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The bright yellow rental truck backed up to the loading dock of Poteet's Fine Furniture Factory. Its reverse alarm beeped loudly for at least thirty seconds. The bumper of the truck slammed into the heavy rubber protectors attached to the concrete.

"Nice driving, you big idiot!" Nighttime security guard Buford Bohannon put down his midnight coffee. "Stop before you break something!"

Buford swung open the door to his office, twirling his flashlight like a spastic baton, and scurried to the loading area. He liked the flashlight. It was heavy and sturdy, like a good woman. He imagined if he ever encountered a thief in the factory and a physical confrontation ensued, he could blind them with its super concentrated light beam and then disable them with a precision blow to the back of the head. Buford was a company man, which meant he would put his life on the line, if it came to it.

Poteet's Fine Furniture Factory was built in 1912, and it had been in the Poteet family ever since. They ran three shifts at the factory, making furniture on a round-the-clock basis three hundred and sixty-five days ~~the~~ year—except for two days off at Thanksgiving, three days off at Christmas, and a week off for the Fourth of July—to remind the people of Steel City just how much the factory meant to their pocket books.

"What's the big hurry?" Buford called to the driver. "Are you blind or what? You couldn't see the dock sitting there?"

It wasn't uncommon to get deliveries during the nighttime. Long-haul truckers would pull in anywhere from the witching hour till three AM to load up. One of the dirty secrets about Poteet's was the work done during the night. First shift was staffed by veteran employees. They were trained craftsmen, and they built furniture by hand, using only a few industrial saws and lathes, along with a lot of know-how. They applied all the polishes and finishes by hand, too, and made sure every little detail was perfect.

On second and third shift, though, the workers were all temps. The small furniture workshop was shuttered, and the big, industrial machines were fired up. It was during this time the temps used glued-together sawdust and plastic laminate to create knockoffs, super cheap furniture for the neighborhood superstore and big-box retailer. Workers knocked out a thousand pieces a day, and it was these pieces that were loaded into the midnight deliveries. The trucks were like smugglers who came in the night with illicit wares. The Poteets loved the profit from the cheap furniture, but they didn't want to besmirch their brand, so the "crapiture" was sold under various name brands, all as phony as the wood finish on the plastic laminate.

Buford wasn't one to judge—he and the other nighttime employees kept the little secret amongst themselves. Still, it was unusual for a rental truck to pull up to the back of Poteet's loading Dock. It was even more unusual for two men to get out of the truck. They were dressed in overalls with no shirts, and they wore surgical masks over their faces.

"You boys drunk or something?" Buford said as the driver hopped up onto the dock as easy as you please. He let his flashlight hang loose in his hand, just in case there was trouble. "What brings y'all out here tonight?"

The driver and the passenger stepped in the pool of light cast by the overhead floodlights. They were both about medium height with protruding beer guts. They could've been brothers, they looked so much alike.

The driver thrust a clipboard with paperwork at Buford. "We're here for pickup."

"Hot night, ain't it?" Buford was just trying to make polite conversation. Except for watching TV reruns on his laptop, he didn't get to hear the human voice much at work. "Is that why y'all ain't wearing shirts?"

It was August in Steel City, North Carolina. Even at midnight, the temperature gauge was showing ninety-two degrees. Buford was soaking his dark blue work shirt and pants, sweating so hard that his drawers and socks were soggy. He didn't see how anybody could stand wearing heavy overalls in this weather.

The driver pushed the clipboard against Buford's belly. "We come here for pickup. Not conversation. So shut your yapping mouth and get to it."

Commented [CM1]: Stet if colloquial

"Okay, okay, no need to get aggravated." Buford felt the edge of the clipboard digging into his gut, but he wasn't inclined to accept such a pushy gesture. Not when nothing went in or out of this factory without his say-so. "Do I know you? Your voice sounds familiar."

"Hell no," the driver said. "You don't know us, and we don't you know you. So take the form, and we'll get the hell out of here."

"I don't appreciate that kind of language being thrown around." Buford let his hand rest on the butt of his flashlight. In a fight, he reckoned the silent passenger would be the tougher of the two. The strong silent types were always the most dangerous, so he would take out the driver first. "You two ain't sailors, so don't cuss like it."

"Who gives a fuck what you appreciate?" The driver jabbed the clipboard into Buford's bellybutton again, making him wince. "We've got a job to do, and you're keeping us from it, so take a look at the paperwork, and we'll be on our way."

The two men stepped closer.

Their shoulders formed a wall in front of him. Buford didn't like intimidation. But there were two of them, and by his calculations, it would be very difficult to shine the light in both of their eyes and then double tap the backs of their head without some kind of fracas going on, and Mr. Poteet didn't like fracas on company time.

Quick as a snake, he whipped the flashlight from his belt loop. He snapped on the light and shone it on the paperwork. Ever so slowly, making sure he read each word as carefully as possible, he examined the bill of lading. "It says here you've come for six lathes?"

"That's right, Einstein, that's exactly what it says. Six lathes. Antique."

"That's an odd thing for you to pick up." Buford scratched his bald spot. Why would Poteet would sell the very equipment the master craftsman needed to do their work? "They use lathes for turning spindles and table legs and such. Been in this factory for as long as I can remember. I can't imagine why Mr. Poteet ---"

“Mr. Poteet doesn't give a flying fuck what you think.”

The passenger snapped his fingers, and the back door of the bright yellow moving van truck rolled open. A half dozen bearded men, all in overalls and wearing ski masks, jumped out. Before Buford could stop them, they marched directly into the factory like they owned the place.

“What're the ski masks for? Ain't it awful hot?”

“You got the bill of lading,” the driver said. “We'll get what we came here for.”

“I don't think—” Buford began, but his words trailed off as the driver followed the passenger and the bearded men inside.

That left him alone on the loading dock with nothing but a yellow bill of lading to keep ~~them~~ him company. He scanned the rest of the paperwork and found Mr. Jerry Poteet's signature at the bottom of the page. It looked for all the world like it was legitimate. Buford couldn't believe it, selling off the equipment had made the furniture factory famous.

“What is this world coming to?”

Buford was dying of curiosity and wanted to know what they were up to, but his position was security guard of the loading dock, and it was absolutely forbidden for him to leave his area. So to keep himself occupied, he prowled down the steps and gave the rental truck a good going-over, visually speaking.

The name of the rental company was emblazoned on the sides. The tires were new, almost squeaky clean. He peeked into the driver's window. The interior was meticulously clean, not even a drink cup or a McDonald's wrapper on the floorboard.

“A little evidence can go a long way.”

Buford eased the driver's door open. He used his cell phone to snap a picture of the tire inflation information, then he went around back and took a picture of the license plate. Not that he was a suspicious person, but Buford had some concerns. He had spent fifteen years on the job after graduating from Allegheny High, and he wanted to keep it. The pay was enough to eat on, and the work hours let him play *Call of Duty* in the mornings when the players weren't so good. He'd hate for some little slipup to cost him such a cushy position.

Commented [CM2]: Allegheny in PA, Alleghany in NC, fyi

Commented [CM3]: Nothing to edit, just wanted to say that this is adorable

He clicked his cell camera a second time. The flash lit up the license plate right before the doors burst open.

Like a gunfighter from *Gunsmoke*, he whirled around and clicked the button of his flashlight, shining the concentrated beam into the face of the driver.

“Shut that fucking thing off.” The man held a hand over his face to shield the light. “Get away from the truck before you get hurt.”

Buford steeled himself. “Are you threatening me?”

The man rolled the back door of the truck open. “I just didn't want you to get hit by this.”

The factory doors burst open again, and six furniture dollies rolled out, each of them holding one of the antique lathes. The machines looked bigger outside of the craftsman's workshop and more fragile, too. They were covered in sawdust and pine tar. Something in Buford's heart broke to see them hauled away like yard sale finds.

It took less than three minutes for the men to load the machinery and strap it down. When the last of the bearded guys jumped out, the driver rolled the door closed and secured it with a padlock.

“See ya, boys.” He nodded to the bearded men. They walked away into the night.

“Where they going?” Buford asked.

“Somewhere else,” the driver said. “Sign the paperwork?”

“Where else could they go?” Buford said, still amazed at the speed with which the lathes had disappeared. “Ain't nothing between here and the highway except the Black Swamp.”

“None your business. Did you sign the fucking paperwork?”

“No reason to be nasty.” Buford picked up the clipboard. He scribbled his name below Mr. Poteet's. “Here you go.”

The driver signed his name on the opposite side, verifying he had accepted the merchandise and it was all in working order. “Make sure your boss gets this. Don't forget and wipe your ass with it by mistake.”

“Now hold on, it ain't right for you to say that.”

The driver patted Buford's beefy cheek. "Aw, did I hurt your feelings? Sorry about [that](#). I forget Poteet's stooges actually got feelings."

"Hey," Buford protested but wasn't really sure why. "I ain't nobody's stooge."

"Don't kid yourself. You're everybody's stooge."

The passenger smirked and got in the truck. The driver climbed behind the wheel of the truck. The brake lights flashed in Buford's face, and the truck rolled forward, inching along until it hit the parking lot.

Buford pointed his flashlight at the side mirror and clicked on the beam. "Asshole," he said. "Foul-mouthed asshole."

Buford clicked off the light. No sense in wasting batteries.

After the truck was out of sight, he nuked his coffee, sat down in his wooden chair and put his feet up. He took a sip of coffee. It scorched his lips. He spat it out, decorating his computer screen.

"Oh crap!"

He was searching for a rag to wipe up the screen when he heard a whining noise inside the factory. He clicked the button [to pause down](#) the video and cupped his ear to listen.

It was a high-pitched squeal, like an engine turning, or belts on a fan squealing. But it only lasted a couple of seconds, and then he wasn't sure if it was coming from inside the factory or may-be from his laptop.

"Your mind's playing tricks on you," he told himself, and was about to click *play* again when he heard the sound.

It was louder this time, [more high-higher](#)-pitched. It lasted longer.

And it was definitely inside the factory.

He eased up from the chair, hitched up his sweat-soaked britches and drew his flashlight. He strode across the loading dock confidently and reached for the door.

That's when he glanced down and noticed his shoe was untied.

Commented [CM4]: Not familiar with this phrase and would cut "down," but don't want to if I just don't know about it.

It wasn't sensible to go investigating with a tripping hazard attached to his foot. He set the flashlight down and bent over, grunting to tie his shoe. He had just double knotted it when the high-pitched noise kicked up again. It squealed louder and longer than ever, definitely like the fan belt of an old Chevy. He wondered how the workers upstairs couldn't hear ~~it;~~ ~~then,~~ of course, he remembered that third shift was sent home two hours earlier due to a gas leak or something.

Commented [CM5]: I know you hate semicolons—a period would also work 😊

He opened the door. A great rush of air blew inside the factory. The wind was so strong, it yanked the hat from his head. The door tried to slam on him, so he stuffed his foot in front of it, stomping hard on the concrete. It was as if the building was drawing breath from all the windows and ~~doors.~~ It was so strong he could hardly keep the door open.

Commented [CM6]: Cool sentence

Inside, the squeal was deafening. In a second Buford lost all motivation for checking out the noise. There was no reason to go poking around things he didn't know about. A simple call to the factory superintendent would get maintenance down here. They were equipped for this kind of work and had all the proper tools.

All Buford really had was his flashlight.

He started drawing out of the door, fighting against the metal, untangling his shoes from his own feet, when the air pressure suddenly changed. He had taken a step back when the explosion happened.

Like the building had exhaled forcefully following its giant sucking of air, a blast of superheated air blew through the door and sent Buford Bohannon flying off of the dock. The force spun him through the air, tossing him like a child's toy off the loading dock, over the paved drive in the back and onto a grassy knoll, where he continued rolling until his body, covered in flames, sank into a retention pond.

With the sizzle of melting polyester, the water doused the flames.

Stunned he was still conscious, Buford tried to sit up, but he had no more ~~than~~ lifted his head ~~than-when~~ he saw a burning tampon box fly ~~over his headby~~. He turned to follow it and

Commented [CM7]: To avoid repetition of "head"?

missed the flashlight twirling through the air. The vindictive baton, hell-bent on finding its target, clubbed him at the base of the skull.

He fell forward into the retention pond. He sucked water into his lungs and would have drowned if the rental truck driver hadn't pulled him out.

"All right boys," the driver said. "Load him up. This feller needs to go for a ride."

It was the last thing Buford heard before he fell unconscious and Poteet's Fine Furniture Factory was blown into smithereens.