

Sunday at the Dump

by Stephen Russell Payne

Smoky Latrel opened the door of the “Cat House,” where he slept with Ellie, the 1960’s Caterpillar bucket loader he used to crush and disperse piles of garbage that arrived every day but Sunday at the Bakersfield Town dump, a huge hollow carved out of the old Knapp farm a half century ago. Thrown from the backs of pickups and station wagons, piles of junk were deposited at the edge of the dump where *the mountain* begins, the mountain Smoky sorted through looking for treasures before he bulldozed its rumpled surface, leaving behind a mosaic of his community’s discarded lives. A square kitchen clock from the forties, its edges swiped with layers of old wall paint, its hands frozen when the new clock was hung. Superman comic books, probably read only once, jammed with dented Campbell soup cans into a wooden produce box declaring *California naval oranges* in a brightly colored label on its side.

Smoky stepped into the red light of sunrise, his corncob pipe protruding from a permanent indentation in his lower lip. He thought he’d heard something out on the dump during the night. Not just the usual raccoons; something bigger, an unusual sort of rustling. Coy dogs maybe. Once in awhile they came in for dinner in the Spring while waiting for mother rabbits to deliver their delicious young bunnies. Too quiet for a black bear. They grunted and sniffed, made a helluva mess clawing around, freeloading off bags of kitchen garbage hidden in the debris. Wasn’t kids. When they came down on Saturday nights they’d fart and belch beer, all the while laughing and shushing each other.

Last night's noise was different. It roused Smoky enough that he pushed himself up on his good elbow and peered out the window beside his army cot. But he was too foggy from drinking a mix of bottom-of-booze-bottle remnants to get a clear bead on where the noise was coming from. Besides, he'd thought, thumping back down on his cot, he was too old to keep chasing varmints off the dump. Let them have at it. It was sort of like having company, anyway.

Smoky drained the last slurry of coffee from his tin cup then stretched his suspenders over his bad shoulder. He walked across the rubbish to where he thought the strange noise had come from. Couldn't have been a coyote neither. Nothing torn apart, not a claw mark anywhere. He squinted, reducing the glare of morning light off the heavy dew covering the dump. He wasn't sure, but he thought he could make out footprints traveling across the surface. He lumbered over to where the footprints appeared to stop.

"It wasn't like that yesterday," he said, noticing a metal chair leg protruding from the trash. "Ellie wouldn't have left that sticking up." He pulled the chair out of the pile, dislodging a box of old medical books Dr. Fichet had dumped last Wednesday. Smoky had squirreled away one book that contained detailed colored drawings of female anatomy.

Smoky pushed his cap back, scratched the top of his head. Something wasn't right. That red blanket wasn't there yesterday either. He would've seen that for sure, would've kept it for next winter's drafts. He took a step forward, grabbed hold of the blanket's tattered edge, and gave it a tug. It was caught on something heavy. Not wanting

to tear it, he cleared away several paper bags full of bottles and cans and a box of moth-eaten red and black plaid hunting clothes.

The blanket wouldn't budge, so he knelt on his swollen knees, grabbed hold with both hands and pulled hard. He recoiled as a man's arm fell out of the blanket like a dead fish out of wrapping paper, its bluish hand settling onto a dew-soaked pile of disintegrating funny pages.

"Where'd you come from?" Smoky said. He lifted the blanket, saw the back of a man's head, scraggly white hair rimming his threadbare collar. "Never seen a dead guy in my dump." A shiver went through him. He looked around, felt like he was doing something wrong and was about to get caught.

"'Spose I should call the sheriff. Have his boys come down, investigate."

He looked at the body again. There was something familiar about the man's overcoat and sausage-like fingers. Smoky straightened up, looked over at the front gate, locked tight with a logging chain and padlock. It was Sunday. No one should be coming. He looked at the dead man again. "Might as well see who you are," he said out loud, as if deputies were listening at the edge of the woods. "Sheriff'll ask me, anyway." He lowered his voice. "Not that I owe the damn sheriff anything."

Smoky had rolled over dead soldiers in the War, had seen men's *last stares* before. It was always haunting, but after all, he was responsible for what went on at the dump. He reached over and rolled the stiff body toward him, revealing an empty whiskey bottle and a third arm, a woman's arm, under the man, under the red blanket. It looked as

though they had died embracing each other. Smoky slowly turned the man's face toward the sunrise.

"Freddie," he said, a bit startled. "Not you, Freddie Knapp."

The woman had a butterfly tattoo on the back of her hand. Smoky pushed the dirty blanket away from her face. His shoulders sank. "Rose—" He shook his head. "Freddie and Rose. What the hell happened? You piss somebody off?"

Smoky looked them over. Not a bruise or spot of blood anywhere. He pulled the blanket back farther, revealing another empty fifth of cheap gin and a spent bottle of pain pills.

"Ah, Freddie, I knew things got bad with your pancreas. Cancer, they said. Lotta' pain. Heard they wanted to put you in the County Home. Well, good for you, you didn't let them."

Freddie's and Rose's eyes were closed. There was no last stare. Smoky tucked the blanket under their heads, making them look more comfortable. "The two of you always said you'd go out together, but I didn't think you were serious." He looked at Freddie. "You promised you'd come back to the farm someday and here you are." He noticed the irregular scar on Freddie's cheek where the barbed fishing hook tore through one afternoon on the Moose River the Spring they quit high school. Smoky reached down, touched Freddie's cold skin. "I'd been meaning to come by, but I don't venture too far since I lost my license that last time. They let me drive Ellie inside the dump is all."

Smoky stood, righted the metal chair, and sat down. "Boy, we had some fun when we was kids, didn't we? Fishing together on Joe's Pond, jumping off cliffs up to

Willoughby.” Smoky smiled. “My favorite was chasin’ coons through cornfields in the middle of the night with kerosene lanterns. And deer camp at Uncle Pete’s shack in Newark. You and I licking the rims of Canadian whisky bottles while the men smoked cigars and played poker most of the night.”

Smoky lit his pipe, drew in ‘till the singed bowl glowed. “I probably never told you, but I felt bad about you and your brother losin’ this place after your folks died. The town could have helped you keep farming, helped develop that sugar woods on the north ridge. That would’ve produced enough to keep you out of hock.” Smoky shook his head. “It was a raw deal, town needed a good place for a dump is all. Showed you no mercy.”

Smoky leaned forward, straightened Freddy’s overcoat a bit. “I know you was upset when the town hired me to take care of this place, but Sis was sick and I needed work bad after the trucking company let me go.” He looked down toward the river’s edge. “I’ve taken good care of your old fishing spot, kept the trash away from the bank all these years.”

Smoky looked at Rose, lifted a curl of matted gray hair out of her eyes. “Rosey, you were always my beauty. Even though you run off with this crazy old coot, I never give up on you. Never forgot that kiss on the Fourth of July.”

When his tobacco died down, Smoky stood, looked at his friends. “I suppose you want me to take care of business or you wouldn’t have crawled in here and drunk yourselves to death.” He checked the gate again. “Tell you what, I’ll fire up Ellie and we’ll get you buried down by the river near your fishing hole. You don’t need no official burying. Screw the sheriff. Law’s nothing but trouble anyway.”

Smoky covered Freddie and Rose with the blanket and walked back to the Cat House. Inside he stared at his work bench, piled high with tobacco cans overflowing with spark plugs, spare parts, screws, nails, and rusted bolts of every variety. On a shelf above the bench sat a collection of rescued appliances including a chrome toaster oven and a coffee percolator that actually worked. Above the shelf hung the lucky bamboo fishing pole Freddie had given him when they were teenagers, its line unkempt and sagging. Smoky hadn't fished with it in decades but he'd always kept it near by.

Smoky kicked a couple of liquor bottles out of the way and climbed up onto a chair. He reached as high as he could, took down the dusty pole. The cork handle still had a good feel to it. He slid the pole into Ellie's cab then walked over to the windowsill where he kept a paint can full of artificial flowers people had thrown away over the years. He pulled out several yellow daffodils and two of the least faded roses. He wiped the cobwebs off the flowers, jammed them into the deep pocket of his overalls. Finally, he picked up a couple white pickets from a fence someone had dumped last summer and, making a cross, pounded a nail through the center of them. He climbed up into Ellie, put the cross behind the seat.

Smoky touched two bare wires together under the steering column and the engine growled to life, quickly filling the ceiling of the Cat House with blue diesel smoke. He raised the bucket and backed out into the yard. A breeze had kicked up, carrying heavy clouds up the river valley from the south. He checked the front gate then drove across the expanse of rubbish to the red blanket. The familiar clanking of Ellie's steel track

comforted him. He lowered the bucket in front of Freddie and Rose, shut off the engine, and climbed down.

The inside of the steel bucket was rusted and stained with a pallet of eggshells, grease, old paint and roofing tar. Smoky looked around, retrieved a box of newspapers that looked fairly dry, and spread them along the bottom of the bucket. He leaned down, pulled back the blanket. “Okay, folks, it may be a bit of a rough ride, but I’m going to take you down to the river, get you buried proper.”

He dragged their bodies up onto the lip of the bucket, then climbed inside and pulled and tugged ‘till they were well onto the newspapers. “Heavier ‘n I thought,” he said, resting for a moment.

As he climbed out of the bucket, he heard a loud horn then the rattle of chains at the front gate. He peered around Ellie. “Shit—“ he said, under his breath.

“Smokeeee!” a man yelled. “Get over here and open this gate.”

Smoky’s heart raced. It was that asshole, Chuck Amidon, from the select board, a deputy sheriff to boot. Probably wanted to dump some stuff he didn’t want his old lady to see.

“Hurry up!” Amidon yelled, dropping the tailgate of his pickup.

Smoky walked as fast as he could, his breathing having a hard time keeping up with him. By the time he got to the gate, Amidon was sucking on a cigarette, looking impatient as hell. Smoky reached into his pocket for the padlock key.

“Bring that machine of yours over here,” Amidon said, flicking his cigarette into the dirt.

“Stalled out. Won’t start,” Smoky said, pushing the bent key into the lock.

“Then just get this stuff unloaded, I got to get back to town.”

“Ain’t supposed to open the dump on Sundays,” Smoky said, as he pulled the chain through the steel gate.

“Do what I say, Latrel. Don’t forget I can kick your ass out of here anytime.”

Amidon looked at Smoky and smirked. “Besides, who else would hire a crazy old drunk who walks around with plastic flowers hanging out of his overalls?”

Smoky felt cold sweat forming under his collar. He’d forgotten about the flowers. He pulled one side of the gate open. “Just dump it here, I’ll move it later.”

“Open the damn gate and I’ll back over to the pile.”

It would be too close. Amidon might see where Smoky’d dragged Freddie and Rose out of the trash.

“Leave it here. I’ll push it over later when I get the dozer going.” Smoky stared at the ground.

“Oh, what the hell. Just hurry up.”

Smoky started pulling boxes of beer bottles and girlie magazines off the truck. Amidon lit another smoke, stood there watching him. “You’re acting even weirder than usual, Latrel.”

Smoky ignored him, finished unloading. Amidon climbed into his pickup and drove off, spraying gravel behind him.

“Asshole,” Smoky said. “With guys like that running the town, I’m glad I live out here.” He picked up the logging chain, ran it through the steel gates and padlocked them together again.

After he was sure Amidon was gone, Smoky walked back to Ellie, leaned against her heavy steel track. He pulled out his pipe and smoked a quick bowl of salvaged tobacco. He wondered if he was about to do something sacrilegious. Wondered if he needed to go find a minister, somebody official. He looked at his friends lying together in the bucket. He’d been to funerals over the years, guessed he could say a few words before he put them in the ground.

He tapped his pipe on Ellie’s frame and climbed up into the cab. He touched the wires together, brought the bucket off the ground and headed down toward the river. Clouds made their way up the valley like a dark, slow moving train, their undersides illuminated with a pale red glow.

A hundred yards or so below the dump, he stopped Ellie on a level grassy area just above a dogleg bend in the river. He lowered the bucket and stared down at the murky Spring current swirling around tree limbs and old tires caught along the bank. It now seemed life had perhaps gone by too fast, though at other times it sure had seemed to drag.

Smoky climbed down off Ellie, pulled a long-handled shovel from the back. He found a soft spot in the turf and cut out a good sized section. He rolled back the sod, began removing the loam and underlying gravel a shovel full at a time. It wasn’t long before his back and shoulders started aching like hell. Usually he had a few pops in him

by this hour but, strangely, he didn't feel like drinking. He rested for a few minutes, checked on his friends, then commenced digging again.

By noontime, the hole was a good three feet down, deep enough to keep the coyotes off them. He was anxious to get them in the ground before anyone saw what he was doing, but felt himself hesitating, wanting to keep Freddie and Rose on the green side of the turf a little longer.

Suddenly, he heard a shot in the distance across the river. Probably some kid out rabbit hunting with a .22. Smoky drove the shovel into the pile of dirt and walked over to Ellie. "It's time," he said, looking at his friends. He'd angled the bucket so they would slide out easier than they went in. He grabbed hold of the blanket and pulled hard. Freddie and Rose slid over the steel lip of the bucket onto the wet ground at the edge of the grave, which gave way beneath his and their weight. Smoky lost his footing and, still holding onto the blanket, fell backwards into the hole, Freddie and Rose damn near landing on top of him. As their bodies settled on the bottom, he quickly pushed himself back against the earthen side wall.

"Not enough room for all of us in here," he said. He reached over, covered their faces with the edge of the blanket, then scrambled out of the grave on all fours. He stood at the edge of the hole, gave them one more look. "Sorry, guys, I ain't going with you."

Smoky walked over, pulled the fishing pole and the cross out of the cab. He laid the pole alongside Freddie.

It took a minute or so to throw in the first shovel full of dirt, but then he looked away from the grave and quickly shoveled a good two or three inch layer over them.

When they were completely covered, he climbed up into Ellie, started her up and pushed the rest of the dirt back into the hole. He back-dragged across the grave flattening it out, then rolled the sod over the topsoil and tamped the edges with his boots.

When he was done, he stepped back, pulled the daffodils and roses from his pocket, brushed them off and pushed them into the grass above where his friends' heads lay. He pounded the white cross into the ground at their feet. All in all, he thought it looked pretty good, peaceful there by the river.

Smoky tried to think of a few words to say. He knew preachers always said something about ashes and dust, but he was awful tired, and his body ached like hell. And he really needed a drink. He turned away and climbed up into Ellie. For a few moments he looked at the depression in the ground. "You'll be all right now," he said quietly. He touched the wires together and drove back up the hill toward the Cat House.

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