Rivertown

When my father, Roy Reese, became president of the Teamsters local, we weren't hearing anything about a strike. That came later, and it wasn't Dad's fault. He had a seventh-grade education and his only leadership experience was herding cows on his parents' farm. He'd brought himself and Mom to the city after the farm was sold, one mortgage traded for another. They wanted the kids they planned to go to school outside the fallow season; they were tired of panicking when the almanac forecast a drought. In the mornings Dad drove to the brewery with a wax-paper lunch and a stare of unfading bewilderment at the suicidal driving practices of city commuters. Around suppertime he came back with red eyes and complaints and sometimes, not frequently enough, money. He and Mom once spent two hours matter-of-factly debating if they should pawn her engagement ring to pay for new tires on his Mustang.

We lived on the west side—the wet side, Rivertown. That was where you found the booze and the rusting bridge that sluiced it over the canal into the countryside, an army of delivery trucks spilling south like a beer stain down a tablecloth. Rivertown was the brewery and the guys that drove for it. There was the second-generation Ellis Island crowd—Italians, Germans, Irish. A scattering of blacks and Mexicans who always came to the local's meetings but never spoke. And dislocated mountain folks like us, who didn't seem to belong anywhere anymore.

On the east side was Milktown. The folks there didn't call it that. They were WASPs with a burning dislike for alcohol, but they had a Pharisee's thirst for profit. Which is why the smartest of them bought a stake in the Faberstohl Brewing Company. If the reprobates down in the west side were going to rot their livers, they figured, why can't we make a few more bucks on our way to heaven?

Dad had been elected VP of the local that summer because, according to him, the job had no duties and he couldn't screw anything up. But the guys trusted him. Especially they trusted him not to embarrass them out of a cost-of-living raise with some stupid jibe in an arbitration hearing. Then Pete O'Shea, the local's president, took his pension early and retired. Supposedly—Dad told us in one of his vein-busting ephemeral rages—Pete wanted to care for his wife full-time because her cancer had returned. "Even though," he said, beating his palm on a defenseless newspaper on the counter, "she's still doing their groceries. Going to the book club. And hasn't lost a pound off her big rear end. Best-looking lady I ever seen that'll be dead in two weeks, by his telling!"

Just coincidentally the cancer had reappeared about a month before the old contract was up in October. Dad would have to lead the local's negotiations with the brewery's owner, Bob Kirkwood. A man with more poetry in his bones than Dad would have compared it to dancing with a rattlesnake in his arms, like the wrong kind of Pentecostals do.

I didn't know how much of myself I'd be giving to the conflict until I got home at six o'clock on the Friday before Labor Day and found Dad waiting next to my bedroom door. He was still in his chambray shirt from work and he wore an odd look on his face—reluctant, irritable, like he was steeling his skin for a doctor's needle.

"What's going on?"

"Listen, Mickey, you know I got to give this speech on Monday, seeing as how I'm president."

The local's Labor Day picnic. I leaned on the door. "Okay. What're you gonna say?"

"I think…" He blustered past me into my room and grabbed up some sheets he'd already laid on my desk, torn from Mom's legal pad. "I couldn't really…look, you're the writer in this house, so I'm gonna have you do it. It don't have to be tonight. Just this weekend sometime."

He spoke with a stammer, a weak imitation of the tone he used for actual commands, and then stared at me to see if I'd say yes.

"Sure," I said. "How long's it got to be?"

"About five minutes, I'd say. Nothing too complicated. Just, you know, we've got the contract coming, and we'll get through it okay. And if we don't we'll steal old Bob's tires off his Thunderbird." He chuckled uneasily. "But don't write that."

"Are some of the guys talking that way?"

"Yeah. They always do. But they ain't president this year." He shifted, eager to escape. I let him dodge around me. "Thanks, Mick. I know you'll set me up good."

I went to my desk beside the window, where I could see the cindery baseball lot crammed next to our house and, distantly, the lazy glisten of the river. With one antsy finger I poked apart the sheets where Dad had scribbled his ideas in a frustrated slant. The lines were a minefield of misspellings, smudged near the end like smoke on a windshield, where you could see he got mad. I was moved with a self-conscious pity, and my own pride at having him rely on me. I was my parents' only kid, born before my mother had suffered something that she circuitously called "problems." A son too skinny to lift a tire and too clumsy to change his own oil hadn't been my dad's expectation. Yet I was the editor of the school paper, whose first fall edition had kept me back at Taft High that afternoon, in the production room by the cafeteria, where I cranked out each damp copy from the ditto and became vaguely giddy from the alcoholic scent. I could write a great speech. I did write one, that exact night, three hundred seconds' worth of prose, equally defiant and humble ahead of the approaching talks with management. I typed it on my mother's Royal and presented it to Dad. He read it on the sofa while his Philco radio screeched out the numbers from the stock market close. He frowned.

"Hmm. Kind of highfalutin."

"What, you only like one-syllable words?"

"No. It's just the hippie stuff…I know you're partial to it, but I ain't about to lead some march in Alabama."

"Then why don't *you* just write it?"

"I can't," he said. The plainness of that statement shut my mouth for me. "But I guess it'll do for a picnic."

Stung, I wanted to rip the pages from him. "If they put out the food first nobody'll even be listening to you," I said, when I was back at my desk and he couldn't hear me. I was angrier at my own flowery pen than at him. At that age, barely a year removed from Dr. King's killing at the Lorraine Hotel, I was still intoxicated with his sonorous speeches. I wanted to slap anybody across the mouth who didn't think peace was the true way to justice. As much as that, I wanted to repay my dad now for all the mechanical assistance he'd be giving me when I finally bought a junker from the west side's only used-car lot.

Apparently the barbecue was indeed served before Dad's speech, and so my words, uttered through him, were received by his union brothers about as blandly as a weather forecast. I didn't go to the picnic, figuring some vigilant soul would detect the truth in my expression—would know that Roy Reese, acting president, could hardly write out his own grocery list. Somebody with some influence, however, must have been listening, because Dad came home nervously animated on Tuesday night. The opinion editor at the local Sunday weekly wanted to print his speech in the next edition. Even though nobody would know it was mine, I hugged him. “It’s real good you didn’t say nothing about stealing those tires,” he said, his only praise. Mom pinched her eyes at us over her coffee.