

Isn't it strange to feel your own world is falling apart while those of the people close to you are rock steady? And you can't figure out why they're not affected the way you are. About 6:30, I slip away from the plant to run home and grab some dinner. As I come through the door, Julie looks up from the television.

"Hi," she says. "Like my hair?"

She turns her head. The thick, straight brown hair she used to have is now a mass of frizzed ringlets. And it isn't all the same color anymore. It's lighter in places.

"Yeah, looks great," I say automatically.

"The hairdresser said it sets off my eyes," she says, batting her long lashes at me. She has big, pretty blue eyes; they don't need to be "set off" in my opinion, but what do I know?

"Nice," I say.

"Gee, you're not very enthusiastic," she says.

"Sorry, but I've had a rough day."

"Ah, poor baby," she says. "But I've got a great idea! We'll go out to dinner and you can forget all about it."

I shake my head. "I can't. I've got to eat something fast and get back to the plant."

She stands up and puts her hands on her hips. I notice she's wearing a new outfit.

"Well you're a lot of fun!" she says. "And after I got rid of the kids, too."

"Julie, I've got a crisis on my hands. One of my most expensive machines went down this morning, and I need it to process a part for a rush order. I've got to stay on top of this one," I tell her.

"Okay. Fine. There is nothing to eat, because I thought we were going out," she says. "Last night, you said we were going out."

Then I remember. She's right. It was part of the promises when we were making up after the fight.

"I'm sorry. Look, maybe we can go out for an hour or so," I tell her.

"That's your idea of a night on the town?" she says. "Forget it, Al!"

"Listen to me," I tell her. "Bill Peach showed up unexpectedly this morning. He's talking about closing the plant."

Her face changes. Did it brighten?

"Closing the plant . . . really?" she asks.

"Yeah, it's getting very bad."

"Did you talk to him about where your next job would be?" she asks.

After a second of disbelief, I say, "No, I didn't talk to him about my next job. My job is *here*—in this town, at this plant."

She says, "Well, if the plant is going to close, aren't you interested in where you're going to live next? I am."

"He's only talking about it."

"Oh," she says.

I feel myself glaring at her. I say, "You really want to get out of this town as fast as you can, don't you?"

"It isn't my home town, Al. I don't have the same sentimental feelings for it you do," she says.

"We've only been here six months," I say.

"Is that all? A mere six months?" she says. "Al, I have no friends here. There's nobody except you to talk to, and you're not home most of the time. Your family is very nice, but after an hour with your mother, I go crazy. So it doesn't feel like six months to me."

"What do you want me to do? I didn't ask to come here. The company sent me to do a job. It was the luck of the draw," I say.

"Some luck."

"Julie, I do not have time to get into another fight with you," I tell her.

She's starting to cry.

"Fine! Go ahead and leave! I'll just be here by myself," she cries. "Like every night."

"Aw, Julie."

I finally go put my arms around her. We stand together for a few minutes, both of us quiet. When she stops crying, she steps back and looks up at me.

"I'm sorry," she says. "If you have to go back to the plant, then you'd better go."

"Why don't we go out tomorrow night?" I suggest.

She turns up her hands. "Fine . . . whatever."

I turn, then look back. "Will you be okay?"

"Sure. I'll find something to eat in the freezer," she says.

I've forgotten about dinner by now. I say, "Okay, I'll probably pick up something on my way back to the plant. See you later tonight."

Once I'm in the car, I find I've lost my appetite.

Ever since we moved to Bearington, Julie has been having a hard time. Whenever we talk about the town, she always complains about it, and I always find myself defending it.

It's true I was born and raised in Bearington, so I do feel at home here. I know all the streets. I know the best places to go to buy things, the good bars and the places you stay out of, all that stuff. There is a sense of ownership I have for the town, and more affection for it than for some other burg down the highway. It was home for eighteen years.

But I don't think I have too many illusions about it. Bearington is a factory town. Anyone passing through probably wouldn't see anything special about the place. Driving along, I look around and have much the same reaction. The neighborhood where we live looks like any other American suburb. The houses are fairly new. There are shopping centers nearby, a litter of fast-food restaurants, and over next to the Interstate is a big mall. I can't see much difference here from any of the other suburbs where we've lived.

Go to the center of town and it is a little depressing. The streets are lined with old brick buildings that have a sooty, crumbling look to them. A number of store fronts are vacant or covered with plywood. There are plenty of railroad tracks, but not many trains.

On the corner of Main and Lincoln is Bearington's one high-rise office building, a lone tower on the skyline. When it was being built some ten years ago, the building was considered to be a very big deal around here, all fourteen stories of it. The fire department used it as an excuse to go buy a brand new fire engine, just so it would have a ladder long enough to reach to the top. (Ever since then, I think they've secretly been waiting for a fire to break out in the penthouse just to use the new ladder.) Local boosters immediately claimed that the new office tower was some kind of symbol of Bearington's vitality, a sign of re-birth in an old industrial town. Then a couple of years ago, the building management erected an enormous sign on the roof which says in red block letters: "Buy Me!" It gives a phone number. From the

Interstate, it looks like the whole town is for sale. Which isn't too far from the truth.

On my way to work each day, I pass another plant along the road to ours. It sits behind a rusty chain-link fence with barbed wire running along the top. In front of the plant is a paved parking lot—five acres of concrete with tufts of brown grass poking through the cracks. Years have gone by since any cars have parked there. The paint has faded on the walls and they've got a chalky look to them. High on the long front wall you can still make out the company name; there's darker paint where the letters and logo had once been before they were removed.

The company that owned the plant went south. They built a new plant somewhere in North Carolina. Word has it they were trying to run away from a bad situation with their union. Word also has it that the union probably will catch up with them again in about five years or so. But meanwhile they'll have bought themselves five years of lower wages and maybe fewer hassles from the work force. And five years seem like eternity as far as modern management planning is concerned. So Bearington got another industrial dinosaur carcass on its outskirts and about 2,000 people hit the street.

Six months ago, I had occasion to go inside the plant. At the time, we were just looking for some cheap warehouse space nearby. Not that it was my job, but I went over with some other people just to look the place over. (Dreamer that I was when I first got here, I thought maybe someday we'd need more space to expand. What a laugh that is now.) It was the silence that really got to me. Everything was so quiet. Your footsteps echoed. It was weird. All the machines had been removed. It was just a huge empty place.

Driving by it now, I can't help thinking, that's going to be us in three months. It gives me a sick feeling.

I hate to see this stuff happening. The town has been losing major employers at the rate of about one a year ever since the mid-1970s. They fold completely, or they pull out and go elsewhere. There doesn't seem to be any end to it. And now it may be our turn.

When I came back to manage this plant, the Bearington *Herald* did a story on me. I know, big deal. But I was kind of a minor celebrity for a while. The local boy had made it big. It was sort of a high-school fantasy come true. I hate to think that the next time

my name is in the paper, the story might be about the plant closing. I'm starting to feel like a traitor to everybody.

Donovan looks like a nervous gorilla when I get back to the plant. With all the running around he's done today, he must have lost five pounds. As I walk up the aisle toward the NCX-10, I watch him shifting his weight from one leg to the other. Then he paces for a few seconds and stops. Suddenly he darts across the aisle to talk to someone. And then he takes off to check on something. I give him a shrill, two-finger whistle, but he doesn't hear it. I have to follow him through two departments before I can catch up with him—back at the NCX-10. He looks surprised to see me.

"We going to make it?" I ask him.

"We're trying," he says.

"Yeah, but can we do it?"

"We're doing our best," he says.

"Bob, are we going to ship the order tonight or not?"

"Maybe."

I turn away and stand there looking at the NCX-10. Which is a lot to look at. It's a big hunk of equipment, our most expensive n/c machine. And it's painted a glossy, distinctive lavender. (Don't ask me why.) On one side is a control board filled with red, green, and amber lights, shiny toggle switches, a jet black keyboard, tape drives, and a computer display. It's a sexy-looking machine. And the focus of it all is the metal-working being done in the middle of it, where a vise holds a piece of steel. Shavings of metal are being sliced away by a cutting tool. A steady wash of turquoise lubricant splashes over the work and carries away the chips. At least the damn thing is working again.

We were lucky today. The damage wasn't as bad as we had first thought. But the service technician didn't start packing his tools until 4:30. By then, it was already second shift.

We held everybody in assembly on overtime, even though overtime is against current division policy. I don't know where we'll bury the expense, but we've got to get this order shipped tonight. I got four phone calls today just from our marketing manager, Johnny Jons. He too has been getting his ear chewed—from Peach, from his own sales people, and from the customer. We absolutely must ship this order tonight.

So I'm hoping nothing else goes wrong. As soon as each part

is finished, it's individually carried over to where it's fitted into the subassembly. And as soon as that happens, the foreman over there is having each subassembly carted down to final assembly. You want to talk about efficiency? People hand-carrying things one at a time, back and forth . . . our output of parts per employee must be ridiculous. It's crazy. In fact, I'm wondering, where did Bob get all the people?

I take a slow look around. There is hardly anybody working in the departments that don't have something to do with 41427. Donovan has stolen every body he could grab and put them all to work on this order. This is not the way it's supposed to be done.

But the order ships.

I glance at my watch. It's a few minutes past 11:00 P.M. We're on the shipping dock. The doors on the back of the tractor-trailer are being closed. The driver is climbing up into his seat. He revs the engine, releases the brakes, and eases out into the night.

I turn to Donovan. He turns to me.

"Congratulations," I tell him.

"Thanks, but don't ask me how we did it," he says.

"Okay, I won't. What do you say we find ourselves some dinner?"

For the first time all day, Donovan smiles. Way off in the distance, the truck shifts gears.

We take Donovan's car because it's closer. The first two places we try are closed. So then I tell Donovan just to follow my directions. We cross the river at 16th Street and drive down Bessemer into South Flat until we get to the mill. Then I tell Donovan to hang a right and we snake our way through the side streets. The houses back in there are built wall to wall, no yards, no grass, no trees. The streets are narrow and everyone parks in the streets, so it makes for some tedious maneuvering. But finally we pull up in front of Sednik's Bar and Grill.

Donovan takes a look at the place and says, "You sure this is where we want to be?"

"Yeah, yeah. Come on. They've got the best burgers in town," I tell him.

Inside, we take a booth toward the rear. Maxine recognizes me and comes over to make a fuss. We talk for a minute and then Donovan and I order some burgers and fries and beer.

Donovan looks around and says, "How'd you know about this place?"

I say, "Well, I had my first shot-and-a-beer over there at the bar. I think it was the third stool on the left, but it's been a while." Donovan asks, "Did you start drinking late in life, or did you grow up in this town?"

"I grew up two blocks from here. My father owned a corner grocery store. My brother runs it today."

"I didn't know you were from Bearington," says Donovan.

"With all the transfers, it's taken me about fifteen years to get back here," I say.

The beers arrive.

Maxine says, "These two are on Joe."

She points to Joe Sednik who stands behind the bar. Donovan and I wave out thanks to him.

Donovan raises his glass, and says, "Here's to getting 41427 out the door."

"I'll drink to that," I say and clink my glass against his.

After a few swallows, Donovan looks much more relaxed. But I'm still thinking about what went on tonight.

"You know, we paid a hell of a price for that shipment," I say. "We lost a good machinist. There's the repair bill on the NCX-10. Plus the overtime."

"Plus the time we lost on the NCX-10 while it was down," adds Donovan. Then he says, "But you got to admit that once we got rolling, we really moved. I wish we could do that every day."

I laugh. "No thanks. I don't need days like this one."

"I don't mean we need Bill Peach to walk into the plant every day. But we *did* ship the order," says Donovan.

"I'm all for shipping orders, Bob, but not the way we did it tonight," I tell him.

"It went out the door, didn't it?"

"Yes, it did. But it was the way that it happened that we can't follow."

"I just saw what had to be done, put everybody to work on it, and the hell with the rules," he says.

"Bob, do you know what our efficiencies would look like if we ran the plant like that every day?" I ask. "We can't just dedicate the entire plant to one order at a time. The economies of scale would disappear. Our costs would go—well, they'd be even worse than they are now. We can't run the plant just by the seat-of-the-pants."

Donovan becomes quiet. Finally he says, "Maybe I learned too many of the wrong things back when I was an expeditor."

"Listen, you did a hell of a job today. I mean that. But we set policy for a purpose. You should know that. And let me tell you that Bill Peach, for all the trouble he caused to get one order shipped, would be back here pounding on our heads at the end of the month if we didn't manage the plant for efficiency."

He nods slowly, but then he asks, "So what do we do the next time this happens?"

I smile.

"Probably the same damn thing," I tell him. Then I turn and say, "Maxine, give us two more here, please. No, on second thought, we're going to save you a lot of walking. Make it a pitcher."

So we made it through today's crisis. We won. Just barely. And now that Donovan is gone and the effects of the alcohol are wearing off, I can't see what there was to celebrate. We managed to ship one very late order today. Whoopee.

The real issue is I've got a manufacturing plant on the critical list. Peach has given it three months to live before he pulls the plug.

That means I have two, maybe three more monthly reports in which to change his mind. After that, the sequence of events will be that he'll go to corporate management and present the numbers. Everybody around the table will look at Granby. Granby will ask a couple of questions, look at the numbers one more time, and nod his head. And that will be it. Once the executive decision has been made, there will be no changing it.

They'll give us time to finish our backlog. And then 600 people will head for the unemployment lines—where they will join their friends and former co-workers, the *other* 600 people whom we have already laid off.

And so the UniWare Division will drop out of yet another market in which it can't compete. Which means the world will no longer be able to buy any more of the fine products we can't make cheap enough or fast enough or good enough or something enough to beat the Japanese. Or most anybody else out there for that matter. That's what makes us another fine division in the UniCo "family" of businesses (which has a record of earnings growth that looks like Kansas), and that's why we'll be just

another fine company in the Who-Knows-What Corporation after the big boys at headquarters put together some merger with some other loser. That seems to be the essence of the company's strategic plan these days.

What's the matter with us?

Every six months it seems like some group from corporate is coming out with some new program that's the latest panacea to all our problems. Some of them seem to work, but none of them does any good. We limp along month after month, and it never gets any better. Mostly it gets worse.

Okay. Enough of the bitching, Rogo. Try to calm down. Try to think about this rationally. There's nobody around. It's late. I am alone finally . . . here in the coveted corner office, throne room of my empire, such as it is. No interruptions. The phone is not ringing. So let's try to analyze the situation. Why can't we consistently get a quality product out the door on time at the cost that can beat the competition?

Something is wrong. I don't know what it is, but something basic is very wrong. I must be missing something.

I'm running what *should* be a good plant. Hell, it is a good plant. We've got the technology. We've got some of the best n/c machines money can buy. We've got robots. We've got a computer system that's supposed to do everything but make coffee.

We've got good people. For the most part we do. Okay, we're short in a couple of areas, but the people we have are good for the most part, even though we sure could use more of them. And I don't have too many problems with the union. They're a pain in the ass sometimes, but the competition has unions too. And, hell, the workers made some concessions last time—not as many as we'd have liked, but we have a livable contract.

I've got the machines. I've got the people. I've got all the materials I need. I know there's a market out there, because the competitors' stuff is selling. So what the hell is it?

It's the damn competition. That's what's killing us. Ever since the Japanese entered our markets, the competition has been incredible. Three years ago, they were beating us on quality and product design. We've just about matched them on those. But now they're beating us on price and deliveries. I wish I knew their secret.

What can I possibly do to be more competitive?

I've done cost reduction. No other manager in this division has cut costs to the degree I have. There is nothing left to trim.

And, despite what Peach says, my efficiencies are pretty damn good. He's got other plants with worse, I know that. But the better ones don't have the competition I do. Maybe I could push efficiencies some more, but . . . I don't know. It's like whipping a horse that's already running as fast as it can.

We've just got to do something about late orders. Nothing in this plant ships until it's expedited. We've got stacks and stacks of inventory out there. We release the materials on schedule, but nothing comes out the far end when it's supposed to.

That's not uncommon. Just about every plant I know of has expeditors. And you walk through just about any plant in America about our size and you'll find work-in-process inventory on the same scale as what we have. I don't know what it is. On the one hand, this plant is no worse than most of the ones I've seen—and, in fact, it's better than many. But we're losing money.

If we could just get our backlog out the door. Sometimes it's like little gremlins out there. Every time we start to get it right, they sneak around between shifts when nobody is looking and they change things just enough so everything gets screwed up. I swear it's got to be gremlins.

Or maybe I just don't know enough. But, hell, I've got an engineering degree. I've got an MBA. Peach wouldn't have named me to the job if he hadn't thought I was qualified. So it can't be me. Can it?

Man, how long has it been since I started out down there in industrial engineering as a smart kid who knew everything—fourteen, fifteen years? How many long days have there been since then?

I used to think if I worked hard I could do anything. Since the day I turned twelve I've worked. I worked after school in my old man's grocery store. I worked through high school. When I was old enough, I spent my summers working in the mills around here. I was always told that if I worked hard enough it would pay off in the end. That's true, isn't it? Look at my brother; he took the easy way out by being the first born. Now he owns a grocery store in a bad neighborhood across town. But look at me. I worked hard. I sweated my way through engineering school. I got a job with a big company. I made myself a stranger to my wife and kids. I took all the crap that UniCo could give me and said,

THE GOAL

"I can't get enough! Give me more!" Boy, am I glad I did! Here I am, thirty-eight years old, and I'm a crummy plant manager! Isn't that wonderful? I'm really having fun now.

Time to get the hell out of here. I've had enough fun for one day.

3

I wake up with Julie on top of me. Unfortunately, Julie is not being amorous; she is reaching for the night table where the digital alarm clock says 6:03 A.M. The alarm buzzer has been droning for three minutes. Julie smashes the button to kill it. With a sigh, she rolls off of me. Moments later, I hear her breathing resume a steady pace; she is asleep again. Welcome to a brand new day.

About forty-five minutes later, I'm backing the Buick out of the garage. It's still dark outside. But a few miles down the road the sky lightens. Halfway to the city, the sun rises. By then, I'm too busy thinking to notice it at first. I glance to the side and it's floating out there beyond the trees. What makes me mad sometimes is that I'm always running so hard that—like most other people, I guess—I don't have time to pay attention to all the daily miracles going on around me. Instead of letting my eyes drink in the dawn, I'm watching the road and worrying about Peach. He's called a meeting at headquarters for all the people who directly report to him—in essence, his plant managers and his staff. The meeting, we are told, is to begin promptly at 8:00 A.M. The funny thing is that Peach is not saying what the meeting is about. It's a big secret—you know: hush-hush, like maybe there's a war on or something. He has instructed us to be there at eight and to bring with us reports and other data that'll let us go through a thorough assessment of all the division's operations.

Of course, all of us have found out what the meeting is about. At least we have a fairly good idea. According to the grapevine, Peach is going to use the meeting to lay some news on us about how badly the division performed in the first quarter. Then he's going to hit us with a mandate for a new productivity drive, with targeted goals for each plant and commitments and all that great stuff. I suppose that's the reason for the commandment to be there at eight o'clock on the button with numbers in hand; Peach must've thought it would lend a proper note of discipline and urgency to the proceedings.

The irony is that in order to be there at such an early hour, half the people attending will have had to fly in the night before. Which means hotel bills and extra meals. So in order to an-