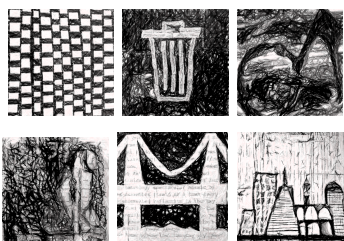


Employment Opportunities



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By Keely Kiczenski





Eyeglasses are expensive and Frank didn't talk much as a child. Both factors delayed in Frank receiving the glasses he so badly needed until he was fully ten years old. This means he had to navigate his world by landmarking ill-defined shapes and fuzzy colors a little longer than myopic children probably should. Upon putting on his glasses for the first time, he called to the schoolteacher Mrs. Donahoe quite ecstatically, confirming that the trees had leaves! The trees have leaves! Mrs. Donahoe thought he was just a slow child, and she did not expect much from him, particularly in the way of English or communication skills.

If Frank's long-term semi-blindness had any benefit, it would be that Frank now has a heightened appreciation for shape and color. But it was not likely that he'd ever go to design school or to any school beyond the 10th grade or so because at that age he'd need to start looking for a job and a place to stay so he could move out of the crowded Children's Home and out on his own. It would be more likely that he would start working at either the shipyard or the auto assembly. Being a little dumb and blind also gave Frank an appreciation for song, and he liked listening to ladies like Dinah Shore sing. On the Home's TV he once saw a behind-the-

scenes Hollywood commercial for American Engines' new luxury car model, the all-new Karman brand La Plaza, where Dinah Shore would sing a song that's supposed to give you the feeling of driving a luxury car down the coast, "A Most Unusual Day". *As an old native-born Californian would say / It's a most unusual day*, Dinah sang, in her iridescent voice and iridescent dress.

This morning Frank awoke to the urgent, vacuous respiration of the 6:45 Key Coaster pulling into 12th. He washed his face in the sink and sure-footedly traversed the trembling, clanging, out-of-place steel spiral staircase that went from the attic of an ashy old Victorian down to the main floor. The staircase was an ill-fitted dangerous obstacle, such that you'd have to duck down at the top before coming down the first step. The titanic sound and frightening movement of the steel when disturbed would remind you of an old rollercoaster at a local amusement park, and it struck a commensurate combination of fear and skeptical distrust on the tenants' faces whenever one of them would venture to ascend or descend it. For this and other reasons, the upstairs attic tenants (3 in all), did not often socialize with the main floor tenants (4). It was crowded, but less crowded than the Home. Here Frank had a little space.

Frank's face stretched nervously as he plodded down the staircase and exited the Victorian through the back door. He deftly avoided the first two broken steps of the whiny, vengeful porch and hopped down the remainder of the wooden stairs down to the backyard. Both the wooden steps and the backyard presented their own dangerous obstacles.

Frank's neighborhood was non-officially called Ghost-town, because from the looks of it, all of the residents must have burned up in house fires decades ago and now they just

haunt all of the graffiti-and dust-covered echo-chamber warehouses that were parts factories during the War.

Frank did, in fact, start work at the Assembly two years ago – the same year that American Engines got a new boss and the Styling Department gave the La Plaza's bubbly body a sleek new makeover. The round and slow look was out; long and sharp and fast-looking was in. Frank thought that the new head of the Styling Department had the right idea.

Frank wasn't into cars, really, but he did appreciate the harmony of an overhead valve internal combustion engine. It really was a modern innovation, engine power. "Turning Oil into Power at Faster, Safer Speeds Every Day", the embroidered back of his Karman jumpsuit would remind whoever was behind him. Frank enjoyed seeing what new colors and shapes the designers came up with to "reinforce the brand".

Frank used to have to walk to work, but last month they upgraded the transit. They put out all the cable cars and set the city up with new diesel buses ('transitliners') and a line running the full 17 miles of El Prado Avenue, from downtown all the way to Richmond. It only takes 8 minutes to commute from Frank's door to the assembly now. He saves so much time each day by taking the bus to work that he's able to browse around downtown in the sharp and intimidating Business District and observe as the dynamic, sun-catching, spectacular mosaic of colors and shapes and faces assembles itself as a town every morning just to admire its shimmering reflection in the Bay. And then every evening Frank watched the town break down to its parts again as neon, showy individuals against an indigo velvet screen. After the smooth blackness of night overtakes the blue and orange cosmic clash

of sunset, Frank always turned backward in his seat on the bus ride home to see the changing skyline.

That night, after work, Frank pounded his way up the steep steel staircase and up to his little space in the attic. No TV, but maybe soon. (Not much left after bus fare and rent.) By the time fall comes he will have saved enough cash in a spare tobacco tin to buy some new threads, maybe a nice black sweater.

He laid in bed and thought about what happened at work. While he and George were on lunch in the break room, some nerd from AE Corporate came in and posted an ad on the bulletin board.

Internal Promotion Available

Waste Management Specialist.

Temporary Contract. \$10 upon completion of job.

Apply Tomorrow!

Apply at our 2214 Grand office by in the City by 7am sharp. Tell the man at the door you're there for ICBM Orientation.

"I hope I get selected," he said to George at lunch. "Are you gonna apply?"

(George was about Frank's age and he was admittedly a little more charismatic than Frank. George grew up in a Negro orphanage a few blocks from Children's Home but he and Frank never met until they both got jobs at the assembly doing

quality control inspection for the hoods and fenders of Karman brand trucks and cars after the machines were done sanding and painting them. Quality control requires a human touch; some things you just need to 'eyeball'. Still, those were the kinds of jobs you just volunteered for without really needing to 'apply'. He'd never technically applied to anything before.)

"You kiddin? I don't think so, man. You gonna go "manage waste" - yuck - and even if it don't take all day they still payin' you less than what you make in a day on the line. What kind of a 'promotion' is that? Nah man. Good luck, though."

Frank hadn't realized that the lump sum pay for the job figured to less than he made on the line. So he wasn't a numbers guy, that's okay. He still had some viable management skills. He knew what people liked, and he liked to think that if he had more money he'd have a really cool sense of style. There's got to be a good job for that. Frank had faith that moving up at AE would make him a respectable man some day. So what if the promotion didn't pay? At least show them you're the guy who will still apply.

Waste management, Frank thought. Frank thought he would make a good, respectable manager. And growing up in the Home he was taught never to waste anything, so he was pretty sure he could get people at the Company to stop wasting things too. Why was that 'yuck'? Plus, he worked hard inspecting those hoods and fenders; he deserves a promotion. Frank imagined he would manage all that waste, cash that crisp \$10 check, take it straight to Capwell's for a sharp black suit and ask the redheaded seamstress in Trim if she'd want to hear all about it over a steak dinner and a movie. This may be

the opportunity he's been waiting for. This could lead to something big. As Frank dreamed big, he fell asleep to the Ghost-town ambiance of wailing sirens and streetlights' insistent fluorescence slicing through all the decaying attic windows.

Frank awoke to the 5:45 Key Coaster and got ready to apply for the manager job in the City. He took a new-smelling, cloth-seated transitliner across the Bridge and into town, watching the shadow of the urban architecture recede into the vast and inviting pink western sunrise. Frank watched it all get bigger and brighter as the bus exited the highway onto Grand. The City was even more spectacular up close than it was from across the Bay. Cars seemed to have more places to go and less time to get there. The people on the lower sidewalks were slower and not especially busy, while the people on the upper sidewalks were busy enough for everybody. Each massive building was designed with a separate American Innovator's vision for the future in mind. Some were very overt, with fountains and columns and statues of bucking horses. Others were tall, severe, and precise. There was only one structure left from the Expo in the year Frank was born.

Attached to the façade of the upper floors of the AE Corporate and subsidiary office building at 2214 Grand were what must have been hundreds of glass domes trimmed in brass in the spaces between. It looked like black and gold bubble wrap. Not Frank's style.

"I'm here for ICBM Orientation", Frank chirped to an official-looking man on the ground floor. The interior of AE Corporate was cool and artificially silent, like a bank or a courtroom. There didn't seem to be any other applicants.

The official man led Frank to the elevator and they zipped up to the 42nd floor. Frank had never been in an elevator before and his chest felt as if it were somehow more compact from the ride.

The elevator opened up to a bright, buzzing office filled with men too busy taking sheets of paper from one desk or machine to other desks or machines. Frank was ushered past the office into what was apparently an examination room. He was told to have a seat on an uncomfortable stool so that his “eligibility could be verified”. A bored doctor soon entered, poked Frank a few times and reported his findings to a stark-looking man in an olive suit.

“Lungs in good capacity; teeth cared decently for. No Tuberculosis,” the olive suit was assured, and its sleeve reached out to shake Frank’s hand.

“Thomas Cavanaugh,” the Suit decreed. He looked down at Frank’s uniform patch. “Frank? So lucky we are to have you today, welcome to American Engines. So you’re looking to go into the waste management industry?”

Frank was not really ‘looking’, but he knew he should still try to say something intelligent.

“I’m looking to go far in the Company,” he decided.

The man in the suit smiled endearingly and a bit pitifully, as if Frank were a small dog in a ladies’ dress or something. Frank was taken back to the elevator and they went up.

“How fantastic! And what a clever choice of words. You’re going far alright. So what was your previous position at AE?”

“Uh, we inspect the quality of the fenders and hoods at the assembly. Me and a Negro named George.”

“Quality control, very important! Couldn’t do it without you. You uh, from the City? Have...family here?”

“Nah, I grew up in a Children’s Home in the East Bay.”

The suit’s face responded more positively to that sentence than people’s faces usually do.

“An orphan?”

“Yes sir. But I’m out on my own now.”

“What an enterprising young man. Or should I say young man-ager,” he chuckled, at the same time as the elevator doors opened to reveal a massive warehouse that must have been a whole block wide and maybe even two blocks long. Frank walked onto the squeaky floor with his mouth and eyes wide.

Standing there in the vast warehouse was Frank, the olive suit, a cushioned stool, and two nerdy Clyde-types in short sleeve shirts and ties. One of the Clydes was smoking a cigarette with one hand and carrying a bagged sandwich in the other.

And there was a rocket.

In the warehouse, bigger than a building, on the fifty-somethingth floor of another building, there was an actual space rocket.

“Gentlemen? This is Frank. He’s an orphan, out on his own, and inspects hoods with a negro.”

Frank felt a bit shortchanged by the introduction but all he could really focus on was the white, shapely whale of a machine that dwarved them all.

“And this, Frank, is the ICBM 881. Some of the guys are calling it Hermes but I think name sounds a bit sissy.”

“I don’t understand. This is for – waste management?”

The man in the suit set his olive jacket aside, rolled up his sleeves and invited Frank to take a stool.

“I’m gonna level with you son. Yes, you’ll be managing waste in space. It’s maverick, we know, but the fact is that providing the nation’s motors with all that power makes a lot of waste. And where should we dump it – your backyard? AE wouldn’t do that to you, Frank. But space – space is everyone’s backyard, so I’m sure we can all agree that the waste would be most fairly managed out there.”

He used both hands to gesture ‘out there’.

“...And, we’ve been wanting to advance to testing stages in our personal commercial intercontinental ballistic missile program anyway. We figured 2 birds, one rocket. Look, the point is, son, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to do something selfless, something patriotic. This is your chance to be an American hero. Will you do it, Frank? Will you be the first man in space for \$10 dollars and the pride of your Nation?”

Frank had many things to consider.

“...Is it...safe?”

“Of course it’s safe! And fast,” the man in the suit winked.

Cigarette Clyde smiled cheaply and butted in:

“We tested the live prototype out in the Valley in March. Her left engine failed about a 100 feet up and it twirled in wild gyrations until ground impact – shame all that damage but it was sure a blast to watch.”

Clyde made a wide face to let everyone know that he thought it was funny that he said ‘blast’, but Frank’s face remained a bit blank about the whole thing. The suit was okay, but Frank didn’t like this shuckster.

“...But that won’t happen this time anyway because we’ve corrected the calculations of liquid fuel relative to the waste cargo, and we’ve invested more research in minimizing impact damage to the body.”

That last part “damage to the body” was spoken through one half of the now unbagged sandwich. The suit took back the conversation.

“Take a look inside, son. Plush interior, a curved glass windshield. And you wouldn’t believe the trunk space in this baby. Fits nearly 200 barrels, ” he boasted.

“Barrels of what?”

“Of cargo.”

‘Obviously,’ the nerd’s cigarette added from the peanut gallery.

“And that’s where you come in, Frank. You see, some things these eggheads can calculate, but some things just need to just eyeball, am I right? Good. So you see that long shiny lever next to the bright blue button? All you need to do is wait until you’re right up on the edge of space, right where the Earth sort of loses its grip. You wait until you juuust start to feel gravity start to thin you out and then you pull that long shiny lever. Then the button will release all the cargo for you, easy peasy. But you need to do it while you still have enough fuel to turn around and come back with this fine piece of AE equipment. Those are managerial decisions, son. We need an intelligent, physically fit, proud and patriotic young spirit like yourself with some experience in quality control to make the tough calls.”

“And being an orphan doesn’t hurt,” blabbed the sandwich-mouthed one.

Waste cargo? Frank tried to wrap his head around his new title and responsibility. He was pretty sure he could pull

the lever, but impact and body damage sounded more expensive than \$10. He didn't know what to say.

"Can't you...I don't know, just make it look like I went into space?"

The three men furrowed their brows toward Frank.

"Like, how I saw some behind-the-Hollywood scenes footage once that showed a man in a suit driving a '53 La Plaza down the coast, but he wasn't really driving on the coast he was just sitting in the car in front of a screen of the coast moving backward behind him and Dinah Shore. Just for the show and for the car. You could, you know, maybe just set me in the rocket in front of a picture of space."

"Then how would we get the barrels into space, nosebleed?"

Clyde was right; what a stupid thing for the Waste Manager to say. Frank felt like he was blowing it.

"Lyle, don't be so critical of the boy. He's clearly overtaken by gratitude; give him a chance to collect himself. Frank I think we'll keep our original plan, but I applaud your ingenuity and I thank you for your democratic suggestion. Do you have any other thoughts?"

Any other thoughts...Frank thought that the rocket looked rather boring. If he was going to do this, at least he wanted to do it in style. Tell them you think it could look cooler, Frank.

"I think it can look cooler."

The three Company men all pretended to be surprised at one another when everybody knew they were just surprised at Frank. He proceeded cautiously.

"...Uh... It needs bigger tailfins, maybe. I mean she looks like a storming machine and all, a real chariot all right, but it

might look more, you know aerodynamic if the tailfins were bigger.”

Frank used both hands to gesture ‘bigger’.

“...Plus then it’ll really reinforce your brand. And it’ll look cooler, I think.”

He caught himself acting maybe a bit too comfortable for company and retreated.

“I mean I guess...I don’t know, you guys are the experts...”

“No please, go ahead,” Cigarette urged genuinely as he raised encouraging eyebrows toward Suit.

Frank brightened a shade and stood up to recommence gesturing.

“Okayy...” Frank paused to consider nodding affirmatively; then he gave himself the nod.

“OK. The tailfins make it look faster, even though it goes fast anyway I’m sure. Those long sleek lines curving outward smoothly so smoothly that you’d never expect the edges to be so sharp.”

Now Frank was really getting into it.

“...And the chrome: one well-placed strip is enough, you don’t want them to think you’re trying too hard. And, if you’re planning to make a show of this whole thing, you’ll definitely want it in color. White’s ok, but the sky’ll wash it out. They’d focus on the fire and not on the rocket. No you need it to be *stark*, a real bold color to get everyone excited. Something that’ll really blow their hair back and show them who’s boss. Like a nice Red.” Frank’s eyes widened for the last syllable. “..Red. On a rocket? No one would think of it. Real futuristic.”

The mid-morning sun shone a perfect spotlight on the four men in the hangar, and the air in that beam warmed up a touch.

“Red your favorite color?”

“On a car? No sir I like black personally. Black really lets that lacquer shine. So smooth you can see right through it to see the detail in what it’s made of. You’d never be able to count the number of iridescent flecks or flat, bold-colored flecks because they’re always changing with the light. Like stars, or people’s windows in the city from far away; all the little flecks of light come together in the acrylic to make the blackest, most intimidating black lacquer shine. And it bounces around the curvature of the chrome and reflects the sharpness of the fin’s edges back onto themselves infinitely. In a big black car you could be anybody, but you’d definitely be somebody. You could be a gangster or the President or just somebody who really knows the value of a good show, you know? A man who demands respect. An individual.”

“Oh I know alright, I know very well,” the suit began. They all looked genuinely surprised by Frank. They spent a good second analyzing Frank from top to toe, and then they made faces of moderate approval toward one another. Frank couldn’t tell if he blew the promotion or not, but either way he felt pretty cool, next to a rocket on the top of the AE building.

“Actually, to tell you the truth, maybe we underestimated you, Frank. Tell you what. Let’s leave the rocket science to the rocket scientists for a minute and grab a drink.”

Frank retired with the man in the suit back through the back door of the hangar to his cozy-yet-opulent office and seated himself in a leather lounge. The suit did the same.

“Whiskey?” Frank was asked.

“I probably shouldn’t if I’m flying, heh..”

“HA. Yes well, you know as a leader at this great Company I have a bit of power here, and I’m always on the lookout for new talent like yourself.”

“Thank you...and I know, this whole thing is great, and I’ll be able to afford some things I’ve been needing too. And that speech about being a hero for going into space - ”

“Son, some heroes are meant to go into space. Some heroes are meant to push buttons and pull levers but some of us - “ (he elevated his tumbler of Bellows) “ - heroes like you and I, Frank, we have the gifts of showmanship and salesmanship. That rocket there? You just sold me that rocket - and *I* already own it! HA. So maybe we did select you for a very special reason - ”

He touched his glass to Frank’s chest for a brief moment and pulled it back to his own.

“...But our Lord God works in mysterious ways they say, and maybe the special reason you answered that advertisement on this unusual day is because you saw an Opportunity to seize the career you’ve been preparing your whole life for. An opportunity to offer people the American Dream. A Car Salesman, Frank!”

“I don’t understand...”

“Forget about the rocket, we’ll just green screen that, like you cleverly suggested. George, that negro you used to work with, he’ll do just fine for the part. Better for you anyway, son. You do realize that we were going to pay you less than what you make on the line, right son?”

“Yes, I realize. I just thought maybe it would lead to something big, you know?”

“It has, Frank, this is it! Forget space! Your negro friend can have the rocket job and you can be dealing chariots by morning, everybody wins. Hell, you won’t just be selling them;

if you're good enough you can make enough commission to buy one of your very own someday soon!"

Buy one? Things went narrow and quiet for a moment in Frank's eyes and ears. Of my very own. He had never really considered it. Of course he really wanted one, I mean who wouldn't? I'm sure Peggy in Trim would be very impressed. Frank just never really thought of it - buying a car that is - as something that could ever actually happen to him. An orphan from the East Bay driving a La Plaza across the wide waterway to the City, leaving that ashy Victorian in its own dust? That was Hollywood stuff.

But Tom was right about mysterious ways, so with that infinite, consuming thought of driving his very own '57 La Plaza all the way to the other Coast, Frank poured himself a glass of whiskey and clinked it against Tom's. First thing tomorrow he'll take all the cash in the extra tobacco tin, pomade his hair very cool, and strut right into Capwell's to buy the blackest, smoothest, most official black suit on the rack. Then he'll get out there and sell some cars. That evening, from his bus seat he looked onto the broken down town against the sunset on the distant horizon, a girl on a neon sign winks at him from above a liquor store, over and over, until she fades out of view, each electric flirtation seeming sillier and more cynical than the last.

END

