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More Workingman's Blues

Will Getelman

I used to waste a lot of time. I mean I wasted time for a living. It was a profession with me. I ran the welfare gigolo circuit, providing my services during the winter months, to unloved welfare mothers. (They do well, those welfare mothers. Make enough to have a live-in service person, as well as stay high all the time. Every five years or so, they need to get pregnant to keep from being canned by their employer, the Federal Government. The government insists that their poor single women have babies between the ages of zero and six, or else go out and get another job. A tough boss, Uncle Sam.) So in other words, in the winter I subcontracted for services, on a local level, from an official government contractor.

The welfare mother is a tough boss, too. She looks down on us poor gigolo's, because we work for her, because we're "just the help." We're scabs, no union to back us like the American Civil Liberties Union backs the mothers. We can be ejected unceremoniously from our duties, another scab in our place by next day, and freeze to death unnoticed in a boxcar off Railroad Street.

I kept working for my welfare mother after the winter was over, simply because we worked rather well together. She was a pretty sweet kid, for a government statistic. Say, why do you suppose the government wants to have paid, unionized, official poor, anyway. And only official mothers. Uncle Sam don't want any official fathers. Just uses scabs. I guess these things are for the management to decide, rather than the government poor themselves. It's like somebody said, "Yours is not to reason why. Yours is but to do or die!"

Well I'll tell you, I'd had about a bellyful of it, and that's for sure! So I went out and got me "The Toughest Job I've Ever Had."

I wasn't about to have this fine woman, my boss, and yes, I even called her my friend; wasn't about to sanction her playing handmaid to the lords of democracy like that. When

spring turned my fancy, I fancied a nice outdoor job making some real money, more than minimum wage in fact. I wanted to show this woman how the other half lives. I wanted to show her I wasn't just a human animal, a greasy monster out of control and run amok through her life, taking her like a desperado, scaring her and delighting her at the same time. Wasn't just her muscle on dope deals. I wanted to be her equal professionally and culturally, so that I, as a gigolo, could come out of the closet, look at my roots with pride, slap her five, and say, "Hey, baby, gigolo is beautiful."

I can see now looking back on it how threatened she must have felt, with me carrying around my own real live money. I didn't need her damn subcontract anymore. I had my hand in the private sector. I was just hanging around out of the pure goodness of my heart. I was chomping at my bit, and there was nobody's hands on the reins. She must have felt that she'd be bucked and left in the dust by the bronc too wild to ride. She didn't like my having the job one little bit.

I hunted for my job in the time honored way: hanging around in a workingman's bar at happy hour, getting soused and getting leads from guys who ought to know, guys on the cutting edge of the job scene, gainfully employed alcoholics. It fell out like this. I was having a drink, and I was approached by an acquaintance of mine, a guy by the name of "Ireland." He established heavy eye contact with me right away and let me know by certain things he did with his eyebrows, that what he had to say to me was very heavy, that he had a deal for me; we'd both be very wealthy men, if we had the guts, if we had the fortitude. He looked at me like he was a guy's sergeant from back in Vietnam, from the elite killer unit that the CIA denies all knowledge of; that never appeared on the CBS News. He's scouring the bars and honky tonks, that seethe with the seedy, to round up the old unit for one more mission, if we still had the guts for the wetwork; if we weren't the "over the hill gang."

That's the way old Ireland was coming on, and he hadn't said a word yet. What was this mission? I knew instinctively that it would be somehow unpleasant, that I certainly wouldn't

enjoy this mission. I wanted out already, but I was trapped, trapped like an insect by his staring, accusing, challenging eyes with their exclamation point eyebrows.

"Howdy. Heard you was lookin' for a job."

"Why Ireland, good to see you, bud. Yeah, I am on the lookout for a job, now that you mention it."

I could see he was going to enjoy, to savor, this moment. I knew in my guts that he was about to offer me "The Worst Job I Had Ever Had!"

It was, too. The deal was, that we had to be out to the railroad salvage company, with bag lunches and appropriate apparel for survival, at 6:30 A.M. next morning. We had to wait in the pre-dawn chill with the other jobless, sorry, mean-looking, under-loved applicants, hoping to get called onto the crew by reason of the unexplained disappearance of some guy who had had the job--up to here--and had failed to show up this morning.

Long about seven, a very angry-looking Mormon burst out the door of the trailer we jobless were huddled around like stand-ins at the filming of a Dickens story. He looked us all over, looked us up and down, remaining just plain pissed the whole time, and picked out of the slovenly crowd, me and Ireland. I felt the butterflies going insane in the pit of my stomach. I knew the mission was mine; knew it was going to be no picnic, despite the sack lunches; knew that if a guy missed one day, his job was gone. The Mormon had picked us because we had work gloves and sack lunches, not because of the lies we told him about our railroading experience. He needed alcoholic beasts of burden who would spend their meager wages right away on drink and would desperately cling to the job so they could stand tall down at the honky tonks, with their very own money. He could see right clean through Ireland and me. We followed him like subservient Negroes to the toolshed, where we filled out our W-2's. We were on!

We were loaded into the back of an industrial-sized dump truck with other gainfully employed winos, with our picks, bars, and other assorted tools of the trade. Then came a fifty mile ride through the dawn--wind-chill notwithstanding--to

our work site near Drummond. Ireland and I had gotten ourselves onto a crew that nobody stays on for long. They either get on another crew, or they go away some evening, get drunk and never come back. Our first experience was "pickin' spikes." We were handed black plastic buckets (I'd been wondering what those buckets were for, all the way out), and we shuffled after the more experienced denizens of the gulag to the roadbed. The day was warming up nicely by now. Getting darned warm, in fact.

It seems that another crew had been there before us, and had pulled all the spikes loose from the railroad ties using a "spike-pulling machine." It was left for us to pick up the loose spikes, every last one of them, bar none, and trot with them, bucket after bucket, to the moving dumptruck. Some lucky soul who got to be in the bed of the truck that morning would pull the weighty bucket off our rust dusted shoulders and onto the truck by grabbing the metal handle as we each trotted up. He'd dump the bucket of spikes, toss back the empty bucket, and it was off again for another load of spikes. This went on mile after mile, hour after hour, degree fahrenheit after degree centigrade, uphill and downhill, as if we were so many John Henry's, but working for the Indians instead of Whitemen, taking the railroad away instead of building it. We left in our wake the total undoing of what all the John Henry's had so furiously done. I had to chuckle about this as I picked those spikes. No one could see me chuckling, because I was hunched over, bent over those spikes, looking for every last one of them, bar none. If a guy was to stand up straight, to adjust his spinal column for a moment, he would attract the attention of the boss. And that was not a good thing to do. There were plenty of folks back at the trailer hoping a guy would try to straighten out his back, or get a drink of water from the truck, so they could have his job. I needed this job. I needed to outlast Ireland, at least, before I hit the road running. I had to show I could do more of a real man's work than that overstuffed Irishman. Besides, I needed the money for drinks, as well as for the little woman. Yes, and I needed to be independent of her. I stayed hunched, and picked those spikes.

I began to notice one little emaciated guy who seemed to be playing a game with me, trying to show me what a real spike picker could work like; running circles around me, the newcomer, who wouldn't know how to pick a spike if his mother was trapped underneath it. I didn't like his sweaty insinuations any more than I liked the escalating heat, which began to shimmer off the creosote roadbed, immersing us spike pickers in a mirage of misery. I figured I'd better show him who he was up against, work him into a malleable form. He was a card that had to be dealt with. I picked up my pace and began really running, not just trotting, with my buckets of spikes. I experimented with different styles of picking up the spikes, looking for the most efficient system. I noticed the wimp was also picking up his pace, not about to just roll over and play dead. As the two of us began to overtake other men in the work gang and make them look like laggards, they in turn were forced to pick up the pace, in order to keep their jobs. Soon the entire work crew was just cooking down those tracks. Cooking is the right word! The heat was waxing intolerable as the sun raged toward midheaven. The driver of the truck could spot what was happening right away. He'd seen this one before. This meant that he could set a record today, against the drivers of the other work crews. He could look good to the Mormons, maybe even get more money. He upped the speed of the truck to accommodate us, and even tried going faster than we needed, to see if we were really going full out or not. The crew boss wasn't impressed. He'd seen this phenomenon before, too. He continued to make sure everyone stayed hunched over, pickin' those spikes.

By lunchtime, nobody could sit up to eat their sack lunches. A couple of guys were puking in the weeds. Everyone was hitting the water cooler too hard, a sure invitation to mucho sickness later in the dog day afternoon. I couldn't help but notice that the wimp was doing alright, sitting up and everything, eating away at his salami like it really was a picnic or church social we were out on after all. He just didn't act like a guy who was suffering from heat prostration. I sat up and began masticating my lunch, striking the pose of a man who was born to pick spikes.

Ireland lay sprawled in the weeds by my side, changing colors like a chameleon, looking none too good for the wear.

"Jesus Christ!" croaked Ireland. "Will you quit the bullshit! You and that wimp are killing the whole crew. Haven't you ever heard of dogging the job? Give us a break, will you?"

"Ireland, you see what that little wimp is trying to do? When he quits, I'll quit. He can't take much more of this. We can slow down to a crawl when we've sent him running with his tail between his legs."

"Jesus Christ, man!" moaned Ireland, and he rolled over onto his stomach and sweated in the bug-infested weeds.

In the afternoon, the contest continued, by silent consent of the wimp, the driver, and me. I had a watch. I knew I could pace myself until 4:30 or whatever: piece of cake; and I did. Four-thirty rolled around and kept on going; then five o'clock.

"Hey, what's the deal?" I asked one of the crew. "What time do you guys quit around here. It ain't getting any earlier."

"Oh, we don't quit at any particular time, " replied the worker. "We just keep pickin' until we get to a place where the railbed crosses a road or somewhere that the truck can get off the tracks. There's one up around the corner, as I remember, the old Beavertail Road. Couldn't be more than a third of a mile."

Of course! There's always a punch line, isn't there? So we worked on through the late afternoon: sweltering, colored orange from rust and dust, inhaling creosote through every pore. Finally, about 6:30 or so, the driver just shut down the diesel and announced, "That's enough for today. We can walk the rest of the way out. There's a truck parked waiting for you guys, up ahead by the bridge. We can walk back in the morning."

Thank whatever gods may be! The day was over. But we still had to walk out. It turned out to be about a mile down the blistering tracks, the trucker setting a murderous pace (I guess he needed to stretch his legs, after all that sitting in the truck) and the rest of us strung out for a quarter mile behind him, dragging our asses along. Ireland was

dragging more than just his ass. He had a game leg, and he dragged it along like it was something he'd found on the tracks and wanted to bring back home with him. By the time we reached the bridge at Beavertail Road, the day was cooling off considerably. It was in fact becoming a little chilly as the evening breeze picked up and the sweat dried rapidly on our blistered bodies. We piled into the truck bed, jostling for spaces near the cab, where the wind would be less intense on the trip back to town. Better to have dust whipping into your eyes than to deal with that damned wind-chill factor.

Well, we got back to town, and we'd made it through the first day of our railroad salvage careers. I, for one, never intended to make it back for a second day. I thought I'd just sleep late and then go to the trailer and try to get an advance against the wages owed me. But Ireland was at my house the next morning at the scheduled ungodly hour, dragging his bad leg and rarin' to go. No way could I quit while that worthless sot still clung to the job. So we headed back out to the trailer with our sack lunches, gloves, lip balm, and insect repellent--the deep woods kind.

The second day was much like the first, except we picked plates instead of spikes. Plates are the metal stabilizers used to hold the rails in place. I could've loaded plates standing on my head, if they hadn't kept raising the truck body higher and higher off the ground the hotter it got. By noon, the truck body was a full thirty or thirty-five feet off the ground. By the time we'd finished lunch, however, it seemed they'd lowered the body back down somewhat. It was slightly easier to get those plates over the edge and into the box.

One good thing happened that day, though. The wimp and I were very careful to work at a human pace, and didn't try to work each other under the table. We became amigos over the next eight or ten weeks, me and that wimp. We mutually respected each other as "spike-pickers' spike pickers." We watched the winos come and go. We three amigos remained: Ireland, the Wimp, and yours truly. We were vets. Nobody could pick steel faster than the three amigos. We thought we were in pretty good shape, that's for

sure, until the football team came to work.

Not the whole football team, just the bad ones: The ones the coach thought would get into trouble over the summer if he didn't keep them really busy. The coach thought this spike-pickin' might just help keep the boys trim and in shape. He was right as rain there. Mostly linemen, hulking collegiates who sniggered when they saw the steel. Linemen and heavy steel weights are like Brer' Rabbit and the briar patch. "Oh, please, coach, please don't throw me onto that steel-pickin' gang! Teehee."

It wasn't all linemen, though; there were a couple of wide receivers, even an assistant coach. You could tell the wide receivers were a little quicker than the linemen, at least on the uptake, because they were the ones that always seemed to have the smoking dope--especially Black Malcolm.

Black Malcolm laughed and smirked his way through the miserable day on black hashish. The big dumb linemen saw how easy it was for Black Malcolm, how his time was such a pure joy to him. Before long, Black Malcolm was fading out into the flat about once an hour, with the linemen blocking out the reality around him; circled about him like a herd of muskoxen, fiercely loyal. The Mormons, it seemed, were forbidden to fire the football team. The whole damn crew, even the assistant coach, stayed stoned as they did their new routines. They hallucinated themselves as pros. They thought they could smell the Hall of Fame, and almost taste the Pro-Bowl.

Ireland refused to partake. You won't find true alcoholics or true drug addicts smoking very much dope. Smoking dope takes the wrong direction for the ones who take the "I've got to forget" drugs. Makes them more aware of their surroundings, rather than totally oblivious, and who needs that? Ireland stuck with codeine. He claimed codeine was like speed for him, that he couldn't make it through a day without codeine. Well, that I could believe. The trouble with the codeine was that it seemed that Ireland couldn't make it through a day with codeine any better than he might have been able to without it. We started to lose Ireland to the

codeine, the heat, and his body. Ireland's spirit began to drift away from us, even before he physically began to. It was his bowels, you see.

Ireland would make the circuit at coffee break, talking each of us out of a scrap of paper bag from our sack lunches, or even a candy wrapper or corncob (candy wrappers were far more plentiful than corncobs). Then, soon after the crew was back to work, Ireland would fade out of the rhythm of the gang, off the grade and into the weeds. There he would wrestle with his bowels for a full fifteen rounds. We'd all forget about him until maybe twelve, maybe fifteen rounds later, there he'd be slogging up the grade, dragging his game leg like a sack of spikes, up to 3/4 of a mile to our rearward. Ireland could walk powerfully slow after a bowel attack, and a record-hunting driver could lead a gang along fretfully fast, so Ireland's absences could be measured in miles.

One day just as he'd finally caught up to us, during our three o'clock break (having survived another attack), the boss came over to have a look at him. The boss just stood there; looking, squinting into Ireland's slightly crossed eyes, punctuated as always with questionmark eyebrows, ludicrously inappropriate eyebrows. The boss, I believe, was waiting for some kind of an explanation.

"God, I'm a little under the weather today. I don't know what to say," said Ireland, buying a few seconds to think. But the codeine wouldn't let him think.

"You should see what I did back there!" he exclaimed, scrunching up his forehead and grimacing like someone who had just witnessed a grisly auto accident. "It looked like a melting pile of green popsicles," he said.

Now the boss did look away. He looked off to the side of the grade, holding his hand up to his ear like he'd just been hit in the side of the head by a rock. He looked as if he felt he too would like to take a trip into the weeds, to puke maybe. But the boss had encountered so many Irelands during his tenure as boss that if he went into the weeds and puked every time he encountered another of them, he would expire of starvation. He just walked away.

Would it be like a policeman who sees a U.F.O., but

won't report it for fear of ridicule by his superiors? Well, I hoped so, for Ireland's sake. But when we got back to the trailer that evening, the boss brought him inside and graduated him right out of the world of spike-pickers into a better world; where it's said that all the trees and shrubs, and especially the weeds, are made of toilet paper.

So I was left alone with the football team and, of course, the Wimp. Neither the Wimp nor I wanted to start any more contests, not with this football team standing around out here. We didn't feel too much like quasi-John Henry's anymore; not next to these guys. I kept an image of myself within my own mind, however. I saw myself now as a kind of Charles Bronson hard case. I might not be as big as these steroid clones, but I was just as tough in my own sneaking deadly way.

And a guy didn't have to be Charles Bronson to work with these guys. They were a real pleasure to work with. They worked as a team, pacing themselves, each to the team pace. The clinking of the steel into the truck became as regular as clockwork, as musical as marimbas, and yes, we felt the reggae vibrations caught in the syncopation between the thrumming of the diesel engine and the clinking steel. We felt the Rastaman in the rhythm of our grunted breaths, the bass pounding of our ocean hearts. We merged, became "One." It was pure pleasure. Back before the team came on the job, we used to fight over who was going to be in the truck dumping spike buckets that day, or who was going to go out ahead of the truck, pulling plates loose from the ties with picks. We fought each other tooth and nail before the team came, but no more. Now the gravy jobs were shared in two hour shifts, equally among us all. Team spirit kept us going. We held one another up. We made sport of this endeavor. These guys were still just a bunch of kids at heart, if men in body. They'd collect rattlesnakes during lunch: Ferreting them out from their cool beds under the ties, putting them in jars and lunch buckets, to play with when they got home. Something to show mom. You know, I really reached the point where I enjoyed that job.

I recall how I used to feel, coming home late on a friday,

after a few cool ones, with my paycheck, earned the hard way: The hardest way anyone in these parts could devise--so hard that football coaches used this job to toughen up their boys for the big game. I sure felt proud on those Friday nights. Independent, but that didn't matter. I was going to show the little woman how the other half lived. I was bringing home the bacon. I was what they call a provider. I felt like a real vet, with the rust and creosote now a permanent fixture, a tattoo on both sides of my forehead, and my hands rough and bleeding. It didn't matter that I didn't make much money. I was part of the real world. That seemed like enough. That seemed like plenty.

I recall the very last time I brought home a Friday night paycheck from the railroad salvage company. I remember coming into the house like I was expecting a brass band or a ticker-tape parade to promenade across the parlour and jump to attention in front of my grandstand. But there was no ticker-tape parade. There was no music of any kind--no sound of any kind, for that matter. It was as still as a church at midnight, as quiet as a tomb: I checked around all over the house, but it was vacated. There was nobody home but us chickens. Then I spotted a note on the kitchen table, scrawled in a welfare mother's hand: A hand that, if it was clapping for me, it was just the sound of one hand clapping. The moment was pure Zen.

Dear So-and-so,

All you ever do is work and sleep! Do you realize you have not played basketball with my son for three weeks. I'm leaving you. I can't take it anymore. I'm going to live with my sister in Sai Pan. Do not try to contact me.

Love,

Your Little Osage Rose

Well, that was about all she wrote. You see, I just wasn't the man she had known anymore. I wasn't the same man

she had dragged home from a bar he worked in, drank in, and slept in (I slept in the basement, you see. So did an old-time git-fiddle picker from Helena, and an Irish pennywhistle player, late of San Francisco). I was different now, and had soured the whole deal. Where was the animal who didn't care jackshit for anything; who drank, fought, and cussed his way through each evening just to get to the other side, like a chicken crossing the road? Who was this new stranger who was gone all day every day, off with that Ireland; and who came home so exhausted that he couldn't even perform his duties as a gigolo, much less play basketball with anybody. A welfare mother doesn't want to be protected, cared for. She's already got that. Uncle Sam does that for her. She wants somebody who hasn't got a blessed thing to do all day except hang around on the couch and smoke dope with her. She sure doesn't need someone who's out with Ireland all day, and comes home with a paltry paycheck she could make in one tenth the time by shop-lifting. She was gone from me, my little Osage Rose, gone from me forever.

So I failed to show up for work the next day. I was so hung over by then, I had to be at the bar by 8:00 A.M. to get well. Someone else got on that crew. Someone else wondered what those black buckets were for as he hunkered down amongst his compadres in the back of a speeding dumptruck. Someone else got my job, and I damn near envy the poor miserable sonofabitch--but not quite.

There I was, a pocket full of money, and as strong as an ox. I had time on my hands and a bellyful of blues to digest. I was free, white and twenty-one. Great God Awmighty, I's free at last; from the toughest sonofabitch of a job I've ever had.