UNCLE OTTO’S TRUCK

Stephen King

It’s a great relief to write this down.

I haven’t slept well since I found my Uncle Otto dead and there have been times when I have really wondered if I have gone insane—or if I will. In a way it would all have been more merciful if I did not have the actual object here in my study, where I can look at it, or pick it up and heft it if I should want to. I don’t want to do that; I don’t want to touch that thing. But sometimes I do.

If I hadn’t taken it away from his little one-room house when I fled from it, I could begin persuading myself it was all only an hallucination—a figment of an overworked and overstimulated brain. But it is there. It has weight. It can be hefted in the hand.

It all happened, you see.

Most of you reading this memoir will not believe that, not unless something like it has happened to you. I find that the matter of your belief and my relief are mutually exclusive, however, and so I will gladly tell the tale anyway. Believe what you want.

Any tale of grue should have a provenance or a secret. Mine has both. Let me begin with the provenance—by telling you how my Uncle Otto, who was rich by the standards of Castle County, happened to spend the last twenty years of his life in a one-room house with no plumbing on a back road in a small town.

Otto was born in 1905, the eldest of the five Schenck children. My father, born in 1920, was the youngest. I was the youngest of my father’s children, born in 1955, and so Uncle Otto always seemed very old to me.

Like many industrious Germans, my grandfather and grandmother came to America with some money. My grandfather settled in Derry because of the lumber industry, which he knew something about. He did well, and his children were born into comfortable circumstances.

My grandfather died in 1925. Uncle Otto, then twenty, was the only child to receive a full inheritance. He moved to Castle Rock and began to speculate in real estate. In the next five years he made a lot of money dealing in wood and in land. He bought a large house on Castle Hill, had servants, and enjoyed his status as a young, relatively handsome (the qualifier “relatively” because he wore spectacles), extremely eligible bachelor. No one thought him odd. That came later.

He was hurt in the crash of ‘29—not as badly as some, but hurt is hurt. He held on to his big Castle Hill house until 1933, then sold it because a great tract of woodland had come on the market at a distress sale price and he wanted it desperately. The land belonged to the New England Paper Company.

New England Paper still exists today, and if you wanted to purchase shares in it, I would tell you to go right ahead. But in 1933 the company was offering huge chunks of land at fire-sale prices in a last-ditch effort to stay afloat.

How much land in the tract my uncle was after? That original, fabulous deed has been lost, and accounts differ … but by all accounts, it was better than four thousand acres. Most of it was in Castle Rock, but it sprawled into Waterford and Harlow, as well. When the deal was broken down, New England Paper was offering it for about two dollars and fifty cents an acre … if the purchaser would take it all.

That was a total price of about ten thousand dollars. Uncle Otto couldn’t swing it, and so he took a partner—a Yankee named George McCutcheon. You probably know the names Schenck and McCutcheon if you live in New England; the company was bought out long ago, but there are still Schenck and McCutcheon hardware stores in forty New England cities, and Schenck and McCutcheon lumberyards from Central Falls to Derry.

McCutcheon was a burly man with a great black beard. Like my Uncle Otto, he wore spectacles. Also like Uncle Otto, he had

inherited a sum of money. It must have been a fairish sum, because he and Uncle Otto together swung the purchase of that tract with no further trouble. Both of them were pirates under the skin and they got on well enough together. Their partnership lasted for twenty-two years—until the year I was born, in fact—and prosperity was all they knew.

But it all began with the purchase of those four thousand acres, and they explored them in McCutcheon's truck, cruising the woods roads and the pulper's tracks, grinding along in first gear for the most part, shuddering over washboards and splashing through washouts, McCutcheon at the wheel part of the time, my Uncle Otto at the wheel the rest of the time, two young men who had become New England land barons in the dark depths of the big Depression.

I don't know where McCutcheon came by that truck. It was a Cresswell, if it matters—a breed which no longer exists. It had a huge cab, painted bright red, wide running boards, and an electric starter, but if the starter ever failed, it could be cranked—although the crank could just as easily kick back and break your shoulder, if the man cranking wasn't careful. The bed was twenty feet long with stake sides, but what I remember best about that truck was its snout. Like the cab, it was red as blood. To get at the engine, you had to lift out two steel panels, one on either side. The radiator was as high as a grown man's chest. It was an ugly, monstrous thing.

McCutcheon's truck broke down and was repaired, broke down again and was repaired again. When the Cresswell finally gave up, it gave up in spectacular fashion. It went like the wonderful one-hoss shay in the Holmes poem.

McCutcheon and Uncle Otto were coming up the Black Henry Road one day in 1953, and by Uncle Otto's own admission both of them were "shithouse drunk." Uncle Otto downshifted to first in order to get up Trinity Hill. That went fine, but, drunk as he was, he never thought to shift up again coming down the far side. The Cresswell's tired old engine overheated. Neither Uncle Otto nor McCutcheon saw the needle go over the red mark by the letter H on the right side of the

dial. At the bottom of the hill, there was an explosion that blew the engine-compartment's folding sides out like red dragon's wings. The radiator cap rocketed into the summer sky. Steam plumed up like Old Faithful. Oil went in a gusher, drenching the windshield. Uncle Otto cramped down on the brake pedal but the Cresswell had developed a bad habit of shooting brake fluid over the last year or so and the pedal just sank to the mat. He couldn't see where he was driving and he ran off the road, first into a ditch and then out of it. If the Cresswell had stalled, all still might have been well. But the engine continued to run and it blew first one piston and then two more, like firecrackers on the Fourth of July. One of them, Uncle Otto said, zinged right through his door, which had flopped open. The hole was big enough to put a fist through. They came to rest in a field full of August goldenrod. They would have had a fine view of the White Mountains if the windshield hadn't been covered with Diamond Gem Oil.

That was the last roundup for McCutcheon's Cresswell; it never moved from that field again. Not that there was any squawk from the landlord; the two of them owned it, of course. Considerably sobered by the experience, the two men got out to examine the damage. Neither was a mechanic, but you didn't have to be to see that the wound was mortal. Uncle Otto was stricken—or so he told my father—and offered to pay for the truck. George McCutcheon told him not to be a fool. McCutcheon was, in fact, in a kind of ecstasy. He had taken one look at the field, at the view of the mountains, and had decided this was the place where he would build his retirement home. He told Uncle Otto just that, in tones one usually saves for a religious conversion. They walked back to the road together and hooked a ride into Castle Rock with the Cushman Bakery truck, which happened to be passing. McCutcheon told my father that it had been God's hand at work—he had been looking for just the perfect place, and there it had been all the time, in that field they passed three and four times a week, with never a spared glance. The hand of God, he reiterated, never knowing that he would die in that field two years later, crushed under the front end of his own truck—the truck which became Uncle Otto's truck when he died.

McCutcheon had Billy Dodd hook his wrecker up to the Cresswell and drag it around so it faced the road. So he could look at it, he said, every time he went by, and know that when Dodd hooked up to it again and dragged it away for good, it would be so that the construction men could come and dig him a cellar-hole. He was something of a sentimentalist, but he was not a man to let sentiment stand in the way of making a dollar. When a pulper named Baker came by a year later and offered to buy the Cresswell's wheels, tires and all, because they were the right size to fit his rig, McCutcheon took the man's twenty dollars like a flash. This was a man, remember, who was then worth a million dollars. He also told Baker to block the truck up aright smart. He said he didn't want to go past it and see it sitting in the field hip-deep in hay and timothy and goldenrod, like some old derelict. Baker did it. A year later the Cresswell rolled off the blocks and crushed McCutcheon to death. The old-timers told the story with relish, always ending by saying that they hoped old Georgie McCutcheon had enjoyed the twenty dollars he got for those wheels.

I grew up in Castle Rock. By the time I was born my father had worked for Schenck and McCutcheon almost ten years, and the truck, which had become Uncle Otto's along with everything else McCutcheon owned, was a landmark in my life. My mother shopped at Warren's in Bridgton, and the Black Henry Road was the way you got there. So every time we went, there was the truck, standing in that field with the White Mountains behind it. It was no longer blocked up—Uncle Otto said that one accident was enough—but just the thought of what had happened was enough to give a small boy in knee-pants a shiver.

It was there in the summer; in the fall with oak and elm trees blazing on the three edges of the field like torches; in the winter with drifts sometimes all the way up and over its bug-eyed headlights, so that it looked like a mastodon struggling in white quicksand; in the spring, when the field was a quagmire of March-mud and you wondered that it just didn't sink into the earth. If not for the underlying backbone of

good Maine rock, it might well have done just that. Through all the seasons and years, it was there.

I was even in it, once. My father pulled over to the side of the road one day when we were on our way to the Fryeburg Fair, took me by the hand and led me out to the field. That would have been 1960 or 1961, I suppose. I was frightened of the truck. I had heard the stories of how it had slithered forward and crushed my uncle's partner. I had heard these tales in the barbershop, sitting quiet as a mouse behind a Life magazine I couldn't read, listening to the men talk about how he had been crushed, and about how they hoped old Georgie had enjoyed his twenty dollars for those wheels. One of them—it might have been Billy Dodd, crazy Frank's father—said McCutcheon had looked like "a pumpkin that got squot by a tractor wheel." That haunted my thoughts for months … but my father, of course, had no idea of that.

My father just thought I might like to sit in the cab of that old truck; he had seen the way I looked at it every time we passed, mistaking my dread for admiration, I suppose.

I remember the goldenrod, its bright yellow dulled by the October chill. I remember the gray taste of the air, a little bitter, a little sharp, and the silvery look of the dead grass. I remember the whisssht-whissht of our footfalls. But what I remember best is the truck looming up, getting bigger and bigger—the toothy snarl of its radiator, the bloody red of its paint, the bleary gaze of the windshield. I remember fear sweeping over me in a wave colder and grayer than the taste of the air as my father put his hands in my armpits and lifted me into the cab, saying, "Drive her to Portland, Quentin … go to her!" I remember the air sweeping past my face as I went up and up, and then its clean taste was replaced by the smells of ancient Diamond Gem Oil, cracked leather, mousedroppings, and … I swear it … blood. I remember trying not to cry as my father stood grinning up at me, convinced he was giving me one hell of a thrill (and so he was, but not the way he thought). It came to me with perfect certainty that he would walk away then, or at least turn his back, and that the

truck would just eat me—eat me alive. And what it spat out would look chewed and broken and … and sort of exploded. Like a pumpkin that got squot by a tractor wheel.

I began to cry and my father, who was the best of men, took me down and soothed me and carried me back to the car.

He carried me up in his arms, over his shoulder, and I looked at the receding truck, standing there in the field, its huge radiator looming, the dark round hole where the crank was supposed to go looking like a horridly misplaced eye socket, and I wanted to tell him I had smelled blood, and that's why I had cried. I couldn't think of a way to do it. I suppose he wouldn't have believed me anyway.

As a five-year-old who still believed in Santy Claus and the Tooth Fairy and the Allamagoosalum, I also believed that the bad, scary feelings which swamped me when my father boosted me into the cab of the truck came from the truck. It took twenty-two years for me to decide it wasn't the Cresswell that had murdered George McCutcheon; my Uncle Otto had done that.

The Cresswell was a landmark in my life, but it belonged to the whole area's consciousness, as well. If you were giving someone directions on how to get from Bridgton to Castle Rock, you told them they'd know they were going right if they saw a big old red truck sitting off to the left in a hayfield three miles or so after the turn from 11. You often saw tourists parked on the soft shoulder (and sometimes they got stuck there, which was always good for a laugh), taking pictures of the White Mountains with Uncle Otto's truck in the foreground for picturesque perspective—for a long time my father called the Cresswell "the Trinity Hill Memorial Tourist Truck," but after a while he stopped. By then Uncle Otto's obsession with it had gotten too strong for it to be funny.

So much for the provenance. Now for the secret.

That he killed McCutcheon is the one thing of which I am absolutely sure. "Squot him like a pumpkin," the barbershop sages said. One of

them added: “I bet he was down in front o’ that truck, prayin like one o’ them greaseball Ay-rabs prayin to Arlah. I can just pitcher him that way. They was tetched, y’know, t’both of them. Just lookit the way Otto Schenck ended up, if you don’t believe me. Right across the road in that little house he thought the town was gonna take for a school, and just as crazy as a shithouse rat.”

This was greeted with nods and wise looks, because by then they thought Uncle Otto was odd, all right—oh, ayuh! —but there wasn’t a one of the barbershop sages who considered that image—McCutcheon down on his knees in front of the truck “like one o’ them greaseball Ay-rabs prayin to Arlah”—suspicious as well as eccentric.

Gossip is always a hot item in a small town; people are condemned as thieves, adulterers, poachers, and cheats on the flimsiest evidence and the wildest deductions. Often, I think, the talk gets started out of no more than boredom. I think what keeps this from being actually nasty—which is how most novelists have depicted small towns, from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Grace Metalious—is that most party-line, grocery-store, and barbershop gossip is oddly naive—it is as if these people expect meanness and shallowness, will even invent it if it is not there, but that real and conscious evil may be beyond their conception, even when it floats right before their faces like a magic carpet from one o’ those greaseball Ay-rab fairy tales.

How do I know he did it? you ask. Simply because he was with McCutcheon that day? No. Because of the truck. The Cresswell. When his obsession began to overtake him, he went to live across from it in that tiny house … even though, in the last few years of his life, he was deathly afraid of the truck beached across the road.

I think Uncle Otto got McCutcheon out into the field where the Cresswell was blocked up by getting McCutcheon to talk about his house plans. McCutcheon was always eager to talk about his house and his approaching retirement. The partners had been made a good offer by a much larger company—I won’t mention the name, but if I did you would know it—and McCutcheon wanted to take it. Uncle Otto didn’t. There had been a quiet struggle going on between

them over the offer since the spring. I think that disagreement was the reason Uncle Otto decided to get rid of his partner.

I think that my uncle might have prepared for the moment by doing two things: first, undermining the blocks holding the truck up, and second, planting something on the ground or perhaps in it, directly in front of the truck, where McCutcheon would see it.

What sort of thing? I don't know. Something bright. A diamond? Nothing more than a chunk of broken glass? It doesn't matter. It winks and flashes in the sun. Maybe McCutcheon sees it. If not, you can be sure Uncle Otto points it out. What's that? he asks, pointing. Dunno, McCutcheon says, and hurries over to take a look-see.

McCutcheon falls on his knees in front of the Cresswell, just like one o' them greaseball Ay-rabs prayin to Arlah, trying to work the object out of the ground, while my uncle strolls casually around to the back of the truck. One good shove and down it came, crushing McCutcheon flat. Squotting him like a pumpkin.

I suspect there may have been too much pirate in him to have died easily. In my imagination I see him lying pinned beneath the Cresswell's tilted snout, blood streaming from his nose and mouth and ears, his face paper-white, his eyes dark, pleading with my uncle to get help, to get help fast. Pleading … then begging … and finally cursing my uncle, promising him he would get him, kill him, finish him … and my uncle standing there, watching, hands in his pockets, until it was over.

It wasn't long after McCutcheon's death that my uncle began to do things that were first described by the barbershop sages as odd … then as queer … then as "damn peculiar." The things which finally caused him to be deemed, in the pungent barbershop argot, "as crazy as a shithouse rat" came in the fullness of time—but there seemed little doubt in anyone's mind that his peculiarities began right around the time George McCutcheon died.

In 1965, Uncle Otto had a small one-room house built across from the truck. There was a lot of talk about what old Otto Schenck might be up to out there on the Black Henry by Trinity Hill, but the surprise was total when Uncle Otto finished the little building off by having Chuckie Barger slap on a coat of bright red paint and then announcing it was a gift to the town—a fine new schoolhouse, he said, and all he asked was that they name it after his late partner.

Castle Rock's selectmen were flabbergasted. So was everyone else. Most everyone in the Rock had gone to such a one-room school (or thought they had, which comes down to almost the same thing). But all of the one-room schools were gone from Castle Rock by 1965. The very last of them, the Castle Ridge School, had closed the year before. It's now Steve's Pizzaville out on Route 117. By then the town had a glass-and-cinderblock grammar school on the far side of the common and a fine new high school on Carbine Street. As a result of his eccentric offer, Uncle Otto made it all the way from "odd" to "damn peculiar" in one jump.

The selectmen sent him a letter (not one of them quite dared to go see him in person) thanking him kindly, and hoping he would remember the town in the future, but declining the little schoolhouse on the grounds that the educational needs of the town's children were already well provided for. Uncle Otto flew into a towering rage. Remember the town in the future? he stormed to my father. He would remember them, all right, but not the way they wanted. He hadn't fallen off a hay truck yesterday. He knew a hawk from a handsaw. And if they wanted to get into a pissing contest with him, he said, they were going to find he could piss like a polecat that had just drunk a keg of beer.

"So what now?" my father asked him. They were sitting at the kitchen table in our house. My mother had taken her sewing upstairs. She said she didn't like Uncle Otto; she said he smelled like a man who took a bath once a month, whether he needed one or not—"and him a rich man," she would always add with a sniff. I think his smell really did offend her but I also think she was frightened of him. By

1965, Uncle Otto had begun to look damn peculiar as well as act that way. He went around dressed in green workman's pants held up by suspenders, a thermal underwear shirt, and big yellow workshoes. His eyes had begun to roll in strange directions as he spoke.

"Huh?"

"What are you going to do with the place now?"

"Live in the son of a bitch," Uncle Otto snapped, and that's what he did.

The story of his later years doesn't need much telling. He suffered the dreary sort of madness that one often sees written up in cheap tabloid newspapers. Millionaire Dies of Malnutrition in Tenement Apartment. Bag Lady Was Rich, Bank Records Reveal. Forgotten Bank Tycoon Dies in Seclusion.

He moved into the little red house—in later years it faded to a dull, washed-out pink—the very next week. Nothing my father said could talk him out of it. A year afterward, he sold the business I believe he had murdered to keep. His eccentricities had multiplied, but his business sense had not deserted him, and he realized a handsome profit—staggering might actually be a better word.

So there was my Uncle Otto, worth perhaps as much as seven millions of dollars, living in that tiny little house on the Black Henry Road. His town house was locked up and shuttered. He had by then progressed beyond "damned peculiar" to "crazy as a shithouse rat." The next progression is expressed in a flatter, less colorful, but more ominous phrase: "dangerous, maybe." That one is often followed by committal.

In his own way, Uncle Otto became as much a fixture as the truck across the road, although I doubt if any tourists ever wanted to take his picture. He had grown a beard, which came more yellow than white, as if infected by the nicotine of his cigarettes. He had gotten very fat. His jowls sagged down into wrinkly dewlaps creased with

dirt. Folks often saw him standing in the doorway of his peculiar little house, just standing there motionlessly, looking out at the road, and across it.

Looking at the truck—his truck.

When Uncle Otto stopped coming to town, it was my father who made sure that he didn't starve to death. He brought him groceries every week, and paid for them out of his own pocket, because Uncle Otto never paid him back—never thought of it, I suppose. Dad died two years before Uncle Otto, whose money ended up going to the University of Maine Forestry Department. I understand they were delighted. Considering the amount, they should have been.

After I got my driver's license in 1972, I often took the weekly groceries out. At first Uncle Otto regarded me with narrow suspicion, but after a while he began to thaw. It was three years later, in 1975, when he told me for the first time that the truck was creeping toward the house.

I was attending the University of Maine myself by then, but I was home for the summer and had fallen into my old habit of taking Uncle Otto his weekly groceries. He sat at his table, smoking, watching me put the canned goods away and listening to me chatter. I thought he might have forgotten who I was; sometimes he did that … or pretended to. And once he had turned my blood cold by calling "That you, George?" out the window as I walked up to the house.

On that particular day in July of 1975, he broke into whatever trivial conversation I was making to ask with harsh abruptness: "What do you make of yonder truck, Quentin?"

That abruptness startled an honest answer out of me: "I wet my pants in the cab of that truck when I was five," I said. "I think if I got up in it now I'd wet them again."

Uncle Otto laughed long and loud. I turned and gazed at him with wonder. I could not remember ever hearing him laugh before. It

ended in a long coughing fit that turned his cheeks a bright red. Then he looked at me, his eyes glittering.

“Gettin closer, Quent,” he said.

“What, Uncle Otto?” I asked. I thought he had made one of his puzzling leaps from one subject to another—maybe he meant Christmas was getting closer, or the Millennium, or the return of Christ the King.

“That buggardly truck,” he said, looking at me in a still, narrow, confidential way that I didn’t much like. “Gettin closer every year.”

“It is?” I asked cautiously, thinking that here was a new and particularly unpleasant idea. I glanced out at the Cresswell, standing across the road with hay all around it and the White Mountains behind it … and for one crazy minute it actually did seem closer. Then I blinked and the illusion went away. The truck was right where it had always been, of course.

“Oh, ayuh,” he said. “Gets a little closer every year.”

“Gee, maybe you need glasses. I can’t see any difference at all, Uncle Otto.”

” ‘Course you can’t!” he snapped. “Can’t see the hour hand move on your wristwatch, either, can you? Buggardly thing moves too slow to see … unless you watch it all the time. Just the way I watch that truck.” He winked at me, and I shivered.

“Why would it move?” I asked.

“It wants me, that’s why,” he said. “Got me in mind all the while, that truck does. One day it’ll bust right in here, and that’ll be the end. It’ll run me down just like it did Mac, and that’ll be the end.”

This scared me quite badly—his reasonable tone was what scared me the most, I think. And the way the young commonly respond to

fright is to crack wise or become flippant. “Ought to move back to your house in town if it bothers you, Uncle Otto,” I said, and you never would have known from my tone that my back was ridged with gooseflesh.

He looked at me … and then at the truck across the road. “Can’t, Quentin,” he said. “Sometimes a man just has to stay in one place and wait for it to come to him.”

“Wait for what, Uncle Otto?” I asked, although I thought he must mean the truck.

“Fate,” he said, and winked again … but he looked frightened.

My father fell ill in 1979 with the kidney disease which seemed to be improving just days before it finally killed him. Over a number of hospital visits in the fall of that year, my father and I talked about Uncle Otto. My dad had some suspicions about what might really have happened in 1955—mild ones that became the foundation of my more serious ones. My father had no idea how serious or how deep Uncle Otto’s obsession with the truck had become. I did. He stood in his doorway almost all day long, looking at it. Looking at it like a man watching his watch to see the hour hand move.

By 1981 Uncle Otto had lost his few remaining marbles. A poorer man would have been put away years before, but millions in the bank can forgive a lot of craziness in a small town—particularly if enough people think there might be something in the crazy fellow’s will for the municipality. Even so, by 1981 people had begun talking seriously about having Uncle Otto put away for his own good. That flat, deadly phrase, “dangerous, maybe,” had begun to supersede “crazy as a shithouse rat.” He had taken to wandering out to urinate by the side of the road instead of walking back into the woods where his privy was. Sometimes he shook his fist at the Cresswell while he relieved himself, and more than one person passing in his or her car thought Uncle Otto was shaking his fist at them.

The truck with the scenic White Mountains in the background was one thing; Uncle Otto pissing by the side of the road with his suspenders hanging down by his knees was something else entirely. That was no tourist attraction.

I was by then wearing a business suit more often than the blue jeans that had seen me through college when I took Uncle Otto his weekly groceries—but I still took them. I also tried to persuade him that he had to stop doing his duty by the side of the road, at least in the summertime, when anyone from Michigan, Missouri, or Florida who just happened to be happening by could see him.

I never got through to him. He couldn't be concerned with such minor things when he had the truck to worry about. His concern with the Cresswell had become a mania. He now claimed it was on his side of the road—right in his yard, as a matter of fact.

"I woke up last night around three and there it was, right outside the window, Quentin," he said. "I seen it there, moonlight shinin off the windshield, not six feet from where I was layin, and my heart almost stopped. It almost stopped, Quentin."

I took him outside and pointed out that the Cresswell was right where it had always been, across the road in the field where McCutcheon had planned to build. It did no good.

"That's just what you see, boy," he said with a wild and infinite contempt, a cigarette shaking in one hand, his eyeballs rolling. "That's just what you see."

"Uncle Otto," I said, attempting a witticism, "what you see is what you get."

It was as if he hadn't heard.

"Bugger almost got me," he whispered. I felt a chill. He didn't look crazy. Miserable, yes, and terrified, certainly … but not crazy. For a moment I remembered my father boosting me into the cab of that

truck. I remembered smelling oil and leather … and blood. “It almost got me,” he repeated.

And three weeks later, it did.

I was the one who found him. It was Wednesday night, and I had gone out with two bags of groceries in the back seat, as I did almost every Wednesday night. It was a hot, muggy evening. Every now and then thunder rumbled distantly. I remember feeling nervous as I rolled up the Black Henry Road in my Pontiac, somehow sure something was going to happen, but trying to convince myself it was just low barometric pressure.

I came around the last corner, and just as my uncle’s little house came into view, I had the oddest hallucination—for a moment I thought that damned truck really was in his dooryard, big and hulking with its red paint and its rotten stake sides. I went for the brake pedal, but before my foot ever came down on it I blinked and the illusion was gone. But I knew that Uncle Otto was dead. No trumpets, no flashing lights; just that simple knowledge, like knowing where the furniture is in a familiar room.

I pulled into his dooryard in a hurry and got out, heading for the house without bothering to get the groceries.

The door was open—he never locked it. I asked him about that once and he explained to me, patiently, the way you would explain a patently obvious fact to a simpleton, that locking the door would not keep the Cresswell out.

He was lying on his bed, which was to the left of the one room—his kitchen area being to the right. He lay there in his green pants and his thermal underwear shirt, his eyes open and glassy. I don’t believe he had been dead more than two hours. There were no flies and no smell, although it had been a brutally hot day.

“Uncle Otto?” I spoke quietly, not expecting an answer—you don’t lie on your bed with your eyes open and bugging out like that just for

the hell of it. If I felt anything, it was relief. It was over.

“Uncle Otto?” I approached him. “Uncle—”

I stopped, seeing for the first time how strangely misshapen his lower face looked—how swelled and twisted. Seeing for the first time how his eyes were not just staring but actually glaring from their sockets. But they were not looking toward the doorway or at the ceiling. They were twisted toward the little window above his bed.

I woke up last night around three and there it was, right outside my window, Quentin. It almost got me.

Squot him like a pumpkin, I heard one of the barbershop sages saying as I sat pretending to read a Life magazine and smelling the aromas of Vitalis and Wildroot Creme Oil.

Almost got me, Quentin.

There was a smell in here—not barbershop, and not just the stink of a dirty old man.

It smelled oily, like a garage.

“Uncle Otto?” I whispered, and as I walked toward the bed where he lay I seemed to feel myself shrinking, not just in size but in years … becoming twenty again, fifteen, ten, eight, six … and finally five. I saw my trembling small hand stretch out toward his swelled face. As my hand touched him, cupping his face, I looked up, and the window was filled with the glaring windshield of the Cresswell—and although it was only for a moment, I would swear on a Bible that was no hallucination. The Cresswell was there, in the window, less than six feet from me.

I had placed my fingers on one of Uncle Otto’s cheeks, my thumb on the other, wanting to investigate that strange swelling, I suppose. When I first saw the truck in the window, my hand tried to tighten into

a fist, forgetting that it was cupped loosely around the corpse's lower face.

In that instant the truck disappeared from the window like smoke—or like the ghost I suppose it was. In the same instant I heard an awful squirting noise. Hot liquid filled my hand. I looked down, feeling not just yielding flesh and wetness but something hard and angled. I looked down, and saw, and that was when I began to scream. Oil was pouring out of Uncle Otto's mouth and nose. Oil was leaking from the corners of his eyes like tears. Diamond Gem Oil—the recycled stuff you can buy in a five-gallon plastic container, the stuff McCutcheon had always run in the Cresswell.

But it wasn't just oil; there was something sticking out of his mouth.

I kept screaming but for a while I was unable to move, unable to take my oily hand from his face, unable to take my eyes from that big greasy thing sticking out of his mouth—the thing that had so distorted the shape of his face.

At last my paralysis broke and I fled from the house, still screaming. I ran across the dooryard to my Pontiac, flung myself in, and screamed out of there. The groceries meant for Uncle Otto tumbled off the back seat and onto the floor. The eggs broke.

It was something of a wonder that I didn't kill myself in the first two miles—I looked down at the speedometer and saw I was doing better than seventy. I pulled over and took deep breaths until I had myself under some kind of control. I began to realize that I simply could not leave Uncle Otto as I had found him; it would raise too many questions. I would have to go back.

And, I must admit, a certain hellish curiosity had come over me. I wish now that it hadn't, or that I had withstood it; in fact, I wish now I had let them go ahead and ask their questions. But I did go back. I stood outside his door for some five minutes—I stood in about the same place and in much the same position where he had stood so often and so long, looking at that truck. I stood there and came to

this conclusion: the truck across the road had shifted position, ever so slightly.

Then I went inside.

The first few flies were circling and buzzing around his face. I could see oily prints on his cheeks: thumb on his left, three fingers on his right. I looked nervously at the window where I had seen the Cresswell looming … and then I walked over to his bed. I took out my handkerchief and wiped my fingerprints away. Then I reached forward and opened Uncle Otto's mouth.

What fell out was a Champion spark plug—one of the old Maxi-Duty kind, nearly as big as a circus strongman's fist.

I took it with me. Now I wish I hadn't done that, but of course I was in shock. It would all have been more merciful if I didn't have the actual object here in my study where I can look at it, or pick it up and heft it if I should want to—the 1920's-vintage spark plug that fell out of Uncle Otto's mouth.

If it wasn't there, if I hadn't taken it away from his little one-room house when I fled from it the second time, I could perhaps begin the business of persuading myself that all of it—not just coming around the turn and seeing the Cresswell pressed against the side of the little house like a huge red hound, but all of it—was only an hallucination. But it is there; it catches the light. It is real. It has weight. The truck is getting closer every year, he said, and it seems now that he was right … but even Uncle Otto had no idea how close the Cresswell could get.

The town verdict was that Uncle Otto had killed himself by swallowing oil, and it was a nine days' wonder in Castle Rock. Carl Durkin, the town undertaker and not the most closemouthed of men, said that when the docs opened him up to do the autopsy, they found more than three quarts of oil in him … and not just in his stomach, either. It had suffused his whole system. What everyone in town

wanted to know was: what had he done with the plastic jug? For none was ever found.

As I said, most of you reading this memoir won't believe it … at least, not unless something like it has happened to you. But the truck is still out there in its field … and for whatever it is worth, it all happened.

*

"Uncle Otto's Truck"—The truck is real, and so is the house; I made up the story that goes around them one day in my head on a long drive to pass the time. I liked it and so I took a few days to write it down.