The Suicidal Freezer Unit

By Tom Wolfe

The freezer was a warehouse within a warehouse, a vast refrigerated chamber down at one end of the building behind a wall covered in sheets of galvanized metal studded with rivets. A door, big as a barn’s, covered in the same galvanized metal and battered as an old bucket, hung from a track. It had been opened for the start of the shift, revealing a curtain of heavy-gauge vinyl clouded by oily smears and shales of ice. The curtain had a slip up the middle so that the workmen could go in and out without too much of the cold air escaping. The freezer was maintained at dead zero Fahrenheit.

Inside, there were no windows. The chamber remained in an eternal frigid gray dusk, twenty-four hours a day. Stacks of cartons, tons of them, many of them packed with meat and fish, reached up three stories high on metal racks. Way up on the ceiling you could make out lengths of gray galvanized metal air-conditioning ducts doubling back and forth upon themselves like intestines. Between the ducts, strips of fluorescent tubing emitted a feeble bluish haze. The extreme cold seemed to congeal the very light itself and remove every trace of color.

Kenny, Conrad, and some thirty other pickers stood about just inside the entryway, waiting for the shift to start. They were clad in the lumpish, padded metal-gray Zincolon gloves and freezer suits with Dynel fur collars the warehouse issued. On the backs of the jackets was written CROKER in big yellow letters that looked lemony in the fluorescent light. Beneath the freezer suits they wore so many combinations of long johns, shirts, jerseys, sweaters, insulated vests, and sweatsuits, they were puffed up like blimps or the Michelin Tire Man. Kenny had the hood of a sweatshirt pulled up over his head, with just the bill of his baseball cap sticking out, upturned and emblazoned SUICIDE. His wild eyes seemed to be beaming out from within a shadowy hole. Three of the freezer pickers were black, three were Chinese, one was Japanese, and one was Mexican, but most were Oakies, like Kenny, and half the Oakies had adopted Kenny’s SUICIDE regalia. They were known as the crash’n’burners, and they called the freezer the Suicidal Freezer Unit, a term Conrad couldn’t get out of his head.

The way the jets of breath fog streamed from their noses and mouths was the first indication of how cold it actually was, but any picker foolish enough to try to work without his gloves on would soon have another. Each of them operated a pallet jack, a small but heavy electric vehicle with which you could jack up a loaded pallet and move it to another part of the warehouse. You stood on the back of a jack, behind its metal motor housing. It was simple to use. But if you touched the levers or handlebars with your bare hands in this ice box, your flesh would freeze to the metal. (And just try pulling it loose.)

To one side of the entrance was a wooden table manned by the night foreman, Dom, an old fellow – in the freezer, forty-eight was old – who looked a mile wide in his plaid Hudson Bay jacket. He wore a navy watch cap pulled down over his forehead and ears, which made the top half of his big round head look ridiculously tiny. Bursts of mouth fog pumped out of his mouth as he studied the printout order sheets in front of him. He had a little cylindrical remote microphone clipped to the collar of his jacket.

The boys were beginning to feel the cold creep in. It made your nose run even more. A chorus of sniffles, sneezes, snufflings, hawkings, coughs, and spitting welled up. Every now and then some picker would spit right on the floor, which made Conrad’s flesh crawl.

Dom’s deep voice sounded out over the wall speaker system:

“Okay, men! Before we get started, just a couple of things. There’s good news and bad news. First, the bad news. We been getting complaints from over at Bolka Rendering that somebody here’s been using their parking lot for tailgate parties…..Kenny.”

“Ayyyyyyyyy,” said Kenny. “Why you looking at me?”

“Why?” said Dom. “Because two nights ago – or it was in the morning – the sun was up – and they’re coming to work over there, and not only’s there a buncha guys sprawled shit-faced all over their parking lot, but there’s some kinda boom box playing this song where they’re screaming, ‘Eat shit.’ Guy tells me that’s all you could hear over half a Contra Costa County, ‘EAT SHIT, EAT SHIT, EAT SHIT.’ That’s really terrific, that’s very high class.”

“Oooooooooo, oooooooooo, oooooooooo!” whooped the crash’n’burners.

“’Eat shit’?” asked Kenny in a pseudo-startled voice. “Iddn’at by the Child Abusers?”

“Whoever it’s by, it’s disgusting.” Boomed Dom’s voice over the speaker system. “There’s a lotta women go to work at Bolka in the morning. I hope you realize that.”

“Oooooooooo, oooooooooo, oooooooooo!” Now the pickers really let out whoops. Dom’s concern for the tender sex, especially in the form it took at the Bolka Rendering works, struck them as a howl, worthy of maximum derision.

Dom shook his head. “Okay, you can laugh, but if you don’t stop, somebody over *here’s* gonna get child-abused. Capeesh? …Okay?” Lest the whoops start again, he hurried on. “All right, now here’s the good news. We got a good turnout, and this is the end a the month, and so it looks like a light night, so whenever you men complete the orders, you can get outta here.” Dom always said “you men” when he was appealing to their better natures.

More whoops, only now with a note of honest elation. Light nights they loved. Toward the end of the month, many of the hotels and the institutional kitchens that operated on monthly budgets – the prisons, hospitals, nursing homes, company cafeterias – cut back on their orders. On top of that, there had been a general falling off of business. The result was nights like tonight, on which the pickers could work five, six, seven hours and get paid for eight, so long as they got the orders out.

The boys converged on the foreman’s table to pick up the order printouts, which were stacked in a wire basket. Now the great dreary chamber was filled with squeals of rubber-soled boots pivoting on the concrete slab, the whines of the pallet jack’s electric motors starting up, the jolts of power hitting the driveshafts, the rumble of the wheels rolling over the concrete floor.

Conrad had slipped his order sheet onto the clipboard on his handlebars before he actually focused on what it was…Santa Rita…He ached a little more and rubbed his nose with the back of his glove. Santa Rita, down near the town of Pleasanton, was the Alameda County jail, one of eight prisons Croker supplied. Santa Rita orders always went on and on and included a lot of heavy cases of cheap meat. He scanned the sheet…twelve cases of beef shanks, Row J, Slot 12…Each case weighed eighty pounds. In loading up a pallet, the trick was to put the heaviest cases on the bottom and build up to the lightest. So that was how he’d have to start the night – lifting half a ton of frozen beef shanks in eighty-pound bricks.

He stood on the back of his pallet jack and squeezed the accelerator levers. With a whine and a jolt, the machine came to life, and he headed down the aisle bearing an empty pallet on the blades before him. The boys were already plunging full-decibel into the frenzy of the light night…all over the freezer you could hear whining motors, squealing boots, cries, shouts, oaths, the crashing sound of pickers slinging heavy frozen cartons onto the pallets…The leaned into the racks’ icy slots, waddled in, crawled in, swollen gray creatures with Dynel fur collars, and then they crawled back out, waddled back out, slithered back out, bearing frozen cartons of food, fat gray ice weevils swarming over the racks in a terribly diligent frenzy; and he was one of them.

His destination, Row J, Slot 12, was deep in the gloom of the freezer. He looked into the slot at floor level and sighed a long jet of breath fog. It was empty. He looked into the slot above it. It was about a quarter full, with the cartons stacked at the rear of the two pallets that formed the slot’s floor. So he did the usual. He hopped up on top of the jack’s motor housing and hoisted himself into the upper slot on his haunches. The slots were only four feet high. He duck-walked across a pallet toward the cartons stacked in the rear. The pallet’s slats sagged in a weary, spongy way beneath his feet. He sank to his knees, hooked his hand over a carton in the uppermost row, let his body flop down on the icy blocks beneath him, and started pulling. It wouldn’t budge; it seemed to be frozen fast between the cartons on either side. He started yanking on it…grunts…bursts of mouth fog…It was dark here…inside this cliff of ice. He struggled to rock the carton free. The pressure on his fingers, his forearm, his elbow and shoulder was tremendous. His eyes started watering, and the rims of his eyelids began to burn.

Finally, with a hot burst of fog, he yanked the carton loose and began pulling it toward him. He got off his knees and rose up in a crouch once more. Then he went into a deep squat and tried to pick up this frozen eight-pound dead weight without straining his back. Since he couldn’t straighten up, he had to pull the carton in toward his midsection and duck-waddle to the mouth of the slot. Eighty pounds, frozen solid, more than half his own weight – already his shoulders, his arms, his hands, his lower back, the big muscles of his thighs were in agony. Despite the frigid temperature, his cheeks and forehead were hot from the exertion. At the edge of the slot he set the carton down, slid the four feet to the floor below, and grabbed the carton in a bear hug. For an instant, he staggered before getting his feet squarely under the weight. Then he squatted again and lowered the carton onto the pallet on the front of his jack. When he stood up, a jolt of pain went through his lower back, he glanced down –

Blearily, in the periphery of his vision, he could see little glints and sparkles. Ice crystals were forming in his mustache. Sweat had run off his face, and mucus had flowed from his nose, and now his mustache was beginning to freeze up. He took the glove off his right hand and ran his fingers through his hair. There were little icicles in the hair on his head and in his eyebrows, and a regular little stalactite had formed on the end of his nose. He looked at his hand. He made a fist. Then he undid it and splayed his fingers out and turned them this way and that. They were extraordinarily broad, his fingers. From yanking, and carrying the eighty-pound carton, they were pumped up, bulging with little muscles. They were…stupendous…and grotesque at the same time. His hand looked as if it belonged to someone twice his size.

He stood still for a moment. The noise in the freezer had risen to a merry old ruckus. The whines of the jacks came from every direction…the crashes of product hitting the pallets…the shouts, the cries.

“Crash’n’burn!” sang Kenny’s boys with the SUICIDE caps in a choral response.

Backing out of a slot nearby, here came a fat gray ice weevil wearing a Panzer helmet…Herbie Jonah was his name…He had a huge carton hugged into his abdomen. Jets of fog came out of his mouth with a regular beat. Conrad couldn’t hear him, but he knew exactly what he was saying, because Herbie said the same thing all night long as he struggled with the frozen blocks: “Motherfucker, motherfucker, motherfucker.” Over there, on the aisle, sailing past on his pallet jack at a real crash’n’burn clip came a wiry little crash’n’burner known as Light Bulb, his SUICIDE cap jammed down practically over his eyes, the hood of his sweatshirt sticking up with a funny point above the top of his head, as if he were an elf. For someone so small, he was amazingly strong. The pallet on the front of his jack was already piled high with product.

“Crash’n’burn”” Kenny sang out from somewhere, this time in falsetto.

And Light bulb, perched on the back of his pallet jack, threw back his head and gave a falsetto yodel of his own – “crash’n’burn!” – and zipped past.

Suddenly Dom’s deep voice was bellowing over the speakers: “Cleanup! Cleanup! Betty 4! Betty 4! Cleanup! Chop chop!”

This meant a spill had occurred. “Betty 4” was Row B, Slot 4. Some product had slid off a pallet as it went around a curve; or some picker had dropped something from an upper slot; or an entire jack – picker, pallet, and all – had turned over, and product was spilled on the floor. Cleanup was not a verb but a noun, a job category. There were two cleanups, two Filipinos, known as Ferdi and Birdie, both of them too small to be pickers, who did nothing but clean up product that spilled or got smashed on the concrete slab. There would be plenty of spills tonight. There were plenty of the every light night, as the boys yahooed through the frozen phosphorescent haze in the name of the god of the Suicidal Freezer Unit, testosterone.

Conrad listened to the crazy din of his mates – and then caught himself. He was letting No! creep into his heart. What he was doing in this place had nothing to do with jacks and slots and pallets and product or with crashing or burning. It had to do with a new life for his young family. With a deep breath, a sigh, and a long jet of breath fog, he hopped back up on the motor housing of his pallet jack and hoisted himself back into the upper slot. A weevil with Yes! In his heart, he burrowed back into the cliff for eleven more eight-pound blocks of frozen beef shanks. The evening had just begun.

BY THE TIME HE HAD loaded all twelve cartons onto the pallet on the front of his jack, his face was burning up, and his mustache was so full of ice he could feel its weight pulling at his skin. Quickly he scanned the printout again…Twenty-four cases of beef patties…Hadn’t even noticed that…Row D, Slot 21…fifty pounds apiece…Didn’t help to dwell on it…He headed off on the jack, bearing the twelve cases of beef shanks on the pallet before him.

Down the aisle sailed Kenny, standing up on the back of his pallet jack. His eyes burned crazily in the shadow beneath his SUICIDE brim and the sweatshirt hood. The pallet on the front of his jack seemed to be more than half loaded already. As soon as he saw Conrad coming toward him, he broke into a big grin and yelled out, “Yo! Whoa!”

Conrad released his accelerator lever and drifted to a stop, and Kenny pulled up beside him.”Yo! Conrad! What the hell’s happened to your mustache?”

“Whattaya mean?” said Conrad. Kenny’s own mustache was heavily flecked with frost.

“It’s fucking turned to ice!” said Kenny. “You look like you got a couple a icicles hanging out your nose!”

Conrad pulled the glove off his right hand. It was true. His mustache was frozen solid from his nostrils to where it dropped down on either side of his mouth.

“I swear to God,” said Kenny. “Looks exactly like a couple icicles hanging out your nose. Whattaya been doing?”

Conrad gestured toward the cartons of beef shanks on his pallet. “Santa Rita.” He said.

Kenny said, “Like liftin the QE2, iddn’it?”

With that, he shot a whining jolt of electricity to his driveshaft and sped on down the aisle.

Conrad burrowed on, a weevil with the best of them, into the Salisbury steaks, fish burgers, gray stock, ice cream, orange juice, cut fava beans, American cheese, margarine, pepperoni pizza, chipped beef, bacon, and waffles, and the ruckus rose, and the cries rang out – Crash’n’burn! – and the product crashed, and the pickers yahooed, and Dom’s big voice bellowed over the speakers: “Cleanup! Cleanup! Kilo 9! Kilo 9! Come on, Ferdi! You too, Birdie! On the double!” – and the light-night frenzy ran through the chamber like a rogue hormone.

As soon as he retrieved the final item on the Santa Rita printout (a dozen cases of frozen buckwheat waffles), Conrad rubbed his nose with his glove to break up the rings of ice that had formed inside his nostrils. A thick, restless fog was beginning to roil around the tops of the racks from the heat of the machinery and the bodies of the struggling human beings. The fluorescent tubing gave off a wan tubercular-blue glimmer behind it. Conrad’s pallet was piled perilously high with product. He eased the jack toward the freezer door. He pulled a handle hanging from a chain, and the door rolled open hydraulically. Slowly he drove through the slit in the vinyl curtain and out onto the dock’s concrete apron.

As soon as he emerged from the freezer, he was engulfed, overwhelmed, by heat. The temperature out here was still well up into the eighties. The trucks were roaring and sighing; a few were already pulling out for the nightly delivery runs. All up and down the platform were great heaps of cartons, drums, canisters, sacks, resting on pallets the pickers had deposited. He could feel the ice melting from his hair and his eyebrows and his mustache and streaming down his face. What must he look like to the loaders and the drivers and everyone else out here in the real world? A poor encrusted weevil emerging from the polar depths, a mutant, bleary-eyed, blinking its way into a sweltering California night…He straightened up in an instinctive bid for dignity.

And yet when he deposited the pallet and its prodigious load at Bay 17, neither the checker not the loaders nor the driver seemed to take any special notice of him. They were used to such creatures, they gray weevils who came crawling out from under the ice…

Before heading back into the freezer, Conrad got off the jack and stood and stretched. His long johns were soaked clear through from humping product for so long without a break.

He gazed out beyond the big white Croker trucks and the glare of the loading platform, out beyond the parking lot, the flatlands, and the marshes. There was such a profusion of stars, they seemed to be swelling and surging in the sky. Below them, near the horizon, he could see other lights twinkling…San Francisco,,,Sausalito…Tibourn, he guessed it was…just across the bay…and so far off. Might as well be another continent. What were people his age, twenty-three, doing over there at this moment beneath that exuberant, starry sky? He couldn’t even imagine it, and he steeled himself against submitting to such an idle exercise, for that would be inviting No! into his heart. The leafy town of Danville, in Contra Costa County, was as near to the fable coast of California as he cared, or dared, to aspire.

With a great effort, he beckoned Yes! Back into his heart. It was slow in coming.

JUST BEFORE CONRAD REACHED THE entrance to go back into the freezer, there was a tremendous clatter. A picker from the warehouse’s main section, Dry Foods, pulled up ahead of him driving an electric truck known as a tugger, pulling three metal wagons piled high with product…drums of detergent, canisters of tomato paste, sacks of pinto beans, huge jugs of red food dye…There was no end to it. The tugger had a seat like a golf cart’s and perched on it was a chubby redheaded fellow, no older than Conrad himself, wearing a short-sleeved sport shirt, work gloves, and crepe=soled boots. The Dry Foods pickers sometimes drew orders with one or two frozen items and were told to just go into the freezer and get them. They weren’t dressed for it, but they could take it for the few minutes they might have to be in there.

This one, the chubby redhead, was studying the freezer’s huge door. He couldn’t figure out how to open it. Conrad drove up beside him and pointed to the chain and then pulled it for him. As the door rolled open, he gestured toward the slit in the vinyl curtain as if to say, “After you.”

The redhead eased his tugger and his wagons on through, and Conrad entered behind him. The light-nigh ruckus had not died down for a moment. Shouts, oaths, crashing sounds, whines…and Kenny’s voice singing out through the icy haze and the roiling fog:

“Crash’n’burn!”

“Crash’n’burn!” answered the crash’n’burners from every aisle, every row, every rack, every icy, hazy, fogbound corner.

Baffled, the boy on the tugger swiveled his head this way and that. All at once he took off for the racks, his tugger whining shrilly from all the juice he was feeding it.

Conrad drove his jack over to the foreman’s desk. Kenny was standing there beside his jack studying a printout he had just picked up.

“Shit,” he said to nobody in particular. Then he caught sight of Conrad and held up the sheet and said, “Nat’n’Nate’s,” and made a face. Nat’n’Nate’s was a big old delicatessen in San Francisco just south of Market Street. The pickers hated Nat’n’Nate’s orders because of the heavy cases of processed meat.

Conrad pulled a printout from the wire basket…Morden Rehabilitation, up in Santa Rosa…He scanned the sheet…Shouldn’t be too ban an order. He got up on the pallet jack and drove into the canyons amid the ice cliffs.

He soon found himself humping product just one slot away from Kenny. He could hear Kenny grunting and swearing to himself. Conrad was loading a case of spareribs on his jack when Kenny emerged from the cliff embracing an eighty-pound carton of processed turkey. All at once, there was a sharp whine and a terrific clattering. Here came the redheaded Dry Foods picker, barreling out of a row on his tugger and pulling his three wagons full of product. He turned to go up the aisle. He was turning too fast. Instead of straightening out, he kept on turning in a huge crazy arc. The centrifugal force sent the wagons up on two wheels. They were going over. A massive gush of product hit the slick concrete of the aisle. A huge sack split open. Pellets! No, pinto beans, streaming in every direction. Hard and smooth and slippery as ball bearings they were. A loaded pallet jack came speeding up the aisle from behind….Panzer helmet…Herbie Jonah…Herbie veered to keep from crashing into the spill. His jack hit the streaming pinto beans, skidded, then went into a ferocious spin. Herbie, the jack, the loaded pallet – spinning, flinging frozen product in every direction, careening straight toward Kenny, who had his back turned with an eighty-pound block of frozen meat clutched to his midsection-

“Kenny!”

-Herbie, screaming, trying to keep his grip on the handlebars of the jack. Bango! He was thrown off. He hit the floor the floor turned red. Red! Kenny turned his head. He could see Herbie’s jack coming straight at him, but he was frozen by his own compulsive grip on the carton. Conrad sprang forward, dove at Kenny headfirst, bowled him over. A tremendous suffocating crash enveloped their bodies…a sea of red…They went sliding through a blood-red muck on the pinto beans…Kenny and Conrad…a tangle of arms and legs…racks and cartons wheeling overhead in the roiling fog…The moment stretched out endlessly and then stopped.

Conrad was upside down on his head and his right shoulder, looking up at his legs – which were red! – jackknifed over Kenny’s body – covered in – my blood? Slowly, not all sure that he could, he rolled his legs off Kenny. Everywhere – red! Hemorrhaging! – but he couldn’t figure out where he was cut.

Kenny, lying next to him, contorted, seemed to be trying to roll over on his back. Cartons, drums, canisters, sacks were strewn about in horrible red muck…A Panzer helmet, a body, a gray weevil, Herbie Jonah, smeared red…Herbie tried to sit up, but the heel of his hand skidded on the pinto beans, and he flopped back down into the red muck again. There was Herbie’s pallet jack, smashed into Kenny’s. The motor housing of Kenny’s was ripped off its base. The levers of the two machines were twisted about each other. The slats on the two pallets were snapped into huge splinters. Both machines were jammed against one of the black metal uprights of the racks.

Out in the middle of the aisle all three of the Dry Food picker’s wagons were turned over, but the tugger itself was still upright, nosed into the row on the other side, and the chubby redhead was still on his seat, slumped over toward his handlebars and moaning.

One of the black pickers, Tony Chase, came running toward Conrad and Kenny. Suddenly his legs went out from under his. The pinto beans. He landed in the red muck. Conrad managed to get up to a kneeling position. He could feel the pinto beans, hard as marbles, rolling underneath his knees. His Zincolon suit was dripping red – blood!

But wait a minute…Blood wouldn’t look like this, couldn’t possibly remain this bright…Then he saw them, two shattered ten-gallon jugs…red food dye…The jugs and the pinto beans…a flash flood of the stuff…

“Can’t get my hand…can’t get my hand…”

It was the Dry Food picker, still hunched over the handlebars of his tugger, moaning, “Can’t get my hand.”

Somehow the boy had taken the glove off his right hand and neglected to put it back on before he took hold of the handlebars to steer his tugger into the turn, and his fingers and his palm had frozen to the metal.

Kenny was sitting up, staring at the wreckage of the two jacks. It was pretty obvious. If he had stayed where he was, squatting down beside his jack with the carton of frozen turkey in his arms, he would have been crushed. Conrad’s diving tackle had knocked him toward the isle. Conrad had thrown his own body directly into the path of Herbie’s careening jack. Had is legs been six inches higher as he dove, they would have been crushed as the two motor housings smashed together. Had they been six inches lower, they would have been crushed by the scythe-like swing of Herbie’s pallet.

The manic light had gone out in Kenny’s wild blue eyes. Pickers were converging upon the spill. Kenny opened his mouth, but no words came out.

From above, Dom’s voice, over the speakers: “Clean up! Clean up! Whiskey 8! Whiskey 8! Chop chop! Birdie! Ferdie! Both of you! On the double! Got a whole aisle out over here! Whiskey 8! Whiskey 8!”

And then Kenny, still sitting in the red muck, spoke more softly than Conrad had ever heard him speak before. “Jesus Christ, Conrad…you just saved my life.”

THE TWO CLEANUPS, FERDI AND BIRDIE, earned their pay this time all right. There must have been a ton of product strewn about in the aisle and Row W, split open, staved in, mashed, crushed, all of it beginning to freeze to the floor in an icy red slush. It was a miracle that no one was badly hurt the padded freezer suits saved them, probably, the suits and all the other stuff they swaddled themselves in. The worst off was the chubby redhead from Dry Foods who, sure enough, had ripped a chunk of flesh off his hand trying to remove it from the handlebar. They looked like survivors of a bomb explosion. There was red dye smeared all over their Zincolon jumpsuits, their gloves, their heads, their faces. Half of Conrad’s hair was soaked with the dye; so was Herbie’s. One side of Kenny’s mustache was a sopping red. It looked as if he had been shot in the nostril.

Dom came over and took the whole bunch of them out to the loading platform to give them a break, let them warm up, and see if they were ok. Godalmighty! The checkers and the loaders looked at them now, all right! The muck had frozen to their freezer suits, and it was melting. The suits seemed to be oozing and festering blood. Every now and then a pinto bean would fall off, looking like a bloody clot. Conrad began to shiver, right out here in the stifling heat. He’d almost gotten killed, or maimed, him and Kenny both.

Kenny was abnormally quiet. He stuck by Conrad’s side. He’d start to talk about what had happened, and he’d say, “I guess…I guess…” or something equally vague, and his eyes would look as if they were pinned on something a mile away.

And then Herbie came over and told Kenny he was truly sorry, but there had been no way he could control his jack once it hit the pinto beans. It seemed so strange, because nobody had ever heard Herbie express anything approaching a tender sentiment before.

“Oh, I know that,” said Kenny. “I heard you yell, and I saw the goddamn thing coming at me, and I just froze. I had a goddamn carton of processed turkey in my hands, and I couldn’t even drop it or nothing. I just froze. If this character here…” He nodded toward Conrad and smiled faintly and then that smile, too, died on his lips, and he got the far-off look again.

Dom came over and told the boys that the lunch break was coming pretty soon and they might as well stay out here until the horn sounded and go straight in to lunch. Then he drew Conrad aside and put his arm around his shoulders and said, “You okay? You showed us something in there, kid.”

Conrad didn’t know what to say except that he was, in fact, okay. He was still too shaken to take any pleasure in the compliment.

The lunch break was at 12:30 a.m. in what was known as the break room, which was nothing but a clearing in the main work bay, Dry Foods, with 4-by-8-foot sheets of raw plywood serving as walls. The freezer pickers had taken off their Zincolon freezer suits, the thermal vests, the hats and gloves and wadding and swaddling, and were sitting in plastic chairs at the break room’s heavy-duty folding tables. Stripped down to shirts and jeans again, they looked whipped and clammy from lifting so much product at such a furious pace and sweating so much inside their insulation. Kenny was slumped back in a chair right across the table from Conrad. Conrad had just opened his paper bag and taken out one of the two meat-loaf sandwiches Jill had fixed him. A couple of dozen pickers, carrying their Igloo coolers, were lined up waiting to cook their lunches in the microwave ovens over by the plywood walls. They kept turning their heads and looking at them. He figured it was because he and Kenny presented such a spectacle, smeared red the way they were.

Light Bulb came over from the microwave with a steaming plastic picnic plate and sat down and said, “Jeeeesus Christ – how you guys dooooin? You okaaaay?” Light Bulb stuttered, but he stuttered on the vowels rather than the consonants. By the time he reached the okaaaay, the little crash’n’burner was no longer looking at both of them but squarely at him, Conrad. He had a glistening look on his face. Conrad could feel himself blushing. For the first time he let the thought form in his mind: They all think I’m some kind of hero.

The notion was not exhilarating. On the contrary, he felt like a fraud. When he dove at Kenny, it had not been an act of calculating bravery in the teeth of dreadful, well-known odds. He had just…done it, in a moment of terror. And he was still terrified! *I could have been killed in there!* That he shared these guilty, submerged, utterly inexpressible feelings with most of the heroes of history, he had no way of knowing.

Just then, to his great relief, the warehouse’s assistant night manager, Nick Derdosian, came into the break room with a burnt-orange manila folder cradled in his arms. In the folder would be the paychecks, and everybody would have something else to think about.

Derdosian was a swarthy man in his mid-thirties. The top of his head was bald, but the rest of him was remarkably hairy. A heavy crop of black hair emerged from the short sleeves of his shirt and ran all the way down his arms and out onto the backs of his hands. Thanks to Kenny, the freezer pickers all called him Nick Necktie. He and the other supervisory personnel and salesmen had offices up in the front of the warehouse, overlooking East Bay Boulevard. Kenny referred to them collectively as “the neckties.” Most of the men up in the front office did, in fact, wear neckties, as did Derdosian – until recently. Every time he turned up in the break room or the work bays, Kenny had taken to yelling out, “Nick Necktie!” and some crash’n’burner or other would echo the cry in falsetto: “Nick Necktie!” This finally so rattled Derdosian, a quiet, stolid man whom God had not designed for dealing with crash’n’burners, he had lately abandoned his necktie and started wearing open-necked shirts. But he was so hairy, a carpet of crinkly chest hairs was visible in the V of the open neck, and Kenny and the crash’n’burners had started calling him Harry No Tie. “Harreeeee No Tie!” So this week he had put the necktie back on and taken to approaching the crew with a necktie and a tense, ingratiating grin.

Tonight, however, he came into the break room without any smile at all. Tonight he looked gloomy and wary, as if he thought perhaps Kenny had dreamed up some new way of making his life miserable.

Instead, Kenny merely nodded and said, “Hi, Nick.” He looked every bit as glum himself.

Derdosian set the manila folder down on a nearby table, removed the stack of paychecks, and started calling out the names in alphabetical order. Conrad took his envelope without bothering to open it, folded it in two, put it in the pocket of his plaid shirt, and went back to the table.

Just then voices erupted at the next table. It was Tony Chase and the other two black pickers. Tony was showing them a white slip of paper and talking angrily. Light Bulb swung around to listen, and then leaned forward again.

“Jesus Christ,” he said, “Tohohohohohony just got nohohohohohotified. He’s been laid off.”

Conrad sat upright. Tony had been hired the same week he was.

Kenny and Light Bulb already had their envelopes out and were going through them to see if there was anything other than a check inside. Evidently they were safe. They hadn’t been laid off. The same thing was going on all over the break room. From somewhere behind him Conrad heard a voice gasp out, “Fuck a duck!”

Slowly Conrad withdrew his envelope from his shirt pocket and slipped his big forefinger under the flap and ripped it open. There was the salmon-colored paycheck as usual. Behind it was a white slip of paper.

He read the first few words: “Due to a necessary capacity reduction in this facility, your services…” Then he looked up. Kenny and Light Bulb were staring at him. He couldn’t make himself speak. He could only nod up and down to tell them, “Yes, it’s true.”

“I don’t fucking believe this,” said Kenny. Lunging, he stretched his arm across the table and said, “Lemme see that,” and snatched the slip of paper from Conrad’s hand and studied it for a moment.

Then he bolted out of his seat. The chair hit the floor behind him with a loud plastic smack. Glaring at the retreating figure of Derdosian, he called out, “Yo! Nick!”

Derdosian stopped in the entryway to the break room. Immediately his head began to jiggle from side to side, as if to say, “I had nothing to do with it.”

“What the hell’s going on, Nick!”

Kenny’s huge hands were pressed down on the surface of the table, supporting the weight of his upper body. His chin jutted forward. Every striation of the muscles of his great long neck stood out. He looked as if he were about to spring all the way from there to the opening in the plywood wall where the cowering assistant night manager stood. His wild-dog eyes bored in, demanding a response, and they opened wide, and he screamed out:

“WHO’S THE BRIGHT BOY THOUGHT THIS UP, NICK?”

You could still hear the clatter and banging of the Dry Foods bay beyond, but here in the break room there wasn’t another sound. The crew froze stock-still, riveted by this outburst of crash’n’burner fury.

“WHO’S THE SHIT FER BRAINS, NICK? YOU’RE LAYING OFF CONRAD? YOU’RE LAYING OFF THE BEST MAN IN THIS WHOLE FUCKING PLACE?”

Derdosian, transfixed, slowly lifted his shoulders and then the palms of his hands and lowered his head, in the gesture that pleads, “It wasn’t me! I don’t make these decisions!”

“HE WAS GONNA BUY A CONDO, NICK! HE’S GOT A WIFE AND TWO KIDS! HE’S GOT HEART, NICK, HE’S GOT HEART! HE’S WORHT MORE’N THE WHOLE BUNCHA YOU FUCKIN’ NECKTIES PUT TOGETHER!’

The assistant night manager now had his palms up so high, and his head down so low, he looked as if were trying to disappear into his own thoracic cavity.

“AW, I KNOW NICK! YOU ONLY WORK HERE! YOU’RE SO FUCKIN’ PATHETIC! YOU KNOW THAT? SO WHYN’T YOU FUCKIN’ GO GET LOST! WHAT’S THE NAME OF THE ASSHOLE THAT OWNS THIS FUCKIN’ COMPANY? SOMEBODY CROKER? IS HE THE BRIGHT BOY? THEN HE’D BETTER FUCKIN’ GET LOST, TOO, OR I’, GONNA – “

Kenny’s voice broke, and he lowered his gaze and looked not at Nick Derdosian but at Conrad. He compressed his lips, which began to tremble, as did his chin. His eyes opened wide, and then he closed them slowly. When he opened them again, they were brimming with tears, which began to roll down his cheeks. Still supporting himself on the table with one hand, he raised the other and covered his face. He lowered his head, and his bony frame began convulsing all the way from his shoulders down to his weight lifter’s belt.

Conrad’s eyes fastened on the most insignificant thing: Kenny’s pale blond hair, wet, stringy, matted down, was already thinning badly in the crown. All at once the indomitable crash’n’burner looked so weak and weary.

Kenny raised his head and tried to wipe his tears away with his hand and then with his forearm. He forced a smile.

“See? I was right, wasn’t I, old buddy? They just ain’t gonna let you do it. And you were right, too. You said I got No! in my heart. And that’s the truth! I got No! in my heart.” He clutched his throat with his forefinger and thumb. “I got it up to here….from lapping up all that crap inside the rut they make you crawl in.”