

REALISM

POE BALLANTINE



AMANDA PARALEE HART

— for Rhonda and Kate

Speak the truth with one foot in the stirrup.

— Arabian proverb

For about ten months I worked at a radio-antenna factory in the tiny town of Hays, Kansas. The factory workforce was comprised mainly of the inexperienced, the handicapped, the socially discarded, the desperate, the just-out-of-jail, and the fallen-to-the-bottom-of-the-ladder, with a handful of cheer-

ful, non-English-speaking Mexicans thrown in. The starting wage was fifteen cents above the minimum. The work was monotonous but undemanding. The average employee lasted probably two weeks.

I was recovering from a nervous breakdown, or whatever you call it when you realize you are a complete failure and you fall down crying and can't get back up again. The compactness and simplicity of my room at the Sunset Motel reassured me. I had my ritual. I was not interested in traveling. (I had lived a nomadic existence for years.) Nor was I interested in being

worldly, or in finding the answers to deep questions. I felt lucky to still have my independence and my health. I read the Bible every night because it gave me comfort and because all the writers I admired read the Bible, and I wanted to be a successful writer.

I was reasonably content at the radio-antenna factory. I appreciated the sameness of the days, the lightness of the tasks, the proximity to the motel. (I had no car.) And I had weekends off to write. I worked in the welding department, where we sanded, machined, and “straked” — wrapped wire braids around — mast antennas for Ford, GM, and Chrysler. I watched other employees come and go. Our department received at least one fresh applicant a week. Sometimes the new guy didn’t even finish a shift. The factory was gritty and loud. The owner treated us like children, touring the floor daily to point out our shortcomings, or else his voice came over the PA to inform us that we were not meeting our quota, or that a holiday would have to be suspended due to a deficit in production. Once, he announced, without irony, that we would no longer be able to listen to our radios. Whenever a healthy adult male reported for his first day of work, I wondered what kind of trouble he was running from. Four of the healthy adult males on our line had weekly appointments with parole officers.

When Russ from Topeka showed up, I estimated he would last two days. He had the face of a heavily tranquilized mule, black plastic-framed glasses (which kept sliding down his nose), a neatly trimmed mustache, and a slope-shouldered stance, palms turned back. Mike the foreman let him weld for a couple of hours, saw that he had no aptitude, and put him on the rod machine next to mine.

I showed Russ how the machine worked: place ball tip on end of rod, slot base plug into chuck, drop rod between hydraulic clamps, press buttons, *whoosh-thump*: machined car antenna. I explained that he would eventually be expected to produce four hundred antennas per hour. (Five hundred was the official quota, but only a showoff could keep up that pace.)

“Piece of cake,” Russ said.

“What brought you to Hays all the way from Topeka?” I asked.

“Got mangled in a bicycle wreck,” he replied. “Four hundred stitches. Mashed up my head pretty good.” He grinned.

I didn’t know what a bicycle accident had to do with moving to Hays, but I didn’t pursue it. Clearly something was wrong with him. He had the thick, slurred speech of the mildly brain-damaged. A vague jigsaw pattern of scars covered his face, as if he’d recently undergone dramatic but unsuccessful plastic surgery. He flashed a slightly crooked, incongruous, but pleasant smile. He said he was thirty-two years old. As he assembled antennas, his gaze wandered around the factory. The three of us who worked the rod machines had trouble conversing because of the mandatory earplugs and the endless *whoosh-thump* (four hundred an hour, times three) of our machines, but Russ lifted his voice over the racket to narrate a barely coherent account of how he and his cousins, whom he was living with, had videotaped their own version of *Home Improvement*

in their basement the night before. “It was funnier than hell,” he shouted, taking his hands off the machine and sticking his finger up his nose, apparently to illustrate one of the funnier parts.

Kathy, the spot-welder to my left, turned from her magnifying glass and gave me a look that said: *Where did this goof-ball come from?* Because there was already a Russ on our line, the new Russ instantly became “Home Improvement.” Home Improvement produced about twenty-five antennas in his first hour, half of them without ball tips.

“This is pretty easy,” he said.

“Try to put ball tips on the ends,” I said. “Some people are picky about that kind of thing.”

He smiled good-naturedly and began to list and summarize the plots of all the science-fiction videos he’d watched over the past week with his cousins. “I like to escape,” he explained. “I have enough realism in my life.”

Russ and I had lunch together at a picnic table. It seemed I always bonded with the new guy, perhaps because after more than sixty jobs and at least a hundred moves — all in pursuit of the writing dream — I knew all too well what it was like to be the new guy. For lunch, Russ had brought a half pound of baby carrots (one of his cousins ate a pound a day, he told me), an apple, and a cola. I learned that his driver’s license had been revoked for multiple drunk-driving violations. He alluded to a wild past and a romantic life of drifting from town to town. As he answered my questions, I got the impression he would say whatever he thought might impress his listener.

“I’m trying to get over being callous and cold,” he said, lifting his scar-paneled face to mine, as if he were James Dean enduring the burden of misunderstood greatness. “That’s what they call me.”

“Why do they call you that?”

He shrugged and popped another baby carrot into his mouth. “I used to drink three or four cases of beer a day.”

“That’s about a can every ten minutes,” I observed.

“I had help,” he said. “My friends would come over.”

“It’s good to have friends.”

He nodded, the slightest flicker of doubt (fear?) in his eyes. “My ex-wife was a stripper,” he said. Then he added, with moral sobriety: “She quit dancing six months after we got married, but she’s still suffering the effects.”

“You got kids?” I asked.

“Two,” he answered, “and two from her previous marriage.”

“How old?”

“Six and eight. I don’t remember how old hers are.”

“What are you doing working for minimum wage if you have two children to support?”

“It’s an easy job to get,” he said.

“How do you make ends meet?”

“I’ve got another job. I’m painting my cousins’ house. I’m a painter by trade.”

The next day at lunch Russ bought a bag of Bugles and a Pepsi from the snack machine. All morning, while he’d worked, he had daydreamed aloud about getting his driver’s license back.

His life seemed to revolve around this event, which was more than a year away. Once he got his license back, he would get a car, and probably a trailer, too; he planned to be mobile for the next two years. Also, he thought he might buy a house — a big place, two bedrooms at least, so his kids could stay with him. A minute later he was going to rent a small apartment so he could save some money. I wondered if his short-term memory had suffered the most damage.

“It won’t be long,” he said, “before the court puts a 55 percent child-support garnishment on my paycheck.”

“Seems like it would be cheaper just to stay married.”

“Too late,” he said. “Can I borrow a cigarette?” He leaned back against the picnic table, lit the cigarette, and began to muse on romance. “Got a girl coming to see me this weekend from Topeka. Think I just might buy me a Harley-Davidson.”

The next day Russ announced proudly: “I haven’t had a drink for two years, nineteen days.”

“Congratulations,” I said.

“God is the answer,” he said earnestly.

Half an hour later, Russ asked if I wanted to go out after work for a beer.

“Can’t,” I said. “Have to work.”

“On what?”

“I write.”

“Oh? What kind of stuff?”

“True-life,” I said.

“I like realism,” he said. “Will you write a book for me? I’ll pay you.”

“A book on what?”

“My testimony.” He gave me his quick-flash smile. “But I’m afraid you’d see who I was and say, ‘Whoa.’”

“The more *whoas*, the better the book,” I said.

“I like to live on the edge,” Russ said.

Russ couldn’t remember anyone’s name except mine and the foreman’s. He slunk around in his James Dean fog, parroting the tired lines of the day. (“Been there, done that.”) His co-workers weren’t even remotely interested. He never machined more than 150 rods an hour. Often he was not putting on ball tips. “They can’t expect speed *and* quality,” he said indignantly.

After two weeks, Russ was transferred to a less-demanding department, the mercury-lamp line. At lunch, in between clichés, he told me he didn’t think he would be able to stay on the new line. “There’s too much jumping around,” he said. “I need to *relax* while I work. Like on the rod machine.”

Though everyone else instinctively wrote Russ off, I continued to give him the benefit of the doubt. I had known a few other head-injury cases. In every instance, the before and after were two different people. A self had to be rebuilt from scraps, sometimes from smoke and mist. I wondered: What if you started with the wrong part? What if the very foundation of your existence was a lie? How would you ever know? Russ, I suspected, had not always been a drifting, sleazy cliché monger. The real Russ was down there somewhere, like a man trapped in a collapsed mine. I thought I could see him struggling to get out while the crazed, bogus Russ prattled heedlessly on.

I had been obliterated by fate myself. I was forty-two, and

all I had to show for my years of privation, hard work, and anonymity were more privation, hard work, and anonymity. I wanted to write something true. I had ridden my Big White Steed of Truth into the craven world and been knocked face first into the mud. After wandering around sobbing and rearranging the letters S-U-I-C-I-D-E for a year and a half, I’d landed in that motel room, where I sat with the curtains closed, underlining passages in the Bible, two rejection slips waiting for me in my post-office box. The writing dream was dust. Mystery had supplanted truth as my religion.

I once read an interview with Kurt Vonnegut in which he talked of his disenchantment with scientific truth because “we dropped [it] on Hiroshima.” Vonnegut’s metaphor is apt: The truth is no flickering Hawaiian lantern. It is searing white light. It scorches roaches and saints alike. It can flash a liar to cinders and in the same stroke smoke the poor bozo next to him who all the while thought that God was on his side.

Having no real acquaintance with reality, Russ did not fear the truth. He talked about God, church, and family, misquoting the Bible and fumbling Republican TV sound bites. Undaunted by any question, he possessed that special brand of liquid ignorance that covered every subject like a high-tech fertilizer. He educated our co-worker Pock — a Buddhist welder from Thailand — about Thai culture. (Russ had once had a Thai girlfriend.) He told a group of us how someone had once tried to rob him with a 9mm, but Russ had whirled on the mugger, grabbed the gun, and shot him in the leg. (He later pawned the gun for fifty dollars.) He was embarrassing to listen to. Was it possible that he thought everyone was as insincere and ignorant as he? I didn’t know what, if anything, about him was true.

(end of excerpt)