

2. WORKING FOR THE MAN

My brother is up early today. He wakes me before I usually get up.

“I’ve got a job for you. You can make some extra money.”

“I’ve got my chores to do, Ramon.”

“You can take care of that later.”

I rush to gobble down some food.

When we’re in the car he starts to lectures me, “I hope that you learned the lesson from *Scarface*. You know that crime never pays.”

“I wasn’t really thinking about getting in any crime.”

“It’s a good thing that you weren’t. They could ship you back in the next plane.”

“I think that they tell Tony Manero something like that.”

I can just imagine what he’d be telling me if I had just watched *Goodfellas*.

“Ramon, what kind of job is this anyway.”

“It’s sort of top secret.”

Next thing I know we’re in a van with two other guys heading down the PCH.

“Where the hell are we going?” They ignore my question.

“Ramon, I thought that you were Hispanic,” one of the other agents asks my brother.

“I speak Spanish. But my parents just wanted us to have more European names. I’m not really Hispanic”

“Cool.”

“You’ve met my brother Benny. He’s a stand up guy.”

I hold my head in the air and smile.

Pretty soon we’re in San Diego.

“Are we going to Mexico?” They again ignore my question. I imagine us bringing back a load of undocumented workers. Office workers for the agency.

“Ramon, there’s a lot of cargo space in this van.”

“They gave us one of the big ones.”

“When you need a truck, you take a truck.”

They all laugh. I still haven’t caught their names. I guess that’s the intention.

We indeed head into Mexico. I’m wondering what the hell we’re doing here.

“Have you ever had a Mexican prostitute, Ramon?”

“I can’t say that I have.”

“You don’t know what you’re missing.”

So this is what NAFTA is all about. A day’s work is a day’s work. They say that you’ve got to get up mighty early to fool the CIA. And these guys are no fools. I keep wondering why they’ve taken me along.

“Are we going to need guns?” They again ignore my question. I guess that I need to read the manual before I know what it is OK to ask. If they’re going to send me on a mission, I expect to see a briefing book like in *Mission Impossible*. Who is playing Mr. Phelps this time?

It’s already dark, and we still haven’t reached our destination. I’m going to get really behind on my chores at home. I just hope that Ramon will be understanding.

“Are we going to stop to eat?” They finally listen to one of my questions.

One of the agents looks at his watch, "We have about an hour until the meeting."

We find a small place by the highway.

"Is it OK to eat here," I ask.

"Of course it is," Ramon tells me.

I'm getting worried that we're going to get into some kind of shoot out down here. The CIA doesn't send a van to Mexico without some plan. I'm just worried what it might be. It's not like they gave me a gun.

It's already night when we arrive at the meeting point.

"Benny, stay in the van." One of the agents gets out with Ramon. The other stays in the van with me. I see them talking with local police. The agent pulls out a wad of bills and hands it to the one cop. His face brightens up enough to light the night sky. This is the strangest thing.

When Ramon gets back in the van, he seems more serious than usual.

"We may be in for a little trouble. Benny, you need to stay in the van until I tell you that it's OK."

"What is this all about?"

"You're on a need to know basis." I feel all official. Gunfire just seems a little more reality than I can take. I guess that I'm glad that I live in a safe neighborhood in LA.

We head off to another location. It's this small warehouse next to a garage. A man in an old suit is accompanied by a shorter guy in a cowboy hat.

"I told you. Benny, stay in the van."

We back into the warehouse. They open the door. I see what the quarry is. Drugs. I assume that it is cocaine.

"Benny, now we need some help."

I get out of the van and start to help with the loading. We fill the cargo area with the stuff.

I am starting to make some sense of what is going on. I hear a few words of Spanish. It seems the drugs have been confiscated from one drug lord who is on the outs with the law. His rival is in cahoots with the police. And the CIA have benefitted from the whole arrangement. There's something more going on. There's a reason that they're picking up this much stuff. I don't know all the answers.

We fill the van fairly quickly. The boss guy shakes hands with Ramon and the one agent. Then we take off.

"This is going to be tricky," Ramon says.

"I'll just keep my eyes on the road. I'll watch for trouble."

We are going along at a good clip when I feel this enormous jolt. Someone has slammed in the van from the side of the road."

"This is some kind of hijacking."

"I didn't come along for this."

"I'll try to work some diversion," says the agent next to me. He pulls out this automatic rifle and is firing at the other cars that are in pursuit. The highway up ahead is blocked by two vehicles.

"We're going to ram them."

"It's not going to work, Sparky."

“Ramon, have you seen the front of this thing?”

There is a slight opening that Sparky turns into the Cumberland Gap. Damn if we're not good. We head off in a trail of gunfire and curses.

“What have I got myself into?” I ask.

Our van is pretty banged up. I wonder if that is all part of the expense.

“At least we got away with our lives.”

“That was a little too close for me.”

We pull to the side of the road to check the damage. It's really not that bad. A dented side panel and some damage in the front of the vehicle.

“Just like on TV,” Ramon tells me.

If this is how they make TV, I want no part of it.

I fall asleep until we make the border. Nothing seems to slow down Sparky.

At the border, they are giving us some problems. The guard pulls us over and wants to inspect the car. I see my brother talking to a DEA agent. It is a long conversation. There is some yelling.

“We're going to be OK.”

“This was supposed to be taken care of.”

“I think that there was some disagreement at command. Someone from DEA had tried to block the operation. They had to go to a higher up in the Agency to pull rank. It was messy. But all this is coming from higher up. They're not going to stop this operation while it's in progress.

“I think that one guy wanted to arrest you.”

“He was being an ass. He told me that if he found anything illegal in my van that he'd have me up on charges.” Ramon is still angry “Can we trust him?”

“Not to say anything. I know the guy. He's an asshole. But he's loyal.”

“You should have said something.”

“I said that I know him. He doesn't know me from Adam. You did a good job.”

Ramon really showed authority. Pretty good from a guy whose main appeal is being good at a kid's game.

I am exhausted by the time that we get back to our house.

“I told you, Benny. There's some money coming your way.”

“I can sleep now. I don't have to start cleaning right away,” I ask him.

“We'll let it slide for a day or so. You did a man's job.”

I sleep until mid afternoon. I care for my wounds psychic and physical with some relaxation by the pool. Tomorrow things will be back to normal.

The next day Ramon has a proposal for me.

“If I sent you down with Sparky, could you do another run for me.”

“I don't want to die down there.”

“The stuff that we got is pure. It's the perfect moment to get some more.”

“There's nowhere closer?”

“I need you.”

“Can't you go?”

“I'm supposed to meet some big fish at the club.”

I agree to do what Ramon needs. This could be the death of me. But I will be a hero for

freedom.

Sparky picks me up in the same van. It's still a mess from the other night.

"Thanks, Benny for coming along."

I try to engage Sparky in conversation. He seems more preoccupied with driving.

"Benny, you like tunes. I've got some Nelson Riddle. Or Air Supply. How about Montovani?"

He seems like a real kick. I've got to party with this guy. I realize that's why they call him *Sparky*.

This time the cops are actually at the warehouse. Sparky is having difficulty with them. I can make out the Spanish.

"You're going to have to pay us a little more this time."

"Are you fucking loose? I'm not going to pay you any more than you got last time."

"I don't think that you'd like to rot in a jail down here."

"I work for the US government. I don't think that you want an international incident."

"You're not even in your own country. You're a guest here. You're dealing drugs. That ought to be scandal enough."

He will not be intimidated. But he agrees to pay a little more. For him, he's almost getting the drugs for free.

It takes a little longer to load with only two people. But we make a clean getaway and we're on the road.

"Who do those characters think that they're dealing with? I told them that if I have another roadblock like last time that I will personally come back and hunt down each and every one of them. We're paying for protection, and it was pretty meager last time."

Sparky is finally coming to life. I'm getting entertained by it all. I imagine him cutting the tongues out of each one of his enemies. After all, he is CIA. He knows all the tricks. This is better than the Inquisition. One truth!

The way home is calm. Sparky needs to recover from that outburst. He has to save his energy for another crisis. I also became worked up.

At the border, he gets out of the van to talk to the border patrol officer. They come back arm in arm. Don't mess with Sparky.

"Benny, you're a good traveling companion. You hardly complain about anything. Let me buy you an ice cream for you troubles. We find a place in San Diego. I'm eating a mocha raspberry cone. What a taste treat. It is dripping on the hot pavement.

"I bet you don't have something that good from where you're from."

"No, sir. Not at all."

I don't dare call him Sparky. The sugar rush staves off my fatigue. But I crash deep when I make it back to the house. By the end of the week, Ramon is getting on me to stay on schedule with the chores.

"It's a privilege to live here, my bother."

He also asks for a cut of my money for expenses. I know it is rolling in for him. But I don't mind paying my share.

The place is really looking spic n' span. I still am getting my pool time. All a body needs is a little love. I smile. I don't see any of that soon. Ramon claims that he can hook me up.

“I want a real girl. Someone who likes me for me.”

“You don’t know what kind of fun you can have until that time.”

I know that I seem a little naive. I’m still learning the ways of the world.

Ramon is still working on his big fish. He is putting in late hours. He is a little irritable in the day. But after a few drinks at night, he turns back into his charming self. I hope that the Agency isn’t turning him into a lush. I guess it’s all part of the lifestyle. He has to learn to play with the big boys. I just hope that his head isn’t getting too big. It’s not as if he really is James Bond. He’s living on borrowed time.

I find an article about the CIA and cocaine on the internet. It’s starting to make sense. I had thought that the Agency didn’t do domestic work. But this is all part of trying to shut down some international revolutionaries. If you’re going to catch a rat, you have to bait the trap. It’s a complex world. I never learned this on *Happy Days*.

Ramon does agree to take me out on a Friday night to our favorite bar. I see Steve there. I tell him what has been going on.

“There’s talk all over the agency about that. It’s one of Sparky’s operations. He thought that he was in for big promotion, but I heard that he’s got in all kinds of hot water. He pulled rank on a bunch of DEA guys, and they want revenge. The only problem is that he’s working with one of their own.”

”So is he going to be demoted.”

“I don’t think so. His drug operations are actually making a profit. That’s good on the short term, but it’s going to backfire. Once a congressional oversight committee sees that, they’ll hit the roof. They actually get a kick out of that kind of thing unless it makes it out in the open, in the press and all. Then they try distance themselves from it, and run from the hills.”

“I think that I’m going to need to find a source of income. But I did have fun. I didn’t know that the Agency handled that sort of shit.”

There was always this rumor that a government chemist invented ecstasy for the CIA to get the agents more in touch with their feelings. I think that’s a myth. But it has a grain of truth to it.”

“I never really wanted to be an agent. All this swashbuckling is fine for Ramon. I’m satisfied just sitting in the back and going along for the ride.”

“I’ll keep my eyes out for you. How ‘s your social life?”

“You’re seeing it. I don’t have money to throw around an impress the ladies.”

“I always say that it’s better to spend your time just working on yourself. That’s what I everyone else does here after year’s of addiction and counseling. It’s better not to get messed up in the first place.”

He sounds like a guardian angel I can see Ramon at the other end of the bar. He is surrounded by a group of starlets. He’s waving his hands wildly, and everyone is having a good time. I never thought it was going to be so tough. Here I am with the fruits of paradise just outside my reach.

The next day I finish my work early. I am looking outside at the pool behind the great picture window. I can see the crack in paradise. I don’t want to give in to my despair. I need to collect my thoughts. Moments like this are good. Steve is right. At least, I’m not on the street.

I decide to head over for some fast food. I haven’t been to McDonald’s many times since

I've arrived. I take my burger outside to eat it in the smog. It really fills the spot. As I am sitting there digesting, I watch a fly settle on a morsel of burger and ketchup. Even the flies have it good in America. Think about it. They are in the lap of luxury. Could it really be any better than this? I doubt it.

I know some people think that you have to be high to enjoy yourself. I am high on life. I just need to share my good cheer with the rest of the world. I think that was Sparky's ultimate goal. He just got sidetracked by his own genius. For Ramon it is different. He always has his riding. Something that physical keep him honest. Even if things get out of hand, he always comes back to that discipline. I wish I had a skill like his. I know what I want for my life. I'm just not sure how to get it.

I am dancing on a volcano. This party can't last. I am waiting for it to blow. That's what you get living near a fault line. Now it is starting to make sense for me. That's why so many people live the fast life out here.

I realize that I'm going to run out of money.

"Ramon, I don't think that I can pay my way any more. I only have a little bit of money left. I want to save that. I do have expenses."

"You have to pay your way. Let me talk to them down at the club."

The club is hid away in Bel Air. The next day Ramon has a proposal.

"Can you do lawns?"

"I drove a lawn tractor at home."

"You're hired."

I'm put on the grounds crew. My rudimentary Spanish helps in talking with the other workers. It is hot work. We just don't cut lawns. We do shrubs. We plant. We lay sod. Every second it's more back-breaking work. It's hard to do when we see so many of the patrons lounging in the sun. I guess that's their payoff for working even harder than us. I am learning a new lesson.

When I get home, Ramon is still expecting me to do my chores. I try to manage. When will it end. He no longer invites me out to parties. He thinks that I need to keep occupied every second of the day. This is no life. Happy days are no longer here!

I try to socialize with my fellow workers. I have difficulty understanding the jokes. But I play along. They find all my facial expressions entertaining. I am becoming one of them. I am accepted.

Today I am using a tractor to tow some sod over to one of the fields. The sun is bearing down on me. It is positively unbearable. I am sweating everywhere. The sun is seeping in my pores and mixes with the mud. I feel caked with it as I unload each clod. I almost fall as I drop them on the ground. I straighten myself out only to start the process over. The sweat is getting in my eyes. I rub it with my shirt.

I shower at work, but I still need another one when I get home. Ramon catches me lounging by the pool.

"There's a hell of a lot of work to get done here. And you're taking it easy."

I try to explain how hard a day I had at work.

"I was dealing with some Chilean diplomat. He was screaming at me. Something about his wife. It was horrendous. I don't want to hear about your problems."

I just listen to him and nod. I fix another cold drink for myself.

Each day keep getting worse. On a good day, I can ride the tractor across the lawn. I spent some times on my hands and knees weeding. I only have to look forward another day of the same.

“If things don’t improve, Benny, I’ll have to talk to me.”

“You are talking to me. You’re getting like everyone in LA. They never say what they really mean.”

“I’m your damn brother. Don’t talk to me like that.”

“Ramon, I am not used to this.”

“Do you think that someone is going to pay you to lounge around the pool all day?”

I could use a guardian angel. I pass out while watching the big TV. When I wake up, it is six AM, and I have to head off for work.

By the end of the week, things are getting tricky at the Agency. I’m actually brought in for some questions about Sparky’s operation. I just sit there and act dumb. It’s not really my place to rat out anyone.

I have this one agent lecturing, “You went across the border and back.”

“I was just in the car. I was doing my brother a favor.”

Sparky gets some kind of lateral promotion. It’s a sort of punishment. He becomes director of a file office in Hawaii. He is going from one of the most bustling offices to a place where only a little bit is happening.

I am afraid that heads are going to roll, and Ramon is going to suffer.

“I’ve got a vacation of sorts for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve got you some time off at the club. You’ll have your job back when we come back in town.”

“Where am I going to get the money to take time off?”

“I’ll front you. They’re sending me to Palm Springs until things blow over. It’s not going to be so bad. I’ll get to keep my job here. We just have to wait for things to quiet down.”

“Aren’t you worried? They asked me all kinds of questions when they brought me in.”

“They’re doing a review of my work. It’s all part of this investigation of Sparky’s operation. One of his rivals is behind. But it’s not going to last. I hardly worked for him. They love what I do. And Sparky still has loads of friends in the Agency.”

“Are you going to lose the house?”

“It’s all temporary.”

I had been getting a little scared to listen to him detail his plans, I welcome anything to get me out of the back-breaking yard work. I guess that I’m lucky my job will be waiting for me when I get back.

They put Ramon up in this luxury hotel. It has a small golf course and two swimming pools. The one pool is connected to a water slide. There’s a bar at the far side of the pool. And a small lake filled with gold fish. This is supposed to be in the middle of the desert.

“I’d love to have you stay here with me. But I have to meet this oil executive here. I can’t have you in the way. It might look messy.”

He is in a palace. As my consolation, I’m put up in a Motel 6 across town. At least the

place feels cool. This is a world where the air conditioning never comes off. Artificial, it keeps out the world even if it is running down inside the room. I see a dead roach on the bathroom floor. There's a hole in the wall near the tub. The room has a musty smell. But I will live with it.

I head out to the pool. It looks like there's something dead on the bottom. Cleverly the water is salty. Maybe I'm not tasting salt. It could be something else.

We are truly in the desert here. It's quite a change from LA. There's a truck stop right next to the hotel. They feed this oasis with everything a heart could desire. How else could they maintain so many gold courses in such a small area. Whose idea was it to put golf courses in the desert. I can imagine hitting a gold ball in the 120 degree heat.

"It's cool in the morning. You can get a round in before it heats up."

My brother pays for a cab ride over to his hotel.

"Benny, I've got some time. I thought that I'd treat you to dinner."

The black sheep is allowed to graze among the fortunate ones.

Palm Springs seems like the outtakes of Hollywood glory. All the actors of old have come here to deposit their bones. There are loads of retirement communities for the wealthy. An auto executive from Michigan can settle himself in style in a land where snow is an unknown

"You can see the snow-tipped mountains over there."

"It is peaceful staring out at the desert." I lose myself in the desert panorama. This reminds me of the place that they first brought me for interrogation.

The next morning I am left on my own. Ramon is off to the nearby polo fields. He will hook up with his contact there. Then he will have more meetings back at his hotel. The finely manicured lawns keep out the heat of everyday life. Sitting by the pool everyone pretends that leisure makes this all possible.

I am benefitting at the far end of this food chain. There's a guy in this hotel who seems to be living here. He's with a woman who has seen the ages. Someone who gets a deep sun tan into her eighties. They spend the morning puffing cigarettes outside their room. I am a little nervous to say hello. They remind of the sort who might kidnap me just for a lark. I nod in a friendly manner, as I bring my magazine to read by the pool.

I head out to the vending machine in the middle of the night. At first, I can't get my drink. Then I hit the machine and I get a bonus Dr. Pepper plus the Sprite that I ordered. I feel that I have won the soft drink wars.

My buddies are moving stuff out at this time. I know that they'll be back later in the night. It would probably be illegal if they actually had something to trade. Sparky could have used some types like this. It would have given both of them a purpose in life. Maybe they are communicating with space aliens in the desert. I can't figure out how they get their money.

The next morning they are again by the door with cigarettes in their mouth. I look over at the gas station. There is a mix of exhaust fumes and heat. The haze is already thick.

Just down the road. 2-Go Burgers boasts of a full-pound burger. I decide to try one. I need to be wheeled back to my room.

I go for a long walk to get some exercise. It's a beautiful day. Already very hot for Palm.

That evening Ramon brings by a case of 24 Coronas and a giant bag of tortilla chips. He's wants to be nice. He's lounging on my bed

“You never thought it would turn out like this.”

I don't have the vaguest idea what he's talking about. I'm stuck in a cheap motel while he's in the lap of luxury. The place is a mess. They only have one station of Showtime and no other premium stations. And the pool looks like the breeding ground for the Creature from the Lagoon.

“At least the air conditioning works!”

“Right Ramon, until America experiences the power outage from hell. Do you have any idea what it take for the upkeep of this desert community? It's a total inversion of environmentally friendly.”

“You got a great burger today. What more can you complain about? Do you want to open the chips.”

They're barbecue style. They go great with the cold beer.

“I'm glad thought about the limes.”

“You can't drink Corona without them.”

We both laugh. I guess he is right. This is the life.

I do find a movie on USA. It's some high school thing about what kids will do to get into the right college.

Ramon drinks another beer.

“Well, I've got to head back to civilization. I'll be in touch.”

I head over to the convenient store to play arcade video games. I see a trucker playing next to me.

“You live here.”

“No, I live in LA with my brother.”

“What are you doing out here?”

“He's doing contract work for the government.”

“I wish I had one of those jobs.”

“That's what I tell him all the time.”

“It probably beats driving. What do you do?”

“I have been doing some landscaping. But it's not me. Especially in the summer.”

“I love to go to the beach in the summer. Look at the ladies.”

I can't tell what his intentions are. But he gives me the strangest look.

“You want to come have a beer in my truck.”

“I'm going to head back to the room. My brother is supposed to call in the morning.”

I may seem like a suspicious type. But I don't want to know what goes on in that truck.

A couple of days later I get call from Ramon.

“Come meet for lunch.”

“Are you going to pick me up?”

“Get a bus.”

The buses run every two hours. Miss your bus and you've got to wait forever for the next. I time the schedule just right. I walk over to the stop. One of the workers from Taco Bell is just getting off of work. He's got his lunch with him to eat at home. He has to make sure that he gets this bus. With what he earns, he can't afford a car. I can't imagine this being me. But it might be.

I get on the bus. There's a friendly talkative girl in the first seat. She is conversing with an elderly woman.

"My son is in Philly right now with my Mom. I can only take it so long at home. It's like she judges me. Too much drama there. It's the alcohol. It just makes people crazy."

A homeless man is sitting next to her. She graciously offers him her change.

"You've got to watch it out there. It's going to be a hot day. Stay in the shade while you can."

I wish that I had taken her advice. I get off the bus at the wrong stop. I look up to see the mountains looking down at me. The city blocks go on forever. I know where Ramon is supposed to meet me. I look at it on the map. As I walk, it gets hotter and hotter. The mountains are still in the distance looking down.

I walk by the airport and see planes circling the runway in the distance. They make an impressive sight against the mountainous heights. Here we are down in this valley, our oasis hope.

I can almost touch what I see. But it is all out of my grasp. I am reminded of this with each step that I take. Since I have taken an early bus, I am hardly late—fifteen minutes. But my brother takes a little fit about it, "I'm buying you dinner, and you're almost an hour late."

"You've got a drink there. It's hardly been that terrible to wait a little while. I had to walk in the hot sun."

He can see the sweat dripping from my shirt.

"If I had known that you would be late, I would have offered you a ride."

"Thanks for telling me now. What's going on?"

"I'm going to be finished here soon. I've heading back to LA."

"I'm glad."

"You should be able to get your job back."

Thanks heavens for small favors.

My brother actually takes the time to drop me back at the hotel.

"I'm going to stop by the casino before I go to my hotel."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"Not until later. I'm going to get some riding in at the club."

"It's a little hot for that."

"I'll wait until the sun goes down. Then I'll shower and change for dinner. My client wants to see me ride."

My favorite tenants are smoking outside their room. I say hello and then look down. I don't want to make eye contact. They might finally abduct me.

I've got a few Coronas left. They are on ice. I drink one and fall asleep. I watch some movie on TBS about a spy. They always give you so much movie to start and then the last ten minutes is broken up with a half hour of commercials. It's hard being a low-rent spy.

I think about the delights that I have seen since coming to America. So many things to see and touch. It is all like on TV. But you have to pay for it. You really can't hold on to it unless you can pay. They make you want it so badly that you'll do anything to get it. That's how they get you hooked working. Then when you get a little bit, you gobble it up like a glutton. You want more.

A quarter pound of ground beef isn't enough. You want a pound. And you can get it. Why stop there when you can own the world? I just need my own car.

When we finally leave Palm, I am feeling slightly nostalgic. I never got to play the luxury gold courses, but I soaked in the desert air. I realized what these communities would be like without automobiles. Even that freaky couple had an old van full of their rickety belongings.

It is quite a change when Ramon pulls up in his BMW. I am back at the country club. He races us back into the LA smog and the terrible traffic. I feel like I am going home,.

I am afraid that he is going to expect me to do chores when we get home. I have been blessed.

"Benny, I knew that we wouldn't be here for two weeks. I hired out some people to get things ship shape. I need it to stay like this."

I feel like saluting. At least I have a place to stay. Tomorrow, I'll find out about my job.

I get a cold Heineken from the fridge and find a lawn chair near the pool. It's great to call this home. I wish that it was no other way.

"Benny, I got some real work done. I think that they'll be really glad to have me back working in LA."

"How could they get on without you," I ask with a tone of cynicism.

Ramon doesn't get it. He takes me literally.

"Most of our contacts were in Palm."

"I'm glad that you could truly be of service."

"It does pay our way here."

I wonder should I smile.