Home

Current Issue

Spring/Summer 2008

Winter/Spring 2008

Autumn 2007

Summer 2007

Spring 2007

Winter 2007

Autumn 2006

Summer 2006

Spring 2006

Winter 2006

Fall 2005

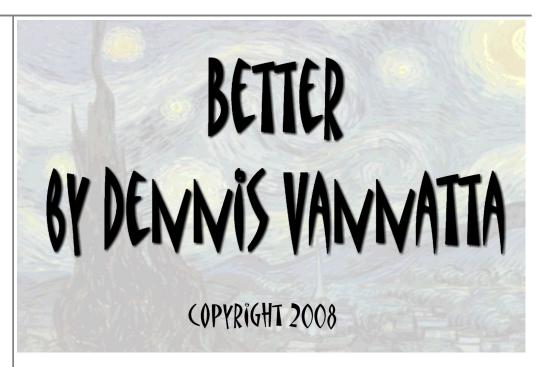
Summer 2005

Editor's Note

Guidelines

SNR's Writers

Contact



Mr. Jennings, assistant manager and day-shift boss at the Shop-Wise, said no one should feel sorry for Anthony. He was a good worker and took pride in his job, you could tell by the look on his face when someone thanked him for helping them out with their groceries. And he was self-supporting, which was more than you could say for a lot of the deadbeats around here. Heck, he'd been at the store long enough that he was making nine-fifty an hour, which was right at twenty thousand a year, not bad for an idiot.

Mr. Jennings wasn't being cruel in calling Anthony an idiot. He thought that was probably the proper medical term--although he was certainly wrong in this. Anthony could sign his name in cursive (true, so slow that you'd get nervous watching him and want to run out and buy him a Big Chief tablet and great big pencil) and apparently could read labels on food products because he rarely brought back the wrong one to a checker. For sure he was slow, though, his face twisting in anxiety and consternation if called upon to do something outside his normal range of duties. He was very small, too, skinny and no more than four-feet tall with a correspondingly small head. To compensate for his size, he walked with an exaggerated, self-conscious swagger, elbows thrown out to the side like he was saying, Make way for Anthony! Only he moved too jerkily for a convincing swagger and instead looked like a child's toy wound too tight.

But then he made a friend.

No one knew for sure where Buddy Tucker came from. Not local, the consensus was, although he obviously had experience in the Shop-Wise chain because he came in as head stocker after Louis Cruzan broke a hip muddin' on his four-wheeler.

Normally a new guy being given a plum job over the old hands would have been the cause for resentment, at the very least. If there was resentment at first, it didn't last any longer than it took to get to know him because you couldn't know Buddy Tucker and not respect him. Or fear him maybe. He was six-foot and broad-shouldered, solidly-built, and he never met a box he couldn't sling up on his shoulders like a four-roll pack of Charmin. Broad shoulders and big-knuckled hands and the way he had of looking at a fellow dead-level and straight-on with no place for you to hide--a guy like that could cause his fair share of fear. . . . Well, no, not fear, that wasn't it, no one ever feared Buddy Tucker. He was a peach of a guy, really, never raised his voice. The opposite of fear almost. It was that seriousness of his, you didn't want to disappointment him somehow. Like your father. The father you should have had.

If you would have walked into the break room a month after Buddy Tucker took over as head stocker, you would have thought he was the one who was the old hand instead of the new guy, the way the others listened when he talked, not like you'd listen to a boss because you had to but because if Buddy said something, you wanted to hear it, not only what aisle to start working and when to take your break but you'd go to him with your problems and ask advice. Like as not he'd do more listening than talking, and at the end of it he'd generally wind up saying, "See, you had the answer all along." And you'd feel good about yourself, or at least better.

At a certain point the fellows noticed that Anthony was eating his lunch in the break room again instead of out in the alley or in some little cave he'd made in the boxes of paper products.

"Hey, bullet-head," Aaron Painter said, "you getting any poon-tang lately?"

It was a standard taunt, Anthony being paralyitically shy around women and furiously embarrassed by any mention of sex.

Everybody laughed loose-jointed, donkey-bray laughs like it was the return of the good ol' days--everyone except Anthony and Buddy Tucker, that is. When the others noticed Buddy sitting there quietly on a box of Van Camp's Pork n' Beans, they stopped laughing, too, and there was an uncomfortable two or three minutes until Aaron said, "Well, dang it, I shouldn't've said that."

He hadn't seemed to say it to anyone in particular, but everybody looked at Buddy, who smiled like the sun breaking on a new day and said, "Well, nobody died, did they? So you get another chance."

Now, Anthony was a bagger, not a stocker, and shouldn't have been able to count on having his

breaks the same time as Buddy Tucker. But Mr. Jennings, who always had his eye on the little guy, saw how Anthony always stuck close to Buddy and sat right next to him whenever they had their breaks together, so he let it be known that it'd be OK if they sort of coordinated their break schedules. That was fine with Anthony, of course, and appeared to be fine with Buddy, too because he'd sit next to Anthony with his hand on his shoulder, and, except for the fact that they were about the same age and Buddy was blond and blue-eyed whereas Anthony was black as the ace of spades, they could have been mistaken for father and son.

All in all it was a good time for everyone involved, so much so that Norbert Jones said, "This is the Golden Age of the Shop-Wise chain." Of course Norbert was a Church of Christer and a pot-head, one strange combination, but, still and all, still and all...

Well, you know what's coming next. If a bubble gets that big and bright, somebody just has to come along and stick a pin in it. It's like we have a failure chromosome that kicks in whenever things start going too well. Does it have to be that way? Pardon me for being the one to say it, but that's a damn good question. Maybe that's the way it is just because we think that's the way it is, because we can't see it any other way. A failure of imagination, in other words. If we could even imagine it another way . . . Well, I don't know, I just don't know . . .

Here's what happened. Jack Smith hired on as a stocker on the day shift. Word was he'd been a head stocker on the night shift at the Industrial Boulevard Shop-Wise. Why he would take a pay cut to be just a run-of-the mill stocker at the Meadow Park Shop-Wise is a mystery. Maybe he got fired at the other place, maybe he got tired of working nights, maybe he just liked the scenery better over here, easy to buy because the Industrial Boulevard area was one bad part of town. Not much good came out of there. Including Jack Smith.

Oh, he wasn't the worst person ever, I guess. He never flat-out killed anybody unless you count . . . Well, we'll get back to that. He never took a piece of rebar to anybody or slashed anybody's tires. As far as I know, he never stole anything, although you'd just naturally clamp your hand over your billfold pocket when he walked behind you and would check your lunch bag to see if everything was still in there or, more important, if anything got stuck in there that didn't belong like a razor blade in your potted meat sandwich or some rat poison in the salt for your hard-boiled eggs. Not that anybody ever found anything like that, but it didn't stop you from looking.

Maybe it was like this: where Buddy had the sort of seriousness that calmed you down and gave you confidence about things, for Jack nothing was serious, it was all a big joke, everything, the whole shebang, and not the kind of joke that when you laughed you felt your shoulders and the muscles at the back of your neck relax but the kind that you knew if you went on laughing that way you were going to get a headache, laughter that hurt coming out of your throat and made you feel bad about yourself when you laughed.

Like Jack's first day in the break room at lunch. There were only about four other guys there, including Anthony but not Buddy right then because an Anheuser-Busch truck had just come in and Buddy always kept an eye out when that stuff was unloaded. Jack didn't even sit down but just stood there in the middle of the break room like he was doing a nightclub routine and started right in on the bastards he used to work with over on Industrial Boulevard, on his old lady who'd run out on him a year or so ago, good damn riddance, on the President of the United States, on the goddamn Yankees and the goddamn Cardinals, on and on, all of it jokes that you laughed at but looked down at your shoes while you laughed.

The whole time he was talking, his eyes moved left and right like he was making eye contact with his audience even though he never quite did it, his eyes never quite lighting on anyone before moving on. He'd pass over Anthony a little more quickly than the rest, just a little more

quickly, and once you caught onto it, you understood that Anthony was the one Jack was thinking about the whole time. He never did look right at him, in fact. At the end of his performance, he just stood quietly a moment, then nodded in Anthony's direction and said, "Who's the Alabama porch monkey?"

Give them credit, the other three in the room, they tried not to laugh, you could tell they didn't want to. But it came out anyway in little snot-shooting snorts at first and then in big whooping thigh-slapping guffaws.

It was at this point that Buddy Tucker walked into the break room--or more precisely right at the end of the shshes and immediately preceding the "ton you!"

When he saw Buddy standing there, Anthony immediately looked shamefaced and hung his head. Unfortunately, this was also the same moment the others noticed Buddy, and for some reason this struck them as the funniest thing yet, and they laughed hard enough to do injury to their rib cages. This Anthony could not take. He began to dance around the room like a prizefighter taking on four opponents at once, all richly deserving a good pummeling, but unable to decide which to hit first. He didn't hit any of them, only fired off a salvo of four or five of his special brand of "shit on yous," which took awhile.

He didn't stop, in fact, until Buddy crossed the room and took him in a big bear hug and pulled him down beside him on the bench. He didn't let him go but held him like that and began whispering in his ear. He whispered until Anthony calmed down and all the fight had gone out of him, and then he went on whispering until Anthony wasn't just calm but content, with a smile on his face like a little boy would have or an angel, maybe, although I've never seen an angel smile, unless this was it. I don't know what Buddy said to him. I'd like to know because there's been a time or three in my life I could have used it on a person I loved, hell, used it on myself in a dark time when . . .

But back to the story. During all this time Jack was the only one in the room not laughing or hugging someone or being hugged. He was just standing there not saying a word, watching everything with a creepy little smile on his face.

When the others had finally had enough laughing, Buddy, still with his arm around Anthony, looked over at Jack and said, not confrontationally but like he was just trying to be helpful, "We don't like to kid Anthony much around here. I know you probably didn't mean anything by it, but he takes it personal. So we just don't do it."

You might have expected Jack at this point to say something smart-Alecky or at least point out that Buddy hadn't been in the room so how the hell did he know that Jack had said anything to Anthony? But he didn't. He just held his hand up like an Indian saying "How" but instead said, "Gotcha. A wink is as good as a nod to a blind man." Which, if you think about it, doesn't make a whole lot of sense. But it seemed to satisfy everyone.

In fact, Jack never said a mean word to Anthony after that. Other fellows he'd make snide comments to and cut down until they felt about the size of the Incredible Shrinking Man climbing out the window screen, but for Anthony it was always, "Morning to you, Anthony!" and "You having a good day today, Anthony?" It would sound so friendly that you'd have trouble putting your finger on exactly why it made you so uneasy to hear him say it. Maybe it was the way Jack was always looking at Anthony, always had his eye on him like he was trying to figure out the

answer to something, and when he got the answer, that's when the next thing would come.

It came, or it began to come, on the day Jack walked into the break room and stood there for a minute scratching his forehead like he was lost in thought. Then he looked up and asked of no one in particular (Buddy and Anthony happened not to be there at the time), "Now, why does Anthony sit on that concrete bench down on the avenue every afternoon after work?"

Mr. Jennings walked in right at that moment. He'd visit the break room a couple of times a week just to show he wasn't too high and mighty for it. Most likely Jack had seen Mr. Jennings on the way to the break room and timed his question so the assistant manager could hear it.

Mr. Jennings did and answered brightly, "Oh, that's where Anthony catches the bus home."

Jack shook his head and smiled that little smile of his that could mean a lot of things, none of them good. "No he don't," he said.

"Sure he does."

"No he don't. I saw Buddy Tucker pick him up in that Ford Escort with my own eyes."

"Oh," Mr. Jennings said. You could see him thinking. "Oh, sure, I'll bet Anthony missed his bus and Buddy just give him a lift home. That was it."

Jack shook his head. "Every day for a week. Every day this week I seen Buddy pick Anthony up with my own eyes. Four straight days. You mean to tell me that boy missed his bus four straight days?"

You could see Mr. Jennings thinking again, his eyes snapping open and shut real fast like a man's who's thinking hard but it's not getting him anywhere.

Jack didn't wait for whatever story Mr. Jennings was trying to come up with. "Mr. Jennings," he said, "is Anthony living with Buddy Tucker now?"

Mr. Jennings was flustered, but he managed to get out, "Anthony had this apartment he lived in, some sort of government-subsidized thing where he got help with stuff when he needed it."

Jack cocked an ear toward Mr. Jennings. "Had? You mean had or has?" Again he didn't wait for an answer but held his hands up like somebody surrendering and said, "Hey, whatever you want to allow on your watch is your business. Probably it's all perfectly innocent."

"Of course it's perfectly innocent!" Mr. Jennings exclaimed like a man who's just realized he's walked into a trap and still isn't sure quite how it happened.

"That's just what I said."

"Why don't you mind your GOL DANG BUSINESS!" Mr. Jennings shouted. He was a family man, a good Baptist, and "gol dang" was strong language for him.

Jack laughed. He smiled that smile of his a lot, but it was the first time anyone had heard him laugh. They didn't want to hear it again.

Here's almost certainly what had happened. Probably Anthony did miss his bus one day. The baggers and the stockers didn't work the same hours. Day-shift for the stockers was 7:00-3:30,

for the baggers 8:00-4:30. Buddy, being head stocker, might stay a little longer doing paper work. If Anthony missed his bus, Buddy probably would have seen him on that bench. Being the kind of guy he is, he would have stopped and offered Anthony a ride home. Would have found out that Anthony lived by himself except for the state-hired help looking in once in awhile. Would have felt sorry for the little guy being alone, maybe just tried to be a friend at first, maybe invited him over for supper, probably at a certain point said, Hey, I've got an extra room right here.

Nobody in the world except Jack would have thought of a bad thing to think or say about it, but Jack thought it and said it or at least hinted around about it, and once a hint like that fouls the air, everything is fouled. Nobody said they believed anything was wrong. Probably nobody did believe anything was wrong. But now they were just a tad uncomfortable with Anthony and Buddy, uncomfortable with Jack, too, of course, but that was just like throwing a rabbit into the briar patch for Jack.

This state of affairs--everybody being just a tad uncomfortable with everybody else except for Jack, who was happy as a pig in shit--went on for awhile. Then Jack dropped the other shoe--or at least the other shoe got dropped, and while there's no proof Jack was responsible, if anybody was to blame, other than God, the smart money was on Jack.

One day neither Anthony nor Buddy showed up for work. Buddy had never missed a day since he hired on, and Anthony never missed except the once every six months he had to go see the doc because of complications from being so small and slow, and it wasn't time for that yet. Everybody was a little uneasy about them being gone, except for Jack Smith, who looked like the cat that ate the canary.

It wasn't until lunch time that Mr. Jennings walked into the break room to tell them what had happened. His eyes were red. They got redder. Here it was. Anthony was dead. He'd gotten run over yesterday afternoon up on Poplar Avenue. He was apparently trying to walk home--to Buddy's house--when it happened.

"Why the hell was he up on Poplar? Buddy Tucker don't live in that direction."

"I guess he got lost. I guess he hadn't ever walked it before."

"Why the hell was he walking it? Buddy always gives him a ride home."

"I talked to Buddy on the phone. He said Anthony wasn't at the bench when Buddy stopped to pick him up. For some reason he'd already took off on his own. . . . No, now don't bother asking me any more questions, fellas. I just don't know any more. Buddy's taking care of the funeral arrangements. Maybe we'll learn more when he gets back."

"Well, shit."

Everybody agreed that shit was indeed the word. Everybody except Jack Smith. Cat. Canary.

Suddenly, Norbert Jones, who'd been slouched over in his chair with his head in his hands, sprang straight up like somebody had goosed him with a cattle prod. "Hey, now I remember, I saw you--Jack Smith!--I saw you, you son of a bitch, I saw your car pulled over to the curb by the bench and you were saying something to Anthony!"

Jack smiled his smile. He only had one. "Oh, yeah, you're right. I did stop. I'd been admiring that haircut of his and I wanted to ask him who his barber was."

"You're a goddamn liar!" Smile.

Now Boyd Tinsley jumped up and pointed an accusing finger at Jack. "You said something bad

to poor old Anthony. You probably said that Buddy wasn't going to stop for him and that he might as well start hoofing it."

Jack leaned back in his chair like someone who'd just got tuned in to his favorite television program. "Tell you what, Tinsley, if you can prove that I'll kiss your ass at high noon in Times Square. If you can't, probably you'd be better off shutting your mouth."

"Oh yeah? You going to make me shut my mouth?"

Boyd was a big fellow, good ol' boy redneck, and this was the point where Jack was about to get his ass severely kicked. Except that, without anybody seeing exactly when it had happened, Jack was now sitting there, no smile on his face but a knife in his hand, blade pointed generally in the direction of Boyd's liver.

Jack stood up. There was about six feet separating him and Boyd, and somehow you just knew that Jack could cover that six feet faster than Boyd could do whatever it was he was trying to decide he should do.

Somebody should have said something at this point--probably Mr. Jennings because he was the boss, but he'd sort of been in shock ever since the knife came out and seemed to have lost the power of speech. Then somebody did say something.

"The best thing to do now is to put the knife back in your pocket, Jack."

They all turned their heads like a Greek chorus when the king walks on stage. There standing in the door of the break room was Buddy Tucker.

"Well well, Buddy Tucker," Jack said, subtly shifting the direction of the knife from Boyd's liver to Buddy's. "The big man hisself, well well well."

"That Jack said something bad to Anthony! I seen it with my own eyes!" Norbert Jones said.

Without taking his eyes from Jack, Buddy held up a hand toward Norbert. "That's all right, that's all right," he said. "Anthony's not the important one now. The one we need to think about now is Jack, why don't you just put that knife away now?"

Jack turned himself so that he was squarely facing Buddy. "Why should I?"

"Because we need to talk, and we can talk better after you put that knife away."

"You and me ain't got one goddamn thing to say to one another, Buddy Tucker."

Buddy covered the ten feet between them faster than you could bat an eye and had hold of Jack's wrist on his knife hand. They struggled for about a second, and then the knife went clattering across the floor. They wrestled around a little bit more, finally rolling around on the floor until Buddy had Jack all wrapped up, his arms around Jack's arms, legs around Jack's legs. They lay like that for the longest time, Jack squirming and cursing and struggling but barely able to more than twitch an eyebrow, Buddy just too strong, had him wrapped up too tight. Then Jack all at once wore out and gave up, you could see it on his face: no use, no use. You could almost feel sorry for him the way he lay there helpless, looking like he was about to cry.

Then Buddy began to whisper to him. You couldn't hear the words but, oh, the way he said them--not hard and hating and vengeful like you might expect but soft and gentle, calming.

Jack tried to fight it at first, clenching his teeth and shaking his head with his eyes shut like it hurt him to hear what Buddy was saying, the more gentle and loving he said it the more it hurt. But then he kind of relaxed into it, stopped fighting it but just listened, once in awhile nodding like, That's right, that's right. Finally he was smiling. That's when Buddy let him go.

Buddy got up first and offered Jack a hand, and Jack took it and got to his feet in stages like it was about all he had strength left for. He brushed himself off and grinned sort of sheepishly.

"Boys," he said, "from now on I'm going to try to be a better man."

He said it like he meant it, too, not sarcastic like he would have said it just two minutes before Buddy Tucker started whispering in his ear.

"That's all anybody can do," Buddy Tucker said.

In fact, Jack Smith was a better man from that day forward. Mr. Jennings made him head stocker, and nobody complained because Jack always did his best to be fair in assigning sections to stock and break times and who got off for holidays and who had to work. He never came right out and said he was to blame for what happened to Anthony, but he did buy a plastic planter with two white tulips and one purple hyacinth in it in the Shop-Wise floral department and left it on the concrete bench where Anthony used to wait for Buddy, and the fellows took that as a sort of confession and apology all at once, took it and accepted it.

No one ever found out exactly what it was that Buddy whispered in Jack's ear while they were lying there on the floor. Jack wouldn't make any reply when they asked but only smiled that smile of his--not the bad old smile but his new one, like there was a light on inside him.

They couldn't ask Buddy about it because he was gone. He left right after the scene in the break room, and they never saw him again. Even Mr. Jennings didn't know where he'd gone, just said that Buddy told him it was time to move on, to do the good work he had to do, I guess, spread the love around a little.

Dennis Vannatta has published stories in many magazines and anthologies, including *Boulevard, Antioch Review,* and *Pushcart XV,* and three collections: *This Time, This Place* and *Prayers for the Dead,* both by White Pine Press, and *Lives of the Artists* by Livingston Press. He teaches English at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.