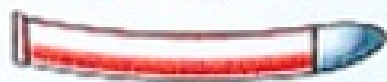




**SINCE
THE
LAYOFFS**



a novel

AIN LEVISON

SINCE THE LAYOFFS

Also by Iain Levison

A Working Stiff's Manifesto

SINCE THE LAYOFFS



a novel

IAIN LEVISON

SOHO

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To My Mother

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ONE

I was in Tulley's, watching a Bills game with Tommy and Jeff Zorda, and I had a hundred on the Bills to win. It was the third quarter and the Bills were down 21-0 and didn't have any offense to speak of, but this was back before we all got laid off, so losing a C-note wasn't the end of the world. Anyway, there was this TV behind Jeff's head that was showing the game about ten seconds ahead of all the other TVs, so I could see how each play was going to turn out before the other two. I was just fucking around at first, but I said, "Hey, I bet I can call the next five plays."

Tommy was interested just for fun, but Jeff Zorda, who had put money on the Jets and was winning, had the gambling bug. "Ten bucks a play. You have to call the plays."

I had just wanted to play around, but whenever Jeff started winning he turned into a cocky prick who was always telling everyone else they didn't know shit about football. So I took the bet.

"The next play'll be an end-around to Thomas. Right side."

"No way, dude," Zorda said. "It's third and six. They're not going to run it."

Sure enough, there was a right side end-around to Thomas for the first down. Zorda shrugged.

The next play was set up as a shotgun. Then one of the linemen moved and drew a penalty.

"This'll be a pass play, but it won't happen. The right tackle's going to move before the snap." I had given Zorda way too much information, a hint that I was cheating, but he didn't catch it. No matter how much you know about football, you can't predict a penalty. I don't think he was listening as usual. Tommy figured something out right away and stuck his head over the booth and saw the other TV, but he didn't say anything. He just smiled. Tommy didn't care too much for Zorda. There were rumors about him and Tommy's wife.

Zorda watched the penalty and stared at me in admiration. "Damn. How the hell could you know that?" Still no suspicion.

"That tackle's been jiggling around the whole game," I said. "He was due for a penalty." Tommy smiled. "Next play'll be a screen pass to Taylor. He'll hit him underneath for a couple yards."

This went on for the whole five plays. I was just about to tell Zorda I was cheating when he got up, took a fifty out of his wallet and threw it at me. "Prick," he said. Then, much drunker than I realized, he staggered off to the bathroom, walking right past the TV that was showing the game ten seconds ahead.

"I'll tell him when he comes back," I said to Tommy.

"Fuck him."

But Zorda didn't come back. He met his coke dealer on the way to the bathroom and left the bar sticking us with his tab. So Tommy and me split the fifty and used some of it to pay his tab, and Zorda

got so fucked up he must have forgot all about it, because he never mentioned it at work.

~~And until I shot Corinne Gardocki in the head, that was the worst thing I had ever done for money.~~

Ken Gardocki is looking at some papers strewn around on his desk while I sit in his nip-and-tuck leather chair in my blue jeans and dungaree jacket, waiting for him to tell me what it is he wants. He has called me at seven this morning and asked me to come down to his office, mentioned a deal we could work out. Ken Gardocki is a bookie and I owe him somewhere in the neighborhood of forty-two hundred dollars so any kind of a deal sounds good. He knows I'm out of work, he knows everyone in this town is, but he still takes bets from me. Maybe he is going to ask me to paint his house, or run some errands for him. Maybe he needs a butler. I could do that. Anything to get me working again.

Ken Gardocki finds one of the papers he was looking for and holds it up, then looks at me thoughtfully. "Canadian football," he says.

"What?"

"You lost eighteen hundred dollars of your forty-two hundred on Canadian football."

"Yeah."

He laughs. "Tell me, Jake, can you name one player in the whole Canadian Football League?"

"Doug Flutie used to play for them."

"What was that, five years ago? He's with the Chargers now."

"Yeah." I like Ken Gardocki because he is a no-bullshit guy. He is also the only guy in town making money, because he sells drugs and guns and he is a bookie. In a town where three-quarters of the men have been laid off in the last nine months, the businesses of desperation are booming.

But I am beginning to wonder why I've been called here. Does he need someone to do a few chores for him, or what? Is it really necessary to go back through my betting history? Obviously, the list of my bets contains a few errors in judgment, or I wouldn't be here in the first place.

"How do you even find out the scores to a Canadian Football League game? ESPN doesn't run them. How do you find out any scores, for that matter, now that your cable has been cut off?"

"You know my cable was cut off?"

Gardocki shrugs. "Everybody's cable is getting cut off." He flips through some other papers and then throws the stack on the desk and looks at me. "So you're placing bets on Canadian football and you can't name a CFL player. What does that tell me?"

Where the fuck am I, in the principal's office? Am I about to be given detention for losing bets? "I don't know, Ken. What does it tell you?"

"It tells me you're desperate."

I shrug.

"It tells me you're betting for the money."

"As opposed to what?"

"As a hobby. For the action. You're betting to feed yourself. You need to place a bet to get the idea that you're making cash, just like you did before the layoffs."

"Yeah. That sounds about right."

Gardocki nods. "You want a beer?"

"It's ten in the morning, Ken. I'm unemployed and I have a gambling problem. I'm not a drunk."

Gardocki nods and smiles. That's the reason people like him, the reason I like him, because he smiles a lot. He is in his mid-fifties, and he has no virtues, and he doesn't take shit from people and h

smiles a lot and he is probably the richest man in town, now that the guys who owned the factory have left. Gone to Texas, or Mexico, or Hollywood. Some place with more sun and cheaper labor than here.

“How much more time have you got left on benefits? Before the government cuts you off?”

I figure now that we’re going somewhere with this. He’s leading up to something, maybe he’s going to ask me to be one of his henchmen. Hell, I could do that. Drop coke and weed off at people’s doors. Maybe he’ll let me drive one of his SUVs. I could cruise around town and listen to CDs and bring people their daily drug shipments, for which they would exchange their unemployment checks. I don’t have a problem with that. Somebody will be doing it whether I say yes or no. My moral refusal won’t suddenly put a halt to this shattered town’s substance abuse problem. Something like that would tide me over, until the new factory opened. They were already talking about a new factory.

“One year and three months.”

“Then what? You going to starve to death in your apartment?”

“The new factory’ll have opened by then.”

Gardocki shakes his head. “There’s not going to be any new factory. Who the hell would want to open a factory here?”

“I heard Scott Paper was looking at the location.” Tommy had called me up and told me he’d read that in the paper. Big businesses were interested, I knew that. There was a pool of skilled workers, a building already set up to produce machine-tooled parts for tractors. Just a few changes, and it would be up and running, producing something else. We all knew that.

Gardocki laughs again. “Scott Paper.” He shakes his head. “That was a heavy metal factory. You think they’re going to turn it into a paper mill? And go through all that union bullshit again? Nobody wants to deal with unions anymore. They want Mexicans. They want people who’ll appreciate seven dollars an hour, not gripe about seventeen. The factory days here are over, Jake.” He leans back in his chair and lights a cigarette. “What happened to that pretty little girl you were going around with?”

“Fuck you.”

Gardocki adopts an expression of surprise. “Is that off limits?”

“You know my cable’s cut off, but you don’t know my girlfriend moved out?”

“She went off with some used car dealer, huh?” Gardocki is looking sympathetic, so as not to rile me more.

“He was a new car dealer.”

After the factory closed, the car dealerships had left town, too. Jobless people don’t buy a lot of new cars. Kelly had gone with him, to Ypsilanti. Before she left there had been a lot of agonizing, when she went through her touching “What should I do?” phase. Kelly never asked herself what she should do when I was making seventeen dollars an hour. After her seven-dollar-an-hour salary as a receptionist at a car dealership made her the top grosser of the household, I noticed she began asking herself these deep philosophical questions. She told me some salesman was asking her to go to Ypsilanti with him, and whatever should she do? I told her to fuck off, and went and placed a bet on Canadian Football. After she moved out, I never picked up the phone, didn’t return the one letter I got from her and didn’t say goodbye. Someone new would come along, once the new factory opened.

“Jake, I want you to kill my wife.”

I laugh. Then I search Gardocki’s face for signs of humor. But I don’t see any. Gardocki isn’t even looking at me. He is looking at a spot on the wall above my head, expressionless. He smokes his cigarette and stares, waiting for it to sink in.

“I’m not going to kill your wife, Ken.”

Gardocki nods. “What *are* you going to do? Go back to your one-bedroom apartment? Hang

around all day? Walk from one end of town to the other, then spend three hours sitting in the library? Go down and see your friend Tommy at the convenience store where he works, and have him steal you a pack of cigarettes?” That was eerie. He knows I have Tommy steal me cigs from the convenience store, but it isn’t really stealing because Tommy is the manager and he knows I can’t afford them so he just lets me have them. How long has Gardocki been following me, collecting information on me?

“You’re going to get evicted eventually, you know that? And what are you going to do then? Become homeless?” Gardocki is being conversational now, and he offers me a cigarette. It is almost relief for me to hear these words spoken, the same words I hear going through my head twenty-four hours a day. What are you going to do for work? How are you going to pay bills? Every month, I lose another possession to the pawn shop or the repo man. I’ve already lost the 1997 Dodge Viper and replaced it with a 1980 Honda Civic. How much more room is there to downgrade, before I come home to an empty apartment? One day I’ll come home and the locks will be changed. Then what? THEN WHAT? I try to quieten the voices with anything I can get my hands on, but these aren’t the voices of a crazy person. These voices make sense.

“What are you going to do about your gambling debt, Jake?”

“Jesus, Ken, you make this sound like a career opportunity.”

Gardocki nods and smiles. He offers me the smoke, and I take it. He goes and stands by the dirty window that looks out over a frozen field and a few rusted shacks.

“Six hundred people, out of work, collecting government cheese,” he says, his voice foggy. “I could make this offer to all of them and at least twenty would say yes. Don’t you think?” He turns around and looks at me.

“I don’t know.”

“Think of the men you used to work with. I mean really think of them. The ones with families, the ones with little children going to that dump of an elementary school. Think of your friend Tommy managing a fucking convenience store, for what, seven-fifty an hour? He’s got a kid, doesn’t he?”

“Tommy wouldn’t do it.”

“How the fuck do you know? Five thousand for one day’s work? I think you start throwing those numbers around in this town and you’d find there are a lot of people would do things. It’d pay Tommy’s mortgage, wouldn’t it?”

“Five thousand?” I just say that before I can stop myself, and I notice behind Gardocki’s eyes that instant flash of triumph. In that millisecond, when I am thinking about the money and not about my soul, or morality, or what my mother would say if she were still alive, he knows he’s won. That would be the gambling debt gone PLUS eight hundred dollars. Eight hundred dollars cash. I hadn’t seen that much money in nine months. I could go to a bar and pay my tab with cash. I could buy milk and bread and make sandwiches and buy real cheddar instead of that government crap that was giving me the shits. I could get my TV back from the pawn shop and get the cable hooked up again and have people over. I could talk to Kelly again, maybe drive down to Ypsilanti and take her out to dinner. Why did I just think that? Fuck Kelly. But I *could* do it, if I felt like it, if I had eight hundred dollars.

Then I think of Jeff Zorda. “Zorda would do it,” I say. “Zorda would do it in a heartbeat.”

“Yes, he would,” Gardocki agrees, and for a second, I think a funny expression flashes across his face. “But I picked you.”

“Why me?” I ask.

“Because I like you.”

“Bullshit. You think I’m evil, or something.”

“No.” Gardocki sits back down again. “I think I can trust you. You’re smart, too. You’re the type

of guy who really needs this offer, but wouldn't go around telling everyone if you decided not to do it. Plus, you're not married. Nobody to go and agonize over the decision to. No wife that I have to worry about whether or not you told. Men tell women everything in bed, and you're not getting laid." He laughs, then goes serious again. "You do what you got to do to survive, Jake. These are tough times."

Who could argue with that? The cops? The preacher? I hadn't been to church since the layoffs. The cops and preachers had jobs, anyway. Their arguments were meaningless.

"Why do you think I kept taking your bets? I cut off everyone else a long time ago."

"I did wonder that."

"This is a career opportunity, Jake. And it might be your last fuckin' one."

"I'll do it."

Gardocki nods. He tells me he'll pick me up later and we'll go for a ride. He tells me to wear nice clothes. He hands me five twenty-dollar bills.

I walk out of the office and get back in my car, not with the heavy heart of a man who has agreed to compromise all his values, but with the soaring high of a man who has gotten a job.

"Here's how it's going to work," Gardocki says.

We are at La Cocina, a pricey Italian restaurant nearly a half-hour from town. I haven't had a decent meal in months, and I'm paying more attention to the menu than to anything else around me. I can't believe my luck. This morning, I woke up expecting another day of nothing, and tonight I'm at a classy restaurant having gnocchi appetizers and a bottle of Merlot. Even if I bailed out of the whole thing, I'd still have this meal to remember.

"Next Saturday," Gardocki says, "eight days from now, I'm going out of town for the weekend. I've got a friend in Denver I'm going to go visit."

"Okay," I tell him. I pour myself another glass of wine.

"My wife will be home that night. She always stays home on Saturdays. It's my night out. She's having an affair with an airline pilot, and he's always in town. He's going to have to leave about nine o'clock. Plane to catch. You go in through the back door, shoot her with this gun I'm going to give you, and walk home."

"The back door will be open?"

"Doesn't close right. We live up a dirt road about a mile from anywhere, so I haven't bothered fixing it. No crime out that way." He smiles to himself. "Until Saturday. If you have to make noise, that's fine. Don't let her get a phone call off to the police first, that's really your only concern."

I nod.

"I've been planning this for eight months, Jake. I've got everything figured out."

"That's very reassuring."

"You're the guy for the job. From day one, I knew it had to be you."

I find this flattering. Being considered the ideal hit man might not seem like a compliment to most people, but to a man who has been out of work for nine months, having someone respect you for any reason is high praise. That's what you miss most about work. There's the money, of course, but it's also the idea that you are worth something to someone. When you miss a day, people call your house to find out where you are. If I died in my apartment now, I'd be pretty smelly before anyone came looking. Probably Tommy, who'd have noticed I hadn't been around to steal cigarettes in a while.

"You also have to make sure no one finds you on the way home. Don't smoke outside my house"

and leave cigarette butts around. They can do things now with DNA, all that shit. Don't leave boot prints in my house, either. ~~Wrap rags around your feet so they can't get a clear boot print, especially if it's snowing.~~"

The waitress comes up and brings our food, and Gardocki changes the subject so deftly it leaves me worried. He's too good at deception, and I'm in a life-or-death pact with him. "And Favre, I'm not sure how much longer he's going to last. The Packers now aren't the same Packers we saw in the Super Bowl two years in a row." He says this in the same voice he has just used talking about the murder of his wife. The waitress tells us to enjoy our meal and walks off, and Gardocki continues, without missing a beat, "I've got your gambling stuff worked out, too."

"How do you mean?" I stare at my steaming bowl of baked ziti, fork ready.

"I'm leaving a line blank on my betting sheets. You're going to place a fifty-eight hundred dollar bet on the Jets-Bills game this Sunday. Whoever wins, I'll just fill that in as your bet. Minus the vig, I'll owe you exactly five grand. That's how you explain coming into the money to everyone you know."

I nod.

"Do you have any problems with this?"

"I understand everything. I'll do a good job."

"That's not what I mean."

"Problems? You mean moral problems?"

"Yeah." Gardocki is waiting to tear into his food, but is staring at me patiently.

"Yes."

Gardocki nods. "Good," he says. "Good answer. If you'd said no, I'd know you were lying. Do you think these problems are going to stop you from doing a good job?"

"No."

"We'll talk about the deeper issues later. For now, just kill my wife and we'll all be happier."

We begin to eat.

I have lied to Ken Gardocki. I don't have any moral problems.

I was aware the question was loaded when he asked, that he was looking for a specific answer. I knew he knew me well enough to suspect I would be morally torn, and I wanted to appear predictable to him, safe. I didn't want Gardocki's big fear to be that I will suddenly find Jesus when I am standing in the kitchen, pointing the gun at his wife's head. I have a feeling I'm going to do a much better job than he thinks. I might discover hidden talents.

The fact is, my morality is all but gone. My own life was taken from me by a twist of fate, an economic whim, a stroke of a pen in some office in New York City. My town is destroyed, my girlfriend is gone, my friends and I are constantly broke. Somebody killed me and my town, and I'm sure they're not tossing and turning about it. Why should I tear my hair out over Corinne Gardocki?

Killing other people, now the idea has been broached, doesn't seem like that much of a stretch. Corinne Gardocki. I've never met the woman. What little I know about her comes from barroom rumors. About five years ago, I placed a bet with Gardocki in a bar, and afterwards got to drinking with some of his older acquaintances. They were all guys from the factory, metal workers who were just a few months from retirement, and the conversation this night turned to Gardocki's new wife, Corinne. She was a stripper at a so-called gentleman's club up Highway 40, and Gardocki had laid eyes on her one night and determined that she would be his next wife, replacing the one who had

passed away from cancer some six years before. Gardocki had been infatuated, had bought her all kinds of presents and visited her constantly. After the stripper's don't-appear-too-eager mandatory nine-week waiting period, she became his wife.

The conversation at the bar that night had been mostly derisive of the new Gardocki marriage. Most of the metalworkers were laughing about it, making jokes about her fucking ole Ken to death and then keeping his plush new house, the product of twenty years of factory work and twenty years of bookmaking. Most of these older guys said they didn't trust her. They talked about how sweet Ken's first wife had been and how reptilian this one was in comparison. At the time, I figured it was just jealousy. Now, having entered into a contract to kill her only five years later, evidently these older guys had seen something that Gardocki had missed.

Maybe none of it is true. Maybe Corinne Gardocki spends her days volunteering at the homeless shelter and the affair with the airline pilot is a product of Gardocki's aging paranoia. Maybe the "airline pilot" is her brother. The fact is, it doesn't matter much to me. She is going to die because I have been laid off from a profitable factory in the middle of my career. She is going to die because my girlfriend left me because I can't deal with life in the unemployment line. Corinne Gardocki is a dead woman because some Wall Street whiz kid decided our factory could turn a higher profit if it was situated in Mexico. Catch you later, Corinne. Any moral problems? Not really.

* * *

I go down and see Tommy at the convenience store, and he has great news for me.

"Jake, one of my counter kids got shot last night," he tells me. "We've got a job opening here."

Yesterday, this would have been great news. Yesterday, I would have started crying with gratitude that Tommy had offered me, had reserved for me, the \$5.75 an hour position as a convenience store clerk. Today, I don't know what to say, because I have ninety-seven dollars in my pocket and I had gone down there to have Tommy steal me cigs so he would think I was still broke. I couldn't let anybody know I had money until after the supposed bet went down, when there would be a legitimate explanation. So my plan had been to continue my usual broke behavior for the rest of the week. Now this creates a problem. If I say I'll take the job, and Tommy needs me Saturday night, how do I kill Corinne Gardocki if I have to work at a convenience store?

Tommy mistakes my silence for glee-related shock, and he tells me the story of the shooting. Apparently, the cops came last night to haul off one of Tommy's two employees, who was trafficking marijuana and cocaine out of the store. He had been squealed on by some kid who had been busted with an eighth, and when the cops came for him he grabbed a gun the store stashed under the counter and ran off through the parking lot. One of the cops saw him with the gun and winged him. If my cab wasn't cut off I might have seen this on the news, if the newspeople even bothered reporting stuff like this any more.

"That's great, Tommy," I say, my voice lacking the required enthusiasm. I have eight hundred dollars coming to me, I don't need to be wearing an apron and making coffee for truck drivers and forking over cigs to housewives for three fifty a pack. But Tommy looks delighted for me. So I've gone from having nothing to do all day to having to juggle my schedule. "When do you want me to start?"

"Today would be great. Come back at five. I can probably squeeze you in as an assistant manager. That's six fifty an hour."

"Great, thanks, man. I appreciate it." I know that the kid who got shot, the drug dealer, was the one who worked the overnight shift. So Tommy's probably going to expect me to work overnight

Saturday, and I have to make up an excuse to get Saturday off. But what excuse can I use? Tommy knows I'm broke and have nothing to do, ever. I couldn't afford a date even if I had one, and Tommy knows all the girls I know, so even if I said I was going out with one he'd mention it to her if he saw her. Now this is getting complicated.

I need someone to vouch for me as being busy Saturday so I can request it off. The obvious choice is Ken Gardocki, but he's going to be out of town. Besides, it's best if I use Gardocki's name as little as possible in the next few weeks, and limit my contact with him. Even if Gardocki provides me with an alibi, that'll look worse than no alibi at all because the alibi could obviously be traced back to Gardocki. All this is going through my mind as I stare, with an expression of forced joy, at Tommy.

It dawns on me for the first time that being a contract killer is more than just pulling a trigger.

"Hey, man, can I borrow a pack of smokes until my first paycheck?"

Tommy nods and grins. He gets them for me. Then he slaps me on the shoulder. "You and me, man. Workin' together again."

I get home just as the phone is ringing, and as my mind is buzzing with thoughts of my new career, I answer it without first checking the caller ID. It is a debt collector, one of many I have been avoiding lately.

"Mr. Jake Skowran?" I realize immediately I have made a mistake.

"Yes, this is me." I make another one. When in debt, never admit to being yourself on the phone.

"This is Mike Murty from Consolidated Finances." His voice is cold and humorless. I hate that, the rudeness with which they begin. I swear, if there was a single one of these guys who didn't forgo the formalities, who chatted with me for a bit, asked me how my day was going, I'd almost be tempted to care that I owed their company a lot of money. "You have a \$3,189.66 outstanding balance on your Visa account, and we haven't had a payment from you for four months. What are you going to do about that?"

"Hold on," I say. "Let me get a cigarette." I fumble around, find my lighter, light the cigarette, exhale, and sit down on the couch. Mike Murty waits patiently. "Now, what were you saying?"

He repeats the same information in the same tone, and asks me the same question. What am I going to do about it? I don't know. Get used to it eventually, I guess.

"I've been out of work for nine months," I tell him. "I got laid off. Everyone in my town got laid off."

There is a silence.

"Mr. Skowran," he says. "This debt isn't going to go away. We need some kind of payment, something to show good faith. Then we can set you up with a payment plan."

"I'm on unemployment," I tell him.

"Unless you can give us something, we're going to have to file a judgment against you. That's going to effect your credit"

He rambles on. I'm not listening. I lie down on the couch and look at the dust outline where my TV used to be. The entertainment center is empty, the stereo gone, too. I can see my breath frosting up into the cool air. The heat has been cut off. Some guy in an office hundreds of miles away writing bad things about me on a computer is the least of my problems.

"I'd like a promise from you that we can expect at least one hundred dollars by the end of the month or we're going to have to take action," he says.

Something comes over me. I am a contract killer now, I don't have to take shit from anyone. I

have a job, I'll be coming into money soon. I'm not going to spend another day avoiding people because I owe them money. I owe *them*, they want to talk to *me*. This is a position of strength.

"Do you remember elementary school?" I ask him.

There is a pause, then he says, "Mr. Skowran? I asked about a payment."

"I asked you if you remembered elementary school."

"Mr. Skowran, I'd like to stay on the subject here. Are you or are you not going to be able—"

"Because I wanted to know if this was it."

He is curious now. "If this was what?"

"Is this what you dreamed of doing when you were in elementary school? Was this your little boy's daydream? Did you stare out of the window of your first grade class and think, one day, one of these days, I'm going to call up people who have been laid off and pester the fuck out of them so they could give their unemployment checks to a giant corporation that charges TWENTY-SIX FUCKING PERCENT INTEREST PLUS LATE FEES"

The phone is dead. Mike Murty doesn't want to hear my irrational screaming. Mike Murty has other people to torment. Maybe there is an unwed mother somewhere in Tennessee he can convince to send him half her food stamps. But me, I feel good. For the first time in months, I feel powerful. All the fear and worry have turned into a hard core of hate, and it has a life of its own.

Jake Skowran is back.

TWO

A sixteen-year-old kid named Jughead shows me around the Gas'n'Go and explains how to use the cash register while Tommy goes home for dinner. He doesn't make eye contact with me once and he mumbles, but fortunately Tommy has provided me with a corporate pamphlet which outlines my responsibilities. I can't understand anything Jughead says, but things are easy to figure out. The Gas'n'Go uses a scanner for everything, so I don't have to know prices, and the register totals everything. My main job is to make sure people don't shoplift or try to shoot me.

Because of the events of last night, the gun which the store usually keeps behind the counter is in a police evidence room, so if anyone does try to shoot me, the plan, I gather, is for me to try to conceal my main arteries. I'm also supposed to be comforted by the fact that surveillance cameras, with which the Gas'n'Go is liberally sprinkled, will catch people in the act of shooting me. The fact that the surveillance tapes are in an unlocked room which anyone could get to by stepping over my body makes the whole forty thousand dollar system worthless, to my mind, but this is corporate security. This is them taking care of us.

Before the factory closed, there wasn't a single armed robbery in this town for as long as I can remember. Since the layoffs, the late-night convenience stores have become fortresses, the six-dollar-an-hour nightshift workers there the equivalent of combat veterans. Every one of them can tell a story of a gun battle. Jughead doesn't seem the least bit fazed by hearing the police have just gunned down his co-worker. When I ask him about it, he shrugs and says, "Agasta mel."

"What?"

"I gotta stock milk. Washaresta."

"Watch the register?"

"Yeah." He is gone.

I sit by the register and read my pamphlet, a nineteen-page tiny-print roman à clef describing the exciting and rewarding career on which I have just been launched. The cover shows a stunning blonde wearing a Gas'n'Go uniform smiling broadly as she hands change to a well-dressed, beaming customer. Inside, I learn it is only a matter of time before I move up the Gas'n'Go food chain to become regional director of all the Gas'n'Gos in the Midwest.

A car pulls up, an old orange BMW covered with rust spots. I eagerly await my first customer, but before I can pleasantly welcome him to Gas'n'Go, Jughead comes out from the back and says, "Reddonplay."

"What?"

"You gotta write down the plate."

“What plate?”

~~Jughead is clearly irritated with me. He pushes past me and pulls out from under the counter a small keyboard. He looks at a tiny color video monitor and types in the car's license plate number, then puts the keyboard back. “All old cars,” he tells me. “Anything suspicious.”~~

“You think he's suspicious?”

“It's an old car.”

“But he's already on the monitor. If he does anything the cops'll get him.”

Jughead reaches down and shows me the keyboard, which is hooked into the wall with a thick black cord. “Gusta cops,” he says. It goes to the cops.

Miraculous. Modern technology at its best. When I type in a plate number, the plate is run through a police computer. If it's a stolen car, or a car registered to someone with an outstanding bench warrant, a police car is immediately and automatically dispatched to the Gas'n'Go. Jughead stares fondly at the keyboard. He finds this technology intriguing, and it gives him a sense of comfort. For my part, all I see is the increased likelihood of a shoot-out right in the store. I make a mental note never to use this feature.

The customer, a middle-aged, potbellied, unshaven man with grease on his hands, comes in and hands Jughead a five dollar bill for \$2.97 in gas. He doesn't look at either of us. Jughead doesn't look at him as he hands him \$2.03. No words are exchanged as the man leaves, pushing the glass door open with his blackened hands, smudging the glass.

“Yagattaclindor,” Jughead says, as he goes back to stocking the milk. I gotta clean the door. “Agasta mel.”

Jughead goes home at seven because there's a state law prohibiting minors from working at night. The only other employee on Tommy's roster was shot last night. So tonight, that leaves me here until seven in the morning, a fourteen-hour shift for someone who doesn't have any idea how anything in the store works.

I wonder if the Gas'n'Go CEOs are aware that things like this occur, their hundred thousand dollar business left in the hands of the likes of Jughead and myself. Judging by their pamphlet, I'd guess not. I think they honestly believe that we smile a lot and wear pressed uniforms and our customers are full of delight. I'm wearing torn three-year-old jeans and I'm happy if the people I have to change to don't have guns. I wonder how this division began, the line between the pamphlet and reality. Did the suits who wrote this never visit one of their stores? Perhaps it's just this store, in this wrecked town, which is an embarrassment to the Gas'n'Go empire. I suspect not. I suspect all of America is slowly sinking into moral and financial decay while the pamphlet-writers sit in their offices with a view of rivers or valleys and make a sport of pretending not to notice. What difference does it make to them, unless there is actually a revolution? This pamphlet was written to pacify stockholders. I tear it into small pieces in front of a surveillance camera, and as the hours pass, I tear the pieces smaller still, until, by three in the morning, I have confetti, and by sunrise, dust.

Throughout the night I get customers and I learn things. An overweight woman in her fifties with unwashed, stringy black hair comes in at two in the morning and buys three gallons of whole milk. She hands me what looks like a credit card, but instead of a bank logo, this is plain white and has a faded government seal on it. I look at her suspiciously.

“Run it,” she says.

I shrug and swipe it through the credit card machine. Nothing happens. She looks at me, I look at her.

“Are you new?” she asks me. She is wheezing with the effort of carrying the milk to the counter.

“Yeah.”

~~“That’s an EFS card. You have to push the EFS button on the machine.”~~ She smiles at me patiently.

I figure she’s a mental patient, and this card is probably an access card to a parking garage in Iowa. I decide to let her have the milk. She obviously likes milk a lot and we’ve got plenty.

“It’s okay,” I tell her. “Just take the milk.”

“There’s a switch, an EFS switch,” she says, getting impatient, or annoyed at being treated like a charity case. Then I see a tiny switch at the bottom of the credit card machine marked “EFS.” I click the switch, and I’m amazed when a receipt prints up. She signs a copy and walks off, limping under the weight of three gallons of milk which she appears to be carrying home through the cold. It must be for a family’s breakfast. I look at the receipt, and it says, “Electronic Food Stamps, Inc.”

Electronic Food Stamps, Incorporated. Not Electronic Food Stamps, but Electronic Food Stamps Incorporated. This is a business. Somebody’s making money designing ways to get government aid to people who have been tossed aside. Some money grubbing software designer has a government contract because we all lost our jobs.

That’s the biggest insult of all, that we are being fed off. The destruction of my life, my town, represents a business opportunity to someone else. Nine months ago, this woman walking through the cold was probably a factory employee, or perhaps the wife of one, and her children had health insurance and she had a car and she bought milk in the daytime, with money. I am suddenly filled with the urge to find the fucker who owns this EFS company and shoot him right in the fucking face. I feel that someone owes me an explanation, not a corporate public relations-type explanation, but a down-on-your-knees-begging-for-your-life explanation, which is the only kind worth listening to.

But he’s not the only one. From now on, I have to make a list of people who need to be shot in the face. There needs to be a real bloodbath, to equal the financial and emotional one which has just been drawn for all of us.

Tommy comes in at six thirty and puts coffee on and looks around. During the night I have mopped the floor three times, cleaned all the glass, scrubbed the coffee pots and polished every inch of stainless steel.

“The place looks good, Jake,” he says. “How do you like it so far?”

“It’s easy enough.”

“Does the night shift bother you?”

“I’ll get used to it.”

“Got any questions about anything?”

“How do you understand Jughead?”

Tommy laughs. “He’s a good kid. He’s worked here since his dad got laid off at the plant. Jughead’s the only person in the family with a job.”

“Who was his dad?”

“A truck driver. Johnny something. Prezda, that’s it. Johnny Prezda. You remember him?”

I think back. I can’t remember much about the factory, the faces fade away more each day. It has become a distant memory, and sometimes I walk around and wonder if there ever really was a factory at the center of this town. Did we ever all get off work at five on Friday afternoons and head over to Tulley’s and drink and laugh and debate whether or not to split an eight ball of coke? Did I ever have a girlfriend named Kelly who was beautiful and sweet, and did she and I ever go for long walks at night?

when it was starting to rain and talk about having children and what kind of car to buy? I shake my head. "I don't remember him."

Tommy shrugs. "See you at five?"

"Five it is."

On my walk home, I pass Kristy's, the breakfast place where Kelly and I used to go on Sunday mornings. There was usually a line out the door by nine o'clock. The place still isn't boarded up, but can tell it soon will be. There are three cars in a parking lot that was built for one hundred. A black man in a shoddy jacket with a worn woolen cap is waiting outside the front door to beg customers for change, but there aren't any.

A freezing rain has started, and the man calls to me. "Hey pardner, can you spare some change? I'm trying to catch a bus."

I know this is a lie and I don't care. He's bummed money off me maybe twenty times and he never remembers me. He's been saving up to catch this bus for several years now. It must be an expensive fare. I've snagged a few quarters from the register during the night, and I give them to him.

"Thanks, man." He takes the quarters and points to Kristy's, behind him. "Don't nobody come here no more."

"Costs money, man. Nobody's got any."

"'Cause the factory closed?"

"I figure."

"I gotta get out of this town."

"Good luck with that."

I walk home and think about a guy from the plant I used to work with named Tim Gregg. He was forty-six and he had a wife and two children, and about a month after the factory closed, because I was a department manager, the company sent me to a list of employee's houses to make sure they had begun receiving a government benefit. It was three days' work, so I took it. Gregg was the last person on my list for that day, and when I got to his house, I found him in the garage attaching a rubber hose to his exhaust pipe. He looked pale. He had been trying to asphyxiate himself in his garage, only the hose had come off and the garage was worn and full of holes and didn't make for much of a gas chamber. He was working on the problem when I showed up, and tried to act as if he was just tidying up the place.

"Tim, man," I said to him. "Are you trying to kill yourself?"

He just sat and looked at me and didn't say anything. Then he signed the papers I needed him to sign and he waited for me to leave, so that he could go back to finishing himself off. I wouldn't leave.

"You can go now," he said.

I knew I couldn't leave. If I heard about him dead the next day I knew I wouldn't be able to live with myself. And I couldn't call the cops, because all the cops ever did around here was give people DUIs and generally piss on you. Nobody in my town called the cops, it just wasn't something you did. So I hung out, and we talked about sports. After a while, he realized I wasn't going to leave, at least not until he yanked the rubber tubing out of the exhaust pipe and opened up all the garage doors. We talked for a couple of hours, never touching on any subject like the plant closing. It was mostly about Brett Favre or Elway. Then he started undoing stuff while we were talking, pulling duct tape off the holes in the roof and unplugging the hose from the exhaust. Then his wife came home, and I chatted with her for a bit, then left.

The last I'd heard of the Greggs, they had moved to Minneapolis to live with Tim's mother.

~~The thing I remember about it is talking to him, thinking, I don't even know this guy. I've never~~ worked a shift with him, but I'm going to make it a point to see that he doesn't kill himself. I'm going to look after him, if only for a day, because he's not a whole lot different from me. What he does after today, that's his business, but he's not killing himself with me standing here pretending it isn't happening.

That decency in me is gone now, along with the Greggs and the factory. If I showed up at his house today and he had a noose around his neck and a gun in his mouth, I'd just get the signature and be gone in time not to hear the shot. I gave the bum some quarters because I had them in my pocket, but if he spends it on bad smack and is rotting in an alley by the time I get home, I don't care. If he catches the mythical bus and reunites with his loved ones after years of begging for change outside Kristy's, I don't care. Either is fine with me.

I don't care anymore. You got your problems and I got mine.

I go to sleep on my couch, exhausted for the first time in months, exhausted from doing a job, from working and earning money. The sleep is sweet and refreshing. I am wakened from it at about ten in the morning by a phone call from Denise at Consolidated Financial.

Denise has a voice so gentle and sexy she should be working a different kind of 1-800 number. The people at Consolidated Financial must have thought, after I screamed at Mike Murty, that they could catch more flies with honey. It works. I'm so relaxed and surprised to hear a sweet female voice on the phone that I don't hang up, even after she introduces herself as an agent of the collection service.

"The reason I'm calling, Mr. Skowran, is that we have an outstanding debt to resolve," she says, only she's making it sound sexy. Resolve my debt, baby, oh yeah. "If you don't take care of this, you could have some difficulty down the road."

"Like what?" I ask sleepily.

"Well, it could be difficult for you to buy a house."

"Buy a house?"

"Yes," she continues. "It would be difficult to have a mortgage application accepted with this on your credit record"

And I'm off.

"Lady, I make SIX FIFTY A FUCKING HOUR IN A GODDAMNED CONVENIENCE STORE! DO YOU THINK I GO HOUSE SHOPPING ON MY DAYS OFF? DO YOU HONESTLY THINK THAT PEOPLE MAKING SIX FIFTY AN HOUR—" I hear a dial tone. These people called me and aggravated me on a FUCKING SUNDAY MORNING! Don't they ever rest? Is nothing sacred?

No, it isn't. Not around here. No church for me. I remember the week the news of the layoffs hit they had a minister come and tell us that if anyone wanted to talk, he'd be there for them. A bunch of guys went down to talk to him, and they came back and told the same story. The reverend apparently had his own agenda. He was a minister hired by the company, sent in from New York. They flew in a minister to make sure nobody was going to show up the next day with an M-16 and start mowing down people in Personnel, which had happened when they closed a plant in Kansas. As for providing actual comfort, he couldn't have cared less. He was mostly interested in our gun collections.

Now, when the people around here go to church, they do so with the sense that they have pissed God off, and are trying to make things right again. They don't go out of gratitude for their blessings,

but out of a fear that things will get even worse if they don't start groveling to a higher power in a hurry. Nobody wants lightning bolts or floods slamming into them as they shuffle back from the unemployment office.

Tonight is my second and final day of training with Jughead. After this, I'll be left on my own. Because it is Sunday night, Jughead explains in his mumbling dialect, tomorrow morning will be much busier than last night, so I have more setting up to do. People will be coming in early to buy cigarettes, get coffee and gas, maybe microwave a sticky bun on their way to jobs they still have. We're close to a highway. Truckers passing through often stop by, and the coffee machines have to be filled and ready to go. Even though it is illegal, Jughead has worked a few overnight shifts and he shows me some tricks and shortcuts.

"Allscontdadror early," he tells me. Always count my drawer early, so I don't have to do it when people start showing up at around six a.m. The drawer I count at five will be the one Tommy uses on the day shift. He shows me how to get the backup filters of ground coffee ready, so starting new coffee to brew is a two-second affair rather than a minute and a half. After he has shown me this and a number of other little tricks for staying ahead of the game, he hangs around, skittish.

"Everything all right?" I ask.

"Mmmph," he nods. He is looking around nervously, making me feel like a girl he wants to ask to the prom. I go about my business, expecting him to leave at any second, but he doesn't. I'm organizing the candy racks and he stands and watches me.

"What's up?" I ask.

"You friend a Tommy, right?"

"Yeah, I'm a friend of Tommy's."

"I need a favor." Apparently needing a favor necessitates that he speak clearly, because suddenly he can.

"What?"

"Tommy would get mad," he says, and stares at his shoes.

"How mad would Tommy get?"

"Labor cost. He's always talking about labor cost."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"He hired you as an assistant manager, right?"

"Right."

Jughead nods wisely. "That means you get salary. You don't get overtime. He can work you ninety hours a week, and you get an average of whatever he promised you as an hourly wage. But I'm a minor. He's got to pay me overtime."

Well, I'll be damned. Tommy fucked me. I guess he had to. This is his job, and the corporate suits give him a bonus for no overtime. What am I going to do? Quit? Maybe I will after I've killed Corinne Gardocki. And perhaps a few others. "What's the favor, kiddo?"

"I want you to punch me out about a half hour after I've left." His face is guilt-ridden and red, and he stares at his shoes with shame as he relates this. "Tony, the guy who got shot, used to do it for me. We'd help each other out. But I gotta be somewhere on Sunday nights. That'll give me two hours of overtime, which is the minimum I need every two weeks to pay my dad a hundred dollars a week."

This poor kid. Where do they come from, people like this? A guy who is so ashamed to ask for a tiny break, who doesn't even expect it. He goes to high school full time, works a full-time job, and

still doesn't feel he deserves a little extra so he can pay his dad rent money. "How about three hours overtime. Think that'll help?"

Jughead smiles, something I didn't believe possible. He turns to go.

"There's something you can do for me, though," I tell him as he is gathering his books from behind the counter. He studies sometimes when it is slow.

"Wozzat?" We're back to Jughead-ese now I'm asking the favor.

"Next Saturday night. I've got some shit I have to do. It'll take about four hours, but Tommy's got me scheduled. I need you to come in from about ten until two in the morning. Don't touch the timecards, I'll just give you cash. Fifty bucks for four hours."

Jughead thinks. He's sharp enough not to ask questions. He probably figures I'm running off to fuck someone's wife, rather than kill her, an impression I'm going to foster by putting on cologne for my Saturday night shift. "Fifty bucks?"

"Fifty big ones. Four easy hours."

"Deal."

"Deal." We nod at each other. He is gone.

The shift goes smoothly, but I notice something. Almost every customer fucks up the store somehow. Some put their nasty hands on my freshly Windexed glass doors, some pick up things, examine the price, then put them back in a different spot. Almost all of them track dirt around on my mopped floor. I don't even want to talk about the ones who ask for the key to the restroom.

This, I realize, is something that I have missed about working. I actually have something to care about. I was good at managing the loading dock, I checked invoices thoroughly, made sure every truck going out had the correct items on it. In twelve years on the dock, I got maybe half a dozen complaints from the receiving warehouses, and a few of those I think somebody miscounted on the other end. If something went missing in the warehouse, I'd spend hours trying to locate it. If guys working the forklifts misplaced things, I'd make sure they knew about it when it was discovered. And here, things are no different. I want things in my workplace to be right.

Working for the man has nothing to do with it. If the head of the Gas'n'Go empire called tomorrow and told me I was getting laid off again, the quality of my work wouldn't suffer. I wouldn't stop cleaning and start stealing, like they think I would, which is why, if layoffs are ever necessary, you never find out until the last second. They consider every worker ant among them a potential felon dying to get his hands on their stuff. But me and the guys I worked with weren't there for them, or even for our paychecks. We were there for ourselves, for the knowledge that we could work as a team and get things accomplished. And that was the worst part of getting laid off, the sudden realization that the team was a mirage, conjured up by management to get more work out of us for less pay. The things we accomplished meant nothing to anyone but us.

A guy comes in and looks at a candy bar. He spends three minutes looking at it, then throws it—throws it, not places it—back with the wrong candy bars. Then he comes to the counter.

"Hey man, you got any beef jerky?"

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why?" He is a skinny, shifty-looking guy, not young enough to be a kid but hardly a man. His thin face and the worn tattoos on his bony arms make me imagine he has a girlfriend who he beats. "'Cause I want to buy some."

"Are you sure?"

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