

Factory Town

By Jack English

Carverton is in upstate New York between Lowville and Fort Drum. It was once a thriving industrial city with designs on outshining Rochester. During the Viet Nam War, it was home to Bundit Industries, a firm that made uniforms for the Defense Department. At its zenith, Bundit employed 1,200 people. When the war ended, it fell on hard times and closed.

Carverton once had a budding freight trailer business too. Long-Haul Industries had 800 loyal employees until the plant unionized. After that, there was nothing but labor-management strife. Long-Haul was sold to General Trailer who closed the plant six months after buying it.

Standard Tank made toilet seats of all things. But the Justice Department sued them and three other toilet seat makers for monopolizing the market. As the smallest of the four toilet seat makers, Standard just couldn't afford an anti-trust defense so they signed a consent order to exit the toilet seat business. That put an end to Standard and its 400 jobs.

Carverton Plastic used to do a good business, but it made the mistake of hiring some of the people laid off from General Trailer. They immediately formed a union and went on strike. The owner of Carverton Plastic was heard to say, "I'm fifty years old. I've made all the money I'm

ever going to need. I'm going on strike against my employees. I'm going to close the plant and go out of business." That put a nail in another 300 jobs.

Of course, with all those layoffs, sales were down at Tractor Supply, which eventually closed. The Piggly Wiggly supermarket closed; French's Exxon closed; Tire Rack closed and a Chevy dealership closed. They accounted for another 450 layoffs. Unemployment hit 40%. The town was going down the drain and the bottom was nowhere in sight.

People moved out of town as fast as they could sell their homes, for whatever they could sell them for. I wanted to move too, but my wife's mother was in the Methodist Nursing Home. Her mother was too frail to move and my wife wouldn't leave her.

It was a warm June morning, a Monday I think, and I was mowing the lawn when a man pulled up towing a trailer. The car looked vaguely like it was from the 1950s, sort of roundish, with bulbous fenders. It had a chrome ornament on the hood. A strip of chrome an inch wide ran down its side. The car had whitewall tires. I hadn't seen whitewall tires since first grade. The trailer had the same vaguely 1950-ish look with its own bulbous fenders and chrome stripes. There was nothing to indicate the make of either the car or trailer which struck me as odd.

The driver was short and round with white hair and a ruddy complexion. "I'm lost!" he said. He

leaned toward the passenger's window. I could see he had a map spread out on the seat. Somebody had drawn so many lines and arrows on the map that it would have been hard for anybody to read.

"I'm trying to find Carverton," he said.

"You've arrived." I spread my hands out in all directions.

"Great! I want to set up a factory. Who should I talk to?"

"I don't know. I'm not what you would call one of the town's movers and shakers. I worked at Tractor Supply until they closed."

"You've got an honest face. Can I hire you as a guide?"

"A guide?"

"Yeah, a guide to Carverton. Maybe you can help me scope the place out," he said.

"Wouldn't you be better off talking to a realtor or somebody?" I asked.

He squirmed in his seat and furrowed his brow. "Realtors are always trying to sell you something. I just want to look around, talk to some people and get a general lay of the land."

I shrugged and shook my head 'no' ever so slightly.

"I'll give you five hundred dollars a day... make it a thousand if you come with me right now."

A thousand dollars a day is a lot of money for a guy who worked at Tractor Supply. I said, "Slide over," and got into his car. "Where do you want to go?"

“Name’s Henry Winklebottom.” He stuck out his hand and I shook it. “What’s yours?” he asked.

“I’m Alex Taylor, but everyone just calls me Taylor.”

“Alright, Taylor, suppose I talk to the mayor and see what he thinks.”

~

Twenty years ago, Brenton Leidy had been the quarterback of the Carverton High School football team. After most of the professionals, skilled craftsmen, and proper politicians moved away, Leidy got himself elected mayor. The first thing he did was to pull together his old football team as city employees. He hired his running back, Dan “Mudd” Marantz as sheriff. One of his ends, Billy Pascal, became deputy sheriff. His center, Russ Springer, became the Director of Public Works. A half a dozen other hangers-on had jobs with the city here and there, but mostly they sat around in Leidy’s office shooting the breeze and talking about old times.

Leidy and I were in High School at the same time so we knew each other a little, but I was on the track team so we didn’t cross paths a lot. I knocked on Leidy’s door. “Mr. Mayor, I have a gentleman here who says he might be interested in building a factory in Carverton. Do you have a minute for us?” At a thousand dollars per day, I thought I ought to provide some sort of introduction. I put my hand on Winklebottom’s back and gently steered him into Leidy’s office.

“This is Mr. Henry Winklebottom.” I held out my hand in Winklebottom’s direction. Then held out my hand toward Leidy. “This is Mayor Brenton Leidy, quarterback of Carverton High School’s winningest football team.” It was mostly true. The team did better under Leidy than any team I can remember. They made it to the New York State Division III Region Six playoffs.

Leidy grinned when I mentioned football because so far it had been the peak of his career.

“Brenton’s the name.” He stuck out his hand toward Winklebottom and pumped his hand like he was campaigning. “Glad to meet you. You say you’re interested in building a factory in Carverton?”

“Well maybe. I’d like to look around first,” Winklebottom said.

“Sure, take all the time you need. If there’s something Taylor can’t get you, maybe me or one of the boys can.” Leidy swung his arm around the room. Sheriff Mudd Marantz, his deputy Billy Pascal and Russ Springer were firmly ensconced in overstuffed club chairs.

“Mr. Winklebottom, do you mind if I ask what your factory is going to make?”

Wow! That was a good question. I should have thought of that. I felt a little embarrassed that at a thousand dollars a day that I didn’t know what my client planned to make.

“Well I...” Winklebottom stammered, “make these battery things.” He put what looked like a

briefcase on Leidy's desk. It was a foot and a half long and just as high, but it was only about two inches wide. He opened a little door on the bottom of the case to reveal twelve electric sockets.

"These are 110-volt outlets," he said. He opened a door on the end of the case and pointed. "There are two 220-volt outlets just in case you need them."

Leidy pointed to a tiny door on the top of the case. "What's this?"

"That's a USB port for charging cell phones," Winklebottom said.

"How do you get 110 volts out of a battery?" Leidy asked.

"Well it's ah..." Winklebottom seemed stumped. "Well let's try it and see."

Leidy pulled a lamp off the credenza behind his desk and plugged it in. It lit right up. "Let's see if it'll light two lamps." Leidy motioned for Mudd to bring over a lamp sitting on an end table. Mudd plugged it in and it lit up. Leidy gestured to Pascal indicating he should bring over the lamp behind him and plug it in. Again, it worked fine.

"Billy," he pointed to Pascal again, "go next door to the Fire Department and borrow their forty-cup coffee maker. Fill it with water and bring it here."

I could see what Leidy was doing. Anything he didn't understand or that was too good, he'd push to the breaking point. I don't know what he expected exactly; maybe he thought Winklebottom's gizmo would overheat or run out

of juice or maybe explode. Leidy liked explosions. He and the sheriff were known to throw sticks of dynamite into the abandoned quarry just to hear the boom. I figured it was a football thing.

When the gizmo put out enough juice to boil forty cups of water while powering six lamps, Leidy sent for twelve power strips. He plugged one into each of the 110-volt outlets. Then he sent his boys to look around in City Hall and the fire department to find things to plug in.

“How long did you say one of these batteries lasts?” Leidy asked.

“Ninety days,” Winklebottom said. “You can see a little red LED display on the top of the battery. It tells you how many more days before it loses its charge.”

“And then what?” Leidy asked.

“Bring it back and I’ll charge it up again. You should be able to get another 90 days out of it.”

Leidy stepped around the lamps, power strips and appliances attached to the gizmo and laid his hand on it. “It isn’t even warm,” he said.

“I think we’ve done enough for one day,” I said. “Mr. Winklebottom is probably tired and would like to find someplace to stay.”

Winklebottom nodded ‘yes,’ a little overwhelmed by the attention his gizmo was getting.

“No! No! This is great! Mr. Winklebottom, would you leave your battery with us overnight so we can see how long it lasts?” Leidy asked.

“Well I’m not sure. I... I’d like to keep it with me.” Winklebottom was looking for a graceful way to exit.

“How does this thing work anyway?” Leidy asked.

“Well, it’s...” Winklebottom stammered, “it’s pretty technical. I think I have notes here somewhere.” He searched all the pockets in his suit coat and finally found a couple of wrinkled sheets of paper.

I looked over Winklebottom’s shoulder. They weren’t mechanical drawings exactly. It looked vaguely like a circuit diagram with squiggly lines here and there I didn’t understand. As a member of the High School’s Ham Radio Club I’d seen a number of circuit diagrams, but that was a long time ago. *Ah... High School*, I thought, *the best time of my life*.

Leidy grabbed the papers. “Gimme that!”

He knew even less about mechanical drawings and circuit diagrams than I did. And that wasn’t much.

“What does it mean?” he demanded.

Winklebottom took the diagram from Leidy, looked at it for a moment, then turned it upside down and looked at it again. “The 110-volt outlets are along here and the 220-volt outlets are here; and this thing up here is the display that tells you how many days of battery life is left.” He turned the diagram sideway. “No, no, I think this is the

display.” He tapped the opposite corner of the diagram.

By this time, it was pushing 7:00 p.m. The only people in City Hall were the people in Leidy’s office. Deputy Sheriff Pascal arrived with a case of beer and a couple of pizzas. They organized a betting pool as to how long the battery would last. Leidy thought it would burn out by 10:00. Mudd bet it would last to 12:00. Pascal bet it would last at least until 2:00 a.m. They all sat and watched and talked about football.

“I got it!” Springer jumped to his feet. “The electric line coming into City Hall is 220 volts. That gets split into 110-volt circuits. Let’s go to the basement, cut the power coming in from the street, and plug this sucker into the 220-volt circuit breaker box.”

“Can you do that?” I asked.

“Sure, I’m the Director of Public Works,” Springer said.

“I mean do you know how to do that?” I asked.

“How hard could it be?” Springer said.

At this point, everyone but Winklebottom and I had knocked back a couple of beers. I closed my eyes and thought, *High voltage and alcohol, what could go wrong?*

Leidy nodded in agreement and motioned for Pascal to unplug the power strips dangling from the bottom of the gizmo. They paraded down to the basement. Winklebottom and I trailed behind. Springer balanced his beer on the breaker box and

went to work. He cut the street power almost before the sheriff and his deputy could get out their flashlights. He used a screwdriver to pop a cover plate off the circuit breakers, wired in a 220-volt plug he swiped from maintenance and plugged it into the gizmo. The lights in the basement came back on.

Leidy said, “Let’s turn on every light in the building and see what happens. Russ, stay here and be ready to pull the plug if things go sideways. OK?”

“Right coach,” Springer said.

They spent the next half-hour turning on every light, computer, copier, space heater, and coffee pot in the building. Then they gathered in front of the City Hall. Its lights were blazing. “Holy shit!” Leidy said. “That’s some damned battery you got there.”

Leidy took everybody back to his office. “Let’s spend the night here and see how long it lasts. Pascal, be a good guy and get us another case of beer. This is official business so you can charge it to the town. Better yet, charge it to the Public Works Department.”

Leidy let it power City Hall all night. Winklebottom asked to get his gizmo back several times, but Leidy always said just give it a couple more hours. Winklebottom was getting more and more frustrated. When morning came, I walked a couple doors down to the law office of Stanley Duke. Duke had a thriving personal injury practice

and was the town's part-time council. I knew him from High School. We were on the track team.

"Stan, this is Mr. Winklebottom. Leidy's confiscated his personal property. If he doesn't give it back, the city could be sued." I told him the story.

"Alright, I'll call the mayor," Stan said. "We don't want to scare off anybody who wants to invest in our town.

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After spending a night in City Hall with Leidy and his buddies, Winklebottom was exhausted. I bought him breakfast at Wanda's Café and offered to let him shower at my house, or I could direct him to a motel. He dropped me at my house and took off for the motel.

The next morning, I got a call from him at seven a.m. sharp. "Still want to show me around town?" he asked.

"Sure." I was thinking about the thousand dollars a day and paying off that last credit card.

"Great. See you in half an hour."

He picked me up and drove me out past the gravel quarry and sandpit. About a mile further on, he stopped at a field that hadn't been plowed for years.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It's my factory. Well it's going to be my factory." He got out of his car and started rummaging around in his trailer. He pulled out a dozen boxes... or electronic devices... or... it

wasn't quite clear what they were, but they were square, heavy and about a foot on each side. There was something odd about their color. They looked dark grey one instant, black the next instant, then blueish black or greenish black the next.

"Grab one and follow me," he said.

Winklebottom wrestled one of the boxes out into the field and spent ten minutes setting it down in exactly the right spot and turned at exactly the right angle to the road. Then he abruptly marched off parallel to the road a hundred feet or so and said, "Here!"

I assumed he meant for me to place my box on the spot he indicated. Then he adjusted it to exactly the right angle to the road. We repeated this until a dozen boxes outlined a large rectangle.

"Are you ready to start building the factory?" he asked.

I shrugged, "Sure."

He slid what looked like a garage door opener out of his pocket and clicked it. A factory building instantly appeared.

"Whoa! What the... What did you do?" I stumbled backwards.

"A little invention of mine, a holographic building."

"A holographic... what?"

"A holographic building."

"But a hologram is just... light, isn't it? How is it a building? How does it keep the rain out? How does it keep the heat in in the winter and the air

conditioning in in the summer? How will it keep out thieves who want to steal your stuff?”

Winklebottom seemed stumped by my questions, like I suddenly asked him to split an atom or recite the recipe for rice pudding. “I... it just works. Don’t ask me to explain it. It’s got something do with Maxwell’s equations or something. Very technical.”

“Who’s Maxwell?” I asked. He seemed to say things were technical when he didn’t have an answer.

“Let me show you something.” He marched over to his trailer and pulled out two plastic water bottles. He squeezed one so the water splashed against his factory wall. It bounced off. “You try it.”

I squeezed the other bottle as hard as I could, hurling the water against the holographic building. Again, it bounced off.

“Go inside and tell me whether any water got through.”

I went in through a holographic door and looked around. No water. I was having difficulty believing what my eyes were telling me and told him so.

“You’ll get used to it,” he grinned. “Help me set up my machinery.”

“Machinery?”

“It’s in the trailer.”

Before either of us could take a step, the sheriff’s car rounded the corner at eighty miles an hour. When he saw the new building, he slammed

on the brakes, fishtailing to a stop just a few feet in front of us. Mudd Marantz jumped out followed by Russ Springer. “What-the-flock is that?” He pointed to Winklebottom’s factory. “And where did it come from?”

“Well you see... I ah,” Winklebottom pulled the garage door opener out of his pocket and started to explain when Springer cut him off.

“You can’t build a building without a permit. Don’t you know that? Taylor, you should have known better than to let him start construction without a permit. Whatsa matter wit chew?

“How much will a permit cost?” Winklebottom interrupted.

Springer looked at the size of the building and said, “Five hundred dollars.”

Marantz swatted Springer’s arm hard and said, “He means five thousand dollars.”

Springer was puzzled for an instant and said, “Right five thousand dollars.”

“Come on guys...” I said. “He wants to build a factory here. He wants to bring jobs here. Why are you pissing on him?”

“Shut up, Taylor. What the hell does a Tractor Supply salesman know about building permits?” Mudd Marantz, a hulk of a man, pointed a beefy hand in my direction.

“A laid off Tractor Supply salesman,” Springer smirked. “At least we have jobs.”

“You’re going to have to tear it down,” Mudd said.

“Yeah,” Springer said. “We’ll have to inspect the foundation before you can build it back.”

Mudd Marantz and Russ Springer turned back toward their car, snorting and snickering like they had pulled a quarterback sneak. Then Mudd spun around, “You know you’re going to need a permit to tear that thing down before you can build a new one.”

“How much?” Winklebottom asked.

Marantz glanced at Springer. “A demolition permit will cost three grand.”

“Eight thousand dollars...” Winklebottom muttered. “I’ve been saving for this factory a long time. I guess I can come up with it, but I don’t have a checking account. If I pay cash, will you fill out the paperwork for me?”

At the sound of the word “cash,” Marantz and Springer spun around and marched back toward us.

“I wouldn’t give these boneheads a dime in cash,” I said.

“Taylor, I’m warning you.” Marantz shook his fist in my direction. At one time, Marantz was a good football player and in great shape. He would have been a formidable foe. But since High School he’d lived on a diet of donuts, pizza and beer. Now he was a hundred and fifty pounds overweight.

Winklebottom stepped between us. “Gentlemen, gentlemen. I might have some cash in the trailer.” He pulled out a trunk full of papers, diagrams, little pieces of electronic apparatus, with no discernable purpose, and money. He rummaged

around and found four bundles of ten-dollar bills. Each bundle contained a hundred bills. So, he paid the first \$4,000 with tens. Then he found six bundles of five-dollar bills making up another \$3,000. Then he rummaged around and found nine bundles of one-dollar bills making up another \$900. Most of the bills were old and tattered. Some of them had greasy thumb prints on them like you might find on money changing hands at a carnival French fry stand.

“You’re still short a hundred dollars,” Marantz said.

“Just a moment.” Winklebottom popped into his trailer and pulled out a can containing quarters. He reached in and withdrew ten quarter coin wrappers making up the last \$100.

“Not so fast,” I said. “Give him a receipt.”

Marantz patted his shirt and pants pockets. “Got no pen and no paper.” He looked at Springer.

Springer spread his hands and said, “I got nothing.”

Winklebottom furrowed his brow. “Oh, my! I want to start demolition right away. I don’t want to have to go back to City Hall to do all this.”

“Text him a receipt,” I said.

“I’m... I’m... sorry.” Winklebottom said, “I don’t have a phone.”

“Text me the receipt.” I gave Marantz my phone number and made sure the receipt included a notation that the \$8,000 fee includes having Springer complete all the paperwork for the

permits. They texted the receipt, scooped up an armful of cash and walked off laughing.

I called Leidy. “Mr. Mayor, Taylor here. Mudd and Russ just tapped Mr. Winklebottom eight thousand for building permits. I’m just calling to make sure that the cash gets to the right place.”

“Thanks Taylor. You’re O.K. for a track and field weenie.”

If I knew Marantz and Springer like I thought I did, they would keep the cash and record a \$50 building permit in the town’s records. If I knew Leidy, he’d smack them around for not giving him a cut, then take most of the money for himself.

Winklebottom turned off the building, if that’s the right term for a holographic building. When Springer came back to inspect the site, the building was gone. “Overnight demolition? You’re good.” Marantz stood off to the side watching. “Did you get a permit to dump the rubble?” Springer and Marantz both doubled up with laughter.

“We moved it out of town,” Winklebottom said.

“So where are your foundations?” Springer asked.

“My building is so light it doesn’t need one.”

The long and short of it was that they forced Winklebottom to hire a contractor to build a foundation to hold up a holographic building that weighed less than a tenth of an ounce. That put him back three weeks and forty thousand dollars. Once the foundation was in and the building was

turned on again, if that's the right term, he set up his machinery.

We pulled a box the size of a washing machine out of his trailer; it looked heavy but was very light. It was black or very dark grey and when the light hit it at certain angles it seemed to have a slight greenish tint. Other times it had a slight gun metal blue tint.

We put it in the middle of the factory floor and he assembled... well, unfolded it is the best way to describe it. By the time he got done opening cabinet-like doors and pulling out extensions, it was about ten feet on a side.

“What does it do? How does it work?” I asked.

“Well... you shovel sand in here,” he pointed to a shoot at one end. “And batteries come out here,” he pointed to a tray at the other end.

“Yeah, but how does it work?” I demanded.

“It works on sand!” he said emphatically, as though I were too stupid to understand what he was saying. The truth was, I was too stupid. The previous day he'd had ten tons of sand delivered to the site. He plunged a shovel into the sandpile, marched over to the machine and poured it into the intake chute. Some small colored lights seemed to shine through the otherwise featureless skin of the machine and there was an occasional faint orange glow coming from inside the machine. He put in three more shovels of sand and one of his batteries appeared in the output tray.

“Does it work?” I asked.

Winklebottom grinned and stuck out his hand in the direction of the battery as if challenging me to test it. I plugged in a lamp and it lit right up.

It didn't take long for word to get out about Winklebottom's battery, factory and most importantly jobs. He hired twenty people just to manage the sand, to sift it, smooth it and shovel it into the machine. He hired another twenty to pick up the batteries made by the machine, test them by plugging lamps into them and stacking them up. Ten people were hired for sales and ten people for accounting. This single, jolly old elf had created sixty jobs in a town that was hemorrhaging jobs, sixty-one if you count me. He continued to pay me a thousand dollars a day. It felt like stealing, but I became his strongest advocate.

One of his first hires was Linden Vossbian. Vossbian was the guy who organized the union at Long-Haul Trucking and the strike that put Carverton Plastics out of business. I warned Winklebottom not to hire him, but Winklebottom had such a positive upbeat outlook on life, he just couldn't believe anyone would deliberately drive a company into the ground. I remember Vossbian's interview like it was yesterday.

"Why do you want to work here?"
Winklebottom asked.

"I need a job," Vossbian said.

The truth was he didn't really want a job, but he needed to keep applying for jobs to keep his unemployment checks coming.

“What kind of hourly rate did you have in mind?” Winklebottom asked.

“I need fifty dollars an hour,” Vossbian said, tilting his head back waiting for Winklebottom to throw him out. I knew for a fact he made \$19.00 per hour at Long-Haul Trailer and only \$17.50 at Carverton Plastics.

Winklebottom said, “That seems fair. Taylor, make sure everyone gets fifty dollars an hour.”

“Yes sir.” I wondered how quickly the company was going to crash and burn if it paid everyone fifty dollars an hour, but hey, he was paying me a thousand dollars a day.

The company didn’t crash and burn.

Winklebottom sold his batteries for a hundred dollars each and it didn’t take long for people to figure out that it was cheaper to get three months of electricity from his battery than from the electric company. That created work for dozens of electricians who cut homeowners connections to the grid and installed batteries instead.

The battery attracted an inventor to town who bought a used Tesla; removed its massive battery pack and installed one of Winklebottom’s batteries. All of a sudden, the electric car’s range jumped from a few hundred miles to unlimited. The inventor started a business installing Winklebottom’s battery in electric cars and hired 50 people to work in his shop.

Another inventor bought a used tractor-trailer cab; ripped out the diesel engine; and put in a

massive electric motor and a Winklebottom battery. It worked great. He and a couple of investors bought the old Long-Haul Trailer factory and started building electric trucks. They hired 400 hundred people.

Of course, anyone smart enough to be an inventor would want to know how Winklebottom's batteries worked. Dozens of people bought batteries and sliced them open to see how the magic was done. What they found were millions of what looked like small glass diodes stacked on one another with fiber optic cables connecting them to semi-conductor nodes. No one ever discovered exactly how the batteries worked. One of the reasons was that as soon as the outer casing was cut, the glass diodes came spilling out. They weren't attached to each other; they were just... well... stacked; and it was impossible to stack them back. A couple of university researchers tried to figure out how the heck the batteries worked. They discovered microscopic differences in the diodes. Apparently, to make the gizmo work, the diodes had to be stacked in exactly the right order; an order nobody could discern.

United Locomotive Services, a Syracuse company that refurbished diesel electric locomotives set up shop in the old Bundit Industries factory. Rather than rehabbing diesel engines, they pulled the engines out and installed one of Winklebottom's batteries. Their battery electric locomotives seemed to have the same

pulling power as conventional diesel electrics, saving thousands of gallons of diesel fuel each month. They hired 1,200 people and still couldn't keep up with demand as railroads sought to convert their fleets to battery power.

Factories as far west as Rochester and as far east as Albany quietly left the electric power grid in favor of powering their factories with one of Winklebottom's batteries. The only limit seemed to be that his form of electricity only had a range of about a hundred feet. So, a factory with five or six buildings had to buy five or six batteries. That didn't seem like much of a restriction until someone tried to take the entire town of Lowville off the grid and power it by one battery.

Winklebottom sold his batteries for one hundred dollars cash and guaranteed they would provide 90 days of electricity. After 90 days, people returned their batteries for a recharge, and that cost fifty dollars for 90 days of juice. At those prices, his business was a roaring success. People were lined up for half a mile to buy batteries. So, he limited batteries to one per person and, somehow, he produced another machine from his trailer and set up another production line. That created jobs for forty more people.

Our good mayor Brenton Leidy, Sheriff Mudd Marantz and Director of Public Works, Russ Springer were having a good time too. Every month, they would come up with a new permit Winklebottom needed to buy: a \$3,000

commercial waste disposal permit even though the factory produced no waste, a \$4,000 labor census fee to reimburse the city for the cost of making a list of everyone working at the factory, a \$5,000 noise abatement permit even though the factory was silent as a bowl of wonton soup, an on-site coffee bar permit for \$2,000 and on and on. But the thing that made me angriest was the way they left laughing each time they carried off cash from some new permit.

They say you should never go to a dentist who is making boat payments. They'll always find one more thing to do.

Russ Springer was making boat payments. Once he found Winklebottom was a soft touch and would pay whatever fee was asked, Springer bought a fifty-foot cabin cruiser and moored it on the St. Lawrence. Sheriff Mudd Marantz was more sensible and simply bought the hottest Corvette in town. But Brenton Leidy was a whole different story. He thought the permit fee gravy train would never end. After all, permits expire after a year, right? Then the money starts flowing again. Leidy built a million-dollar mansion right in the center of Carverton. "A palace," he said, "fit for a mayor." He figured as long as Winklebottom was making a cartload of cash from his gizmo, there was nothing to worry about. Right?

But not everybody was happy. Linden Vossbian was miserable. He was making over a hundred thousand dollars a year, more money than he ever

dreamt of, and he still wasn't happy. He tried to start a union, but he was shouted down by his coworkers. They knew this was the best job they'd ever had or were ever likely to have.

Winklebottom was a trusting soul, too trusting. On the other hand, I had less faith in my fellow man and had security cameras installed around the factory. I mean if Tractor Supply is important enough to have video surveillance, Winklebottom's factory must be important enough too. One day I was going through the video footage and saw Vossbian spit into the sand going into the machine. The only thing Winklebottom ever insisted on was that the sand be the purest, cleanest, whitest sand possible. Spit was not part of the program. I checked with the battery testers but the spit didn't seem to have any effect on the product. Then I saw him throw a cup of coffee into the machine, not just the coffee, but the paper cup as well. Again, it had no effect.

Then one day, I saw him sneak a rock the size of a potato out from under his shirt and slip it into the sand intake. I ran out onto the factory floor trying to stop the machine before the rock destroyed it, but when I got there, I realized Winklebottom had never told us how to turn the machine off. Or turn it on for that matter. It didn't seem to have any real controls. Just once in a while, some colored lights would seep through the machine's dark grey-black-greenish-bluish skin. I ran around to the output tray and the rock was there untouched, next

to a shiny new battery. I told Winklebottom and he said he'd talk to Vossbain.

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“Are you unhappy here?” Winklebottom asked Vossbain.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“You’re getting rich off the backs of labor.”

“So, what do you want?”

“More!”

“How much?”

“I demand a ten dollar an hour raise!” Vossbain leaned back in his chair and turned his head sideways a little as if waiting to be struck.

“OK!” Winklebottom said. “Everyone gets a ten dollar an hour raise. Now let me ask you. Are you going to try to sabotage operations again?”

“What do you mean sabotage?”

Winklebottom placed a plastic bag on his desk containing the potato sized rock.

Vossbain hung his head. “No, I guess not.”

It was a lie. The following week we caught him throwing two cinder blocks into the machine. They came out on the production tray with no apparent harm to the machine or the battery that was being produced at the time. I told Winklebottom to fire him.

Winklebottom just shook his head and said, “Sooner or later he’ll get tired of trying to break things and just do his job.”

“I love you like a father Henry, but you just don’t understand human nature. No matter what you pay Vossbian, he’s going to want more. Just watch, in a couple of weeks he’ll be back for a raise. And, he’s the kind of guy that hates having a boss.”

“Am I his boss?” Winklebottom grinned.

“You pay him,” I said.

“But how many times have I actually asked him to do anything? He knows how to shovel sand. It’s a simple job. I’m not giving him orders or breathing down his neck,” Winklebottom said.

“A guy like Vossbian resents you, just because you’re you, just because you gave him a job.”

Winklebottom just chuckled and walked away. But sure enough, not a month had gone by and Vossbian demanded a raise to seventy-five dollars an hour and this time he brought three other malcontents from the defunct Long-Haul union with him.

“Do you work for me?” Winklebottom asked. “I thought I knew everyone.”

“No!” One of them said defiantly. “We’re here to support our brother in labor, Linden Vossbian.”

“Get out,” I said calmly as I could. But underneath I was boiling mad at the way everyone took advantage of the old man.

“No. And you can’t make us. We got rights you know.”

Winklebottom opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

“I’ll handle this,” I said and phoned City Hall. “Mr. Mayor, Taylor here. Somebody’s trying to kill your golden goose... Yes, out at the factory. Bye.”

Vossbian and his three thuggish friends had decided to stage a sit-in in Winklebottom’s office. Actually, office is an exaggeration. He had a desk in one corner of the open factory floor so he could see everything. Video monitors lined the credenza behind him. Four stuffed chairs faced the desk so Winklebottom could hold “meetings” in his “office.” Winklebottom offered the men coffee and donuts. They seemed shocked by his good manners considering the fact they had come to intimidate him.

Before they could finish their second donut, Mayor Brenton Leidy, Sheriff Mudd Marantz and Director of Public Works, Russ Springer arrived. I explained the problem, told them that Vossbian was trying to hold up the old man for seventy-five dollars an hour, and suggested that there might not be money left over for municipal fees and permits at that rate.

Leidy looked over the four men. “I recognize you jamokes. You played football for... Lowville High. You guys were pathetic. What the hell are you doing in my town?”

“We have rights,” one of them protested.

“He,” Leidy pointed to Vossbian, “has rights. He works here. You are trespassers.” He turned to

Mudd, "Sheriff, what do we give trespassers in Carverton, thirty days?"

"Sixty," Mudd said flatly.

"If they are still here in thirty seconds, cuff 'em and if they set foot in the factory again, arrest them and impound their vehicles."

Vossbian's accomplices ran and he was left alone in front of us.

"If I give you seventy-five dollars an hour, are you going to ask for another raise in a month?" Winklebottom asked.

A petulant Vossbian looked down at the ground, "I don't know."

"Well I'll give you and everybody else seventy-five dollars an hour, but I'm cutting everybody down to thirty hours a week. I've got expenses other than your salary." Winklebottom glanced at Leidy and Marantz who couldn't help chuckling under their breath.

Vossbian took the raise and immediately organized a slow down so Winklebottom would have to reinstate a forty-hour week. Ordinarily, it took four shovels of sand to produce a single battery. But, somehow batteries were now coming out after three shovels of sand. Vossbian, tried to slow his fellow employees even further, but no matter how slow they shoveled, batteries kept coming out at the same rate. Vossbian was not a happy man.

Others were unhappy with Winklebottom as well, and dark ominous things were beginning to

move. For one, the local electric company noticed that their revenue dropped dramatically. No one in Carverton was buying electricity off the grid anymore including the town's remaining businesses. The electric company sent an engineer to investigate, thinking there must be some problem with the way electric usage was being measured. He returned to the company with one of Winklebottom's batteries. They instantly understood the threat and had the Public Utilities Commission open an investigation.

The Public Utilities Commission contacted the State Treasury Department who sent a squad of auditors to make sure Winklebottom was paying his taxes. Winklebottom showed them a list of his sales, expenses and taxes paid. They could find no fault. They contacted the IRS who sent another squad of auditors.

“Yeah, I see your sales and I see deductions for sand, labor, taxes and permits. But where are your other expenses?” the lead auditor asked.

“Other expenses?” Winklebottom asked.

“Depreciation? Office expenses, all the other stuff that normal businesses deduct.”

“Well... I don’t know. We never needed depreciation or other expenses. Should I buy some?”

The IRS and New York State Department of Revenue could find no fault with Winklebottom’s books, but they were convinced something was going on. They contacted the U.S. Justice

Department who opened an inquiry into whether Winklebottom was involved in an illegal monopoly. The team from the Justice Department mentioned something called the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, but that went way over my head. Honestly, I didn't understand but one word in ten of what they were saying. The Justice Department called the Labor Department to determine whether there was any discrimination in hiring, promotions or firings. There were no promotions because everyone but Mr. Winklebottom, including me, was just a worker bee. There were no firings even though I said Vossbian should have been fired. Just by accident, the race and gender of the labor force exactly matched that of the town so there was nothing for the Labor Department to grab hold of.

Frustrated, the Labor Department referred the matter to the Division of Consumer Protection. Consumer Protection sent a squad of engineers and testers to make sure Winklebottom's battery was safe. It performed flawlessly in every test. They even threw a battery into a pool to see whether it would shock a hapless Consumer Protection Department intern. It did not. They subjected it to heat. They used an actual flamethrower to see whether it would explode. They subjected it to pressure. They had a fully loaded trash truck run over it. Nothing happened.

Consumer Protection referred the matter back to the Labor Department with the recommendation

that they check the company's Workers Compensation Insurance and analyze on-the-job injuries. One of the things I remembered from working at Tractor Supply was that people were always complaining of back injuries from lifting things. So, I had made sure that Winklebottom had a Workers Compensation policy. It turned out that no one had made even a single claim for an on-the-job injury.

Meanwhile, people found more uses for Winklebottom's battery. He opened a third production line, and then a fourth one. Six new businesses moved to Carverton and hired four thousand people. Chevy, Ford and Nissan opened dealerships and sold mostly electric cars. Tractor Supply returned and offered me my old job back. I declined. A new Walmart opened. There were three Starbucks. Piggly Wiggly reopened its supermarket. An Olive Garden and a dozen other restaurants opened.

Nothing lasts forever. I told my wife so, and we banked half of every dollar Winklebottom paid me. I took the position that any day could be my last day in the tall clover. Then the signs began piling up quick.

The electric company complained to the state Utilities Commission and tried to get it to regulate Winklebottom's battery or at least force him to increase his price to match the cost of electricity from the grid. The Lithium Battery Association lobbied the State Assembly and Consumer

Products Safety Commission to ban these obviously dangerous batteries. The fact that no people, property or small animals had ever been injured by a Winklebottom battery had no place in their protests.

Companies ranging from those that built electric cars, to locomotives, to those building trucks protested that he was “unfairly” disrupting their businesses. Politicians, jealous of anyone that was too successful, began to speechify against Winklebottom. “Who is this guy? What does he want? Why is he causing trouble?” Several politicians started a media campaign against him.

The National Labor Relations Board accused him of unfair labor practices. When I asked their representative what those unfair practices were, she said, “He pays so much that no one will ever want to unionize.”

Then one morning, six black Chevy Suburbans pulled up in front of the factory. Four men in black suits with reflective sun glasses got out of each car. *Holy shit!* I thought to myself. “May I help you?” I asked.

One man held up a badge. “Agent Johnson, Environmental Protection Agency. Are you Winklebottom?” I shook my head no and pointed to the old man. “We’re here to check for hazardous waste or violations of law. You want to show me what you do here?”

I had long since gotten used to walking through a holographic door, but it seemed to take Agent

Johnson aback and he lost his balance for the briefest moment.

Winklebottom said, “We get sand in from a local sand pit. It’s dumped in down there. Our staff puts it through a series of sifters to remove sticks and stones, then we dry it and when it’s dry, we shovel it into this machine.” He patted the dark grey-black-greenish-bluish device. “Batteries come out here.” He showed Johnson the output tray.

Johnson watched as sand was shoveled in, glanced at the colored lights, and saw a battery slide down the output tray. “Can I touch it?” he asked.

Winklebottom nodded and Johnson picked it up, felt its weight, or lightness, looked at it from every possible angle, found the door that covered the 110-volt outlets, the one that covered the 220-volt outlets and the display counting down the days until the battery was out of juice. “What do you do with the waste?”

“The what?” Winklebottom asked.

“The waste, the byproduct, the input that doesn’t end up in the product?”

“There isn’t any. See for yourself.”

Johnson wasn’t prepared for that answer so he continued, “Does it get flushed down the sewer, sent to a holding tank - what?”

“There is no byproduct, no waste. All the input sand goes into the battery. Nothing is left over. See for yourself.” The machine sat a few inches above

the ground on spindly little legs. “There is no sewer pipe, no holding tank.”

“That’s impossible. No machine or process is 100% efficient.”

“How do you know it’s impossible? Look for yourself. See with your own eyes,” Winklebottom said.

“I have a warrant to search the premises.”

Johnson slapped a warrant against Winklebottom’s chest and circled his hand in the air. Agents took off in all directions, some poking around the building, some talking to workers, and some trying to figure out how the machine worked.

Johnson and his crew used police tape to secure the factory and forbade anyone from leaving or entering. He and his crew were there for a day and a night, but they just couldn’t find anything.

Over the next three months, the factory endured pickets and protests, demonstrations and leaflets. News crews were constantly searching for some flaw or weakness to bring Winklebottom and his factory down. Dozens of laws were passed limiting where and how Winklebottom’s batteries could be used, dozens more were proposed but not passed.

An examiner from the patent office visited the factory. “Mr. Winklebottom, I’m from the government and I’m here to help you. According to our records, you haven’t patented your battery. Would you like us to help you?”

“Why that’s very kind, but I have no need for a patent,” he said.

“But without a patent, anyone can copy, produce and sell your battery. They can steal your technology!”

“I’m not worried about that,” Winklebottom said.

“Then would you mind telling me how it works?”

Winklebottom placed a battery on the desk. “If you need 110 volts you plug in here. If you need 220 volts you plug in here. It’s simple.”

“Yes, but how does it generate electricity?”

“It doesn’t; it’s a battery. It just stores electricity. Didn’t I make that clear?”

The man from the patent office was getting exasperated. “OK, so it only stores energy. How does it do it?”

For a minute, I thought Winklebottom was going to say it was technical. Instead he said, “To file a patent, I have to disclose how my invention works. Is that right?” The patent examiner nodded. “Then after the patent expires anybody can make my battery, right?”

“Well that’s twenty years away, but essentially you are right.”

“But if I keep this a trade secret, I can keep using this exclusively forever, or at least until someone independently figures out how to do what my battery does. Is that right?”

“Yeah, but...”

“Suppose I just keep my battery a trade secret.” He rose and pointed the patent examiner to the door.

“Would you be interested in patenting your holographic building?” The patent officer asked over his shoulder. Winklebottom just closed his eyes and shook his head no.

~

One wonderful spring morning the sun glistened off the morning dew, the birds were singing and the grass was growing. Winklebotton had set the building to project just a holographic roof. The walls had been discontinued to let in light and fresh air. The factory was humming along. Sand was being sifted and rhythmically shoveled into the machines, and there was a faint clack as each new battery slid down the machine’s output chute. Everything seemed right with the world.

Henry Winklebottom was always in a good mood, a better mood than most people I’d ever met. I expected him to be in a super good mood on a day as beautiful as this. Instead, he seemed nervous, more nervous than I’d ever seen him.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I have this general diffused apprehension and I can’t put my finger on why,” he said.

I spread my hands and looked around. “Things couldn’t be better.”

“I’m a... I’m going to take a walk. You can handle anything that comes up,” he said.

I shrugged and thought to myself, *Anything?* That seemed a little out of character, but I headed to the factory's coffee bar.

It was then that Leidy and Marantz pulled up in the Sheriff's car. I knew the drill. This was some new fee or permit.

"We just stopped by to let you know about the town's new manufacturing permit." Leidy said.

"On top of all the other permits you've whacked us for?" I asked.

"Well yeah," Leidy said. "We just passed it." He held out a paper. At the top, it said, "Manufacturing Permit." The word manufacturing was misspelled and the ordinance was dated earlier in the day.

"And the permit fee?" I asked.

Leidy looked me straight in the eye and said, "Twenty thousand dollars."

"Twenty thousand! Winklebottom isn't going to like that," I said.

"He'll pay," Leidy said. "He always pays."

Just then the EPA's black Chevy Suburbans returned, all six of them. Two dozen men in black suits and reflective sun glasses spread out across the compound as Agent Johnson pushed Leidy and Marantz out of the way. "We have a warrant for the arrest of Henry Winklebottom. Where is he?" The Chevy Suburbans had been followed by two television camera trucks and a carload of reporters. Evidently, Johnson planned a perp walk for primetime TV.

“What’s the charge?” I demanded.

“Violation of the clean water act and obstruction of justice,” Johnson said.

“How so?” I shot back.

“He said the company had no toxic waste to dispose of. One of your employees says different.”

“Who?” I demanded.

“Him,” Johnson pointed to Vossbian. “He says you dump hundreds of gallons of waste chemicals in the Black River every day.”

Vossbian winced at having been fingered and looked away.

Just as Johnson had pushed Leidy aside, an army officer wearing a colonel’s scrambled eggs pushed him aside. Two soldiers positioned themselves on either side of me. “Mr. Winklebottom. I’m Colonel Griggs. I’m going to have to ask you to come with me please sir!” I felt a hand on each arm pushing me forward.

“I’m not Winklebottom!” I said as forcefully as I could.

Griggs flicked his hand and the soldiers released their grip but continued to stand uncomfortably close. “Where is he?” Griggs demanded.

“He was here a couple of minutes ago. He said he felt ill and was going to get some air.”

Griggs pointed to one of his officers with a flat outstretched hand. “Lieutenant, remove these people,” he pointed to the mayor, sheriff, Johnson and his federales, “and secure this facility.”

It was only then I noticed there must have been two hundred troops standing in stake body trucks, waiting for orders. I should have known that sooner or later the military would want Winklebottom's gizmo.

So, labor and the unions wanted to get him, the electric company wanted to get him, other battery makers wanted to get him, Leidy and his crew wanted to bleed him dry, the EPA and a dozen government agencies wanted to get him, and now the army wanted to get him.

Johnson stuffed his business card in my shirt pocket. "Tell him to turn himself in," he said and walked away.

I looked at Leidy. "There goes your meal ticket. I wouldn't count on getting that permit fee any time soon." And of course, I was right.

Just then, I saw Winklebottom out of the corner of my eye. "Run Henry! Run!" I shouted.

One of the soldiers struck the back of my knee with the butt of his rifle and I went down. But from where I laid on the ground, I could see pretty much everything.

Winklebottom sprinted toward the back door. I never saw the old man move so fast. Vossbian saw Winklebottom take off and came in from the side to tackle him. He must have remembered something from his Lowville High School football days.

One of our other employees saw what was happening and stuck his foot out, tripping

Vossbain and sending him sliding across the floor. But he reached out and still managed to grab hold of Winklebottom's left shoe. Winklebottom squealed and dragged Vossbain a foot or two before freeing himself and sprinting out the back of the building.

Johnson and Griggs raised their hands over their heads and pointed toward Winklebottom. They did it like twins, in perfect sync. It must have been a federal government thing. At any rate, when they did, Johnson's men took off in a sprint, Griggs men jumped out their trucks and tried to give chase while clutching their rifles.

Without anybody saying a word, our workers bunched up in a line between Winklebottom and the Feds. Johnson's' men and Griggs soldiers broke through their line, but they were slowed just enough for Winklebottom to vanish into the woods. They searched until midnight but couldn't find him.

When I returned the next day, I found the Army bivouacked around the factory. There were thirty tents and almost as many campfires. But the factory building was gone, switched off. The machinery that made the batteries was gone too. All that remained was a useless foundation and sand.

I asked to see the Colonel, and they said he'd bunked at the Motel 6 and would be along directly. I found his lieutenant. "What happened?"

“All we know is that the building vanished sometime after 2:00 a.m.”

“It was a holographic building. It could be switched off. Where’s the machinery?” I asked.

“A holographic what?” The lieutenant cocked his head.

“The building was just a hologram. You can switch off a hologram. The machinery...” I flailed my arm in the direction of where the machinery had been, “the machinery was real. You can’t just switch off a real live physical machine!”

The lieutenant shrugged. “All I know is that it was there until at least 2:00 a.m., and when the watch changed at 4:00 a.m., it wasn’t there.”

“What are you going to put in your report?” I demanded.

“Already discussed it with Colonel Griggs. We’re going to treat this like it was a UFO sighting.”

“A UFO?” I practically screamed.

“There never was a building. There never was any machinery. The so-called super-battery never existed. This was all part of an elaborate con game, a swindle, a hoax. It was all a mass hallucination.”

“A weather balloon,” I said.

“Well that would be stupid,” the lieutenant said.

“What about the hundreds of people.... the thousands of people whose homes are powered by those batteries? What about the cars, trucks and trains using the batteries?”

“It’s a fake, an illusion.” I could see he was tired, and for an instant, all emotion drained from his face. “It’s *got* to be an illusion.”

“What about the YouTube videos that talk about the battery and show it being used?”

“They should be sanitized by tonight,” he said.

“Sanitized?!!”

“Expunged, disappeared, scratched, whatever you want to call it. It will be like they never existed,” The lieutenant said.

~

When our workers showed up all I could say was, “No factory, no work. I guess we’re all laid off.”

Without new batteries, the shop converting Tesla’s and other electric cars to Winklebottom’s gizmo closed laying off 50 people. The company building electric trucks went out of business and laid off 400 people. United Locomotives moved back to Syracuse and laid off 1,200 people. All the other businesses that had been built around Winklebottom’s batteries folded.

Without Winklebottom’s permit fees Springer couldn’t make his boat payments and he lost the boat. Leidy couldn’t make the payments on his million-dollar mansion and the bank foreclosed on it. In hindsight, it seems like Sheriff Marantz was the smartest of the bunch. He’d paid cash for his Corvette.

Eventually the batteries powering homes, factories, cars, trucks and trains ran out of juice

and without Winklebottom, there was no way to recharge them. At least this made work for electricians who had to remove dead batteries and reconnect homes and businesses back to the grid.

People left Carverton in droves and that caused the collapse the Walmart, the Piggly Wiggly, Tractor Supply and a dozen restaurants. Slowly, things returned to normal for Carverton, if normal is 40% unemployment.

Two months later, I got a card postmarked Amarillo, Texas. It said, “I thought I could bring jobs and innovation to a town that needed them. But in the end, they really didn’t want me. Goodbye, Taylor.” The postcard was unsigned, but I recognized Winklebottom’s scrawl.

Sadly, my wife’s mother passed away and we were free to move too. We’re headed for Texas. I hear there are jobs there.

THE END

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