

Msaishutne
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SUMMER NIGHTS IN INDIANA are usually pleasant; cool breezes balloon lacy curtains, whip them aside, and then reward the patient for their day's labor. Unfortunately, I didn't have any curtains, and even with the brown shade rolled up to expose all of the screen it was still hot inside. Those cool winds seemed particular, all up and down the street they'd rush in one window and then another, but never mine. Perhaps they knew the electricity had been shut off or they had seen the uncollected garbage on the back porch and had decided that I was undeserving of reward.

My warmth, then was not caused by the nude reclining on the chair in front of me. With my bare ass resting on the edge of the cot, I'd been leafing through an old *Playboy*, my flashlight reintroducing me to half forgotten cartoons until I came across "Miss December." I checked the front cover—1966—and unfolded the hinged body so that her head rested on the back of the chair and her legs dangled over the edge. I sipped some beer, placed the bottle between my feet and offered my apologies for not remembering her better. She'd born her years well; the creases across her shoulders and belly were a little more evident but she was still everything a boy could want for Christmas. Her red lips smiled warmly. Her right hand, poised above her head, held some mistletoe tied with a red bow and her left hand seemed to be losing its grasp on the flannel pajamas that in some future time would slip forever from her round hips.

My attention shifted to the drop of sweat that was slowly working its way down my brow. Past the bridge of my nose and on to the tip—"plunk," it found its way into the small opening of the bottle below. I finished the last of the warm beer and went to sleep.

Less snobbish than last night's cool air, the sun easily found my open window. Miss

December watched me light a cigarette and flip on the radio— 9:16, 82 degrees and “Boys and girls, moms and dads, an oldie but goodie: “Summertime, summertime, sum sum summertime/ Summertime, summertime, sum sum summertime”

Since school let out I’d spent my summertime looking for a job. In the past I’d avoided going home by working for a local printing company but they were no longer hiring temporary help. When the dorm closed I’d anticipated the summer’s poverty and had moved my junk into an old two-storied house that a friend and four or five others shared during the school year—they’d all wisely gone home but to not lose the place had paid the rent until fall.

It was amazing that such a small town had so many places where one could look for work. But looking was about all I could do. I’d spent several weeks applying at all the local factories but with no luck. Finally, in desperation, I’d ignored the “experienced only need apply” phrase in the help wanted ads and sought work pumping gas or washing dishes only to find they wanted someone year round or that they actually did want only “experienced dishwashers.” It was definitely a buyers’ market.

There were only two more possibilities left. World Wide Plastics and Weird John. I’d spend just one more day looking and if I couldn’t find anything, well—I’d

head back home to the cornfield.

I’d discovered World Wide Plastics the previous night. Several miles out of town and not far from the dump, it appeared to be an old brick school house made over so that Crawfordsville might capture the world market in plastics.

The inner office surprised me: panelled walls, carpet, and even an air conditioner in its one window. The secretary was less of a surprise. The several dozen I’d seen over the last few weeks all seemed alike; you got the feeling that if one of their girlfriends described them no mention would be made of charm or wit but only “Wanda drives a ‘73 Mustang with mag wheels and four on the floor.”

I filled out the application with all the proper names and numbers. It typically takes about a half hour to print your life history, filling in two pages of blank spaces in order to delight some future anthropologist interested in twentieth century midwestern life.

The next hour’s wait was also typical. As “Wanda” possessed the only reading material, *The Sensuous Woman*, and as I wasn’t bold enough to seek her opinions on whipped cream, I spent the time silently daydreaming about Miss December.

The manager’s performance, too, was familiar. He divided sixty seconds between glancing at my application and repeating a

speech I suspect is passed from one factory to another on a crumpled typewritten page, "We aren't hiring any summer employees at the moment but we appreciate your application and we'll keep it on file and give you a call if anything comes up."

Before he could catch his breath and run out of the office I gave him a suggestion I'd offered others during the last few days: why didn't he save all job hunters a lot of goddamn time and trouble by simply installing a neon sign like the ones motels use, "No Vacancy." His response, probably taken from that same typewritten sheet—or borrowed from a recent *American Journal of Personnel Psychology*—was brief and to the point, "Fuck you."

My last chance to stay in town was by working for Weird John. W. J. deserved his title. Besides being queer, he had a passion for potbellied stoves of the type found in railroad cabooses; in obtaining the most recent addition to his collection he had been arrested. As punishment for being weird he was given a year's probation and expelled from school for a semester.

Besides all that, however, W. J. was a financial wizard; at twenty, he already had a fat bank account, a plane, a new sports car and even a panel truck (for hauling potbellied stoves, I suppose). His

project this summer was to calculate the amount of refund due customers of an Ohio electric company that had been overcharging. W. J. had put in the lowest bid, rented the top floor of an old warehouse and staffed his operation with some high school kids.

John didn't need any extra help but finally hired me for the afternoon. I was given an alphabetized stack of pink slips, all W's, and shown how to calculate the refund and where to record the amount. Later the second runner-up in the "Miss Montgomery County Beauty Pageant" would punch the information onto IBM cards and then an even more expensive, if less comely, piece of machinery would type out the checks.

Four hours later I was finished with Robert Wythers (only a \$42.37 refund, old Bob was apparently frugal with his kilowatts) and yet still had a number of slips left. Then I discovered that the remaining slips all belonged to the same person: Miss Joy Wyuka, it seems, had moved no less than twenty-seven times during the last few years. Each move was beautifully timed to correspond with the arrival of the electric bill as only one was marked paid. (That one was for two months at 1210 Main Street in Dayton—it must be an extraordinarily attractive neighborhood.) I stapled the one paid bill on top of the others and recorded the refund due a more conscientious customer. If the check ever catches up with her, perhaps Joy can settle down—

at least for a few months.

Six bucks for four hours' work. Not too bad, but unfortunately, that was the last day of W. J.'s operation. Still, six bucks was enough to put some gas in the car and finance another day's job hunting, though I really didn't know where else I could look.

The money was the most I'd had in several weeks; I passed up my usual 250 hamburgers and headed for Carl's. The place was deserted—only a few townies—but a cold schooner and a corned beef sandwich left me feeling better than I had for quite some time. And even at Carl's prices I still had enough gas money to take me home.

Home; reason number one for trying to stay in Crawfordsville. God how I hated the farm! My dad's corn fields stretched for as far as the eye can see and—corny or not—that's quite a distance in Indiana. Christ, how I hated those corn fields. I remember one day slowly wringing the neck of one stalk and then throwing the cob as far as I could; I watched it somersault against the summer sky until it descended and brought my eyes back to—more corn, miles and miles of it. No trees, hills or streams, only corn, and no way I could kill it all.

I picked up a wet dime from the change and called reason number two. Janice, however, had decided at the last minute to join

her parents for a week's vacation at their cabin in Nebraska. I asked her grandmother why in the hell anyone would buy a cabin in Nebraska but she didn't answer.

Fitz came in. For some unfathomable reason he hadn't wanted to spend the summer with his parents in California. He too had been unable to find work but did have one last idea, why not work in Indianapolis? Between us we had enough money to finance at least one day's job hunting and if we did find something, it was close enough so that I could see Janice as often as I liked.

Fitz treated for another beer and a copy of the *Indianapolis Star*. It took a good half hour to work our way through the want ads but our labor was well rewarded, for, with mounting joy, we had stumbled across an array of the most fantastic opportunities ever dreamed of:

Summer Employment for College Students! Humanities and Science Majors Only Need Apply. (Who else?) This is not a selling job but one that offers a guaranteed salary and a chance for a scholarship for those willing to perform a public service. Apply room 805 Capital Building.

And on and on, so many jobs just waiting for the untrained college student. Crossing off the few factory jobs we'd circled at

the beginning, we were left with an even dozen ads and each one seemed to have been written just for us. It was agreed; Fitz and I would share expenses and make the sixty mile trip the next morning.

Carl finally tossed us out at closing time and I carefully drove back to the house; I wasn't in beer drinking shape since my dad's monthly checks had ended with the school term. I had forgotten to put the flashlight in the car and so had to grope to find the keyhole and feel my way past the living room and into the kitchen. I opened the refrigerator and discovered I didn't even have a warm beer left. (It had somehow seemed appropriate to keep my case in the refrigerator although it had ceased functioning.) Holding the handrail, I found my way upstairs to the front of the house and my cot. I stripped and opened the shade. I was just at that point of drunkenness where I didn't feel like sleeping; instead, I focused on the summer night outside, at my neighbor's gently moving curtains, at the moths that banged against the street lamp and at my old Ford parked below. Then I remembered the one joint hidden in the car. Bumping into the hallway, tripping half down the stairs, I was outside and opening the hood. The weed was in a magnetic box hidden under the fender panel; as I bent over to retrieve it I remembered that I was bare-assed naked.

Upstairs I smoked, coughed,

and resolved to find a better hiding place for any future grass. I vaguely remember saying goodnight to Miss December as I tucked her between her paper covers.

Our hope for honest employment was short-lived. The first two jobs turned out to be selling encyclopedias door to door on commission. The third "public service, guaranteed salary job," was for selling magazines door to door; again on commission and again with a slick and somewhat less than honest spiel to be memorized.

Discouraged but still hoping, we phoned the remaining ads. The secretaries weren't very friendly but most cooperated; "liberal arts and science majors only" jobs involved, it turned out, selling everything from pots and pans to Bibles. Only two sounded the least bit encouraging and we headed toward the first of these.

"Msaisuhtne" (ma-sut'-ne) yelled the man in front as his right arm, with clenched fist, punched the air above him to punctuate his cry. "Msaisuhtne!" A dozen clean-cut bodies echoed their leader. Each carrying a cardboard briefcase, they marched two abreast from the office we were about to enter—we can't claim we weren't forewarned.

Inside on several long couches sat fellow college students. Most, it seemed, had an appointment with a Mr. Rozelle and as

promised he appeared promptly at 11:00. Except for his haircut he looked exactly like the guy on TV who for the past seven years has conducted "... for this month only a search in your area to find talented artists to meet the ever increasing demand of the ART World!" You know the one, he shows you a picture of a hockey player "but you'd be surprised how many people don't recognize this as a hockey player! They lack the vital gift of 'graphic recognition.' "

But this guy's line—my God—in five minutes he'd destroyed any cynicism the morning had created, in fifteen any that I'd learned in my twenty-one years, and at the end of the first half hour he could have sold me the Emperor's clothes. *This* man was no lowly encyclopedia pusher.

"Our concern is education! We wish to place teaching machines in various homes for the edification of children. To encourage parental cooperation you are authorized to give the parents a free set of encyclopedias and, in addition, a ten-year subscription to our information service, permitting them to receive a written answer to any question they have, ten questions a year!"

God! We'd simply be asking parents to help "educators" gain knowledge about the efficacy of teaching machines and we'd get paid for our trouble.

Rozelle demonstrated a model "similar to the ones you'll be placing" and it certainly was

impressive: lights, buttons, buzzers, and programs for different areas and different age levels.

An hour of complete mesmerism and then Fitz began to ask questions. "Do the parents have to buy the encyclopedias?"

"No! They're absolutely free—only an inducement to encourage them to use our teaching machines so that we may improve the quality of their children's education."

"Do the parents have to pay anything for the machines?"

"No! They're absolutely free!"

I pushed Fitz in the side—this guy was obviously a saint, only trying to spread the noble aims of Academia in humble Indiana—and didn't deserve to be given a hard time. Another half hour went by and in spite of my new found faith, I did get the feeling that this saint was telling us more about the encyclopedias than the teaching machines that were to shed Promethean light upon our bucolic land.

But then Fitz stiffened as if he had suddenly seen all the ills of the world laid before him. "Do the parents have to pay for the information service?"

"Not really. We usually charge a fee of \$5 for each question subscribers may ask, but the families you'll be dealing with will only pay a nominal fee."

My prospect of an honorable fortune began to fade somewhat but it wasn't for another ten minutes—the dude seemed to be finishing and was beginning to

ask how many were interested in working in this high paying and humanitarian cause when Fitz asked the final question:

"How much is the nominal fee?"

"Uh! \$3.95" — and then back into the closing pattern.

Everyone seemed pacified but I had grasped Fitz's logic: ten information tickets a year for ten years at \$3.95 each--\$395. We were being recruited to sell encyclopedias, short and simple!

Fitz and I were the only ones who didn't agree to come back the next day to take the training course on how to place those marvelous teaching machines. MSAISUHTNE!

We got some coffee and Fitz called his parents, collect. His end of the conversation consisted mostly of grunts but when he returned to the table he announced he was heading home. He had an airplane credit card and enough left for cab fare. I said I envied him for having California to go home to. He said he didn't know why and left.

Since it was on the way to where the car was parked anyway, I figured I'd try the only want ad we hadn't eliminated.

"Look Mr Campbell, I might save us both some trouble by telling you that I'm not interested in pushing encyclopedias."

Mr. Campbell smiled, "I know exactly what you mean; those encyclopedia boys should be put away! But our product doesn't need to be pushed. It's really like our want ad says, we really do feel that we're offering something the public needs."

I sat down. We made small talk about my college football team while I examined the product: a small plastic fire alarm with a little disk inserted at the bottom that apparently melted at a certain temperature and set off a piercing alarm—"guaranteed to wake the dead and keep 'em up for at least five minutes." I guessed that it sold for four or five dollars and figured it wouldn't be too bad a job if there wasn't any high pressure routine involved.

"Hell no, we don't need any high pressure tactics. All you need is our little booklet; it'll sell them for you."

He pulled out a briefcase with several fire alarms and a glossy pamphlet inside.

"And none of this knock on every door in town routine. We only approach middle class families and older people. And once they see this little booklet they buy one for every room! And besides helping people out there's good money in it for you. You get \$10 for each one you sell. That's a 20 percent commission."

Christ! Fifty bucks for something any half-wit could make himself for a few dollars; but before I could say anything, he opened

his “self-selling” booklet—glossy photographs of children and old women who had been severely burned.

I was on my feet but Campbell was taking my profanity calmly as though he were used to it. But when he moved to show me the door I removed the disk from the sample alarm still in my hand. It let off an ear shattering noise as I tossed it into the far corner of the room. Campbell rushed toward it as I proceeded to disarm the five alarms in the briefcase. As I left, Campbell was at the other end of the room trying to break the plastic box with the heel of his shoe.

Back in Crawfordsville, I filled the tank, picked up my few belongings and headed home.

A half hour along on my three hour trip I stopped at a roadside tavern and bought a cold quart of beer. My cigarette ash dropped on the seat as I reached for a second sip from the bottle beside me. The sun was just setting and in front of me—and behind me—and on either side—stretched miles and miles of corn.