

Nathan Cover

## Every Rose City Has Its Thorns

It was a management training position, at least that's what they told me when I answered the ad in the paper. Yes, I'm old, if that makes you feel better. We learned about all the different types of perfume and cologne, eau de toilet, eau de parfum, eau de the other one whatever it is, the cheap one I forget now. It isn't the toilet one though, that's not cheap even though you might think it is.

By the second week, I had decided I was going to fail miserably at this. I watched the felon I was training with swipe a Dr. Pepper from the grocery store refrigerator before we got out to the parking lots to do the real work. He had the gift of gab and I was genuinely impressed how he made a sale on the train to this girl who seemed completely uninterested from the start, just cold like that. It was incredible. I've never been able to talk to people like that unless I'm wasted. When I got high it made me even less talkative so that was a bad combo, me just sitting there staring and vibing, but it was all I could do to get through the day.

In the parking lot we greeted people going into the store with our boxes full of knock off cologne, imitation Ralph Lauren, Curve, you name it. I think the grocery store was too upscale for what we were trying to do, but Sneaky Pete sawed through repeated rejections one after another, like a grungy Northwestern salmon swimming upstream.

It took me a good thirty seconds to work my nerve back up after being casually dismissed in an ongoing and steady stream, allowing a good half of my potential customers to pass by me without even being pitched.

Sneaky Pete could sense what a liability I was going to be, so even though he was supposed to be training me, he asked if I knew how to get back to the office and I told him yes, because I thought I could

figure it out from the train map. Then he said we should split up, we'd have better luck that way, which wasn't true, but *he* definitely would have better luck without my gloomy Elliott Smith vibes lurking over his shoulder, unsuccessfully trying to pick up the tricks of the trade.

At the end of the day, I dropped off my box at the 'management training office' which was a room off of a giant warehouse they were renting, by the hour it looked like. The main guy, Rick, was clean cut and well-groomed, and his girlfriend, well I could see why she was doing well in sales and it didn't have anything to do with the strength of her pitch.

He was saying something about how if you were a military deserter they couldn't hire you, but that he understood. And apparently it would be better to come clean with them and just take your punishment. I couldn't have followed his train of thought even if I hadn't been high. Then he was talking about how they were looking for highly motivated, skilled and able trainees who weren't afraid to do the hard work it would take to get a new branch started. I began to wonder if he was having a psychotic break from reality or if I was. We had just been standing out in parking lots all day, me clean cut and looking like I just got my slacks from J.C. Penney's for Easter morning service and my partner with the shifty eyes and wallet on a chain crushing me in sales.

I decided then and there that I wasn't coming back here tomorrow. It seemed rude to leave right in the middle of his speech though. He got lost on a tangent about having a one-time cheat pass if he ever got the chance to hook up with Jennifer Anniston. I realized he thought he was giving a motivational speech, but at least it was wrapping up and I made a quick break for the exit.

"Avers!"

"Sir?"

"Tomorrow's the day!"

"The day?"

"The day you make your big breakthrough! Be here at 8:30 to go over the pitch with me."

"Yessir!" I said, even though we weren't supposed to start until 9. It was like Greenpeace canvassing all over again. Always trying to squeeze a little extra out of you.

That night I tried to sell some over the phone to my aunt and uncle. Even they wouldn't bite. That did it. Fuck this. I decided I'd call up the place that was looking for people to get petitions signed. At least there was no sales in that. \$10/hr as long as you meet the minimum required signatures.

At 8 the next morning I took the bus to the address listed for petition signing.

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It looked like they were signing up anyone with a pulse, which was great. I was really hungover, but I showered and combed my hair at least. By 9:30 I was out on the street getting signatures for 2 different things.

Option 1 was like, 'Open a domestic violence shelter in our community!' Option 2 was like- 'Get Harry K. Chance on the ballot!' I'd start really casual like,

"Hi there, are you a registered voter? That eliminated a lot of people because once they saw the clipboards they knew you wanted something. So, I'd hit 'em with that and if they said no, I'd be like

"Me neither, but they don't check these very closely. It'd be great if we could get this shelter open. Do you mind helping out?"

If they'd say yes and act like they had their shit together then I'd tell them about how we were trying to get under-represented candidates on the ballot and would they mind signing so we could get some new options for Portland? Most people responded to that. I didn't know if Harry K. Chance was an oompa-loompa or a real estate developer. They probably covered that part too early in the morning. It wasn't horrible, but I still felt really thirsty by the time 5 o'clock rolled around.

I did it for a few weeks, but it was getting colder. It was ok for an October job, but come Halloween I felt my life turning cold and wet and shitty. Hard pass.

I went to a Halloween party that night without a costume. People kept asking,

"What do you do for work?"

That's all Americans ever want to know. Who gives a shit?

"My work doesn't define me," I kept saying. People nodded politely and then left me alone as soon as they found a way to exit the conversation. I pounded a few Steel Reserves and looked for my friend Denise and one of the joints she liked to pass around.

She was a cool hippyish kind of chick, really tall with long hair, but not patchouli smelling. She dated one of my friends in school, so off limits. Mostly she was late and I couldn't figure out her costume even once she got there. Something with a beret?

She had some fancy ass friends who were going on a trip to Europe. I didn't want to hear about that shit. I got pissed off and did a little Irish goodbye. I was living in income controlled housing at the time and had an incredibly low rent of \$390 a month, which was awesome, but came with some drawbacks. Namely that my neighbor, who was on a lot of psych meds, but maybe not enough, liked to bang his head against the wall for hours at a time until someone had to be called.

I was also in a dispute with the apartment super about the art on my wall, which she said, 'looked like a serial killer made it.'

I liked it though. It was mostly naked women's body parts positioned at odd angles, then I'd thrown some National Geographic images of exotic locations that Big Oil was fucking up at this very moment on top of refugees with their arms full of their grandmother's ashes or a dismembered child. My favorite thing to do was tape really wholesome ads and commercial content to bloody images of amputees.

The super tried to make it about being a 'fire hazard' rather than a taste issue, but my buddy Adam who worked in the office was able to convince her to back off and leave me alone since I paid my rent on time and wasn't a raving lunatic like half the other tenants. I mean banging your head against the wall for 5 hour stretches, that was way worse than a few pussys taped to the wall, wasn't it?

After my last Steel Reserve that night I didn't make it back in for petitioning the following morning, so they let me go, it being my second warning and all.

It was just as well, I needed to get something more weather proof. I scoured the ads in the free newspaper again. Portland Parking Management was looking for people, \$8/hr. It wasn't totally weatherproof, but at least there was a little booth at most of those places where I'd seen their logo downtown. They told me to come in on Monday and I did, but then they wanted me to take a drug test. *Fuck me.*

Well, so much for that. Except that they told me to go take it right then and directed me to a location across the hall. I couldn't very well just walk out. I'd kept a straight face when they'd said it, but it seemed quite

pointless to take one. It was too embarrassing not to with it right across the hall though. I'm sure I pissed hot, but I handed them the cup and smiled and said I'd look forward to hearing from them.

Maybe they were just looking for coke or heroin or something, so within two weeks I was wearing the ugly ass bright red Portland Parking Management uniform and getting my training from Andy and Patty. In the meantime, I donated blood and signed up for food stamps, which I was kind of surprised to get. I didn't think white people living in a city could get them, but apparently I could, and so I did!

Andy slept in his car at the Convention Center to make ends meet and had two moods: extra friendly or extra grouchy. It was easy to read which kind of mood he was in, so you just had to adjust yours to fit his and all was well.

Patty was in her fifties, but had her hair braided like some sort of Norwegian Viking princess. She and her husband blew glass bowls for head shops on the side and she was always haranguing me about the dangers of eating fast food. I'm not sure what she ate exactly, but it always came in the same tupperware container that looked like a marinara sauce had bombed it for 20 years consecutively.

Neither of them was much to worry about. Ezana was another story. He was the boss, an Ethiopian with red eyes, but who never seemed high. His wife was a big spender and this caused Ezana great stress, which he would frequently take out on us. We couldn't understand a good quarter of what he was saying, and since he had never really trained any of us there were frequent misunderstandings and miscommunications about leaving the gates open or not, and how much change he was supposed to leave us.

You could always outlast Ezana Shentema was the good thing though. Just bog him down in the details and play dumb if it was your fault. Like clockwork his wife or his mistress or his daughter or who knows would blow up his phone and he would begin arguing with them vigorously in Swahili or whatever the fuck it was they spoke and then he would drive off, tires screeching and fuming, leaving us to deal with the problem ourselves, be it irate customer, lack of small bills or technical malfunction.

Our go-to solution was just to raise the gate and let them through, unless the customer had really pissed us off *personally* for some reason. In which case the better strategy was to let the line of cars behind them stack up and start honking as they tried to reason with you. Eventually they would realize that their time wasn't worth

the eight dollars they were trying to save and pay up, threatening to call your supervisor. The supervisor, of course, was Ezana who never answered his phone.

I read a lot of inspirational autobiographies in that time when the day would crawl, Nelson Mandela and Lance Armstrong, and thought about what a pathetic waste of existence I was. On my off days, I'd bring my one-hitter out to Forest Park and just squat there looking up at the trees. Sometimes I tried to be healthy and run with my patented vodka-water blend to keep me both hydrated and energized enough to finish the run.

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Things all started to change when Carlos came on board. He was a big Mexican kid with a beard and a gut. Carlos was on the no fly list for some reason he wouldn't disclose and had a pregnant live-in girlfriend who was very nervous about how they were going to pay their bills after the baby was born.

He didn't seem bothered by Ezana at all. At first, I figured he was just trying to stay out of prison and not lose his temper and whatnot, but I started to put it together two weeks later when we worked our first Prepay.

Prepay was for events where everyone was coming in and going out at around the same time, unlike the more dynamic flow of regular Convention Center traffic. It was at night and once the Prepay tickets were sold, they wanted most of us out of there so they didn't have to pay us for the whole night of work. After we sold to the incoming vehicles in the rush, we'd leave the gates open and all but one of us were instructed to clock out.

Fine by me leaving early, but it was kind of a pain in the ass trip, coming up for just a couple hours pay. I first noticed that he hadn't pushed the button after taking the car's money about an hour in. Since I was supposedly training him, I reminded him,

“Hey man remember, you gotta push the button anytime you give a ticket.”

“Oops.” He said and smiled.

Ten minutes later, I saw him forget to push the button again and smack his forehead when he saw me looking at him.

That night as we were leaving, he pulled me to the side once we got out to the street.

“Man, don't nobody check that shit. As long as its cash they don't know who's coming in when the gates is up.”

“Yeah, I mean, David might check the camera.”

David was a white guy from the Convention Center who sometimes checked up on us because he knew Ezana was a fuck up and he didn't want long lines of cars honking and clogging up his precious lot.

“Well, he ain't check last week. David be real fucking busy man. Every time I see him he's running off to do somebody else's job. He ain't got time to check shit.”

“Yeah, I guess you're right.”

“You gonna rat on me?”

“Nah, man, I don't give a fuck.” But I did give several fucks as it turned out. I felt stupid for not having thought of it myself.

“Just don't get greedy and they ain't gonna notice.”

“How much you take?”

“200.”

“Shit, man they might notice that!”

“Who? Ezana driving off with his wife in his ear, David scrambling around the whole Convention Center.” He paused. “You making the trip up here for \$20? Shit man.”

I thought it over at home while looking at the vaginas on my wall and my shitty Payless shoes. The next time we did Prepay I took \$40. It was important to always take an amount that was a multiple of 8. Carlos coached me up. He told me to take a 20 dollar bill once every hour and put it in my other pocket from where I kept the rest of their change.

The next time I took \$80 and after that \$120. They never said shit. I never went over \$200, but I'm sure Carlos did.

If I did it his way, putting it in my left back pocket every once in a while, there was nothing to hide at the end of the night, you just walked out like normal. There was nothing for them to see even if someone was at the cameras. They were understaffed in house anyways. Security was for the patrons, not for us.

Carlos started inviting me over. I tried to get him to elevate his taste in beer to Black Butte Porters, but he said they just made him sleepy. He introduced me to hurricanes. It was just a Budweiser mixed with Clamato but once you got used to the taste it wasn't bad. Better than Steel Reserve anyways.

His old lady was a little suspicious but tolerated me well enough. I'd go over to his place after Prepay nights sometimes and we'd take down some hurricanes together. If it was getting too late for the buses to run, they'd let me sleep on the couch in the living room.

All that changed after they had the baby of course.

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I guess the dumbest night was after Carlos' baby came out. I was lonely and had reached out to Denise. We were doing Irish car bombs at a place that specialized (\$4 a pop!) Who could resist?

Denise kept having to shut me up because I was bragging about the Prepay cash I'd taken. She told me to shut up and then I'd gotten a little too wasted and fell asleep at the bus stop. Denise refused to let me stay with her because 'she didn't trust herself,' whatever that meant.

Luckily a ghost bus appeared and I managed to board in a blackout. I awoke at Union Station with the bus driver shining a light in my eyes aggressively.

"Don't have to go home, but you can't stay here," he intoned deadpan before hoisting me up by the arm. I left the bus under my own power, but hadn't gotten very far from Union Station when some new friends tried to sell me weed.

"How much?" I said.

"60."

I should have been suspicious of how cheap it was, but I had the Prepay money burning a hole in my pocket.

"Wait here." he said and disappeared around the corner.

Twenty minutes later it dawned on me that he wasn't ever coming back and all the exhaustion began to hit me. I now had miles to go to get back to my place and with nothing running it would have to be on foot. No taxi would take me staggering as badly as I was.

I hadn't gone more than a block when another friend approached.

I informed the solicitous gentleman that I did in fact want weed, but didn't have any money.

"No prob, boss. ATM right there," he said pointing me in the direction.

I took out \$100 and gave it to him. I wasn't going to wait right there this time like a chump.



“Wait ten minutes then go to the 5th floor of the parking garage.” he said pointing diagonally across the street the other way.

I waited five and started up. As I reached the fifth floor it looked dark as fuck with half the lights busted out. It was starting to look like a really bad idea. I waited around another half hour though, sitting on one of the concrete parking barriers. I was tired and it had started raining.

Ripped off again. I felt so dumb. I almost nodded off, but my instinct told me this was not the place to pass out, so I willed my legs into motion climbing hills, ignoring all solicitations this time.

All of Portland’s stupid hills were kicking my flatlander ass. After what seemed like millennia I staggered in the door of my apartment and collapsed on the hard twin mattress.

All that climbing had awoken a hunger in me.

Suddenly, the urge for macaroni and cheese overtook all of my other senses. I searched desperately in the cupboard, finding one last precious box and cried joyfully into my sweaty Portland Parking shirt. I boiled water, dumped in the noodles, and took out some Tillamook cheese I had acquired with my precious food stamps.

Brilliant!

I awoke to the screeching of my fire alarm and a room full of hazy smoke. I scrambled pants around my ankles to try to locate the source of the madness. Failing to find it, I crawled to the windows and worked them open. The place had a problem with suicides for some reason, so they wouldn’t crack more than a few inches.

Eventually I parsed out that the burning stove macaroni was the culprit of my troubles and managed to get it turned off. Luckily, I hadn’t gotten the building evacuated and eventually the smoke began to clear as I siphoned off gobs of air from the outside, my tongue hanging out the window.

At this point, the original source of inspiration returned. The hunger.

I returned to the blackened macaroni pot. How bad was too bad? I scraped off the worst parts as unsalvageable. But there was a third or so that might do the trick. I threw a little cheese powder and some butter over it. It seemed a shame to waste the good Tillamook pepper jack on it, but I was desperate.

I shoved it down my throat and gagged. I did manage to get a few bites down. The peace of that was short lived, however, as I felt it all roil back through my throat the other direction. The bombs of Belfast shook my esophagus with a volley of friendly fire. The kitchen was tile, and connected to a tile bathroom which I

didn't make it to. Still, I managed to slosh over in the general vicinity of the toilet, so that the next pane-rattling explosion found the target partially. Just before passing out on the cold bathtub edge I remember smiling and thinking that my wall art could really use a three dimensional element, and wouldn't that cunt of a super just love that?

I pictured all of my wall boobs plastered with the remains of the blackened macaroni. I smiled and thought, I've finally done it. They already *think* I'm disgusting, I'll give them something to really get disgusted by.

In the meantime, I tried to focus my eyes by imagining what my wall collage would look like if I moved it to the ceiling instead. Fantastic, just fantastic. I reached out a finger toward the Shell ad beside the tub. It was no Michelangelo painting the Sistine Chapel, but for a moment as I reached my puke stinking finger out toward the picture of the barren road of deforestation with the question mark We destroy? Do you? I felt like god in the moment of creation reaching out with awestruck wonderment. It wasn't much, but it was my Sistine Chapel and as I smeared the puke onto the questions, sealing them in hard, I wondered if god had ever stopped to consider if creation was such a good idea after all.