Why We Were Arrested

by Kenton deAngeli

I understood what we needed to do as soon as she told me she had bought the van, big and white and without windows.

It was the beginning of my third month of unemployment, and the phone call had startled me from some stuporous midmorning reverie, my shoulders jerking up and my bathrobe creaking. I held the phone to my head and scratched at my stubble.

"Come over," I say. "I have an idea."

While I waited, I found a pair of pants and pulled on a shirt, and then, drawn by some momentum I thought I'd long ago forgotten, found myself shaving. I peered into the mirror, surprised by this unfamiliar person who had appeared from under the lather. My face looked naked. I brewed a pot of coffee and sat at the kitchen table, looking out of the window at my neighbors getting into their cars and driving to work, some of them even kissing their wives goodbye. I thought, “I could get used to this.”

Nearly 160 million children worldwide were already slaves to the economic system of global capitalism, and it was the fact that I had just purchased candy in bulk that made me certain. I'd been without a job for some time, and the prospect of participating in the modern economic landscape excited me.

A few hours later and we're cruising around downtown, already having dipped into the candy, our lips red with red 40 and high-fructose corn syrup, the windows down and soft warm fall air spilling in with each turn, both of us on the look-out for employees.

Callie tells me that multinational corporations have successfully pressured foreign governments to maintain relaxed labor laws by their willingness to move their factories to other countries at the first scent of union organization. She checks the lanes in the mirror and then continues. "The consideration of human labor in terms of use-value inevitable in capitalist thought” she says, sipping her coffee, “has caused human health to be given a

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monetary value which can be weighed against the potential profit of its exploitation."

I nod, buying her underlying reasoning but mostly just enjoying the feel of the sun on my arm dangling from the window, the wind warm on my face and the feeling of having something real to do. From the window I see a lawn full of old stuff and a hand-written sign. “Yard sale!” I yell, pointing frantically. Callie screeches to a stop and we find some curtains and an old water cooler. We load them into the van, satisfied that the universe, even, seems to be helping us with our plan.

Over the next week, I clean out my old basement. It is good, honest work. I move all the old junk to the side of the street, give the place a thorough cleaning, and then set to work. I fit a nice big work bench in the middle and surround it with folding metal chairs. I screw a nice new bulb into the bare socket overhead and hang some sheets in the corner around a few inflatable mattresses, creating a psychological divide between the sleeping and working spaces, which I've heard is important. When I'm finished, I call Callie over and we sip lattes and outline our business plan.

“We have a responsibility,” she says, “to enrich our local business community while delivering quality products to customers.” She had brought over some application forms for the Better Business Bureau, and we sit at the big table and fill them out, marking the boxes next to “manufacture/retail” and “locally owned.” We discuss suppliers and map out potential customers, paying attention to companies that practice sustainable production and have good humanitarian records. Afterwards, we have a small fashion show. She had brought me a nice new suit, my old one having far too many vague stains, and I put it on and strut about. “My years in Phi Beta Alpha really prepared me for the fast-paced boy's club of investment banking!”

She walks down the runway in a skirtsuit and I applaud. “The jacket says you're a no-nonsense negotiator,” I laugh, talking like the Home Shopping Network, “The skirt says, ‘but I'm still just a woman!'”

She giggles, and makes a comically vacant look. “I want people to know I'm professional,” she says, putting her finger to her lower lip, “but I need them to know they can still treat me like an object!”

We now have a fully-functional factory workspace / living quarters, complete with work benches and sleeping pallets, a small water cooler and a business plan. The bare concrete floor gave the whole scene an historical veracity, I felt. I was glad I hadn't bought the throw rug I was considering at the yard sale.

Every morning we hop into the van and make our rounds, dipping into the candy supply and nominally looking for children to kidnap but really I'm just glad to get out of the house. For the past three months I hadn't known what to do: I couldn't bear to enter the workforce, all corporate loyalty and spending weekends with the co-workers, hoping the main office will transfer someone attractive into your department so you can while away the time with flirting and eventually get married, like giving up. But what else could I do? I had an art degree.

Callie was much more functional in society, successfully holding down a job at a small law firm. She didn't need to do this with me, but I liked that she had. Her family and employers considered her a model citizen but underneath I guess she was something like a sleeper agent, concealing her love of chaos and destruction with carefully-constructed business casual disguise, waiting for the right time to strike. I asked her why and she smiled, a nice devil's grin.

“Where else am I going to have this much fun?”

And then we found our first employee. He fell into our laps. We weren't even trying; we had stopped the van near a park to buy water and lounge against the van, our mouths sticky with candy.

A young boy approached, eyeing the bag from which we were eating. It was easier than I had thought, to make the transition, from him outside of the van interested in our candy to him inside the van, his mouth full of candy, his hands on the back of our seats, pointing excitedly at the city seen from an elevated van

window. When asked, he politely held out his hand and introduced himself as Jorge.

We took him to the basement, and Jorge seemed pleased. He was amazed with the sewing machine. He appreciated the effect of the curtains in creating a perceived difference between the workspace and the sleeping quarters. He didn't seem to care if he saw his family again or not. He was perfect. We played hide-and-seek with the work table for a while, then I decided it was time to get to work.

Callie had gone to fashion school at some point in her past. She had designed several pairs of sneakers, delighted to find an application for her degree. She showed Jorge how to cut leather, where to lay out the pieces, how to make a neat stitch. His eyes serious, he followed her instruction closely, mimicking the motion of her fingers with his own. After a few hours, he was sewing away like a natural, as if he were from Bangladesh or India with a couple years under his belt and a contract as a supplier to Wal-Mart, not from right down the block. It was a nice scene, like from a public service announcement, this serious career woman teaching an underprivileged youth a marketable craft.

I brought down some lemonade and we surveyed our means of production, the three of us smiling satisfied smiles. Under the small, dirty window through which wan light leaked into the concrete room, I had placed a poster of a cat hanging off a branch, right above the phrase, "Hang in there!"

We raise our lemonade glasses, a toast to our new venture, and things got underway. Every morning I woke up and received deliveries from materials suppliers. I brewed a large pot of coffee and got the morning paper, waving to my neighbors on their way to work. They weren't as excited as I was, but they didn't yet know that I was now one of them. “Hey Tom!” I would yell as a car passed, “how about that neighborhood watch meeting, ha ha!” I made breakfast, enough for me and Callie and Jorge, and by the time I served it she was arriving, with lists of retailers we could sell to

and refinements to the shoe designs. I bought chocolate milk by the gallon because Jorge loved to drink it with breakfast.

By the end of the week it feels like we'd been doing this forever. Callie designs shoes, Jorge makes them, and I put on my nice suit and sell them. I stand up straighter and smile at passers-by when I walk. I shave every morning, and it feels great. After graduating from art school, I had despaired of ever entering society in a useful sense, yet here I was, with my own factory and a worker, and the whole global market of commodity exchange to explore.

I feel a bit like Tyler Durden, leaning up against the counters of local boutiques, all cool, selling our shoes at steep, steep profit, my very presence a commentary on the grisly underbelly of post-modern consumer society, or the commodification of masculinity, or what was that movie about?

At night, I roll up my sleeves and attend to business matters, balancing the ledger, ordering raw supplies, sending out invoices. Sometimes I consider what it would have been like to major in business, or accounting. There is a particular methodical satisfaction in the procession of naked numbers down the page, in orderly rows; how they combine and subtract, how gradually they seem to take on a large shape in your head, so the feeling of commerce, of profit and expense, of manufacture and labor, becomes a low thrum that blends in with the thrum of my own heart, my own blood, familiar and warm.

I'm sure this visualization results in some pretty inaccurate calculations in terms of our accounts, but we're beginning to make a lot of money, and precision doesn't really matter.

One day Callie returns with Mina, a quiet, young girl with a red bow in her black hair, and our workforce doubles.

"She's my niece," Callie explains. "My sister's out of town for the week and asked me to take care of her."

Jorge is the littlest gentleman, and wastes no time in making Mina feel welcome. She watches him speak, her eyes large and dark. He shows her around and we say our goodbyes and leave

them in the basement for the night, already building a small fort from our raw materials.

Mina and Jorge get along well. Hard workers, both, they get up early with smiles on their faces and take real pride in what they're doing. Meanwhile, we show up at local boutiques, our faces beaming.

"How did you manage such delicate stitching?" they always ask. "You can't find this on any other locally-made shoes. Almost Nike quality!"

We smile, keeping our secret. As the process stabilizes, and our savings gradually increase, we think: what else?

At night we gather around the fireplace and it almost feels like a family, a real family, like I've seen on television, everyone getting along and no simmering resentments or ugly fights or an impending divorce, just light comedy and short story arcs. I almost want to comically mess up dinner, only to have Callie swoop in and fix everything, laughing at my bumbling, loving incompetence, the kids somewhere offscreen rolling their eyes.

It felt good to relate to society at large in a way that was understandable to both parties. We were vendors, and they purchasers, as opposed to whatever relational limbo an unemployed artist without a tangible craft inhabits. Even jailed, if we happened to be caught, we would at least be a sensical part of society; we would understand our role, the people around us would understand our role.

I think I was half-hoping to get arrested, just so I would know where I stood, instead of attempting to explain to suspicious strangers the importance of performance art in engaging our assumptions of the world around us and not quite knowing myself.

As it was, we were stopped short by the beauty and ease with which we had become part of a global structure, a vast and beautiful multi-tendrilled organism that reached out and connected us with electric fingertips to the living breathing evergrowing everspending pulse of the world itself. At the rate we were growing, we would have to start ordering our raw materials from China, from

Taiwan, Pakistan, India. Soon our shoes would be shipped across the country on trucks, on trains, some sent overseas inside large cargo boats, flown over oceans. We could be a hub at which Indian rubber and Pakistani foam padding came together peacefully, at which China and Taiwan unknowingly arrived at comfortable arch-supporting coexistence. I always liked talking about making a change in the world, but to be actively participating like this made me understand why people were so dedicated to their jobs, because it all felt like a big, beautiful family, everyone putting aside their differences and labor regulations and just getting along.

I explain these ideas to the kids with magic markers and some graphing software, and after that they ask for the destination of each package excitedly, eyes growing as we mailed shipments farther and farther away, fascinated at the places their work will travel, the different people that will wear them, the different lives they will become a part of. “Once we break into the international market, I say hilariously, “in some of these places this sort of operation is almost entirely ignored by both local and international law enforcement!”

In the evenings we all gather upstairs, usually with hot chocolate, and I tell a bedtime story. Jorge and Mina sit at Callie's feet, her high-heels off, and I sit in an old lazy boy. Jorge listens seriously, his back straight, and Mina closes her eyes and rests her head on Callie's knees. Jorge likes superheroes and Mina likes poodles, so every night I loosen my tie and relate another installment of Poodle Man: the superhero who was distracted by dog treats. Poodle Man once again thwarts the evil sous-chef who has pledged to destroy the town and I make a silent apology to my ancestors who practiced the oral tradition.

Mina has wide, dark eyes, and sometimes asks questions I don't quite know how to answer, like, “Why do people live longer than dogs,” or, “What happens when there are too many people on the Earth,” or “How do you know if you like a boy?” When she asks these questions, I direct her to Aunt Callie, who is always ready with an answer.

“Do you think Mina likes Jorge?” I ask Callie. It's morning, and I have just brewed a pot of coffee. Mina is leaving in two days, and I worry she's grown attached to him.

“It's just puppy love,” she says.

“How will we keep up this level of production when Mina leaves?” I ask the question we'd been thinking about all week. Mina had doubled our output, and our customers still wanted more. “We don't want to Jorge to pick up all the slack. He's working too much as it is.” We look at each other in the kitchen. We call out, “be back soon, kids!” We go get the van.

We find Chris. He is in a park, throwing a ball for a dog that is not his. He doesn't want to talk to us but we tell him we have a Playstation so he gets into the van. When we introduce him to Jorge and Mina, it is clear he has not been taught manners by his parents.

“Where's the Playstation?” he yells. Jorge tries to show him how to make patterns and he knocks the sewing machine onto the floor. We decide it's time for a break and retreat upstairs, leaving the children to get to know each other.

“I don't know if Chris is going to work out,” I say.

“Give it some time,” Callie says, “some people take longer to adjust.”

I make dinner, macaroni and cheese, and Chris pouts. He won't eat, and instead throws his plate on the floor. When we gather for story time, he won't let me finish, and insists that Batman could kick Poodle Man's ass. Chris is a complainer. We decide to put everyone to bed and figure it out in the morning.

That night, there is a soft knock on my door. Sleepy, I open it to find Mina standing there quietly.

“Chris is gone,” she says.

“Oh shit,” I say.

Callie and I put a sleepy Jorge and Mina into the van and careen out onto the street, yelling from the windows. He could be anywhere, and it's dangerous for a child to be wandering around at this time of night, no matter what neighborhood it is. My suburbs

seem innocuous, but this evening I suspect these wholesome-looking business people of being the worst kind of villains.

"Where could he have gone?" I say, looking into the night, my hands gripping the steering wheel. Callie has her head out the window. "Turn there," she says, flinging her hand out. I begin to worry. Chris wasn't the most pleasant child, but I didn't want anything bad to happen to him. How could my attempt to enrich the world have gone so wrong? I begin to doubt that anything I'd been doing had been helping anything, that the little utopia I'd constructed of international amity and sharing had been nothing more than a naive hope. We needed a larger factory, an outsourced employee pool, middle-managers. We hadn't even chatted around the water cooler, not once. I regretted everything we failed to do in our pride.

But then, Callie found him. "There!" she yelled. We pulled up to the house the yard sale had been at. There was Chris, talking to some adults. I get out of the van with Jorge. "Chris!" I said. "Don't talk to strangers!" The adults move protectively in front of Chris.

"We're his parents," the man says. "We've called the cops."

"Shit," I say, for the second time that night.

I envision running back to the van and speeding off, escaping with Jorge and Mina and Callie and hiding out someplace in the woods, maybe. We forage for food and I tell Poodle Man stories every night. We stay together and in the evenings we laugh on the porch and watch the setting sun, so happy to be surrounded by the people we've grown to love. Eventually, when the heat dies down, we go back into business and get incorporated and exempt from labor laws, or we travel the world together, having unlikely adventures and solving mysteries. I wonder if there was ever any other option for me, who could never stomach what seemed to make other people successful, selling your soul for something you didn't believe in, or driving to work every morning, wondering why you never became an

astronaut. “Run,” I tell Callie. “Get out of here. Take Mina and get out of here.”

“What about you?” she said, putting the van into gear. She doesn't give me time to answer. I stand there on the lawn while the cops pull up. As they drive me away, Jorge waves sadly. I wave back.