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## Free Agent

Caleb Huntington

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No bell. He knocked on the door.

; A river

Fuck it's cold. These rich assholes are always cheapskates. Look at this place it's a palace.

-Hello?

-Yes, Evening ma'am. I'm here representing Habitat For Humanity. We-

-No. Thank You. We make our charitable donations through our company. Once a year. And we don't appreciate people coming to the door. Especially at this at hour!

-Ma'am, If you please, it

-Thank You.

-Uh-huh.

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ever.

Screwy old bat! Especially at this hour! It's seven freaking thirty for christsakes. ... Oh, check out this beaut. Vines and all! It looks like Harvard University. ... The Delaneys. Oh frig! It's a bloody inter-com...

-Hello?

-Good Evening Sir! My name is Matthew, and I'm here

-No. Good Night.

cook up  
what?

Ah well the intercommers never go for it. ... Sweet. Here's another one.

-Yes?

-It's Habitat for Humanity.

-No. And I do not like being bothered at home. It's the dinner hour!

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Yeah. I'm sure he'd have been much more generous if I had caught him at work.

it was the same every night. about 75 or 80 houses. maybe five or ten donations. a few small ones in cash. maybe some big ones in cheques. a few renewal cards with info on existing members who live on that evenings' turf. most of canvassing is just renewing old





*Paper Mill Press*

members. but it can't just be that--or you'll get fired. you've gotta sign up some new people. generating cards they call it. but if you're wise, you'll also get some donations from new people that you don't sign up. no cards, no paper at all--except the cash they give you and the free tat you give them--a copy of the magazine, some bumper stickers and shit like that. then you take some of that undocumented money and you cash it out at the end of the night, with your cheques and cash memberships, renewals and new cards. maybe you cobble together a bunch of change and fivers and buy a 'gift' membership for your sister or something, just to keep up appearances. but you make sure that you keep a bit for yourself. you've earned it -- but you just take a little. you don't wanna get caught.

She pulls back the gauzy curtain beside the door.

-Yes?

-Missus Gardener?

He holds up his clipboard and smiles.

-Remember me? Matthew, with Habitat For Humanity. It's been a year already!

sometimes it's easy. with cards. but there's no real thrill to those kind of doors. the best ones are when you can get someone new to write a big fat cheque. or better still, they give you some cash and forget to ask for a receipt. somehow you just dazzle them ... and walk away with their money in your pocket. that feels good.

He stood at the next door in a daze. Thinking of Tyson.

He got me this job. Now look at him. That's a bad scene. The street nurse said she'd seen worse, but I'd like to know where. I don't want to end up like that. I can't end up like that.

-Hello?

-Hi there. How are you this fine evening?

-I'm well thank you. What is this about?

-Habitat For Humanity. Are you familiar with our campaign to build thirteen houses for underprivileged families down by the site of the old Lexington?

-Yes. I saw a bit about it in the paper the other day. C'mon



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in. It's freezing out here.

it was cold. he felt like he would freeze his bag off and his head was banging. His skin felt tight and he had an ache coming from deep down inside his bones. but he had made quota and a little extra and now it was time to call it a night. the best part was, the office was the other side of downtown, so he could stop off for a hit before cashing out.

\$175 for the man. And \$50 for the boys.

he'd only had a little taste before work. just enough to get him out the door, enough to give him the strength to deal with these douchebags in style, and shield him from the pain of rejection. ... and that little taste had worn off a long time ago. he felt like shit, but glad he didn't need to go into the office sick. he jumped off the bus at sixth and powell and hurried the five blocks to the ratty hotel. he nodded to the guy behind the smeary plexiglass who buzzed him in and he ran up the three flights of stairs with a single thought burning in his mind like the pointed singularity of a butane flame. a big native with deep pock-marks and crutches answered the door.

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-I'm looking for Dave?

-Dave's not here, man. ...Get it?

-Yeah. It was funnier when Tommy Chong said it. Is Dave here?

-Everyone's a critic. ... Dave!

-Let him in. And close the door, heat-bag! ... Matty my man, I've got a quarter waiting for you right here.

-Sweet. Do you have a clean rig? I want to fix it right now.

He nodded off on the way from the hotel to the office and had to walk ten blocks back. It was quarter past when he got there.

-Where have you been? Everybody's been done and gone for twenty-five minutes! You better hurry and do your cash out -- I want to go home. And I think Steve wants to talk to you.

-Yeah. I lost track of time. I was signing up a monthly. And





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we got to talking...

-OK, Jimmy Carter would be proud, I'm sure. You look like shit. Go do your cash out, then talk to Steve.

His vision was blurred and he made a huge mess of the paperwork.

Liquid gold flowed through his veins. His eyelids were heavy. He felt distant, itchy, and warm. The world was muffled and muted. A fuzzy shape grew large before him; then spoke...

-Matthew ... Matthew! Wake up! Are you done with that? It's time to go! ... This is a mess. And look at you. ... Matthew, look, I've been meaning to talk to you. ... I know you're dealing with some stuff right now, and I've tried to be understanding. But-

-Steve,

-No. I've gotta say this. ... Your numbers just don't add up. And it's only cheques. I mean there's no cash. None. And look at you. I can't send you out like this.

-Steve, man

-No! ... It's over Matthew. You're done. I'm sorry. I'll need your ID and your receipt book before you go.

He stood on the street corner outside, waiting for a bus. He hated Steve for firing him, and he hated all those people behind all those doors because they had all said no. He hated Tyson for getting him that job and for showing him the ropes, for giving him that first shot of dope. And he hated himself for taking it. But as he fingered the receipt book and blank ID card he had swiped on his way out of the office, a strange mix of pride, shame, and fearful anticipation swelled up within him. He was afraid of what would come next, but he needed to eat, didn't he? And his habits needed to be fed too. And starting tomorrow he was a free agent. He probably had a month before people started catching on. He'd best get to work straight away ... doing what he had to do.

Untitle  
Virginia

