

One Person's Story

A young man in his early thirties, who we'll call Tom, came to Minnesota in 1981 from out West. His family had initially accompanied him to a family reunion in Taylor's Falls but then left.

Tom spent the next two months working on his uncle's farm, hauling hay bales and shoveling manure from the cow barn after milking was done. Sensing some tension between the old farmer and his wife over his stay there, he left shortly after painting one of his uncle's barns for the Twin Cities.

The two hundred dollars his father had given him was soon spent on a blown head gasket and rent for the day house he stayed at. For the first time in his life, he was practically penniless. Without a phone, an alarm clock, or a typewriter, his job search was severely limited. However, on the day before his thirty-first birthday, Mr. Bible, job a counselor at the State employment office told him there was a job at a plastics factory in Richfield. Tom applied for the job and was hired.

Now, Tom had a college degree in Political Science. He had never set foot in a factory until the day he was hired by the Plastics factory. The factory made plastic airplanes and games. His first job there was to snap plastic gas tanks inside the fuselage of airplanes as they whizzed by on a conveyor belt. It was hard work. The gas tanks needed to be forced on, sometimes with pliers. It wasn't long before he was so behind in his work, the supervisor had to shut the line down and come over and tell Tom to get his act together. A lady came over to help him. He gritted his teeth and fought back the temptation to walk. He sat alone in the lunchroom at break and ate his bread sandwich.

This went on for eight years. Although the company had been around for twenty-five years, it had run its course. Foreign competition and a couple of toys that didn't sell put it near bankruptcy. As one of the last people hired before business turned bad, Tom was laid off every other week. Or so it seemed.

Tom lost a lot of weight. He ran most every night and lifted weights so he could keep up at the factory. Feeling very empty and alone, he went to strip bars. Tom also attended a big Lutheran Church downtown when he wasn't hung over.

A few months prior to the plant shutting down, management had this great idea to schedule 12 hours rotating shifts. Now it didn't matter if it was Saturday or Monday. Getting up in the middle of the night to go to work became a necessity.

The plant shut down in June of 1989.

After a slew of temp jobs, Tom finally got a job at a skate company. He worked in the shipping department. It was 1991, and he was almost forty.

The shipping supervisor was a pseudo driller instructor. Every morning he would take roll and address the work crew in his navy blue shorts, and Marine Corps tee shirt. In the winter, he wore an Army Flight Jacket. Following the morning's pep talk and work assignments, he would order the workers to do calisthenics. During the day, the workers saw the "sup" walking around the shop- silver whistle around his neck, clipboard in one hand, stop watch in the other hand.

The pace was fast, sometimes very fast. It was a bust your ass job every day of the week. Tom got very muscular.

But then the depression set in. At first, it was just a tiredness, a feeling of sadness at all the opportunities lost. Of all the times working as hard as he could with no future in sight. He began drinking every night to go to sleep. The few times he dated, he was so stressed out from work, and he couldn't enjoy the women he met. Sometimes he got angry with them, almost landing him in jail.

The one thing Tom enjoyed was being outdoors. He planned weekend trips to State Parks. He saw bear, deer, muskrat, beaver, porcupine, ground hogs, pelicans, and falcon. Once a deer came up to him so close, Tom could reach out and touch him. He went fishing whenever he could. Just a stroll around a Minneapolis lake seemed to make life worth living. As he sat by the lakes on warm summer afternoons, he was able to reflect on his life and his reason for being. He'd watch the seagulls fly in and skim the surface of the lake. He marveled at the fish jumping. He'd watch the sun slowly setting on the horizon.

In 1997, Tom had been with the skate company seven years so he had several weeks' vacation built up. Excited by the prospect of having so much time off, he planned two week long stays at a Church camp and a weekend down in Austin, Minnesota. The two weeks in the woods was revitalizing. He found some real devotion and kindness among the people in the church group. He didn't want to return to the cities. But he had bills to pay and a job interview to go to. With a big sigh of remorse, he got into his car and drove back. A week later, he was down in Austin spending all his time and money in the strip bar.

Things were starting to get unglued around January 2000. The skate factory, now facing hard times also, ordered everyone to work 15 hour shifts seven days a week. A slight depression turned into a deep chronic depression. And even though he was exhausted every night when he came home from work, he couldn't sleep. He started seeing psychologists. After his mother past away in 2002, he wound up in the Emergency Room at Region's Hospital suicidal. He was first put on a strong anti-depressant, and then later given a lighter anti-depressant.

After injuring his back at work, Tom quit his job at the skate company. After working seven days a week for so long, he knew he could do the same for himself. Physically he still was very strong. He couldn't sink much lower psychologically. Maybe it was God, maybe it was Fear- probably both; but he knew he had to do something he enjoyed for a living. He transformed himself. After taking a class in Business Planning, he wrote his own business plan. After meeting with a few business consultants, he fine-tuned it. Money from his mom's inheritance helped launch the business.

In your opinion, did Tom survive, strive, and succeed?

Tom still works seven days a week, but it is at something he enjoys doing. And while the business isn't profitable yet, it is slowly getting there. His only regret is that it has been a long while since he sat by the lake and watch nature unfold around him. Tom feels that day too, shall come.