

EUREKA

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On the evening of June 18th, 1950, the workers living in the barracks of Camp One decided to rise in revolt against their masters, the bosses at the Libby, McNeil, and Libby canning factory in Eureka, Illinois.

Eureka, Illinois. It's a real town. Look it up. Take out your atlas. President Reagan was born there. Or went to college there. One or the other.

So here's the scene: You go through the railroad underpass at the end of the cannery buildings and start up the dirt road toward the crest of the hill where the first cornfields start out at the edge of town. That's Camp One in front of you: three army-type barracks with a fence around it. See that gate? How it leans open? It leans open all the time now.

Camp One. As if there's a Camp Two and maybe a Camp Three. But there isn't any Camp Two or Camp Three. Who knows? Maybe when the bosses at Libby, McNeil, and Libby built these three army-type barracks out where the first cornfields start they imagined that at some later time they'd build more camps. For more workers. To harvest more peas. And after the pea harvest the corn harvest, and after the corn harvest the pumpkin harvest. But for reasons that are beyond you and me, that never happened.

Army-type barracks. You've seen them. Wooden floors, two rows of double-decker bunks going down each side with an aisle in the middle. At one end the head: toilets, showers, wash basins. Down at the other end a small room where, if we were still fighting World War II, the sergeant who lived in this room would turn on the lights at some ungodly hour like four-thirty in the morning and shout something like, "All right ladies, drop your cocks and grab your socks."

Only this isn't the army. World War II's been over for five years. The dirty goddamn Huns and the dirty goddamn Japs have been beaten into the pulp they so richly deserved. We've saved the world for democracy. We're in peacetime now. Americans are lurching forward to reap the benefits and amass their fortunes.

Even, in their own way, so are these men you see at Camp One. If you can call a wage of sixty cents an hour amassing a fortune. That is, sixty cents an hour when the men are out in the fields actually working. Shoveling pea vines into pea viners. Which right now at this moment they're not.

Although this spring they were promised work. Yes, sir. They signed contracts.

They signed these contracts down in Arkansas. See, these guys are Arkies. Which means they're from the hills of Arkansas. Which distinguishes them, although not much, from the Okies, who come from the hills of Oklahoma. But for some reason, which is beyond you and me, the bosses at Libby, McNeil, and Libby here in Eureka, Illinois, the very town where President Reagan was either born or went to college, one or the other, prefer Arkies. This spring, just like every other spring since the end of the war, the bosses sent their man down there to those hills and he got the contracts signed.

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Like I said, on this particular evening these men are hanging around the barracks because right now at this moment there isn't much work out in the fields harvesting for Libby, McNeil, and Libby, shoveling the pea vines into the pea viners. The reason there isn't much work is that it's been raining a whole lot and the fields are soggy, which makes the pea vines soggy, and everybody knows you can't thresh pea vines when they're soggy.

So, you see, the men not working isn't any conspiracy by the bosses at Libby, McNeil, and Libby to keep the workers down. This isn't by capitalist design. It's just been raining a lot.

Well, all right, some of the men went out today. But only six men. Out of all these other men. This morning the foreman and two assistant foremen paid a visit to the barracks at some ungodly hour like four-thirty in the morning and turned on the lights and shouted the names of the six men they'd somehow chosen. And this morning each of those six men went out in a truck and the truck dropped each man off at a viner and each man stayed there all day watching over his viner—not real work at all, even though each man got paid his regular wages.

But that's only six men out of all these other men, who—and this is a matter of historical record—rose in revolt against their masters on June 18th, 1950.

Why this date? Why not June 17th or June 19th, or, maybe, say, July 4th?

And why the summer of 1950? Why not the summer of 1949? There was some rain that summer, too. Well, all right, not as much rain as the summer of 1950. But, still, there wasn't any revolt in 1949. And not the summer before that, either, 1948. And not the summer before that.

So why 1950?

Was it that suddenly, for some reason unknown to you and me, it simultaneously occurred to these men that they were not participating in the general post-war lurch to amass riches after we had saved the world for democracy? Did they finally figure out that that sixty cents an hour—when they were actually out in the fields working, that is—wasn't going to make it?

Well, in my opinion, for what it's worth, the men already knew this. That they were, so to speak, near the bottom of the goodie barrel.

How could they not know this? They had their eyes open, didn't they? All they had to do was walk up to the town square in Eureka and have a look around. Which I'm sure they did. And not only this summer, but last summer, too. When it also rained. And the summer before. And the summer before that, as far as I know.

Look: you can be sure as you can be sure of anything that the man Libby, McNeil, and Libby sent to Arkansas to get the contracts wasn't about to sign up any known trouble-makers who had ideas about raising workers' consciousness.

Think about it. You wouldn't have signed up men like that either, would you?

Well, would you?

I don't think so.

Okay, back to the story. On the evening of June 18th, 1950, the men of Camp One decided to rise in revolt against their masters, the bosses at the Libby, McNeil, and Libby canning factory in Eureka, Illinois.

Why June 18th?

Well, look closer at Camp Number One. Especially barracks number one of Camp Number One, the barracks closest to the gate which is permanently leaned open now and therefore no longer keeps anyone in or out. You could walk right in or out if you wanted to.

In fact, I invite you to do exactly that. I invite you to walk up the dirt road from the railway underpass all the way to where the cornfields start at the edge of town and go through that now permanently leaned-open gate and come in the door at the end of barracks number one where the sergeant's room is—that is, if we were still at war saving the world for democracy and a sergeant really lived in that room and turned on the lights at some ungodly hour in the morning like four-thirty shouting things about ladies grabbing their socks. But, as I say, there isn't any sergeant now.

So, you've just come in the door and the sergeant hasn't yelled at you and you look down the two rows of double-decker bunks and see a lot of men clustered around about halfway down the aisle.

Why are these men clustered around?

You could go up and have a look.

Go ahead.

Well, sure, okay, it's understandable. You feel just a bit uneasy about doing that. Because my guess is—and I think this is a pretty good guess—you're not an Arkie, or even an Okie, and probably you don't make your living working with your hands. And right now my guess is you're not wearing work clothes and boots and you never even thought of chewing tobacco. Which is to say you're probably wearing city clothes.

So that's why you feel a bit uneasy about walking up that aisle.

Which, as I say, is understandable.

Still, and this is also understandable, you're curious. And, come

on, after all, that gate doesn't keep anyone in or out. It's permanently leaned open now. And there wasn't any sergeant yelling at you.

So you figure maybe you'll just find out, have a go at it, see what's going on halfway up the aisle with that cluster of men.

So you start to work your way up the aisle just hoping the men won't notice you, the way you're dressed, city-like, which is my guess.

And what do you see?

You should have known.

A poker game.

That's what working men have always done when it's raining outside and their name isn't called to go to work at the ungodly hour of four-thirty in the morning.

Seven men shielding cards in their hands sit around two orange crates that have been fitted together. A red cloth's been thrown over the orange crates making the whole arrangement look something like a coffee table. Behind those sitting men are the other standing men, now including you, watching. Because of the way the bunks are set up most of the men, including you, are squeezed together at either end of the orange crates, one group spilling out into the aisle and the other group pressed against the windows.

Even though the orange crates have been fitted together, the playing area is still pretty small. There isn't really room on those orange crates for all the money. In the middle, yes, okay, the pot, coins and dollar bills. But around the edges? The money's almost falling off. And the men have to have space to lay out their cards, don't they?

Because this is serious business. A man can amass his fortune here. It's been raining outside.

And you can bet your life that when the men are dealt their cards they sure don't fan them out right away where any and all, including you, can see them. No sir. You never know what kind of cheating might be going on. Or could be going on. Or who's a card shark and who's not. Or who's watching from behind throwing signals. And

who's that new guy, anyway? Never seen him before. The one dressed in the city shirt and the city pants? Where'd he come from? He ain't one of us.

So that's why the men don't open the cards they've been dealt right away. They hold them closed on their laps making talk, swapping jokes, maybe a swig from that bottle of whiskey down on the floor. Then, finally, mostly before the first round of betting but sometimes after, this man and then that man slides his cards up close to his chest and edges them slightly apart. You lean forward trying to have a look, but you can't really make anything out.

"Well, now," says one of the men squeezing his cards closed again, "Just to keep ol' Jack, here, honest."

He shoves eight quarters toward the pot.

"Hell," says a second man, "I'll join the fun."

That's eight more quarters.

"Shiiit!" says a third man, "look here!"

This man throws his cards face up on the table.

He isn't supposed to do that. Cards face up. Everyone knows you don't do that. Until the hand is over. Then you can throw your cards face up if you want. Show everyone how luck's been treating you. An act of God—like the rain.

Everyone knows the smart players don't show their cards even then. Unless it's part of a bluff.

But this man throws his cards face up.

"Six goddamn hands in a row," he says.

He reaches down to the floor for that bottle of whiskey and takes a swig.

"Six goddamn hands."

He's a big man with big hips taking up more than his part of the bunk. He's wearing a bright yellow shirt with some kind of silver chain at his neck and he's got some kind of silver bracelet around one of his wrists and a silver watch with a silver expansion band on the other.

“Six goddamn hands,” he repeats, taking another swig from the bottle while he watches the other men play out the hand.

He’s been drinking too much. In fact, you see he’s been drinking too much for too many years, the red face and the even redder nose, the flesh around his nose that’s beginning to look like putty.

“Well, I just tell you what,” he says as the other men are throwing their cards in. “I’ll just tell you fucking what.”

You watch him unbutton his breast pocket and pull out a roll of bills.

“Yessir,” he says taking the rubber band off the roll of bills and shoving the bills next to the pile of nickels, dimes, and quarters in front of him, “tell you fucking what.”

The other men who have finished the hand watch the man in the bright yellow shirt add his bills to the pile in front of him. So do the men standing around watching—which now includes you.

And standing there watching, you know what’s going to happen. Probably every man there knows what’s going to happen. The man in the bright yellow shirt is putting his entire stake on the table. All the money he brought with him from Arkansas. That’s one thing you know. The other thing you know is that he’s going to lose that money. All of it. The other men are going to take it from him.

So you consider trying to warn him. You play with the idea of saying something like, “Careful now.”

But you decide against it.

After all, that would only call attention to yourself. The other men might ask you who you were and what you were doing here.

And, furthermore, what difference does it make? The man in the bright yellow shirt wouldn’t listen to you. He won’t listen to anyone. He’s too drunk.

One of the other players is collecting the cards and beginning to shuffle them.

“I think we’ll just have ourselves a little game of seven card stud,” says this man.

He is a small, thin, baldheaded man with a narrow face and a hooked narrow nose. You watch the way he shuffles the cards. Something about this motion captures your attention. Ah, you know! The man shuffles the cards like you've seen street magicians do it, very fast, faster than you can see what's happening. Even the fast way he snaps the deck of cards to his neighbor for his neighbor to cut.

"Just one minute there. Just one goddamn minute," says the man in the bright yellow shirt. He reaches out and grabs the pack of cards. "Just one goddamn minute."

He takes the cards in his hands very slowly as if to counter the quickness of the thin, baldheaded man, and starts to cut the deck in one place, then cuts it in another.

"Goddamn right," he says.

He puts the deck down in front of the thin, baldheaded man and knocks on the top of the deck with his knuckles.

"Don't mess with that sucker," he says.

The thin, baldheaded man reaches into his breast pocket and you watch him pull out a wad of bills of his own. He adds that wad to the pile of money in front of him.

"This game, this here game," he says, "ain't going to be your ordinary game. This here game is going to cost some money. Going to cost twenty bucks to play in this game."

He throws the twenty out on the middle of the table.

You know what's happening. All the men standing around with you know what's happening. It's obvious. The thin, baldheaded man wants to go one-on-one with the man in the bright yellow shirt.

You look at the thin, baldheaded man again. Maybe he's a card shark. Maybe. Such men come up here from Arkansas to work in the fields, too. Trying to amass their fortunes.

The other men sitting around the orange crates throw in their cards. Face down.

But not the man in the bright yellow shirt.

"Twenty bucks?"

"Cost you twenty," says the thin, baldheaded man.

The man in the bright yellow shirt detaches a twenty dollar bill from the pile in front of him and tosses it on top of twenty already in the middle of the table.

"You're fucking on."

"Seven card stud," says the thin, baldheaded man.

He starts dealing, flick, flick, flick, flick, right off the top, without lifting the deck from the table, but so fast that even though you're watching for it, you don't see it, the trick, if there is a trick, a sleight of hand, two cards up and one card down.

The man in the bright yellow shirt's showing a king; the baldheaded man a two.

"Guess I go first," says the man in the bright yellow shirt.

He shoves another twenty into the pot.

"Well?" he says.

"Guess I'll just match that," says the baldheaded man, and pushes in his own twenty.

"Ready?" he says.

"Ready," says the man in the bright yellow shirt.

"Then here we go."

Again, flick, flick, right off the top of the deck.

Now the man in the bright yellow shirt's caught something, a pair of kings. The baldheaded man's showing nothing, a two and a nine.

"Well, well, well," says the man in the bright yellow shirt. "Well, well, well. Look at that. I guess that's worth a little extra something."

He pushes in two twenties.

"Up to you," he says to the baldheaded man.

"Don't have much choice," says the baldheaded man, and puts in two twenties of his own.

Flick, flick. The man in the bright yellow shirt, gets a queen, bets another two twenties, then catches a queen again.

Look at that. Now the man in the bright yellow shirt's got two pair. A high two pair.

He puts in three twenties. The baldheaded man matches him.

The last card, down and dirty. The baldheaded man's still showing nothing, a two of clubs, a nine of hearts, a jack of spades and a six of diamonds.

But the man in the bright yellow shirt's sitting there looking at two pair. A high two pair. And if he's holding a queen or a king in his other three cards, well, then barring some kind of miracle, he's won, a full house.

"Well, well, well. We'll just see about this," says the man in the bright yellow shirt, and starts to shove in all the money in front of him into the pot.

"Careful, there, Claggon," says one of the men standing next to you.

"Careful ain't nowhere," says the man in the bright yellow shirt as he pushes all his money in.

The baldheaded man looks at all that money.

"You sure?" he says.

"Damn sure," says the man in the bright yellow shirt.

He sits back to watch.

"Well, seems to me, looking at it logical-like, I ain't got no choice," says the baldheaded man.

He counts the money that's been shoved in, counts his own money, and matches what's been shoved in.

One thing's for sure, that's a lot of money in the pot. And also for sure: that's all the money the man in the bright yellow shirt's brought with him.

"So," says the baldheaded man, "let's see what you got."

The man with the bright yellow shirt smiles and lays his three cards out on the table. Sure enough, you knew it all along, he's got a king in there. So, three kings and two queens. A full house.

"Figured you for that," says the baldheaded man. "Had you figured for that."

He lays his own three cards out. What's this? Three "two's." With the "two" out on the table that makes four of a kind. And four of a kind, any four of a kind, beats a full house.

“A bit of luck there,” says the baldheaded man as he starts to pull the money in.

“One fucking minute!”

The man in the bright yellow shirt slaps his hand down on top of the other man’s hand.

“Just one fucking minute, buddy!”

With his other hand he takes a card from the table.

“See that?”

He holds the card up so the other men can see it.

“Fucking marked card.”

He pushes the card closer to the standing men and one of them takes it and looks at it.

“Goddamn fucking marked card!” says the man with the bright yellow shirt still holding the baldheaded man’s hand down against the money on the table.

Other men reach out to examine the card. Someone even passes it to you. You look at it. Well, all right, the light’s not the best, but you can’t see anything unusual about the card.

“Buddy, we got ways of dealing with the likes of you,” says the man with the bright yellow shirt.

“Take your stinking hand off of mine,” says the thin, baldheaded man.

The two men stare at each other. You don’t know what’s going to happen. Where you come from this sort of thing doesn’t happen.

But what does happen surprises you. The two men keep staring at each other and then the man with the bright yellow shirt pulls his hand away from the middle of the table. The thin, baldheaded man pulls in the rest of the money.

One of the men standing near you laughs.

Quick as you can imagine, just like that, you had no idea he could move so fast, the man in the bright yellow shirt has stood up and caught the man who laughed by the collar of his shirt and is pushing his fist into the man’s throat so hard that the man is making a gurgling sound.

“That was a fucking marked card!”

The man is trying to talk, but he can't because of the fist at his throat.

“A fucking marked card!”

“Marked card...” the man gets out.

“I don't think...” you start to say.

And again, quick as a flash, before you really know what's happened—how can he move that fast?—the man in the bright yellow shirt has got you by the collar of your shirt. He's driving you back. You hit up against something and you come to a stop and he comes to a stop, but he's still got his hand up at your collar right next to your throat.

“What the fuckass you doing here?”

It hurts where his fist is against your throat. It hurts a lot. But you can't do anything about it. Even though he is drunk he's a lot stronger than you are.

“Huh? Where do you get off coming here? You treat us like shit. Like scum.”

You understand. It's the way you're dressed. That's what it has to be. He thinks you're part of the management. Of Libby, McNeil, and Libby. He thinks you're one of the men who run the cannery.

“Shithead!”

You're on the floor. The wooden floor of the barracks. He's tossed you aside. He's thrown you down. Thank God. Because for a moment there you didn't know. Because you don't have any experience with this kind of thing. For all you knew you were about to meet your maker. Right then. Imagine that. You. Meeting your maker at Camp Number One in Eureka, Illinois. Of all places.

You're picking yourself up. You're on your knees trying to get to your feet. Because no one comes over to help you. Where you come from others would have had their arms under you right now. They would have been lifting you up. They would have said, “Are you all right?” or “Take it easy, now,” or “It's going to be just fine.” And they

would have helped you aside and eased you down and told you that that man was crazy, what an absolutely crazy man, that there'd been trouble with him before. And maybe by now someone would have even called the police.

But you're not there. You're in Camp Number One in Eureka, Illinois. You're in Camp Number One standing on your feet and holding onto one of the bunk rails for support. Just to steady yourself. You look over at the men at the card table. There are still a few of them left. One or two of them look back at you. But there's no sympathy in that look. It's a dead look.

Except the thin, baldheaded man, the card shark. He's looking at you. His look is different from the other men. Because he's smiling at you. Well, not smiling exactly. But it's almost a smile. Nearly a smile. Some form of recognition. Some kind of contact.

You try to smile back.

The card shark dips his head in another form of recognition. A tiny bow.

It occurs to you that somehow you and the card shark are on the same side of things.

Down at one end of the barracks the man in the bright yellow shirt is holding forth, ranting and raving, something about how they treat us all like shit here and the bastards bring us up here and the bastards don't even pay us and, by God, says the man, he's not about to take this shit any more, no by God, not one hour longer.

Then he's saying: What's the matter with all of you? Chickenbastards! Letting them treat you this way! Like goddamn scum! Like dogs!

The card shark inclines his head toward that end of the barracks. A smirk? Is that a smirk on the card shark's face?

You're feeling steadier on your legs now. You smirk back at the card shark. Well, you can't see your face, but you think you smirk back.

Crash!

More crashes.

A whole double-decker bunk down at that one end of the barracks comes down.

“Fuck this!”

The man in the bright yellow shirt is stomping around down there.

Then a flash of fists. One man crumples to the floor and the man in the bright yellow shirt stands over him.

The card shark is pointing at you. Then he’s pointing at the door. He’s trying to tell you something. He’s trying to tell you to get out of here. Get out now.

You let go of the railing of the double-decker bunk and step out into the aisle. But your legs don’t hold you up that well. And, anyway, you make a mistake. Because there’s another crash, another double-decker bunk going over, and you pause to look down that way, standing there in the middle of the aisle. That was your mistake.

Because the man in the bright yellow shirt sees you and he’s coming down the aisle for you. And, for some reason, maybe because you’ve already made one mistake, you make another and don’t run. You stand there watching the man with the bright yellow shirt coming right down the aisle toward you and reaching out and grabbing you.

“All right, fucker!” says the man in the bright yellow shirt.

He’s got you by the collar again. And again he’s pushing his fist in on your throat. And again there’s nothing at all you can do about it.

“Pay us! You brought us up here! You fucking pay us!”

He’s got you backed up against the wall. You see the other men gathered around. They look at you with dead faces.

“Pay us, fucker!”

He’s starting to push you harder against the wall and again you’re thinking, this is it, of all places, you’re going to meet your maker right here at Camp One.

Except that you’re saved. The most amazing thing. Something you

never would have expected. The card shark has pushed himself between you and the man in the bright yellow shirt.

“You fuck,” says the card shark. “You crazy? You crazy out of your mind?”

The card shark is actually slapping the man with the yellow shirt across the face. Short slaps. Sharp short slaps.

“Here!” says the card shark.

From somewhere he produces a twenty dollar bill. He thrusts it in the face of the man with the bright yellow shirt.

“Here!”

The man with the bright yellow shirt has taken his fist away from your throat. He’s taken his fist away from your throat and opened it and taken the twenty dollar bill. He’s looking at the twenty dollar bill.

The card shark has got you by the arm. He’s pulling you away from the bunk. He’s pulling you down the aisle toward the door. You’re holding one hand up to your throat to try and stop the pain there.

“Now just one minute there,” says a man standing in the doorway. This man isn’t letting you and the card shark through.

“Who is he?” says another man.

“Where’d he come from?” asks another man.

All three of them are blocking the way.

“You just never mind who he is,” says the card shark.

“What’s he doing here?” says the first man.

“Say,” says another man coming up from behind you and touching your shirt, “you’ve got some nice clothes here.”

“Where’d he get them pretty clothes?” says another man coming up from behind.

The rest of the men have closed in around you. Not only can’t you get to the door any more, the aisle down the other way is cut off, too.

“He’s all right, boys,” says the card shark. “You just make way, now.”

“Think we’ll have a little do with him,” says one of the men reaching out toward you.

Suddenly you find yourself talking.

“Hey,” you say, “you got the wrong idea here. About me. Completely the wrong idea.”

Those sentences came out all right. You keep trying.

“You think I’m one of them. But I’m not one of them. No, sir. I’ve never been one of them. No, sir. Not at all. I’ve never been one of them in my whole life. You men can believe me on that. I’m on your side. I’ve always been on your side.”

And suddenly you’re talking about a strike. You didn’t mean to. It just comes out. You tell the men that it makes no sense to just wait and let the management take advantage of them. The management brought them up here, didn’t it? All this way? From Arkansas? That’s a long ways for a man to come. And there’s a promise in that. An inherent promise. A promise to be paid. Rain or no rain. Because, you tell the men, they aren’t powerless. Not at all. If they come together, pull together. Make the pledge together. Because, look at it this way, you tell the men, you are workers of the world.

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To say the least, you continue to surprise yourself with this rhetoric, and wonder, as it pours out, where it is coming from.

Because now you find yourself talking about the war. Come on, men, you say to them. Why did we fight the war? Why did so many of the best of us, our fellows who are no longer with us, lay down their lives? Give the highest sacrifice that a man can give? Weren’t those men sacrificing themselves for our country? For you men as well as everyone else? For Arkansas as well as the other states in this great union? Because, you say, you had always thought that that war was fought to save the world for democracy. A basic idea, but a pretty important idea. And now look what’s happening. What the management’s trying to do. Right here in Eureka, Illinois. Right here at Camp One.

The men’s faces have begun to change a little bit. They’re not so hard. You can see you’re beginning to win them over. My goodness, you had no idea at all that you had such a talent as a labor agitator. No idea at all. And again you wonder where all this came from.

But you are only warming to your task.

Look here, you tell the men. Here is what we must do. We are all going to sign a piece of paper. This piece of paper will be like a contract. Between us. It will bind us all together. By this piece of paper we will all agree that not one of us goes out in the morning until they agree to pay us. Not one of us. Whether we work or not. Because in the morning the foremen are going to come in and they're going to turn on the lights and they're going to announce the names of the six men they've chosen. However they chose them. But unlike other mornings we show them the piece of paper and tell them that's what we've agreed to, that nobody goes out, not even those six, until they've agreed to pay us. All of us.

And then, you tell the men, the management will give in. They will have to give in. Because you—and here you mean yourself—know those management kind of men. How they think. And you know that when they're faced with such a piece of paper they will give in. What are they going to do? Let their peas rot on the vines?

"He's goddamn right. By God, he's goddamn right."

That's the man in the bright yellow shirt. He's pushed himself through the ring of men and has come up right next to you. In fact, he even puts his arm around you.

"By God, men, we're not going to take this shit any longer."

"No reason to," you say.

"No fucking reason to," says the man with the bright yellow shirt.

Someone's produced a piece of paper and a pen and handed it to the man with the bright yellow shirt. But this man hands the piece of paper to you.

"Here. You've got the words," he says.

You find yourself sitting at the two orange crates where the men had been playing poker. You put the piece of paper down and write at the top, Camp One, Eureka, Illinois, and then the date, June 18, 1950. Then in bigger letters you write, WE, THE UNDERSIGNED, IN CONSIDERATION OF SOLIDARITY AND BROTHERHOOD AND

IN ADVANCEMENT OF LABORING MEN THROUGHOUT THE WORLD, and then in smaller letters the rest of it, about how no one will go out in the morning until all, even those who don't go out, are paid, and when you have finished all this you sign your name with a flourish—although, as you are signing your name you are not quite sure you meant to do that because in so doing you are perhaps committing yourself to something you didn't mean to commit yourself to.

Still, after you have signed your name you pass the paper to the man with the bright yellow shirt who signs his name right under yours, and then he passes the paper to the other men who are crowding in.

“Don't be stupid,” says the card shark to the men who haven't signed yet.

But the men don't pay any attention to him. One man signs, and then the next.

“They keep files,” says the card shark. “They got files on every one of you. You'll get a red mark next to your name.”

But the men don't pay him any attention. You watch each of them sign. But when the last man hands the paper to the card shark, the card shark pushes the paper away.

You grab the piece of paper and thrust it at him.

“Sign!” you say.

“I'm not crazy,” he says.

“Sign!” you say.

But he won't. He pushes the piece of paper away again.

“All right, then,” you say.

You nod to the man in the bright yellow shirt. The man in the bright yellow shirt nods back. He understands.

“We'll just see about this,” he says.

He grabs the card shark at the collar of his shirt. He pushes his fist in against the card shark's throat.

“Sign!” says the man in the bright yellow shirt.

“Sign!” you say.

You see the card shark look around—that is, as much as he can with that fist at his throat. He more looks around with his eyes. You know that he can see that he is alone, that no one else is going to help him.

“Sign!” says the man with the bright yellow shirt.

“All right. Jesus!” says the card shark.

“Let him go,” you say to the man in the bright yellow shirt.

The man with the bright yellow shirt releases his grip on the card shark’s collar and the card shark brings his hand up to his throat.

“Jesus,” says the card shark.

“Sign!” you say.

You watch the card shark sign his name down at the bottom of the other names.

You take the piece of paper.

“Look!” you say.

You hold it up for all the men to see it.

“We’ve won!” you say.

Men are coming over to you. They’re shaking your hand.

“Glad to have you with us,” says one man.

“Good you showed up,” says another.

“We can sure use someone like you,” says a third.

“Say,” says still another man, “you know words? I got a letter last week.”

“Bring it,” you say.

“Got a letter from the county clerk,” says another man.

You hold forth at those orange crates. Different men bring you different pieces of paper.

The one man’s received a notice from a law firm announcing that he’s got one month to make all the delinquent payments on his house. This is the final notice.

“Sonsobitches,” says the man when you explain this to him.

“Maybe you should see a lawyer,” you say.

“Don’t got no money for no lawyer,” the man says.

Another man's received a letter that's got something to do with probating the estate of an aunt who recently died. As far as you can tell it doesn't make any difference whether this man gets into the probate action or not because the aunt had no money. That's what you tell the man.

"No money?"

"Don't think so."

"Well, fuck," the man says.

And other letters and documents. And other things. One man even shows you a strange-looking sore on his hand covered with pus. You ask if there is a medical kit around. Someone produces one and you spread an antiseptic cream on the sore.

"The thing to do," you say, "is to keep it clean."

"Will it get better?"

"I don't know," you say.

The man with the bright yellow shirt brings you some work clothes.

"You'll need these in the morning," he says.

You look at the stained clothes and it occurs to you to say that you weren't really planning on spending the night.

Well, that's certainly true. When you came here you weren't planning on spending the night. But on the other hand, you decide you don't really have much of a choice now. After that big speech you made. All that fine-sounding rhetoric. Which you meant. No, no, you weren't pretending. You really meant it. Even if you'd never heard yourself speak like that before.

So you look at the work shirt. It seems about the right size. Probably it'll fit. You pick up the pants. Yes, they'll probably fit, too. You see they've even found a pair of boots for you.

"And we cleared a bunk," says the man in the bright yellow shirt.

You collect all the work clothes and follow the man in the bright yellow shirt down the aisle until he shows you the bunk.

"Guess this will do for you," he says.

Apparently it is right above his bunk.

“That’s fine,” you say. “Thanks.”

You look around. You see some hooks by the window and so you hang up the work clothes on them. Then you notice most of the men are beginning to get ready for bed. In fact, one man is already in his bunk and snoring. You must have spent more time than you thought at that orange crate table looking at those different pieces of paper.

So you strip off your clothes down to your underwear and hang those clothes up on another hanger next to the work clothes. Of course you don’t have any pajamas because you certainly never expected to spend the night here. But looking around you a lot of the men don’t have pajamas either. Like you, most are in their underwear.

“Good night,” you say to the man in the bright yellow shirt in the bunk under you—although now, of course, he won’t be in that bright yellow shirt.

“Good night, brother,” he answers back.

Brother! Yes, that’s what he said: brother. That makes you feel good.

So you lie there feeling good looking up at the two-by-four beams in the ceiling. A few of the men are still talking and joking. But more men have started to snore. Someone turns off the lights.

You lie there.

The man under you called you “brother.”

But this isn’t the Army. It’s not World War II, the last war where one could fight with honor. There’s no sergeant in that little room down at the end. And it’s only Libby, McNeil, and Libby in Eureka, Illinois, and it’s only Camp One, and they never even built any more camps here. Still, you are finally involved in a great action. You remember in fifth grade when you studied democracy and your teacher said it was the best system in the world.

The man below you joins in the snoring. His is irregular, explosive.

How in the world will you ever get to sleep with these explosions going on right under you?

Because you're going to need all the sleep you can get to face the action of the morning. You sure want to have all your faculties then. The strike. The decision you all made to rise against your masters.

Well, concerning sleep, you decide to pretend you are in one of the enlisted men's bunk rooms right under the flight deck of a great aircraft carrier cruising the Pacific looking for Japs. All the snoring is not snoring but the sounds of fighter planes being launched and recovered right above you. During the first few months of your tour in the aircraft carrier you could hardly sleep at all for the noise. But that was then and this is now. You got used to it. They could land B-17s right on top of you by this time and it wouldn't make any difference.

And you must have fallen asleep because you are no longer at war but back somewhere in childhood and your father is cranking one of those ice cream makers, the kind that looks like a wooden tub, and your mother had given you the job of pouring the salt onto the crushed ice that surrounds the metal cylinder. You watch that cylinder turn in the ice as your father cranks. Soon you will be tasting the ice cream. There's nothing better. Vanilla. Also you saw your mother pour raspberries into the thick, white cream.

Then suddenly it's not your childhood anymore, you'll never get to taste that ice cream, because the bright light's everywhere and the sounds of doors slamming and someone shouting, "All right, ladies, drop your cocks and grab your socks!"

You open your eyes and look out into the light. A man is standing there in the aisle saying those things. But he's not a sergeant. He's wearing work pants and a dazzling white T-shirt and a red baseball cap that says "John Deere." There are two other men standing at either end of the aisle. All three men are big men.

"Now, boys," says the man who's partway down the aisle and who had said something about cocks and socks, "this here's how it's going to be this morning: Jackson, Miller, Trinkle, Ball, Schuler, and Fenster. Those are the men that's going out. Rest of you get another day's rest."

The man starts down the aisle toward the door.

"Truck's leaving in half an hour," he says.

Jackson? Jackson? That's *your* name. He's called *your* name. Along with five others. You're one of the men going out today. Somehow you've been chosen.

You can't quite believe that. After all, you only showed up at this place last evening. You didn't even know they knew your name.

And, anyway, think about it. The strike. Last night all of you agreed. You all agreed that none of you would go out into the fields until all of you were paid first. Solidarity. You even all signed a piece of paper. Although you're not quite sure where that piece of paper is just now. You remember holding it up to the men and shouting, "Look! We won!" But somehow that paper got away from you. Surely it's around here somewhere.

So you slide down off your bunk trying not to step on the man beneath you. But you see he has reached up with one arm to cover his face. And looking around you see one man pull a blanket up over his face exposing his bare feet as he does so.

Only a few men other than you are out of their bunks dressing. These must be the men that are going out this morning. To watch over the pea viners. You see that the card shark is among them. You can't believe how thin and wiry he is in his underwear.

The card shark looks over in your direction. He nods. You nod back.

Your clothes are hanging on those hooks next to the window, your nice clothes on one hook and your work clothes on another. The nice clothes look clean and fresh; the work clothes dark and grimy.

Why not? You could put on your nice clothes and just walk away. No one would stop you. That gate is leaned permanently open. It no longer keeps anyone in or out. You could walk down the dirt road right under the railroad underpass and up past the cannery and pass the houses where people are beginning to wake up to carry on with their day until you'd reached the town square in the

center of Eureka. Probably they've got two cannons with shells stacked up there on either side of the main entrance to the courthouse. To honor the war dead.

But you don't. That is, walk away. Because you all made a pledge together. You all signed a piece of paper. Solidarity. And you believed what you said.

So you reach out towards the hook holding your work clothes. You lift off the work pants and try stepping into them. Yes, they fit—a little loose at the waist, but not bad at all. You put on the work shirt and then you bend over and pull on your boots.

The man in the bunk starts snoring again in those irregular, explosive bursts. Like B-17s landing above you.

Except this isn't World War II.

You follow the other five men out into the morning air and see the fringe of pink to the east and follow the men through the darkness into a mess hall where you eat eggs and hash browns, both burned, and drink some coffee, and then you follow the men out to the truck and you are the last one behind the card shark to climb into the bed of the truck. The card shark offers you his hand to help you in.

The truck starts up and you lean against the top of the cab as it goes out through the gate that is always permanently leaned open. Looking back at barracks number one you see the man in the bright yellow shirt, only now in his underwear, of course, leaning against the door of the barracks looking out at the truck. You wave at him, but he doesn't wave back.

The truck goes under the railroad underpass and along the cannery buildings, up a short hill, around the town square with the cannons sitting in front of the courthouse honoring the war dead, past more houses, and now the truck is picking up speed out on the highway in the country between the cornfields.

You lean against the cab of the truck and watch the highway roll in toward you and feel the wind in your face.

Well, it's not so bad. This development. That's what you think.

Not so bad at all. Probably you'll be out for at least ten hours. Because it's been raining there won't be any real work for you to do. So it'll be an easy day. Just watching over the viner. And at sixty cents an hour, well, look at it this way: That's a lot more money than you could make in Arkansas in one day. For sure.

And think about this also: the pea harvest isn't the end of things. No, sir. If you keep your nose clean and don't get into any trouble, be careful not to get a red mark on your file, there's the corn harvest after the pea harvest and then the pumpkin harvest after the corn harvest. All those long summer hours at sixty cents an hour. At the end of the summer there's no telling how much money you'll have amassed.