

Z Hof

Burned Out



Zeb sat in the employment office waiting for the his name to be called. Over three hours passed before he decided to get something to eat. He got up and headed for the main entrance. When he grabbed the door handle, an interviewer called, “Zebadiah Smith.” As he turned around, he again heard his name being called. He said, “Here,” as he walked toward the counter where he was told to have a seat

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at a desk located in a small cubicle.

“Have a seat, Mr. Smith. My name is Marty Green. He was a well dressed man in his thirties. He tapped his pencil on his desk several times as he gave Zeb a quick once over before he said, “How may we help you today?”

“I am looking for a job as a construction superintendent or a job as a carpenter’s foreman.”

“I see. ... Your job application indicates that you were a superintendent for less than five months. Most companies around here want to see a track record and at least five years of recent work

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experience with the same employer.”

“Here we go with that experience thing again. I will always be a pack mule toting barges around and digging holes in the ground,” he thought. “I know I don’t have a lot of experience, but the company I was working for went broke. I was not fired or anything like that. I had a very good work reputation with my former boss, Dan Apperson.”

“I have no doubt that you are well qualified. However, I must go by what our job listings say. And that boils down to lots of experience and excellent references. Is it possible you have some other qualification you did not put down

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on your application? For instance, do you have any college credits or a college degree?”

“No. But I plan to start going to Phoenix College. I want a degree in mechanical engineering. My sister-in-law is going to graduate this summer and I want get started this fall.” Zeb did not realize that PC was a two year college, and that he would more than likely have to nearly start over when he went to a four year college if he was not careful in selecting his program of study.

“Well, the only jobs I have open in the construction trade are a plumber’s helper

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and a carpenter to rebuild an apartment building that burned down. The pay is good, however, the job is classified as dirty and hazardous.”

He was sweating and wanted a good job. The plumber’s helper job was a non starter, because when he worked in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, he watched the plumber’s helpers pitch dirt and carry around heavy cast iron pipes all day long.

“How much are they paying?”

“The card says they will pay up to three-fifty an hour. However, that usually means something in the two dollar an hour range.” He thought for a minute

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before he said, “I guess I have no choice. I have a wife and a son to feed. Where is the job located?”

“It’s located just off Van Buren Street in downtown Phoenix. The card says you will need to wear old work clothes and for you to bring some rubber boots with you. Here is your work referral. You need to talk to the foreman, Hank Watson, at seven-thirty in the morning. It says here for you to be ready for work. There is a rush on to get the apartments rebuilt.”

Zeb had heard the word production all too many times. His stomach was boiling as he left the employment office to go

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home and tell Nancy, his wife, that he got a referral to a lousy stinking charcoal pit. However, he was going to spare her the vivid description of his new job prospect. When he walked up the steps to their apartment, he saw Zeb Lee, his two-year-old son, looking out the window at him. He waved at him and heard him say, "Daddy!" Nancy knew something was wrong from the way he looked as he opened the door. After they embraced, she said, "What's the matter honey?"

"I got a work referral to a job located on Van Buren Street," he said as he flopped down in his easy chair.

"Is it a good job?"

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“Not unless you call cleaning up and rebuilding a burned out apartment building on Van Buren a good job.”

“Do you mean the one where the middle of it burned out?”

“I guess.”

“Please don’t take that job.”

“Why?”

“Because the news said a woman my age, her two year-old-son and her baby daughter got burnt up in it. We have a two-year-old son that’s why. Its a bad omen. Also, I’ve had a lot of bad dreams about fires.”

“Are you superstitious or something?”

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“No. I don’t want you to take that job. One of my dreams was about you falling off a burned up building.”

“I have to take the job. Work around here is all dried up. Do you have any good news for me?”

“I am glad you are sitting down.”

“Why?” “Because the landlord knocked on the door today and handed me an envelope. They are going to raise our rent five dollars a week.”

“What!”

“Don’t get upset. There is nothing we can do about it. We can’t move anytime soon. We will just have to pay it.”

“Yeah. All I am good for is to dish out

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money to whomever happens to comes along. Sometimes I wish I was stupid. At least if I were, I could get some sleep without the wheels going around in my head all night long.”

“I talked to my sister today. Things are not going too well for her either. I hope she is going to be alright. She has been having real bad stomach pains. To make matters worse, dad has not been feeling all that well lately either. He is going to see Doctor Brumbell on Friday after work.”

“You are trying to cheer me up, aren’t you?”

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“Not really, but you could cheer me up if you like.” Then she took him by the hand and led him to the shower and told him she had plans for him after he took a shower.

Afterward, she said, “I have a real nice dinner on the stove for us. Are you ready to eat?” When they finished dinner, she said, “Why don’t we go for a walk?”

Zeb was hoping for more. “Let me get on some better clothes and we can take Zeb Lee and get him a treat. And I need a root beer float.”

She said no more. A root beer float was his way of saying I am troubled. They walked to the drugstore on Central

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Avenue and went into the soda fountain. Kim, Nancy's sister, was behind the counter. She did not look happy. "Having a bad day, are we?" said Nancy.

"Not really. Just bored."

"Join the club." Zeb felt even worse than he did earlier. Nancy's feelings were important to him. He hated to see her displeased. Zeb Lee kept trying to get between them to get some attention. Both of them focused on him. Zeb said, "How did your day go son?" He knew his son could not tell him how his day went, but he was hoping Nancy would see something good in the day to tell him.

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They bought a dish of ice cream for Zeb Lee. He made a mess of it and got it all over himself and his clothes. They tried to wipe his clothes off, but it was hopeless. On the way back to their apartment Nancy said, "I know the money is a bit tight, but I know you will get a good job soon." He was depressed. It was obvious she was trying to brighten his spirits because she knew the job he was going to ask for was the pits. Zeb did not know that Nancy had asked her father if he thought she could get her old job back. However, she knew Zeb would be furious with her for even considering going back to work there again.

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“Honey. Do you want me to go back to work?”

“No! I will work through this. You need to be at home to take care of Zeb Lee.”

“Don’t get mad. I just want to help out. That’s all. But, what about you taking care of Zeb Lee? I know you will take good care of him.”

“You know I would be totally lost trying to take care of him.” He was on the spot and wanted a way to change the subject. “This bad luck spell will turn to sunshine soon. Trust me. I remember how Mr. Frank, back in Hattiesburg, turned to his Bible when he was troubled. I cannot

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imagine his sorrow after he found out he had terminal liver disease. I miss his fatherly advice so much.”

“We have been dwelling on our troubles so much that we almost missed the beautiful sunset over there.”

“It is beautiful. Sunsets help make Arizona a great place to live. Tell me something, has Kim ever said anything to you about me being out of work?”

“I won’t lie to you, she said that’s what you get for being a construction worker. Feast today and famine tomorrow.”

“What about your dad?”

“He would never say anything bad about you. He told me you have the drive

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to get a good job when you want one. He laments the fact that he has had to put up with loading bricks, concrete blocks and cement into trucks for over thirty years. He is so afraid of being out of a job that he will not quit and try to find a better one. To tell you the truth, I was worried to tears when I quit my job just before Zeb Lee was born.”

“Do you like staying home and taking care of him?”

“I want to go back to work, but at the same time I want to be with him. Does that make sense?”

Zeb was not about to tell her how he

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hated being an upgraded mule and how much he despised being a construction worker all together. But that was all he has ever known. Someday, he planned to become a mechanical engineer, but he was keenly aware that it would require years of hard work and many sleepless nights studying into the wee hours of the morning, but that was the dream that kept him going.

“Yes that makes perfect sense. I don’t like to talk about it but deep down inside I feel I deserve more than having to pound nails for the rest of my life.”

“You will find yourself one day. I know that as sure as I am walking beside you.”

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When they were within sight of his 1953 pickup, he saw that his tool box on the back of the truck was broken open and the lid was up. He rushed to the truck and all of his tools were gone. He remembered the landlord telling him to keep anything of value hidden. They went upstairs and called the police to report the missing tools. When the police officer arrived, he said, “The chances of your tools being found are very remote. I will file a report and we will do what we can to locate them. You will need to make a list of the missing items.”

“He made a quick list of the tools and

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made a statement as to how he found out that the tools were missing, then he handed the list and the statement to the officer.” The officer looked at him with squinted eyes. Then he said, “Is that all that was taken.”

“Yes sir. I was a superintendent before the company I was working for went broke so I did not use a lot of tools.”

“I see. Well if anything turns up be sure and contact us. We will keep this report on file so we can contact you if we have any new leads.” The officer gave him a nasty look as he got into his patrol car.

“I don’t know why I even called the

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police. That officer made me feel like I stole the tools myself.”

“You must admit you only had a few things taken.”

“Yeah! What if I was still working as a trim man. I would have lost a lot of valuable tool.”

He was well aware they could do next to nothing about it. Zeb was fuming. His tools were the key to his livelihood and he knew full well that if he bought new ones they may well be ripped off too. Nancy said, “Maybe we need to forget about building a cabin on our lot up in the mountains.”

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“I don’t think so! We have no idea of how many cabins are broken into or burned down every year. We could be killed up there for my tools and by the time the sheriff got there it would amount to a Jane Doe and a Zeb Doe killed for a hand full of tools. I know I have not said too much about moving to the high country because I know you like the mountains so much. I am terrified of living in a place where the next living thing is miles away. When I left Phoenix and drove to Hattiesburg, MS I was scared that my car would break down in the intense desert heat. I was so glad when I started driving through the trees

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back east.

Mr. Frank made the rooming house feel safe and home to me when I moved to Hattiesburg.

“I guess I feel a bit violated because my tool were stolen. But, somehow I feel it will make me much stronger. It has made me realize that my father has been wrong all these years. He has lived out in the desert with a loaded gun in his house ever since he was a kid. I don’t want to have to live like that up in the mountains.

“One day several years ago, a man came to my father’s door and started talking about stealing and burglaries.

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The conversation went on for some time as they discussed several robberies in the area. My father lashed out at him when he said, “You surely would not shoot a man for stealing your television. My father said to him, “Sir! I would not hesitate wasting anyone who stole the knob off of my TV, because I cannot use it the TV without it. However, Herman’s evil ways have made me determined to earn a degree in mechanical engineering and amount to something.”

“I know you will, but what happened to all of your fancy tools?”

“I put some of them under our bed, some of them behind the front seat of my

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truck and the rest are in the trunk of our Chrysler. That way I figured a thief might only get a few of my tools if they robbed me. I am sorry I did not tell you sooner. But I didn't think it really mattered all that much."

Several hours later he told Nancy he was going down to fix the toolbox lid. He planned to fill up the toolbox with scrap wood and old newspapers so no one could get his tools.

A while later she came down and said, "Are you almost finished fixing the toolbox?"

"Yeah. I will be done in a minute."

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“I’ll be waiting for you upstairs.” When he went into the apartment some time later, he saw Nancy all dressed up and the table was decorated real nice and fancy.

“What’s the special occasion for all of this?”

“It’s a secret until we finish dinner.” When dinner was over she said, “Guess what?”

“Okay What?”

“Kiss me first.” He kissed her and again said, “What?”

“This is big. I need a better kiss than that.”

He embraced and kissed her again.

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Then he said, “Okay. What is your secret?” Zeb thought she had something real fun in mind. Instead, she went over the dresser and got out one of Zeb Lee’s old baby booties, then she took it by the string and began swinging it back and forth in front of his face.

“Another baby?”

“I think so. I will need see Dr. Brumbell next week. I called his office and made an appointment while you were at the employment office.

He was floored. His truck toolbox was broken into and now he was about to become a daddy again. He was in deep

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thought when there was a knock at the door. It was Nancy's father. After he was in the apartment, he said that some strange men were knocking on your door when he drove up earlier. "There was an old pickup truck parked in a driveway a few blocks away. It was loaded with scrap metal and a bunch of tools. The two men hastily went down the stairs and headed for the truck. When they saw me looking at them, they continued walking down the street. I thought this looked suspicious, so I got a pencil and wrote down the license plate number as I drove by the truck on my way out. It had a Texas plate.

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Here's the license plate number.

Nancy offered to fix her dad a bite to eat, but he turned her down. He said he was going to the doctor in the morning, Friday, October 9, 1958. Nothing much happened for the rest of the day.

In the morning he got into his truck at seven o'clock and headed for the job site on Van Buren. When he got there the place smelled awful. An ambulance with its red lights on was loading a gurney into it as he parked his truck and got out. He was looking up at the scorched wood and plaster when someone said, "Are you here to apply for the carpenter's

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position.

“Yes sir. What happened?”

“One of my men fell off the building when a roof section collapsed under him. They’re taking him to the hospital.” Then in a harsh voice he said, “What is your name and what kind of work experience do you have?”

Zeb remembered his wife telling him not to take the job before he said, “The name is Zeb Smith. I’ve done anything from cutting down trees to trimming out custom homes.”

“For how many years?”

“A year and a half in Mississippi and about a year here in the Phoenix area.”

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“Who did you work for?”

“Dan Apperson in Scottsdale. I did remodeling and new tract homes for him.”

“Got any references?”

“The company went broke last month, so it would be hard for me to get a reference.”

“Well let me think on this. ... I can start you at two and a quarter an hour. What do you say?”

He didn't want to say anything because he knew he would not like what he had to say. There was really no choice since another baby was on the way and his

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money was dwindling fast. He said, “I am ready to start ripping out some burned up wood.”

“Fine. Get out your tools and start at this firewall and gut out all three units. By the way, have you ever operated a jackhammer before?”

“No, but it can’t be all that complicated to learn how.”

“Yep. After a few days you will get the feel of it and start looking for some liniment to sooth you aching arms, back and legs.” This foreman had a heart colder than an iceberg. “You will need to bust out this concrete floor with a 90 pound jackhammer. After we get the

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mess cleaned up, you can pour the new floor. When the concrete dries enough, then you can start on the framing. You have done framing before haven't you?"

"You bet and I have the scars to prove it."

"Let's get to work. It was chilly as Zeb got out his tools and began ripping out the old building materials. By noon he was exhausted. It had been some time since he had to give his back a big stress test. When he went to his truck to get his lunch, he saw himself in the side view mirror on the truck door. He looked like a coal miner that had not bathed in a

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week. By 4:00 he was total worn out. Nancy would hardly recognize him when got home. As he drove into his parking place, he saw Nancy and Zeb Lee looking out the window beside the front door. He waived at them and started up the stairs. After he opened the door he saw that she was dressed up. That made him feel more like a horse about to get hosed down and combed out. She said I know you want to hit the shower before you sit down to dinner. She smiled at him before he went to the shower, he got undressed and put the clothes in the hamper as if they smelled like a skunk. While he was in the shower Nancy

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turned on the radio to some romantic music. After several minutes the news came on where they announced that a carpenter was killed after falling off a roof that collapsed under him at an apartment building on Van Buren Avenue. Then the phone rang.

When he got out of the shower, she said that Dan, his old boss, called and said he wanted to talk to him. A while later he called Dan and said, “What’s happening?” Dan told him he was now a superintendent for a tenant improvement outfit. He said that he would like Zeb to come to work for him in about three

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weeks. He told him that he wanted to be sure of his position before he hired anyone. He also told Zeb to keep it under his hat, but he has been talking to his brother and may be able to get a loan to start his business up again. “Oh. One other thing. The police think they found my old bookkeeper. He has been hiding somewhere in Oklahoma. They said they plan to make an arrest in the next day or so. I am hoping they can get some of my money back.

“The job I have in mind for you is a saw man. You will be operating a 12 inch swinging arm saw and cutting wood at the company lumber yard. The pay is

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good and I know you need the money.”

He was getting sick to his stomach and mentally burned out even though he only worked one day at his new job. His choices were either to stick with the burned out apartment, which his wife threw a fit over, or he could wait three weeks and take the saw-man job and risk cutting off one of his hands.