

ADAM GOCHENOUR

Nothing but the Crust



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For my family and everyone who encouraged me to keep writing.

About the Writing of Nothing but the Crust

I have always had a passion for storytelling. Back in high school, I spent hours writing short stories. Outside of school, I channeled my creativity in other ways, most notably by playing in a band throughout my 20s. Writing was something I always returned to, but I rarely finished anything. I loved the excitement of new ideas, but I lacked the patience to see them through, having become too accustomed to the instant gratification of performing live music.

Now, at 40, with two kids nearing junior high, I have finally found the patience that once eluded me. I realized it was time to return to my creative roots and commit to finishing a story. I started writing this book on February 9, 2025, and after countless late nights spent writing while the house slept, editing, and even designing the cover along the way, I typed the final words on August 2, 2025.

This book is the result of those long nights and my stubborn dedication. I hope readers will connect with it and enjoy the journey as much as I did while bringing it to life.

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*Nothing
but the
Crust*

By

Adam Gochenour

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Chapter One

Thirteen-gallon trash bags are a joke. Unless you have one of the small trash cans, just slightly bigger than the one under your desk at the office. Any household trash can will struggle to make use of such a pathetic-sized trash bag. It doesn't even reach the bottom of the can. Yet, the thirteen-gallon bag seems to be the most popular for reasons I will never understand. Baffling.

I found myself sitting, staring at the floor again. Sometimes, my mind would wander off without me. My thoughts had been interrupted by nothingness, just staring into the void. I was about to look for something to eat or check on the laundry. I remember starting to get out of my chair before my mind trailed off. Maybe I should get up and figure it out once I'm moving again. I stood up, walked into my kitchen, and found something to eat, not out of hunger, but because the refrigerator seemed to have a gravitational pull once up and moving around.

For the last few years, home has been a small rental in a railroad town made up of narrow streets and rows of small houses. Most were built in the 1860s to house railroad workers, and mine is one of them. It amounts to a one-bedroom apartment with a lawn to take care of. A broken sidewalk leads to the door, and the white paint on the siding is cracked and

flaking, likely lead-based if I had to guess.

The inside leads directly into a small living area, with a bedroom on the left and the kitchen counter, refrigerator, and stove located along the back wall. The space has a small bathroom with a stackable washer and dryer. The furnace and water heater are located in a small closet in the corner of the living room. Central air was never part of the design, so two small window units have to do the job. There is one in the bedroom and one in the living room. The summers are hot and muggy. I never let those two window units shut off, as they already struggle to keep up as it is.

They say that a painter's house always needs to be painted, and a carpenter's house is always falling apart. This is true, for the most part. I am a heating and air conditioning service technician. Most nights, I slap the sides of the window units to keep them going, hoping I won't wake up to a 90-degree bedroom.

As I pull into the parking lot at my workplace, Pals Mechanical Systems, we often refer to it as P.M.S. Customers always seem to smirk a little when I introduce myself, saying, "*I'm Jay from P.M.S.*" Some of the older customers, who remember the commercial from the early nineties, often tease me about it. The commercial had a catchy slogan like, "You can trust us; we're your Pals!" If I had a dime for every time someone said, "I trust ya, pal!" with a proud grin, I'd be well off by now. I just smile and keep my mouth shut since I dislike small talk with strangers. Mostly, I want to get my job done as quickly as possible and get away from them.

I always park on the far side of the building and enter through the side door to avoid speaking with Carla at the front desk. The things that woman says are so stupid, and I find myself

surprised that she manages to wear her clothes the right side out. I've never checked to see if her shoes match; I should ask one of the guys about that.

Walking in through the side door, I'm greeted by Doug, our service manager. Doug is always dressed snazzy but has a smell like an ashtray filled with coffee. He's an old-school guy; his brother owns the company, and he's been around since day one. Doug usually stands by the coffee machine, waiting for it to brew so he can sneak out for a cigarette with his cup of coffee. Most of the time, the picnic table on the side of the building serves as his office. Inside his actual office, there is a reek of cigarette smoke. I suspect he still smokes in there when no one else is around.

"Happy Monday, Jay! How was your weekend?" Doug greeted me as I walked in.

"It was fine, nothing to write home about," I replied. I know full well he is about to tell me about his weekend of playing golf or doing whatever rich people do. "How about yours?" I said, trying to sound like I actually wanted to know.

"Oh, remember my daughter wrecked her car last week? I went out and picked her up a new hybrid SUV. Better than the last one I got her. Lots more room if she and her husband decide to have kids finally."

Doug's daughter is forty-three, by the way. That's six years older than I am. Wish I were Doug's daughter. I'm driving a '79 Ford F-150 that I picked up for seven hundred dollars a few years back. Thank god I have a company van for work. "That will be great, I'm sure she's gonna be real happy with that," I said, while feeling like what he just told me was a kick in the gut. "What's on the list for the day? Where am I heading?"

"That new church off Highway 92. I'm gonna have you help

Dave. He's swapping out compressors in that new rooftop unit, warranty call. We have to get it cooling by the end of the day. Lots of complaint calls yesterday. Customer is not happy."

"Are Dave and I supposed to rope the compressors up onto the roof?"

"I had them brought up with a boom truck Friday late in the day. That's why the customer is so pissed off. Thought we were coming in to work all day Saturday, I guess."

"Great, pissed-off customers to deal with on top of trying to keep Dave on track."

"Dave will be fine, just make sure he keeps off the dick jokes in front of the customer. The customers will be fine too. It's a church, they aren't gonna cuss you out."

I haven't been to this church yet, but I know I'm in for a treat. Some little old lady telling me just how horrible it has been there. Asking why it took so long for the factory to ship the replacement compressors, as if I were going to have all those answers.

Fortunately, when I arrived at the church, I noticed that Dave had set up an extension ladder, allowing me to avoid going through the building and interacting with the little old church ladies. "How's Dave?" I asked as I approached him, standing at the rear of his van, gathering tools.

"I'm good! How's your mom? She seemed upset when I left the other night. I felt bad, but I need to get some sleep! That horned-up mom of yours never lets up!"

"You're a dumbass. Are these people here? How pissed off are they?"

"Nope, just us so far. They must be reading Bibles from home today."

"Doug bought his forty-three-year-old daughter another car!"

“Wish I was Doug’s daughter.”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“Karma, man! Gotta gather up some good karma!”

“You show me where that’s at, and I will gather it all up. Hopefully, enough karma to fill my cupboard and buy a new pair of boots.”

“This shouldn’t be too bad. I only asked for help getting the old compressors off the roof later. Maybe we’ll even be done early! Then we can go gather up all kinds of good karma.”

Dave loved to joke, but he was a smart guy. You would think he wasn’t all that bright on first impressions. He had been doing this work for about as long as I have. He would get sidetracked easily, but I would trust him to work on anything. Once you get to know him, you realize he was pretty normal. A kind and caring guy who loved to chat and talk about his kids. All that said, I’ve heard him say some of the craziest things. He tries to think up something wild just to see how someone will react when he says it. Maybe to throw people off their balance or something.

Dave and I began the process of hauling all our equipment up to the roof. It took us several trips to move everything from our trucks to the base of the ladder. Carrying recovery tanks, nitrogen tanks, touches, and all of our heavy equipment up a ladder is not easy. We always use a rope to hoist the heavier items up. I drew the short straw and went up to the roof while Dave stayed below to tie things on.

From the roof, I could see a car pull up. It was a jet-black BMW. A cheesy-looking middle-aged man stepped out and walked over to Dave. I can’t make out what they’re talking about. The man looks like a car salesman. He had on khaki pants with boat shoes, a blue Hawaiian shirt, and sunglasses

propped up on his head. After a few minutes of conversation, the man got into his car and sped out of the parking lot with loud, terrible pop music blasting at full volume. Dave worked his way up to the roof. "What did cheese ball want?" I asked

"That was the pastor, I think. Maybe he just owns the building. Pretty sure he has a crush on you!"

"Sure, he does. Who wouldn't? Did you get his number for me?"

"No, he said he would be back. He needed to slip into something a little more comfortable. He said to make sure that handsome man up there comes down to say hello when he gets back!" Dave said with a smirk on his face.

"Was he upset or anything? How did he seem?"

"No, he seemed fine. Just trying to get an idea of when we would be done. Something going on here Wednesday, it sounds like."

"Place should be cooled down by then if we don't run into any issues today."

Dave continued tossing zingers at me every few minutes. I try my best to toss them back. Of course, I have to hear about his ongoing imaginary relationship with my mom. He goes into elaborate stories about vacationing with her and spending the holidays with her. He will even sit me down and go into this whole *stepdad trying to win me over* routine. "Sport, you know your Mom and I love each other very much. I know I can't replace your father, but I hope in my sincerest of hearts that someday you may look upon me and call me Dad." This guy could win an Oscar with the bonkers stuff he says. If you didn't know any better, you wouldn't realize he was kidding. All the banter between us made the day go a lot faster.

We were almost finished by lunchtime. We needed to let the

system pump down for a while, so we decided to grab something to eat. There was a diner about eight miles up the highway, but Dave mentioned he had to get gas a few miles in the opposite direction. I decided to drive separately, thinking I could order him something ridiculous off the menu before he arrived.

As I headed toward the diner, I realized I didn't travel this highway often. Recently, I had heard about a good fishing spot in this area, so I found myself scanning the side roads for signs. Most lakes are usually marked in some way, but I couldn't remember the name of the lake I was looking for; it was an unusual name that you don't hear often. Then, I spotted a brown park sign approaching, Lake Eekwinika. That must be it! I'll have to swing by later and check it out.

I pulled off the highway and into the diner's gravel parking lot. It was an old place. I think I can remember going there as a kid with my parents. But the memories aren't vivid, so I could easily be mistaken. This place looks like many roadside diners you would see in the movies. It was roughly eleven-thirty, and I'm pretty sure I arrived ahead of the lunch crowd.

I went through the old, dusty glass doors. A bell rang above my head as I passed through them. "Just have a seat anywhere." I heard a woman's voice say. She sounded rough. Too many years of smoking, I would imagine. I sat down in a booth along the window. The table seemed like something recycled from an old bowling alley. The seats in the booth were lined with faded red vinyl. I noticed another booth had some duct tape holding the vinyl together.

The waitress came over to the table nearly as soon as my butt hit the seat. She was a sight to see. She was probably pushing 70 years old and had bright red hair that was put up into pigtails. Her voice was high and gravelly. "Just you today?" She asked.

"No, I got another guy on his way. He gave me his order, though."

"What can I get you to drink?"

"I'm gonna have an iced tea, and he's gonna have... Do you have hot cocoa?"

"Yes, we sure do!"

"Hot cocoa it is then!"

"I'll be right back with those."

I took the time to review the menu and choose something outrageous for Dave's lunch. I hurried through the options to ensure I could place his order before he arrived. The waitress brought our drinks out much faster than I expected. They must have hot cocoa on tap back there or something. "Looks like you're going to beat the lunch rush today!" she said. "Are you ready to order?"

"Yes, I'm gonna have the open-faced roast beef special. My pal, who's on the way, wants the five-piece buffalo wings, extra hot. With the Smiley Face Pancakes and bacon."

"From the kid's menu?"

"Yep, that's the one!"

He probably won't complain about that at all. I'm not sure how he feels about hot wings, but I could definitely eat those without any complaints. I just needed a little more time to look over the menu. Maybe I should have just ordered him a mountain of bacon or something.

I watched as Dave pulled into the parking lot and got out of his truck, moseying in like a cowboy with a goofy look on his face. "Hey, is that the waitress you were telling me about? Wow, she is a fox! You were right!" he exclaimed loudly enough for everyone to hear as he slid into the booth. I lowered my head and pretended he hadn't just said that.

"You can't chicken out this time, man. You've got to get her digits! Is this my cocoa? Sweet!"

I knew I wouldn't be able to get him with that, but he sure had got me. I could see the waitress and the lady behind the counter snickering together, glancing over at me as if they expected me to make a move on her.

"You're an asshole, man! That lady is like 70, plus, she looks a little crazy!"

"No! She's a hard-ridden 50 tops. She's had a rough life. Give her a break!"

The waitress came walking by to the booth behind us. Dave started kicking me under the table and motioning his head towards her like I had something to ask. "Is everything ok? Let me get you a refill on that iced tea!" She said as she put her hand on my shoulder. I would say for longer than a comfortable amount of time. She took my glass and headed back toward the kitchen. Dave had his fist in his mouth, trying to hold back the laughter.

"Dude, you are so in! She's all yours, man! Your night is all set. She's gonna wreck you! She didn't even take my order. She just wants her hands all over her new man!"

"I already ordered for you, and you're an asshole!" I fired back.

"Awe! That's sweet. Wait. You know I'm married, right?"

"Do you ever stop! This isn't funny. Everyone in here thinks I'm some kind of nursing home Casanova!"

"Oh, you ARE pissed. I'll stop. I'll hold your hand when she comes back so she thinks we're a couple. When old people see something they don't understand, their brains catch on fire."

I was probably overreacting anyway. It's hard to tell if the people here actually believe it. I'm sure they can tell he is just

having a little fun with me. But it does seem that the old gal is at least playing along with it. She came back with my tea and ran her hand from one shoulder across my back to the other as she placed the drink in front of me. "There you go, sweetie! Your food should be out in a sec." Running her hand back across behind my neck, back to the outside shoulder as she left. Dave's eyes were opened wide with a look on his face like he was about to cry with laughter.

"Oh my god," I said with my elbows on the table and my face in my hands. "I'm gonna get you for this, just watch! I'll figure something out. Just you wait!" Our food arrived at the table just as I was about to say more.

"Here you go, boys. Enjoy!" Again, with the hand on my shoulder. "Anything else you need, just call me!" Dave pivoted to face the window, trying to put his back to her as best he could. I could tell he was doing everything in his power not to burst out with laughter. I'm looking at his stupid happy-face pancakes and wings. Those actually look good. What a dumb idea.

"Hey, smiley-face pancakes and wings! Awesome!" He said, still laughing. "We both made out like fat rats today. No more lonely nights for Mr. Jay and smiley cakes for me!"

"She said, 'Call me!'" "If she gives me her number, you're paying the bill!"

"I'll pay. You got me hot cocoa and everything. Couldn't ask for a better friend. Hey, remember good Karma. We just made her day. Make some eyes at her before we leave. She will be floating around on air the rest of the day. Maybe she'll treat herself to a new dress or something. Maybe she will go home and clean her apartment really nice. Just feeling good about herself for a while. You don't ever have to come to this place

ever again. Just play into it a bit.”

“I’m just trying to pretend this isn’t happening right now. This doesn’t serve a purpose to me. This interacting with strangers thing that you love so much. I just want to be as unseen as possible. I just don’t get it!”

“Oh, come on, live a little! How many times has someone been a little extra nice and left you feeling better about yourself? Even if it was just for a few hours. It doesn’t take much. Even just giving someone something to talk about can be helpful. Do something random and amusing. Sometimes, when the family and I are out to dinner, I will yawn obnoxiously loud every few minutes. My wife hates it. I love it because people start snickering after a while. They will have a funny little story to tell now and then for the rest of their lives. Smile at a girl who doesn’t get smiled at, ask for her name. She will instantly feel ever so slightly better about herself. It costs you nothing.”

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I could hear his point and thought about it as we finished our day. I don’t like engaging with people, but slipping on a banana peel in front of a busload of kids would make their day. Those kids would laugh about it for a long time. Guys like Dave feel pride in giving people those moments rather than embarrassment.

As I pulled out of the church parking lot, I drove toward the lake I had noticed earlier. I didn’t have a fishing pole with me; I just wanted to check the place out. If it looked like a good spot, I could go home, hop in my old Ford, and drive back. The lake was about a mile and a half off the highway, down a gravel road.

It was a beautiful sight, tucked back in a valley, and hardly

any traffic on this road. My kind of place, I thought to myself as I pulled into the parking lot. The lake was large, with a nice boat launch and a lengthy dock. I could see another dock on the opposite side, with perhaps one person fishing off it. There must be another parking lot on that side of the lake.

After taking a moment to enjoy the view, I turned around in the lot and headed back toward the highway. I hadn't driven far before I noticed a car approaching from up ahead. My first thought was hopefully this place wouldn't be crowded after everyone got off work. But then I realized the car was drifting toward my side of the road. I slammed on my brakes, skidding to a halt.

The car slowly came to a stop, with its front driver's side tire nearly in the ditch and its rear end angled out into the middle of the road. I could see the man driving was rocking forward and back like he was on drugs or having some sort of fit. "What the hell is this nonsense?" I said under my breath. I just wanted to go around, but what if he was in some sort of trouble? I thought about Dave and his Karma garbage. I hopped out of the van and slowly walked around the back of the man's car in case he still had it in drive. The last thing I needed was to end up in the ditch with a car on top of me.

I approached the driver's side and knocked on the glass. I could hear him talking. I thought at first he was crazy until I saw him holding a phone in front of his face as he rocked back and forth. He opened his door and nearly fell out in the process. He looked a bit rough and had shaggy salt-and-pepper hair. He was wearing a navy blue jacket and black slacks. I noted this in my mind right away because it was 90 degrees outside. He looked at me with a scared and almost hateful look in his eyes. "I'm having a fucking heart attack!" he said with his teeth

clenched shut. I could hear a woman's voice on the phone, but I couldn't make it out. He looked at his phone and yelled, "Just fucking get here!" and hung up on whoever it was.

"Do you need an ambulance?" I said frantically. "What can I do?"

"They're coming; they're on the way. Get these bags!" He said as he fell out of the car, reaching for the back door.

"Bags? You need to sit down!"

He reached up and opened the rear door. "TAKE THE FUCKING BAGS!" he screamed, with every word grinding through his clenched teeth.

"If you're having a heart attack, I wouldn't be worried about these damn bags! You need to worry about not dying!"

"I'M GONNA DIE IN FUCKING PRISON IF YOU DON'T GET THESE BAGS OUT OF HERE BEFORE THE FUCKING COPS GET HERE!"

It was at that moment that I realized he was holding a snub-nosed revolver in his right hand. I don't know why exactly, but I reached in and grabbed the two heavy duffel bags from the back seat of his car. I could have easily just walked away. He was dripping foam from his mouth. He wasn't gonna give chase. He was a dead man. I could hear sirens in the distance as I loaded the bags into my van. I put it in gear and drove around his car and down the road. I drove onto the highway and locked eyes with the ambulance driver as it turned onto the gravel road, its lights and sirens blaring; a fire truck followed closely behind.

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Sitting at home, I still hadn't checked the bags. I hadn't even removed them from my work van. I just sat and stared blankly

at the floor. I thought those bags were heavy enough to be a body cut into pieces. *Did I just help that guy get rid of a dead body? Probably not, but what if?* It had to be money or drugs. If that were the case, with my luck, I would get pinned for a robbery I didn't commit. I don't want to think about it being a body. They could have had damn near anything inside. Not knowing what it could be, I didn't want to be seen with the bags. I just sat on my couch, still in my work clothes, waiting for it to become dark outside. I waited until dark, and then I waited some more. At about 1 a.m., I finally went outside to retrieve the bags.