

about 5300 words

Men at Work

Her tail lights disappeared into the fog like two red lanterns drifting out to sea. I could still feel the softness of her lips. At five in the morning we barely spoke, me a bundle of nerves after a sleepless night waiting for the 4:00 am clang, dreading the flight, the drive, the grind ahead. I can't imagine what it was like for her, my departures. Arrivals though, they were something else again; Cathy standing at the end of the concourse, looking like a million bucks with a smile that said I was going to be the luckiest guy in Boise that night. We'd beat it back to her place, have a glass of wine or two, then I'd show her how much I'd missed her. I wondered how much longer she could put up with it, the too short weekends, the endless goodbyes. The company bought me a plane ticket every two weeks; it would be a while before I held her again. I turned and entered the terminal. Three and a half hours later I pulled into the job site in Orange County, CA, 8:37 am PDT. The wonders of modern life.

A couple of years earlier it had been Boise that I was flying into on Monday mornings. Back then I had a cheap apartment in Spokane, a

few blocks from the home I had recently left. The hope was that my kids, Sam and Alice, could visit me on the weekends I was in town. It sort of worked. They were sixteen and eighteen, so they had busy lives of their own and were at an age when hanging out with Dad wasn't really a thing. But they knew I was there for them. Every other weekend.

No-one drove me to the airport or kissed me goodbye; I took the bus. I was a man alone, flying blind at 30,000 feet. Then one day I walked into the clubhouse of the apartments I was building in Boise and there Cathy was. Holding a briefcase with both hands in front of her, she stood alone by the fireplace, totally unaware of my presence. She had on a business suit that couldn't hide her shapeliness. Her layered pixie cut brown hair highlighted her soft brown eyes and sensuous lips. She was beautiful, and her expression betrayed a depth of character, someone who had a certain understanding of the world. I could see that there was a questioning about her, that she wasn't totally comfortable in her situation, whatever it was. I saw the whole of her, from across the room. She seemed beyond my reach.

A few days later I wandered into the apartment offices and found her sitting behind a desk. "Hi. You working here?" I knocked on her open door.

"Yes, I just started this morning." Her soft, lilting voice wrapped around me like a warm quilt. I became a regular visitor to her office door. When she told me that she liked to read I brought her a copy of *Love in the Time of Cholera*. It was a gift with many meanings:

beyond the pleasure I hoped it would bring her, I wanted her to know that I, too, was a reader, someone with a depth and range beyond the stereotype of my profession. It also gave us something to talk about during my now daily visits to the clubhouse. Mostly, I hoped she would see that I was, like Florentino, a romantic. It was my way of telling her that I was smitten: she was my Fermina. She fell for my ruse, and for me. Now she was stuck with my departures.

Unlocking the job shack door I hurried inside hoping a tradesman wouldn't confront me with some insurmountable problem. That was part of my job, solving everyone's unsolvable problem. I enjoyed following an electrician or framer into a building after hearing his anxious description of some inextricable dilemma. "We'll figure something out," I'd say as I patted them on the shoulder. "Haven't seen a building yet that didn't get built." But on Mondays I was in no mood for such walks. I needed a good night's sleep before I took on the impossible.

I sat in my chair and turned the computer on. While it was booting up I glanced at Dave's tool belt lying in the corner of my office where it had been for more than a month. The hammer, square, tape measure and carpenter's pencil were barely used. When I had called the home office and told them that I needed a carpenter they told me to call Labor Supply. It was cheaper than putting someone on our payroll and there was no risk of a workman's comp claim. It wasn't like calling the union hall where you knew you'd get an experienced

carpenter who made decent wages, someone who had a home and a family. But that is a story from the past. Contractors call Labor Supply now. Of course, you never know who you are going to get, but it's usually someone who has lost their purchase in the world. Dave was who I got. He was a bright guy who, as he told me, had once led a solidly middle class life working as a fireman. Then one day he came home and found his wife in bed with another man. Things didn't go well for Dave after that. The other man was a California State Patrolman, and soon Dave was unemployed and behind bars.

After he'd worked for me a while I learned that he was sleeping in the building. He would leave the jobsite at four o'clock each afternoon, then wait across the street until he saw me drive off before sneaking back in. He did a capable job for a few weeks, then one day he disappeared. I was sure he'd come back for his tools, but there they lay. He hadn't even contacted Labor Supply to get his pay. The second week of his disappearance I started searching missing persons and arrest records for the towns in the area, but the only trace of him was his tool belt. It was too painful to look at anymore. I called Labor Supply.

“Hello, this is Bob Wright with Modern Construction Company. I am calling about Dave Enderby, the fellow who disappeared. I have his tool belt, here, and I'd like to get it to you in case he comes back.”

“Who.”

“This is Bob Wright. Modern Construction Company.”

“Yeah, I got that. Who're you calling about?”

“David Enderby. He came to work here, then disappeared. I've got his tool belt in my job shack and I'd like to get it to you.”

“Just a minute.”

I heard the phone being put down, then footsteps receding as if the person on the other end of the line worked in an empty warehouse. Out my window I could see Harold, Dave's replacement from Labor Supply, walking out of the building. He had his hands wrapped across his midsection, as if he was holding something, but there was nothing there. He glanced toward the job shack, then hurried into the garage.

“David Enderby, you say?” The voice came back.

“Yes, David Enderby.”

“Yeah, he hasn't been in to the office for over a month. We've still got his paycheck here. You tell him if he doesn't come pick it up pretty soon we're gonna tear it up.”

“Look, I know he hasn't been in. He disappeared, right? I don't want his tool belt here anymore. It depresses me just looking at it.”

“What's that got to do with me?”

“Technically, Dave worked for you. He was on your payroll, not mine. So technically his possessions should be returned to you.”

“Look mister, there's no need to get short with me. I don't know anything about any tool belt and I really don't care what you do with it. We've got hundreds of men a day that we run through here and, to be perfectly honest with you, most of them aren't good for much. You don't end up at a place like this if you are on top of your game. Half of them *do* disappear, right after they get their first paycheck. You get

my drift?”

“Dave wasn't like that.”

“He's gone isn't he?”

I wanted to tell him Dave's story, that he had once been a fireman, that he had owned a tri-level on a quiet street with peach trees in the front yard, kids on trampolines in the back. That I had never smelled alcohol on his breath. That he worked hard and told humorous stories. I wanted to tell him that there was a growing current of Daves, people that for one reason or another had become uprooted, people that were being swept into a void, a state of unbeing. But then I remembered who I was talking to, that he was the gatekeeper of the world's Daves, hundreds of them a day.

“What do you want me to do with his tool belt?” I asked.

“Is it worth anything?”

“They're all Craftsman tools. They'd be good to have around the house.”

“I'll stop by after work.”

Along with solving the insoluble, another of my responsibilities was to motivate the unmotivable. Construction projects have many moving parts, each dependent on the timely performance of the others. Of course, the parts are really humans, and by our very nature we are prone to undermining our own best intentions. It was my job to keep all parts running smoothly, which often meant that by cajoling, bribing or threatening, I attempted to prevent humans from

being human. Take Ted, for instance. Ted was a finish carpenter who had subcontracted the installation of doors and trim in the building. We had used him on other projects, so he traveled around with us from one job, and city, to the next. Ted was a little mercurial, but he always got his work done. A week earlier, after working late, I had run into him at the local convenience store. He was on his Harley, which he had towed from Washington behind his work van. In one of his buoyant moods, he greeted me effusively as he tied a half case of PBR to the back seat.

“Do you think it's a good idea to be riding that thing when you've been drinking?” I asked him.

“It's only a couple of blocks,” he said. “Gotta keep the party going,” he beamed. You see, Ted was also living in the building. I imagined him and Dave and other homeless workmen, as yet unknown to me, women, too, perhaps, because what is a party without women, living it up on the fourth floor, sleeping bags and Burger King wrappers spread around the bare gypcrete floors.

“Be careful,” I said.

A few hours later Ted was bailing himself out of the Westminster City jail, his Harley and his driver's license having been impounded. His buoyancy pierced, Ted moped around the jobsite for the next few days, getting nothing done. Then Thursday morning Thanh, the night watchman, knocked on my job shack door. Thanh lived in a decrepit camp trailer parked next to the building. He spoke very little English, but I had managed to learn that he had been in the U.S. for seventeen

years working as a night watchman, mostly on construction sites. In three more years he would have enough money saved to return to Vietnam. Looking at his wizened face and hands, I had asked him how old he was. “Just sixty-eight,” he said. “Plenty time left. Find beautiful wife Vietnam.”

“Ted owe me two hundred dollah,” Thanh said as soon as I opened the door.

“Okay?....” I said, wondering what this had to do with me.

“He no pay. You pay,” Thanh insisted.

“He can pay you back when he gets his draw,” I explained. “He should have the money about the tenth of the month.”

“He no work, no get pay,” Thanh said. I scrunched my face in a puzzled look.

“He jail. No more money from me,” Thanh blurted.

“Again?” I exclaimed. “Ted's in jail again?”

Thanh nodded emphatically. I explained that I would see what I could do, and thanked Thanh for letting me know about Ted. Thanh kept repeating “You get me money, you get me money.” I told him that any arrangements he had made with Ted were beyond my control, that he'd have to get his money back himself, but he remained determined that it was on my shoulders to see that he was repaid by Ted.

After calling the city jail and determining that Ted was indeed back in jail, I drove over there and bailed him out, putting the five hundred dollars on my own credit card. I knew that I would get it back; I could

have the five hundred withheld from his next draw and get reimbursed by the company. The important thing was to get Ted back on the job. His humanness was gumming up the works, screwing up the schedule for all of the finish trades that followed behind him.

“What the hell is going on, Ted?” I complained as soon as he was in my truck.

“I know, I've got it coming,” Ted drooped, his head hanging.

“They said they impounded your van!” I wailed. “They said they arrested you driving out of their parking lot! They took your license away, Ted. What were you doing driving in their parking lot?”

“I had to set a court date for my DUI.”

“So you just drove over to the police department with a suspended license? What a brilliant idea, Ted.” He hung his head even lower, stared into his hands.

“Well, I guess it could be worse,” I said feebly. “At least you didn't kill anyone. I'll help you straighten this out. Right now the best thing you can do is concentrate on your work. It'll keep your mind off your problems,” I cajoled.

“My tools are in my van,” he said.

“Where's your van,” I asked.

“In the impound yard,” he said.

“Christ!” I said.

I returned to the police station where, after an hour of pleading with administrators of escalating importance, I was able to arrange for Ted to get his tools out of his van.

Now I walked into the building and onto the second floor where I hoped to see Ted busy installing doors and casing. Instead the hallways were empty, silent. Every doorway was vacant, just raw edges of drywall and exposed lumber. I climbed to the third floor which was also raw, silent and empty, except for one doorway that had been fitted with a two panel, metal clad door and wrapped with casing. Swinging the door open I saw Ted pacing back and forth across the gypcrete apartment floor which was covered in newsprint that had apparently been spread out in some freakish attempt at furnishment. A rumpled sleeping bag and pile of clothing filled one corner of the room. Ted's head was half covered in shaving cream, the other half shaved bald. Trickle of blood dappled his pale skin. He made no notice of me but kept pacing, all the while muttering some unintelligible phrase.

“Hi Ted,” I said as cheerfully as I could. “What's going on?”

Ted stopped pacing and looked up, suddenly noticing me. His eyes had a threatening, feral look. For an instant it seemed that he might spring upon me like a trapped animal, all fangs and claws, but he lowered his head and resumed pacing.

“What's going on with your head, Ted,” I asked as nonchalantly as possible.

“Hygiene, Bob. Hygiene!”

I felt myself tense up. Ted was obviously in rough shape, and I was concerned about his well being. Anyone could see that he needed heavy medication and professional guidance. But neither one of us

could afford that. He didn't have the money and I didn't have the time.

“I see that you haven't gotten any work done.”

“I've been busy with other things, Bob.”

“Like what, Ted?”

Again he stopped pacing and looked at me, this time with a look that indicated that I was a complete fool, incapable of comprehending the obvious.

“Whatever you've been doing it must be pretty important,” I said. “I mean, it'd have to be darned important to keep you from working. It looks like you're holding up the whole damn job, Ted. I'm going to have to reschedule the painter.”

Again Ted looked at me like I was an idiot. I tried raising my voice.

“Goddammit Ted, I've got a job to do and you're gumming up the works. Pacing the floor with your head half shaved isn't doing either one of us any good. What you need to do is get your tools out and start setting doors. Just take it one step at a time. It'll make both of us feel a lot better.”

Ted resumed pacing and muttering. He shook his head violently, throwing blobs of shaving cream onto the newsprint.

It was stupid of me to press my needs like this. It was obvious Ted was in no shape to do anything. He probably hadn't slept a wink since I'd seen him last Friday. But I hadn't slept much, either. I didn't want to be there anymore than he did. Looking back, I can see that I wasn't in much better shape than Ted, that I was close to slipping into the

abyss with him. Perhaps it was my own fear, or just emotional laziness, an unwillingness to face the abyss and connect with him in any meaningful way, that made me start yelling at him. I mean, I was practically screaming, threatening him with the dire consequences he would face if he didn't start working pronto. I had a vague awareness that I was behaving just as crazily as Ted was, but I couldn't stop.

As I slipped out of the room two workmen walked by. I could see that they, too, were touched with fear, that they were aware that the room I had exited was possessed of demons, and that they had heard me yelling. I could see the disgust they had for me as they slouched past Ted's door. I held it for myself, too; the disgust. I stood watching the workmen hurry away down the hallway slump-shouldered, just as several hours earlier I had watched Cathy's taillights disappear into Boise's morning fog. I became lightheaded, put my hand on the wall to steady myself. For a moment I was floating somewhere between the comfort of Cathy and the discomfort of Ted. I yearned for comfort, but comfort wasn't on my agenda. I turned and went back through the door.

I sat quietly in the lone metal folding chair placed in the middle of the room and watched Ted pace and mutter. After several minutes he stopped and faced me, as if he had noticed me for the first time. His expression was almost rational. The shaving cream had mostly dripped from his head to his neck and shoulders.

“What can I do to help you, Ted?” I asked as gently as I could. It was a moment of resignation for me. It was obvious that Ted wouldn't

complete his work, that I would have to find a contractor to replace him, that my budget and schedule were history. But I realized that something bigger was at stake.

“Have you talked to your wife lately?” I asked. I could see his eyes well up. “Maybe we should call her.”

As Ted resumed his pacing I saw his phone on the floor next to his sleeping bag. I picked it up and speed dialed #1.

“Hello,” answered a soft feminine voice.

I explained Ted's condition to the woman on the phone, whose name I learned was Melanie. “If there's any way you can get down here, I think it would be the best thing for Ted,” I suggested. “He's in pretty tough shape.”

When she told me that she couldn't afford the ticket I offered to buy it for her. “It's a pretty serious situation,” I told her, explaining the impounded van and motorcycle, the shaving cream. “O.K.,” she said. I booked her on a flight for the next morning. I added up the now eight hundred dollars I had “loaned” Ted and the two hundred dollars that he owed Thanh, plus the unknown amounts he had undoubtedly “borrowed” from other workers. I could see a deluge of claims being made to the company against Ted's earnings. I felt less certain that I would recoup the money I had spent on Ted. But I was relieved to pass responsibility for Ted to his wife. Lord only knows what she will do with him, I thought. Have him committed to a psychiatric hospital? I pictured Ted in a straight jacket being escorted from the building by white-coated officials, leaving a trail of shaving cream and

blood. But that costs money, I realized. Whatever happened was in his wife's hands.

After walking through the building and talking with a few of the workmen I was approached by the elevator engineer.

"I've been looking all over for you," he said worriedly.

"What's going on?" I asked. "Having trouble with the elevator?"

"Not really," he said haughtily. "My installs always run like a charm."

"So...?"

"So I can't finish the install without my laptop!" He stood there almost challenging me.

"I'm sorry, but I'm still not getting what the problem is."

"Like I said, I can't finish the install without my computer. It's gone!" Again he was glaring at me.

"So you're saying your computer is missing?"

"That's what I am saying. And I don't need it for just this job. It's got the program for every install I've done for the past three years. Without my computer I can't do maintenance control on any of them. Probably a hundred elevators.

I stood there wondering what I could possibly do to help him. I thought of asking him if he had backed up these crucial files, when suddenly the picture of Harold furtively entering the garage while holding something under his shirt popped into my mind.

"Come with me," I told the engineer. "I might be able to help you."

After about twenty minutes of searching the garage we found his computer in a dumpster, tucked away under some cardboard and old

lunch bags. No doubt Harold had stashed it there planning its retrieval at quitting time, just before he got on the bus to wherever it was that he called home. I imagine the resale value of the computer was significant for Harold, perhaps two weeks of take home pay, a real bonanza for him. Harold was a scraggly fellow who looked like he rarely bathed. The other workmen told me that he was living in a camper in a widow's driveway. She gave him free rent in exchange for chores and other "favours," they said, giggling and guffawing.

I conjured the desolation of the coupling, the indiscriminate yearning that brought them together, the repugnant withdrawal. But maybe it wasn't like that. Maybe Harold had charms unknown to me. He was, after all, living in her driveway; the relationship was ongoing. I wondered how she would take his getting sacked. Maybe she wouldn't find out; maybe he would continue to get up each morning and catch the bus to "work." I pictured him wandering the streets all day, or sitting on a park bench feeding pigeons until it was "quitting time."

I wondered what Harold's story was, how he had fallen to this state. What was his childhood like? Had he ever been married? Had children? Unlike Dave, he was sullen and silent, so I never learned much about him. He was anonymous to me, someone sent by Labor Supply. Who he is wasn't supposed to matter to me. It probably didn't matter to anyone. Perhaps the widow, but who knows. If he had been on the company's payroll I would have felt responsible for him. But he was Labor Supply's responsibility, and that was precisely why we

didn't put workers on our payroll. Caring about the Harolds and Daves and Teds isn't cost effective, and I didn't have time for any of it.

By now I was fully engaged in my Orange County life. I spent the rest of the day walking the building, conversing with the tradesmen, learning where I needed to push and figuring out where the potential problems were. I avoided Ted's door. I would deal with him after his wife arrived. Perhaps she could comfort him into some kind of productivity. We had a common interest, her and I. I needed his work and she needed the money it would bring.

Around 4:00 PM, when the workers started wrapping up, I returned to my job shack. I made a to do list for the next day, scheduled material deliveries, filled out my daily report. Just before 5:00 the guy from Labor Supply walked in.

"I'm here for the tools. These them?" he said without introduction, staring into the corner where Dave's tool belt lay.

"That's them," I replied. "They're all yours."

He stooped over and picked them up, then headed for the door without another word.

"Hold on a minute," I said. "I have something else to discuss with you."

He turned and looked at me blankly. I returned the look.

"Well," he said. "I haven't got all day."

"It's about Harold," I said.

"What about him."

“I won't be needing him tomorrow.”

“OK,” he said, once again heading to the door. Why Harold wasn't needed held no interest for him. Harold was just one of the hundreds.

I stopped off at Kentucky Fried on the way home for some comfort food. Built in the sixties, my apartment was dark and dreary: shag carpeting, aluminum windows, chipped laminate counter tops and avocado colored appliances. A forty-five minute drive from the job, it's great redeeming quality was that it was a five minute walk from downtown Huntington Beach, the ocean and miles of surf and sand. But today the sun wasn't shining. The world was wrapped in a cold coastal drizzle. I poured myself a glass of wine, grabbed the chicken and sank into the couch. A dank loneliness settled over me as I sought comfort in the Colonel's secret recipe, the mashers and gravy, biscuits and honey. I poured myself another glass of wine, measuring how much of the bottle was left, promising myself that I wouldn't drink the whole thing this time. Thirty minutes later the chicken and the wine were both gone, neither having quelled the gloom into which I was sinking.

I uncorked another bottle and called Cathy. I told her about Dave's tool belt, how sick it made me feel looking at it every day, wondering what happened to him. We shared amusement at the dispatcher's greedy eagerness to get Dave's tools. I told her about Ted's half-shaved head, making a joke out of it. “Hygiene, Bob, hygiene,” was the punch line we both laughed at. I skipped over the part where I yelled

at Ted, telling Cathy instead how I had arranged for Ted's wife to fly down. I had my eyes closed while I talked to her so I couldn't see the dinginess around me. The wine was working me, bringing out my emotions. I repeated the story of my day several times, always chuckling at the punch line, hoping that the humor would make the pain of it go away.

Cathy, as always, was sympathetic. But I heard a hint of resolve in her voice, as if she wasn't letting me all the way in this time. She was holding back, not giving herself over to the comfort I had become accustomed to receive from her. But I kept digging, hoping if I told the stories in the right way I could get what I needed from her.

“Bob, you told me already. Several times.” She said it softly, but firmly.

“I know. I guess I'm hoping that if I tell the story in just the right way it won't matter to me anymore. When I was in Ted's room, watching him pace from wall to wall with shaving cream covering half his head, I felt myself sinking. All I could think about was making it through til this evening when I could talk to you.”

“We need to talk about that, Bob.”

“About what, Cathy?”

“Do you know that you are slurring your words, Bob? You do this every time you call me. You drink too much, and then you pick up the phone. How do you think that makes me feel? And you haven't once asked me about my day. Do you think I like this? Seeing you for a couple of days every two weeks, then driving you to the airport at six

in the morning?”

“I'm sorry, Cathy.”

“Being sorry doesn't do anything. I just can't do this anymore. You're a nice guy, Bob, but I can't do this anymore. I just can't. Do you know it's been a year since you left?”

We were both silent for a while. I imagined a conveyor carrying hordes of men, winding through a massive warehouse. There were stations where men were getting on and men were getting off. There was a tremendous sense of busy-ness, but nothing was getting accomplished. At the far end of the conveyor, where it wrapped underneath itself and returned to the starting point, men were dumped into a giant pit. I could see them clambering over each other, crying out mutely while attempting to escape. Others were resigned to their fate and lay listlessly while the more determined, more frightened men struggled over their bodies.

“I'll be done with this job in a couple of months. Then things will be different.”

“When you finish that job there will be another one. And another one after that, and none of them will be in Boise. We've been through all this before.”

“I need you Cathy. I don't know what I'd do without you.”

“You're a nice guy, Bob. You'll find someone else.”

Random bodies clutching umbrellas speckled the sidewalk. Couples and families in fleece dined under canopies. A crowd flowed out of the

movie theater as others lined up at the entrance. Each smile, each held hand or arm around a waist drove a coldness into me. I was in the crowd but not one of them; for them I did not exist. I felt a shiver of lightness, as if I might disappear altogether.

No one was on the pier save a few fishermen reeling in lines and closing tackle boxes. I leaned over the railing and listened as the luminescent waves rolled in, one after another. The meditative rhythm calmed me. As I rested there I sensed that I was not alone, that I was being observed. I scanned the few souls left on the pier, hoping for some sign of acknowledgment. But no-one took notice of me. Then, about thirty feet away, perched on top of a piling, I saw my companion: a pelican. We communed silently for a minute or two before his attention turned to the waters below. Then with a spring of his legs and flapping of his wings he took flight. He swooped down in front of me before turning, with a sure and graceful movement, toward the open sea and disappearing into the darkening mist.