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This Place of Wrath
and Tears . . .

by William H. Pyne

The sun was getting hot and it was all I could stand to balance myself barefooted on the sun bathed rail as Tony and I walked down the railroad toward Capital street. Tony, hopping from tie to tie and munching on one of my mother’s oatmeal cookies, was tossing up a rock about the size of a baseball and trying to catch it with his free hand. He lunged toward me, missed the rock and made me lose my balance. The sharp edged gravel of the roadbed bit into my bare feet.

“Now look what ya did! And I was tryin’ to see if I could stay on all the way to Capital!” The stinging of my feet put a knife in my voice.

“Don’t count it. It ain’t your fault. If ya don’t fall off the rest of the way it’s the same thing.”

“Naw, it ain’t either.” The hot rail on my now tender feet was more than I could take. I hopped along side of Tony.

“What are we gonna do?” he mumbled through a mouthful of cookie.

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s go down to the schoolyard and see if we can get enough guys for Indian Ball. Whata ya say?” he suggested as we passed the mine siding and turned down Capital.

“Okay by me.” The sidewalk was too hot for my bruised feet. I walked in the grass—it felt soft and prickly at the same time, but much cooler.

A block from the mine there was a group of miners milling around the corner. Tony’s father was a miner and several of the men spoke to him.

“Hi, Tony. Where’s your ol’ man?”

“Your old man ain’t scabbing on us, is he, Tony?”

“Hell, no!” Tony’s face turned redder than my mother’s roses in the backyard everyone had to be so careful of. “He ain’t no goddamn scab!”
"You tell 'em, Kid!"

We skirted around the edge of the crowd. My heart leaped at the sound of their voices; some were pitched unnaturally high, and oaths spewed out in torrents, like the gushing of water through sewers after a downpour. I glanced at Tony. His eyes were lit up like a hundred watt bulb—only once before had I seen him look like that: the night we’d got into the gang fight after the football game. My stomach took a fast ride up an express elevator.

"Come on"—my voice came out strangely, startling even me—"let’s go, or the gang will all be gone!"

"Stick around!" he snapped at me.

The look he gave me was almost like a slap. I felt my face glow and I backed away toward the sidewalk, stubbed my heel on it, and ignored its heat; I had a feeling of awkwardness and a strong fluttering stirred in my breast.

A truck load of coal went roaring past, and someone shouted: "There goes another load of scab coal on a scab truck!"

I saw Tony heave his rock at the departing truck; it fell short of its mark, and Tony said disgustedly:

"Missed the scab-bastard!"

"Atta boy, kid!" a voice from the crowd yelled.

My hands began to tremble. I gasped, "Christ! What did ya wanna do that for? Let’s get outa here!" and tugged at his arm.

"What the Hell ya scared about!" He jerked his arm away angrily.

"Who said I was scared?" I sneered, calling up all my strength to be convincing.

"Well, you sure act like it!" His voice was raspy and his face was flushed pink. "Help me find some more rocks, then. If you ain’t afraid!"

"Okay, okay, but ..."

He turned on me sharply. "You ain’t chickenin’ out on me, are ya?"

I swallowed a lump in my throat and brushed past him. Scared, was I? I’d show him! I scoured the block and returned with both of my overall pockets bulging with rocks. I started to say something to Tony but he held up his hand for me to listen. I couldn’t quite get what the talk was all about, for everyone seemed to be trying to damn the scabs at the same time. Suddenly a feeling of importance swelled in me; I felt as though I belonged—I felt a brotherhood toward the whole crowd—I became a miner with a big grievance.
A warm pleasant feeling swept through me; and I tried to swagger my way through the crowd like Tony.

More people joined us, and another crowd had developed on the other side of the street. Foul epithets to scabs were bandied between the two groups. Rocks and clubs appeared magically out of nowhere. Another truck rambled past. The crowd grew almost silent, only the shuffling of feet and heavy breath disturbed an otherwise quiet people following the truck with their eyes. A lone rock went sailing through the air. The mob burst into screaming filth and a shower of rocks and clubs filled the air, but the truck was out of range.

"Kill the dirty scabs!"
"Kill John L!"
"Give 'em Hell, men!"

Before I knew what I was doing I had thrown my rocks and was screaming filth at the top of my voice. I was pushed, pulled, mashed and tugged along with the milling crowd in a mad scramble to retrieve the thrown rocks and clubs. I became separated from Tony, but I didn't care. I didn't need him anymore. My heart was thumping like the old water pump in our basement, and a warm sweat made the palms of my hands slippery.

Another truck was spotted turning out of the mine entrance, and a cry went up through the crowd. This time everyone was ready. I could hardly wait until the truck was in range. I aimed a rock at the man behind the wheel, but my aim was lousy. But amid the shower of bricks and rocks bouncing off the truck the windshield disappeared with a crash. The truck veered crazily, first one way and then another, finally straightening out and seemed headed right toward me.

Someone screamed: "Lookout! That crazy bastard's trying to run us down!"

The men in front of me scrambled hastily to get out of the path of the onrushing truck. I turned around and pushed and shoved wildly, my heart pounding furiously in my ears. Someone stepped on my heel. I fell forward, clutched desperately at fleeing legs in front of me and a miner's boot heel exploded on my chin. A terrific crash boomed in my head. My teeth bit into my mouth and I tasted blood as a flood of pinhead lights flickered before my eyes. The trampling feet came to a sudden halt and I staggered to my feet feeling lightheaded.
The telephone pole was tottering, and the truck, like some crushed monster, was squirting hot water from its radiator like water being squeezed from a sponge. The retreat was over and the crowd was surging back toward the truck.

"Kill 'im!"

My head was throbbing with pain and my body was shaking worse than the time Tony and I had broken through the ice while skating on the quarry pond. My aches fed my fired brain with just one thought: To smash that scab with my bare fists. I rammed my way through the crowd. An iron hand grasped me on the shoulder from behind, and I was spun around with a violent jerk and sent sprawling to the ground. A silver badge on a blue uniform and a billyclub clenched in an iron fist flashed before my eyes. My breathing almost stopped; a cold chill clutched at my heart. My shoulder and chin burned; my head throbbed. I jumped to my feet and ran headlong across the street. Looking back, I saw the driver jerked from the cab of the truck by two burly miners. Their faces seemed almost purple as they clubbed him with their fists; others grabbed frantically at him as he started to fall. His clothes were in shreds. He fell to the pavement like an empty potato sack. Blood had turned his face into a hideous mask of red mush! Then it hit me! A scab! My God! This was a man!

A policeman ran up beside me, pointed a big barrelled gun over the heads of the turbulent mob. Pop! Someone let out a scream of pain. A cloud of white smoke burst into sight among the crowd. Other policemen around the fringes of the seething mass of men, their faces hid behind grotesque halloween-like gas masks, hacked away at them with clubs. The mob began to disperse quickly: men began to stagger away covering their eyes and noses with handkerchiefs; some were left where they had fallen on the ground; some sat with dazed expressions on their faces. I saw one man running blindly, holding his hand to his head, blood oozing out between his fingers. Another man, being led away by a disheveled companion, stopped and spat blood on the ground through split and gnarled lips. The lonely wail of sirens filled the air as more police cars and ambulances appeared on the scene.

A sickening convulsion gripped my stomach and I supported myself on a nearby car fender as I vomited. My trembling became violent, my knees became watery and I slumped to the curb. Something welled up inside me, like a fountain of vinegar gushing and splashing around in my breast, tears flooded my eyes and trickled
into the corners of my lips and were salty in my parched mouth. The screaming of every bone and nerve in my body soon subsided into a numbing weariness, and I felt more tired than I had ever been before. I suddenly felt as though I were all alone, trapped in front of an onrushing train and was unable to move from its path—and I didn’t care . . . I just didn’t care a bit.

“You all right?” I recognized Tony’s voice.

I kept my face buried in my arms so that he couldn’t see my tears. Not that I cared about him anymore, either. For he wouldn’t understand. It was just easier this way.

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

“What in the hell are ya cryin’ about, then?”

“I ain’t cryin’,” I lied. “I got a dose of that tear gas.”

“Don’t cover your eyes then, stupid! Let the air at them.” He touched my aching shoulder and I winced. “Come on, let’s go down to the school and tell the gang. Jesus, that was sure some go around while it lasted!”

“You go ahead,” I said. “I’ve got to go home and get something for my eyes. I’ll see ya later.”

I got up, turned my back on Tony and the whole miserable scene, and headed toward home. I knew no one was home, and I needed to be alone.