

NOBODY NOBODY SENT

Sheri Reda



This was it?

I stood in the parking lot, hands on my hips, unclear about what to do next. I'd finished my last final in English lit, the one with the Shakespeare quote that said, "What's past is prologue." I did OK, I thought. I'd said good-bye to the three people in town I still knew. Then I'd gone back to my room and stuffed my old Malibu windshield to windshield with books, linens, clothes, cooking supplies, posters, and a four-foot-tall stuffed Pink Panther, safely belted into the back seat. I was off to stash my stuff, camp in a friend's living room, and land the job that would launch my career, I guessed.

I'd skipped graduation but I wished I had some way to mark this moment of fruition, which might, after all, be my last. I was pretty sure I'd already peaked.

My working life was ten years old that year. I was babysitting for change at twelve and earning real money at fourteen when my mom rented me out to Mr. Kramer next door. It was boring to ride with him from car dealership to car dealership and mind-numbing to address his stupid marketing cards, but I liked the four dollars an hour cash. And I loved the view of the garage. I still mooned over some of the mechanics there.

Then I'd lucked into the dream job at the record store. It only paid a dollar sixty but it came with a cool factor: concert tickets, discounted records, fun friends, sponsored pot breaks—and Steve, who lent me his copy of *Be Here Now*, by Ram Dass, proving my economic path could be my spiritual path too.

But everything from there on in had been a bust. First, the record store was bought by a chain. They fired Steve and hired a VP's son, and I quit in protest, which Steve said was stupid, and it looked like he was right. It looked like I'd graduated early, in valedictory triumph, only to peer into store windows and pore over those sexist, depressing help wanted ads for people without any college.

The obvious places were impossible. My romantic rival Barb was a teller at a bank, but I could never work for the Man. Besides, I lost track when I counted stuff. Billy had found



happiness at Dunkin', which made him smell good, but he had to get up at four in the morning, and he fell asleep five times a day.

I couldn't cultivate the counterculture while cashiering in a Kmart smock. And there was no way that I, an aspiring fruitarian, would be a pimply purveyor of meat at McDonald's. My mom said I could go back to babysitting and being a maid. But I told her that people should clean their own messes.

When Cathy invited me to join her

at Ponderosa, I threw up my hands in disgust. "It's a steak house, Cathy!" I exclaimed. "As in, dead cows."

"But they're hiring," she wheedled. "Always! And they have no-calorie lettuce," she added dreamily. Cathy was currently on the baby food diet—two jars per meal, six meals a day.

"Just concentrate on the salad," she advised the very next day, while a miasma of burned flesh and dirty diapers sank inside my own skin. I didn't know how long I could clear away half-eaten, half-chewed, spit-out discount steak.

"It's just too gross," I said at the dinner table that night.

"You shoulda had my first job," said my dad. "Cleaning spittoons. I was nine."

Spittoons? "Back at the tavern. They used to chew tobacco. You had to give 'em a place to spit out the juice or else they'd let loose on the floor. So we had six spittoons.

"In the morning, your grandpa put a silver half dollar at the bottom of every one. At the end of the night, or whenever they got full, whoever cleaned 'em out got to keep the half dollars."

I was speechless, which showed my dad he'd won. I'd shovel the half-eaten fat at Ponderosa and be glad it wasn't hocked up tobacco juice. Minimum wage, plus tips. Except it was a buffet, and no one left tips, and my gag reflex kicked in anyway because now tips made me think of spittoons.

Cathy endured at that job all summer, but I quit after ten nauseating days.

There had to be something that would feed my soul, or launch my creative life, or at least pay a little better. I would've crawled back to Mr. Kramer if he hadn't dropped dead on his kitchen floor. I'd lost old Fezziwig, and my innocent working days were gone for good.

I surveyed the ads again and got a job at the Jovan perfume factory. It could be Cannery Row, I thought, and I could be Steinbeck: witness factory operations, write about wage earners, finger the fabric of working-class life. Plus, it paid three bucks an hour.

There were cool and interesting jobs at the plant, but no one let summer workers or women drive the forklift or even load the trucks. My job was making sure bottles were shut tight—working fast but not too fast or they'd speed up the line. There was no talking. It wasn't forbidden, but the lifers, who packed bottles into boxes and

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boxes into cartons, were busy reading romance novels while they worked. I was jealous of their place on the line and their mad one-hand assembly skills, but they'd earned them; they'd each been commuting an hour and a half to the factory line for fifteen, almost twenty years.

"Grateful!" a woman scolded me. "Praise God."

This was writing material, but not for me. I was used up like a washrag at the end of the day, life force wrung out in my endless effort to keep from bolting. Other people coped by getting high during breaks, but I tried it once and it made the time stretch so that I thought a new decade would dawn before the dismissal "bell" buzzed.

I went home to find my mom and "Aunt" Doreen drinking together on the patio in the backyard. Their shift at Eastern Airlines had begun at five and ended at one.

My mom sniffed the air and sighed. "Yeesh, you smell like a cheap whore," she groaned.

"It's cheap perfume," I shrugged.

Aunt Doreen laughed. "Keep job hunting!" She raised a glass and they clinked.

Two days later, on my way home from work, I spotted a help wanted sign at the gas station. Part time, but it could grow. If I learned to pump gas, I could break ground as a woman in a man's field, like Gloria Steinem. Eventually, I could expose the oil industry to the world.

I smiled brightly at the greasy manager, who looked me over. "I don't have a shirt that'll fit you," he said. "Try this." It was a men's XL, which made me look bottomless. "Excellent!" he said. "You can start right now."

After rush hour ended, I pedaled home. "Perfume and gasoline?" my mom exclaimed. "Whore at a truck stop!" Doreen laughed. My mom pulled out a cigarette and thought better of lighting it.

"I need money for college," I retorted.

"Can't you find something that doesn't stink?" And for once, we were aligned.

A week later she got me a job through Holy Ghost Church. "It's a corporal work of mercy," she said. "You just go help a blind man for six hours, twice a week. He'll pay you twenty bucks a visit."

"Who is this guy?" I protested. "Does anyone know him?"

My mom waved at the air. "He's from the church. Anyway, he's blind. If he tries something, you can dodge him."

Twenty bucks was better than factory work. And maybe the guy had a story to tell. And maybe I was a writer after all. So I rode over to his isolated ranch house, so dark and dank it could have been underground.

Why did he keep it shut up and stuffy? Because he liked to wear shorts? He had scabs all over his arms and legs—maybe it hurt to wear long pants and long sleeves? I never got to ask. He didn't encourage conversation. He just sat on his moldy couch, wearing shades,

and gave me crazy jobs like refinishing his dresser or polishing his floor. Things that couldn't matter to a blind guy.

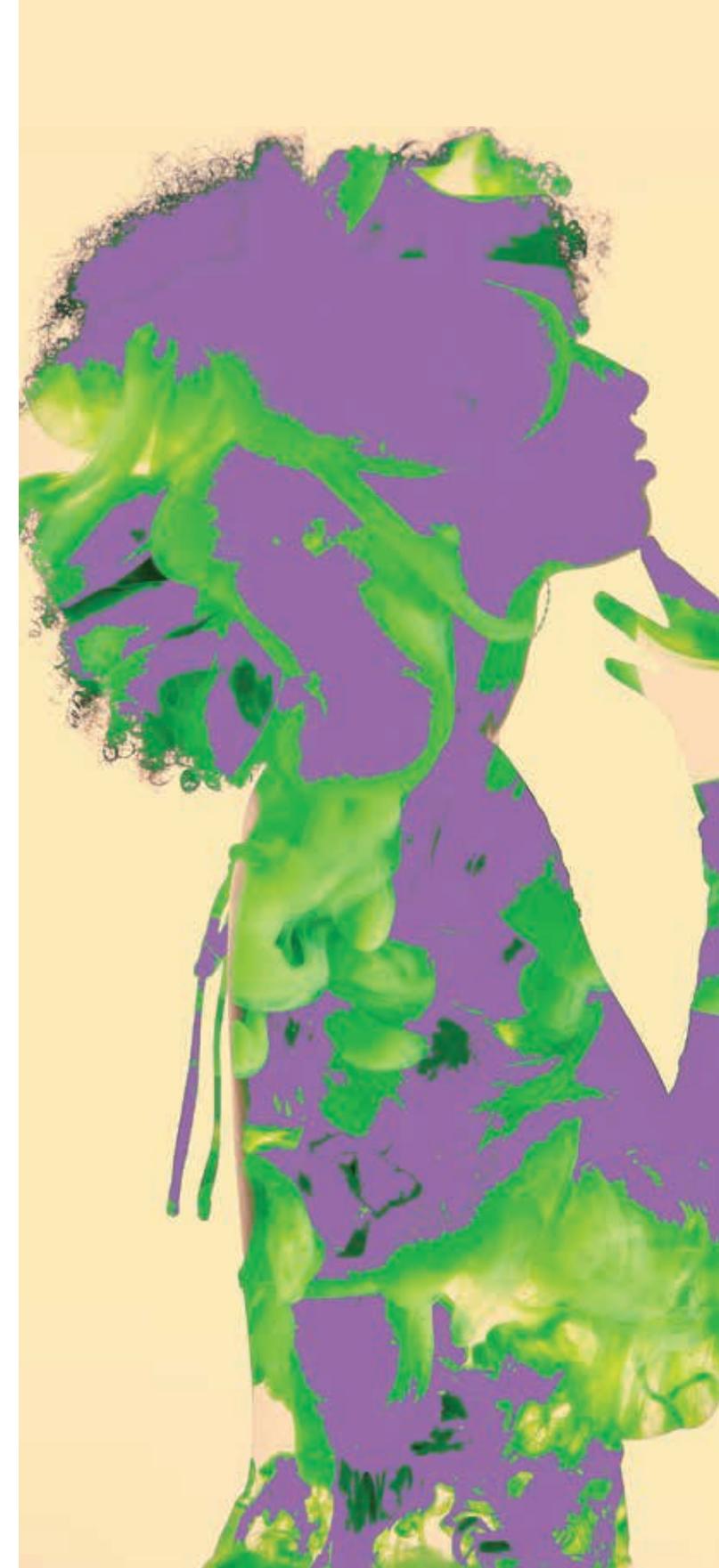
In the middle of the second dresser in the middle of the second week—what was it about week two?—he asked whether I had a boyfriend, what I did for fun, what drugs I liked. He edged a bit closer to where I stood. Sensing a new low, I quit before his glasses came off. At least I still had the gas station job.

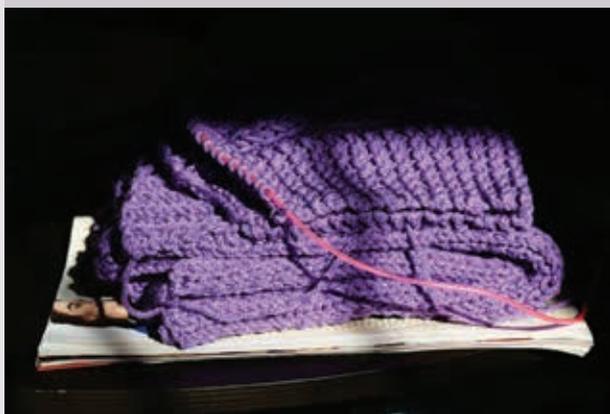
"Hey!" A regular customer yelled. "You missed a spot!" He pointed to the middle of his windshield. I glared and stretched across the car to wipe the window clean.

"Ha-ha!" he laughed, "you missed a spot!" I vowed to wear extra-long bell bottoms to work for the rest of the summer.

College wrought no miracles on the career front. I thought work-study would feature apprenticeships in publishing, journalism, humanities, maybe law. But no, it meant minimum wage catering jobs. I quit and took a pizza-making job no one wants to know about because people want to like their pizza. Then I quit that too.

For three lovely weeks the next summer I had a working-class sinecure taking stadium parking slips. I could have been writing in between arrivals, but the job started at six in the morning and didn't last. I set my alarm for dawn, but it turned off in the middle of the first night. And the second. On the third night, I set the alarm again and moved the clock across





the room. On the fourth, I tried putting it in the kitchen, where I didn't sleepwalk it off but couldn't hear it. Finally, on Thursday night, I put the alarm clock in my housemate's room and asked him to shake me awake in the morning. He overslept, and I got reassigned to hanging toilet paper rolls and picking up trash.

I wasn't just mortified about all of this. I was scared. I'd become an English major because I liked to read and I hoped to find truth. I knew it wasn't a pipeline kind of major, but I didn't know anything about how to chart a future. I didn't even know people did that. Summer after summer had served up drudgery, and my small-time professors didn't have a clue, and vision was nowhere to be found.

With ideals in mind, I'd taken a caretaker job at Elaine Boyd Crèche;

I changed diapers, inserted feeding tubes, and lived nightmares that taught me social work was not for me. The last straw fell out of that job on a bike ride home from work when a dirty-shirted guy leaned out of a pickup truck window and slapped me on the ass so that I pedaled full speed into a ditch.

I tried the factory route again, at a transistor-assembly job, where I lasted two days. God, if He existed, tried to warn me off that one by sending a pigeon to shit on my head as I walked to work. I showed up late, made my quota anyway, and earned myself enemies the very first day.

My dad explained how this is all my fault. "It's not about bein' smart!" he exclaimed. "It's not what you know, it's who you know that counts." My sister Christi, who was popular, nodded.

I stared at them both and felt my rage rising. All this knowledge I struggled for had to be worth something! Anyway, who the hell could I get to know?

"Awright, awright, I'll get you work," said my dad. Two days later I was the switchboard girl at Brown, Foreman liquor distributor, a job I lost after I cut off caller after caller, all the way up to the president. So much for connections.

Desperate for cash and a path forward, I dredged my past jobs for ideas. I found a car dealership that needed a receptionist, but the boss caught me typing a letter to a friend about the pointlessness, the meaninglessness, the utter vacuity of the job. So I got a split shift at a Seven Eleven—seven to

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three on Monday and Tuesday, three to eleven Thursday and Friday, and eleven at night to seven in the morning on Wednesday. The graveyard shifts would give me time to read and write.

I didn't get fired from that job for locking the doors and scrutinizing the customers before I'd let them in. I left under suspicion of stealing dirty magazines. I'd taken a lie detector test to get the job, and I refused to take a second one. Why would I steal dirty magazines when I could—and did—read them all night long?

"You could, uh, sell 'em on the black market," the seventeen-year-old manager said. I walked away. *I'd live on ramen*, I muttered to myself and made that prophecy come true.

The last summer before graduation, I finally knew a guy. My college friend Frank offered his friend Craig and me a

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job with his uncle downtown. "It's kinda like a currency exchange for the racetrack," he explained. "People give you money to make bets. Every couple of hours, one of my uncle's guys picks up the cash and brings it to the track."

"Five bucks an hour. Cash," he said.

So Frank, Craig, and I rode downtown with professionals on their way to work. I tried not to notice how bored they all looked. After hopping off the train, I walked a few blocks to a storefront with thick glass windows and teller bars. There I took money, handed out receipts, and bundled cash for pickup each day.

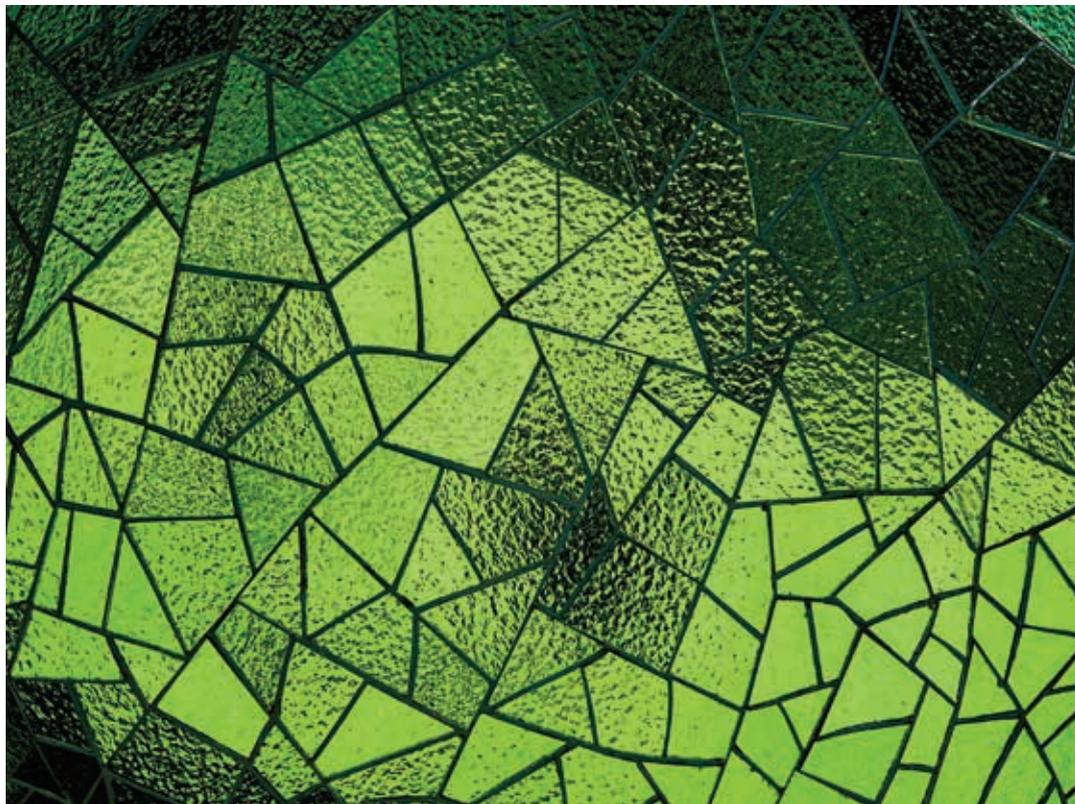


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The job was simple and dull and had no future, but it was downtown and air conditioned, and I was with friends. We listened to music, like in the old days, and talked about the world and watched the city live its life. Sometimes I bought lunch from a little old Italian guy two doors down who treated me like a granddaughter. It was a decent summer job—until police stormed in, dressed in full riot gear, demanding we open up the back room.

Frank tried to call his uncle, but the younger, angrier cop tore the phone out of his hand and the cord out of the phone .

"Back up against the wall! Everyone up against the wall!" he screamed.

"Stand still!" shouted the other.

"Which one?" I asked frantically.

"Shut up! Against the wall!"

"You can't come in here like this," Frank sputtered.

"Watch us," the angry one threatened.

Frank took a breath and calmed himself down. "This is a legitimate business. Lemme call my uncle. He can ex—"

"Against the wall," the cop growled. "And shut up." He pulled out some handcuffs. "Do I need to use these?"

What did handcuffs have to do with shutting up?

"Take it easy, Patty," said the older cop. "There's nuttin' here. Question 'em, let 'em go—"

"Unless you don't cooperate," Patty warned.

"Go to hell!" Frank sneered at the same exact time I said, "What-do-you-want-to-know-I'll-tell-you-anything." So much for martyrdom.

They put us in separate corners, and I got the "good cop," who asked my name and address and let me go. Craig got dismissed too. Frank was heroic in the face of police intimidation. Refusing to cooperate, even a little, he made me think of the SDS except for off-track betting. But in the end, the cops decided we were small fry. Minnows. They told all three of us to get out and go home.

Craig and Frank were wired up. They wanted to find Frank's uncle and give him a play by play. But I was just played out.

“Call me if you need me,” I said. I found my purse and its contents, put them back together, and hiccuped down the street.

“Bella!”

The old *cumpà* had seen the raid, which was playing as news on the little black-and-white in his shop. He patted me on the shoulder and peered into my eyes. “You OK,” he said. “OK?”

I nodded. He kissed my cheek and handed me a can of Coke. Then he fished around in the pocket of his apron and pulled out a dollar. “Take,” he said.

“Oh! No . . .” I said.

“Take!” he commanded. I took the dollar. After all, I’d emptied the spittoon.

I spent my last school year working my way down from City Hall proof-reader to waitress to barmaid at a lo-

cal club where I cowered against the passenger-side door when the lech of a manager drove me home. Then it was over. I’d graduated. And I still had no idea what to do. I drove the car the wrong way up Route 66, renamed 55, and stacked my stuff in the sub-basement at home. My mom admonished me to “pound the pavement,” but I knew just enough to pound my typewriter instead, grinding out up to ten badly typed application letters a day.

Eventually, I got an interview with an actual newspaper, *The Chicago Defender*. I did some research and liked what I saw. The paper was small but scrappy. Its writers attended city meetings, investigated public figures, and advocated for justice. They had published Langston Hughes.

I was in! Except I wasn’t.

“Your writing’s OK,” the managing

But we make our own way, in the dark. And we get somewhere. And then we do it again.



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editor said. “But what do you know?” My breath caught. He was asking what I knew.

“You’re just a college girl,” he added. He wasn’t really asking. He thought he knew what I knew: nothing.

“Graduate,” I murmured to the floor. “Summa cum laude.”

“A white girl. From the suburbs,” he amended.

I didn’t know what to say to that. I thought I was brown, or olive, anyway. All this time I’d been brown. My parents had twisted themselves into scalille trying to teach me an immigrant’s brew of humility and pride. Now I was white?

The editor chuckled, “What do you know about life?”

He didn’t want an answer, really. He just wanted to make the speech.

Or maybe all he knew was the speech. Maybe no one knew the whole story, I thought, and that’s why we need each other. I couldn’t put that into words yet, though. And I guessed I agreed with his estimation: I didn’t know nuttin’. I didn’t know nobody. And still in Chicago, and maybe everywhere else, nobody wanted nobody nobody sent.

In a flash, I caught an extra insight from one of those crazy jobs I’d had—the one with skeezy old blind guy who was maybe not blind. Like him, and like the pompous guy in front of me, and like most everyone else, I’d have to feel my own way forward. What you know, who you know, all of it counts. But we make our own way, in the dark. And we get somewhere. And then we do it again. ☼