

Final Count

By Joseph A. Mootz

forty-five minutes of non-work. I gave up after a few minutes. It was too early in the morning for any heavy math.

"Can you turn down the AC," Sharon yelled up front to Red. I was about to object to the action until I looked over and saw her shivering under a light coat draped across her chest and shoulders.

"Where are you from if this is too cold for you?" I asked.

"Tucson, born and bred," she replied with a smile.

The blast of air from the vents stopped and the van fell silent except for the sound of air rushing by outside. I stared outside as a pinkish hue began to appear above the mountains in the distance.

"How many days until you turn twenty-one," Red yelled back to Sharon.

"Thirteen," she yelled back.

"You aren't going to go out that night are you?" Red yelled back.

"Oh no," Sharon said. "I'll probably stay home with my parents."

Red, Harry and Sharon all erupted into laughter.

"I'm trying to remember back to my twenty-first birthday," Harry said.

"I'm trying to remember who I was with at the time. I think I was in Montana with my first wife. I think we stayed inside. Too cold to go out in the middle of winter up there."

"Were the buffalo still roaming the prairie back then?" Sharon said giggling with glee.

"No but I sure could have used a Buffalo skin coat when it was ten below outside," Harry said.

I thought back to an incident that had happened a few years earlier on this same stretch of highway. A woman had been out celebrating her twenty-first birthday. From the news reports it appeared that she had been by herself most of the evening and had made the rounds of all the local hot spots trying new drinks as she went.

Shortly after midnight a state police officer had parked his vehicle in the passing lane of the six lane freeway. He had set out a number of cones and flares and flashing lights for hundreds of yards behind his vehicle to warn drivers to move to the right lane.

He sat in his car waiting for a tow truck to clear a disabled vehicle from the passing lane. The vehicle had been involved in an alcohol related traffic accident earlier. As he filled out his report, the newly turned twenty-one year old woman plowed into the back of his Ford Crown Victoria crumpling the driver's side and passenger's side doors and trapping the officer inside. A few seconds later the gas tank on the vehicle exploded and burned the officer alive. The woman was still awaiting trial for homicide.

I felt the urge to warn Sharon of the dangers of drinking and driving, but instead stared out the window as Red pulled the van off the interstate and onto the freeway that led to the small military town south of Tucson. I felt a trickle of sweat run down my spine as the sunrise turned the eastern horizon a pinkish-orange.

"It's another tequila sunrise," I whispered to myself.

"Let's go people," Red barked from the driver's seat of the van.

Matilda and Mary casually extinguished their cigarettes in the ash bin at the front of the dollar store and then just as casually waddled towards the van. I could see the sweat trickling down the side of Matilda's face as the hot afternoon sun beat down on her from above. Sharon was sitting next to me in the back seat and the air conditioning vents blew cool air on the back of our necks as Harry opened up the side door to allow the ladies to enter.

"That went well," Matilda said as she took her seat in front of me.

"I thought we'd be here six hours and it only took four," Mary said.

Harry squeezed into the seat next to the women and slammed the door shut.

"What'd you expect," I chimed in. "They sent the 'A' team down here today."

"Yeah, well what about all those re-counts you had," Mary said.

"You know I have trouble verifying any areas over a hundred," I said.

"They should make the areas smaller."

"Or you should learn how to count," Mary said.

"That bin of loose golf balls was the worst," I said. "I must have counted over a thousand of them at six for a dollar. If I never see another golf ball, it will be too soon."

"I break them down into smaller parts when they get that big," Sharon said to me quietly. "I separate them out into boxes, count each box, write the number down on a tag and add them up."

"I'll have to try that next time," I said.

We were back on the highway that led from Sierra Vista to the interstate. I stared out the window into the green desert illuminated by the harsh sunlight as the cool air blew on the back of my neck. I wondered what Sharon was thinking about at that moment as she huddled under her lightweight coat. She was an attractive girl as are all hardworking decent women that age.

I wondered what her family life was like. I had overheard her speaking of taking care of her grandmother and of a close friend of hers that was

with the entry door. The pouch hanging from her belt bounced up and down against her thigh as she walked.

"We'll pick them up off the interstate," Red replied. "Let's go."

Mary took a final drag from her cigarette, smashed the butt on the asphalt with her foot, and followed behind Matilda; her pouch bouncing against her thigh in unison with her mentor.

The two women entered the van and greeted me politely. I nodded my head in response and was grateful that they both sat in the middle seat rather than next to me in back. I knew my rear end was not as small as it should be, but the thought of sharing the limited seating in the back with those two behinds squirming for more room was not pleasant. I got a whiff of the smell of cigarette and sweat from the women before the vents behind me blew the odor away and I was ever more grateful that they chose not to sit in the back.

"Boy that dollar store didn't go very well last night," Matilda said to Red.

"What happened," Red snapped back in his usual gruff tone. He put the van in reverse and looked deep into his rear view mirrors as he backed the van out of its parking spot.

"We didn't get out of there until after ten," Mary said. "We had to re-count almost every area Mike and Barry counted."

"Who are Mike and Barry?" Red asked. He pulled the van up to the parking lot exit and looked both ways before pulling out into the deserted street.

"Oh a couple of new guys," Matilda said. "They didn't know what the hell they were doing."

"Why the hell didn't you send them home," Red said.

"Everything was going along fine until we started doing the printouts," Matilda said.

"The totals were right on their area tickets, but they were messing up on the shelf numbers, the area numbers and the departments," Mary chimed in. "God what a nightmare. I had to recount five areas myself. They ought to be let go."

"I talked to Diane last night," Matilda said. "She is going to call them in for some remedial training."

I smiled and stared out the window into the dark morning as we drove past a cemetery on the three lane street lit up by yellow overhead lights. I thought back to my own struggle with the machine they called the "Assessor." It was no simple task to memorize the sequence of numbers and function keys that needed to be pressed for any particular store. Each store audit began with a speech approximately two minute longs that went over the unique sequence for the store in question. Experienced auditors seemed to intuitively know the correct sequence and I was starting to see a pattern develop myself. It was not until a kindly old team leader named Harry clued me in to take notes during the meeting that I began to reduce the struggle with memorization and increase my accuracy and productivity.

We were on the interstate now traveling at seventy five miles an hour past warehouses, baseball fields, and RV and mobile home parks. I wondered if I should put on my seatbelt, but noticed no one else was wearing theirs so I let it go.

I continued to stare out the window as Matilda told an off color joke to Mary and Mary snickered politely in response. A woosh of air cooled the back of my neck as it blasted through the vents behind me. I took a swig of water from the small plastic bottle I carried in my pouch.

Red navigated the van off of the freeway to the back parking lot of a small truck stop just outside of town. The company had generously provided pickup spots on each side of town for employees to congregate at rather than make the drive into town to the office when a job required out of town travel. Each employee was responsible for their own transportation for in-town jobs.

As Red pulled the van to a stop nearby, I recognized the tall lanky frame of kindly old Harry as he stepped out of his bright red two-seater sports car. He held his black belt and pouch in his left hand as he approached the van door. I also recognized the short squat frame and pretty face of Sharon as she approached the van from behind Harry.

Harry slid the van door open and stood back as Sharon climbed in and sat down next to me in the back. Harry squeezed his thin frame in the middle seat next to Mary and then slammed the van door shut.

"How'd your shoe store go last night?" Red asked Harry. He pulled the van out of the parking lot and accelerated up the on ramp to the interstate.

"Real well," Harry said. "We were done in two hours and fifteen minutes. If we keep that up Diane will cut me down to just three people to do that store."

I thought about what Harry said. I was still trying to understand the business. I knew that all employees were paid a minimum of three hours no matter how long the job took. I assumed GRITS negotiated a set price per store so the only variable in the cost would be labor. I tried to calculate the break even point at which it would be more economical for GRITS to send three people rather than four to a store if they were paying four people for

I pulled into the grocery store parking lot and looked for a likely spot to meet the other members of the audit team. It was my first out of town job and at 3:30 a.m. I was a little early for the four o'clock meeting time. Nevertheless, I spotted a van with someone wearing a red sport shirt in the passenger's seat. I recognized the shirt as the familiar uniform of an auditor for Grocery Retail Inventory and Taxation Specialists or GRITS as we liked to call the company. Auditors were the lowest employees on the totem pole and wore red shirts; team leaders wore gray shirts while managers wore casual business attire of their own choosing.

I pulled my car alongside the van, shut off the engine, and grabbed my black pouch and belt from the passenger's seat as I exited my worn out compact car. When I worked as an engineer for a large company, I used to put a lot of pressure on myself to do the best job I could and was always over-prepared for even the smallest task. Now that I was living the life of a starving artist and only working part time, I could feel myself mellowing out. My performance at work did not mean that much to me anymore.

New situations seemed to bring on that old pressure again. This was my first out of town job for GRITS and I wanted everything to go right. I double-checked my pouch to make sure it contained the requisite pen and pencil and paper tags for marking inventory areas. I was an uptight person and I knew everyone around me sensed that.

I slid the van door open, acknowledged the manager at the steering wheel with a nod of my head and then climbed over the empty middle Barrych into the back seat. The manager had the air conditioning on full blast in an effort to bring the ambient internal temperature down to seventy two degrees from the outside summer morning temperature of eighty.

The manager's name was Red. I had only worked a store with him once before. I had been warned by co-workers that he was a very gruff person. The warning meant little to me as I doubted he could be any more gruff than some of the military people or engineers I had worked with in the past. To me gruffness just meant that he did not put up with any unnecessary antics from his employees. That was one of the things I enjoyed about my new job; that people came in to actually get some work done and not to sit around and wait for the clock to tell them when to go home. We came into a store and almost immediately were out counting and did not stop until the whole store was done. Then we got in our vehicles and went home to our personal lives; such as they were.

Red was talking to a fellow auditor named Bill who was sitting in the passenger seat up front. Bill had helped break me in to the job when we teamed up to count a frozen meat locker my first week at work. The cool air from the air conditioning vents blasting against my neck reminded me of how cold it was in the meat locker even with a heavy coat, hat and gloves. The sound of the rapid rush of air from the vents excluded me from the conversation in the front. I stared out the side window marked with various fingerprints and head-prints from previous occupants of the van. The parking lot was vacant except for a few cars of grocery store employees.

A dirty blue compact station wagon pulled up next to the van and two cigarette smoking rotund females exited. The driver sleepily got out of the car and walked around the front to the driver's door of the van. She was slightly Barryt over as she fought the force of gravity pulling on her large breasts. Her hair was disheveled, her pants and gray shirt were dirty and wrinkled, and her eyeglasses sat crookedly across the bridge of her nose. I recognized her as a team leader named Matilda that had a reputation for being a stickler for making people go by the book when it suited her need to feel like she was in control. She leaned her large rear end against the right front fender of her car and took a long drag of her cigarette.

I recognized the second occupant of the car as Mary, a younger version of Matilda. Her back was not as cricked when she walked and her hair and clothes were not as disheveled but in my mind I could see that in twenty years she would be in the same condition as the matron standing next to her.

"Let's go people," Red barked from the driver's seat after rolling down the window.

"Where is everyone else?" Matilda said as she took a final drag from her cigarette and walked towards the side of the ban

expecting a baby any day. There was no mention of a boyfriend which most women seemed to work into the conversation within a few minutes of meeting me.

I wondered why they did that. I suspected that my loner lifestyle made me so hungry for companionship that whenever I was around other people I gave off the kind of signals that immediately scared women off. It was an involuntary defensive mechanism on their part. They were protecting themselves from unwanted advances from a person that was obviously too needy and would be hard to get rid of if anything ever started up.

She never mentioned school which was a common occupation for people her age that worked part-time for GRITS. It was a good way to put oneself through college, I thought. Flexible and odd hours with the right to refuse any job suited the lifestyle of the student working poor as well as the starving artist.

But the majority of the people I had met that worked for GRITS fell into two categories, the working retired poor, like kindly old Harry, and the burned out trailer park types, like Matilda and Mary, with too many kids too many bills and a dim future. I wanted to find out more about how these people arrived at a station in life so different from my own. I picked up more clues every time I worked with them but the picture was still fuzzy.

Most of the workers were chain smokers and heavy coffee drinkers. I often joked that if it was not for the inevitable hacking of smoker's that started up like clock-work every three hours on a job, the rest of us would never be allowed to take a break. Most of them were women and from the conversations I had overheard most had been divorced at least once, were living with someone they weren't married to at the time, and had teenage kids that were either in trouble at school, in jail or in the military. Their world revolved around their unpredictable and sometimes brutal schedule at GRITS and what they were going to make for supper when they got home.

I had been on jobs manned mostly by trailer parkers that had worked eight jobs in three days with no more than a few hours off at a time and yet they had the same amount of energy as they had when they showed up after two days off; a dull listless kind of energy. Yet their fingers would fly over the ten-key pad on the Assessor much faster than my own fat stubbies could possibly move accurately over such a limited space.

Red turned the van on to the interstate on-ramp and I felt the vehicle accelerate underneath me to eighty miles an hour.

"Another coyote crashed up here the other day," Bill said from the co-pilot's seat. I could barely hear him over the woosh of air blowing past my ears. I knew by "coyote" he meant the people that transported illegal aliens up and down the interstate every day in old worn out pickup trucks.

"The final count was two killed, five injured and twenty more scattered into the desert," Red said. "I wonder how much that is going to cost us taxpayers."

I stared through the window ahead at the small hill the van was climbing. Some small movement up ahead caught my eye. I blinked to try to distinguish what looked like a white blur in the bright blue sky above the hill crest.

"Can you turn the air down," Sharon shouted to Red.

As Red reached over with his right hand to move the lever on the console to the left, time seemed to stop and the white blur ahead came into focus. I stared in disbelief as dozens golf balls bounced down the freeway towards the front of the van. The van and its occupants seemed frozen in time and it took an eternity for the first ball to strike the windshield in front of Red's face.

Time returned to normal and I felt the van tip to the right as Red turned the steering wheel sharply to the left with his left hand and tried to gain his balance enough to return his right hand to the wheel. Suddenly everything in the van was flying in a swirling motion and the bright sunlight faded into darkness.

I awoke to the smell of gasoline and burning rubber. I could hear the sound of a siren in the distance. Sharon's lifeless body lay on top of mine. I felt a drop of liquid drop from her face on to my cheek but could not move my arms to brush it away. I struggled to breathe. The light in the van seemed dim. I realized I was lying on the floor underneath the back seat and the van was sitting at an odd angle tipped to the front and left. I looked towards the front to see the motionless face of kindly old Harry on the floor in front of the middle seat. He was pinned to the floor by the massive carcass of Matilda. The limp arm of Mary hung down over the seat in front of Harry.

I smelled the odor of burning gasoline as a bright orange flame and thick black smoke travel from Harry's feet towards the middle of the van.

"Final count seven dead and a hundred and twenty-five golf balls scattered into the desert," I whispered to myself.

If you would like a printed copy of this document, please reference the above title and send a check or money order for \$2.00 to:

Living the Dream Publishing
8340 N Thornydale #110, PMB 173
Tucson, AZ 85741.