

MY FIRST JOB
BY
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I want to tell you the story of my first job and why it was that I never bothered to collect my pay. But first I need to say something about my early life. You see my troubles started from the day I was born. I was cursed by my own father, and I lay the blame squarely on his passion for English cars. When I was born he decided to name me after one. Fine—he could have picked Jaguar, Morris, Austin or even Leyland. But no, he chose to call me Rover!

That's when my troubles started. It didn't help matters when two of our neighbours called their dogs Rover.

Can you imagine what I went through at school? 'Rover, would you sit down!' And someone would yell out: 'Then roll over and play dead!' The teacher would say, 'Rover, your book is dog-eared!' And the kids would howl with laughter.

So I developed a sense of humour, what else could a poor mutt like me do? But it's not school, it's my first job that I want to tell you about.

It was the end of the university year and I had temporary work lined up in a cannery. I'd better not say which one for fear of reprisals. On the first day my job was to load the empty cans onto a conveyer belt which would whisk them, rattling and clanking, upwards and out of sight at the rate of about two hundred cans a minute. A simple job. Mr Jones showed me what I had to do.

'Is that all I've got to do all day?'

'What, is that too boring for all your university brains?'

'Could I bring a ghetto blaster in and listen while—'

'Certainly not! Radios are against the rules. And if the floor manager, Frankenstein, catches you he'll have your guts for garters.'

'Who did you say?'

'Frankenstein. Mr Goliath. But everyone calls him Frankenstein behind his back. Just don't let him catch you bludging, he's a reasonable man, but when he gets angry he turns into a monster.'

At smoko I saw Mr Jones again.

'How's the can-loading going, Rover?'

'No problem, Mr Jones. It just gets a bit boring.'

'That's okay, you'll get used to that.'

'Could I read a book?'

'Oh sure, that'd be just fine. Then when Frankenstein catches you he'll have something to wipe the blood off his hands with after he's finished with you.'

People have always said that I am a persistent little pup, and I thought that it was petty not to let me have something to do while I was working. I decided to use my Walkman. I had it in my locker and I figured if I wore the small earpieces no one would notice. I was sitting down (for just one minute!) in my little corner trying to tune in a FM station. I looked up and saw a creature from heaven, an angel. She was ravishingly beautiful and dressed in a white dustcoat, a white belt around her waist. I had never seen anyone as beautiful or as fascinating in my whole life. She was about twenty and had a freshness about her as though she had just been baked, steaming fresh, from God's perfect oven, then sent down to Earth as an angel disguised as a young woman. And here she was two metres away staring at me with exquisitely beautiful wide-open eyes. I stared back, my mouth open, and she said something to me I couldn't catch.

'What?' But I couldn't hear. The Walkman was too loud in my ears. I was confused, she turned and walked off. Was she returning to God? I sprang up, dragging my Walkman off the seat to the floor; it jerked the earpieces from my ears. I tried to stop her, but she was getting further away. The cans had almost run out, the loader nearly empty. Ignoring the cans I started after

her, the Walkman dragging along the ground, the earpiece caught around my shoe. I stopped to pick it up and she was gone. I turned to see the conveyor belt devoid of cans and a red light flashing ominously.

I rushed back and opened a new box of cans but all the time I was thinking of the angel in white. Where had she gone? An angel sent to me by God! Perhaps she was a sort of vision brought on by staring at all those stupid tin cans. Canner's ecstasy.

I hurriedly loaded the cans; sucked into the system, they sped along like shiny silver rockets, but all the time I thought about the visitation. When I opened the next box of empty cans I immediately sensed that something was wrong. But what? Oh! I had placed the previous lot of cans on the belt upside down!

I began to panic. It was too late to stop them—already they had disappeared into a maze of conveyor belts above my head. I realised what I must do was to run after them and find them before they were filled. If I could catch the cans I could turn them the right way up before they got to the filling machine.

I ran along beneath the conveyor belt trying to follow the progress of the cans. Eventually I found the spot where they were supposed to be filled with baked beans. I could see them up above me, going under the filler one by one—upside down, the hole pointing downwards at me. I climbed up a steel ladder trying to reach the cans. Too late. They were out of reach and already the machine was trying to fill them. Instead of filling them, the machine was dumping the beans onto the lids. The baked beans in sauce flowed everywhere: down the sides of the can and onto the conveyor belt where they were mashed into the pulleys and dripped onto the floor. The sauce ran like a lava flow down can after can, the rejected baked beans dribbling down into the machinery. There was nothing I could do.

I headed back towards my work station and on the way I noticed mashed baked beans spreading themselves slowly along the spotless walk-ways, dripping sauce, falling into the pulleys, crunching and mashing up until they looked like peanut butter. I ran to my place and began loading cans in, trying to catch up and hoping no one would notice the flashing red light. After ten minutes, my concentration still shot through with guilty thoughts about what had happened, I heard the conveyor belt stop. Then an announcement came over the P.A.

'The baked beans line will be stopped for fifteen minutes. Please assemble outside.'

Everyone began wandering out of the factory towards the toilet block and the cafeteria. On the way out I could see the squashed baked beans on the floor and the long skid marks where people had slipped. I could see some of the women with their white coats stained sauce-red on the bum, now looking more like abattoir workers.

We gathered outside—some people taking the opportunity to have a hasty smoke. Workers were glad for the extra break, while I was plain terrified my error would be discovered.

Frankenstein, the scowling floor manager, came forward with a nasty red smear around the backside of his large white dust coat. It told the story of his slip and landing.

'Quieten down! There has been a malfunction in the filling equipment. We have the mechanic inspecting it at the moment. When the problem's been fixed we'll be returning to work.'

'What happened?' someone called out.

'Apparently the baked beans dispenser has been over-filling the cans. Baked beans have been dripping onto the conveyor belt and spread about the factory. Personally,' he paused for effect, 'I suspect sabotage.'

'So do I!' put in a middle-aged woman standing behind me. 'Just before I had all the trouble with the sauce drippin' on me 'ead I sees a strange young man climbing up on the runway, next thing it's rainin' baked beans.'

'You should have told me immediately! I think our rival is trying to disrupt us. By God, if ever I catch the bastard I'll tear him apart with these hands.' I looked aghast at his monstrous hands; they were hairy and huge like King Kong's. 'What did he look like, Marge?'

'Young. I'd not seen him before. He wore glasses.'

I quickly slipped mine off, my heart racing.

'Alright. Everyone keep a lookout—report anyone acting suspiciously to me. Now return to work when the whistle goes.'

Then to my astonishment I saw the "angel" appear out of the crowd. She walked right up to the dreaded Frankenstein and began talking to him. I moved closer to hear what they were saying.

'Sandra, tell your mother I'll be staying back an hour tonight. I want to check over some of our past employees.'

'Dad, do you really think it's sabotage?'

'I'm sure of it. And when I find the culprit he's going to be dogmeat.'

'Bye Dad.'

Oh my Lord! Frankenstein's daughter.

But she was so beautiful. She stood there by herself. I walked up behind her.

'S-Sandra?'

She turned around. 'Oh. You're the new guy aren't you?'

'Rover. I'm a university student, here during the vacation.'

'Wow, I'm a uni student too! I come back at the end of each semester.'

'That's great.' I laughed. 'You don't happen to go to Rouge Williams' political science lectures?'

'I sure do! He's a barrel of laughs, isn't he?'

'It's a wonder I haven't seen you around the concerts and things.'

'I spend a lot of time at the theatre.'

She was talking, and I couldn't take my eyes off her, she was hand-made by God. I desperately wanted to ask her to go out with me. But I felt nervous—how often do you talk with an angel?

Ask her! I told myself. Now! Do it! But I felt so nervous, so embarrassed.

Ask, just ask her!

'Sandra?' Just then the whistle began blowing. 'I'd like to take you to the movies.'

'What?'

Just as the whistle stopped I tried again, this time I yelled: 'I'D LIKE TO TOUCH YOU ON THE BOOBIES!'

There was silence. Why I said that I don't know, it was just one of those dyslexic spoonerisms that I came out with when I was under pressure. When I felt threatened my tongue would say whatever it felt like. I had no control over it.

I tried to fix things up: 'What I meant ... to ... I want to take your boobies to the movies. No! I—'

But already she had turned and was walking away.

Everyone had heard. A weaselly looking guy my own age came over. 'Boy you've got guts! Her old man likes to beat people up. Frankenstein used to be a wrestler, but they had to ban him because he killed everyone he got in the ring with.'

His mate was laughing at me. 'You got a death wish fella?'

'Yeah, we all reckon the last guy who talked to her is packed away in two hundred cans of Irish stew. The rumour goes that he accidentally fell into the mincer!'

'Nah,' said his mate, 'I don't believe that. I reckon he went into the dog food!'

* * *

The next day when I was due to begin work I found Sandra's father, Frankenstein, waiting for me. Was I going into the mincer?

'You! Rover. I've got a different job for you today, tomatoes. Follow me.'
We walked to an area just in front of a few women, who worked on an elevated table sorting tomatoes. 'The tomatoes will start rolling down this chute, you put an empty box under the end, when it's full stack it on that pallet. Got it?'

'Sure. That's easy enough.'

And it was, no problem at all. The tomatoes came down the chute plop, plop, into the box. The box slowly filled. I could see four women working on the conveyor belt. They were selecting different sizes and quality. The box slowly filled. I pushed an empty box under the chute, then took the full one to the pallet. No problems.

It kept on that way for an hour. This was going to be an easy day for me. Gradually the tomatoes rolling down the chute started to come in groups, no longer one or two at a time, but five, six, ten at a time. Then they started to come at a rush.

I looked up and saw that the more and more women were coming onto the line. The tomatoes were now coming down bucketfuls at a time! The cardboard box filled more and more quickly. I timed it at twelve seconds from empty to full. I now had to hurry with the full box, stack it, then rush to get back with my empty box, the second box already filled.

Then disaster struck.

As I rushed back with the new box I saw a tomato overflow the box and drop splat! onto the floor, where I accidentally trod on it. Then another: splat! While I picked them up, a dozen more made the leap to their death. I quickly stood up and tried to push the empty box underneath the chute. But the full one would not move, it was stuck with the weight of the tomatoes now piled up high and overflowing. Struggling to free it and move the new box in place took a mere fifteen seconds. During that time a whole new boxful had rolled out the end of the chute, over the top of the full box and onto the floor. Tomatoes lay everywhere. I suppose panic would not be too strong a word; something I did very well. I rushed helter-skelter about picking up tomatoes from the floor, putting them into an empty box, inadvertently treading on poor wounded tomatoes as they oozed their life out on the concrete floor.

After twenty seconds I noticed a new avalanche of tomatoes rolling across the floor. I rushed away and snatched up an empty box and had it back in four seconds. Unfortunately it stuck as I tried to push it under the chute. Finally it went into place. I decided this time I would run back and get an empty box immediately—before trying to stack the full one. No trouble, apart from stomping on a few more tomatoes. They were unavoidable. They rolled about the floor everywhere—except for those now shaped like fried eggs. I watched as the box filled and began pushing—this time with all my strength—the new box into place. But oh! I looked up just in time to see the first box pushed right off the end of the bench! It hit the floor and spilled tomatoes in all directions.

The next hour is somewhat of a blur. Dead tomatoes lay everywhere. Yet hundreds had escaped by rolling down the corridors, under machinery, into toilets and offices. Full boxes lay stacked haphazardly, mostly on top of tomatoes.

Finally Frankenstein came back.

'My God! What happened?'

'Sabotage.' The word sprang to my lips in a flash.

'What?'

'Um. Three masked men, they came in here ... tied me up. One of them had an AK-47, the leader looked rather like Arnold Schwarzenegger. It took me twenty minutes to get free. I couldn't call out because I had a gag in my mouth. I think I could identify them in a police lineup.'

'How much do you weigh?'

'Huh? About seventy kilos. I ... uh can explain everything.'

'It's perfectly okay. I'm just calculating how many cans of dog food you'd fit

into. No—perhaps I should sack you before I kill you. See me in the office in five minutes with your will.

* * *

'Uh Mr Goliath I feel sure I can explain everything.'

'Try me.'

'You see, when I was fighting with the guy who looked like Arnold Schwarzenegger—'

'Shut up! I know your sort! And it would give me great pleasure to rip your limbs apart, one by one. But my daughter tells me you attend the same university as her.'

'Yes, that's right.'

'And because of this she has asked me to give you one more chance.'

'Oh thank you! I'll be really careful. I'll be so thoughtful you'll—'

'Shutup! I don't want any dog shit from you Rover. One mistake and you'll be a dead dog! I'm putting you with the maintenance man, Tony Murphy.'

'Tony I want you to take Rover with you this afternoon. If you've got any crawling about in ceilings or under buildings, Rover will do it. If you want anything fetched, Rover will fetch it. If the septic tank needs cleaning out, he's your dog. But I warn you: don't leave him alone. Watch him every minute. Off you go.'

Mr Murphy glared at me. 'Right. Trot behind me, don't look left or right, don't bark, don't even smile. Just do what you're told. This must be your lucky day. Usually I'm crawling around the roof, or under buildings. Today, we've got a nice easy job. Testing the fire hoses. I'll do the testing. You watch and listen. There are twenty-two hoses to test all over this factory and the upstairs office. I don't want to see you even smile till we're finished.'

Boy this Murphy was a grouch! I did everything he told me to. We rolled the hoses out of their reels, checked them for cracks and leaks, turned on the main tap, then opened the nozzle for about a minute pointing it full blast out onto the lawn. The pressure was terrific, the water shot up into the air like a huge fountain. Grumpy Murphy wouldn't even let me hold the hose while it was turned on, although we had done twenty without a hitch. There were only two left to do, and to be honest I thought it would be a bit of fun holding the hose and seeing how high out over the lawn it would spray. But Murphy wouldn't give me a chance; my job was always the inspection, looking for dripping pipes, that sort of thing.

'We've got to test the hose in this office. Now obviously we're going to be extremely careful. Right? We'll point the nozzle out the window when we turn it on and hose over that garden. Got it? 'Sure. You're the boss.' 'Now the first thing—'

A message came over the P.A. 'Mr Tony Murphy, telephone call on line six.' He walked over to the little partitioned cubicle and picked up the phone. I could see him laughing and relaxing as he talked.

I was standing around bored when I noticed Sandra sitting at a desk typing.

'Hello Sandra. This is a nice office you've got here.'

'Yes.'

'Lots of computers and photocopiers and stuff.'

'Sure. It's an office. Can I help you?'

'Oh I'm just waiting for Murphy. We're supposed to be testing the fire hoses, but it seems he doesn't trust me to do anything by myself.'

'Hmm. You'd better watch out my father just came in.'

I saw him glaring at me as I stood talking to the Sandra, waiting for Murphy. I sprang up and headed for the damn hose. It seemed I couldn't win. Murphy didn't trust me to do anything by myself and Frankenstein would sack me for doing nothing.

I unrolled the hose the full length of the office, checking it for cracks and drips. Everything was okay. I looked at Murphy—he was still chatting and laughing on the phone. I carefully checked that the nozzle was turned off,

walked down to the end and turned the tap on. No drips. Fine. Murphy was still talking on the phone. I walked back to the nozzle, pointed it out the window and turned it on full force.

I should have remembered to open the window first.

Not my fault! The glass was so clean, you'd have sworn it was open. The water smashed the glass and sprayed back over my face, blurring my glasses, splashing in my eyes. It surprised me so much that I inadvertently let the nozzle go.

Wow did it take off! You've never seen a hose move so fast, spraying about the office with terrific speed. First one way then the other. For a few seconds it seemed to float high up in the air as if by magic, like a cobra rising from its nest. The women were screaming, for I expect they were scared of this monstrous grey snake that wriggled and squirmed, flying through the air and at the same time spraying a jet of water under their tables, jumping desks, floating and curling about the room.

Frankenstein was chasing the nozzle screaming at me to turn it off, trying to stomp on it but it was just too fast for him. Once he nearly got it but it jumped up as though it were alive spaying him full in the face before it headed into the kitchenette.

I ran towards the tap, and I'm sure I would have turned it off if I hadn't panicked. Clockwise is off, but was that when you were standing in front of it or standing behind it? It's so easy to get confused about clockwise and anti-clockwise when the pressure is on you.

After a few turns the handle went no further. I guessed it was stuck. They do sometimes of course. I knew I had to do something drastic because it was no longer funny. The hose was in the kitchenette and I could see that the water had sprayed everywhere—into the toaster, the stove, and the microwave. The nearby photocopier now had smoke pouring out the back of it. That looked rather serious. Murphy was running about chasing the nozzle. I heard him call out: Turn it off!

I gestured helplessly at the tap. 'It's stuck,' I apologised. Then I had an idea. If I jammed the leg of a chair—one of those tubular steel ones—behind the tap wheel and pushed, the extra force would provide one more turn, the water would stop and everyone would be happy.

Down the other end Murphy and Frankenstein had captured the nozzle. They were shutting it down, still—I had to turn off the main tap anyway.

I slotted the chair leg behind the tap handle and twisted it with all my force. Boy! it was really jammed. They were still yelling at me—as if I were not trying my hardest. I swung on the chair with all my body weight. I felt a click, a groan, and then to my astonishment the whole top of the tap burst off.

The force of the water knocked me over backwards. I clambered to my feet and watched the water spray in a large circular pattern over the desks. The women looked like they had been caught in a waterfall; their wet clothes looked silly, and their hair dripped into their eyes. Murphy and Frankenstein had hold of the snake's head. It was lifeless in their hands now that the main tap had broken off. The water was squirting out in a powerful spray from the tap head like a burst water main. But at least it wasn't running wild; it was a nice steady spray shooting out into the centre of the office.

'The main supply!' Frankenstein shouted. 'Where is it?'

Murphy said, 'Down at the front gate. I'll go down and turn it off!'

He ran towards the door, tripped on the hose and fell heavily. Lucky for him there was a lot of water on the floor which helped to break his fall.

Frankenstein rushed to him. 'Where's the tap? For God's sake don't pass out!'

'Front gate ...' Murphy managed to gasp out in pain. Frankenstein walked out quickly, his face the colour of his white dustcoat. 'Don't panic. I'll be back to kill Rover.'

Sandra asked: 'How are you Mr Murphy?' He was still lying on the floor in the water, lifting his head now and again so the water wouldn't get in his nose.

'I think my arm is broken.'

'Don't touch it; I'll call an ambulance for you. Try and keep your face out of the water.'

The other women, shrieking and shaking themselves like wet dogs, were huddled in the kitchenette staring at the huge cloud of smoke rising from the photocopier. They were trying to avoid the force of the water spraying over the computers.

I looked about for one of those chemical fire extinguishers. I could see one nearby on the wall. I snatched it off and ran to the smoking photocopier. I squeezed the handle but it would not work. There was writing on the extinguisher, but in my panic I found it difficult to concentrate on the instructions. I was terribly afraid the photocopier would cause an electrical fire, and I didn't want any unnecessary trouble.

'How does this work?' I asked Sandra.

'Read the instructions.'

'I can't, it's all a blur.' My glasses were dripping water.

'Isn't there a pin you pull out? I'm going downstairs before I drown. I can't tread water all day.'

'I'll have to smash the top off.'

'Don't. It's only smoke.'

'You'll have to trust me on this one.' I picked up the fire extinguisher and hit the neck of the extinguisher full force on the window sill. After three or four good whacks it broke off and a terrific spray of foam, like a volcano of shaving cream, squirted up into the air. Murphy was shouting at me, and the women were yelling abuse.

'It's okay!' I called over the persistent roar of the spraying water from the broken tap. 'The foam will put the fire out. Believe me!' But they were scrambling around trying to avoid the snowstorm of foam choking the air. The water was now ankle deep and rolling out beneath the door.

The office workers started to panic. They were rushing to get sodden papers from their desks, snatching up handbags and fussing over the smoke belching from a desk computer. I believe that the main cause of the trouble that followed was the smoke detectors. It seems they were not only connected to the fire brigade, but also designed to cause a shutdown of the cannery's entire electrical system.

The women, sloshing about in the water—which was now past their ankles—were going down the stairs to safety. God knows what Frankenstein was doing. The tap head was still belting out water like a fountain. Murphy was crying as he ran about trying to move the computers. The taphead was spraying a lovely even pattern over everything: the computers, the printers, photocopier, the phones, the fax, and all the paperwork on their desks.

I sheepishly followed the office staff down the stairs, hoping not to be noticed. Outside there was a sort of general panic for all we could hear was the cannery fire siren. The general power had automatically switched off bringing the factory to a standstill. Everyone was rushing out onto the lawns to avoid the flames.

Fortunately fire drill was well-practiced and I could see them handing out helmets and pulling hoses about. As I came down the stairs the Chief Fire Warden asked me, 'Is the fire in the office?'

'Well, yes. But the hose is broken.'

'What! That's lack of maintenance. Just when we want to use the hose to save the building—it's not working. Murphy's a slacker.'

Murphy was coming down the stairs holding his arm. 'Watch your mouth. The maintenance was done.'

'If the maintenance was done, why is it broken now? I haven't time to argue with you Murphy. I'll deal with your lack of maintenance in my report. Jack! Roll out number four and number seven hoses and train them on the upstairs office till the flames are out.'

'Chief! Chief!' The men were calling out excitedly. 'The water's just gone off!'

'What? My God!'

'Yes,' I said, 'Frankenstein just turned the main supply off.'

'He did?'

'Yep. Here he comes.' I pointed at him as he was running full speed towards me.

'Frankenstein! Who said you could turn the water off? I'm the boss when we have a fire. I am in charge as Chief Fire Warden.'

'Bullshit! I had to turn it off. There's no need for water. And I'm the boss,' Frankenstein shouted at him.

'There's a bloody fire and you turn the water off! Don't you know the rules? You stupid drongo!'

'There's no fire I tell you! You snivelling little runt!'

Just at that moment we heard the fire brigade siren. A few seconds later we saw two huge red fire engines come speeding into the yard, and stop near the Chief Fire Warden and Frankenstein—who were yelling and wrestling on the ground in the mud. Everyone was pointing to the office where a thin wisp of smoke came out of the broken window. The fireman began, amid great excitement, to unroll hoses and bring out axes and a ladder.

The fire warden was screaming for his fire officers to drag Frankenstein off him, but there was no holding Frankenstein. He was putting up a terrific fight against five men. By God he could fight, I'm glad I wasn't trying to help them.

'We'll call a general strike! Get the union. Gallagher, call a stop work meeting.'

The firemen were chopping into the doors with their axes.

The ambulance came about the same time but Mr Murphy refused to get into it,

'I'm not getting into the ambulance until that upstart fire warden apologises to me. I'll take him on when Frankenstein has finished, broken arm and all.

And where's Rover?'

I felt that really it was time I left. It seemed to me that my future at the cannery was doubtful; promotion would be difficult. Sandra seemed rather cool to me.

I made it to the car park in the confusion, and then managed to get well clear as the police and TV reporters arrived to film the firemen, with axes swinging, chopping into the upstairs office door. It just shows you how the newspapers get things wrong. The next day's headlines said:

FIRE BRINGS CANNERY TO A STANDSTILL. SEVEN MEN HURT IN DRUNKEN BRAWL. INVESTIGATION TO BE DONE INTO LACK OF MAINTENANCE. GALLAGHER SAYS STRIKE IS LIKELY.

Perhaps you'll understand now why I never bothered going back to collect my two days' pay.

END

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