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Airmail

by Dennis Must

Julius Gursky wasn't about to hire a white man, especially one who'd spent too many years in the university.

"But the woman at the State Employment Agency said you wanted a beginning cabinetmaker."

"You said you were good at basic carpentry."

"I am."

"Except you're not a cabinetmaker."

"But I know how to use a saw and hammer."

"That's why I've no job for you."

I walked to the door of his showcase cabinet shop, then turned. "Look, Mr. Gursky, I've a strong back. I'm used to hard physical labor." The shop floor was piled with raw lumber; I could hear workers a floor above me. "I'll work cheap," I said. Resistance to the war in Vietnam had begun boiling over in the States. It no longer made much sense to be instructing high school seniors in English syntax.

"Can't use you."

I walked outside. His face impassive in the window. "I'll work free for two weeks," I shouted. "If I've not been a smart addition to your bustling enterprise here . . . you don't owe me a damn dime. But if I am—you pay me, retroactive, two bucks an hour."

"One dollar fifty," he mouthed.

"No deal."

"Can't use you." Barely audible.

I headed down Bowery toward the next cabinet shop. Within seconds he was shuffling behind me. "One dollar fifty, and you start tomorrow."

"Two Washingtons, Mr. Gursky. A man's got to have some pride even if he is overeducated."

"Seven o'clock sharp tomorrow, boy." Like I'd beat him at dice.

For two weeks I did nothing but hoist four-by-eight sheets of plywood Gursky wouldn't use in years up four flights of stairs to the lumber loft in the converted Bowery tenement. He'd gotten

a special deal, and it made no sense for him to pull either of his two cabinetmakers off their tasks.

Get the teacher to do it. Serves him right.

Gursky asked on my second day if our agreement was still on. "Two weeks free if I can't use you, correct?"

"I gave you my word."

That crooked grin—affirming he knew more about life than I ever would. Wednesday at closing time he asked me to stay back after the cabinetmakers left. Open cardboard boxes lay scattered about the showroom floor.

"Go upstairs and bring down the barrels of shavings and scraps, Muller."

Once I'd wrestled the two fifty-five gallon drums down the baluster stairway, we poured their contents into the empty boxes. He handed me a ball of hemp twine. "Got to make it look like the boxes have been fastened strongly for overseas shipping." After each container was carefully secured, he licked an oversized blue and white shipping label with a fictitious name and address—and slapped it on its top. On some he wrote in bold marker script China, others Italy, Puerto Rico, or Santa Domingo. With no return address. By then it was dark outside.

"Okay, Muller, you go up to Houston and I'll head toward Canal. When nobody's watching—we airmail: drop your box in the middle of the street. It accidentally fell off a truck, get it? Then hurry back here for the second flight. Rivington, Orchard, Elisabeth, and Mott Streets make good drop zones. You 'n' me—we're the Polish Air Force."

Twice a week Julius and I did airmail.

I began to look forward to our flights. Overtime we developed a curious comradery preparing for them. After closing hour, however.

"Julius, why haven't the neighbors caught on?"

"There's always a sucker, Muller . . . especially in Babylon."

In the early runs, once I thought I was in the clear, I'd unload the container and take off into the next block. Sometimes I'd circle back; every time the parcel had vanished.

"You don't stick around to watch who snaps up the cargo, Muller?" Julius asked one night.

"Don't want to be caught," I said.

"You think I do this because I'm too cheap to pay for disposal, huh?"

I was absorbed knotting the hemp.

"OK, your prerogative, Muller. But it's sucker bait we're cooking up here. Fly casting on the banks of Jew Town Shopping Center, Chinatown Canal, or Tomato Alley. You want to see them bite, kid."

On the final day of my two-week trial period—a Friday—Julius said nothing about my coming in the following Monday. The trailer-load of plywood was stacked neatly on the fourth floor.

Also, he and I had cleaned out his office of two decades worth of files and yellowing newspapers, literally stacked to the ceiling. We stayed late that night to airmail ledger sheets and the Daily News on Bank Street in the Village.

Julius turned off the shop lights. A deal was a deal. I'd sensed he'd called my bluff.

"Muller? You say you can pound a nail without leaving any Portugese nickels?"

I didn't get it but said yes.

"Monday morning sharp with your wood plane."

"Thank you, Julius."

He lifted my paycheck, rolled up like a cigarette, from his shirt pocket. I couldn't help but notice his tie—worn through to its lining at the four-in-hand.

When I showed up for work on Monday, Julius handed me a Masonite carpenter's tool case that an earlier employee had discarded. "It's yours. Now go upstairs and begin planing boards for Juan and Charley."

The two workers, both immigrants, had ignored me for two weeks. When they watched me coming up the stairs, each shook his head in disbelief. Julius directed me to a workbench and a pile of 10 foot rough-sawed 2x4s. The shop had no machine planer or jointer to finish and square the lengths of board.

I pulled a Sears and Roebuck wood plane out of a lunch sack as the two cabinetmakers guffawed.

"Make the boards straight, Muller." He watched me place a length of lumber into the vice. "Square each side and smooth the surfaces—one like a baby's ass." Gursky glanced conspiratorially at the two men who bowed their heads.

What I didn't understand, of course, was that I needed a sixteen-inch joiners plane for squaring and leveling lumber. My six inch tool would only make valleys and dips in the surface of the hardwood.

After the third day, and more shavings than the shop had probably seen in years, Juan, the head cabinetmaker, stepped over to my bench.

"You a teacher?"

"I was," I said.

"Why do you give up an honorable occupation to come and work in this place?"

"Teaching no longer made any sense to me," I said.

"Me, I would die to have an education like you so I don't have to work my life in shit factories for shit bosses like Gursky, making shit products—and here you come. School . . . how many years you got?"

“Almost twenty.”

“Something’s crazy. And you can’t plane worth shit.” He shook his head. “You Americans—*lelé da cuca*.”

It’s acceptable to work your way up in our culture. Unacceptable to work your way down. At day’s end my body ached badly, but it was an honest pain—and I suffered no ancillary mind ache. Also, I slept like I hadn’t in years. Months earlier I’d caught my reflection in an haberdashery’s glass. Dorian Gray, I thought. That’s who you are. Your mauve boutique shirt, and a complexion the color of dripping tallow. Fancy boots that smell of lemon-scented shoe polish. A display-window exquisite on the outside looking in.

You need to get beat up a little. Something to cause the blood to run again inside your veins. Your heart is pumping cow piss now. Where’s the old Jamie Muller? Youth’s bleached out of you.

A leather satchel of papers to grade hanging from your stooped shoulder. You will blemish them with red dots yet another evening before sleep mercifully comes. And we are raining napalm in the delta. Oh, Jesus, it makes a lot of sense, Muller.

How could I tell Juan my hand felt like a claw for having built a mountain of shavings over the last three days?

He took the plane and began moving it over a board, his body gliding back and forth in a dance motion. The hand wasn’t doing the work, or the wrist. “Don’t fight it, kid. Smooth and easy. Like you’re sailing the plane across water. Find the balance point. Then its simply rhythm and motion. Sing a song to yourself; let your body dance. The fucking day will close sooner than you think.”

My first lesson as a cabinetmaker.

“Tonight, go buy a T-square so you can check the accuracy of your work. Also, a wood plane with a longer shoe. And, for chrissake, don’t go to Sears & Roebuck,” he cautioned. “That’s where wood butchers shop.”

Soon my carpenter’s tool case began to take on extra poundage. When I caught my reflection in that same Village storefront one evening, I was no longer depressed at what I saw. No red marks pointing out dangling participles. No dead essays. Two bucks an hour, honest wages. I was earning my bread with both hands.

Six months into the job Juan began teaching me how to put a showcase together. Much of the inferior grade plywood and raw lumber I’d dressed we camouflaged with cheap mica.

“I have to make it look like it ain’t shit, Muller.” In time I discovered that when Juan vented his anger at Julius for not giving us the supplies we needed or forcing us to use defective wood or chipped Formica, the shopkeeper would counter with . . .

“Remember, I saved you.”

Always the pervasive threat of calling the authorities if Juan, or his “associate,” didn’t like the way the shop was run. The Asian worker who never spoke occasionally would stop working long enough to smoke a cigarette and stare out the windows that were covered with years of soot and grime. We only knew if it was overcast or night outside.

One afternoon I gathered a water bucket and rags and washed the grime off the glass that

looked out across the Bowery. Juan and Charley shook their heads.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Julian ain’t gonna like that,” Juan said.

“Why?”

“He wants us boys to keep our eyes on his shit work—not on street bootie.”

“Sunshine makes workers whistle,” I said.

“*Lelé da cuca*,” Juan countered.

When Julian came up the steps, he spotted the sparkling windows right off.

“Who did that!” he burst.

The aliens didn’t break their rhythm.

“I did,” I said.

“You wanna be a cabinetmaker or look at women’s asses?”

“We come to work in the dark. Julius, when we quit it’s dark. We can’t have a radio, so give us sunshine.”

“Head learning’s fucked you up, Muller.” Gursky took a wet rag, swept it across the gritty floor, and scrubbed a pasty black grime back onto the sashes. Outside was even more leaden than before. “Now get back to work.”

Soon Juan and I were finishing four showcases a day. Charley didn’t mind as long as everyone left him alone. Juan told me about his home in São Paulo, and because Julius had given him gainful employment without a card he felt he owed the shopkeeper.

“Besides, I get union wages, Muller.” He was making twelve dollars an hour.

“As an apprentice what would I get if I belonged to the Union?”

“Seven dollars an hour.”

We both laughed.

“You making two dollars, right?”

“Uh-huh,” I said.

“Union boss better not find out.”

“Whadaya mean?”

“He makes surprise visits. Make sure crooks like Julius pays his men Union.”

“He could do that?”

“Union boss don’t bother as long as workers make scale and contribute to the fund. Otherwise Gursky gets hurt.”

“Can I join the Union?”

Juan shook his head. “Julius won’t pay.”

“Is Charley in the union?”

“Yeah.”

“Makes as much as you?”

“Nobody makes as much as Juan. Otherwise, I quit. Charley’s my apprentice. Eight years.”

“How often does the Union boss visit?”

“I tell you if you still around.”

A year had passed when one winter morning Juan stopped working and crept to the stairwell. “Muller, begin pounding!” he hissed.

“What?”

“Hurry, pick up a hammer and bang on anything. Hard! Goddamnit, quick!” He scrambled down the stairs, motioning for Charley to follow him.

“Get back to work!” Gursky screamed at the pair.

Neither moved.

“What’s the noise I hear upstairs, Julius?” a bass voice resonated above the din of my sixteen-ounce Stanley hammer. “Machine gone bad?”

“My nephew,” Julius offered. “Building a bookcase for his mama. Ain’t that so, Juan?”

Juan stayed mute.

“Well, let’s go meet your nephew.” Within moments a large black man stood at the top of the stairs. Julius cowered behind him, panting.

The stranger watched me beating on the workbench.

“What’s your name?”

“Jamie Muller.”

“You his nephew?”

“No sir.”

“You employed here?”

“Yes.”

“How long?”

“One year 'n' twenty-two days.”

“What’s your wage?”

“Two bucks an hour.”

“Damnit, Gursky—your men deserve a fair wage!”

“I want no trouble,” Julius minced.

The Union representative walked over and placed his arm about my shoulders. “What did you do before you came to the Bowery?”

“I was a school teacher.”

“Welcome to the Carpenters & Joiners Union, prof. You are now an apprentice cabinetmaker earning the handsome rate of seven dollars an hour. Time and a half overtime.” Julius pled as the pair descended the stairs.

“I don’t like being duped,” the visitor’s terse response.

When Juan and Charley returned to the shop floor, Julius, apoplectic and wounded, shuffled up the stairs after them. He glared at the Brazilian.

Juan grabbed his winter jacket off the hook. “Four times a day we make a shit showcase, Julius. You sell and take a check and run to the bank before the ink dries. All day for fifteen years I make shit. The teacher, he wants to make something of himself. He works hard. You take advantage of him like you do me. If me and Charley don’t got the Union behind us, you’d squeeze your boot on our necks a little harder. Well, he is Union now, too. You want to fire me to stop making your shit . . . say so now.” Juan stood bundled up at his bench.

Julius shuffled to the windows, making believe he was looking out, then turned wearing his crooked grin. “I’ll turn up the heat, Juan.”

Soon the shop pulsed with the sounds of labor again.

That night was our scheduled airdrop meeting, but the showcase floor sat bare. Julius stood motionless in the shop’s display window. His breath fogged the glass. “Muller, don’t bother

coming in tomorrow.”

“I’m fired?”

“Work’s slow.” His voice, clipped.

“Maybe we could talk, Julius. You don’t want to do airmail?” Over the year we’d begun to challenge each other’s temerity. Who could garnish a package of detritus handsomely enough, drop it in a storefront vestibule, and hook an upscale shopkeeper.

One evening Julius even confessed he envied my formal learning. “Perhaps you give me one of your philosophy texts to read, huh? Instead of flying low over Tomato Alley, you ’n’ me sit here in the dark and talk Machiavelli. OK? Ancient schnapps back there in the closet and smokes, too. Leave our PAF jackets on their hooks—whadaya say, Sky King?”

But he wouldn’t take the bait.

“I’ll do the drops from now on, Muller. You shaved too much profit off the boards anyway.”

The following morning I waited outside the Union headquarters. Around eleven a.m. the boss showed, nodding as if he recognized me. He removed his suit jacket and sat rocking in a leather swivel chair opposite an ornate walnut desk—the trappings of a corporate executive, except for a 32-caliber pistol strapped against his chest.

“What can I do for you?”

“You made me a Union man yesterday.”

A blank stare.

“Gursky’s Bowery Showcase shop, remember?”

“Oh,” he laughed. “Julius’ nephew.”

“No more.”

“Whadaya mean?”

“He canned me.”

“Why?”

“Said business was slow.”

His eyes shifted to the Fourteenth Street window.

“I got rights now that I’m in the Union, sir. That’s correct, isn’t it?”

“The man says he got no work . . .” The steward opened his fleshy palms and shrugged.

“There’s no work ’cause fucking Gursky won’t pay scale!” I chafed.

The steward drew a cigarette from his shirt pocket, sliding the holster to one side.

“You mean I’m not in the Carpenters & Joiners Union?”

“Man’s only in the Union if he got a job, prof. You had one—but don’t no more. Am I right?”

Two weeks later Juan saw me crossing Delancey Street.

“Hey, *Lelé da cuca!*” he shouted from a van advertising Custom Gondolas in neon orange script. “How’s the crazy American?”

Still puzzled as to what Julius Gursky had airmailed Union Square the eve of my promotion, I could only wave.

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