

Stanley Wycoff | My First Job

Still funnier than shit

People still ask, “Tell me the story of your first job.” And I do.

My friend Dave was an extremely popular senior at Millikan High. He was handsome, cocksure, and witty (in a pun-laden adolescent kind of way), as well as being a baseball star (Moore League athlete of the year). He dated the Homecoming Queen, and two of her court. Unbelievable.

I, on the other hand, only a junior, was a regular-looking guy with an affected confidence, and was a marginal letterman. I dated the girls that fell out of Dave’s pockets. I did, however, play the guitar, write songs, and sing. I also wrote a weekly high school sports column for the free Long Beach weekly newspaper. In other words, I was no “Dave,” but I was in the vicinity.

One summer day, Dave called and said, “I’ll be by and pick you up.” This was good news, since I didn’t have a car and Dave’s (family) Chrysler had been in the shop since one of us had thrown a lit roach out the front window (the matter of who actually flipped the roach out the window is disputed to this day) and it blew into the backseat, setting a

fire that we finally noticed when passing motorists honked, waved, and screamed, “Your car’s on fire!”

This “fire” incident would figure in the “job” story.

When Dave pulled up at my house and honked, I moseyed outside and got in the shotgun seat of the Chrysler. Dave started right up with, “I know someone who can get us a job.” I was incredulous at first, having never *had* or even *considered* having a job. But then I thought, knowing Dave, this *someone* must really be connected, and this could be some swell *job*. Instead it turned out that the person Dave knew was Bill Fuller’s mom, who knew someone *else*. Fuller was the team’s shortstop. We *all* knew Fuller’s mom. They lived near school, and Fuller and I would walk to his house every day after practice, where he would mix us drinks and we would sit and discuss the day’s events. We would clean up before Fuller’s mom got home. In no way was Fuller’s mom “connected.” I began to worry.

As well I should have. The person who Fuller’s mom knew was a clerk at the unemployment office.

Having never been *employed*, I had never been *unemployed*, making this my first (but not last) trip to the place. Here, for once, no one gave shit-one about Dave’s fame and glory. We stood in a very long line of what my mom called down-on-their- luck people. I was embarrassed and a little intimidated. The clerk got us a job immediately. We could start that afternoon. There were two openings at the new fast-food place on Anaheim Street—the newest hamburger joint in the entire Long Beach area. This was

forty-three years ago, and there were only a couple of McDonalds in the entire Southland. But it had already developed a reputation as (1) the best place in the entire United States for burgers, and (2) the shittiest place in the entire United States to work. It has been my experience that most reputations are earned.

But why didn't Dave say, "That's not exactly what my buddy and I had in mind," or "I'm allergic to burgers"? He was, like most high-school heroes, a gifted manipulator, a devotee of the unnecessary lie. All of a sudden he was saying, "Thank you so much, this is great," and off we went. My job was to ride along. So I did.

I was in a trance-state when we pulled into the parking lot at Anaheim and Obispo and Dave bounced out of the car with his athletic grace and vigor in full form. I couldn't help but notice, trailing behind, how the "Help Wanted" sign on the side of the building was no banner or tacked-on thing, but was engraved in the structure itself. It was as permanent as the arches. Uh-oh. Then we were greeted at the door by the manager.

The *manager* deserves his own paragraph, if not his own story.

Now, I was no stranger to drinking. As I mentioned, shortstop Fuller and I had our ritual of relaxing with cocktails as we wound down from the incredible tensions of our seven-period day. I should add that my family's birthday and holiday celebrations were famous

around Long Beach, and were especially well attended by my friends. But the manager was my first close encounter with someone who was bloated, bleary, miserable and ashamed at a glance. I had met my first booze-hound boss.

There was something else about him ... very distinguishing ... something disturbing. I couldn't put my finger on it, as I was trying to write this sentence. I wanted to get it right.

I decided to call Dave. We have remained dear friends through the years. I had been best man at some of his weddings and he had been best man at one of mine. I got right to the point. "I am writing about our job at McDonalds. You remember that, don't you?"

"Are you kidding me? Of course," Dave replied.

I continued, "I remember that the manager was a drunken moron, but I feel that there was something else about him that I have forgotten, or repressed."

"No problem," replied Dave. "He was a pervert." I could barely thank him enough before hanging up and excitedly resumed writing this piece. I knew our boss deserved his own paragraph.

I know that I am well into this story. I know that this story is called "My First Job." I know that I haven't even started to write about the job. Don't worry. I only lasted two days. Plus, from now on this will become an "interactive" piece. This will save words and time. By this I mean you, the reader, will assist me. The rest of the story takes place

exclusively in the back kitchen area. What I need for you to do is ... whenever I describe or mention any person, place or thing ... I want you to modify, in your head, that person, place, or thing with the phrase ... *totally fucking greasy*. The exception is, whenever I mention my friend *Dave*, you modify his name with the phrase *that complete asshole*. I'll model the first sentence for you. The *totally fucking greasy* pervert-manager led us into the *totally fucking greasy* back kitchen area. "Look, even the ceiling is *totally fucking greasy*," said Dave, *that complete asshole*. Here we go.

The manager was about forty years old. He was pear-shaped with a round face, pointy nose and ears, beady eyes and rubbery lips. His hair was very short, very black, and *totally* ... (just testing you). He led us through the kitchen in a tone of amazing reverence. There were three stations of his cross. There was the fry station, the grill, and the milkshake station. Dave and I would each either be the "grill man" or the "milkshake man." The "fry man" job was already covered. Thank God.

The manager said, "Why don't you watch the fry man do his job? He is an *excellent* fry man." We watched as the fry man sliced the raw (actual, swear to God) real potatoes. He then put the raw potato slices in a short-handled metal sieve-like basket. He lowered the basket into a tank containing a couple of gallons of scalding, bubbling, raging, Vesuvial, grease. Good Lord in heaven. There was sound and fury. Heat and light. Then, in a matter of seconds there was a basket of french fries. I thought he had

blown his hand off. Dave thought this would be a good time to ask about wages. I agreed.

“First, let me figure out which station I feel each of you is best suited for,” the pervert-manager said. “The grill man needs to be quick ... think fast ... be sure of himself.” He struck a pervert-thinker pose and went, “Hmmm.” He then looked at me, shook my hand and proclaimed, “Son, I think you are our new **GRILL MAN!** (Dave became milkshake man by default.) I was momentarily proud. My previously overlooked skills and mature temperament: finally acknowledged. Dave (don’t forget your part here) smirked and knowingly chuckled.

The manager told us we would make the minimum wage ... \$1.30 an hour. And for those of you who say \$1.30 was a lot of money in those days, I say you are fucked in the head. It gets worse. We had to wear a McDonalds bolo (string) tie at work. The cost of the tie (\$5.00) would be deducted from our first check. So the short afternoon shift that we would work that day would be on us. Geeze. The manager (I can’t write “pervert” every time, but I can think it) showed us where to hang our street shirts, where to eat our free lunch of burger, fries and soda (a whopping \$0.40 bonus) during our twenty-minute lunch break, and offered the immortal advice: **When There’s Time To Lean, There’s Time To Clean.** He showed us to the grill.

It was in the center of the back room. The room was the size of a moderate bedroom. The grill was flanked by the fry station and the milkshake station. The grill itself was the size of a coffee table, and was a solid sheet of metal with burners below. It was sizzling

hot. The manager explained that the grill worked on the “24” principal. When the manager hollered, “Drop 24 ... 18 and 6,” that meant I was to grab 24 patties from the stack on the left and arrange them in four rows of six: 18 would end up regular burgers, and six would be cheeseburgers. That plus the fries was all the “food” we sold. No double-anything. Just the single burger and single cheeseburger.

The trick to being a good grill man was in the flipping. This was the franchise that would become the McDonalds we know, and they didn’t get that big without having patty-flipping down to a science. You see, when you laid the 24th patty on the grill, the first patty was ready to flip, and when you had flipped 22 more patties and got to the 24th ... the 24th patty was ready to flip! You knew a patty was ready to flip when you could see the grill through a few small holes in the patty itself. It worked like a charm when everything went to plan. You then added cheese to six patties, readied the ketchup, mustard, pickles and buns, and made sandwiches out of patties. The burgers were placed on a tray and passed to the front, where the more senior workers packaged and sold them. The front or “window” workers—the people the public could see—also drew all the sodas.

Dave’s job was as laidback as mine was frantic and painful. Half the people bought fries, a quarter bought milkshakes. When Dave screwed up, he licked ice cream off his fingers. When I made a mistake, which was often, I burnt the shit out of my hands. Dave’s job as the milkshake man was so easy that he was told to let the manager know any time the grill man (me) let an item hit the floor. “Scratch one bun,” he was supposed to yell, or “Scratch one patty,” or even “Scratch one pickle.” This was supposed to keep me on my toes, and allegedly helped track inventory. But Dave, being

Dave, had to make it personal and “funny.” He would yell at the top of his lungs, “Scratch one of Stan’s buns,” or “Scratch Stan’s big patty,” or “Scratch Stan’s pickle.”

About this inventory thing. I noticed that the window men were giving most of the food away for free. During a break I asked one of them, “What’s in it for you?” He told me that food was routinely bartered for completed homework assignments, sporting equipment, beer, weed, pornography, car washes, lawn services, and, in one legendary instance, a handjob.

If I could hang around long enough, the “window” man job might be okay.

It was a constant refrain of Drop 24 ...14 and 10. Drop 24 ...19 and 5. Drop 24 ...16 and 8. Past lunch there was still a substantial line. I was starting to get the hang of it, till I got my first “grill” order. A grill order was a *special* order made by a customer who wanted to let you know who your *real* boss was. The whole 24 concept couldn’t work smoothly with a grill order.

This particular grill order was for a hamburger with *four* pickles, and I lost all my rhythm trying to get the three extra pickles. (The pickles came in parcels of 24.) Right away I started dropping things, one right after another, which meant Dave yelling those horrible “Scratch Stan’s _____” nonstop. He did accents. He shouted in wonderment. Everyone, including the fry man, who was glum by profession, was cracking up. I was laughing too, but that just made my situation worse.

You should have seen the floor.

If you've ever opened up a McDonald's burger and looked at the ingredients, you know they're not that appealing to begin with. Now imagine them strewn haphazardly across the floor, stepped on and ground into the tile in the most bizarre and disgusting combinations of colors and texture. The manager was not happy with me. Believe me, it is no urban myth: Don't mess with the people that cook your food. Instinctively, I took the four-pickle "grill" order and cooked the slip of paper *into* the fucking Nimrod's burger.

I somehow made it to the end of the shift, only to find that someone had stolen my street shirt. I got one new shirt a year. It was my only expensive shirt. I always tried to look nice when I went out with Dave.

I would have to work at least a week to make up for the expenses my first job had already cost me.

On the second day I made it past noon. But the first unsettling thing to happen was *very* unsettling. The obvious-from-across-the-playground pervert-manager showed up. He had been beaten to a pulp. His face was bruised, raw, swollen, and cut. He'd gotten his ass kicked royally for doing God knows what, to God knows who, God knows where. He said he fell. (Off Kilimanjaro?) It was such a sad sight. I, being myself, felt sorry for the guy. Dave, being Dave, decided to make himself the new boss and never do anything the manager told him ever again. Dave had an eye for weakness.

I felt particularly bad when the manager complimented me—this time not in the giant all-caps praise of the grill-man paragraph, but more like “i think you’ll make a good grill man.” I felt sorriest when he went back to the milkshake station and told Dave, “if there’s time to lean, there’s time to clean.” And Dave said, “For a dollar thirty, I’m leaving it dirty.” The place exploded in laughter. You couldn’t help it. It was so funny. The final straw was when I got another “grill” order from the four-pickle customer.

“I quit,” I said, turning to Dave. And do you know what he said?

“You can’t.”

And I said, “Why not?”

And do you know what he said? “You can’t quit until we make enough money to pay for the repairs for the fire damage to my backseat.”

Unbelievable.

I yelled out, “I quit!”

I still felt bad afterward, of course. Because I knew for the rest of the day, the pervert-drunken-beat-up manager would have to be the pervert-drunken-beat-up manager/grill man, with Dave acting like his inevitable, eternal boss. That thought was too much. Just like my being grill man and sidekick to All-Star Dave was too much.

As I walked home, I felt released. Like getting out of jail. (I actually had never been to jail yet.) The air felt fresh, the sky was blue, the trees were green, my walk unhurried. Things were like, nice, for that moment. Still, I was poor, and I wondered who stole my only expensive shirt.

Probably the guy that got the handjob.