A Mouse in the Bin

Gary McKinney

Sandy leaned again into the huge steel bin and pulled out another cedar shake. Before he slapped it into the packing frame, he pounded the fat end against one of the sides.

"Move it up there!" he yelled.

"Hey! Up yours, Doherty!" came the reply, ringing off the walls in short metalic echoes.

His sawyer had been dogging it for the last half-hour and Sandy hated working slowly. It got him out of rhythm and if there was anything you had to have in order for this job to be interesting, it was rhythm; and for rhythm, you had to have shakes, and that's what he wasn't getting.

Sandy was a twenty-four year old packer who worked at the Saginaw Shake Company in Raymond, a small logging and fishing town in southwest Washington. He was on the graveyard shift and had been going strong since 11 PM.

He decided to take an unauthorized break and let the shakes back up a little. The foreman, Cecil Pollard, had already made his rounds for this hour, so he pushed aside one of the movable partitions and stepped through.

It was 5:30. The night was giving way to morning and the sky had a bluish-grey color that he liked. He quickly crossed the dirt yard and went behind a large pile of cedar blocks. He stood on one end, put his foot up on it, rested his arm on his knee and took a long look at what was in front of him.

About twenty yards away a thick fog clung tight and low to the Ellis Slough, an arm of the Willapa river. Only its misty edges ventured past the brown clay banks. Black pilings from a long-deteriorated loading dock stuck their tips through the haze like three-day beard stubble. On the far shore, a lone scraggly hemlock, its top bent over like a scolded child, stood among the brown swamp grass and green scotch broom of the tide flat. Further still, he could see the steeple of the Catholic church and the Quonset-hut shape of the high school gym.

The morning dew had slicked back the foliage and made the muddy banks of the river glisten. From downstream, three ducks flew just above the fog, following the river's winding path closely as though they were sentries on patrol. As they drew near the mill, they quacked a warning, but it paid no attention. The high-pitched whine of the fifteen-foot bandsaws, the clanking and clattering of chain-driven conveyors, and the chunk-a-chunk-a monotony of the prime-splitters continued on, as it had all night.

Sandy took a deep breath, exhaled, and walked back to his station, reluctantly slipping back through the partitions. None of the other packers had noticed he was gone, as his was the last bin on this side of the mill. He was glad to see that his sawyer had gotten sufficiently pissed-off to fill it about three-quarters full.

He plunged into the work; leaning, pulling, and slapping with great speed and dexterity. When the frame was filled with shakes (nine high and tip-to-tip), he grabbed the quarter-inch banding tape and pushed it though the small groove on the bottom until it poked out the other side; then, he pulled it over, held the two ends with one hand, and with the other reached for his ratchet. He tightened the tape and secured the bundle with a one-inch staple and crimping tool, slammed the tools back in their place, jerked down the rear gate with a clang, hoisted the ninety-pound load with a short grunt, and did a quick two-step waddle to the pallet. He stacked them there six high, three to a row, 200 to 250 times a night.

Sandy wore traditional packing clothes: leather apron, faded jeans, white nylon gloves, black steel-toed boots, light-blue, pin-striped work shirt, and orange hardhat. He was six foot, 175 pounds, had ear-length brown hair, hazel eyes, and an angular featured face. He didn't stand out from the other men in any physical way, and as far as the company was concerned, he was just another payroll number.

"Hey, Perfesser! Read any good B-BOOKS lately?"

It was Merritt Kover, the forklift driver.

"Just move the pallets, will you?" said Sandy.

That was the difference. Sandy had a liberal arts degree from the University of Washington. In their minds, a man didn't go to college so he could work in a mill. They were suspicious of him.

"What're you still doin' here?" said Merritt. "I heard you was t-takin' a job in the city."

"You heard wrong, Merritt," said Sandy, thinking his mother had probably started the rumor. He turned back to his work.

What are you still doing here, he thought, saying each word slowly in his mind; *damn, I'm getting tired of that question.* His parents wanted to know, his girlfriend wanted to know, and now the son-of-a-bitch forklift driver wanted to know. Well HE didn't know, so how the hell could he tell anyone else? What had started as a summer job two years ago had slowly become everybody's problem.

He was packing fast, challenging himself to catch up by break time. For Sandy, there were two mental states that came with this hard, redundant labor: one, his favorite, was a non-thinking, be-here-now Zen trance; the other, the one he was IN now, was a kind of one-man tennis match with a brick wall, using his thoughts as the ball.

The shakes were reddish-brown today. Maybe that was what he liked. They were always different colors—sometimes yellowish (what the men called 'cream'), sometimes as dark as burnt umber.

He thought of more reasons, but none came up that would convince his parents or Cecile he wasn't loony:

I like the smell of cedar and cotton.

Sandwiches taste better when your body aches.

Coffee and Camels are a buzz at three AM.

"No, he thought, they couldn't relate to that. How about, "It's fun being where you don't belong but you do anyway." Bonkers, that's what they'd say. Boop-shooby ville. Ship him off. The only things they understood were good wages, steady work, and a place to go everyday; but not blue-collar, not at a mill, and not with a Summa Cum Laude.

Besides, Sandy wasn't there for the money. He was there for the sweat, the ham and cheese with mustard, and the afternoons by himself.

A short whistle blew, signaling the last break. He'd finished. As the saws decrescendoed and conveyor belts came to a temporary halt, he pulled his gloves off and headed for the lunchroom.

Sandy bounded the stairs, entered at the first door, and sat on one of the benches. He took a smoke from his shirt and butted a match to its end. It was a fresh pack and the tobacco was sweet, pungent, almost damp. He inhaled deeply, satisfied, then removed his hat and leaned against the wall.

Maynard Strozyk was at the table, greedily finishing off a piece of apple pie. He'd been married recently, and now brought hand-packed lunches to work instead of ordering out for Dairy Queen burgers like many of the single men did.

"If she fucks as good as she cooks, you're gonna be one happy asshole, Maynard," said Nate Nowgrowski, the deckman.

"Eatcher heart out, Nate."

"Ya had to slap her around yet?"

"No, but I will when I have to."

This was the kind of attitude that had cured Sandy of any blue-collar romanticism. At first, it bothered him alot; but as time passed, he became quite adept at tuning it out, even going to such lengths as listening to Vivaldi on his Walkman tape recorder. That technique had given him some amusing moments, like when the music would synch with the men scratching their balls and spitting tobacco on the sawdust-covered floor, but had worn out its novelty. Now, he just tried to be understanding. They knew what they knew, and he couldn't blame them for all of society's ills. Besides, with them, he always knew where he stood. The intellectuals at school often played the same games and had the same attitudes, only buried under mounds of rationalized twelve-dollar philosophies.

"Hey, Waddell, how'd yer hand git swolled up?"

It was Earl Howard, coming in front of his saw.

"I was in Aberdeen the other night," said the hefty prime-splitter,"and I had to punch some asshole's lights out."

"What for?"

"Said we wasn't gonna be good enough to win the football title again next year."

"Sounds like he needed t' be stomped," said Earl. "Hey! Anybody wanna go cat-shootin' tonight?"

"That's chicken-shit," said Gordon Stark, the millwright.

"Say what?" said Earl.

"Anybody can shoot a cat with a 30-ought-six and a flashlight, Earl. What takes guts is takin' that light off 'n' goin' out to the dump with heavy boots, then blindin' one of them big garbage rats, walkin' right up to it and stompin' its head in."

"You think that's tough?" said Earl. "I done that. Lemme tell ya 'bout the time me 'n' Waddell were out on the Monohon Landin' Road near ol' Ben Felber's farm. We were drunker n' shit, 'n' this ol' cow come up near the road by

where we was parked, just a brayin' and a mooin' 'n' I just got crazy wild 'n' got my huntin' knife out, then jumped the fence 'n' onto that cow's back n' rode 'er 'n' stabbed 'er till she was deader 'n' hell. Ain't it the truth, Waddell?"

"It's a fact."

The men murmured their approval. Sandy almost threw up. Earl was one person he could never get used to. Once, Sandy had opened his lunch box to find a four-inch dragonfly squashed on top of his sandwiches. It wasn't being startled that had bothered him the most. It was the fact that Earl had gone to lengths to kill a beautiful insect for a sick practical joke. He was without conscience, almost pure in his viciousness, and constantly in everyone's face.

"Hey, that's great, Earl," said Gordon. "You're one motherFUCKIN' mean asshole."

"You got that right, Jack," said Earl.

"Gord," said Maynard, "ya got any chew? I'm all out and I love a nice thick chew after apple pie."

"I like a nice thick chew after 'hair' pie," said Earl.

The men broke-up. Sandy got ready to leave.

"Hey, Lube," said Earl." You ever done any cat-shootin' or rat-stompin'?

Lube Miller, as usual, said nothing. The only way he ever got involved in these lunchroom gross-out orgies was when Earl started picking on him.

"What's wrong, Lube," said Earl, "rat gotcher tongue?"

The men laughed, Sandy sat straight up, and Lube did what he always did when he caught shit; he hung his head and looked at the floor.

"Christ, Lube," said Earl. "You're never any fuckin' fun. Can't you morons take a fuckin' joke?"

"Leave him alone, Earl," said Sandy.

Earl turned to him with a smirk on his face. "Well, ain't this a sight," he said, "the perfesser 'n' the moron teamin' up."

Sandy rose. "He's not a moron and I'm not a professer."

Lube gave Sandy a quick side-long glance that said 'thanks' as clear as he'd ever heard it spoken.

"Yer standin' purty tall, 'fesser," said Earl. "You ever do anything worth talkin' about?"

"Yeah," said Sandy. "I caught a 14-inch rainbow up on the South Fork last week."

"No shit!"

It was Gordon butting in.

"Yes, sir. I even took a picture so you guys wouldn't think I was lying."

The photo was passed around and Earl, puzzled by Sandy's diversion, retreated to another corner of the room. Sandy looked again at Lube, expecting more approval, but the one glance had been all he would get; now, it was just part of Lube's slicked-down hair. He felt momentarily self-consche'd never stand up for himself. The men thought he was retarded, but Sandy knew from his eyes that he was just very withdrawn. Not that he saw much of his eyes—he'd never even heard him talk. In two years, the only real communication between them had been when Sandy had the let's-get-all-the-sawyers-to-throw-their-shakes-in-Sandy's-bin joke played on him. Lube hadn't said a word, but worked through lunch to help him pack out.

The quick double whistle blew, indicating "break over," and the men filed out of the room. There was only an hour left in the shift, and, since it was Friday, this last push be an easy one.

Sandy was having a mild mental tennis match with himself when his trance was broken by shouts from the sawyers above. He looked up into his bin and was surprised to see a small brown mouse gripping onto the end of a shake about half way up. Its snout was twitching, its whiskers moving up and down as quickly as hummingbird wings. It was quivering with fear, suspended and helpless. While he was staring, wondering how it got there and what to do, most of the crew gathered around his station.

"The damn thing was in the trunk of one of the log," said Nate.

"Yeah," said Maynard. "The fucker ran up one of the belts and jumped in the fuckin' bin."

"How d'ya wanna kill it?" said Earl. "Should I get my shotgun, or ya wanna squash it with a board?"

"HEY! Why do you have to KILL it?" said Sandy.

"What's wrong, perfesser," said Earl. "Fraid of a little mouse?"

"Back off, Earl."

"That's twice, fuckface. Looks like you gonna get'cher ass beat."

Suddenly, Lube Miller pushed through the crowd. Moving faster than anyone had ever seen him move before, he climbed the bin and grabbed the mouse. He caught it deftly but gently in cupped hands, jumped from the bin, and bolted past the stunned workers. Before they had a chance to realize what he was doing, he was halfway to the field on the south side of the mill.

"HEY!" yelled Earl. "What the FUCK is that moron doin'?"

Sandy dropped back quickly and stood between the men and Lube. "He's being decent!"

The men protested. "Bring the fuckin' rat back here!" "You goddamn idiot!" But none of them walked past Sandy.

I'm gonna git that sumbitch!" said Earl, starting after Lube.

"Leave him alone!" said Sandy.

"Fuck you, asshole!"

Sandy shoved Earl back with both hands and crouched.

"Gettin' tough, huh, faggot face?"

Just then, Cecil Pollard walked in on his rounds.

"What are you men doing down here!" he demanded.

There was silence.

"Nothing," Sandy said finally.

It was a short but forceful declaration, and the group dispersed.

As Earl walked away, he turned to Sandy. "I ain't forgot you, smartass."

Their eyes locked. Earl's were pale blue, cold and shallow. Sandy knew he should be scared, but that would come later. Right that instant, he just stared straight back, unyielding and hard. Seconds passed before Earl turned his slightly and spit tobacco close to Sandy's boots. We wiped his mouth with his sleeve, gave another squint-eyed look, and left. Sandy could feel his fingernails dig into his palms. hadn't been in a street fight since the third grade.

He heard whispering beyond the partition, then Cecil saying loudly, "What's the big deal about a dumb goddamn mouse?"

Sandy sucked in a deep breath, then let it out slowly. Lube was returning from the field, his head in its regular downcast position.

"Lube," said Sandy, gently.

Lube looked at him long enough for Sandy to see that he had very deep brown eyes.

"You did good, Lube. Real good."

Their eyes stayed together for another split-second.

"Thanks," he said. The word came out slowly, almost like he was learning the language for the first time. He looked back down, quickly returning to his shyness. He stepped awkwardly around Sandy and walked back to his station.

Sandy, too, returned to his bin. The shakes were falling in at a pretty good clip. He reached in and grabbed one, then slapped it, HARD, into the frame.