

# THE WAREHOUSE

ROB HART



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***PROCESSING***<sup>1</sup>

## GIBSON

Well, I'm dying!

A lot of men make it to the end of their life and they don't know they've reached it. Just the lights go off one day. Here I am with a deadline.

I don't have time to write a book about my life, like everyone has been telling me I should, so this'll have to do. A blog seems pretty fitting, doesn't it? I haven't been sleeping much lately, so this gives me something to keep myself occupied at night.

Anyway, sleep is for people who lack ambition.

At least there'll be some kind of written record. I want you to hear it from me, rather than from someone looking for a buck, making educated guesses. From my line of work, I can tell you: guesses are rarely educated.

I hope it's a good story because I feel like I've lived a pretty good life.

You might be thinking: Mr. Wells, you are worth \$304.9 billion, which makes you the richest man in America, and the fourth-richest person on God's green earth, so of course you've lived a good life.

But, friend, that ain't the point.

Or, more important, one thing has nothing to do with the other.

Here's the real truth: I met the most beautiful woman in the world and convinced her to marry me before I had a penny to my name. Together we raised a little girl who grew up blessed, yes, but has been taught to appreciate the value of a dollar. She says *please* and *thank you* and she means it.

I've seen the sun rise and set. I've seen parts of the world my daddy never even heard of. I've met three presidents and respectfully told them all how they could do their job better—and they listened. I bowled a perfect game at my local bowling alley and my name is still up on that wall to this day.

There's been some tough stuff mixed in, but sitting here right now, my dogs resting at my feet, my wife, Molly, asleep in the next room, my little girl, Claire, safe and secure in her future, it's easy to feel like I can be satisfied with the things I've accomplished.

It's with great humility I say Cloud has been the kind of accomplishment I can be proud of. It's the kind of accomplishment most men don't get to make. The freedoms of my childhood disappeared so long ago, it's like you can barely remember them. Used to be earning a living and settling down somewhere wasn't so hard. After a while it became a luxury, and finally, a fantasy. As Cloud grew, I realized it could be more than a store. It could be a solution. It could provide relief to this great nation.

Remind people of the meaning of the word *prosperity*.

And it did.

We gave people jobs. We gave people access to affordable goods and health care. We've generated billions of dollars in tax revenue. We've led the charge in cutting carbon emissions, developing standards and technology that will save this planet.

We did that by concentrating on the only thing that matters in this life: family.

I've got my family at home and my family at work. Two different families I love with all my heart, and I will be sad to leave them behind.

The doc tells me I've got a year, and he's a pretty good doctor so I trust what he says. And I know the news is going to come out pretty soon, so I figure I might as well be the one to tell you.

Stage-four pancreatic cancer. Stage four means the cancer has spread to other parts of my body. Specifically, my spine, lungs, and liver. There's no stage five.

Here's the thing about the pancreas: it's hidden way back in your abdomen. For a lot of people, by the time you find out something's wrong, it's like fire across a dry field. Too late to do much about it.

When the doc told me, he put on that stern voice and placed his hand on my arm. And I'm thinking, Here we go. Time for some bad news. So he tells me what's wrong and my first question, swear to truth, was: "What the hell does a pancreas even *do*?"

He laughed, and I laughed, which helped lighten the mood a bit. Which was good because it took a hard turn after that. In case you were wondering, the pancreas helps digest food and regulate blood sugar. Now I know.

I got one year left. So starting tomorrow morning my wife and I are hitting the road. I'm going to visit as many MotherClouds in the contiguous United States as I possibly can.

I want to say thank you. There's no way I can shake the hand of every person who works in every MotherCloud, but I'm going to damn well try. That sounds a lot nicer than sitting at home and waiting to die.

Just like always, I'll be traveling by bus. Flying is for the birds. And anyway, have you seen how much it costs to fly nowadays?

It's going to take some time, and as the tour winds on, I suspect I'll be a bit more tired. Maybe even a little depressed, because despite my sunny disposition, it's hard for a man to be told he's going to die and then just carry on. But I've been the recipient of a lot of love and goodwill in my life, and I have to do what I can. Otherwise, I'm just going to sit and mope every day for the next year or so, and we can't have that. Molly would sooner smother me just to get it over with!

It's been about a week now that I've known, but something about writing it down makes it so much more real. No taking it back now.

Anyway. Enough of that. I'm going to walk the dogs. Could do with some fresh air. If you see my bus driving by, give it a wave. That always makes me feel pretty good, when people do that.

Thanks for reading, and I'll speak to you soon.

## PAXTON

Paxton pressed his hand against the front window of the ice-cream parlor. The menu board on the wall inside promised homemade flavors. Graham cracker and chocolate marshmallow and peanut butter fudge.



Flanking it, on one side, was a hardware store called Pop's, and on the other was a diner with a chrome and neon sign he couldn't quite make out. Delia's? Dahlia's?

Paxton looked up and down the stretch of the main road. It was so easy to imagine the street bustling with people. All the life this place used to hold. It was the kind of town that could inspire feelings of nostalgia on the first visit.

Now it was an echo fading in the white sunlight.

He turned back to the ice-cream parlor, the only business on the strip not boarded up with weathered plywood. The window was hot to the touch where the sun hit it and coated in a layer of grit.

Looking inside, at the dusty stacks of flared tin cups and the empty stools and the fallow refrigerators, Paxton wanted to feel some kind of regret, about what this place must have meant to the town that surrounded it.

But he had reached the limit of his sadness when he stepped off the bus. Just the act of being there was stretching his skin to bursting, like an overfilled balloon.

Paxton hitched his bag over his shoulder and turned back into the horde shuffling down the sidewalk, trampling the grass jutting through the cracks in the concrete. There were still people coming up in the rear—older folks, people nursing injuries so they couldn't walk as well.

Forty-seven people had gotten off the bus. Forty-seven people, not including him. About halfway through the two-hour ride, when there was nothing left on his phone to capture his attention, he'd counted. Heavy-shouldered men with the callused hands of day laborers. Stooped office workers grown soft from years of hunching at keyboards. One girl couldn't have been more than seventeen. She was short and curvy, with long brown braids that reached down to her lower back and skin the color of milk. She wore an old lavender pantsuit, two sizes too big, the fabric faded and stretched from years of washing and wear. The sliver of an orange tag, like the kind used in secondhand stores, stuck out from its collar.

Everyone carried luggage. Battered roller suitcases wobbling on uneven pavement. Bags strapped to backs or slung over shoulders.

Everyone sweating from exertion. The sun baked the top of Paxton's head.

It must have been well past a hundred degrees. Sweat ran down Paxton's legs, pooling in his underarms, making his clothes stick. Which was exactly why he wore black pants and a white shirt, so the sweat wouldn't show as much. The white-haired man next to him, the one who looked like a college professor put out to pasture, his beige suit was the color of wet cardboard.

Hopefully the processing center was close. Hopefully it was cool. He just wanted to be inside. He could taste it on his tongue: dust blowing from ruined fields, no longer strong enough to keep a grip on anything. It had been cruel of the bus driver to drop them at the edge of town. He was probably staying close to the interstate to conserve gas, but still.

The line ahead shifted, drifting to the right at the intersection. Paxton dug in harder. He wanted to stop to pull a bottle of water out of his bag, but pausing at the ice-cream parlor had been an indulgence. There were now more people ahead of him than behind.

As he neared the corner, a woman launched past him, clipping his side, making enough contact he almost stumbled. She was older, Asian, with a mop of white hair on her head and a leather satchel looped around her shoulder, making a hard push for the front of the pack. But the effort proved to be too much and within a couple of feet she tripped, went down hard on her knee.

The people around her stepped to the side, gave her room, but didn't stop. Paxton knew why. A little voice in his head screamed, *Keep walking*, but of course he couldn't, so he helped her get to her feet. Her bare knee was scratched red, a long trail of blood running down her leg to her tennis shoe, so thick the line was black.

She looked at him, barely nodded, and took off. Paxton sighed.

"You're welcome," he said, not loud enough for her to hear.

He checked behind him. The people at the back were picking up the pace. Walking with a renewed sense of effort, probably at the sight of someone going down to the ground. There was blood in the air. Paxton hitched the bag again and took off at a brisk pace, aiming hard for that corner. He turned and found a large theater with

a white marquee. The stucco on the front of the building was crumbling to reveal patches of weather-worn brick.

Broken neon glass letters formed an uneven pattern along the top of the marquee.

R-I-V-R-V-I-E.

Paxton figured it was supposed to spell out *Riverview*, even though there didn't seem to be any rivers nearby, but then again, maybe there used to be. Parked outside the theater was a mobile air-conditioning unit, the sleek vehicle humming, pumping cold air through a sealed tube into the building. Paxton followed the crowd toward the long row of open doors. As he got closer, the doors on the end closed, leaving a few in the middle still open.

He pushed forward, nearly running the final few steps, aiming for the middle. As he stepped through, more doors slammed behind him. The sun disappeared and the cool air enveloped him and it felt like a kiss.

He shivered, looked back. Saw the last door close, and a middle-aged man with a pronounced limp was left out in the blazing sun. The first thing the man did was deflate. Shoulders slumped, bag dropped to the ground. Then the tension returned to his spine and he stepped forward, smacking his palm against the door. He must have been wearing a ring because it made a sharp crack, like the glass might break.

"Hey," he yelled, his voice muffled. "Hey. You can't do this. I came all the way out here."

*Crack, crack, crack.*

"Hey."

A man in a gray shirt that said *RapidHire* on the back in white letters approached the rejected applicant. He placed a hand on the man's shoulder. Paxton couldn't read lips, but he assumed it was the same thing spoken to the woman who'd gotten turned away from the bus. She was the last person on line and the doors closed in her face, and a man in a RapidHire shirt appeared and said: "There is no last place. You have to want to work at Cloud. You are free to apply again in one month's time."

Paxton turned away from the scene. He couldn't find more room



for his own sadness—certainly he couldn't muster space for anyone else's.

The lobby was filled with men and women in the RapidHire shirts. Some stood with tweezers and small plastic bags, smiling happy, friendly smiles. Each applicant was instructed to allow a person in gray to pluck a few hairs and place them into a plastic bag. Then the applicant was invited to write his or her name and Social Security number on the bag in black felt marker.

The woman collecting Paxton's sample was almost perfectly round and shorter than him by a head. He had to bend down so she could reach. He winced as she ripped a few hairs from their roots, and he wrote his name on the bag, which he passed to another man who was waiting to run it off. As Paxton stepped over the threshold from the lobby to the theater, a stick-thin man with a bushy mustache handed him a small tablet computer.

"Take a seat and turn it on," he said, his voice a practiced, disinterested monotone. "The interview process will begin shortly."

Paxton hitched his bag on his shoulder and made his way down the aisle, the path worn almost to the subfloor. The space smelled like old, leaky pipes. He picked a row toward the front and moved to the middle. By the time he was settled into the hard wooden seat, his duffel next to him, there was a series of hard clicks at the rear of the theater as the doors latched shut.

His row was empty, save a woman with skin the color of baked earth and springy coils of dark brown hair piled high and unevenly atop her head. She wore a butterscotch sundress and matching flats, and sat toward the far end of the row, by the wall of the theater, where the ornate maroon wallpaper was marred by water stains. Paxton tried to catch her eye, smile at her, wanting to be polite, but also wanting to see more of her face, too. She didn't notice him, so he looked down at the tablet. Pulled a bottle of water from his bag, downed half of it, and pressed the button on the side.

The screen flared to life, large numbers at the center of the display.

Ten.

Then nine.

Then eight.

When it hit zero, the tablet buzzed and flashed, and the numbers were replaced by a series of empty fields. Paxton balanced it on his lap and focused.

Name, contact information, brief work history. Shirt size?

Paxton's hand hovered over *Work History*. He didn't want to explain what he had done before this, and the confluence of events that had brought him to a broken theater in a broken town. Because to do that meant having to explain that Cloud had destroyed his life.

Anyway, what would he write?

Would they even know who he was?

If they didn't, was that better or worse?

Paxton found he did, in fact, have more room for sadness, at the thought of applying for this job with *CEO* in the work history field.

His stomach knotted and he settled on the prison. Fifteen years. A long enough time to demonstrate loyalty. That's what he would call it, if he were asked: loyalty. If someone wanted to know about the gap, those two years between the prison and now, he'd deal with it.

After he filled in all the fields, the next screen appeared.

Have you ever stolen anything?

Underneath were two buttons. Green Yes and red No.

He rubbed his eyes, the brightness of the screen making them ache. Thought back to when he was nine, standing by the spinning wire comic rack in Mr. Chowdury's deli.

The comic book Paxton wanted was four dollars and he only had two. He could have gone home and asked his mother for the money, but instead he waited, his leg shaking, until a man came in and asked for a pack of cigarettes. As Mr. Chowdury bent down to where he kept the cigarettes underneath the counter, Paxton rolled up the comic, held it flush to his leg so it'd be out of view, and headed for the exit.

He walked to the park and sat on a rock and tried to read the comic but couldn't concentrate enough to understand it. The artwork blurred and got muddy as he obsessed over what he had just done.

Broken the law. Stolen from someone who had always been kind to him.

It took him half the day to work up the nerve, but he went back to the deli; stood outside, waiting until he was sure there was no one

else in there; then brought the comic book to the counter, carrying it like a dead pet. He explained through a hot gush of tears and phlegm that he was sorry.

Mr. Chowdury agreed to not call the police, or worse, his mother. But every time Paxton went into the deli after that—and it was the only deli within walking distance, so he had no choice—he could feel the old man's eyes burning on his back.

Paxton read the question again and touched the screen over the red box marked No, even though it was a lie. It was a lie he could live with.

The screen flashed and a new question appeared.

Do you believe it's morally acceptable to steal in some circumstances?

Green Yes, red No.

That was easy. No.

Do you believe it's morally acceptable to steal under any circumstances?

No.

If your family were starving, would you steal a loaf of bread to feed them?

Real answer: probably.

No.

Would you steal from your job?

No.

What if you knew you wouldn't be caught?

Paxton wished there was an I'm-not-going-to-steal-anything-please-let's-move-on button.

No.

If you knew someone stole something, would you report him or her?

He almost pressed No, having gotten used to the repetitive tap, then jerked his hand away and pressed Yes.

If the person threatened to harm you, would you still report him or her?

Sure. Yes.

Have you ever used drugs?

This one was a relief. Not just for the change of subject, but because Paxton could answer this one honestly.

No.

Have you ever had alcohol?

Yes.

How many alcoholic drinks do you consume per week?

1–3

4–6

7–10

11+

Seven to ten was probably more accurate, but Paxton picked the second option.

After that, the questions shifted.

How many windows are there in Seattle?

10,000

100,000

1,000,000

1,000,000,000

Should Uranus be considered a planet?

Yes

No

There are too many lawsuits.

Agree a lot

Agree a little

No opinion

Disagree a little

Disagree a lot

Paxton tried to give each question serious consideration, even if he wasn't sure what it all meant, though he figured there was some kind

of algorithm—something that would reveal to them the core of his personality through his opinion on astronomy.

He answered questions until he lost count. Then the screen went blank, and it stayed blank long enough that he wondered if he had done something wrong. He looked around for help but, finding none, looked back to the screen, where there was more text.

Thank you for your answers. Now we ask for a brief statement. When you see the timer appear in the lower left-hand corner, the recording will start, and you'll have one minute to explain why you want to work at Cloud. Please note, you don't need to speak for the entire minute. A clear, simple, and direct explanation will suffice. When you feel that you are finished, you may hit the red dot at the bottom of the screen to end the recording. You will not have the opportunity to rerecord.

Paxton's face appeared reflected back to him, distorted by the tilt of the screen, his skin washed to a sickly gray by the glow. A timer appeared in the bottom left-hand corner.

1:00

Then:

:59

"I didn't realize I would have to give a speech," Paxton said, giving his best this-is-a-joke smile, which looked sharper than he intended. "I guess I would say that, uh, you know, it's tough to get a job in this day and age, and between that and looking for a new place to live I figure it's kinda perfect, right?"

:43

"I mean, I really do want to work here. I think, uh, it's an incredible opportunity to learn and grow. Like the commercial says, 'Cloud is the solution to every need.'" He shook his head. "I'm sorry, I'm not great at talking off the cuff."

:22



Deep breath.

“But I’m a hard worker. I take pride in my work and I promise to give this my all.”

:09

Paxton pressed the red button and his face disappeared. The screen flashed to white. He cursed himself for stumbling through that. Had he known this would be part of the application he would have practiced.

Thank you. Please wait while the interview results are tabulated. At the end of the process your screen will turn either green or red. If red, we are sorry, either you failed the drug test, or you did not meet the standards expected at Cloud. You may exit the building and you must wait one month before reapplying. If green, then please stay and await further instructions.

The tablet turned black. Paxton raised his head and looked around, to see everyone else raising their heads and looking around. He caught eyes with the woman in his row, gave a little shrug. Rather than return it, she put the tablet on her lap and dug a small paper-back out of her purse.

Paxton balanced the tablet on his knees, not sure whether he wanted to see red or green.

Red meant leaving here and standing in the sun until another bus arrived, if there was even one coming. It meant scratching through want ads for jobs that didn’t pay enough to survive, and apartment listings for places that were either out of his price range or so decrepit as to be unlivable. It meant finding himself back in that rotten pool of frustration and emotion where he’d been treading for months, his nose barely above the waterline.

It almost seemed preferable to working for Cloud.

A snuffle erupted behind him. Paxton glanced back and saw the Asian woman who’d pushed past him earlier, face down, features washed in red light.

Paxton held his breath as his screen flashed.