

A Job For Gotsdiner

Gotsdiner lost his cozy job after twenty-seven years. All sorts of inadequate reasons were given: the industry was retooling its paradigms, his mentors were dead or retired, the computers were down, there was not enough work, there was too much work, the market needed correcting, the new governor was a schmuck, there was a power struggle, the times they were a-changin', nobody seemed to know. The excuses ran on and on, as endless as history, but not nearly so entertaining. Gotsdiner, however, knew the truth: they fired him because, for no particular reason, they could no longer stand the sight of him. So they canned him, and there he was, age fifty and out on the street.

You want a good laugh sometime? Answer a "Help Wanted" ad, and tell them you're fifty years old and you're looking for a new job. You'll hear a lot of things, but "Welcome aboard!" ain't one of them.

Gotsdiner sat by the phone and waited for calls of consolation and regret from his boon companions. It didn't take long to realize that these calls were not forthcoming. If it's true that nobody knows you when you're down and out, it's true in spades that nobody knows you when you're a slightly graying fifty and out of work.

Gotsdiner sent out 279 resumes to total strangers in the private sector and waited. While he waited, he watched TV. It was even worse than he remembered. Everybody there, it seemed, wanted to sell him car insurance, although he could no longer afford a car. Lithe young actresses peddled exercise machines, on which Gotsdiner knew he would last five minutes, tops, before the old ticker called it quits. Many other commercials he could not understand at all. He could not tell what they were trying to sell him. Images rocketed by him, accompanied by music that seemed to have been performed on a dentist's drill. They had guitars now that sounded like jackhammers. The commercials left him feeling exhausted and confused. And, of course, old.

Most of the total strangers to whom Gotsdiner sent his resumes responded. They sent him letters. Gotsdiner referred to these as T.S.G. letters. Thank you, Sorry, Good luck. They all said that. But Gotsdiner knew that T.S.G. didn't really mean Thank you, Sorry, Good luck. T.S.G. really meant Tough Shit Get lost.

In his long-gone youth, Gotsdiner recalled, companies had Personnel Departments. These entities were now as dead as Woodstock. They had been replaced by Human Resources Departments. They were staffed by ecstatic, cruel twenty-one-year-old Caligulas and Borgias who took one

look at Gotsdiner and figured he was there to ask for retirement information.

“I don’t want to retire,” he said. “I want a job.” Most of them tried not to laugh in his face, but some couldn’t help it. Their laughter caromed down the corridors like crude weapons as Gotsdiner retreated.

Whenever he got a T.S.G. letter, which was often, he considered sending an arch, sarcastic reply, something brimming with well-tooled malice and charming vitriol. But he refrained. Why bother? He knew that no one in any Human Resources department could read.

Gotsdiner called one of his oldest and dearest friends, the executive director of a local firm of substance. Gotsdiner greeted him warmly.

“Who?” the friend asked, disbelief and fear mingling in his voice.

Gotsdiner repeated his unlikely name, but the friend was drawing a blank.

“Who?” the friend wailed.

“I’m looking for a job, old buddy,” Gotsdiner said, recounting old college days and drunken frolics and suspicious misadventures of youth, in which he and the old friend had often been partners and co-conspirators.

“*Who?*” the friend cried.

“It’s Gotsdiner,” Gotsdiner said. “I’m looking for a job.”

The friend was speechless. When it comes to job-hunting, nobody is anybody’s friend. Gotsdiner listened to the silence, and when it became too loud, he gently hung up.

If friends greeted his inquiries with deafening apathy, the total strangers were sadists, honing their skills of treachery and betrayal to points of exquisite fineness. The world, it seemed, was now run by nineteen-year-old girls. They answered the phones, they occupied the receptionists’ desks, they snarled, irritated at Gotsdiner for showing up just as they were about to repair to the ladies’ room to take yet another home pregnancy test. When Gotsdiner had entered the job market, it had been run by men in their forties and fifties. Where had they all gone? Gotsdiner called old employers, old professors, old roommates, seeking counsel and advice, but the old employers were either dead or in the nuthouse, the old professors were on permanent retreat, and the roommates were either in prison or unemployed themselves. A few old acquaintances had risen to spectacular heights in the world of big business, but, like his former oldest and dearest friend, they were so terrified of losing their positions that they had surrounded themselves with an impenetrable phalanx of toadies, yes-men, goombahs and nineteen-year-old girls, whose collective job was to keep Gotsdiner away, at bay, far, far away.

Gotsdiner decided to improve his employability by buying a new suit, but the clothiers who had for years clad his lumpy and inadequate frame

informed him, without a trace of regret, that he could no longer afford them, and that he would now have to take his custom elsewhere, like to the Salvation Army.

Gotsdiner did not feel that he had actually changed much since the axe had fallen. But everyone else had. Once-cheerful counter-men and grocery clerks now gave him the evil eye. Merchants with whom he had exchanged light and witty banter now wouldn't give him the time of day. They seemed, in fact, to resent his business, on the theory, apparently, that Gotsdiner was swathed in bad luck and that it might rub off. He quit dining out, bought little or nothing, stayed home, watched TV.

TV had changed since Gotsdiner's youth, when there had been three channels. Now there were at least seven hundred. There were special channels devoted to religion, pastry, exercise, iffy real estate practices, athletics, classical music, fishing. Some channels showed nothing but the black-and-white comedies and dramas of his ancient youth. Gotsdiner had disliked this crap in the fifties, and he disliked it now. Time, which worked wonders for cheese, wine, and certain mutual funds, did absolutely nothing for stale and unconvincing jokes. The announcers who introduced this dreck, though, seemed entranced by it. They spoke of old episodes of *Leave It To Beaver* and *The Munsters* with the wonder and awe that should have been reserved for promoting *Die Zauberflote* at Covent Garden. Gotsdiner wondered why the Library at Alexandria was gone, but reruns of *I Love Lucy* were readily available at any time of the day or night. It had once been customary to teach young men Greek and Latin, as a matter of course. Now young men were taught the dialogues of long-dead gag-men with names like Morty and Art. It occurred to Gotsdiner that his philosophical reflections were naught but the musings of a prematurely aging misanthrope, and he resolved to change his ways. A tall order, in Gotsdiner's case.

Gotsdiner's Case: *The People vs. Gotsdiner*. A case for the ages, and his was fifty. Therefore, his guilt was presumed. Guilty of being too old. Why had the world turned against him? His old friend Priscilla, once the light of his life and now a local financier and mover-and-shaker who was way too successful to be concerned with the likes of him, shed some light on the subject one afternoon, returning a call he had made a month or two earlier.

"Because you don't amount to a hill of beans, hot stuff. Never did," Priscilla trilled, her voice unnecessarily cheery and bright. The cheer of money, Gotsdiner knew. She had a lot of it, knew how to get it, always had and always would. Even in their antique youth, Gotsdiner knew, she had sensed that any investment in his future would be unwise and hilariously unprofitable. Once a squeeze—perhaps even a main one, in the nanosec-

ond of their abortive courtship—Gotsdiner knew he was not even a footnote to her history now. Which was why she had returned his call, after a hefty wait. To mock him, in the manner exclusive to the dizzying heights of executive suitedom.

“How’s about a job, for old time’s sake?” Gotsdiner said, trying to sound concerned, rather than desperate, hopeful rather than doomed.

Priscilla’s laugh was a noon whistle, a rebel yell, the triumphant trumpet of a jungle predator.

“I wouldn’t hire you to drain my pool, Gotsy,” she cried. “I’m all in favor of ‘old time’s sake’ and all that other sentimental horseshit. But *you*? Where the hell would our industry put an unemployed bureaucrat who’s, what, fifty now?”

“Fifty, same as you,” Gotsdiner said, reflecting that he had heard the voice of doom a few times in his life, but never from his very own voice box.

Priscilla whooped. She was having entirely too much fun with Gotsdiner’s misfortune.

“Nothing, honey,” she said, cracking up, holding the phone away from her ebullient and no-doubt slightly chubby face long enough to regain her composure, “nothing, about *you*, is the same as *me*.” The concept of Gotsdiner being in any way her peer engulfed her once again, and she collapsed in mirth.

Gotsdiner held the phone away from his burning ear. Since his dismissal, everyone seemed to be laughing all the time. He hadn’t remembered that much laughter from the halcyon days of his prosperity. He waited for her to recover from this attack of the giggles, but when it seemed certain that hers was a terminal case, he gently returned his useless phone to its cradle and took a nap.

At day’s end, the mailman brought him a fistful of letters from uninterested employers. They wrote to tell Gotsdiner of their sorrow. They were all *sorry*. Gotsdiner could almost see the tear-stains on the boiler-plate pages. But they were also grateful. *Thank you*, they wrote. Thank you. Their gratitude slopped all over the place, like spaghetti sauce on a fresh white shirt. And *Good Luck*. That was the worst part. Good luck. If you wanted me to have good luck, Gotsdiner mused, you’d just give me the goddamn job and keep your sorrow to yourself. And how am I to use your unwanted, unrequested, un-asked-for sorrow? Where can I spend it?

On the dizzyingly false theory that he was just killing time until he “found something”—as everyone said he would: “You’ll find something! Hang in there!”—Gotsdiner took a job at the post office. He lasted one whole week and part of another until conceding that it wasn’t the snow, the rain, or the dark of night that was keeping him from the swift completion

of his appointed rounds, but rather the militaristic, not to mention dictatorial, not to mention fascist, nature of the management, which drove him to the voluntarily resumption of his unemployment, his idleness, his sloth. Somewhere between the diplomacy of Idi Amin and the patience of Vlad the Impaler lay the character of his supervisors. They had all served with distinction in the army, so they said. And they made it clear to Gotsdiner that only proud veterans of the various illegal wars in which his country had engaged during the last thirty years or so were morally worthy of federal employment, that they and they alone packed the ethical and patriotic gear needed to deliver mountains of unwanted junk mail to the housewives of his town. They had no use for his dearth of military experience, and what they perceived to be a latently pacifistic, i.e. commie, mind set, and when he at last pointed out that of the entire local postal corps, he and he alone had packed the brains to figure out a way to stay the hell out of the army, that, as they say, was that. Gotsdiner went home and turned on the TV. He watched reruns of *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*, whose teenage characters with names like Maynard G. Krebs and Zelda Gilroy, faced with the first rumblings of a disquieting world, smiled and said “Surely you jest” in moments of stress. It seemed to work for them.

There were times when Gotsdiner himself, rattling around the house in despondent—and, increasingly, alcoholic—despair, found himself muttering these very words. After a morning of being rejected by an endless host of haughty H.R. teenagers, Gotsdiner shouted “Surely you jest!” at no one in particular. He went to a local print shop and ordered a Surely You Jest rubber stamp in capital letters. For a week, he spent time every afternoon stamping this new motto on the T.S.G. letters he received and returning them to the baffled senders. It didn’t improve his standing in the local job market, but at this point he didn’t particularly care.

He decided to engage in some soul-searching, although he had always felt in close touch with his soul. Sometimes the damn thing wouldn’t go away, like a stale lover or the flu. Nevertheless, he searched.

To start with the obvious: Gotsdiner wasn’t very smart and he didn’t really know anything. This wasn’t as bad as it sounded. Lots of men of high rank and wealth were airheads. Some didn’t even have air, were dying from oxygen deprivation, and it didn’t keep them from reaping every benefit their God could think to shower upon them. Smarts and knowledge were overrated. Just look at TV, at the success of Morty and Art, Herman Munster, the lizards who sold car insurance. In a world where Greek was eschewed in favor of boys named Beaver, what the hell did a guy need with smarts?

He was generous, too. He gave fifty dollars to Jerry’s Kids every Labor Day, and five bucks to the paper boy at Christmas. He had never

beaten anyone up and only insulted people who definitely had it coming to them. He brushed after every meal. He was kind to animals, benevolent to the poor, courteous to the halt, deferential to the elderly. He didn't drink much, rarely threw up in public and was not nearly as much of a sexist pig as he had been in his salad days. Why wouldn't anyone give him a job?

"Why should anyone give you a job?" asked the thirtyish headhunter to whose firm Gotsdiner paid beaucoup bucks to rustle up some employment for him. He filled out their reams of paperwork, answered their puerile questions, submitted to their sophomoric philosophizing, took their tests, breathed the sodden and excessively conditioned air of their high-rise. And now this little punk in his pinstripes and his pink shirt and the tie with cartoon characters on it was looking down his nose at Gotsdiner, asking why anyone would hire him.

Gotsdiner didn't despise the young any more than he despised anyone else, but lately he was beginning to despise anyone else a great deal, everyone else, you name it, especially when they challenged his right to work. Especially when he paid them cash money to find him a job and the best they could do was ask idiot questions.

He explained to the young man that he should be hired because he had an impeccable work record, perfect attendance, high standards, outstanding production, great personal hygiene and an unblemished record of being an all-around nice guy.

Then he tipped over the guy's chair—with the guy still in it—and went home.

Gotsdiner went shopping. The streets were filled with cars, the stores were filled with men and women his own age and younger. Why weren't they working? They couldn't be unemployed. They looked too healthy, too clean and sober, too motivated. Motivated by what? By early retirement, of course. Nowadays, you got yourself a great job the day after you got your diploma, and fifteen years later you were a man or woman of leisure. It hadn't been that way in Gotsdiner's day. Not, come to think of it, that he'd ever really had a day, but if he'd had, it certainly didn't include retirement at 36. Back then, you struggled to find some low-life job to pay off your student loan. Forty years later, if you lived, you might be able to quit work and spend the rest of your days in the modest home you'd sweated decades to pay for. Now the book stores and their concomitant *de rigueur* coffee shops were filled with 36-year-old millionaires. They stocked up on Proust and Jane Austen to read on their next Hawaiian extravaganzas, their perpetual vacations. What did they do with these books? Gotsdiner knew they didn't read them. Used them as props, probably, furnishing an imaginary life of the mind.