

Letters to the Editors

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Journal by Anna M. Szaflarski.

Letters from Editors: Stephen Remus, "You Got a Good Job Right Out of High School, Or, How St. Catharines Had Dumb Luck" pg. 6

Black and Incongruous Headlines

**A story to accompany the poster edition, *A Man's Job*,
launched at the Niagara Artists Centre.**

GM is leaving the modern industrial hero, and has been for a long time. She's not answering his calls anymore, and she leaves her messages with her solicitors, which are less part of a dialogue and more like announcements. She's become frigid, but it hasn't always been that way. There was a time when she would tell the hero about everything, they'd stay up all night and giggle about their dreams, talk about children, and home life. She told him she needed him, and made him promise that he would never leave her. Money was of course an issue, its always an issue. But they could still go to neighbors' houses for backyard parties, drink beer and chill with the guys.

Those were the, so called, good times, but also the times that brought about awfully serious promises. After coming back from overseas from the First World War the hero was eager to make vows about the kind of man he wanted to be:

A man's job is his best friend. It clothes and feeds his wife and children, pays the rent and supplies them with were-with to develop and become cultivated. The least a man can do in return is appreciate his job. If you ask any successful man the reason for making good he will tell you that first and foremost it is because he likes his work indeed he loves it. His whole heart and soul are wrapped up in it. His whole

physical and mental energies are focused on it. He thinks his work and he talks his work, he is entirely inseparable from his work, and that is the way every man worth his salt ought to be, if he wants to make his work what it should be, and make himself what he wants to be.¹

She was pleased. Everyone knew their place in the world and things were good for awhile.

Then problems at work started. Maybe things till then had gone too well, and they got too comfortable, but all of a sudden she needed more than the hero could offer. She needed more than a good heart and two hands, she needed technology, tax evasion strategies, and three times the amount of hands for half the price, heart not included. And he noticed how hard she was struggling, coming home late at night, getting practically no sleep. But he couldn't help her and she started to change. She did things that he didn't recognize and didn't like, and she told him to pull his head out of his ass and get with the times. Gradually they didn't speak much to each other, and things started to fall apart.

The modern industrial hero didn't know what was going on. He was confused and felt powerless. He put his head down and tried to be the man he described so many years before, hoping it might all blow over.

Like in all love affairs, the individuals involved want everything to stay the way things were when they first fell in love. So much so, that they ignore the blatant signs that their sweet delusion is beginning to disintegrate. The first signs are well known: the waning attention followed by desperate reactions. But the lovers don't notice at first because they are busy dreaming about how it was when they first met. Digging their nails into the memories of their first convinced moments together, and engaging in cyclical conversations like, *what did you think of me when we first met?* They force each other to coexist in a euphoric past, and ignore the passage of time. They pull the covers over their heads, and make informal vows: *if we live in the past, time will not go on, and everything will stay the same.*

¹ Text referenced from McKinnon Doings (Journal), "Published for and by the employees of the McKinnon Industries (Industrial predecessor to GM in St. Catharines, Limited)". Volume I Number 10, St. Catharines, December 3, 1937.



It's hard to watch a crumbling romance. Everyone around seems to know more about the imminent collision between dreams and reality than the lovers themselves. In this case it was plastered in the newspapers in black and incongruous headlines: *GM Accused of Sleazy Tactics*, *Anxious about 1980*, *The Truth Hurts* and *All's Quiet on The Local GM Front*. Once in a while, there were headlines that offered small hope: *Expansion*, *New Plant*, and *Nothing Wrong with Economy*. As if GM didn't want to let go either, as if she had second thoughts, or suddenly felt sentimental about the past. Although maybe it wasn't sentiment at all, but legal compromises, because each kind word was promptly followed by cutting announcements of non-negotiable circumstances. These headlines are nothing but the traces of a very public alimony battle in the brutal divorce between the auto industry and the worker, who's having trouble betraying his vows to be modern industrial hero; a real man, a man worth his salt. The headlines waver from hopeful to cynical but the general direction points towards ultimate disintegration.

Someone asked the hero, how do you keep caring after reading a sour headline like, *Kick In the Teeth from GM?* He said, no matter how threatened his job felt, he still felt a resi-

due of that old marital contract; in sickness and in health. He said that the day he got hired on to the assembly line, it was like winning the lottery. Over the years, he moved from one job to another inside the plant hustling and dodging layoffs. Like in any crumbling relationship he thought, things might still change, and the only way he saw to ensure a way off the sinking ship and a seat on the modern cruise liner was to work hard. He thought might still spark some passion in the old lady.

Some say that our world today is looking awfully precarious. Others say that's its always been that way, and that life-long contracts were an illusion all along. Labour is just not in demand in a first world country anymore, and maybe that could have been easily predicted. *What was that crazy young couple thinking?* The industrial hero, who was once a needed resource is expected to diversify, reinvent, reposition himself and self-employ if need be, because GM is leaving and she ain't lookin' back. Marriage just isn't what it used to be.

The hero was driving across town from a long day's work. He bought some flowers along the way and a bottle of wine. He thought he'd try one more time to make things good with GM. Just the two of them, no lawyers, no unionists. It was a considerable drive up to her place, and an old Dolly song playing on the radio:

*You have put me just as low as anyone ought to go
So I lay down beside what's left of my pride
If you go, then you'll know, because you can't help but see
The only way out is to walk over me.*

The song only made the hero feel bitter, which is not the mood he wanted to be in. So, he started flipping through the stations and was so consumed by it that he drove right past her. He only noticed her sitting in a parked car after he had himself parked a block down the road.

From where he was sitting he could see that she was in some compact slick thing. He barely recognized his gal, who used to utilize her pickup as a BBQ station. From where he was sitting it looked as if she was talking to a group of foreigners, but he couldn't be sure. She smiled in ways he hadn't seen for a long time. She was shaking their hands, and envelopes

were being exchanged. He had suspected, but had never really considered for a million years that it would come to this. From where he was sitting it seemed like his marriage had finally come to an end. And from where he was sitting, maybe it didn't seem like such a bad thing.

A fellow writer put it so poignantly: that the only labour that society feels is worth compensating someone for is labor that we don't enjoy — labor devoid of love.² The modern industrial hero has been caught up in a loveless marriage for more than half a century, and as his ol' Lady moves on to less fortunate nations, perhaps she leaves the hero and the general workforce in Canada an opportunity to redefine what it's worth, and what it should be paid for. Instead of begging her to stay, the hero starts to imagine a world where he isn't rewarded for working like a dog day in and day out, for sacrificing himself or for being a martyr. It's not the way he was raised but he imagines a life without her and any other labour-dependent industries in his life. It's scary but for the first time he can say, he doesn't love her anymore, because he realizes maybe it never had anything to do with love.

The modern industrial hero, who nobody needs or wants anymore, turns the ignition and drives away. ◻

2 *The Virus of Scarcity and the Culture of Abundance*, Maya Mackrandilal, essay published on sixtyinchesfromcenter.org, 2015.

Dear Editor: Letters to the Editors is a correspondence with you, and with someone else you also most likely know. This journal is released bi-weekly, and distributed personally by me, your friend or acquaintance Anna M. Szaflarski. I'll write various texts including commentary, and short stories, but would like it if you would write something too. If you are interested in contributing, please send it to me. annaszaflarski@gmail.com

Stephen Remus

You Got a Good Job Right Out of High School, Or, How St. Catharines Had Dumb Luck

Jack said, I went to a funeral, it was one of the guys from the plant.

I saw my old boss there, hadn't seen him in forever saw a lot of guys there I hadn't seen in forever and I figured I had to say something.

I mean I was a lousy employee, I was a terrible fucking worker, just awful.

You know, we'd come in here at lunch sometimes, get a tray of drafts, the little ones, and maybe we'd get a couple more and we'd go back half-cut. Sometimes we wouldn't even go back. Just pack it in, that'd be it, go home from here. Then next day, we'd be back at work like nothing happened. It was nuts.

So I saw my boss at the hall after the funeral and said, Hi, remember me?

He said, Sure Jack sure, I remember you.

I said, Look, I just wanted you to know that you were a good boss and I was a terrible worker. And I want to apologize for that.

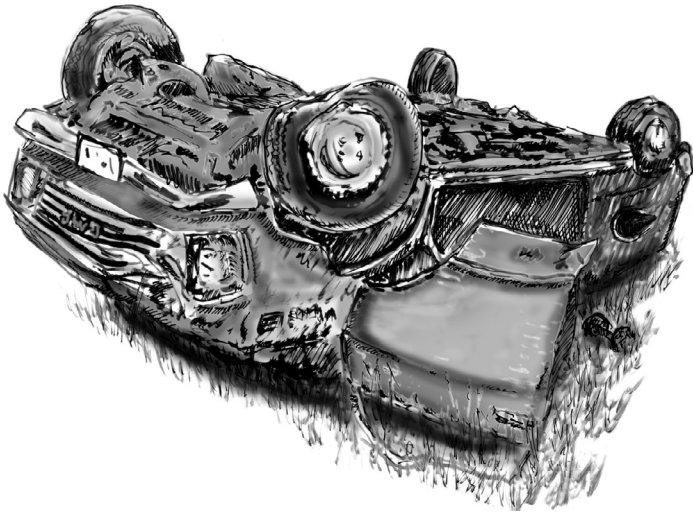
And he said, Oh come on Jack, you weren't that bad, you pulled your weight.

I said, No, no I didn't. I fucked up a lot, I was a lousy worker and for that I want to apologize.

And he said, OK. And I felt all right about that.

We were having burgers and fries with a beer at the bar. It was the middle of the afternoon, bright sun and fresh snow outside, but it was dark in there. The radio was playing Heaven's Just a Sin Away by The Kendalls. Torture. Nothing was happening except the girl working the bar and three or four people scattered around at tables.

The burger was a mess, a worthy example of the pornography of cuisine; not particularly good for you and not something that would ever hold together without your hands. This one had blue cheese.



I said, Well, what the fuck,

You didn't owe those guys anything. I mean take a look around this town, there isn't a single building other than the ones they own with GM's name on it. There's no rink, community centre, hospital, nothing. They just came in, worked the town like mules, a shitload of cars got punched out of the plant, and now they're buggering off to Mexico and China for good.

At least you had some fun at their expense.

Jack said, That's where you're wrong, it wasn't fun. It was awful. I can barely walk, my knees are so shot. It was just bullshit. Working behind those machines, it was hard on you. You went crazy. I went crazy.

I said, Well I don't think having a few extra beers at the Duck for lunch is like going off your nut exactly.

Jack said, Yeah but the things is, we were always going hard. When I think back I don't know how we did it. We'd always be going over the river, to the Hacienda, the Late Show, it really didn't matter, we'd be over there all the time. We were wild.

The waitress came over. Jack liked her, thought she had a cute behind. No argument from me, and when she checked on us Jack said we'd have two more. I thought we were leaving, but he'd made a call.

Jack said, We went over to Buffalo one time I can't remember all the places we used to hit with this guy I used to hang with, he was a good guy, he had this van, a real shagging wagon, a Vandura, remember those,

(cont'd from pg 7: Stephen Remus)

with the little teardrop window in the back?

Anyway, we were drunk and stoned and we're coming back and it was dark and raining and I'm so high I'm just lying in the back of the van. It's all I could do.

He's got all these weights back there. I don't even know what he was thinking, I guess he used to work out in his van maybe, maybe he was moving them, I don't know, but he's got all these barbells and stuff and I'm just lying there on the weight bench, sleeping.

The waitress came back with the beers. Jack tried to make something more of it than what it was, but big surprise, she was just bringing us beers.

Jack picked it up again, So I'm lying there in the back and buddy falls asleep at the wheel. The fucking van goes into this huge ditch. The van cartwheels, like ass over tea kettle. From how it tore up the ground we figure it rolled three times, maybe four.

And I remember waking up to a big noise when we left the road and I'm scared shitless in this van and I'm bouncing around with all these barbells. I can still see it, everything's in the air like it's zero gravity up in space or something, except everything's moving fast and everything's hard and everything really fucking hurts. And I'm thinking, oh boy, this is it. I'm done.

We're laughing, it's a messed up story.

See this gash on my head? Jack bent and pointed to well-healed scar about three inches long on the top of his bald head. That was a barbell. Or who knows? It was fucked up. I was cut up and bruised from head to toe. The van was totalled, you wouldn't recognize it, but somehow we were OK.

I couldn't believe it. We got out. We were all covered in mud. It was a real ditch, deep, and we crawled out of it and walked to this house in the middle of nowhere and we knocked on the door. You should've seen us all bleeding and covered in mud, we must've scared the hell out of those people.

Fuck, you are some lucky, I said.

You know it.

I guess driving around with loose weights and passed out friends in the back of your van is a recipe for disaster, I said for a laugh.

Yeah, there's something to it, Jack said, and we laughed when he said it, but we were really laughing about dumb luck. □