

# In Training

by Con Chapman

Will got his job at the ice plant through his dad, who knew Old Man Cunningham, the owner. His dad told Mr. Cunningham that Will played football and wanted to build himself up; Mr. Cunningham didn't have kids, but he was a big booster, and he tried to give the summer jobs to the football players. "Send him on down," Mr. Cunningham said. "If he lasts 'til August 15th," when two-a-day practices started, "he'll make the team."



The first two days they put him to work painting the back side of the building, the part that faced the railroad tracks, where he couldn't hurt anything but himself. He was up on a ladder in the hot sun all day, working with thick paint and an old brush. It was boring and he hated every minute of it. On the third day he helped unload a box car with frozen sides of beef—Cunningham told the foreman they weren't making any money painting the back of the building. It was hard work—the sides of beef weighed seventy to eighty pounds apiece—and by the end of the day his front was wet from his shoulders to his knees. The older men were able to heft the beef around without getting themselves too wet, but he couldn't because he only weighed a hundred and fifty pounds. That's why he wanted to build himself up.

After a few weeks Mr. Cunningham figured out that Will belonged on the front dock, selling bagged, block and dry ice to customers, and pulling the 300-pound blocks through the chute. He could use tongs for all the heavy work, like loading blocks on the trucks for the poultry plant; he wasn't big enough to be of much help unloading boxcars.

Most days it was Will and an older boy Mike, who was going to be a senior, in the front. Mike was a smart-aleck. If some poor hick came up to the dock and said he wanted a bag of party ice, Mike would draw balloons on the side of the bag with a pencil. If they were unloading watermelons to sell in the walk-in cooler, Mike would make a big show of accidentally dropping one on purpose, and they'd get to eat it for the rest of the shift. He showed Will how you could steal ice cream bars from the cold storage room, and he made fresh remarks to just about every customer when it wasn't busy.

"Carl, your wife is like the State Fair," he said one day to a farmer who drove up in a truck with a load of watermelons in the back and his fat wife in the front seat.



"How so?" the farmer asked.

"She just gets bigger and better every year," Mike said, and the woman, not knowing or not caring that the joke was on her, gave Mike a big toothless grin.

When they worked the 2 to 10 shift together, Mike would pull the ice from the floor, bring it over to the scoring machine that would saw cuts in the blocks to make it easier to break it up into fifty and twenty-five pound pieces, and send it through the chute into the ice room. They'd load up a truck together and Mike would take it over

to the poultry plant, where he'd unload it himself unless he could find someone to help. On the last run of the night, he liked to take Will over so they could unload quickly and go home.

One night a carful of Mike's classmates pulled up to the dock and asked Will to send him out. Will went into the plant and yelled for Mike. He didn't hear Will call over the noise of the compressor, so Will had to walk halfway around the plant to get him.

"Your friends are outside," Will said loudly when he had caught Mike's eye. Mike hauled a load of ice over to the chute and dunked it in brine to loosen it up, then went out to the dock.



Will went back to the ice room and began crushing and bagging more ice. He was supposed to bag three hundred bags a day, which if he did a pallet of fifty bags every hour for the first six hours, left him the last two hours to goof off. It was seven-thirty, and he only had one pallet left to go.

He was stapling a bag when Mike came in through the front door and stuck his head through the tarp curtain that hung between the walk-in cooler and the ice room. "Look what I got," he said with a big smile on his face as he held up a six-pack.

"What is it?" Will asked.

"It's malt liquor—good stuff."

"Cool."

"I'm gonna hide it here in the walk-in, and we can drink it when we make the last run tonight."

"Sure," Will said. He had tasted beer when he took his dad's bottles back to the kitchen and drained the last sip, and he didn't really like it. "What does it taste like?"



"Like beer, but better—not so sour—and stronger."

"Okay—maybe."

"No 'maybe,' boy. You're comin' with me to unload."

"I meant 'Maybe I'll try some.'"

Mike looked at him with a sneer. "Do I detect a rookie drinker?"

"No—I just never had malt liquor."

"You're gonna have some tonight—unless you're a pussy."



Mike turned to go push the ice through the door with a sneering smile, and Will went back to bagging. He wanted to get drunk eventually, but not tonight, and not while he was in training. It was

hard enough getting his running in every day when the shifts he worked were two-to-ten at night or six in the morning until two in the afternoon. He slept late when he worked the night shift, then it was too hot to run. If he worked the early shift all he wanted to do when he got home was take a nap.

The load of ice started coming in the chute and he grabbed his tongs to pull the blocks through. He had to pull them up the floor that slanted down towards the front-door, and he had to pull them out of the chute fast enough so that they wouldn't crash into each other. If they did, they'd break and all they'd be good for was crushed ice; what they needed was enough block ice for the last load to the poultry plant. He was pulling a block up the floor when Mike stuck his head in the chute and yelled "Hurry up, pussy—I ain't got all day."

Will slid back down to the chute and pulled a block out of the way just as another was about to hit it. He pulled the second block out of the way down to the crushing machine so that the next block wouldn't hit it.



When the last block was in the chute Mike turned off the conveyor and things quieted down. Will heard voices in the walk-in cooler and, when he went down to see what it was, saw two black guys rolling a watermelon off the dock and loading it into the trunk of a Thunderbird with a red body and a white top.

"Thanks, man," the driver said. It was Zip Wilson, who worked at the plant when he needed money, and was in Mr. Cunningham's

good graces. "Be cool," he said as the other two got in the car and they drove off.

Mike came out on the dock for a smoke and saw Will watching the T-bird drive away. "Was that Zip?" he asked.

"Yeah," Will said. "He and his friends just took a watermelon. Is he allowed to do that?"

"He's allowed if you want him to do things for you."

"Like what?"



"Like buy me and my friends malt liquor, pussy." Will was bigger than Mike, but didn't want to get into it with him. "You 'bout finished bagging ice?" Mike asked. 'Cause I got one more load, then I'm done."

"I have twenty more bags to do."

"Until what?"

"Until I have three hundred."

Mike looked at Will as if the younger boy were simple. "Don't *ever* do three hundred bags."

"That's what Mr. Cunningham says I'm supposed to do."

"So? If he told you to do a jackknife off the dock would you do that?"

"He's paying me."

"Tell him you can't do it. He's not gonna fire you. You're just here for the summer." Mike took a drag on his cigarette. "You're gonna piss off Legs," he said, referring to an older man who worked the day shift.

"Why?"

“Legs says if you ever do three hundred bags in a day, they’ll make you do it every day for the rest of your life.”

“So what does he do?”



“He does two hundred some, then looks busy doin' something else. Or he finds somethin' that's broken, and goes in and tells Cunningham about it, and says he can't do any more, or sets to work fixin' it.”

“Oh.”

Mike threw his cigarette in the street, got up and went in the walk-in cooler. When he came back, he was holding two cans of malt liquor in his hands, and he popped one open, sending a spray of foam into the street.

“What'd you do—run this through the crusher?” he laughed as he held the can at arm's length.

“I didn't do anything with it,” Will said.

“Been bouncin' around in two cars, then they threw the six pack up to me,” Mike said as he took a long sip. “That's what did it. Here,” he said as he offered the can to Will.

“No, thanks.”

“See, I knew you were a pussy.”

“We're out in public, you idiot.”

Mike looked up and down Main Street, which was deserted. “I think—the coast is clear,” he said facetiously. “Here.”



Will looked at him, then took the can and had a sip. It wasn't bad—not as smelly as his dad's Falstaff beer.

“Well?” Mike asked. “Whadda ya think?”

“Pretty good. I like it,” Will said.

“See—I told you. You don't have to be a goody-goody all the time.”

“I'm not a goody-goody,” Will said defensively.

“Yes you are, but maybe I can cure you. Here . . .”—Mike said as he opened the other can and handed it to Will before turning to go back into the plant and pull the last load—“ . . . knock yourself out.”

“Thanks,” Will said without enthusiasm. He went back into the cooler, took a sip of the liquor, then set it down under the bench on which the watermelons sat along with the other cans. It would be just his luck for Old Man Cunningham to walk in and discover him, he thought. He took another sip, went back to bagging, and had his last twenty bags done and stacked before long. He heard the bell that signaled the last load of ice was coming through, grabbed his tongs and stuck his head through the chute.

“Send ‘em on in!” he said with a grin that didn't feel like it belonged on his face. That must be the liquor, he thought. It wasn't such a bad thing.





The blocks came through—six in all—then Mike came around in front and backed the truck up to the dock. “Let’s get ‘er done,” he said as he stuck his head through the front chute.

Will began pushing blocks through the door, starting with the rows that were closest to the chute. They developed a rhythm after that, with Will dragging a block down from higher up and sending it on its way with a push, and Mike grabbing it as it came out the door and using the momentum to get it onto the truck and sliding across the truck bed.

Mike had his can out on the dock and would take a swig from it whenever he gained a little on Will. “C’mon,” he’d yell into the chute. “I’m waitin’ on you.”

Will was sweating, and he had to take a break after a while. “I need a drink” he shouted out to Mike.

“I’m way ahead of you,” Mike called back through the hole. “We got two more rows to do then we’re outta here.”

Will took a couple of big sips from his can, imagining that was the best way to get drunk, which must be the point of drinking, he thought. The alcohol warmed him up and he felt himself sweating freely, but he found his feet slipping more as he pulled the last blocks down the slope to finish the load.



When he had finished he began to close up, turning out the lights and emptying the night's cash into a coffee can—keeping five dollars to compensate himself for finishing his three hundred bags, now that he knew the day shift didn't. He dropped the can in the hole in the office wall and, as he came around front, saw that Mike was pulling the ramp away from the truck and setting it up against the wall. "C'mon," he said. "Let's go."

Will locked the office door and dropped the key through the slot, then jumped down in the street and started to climb in the cab.

"Did you get the booze?" Mike asked him.

"Christ, no," Will said.

"And you just dropped your key through the slot, you dingle-berry," Mike said. "I guess we're up shit creek now. If Legs finds the beer he'll take it, and if old man Cunningham finds it we're dead."

"Let me check," Will said, and got out of the truck and vaulted back onto the dock. He tried the ice room door—it was still open.

"We're okay," he yelled to Mike. "I forgot to lock the door."

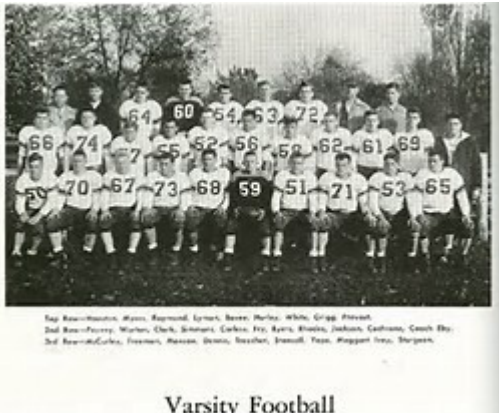
"Well hurry up you stupid shit."

Will grabbed the cans, locked the door from the inside, climbed through the ice chute into the plant and walked around to the front door. He opened the door from the inside, took the keys outside with him, locked the door and dropped the keys through the slot again.

"What a fucking genius," Mike yelled from the cab of the truck, and Will raced around the front and got in.

They turned left up Main Street and drove slowly so as not to rock the ice too much. They passed a bar where men were hanging around outside, drinking from long-necked beer bottles.

"That there's a bucket of blood," Mike said with a nod towards the bar.



"What's that mean?"

"It means guys will sit there takin' turns, waitin' for the next guy to come in, then they'll take a punch at him just for the hell of it."

"Gosh," Will said.

"Gosh,'" Mike said, mocking him. "'Golly.'"

"Shut up."

"Let's go past the Sportsman's Club."

"What's that?"

"You don't know what the Sportsman's Club is? You *are* a rookie."

"So what is it?"



"It's a whore house, right over the bridge. I'll show you."

"Okay."

They rumbled down Main Street to the railroad crossing at Ohio Street. "I can't take the bridge with this load of ice," Mike said. "We'll cross here and drive up through the neighborhood."

They crossed the tracks and turned right towards the Sportsman's Club. A woman emerged from the darkness when they stopped at a stop sign. "Hey, baby, you lookin' for some action?"

"Well, hello there," Mike said out his window. "No, we're just making an ice delivery."

"Iceman don't come out by my house anymore."

"That's cause everybody got a refrigerator but you."

"Y'all got any money?"

"I've got five dollars," Will said to Mike.

"I'll do you for five dollar," the woman said.

"He ain't old enough and we ain't got time," Mike said. "Nice talkin' to you."

"You come back when you got yourself some money," the woman said to Mike, then was off in pursuit of a car behind them.



"Don't ever tell them you have money," Mike said. "Their pimp will just take it from you."

Will was silent; he apparently had misunderstood the woman. He thought she was asking for charity.

"For five bucks all you're gonna get is a social disease. You want a high-class whore you need to go to Kansas City," Mike said, sounding worldly. "Save your money 'til you got a hundred."

They took a left turn, then another, and made their way back to the poultry plant, where the lights were on for the graveyard shift. Mike pulled the truck down the road a bit, then backed it into the dock to unload. When they were close, he told Will to get out and open the back doors.

"How they hangin'?" a man in a yellow rubber slicker asked as Mike climbed up into the bay.

"I need two strong men and a boy with me when I go to the bathroom," Mike said. "How about you?"

The man laughed. "Punk like you, don't know yer ass from a hole in the ground."

"At least I can do more than dream about it."

"At least I got memories, which is more than you got," the man said to Mike. "Help me out here, kid," he said to Will, and they dragged a metal ramp over to the truck and hooked it up. "Yer all set," he said to Mike, and walked away.

"I'm pitching, you're catching junior," Mike said as he climbed into the truck..

Mike took his pair of tongs and began to push the blocks of ice down to Will at the end of the ramp, who had to drag them over to the cold room. Mike had brought his can around to the back of the truck and would take a sip whenever he had a lead on Will.

"Take your time, pal," Mike called from the back of the truck. "I'm enjoying the refreshments."



"I'm doing all the work," Will said.

"Like hell," Mike said. "Take a break if you want to."

Will went around to the cab of the truck, got his can, and took a sip. He came back around to the bay where Mike was sitting on the loading dock.

"It's good shit, isn't it?"

"It is," Will said.

"This is what being an adult is all about. This and pussy." Mike said. Will drank silently, too quickly at first, then sipping slowly. "Are you workin' through the fair?" Mike asked.

"I don't want to."

"Why not? That's when you make the real money."

"Football starts August 15th. I want to quit before then."

Mike snorted. He was a baseball player. "Football's too much like work for not getting paid," he said.

"Did you ever play?" Will asked.

"About a week my sophomore year. I puked my guts up the first day. It was downhill from there."



"I've played two years already. I was defensive captain both years."

"Big deal," Mike said. "It gets a lot tougher real fast when you're playing varsity. You're not playing against kids in your class. You're playing guys who are two years older than you."

"I can handle it."

Mike laughed. "I'd like to see you go head-to-head with that 240-pound Samoan kid who flattened me."

"When you're up against somebody bigger than you ya gotta use leverage."

"What position do you play?"

"Linebacker."

"Okay, Tommy Nobis. Let's see you stop a 300-pound fullback."

Mike stood up, climbed back in the truck and positioned a block of ice at the top of the ramp with his tongs.

"Here comes Jim Brown," he said.

Will took a position at the bottom of the ramp as if he were standing behind his defensive linemen, ready to stop the run or drop back to cover a pass. "I'm ready," he said.

Mike pushed the ice down the ramp and Will stopped it with a forearm, then grabbed it and pulled it into the cold room.

"That's called a forearm shiver," he called up to Mike.

“Here comes Jim Taylor,” Mike said, and pushed a second block down the ramp. Will dropped his tongs and stopped it with his hands, then pulled it backwards with his tongs into the ice room.

They continued in this manner until the truck was unloaded. When Mike had pushed the last block off the truck, he jumped down and whistled loudly for the man in the yellow slicker, who turned when he heard and came back to the bay. Mike grabbed a clipboard out of the cab and handed it to the man, who made a perfunctory count of the blocks of ice, then signed. Mike took the clipboard back, tore off a copy for the man and handed it to him, saying “Pleasure doin' business with you, as always.”



“When's Cunningham gonna call me 'bout the dent you put in the side of the building?”

“That dent's been there for years,” Mike said with a look of mock offense.

“It'll be years before Cunningham will pay for it is what you mean. You boys be good, and if you can't be good be careful.”

“We will,” Mike said. He seemed mature to Will, who hoped he would carry himself the same way when he was as old as Mike. They threw their tongs in the truck, Mike drove forward and Will closed the doors.

“Let's drive around and finish the rest of the six-pack,” Mike said.

“I don't want to drink three beers,” Will said.



"You don't have to, I'll drink four in the time it takes you to drink two."

Mike drained the last of his first can and reached under the seat for another. "You need to get goin' there buddy," he said. Will took that as a challenge and drank the last of his can so fast that he almost spit it back up.

"That's the spirit," Mike said as he handed Will another can.

They drove around the north side of the tracks and drew stares from black men, young and old, walking the streets. At one point Mike slowed the truck down to greet one.

"Hey, Bird Dog!" he yelled out.

"Mr. Mike. What you been doin' with yourself."

"Little of this, little of that. When you comin' back to work?"

"I caught on at the cemetery. Won't be comin' back."

"What?"

"Too damn cold for me."

"Nothin's colder than a grave-digger's ass."

"You out in the fresh air at least. Not cooped up in some cold storage room rollin' turkeys up a ramp."

"I'll grant you that. Where's the action tonight?" Mike asked.

"Goin' over to the Sportsman's Club, where it usually is," Bird Dog said with a smile.

"You wanta rub my head for luck?" Mike asked, leaning his head down a little.

"All I get from rubbin' your head is a handful of lice."

Mike laughed, then said "Take it easy" and put the truck back in gear.

The man waved to them and they drove off.

"That's old Bird Dog, he used to work at the plant."

"Pullin' ice?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes they put him in the back, or in cold storage. I thought he'd be there forever."



“Why?”

“‘Cause whenever he got paid Friday he'd lose all him money playin' craps Saturday, or get so drunk he wouldn't even know somebody took his money. He'd have to go into Mr. Cunningham Monday morning and get an advance on his next paycheck. We called it 'job security.'”

“Why?”

“Because they weren't gonna fire him as long as he owed them money. You sure you don't want this last beer?”

“Naw. I'm in training.”

“Okay. I'll hide it in my coat and drink it up in my room.”

They drove around for awhile more, with Mike drinking steadily and Will nursing his beer. “You about ready to go back?” Mike asked.

“Sure, whenever you are.”

“My mom should be showing up pretty soon. Somebody picking you up?”

“Uh, no. My mom and dad are out of town—I was gonna walk home.”

“We'll give you a ride.”

Mike drove up to Main across from the bar he had called the bucket of blood, took a right and brought the truck to a stop slightly before the ice plant, out of the way of morning traffic at the dock. There was a car parked in front of the plant with a woman in the

driver's seat and a girl in the back. The boys climbed out of the truck and Mike locked it, dropped the keys in the slot, then signaled for Will to follow him.



"C'mon, that's my mom up there."

They walked to the car and Mike got in the front seat. "Mom—this is Will."

"Hello, Will," she said. "Nice to meet you. That's my daughter Teresa in the back seat."

"Hi," Will said as he got in the back.

"She don't bite."

The girl gave him a smile. She was wearing a wet bathing suit.

"We went over to the town pool to cool off," the girl said. "We don't have air condition."

"Oh," Will replied.

"Do you?" the mother asked him.

"We have one in each bedroom, and the living room downstairs."

"Hoo-wee," the mother said. "What does your daddy do?"

"He owns a store downtown."

"Mom—please," Mike said. "I have to put up with this dipshit all day long—don't encourage him."



“Well, I was just complimentin' his family is all. No need for you to be a smart-mouth.”

“Just drive,” Mike said as he looked out the window.

“Aren't you gonna take your coat off?” his mother asked him.

“It takes me a while to warm up after spending all day in the cold,” he replied. Will knew he was hiding the last beer.

“Where do you all live?” Mike's mom asked.

“Over on Broadway.”

“There's some nice homes over there,” she replied.

“I know your sister—she's head cheerleader ain't she?” the girl asked him.

“That's right.”

“Teresa, be quiet,” Mike said to his sister. “Don't let her attack you,” he said to Will. “She's a nympho.”

“Shut up!” the girl snapped at Mike.

“What kind of grades do you get?” Mike's mother asked him.

“He gets his name in the paper for Honor Roll,” the girl volunteered.

“I wished my kids got good grades,” Mike's mother said.

“You can let me off here,” Will said.

“I thought you lived on Broadway,” Mike said.

“I do, but I want to walk from here—clear my head.”

“Okay—whatever suits your fancy,” Mike's mother said.

She stopped the car and Will got out and closed the door behind him. The girl smiled broadly at him, and he gave her a polite smile back. "Thank you very much for the ride," he said as he looked over Mike at the mother.

"You're very welcome—any time."



"See you tomorrow," Mike said. "Same shit, different day."

"Mike!" his mother exclaimed.

"You're right, mom," Mike said. "I should wait 'til I get home to talk like that."

"See you tomorrow," Will said to Mike.

"Okay."

The car drove off and Will waited until he saw the tail lights glow brighter as the car came to a stop. It turned left on Lamine to go to Mike's house. He set himself, took a deep breath and started running, because he was in training.

