

Working Without a Net

by Randy Lowens

1

John dropped his bookbag on the sidewalk and stretched. "First thing after graduation," he announced to a passing car, "I'm designing a backpack that doesn't turn students into educated Quasimodo's." He reached inside for a box of Marlboro Reds and lit up.

His mother nagged about smoking. The habit was out of fashion among his fellow students. Carol, his wife, complained about the smell and wouldn't let him smoke inside the house. John was forever "trying to quit", but that was just what he said to excuse the habit. Dying from emphysema or cancer, at some point in the distant future, was the least of his worries.

Cocaine, he really was trying to quit. Soon, as in immediately, before Carol figured out he'd invested next month's rent in Peruvian flake. Besides, he hated peering out the blinds at four AM, searching for shadows of policemen in the alleyway. Three weeks had passed since he'd tooted up. He rarely thought about it anymore, he assured himself.

He leaned against a waist-high brick wall that lined the sidewalk and blew smoke out his nostrils the way he had seen Charles Bronson do in a black-and-white spaghetti Western. Across the street, a parking garage was being built. John was an engineering student, but he wasn't thinking of how the principles of physics applied to the structure. Instead he watched a fellow on the second floor roll up a drop cord.

The man appeared to be about John's age. He wore a mustache, jeans, boots, and a plaid shirt. If he traded his hardhat for a Stetson, he might have been the Marlboro man. He had finished cleaning some welds on an I beam with a rotary brush and had started gathering tools, preparing to depart.

John wondered where the guy was headed. Probably down to the corner bar to toss back a few. He'd shoot some stick, maybe croon a

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tune with his pals, then turn some cowgirl's head before turning in for the night. When this guy lit a smoke, nobody nagged. Men slapped him on the back, and women waited in line to two-step. No paranoia in the wee hours, no bleeding septum or bills he couldn't pay. John was suddenly filled with the conviction that this man lived a simple life, a healthy life, his body nourished by manual labor and his spirit by the camaraderie of his fellows.

When the man disappeared, John considered tailing him. If he hurried he might catch the guy in the parking lot, ask what bar he frequented and make plans to meet later. Instead John snuffed his butt on the sidewalk, shouldered his book bag and started walking towards home. Otherwise, Carol would rag his ass.

2

Carol leaned against the windowsill and watched a garbage truck backing up the alleyway. "I'll thank the Lord when you have your degree, and we can afford a real house with a lawn," she said. "That's not so much to ask. It's not like I want a mansion. A little A frame in a suburb would be fine." John stared at the sweat on the side of his bottle of Heineken. He held his breath and counted one, two, three: "Your father would loan you the money for a down payment, Morris. If you weren't so proud."

Carol always called John by his middle name, Morris. She said John sounded common and Johnny, childish. At first he'd liked that she had a special name for him. But lately when she called him Morris, he felt she was talking to some alter ego he'd never met. So he sat quietly and waited for this mythical Morris to reply.

John wondered if Construction Man was married, and if so, if he endured this crap. Probably not. He probably returned home each evening with a brand new beauty on his arm, until one midsummer's eve he crossed fates with a Debra Winger look alike, all soft brown curls and chocolate eyes, who moved in soon after. She secretly longed for a ring, a promise, but was too demure to ask. Construction Man was tempted to propose marriage, but thought better of it. He knew their love must be given freely, or not at all...

Carol's voice snatched him back into the room as surely as if she had jerked his necktie. "God, I hate working second shift," she whined, slumping into a chair. Red lacquered fingernails worried blonde ringlets that cascaded across her shoulder. "I swear, I must have the worst job in all Chattanooga. I should have stayed in school and let you support us."

Talk of finances reminded him of the upcoming rent. He thought, too, of the money owed his dealer. His wife's check would cover one or the other, but not both. If he paid the dealer, would the landlord evict them? If he paid the landlord, would the dealer slam a desk drawer shut on his fingertips? Carol muttered something unintelligible. She snatched her purse from the table and left for work.

3

John watched the clock until his wife had been gone precisely fifteen minutes. He stashed his book bag in the closet and strode to the bedroom. Reaching beneath the bed, he removed a mirror that was larger than a compact, but smaller than what hung on the walls. A razor blade lay atop the mirror. The surface was wiped clean.

He carried the apparatus into the kitchen and stepped on the pedal of the trash can. He hesitated, then dropped the blade inside. Next he walked purposefully to the window, opened it, and slung the mirror as hard as he could against the brick wall across the alleyway. To his dismay, it struck the wall on its edge and fell unbroken to the street below. It landed on a cushion of castoff cardboard. John fancied he saw the image of a face in the mirror, grinning up at him. He pulled the window shut, turned, and sat on the sill. His breath came fast and his forehead was slick with sweat. He looked up. Jesus, on the wall opposite, knelt to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane.

John returned to the kitchen. Where he had run his hands through his hair, it stuck out from the sides of his head like rays from the sun in a child's drawing. He fetched a bottle of Chivas and a highball glass from the cupboard. Crossing the room on his way to the

icebox, he stopped in mid stride and stood chewing the hair on the back of his hand. He returned to the cupboard, replaced the bottle and glass, and vanished into the bedroom. When he reappeared, he wore what Carol called his "slumming clothes": a pair of denim pants, a shirt with no tie, and boots.

An hour later his Camry crossed the Alabama line. It entered a gravel lot and parked next to a portable sign that read, "The Wagon Wheel". The second e was missing, but the message was clear.

Like the sign that advertised it, the bar and grill sat on a trailer. A porch had been added, fashioned from rough cut two by four's, and a wooden wagon wheel hung from the railing. Straightforward enough, John figured.

He sat with his lips parted and stared at the front door. As if suddenly remembering an appointment, he glanced at the seat beside him. A pint of Maker's Mark nestled beside a plastic bottle of Seven-Up. John took a sip of each and got out of the car. He locked the car doors. The horn beeped as he walked away. He climbed the steps, took a deep breath, and stepped inside.

As the aluminum door swung shut behind him, he had the feeling of being naked before strangers. Two old men at the bar, the bartender, and a waitress swiping a cloth across a tabletop all turned and stared. One of the patrons wore a ponytail that trickled out from beneath a straw cowboy hat. The other was hatless, his hair neat and secured with Brylcreem. Both men wore plaid shirts, faded Wranglers, and cowboy boots with pointed tips. The cumulative effect was that of rugged men's wear, in contrast to John's Calvin Klein denims, pressed cotton shirt, and Timberland footwear. His hesitation snowballed into naked fear.

The bartender spoke. "Grab a seat, young un, and Karen'll be right with ya." John knew tables and booths should be reserved for larger parties, but he didn't want to join the gang at the bar. Since the place was nearly empty and it was already eight o'clock, he stepped around the pool table that occupied the center of the room to sit in a booth.

The waitress approached, wiping her hands on an apron and smiling.

"Name's Karen. How are ya?"

He offered a weak smile and nodded.

"What can I bring you to drink?" she asked.

"I'll have a bourbon. Maker's... No, Jim Beam," he decided. "Make it a double, and a Miller on the side. High Life, not Lite."

Karen rewarded his selection with a smile and strolled off to fill the order. John watched her walk away. He released his breath and turned towards the guys at the bar. On a television screen above their heads, a youthful Jack Nicholson sporting 60's era sideburns climbed into the bed of a delivery truck to play Chopin on an old piano. The bartender changed the channel as his drinks arrived. He tossed down some of the bourbon. It burned, but he recovered with only a small cough. The ice cold beer tasted good behind it. The muscles in his shoulders began to relax as he finished the whiskey. He burped silently, with his mouth closed, and signaled Karen for another double.

Sometime later that evening, Construction Guy arrived. John wasn't sure when because he'd placed his wristwatch next to the restroom sink as he washed his hands and somehow lost it. The clock on the wall was no help, either. It was only a blur.

John was certain the latest addition to the party was Construction Guy. He could tell by the way the fellow dressed, all metal and leather, by the deliberate way he ambled in and waited until he was leaned against the bar before removing his motorcycle gloves. (Why hadn't John thought of that before? Construction Guy rides a Hawg!)

Karen delivered John another round. He raised his shot glass and toasted the sight of her departing rear end, which was looking better all the time. He resolved to take her home come closing time. Construction Guy was going to see what ole John was made of.

He chuckled, proud of himself. He looked down at a puddle of beer on the table and got lost in it. From there the evening progressed like previews of a movie, flashing from one scene to the next with only the vaguest connection between. The pony tailed

cowboy was standing nearby saying something about treating Karen, the waitress, with respect. John had no awareness of traveling from his seat to the doorway, but when the gravel parking lot chewed his knees and landed a haymaker upside his head, alertness returned. He rolled onto his side, curled his knees against his stomach and lay laughing.

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The next day, John's kneecaps looked like Tennessee Pride Real Country Sausage. The bandage on his head kept coming loose, having to be tucked in, and he was suffering the Stone Mountain of hangovers.

At the head of the class, Dr. Tallmadge pointed at the blackboard with a yardstick. The equation was incomprehensible. John couldn't remember what the various terms represented, much less how they related to one another. He tried to focus on the instructor's words, but they were distorted like the voice of an adult on a Peanuts cartoon.

The class was Dynamic Systems 305. The first week, Dr. Tallmadge had used a quadratic equation to model the motion of an object attached to a spring that moved through a medium. John had found the analysis straightforward enough. The second order term was the acceleration of gravity, the first order was the spring's coefficient, and the damping action of the medium provided the constant. But during the second week, the instructor began to apply differential equations to analyze electronic systems. John had struggled with differential equations in math class, and as for electronics, he had no intuitive grasp, nothing concrete on which to hang his understanding.

The fifth week of class found him hopelessly lost. The subject matter seemed utterly intangible. The class was like a speeding train, and he stood on the station platform craning his neck in a futile effort to catch a glimpse inside the most recently passing car. The metaphor made his neck hurt. He rubbed it and leaned back in his desk to look out the window. What did Dynamic Systems have to do with designing a parking garage, anyhow?

As he examined the skeletal structure across the roadway, he thought of Construction Guy. He wondered what floor the man was working on today and if the hombre at the bar had really been the same fellow. He had felt certain at the time, but according to the principles of Probability and Statistics 202, probably not. He wondered if Construction Guy suffered for two days whenever he got drunk, or if upon awakening he had only to shake his head to clear it before flexing his biceps and tossing his toolbox into the back of his pickup truck.

A prolonged silence in the classroom brought John hurtling back inside the window. Dr. Tallmadge was looking at him, as was the young lady in the next row. The instructor must have asked him a question. "I, ah, I'm sorry, Dr. Tallmadge," John stuttered, "Could you repeat that, please?" Dr. Tallmadge rolled his eyes. He turned to the girl and nodded. She responded that a Laplace transform was necessary to describe the effect of the various stimuli upon the capacitor. John knew leaving class was a bad idea, but he figured puking in the floor would be even worse, so he hurried out the door towards the restroom.

5

Carol squinted at the strip of paper in her hand. She tossed it into the toilet and flushed. "Praise the Lord, at least I'm not pregnant," she announced.

"We could try some more."

She cut her eyes at him, but said nothing. She crossed the hallway into the bedroom and began placing clothes inside a suitcase that lay open on the bed.

"How long will you be gone?"

"How long? I don't know," she replied. "I don't know that I'll ever return."

He looked at his Timberlands, moping. Carol preferred him in loafers. He yearned for a pair of boots, real cowboy boots with pointed toes like the guys at the Wagon Wheel wore. So he wore Timberlands, and no one was satisfied.

Carol snapped her suitcase shut, lugged it out of the bedroom and placed it beside the front door. "I'll be back when you give change your ways," she proclaimed. "I'll be back when the rent is paid in a timely manner, by your hand rather than mine. In other words, Morris," she lisped, oblivious to the speck of saliva that clung to her lower lip, "I'll be back when you grow up."

She placed her luggage on the landing outside. "Give your mother my regards," he called as she reached to close the door behind her. The latch clicked, and he was alone. He walked to the closet, removed a large cardboard box and began packing his belongings, too.

6

Midway through the second week, the East Ridge motel room was a dump. A thin rectangular shaft of morning sunlight leaked past the drapery onto a table top littered with pizza boxes and potato chip bags. A mound of cigarette butts overflowed an ashtray and spilled onto the nightstand. "Damn things smell like my mouth tastes," John said with a groan as he stumbled toward the bathroom.

He had to brush his teeth twice, and finish a can of beer left over from the previous night, before he had confidence to brave the lobby for coffee and a newspaper. When he returned, he began sweeping the table's refuse into a plastic garbage pail.

He glanced at the styrofoam cup in his hand. "This coffee is grounds for divorce." He'd always loved that joke, but, somehow, today it wasn't funny. He slumped into a chair. The plastic cover made crinkling noises against his back. He wiped his eyes and rubbed his forehead. There was nowhere to go but forward.

He placed the chair on the sidewalk outside the door and balanced the ashtray on its arm. After retrieving an ink pen and some mail from his car, he sat down and opened his grade sheet. Dynamic Systems Analysis showed an F. He crumpled the paper, set it alight, and dropped it into the ashtray. Next he crumpled a past due notice from his landlord and burned that as well. Finally, he repeated the ritual with a letter from his estranged wife, a note that spelled out the timing and conditions of their divorce. Each flame

began modestly, consuming only a corner of the paper, then peaked into a great leaping blaze that covered the entire sheet before collapsing again into timidity and ash.

Returning inside with the chair, he spread the want ads across the bed and began methodically searching for job prospects. Periodically he sipped his coffee. His courage grew with each swallow, in direct proportion to the caffeine that entered his bloodstream. By midmorning he was ready to start calling.

He dialed the first number. A woman's voice answered, curt and efficient. "Headrick Brothers Construction. How may I direct your call?"

"I, ah, I'm calling to inquire as to your procedure for applying for employment," he stammered.

"Yes sir, and what are your qualifications?" the voice immediately responded.

"Qualifications? Well, until recently I was an engineering student..."

"Do you have a degree?" After only the briefest pause, the voice continued, "I said, do you have a degree? We have an opening in structural design, but the position requires a bachelor's degree in engineering."

"No. No, I don't have an engineering degree."

"The engineering division also has an opening for a draftsman..."

"Oh, that's great."

"...which requires certification from an accredited technical school. Are you a certified draftsman?"

"Certified? I can draw, but... well, no, I don't have a tech school certification. See, I really wanted to be a Construction Guy, anyhow. I mean, I wanted to work as a laborer." John lowered his voice, aiming for a gruff tone. "You know, flex my muscles outdoors, hang steel and stuff like that."

"Can you weld?"

"Weld?"

"Yes," the woman replied with a sigh. "Can. You. Weld."

"Umm, no."

"Then tell me, what qualifications do you have to become an employee of Headrick Brothers Construction?"

"Well, ah, I don't know. I guess I don't have any."

"I'm sorry, we only hire unskilled laborers through temporary employment services. Have a nice day, sir." The line went dead. John stared at the classifieds page. It was inked up with check marks and exclamation points throughout the Building Trades section. He opened the blinds and for several minutes stood watching the sun climb towards noontime. At length he whispered, "Well, Cowboy, here we are. What the hell you gonna do now?"

