

*Even the Dust*

Dick tossed his cigarette butt out the window. He inhaled deeply, the rank smell of raw sewage filling the cab of his truck as we squinted in the glare and crossed the bridge. He said, "Ah, New Jersey," and laughed.

We took I-95 down along the river past the airport and got off in Eddystone. I was quiet. I'd lost my job, and Dick was throwing me some laborer's stuff, some nasty, dirty under-the-table demolition work in an abandoned foundry. There were chemicals involved – a huge, terrifying plastic tank bearing a sign in red foot-high letters (DANGER ACID), buckets and bins of caustics, black barrels marked with ominous symbols. And marijuana flowing through us like the lie that adversity makes you stronger. We were strong. The first hit of the day is sometimes the most important.

The foundry was ice-cold and musty. We spent a few minutes stretching and drinking Cokes. I was wearing longjohns and layers of clothes, but the morning air sent fingers through me. I hated what lay ahead: the taste of drywall, the numbness of arms vibrated by power tools, the sickening ozone of a Sawzall held at precarious angles, eyes red with sweat, shitting in toilets that hadn't been cleaned in ten years. I wanted my shitty old job back, my shitty old life back home. I got tricked into a promotion 300 miles away from Pittsburgh, only to find that my new boss was looking at a fat bonus if she could turn me out quickly. We played cat and mouse for a while, and then Cadence nailed me because I lost my girlfriend and went crazy. With no woman and no job I got crazier. Dick liked the change. He wanted me to work this job, take the cash, sell my car, buy an old Dodge panel van and set out on the American Tour. He was sure it was the best thing for me to do, the best thing for anyone. I thought about vandalizing Cadence's car, about waiting late at night to shoot the evil bitch in the head. I prayed for Unemployment. I didn't sleep. I started smoking again. I lay awake and dreamed of cancer. I wished that the pain inside of me would jump up and throttle me; I was calling its bluff.

We worked all day, stapling plastic sheets to walls, cutting out copper pipe, watching the soles of our work boots begin to melt in the ooze that covered some of the floors. That was the idea: industrial waste cleanup on the cheap. They weren't going to do anything with the

building because, over a dozen reincarnations, it had acquired the sludge of a dozen toxic industries. "Make it look neat," the guy had said. Even the dust frightened me.

And the fucking tank of acid. We had a warm day, and the whole place smelled of it, our eyes stung. The money wasn't just good, it was all we could find. A few months later we could have cut lawns six days a week and blown it all on Corona and Mexican Brown.

We worked quietly, but there were outbursts. Dick surprised me with the pressure washer, trying to clear the muck from my Tyvek suit, and hit me in the balls. I went down on one knee. He couldn't stop laughing, and, eventually, neither could I.

We bought Polish sausage sandwiches with brown mustard from the roach coach that still sailed the complex, and we ignored the shit all over our hands when we ate. Dick showed me how to use the butcher paper that came wrapped around our sandwiches so I didn't have to touch anything I put in my mouth. We made jokes: "Hey, Mike, wouldn't you like to send Cadence for a swim in the big vat of acid?" We named that fear: the Vat of Acid, something from the horror film that our lives were becoming. Dick was cheating on disability doing this job, and his hands were claws frozen on the steering wheel as we drove home at night. I was 300 miles from home, broke, unemployed, alone. We decided we'd wear dime-store red-devil costumes and black leotards, play the theme from *The Addams Family* over and over, suspend her from the ceiling by a rope, pare it down strand by strand with a Buck knife.

Cadence, my old boss, became someone for him to blame, too.

We tore out wire and drop ceilings, light fixtures and air conditioners. We used a pressure-washer to scrub everything that might be sold later. I climbed ladders and used a Sawzall upside down. I choked on the dust.

When I thought of the woman I lost I could do those things. When I thought of April, curly red hair and hot freckled skin, I had just enough courage to stand in front of a locomotive.

We worked on fixtures one day. There was a heat exchanger hanging from the ceiling, a quarter ton of steel. Dick was cutting with the Sawzall, and I was on the short ladder, holding the thing, feeling the mad vibration of all of those pipes, that steel. The leg came off my ladder, broke just below the bottom rung. Dick shouted. I pushed myself backwards, all of that steel swaying on the tow strap supporting it. I hit a steel support and then the ground. I held my head. I heard Dick's voice. I looked up at the swaying steel. I wondered if it would fall and crush me. I looked at it coming a little closer, going a little farther away, and wondered. I scuttled backwards as it rocked. My heart was beating.

"Mike?"

"I'm okay," I said. "You okay?"

He rounded the corner, picked up the remains of the wooden ladder with one hand, and threw it outside. I sat in sawdust and filings on the cool floor, feeling the bruised but whole bones of my hands, legs, neck, arms, back. He jumped on the ladder. He kicked it with his boots, brown leather opalescent with accidents of chemistry. He swung it against the wall of the building. He looked at me.

Dick loved me, completely and without reservation; he called me “brother” sometimes. He was my oldest friend, a felon and a sociopath, the boy who invented Baby Bird Season and taught me to hunt groundhogs with a Volkswagen, the young barbarian who introduced me to drugs. I once watched him pull a treble hook out of his scalp, and he only seemed puzzled by the blood that soaked his hair and ran down his forehead. People were scared of him.

He said, “I taught that fucker a lesson.”

I nodded and tried to light a cigarette. I was shaking. A truck shifted gears out on the highway. There were no birds. There was lichen growing in a crack in the asphalt, a gray-green fault. Dick put his hands over my fist. He struck the lighter and guided the flame to my cigarette. “Hey buddy,” he said softly. “That was a good fall; you kept your head up.”

He sat down and lit a cigarette. He looked out over the lot. A wide muddy puddle lay like a moat before the concrete steps. The wind kicked up grit that hissed against the corrugated sides of the next building. He said, “Feel good to be alive?” and we sat listening to someone testing helicopter turbines up at Boeing. After a while, we collected our tools, locked the place up. We walked to the truck in silent agreement: fuck Eddystone. Fuck this job.

Driving back across the bridge, the winter sunlight pale and the arc of the bridge carrying us toward it, we smelled the sewage, and Dick said, “Welcome to Philthadelphia,” while I cried and he looked away.

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