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Stephen Dixon

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The Clean-up Man · *Stephen Dixon*

“THAT’S IT, I quit, I can’t stand it anymore,” and I put the broom into the closet and go downstairs to the dressing room. The boss comes. “What’s this? What happened? If it’s Pete again, I’ll sack him.”

“No, it’s not Pete, though he gives me a hard time all right. But it’s not him. I’m tired of this job. I’ve been working at it too long. Tired of all this kind of work. I get no satisfaction from it and I don’t think I ever did, not just here but in every place. I don’t know, but I’ve got to get out of it for good.”

“What satisfaction you want? You sweep the floor, you clean the dishes and occasionally bus some tables. What possible satisfaction can you get in that, except in doing a good job? And you do a good job with your sweeping and cleaning and when I ask you to bus, not to say the way you take care of the windows. Those windows shine. And when they shine, people see them and know it’s a clean place I got here and they come in and sit down and want to be served and eat and drink and spend money. People compliment me on those windows. Customers do. So I compliment you. On everything you do besides. So why do you want to go? Satisfaction, that satisfaction that artists and scientists and great teachers get from their work, will never come to me or you. But just small satisfaction, like those people complimenting me about my windows or the food and a compliment or two from me to you or just in your own self about the good job you do, that you’ll get. And that you deserve, so stay. I’ll raise your salary if you want—ten cents an hour starting when you came in today.”

“It’s not the money.”

“Don’t be a fool. It is so the money or has to be in some big way. Because what else you live on: the garbage you sweep off the plate or mop up in the corners of the dining room? Maybe you do find something every now and then on the floor you don’t tell me about, like a diamond earring or dollar bill or some customer’s chain. That you deserve too if that person who loses the bracelet or ring doesn’t come in to say she lost it, though whatever money you find is yours no matter who comes in to claim. But money you earn is what you live on. And ten cents an hour, though not a lot to most people, to you comes up to almost five dollars a week, which you can certainly use. So ten cents an hour raise you’ll get, and starting first of this week, not today.”

“Really, it’s not the money. I don’t want a raise. I wouldn’t say no to it if I stayed here, but I wouldn’t stay here for a dollar more an hour from you. I’m just tired of the job and it’s probably tired of me, whatever that means.”

“Fifteen cents an hour then, but that’s my limit. At three-fifty an hour with the new raise, you’ll be making more than just about any restaurant clean-up man in the city.”

“No, please, I told you—”

“Okay, you got it. Twenty cents an hour raise, but only because you’re so damn dependable, though don’t try to hold me up for more. That’s almost nine dollars more a week you’ll be getting, plus I won’t even tell you how much it costs me in those two big meals a day you eat. Of course, you’ll have to work a little extra harder for it. I don’t give raises away like that just any day of the week.”

“Really, I’m through with this kind of work. I have to try and do something else, but I don’t know what.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. I said that.”

“Then why leave? Leave, and I can’t say you did anything but quit. And if you quit, the state won’t give you unemployment insurance.”

“I don’t want any.”

“If you could get it, you’d take it—don’t tell me. It’s probably what you’re planning to do anyway.”

“No I wouldn’t. Jesus, over three years I’m working for you, and you don’t know me at all. But you see, I’ve worked here at this and all those other restaurants for twenty-some years because I’m not fit for anything else and never really tried. But I want to be . . . Well, I want to do . . . Oh, the hell with it. Sorry. And I’ve got to go.”

I put my apron on the bench, change into my street shirt, say “So, I’ll be seeing you then, and I hope no hard feelings,” and start upstairs.

“Go then,” he says, following me. “But you made a fool of me by not accepting that raise, which I’ll never forget. Use my name as a work reference somewhere and you’ll never get anything even close to what you had here. I’ll go out of my way, even, to make sure you don’t get hired. And if I hear you’re working in some other dump, I’ll call the manager there and tell him just what I think of you. I won’t say you stole; that you never did, which is another reason why I prized you. But there are other things I can say that will sound almost as bad, especially that you left me stranded today and with five hours to go on your shift.

That's almost as bad as stealing as far as we're concerned. And if I can't get a replacement for you in two hours, just as bad and maybe worse."

I buy a newspaper outside, go home and look in the paper for possible jobs. Secretary, receptionist, machine operator, etcetera—nothing I could do, and they all say no on-the-job training. File clerk and messenger I could probably be hired as, but they seem no better and interesting as jobs than what I've been doing.

Next morning I get into my best clothes—my dress clothes, which aren't much, but something—and go to a dozen or more employment agencies. The interviewers all tell me my experience and education qualify me for nothing much better than what I've been doing: clean-up man, dishwasher, busboy. I want to do something more challenging and personally rewarding, I tell them, and will work very hard at whatever it is, and I'm too old to be a busboy.

"Busboys come in all ages," the last interviewer says. "A man can retire at sixty-five as a busboy and get a reasonably good pension if he belongs to a good union. I'd suggest you find work in a good restaurant as one. If you work fulltime as a busboy and your waiters are fair with sharing part of their tips with you, your earnings should add up to more than you'd make as a clean-up man in even the best-paying restaurant. If you're interested, I have right here a new listing for one."

"I'm too old to be called a busboy is I guess what I'm saying, and I also feel I'm still young and healthy enough to hold down a better kind of job, and also for a change, one cleaner. Maybe I should go back to school for something."

"You're forty-five. You want to ask my opinion? You're also too old to return to school to study for a new profession. For an education, maybe—just to get an education is what I mean—but that's what you want? Go ahead—everyone can profit from one at any age. But I don't expect you have much money saved, and just going to school without working at the same time is one luxury I don't think you could afford."

I buy the evening newspaper, go home and read the job ads. Records assistant, operation analyst, registered nurse, data processor (manual)—half of them I don't even know what they mean. There is an opening for someone to clean offices, but that would be more of what I was doing and the ad says I'd need a car. It gets depressing, reading these ads, and I drink more than I usually do and soon I'm feeling drowsy. Well, maybe a good night's sleep is what I need, and tomorrow I can start out fresh in looking for a job.

My ex-boss calls just as I'm getting into bed. "So," he says, "find anything yet? Bank president? Water engineer? What?"

"I'm still looking. What do you want?"

"You sound different—your speech slurry. What is it? You became a drunk already in the one day since you quit on me? Because you never drank much that I knew."

"All right, I'll be truthful with you, for I've nothing to lose. I had more to drink than I'm used to. It's depressing looking for work when you know there's nothing much for you but the same lousy thing. And one full day of it and I think I got the picture what's out there, not that it's going to stop me from looking."

"You know, you really got me mad yesterday."

"Oh yeah? Well, if I made things tough for you, I'm sorry."

"Shh—listen to me. And mad not just for that raise business and that I had to wash dishes for three hours myself. But as I said, good clean-up men are a rarity in this city, and great ones like you are a find that I'd never let any other restaurant manager know of. Start drinking on me though, and I wouldn't let you work another minute in my place."

"Who says I want to work for you? I in fact don't."

"Wait'll I finish first. I think so highly of you that if you do come back as my clean-up man, I'll also start training you under the cook. 'Sous chef'—do you like that title? Because for an hour a day, we'll say—or let's just call it 'sous chef apprentice'—that's what you'll be. Now cooks are good paying jobs and can also be very creative ones—not in my place so much but in others. And when you've learned enough, which, granted, takes time and the cook wants to go on his break, you can fill in for him instead of me or the salad man, and get plenty of practical experience. Then—though who knows when?—you really proved you can handle it, I might even put you in for him on his day off, though you'd have to work an extra day a week to do that, and on your regular wages. That might take a year. It might take two. And I'm only training you that one hour a day as I said. Though train as many hours a day as you want on your own time, if the cook doesn't think you're getting in his way, but after the eight you work for the restaurant, which includes the one I'll pay you for to be trained. So what do you say? It's a big step up and can lead to who knows where. In two or so years you could be filling in for the cook on summer vacations, and on real second-cook wages. It's even being very generous on my part after the treatment you gave me, but I felt the offer worth it if I get a

verbal guarantee of your clean-up work for me for two to three more years. And starting at the last salary I offered you, with regular increases of course, which was what?—three thirty-five an hour.”

“You said ‘three-fifty.’ ”

“Hey mister, you drive a hard bargain and got too good a memory, but okay: consider yourself the winner. Now as for your current drinking problem, we’ll just call it an off night, right? Because I still appreciate you, and even if nobody else in the restaurant says to your face they do, I know they all think you’re a big plus for the place running so smooth.”

He says he’ll see me the regular time tomorrow morning and hangs up. I slam down the receiver. I kick the chair and throw the ashtray against the wall. I slam my fist into the lampshade and the lamp goes flying over the couch and the bulb in it explodes when the lamp hits the floor. The room’s dark and that was my one lamp and bulb. I turn on the ceiling light switch, but that bulb went a couple of years back. I finger around for the ashtray pieces on the floor and after nicking myself, give up. Maybe that’s what was wrong with me all these twenty, twenty-five years. I never once lost control.