

Sarah Estime

THE CO.

Jamie put the truck in park and sat tensely for a moment as it kicked back. He turned the engine off and relaxed in the puff of his forest green bubble jacket. The electronic sign suspended over the bank a few miles back blinked "seven degrees." He cursed to himself.

"Get your vest," Perry said.

He thought for a moment before letting himself strain behind the chair and wriggle for the neon yellow traffic wear that did his job for him. He snatched it and sat it on his lap, his breath huffing and puffing vapor that was illuminated by the street light above him. It was already five o'clock, which meant the sun would rise soon. Vibrant red letters reading "Holly Brooks Brothers & Co. Parking Only" were becoming legible. He caught his breath and started to slip the thing on.

"Get out," Perry said, tapping on the door. "Let's go."

Suppressed dread came over him. Jamie opened the door, the rust making it screech, and followed Perry's coffee-induced motivation.

"You got the cones?" Perry asked.

"Yes, sir," Jamie said.

He unloaded the back of the truck, allowing his head to reach a place so deep he didn't know where he was. Lou hopped out of another Toyota painted with the same loud logo. He joined them, his smile brighter than the moon. Jamie anticipated some lame idiom he thought he left behind floating around his high school hallways.

"Morning!" Lou shouted. "Another day in paradise!"

Jamie cringed.

The happiest place on earth!

Living the dream, right?

Don't you just love it here?

The corniness never ended, he learned.

Lou unloaded his own truck bed while whistling something most likely from a Top Forty playlist—pop music was one of three receptive stations in the town. By his third day on his way to work, Jamie quit searching for a whisper of classic rock amongst the static Ketchum called radio broadcasting.

The cones were lined up where they were supposed to be. The traffic was already complying. Lou had a Boise State ski mask on and he kept pulling it up with his bulky snow gloves to yap about the games and the government and whatever else. Perry halfway listened while adjusting caution tapes and moving around construction tools. He held his clipboard close to his chest concentrating on his surroundings. Lou leaned into him despite Perry's body language.

Jamie considered pretending he forgot something in the truck so he could sit down and check his phone but the walk was much too far. And the church across the construction site was very specific about the contractors not using their parking lot so Jamie was confined to standing in the middle of the street until

lunchtime unless he wanted to brave the cold for only a moment of relaxation. He brewed in the frustration of feeling stuck and controlled and degraded before retreating back to his distractions—making money, only two increments of four hours a day, better than sitting in a classroom listening to the life and times of Langston Hughes. Jamie was also satisfied with how much power he had over the morning commute. He had the authority to make cars slow down and drive in zig-zags, the drivers making eye contact with him for approval that they were driving correctly. He saw twenty-somethings with their hair disheveled most likely late for class, men in suits using the “Slow” sign as an opportunity to peer into their glove compartments, soccer moms with pixie cuts wringing their wet hair with their fists. Granted, he didn't have a ticket book—he couldn't even call the police should the need arise—but he possessed some power over mourning, rushing goers.

He wondered what he'd do if a car zipped through the infrastructure or, worse, through him. He wasn't even allowed to touch the tools.

He was a pointless, standing figure.

No, he was purposeful. He had a sign that belonged to a legitimate company and he had a job title—Traffic Control Operator.

His cross guard was paramount to his childhood. His cross guard put a smile on his face and Jamie knew that he made the seventy-year-old's day each afternoon he allowed him to do his job. He wondered if cross guards volunteered or if they were paid. He wondered if they volunteered because their lives were somber and lonely. He wondered if their lives were even somber and lonely. The cross guard he knew growing up probably had a wife and a pool and a fancy grill his friends were impressed by. He wondered how much cross guards were paid.

Jamie was purposeful—he was making money, he had a thirty-minute lunch break, and he wasn't sitting in a classroom listening to the life and times of Langston Hughes.

"I know some of ya'll have school or whatever you have going on. It's a simple job. Stand in the middle of the street, hold signs, direct cars. It shouldn't be that complicated," Perry told the group when they were hired. "It's quick money. If you come across any problems, get with me and I'll take care of it."

"Are we allowed to take tips?" said an older woman cosmetically adamant about looking younger.

"You probably shouldn't. You're not actually servicing anyone. You're here to stand and look pretty while the construction workers do their thing," Perry said. "See, stuff like that—the shit that wasn't in my job description—if you run into a sticky sitch like receiving money from someone from their car, get with me and I'll be more than happy to handle it."

The woman sucked her teeth. Perry didn't acknowledge it.

He pointed to a petite girl with his clipboard, "You all look pretty tightly bundled. I can't tell if you're a boy or a girl and, anyway, you look twelve. But if anyone is stopping and harassing you for any reason, you can grab me. If I'm not out and about, I'm in the truck."

Jamie didn't have to "get with him" just yet. As Perry mentioned, it was an easy job. Quick money, temporary, lunch break, not school, hopefully an opportunity at the end of it. Again, he remembered the meager nature of the job.

Lunch came and went. The sun shone through the windshield of the truck so his turkey and cheese sandwich was moist and melted. Jamie was tired of turkey and cheese but, as he walked back to his position, he was glad that he was satiated at an inexpensive price. Still, he felt he was better than turkey and cheese. He was a gourmet burger and gruyere kind of guy. The woman with the chalky mascara, Lou's loud mouth,

the petite woman whose age everyone questioned—he was better than all of them. He was working toward a real life, not season tickets or industrial orders of concealer.

No, he was just like them. No, he wasn't like them at all.

The construction workers were making progress in the hole they were digging although they appeared to not be causing a commotion. Jamie felt time sloth by standing in one spot all day. He was so busy being bored he didn't notice his surroundings. As humdrum as the hours felt, he doubted he'd have time to make as much progress as the construction workers did drilling a hole into the street. He couldn't dig a hole into the granite and complete whatever the construction team was working on let alone stand there and watch.

"Hey, man!" Lou shouted behind him. "How you doing, man? How come we never see you eating with us inside? You know you could come inside right?"

He didn't have the ridiculous blue mask on and Jamie could see in his eyes that he was genuinely concerned. His thumb was unofficially pointing to "over there" where everyone else ate lunch.

"No, I'm alright. Thanks, though," Jamie said puzzled.

"Suit yourself. What are you doing here, anyway? Behind on child support?"

He nudged him the way two men drinking beers together did but Jamie didn't know him at all.

"No.. not that."

"Well, I'll tell you what I'm here for. Totally tanked on a poker game last weekend. When I saw the ad at that Jacksons—you know the one on Northwood—it was like—" he cupped his hands mocking an angelic hum.

Lou smiled with his big mouth, watching Jamie to smile back. Jamie looked over at where Lou was supposed to be positioned. His “Slow” sign leaned against a telephone pole. Havoc wasn't wreaking but Jamie was slightly nervous for him. He feared mass punishment. His football coach thrived off of drilling his point in. He told the team it built character and enforced teamwork. Jamie never really understood teamwork when the team worked to carry one star player. In this instance, they were carrying Perry or Perry's boss or whosever idea it was in which Jamie ended up there. He advised Lou get back to work. Perry was nearby. He had taken his coat off and was directing a bulky black guy to move positions.

"It's fine," Lou dismissed. "What else are we getting out of this? A career?" He lowered his voice and leaned forward, "Perry, man? He's set. He does a good job on this, the opportunities are endless. I come here happy to do my job because that's just the kind of person I am. But do I see myself walking around with a corny clipboard and a nametag in two weeks?" Lou laughed, breathing into his hands and stuffing them into his pockets. He looked around casually. "Nah, I have something set up for me. The car wash over on Lewis Street really likes me. I'm working on something at least part time.. that way my girl'll stop bitching." He chuckled. "So what are you here for, for real, man?"

Jamie thought to himself as Lou talked. He suddenly didn't know what he was doing there. He took school and football seriously only to come to the realization that he couldn't compete. So then he joined the theoretical working world only he wasn't working at all. He wasn't going anywhere standing there. His expectation of quitting to start fresh and seizing his destiny as a leader or an entrepreneur or simply a likeable guy was irrational.

"Just getting my girl something nice for Valentine's Day," he lied.

"Aw, man," Lou said, and then went on to describe his own holiday dilemmas.

Perhaps Lou had a better chance at advancing because he was outgoing. Standing next to him, Jamie knew for sure that he stood no chance at all.

“Anyway, you coming with us to Lefty’s tonight?”

Jamie told him he would. Knowing he was only seventeen, however, he walked home alone, listened to his parents’ carping, which was gradually turning into casual, snide remarks, and unwound in his bedroom while waiting for them to leave. He felt both accomplished yet incomplete. The feeling crept over him in the cold as he traversed his hometown, realizing a corporate career was unrealistic and internet fame was difficult to achieve without a computer. He passed a homeless man with one boot and a tank top on and wondered how he ended up there. He recalled McDonald’s new policy about prospective employees requiring a high school diploma or a GED. The homeless man was probably where he belonged—the dry, snow-streaked concrete was the only place he was qualified to be. Jamie was also qualified for quick gigs paid under the counter and maybe sex work. His youthful strong physique was the best it was going to be.

Dread slunk over him for a moment. He didn’t want to obtain his GED. If he was going to be a dropout, he was going to produce something out of his defeat. He felt encouraged knowing that Jim Carey and John Travolta made it work; but they were sure-shot talented or firm to the idea of being a figure whose success arose despite their so-called embarrassing circumstances. Jamie knew he was perfectly capable of obtaining a GED but, like a high school diploma, he simply didn’t want one. He forfeited all of his opportunities hoping the low-down nature of his situation would motivate him. The only ones who made it were those persistent enough to not give themselves a Plan B; they were confident that they were of value. Jamie had to either be desirable or extremely buoyant in order to prevail. He was neither, leaving him at square one again.

He tossed around in his head for a moment until he heard car keys jingle—the sweet sound of imminent solitude. He heard the front door shut and his mother’s gentle, groaning voice become muffled. He went into the kitchen and looked at his schedule posted on the fridge. It wasn’t even a real schedule—it was the job posting. “Make close to 600\$ a week with Klipspringer’s Control Company. Contact Perry Moore.” He cringed reminiscing on the belief that the job was something to be proud of. He drew an unrealistically impressive notion with crayon and drool, telling his parents he was going to be alright because he was getting into the construction business. He wasn’t even being paid six hundred dollars. After lunch breaks and taxes were accounted for, he may as well have been working eight hours on a five hour time clock. The pay was not worth the labor. He resented the power of big letters and construction paper. He also resented the dollar sign being placed after the number “six hundred.”

He made himself a Celeste frozen pizza and sat on the couch knowing, eventually, they’d all be able to sit together in silent disappointment.