

CRACKED CANYON

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Abstract (short overview)

A toothpaste factory on a dreamy dry lake bed. A peaceful and quiet lifestyle changes with the theft of company property and the introduction of a loss prevention officer and the arrival of a sophisticated southern belle with court papers.

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Signed: Len Kirschner
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LUNCH

We always sat down on the berm overlooking the dry lake to eat our lunch. We always called it lunch no matter what time of day or night we were eating. Once we worked four rotating shifts but now there was only one shift left. The 50 employees we once had were reduced to 12.

When the silver tankers came up from Taluka, TubeWorks would recall about 25 workers on temporary assignment for 89 days and then lay them off. That was enough time to place the eight tankers worth of toothpaste into the tubes that we still manufactured at TubeWorks.

I loved my Stanley lunch box. It was once black but now it was the color of the metal, for I had not cared about its appearance any more than I had cared about my own since I began having the dreams. I was reminded of the dreams by Stan Showalter. Stan and I had eaten lunch together for the last 30 years. "Are you daydreaming about the dreams again?" he asked. "No," I lied. He looked at me and shook his head and bit into his bologna sandwich.

He knew about my dreams because I had told him. I had told him everything and he suggested I take a few days off and go to Errata and see someone. With Errata's large population and government buildings there were over 30 licensed psychologists and psychiatrists. I chose one with a nice sounding name, a female, and she assured me I was ok and that I was just a hopeless romantic. It was good that she was a psychologist because a psychiatrist would have prescribed medication and then be done with me.

Her name was Cyra, a name I had never heard before. Cyra wanted me to talk about Aemilia. I was very shy about talking about Aemilia because most of my time spent with Aemilia was spent in dreams. Cyra finally got me to admit that I couldn't recall any experience I could remember with Aemilia

that wasn't in a dream. She told me I was very sweet and to come and see her again if I was near Errata. I had no plans to go to the city after that even though Cyra gave me her business card and wrote her home phone number on the back.

"Are you up for some baseball on the weekend?" Stan asked. "Six versus six?" I asked. "No, Roscoe can't be there. He's playing a bar gig out in Caspra," Stan said. "He will probably drink away what they pay him and come back asking us to loan him money," I said. Roscoe was a musician. He played fingerpicking guitar. "No, we will just practice and then when the Silver Tankers come up from Taluka, we can challenge them to a game," Stan said.

This idea had come up before. I was drinking orange juice by now. "They only want to play soccer," I said. Stan grunted, kicked up some dust with his boot as he stood up and said "That they do son, that they do." He puts his hands on his hips and looked across the dry lake bed. Soon a line of Silver takers with sunlight beaming off of them would appear to the south and make their way north past the Elephant's Feet over the Grande Tusks bridge and to TubeWorks. I closed my lunch box and stood up beside Stan looking across the dry lake bed. "Stan, I am going to miss having all this fun with you. Are you sure you want to retire?" Stan walked down from the berm and back to the employee's entrance to TubeWorks without saying a word.

MY BIG WORRY

Stan was the only one at TubeWorks that knew about Aemilia and I was afraid that after he retired, I might spend more time with her. His only response was "I have spent my time being old now it's your turn." I thought about that quite a bit looking for meaning beyond the obvious and found nothing. Soon the Silver tankers would be here and my mind would be more occupied.

STAN SHOWALTER BEYOND THE OUTER DRIVE

Even though I had been having the dreams for quite some time, it was when Stan decided to go on vacation a few years back that the dreams escalated. I don't really blame him, but maybe I do. He said he wanted to go beyond the Outer Drive. Myself, I had never wanted to go much outside of Cracked Canyon. I had heard of things happening beyond the Outer Drive. Maybe it's because you only hear the bad news coming from there but I had no desire to be part of any news. I wanted to stay at work and if I was able, I aspired to have perfect attendance.

If I needed exercise, I could simply step onto the dry lake bed and walk until I wanted to come back. Although we had no cellphone service in Cracked Canyon, I could set my timer on the phone, set off walking, and turn around at the sound of the alarm. I would stuff my backpack with bottled water and maybe some snack. It was vacation enough for me and I wouldn't miss a minute of work.

That was back when I was the lead employee in Rheology Modifications Unit. It had taken me fifteen years of entry level jobs to work my way up to the unit. I had even worked in Sweetener Modifications, a job that eventually was staffed by only women. Stan and I had taken our lunch on the berm when he told me the news. "I'm going on vacation." It was that abrupt. I didn't know what to say. It wasn't like Stan or anyone at TubeWorks to take time off. It was a reasonable request but I never thought anyone would actually ask for it.

THE DAYS OF WATER

The next day was my first-time eating lunch on the berm overlooking the dry lake bed without Stan Showalter. I had opened up my lunch box to discover a corned beef sandwich that I had made very early that morning. The dry lake bed had fishing shacks scattered along its edge on the other side of the berm. They had been called fishing shacks in what I learned was called The Days of Water. The dry lake bed had been called The Red Lake and then simply Red Lake. No one knows how long ago that was because no one at TubeWorks asks questions like that.

Mr. Merz, our general manager, had told us that the shacks were employee housing and that \$35 a month would be taken from our checks each month for their use. He also said anyone commuting to Caspra, Lyndia or Errata wouldn't last a month. "The commute will kill you and by the time you get here you won't be worth a dime. Staying in the employee housing will only cost you 350 dimes. I highly recommend you stay in employee housing." Mr. Merz was like that. Numbers were always going through his head. He said it came from golfing. "I never respected math until I started playing golf," he had said once.

ELEPHANT'S FEET

Being alone for lunch I decided to be more alone. I walked away from the factory and across the Grand Tusks Bridge, past the Bottleneck, to two rock pillars aptly names the Elephant's Feet. There were many mythical stories about elephants in this area during the Days of Water but all I knew at the time was that they would make a pretty good back rest. I opened the lunch box and started on the corned beef sandwich, a banana and a small thermos of coffee. That is where I first had the dreams.

Leaning back on the Elephant's Feet, which were more like legs I started thinking of France, particularly the South of France. More people talk about

the South of France than the North of France. I'd like to find out why. If I went beyond the Outer Drive that is where I would go. I finished my sandwich and banana and held the small thermos cup of coffee in my hand. Looking across the dry lake bed I often was awed by how the heat waves danced above and off the surface.

LOSING AEMILIA

On the Dordogne I was taken aback to my first days of fly fishing, the water inside of my waders, my feet feeling their own warmth as they raised the temperature of the river water inside the boot. I had come from an extensive outing on the headwaters of the Loire and had no idea my waders were leaking until now.

My anger was blindsided when a streak of illuminated colour passed below the surface of the blue water. I had left my tackle box downstream with all my flies to scope out these holes upstream. Without hesitation I was running through the brush along the riverbank to retrieve my rod and flies.

I chose an Adams dry fly and passed the same route I had taken in my hasty retreat. I returned to the very spot where I had been enchanted and couldn't find anything but the same blue water of the Dordogne. In a state of increasing trepidation, I started with the same dry fly Adams and had no success. I pulled it off and replaced it with a parachute Adams and within thirty seconds felt that I had already had the window of time to catch this elegant fish close in front of my eyes.

I then switched to a Woolly Buzzer on a dead drift. My mind was racing at speeds that a Formula One driver would be terrified of. I started considering some "what if" ideas. What if I could catch this fish with bait? The lowest of all thoughts a fly-fisherman can ever have and a clear sign of a faulty upbringing as a child.

I returned to the bank and frantically searched the possible holes with the panic of a prison guard with a spotlight searching for an escaped prisoner. I roll cast three or four more attempts with the Woolly Bugger and while going for a fifth I saw a paper stuck on a Chestnut tree up on the riverbank. Curious, I splashed over to it.

It was stuck to the Chestnut tree with a Zebra Midge Nymph, a wet fly, one that has no place on the Dordogne. There was a note written: *Never be downstream to catch a charming fish that is upstream. She is in my frying pan now. Gordon*

“Son, Son.” It was Mr. Merz. “Make sure you get back in time. You only have 6 minutes,” he said. He could have said 5 minutes but he said 6. He was exact. It came from golf. I looked back and saw him at the Elephant’s Feet. He sat down as I had done earlier. He was looking across the dry lake bed. Perhaps he was imagining a golf course.

BOTTLENECK QUATERBACK

The next morning all work had stopped because it was the day of our bottled water delivery. On a dry lake bed bottled water was a valuable commodity. At our employee housing shacks we would collect our empty bottles in garbage bags and eventually drop them in what had developed into a mountain range of empty plastic bottles. The location was near the Elephant’s Feet and Mr. Merz had explained that elephants have seven neck vertebrae and although they are flat, they support the weight of the elephant’s head and tusks. We utilized a back room of the factory for what was termed “The Creation Shop.” Recently Mr. Merz had a ticket for a sign that said *The Bottleneck* and our crew took a week to make a very professional looking sign. It was placed at the bottom of the empty bottles that were stacked up into the sky.

Throwing your bottle on top was something you aimed for but eventually all bottles slid down. The last person to throw one on top was Young Worschek and he accomplished the feat long after everyone else at TubeWorks had given up. His father was an upper manager at TubeWorks and was hardly ever seen but appeared to be a friendly fellow while maintaining the demeanor of an upper level manager. Young Worschek had attended one of the Errata Universities but only lasted a portion of one term. Rumor has it that he played football in that term and it was either his failure at the game or his grades that found him temporarily employed at TubeWorks.

Young Worschek worked with George in Flavor Modification Unit and they both always wore the scent of menthol or cinnamon from the flavoring oils involved in the job. All lunch breaks and the quick 10-minute breaks they could be found running outside to throw a football back and forth. Young Worschek used that technique on empty water bottles and was able to reach the top of the bottleneck months after everyone else had given up.

THE SEASON OF DISCONTENT

Having never spoken with Young Worschek I cannot verify if what George said is true but he was saying it to everyone. “Worschek says we aren’t getting a fair shake,” I believe are his exact words. Now I don’t know what it’s like beyond the Outer Drive but the employees were getting all riled up. One employee was fired for making a cardboard cutout of a manager, that had no resemblance at all, except for the fact that he wrote the manager’s name on top with felt pen and used it as a dart board.

As we unloaded the new bottles off the trucks, I could hear the rumblings and saw not a smile on the faces of the employees. Mr. Merz watched with his arms folded still kind of disturbed that he had to fire the dart thrower. We could still see the Dart Thrower as a small black dot with

binoculars walking on the far side of the dry lake bed. He had been fired yesterday and was walking very slow.

A CLEAN SHOP IS A HAPPY SHOP

Mr. Merz was very strict on his worker's taking showers. He had installed wood burning water tanks and had logs shipped in from beyond the Outer Drive. It was not uncommon to hear someone with a chain saw before dawn sectioning off logs while wearing a headlamp. TubeWorks had three chainsaws and it was frowned upon if you returned one without sharpening the chain. The Creation Shop had made more signs as well. *A CLEAN SHOP IS A HAPPY SHOP* they proclaimed. Mr. Merz called the factory a shop. It was something he carried over from his days in the aircraft industry. It took 50 plastic water bottles to fill the tank and about 30 minutes to heat the water. We were told to shower daily but I know that few employees did that. They spent the time they would have spent getting clean talking to George in quiet huddles.

THE FINGERPICKING ROCK STAR

The sound of a truck driving seemed to take everyone off guard until we discovered it was Roscoe. He must have been too drunk to drive home after his Sunday night bar gig in Caspra. As he stepped down from the cab he told us some surprising news. He had been offered a two-weekend gig in Lyndia and if that went well there was a club in Errata that was interested in him. Plus, he

was now looking for a manager and an agent. There was no response as the workers went back to unloading the new bottled water off of the trucks.

Stan Showalter, who was still on vacation and hadn't sent a postcard, had been to see Roscoe with me and a few of the girls from the Sweetener Modification Unit a few weeks back in Caspra when Roscoe first got the gig. That night Stan told us stories of seeing Duke Ellington and Count Basie's bands at the Paradise Theater in the Black Bottom District. He wasn't sure about fingerpicking guitar but what we saw that night we both were in agreement that if Roscoe didn't drink, he would have been embarrassed.

We walked in and saw Roscoe at the bar drinking coffee and eating his third large bowl of chile. This was obviously a failed attempt to conceal the fact that he was drunk and in no condition to work the night in the scantily attended establishment. Roscoe then proceeded to the small stage where he attempted to secure his strap on his guitar only to have the instrument fall to his feet the moment he let go with his shaky hands.

We knew he had only started writing one song "My Undiscovered Life," and knew he wouldn't be playing that because he confessed, he couldn't remember it. His song selection seemed to include the farthest away from finger picking style that you could get. Simplistic three or four chord pop songs that were poorly represented by his stumbling singing and unfocused guitar playing. I was shocked at the news that anyone would hire him for any longer than one night.

PEANUT BUTTER

The next day with Stan still exploring the region beyond the Outer Drive I decided to take my lunch again at the Elephant's Feet. I hadn't wanted to mingle in the gossip group that was now spreading word that Mr. Merz was profiting so much money that he was interested in damming up the West Fork

of the Caspra River to irrigate a golf course that he wanted to put on the dry lake bed or a rumor that he was leaning toward Astroturf and leaving the river alone. The guys from the Colouring Modification Unit were really upset over this but I attributed it to their exposure to toxic levels of Titanium dioxide.

I hadn't meant to do peanut butter sandwiches but that was the quickest throw together lunch I could think of. Caspra had a great market and I planned to go there in a few days and stock up. I had a small milk carton that I opened once I leaned back on the Elephant's Feet. The day was particularly pleasant and quiet now that I was out of ear's reach of the annoyance of the speculative stories.

MY SAVING GRADES

Whoever it was that told me that girls had cooties was soon proven wrong. Stepping into a classroom that had the smell of food was both soothing and frightening at the same time. My Human Relations teacher who doubled as school counselor assured me there would be other boys in the Homemaking class. "It is something that a lot of my students do to up their grades. You won't fail this class, nobody does," he said in a reassuring way.

I can't remember much about the class but I probably have used some of these skills without knowing where I first picked them up. We did various cooking projects and the four boys would pair up with each other and the girls were left to themselves and their cooties. The hour went much faster than Math which made up for it in volumes. I felt that I hadn't screwed anything up to that point so I was pretty comfortable with the idea that I was passing.

It was then that various class members became no shows because of flu season. I had experienced mononucleosis the year before and had my share of feeling sick physically as well as mentally so I was glad that they were staying home, that is until the day of unevenness.

BUTTERCUP

“Why don’t you work with Aemilia today,” was the most shocking thing ever said to me in school. I would have taken mono or the flu over this fate. Her partner as well as mine were home probably watching *The Price Is Right* or *Days of Our Lives* with their mothers while sipping Chicken Noodle Soup in bed. Life had been difficult up to this point and now it was simply more difficult.

We were to make butter we were told. We both walked over to our table, the one that I had been at before so she was already trespassing. We were given two quarts of heavy cream and told the cream would reach room temperature quicker if he wrapped our hands around the glass jar. With our hands warming the jar I tried not to look at her eyes but when I did, I saw something I had never seen before and still to this day cannot describe.

She then placed a churner on top of the glass jar and twisted it into place. She had done this before I was quite sure. After several minutes of churning a bead of sweat had broken over her eyebrow. She stepped back and blowing out a breath said “Whew, do you want to try?” I was certain this was where my grade would drop. It had failure written all over it. I churned nevertheless like my entire future depended upon it. “Stop,” she said. That was the first time I had ever heard a girl say that. I wanted to keep going but I stepped back as ordered.

She pulled the teacher over and I stepped back farther. “I can see white buttermilk and clumps of yellow butter now,” Aemilia said. “You are ready for processing,” the teacher said. She squeezed out the buttermilk and the teacher returned saying “let your partner do that too.” I liked being called her partner. Looking back on it I can say I loved being her partner. I squeezed it until the water ran clear. She kneaded and squeezed after I did. When her eyes were on her work my eyes looked at everything about her.

We shaped our fresh butter into blocks and she caught me smiling. “Do you like doing this?” she asked. “No, I’m just doing it for the grade,” I said feeling immediately like the stupidest person on earth. We sealed it and put it

in the refrigerator. The next class our flu classmates returned still snuffling and coughing but that's how it was in the what could have been..

GODDESS OF THE GARAGE

The last day of the term I asked her if I could carry her books home for her. Even though her house was across the street from the school I didn't know what else to say. I met her at her locker after last period and she handed me a single steno notebook. It was the last day and of course she wouldn't be taking any books home for homework but she had to have me carry something.

Even though we walked as slow as humanly possible we eventually crossed the street. She opened the garage door stepped inside and turned to me with her hand out. I placed her steno notebook in her hand and then reached further up her arm and pulled her gently towards me. I placed my lips on hers as softly as a butterfly landing on a petal but it was probably Aemilia who was the butterfly. As soon as we heard her mother moving about inside, I turned and ran home. I waited five days before I was satisfied that girls do not have cooties.

ALL HANDS MEETING

"We are having an all-hands meeting," George said. I opened my eyes to the smell of mint and cinnamon and must have blinked twenty times before I looked at the lead man from Flavors Modification Unit. I gathered up my lunch items and strolled past the Bottleneck over the Grand Tusks Bridge to the scattering of employees who were mostly sitting crossed legged on the ground or standing in the back, smoking cigarettes, a dirty habit according to Mr. Merz.

"Can everybody hear me? I'm not gonna use a megaphone so put out those damn cigarettes and move close enough so I don't have to scream. OK, we're going to be getting a new man coming in. He's college educated at Outer Meridian University, has a ton of experience and will be starting next Monday.

He will be tasked in making our work crew a synergetic powerhouse of production. His name is Mike Wall. Mr. Wall will be reporting directly to me and you will all be reporting to him. He has taken courses from Ishizawa Laboratory and has seen first-hand how Hamigaki Nadeshiko has revolutionized toothpaste production in Japan. The Lion Corporation is running scared and Brilliant More, even with its more commercial name is having the sales advantage it once enjoyed decline on a daily basis. This is what I want from TubeWorks. Does everybody understand? If there are no questions have a great afternoon.” No one at TubeWorks had ever asked questions.

DISCOUNT DUST STORM

The following Monday we did our usual bottled water activity. Then we carried our empty bottles to the bottleneck. By this time Young Worschek was gone. It seemed that Old Worschek had caught him not working one too many times and found him a job working with another family member. All of the bottles thrown that day landed on the side of the mountain of bottles and rolled weakly down the side sometimes even all the way back to the ground level. TubeWorks had no plans to relocate them anywhere. The dry lakebed provided lots of room for expansion.

It was at the end of the dry lakebed that we first noticed the playa substance becoming a cloud. There was no visibility and no one knew what it was except Mr. Merz. “It’s Mike Wall,” he said. The cloudy downwash turbulence seemed to be following a helicopter that was flying very low and I remembered I had once seen a helipad out here but no one had ever used it, and he seemed not to be headed in that direction.

The helicopter hovered in front of us and then landed on the playa. It took over five minutes for the playa storm to clear, the rotors to stop and for Mike Wall to step out. At first impression anyone who had studied World History in high school saw that his was a dead ringer for Joseph Stalin complete with the identical moustache. Those who never finished high school,

which was not a requirement at TubeWorks most likely thought he just looked like a weird guy.

“Sorry about the dust,” he said stepping out and looking about as if he was a real estate appraiser. “They wanted me to get Air Taxi authorization and because of my experience I knew that was a wasted expenditure so we had to remain under 100 feet AGL. Anyone know what AGL means?” he asked. Before anyone had a chance to answer he said “Above Ground Level. AGL.” The helicopter pilot just shook his head.

“I want to get to know each and every one of you so I will be making the rounds. I can feel the great chemistry here already and it’s only going to get better. So, carry on with what you were doing and we’ll get to know each other real soon. He walked off with Mr. Merz toward the TubeWorks offices which amounted to a large white fishing hut left over from the Days of Water.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

Within two hours Mike Wall walked into the Rheology Modification Unit alone. He was usually alone in his time at TubeWorks much like a pinball bouncing from one buffer and ramp to another until it fell into the drain. “How’s the wife and kids?” was how he started. I told him I wasn’t married and had no kids. “Show me what you do. Do you think you are overworked? What do you plan to be doing in five years? Ten years?” I hadn’t looked at the clock but was told it was lunch time. Mike Wall left with a “see you again soon.” I grabbed my lunch. I thought about Stan Showalter and the surprise that awaited him and then went over the berm, over the Grand Tusks Bridge, past the Bottleneck and to the Elephants Feet. I was mentally too tired to eat my lunch. I could sneak that in during work. I just had to remember to wash my hands after taking off my gloves. I closed my eyes.

OVERBOARD

We were told what to do if we fell overboard. Those who couldn't swim were told to wear lifejackets or stay away from the edge. I never understood Cotton Candy but most of the girls and a few of the guys were running around with it on a stick. I knew from experience that Cotton Candy is really hard to get off of your clothes without a spin in the washer. Getting it off your hands is easier. I was told once that it really shouldn't be considered food, so I thought why eat something that isn't food.

Some of the kids got seasick but not many. It wasn't that long of a boat ride to the amusement park. My parents had packed me a lunch in a brown bag and told me not to eat at the amusement park due to the chance I might get food poisoning.

I was with one of my friends but I can't remember which one. I didn't have that many or so I thought so this memory lapse is quite disturbing. The sound of the Joe Vitale "boat band" filled the air. We placed our wooden folding chairs around the ring of the dance floor and the scenery from the shore slowly moved by as we floated down the river.

The main talk was how bad the music was, although it wasn't bad at all, but with Joe on accordion accompanied by piano, sax, trumpet and small drum set mainly stuck with big band era music. The trumpet player had played once with Artie Shaw but because the kids had no idea who Artie Shaw was, they just dismissed him as some old guy.

A few of the older people danced every single dance as the kids watched mainly each other. That is when I noticed that one of the girls, maybe not the best looking one or the worst looking one, but the only one I was looking at looked back at me. She was smart enough to not be holding a stick of cotton candy. We looked at each other for the next half hour.

Joe Vitale announced this is the last dance before we arrive at the park. "How about *The Hokey-Pokey?*" Cheers went up and I started crossing the dance floor to ask this captivating girl to dance. To my surprise she stood up

at the same time I did. We met at the center of the dance floor and touched hands. "I'm Aemilia," she said in a quiet untroubled voice. I smiled already knowing her name as if it were my own and failing to introduce myself, something I was never good at.

We stepped back and put our right feet in and then took them out and then shook them. This was not what I wanted to be doing with this girl but we were trapped in this social event. I knew once we got on the island at the amusement park, I would go on whatever ride she wanted to or no ride at all. There would be no greater amusement than just being with her.

MY, MY, MY WHAT A WONDERFUL DAY

Then, for the first time after being with Aemilia it happened-I woke up unassisted. The dry lake bed seemed to have a new clarity. My mind felt totally awake. No one was standing over me telling me to wake up. I had been with Aemilia and no one else knew. I gathered up my lunch, finished my sandwich, tuna this time, and slowly stood up at the Elephant's Feet, walked past the Bottleneck, over the Grand Tusks Bridge and back to work. I even had five minutes to kill.

THE ART OF PLANNING

We hadn't seen much of Mike Wall the next day except for him walking alone down the halls periodically. About 9 A.M. he walked into the Rheology Modification Unit. "How's the wife and kids?" he said without a trace of a smile. I said "I'm not married and there are no kids." "Well then, how are you?" When I didn't answer quick enough for his liking, he said "What is your count on the CMC carrageenan. I heard you ran out of cellulose gum six months ago. Make sure that doesn't happen again. We've got to keep ahead of

the game,” he grinned quickly and then dropped into the stern Stalin face, turned on his heel and walked out of the Unit.

Now as luck would have it right outside the door Mike Wall found Jimmy, our custodian who we called our helper sitting on a glycerin tank staring into space. “Are you on break? Mike Wall inquired. “No,” said Jimmy. “Then what the hell are you doing?” Mike Wall asked obviously building up steam. Jimmy looked up and said “I’m planning my next move.” Mike Wall gave him what was later known to be the *Stalin stare-down*, turned on the same heel and proceeded down the hall with a stepped-up walking gait.

THE RETURN OF STAN SHOWALTER

It’s not that I didn’t want to see him except seeing him meant eating lunch with him on the berm. I learned he wasn’t in a good mood which was off-character for Stan who usually had a sunny disposition. “Couldn’t even see it,” he said about his hike to Telegraph Falls on the other side of the Outer Drive.

“There must have been a thousand people on that skinny hiking trail and when I got to the falls viewing area, I couldn’t get to the front row so I had to look at the falls in-between the heads of those in front of me,” Stan said with an air of disgust. “There were so many people there and it was so hot I could identify what brand of deodorant they were wearing,” he said. We ate lunch together there on the berm for the rest of the summer. I was missing Aemilia so much that I started reducing my lunches to the point where I was only bringing those crackers with cheese spread on a little plastic stick. Stan had nothing to discuss.

I tried to get him interested in going to the Outer Meridian to take pictures of the University that Mike Wall was from but to no avail. Stan even got along with Mike Wall, not in a social sense but he was able to tolerate him

better than anyone else at TubeWorks. Mr. Merz's patience even seemed to be wearing thin.

The only thing that he mentioned is that George, and he called him "Crazy George," had asked him what he thought about forming a union. I could tell Stan was thinking that pointless being so close to retirement. Myself, I could use enough money to get a second pair of work boots from that store in Errata that gave a TubeWorks employee discount. I immediately thought of Cyra the psychologist. If I went to Errata, I could see her and maybe sneak to the Elephant's Feet on the way to visit Aemilia who I hadn't seen since Stan returned from vacation. I missed her more than anything and looked over towards the Elephant's Feet as if looking at the front door of her house. It was as if I was standing on the sidewalk too shy to walk up to the door and knock.

THE MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF THE TUBE CAPS

Or ALL HANDS MEETING #2

While going back to the Rheology Modification Unit I noticed a crowd of employees gathering outside. George came over to tell me that we were having another All-Hands Meeting. Mr. Merz was there in the background with arms crossed and Mike Wall had set up a microphone and a small amplifier.

"For the past week I have been examining our excess inventory on floor problem. We will be making some upper management decisions on how to go forward on what we have learned but that's not why we have called this meeting. During the investigation I found a discrepancy in the count between toothpaste tubes and toothpaste caps. I have found three of the tubes have no caps which renders those tubes useless. Does anyone know anything about this?" all of Cracked Canyon basked in silence. A slight breeze would have been nice. "If no one knows anything about this then we will stay here until you," Mike Wall said with a smile that of course resembled Joseph Stalin. After

fifteen minutes employees started sitting down. George was first. After two hours Mike Wall walked off in a huff and Mr. Merz took the microphone and said “*Go back to work,*” and then took the amplifier and microphone back to the office shack.

GREAT LAKES LOSS PREVENTION OFFICER

Or All Hand Meeting #3

Quite a few days later, on the far side of the dry lake bed Stan and I heard what could have been a bee buzzing but after we saw the playa dust rising from the ground, we realized it was a car of some sorts but it was too loud for being at that distance. We were taken by what sounded to be gun shots. As the car advanced closer a look of concern crossed Stan’s face.

If there was an award for loud cars this one would take it. A middle-aged man of stocky build, with curly hair, a moustache and Coke Bottle thick glasses stepped from the vehicle. Stan suspecting it was an inspector from Errata, greeted the new arrival with “Are you a dentist?” “No, why?” “Well the last thing we need around here is a dentist working as an inspector snooping around,” Stan said. I could tell right off right off that he wasn’t a dentist and if he had been, he would not be that popular and probably wouldn’t have lasted a day without having his tires slit.

Mike Wall bolted out to intercept him before Stan got physical. At that time employees began pouring out of the factory followed by Mr. Merz with the same microphone and amplifier that was used a few days before. Mike Wall took the microphone and started “*test...test...test. Is this on all the way? Test...test...test. You in the back, don’t be shy, move closer. Ok, is everyone here? No stragglers, ok. This is Ryan Lee. He is our new Loss Prevention Officer. As you know from our last meeting, we have an inventory discrepancy. All of our on the floor inventory, especially our excess inventory has to be accounted for with complete accuracy. Mr. Lee here has a background in law*

enforcement and has completed classes at Great Lakes Security with an emphasis in Loss Protection. Once I saw his qualifications, I knew he was the right fit for TubeWorks. He will be reporting directly to me. If there are no questions have a great rest of the day.” With that, Mike Wall shut off the sound and Ryan Lee was led to the main office shack by Mike Wall joined by Mr. Merz.

“You want to handle this Jim?” Mike Wall asked. He handed Mr. Wall some papers and walked out. “Son,” Mr. Merz began, “I have papers here from an attorney garnishing your wages and I feel uncomfortable doing that, seeing that you have no wages yet. I have a second letter from a second attorney representing a Cora Lee Spillman offering to drop charges in exchange for the car you drove up here in. I have a third letter from the second attorney stating that Ms. Spillman will be flying in to Errata International tomorrow at 1:30 P.M. for the purpose of taking ownership of that car. I will have Jimmy go and pick her up and bring her here. You will have to sign paperwork.

We have an ongoing problem and need you here at the factory starting as early as right after this conversation. I didn’t know about this problem of yours when we asked Great Lakes for your services but if this is taken care of, we will forget that it even happened. Are you good with that?” Ryan said “OK.” Mr. Merz gave him a key and said “Your employee house is N3. We had to fire a dart-throwing employee so that is vacant. I hope you like walking.” Ryan took the key and said “I have a lot of experience doing that, no problem.”

CODY

It seems within an hour Ryan had driven to his shack unloaded and then drove back to the factory and spent the entire evening, including supper with the girls in the Sweetener Modification Unit. Stan and I went for a walk at dusk and ran into Cody. That wasn’t her name, it was just where she was from. “Is that new guy Ryan, is he a ladies’ man?” Stan asked with a smile. Cody smiled back “Oh, yes. He’s a real spinner of yarns. Ladies like a man who doesn’t hold back. He was telling us all kinds of stories about Ernest

Hemingway. You would swear that he grew up with him as best friends,” she said. I threw in “It’s good to hear discussion of literature at TubeWorks. We don’t get enough of that. Do you read books?” I asked. “Oh no, not me but I used to follow shows on the TV before I came here,” she said. “Do you know if we are ever going to get satellite TV here?” I told her I didn’t know.

THE PASSENGER

Jimmy held a sign that said *Ms. Spillman*. She had no problem finding him and they both went to his car and drove away from the Errata International airport terminal. Ms. Spillman had looked around the interior of the car awhile and then told Jimmy “Something in here smells bad enough to knock a dog off a gut wagon.” “That’s me,” Jimmy said. There was no further conversation on the ride to TubeWorks.

RECIPROCITY AGREEMENT

“Cora Lee?” Ryan said as if he wasn’t sure. “Look Ryan, I don’t want either of us to pitch a hissy fit I just want you to sign those papers with me and be done with it,” she said, and they did. It took all of three minutes. Ryan handed her the keys to the Pontiac G.T.O. and she put them into her handbag. “I’m plum tuckered out,” she said. “Kinda hankering to take a nap. These time zones. It’s almost dark. I’m worn slap out. Could you people put me up for the night?” she asked. Ryan perked up, “You can stay in my place. I can set a sleeping back outside for myself. I’m a security guard now so you’ll be safe.” Ms. Spillman rolled her eyes and said “OK, I guess.”

Mr. Merz asked Jimmy to go and change the sheets but Ms. Spillman said “Somebody else,” so that task fell to Cody who jumped into the G.T.O. with Ms. Spillman and made the drive to House N3 carrying clean sheets and fine linens. “It’s just a shack,” Cody said, “but it’s a lot better than driving to Caspra or Lyndia in the dark.” She found Ryan’s sleeping bag and tossed it

outside. "I hope you find it comfortable being what it is," said Cody. "Well, I never thought I'd find this place living high in the cotton so I guess it'll have to do. Thank you darling," Ms. Spillman said. Ryan meanwhile made it back to the Sweetener Modification Unit and resumed his narrative with the girls.

THE HUSH OF NIGHT

In the late evening and early morning hours there was some commotion coming from the far side of the dry lake bed. Stan Showalter was the first to rise and was sitting on the berm when I found him with my flashlight. We sat there without conversation. I thought of brewing some coffee but I also thought of going back to sleep. After a good while Stan said "Those howls aren't coming from coyotes." I went back to my shack and pulled the covers over my head.

PRIVATE BUSINESS

For the next three days not much happened at TubeWorks. The G.T.O. was still parked at N3 and each night there was a car radio turned on all night at N3 but it didn't do enough to drown out the grunts and screams coming over the dry lake bed.

Stan and I met again on the berm in the darkness. It was a starry night that we both would have missed if we had been able to sleep till morning. "Stan, do you think that sound would carry this well over water?" I asked "Oh yeah," Stan said. "Water would be much worse." "What about if the dry lake bed was filled with a dense forest?" Stan didn't answer. "What about if they went about their business in a more private way?" he commented in a questioning way. We both went back to our shacks. If I ever went to Errata, I would get more heavy blankets instead of work boots.

IMPLEMENTING CORRECTIVE ACTION

On the fourth day working I noticed something different. No Mike Wall running around, Mr. Merz was not in the office and Ryan was not in Sweetener Modifications Unit which was not surprising being that he must have been up all night long.

Then I noticed the gathering of people around Roscoe's shack and Roscoe carrying out his belongings and throwing them into the back of his old goldish-green pick-up truck. I walked out and Mike Wall came walking towards me "Go back to work," he said. "Ryan found the missing three toothpaste tube caps. Roscoe was using them on his fingers banging his guitar strings. He will be leaving us. Do you need anything?" I didn't so I went back to work. I was later told that Mike Wall asked Roscoe on his way out if he saw the corpse of the dart thrower lying on the dry lake bed, if he could kindly throw the body into the back of his truck it would be appreciated.

Later Cody told me that a few of the girls went out to see Roscoe in Caspra and noticed he was getting a different sound out of his guitar by wearing some white caps on his fingers instead of picks. "Ryan asked us about it and he put two and two together," she said smiling. Thinking about the quick resolution to the missing caps and the fact that the G.T.O. was still parked at N3 I thought he must be doing something right.

TOOTHLESS

Now as the evenings grew into their certainty of events the workers, one by one started turning on their own car radios to cover up the sporadic noise from Shack N3. Our advantage, being in Cracked Canyon, was that there was only one AM station that came in clear and everyone was tuned to it. We heard talk about aliens and other subjects that were easy to drift your attention away from. Sleep improved for the next few weeks and things resumed to be seen as normal.

One afternoon Cody joined Stan and I on the berm for lunch. We sat exchanging small talk until Cody asked “Is she going to be living here?” Stan and I opted to not even think about that preferring to tend to our own business. “Does she bother you?” I asked. “We haven’t very much seen her since she arrived. When we do see her over yonder, she’s always wearing that night gown,” Cody added. “You wouldn’t happen to have a crush on Ryan, would you?” Stan offered.

Cody looked uncomfortable. “We just didn’t have men like that in Wyoming. He does give me butterflies when he tells me those stories and then when he’s gone, I can’t get him off my mind. He gets my eyeballs floating and my heart all torn up inside. Who is she anyways?” Both Stan and I looked at each other and raised our eyebrows. “For all I know she could be his sister,” Cody said with a bit of anger. “Stop that kind of thinking, that’s disgusting,” Stan said in the voice of an elder. Cody would have none of it. “If I had a chance, I’d punch her in her tater-trap and make her a toothless hillbilly.”

The rest of the lunch period was spent talking about aliens and the other garbage we heard on the radios simultaneously dancing on the airwaves across the dry lakebed at night. We both made notes to self to keep Cody away from Ms. Spillman. Her employment could depend on our efforts.

ESCAPE TO PARADISE

A few weeks later on a fairly warm day, it was coming upon lunch when I learned that Stan had volunteered to help clean out Roscoe’s shack. George had come around with some propaganda about the benefits of belonging to a union which I rolled up and stuck in my lunchbox. Some people called them lunch pails but I never did. It must have been where I was born. I grabbed that lunchbox and trotted over the Grand Tusks Bridge, past the Bottleneck and to the Elephant’s Feet. I leaned against the rock with the comfort of falling into bed. Not knowing where to put the Union propaganda I set it aside and

proceeded to devour an Avocado and Havarti cheese sandwich. Sipping my coffee, I looked across the dry lake bed to the G.T.O. at N3. I smiled and thought of my lack of sleep as being a sacrifice for those love birds. There must be quite a story behind their friendship.

SINK RATE

I knew the feeling from somewhere in my past but I couldn't place it exactly. That feeling you get when you've been someplace for two days, are scheduled for five, have already spent more than you planned to with nothing to show for it, and just want to go home. That feeling. It was one of those resort parks where everything you do cost more than it should so you convince yourself that doing nothing is something.

At the hotel I decided watching television was a waste so I looked outside at the pool and hot tub and thought I would find a lounge chair with an umbrella and lay there until I broke a sweat and then jump in the pool and then back to the chair. Not what I had planned. After opening my eyes again, I saw a child holding hands with the life guard as they walked back to the child's parents.

I felt a feeling of exhilaration come over me when the life guard turned and seemed to be scanning the area either over me or thru me. This sensation of hope quickly collapsed when she went up to sit at her lifeguard post and pulled out a magazine that she half-read while keeping a bee line on the children in the shallow end.

I needed to cast some eye contact between us but she seemed not to be attracted to me or hadn't seen me yet. I stepped in the pool and began backing in the direction she was looking but that kept changing. I tried twisting myself to get on her visual line but to no avail.

Dragging myself across the pool was hampered by the fact that the pool had very little room to move and was primarily occupied by overweight seniors, some of who were wearing sunhats. I saw an opening and did a butterfly crawl over to the children's section in the shallow end of the pool. I sat and looked

up at her and was surprised that sitting with the children didn't raise her curiosity seeing all the bad stories in the news about this kind of thing.

I gripped the side of the pool and stood up and stared directly at her and she simply scanned every other section of the pool. I held up my palm to signal hello but that failed to get her attention as well. I rose from the water and went back to the lounge chair, uncertain as what it would take.

After careful thought I decided the determining factor would be my sink rate. I could pull it off if it looked realistic. It could only be done in the deep end so that's where I went. I felt kind of foolish but everything I had tried up to this point was foolish, so what did it matter? I tilted my head back opened my mouth and started bobbing up and down. I'm always amazed at how quiet the world gets when you are underwater. It was very quiet.

After a few bobs I saw that people were moving away from me and she would soon be pulling me out of the pool. I had been kicking my feet so I stopped that and let myself sink. I was waiting for her hands to be grabbing me under my arms but that didn't happen. She would have me on my back and be pushing on my chest with both hands. I didn't think they did mouth to mouth anymore but that would be preferable. At least, she could throw me a flotation device.

As luck would have it, I forgot what I was doing and took in water through my mouth. I totally forgot where I was and started gasping for air which underwater is a move that is guaranteed to bring negative results. Shooting back up to the surface, taking in more water and coughing all the way I heard a young girl's voice call "Aemilia, Aemilia, I've pooped in my swimsuit." The small girl swam from an area very close to where I had performed my act. While still coughing like a cat with hairball I was looking at Aemilia's pointing finger as she said loud enough for all to hear. "He's not drowning."

UNION

I didn't see it coming but there was a glass bottle in front of my face. "Are you all right. Are you all right?" It was Ryan. I was coughing ferociously. "Drink this," Ryan said. I took a gulp and spit it out. "(Cough, Cough) I see (Cough, Cough, Cough) you're not (Cough, Cough, Cough) fighting the war (Cough Cough) on sugar," I finally said totally out of breath.

"Ryan, How's the wife." Ryan stared blankly at Mike Wall who seemed to have been running towards us from somewhere. Ryan simply handed Mike Wall the rolled-up papers and said one word that changed everything, "Union."

CHANGE ON THE WAY

I started spending more time with Cody. She seemed to quite serious about doing something to Ms. Spillman who was still in shack N3. Once the G.T.O. was gone for the night. Talk was that they went to Caspra or Lyndia for a night out but the next day the G.T.O. came roaring back up the canyon to the shack. "They probably got groceries," I offered thinking that it would have to happen eventually. Cody just stared at the shack talking about open carry laws and topics of that bent. "She's so stuck up she would drown in a rainstorm" Cody said. "How come she never comes over here? All she does is stay in that shack and make me jealous at night." "Well," I offered, she doesn't work here." "I know, she works over there," Cody said.

Mr. Merz had some contractor put an aluminum roof and siding on the office shack and started referring to it as the *Tin House*. George and I didn't talk much about it but we knew we would be in the *Tin House* soon.

DOUBLE DAVES TO THE RESCUE

George and I kept a low profile for the next few weeks but eventually received notice to go to the *Tin House*. "You know why I'm smiling?" Mr. Merz asked as soon as we walked in motioning for us to sit in two chairs that were in front of his desk. He was posting the most insincere smile I have ever seen.

“I’m smiling because I’m no longer your General Manager. These two men: Dave Bottoms and Dave Mills are your future. Mr. Bottoms will replace me as General Manager and Mr. Mills, well he is going to be the head of your new union here at TubeWorks.” George got up and shouted *YES* and slapped me on the shoulder.

I’d like both of you gentlemen to consider very seriously as being union stewards. Mr. Mills and two stewards will run the show and we would like you two to be those two stewards.” George was having trouble containing his enthusiasm. “Yes, we would,” George said.

Mr. Merz walked out saying “I have a golf course to build. The Cracked Canyon Country Club. Do you boys play tennis? We’re going to have that too.” George looked at me with the happiest smile I have ever seen on anyone.

Dave Mills scooted his chair up right in front of us. “I’ve conferred with Mike Wall and he and Mr. Bottoms have convinced me that our best expertise here is in tubes. Doesn’t take a genius to figure out why we call it TubeWorks, it’s the tubes that make us great.

There is a factory in Taluka that is fully prepared to take our entire toothpaste production operation and return it to us at a fraction of the cost. We will still use our superior shop knowledge to put that toothpaste in tubes I’m going to announce this tomorrow right after we unionize each and every worker. It’s the only fair way and then announce that we will be laying off 76% of our work force. Being that they are union they will be called back in the order of seniority when we need employees to work our golf course if they have training in that area. I’d like my two shop stewards standing with me when I announce it.” Then it was done. Our meeting and our days as non-unionized employees were over.

LUNCH FAREWELL

We always sat down on the berm overlooking the dry lake to eat our lunch. We kept an eye out for the silver tankers. We always called it lunch no

matter what time of day or night we were eating. Once we worked four rotating shifts but now there was only one shift left. The 50 employees we once had were reduced to 12.

Cody had been joining us. She had enough seniority to stay on. Right after the Unionization of the workforce Mike Wall had been fired and Ms. Spillman and Ryan had thrown their things in the G.T.O. and taken off up the dry lake bed never to be seen of again. Cody said “Ryan said they were going to New Jersey to tie the knot.” She looked down mischievously and then after hesitation said “You know that’s the only state where you can marry your sister don’t you?” “Stop it, that’s disgustingly sick,” Stan said. “Give it a rest, that’s below you Cody,” I threw in for good measure. Cody looked up and smiled saying “why else would anyone go there?”

STAN SHOWALTER DRIVES AWAY TOWARDS THE MOON

“It’s your turn to be old now,” Stan told me. I knew just what he meant. I had been to see Cyra in Errata a few times to tell her about Aemilia and how I never had found her. She smiled and took my hand but by this time she was married with grown kids who had kids. She told me I was sweet and just a romantic. It seems she believed that so I told her I would too.

Stan drove off alone over the Grand Tusks Bridge past the Bottle Neck and the Elephant’s Feet. I wondered if the dart throwing employee ever made it to where he was going. With night falling and the moon rising, Stan’s car looked like it was driving straight toward the moon. I followed Stan’s car until it escaped my vision.

LIFE IN UNFAMILIAR ORDER

As a Union Steward I was offered one of the many empty shacks. To humor myself I took N3 just to feel the history of it. It was turned into my office. I took the bed to Goodwill in Caspra, gave the mattresses to Dave Mill, (I think he burned them somewhere) and turned it into a very efficient space, not that it hadn't been before. For my own safety I started taking all my lunches at my desk.

I was amazed at how many complaints can come from a dozen employees in a factory that was more like a warehouse for tubes and caps. Cody was dropping by daily with something and eventually she did give a thumper to one of the remaining girls. Mr. Bottoms sided with Cody and saw that they were both frustrated by their new work assignments or lack of them and it cleared over in a short amount of time. It was good to have her company and be there whenever she started pining for Ryan and what could have been. "I should have known with that woman showing up as pretty as a peach. No getting around it I never had a chance," she would say. I would encourage her to move on and she did take over the union post that I was abandoning.

I worked a couple of years like this, and then I too, found my way to retirement. I first went beyond the Outer Meridian and spent time camped at Teardrop Falls. Not too many people went there because of the difficulty of traversing the rocky boundaries of the high peaks and the amount of recovery time needed before attempting a return. My return was aided by the fact that winter was moving in early so I returned to my new place between Caspra and Lyndia. I made limited social contact in Errata for Union breakfast events but eventually even that lost its appeal.

Epilogue

About fifteen years passed when I received a call from Stan Showalter. It seemed there was going to be a Cracked Canyon Country Club grand opening. We both remarked we were surprised to still be alive at this age and other small talk before agreeing to meet at the event.

Driving into Cracked Canyon I saw so many structures that had been put up that if I didn't know the route so well, I would have sworn that I made a wrong turn. Mr. Merz had decided to go with the AstroTurf and it seemed to cover every inch of the playa. I saw a soccer field with a few children playing. I assumed they belonged to some of the parents inside. I saw the main clubhouse in the location where the berm used to be.

I was lucky enough to catch Stan standing outside so that whatever I had to endure I wouldn't be doing it alone. Mr. Bottoms and Mr. Merz joined us for some chit chat about the TubeWorks operation which was now down to 7 employees with automation. The majority of the crowd was from Taluka including the band who was really tight and dressed in debonair outfits with a female lead singer in very chic style. The band played popular songs of the day sung in Spanish.

A server came to the table with a menu with appetizers and Stan and I ordered drinks for the occasion. She had a presence about her that was growing more delightful by the minute. She brought me an Elk Loin with Butternut Squash, Fennel, Pecan, Golden Raisin, Shepherd's Halo and Demi-Glace. Stan went with Duck with Potato Mustard Puree that brought a smile to his face like I had never seen. Mr. Merz had spared no expense and this was a world class country club.

I asked Stan about the all the places he had gone during his retirement and then I asked what was the most beautiful place he had ever seen. He said

the dry lake bed and I knew he was serious. “This is very nice if you want to golf and eat and drink but I wish it was someplace else,” Stan said.

The band announced in English that “this old song we learned for you.” The band started playing a familiar oldie but had the translation wrong. Stan walked up to the stage and signaled the girl who stopped the band. He quietly explained the difference between the singular and the plural and the band guaranteed him that they would never sing *These Boots Is Made for Walking* again.

I saw the server approach our table smiling like the first rays of sunshine on a misty morning at Teardrop Falls. She said that was really cool how Stan helped the band without offending them or anyone else. I felt like getting quite chatty with the young girl. I saw her name tag and tried getting more personal for no other reason than to entertain myself. “So, Michelle, how long have you been working here?” “Oh, I’m not Michelle, she said. “I forgot my name tag at home and had to borrow this one. Michelle doesn’t even work here anymore. I’m Aemilia.” We were generations removed from each other. All I could do is order another Cognac and smile with the certainty of Crepuscular shafts of light extending over a sunset western sky.