

Labor to Go

By Jack Bates

How did a guy with an MBA in Finance wind up in boat like this?

A crowded room of out of work laborers?

Tony Scovoronski had been asking himself that question for nearly two weeks. Had he ever had an actual career in his field? Had the sub primes really done him in? It seemed like a hazy memory from some bad acid trip. For a dozen days now he had been getting up at five to get to the store in the strip mall by six to sign in and wait at a white plastic table usually reserved for a concrete slab on the back side of a three bedroom ranch. By six-thirty the 510 from the city unloaded another ten or so lost souls who hoped to grab a day job from the same tired sounding clerk behind the counter. In all, Tony figured the capacity of the jobless crew waiting for calls to be about thirty.

A slow day.

The idea here was similar to Kelly Services, only for construction companies. The companies paid a fee, made a call to Labor to Go in search of workers, and if someone in the lobby fit the criteria – meaning if he were breathing – he took the job. Sometimes a guy got lucky and a job was waiting for him. Other times, ten a.m. came up quick and the clerk would tell everyone there would be nothing until tomorrow.

Tony sat on the side of the table where he could look up at the wall-mounted television. Fox News was on and he hated Fox News. He pulled his latest Hard Case paperback out of his hip pocket and opened it to where he marked his last spot with a photograph of his former fiancé. It took him a moment, a moment where the lump in his throat was like swallowing a ball bearing, before he slipped Shauna's face into some of the later pages, before he started to read while still thinking about her.

The door opened. A blast of winter air rushed the inside. Those closest to the door looked up and grimaced. The 510 riders came inside. Mixed in with them was a guy Tony had seen in there before. He was a tall man with a slouch and he was always talking. Always. Tony thought of him as Radio Gaga because of the ear-buds the man kept wedged in his ears. The man played his music so loud it was audible to all present. And because of the volume, the man spoke louder than he needed to. No one said anything, though, because having to confront the kind of in-your-face guy he was, the last thing any of the jobless gathered in the room needed was to antagonize him.

Tony shifted in his white plastic chair and put his attention into the book. He slouched down between the two molded arms and put a hand over his brow. Everything about his body language said to leave him alone.

Trouble was, for some folks, it was an open invitation.

Tony could hear Radio Gaga singing up at the counter as he filled out the forms. Might have been okay if the man had a voice but he didn't. It was shrill. Only when he sang, though. When he spoke, it was a little deeper.

“How ya doing today, Miss?” Radio Gaga asked the clerk. She smiled politely. “Weather's turning out there, ain't she? Yes, sir. It's getting colder now. Pretty soon these construction boys gonna take their jobs south for the winter. I might just follow them. How about you?”

The girl took Radio Gaga's forms and looked them over.

"They okay?" he asked. The clerk smiled and nodded. "They should be. I been filling them out enough lately." Radio Gaga laughed at his joke, then slapped the arm of the man standing next to him. The man smiled politely but moved over a step or two. Radio Gaga snapped his fingers and sang to the song playing in his ears.

Tony adjusted in his chair. He laid the book flat on the table and folded his arms in front of him. He could still hear Radio Gaga moving around the room and he knew his routine. The next stop would be the coffee station. He'd pick up the glass pot, swirl it, sniff it, and then put it back, making a comment about it.

"This coffee fresh?" He put the glass pot back. "It ain't fresh. I used to be a line cook, y'all. I know fresh coffee. This is far from fresh."

Tony turned the page of his book. Radio Gaga would now engage whoever was closest to the coffee station until that person inevitably got up and went to the counter to ask for the bathroom key.

"This coffee fresh when you got here?" Radio Gaga jerked his head towards the coffee station. An overweight, middle-aged man sat in the chair next to the station, his plump hands resting on the top of his apple barrel belly.

"I don't drink coffee," the man said.

"You don't drink coffee? I gotta drink coffee."

"My doctor says I shouldn't."

"Doctors. What do they know? All those years of school and they still mostly get it wrong. Doctor told my momma a bunch of stuff and she did what he told her but she's still not well. It's why I gotta work, see? All because of them damn doctors."

"My guy is one of the good ones." Apple Barrel was new to the room. He had no idea the road he just started down, Tony thought.

"Oh? So you saying it's my momma's fault for picking a quack?" Radio Gaga put a foot up on the plastic chair next to the man. The man put his hands down on the arms of his chair. His sausage-like fingers curled around the molded ends.

"I'm not saying anything at all, mister," the man said. "I'm just saying I trust my doctor."

"My momma trusted hers. See what I'm saying? How can you know for fact that my momma's isn't as good as yours? What makes you think your doctor is so special?"

"He's my grandson."

Tony could tell without looking up from the book the men in the room began to relax. He did let his eyes drift to the window where he caught the blurry reflection of the room and the clerk behind the counter. Tony looked over his shoulder at her. There was still some worry in her eyes.

Radio Gaga laughed. It was a heavy laugh, almost a bray. He slapped his leg and then took it off the chair he was resting it on. "Your grandson? Don't that beat all. Your grandson a doctor and here you sit, waiting to get called for a job just like the rest of us."

"He's the doctor. Not me. I still like to work."

"Like to work? Look around you, Pops. We gotta work."

The older man looked around. He now seemed uncomfortable. "I just meant. I mean, look. I lost my job. I need the work too."

"Need? What do you need? You probably don't even need insurance to cover you bills."

“Is there a problem out here?”

All eyes turned to the counter. The young, waifish girl had been replaced by a large black man. He held a clipboard in one hand and a pen in the other. Tony knew him as the manager of Labor to Go. No one spoke and as the manager made eye contact around the room, everyone shifted and turned away.

Everyone except Radio Gaga. He stared back at the manager.

The manager smiled. He read from the clipboard. “Anthony Scovoronski?”

Tony looked up from his book. “Yes?”

“You’re next on the list. Your profile says you have carpentry experience?”

“I do. Some.” Tony closed his book and set it on top of his book bag.

“Can you come up here? I might have something for you.” The manager flipped through the sheets on his clipboard. “Apartment contractor putting in cupboards and counters. Take a look at the specs.”

“Yeah, sure.” Tony pushed his chair in. He went to the counter and leaned over the posting the manager slid towards him. Sinkers, screws, and a cordless power drill. Nothing he hadn’t handled when he was working his way through school. The best part was it looked like it could be an extended opportunity, which would be better than having to go into this hellhole every day. And as a bonus: The job was inside, away from the frigid Michigan February.

As if on cue to remind him about the downside of outdoor labor in midwinter, a rush of cold air blew in. Tony felt it on his neck and along his cheeks.

“Can you take it?” the manager asked.

“Yeah. Absolutely.”

The manager initialed the job request form then ripped out the middle pink sheet that he handed over to Tony. Tony folded the job sheet and tucked it into his back pocket. He could feel the smile on his face, relieved to be done with Labor to Go for at least a few days. Tony turned around to get his stuff and stopped on his way to the table.

His book was there.

His book bag was not.

And neither was Radio Gaga.

Tony looked around. The older man by the coffee station looked away from Tony’s eyes. In fact, everyone looked away. Eventually one man shifted in his chair and spoke to him.

“He went outside right after you went up to the counter.” Tony kept his eyes on the man. “Yeah. He had your backpack.”

Tony hurried out the door. He didn’t have to go far. Some of the men who had stepped out for a smoke in the nearly single digit air motioned with their heads. Tony hadn’t had to say or ask anything. Radio Gaga waited around the corner on the north side of the building.

Tony ran past the coin-operated Laundromat and the home theatre store. Radio Gaga leaned back against the northern facing side wall, a cigarette dangling between his lips. He wore a pair of mirrored sunglasses now. Tony’s book bag hung open in one of Radio Gaga’s hands while he rifled through it with his other. Tony stopped himself from saying anything, took a pause, then reached out and grabbed the shoulder straps of the bag. He started to pull it out of the man’s grasp, only Radio Gaga wasn’t ready to let go of it.

Radio Gaga raised his eyes over the top rim of his mirror sunglasses. “You need something?” he asked.

“Yeah. My bag.” Tony yanked on it again. Radio Gaga’s grip tightened. His arm didn’t even uncoil.

“You say this is your bag?”

“It is.”

“How do I know that? It was sitting on the table all by itself.”

“Under the book I was reading.”

“Well, I didn’t see any book.”

Tony thinned his lips. “It was there.”

“What was there?”

“The book. On top of my book bag.” Tony yanked again, this time a little harder. This time he felt a slight springing in Radio Gaga’s arm. It wasn’t enough, though, and he still didn’t have his bag. They stood in a frozen tug-of-war. Tony stared into his own eyes reflected in the early morning twilight curving on the mirror lenses. He took a quick inventory of the bags contents. A couple of Moleskin journals with paper covers the color of grocery bags, some pens. There was the small packet of pictures from the trip he took with his ex; why he carried them he wasn’t sure. Only thing of real importance was the lunch he packed. Radio Gaga could have that. Tony released his hold on the straps. He held his hands out in supplication and started to back away.

By now, a few of the smokers had wandered close enough to the corner edge of the strip mall. Tony shot glances at the few who quickly backed off. One appeared to be on his cell phone.

“Oh, now hey. Don’t go reversing your psychologicals on me. Here, you want your bag?” Radio Gaga held it out to Tony.

Tony eyed the man with caution. He reached for the bag, expecting Radio Gaga to yank it back in some playground game of taunting and teasing. Radio Gaga shook the bag until Tony took it by the straps. As soon as Tony’s hand made contact, Radio Gaga pulled the bag back with a force Tony hadn’t been expecting. As he pulled, his free hand came up and pulled Tony around so that he was facing the cinder block wall. Radio Gaga pushed him face first into it then raised a knee into Tony’s back pinning him against the blocks. The man palmed the back of Tony’s head like a basketball and pressed Tony’s face forward.

“Now I don’t want your bag, Jack.” Radio Gaga leaned in close to Tony’s ear. “I want your job.”

“They gave it to me. I was next in line.”

“I don’t care if the good Lord bestowed it upon you. I want the job.”

Tony felt something sharp press up beneath his jaw in the fleshy part just below his molars. He froze, and not just from the cold. Radio Gaga twisted the blade and a sharp little bolt of pain shot up through the nerves beneath his skin. The pain distracted him enough to let Radio Gaga start digging around in Tony’s pockets. He found the folded up pink sheet of paper and yanked it out.

“You know, maybe I’m just tired of getting the shit end of the stick,” Radio Gaga said behind him. “I get in at Fords and they sell off the division to some outside group that doesn’t know what the hell it’s doing, so Fords stops doing business with a company it created. I got a degree, you know that? Four years of college. Big freaking shit.”

“Yeah, well, I got one in finance,” Tony said. He clenched his teeth to speak. The man’s free hand pushed Tony’s face so hard against the wall Tony thought his head was going through the cinder block and into the store they stood outside. Add in the cold and the slightest pimples in the bricks felt like nail tips ripping into his flesh.

“Well ain’t we a couple of Ivy Leaguers.”

Tony felt the blade slip away. He spun around to face the man, the book bag hanging like a limp sack from his right hand. His breath billowed into the cold morning air. The sky took on more blue as a giant orange dot rose up behind the empty limbs and branches of the trees in the neighborhood behind the strip mall. Wisps of early morning furnace steam floated above the homes. It was all Norman Rockwell perfect, and here Tony was fighting for a scrap of paper that guaranteed him temporary security.

Radio Gaga folded the pink paper and tucked it inside his coat. The knife was nowhere in either hand.

“Come on, man. Give me back the job.”

“Job is mine.”

“Look, I’ll just go over to the address. I don’t need the slip,” Tony bluffed, but not very well.

“The hell you don’t. You just gonna walk in and say you’re the man? This paper is the golden ticket, my man. Without it, you ain’t getting past the gate.”

Tony dropped the book bag and took a step forward. He caught Radio Gaga by the front of his parka and balled up a fist with his free hand. Now he flung Radio Gaga around and smashed him up against the wall, bouncing the man’s head back with a crack against the same cinder blocks he’d been eating. Radio Gaga’s head wobbled. His chin rolled on his chest.

It was about then a black and white cruiser of the local municipality came around the back side of Labor to Go out of the alley. Unaware that a female officer sat inside the vehicle watching them, Tony swung his left fist through the air in an arc that when he connected was going hurt his hand more than it was going to daze Radio Gaga. No sooner had Tony started on the full extension of the swing than the officer hit her sirens. The blast of sound followed by the pulse of blue and red flashes dropped Tony’s haymaker like a stone dangling from a wet noodle.

“Gentlemen. Do we have a problem here?” the officer asked. She closed her car door.

“Misunderstanding, officer.” Radio Gage said. He rubbed the back of his head.

“He took my job,” Tony said. It was the only thing he could think to say. The officer turned her attention on Tony. “I was given a job and he mugged me for it.” Tony picked up his bag.

“He took your job?”

“Yeah. The pink paper he tucked in his pocket. The manager signed off on it for me. While my back was turned he took my book bag.”

“The one you’re holding?” the officer asked.

Tony looked at his hand. He looked back at the officer. “He gave it back after he held a knife under my chin and told me to give him the job.”

“What is this job you keep talking about?”

“It’s right there. Inside his coat. Pink piece of paper. I can go inside and get the manager.” Tony took a step backwards.

“Stay right there sir,” the officer said. Tony stopped. He looked at the growing crowd of people from the Labor to Go. The officer turned to Radio Gaga. “Sir, I’m going to ask you to empty the contents of your pockets.”

“What the hell for?” Radio Gaga asked. His voice was incredulous.

“Please, sir. Empty the contents of your pockets.”

“And if I don’t?”

“I’ll be forced to make you.”

Radio Gaga straightened up. The officer, a full foot shorter than him, did the same; only her hand went to a small canister hanging off her belt.

“This is bullshit,” Radio Gaga said. “You gonna search me, why don’t you search him? Why you think I’m the one who did something wrong? Just because he says it?” His statement shook the officer more than if he had punched her.

“I want both of you to stand on either side of my vehicle and I want you both to empty your belongings on the hood of the car.”

“But, officer,” Tony began. “I’m telling you--”

“Now. Both of you.” Her tone was a little more demanding.

Tony moved up first. Radio Gaga followed and went to the opposite side. Tony pulled out his wallet, his phone. Radio Gaga set down a pack of smokes, a Zippo, some gum in loose wrappers.

“Now the book bags, gentlemen.” Radio Gaga flipped up the flap of his shoulder bag. He pulled out a laptop. It was followed by some cords, an adapter, an issue of GQ, but no knife.

Tony reached up absently and touched the spot where he swore a knife had touched him. He opened his book bag and pulled out his lunch, his pictures, the journals, and then stopped. He looked down into the bag.

Stuffed in the back right corner was a small re-sealable plastic bag and inside the bag was something dark and organic, something he remembered from his latter high school days and then early college days. He knew the pot wasn’t his. Even when he smoked it he never bought it. But there it was, a nickel bag’s worth of grass in the book bag he just told the officer was his.

“Is there a problem, sir?” The officer kept her eyes on Tony.

Tony looked up at Radio Gaga. He quietly put his belongings back into his shoulder bag. “There’s something in here that isn’t mine,” Tony said.

“Is that your book bag?” the officer asked.

“It is. But he took it from inside.” Tony hooked his thumb over his shoulder.

The officer took his bag and looked inside. She pulled out the bag of grass.

“And you’re saying this pot isn’t yours?”

Tony shook his head. “It’s not.”

“But the book bag is yours.”

“It is, but--”

“But the pot magically appeared inside it?” the officer asked.

The 510 stopped at the street sign in front of Labor to Go. The hydraulics hissed as the door squeaked open.

“We good here, officer?” Radio Gaga asked. “I got a bus to catch.”

“You pressing charges?” she asked Radio Gaga.

He shook his head.

“What about my job?” Tony asked.

“I’m still trying to decide if it’s worth it to take you in for this.” She dropped the plastic bag on the hood of the car.

“He pulled a knife on me.”

“Did you see a knife in any of this?” Radio Gaga asked. He pulled the strap over his shoulder.

“Search him!” Tony said.

“I know my job here, sir,” the officer said.

“Do you?” Tony asked. He regretted it instantly.

“Sir, I’m going to ask you to sit in the back of my car.” The officer took a step back and opened the rear door.

“This isn’t happening. This is a dream,” Tony said.

“Sir.” The officer reached for him. Tony went to the back of the car and got in. The officer closed the door as Tony leaned his head back against the padded seat. He watched Radio Gaga step up onto the bus and as he did, he saw the man’s pant leg rise up and reveal the handle of the knife tucked into his boot. Tony sat up to say something, but the bus doors closed and the bus pulled away.

Tony slumped back in the seat. He listened as the officer radioed in her call.

Tony let out a sigh that ended with a chuckle. Four years at the University of Michigan. Near the top of his class. A comfy job in Troy in an office with a window looking out on Interstate 75.

And then the bubble burst.

That’s how a guy with an MBA in Finance wound up in a boat like this.

Jack Bates is an award winning playwright and screenplay writer who has recently turned his talents on crime fiction. In June of 2009, he was a contributing writer for Flyover: Voices of Men of the Midwest at the Williamston Theatre in Williamston, Michigan, and a featured writer for the New Works Festival at the Baldwin Theatre in Royal Oak, Michigan, which will premiere Midnight Angel. He also has a series of private eye novellas featuring rookie gumshoe Harry Landers through mindwingsaudio.com.