

7. COMMUNITY SYMPATHIZER

My name's Eddie. With my two friends John and Tony, we are all working this summer for Americorps. It's a joint venture with the Park District of Chicago. John and I both go to U of I Chicago. We're staying at Tony's uncle's place in Irving Park so we can be close to our work. His uncle drives a truck, and he's never there so it's our summer palace.

–Let's go the beach .

–I hate the beach.

–There will be girls there. Eddie hates girls.

–I just don't like the Irving Park beach.

–You should quit complaining. You're from Naperville.

My parents moved out to Naperville when I was five. I did what I could to get back to the city.

–I need to stop at Walgreen's.

–Tony, what is it now?

–It's August. It's my allergies.

He comes out loaded with sudafed.

–Tony, you're not dealing drugs to minors.

–Why else would I be working this low-rent job?

–It's good experience.

–Shut up, Eddie. You're a little snitch.

–Isn't dealing drugs to kids some kind of federal offense?

–I think it is if you're doing it on government time.

–Since when did you guys become experts on the law?

–What would the President think of a community organizer pushing drugs to kids?

–He'd understand how hard it is to live on a budget. I'm being squeezed from both ends by this economy. Besides you guys are crashing at my place for free.

–Do you want us to give you some money?

–That's not what I'm saying. Just quit trying to bust my chops.

–Speaking of allergies, I need to get some medicine of my own.

–If we make any more stops, we're not going to have any time at the beach.

–Eddie, just because it's your car, you don't have to be such a dick.

–And, Eddie, you were the one complaining about Irving Park beach.

It is a crowded day, and we are having trouble parking.

–Pull in there.

Some guy gets it before we do.

–Shit!

–Eddie, you're not fast enough. Just like a suburban kid!

–Shut up, Tony!

We finally find a place, and get out and start walking to the lake. Tony is wearing cut offs. John points at him.

–Can't you afford a swim suit, cheapskat?

–I'm not going to waste my money on something that I can't wear when I'm not at the

beach.

–Didn't they ban cut-off at the park beaches?

–Eddie, you're such a buzz kill.

We walk by a couple of guys, and one of them is staring at Tony.

–Tony, he likes your hard nipples.

–Fucking fag.

–He's just trying to complement you. I'm sure that girls do that for you all the time.

–Eddie, you're just trying to be politically correct. Tell it like it is.

–How is that?

–Some lecherous dude trying to prey on a young guy like me.

–Isn't that what the girls say about you at night?

–Eddie, those guys are following us.

I look back but they have turned in the other direction. When one of them sees me turn, he blows me a kiss. I smile. I guess that was really meant for Tony.

There are hardly any girls at the beach. Mostly all families. After swimming, Tony wants us to head over to Lincoln Park,

–Nothing doing. I don't want to hang out with the goons.

–We're not going to go to one of those frat bars. I'm supposed to meet some girls from De Paul.

Tony has a thing with the first year girls. They are all pretty naive until they catch on to types like Tony.

–It's not like you think.

–Whatever I was thinking...

When we arrive at the bar, I feel as if I am raiding an elementary school.

–None of these girls even look old enough to get in here.

–Shut up, old man.

John has his own take.

–They all have fake ID's.

–Do they now?

We all smile. Some girls are waving at Tony.

–Here comes trouble.

There are two of them and three of us. Someone is going to play the odd man out. The girls look as if they're out of one of those beach commercials. I'm ready to toss them the beach ball.

–Eddie, Gwen studies philosophy.

Now, I feel like a real loser. What has Tony been saying about me?

–He likes to spend a lot of time alone in his room. I'm sure that you'd understand.

He didn't really say that, did he? She tries to get my attention.

–My father told me to study philosophy. He said that it would be good if I wanted to go to law school.

–So you're not really into studying philosophy, per se.

–Per se?

–Yeah, for its own sake.

–I like it. As much as you can like going to school. I just don't like to read that much.

–I guess that I don't either.

Of course, I was playing along. And this was seeming like a real short read.

–What kind of philosophy have you been studying?

–You know. The stuff. The big questions. Man's place in the universe. Are we living in a dream?

–Any philosophers.

–Yeah. Just intro. These guys.

–Plato, Aristotle.

She nodded her head, but I wasn't sure if she was just trying to get me to change the subject. She kept playing with her hair as if I was asking too many questions.

–Tony, said that you were the shy one.

I wasn't sure how to answer. We talk on for a while, and then the girls go the bathroom.

–Quit being such an asshole. For these girls, having brains means that you want to earn a lot of money.

–Do they know where we work?

–Yeah, but it sounds like some kind of fancy government job to them.

–You should have said that we're working for the CIA.

–You always have an answer, smart ass.

They come back all prim and proper. Gwen gives me a look as if we have shared the deep secrets of the universe together. I don't seem to be buying it. Tony gets a little pissed.

–I'm setting you up, and you're treating me like a dick.

–I'm not feeling it.

–You should do like your mom wants an marry Mary Louise

I've known Mary Louise since the ninth grade. Her family is friends with mine. And we have hung out quite a bunch together, but she doesn't understand me. It's worse than being with John and Tony. However, when I feel lonely I like to pretend. So I'll just call her up. I'm not trying to be hard on her. Maybe if I could just switch a gene here and there. Then things might work out. Until that point, I'm not get my hopes up.

Needless to say Tony ends up going up with Gwen's friend. And John makes out with Gwen. He later offers his assessment.

–Gwen and I didn't get on that well. I don't dig smart chicks that much.

When I get home, I think about calling Mary Louise, but it is too late. Tony rolls in around six in the morning. The racket wakes me up. It's as if he's taking a victory lap.

Before work, we all go to breakfast. We'd normally eat at the house, but Tony is in a great mood and agrees to treat us.

Tony is now in full swing. He asks John and me to meet him at a bar on Milwaukee Avenue in Wicker Park This is definitely a zoo, much worse than the place in Wicker Park. All the girls are in short skirts and spiked heels. I feels as if I am at casting call for a reality show.

–Pick me! I'll have sex on camera.

Of course you will, dear.

–I don't want to be here. The whole game is rigged.

–Eddie, you have to learn to play the hand that you're dealt.

–I'm looking at no pairs.

–You just need a drink to settle you down.

I'm driving. And I'm not about to get caught up in another one of Tony's schemes. But I do need to loosen up.

–I'm buying.

I can't complain.

–Where did you get all the money?

I shouldn't have asked.

Tony returns with the drinks. He catches me staring at a stunning blonde with long legs.

–Take care of my drink.

–What?

–Watch and learn.

He makes it to the bar just before she arrives. He catches the bartender's eye.

She says something to him. I can only guess what it is.

–I was here first.

–Let me get you a drink.

–Thanks. I'll have a vodka orange.

–Let me buy you a shot.

Before I know it, she has a big smile on her face, and she's downing a second shot with Tony. And she still has her drink at the bar. So he's made in the shade. The two of them are laughing. He's got a captive audience for the rest of the night. As I continue to watch, I realize that I am now drinking his drink. I'm driving. And I feel as if I'm only get drunker if I stay here.

Under the present condition, I can hardly interrupt Tony. I just don't have enough money for these expensive drinks. There is no way that I could finance such a rogue operation as he is conducting. I sit here helplessly.

He's already touching his girl all over. He has his hand on her back. She feels so comfortable.

There's a group of girls at a table near mine. They are screaming and giggling. I'd have no shot with them. A couple of guys raid the table, and things get even crazier. The panic is overwhelming.

The music isn't helping. It's this big disco beat with all this techno shit on top. I look back and Tony isn't even there. I'm not sure if I should duck out. I am his ride. But he hasn't talked to me in almost an hour. It's not as if he's a child who can't find his way home.

I notice that he's on the dance floor. The girl is almost falling on him. I feel that I've learned a lesson. I slide on out the door. So much for a Saturday night.

We don't see Tony until the afternoon.

–Sorry I abandoned you there.

–I looked around for you, and you were gone. So I just thought that I'd get a cab. Steph lived about a quarter of a mile away. And I just crawled back to her place. And I got the El back home. No problem.

–Another success for Mr. Tony.

–She’s studying accounting and works at her mother’s company. She’s a real nice girl.

–You’re going to see her again.

–How can I? We slept together already.

–What is that supposed to mean? She obviously likes you.

–There’s got to be something wrong with her. She’s too easy.

–But you’re always in situations like that. How is this any different.

–That’s why I can’t stay with these girls.

–You’re a little hard.

–I’m all hard. I have no choice. I don’t want some bitch ruining my vibe.

–Tony, why are you such a dick.

–I’m a nice guy. Too nice. That’s why I can’t let some charming gold digger get her claws into me.

–Tony, you barely have as much money as any of this.

–Eddie, chill. I skipped church. I don’t need some priest telling me that I’m going to hell.

–What would your mother say about your behavior?

–She knows that no girl is good enough for her boy. I haven’t found one yet.

–How do you keep any of these girls as friends?

–I give them what they like.

He’s freaking me out. I call Mary Louise. I just want another influence. She doesn’t answer. I spend the rest of the day playing video games.

The city seems to be in short supply of labor at some of the parks. So they have us doing maintenance work. This week we’re laying down sod. We all have to unload the truck, and then spread it out. There has been some carnival over the weekend so it takes quite a bit of work to put everything into shape. The day starts out quite cool. But with the heat and all the work that we are doing, it gets just unbearable.

–How did we get suckered into this shit?

–We were low on money. It’s not as if we have a boatload of skills.

–Weren’t we supposed to be working with the kids.

–We were. But the park is having problems with the money.

–Just what we need.

–Tony, it’s probably better that they keep the kids away from you.

Friday morning, we are all ready to celebrate. It has been a really shitty week. We have done a load of work for next to no pay. The District has got a bargain. Then things really go crazy. We get called into the office.

–We thought that you boys were above board.

I am pissed at Tony. They have finally caught him dealing drugs to kids.

–We were going to call in the police. But we’re going to cut you all a break. You’re in college. Besides, you’re not even our employees.

I don’t dare ask any questions. I don’t want to get us in more trouble than we’re already in.

–Tony, you really fucked up.

–What?

–I told you to lay off the kids. They could have put us in jail for a long while.

–This has nothing to do with drugs.

–How do you know?

–I don't think that they would have cut us some slack.

–He said that he was feeling sorry for us.

–That's bull shit

The Park District has this messed up inventory system. And we also suspect that someone up top is messing with the books. For some reason, Gill Park has ordered a bunch of wire fencing that never gets delivered. They need someone to blame. After all the fencing had been inventoried and paid for.

–We were set up.

–We need to sue them.

–How? We have no proof. They just screwed us over.

–We can't let this happen. We have rights. We work for the Federal Government.

–We're nobodies. And I don't want someone putting the heat on my personal business.

–Your personal business is destroying our public business.

–It has nothing to do with it.

–Then we have to investigate.

–Investigate what. We know what happened. Some guy is covering his own ass at our expense. We aren't even on their books. So they can get rid of us. Surely they've made a report to Americorps.

–This is going to fuck us up for life. We didn't do anything wrong!

I'm letting it get to me. It wasn't even a real job in the first place. Now it is having repercussions for the rest of our life.

–Tony, I need money.

–You can still stay at the house.

–I need money for food. Money to go places. Gas for my car.

–You can help me out. I've really got my business going well.

–That's all I need. To get busted for drugs.

When we head down to the Americorps office on Monday, they seem to have no record of the Park District complaint. The program has simply been terminated.

–We could do something else.

–We'd love to have you guys. But there's no more money set aside in this cycle.

This cycle? I can feel the world spinning around me. I have to get on the right track for the fall. I consider Tony's offer. Not to sell drugs. But I could still stay at the house. The inevitable hits me. I'm going to have to move back to Naperville.

–There are other jobs.

–It's a shitty time to find a job. I need to get my life together. I can spend all my nights in bars trying to score chicks.

–You're starting to talk like me now. I've got you in the mood. Hang out for a while. You've saved some money. After all you don't go crazy with money like I do.

–Tony, I need a new atmosphere for a while. I just need to get away from this shit.

I imagine myself getting driven around in Mary Louise's Honda.

My parents are at first happy to get me back home.

–You were in a den of sin.

My mother smiles as she tells me this.

–You are going to have to get job if you stay here.

I'm thinking of putting off school for a year. Work and build up some money. My Dad has all these ideas for me.

–Give me a couple of days. I need to get my head clear.

I meet Mary Louise to go to a movie. True to form, I let her drive her car. Afterwards I try to kiss her.

–Eddie, you've got sort of weird since you moved to the city. I'm not sure if we're really right for her.

–I just want to have a little fun.

–I'm looking for a boy who's serious about his life.

–I'm going to get a job. Maybe take off the year.

–You're not going to stay in school.

–It's just temporary.

–That makes me feel even worse about you.

–I've got a plan for my life. It's just on hold.

What the hell is she doing? Staying in Naperville and working in a bank. She's trying to moralize to me.

–Mary Louise, are you still taking courses at community college.

–I was. But I got pneumonia. And I needed to help around at home. My Mom's been sick.

I just stare in space.

–You don't want to make out for a while.

She gives me a stern face.

–It is late. And I better get on my job search.

My mother has pancakes for me in the morning.

–This should help you get going!

After I eat, I'm just stuffed. I sit in front of the TV for a talk show. Some Oprah spin-off. It's all about the warning signs for bad guys. I'm getting in to it.

–Eddie, I'm going to the store to pick up some things. Do you need anything?

–I'm fine.

I'm getting into the show.

At night, my father is a little more severe.

–What about this search? You've got to start looking at the paper when they deliver it early in the morning.

–I don't think that they have the kind of job that I'm looking for.

–What do you want?

–Something with computers. Maybe graphic design.

–What kind of experience do you have for that?

–I've had some classes.

–That may not be enough in this job market.

–It’s what I like.

–Jim, you can give the boy some help.

–Yeah, Dad. Do you have some ideas.

–I’ve got some friends that I can talk to.

I pretend that I am on the right track. As I’m watching TV, I imagine what kind of job is waiting for me. My father has always been pretty good at that sort of thing. Anything to get me out of Naperville.

–Eddie, you watch too much TV.

–You’ve got this big screen in the living room. It doesn’t seem conducive for much else.

I’m getting tired of him hassling me. It’s enough going on a job interview for him. I don’t need him interfering with my TV viewing. I head to my room to use the computer.

I chat with Mary Louise for a while. I tell her about my father’s ideas for a job. She seems pleased.

–*You need some direction!*

Before I can do anything about my situation, she ends up moving into the city. This is her first shot. She gets a place just off the lake. The bank has promoted her. She asks me over to celebrate. She’s not use to drinking. After a little champagne, she gets all flirty. The next thing I have her shirt off.

–Eddie, this is too much for me.

–Are you a virgin?

–Quit being silly. I did some wild stuff when I was younger. Church retreats and all that. But then I decided that I needed some discipline in my life. I’m not going to let some guy wreck my plans for myself.

–We’re just having some fun. We’re celebrating.

–I have to know that you like me for me. Not just for some fun.

A couple of days later, she makes me an invitation.

–Eddie, if you get job, you could move in here with me.

–Living in sin. Aren’t your parents going to disown you.

–They have enough problems of their own. I’m paying for my own way.

This all seems so logical for her. Maybe I should just go along.

My father sees that I am drifting with my life. He uses a connection to get me an interview for a job at the Chicago Board of Trade.

–This is going to be a big deal.

–I know that it is.

I get there early. I walk by on Van Buren. I question if this is going right for me. All these young guys in their colored jackets who look as if they are old beyond their years. I can’t imagine myself getting caught up in this. But I just need to show up for the interview. It’s one thing if I don’t get the job. It’s quite another if I don’t go. What is my choice? I’ll give it my best.

The interview surprises me a little. It’s almost a gift.

–Just because we’re going to give you this job doesn’t mean that we’re going to let you coast.

–Yes, sir.

–You’re going to have a lot to learn.

I nod my head and try to look interested.

When I finally get out of the office, I feel as if I need a drink. It’s not as if I’m used to drinking in the morning. But this was what I was afraid of. I could feel the walls closing in on me as I was in there.

I am sitting in a downtown bar at eleven in the afternoon. How did I end up like this? This is supposed to be my success. And it is turning into a worse defeat than ever.

I am trashed by mid-afternoon. I can’t very well go home today. I head over to Tony’s.

–What happened to you?

–Don’t ask!

–I’m going to ask. You look like you got run over by a train.

–I got a job.

–Oh, boy, What would have happened if they turned you down?

–I need to crash here tonight.

–I didn’t kick you out. You ran back to Naperville.

I fill him in the details of the job.

–Maybe you’re back for good.

–I just have to find a job that’s right for me.

–My cousin works in a graphic design firm. She can set you up.

When I sober up, I head back home.

–Ed, this was a once in a lifetime opportunity. You don’t know the strings that I pulled to get you that job.

–I wasn’t made for that kind of work.

–You’re still going to have to get a job if you want to live here.

–I may move in with Mary Louise.

–She’s going to let you sponge off her.

–No, Tony is going help you me get a job.

–I tried to help you. Why is it going to be any different with him.

–Because it’s a field that I like.

–A job’s a job. We can’t always do what we like.

–So we do what we don’t like. And we hate our life.

–You’re a little bit of a wise-ass for a kids without a job.

Tony’s lead turns out to be golden. So I get this job doing computer lay out. It is perfect for me.

–You going to repay me by moving back.

–Tony, I’m growing up. I need to think about my future. I think that I’ll hang with Mary Louise.

–Wasn’t that what your mom always wanted?

–I don’t need you to tease me.

When I stop by Mary Louise’s, she is all happy to see me. She gives me a big kiss.

–So are you going to move in.

–I just came to tell you the news. And you’re getting a little freaky on me.

She laughs.

During the next week, I get my things from my parent's, and I move in with Mary Louise. It is even better than I expected. We get up early to go to work. And we spend time in the evening together. I never realized how much I dig this girl.

–You like *Raiders* too. That's one of my favorite movies.

We rent the complete series and watch one every night.

Everything is going well. Too well. I get called in to my supervisor's office.

–We love your work. We really do. But we can't afford you and Penny. She's just going to have to do her own set-up work.

I get a good recommendation and a lead for a new job. I wait to tell Mary Louise. After a few days. I realize that I am losing my motivation. I still go for an interview. I'm not that enthusiastic.

–So what are your plans to get a job?

–I'm not sure.

–What about that interview?

–They haven't got back to me.

–So you're not going to get it.

–No, he's going to call.

–Shouldn't you do a follow up.

–I will. I just wanted to wait a couple of days.

–That's your only prospect.

–I have some other ideas.

–You're not that motivated. No one's going to just hand you a job.

–Things don't feel right.

–You're not even going back to school.

–I want to go back. I just need some more money.

–You could just get a part-time job.

–I'm not sure if I could work and go to school at the same time.

–You're not the guy that who I decided to go out with.

Mary Louise is becoming a royal pain. I don't know why I even wanted to go out with her.

–Ever since you lost your job at the design firm, you've been moping around.

–I'm doing the best that I can.

–Are you trying to get back at me?

–It has nothing to do with you.

–Then why are you so resistant to my ideas.

–I just need the kind of work that's right for me.

–We can't always do the work that's right for us.

–But we can do a job that's more suitable to our character.

–You were the one that told me about that job that you interviewed for. What happened with that?

–I don't think that I got along with the interviewer.

–You have to be more sympathetic to other people's points of view.

–I'm not that difficult. Tony and John never gave me this much shit.

–You can't blame me for you being so lackluster about your life. I never thought that you were like that before.

–It's just a strange time in my life.

–You don't have to make it worse for me too. I'm just trying to help.

I feel as if she is interfering. It is making me a little angry that she's standing in my way.

–I'm sorry if I'm being such a jerk.

I am trying to get her sympathy. But it's not as if I'm going to reciprocate.

Needless to say, I don't get the job. It's not as if it was all that real. My days with Mary Louise are numbered. I can't go home to Naperville.

–What are you doing back here?

–You know that I'd be back

John, Tony and I start laughing.

–Where are you guys off to?

–A massage parlor.

–You're paying for that sort of thing. You can count me out!

–You're still the buzz kill!

–What's happening, Tony? Have you lost your touch?

–Sometimes, you just need it taken care of.

–Now you're the philosopher!

–I'm just never sure that I'm going to have what I need. This way I don't have to worry about it.

–That sounds pathetic!

–It is!

Another one of Tony's relatives has a connection downtown. They make sure that we get a public works job for our trouble. I'm going to go back to school soon,