

Grant Buday / WHITE LUNG

At three in the morning Epp thinks of White Lung. His buddy Klaus was always warning Epp about White Lung, the baker's version of Black Lung, which miners got from breathing coal dust. And it was true that every graveyard shift Epp inhaled flour by the sack full. He'd been doing it for twenty-two years. Klaus said soon Epp'd be on one of those oxygen cylinders. And after that it wouldn't be too long before it was straight to the boneyard. Which was why he wanted off graveyard shift. But they were giving him the run around. Klaus said statistically speaking Epp had seventy-four years. That meant thirty-three to go, barring another injury. Epp knew he was accident prone. Still, he meant to make the most of those years, especially since graveyard was killing him. Klaus said so. Epp believed everything Big Klaus said.

Epp was dumping flour. At 5'3", 120 pounds, Epp was a runt; the flour sacks weighed 40 kilos each. Epp didn't know exactly how much 40 kilos was in pounds, but it was too much, it was dead weight, like shifting a corpse, or how he imagined shifting a corpse to be. But a corpse at least there'd be arms and legs to grab. The 40 kilo sacks only had ears. That's what they called the corners, the points of paper that Epp gripped when he heaved the sacks from the pallet to the flourdump. The flourdump was the size of a ticket booth. It was a chest-high sieve with walls. And it vibrated. He dragged a sack from the pallet, slit it lengthwise, then wrestled it onto the vibrating wire mesh where the flour got sucked down to the silos, except, that is, for the flour dust which puffed up in big clouds that Epp inhaled, contributing to his White Lung. When Epp got home each morning he coughed flour dust. He picked it from his nose, his ears, even dug it from his belly button. It went right through his pants and clung to his crotch. There was flour on his basement suite floor, his couch, his sheets, even in his coffee. Epp drank 15 - 16 cups a day and lived on raisin bread he stole from the bakery.

By three a.m. everything in the bakery had settled down for the

night. The bread had been sliced and wrapped and it waited in trays for the trucks. They'd shut off the overhead and it was quiet, a three a.m. lull in the world, a low-tide calm during which everyone dwelled on his own private concerns: money, baldness, paunch, sex, the fact that graveyard shift took ten years off your life.

Epp thought of Lee. They'd lived together. They'd had things in common, like flea markets. They were connoisseurs of flea markets and garage sales. She'd plan out their entire weekend around them. When she got the table at the flea market on Terminal, Epp was thrilled. Her own table — their own table. Epp was proud of being with Lee, proud that the other vendors knew them as a couple, and that he didn't have to pay the quarter to get in. He'd always bring Lee a coffee, or spell her so she could step out for some air, because after awhile you didn't notice how musty it got, and he worried for her lungs. After all, everything in the flea market was turning to dust. It was bad enough that she smoked rollies without inhaling the dust of old books, old *National Geographics*, crumbling couches, rotting shoes. Everything had that basement smell. That was something Epp didn't like. That and the men who looked at Lee. Lee was five-feet-even and a hundred pounds. A hundred-pounds-perfect, Epp always said. He liked the ring of it. A hundred-pounds-perfect. She made leather clothes and sold them: belts, bags, moccassins, coats, and a specialty line of panties and brassieres. You had to order and pay for those in advance. The guys'd always ask about them. They'd grin and ask was she wearing them and could they see. And Epp, all 5'3" of him — 5'5" in his Daytons — would feel the blood pumping up big in his ears and his heart panicking in his chest. But he'd stand up to them. "It's none of your business what she's wearin'." The guys'd eye Epp and laugh, but move on. Sometimes Lee had got mad and said he'd chased off a customer. Epp had always studied the guys she said that about.

Lee was a number. A fox. And she looked hot in that leather coat with the tassles along the backs of the arms. Epp liked that sweet leather smell he associated with her. It was her smell. Smell was important. She liked that he came home smelling of baked bread, even though he was only a janitor and not a real baker. And there was that time, his 30th birthday, when she buttered him, buttered him like he was a cob of corn. He'll never forget that birthday, especially since the

next one she was gone. She left because "They weren't going anywhere." Epp had asked where she wanted to go. She couldn't say, but she left on the back of a motorcycle.

Every time Epp saw a pair of LEE jeans he thought about her. She used to get a charge out of the fact that she was named Lee and so were the jeans. She collected the leather LEE patches. Epp figured he should've taken that Small Arms repair course he'd seen advertised in a matchbook along with Power Engineering and Hotel/Motel Management. He'd've had a trade. Lee said he should because it'd be a step in the right direction. Klaus had agreed.

Klaus was on days now, so they only saw each other when their shifts overlapped for half an hour in the morning. Epp felt betrayed when Klaus left graveyard for days. He wanted onto dayshift too, but Singh, the Supervisor, wouldn't let him. "Why not?" he'd asked, "I got the seniority." Singh had told him why not: "Because you're a fuck-up." Singh kept him tucked away on janitor shift for his own good. But even there Epp screwed up. He got his hand flattened between the rollers of the moulder four years ago and it swelled to the size of a boxing glove. He nearly blew his eardrums out cleaning them with an airhose. He broke his fingers on the iron bread racks at least once a year. And one time, when they let him load the oven, the mechanical arm that raked in the pans caught him and he got dragged right in. Klaus hit the Emergency stop. They hauled Epp out by his feet, hair burnt and eyebrows scorched.

Epp knew they laughed. He heard them. He ripped open another flour sack. The flour came in boxcars. Five Roses Flour. By the end of a night of unloading one of those boxcars your fingers were shot, the tips bruised and bleeding like they'd been hit with hammers. Epp slit open another sack and heaved it onto the vibrating grate. He slit the sacks with a small piece of slicer blade wrapped at one end with electrician's tape. The slicer blades were 12 feet long and ran in a loop around two spinning drums. That was how you got sliced bread, and why most of the guys who ran the wrappers had stumps for fingers.

Epp gutted another sack. Flour puffed up, dusting his face. He thought of his lungs. When Epp tried using White Lung as a reason to get off graveyard, Singh had pointed out the box of disposable face masks right there by the door next to the earplugs and gloves. Epp

didn't know what to say. He didn't want to wear one of those gauze masks. Klaus always said it was too late for masks because they were all dead anyway. Epp had liked that. He liked the sound of it. And it was true. They were old guys now. Let the kids wear masks, there was still hope for them. Thinking like that had made Epp walk differently, like he was an old campaigner, a veteran of the wars, a sod buster who'd been walking these goddamn cement floors since before some of these young jobbers were born. Epp remembered when they used real eggs in some of the breads. They'd actually stood there cracking eggs into the buckets of flour. Epp was forty-one; he'd be on graveyard until he was sixty-five. Unless the plant shut down first. Ever since the roll-back that's all anyone talked about. Except Klaus. Klaus hardly talked at all anymore, and when he did just said it didn't matter. Epp figured he meant it didn't matter because Klaus was going to open up his own bakery soon, but Klaus wouldn't talk about that either. Epp thought of that oxygen cylinder awaiting him. An oxygen cylinder and a wheelchair. And no Lee. Suddenly all that crusty romance was gone. He turned and shouted at the cement walls: "THAT'S WHY THEY CALL IT GRAVEYARD SHIFT!"

He glanced around, embarrassed. He was alone though, nothing there but sacks of flour and the forklift. Epp had never driven the forklift. Twenty years and he'd never been allowed to drive it once. Singh wouldn't let him. He wouldn't even let him sit in it and pretend. It was parked ten feet away, a Mitsubishi.

The first thing Epp did was lurch the forklift forward and slam it into the wall. "Shit!" He hit the gas, backing around the corner toward the edge of the loading dock and a five-foot drop.

Donnelly, spraying insecticide along the walls, screamed: "EPP!"

Terrified, realizing this was a bad idea, Epp jumped out. But he forgot to put it in neutral, and he watched the forklift run straight over Donnelly's foot then glide right off the dock.

Singh called the ambulance while Dean Smee, the First Aid man, cut Donnelly's boot from his foot. Donnelly's shirt was transparent

with sweat, and he was shrieking, beating the floor with his hand like a hit bird beating the ground with its wing.

When the ambulance left with Donnelly, the others headed to the coffee room. Smee set Donnelly's boot in the middle of the table.

"Steel toe." He tapped the toe cap with a spoon. "He's lucky. Be walking around on a stump otherwise." Then he pointed to the arch support, which, cut open, revealed its anatomy like a surgical exhibit. "Good boot. Three-ply sole. Air cushion heel." Smee was an expert on footwear. He knew all about industrial shoes, earplugs, face masks, safety goggles. He'd trained in Industrial First Aid to improve his job prospects against the day when the Vancouver plant shut down. Smee was practical. He was taking more courses, thinking of becoming an ambulance attendant. People were always getting hurt or sick so the prospects were good. Smee had three kids. His wife was a nutritionist. They both weightlifted because it was good for your bones.

Singh looked around. "Hey. Where's Epp?"

They found him out back by the sinks where the machine parts got washed. He'd barricaded himself into a corner with stacks of blue plastic bread trays, and armed himself with the power washer, a pressurized hose that shot scalding water.

"Stay back!" Epp fired water over their heads to prove he meant business.

"Okay," said Singh. "Come out've there." And Singh, holding out his hand for the weapon, walked toward him.

Epp saw him coming. He panicked. He gripped the lever and hit Singh square in the chest with a blast of water that knocked him on his ass.

Smee pulled Singh out of range.

"Call Wong," said Smee. Wong was the General Manager.

"At four in the morning? I'm calling the cops."

"You'll traumatize him."

Singh gave Smee a look. He knew Smee was taking those medical courses.

"Wait'll Klaus comes in."

Singh knew Epp and Klaus were buddies. Singh also knew that Epp began getting worse when Klaus quit graveyard. "Epp. You wanna talk to Klaus?"

"Yeah! Get Klaus! I'll talk to Klaus!" And even as Epp spoke he felt his throat thicken with tears. He saw the cops on the TV news hunkered behind the open doors of their cars waiting for the signal to storm the bakery and haul him out in handcuffs.

"Can you hold on?"

"Yeah! Sure!" Now Epp felt a little better. He heard the concern in Singh's voice, like he cared, like they were working together on this, like Epp was in a bind and it wasn't his fault. And it wasn't, not really. If Singh'd only have let him drive the forklift even once or twice this would never have happened. If they'd only let him off graveyard everything'd be fine. So Epp held on. He stared at his watch, the watch Lee gave him, like a miner trapped in the dark staring at a light. He wondered if Donnelly was going to beat him up. He wondered if he was gonna have to pay for the forklift. Or go to jail. All he wanted now was to go home, to bed. He put his watch to his ear and listened to the ticking. He shut his eyes and a sob surged like a hiccup. He quickly knuckled the tears from his face then peeked through the gridwork of the trays. It was 4:20. Forty minutes before Klaus'd be in. Epp peered out at the sacks of flour and sugar, the boxes of Australian raisins, the barrels of waste dough swelling up and flowing over and filling the air with a live-yeast stink. He cupped his palm over his mouth and nose and breathed, imagining that oxygen cylinder Klaus said was waiting for him. White Lung. He wondered if it'd hurt. He should've taken that course in Small Arms repair. He hadn't though because Klaus was always talking about quitting and opening his own bakery, and saying how Epp could come work for him. That was before he went and got off graveyard. Now Epp thought maybe Klaus didn't really want Epp to work for him.

When Klaus plodded in at five a.m. Singh was waiting. He explained the situation. Klaus said nothing. He'd been drinking. Just a few beers to get him started. Everyone knew Klaus was an alcoholic. They also knew that no matter what shift he was on he always arrived an hour early. Klaus and Singh headed out back.

When Epp spotted Big Klaus he shouted. "Klaus!"

Klaus shoved his hands into his pockets and swallowed a belch. He had his beer buzz up and going and wasn't really surprised to find Epp holed up behind the trays for running over Donnelly's foot with the forklift.

"Klaus!" Epp wanted Klaus to toss him a line, to haul him out of here. He waited, wide-eyed, to see what Big Klaus was gonna do.

Klaus spoke quietly, as if Epp was sitting across the lunch room table from him. He said, "Epp."

Epp huddled forward, face to the trays.

"What happened to all that beer?"

"Beer?" Epp wiped the tears from his face. Klaus meant the beer Epp made in the green garbage can last summer. Epp and Klaus had sat sucking on that siphon hose like Turks sharing a hookah, the floor covered in bottles and caps and carboys and spilled corn sugar. Klaus had talked again about opening a bakery of his own and baking quality bread, not the white flour crud Bestbuy pumped out. And Epp had nodded yeah, yeah, getting all worked up, thinking it was really gonna happen. Epp laughed now, remembering. "We drank it!"

"Did you get any into the bottles?"

"Sure! I got some in. It's still there!"

"Well let's drink them."

Epp was weeping now, the hot tears softening the dried flour crusting his cheeks. He wished Klaus was still on graveyard with him. They used to meet before the shift at the Blue Boy and down a few fast ones, and Klaus would talk about that bakery he'd open, how he'd make his own hours, be his own boss, even get to know the customers. Then they'd head to work, always arriving just in time to punch in at ten, so Singh couldn't give them shit. And they'd be smiling, smiling like they knew things, like they had plans, inside information, like yeah, we're on graveyard alright, but fuck you, we're not dead yet.