

“Sometimes the Hard Dollar Comes Easy”
William Hrdina

When I was a younger man, I was under the impression I'd be taken care of when I retired. I believed the brochures. They said, “Work hard, spend your money wisely, and the American Dream is just there waiting for you.”

So that's just what I did. I worked 60-hour weeks, weekends, whatever. But it didn't make a lick of difference.

It turns out you don't have to be a teenager to be hopelessly naïve.

The marvelous windfall I thought would be coming in the form of Social Security and my pension ended up being nothing but a fart in the wind, silent but deadly.

Oh well. You live, you learn. You stop learning; you might as well be dead.

I remember the day I retired. I worked at the same factory from the time I was 28. I planned on traveling during my retirement, to see the world I'd neglected in my younger years. Then, two weeks after I took my last step out of that damn steel plant I hear on the CNN that some executive managed to find a way to steal the whole shebang.

They say the investigation is still ongoing, but it's been four years now and there haven't been any indictments. I'd say the investigation's closed and the rich guys won. So what else is new?

Two months after I lost my pension the CNN told me social security was belly up and the old people of America were shit out of luck.

Needless to say I don't watch the CNN anymore. The CNN is worse for my stomach than a big bowl of spicy chili. Now I pretty much just watch old re-runs of Gilligan's Island.

That Gilligan really cracks me up.

I'm sorry, I've been babbling on here and I haven't yet introduced myself. My name is Carl Throckmartin. I'm 72 years young. I know that's a hackneyed phrase, but it fits me and I'm old enough that I don't care if you don't like it.

I'm not a vain man; I can admit that I probably look a lot older than I am. I wouldn't be offended if you said I looked 87. I've always liked the outdoors and I've dried up something fierce over the years. Carl, the human prune. I was married once to the most beautiful woman I've ever known, both inside and out. She died ten years ago, when I was 62. Seems like a lifetime ago now. I've never even considered remarrying, I loved my Marjorie and no other woman could ever compare to her.

Anyway, I'm old but I still have my mind, and while everything doesn't work as well as it's used to- I'm holding together pretty well if I do say so myself.

That's not the end of the good news as far as I'm concerned. While I was enjoying my retirement, it turns out that losing all my money propelled me into my latest job, and I've come to really like it. In some ways it's the best job I've ever had.

I'm really good at it. Better than I ever thought I could be at anything.

I wish I would've realized my talent sooner; maybe I could've had a fat bank account and been impervious to things like corrupt assholes losing my money. If things had played out a bit differently, I might've even gotten to be one of those assholes myself.

But things didn't work out that way, they worked out the way they did- that's how life works.

I'm a quiet person, or I was in my old life. Kept mostly to myself. I was the guy that would always hold the door for you if you needed it, the one sitting $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way back in every audience. I loved my Marjorie and truth be told, I considered everyone else a bit of a nuisance.

All my life I've worked for other people. I would do what they said to do when they said to do it. That was fine for then. But I knew when I lost all my retirement money the one thing I wasn't going to do was to go to work for someone else.

I was done with that.

I wanted to work on my own time. Be my own boss.

Instead of working for the Man, I would find a way to be self-employed. Problem was- I didn't have the slightest idea how to make such an effort work. All my life entrepreneurship was just a word to me; I'd never once tried my hand at it.

Then, one afternoon my phone started ringing. I didn't know it at the time, but that call would alter the course of my life.

At the time I was extremely lonely and still in despair at the loss of my retirement money. The ringing phone startled me. My phone almost never rang. I had just poured myself a cup of the java from my good friend Mr. Coffee and I nearly spilled the whole thing on my shirt.

Cursing, I went to the phone and answered it.

"Hello?" I asked.

"Congratulations!" came the falsely excited voice of a clearly unenthusiastic individual. "You are potentially a winner in our Cruise to Vegas Sweepstakes. All you have to do is take out your checkbook and read me the numbers written across the bottom. If they add up to our magic number you will be the winner of a free trip to fabulous Las Vegas, Nevada."

I was incredulous at first. Could this yahoo really be serious?

I decided to ask.

"Are you serious? You're actually calling me up out of the blue and expecting me to read you the numbers off of the bottom of one of my checks?"

"Why yes sir." The man responded- sounding wounded. "You have a good opportunity to win a fabulous vacation here. All you need to do is go and get your checkbook..."

I cut him off.

"Am I supposed to be ignorant of the fact that turning over my routing number that would basically give you electronic access to my bank account?"

"If you were, that wouldn't be a bad thing." He replied.

Did I detect sarcasm? I couldn't be certain.

"Let me guess, I win an extra prize if my social security card has three digits, then two, then four more? How stupid do you think I am exactly?" I asked.

There was a long pause on the phone. I honestly thought the guy was going to hang up the phone. Or maybe even answer, "Really stupid."

Except in the end he didn't.

Instead he responded in a way I didn't expect. He said, "I don't think you're stupid sir. I just think you're like everyone else and you would like the opportunity to win something for nothing."

I was amazed. I did everything but call the guy a thief, a moniker which clearly fit, and he doesn't even have the decency to be ashamed. He was like a man caught "in flagrante delicto" with another woman, and yet denying what was happening to his wife while the other woman was standing naked and embarrassed behind him.

"People really fall for this don't they?" I asked, more out of amazement than curiosity.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you." The guy responded. He sounded as lonely as I was, maybe more.

"Try me." I challenged him.

"On a good day I get a 15% success rate." He said.

The pride in his voice made me reject the idea that he was lying. I was impressed. That was a far sight better than a major league hitter, and this guy was just cold calling for old people.

It took a minute, but the enormity of what he was saying started to sink in with me in a place within my soul I had little familiarity with.

"So is this a total scam or a partial scam? Is there any trip to Vegas?" I asked.

"Sure there is. It comes along with a high-pressure condo sales pitch, but there really is a trip. Believe it or not the contest part of what I do is perfectly legal."

He was clearly implying that there was another aspect to what he did that wasn't legal at all. Like the part where he used the information to buy himself a new couch. I wondered why he would make such an admission, and then remembered that sense of loneliness I detected earlier.

He probably didn't have anyone to talk to, just like me.

We spoke for fifteen minutes. His name was Greg and as I'd suspected, he was single, lonely, and actually, remarkably rich. Even though Greg made his living lying to people over the phone, I believed every word he said to me that day. He never asked me for any money; instead he laid out how the scam worked, how he learned it, how he wished he could just close up shop and retire, but he had two ex-wives that were both essentially threatening to turn him in if he didn't pay what amounted to a monthly blackmail payment.

When I hung up the phone I knew I'd just had the most important conversation I'd had in 30 years.

In the midst of Greg's explanation of his scam- I had formulated one of my own.

By the time I hung up the phone I was giddy with the excitement of it. It wasn't a perfect plan, but if my buddy Greg could get people to turn over their bank account numbers 30 seconds after hearing his voice, I felt sure that I could run my own ruse just as successfully.

I haven't yet mentioned it because it hasn't been relevant to mention until now, but my one serious hobby has always been music; and not just the music that I liked when I was a kid either. Most people never like a single band they didn't like when they were 25. But not me, I like the new stuff too.

Well, I should qualify that. I like the new stuff that doesn't suck, and a great swath of it sucks. I'll know we've arrived as an advanced species when we can

demonstrate mathematically how terrible a lot of the crap they try to pass off as music really is.

At the time of my revelatory phone call I still occasionally went to concerts. Not so often as I used to, (I went at least once a week when I was in my 60's) because the speakers are simply too good these days and they hurt my ears something fierce. But I went as often as I could muster myself up for. I remember when I was in my 30's and I would talk about the way you could feel the bass in your chest.

I was wrong. Back then it was a light tickle at best.

If you get to close to the speakers now there is a good chance your breastbone will literally shatter into little bits inside your chest from the impact of sound waves so thick you can almost see them. Still, even though I felt old when I did it, I would still stick in some earplugs and go check out a band if I really like them.

People at shows have always been nice to me. They give me space when I'm standing and try not to bump into me very often as they dance. I try not to bump into them too much either.

I mentioned earlier that I like to be to myself most of the time. Well, this part of my character becomes important in this part of the story because my general solitude has afforded me a great deal of time to think.

For years I've honed and perfected various theories about human behavior.

While I was sitting alone at lunch I used to amuse myself watching the behavior of my coworkers at the steel plant. Like an anthropologist watching apes I would observe the way my co-workers grouped together and I'd listen in on what they were saying, you know, like what kind of things they were interested in talking about. After doing this on and off for literally decades I came naturally came to a few tentative conclusions.

There was one thing I noticed in particular that's relevant to my story. I've come to think of it as Throckmartin's Fifth Theorem of Human Behavior. It goes like this: "People's entire gestalt towards strangers depends almost entirely on how the stranger is categorized."

Let me try to explain that in simpler terms.

People have piles in their brains they put people into.

Maybe this isn't the most astonishing sociological insight. In fact it's one of those things that are so obvious you never think explicitly about them, which is how the full weight of their meaning avoids our conscious thoughts.

This makes you weak and vulnerable to anyone who doesn't meet your expectations.

Like me, for instance.

Ever since I could be fairly called old, there was someone at every show who felt the need to know the story of how this old fart ended up in a concert full of 20 year olds.

The conversation always went about the same way.

"Hey Dude."

Not thinking I was the Dude in question I usually didn't respond to this.

So it would be repeated.

"Hey Dude."

And sometimes, "uh... Sir?"

I always responded to 'Sir.' When they said Sir, there was no doubting they were talking to me.

So I would look up and they would continue.

“Uh yeah, I was just wondering.” The kid would stammer, always looking a little embarrassed to be asking. “How is it that you’re here?”

I wish I could say my now standard reply came to me the first time someone asked.

But that’d be a lie.

The first time a kid asked me what I was doing at a concert I gave some lame desperate explanation. I think I tried to justify why I was there- as if I needed to justify my presence to a kid.

I told that first curious soul that I’d been going to shows for years and I liked the band. He just looked at me incredulously, nodded his head, and walked away. I felt like an idiot.

I thought of the response I use now about a week after that concert.

My new response works much better.

I say, “My parents fucked. I was born. Since then I’ve just been riding the wave.”

Then I smile.

My voice isn’t surly or angry or anything when I say it, instead it’s more matter-of-fact.

No kid in his early 20’s expects to hear those three sentences strung together coming out of the mouth of a guy who looks older than dirt. Remember what I said earlier about how people have piles in their heads? Right away the pile this kid put me in got all screwed up by my response. I now have the unique freedom of putting myself into whatever pile I choose.

Immediately I have a credibility- no matter what else comes out of my mouth, there’s a good chance they’re gonna believe me.

I’ve thought about people telling the story of their encounters with me to their friends. I’d bet money all of them quote me pretty close to perfect on those first three sentences.

It became a kind of fun hobby for me to start making up crazy life histories during these conversations- trying to see the limit of what they’d believe.

I’d tell the people I talked to that I was everyone from a roadie to a Congressman who liked to sneak off to shows during recesses of the Senate. When they asked how I got from Washington DC I would tell them that I commandeered an Air Force jet. If they looked like they didn’t believe me I would look them right in the eye and say, “Oh come on kid, we do this kind of stuff all the time. What do you think the military is for? Fighting wars?” Then I would laugh.

And they believed.

One time I even claimed to be the largest pot dealer in America. I told the kid I was selling the band a half-ton of weed for a private party they were going to throw in a nearby state forest. I told this stupid kid they were going to make a big bonfire and dance around it with 20 hired hookers. This particular young man nearly peed himself begging me for the location of my imaginary shindig.

In the end I gave him directions to some made up place because I didn’t think there would be any other way to get away from him.

Another time- the time that plays very prominently into what I'm doing now- I claimed to be father of the lead singer of the band I was seeing.

Right away the kid I was talking to started begging me to take him backstage. I had to hurry up and backpedal, saying we had a strained relationship and I wasn't even going backstage.

"I cheated on his mother and he hasn't spoken to me since." I explained.

The kid accepted this and after giving his condolences walked away.

For some reason I still don't even try to explain, I thought about the time I impersonated the lead singer's father while I was on the phone with the telemarketer.

I could have played it differently. I thought.

And so that night I looked on the internet to see what big time band was coming to town in the upcoming week. This time it didn't matter whether or not I liked the music, it just mattered that they were big. It turned out that the current favorite with the college set was playing the big venue downtown a week later. I dutifully searched Ebay for a backstage laminate, the identification of choice at concerts since the 60's. I copied a picture I found of someone who was selling the band's backstage pass from the previous summer's tour.

Then I copied the file into Adobe Printshop and a few minutes later I had a backstage pass for this summer's tour.

It looked pretty good. I went to Kinko's and had the fake pass laminated. Pretty good became great- I would've thought it was authentic if I didn't know better.

And if things went according to plan, the person I was talking to wouldn't know better.

The night of the concert I did my best to look stupid. I wore a button-up collared shirt tucked into gray dress pants of the old-man variety. I then bought a t-shirt from the vendor and put it on over the dress shirt. I wandered into the bathroom to check myself out in the mirror.

Looking at my outfit I thought about two boys I saw through the bus window on the way to the concert.

They were standing out in front of their apartment building with their parents. One boy was dressed up like Spiderman and the other like Batman. The costumes were actually pretty good, of Halloween quality, except it was the middle of June. I remember looking at the boys and realizing that everyone on the street was exactly like them, only they weren't conscious of it. Every piece of clothing people wear is a costume, no different than Batman or Spiderman.

In my brief time of retirement I did manage to go on a single trip. I went to Tokyo, Japan for seven days. On my third day, I went down to the lobby of my hotel and discovered a whole slew of kids dressed up like cartoon characters from Japanese anime movies. Some were even lugging around Styrofoam swords. I asked one of them, a kid in his early twenties, if there was a contest or something. He replied that every month or two they all just got dressed up and met in the lobby of a hotel.

Just to do it.

Dress up, freak people out.

I look at the girl with seventeen piercing through her face and clearly visible nipple clamps walking down the street in a dog collar and I know that girl is dressed up

just like those Japanese kids- except she doesn't know it. Not in the same way. The Japanese kids I met that day were aware of clothing as façade.

We aren't.

In our brave new world of the hard dollar- we *are* what we make ourselves appear to be. So when I presented myself as a slightly bleary, naïve old coot with a badly fitting t-shirt that looked like someone had crammed over his head- this is exactly what people thought they were dealing with. In a weird way, it *was* what they were dealing with- at least in their own minds.

Smiling one time at myself in the mirror I went out into the never-ending circle of hallway that wrapped around the large amphitheatre. The band, not very good in my opinion, started playing to the rapturous applause of the kids inside. I found a seat in the back and waited for about half of the first set to pass. Then I wandered out into the hallway in search of a bathroom with a line.

I found one with no trouble; it was a concert after all.

In less than two minutes a red-headed kid with squinty eyes standing just to my right asked what I was doing at the show.

"Well, my parents fucked. Then I was born. Since then I've just been riding the wave." I replied as I always did. Then I smiled.

The kid's eyebrows went up in surprise. Then he smiled back.

"You're a cool old dude." He said with admiration.

"Ayup." I agreed, amiably.

"Seriously, how did you end up at this show? I didn't know these guys were big with the senior set."

I smiled at him sheepishly, trying to look like a man who knew he looked out of place, but couldn't help it. "I'm here to visit my son." I said with a shrug, indicating the pass strung around my neck with only the subtlest of nods. I don't even think the kid knew I directed his eyes to look at the laminate hanging around my neck.

Still his eyes went down, and his face suddenly took on a much greater look of curiosity.

"Who's your son?" The kid asked.

"He's in the band."

"Who?" The kid asked.

I could see the hook hanging out of the side of his mouth. It was almost too easy.

"The guitar player."

"James?"

"Yeah. He's a good kid." I smiled.

"Wow, so that really is a backstage pass around your neck?"

I agreed that it was.

The boy's eyes widened. I could see his next question coming at me from a mile away.

"Do you think I could come backstage with you and see him?"

I explained that I would like to, but the security was very strict and it would be impossible for me to get him through. I tried to make my voice a convincing mixture of matter-of-factness and maybe a little regret.

Like maybe if I had a really good reason to let him in there was something I could do. Of course, I left it up to the boy to figure out what that reason could be.

A quick study, it didn't take the kid long to hit upon an idea.

"I could pay you. Anything you want."

I tried my best to look shocked at the mere suggestion.

"Oh no, I couldn't..."

"200 bucks." The kid said.

I could see him working out if he could still make his rent in his head. It looked like he had a little more.

"Can't do it." I replied, looking disappointed.

"300." The kid said. He looked a little desperate now. "C'mon, you know the security guard will remember you. You'll be able to get backstage again."

That would come to be my favorite part, when the person buying my fake backstage pass assured me that I too would be able to return to the backstage area, apparently nobody wants to feel like they're leaving an old man stranded.

Hesitantly I reach for the pass looped over my head. I'm watching the kid's eyes; he looks like a junkie being offered a fix. I cannot help but marvel at the power of celebrity in our society. There were, I realized in advance, so many things about my plan that shouldn't work. But from that first kid it was just so easy.

Nobody asked why the old man Father of a rock star would need the couple of hundred bucks. Nobody wondered what the old man Father of a rock star was doing wandering around in the normal crowd instead of watching the show from the side of the stage or something.

I sold my pass at four shows in a row but on the fifth, no one approached me and the day bordered on being wasted. What was worse, I was only 100 bucks away from making all my bills for the month and it was only the 12th. I was almost out the door when I realized I was missing another obvious opportunity. Since I hadn't scammed anyone, there was no reason I had to stay away from the backstage area. No one would be lurking around waiting to beat up the old man that sold them the bunk backstage laminate.

So I went down and approached one of the guards blocking the backstage area. As always I was dressed in my old man's clothes with the clearly brand new t-shirt awkwardly pulled over the top like a man in a business suit with a feather boa wrapped around his neck. The guard noticed me right away.

He even came forward and asked, "Can I help you, sir?"

I smiled a confused smile.

"I'm trying to get backstage again, but I've lost my pass and I can't seem to find my way back to the entrance I left from."

"What happened to your pass?"

I looked down, feigning embarrassment.

"I dropped it into the toilet. I went out to buy one of my son's t-shirts..." I proudly pulled out the t-shirt from my chest, partially untucking it from my pants. I showed the t-shirt to the guard, it had the band's logo and a wickedly grinning mouth with blood between the teeth.

I smiled as if to say, "What can you do?" and continued my explanation, "My bladder simply isn't what it used to be and I had to wait in line and when I finally got myself to a urinal the first thing I managed to do was flip my pass into the toilet." I said all in a rush.

“One of your boys is in the band?”

“Yeah,” I agreed, “Gummo the drummer, but his real name is Steven.” I never went out for this gig without first learning the names of everyone in the band and reading their basic bio.

“You’re Gummo’s Dad? I guess he has to have one. He’s such a lunatic though...” The guard stopped talking; suddenly realizing he was talking to the man’s father. Or at least he thought he was.

And as soon as he thought he was, I was in.

Two minutes later I was standing backstage. I actually like my newly adopted son’s music, it’s a bit aggressive for my normal tastes, but they do very interesting things with noise, so I watched the encore from the side of the stage and then wandered down to the dressing room.

When the band came into the room they saw me sitting on the couch and everyone in the band looked at everyone else. They were all trying to find who had the look of recognition on their face.

They realized simultaneously that no one did.

“Hey old dude, do one of us know you?” Asked Rummo, the lead singer.

I explained to them I’d lied about being Gummo’s Dad so I could get backstage and get their autographs. I told them my grandson was a big fan and I’d gotten into their music through him. I dropped the names of a couple of other bands I knew were influences and when I walked out I had enough autographed gear that I was able to make a double payment into my property tax account by selling the autographed stuff on Ebay, which I knew would pay dividends when the winter heating bill came in the mail.

I guess this story is my confession. I don’t feel bad about what I do and I don’t want forgiveness for it, but confession is still the most accurate description of this document. You do what you need to do to survive, that just our lot as humans.

I actually enjoy the irony. I found a job that isn’t a job in retirement. It is the first employment I’ve ever been happy doing, yet most people wouldn’t even agree that what I do is work. That’s fine. I don’t think what professional athletes do is work and they make ridiculous salaries at it.

Things are as they are. As long as most people keep believing that, I can get all the money I need. Peace.