

DIRTY WORK

a novel by

Mark SaFranko

1.

My job is simple. Sweep up the glass from any bottles that explode en route to their cases, or “shells,” as they’re called around here. If a bottle without a cap scuds by, get it off the conveyer belt, because once beer is exposed to open air for too long, it turns “skunky.” All you have to do is stick your nose into the aperture to get the idea. Finally, make sure that the shells are properly sealed before they roll off the line....

That’s about it. Oh, and one more thing: try not to get *too* drunk. Management didn’t want you stumbling into one of the giant machines and being eaten alive. It had happened to one or two soused lunch-bucket Charlies in the past.

The first few weeks at the brewery weren’t bad. Six bucks an hour was the most I’d ever pulled down. And I didn’t mind standing there all night long next to the conveyor belt with my broom and goggles. It gave me lots of time to daydream, which was what I was really good at. Mostly I daydreamed about books and music, and all the women I was going to screw.

I was a fool.

Nobody ever said a word to me, which was even better. I knew exactly when I could take my cigarette breaks, and what time

Dirty Work

to eat lunch. The neighborhood bars opened at six a.m. sharp in order to cater to the guys like me who had the graveyard shift. That's when they did most of their business.

I'd landed the brewery gig through a history professor at the school where I was supposed to be taking classes. Someone in his family was part-owner of the plant, and they always needed new hands. If things worked out, I'd even get to join the union. I didn't know how long I was going to hang around. My only plan was to continue avoiding the draft.

The truth was that the brewery was about all I could handle. I was still recovering from a bad mescaline trip a couple of months earlier that had me hurtling through the streets in a blind panic. My brains had been scrambled and fried by the experience, and I still wasn't feeling all that steady. Maybe, I feared, my brains would be permanently scrambled and fried. I experienced terrible flashbacks and bouts of uncontrollable anxiety. Often I felt like I was losing my mind....

My biggest problem right now was trying to sleep after the shift ended. When I got back to my room, I couldn't shut off the preceding eight hours. I closed my eyes and behind the lids watched a surreal rush of eight-ounce bottles, a green Amazon River that originated in some mysterious place and seemed to never end. Not only could I see the bottles, I could *hear* them too. The infernal commotion was like the crashing waves of an ocean of glass.

The din was even worse when the plant switched over to cans, which happened twice a week. The machine-gunfire of tin in my brain reverberated for hours after I left. It was enough to drive a person straight into madness. I didn't know how the others, the ones who'd been there for decades, dealt with it, because I could never

Dirty Work

seem to get used to it. The brewery was an unrelenting, all-out assault on the senses. Astonishing, that human beings were willing to work in such an environment.

And there I was.

Sometimes, to try and relax, I'd drink more beer. Other times Sheila was there, and we'd fuck, but that didn't do it either. Finally I'd give up and get out of bed, light a cigarette, open a book and try to read or slap a record on the turntable. Around noon I'd finally fall asleep when the racket and the hallucinations wore off, and I'd wake up in the evening, about an hour before it was time to report to work again.

I was all screwed up. The vicious cycle was bound to kill me sooner or later. It was no way to live.

Occasionally the telephone would ring. If it was my old man on the other end, we'd get into a touchy discussion.

"Why aren't you going to school? Isn't that what you're supposed to be doing out there?"

"Yeah, well...."

I didn't want to tell him that I hadn't attended a class in months. And I wasn't about to tell him that I was going to come away with nothing but unpaid loans, and that I'd much rather pick up some money to try and pay them off. Because that strategy wasn't working either. Money seemed to burn a hole in my pocket. As soon as I got my paycheck, it seemed to mysteriously disappear.

Sheila and I talked about getting married, I don't know why. It's true we got along and that she was very easy to look at. And we both liked to read books. Sometimes we'd just sit there for hours on end doing nothing but turning pages and smoking cigarettes. But the best thing, the very best thing about Sheila, was her blowjobs. The

Dirty Work

girl had a mouth like a vacuum cleaner. I'd never experienced anything like her before -- not that I'd had all that many. When I exploded, I'd hear a grunt -- "Mmmm!" -- but instead of choking or spitting it out, she allowed my juice to roll straight down her throat, never once letting a drop hit the floor. Then she'd tilt her head back and swallow the rest.

I've never had anyone as good since. When you're young, you figure you'll always find it again, no problem....

Maybe it was on account of Sheila's unique skills that I thought I should do it -- get married, that is. And that was probably as good a reason as any.

2.

Since I was doing such a splendid job cleaning up busted glass and catching uncapped bottles before they reached their cases, Manolo, the foreman, figured I could do as well elsewhere on the line.

"Zajack -- I'm movin' you."

"To where?"

"Come with me."

The pasteurizer was a mysterious, gigantic metal vat the size of a small swimming pool. It was comprised of various water tunnels that the beer-filled bottles and cans passed through before beginning their run to the cases. Changing water temperatures completed the process, but the bottles sometimes shattered in the hot water and the glass shards had to be netted out.

That was my new assignment.

Dirty Work

Okay. I'd do whatever they told me to do. That's what happens when you're nobody: if you want to hang onto the job, you have to follow orders.

Before I even climbed up on the gangway, I knew it was going to be trouble. Because the guy who operated the pasteurizer controls was Festrum. He was a hick from the hollows of Western Pennsylvania, an annoying, obnoxious piece of shit who every peon in the brewery hated. Festrum only stood about five-feet-one, which made his resentment for everybody and everything in the world that much more fierce and comical. He looked like the kind of twerp you could fold up and stash in your pocket, yet he had all of us stepping and fetching.

Since I'd never had any trouble with anyone in the plant, Manolo figured that maybe I was the one who could get along with Festrum. But it would be no different for me than for the others he'd run off his turf in the past. No sooner was I holding the net than the little bastard was all over my case.

He pointed into the roiling water.

"Look -- glass! The fuck's wrong with you'uns? Don't you'uns know how to do your job? I'm gonna talk to Manolo and make sure he gets your ass the fuck outa here!"

The only word this idiot seemed to know was "you'uns," which is the western Pennsylvanian hillbilly equivalent of "y'all."

If Festrum talked to the boss, he didn't listen, because come Monday night, I was back on the gangway fishing for glass. Within minutes we were arguing.

"Wanna piece 'a me, jack-off?" Festrum puffed out his chest. An ornery look burned in his pig-like eyes.

I shook my head. "I've got better things to do, Festrum."

Dirty Work

“The parking lot! Soon as we get off!”

Jesus Christ. Now what was I going to do? I sure as hell didn't want to fight the little douchebag. I didn't want to fight anybody, for that matter. All I wanted was to be left alone; it was all I'd ever wanted. Being the last man on earth wouldn't bother me in the least.

But I lucked out. By early morning Festrum was passed out and snoring on a bed of shells. He drank more beer on the job than most, probably because he had to go home every morning to his geek wife and geek kids.

For tonight, at least, the great Master of the Pastuerizer wasn't going to be duking it out with me or anyone else.

I went out to the street. The sun was just coming up. I had the world to myself. That morning I didn't head straight to Ronko's Tavern, “home of the tallest draft in town,” like I usually did. Instead I walked through the deserted streets of the town. For the time being I liked being a nobody in a nowhere place in the middle of nowhere where nobody knew me, a thousand miles from where I'd come from....

Unfortunately, the shit didn't stop. Festrum kept jabbing at me. With only a few more days on the job I'd be eligible to join the union, which meant a higher hourly rate, benefits, and all the rest of it, but if it meant having to be near Festrum for the rest of my life, I wanted no part of it.

Finally I couldn't take it anymore. I walked over to Manolo's little office and asked him to relieve me of pasteurizer duty. Being sent to the pasteurizer, I explained, had set everything moving in the wrong direction.

The boss squinted at me through his cigarette smoke. “No

Dirty Work

can do right now, pal. I got nobody else I can spare.”

What he really meant was that none of the union guys wanted to be anywhere near Festrum. And since they all had seniority over me, it was Manolo’s way or the highway.

I was trapped. Even when life is hell, it’s not easy to walk away. I climbed back up on the gangway.

Festrum went right on sniping at me. He sniped at anyone who came within earshot. Why no one beat the shit out of him was beyond me, especially since he had no friends to back him up and he was such a little turd. If he got rubbed out in the darkness of the parking lot during a smoke break, the killer would never be turned in.

It got to the point where just the thought of reporting to work was enough to make me want to puke. What had begun as a refuge from reality, a place to hide and be left alone while collecting a paycheck, had turned into a nightmare, all on account of some pissant bully.

And what the hell was I doing stranded in the boondocks anyway? Aside from assholes like Festrum, the people were friendly and the ladies were easy, but did I really want to spend the rest of my life sweeping up broken bottles and taking shit from trash like Festrum? The truth was that I was growing bored, even with Sheila.

Sure enough, after my first cigarette break Festrum started in on me again.

“I see a goddamn piece of glass down there, Zajack! What the hell did I tell you’uns a million times already? Get your eyes checked!”

My blood began to boil. Festrum was standing there pointing into the vat. I walked up behind him and drove the net handle into

Dirty Work

the small of his back. He went flying into the bubbling water, arms flailing and legs pumping.

I stood there with my hands on my hips and laughed. It was funny, really, really funny. Some of the other guys nearby whooped and cheered.

Finally Festrum came up for air. His mousey hair was pasted to his face and his shirtsleeves and pant legs looked like they'd been pumped full of air.

“Mother-FUCKER! I’ll get you’uns!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” I said, still laughing.

But he wasn't going to get me. I was already headed for the street. The next morning I was on a train back to Jersey.

--- END OF SAMPLE ---

Full Version Available on Amazon and MurderSlim.com