

HILARY JAMES LIBERTY

Under Number Nine

LOUIS DONATO RUSHED to lace up his work shoes as he hurried from the locker room to the factory floor. I jammed the paperback I was reading into my back pocket and followed him outside into the day's fierce heat. Lou was a big guy with baby fat and a puffy face. He said it was all that macaroni his Italian family cooked on the weekends. His shoes kicked up little dust bunnies as he raced across the yard from the locker room towards the treatment plant.

"What's your hurry, Lou? It's hot as hell and we've got fifteen minutes yet before the shift starts," I called after him.

"You think so, huh? Not this week. Hook's our foreman today."

"What's the difference as long as we make it by the seven o'clock whistle?"

"Show up at seven sharp, and *you'll* see."

Lou hurried out onto the TP factory floor and I followed him. I had heard about this foreman, and it seemed wise to be cautious until I had more information. Out on the floor, Lou grabbed a broom leaning against the wall, and actually began sweeping, even though it was only 6:45 a.m.

"Hey Lou, you're working and we're not even on the clock yet."

"Keep your voice down, Jack, or he'll hear—and you better grab a broom."

I collected a broom which had been leaning against the wall, and began gently sweeping the cement floor. I soon accumulated a small pile of dust, because when you swept these concrete floors, you always accumulated dust. Lou was doing the same thing; not

really working too hard, just moving. I looked around; men scattered about the factory floor, all fidgeting with brooms. When the dozen or so brooms were gone, other men came and looked. Seeing no brooms, they began tinkering with machinery, pulling on belts, checking to make sure bolted assemblies were tight, but they weren't really checking anything. They had very serious, businesslike expressions on their faces, but it was a consensual lie, maintained by agreement as the dust from our preliminary sweeping began to pervade the last of the hostage morning dampness in the factory's indoor corners. Looking around me, I saw the progression of ages: young men, grey-haired men, and a range in between. I grimly considered what it must be like to spend one's life pushing a broom for no particular reason. Busywork. At 6:55 a.m.

"You gotta understand, Jack. In a couple of months, you go back to college, but I'm here. I'm not going nowhere. Last thing I need is to rile the foreman." Lou wiped his face with his hands, then shook them, spraying sweat.

I nodded in sympathy. "Hope we don't get outside work today. On the radio they said it might go over a hundred," I remarked, leaning on my broom.

Lefty Perez passed. "No one in their right mind would send us out there, today." Then he smiled. "Not even you, college boy." College boys were summer help: temporary, expendable. If there was a job no one else wanted, assign a college boy. Lefty was carrying a shovel for no particular reason.

I heard a car door slam, and Hook entered the TP from the Loadhouse side. I had no doubt who he was even though I had never seen him before. Fiftyish. Grey-haired. Wiry build. Steel-rimmed spectacles, and shiny, shiny white plastic hard hat with an American flag decal in the centre above the visor. His attitude, demeanour, everything about him had that busy, worklike tone that we were all mimicking. It seemed to me that he looked at us with a positive, upbeat, but critical manner. He came over to me.

"Lean down on the broom, son. If you lean into it a little more, you'll get more of the dust up from the cement," and with that he shared my broom handle with me, even pushed with me to demonstrate. I wondered, in a factory where there is dust everywhere, falling constantly, who could possibly care about getting a few more ounces of dust out of the cement? But I co-operated, realizing that this was a man who knew no rest. He was a com-

pany man in the worst sort of way. Then, after all this mock effort, the whistle blew and the work shift began.

We gathered on the main floor outside the TP office, waiting to be assigned our specific tasks for the day. As the crowd of several dozen men gathered, Pedro Gonzalez rushed out on the floor buttoning his shirt as he quickly merged with the back of the crowd. He looked relieved to have made it. Farley O'Toole wandered over to the pay phone against the TP office wall. He ran a hand through his grey hair and popped a quarter into the phone. We weren't allowed to use the pay phone during work hours, but Farley was an old-timer, a regular, and they did things that would not be tolerated from newer workers. Farley had been here for thirty years and knew the equipment better than anyone. No one had to tell him what needed to be done. We all knew that he was calling home. His daughter was due any minute, and he was hoping for a grandson.

I noticed Lou looking at me with a quizzical expression.

"Hey Jack. What are you reading today?"

"Same book as yesterday, Lou."

"I'd thought you'd have finished it by now."

I smiled.

"You read a lot. Don't you?" Lou asked.

His question surprised me. Compared to whom? I shrugged.

"I guess."

"How'd you decide to go to college?"

"Gee, Lou. I never gave it much thought. I always knew I would go. How did you decide not to go?"

"Well, like you said, I never gave it much thought."

I had thought a lot these last two months about what it must be like to spend one's whole working life watching a column of stone go by on a conveyor belt or shovel dump trucks full of gravel endlessly, all day, every day. This factory didn't even make a product that the average person would recognize. We were making roofing granules which were shipped all over the country to other plants where they were used in making shingles. Imagine what I'd say if a classmate asked me what I did all summer. "I made little stones to be used in shingles which go on roofs. No. I didn't make the shingles, just the little coloured stones that go on them." On the other hand, these were honest, hard-working men who were supporting their families. There is value in work, any work that pays the rent and puts food on the table.

One of the other students who had worked here last summer said that after he went back to school, he couldn't drive past a house without noticing the colour of the shingles. He would ask himself, "Did I make any granules that colour?" I looked over at Lou.

"You know, Lou, there's a community college not far from here. I think they mailed me a catalogue at home. I could bring it in. You could take a course in the evenings. See if you like it."

"You think I could? I got high school but I wasn't very good at it."

"You never know if you don't try."

"Listen up, men! Listen up!" Hook waved his hand signalling come closer. The workers drew up at his signal. "We are starting a new rotation, today. The regulars know me, but I see some new faces in the crowd. So what I have to say is mostly for the new men although it applies to everybody. I'm your foreman. My name is Howard Bronski—to you, 'Mr. Bronski.' I just want to get a few things straight so there will be no misunderstandings. I just want to be clear. You will notice that I wear the white hard hat while you wear the yellow ones."

As he wound into his talk Farley O'Toole hung up the phone and muttered to Lefty Perez without turning his head, "I guess he's going to do the full Monday morning speech—Hook's Monday morning special."

Lefty groaned. "How's your daughter?"

"Don't know. They left for the hospital last night. No news since," and he looked across at Hook with his best church face.

"Most of you know this, but for the new men, the union here is the United Mine Workers of America, the UMWA. You pay dues. When you are here thirty days, the UMWA provides you with a pair of oil-proof, steel-tipped safety shoes. The union is here for your protection, both your safety and your rights. If you have a problem with anything I say to you, take it to the union. I say 'Take it to the union' because I am a rule-book foreman. Everything I ask you to do is by the book. If you have a problem with what I say, then you don't have a problem with me. You have a problem with the rules. That is why I say, 'Take it to the union'."

"As foremen go, I've been here longer than most. I'd like to think that's because I'm better than most. I care more. My workers are more closely supervised." He paused to push his steel-rimmed spectacles up on his long, beak, hooked nose, and squinted out at us. "Now I have a reputation. If you give me a day's work, you

don't need to worry about it, but if you have any ideas about slipping, then what you heard about me is all true. I don't tolerate slippage." He made a hook with his right index finger in the air above his head. Then in a single sweeping motion, his signature gesture, he brought the hook down to a closed fist at his hip. "I'll tighten you up right quick."

"Are we clear?" He looked around, waiting for responses. His eyes seemed to probe at each of us. We nodded in response since clearly a response was required. He lifted his immaculate, white hat to relieve heat and replaced it carefully on his head.

"And for the new men, welcome."

He paused looking around at the silent equipment. Then almost as an afterthought, he turned to the group. "Oh, Pedro," and he located Pedro in the crowd. "I was especially pleased to see that you could join us, today. Yes, I noticed you buttoning your shirt on the factory floor. Trouble getting in this morning? Well, we'll have something special for you to do, today. Just give me a moment. Will you, Pedro?"

Pedro did not answer.

"Now, where are my regulars?" As the regulars moved to the front of the group, Hook called them by name and assigned each of them a task. Sometimes he would add a familiar comment like "How's the wife?" or "How is your daughter doing in school?" but using first names of wives and daughters. The comments seemed to be designed to add a personal touch, to show that this foreman cared about his men's families. The men responded factually to his questions, without emotion, in respectful monosyllables.

Soon all the regulars had gone to their tasks. They hardly had to be told where to go and what to do. Then Hook looked around. "You boys will be my yard crew." No one liked the sound of "yard crew." "But first, Pedro?" Pedro came forward. "I want you to shovel out the well underneath Number Nine Rolls." With that Frank Perrone, one of the regulars, turned from a distance where he was walking and called back, "I thought I was running Number Nine Rolls."

"You are."

"But we always shut down Number Nine when we clear the well."

"Not necessary. We'll clear it with Nine running."

Frank shook his head and walked away speaking to no one in particular. "There's hardly even crawl space under Number Nine."

We're not talking stone in the well. We're talking dust. Fill a shovel and blow on it; the shovel is empty. He's got to crawl under a four-ton moving flying-wheel driving a stone crusher, shovel dust as fine as smoke breathing it all the time, all in less than four feet of crawl space. With the rolls shut down it would take an hour. With it running, Pedro will be under there all day. All this because he didn't get to the TP floor on time."

"You say something, Frank?" Hook asked.

"Nope—just talking to old Number Nine. Then in the softest voice, that only those nearest him could hear, he muttered, "Howie, they don't call you no Hook for nothing," and he started up the motor. Pedro went to look for a shovel with a short enough handle so that he could take it down in the well with him.

"Boys, there are two things we need to get done, today." He scanned the group thoughtfully. "We need to collect the trash and take it up the hill. And there are two large piles of waste stone, belt run-off, at the edge of the yard. They need to be moved to the dry-fill site." As soon as he said "yard" there was a collective groan from the group. Joe Schuller called out, "Mr. Bronski, it's supposed to be a hundred degrees out there!" Joe was tall and lanky, over six foot. He jumped up and down as he spoke.

"Take it easy, boys. I know it's hot, but it's still a work day. We can't just shut the plant down and wait until it gets cooler. We'll clear the piles and take out the garbage, today."

Lou Donato turned to Joe and muttered, "Those piles have been at the end of the yard for a week. Count on Hook to pick the hottest day of the year to move them."

Hook studied the crowd, then pointed. "You there. What's your name?"

"Nelson."

"Nelson what?"

"Bob Nelson."

"Well, Bob. You're garbage detail. Do you know how to drive a payloader?" Bob was wearing a Penn State T-shirt. He was a freshman there.

"Nope."

"I guess they don't teach you that in Penn State."

Joe waved a hand. "I drove it all last week. I'll do it if you want."

"Good. You can show Bob the controls. I suppose there are a lot of things they don't teach you in college."

Bob winced when Hook spoke, but said nothing.

“It’s a bit tricky, especially with the bad brakes and all—”

“He’ll manage. College boys learn fast. Right, Bob?”

He took off his white hat and waved it slightly to relieve the heat under it. Then he carefully replaced it on his head in exactly the same position. Turning, he walked over to the open bay that emptied onto the loading dock and out into the yard. We followed. He stepped outside onto the dock, staying in the shade of the building. We stopped behind him. The sun had increased and we shaded our eyes from the glare. As the shimmering heat from the yard hit me, I immediately broke a sweat and was soon mopping wet. He pointed to the two hills made of roofing granules at the far end of the yard. They were larger than any piles I had ever seen. Someone had parked a dump truck between them. It looked small between the huge mounds.

You guys ought to be able to clear both piles today. The weather says it’ll be even hotter tomorrow, and tomorrow I’ll have to shift two of you over to the Loadhouse. So, I want it all done today.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Bronski.” He looked over at me. “Given the heat, couldn’t we do something inside today? Maybe do that when it’s cooler?” I asked. It seemed perfectly reasonable to me.

He squinted at me a moment.

“No one likes a smart ass, college boy.” He turned on his heel and walked inside, head up, shoulders back.

No one said a word as we all turned to get digging implements from inside. The stone piles looked larger than life—vast.

Back inside, “I’m doubling for the Hill foreman. There’s a management meeting. So I have to go talk to the dozer crew and I won’t be around as much as usual.”

He waited just long enough to insure that we were getting spades for digging and that we were headed towards the piles. I noticed that he took an oversized handkerchief from his back pocket. He had rolled it in some special way. Now, in a single snapping motion he flicked it so that it unrolled and flashed across his left shoe, dusting it. Then he snapped it like a whip, dusting his right shoe. His shiny shoes looked vaguely military. Then in a single, rapid, two-handed motion, he rerolled the kerchief and it disappeared back into his pocket. Turning on his heel, he walked off to his car.

As soon as he was gone, Farley O'Toole came charging down off the catwalk between Number One and Number Two Rolls. He ran for the pay phone. We all looked.

"Couldn't reach my wife. Have to try my other daughter—see if she's heard."

Joe Schuller walked Bob Nelson over to the payloader and showed him the controls. A payloader looks like a farm tractor only it has a bucket on the front. It has two large tractor wheels on the back, and two small wheels ahead. The bucket looks like a smaller version of what's on a steam shovel. It is attached to the tractor with arms like a bulldozer.

As Bob drove away, the look on his face reminded me of a kid with a new toy. We spread out at the stone piles on either side of the dump truck, which had been wisely pulled in and parked between the two mounds. This allowed us to form an arc around the truck with each worker about the same throwing distance. The distance that you must throw each shovel load is no small matter when you are throwing all day.

Lefty Perez took a position next to me. He watched the payloader drive away to begin collecting garbage.

"I hope Joe told him that the brakes on that thing ain't no good. When she gets away, it's like riding a bucking bronco and pray she don't roll over on ya."

It was getting hotter. I didn't see how we would last all day. With all of us throwing, it was a pretty steady stream of granules. The dust, like smoke, rose from the back of the truck. The granules landed in the empty truck with a clatter and a hiss. The clatter sounded like sand on paper. Hearing the hissing, I thought of a truck full of snakes. The cadence of the day: dig, turn, throw. Dig. Turn. Throw. Rivers of sweat ran down my back. When I licked my lips, my tongue came away bitter from the salt sweat runoff on my face. Dig. Turn. Throw.

Bob passed on the payloader. He waved from a distance as he crossed the yard to the top of the hill. He had emptied all the trash cans at the main office into the payloader bucket. I wanted to call to him, "Slow down! Be careful!" but he was too far to hear, and besides, he wasn't paying attention, anyway. Up the hill he went with the full bucket raised high, shifting the load too far from the center of gravity. The payloader rocked dangerously. He roared up the hill.

By the 10:30 break my knees were weak from the heat. The truckman parked in the middle of the yard blew his horn a few times and waited. Lou was weaving as he walked to the coffee truck. Men in yellow and white hats usually came from all surrounding buildings to buy coffee. Today there were only yellow hats in the crowd. No one ordered coffee. Juices, ice tea and lemonade. Ice. Extra ice. Then shade for ten minutes. Bob never came by. He must have stopped at the other truck, up by the main office. The truckman had an accent when he spoke. I thought Jamaican. He looked at the group of us coming from the stone pile. "Hey mon, can't you find no work out da sun?" Those in front shrugged. Lou sat next to me with a lemonade. He abruptly ran his hand through his hair.

"You see the deal is, man—me and my girlfriend want to get married and buy a house right away. We could both work for a little bit but we want kids and we don't want to wait. I'll need a second job. So if I go to school now—well, there's no time. A year from now, what's it going to get me? Besides, I'm just not college material." His face twitched slightly.

I shrugged, unsure what to say.

After the break, we returned to the stone piles. It had gotten even hotter while we were away. As the sun broiled us, Lou looked nauseous. I felt light-headed. Suddenly, Frank Perrone ran out on the dock waving his arms and yelling to us. Pedro had passed out from the heat under Number Nine, and was unconscious down in the well. The entire yard crew left the stone pile and came running to pull him out. Farley had dropped off the catwalk and got there moments before us. I looked down in the well and all I saw was a smooth layer of dust. I was terrified that he might have suffocated. Farley turned to us speaking quickly. "I need the smallest and the biggest. Lefty, you're the smallest. We're going to lower you head first to the dust line. Joe and Lou, you're the biggest. You hold his feet. Lefty, all I want you to do is poke around and find Pedro's head. Then get your hands under his armpits and holler. You're not going to try to lift him out. We'll pull you. All I want you to do when we pull you is to get his head above the dust, so he doesn't suffocate, and so that we can see which way he's pointed. Then we'll get some men down there to lift him out."

Joe and Lou lowered Lefty. He fished around in the dust for a few seconds. "Give me another inch!" Then he seemed to lunge

with his torso. "Got'em!" He switched his grip slightly as a yellow hat appeared in the dust.

"Pull!"

Slowly a limp figure emerged from the dust.

"Keep going! I think I can get him up!" and the limp form continued to rise as Lou and Joe pulled on Lefty's legs. Frank Perrone slid in beside Lefty. There wasn't enough room in the well, but he got an arm around Pedro's waist.

Soon they drew Pedro from the dust and laid him on the concrete. The white dust covered him like a pall. I shivered as I looked down at the white, utterly still form.

"Jack!" Farley called. He shoved Pedro's helmet at me. "Run to the locker room. Fill this with water. Quick!"

As I ran, he called after me "And bring a bunch of paper towels!"

When I returned, helmet slopping water and paper towels under my arm, they had Pedro's shoes and socks off. Farley poured water into his hair, then on his feet. They had his shirt open. They wet the paper towels and began rubbing his face and chest. The dust made little grey balls, and they had to stop and pick them off of Pedro.

Suddenly, he coughed. Then he wretched. I could hear him wheeze. Then he tried to sit up and I thought of Lazarus back from the grey crypt.

"Stay down, Pedro. It's cooler there. You need to rest." Farley spoke softly. Then he rose and walked across the floor to the pay phone.

"He's like Lazarus, back from Nine's well," I said.

Lefty did a double-take. Then he began to laugh. I didn't see the humor, but soon the tears were running down his face as he laughed and laughed. He said something to Pedro in Spanish. Soon Pedro was sitting up and laughing as he put his shoes back on. He didn't even remember what happened.

"Why are you laughing?" I asked, but before Lefty could answer, Farley returned. The crowd froze. His face was white as a sheet. No one asked the question. We just waited.

"Something's wrong," and he shook his head.

"What's the matter, Far?" Joe blurted out.

"I don't know. They said something about 'cord involvement'. I don't know what that means."

"Maybe they're going to do a C," Lefty added.

We persuaded Pedro to sit awhile longer.

Farley shrugged and turned to Frank Perrone. As he spoke, I realized that Number Nine Rolls was still running.

"I want to shut down Nine and get that well cleared. On Number Eight, loop all the feed into the return belt."

"Too much return on the feed belt will jam the crushers—burn out the rolls motor," Frank said.

"Listen. If you feather the belt, you got about ten minutes before you smell smoke. That's the insulation on the motor. Then you reverse the feed to normal. We can't stop the whole plant. It would take too long, and besides, the tonnage for the day would be light. Hook would know something was up. We have to do something with the feed. I've done this before. The second the feed goes to the return, we stop Number Nine. Put two men in the well and we can finish clearing it by the time we need to get Nine up to speed."

He turned to the group. "We can do it. Can't we boys?"

There was a chorus of "Yeahs," and Frank shunted the feed on Number Eight. We were going to clear the well beneath Number Nine Rolls in under ten minutes.

Lefty and I were the smallest. So we dropped down into the well. We could stand, now. Our heads were between the idle spokes of the rolls. Joe used his hat and those long arms. He reached down from the side as we shoveled, scooping up what he could with his hat. We worked like crazy, even in the heat. Just as we finished, I smelled the acrid odor of insulation burning. We leaped from the well and the second we were clear, Farley started the rolls as Frank returned the feed to Nine. Lefty and I stretched out on the floor, laughing and gasping from the exertion in the heat.

Suddenly Pedro hollered from behind us. He was sitting on the floor against the wall where he could see out across the loading bay. We ran to see where he was looking.

Bob had brought the payloader up next to the truck. He was going to try to fill the truck using the payloader, against company rules. It wasn't safe. Because the front of the ancient bucket had been blunted over the years, it did not bite into the pile. The payloader simply stopped with the bucket lodged against the pile and the rear wheels began to spin. He backed up the payloader some distance across the yard, and then raced at the pile like a joust.

Watching, Pedro muttered, "Oh my God!"

On impact the payloader lurched to a stop but the bucket filled. He raised the bucket and tilted it up and backed away from the pile. We could see the rocking motion of the payloader but it was too far for Bob to hear our calls over the sound of the motor. As he approached the side of the truck, the loader tilted dangerously. Bob, unconcerned, raised the bucket even higher so that it would clear the side of the truck where he intended to dump his load.

"Too high! Too high!" muttered Farley as we all watched.

Before he could clear the bucket over the side of the truck and dump his load, the payloader leaned dangerously and began to slide. He was too close to the truck to lower the bucket, but also at the wrong angle to drop his load into the truck either. He tried to back up, but the wheels slipped. Then the whole vehicle slid sideways.

Farley continued like an announcer to the drama, "Drop the damn bucket in the truck! Lower the center of gravity. Don't worry about where the sand goes! Save yourself!" But of course Bob couldn't hear. Then the payloader rolled over like a bronco. In the last instant Bob jumped, but we couldn't tell if he was clear. The large tractor wheels continued to turn—spinning in air.

We charged across the yard in the heat. As we ran I wondered at such a morning full of catastrophes. When we got to the payloader, Bob was pinned under it. He was conscious, but stunned. He didn't know if he was hurt or not. We lined up on the down side to try to lift it off him.

"Wait," called Farley, always practical. "Watch his legs while I lower the bucket. No need to lift that, again." He reached into the tractor, gingerly pulled the lever, and dropped the bucket, which moved it sideways to the ground since the payloader was on its side. Then he put it in gear, turned off the ignition, and removed the keys. "I don't want it to roll on him as we lift it." Then with it locked in gear he joined us at the payloader's side. We sweated and heaved. Then all at once the payloader flipped like an animal righting itself. Because Farley had put it in gear, it did not roll on Bob. He lay there beneath it, fully conscious, feeling himself. First he felt his arms by reaching them across his chest. Then he felt his ribs. By the time he felt his legs he was laughing. I could see anger building in Farley's face. He did not understand how Bob could laugh at a moment like this. As Bob rose to his feet, he laughed harder and harder, but when I looked at him tears were running

down his face. Soon the laughter turned to sobs, "I nearly died under there. I could have been killed."

"Yes you could've," Farley replied, and with that the lunch whistle blew. Farley ran for the pay phone.

Lou turned to me, "I don't know, Jack. I don't see how I could swing it."

"Couldn't you ask your family for help?" I asked.

"Pop already can't figure out why I don't have a second job. He says work hard while you're young; maybe you have it a little easier when you're older."

"There's got to be a way. Anyhow, I'll bring you the catalogue."

"Thanks, Jack."

Lunch was a subdued affair. Each of us was lost in his own thoughts. Two near tragedies in one morning and no one hurt. We were awfully lucky. Farley returned. We could tell from the way he walked with his head down that there had been no good news. As he reached us he saw that everyone had stopped eating and was looking at him.

"I can't raise anybody on the phone. I think something's happened and they've all gone. Don't know if it's good or bad."

He went into the locker room and brought out a drink of water in a paper cone cup. He drank his water slowly, deliberately. His lunch remained untouched.

Hook drove up and parked his car in the centre of the yard. Normally he parked on the Loadhouse side because the yard was too dusty, but he didn't have time for that today. He drove a big Ford, this year's model. As he slammed the car door, he faced the two stone piles. With his back to us he stood for a moment, unmoved, considering. When he turned and walked to us, each step was measured, deliberate. In front of us, he planted his feet just a little wide, even with his shoulders. He glanced at the ground as he did so. We knew an announcement was coming.

"Boys," and he looked us over as he paused for effect. "Boys, we're going to have to pick up the pace. We need to work a little faster to get the job done." Hook's capacity for getting even was greatly renowned. We knew that if we didn't finish the pile today as requested, Hook would find a means of reparation either as a group or one by one. After all, he was the Hook. "I'm counting on you, boys. Don't let me down." And with that he turned on his heel and walked back to his car. Out came the kerchief and it flashed twice as he sat down. After he sat, he tapped each shoe lightly on

the side of the door before bringing it into the car so as not to track dust on the floor mats. He drove away fast, leaving a low cloud of dust behind him in the yard. We sensed from his speed and the brevity of his speech that today he had more responsibility than he liked.

I looked over at the stone piles. There was more there than we could move in the two hours remaining in the shift. When the whistle blew, Farley got up fast and walked into the TP. I saw him speak to Elmer, who was working the Flight Deck today. Sixty feet in the air, a worker stood on a steel platform and monitored the cross-over feeds, conveyor belts that moved the finished stone from the TP to the Loadhouse. I had worked it once. I recalled the panoramic view from the vertiginous height of the platform.

“Frank is going to watch Number One and Two for me. Elmer is going to be a lookout for us and we’re going to move some stone out of here today. If Elmer sees Hook or any other white hat coming, he’ll gong us. You see there’s this hollow steel pole that runs the height of the plant. When he whacks it with the flat of a shovel ‘Gong!’”

Joe Schuller waved a hand. “Are you sure we’ll hear it out here?”

“When he bangs that pole, you will think the creator has come,” Farley replied.

Then he continued, “Bob, hate to demote you, but I need the loader. You go back to shoveling, but first, there are a couple of things I need you to do. In the TP office, get the wastepaper basket and put it on the edge of the loading dock. Then find Pedro’s shovel, the short one he took down in the well with him, and set it next to Number Nine.”

“Everybody works on the left side of the truck. I’ll work on the right.” He said something to Pedro then strode over to the payloader, took the keys from his pocket, started the engine and headed for the stone pile. He drove with decisive, planful movements. The bucket was only a foot off the ground because there was no reason to have it higher. When he approached the pile of granules, the vehicle moved slowly. He tilted the bucket at a sixty degree angle, gently placed it against the pile, and rocked the bucket up and down slightly while pushing forward. The stone seemed to ooze into the bucket. Soon it was full. He did not try to lift the bucket over the side of the dump truck. He went around to the back where the gate was open and he hardly had to raise the

bucket at all. Soon the truck was full. Lefty jumped in and drove it out to the dry fill site. As the afternoon passed, the piles shrank. We worked steadily in the withering heat. It was over a hundred degrees. In an hour and three quarters, we moved more stone than in the entire morning. We had actually cleared the entire two mounds.

At a quarter to three, a shattering gong pierced the yard. We stopped, stunned at how loud it was. However, Pedro and Bob took off at a dead run, and Farley raced the payloader across the yard to the dock. He jumped off it, leaving the loader with the bucket slightly raised and tilted back almost on the dock. The motor was still running. He ran into the TP and quickly climbed to the catwalk between One and Two. Pedro ran inside to Number Nine. Bob leaped up on the dock next to the payloader bucket, and stood there, waiting.

As Hook stepped from his car, there was joy in his demeanor. He looked at the spot where the mounds had been with obvious pleasure. Then waved for us to follow him into the TP. He was carrying a small slip of paper from a message pad in his hand. As he stepped up onto the dock, Bob picked up the TP wastepaper basket which he had left on the dock at lunch. He dumped it into the bucket just as Hook walked over to him.

“Good job. You can leave that right there. Join us inside.” As we assembled on the TP floor, Pedro crawled out of the well under Nine, scooped up one tiny shovel of stone with his short handled shovel, and dropped it in a waiting wheelbarrow. I could hear a low whine as all the rolls cycled down one by one to complete silence.

“Men, before we end the day, I want you all to know how pleased I am with you. You cleared those piles and I know how much hard work that took in this heat. You should be proud of yourselves. Before I let you go, there is one last thing. I have a phone message for Farley that the plant manager gave me personally. I don’t think Farley would mind if I read it to you. ‘It’s a girl.’”

Applause broke out everywhere. Farley beamed as Hook handed him the message.

“Pedro. Good job in the well. See you tomorrow, bright and early.”

Pedro nodded, his eyes veiled.

“Where’s the smart ass?” Hook glared at me, then smiled. “We’ll have something special for you to do, tomorrow.”

The three o'clock whistle blew.

As we headed for the locker room, Pedro turned to Lefty, "He'll get his one day."

"Yeah, but not today."

Lou looked at me, "What's he gonna have you doing tomorrow?"

I shrugged. "Lou, I'll see if I have that college catalogue at home. I'll bring it in."

Lou looked away. There was decision in the gesture, and I knew that Lou had made up his mind. "Not for me, college boy. There's honest work right here. Thanks just the same." And then a smile masked his face.