

BEN LIEBERMAN

ODD JOBS

a Kevin Davenport Novel

*“Odd Jobs is a tightly-wound, well written
mystery that I read in one sitting.”*

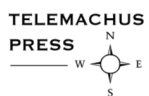
JAMES PATTERSON

#1 Best Selling Author

ODD JOBS

by

Ben Lieberman



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ODD JOBS

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*To Debbie — My wife, best friend and a great editor as well. Evan,
Jamie and Rachel — I'm so grateful for all your encouragement.*

CHAPTER 1

Just when I thought I could pull it off, I let out a double tequila burp. I can't stop tasting the shit. I'm in the ultimate purgatory: that place simultaneously blending being hungover and being drunk. What seemed pretty manageable last night has a whole different view from this bus. Man, I just went out to meet Ray and Cindy for a few Margaritas at Rio Bravo and just like that, it's two in the morning and I'm doing shots of Wild Turkey in the Blarney Stone, arguing politics with some toothless 80-year-old guy.

The sun is coming up, and somewhere someone is thinking how beautiful this is and what a great day it's going to be. That's not me. The bus turns left onto Industrial Road and passes a huge cemetery that is jam-packed with acres and acres of tombstones all on top of each other. It's fuckin' packed tighter than the six-train. Some low budget tombstones are actually outside the metal fence. I guess they got a discount. A guy is walking his dog and the dog is taking a leak on one of the exterior tombstones. This gives me a degree of satisfaction, as someone is having a worse day than me.

When I graduate from State and get a real job, I'm buying a Maserati GranCabrio. That's what I tell my friend Cliff Tsan sometimes. He keeps me down to earth and tells me to start liking buses, because I'll never have any job but odd jobs, like the one I have now, carrying beef carcasses. "You know why they're called odd jobs?" he says.

"Because they're really strange?" I answer.

"No, asshole," Cliff says solemnly. "Odd comes from an Old Norse word meaning the tip of a spear. Therefore, an odd job is a job that makes you feel

like you're being stabbed with a spear." Cliff is an English major whose father is a famous novelist, so maybe he's right; then again, maybe he's just busting my balls.

The bus hits a pothole, and my neck goes right through my brain. That's what it feels like, anyway. I don't know why I go out drinking with my friends on a work night, but sometimes I do. Like last night. It's not like I can even afford it; I'm supposed to be saving money for school. But I don't want the guys to think I'm an asshole.

Through a red haze of pain I see the dairy factory on the left, pink and gold in the light of the rising sun. I wish I had a job there. I could run the machine that separates the milk from the cream, or drive a tanker truck. Nice clean jobs. But no, the part of Maspeth, Queens, that I claim as my little piece of heaven is staring right at me. In front is a honkin' big sign in hemoglobin red and raw bone white reading Kosher World Meat Factory: The highest standards in this world and beyond.

I don't belong on this bus, and I don't belong at Kosher World. But I don't belong with the hard-drinking, money-hemorrhaging crowd either, like Cliff and his friends. So where do I belong? That is the million-dollar question, Regis. But first I've got to try to do something about my current situation.

My watch reads 6:15 a.m. as I enter the building and get struck in the face with the stench of blood, tripe and oozing intestines. Miraculously, my stomach stays where it's supposed to be. Better yet, I'm on time. It's June 23rd and I'm bundled in long underwear, flannels and a thick orange jumpsuit, the uniform of the serious meat handler. I'm sweating like a racehorse. Christ, this is so unnatural. But the money's good, real good. There's no one back at college making this kind of money, at least not legally. Cliff and Mike Katz have internships at a swanky law firm, but you can't eat prestige. I'm pulling down \$18 an hour, plus time-and-a-half for each hour of overtime and double time for Saturday nights and holidays. I know if I bust my ass and stay focused this summer, I can cover a decent nut on my school expenses for a semester or so. Finish my last year of school and start making some real money. Hell, I've handled this crap for a whole month so far. Now, if I just get through the day without getting fired, and hopefully without puking, I'll be golden.

A couple of guys pass by and mutter 'hi' under their breath. I say 'hi' back, still trying to hold down the contents of my gut. There's a lot of noise — men yelling, trucks roaring into the yard, the thumping of the packing machines. My head feels like a boiler under way too much pressure. I shuffle off in the direction of my workstation, but I'm taking my time, trying to ignore the damn smells and noises.

The essence of my job is twofold. I am a grunt. I unload sides of beef off trucks in the mornings and in the afternoons take huge racks of hotdogs off a washing apparatus and load them onto a conveyer belt for wrapping.

I got this job through a connection and basically get paid as a union guy but don't belong to the union. The union, by the way, is poetry. They have negotiated time off, vacations, breaks and benefits out the wazoo. You don't want to work too hard or you can hear it, "Hey fuckin' college boy, are you getting paid by the box or the hour?" You see, all the nice gentlemen here would like to work at least one hour of overtime a day. At time-and-a-half, working one hour extra a day means getting paid six days for five days of work. Seems pretty slimy to me, but I don't have a wife and kids to support. Plus, management ain't exactly angels either.

My stomach gurgles menacingly. I know for a fact that I am so sick that I'm not going to make it today unless I get away from the stench that's weaving its way into my nostrils and into my digestive tract. Maybe I should have called in and taken my chances, but they just don't take that weak stuff from grunts. I'd be gone and I need this job. But if I get sick on the meat, I won't have much of a future either.

I decide to face up to my problem. I see Severan Reynard giving directions to two guys carrying a crate of ribs. Sev calls the shots on the floor. Sev doesn't say much and he really doesn't have to. He's 5'11" but seems bigger. He's got a body as wide as a truck with a decent size gut and skin so dark it actually looks black. His goatee is black and so are his eyes. His eyes are what do the commanding. When he wants something done, he opens those black eyes wide and points. The whites of his eyes are such a contrast to his other features that it shakes people. It's fuckin' freaky.

The funny thing is, Sev runs the place but he's not the real boss. Supposedly, there's a foreman. I haven't seen him yet but I heard he's some lazy sack of shit that got "put" in the job. Sev doesn't have the title, but I guess running the place beats taking orders from someone else. Everyone, including the foreman, knows Sev's the best guy, so it just works. Word is he did some wild stuff in the Marines like 15 or 20 years ago. Obviously the guy has been around. Supposedly he's a pretty straight shooter; I figure that if I go and talk to him and let him know how sick I am, maybe I can pull some other duty today.

Sev is talking to Sal and Frank in the doorway of the employee lounge. The lounge is a large room with 20 foldout cafeteria tables. In the corner there is a soda machine, a candy machine and a table with a microwave. It doesn't look like the guys are saying anything monumental, so I figure this is as good a time as any to talk to Sev.

“Sev, can I grab you for a minute?” I ask.

Sev shoots me a glance and then quickly turns back to Sal and Frank. Frank is telling Sev that we are behind in June production. But this is good news for Sev because being behind schedule means overtime and some double time. The boys in the trenches are going to be happy.

A minute or two later, Sev looks over and says, “What’s up?”

“Sorry to hassle you,” I answer. “Uh, look, I’m having a little trouble today. I’m uh, kinda sick. Is there any other area I can work today?”

Sev is staring straight at me and his mustang eyes are getting pretty wide. He’s not saying anything, but something is going on. Frank looks surprised and Sal grins. Immediately I know that I’m making a mistake.

“Motha-fucka!” Sev says in the loudest voice I have ever heard him use. “What the fuck do you think you’re pullin’ here?”

“Really Sev, I’m not trying to pull anything,” I answer, trying to avoid those eyes.

“You think I’m a moron? You think I don’t smell the liquor on you? You think I’m blind and I don’t see you stumbling like a fool?”

I don’t answer him. Even if I were on my game, he is pretty much right.

Sev is really going now. “What? You think this is a damn joke?”

I try to recover. “I’m really sorry, I made a mistake. I’m not looking for any....”

Sev interrupts. “Look, you want to go out late, fine. But don’t go out at night barkin’ like a dog if you’re gonna be pissin’ like a puppy in the morning. It don’t happen like that in my house. Now get the fuck outta here, you’re done.”

I look around. It’s pretty quiet now. I seem to be the center of attention, and everyone seems to know what just went down.

“Get the fuck outta here,” Sev barks.

Sal steps up and says, “Sev, maybe we should wait a minute.” Sev’s eyes close just a little. “The kid got the job through Jimmy Balducci,” Sal reminds him. “Why piss him off if we don’t have to?”

“I got a floor to run and this little snot deserves to be canned.”

“No doubt,” Sal agrees. “But the kid’s actually been doing all right. He’s a hard worker.”

“So I’m suppose’ to put him on the line where he can kill himself or, more importantly, one of my guys?” Sev growls, “Look at ‘im! He can barely stand up!”

“Why don’t we give the kid a break from the hard labor and give him a nice, easy job today?” Sal says. “I got a great place to nurse a hangover that always needs a few more workers.”

Sal pulls Sev to the side and mutters something. I can't hear what they say, but whatever Sal says causes Sev to do something I haven't seen since I began working here. Sev smiles.

Sal and Sev talk for a few more minutes while I just stand there like an asshole. Eventually Sal walks past me and says, "C'mon kid."

He's walking pretty fast — at least it feels like he's walking fast — but eventually I catch up to him. "Thanks a lot for saving my job back there," I say.

Sal laughs. "You are so fucked up, you have no idea what you're in for. Don't be thankin' me, kid. I'd ask your name but it doesn't matter. It's just a matter of time before you quit."

"I'm not going to quit, and you know my name is Kevin."

"Whatever."

"Why do you think I'll quit?"

"You, young stallion, are on Sev's shit list. You are past the point of no return. You can't possibly imagine the shit detail you are going to be pulling. I've been working here 12 years, I know exactly what's going on, and all you are right now is sport."

"What do you mean?"

Sal tells me that the guys are making book on my estimated time of departure; lots of money changing hands as we speak. In here, he says, they bet on anything they can think of; it helps the day pass quicker. "And today we got you."

"Just great," I mumble to myself. A small man in a black outfit and a long dark beard bumps into me. Or maybe I bump into him. "Sorry," I say. He just mutters something to himself and walks on. I can see he's wearing a skullcap.

"What's up with him?" I ask Sal.

"Rabbi," he tells me. "You've never seen him before, wandering around? I wonder if he has any action on you yet."

We continue to walk past different huge refrigeration and freezer rooms. They all have names, like pickle box and curing room. We are walking in areas I've never been before.

"Why is there a rabbi here?" I ask.

"It's his job. This is what he does." Sal pauses. "He blesses the meat."

"Really?"

I'm not sure if Sal is starting to like me or, he just likes the sound of his voice, but for whatever reason, he explains the situation to me. "Kid, it's Kosher World, right? Someone has to make the meat kosher. Now, you have your all-star rabbis that lead congregations and save souls. Your B-team rabbis do other stuff like performing a bris on baby boys. I think they're called moguls. Then you have guys like our Rabbi Silver. He spends his day blessing meat. He has a congregation of dead carcasses."

Sal and I pass the smokehouse and finally get to the last room on the floor. Sal opens the door and immediately I'm engulfed by a strange smell. It's a cooked smell, almost like sanitary cleanser, but definitely cooked. It actually seems a lot tamer in here than the loading dock and the sides of beef I usually haul. I can pull this off.

Sal and I are the only ones in the room. He looks at his watch and informs me the gang will be here in less than two minutes. They start at 7 a.m. today. I ask what they'll be coming in to do, exactly.

"Kid, you are going to help in bringing a popular and special Jewish delicacy to your local restaurant and delicatessen. You should feel very honored."

"What delicacy?"

Three people walk into the room, all wearing big white smocks over their orange jumpsuits. "Heya Sal, what brings you to our corner of the world?" one of them asks.

"Morning, Georgie; wanted to bring you a little help today. You're always looking for a little help, aren't you?"

Georgie starts looking me over. Georgie is maybe 5'5" tall and could possibly be 5'5" wide as well, but his most noticeable characteristic has to be his ears. They are the hairiest ears I have ever seen; there's a forest coming out the sides of his face. I stare at him dully.

"What's the matter with him?" Georgie asks.

Sal tells him I am a college intern who just wasn't up to the heavy labor today, so he thought Georgie's line of work might be a better match for me. Then Sal excuses himself, leaving me in the capable hands of Georgie Skolinsky, who introduces me to Felipe Cortez, Ramon Pizzaro and Lily. They are talking and getting ready for what must be the task at hand, but the whole thing has a weird feel to it. After all, Sal did say something about a shit detail. I look around and notice that everyone is a little...odd. There's Georgie with his hairy ears, and Felipe, who walks with a bad limp, as if one leg was 12 inches shorter than the other. Ramon isn't talking at all and I'm not sure if he doesn't want to be part of this group or just can't follow the chatter. And then there is Lily, who is extremely heavy and has the most god-awful dyed red hair ever. It's more orange than red. She has on orange lipstick that perfectly matches her hair, but there's more lipstick on her teeth than on her mouth. What is this, the detail of the damned?

Georgie barks, "Let's get started."

Ramon wheels in a huge, tall vat while the others circle around a stainless steel table. There is steam coming from the vat and something is obviously boiling. Between the boiling vat and the cold of the refrigerated room it looks

as though the vat is on fire and smoking up a storm. Felipe has a ponytail, and it looks pretty funny when he puts on the plastic sanitary hat that they all begin pulling on. Everyone looks pretty silly; it's like an operating room.

"Here you go, sweetie," Lily says as she gives me a hat.

"Don't try too hard, Lily. I don't think he's ready to marry you yet," Georgie says with a yellow-toothed grin.

I put on my hat and watch as Ramon wheels the vat next to the table. He gets on a step stool and, wielding a huge spoon the size of a shovel, begins scooping something from the vat. The water strains from the holes in the gigantic spoon and he dumps these slimy things on the table. They just slide toward the middle. Within about three minutes there are dozens of huge pink blobs on the table, roughly the size of an NBA basketball player's foot. Then I recognize them. They are rock-solid huge tongues. I might still be a bit buzzed, but it looks like these tongues are aimed at me, taunting me.

Georgie sees my amazement. "Tongue," he says.

"I can see that, but from what?"

"Cows, moron."

I'm watching as the group begins working with surgical precision. Hands move fast and each huge tongue is processed in about three minutes.

Lily is complaining about how the government is too soft on crime and how she can't even walk two blocks in her own neighborhood. She keeps at it for a few minutes. Man, she can go.

Finally, Felipe interrupts her. "The men in your neighborhood must be all over you. They can't get enough of you."

Georgie and the others start laughing. It's a bit sad that they are having such a good time at Lily's expense, but I have to admit, I'm grateful that Felipe got Lily under control. Just listening for a few minutes, I could tell she is a runaway train.

Georgie notices me and says, "Someone get the kid involved."

"C'mon over here, hon, I'll help you," Lily offers.

"Quiet down, Lily, I got it. Stand over here, kid," Felipe says.

That's a relief; the last thing I need is to be cornered by Lily. Felipe begins to show me the ropes. He lifts one of the gigantic tongues, tosses it up a few inches and catches it again with the back facing him. Now the tongue is sticking out straight at me. I'm doing everything I can to keep down a pint of tequila and Wild Turkey.

"Okay," Felipe begins. "Three steps, simple as that. First, you take the bone that attaches this lovely tongue to the rest of the beautiful bovine." Felipe digs his thumb and middle finger into the back of the tongue and pulls on

a four-inch bone. It gives him a bit of resistance but he finally yanks it out. “Next, you turn it over and scrape off the USDA grade that was stamped on the bottom part.” Felipe takes a short, sharp knife and begins to whittle at the stamp. Small pieces of flesh begin to drop onto the stainless steel table until the bottom of the tongue no longer has a mark. Watching him is mesmerizing. I’m staring and getting a fuzzy head.

“Here’s the fun part. This thing has a tough cover of skin that needs to be removed before it can be eaten.” I stare at him and the tongue, wondering who was the fuckin’ Einstein that came up with the concept to eat cow tongue in the first place? And who was his friend that said, “Yeah, great idea.”

Felipe continues. “Some amateurs will try to get the skin cover off by using their knife, but that’s too slow. The tongues get these blisters from boiling for hours. You have to find a blister on the tongue, pop it and work your thumb underneath. Zip up, and the skin peels right off. Just like this.” He demonstrates as I try to watch. I’m getting a bit dizzy and definitely queasy. Felipe slides a tongue at me and says, “Time to peel some tongue, kid.”

I go to pick up the repulsive thing, but nature is taking over. My stomach is heading for my throat and I have to get out. I drop the tongue and race toward the door. I have to find a bathroom. Fast. I don’t remember if it’s to the left or the right, but before I can make my decision, bam! I collide with Rabbi Silver, who is walking in. We’re both sprawled out on the floor. Now I have no shot of making it to the bathroom.

Jumping up, I quickly glance at Rabbi Silver, who is sitting up and muttering something. I don’t have time to apologize. Where can I go? I look around and spot a vat in the smokehouse room; it’ll have to do. I scramble over to the vat. I have no idea what is in there but it’s out of my hands. Then it’s out of my stomach. Violently, a yellow liquid filled with unrecognizable lumps cascades out of me. When I start getting control I realize I have heaved into a vat of cow by-products — eyeballs, spleens, bladders and some pink things that could be reproductive organs. The smell reminds me of the men’s bathroom at the bus depot, now combined with the stench of half-digested food. I’m hoping that the lunatics who eat tongues aren’t eating this stuff, too. I figure if it’s garbage I can keep my job. If it’s another ingenious delicacy, I’m toast.

My clothes are wet with perspiration; it’s like 20 below, but I’m drenched. Wow, I feel good, almost like a human being again. There are about 15 guys around me and they’re all cracking up. They got some show from me this morning, and it’s not even close to 9 a.m. yet.

It's hard to imagine I still have a job, but until they tell me otherwise, I'm working. I pick myself up and head toward the bathroom to clean up. The guys are still laughing. Some are patting me on the back and others are making comments like, "What a loser."

If they're going to can me, I hope it's sooner rather than later. I wash up and look in the mirror and say, "Let's peel some tongue."

Walking back to the Tongue Room I notice Bino walking toward me. His real name is Russell Binoheitzer and since there's no time for all that, everyone calls him Bino. He's an ornery red-haired guy with real fair skin. After working in the freezer for a few hours, he looks like he's been dead for a week. All us grunts were given fair warning to avoid this guy and stay off his radar. As Bino passes, he nails me with his shoulder and nearly knocks me over. He says, "What a pussy. I lost 350 bucks because you couldn't make it 'til lunch time."

Yup, I'm pretty stealth flying under the radar, I say to myself.

Inside the Tongue Room, life isn't much better. I'm ripping bones and peeling off skin like a pro, but the comments keep flying at me. They're examining my every move, and Old Ear-hair is really starting to ride me. "Let's go, college-boy. I never finished high school, but I calculate that you're about five tongues behind the rest of us."

Felipe says, "You think you're too good for this, don't ya?"

Why did he say that? This guy was helping me before; how did I lose him? I don't have any problems with these guys. Christ, they're all making an honest living and trying to get by. I appreciate that. All us college interns start with two strikes because we're getting money without paying union dues, but I always show respect to the guys. I thought I was okay with them. It's amazing how many places I can't fit in.

I'm trying to stay low and not get into it with anyone; but the shit just keeps coming. Felipe thinks it's funny to call me princess and he won't stop. "Here's another tongue for you, princess. You missed a spot on this one, princess. Your highness, are you ready for another tongue?" I have to start defending myself.

"Shut the fuck up, Felipe." I can see this outburst catches Georgie by surprise. "I'm working like everyone else. I've always done my job and never gave anyone a hard time. I got banged up last night and I fucked up. It's not your business and it doesn't affect you, so stay the fuck out of my face."

"You put that face knee-deep in animal parts and you're worried about me being in your face?"

The others start laughing, Lily the loudest. So much for trying to defend myself.

Even the tongues are copping an attitude with me. Look at that one, just dying to chime in. That's what I need, talking cow tongues. I can see what this fat bitch is thinking. *Why does every situation turn out like this? Can't you deal?* I hear it saying.

I'm thinking, *Like you're one to talk. You're about to land on some shriveled old man's rye bread and you're giving me advice?*

Don't take it out on me. Live your life, don't live someone else's, the tongue replies. *Look, you hold down like 80 jobs to get through college, but you don't give a shit about college or your classes. You just want a piece of paper so you can make big bucks, like your friends.*

And the problem is...?

I can see its smug expression. *You're too impressed with money. It's all you think is important, and you keep chasing it, like a stupid hamster running on a wheel. Not only are you missing out on what's important, but you keep winding up in the Tongue Room. You always end up in the Tongue Room, one way or another.*

I can't let a fucking tongue talk back to me like that. *Listen up, Tongue. I'm not asking anyone to give me anything. I'm willing to do what it takes. I'm doing the work. I don't have to just fall in line with everyone else. It's not a sin to want more, to make a situation better.*

Dude, when have you ever made the situation better?

I get things going. I've done stuff, I answer, feeling a little defensive now.

Yeah, you get things started, but that's it. You get used or you blow a good thing and, of course, you wind up in the Tongue Room.

Maybe this time I learned, I think. It can't get lower than the Tongue Room. Things can't get worse. They gotta get better. This, you fat, slimy, ugly tongue, is the low point; it's all up from here.

Bullshit! counters the tongue. It's sneering at me; at least I think it is. *All you had to do here was some simple manual labor. Just bite your tongue, pardon the expression, and do your fuckin' job. But you want to go out with your fancy friends and whoop it up. Problem is, they have bucks a-go-go and you have squat. While you're here peeling tongue, they're drinking Mimosas. Was it worth it?*

Hell no, but I didn't think everything would come down like it did.

The tongue is laughing now, and it's not a very pretty sound. *Think? Kid, that's the trouble: You don't think You made an asshole out of yourself in front of the whole place. There isn't a worker in Kosher World who doesn't know who you are — Puke-Man, Rabbi-Crusher. Can't you be anonymous anywhere?*

*I don't know, I tell myself. Being anonymous is kind of over-rated.
You should try it sometime. It might fit you better.*
It's depressing to think that the tongue gets the last word.