

PHILLIP

**LABOR DAY [I]**

I don't work.

I have worked in the past, of course. My first job was working at the concession stand at a public swimming pool, way back in the 80s. My most recent job was working as a sound engineer for a company that produced job training videos, and that lasted up until the spring of 2002. In between I've done all sorts of stuff, most of it not that interesting—pizza deliveryman, cashier at a thrift store, administrative assistant. I spent one miserable summer pretending that I could be a professional DJ. Nothing can erode your faith in the sanctity of marriage quite like DJing a dozen weddings in one month.

I quit working for the training video place because I got a bunch of money when my mom died. She wasn't super-rich or anything—she was an elementary school teacher—but she was kind of a thrifty lady, so she had some money put away. Plus she got money when my dad died, that would have been '96—he died in a commuter train fire, and my mom got settlement money from the transit authority people, plus the insurance money, and I think she mostly just stuck that money in the bank and forgot about it. So all of a sudden my two brothers and I were all orphans and we each had like forty thousand dollars.

Both of my brothers are married, and they have kids and stuff, so I think they just took the money and went *well, this will come in handy when the kid needs braces* or *OK, this'll pay for one year of college* or whatever. But I don't have any dependents, and I don't really plan on having any anytime soon, so I was a little more free to do whatever I wanted with the money.

*Use it as the down payment for a house*, said my oldest brother. Good advice, I guess, in a cautious-and-predictable kind of way. I considered it for a while, but something about home ownership still seems like a trap to me. I still believe that you should be able to pack up and get out of town at a moment's notice, should circumstances call upon you to do so. (I am young enough to still believe this, but old enough that I cannot imagine what those circumstances might possibly be.)

*Just put it away*, said my other brother, the second oldest. *Just hang on to it*. This advice also seemed to lack a certain spectacular element. I figure if forty thousand dollars falls into your lap from nowhere you should use it to make at least *some*

frivolous gesture. I tried explaining this to my brothers—they didn't really get it. Finally one of them (I can't remember which) sighed with exaggerated exasperation and said *I don't know, Phillip, take a vacation or something.*

So I quit my job.

I decided not to *go* anywhere—I thought about going backpacking through Thailand or something like that, looked up some packages on the Internet, bought some Lonely Planet guides, but eventually I decided that what I wanted the most was to stay here and kind of work my shit out.

It was suicide, you know. My mom. Carbon monoxide in the garage. My brothers talk about it like it was an accident but you can look in the police report and read about the hose that she hooked from the exhaust pipe to the driver's-side window. I mean it's right there in the report. Or look in the fucking paper. I've got the clipping: *beloved local teacher takes own life. Blah blah blah blah, she is survived by her three sons.* If that doesn't make you question the value of like having a house and a job and kids and all that then I don't know what's wrong with you but.

Anyway.

So I quit my job. And I decided that before I went back to work I needed to think about work, like formally *think about it as a concept*. Try to figure out whether there were jobs out there that would make me feel happy, valuable, jobs that would make feel like there was some kind of *meaning* in my life. Looking through the paper didn't help. I looked at some of those books, too, that *What Color Is Your Parachute?* kind of shit, but that'll just make you gag. Eventually I figured out that what I really wanted to do was talk to people about their jobs—people about my age—and really *have conversations*. I mean, if you ask somebody *so what do you do?* and they say *I'm the assistant director of marketing for a medium-sized non-profit* then it's easy to go *oh, uh-huh* and walk away still having no fucking idea what it is that they actually *do*. It's way harder to actually keep asking questions until you begin to get a sense of what the job is. *So what does that entail? What are the actual duties you're responsible for? What's the first set of things you do in the morning? How much of your job is talking on the phone? How much is paperwork? How much is meetings? What do you do if there's nothing to do?*

So I decided I'd take a year off. And I set a goal for myself. I decided that between Labor Day 2002 and Labor Day 2003 I would interview three hundred and sixty-five people about their jobs.

This is the final interview.