

GOING DOWN SLOW WITH RENT-A-STAFF

East London dockland in the 70's before the urban renewal. Gloomy warehouses of rotting timber overlooking poorly lit streets that ended in abandoned wharves. The advent of deep- water ports for container ships changed everything. However, in 1970 the inveterate fur brokers, Anning Chadwick and Kiver, were still alive and in control of their double- story depository.

It was 8 a.m. – my second week on the job. In order to get upstairs, I had to walk from one end of the tannery to the other. About twelve East End Cockney women worked there, tasked with treating the skins and hides. This involved soaking, liming (an alkaline solution containing sodium sulfides, cyanides and amines), removal of extraneous tissues, deliming, tanning, drenching and pickling (hot water, salt and sulfuric acid). The toxic stench was overpowering. A week earlier, my first impression had been that it was like entering Hieronymus Bosch's underworld. In my eyes, the women workers looked rough and feral - no surprise given day after day, year after year working in the toxic, inhumane conditions of the tannery. As I walked the line to reach the staircase at the end, they whistled and called out comments like "I'll tan your skin for you darlin'." This was another world. I had no idea how to respond.

Six months before, I had been a graduate student at The London School of Economics. But then one day the roof fell in. I had no support from my parents. Not knowing London and having spent the previous three years doing an undergraduate degree in Canada, I had no friends. I had no loan and no savings. I was surviving by earning just enough money to pay the rent by doing substitute teaching two mornings a week. But the real problem was that I hated the intellectual aridity of the Masters program. Then in the Spring, when a rocky relationship ended with deceit and betrayal, it was all too much. I was spent, broken. I had to get away. In a kind of daze, I quit LSE and joined a couple who were going to Morocco. They were hippies, I wasn't. They had money, I didn't. They were into drugs, I wasn't. Things didn't go well. In fact it was a nightmare.

On returning to London, I set about picking up the pieces. It was 1970. I had become a kind of lone wolf, over-conscientious rebel. I was against the class system, the capitalist economy, elitism, entitlement. I was drawn towards both anarchism and socialism - at least in theory. But that was the thing - I needed first-hand experience to see how things really worked. That could have meant demonstrating against the Vietnam War or joining a left- wing party, but that didn't seem like direct action on an individual level. I knew what things looked like from half-way up the ladder but I didn't know what it was like down below – working there, living there, being there. I had been greatly influenced the biography of Gandhi and George Orwell's account Down and Out in Paris and London. Everything about Orwell resonated: his colonial background, well educated but economically not well-off, his rejection of the British class system of power and privilege. I wanted to do what he had done, see what life was like at the bottom of the ladder.

Someone told me about an agency called Rent-A-Staff – an agency that paid less than minimum wages for temporary workers prepared to do the most menial jobs imaginable. I signed up. The first job that I was assigned to was as a dishwasher. In the basement of a seemingly reputable French restaurant, there was a kitchen and in a separate room, the scullery. There was no automated system in the scullery, just a double sink. Dirty dishes came down in a creaky old dumb waiter and had to be washed by hand. It was stuffy, hot and the lighting was

poor. At 6 p.m. things were manageable but by 9, it got crazy. The dumb waiter kept delivering. It was oppressive – not even time to sneak out for a cigarette. Fortunately, the job only lasted a few weeks as I was a temporary replacement for some poor soul who was ill.

After a few days lull, I was contacted by the Rent-a-staff office and told they had another job for me. It was at Bass Charrington, one of the biggest breweries and bottlers in London. They were located in Plaistow, in a grim industrial area that had been heavily bombed by the Lutwaffe during the blitz. Every day, I had to walk past a meat-rendering plant that produced tallow, grease and glue. I was told it was attached to an animal slaughterhouse or 'knacker's yard'. The smell was indescribable, as bad or worse than the putrid stench I experienced a few months later at Anning, Chadwick and Kiver. It was enough to make you vomit. I had to cover my nose and mouth with a scarf when I passed by.

For the first week I was there, I had a task that beggared belief. I was shown an outdoor courtyard that had crates of beer and wine bottles stacked against one wall. I was told that all the bottles were defective in one way or another and that my job was to smash the bottles one by one by hurling them against a brick wall. It may seem that this is a remnant of an absurdist dream but no, it happened. It was real. In a way, it turned out that smashing glass violently for hours on end had some therapeutic effects in helping me get rid of the residual cobwebs of graduate school.

After a few days of bottle smashing, I was ushered into the plant and told that my job would now be to stand at the end of an assembly line and remove bottles of wine as they arrived and crate them. For eight hours a day I repeated the same action of lifting bottles off the conveyor belt and putting them in wooden crates. Back and forth, back and forth - I couldn't even go for a piss because that would have caused the bottles to back up and cause chaos. I was reminded of a scene in Charlie Chaplin's 'Modern Times' in which he brings a whole new meaning to 'throwing a spanner in the works'. I learned that there were some jobs that were so stupefyingly boring that they reduced you to feeling like no more than a cog in the wheel.

I was one of the few white guys in the plant, the majority being Pakistani or West Indian. One day, I was approached by the Foreman who told me I would have to join the TGWU (Transport and General Workers Union). He told me to pay my union dues and said I would receive my union card in a week or so. Given my political views, I wanted to be a 'union man', so I was happy to pay up. However, I never did receive the official card. Another lesson - there was corruption at both ends of the social ladder, white collar crime and blue collar crime. Knowing that from a book was nothing compared with the experience. It was another affront to my idealism. Once again, I recalled Orwell and his message in Animal Farm.

It was 2 pm. at Anning Chadwick and Kiver. Only one more hour of de-stapling before being ordered to bring batches of assorted furs to the assembled buyers. They had come for the twice annual auction from Stockholm, Amsterdam, Paris, Munich and other major European cities. They were looking for pelts such as mink, sable, marten, fox, otter, sheep, wolf and chinchilla. It was 1970. A decade before the fur trade started dying out thanks to the efforts of animal cruelty activists.

For a week, I had worked with one tool – a kind of flat head screwdriver. And with that, for 8 hours a day my job was to de-staple the price tags. Why? I had no idea why they had been stapled there in the first place but presumably they had to be removed now so they wouldn't influence the bidding.

3 p.m. The show was on. The auction commenced. As dishwasher and bottle-thrower, I had been unseen. As last guy on the assembly line, I had been part of the machinery. Now as de-stapler and errand boy, I was barely noticed. I was a page, a serf, a nobody. But I certainly saw them. They were like a satirical cartoon brought to life, an embodiment of cigar chomping, fat-bellied capitalists. Some wore fur hats and others fur coats.

What, I asked myself, was I doing with my life? Seeing it from the other side came the response. But then, unlike the Cockney women, I could escape.