



Summer Work by Allen Coyle

FLYMF December 2004, The Rampant Consumerism Issue, Volume 1 Issue 10

A major problem confronted me: I needed a summer job, but didn't want to work.

I figured I'd done enough ball-busting labor in my life. All through high school, I'd spent every summer as a grunt toting lumber and wielding a hammer to build fancy decks for rich snobs. Now that I had graduated and would be starting college in the Fall, I wanted a job that would permit me to sit on my dead ass and still collect a paycheck every week. Such jobs, of course, are rare. There are only so many people the government can hire.

The second week out of school, following a short leisure period of watching Golden Girls reruns and extensively surfing Internet porno sites, I commenced a grand-scale job search. What I found discouraged me. Every available job required some form of work. The local pizza parlor wanted me to flip dough; Starbucks wanted me to pour coffee; the Post Office wanted me to sort mail; the crack dealer on Sixth Street wanted me to drudge up potential clients. No one was in the market for a lazy, feckless high school graduate. The free market indeed. Stupid capitalist society.

I would have taken the summer off, but I needed the money. Not for college, you understand; my parents would foot the bill for that. No, what I wanted was a 17-inch Apple Powerbook computer with a G4 processor and a Mac OS X 10.3 Panther operating system. A sweet little toy. Unfortunately, one would cost about three thousand dollars. My parents wouldn't foot the bill for that. They told me to make do with my Atari ST.

So you could see the predicament. I wanted a relaxation break before college, but I also wanted that Powerbook. Quite a conundrum. After two weeks and a failed job search, I thought about surrendering myself back to the deck company. Perhaps I could endure just one more hellish summer and its comprising ingredients: searing back, aching arms, the taunts and chants of my fellow coworkers.

"Get your ass over here with that skill saw!"

"You can't even lift that rail? What a pansy!"

"Don't nail your dick to the floor. Course, you'd need a smaller hammer to do that."

God. No way. Uh-uh. Couldn't do it. I had to face the truth: Unless a distant relative suddenly died and left me a wad of cash, I'd have to live without the Powerbook. That'd mean using the university computers to download porno.

I'd given up all hope. But then I talked to Matt.

I rarely saw my cousin. He was already a sophomore in college. But one Saturday in early June, in my aunt and uncle's backyard for a small-scale family reunion, I spotted him sitting by the patio spa, sipping on a bottle of beer. He looked the same as he always had: mop of greasy hair, wide, opaque eyes, random patches of a beard he had been growing since the age of fifteen. I sauntered over to him, bored out of my mind. Perhaps he could give me some pointers on scoring with college chicks. God knows I needed all the help I could get.

He nodded as I approached. "Pete," he said, smiling. "You got dragged along to this too, I see."

My folks reminded me often that parental control doesn't cease when you enter college. Matt was living proof of this fact. His folks paid his tuition. They told him to jump, he asked how high.

He told me he'd been doing well in school. It was neat, he said, to be able to show up to class drunk with puke stains on your shirt. Professors didn't concern themselves with their pupils' personal appearance. This sounded like good news. High school teachers always chewed me out for my puke stain oversights.

I asked him about the chick situation.

"No prospects," he said, looking up at the sky, forlorn. "To be honest, girls don't change when they go to college. They still don't give you a second look."

Profound advice. I'm not sure how the topic of jobs came up. It probably started when I asked Matt what he was doing over the summer.

"Working," he said. He didn't offer anything more.

"Doing what?"

He shrugged. "Stuff."

He didn't want to tell me. Oh well. His problem. Maybe he was a male whore and too embarrassed to tell me.

"The thing is," I said, "I need an easy job for the summer. I used to work construction, but I can't do that anymore. I got lazy."

Matt looked at me. "You need a job?"

"Yeah." I looked back. "Any employment opportunities where you're at?" I wouldn't mind being a male whore, if that was the case. I'd get to lie down on the job, at least. Meet some interesting people.

He scrunched his lips, then motioned me closer. I hunkered down till my face was level with his.

"You're family," he said. "I ain't supposed to be spouting this around, but I like you. Blood means something."

"You got a job for me?" I asked.

He nodded, looked around as if searching for a network of spies. All I could see were drunken relatives.

"You heard of the State Department of Transportation?" he asked.

"DOT? Yeah."

"I work for them."

"Oh." I felt my chest shrink with disappointment. "I already tried the state. They don't hire without college experience."

"No, listen to me on this," Matt said, whispering now. I leaned forward even more. Someone would probably think we were making out. "You know how the DOT exists?"

I shrugged. "I dunno. We pay taxes, they fix roads."

"Right. But there's more to it than that." He took a quick gulp of beer. "The DOT does fix roads. They also install stoplights, widen existing highways, stuff like that. But they need a reason. They can't just go out and reseal some street unless there's documented justification."

"Uh-huh." I had already lost interest in the conversation.

"Listen: In order to sustain itself, the DOT needs money. Tax money. And lots of it. In order for them to get money, there needs to be problems with the roads." He grinned. "Now, what do you know of that causes road problems?"

I didn't know where this was going. "Traffic?"

"Traffic! Exactly!" Matt's eyes shined with the excitement of a two-year-old. "When traffic clutters roadways, people complain. They demand new roads. They willingly fork over tax money. The DOT then takes this money, pockets a good portion of it, and then uses the rest to put up warning signs or to repaint lane dividers. The DOT needs traffic. The more the merrier. Basically, the more traffic on the streets, the more people complain, and the more money gets handed over to correct the problems. But it's all a big scheme. Nothing gets fixed. The roads remain the same. But the higher-ups at the DOT collect more cash than you could ever imagine."

I stared at him, tried to tell if he was lying. I didn't see any telltale signs. He appeared serious. "Are you a part of this?" I asked.

He grinned again. "You'd never know it, but I'm one of the hundreds of people who create traffic. Purposefully. The DOT pays me to literally drive around and keep the roads clogged."

"You do this?" It sounded too absurd.

"You wouldn't believe how many people do it. Why do you think it's such a hassle to go across town? Think about it. Weekdays at two you get off from school. Most people should be at work, right? You'd think the roads would be empty. But they're not, are they?"

"No," I said. "They're always swarmed. I've wondered about that, too. Why are all those people driving at that hour? It's not lunch, it's not five o'clock. Shouldn't they be at work?"

He smiled. "They are at work, Pete. That's what they do. They create traffic. Their sole purpose is to irritate people like you and get you to complain to the DOT. And then your taxes go to correct the problem."

"Only the problem never gets fixed."

He nodded. "And what I'm telling you," he said, "is that there's always room for one more. Think about it. You said you wanted an easy job. What's easier than driving around aimlessly?"

I stared at him with my mouth hanging open.

Matt brushed away his empty beer bottle and stood up. "If you're interested, see me tomorrow morning," he said. "My parents' house. Six o'clock, sharp." He immersed himself in the crowd. I watched him leave, starting to think maybe I would get that Powerbook after all.

I reached Matt's house by five forty-five. His car sat idling in the driveway. He emerged from the house just as I pulled up.

"Training day," he said, smiling. "I'm glad you showed up." He motioned to his car. "Have a seat."

I climbed into the warm, stuffy interior as Matt slid behind the wheel. He backed out of the driveway and peeled off down the road. We hit the highway and started to cruise toward town.

"Pretty sparse out right now," I said.

"The major rush doesn't start until seven." Matt tuned the radio to a morning show and kept the volume low. "That's when our job starts."

We stopped at a 7-11 for gas, coffee, and snacks. It was about six-thirty when we finally left. As we pulled onto the highway, I noticed the traffic level had slightly increased.

"Are these your people?" I asked, motioning out the window.

Matt shrugged. "You never know. Everyone drives his or her own car. You can't tell if a person has a legitimate reason to be on the road, or if they're one of us."

We came to a stoplight at the intersection of 40 and Peaks. Matt pulled into the left turn lane, his signal blinking. A line of cars built up behind us.

My cousin turned to give me a wicked grin. "Lesson One. You ready?"

I shrugged. "I got to see how this works."

When the light turned green, Matt stayed still. He counted out nine full seconds before a car behind him honked. At that point, he lightly tapped the accelerator and plodded onto Peaks Street. Three cars made it through the light.

"Damn," I said, turning my head. "There's about fifty cars sitting there now."

"Lesson One," Matt said, "is never going when the light turns green. You want the turn lane to build up and make people wait through two red lights." He smiled. "It pisses them off."

We turned off of Peaks Street about a mile later and swerved back onto the main highway. Matt veered into the fast lane and cut his speed down to twenty miles an hour. The posted limit was fifty-five. The car behind us slammed to a halt, nearly missing our bumper. Within seconds, a parade of commuters were trapped behind us as Matt slogged down the road. He put on his right blinker, but didn't move.

"This is the oldest trick in the book," my cousin told me. "Get in the fast lane and sit. Nothing pisses people off more than being stuck behind a slowpoke when they're on their way to work."

"What's the signal for?" I asked.

"It's a bluff. It makes the people behind me think I'm going to switch lanes and get out of the way. But I've got no intention of doing that. It's my job to be in their way."

"I can't believe you get paid for this," I said, turning my head around. A large truck behind us flashed his lights on and off repeatedly. The driver saw me and snarled.

"Ah, perfect!" Matt exclaimed, peering forward. "A barrier." I followed his pointed finger. Up ahead, a tractor trailer hauling smashed, pancake cars chugged in the slow lane, belching out exhaust. Matt gradually increased his speed. An angry motorist flew around our right and cut us off, flying down the empty highway ahead of us. He extended his entire arm out the window to flip us off.

"Damn," Matt said. "I let that one slip through."

The cars behind us pulled away as we picked up speed. I started to wonder what kind of game Matt was playing.

I found out soon enough. He pulled alongside the tractor trailer so that our gaze was level with its front tires. The people behind us probably expected Matt to pass it up. Instead, he slowed back down to twenty, almost perfectly matching the tractor's speed.

"This is the best scenario," Matt informed me. "Whenever you can, find a slow industrial vehicle to pull up next to. Now nobody can pass me on the right and get around."

I looked in the rearview mirror. The line of cars behind us stretched beyond the horizon. I turned back to Matt. "This shit happens to me every day. I always just thought this town was full of ignorant drivers." I shook my head. "You guys actually do this on purpose."

"Yep." Matt gave me a smug grin. "That's the name of the game. It pays."

"Doesn't it seem sort of evil?" I asked. "I mean, we're screwing with people who've done nothing to us. All they want to do is get to work on time."

"I wouldn't say it's evil. It's just a scheme. Hopefully some of these guys will call the DOT and complain about the traffic. When that happens, the city government will allot more funds for improving roads." Matt took his foot off the gas and let the car slow down even more. "The higher ups get their money, and I get some cash under the table. It's a business proposition, nothing more."

"I gotta be a part of this," I said. "Where do I sign? Do I have to apply?"

Matt laughed. "Hold your horses there, Pete. I haven't finished training you yet."

I rode with Matt as he pulled similar stunts during the eight and nine o'clock rush hour traffic. He turned in front of cars, cut people off, traveled well below the speed limit, and helped to clog the roads. He taught me how to wait until the last possible moment before swerving in front of somebody in order to slow them down. He demonstrated the importance of slamming on your brakes for no apparent reason. He showed me how to occupy two lanes at one time, to stop on the highway and turn without using the turn lane, to slow down a mile before a green light so that it turned red by the time you reached it. I observed his every move and took copious mental notes. I had to unlearn everything my parents and common sense had taught me. I was accustomed to driving the speed limit, allowing faster traffic to pass, and using the turn lane and shoulder to pull off the highway. These instincts, of course, would get me nowhere in this line of work.

"Of course, you're not limited to these particular maneuvers," Matt said. "Your main objective is to hamper the steady flow of traffic. If you can devise a means to accomplish this goal, then do it. However," he continued, "under no circumstance are you to intentionally cause an accident. It's fine to pretend your car has died in an intersection and halt cars. But ramming

into people, driving them off the road, or administering hand gestures is strictly forbidden. If a person is dead or injured, you understand, it's much more difficult for them to call in with a complaint."

"What if someone jots down my license number?" I asked. "Can't they call the cops on me?"

"You will submit your vehicle information to the DOT," Matt said. "Most of the police are well-informed of the scheme. They'll look the other way if they catch you performing any traffic violation. Their job is to ticket those who roar around us and give us gestures. It helps to piss the public off."

Matt drove me around town until about three, when he took me back to his house. The five o'clock shift, he explained, would be hitting the highways soon.

"You've got to be really on the ball to be assigned the five o'clock shift," Matt said. "It's one thing to obstruct people when they're on their way to work. But people are more likely to get pissed when you mess with them on their way home. You got to know how to congest the roads without someone losing it and killing you."

When we got back to his place, Matt reached under his seat and gave me some forms to sign. I jotted down my vehicle information, my license plate number, my name, social security number, and mailing address. I returned the form to Matt, who took it and folded it.

"I'll give this to the powers that be," he said. "But basically, you can assume that you start this Monday. Six o'clock to three. If you're good, they might move you to the five o'clock rush hour shift."

"How will I get paid?" I asked.

"A plain, white envelope will be mailed to your address once a week. It'll contain only cash, nothing more."

"And how much will I get paid?"

My cousin grinned. "Thirty dollars an hour."

"What?" I gasped. "Thirty dollars an hour?"

"Yeah," he said, smiling. "Why not? It's only tax money. But more than that, it's also intended to keep you quiet."

"Keep me quiet?"

“Yeah.” Matt leaned across the seat. He looked from side to side before he whispered: “Listen, under no circumstance are you to talk about this to anybody. You understand? If word of this scheme got out, some very important bureaucrats could get in trouble.”

“Bureaucrats?”

“Yes -- the people who run the DOT. You can’t imagine how much personal wealth this gains for them. If someone talked, he or she would disrupt the lives of some very powerful people.” He leaned closer. “That’s why it’s imperative that you never leak a word of this to anybody. And I mean anybody. Not even your own mother. Tell her you got a job flipping burgers or shoveling shit. Don’t ever tell anyone what you’re doing for a living.”

I nodded. “All right. Sounds fair.” For thirty dollars an hour, I could afford to zip my lips.

“Great.” Matt shook my hand. “Welcome to the club, Pete. I know you’ll do well with us.”

And so that’s how I started working for the DOT.

I started my new job the following Monday. As I cruised down the city’s main highway, I spotted Matt snaking through traffic up ahead. I passed him up, but didn’t wave. To acknowledge him might jeopardize both our careers.

I have to say that I performed quite well. It took some time to develop my new driving habits. I’d often find myself traveling at the speed limit and had to remind myself to slow down. I’d also use my turn signals and then change lanes accordingly. However, I adapted pretty smoothly to the new system, and within a week, I was clogging traffic like a pro.

Sometimes it made me feel bad, but then I’d think of all the cash that arrived in the mail every week, and my qualms would disappear. After awhile, I started to enjoy disrupting people’s driving routines. I’d race ahead a line of traffic, maneuver into the fast lane, slam on my brakes, and halt the procession of commuters to a sluggish pace. I’d slow down to fifteen when I saw a green light ahead, frustrating the drivers behind me. I’d stop on the highway, resist the urge to put on my blinker, then make a sudden turn off the road. My skills improved each day.

I’d finally found what I had been looking for. I thought back to those horrid days of deck building and shuddered. Why

couldn’t I have discovered this job long ago? I’d already banked nearly a thousand bucks. And all I had to do was sit on my dead ass all day. Talk about a cool summer job. Eat your hearts out, deck builders! Eat your hearts out!

Sometime in early July, the dream job crumbled beneath my feet. Knowing my luck, I should have seen it coming. It was all Matt’s fault, really. He called me up one night after dinner, his voice sounding desperate. I had just sat down to play another game of King’s Quest on my Atari ST. I was looking forward to getting my Powerbook and finally being able to play video games made after 1990.

“Matt, what’s wrong?” I asked. He breathed so hard I could barely make out his words.

“Did you hear about the wreck today?” he asked. “With the woman?”

“Yeah.” I’d seen it earlier on the evening news. Someone had cut off a woman while she was driving to lunch. Her car had smacked a tree, throwing her headfirst through the windshield. The reporter had said she was in critical condition, and doctors didn’t know if she would pull through. The culprit had driven off, and no witnesses had seen the offending vehicle.

I suddenly put two and two together. “Oh no. Matt?”

“Yeah, I did it. I don’t know what happened though, man. I guess I just got overconfident. I was going to get in front of her, that’s all, and slow her down. But somehow I pushed her off the road.” He started sobbing.

“Dude,” I said, “get a grip on yourself. It was an accident.”

“I know,” he said. I heard him swallow, trying to regain his composure. “I got to turn myself in. I have to. I can’t live with this on my shoulders.”

“Well, if you feel that’s what you got to do...” I said.

“It is. But before I do, I’m going to break the scheme to the press. This madness has to stop.”

“Oh no.” My heart leapt to my throat. “Matt, listen to yourself. You’re talking crazy here. You don’t want to do that.” I still hadn’t made enough money for that computer yet.

“No, don’t try to talk me out of it! I’ve made up my mind. I’m heading out right now. This whole thing’s going to end. It’s destroyed too many lives.”

“It’s just one woman!” I exclaimed. “C’mon, she isn’t that important. Think of all the money we’re making.”

“Goodbye, Pete. I’m sorry. Wish me luck.”

“I don’t wish you luck. In fact, I wish you bad luck. I think you’re being irrational. It was just one accident, man. She’ll pull through. Watch, you’ll see. Don’t ruin this thing just because of her! She probably deserved it!”
The phone clicked in my ear.

“Shit.” I sank down in my chair. There just went the best summer job of my life.

Channel Four broke the story the next night. Immediately after, the police opened an investigation looking into the Department of Transportation. A grand jury indicted the department director and several officials lower down the food chain. There were even speculations that the state governor was involved. The scheme went up higher than I imagined.

I hadn’t worried too much at first, but after the indictment, several bodies started to appear around town. Each death offered no clues, only questions. It didn’t take a genius to figure out what was going on: The higher ups didn’t intend to take a fall of any kind. As such, all potential testifiers had to be eliminated.

I decided an expedition to Mexico was in order. I knew my parents would object, so I scrawled them a note and left it on the kitchen counter, telling them I’d be back in twenty years. I packed a duffel bag with some clothes, snacks, and porn, and darted out the front door.

A black Cadillac pulled into the driveway just as I was dashing to my car. I spotted it and tried to switch direction, but I stumbled over my bag, whose straps had tangled in my legs. My feet slipped from under me and I smacked down onto the pavement. Damn. Ouch!

I craned my neck from my fallen position to see two men dressed in business suits and shades stepping out of the car.

“Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit!” I scrambled to my feet and pounded to the backyard, tossing my duffel bag behind. I heard heavy footsteps trailing me. I ducked through the gate, tore my feet

through the gravel, and jumped onto the back wall that led to the alley behind the house. I scampered up like a rat, tearing flesh from my knees and scratching my hands on the coarse texture of the wall.

A bullet whistled past my ear as I jumped over. I fell onto a trashcan, spilling both myself and a pile of foul garbage onto the ground. I heard grunting and cursing behind the wall. A head appeared. Then a hand. The hand clutched a gun.

I scuttled to my feet with banana peels in my pants and an egg carton up my ass. Two more bullets whistled past me. I pounded my feet against the pavement, my sides searing. I’d gotten out of shape since my deck-building days.

At the far end of the alley, a car suddenly swerved and blocked the way out.

I stopped in my tracks. I peered over my shoulder, saw the two men galloping toward me. Shit. They had me sandwiched. I was done for.

“Pete! Get in!” I turned. Matt leaned out the car, waving me forward. Holy crap. Salvation!

I hustled toward the car and dove in through the open window. Matt slammed the car into reverse and squealed away from the alley. The men took aim and fired, blowing out the windshield and the front headlights. Matt stepped on the gas, and sped down the empty side street.

I lay panting in the seat, sweat pouring down my face.

Matt gripped the wheel and shook his head. “I shouldn’t have started this shit, man. I stirred up a hornet’s nest.”

I finally regained some of my strength. Every limb on my body trembled. “You’re running too?” I said, gasping.

“Yeah.” Matt twisted his mouth. “That piece of shit woman made a full recovery. Now she’s got a civil lawsuit pending against my ass. I got to flee the country, or else she’ll own me.”

“I’m with you,” I said. “We’ve got to get to Mexico. Fast.”

“Right.” Matt kept the pedal to the floor, the scenes outside whizzing past in a hazy blur of yellows and browns. He reached over to the radio. “How about some music? Even fugitives need to rock out.”

I sank back in the seat. “Yeah. We need something to get our minds off the situation.”

“Cool.” Matt turned the knob. We heard a click.

Then the car exploded.

I came out okay. Matt came out in a million bloody pieces. Needless to say, I didn’t see him after that.

The police responded to the scene and took me in while they mopped Matt off the road. In exchange for testifying against the DOT higher-ups, I’d be placed in the Witness Protection Program. I’d never see my parents, my car, or my Atari ST ever again. Bummer.

I can’t tell you where they set me up, but I did my best to resume a normal life. I enrolled in a university and worked summers building decks for rich snobs. When I look back, I see how badly the experience scarred me. But I did learn something. Quite a few things, actually.

One: It’s never good to be lazy. A good work ethic takes you a long way.

Two: Don’t get messed up in government conspiracies. They really screw your life up.

Three, and perhaps the most important of all: Chicks don’t change when they enroll in college. They still won’t give you a second look.