

Deuteronomy

The truckers were lined up on the side of the road, clogging the chain up area pull out before the long slow ascent into the Blues. Not too many of them had chains on board this time of year, Cletus thought, so they probably were just pulled over waiting for mechanics from LaGrande or Pendleton to round up what they could. Couldn't be much even in town, not in June. But who would expect a snow storm in June, especially with all the talk about global warming all over the papers and radio and TV. He always suspected it was just some kind of a conspiracy by those left wingers trying to get more control over things and here was the proof, a snow storm on the first day of summer, that there wasn't anything to any of it. Just a bunch of college professors who don't know anything about the real world anyway, all wrapped up in ideas with no practical application, not a one of them that would know how to put on a set of chains. Oh, there was some of it that was O.K. Which was why he had sent his boy to State U. to learn accounting and such so he wouldn't make all the same mistakes Cletus had made, thinking that the money in his checking account was his when he actually owed it to the government (what the government claims is theirs they come and get). That one set him back quite a bit. He worked the better part of two years digging out of that hole before he hired Bethany to do his office work and she set him up on Quickbooks. Now he kept track of all his costs so when he bid a job he could figure it real tight and then he'd keep track of how he was performing, even know if his crew had been productive enough each day, running the numbers at night in his trailer. But the State University was run by homosexuals; well not run by them, but they pretty much controlled things, ran rampant on the campus. You just couldn't get away from them so Bobby had transferred to the church run college in town which was setting Cletus back a pretty penny, but at least it was a good Christian environment and Bobby was learning what he needed to.

Deuteronomy

Cletus shifted into four wheel drive as the snow started building up on his windshield heavy and wet, the wipers smearing more than cleaning. But who has money in this economy to replace wipers? Better to save what little he could scrape up for real emergencies because God knows they come and you better be prepared. He still had a good two thousand feet of elevation to climb and if it was coming down this heavy now he just imagined what it would be like up on the summit. He'd thought about getting a room in LaGrande and waiting the storm out. It'd probably be melted off by tomorrow afternoon, but his crew was all up in Hermiston and, with the way things were, he needed to be there to get them lined out in the morning. There wasn't any margin in the bid and he couldn't afford even one bad day. He had good people working for him, quality people (no Mexicans ner nothin'). In this market you could get guys for eight or ten bucks an hour. Hell, some folks are so desperate that they'd work for just some shelter and food, but they had families, too, and that was important to Cletus, because if a man has a family to work for he'll work twice as hard and won't be giving you no trouble, having to bail them out of jail on Saturday night,. So he paid them well. You get what you pay for and Cletus always said that was true for people as much as anything else. He'd put his crew up against anyone's; they were his associates more than they were his employees and you should treat your associates like people.

He almost enjoyed the four hour drive up to the jobsite. It gave him a chance to sort things out. And there was plenty to sort out. He had the bankers after him all the time threatening to foreclose on him. If it wasn't the house it was the shop or the equipment or his dad's house, which he had cosigned on when times were good, when his equipment line up for the service truck at the end of each day was a quarter mile long and he had more work than corn has kernels. Now he was down to four guys and his equipment was spread all over Idaho, left wherever a job had ended with no money for trucking, and it made it harder for the bank to repossess anyway. Sometimes at night he'd lie there and do an inventory of all the scrapers, loaders, dozers and rollers, seeing each one in his mind and naming the town it was in just so he wouldn't lose track. He knew where each one was and how much he owed on it and what it was worth, which wasn't much on account of

there was no work for any of it and you could buy it all for a song. But once in a while he'd pay the freight to haul a dozer or scraper to the auction yard and take the loss just so he'd have some cash to make the mortgage payment on his house.

The snow was coming down in huge flakes now, halfway up the pass, and it was beginning to pile up on the road, just a couple of inches. Cletus took it slow, geared down for traction. Some of the cars were spinning out and he didn't need any of them crashing into him. The world is full of too many people, he thought, and most of them couldn't find a tic on a hairless dog, scurrying about to who knows where, stuck in a snow storm in June without chains or four wheel drive and don't have the sense to get off the road, so now he had to watch out for them, too, just one more obstacle in his life. He'd gotten kind of carried away with the house. It had turned out a lot bigger than he planned. But times had been good, him running hard and the money rolling in. Besides, Earline deserved it after all those years raising babies in the little clapboard house behind the shop, having to listen to trains rumbling by shaking the house so loud you thought the locomotive was going to bust right through the wall any minute. He'd built it for her, and for the kids, even though Bobby was out on his own now working and going to school and with his girl friend and the baby. And Donelle was so busy with beauty school and running with her friends that they hardly ever saw her. But it was for them, too, just the same. The house you live in is important to how you see yourself in the world and a four thousand foot Tuscan can do a whole lot more for you than a two bedroom bungalow by the tracks, that's for darn sure. Still, if he'd just stopped at three thousand he might not be crawling up this hill in a snow storm right now, headed for the dairy where the wind blows so hard the cowshit-filled dust sticks to your teeth like the scum on a desert pond. He might not be eating Swanson's every night in the camp trailer watching a little black and white with tin foil hung from the rabbit ears, the scratchy picture as bad as the view out his windshield, what with the snow coming down even harder now and the wind picking up, blowing it sideways so hard he had to squint to see the lines on the road, hoping some yahoo wasn't stopped in the middle of the highway up ahead.

He crested out for the twenty mile run across the timbered ridgeline of the Blues, just a gentle roll really, not like the mountains of Idaho. But it got plenty of

weather, big fronts from the coast that dumped what they had when they hit the mountains, and today the wind was blowing up a whiteout so that traffic was barely creeping along. Every mile or so a sedan was skidded off the road and Cletus stopped to help the first two get back on the highway, but after that he just kept going, hoping that they had warm clothes and plenty of fuel. "I can't save the whole world," he thought to himself. "I got trouble enough just tryin' to save myself." Evening was coming and the snow came darting in from the vision edges attacking the windshield, the quiet silhouetted forest a dark mass brooding on the roadside. The lane markers were covered in snow, the reflective posts every hundred feet his only guide. He watched them intently, concentrating on his path when ahead, just off the side of the road, he saw what at first he thought was an apparition, a trick his eyes were playing on him, an illusion. He saw what looked like a black man, wearing nothing more than a windbreaker and a ball cap, so covered in snow he could have been someone's idea of a joke, a black Sambo snowman, walking backwards down the side of the road (where any one of the cars could suddenly spin out and slide into him ending all his problems) with his thumb stuck out. "I'll just be damned if I don't see what I thought I saw," Cletus said to himself. "Some people just ain't got a lick a sense."

Cletus edged over to the shoulder just past the hitch hiker and waited, watching in his rear view mirror as the young man turned and ran toward his truck.

"Thanks, Mister. I really appreciate you stopping. It's getting pretty cold out here."

Cletus nodded. "Just throw yer bag in the back. I reckon it's soaked through by now anyway. Yer car break down?"

"Nah, I haven't got a car."

"Haven't got a car? What in heck you doin' out here on a night like this?"

"Same as you: travelling."

"Not quite same as me. Where ya headed?"

"I was thinking of going up to Seattle. There's lots of work up there."

"Lookin' for work, huh? What you do?"

"IT stuff. Programming mostly."

"Computers?"

“Yeah, computers. That’s what I studied in college. But I lost my scholarship. Blew my knee out and right now I can’t afford the tuition. I figure once I get set up in Seattle I can go back nights and finish up.”

Cletus thought on that a while, driving silently through the now dark night, the snow already turning to big wet flakes melting on the road into slush piles icing up in the wheel wells, the apparition by the side of the road now real, a presence bumping up against his world.

“Mind if I ask you something?” Cletus asked.

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Now, don’t take no offence, but you don’t talk black.”

“Oh yeah? What does black sound like?”

Cletus glanced at the hitch hiker, the big white smile confirming that the joke was on him, which didn’t seem right. It was his truck, after all, and if he hadn’t stopped the boy would still be out there shivering, maybe never get picked up, maybe get hypothermia.

“Cletus’s the name.” He stuck out his hand.

“Leland.”

“LeRoy?”

“Leland.”

“Oh.”

They began the descent into Pendleton, the snow turned to rain poured out of the gloomy night, sloshed by the worn wipers across the windshield blurring the oncoming headlights. Leland scrunched up against the passenger door resting as best he could, ear phones insulating him within some unshared world carried in his pocket. Cletus wondered what Earline would think, him dropping down the grade, riding in the dark with a darkie that didn’t talk like one, just like it was normal. He knew people thought he was a racial. Maybe it was the story he told of his grandpa being the head of the KKK in Idaho, but that was just a story, which was the truth, but nothing to do with him really. We’re all God’s children, that’s what Cletus tried to live by. Live and let live is the way he saw things. No, he wasn’t no racial. Hadn’t he been the one to stop and give LeRoy a ride? All the so called right minded folks had passed him by. They might preach about brotherly

love and how we're all equal, but when it comes right down to helping a black on the side of the road they don't want no part of it. It's a lot easier to talk than do, but doin' is what Cletus was all about. They could call him a racial all they want, but here was the proof that he wasn't no such thing. The more he thought about it, the nobler he felt, and he realized that the apparition by the side of the road was just God providing him with an opportunity to prove himself. It wasn't no accident.

He looked over at the hulking figure, resting now, temporarily protected from the uncertain fate he had faced just a few minutes ago, stranded in the deluge of wind and wet and cold, dependent on the kindness of unknown souls who crept by silently, only the occasional rhythmic clacking of the chains muffled by the blanket of snow shrouding the darkening landscape. Now he was rescued and safe from the elements, given a few moments of rest and sanctuary before he would again be put out into the dark. It just didn't seem right, Cletus thought, imagining the stop at the end of the ramp, highway 395, that led to the trailer park (his crew cleaning up the last of the dishes now, the lonely evening feeling away from home mixed with anticipation of the first chortle of the diesels turning over in the morning, the determined hope for rest); the passenger door opening, the brave step out into the night, the retrieval of the bag and the walk across the highway to the on ramp, thumb stuck out. An opportunity left at the side of the road.

"Hey LeRoy." Cletus reached out and touched the burly arm.

Leland sat up, the ear phones pulled down around his neck. "Huh?"

"I turn off up here in a couple of miles."

His passenger rubbed his open palm from his forehead to his chin then shook his head, an effort to rustle himself back into the waking world.

"O.K. You can just drop me off when we get there."

"Hey LeRoy, I been thinking. See, I got a crew working over here and I could use another hand. You say yer lookin' for work, so maybe the two of us could work something out. I know it ain't exactly what you want, but I can pay you twelve bucks an hour and give you a place to stay and some food money. It'd at least give you a grubstake 'fore you head on over to Seattle."

“What kind of work have you got, Cletus?”

“We could always use a laborer. There’d be a little shovel work an’ you could help set grade stakes, and then there’s the roller you could operate. Ain’t nothin’ fancy like the office work you do, but it’s work just the same.”

Leland looked out the passenger window, the flat horizon hidden in the dark, only reflective markers streaking by like the windows of a miniature train passing in the night, one by one in an unending rush marking some kind of progress if you have a destination, but just bits of reflected light to him.

“Sure. Why not.” Then the ear phones back in place, the scrunch against the door, head resting down.

The truck pulled in through the chain link gate of Mountain View Estates: two long rows of trailer houses in a barren field, relics from a more promising past. Mostly abandoned, the homes lay dark and ghostly. Broken sofas and washing machines cluttered their ramshackle porches. Rusted out engine blocks and swing sets were scattered along the drive lane. Dolls and bicycles lay abandoned, motionless in the chill night. Cletus pulled up in front of a trailer with light in the windows.

“Here’s where the crew bunks. I’ll take you in and get you introduced.”

Leland stepped out of the truck and raised his arms high in the air, rocking onto his toes as he stretched and yawned. Then they clumped up the wooden stairs and across the porch. Cletus opened the door into the blue light of the television where four bodies roused from their stupor and stared at the strange archetypal figure that emerged from the dark. Then they looked at Cletus, waiting for some explanation, a break from the awkward silence.

“Guys, this here’s LeRoy. He’s our new hand and I figure he can bunk on the couch here.”

He laid it out neat and matter of fact, like it was an everyday occurrence, like as if there was enough work for the four of them let alone some new hand. Like as if there weren’t regular hands back in Boise collecting unemployment hoping for the call. There was a moment of bewilderment, a pause, and then Jimmy, the youngest rose from the sofa and stuck his hand stuck out.

“Hi, Leroy,” he said.

“Actually it’s Leland.”

“Hi Leland. My name’s Jimmy. Make yourself at home. We were just winding down. ‘Bout time to hit the hay.”

The others mustered a welcome of sorts, still wondering but resigned: there was work for tomorrow and rest to get. One by one the room emptied and Leland settled on the couch, earphones transporting him to a more familiar world.

Cletus drove to the end of the row, his small camp trailer cold and dank and quiet, the seclusion from his crew his only luxury. Sitting at the table he removed his boots and loosened his belt, poured himself a glass of water, and imagined how he would break the news to Earline. He could call her right then and tell her all about it, the apparition on the side of the road, the opportunity taken. But that would make it seem false, less than it was. He’d let it unfold naturally, come out in the telling of some story as if the importance was unnoticed by him. Or better yet, he could take some pictures of his crew at work and casually leave them around the house for her to find.

“I’m not sure which guy yer talkin’ about. Oh, him? That’s Leroy. He’s my new hand. Smart fella, too. College guy.” He imagined the reaction in her face, the scolding he would get.

“Cletus! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what, Honey?”

“Cletus! You know very well what,” she’d say with an accusing smile.

“Nothin’ to tell, Earline. Didn’t think nothin’ of it.”

Cletus was under the dozer, filling each zerk with four squeezes of grease. There was no money for a service truck on this job. He heard the rustling of the crew, the footsteps quiet through the long grass, sleep not quite vanquished, dipsticks pulled, the gurgle of oil.

“Is that you under there, Cletus?”

“Ain’t nobody else.”

“What would you like me to do today?”

Deuteronomy

Cletus turned toward the disembodied voice, blue jeans rumped over running shoes all he saw, the remnants of yesterday's good intentions here to be dealt with, somehow worked into a productive part of his crew.

"Where're your boots. Gotta have boots. OSHA'll kill me if they see you like that."

A pause, a consideration. "Cletus, I don't own any boots."

Cletus scrambled out from under the Cat, thinking now what Leland could do.

"Jesus, haven't you got a tee shirt or something? An old ball cap? That one's gonna get ruined out here." He saw the new blue jeans, a button down short sleeved shirt, the orange ball cap with a bronc rider on the front.

"I'll be O.K."

"What size boot you wear? I got to run into Kennewick for parts later. I'll pick you up a pair."

"14 double E," Leland said laughing.

"Good God Almighty. Where you get those?"

"It isn't easy, Cletus, but you might get lucky. They might have something."

Cletus paused, his cold blue eyes recessed behind protruding bushy eyebrows, studying Leland as if he was trying to discern whether what he saw was real or still an apparition, a vision of his imagination.

"How big are you, anyway?"

"I'm down to about two sixty."

"Down to?"

"I played at two ninety."

"Played what?"

"Football. At Wyoming. I'm a Cowboy, see?" He pointed to the bronc rider logo on his hat.

"You don't look like no cowboy, Leroy. You look more like, well, I don't know what you look like, but it sure ain't no cowboy. I guess for now yer a construction worker. Why don't you grab that bar and clean the tracks on this here dozer while I line the crew out? An' if you see someone nosin' round that looks like he's from the govment, hop right in that truck so's he cain't see yer shoes."

Cletus wandered over to where his crew was gathered, the morning coffee taking effect and stirring them to conversation, the occasional laughter, a kicking of the dirt. Soon he returned to the dozer, where small clods of dirt lay on the ground as Leland used the bar to poke delicately at the tracks.

“Seems like a big guy like you otta do bettern that,” Cletus said as he took the bar from Leland and soon released big globs of caked dirt and mud from the Dozers tracks. “This here is how you handle a bar.”

Leland stepped back, watching the grizzled old man’s technique. “You’re pretty good with that, Cletus, for an old guy.”

Cletus turned to see the good natured smile, once more at his expense.

“I’ll finish this. We ain’t got all day to get a little job like this done. You go help Dale set grade stakes.”

Cletus soon had the tracks cleaned and was on the dozer clearing the dairy waste from the site where his crew would build a new settlement pond. Occasionally he would uncover the rotting corpse of a cow that had succumbed to disease and, a chain wrapped around a hind leg, been towed out of the dry lot and discarded in the pile of manure. He would separate out the gelatinous stink of guts and maggots, the carcass disintegrating in a liquid trail as he pushed it toward the fence line with the other dead animals he had uncovered. He had built his company up carving out subdivisions in the Treasure Valley, laying the utilities and building roads ahead of the foundation contractors and framers, three or four subdivisions a year. Pushing dead animals and their shit around wasn’t what he was used to, but there hadn’t been any subdivisions to build for years now and it paid the bills.

The shelving gondolas were laid out in endless rows of shoes above a gleaming vinyl floor, buffed every night by anonymous workers, part of a global force that was busy while the rest of the world slept, cleaning and stocking. The shoes were sorted by gender, style and size. Cletus found the men’s section and then, like looking for a book in the library, which he had never done, followed the numbering system until he found what he was looking for: size thirteen and larger. In a store with five acres of floor space and over one hundred thousand

items, each fabricated in whatever corner of the world could do it cheapest, only a paltry few boots, size thirteen and up, were displayed. Cletus picked through them hoping to find a pair of genuine simulated leather boots, only \$29.99, in size fourteen; alas, they only had one pair big enough, size 14M, \$106.99. Rummaging through every pair of boots in the section hoping to find a better price, Cletus weighed the economics of the decision, taking into account the likelihood of an OSHA inspector showing up on the job (remote, but with all the other government inspectors at the dairy, you never know) and the potential cost of Leland going without boots (at least a five hundred dollar fine after he negotiated it down, plus the cost of higher insurance premiums), and finally, the deciding factor: the possibility that Leland would get “injured” because he wasn’t wearing boots and he’d have a huge workmen’s compensation judgment against him. He bought the boots.

That night in his trailer Cletus reviewed the day, adding and subtracting, just as he did every evening. Between the boots and wages, overhead and food, he figured Leland had cost him about three hundred dollars so far. When he asked Dale how things had gone, Dale said Leland was a nice enough fellow, he just don’t know anything. Cletus had stuck up for Leland, reminded Dale that he was a college guy trained for office work, that it’d take a little time to get him broke in. But still, Dale had a point: it was going to be hard to get any value out of Leland. He’d have to figure something out though. There wasn’t any money in the budget for dead wood. In a couple of days they’d be done with the cut, Cletus thought, and when they started building the swale banks he could put Leland on the roller; “Don’t need to know much to run a roller,” he said out loud to no-one.

In the morning while the crew was greasing and oiling the equipment Cletus noticed Leland still wearing the running shoes.

“What’n hell you got on yer feet?” he exclaimed. “Them boots set me back over a hunerd dollars.”

“They don’t fit Cletus. You’ll have to take them back.”

“But they’s size fourteen, just like you said.”

“Fourteen medium, Cletus. I got a wide foot.”

“Where are they?”

“In the trailer, next to the sofa.”

Cletus raced back to the trailer house, his truck tires spitting gravel as it bucked and bounced down the lane. Soon he was back, the truck skidding to a stop in a cloud of dust like a horse in a reining contest, hind quarters planted solid.

“Try the fuckers on,” he ordered, throwing the shoes at Leland’s feet.

“Already did, Cletus,” came the reply, firm and resolute, standing ground.

“O.K. But just to humor me. Maybe we can fix ‘em.”

Leland surveyed the blue eyes, the raising of the brow, the hint of a smile and decided it was O.K. to pull one on. Even with the laces loosened all the way his foot barely squeezed into the boot. It hurt too much to walk.

“Let’s see what we can do,” Cletus said, pulling out his pocket knife. Taking the other boot, he sliced the outsole open.

“Here, try this one on.”

Leland looked baffled. “What for? You just ruined it and now you can’t even get your money back.”

“Like I said, just humor me.”

Leland put the boot on and Cletus placed a piece of cardboard over the cut outsole and wrapped the boot with duct tape.

“There, how’s that feel?”

“Can’t I just wear my shoes? This is kind of ridiculous.”

“It may seem ridiculous to a college guy like you, but to a poor dirt guy like me it’s just a way to save my ass. The govment don’t care what kinda shape yer boots is in just so long as you got ‘em. Without no boots you could cost me a lot a money. So now, how’s that feel? Can you get around in ‘em?”

After a moment Leland began laughing. “You are something else, Cletus. Look, if you want me to wear the boots that bad, I guess I can get around in them.”

For the next few days Leland helped set grade stakes, mostly just following Dale around. In the morning he’d clean the tracks on the dozer and help grease and oil the equipment. His enthusiasm spread to the rest of the crew and in the mornings and at lunch break Cletus heard their laughing banter and wondered at the ease with which Jimmy and Dale and the others took LeRoy into their midst. Each night in his trailer Cletus would tally up the day, and the numbers told him

that, although the payroll had increased, production wasn't any better. There's only so many machines to run, he conceded, and hiring Leland hadn't changed that. He was relieved when the time came to start placing dirt and he could put Leland on the roller. He had two guys on scrapers while he pushed the dirt with the dozer and Jimmy ran the water truck. Leland ran the roller. The nightly tally started to show some improvement; they were moving enough dirt to make a little money, enough to make a few more house payments if things kept on that way. Cletus was encouraged enough that when he handed out checks on Saturday he offered to treat the boys to beer and pizza in town.

They gathered around the wooden table, the middle aged waitress, too tight blouse unbuttoned enough to show a rose tattoo, short skirt and varicose legs, a pair of baby blue canvas shoes and bobby sox, brought three big pitchers of beer while they waited for pizza. The men shared hunting stories, talking about four wheelers and Remingtons, tree blinds and close calls, the drama of their tales increasing as the liquid in the plastic pitchers diminished. And then the jokes, gently laughing at the others expense, how Harold made two runs with the scraper without picking up a load, must have been asleep at the wheel; Dale spent an hour laying out the grade with his story pole upside down and couldn't figure out why he had a fill instead of a cut. Leland sat quietly, a city dweller with country folk never having held a Remington or rode a four wheeler, good natured but an outsider nevertheless.

The topic turned to women, conquests and failures. Jimmy, thinking to include Leland, turns and asks, "Is that right about once you go black, you never go back, Leland?"

"I don't know, Jimmy, I'm actually kind of partial to white girls," he smiles as they whoop and holler.

"You hear that, boss?"

"Heard it," Cletus says, reaching for another slice of pizza.

"Hey, what do you call a eighty year old black guy?" Dale entices them, drawing it out as long as he can as they shrug their shoulders. "Antique farm equipment!" comes the punch line to more whooping and jeering.

Deuteronomy

Otis, wanting in on the action poses his own question: “What do you call a black guy in a three piece suit?..... Will the defendant please rise.”

Cletus laughing now, slaps his thigh and holds a pitcher of beer over Leland’s glass. “You want some more?”

“No, I’ve had about enough, Cletus.”

“Hey what are you so sour about? They don’t mean no harm. Nothin’ wrong with enjoyin’ a good black joke once in a while, just like I enjoy a good honky joke, too.”

“You know any honky jokes, Cletus? Why don’t you tell us one.”

“Well, not right off hand. How about you? Why don’t you tell one. Go ahead.”

“O.K. Cletus. What’s white and hard and twelve inches long?”

Jimmy and Dale and Larry and Otis all perched forward, beer and tomato sauce dribbling through week old whiskers, mouths half open, squinting eyes waiting for the punch line.

“It ain’t white, Cletus, it’s black and yo’ white bitch cain’t get ‘nough of it.” Leland was clowning, playing the caricature as he hulked over Cletus with a mocking smile. The crew threw their heads back, howling and guffawing, “ain’t that right, LeRoy!” because he was LeRoy now, no matter what his name really was, because he was one of the crew after all, one of them.

Cletus slammed his mug of beer down on the table.

“No it ain’t right, ain’t right at all.”

“What’s that, Cletus? Didn’t you like my honky joke.”

“There ain’t no honky to it, just sacrilege.”

“What are you talking about? It’s just a stupid joke.”

“It goes against the Bible.”

“You’re kidding....”

“No I ain’t. ‘Thou shalt not sow thy vineyard with divers seeds.’ That’s Deuteronomy.”

“So much for brotherly love, huh Cletus.”

“Now I didn’t say that. We’re supposed to love one another, but that don’t mean we can’t honor our differences.”

“And just what are those differences, Cletus?”

“Well, that’s the sixty four dollar question, ain’t it?”

“It isn’t a question at all, Cletus. It’s a proclamation of ignorance.”

There was a long silence, the crew hovering for the response, then: “LeRoy, you don’t talk like no football player, that’s for darn sure.” Cletus laughed now, the light from his wrinkled deep-set eyes freeing his crew to do the same, as he slapped Leland on the back. “Come on now, let me pour you another beer.” For the rest of the evening they celebrated, six souls bound by a common endeavor, safe within its cocoon.

For the next several days the scrapers scraped and hauled, the dozer spread and leveled and the roller compacted, yards of dirt were moved and measured, accounted for each night at the formica table by Cletus with tablet and pencil in the spare light at the end of the second row, space number 49, Mountain View Estates. The crew was humming, money was being made. Not a lot, but enough to cover wages and insurance, keep the office going and make enough house payments to get caught up. Cletus thought that he might even make a payment or two on the equipment.

Then it came to a halt. It was the roller, bound up, unable to move; stuck on the berm, no way to compact the dirt. The dozer stopped pushing, the scrapers stopped hauling; six men stood on a bank looking at the broken machine, hoping for the best, careful not to accuse.

“Guess I’ll have to get the mechanic out from Kennewick,” Cletus finally proclaimed, unable to find the source of the problem. “Why don’t you fellas take the afternoon off? We’ll hit it hard in the morning.” A man doesn’t build a business without being hopeful.

It was mid-morning the next day before the mechanic arrived. Jimmy and Dale and Larry and Otis greased and oiled the machinery in the morning just like they did every day, exercising the pretense that it would all soon be fired up and they would again be moving dirt. They spent an hour crawling over and under the roller, starting the engine, engaging and disengaging the clutch, determined to get it running, the four of them discussing the possible problems. Leland was self consciously present but silent, the workings of machinery an alien world to him, the burden of responsibility awkwardly unspoken, but felt nonetheless. Then the

kicking of dirt, the resignation as they wandered back to the trailer, each calculating the affect of the lost wages, the explanations to wives and girlfriends.

By one o'clock the mechanic had the end plate off the drum. The crew had wandered back out after lunch, anxious for the report of progress. They were all there, Cletus standing nervous by the roller, the cost of the breakdown now figured by the minute.

"Can you tell what's wrong with it?" he asks of the man (who has driven the service truck the forty miles from Kennewick, who had an argument with his wife the night before over bills unpaid while the boat sat idle in the slip, no money for gas. She'd been against it all along, she'd shouted, before the sleepless night spent thrashing and turning) now kneeling within the roller drum, wrench in hand.

"Looks like a dry bearing. Might as well change them all while we're at it."

Cletus, the weight of numbers heavy upon him, the work at a standstill and bills piling up, could no longer hold back the accusatory glare. The crew stood looking at Leland, too.

"I shoulda known better'n to let you grease the roller. You shut the whole operation down over a missed zerk." Leland now stood alone, separate from the rest, Cletus's scowl putting him off limits.

The weary-eyed mechanic crawled out gagging, his coveralls black with the grease in the drum, face smudged with it.

"Jesus, what kinda dirt you been movin' out here? The stench in there is godawful."

"Just regular dirt, and cow shit, I guess. Cow guts, occasionally. It ain't pretty, but it pays the bills, long as we can keep runnin'."

"Well, I'm not going back in there. You can pull the bearings yourself. I'll see we get replacement parts to the dealer in Hermiston. I don't mind grease, give me grease all day long. But cow shit and guts is too much for me. Besides, no point in paying me to do what you can do just as good yourself."

The crew wandered off, inspecting the scrapers and water truck for overlooked zerks, hiding from the duty of crawling inside roller drum.

Cletus had made up his mind. He'd done his part, given the kid an opportunity, but now things had come to their inevitable conclusion. He should have known

better, he thought. Things are the way they are and it's best not to mess with them. That's what he'd done: he'd messed with things, tried to overrule the laws of life, and now he'd have to pay. He'd learned that in order to survive sometimes it was necessary to cut his losses. Good intentions don't put food on the table.

"LeRoy," he said turning his cold hard attention toward him, "it looks like we're going to be shut down here awhile. That means no work. I'm afraid I'm going to have to let you go."

"Cletus, it wasn't my fault. I did everything just the way you showed me. This isn't fair and you know it."

"Fair? Who the hell said anything about fair? You think life is fair, boy."

"Boy? Now you're calling me boy? Don't talk to me like that, Cletus. You're better than that."

Cletus looked at the ground, shuffled his foot, considering.

"Tell you what, LeRoy. You want a job, the only thing to do here is to crawl into that drum and start pulling them bearings. You do that and you can stay. It's your roller after all." Leland looked at the roller, remembering the retching mechanic stumbling out covered in grease, building himself to the task.

"Cain't get no blacker 'n you already are." The words came like a wad of snoose spat out, foul and squalid.

Leland looked calmly and steadily into Cletus' eyes, his shoulders pulled erect, the measure of him filling the space, smothering Cletus' dwindling presence. He had been a bit of refracted light on the side of the road, a soul on a journey awaiting its course, moved by protons and electrons toward illusory experiences bound together into some kind of meaning. There was no need for explanation, for resolution. What's done is done.

Cletus pulled on his coveralls (if you want something done right, best do it yourself, he always said) and crawled into the roller drum dripping with grease and feculence. He had the bearings pulled in time to run into town to the parts house before it closed. Pulling one of the bearings, he had noticed the missing zerk, not even broken, just gone; vibrated loose, he guessed: nothing to grease. The bearings were bound to seize up. Could've happened to anyone.

He saw him leaving the trailer park, walking down the road duffle bag in hand, headed toward the interstate. Cletus pulled over, rolling the passenger side window down.

“Can I give you a lift out to the highway,” he leaned toward the window, creeping along beside him. Leland turned toward Cletus, then looked straight ahead without breaking pace.

“Look, when I seen you aside the road that night I was just.... I thought I seen a chance to make something right, maybe help the both of us. Now I figure..... well, I didn’t do neither one of us no favor. I been bustin’ dirt my whole life. If I wasn’t farmin’ it I was scrapin’ it and movin’ it from one pile to another. I never learnt much, but I ain’t all bad. I didn’t mean for it to turn out this way.”

“We come from different worlds, Cletus, and I’m not talking black and white. You might have meant well, but like you say, in the end you probably didn’t do either one of us any good.”

“Let me try to make it right.” Cletus’ grimy black hand clutched five twenties, extended as an offering meant for absolution.

Leland stopped and faced Cletus, hand on the open window.

“Just who do you think I am, Cletus? Don’t you know why I am here? It wasn’t an accident that I ended up in your truck. ”

“But....”

“But what man. You screwed it up, Cletus.” Face in the window, he was bigger than ever, looming over Cletus, laughing.

Cletus sat in the truck, transmission in drive, foot on the brake; forty-five under the seat that would wipe the grin off LeRoy’s face. But that wasn’t what he had set out to do, wasn’t how he wanted to tell the story to Earline. It wasn’t his fault the kid didn’t work out; he’d given him the opportunity. There was a reason he’d been hitchhiking. Slowly his foot let off the brake and Cletus rolled away, the apparition growing smaller and smaller in his rear view mirror, just as if he could leave it behind him.