

## Everything Comes Together

*by Frank Haberle*

Copyright 2018 © by Frank Haberle. All rights reserved

IT'S A MONDAY NIGHT IN OCTOBER, and the snow has started again. Walking up the icy dirt road, you see an old man in a big wool coat standing in the glowing light from an open front door. The old man is searching for something, first deep in his pockets, then in the snow around him. Snow has gathered on his hat and shoulders. He notices you, mutters, and shuffles painfully back to his door. He disappears into the ramshackle cottage, one of a dozen that line the path like little hats. A bare bulb illuminates the interior. The door shuts. As you walk past the cottage, you think about the big coat the old man was wearing- how warm it looked, how it was such a waste, how old people are always cold and stay indoors most winters up here anyways.

You look down and see, in the dim light at your feet, a wad of crumpled dollars. You pick them up quickly and continue up the road, not turning back until you turn the bend. From there, through a cut in the woods, you look back. You can see the old man again, returned to the spot in front of the cottage. He peers down at the snow, clutching his unbuttoned coat, still muttering.

In your trailer, it's colder and darker than outside. You pull the wad of bills out and smooth them out in your frozen red palms. There's a twenty, a ten, and eight singles. For one flashing moment you think of your rent, now ten days late. Then you get up and start walking back to town.

The Foghorn bar has big electric heaters. A longneck costs a buck fifty, and Monday night is dollar hot-dog night. Sitting at the bar you meet two small, scruffy men counting their change. They look cold, fearful of the snow outside. "We're bums," one says. "We just got up here." You buy them beers and hot dogs. There are four other people in the bar, three men and a woman, sitting closely together, folding blue papers and talking seriously. The woman has black hair that sparkles in the bar's neon lights.

You buy another round for yourself and the bums. You focus on tearing the label off of each longneck. It takes a few hours to blow through the \$38. When you run out of money, the two strangers go out in search of another bar. You stumble home, past the old man's cottage. If I see him, you think, I'll just walk by like nothing happened. But the old man's lights are off.

\*

Tuesday morning. You wake up in your sleeping bag in the trailer. You grope for your pants and you stumble out the door. The day before the owner left a single word scribbled on yellow paper, taped to the door: “When?” Outside the air smells like more snow is coming. You run stiffly down the hill. You stuff your sore, frozen hands in your pockets.

Twenty minutes later you arrive at the edge of the piers. Flat, squat, colorless buildings cluster together before you--canneries and processing plants and refineries and warehouses, all tangled together, already hissing steam; and behind them, the green glacial sea. At the load zone you are surprised to see somebody new. It's a little man with crazy red hair and a freckled little boy's face. He wears a RUSH SOLD OUT t-shirt. He's standing where you're supposed to be standing, stacking loose cans onto a pallet and wrapping them in plastic. You stop and glare at him. He does the same. You walk into the supervisor's shack. Another stranger sits where your boss is supposed to be sitting, punching a red stamp onto a stack of clipped invoice forms.

“You must be the one who forgets to punch the clock.” The man says. “You remember to punch the clock?”

“Where’s Johnson?” you ask.

“Johnson, well.” The man laughs; strange yellow teeth with wide openings between them. “Johnson has been reassigned. I am Rumson. Did you meet Nickel on the way in? I would like to meet you both. That way we have extra nuts to bust. Three boats we have to load today. The next 26 of a week or so.”

“I thought production was down”

“Hardly. Who told you of this?”

“Johnson.”

“Perhaps Johnson’s production was down. Okay then,” Rumson says, scratching a thinning scalp. “Let us go.” He rises heavily from the chair. “First, there are more pallets to be needed.” You walk past Nickel to the bin of split pine strips and load the pneumatic gun up with two-inch nails. You start pumping the stack, five pallets, ten pallets. Stray nails ricochet off the concrete floor; a few ding off the steel rafters. Occasionally you glare up at Nickel, the back of his head, the ridiculous red hair, as he continues packing cans. Johnson and Rumson and Nickel. They come and they go, you think, punching the nails into the dried wood. Somehow, you are still here.

Some time later, you look up the Floor and see the man with the tie showing a woman around the plant. In nine weeks you have never seen a woman in this space before. She is short and wide shouldered and her hair shimmers in a black bun under the fluorescent lights, like the girl in the bar. She follows the man with the tie up the stairs into the office, and they close the door.

Everybody in this vast, cavernous plant hates each other, you think. Machinists and sorters and cutters and canners, the people responsible for unloading boats full of dead slimy fish and those at the load zone responsible for filling other boats with labeled, odorless cans. It is this universal loathing that pulls things in through the receiving dock door, and pushes things out through the loading zone door. Everyone makes somewhere between \$4.50 and \$5.00 an hour. Floor people get incentives and bonuses that might add up to an extra \$20-\$25 a week. Everyone lives in debt. Everyone waited 4 to 5 hours in line to fill out a two-page application for this job, and everybody had to go stand by a pay phone in town and hope it would ring. Everyone knows how lucky they are that it rang when they were standing there. And everyone knows somebody who got injured or fired since they've been here, who was no better or worse a worker

than they are.

\*

It's Wednesday morning. When you punch in, you see the woman across the floor, using an electric knife to slice pink strips of fish parts and stack them on a belt. She wears boots and jeans, a flannel shirt, safety glasses and a respirator mask. The knife is attached to a red spiral hose running down from the roof. It's her, you think. It's the girl in the bar. You move away from her quickly.

At 3 o'clock you are loading a new boat with 400 stacks. The boat is tied off at a bad angle, exposing a two-foot gap on the right side, between the boat and the dock. Rumson pulls the forklift to the dock and leaves rows of stacks on the edge, requiring you and Nickel to carry the heaviest stacks into the dark hollow of the boat with a hand-truck and stack them by hand.

"So you see," Nickel snorts, lazily half-pushing a stack up just as you are about to cord the row, "I hear that a chick got herself a plum job working over there on the Floor."

"That doesn't go there yet," you say, stepping into Nickel's path. You pull his stack out. "You've got to start a new stack with the

fours.” Deep inside the well of the boat it is dark, and damp, and cold. Outside, through the plywood and steel walls, you hear the ferry blowing its horn, heading down land. You peek between the boat and the plant, hoping to catch a glimpse of the ferry, to see if there are still hippies camped up on the sundeck, staring out at the distant mountains. But you can’t see the ferry; a huge rusting processing boat, tied to the next pier, blocks the view. It is unmarked and has been parked there for three weeks. Nobody knows where it came from or what it’s doing here. Fast food wrappers and plastic bags have begun collecting in the water around its stern. You slide a new stack on the hand truck and steer it back into the cavernous well. You can make out Nickel’s luminous red hair in the interior. He has dropped his latest stack by the wall, where it is unraveling; cans drop into a puddle on the steel floor.

“See, I applied for machinist,” he says, suddenly holding his arms out as if to ask why. “I sure as hell didn’t want to do no pick-ass loading. That’s for sure. I mean, no offense or nothing. But I worked on pipeline for 18 months before I came down here. I’m certified.”

“You need to pick those up,” you say, putting your stack in place and gesturing toward Nickel’s. “We need to start a new row.”

Nickel lights a Winston with a square, silver lighter. The flames reveal that the stacks you are loading are off-center. If you don't hide the last sloppy stack with a neat new stack quickly, Rumson might show up, and you will have to re-stack the whole boat.

"Thing is," Nickel continues, "the Floor is all about overtime. Them suckers produce, they get paid. This here is chicken shit. That girl over there, she don't know it; maybe she got hired because they got a quota thing or something, I don't know what. But when she starts slowing things down, there's gonna be shit all over the place. Like the kind that hits a fan, or something."

"We get lots of overtime," you say. You start picking up Nickel's loose cans. "Thing is, we have to do things right. If we don't get it right, Rumson isn't gonna give us a chance to get it right the second time."

"I was a welder, a certified welder," Nickel says, pressing the back of his wet shirt to the boat's icy wall. Then he leans back up, leaving a pressed stain, like a little mushroom cloud. "I welded quarter-ton pipes onto mounts." He stares up toward the Floor. "I'd like to see that little girl over there do that."

The hollow thuds and shuffles from the work in the well of the boat are broken by the snap of something exploding on the Floor, followed by yelling.

“I told you so,” Nickel says, walking down the floor to stare at what happened. “This is going to be good.”

You feel relief. This weird new tension is over. People get hurt here and they simply get let go, they never come back. Then you start worrying about her. The thought that she got hurt, that somebody might have hurt her. It makes your ears burn.

Nickel comes back disappointed. “It weren’t her,” he says. “It were the canners, not the cutters. Some little cave dweller done sliced up his hand bad. He tried to save the sheet from falling, and for what? But she’ll git somebody hurt sooner or later. You wait and see.”

\*

It’s Thursday morning. One of the Floor workers nods to you as you walk past after punching in. Through his breathing mask, he asks if you want to play some hoop with the Floor guys during the 3 o’clock break. “Sure,” you say. You guess that ‘hoop’ means somebody has a ball they chuck up at a hoop tacked onto the wall of

one of dozens of buildings surrounding them. This must be a peace offering, you think. Maybe they'll have some smoke. Maybe we'll hang out, have a smoke, and throw a ball up at a hoop.

When the break buzzer sounds, the Floor guy waves you frantically out the door. He is with another guy everyone calls 'the Samoan.' The nickname makes no sense, really; the Samoan has a blonde perm, wears a company t-shirt, and a tool-belt. You follow Floor guy and the Samoan to a paved area that is shoveled clear of the gray, dirty snow. Someone long ago marked out a half court and nailed a net and backboard up over a steel door that was welded shut. Waiting there are two other Floor guys, and Nickel, who looks angrier than usual.

"Check, ball!" The Samoan screams, throwing a ball into your stomach.

Your hands have no grip. You drop the ball, just as Nickel tried to slap it out of your hands. You fake a two handed shot, dribble once with both hands, then push the ball hard to the Floor guy. "To the net, dippass!" the Samoan screams while he dribbles left and right on the court's perimeter. You run toward the net. The ball smashes into your nose. A white flash of light blasts before you; a smell like burnt

rubber. Nickel scoops the ball up and passes it out to one of his teammates, then sets a pick, pressing an elbow against your kidney. Nickel's teammate then glides past you for an easy layup.

"I thought you said he could play," the Samoan says to Floor guy.

"I said I thought he could play."

"I never said I thought I could play," you add.

"Just check the goddamned ball," Floor guy says. "Then get me the ball. And don't be a pussy." You bounce the ball to him, nervously, but he pulls it in, and starts dribbling wildly again. "Now do something!" Floor guy yells. "Move!" Somewhere in the maze of surrounding warehouses and outbuildings, a truck horn echoes mournfully. Your nostrils sting and smell like blood. You charge again, for the base of the net. This time Nickel sees you coming, and sticks a leg out. Your elbow and the ball skid together across the pavement. You hear the slap of hands between Nickel's teammates. You limp back toward the plant. You sit on the cement curb by the front door. You hold your bleeding left elbow in the cupped palm of your right hand, and wait for the shift bell to buzz inside the plant, calling you back into work. You have only a few minutes to stop the

bleeding. If you're bleeding Rumson might send you home early; you'll miss some hours and they may replace you.

You can barely make out the players behind a dumpster. You can hear the squeaking sneakers of the game continuing on the ruptured tar surface; the dull bang of the rim when the ball bounces free. Soon, the bleeding seems to stop. You remove your blood-stained hand to look at neat slices etched into your forearm. Little gravel stones cling to scraps of white skin. You pick one out. Someone sits next to you on the curb. You look up; it's the new girl from the Floor. She is staring at your elbow, wincing sympathetically. She grips a home-rolled smoke between startling white teeth. "You want a hand with that?" She asks.

"Yes, that is, I mean, no," you say. "It's not so bad. It just looks bad. It looks badder than it is, I think. It's better than it looks."

"I know they got a first aid kit in there," she says. She has an odd, low voice; a thick accent from somewhere else. "You want me to go get it?"

"No, thanks. I mean, they sort of get pissed. If it's not work-related, I think. I was playing basketball."

“They’re not very good,” she says, looking out at the distant players, puffing smoke out between her teeth.

“I’m not very good either,” you say. “I don’t know how to play.”

“No, not the basketball,” she says. “The management. They make so much money, but they are not very good about taking care of their people. You get hurt, they should help you. There’s no medical plan, no nothing. You guys bust yourselves for them. They should help you. If they help you, you’re happy. You’re happy, they’ll be happy.”

She looks away, toward the sea, which is surprisingly clear and luminous this morning- waves and waves, all pouring endlessly away from here, in the other direction, down land, down land. to the other sea. “I just think they should pay us fair wages, that’s all,” she says. “And some benefits. We work so hard. Don’t you think we work hard?”

“Yeah.”

“You know,” she continues. “Me and some friends of mine are having a little gathering tonight in town, at that church out past the graveyard. We’re just going to have a little gathering to talk about all this. To talk about how maybe we can change things. You’re welcome

to come. There will be food and stuff. And heat.”

“Okay.” She gets up, then pulls a blue, folded flyer from her pocket. “here’s a little something about the meeting.” You take it, hesitantly. Without reading it, you put it in a pocket. “You don’t have to come,” she says. “But if you’re angry about this, about the way things are, you may want to come and talk about it.”

The buzzer echoes across the parking lot. “Will I have to say anything?” you ask.

She flicks the end of her cigarette into the lot. “Not if you don’t want to, I guess,” she says. “I guess nobody has to say anything if they don’t want to.”

In a second she disappears. Later, when you get in line for your paycheck at the office, you decide to tell her you’re definitely coming. But when you reach the parking lot, she is gone.

\*

You read the flyer while you walk back toward town. You don’t really understand it; it’s about dock workers and boat workers and cannery workers all coming together, and fair wages and health care. It’s in Spanish on one side and English on the other. There’s a fist

shooting out of a star and quotes; something about a fight.

You cash your paycheck at a bank. Hurrying up the hill to your trailer, you leave \$100 for rent under your pillow-\$80 for November, plus the \$20 you were short for October. This leaves you \$44. You splash cold water from the sink around your face and neck. You have no clean shirts, but it doesn't matter. What will you say at the meeting? What will she want to talk about? It is very confusing to you. You walk down the hill, trying to think of something. You approach the old man's cottage. There are no fresh footprints in the snow; the inch that has fallen since Monday night is untouched.

You start to imagine that you knock on his door. You will hand him \$38. 'I think I found something of yours,' you'll say. The old man's face will light up. 'Of course, of course,' he will say. 'Please come in.' You will sit with him in a dust filled parlor. The old man will sit in his trenchcoat and slippers and tell you a story of what it was like working the docks in the old days. You will relay this story, compare it with life on the docks today. This is a very solid plan, you tell yourself. This is it. Everything comes together.

But in front of the cottage, you think you see a light through the old man's curtains, and you panic. You keep walking. I have to think

this out a little more carefully, you tell yourself. You walk all the way to the Foghorn. Sitting with a longneck, all of your confidence drains slowly from your body. Then the door bursts open and your two scraggly friends from Monday night explode into the bar. “There he is!” They yell. “We got jobs! WE’RE buying YOU a beer now.”

“Hey guys,” you say. “That’s great. But I got to go meet some friends.”

They are already quite drunk, and they seem hurt. ‘Hey man,” one says. “I thought we were your friends.” He’s right, you think. And one more beer can’t hurt.

\*

It’s Friday morning. You open your eyes. You try to jump out of bed but your legs don’t seem to work. You look at your elbow, which seems to have reopened itself and is sticking to the sleeping bag liner; there is dried blood all over the pillow. You reach underneath and the rent money is gone. Now you remember; you came back for it in the middle of the night. You look for your wind-up alarm clock on the floor. Work started an hour ago.

On the walk down the hill you think of what you’re going to say,

not to Rumson, but to her. You start to imagine your story from the night before, only you add some layers to it. “There’s this old man I help out sometimes,” you picture yourself telling her, as she walks with you away from the plant. “He used to work on the docks here for forty years, and now his hands are so screwed up he can’t do things.” In your mind now she’s smoking her rolled smoke thoughtfully, listening to you. “We’re meeting again next week,” she’ll say. “I’d really like you to come.” “I’ll be there,” you tell her. “I’ll definitely come.”

On your way in you pass production; she is not there. The Samoan looks up at you and mutters from behind his mask. You walk straight into Rumson’s office. Rumson does not look up from the stack of invoices.

“There, it is him now,” he says. “You smell like a rum-cake.”

“I’m sorry I’m late,” you say. “I was sick. I tried to call.” You lick your cracked lips. “It won’t happen again.”

“No it won’t,” Rumson says. He keeps staring at the schedule.

“You have some catching up to do. Two boats coming in at once. Here are the work orders. We need 88 stacks by 4 o’clock. You can go join

your friend there. He will leave at 5, and we will all leave at 5. But you, my friend, will stay until finished.”

You walk back to the dock, where Nickel sits on a crate smoking; a stack of wooden planks and the nail gun lie scattered on the floor in front of him.

“Somebody told me you’re the palette expert,” he says.

You pick up the nail gun and plug it into the compressor. Stepping around Nickel, you lay out the planks, two on the floor, eight across.

“You missed quite a little scene here this morning,” Nickel snickers.

“It appears that everybody’s favorite lady over there was some kind of commie. She came here to try some kind of labor agitator crap, invited some of the Floor staff to some kind of commie meeting. They ratted her out though. She came in and they were waiting for her, the man with the tie and everybody. She was lucky to get out of here in one piece.”

The air pressure gauge reads ready. You punch nails into a board, which cracks and splits. You pick up a second board and place it down on your right hand.

“Stupid commie bitch,” Nickel says.

You turn to look up at Nickel. You are going to hit him. You are going to lose your job. But then, suddenly, everything changes. Nickel looks at you, and the cigarette drops from his lip.

“Hey,” he says, “watch what you’re doing!”

You’ve just punched a nail through the back of your hand, into the board. You try to pull it free, but it’s stuck. So you kneel there, watching a little pool of purple blood form around it. Rumson comes out, and joins Nickel, and they start laughing. You start laughing too, while you pry the nail out. You wrap your hand in a Styrofoam sheet and some shrink-wrap, just enough to stop the bleeding. Still chuckling at yourself, at your hand, and at everything else, you then follow them over, toward the loading zone, where the next boat starts roping itself in.



**Frank Haberle's** short stories have won the 2011 Pen Parentis Award, the 2013 Sustainable Arts Foundation Award, and the 2017 Beautiful Loser Magazine Award. They have appeared in magazines including the Stockholm Literary Review, Inwood Indiana, Necessary Fiction, the Adirondack Review, Smokelong Quarterly, Melic Review, Wilderness House Literary Review, Cantaraville and Hot Metal Press. A professional grantwriter with nonprofit organizations, Frank is also a volunteer workshop leader for the NY Writers Coalition. He lives in Brooklyn, New York with his wife and three children.