

Three weeks have passed, and still I've found no work. Three weeks my family has had to do without money, scraping by with the small amount left from my last job. I try hard, but it doesn't seem to matter. Hopefully, today will be different. Today something has to happen. And if something doesn't, I'll have to pawn my wedding ring to buy some necessities. I don't want to, but then again, I don't want my family to starve.

I approach the group of about eleven guys who are just as qualified as me, looking for the same jobs, needing the same work in order to survive. Our stop is a little section of barren space near the railroad tracks; barren, that is, except for one small tree. We meet here everyday with our tools and our backpacks, and would-be employers know that. They come and pick up a few of us when they need us, which could be once a day or once a week; it just depends. The jobs are mostly manual, construction of some sort, but there is the occasional job that isn't so dignified. It doesn't matter though, a job is a job. All modesty is lost among us, who are embarrassed by the fact that we can't adequately provide for our own families.

Our little jobless group consists of men, and an occasional woman, of every color and creed. We have no prerequisites or membership qualifications, just the fact that you need a job, and the unemployment office can't seem to help you. We line up in rows of four; the sooner you arrive, the nearer the front you get.

We don't talk much, most of us being too ashamed of our predicaments, even though we didn't choose to be where we are. The economy hasn't been doing well in the past year or so, and therefore layoffs are quite common, quite common indeed. Of course, to the company we're just excess waste, part of the trimmings that need to go. Of course we're expendable, so long as the top men don't have to take any pay cuts. It seems I was better off when I used to cook pizzas as a teenager; at least I had job security.

Today, I'm near the back of the group. It's about 9:30 a.m. I arrived later than I normally do, because earlier I went to check a possible lead. It turned out the construction site didn't need another worker after all. I asked if they foresaw an opening in the future. The foreman said he found that unlikely, but said I could check-up every week until the project was completed just in case. I said I would, thanked him for his time, then proceeded to walk here. I could have taken a bus, but that's just a waste of money, because my feet can get me here just as good, and plus I don't get charged to use my feet. Being in the front line of the group does have an advantage, but some seekers (people looking for workers) just pick at random, whomever happens to catch their eye.

Looking around, I notice a few familiar faces and some new ones. I recognize the guy next to me. I think his name is Jim, although I'm not entirely sure. He's wearing a yellow shirt like me, although his is a bit dirtier because he had some work a couple of days ago. Plus, the shirt I'm wearing is a new one the center gave me because my old one was falling apart.

A truck approaches, a sure sign that a few of us will get hired. (Those that are really serious about hiring bring a truck to drive us to the job-site.) We straighten up, and allow enough room between us to be seen.

The truck's tires kick up dust as it approaches. An older gentleman with tanned skin slows down as he approaches. Rolling down the window, he says, "I need about five or six guys to do some construction-type work, some light masonry, painting, and a little auto-mechanic work. It'll probably just be for today, and you have to have your own tools. Those of you who can handle it raise your hands, and don't lie cuz I'll bring you right back if you can't perform."

Everyone in the group raises an arm.

"Shit, that's what I figured. I can still only use 'bout five or six of you."

We all listen and hope that he opts for six instead of five. We put our arms down and wait patiently for him to pick the workers. We don't push or shove; none of us can take the risk of injury, no matter how small. And plus, we do have manners; we're unemployed but we're not animals.

Placing his hand out the window and pointing, he calls out, "I'll take you in the blue shirt; you in the red; you with the stripes; you back there with the green hat; you in the white shirt." As the man pauses to think, the five men he called out climb into the back and take a seat.

I start to squeeze my hands together thinking, "Come on, take six...take six..." Hoping, I feel my stomach wrenching, most likely from the anxiety as well as being hungry.

"Ah, shit. I should just stick with five of you, but what the hell, I guess I can afford one more." The man adds as he points in my direction. My hopes jump up. "I'll take you in the yellow shirt."

Yes, finally, after three weeks of unemployment. A smile creeps up, but I quickly remove it. Those around me aren't getting hired, and showing one's happiness at times like these seem rude. I start to make my way forward, holding my self a little bit higher than earlier, knowing that today I'll be able to earn some money to help support my family, like a real man should, like any decent man should.

Something goes wrong though, because the seeker says, "No, no, no. Not you, the guy next to you."

What? I think, turning to look at Jim. I say to Jim, "Come on, you just had some work a few days ago. I haven't had any for a few weeks. Please, let me have this one."

Jim starts to move forward and says, "I'm sorry, but I need to prepare in case I don't get another job for a few weeks. And besides, he chose me, not you."

He pushes me slightly aside, not out of rudeness, but rather because I'm blocking his way.

I have my back turned towards the group. I hear Jim say, "Thank you, sir." The man responds, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, you just better be worth it." I hear Jim hop into the back of the truck as it pulls away.

I feel like crying, but don't though. Not because there are other men around, but rather because it's useless to cry. It doesn't help you get hired, and if something doesn't help you get a job, there's no reason to do it. I suppose that's why I don't drink. Getting drunk doesn't help, because when you sober up, you're still unemployed, only you're worse off than before because you had to waste money on the booze to get drunk with. The six of us that are left sit on the ground under some shade provided by the small tree. We take our bags off our shoulders, and put them in front of us. I sit facing the shops across the street. Three hours pass, and we sit waiting, hoping that another seeker will come by.

The aroma of pizza from the parlor across the street fills the air. I recall those teenage days, working for money to blow. I didn't have to worry about supporting a family; I was only concerned with myself. Vivaldi's Pizza, that was the name of the place. The only pizza parlor around with a composer's name. I remember Vivaldi too; he was your short, typical Italian. He always spoke with his middle finger touching his thumb. I can still hear him, "Tony, what's a-you a-doing, eh? You know how a-mucha toppings go on a-each pizza pie." Of course, although I never paid much attention. I always put on a little more toppings than usual. And Vivaldi would pretend to get mad, but he never truly was, because those extra portions of toppings kept the customers coming back.

A BMW starts to come down the dirt-covered road. All the guys get up, put on their backpacks, and line up. This time in two rows of three.

As the sports car approaches, we notice there are two teenagers in it. The driver lowers his window and says, "Hey, which one of you fuckin' lazy-asses wants a job?"

We all raise our hands. We hate it when people like this come up, but a job is a job, no matter who hires.

The teenager wearing sunglasses and clothes that probably cost more than I've made in the past month continues, "Our fuckin' gardener quit on us, and we're supposed to have guests over. My parents told me to do it, but I don't want to get all dirty and shit. And I figured, why should I when there are plenty of unemployed scum like you who wish they could do it. Of course, I'll pay you. And what the hell, since I'm a nice guy, I'll even throw in a free meal. So, why don't...you in the yellow shirt, hop in."

I really don't want to go, but it's not a question of whether I want to or not; I have to, and that's all there is to it. I pick up my bag, and start to walk towards the car.

The passenger looks at me and says, "Nah, not him. His shirt's too fuckin' clean, probably cuz he doesn't work hard. And he's not Mexican either, and everyone knows that Mexicans are the best gardeners."

"You're right, Bobby. Hey, clean man. Get back. And you, the fuckin' wetback in the traditional chee-con-oh plaid, hop in the back."

The Mexican guy isn't too happy that these are the people he's going to have to work for, but like I've said, a job is a job. The newly hired worker opens the back door and steps into the car.

As the car is about to pull away, the driver holds out a submarine sandwich. "Here, one of guys want this?"

I begin to move forward to get it, considering I haven't eaten all day.

"Good, go fetch, boy!" With that said, he hurls the sandwich into the dirt a small distance away. Laughing, the two kids peel out and drive away.

Sometimes, I wonder how the world can be so cruel. And as I look at the other guys, I see them wondering the same thing.

The five of us left over sit back down, once again removing our bags from our strong backs. We sit in the shade, but it's still about 105 degrees. Some of the guys have their shirts off because of the heat, and I notice their backs are well-tanned from working underneath the scorching sun. Once again you can tell who has had work lately, this time by the darkness of their tans.

After another four hours of facing the pizza parlor, I notice an Italian guy come out with a pizza box. He begins to walk in our direction. Probably another delivery to the apartments on the opposite side of the railroad tracks.

The Italian guy walks straight up to us, though, contrary to my guess. He says (without the Italian accent that Vivaldi had), "Hey, guys. Would you like some pizza?"

One of the guys, fearing a similar repeat of the earlier fiasco, says, "Sorry, sir, but none of us can afford to buy some right now."

The Italian man looks at us, confused. "Who said anything about buying?"

Being pessimistic, I ask, "What? Are you going to give us that pizza for free?"

"Yeah," nods the guy.

Still doubtful, I ask, "Why would you give away a perfectly good pizza?"

"Oh, I didn't say it was a perfect pizza. "

Catching on, I add, "Wait, don't tell me. It's a little dirty, right? "

Shocked, the pizza carrier echoes, "'Dirty?' What kind of sick animal do you think I am? The only thing that's wrong with this pizza is its shape. Look at it." As he opens up the box, we see a misshapen pizza. "Who the heck would buy a pizza that looks like this? No one. I figured, since it was just going to go to waste, I should just give it to you guys. I didn't think looks would matter to you. Maybe I was wrong."

Feeling stupid, I say, "Of course not. I'm sorry. Thank you very much for being so considerate. We're all very grateful. Aren't we guys?"

Sporadic "yeses" and "Thank yous" come from the group.

The parlor owner gives the box to the guy nearest him. The box gets passed around until we each have a piece, or at least the closest thing to a piece. The owner says, "Looks like there's enough for you to get two pieces each. I'm sorry I couldn't bring any drinks."

"This is fine," I say, while chewing some pizza. I notice it could use a little more oregano, but don't bother to mention it. I don't want to seem ungrateful.

The pizza bearer continues, "I wish there was some other way to help you guys out. I mean, I'd like to hire one of you, but what do you guys know about the pizzeria business?"

"Actually, I used to work in one as a teenager." I answer without really thinking much about it.

"Did you really?" he asks.

"Yes."

"Were you good?"

"I kept the customers coming back."

"Think you still could?"

"Yes, I mean, no offense, but there's not much to it."

"Come with me then," says the owner, walking back to his parlor.

Grabbing my bag with the hand that isn't holding the pizza, I ask, "Why?"

"Because, I'm about to fire the teenage kid who made that pizza. I mean, he probably just blows his money anyway, while you have a wife to take care of, and maybe some children."

Jogging quickly to catch up, I ask, "How did you know I was married and had a family?"

The Italian man stops and looks at me, confused. "I saw your wedding ring. How else would I know?"