

Live Bait & Ammo #179: Go/No-Go

They always assign me the simplest jobs. Jobs that don't require a thought: no skill, no dexterity, no mechanical or analytical aptitude. A no-brainer? Give it to Shot. He likes it. It's true. I do. I don't mind playing the simpleton. I don't want to think about my factory job. That's why I ended up here in the first place. And the less I know the better. I'm doing time. I'm not here to impress anybody. I'd rather rent my body to The Man for eight hours than let him muck around in my brain. Give him my brain, and trust the devil, he won't return it in the same condition I lent it to him. Give me the grunt work, the no-brainer, I'm happy. Like today, they put me on the Go/No-Go sort job. I take this gauge which is simply a handle with a bar attached to either end. Green bar equals Go. Red bar equals No-Go. I stick one end into a hole in the part to be inspected. Go? No-Go?

A monkey could be trained to do this job. I don't care. I'm not a monkey. Go. No-Go. Whatever. Sometimes I don't even check the parts. I'll take a whole tray and stack it on a pallet of scrap. Sometimes I just eyeball a part, make a snap judgment, toss it into the scrap bin. What the hell, I've been to Nam. 55,000 kids died fighting Communism and now GM is building Buicks in China. Wouldn't you rather drive a Buick? It's all bullshit. I can't pay attention to all their bullshit. I let my mind drift. Drift away from the job, the clock, my body. No challenge equals no stress. I'm fully absorbed in the task of releasing my mind from the confines of the work-a-day world. My physical presence is the illusion they pay me for. I know better. I'm gone, man.

I prefer not to talk. I don't want my reveries interrupted by nonsense. But if someone wants to talk, I talk. It's more ingognito. Silence is suspicious.

So while I'm plugging holes, Rizzler stops to talk. He has long gray hair and a full beard. He's a Harley guy with a Harley gut, a Harley heart, and a voice like a Harley muffler.

“When they want quality they know where to go,” Rizz says.

“That’s me, the go to guy on the no-go job.”

“Find many rejects?”

“What’s the difference? They’re going to sink the ship.”

“We saw the writing on the stalls.”

“Are you going to the protest?”

“I don’t know. It’s raining.”

“Yeah? You think they’ll tell us to take paid sick days on account of rain?”

“I mean, it’s no use. They can do whatever they want.”

“So can we.”

“I can only do what I know how to do.”

“What’s that?”

“Fuck the fuckin’ fuckers.”

I went back to plugging holes. The hours passed like clouds. Early in my career as a laborer I realized that time was hell. Or rather, the awareness of time, the focus on the clock, was hell. Time is nothing but an arbitrary concept imposed by the bosses, the owners of the clocks, as a means of control. I use time. I don’t let time use me.

Marx stopped to say hi. I could hang a long wool coat on the cleft of his chin. His nose was thin and sharp as a hatchet. His eyebrows were thick and squirmy as caterpillars. With thick black safety glasses on he looked like Groucho. Eventually the nickname shortened to Marx and stuck. Marx needed a bone to chew. I threw him one.

“Going to the protest?”

“The protest is cancelled.”

“What? How can you cancel a protest? You can close a plant, but you can’t cancel a protest.”

“All the union reps are walking the floor, dickheads you haven’t seen since the last election, telling people the protest is cancelled.”

“Why?”

“Probably because the company told them to do it.”

“We’re in a pandemic and they cancel the protest?”

“Haven’t you heard?”

“What?”

“It’s raining.”

“So what?”

“Here comes dumb fuck. I got to go.”

The boss approached. He had a complexion like yellow split pea soup. He wanted to be in control. He wanted to know everything about everything at all times, but nobody told him anything any time, not even his wife.

“How’s it going, Shot?”

“OK.”

“Finding many rejects?”

“Some.”

“Do you think you’ll finish this pallet by the end of the shift?”

“Not if I’m wasting time talking to you. You know I can’t work and talk at the same time.”

Straw boss walked off and I went back to my plug job. Peace at last but not for long. Schmutz stopped by. Schmutz was a crusty old farmer who wore his bibs like a badge of wisdom.

“Where were you yesterday, Shot?”

“I took a Mental Health Holiday.”

“You know you can’t fuck the company if you don’t come to work.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Me and the company see eye to eye. We have the same ideology.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, they profit by reducing cost or raising prices. Right?”

“Right.”

“Well, I can’t raise the price of my labor but I can reduce my cost.”

“How’s that?”

“The less work I do, the lower my cost. Lower cost means higher profit.”

“I don’t see how they could argue with that.”

“Hell no. It’s their own logic.”

After lunch Straw Boss sent somebody over to help me with the plug job.

Frank Joyce was a fifty year old white guy with a grey toupee. I hoped he wouldn’t be chatty. I’d had enough conversation. I needed to space out. I put my ear plugs in and hoped he’d take the hint. We worked side by side in silence for a while. Plug, Go. Plug, No-Go. I’m not the only Joe with a need to investigate my own mind in my own time. It was comfortable. A while passed, then Frank must have hit an impasse. Suddenly he wanted to talk. I didn’t respond but he wasn’t discouraged and finally I felt compelled to take the ear plugs out.

“What?”

“Did you go to the union meeting?” he asked.

“No.”

“Not interested?”

“They don’t need me.”

“You should go to meetings.”

“They’re boring.”

“We don’t have much control at the top but at the local level we have some say and the local contract determines our day to day conditions on the shop floor.”

“You mean we can enhance the terms of our exploitation through bureaucracy, arbitration, and...”

“It’s attitude like that that weakens the union.”

“You just said that we didn’t have any control at the top.”

“But we do at the bottom.”

“It’s an illusion. They give us a semblance of control to distract us from the real terms of our enslavement. We’re trapped in debt and manipulated by fear. As long as the landlords of the world continue to control the banks, the government, and the means of production all we get to do is bicker over crumbs and fight for our place in line.”

“Are you a communist?”

“I went to Nam to stop the spread of Communism and now GM is building Buicks in China. But what the hell, what’s good for General Motors is good for America. Right?”

“That was a raw deal.”

“Must have had a weak local union.”

“Well, they weren’t cooperative.”

“A union that cooperates is a company-union.”

“Well if you’re not going to go to meetings, you shouldn’t complain.”

“OK.”

I looked at the clock. Damn. Two hours to kill with a narc. I go to all the union meetings. I never saw him there.

“You aren’t going to the protest today are you?” Frank said.

“Sure. Why not?”

“It’s cancelled.”

“Bullshit. You can’t cancel a protest.”

“It’s raining.”

“We’re in a pandemic not a flood.”

“Hey, there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“You must mean the rain.”

“I mean the pandemic. You can’t do anything about it.”

“Whose side are you on?”

“You’re not one of those SOS fools are you?”

“If, by SOS, you mean, do I believe in sticking up for my rights? Do I believe in fighting back? Do I believe in the power of solidarity? If the company can lock us out, they can lock us down . . . with pay. Yes, I am one of them.”

“You assholes are dividing the union.”

“No, we are dividing the company from the union.”

“Look, the union is doing the best they can at the bargaining table. You have to trust them.”

“We are the union and we are doing the best we can at the point of production to gain some bargaining leverage.”

“You mean that work-to-rule crap? If we don’t make concessions on every contract, they’ll close our plant.”

“Hell, if concessions worked as a bargaining strategy, we’d have full employment in the USA.”

“We have to cooperate if we want to keep the plant open.”

“We bent over backwards. We jumped through all the hoops. Now the chickens are coming home to roost.”

“The trouble with you is you just don’t get it.”

“Get what? Go/No-Go? Or the attitude of helplessness?”

“You can’t organize the workers here. They’re apathetic. They don’t care.”

“The best organizer is an asshole boss and our boss is the biggest asshole in the asshole business.”

“You can’t win.”

“I refuse to be a victim.”

I put my Go/No-Go plug down and got up.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m leaving. I’m going to join the protest.”

“It’s raining. The protest is cancelled.”

“I will not be cancelled.”