

Contracts

by J. Malcolm Garcia

Johnny wants to slam his burrito in my face. Wants to, will do—hard to read—but I'm leaning toward will do.

You took my job. Why don't you take my lunch, too? Johnny says.

He's drunk, voice slurring in an ocean of saliva, jaws loose on their hinges. I just wanted a quick lunch. This little burrito joint on the corner of Leavenworth and Ellis, its grimed windows steamed and marked with the finger drawings of the owner's small children, usually provides me a relaxed place to take a mid-day breather from work. Until Johnny showed up, I'd sat blissfully by myself.

He always drank but I never knew him to get this wound up. Of course, I'd not fired him before. We sat in my office two days ago, his eyes bloodshot and rheumy, pigeons on the window sill, pacing back and forth in their cooing, head-bobbing way, witnesses to the hammer coming down on a guy I'd lied for and promoted.

Johnny, I said, you know how this works. When state budget cuts come down, I have to lay off staff. My way of doing things is to let go those people I think can find work. You can find work. You can get another job if you chill out on the drinking.

In the last three years, I've laid off more staff than I want to think about. Fired. That's how it feels to them. The look in their eyes. The sense of betrayal. The tears. All the self-respect they had clawed back into their lives gone in the two or three sentences it takes for me to tell them. What did someone who had spent years on the street have other than the minimum-wage job I gave them? A room at a residential hotel, no kitchen, bathroom down the hall, and a tab at some restaurant that extended them credit, that's what. I laid them off and saw them back on the street in no time, back to what they'd known, back to the sidewalks, the doorways, the homeless shelters, in line with everyone else for whatever benefit they might be eligible, general assistance, SSI, unemployment, blending in with one another in an undistinguished mass of ill-fitting

thrift-store clothes in a poor version of a nine-to-five routine, as if they'd never left. In a way, I suppose, they hadn't.

This because of yesterday? Johnny asked.

Yes, I thought, it is. But instead I lied one more time to spare him the truth and to spare me his denials.

No, it's about the budget. It's about who I think can find a job, I said.

I extended my hand. He wiped his eyes and ignored it. He didn't look at me. I knew he didn't believe me. Too bad for him he ran into Tim McGraw, the guy I answer to. McGraw talked to me and now here we are. However, the state had cut a homeless grant. That was no lie.

Is that it? Johnny asked.

I nodded and he left.

I'm the program director of the men's homeless shelter for Out of the Rain, a social services agency in San Francisco's Tenderloin district.

I answer to McGraw, the executive director. The shelter stands on a block of Leavenworth Street beside boarded store fronts, convenience stores stockpiled with cheap wine and cans of Dinty Moore beef stew, residential hotels and other social service agencies. On the first of each month, I see guys in need of booze to silence the voices inside their heads standing alongside your average, no-voices homeless alcoholics shelling out 99 cents for half-gallon jugs of Thunderbird while the speed freaks do the jitterbug, fried-nerves tweak on the sidewalks, day-tripping out-of-control marionettes fumbling for their crack pipes. Police cars coast their slow, bored, welfare-check-payday-crawl as officers glance over people—who are all suddenly hands visible or hands and arms at their sides or hurriedly walking away, message: I'm clean officer, I'm clean—looking for a drug dealer, an informant, someone in the middle of a score, whoever they can find. Fuck the drunks, that's just a vagrancy rap. Drug busts mean promotion.

Guys, young and old, their hair askew as if charged with electricity, scratch their arms raw, and they're not displaying their latest prison tattoos, no, they're showing dealers their track marks, their need. Slick as slick, unruffled in fake leather jackets, the

dealers at first pretend not to see the scratchers or the black lines etched down their arms like bruised highways. No, the dealers wait to see if 5 O circles back. Then they motion to the scratchers, digging into their shirt pockets for bags of the white stuff. When the high wears off, the drunks, the voice hearers and the scratchers lurch and stagger to my shelter, like dead people risen from the sidewalks, broke and hallucinating, until they piss themselves and fall asleep or start a fight and we throw them out only to see them come back five minutes later begging for mercy, begging for money, flying off the handle again in a stream of invective and threats, a kind of poetic assault with the word motherfucker as the driving force.

My contract requires me to hire the homeless, the idea being that people with problems can help other people with problems. I select my staff from the few among them who get clean, or, short of that, like Johnny, keep it together despite their vices. If nothing else, they know their world.

One time, on my way to a meeting, I saw a shelter client holding a knife to a volunteer's throat. Johnny was on duty. I paused, considered the knife. Serrated edge. Maybe a Gerber, I didn't know. The volunteer's eyes were so wide I half expected to see planets orbiting around them. He stayed in the shelter and was guaranteed a bed if he worked a few hours signing people in for the night. He had his hands raised above his head and sweat waxed his face and he could not have sat stiller if he tried.

What's going on? I asked.

Nothing, Johnny said.

Monday afternoon mood swing?

Something like that.

You got this covered?

Yeah, Johnny said.

Do I know you? I asked the guy with the knife.

He looked at me, eyebrows puckered in thought.

I don't think so.

We're good here, Johnny said.

OK, I said and left for my meeting.

When I returned an hour later, the guy with the knife was gone. The volunteer, Johnny told me, had quit. I wonder why, I said, and we both laughed. I thought of asking again what that had been about but I wasn't in the mood to give credence to an answer I knew would make no sense. Johnny handled it, no one died, all good.

So, months later, when the state of California relieved me of funds that covered much of my staff's salaries, I had choices to make. The way I saw it, if a drinker like Johnny who, no matter how lit he gets can still make it to work on time, supervise the shelter and chill-out a guy with a knife, well then he has a chance—I'm not saying a great one—of finding another job. That person, according to the skewed logic I engage in, should be laid off.

I want you to have my burrito, Johnny says again.

I'm trying to keep calm but I'm getting a little PO'd. How many times did Johnny show up to work smelling of booze? How many times did I talk to him about it? He used mouthwash like that'd fool anyone. I looked the other way. I considered his drinking a perk I let him have because no matter what I could rely on him. He kept the train running, so to speak. But staff and clients all knew he drank. They didn't say anything but they knew, and they knew I knew and when I caught people nursing a bottle of Thunderbird in the shelter and told them to toss it or leave, they'd say, rightfully, What about Johnny? I had no good answer.

Johnny came to Out of the Rain a year ago for a clothing referral. He wore an army fatigue jacket too big for his slim body. His graying hair hadn't been combed in a while and his missing front teeth left a gap in his mouth that made him hard to understand when he spoke. He told me he'd been in the Army, stationed in the Philippines. One morning, he was called into the office of his CO and told he was being discharged. The base was closing, he was no longer needed, the CO said. Johnny caught a flight out that night with nothing but his duffel bag. Twenty-four hours later, he landed in San Francisco, the closest U.S. airport to the Philippines, or so he claimed.

I didn't believe a word. The Army doesn't discharge soldiers because a base closes. Johnny screwed up somehow. Maybe it was his drinking, I don't know. If I've learned anything, I've learned this: Don't believe what anyone on the street tells you.

They have their secrets. They're not all bad or all crazy or all addicts. I've met more than a few who are homeless only because they need a job, that's it. But even they have their secrets, their unbelievable tales to fill in the blanks of what they don't want you to know. I let Johnny have his story. I presumed he'd lost everything else.

While he stayed at the shelter, Johnny volunteered. He put mats on the floor, mopped the bathrooms, made coffee. When one of the shelter staff quit, I offered Johnny the job.

I really want you to have it, Johnny says again, tossing the burrito from hand-to-hand as if it were too hot to hold. I'll give you a fork and everything so you don't mess yourself.

Johnny takes a step toward me, trips, regains his balance. I hope something will distract him. People coming in for lunch. An announcement that someone's order is ready. Something. To think that only a few months ago, I lied my way to hell to get Johnny the shelter supervisor job. At the time, the supervisor had been a guy from Texas we all called Tex. He seemed as normal and middle class as a bank teller until one day he decided to resume his crack habit and I never saw him again. That created a job opening. I wanted Johnny to fill it.

However, I had hoops to jump through. The contract didn't allow me to appoint people to administrative jobs. Johnny and anyone else interested in the supervisor position had to appear before a three-member hiring committee made up of homeless men and women elected by people in the shelter to, the contract read, give the homeless served by the agency a say in staffing. That in turn, or so the thinking went, would teach them responsibility. They'd be, in contract-speak, "invested" in the program and their own "outcomes." The contract emphasized that the director could in no way influence the committee. I could sit in on interviews and help facilitate but I could not participate in discussions about the applicants or vote.

I posted the position and asked a homeless volunteer, a guy named Ross Hitchcock, to coordinate the election of a hiring committee. Ross grew up in Boston and had a thick, New England accent. He had no teeth and when he wasn't talking, his mouth flattened into a thin line above his chin. He schemed and had a racket unique to

anyone I knew. For several hours a day, he'd stand beside a parking meter and flag drivers searching for a parking space. He'd then offer to get them an hour on the meter in exchange for a quarter. If they agreed, he'd withdraw a popsicle stick from his pocket, jam it in the meter, crank it up and down and watch the numbers flip until they reached sixty minutes. Pleased and amused by his ingenuity, drivers would often give Ross additional change. Within a few hours, he'd make \$100.

Ross announced the election that night at the shelter. Whoever wanted to run wrote their name on a piece of paper tacked by the front door. More than a few people thought the candidate sheet was the sign-in list for a bed. As a result, we had many clients unaware they were running for the committee. Three days later, I left ballots with the names of dozens of candidates by the front desk. Completed ballots were put in a box. The three candidates who received the most votes won. If they showed up for the interviews, we had a hiring committee. If they didn't, we held another election.

The day of the vote, I called Johnny into my office and told him I wanted him to be the new super.

You can't go before the hiring committee with alcohol on your breath, I warned him.

I don't drink when I'm working.

You drink and everyone knows it, period. If you want the job, don't come here smelling of booze.

At first, only Johnny put in for the job. Then the day before the application deadline, one other staffer applied. Billy White. He came to the shelter about the same time as Johnny. He had a wide, open face with a mole on his right eyelid that seemed not to bother him but always distracted me when we spoke. Guys would hit him up for money and he'd give what little he had and then act surprised when no one paid him back. If someone said, Hey, Billy, I like that sweater, he'd lend it to them but of course he never got it back, and I'd see him at night in line waiting for the shelter to open, his arms crossed, shivering, the hurt expression of a child who knew he had been taken advantage but didn't understand how or why writ large across his face. I hired Billy to get him away from the piranhas feeding off him.

He did not make my life easy. He never got to work on time because he insisted on standing up to the indignities of his life as if now that he had a job he could finally assert himself against those who had abused his trust. One time, he blamed his tardiness on his landlord. That morning, he refused to pay rent after he complained about the halls being dirty. The landlord threatened to evict him. Billy then called lawyers to sue the owner. Then he asked other lawyers to sue those lawyers for not taking his case. When they refused, he walked to the *San Francisco Chronicle* to ask a reporter to write about the dirty halls. He demanded a meeting with the editor. He waited a long time before his request was denied. Had they not made him wait, he explained, he wouldn't have been late.

I kept him. Firing Billy would have been like kicking a puppy. Out of the Rain existed for the Billys of the world, and the Johnnys and Texs too; people who, we should concede, will never fit into the five-day workweek. Unless, of course, our work ethic changes and allows for people who talk to other people none of us can see, people with 24-7 drinking and drug problems, people like Billy who obsess on the smallest slight, people with college degrees who look good on paper, but have troubles, too, and have ended up on the street among all the other dispossessed in an equal-opportunity smorgasbord of triaged men and women, unable to pass the entrance exam to the American Dream.

About two weeks after Tex vanished, Johnny and Billy appeared before a hiring committee made up of clients I knew well:

Oscar, a speed freak, a tall, lean man in his late thirties, was on one of his periodic sober runs. He could sing like nothing else mattered in a voice that should have had Barry Gordy knocking at our door.

Gill Harlee, a guy with a barrel-chest laugh and a round, bowling-ball stomach, and an explosive temper. A meaningless disagreement on something as simple as the weather could set him off. Good mood or bad, he always shouted as if he was trying to make himself heard above insurmountable noise.

Marcela Brooks, an elderly woman who came in every morning for coffee and whom we all called Granny. Depending on the day, she'd tell us she was 78 or 90. She

wrapped herself in at least three coats and used a wheelchair like a walker, hobbling behind it and pausing every so often to catch her breath, her lined face canyoned with exhaustion.

On a Wednesday afternoon, the committee interviewed Johnny first. We sat in a circle by a closet where we stored the mats. We held a list of ten questions. The sun shone and I could see seagulls circling above a YMCA at the corner of Golden Gate and Leavenworth. Johnny took a chair next to mine. I smelled the alcohol on his breath.

First question:

Oscar: What would you do if the shelter was full and someone needed a place to stay at two in the morning? Would you turn them away?

No, Johnny answered. He'd find them a spot even if it meant sitting in a chair. Granny asked a similar question about a family that showed up in the middle of the night. Johnny said he wouldn't bother calling other shelters. He understood we weren't a family shelter but at that hour a family would need rest, especially the kids. He'd take them in, too.

God bless the children, Granny said, and then launched into a story about how she was denied shelter by Salvation Army because she refused to take a shower.

That wasn't right, she said. A shelter's not supposed to turn people away. I'm an old woman.

After we finish here, Granny, you and I will talk about it, I said.

It wasn't right what happened to me, Granny insisted.

I turned to Oscar and Gill.

Let's continue, I said.

What about me? Granny asked.

We'll talk, I said.

Second question:

Gill: What would you do if. . . Gill stopped and put the list of questions aside. Instead, he asked Johnny if he'd kick someone out of the shelter if they were caught drinking or using. Before he could answer, Gill demanded, What about you? Would you
86 yourself?

What do you mean?

You come to work drunk.

I don't drink here, Johnny said.

Gill smirked.

Do you attend AA, Johnny? Oscar asked.

No, Johnny said.

Would you go to AA if you get this job?

I don't see why I would, Johnny said. I don't drink at work.

Let's stick to the questions, I said, raising the list.

Gill made a face and his hand shook with mounting anger but he didn't explode. I appreciated his self-control. Still, he'd done some damage.

Billy showed up fifteen minutes late. He couldn't find his keys, he explained. As excuses went, that was so acceptably mainstream, he left me speechless.

First question:

Oscar: If it's raining outside, would you open the shelter earlier than usual?

Billy pondered. He wanted to know the situation of each person seeking shelter. Had they ever been 86'd? Were they intoxicated? Were other shelters available to them? The committee made up answers to his hypotheticals until I intervened, contract be damned.

Billy, just answer. It's a yes or no question.

Then yes, he said, although I think these questions need to be more specific.

When we finished interviewing Billy, I walked him to the door, closing it behind him.

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What do you all think? I said.

Johnny, the committee agreed, was the better applicant. He answered the questions with common sense. They'd seen him on the job. They knew he was reliable. Billy, they worried, would complicate the simplest problem. They worried he'd obsess over one task at the expense of others. However, Johnny's drinking disturbed them

more. Whatever else could be said about Billy, he wouldn't be drunk when he enforced the rules about alcohol and drugs.

Why do you allow Johnny to work with alcohol on his breath? Oscar asked me. I've always wondered that myself, Gill said.

I didn't answer. My overriding principle: make a bad situation less bad. Johnny was my less bad.

Because we're here for people with problems and despite his he works out better than most.

They didn't disagree. However, whatever their own problems, Oscar, Gill and Granny understood hypocrisy. They voted for Billy.

Now, are we going to talk about me getting thrown out of Salvation Army? Granny asked.

Billy, I knew, would be a disaster. I needed a plan. Crisis fueled quick thinking. I reminded the committee that according to the contract, the Executive Director had to sign off on all new hires. I knew McGraw wouldn't care who I hired. I just had to tell him.

I didn't. Not yet. Instead, I called the committee back for a meeting the next day and I bald-faced lied to them. I told them that I'd met with McGraw and he had recommended hiring both Billy and Johnny. He wanted one of them to supervise the day program, the other the night shelter. It would provide for better coverage to split the position into two.

Granny and Gill liked the idea. Only Oscar objected.

What's the point of having a hiring committee if McGraw's just going to make his own decision? he asked.

He didn't decide, I said. He just gave us another idea. Think about. This will open up two staff positions.

Oscar, I knew, wanted a job. It served my purpose to dangle the possibility now. I couldn't tell if he picked up on my not so subtle hint, but he didn't push his objection. The contract could talk about homeless people "participating in decision making" all it wanted but everyone knew who was in charge—McGraw. The committee had its say. By channeling McGraw and offering a bribe, I had mine.

As I knew, McGraw didn't care. He thought it was a little cumbersome having two supervisors but if that's what I wanted, fine. I gave him some mumbo jumbo about how it was an example of the agency taking a job opening and creating more than just one opportunity. He gave that laugh again and slapped me on the shoulder. He liked how that sounded. Funders would eat it up. McGraw got his talking point. The committee got Billy. I got Johnny. Win-win-win.

I gave Johnny days and Billy nights. There wouldn't be much to do at night once the lights went out at eight, which I thought would suit Billy best. Johnny worked out as I knew he would. Boozy breath but fine. Billy, however, was Billy.

I'm sorry I'm late, Billy would apologize to me. The bus was running behind schedule. And I talked to the driver about how that wasn't right, and he talked back to me. So, I wouldn't get off until he apologized.

I'd listen. I always listened. I found Billy's outrage at the everyday insults the rest of us take for granted somehow endearing. Soon, however, the tardiness got out of hand and I suspended him for two days, but it didn't make an impression. Finally, I dropped him down to shelter staff again. He didn't object. OK, he said. The dejected look on his face told me he didn't understand how I couldn't appreciate his need to confront every disparaging moment. I didn't.

He was so preoccupied with standing up for his wounded dignity that the demands of being a supervisor had, I think, become just one more humiliation. Whatever he felt didn't matter. I got what I'd wanted all along. Johnny was now in charge. No one asked me about filling Billy's position.

About two weeks later, McGraw called me into his office. He sat at a long table strewn with files and spreadsheets, glasses perched at the tip of nose. A computer blinked on and off behind him and a shelf behind his head held books about time management. I knocked on his open door. He looked at me, dragged a hand through his mop of blonde hair and laughed a-here-we-are-in-the-shit-storm laugh that I knew couldn't be good. He had been an advocate for welfare recipients when he first got into social work. Then, he earned a master's degree in public administration. Now, in his

mid-thirties, he ran an agency with a million-dollar budget. His time now was consumed with grant writing. Advocacy through fundraising, he often said.

He pointed to a chair. I sat down. Then he got to it. Another budget cut. This time the state had decided not to renew a homeless adult program grant that, among other things, covered some of my staff's salaries. I'd have to cut some positions and combine others.

Start at the top, McGraw said. Higher the salary the better.

I knew what that meant. In the pecking order of high salaries I was first, Johnny second. Well, I knew I wasn't going to lay myself off. McGraw looked at me over his glasses and gave that laugh again.

I saw Johnny this morning. He smelled like a brewery. You have to draw some lines.

If I draw lines, I'll fire everybody.

Johnny came to work drunk. There's your line.

In the burrito joint, Johnny takes another unsteady step toward my table. I look at the guy behind the register. He's adding up receipts and doesn't notice a thing. Whatever's going to happen I guess, will happen. I push back in my chair but remain seated. If I stand, Johnny might think I'm gearing up for fight. Don't be the aggressor. De-escalate. Where'd I learn that? Some workshop for staff development. Strange what goes through your head when you think a burrito is about to wallpaper your face.

I don't want it, Johnny, I say again.

He sways and grabs the back of a chair. He drops the burrito on a table and sits sloppily in the chair. Stares at the floor, chin against his chest, arms loose at his sides as if something essential has left him. Saliva hangs off his mouth in a thin line and he closes his eyes until I assume he's nodded out.

Johnny, I say. Johnny.

I smell it before I notice Johnny pissing himself, a slow, wet stain unfurling across his crotch.

Johnny, Jesus, wake up!

I get up and shake his shoulder. He opens his eyes slowly, looks lost, confused. He closes them again and I keep shaking him.

Johnny.

He turns his head and stares bleary-eyed, sagging deeper in his chair.

What? he says, his voice burdened by the effort to speak, rising out of his throat in a cracked whisper.

Before I can say anything, he presses a hand against the table and rises seemingly half asleep. He reels over the table like a bop bag, turns slowly and walks out stiff-legged, arms out for balance, angling through the open door to the street. Through the fogged windows, I see the outline of his body pass in staggering steps. The odor of piss rises off his chair. I was sure I'd take a burrito to the face. I hadn't expected it to end this way. In the words of my contract, a positive outcome. Staring out the door, I remind myself that Johnny was just another layoff, nothing personal. He brought it on himself. I covered for him until I no longer could but as much as I want to, I can't rationalize away the guilt I feel wrapped tight and tucked away deep inside me and out of reach most days. I stand beside his chair a moment longer, then reach for the burrito and drop it into my coat pocket. Someone in the shelter will eat it.

Author's note: The names of people and the agency have been changed to protect privacy.

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