

HENRY HARVEY

UNION ROAD

THE DAY WAS HOT AND BLUE and green and brown and grey with a broken yellow strip down the middle and Staff Sergeant John Kerney had parked his patrol car behind a stand of dogwood in a pebbled tractor lane that led to a field no longer farmed. Wheelruts over a shallow culvert. The sky was not entirely blue. It paled away to white at the horizon, and the sun directly above made the sky there impossible to look at. The fields of wild grass rolling alongside the Union Road had the blanched look of mid-summer. June had seen a lot of rain, but July had so far been hot and hazy, and today was hot and silent and still, with the heat filling the patrol car and no breeze to blow it away. Ordinarily, Sergeant Kerney would be tidying his desk or reading the paper in his lonely Saturday air-conditioned office at headquarters. Instead, he sat in the heat of the car, mesmerized by the heat, soothed by the still summer day, staring out at the leaves of the dogwood trees and admiring how the polarization of his sunglasses allowed him to see each leaf in green detail, and how they all moved together at the slightest breath of wind even he couldn't feel, like a flock of birds, or a school of fish.

No cicadas buzzed. Reddish-orange devil's paint brushes grew in a line in the ditch, alongside some white-and-yellow daisies and purple-blue vetch. To his right, the narrow grey pavement went down a ways, then up again, and he could see the top of that hill, about a third of a mile away. To his left the road went dead straight down a bit then up hill for about a half mile along where it banked to the right, out of sight. All around were green fields bordered by spruce and woodlots of spruce and maple, poplar and dogwood, and birch. He'd been parked here almost a half-hour now and not a single car had passed. He knew he ought to move on soon, but he knew to do so would end something he might never get a chance to enjoy again. A welcome gust of air, not enough to be called a breeze, but thick with the scent of the red dust and the chamomile and the yellow stillness of the day, swept through the car, and he watched the leaves of the dogwood trees rustle.

His radio was off. He knew it should be on; his fingers hovered nervously near the switch, but he was afraid if he turned it on someone would be calling him in. It was just a fluke he was out, what with the new constable calling in sick, and basically no one around to tell him no.

He put the thought away, and his fingers withdrew from the radio switch. Guys turned off all the time when they stopped for lunch. I'll turn it back on in an hour and say I hadn't realized it was off, he thought. It was the day. The solitude. The silence. The heat. He would have these things for an hour more. By then he'd be bored of it anyway. What would they do? No one was going to fire him over it. He wasn't breaking any law.

The green and blue day glowed with the heat and there was gold in the colour of the heat too, gold that was not present in the colours of the flowers or the field or the sky, but came from the heat and conspired with the asphalt of the road, and the red soil trimming the road, and the chamomile that grew against the asphalt and poked through it, releasing its golden scent of pineapple and strawberry into the rippling, pepper-flecked air.

Something big came over the hill to his right. It was a cattle truck, the kind with the grey trailer with the corrugated sides perforated with airholes so that the animals inside could breathe, and it looked enormous, and it seemed to bulge like a bicep, overwhelming the opposite lane, though this was probably just a trick of the light and the slope of the land. It didn't look like it was speeding, but the problem was, this was a posted No Through Truck Traffic zone. He was going to have to pull this guy over.

There was a lot of roadwork going on over on the highway and it wasn't surprising that someone would try to avoid line-ups and delays and sneak down some country road, but if that became a habit and the law wasn't enforced, these roads would soon be torn apart. They weren't built for that kind of traffic. Or something like that. He didn't like seeing big trucks on quiet roads like this. Big trucks were like giant monsters. Anyway, it was illegal and he had to tell the driver so. He wouldn't give the guy a ticket. Just a warning. Unless the guy was a jerk about it.

Sergeant Kerney turned the key in the ignition. The engine started to life, quietly rumbling. He pulled out onto the road just far enough so that the truck would see him and then he flicked on his lights and he waited for it to come into view again, as it climbed back up the hill toward him.

It had been a day like this one, late July, brilliant and burning, and it had been a big truck, but not a cattle truck. A tractor-trailer full of pallet stacks, that last day he'd driven a patrol car. It wasn't the tractor trailer

he'd pulled over. It was the drunk guy with the kid, whose name turned out to be Paul Sterling McFadden, age nine, eighty-one pounds, four feet, ten inches, hair brownish-blonde, eyes brown. The drunk guy turned out to be the kid's uncle. Sergeant Kerney couldn't remember his name. The kid was in the front seat. He looked terrified. Kerney collected the man's driver's licence and his keys. While Kerney went back to his car to radio it in, the guy took off. He must have had another set of keys in the car. Kerney flipped the siren and pursued the vehicle, which did little more by way of escape than accelerate to approximately 120 kilometres an hour and drive straight into the oncoming tractor-trailer full of pallet stacks. The truck driver was fine. Both the driver and passenger of the car were killed. It happened right in front of Sergeant Kerney's eyes. The car was crushed into the front of the tractor-trailer cab, and then the cab rolled over and crushed the car more, and as it did so it almost looked like a beast opening its jaws wide to devour its prey, yet it all happened in less than a second and Sergeant Kerney didn't really know what he saw anyway.

He should have taken the guy out of his car and stuck him in the back seat of the patrol car, where he'd be safe. But he hadn't. And at the time he was glad when he was given the desk job. But that was twelve years ago. There was no reason now he couldn't take a shift on patrol once in a while. Anyway, what with all the crazy changes of late, and the new guys coming in who didn't seem to know what was going on, Sergeant Kerney figured no one was going to notice he was in a car today, and not at his desk. All the same, he kept his radio off.

As the cattle truck closed in on him, it seemed to lose the glamour of optical illusion, the shimmering air through the distance a strange lens, and had resumed its actual size and dimension. He put his hand out of the window and directed the driver to pull over. The big truck came to a halt just after him, pulling dust devils in its wake. Sergeant Kerney parked behind it. He ought at this point to pull out his clipboard and slide in a form WR4-45, then radio in the stop. But he intended only to give the man a warning, and plus there was the possibility that if he radioed in, people would realize he was out there, and tell him to come back.

Anyway, it was too nice a day to give out tickets and such. He shut off his engine, got out of the car and sauntered up to the cab past the grey cargo trailer. Its big diesel engine rumbled and spewed stink from exhaust pipes that curled up behind the cab.

Sitting up high inside the cab was some scruffy small-faced man in big silver sunglasses, a cowcatcher moustache, and one of those Saturday-night, looking-for-a-fight, high-topped trucker caps. The man had his hand up by his CB radio, like he'd just been talking on it. He didn't look down when Sergeant Kerney arrived below his window.

"Howdy," Sergeant Kerney said.

The man looked down then. He smiled. "Beautiful day," he said.

"Yes, indeed. You wanna turn off your engine, please?"

"What can I do for you, Officer?"

"You wanna turn off your engine, please?"

"Alright, then." The driver turned off the engine. He had an insolent way about him.

"You're aware that you're driving on a 'No Through Truck Traffic' road?"

"Oh, yeah. Thing is, I got me a dispensation." The driver grinned down at Sergeant Kerney.

"A dispensation? Is that so? Well, now. Can I see your driver's licence, please? What are you hauling here?"

The man passed down his licence. "Sheep," he said. "I got a dispensation."

"You got a dispensation."

"That's right."

Sergeant Kerney wondered why he was having this conversation. He didn't like looking at that tobacco-stained grin. This guy was getting a ticket. "Wait right here," he said.

Sergeant Kerney went back to the patrol car, taking his sweet time about it, sat back in the driver's seat, got himself comfortable and took a long leisurely look at the licence. Frank James Edward. The guy's got three first names. Thirty years old. Red, insolent eyes. Sergeant Kerney didn't like the attitude in those eyes. Five foot six. Hundred and forty-four pounds. Sergeant Kerney gave a satisfied grunt. He had five inches and sixty pounds on that. He poked his fat gut with his thumb, thought about all the years behind the desk, sniffed and got the billy stick out from under the dash. He slid it into its loop on his belt.

He pulled out the clipboard, slid in a form WR4-45 and took his time filling in the date and his name, Frank James Edward's name, and details of the violation, and then he flicked on the radio.

Immediately, Captain Kreilmann's voice was speaking from it.

“Car seven, come in, car seven. Sergeant Kerney, come in, Sergeant Kerney.”

“Sergeant Kerney here, sir. Over.”

“Sergeant Kerney. Thank you for answering the radio summons. Please return immediately to station base, over.”

“Yes, sir, I’m just in the process of writing up a ticket for a WR4 violation on the Union Road. I’ll just finish that and come back in, over.”

“Say again, Sergeant Kerney, you are presently writing a ticket for a WR4 violation on the Union Road, over?”

“Affirmative, over.”

“Is that a cattle truck you got there, Sergeant, over?”

“Affirmative, over.”

“Driver, one Frank James Edward, over?”

“Affirmative, over.”

“That boy’s got a special dispensation, Sergeant. You will leave off writing the ticket and get on back here right now, over.”

“Yes, sir, say again, sir? A special dispensation, over?”

“It’s called a 3-11-40. You got a stack of them in your desk, God-damnit.”

A 3-11-40? He’d never called it a dispensation.

“Driving patrol is not one of your authorized duties, Sergeant. Now you send that boy on his way and then get your gallivanting ass back here pronto, understood, over?”

“Yes, sir, over.”

“Kreilmann out.”

Sergeant Kerney switched off the radio. The day was still there, outside the car, but he’d soon be leaving it behind. Nice while it lasted and all that sort of thing.

Sergeant Kerney looked at the back doors of the cargo trailer. It was filthy. In the stillness and heat of the day, he could smell the raw, sweet stink coming out of the thing. Dispensation. This guy gets a dispensation. I get my gallivanting ass back to base, pronto. He looked out over the field and saw white-winged butterflies fluttering over the grass and he watched them for a moment. He thought about giving the movie another try tonight. Just keep my cool. Bring home Chinese. He hadn’t said a lot to his wife that morning, after what had happened at the theatre last night. She was making too big a deal of it. It was just, there was a long line for tickets, and long lines made him nervous was all. And there was that group of teenagers that

were talking loudly and swearing and laughing. That was really aggravating. And his heart was pounding and poisons were flowing through his blood and he just had to go. And maybe that had freaked Betty out, the way he'd put his head down and ploughed a path through the people behind them in the roped-off line. And she was probably disappointed about missing the show and him so cranky the rest of the night. If she hadn't kept at him ... What's wrong? What's wrong? He probably could have handled the line if it hadn't been for those teenagers. "Hey," he could have said, in his cop voice. "Hey. Settle down, there." And they would have laughed and taunted him, and he would be humiliated. His heart was pounding again. The poisons. He took a deep breath. A weird summer insect with tiger-stripe wings landed on the windshield, shivered, and flew off again. That Goddamn truck stank to high heaven. Goddamn teenagers. He got out of the car. He had the driver's licence of Frank James Edward in his hand. He took his time, in no special hurry to return that object. A 3-11-40 was one thing. Operating a conveyance for livestock in a cruel and inhuman manner, causing undue suffering to the transported livestock, was punishable by a fine of up to ten thousand dollars, and convicted drivers could lose their certification.

He came up the side of the truck. He couldn't see through the holes but if he got up on his tiptoes ... The sun was too bright above him here. The smell was awful. He went around back again. In the silence that was not silence but was now filled with insect noise he heard the driver open his door. Now he's worried. That's right, buddy. Come on down. Under the door was a ladder rung, and Sergeant Kerney stepped up on it, and tried peering in.

It was hard to see inside because the light was coming through all the little golfball-sized holes in the walls of the cargo bay and there seemed to be more shadow inside than there was light. It appeared to be full in there, though. There was a shuffling movement of shapes. He could hear Mr. Sunglasses climbing down out of the truck. He took his own sunglasses off and pressed his eye against the hole, squinting the other one up tight and now he could see inside much better. The truck was filled with people. Some were turned to him, watching him with dull expressions. They were all naked. Sergeant Kerney stepped back and almost tumbled onto the ground. Their heads were shaved. The light and the darkness. The quiet. Golden dust motes. He started to climb back up when the driver came around the corner and was beside him. Sergeant Kerney turned to say what the hell at the sunglasses and the moustache and the scrappin' cap that he could now read and which said PEI Agro Feed on it beside a needlepoint rendering of a sunflower. There was

a very loud noise and as he flew backward, propelled by the shotgun blast that had blown a hole in his chest and destroyed his heart, and as his eyes took in the view of the truck from this new angle, how it seemed to grow wider as its length angled away from him, his mind tried to understand why the cattle truck was full of naked people, and not sheep. They had behaved like sheep. They had been silent the whole time. They had seen him. A police officer. They hadn't cried out or tried to escape. He wondered what could have been done to them that would make them so passive to such a crime. There was hay on the floor. No one was sitting. He wondered who they were, where they were from. So many. An infant in its mother's arms. A bent old man with hairy boobs and a gnarled pizzle beside a little girl who looked like an unfinished doll in an abandoned factory. Anatomically correct. A man, men, men like himself. Women. All different kinds. None trying to hide their nakedness. How horrible it was to see the nakedness, how ugly and bestial it was. They were all so flabby and wrinkled and bruised and dirty, drowned coloured flesh in little circles of light, enmeshed in shadow. He saw the driver, in his tight plaid shirt with the silver buttons and the sleeves rolled up past his elbows, tight blue jeans and cowboy boots, a small, wiry little man, holding his sawedoff dispensation with the chestnut stock in his hands, waist high. As Sergeant Kerney flew backward, his body turned, and there was the sky, darkening blue toward the sun and then suddenly, the forbidden face of the sun itself, and the sun returned his gaze and burned his eyes till the yellow and the blue turned white and then darkened to red. And then he landed in the ditch among the daisies and the devil's paint brushes.