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THE DAY THE MILL WENT DOWN

A procession of cars and trucks came slowly out of the main gate of the mill, crossed the railroad tracks, and began to move up the hill toward the town. Most of the cars and trucks were clunkers, rattletraps. None of the men smiled, and no one told jokes or played grab-ass, which was unusual, because horsing around was the manner of these men.They were robust, rough-edged; they loved work, loved life—beer, food, some grab-ass—and many had known each other for years, because they had gone into the mill just out of school, twenty, thirty years before, most of them, when they were kids.

It was a hot, oppressive day in July 1986. Heavy gray clouds covered the sky, and sweat stuck your shirt and pants to your skin. All day it seemed as if it would rain, but it did not. I was standing alongside the street, Amity Street, and as I watched the cars and trucks and the desolate looks on the faces of the men, I thought of how, when I was a boy in the

drab factory city where I had been born and had grown up, and a funeral procession would go by and I would sit on my bicycle and watch the slow-moving cars led by a black hearse that carried the coffin banked with flowers, and I would think to myself, "There goes another chalk-faced corpse to the grave," and then I would turn my bicycle and ride away. But in this procession, the cars and pickup trucks were not washed and polished as they would be for a funeral, and there were no small flags, thoughtfully provided by the grim-faced dark-suited men from the funeral home, flapping from the radio antennas. And you could not go away.

The works, from which the men had come, stretched for several miles along both sides of the river and was a hodgepodge of many structures—monstrous black furnaces where the iron and steel were made; huge rust-colored metal sheds where the steel was rolled, great open yards where the steel was stacked, guard shacks, machine shops, a dock on the river, office buildings, miles of wire and cables and railroad tracks.

The town, Homestead, Pennsylvania, run-down and forlorn, straggled up the hill that rose from the plain of the river. Homestead had for decades been America's most famous steel town, one of the great steel centers of the world, a place, too, of the most immense vitality: men and women working, shopping on Eighth Avenue, coming and going all the time, particularly at shift change, three times a day, when thousands entered and came out of the at-once dark and fiery mill. Now Homestead was a gray, depressed place. The area by the works, where men with nothing to do loafed, was especially shabby. Years before, Sixth Avenue had been a roaring strip of whorehouses, bars, and gambling dens. No more. Now it was made up of dilapidated, seamy bars, mostly, and store-front businesses. There was a barbershop, the headquarters and car barn of a bus company, the union hall, some other businesses, and many abandoned stores. The main street, Eighth Avenue, three blocks up from the mill, was also run-down, and there were few people on it, although the town's major businesses were located there: Moxley's Drugs, a pharmacy and meeting place; Levine Brothers, the hardware store; Katilius, the furniture store; Modern Bride; Marks's Card Shop; Victor Shoes; the Great American Federal Savings and Loan, "the Hunkie bank," as it was known; the Mellon branch bank; the Fantasia Health Spa, a massage parlor, abhorred by many townspeople, which the chief of police had sworn to close; the Blue Bonnet Bakery; the Sweet Shoppe, a restaurant and candy store; Shupink, the jeweler; Goodwill, the thrift shop store; Lapko's Bar and Grill; Chiodo's Bar; Eat 'n' Park, a restaurant.

The homes of the town, modest places, were on the hill above the

mill. Many were not being maintained. The parks—one below the library, in Munhall, the adjacent town, the other in front of Saint Mary Magdalene's Roman Catholic Church, the biggest church in town—were scruffy; the trees had not been pruned, and the grass had not been cut for some time and was thick with weeds. The streets had many bumps and chuckholes; the town had little money for road repairs—enough for some hot-patching, not much more.

For years, the mill had thrown up thick plumes of smoke that had blackened the town. The dirt could be cleaned, but cleaning was a constant chore, and despite the effort the smoke had over the years left a grime that seemed to have been absorbed into the houses and other buildings of the town, even sometimes into the skin of the townspeople. Once there had been a man who worked in the mill, and it was his task to transport the orange material left over from steelmaking at the works to a dumping site over the hill behind the town, in what was then the country.

He would clatter through town several times a day, his truck piled high with the refuse, the material sometimes rolling up in a great cloud behind him. Most labor has peculiar demands, the prices it exacts from those who perform it, and what was unusual about this man's work was that no matter what the man did, scrub, shower, soak in the tub, he could not remove the orange color from his skin. He was orange, that was that, and this even gave him his identity, for he was known not by his name but as "the orange man."

As the procession from the mill came by, and the cars and trucks stopped at the cross street, I talked to a couple of the men. I told them I was a reporter and had come to talk to them on the day the mill went down. The line stopped behind where we were, and the men in the front vehicles waved up the men who were behind, and soon there was a clutch of us talking, there on Amity Street. Then a photographer from the newspaper by which I was employed came up and said, "Why not take a last picture?" So the men pulled their cars over to a slag-covered spot by the tracks, near the old, abandoned railroad depot, which had been there almost a century ago, when the great Homestead strike and lockout had occurred, and everybody got out and posed for some pictures, and now for the first time there were a few jokes, a few smart remarks. There were about a dozen men there, all workers in the Number Two Structural Mill, which, erected in 1927, had rolled pilings and structural beams for buildings, dams, and the like.

Ed Buzinka, a craneman, was an amiable fellow of medium height, somewhat bald, who wore his glasses on top of his head. He always

seemed to have a smile on his face, and all the other men liked him immensely. Like the others, he had started in the Homestead Works—gone into the mill, as the men said—years before, had worked hard there, and had enjoyed what he had done.

Bob Todd was a stout, red-haired man who, his friends said, registered on the Richter Scale when he walked. He was a crane dispatcher, meaning he gave the orders for which crane was to go where and do what, and he was also a union grievance man, meaning that he represented the men in disputes with the corporation. He often wore blue bib overalls and smoked thick, malodorous cigars, and seemed to use the word "fuck" all the time: fuck this, fuck that, fuck something else, using it as the basis for almost every part of speech—noun, verb, adverb, adjective, gerund, object of direct address.

Todd was driving a pickup truck, an old blue number, and in the back he had his locker from the mill, figuring he might have some use for it someday. Todd was a buoyant man, but he could not mask his depression about the mill's closing. He had put twenty-three years into the place, working up from laborer to roll hand to craneman to crane dispatcher. He had always been fascinated by the cranes, huge machines that rolled through the mill with great noise. Nothing moved without a craneman, you were right at the center of things, and Todd had been impressed by this. One day he saw an opening posted on the bulletin board for a craneman trainee, and he applied and got the job. That was in 1965. Then, in 1980, he became a crane dispatcher, a doubly important position, the boss of bosses. "I didn't have a job," Todd said. "I had a position."

Ray McGuire was an equipment repairman. He spent much of his time repairing cranes, from small, twenty-ton cranes to monstrous mothers weighing five hundred tons. He went into the mill in 1949, just after he graduated from high school. "Don't be ashamed about working in the mill," his mother told him. "It's good work, and the money is good, too."

McGuire first worked in the pits, then became a motor inspector's helper and then a motor inspector. He spent all his years in the mill in Number Two Structural. The men, he said, were a good bunch of guys. Everybody tried to help each other out. Why, when the union was formed, in the 1930s, one of the first things the men did was create a flower fund, a dollar apiece each payday, so the union could buy flowers when somebody, a worker, his wife, passed on. Also, everyone seemed to know a little bit of something, so that in a group of men who worked or loafed together, about every skill imaginable was represented. Once, Ray McGuire said that he was going to put in a driveway, but that he was worried because he didn't know much about cement. Saturday morning

he looked out and eight men he worked with were standing in his driveway. They made and poured the concrete, and laid the driveway in half a day. Did a nice job, too. In the mill you helped each other like that.

Denny Wilcox was a router screwman, although by the time the mill went down he had been bumped back to the hot saw. He started in the mill on October 8, 1952, a few months after he finished a four-year hitch in the Army. Wilcox began in the mill as a laborer and worked his way up, becoming a stop-setter helper, stop setter, marker, drag-over operator, hot-sawman, and finally router screwman. He had been looking forward to getting thirty-five years in the mill, and especially forty. Thirty-five-year gifts had been discontinued, but if Wilcox had gotten forty years, he would have been given a watch. The only gift he ever received was when he got twenty-five years. The company had a catalog, and you picked out what you wanted. Wilcox picked out, for his wife, a necklace with "U.S. Steel" engraved on it.

Bill Brennan was a millwright, meaning he did maintenance work, repairing equipment, changing rolls, and so on. Brennan was a Munhall boy, born in Munhall and a graduate of Munhall High School. He went into the mill on January 2, 1948, at age twenty-two. His father was a heater in the forty-eight-inch mill, and Brennan's four brothers also worked in the mill. Two years before, Brennan had had a heart-bypass operation. He was out sick for several months. When he came back, his pals would not let him do any hard work. "Sit down, Bill, we'll do that," they said, even though he insisted he could do the work. The men would not hear of it. That was how it was in the mill, too. You took care of your buddies.

Brennan enjoyed his time in the mill, making steel, stopping for a beer or two in the beer garden near City Farm Lane, living in the Homestead district, although he had become depressed in the last few years, when the company was not putting money into the mill, was laying people off, turning one worker against another. "We needed bearings; they wouldn't buy bearings," he said. "Hoses, clamps. We were using everything up. We had the best saw-sharpener there was, but they closed our sharpener down and sent the saws out to Ohio." Life in the mill and the town was good before, when the mill was humming, he said. Then, as the company laid off workers and began to let the mill go, things began to fall apart. "It was all beautiful, not like today," Brennan said. "Everybody knew each other. They talked with each other, they associated with each other. We were good working people. It was like a family. Not like today. People today don't know you. There was no cutthroat then. Today it's all cutthroat, everybody for themselves."

Bobby Schneider had been in the mill twenty-three years. He was

born in Homestead and his family lived in lower Homestead, below the tracks. In 1941, when he was three, his family had to move because their home was knocked down when the government expanded the Homestead Works for war production. He grew up in the Glen Hazel projects, across the Monongahela River from Homestead, and was going to go to college, Maryland or Michigan State. In 1953, his father died, and Schneider took it hard. He dropped out of school in his senior year and at age eighteen went to work as a laborer in the structural mill. He became a shearman's helper, then a shearman, working with the hot saw, and finally a roller, his occupation the day the mill went down. Roller was an important position in the mill, Schneider said. He had a pair of calipers and determined whether beams were of proper quality. He passed what was good and sent back what was not. It was almost as if he were in charge of the mill, and he enjoyed the authority the job gave him.

Steve Butala had started as a laborer when he was sixteen, working for nine months during World War II. The workers his age were called junior commandos and were given light jobs, like sweeping, and some that were not so light, like cleaning bricks out of furnaces. They went into the furnaces with wooden shoes on to prevent their feet from being burned—remember, now, Butala was sixteen at this time—and removed the bricks with large tongs and pitched the bricks out to helpers outside the furnace. The junior commandos worked 5:30 P.M. to 9:30 P.M. during the week and eight hours on Saturday and on Sunday. After the war, Butala continued with high school, and when he graduated, in 1947, he went back into the mill. He then entered the service, serving as a tank mechanic with the Army in Korea and making sergeant. He was mustered out in 1953, and he went into the mill again and never came out.

Butala was a local guy who had grown up on Ravine Street, in Hunkie Hollow east of town, where many people still spoke Eastern European languages. His dad was a millwright in the Homestead Works, and his mother took care of the house. He never saw the mill as his life's work, but it became that. In his department, you could often work as much overtime as you wanted, and whenever his family wanted something, Butala worked overtime and got it. His kids wanted a swimming pool, so Butala worked overtime and bought them one. He put in extra hours to take his wife and kids to Florida, and he paid cash. No credit cards for Steve Butala. He put in overtime to buy a twelve-foot boat with a motor and liked to fish on the Monongahela River, carp, bass, and muskies, although he never ate any, figuring the river and the bed of the river were loaded with chemicals from the coke and steel plants. When he went to work in the mill, he was paid $5.24 a day; when he left the mill, he was

getting almost three times that an hour. "Anything I wanted, I got," Butala said. "We never hurted for anything. It was a wonderful life."

Bob Krovocheck, a craneman, was a tall, bald man with a small black mustache and a soft, lumpy body, like an old davenport that might be set out at the curb. He did not get good grades in high school and did not graduate. His father worked in the Number One Machine Shop and knew an employment boss in the mill, and in 1941, at age nineteen, Krovocheck went into the mill, first in Open Hearth Number Three and then in Number Two Structural. "I worked in that rusty mother for thirty-nine and one-half years," he said. "Now it's gone. It's a goddamned shame."

II

Homestead existed because of the mill, and the shutting of the mill by its owner, the United States Steel Corporation, department by department over several years, had brought immense economic hardship to the town. For years, the mill had provided a substantial part of the town's taxes; this amount had decreased as the mill had closed, and the town showed it. The chief of police, Chris Kelly, was on patrol the day the mill went down. Kelly was a Homestead boy who had gone to Saint Mary Magdalene's School and then Homestead High School, where he was an excellent football player, a big tackle, a hard hitter, fast for his size. He used to take his bike across the High Level Bridge to watch the Pirates at Forbes Field, where he and the other kids would get seats for a dollar in the Knothole League section in right field. And he would hitchhike up to the town athletic field, on top of the hill, and play baseball or football, depending on the season, for hours each day.

The Chief and his wife, Paula, lived in a little house almost underneath the water tower. Kelly loved Homestead and wanted nothing more in life than to be chief there. He put in hundreds of extra hours, whatever it took. The decline of the town that came with the decline of the Homestead Works disturbed him intensely. "Look at the weeds," the Chief said that day in the hot patrol car. "We have no money for recreation, for ball fields. Homestead doesn't have a baseball team, no Little League, no Pony League, nothing. Look at the weeds. It didn't used to be that way. The playgrounds were immaculate."

Six months before, it had been the Chief's duty to go to the Homestead Works and hunt for a foreman, David Sapos, thirty-nine, who had not returned home the previous night after working on the night shift. His wife had called plant security, who called the police. Kelly and other officers poked around the mill for several hours—cold work, for this was

February. The cold in such a place seeps into your body and makes you cold to your bones.

After a time, the searchers found Sapos, suspended from a beam high in the open hearth. He had hanged himself. He had wrapped a steel cable around his neck and body, and, after placing his work gloves in the right back pocket of his blue dungarees, stepped off the beam. On his head was his white safety helmet, his white hat, the symbol that he was a foreman. Finally Sapos's body was brought down, and the coroner came, and the body was removed in the dead wagon. But the Chief had not forgotten what he had seen and what it was his responsibility to do that day. The idea that Sapos, after wrapping the steel cable around his neck and body, would carefully place his gloves in his right back pocket before he stepped off that high beam, as if he were going to inspect a machine —he needed the touch of bare fingers to do this—stuck in the Chief's mind.

Rumors had gone around for years that the mill would close, but few people believed them; that is, few had believed the entire mill—the vast Homestead Works, such a storied and famous place—would close. Who would have thought that? The forty-eight-inch mill, which made structural beams up to forty-eight inches wide, had closed in 1979, and that had frightened people. Then, in 1982, the company announced it would close the mill's open hearth, known as O.H. 5, because it was the fifth open hearth in the history of the mill, built during World War II. This had made people sit up, think, "Jesus, maybe the mill will go down one day." Late in 1982, Betty Esper—who had worked as a clerk in the mill since 1953, when she was just a few weeks out of high school; she had taken the summer off for a trip west, but no more—had been Christmas shopping at Kaufmann's, the big department store in downtown Pittsburgh, and had bumped into one of her old bosses in the Homestead Works, Robert Schneider. This was three years after United States Steel had closed its huge old Youngstown Works, in Youngstown, Ohio, sixty miles west of the Pittsburgh area. "What do you think?" she had asked, and Schneider had said, "I think the Homestead Works is maybe five years from Youngstown," meaning that the Homestead Works had just five years left. Schneider had it right, except that he was off by a year. The mill had four years to go.

Still, for most people, it seemed impossible that the mill would close. The Homestead Works had existed for more than a century. It had been responsible for the creation of the town, at least for the manner in which the town had developed; it had been the centerpiece of the vast iron and steel empire put together by Andrew Carnegie, the steel master who

created the American steel industry. The Homestead strike and lockout of 1892, an epochal strike in American history, broke union power in the iron and steel industry, and blocked unionism and strengthened the authority of employers throughout the country for more than a half-century. It was this, the steel that the mill made, plus the strike and lockout, that gave the Homestead Works its fame.

The mill had been constructed to make steel rails for the railroads that in the last decades of the nineteenth century were crisscrossing the continent, at the rate of ten thousand miles of track a year. When Andrew Carnegie acquired the plant, he realized that the rail market was saturated and that the rail boom could not continue forever. Carnegie had his detractors, and still does. But there is no denying that he was sharp as a tack. The elevator, invented in 1851, but not recognized at first for the revolution that it was, was becoming popular, and buildings, which before the elevator had been limited to six or so stories, were becoming higher, twelve or fifteen or even more stories, so high that people coined a new word, "skyscraper." Carnegie, always a man able to see the future, had transformed the plant into a manufactory of beams for buildings and bridges, and then, as the nation began to build its naval forces, had made the works into one of the nation's great factories for armor plate, realizing, although he regarded himself as a pacifist, that there was much money to be made in armaments.

The works had produced steel for much of the nation, including many of the emblematic structures of America: beams for the first skyscraper, the Home Life Insurance Building, in Chicago; the Panama Canal; the Woolworth Building; the Flatiron Building, the Chrysler Building, the Empire State Building, and Rockefeller Center, in New York; the George Washington Bridge, across the Hudson River; the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, across New York Harbor; the Oakland Bay Bridge, across San Francisco Bay; the United Nations Building, in New York. Steel from the Homestead Works was used in the construction of such ships as the USS *Maine* and the USS *Oregon*, when, as the nation approached the twentieth century, the government eliminated the wooden-hulled Navy and replaced it with a Navy of steel ships. Homestead had made steel beams for dams and stadiums, steel rods for highways, beams for highway bridges, steel plate for factories. During World War I, workers at the Homestead Works constructed a new plate mill in the astonishing time of six months, and the mill set production records as workers turned out plate for the U.S. armed forces and for the nation's allies. It became known as the Liberty Mill. At times during the war, when high production was needed, the men worked so hard and put in

such long hours that they had to be admonished to stop working and were sent home.

During World War II, the works was one of the great industrial centers of America. Beginning in 1940, the government, as part of its military preparations, condemned a large section of Homestead, a mile-long area along the river west of the existing mill, and allocated $50 million for expansion of the Homestead Works. Some five hundred homes were razed, as were churches, businesses, and social clubs, and more than eight thousand people were uprooted. This additional land allowed the mill to be expanded by one-third, and by the war's end more than twenty thousand workers were employed at the works, compared to twelve thousand at its beginning. Homestead in the war days was a tableau of twentieth-century industrial America—the huge buildings, the pouring of the molten steel, the steel shooting along in the rolling mills; the smoke, the noise, the men and women—substantial numbers of women now joined the Homestead workforce for the first time—streaming in and out of the plant.

For all the years that the Homestead Works existed, the strike and lockout of 1892 were never forgotten. Andrew Carnegie had wanted to reduce his labor costs and install new labor-saving equipment, and, after journeying to Europe for his vacation, as was his custom, he instructed his second-in-command, Henry Clay Frick, to eliminate the workers' contract. Frick was a tough-minded fellow, as hard an egg as might be imagined, with a history of confronting unions, and he demonstrated in the Homestead fight that his reputation was deserved. The workers refused Frick's demand that they accept cuts in wages and disband their union, and went on strike. Frick then brought in three hundred Pinkerton men on two barges to secure the property so that he could bring in strikebreakers. But the workers had vedettes posted along the river, and one of them saw the barges, and the people of Homestead were alerted. A furious, day-long battle ensued, as the workers pinned down the Pinkertons in the barges at the dock of the Homestead Works with rifle and pistol fire. The fight had its bizarre elements. One of the workers killed, Silas Wain, had his head blown off by his comrades, who had dragged an old Civil War cannon, a ten-pounder, away from Grand Army of the Republic hall in Braddock, across the river, loaded it with screws and bolts and scrap steel, aimed it at the barges, and touched the cannon off. The load overshot the barge and killed poor Wain. This did not prevent his fellow workers and their supporters from transforming him into a working-class hero, a martyr to labor's fight against capitalism.

Two weeks after the fight, the governor of Pennsylvania, Robert E.