

Robert Howard

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Robert Howard

Robert Fucking Howard.

Wallace Robert to be exact. Wallace Robert Fucking Howard. A man with a surname for a given name and a given name for a surname. Nemesis. Tormentor. Punishment for all my good deeds.

A postcard, forwarded from my erstwhile office. Read, I am sure, by everyone from the mailroom clerk to the FBI: “Thanks for everything, Robert.” In his barely legible scrawl.

They will wait a bit to see what I do, and when I don’t do anything, they will knock on my door in the middle of the night, drag me in and ask me questions I can’t answer, and they will believe nothing.

Someday, maybe, when they grow tired of waiting, they will either leave me alone or charge me, though if they charge me God knows what evidence they will use. What the hell? Maybe he’ll blow something up, and then they won’t bother with evidence.

They keep looking, but I doubt they will never find him because they are looking for the man depicted in their files—my files, actually—a man who never existed: poor, mentally disabled, unable to drive or use a credit card or think logically. The perfect menial.

By the time I had inherited him from my predecessor, who never came back from maternity leave, he had a file as thick as my wrist. I work, or did work, for Social Security, and my job is to try to wean

psychologically impaired individuals off the public dole by finding work they can do in spite of their impairments. Basically, I look at these folks and I say, “Hey, you’re sick, but you’re not that sick. Let me give you a shovel.” It’s hard because they think once they have those benefits they can keep them forever. That’s one of the reasons so many end up on the streets.

Robert had been an accountant for ten years and was pulling down six figures when he got sick. One day, he didn’t come to work, wouldn’t answer the phone, and when people came to the house they found a “Keep Out” sign on the door and windows covered with cardboard. He was diagnosed with both affective (12.04) and anxiety (12.06) disorders. Manic characteristics—hyperactivity, flight of ideas, inflated self-esteem, sleeplessness, easy distractability, delusions—leading to a difficulty maintaining concentration, persistence, pace. Also constant anxiety, characterized by motor tension, hyperactivity, apprehensiveness, vigilance and constant and obtrusive references to previous traumatic experience, which in sum produce an inability to function, as above.

Yada, yada, yada. I Xeroxed the files in case the Feds decide to lose a few pages. The assessment was based, as far as I could tell, on the anecdotal evidence of friends and family and two one-hour interviews with a shrink.

In my profession, you take those assessments with a large grain of salt. No question the guy is/was sick, but you could toss all that paperwork into the round file and just say, “The guy is incredibly weird.”

The first time we talked about work he might do, Robert told me he had been to the place in Nevada where the Army stores dead

aliens—he looked through the fence for hours until an armed man in a Jeep told him to go away. He wanted to work there. Then he told me that if you suck a lemon while cutting onions you won't cry.

He had no trouble maintaining concentration, when he wanted to. Give him a puzzle like Sudoku or a simple video game, and you could check back three hours later, certain he'd still be at it. Once he got into something, he REALLY got into it. But if he were filling out a form and you asked him to stop and give you his address, he'd tear up the form and walk out the door. His life, then, was a long chain of uncompleted tasks.

But he did see a therapist, and after a while, he seemed pretty normal. He'd got to the point where he resented home aides and was willing to try work just to get away from the people coming to his door to confirm the fact that he hated people who came to his door.

My job was to find Robert a job, a counselor, a home, anything that would return him to independent living. My clients must have been employed before they became disabled, and they must put real effort into the process. If they don't, then it's Catch-22. I drop them from the program on the grounds that they're not trying to get out of the program. Many of my clients are frauds—and not just the mental cases. Just before I was furloughed, I went to the house of a man with a chronic bad back and found him reroofing his house. So it goes.

Most of the time, even when I can see through the act, I have to play along. With Robert, it was no act. Nor was it one of those sweet harmless obsessions you see on TV. It was life and death played out in miniature. Sometimes, you could hear the tiny gears grinding.

He came to the office. He took a number. That number and all the

others are still in the file; he insisted I keep them. At first, he didn't want to talk to me; I wasn't the person he had talked to before. But when I told him he wouldn't get benefits if he didn't stay, he fixed me with that thousand-mile stare of his and collapsed into the chair. The rest of the interview, and it lasted probably half an hour, he wouldn't look at me. He responded, appropriately and politely, to my filing cabinet.

He said he didn't want a job, but since he had to have one, he wanted one in his field, but without a lot of people talking about him. And he didn't want people looking over his shoulder or second-guessing his work. In other words, he didn't want co-workers or a supervisor, and if he made a mistake, he didn't want to know about it. Strange as it may seem, in my business those are not unusual requests.

He was about thirty then, his face taut, his body almost morbidly thin and some part of him always in motion. He spoke with his hands, and while his hands were in motion, his feet were still, but he listened, apparently, with his feet. His hands would grip his chair, and the foot of one leg would bounce madly on the knee of the other. He was nearly bald, and as he spoke, sometimes, I would watch vagrant wisps of hair wander the top of his skull as if they couldn't figure out where to go.

His first job placement was to straighten up the accounts of a bookstore. A couple of old hippies had a place on the East side that sold books and art and music. They'd made a go of it for five years before the Feds weighed in. Something to do with the way they paid their artists and the write-offs they took for unsaleable merchandise. In a few weeks, Robert had cleared up those problems; the Feds were content, and the owners were beaming. He was difficult, they said, but what a Godsend!

Then came time for returns. I know nothing of the book business, but my understanding is that you pay the publisher for books, and if they don't sell, you can return them in good condition for credit. But if you're a small concern, they take months to credit your account. That created a cash flow problem for the hippies, and they handled it in good hippie fashion: they didn't wait for the publisher to issue a credit; they took the credit off their invoices and paid the remainder. The publishers didn't complain, but Robert did. In front of customers he called them crooks, his hands shaking, tears in his eyes. He wrote a long, impassioned letter to the IRS, which caused no end of trouble. So much for Robert.

That happened in January. In February, I got him a job entering data with a local tax preparer. It was a night job—no public contact, and all he had to do was type in the numbers that customers had already written on company forms they had turned in. Each line on the form corresponded to a square in the computer program; you filled them in, and the computer did your taxes. Robert lasted less than a week. He had no trouble typing in the figures; in fact, he was the fastest of the bunch. He disagreed with the computer program. Apparently, while he was typing, he was calculating, and he concluded that the computer was not taking all the deductions that some of the customers were allowed. He brought that to the attention of his supervisors, and they tried to convince him that the computer was good enough—after all, these were people who did not have a lot of money and did not want to pay an accountant \$150 an hour to find another \$130 in deductions.

Once again they were frauds, and Robert was out of a job.

There were several more ventures of that sort before I became convinced that any job that even remotely called on his training was a big mistake.

He worked for a nursery next, raising up flowers in little plastic boxes and caring for them. His meticulousness impressed his employers and his ignorance of plants made him willing to follow their lead. The job lasted over a year, and I felt like a genius. I even bragged to my co-workers, for Robert was well-known among us.

Then toward the end of that virginal year, he discovered a deep passion for plants. He couldn't stand for any of them to die. A nursery, of course, is not only a vegetable babyfold, it is a charnel house. Plants that don't thrive are ruthlessly exterminated. Most people don't mind this when the condemned is a petunia, but Robert is not most people and after a vehement expression of his newfound ideals he was once again out of a job.

Disheartened, I looked for a job that would not require judgment of any kind, and the closest I could come was custodial work. First, at a school, but the hours required some brief contact with children, and that did not go well. Next, at a strip mall, but he was too slow. One of the tenants was a beauty salon, and he'd worry about every stray hair. Once a month, they told me with some good humor, he'd go after the corners with a toothbrush. At this point sensible people might have given up, but the government does not require sense of its employees, and I didn't exhibit any.

I got Robert a job with a local security firm. The man had used us before and had found, to no one's surprise, that certifiably crazy people are far more honest than the rest of us. Since I had told the man about

Robert's peculiarities, they left him to his own devices, monitoring him only when he was around money. He worked there a year and never pocketed a penny. The owner called to thank me and said, "Even I'm not that honest."

They promoted him to recounting the money and entering the amounts in a computer. He was perfect, far better than any of the others, for even counting machines blunder. Then one day a machine broke down. This was not, apparently, like a Xerox machine breaking down. You don't call the company and wait a day for someone to show. You wait a day, and the next day you have no customers.

Unfortunately, the company that leased the machines didn't see it that way, and told Robert's employer at midnight that a technician would be there first thing in the morning. No one knew what to do except Robert. He opened the thing up, spent a couple of hours fiddling with God knows what, and it worked—at that point the company began to explore the possibility of doing its own servicing.

Robert was a hero, Robert was a god. Unaware of his previous income, they held an informal meeting and gave him a dollar-per-hour raise. He didn't complain. Soon, they discovered he could work with all sorts of machines. Again, I am not an expert in these matters, the Feds be damned, but in this city there was, I am told, a monopoly on servicing such devices, which was why the company could choose not to pay a technician overtime.

Slowly, Robert's company entered the market. At first it was a rough go, but after a while the sort of resentment monopolies always engender rose to the surface. They got contracts with companies like themselves and then with small banks that carried the names of cities

or counties. They hired personnel, but they also sent Robert to a school for such people, and he gave no trouble—or at least no trouble people felt like reporting to me. Once he was accredited and had worked in his new job for six months, I dropped him. He had a job, he had kept it, and he had actually shown the ability to rise to higher positions. As far as the government was concerned, he was cured.

The last I heard, he had uncovered an ATM scam—a very sophisticated one that involved people in other states—that was bleeding not his employer but customers of the banks.

From that point on, I know only what I have read in the news, what I have inferred from interviews with authorities and what I heard, early on, from Robert's employer, when that man was still speaking to me.

There are, of course, such things as time locks, which allow no one to access a safe, except within certain hours. When you buy such a safe, the owner or manager sets the time; then even he or she cannot walk into the bank and empty the safe during off hours. That's why you occasionally see junky cars outside banks at three in the morning. The cleaning company has a key.

Apparently, each of these safes has a protocol for overriding the codes, in case something doesn't work. It wouldn't do to have a bank closed because they couldn't get into their own safe. Only a few people have access to such codes (and their default settings), and the person who services the thing must be one of them. And of course they are serviced, now and then. And of course, while it might be difficult to get into a bank during off hours, it is not at all difficult for an employee of the servicing company, which also processes money transfers, to get into that company's own safe.

No one is saying exactly how this was done—although there are people who feel that I know—but one night about four in the morning, Robert put a million dollars in cash into the back of his van and drove off. At least two people saw him carrying the money to the back of the building and thought nothing of it. At least one person, his supervisor, did not see the money but did see him leaving and thought he was off to an assignment. Those three people, I would imagine, are now living under the same cloud of suspicion that hovers over me.

It probably came to them much earlier. Only about two months after the robbery, long after the folks in my office had given up asking (in jest, I hope) if Robert had cut me in, a man in a grey suit with an FBI badge showed up at work—emphasis on show. He didn't ask that many questions, but he made a point of telling everyone in the office that I was a "witness." I had no idea what I might have witnessed, nor did he tell me. He had a warrant for Robert's file, and after our secretary Xeroxed the documents, I gave him the originals; he asked about our relationship, and I told him it was difficult but friendly. He seemed to be under the illusion that Robert had never been sick, that he had gone through the system from the beginning in order to find a way to steal money. I tried to tell him how absurd that was but received only suspicion for my efforts.

That was it, for a while. Then another man came by to ask me in detail about each of Robert's previous jobs, focusing particularly on whether there had been any reports of theft. I got the feeling that he had already talked to the employers and they had, as people often do in such circumstances, discovered all sorts of thefts they had never reported to me. So I said so, and the man laughed. He'd often found people acted that way, he said. It was just human nature.

But then the head of the security firm, previously a great fan, turned against me. He decided that I must have engineered his downfall—for by then he had lost so many clients he had been forced to file for bankruptcy. How I had engineered the scheme, he didn't know, but he was sure I'd done it. These suspicions were reported, with the usual disclaimers, in the local press.

And all the while no one had been able to find Robert.

That seems to be a key. No one can find him, so he can't have been ill. No one can find him, so he must have an accomplice.

And who better to fill the role than a civil servant making less than \$50,000 a year? My background was checked, my neighbors talked to, and all that information distilled before their first real interrogation of me. They asked me about vacations, they asked about my Mercedes, they asked about the hot tub in my house. I told them my mother had died and left me insurance—I offered to let them into my bank account so they could track my income and expenses. They already had.

So they knew the answers to those questions.

I called my ex-wife, and asked if she'd really said I was loose with money—and when she bothered to answer the phone, she told me she had said no such thing. Two days later I received a call from some lawyer telling me I'd better not badger my ex-wife any more or there would be trouble.

The neighbors I like stopped talking to me; the one I don't like, the man next door who fights with me over whether my fence is on his property or mine, invites himself over now and then just to find out what new horrors have been visited upon me.

Robert, meanwhile, has been seen everywhere from Canada to

Calabria. The post card, however, came from a station about three blocks from my house.

Suspicion didn't die, it just got bored and went away. My year-end performance review was so poor that I filed a grievance and won. The arbitrator pointed out that I'd had fifteen years of stellar reviews up to that point and there was no real evidence of a change in my work habits, beyond the annoying traffic of federal law officers through our building. But I was reassigned, at my own request, to a position that did not require public contact. I was tired of the clients and their jokes, my colleagues and their silences, my boss and his attempts to get rid of me.

So there I was, a week ago, minding my own business turning actual paper into virtual paper like a good little boy, when a box appeared on my desk, along with my boss and the building security officer. It looked like an ordinary box to me, but they pointed out what they called telltale signs. The sender had used stamps not a metered slip, and several of them had been pasted upside down. The box had come from a liquor store and had probably been picked out of a dumpster. The mailer had used masking tape instead of postal tape. The address was in block letters, not in script or a more personal printing, and there was no return address. Worst of all there were a couple of greasy stains that could easily have come from the dumpster, but might also have come from the presence of some greasy substance inside, like plastic explosives. These were good people, who knew about my problems but did not believe in my guilt, or at least said they didn't. They thought someone had sent me a bomb.

Enter the bomb squad. They arrived in their Michelin Man suits with a dog and let the dog sniff the box. The dog was unimpressed.

Still, they took the box in an armored vehicle to an area on the edge of town just beyond the animal shelter, with its surrounding piles of ashes. My supervisor and I came in his car. The Feds arrived soon after.

A Michelin man took my box out to a big crater in the ground and set a charge under it and came back. As he was taking off his suit, he told me the last one he'd done was a cake from somebody's grandma.

Then they blew it up, and in a great shower like a confetti parade, down floated \$50,000 in twenties, somewhat torn and singed by the explosion. And everyone—the bomb squad, the Feds, my supervisor, even the damned dog—turned and looked at me. □