

# ANOTHER SHOT OF THE GOOD STUFF



STORIES BY  
**SEAN CARSWELL**

# Framing Invasion

Barney pulled into John Reese Ford and I knew we were all gonna end up in jail.

It was my fault. Drew sat in the middle of the bench seat, between Barney and me. His hands were on the dash board and he rocked back and forth, saying, "Let's do this! Let's do this!" We were all pretty drunk.

Barney said, "Sean, you take Drew and cover the north side of the lot. Steven and I will take the south side. You know what to do."

I did. Barney, Drew, and I jumped out of the cab of the truck, Steven jumped out of the bed. We split up into groups of two, just like Barney told us to.

I walked up to the first car salesman I saw. I walked slow, cool, like I might buy a car that night. A Ford. A John Reese Ford. I tried to sell my walk, even with my stagger and my blood-shot eyes and the sawdust in my greasy hair. Even with Drew stumbling along two steps behind me. I walked right up to that car salesman. He smiled as if to say something, but before a word could slip out of his mouth, I screamed at him, "Bar!Ney's!Crew!"

This stunned the salesman. He got that unmistakable look like he didn't know whether to shit or go blind. I yelled it again, "Bar!Ney's!Crew! You need a house?! We build houses! A dollar thirty-three a square foot!"

I didn't have to look behind me to know that, as soon as I paused, Drew would yell, "A dollar thirty-three a square foot!"

Our timing was on. We'd practiced this a long time. I never thought we'd put all of our practice into play, but there's a

time for everything and now was our time. I yelled out, "You want gables?!"

Drew yelled, "We build 'em!"

I yelled, "Vaulted ceilings?!"

Drew: "We vault 'em!"

Me: "Custom homes?!"

Drew: "We throw 'em up!"

Me: "Crappy homes!"

Drew: "We tear 'em down!"

Me: "Bar!Ney's!Crew!"

Drew, about to pop a vessel: "We build houses strong!"

"Strong!"

"Strong!"

By now I could feel all the blood in my face. My throat was ripped dry in that way it gets after a dozen beers and a lot of yelling. The smallest bubble of spit balanced on the stubby little salesman's forehead. He still hadn't shat or gone blind. He hadn't done anything but stare at Drew and me, trying to figure this scenario into his reality. As soon as we paused from our screaming, the salesman turned and ran for the offices of John Reese Ford.

I looked around the car lot for another salesman to yell at. Barney and Steven had cornered another salesman over by the Expeditions and yelled the same bit at him. All the other salesman had sought shelter under the overhang in front of the offices. I turned to Drew and said, "I'll take 'em all on."

"Fuckin' A," Drew said, and we headed over to the line of car salesman. Two drunk carpenters ready to battle an army of white starched shirts and suspenders and slacks. All the combovers in the world couldn't save them. I started running. Drew followed. As soon as I got within shouting distance, I started yelling, "Bar!Ney's!Crew! Bar!Ney's!Crew!"

Through the window, I saw a receptionist eyeing me and dialing a phone. I hoped she was calling John Reese. That guy was our nemesis even if he didn't know us. He was the one we were after. His salesman were just the soldiers we had to fight through. I kept my eye on the receptionist and a brief moment of

clarity hit me and I knew she was calling the cops and I realized how ridiculous the whole situation was, but I still kept screaming, "We build houses strong! Strong! Strong!"

Like I said, the attack was my fault, but Barney was our leader and Barney led us into it. We were, after all, Barney's crew. He was the guy who hired rag-tag drunks like me and Drew and made carpenters out of us. Before working for Barney, I'd kicked around on probably a dozen or so framing crews. We mostly built track homes, the same four floorplans over and over, and each guy on the crew worked his own spot like an assembly line. Over the course of the years, I'd worked each spot on the assembly line, from laying out the plates to drying in the roof to building soffits and arches and vaults. I never considered myself a carpenter, or even a framer. It was just something I did.

Then I started working for Barney.

Barney loved being a framing carpenter. He loved everything about it. He loved the dew that settled on the stack of two-by-fours in the morning. He loved the smell of a skillsaw burning through yellow pine when he cut the tails off trusses. He loved his twenty-eight ounce waffle-head, hatched-backed hammer and the way it could sink a nail in two hits: set and drive. He loved the way the shadow of his tool belt looked on the rest of his shadow when he stood on a roof and looked down to the ground. He loved the sun and the sweat and the sawdust in his lungs. And his love was infectious. From the first day I worked for Barney, I realized that he was more than building a house, he was sculpting a work of art out of wood and nails and Tyvek. It was impossible to understand this and not participate in the sculpture. It was like we were building Michelangelo's "David," and the last thing I wanted to do was tack on a sixth toe.

So I stuck it out with Barney. I learned a lot about building a house. Carpentry stopped being what I did and became what I was. I even started to enjoy it. My only knock was the radio.

Barney loved classic rock, and classic rock torments me. We'd listen to the radio all day, and every day, it played the same

songs and the same commercials. I don't even think they had a DJ. I think it was just one, twenty-four-hour-long recording. When you heard, "Dust in the Wind," it meant lunch time was ten minutes away. Led Zeppelin's "Rock and Roll" meant that we were five minutes from quitting time. Even quitting time couldn't make me happy to hear Led Zeppelin again.

I started to obsess on the radio. I felt like listening to these songs was the same as watching a clock, counting down the minutes and hours of my days with each familiar drum beat, with each played out guitar solo. These songs were a way of slipping into a time warp, where weeks blended into years so mindlessly that you didn't even notice that your life had slid into a meaningless void.

At times, I wanted to bust open that fucking radio. I read Barney's blueprint on life instead, though. I took something that I couldn't avoid and made it my own. I started singing along to all the songs, only adding my own words. It was benign at first. Since we worked with a guy named Drew, I started by changing every "you" to "Drew." So when U2 would sing, "All I want is you," I'd sing "All I want is Drew." When the Stones came on, I sang, "Drew can't always get what he wants." When Bachman Turner Overdrive's one hit song played, I'd sing "D-D-D-Drew ain't seen n-n-n-nothing yet," complete with stutter. And so on. Classic rock was full of Drews.

From there, I built up my repertoire. I turned "Addicted to Love" into "A Dickhead to Rub." The Boss's "Hungry Heart" became Drew's "Rumbly Fart." There was really no end to it. I even made fun of bands I liked, like the Clash, by changing "Should I stay or should I go?" into "Should I frame or should I smoke?" I always made sure to dedicate that one to our hippie laborer, Steven, who was always stinking up the portajohn, and he wasn't shitting in there.

Actually, it was with the help of Steven that I got Barney and Drew to turn off the classic rock station. Since Steven wouldn't ever cut his hair, I changed "Stairway to Heaven" to "Hairway to Steven." The home of classic rock played that song so many

times during the work week that, one Friday it came on and, without my prompting, Drew started singing, "There's a framer who knows/ to go to the portajohn to smoke/ and we call him the Hairway to Steven."

Barney was working with Drew at the time. He listened to Drew, singing along to my words without any irony or any hint of kidding around, and Barney got so damn mad that he switched over to a country station.

The next few days weren't as bad for me. I didn't like country any more than classic rock, but at least I didn't know the words to the songs. I hadn't heard them every time I'd walked out onto a construction site over the past ten years. So they were easier to ignore. That's when John Reese became our nemesis.

Even though the songs were different, the commercials were the same on the country station. The same company owned the classic rock station and the country one. The same companies advertised on both. And the biggest offender was John Reese Ford. He pulled one of those tricks where he kicked the volume up on the mix of his commercial, so whenever it came on, it was like someone turned up the radio. And he pulled the dreaded dual-announcers screaming at each other through the whole commercial: "John!Reese!Ford! You need a car?! We'll sell you a car! F150s! We got 'em!" And so on.

Now that I didn't have Rush and Queen to torment me, the John Reese Ford commercial bugged me even more. So I made it my own. What the hell? I started my whole, "Bar!Ney's!Crew!" rant. It helped pass the time. It made the day more pleasant. The yelling was cathartic. It made Barney feel good, too.

Then, two things happened.

First, Barney got hired to frame a house in Orlando. It was fifty miles from where we lived, but the homeowner insisted Barney frame his house. Barney made sure we got paid for our drive time and for our gas, and he hiked up the price, but he took the job. Every morning and every night for two weeks, the four of us piled into Barney's truck – Barney, Drew and me up front in the cab, Steven riding bulldog – and we drove past John Reese

Ford. The car dealership was a block long. No one ever said anything about it.

Second, we finished the job. We got paid. Cash. We did what carpenters do when they get paid cash. We got drunk. We started at a dive bar with four dollar pitchers. When the bartender cut us off, we went to a strip club. Not the small town Cocoa Beach strip club that we were used to, but the fancy Orlando strip club where the dancers have been in porno mags and you get free popcorn at your table. We all had a little extra dough, what with the drive time money and all, and we were all feeling good. Then, the unimaginable happened. A pause between songs. The dancers cleared the stage. The DJ said nothing. A voice exploded out of the stereo, but it wasn't singing and it wasn't telling us to tip our entertainers. It was screaming, "John!Reese!Ford!"

I'd never heard of a commercial in a strip club. I was flabbergasted. No one else in the club seemed to react. Cocktail waitresses served drinks, businessmen negotiated lap dances, dancers fastened their tops back on. No one seemed surprised. Then, I looked back at the crew, and those guys were livid. Even Steven, who was stoned enough to have smoked away all his anger.

"This won't stand," Barney said. "This won't stand. I paid to get in here. Didn't I pay to get in here? It's one thing when this goddamn fucking commercial is on the radio. I didn't pay for the radio. But I paid to get into this motherfucker." Barney stood up and grabbed the bowl of popcorn off the table. "Drink up, boys," he said. "We gotta go collect some rent." Drew, Steven, and I slammed the rest of our four-dollar beers. Barney hurled the popcorn bowl at the DJ and walked out the door. The rest of his crew followed him, holding back the bouncers.

Barney ranted and raved on the way to John Reese Ford. He didn't make a whole lot of sense. I knew what we were gonna do, though, and I was willing to do it. What the hell? We were a crew. A crew follows the lead. That's what a crew does.

So I jumped out of the truck and scared the hell out of one salesman and raced over to the line up of the rest of the salesmen

and yelled at them. Drew followed me. By the time we finished our second round of "We build houses strong! Strong! Strong!" Barney and Steven were behind us. Barney was ranting again, but this time, he was making sense.

"I want to see John Reese," Barney screamed. "I want to see that motherfucker. I'm here to collect rent. I want rent for the space your fucking commercials take up in my mind. Every day, I labor through your yelling and screaming and I want to get paid for my labor..."

The faces on the car salesmen had gone back to normal. The surprise seemed to have worn off. Now Barney was bringing them back to concepts they understood, as in, he wants money. Don't give anyone any money. We're car salesmen. Money is what we take. Not what we give.

Not one of those salesmen seemed to show any understanding about what Barney was talking about. But I understood. And Drew understood. And Steven understood.

It didn't matter that, in ten minutes, the cops would show up and arrest all four of us. It didn't matter that we'd have to sleep in a holding cell. It didn't matter that, the next morning, the judge would fine us a hundred and fifty bucks each for public drunkenness, and the little bit we'd gotten ahead with our paychecks would suddenly become the little bit we'd gotten behind. None of it mattered.

I watched Barney rant and rave. I listened to him explain to the representatives of John Reese Ford that of course it was absurd for us to come by where they work and yell at them, but it was just as absurd for them to do the same to us, through the radio. I listened to everything Barney said and suddenly things sounded good. Things weren't so familiar. Time wasn't slipping into a warp, weeks wouldn't blend into years so mindlessly that I wouldn't even notice my life sliding into a void. Fuck no. I was a carpenter. I had my lead. I had my crew. And all the yelling back felt fucking good.

## Everything for a Dollar at the Monte V

Joel and I were drinking shots of Ouzo long past the point when we should've stopped drinking altogether. We were at the Monte Vista bar and hotel. The bar's ownership was changing hands. The new owner would take over in the morning. The old owner would be left with more booze than he could drink in a lifetime, so on this night, everything was a buck. We got there early enough to get dollar snifters of Grand Marnier and one dollar shot of a Jack Daniels Reserve each. We weathered through the middle shelves, drank all the Ten High in the well, and vowed we'd stay until nothing but fruit Schnapps were left.

The woman to my right kept screaming out, "Look at the head on that cabbage." Every time she said it, she'd cackle herself silly and slap me on the arm. She only yelled it out when big haired sorority girls came through the Monte V. I'd drunk enough to make that lady make sense. Yes, I was thinking. Look at the head on that cabbage.

There was a four-and-a-half foot tall gangster in a Raiders jacket who'd been staring at us for the past half hour. Earlier in the night, he'd sat next to Joel and me. He complained about all the Navajos in Flagstaff. He kept calling them "camel jockeys." It was so far wrong that I didn't know how to correct him. Joel didn't say anything for a while, either. We just let him go on and on about the camel jockeys until Joel finally said, "You know, Jim Plunkett was a Navajo. The Raiders haven't been to a Super Bowl since he was quarterback."

This pissed off the gangster so much that he moved down two bar stools and stared at us while we drank Ouzo. I don't think he knew that Joel was lying.

The current circus surrounding us notwithstanding, I liked drinking with Joel. He was the only guy I knew who could start

true stories about his life with sentences like, “So I started dating this lady cop, which was a bad idea because I was living in a tent in the national forest, selling speed until I got enough money to get an apartment.”

One night, we’d been drinking in the Monte V and drinks were full price, so we were taking pills to augment the whiskey. Joel had a few female friends who would go to the university health center with bogus menstrual pains, then sell their prescriptions to Joel. So we were drinking whiskey and eating Vicodin when Joel told me a story about how one night he’d been walking home from the Monte V and he took a short cut on the train tracks. He’d had way too many whiskeys and way too much Vicodin and decided it was a good idea to lie on the tracks and wait for a train to pass over him. So he did. He laid down right there between the tracks and fell asleep. A little while later, a train woke him up. It flew over him at ninety miles an hour. He lay real still, watching the cars race by.

“It was fucking A cool,” Joel told me.

“Weren’t you worried that something might be dangling underneath the train,” I asked. “One loose chain would’ve sliced you in half at that speed.”

“Nah,” Joel said. “I figured, as long as I kept still, I’d be fine.” Joel kept drinking whiskey and eating Vicodin on the night he told me the story. Later on, he walked home from the bar, taking the shortcut across the train tracks.

So that was Joel. What made his stories so good wasn’t that they were fucked up or that he’d really lived through them. What made them so good was that he was *still* living through them. What made the stories good, too, was that my life was similar enough that I could relate, and that I could feel like I’d get away with the same crazy shit, too.

And, on this night of everything for a dollar at the Monte V, right in the middle of our second shot of Ouzo, six hours before the world’s worst hangover would kick in, Joel said to me, “I’m moving to Guatamala.”

I looked to the cabbage lady and the four-and-a-half foot tall gangster to see how they'd react. It was a loud, crowded bar, though. The cabbage lady and the gangster hadn't heard Joel. They didn't care. I must be tripping, I thought. I said, "What?"

"Yeah, man," Joel said. "Guatemala. I got a bus ticket down to Phoenix, and a flight from there. I just got my student loan check this week. I'm going."

It was so far out there that I didn't know what to say. I said, "Really?"

Joel laid it out for me. He had everything planned. He'd read the *Lonely Planet* guide and the *Frommers* guide to Guatemala. He'd stashed away two student loan checks amounting to several thousand dollars. He'd sewn a steel plate into the bottom of his backpack so that no one could stick a knife in the back of his pack and steal everything as it fell out. He'd gotten a good pair of hiking boots and whittled everything else down to what would fit in his backpack. He'd read every book by William S. Burroughs, and now he was on his own quixotic adventure to Central America.

It all sounded too crazy to me. Especially the William S. Burroughs part. Not that I didn't read and like Burroughs's book *Junky*, but it seemed like a bad place to steal a blueprint for how to live your life. I even told Joel, "Man, Burroughs is all right, but he's no role model. He tried to shoot an apple off his wife's head and killed her, for God's sake. And now you're gonna follow his dream into Guatemala?"

Joel smiled. "It's where the good drugs are," he said.

How could I argue? And, seeing as how all the wheels were in motion and he didn't want me to change his mind, anyway, I didn't try to argue. I ordered four shots of Ouzo: one for the cabbage lady, one for the four-and-a-half foot tall gangster, one for Joel, and one for me. It was the last of the Ouzo. Nothing was left but the fruity Schnapps, now.

After the bartender laid them out and collected the last of my money, I raised a toast to Joel in Guatemala. "I hope you find what you're looking for," I said.

The truth of the matter, though, was that I hoped he wouldn't find what he was looking for. See, because the thing with Joel was not that he'd sell speed for a living while he shared a tent with a cop. It wasn't that he would pass out on train tracks and wake up with a train charging over him. It wasn't that he didn't know better than to do these things. It was that he did know better, and he did these things, anyway. And he got away with them. So he kept upping the ante. He'd go to Guatemala and probably find those drugs that had eluded Burroughs. And then what?

Two days later, I was mostly recovered from that suicidal mixture of alcohol that I'd put in my belly at everything for a dollar night at Monte V. I was at the Flagstaff bus station. I waved goodbye to Joel when he boarded his bus to Phoenix, which would lead him to a flight to Guatemala and into the unknown. Now ten years have passed and I haven't heard another word from Joel.

When I think of other friends who I've lost touch with over the years, I wonder where they are and what they're doing. When I think about Joel, though, I just think, I hope that guy's still alive.

## Also Available from Gorsky Press

**Whiskey & Robots by Bucky Sinister — \$8 ppd.**

*"I don't really do blurbs anymore, but I really dug this book."*

—Jimmy Santiago Baca, author of *A Place to Stand*

**The Snake Pit Book by Ben Snakepit — \$10 ppd.**

*"Ben Snakepit captures some moments and moods of our lives so well, like a great song, and when it came down to it, I couldn't resist singing along."*

—Aaron Cometbus

**Born to Rock by Todd Taylor — \$10 ppd.**

*"When Todd Taylor graces our pages, we believe in punk rock again. And punk rock gives us hope."*

—Ryan Henry, Thrasher

**Thank You for Your Continued Interest by Rich Mackin. — \$10 ppd.**

*"I can't believe they write you back."* —Ralph Nader

**Punch and Pie edited by Felizon Vidad and Todd Taylor — \$5 ppd.**

*"These stories are great. The corporate publishing overlords could never put out an anthology (by living, breathing authors) such as this."*

—Phil Wagner, *The Iconoclast*

**The Undercards by James Jay — \$8 ppd.**

*"Its cast of stooges, high-flyers, and maulers will, by turn, make you guffaw out loud, gasp with awe, groan with grief. This book puts the smack-down on poetry!"*

—Jim Simmerman, author of *Kingdom Come*

**Dear Mr. Mackin... by Rich Mackin — \$10 ppd.**

*"Richard is on to something here, something big... If you are not hip to Mackin, you are missing out...: Mackin is a witty genius."*

—Factsheet 5 (editor's choice)

**Drinks for the Little Guy by Sean Carswell — \$10 ppd.**

*"The best book about a carpenter since the Bible."*

—Flipside Magazine

**PRICES ARE ONLY VALID DIRECT FROM GORSKY PRESS AND FOR US ORDERS. SEND MAIL ORDER TO GORSKY PRESS, PO BOX 42024, LA, CA 90042 OR ORDER ON THE WEB AT WWW.GORSKYPRESS.COM.**

“Meet Sean Carswell, eyewitness correspondent of the marginally unemployed, street-level philosopher of the underclass majority... [He] presents an array of disgruntled construction grunts, strangely alluring waitresses, blackout drinkers and plasma-financed thinkers... Language used is earthy and uncontrived. The crossover between the truth and that which should be true is seamless... Amid the swirling eddies, Carswell makes an effort to find positive moments, always perceptive enough to hear the muted tones of hope...

Get in on the ground floor folks.”

—Todd Mercer, *New Pages*

*Another Shot of the Good Stuff* offers two quick stories from Sean Carswell's upcoming short story collection, *Barney's Crew*. Gorsky Press will release *Barney's Crew* in the spring of 2005. Only a hundred copies of this zine have been printed. Count yourself lucky to hold this in your hands. And, if you enjoy these stories, please be sure to buy *Barney's Crew* when it comes out.

GORSKY PRESS, PO BOX 42024, LA, CA 90042  
[www.gorskypress.com](http://www.gorskypress.com)