

# 1

My friend Todd gave me a ride to work that Saturday. Maybe it was Sunday. It could have been Wednesday. My mind was on other, more beautiful and distant times: reading cheap pulp fiction under a lone tree, next to a deserted railroad track, in the middle of Idaho on some lazy, breezy Sunday afternoon. But on this nameless day, we both had to work in the cruel, desolate frontier of a factory outlet mall.

You've maybe seen these prisons of Consummate Retail. You're driving down some interstate on a weekend afternoon, thinking about cloud swirls and swearing about road construction and suddenly there they are, these little plastic environs of Consumer Paradise getting on-the-way cities into bus station brochures. They decorate the suburban ghost towns you pass: well-manicured, air-conditioned compounds with Muzak of the Beatles-in-symphony or Kenny G in '80s glam rock, elongated whammy bar-chords style. Think hard as you drive along. Pay attention. For just as you're avoiding a pile of cow shit in the road, or a fleeting Pomeranian, asking yourself *How the fuck do those things get onto the freeway?*—There! You glance in the rearview mirror to confirm what you thought you saw, and you see it: one of these monoliths of global fashion conglomerates that are really second-hand shit troughs where tourists and retirees drop chunks of cash on name brands at bargain basement prices. You're passing me in that women's shoe store, where I think about plants and animals—and sell their hides—highlighting the instep and

the well-corrugated style of the toecap. It's God's work. He sat at a drawing board to design cows, and from that we design shoes and sell them. Or does he design and sell the shoes as well? This is where I work, assistant-managing a women's discount shoe store, helping the on-the-budget American shopper find the size 9½ wide in taupe.

Now turn the radio up and give us poor missionary retail bastards a wave.

But we weren't there yet. We still had time to enjoy those last nail-biting moments of freedom before work. Todd, who worked a few doors down from me at a classier shoe store, was chain-smoking with shaky fingers while he drove, letting an inch of ash develop on each cigarette. Though it was a mild day, little beads of sweat were already developing on his forehead. He put on Thin Lizzy's "Bad Reputation" and began singing along, banging on the steering wheel, making the whole car shake violently. He'd obviously sparked the day with something or other.

By looking at him, you'd never guess that Todd had a sweet tooth for speed. He stood 6-feet-5-inches, weighed 250 pounds, and sported a poorly grown beard that made him look like an offspring of Paul Bunyan and Dom DeLouise. We must have looked odd together. I was 18, though my slight frame made me look about 12. Todd was only 21 but looked 30 or 40 at least.

He lit another cigarette, bobbing his head up and down to Thin Lizzy. "Sorry about being late. My dad wanted to have another, well, you know, talk."

Yeah, I knew. Todd's dad drank, sometimes to the point where he pissed his pants in his recliner, singing classic rock songs with sloppy, lisped-tongued vocal back-ups, giving away every construction-blue-collared dollar he had to his kids. I'd also frequently watched him suddenly come to, eager to give his two sons a plethora of advice of the most esoteric and illogical variety.

"Yeah," Todd said, "this morning, as I was rushing to the door,

he insisted I know just one thing before I went off to work. It was, of course, something that not many people know. Are you ready for this one?"

I chuckled in anticipation as Todd turned down the sound. He cleared his throat and took on the serious demeanor and heavy, booming voice of his father. "Todd, listen to me. Pigs get fat. But hogs get slaughtered." He paused briefly before continuing in his father's voice again, louder this time. "Pigs get fat, goddamn it, but hogs get slaughtered. Don't you fucking get it? You work at a goddamn outlet mall. You must understand. Think about it, goddamn it, think about it."

I looked over at Todd. He wasn't laughing. He was searching for meaning in his father's words. "So, what do you think?"

"I don't think it matters," I ventured. "If I had to choose between being a pig or a hog, then fuck it. Fuck it all. Maybe that's his point. Although I really don't think it is."

An uneasy silence grew until Todd turned the music back up. "I should've called in sick today," I said, the absurdity of human life overtaking me.

"Yeah, me too," Todd replied.

"I guess you can't be sick every day."

"Unfortunately not."

"Yeah." Then it struck me that maybe absurdity was precisely what we needed, blatant absurdity in the face of concealed absurdity. "Well, let's just keep going today, right past the mall. Let's take a trip and call in tomorrow and say that we got into a terrible accident, that we're all fucked up and they might have to amputate. You know, like our legs or toes or something. We had to be hospitalized and we're lucky to be alive because our car is in shambles and yadda-yadda."

"They wouldn't believe that shit."

"Maybe not, but that kind of tragedy happens. It happens all the time. All the time. Jesus, I read the paper, don't you? Why wouldn't

they believe us? They'd have to, or they'd be branding themselves cruel and unusually callous. Medical leave is law, man. If they give us any shit, we'll just start a union. Go Teamster, outlet mall Teamster."

"What?" Paul giggled ferociously. "Are you going to then go back to work with a nine-inch scar on your forehead, and a wooden peg leg?"

But I kept on going with it. "We could keep driving. South, right on into Mexico, Ensenada. We could make a living selling shitty spray-art on the streets, and drink watered down tequila in the sun by the rocks. We could learn Spanish, all the dirty words first, wear ponchos and get some mean fucking sombreros. We could meet a couple of beautiful señoritas and get married in some ancient church. We could, you know we could."

Todd paused thoughtfully. "We could," he finally said with conviction. "We certainly could do that." But by the time we asserted Possibility, by the time we became conscious of all the potentiality of life, of all that can flutter and flounder under the vast and eternal blue sky, we were at the outlet mall. Mexico vanished.

Todd turned to me with a face both gorgeous and contorted. "I think that, pigs or hogs, we're selling shoes today. We're shoe salesmen. It's what we do. In a lot of ways, for all intents and purposes, Scott, it's who we are." His voice held an alchemical mixture of sarcastic humor and desperate resignation.

I started to stutter, falter, grab at the air with my tongue. "No. No, you're Todd. You're a musician. A good musician, a talented rhythm guitarist. And we could still go to Mexico today. It's never too late to get busy doing nothing."

Todd smiled slowly, sagely. From that fine-line zone between pigs and hogs, he said, "I thought that's what we're here to do. Get busy doing nothing." He shot me a knowing smile.

And that was that. Despite Todd's long list of bad habits, he was responsible. Even if he was strung out on coke or coming down off

some arbitrary painkiller, he still worked hard, feverishly, responsibly. Narcotics did not hinder Todd's work ethic because his work ethic afforded him narcotics.

He dropped me off at shoe store #1, then dashed tires-a-screeching down the parking lot to shoe store #2. And so we embarked, as we did everyday, with our well-applied retail masks and our hearts hanging heavy over a chasm of space and time only the young and the lost and the dying may know. It's a peculiar juncture, where freedom begets the collision of a mortal responsibility and an immortal dream—a collision so contemporary that it lingers on the tip of your tongue as you try to spell it out, and then it begins to tumble: *I want, I mean, I need, and, what I want, or, what I need, but what I have to do, want to do, and, but—*

But maybe you hit that Pomeranian in the road, and you don't turn around. You shack up at the roadside attraction of an outlet mall. And by the time you look in the rearview mirror, all you see is your face, 50 or 60 years old, all the absurd dreams forgotten. You're just making a living, selling shoes. Sometimes I'd walk into the shoe store and the back breeze of the closing door would hit me. I'd suddenly realize I was only dreaming about my dreams while living my waking life. I'd look into a shoe mirror, and around the store, asking myself, *What happened?*

Todd and I had worked our way into the general ambience of the factory outlet mall seeking sanctuary from our former jobs. We'd sold phony concert tickets to gullible rich folks. The show supposedly benefited a local cooperative between police and local neighborhoods called CrimeStoppers—the creative touch of a true con artist. Neither of us actually knew the whole operation was phony at the time, though certain signs did indicate that not everything was legitimate.

Our employer's belly plopped out over his belt, and he had slight

bristle on his face at all hours of every day. He maintained a disturbing Ron Jeremy mustache and wore a gold crucifix around his neck that shone against prolific chest hairs when he undid the top three or four buttons of his pink-striped, collared shirt. He called himself David Patrick, though probably even the name was phony.

We were a four-man unit. Todd and I worked the phones. A bare-chested neo-Nazi skinhead with Just jeans, Doc Marten boots, and hellish tattoos front and back, would run to the houses and pick up the money that the patrons were instructed to leave in their mailboxes. David Patrick stayed behind the scenes, running the whole show. We worked out of a mobile trailer—a makeshift shack, really—in a dirt lot in the back of a dying shopping plaza. Inside there were four walls, three desks, three telephones, one dying plant, and an old *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit poster of some has-been supermodel from the '80s with a name like Cheryl Roberts. Shades down, David Patrick refused to turn on the lights.

The routine was simple. David Patrick would sit in the reclining chair at his desk and chain-smoke cigarettes, mixing in a cigar here or there even though the only window in the trailer was jammed shut. Todd and I would sit at our phones, dial numbers and go through our scripts.

“Mr. Sucker? Hi, this is Scott with CrimeStoppers and I’m just calling to let you know that we’re having a benefit concert next month, *Oldies but Goodies* with the Temptations. May I ask you if you’re familiar with CrimeStoppers?” The person either hung up, listened and refused, or was an easy sell. We made \$8 an hour and 20 percent commission.

David Patrick would get random spurts of enthusiasm, yelling from his torn leather swivel throne. “That’s it. Sell those fucking tickets. Sell ‘em!”

But if you weren’t selling up to par, he’d walk right up to your makeshift desk, grab your phone with one hand, lean onto your

chair with his other hand, and get right in your face, screaming. “Am I going to have to get rid of you? I can’t pay people to work here who can’t sell fucking tickets. That’s what we do, goddamn it. We sell tickets. Do I need to teach you how to talk to people? Do I? Just sell those fucking tickets, goddamn it! Fucking sell or get the fuck out!” By the time he was done, my face would be stained with the stench of second-hand smoke and whatever David Patrick had eaten for lunch that day.

The terror I felt when David Patrick suddenly exploded never diminished when the skinhead runner came in. He’d sit down silently in the corner and stare at me for what seemed a painful eternity, never changing expression or moving a muscle. Just stare, stare, stare holes into my head. I nearly pissed my pants at times, trying to voice a smooth sale while Adolf L’America burned holes into my forehead, reducing every particle of my being to puny gray matter already pummeled by David Patrick’s breath. The whole operation made Todd and me feel like we worked for a gutter version Don Corleone, never knowing when we’d be asked to take a long ride with Mr. Sixth Reich and Ron Jeremy’s double.

But we didn’t leave until the content matched the form, and we knew that every facet of David Patrick’s personality matched his devilish presentation. It must’ve been some kind of cosmic fluke that he was selling phony concert tickets instead of rubbing his greasy stubble and pushing porn, telling girls when to moan and guys when to grunt. His love for anything sexually perverse would come gushing out at the most arbitrary and inappropriate times. He was a man with a Tourette Syndrome lust; anything or nothing could trigger an erotic tic.

Blowing big clouds of blue smoke in our direction, he’d ask, “You know what’d be good right now, boys?” He’d get up out of his chair and pace around a little, imagining whatever nasty vignette occupied his mind, rubbing his stubble. Smiling.