

5. JOB OFFER

He needed a job. Things really hadn't been going his way. He had heard about a shipping company. They unloaded trucks, and put the container on trains. All mechanized using cranes and all.

He had the address in the jacket that he wore to work. That's where he first heard about the job. He had looked in his other jacket. There it was in the pocket all crumpled up, just folded around some Kleenex.

There it was. Somewhere in the Southside near the river. He looked up the address on the computer. But the streets just zigzagged down there so he got lost.

At one point, he was driving around in totally the opposite direction from where he started. He kept driving around the same block over and over again. He was looking for a non-existent number.

Streets intersected diagonally with each other. He got so disoriented that he had to swerve to avoid a dead dog in the road.

Finally, he needed to ask someone. He saw a bar nearby. The street used to have trains run along it. They were still tracks protruding from the pavement. As he drove over them, his car rattled.

The bartender ignored him as he walked in. He approached one of the patrons.

The shipping company. They haven't been there in six months."

"That's strange. I just got the tip about the them."

"That sucks."

"It really does."

"I hate the fact that you came all this way for nothing. Why don't I buy you a drink?"

"Huh?"

"You know. A bit of good luck."

"I'm not used to anyone giving me a break."

"No big deal. Besides, I hate drinking alone."

"I know how that gets. Get me a scotch on the rocks."

"Sounds good. You've been looking for work for long."

"Not too long"

"That's the worst thing, having to look for work."

"Don't you know it. It seems to be happening quite a bit to me."

"I was working a dishwasher in a restaurant. Really shitty work!"

"So you just quit!"

"No. Nothing like that. The guy who used to do the job came back into town. They decided just to give him his job back."

"No notice, no nothing?"

"What a bunch of dickheads."

"You know it."

"It really brought me down. I felt expendable. It's just that feeling that I get. If I died tomorrow, who'd even shed a tear. Who'd even remember that I was gone."

"You didn't make any friends at your last job."

“I wasn’t there that long.”

“This isn’t a great place for friends. I’ve been here a couple of years. I still only know a few souls. Mostly the guys that I work with.”

“It is a bitch.”

“You could say that again.”

“I could help you get a job.”

“You’d do that for me.”

“You need a job. I have a friend who needs someone. Sounds like a perfect fit.”

He looked over to the bartender as if he was trying to get his permission. The bartender didn’t even look back as if he realized that Van didn’t need another drink.

“I might like to do something like that!”

“This isn’t the kind of job for everyone. You’ve got to be a real go-getter.”

“That I am.”

“Let me get you another drink.”

“I’m OK with my first. Maybe later, I don’t like to drink when I get depressed.”

“You shouldn’t be down. You’re going to get a job. You should celebrate.”

“In that case, I should celebrate. It’s still going to take me a little while to finish this one.”

“Whatever you say. I’ve got your back.”

“I’ll be careful not to say anything too stupid.”

“We’re all friends here.”

The bartender seemed to wink at Van as if he was giving him a signal. Van wondered what the bartender was thinking. Did he know more than he was saying? There was little that he could say with Van host sitting right there.

“I’m definitely interested in this job. What am I supposed to do?”

“I’m going to call my friend. And then you have to meet him. And he’ll see if you’re right for the job.”

“Does he have an office? I’m supposed to go to his office.”

“This is all between friends if you know what I mean. He doesn’t really want his company mixed up in the deal.”

“It’s not illegal.”

“What if it was? You need work.”

“I just don’t know if I need it that much.”

“He’s a good guy. He’s my friend. He’ll look out for you.”

“I hope that’s enough.”

“A friend of mine is a friends of yours. What more can you ask for?”

“Not much.”

“Get me that other drink.”

“You are feeling better!”

“A lot better than when I came in here. I almost ran over a dog.”

“You hit a dog.”

“It was already dead. I saw it in the street. And I almost ran into it.”

“Damn shit! You don’t want to be the one who actually runs down a dog.”

“I guess that I have this respect for life.”

“All life.”

Van nodded.

“Even shit heads.”

“I guess that I have a special respect for shit heads.”

They both laughed.

“You’re going to be perfect for the job.”

“I’m protecting a shit head.”

“More than that.”

“Tell me then.”

“If you could have anything that you want in the world, what would it be?”

“I want my freedom from this darkness that envelops me.”

“How do you get that?”

“I don’t know. Alien benefactors.”

“The right job.”

“I feel as if I’d always be a slave to the hours.”

“A wage slave?”

“I want the chance to shape the world according to my imagination.”

“Seems like a noble task. Are you an artist?”

“If I was, I could take a little more pleasure in my situation. I’m just a lost man looking for home.”

“That drink is starting to take hold.”

“I wish that I had a skill. Like a mason. Or a carpenter. I only do odd jobs.”

“That would be liberation for you.”

“A trade, maybe. I’m not sure that I have the discipline to apply myself. Maybe.”

“Maybe I have what you need.”

“Another drink. No thanks. I’m starting to sound pretty crazy.”

“No, you’re making sense. I was just talking about the job.”

“I do need that job.”

Victor put his head in his hands. “I will do what I can.”

“Is something wrong?”

“I just want to make sure that you are the right one for the job.”

“I told you that I was interested.”

“Now, you’re expressing doubts.”

“Not at all. It’s just the alcohol talking.”

“My fault. I shouldn’t have tried to get you drunk. I guess that I wanted to test you.”

“How am I doing?”

“You’re holding up. I’m the one who’s being a bit of a prick.”

“What’s going on?”

“You’re going on.”

“What?”

“You’re going to be fine for the job.”

“I feel as if I’m being hired to be a bar tender in some kind of kink bar.”

“Dream on!”

“What then?”

“I told you before. You’re just going to have to take care of business. I just need someone who can do things discreetly.”

“I can keep a secret. I told you that I don’t have many friends.”

“Just as long as you don’t crack under pressure.”

“So I am going to work in a kinky bar—as the entertainment.”

“You need to relax.”

“I’m trying to relax. I’m just not sure what you really expect of me.”

“I’m not doing the hiring.”

He didn’t want to do his interview in another bar. But that seemed to be his only option. He tried to arrive early, but Victor’s directions were quite terrible. His rendezvous was waiting at a table. This place was much more upscale.

“What if I asked you to kill someone for money? Would you do it for me?”

“I’m not really a violent person.

”But you do need the money.”

“That is true.”

He started thinking about how much money he had left in his wallet. Could he even afford a drink?

“I want you to think about this. Let me get you a drink.”

If Vince wasn’t buying, he wouldn’t mind taking another. This wasn’t his style to let other people buy his drinks. But this was a lot better than getting depressed about not finding a job.”

“This is all hypothetical about killing someone.”

Vince nodded.

“I’m not a killer.”

“You’ve been in fights before.”

“Minor shit. The kind of stuff that happens in school. I’ve never really hurt anyone.”

“But you’ve felt like it.”

Van shrugged.

“You know what I’m talking about. The kind of guy that belittles you. Hey, old man, you mind if I beat the shit out of you. You know that guy. You just want to grab a beer bottle and rap him across the skull.”

“Whatever!”

“You feel it?”

“I guess I do. It’s just like I said: I’m not a killer.”

“I guess no one starts out that way.”

“They probably should stay that way.”

“So is that the job that you were telling me about.”

“No. Not exactly.”

“So this guy that you want me to kill. This isn’t someone that I know.”

“That’s the whole idea.”

“And I’d get money for doing it.”

“That is what we’re talking about. But it’s just more talk. I’m not really suggesting that you kill anyone, much less this guy.”

Vince was putting on a tough act for Van’s benefit. He was trying to use all this ruthless talk to rile up his new friend. But Van was pretty passive.

“I could kill him if I really wanted to. I’m not some kind of pussy!”

“No, you don’t look as if you are.”

“I can do a job. That’s what I’ve tried to tell people. Even the boss at the last job. I was doing a good job at washing dishes.”

“You weren’t breaking any dishes.”

“You know it. I wasn’t dropping any.”

“He knew that I was good.”

“And he just let you go?”

“The other guy came back. Didn’t I tell you that?”

“Yes, you did. Maybe it was time to do something else. How long were you there?”

“Just a few weeks.”

“And someone told you about this job.”

“Yes, he did. He as a customer. He saw me working there. I work hard. He saw that. And he offered me the job. He wrote his name on a piece of paper. And I just stuffed it in my jacket pocket. See I already had a job then. Here’s the piece of paper.”

“Yeah, a job.”

“Only there isn’t no such place.”

“But you met Victor. And I now have a job for you. That’s pretty good luck.”

“Yes, it is. Although by the way that you’re talking about killing, I’m not sure.”

“But you’re still interested. I’ve got you interested in a job.”

“I need a job. You’re not fucking with me?”

“About what?”

“The job, the killing.”

“I’m kidding you a little about the killing part. But I do have a job.”

“That’s good. Otherwise, I might just leave.”

“You’ve got a drink to finish. Where would you go?”

“Home. To another job lead. Somewhere else. I didn’t come all the way over here for nothing.”

“You don’t really have any job leads. And not much of a home to go to. I can offer you money. Money up front. And the rest after you do the job.”

“I don’t think that I could really kill a human being.”

“This isn’t a human being. This is a monster. Just think about it that way. Everyone who you have borne a grudge against, all these people, are distilled in this one monster!”

“I wish that it was that easy. Like ordering another drink from the bar. I’m the one who has to do the dirty work. Squeeze the trigger. Use a knife on him. Choke him with my bare hands. I don’t even know if I could do it to someone I know. Someone I hate. And you want me to get rid of a stranger.”

“It’s more fun that way. It’s all about the immediacy of the feeling. There is nothing else to get in the way.”

“I’m going to have the burden sticking with me everyday.”

“People die all the time. You’re just helping the process along.”

“I’m part of the process, and I don’t want to help it along. I want to do what I can to slow it down. To end it where I can. So I can say to myself that I did something.”

“This is much easier than you think. There is no philosophy involved. You do the job. It’s over. That is that. You never have to think about it again.”

“It’s easy for you, not for me. I don’t want anything to do with this.”

“What are you going to do? Live on the streets for the rest of your life. Look at yourself. Is this how you want to be?”

“I’m not willing to do penance. What did I ever do wrong?”

“There are two kinds of people in life. Those who do great things and those who watch those great things from the cheap seats.”

“Great things how? Killing some guy in cold blood. Am I a vigilante? Or am I killing somebody who just happens to stand in the way over some business deal.”

“You’re getting rid of someone who has got away with bad things.”

“Bad things. You sound like you’re talking to a four year old. And killing is some kind of spanking punishment. What gives me the right to say that this guy has to die?”

“You’re not saying anything at all. You’re just doing the job. The one who’s paying you is making the decision.”

“I’m the one who’s got to do the deed. The benefactor gets the rewards from having this person out of the way. But I’ve got to live with the fact that I’ve actually killed someone.”

“Everything we do has bad consequences. The guy on the assembly line builds a car that runs over some small kid.”

“The car isn’t built with a killer program inside. It’s not even the intention of manufacturer to have the car run down innocent people.”

“This person isn’t innocent.”

“Who’s to say?”

“We do! There’s enough people who could give witness that this guy has to go away.”

“Maybe we should talk about something else. If I have to dwell on the fact that I’m going to kill somebody, there is a lot less likelihood that I’m going to go through with it.”

“What are you saying?”

“Give me the money, tell me who it is, and I can just get it over with.”

“What are you saying? That you’ll do it.”

“If I am going to do it, then just make it something simple. Don’t wrap it in this revenge philosophy. It’s too much for my head to get around.”

“You are going to do it.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do. I need to do something. What would you have me do?”

“I need to be sure that your heart is in it.”

“My heart is never going to be in it. I have to turn my heart off. Just think about getting it done, and then putting it away.”

“It helps to have a hobby.”

“Life is enough of a hobby at this point. I can’t deal with that many things that I have no

control over.”

“But sometimes it helps to see the pattern. To know things are going to happen.”

“That’s the Weather Channel. And they can’t even get things right half the time.”

“This is something that you can be certain about.”

“I wish that I could say the same about my own feelings.”

“Just suck it up. We do it all the time.”

“I’m not too good at sacrifice. I can’t see that far into the future.”

“You have no allegiances. Nothing holding you down. Just think of this as justice.”

“It’s easier thinking that way at night. I just don’t want to wake up with a guilt hangover.

I’m not going to start drinking in the morning.”

“Think of it as the beginning of a new day. Whatever was bothering the day before is gone in the morning.”

“That’s a little too brutal for me.”

“There’s always a blessing in disguise.”

Van imagined all the crimes perpetrated by his target. That was supposed to be enough to assuage his conscience. It wasn’t as if he was creating precedent for the ages. He was just getting a job done. Washing dishes had always seemed like shitty work. But it never had this kind of impact for him.

He spent the next few days going through the paper and listing openings. His jaunts to these locations were all dead ends. Jobs already filled. Hundreds of applicants. Lack of proper qualifications. He hated to think of himself as desperate. He was a working man. He could never imagine himself sticking up a store for money. He would definitely not try it with someone on the street. Why was this any different?

He had nowhere to stay. And he was at the ends of his rope. Things had gone a lot worse than he expected. He couldn’t squat again, not after what had happened. And the police were cracking down on vagrants.

He looked in his pocket for Vince’s number. Here it was. Still crumpled up in a ball. As if he cared about it all that much. He couldn’t call. Not today.

He went to the library to chill out. Anything to get his mind off of what he had to do. Why could he even be trusted? Here he was this homeless guy. No friends. A little erratic.

“You have nothing weighing you down. No connections. Guilt is just a temporary thing. You’ll be over it in a few days. And once you get the hang of things, you’ll want to do this all the time.”

“That sounds like a great recommendation for my character.”

“You have no character. You’re an empty vessel waiting to get filled in.”

“Why don’t I go kill someone randomly in the street. For me, what’s the difference.”

“This is about the money. You’ll have chance to clean up. Take charge of your life.”

He had done his best to keep clean. He showered when he had the chance. He cared about his appearance. But he was running out of clothes. It was getting harder to stay ahead of things. He could feel that he was slipping down.

“I know your story. I’ve heard it loads of times. You’re getting obsessed with yourself. It’s driving you crazy. This gives you a sense of purpose.”

“This is ugly. I’m not like this.”

“No one has a real choice about their circumstances. You have to take the cards that you’re dealt and make the best of them. This is your chance to play with a royal flush.”

“I’m not into gambling. Too much to lose.”

“Here, take a few bucks. Get cleaned up. Get some new duds. Spend a night in a nice hotel, and then talk to me in the morning.”

“A few bucks.”

He had a couple of hundred. Perhaps a little more. He was turned on by the opportunity. Maybe he could admire the reflection of his face in the sparkle of wine glass. Get turned on by the heat and the light. He wanted to inspire his life with some deeper purpose. While at the hotel, he did just that.

Had he gone too far in taking the money?. He had not yet committed himself to the killing. And he was already enjoying the luxury that the money afforded. This, he didn’t want to stop. Could his conscience be bought off that easily. After all, what was his conscience but the simple desire not to get dragged down into the mass of humanity. Was this what happened with everyone that he despised? Was he becoming the suitable target for some future assassin? People who would come to enjoy the spoils of their avarice that they would never have to think about the suffering that they caused. Suffering seemed like such a remote thing. You couldn’t put a finger on it. You couldn’t really put it away. The wine bottle was something solid. The coffee table in the hotel room. All these things that seemed so real to him.

The next morning, he returned to the familiar world of his abstractions. The guilt, that he had put away the night before, now stared back at him with a brilliance that far outshone the bottle on the coffee table. His natural inclination was to pour himself a drink. All this over some money. What if he had actually killed someone?

He needed to review the events of the night before just so that he could be sure that he hadn’t, in a drunken frenzy, followed through with Vince’s plan. His stomach felt queasy. He didn’t even have a good enough excuse for the way that he felt. That was why Vince gave him the money. To show him the guilt that comes from success only breeds the need do something more ghastly to justify the guilt. Again his world of abstractions!

So he was already in a bargain with the devil. And the devil was beating by a two to one margin. He was thinking like a gambler. Time was no longer on his side. He needed the royal flush.

There was a free breakfast buffet that was included in the price of the room. He needed to enjoy all the trappings of wealth before he was cast upon the street again. He needed to eat. He just needed to get back his strength. Except his upset stomach wasn’t making that easy. After a couple of glasses of water, things quieted down. And he ate something. This was how it was supposed to be.

None of this was all that different from the days that he went into the restaurant job. Or any job before that. He had never really been on Lucky Street, so why should he worry about it? Especially not now!

When he got back in the room, it felt like a new beginning. He couldn’t go back to the rags that he had covered himself with before. He was meant to give off this glimmer. He even walked with sprightly gait. And he had his opportunity. It was all making sense.

“You think that I can be bought off that easily.”

“There’s a lot more where that came from.”

“Maybe I’m better suited to a sales job.”

“The market goes up and down. This kind of thing never fluctuates. Hate never takes a holiday.”

“I’m not really the spiteful type.”

“You’re just taking care of things for us!”

“Sure!”

I was changing from an *angel of vengeance* to an *angel of mercy*. I felt uplifted. Almost holy. From an itinerant to a man with a mission.

My days of vagrancy were behind me. I knew that it would be difficult to adjust. It might be harder than ever to make friends. But finally I had my place in the grand scheme of things.

“Think of it as a trade off. You’re getting rid of a scum-bag. And you’re getting all this good fortune in return.”

“I’m hardly a saint!”

“Good deeds come in strange packages.”

Vince was trying to play the part of a theologian. Van still wondered what was really expected of him.

He was being forced to enter a fictional world. Formerly, it was unthinkable for him even to consider murdering someone else. Now it seemed like natural course. He was risking getting caught by the police. Even getting stopped in the act. But that was all reality. In the fiction, there was nothing in his way. Mere consideration was enough to justify the deed. Morality was all a thing of the past.

It was one thing to regale on the spoils of his misdeed. But actually to use his bare hands to snuff out the life of another man was more reparation for his death was more than Van could bear. He needed to quit being a coward. He needed to do what he had committed himself for.

“Where do I make contact with the victim?”

“You are going through with this?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“You’re not afraid.”

“I’m shitting bricks. But if I don’t get this over with, I never will.”

“There’s a lot more to this than me giving you a name. You are going to have to wait until it’s the right time.”

“Is this going to take forever?”

“It will all happen in good time.”

“Are you going to give me a cover story? Or just a face?”

“You want something to get you riled up?”

“I want to know why I’m really doing this.”

“For money.”

“I need some deeper motivation.”

“You’re not a fucking actor. You’ve already taken my money. And you’re going to do this job. Or you will be the next job.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“If that’s what it takes.”

“How did I ever get in this?”

“You told Victor that you needed a job.”

Van’s big mouth had gotten him into this mess. It just wasn’t doing much to get him out. What had prompted him to get so far ahead of himself. What would the *the new me* do?

If only he had someone to talk to. He knew what any friend would do. They would do their best to talk him out of the madness. Now he was so deep in this game that there seemed little hope of talking himself out of it. He didn’t want to be on the run from this crazy asshole. On the other hand, if he did his bidding, there would only be more that he wanted from him. It would be just hopeless trying to sort things out.

For the next few days, he made himself scarce. That was the best that he could manage under the circumstances. It wasn’t as if Vince made any of this seem urgent. So he retreated back into his own darkness. He had enough money to give himself time. And he savored every minute of it.

During his time alone, he realized that he wasn’t a killer. No amount of reasoning by Vince was going to make him cold-blooded. He really had no ties that Vince could exploit. He had nothing to lose. But nothing to gain. Even with his new attitude, his life just appeared as this wasted farce. How different had it been when he was stacking up dishes at the restaurant. Or in his job before that.

He liked the life of leisure. He liked thinking that he was somebody. There was something about Vince that he really admired. A tough guy.

“Do you think that you could kill a woman?”

“Is this a test? Or is this my victim?”

“I still don’t trust you. I need to figure out what you’re made of.”

“So I don’t have to kill a woman?”

“I didn’t say that. Could you kill a woman?”

“Someone that I know?”

“Has a woman ever got you angry. Really angry.”

“I’m not that sort of guy.”

“No girl’s ever got under your skin.”

“I’ve been telling you all along that I’m a pretty even guy.”

“You don’t hate the world for the cards that you’ve been dealt. You’ve never been pushed to the wall by some bitchy supervisor.”

“Women are no different in that department than men. Besides, with a guy, there’s always this implied threat.”

“Have you ever got into it with one of your superiors?”

“I’ve been pissed off when I’ve been shoveling the shit. But it just got me working harder.”

“This job is going to take a lot out of you. You really have to be a man if you expect to get it done.”

“I’m waiting.”

“You’re still going to have to wait some more. I don’t want you getting involved in the personal side of this case. Nothing that can tie you to the victim.”

“I’m tied to you.”

“But I have nothing personal wrapped up in this case. This is all business.”

“The American way!”

“What?”

“It was a joke.”

He was trying to push all Van’s buttons. Vince wanted to see if Van was some kind of sicko who found delight in preying on women. But he wasn’t that type at all. He didn’t feel weak. He didn’t feel pushed down. He just had a lot of bad breaks. And here was his chance to turn things around.

Van went back to living in his fiction. Where you could make things happen by wishing them so.

He tried to resist the temptation of thinking of himself as a super-hero. As if he was reviving justice that had been trampled down by the power-hungry. Vince was grooming him for a transformation. And Van loved the idea.

He had to do a double-take. Justice was all in the eyes of the beholder. And the avenger only saw himself as pure because he got off on his own sense of power. He had seen guys in a fight keep beating on someone as if they had some kind of internal justification. He didn’t want to give in to that blood-thirst. But how could he help it if was actually contemplating killing someone. The waiting made it even more difficult. He could no longer act as if this was something accidental. Or that fate had forced this end upon him. This was happening in slow-motion, and the only thing that was going on here and now were his thoughts. He could stop that terrible end before it happened.

He needed to sleep. It was the middle of the afternoon. But he needed to sleep. When he woke up, it might be morning!