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DESPITE BREAKING the land-speed record along Kingsway into Burnaby, Jack and Parm were still late getting to work. As soon as Val was parked and locked, they dashed across the asphalt towards the rear door of the Paradise Car Wash, hoping to get safely into the staff lounge before being spotted by their boss.

The staff lounge was actually a small, dingy kitchen and storage room lined with steel lockers and coat pegs. Jack and Parm quickly opened their lockers, removed their jackets and climbed into the faded orange coveralls that were the standard uniform of Paradise car wash attendants. On the back of each jumpsuit was a cheesy embroidered graphic of a yellow and purple sunset over tropical waters, with a motto that said, "Welcome to Paradise." Jack's jumpsuit always smelled like a cross between a dusty old tent and a moldy dishrag. Paradise needed a trip through the washing machine.

Parm and Jack rushed out to the front office and punched in. Parm tried to look casual while Jack frantically struggled to roll up the frayed pant cuffs of his coveralls.

"C'mon, you guys. Get going! You're fifteen minutes late...again!" The voice of Bill Ditklitch boomed from the doorway of his office, bouncing off the ceramic tile floor of the lobby. He had actually startled Jack, much to his delight and Jack's irritation.

"Sorry, Mister Ditch-Lick!" Parm shouted, grinning mischievously in Jack's direction. Over the past fourteen months, Parm had managed to convince his boss that he couldn't pronounce his last name properly, no matter how many times Bill patiently tried to correct him. Coming up with new deviations every week or so was one of Parm's few pleasures.

As he watched his two problem children scurry off to their duties, Bill Ditklitch, the Manager of the Paradise Car Wash, smiled to himself and hitched his pants up by the belt loops. He wasn't as upset as he had sounded about them coming in late. He enjoyed giving the boys a hard time for their small trespasses. They always worked hard and had reasonably good attitudes, so there was really no need for any reprimand. There were more important problems to attend to in his job.

Bill was forty-two, overweight and would be completely bald within five years. He had been with Paradise for over fifteen years, and although he hadn't originally planned to manage a car wash full of lazy, young hoodlums, he found that he enjoyed the place, the people, and the diverse challenges that the job brought to him every week. Bill hated inefficiency and wanted his staff and equipment to operate smoothly and without mistakes. After all these years, the Paradise still had a reputation for conveyor-line consistency and efficiency, which had translated into repeat customers. Happy, loyal, repeat customers.

Located along the edge of Kingsway, the Paradise Car Wash—flanked by a car dealership, a fitness center, numerous restaurants and a 7/11 convenience store—was quite a bizarre sight. Out front stood a large neon sign depicting palm trees and a setting sun from some cartoony tropical isle. The main building was a flat roofed, one-story structure covered in white stucco and large pieces of rough-hewn stone. It had a tall plate-glass window in front with the same setting sun and palm tree logo painted in gold and bright colours. Large, dusty wooden planters full of palm trees and exotic-looking plants crowded around outside the front door. In quieter moments, Bill wished that the lame-ass tropical theme would finally reach its ultimate conclusion. He imagined a chorus of dancers from the musical *South Pacific* cavorting through the lobby, waving their washrags over their heads, prompting him and his staff to burst into song in a perfectly synchronized Busby Berkley finale. Nobody except Bill's mother knew how much he loved flashy old Hollywood musicals. The Paradise was a relic of the 1950s, when businesses adopted garish themes to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Despite its outdated-theme-park status in the Greater Vancouver car wash industry, its retro

style and almost comical appearance continued to attract attention, and the quality of the car washes was well known around town.

Cars entered the Paradise from Kingsway on the right-hand side, lining up in two lanes. The front car in each lane was met by an attendant who greeted the customer, opened the car door to let them out, cleaned out any garbage and vacuumed the carpets and upholstery. The attendant then drove the car around a short turn until its nose lined up at the end of a conveyor – a large chain that looked like something you'd find on a giant's bicycle. The attendant then put the car into neutral and hooked the car to the conveyor with a small hooked chain. As the car was towed into the washing system, each wheel passed over special rollers, which, when pushed down by the weight of the car, spun rapidly while a brush jetting soapy water pushed up against it to scrub away dirt and grease.

Cars crept slowly along the line, passing under a wide spray of hot, soapy water, after which they were hand-washed by two attendants using sheepskin mitts fetched from large steel water troughs. The entire body of the car was scrubbed, rubbed, and wiped thoroughly by the attendants, front to back and top to bottom. The car then continued along to another hot water rinse, a jet wax sprayer (if the customer asked for it), followed by jets of hot air to dry the vehicle. Finally, as the car rolled out the end of the system, it was decoupled from the conveyor and wiped dry wherever necessary by two more attendants. It was then driven off to the front of the lobby entrance, where the customer's ticket was collected. There could be up to three cars "on the line" at any time, and from the initial vacuuming to the final drying, the whole process could be completed in about five minutes. It was like a giant alimentary canal, inhaling dirty cars in one end and emitting clean ones out the other. All in all, it seemed to be a very efficient operation.

Whenever a vehicle traveled through the system, one attendant always stayed inside to clean the interior glass, dashboard and other surfaces. This person was known as "the Insider." On some days, Jack did the hand washes, and at other times he wiped cars dry. He was told that, because of a need for cleanliness and an eye

for detail, only the senior attendants got to work as Insiders. Mac was senior, according to Bill, and had been an Insider for some time. Jack had only been at the Paradise for the past few months, so he was still considered the new kid on the line. Parm, who had originally helped Jack to get hired, expected to be made an Insider in the next few months. While the promotion to “Insider” did come with a small raise in pay and the privilege of staying relatively dry, Jack thought this use of seniority was stupid as hell for such a simple task as wiping down the insides of a car. All the same, as weak as it was, it was still probably the only incentive Bill had to slow down the regular turnover of his washing staff.

That morning, while working the car vacuum, Jack witnessed some strange events. As a large black Lincoln Continental cruised smoothly into the line, Jack greeted the driver. While he was vacuuming out the car, Bill trotted over, greeted the driver with an enthusiastic handshake and the two men walked over to the side of the building and started a discussion. The Lincoln owner was a fat, immaculately-dressed businessman with graying temples and two chins. From the way Bill treated him, he must have been very important. The custom license plate of the man’s big black car said “DAVE-1”. Jack briefly wondered who this Dave was, then shrugged the questions out of his mind and got back to work. He was just finishing vacuuming the foot carpets when Mac came over.

“I’ll take this one,” he told him. “You go do hand-washes with Parm for the rest of the morning, ’kay?”

“Okay, Mac,” Jack replied, noticing how intently Bill was now watching them. As he walked across to the side entrance, Jack snuck another glance at Bill and the businessman. The businessman was calmly asking Bill a question—something direct—and Bill, shirtsleeves rolled up and hands in his pockets, was rocking back and forth on his heels, which probably meant that he was considering his answer carefully.

Jack walked through the “Staff only” gate next to the side entrance and joined Parm at the stainless steel wash troughs. Whenever on the line, conversations between co-workers were usually next to impossible due to the music blaring over the P.A., the constant noise from the equipment and the loud hiss of the

pressurized water jets. To compensate for this, Parm and Jack had become proficient at a variety of simple hand gestures and pantomime in order to communicate with each other or to trade jokes. When no cars were coming through, it also provided Parm with a chance to practice his air guitar in an effort to crack up his friend. When he saw Jack enter the line, Parm launched into a full-tilt rendition of *Who Are You?* doing his best Pete Townshend windmill move using his water hose as a guitar. With each “Who are you?” from the P.A., he flung a rubber-gloved finger accusingly at Jack, flicking water as he lip-synced his way to fame and glory. Jack laughed and decided he would be Parm Townshend’s twin brother on air guitar but stopped when he saw the Lincoln Continental finally creep slowly towards them, ready for its luxurious hand-wash.

Seeing the Lincoln, Parm made an “I’m impressed” face and a thumbs-up gesture that communicated his approval of this car. Jack knew that Parm one day wanted to own a big car like this. He’d told Jack he wanted to be a businessman himself one day. Perhaps he planned to come back to the Paradise, take it over, give the employees all big fat raises, and then run the business into the ground so everyone would have to go and get better jobs.

As Jack scrubbed the windshield and side windows, he saw Mac inside the car wiping down the dashboard and steering wheel. Parm nodded urgently at Jack, hinting that he should look over his shoulder. Jack did and realized that Bill and the businessman were intently watching the progress of the Lincoln. Mac saw this, too, and spent a long time cleaning something under the driver’s seat. By this time, Jack had moved over to wash the roof and the rear passenger door behind the driver’s seat and could no longer see Mac’s movements inside the car. When he glanced over his shoulder again, he saw that Bill and the businessman had walked ahead into the lobby. By this time, Parm and Jack had finished washing the car and Jack watched the Lincoln disappear into the haze of the hot water rinsing jets.

After the Lincoln owner had paid and driven away, Bill motioned Mac into his office and closed the door. Jack looked at Parm, but Parm just shrugged. Something weird had just happened, and they had no idea what it was.

One-thirty finally came, and with it, a lull in the traffic—a good time to take lunch. Earlier, Parm had told Jack to skip his fifteen-minute morning coffee break so they could have forty-five minutes for lunch. “I gotta talk to you about something” was all that Parm would say.

With the requisite grunt of approval from Bill, they trotted over to the Kentucky Fried Chicken across the street. Even after months of working at the Paradise, Jack still felt self-conscious about wearing his “wash boy” jumpsuit outside the premises. The over-sized outfit hung on him loosely, and whenever the wind picked up, he felt like he was wearing a big orange parachute with the words “I’m a moron” emblazoned on the back.

After ordering Cokes, fries and chicken sandwiches, Parm and Jack plopped themselves down at an outdoor table. Parm emitted a loud “Aahhh!” and attacked his sandwich with a zeal that would put most German Shepherds to shame. Parm’s face told him that he was one carnivore who had earned his lunch break and was going to make the most of it. Jack closed his eyes and tilted his head up, allowing the hot midday sun to permeate his cheeks and eyelids. He took a deep, slightly polluted breath of air, and figured this moment of freedom was one of those “small blessings” that his father said he should try to appreciate. The front of the Paradise Car Wash glared at them garishly from across the street.

“So what’s up, Parm?” Jack finally asked. This was his chance to get carnivorous with his own chicken, which he did enthusiastically.

Parm forced himself to swallow a too-big bite. “Man,” he gasped, “I gotta tell you what I heard this morning. Harsh news, man.”

“What?” This sounded juicy.

“I overheard Mac in Bill’s office this morning. Mac was tellin’ Bill that he wanted to get out, to quit!”

Mac had worked at the Paradise for years and never appeared to have any problems with the job. In fact, Mac had been as close to a model employee as that place had ever deserved. Jack didn’t understand why he would give his notice so abruptly. He figured it wasn’t that bad a place to work. He himself was happy to be working steadily and even saving a little money.

“No way!” Jack replied. “Doesn’t Mac have a wife and kid? Why?”

“Hang on, there’s more. I heard Bill tell Mac that he needs him to stay on a bit longer. ‘Don’t do this to me, Mackie,’ he said. Sounded real concerned, like Mac was super important to him.”

“Geez, Parm, any jackass can wipe down the inside of a car! What’s the big deal?” It didn’t add up.

“So,” Parm continued, “Mac told Bill he didn’t care. He wasn’t even going to give his two weeks’ notice or anything. He was real pissed off about something. He said he’s starting a job downtown in a week, so he wanted to leave right away.”

“Hmmm... maybe he’s got a new job with better pay. I guess it wouldn’t be too hard to find a better paying job than this one, eh?” Jack smirked. Still, Mac was usually a very dependable and methodical guy. This was a pretty impulsive thing for him to do.

After swigging deeply on his Coke, Parm took another huge bite of his sandwich and continued talking as if he was being timed. “So later on, I cornered Mac in the staff room and asked him what happened. He said ‘Look Parm, you’re due to be an Insider next so you gotta know the real score.’ That really made me curious! I asked Mac if he’d had some trouble with Bill. He said he would be leaving at the end of the week and that Bill would be looking for a new guy to take over as Insider real soon. Mac told me that there’s extra work that Insiders can do. Night shifts and weekend hours, too. A lot of hours apparently.”

“Well,” Jack pondered, “it could just be some nighttime maintenance stuff, like that time I helped Bill replace some spray hoses and worked on the motor for the big chain. Paid me cash.”

“Naw, Mac said it’s not like that,” Parm replied. “Mac said that Bill had him running around town doing different things. He said that one time all he had to do was drive a bag over to some guy’s place at eleven-thirty at night.”

“What? A bag? What kind of bag? What was in it?”

“I don’t know. It was just like some old gym bag or something. He said he went to this guy’s house, put it on the back porch and just left. Weird, huh? And Mac said that another time he had to sit in his car next to some park and wait for this man to walk by,

and then phone Bill and say what the guy was wearing and what he was doing.”

“What’s up with that?” Jack asked in complete disbelief. “Is this gang stuff or what?” He was beginning to feel a little agitated.

“I don’t know.” Parm’s brow was wrinkled and he had fixed two deeply critical eyes on the building across the street. He was very suspicious of what he had heard. “Mac just told me that when he was made an Insider, he would get extra cash in his pay envelope whenever he did one of these “errands” for Bill.” Parm emphasized the word as if he had never used it before. “Cash,” Parm said with money-hungry eyes. “Lots of cash.”

“Well, I like the part about all the cash!” Jack said light-heartedly.

“Yeah, but check this out: Mac also said that Bill had sworn him to secrecy about all this stuff, and that he’d lose his job if he ever breathed a word about it to anyone else.”

“Christ.” Jack sighed, leaning back on his seat. Now the facade of the Paradise Car Wash seemed cold and remote. He had lost some of his appetite, preoccupied with nagging feelings of deceit and confusion. He remembered Bill’s intense interest in that black car when Mac was cleaning the inside of it, and wondered what the hell was going on between Mac and Bill.

A light gust of wind caused the paper wrapper from Jack’s sandwich to pirouette across the table. Shielding his eyes with his forearm, Jack squinted straight up and watched the last edge of the sun creep behind a large cloud.