

## **“A Good Year, Man”**

by Mike Watson

If you drive north on 512, you'll go through Bath, Pennsylvania to the stoplight at the center of town. I usually get gas at the Sunoco across the street, but it doesn't matter where you fill up; the important thing is to remember a receipt. There's a bar on your left where you can make a few extra bucks after dark. The people there will stop you and tell you to “come back tomorrow”. The next night, it'll be ninety degrees even at nine o'clock, and they'll be sitting inside, comforted by air conditioning, while you sit at the stoplight and peel your legs off the crooked vinyl seat. You'll think of them every evening, and you'll look back for a second when the light turns green. They won't come out, but maybe tomorrow.

You'll follow Main Street until you hit the railroad tracks. Aris's shop is on the right. When you get back, plug in the truck, “otherwise the ice cream will become ice cream soup,” Aris says. Double check the cord (wrap it around the socket to hold it in place), and then go count your money on the counter in the garage. Write the number on a slip, put the slip in the bag, put the bag in the drawer, and write your totals down in the book. The garage door will usually be open, the fan will be on, and Aris will ask, “How'd ya do tonight, man?” No one does amazing on his first day, but generally, business is better than you would expect. Even on a bad day, you'll make sixty or seventy bucks; on a good day you could make \$150 or \$200. You'll have to establish a route, stay positive, and most importantly, be patient. “It's gonna rain sometimes,” Aris will say, “but we're gonna sell ice cream in the rain.”

If you're heading to Northampton, you'll pass the alley that winds behind the Sunoco. You'll most likely drive by and head to the stop sign, make your left, and head down 329. But there's a side road there, on the right. It's a typical back alley, a gravel-covered path leading between the backs of

houses. There's a pick-up truck sitting on one side and a swing-set in a backyard halfway down. In the fall, a few kids probably play basketball at a hoop hanging above a garage door. Most have driven past and headed down 329, but I pulled over there last Memorial Day, just after 1:00 pm. My mother had called me, even though she knew I had just gone to work. She waited a second after I picked up to make sure I was there. "Gram died this morning," she said.

I turned off the truck, and she paused. I looked up the road toward the trees behind the dead end sign, and listened to the hum of traffic behind me. It was hot and humid that day; condensation gathered on the freezers. I thought of how I would continue my shift, and in my mind, I took 329 west towards Northampton. I passed the cement plant, I wound around the hills and across Airport Road, trying to block out what my mother had just told me. She began to talk again. Slowly, she formed each word: "She wanted me...to tell you kids...that she loved you very much."

I thought of two springs ago, the last time I saw Gram healthy. She emptied the bag of bird seed into the feeder in front of my mother's house. She asked me how school was going as I walked up to the front door with my backpack on my shoulders and my wash basket in my hands. I said, "It's going pretty well. Lots of homework, though." I smiled and she smiled back.

"College is a lot harder than high school, but the ice cream truck job is working out really well," I said.

"Very good," she said, "I bet your glad to get away from that job at Target. And I bet that the hours are a lot betta." She had a slight southern drawl, which was odd because she grew up in Maine.

"Yeah, it's nice to be able to sleep in past three in the morning."

"Are the people treating you well in Catty? Your motha told me that you were making a lot of money."

“I get stuck on Second Street for about an hour every Sunday because there are so many people. Everyone's really nice so far. It's turning out to be really great.”

“Very good,” she said. “You have a good day now, Mike. Oh, and Gramp and I are headin' to Dunkin Donuts later if you'd like to join us.”

“Okay, let me know when you are going,” I said. When we came back, we sat around the table and played cards.

I remember the words clearly, “Gram died this morning.” My mother spoke slowly and deliberately; it was like a good piece of writing: no fluff. She had a long, difficult story to tell, but she cut out everything but those four words.

But everyone goes eventually. They will tell you that they will be back “tomorrow,” or “every Thursday,” or “next year”; but one day they don't show up. And it's not your fault, it's just the way the business is. There are some things you can't control. Just sell what you can until it gets dark. Fill up the tank on your way back, and don't forget a receipt.

Sometimes people will walk up to you pumping your gas. “You still open?” they'll ask. Of course you are, even at 10:30 on a hot July evening. You'll lean against the truck in the humid night, and you'll watch the swarms of gnats almost block out the dim lights above the gas station. You'll be drained from the ten hour shift, thirsty and hungry, and when you close your eyes, you'll see the ice cream lined up in the freezers. It won't take you long to learn their prices, and when the season's over, it won't take you long to forget them. You'll peel yourself off the hot, rusty metal of the truck and get your receipt. “It could have been worse,” you'll tell yourself.

In early September, you'll drive on 248 West for thirty-five miles. You'll pass a potato farm. It's

the only thing for the first ten miles, and it'll be on your right on your way back. Late at night, you'll see the tan sign with yellow lettering and you'll know that you're almost home. Flowing like a river, 248 slides up and down the farm-covered hills and cuts through the valley where it meets 209 in Lehighton. The road winds slowly down the mountain like the walkway of the Guggenheim leading into Jim Thorpe; a small stone barrier is the only thing between your car and a five hundred foot drop into the Schuylkill River. When you drive up that road at night, watching the lights from the town shrink and slip away into the Appalachians, you'd swear you were flying home: flying like a bird back to your bird feeder in front of a house in suburban New Jersey, the evening's cool mountain air waking you up to your cool Sunday morning.

From the mountain, you have a bird's eye view of the train station, and when you get into Jim Thorpe, it will be on your left. There's usually a green and gold engine sitting there getting ready to tour the region. The station—it must be from the late 1800s—wraps around the turn and sits behind a large concrete patio with tables and chairs and people right out of a western. Sometimes you'll get stuck in traffic there for an hour because of the Sunday festivals. But you'll enjoy the smell of hamburgers and barbecue, the sight of bikers parking their motorcycles in the gas station parking lot, the view of the mountains holding in all the people like two hands cupping the water of civilization. There's no radio in the truck, but you wouldn't want to listen to it anyway. You'd rather catch the hum of your engine in between the people talking as they walk down the sidewalk shopping, eating, enjoying the mild weather. You'll sit in traffic and watch, and you'll forget about the rattling of your rusted doors, the gasoline stench of your truck, the bad business of Northampton in August.

You'll feel secure because ten minutes away, the people in Lansford are always there for you. Loyalty is everything in this business. You could stop at the top of Water Street Hill every day and

they'd all be there. The same family at the corner would get all six of their kids in a line, each with their two singles. The guy next door and his girlfriend always make a list, but never get what's on it.

You'll slowly make your way down the four major, slowly sloping streets, each with its own late nineteenth-century church, each with wide roads and 1920s row homes lined as straight as the backs of the miners who settled the village. You'll feel at home there, in the warm afternoon of an isolated coal mining town. And though the air has been cooler lately, Uncle John still goes fishing, and I still drive past the Sunoco, up 248 to Lansford. That's how it is on Sundays.

All the kids on Bertsch—the ones who live in the houses across from the Midrise Apartment building—sprint out to the edge of their parents diagonally parked Subarus and Jeeps and wait patiently for me to notice them. They jump up and down and wave their dollar bills. Moms and Dads open their screen doors and wait for their change or bring another five or ten or twenty, telling their kids to get something for later. “Your last week right?” they ask.

“I'll be around at least until the beginning of October.” I say. They smile, but they don't tell their children.

I put my sweatshirt on before I leave. I close my window and lock the door with a deadbolt. Even my feet—which are usually warmed by the engine—are a little chilly, tonight. It was a good night, though. I stayed until twenty minutes after dark. The ride home is peaceful; there's not even any streetlights between Lehighton and Bath. There's just a long empty, easy flowing road. I am like driftwood being washed down the Schuylkill.

I arrive at the shop at 7:30. I park the truck in the driveway, steering with my sweatshirt sleeves over my hands, and I walk in through the open garage door. Aris is there watching the Phillies game on his small television above his work bench. He cleans the oil off of his racecar's transmission with a

rag. “Hey, Mike, how's it going?,” he asks.

“Pretty good,” I say, “It's cold out tonight.”

“Yeah, they're calling for snow on Wednesday,” he closes the garage door behind me as a chilling wind blows in. “Tomorrow's probably the last day, man.”

“How'd ya do tonight?” Aris asks walking to the back.

“I did well, I mean, for it being fifty and drizzly for most of the afternoon.” I put the bills in the blue bag as I stack the quarters on the counter. “Two-fifty.” I say. I am surprised that business had been so good even into October.

“Nice,” Aris says, flipping through the books. “You did great this year, man.”

We stock the trucks with the last cases of popsicles and ice cream bars, and with an unexpected start to winter, our season ends abruptly. We talk about how great the business was this year, even in the recession. It was the same throughout the summer: we'd flip through ice cream catalogues, leaning against the trucks on the warm, humid nights talking about Aris's plan to install an ice cream parlor in his garage. The sweat from the days' summer heat caked on our faces, we'd talk baseball and weather and customers and ice cream, and he would ask me how I did, and I'd say, “I did really well.”

As I leave that night, Aris tells me that his mother had recently been diagnosed with cancer, and I can't help but think of Gram. She had been struggling with cancer for about a year before she passed. I had visited her only three days before that day, and while she kept drifting in and out of sleep, I could tell that she really enjoyed seeing me. My brother and I talked about our band, and she seemed excited. We made her laugh a little when we talked about some ridiculous things at school; I suddenly knew how much I meant to her when I saw how hard she tried to stay awake and converse.

“I know that you didn't get to know her that well,” my mother said as we sat on the steps outside

the funeral home. Putting her arm around me, we both cried, “but she loved you kids as much as she loved her own grandchildren.” My mother and Mark had only married a few years ago, and I hadn't known her long enough. Mark watched his own mother die, and I still went to work.

“We had a good year,” Aris had been saying for the past week. I wasn't really sure if the year had been good or not, but I suppose that the consistency of my job certainly helped me to get through it. “Yeah.” Aris says, “You know we had some issues, but it wasn't too bad. The only major problem was the engine in truck three.” Aris leans on the freezer next to the garage door with his one elbow. He stares into the ceiling, philosophically.

“Well, truck two had some trouble in June. Remember when I had to start it with a screwdriver because the ignition was busted?”

Aris laughs and shakes his head.

“But I had an awesome Fourth of July,” I say.

Aris's eyes get big and he nods, “Man, no one will ever break that record. \$983? That's insane, dude.” Aris shakes his head in disbelief and smiles because he knows that \$700 is a great mark for a holiday. “You got the Bethlehem Fireworks covered forever, man. Next year you'll break \$1000.”

“1200,” I say.

We both smile and sigh.

I had done well selling ice cream this year, but the long rides through the mountains at the end of the year really held me together. I must have seen three thousand different people smile and thank me for doing my job, and even on ugly days, people would come out in their sweatshirts, or with their

umbrellas and say, “You'll be back next Thursday, right?”

Like birds, they would flock to the truck when they heard “The Entertainer,” and similarly, I would fly there a few times a week, knowing that they would be there for me. I would drive past the alley behind the Sunoco every afternoon from April until October, but somewhere in between, I realized that I was missing something that I hadn't known that I had. I could continue my shift, driving down 329 only for so long. Eventually, the season would end.

But I remember Aris' words: “We had a good year, man. We had a good year.”