**Oscar´s Two Dollars an Hour**

*Jeff Lee*

¨Hey Lee,” rumbled down the long, dull halls of the Denver Federal Center. A big voice, yes. A big, odd, and impossible to ignore noise. I listened. My name was Lee, but it wasn´t about me at all.

It came from a rolling heap, a lumbering shambling presence, almost comical but with unignorable power that came from his shear size. Oscar was maybe 290 pounds, not especially tall, fat. Unbuttoned giant sloppy shirt over a stained T, jeans made from tent patterns and untied Keds dragging dangerously along.

He didn´t standout except for the voice, ingratiating with a bit of menace. We were all kind of shabby, a night crew thrown together for a subcontract to wax acres of federal office building floors. Six-to-two five nights a week for maybe two or three months. Two dollars an hour, a lot in 1966. You could live on it. For awhile.

Oscar was yelling to Lee, the main man among us. Not a boss or a leader, just a gifted stud. Our Leroy Brown, “badest man in the whole damn town.” But he wasn´t. Sure he was six four, 240 with biceps and pecks like a ´roided-out Greek statute.

But he didn´t threaten. Didn´t need to maybe. He didn´t demand or ever raise his voice. Things just came to him. Including Oscar who wanted to be his man, his second, his buddy who might want to be dangerous and admired too.

There was some vague shapeup with crews a half dozen or so of selecting themselves. Ours was just an accident, whoever was left standing around that no other crew picked up.

Me, Oscar, Lee, Jesus, Angel and Rummy. Angel and Jesus were just alike, about five three, chunky fireplugs. They married sisters and shared a mother-law-in who let them know she didn´t think they were quite good enough for her daughters.

Together they moved a hell of a lot of heavy desks and file cabinets every night. Perfectly matched short steps and arm and shoulder strength that lasted all night. They had day jobs too, 40 hours a week—moving furniture. At breaks they talked about family, birthdays, jealousies, arguments, and their plans. They kept to themselves unless you asked. They

pretty much thought we were all full of shit.

Rummy wore old shinny dress pants and shirts and shoes from Goodwill. Sometimes he showed up with the shakes. An alky, maybe 60 something, but mostly he showed up and was quietly ineffective.

I was a skinny 20-year-old working to pay for a sophomore year in college. I had an older girl friend on the pill and was getting laid. I thought I was an adult. We all got these jobs out of the newspaper or from someone who told us about them. There were 80 or 100 of us, mostly black, maybe a third women. Most had other jobs, I am pretty sure.

The drill was: clear out the office furniture; thrown down very hot striper water to take off the old wax; pick up the mess with mops; let the floor dry, spread new wax with a clean mop, shine it with a heavy hard-to-control electric buffer and put back the desks, cabinets, and chairs.

Jesus and Angel did most of the lifting with Rummy, me and Oscar doing the rest but much more clumsily. Lee smoked quite a bit--shitty, nasty, little, plastic-tipped cigars. We shared this. I had a rum-soaked-tip cigar habit from the summer before when I almost flunked out playing gin rummy, drinking cheap cognac, and smoking.

Lee put down the stripper sometimes and almost always applied the new wax. He had an odd little step doing it, almost like a dance, a feminine dance nobody talked about.

Oscar and Lee talked about money and women mostly. It was one-sided. “Oscaa,” Lee called him drawing out the sound to kind of make clear fun of him. Oscar didn´t care. He was talking with the main man.

Oscar was just big and sloppy. Everyone saw it. One night he turned over a whole bucket of dirty water just leaning too much on the wringer lever, something impossible for others to do.

“You see that big-ass wooman last night?” Oscar says to Lee once. “I knows you like dem big booties don´t cha.”

“I see her,” says Lee. He´s got a tiny voice, high pitched. It didn´t fit him like the waxing dance. It didn´t matter. Everyone thought he was the man, and if they didn´t, they said shit about it.

I knew who Oscar was talking about. Everyone did. She was the Lee of the women on contract. Pretty, talked smart, I mean tough but intelligent. She had a daughter somewhere. I think she may have even showed up at the job for a week or so to pick up some money. The woman had a family.

“What you doin´ here?” she asks me once when she caught be looking at her butt in a hallway.

“Two dollars an hour,” I say.

“You make more ´n nat anywhere,” she says. Her all-women crew laughing about the dumb white boy so lowdown.

“No, I can´t,” I said. “This is good money to me.”

“Well, I guess so,” she says and her crew crackles away again—not real mean, just the way it was. We all laughed.

We had these bullshit whole-crew meetings sometimes when the contractor boss told us something or other like we were not careful enough with wastebaskets or we would have to work faster to fill the contract. We didn´t care.

At one of these big meets a skinny black guy from another crew runs his mop bucket into mine. It wasn´t an accident, just something he knew he could get away with. So, I had to run my bucket back into his. His crew sees it. Trouble is coming everybody hopes. Lee is 30 feet away. He makes a noise sucking on his teeth. We all know what it means and head back to work.

“So got that young little girl wit you,” Oscar says to Lee one night.

“I got her.”

“She be a young one, huh. She look young. How old? 15?”

“Less dan dat,” says Lee.

“Where she be from? Not round here.”

“I bring her up from Alabama,” says Lee. “She make me a lot of money. A lot of money.”

“How much?” asks Oscar.

“Oscaa, you couldn´t afford it.”

“I spose you right,” he says. “I can dream about it.”

“Might cost you too,” says Lee. Oscar chuckles nervously.

We all go home at 2 a.m. Many like Jesus and Angel get up at 7 for their real jobs. I drive a beat-up old Allstate scooter my mother´s wonderful, heavy-drinking looney boyfriend gave me. The kick starter doesn´t work. I have to put it in second gear, run it ten yards and pop the clutch. Often it doesn´t kickover even then and sometimes the second time either. It is summer in Denver. It is warm. The stars are out. I don´t care. It is six miles back. I don´t care. I have a girlfriend. The scooter mostly starts by the third time.

So the contract is coming to an end. The work wasn´t really that necessary anyway, a budget item no one bothered to change. The money will end for most of us. They pick a skeleton crew to finish up. Lee, our worst worker, is, of course, on it.

One of the last nights Oscar strides in with a shit-eating grin on his face. We all see it. He strides in like a bunch of starched rags.

“Oh I had me a goood time last night,” he says.

“Good fo you, Oscaa,” say Lee. “This be the last pay day fo you.”

“It be wort it,” says Oscar and ambles off knowing little work will be done this last night.

“Come on yere,” says Lee gathering the rest of us all around. He pulls out his wallet. “Dis be Oscaa´s sixty dollas,” he says waving the cash. “He give it dat big-ass wooman. She give it me.”

None of us doubt it. But we don´t have the glee Lee does. Oscar comes back before we all leave, and we all watch Lee joke about him to his face.

The scooter starts the first time that night. Why did he have to do Oscar that way? He couldn´t just take the money. Why not just take the money. We share two months together, and he has to do that. I never go back, never forget, and never know what to make of it.