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UPHEAVAL

THE CAB OF THE TRUCK FEELS HOT ALREADY, and already Haskell can feel the film of coal and dirt gommeing his skin. Clouds of dust rise high enough to pebble his windshield, so thick the roadway edge is barely seeable. He wonders who it is driving the spray truck and why they're not doing their job.

As he passes the raw coal bins, he meets George Turner flying toward him on his road grader, the machine bouncing so high on its tires that Haskell feels a gut-clench of fear. He thinks to himself, *That's too fast. He's going too fast.* He touches his own brakes as if to slow George Turner's grader and battles the urge to cut his wheels toward the road edge.

A shrill ringing begins deep in Haskell's left ear, like the whirl of a worn bearing. He can see George Turner's face – the beard stubble on his jawline, the thumb-smudge of coal black beside his nose. It surprises Haskell how near George looks. He braces his arms for the hit, gritting his teeth as the ringing grows more worrisome. Almost before he knows it though, and with no more a calamity of dust and motion than a hard wind might have caused, the grader is by and gone, not even near to tagging him, not really. The ringing in his left ear fades to just a pin-prick of sound near the hinge of his jaw.

Lord have mercy, he tells himself. His headache has begun to throb more strongly, and he feels a weakness in his hands as if he's gone too long without eating. He pops two aspirin and swigs from his water jug. It had been a solid chunk of ice when he'd taken it from his freezer that

morning, but the ice is melted away now, the water almost warm. *I'm as nervous as a cat*, he tells himself. He drinks deeply, chasing the bitter taste of aspirin, letting the water fill and calm his stomach.

If I just get through this day, he tells himself. *If I just get through this day*. He presses the water jug to his forehead, and for a moment is soothed by the moisture seeping into his temples. He sees the spray truck parked at the road edge next to the Peterbilt that Albert Long drives. It is Jim Stidham's boy, the one they call Tad, standing at the rear bumper, fighting to coil up a hose. As he passes nearer, Haskell sees the Peterbilt begin to back toward the rear bumper of the spray truck. He thinks, *Surely that boy's got sense enough to look around him*. But Tad keeps on coiling the hose, neither moving nor looking up. Haskell thinks, *Surely he can hear the backing alarm*.

He tries to catch himself before he leans out the truck window and yells like a fool. He tries to tell himself that what he thinks he is about to see happen—Tad Stidham getting pinched between the truck bumpers, getting crushed, getting killed and mangled—is no more about to happen than he'd been about to collide with George Turner's grader. It's just him in his nervousness looking for the worst to happen.

He leans out the truck window though and bangs the door with the flat of his hand and yells, "Ho! Look out there! Ho!" Tad Stidham startles so suddenly that he almost trips himself on the hose. For a moment he looks wildly around. He looks at the Peterbilt that has stopped backing a good ten yards away and is now pulling forward onto the haul road. He looks at Haskell going by in his big rock truck.

Haskell sees the expression of the boy's face change from startlement to anger, and he knows by that what the boy must be thinking — that Haskell's called warning has been just to scare and make a joke of him again because he is low man on the totem.

The boy flings the hose to the ground and shouts something at Haskell. And though he can't hear the words, Haskell knows he's been cussed. He feels a touch of anger himself then. He doesn't cuss other men. He is angry still when he passes the walking dragline and turns his truck to get in line for reloading.

He watches the boom of the dragline swing out, a football field long. It is hard to think how big a piece of equipment a dragline really is, hard to see without some other smaller piece of machinery standing near for comparison.

The bucket rakes into the overburden. Tremors rise up through the tires and frame of his truck and up through his boot soles and legs like all the ground beneath and around him is being upheaved. It is hypnotizing. One haul, a hundred tons. He feels his mind ease some as he waits, knowing he has a good ten minutes or more of sitting idle.

THE MORNING BREEZE HAS DIED, and though the air has grown less humid with the noon-time heat, it feels even muggier now. Most of the men sit or half-lie on the ground or on the tailgates of their pickups as if to move even enough to eat is more an effort than it is worth. Others pace on restless legs, and some stand and kneel at intervals, seeming to find no ease in either position. Once and again a man will speak to say how hot and miserable it is. They sit quiet otherwise and sullen in a way not common to any.

Haskell sits next to Joe Calhoun on the tailgate of Joe's pickup. The old man's left hand is wrapped around from wrist to fingertips with a white handkerchief. He holds the hand away from himself as if neither to see it nor let it be seen. It bothers Haskell not knowing how he's come to harm himself—Joe the oldest man on the site, the least careless, the least likely to mistake himself around machinery.

Nearby, Josh Owens and Bill Bates sit facing each other across a cable spool upended for a card table. They focus on their play with heads lowered, hardly speaking but to bid or pass or call trumps. Their behavior is so out of keeping with their normal foolery that Haskell feels his own humor made bleaker by their company.

Haskell wipes his shirt-tail into his eyes, cleaning sweat and fine grit from the corners. His vision clears for a moment then becomes hazy again. He bites his sandwich, and even that seems mucked, the bread made soggy by the steamy air, the baloney flavored less by the taste of mustard than the scent of diesel fuel on his hands. He pitches the rind of his sandwich toward the ditchline and takes a drink of water to rinse his mouth of the tainted aftertaste.

When he looks again at Joe, the old man's face, dark as it is with sun and weather-burn, seems almost sickly. He is about to give over and ask Joe if he's all right, when a sudden, unexpected uproar commences among the card players. Haskell looks to see Bill Bates standing over Josh Owens, Bill flinging his cards in disgust upon their make-do table.

"That's enough," Bill is saying. "By God, that's enough of that." The sides of his neck and his ears have become suddenly blotched with

red, and the skin of his face where it shows through the mask of coal-black has flushed red.

"Now, I don't mean nothing," Josh says, standing as well.

"You don't never mean nothing."

Haskell has half-risen to step between the two, when Joe Calhoun mutters something almost beneath hearing. Haskell leans toward the old man, straining to catch his words. "What?" he asks. "What is it?"

For a moment longer Joe sits completely still, his face pained and angry-looking. Suddenly then, he turns to Haskell and speaks in a strong, loud voice. "I said a man's got to watch. Watch himself and everybody around him. That's just the fact of the matter."

Joe stands and strides over to Bill and Josh. Without speaking he gathers up their cards in his good hand and walks on. After a few paces more he stops and turns, staring upward toward the job site. Josh and Bill stand facing each other a moment more, then stalk off in different directions.

For awhile then Haskell sits studying the big insulated cable running from the generator house to the dragline. He tries to think how many volts it carries. It is a firing offense for a man just to walk near that cable. He can still feel the motion of the rock truck in his legs and arms, and from time to time he reaches to the pickup's bed wall, feeling the need to brace himself against something solid. He rises and walks over to Joe Calhoun.

"Got to be on your guard," Joe says. "All the time."

"You'd think a man could get some little break," Haskell replies. "Some little peace of mind."

The other men begin to rouse themselves then. Those who are still pacing stop and stand staring a last few moments into the distance beyond the near ridges. On the leveled hillside above them the dragline works on and the two payloaders work on to keep filled the outgoing coal trucks. As they start up the hill-path toward their machines the men raise their eyes to watch the boom of the dragline swing about, the huge bucket darkening the earth askance of its path. Haskell feels a slight chill at the back of his neck as the ground where they walk becomes shadowed.

HALF-AN-HOUR BEFORE QUITTING TIME Haskell hears it, a sound so faint as to be imagined, just barely out of kilter with the regular uproar of haulage – of backing alarms and rumbling wheels and buckets and blades and whirring auger bits – a lone, flat-sounding boom like close-by thunder, like something near in distance, heavy and solid, coming hard to ground – followed by slow-growing quiet.

Haskell guides his truck off the haul road and parks it nose-up against a bank of spill dirt. As he climbs down the side ladder from the cab, he feels a trembliness enter into his legs, and even when he is on the ground he feels somehow unsteady. He takes off in a staggering jog toward the road edge where the men are coming to stand. Twice he stops and turns, studying to see that his truck is not rolling. At the road edge he presses in among the others, going as near the drop-off as he can without pitching over in dizziness.

Who is it? somebody asks.

And then again, somebody else, Who is it?

That Sparks boy. That Pete.

Got away from him, huh?

The overturned coal truck lies on the bench of earth below. Most of the coal load still sits within the side-turned bed, though spilled blocks strew the hillside from the road-edge downward, marking the path of the wreck. Hydraulic fluid has begun to drip from a burst reservoir, a reddish stain forming as from a living wound within the litter of broken glass and metal and other odd rubbish. The cab is twisted askew of the bed, and the vehicle looks enough like a broken-necked animal to cause a man or two to turn away almost in sickness.

Is he killed?

I don't believe he's killed.

He ain't killed?

No, he ain't killed I don't believe.

In the half-hour before the ambulance arrives the men pace along the road edge and barely speak, each straining to hear first the oncoming

siren. When the rescue vehicle is spotted finally, they all wave their arms and whistle and call out. They step aside as the paramedics descend to the wreck, but then crowd forward again as the stretcher with the injured boy is hauled up.

The Sparks boy's teeth are gritted. His head and neck are held rigid in a brace and he must roll his eyes wildly to see about him. The men reach to touch the stretcher in passing, getting their hands in on the moment's sole job of work. As he is lifted into the back of the ambulance, the Sparks boy raises his arm in the show of hardihood every man had been watching for.

He's a tough one, somebody calls out.

For awhile again no one speaks. The ambulance descends the access road, its siren echoing strangely in and about the cutbanks and spill dumps and coal bins. When the sound fades finally into the distance, there is near silence across the job site. The dozers and rock trucks, the payloaders and road graders all are hushed. Even the dragline has yet to be restarted.

In the dearth of machine noise, a soft roar can be heard, as of gathering wind. A bank of clouds crosses the sun, and on the near ridgelines the stands of fir and hickory begin to sway. Before long the wind is passing among the men, a cooling wash of air scented with coming rain. Then several voices start in together.

I seen a boy one time open a gas main with his dozer blade. Burned him and the dozer both up.

That day Arthur Sexton and Sonny Everidge hit one another head on.

You don't know what's like to happen.

They move about restlessly now, no longer tired out. They nudge one another with elbows and clap hands on one another's shoulders, jostling and playhorsing, a sudden wildness come upon them.

Sonny broke both his arms, his collar bone, three ribs, his ankle, fractured his skull. They say that Sexton never had a mark on him. Not a bruise.

You got to watch yourself.

Old boy I worked with at Delphi.

Who was it to blame? That Everidge boy and that Sexton?

Told how a deer come leaping off a highwall.

You got to watch. All the time.

Crushed in the cab of a man's pickup.

One by one then they hush. Their high-sounding laughter falls still and their unruly moods dampen until finally they all stand quiet again in consideration of the wreckage. They stand as if praying, as if thinking together a single thought.

The second shift comes on, the fresh men sneaking looks as they go by but otherwise making no intrusion. They have heard already and would as soon make no more mention of the occurrence than need be, their own shift just beginning.

Slowly, as the work noises start up again, the men quit their assembly. Bill Bates and Josh Owens head off together down the hill path, walking side by side and conversing in friendly-seeming terms, their faces and clothes covered so alike with coal dust and machine grease that if not for Bill's height and Josh's width they might have passed for one another. Joe Calhoun goes after, studying the bandaged palm of his hand as if to answer for himself some puzzlement.

As he leaves the job site with the other men, Haskell feels his own day-long pall of nervousness and worry fade, his mood uplifted by passing talk of knife brands and weekends planned fishing.

DORY MEETS HIM IN THE KITCHEN as he comes through the back door. Right then, for what reason he can't name, Haskell feels the calmness of the day's end go out of him. She takes his thermos and dinner bucket and empties them into the sink. Nothing is said, but she gives him her back and turned shoulder in what seems to him a purposeful manner.

Then the boy starts in, the way he always does, his talk a breathless gabble of noise out of which confusion Haskell hears plainly no more than, *Dad. Hey, Dad. Dad.* Haskell stares Dory down. *Can you do something? Now? Can you?*

She tilts her head back, shaking it slowly and rolling her eyes toward the far wall as Haskell stalks through the kitchen.

When he reaches the hallway Haskell feels free enough of the clamoring to pause for a minute. He watches Dory kneel before the boy and place her hands on his shoulders. She speaks to him in a stern, almost harsh manner that still yet settles him enough that he hushes.

Haskell is about to go on again, but then Dory raises her hand to brush a lank strand of hair from her face. He glimpses the smudges of pricing ink on her fingers. On her thumb is a small bandage that is worn and dirty enough to have been there a week or two. He notices too the dark streaks of grime on the red *Food Town* smock, that it seems to him is the first and last garment he sees her in each day. It occurs to him that she would have gotten home hardly before he did.

He blinks and shakes his head as if to rid himself of some unseemly spectacle, of some bad odor or vexatious thought. He'd like to tell her how bad his legs hurt, how bad his back hurts. He'd like to tell her what a day he's had. *I've not been home five minutes*, he'd like to say.

He drops his clothes in a pile on the bathroom floor and runs water into the tub until it is hot almost to steaming. Chill bumps rise upon his shoulders as he settles himself in. He feels the sting of bug bites on his legs, of cuts and scrapes on his hands and arms and sunburn on his neck. When the water begins to cool, he drains it off and runs more in, keeping the bath as hot as he can stand it. *I don't see what she's got to complain about*, he thinks.

THE SPACE WHERE THE OIL FILTER FITS, beside the water pump and the A/C condenser, is so close Haskell can barely get a hand in to grip the wrench handle. Then too the filter is on so tight hand strength alone will not break it loose. He will need to get leverage with his arms, his back, and there is scant room to maneuver.

He can feel Robbie crowding in at his elbow, see his shadow across the motor. Each time Haskell moves it seems he bumps into the boy. He has to watch Robbie from the corner of his eye, try to see that he doesn't cause himself harm. He's said to him, how many times, in the kindest, most patient way he knows how. "Robbie, son, there's *so* many ways to get hurt around a car engine. *So* many ways to get hurt working with tools."

But the boy is mindful of nothing Haskell tells him. He crowds in, his hands fiddling without cease — upon a hose coupling, a cable, a belt. He pulls tools from the box — pliers, a magnetic screwdriver — turning them over and over in his hands, all the while chattering about twenty-

eleven different things — some animal he has seen, some cartoon show, some wrong done him by his buddies at school.

Haskell can feel the anger rising in his chest, the adrenaline surging into his arms, his hands. *Just one good, hard jerk*, he thinks. *One good, hard pull, and it'll break loose*. The loop of the oil wrench squeezes so tightly that the filter's soft metal casing begins to crimp, though the thread does not give. He wants to pull the wrench off and fling it into the creek. He wants to take a hammer to the filter, to the whole damn motor. *Break the shittin' thing to pieces*.

From the corner of his eye he sees Robbie playing with a socket wrench, ratcheting it over and over. It is a battle to keep from yelling at the boy. He takes a deep breath, then another, and after a moment he is able to cease his effort. He lets go the wrench handle, takes the cup of coffee he'd left cooling on the car fender and steps off a little ways.

When he's had his breather and his sup of coffee and is calm again, he says to Robbie, "You ever see such a tight sumbuck?"

In the moment after his father speaks to him, Robbie becomes quiet and still. He gives a hesitant grin and shakes his head.

"We'll get her," Haskell says. He props a foot upon the bumper this time, leaning further in, rocking down upon the wrench. The filter's casing crimps even more, like a beer can being crushed, but the wrench does move, or at least Haskell thinks it does. He rises on the bumper, bearing down with as much pressure and might as he can muster. Of a sudden the wrench slips loose, and Haskell heads off balance into the motor. He throws his left hand up to catch himself and bangs it hard against something sharp — a bolt, a lip of metal.

It comes out of him then. He strikes the oil wrench against the filter, against the generator, the head cover, the breather lid, flailing with it as he pushes himself upright. He throws the wrench hard to the ground, holding his skinned knuckles to the side. As the first surge of pain runs through him he curses, feeling sorry for it even at the time, but spewing forth nonetheless.

"Goddamnit," he says to Robbie, "Goddamnit, I said to leave them tools alone."

He is several minutes getting calm enough to pick up the oil wrench and return to his task. "It's always something," he says to himself. "Can't do the least thing without it being something, always something." He

takes another breath before he speaks to Robbie. "Try not to get in my way," he says, his voice as level as he can make it. "Just try not to get in my way is all."

He leans over the motor, fits the loop of the wrench onto the filter again. He gives a pull, and this time the filter moves. He pulls the wrench as far as the tight space will allow, getting a half-turn before coming up against the generator. He slips the wrench off, replaces it, pulls. The filter turns easily now. In less than a minute Haskell has it free. "We got her," he says. He holds up the filter, dripping oil from the open end, spattering it almost gleefully, like a drunk man spilling his cup. "We got her, Robbie."

But the boy is not there anymore. Haskell walks around the car and then the yard, calling the boy's name. He is nowhere, as far as Haskell can tell, within sight or hearing. Haskell is about to go into the house and look for the boy there when he glimpses Robbie's face at the edge of the living room window just before the curtain falls to.

When he's emptied the thick oil from the old filter into a plastic jug, Haskell finds his nine-sixteenth box-end wrench, gets down on his back and scoots beneath the car to reach the oil pan. As he loosens the plug, he tells himself that it's better anyway for the boy not to be fooling around the car while he's working on it. He tells himself there's *so many* ways to get hurt around a car engine. *So many* ways to come to harm.

THEY ALL SIT QUIET through their supper together, Dory hardly raising her eyes from her plate except to glance toward the window or the wall clock. Robbie is quiet, though Haskell is half-afraid to move lest he give the boy some unintended upset. He begins to wish more and more strongly for conversation, a joke, anything to cover a little the irksome sound of forks scraping against plates, of chewing and swallowing, but there is nothing he himself can think to say.

By the time Dory rises to clear the table, Haskell has begun to feel the first mild throb of his daylong headache coming back on him. Listening to Dory clang away at the plates and bowls, it occurs to him to ask if that noise is necessary, to ask if that noise is in some way for his benefit.

"Sit down here and rest a minute," he says instead. She continues to move as if she has not heard him, and he feels it foolish to repeat himself. There is a tug on his arm, and he hears vaguely the sound of Robbie's voice saying something again and again. He blinks his eyes

open, though he'd not been aware even that he'd had them closed. Dory is sitting across from him at the table again, watching him.

Haskell feels a growing urge to strike something—the wall, the table. He can see himself upending the table, kicking his chair across the room. Something, anything just to make known what he thinks of the situation.

He speaks without knowing he is about to. "You'd think a man could have just a little peace of mind when he comes home of an evening," he says. "You'd think a man could look forward to a little rest in his own home."

"You can rest," she says.

"Ain't no peace of mind around this place."

Dory leans closer to Robbie until she is almost hovering over the boy, as if to pull him from harm. A splotch of light from the overhead bulb reflects from the white cloth covering the table. It brings shadows to the underside of her face, deepening the creases about her mouth, her eyes. She has become years older looking by that light—her skin blotched and unhealthy looking, her cheeks and eyes sunk in so that the outline of bone can be seen, the sockets and hinges. Haskell watches the mechanism of her jaw as she opens her mouth to speak.

"You can rest," she says. "Nobody's stopping you from resting."

It occurs to him to ask what she means by that, but he says nothing. In his oncoming gloom he has begun to think again about Pete Sparks wrecking his coal truck, about the sound it had made going over, about the way the boy had looked being pulled from his truck cab, him shaking so hard from shock you could hear his teeth chatter from as far up as the roadway. He thinks again of his own near mishap, what he believes was a near mishap, with George Turner's grader, and he feels again the urge to touch his hand against something solid, to steady himself against the fitful dizziness and upset he feels come upon him again, against the tiredness.

He looks at Robbie. The boy is staring at the bare tabletop, his face stiff, a flush of redness on his cheek and neck. Dory places her hand upon Robbie's shoulder, and he seems at once to calm.

Haskell rises and walks out of the kitchen. He stands on the back porch a long while, feeling the comfort of the moist night air. When he finally

feels some at ease again, he turns and looks through the screen door into the kitchen. Dory and Robbie are still seated at the table, their heads close, speaking so softly together that Haskell can barely hear the sound of their voices. He thinks how he'd like to tell her about Pete Sparks wrecking his truck, about him almost colliding with George Turner's grader. He reaches his hand to the door, pauses, then walks off the porch into the dark of the yard.

ON HIS FIRST HAUL HASKELL WATCHES his truck's rear end in the side mirror, lining it with the berm as he backs toward the highwall edge. His eyes and skin feel gritty. His feet and knees and his lower back all ache as if they'd not been rested even a single night. His neck feels tight, and already there is a dull pressure in his temples that throbs with each shriek of the truck's backing alarm. He feels his shirt pocket for the aspirin tin, then suddenly the muscles in his back and legs and arms all clench at once and he hits his service brakes. He leans out the window and looks hard at the ground before the berm.

The truck's engine throbs through his chest, and for a moment it is as if his heartbeat rises and falls with the idle speed. He tastes diesel at the back of his throat, feels the sting of it high in his nostrils. His head swims like he is drunk. He fumbles for the seat belt catch, and then he realizes if it was going to go it would have gone already. He sucks deep breaths. It was not the ground giving way, he'd seen. It was heat shimmers. Or it was the shadow of a cloud passing. Or it was light on his mirror.

For awhile he watches Joe Calhoun working his D-9 on the adjacent hill-seam, the dozer's blade cutting into the overburden, loosing boulders and small trees toward the valley floor. It seems a marvel almost the way the huge dozer clings to the contour of the hillside, the way the tracks sidle and shift on the near-vertical incline.

He watches as Joe Calhoun goes about leveling a large beech, first ditching the ground on the downslope and then above. In a short time the tree begins to topple of its own weight, its branches catching and snapping against the still-standing timber, its roots tearing slowly free of the ground. Joe Calhoun moves the dozer to and fro, nudging with the blade in a gentle-seeming way.

Haskell has run a dozer himself. It is as familiar as any piece of machinery on the site, but he watches it now like a man seeing something he never has before. He feels strangely like he is about to see some-

thing or know something he never has, that all he has to do is sit still long enough and watch close enough and it will come to him.

But as the beech begins to skid down the hill slope, its broken limbs shinning whitely in the bright sun, clods of black dirt dripping from its tangle of upturned roots, he feels again the sensation of loose soil sliding beneath his wheels. He presses his foot even harder onto the brake pedal.

From the corner of his eye he sees Ray Sturgill sitting in his truck, waiting his time to dump. Haskell wonders how long a while he's been sitting idle just watching another man work, if it's long enough for Ray to have thought something.

He lets off his service brakes and continues backing until he feels his wheels touch the berm. Then he puts the transmission into neutral, sets the park brake and pulls the dump lever. At the same time he guns the engine. Dust rises with the clamor of falling material from his truck bed. He can feel the truck's back end jarring, and for a moment he feels dizzy again. He clenches his hands tight on the steering wheel and raises his foot above the brake pedal. But then the bed empties out and the rear end is still again and he is not slipping off the highwall edge but sitting stable.

He lowers the bed, puts the truck in gear and lets off the park brake. The adrenaline fades out of him as he pulls back onto the haul road. He begins to worry then that he's forgotten something important or overlooked something important he should have seen. He runs through his morning safety checks--belts, brake linings and pads, wheel cylinders, hydraulic lines. There is nothing he can think of that he's missed.