



THE VANISHED TRADES ♦

The Human Computers

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Welcome back to the fire, friends. Glad you found us — the nights are getting that particular kind of dark lately, the kind that makes you want to settle in and not move for a while. I've been thinking about work. Specifically, the work that used to exist and then, at some point, simply didn't. Not the big industrial losses — not the mill towns or the mine closures, though those stories matter and we'll get to them another night. I mean the single jobs. The one-person jobs. The jobs that had a name and a craft and a daily rhythm, and then one day — quietly, without ceremony — stopped being needed.

CAROL

You know that feeling of reaching for a word and finding the space where it used to be? That's what you're describing. Something was there so long it shaped the air around it, and then it wasn't.



MARTY

There was a job called a knocker-upper. I want you to hold that name for a moment before I explain it. In Britain and Ireland, well into the early twentieth century, there were men and women whose entire profession was waking people up for work. They'd walk the streets before dawn — and I mean long before dawn — carrying a long wooden pole or a length of wire, and they'd tap, quietly and precisely, on the bedroom windows of the people who had paid them a few pence a week. Just the right window. Just the right number of taps. Enough to rouse you, not enough to wake the house.

CAROL

That's such a careful job. Someone cold and awake in the dark so that you could be warm and asleep until the last possible moment. There's real kindness in that precision.



MARTY

The question that gets me every time is: who woke the knocker-upper? And the answer is — other knocker-uppers, in a sort of human chain, each waking the next, with the last ones in the chain simply staying up all night. The job persisted longer than you'd expect — some knocker-uppers were still working in London in the nineteen forties, for night-shift workers who didn't trust the alarm clock. The last well-documented one was a woman named Mary Smith, who worked the East End in the nineteen twenties. Her tool of choice was a peashooter. A long tube, peas against the glass.

CAROL

Mary Smith deserves a plaque somewhere. "Here worked Mary Smith. She got you there."



MARTY

The lamplighter is another one — you've seen the image in paintings and old photographs, the figure with the long pole at dusk, moving down a gas-lit street, touching flame to each lamp in turn. He'd light them in the evening and come back to extinguish them at dawn. It's one of those images so beautiful it became its own category of art, a whole visual shorthand for a certain quiet urban dignity. In most North American cities, the lamplighters were gone by the early nineteen hundreds, replaced by electric streetlights that turned themselves on and off.

CAROL

What I can't shake about that is — the street looks exactly the same afterward. Same lamps, same light. But the man who had a relationship with every post on that block, who knew which one burned a little hot and which one needed coaxing — he's just not there. The street doesn't remember him.



MARTY

But here is the story with a date. October the sixth, nineteen twenty-seven. The Jazz Singer opens at the Warner Theatre in New York City. And at that moment — not that anyone knew it yet — every pianist who'd been sitting in the dark of every movie theatre across North America, playing the music live under the silent pictures, felt the floor shift under their stool.

CAROL

We talked about this in that film class, the one where we met — do you remember Professor Hartley? He called it the most violent single night in labour history that nobody discusses. I've never stopped thinking about that phrase.



MARTY

The Jazz Singer wasn't technically the first sound film — film history is never that clean — but it was the first one that convinced the world the thing was permanent. Within roughly two years, the studios had converted entirely to sound. And across the continent, the musicians who'd played for the silents — the pianists, the organists, the small house orchestras in the grander theatres — lost their positions. Some estimates put it at ten thousand musicians in the United States alone, out of work inside eighteen months.

CAROL

Ten thousand people who had spent years learning exactly how to make you feel something. When to build, when to go quiet so the grief in the scene could breathe. And then the film just — did it itself, and didn't need them anymore.



MARTY

Some of those musicians had developed real, intricate systems. There were published cue sheets — little guides that came with a film print, telling the house musician what to play for which scene and when to shift. But the best ones ignored the sheets entirely and improvised, reading the picture the way a jazz player reads the room. Those people were extraordinary. They were doing something genuinely hard and genuinely live every single night, and almost nobody alive today knows they existed.

CAROL

I keep thinking about the last night. Not the first talkie — the last silent, in some small town that hadn't converted yet. Some pianist playing away in the dark, completely unaware that it was the last time anyone would ever need exactly that skill, in exactly that way.



MARTY

There's one more I want to tell you about — the lecturers. In the cigar factories of Cuba, and later in Tampa, Florida, and a handful of other cities, there was a person — almost always a man — whose sole job was to sit on a raised platform in the middle of the factory floor and read aloud to the workers all day long. Novels, newspapers, political essays. The cigar rollers, whose hands were occupied but whose minds were free, would vote on what was read. And here's the part that still amazes me: they paid the lecturer themselves, out of their own wages, a small portion collected weekly.

CAROL

Wait — the workers paid him? Out of their own pay, not the factory?



MARTY

Out of their own pay. The factory owners tolerated it, mostly, until the lectors started reading Marx and anarchist literature — which, given that the workers were choosing the material, was probably inevitable. In Tampa, in nineteen thirty-one, the owners banned the practice outright. The workers went on strike. They lost. And that was the end of a tradition that had run for decades, one of the most civilized arrangements I have ever heard of in a workplace.

CAROL

People pooling a little of their own wages so someone could read them a novel while they worked. That's not a lost job — that's a lost civilization. I would have paid into that fund without blinking.



MARTY

What strikes me, when I hold all of these together, is that not one of them was simply replaced by a machine that did the same thing. They were replaced by a change in how life was organized. And the change was usually called progress, and usually it was, in most of the ways we measure. But there was something human in those jobs that didn't have a clean equivalent on the other side of the shift.

CAROL

The knocker-upper knew which window was yours. The lector knew what chapter you'd been waiting for all week. That's not efficiency — that's someone paying specific attention to you. And I think that's what actually disappears. Not the job. The person who knew you.

MARTY

A friend of mine is a retired film projectionist — real film, not digital, the big platters and the carbon arc lamps. He told me that every print of a film is different by the time it finishes its run. Scratches, splices, little jumps where someone repaired a break. He said he knew every flaw in every print he ever ran, and when they came up he'd feel this private recognition, like a handshake. He retired the year the multiplex went digital. He said, quietly, as though it were just

a fact about the weather: the machine doesn't know the print.

CAROL

The machine doesn't know the print. Marty, that man should sit right here beside this fire and talk until morning.

MARTY

Maybe the right way to hold all of this isn't as loss, exactly. Those people did their work. They were good at it, most of them. They were paid — not always enough, but paid. They went home at the end of the day knowing they had lit a city's streets, or gotten a neighbourhood to work on time, or given a factory floor an afternoon with Tolstoy. That's not a small thing. That is a life, shaped by a specific skill that took years to build and was genuinely needed, right up until it wasn't.

CAROL

And I think the best thing a story can do is make sure those people exist for a few minutes — not as symbols of change or casualties of history, but just as people who were extraordinarily good at something specific. Mary Smith with her peashooter. The pianist in the dark. The lector finding the good paragraph on a Tuesday afternoon. I'm glad you told this one.

MARTY

So the next time your phone alarm goes off tomorrow morning, maybe give a thought to Mary Smith, cold in the East End before dawn, loading her peashooter. To the pianist in the dark, watching the picture and finding the right chord by feel. To the lector up on his platform, knowing exactly which sentence would make the afternoon go better. To the lamplighter who had a relationship with every post on his street. Some things end. Some things are worth saying out loud, at least once, so they don't end entirely. That's all we can do, some nights. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

Sleep warm, friends. And if your alarm goes off in the morning, please — for Mary Smith — answer it on the first tap.