



11-15-2015

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Tom Larsen

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### Recommended Citation

Larsen, Tom (2015) "Inside Work," *Westview*: Vol. 31 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol31/iss1/3>

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# Inside Work

Tom Larsen

**The TV flashes** but makes no sound. Sedalia rocks the baby in her arms and reads the closed captions too slowly, maybe three words before the next lines come up. I watch her lips move, and I want to say something hurtful. Stupid Sedalia, refusing even to try until it's too late. Until all the problems that can arise have arisen and even the man in Family Services has lost his puzzling interest. I want to lie here and pile it on, talking in that snide rasp, the words sagging in monotone, as is my way. Felix Uncle, your humble narrator.

"It's not like they say, little *mamere* with first born," I tell her. "It is not always the mistake they make it out to be. You will still be young when Sam is grown with his juvee record and his ADD. You will get a second chance."

"*Disentise paola, mana Felix,*" she warns the kid about me.

Outside the sirens start up again. The nursing home has an emergency response language of its own. The short, warbling exchange is an inside joke, I'm convinced. Sedalia glances to the window and makes the sign of the cross.

I want to say, "And in the end you will have someone to pay the cable bill, providing he doesn't steal the television. Look at him, *mamere*. His first hot car hasn't even been built yet."

But I don't. The world will see to Sedalia soon enough and without my help, already dealing with her by proximity of decay. The hole in the floor beneath the crib is stuffed with old newspaper. A ball of it crumbled to dust in my hand. Another showed a strip of baseball standings, the National League reduced to the original eight. Brooklyn, Milwaukee, waiting all those years for Sedalia and Sam. The Polo Grounds pre-Willy Mays, painful enough, even to the ignorant.

Edgar calls up to me, but I ignore him, also my way. Edgar can tell from my silence whether I am home. When I am home my silence speaks clearly. It says *shut up, Edgar. Your fast track finaglings don't interest me*. He wants to come up and look at Sedalia's breasts, but I will do my best to foil him.

"And to think, Sedalia. Now at least you have a chance, slim as it may be, to profit from this mistake that is no mistake. You are in the running. Sammy the poet laureate, the Speaker of the House, the number one draft choice. It could happen, they tell me."

She reads, "... order now ...guaran ...tee"

"Felix, it's me, Edgar!" as if I would mistake him. "I have work for you, Felix."

Edgar has been here for three years, long enough to take a rung up the ladder. After a year, there are jobs the woolies will no longer do. Of course, I

am the exception. When you are fifty-six with one gift and many habits to feed, there is no ladder. I go to the window.

“You would have me rake rocks?” I snarl down to him.

“No rocks, Felix,” Edgar waves his hands like an umpire. “Inside work.”

I try to think what sort of inside work would be worse than raking rocks. There are more difficult things, surely, involving established procedures and tools that are beyond me. But raking rocks is interminable. Each stroke produces more rocks. Progress is measured in piles, not in the absence of rocks. Many piles are better than fewer piles, but the rocks are forever with you. The trick is to dislodge those that are visible and smooth over the rest. It’s a trick my people learned well raking the rocks of our own country’s rich, but, for me, it goes against the grain. I have no knack for it. There is always a rock that cries out to be raked.

“Let me come up, Felix.” Edgar wheedles.

“Sedalia?” I consult her.

“Order now ... money back ...” her lips wrinkled in distaste.

I cross back to the sofa for my cigarettes, and baby Sam watches me. Impossibly young, thoroughly unemployable, absence of memory, the blissful state. My grandmother was the lumiere of her village. As deathbed intermediary and advocate for the doomed, she put but one question to her charges. If they could live the same life again, would they? It is a question that cannot be answered in advance, as it is the nature of man to be hopeful and the nature of events to surprise us. In the end, all but one elected to decline. “Life is a disappointing business,” my grandmother would say. Better to be a cat. Sleep life away without a pang of guilt.

“Sedalia doesn’t feel up to it.”

“Up to what?”

“She’s not the best judge of character, but she doesn’t care for you, Edgar.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Anyway, that’s not love, my friend.”

“I wouldn’t screw Sedalia with your dick.”

“Have it your own way.”

We walk the pretty streets across town, skirting the low rent district to avoid relatives. Edgar’s got his business hat on and a small notepad in his shirt pocket. While it is true he can negotiate a better price than we can, Edgar’s percentage knocks it back down to subsistence level. We would like to kill him for this, but then we’d have no one to blame. He blows off a couple of cousins scratching lotto tickets in Jolene’s doorway and leads me across the parking lot to a sad row of houses. The one in the middle has a car parked in front with an older white

man at the wheel. The window slides down as we approach.

“That’s it?” the man looks me up and down.

“I can get all the help you need, but you must make a better offer,” Edgar tells him.

“You know the bid is not negotiable. I got a dry wall crew coming in on Monday, and this place has to be ready.”

“Well then, we should let him get to work, eh?”

The man and Edgar move out of earshot, and their sly laughter tells me I’m being screwed. The man is in love with his wife but suspects that she’s being unfaithful. Edgar is not in love with anyone, though at times he pretends to be. The thing is, I can follow love to the source. It is my gift. I see it in the eyes and hear it in the voice. It began as a knack for reading faces but soon went deeper. My reception is as clear as the WAMU radio signal, and, in matters of the heart, I am as infallible as the Pope.

When the man drives off, Edgar turns me to the door.

“Don’t try to get to know her, Felix,” he knocks more sharply than I would have, startling the old woman already standing there.

“Mrs. Jessica,” Edgar calls through the storm door. “This man is here to remove your plaster.”

“I cannot do it.” I smile right at her.

“It’s OK, Felix,” Edgar squeezes my arm. “You’re just doing half.”

The door swings open a crack, and the woman fits her mouth to the gap. “Just one minute, boys. I’m on the telephone.”

“I have no tools, Edgar.”

“There’s a hammer up there and some trash cans. The dumpster will be here any minute.”

“I’m to carry the stuff downstairs in trash cans?”

“I told you, just half of it. They couldn’t get a chute.”

“It’s 95 degrees!”

The woman taps on the glass and pushes the phone through the opening. “It’s my son. He wants to talk to you.”

Edgar takes the phone and turns away from us. The voice on the line is loud and cranky. The woman pats at her hair and looks everywhere but at me. She loves a young man from her childhood, and her dreams are rich in detail. She also loves her son, but in a way that is barely detectable. No one knows I can follow the love, but then I am a man of many secrets.

“OK, Mrs. Jessica. He can start with the third floor.” Edgar fits the phone back through the crack, and we wait for the locks and latches.

I study the seam where the wall meets the ceiling. There is a clean swipe where my fingers cleared a cobweb and the husk of an insect dangles from a thread. I can hear the woman downstairs move from the hallway to the kitchen. Everything is ready, waiting.

I drive the claw end of the hammer into the highest point on the wall. The sum total of blows reduced by one, then two. Plaster rains down on me, crumbling onto my arm and into my eyes. Dust melts in my sweat, and grit settles in my scalp. I pull the hammer away, and the holes stare blankly. Two holes in a room no one uses, still time to walk away. The choice is mine, and, for a moment, I wonder what I will do.

Five solid whacks and the room fills with dust. I watch it swirl past the window, churning backwards as it catches a draft. I see it settle over the mantel and drift toward the open door. It will only get worse. Dust will fill the whole house, and the woman will blame me. Who else would she blame? I rifle through the drawers in an old bureau and find a box of plastic garbage bags and a roll of duct tape. Marveling at my luck, I tape the bags together and hang them over the doorway. Next, I grab a fan from the second floor bathroom and position it in the window blowing out. I move quickly, listening to the woman track me two floors below.

"We are all prisoners of history," I call down to her in my native tongue. "Myself, for example. Carried on the first wave of teeming refuse. The ladders of success to be built with our bones."

A board creaks as she is drawn to my words.

"Yourself, dear lady. A life trapped in an instant of regret. What was it you were thinking?"

Silence stretches. The dead bug twists. We take up our positions.

WHUMP! WHUMP! WHUMP!

"You can feel the things converging. Sense it in the pace of time, the beat of your heart, dear lady."

The wall puts up stiff resistance. I attack in short violent bursts, but the heat and dust send me scrambling to the window. I cough up great brown gobs and hack curses on my children's children. A shadow flickers down the stairway.

"My fate could not be averted, (hack, TOOHEY), but you ..." I pause for effect. "The way it all turned on a whim. The heart said yes, but the lips said ..."

Nothing.

I work from the waist up. Edgar has hired a shorter man for the rest, at a dollar less an hour. It is the sort of bamboozling that passes for American in the low rent district, along with the hats and notepads. In truth, Edgar just wants me out of the apartment to have a go at Sedalia.

"You must have considered the consequences," I slide into the dialect of my province. "A petty slight as your defining moment."

TV laughter clatters up the stairway.

"And THIS," I bury the hammer to the hilt, "...is not you. All this dreariness, where did it come from? But for one missed step, you would never have spent a night here."

The higher I go, the more direct the avalanche of debris. The shorter man will have to deal with lower back and knee strain, but blindness shouldn't be a problem for him. The steady sprinkling wedged inside the lids, scratching the surface, settling into corners, drying to black meaty pebbles.

"This house of unhappiness," WHUMP! THUNK! "Walls and floors steeped in longing and despair."

More coughing, godawful. I take the stairs to the second floor and snatch a pair of pantyhose from the shower curtain rod. The figure in the mirror is unrecognizable, teeth and eyes on a field of grime. I wrap the pantyhose around my face and tie it tightly behind my head. I finger her things, leaving smudges everywhere.

"He was yours for the taking, but you let him slip away." I scold her through the mesh. "If you had the choice to live it again, could you possibly bear it?"

I shovel the broken plaster into two rubber trash cans. They are half full, and I can barely move them. I can continue to work or wait for the dumpster and problems that will become readily apparent, assuming it ever comes. I stand gasping with my hands on my knees watching sweat puddle in the dust between my feet. A passing cloud plunges the room into shadows.

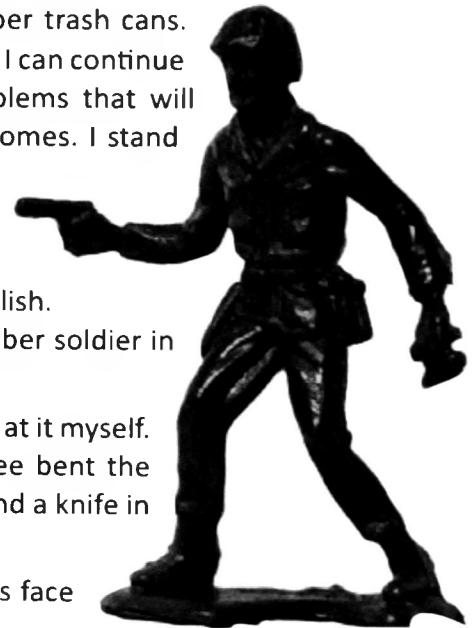
"Look... what I found," I speak to her in English. She looks from the television to the small rubber soldier in my hand.

"It is your son's. From another time." I look at it myself. The soldier is in a crawling position, one knee bent the other extended. He has a pistol in one hand and a knife in the other.

"David loved his army men," the woman's face softens.

"So lifelike, this one." I step closer, turning the tiny figure in my fingers. "Imagine, being frozen in this pose. Look." I hold it closer. "His face set in concentration. While our lives unfolded, he was up there, every minute of it. The rainy days, Christmas, always there."

She looks away. I have taken her where she mustn't go.



“Shall I leave him with you?”

She waves a hand dismissively.

The beams are old but sturdy. The wiring is from another time and should be replaced while the walls are open. A gum wrapper lies flat where the framer left it. The men who built this house, decades dead.

I follow the path of the sun through the windows. Light fills space long lost to darkness. I am conscious of this and of my role in it. Outside, the carillon plays “Greensleeves” while Edgar’s dumpster fails to show. I work until the rubble is knee deep then just leave it there. My shadow precedes me down the stairs. Sirens warble in the distance as I see myself out.

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