THE ROOT OF IT

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A LOT OF this mess started when Stuart showed up. Walking around here in his cowboy boots, cocky, looking like God's gift to McConnell Gravel. I'm not saying he was the root of it. It was something I've known for awhile. If I didn't know better, though, I'd swear he was sent out here to gouge it out of me.

Stuart is a young guy, about twenty-five, the company brought here to be the Operations Manager. That's what his door says. Before, the site foreman would call a loader, Marty or me, on the mobile phone and tell us what mix to load and how many trucks they needed. We were doing fine. No one ever complained. Now they call Stuart first and then he tells us. He makes all the mix orders sound like his idea—all business like. "Right Stu," I say and hang up.

About the first thing Stuart did was convert the cook trailer into his private office. It was where all the drivers ate their lunch. It might have been that the big shots had it planned all along and were only waiting for Stuart to get out here so he could take the heat, but I doubt it. If the company wanted to be more efficient they should have asked Marty or me. Nobody said, "Ask the loaders," and we got about a hundred ideas. Now we're saying nothing—especially to Stu, since he'll take all the credit. They'll say he's doing a "bang up job," and give themselves one more reason to keep him in the trailer. I'm not saying we do a bad job; we do the job right but we just don't do any more. And it ain't because we're afraid of getting fired. I do it because I couldn't stand myself doing a bad job. Doing a bad job leaves you with nothing.

Now half of the old cook trailer is his office and the other half is a lounge. I checked it out once when I stayed late for work. They took the calendars down and got the whole place painted off-white. A conference table in the middle. I told my wife it'd be like working in a refrigerator. Anyway, most of the drivers eat lunch in their trucks

now.

Mornings are the best part of the day. It's bright out when we wake up. My wife is usually up before me and sometimes I lay there and listen to her shoes squeak and the sound of silverware and frying pans. Later I get up and walk out onto the porch to get my clothes out of the dryer. Then I'll help her with breakfast and fill the thermos. It's cool and sunny and I like driving to work in clean clothes with my wife. They needed someone to take weight, so I got Steph the job in the scales trailer. It's air-conditioned and she's got plants hanging up and even a couch in there now. She's a good worker too; she keeps that office neat as a pin and she's got nice handwriting.

Sometimes the big shots go up and bullshit with her. I watch them walking over to her trailer. They talk to her because she's such a kick in the pants and she's got a sense of humor that could bust you in half sometimes. She tells me what they say but I shake my head. I can't imagine them telling a joke. Sometimes I wonder if they're thinking about how a good lookin' woman, one as funny as Steph is, ever got stuck with some guy driving a loader.

Anyway, Stuart comes out of his trailer yesterday morning in these western slacks he wears. It's early, still cool, and the best time to do maintenance. I'm turned around looking at an injector when I hear him step up.

"I noticed you didn't grease the u-joints," he says.

"Once a week," I say.

"I think we should start greasing them every day from now on," he says, nodding. "Yup," he says, "every day from now on."

I look up at him. "The manual says once a week," I say. I think about scooting under the loader on my back. Having dirt in my underwear.

"I've read the manual," he says, "but I think we'll do it every day. Just to be on the safe side."

My hands are wet with diesel and I've got them held up like a surgeon.

Stuart crosses his arms in front of him and then turns to walk away. "I've made up my mind," he says.

I pick up the grease gun and walk to the other side of the loader. I stop for a second and watch Stuart walk over to a truck. He kicks at a front tire. Jesus. Later I figured he must have been watching me with binoculars or something.

Just after break I see three big shots roll up in a big blue four-door. Company car. They get out wearing ties and shirts with the sleeves rolled up. Two of them walked jumpy so they wouldn't get their shoes

dusty. Sometimes the whole bunch of them stand on the edge of the pit to watch Marty and me load. They stand there like they're thinking up some way so they wouldn't have to pay anybody. It's either that or they figure they're the boss so they have a right to stare. They go right ahead. I never have liked the idea of them figuring out our pay.

Marty doesn't care if Stuart or the whole world watches him work. He'd probably just wave. Like once our checks are three days late when Marty and I walk into Stuart's trailer. Marty slams the door behind him. "I want my check," he says. Old Stuart looks up at him for a second and then writes him out an advance. No questions asked. I watch Marty signing for it but then I see Stuart with a little smile that I thought was nerves. Then I see it's because Marty writes his name like a third-grader. That comes from holding a wheel all day. Stuart doesn't know jack about that but Marty doesn't care what Stuart thinks. That's good for him. I care, though; I never sign my name in front of Stuart.

My wife leaves the squelch off her mobile phone so she hears it all. Sometimes during lunch she'll tell me they have a new mix ordered for the afternoon. I'll go down and start on it right after lunch. When Stuart calls I know he's seen me doing it already. "Right, Stu," I'll say, smiling. "I'll get right on it."

Yesterday, we're sitting down when Stuart walks in her trailer. "Stephanie," he says, "you can take the rest of the day off." He tells me I can do the thousand-hour maintenance. "Yeah," I say. I don't like him giving her orders, not when I'm around. She looks at me, says she wants to go swimming anyway. She says she can get a ride into town with one of the big shots.

That afternoon I pull up the floorboards. I get into the loader good. Draining clutch and transmission fluids, warm, into a five gallon bucket; I love this part of the job. It's quiet work, waiting, and I think about Steph. I used to go watch her swim on Saturday mornings. Moving in the water, so clean and lazy, like she was sleeping. I never went in, though. I swim like a bulldozer.

Last night she wants to go pick up our wedding ring, which I had almost forgotten about. First we didn't have the money, so we got married without it. Then we had a hell of a time getting one picked out. They had to order it from back east. Anyway, she wanted it last night, for sure.

We drove down to the mall and she wanted us to go in together but I wanted to go look at some new speakers. A few minutes later she comes in and tells me they are going to charge us to size the ring. She

gives me a look. I turned on a couple of TV's and stereos and then turned them off. I'm positive the salesman told us they sized the ring for free. I'm ready when I get in there.

The guy was a real dandy with a manager-pin on his coat. He told us it wasn't, nor had ever been, their policy. He held up a little sign. I smacked my hand down on the glass so all you could hear after was the Muzak, some violins playing "Let it Be." I told him, with a finger in his face, that he wasn't bleeding another cent out of me and if he didn't size it, I would size it myself with a hacksaw. "Size six," my wife says as we walk out.

We're walking fast in the mall. "Damn him," I say, and a teenage girl in tight pants jumps out of my way. "He's such a wimp." Stephanie is surprised, smiling, thinking the whole time I'm mad at the salesman.

Down on the southern end of the pit there are some rock mounds piled up from the sifter. About nine o'clock one night last week, Jack and Marty and I are walking back through them. We'd parked the machines back there and I'm feeling light, like I always do when the motors are cut for the night. We're winding around these things when Marty nudges me with an idea. We give Jack the slip, get a good jump on him. I remember the "tick" as the lantern went out. "Ha, ha, ha," Jack is saying. We hear his footsteps around the corner. "You know, you guys are a regular goddamn riot." Marty and me standing, our eyes bugged out, waiting.

It was all timed so I would shoot a flashcube and all Jack would see is this big-ugly with his arms in the air. He would only see it for a second, then be left there in the dark with it. "That's the beauty of it," Marty said.

Jack about walked into us when Marty lets out his grizzly bear mating call. The flash goes, making shadows of one side of Marty. In the blue popping I saw Jack's arm moving, heard the smack he gave old Marty. I had to use the rest of the cube to find Marty and see if he was okay.

By the time I get the lantern going, Marty is up and working his jaw. "That was a damn good scare," he's saying. I'm standing there holding the light onto his face, thinking that I would have run or something. I wouldn't have come out swinging.

It's hot and we're laying with a sheet over us. My wife is not feeling good, ever since we got home from the mall. We're awake when she rolls over and tells me what happened.

She was swimming and when she rested she would talk to this joker doing laps. He invited her to have a cup of coffee after the swim. He

said to her as she got out, "Oh, you're not married or anything are you?" He could have said, "Are you married?" and it wouldn't have sounded like a huge disappointment if she was. It was quick and before she knew what she was doing she said no. She had to get out of it later. She's worried because she thinks it says something. I know it has nothing to do with her wanting to be married. I know I'm rubbing off on her.

"Hon?" she says, as I put my shoes on. She thinks I'm mad at her and I let her think it.

I walk out through the porch and put the back down on the pickup. After a while I put on some music and start a cigarette. Sitting on the tailgate, thinking a woman lies next to a man, in the night she'll feel his power. I don't know what she might be thinking. Maybe hoping I don't have this thing; knowing it was a fake in the jewelry store, knowing about Stuart. I listen to a cat fight down the street and I don't want her touching me.

In the morning she asks me questions and reaches for my arm, but then on the drive out she was quiet, too.

Around ten o'clock the big shots come out of the trailer and stand there, four of them in a row, like people in a game show. I'm loading, jumpy as hell, when I almost back into a truck. I hit the brake hard as Jack pulls around me. I see Stuart start down into the pit. "Dammit, dammit," I yell in the cab. I make like I don't see him. When he gets up beside the loader I look surprised. I idle down. Door open, I lean out. Stuart says, "You need to be more careful, John, you almost backed into one of the dump trucks." I look at him for a second. "Right, Stu," I say and shut the door. Through the dust on my side window I can see Marty stopped and looking over.

At lunch Marty comes up to the scales trailer to eat. He is looking at me. My wife is there too.

"Well?" he says.

"What?" I say to him. I hear the radio going in the back, the big shots talking back and forth. "What do you want, Marty? You want me to tell him to go to hell every time I see the guy?"

Marty smiles a little. The bastard. My wife stops eating. I stand up and walk out, stopping for a second to look over at Stuart's trailer.

"Listen Stuart," I'm saying, "hear me out. I've worked in this hole for ten years, almost. I drove a truck before that. When I started out, I thought if a guy did a damn good job he would get moved up. I told my wife that. I've been driving for ten years with no accidents. None.

Nothing has gone wrong with any machine I worked on. I could run this place twice as good as now. I've never been moved up. Now they send you out here—some kid out of school who they are grooming for one of the top spots. Shit. They tell you to run this place, make it better. They don't ask us nothing. You've got a couple things to learn old buddy. . . ." I filled up the cab with this.

My watch stopped sometime during the afternoon so the only way I knew it was five o'clock was Marty parking his loader and walking up to the scales. At five o'clock, it's still hotter than hell but the sun is coming at you from the side so your hat ain't nothing for shade. You walk around with your arm in the air like you're afraid of being hit. I look at the scales trailer. She's thinking I'm going to pick her up and then sees me head for Stuart's trailer.

I heard the trucks on the highway, the air-conditioner going on top of his trailer. I felt the soft dirt my boots are kicking up. The blue cars meant the big shots are in there.

I knock on the door and wait. I stand on the steps.

"Hi-ya, John," Stuart says, all friendly, "come on in." He smiles. They're all sitting around the conference table. They look up at me.

"John," Stuart says, "meet Val Henderson . . . Byron McCarthy . . . Glenn Johnson . . . Pete Keller." They nod at me, one at a time, and smile.

"I know Pete," I say and nod at him. He used to call me with mix orders.

"Have a cup of coffee, John," one of them says.

"Help yourself," Stuart says.

I look over at the coffee maker.

"Say it's pretty hot out there, isn't it?" one of them says.

"Over a hundred," another one says. He looks at me.

Above the coffee maker is a poster of a pale girl in a bikini pointing to a Cat D9. It has some equipment company's name underneath. As I'm pouring the coffee I know they're giving me the once over. One guy makes no bones about it.

"You want to have a seat here, John?" one of them says, and pulls a chair around him and up to the table. I walk over and sit down with my coffee.

Pete leans back in his chair. "How are the loaders running these days, John?"

I look up at him. "Fine," I say, "real good." My hands are gritty on the coffee cup.

"That's great," he says, "just great." He smiles, looking me over. I

put my head down. "You knew last month our efficiency rating was up ten percent. We've just now got the figures. That'll save the company quite a lot of money."

I look at my boots on the tile floor. It's out of me now. I've lost it, I know that.

"I better get back," I say. I walk over to set the cup down next to the coffee maker when I hear my wife's voice. I turn and she's walking out of one of the back rooms with a binder to her chest. She stops when she sees me. She looks, wondering what I'm doing there.

"Here you are," she says, cheerful.

They all look up at me. Probably waiting for me to say, "Yeah," or "Are you ready?" and then for the door to close behind me so one can say, "strange."

My arms have goose bumps and I wish they would reach the door handle so I wouldn't have to move my feet. It is coming up in me now. I have no choice.

"This stinks," I say. It sounds weak, but Stuart's eyebrows come together. It's stone quiet now.

"Reeks," I say louder. One guy's eyes move over to my wife but she doesn't see it. She's looking at me. Pete is waiting for me to take another step so he can hold up a hand and say, "Now, John."

"Honey?" my wife says.

I spin around and hold the coffee cup out like a pistol. "You!" I say. It comes out of me hard, sharpened before I can catch it. She takes a small step back, her eyes are turning red. The cup I hold out to her shakes.

I know it's loose now. I can taste the acid in my throat, bitter and dark, like the coffee running down the back of my hand. What I know about this thing is this: truly, it is a meanness.

"Let's go home," she says.

But in this same meanness is a calm. And as I turn back around to them I know that I will go home, but not until I have dirtied them. Dirtied them—"Listen up," I say—with what I have been given.