

After Detox

by Jamie Iredell

This is the man who gets a job at a place like Performance Exhaust, after he tells the owner—a skinny Vietnamese named Wang—that he's worked imports all his life, his father a Volkswagen man, his grandfather Mercedes. Wang asks him to look at the automatic transmission on a '94 Sentra. The man laughs, and—no surprise here—Wang hires him.

The schedule is a day shift: eight AM to five PM. At first everything goes according to plan. Our man stumbles in mornings and breathes open the garage doors. His own breath escapes like the fog that sits over the tiny valley where the shop has been planted. Our man goes to work, a car at a time, overhauling engines, transmission rebuilds. Wang wanders in around ten, a Kool dangling from the corner of his mouth, his cellphone hooked onto his belt and constantly beeping that annoying Nextel beep. Wang gets his hands under an open hood and removes a hose. The shop stays open till nine PM and Wang does all the work after our boy leaves at five.

One day, Wang's Nextel goes off and he starts jabbering in his Viet-lingo, then he laughs and jigs around some more in that fucked talk. He lights a fresh Kool. Our man who is fresh out of detox is replacing a blown head gasket on a '64 Lincoln, a beauty, suicide doors and everything. Wang steps away, ching-chonging as he goes. Our man keeps at the Lincoln, but does not finish, as a middle-aged couple's Ford jalopies into the lot, spewing steam and smoke like a dragon. Wang never returns. At five our hero closes the shop doors and goes home.

Next morning, Wang waits for detox-man in the office. The man has never seen Wang there this early. "You lazy American," Wang says. "I leave shop, and you close up, now customer angry." He points at the unfinished Lincoln. Detox-man says that he worked

from eight to five, that that was his shift. Wang says he'll pay overtime.

Wang stops coming to the shop in the mornings. Every other day he wanders in around lunchtime, scans the lot of vehicles waiting to be repaired. "Hey lazy white," Wang says. "You work faster, I pay." Then he disappears again, kissing his Nextel.

At lunch, detox-man walks across the street to the sports bar. At first he orders chicken wings and Cokes. Then he replaces the Coke with Budweiser. Then he replaces the chicken wings with Makers Mark.

After lunch, Wang's smoking a Kool in the middle of the car-littered lot. He stamps his tiny oriental foot. When detox-man says he needs help to get everything done on time Wang's eyes grow into tea saucers and his mouth into a donut hole. "Oh, you drunk! You drunk! I smell the booze!"

Wang goes to the office to write up detox-man's last check. Our hero grabs the keys to the Lincoln, which he's now finished and has stashed around the side of the shop. Wang hands over detox-man's check. "You very bad, drunk lazy American," Wang says. Detox-man says thanks, thanks for the job. Wang waves him off like he might wave at mosquitoes. The smoke from his Kool scatters into tiny thunderstorms.

When detox-man drives away, the windows down, the radio playing on the classic rock station (The Eagles), he thinks about moving out of town. He thinks he should go to his room and get his clothes and just drive off. Then, on the freeway on-ramp, he thinks: screw the clothes.

