



*The first thing I do after my free ride* drops me off in the city is take the 15 bus south, all the way to the edge of the city limits where the housing used to be cheap and the local Target was always hiring. I can remember as a kid, before we moved out into the boondocks, the local high school always had a cop car outside it and a murder of black kids always loitered around the Kwik Trip across the street. Now, when I get off the bus in front of the high school, nothing feels the same. The people walking down the neighborhood's main drag are all wearing Polo shirts and loose jeans, with cigarettes dangling between their lips and an iced latte in one hand.

I should be happy, I suppose, to see the old neighborhood I grew up in doing so well. But all I can think about is how expensive living is going to be, and I don't know any other part of the city well enough to venture into to look for a job. I thought coming back to this place would be easy, and now I barely recognize the neighborhood anymore.

I walk south, down Kinnickinnic Avenue, grabbing a 'For Rent' flyer stapled to one of the wooden electric poles between an ad for Bigger Cock and a notice to heroin users on where they can pick up free syringes. I walk another half-mile before cutting into one of the side streets leading to the lake and stop in front of the plain white house/building where the landlord's office is located. The windows are boarded and painted over in white, just like when I was a kid, only back then it was an ice cream parlor that always ran out of Rainbow Sherbet before noon. Inside, I find two large desks where the display cases used to be and a plain white refrigerator sitting in front of the door that used to be a unisex bathroom.

The man behind the nearest desk looks up from his paperwork, over a pair of loose-fitting black eyeglasses. He's got long hair and a dark black goatee with hairs that hang down over his upper lip so when he asks 'Can I help you?' they wave out from the exhale of air like black sea anemones.

'I'm looking for a place,' I say. I hold out the flyer. 'Preferably something in the neighborhood.'

The man gets up from his desk and walks over to me. 'Sure, sure.' He extends a hand in my direction. 'I'm Kurt.'

I take his hand and shake it. 'Nice to meet you.'

‘We have a lot of places in the neighborhood.’ He reaches into one of the aluminum drawers on his desk and pulls out a thin manila folder. ‘Are you looking for a particular price?’

‘No, money isn’t an issue.’ Three years of dealing with student housing slum lords forces you to learn the rules of renting.

‘Good.’ He looks at his watch, as if his paperwork can’t wait a few minutes. ‘We can take a look at a few in the neighborhood right now, if you want.’

He drives me in his Jeep to a few of the nearest available houses. I take the opportunity to re-acquaint myself with the old neighborhood. I don’t remember much of anything at first, until a few local landmarks begin to jog my memory: the steeple-shaped Presbyterian Church with its small white oval-shaped addition where the local newspaper used to be distributed. The old McDonald’s that used to always sell out of the best Happy Meal toys. Sijan Field, where my old man played softball for our church and we cheered him on from the cold metal bleachers.

I don’t act very interested until he takes me to the last place on his little hand-written list, a duplex that has a young college girl living in it already, with a spare bedroom and plenty of space everywhere else. The three of us talk awhile and take a tour and work out a few money details, and she casually mentions that her boyfriend likes to sleep during the day when he has to work a graveyard shift at the steel factory downtown. I don’t know if she’s mentioning it because she thinks I’m loud or if she thinks I’m going to hit on her, but I politely explain to her in less astute terms that I’m not loud and I don’t find her attractive, so I don’t really have any problem with the boyfriend’s catnaps.

I wait at the house for the landlord to bring back the rent contract and the credit check form, tossing my full backpack into the empty bedroom.

‘Where ya from?’ the girl asks. I’ve already forgotten her name.

‘Dodge County,’ I say. ‘A couple hundred miles south.’

‘You just moved here?’

‘An hour ago.’

‘For school?’

I shake my head. I’m not purposely trying to avoid eye contact with her—my eyes are searching the decorations on the piss-yellow fridge for a name, anything that sounds or even looks familiar from just moments ago.

‘No reason in particular?’

I shake my head. ‘Just needed to get out. What happened to your last roommate?’

She doesn’t ask any more questions, so I let the roommate thing drop, too.

By the time I’ve signed the sublease and gotten the full tour, I still have half the day to waste with absolutely nothing to keep myself occupied. I take my new house key and walk down Estes Street to the nearest bus stop. I stop in at the local Starbucks to fill out a quick application before hopping on the next bus heading west. I get off in front of the local Target (Now a Super Target) and use my credit card to buy a pillow, sleeping bag and some sketching supplies. Before I leave, I stop at the automatic exit doors and take a seat in one of the Job Application Terminals. I type in my name and address and personal information, then fill out the personality survey that starts to repeat itself—re-worded, of course—after the fifteenth question. ‘How often do you get Depressed?’ turns into ‘Do you find it difficult to get out of Bad Moods?’ the second time around.

I take the eastbound bus back to my new home and lock myself in my new empty room. The calendar on the fridge says October 8 but the sticky warm air makes it feel more like a Midwestern August. I open one of the windows and spread out my sleeping bag. I can hear my roommate and her boyfriend talking downstairs in the living room.

My cell phone rings a lot. I don't answer any of the calls, except the one from my sister to tell her I'm okay, and I promise to call my parents after I'm all situated.

'Somehow, we had a feeling,' she says.

I sleep on that, reliving my last few months in Dodge County and trying to pinpoint an exact spot when I first decided to run away. Run away from what? I don't know—all I know is that here in the city, the pressure around my chest has ceased. Everything feels new. Sleeping on the floor has never felt so good.

In the morning, I take the Superior Street bus south, past the city limits and into the town of Cudahy. I get off in front of what used to be a hobby shop but now has nothing but old rusty brown bicycles in its display cases. I jog across the busy street and into the Labor Ready that has a fat whiteboard hanging in the window with a listing of recent jobs. The chubby-faced woman behind the counter eyes me approaching and already has a sheet and clipboard ready for me to fill out by the time I reach her.

'Good morning,' she says, holding out the clipboard. She has the darkest blue eyes I've ever seen—they're wasted on someone so overweight and otherwise unattractive.

'I'm just looking for any job,' I say. 'Do you usually get someone coming in every day?'

'Fill out the form,' she says. 'That way, we can give your name to employers.'

I sit down in one of the folding chairs circling the small flat screen TV against the wall. There are a few other people sitting around watching TV: a group of older-looking Mexican men, a young white guy with red-and-black tattoos along his arms, and two heavysset mulatto women sharing a cigarette near the front door. I fill out the paperwork as quickly as I can, using my cell phone number even though I can't afford next month's bill without an extension on my credit card payment. I need a job right away, but I don't want to look desperate. So long as they don't check my pulse, I should be okay.

I give the clipboard back to the woman and sit in one of the chairs, away from everyone else. I wait in silence, trying not to pick up on any of the Spanish the Mexican guys are saying, avoiding listening to the courtroom drama on the television. At about one in the afternoon, the door opens and a tall middle-aged guy wearing tight jeans and a dirty white t-shirt walks in. He goes over to the fat-faced woman behind the counter and the two look directly at all of us sitting around. When I notice no one else is watching him, I turn back to the TV and try to hide the fact that I want to be picked first. Like we're in gym class all over again, waiting to get picked for a goddamned dodge ball team.

The woman calls the name of the other white guy, then one of the thinner Mexican guys, then me. We go over to the man, who introduces himself as Mister Cohn and lets each of us shake his calloused hand. He stinks like Old Spice aftershave and sawdust.

'We're tearing apart two offices,' Mister Cohn says. 'Mostly cubicles. We're gonna work through dinner, long as it takes. Good?'

We all nod and follow him out to the van parked outside. There's a much larger man sitting in the passenger seat, eyeing each of us as we get in through the side door. I slide it shut, then shift into the empty back seat and buckle up. No one else buckles up.

Mister Cohn drives erratically back into the city, across the bridge over the harbor, through the tight city streets before parking in front of one of the ancient-looking buildings with gothic sculptures carved into the concrete. If I had my sketch pad with me, I would pass up the job in a second just to have the rest of the day to capture the images in front of my eyes: the dark gray lines flowing around the windows, crashing against them like waves and sifting away the granules of sand and granite to form the complex concave designs. I mentally pinpoint the location in my memory for another day.

A moving van is already parked in front of the building, so we park on the side street in front of a tattoo parlor. Mister Cohn leads us to one of the large office rooms that are partially divided by dozens of individual cubicles. Three other guys are standing around in the large room, on the other end where a half dozen of the gray plastic walls have already

been disassembled and are leaning up against the wall. The tattooed white guy gives a wave and walks over to them. They're all bald, but the one who talks first with the tattooed white guy has the most defined crown of shaggy black hair, which seems to make him the alpha male of the group.

I turn around to ask Mister Cohn what the hell we're supposed to do, but he's already made his way back into the main hallway, talking with two other middle-aged men whose stomachs suggest they're better at supervising than any sort of manual labor. I turn to the Mexican guy and shrug. He introduces himself as Juan and points over to the other end of the room, near the large rectangular windows overlooking the city. 'We can start there,' he says.

The plan suits me just fine, so we grab one of the power drills sitting by the door and head over to the other end. We keep our distance from the others, trying to avoid listening to their talk directed our way. It occurs to me that we might all be scabs, that the regular workers for Mister Cohn are on strike and any number of things could happen once the job is finished. But I need money and I need it fast, and for now that takes precedent over personal safety.

We begin disassembling the cubes one at a time. I hold the walls steady and let Juan unscrew them from the floor. We take the walls one by one and stack them up near the windows, mainly so we can watch the people walking by on the sidewalk two stories below while we catch our breath. Down below, the sidewalks have begun to crowd again with men and women wearing respectable work outfits that hold up well in the high altitude of the larger buildings, pushing their way to the bus stops and taxi loading zones.

After an hour of this we're halfway finished with the room. The other guys are taking their sweet time even though Mister Cohn and his two supervisors come in periodically to grab the loose walls and load them onto the truck outside. I need the money but I can't stop looking at my watch, half-wishing we could just end now and I could take whatever measly sum an hour of this work is worth and just go grab a burger.

By the time we finish the first room, the sun has already tucked itself behind the western skyscrapers. Mister Cohn takes us to the first floor, to an identical—if not slightly larger—room filled with the exact same cubicles. This time, we have to take the desks out first, loading them onto a second truck, stacking them after we run out of room. I can tell Juan's back has begun to get sore from the lifting so I do what I can to keep the pressure on my own body. The other four guys don't really offer much help except when Mister Cohn or his supervisors are nearby. Then they're all smiles, joking around, letting the supervisors get in a few stale jokes at the expense of the female work force.

In the middle of the room, with the others safely on the other side and fifteen cubicle walls between us, I crouch down by Juan and ask him what kind of pay we might get for this.

'Depends,' he says. He smells like stale coffee—a mild blend of Arabian and Latin American beans. 'Usually whatever money the boss has in his pockets. Split six ways.'

I wait for him to unscrew the last bolt. We take the small wall and set it near the door to the hallway so the supervisors don't have to step over us when they come for the next load. When we get back to the cubicle-in-progress, Juan looks back to the door before crouching down and wiping the sweat from his forehead.

'We need to slow down,' he says.

I crouch down beside him. My legs feel like jelly, grateful for the reprieve. 'Why's that?'

'We're keeping up with the gringos,' he says. Then, maybe as an afterthought: 'No offense.'

'I know I'm a gringo.'

Juan smiles. 'You ever done this before?'

I shake my head, wondering what his story is, why someone so young hasn't found a niche yet. He's not bad looking, I think—he has thick, dark eyebrows that match his eyes and short-cropped hair, with a chubby torso that's obviously hiding muscle from years of hard labor.

‘Those guys over there,’ he says, pointing through the blue carpeting of the cubicle wall, ‘they’re always at Labor Ready. You make them look bad, you gotta deal with them every day you’re both there. You gotta find a balance. Comprendo?’

‘Yo Comprendo.’

Juan smiles again, probably because my Spanish sounds worse than a Catholic fifth grader’s. ‘They’re trying to drag it out to make more money, but I don’t think it’s going to work. They’re just going to piss off Señor Cohn and then he won’t hire any of us again.’

‘What can we do?’ I ask.

Juan shrugs. ‘Spend a few days at Home Depot to let them cool off, just in case.’

‘I don’t like shopping at Home Depot.’

‘No,’ he says, shaking his head. ‘No shopping. Standing around. Like Labor Ready, only not exactly.’

I lay the cubicle wall flat, stacking on the other two sitting on the floor. ‘Like a job, you mean?’

Juan nods. ‘Or stand across the street, if they don’t want you by the door. Someone will come by. Usually looking for people to paint.’

‘Models?’

‘No, no.’ He laughs. ‘Painters. Workers they can hire for a day to paint a house or a garage. Stuff like that.’

We lift the three walls and carry them over to the hall, side-stepping in rhythm so none of the top walls slip off. My shoulders are sore from the stacked weight. My thighs haven’t stopped burning since we first started moving the desks into the truck outside. We pace ourselves to the rhythm of the other group of guys, taking things slow and making sure they finish their side of the room first so they can help us out. When we’re finished, we help Mister Cohn and his supervisors load the last few walls into the big truck outside. A wind blowing off the lake cuts right through my shirt and embeds the stench of dead fish into the fabric.

Mister Cohn pulls a large wad of cash from his pocket. He licks his fingertips like bosses do in the movies and deals out sixty bucks to each of us.

‘We need to get these trucks to the yard,’ he says, and then turns to leave.

Juan and I watch the other four guys cross the street, walking toward the row of bars with neon Miller Lite signs lighting the windows.

‘You know how to get back to the south side?’ I ask him.

Juan nods. We walk three blocks west and wait in front of the downtown mall for the 15 bus to take us south, through the shipyards along the lake and out of the main commercial district of the city. We’re mostly silent, but the next day I see him at Labor Ready again and he motions for me to sit with the other guys who didn’t get the last job. All of the men have a different scent of cologne, creating a bouquet of alcohol strong enough to make my eyes burn. It’s almost like a competition, and I’m stuck with nothing but a stick of deodorant. ‘After Hours.’ I let them talk in broken English, impressed that they would try and include me. We wait all day. One person comes and takes a few of the ladies for a big cleaning job down on the east side.

By five o’clock, I’m tired of sitting around watching court shows so I take the bus back to the south side. I sit down in my new kitchen with a sketch pad, determined to give the muscles in my fingers a work-out by capturing some of the appliances on paper. Before I can start, my phone rings. I don’t know the number, which is the only reason I even bother answering.

‘It’s Mister Cohn,’ the voice says. ‘I was wondering if you wanted a job for the night.’

‘Sure, but I don’t have a car right now.’

‘That’s okay, I can come and pick you up quick. We’re throwing a party tonight and one of my valets is stoned out of his fucking mind. You do drugs?’

A good joint would hit the spot right now. ‘I can’t even afford a six-pack right now.’

‘That’s good.’ He laughs. ‘I guess.’ Thirty minutes later, I’m sitting in the passenger seat of a brand-new Lexus that smells like cherry cigars, heading west through the city and into the more affluent suburbs along the countryside. ‘There’s no place for everyone to park by my house,’ he explains to me between puffs of a cigarette. ‘So you and the other valet are going to direct them to the park down the road. You can ferry them to the party with the Lexus. Can you drive stick?’

‘Like it’s my fucking job, boss.’

‘Good. You can drive. I’ll let the other guy—Mike, I think—stay at the house and direct people. Split the tips evenly, and then ferry everyone back after the party.’

We pull off the freeway onto a side road and take it for about ten minutes through the sparse rural landscape. Mister Cohn pulls onto a side road called Fern Gully Drive and parks in front of the third house on the right. The house is huge, with revolting brown trim around the large windows and a castle tower in the rear that reminds me of one of the old mansions the logging barons in my old home town used to live in. There’s a big van parked on the grass next to the gravel driveway that has ‘On the Spot Erections’ painted in big white letters across its side. I do a double-take before I notice the edge of a large yellow tent poking out from behind the house. Hey, I’ve seen enough HBO shows to know what happens out in these affluent suburbs.

Mister Cohn introduces me to Mike, a guy in his late teens who could have passed for Screech’s body double on *Saved by the Bell*. He’s got the awkward stance of a teenager-out-of-his-element, his eyes darting left and right, trying to take in all of the scenery before it can change. I half-expect his voice to crack when he talks, just to give the motion picture a soundtrack.

We don’t have time to get too acquainted. The first few cars begin to pull up almost immediately, and Screech walks to the edge of the lawn to point them in the direction of the park four houses down, the parking lot specifically, he explains to each driver. I follow the first group of cars in the Lexus, letting my feet really get a feel for the smooth pedals, the way such an expensive car effortlessly handles the gravel road. Two couples decide to walk back so they can enjoy the unseasonably warm weather. The third couple has two bratty kids who don’t want to walk on account of their uncomfortable shoes, so I chauffeur them back to the house and drop them off before returning to the parking lot. No one offers a tip.

By seven, the majority of the guests have arrived, and the last few simply park illegally on the other side of the road. Screech and I sit in the Lexus and listen to music, occasionally taking a walk to the road to smoke a cigarette. I don’t talk much to Screech, only the bare minimum, where he goes to school, where he’s going to college, what a bunch of rich fucks all these people are. It doesn’t surprise me that his dad knows Mister Cohn.

At eight, we turn the a.m. station to the ball game and catch the end. At nine, Mister Cohn comes out back and at first I figure he’s going to yell at us for draining his car battery, but instead he invites us back to grab a plate of food.

‘But eat it back here, okay?’ he says. That’s what Screech probably hears. What I hear is something completely different: ‘You won’t fit in, so don’t bother trying. These people don’t want to associate with you—trust me.’

We go to the gigantic backyard, where everyone is mingling on the healthy green grass. The kids are watching the blues band playing on the small stage outside of the tent. The prettier couples are sticking close to the miniature bar, sipping their drinks through glasses lined with gold along the brim. I grab a plate and load it with as much pork sandwiches, chips and cookies as I can, creating a veritable pyramid of meat and carbs. I take two cans of Mountain Dew and make my way back to the Lexus.

At the end of the night, I ferry everyone back to their cars. As soon as I pile one group into the car, their tongues fork and they let fly the expletives about another group from the party. By eleven-thirty, I can draw a delicate spider web of the connections, feuds and alliances between each of the families present at the party. The Cohn family is in the center, holding the surrounding families together with free alcohol and expensive food.

When Mister Cohn finally comes out and asks how we came out, I break the news that no one gave us a tip.

'Really?' he asks, digging into his pocket. He's always got a wad of cash, it seems. He gives each of us eighty bucks and tells Screech there's another ten in it for him if he can give me a ride back to the city. Screech politely declines, but doesn't give a reason.

Mister Cohn runs back into the house to put his drunk wife to bed before coming back out to take me home.

'What was the name of the guy you were working with at the Hyatt?' he asks me after we're out of the burb and back on the main expressway. 'The Mexican guy.'

'It was Juan,' I say. 'I don't remember his last name, though.'

'That's not important. My brother's looking for about a dozen people for next week, if you're interested. I told him I would throw a few good for-hire guys his way.'

'That'd be great,' I say. 'What does he do?'

'Mezzanines. He builds them for the big warehouses around Chicago. He pays good, but he'll probably put you on the payroll, so you'll get taxed.'

'I'd still love to do it.' I need more money. I've developed a lust for fine-tipped charcoal pencils that's stronger than my nicotine and alcohol addictions combined.

The next day, I get a call from Target and Starbucks. I set up interviews for the afternoon and walk to both of them, borrowing one of my roommate's blouses that could pass for a guy's shirt and doing my best to clean myself up. Both of them like me, and so they each set me up with second interviews with another manager at the end of the week. I spend the time in-between downtown, sketching the beautiful gothic buildings, losing myself in the white paper and clearing my nagging doubts about money. It'll all work out, somehow. It'll take a couple months to pay off the credit card, but it'll all work out.

Starbucks calls me first, early on the next Tuesday, while I'm down in Chicago with Juan and a dozen other guys tearing down giant two-story overstock frames to make room for mezzanines. We're staying in a hotel, four to a room, me and Juan with two other guys who nobody likes much at all. One's another Mexican named Jesus (Hey-Zeus) and the other's a white guy named Greg. They're both fucking nuts.

'Everyone used to love Jesus,' Juan explains after both have already left to find food for dinner. Juan and I decided to stay behind and order a pizza just as soon as I call Starbucks back.

'Nice guy?' I ask, simultaneously listening to the ringing on the other end of the line and Juan.

'No, total asshole. But everyone thought he was really smart. Like some kind of wise man or something who could solve all your troubles with his tongue.'

'What happened?'

'Turns out he was just quoting lyrics from Rolling Stones songs.'

'Fuck. Yes hello? Karl, please. Karl. Yes it is. Just returning your call, sorry about that I'm actually out of town for a few days visiting relatives. Sure. Definitely, that's great. Sunday will work fine. Great. I'll see you Sunday at nine, then. Bye.'

Juan waits for me to hang up. 'Good news?'

'I got a job at Starbucks.'

Juan nods, looking at me with his light brown eyes that are speckled with ... what? Maybe a twitch of envy. Or pride. 'So we can order the pizza now?'

We wake up at four-thirty the next morning to put in one more twelve-hour day. I wait for my turn to shower, pre-washing in the sink sitting outside the bathroom. I blow my nose hard. Black snot, clogged with dust and dirt, bursts through the thin Kleenex and hangs from the spout of the sink. I wipe it away and try one last time to scrub all the ashen dirt out of the creases in my hands.

Greg's been acting stranger ever since we bunked up the first night, so it doesn't surprise me that he's taking his sweet time in the shower. I imagine him being the type to stare down at the drain for a few minutes after a long, hot soak, and then slowly run a razor blade diagonally across his wrists. I imagine him being the type who enjoys damaging his body, getting an erection watching life quickly travel down the drain diluted red drop by diluted red drop. And I'm the lucky one who gets to spend the rest of the week on the scissor lift with him, taking down steel support beams.

When he finally opens the door, he's fully dressed, his greasy black hair combed to one side and his mustache neatly trimmed. He looks like every other normal guy on the planet, except he carries a bottle of prescription medicine in his pocket. That prescription, apparently, has run out since we first arrived.

'Are you the one who's planning to kill me?'

I only need to look into his beady brown eyes for a quarter of a second to know he's serious. 'I don't even know how to answer that, Greg.'

He nods and steps aside so I can use the shower.

Twelve hours feels like a year when you can't stop staring at the clock.