early and hear Rutley and Malin talking shit about me in shipping. They don't know that I'm on the other side of the door. Not intentionally, just happened to be at my station, by the encoder, getting into the apron.

"Then there's something wrong with him," says Malin the sissy. This guy, who likes to run around like a gossipy old broad, is passing judgement.

"He smells," said Rutley.

"Huh?"

"Like cat piss," emphasized Rutley.

Both are chuckling. The mothers are bad-mouthing a fellow co-worker and laughing it up. Even though Rutley is wrong. It's not me that smells, but the goddamn *Made-In-China* raincoat. ***That's right.*** Purchased at Target. ***Brand new.*** I shower in the morning when I get up, every goddamn day. Then get into the raincoat when the weather calls for it, and by the time am through riding the bike to work and having worked up a sweat, the cheap-ass plastic material that the Chinese used to make the raincoat gives off a *stench* powerful enough to be absorbed by my clothes. And so now am doomed. *Because I smell like cat urine.*

Then he adds something else to it, about my acting nervous. Well, I am, when around people I don't know and/or don't trust. **Peeps like these assholes, exactly.** People make me feel uncomfortable.

"He's shy," said Rutley.

"*Shy?*" said Malin. "Probably a faggot."

The *psycho*, who has a habit of running around and clucking like an old hen has nerve to call someone he does not know, a *faggot*. Does it irk? It does. It shouldn't, but it bothers me. I feel like cleaning this punk's clock.

You learn, you LEARN as you move through life—there is never an end to the supply of *demented scumbags* in this world. Never. No end to dues. It goes

on. And my respect for Rutley just dropped down to about zero. And the other *grouching-sack-of-excreta*? I never had much respect for to begin with.

Am burning up inside, the total disrespect of it, the absolute disregard toward me as a human being. The lack of integrity on display here by these *low-class cretins* and how quick they are to behave like *gutter slugs*.

I step away from the door. Not only do I not need to hear anymore, but do not wish to appear to be eavesdropping. It's then that Rutley steps through, walking past me to get to his press, and I can see that his face is on the red side. Embarrassed at having been busted. Ashamed at his own less-than-commendable behavior of a moment go. And this was someone I'd initially thought was above board, stand-up. *Hell*. . . .

He says good-morning, and continues on. I greet him, but do so without looking up, and just go about my business getting ready for the day.

CHAPTER 50

They stick me in bindery. I have no say in the matter. I'd been given a task, a job that presently required trimming. I carry the stack of forms to the cutter, and this thing has a blade about a yard long. The system is computerized. Looks like. So am cautious. Place the stack on the flat platform, trying to figure out how to go about making the trim. It dawns on me that the thing had been pre-programmed for a certain type of cut and that it would need to be re-programmed for my needs, in order to make the trim I need to make.

Malin suddenly pokes his nose in, acting like he was the one who caught it and happened to stop me in time.

"*That's wrong,*" he says. "*You don't want to do that.*"

The other sissy runs in. Gavin. Same height and age. Giggles like Malin. Gavin points out that the cutter is computerized. No kidding, I almost said. I noticed it before the two of you punks freaked and are acting as though you stopped me from making a grave mistake.

The super, Jesse-Butch Lipworth, can be heard singing that tv theme that he loves just outside our door:

"*Rollin' rollin' rollin'.*"

A real winner. *Motivator par excellence.* Malin pushes the door open, calls him over. Goes into the nothing event that never happened, but he makes it look like it actually did, as though the error had actually taken place—and *he was the one who saved the day.*

This is totally fucked, as well as humiliating to me. It is hard to believe that anyone would behave in such a *chickenshit* manner. If I hadn't witnessed it with my own eyes I would not have believed it.

Lipworth, the 60-year-old with that deep southern drawl rubs it in by laughing and shaking his head as though I'd actually committed the blunder, and Malin picks up a few *brownie points* as a result. The fact that in the short

time that I have been here I have actually seen Malin screw up *more than once* does not make a bit of difference.

The other punk leaves the shipping room to join up with them in the corridor. Lipworth has moved on; I know so because the *Rawhide* tune has faded away, drifted on to another part of the psych ward to torment someone else. Malin and Gavin, however, have remained just outside the shipping room door. You see, they aren't through.

Gavin has further wisdom to share with his *sissy buddy*, having to do with my hair. Yes, *my hair*. Grown men, adults, talking about how another man combs his hair. What could be *sillier*? You tell me. This is how *pussies* behave.

"Hairspray," says Malin. Both are chuckling. It's funny, you see. Hairspray. *Not only is he a fag, but he uses hairspray.*

No, you're wrong, sissified punks. It's not hairspray. I hate hairspray. It's gel. *Dep.* The only way to keep the strands combed back and out of my eyes. It was not a fashion statement or anything having to do with vanity. Years before I'd had it long, in a ponytail—again, nothing having to do with any type of statement, but as a matter of convenience and to save money. I'd also had it short, post ponytail, in a flattop; merely to try something new and different. The long hair was fine and I would have kept it, stayed with it (yes, the fact women liked it was a plus), only I'd neglected to use conditioner after taking a shower one evening, hit the sack. When I woke up the next morning it was a tangled mess, in knots—and hopeless. Nothing I could do but have it sheared off. My current so-called style wasn't anything I paid much attention to and used gel, as stated, to keep it from falling over my forehead and out of my face.

Nothing even worth mentioning or talking about. But to the *slugs*, the *clucking/no-class loons*, this was an issue worth pursuing.

No way around it: I was stuck in another situation with some warped humans. Malin, quite possibly, had to be on *meds*. I was willing to bet my last damn dime on it.

CHAPTER 51

I go about my business, do what I'm told. *Walking On Eggshells* describes it.

"Keep the bindery clean if you want to get along with me. That's the key."

I don't say much. Keep to myself. I figure it's the safe way to go about it. Guy is *unbalanced*. I mean, I'm fairly scarred myself, but this mother is a certified *loon*: unstable, fraction of an inch away from losing it completely.

What I hear next adds weight to my conclusion: lasted only weeks in the army and got kicked out. Attempted to join the police force. *Couldn't pass muster/couldn't get past the shrink*. Something was wrong with this *punk's noggin*. At first, as he spun his tale, he attempted to blame it on his Italian uncle back in Cicero, Illinois, who was "connected." I listened to this line of bull, but knew better. *Dipstick* had problems.

"The army said I couldn't handle authority well," said he, by way of explanation. Really? There's more to it than that, Skippy. "That hurt me later on in life."

The other fool, Gavin, is in and out. Usually to use the cutter or grab a marker, something; and he's usually whistling the *Three-Blind-Mice* tune. Each and every time he enters the two are *giggling/playing grab-ass/pinching each other in the ribs like schoolgirls*.

He walks in whistling the tune, and he leaves whistling the same. ***One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*** is right. I do my best to ignore it. Keep my head down/keep busy, maybe they'll leave me alone/let me be.

At least the owner, Jens, appears to have integrity; the women were friendly, human. Dedrick was a nice guy, Jude seemed all right; Sayer never smiled, kept to himself. Gilby was missing some front teeth, another hypocrite who bad-mouthed you the minute your back was turned. Dusty R., recently hired, seemed nice enough. But you never knew what someone was like, when it

came to people. They seem to be the real thing—and then later turn out to be snakes. A damned shame.

CHAPTER 52

Lunch, as respite away from Malin and his girlfriend Gavin, is a godsend. Priceless. Am tired of the *Rawhide* theme, sick and tired of the other white-bread dork whistling the *Three Stooges* ditty.

I go outside, in back of the warehouse, where it's quiet, to eat my measly sandwich in peace. There is another fellow there, Dusty R. From New Mexico. Dark-haired, late 30s. Recently married. He's been here about as long as I have, helping one of the printer's in the back. Dusty and I never got a chance to get acquainted until now. He seems like an all right type; not loud or obnoxious like some of the others. Sane, is the word. Sane. And it's welcome, refreshing. We're able to get along, have a civilized conversation.

"My lady's a good woman," he tells me. "Comes from a good family. I got lucky."

I liked hearing it.

"I used to have someone," I tell him. "Years ago. When I lived in LA. She wanted to date other people. Guys were always hitting on her, and it went to her head. I had to get away from that place. Too expensive; and when it comes to women . . . if you aren't rich and famous they want nothing to do with you. Being in a good relationship is just about impossible. LA women are nuts."

We're both pretty sure that we won't last. He's never done this kind of work before; and really, neither have I, with the exception of that brief stint up at that small print shop.

Break over. We don't look forward to going back and hearing Lipworth sing his nerve-wracking jingles or the other ding-a-ling whistle his . . . but we got no choice.

CHAPTER 53

He's got pictures of his ugly kid up on the pinboard. Cork is the unlucky offspring's name. A morning did not go by that he did not talk about Cork's dowery.

"Cork's got ten-grand in the bank. And Juniper's brother put another five-grand in his trust fund."

I wanted to tune him out. Needed to. Desperately. This nut, this flake actually was raising a child. *God help us.*

"Juniper didn't want me to be a cop anyway. But yeah, that was my big dream. That was it. Since I was ten, living in Cicero, all I wanted was to be a cop."

His family moved out when he was a young boy. Met his wife in church. Used to do bars "real heavy." Not anymore. Hurt his shoulder. Was going to have it operated on shortly. Lived in Hawaii. Got tired of the water.

"When you see it every day, what can you do with it?"

I seldom said anything. Listened to this inane crap for almost *three goddamn weeks*. It was *torture*. I prayed that I would get sent back to the encoder—***that I hated***—but anything was better than having to listen to this psychologically-warped pissant's whining/groaning and moaning.

"Keep the bindery clean if you want to get along with me," he reminded me. "That's key."

How about if you close your fucking mouth?—I felt like saying. That's **key** with **me**.

There was the time his wife called. She wants him to pick up a few things after work: milk for the baby, etc., bread, etc.

"Yes. Uh-huh." Then I hear him whisper into the receiver: "I love you, too."

Explain it to me. Some poor wench actually loves this jerk.

CHAPTER 54

“Cork took his first steps over the weekend,” said Malin.

I nodded. *Man, I don't give a fuck if he ran a 26-mile marathon. I've got this min. wage job I'm sweating. If that's not bad enough, I've got to listen to you yap about your kid who's got a head on him like Sasquatch.* God have mercy.

I was stapling parking tickets together, putting covers on thousands upon thousands of parking tickets/moving violation citations for the Tucson Police Department, maybe forty-thousand booklets, one wrong move, a miscalculated slip of the hand and your fingers get smashed.

I kick the pedal on the floor each time, twice per booklet, along the gutter, while the whiner goes on about his simian-faced kid named Cork. I did my best to tune the son of a bitch out, but he went on. No ending to it. Malin Moloney (rhymes with baloney).

Now it's about him and his wife thinking of selling their present house and buying a bigger place. This goofball and his spouse want a second child. Jesus Christ. *No wonder it's a demented world.* You've got *nuts like this* pumping them out. Give the *loon* some kind of sanity test first (although he's failed the army and the police).

And that other sissy Gavin was always leaving his AB Dick machine and hanging around the bindery to be with his sissy pal Malin. And the two of them would banter endlessly, back-and-forth, in those irritating effeminate voices. I mean you've got two six-foot-three males sounding like genuine sissies, teasing one another like a couple of squeaky-sounding broads. It was sickening. It went beyond. How did I end up here? What was my crime? How? Why? *Hadn't I suffered enough?*

You said you wanted to get away from crazy LA. Here you are, pal. Look, I'm not saying all of Tucson is like this, just these shitheads here. Not everyone in this place is whacko, just possibly these *white-bread pissants* right here.

First the one (Malin) would say something inane, maybe curse like a girl, then the other would giggle, then utter something just as pathetic, or worse. ***Goddamn, it was torture.*** No escape. Nowhere to run. I was stuck in the shipping area. There would be no *respite* until either Gavin left on his own, or was scared off by the super named Jesse-Butch “Good ol’ Boy” Lipworth.

“*Rollin’ rollin’ rollin’*,” sang Lipworth. His idea of keeping a “positive attitude.” And then his white-haired/stern-looking redneck wife shows up at the loading dock to visit for some reason. He wasn’t making much noise then. Pussy-whipped big mouth didn’t dare open his yap around her.

CHAPTER 55

I'm in shipping, sealing boxes. It's quiet for a change. Malin isn't talking about his kid or his shattered dream of becoming a cop.

The punk named Gavin sticks his head in. Tells me to go with him. I follow him out to the AB Dick offset press. He was told to show me a few pointers. He picks up a dropper.

"You use this solution, then you pour on the water solution, from one end of the roller to the other. Then you use the dropper to suck it up."

I was tempted, so tempted: *How about if you suck my dick instead, bitch?*

He tells me he likes to keep his work area/table "*neat and clean*." So this guy's like the Malin Maloney character in bindery. It's fag behavior, not that there's anything the matter with it (if you like it, if this is the way you are), only it irks me because these are the very same class A-1 dorks who are always ready to point the finger at you (for whatever reason: be it gel in your hair; be it something; be it ANYTHING), the way you talk/walk/blow your nose.

So now, I've got this latent homo showing me how to use this press and there is nowhere to go. This is where good ol' boy Jesse-Butch Lipworth has put me (for the sake of "*versatility*"), only I doubt I'll be sticking around long enough: You've got personalities and attitudes.

The lesson over, am sent back to the other six-foot-three wuss.

"I worked the presses over at Arizona Printing," said Malin. "Didn't like it, didn't like getting dirty. Didn't like coming home after work with all that grease on me."

They all sound like *punks*, these so-called married men who are always quick and eager to point the finger at someone else, always preoccupied with someone else's *sexual leanings*.

Hey, mothers, if I were queer, I'd announce it to the fucking world. I wouldn't be sneaky about it, I wouldn't be hiding it. But since I prefer pussy

(and the *female culo*), that's my own particular trap, my dilemma, because most women aren't worth the goddamn trouble. But yes, I still prefer beaver to pipe. Get it, pissants?

You got the feeling somehow that these pussies got married in order to flash that wedding band, therefore "proving" to the world that they indeed were men/heterosexual in every way, as opposed to what they truly were: *latent homo pussies in denial*.

And you know something? None of this even interests me, but the hypocrisy does rile. Evil Knieval was right that time for beating an asshole with a ball bat for calling him a fag. I say: Right on, brother! Certain *label-slingers/finger-pointers* deserve every beating they get.

CHAPTER 56

Malin is running his mouth/bad-mouthing the owner this time; boasting how he likes to tell Jens off. This *creepo* is sick. All there is to it. Jens, far as I could tell, had more *heart and class* in his little pinky than Malin had in his entire body. But there he was, mouthing off, talking shit. Par for the course.

I hated being a party to it and wished I could've walked away. I wanted to tell him to just shove a sock in it, only I couldn't. I was stuck. It was then—and the timing could not have been better—that Jens stepped through the door.

I could not help it, said to the back-stabbing blowhard:

"There he is." In other words: You talk big, a-hole. Here's the boss. *Go ahead, tell him off. Tell him what you think. Here's your chance.* Only Malin's face turned beet red, the cowardly little twit, the prig. He had nothing to say. Big mouth for a twat.

"How do you like working with Malin here?" Jens asked.

For lack of anything better, on such short notice, I said:

"Malin's got some sense of humor."

Had me on the spot. Could have been worse. But I liked Jens, had started the business up from scratch. A lot on his mind. Took a chance on me, and I genuinely felt regret (that maybe I had somehow let him down). But my problem had nothing to do with him. It came down to that redneck Lipworth and the two punks Gavin and Malin; Mutt and Jeff. Always playing grab-ass; homos-in-the-making. The sissies had wedding bands on their fingers; Malin an earring in his left ear. What did that tell you? Couldn't recall if Gavin had one in his—and if he didn't, he should have. It would've been so appropriate. In LA only gays wore an earring in the left ear.

Stuck in hell. *Stuck*. No way out. For *five-bucks-an-hour*. In 1997, amigo. 1997. In Tucson, AZ. Right-to-work-state, they call it. Excuse me while I puke. Right-

to-slave-labor, was more like it. Pathetic. And heartless.

Jens had nodded, smiled that smile, and stepped back out. I knew Malin would get back at me for the quip. I just didn't expect it to be as severe in tone.

CHAPTER 57

I thought maybe I ought to at least make an effort to get on his good side, try to “make amends” by talking a bit. Lipworth always singing the goddamn *Rawhide* theme had reminded me of the redneck bar scene from the *Blues Brothers* movie. Band was into a blues tune in this gritty/sawdust-on-the-floor/country-western venue. Half-drunk and rowdy, the rednecks—not wanting anything to do with the blues number—start pitching beer bottles and whatnot at the chickenwire (that the band was on the other side of) and don’t stop until Belushi & Co. drop the R & B for “. . . rollin’ rollin’ rollin’ . . . get them doggies rollin’ . . .”

I remembered the bit as being not only amusing enough and just about perfect enough to bring up (for obvious reasons), as well as felt that it had terrific potential as icebreaker. Only I hardly get the words “redneck bar” out before the disturbed mother, Malin—in this clearly superficial attempt to stand up for Lipworth—snaps: “*What’re you got against rednecks? I’m a redneck.*”

Like hell you are, I thought. It did stun me. I could have responded (and I had plenty to respond with), only there was no way he would have stood for it. This was one demented jerk who was paying me back for a slight that never happened, not the way he saw it.

What did I truly have against rednecks? For starters—*plenty*. Getting punched in the breadbasket and having the wind knocked out of me by the redneck DI in Basic for no reason other than the fact I had enlisted, or maybe he hadn’t cared for my name or looks, who knew?

Southerners hated anyone from the North. That’s the way it was back then. Sorry pukes. Harassed by the other redneck drill instructor named W. and the rest of those redneck recruits. And then there was ‘Nam: the name calling (“nigger- lover”), because I had friends who were African-American; but then I’d had friends who were Hispanic/Asian, throughout my life, didn’t matter; we weren’t raised by bigots. Yes, our folks were flawed in other ways, believe me,

but there was no animosity towards anyone because of their ethnicity or skin color; it just didn't exist in our family.

Like I said, we had other problems, like all families, but racism was not one of them. My own father, who brutalized me for thirteen-years, had a habit of saying, when it came to people: "You have good and bad in every group."

And there you have it.

"Faggot" is the other label rednecks are in love with. Because carrying sixty-pounds on my back in the boonies of 'Nam, which is what the rucksack at times weighed that caused pain in my testicles (having hurt myself while doing squats at the Ravenswood YMCA back home in Chicago), and having gone in to see the medic about it while we were in the rear, established safe zone/base camp, hoping to get a jockstrap or jockey underwear because I was in dire need of support down there—unfortunately all the army would provide was boxers, which were of no help to me at all—and the flakey/inexperienced jerk somehow got the idea that I was in there because I wanted to be fondled by him.

I mean, this is sick shit, and spread the rumor—so when I got back to the barracks the redneck cocksuckers badgered me about it, and were ready to beat the daylights out of me, if the supply sergeant in charge hadn't put his foot down and ordered them to knock it off, that it was enough, and the spineless farm animal-molesting hicks clammed up. Sorry sacks of Southern Fried pig waste.

To add hurt on top of hurt, I was heartbroken over my best friend Gunter back home in the Windy City banging my girl Lil. I didn't have a sweetheart to write to, like so many of the guys. And you didn't discuss this kind of personal shit with people, not that I had wanted to. Back then you kept matters of the heart to yourself. It was the "manly" thing to do. Yep. Sure.

My best pal had moved in on her while I was away in Basic and AIT; was laying pipe to this girl I had fallen for, even had the audacity to ask for my approval while I was home on leave (before being sent to the boonies of 'Nam).

I was dealing with this, while at the same time coping with the pain in my testicles that had been exacerbated by the heavy goddamn ruck I had to lug on my back throughout all the jungle humping during my year-long tour of that godforsaken hellhole.

Fucking life came at you from all sides. *From the cradle to the humping grave.* Psychologically defective parents, backstabbing pals, white-trash humans to serve with while in Uncle Sam's "wonderful" army; meeting my share of ballbusters and having my heart shredded by same.

Hey, was life always this much fun? No, because I'd met and known a few terrific peeps along the way, too. But I gotta tell you, some of this negative crap can be so intense and goes so deep that it just sticks with you more than the other.

I made it. Got through Vietnam. *Supposedly intact.* On the surface. Had my problems, for sure, but they weren't readily visible. Like so many of those who did time over there. Did my best to deal with the deadness inside. This was how I endured and defeated the fear the entire time I'd been stuck in the jungle. Don't give a damn. Go through it like it don't mean shit. *Death or life.* So *what?* It was the only way. Either that, or you lost *your mind.* What kid of 18 or 19 wants to think about dying? *What kid of 18 or 19,* who hadn't lived or done anything yet—wants to be stuck on "Death Row" while awaiting (*the never stated*) day of execution. This is what being in a War Zone was like. But I got through it, like I said.

Back in the States, at a base in the Midwest, there was more of the same by moronic white trash who absolutely hated people of color—and god help you if you treated these peeps of color as human beings and with respect. Because then, according to the bigoted gutter cretins, you were *far worse.* Get it? I never got it or understood it.

Can't seem to get away from the rednecks. Everywhere you go. There they are. And there were enough, I supposed, working as cabbies at the Eager Beaver Cab Co. in LA as well.

What did I have against rednecks? Should I go into it the way I would like with this sorry sack-of-waste named Malin? Considered it. I needed the measly low-wage job, so I didn't. *You take the crap.* You take it. *It never ends.* Everywhere you go. The assholes/peckerwoods/knuckle-draggers and miscreants. No class, no brains—*white-bread gutter trash.* They got them in certain parts of Europe, got them throughout the South/Midwest/parts of California, and now here in Tucson.

Instead, I say calmly to the misguided mook:

“Look, I like Merle Haggard, for what it’s worth. I like Trisha Yearwood/Waylon Jennings/Patsy Cline/Brenda Lee/Johnny Cash/Hank Williams. . . .”

He ignores this. Is not about to respond, or would even know how. He’s not being genuine and is not able. That’s exactly what is happening here. He was not “standing up for/defending” Jesse-Butch Lipworth, he was paying me back for that quip from the other day when Jens had unexpectedly entered the bindery and Malin—yes, Malin—had embarrassed himself and *stepped on his own dick with that big mouth of his*.

Forget it. You’re dealing with a halfwit. I felt like saying: You moron, I wasn’t knocking Southerners per se, as I’ve got some close friends who are from the South. “Redneck” is a figure of speech, a term that describes xenophobic asshole bigots who are hateful towards anyone who is not white and not from the South. My brother-in-law, who is one of the most capable and intelligent people I have ever met and I think the world of, is from the South, so is his mother. One of my best friends—Chubby Elston; yes, the very same who starred in the *Bloodsucking Geeks* flick—is from Ohio; two others live in KY, etc.

What’s the point? You’re dealing with a low-IQ buffoon. What had I walked into? Some kind of cliquish viper pit? Decent on the surface, but rotten inside? Is this it? What’s happening to the world we live in? No peace of mind to be had no matter where you go.

What do I have against rednecks? A better question would be: ***What don’t I have against them?***

What am I doing putting up with this for five bucks an hour? Am I stuck in another trap here in the Old Pueblo? More crap from my defective fellow humans? Is that it? What’s the answer? Should I have moved to Australia? That had been the notion throughout the ‘80s (while earning a living as a cabbie), and meeting and getting to know so many terrific Aussies who happened to be visiting LA at the time. Was life easier “Down Under”? People saner? You hoped. I suspected the country had its share of deficits, like any other place, but you could not help but wonder if life was less stressful and

love (not only easier to find), but possible to hold on to. Like I said: you wanted to believe a haven like that existed *somewhere*.

Hey, Jens, should you happen to be reading this: I meant what I said about you having real class, about liking you as a person. But you've got to understand: You've got some real pernicious turnips working for you back there. I do get it: You keep them on because they get the job done (somehow), and it's a bitch to have to hire and train new people, even though you could train a fucking inebriated monkey to do that shit.

CHAPTER 58

Am getting into my apron Friday morning and Rutley, who is a Mason, is drinking from his usual huge jug of Mountain Dew and eating a Payday candy bar. This was the shaved head I was initially convinced had character, some class. (Win a few/lose a few.) Tells me he's leaving early today.

"Don't look so sad," I kid him.

"I'd rather be retired," he says.

Since no one has suggested different, I enter the bindery. Dread going in, but do so. Am hoping the nut will stay off my back so long as I keep to myself, do my work, keep quiet. Am using the cutter, trimming stacks of forms. Getting it done. So far so good. Tiny bits of paper and spaghetti-like thin strips are on the floor as a result (that I haven't had a chance to sweep up). It is nothing crucial, I figure, nothing that anyone would get worked up about, anyone, that is, but a mentally-ill cocksucker named Malin Maloney.

"This *pisses me off!*" He's pointing a finger at the floor. "Messy work area *pisses me off.*"

I respond by not saying anything. Grab a broom and sweep up. Didn't matter much, because a while later there was something else that "pissed" this asshole off. Fact was, there was very little that *didn't piss him off*. And each and every time he had to announce it to the world like a moping, spoiled brat:

"*THAT PISSES ME OFF!*"

Where do these *twats* come from? Deliver me from these nitwits somebody, please. Endure a childhood as your short-tempered father's favorite punching bag, live through a war in the jungles of South-East Asia while still in your teens, survive a loveless existence and years of struggle in furnished rooms in a dog-eat-dog/maddening hellhole like LA without any kind of support—and *then come and tell me, after you have earned it and paid heavy dues—AND I*

MEAN PAID SOME SERIOUS FUCKING DUES, what “bothers and/or pisses you off,” punk!

But I say nothing/go about my business/do my work. Even so, feel in my gut that my time in bindery is dwindling. There is no way the dolt and I are going to even come close to ever reaching some kind of rapport. I can’t stand the sight of the neurotic gasbag. Still, and still, I’ve got to endure, take it; keep my head to the grindstone and endure.

He’s staying quiet in his area of the room doing his work, while I do mine at the stapler, and things seem to go relatively okay the rest of the morning. At noon I eat my baloney sandwich and apple outside. Return to work a half hour later, and the humming super, Lipworth, puts me on the encoder.

That’s when the real trouble began. That goddamn machine is a pain in the ass, I don’t mind telling you. The slightest thing throws it off and you’re back to zero, like some kind of Chinese torture test. It’s agony. Spent the entire afternoon setting and re-setting the damned thing. Rutley had left by then, and so it was down to the super and me trying to figure the thing out. And he can’t run it, either. In fact, I know more about it than Lipworth.

It’s obvious enough: this is primarily what I was hired for, and if I can’t handle the encoder I’m out. Did have a friendly chat with Lipworth as I related this to him. He’d appeared with his usual: “How’s it going, Flash?”

Calling me “Flash” was nothing more than this guy’s way of rubbing it in. So be it. I let it wash over, and touched on being aware why I was hired. Lipworth had nodded.

“That’s right.”

“I’m a hard worker. I did fine in shipping. I realize what I’m here for and I wouldn’t want to accept money for work not done. I’m no slacker, but that machine is a pain.”

I was pretty sure I’d botched it with Malin, and the encoder was my last chance. Again, the man is a retired light colonel, Air Force. Former military. Gotta respect that. Trouble is the afternoon slipped away way too soon and I’ve got *zero progress to show*. When he re-appeared later, I got:

“Well, we’ll give it another try on Monday.”

And I’m thinking: *am not so sure I even want to come back. I’ve had enough, too much—for five-dollars-an-hour. There’s too much pressure here at these wages. Life is short.*

The old bike was down, sprocket trouble, and Bro picked me up. I’d related the situation to him. He got it. Didn’t say much. So now what? The way I feel: I’d rather be washing dishes (a lot less taxing on the psyche). If it’s going to be minimum wage anyway, might as well save the brain power for the writing.

CHAPTER 59

Here it is Saturday. Hit the sack early (due to exhaustion), and then woke up about thirty minutes ago. I look at the clock. *It's 2 a.m. Too much on my mind. Can't sleep.* Looks like I'll get fired (if I don't quit first).

And that's how I feel. Why I woke up in the middle of the night thinking about it all. Weighed heavily on my mind. I shouldn't have to go through this kind of shit at my age, after all I've been through. Hadn't I paid enough? Only there is never any end to the dues. It just goes on. You pay and you pay—and *there is always someone else there to make sure you pay some more.*

I did get to know a number of decent people, friendships were developing. There was Dusty, the recently married dude from New Mexico. There was Terrill, 54, (marketing director at the label company that was also owned by Jens), who liked to refer to me as "Sgt. Cash." Had even handed me a cigar (as a way of celebrating the birth of his son). He'd grinned that big grin while proudly flashing his infant son's picture. Hell, who could blame him? It was a celebration of life; it was also a reminder that I still had some kind of chance, if I could only get my act together, put a few bucks in the bank; find a job that made it possible.

I'll wash dishes. Do what it takes. I can't quit on Tucson this soon. *Can't go back to LA/wouldn't want to.* What would I do there, anyway? Yes, the Venice boardwalk was nice enough, but when you can't even afford to leave work long enough to go to the boardwalk, what good is it? And then you've got the crowding and earthquakes, traffic jams. Would I want to return to that? I don't think so.

CHAPTER 60

Thinking of going to K-Mart with Bro tomorrow to buy a new bike. Got a sale on. I can pick up a bike for eighty bucks, plus tax. No way around it. Need wheels. I like biking it. No problem with that at all. Got to start thinking about finding another job—just when I thought I was set. This is the way it is. You spend quarter of a century working shit-jobs to subsidize the writing—and people still can't wait to hand you some *dead-end gig* and *offer you minimum wage*.

Goddamn life and the world. Your concerns don't concern them. Get those checks encoded, get those stupid forms out. *Get the job done. For what? What does any of it mean? It's bullshit, you feel like saying. And the waste: my god, the waste.* And having to listen to Malin in bindery bitch and moan and curse like some whacky PMS-stricken neurotic cunt. And wouldn't you know it—he and the goofball, Gavin, on the AB Dick are pals. It's a screwy world we live in. And they think I'm the one who's nervous. These *spineless pussies* are convinced I'm the one with problems.

Did I ever deny my discomfort when around people? Never. Never have. People generally make me nervous and I don't care to be around them. But you do your best to appear sociable, pleasant—but inside I'm thinking: Goddamn, I wish I could get away. Wish I didn't have to have anything to do with them. Please deliver me from these clowns.

Again, I say I met a few folks I liked; but you've got the back-stabbing ballbusters (male in this case) in every crowd. So here it is, going on Saturday morning and just the thought of not having to return to the *hell-hole* that the job has become feels *liberating*.

CHAPTER 61

Went up to K-Mart and bought the bike. Hundred bucks, plus tax. Of course. Mailed ms to Colorado with a check for \$30. Mailed \$20 to Tustin for the bar code. Bought some food, two Sunday papers, and the \$170 paycheck disappeared.

CHAPTER 62

Did it. Quit. Phoned Jens at the print shop. It was a good parting. I had that encoder all figured out, was able to operate it, with the exception of the occasional glitch—which could only have been worked out over time. (Experience would have taken care of that.)

He understood.

“I feel kind of sorry that Rutley will have to train someone all over again.”

“We were getting ready to decide to either let you go, or give you a raise.”

I got the feeling even if he had been for me staying, Lipworth—the *Rawhide*-droning hick—would have opted to see me cut loose. You see, this would have spared his own position from being jeopardized—or some such. He struck me as thoroughly useless and incompetent, not that it mattered, because the stooge’s job was to crack the whip—and crack it he did.

My check would be mailed to me. I could not let Jens go without letting him know he was one of the nicest employers I ever worked for.

“You sound like you mean it.”

“I do. You’re a businessman; it’s understood—but you’re not cold-blooded about it.”

“I appreciate that,” said Jens. “Although there might be some people who might not agree with you.”

Told him I hated to leave my new-found friends, the few I had there. “That part bothers me more than the other.”

It’s back to square one, in search of work. The way it is. Back to being broke. Got one more check coming from them.

Bought a typewriter ribbon, whiteout, and xeroxed the resume at Office Depot. Trying to finish *Gimme My Change* for the New York publisher. Will mail that and look real hard for another job.

CHAPTER 63

What a relief it is not to have to go in to the print shop, not to have to listen to Malin grouse about every little thing (and he did it in an uncalled for/excitable way that was not only painful to listen to but rattled the brain); what a relief it is not to have to listen to Jesse-Butch Lipworth sing that same hokey *cowpoke* song over and over and over again; what a relief not to have to hear him quip: “How we doin’, Flash?”

What a relief it is not to have to be referred to as “*Pally*” by some guy you don’t even know. What a relief it is not to have to listen to a pussy like Gavin over at the AB Dick press whistling *Three-Blind-Mice*. . . . It goes on. WHAT GODDAMN RELIEF.

Alas, I know, this joy am experiencing presently is fleeting, as I will have to find another job somewhere to support myself. Either that, or sell something.

CHAPTER 64

Hopped on the new bike and rode it on down to the post office. Checked PO box. Nothing. Mailed letter to Inga (with several photos, in case she's got a friend who may be interested), and sent forms to R.R. Bawker.

While in there, standing at the stamp machine, noticed a tall blond in perfect-fitting/faded jeans waiting in line. *My god.* A looker. But I don't say anything. Too many people around. Probably not single, you figure, you think—but you could be wrong. So why not approach her? *Too many people around.*

I do the only thing I can: ride out, and it occurs to me later: Why didn't I hand her a note? Could have written down my phone number on a piece of paper. . . . *Forget it. You'll never see her again.*

It's hot out. Feels like more than a hundred degrees. Got to stop and take a sip of my warm water from the black jug, etc., anything to wet the lips. I ride it on up to storage, go through some boxes. Find some books by Bukowski and one by John Fante I'd like to take back with me for something to read. Stuff them in my pack. Stuff a photo album in there as well. I wonder what happened to some of the slicks I used to have, like *Boobs & Buns*, etc., *Big Butt*, etc., *Voluptuous*. Could be I threw them out.

Can't help but notice all that Kodak Super-8 film (50ft-reels and two-hundred-footers) rotting away in two large cardboard boxes (that cost me *two grand*; bought for that horror flick I was going to make while residing in South Gate), but never did. Lived in that cab of mine, literally, slept in it, averaging three to four hours of sleep a night, for *six-long-months* until I had six grand in the bank and finally had the breakdown; body and soul gave out, case of pneumonia on top, and ended up in the hospital for three days, near death, due to malnutrition and exhaustion and was fed glucose during the entire hospital stay.

The irony, the great irony, before the six-month-stretch I'd hacked weekends and been able to stay on top of my rent and bills and stayed fit by running during the week. Even got some writing in: screenplays, stories and that horror novel I'd started up in North Hollywood while staying with my friend Toby and his three dogs. But then I got the movie bug again, need to direct; got this silly notion to try and make another flick, to compensate for *Bloodsucking Geeks* and to get rid of the aftertaste caused by same that wouldn't go away.

Once out of the hospital, and having bounced back physically, I went about building and/or collecting props like a demon. Eye-opener was: after spending money on materials and film stock there was hardly enough to pay cast and crew (yes, I'm one of those who likes to pay people for work they do on my projects), and the film—which surely would have been something to be proud of—had to be abandoned.

Was it heartbreaking? (*That, and more.*) Crushing disappointments like this scar and chip away at your confidence and sanity. Little by little. A lifetime of it that eventually weighs on you, pulls you down—and one day, possibly under—for good.

Truth was the only ones who related to this were other creative types, wanting to do/accomplish something, other than merely hold down a dreaded job for nothing more than a steady paycheck (and/or big house with the swimming pool and latest luxury ride, with the mistress on the side).

All I know is the film stock is no longer any good. Emulsion comes with an expiration date. *Two Grand*. All that sweat and toil. A shame, waste. . . . I lock up, take the bicycle with. It's a real hot mother outside, debilitating. I ride back down Speedway to the house.

I get through the gate and the dog starts barking. I go inside, fetch her a dog biscuit, then another. She loves these things. I drink some ice water, try to write, to do something. Can't get with it. Am down to five dollars again. Am always down to five bucks. Always down. Down, baby. . . . DOWN.

CHAPTER 65

Long Labor Day weekend finally over. Rode bicycle seven or eight miles west of here. Address on Flowing Wells Rd. **Production Workers**, the ad said. Second shift. Starting wage \$5.95 per hour. What else have I got going?

With Bro gone for four days and my money, the last of which was spent on the Sunday paper and dog food, was gone now. Down to pennies (and I didn't want to fool with pennies). I'd been eating mac & cheese, spooning peanut butter (no bread left). Like I said: What choice was there?

Rode the bike down. Make it, chain it to a sign outside the office door. Go in. The receptionist, a young, black woman, takes my resume.

"They'll be seeing people tomorrow: 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m."

I thank her, and go back out.

I ride east on Grant for several blocks, stop to take the map out of my backpack and try to figure out where the main library is downtown. I locate it: Stone and something. . . . I get up to Stone and take it south toward Downtown Tucson.

It's a nice enough day, maybe about 90, but since it's overcast it's not too hot. You learn around here that 90 is tolerable—even anything close to 100-degrees is tolerable. It's when the barometer goes past the hundred mark do you begin to truly feel it and sweat and have a hard time breathing. I do. But today is nice. I like it. I get to about within a block and stop to ask a couple of women, office workers in black dresses, for directions. Both are pleasant enough. Am told I am but a half block away.

"It'll be on your right."

I thank them, and make it.

It's a modern glass structure. There is a park in front, benches. People walking about and not in any particular hurry; a drunk or two dozing in the

grass. I chain the bike to the bike rack and go in.

I seek a bit of help to locate the books am looking for: *The Balkan Express* by Slavenka Drakulic, *Love Thy Neighbor* by Peter Mass; one entitled *Bosnia, A Short History*, and another: *Young People From Bosnia Talk About War*. Folks who work in this library are eager to assist. It means a lot. This kind of graciousness always has to me. I don't know what's on the above floors (as I don't go beyond the second floor).

I get my titles scanned in the lobby and ride the bike on over to Speedway. I take it east, stop in at the post office. Find my new checkbooks in my box, and ride on back to the duplex.

Feeling weak. Lack of food will do it to you. Can't shake the sadness in my belly. I should be feeling better, more positive about things—but don't. Can't seem to shake the dread (brought about by my situation: a man of 46 staring at an assembly job, this after twenty-six years of writing). I realize no one ever said I'd be able to make a buck at this game, still. . . .

Bro's car parked out front. I look in the mailbox for my check. No mail yet. Later, after the mailman has stopped by, I take another peek in the mailbox to find nothing in it for me. I call the print shop to find out that the girl had mailed my funds last week. It doesn't help me any.

I explain to Bro why I hadn't bought any food. He says he'll get some. He leaves shortly after. I have a couple of spoons of peanut butter, wash it down with water. I find a can of chicken soup, heat it up. On the salty side. I chase it down with some ice water.

I sit on the patio as grayish shifting clouds above grow even darker. The dog, at times like this, acts restless and panicky. Rain seems to scare the hell out of her. I light up the stogie and pat her head, try to tell her to relax. Ain't nothing but a rain storm brewing. She doesn't get it. Never saw a dog that panicked like this due to an impending storm.

I finished off the stogie, find another there in the ashtray (couple of days old and far from fresh), fire it up as well. I retire to my room and start reading *Balkan Express*. The woman is a strong writer. It's an evocative work that slowly, gradually (as I fight against it) creates a lump in my throat . . . just when I thought I was past feeling this way about the killing fields of Bosnia. . . .

CHAPTER 66

Rode the bicycle down to Flowing Wells and Grant this morning to see about the job. About thirty people showed up. We filled out forms and waited. Was interviewed by a tall lady with brown hair this time. Well kept. White. About 40. She had my application in her hands. Looks up, exclaiming:

“You’re single!”

I had no idea what it meant, or how I was supposed to react, but admitted to it:

“Yes. I am.”

Then she seemed to realize that maybe she ought to calm down, return to being professional and business-like, and her eyes were back on the application.

Although not a breath-taking beauty, the woman was attractive enough, with a shapely figure, coiffed and neatly dressed in a classy beige blouse and skirt, heels. But, man, my mind was on the cash I desperately needed, and the fact she had shown genuine interest in me absolutely went right over my head. It didn’t even register until after, way after. But being demoralized at having to work a demeaning crap job like this kept me from considering anything having to do with romance and the libido.

Interview was brief. Pleasant. A rarity. Usually these things are torture, sheer torture. All told was there one hour and twenty minutes. Then was given another form, address where the clinic was located for the drug test.

“Can you work ten-hours a day?” she asked.

“Sure.”

“Can you work on Saturday?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Can you work on the swing shift?”

“Absolutely.”

It was affirmative to everything. Ready to sign your life away. You played the game for the crumbs that were dangled. We were desperate and we were pathetic. America's poor. And you (almost) wanted to laugh at the way people in other countries saw us: Well-off. All of us. Luxury cars and widescreen tvs. Homeowners; with money in the bank and trips to Vegas and Cabo whenever the mood struck. We had deep pockets and only worked for something to do. Millionaires, the lot. Our streets weren't macadam and cement. No, sir. Roads here were paved with gold. Nothing less would do.

Not only that: gilded sinks and taps; urinals and toilets. Didn't even have to wipe our own ass. Americans had it made. We got fat on the finest Porterhouse steaks; cake and ice cream whipped up by top pastry chefs.

"What we might do is move you around to the day shift if we need you."

Swing shift paid \$5.95, day shift paid just under five-fifty. Anything over forty-hours is time-and-a-half. Yes, I was interested. Damned straight. Need the money. Need to find a place of my own and a used car to get around—and, of course, my beloved books. Need money to publish my beloved books! *Yessireebob*. I'll do what I can.

We both stand. Shake hands. I thank her and leave. Now I've got to look up where 4700 North 1st. Avenue is. And do. And it ain't even close, pal. In the Foothills. I ride up Grant to 1st., and go north. It's windy and riding a bicycle against the wind ain't fun. The harder you pedal the less progress you seem to make. But you truck on, keep at it. It feels like 95 degrees outside, or higher, could be, but you keep right on pedaling.

CHAPTER 67

If the Flowing Wells factory is seven or eight miles from my abode, this clinic has got to be about 12-miles from the factory. A haul, baby; quite a long haul. Somehow I make it. Take a sip of that foul-tasting tap water I've got in my jug. It's warm, but it's liquid. I make it to the clinic. A couple of Mexicans sitting there already waiting. We greet each other. Clinic is closed for lunch. An hour later the door opens and we file in.

A urine test is required of us. The same black receptionist I met that first day at the plant is here. Wearing latex gloves today, she hands me a plastic cup.

"Pee in the cup until you have reached this mark," she instructs.

I nod.

"Don't flush the toilet or turn the faucet on until *after* you have handed the sample to me."

I agree. Of course. Do as told. Return to the john across the hallway, flush away, wash my hands, wish the others in the waiting room good luck and am back outside on the bicycle in the Arizona heat. But it feels okay somehow; it feels all right. All I want is a chance to make a buck, move out of Bro's place and start my own/new life here in Tucson. I still think about getting married . . . but one can't so much as breathe without a paycheck . . . and doing it solo is going to have a HARD TIME OF IT.

Some guy on a bicycle passes me somehow. Am quite baffled. You see, this guy's bicycle is loaded down with plastic bags full of groceries: He's got four hanging from the handlebar and he's got a couple more tied to the back wheel. How's he doing it? *How is he able to keep up ahead of me like that?* He's gotta be a younger dude. The heat is merciless. Throat dry; weak, feel weak . . . all I'd had for breakfast was that one hard-boiled egg. That egg is not giving me the power it takes to ride a bicycle this great distance. The butt/legs, sore. I dismount from time to time and walk it off, then jump back on.

I make it to Grant, reach Park and take that south. Say hello to a coed or two riding from the U of A. They always smile, wave hello. A friendly bunch. I like that about Tucson.

I cruise the rest of the way in, no choice. Depleted. Weaker than ever. Feel like I'm about to pass out, my friend . . . but I hang in there. Am thinking, and this keeps me going, if my check is in, and it should be, my last check from the print shop, am going to cash it, take Bro out to dinner at Boston Market. I owe him that. I owe him a lot more, but when the wallet is thin, what can you do? In the future, when the books hit big, the BIG TIME, am going to give the kid a few grand and say: Here. Live it up. I owe you this.

I reach the duplex, open the mailbox, only to find a bunch of junk mail. What gives? Paycheck should have been here already. I don't get it. It has been a whole week and three days. Could be the long holiday weekend screwed things up at the post office.

I go inside, fill the tumbler full of ice water and drink it down. Sweat pours. The other hard-boiled egg is there. I crack it open, sprinkle it with salt and chow down. A short while later Bro shows up with groceries. I have a sandwich, then sit down to the typer. On a Wednesday afternoon in Tucson, AZ.

CHAPTER 68

Friday. Still no check. Mother Teresa died. She may have been in her late 80s. Everybody's dropping off.

Heard from my friend Chubby Elston, (Bubba, one of the main cannibals in the *Bloodsucking Geeks* flick we made years before). Calling long distance from KY. Says he's doing a lot better since his stroke. On medication. He'll be taking his heart medicine the rest of his life, including aspirin. He says it's different for people who have had a bypass, as their lungs are clean and clear. In his case the cholesterol level is down, but could be even better, according to his doctor. He says one of the nurses there, a nutritionist, told him that smoking caused his lungs to clog up. It's the glue/adhesive in the tobacco that choked his arteries.

He says: "After something like that you're never the same."

He's watching what he eats, but still—*I was taken aback*—smokes. Not regular cigarettes, but cigarillos.

"The brown kind," said Elston.

"I know what they are, Chubby."

I was surprised, but understood when he said:

"It's hard to quit. I don't smoke the cigars but once every two weeks."

Yep. That's like saying to a woman that you'll *only* put it in part of the way. I let it go. Whose life was it anyway? I loved the guy like a brother; one of the best friends I ever had. You just can't tell people how to live their life. I had a tough enough time dealing with my own existence.

CHAPTER 69

Hopped on the bike to drop off a roll of film at the ABCO supermarket on Speedway. Only I get about to within two blocks and the front tire goes flat. Just like that. Thorn. They're everywhere. Can ruin your day—if you let it. I ain't lettin' it. No big deal. I carry patches and a bicycle pump in my backpack. A nice guy, desert rat type, who has a sort of basket on wheels attached to his rear tire (he's been checking trash bins for soda cans), stops by to ask if I need assistance.

"Wanna use my bicycle pump to fill up your front tire?"

"I've got all that stuff with me. It's just a hassle to have to do it."

He nods.

I say: "Anyway to thorn-proof these tires?"

"Not really," he says. "Should do like I do and ride down the middle of the road."

I shrug. "I like to stay out of their way."

"We got just as much right to these roads as they do. What the law says."

I nod. As he pedals off he suggests I find shade to work in.

I get the thing done, make it to the market, drop off the roll of film. I step back out and realize I still have a leak in the front tire. I pump it full of air and decide a change of plans is in order. Can't make it all the way out to K-Mart (at Kolb and Broadway) and head back to the apt.

I get the tire out, find the puncture: just on the other side of the new patch. I seal it, put the tire back on. Later there is a phone call from the plant.

"Can you come in on the 9th at 2 p.m.?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Wear a shirt with sleeves. They can be short sleeves, as long as it is not a sleeveless shirt. Wear either sneakers or boots—no sandals."

I confirm the hourly rate, which is \$5.95.

Well, my spirits are a bit lifted, as they say. Work is work, after all. Be positive/look positive. I can use the money. I've got this book on my mind. Brother, do I ever—and finding a new apartment, a used car of sorts, a secured credit card. . . .

All of this is on my mind. Can you blame me for wanting to have some kind of life?

CHAPTER 70

Gotta be an easier way to make a buck. AZ is a “right-to-work” state, meaning they have the right to pay you slave wages, right to exploit.

Second day on the job. Four-hundred-and-fifty-people at this particular plant. Owned by a huge UK conglomerate. They own a gun-manufacturing plant as well. It’s like the flick *Metropolis* in here, especially when we all line up to clock in/clock out. *Assembly-line bots*. We make air vents, all kinds. Lots of machines everywhere that punch and staple; sanders with sparks flying. Burned my finger last night. Blade went right through the glove. The most dangerous aspect is all the tiny TINY ALUMINUM FLAKES that blast through the air, get on clothes, in your hair. We are required to wear protective-glasses/goggles, but that does not protect the mouth and nose.

Makes you think.

By the end of the shift (TEN-LONG-GRUELING-HOURS ON YOUR FEET ON CEMENT) was dog-tired/exhausted, brother—EXHAUSTED THOROUGHLY. Could not wait for the buzzer to go off.

We get a couple of ten-minute breaks, thirty minutes for lunch. The pace is constant: GO GO GO. Everyone sweatin’ it out for that measly paycheck. We’re required to work ten-hours Monday thru Thursday, eight on Friday and six on Saturday. They’re murdering our souls for a measly five-ninety-five. Bots for hire/automatons. You bust your ass for groceries, a used bucket/rent/some bills/second-hand clothes bought at Goodwill or some other thrift store. It goes on. Working for the Man.

They also do painting here, sheetmetal work. Lots of women here but have yet to find anything. . . . Lots of Vietnamese; friendly, married, but hardly speak English. Can hardly understand a word they say. They are, however, helpful. Tin, one of the Vietnamese guys, even gave me a work apron to use that he had brought from home, which was greatly appreciated, as my first day on the job I ruined a perfectly good shirt and walking shorts due to grime and

all. Spent over three hours yesterday in search of an apron to buy, checked various hardware stores and other places—and could not find a simple thing like a shop apron. So when I got to work yesterday afternoon and Tin handed me the black apron it meant a good deal (as I've got to take care of what clothes I've got left).

One good thing about working in a noisy hell hole like this (that shouldn't be taken for granted) is that you can fart to your heart's content and no one is going to give you a hard time about it. Might not sound like a big deal but it is—to someone like me, with a serious gas problem & have a need to liberate a backfire or two every ten minutes or so. What's behind the methane? Couldn't tell you. Might be peanut butter. You got me. All I know is it's a real relief to be able to break wind whenever the need arises.

And so at the end of the ten-hour shift everyone lines up at various time-clock locations in long lines and clocks out and rushes out to the parking lot in the back to their used vehicles, while I walk to my K-Mart bicycle, unchain it and pedal; dog tired, mind you, bones aching, pedal the seven or eight miles back home in a deserted town—all quiet, no traffic, on the eerie side; I pedal on to the apt, wondering what happened to the goals and dreams, wondering and quite resigned to the fact am just another ant spinning wheels in the quagmire whose life never amounted to a hill of pinto beans . . . and never was meant to . . . like so many other ants out there, like so many others. . . .

CHAPTER 71

10:50 a.m. Just got up. Ache all over. Putting in ten-hours at the plant will do it to you.

A pretty terrific thing happened last night, though. Tam, the Vietnamese lady who works in my area, offered to give me a ride home. And I say it was terrific because there is no other word for it. Incredible. You see, after having endured a long shift on your sore feet and legs you are not looking forward to pedaling a bike for miles up Grant in the dead of night. Needless to say, I was quite grateful to the woman.

She said to me: “My husband ride bicycle for six-months, so it hurt my heart to see somebody ride bicycle that way after work.”

She speaks broken English, but I understood.

She said: “One time my husband ride bicycle to work *eighteen-miles one way*. He very tire’. Then got different job. He ride bicycle all together for *six-months* until he buy car.”

In my sector is another nice woman, also Vietnamese, named Ping, and the half-Vietnamese/half-black guy named Tin who gave me the apron. Thirty-four. Nice enough. Quiet. No eyebrows. Don’t know what happened to his brows—and scary from a certain angle. Skinny, as they usually are. About 5’5”. Hardly speaks english. Out of thirty words he utters I might make out three. But like I said, a quiet guy. Easy going. Then there’s Gaston. Canadian originally, I believe, in his 50s, who is the spot-welder. All nice folks. Helpful. Seemingly.

But one thing, above all else, that stands out when it comes to the petite and thin Vietnamese people, is how hard they work. What workers; Lord. Gaston said to me the other day:

“Makes me tired just to watch them work.”

Gaston is kind of slow-moving, large and lumbering. Your basic overweight, out-of-shape slob. He’s been at the plant since ’83. Hair longish, ash-gray.

About 6'2". Quiet demeanor.

I spot Tin some gas money each week, seven to eight bucks usually, for giving me a lift to work. The eight-mile haul for a forty-six year old man to make after working a shift on his feet is no picnic. So I do appreciate this guy's help. He has never asked for money, but I offer it just the same.

Tin's license was revoked for two weeks, not sure for what reason. (He's got a court date on Monday next.) So he had an idea.

"You got license?" he asked, before quitting time last night.

"Sure."

"You want to drive my car? You come by my house and drive me and you to work in my car."

"Sure," I said.

"I got no insurance," he said. "You still want to drive?"

"Yeah. It beats having to ride the bicycle at night."

Then Ping said: "You got American license?"

"No, Ping, I got *Mexican* license."

She laughed. As did Tam. Had heard me and laughed. I like making the woman smile. They all like to smile, and it doesn't take much.

Ping seems to be in charge of this particular corner of the plant. Pretty knowledgeable of what has to go out, all that. She's been showing me what to do. So far have been assembling air-conditioning vents.

But here it is after 11 now and in a couple of hours it will be time to go back. The working man's blues . . . never end. And the dog in the front yard is waiting to be fed and I need to take a dump.

CHAPTER 72

It's Friday night/or early Saturday morning, whichever you prefer. Just got in. Worked only eight hours today. Drove Tin's Toyota in to his place (a block and a half west of here), then rode the bicycle rest of the way.

Got to be at work by 11:15 Saturday morning. That means I'll be by Tin's apartment at about nine. Did a lot of sanding of large aluminum panels (for air ducts). Gaston, the Canadian, does the spot-welding, places them on the conveyor and I go over them with the sander. It causes a lot of metal flakes to hit the air, not unlike tiny crystals and dangerous, gotta be. So I requested a face mask for the sanding and did it that way. Everyone wears goggles as well (while inside the plant). Best to be safe than sorry.

Tomorrow is a six-hour day. Should be a day of rest, but. . . . Won't be getting a paycheck until next Thursday. Got to stretch the buck, make the food last. Bro gone to Arkansas to visit his pal Boyd for a month. Am on my own. Got to watch my money, got to find a place of my own. Might buy Tin's car down the road. He's interested in selling (for eight hundred). It's got one-hundred-and-seventy-thousand-miles on it. A stick. I don't care for manual transmissions. Wear and tear on the old foot.

Saturday afternoon. Got through another day at the plant. Have to wear the Honcho boots (and those goddamn hard as cement heels dig right up into your feet, particularly the heel part). Feet still sore, aching. They won't allow us to wear sneakers. Shoes must have leather on them, in some cases must be steel-toe.

Anyway, we started at 10:15 a.m. this morning and finished at 4 p.m. Gave us one fifteen-minute-break at one o'clock. I stand there at my machine all day long making screens for air vents of varying sizes, etc. And even though you

are standing on a wooden platform the feet still get sore. Couldn't wait to get the hell out of there; couldn't wait.

Stopped by the Circle K on Speedway, bought half gallon of 2% milk and a large box of doughnuts. To treat myself for lasting five days at the plant. No check until Thursday—and even then will have to be careful what I do with it. Stretch the buck, make it last.

It's raining out there again. Flash-flood warnings. So many of them in AZ this time of year. When do I buy my car? Or how about a good raincoat? That could be cheaper. Got to get the damn book to the printer. How much longer do I keep putting it off?

CHAPTER 73

Just about 9 a.m. The dog barked (or there was some noise), and it was all it took. Way too tired and way too early for me to be up (as I had dropped in the sack at 4 a.m.). Today is payday. We'll see.

At the plant they have this large, LARGE production chart posted on the wall next to the drinking fountain. Current numbers (they claim) are between one-hundred-thirty-five thousand to one-hundred-fifty-thousand. The honchos would like it to be closer to one-hundred-and-seventy-five-thousand. This is what's on the goddamn thing. No lie, pal.

Meanwhile, the low-level *grunt gets no participation*, not at \$5.95 an hour. So why should we give a damn? Good question. While the *fatcats* get fatter. And at the end of each day they have us fill out a production sheet. While there is not the constant harassment, there is the PRODUCTION SHEET at the end of the shift. That means certain peeps are keeping track.

Three days ago I did 260 of those air-vent things, to include frame and core, etc. (Frames are referred to as rails, by the way.) Then the following day I did 230. And then last night my output *really dropped*: down to 169.

Ain't easy, babe. You're on your feet, on your feet. For ten long hours (save for a thirty-minute lunch and the two ten-minute breaks). Slavery is alive and well and thriving in Tucson.

Need more sleep. Should feed the dog.

CHAPTER 74

Got my check Thursday. (All of \$216.00) for 43 hours. You bust your ass for the FAT CATS/CONGLOMERATE and get peanuts.

They had me spot-welding today. Was on it for a couple of hours when the damned welder blew up right before me. Sparks flew, etc. Gaston, the 13-year man replaced the bit. Some people work seven days a week at the plant, the Vietnamese and the Latinos. How do they do it? *How?* I tried that in the cab and ended up in the hospital with pneumonia for three days and IVs in both arms. Serious business.

Today being Friday (was earlier) we only worked eight- hours. Eight is tolerable. Okay. Feet sore, but not as sore as the previous four days. Anything past eight-hours is a killer, amigo. The feet go first. Heels aching.

Let's see what I get coming Thursday, what kind of check (for working six days).

CHAPTER 75

The most difficult aspect to this job (other than having to stand on your feet the entire shift) is having to listen to this Vietnamese woman named Ping jabber all the time in her high-pitched voice. Yes, the same one I'd initially thought was sane and reasonable.

It's nerve-wracking. She can't articulate, can't enunciate; all she knows how to do is scream.

"No, you do this way! IN HURRY! YOU STOP THAT ORDER! YOU DO THIS FOR ME!"

Every 20-minutes or so. I just wish she would shut the hell up. I don't think she's even five feet tall, maybe weighs about 95-pounds or so; but what a *relentless mouth*. She's not married. Your guess is as good as mine. She has never learned to listen, can't seem to talk the way a normal/sane person should.

The screaming gets to you, believe me. Was considering transferring to another department—it got that bad last night. We were out of chevrons, the barrel empty. She comes up and tells me to use the bent chevrons next to the empty barrel in a metal box. They were indeed slightly bent, but was all we had to keep making air vents. So I do that, was working on a big order, close to two hundred, etc. The other two people in our section: Tam (pleasant woman) and Tin (the quiet, easy going half Vietnamese/half African-American 34 year old I mentioned earlier) are doing same, using these slightly defected chevrons. Things are made out of aluminum, easy to manipulate, etc. One whack with a mallet or piece of wood and they are flat and perfectly usable/good. And so have the job just about finished, have about 25 pieces to go, am exhausted; have been on my feet about 8-hours now, feet are killing me, especially the heels (I need better shoes), when she started screaming:

"YOU GO GET CHEVRON! THEY MAKE NEW CHEVRON! THESE CHEVRON NO GOOD!"

I had talked to the super about the chevrons earlier. Was told the operator who made them was out for the day and that there would not be any new chevrons until tomorrow. Well, two hours before quitting time (at about midnight) they get a guy on the press to start making chevrons.

Now, what gets to me about this little screaming witch (who happens to be nice usually, well-meaning, etc., except when she starts yammering and jabbering and shouting *ad infinitum*), she sends me back there; tells me to get rid of the chevrons I've been using and get the new ones.

"Old chevron NO GOOD, NO GOOD! GO GET NEW GOOD CHEVRON AND USE GOOD ONE THEY MAKE IN OTHER ROOM!"

I mean my eardrums were hurting. You could hear the screwy broad above the loud din of all the machinery and equipment in the plant, that's how loud she can be. Incredible. It was a shock to my system, as I like to tune everything out while working. Am in a world of my own, day-dreaming, thinking about my book and how to get the publishing off the ground, how to stretch a buck, all that (having to pay rent on Bro's place, that I live in, since he asked: called in from Arkansas, where he is visiting a friend, and took me up on my offer to help him out—and so now, even though I owe it to him and am happy to help out—*my first full check is gone*. Just like that. So am thinking about all that while trying to keep up a fast pace at my machine. Did two-hundred-and-ninety-nine of those air-vent frames today, which is pretty darn good—when you consider a guy 34 years of age, Tin, who has been there three years—only did about 290), and that's when she starts in with her goddamned shouting.

I can't, CAN'T STAND bitches with a Jekyll and Hyde personality. I hate that shit so damn bad—and that's what she's got (as have a few other broads I have known over the years). I notice some of the other Vietnamese telling her to shut up. They couldn't stand it, either.

She ignores that. Sends me back there to the other part of the plant (just as huge as ours; this plant is easily the size of a football field. And then there's the warehouse in back—so you could say the entire enterprise is the size of a couple of football fields).

I walk back there and see people standing around this press. I ask the guy who appears to be in charge, and he says:

"Yes, we're making them now. I told Ping it would be a while."

I shook my head. "She sent me back here knowing that. She makes me nuts."

He nodded. "I know. That's the way she is."

I went back, wheeled my empty cart past Ping on the way to my station.

"What happened?" she asked. "You get it?"

I said nothing, merely indicated my empty metal box.

"THEY DON'T HAVE?"

"No. You sent me back there for nothing, Ping."

"YOU GET FROM TAM! YOU SHARE WITH TAM!"

Goddamn, I felt like telling her to shut her goddamn mouth. The broken-English was pure insanity. Anytime she spoke I could but comprehend two or three words out of fifty. *Insanity.*

I wheel my cart over to Tam's machine, and Tam is in stitches. She finds it all so very hilarious, as she knows Ping is batty. I scoop half the chevrons out of Tam's box. Tam can't stop laughing. Ping is still jabbering back there in the background and I can't make out a word, *not a single word*. After a lifetime of paying dues I still have to put up with craziness like this. Lord have mercy. On the other hand, he must not. Why else would he stick me in a situation like this? *Loony bin. Lifetime of paying dues.*

I wheel my cart past Ping, who has finally shut the hell up. I make it to my station, my machine, and return to work. By now she has cost me 15, 20-minutes. It matters, it does. I had been keeping up a pretty damned good pace—until now. She breaks your stride, your rhythm, the loony little witch. I'd wanted to see just how many of these frames I could put together, for my own sake, my interest, not the company's. The company was part of a huge corporation and I didn't give a damn about them or that—but for myself I wanted to see how many of these things I could frame—and now my pace was off and I felt down, in a lousy mood due to her screaming. A woman, a nutty woman will do it to you every time.

GO FIGURE, GO FIGURE.

Better yet, forget it.

A few minutes later Ping comes up.

“How this work? This better, right? Better chevron. Other chevron no good, why in box they put next to good chevron; why I tell you use good chevron, use new. I did not know they not ready.”

She’s babbling like a machine-gun. Christ. I know she means well, but you’ve got to understand: this kind of chatter is pure hell and torture. *Shut it, lady!* I felt like saying. *JUST SHUT UP AND LET ME BE.*

Instead, I say quietly: “I just want to be left to do my work, Ping.”

With most peeps this would suffice. Not here. Not with her. I got no choice, and liberate a rank one to see if it does any good. While her ears might’ve failed her her *sense of smell* sure didn’t, because she did not waste time *vacating* the immediate area. The big mouth zips it and walks away. Thank god.

Here it is 9 to noon, next day, and still don’t feel one-hundred-percent. Feet sore, maybe a blister developing on the big toe on the right foot. Tired.

CHAPTER 76

Paid last night. Went up to the grocery store today.

Rodrigo, the foreman: six-two, big and beefy, possibly Native-American, aka the Fat Man, aka Pillsbury Doughboy, pulls me off the hole-puncher and tells me to go with the other soup: No-Ass Leon (thirty-five-years with the company; glasses, mustache). He's waiting in the main, center aisle. Starts walking in his usual fast pace before I reach him. I make my left, and follow for about a hundred feet. The doorless entrance to this large room the size of a gymnasium is full of heavy machinery, presses. This is where the slats and rails and chevrons are made. It's loud in here. Not many people around.

There's a short, thin guy there. Bald, in his late 50s (or older). Reminds me of Mr. Magoo, the cartoon character, only this guy is wiry, alert. He's in a worn pair of baggy black trousers and a grimy white T-shirt.

"That's Homer, the lead man," says Leon. "You'll be working with him for a while."

Homer looks up. Walks toward us. No-Ass Leon is gone. Homer's got a wedding band on his finger that's missing the tip. Then I notice some of his other fingers are missing tips as well, that goes for part of his thumb. The fingers on his right hand are also missing a tip or two. Mess with the presses and this is what happens: end up like Homer, with parts of your limbs no longer there. Tends to sober you up (not that I wasn't sober enough to begin with).

He shows me how to work one of the machines. Easy. On the surface. So long as you pay attention. You sit there and press a red button and the slat comes through, hits the end (a type of recoil) that triggers the press blade—and *WHOOSH!* Blade drops with the force of a *deadly sledge*, cutting the metal strip—and maybe a couple of fingers (if you're not careful).

“Keep your hand out of the way of the blade when it comes down,” says Homer.

I get him to help me reload new coil. Not too tough, until you have to feed the strip through the press. Strict adherence to caution advised, or else you wind up like this hard-working, energetic gent—without fingertips. Damn things are *stubs*, with just a trace of fingernail visible.

I sit on my ass for a couple of hours doing this. Not bad. Then Leon appears, tells me to return to my regular spot at the hole-punching machine. I work with the Vietnamese lady named Tam. Quiet. Smart. I like her. Has a sense of humor. Knows her business.

One of the welding guns or two are down. So now we got Manny doing all the welding. Hard work. The son of a gun is a dynamo. In his 50s, but works damn hard. By himself last night he did 1,012 frames. He welds frames to core.

In the past, with three welders working (actually it's spot-welding; these guys don't use flame, but volts) we've done fourteen, fifteen and even sixteen-hundred.

And then the Fat Man, Doughboy, who moves like a rhino, tells me to help out in Dong's area. Hung is back from vacation. Both are Vietnamese.

It's back to hammering for me. 10" x 4" frames. Not a big deal, but you just hate being ordered about: ***Go here/go there; do that and do this.*** And it's not even that he orders people about—it's just that the mother isn't smart enough or old enough or paid enough dues to tell me anything.

But he's the foreman, you see. Been here fourteen years. Antonia, recently transferred from the paint line, who doesn't even know how to run the hole-puncher, is standing right there and Fat Man tells me to go over to K's table. It bothered me, but I just keep quiet and do as told. What the hell. I need the paycheck. I've got this book to publish and need the bucks. And then I hear big mouth Dong say to Fat Man:

“He don't like it.”

“I don't give a shit what he likes,” says Fat Man as he walks away.

And if I had been in a lousy/dark mood I would have given the two a piece of my mind . . . but I say nothing, do my work. You're always going to find an asshole or two no matter where you go.

I finish that, return to the hole puncher/press. The new boots do help, but still there is soreness, numbness. Heel. Outer edge of big toe of right foot developing callouses. You work on.

Finally 2 a.m. rolls around and about time to leave the slave ship.

CHAPTER 77

They had me painting posts last night. Big shot owners coming in from England next week supposedly. Didn't feel like painting, but did it. Considered walking out. Got myself a cart instead, placed the ten-gallon can of paint on the bottom shelf. Got a couple of rags. They gave me a paint brush. The guy who showed me where all the paint was (and where later to leave it) was a tall/dark-complexioned Mexican. Seemed to have a chip on his shoulder. Too many years in. Took its toll. Or maybe it came down to nothing more than the gent being disappointed when he saw what they'd sent him: a dude my age—and (possibly) didn't feel good about it for me. That made two of us.

I went to Doris (the other super), and said: "The newspaper ad didn't mention anything about being a painter. It said 'production work.'"

She counters with: "In here 'production work' can mean anything."

I wasn't dressed to be a painter. Got paint on my apron, boots, a spot on my new blue shirt. This is oil-based paint and won't come out. Goddamn. Low-wage mother. Flunky. They crap on you for the hell of it. AZ is ten years behind the rest of the country in paying a decent wage. Out here, minimum-wage literally means that.

Painted quite a few posts for ten-hours and still did not get all. Toward the end of the shift went in back where air vents are spray-painted, got thinner to clean cart with, paint brush, etc. Guess I'll have to do some more painting today. Guess I'll stay with it in order to get the book published. Post office needing their box rental money: \$52.

Spoke with a woman over at Focus Printing regarding quote for one hundred books of the *Streets of LA* anthology. She'll get back. Earlier she had given me a quote of \$900 for two hundred books. Then when I stopped by a week later, she said quote was way too low. So O.K. See what she comes up with now.

Typesetter Mel South quotes me \$700 to typeset *Gimme My Change*. Ain't cheap. Plus additional 50-cents per page for scanning. Ain't cheap (like I said). But it would be someone local. Just too inconvenient to stay with J. out in Colorado.

CHAPTER 78

Yes it is. Friday, that is. Alas. Amen. Finished painting those posts at work last night at about 9:50 p.m. And then got the OK from Rodrigo to return to my area. Am there, and happy, for a while anyway—because an hour later the Vietnamese broad, Ping, receives a special rush order (from the super) to make twenty-four 44” x 36” frames.

As he passes my machine, he says to me to go and help her. I don’t want to, but go along. The other guy, quiet Tin, wants no part of Ping. The broad shrieks, doesn’t talk. I swear she *shrieks*. Drives us both nuts. Could be the worst part of this job is having to listen to this older broad *yak* and *YAK AND YAK SOME MORE*.

It finally came to a head (once again). Am doing my best to assist. While she’s punching the screw holes, I grab a couple of rails and walk over to the other end of our area to “staple” the rails together on the staker machine. And there she is shrieking:

“NO, NO! YOU NO DO! I DO. YOU HELP ONLY! YOU CAN’T DO!”

Goddamn. And as a result, I do screw up by staking two 44” rails together, instead of one 44” rail to a 36” rail (as part of the frame). I bend them and toss them in the mistake box. She notices this and starts her *yapping*. It’s too much. Everyone makes errors in this place and plenty of them, including her. But she won’t shut up about it.

“I TOLD YOU YOU WAIT: I DO FRAME! YOU ONLY HELP!”

“I wish you would learn to articulate, because I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, Ping. All this screaming and yelling is giving me a goddamn headache.”

“I TOLD YOU I DO! YOU NO DO! YOU DON’T KNOW!”

“I don’t know *what?* I did rails this size when I first started working here four weeks ago. And as far as the mistake is concerned—so what? You make

mistakes all the time. I can't concentrate when you're constantly yakking at me."

I ached, wished—so help me—to be able to offer up one of those powerful backfires here &, unfortunately, was not able. I have yet to develop the skill & talent to summon gas on cue. Just as well. Because later, she apologized. Also: she screwed up four frames herself. *God help us*. A busybody. Too busy talking and yapping to take care of business.

Been getting along with other Vietnamese: Lang (sweet potato), Tin, etc. Gaston, the Canadian, is cool and quiet. On the surface, at least. Could be a streak of dementia lurking just below the surface. One never knows.

Felt weak all during the ten-hour shift. Was happy to be leaving at quitting time. Was I ever. The job just drains.

Got paid: \$288.

Deposited \$250 of it at the supermarket. Picked up photos taken at the plant. Most of them too dark. Been using cheap film. This time (today) bought a roll of good Kodak film. Been taking a lot of pictures lately just for the hell of it: the plant, co-workers. Had photos taken of myself in hopes that one will turn out that I can use for the back cover, etc., and basically for posterity.

Bought groceries for work, bones for the dog. Rode bicycle back to the duplex. Cooked a couple of burritos, while the dog worked on a bone. And then later, not having any dog food on hand, let her have a bowl of cooked hamburg/beans/corn, along with tortillas. She was thrilled. Will go to Reay's for dog food tomorrow.

2:01 p.m. now. About time to prepare for work. Put my lunch together. Even have an Igloo cooler like a real working stiff, a nine-to-fiver. ***Mainstream's got me by the balls.*** What can you do? What indeed.

Might try to work O/T Sunday. (Pays *double-time*.) Could use the extra bucks for the cover graphics. Got a guy over at the digital graphics company who can handle it. Everything costs money. MONEY. He quotes me anywhere from \$150 to \$200. These people don't realize that I have to work 54-hours at the factory just to clear two-hundred-and-eighty-eight- dollars.

Could ask for a little flexibility. Yeah. *Pie-in-the-sky*. Well, the folks here in Tucson appear to be a bit more reasonable than the vipers in La La.

True.

Get up and away from the typer, amigo. Time to get ready to do that *eight-hour-tango*. (Friday is a “short” day.) The factory is waiting. It’s always waiting. Always there. A relentless *mother*. The beast. *Prepare to enter the belly of the beast*.

CHAPTER 79

Spent Saturday's shift over in the "600"/OBD area working with the Mexican woman who can't seem to stop blabbing. All but one, that is. The minute your back is turned, there they are bad-mouthing you to the boss: *He's not working fast enough.*

Chickenshit, petty-ass droning. Hated working with them. There was one other male there, also Mexican, in the US three years (from Hermosillo), who was all right, and a short Mexican lady my age who was decent—but the rest I had no use for. I mean I was busting my ass, sweating like a pig (taking these 24" x 24" panels out, labeling them on my steel table), punching a hole (for painting) and then carrying them over to the table where the two unhappy broads drilled holes and screws into the panels for air-duct attachments.

Hard work. Six hours of it. I'm doing my best, and apparently it wasn't good enough. The day before (Friday) I spot-welded all day and liked it. It, too, was hard work. You stand on your feet for eight hours, but I was working with people I liked. I can't stomach back-stabbing gabby, homely wenches.

Got through the day. Swept up. At 4:00 p.m. found a seat away from the ugly broads and waited for 4:15 to roll around. If you hang around the time-clock before you are supposed to, Rodrigo gets pissed, the old story. Everyone protecting their piece of turf, hunk of bread.

A minute or two before the quitting horn went off, there we were, lined up, eager to clock out. Did that. And got a ride home with the Vietnamese lady named Tam.

Showered, then rode the bicycle to a backyard barbecue hosted by peeps Bro knew. It was all right. Fun/music/food/talk. Drank four bottles of Henry Weinhard.

There was a Bosnian dude, some years older than me, asking how to go about finding a rich woman to marry. He had a job at a chemical plant that he

hated and wanted to get out of. Just plain tired of what he had to do to make a buck.

Yeah; I know that song. Been singing it my whole life. What can you do? What else is there? I did like the people, though. Enjoyed myself for a change. It had been a nice outing.

Left there 'bout midnight. Got up around noon today. Ate. Hand-washed some clothes in the bathtub. Trying to save up money for the printing. You see how it is: ***We all have our goals and plans and schemes and dreams. And, really, what does it add up to?***

And yet, if we didn't have these plans and notions we'd be left with what? Lethargy? Would there even be a reason to get up in the morning?—other than for *food* and *rent*? What kind of life would that be? Without something to go after, dream to pull off? So am trying to save up for this little bitty *pie-in-the-sky* dream that I have. You see, used up the budget for food. Gotta watch every damned dime.

Took leash off the wall and the dog went *nuts*. She knew she was going for a walk. So hopped on the bike and the dog kept up for about a mile. As Nell was clearly huffing and puffing by then, we walked the rest of the way to the house of the barbecue the night before to see about picking up a few bones for her. She loved it.

And here I am, back at the old desk in this room, taking it easy. There's the factory tomorrow. The factory (that's always there), the bullshit gig at the low-wage.

The other nice thing about the job (other than being able to cut loose with the methane) is the fact it keeps me away from tv and its crap, *the inanity, the idiocy*. Re: Job. It's one day at a time; one week at a time. Never know if I am going to make it through the shift; never know what new crappy task am going to be assigned, what new asshole am going to have to work with. Am not saying that all the people there are a-holes, but you always have a certain amount to bear with. What else is new?

That was the single good aspect to driving the cab: If you didn't care for the son of a bitch in your backseat all you had to do was keep cool for twenty minutes (the average ride lasted that long) and the SOB (or psycho-ballbuster)

was out of your life. Not so with a regular nine-to-five/slave-wage ball & chain. And it's slavery. It's slavery, baby. Tucson is good at it. Milk them for all you can. Squeeze all the life that you can out of the poor bastards at low pay (until they are just about ready to be dropped in the ground). **Bingo/Bango/Presto.** It's over.

Stay on top of the game, keep your wits about you. Pace yourself. Pace your energy. Trouble is every time you attempt to do that the other idiots, the brain-dead *workaholics* want to keep going at *three times* your pace (you see, they've got the mortgage/the new car payments/kids—all that). They're trapped and forced to work like demons, chained to their *illusive goals/nebulous targets*—and won't let YOU be. They pull you right along with them. Often/nearly always/I do my best to temper my pace, go at my own speed (while maintaining reasonable productivity), so that at the end of the day I can still have enough energy to walk out of the plant to the parking lot where my buddy Tin's car sits waiting. But it nearly always appears to be the impossible objective. The Vietnamese and Mexican workers are obsessed demons bent on cutting their little miserable lives short for pennies above min. wage.

Go figure it out, amigo.

Can't.

The bastards who own the company are stopping by for a visit (mainly to play golf here in AZ), and the *grunts* are paying for those golf trips (and don't know it or even realize it). The way it is.

CHAPTER 80

2:45 a.m.

Tuesday morning.

Just got in. Body aching. Especially the feet. They had me on yet another *shit job*. This time Rodrigo said:

“Go get yourself a bucket and put some degreaser in it, add water to it, and clean the machines.”

I lugged that bucket down one aisle and then up the other, cleaning these filthy damned stakers/generators/file cabinets. Did that up until 11:00 p.m., then he put me in with the Vietnamese guy named Dong. Hammering slots. Did that until quitting time. Felt like the arm was about to fall off. Stiff elbow, etc.

Got in. Dog’s water dish was empty. Filled it. Gave her what remained of the bones (from the barbecue the other night). Then sat down to the typer. Too damned tired to type anymore. Will try to find something to eat, drink some water. . . . Payday is coming up Thursday. Payday.

CHAPTER 81

The Vietnamese peeps seem to love to yell. Could it be because they are so damned tiny? I'm of average height, but appear tall compared. Yelling is typical. Tam, a married, pleasant lady is the exception. Last night they put me back in with Dong and his pal Hung. Hung is a welder. Face pocked, pushing 50; greased cowlick parted on the side. A yeller. Angry all the time. Looks it.

Did a lot of hammering last night, then they gave me a gun to use (a small, hand-jackhammer really.) This made it easier, but the hand still gets sore from holding the ten-pound handgun. Anyway, after that he's jabbering about I should go in the back.

"Work machine."

I can't understand what these people are saying. Could be why they yell (to compensate). He's got a pallet jack with him. We walk way in the back. He shows me this machine that cuts steel slats, half-inch wide, maybe thirty-inches long. He wants me to cut them down to 5-&-one-eighth-inches. Okay. Seems easy enough.

He sets it up. Only the vice-grip he uses is way too heavy and too long. But he gets it in the machine somehow. Shows me how it's done. The pedal is on the floor. You press down on the pedal with your foot and WHAM!—the blade comes down, chopping the steel strip off. He measures it for correctness. Fine. It seems all right.

"When you finish you come back," he says. This is the way they all speak. Irritates the hell out of me. But what to do? You put up with it (for the chump change). He walks away.

I stay on the machine for about an hour and a half. *Easy-job/easy-money*, I'm thinking to myself. It's rather quiet in this part of the plant. Nobody to mess with you. *Yes, I like it.* I could do this all day long, every day, six-days-a-week.

The lady super stops by (as the ladies' room is nearby). Her name is Doris. She says hello. Been here *thirty years*. Yes. Incredible. She is short, about 60 (or near). (This is the same one who said that time: "Production can mean anything in here.")

"You're just all over the place," she says.

"I go where they put me," is my response.

Doris smiles, nods. "That's right, I guess."

She leaves.

The quality control guy stops by: white-haired, in his 50s. Vicente. Low-key. At the plant 16 years. Due to retire in 18 months. I like Vicente. Hispanic. Has two grown sons with their own house painting business. We talk baseball a bit. Both are surprised the Indians won the World Series.

He walks off.

And then I realize the pieces I've been cutting are no longer 5" & one-eighth. But are five & a half, five & three-quarters, six-inches, and some longer even! *Goddamn*. I am cursing under my breath. How did that happen? How could it have happened? I don't get it. And then it dawns on me: the yeller had never tightened the vice-grip properly. *Son of a bitch*. All that work for nothing. I've got pounds and pounds of these metal strips in the metal box now that are useless (unless they can be trimmed—and that could be dangerous). You'd have to get your fingers in there, down under there too close to the damned blade.

I trim one or two and the rubber guard part comes down, hits my thumb. No damage/no harm. Too risky, too close to the blade that does the actual cutting.

The yeller comes by (he only works eight hours and goes home). Says: "When you finish, you return stuff to table. Take back."

He can't say what he means. But I understand what he's getting at: return the vice-grip, etc., back to Dong's table.

I nod. And then, I didn't have to, but do—trying to promote camaraderie; after all, I'm the new guy:

"The vice-grip wasn't tight enough and the measurements are off." I had only about two pounds of strips that were the right size. And now the little prick starts yelling:

"NO, NO. GRIP O.K.! YOU PUSH THIS TOO HARD AND MOVE!"

The whole plant can hear this little bastard. Two other faces jam their noses into our discussion.

I tell the little punk: "You're full of shit, my friend."

"NO, I SAY RIGHT! I AM RIGHT! YOU PUSH STRIP TOO HARD AGAINST STEEL BLOCK AND MOVE—"

"HOW WOULD YOU KNOW? YOU WEREN'T EVEN HERE TO SEE IT!"

"I KNOW YOU DO THIS BECAUSE I MAKE TIGHT, MAKE GOOD! YOU MOVE! YOU DO NO GOOD WORK!"

The little bastard was really getting on my nerves. This is the 9-to-5 grind I had tried so hard to stay clear of; this kind of miserable bullshit, types like this, assholes like this (not so far removed from my ignorant old man).

I walk away with the good ones in the second metal box. Vicente happens by, and now the rooster is bad-mouthing me to Vicente. Vicente, civilized gent that he is, remains calm, taking it in. I make it back to Dong's table and the bastard is bad-mouthing me to Dong now. The yeller leaves. I explain to Dong what had happened.

"If I'm at fault, partially at best, for not double-checking the whole Mickey Mouse set-up, fine. But Dong, he never tightened the thing properly before leaving me with it. I never worked on the machine before. I'm still learning how things are done around here."

Dong smiles, says: "Don't worry about it."

At 20 minutes to 2 a.m. Dong says: "We clean up good, sweep up, because big-shot come by tomorrow."

We do that.

We're done.

CHAPTER 82

Thursday. 11:50 a.m. Heels still numb from last night. An improvement (because when I staggered in from work, toes *and* heels were numb, not to mention shoulders aching/thighs/upper arms). Back from the coal mines. Get no writing done. This is about it. No energy. Am existing (presently) on two apples and a peanut butter sandwich a day. Weight melting off, but is it healthy? Doing my best to budget myself. Allow thirty-bucks per week for food—that's it. DOING MY BEST TO PUT \$250.00 in the bank every week. Made one deposit thus far, hope to make another tomorrow . . . and will try to do this as long as I last at the plant.

CHAPTER 83

Getting ready to leave for work this Saturday morn. I leave here at 9:30. Pedal my bicycle two blocks to the Vietnamese guy's apartment building. (Now that he has his license back), he drives us the eight-miles west on Grant.

Recall how tough it was before I got this ride, when I first started the job: I'd pedal the bike all the way in (& back). Was no fun to do in the rain. (Streets here in the Old Pueblo puddle up something fierce.)

Signed on to work Sunday. (Pays double-time.) Sunday's hours are really weird: 4 a.m. to 10 a.m. Christ. Yes, there is no escaping the dichotomy. I hate it when during the week (Monday-thru-Thursday) am outnumbered when the clipboard is passed around and so many sign up to work O/T. (Friday is always an eight-hour shift.) *Eight hours of standing on your feet is enough*; but there they are making us work 9, 10—and even *eleven-hours* on the days it's allowed. No, that is tough to take. But 4 a.m. to 10 a.m., six hours . . . is a bit easier. If not for the press, there is no way I'd even consider it.

Truth of it is: *We all have our goddamn reasons/what drives us/makes it possible to get up and do the grind.* The way I look at it: at least I'm not out there with a phony sign that says: **Will Work For Food**. Am not looking for a handout, am I? Only, I doubt I'd turn it down should it ever happen to cross my path.

I get off at 4:15 p.m. today. Can use the bucks. The printer is waiting. Some work to pay off the house/car/real estate, etc., their kids' education (whatnot). Me? I work the factory gig—as stated—to pay for the printing of my book. The way it's been. My life. . . . Far more valid than their mortgages and/or kids (and/or whatever else they're after). The way I see it. Am I laughing at this and thoughts on it?

Got a Patsy Cline cassette on. Not much writing lately (due to job and lack of time). It's toil that kicks your ass. On your feet all the time. They gave us a little lecture last night:

"You don't run up to the clock until the buzzer goes off," said Rodrigo in the break room. ***"You don't cut in front of each other and act like children. Take your time; it'll happen."*** He was right about that last one, as some of the peeps do behave this way. ***"You don't quit early and you don't start sweeping up early. We haven't had any major accidents,"*** he said. ***"Only minor cuts and bruises."***

And then later at quitting time some of the people did exactly what Doughboy said not to do. One black guy cut in front of everybody with his time-card, clocked out. Hung, the same Vietnamese guy I had a run-in with regarding that cutter in the back (have since found out he's O.K.), anyway, he goes after the black guy (who is a head taller), ***"YOU NOT SEE PEOPLE WAITING?"***

The black guy keeps right on walking toward the exit, having already clocked out.

"WHY YOU DO THAT? WE HAD MEETING ABOUT THAT! YOU NOT SEE PEOPLE WAITING THERE? WHOLE BUNCH OF PEOPLE THERE!"

The soul brother keeps strolling (like a phony Mr. Cool). Got to be from somewhere else. He says:

"Man, what's your problem?"

Only this time I do agree with the Vietnamese dude.

"YOU NOT SEE MANY PEOPLE WAITING?"

The fool keeps walking right out the door. The wonderful Vietnamese woman, Tam, talking to another woman, says:

"That's rude to behave that way."

Gave Nellie the last of the bones. Dog is getting spoiled. Next thing you know she'll be wanting bones every day, all the time. Ain't going to happen.

Got to figure out where and when to squeeze in doing laundry (for work). Out of clean shirts and walking shorts. Winter chill moving in here in Tucson. Air nippy. . . .

In the p.m. 7:42. Worked my Saturday overtime shift.

CHAPTER 84

Without giving us a heads-up, management switches some of us to the day shift. All we get from them is that it's temporary. If you don't like it, there's the door. It's not stated, but this is the attitude. We're dogs, huskies—and might as well be toiling away in the Alaskan wilderness. So be it. Fine.

Due to the sudden shift switch, am too exhausted to pedal the bike this afternoon and accept a ride with the nose-picking smoker. I leave Tin's place. Glad of it. Tired of the loud hip-hop garbage and the dude jamming his finger up his honker. I figure am not going to ride with the guy anymore. I'd rather go back to the bike, making it solo. I'd rather struggle and strain pedaling on that cheapo K-Mart two-wheeler that at least allows for peace-of-mind, makes it possible to do some meditating/day-dreaming and harmless scheming.

I push my bicycle away from the apartment building he lives in with his Vietnamese roomies, guide it along on the gravel sidewalk, my head down. A habit of mine, from time to time: keeping my head down. Helps with the daydreaming process, wondering how to dig myself out of this perpetual hole I was stuck in, and also: it's a good way to keep from stepping in dog waste. Yes, it's there. Most folks will pick up after their pet in this neighborhood. Most, not all.

I'd rather not hop on the bicycle for some reason. Walking feels fine. It's a nice day, a pleasant way to unwind from the blasting radio in Tin's car by walking the relatively short distance to my abode on Fairmount. I cross the street, taking it north to the other sidewalk and more gravel, continuing north on Camilla.

Am plagued by the usual, you know: How do I liberate my vanishing soul from the hell that is the plant before I completely lose my mind and/or will to go on; and of course, the longing, that forever longing for a good-hearted woman to enter my life—and not seeing anything happening on the horizon. I'm resigned to it. Have been for quite a while now.

Without fail, it happens when you least expect it. This time was no different. I'd had my eyes on the gravel, walking along, minding my own business, pondering how to rescue myself from this nowhere pit that my life has turned into. Not feeling sorry for myself, mind—or perhaps only slightly—but merely going over my non-options, when I nearly collide with her: a pretty girl approaching from the opposite direction. She's in jeans, carrying what appears to be school books. Has a ready/bright smile on her face. My apology is immediate.

"I'm so sorry. I just didn't see you."

She says it's quite all right. No harm done. It was close; we'd both been walking at a leisurely pace and had been able to stop in time. I don't recall the other pleasantries that may have been exchanged, but the unexpected encounter had been one of the most wonderful in quite some time and had left me with thoughts of her the rest of the way home (hoping I'd see her again). And what were the chances of that happening?

Got home. Had my mayonnaise sandwich, had a few Twix bars, pulled on the hammer, and dozed off. Needed to get that rest in preparation for this morning's 4 a.m. to 10 a.m. shift; that is, will be working the Sunday (double-time) six-hour stretch. And then afterwards will have to do laundry.

Wondered if I'd run into the girl again. Wondered about other things: Her age. Did she have someone? Where did she live? What was her background? What chance did I have of having someone like this in my life?

Yes, am working seven-days-a-week. *Sixty-hours*. Next check ought to be for about \$340. It'll take a lot to get the books printed, move out of here. And eventually, finally, somehow buy a used car. Will also need money for promotion/publicity, etc. But all of that seems to pale compared to the gorgeous face I'd had the encounter with. Alas, she was not there Sunday. I'd ridden with the nose-picker again, but did not see her as I walked my bike home afterwards. It was Sunday, what did I expect? If she were a student, why would she be attending classes on a Sunday? My heart sank; I'd had a need to catch a glimpse of that smile.

I was still enduring the hip-hop brain-farts and Tin's nose-picking. What made it worse, the oblivious dude would wipe his finger on his jeans. He'd have that finger jammed up his nose, then would casually wipe it against his thigh. **WTF?** I mean, peeps pick their nose, but not in public, man. That's something you did when no one else was around; and even then, you did not wipe snot against your pants. Then there was the *toxic cigarette smoke* that always left my belly cramping.

I used to be a smoker, you see, back in the 70s, a habit picked up in 'Nam, when they would drop those cancer-sticks down to us in sacks in the boonies—free of charge. The choppers would bring out the ***mail/R-rats/clean fatigues/paperbacks—and cigarettes***. And so many of us came back not only with the tobacco habit, but others as well. At least I'd managed to stay away from drugs. And the only reason for that was because I'd hated drugs from the get-go, period. Beer? Beer was fine. I'd consumed rivers of it over the years. That was my *vice*, that and jacking it to smut (when the real thing wasn't available).

But that was the least of it, because she wasn't around. Several days went by. I was about to give up for a number of reasons: in high school, no doubt. And who knew how old? ***Forget it, you over the hill, lovesick never-was. Forget it.*** You need someone a bit older; someone closer to your age. *At least* over thirty. I doubted she was anywhere near that.

No, I was no saint, never claimed to be. Fact was, pole was always hard and hungry with desire, but say once you got the roll in the sack over with, what would there be to talk about? Relate to?—with someone as young as the girl carrying those school books.

Days went by. Couldn't get her out of my head. If I saw her again, what would I say? How to connect, make for a possible bonding to take place? How to let her know I wasn't looking for a *fling, a mindless lay, but something more*. I was a fool wanting to be in a fifty-fifty type of relationship with a good-hearted soul. Hadn't I always been yearning for that? Spent my whole goddamned life wanting it. Never mind the missed opportunities, the times I flubbed and tripped up and let love fall by the wayside—for one reason or another; it was something you dreamt of for as long as you were alive;

something you longed for, some of us, most of us did—*male & female*—until they lowered our *lovelorn/pathetic ass* into the ground.

CHAPTER 85

I got the idea to pick up a greeting card/jot down a few heartfelt words and hand it to her the next time I saw her, if I saw her. I carried this card in my pack for days, and kept missing her. There were times Tin wouldn't come in, or else he'd opt to work **O/T** and I wouldn't, and I had no choice but to ride the bike to and fro, or else I simply couldn't take riding with him for reasons mentioned. But then I decided to go with the skinny dude, if for no other reason but because it was walking from his place that time that I'd met her initially.

I was on foot, like the other times, when I left his building. Wondered when I'd get the chance to hand her the card; about to give up. And then there she was: I had my head up this time and could see her lugging those books from a block off. It was her. *Had to be*. She had a habit of walking south from Pima. That incredible smile always there, and had me smiling as well and feeling great inside. There was more to life than working **O/T**, making a couple of measly dollars and pursuing a lit goal or two. There was more. Love was probably the only true thing that mattered. Heart-connection. Being able to hold a pretty girl's hand as you went places; being able to share thoughts/moments/laughter. It came down to this. I'd always believed in it. Call me a sentimental fool/pathetic so-and-so. Fine. That's who I am and always have been. There are plenty of men (as well as women) who can relate and feel this way. Only the male of the species (usually) is reluctant to admit it. Women? Most women not only don't have a problem with it, but will readily confess their need for it. *Love/companionship* beats all the rest of it any day of the week.

We exchanged hellos. It was brief. I handed her the greeting card.

"This is for you."

I could have embraced this happy girl with the captivating smile, so help me. But I did not know her, and it wouldn't have been right, no matter how friendly she appeared. It would not have been appropriate. I'd been by myself too goddamned long. It ate away at you. Solitude was great; I didn't need to be around large groups all the time like some folks, but a friend now and then was fine, being around good peeps now and then was good for morale.

I'd basically been a loner throughout my life. But, man, I had nothing against being with a good woman, having love in my life. I did not have a heart of stone, no matter that I did my best right after splitting and having had my heart shredded by the cynical man-hater with daddy issues sixteen years earlier.

I'd gotten over the bitterness and anger it had left me with, the chip on my shoulder toward the female, especially *counterfeit blonds* (whose hair color came out of a bottle). It had taken a good decade to deal with it, shake it and realize what I had known and believed all along: this world wouldn't be much without women. *This world would not be worth living in without the female.*

So be it.

Anyone who didn't care for this and/or cannot/refuses to relate—too bad. Am talking about certain scammers out there who truly hate women and cannot wait to use them at every opportunity: as in: Find them/shag 'em & forget 'em. As in: Take every bitch you meet for all she's worth.

Sorry, but I can't abide. Refuse to. There were women out there who were golden, decent in every way. Right off the top of my head two from work popped up: the Vietnamese Tam and the white woman in management, the one who'd hired me. No, I did not know the white babe, but so what? All am saying she struck me as one of the worthwhile ones. And there had been others, quite a few others over the years.

Moving along: Penny, this was the girl's name, and I parted ways. I'd done what I could, reached out: with words, and a way for her to contact me. The rest was up to her. Ball was in her court—should she be interested in any way. I could only hope/wished that she might. Had no idea that she would, for various reasons: the age thing; who knew? And then all the other roadblocks rose up before me: I had nothing going, nothing to offer anyone. Did not own a

car even; had no future. I was but an over-the-hill factory-flunky with a cheap-ass bicycle.

And the writing? What a joke. *Never published, and quite possibly never would be.* My talent, what I thought/had myself convinced was there, nothing more than some *fantasy*—like my brother quipped mockingly that time (in the presence of his lady, no less)—like all the other fantasies and illusions over the years throughout my less-than-auspicious existence. But I refused to give up hope. We cling to the impossible. I needed something more than the factory and the sore tailbone and limbs and not much happening on the horizon.

CHAPTER 86

A day or two passed, and there she was—as I walked north on Camilla —*that smile brighter than ever*. Thrilled to see me, was she? As thrilled as I was to see her?

She was gushing. My words had nearly brought her to tears. She said her mother thought I must be a nice guy. Her brother's reaction, on the other hand, had been: Why would anyone be interested in her?

I asked where it was she was headed. Her mother was a social worker at a facility on Country Club Rd. Penny rode home with her when her mom got off work. I got that part of it, and did not dare ask about the school books, what grade she was in. I had suspected she was in high school all along, perhaps the one at Palo Verde and Pima, and left it alone.

No denying, seeing her made me feel good all over. Greeting card had worked its magic and exceeded my expectations.

"It made my day."

"Well, I'm glad," said I. Asked if she liked dogs.

"*Do I?*" she beamed. "*We have five.*"

Dog-lover. Huge plus right there. The fact she was a walker, did not own a car was something else we had in common. It seemed there was no dad in the picture. Her and her older brother were being raised by mom. There was a lot to like. Kindness and decency to spare. This second encounter had certainly *buoyed* my spirits.

We parted. I wanted so badly to be with her. No denying. No getting away from thoughts of love and love-making (that I could not help jacking it to), day after day. Alas, there was the rest: trepidation/guilt. What right did I have to let a girl in high school fall for me? What right indeed? I had none.

Yes, a flakey, overrated comedian romanced a high school chick in a flick called *Manhattan*, but that was a Hollywood turnip named Woody Allen in a

celluloid fantasy (who had even attempted to take Mariel to Paris post-filming, which Mariel, to her credit, had declined). That wouldn't be me. With all my flaws, and there were too many to list, I couldn't get involved with a high schooler.

Truth was, I was a 46-year-old wash-out factory hand with zero for a future, non-existent prospects. It gnawed at me. I could have been selfish about it, seduced the girl and moved on. And even if I failed at walking away and made a genuine effort for a true heart-connection to develop, what chance did it stand in the long run? *What right did I have to do this to someone so young?*

Was I a dirty old fool, after all? *Lech? Geezer?* I wanted and needed someone in my life, yes, but not a teen. The age difference was too vast, the distance between us too great. I'd be fifty in four short years—and she was what? High school senior? Seventeen? Eighteen? Possibly. Didn't know. Couldn't tell. Even though eighteen was legal, it was still too young and would've made me a cradle-robber. Frustration piled on. Dragged me down. Guilt so heavy I found it tough to continue to pull on it with thoughts of her.

It was no good. *I couldn't/wouldn't let it take place.* The right and commendable thing had to be done here—no matter how many, past their prime, pussy-hounds would've jumped at an opportunity like this. I lost sleep thinking about it, searching for the answer, the will to make the right move. The word *tough* did not begin to describe it. But I would do it: *create distance.* Draw back. Decline to reach out—and hoped she understood.

We all lived with regrets: wrong moves we were guilty of, unkind words uttered to friends and relations that should have never escaped our lips. (I'd said some crude things over the phone to Christine that time; said some downright cutting remarks to AMV during our parting in '80.)

I'd committed my share of mistakes/lugged my share of remorse. *Here was an opportunity to "atone" for some of that.* I would hold back and prevent this thing from developing into an affair. There would be no hugs/no dates/no kissing/no love-making. *Nada.* Nothing. *Absolutely nothing.*

Call me a chump/loser/ass-hat/dipstick—any and all of the above—for blowing a once-in-a-lifetime-chance at an untouched girl. I never went around chasing after virgins like some guys, who, in my book, were *certified shitbags* to begin with. *That wouldn't be me.* I wouldn't do it. Not here. So be it. *Goddammit*, so be it.

CHAPTER 87

There were times the phone would ring and I wouldn't answer, or else if I picked up, heard a female voice on the other end—whether it was Penny or (possibly) her mother, didn't matter—I'd lower the receiver right back down into the cradle. And it ended that phase of it. But then a phase of a different sort transpired one weekend afternoon when Nellie would not stop barking.

She was louder than usual and forced me to yell at her to shut up. When she wouldn't, I rose from my desk to see what the ruckus was about. I paused at the glass door, looking past my front yard gate and noticed Penny sitting in a car with a guy a bit older at the wheel. Her brother, no doubt. She'd attempted to enter the yard, I imagined, and been put off by the dog's aggressive reaction. I stood there at the patio door for a while—could see them both looking my way—and then I turned away.

Later that day, after the car had left, it occurred to me to go out and make sure the gate was closed all the way. In fact, the latch had been disengaged. While closing the gate, I happened to take a look past it and noticed writing in the gravel that I could not make out. I opened the gate to take a closer gander. There was a message of sorts that had been scratched into the dirt with a twig or finger. *From Penny?* What was it she had tried to say? I was able to make out the letters that spelled out my name; digits that were, no doubt, part of a phone number—and the words: “. . . please call me.”

Wished I could have explained my seeming indifference; wished I could have, or should have articulated why for weeks afterwards, when seeing her out there walking in different parts of town (the girl walked everywhere, lugging those school books), and having offered her nothing more than a non-committal hello. She always had that shy smile on her pretty face. Had perhaps

expected me to stop and chat, like we did that time after I'd presented her with the greeting card, but I never did.

I hoped she understood. I thought and believed I had done the decent thing—even though, hell, I wasn't so sure of it myself and hoped I wouldn't regret it; hoped this wouldn't turn out like so many other times when opportunity/possibility of love/genuine heart and soul-connection came knocking and I had bungled it, let it slip right through my fingers.

Would I, years from now, regret having let this *potential union* fall by the wayside? Would I? Hell, I wouldn't have to wait years for that to happen. So why behave this way?

Because every now and then you got an opportunity to do what you felt in your bones ***had to be right***. *That's why. Exactly why. Yes, but*—Lookit Charlie Chaplin and Oona O'Neill that time, Eugene O'Neill's daughter. Chaplin was in his mid 50s, Oona *only* 18. They had married and stayed together until he died many years later.

Yeah, well, *fuck the "Little Tramp."* I wasn't Charlie Chaplin and didn't want to be. Besides, *that was Hollywood*. Tinseltown buttholes got away with all kinds of scuzzy/under-handed crap. Cretins were known for it. Yes, am saying it: self-centered celluloid cunts and a-holes—and celebrities in general—were a repulsive effing bunch.

I couldn't stop hating myself, second-guessing, doubting the move. *I must be a fool*. I only hoped that she got it, with time, that she would get it. Not that it helped any. Day after day I felt this way. Week after week. It went on. For months.

CHAPTER 88

They switched me back to nights and Tam, kind-hearted/easy-going Tam was there at the end of the shift reminding me that the ride offer was still good. Her big car was packed with a few other Vietnamese ladies. My bike was in the trunk in back, and we headed up Grant. A block east of Stone the rear right tire blew. I asked if there was a spare available. Tam said that there was.

We got the trunk open. I hauled the spare out, the jack, took a look at the lugnuts and froze. *Locking type*. She didn't have the key with her. We were in trouble. No point even attempting to unscrew 'em. ***They were locked, solid.*** I explained to my friend Tam. She didn't quite get it. I tried again. Asked if she had the key. She shook her head.

"Does your husband have the key, Tam?"

"Yes," she said.

"You'll have to call him, hon, because there is no way for us to take them off without stripping the lugnuts, not that we'd even be able to get them off. You'll have to contact your hubby."

And while this was sinking in, a strung-out white dude in his late 20s staggered up out of nowhere, reached for the jack. Got it on a lugnut and began to struggle and strain to unscrew it.

No one had asked him to get involved; there was no hint of it. Junkie was sweating like a pig, desperate for a shot of dope/rail/something/anything, working to show how eager he was to assist in hopes of picking up some "loose change."

He got nowhere, but it didn't seem to matter to him. Even after I insisted the lugnuts were ***locked***, the jerk wouldn't let go of that goddamn jack.

"*You're stripping the lugnuts, man.*"

He kept on.

“You’re ruining my friend’s car. Those lugnuts need to be unlocked. Understand?”

He had his head down, sweat pouring from his brow, while jamming that jack on there and struggling to turn it over and getting nowhere fast, as before. *This druggie loon was dumber than the locked lugnuts.* It bothered me plenty, while Tam, slight of build and harmless in every way and too classy to insist that the *mook* let go of the tire iron and move on.

I hated to part with money, my press and publishing money, no matter how small the amount, but reached in my pocket and shoved a fiver in the “Good Samaritan’s” face, thanked him for his help. He snatched the five-dollar-bill, shocked to be the recipient of so much, and hurried back down Grant, the direction he had evidently come from initially.

I reached inside the trunk, hauled my bicycle out. Paused there briefly, looking at a perplexed Tam. I suppose she didn’t like the idea of having to wake her husband, or some such. There was no choice.

“Tam, your husband will have to come down here with the key. That’s the only way the spare can be put on there, my friend.”

I would have hung around, and probably would have had she been by herself, but she had her fellow co-workers with her to keep her company until her husband showed.

I got on the bike, and pedaled on home. Hitching rides with folks just wasn’t worth the trouble. Hauling ass on the cheapo K-Mart bike was no easy task, yet remained *preferable* to the alternative.

CHAPTER 89

Got through Sunday somehow. Worked my six hours of O/T. It is 8:36 p.m. now. Eyes burned the whole time at work due to lack of sleep. You get used to not going to bed until about 3:30 a.m. (my regular schedule during the week), and then you sign on to work Sunday and the hours are simply murder. Started to get sleepy about 1:00 a.m. this morning, but stayed up from fear I wouldn't be able to make it in. At 20 after 3 this morning left the apartment, walked up to Tin's place and waited outside the apartment building for Ping to pick me up in her car (after swearing off accepting rides from any of them). She showed and we drove on in.

Did OBDs/stocked pallets/helped welders, etc. During our fifteen-minute-break at 8:00 a.m. had half a sandwich, yogurt. I did ride back with her. This would be the last time I'd ride with any of them.

CHAPTER 90

Last night was another killer ten-hour shift. For the first two hours they had me working the puncher, whereby I punched holes in various vents, labeled/OBD'ed and stacked them on shelf (with Tam, who remains a pleasure to work with). When I punched wrong holes, etc., made mistakes, she handled it quietly, did not make a big fuss the way Ping likes to do. In fact, Ping did stop by, saw me punching holes in a vent, I was doing it right at that point, and she screams:

"WAIT! WAIT, I SHOW YOU!"

She's screaming some more and I just ignored her, placed the vent on the shelf, knowing it was right. Then Tam showed her the chart, and Ping shut up that fast. She returned to work at her station.

Fat Man, Rodrigo, comes by:

"You'll be working in the back," he says.

I knew what that meant: the warehouse, but said just the same:

"You mean the warehouse?"

"Right. See a guy with white hair named Bud."

"Will I be there the rest of the shift?" I inquired.

"Yes."

I grab my things: Igloo cooler, thermos, and the plastic bag. Walk in the back, way in the back. The white-haired dude, another super, is at his desk. He points to the loading dock, a good distance from here, says: "See Jethro."

I nod, walk some more. Reach Jethro's desk, and he says:

"Give that guy a hand loading up the truck."

Loading is right. Work, heavy lifting, work. Back muscles ached; groin muscles, too. Did that for three-hours with a Mexican who'd been a welder for seventeen-years, and yet the man hardly spoke English. I don't get it. He was a nice enough sort. We got the damned trailer loaded up. High. Way up there.

Threw the medium-to-light boxes up on top—and then several boxes came tumbling down on my head.

Then the Mexican driving the forklift, Junior, worked like a maniac. Probably on uppers. He kept pushing those full pallets in on us, damned near burying us in packages/boxes/crates. Junior had been in Tucson since April, was from Montebello, CA. He didn't have a problem with his English. Big nose and head shaped like an acorn. Crewcut. Bad one. Short. Baggy Levi's cut-offs.

When we were done with that we took a brief break, then I returned to my other post, working the puncher, etc., the rest of the shift. You ache, brother, by the time you're done, you ache all over. . . .

And here I am, still aching. . . . The dog started barking early at 8 a.m. after I'd only slept a mere four hours. Attempted for a bit more slumber (after telling her to shut the hell up). Did get a few more hours, but still feel tired. Exhausted. Weight dropping, but exhausted is what I feel like today and every day. Got to stay with it. Got to.

It's off to work.

CHAPTER 91

Thursday is always a good day because it's payday. Three minutes past noon. Last night not as hard as some others. Sure, you're on your feet for just under twelve-hours and the soles and heels numb, but that's par for the course; that part I may be getting used to.

They had me with the two Vietnamese guys: Dong and Hung. I shoved steel slats through various support bars. Relatively easy (as no hammering involved). Later, there was some hammering required (during the last couple of hours).

Dong says:

"I go to welding next week. Make more money. Fifty-five-cents more."

I nod my head. This guy is all right, usually (they all have their moods). Today he's in a good mood. He's very loud when he speaks. Skinny. Rail thin, as they say. In his mid-50s.

He tells me:

"I work before, welding. No pay more money before. Now pay more."

His response to my question why he hadn't stayed with welding while he was in it:

"I have *energy*," he says, meaning *allergy*. "I work different area, no allergy."
(After I'd corrected him.)

"I'll go with you," I tell him. "I want to be a welder."

"You cannot. You not have been here six months yet. Later."

Rodrigo, the super, moves slow, very slow. When you're obese that's the way it is. We had three-minutes to go before the buzzer went off and I'd already swept our area, and Rodrigo says:

"You sweep already?" Indicating near aisle.

"Not out there; only in here," I tell him.

"Just sweep up some by the table."

I don't mind this guy; it's not like he orders you around like a drill sergeant. Appears easy going on the outside, calm. Quiet. But inside I'm sure he's got his tornadoes, maybe even high blood pressure. Rarely takes a day off. He has thirty years in here at the plant. Works usually six-days-a-week—and on Sunday when needed. He was there last Sunday.

I grab a broom and sweep up. I don't need problems at this point. When I pick up the check this evening I'll have nine- hundred for the printing. Pretty darn good. I'll wait another check or two—apply for my credit card, have the cover done, leave a deposit at the printer's.

First thing to do, though: need to pay rent on the PO box. There is still the apartment to find. So close to getting the printing done. Hard to believe.

CHAPTER 92

I'm working the hole-puncher, when I hear Rodrigo call my name. This could mean anything. Could mean I'm back at the loading dock loading trailers. Hard frigging work. Sweat.

He says: "Go with No-Ass Leon."

Leon Lupo is the super with the pot belly and no ass. 6'1". In his 50s. Been with the company thirty-or-forty years. Rodrigo, as mentioned, has 30-years in. Lifers.

I reach under the table, grab my cooler, the plastic bag I've got the mask in, *Tucson Weekly*, and follow Leon, who has a rather fast way of walking.

We near the Pepsi machine outside the restrooms, where one of the other supers is yakking with a plain blond (not only are there no good looking women in this factory, but none of them—not a single one of them—knew how to dress, other than the babe in the front office who hired me).

I stand waiting at the soft drink machine while he yacks with them for ten/fifteen minutes. This is what they do, these supers, shoot the breeze all day long. They don't do any work. While the rest of us are toiling our asses off, these clowns are wasting their time. I'm finding things out about this plant: while the rest of us are killing ourselves *day-in/day-out*, you've got *slackers* with cushy jobs who spend their day *walking around/chatting/doing nothing*. Their favorite trick is to appear to be looking for "***tickets***" (*orders*).

You see them holding forms in one hand and walking to-and-fro, in search of something (with what might resemble *determination*). You never see these people break a sweat, unless the countless gigantic fans throughout the factory fail at reducing the summer heat in any genuine way.

Finally, we're on the move, pass the paint line (where the frames are hung for the painter inside the paint room) and stop at the giant **Komatsu** press. This thing is a beast, a monster. *Four-million-bucks*. It forges panels, comes

down like thunder. The ground shakes each time. This part of the plant is like something out of *Blade Runner*, a gloomy cavern. High ceiling.

Am introduced to Ray, the press operator. Early 50s, thin, with the exception of the spare tire around his middle. He's in baggy jeans and a dirty T-shirt. Dude is probably caucasian. Hair the color of old and dirty motor oil. Wears glasses.

My job is easy. Sit on the left side of the long press and occasionally pull scrap metal out of trays with a six-foot long bar with a curved tip. The press has a grill (that you can easily see through) on either side (that goes up and down, when needed). Ray stands a yard or two to my right, at that end, from where he controls the press.

I cannot get over this mechanical freak that is about the size of a double-decker bus and, as stated, Ray controls from where he's standing. There is no way he can see what I'm doing, or what the press is doing—unless he leans out to his left.

To communicate with one another—due to the extreme noise in the place—we must shout. I should point out, in all fairness, before he returned to his post, I'd been advised to keep my arms and any part of my upper body: head/shoulders, etc., out of the impact area. Ray suggested I use the bar I'd been given for all retrieval purposes.

Easiest gig I've had. No work required. So long as I didn't stick any part of me in that *verboden* section (beyond the grill with the horizontal bars). I asked Ray how long he'd been at it.

“Nine-months. Too long.”

And then about two hours hence, when a new roll of sheet metal had to be fed to the press, he got a bit bent out of shape, as it was not as wide as it should have been and the feeder/rails had been left loose apparently by the day man. Adjustments were made. Still nothing. Ray was getting pissed/worked up. I sat back. No concern of mine.

Why let a machine get to you? (Especially at what we were being paid.) It was crap anyway. Too much was being wasted. Too much metal/paper *wasted*—everywhere, all over this country and the world. We were destroying the

planet. Then they (Lupo and Ray) figure out why the sheet metal wasn't coming in high enough off the conveyor: the bent upwards tray/makeshift tray wasn't bent enough.

Later Ray was shaking his head, feeling better, and saying:

"Guess I was too tired to think straight. Of all people to get me to figure it out I had to get No-Ass Lupo." He'd had a confrontation with Leon once or twice before.

We had the Komatsu running again.

CHAPTER 93

There was a lull, Ray was fiddling with buttons, making adjustments at his end. Chu, one of the forklift drivers pulls up. Climbs down. Chu is Asian, 34. Doesn't look it. Didn't like driving the damned thing. Gave him back pain, but. . . . After fourteen years in he was only making \$8 an hour. Planning to retire in six years (at \$135, plus \$750.00 more from the government). Is taking an accounting course during the day so that he can do his own books when he opens his own business when he retires.

Like I said: Everyone dreams of a better life. Only by the time we get there (*should we ever get there*), we're too close to that hole in the sod.

"How you like the Komatsu?" he asks.

What can I tell him?

"It's not as bad as some of the other things they've had me doing."

"You not supposed to lean in. You supposed to use the long bar when adjusting panels. They tell you this?"

"Ray mentioned it."

"Mexican guy who work here before you," he said, "he die."

I stared at him.

"Nobody tol' you?"

"No."

"You not supposed to *lean in* when adjusting panels. Always use the long bar. Mexican was crushed. Komatsu come down when he lean in to make adjustment without the bar."

"Crushed him?"

He nodded. "From chest up. Like taco. He want to adjust panels, but don't wait for Ray to stop the press. His life over. *That's it.*"

"For shit wages."

"You think company care?"

He looked around nervously, making sure none of the supers were around. Pointed out he had to return to work.

“They see us talking they yell at us.”

He was gone before I’d had a chance to thank him for the heads-up.

We shut the press down at 7 to midnight. I swept the area. Thought about what Chu had said as I scooped up debris and dumped it in one of the trash bins there. A man had been crushed to death and no one had mentioned a word to me about it. Made you wonder how many others had been killed or left maimed over the years.

Even though I suspected Ray was a moody type, the signs were there, assisting him had been relatively easy so far and I’d even contemplated offering to return to the press as a way to get away from Hung and Dong and all the other humiliating and/or physically demanding chores I’d had to endure, but hearing about the helper who’d ended up flattened by the Komatsu—and really how easy it would be for it to happen to anyone—made me less than eager.

I walked back to my regular station. Clocked out at 12:15 a.m. with the other slaves.

CHAPTER 94

You blink and the weekend is over.

Worked Saturday. Off at 4:15 p.m., as usual. Didn't do much Sat. night. Rested. I never go out to clubs these days (not that I was ever much of a barfly or even cared for that type of life). Then today rode the bicycle to the laundromat at Alvernon and Pima. Took care of two loads of shirts, shorts. Some teenage black chick screaming and cursing at three black youngsters in there. It was no way to raise kids. Didn't say anything, although I was disgusted by it.

Got out of there.

Back here.

Went to see Kiana South, Mel South's daughter (who does proofreading) to talk to her about proofing manuscripts for me. Woman was in her 20s. Seemed nice enough. Just hope she knows her stuff. Did let her do a sample and she seemed capable. No matter, will have to do the usual: proof her proofed version myself. So then why do it? Because it helps to have another pair of eyes go over typos/errors I tend to overlook. It always works that way. We tend to miss the most obvious; all of us: me/Ernie Hemingway/F. Scott Fitzgerald/James Jones/Thomas Wolfe.

These guys had the legendary editor Max Perkins and his input, while scribes like me get it where we can afford it. Yes, in spite of the fact I got As and Bs in English in high school, I fail to pick up missed letters and other errors. So now waiting for the ms to come back from the typesetter.

Stopped by the health food market on Speedway (not for any health reasons, either, but because it's the closest in the area). Picked up milk/bread/pasta/sauce. Stayed in. Had the tube on for a bit. Nothing on. Television is a waste of time. Usually is. Tossed the dog a couple of biscuits.

Well, going on 1:00 a.m. now. Orbison on. Singing *It's over* . . . Yes, I know. It was over a long time ago, Roy. Tomorrow is Monday and it's back to work, pal. The factory. Sheet metal. Bust your back for The Man.

CHAPTER 95

They had me on the Komatsu again. Am getting to hate working back there. Loaded 24" x 24" panels into bins on the floor. Lifted this stuff off the conveyor belt and lowered into steel bins. Cut my forearm on steel panels. A rough way to make a living. They had four guys back there at one time. Why? Good question. The press operator Ray, Jorge the scrap man, me and some Mexican guy in a large, vinyl cowboy hat.

I've got cuts up and down both forearms. This is the way the writer buys time to write.

Crawled into bed at 4 a.m.

And then at 7:30 I hear the g.d. dog barking, also the two dogs in the yard to the right of here. God help us. Am forced to get up out of bed and hiss at my dog. She shuts up. The woman next door brings her own dogs inside.

Am back in bed, only trouble is I can't fall asleep now. And I need my rest (for the job). Can't go on this way. Nellie, the dog here, is just too dumb to take a hint. You tell her a million times to shut the hell up and she doesn't get it, or does for a while—and then a few hours later, or the very next morning does the same damned thing: makes a big racket over nothing. It's usually someone out there walking their dog in the early a.m. and Nellie acts like she's protecting the place (when she and I both *know* different).

It took me forty-minutes to doze off and this time slept for three more hours. Needed it. Here it is 11 to 2 (p.m.) presently. Got my lunch ready (for work), etc., dressed, waiting for what. . . . I leave here at about ten to 3.

CHAPTER 96

Once again: I drop in the sack at 4:00 a.m., and the damned dog starts barking at someone walking *their* dog at 7:30 in the morning. Incredible. This dog, this dog here has got to be one of the dumbest animals I have ever seen. One of the most unfeeling and cruel. I have to get up and hiss at her to shut up.

It takes me *thirty-minutes* now to fall back asleep. Last night, last night at the factory, the sheet metal factory was another bitch of a night. Every now and then you get stuck working with people who make life a lot tougher than it has to be. Working with Ray on that goliath Komatsu press was/is always like that. *Hell*. This jerk has serious mood swings. And soon it tires you out, wears you out.

What gives, man? He's always angry. Not smart enough (really) to run the press, but there he is. And while I'm placing panels in the bin he wants me to get more and more in there. Hands me a long screwdriver so that I can wedge that tip in there and move a layer of them and make room for more panels.

"You can at least get another hundred in there."

Like a fool, I do as am told. Don't make waves, I figure. Then later Jorge and I realize what all that shifting with the screwdriver has done to quite a few of the panels: scratched them along the edge, dented them; dented so many. I'm on probation (for the first six months) so don't say anything. But you bet, I'm tired of it.

Turns out this guy Ray is about the most miserable wretch working here. You feel like saying to a grump like this: *Hey, lighten up, man. Life is short. Wipe that frown from your face. It isn't helping you or those around you. Get it?*

Only they don't get it. It takes a bit of wisdom to get it, a bit of smarts. I quit talking, saying much to the guy. I help out, etc., that's it. I help, along with Jorge, load up new coils onto the feeder carousel. Unload scrap to clear main chute from the press and make room for small scrap. Mainly, though, my job

was to unload panels off the conveyor belt and place them in huge steel bins on the cement floor. Then Chu, the forklift driver, comes in and carts the bins away. We usually have five bins on either side of the conveyor. Fill them up. Then Chu drives in, takes that away, comes in with empty bins. He does a lot/works hard/keeps a good attitude/cheerful, except when he's around Ray, the pissed-off guy, the angry face.

Twenty to 1:00 p.m. now. Cooking spaghetti. Placed a bagel (with slice of beef boloney inside, cream cheese), along with another sandwich, w/mustard, one green apple. Lemonade. I drop them inside the cooler by the door. In one plastic bag I carry the extra pair of work gloves/dirty apron/face mask, a magazine (we get to the plant early and this way I've got something to read until the buzzer goes off).

But this is the way it goes, the way one gets ready/prepares psychologically for the ten-hour grind at the sheet metal factory, the slave dungeon (for slave wages).

I guesstimate this one plant takes in (monthly) anywhere from 2.7 mil. to 4 mil. *That's per month, Hoss.* Exploitation thrives in the Old Pueblo.

Got some Bach on the FM dial, and mainly just trying to take it easy until the time to walk up to my Vietnamese pal's apartment building and then he drives us in to the plant in his beat-up black Toyota. (Comes down to putting up with the loud funk/nose-picking/cigarette smoke, versus aching legs and exhaustion, so I ride with the dude.)

I'd like to get out of the factory. Places like this grind people into the ground, literally. They do it slowly, but surely . . . every day taking an inch or so out of you. It's a death sentence. I've got cuts up and down both arms from handling sheet metal/panels/rails (aluminum and steel).

And for what?

For what?

At five (and change) per hour.

Somebody is laughing his head off at how stupid we are, how gullible and easily taken. Someone is howling at our feeble-mindedness. (Letter/key "N" sticks more often than I care to be reminded.)

CHAPTER 97

Worked my Saturday shift and dropped in the sack soon as I got home.

Feet sore, feet sore. These new boots (steel toe) just not wide enough. This is pain. Even after spending fifty-bucks (a lot for me). What's the solution? Without comfort down in the foot department you're doomed (at this place). Not sure what to do. Do they make shoes wider than this? Sell them at Payless? This was supposed to be a wider pair. Would they take them back? Have worn them for two days now. I realize it takes a while to break a pair of work boots in . . . still. . . .

Should look to buy another pair of shoes, a different type of work shoe ('cause just can't make it this way). Won't last much longer. Every chance I got, there I was leaning (for a brief sec or two) against the conveyor belt while the frames came down.

Doing the same lately. Same old thing. Working the hole puncher. I stand there with my foot on the metal pedal on the cement floor and press down, punching holes in different size frames. Yes, errors are made at times. Yes, it happens. But am gradually getting it, and making fewer and fewer errors every day.

Tried to feel upbeat early on in the shift, good attitude, all that (like most people), but eventually the pain down in the foot area got to me, baby; the pain. Felt blisters coming on (you know, with the big toes pressed up/pushing against the steel toe of the boot). It was sheer agony. But what do you do?

The obese super there, Rodrigo, sitting at his computer desk in his comfortable chair in the middle of the plant, comfortable sneakers (could have bought sneakers, yes, with thick soles, but I got the steel toes for safety reasons). After all, things do land on one's feet.

CHAPTER 98

Returned to Payless to take their killer boots back. Got my \$42, then drove to a few places (with Bro) looking at shoes. To my amazement found out that some work shoes go for as much as *one-hundred-and-eighty-dollars*. *What!* Give me a break. Red Wings or Red Tips, etc. Thanx, but no thanx, amigo, said I to the store clerk on Broadway. Then we drove over to El Con Mall. Had no real luck until we went in JC Penny. Their Wolverines were excellent and reasonably priced at \$125 and \$140 (25% discount); only they had no Double Es. So that was that.

Found out from a clerk at Robinson-May we ought to try K-Mart. Treated Bro to lunch at Boston Market, then we drove out to Broadway and Kolb. They had the Es, but not steel toe. I settled on a pair of steel toe 9s. Fifty bucks. Plus tax. Add on the \$8 I had to spend on inserts at Walgreens the other day.

A bit narrow and tight, but much, MUCH better than the goddamn killer shoes I'd worn for two days bought, as I said, at the Payless at Alvernon and Grant. The pain lingers from those two days. Feet remain sore. Sore. Take care of your feet, man. Got to. GOT TO. Without your feet you won't make it at work, and you know the rest . . . no paycheck, etc.

Bought Bro power steering fluid, quart of oil. We drove back here. Dropped me off, and he drove on over to his old lady's apt.

Watched a beauty pageant from Mexico. Jacked it during the swimsuit competition. Dropped in the sack and slept for three-hours. Woke up at midnight to take a leak and here I am, at the typer with Michael McDonald on the cassette player.

Love lies, says he. . . .

Yep.

CHAPTER 99

They gave us four days off. Without pay. Need to be there six months in order to get a paid holiday. Okay. Still happy to have the time away from the place.

The other day a Mexican got three of his fingers crushed on a machine. For \$5.95-per-hour. And the fat cats at the top over in England—do you think they give a damn? Hey, life is cheap.

Leon Lupo fired. The guy with the big gut and no-ass; remember? Yes, that Leon. After 37-years and *three-years short of retirement*—fired at 59. Loyalty? Sure. This company has it, baby. The guy I used to work with, Ray, in all likelihood rigged the Komatsu and Leon let him attempt to “repair” it, which only made a bad situation worse. Ray loused things up to the point that it cost the corporation a hundred-grand to repair the huge press. And guess what? A thirty-seven-year man gets the axe.

CHAPTER 100

Sunday. 11:32 p.m. In this duplex in Tucson, Arizona. *Pulp Fiction* on the tube for a while—and had to *shut that shit off*—and here I sit, at the desk, at the typer.

Thanksgiving-weekend over. Tomorrow'll be Monday (again) and time to return to the hardrock mine. Again. Bob Marley on my black radio. Things to be done. Got eighteen- hundred in the bank, after three-months of backbreaking sweat and toil at the plant on Flowing Wells Rd. Stay or move on? The question. If I stay here the rent is \$340, plus utilities. And of course I'll have a couple of phone lines installed. If I move: there is a large studio closer to work available for about three-hundred a month, plus utilities. One-hundred-and-fifty deposit. They can't wait, the vultures, cannot wait to get their grubby claws on your hard-earned cash, baby.

Life. The world. People. Jackals. Jackals and vultures. There's a title for you:

Jackals & Vultures

"N" keeps sticking. Nothing to do about it.

Electric bill sits on Bro's waterbed in the living room, for \$52. It's really for \$24, but a bounced-check fee of ten, plus late charge makes it \$52. Bro keeps writing bad checks. Not intentionally—still. . . . I figure I'll pay the bill, plus kick in for at least half the rent. Got to help him out (for helping me out).

But the money in the bank is already spent. This is money for the printing of the book. The book. Finally. Do I go with a hundred copies locally for \$850? Or do I have a real book printer out in Michigan do a run of 250 for about 26-hundred- bucks? The latter is cost-effective. The more books you print the cheaper it gets.

It's a tough one.

Do the local short-run for reviews and to test the waters—and then go for the bigger run?

Decisions. . . .

And then be broke again. Penniless.

Don't even own a car yet. Can't do both. One or the other: print the book or buy a car. Got to print the book and move closer to work (so that I can make it in on the bicycle if I have to).

How long do I remain in Tucson?

Not sure.

Should stay here long enough to get these books printed and on their way. Eventually I'd like to try living somewhere else. Where? Not sure.

CHAPTER 101

The Cash Register “Tribune” rolls on. Got Edith Piaf on the CD player. The check for Thanksgiving was for \$137. We were given the days off (w/o pay if you were on “probation”). They refer to your six-month “trial period” as PROBATION. Sounds like something else, don’t it?

Anyway, it’s a cheap-ass company to work for. Heartless. Got five days off coming up next week—and, no, they ain’t paying us for all of them (no matter how long you’ve been here). People are always quitting. Just no future here, amigo. They got me back spot-welding again (during O/T). We’re working nine-hours Monday-through-Thursday these days. Eight on Friday. Six Saturday. Would like to find something else. Not easy to do without transportation. The way it is.

Waiting for the manuscript from my typesetter in Colorado. Then will proofread once more and take it from there. Then it’s on to the cover design and printing. Amen. It has been a long, LONG time . . . like forever. What a gestation/birth.

CHAPTER 102

Sitting here sipping RC (yes, back on the soda) and smoking a cigar. Off for a few days for Xmas and it feels good. Feeling rested up. It will be back to work on Monday for a couple of days and then off again for New Year's.

Obtained a secured Visa. Bought a new vacuum cleaner. The place needed it. And some other things. *The place needed it.* Now that I'm staying here might as well make it livable. Don't like living in a sty. Ain't no Felix Unger, but don't like a disorganized abode. Can't think to write when the joint is in disarray.

However, having mentioned all of the above, it's scary how quickly the money goes. So damn difficult to save and then all at once it begins to slip away, right through the proverbial fingers.

Was up at Borders. Spent *sixty-six bucks* on a few books. Not that many at all. Total of four. Felt I needed them: couple of dictionaries, paperback of Bohumil Hrabal's *Too Loud A Solitude*; and last, but no way least: Nelson Algren's *The Man With the Golden Arm*. The latter I already had two copies of, pocketbook versions, though the print too fine to make out without tremendous strain.

This version came with a beautiful black & white cover photo of Algren w/gold title lettering and it is trade paper size. Just had to have it. You bet, the look of the book does mean a lot. If you can't read the print and if the cover does not do the content justice . . . hell, it hurts it. So there you have it—**sixty-six-bucks**. And then while riding the bicycle back down Broadway, then cutting across some street or other (north-bound) toward Speedway, it is night now, mind you, and windy and cold and I've got no gloves on, make it to Speedway and head west, I pass a Hoover vac store in a practically vacant strip mall parking lot. I go in and end up buying a vacuum for \$107.

Now, I needed the damned thing. It is not like I'm spending the money just to spend. I write a check. The man *accepts my check*. (In LA, *No Way, Jose.*) He takes my check. Nice man. And I'm on the bicycle. You see: one hand (my

right) is gripping the top of the vac handle, while I attempt to steer the bike by gripping the handlebar with my other hand, and all the while doing my best to keep from losing my balance and toppling to the side. Not an easy thing to do. The Hoover is not light, plus I've got a pack on my back full of books. But you do what you gotta. *Survival is the name of the game.* How long? For as long as I can endure.

The vac is so heavy and puts enough strain on the arm holding it up that I have to stop every block or so and switch hands. Got to. No choice. But you endure. *No choice.* Right? Not that I think there's anything special going on here. *Plenty of other peeps before me have suffered through a lot more than this little task; and plenty of others (long after I have vacated this mortal coil) will endure their share of shit that the fates have in store for them.*

I make it (somehow), the three or so miles (with plenty of rest stops) to my place (blister-free for either hand or backside). I unload the cargo, and am back in the saddle and riding west on Speedway toward Viva, the Mexican food joint. Buy a burrito, and something else I can no longer pronounce, drop my change into the Styrofoam tip cup—and rolling once again. At the Circle K I pick up a large plastic jug of RC (back on it) and some weight gain; tray of Danish/newspaper/milk/cereal.

You see how fast the money goes? And it adds up. And when all you're pulling down is a measly wage and busting your ass to do it six-days-a-week it hurts . . . but you've got to live.

And after all that . . . I feel all right. I feel okay. Still thinking about the book every day, all the time. Tunnel-Vision. TUNNEL VISION. The only way. I might have second thoughts about having included the free verse (but it is too late now to have those second thoughts).

Feeling is poetry detracts from the prose. Never cared for poetry per se, never did. Until I came across Bukowski's hard-hitting free verse. His was about the only poetry I could stand to read or wanted to. All those white-collar academia fakers with their horse dung and nothing to say were a joke. I didn't care for Ginsberg's poetry; didn't care for Kerouac's, either. ***Not worth the time/not worth a dime.*** And so I thought: Hey, I'd like to give this a try; write

a few. And I have, between fares in the cab, while waiting on cab stands at various hotels in Century City and Beverly Hills and in the LAX taxicab Holding Lot, while treading-water in that roiling/over-crowded ***Hellhole-of-a-Pit called La La***. But poetry and story collections, we will discover eventually, rarely sell—unless you happen to be *Chinaski*. Even there, what got him over/made him, were the novels: *Post Office/Women/Ham on Rye*—and of course, those incredible short stories of his.

In my humble estimation, Buk was second-to-none when it came to the short story. Superior to Ernie Hemingway even; better than the great Nelson Algren. Yep. Buk had them beat. Kicked everyone's ass when it came to the short form. Hilarious shit. Quite a bit of it was and still is. More than likely saved my ass/kept me alive all through the suicidal 80s, that and jogging six-to-ten-miles-a-day, Monday-through-Friday. Made just enough hacking weekends to make rent and put grub on the table.

Where was I? Poetry. Very often: ***just another jive-ass shuck***. There you are. One man's *two-farts*.

CHAPTER 103

1:20 a.m. Jan. 1, 1998. Wed.

Ring in the New/Out with the Old, as they say. Here alone in this duplex in Tucson, AZ. Did not go out, did not do much . . . as per motto, this loner's motto. Recluse is right. This is how the scribe lives. And it got lonelier than most times, it did. Ate a bag of Ruffles chips/cherry pie/bean dip with *jalapeños* . . . washed down with RC Cola.

What a life.

They made us work at the plant today. Six hours: 10:15 a.m. to 4:15 p.m. Since I finally gave the color set away (along with the VCR) to Bro and his girlfriend, am sitting here with the small radio on. *Oldies*. . . Going through tv withdrawal even though **I hate tv**, always have. Lived without for ten years. Never got so much accomplished. But had to get rid of the damned thing (that interfered with my writing). Have not done much at all since starting at the plant. *The plant, the plant, eats up time*. Will have to adhere to a better/more disciplined schedule and get back to the *typer/writing/prose*. Prose. GOT TO. I've got books to finish . . . but the job is a bitch. They won't let me work just eight-hours per shift for another three months (by which time my probation will be up). I'll still have to put in my six-hours on Saturday (which they often make mandatory). But at least by working only eight-hours five nights a week I'll be getting home earlier and hitting the sack earlier and getting up EARLIER and in time to get a few decent lines down! And this is all that matters, folks.

Have yet to receive the latest version of *Streets of L.A.* from the typesetter. She's had the thing for over four months now. Way too long. Need it back to go over one final (hopefully) time. Been on it *eighteen-years now*. (Been revising for only the last eight), but the original draft had been written way back during 1980 through 1990.

Yes. A LONG, LONNNNNNNGGGGG DAMN TIME. But the way it goes, man. Just trying to do a good job of it. Feel that book lovers deserve to be treated with respect. If a writer/artist (anyone: architect/shoemaker/auto designer, etc., etc.) cannot do his/her best. . . . Just wouldn't be right to release less than your best. Always. Have felt this way about everything.

CHAPTER 104

At least the ms from my typesetter is in.

Been biking it for a week now. Yep. Eight-miles down, and then back up again at 1:15 in the a.m. Ain't fun, not at this working stiff's age, but it sure is a lot better than having to listen to the Vietnamese guy's rap crap on the car radio. Tin loved to blast that shit the minute we were in the car. Funny part is he can understand maybe twenty-percent. Go figure. After a shift of hard toil this is the last thing I need. A bad headache is always the result for me. So enough of that, I said. ENOUGH.

And so the next day rode the bike way up there, about ten/eleven miles to the K-Mart on Broadway, bought myself rain gear (coat and pants, etc.). So now if I get caught in a downpour am protected. Carry it with me always in my pack.

Had another beef with Hung, the Vietnamese guy I work with. Yes, Dong's pal. Toothpick thin, 50. Reminds me of a rooster. Yells a lot. Not unlike Ping. This is the male version. Couple of inches taller than Ping. The man is a yeller. For over three-months now I have been putting up with this shit. Finally had it out with the little bastard. I could have grabbed him by the collar and thrown him out the goddamned door—but that would have meant immediate dismissal. Bro had moved out and was staying with his old lady, and since the lease on the apartment for the next six-months was in my name I thought I ought to hold on to the job. Besides, punching the guy out might've made him crumble like a potato chip, which I didn't need to see. He was nothing more than another noisy runt of a turd, as a few are.

My first month was spent with a screamer of a woman named Ping, and the last three-months with this SOB named Hung.

So immediately he goes running to the supervisor: *bla bla bla*. This is where my life is presently. After all the dues paid, there's always more they're going

to throw at you just around the bend. Life. I can tolerate the job, it's the assholes one has to deal with that makes it tough. These Vietnamese people will turn on you over the slightest. They act like they're your friend and bam, they stab you in the back. The best thing is to stay clear, if possible, but that doesn't work unless the super puts you in a job situation where that can happen, where you can just keep to yourself and do the work in peace. I never asked to be stuck with these peeps.

CHAPTER 105

Did my six-hours at the plant. Difficult to unscramble the brain after the plant has done a pretty good job of scrambling things. Slept for about three hours just now. Too exhausted. Needed the sleep. You see, they kept us working until 1:15 a.m. Friday night, and then force us to come to work again Sat. morning at 10:15 a.m. Assholes run the company. Right. *Callous assholes who care about nothing but making money for the corporation.* And the grunts? *Fuck the grunts.*

The way it goes.

Look, I've said this before: I'm not political, nor do I believe in any form of communism and/or socialism. I believe in *Democracy, the Constitution. Freedom of speech, Second Amendment; all that.* Yes. *Forever and a day.* That does not make me some kind of political type. No, sir. I don't belong to any party. **None. Zip. Zero.** I'm a member of *My Party, the Chance "Cash" Register Party.* How's that?

Free enterprise is fine. But if you're going to give the supers a bonus for working us and pushing us like dogs, how about a safer workplace? How about treating the grunts more like human beings as opposed to animals?—Which is what goes on here. People are underpaid. People, who risk life and limb are way underpaid, fuckers! Fingers get crushed, torsos get smashed flatter than an IHOP flapjack—for pennies. Crumbs. It's effing heartless.

Articulate some of this to a super? Are you kidding? The rookie supers are just as nervous and scared as the rest of us. And the ones who have decades in? Hell, they're part of the problem. Used to it. Paid their dues, you imagine, and feel like they've earned their right to dictate and shove and push around. *Brainwashed lemmings.* The Bonus is the perpetual carrot being *dangled* in front of their eyes.

I've had similar gigs before, warehouse shipping gigs before; had all sorts of dead-end effing jobs. But this one, this goddamn situation has got to be one of the worst. I equate it (almost) to being in the 'Nam jungle burning leeches off your nutsack, sidestepping snakes and dodging bullets. You die in both places: there and here. For what? Only difference being we're not being shot at in this jungle of machinery, and the booby-traps are easier to spot—at times. Not always; *at times*. And there's no risk of being captured and tortured and beaten and starved. *Hell; misery is misery, though, isn't it?*

If not for having this ability to write it down, as I see it, I'd have picked up a piece and blown my brains out a long time ago. What was it that Bukowski said? ***First thing writing must do is save your own ass.***

Exactly.

And so today I walked over to the foreman, 6ft-3 Rodrigo, aka *Doughboy*, who actually happens to be a pretty good guy—for a foreman. You sense it underneath the poker-face exterior. Rodrigo is Tohono O'Odham Indian, who also happens to speak Spanish. He's standing outside the restrooms dropping coins into the Coke machine.

The rat-fink is also there: Yago. Standing on the other side of him. ***Ratting somebody out***, no doubt. This was what he was best at. Ran around eavesdropping/watching to see who was not working as fast as they were supposed to. He was also in and out of the john, timing how long it took you to take a dump, insane BS like that. It was bughouse loony. And if you were in there smoking, you got snitched on by the rat, the 45-year-old-punk with skin like cracked-and-weathered brown shoe leather.

So what that he's here, because I need to talk to Rodrigo. I ask him in a respectful/quiet tone:

"Does that mean I have to stay with the yeller?"

"*What yeller? Who's a yeller?*" he says.

I don't get it. He's got to be putting me on. Everyone knows Hung yells, always.

"I never hear any yelling when I'm over there," says Rodrigo, the foreman.

Give me a break, Doughboy, I feel like saying, but don't.

"That's what that beef was about the other day—the yelling."

“I can’t move you until we get caught up.”

And the rat-faced fink is standing on the other side of Rodrigo, the fink named *Yago*. The snitch. Average height, thin. Pushing 50. Fink had the face of a fink. *Shifty-eyed; sunken cheeks*. Eyes and ears always on the alert for the latest image and/or bit of gossip he might absorb and run to management with, especially Rodrigo.

Yago lived to rat his co-workers out and stab people in the back in order to kiss-up to Doughboy. Rat-fink is not a foreman himself, but acts like one. He goes around looking for anything he might be able to run to Rodrigo with and score a few *browny points*. Son of a bitch reminded you of a *shit-house rodent*.

So the snitch, still on the far side of Doughboy, turns away when he notices me glance at him (to let him know that I know what he’s about), and that he’s (*clearly*) eavesdropping—and I don’t give a damn. I know it’ll get back to Hung, but I don’t care at this point. I’d like to get away from the little yellor/pissant/crybaby who ran to Rodrigo about the “incident” right away (when there hadn’t been any need for it).

So I’m stuck now. Stuck working with the little punk. The biggest irony of all? I was there as a young kid of 19 scared shitless, there in the jungle fighting to keep peeps like Hung and Dong and Tin and Ping and their mothers and daughters and sisters from being overtaken by the ruthless North, Uncle Ho and his determined Commie murderous slime from slaughtering them like hogs in a slaughterhouse. And that’s what happened once we pulled out; exactly what took place. And then there was what Pol Pot and his butchers did to so many in Cambodia. Eliminated anyone with a brain, the educated. Anyone with a degree was his enemy. Once they wiped out the intellectuals, what were they left with to run the country?

What makes sense? We’re for Democracy. Me, my Vietnamese co-workers—but you look at the crap we put one another through. And it isn’t just them vs. me; look at what took place in Ireland for decades, in Bosnia and the mindless killing there: Serb vs. Croatian, with the Bosnians caught in the middle and paying a far-greater price than either of their oppressors; and then all the crazy waste of life among the tribes in Africa—for years and years.

Hell. Humans. It never changes. We're rough on each other. Look at the years of abuse my siblings and I endured with that brutal bully of a father we had. He provided, yes; he did not chase whores, stayed out of bars; did not do drugs, was not a drinker—but he beat his kids. *The unenlightened bully beat his kids.*

Didn't matter if you were male or female, he'd backhand you over nothing, man. Literally over nothing. If there happened to be a bit of dust in a corner, a piece of paper or what appeared to be a crumb on the living room carpet, or say you dropped a glass while washing it, whatever, he'd walk over: *and wham!* That hard backhand nearly knocked you off your feet.

He would usually come home exhausted and pissed. Building cabinets kicked his ass, I imagine, and he had to take it out on someone. Couldn't very well hit the wife, because she would have walked. Who was left? The kids. Or else if she complained about one of us about anything, didn't matter, the belt came off and the knuckle-dragger would give you a beating. This was how and why I got into weightlifting, so I'd be able to fight back—and eventually did. But I digress.

The other Vietnamese guy isn't as bad, but hardly someone to trust. Not many can be trusted. Weasel-eyed, sneaky. Backstabbers. Is it any wonder I have made every effort to these many years to stay out of places like this? Any wonder at all? This is the kind of *mind-fuck* I have stayed clear of most of my life. ***And now I'm stuck.*** For the time being. ***Trapped.***

CHAPTER 106

Well, the day went quietly. Hung says nothing to me, and I say nothing to him. If I need info about a certain order I speak with Dong. Which is fine by me. Others have expressed same feelings regarding the rooster. He's a quirky little cocksucker. Unpredictable.

For months he had been telling me if the support bars are too long that makes for a bad welding job, a difficult weld. When I point out that support bars cut by the day shift were, in fact, too long, and that I could have easily trimmed them, he goes against me out of spite, having a bad day and all, on the rag, so he takes it out on others, not unlike my brother's chick. I'm so sick of little turds like this. Why can't adults act like adults and keep their problems to themselves?

That's a rhetorical question, isn't it?

I've got a month to go before I am off "*probation*," before I can apply for a change of position/or day shift even. Toward the end of the shift I sweep up the floor, as I always do, while Hung and Dong are off somewhere sneaking smokes. By the time they return I am done.

Something wrong with this picture. Once a month we have these meetings in the break room where Rodrigo makes it a point to discuss "housekeeping."

"There's always work to do. Always be doing something: be it working at your table on a unit or be it housekeeping. If you're done with your area, help clean the area next to you."

And so how is it that these clowns I work with: Hung and Dong, get away not doing any of the housekeeping?

You tell me.

They've been here fourteen-years, you see, and so they don't have to lift a broom. The other thing is they are *welders* and *needed*, and *you're not*.

At 4:15 the buzzer sounds and we clock out. I carry my backpack outside to where I have my bicycle chained. Unlock it, hop on and ride. Freedom, a bit of freedom for the time being. Until Monday anyway (which rolls around way too quickly). I ride east on Grant.

At the corner of Campbell and Grant I stop in at the large used bookstore called Bookman's. It's packed in there. Lots of people. Buying used books and CDs/computer games. I walk around a bit, do a bit of browsing. Some woman who works there tells me I need to check in my pack. I tell her I was leaving anyway. And do. Ain't buying a thing for a while. Got rent and other bills that come first, that and the printing of the cab book.

CHAPTER 107

The weekend over for me already. Where did it go? What weekend? *Saturday night and Sunday.* Call that a weekend? Sat. night having been spent catching up on much needed rest. And then it takes a while to get into the groove of writing, to get into the book, the dynamics—and it's not easy with the clock on the wall in the living room ticking and you realize time is slipping away. This is what I am up against with this goddamn factory job that I am stuck in/trapped with the loonies and not able to break the shackles.

And tomorrow again it'll be time to return to the madness/the nightmare, and while you're there hammering and listening to the maddening Vietnamese voices chattering their usual senseless crap, and laughing their fake laughs and chattering some more . . . goddamn, save me. I have paid dues, plenty—all my life. Get me out of this hell.

When and how do I find the time to do real work, MY WORK, not the factory's and the fat asshole millionaires who own the plant? When? WHEN DO I GET TO FINISH POLISHING MY TAXI MS? WHEN?

It's the way it's always been: There is no let up. Never/ever. You deal with the pressure, the bullshit, nine hours (or more) of it and then must ride the bicycle for close to an hour at after 1:00 a.m. in the morning and attempt to write a bit, work on the collection . . . but you are only human and simply too exhausted.

You will attempt to rise very early the very next day and make another effort. You will. YOU MUST. Finish it. Send it back to the typesetter. Get this damned thing finished. Have it proofed and then it's on to the graphic artist and the printer.

CHAPTER 108

The month of January about over.

Seven minutes to 1:00 p.m. Just could not, could not get up until about 11 this morning. Too exhausted from (nine hours of hammering) the night before. *Nine steady hours of nothing but hammering.* That's what my job consists of at the plant. They let us out at 1:15 a.m., then I've got to walk outside and tinker with the damn bicycle chain, unlock it and then wrap it tightly around the seat post. Maybe takes me about four/five minutes. And then I ride like a madman (if I can, if the energy is there). For about a quarter of a mile there is a gravel shoulder I've got to stay on in order to reach Grant Rd; so it's a wobbly proposition, but you do what you can. I've got that small light on the handlebar, and one blinking red light in back below the seat. I use them both sparingly (to save the batteries—and the other reason being if people in cars, fools in cars don't notice you they usually leave you alone, and by that I mean they don't scream/shout at the top of their lungs as they drive past, scaring the bejesus out of you).

Once I get to Grant I stay on it, taking it east. I stay out of the street, too dangerous. I keep on the dirt sidewalks. Sometimes they're gravel, other times paved. But I keep on the sidewalk and do my best. It's quiet out here this late at night. Not much open, save for Fry's supermarket, some gas stations. (Since Circle K accepts checks) now and then I will pull into one and pick up some milk/chips/bean dip/Danish, stuff it in the backpack and continue on. But it's a long haul, my friend, for this middle-aged never-was, for this blue-collar working stiff who has been paying dues forever.

And while you're biking it this way in the nippy night, by yourself, alone, you and your thoughts, so much goes through your mind: your life, your entire life, from childhood on, all of it—the dreams you once had, the bad choices you made, things not having gone right at all. You think about so much . . . all the

while realizing the clock is ticking and you're approaching the end of the line . . . *AND STILL PAYING DUES, MORE DUES, UNTIL THEY DROP YOU INTO THAT BOTTOMLESS PIT.* Dues, at five-dollars-and-ninety-five-cents per hour at the plant.

They sure know how to squeeze the poor bastards. They know how to get the most out of us. And why does it go on? How much wealth is enough? How much do they need (before they start acting like human beings), and let us up for air?

These are rhetorical queries (that you cannot help but keep asking). Greed has been around since forever—and will go on. Now they want us to work *nine hours* on Saturday. *Nine hours.* “Inventory.” They’ve got the reasons/excuses. “*Inventory.*” Nine hours this coming Saturday. (My only time/my only chance to focus on my anthology manuscript: Saturday evening and Sunday.) But that’s shot.

You think about these things as you’re pedaling, pedaling, wishing you lived closer, just a little closer. It’s late and you’re too tired to have to go through this every night. Finally, at last, you reach Campbell, the half-way mark. It makes you feel good inside. I’m halfway home. Bookman’s is there, the used bookstore. Closed and quiet. You glance at the hardbacks in the window. Maybe one day soon, real soon, yours will be on the shelf. Maybe . . . could be . . . if you can only find the time to wrap up these revisions. Been revising the book since 1990. It goes on and on. Just trying to make it better. Want to do the best I can (for peeps who like books). You owe it to them. People work hard for their money, some people anyway, most people (like yourself).

You’ve got to remember to keep your eyes peeled to the ground in front of you, avoid broken glass/nails/sharp rocks/anything that might damage your tires. The bike is your *lifeline/bloodline*—without which you would not be able to function, to live. You ride it everywhere: post office/supermarket/pharmacy/laundromat/work. You throw a pack over your shoulder and ride/make the runs/place items inside the backpack and ride it on back home. Your lifeline without which you would never make it. Watch the ground in front of you. Tucson streets are poorly lit, and some, like the ones in

my neighborhood, have no streetlights at all. It's *pitch-black* and nearly impossible to see anything.

I'm sweating. The ski jacket has kept me warm. No matter how chilly it is outside, all that work on the bike, the pedaling keeps you warm; you work up a sweat.

Check the mail box. Grocery store flyers/furniture store ads. Junk mail. You open the gate, and the dog is there: frantic/excited to see you. But you shush her so's not to wake your neighbors. Made it. Here. At last.

What a life. And without fail, you wonder how it was that you pulled it off, such a great distance, after spending a long shift on your feet hammering away. You just want to forget: the night/the job, hoping by doing so it won't be there tomorrow, that it will go away, but you know it won't. It'll be there tomorrow again. You'll have to go through it all over again. But that's tomorrow. Tomorrow.

You unlock your glass patio door, slide it open. Pet the poor animal. Bring out the bag of dog food, pour some in her tray. You take the bike inside, close the door, slump your tired body in a chair and rest. Just rest.

This is that next day. It is 1:20 p.m. Time to start thinking about doing it again, all over again. *One more time*. Time to get into the work clothes, time to prepare the peanut butter sandwich you will be taking to work. Time to get into those steel toe work boots. Shortly it will be time to sling that pack over your shoulder, climb up on the K-Mart Caddy and ride it on down toward Flowing Wells . . . for another night of the same.

CHAPTER 109

Work getting impossible to take. I function in a perpetual state of numbness. They had me hammering away again (different size blades through various support bars). The S and Z bars are easy, it's the other that's a bitch.

So am into it for about an hour, hammering, my mind on other things, when suddenly the new foreman (his turf is in the back, warehouse) sticks his mug in my face, shoves a hand at me. Am forced to shake. Says they need me to load semi trailers. And walks away. This is a real hard-nose type (from back east somewhere). Jersey/New York, who knows? Word is out on the guy: he's a real asshole. Shooting for brownie points. Various supervisors have been fired (Tungston, after only six months, Lupo, etc.), so I doubt this guy will even last three months.

And I'm *boiling* inside. I cringe as I grab my backpack, jacket, and take my time walking to the rear of the plant. I hate what I am about to do. *I hate loading truck trailers.* Not only is the light inefficient inside these things, but the boxes are heavy and have a tendency to fall over (from up top) and land on your head. It's a bitch of a task. *I ABHORE IT* (more than I can describe).

I'm back there loading a trailer with two other grunts: a welder (Mexican, an all right sort: skinny/crewcut/ jet black hair; couple of inches taller than me), and a Jamaican, or African; not sure where the black dude is from.

The forklift drivers are maniacs. They drive like lunatics: rushing/pushing pallets of crates/backing out, like someone on speed. And there's laughter, painfully loud laughter 9by them, at how obviously overwhelming they are making the task for us) that makes it *worse* for me. ***What am I doing here?*** When does the *DUES PAYING END? DOES IT EVER?* Why am I stuck in here with these clowns? Like I said, the Mexican was all right, a quiet type, but I could have done without the rest.

We're going at it, loading the stuff up. And then some boxes start tumbling down on us. I get rapped on the left side/ear. I check to see if my protective glasses are okay. They are. And then a short while later a fairly large box lands against, or should I say bounces off the black guy's forehead, nearly knocking his protective goggles off. He removes them to check for damage. No damage.

At about 7:30 am sent back to my regular post. I'm relieved, more than relieved. The hammering is hard work, hard on the arm, but it's my area (that I'm used to). I'd rather not be here period, but. . . .

Lunch consists of two peanut butter sandwiches washed down with an RC. I have some raisins. Try to read the paper. Thirty minutes is all we get for lunch. At 8:30 lunch is over. Back to work. The atmosphere with the Vietnamese guys there is a bit better. We're all making the effort to get along. They might have taken a different view of me upon discovering that I had spent time in their country.

And then at about 9:00 the hard-nosed foreman makes another appearance. The son of a bitch wants me back there again loading trailers. I can either blow up or smile. I happen to smile.

What am I doing here? I should be at home finishing the re-write on the cab anthology . . . I should be working on stuff that matters to me . . . and not wasting away in this dungeon.

I make the slow walk once again to the back. Do I have any choice? Not if I want to publish this book. I need the money to get the book done, to make rent.

I'm back there again with the same two guys. The geniuses who run the show back here like to see the trailers filled to the brim; to the top, baby. And since no one here is that tall, we end up **throwing/tossing/hurling** boxes up there. Trouble is some of the boxes don't want to stay and thus come tumbling right back down (and if you're not careful, will land right on your noggin). And that's exactly what happened: one of the boxes came tumbling back and bounces off the top of my head. That was the last straw for me. I couldn't take it. I'd had enough, *MORE THAN ENOUGH*, and exploded:

“GODDAMN, I HATE THIS MOTHER-FUCKING PLACE!” I shouted.
“FUCKING SHIT-HOLE!”

I think the Mexican jumped. The black guy muttered something about: “Ohh no. . . .” Then shut-up real quick. I didn’t give a damn who heard me. *Black-and-blue* is what I was going to end up looking like and paid peanuts for it. ***Exploitation. This was it. The rich shafting the poor. When would it end? ONLY WHEN WE STOPPED LETTING THEM DO IT TO US.***

The black guy went to work somewhere else. Good, far as I was concerned. I’d heard him *bad-mouthing* me earlier. Didn’t know me from Adam, but there he was saying shit about me to the Mexican. You can always tell a low-class a-hole simply by how quick he/she is to badmouth somebody they don’t even know.

We’d unloaded a bunch of pallets, one after the other, and now there was a lull and me and the Mexican were leaning against the wall of the trailer to rest up a bit. He mention** (trouble with letter N; sticks); anyway, he mentioned that the *fumes* caused by the welding guns in his area were causing people to cough up *phlegm*, maybe something else mixed-in there, *maybe blood*, not quite sure, due to lack of ventilation. They were going to get a bunch of signatures together and send it to OSHA in Phoenix.

“*Damn right,*” I said to him. “*Gotta do something. The company doesn’t give squat about us. All they care about is making their millions.*” Low-wage paying shit-hole is exactly right. “***We’re treated like slaves here,***” I said.

He couldn’t agree more. Arizona is a slave state. On top of that, we have to put up with a brown-nose a-hole like this new foreman.

At about midnight we’re sent back. I do some more hammering for an hour or so in my area, then it’s time to sweep up/clean up. Time to punch out, go home. Only home is an hour away on that bicycle of mine.

I climb on the bike and begin the pedaling phase, ‘cause I got no other choice. It’s slow-going at first, feet and legs already tired from having spent nine hours on my feet—but now if I want to get home I have to keep pedaling. I take it slow, the only way I can go. Easy. Can’t help but go over/recall, all those

years, so many years of living like this, of this kind of non-existence. What a life. Biking it home after working my ass off for The Man. So many years of this kind of fucked life.

A body would be better off dead. Somehow, somehow, I make it to Tucson Blvd. I take my bike inside the Circle K market, pick up a few things: ice cream/milk/Danish/potato chips/bean dip. Write a check for it, and make it on home.

CHAPTER 110

Sunday night.

Struggling (against time, as usual) to finish this (one page and a half) poem about Christine that has turned into eleven or 12 pages. So help me. The damned thing grew. Not entirely recently (spent well over a month on it a few months back, prior to starting at the plant, when there was time to sit down and write). Yes, it's long—but I'm proud of it, I like it—and will leave the new version in, if only I could complete it. Then off to the typesetter. Then I wait for her bill to appear in the PO box.

Was so exhausted from having put in eight hours at the plant Sat. (inventory; everything, all rails, etc., had to be taken down off the shelves and taken to scales and weighed). These loads, on average, were five-hundred-pounds each. Talk about back-breaking work. Tried it their way for a while. Then thought: To hell with that. Am guesstimating, and did. But then, fearing I'd get busted, went back to what I was doing before: loading shit onto the cart and pushing said cart down to where the scale was *in the floor* (yes, part of the floor itself) and is about five-feet by five-feet, etc.

I was half-finished with my workload—when someone pointed out ***the forklift operator had a scale on his forklift***. SHIT! WHAT SHIT.

Doing it *that* way was a lot easier! Way easier. All you had to do was load up the cart, push it out into the aisle and the forklift driver would shove the fork under it, lift the cart an inch or two off the floor, and read off the digits on his scale inside the cab. Easy. And then I said the hell with all that and went back to doing guesstimates like before to finish up. Damn right. I wasn't about to weigh everything.

Either way, it was a bitch of a day, the work and the new super getting his nose in everybody's ass. Dude wears these large glasses with an orange frame, something like the type Elton John is known to wear, and so peeps started

calling the new super “Elton.” Made as much sense as anything else. Only this guy was tall; not pudgy at all. This was our one chance, though, Hung’s and mine, to clean out all the crap under the steel table. We pulled the pallets out and there was a whole bunch of crap down there: pieces of bars and blades, dirt and dust. I get that crud out with the broom and am doing what I can to separate the dirt, what’s biodegradable from the metals and Elton, wise-ass Elton says:

“Hey, what are you doing?”

I explain it to him; and his crony (another a-hole super) and he laugh. Elton says:

“No, no; that’s a waste of time. Dump it all in the trash. Once it hits the floor it’s garbage.”

I say nothing. Don’t care for it, but I say nothing. Do as I’m told. I look up, see that the idiots are gone and I can’t help but curse loud enough for others to hear:

“It’s stupid people like that who are destroying the planet,” or some such. Everyone else not saying a thing; their heads are down, busy working/too scared to say anything and risk losing their precious low-wage job.

So Hung sees that the middle pallet (that was under the table, is too shoddy to be put back there), finds another pallet. Only it does not fit. Too wide. He tries cutting it on the electric grinder—that causes lots of smoke. You see, this thing is for steel, *metal only*, not cutting wood. Asshole Elton runs over/makes a big fuss. Man’s got to stick his nose in everything.

“This is not for wood. Metal only. Only metal, remember that.”

Hung, the Vietnamese guy, nods quietly, goes about his business. Elton disappears to bother somebody else. Man, this guy is hated by everyone. Where in the hell did he come from? Somebody said he was Mormon. Couldn’t be. I’d never known Mormons to be this obnoxious.

We still need to trim the pallet. I take it outside, by the maintenance guy’s door, ask for a saw and hammer. I saw off what I need to saw off and do my hammering, and freaking Elton *shows up again*, sticks his face in:

“What’s going on here? You guys building a piano?”

The maintenance guy, again, says nothing.

My comeback is: "Yeah."

Elton wants none of it. Too obnoxious/too nervous/a busybody, shaking his head.

"*We don't have time for this. We got inventory to finish.*"

He walks off. I drag the pallet back to my table. Hung slides it under there and makes it fit.

And so, after a day of that, yes, was damned tired, hit the sack about 9:00 p.m. and did not, DID NOT get up until 11:30. Half the Sunday shot. Now I've got to stuff four loads of dirty laundry in my gym bags. Weighs plenty. I've got one bag hanging from one side of my neck, one from the other—and I balance this on the bicycle as I ride on up to the laundromat on Pima, a three-mile haul from here. No fun, and no choice. Got to have clean clothes for work next week. I leave this stuff with the desk, hop back on the bike and ride it on over to Fry's supermarket on Grant, take a twenty from the ATM, buy detergent/fabric softener, and ride back.

It takes a couple of hours to get the laundry done. Four loads. Twice to dry. First cycle wasn't enough.

I ride back to the duplex. It's after 4 p.m. Close to 4:30, in fact. My Sunday finished. When am I supposed to get my writing done? I cook up some spaghetti, feed the dog (her bag empty; got to remember to buy dog food tomorrow). I do a bit of vacuuming, rearrange some of the boxes (Bro got what remained of his stuff out Sat., brought my own stuff down from storage).

I leaf through *The Neon Wilderness*, stories by Nelson Algren, then I attempt to get to work on this poem about the girl I'd had this crazy crush on in the 5th grade. Get some work done. Only it is 1:36 in the a.m. now . . . late . . . late . . . and Bobby Darin on the radio: *Dream Lover*. . . .

I like Bobby Darin's voice.

Died young, way too young.

And tomorrow is Monday . . . and you know what that means? Back to slavery . . . back to the plant and hard work and sweat (for peanuts).

CHAPTER 111

Weekend over for me. Had us working Saturday again. The geniuses had the maintenance guy, Walker, spray painting the ceiling. And they had me assist. Walker had on white coveralls, I had nothing. When I requested coveralls from Rodrigo, he and Walker were quick to shake their heads.

“You won’t need any. Besides, we’re out.”

Like I said: It’s a pathetic way to run a plant of this size (or any size, for that matter). I walk back there, to my original area where I first started with that screaming Ping woman. Walker has a bucket of paint on a pallet on the forklift, machine beside it, hose and spinner inside the paint can opening.

The sprayer in Walker’s hands is three yards long and he’s holding this thing up and spraying the ceiling with white primer. Paint all over; raining down like raindrops—***only it is not rain***. Walker is wearing an old ball cap/his eyeglasses/no mask. Doesn’t care. I’m different, I suppose, I give a damn about stuff like this. *I simply do not want my lungs lined with paint.*

I walk back to the foreman, ask for a paper mask (that will go over my nose and mouth). It does little good. Walker is spraying that paint, doesn’t give a shit. Not a care in the world.

Says to me: “When I wear the mask it fogs up my glasses.”

“You don’t care about the paint getting inside your lungs?”

He shrugs. “Only got one left. Spleen’s gone, a third of my intestines.”

“Yeah? How’d that happen?”

“I was in a prop plane crash in South America while working for the CIA.”

And we keep painting. One Vietnamese woman comes close to fainting, another lady starts hollering (rightly so). Goes up to Walker. Gives him a piece of her mind. At this point we had been painting for close to *four hours*.

Walker lays down the spray gun. He’s got a door to repair. And it’s my job to clean up, sweep the dry paint (flecks, some of it, some blotches from the

leaky spray gun), mop the floor. It's a cement floor. I am covered in paint: spots, white spots all over: *hair/shirt/shoes*. The company just doesn't give a damn. Somebody needs to call OSHA in Phoenix and complain about this. It's too much. No real masks, no coveralls (or anything regarding genuine protection).

This spray painting should not be going on during working hours, not while people are here. The other shop foreman, Doris, who's been here at the company for about three decades, agrees readily. Shows me a folder that had been sitting next to her computer desk and the paint film on it that had accumulated since Walker had begun the spraying that Saturday morning.

Alas, 4:15 rolls around. Time to go home, time for the poor bastard slaves to leave the dungeon and get on home and a bit of freedom at last.

I get on that bicycle of mine, that black K-Mart bike and pedal slowly on out of there, south on Flowing Wells Rd., to Grant, and then east on Grant. No energy, no gusto. All gone, this 46-year old factory-hand running on empty these days. It is dark/overcast this afternoon, windy, but am sweating inside my blue ski jacket (due to the pedaling). My legs ache. They always do.

I continue on slowly, and then hear someone from across the street at the Harley-Davidson motorcycle shop parking lot, a woman/cycle mama, laughing, saying something to her male companion about how tough I am having it on the bicycle. She yells, good-naturedly: "KEEP THE FAITH, BABY!"

I don't turn/don't even look, keep on going slowly up Grant, staying on the oftentimes dirt/sometimes gravel sidewalk. It is a slower pace than is usual for me. Can't be helped. Haven't got the Go-Power lately. I do what I can (in keeping at least a steady, if not quicker pace) in hopes of beating out the impending storm.

Each and every revolution of the sprocket is a task, a job, ordeal. The pain is in the thighs mainly. Breathing heavily; no way around it. Keep going. Get home. The dog (you inherited) waiting to be fed. And you'll be able to plop down in the chair and rest. Rest.

I make it to the purple gate at last. Get inside the yard. The dog is about to get frantic. I know she is happy to see me, but it is no fun. Too exhausted at

this point.

I unlock the glass door to the duplex, go in. I grab the bag of Kibbles 'n Bits, pour enough in her red food dish and watch her go at it in a nearly maniacal way. I'm inside the apartment. Glass door closed. No sooner do I have the jacket off, the dirty/paint-covered work boots/pants/shirt, and drop into the comfortable chair in the middle of the living room, does it start pouring. And hard.

Made it through (once again). Got through another torturous day at the slave dungeon. How much longer? How much more of this can I take? How many more months? Weeks? Days?

My probationary period ends March 7th of this year. It's Feb. 16th presently. *Will I make it? Will I last? Will I?* (There awaits for me either a 25 or 28-cent raise. How magnanimous of them.) And if I don't, how does the book get published?

CHAPTER 112

Heavy storm all day. Did some xeroxing of scripts at Kinko's on Speedway, west of here. Some of the scripts are porn and am planning to take to a porn video company here in town. It did not start to rain until I got back from doing that, and then I could hear it hitting the roof of the duplex. What now? You could say a bit of dread swept through me. I was going to have to ride the bicycle in the rain down to the slavers' plant. Did it bother me? A bit, you might say—a bit. I've got that yellow slicker all right—but you know, it's still a bitch any way you cut it.

But first I felt on the hungry side, none of that beef stew left (that I pick up a large can of at the Circle K for \$2.50 each), so I look in the fridge. Quart of milk left/wheat bread/Wonder bread (the worst/weakest/poorest excuse for bread). I scarf down three mayo sandwiches, washed down with moo juice. Get dressed, get ready for the long, *LONNNNGGG* bike ride. Get into the yellow slicker, the work boots.

I carry the bike out, walk it to outside the purple gate, get on it—and ride, baby . . . just ride . . . through puddles and more puddles. Rain. Rain everywhere. I don't worry about any of me getting wet, except for the boots, socks. I stick to quiet side streets for most of the way, up until Park Avenue, get on Grant and take it west.

My work boots are wet. Wet. Socks inside them feel wet. Nothing to do, but keep on truckin'. *Get tough/be tough*. You're a tough loner, remember? Sure. That's me. On the down side of forty. I'll be 47 in a couple of months.

Tough guy?

Right.

I make it to the plant. It's coming down, hard and heavy. Chain the bike up. Go in. Slide the huge door open just enough to get inside the endless structure/prison/"salt mine," reach down for the protective glasses inside my backpack. See: they'll write you up for not having them on.

I punch in. It is quarter to 3. Walk in the back to the break room. Slowly, slowly get out of the slicker. The rubber pants are tough to get out of. I undo the work boots first, then slide the slicker pants off. Socks 65% wet. Boots 100% wet.

What a life; what a way to live. Fuck this. Fuck my nothing/miserable existence. The way I feel. No way around it, no beating around the bush. Sometimes I laugh at things, sometimes I just feel low; a deep funk sweeps over you and hangs in there.

Redneck walks in to drop coins in the soda machine, and says: "Mr. Bill gonna kick that fucker Saddam Hussein's ass."

I don't know the redneck and don't give a damn about what he's talking about. The fool can't string two sensible words together. Do I need to hear anything about Hussein? They should have eradicated the a-hole a long time ago. But you see, a little war is exactly what "Mr. Bill/Bubba" needs right now in order to divert attention away from Paula Jones/Monica Lewitski (or however you pronounce her last name).

Getting through the shift is a bitch. Slow and drudgery. Time dragging, DRAGGING. Salt mine. Slavers. They had me working in the back, away from my regular table. No orders, they said. Work in the back. A month ahead. We are. *So why then make Saturday mandatory?* Why mess with people who would love to have an entire weekend off? Why indeed? They don't care, that's why.

I assemble blades, make cores. Spot-weld for three hours. I hate it. Time drags on.

Finally, at last, the 1:15 a.m. buzzer! Still raining out there. I have to get back into the yellow slicker and ride it on home. Bike lane a puddle everywhere. I stay on the sidewalk (mud now for the most part). Sidewalk on Grant is 80% mud and/or gravel. No choice. Feels safer on the sidewalk. Front light goes out (and stays that way; weak, for the most part). Had just recently replaced batteries, but it does no good.

I'm huffing and puffing, breathing heavily, trying to make it on back to the one-bedroom. This pedaling, after working *nine hours*, is exhausting (it would be at any time, but especially after having worked a long shift like that).

I remember to stop in at the Circle K at Tucson Blvd., buy provisions. Make it on home. Feed the dog. Have a boloney sandwich with mayo and then sit down to the typer.

CHAPTER 113

Fri. 2:15 a.m. Just rolled in. Fed Dog. Another arduous, and I mean ARDUOUS night at the high-tech sweatshop (and that's exactly what the plant is). SWEATSHOP.

Got a bad blister on my ass from all that biking, and I mean right on the rectum. Can't win. They had me working the goddamn paint line all night. Unloading pallets and hanging air vent covers onto hooks, and some of these hooks are four- foot-long steel bars with a double-cross on them. How appropriate. We're being crucified for slightly above minimum wage. *Mothers*. And the line moves right along and you've got to keep up with it. Right there, some of the hooks (a foot above your head) and some of these air vent covers weigh *thirty-five/forty-pounds* (made for prisons and/or banks or both). The lighter ones weigh fifteen-pounds. Still heavy. Do two or three pallets of this, baby, and you feel it in your *shoulders/arms/back*. You sweat. It's work. Hard work. And they kept pushing those pallets in on us via forklifts all night long. No respite, no real and true respite. Two ten-minute breaks and a thirty-minute lunch hardly enough. Back of my neck aching.

Still no word from Grunt Press. Anything resembling a type of reprieve at this point would be greatly appreciated. Got to get the hell out of this plant run by money-grubbers with dollar signs for eyeballs.

CHAPTER 114

Six months of slave-wage labor was enough, more than enough. I thought about those hardcore screenplays again (that I had put together a few years back while driving a cab in LA) and wondered if that could be the answer. Maybe I could sell them to someone, somewhere. Desperately looking for relief/respice, a way out of the pit that was the plant. Although I'd been a fan of porn for years, I was not interested in being part of that scene, but if I could sell a script, better yet, be allowed to direct or videotape smut for a living I was willing.

I found myself in a porn video store on Stone, leafing through my favorite skin mags: *Stacked* and *Breeders/Big Butt/Juggs*, some others. Then to the left, on a separate rack, noticed the adult entertainment directory: *The Porn Biz. TPB*. Leafed through it. The index section in back of the publication is where they had quite a few of the adult video production companies listed. Most were in Southern California, the San Fernando Valley, it looked like, as I had known all along, having lived there for over two decades. There were listings for Northern California/Washington state/Oregon/San Diego/Florida/Illinois/Georgia, but most were in the Valley.

Why hadn't I attempted to sell the scripts while living in L.A.? Always kept hoping there might be another way, a better way to get my foot in the door, get some kind of break. There was also the accepted fact that rip-offs were common, as I'd had more than one idea, (non-porn) screenplay or two pilfered from me—and never bothered, knowing they weren't going to give me money for any of the porn scripts or even let me direct any of the material myself. But now, this was different. I was at wits' end. Pushing 50 and felt I'd paid too many dues for too many years not to give the porn scripts a go.

I also noticed a couple of the video companies were actually located here in Town. I paid for the *Breeders* and the directory, rode the bicycle home. After I'd

pounded off a couple of times to the spreads in *Breeders*, I went over the index in *TPB* once again.

I found yet a third adult distributor in the area. I decided I would make it to the nearest one on my way to the factory job the next day. I also decided I'd bring a video copy of that zero-budget slasher flick I'd written/directed and co-financed ten years back in Tinseltown with some friends I'd attended some crappy film school with in Hollywood in the early 70s.

No doubt about it, the deck is stacked against so many of us. If you don't have a rich daddy or mommy you are not going to get the same breaks, baby. Having been a Nam vet at the time, with access to the GI Bill, I thought I might get into something to do with filmmaking, something/anything, that would allow for a creative outlet. I'd been stuck in another dead-end situation at the time: painting apartments for thirty bucks a week. Yes, I'd had free room and board at this apartment complex in West Hollywood that I was assistant manager of, but thirty-beans a week was/is pathetic—by anyone's standards. I'd driven out from Chi-town in my Fiat lemon, was stranded, down to two dimes, when I came across the apt. gig in the paper. Had been grateful that I was taken on, etc., all that.

I was desperate to get away from the factory and the mandatory O/T that the Vietnamese workaholics were generally responsible for. I would ride my bicycle over to the porn production office and see about peddling my scripts. It wasn't raining hard, just drizzling enough to keep you nervous/on the lookout for out-of-control skidding cars.

I rode my bike up Oracle, north of Grant. Made it to the front entrance part of the building. Door had wrought iron bars over the glass, a NO SOLICITING sign, and a decal in a corner that warned that the place was protected by a security system. There was a furniture warehouse/retail outfit to the left, a tattoo parlor to the right.

I locked my bicycle to a rack in front of the furniture store, fished the splatter VHS from my pack, cleared my throat—this sort of thing always made me nervous—and walked to the door with the wrought iron bars. I rang the

bell. A broad appeared: heavy set and cross-eyed. The bifocals she wore were smudgy, the metal frame bent, and there was a hard to miss crack in a corner of the right lens. This was the thing I noticed about the beefy chick: dishwater stash above her upper lip, the cracked lens, and hair the color of overcooked cornmeal. What made it a shock to my system was the obvious touch of cruelty about the features.

She appeared to be in her early-30s. As I said: large boned/porker/with a baby face. That was the dichotomy. Some combination.

I'm not exactly sure what it was I asked her, if they were hiring behind the camera personnel, something to the effect, that I had screenplays I wanted to get to someone. Before I'd had a chance to get it all out, she'd been quick to counter with: "*No, we're not hiring.*"

It was the same type of crude behavior I'd experienced for over two decades in Southern California. This town was supposed to be better. All I could counter with was:

"So this is like LA."

"That's right."

Closed the door before I could say anything else. The demented-looking broad had shut that door in my face before I could actually convey some background info. Some bitches enjoyed being discourteous and rotten. This was the type. I'd just had the door slammed in my face by a cunt who resembled a cyclops.

CHAPTER 115

I stood there, undecided. What now? My last resort were these porn scenarios (that I felt were pretty damned decent for what they were). They had humor, a storyline, were sound structurally—and best of all, most important of all, were packed with scenes meant to entertain. They were also loaded with steaming/hardcore shagging. And this bitch—who did not know anything about me, hadn't even given me a chance to say anything—had shut me out.

Where else was there to go? High-tech sweatshop? The jabbering co-workers? Forced overtime? The aching legs and lower back, the blisters on my feet? I had to try again, ring the bell one more time. I would at least let it be known all the work that I'd done on this splatter film, that upon initial release had sold close to ten-thousand-units. Not bad for a movie put in the can for fourteen grand (the additional 7-k for sound-mixing and other things, notwithstanding), never mind that certain distribution entities had shafted us out of money. We'd made twenty-six-grand back, paid off investors—and there hadn't been anything left after that. I'd gotten evicted from my apartment on Burnside, dropped into a depression that added to an existing depression; ended up homeless. If a friend hadn't taken me in that's exactly what I'd been facing for a future: sleeping in some doorway somewhere or a bus bench.

What was I going to do here? I had this copy of the horror flick with me, and I had some literature on it: full-color flyer/favorable reviews (not excellent, but favorable, for the most part), as well as publicity in various genre publications. I couldn't bring myself to walk away without at least showing this to *someone in there*—even if it had to be the beast who'd just told me to get lost.

I took a deep breath. Rang the door bell again. The door flew open, only this time I was looking up at a pissed guy who towered over me. Stood 6'5", about my age. Worn mug. Baby face here as well, but worn, as though he'd been

around the block a few times: booze/drugs/whatnot. A gold loop dangled from the left ear. And for a big guy, the thing I noticed right off, were the small hands, the big belly. And, like I said, he was not happy at the fact I'd had the nerve to bother them again.

"*What is it?*"

This made me nervous. I stammered, holding the items up in my hands. Reiterated I was searching for behind the camera work in the adult video field, that I had written/directed and edited *Bloodsucking Geeks* a few years back. I held up the flyer and other materials. As pissed and bothered as he was at least he heard me out, let me speak without slamming the door on me. This boosted my confidence level somewhat. We talked a bit. It was brief. He looked at the video, nodded.

I explained I'd lived in LA for years and had to get away from the rat race. It was chit-chat. I wanted to give this guy some idea what I was about; that I was not a flake, not looking for a handout, but a legitimate job, a chance to show what I was capable of. He nodded.

"I understand. All the production work is done in LA. We wouldn't be needing anybody like that here."

I did the only thing left to do: thanked him. Door was closed. I stood there in the drizzling rain. Accepted it. That was that. You're stuck in the factory, amigo. More of the same torturous jive, for slightly above minimum wage. Welcome to my world. This is your life, Cash Register—and what a life it has been.

CHAPTER 116

I walked to where I had left my bicycle chained to the other building, proceeded to unlock it. Nothing to do but go on to the swing shift gig, the madhouse. It continued to drizzle. I had the rain gear on and the rain didn't matter; I ignored it, was too deep down dealing with the gloom, the deep gloom that there was no climbing out of.

I took a half dozen steps, didn't feel like getting on the bike and riding. Walking might help clear the head, might help to figure out/come up with other possibilities. There had to be a way out of the factory; there had to be something else I could do—but without wheels, real wheels, a car, job prospects were limited. Landing the factory gig had been tough enough.

Nothing changes. I'd traveled all this way from Los Angeles and nothing changed for me. Thirty years ago, fresh out of the army, had survived Nam, and recall going through the same thing: looking for some *nothing job* and couldn't even get that.

What was it? What the hell was it about me? Born jinxed? Had been forced to apply for food stamps for a few months, because I couldn't get anything. Effing Hollywood. The talent had been there . . . but there was no way to get a break. Others were getting their share of breaks, why couldn't I? Just a chance to show what I could do.

The horror flick had been the only shot I had going. I'd sold the cab, put what little money I had into the movie, raised the rest, found investors with the guy who ended up being line producer. *Geeks* was going to give me my shot, a chance at something, to become a working filmmaker; at 36, finally. This had happened during the video explosion in the mid-'80s. Video was new then and product was needed. Several of the guys I'd gone to that low-rent film school with and I decided horror was the way to go, a sure bet: movie going audiences never got enough of horror. And although I don't look down my nose at the genre (the way certain snobs find it convenient to do so), as certainly the

original *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and original *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Exorcist*, and a few others, were classics in the field, my motion picture tastes weren't limited to horror, as I felt there was more to flicks than *slice & dice* (and when it came to reading, other than true crime, I rarely got into horror).

Long story short: the horror had been behind the camera and not in front of it. It had been hard to take: friends you expected to be reasonable and supportive, instead end up being your worst foes and obstacles to make a dream happen and cause you to have a meltdown in front of cast and crew at one point. It was fucked, and the hurt lingered.

Lesson learned? Never ever enter into a project with people/associates you do not have the power and/or authority to ***fire/cut loose/let go*** should they cause trouble—***no matter what. Ever.***

And yet, even with all that, once the video hit stores, it racked up sales. The horror junkies went for it to the point the flick had developed a cult following. It was being collected and held in high regard, *weaknesses and all/shoestring-budget and all*. Those who appreciated the subject matter sensed the earnestness behind the effort and had reciprocated with their support.

And what did it ultimately gain me? I had stacks of screenplays and novels and free verse poetry I'd written—and was presently on my way to a factory job that was draining the very last bit of will to go on.

Demoralized? Plenty. Suicide was never far from my mind. At times like this the notion hovered closer than ever. *Do yourself in. You'll never get anywhere. Your life will never change.* You're like that sorry mook Sisyphus forever attempting to push a boulder up the effing hill—and not only not getting anywhere, but the damn thing was usually determined to roll back over me.

Like I said, I was resigned and had begun to walk away. That's when I hear the same door open. I didn't bother to turn my head. Felt bad enough. Didn't need to be browbeaten some more (on top of what I'd already experienced).

Okay; got the message, pal: am not needed. Fine. I could tell it was the six-foot-five giant walking up. Then I heard, (or thought I heard) him say something. *Was it to me?* I wasn't sure. Didn't bother to look up. Then he said something else:

"Listen, I'm sorry about earlier. Didn't mean to be rude. It's been a bad day."

I stopped. Turned this time. Nodded. Said it was okay. And clearly expected it to be the end of it. Then the guy shoved a business card at me. I looked at it. Primary name on there was Touhey Scheib. There was the image of a naked woman with large tits in dark silhouette, and below his name: **Rocks-Off Video, Inc.** There was printing directly below that: Seymour J. Schinitzky, President & CEO.

We walked north, crossing the furniture outlet parking lot. He said the video box looked impressive, that they might be looking for someone like me, only that he was not in any position to say exactly as he was in sales, but that either the boss or his daughter Renna would be better to talk to about that.

He asked if I had time and if I would walk with him to the daughter's office, where he could get me a more current business card and see if Renna was in, so that I could talk to her.

There was hope, a way out of the factory possibly; away from the hammering, the lifting and loading of heavy boxes, working the Komatsu monster and dealing with irritable types like Ray; the jabbering, hungry-for-overtime-toilers and harassing foremen.

The modest, Spanish style adobe house (to the left of the furniture facility) had been turned into a suite of offices. We entered. Renna was not in, her husband Noah was. Six-two, thin, with a gold earring dangling from one of the ears, prominent nose.

This character had a Julius Caesar type of cut: short, with bangs across the forehead. The very top of his 'do was the color of carrots, a bleached job, while the rest of the hair on his head was dark brown. I didn't understand these new hair styles and did not get why a grown man, and this guy appeared to be in his late-20s, would do something like this to his appearance. To each his own, as the saying goes. All I wanted was out of the factory.

Touhey introduced me to Renna's husband and some Hispanic kid named Flavio sitting there in the foyer in front of a computer screen. Noah stood over Flavio's shoulder, evidently taking editing pointers, as they went over color video footy of three partially-clad porn starlets with impressive hangers.

This place was small, three or four offices the size of your average walk-in closet and situated in the rear. Touhey went in his, picked up a fresh card from a box of new ones, handed it to me. Said I should come back and talk to Renna when she's in. I thanked him and left.

CHAPTER 117

It was on a Friday, a holiday, another forced work day at the plant that I took a chance that Renna might be in and stopped by her office. She was in there by herself. There was no one else around. My god, how nice it would be to work in a place like this, so quiet and civilized, holidays off; no noisy metal-crushing presses, no yelling co-workers, no noisy grinders and hissing spot-welding machines; no aching feet to worry about. No mandatory Saturdays. . . .

I knocked on the glass door. A tall blond in tight jeans walked up. About the same age as Noah. Not bad looking at all; in fact, attractive and pleasant. I could not help but notice the healthy backside on her. I could never not notice something like that. If a woman had hips she had me. I was a sucker for a great caboose. This caboose was pretty good, I thought.

As before, I had the VHS video in my hands, the other materials: color flyer/reviews/write-ups in various horror publications, all that. It wasn't much, my life didn't amount to much, but it was all I had to show for my close to half century existence on this screwy planet. This was it.

The way she extended her hand so that we could shake, and her welcoming nature and the effort she put forth to make me feel at ease and comfortable was greatly appreciated. I could work for someone like this, I thought, someone smart and sane, a creative type. I always found it so much easier to relate to creative types. She invited me to the inner sanctum, her private office, and to take a seat.

I sat in a chair across the desk from her. She saw how nervous I was: job hunting and having to "sell" myself never got any easier, no matter how many times I've had to go through this. I also had the screenplays in my hands. She looked at them, kept apologizing for the mess, that she had decided to come in on her day off and clean up a bit.

She was frank: “I don’t know much about screenplays. We have someone in LA who does our videos for us, in that he hires talent/directs/produces—but what I’d like to do, if it’s all right with you, is fax your scripts to him.”

I nodded.

“That would be fine.”

“Would you be able to leave them with me?”

Yeah; sure. Why not? I wasn’t being crowded at all. I didn’t see porn producers or anyone else coming after me, calling me night and day asking to read my stuff. And while all this was going on, I could not help but take in all the explicit hardcore flyers and various publications all around me: on the walls/on her desk/on various end-tables and shelves in back of her. It was everywhere: pussy/big tits/ass shots; hot bitches fellating massive members and/or engaged in intercourse.

Yes, this was the place for me. Absolutely. Exactly what I’d been praying for, to be in an environment like this. I noticed a wedding band on the woman’s finger, and thought: If she’s coming on to me I better let her know I don’t play around. That was definitely against how I lived my life. I didn’t want some half-crazed husband coming after me with a butcher knife, or worse. Am not sure why I thought she might be coming on, could have been all the porn all around and that we were discussing it.

“Oh, I don’t either,” she said.

“How does someone like you get into this line of work?”

She smiled. “Guess I’m just a pervert at heart, Cash.”

I had to laugh. Woman had personality. Charisma.

She mentioned they were in the process of putting together a hardcore magazine. I suggested maybe I could write for it. She explained that her father Sy had a friend already doing that.

She said: “A position in the warehouse just came up—it’s not the same, but if you’re interested you might want to think about it—but more importantly: one of our models will be in town to do a show at a local strip club, and should you be inclined, we’d like to hire you to video tape her act and maybe do an interview with her later. Soupy Sandwich (being her dad Sy’s porn biz alter ego) will be on hand to interview her. All you’d have to do is video tape it.”

I said I was interested, that I owned a Hi-8. Kept to myself that it might require some minor work, fuse or something; wasn't sure. I'd figure it out later.

"Think about what you'd like to be paid," she said. When she showed me their latest catalog I could feel my groin stir inside my trousers.

There they were: stills. Steaming hot images from hundreds of different videos: gorgeous babes with impressive hangers engaged in all sorts of heart-stopping carnal encounters.

Stuff was turning me on. Had my libido going ape-shit in purgatory. I could feel sweat forming across my brow. My scalp itched. It was too much. Cunt and shagging. And yet the way the woman went on about it so casually you'd think she was discussing her grocery list. Used to it. Nothing more. She was proud of their catalog.

"Do you have an extra copy?" I asked.

"Of course," she said. "Please take it."

This was too good to be true, a chance to work in smut with someone like this and that gentlemanly Touhey Scheib guy. Well, other than being put off by that rude broad's appearance, this was a far cry from the sheetmetal factory and the machinery din.

I mentioned being glad to be away from LA and that bunch; traffic/stress. She didn't care for LA, either.

"But we do spend time there, as most of our product is made in LA now. Most of the talent is there."

I nodded. I understood. Rose. We shook hands. It was agreed I would stop by the next day at the warehouse to pick up her video camera and batteries, and that Bernie, their warehouse manager, would be there to let me in.

She walked me to the door. Unlocked it to let me out. I thanked her again, and walked down the stoop to where I had my bicycle locked to the street sign. I heard her re-lock the door behind me.

I continued on to the job. But you know, I was walking on clouds. *Finally, at last: a break.* It looked like a break. I could breathe easier. *My god; a chance to do something creative. I didn't give a damn that it would be in porn. It didn't matter. Being around porn was a lot better than being around obnoxious bosses at the factory.*

That night I leafed through the catalog. Jacked it a few times and slept like a baby.

CHAPTER 118

Two weeks pass. Renna calls me on a Friday.

“Haven’t had a chance to read your manuscripts yet.” She goes on. She speaks fast. Not an unlikable woman. “Are you familiar with Lana Lush?”

Who wasn’t? Lana sucked pipe and ate muff in her share of porn flicks. Sported huge, incredibly huge cantaloup implants and had appeared on tv talk shows and was a pricey exotic dancer. Some of the vids that she was in were distributed by Renna’s father/boss and CEO of Rocks-Off Video, Sy Schinitzky, aka Soupy Sandwich.

I said I was familiar with Lana Lush.

“Well, she’s in town to do a series of shows at Tempest House on Craycroft Boulevard. What we’d like to do is have you tape a couple of her shows either today or tomorrow night. We’re in the process of getting the okay from the club. It’s being set up. Lana will be expecting you. We’d like you to get as much footage as possible. Sy will also be there to do an interview with her.”

She asked if I had access to a video camera. I did, but it was on the fritz. I wasn’t sure what the issue was with the camera. I told her I would take it up to the shop today and find out.

I said: “It’s a very good Sony.”

She added: “What I’d also like for you to do, like I mentioned before, is think about what you’d like to be paid for your expertise.”

I said I believed them to be fair people and would let them decide that one. And I had based it on the 5-Gs they had paid some hick recently after he’d sent in video footage of this heavy, homely, truly unappealing heifer with such enormous hangers that they weighed *seventeen-pounds each*. The amount given to the man as compensation for the footage had been pointed out to me by Renna that day we met and spoke in her office.

She had treated me with every courtesy, explained what their company Rocks-Off Video was about: mainly big tops, hardcore sex.

She added: "As far as your job is concerned, I don't want you to get in trouble over this. On second thought, I'll let you worry about that; I'm not going to be concerned. It's up to you."

We agreed to iron out the details later in the day.

CHAPTER 119

I get on my K-Mart bike. Take it east on Speedway, south side of the street. Spot a barber shop. No one inside but a lone barber sweeping the floor. I stop the bike, walk up to the glass door and poke my head in.

“Will you take a check?”

“Yeah,” he says.

“Okay to bring my bike in?”

“No problem.”

I seat myself in one of two chairs. Just want/need a quiet haircut. Not too much chatter. Although the guy is not a loud type, he starts to talk/ask questions/probe. So now, so's not to appear rude I have to answer his questions, all that. And usually some of this stuff is personal, too personal to be discussed with a perfect stranger. What business is it of his why me and my ex split? And how long ago? And what do I do for a living? This was why I left LA. Lay off it, pal. Lay off.

I try to stay quiet and so is he for a while, then another question. What gives? I can't be rude, find it difficult to be rude (unless am pushed beyond my limit). I answer his questions. Just to be courteous, and simply because this man I do not know has a sharp blade one inch from my neck. You never know. Things can happen. Anything does and can happen.

I notice a couple of framed photos of a gleaming Harley on the wall in front of us. Ask him about that. I'm doing what I can to be pleasant. I want to divert the questions, the focus away from me. Said he owned it once. Not anymore, since his divorce. Wife left him for a black man.

“Know what they say,” he adds; and I see this one coming a mile off: “once you go black, you never go back.”

Which, of course, is total bull. I wish the mustache would just shut the hell up. I don't know the man or his ex-wife or her black beau. It doesn't concern

me. If he were a friend, someone I knew, it would be different. I give a damn about people I consider friends. But this is jive/verbal masturbation.

Why not just shut the hell up, man, I feel like telling him. I just want a haircut; that's why I stepped in. Why can't barbers behave the way I behaved for years in my cab? If my fares wished to be left alone, I left them alone—and gladly so, because I preferred it that way. I rarely liked talking anyway, unless it was something/someone interesting, which was rarer than discovering a ruby in the city dump.

He wants to make sure I get the type of haircut I want. Close around the ears, short on top, or at least just long enough so I can comb it back and it doesn't stick out. He'd had his cut so short back in October that it still remained looking like a crewcut even now in February. *Man, spare me . . . please. Cut my hair and let me get on with my life.*

He's got two kids. Sons. Little-Leaguers. Do I have a single sister? Yeah. Two. But they live in the Midwest and got too many problems. The other one, the third sister, is married.

He grins. Says: "Nobody wants to fix me up."

I said: "The single ones are troubled. I don't even like being around them."

"In that case . . . I don't need that. No."

How long ago did I split from my ex, he wants to know.

"Almost twenty years ago."

"Ever talk to her since then?"

"No. Haven't wanted to."

"You're a tough guy," he says.

Not really, but he isn't going to get it. I'm not going to go into it, either.

"Seeing somebody now?" he wants to know.

Thought of Penny. Told him I'd met someone two months back, but because she was much younger than me I'd had second thoughts. It scared me.

"How young is too young?" he asked.

I smiled. Wouldn't say. Girl was in high school, and nobody else's business. Certainly not his. He insisted. Had to know. I refused to tell him. I didn't even know myself. But I had walked away from it, without having had a single date with her. How old? Seventeen? Eighteen? I couldn't say. All I knew was that

she had fallen for me and that I'd stepped out of the picture to make it possible for her to find someone closer to her age eventually.

Finally he was done. I thanked him. Pulled out a check. Cut was \$9. I wrote it out for \$13. That's the way I am. I believe in basic decency, fairness; but just don't talk me to death, because there is no need for it—BECAUSE YOU'LL BE TREATED FAIRLY BY ME ALL THE SAME.

I walk to the door. Can't help but pause, as am turning my bicycle around, the plaque on the wall, little league plaque, a group of the baseball team his tow-headed sons played on: two coaches, one on the left of the group and the other on the right, standing proudly in the background.

Life was about pain. Very often. Not all of it, of course, but certainly enough of it was. I truly had nothing against this individual. I understood, and just did not think it did much good (*better yet: any good*) to reveal your personal side to people who were incapable of giving two dog-turds about you (simply because in order to care you must know the person). And still, having said all that, I cannot help but offer something complimentary about his sons.

He smiles, says: "Thank you."

I'm out the door with my bicycle and pedaling up speedway to the VCR/camcorder repair shop. They require a \$40 deposit. I write a check. The middle-aged lady tells me it could cost upwards of \$125.00. I nod. Okay. A lot of beans for this factory hand. What can a person do? I leave it there. I might need to use it someday. I stop in at the ABCO. Buy dog food and other things.

Later that day Renna calls. It's a go, the thing with Lana Lush. I offer updated info regarding my camcorder.

"It'll be a few days before I can have it back."

"Can't those things be rented?" she asks.

"Yeah." Of course they can. Trouble is, I haven't got the funds to rent a pot to whiz in, let alone a sophisticated video camera.

"I have a camcorder at the house, but it's nothing sophisticated. Bought it three years ago, just something to shoot video of the kids around the house."

I like this woman. Married; two kids. Devoted wife and mother. She adds:

"I'm not sure that we can use it for the documentary."

I ask if it's Hi-8. It isn't it.

"I think it's regular 8."

"That's fine," I tell her.

We agree that I'll stop by the office to pick it up Saturday. We hang up. *A way out of the plant?* WAS THIS IT? A WAY OUT FINALLY AFTER SIX-MONTHS OF THAT HELL?

CHAPTER 120

Cleaned apartment. About time. Had no time before. Too exhausted. ALWAYS, MAN. Too pooped. Feel good (at not having to go into the torturous plant! Amen! Don't know what I'll do to survive, but am taking that chance. Got a grand (in my secured Visa card), and about six or seven hundred in checking. Quite a bit of the checking will be eaten up by rent due by the first, plus thirty-something on rent at the storage facility. Phone is going to be over forty-dollars, maybe closer to sixty (turn-on fee is \$46 alone). And then there's groceries, pal, dog chow. But I am taking the plunge, a big chance here.

Friday evening. Raining hard out there. I should be at work but am not. Phoned in and said I wouldn't be coming in today.

Working that goddamn paint line last night pushed me over the edge. Too hard/too much of it/too many cuts and bruises inside of both forearms. Got a nice little gash on the inside of the right arm. Had to quit/get out/GET THE HELL OUT AND SAVE MYSELF. If you've ever been stuck in a miserable situation like this you would know, brother and/or sister, YOU WOULD KNOW.

Would've been nice to have access to my Hi-8 camera, but what can you do? Renna's Regular-8 will have to suffice. Want to do a good job for these people . . . just want to stay out of the factory. I've had enough of it. Six months, short of 14-days! Not a day missed. *Not-a-one*.

I'll finally be able to finish the *Streets of LA* manuscript, get the thing going. . . . Amen. Remember to thank the gods. I do. Always. The gods. The gods forever there.

Rain hitting the roof, hard. I part the white sheets hanging over my glass door. Rain. Plenty of it. I'd be a fool to ride the bicycle in it, not to mention the blisters on my bunghole. Sore, sore. Fucking hurts. How did I get blisters on

my rectum? Riding the bike for miles at a time. All that riding. Too old for it. Too old. And yet, don't feel like an old man at all. It's all in the head. Young-at-heart, all that. A chick with a big ass can still give me wood. No lie. But it's the plant, the damned sweatshop. A way out.

CHAPTER 121

Come Saturday. I ride the bike down. Butt hurts. I do my best to position myself away from the bunghole. Try to either sit on bone, or ass cheeks. Ain't funny. Ain't funny at all. It's a windy Saturday, but so good to be away from the dead-end factory and their obnoxious supervisors and deadly chemicals. So good. Got the top button on my navy pea coat buttoned, wearing gloves, pack on my back. I make it on down to the office on Oracle.

A shifty/nervous type in baggy walking shorts answers the door after a couple of rings. He's about 50. Bernard is his name. We shake hands. Soon after, a dorky/white-haired guy of about 60 walks up. Stands there behind the dude named Bernard with some type of stunned look in his eyes. Frankly, made me wonder what I was getting myself into. The dorky dude returns to wherever it was he had come from inside the warehouse. The camcorder is in a shoulder case atop a filing cabinet in the lobby. I check things out. All there. Read Renna's brief note.

Hi Cash,

You'll need some new cassettes. All mine are used. Large battery should be charged – check them. Ask for “Stew” at the club around 6:30 Saturday. 22nd & Craycroft. “Tempest House.” Film as many shows LANA LUSH performs. Tell Stew you're there as per Soupy Schinitzky T & A Sales & Rocks-Off Video. Any problem call ——. .

Thanks!

Renna

I grab the stuff, thank Bernie the warehouse manager, and leave. Walk to the corner where I'd left my bike chained to a street sign. (Don't want peeps to see a camera operator and/or filmmaker riding a bicycle.) Anyway, I unchain the bike, and begin the slow ride back to the duplex. It doesn't get any easier. The burning pain in my butt. That's something else, every time you take a dump it fucking stings. Hemorrhoids. How did it happen? Was it the bike? All that riding? What causes it?

And I used to chuckle at all those *Preparation H* commercials over the years. Me and you and others, my friends—would see, I'm sure, those tv ads and laugh. *Hemorrhoids*? Not me. I'll never get that. Real old peeps get that. My asshole won't do *me* like that. Don't intend to have no kinda issues with *my crapper*. That's what *you* think, pal. Wait a while, and we'll see what happens. We'll see.

CHAPTER 122

It's a real strain, riding the cheap-ass bike with two leather bags weighing me down: pack and the camcorder bag.

I push on. Breathing heavily, but I push on. No choice. Gotta get back to the house. Got to. Could be a way out of this nothing existence, out of the factory and mire of poverty (that I have been stuck in my entire life). Out of this misery and drudgery. Out of it. Out of something . . . out of the blues and experience a bit of happiness somewhere/somewhat. . . .

I make it. Dog-tired. No sooner do I get my gate open, when *the mutt* is about to go into *hysterics*. Happy to see me, so happy and excited . . . which is all nice and sweet, but am too exhausted for it. I've got to tell her to cool it/settle down. I keep saying "No" to her and manage to circumvent the hyperactivity. She calms down. I unlock my sliding glass door, slide it open. Unload the camera bag. The pack hits the carpet with a thud. I sigh with relief. Made it once again. Made it. I think.

Now I've got to figure out what to do about the show later that day. I'll need to buy a couple of cassettes, recharge all the batteries, including my own, so that I'll have enough juice to shoot all of it. After a good rest, I'm back on the bike and pedaling it the three-blocks over to Walgreens on Speedway.

I go in. Select two 120-minute tapes/gallon of milk/bag of sizzle sticks (beef flavor) for the dog, fig bars (for myself), 50ft-cord for the Fax/phone machine—and my bill is thirty-eight goddamn dollars! Too much. I can't be spending this kind of money (for a man who is about to quit his real job).

It bothers me. Way too much. Should have bought the 7ft- cord for two-bucks, instead of paying \$7.98 for the 50ft one. The price tag hanging from the shelf had said it was five- bucks. It always works that way. Deliberately confusing. Always. You think something costs one price/turns out it's another. ALWAYS. I'm beginning to think it's a con, a trick.

I go about recharging the batteries. It takes close to three- hours to get them all. Four batteries. The one, takes two- hours. A long-lasting battery that belongs to Renna. I test her camera. Works fine. I'm dressed. Shined the brown loafers I only wear for special occasions. Got into a neat/clean pair of brown cords, clean plaid shirt. I'm ready. Only the big battery requires more time. Takes forever. But they're handy to have. Last a couple of hours when shooting.

Finally, at ten-minutes to five the battery is charged. I place it all in the bag. I'd been contemplating carrying my tripod in my backpack and thankfully/mercifully decide against it. I get on out there. Ride the bike over to 22nd, and then up, east toward Craycroft. Make it to the intersection. Locate the strip mall Tempest House is in, next to some fast food joints: Little Caesar, etc. As before, I chain my wheels to a street sign on the corner, a third of a block away from the night club.

I walk. Have the camera out, take footy of the brightly lit marque above the entrance:

FEATURE DANCER LANA LUSH

SHOWS AT 8:00 & 10:00

I step into the lobby. And right away the bouncer there with the old-style lamb-chop sideburns confronts me: No video taping allowed. The girl, also there standing beside him—not sure what her function is—is quiet. Not very pretty, tits so-so; too much make up, says nothing. I explain.

“You’ll have to wait here,” he tells me. And goes off to find somebody to talk to. Six-minutes later, or is it ten-minutes later?—a big burly type approaches me.

“We don’t allow taping in here.”

I explain my situation to him: Here to do a doc on Lana Lush. Show him a business card with Soupy’s name and number, and the name of his video company.

“I was told to see a guy named Stew.”

“I understand, but Stew isn’t here right now. He’s the manager.”

A friendly sort, this giant is. He is easily 6’5”, but well-mannered, not at all rude or pushy. I appreciate that, I do. Am shown to the bar and invited to have a seat.

“Stew won’t be in until seven,” he says. “You can wait here if you like.” And advised me not to do any video taping until the manager showed up.

I nod my head, agree. What else was there to do?

“I’m here to cooperate,” I tell him. “Whatever you say.”

He smiles. Leaves.

CHAPTER 123

I'm by myself. Not many people in the joint. Music is loud/blasting/shaking the floor and walls. They've got the usual DJ in his elevated booth talking jive. Mr. Hip Jive-Ass Jiver. I don't like bars/clubs/places like this. Barflies and nothing. Dead-end. Con. No more than a mirage.

They've got one main stage, a cage to the left of it, and another smaller stage to the right with a background consisting of three large mirrors. The girls are skinny, swaying slowly, a conscious effort to conserve energy. Skinny chicks. No butt, no real tits. Skinny is a turn off. There is a sadness to all this, a pointlessness. I like knocking boots as much as anybody, but this here in this club was nothing more than pathetic. I didn't like being here. Made you feel that the women shouldn't have to be here themselves, humiliating themselves like this. It was a depressing scenario. Not just that, not only that—there was nothing faintly erotic about any of it.

A pretty Latina, young, takes the stool next to mine. She smiles. I smile back. She orders a club soda, sips through a straw. She's interested to know what I'm doing inside the club with a video camera. I touch on it briefly this time.

"I guess her fans are interested in knowing more about Lana Lush, the behind the scenes, all that."

She nods. A nice, friendly girl.

"You like working here?" I ask.

She pauses, says: "I like the money."

No, they don't like it. It's a job. That's what it is. Job. It's a living. We are both silent. Then another one walks up in white six-inch platforms. White short-shorts, so short her asscheeks are clearly hanging out. Layers of warpaint on her face. Strawberry blond hair in a bun up-top and a long ponytail two-feet long. Bit of a derrière, a bit more so than some in the place, but really no great figure. She did have the walk down: *flamboyant and ridiculously exaggerated*.

None of it was remotely interesting. They were making a buck, and I was trying to make a buck. Life. Life can suck sometimes, pal. Yeah, tell it to all those homies in ball caps who sweated their asses off during the week at some soul-crushing blue-collar gig and were in here now to have a beer, a laugh or two and forget about that demoralizing job they were going to have to return to come Monday morning.

Life. Traps. Stuck. We all were.

The blond leaves. Am glad. I liked the Latina. Pretty girl. Personable. A nice human being. I ask if she's married or has a boyfriend.

"Boyfriend," she says with a shrug. But then the DJ announced her name, and that it was time for her to go up on stage and do *her* thing. I don't feel good about it. I don't feel good for her. She shouldn't have to do this if she doesn't feel right. Bills. Bills got to be paid.

Stew, the manager, walks up. In his 30s. Maroon shirt. Short hair. Neatly coiffed. We shake. Everything is fine.

"Lana won't be in until ten-minutes to eight. I'll take you in the dressing room and introduce you to her," he says. Walks off.

CHAPTER 124

The steady/relentless base drum pounding is hurting my ears at this point. It is 7:35 and I stand on my feet, walk out to the lobby to wait. I shoot footy of the poster they have of Lana Lush taped to a large mirror on the wall. Great shot of her: tanned ass stuck out, both watermelon tits held up in her hands, grinning. She never did anything for me. I didn't care for this chick. No real charisma or knew how to turn a man on. Didn't know how to suck or screw. Caught her in a porn video or two in the past. Dud. No turn on. Could be in real life she was a muff-diver. Preferred eating twat to blowing dick. That was the word. Lana preferred snatch to tubesteak. OK. Figures. Could be why she overacted in those videos with men, why all the fake moans and groans and bogus carrying on. Somebody needed to let her know that the fakery wasn't necessary and that it wasn't working.

But what do I care? It's a job. Maybe I'd be compensated properly for my time. Entire Saturday lost for this.

I finish shooting the lobby poster and showtimes for Lana Lush with the airbag jugs and I can hear the manager (as he approaches the lobby in a hurry; a harried-tone to his voice), "*Where's that camera guy? Where's—*" Stops mid-sentence when he sees me standing there in front of him. "Got bad news for you," he says. "It's off. Just talked with the owner on the phone and there is definitely not to be any video taping inside the club."

I stood there, staring at him.

"You've got to be kidding me."

He shook his head.

"Sorry. No video taping in the club."

I nodded. Said: "All right."

He walked off. I thanked the bouncer with the lamb-chop sideburns for his courtesy and stepped outside. I figured I would wait for either Renna or Soupy

to show. Renna had said she would swing by at eight, after a dinner she had to go to first.

I waited.

Looked at my watch. Eight o'clock. No Renna, no Soupy Sandwich. Peeps keep pulling up in their cars. Parking lot was filling up. Lana Lush was a drawing card. She packed them in. Now and then there would be an unattractive woman or two, but for the most part it was guys. Usually short-haired. Military? Could be. Davis-Monthan was nearby.

And then a short, uber thin, ash-blond stepped out of the club to have a smoke. She appeared nervous. Dressed in baggy jeans and sweatshirt. Big nose, large dark eyes. Sneakers. She dragged on her butt. Restless. One second she'd be seated on the bench there, and the next up and pacing about, nervously checking out the parking lot, the cars that pulled in. Waiting for somebody.

I asked if she was a dancer, (as I wouldn't allow myself to believe that she could be, not with her appearance and lack of looks). I was curious and looking for a way to kill some time.

She was a dancer indeed. Had worked three hours and only made twenty dollars.

"I could do better at Circle K," she said with a shrug.

"What did you do before?" I asked.

"Daycare," she offered.

I didn't know what to say/how to react to it.

"You were supposed to laugh. Everybody laughs when they hear that."

I nodded. It was funny at that, but explained I hadn't wanted it to seem that I was laughing at her.

"It's not what people think," she said. "We don't make a lot of money here."

She asked who I was and what I was doing. I let on about the Lana Lush documentary. That made her chuckle.

"I'm sure that's her original name," she said.

She was on the cynical/angry side, and from where I stood it was understandable.

"Life's a bitch."

"It's easy enough for me to relate," I told her.

She nodded. Had a young son she was raising by herself. Jobs that paid anything were scarce. I understood better than she would ever know. And then a chick drove up in a sedan, an acquaintance of the thin one's. My new-found friend ran over to the driver's side. Was back in another minute.

"I hate that shit; when people check up on you like that," she said, dragging on her butt.

I asked who it was.

"A friend, somebody I know. Not a real friend. This guy I was seeing and split up with keeps her checking up on me. *Hate that shit.* I'm at work. *Where the fuck else would I be?* He's got my so-called friend checking up on me for him." She shook her head.

I liked her. Not anywhere near my type. No curves, no looks. Doesn't know how to dress. No makeup, or enough height. Not much really going, but I liked the human being. She was doing what she could to have some kind of life for herself and her kid.

I wanted to have more time with her, just to keep talking like this. She was good company. I went into my background a bit: raised in Chicago/gone to Nam and having moved to LA after I got out of the army. The struggles out there to make it as a filmmaker for over twenty years—and finally having had my ass handed to me for all those dues, an endless parade of dues and struggle and measly existence in furnished apartments and rooming-houses.

And here I was, at my age, not even able to scrape two nickels together. And it wasn't being done in any "woe is me fashion," either. Merely stated as fact. Hey; it was no different for so many of us. And I still believed in the country/the system/flag. Democracy; all of it. The missteps were my own, owned by me. There was no finger-pointing going on here. It was all on Cash Register. I could've pursued a "legit" career/something/anything with real prospects: either in the white-collar sector or even blue—or in-between collar. But no; I had to fall in love with books and writing, cinema. Was there a choice? Did I truly have a say in the matter? Books/writing saved my life more times than I can recall. Books/jazz/running; the occasional great flick. But it came down to *books mainly. Writing.*

I knew what she was talking about. I got it. She looked at me, nodded. She reminded me of a swallow, a sparrow, or a hummingbird. Like the others earlier, I felt: she shouldn't have to work in a dive like this for a buck. She should've, instead, been doing something a little better/easier/civilized.

Alas, her ride: old, red pickup drove up. There was a grizzled white male at the wheel. About 50. I didn't know what it meant. Or maybe I did.

"Sorry, but I gotta go," she blurted my way, and ran off to the pickup.

"See ya," I said, and was left by myself.

CHAPTER 125

Inside the club things were clearly heating up. The booming/powerful voice of the DJ could be heard coming through the speakers as he introduced Lana Lush to the audience, listing the countless magazine covers she'd graced, the many videos she'd starred in, the television talk shows; all of it . . . and this intro went on for minutes. You could hear him and the guys inside whistling and making a general ruckus. There was no denying I wished I was back in there, just to check her out, even though she was far from my type. It would have been nice to have been able to take a gander and later (let my buddies in LA know) that I saw her do her thing on stage with those cosmetically-enhanced *basketball jugs* of hers.

I could have easily gone back inside without even having to pay the \$6 cover with the *Tucson Weekly* ad I had in my pocket; could have easily withdrawn enough cash from the ATM in the lobby to cover the two-drink-minimum (or whatever the hell it was), but I didn't/wouldn't. I'd wanted it my way, done the right way: the filming/interview, and then would have/might even have asked to have my picture taken with Ms. Lana Lush. But since that was not to be, I was determined not to go in and just say Fuck It. *Fuck the whole incompetent way the entire fiasco had been orchestrated.*

She was out on stage evidently. You could hear the crowd's response. Music rose plenty. I waited. Hoping still Renna or Soupy (whom I had yet to meet) would appear and smooth things over with the club's manager.

By 9 p.m. Lana was done with her first show. I stepped back inside the lobby and asked Mr. Sideburns if I might still be able to interview her in her dressing room. He said he'd have to okay it with Lana, who was busy having her picture taken by guys in the audience. This went on for twenty-minutes, while I waited, hoping to salvage what remained of the dwindling evening.

Nine-thirty at this point. Still waiting. I'm no quitter. When am hired to do a job I intend to get the job done. Don't like to give up. No way, no sir.

I stepped back outside to get away from the blasting rock 'n roll, the worst kind. It was senseless, pounding, heavy drum beat. Noise. Hades in a jive topless joint. Customers, guys who had first appeared, had gone inside at the beginning of my waiting period were now leaving the club and seeking to go elsewhere, greener pastures, found it difficult to see me still hanging around.

"Been out here about three-hours now, ain't you?" one friendly black dude remarked as he walked to his car. I nodded.

"You're right."

He shook his head.

Another guy emerged, wondered if I'd got stuck without a ride.

"Waiting for some peeps I work with," I explained. He nodded with a smile, and walked on to his car. Then Stew, the so-called manager, stepped out, on his way to buy some grub nearby, no doubt.

I ask him what I asked the bouncer earlier: Would it be possible to interview the stripper in her dressing room? He walks past me. Says:

"I'll see what she says."

It was then I decided I'd had enough. It was ten-o'clock and too cold to be hanging around this goddamned motherless venue. Many dancers that I'd seen doing their routines earlier were now in their street clothes and being escorted by boyfriends and/or husbands and/or other family members to their cars in the lot. It was also time for this "cinophile" to leave as well.

I walk to the corner, cursing under my breath. What a load. I prepare, I'm on time—and people let you down. Everything, all of it, had already been "set up" by Renna and Soupy. What I had been told. . . . I unchain my bicycle. Realize I'd left the handlebar light in my other pack back at the house. Could get stopped for not having it.

I'm on the bike and glide on home, shivering in the chill February night air in a city called Tucson.

CHAPTER 126

I stopped by the factory on Monday to tell them I was quitting. And, I suppose, more importantly, my reason for going down there was in the hope I'd see the woman who'd hired me initially, and exclaimed—upon mulling over my application: "*You're single!*" I had so wanted to see her one final time and say good-bye in person.

As I reminded the receptionist that my goggles and cutters were inside my metal box and that they could just cut the lock off, the woman I had wanted to see and say *adios* to happened to walk by.

I removed the sunglasses I'd worn while biking it down. Clued her in briefly. She nodded. The check would be mailed to me. Seeing her again was a further reminder: This was another one with nice legs and figure, and most of all, pleasant demeanor. Not exactly a stunner (if one did not bother to look beyond the face), the hair could have used a stylist's touch, something—and yet there was no denying there was plenty that was appealing: she had the hips, the height; wore stylish heels and the always classy skirt and blouse.

I love a groomed woman who takes pride in her appearance and this one obviously did. The lady had even walked past my table once or twice, stealing glances my way during the six months I labored away inside the inner bowels of the beast that was the factory.

It never once occurred to me why she'd never made so much as an effort to approach me: being in management, she could not make a move without risking her position. And me—feeling less-than-positive about being an effing factory-hand and my situation in general—I never indicated I was drawn/interested, and let another potential union with a nice woman slip through these fingers. I'd never said hello, let alone asked her out. Not once. Ever. The entire time I was there.

Today would be different. I would say something. It was lame. Hardly enough. I knew it. So be it. (When you felt beaten down this was how it went.)

“Look, you always came across as down-to-earth to me, for what’s it’s worth.”

“Thanks,” she said. “I try.”

And I walked out—kicking myself—as I have so often in the past. This is the way it happened, the price you paid, when you failed to reach out (the few/rare times opportunity presented itself).

CHAPTER 127

I was back out and riding the bicycle to the smut offices of Renna Manley. I reached Oracle and headed north for a stretch.

As before, the dude with the orange hair was there: her hubs Noah, standing over the shoulders of a seated Flavio, studying the 3D-graphics the guy had been creating on the Mac computer before him. Touhey was not around.

I explained to Renna what had happened at the strip club, all of it, the downer; club's management not allowing me to get anywhere near La Lush. She apologized. Said there must have been some misunderstanding or something. I didn't probe. It was safer not to. She asked if I considered taking the warehouse position.

"I'd like to try, sure.

"Why don't I take you to the warehouse and introduce you?"

It was then the Baggett character walked in to pick up the package containing the premier issue of *Loopy Soupy's Sexxx Asylum*. He was about to leaf through the mag. Renna stopped him, saying it was the first issue and Soupy should be the first person to see it, being CEO and all.

This guy Bernie readily nodded in a nervous way, as though he feared the woman. I would eventually find out that a lot of people feared her. This was, after all, the boss's daughter and vice pres, and she wielded enough power to hire and fire.

She then said: "Bernie, I'd like you to meet Cash. He'll be working in the warehouse, taking over for Claude."

We shook. Neither of us were inclined, but did shake.

"We met the other day," I said to Renna.

Bernard Baggett picked up the FedEx box that contained the three copies of the magazine and was out the door. Renna was back inside her private office looking for something. When she emerged, I followed her lead and we were on

our way to the warehouse. On foot. It was but a matter of crossing the parking lot.

Feb. 23, 1998

End of Book One

Cash Register — Tucson Working Stiff Series

Followed by:

Loopy Soupy's Motley Crew

Journey to the End of the Week

A Confederacy of Mooks

nonentity — A Rant For Those Who Can't

You're Gonna Have Trouble

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kirk Alex's stories & poems have appeared on internet sites such as: <http://scars.tv/cgi-bin/framesmain.pl?writers>, schlock.co.uk, www.fictionontheweb.co.uk, <https://literallystories2014.com>, et al. His horror novel *Lustmord: Anatomy of a Serial Butcher* was a finalist in the Kindle Book Review's Best Book Awards of 2014. He is also the author of the whacky funeral home novel entitled *Zook*, the 4-volume *Edgar "Doc" Holiday* thriller series, the multi-volume *Chance "Cash" Register* blue-collar/working stiff series, and a few other novels and story collections, as well as several volumes of free verse.

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