

Rough Side Drag

The first time I saw the old guy was on my last pay day in late August. After three o'clock each Friday, workers from company sites began to show up and cluster outside a temporary office shack assembled on the naked concrete first floor site of what would become an office building. Back then, checks were still passed out in person in plain paper envelopes with just handwritten employee names inked on them. As clearly the junior member of the gathering, I stood on the periphery and took in the scene.

The humid air was thick and stale with the smell of damp sawdust, drying sweat and lingering whiffs from the containers marked with hazardous chemical warning symbols. Some of the swelling group waiting outside the shack took off their tool belts and sat on crates and boxed deliveries. Others milled around talking happy nonsense about weekend plans and the "eagle flying on Friday." The old man was uninterested in all that, sullen and solitary as he sat on a banded pile of framing lumber with an unfiltered Camel cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. It would be the next summer before I found out he was a master carpenter, a kind of magician in his craft, and much later when I realized his profound and lasting influences for life.

Shortly before the checks came out, Jack, a full-time carpenter's helper a few years older than me, arrived and milled through the group with gregarious glad-handing and what he perceived as clever commentary. He asked aloud, three times over the course of those few minutes, where everyone was going for drinks after work. He loudly told another guy to be sure to bring his sister's phone number on Monday. And, when he looked over to the old man sitting by himself, waved a hand and called out, "Hey Bill! How's it hanging?"

It happened so quickly; it took time for most of us to process. Within reach of the old carpenter was a 22-ounce straight claw hammer. In one swift motion, he grabbed the hammer and hurled it, tomahawk style, toward the wall of the office shack. The hammer claws stuck in the temporary sheathing and hung within about two feet from where Jack stood. The startling thud brought down a sudden silence before the carpenter spoke.

"Don't matta if you see me daily," he said, cigarette dancing in time with the words, "you'll be callin' me, Mister Bailey."

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At the start of that summer, I had finished Junior year and turned 17. I realized it was time to ‘get real’ and implement a course of strategic planning for life and career. Finding decent pay for a summer job would be the first step in the plan. It was clear I would need funds for gasoline, beer, and chasing girls in my forthcoming status as hot-shot high school senior.

At the time, my hypothetical resume included throwing newspapers, mowing lawns, washing dishes, and stocking shelves. That year, the minimum wage was \$1.30 per hour. On the corner by the new building site a few miles from my house, a hand-painted plywood sign advertised for laborers, paying \$2.25. I already had the construction boots and figured I was ready. I showed up the next morning and was hired on the spot.

The first few days involved maneuvering wheelbarrows full of sloshing concrete about 100 feet over roughhewn planks laying across the mud. A momentary break waited at the end of the path, as others in front of the caravan dumped their loads into the lumber framed forms. Then, back across for another heavy shifting load, each seeming more than the scrawny 150-pound physique holding the handles.

Employees hit the punch clock by 7 a.m. to beat the summer heat each day but it didn’t take long for the heat to surge into the lead. Many days involved stripping the wooden forms from the previous days’ pour, knocking nails and crusted concrete from the plywood and 2 x 4’s, and stacking the surviving clean lumber in piles for the next use. The muscle aches and brain-numbing monotony provided the opportunity for mind excursions and existential considerations. As I took in the lay of the land that summer, perspiration spurred inspiration. I’d need to find alternative employment next time around.

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Next summer’s job search had increased urgency; I’d be leaving for college in the fall. The construction company I worked for had expanded to include refurbishing governmental buildings and historical sites. Classified ads in the local weekly paper posted ‘Carpenter Helper’ jobs at \$3.75 an hour, \$4.25 after 6 weeks. I scraped up enough cash to buy a few carpentry tools and a beat-up old toolbox at the pawn shop and signed up at the construction office.

The first day, new hires met in the warehouse to be assigned a job site and to allow carpenters to choose, in turn, who they’d be working with. About seven or eight carpenters’

helpers awaited assignment. Those who had worked past projects were chosen first. A superintendent with a clipboard recorded the pairings. I recognized the next name he called and the old man who looked in my direction.

“I’m gonna take Pete,” the carpenter said. I looked side-to-side and behind me before realizing his pointing finger was directed at me. I stepped up and extended my right hand.

“Hello Mister Bailey. My name’s Richard,” but the handshake wasn’t met. He kept the finger pointed at my chest and his face was a portrait of contemplation.

“Well,” he said after a few seconds’ pause, “I’m gonna call you Pete.”

Some large projects required two or three carpenters and helpers. Mister Bailey was the one assigned to jobs with special conditions; refurbishing wood trim, restoring antique staircases, block paneling and the like. I would be working one-on-one with him on several projects.

During that time, I never saw him wear anything other than khaki Big Mac Square Back overalls, usually over a flannel shirt taken off on the warmest days to reveal just a classic ‘wife-beater’ undershirt. On those occasions, you couldn’t miss the contrast between his leather-tan face and fish-belly white bare shoulders. He was about three inches shorter than me and an indeterminable 45 to 60 years old. He wore Barry Goldwater style horned-rim glasses and maintained a thinning haircut typically depicted in barbershop wall photos as a men’s “regular.” I also don’t ever remember seeing him without either a cigarette or a chaw or Red Man tobacco in his mouth.

I observed and learned a great deal about his craftsmanship and trade during that summer, but very little about him. Yes, his name was Bill Bailey, as in the title of the old Dixieland Jazz Band standard tune, but I never heard anyone make that reference in his presence. He certainly had certain unique eccentricities, and in contemporary times, might be slotted somewhere on the autism spectrum.

Always a reticent man, there would be long quiet periods through workdays, him on scaffolding or ladder, me making saw cuts below. Other than the measurements and terse instructions he called out, he would rarely speak much at all. And when he did have something to say, it often came out in spontaneous rhyme.

He would start each workday by carrying in a folding table from his truck and covering it with a clean canvas drop cloth. From there, much as chefs practice 'mis en place' by preparing all ingredients to be used in a recipe, Mister Bailey would lay out each shiny tool he would need, taking time to arrange them in the projected order of use. Once, I watched him climb back down off a scaffold to move his placement of one chisel, resetting it to lay parallel among the others.

About the third week in June, he turned and called down, "Hand me up that smallest nail punch, Pete."

I picked it up and, stepping up on the first scaffold rung to reach it to him, finally chose the opportunity to ask, "How come you call me, Pete?" He momentarily held me with a blank stare before he spoke.

"Had a boy work with me one time. Name of Pete. Worked out real good." He stood up, rearranged the tools within his front pouch, then fixed a solemn gaze back at me and said, "Find what works best one day. Don't never do another way."

One day with his apparent attempt to approach actual conversation over Styrofoam cups of food truck coffee, I found out he was from rural North Carolina, the nearest 'big' town being Mt. Airy. He asked if I finished high school. I answered I did. He nodded and said that was a good thing. "I nary finished ninth grade. Hadda quit, go it alone. Feeding folks back at home."

Late one Friday afternoon, we were replacing some water-damaged crown molding in a county courthouse. I guess I was hurrying to finish the workday, beat the traffic home and start my weekend. I dropped a piece of molding as I moved it onto the miter saw and chipped off a significant chunk on the end. Years before, Mister Bailey had an accident in which he cut off ends of the middle and index fingers on his left hand. This feature was prominent whenever he held a burning cigarette between thumb and stub. The clattering piece of molding I dropped caused him to turn around.

"Look a-here," came the call from above my head. He held up his left hand, the fingers were a wiggling silhouette in the glare from the courthouse skylight. "Take your time, take your time," he said. "If I'd a took time, I'd still have all mine." Recognizing the somewhat pleasant tone as this bit of advice was delivered I realized that, maybe, the man might not dislike me.

I witnessed many carpentry tricks of the trade that summer and some memorable magic. In August we were sent to refurbish a staircase in a county courthouse designated as an historic site. Because of worn stair treads and wobbly banisters, the second floor of the building was closed to the public out of safety concerns.

I saw the care and caution needed to pry the dry and brittle spindles and newels free with minimum breakage. By the end of the second day, I was actually pretty good at it, only damaging one spindle beyond repair. Mister Bailey took another whole one home with him. After working one up on the lathe in his garage that night, brought a complete replica back to install the next day.

Matching faded and yellowed old varnishes was perhaps the hardest part and required a kind of alchemy. Inside a metal cookie tin in his truck were little jars of ingredients like instant coffee, tobacco flakes, dry mustard. With a pinch or shake of each, he ground them together with mortar and pestle, squirts of WD 40, sometimes a spit of tobacco spit juice, and drizzled the blend into a pan of with splashes of storebought wood stain. It took two or three coats sometimes, but the finished product was always indistinguishable from the ancient woodwork it was intended to match.

I don't remember seeing a sign he experienced any sense of satisfaction with the fine work he did. Near the end of one of those late August days, I called after him as we were leaving. "Great job, Mister Bailey!" He turned back, but I wasn't sure he heard me over the usual metal squeak and pop as he opened the truck door. "Another great job today, Mister Bailey." He had pulled the red bandana he kept in the chest pouch of his overalls to clean the sweat residue from his glasses. He took time to finish one lens before saying anything.

"I reckon you can rightly call me, Bill."

"Okay then," I smiled and quickly answered, "you can call me Richard." Bill still had the other lens to clean and this brief exchange to process before he spoke.

"Well," came the slow response, "I bleeve I'm gonna call you, Pete."

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The end of summer was rapidly approaching and the excitement and uncertainty of leaving for college was a powerful distraction. I guess I took on the outlook of a short timer. I'd done fairly well to that point and felt somewhat accomplished understanding measurements and instructions called out to me on the saws. Some minor mistakes began to creep into my workday. So, one afternoon when I heard Bill say, "Forty-five degree outside corner, 22 and a half in, 56 and three quarters long point to short. Half a kerf off the 22," I jumped right on it.

I slapped a length of the custom panel mold on the saw, marked it up, and pulled the trigger before I thought I heard Bill's garbled voice yelling something like "side rag" over the howl of the saw motor. With the cut finished, I looked up and saw Bill moving a hand over his distressed brow. He turned and slowly stepped down the scaffold stirrups. I'd rarely seen his face give away any emotion, but the look he gave me suggested something like empathy.

"Let the rough side drag," he said as he turned over the piece of molding on the saw. In my haste to make the cut, I hadn't distinguished the sanded factory face of the wood from the other side. "I guess it must be hell, trying to do your little bit," his face waving slowly side to side as he spoke, "when you really just don't know shit." He passed a hand over his chin and quietly looked at the floor for an extended moment, apparently collecting his thoughts.

He held out his palms parallel to the floor and placed one on top of the other in a kind of horizontal prayer. "Now, 'member this always," speaking quietly as if in a shared secret. "You let the rough side drag. Let the smooth side show. . ." rotating the other hand on top to visually illustrate his point. ". . .When you pull that load, anywhere you go." His facial expression never changed much but his nod and fixed gaze conveyed a certain, resolute, 'you're welcome.'

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I was working my last Friday with a lot on my mind. Within the next week, I'd be starting a new chapter in life. Friends would pack up and scatter to distant out-of-state schools, perhaps never to be seen again. My girlfriend would leave the next day to attend a college almost 400 miles from where I would be. I couldn't stop thinking our last date that evening could be, let's say, a memorable night.

Bill and I were putting up the final pieces of paneling and trim work in a restored, historic courthouse several miles out in the country. If things played out the way I envisioned, we'd

finish shortly after lunch and head back to the office. Bill would then negotiate where he'd be working on Monday. I would pick up a paycheck and start prioritizing options for the last weekend in town.

Traffic getting to the job site had seemed worse than usual that morning and Bill's meticulous set up before we could even begin work made me nervous. Later, with the end in sight, it looked to be a beautiful finish on the elaborate project. Bill was nailing up the custom fabricated black walnut trim to run beneath the crown molding, matching the original design. He would fill the tiny nail holes with a mix of mineral oil, wood glue, and walnut sawdust.

At one point, he asked me to hand him the level from his toolbox so he could site the line where pieces of trim would match in the angled corner. The tool was antique, with the bubble readings set in brass fittings mounted within a hardwood block. But when I handed it up and he held it against the wall, his level was several inches too short to get an accurate line.

"Here you go," I said, swapping the longer aluminum level from my toolbox with his. That worked and progress resumed. Most of the operation went smoothly, with Bill calling out measurements to me on the floor below. Then it happened.

One last piece of walnut trim was needed and only one piece remained on site. I laid it across the saw, pulled the tape measure down its length, marked it, and made the final cut of the day. I handed it up and took off my tool belt. I brushed off the saws and looked around for a broom to begin sweeping up. I had places to go. People to see.

Then, the quiet made me look up. The trim piece was about $\frac{3}{8}$ inch short. I must have marked three sixteenths on the wrong side of an inch. Bill was positioning the piece flush to one side, then the other to determine which gap would be less obvious. After several moments of consideration, he split the difference and nailed it up. He came down the scaffold, flipped open his lighter and lit a Camel, looking up at the small gaps on each side.

"Feels good to get this one finished," I said, walking over to where he stood.

"Naw," he turned and with deliberate courtesy blew the smoke above my head. "Taint." He took another drag on the cigarette and exhaled again. "Not like that, it aint."

“But it looks great from down here,” I told him, “I mean, who would ever know?” True to form, Bill took a long moment before he replied.

“Well, there’s you. And it’s me. Who else it needs to be?”

We packed up hurriedly to beat the predicted rush hour thunderstorm. I was first, back at the construction office to pick up my check and, after hanging around a bit waiting for him, left before Bill arrived. I knew from the few times we rode together, his workday always ended with a stop for a pack of Camels and a Miller High Life tallboy. I also knew he would probably be back on Monday to fix that piece of the job we left undone.

That afternoon was the last I ever saw of him.

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A few years later, during a Christmas visit to my parents’ house, I needed a wrench to adjust my windshield wipers. I found my old toolbox on the floor of my parents’ basement not far from where I left it that September. In my absence, the toolbox had become a kind of family catchall, and I had to dig through the unorganized contents. When I lifted out the mildewed tool belt, there it was; Bill’s old level I inadvertently swapped in the exchange that summer. I looked it over. In the dim light from the dangling light bulb, it was a relic telling tales from another time and place. I rubbed a cleaning paste on the brass top plate and inscribed letters began to come into view. “Disston Keystone Tool Works – PHILADA” and along the side of the label, “PAT OCT 29-1912.”

I polished up the antique level and it has lived on bookshelves or mantels where I’ve lived since then. Sometimes when I see it, I think about things I took from Bill Bailey that summer and consider how much more I might have absorbed with a bit of maturity and the perspective gained with the passing of time. The seeds of some ideas did stick with me. Now, when I undertake new projects, intricate or mundane, I’m sure to load up my figurative toolbelt with all tools and implements which might be needed. I know that once you figure out the best method to complete regular tasks, any other way is, well, just not right. I also reflect on a life of choices made, conflicts endured and the mystery of managing personal relationships. I wonder how they might have turned out differently with the foresight and finesse to let the rough side drag.