

Chapter Seven

Sir, No Sir

The next day before sunrise I was in my Chevy and on my way to work at Hacienda de Calistoga. Sometime during the night the storm had blown over and the calm, turquoise pre-dawn sky was alive with stars. I'd been hoping to get turned back by flooding beyond the Russian River bridge. I wanted to be able to return to my bed and go back to sleep, all warm and snug and worry-free, but no such luck. When I reached the other side of the bridge, in the dim edges of my headlights I saw rows of leafless grapevines protruding like tarantulas above a lake of brown standing water. But the engineers who'd designed the new road knew how high the water got during a typical winter flood and, across the lowlands between the bridge and Jimtown, they'd put the highway up on landfill. And so, like a dike bisecting two rice paddies, the highway tapered down until, when it returned to ground level, the lake was in my rearview mirror and I had an appointment with my shovel.

I'd been on the job for a week and a half and, my hopes for a day off dashed, I punched in for work in a foul mood. I'd borrowed another two hundred bucks from my dad, and I'd spent fifty bucks of it to buy me a new heater for my Chevy (the old one had finally clunked to a halt). I was freezing during my commutes to and from work, and I'd been looking forward to using my day off to get the new heater installed. Also, to add bitter to sour, not even once during my labors had Mr. Johnson come out to see me and give me—at the very least—an attaboy. This, even though I knew he was checking up on me because Old Faithful had told me that he was happy with my work. My dad had taught me that business wasn't impersonal; to the contrary, real business was always done up close and face to face. It was only assholes who were impersonal, my dad warned me. I was to steer clear of them and—there was a bit of method in the madness of this world—that was

easy, because being avoided was all they really wanted anyway, and that's what made them losers. "If you don't love people," my dad used to intone, "never open a restaurant."

Besides, the whole idea that I had to be at work this morning because my boss was in a big old hurry sounded like bullshit to me. It was senseless because, even if I'd returned all of the mud to all of the trenches yesterday, they'd still be soupy-soft at least until things dried out in June. When one morning I told Old Faithful about my misgivings—that what I was doing was sort of like filling in potholes with water balloons—she assured me they'd already thought of that and so I needn't worry. Once I was finished and they got a bit of sunny weather, she said, they were going to cover the trenches with strips of grass sod four inches thick and ten feet long. By the end of summer, she confidently predicted, nobody would even know the trenches had been there.

Having experienced mud in all of its colors, consistencies, and flavors, it occurred to me that in the meantime Old Faithful wouldn't want to be stepping on those grass strips. I imagined her, while out on a survey of her property, stepping on the middle of a grass strip and instantly sinking down to her waist while the two ends rose simultaneously and slapped her upside the head. The outward-moving shock wave caused by her plunge into the mud, reversing direction, would slap back against the strip and, like a clothespin, hold her in place, squeezed as tight as a hush in a puppy. And there she'd stay until her husband heard her heartrending cries for help and rushed to un-stick her. Imagining just how he'd go about doing that made me giggle.

"What's so funny?" Old Faithful asked suspiciously.

"Nothing," I lied, wiping the grin from my face. "Just a funny thought was all."

But this morning I was in no mood for humor. My body was torn down, and the main reason for that was because I was doing everything with a shovel instead of with a

shovel and a scalping hoe. And because I was good and ready to move on to my next job; the longer this one took, the more I realized that the money I was making no longer brightened my disposition. I was only halfway done, and every day I was getting wearier and the mud was feeling heavier. If I'd've been supplied with a scalping hoe, I'd not only be a lot further along toward my goal, but also I'd be physically stronger for the stretch I had to look forward to. A body can pull more than it can push, and if I'd've been able to switch between a shovel and a hoe, the physical punishment would have been shared between my push muscles and my pull muscles. I'd be fresher, stronger, and more productive.

That's what stuck in my craw: the utter stupidity of what I was doing. Once, I asked Old Faithful why they didn't hire more workers to help me, and she told me it was because it required too much paperwork for a job so small. So I was stuck working alone, even though I wasn't accomplishing anything much beyond saving some pocket mice and wood rats from drowning in the canals. My bosses didn't give me the tools I needed, and they didn't consider the fact that—just like a machine—I'd get worn down as the days rolled on. The result was that I was wasting not just my time and my body—which they obviously didn't care about—but also their money, which they very much cared about. Yet, it seemed to me, if they cared about their money, why would they be pissing it away on a silly project like this? Why wouldn't they wait until spring, when they could bring in a backhoe and, *bing-bang-zing*, get the job done at half the cost? And if the answer was that they had so much money that they could afford to piss it away in order to “keep the ball moving” or whatever, why didn't they give their money to me? Give me the money they were pissing away, and I'd be bound to have some fun with it, and so at least they'd be accomplishing something.

Now, it had occurred to me to bring a scalping hoe from the Healdsburg ranch. A half dozen of them were rusting in a corner of the barn, and no one would have minded if I'd taken one. Had I been old and wise instead of young and headstrong, that's what I'd've done. But I'd made it a rule never to volunteer for anything when I was dealing with a boss, and in this particular case my boss might view my gift as a backhanded slap in the face or—worse—as a commendable example of individual initiative that was of great value to his pocketbook. In the latter case, after patting me on the back and giving me a hearty attaboy, maybe he'd want to keep me on his payroll beyond the terms of our contract, and I didn't want that. And maybe that was why, when I stepped through the back door of the trailer in order to punch in, instead of exchanging ritual greetings with Old Faithful and getting straight to work as usual, I cautiously approached her desk.

“Can I help you?” she asked me.

“That was quite some storm we had last night, weren't it?”

“Yes it was.” Old Faithful put on her poker face.

“It's a beautiful day today, though, ain't it?”

She nodded and allowed me a slight, indulgent smile.

After mentally twiddling my thumbs while waiting to see if she wished to add anything, I got to the point. “I was wondering when I'd be getting paid. This is my ninth day on the job and I haven't seen any money.”

Old Faithful furrowed her brow as if it had never occurred to her that that might be any of my concern. “We always pay on the first and the fifteenth of the month. But you are a temporary employee, so I don't really know. You'll have to talk to Mr. Johnson.”

“He's coming in today?”

“He always does.”

“Good. When he comes in can you send him out to see me? I need to talk to him about a couple of other things besides.”

“When he comes in, I’ll let him know.” As a matter of general principle, Old Faithful wasn’t granting me anything more than that.

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

I stepped out the back door feeling a little upbeat. I’d taken some individual initiative on my own behalf, and I was confident that, come quitting time, I’d have a day off and some wage in my pocket. While I got the impression that Old Faithful hadn’t enjoyed our exchange (“Yours is not to reason why”), she seemed decent and levelheaded enough to grasp the reality of my situation and the modesty of my request. As an added bonus, it was sunny outside, and that meant Mr. Johnson wouldn’t have an excuse for not coming out to see me. So when I started working my shovel and tossing mud, I felt like my body had gotten a second wind.

It wasn’t until mid-morning that I heard Mr. Johnson’s car pull up to the office. The weather had been holding clear and I figured soon he’d be out to see me, and that I was looking forward to. In the meantime, I soaked in the sudden outbreak of sunshine. All morning a flock of little birds perched in the nearby trees had been chirping so loudly I wondered if they were keening for their poor lost buddies who’d gotten blown away during the storm. Out back the creek was running bank to bank, and it was roaring loud enough to compete with the sounds of the traffic on the state highway. The foliage in the trees was glistening, the grass was sparkling, and two gray squirrels, after hitting the dirt at the base of a tree, were chasing each other in playful circles across the grass. On such a glorious morning and after so many days of foul weather, who’d want to be trapped inside an office?

When it was nearly lunchtime and I still hadn't seen Mr. Johnson, I started getting pissed. I knew when he arrived at his office that he'd want to get whatever news there was from Old Faithful, and no doubt he'd also want to thumb through his mail and maybe make some phone calls. But no way could those routines have taken him two hours. Since it seemed farfetched that Old Faithful hadn't given Mr. Johnson my message, I assumed he was stalling. The man was showing me who was boss, and I didn't like that one bit.

Yet, instead of stewing, I found myself fondly remembering a string-bean-looking, gold-toothed Mexican coyote (labor contractor) I'd cut some grapes for down by Raisin City. That old coyote was one of the reasons I'd stuck with farm labor. At first light, the coyote would drop five of us off out of his van and into the vines and then he'd speed away down the highway toward his next pickup of men and boys. The only time we'd ever see the coyote during the workday was at lunchtime. When we were sitting cross-legged in the dirt around our little cook fire heating homemade tortillas on our scrap-iron griddle was when he'd show up.

The other grape cutters were Mexican-Indian peasants from the far south, and every day they brought wide-mouthed thermoses full of various taco fillings: rice and vegetable concoctions, beans, stews, salsas, shredded and barbecued meats. Lunch around the fire was share-and-share-alike and everybody enjoyed showing off his own wife's home cooking and sampling the others'.

The Mexicans were also very generous with me, partly to impress me and partly to be hospitable. Once I realized that they were not interested in my peanut butter and jelly or bologna and cheddar cheese sandwiches (mayonnaise especially turned their stomachs), or even in my little pop-top cans of Beane Weenees or my cellophane packages of identical twin Twinkies, I stopped bringing my own lunch and starting eating theirs. I'd contribute

a bag of fresh truck-farm fruit and, after work when the coyote dropped us back in Raisin City so we could fetch our cars, a beer or a soda in the cantina if they wished.

Lunch came with an ever-changing menu, and once our griddle was sizzling hot and we were flipping tortillas with our spit-moistened fingertips, here'd come the coyote, his pointy-toed alligator boots wearing a thin sheen of blond dust, his hip-hugger jeans creased and spotless, his giant silver belt buckle flashing in the sun, and his weathered and crafty face shaded beneath his tall *vaquero sombrero*. The coyote would pretend to be checking up on us to see if we had any questions, complaints, or requests, but everybody knew that what he was really after was to poach some of our food. Always upon his appearance one or two of the *compadres* would offer the coyote a seat, he'd gladly take it, and, while graciously accepting and singing the praises of the offers of finger food, he'd carry on in Spanish in ways that got the others laughing and trying to go him one better.

I liked that crooked old soul sitting among us even though he was a coyote, the others just *pollos*, and me a curiosity. The coyote was genuinely delighted to share our company, and that told me something about his heart. Also, he paid cash on the barrelhead any time if you were in need or every Friday after work if you weren't.

As the morning wore on—I'd started tossing mud at a pace a bit a quicker than I should have—I resolved to go and see Mr. Johnson in his office if need be. But luckily it never came to that because I finally spotted him in the distance marching my way. I discreetly reached into my pants pocket for my watch, peeked at it, and then slipped it back out of sight. It was five minutes to lunchtime.

"My wife tells me you have a problem," Mr. Johnson announced officiously.

Stung by his rudeness—had Old Faithful complained about me?—I jammed my shovel into the pile of mud, mournfully shook my head, and chuckled. "Not unless you call

being flat broke a problem. I was wondering when I'd be getting paid. I also wanted to tell you I need a day off because—"

"I thought it was understood that you'd get paid when the job is done. You are just a temporary."

"So why'd I do all of that paperwork?"

"Because everything gets run through our corporate headquarters in Houston. Our payroll, purchases, fees, taxes, income—everything runs through Houston."

"I thought you owned this place."

Mr. Johnson laughed. "Golden Spike Developers Inc. owns this and about two hundred other haciendas scattered across the eleven western states, plus Alaska and Hawaii. We're one of the biggest names in the business, I'll have you know. My wife and I are shareholders and this is our franchise, but you work for Golden Spike and not for us."

"So when will they pay me?" I asked plaintively, feeling like a cruel trick had been played on me.

"As I said, as a temporary hired to complete a specific task, you get paid when the job is done."

I gazed down the length of the particular trench I'd buried so far, then slowly swung around to search up ahead to where it still needed filling in. Then I looked Mr. Johnson in the eye and said, "This job is going on way too long for that. Day labor is day labor, and it pays cash on the barrelhead. Plus, I've got to see my mom at Christmas, and there's no way I'm finishing up here before then."

"You agreed to finish the job. Now you want a vacation?"

"At Christmas I've got to go and see my mom in LA. She's disabled and I'm obligated, you know? But what difference does it make in this shitty weather? Maybe if I

go away for a week, we'll get lucky and it'll stay sunny and things will dry out. Since a shovel-load of sopping wet mud weighs more than dried -out mud, I'll have an easier time of it, and you'll get more bang for your buck."

I could tell Mr. Johnson didn't like my attitude. What was I, his financial advisor? I could also tell that he was losing patience with me and so I cut to the chase. "At the end of today you'll owe me for seventy hours of work done. How about you advance me for fifty hours and you can pay me the rest of what you owe me when I finish up after Christmas? That's easy, ain't it? Plus, I need a day off. The heater in my Chevy died the other day, and I want to get it replaced because I'm freezing my ass off driving to work and back."

Mr. Johnson stared at me, the wheels in his head grinding. Finally he said, "I have no problem with you taking a day off if you want to. You just need to ask. I don't mind if you go away for Christmas, either. In fact, I was planning on it. But, I'm sorry to say, we have a policy against issuing advances. Not even our regular employees get advances."

"What you mean 'we,'" I asked, letting go with a flash of anger. My eyes icy, I made a sweeping gesture with my arm to indicate the great outdoors. "All I see here is you and me." Then before he could object to my rudeness in pointing out the obvious, I said, "Look, man. What are we talking about here? A hundred and forty bucks American? And it's not like you're giving me anything or taking any risk. I've already earned the money and it's in the bank. You're the banker and I need to make a withdrawal."

"I don't lend money," Mr. Johnson retorted, his eyes hard, his patience gone, his mind already turning toward his next order of business.

"You don't see how it's not a loan?"

"What I see is somebody who doesn't know that policy is policy and a deal is a deal."

“Come on, man. You really expected me to work right through Christmas with no pay?”

“Our pay policy is the gold standard across the corporate world. Where have you been? What you want is special treatment.”

Now it seemed the trick that had been played on me was turning into a nightmare. “You really expect me to go past Christmas with no pay?” I couldn’t believe I was even asking the question.

Mr. Johnson dismissively shrugged his shoulders. “You seem fairly resourceful. I’m sure you’ll find a way to survive.”

Mightily tempted to jab him in the nose, hook him on the jaw, and put him down for the count, I took maybe five seconds to contain my rage. Then I gently handed him his company’s shovel.

“What’s this?” he protested, pulling his hands away and letting the sweaty-wet, muddy shovel fall to the ground.

“I quit, man. I quit right now and, under the laws of the State of California, you owe me money for all of the work I’ve done. You owe me money and I want it now because I’m done with you, man. I never want to see you again. So I’ll get out my muddy boots and gather my gear and you can go back to your office to cut me a check. I’ll be right behind you.” I started for the equipment shed.

“Who do you think you’re talking to?” he demanded to know.

I spun around and, instead of charging him, I pointed my finger at him like it was the barrel of a cocked and loaded .45 pistol. “You owe me money. You go get it.”

I continued on toward the toolshed aboard wobbly legs, my capped-off well of boiling rage making me feel dizzy and weak in the knees. Needing to get in the last word,

Mr. Johnson called after me, “If you want to quit, go ahead and quit. Do you think I care? All you are is a goddamned ditch digger.”

Returning home from Hacienda de Calistoga for the last time, I stopped in Knights Valley to say what I thought was my goodbyes. I had my full paycheck, all right, but Mr. Johnson had gone straight to town so it was Old Faithful who’d handed it over to me. She’d put it into my hand as if I was an office messenger boy and she was dispatching me to deliver some routine sheet of paper. Her coldness toward me was icing on the cake. I’d never been able to penetrate her shell, and now that I’d feuded with her husband, I was just another rank stranger to her. It was exactly as if we’d never met.

Knights Valley looked different under a calm blue sky. The colors in the terrain were deeper, the details sharper, and the skyline a razor’s edge. Yet I couldn’t enjoy the scenery because my stomach was churning with worry because I’d lost my job. Just like Mr. Johnson had guessed, I hadn’t *needed* an advance but still I’d demanded one. I knew what a “gut-check” was, and in my wicked mind I’d just wanted to see what Mr. Johnson was made of. Since I already knew that he went through life with a piano stuck up his ass, maybe I’d hustled the poor sucker. Maybe I’d ambushed him as payback for his rich-boy arrogance and stupidity. I could even concede the possibility that, even though I was meditating and educating myself about “right living” by reading literature and philosophy, my heart was still as crooked as that old Mexican coyote’s when it came to me getting what I wanted. And it could be that, just as Miguel had suspected, I was just another shiftless Anglo loser with a big chip on my shoulder.

I’d been looking forward to the grape pruning job Miguel had promised me, and it hurt seeing that prospect evaporate before my eyes. It occurred to me that if Mr. Johnson really didn’t care about me, like he’d claimed, then maybe he wouldn’t snitch me off to

Miguel. Maybe Mr. Johnson had left it to Old Faithful to hand over my paycheck not because he couldn't stand the sight of me but because, determined to get the job done in spite of the setback I'd dealt him, he'd gone to town to fetch three or four Mexicans off a street corner. If that was the case, maybe Mr. Johnson would let bygones be bygones and forget about me. I'd earned my money, hadn't I?

Yet that was wishful thinking, and in my mind's eye, I could see Mr. Johnson on the phone giving Miguel an earful. Clinging to the slim hope that I'd still be able to get another job out of Miguel, I decided that the best thing I could do was to not go and see him until after I returned from Christmas vacation;. If I gave the dust time to settle, I figured, I'd have a better chance of Miguel listening to my side of the story.

I hadn't planned on heading south until a couple of days before Christmas, but now that I was gainfully unemployed I saw no reason to stick around Healdsburg. A few extra days in sunny Southern California would be fun and it'd save me money; factoring in all of the good eats I'd be getting while I was down there, what with my mom's, stepmom's, and sister's home cooking—plus my dad picking up our clan's tab in restaurants—I'd have to be a fool to stay in Healdsburg. I imagined myself lying on a sandy beach with the Southern California sun taking the chill off my bones and, by golly, it felt like me up and quitting had been the right decision after all. Me losing a shovel-shoving job wasn't the end of the world. All things considered, Mr. Johnson had done me a big favor, and I tipped my hat to him, so to speak. While getting back into my Chevy to continue on my way, I resolved that tonight was the night I'd tie one on.