

DAVID J. HORN'S

HARD LABOR



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Front cover art is from the film *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) © Warner Bros.

For all the working stiffs
who can't stand working.

HARD LABOR

TABLE OF CONTENTS

BEFORE WE BEGIN...

THE JOB INTERVIEW

WALKING WALTER

THE FIRST TIME

BARBECUED

OOPS INC.

BLOODY BOOTS BURIED IN THE SAND

THE UNEMPLOYABLES

THIS TIME THE WORLD REALLY IS ENDING
AGAIN

THIS TIME THE WORLD REALLY IS ENDING AGAIN

The whole country was going ape shit for the end of the world. Comets, aliens, wars, diseases, natural disasters, fascist state conspiracy freakouts. It's all people talked about. Newspapers, television, the Internet – it was one gigantic shit storm that smelled worse than a port-o-john at a Megadeth concert. One thing seemed certain, everyone was jonesing for the final scene. Even the Government was making foreign policy decisions based on the prophecies of Nostradamus. Everyone was bucking for the end.

And then there was Jamie Dropping. He wasn't

particularly interested in all the hype about the world ending. He had his own problems to deal with. He no longer felt the warm embers of happiness. Life for Jamie was a lot of smoke with very little flame. Now that he was nearing the age of retirement, he felt his age. He woke up, his ankles hurt. His legs were stiff. Actually his left leg was beyond stiff. It was completely numb. He could sleep for twelve hours and still feel exhausted. He looked at the dark bags under his eyes and wondered about his glory years. He had had them. There was a happy idealized past somewhere...He gave up thinking, dried his hair had a quick cup of coffee and hit the road. Off to work. Another shitty day.

As the world was ending (again), Jamie's numb leg began to worry him. It had happened on a dreary humid evening. Jamie had gone to bed, and when he woke up the next morning his leg had as much feeling as a roll of toilet paper. Like any normal person, Jamie hoped that the numbness would go away just as suddenly as it had appeared. But as the numbness persisted, he began to interpret his leg as a sign: this was the beginning of the end. He had thought about seeing a doctor, but he had soundly reasoned, *What good is a doctor if you're dying?* Of course, Jamie didn't *really* believe he was dying. He rarely even thought seriously about death. Hell death didn't exist; it was something that happened to other

people. He still had plenty of time. But it seemed like a good enough excuse to avoid the hassle of a doctor's visit.

Jamie's other problem was occupational. He was a life insurance salesman at a peculiar point in history that the media was calling "the end-of-time." He had been selling life insurance for the last 12 years, and once upon a time he had been moderately successful at it. But now it was near impossible. When the world is ending all the time, it is difficult to see the utility of life insurance. Most people had reasoned, just as soundly as Jamie had reasoned about doctors, *What good is insurance when the world is ending?*

Even though it was a tough market, Jamie was able to sell a policy here and there. His strategy was simple. Every now and then, one of the myriad Doomsday groups would throw an end of the world pep rally. There would be guest speakers, brownies, punch, cheerleaders, sing-a-longs, and, of course, lots of talk about death and dying. Jamie would pose as a new member and try to meet people. He would work the crowd, taking down names and phone numbers. His pitch was, "I'm a new member and I thought it would be cool to meet some other members and really get to know them before the end of the world." Most people looked at Jamie as if he were a hideous freak, but every now and then there was a taker, like Mr. and Mrs. Lint.

Jamie had met Mr. and Mrs. Lint at a rally that

celebrated the arrival of time traveling aliens from another dimension. The aliens hadn't arrived yet, but they were rocketing through some other dimension in their Doomsday rockets. Once they landed on earth they were going to blow the shit out of everything and everybody. But the aliens had made contact with the group leader, Dr. Jerry Rammer, and had instructed him to

ORGANIZE AN ARMY. ORGANIZE AN ARMY OF SOLDIERS THAT WILL SERVE AS THE VEHICLES FOR OUR MASS VIOLENCE AND WE WILL REWARD YOU AND YOUR ARMY INFINITELY.

The verb “reward” and the adverb “indefinitely” were interpreted by Dr. Rammer to mean that the group would be whisked away to the home of the aliens, which Dr. Rammer said was just east of a planet named Hulga. No one seemed too concerned with the troubling phrase “vehicles for our mass violence.”

Mr. and Mrs. Lint were passing out homemade chocolate chip cookies at the end-of-the-world-lets-be-vehicles-of-aliens rally. They were old. Real old. They were well beyond their golden years. Jamie knew they weren't insurable *per se*, but you never could tell. Maybe they had children. Grandchildren.

When Mrs. Lint saw Jamie standing in line with the other Doomers (that's what people were called who waited around for doomsday all the time) waiting for cookies, she

told him, “You remind me of my son. Except he's a bit shorter and has longer hair. He doesn't wear glasses. Could you take your glasses off?”

Mrs. Lint had spent a lifetime perfecting the art of false sympathy. She was sweet and kind looking, but behind the silver haired grandmother facade was a cold, calculating misanthrope. Mrs. Lint always pretended to like her son publicly, but in private, he was her Judas.

Jamie took off his glasses and grinned. “Doesn't he look like Chad, Charley?” Charley Lint, was also handing out cookies, but his unhappiness was genuine. “Chad's an idiot.”

“Yes, but this man, doesn't he look like Chad?” Mrs. Lint insisted.

Mr. Lint squinted at Jamie for a moment and said, “Chad's taller and he wears glasses.”

It was clear that neither Mr. Lint nor Mrs. Lint remembered what their son looked like anymore. It had been a long, long time since they had seen or heard from Chad. It didn't matter. Jamie saw his opportunity, so he popped the question. “Do you think we could hang out and get to know one another before the aliens arrive?”

Mrs. Lint pretended to be pleased with the idea, and said with hand clapping enthusiasm, “That sounds fantastic.” Jamie took their names and phone number.

Jamie, of course, didn't call. Not right away at least.

He waited for the group's deadline to pass, and once it passed and the aliens hadn't arrived, Jamie made his move. He called Mr. and Mrs. Lint to see if he could meet with them. Mrs. Lint said they would love to see him. This was the difficult part of Jamie's sales strategy: he had to play the role of a Doomer turned life insurance salesman. It was never easy.

One thing in Jamie's favor was that Doomers, living beyond their own Doomsday, were usually depressed and despondent. They were slightly suicidal and generally grumpy. Some were ready to believe in anything to fill the hole left by their collapsed belief systems.

So, one stormy Monday morning at 9:00 am sharp, Jamie pulled up to the Lint's house. He parked, limped to the front door. He paused for a moment collected himself and repeated the mantra of his profession, "My money is in their pockets. My money is in their pockets," and then rang the doorbell.

Mrs. Lint opened the front door. "Hello," she smiled.

"Hello Mrs. Lint..."

"We've been waiting for you all morning long. Charley is *soooo* excited that you wanted to stop by.."

Jamie noticed that Mrs. Lint was wearing an extra large white t-shirt that read "Goat Foot Pilot." The words were printed in plain black block letters.

Jamie stepped inside and saw that it was a typical

Doomer house. It was devoid of all furniture, with the exception of a folding table, a couple of chairs and an old beat up television. No self respecting Doomer would own anything as the end approached. Mr. Lint was seated in a chair at the table. He had a yellow legal pad of paper in front of him. He was asleep.

“Charley, Jamie is here,” announced Mrs. Lint. Nothing.

“CHARLEY, JAMIE HAS STOPPED BY TO SEE US,” she yelled. Still nothing.

“Maybe I can come back at a better time,” Jamie suggested.

Mrs. Lint walked over to Charley. She picked up the legal pad and whacked Mr. Lint on the top of the head.

“What the hell...” Mr. Lint woke up swinging. Jamie realized that Mr. Lint was also wearing a white t-shirt with big black letters. His shirt read, “Endless Crapper”.

“Charley, Jamie is here to visit with us.”

Mr. Lint looked around the room, trying to gather his bearings. He scowled at Jamie, “Who the hell are you?”

“We met at the rally a couple of weeks ago. You were passing out the cookies.”

“He's the one I thought looked like Chad,” explained Mrs. Lint.

“What the hell do you want?”

It was an uncomfortable beginning. Jamie wiped his

brow and said, "Well, I was waiting for the aliens to come. I was waiting to be a vehicle of doom. I really was. My whole heart was in it. And then when they didn't arrive, I got really down. I mean what happened to them? Maybe they're lost...or delayed...or maybe something terrible happened to them. Then I began to think about life. Maybe we won't die. Maybe we are all going to live. Maybe, just maybe..." Jamie began to notice that Mr. And Mrs. Lint's faces were buried deep beneath a set of frowns. *They can smell the sales pitch*, thought Jamie. He decided to take it slower. "Is everything OK?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" asked Mr. Lint.

"The aliens that didn't arrive..."

"These damned shirts were made by aliens."

Jamie tried to smile. "I'm sorry. They were made by illegal immigrants?"

"No. You dumb son of a bitch. Aliens from outer space."

"Didn't you get your shirt?" Mrs. Lint had that concerned motherly look on her face, but she was really imagining hitting Jamie in the head with a meat cleaver.

"Oh, of course. Of course I got it. I just didn't feel like wearing it," Jamie lied.

"You didn't feel like wearing it?" Mr. Lint was beyond words.

“What's your name?” asked Mrs. Lint.

“Jamie,” said Jamie. His mind began to send out warning signals. The scene was beginning to freak him out.

“No, your new name. The one on your shirt, silly.” Mrs. Lint now hated Jamie more than her son Chad.

Jamie looked at the shirts. Endless Crapper. Goat Foot Pilot. “My new name? Mule...Snot...Sucker.” Jamie was sweating profusely.

“Yeah, well you should be wearing yours. Because you never know when the world is gonna blow – and these shirts are our salvation,” explained Mr. Lint.

“Of course,” said Jamie. He was completely confused.

“Dr. Rammer explained at the meeting...weren't you there?” Mr. Lint was convinced that Jamie wasn't flying at full speed. “These shirts were given to us by the aliens so that they can identify us. These shirts are our insurance,” said Mr. Lint.

What a load of crap, thought Jamie. Then he added with a smile, “To be honest, I just don't like my new name that much. I mean Goat Foot Pilot is a good name. But Mule Snot Sucker?”

“Well at least you're not Endless Crapper,” Mrs. Lint joked, but Mr. Lint didn't find his new name very funny.

“It's just unfortunate that the aliens don't know

English that good,” Jamie laughed. Neither Mrs. Lint nor Mr. Lint thought the comment funny. “Well, anyways...I don't think the world is gonna end today,” said Jamie.

“What the hell do you know?” barked Mr. Lint.

“It doesn't look too good outside if you ask me,” said Mrs. Lint peering through the curtains.

Jamie limped to the window. The sky was gangrenous green and filled with black pussy soars. Jamie listened at the window. Everything was silent. There wasn't a single sound. Not a buzz. Birds, squirrels, deer, moles, flies, bees – all of suburban nature that lived in the Lints' neighborhood had enough sense to hide.

“Oh, my God,” said Jamie.

“You need to run home and get your shirt,” advised Mrs. Lint.

Jamie limped quickly to the front door. But the wind was getting wild, and the screen door started slapping violently against the house.

“Maybe I should wait a bit.”

“But your shirt? Don't you want to be saved?” asked Mrs. Lint.

Jamie said nothing. He just looked out the window.

“Of course he doesn't want to be saved! He's a bum. Just like all the other dead beats in his generation,” answered Mr. Lint.

The wind was roaring. There was a sudden silver

flash and then darkness. The darkness didn't last long, but it was profound. Deep. Not a single spark of light could survive in that darkness. When the light returned everything seemed grey and faded. The light seemed stale and tarnished. Standing among the Lints and Jamie was Death.

Mrs. Lint howled. Jamie jumped, and Mr. Lint blurted, "Are you one of the God damned aliens?"

"No, I'm Death," said Death.

Mr. Lint was perplexed. Mrs. Lint shook with fear. Jamie Dropping couldn't believe his eyes. He had always imagined Death as a black robed skeleton with a sickle. But Death didn't look so fierce or ominous. Instead Death looked like a used car's salesman. He was wearing a short sleeve dress shirt and a tie. He was balding and his hair was combed over from one side of his head to the other. Death was even chewing gum.

"You can't be Death," said Jamie.

"Why not?"

"You look just like..." Jamie didn't know what to say, plus he didn't want to offend Death by telling him that he looked like a used car salesman.

"I look like an insurance salesman?" Death smiled. "I'm Death, Jamie. I don't peddle life insurance." Touché.

"Yeah, whatever," Jamie mumbled to himself. Mr. and Mrs. Lint weren't paying attention to Jamie's

conversation with Death. They were busy whispering about the aliens and being saved.

“What are you two whispering about?” snapped Death.

The old couple stopped whispering and Mr. Lint spoke to Death in Tarzanese, “Me Endless Crapper. She Goat Foot Pilot.”

Death was not finding the situation amusing. He was grossly irritated by Jamie's doubting and Mr. Lint's profound lack of intelligence.

“Enough bullshit. I have come for you three. As of this moment you're all dead.”

Death was carrying a beat-up, tan briefcase. He dropped it on the folding table and popped it open. Inside the briefcase was a chaos of paper. Death sighed at the sight of it and began to rummage through the papers.

It wasn't that Death was disorganized, there was just too much work. He couldn't keep up with it all. He cursed the Universal Governing and Organizing Department for its lack of support. But he knew things would never change. Death was seriously considering subcontracting some of the collection work to some of the Dead in order just to get some time to himself: to watch *Laverne and Shirley* reruns, sipping a Budweiser. He just wanted a break.

Death finished rummaging and swore, “DAMN IT. I only have the long forms left.” He sighed, pulled out a pen

and asked Mrs. Lint. "Full name please."

"But you can't take my husband or me...we're saved."

"We have the t-shirts," insisted Mr. Lint.

Death looked at the t-shirts. "Death gives preferential treatment to no one."

"But if we're dead, we'll miss the end of the world?" Mrs. Lint was very disappointed that she couldn't watch million of others burn or drown, however Armageddon would play itself out.

"Those are the breaks."

"Is it because of my leg?" Jamie asked Death.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I never saw a doctor about my leg going numb."

"Listen people, you're dead. Forget about the living. Forget about what you regret not having done while alive. It just makes being dead more difficult," said Death returning his attention to the paperwork.

"Well...well, I'm not dead," protested Jamie Dropping. He limped quickly to the door. Flung it open and stepped out into the eerie green daylight. He fought against the wind and made his way to his car. He wrestled with the driver side door. Death stood, watching Jamie from the front door - flanked by Mr. and Mrs. Lint.

Jamie managed to open the car door and shouted out defiantly, "Ha."

"You're going to let him get away?" complained Mrs.

Lint.

“The car is dead as well,” Death sighed.

Jamie turned the key, pumped the gas, turned the key a few more times. Soon, the engine was flooded and stank of gasoline.

Jamie limped back to the house. He tucked in his shirt tails and said, “My car won't start. I need to call a tow truck.”

“The phone is dead.” said Death. “Your car is dead. These old people are dead. You are dead, Jamie.” Death unwrapped another stick of Juicy Fruit and popped it into his mouth.

As Death filled out the paperwork, he kept checking his watch and sighing, "This is ridiculous." Then he made an appeal for sympathy, "Look at the amount of paperwork I have to file. I've got another 155,456 people to collect still. God I hate this job."

Mr. and Mrs. Lint had turned on the TV and were flipping the channels. They wanted to see what was happening around the world. Maybe this was the end of the world. To their surprise nothing was happening. Sports channels televised golf from India, tennis from Australia, there were even people bowling and playing poker. Mr. Lint continued to flip through the channels. He found a talk show where the hosts were discussing the food they ate for dinner the night before. They told jokes.

He landed on a channel that showed a colorful parade marching down a street. Drums and trumpets. Batons tossed into the air. Cheerleaders flipped and did cartwheels. He dropped the control from his hands. Mrs. Lint began to cry. It was depressing for them to think that the world still went on even when you no longer existed. It made the Lints feel cheated. It seemed so unfair. You were dead and people were telling jokes, bowling and having parades?

Even Jamie found the images a bit depressing. Seeing the living made him think about his own life. There was a lot of stuff he didn't want to think about. There were parts that he would have liked to flush down the toilet. Whole decades. But even though he had made a mess of the life he had lived he still wanted to go on. He didn't want it to end. While the Lints wept bitterly to one another and lamented the absence of the aliens that should have saved them, Jamie sidled up to Death. "Is there anyway you can maybe let me live?" he sniveled.

"Impossible. You are already dead," Death didn't look up from his paperwork.

"There isn't anyway I could get a second chance or something?"

Death sat back and sighed. He glowered at the Lints. "Frightening. Absolutely frightening. You know, the living scare the hell out of me," Death put his arms behind his

head and Jamie could see the sweat stains in the armpits of his shirt. "I've got an ICU02 form. It's a diversion. It's a helluva lot less paperwork."

"A diversion?"

Death rummaged through his briefcase and pulled out another form. "You can be reborn. How's that? You can be reborn anywhere you want. So, think of some place exotic."

Jamie couldn't believe what he was hearing. He was stunned silent. Never in his life had he been so lucky.

"So where the hell do you want to go?"

"How about..." Jamie thought for a moment and said the first place that came to his mind, "Idaho."

"How about Monkey's Elbow Idaho? It's filled with retired circus performers. Acrobats, escape artists, lion tamers. I always like it there. A real friendly bunch."

"Sure."

Death started filling in the paperwork. Jamie peered over Death's shoulder and watched him write the words *Monkey's Elbow Idaho*. At the top of the form was the title

ICU02: Soul Diversion

While Death filled out the paperwork and the Lints whispered hotly at one another, Jamie waited to be reborn.

Mr. and Mrs. Lints' nosy neighbor, Mrs. Joy Mudwart, was watching the eerie weather conditions from her front door. She peeked through the curtains with one eye open and the other closed tight. She was afraid of what she might see. Maybe the dead were parading about looking for living humans to eat, or something equally horrible. And what *did* she see? With that one terrified open eye, she saw three skeletons doing the dance of death in the yard next door. She ducked down. Her heart racing, panting. She looked again. Two skeletons dancing and the third sort of limping around. Mrs. Joy Mudwart shrieked, "LESTER!!!!!"

Her husband, Lester, was hiding in the basement, daydreaming about throwing himself off a cliff. "What? WHAT? WHAT THE HELL DO YOU WANT NOW?" he shrieked back. "Lester, skeletons are dancing in the Lints' front yard. This time the world really is ending, Lester."

