

Spark #1.08 - Day Job #2

- Henry Warwick

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The trials and tribulations one goes through to survive and make art. Many years ago I met a fellow about 15 years my senior- so he'd be about 60 or so now. His Day Job was doing delivery work. Driving all day, double parking, getting tickets, moving boxes, handling envelopes, dealing with traffic- endless hassle. I asked him why he did this. He said that he liked to paint, and did "OK" at selling them - he had a gallery to represent him. But it didn't make him nearly enough money to pay his rent and feed his kid, so he drove a delivery truck. He hated it.

I asked him if he had any advice for me, a mere art student. I remember the look in his eye- he knew he was talking to a young, naïve, and probably slightly stoned and impressionable young artist, and he had a good chance to make a big difference. His eyes somehow narrowed and widened at the same time- like he was peering into me and pleading with me at the same time.

He told me with the greatest sincerity, "Get A Good Day Job. Get a career. Get a marketable skill, anything. You see, my life is pretty well screwed. I thought I would move to New York City and be some great artist and make a pile of money making the paintings I love to paint. Well, my painting style is out of vogue, and my integrity and devotion to my work won't let me swing with the crap they call painting these days. I never thought I'd have to worry about what I'd do if the painting thing didn't work out. And, it didn't — and now I deliver boxes of meaningless crap to offices filled with lawyers and stockbroker scumbags, and they all treat me like dirt. I hate it, and I feel doomed. Please, kid - do yourself a favor — learn a trade that'll make you a real living. This bohemian stuff is a load of bull. It works for measly trust fund punks, but if you're a working class hero like you and me, kid, we can't afford to be poor like that. And when you're middle aged and trying to feed a kid- it isn't fun anymore. Get a good job."

I shook his hand, and we wished each other the best of luck. The elevator door opened, and we walked out of the building- he went back to his truck, and I walked to the subway down the street. I had just taken a lie detector test to see if I was "honest" enough to work for some puny wage at an electronic component company. I was offered the job, but I didn't take it. I felt insulted by the lie detector test- if the company felt they had to do that to their employees, there obviously isn't a great deal of trust between the proles and management, and that was not the environment I wanted to work in. I later found out that the company was sued for demanding those tests, but I never saw any of the settlement money.

Still and all, I needed a job- soon- the lousy pittance of my last check from Two Guys was draining quickly. I needed money. Fast.

A few days later I went to a "temp" agency, and was quickly placed. They sent me into the Gaping Maw of Industrial Hell - Manville, New Jersey, where I would work at Johns Manville.

Johns-Manville, in Manville, New Jersey, no longer exists as it did then, for much the same reasons Two Guys no longer exists. They made crap, and they treated their people very badly- much worse than Two Guys. Ming would make your life a living pit of infernal misery and hopelessness, but Johns-Manville Slowly Killed their employees with asbestos. Killed Them Dead. Families righteously sued the company for millions, and rather than be responsible adults and say "YES WE KILLED YOUR DADDY FOR THE ALMIGHTY DOLLAR AND OUR STOCKHOLDERS" they declared bankruptcy to avoid paying jillions of dollars to orphans and widows.

And how did I fit into this miserable circle of hell? My job was to drive to different banks, collect many large heavy boxes of paper, bring it to the factory and unload it. Simple enough. What it actually entailed was far more vile, grisly, and bizarre than anything Ming and his evil minions could ever dream of inflicting.

First, I had to go to the banks. Dressed in tattered clothes, I stood out like a homeless beggar at Cinderella's Wedding. I was directed to the "back room" where I would find boxes of computer printouts and other similar paper. I would sign for it - usually with a flourish, like I was signing the Declaration of Independence, and load it into the van. Then, at a breakneck pace I would drive to the factory, where the truck would be weighed. After I unloaded it, the truck would be weighed again. Large signs were erected everywhere "NO CAMERAS PERMITTED ON PREMISES". The Company was already in deep Deep DEEP Trouble, and people were leaking photos of their filthy operation to the press.

Once past this gate, I drove to building D. Building D for DEATH.

Building D was huge. It had several large rooms, connected by a hallway large enough to drive a truck through, and I did. I'd drive the truck to a loading dock, and back it up a ramp into the building. The smell was indescribable. A weird mix of pool cleaner, rotten eggs and that damp musty smell from filthy standing water. And there was a lot of foul water around. I drove to a particularly large room, stopped the truck and climbed in back. Swinging opening the rear doors, I began heaving bales of paper out into the foot or so of standing murky muck that was mostly water, so I might have something to stand on as I tossed the rest of the paper into a giant hopper that was attached to an even more gigantic vat. This vat was at least 20 feet tall, and completely surrounded by the brown rank filth that filled the place. Rats could be seen swimming, their rapid little strokes causing the otherwise flat water to ripple into small v shaped waves, and their tiny noses poking through the meniscus of the rancid brown fluid that covered the factory floor.

There was a fellow who worked near me, Mike. He wore a mask that was covered with what seemd to be asbestos. This bluish dust hung so thick in the air, you couldn't see to the end of the building, as the hallway disappeared in a bluish grey haze, the mottled light from the yellowed factory windows filtered through the guazy filaments of carcinogenic crap. Mike was making a lot of money. His job was to take a large bowie knife and hack at the black sludge that slowly extruded from a large pipe at the bottom of the vat. This sludge was filled with ink, dioxin, and god knows what all. Mike would hack at it, and let

it slowly drop into a wheelbarrow. He'd push the barrow through the water to a 55-gallon drum at the end of the dock. Once the drum was full, he'd cap it, seal it, and have it put on a truck, where it would be "taken somewhere".

I didn't wear a mask- I was there as little as humanly possible, and when I was there, I worked my butt off to get the hell away from that place. I don't know what ever happened to Mike. When I finally quit that job, I took a bath for a month.

My next job was as an apprentice house painter. On the down side, it paid minimum wage, but on the upside, it was under the table, so the effective wage was much higher. The guy I was working with, Charlie, was this grizzled old ex-alcoholic geezer. Even though he was not too quick on the uptake, he had a gentle soul, and was pretty nice to work with. He'd drop me off with some paint and a ladder and set me to some simple painting. This was OK- I rode my bicycle to where he lived, so my commute was easy and fun.

He had lived a hard life. I got the impression it was a fairly dissolute one. He was married, and they owned a ratty torn up bungalow. They didn't have much furniture, and what furniture they did have was ugly and in poor condition, like cast-offs from a Salvation Army. They had one child, a smart, energetic, sweet, and very happy six-year-old girl who had a weak leg, and was deaf as a post.

Here I was — Mr ProgRock Multimedia Teenager — nihilistic, cynical, angry, party animal. And here was this child who will never hear music. And her parents — her mom who worked at a department store for minimum wage, and dad who was such a loser he hired ME as his apprentice. Her schooling was costing them a fortune. Between the special deaf school and her health problems, this family was barely scraping by. Every dollar they made went to their little girl and the leaky roof over their head and the week old half priced bread they put on their crappy Formica table fretted with cigarette stains and buried under the endless stack of bills. It was heart breaking.

When late autumn hit, work began to dry up. One cold day in October he paid me what he owed me and told me that he had to let me go. All he had was some small interior work to do, and couldn't afford to keep me. It didn't bother me too much, being let go like that, with no warning. It didn't bother me when his check bounced. It didn't bother me that I was broke and had few opportunities, if any, for immediate employment. Because over the several months I worked for him, I knew where that bounced check went, I knew where all those endless hours of paint fumes, aching backs and elbows went - I had helped put her on a short yellow school bus about every other morning.

That was a cold winter for me, and my next day job would be in a government sponsored training program. I learned a lot from those two jobs, but it was mostly emotional, and visceral learning- not the kind of thing that easily translates into words. All encompassing visions of chemical death and poverty driven squalor don't readily lend themselves to words. Words fail, badly, when one tries to shoehorn such experiences into prose.

It's like talking about war — poor people dying horrible deaths for the sake of ruling elites. One might be tempted to say "it was awful" and leave it at that. I prefer to let such experiences inform my life and creative output in such a way that I have a crystal clear understanding of what's Really Going Down. Sometimes, it tends to amplify my cynicism about "Official Culture" and for what passes as "News" in our world, but it also has sharpened my empathy, and deepened my regard for some of life's basic human concerns — dignity, fairness, and the fundamental nobility and heroism of all our common endeavors.