



DAY LABOR IN DENVER

by Tim LaFredo

Hey,” he yelled, “I’ll put you to work.” He had been yelling to me every day. He was standing on the front porch with a hammer in his hand. I was running past. I was out running because the afternoons were my own, and because I’d been doing a lot of running. I had run away from the Midwest, from my job, from my old existence. I’d run off to Denver because of Kerouac, or maybe Ginsberg, and because I had to see if I could recover something I had lost. I hadn’t lost it in Denver, which was why I went there looking for it. Counselors and therapists call this “the geographic cure.” It was my plan. It seemed as good as any other.

I’d been doing my best to avoid work, although running in the purgative heat of Denver in mid-July is tougher than a lot of jobs you might name. It’s a hundred degrees and it

hardly ever rains. You can't breathe because you're a mile up and the air is dry and the smog index is bad. So you run and gasp and sweat, and you are cleansed. Or sometimes people just yell at you.

In this case: "Hey. I got some work for you if you got that much energy."

His name was Rick. He was a big guy with a sleeveless shirt and jailhouse tats. He and his crew were restoring a beat-up old house on Garfield Street, near Colorado and Colfax. They'd been working on it for weeks. It had the potential to be a nice little place, but someone had turned it into a garbage dump. Day after day Rick & Co. dragged out dead appliances, mildewed clothing, broken furniture, and sofa-sized paintings of dogs playing poker. They had filled and emptied a forty-yard roll-off Dumpster five times over. That afternoon, when Rick finally succeeded in flagging me down, he said there was still a lot to do. His deadline was Friday. Wouldn't I like to make a few bucks? Lunch would be included, of course. I said I'd see if I could clear my schedule. He said to be there at seven a.m. I hadn't seen seven in a long time.

When I arrived the next morning, I found they had been at it since five. They were all in different rooms, driving nails and plastering holes. Rick handed me a sander.

"Ever done this before?" he said.

"Uh, not much."

"Well, it's easy enough. Even J.C. can do it." He motioned toward the skinny kid working in the opposite corner. The kid didn't look up.

Rick led me through the house, pointing out the guys. "There's Andy. That's Angel. You met J.C." I mentioned how it seemed like Providence—uh, you know, to work with J.C. and an Angel. Rick wasn't much for dumb puns.

I spent the next several hours crawling around on my hands and knees. The work was tough. I was trying to sand deep scars out of the hardwood floor. It looked as though someone had tried ice skating in the living room. It seemed like a lost cause. We all worked away, sweating and listening to the bad rock stations from Denver. I was happy when somebody ran a power tool because it gave me a break from the *merde du jour*.

Soon my mind was wandering and that same old restless feeling was back. I couldn't stop thinking how much I wanted to be somewhere else, doing something else. I tried to coach myself through it. I thought of what I had read on the Buddhist perspective of work. The idea is that you submit to the task as a means of overcoming transient thoughts and desires. You give yourself over to the job and enter a state of moving meditation. It's a way of finding purpose in your work—maybe even a path to enlightenment. It's a nice thought, isn't it? But on that floor, slowly wearing a hole in an old, asbestos-filled house, all I could think of was the sad futility of the human condition. Sorry. I just wasn't at a point in life where I could pick up a power sander and be at peace with it.

I could hear Rick yelling at J.C. in the next room. The kid had forgotten to clean a paintbrush the night before, and Rick had just discovered it. It was a dried, gnarled mass of white bristles. Rick yelled, "I give you a simple task and you can't even get that done. What you're telling me is you can't be

trusted. What does it say for you if you can't be trusted with a paintbrush? What, it's too hard? You can't be bothered? Maybe you're just too stupid."

Everyone else kept working.

Later Rick stopped in to ask if things were all right. I told him I needed more sandpaper, so he sent J.C. to get it. The kid ran to the truck and came back with the wrong grit. Rick looked at him and clenched his teeth. "Step into my office," he said. The two went into the next room and Rick slammed the door. He began an eight-minute diatribe on what an idiot J.C. was, and how a kid who didn't even know P50 from P80 would never amount to anything in today's world.

"You just try that with them dudes up in Sterling," he said. "You wouldn't last a day in there. Look at me. You got any idea what I was doing when I was thirteen? You hear me?"

We all heard him. I couldn't sand hard enough to block it out. A couple of times I thought Andy would stand up for J.C., but he never did. A couple of times I thought I would stand up for him. I never did. I just kept on working. Eventually the yelling stopped.

A few more hours passed in relative peace. Andy stuck his head in the room. "Hey," he said, "somewhere out there people are actually working for a living."

"Yeah," I said, wiping away the sweat.

"Come on, man," he said. "Break time. Get some water."

It was already in the nineties and getting hotter. We sat down out front, all of us except Angel. He kept working. Rick was admiring himself in the mirror that was propped on the porch. He pinched a zit, squeezed the pus out, and said, "Damn, boys. If I get any better looking, I just don't know what I'm gonna do."

Andy wanted to know who I was, where I'd come from, what I did. This seemed like a breach of etiquette to me. I thought we had agreed to work in semianonymity. I didn't know their last names; they didn't know mine. I wasn't there to make friends. I was doing manual labor for some cash under the table. Then I would go home. That was it. The last thing I wanted was to be interviewed. I tried to be polite, but I stuck to one-word answers.

There was another crew at the house across the street, putting in a wooden floor. They showed up in a new truck with a nice logo on the side: Lear & Sons Flooring. Even their work clothes were better than ours. The youngest was about seventeen. He was getting on-the-job training. When Rick saw him, he shook his head and said, "That lucky kid. He's got a trade. His whole life is laid out for him and he doesn't even know it yet. That lucky kid."

"Yeah," said Andy. "He don't know how good he's got it."

"J.C.," said Rick. "Out back. Now. We got to talk about that spigot."

They walked through the house, leaving Andy and me on the porch.

"He gets fired up sometimes," Andy said, "but long as you do good work, you'll be fine with him."

End of excerpt