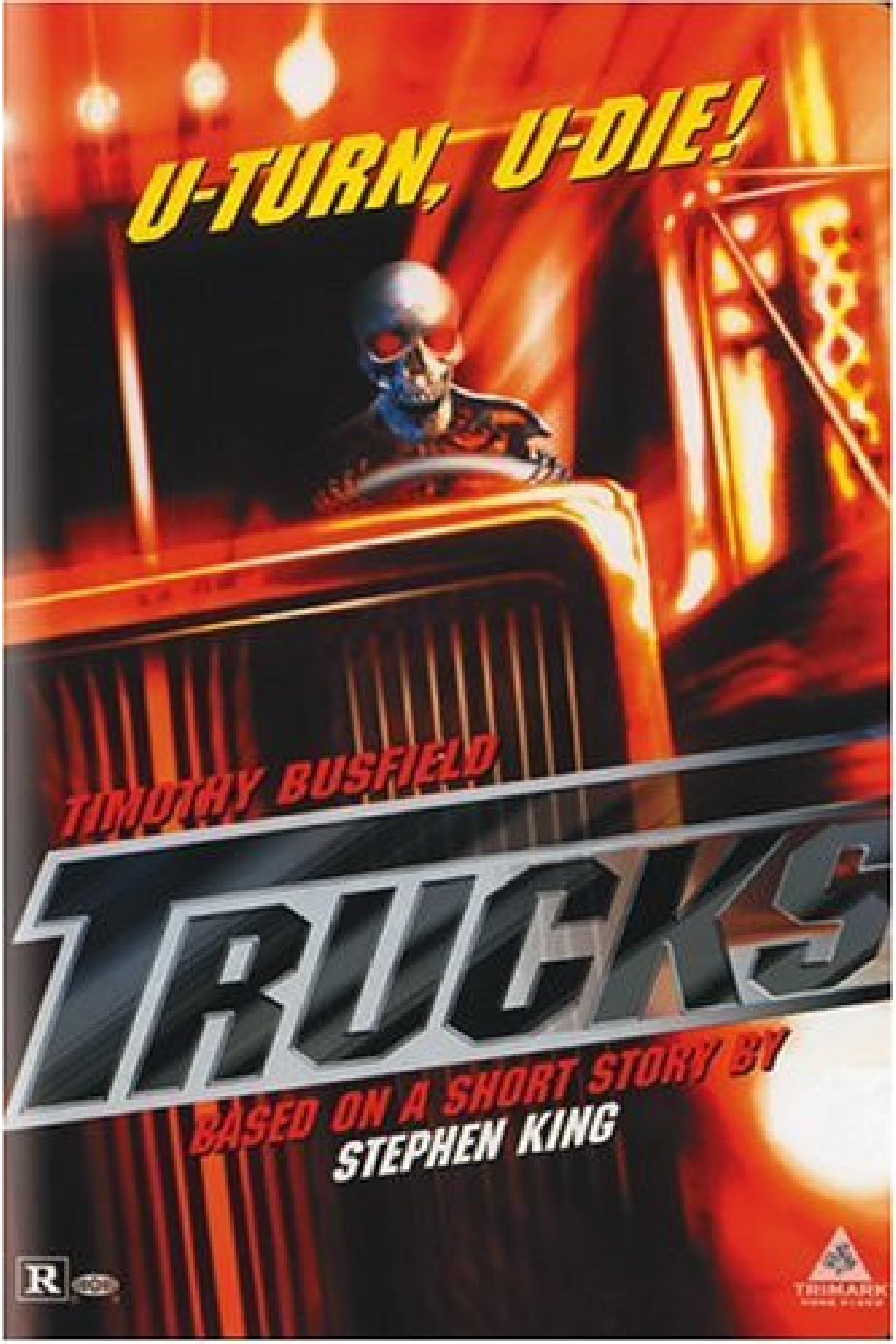
U-TURN, U-DIE!
TIMOTHY BUSFIELD
TRUCKS
BASED ON A SHORT STORY BY
STEPHEN KING
R
TRIMARK

TRUCKS

Stephen King

The guy's name was Snodgrass and I could see him getting ready to do something crazy. His eyes had gotten bigger, showing a lot of the whites, like a dog getting ready to fight. The two kids who had come skidding into the parking lot in the old Fury were trying to talk to him, but his head was cocked as though he was hearing other voices. He had a tight little pot-belly encased in a good suit that was getting a little shiny in the seat. He was a salesman and he kept his display bag close to him, like a pet dog that had gone to sleep.

"Try the radio again," the truck driver at the counter said.

The short-order cook shrugged and turned it on. He flipped it across the band and got nothing but static.

"You went too fast," the trucker protested. "You might have missed something."

"Hell," the short-order cook said. He was an elderly black man with a smile of gold and he wasn't looking at the trucker. He was looking through the diner-length picture window at the parking lot.

Seven or eight heavy trucks were out there, engines rumbling in low, idling roars that sounded like big cats purring. There were a couple of Macks, a Hemingway, and four or five Reos. Trailer trucks, interstate haulers with a lot of license plates and CB whip antennas on the back.

The kids' Fury was lying on its roof at the end of long, looping skid marks in the loose crushed rock of the parking lot. It had been battered into senseless junk. At the entrance to the truck stop's turnaround, there was a blasted Cadillac. Its owner stared out of the star-shattered windshield like a gutted fish. Horn-rimmed glasses hung from one ear.

Halfway across the lot from it lay the body of a girl in a pink dress. She had jumped from the Caddy when she saw it wasn't going to make it. She had hit running but never had a chance. She was the

worst, even though she was face down. There were flies around her in clouds.

Across the road an old Ford station wagon had been slammed through the guardrails. That had happened an hour ago. No one had been by since then. You couldn't see the turnpike from the window and the phone was out.

"You went too fast," the trucker was protesting. "You oughta—"

That was when Snodgrass bolted. He turned the table over getting up, smashing coffee cups and sending sugar in a wild spray. His eyes were wilder than ever, and his mouth hung loosely and he was blabbering: "We gotta get outta here we gotta getouttahere wegottagetouttahere—"

The kid shouted and his girl friend screamed.

I was on the stool closest to the door and I got a handful of his shirt, but he tore loose. He was cranked up all the way. He would have gone through a bank-vault door.

He slammed out the door and then he was sprinting across the gravel toward the drainage ditch on the left. Two of the trucks lunged after him, smokestacks blowing diesel exhaust dark brown against the sky, huge rear wheels machine-gunning gravel up in sprays.

He couldn't have been any more than five or six running steps from the edge of the flat parking lot when he turned back to look, fear scrawled on his face. His feet tangled each other and he faltered and almost fell down. He got his balance again, but it was too late.

One of the trucks gave way and the other charged down, huge front grill glittering savagely in the sun. Snodgrass screamed, the sound high and thin, nearly lost under the Reo's heavy diesel roar.

It didn't drag him under. As things turned out, it would have been better if it had. Instead it drove him up and out, the way a punter

kicks a football. For a moment he was silhouetted against the hot afternoon sky like a crippled scarecrow, and then he was gone into the drainage ditch.

The big truck's brakes hissed like dragon's breath, its front wheels locked, digging grooves into the gravel skin of the lot, and it stopped inches from jackknifing in. The bastard.

The girl in the booth screamed. Both hands were clamped into her cheeks, dragging the flesh down, turning it into a witch's mask.

Glass broke. I turned my head and saw that the trucker had squeezed his glass hard enough to break it. I don't think he knew it yet. Milk and a few drops of blood fell onto the counter.

The black counterman was frozen by the radio, a dishcloth in hand, looking amazed. His teeth glittered. For a moment there was no sound but the buzzing Westclox and the rumbling of the Reo's engine as it returned to its fellows. Then the girl began to cry and it was all right—or at least better.

My own car was around the side, also battered to junk. It was a 1971 Camaro and I had still been paying on it, but I didn't suppose that mattered now.

There was no one in the trucks.

The sun glittered and flashed on empty cabs. The wheels turned themselves. You couldn't think about it too much. You'd go insane if you thought about it too much. Like Snodgrass.

Two hours passed. The sun began to go down. Outside, the trucks patrolled in slow circles and figure eights. Their parking lights and running lights had come on.

I walked the length of the counter twice to get the kinks out of my legs and then sat in a booth by the long front window. It was a standard truck stop, close to the major thruway, a complete service

facility out back, gas and diesel fuel both. The truckers came here for coffee and pie.

“Mister?” The voice was hesitant.

I looked around. It was the two kids from the Fury. The boy looked about nineteen. He had long hair and a beard that was just starting to take hold. His girl looked younger.

“Yeah?”

“What happened to you?”

I shrugged. “I was coming up the interstate to Pelson,” I said. “A truck came up behind me—I could see it in the mirror a long way off—really highballing. You could hear it a mile down the road. It whipped out around a VW Beetle and just snapped it off the road with the whiplash of the trailer, the way you’d snap a ball of paper off a table with your finger. I thought the truck would go, too. No driver could have held it with the trailer whipping that way. But it didn’t go. The VW flopped over six or seven times and exploded. And the truck got the next one coming up the same way. It was coming up on me and I took the exit ramp in a hurry.” I laughed but my heart wasn’t in it. “Right into a truck stop, of all places. From the frying pan into the fire.”

The girl swallowed. “We saw a Greyhound going north in the southbound lane. It was … plowing … through cars. It exploded and burned but before it did … slaughter.”

A Greyhound bus. That was something new. And bad.

Outside, all the headlights suddenly popped on in unison, bathing the lot in an eerie, depthless glare. Growling, they cruised back and forth. The headlights seemed to give them eyes, and in the growing gloom, the dark trailer boxes looked like the hunched, squared-off shoulders of prehistoric giants.

The counterman said, “Is it safe to turn on the lights?”

“Do it,” I said, “and find out.”

He flipped the switches and a series of flyspecked globes overhead came on. At the same time a neon sign out front stuttered into life: “Conant’s Truck Stop & Diner—Good Eats.” Nothing happened. The trucks continued their patrol.

“I can’t understand it,” the trucker said. He had gotten down from his stool and was walking around, his hand wrapped in a red engineer’s bandanna. “I ain’t had no problems with my rig. She’s a good old girl. I pulled in here a little past one for a spaghetti dinner and this happens.” He waved his arms and the bandanna flapped. “My own rig’s out there right now, the one with the weak left taillight. Been driving her for six years. But if I stepped out that door—”

“It’s just starting,” the counterman said. His eyes were hooded and obsidian. “It must be bad if that radio’s gone. It’s just starting.”

The girl had drained as pale as milk. “Never mind that,” I said to the counterman. “Not yet.”

“What would do it?” The trucker was worrying. “Electrical storms in the atmosphere? Nuclear testing? What?”

“Maybe they’re mad,” I said.

Around seven o’clock I walked over to the counterman. “How are we fixed here? I mean, if we have to stay awhile?”

His brow wrinkled. “Not so bad. Yest’y was delivery day. We got two-three hunnert hamburg patties, canned fruit and vegetables, dry cereal, aigs … no more milk than what’s in the cooler, but the water’s from the well. If we had to, the five of us cud get on for a month or more.”

The trucker came over and blinked at us. “I’m dead out of cigarettes. Now that cigarette machine …”

“It ain’t my machine,” the counterman said. “No sir.”

The trucker had a steel pinch bar he’d gotten in the supply room out back. He went to work on the machine.

The kid went down to where the jukebox glittered and flashed and plugged in a quarter. John Fogarty began to sing about being born on the bayou.

I sat down and looked out the window. I saw something I didn’t like right away. A Chevy light pickup had joined the patrol, like a Shetland pony amid Percherons. I watched it until it rolled impartially over the body of the girl from the Caddy and then I looked away.

“We made them!” the girl cried out with sudden wretchedness. “They can’t!”

Her boy friend told her to hush. The trucker got the cigarette machine open and helped himself to six or eight packs of Viceroys. He put them in different pockets and then ripped one pack open. From the intent expression on his face, I wasn’t sure if he was going to smoke them or eat them up.

Another record came on the juke. It was eight o’clock.

At eight-thirty the power went off.

When the lights went, the girl screamed, a cry that stopped suddenly, as if her boy friend had put his hand over her mouth. The jukebox died with a deepening, unwinding sound.

“What the Christ!” the trucker said.

“Counterman!” I called. “You got any candles?”

“I think so. Wait … yeah. Here’s a few.”

I got up and took them. We lit them and started placing them around. “Be careful,” I said. “If we burn the place down there’s the devil to pay.”

He chuckled morosely. “You know it.”

When we were done placing the candles, the kid and his girl were huddled together and the trucker was by the back door, watching six more heavy trucks weaving in and out between the concrete fuel islands. “This changes things, doesn’t it?” I said.

“Damn right, if the power’s gone for good.”

“How bad?”

“Hamburg’ll go over in three days. Rest of the meat and aigs’ll go by about as quick. The cans will be okay, an’ the dry stuff. But that ain’t the worst. We ain’t gonna have no water without the pump.”

“How long?”

“Without no water? A week.”

“Fill every empty jug you’ve got. Fill them till you can’t draw anything but air. Where are the toilets? There’s good water in the tanks.”

“Employees’ res’room is in the back. But you have to go outside to get to the lady’s and gent’s.”

“Across to the service building?” I wasn’t ready for that. Not yet.

“No. Out the side door an’ up a ways.”

“Give me a couple of buckets.”

He found two galvanized pails. The kid strolled up.

“What are you doing?”

“We have to have water. All we can get.”

“Give me a bucket then.”

I handed him one.

“Jerry!” the girl cried. “You—”

He looked at her and she didn’t say anything else, but she picked up a napkin and began to tear at the corners. The trucker was smoking another cigarette and grinning at the floor. He didn’t speak up.

We walked over to the side door where I’d come in that afternoon and stood there for a second, watching the shadows wax and wane as the trucks went back and forth.

“Now?” the kid said. His arm brushed mine and the muscles were jumping and humming like wires. If anyone bumped him he’d go straight up to heaven.

“Relax,” I said.

He smiled a little. It was a sick smile, but better than none.

“Okay.”

We slipped out.

The night air had cooled. Crickets chirred in the grass, and frogs thumped and croaked in the drainage ditch. Out here the rumble of the trucks was louder, more menacing, the sound of beasts. From inside it was a movie. Out here it was real, you could get killed.

We slid along the tiled outer wall. A slight overhang gave us some shadow. My Camaro was huddled against the cyclone fence across from us, and faint light from the roadside sign glinted on broken metal and puddles of gas and oil.

“You take the lady’s,” I whispered. “Fill your bucket from the toilet tank and wait.”

Steady diesel rumblings. It was tricky; you thought they were coming, but it was only echoes bouncing off the building’s odd corners. It was only twenty feet, but it seemed much farther.

He opened the lady’s-room door and went in. I went past and then I was inside the gent’s. I could feel my muscles loosen and a breath whistled out of me. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror, strained white face with dark eyes.

I got the porcelain tank cover off and dunked the bucket full. I poured a little back to keep from sloshing and went to the door. “Hey?”

“Yeah,” he breathed.

“You ready?”

“Yeah.”

We went out again. We got maybe six steps before lights blared in our faces. It had crept up, big wheels barely turning on the gravel. It had been lying in wait and now it leaped at us, electric headlamps glowing in savage circles, the huge chrome grill seeming to snarl.

The kid froze, his face stamped with horror, his eyes blank, the pupils dilated down to pinpricks. I gave him a hard shove, spilling half his water.

“Go!”

The thunder of that diesel engine rose to a shriek. I reached over the kid’s shoulder to yank the door open, but before I could it was shoved from inside. The kid lunged in and I dodged after him. I looked back to see the truck—a big cab-over Peterbilt—kiss off the tiled outside wall, peeling away jagged hunks of tile. There was an ear-grinding squealing noise, like gigantic fingers scraping a

blackboard. Then the right mudguard and the corners of the grill smashed into the still-open door, sending glass in a crystal spray and snapping the door's steel-gauge hinges like tissue paper. The door flew into the night like something out of a Dali painting and the truck accelerated toward the front parking lot, its exhaust racketing like machine-gun fire. It had a disappointed, angry sound.

The kid put his bucket down and collapsed into the girl's arms, shuddering.

My heart was thudding heavily in my chest and my calves felt like water. And speaking of water, we had brought back about a bucket and a quarter between us. It hardly seemed worth it.

"I want to block up that doorway," I said to the counterman. "What will do the trick?"

"Well—"

The trucker broke in: "Why? One of those big trucks couldn't get a wheel in through there."

"It's not the big trucks I'm worried about."

The trucker began hunting for a smoke.

"We got some sheet sidin' out in the supply room," the counterman said. "Boss was gonna put up a shed to store butane gas."

"We'll put them across and prop them with a couple of booths."

"It'll help," the trucker said.

It took about an hour and by the end we'd all gotten into the act, even the girl. It was fairly solid. Of course, fairly solid wasn't going to be good enough, not if something hit it at full speed. I think they all knew that.

There were still three booths ranged along the big glass picture window and I sat down in one of them. The clock behind the counter had stopped at 8:32, but it felt like ten. Outside the trucks prowled and growled. Some left, hurrying off to unknown missions, and others came. There were three pickup trucks now, circling importantly amid their bigger brothers.

I was starting to doze, and instead of counting sheep I counted trucks. How many in the state, how many in America? Trailer trucks, pickup trucks, flatbeds, day-haulers, three-quarter-tons, army convoy trucks by the tens of thousands, and buses. Nightmare vision of a city bus, two wheels in the gutter and two wheels on the pavement roaring along and plowing through screaming pedestrians like ninepins.

I shook it off and fell into a light, troubled sleep.

It must have been early morning when Snodgrass began to scream. A thin new moon had risen and was shining icily through a high scud of cloud. A new clattering note had been added, counterpointing the throaty, idling roar of the big rigs. I looked for it and saw a hay baler circling out by the darkened sign. The moonlight glanced off the sharp, turning spokes of its packer.

The scream came again, unmistakably from the drainage ditch: “Help … meeeee …”

“What was that?” It was the girl. In the shadows her eyes were wide and she looked horribly frightened.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Help … meeeee …”

“He’s alive,” she whispered. “Oh, God. Alive.”

I didn’t have to see him. I could imagine it all too well. Snodgrass lying half in and half out of the drainage ditch, back and legs broken,

carefully-pressed suit caked with mud, white, gasping face turned up to the indifferent moon …

“I don’t hear anything,” I said. “Do you?”

She looked at me. “How can you? How?”

“Now if you woke him up,” I said, jerking a thumb at the kid, “he might hear something. He might go out there. Would you like that?”

Her face began to twitch and pull as if stitched by invisible needles. “Nothing,” she whispered. “Nothing out there.”

She went back to her boy friend and pressed her head against his chest. His arms came up around her in his sleep.

No one else woke up. Snodgrass cried and wept and screamed for a long time, and then he stopped.

Dawn.

Another truck had arrived, this one a flatbed with a giant rack for hauling cars. It was joined by a bulldozer. That scared me.

The trucker came over and twitched my arm. “Come on back,” he whispered excitedly. The others were still sleeping. “Come look at this.”

I followed him back to the supply room. About ten trucks were patrolling out there. At first I didn’t see anything new.

“See?” he said, and pointed. “Right there.”

Then I saw. One of the pickups was stopped dead. It was sitting there like a lump, all of the menace gone out of it.

“Out of gas?”

“That’s right, buddy. And they can’t pump their own. We got it knocked. All we have to do is wait.” He smiled and fumbled for a cigarette.

It was about nine o’clock and I was eating a piece of yesterday’s pie for breakfast when the air horn began—long, rolling blasts that rattled your skull. We went over to the windows and looked out. The trucks were sitting still, idling. One trailer truck, a huge Reo with a red cab, had pulled up almost to the narrow verge of grass between the restaurant and the parking lot. At this distance the square grill was huge and murderous. The tires would stand to a man’s chest cavity.

The horn began to blare again; hard, hungry blasts that traveled off in straight, flat lines and echoed back. There was a pattern. Shorts and longs in some kind of rhythm.

“That’s Morse!” the kid, Jerry, suddenly exclaimed.

The trucker looked at him. “How would you know?”

The kid went a little red. “I learned it in the Boy Scouts.”

“You?” the trucker said. “You? Wow.” He shook his head.

“Never mind,” I said. “Do you remember enough to—”

“Sure. Let me listen. Got a pencil?”

The counterman gave him one, and the kid began to write letters on a napkin. After a while he stopped. “It’s just saying ‘Attention’ over and over again. Wait.”

We waited. The air horn beat its longs and shorts into the still morning air. Then the pattern changed and the kid started to write again. We hung over his shoulders and watched the message form. “Someone must pump fuel. Someone will not be harmed. All fuel

must be pumped. This shall be done now. Now someone will pump fuel."

The air blasts kept up, but the kid stopped writing. "It's just repeating 'Attention' again," he said.

The truck repeated its message again and again. I didn't like the look of the words, printed on the napkin in block style. They looked machinelike, ruthless. There would be no compromise with those words. You did or you didn't.

"Well," the kid said, "what do we do?"

"Nothing," the trucker said. His face was excited and working. "All we have to do is wait. They must all be low on fuel. One of the little ones out back has already stopped. All we have to do—"

The air horn stopped. The truck backed up and joined its fellows. They waited in a semicircle, headlights pointed in toward us.

"There's a bulldozer out there," I said.

Jerry looked at me. "You think they'll rip the place down?"

"Yes."

He looked at the counterman. "They couldn't do that, could they?"

The counterman shrugged.

"We oughta vote," the trucker said. "No blackmail, damn it. All we gotta do is wait." He had repeated it three times now, like a charm.

"Okay," I said. "Vote."

"Wait," the trucker said immediately.

"I think we ought to fuel them," I said. "We can wait for a better chance to get away. Counterman?"

“Stay in here,” he said. “You want to be their slaves? That’s what it’ll come to. You want to spend the rest of your life changin’ oil filters every time one of those … things blats its horn? Not me.” He looked darkly out the window. “Let them starve.”

I looked at the kid and the girl.

“I think he’s right,” he said. “That’s the only way to stop them. If someone was going to rescue us, they would have. God knows what’s going on in other places.” And the girl, with Snodgrass in her eyes, nodded and stepped closer to him.

“That’s it then,” I said.

I went over to the cigarette machine and got a pack without looking at the brand. I’d stopped smoking a year ago, but this seemed like a good time to start again. The smoke rasped harsh in my lungs.

Twenty minutes crawled by. The trucks out front waited. In back, they were lining up at the pumps.

“I think it was all a bluff,” the trucker said. “Just—”

Then there was a louder, harsher, choppier note, the sound of an engine revving up and falling off, then revving up again. The bulldozer.

It glittered like a yellowjacket in the sun, a Caterpillar with clattering steel treads. Black smoke belched from its short stack as it wheeled around to face us.

“It’s going to charge,” the trucker said. There was a look of utter surprise on his face. “It’s going to charge!”

“Get back,” I said. “Behind the counter.”

The bulldozer was still revving. Gear-shift levers moved themselves. Heat shimmer hung over its smoking stack. Suddenly the dozer

blade lifted, a heavy steel curve clotted with dried dirt. Then, with a screaming howl of power, it roared straight at us.

“The counter!” I gave the trucker a shove, and that started them.

There was a small concrete verge between the parking lot and the grass. The dozer charged over it, blade lifting for a moment, and then it rammed the front wall head on. Glass exploded inward with a heavy, coughing roar and the wood frame crashed into splinters. One of the overhead light globes fell, splashing more glass. Crockery fell from the shelves. The girl was screaming but the sound was almost lost beneath the steady, pounding roar of the Cat’s engine.

It reversed, clanked across the chewed strip of lawn, and lunged forward again, sending the remaining booths crashing and spinning. The pie case fell off the counter, sending pie wedges skidding across the floor.

The counterman was crouching with his eyes shut, and the kid was holding his girl. The trucker was walleyed with fear.

“We gotta stop it,” he gibbered. “Tell ‘em we’ll do it, we’ll do anything —”

“A little late, isn’t it?”

The Cat reversed and got ready for another charge. New nicks in its blade glittered and heliographed in the sun. It lurched forward with a bellowing roar and this time it took down the main support to the left of what had been the window. That section of the roof fell in with a grinding crash. Plaster dust billowed up.

The dozer pulled free. Beyond it I could see the group of trucks, waiting.

I grabbed the counterman. “Where are the oil drums?” The cookstoves ran on butane gas, but I had seen vents for a warm-air furnace.

“Back of the storage room,” he said.

I grabbed the kid. “Come on.”

We got up and ran into the storage room. The bulldozer hit again and the building trembled. Two or three more hits and it would be able to come right up to the counter for a cup of coffee.

There were two large fifty-gallon drums with feeds to the furnace and turn spigots. There was a carton of empty ketchup bottles near the back door. “Get those, Jerry.”

While he did, I pulled off my shirt and yanked it to rags. The dozer hit again and again, and each hit was accompanied by the sound of more breakage.

I filled four of the ketchup bottles from the spigots, and he stuffed rags into them. “You play football?” I asked him.

“In high school.”

“Okay. Pretend you’re going in from the five.”

We went out into the restaurant. The whole front wall was open to the sky. Sprays of glass glittered like diamonds. One heavy beam had fallen diagonally across the opening. The dozer was backing up to take it out and I thought that this time it would keep coming, ripping through the stools and then demolishing the counter itself.

We knelt down and thrust the bottles out. “Light them up,” I said to the trucker.

He got his matches out, but his hands were shaking too badly and he dropped them. The counterman picked them up, struck one, and the hunks of shirt blazed greasily alight.

“Quick,” I said.

We ran, the kid a little in the lead. Glass crunched and gritted underfoot. There was a hot, oily smell in the air. Everything was very loud, very bright.

The dozer charged.

The kid dodged out under the beam and stood silhouetted in front of that heavy tempered steel blade. I went out to the right. The kid's first throw fell short. His second hit the blade and the flame splashed harmlessly.

He tried to turn and then it was on him, a rolling juggernaut, four tons of steel. His hands flew up and then he was gone, chewed under.

I buttonhooked around and lobbed one bottle into the open cab and the second right into the works. They exploded together in a leaping shout of flame.

For a moment the dozer's engine rose in an almost human squeal of rage and pain. It wheeled in a maddened half-circle, ripping out the left corner of the diner, and rolled drunkenly toward the drainage ditch.

The steel treads were streaked and dotted with gore and where the kid had been there was something that looked like a crumpled towel.

The dozer got almost to the ditch, flames boiling from under its cowling and from the cockpit, and then it exploded in a geyser.

I stumbled backward and almost fell over a pile of rubble. There was a hot smell that wasn't just oil. It was burning hair. I was on fire.

I grabbed a tablecloth, jammed it on my head, ran behind the counter, and plunged my head into the sink hard enough to crack it on the bottom. The girl was screaming Jerry's name over and over in a shrieking insane litany.

I turned around and saw the huge car-carrier slowly rolling toward the defenseless front of the diner.

The trucker screamed and broke for the side door.

“Don’t!” the counterman cried. “Don’t do that—”

But he was out and sprinting for the drainage ditch and the open field beyond.

The truck must have been standing sentry just out of sight of that side door—a small panel job with “Wong’s Cash-and-Carry Laundry” written on the side. It ran him down almost before you could see it happen. Then it was gone and only the trucker was left, twisted into the gravel. He had been knocked out of his shoes.

The car-carrier rolled slowly over the concrete verge, onto the grass, over the kid’s remains, and stopped with its huge snout poking into the diner.

Its air horn let out a sudden, shattering honk, followed by another, and another.

“Stop!” the girl whimpered. “Stop, oh stop, please—”

But the honks went on a long time. It took only a minute to pick up the pattern. It was the same as before. It wanted someone to feed it and the others.

“I’ll go,” I said. “Are the pumps unlocked?”

The counterman nodded. He had aged fifty years.

“No!” the girl screamed. She threw herself at me. “You’ve got to stop them! Beat them, burn them, break them—” Her voice wavered and broke into a harsh bray of grief and loss.

The counterman held her. I went around the corner of the counter, picking my way through the rubble, and out through the supply room.

My heart was thudding heavily when I stepped out into the warm sun. I wanted another cigarette, but you don't smoke around fuel islands.

The trucks were still lined up. The laundry truck was crouched across the gravel from me like a hound dog, growling and rasping. A funny move and it would cream me. The sun glittered on its blank windshield and I shuddered. It was like looking into the face of an idiot.

I switched the pump to "on" and pulled out the nozzle; unscrewed the first gas cap and began to pump fuel.

It took me half an hour to pump the first tank dry and then I moved on to the second island. I was alternating between gas and diesel. Trucks marched by endlessly. I was beginning to understand now. I was beginning to see. People were doing this all over the country or they were lying dead like the trucker, knocked out of their boots with heavy treadmarks mashed across their guts.

The second tank was dry then and I went to the third. The sun was like a hammer and my head was starting to ache with the fumes. There were blisters in the soft webbing between thumb and index finger. But they wouldn't know about that. They would know about leaky manifolds and bad gaskets and frozen universal joints, but not about blisters or sunstroke or the need to scream. They needed to know only one thing about their late masters, and they knew it. We bleed.

The last tank was sucked dry and I threw the nozzle on the ground. Still there were more trucks, lined up around the corner. I twisted my head to relieve a crick in my neck and stared. The line went out of the front parking lot and up the road and out of sight, two and three lanes deep. It was like a nightmare of the Los Angeles Freeway at rush hour. The horizon shimmered and danced with their exhaust; the air stank of carburization.

"No," I said. "Out of gas. All gone, fellas."

And there was a heavier rumble, a bass note that shook the teeth. A huge silvery truck was pulling up, a tanker. Written on the side was: “Fill Up with Phillips 66—The Jetport Fuel”!

A heavy hose dropped out of the rear.

I went over, took it, flipped up the feeder plate on the first tank, and attached the hose. The truck began to pump. The stench of petroleum sank into me—the same stink that the dinosaurs must have died smelling as they went down into the tar pits. I filled the other two tanks and then went back to work.

Consciousness twinkled away to a point where I lost track of time and trucks. I unscrewed, rammed the nozzle into the hole, pumped until the hot, heavy liquid splurted out, then replaced the cap. My blisters broke, trickling pus down to my wrists. My head was pounding like a rotted tooth and my stomach rolled helplessly with the stench of hydrocarbons.

I was going to faint. I was going to faint and that would be the end of it. I would pump until I dropped.

Then there were hands on my shoulders, the dark hands of the counterman. “Go in,” he said. “Rest yourself. I’ll take over till dark. Try to sleep.”

I handed him the pump.

But I can’t sleep.

The girl is sleeping. She’s sprawled over in the corner with her head on a tablecloth and her face won’t unknot itself even in sleep. It’s the timeless, ageless face of the warhag. I’m going to get her up pretty quick. It’s twilight and the counterman has been out there for five hours.

Still they keep coming. I look out through the wrecked window and their headlights stretch for a mile or better, twinkling like yellow

sapphires in the growing darkness. They must be backed up all the way to the turnpike, maybe further.

The girl will have to take her turn. I can show her how. She'll say she can't, but she will. She wants to live.

You want to be their slaves? the counterman had said. That's what it'll come to. You want to spend the rest of your life changin' oil filters every time one of those things blats its horn?

We could run, maybe. It would be easy to make the drainage ditch now, the way they're stacked up. Run through the fields, through the marshy places where trucks would bog down like mastodons and go —

—back to the caves.

Drawing pictures in charcoal. This is the moon god. This is a tree. This is a Mack semi overwhelming a hunter.

Not even that. So much of the world is paved now. Even the playgrounds are paved. And for the fields and marshes and deep woods there are tanks, half-tracks, flatbeds equipped with lasers, masers, heat-seeking radar. And little by little, they can make it into the world they want.

I can see great convoys of trucks filling the Okefenokee Swamp with sand, the bulldozers ripping through the national parks and wildlands, grading the earth flat, stamping it into one great flat plain. And then the hot-top trucks arriving.

But they're machines. No matter what's happened to them, what mass consciousness we've given them, they can't reproduce. In fifty or sixty years they'll be rusting hulks with all menace gone out of them, moveless carcasses for free men to stone and spit at.

And if I close my eyes I can see the production lines in Detroit and Dearborn and Youngstown and Mackinac, new trucks being put

together by blue-collars who no longer even punch a clock but only drop and are replaced.

The counterman is staggering a little now. He’s an old bastard, too. I’ve got to wake the girl.

Two planes are leaving silver contrails etched across the darkening eastern horizon.

I wish I could believe there are people in them.