

Standing up for Number Two

The upper panel of the door had an inset frosted glass pane with thousands of little raised bumps on the outside and gold letters painted inside: Aames Employment Agency.

Sam Spade, Private Investigator would not have been a surprise, given the timeworn look of things. I blinked and shook the black and white 30s movie out of my eyes and worked to shrug off the expectation of seeing men inside sporting fedoras and baggy, rumped wool suits, perhaps served by a woman secretary in a long, dark dress that failed to hide her deep décolletage, her knowing eyes.

Quit stalling, I told myself. I tucked in my shirt and opened the door. Stark fluorescent tubes lit a boiler room type operation almost totally empty of furnishings, ready for a quick move in minutes, ahead of the law or landlord. There were no photographs or other personal nesting items on the two heavy wood desks and nothing against the walls but metal folding chairs for the clients, who were smoking and reading want ads and picking horses in the *Racing News* while they waited. The atmosphere was akin to the cheap seats section in a race track, if not a pool hall.

The crowd was mixed, all male. The single clerk was white, his nervous young client black. The clerk sported the only tie in the room, and it had slid down to half-mast during an

obviously long day. He looked up at me as I entered. "Jesus Christ, another one," he said, flicking the ashes from his cigarette into an overflowing ash tray and looking at his watch. "Excuse me a moment," he said into the phone, then covered the mouth piece with his hand and looked up at me. "Hey, lock the door behind you, will ya? The top lock, that's right. Enough is fuckin enough."

His voice smoothed out as he resumed his telephone conversation. "Well, what can I tell you. All I have left is *two* people here in the office . . . well, what can I do? Didn't the other *two* I sent you work out okay? . . . "

Hm. There were four clients in the room besides myself. Four.

I sat down and tried to get a conversation going with a bitter looking oldtimer. "Been waitin long?"

"Long enough," he finally said.

"Uh-huh."

I caught someone else's gaze. "This place any good?"

"They all the same."

"Yeah, spoze so."

"Got an extra smoke?"

"Oh, sure." I rapped my pack and two cigarettes popped up. He took both of them. I opened my mouth, then closed it. There it is again: two.

I pulled out a Chester Himes Harlem detective book and started reading. The clerk wrote out a job slip and dispatched the young man before him, then redialed the phone and beckoned for the next client. I got through a chapter of the book and a couple of cigarettes while

he cleared the room. Then it was my turn. The clerk waved me forward and went through the paper coffee cups on his desk. They were all empty. “Shit,” he said, as I sat down. My sentiments exactly.

I handed him my completed job application card. He held it in his hand for an instant and sized me up. His gaze flickered over the book in my hand and the notebook and pens in my shirt pocket. “Ever work in an employment office?” He glanced at the unused desk next to his own.

“Naw. I worked in an office once, didn't like it.”

“It's commission work. Ever work for commission? You can make good money.” He looked at me hungrily, if not seductively.

“I just want a factory job.”

“Okay,” he said, and the light went out in his eyes. He looked at my card and rubbed his hair with his other hand. “What can you do?”

I held up my hand. “First, I just gotta know—what does *two* mean? It's obviously some kind of code. You said there were two people here when there were actually—”

He looked around and turned to me conspiratorially. “—That's for niggers.” No, no! I'm not in that club, I wanted to say. I took a breath, trying to get it up for one more speech, which would be followed by a stomping out of the room scene. Yet again.

“One's white,” he went on. “Two's black, three's Puerto Rican, four's Jewish, five is oriental, six is Filipino—”

“Look, I don't need all that; I just want a job.” I know, I should have made the speech, ranted at him, something, but I was tired of making speeches, and I sho nuff needed a

job. That morning I'd pawned my typewriter. Typewriter—that dates this whole story.

Remember typewriters? Factories?

* * *

The fiftyish white man in a suit put a fatherly arm around my shoulder as he guided me back to the door to the plant. He opened the door and stopped as the heat outside fought it out with the air conditioning in his office. “Ask for Carl,” he said, raising his voice to compete with the noise of machinery. He slipped my handshake with a higher caste's look of distaste and motioned me through and closed the door behind me.

The noise from the presses was deafening and it took me three tries before I could get directed to the shipping room. A young man pushing a skid of boxes on a hand-powered fork lift looked me over and led me through a labyrinth of presses and shelving to a freight elevator.

“SECOND FLOOR!” he shouted. “Pull that rope all the way down before you push the button!” I pulled down the old wooden slat door with the knotted rope and pressed the button for the second floor. The machinery groaned and a small motor slowly pulled the elevator to the next floor. I opened the latch and pushed down the lower half of the door with my foot as I raised the top half with my hands.

“Well, hello there,
my it's been a lo-ong, lo-ong ti-ime.
How's your new love . . .”

Joe Hinton on the radio. Quite an improvement over the noisy machinery on the other floor, and I grinned as I stepped into the shipping room. Several men inside were packing books in boxes at top speed, mashing down handles on tape machines, sealing boxes, sticking on labels, tying the boxes with string. There were some windows high up by the ceiling tilted open for air, but nothing came in from the outside world but humidity and a little light through the gritty glass.

Everybody was in jeans and T-shirts or sport shirts and chinos except for one white man in hush puppies and cheap slacks and a button-down short-sleeve white dress shirt with pens in a pocket saver, a loosened tie around his neck and a clip board in his hand. He had to be the boss man. And that doesn't date things, cuz it's still that way.

The blank looked me over. "I'm Carl. Ever worked as a shipping clerk before?"

"Yeah. Bout a year."

He nodded. We both knew it takes less than a week to break in even the slowest learner. He went through the usual drill, telling me about the dire consequences of missing Mondays. "A word to the wise—I've had to let some good men go for missing Mondays. If you're going to be sick—" and I nodded and tried to keep a neutral face and tuned him out as he told me missing Mondays could cost me this wonderful dead-end, virtual minimum wage job. "Let me show you around for a minute," he said, and he led me around the long, tall racks of books. Black plastic rat poison dispensers peeked out from under dusty green-painted metal shelving and yes, that was rat shit on the old wooden floor. Some tour.

"Listen," he said, and he gave that same shifty-eyed conspiratorial look and glance as

the employment agency hack. Not again, I thought. This time I'll walk, fuckit. Ya basta.

:”I needed somebody in a hurry,” he said, “so I told the agency I'd pay sixty-five a week. But I'm only paying the rest of them in there sixty, see?” He nodded his head. An uh-huh escaped my lips. “So you know, that's just between you an' me, all right?” and he nudged my ribs with his elbow. “Keep it under your hat.” I smiled and nodded my head. I'd go one better than make a useless speech to Carl; as a born shit-disturber I'd wait till payday and tell everybody, ruin his game. I'd take the five bucks over minimum wage and buy everybody beers with it, honor intact.

Time has blurred the memories of that job into a montage of books, boxes, sticky tape, adding water to feed the tape machine brush, folding flimsy purchase orders and sticking them in my pocket as I climbed the racks and handed or threw down books to my workmates. Juan, the straw boss below Carl, was from Colombia. Luis, the other latino, was Cuban and Black (we capitalized it back then). Or I could have said that Willy, the “American” was Black or that I, the other “American,” was nominally White, though raised among Cubans. Francois was from Haiti and Pierre from Quebec. One way or another, there were never two of the same exact “kind.”

But people will be people, no matter what. We jived around a lot. Carl couldn't be happier than when we'd bet that the last one to finish a stack of orders had to go out for our coffee. Pack, pack, slam, push, push, stick, stack—”Hah! It's you again, Pierre!”

“Merde!” and he'd take our orders, go out for the coffee (“Dark,” “Make mine light this time!” “Dark now, not black like me—I don't play that shit, Pierre . . .”), scones, bagels,

English muffins, find us sitting down on boxes of packed books, bullshitting and smoking when he came puffing back with our orders.

The blessed AM radio was a constant presence, the frantic DJ coming in after every song with ads for “Jay's, a Hundred Ninth Street and Third Avenoo” no-money-down furniture, so credit-oriented, m I later found out, that they refused to sell something for cash in full; Possner's offered “The soft silky hair that men like.” If our stomach ached we could “Take a BC Powder, and come back strong . . .”

The music was “Land of a Thousand Dances” and “Heat Wave.” A blues said, “Uncle Sam ain't no woman, but oh, lord, he sure can take your man/that's why I'm beggin you please, Mister President, will you send me back home again.” I caught myself singing along with a line that said I wouldn't burn my draft card—hah! And always, “I got sunshiiine, on a cloudy da-aayyy . . .” Singing in unison with that definitely took us out of the “victim” class; victims don't make heavenly music like that. It was a strong “Indian” summer, between Freedom Summer and the Watts Riots the following year. We were on the cusp of something and we didn't know it.

“I guess you'll saayy

What can make me feeell this way? . . .”

Now any group of men together will talk a lot of trash about sex. One day Luis and I somehow got into an educational seminar directed toward the others about the joys of mamando, sucking pussy. After awhile Luis caught himself waxing lyrical about it and threw up his hands

in mock exasperation: “Pero, coño, chico, siempre, cuando los cubanos se reunen terminamos en hablar de la misma cosa.” “But damn, man, whenever Cubans get together we always end up talking about the same thing,” and he made that little triangular sign for what a woman has. But then he started in again about sucking pussy just to get to Willy.

“Oh man, all y'all's sickenin with that shit. I'd never—man, don't even talk that mess around me,” Willy said, and had a good laugh.

“Willy, you don't know what's good; once you do that a woman never forgets you.”

“Forget your own damn self,” Willy muttered back. Finally after we'd ragged him to the nth degree on his limitations he said, “I'll show you what a woman wouldn't forget,” and he climbed on top of the shelves and pulled down a book he'd stashed up there.

Juan giggled. “You know what I'm talkin about,” Willy said to him, then turned to us. “We used to pack a lot of medical books, Juan n me. Now look here,” and he opened the book to a photograph of a couple in the missionary position.

“Yeah . . .” Pierre halfheartedly allowed.

“You see nothing yet,” Juan said, as Willy flipped past several pages of couples in various sexual positions until he found the page he'd been looking for. We crowded around him and gasped.

“Me cago en diez,” Luis whispered. “I shit on ten.”

“A woman would really find a suprise,” Pierre said.

“One she would never forget,” Juan said.

“There is no woman like that,” Francois added.

“This man needs two women,” Luis said, pointing to the photograph.

“Well, he could put one in front, and the other . . .” Willy started.

Juan looked at Luis, who shook his head and held up his hands and turned toward me. “I don't know what to say,” I said.

Willy saw his chance and gleefully rushed in. “You never did that?” And then to Juan, “Come on, Juan, I know you from the country. You probably jammed a cow in the ass back home when you was comin up, didn't you?”

Juan sputtered angrily and waved his finger at Willy, but Willy had turned to Pierre. “I know all y'all do it that way in Canada; I know that for a fact.” Pierre let a guilty grin escape onto his face. Willy turned to us in triumph. Several voices clashed at once. Luis tried to be heard as Willy went on. “Oh, all y'all can dish it out, but you can't take it, huh? If you can talk all that shit about eatin pussy—”

“Let's make a deal,” I started, but my words got lost in all the uproar. Carl stuck his face around the corner. Luckily Willy's back was to him so the little man didn't see him waving the book. I caught Willy's eye and gave him the high sign and he clutched the book to his chest.

“Hey, let's pack some books today, huh?” Carl said, and we all broke up, covering Willy as he stashed the book back in the stacks.

We spent the rest of the morning working and breaking up about the man who had a spare. “Ooh-wee, he could get him some trim, Jim.”

“He'd be like that BC Powder, and come back strong.”

“That'd be one time his woman would get enough, that's for sure.”

Finally it was lunch hour and my first payday. We all got out five minutes early—thanks to him, Carl reminded us—so we could jump in early to line up at the bank across the

street to cash our checks and beat the crowd from the neighboring factories. Factories—that one word dates this memory more than saying 1964. Factories . . .

I noticed that this group that had been so cohesive just minutes before had atomized and turned inward as each man ripped open his pay envelope and went to a different table to endorse his check and carefully shielded it from view as he signed it. Oh yeah, my moment of truth. Leave things as they were or start some shit. I took a deep breath. I had a duty to perform.

I sidled up to Francois with my check. “You know,” I loudly said, “on my first day I came here Carl told me I was the only one making sixty-five dollars.”

Everybody looked up. “You?!” Willy said from the other side of the table. “But he told *me*—”

“Mais moi, je suis le seul mec ici qui gagne—”

“Pero me dijeron que el unico aqui que cobraba sesenticinco pesos soy yo—”

“*I* was supposed to be the only—”

There was a confused mass of guilt, embarrassment and anger as it all came out. Carl had told each one of us that he was the only one making sixty-five dollars a week, supposedly five bucks more than everybody else, and Don't discuss your wages with anyone else, huh? and the conspiratorial wink. The game had been going on for years.

I'll break it off here, as I did back then, leaving soon after for greener pastures. I've always been easily bored and I admit to having flitted around a lot in my younger years, going from job to job and moving on from one political cause to another, and I only heard about things at the plant from time to time. My one shit-disturbing act had led to long, slow union organizing

and the men had finally joined a union and made progress of sorts, and I was glad of that. Of course more “progress” has since undoubtedly erased that whole operation, what with Amazon and suchlike.

A lot has gone down since then and I seldom think about that one job out of so many I've drifted through, but every once in a while an oldie but moldie will come on the radio and I'll think back to pushing a skid of books across the groaning, grooved wooden boards on that shipping room floor with that old crank-up fork lift, jiving with my coworkers, the radio always on the soul station, and I'll smile, thinking of how divide and conquer does not always work, as long as there's conversation, laughter and good, unifying music. Yeah, I can hear it now, the opening bars as the guitar hook opens the song, and I clear my throat, ready to sing, a big grin lighting up my face as I think of all those good times with such full of life people, and that one particular time we broke up over that sex education book, and I wonder—what would it be like to have two dicks?

“I got sunshiine
on a cloudy daayyyy . . .”