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OVER FLAT MOUNTAIN

THEY DIDN'T USED TO CALL LOUISVILLE the Mile High City. I know because I was raised there, in the old West End, when the Falls of the Ohio were just dry limestone flats bypassed by a canal, and the river was slow and muddy, and the summer nights were warm.

Not anymore, though.

It was chilly for August when I rolled into Louisville from Indianapolis, heading south and east for Charlotte. The icy mist was rising off the falls where they plunge into the gorge. It was too much trouble to dig a flannel shirt out of the back so I bought a sweatshirt in the truckstop annex, figuring I would give it to Janet or one of the girls later—they wear them like nightgowns—and rolled on out of there without a second piece of pie.

The shirt said "Louisville—Mile High City of the South."

I bought a CD, 50 Truckin' Classics, forty-nine of which I already had. I have a library of eleven hundred CDs in my cab. Imagine how much space that would have taken in the old days when they were as big as cookies.

I don't generally pick up hitchhikers, but I must have felt sorry for this kid. I was an hour south and east of Louisville, just under the cloud shadow, when I saw him standing in the rain by the CRAB ORCHARD COGWAY 40M/64K sign, wearing a black garbage bag for a raincoat, and I figured, what the hell. He looked more than a little wet. It rains six days out of five south of Louisville since the Uplift.

When we Flat Toppers run, we run. I just barely pulled over and was back in low-two before he was up the ladder and through the inside airlock lens, peeling off his garbage bag like a landlobster molting. He couldn't have been more than sixteen. He had greasy blond hair tied back with a rubber band under a Delco cap, and under his garbage bag a windbreaker over a T-shirt. Glad to see he had a coat at least. Boots had "hand-me-down" written all over them. Carried his things in a Kmart plastic bag.

He combed the rain off the bill of his cap with one finger and perched on the edge of the seat until I swept the CDs off the seat into my own hat and dumped them into the glove compartment.

"Nice gun," he said. I had a Brazilian 9 mm in the glove compartment. I closed it.

“Wet out there,” he said.

I nodded and popped Ricky Skaggs into the player. I hadn’t picked him up for conversation. I picked him up because I’d done some hitchhiking myself at his age. Sixteen going on twenty-one.

“Appreciate your stopping,” he said.

“Nice rig,” he said.

I was pulling a two-piece articulated, with a Kobo-Jonni. The KJ is an eight-liter steel diesel with that mighty ring that engines used to have before they went to plastic. A lot of guys fall all over the new plastic mills cause they don’t need oil, but I like oil. I had built the KJ three times, and was just through breaking in the third set of sleeves. Plastic, you just throw away.

The kid told me his name but I forgot it. “They call me CD,” I said. I popped out Ricky and popped in the Hag to show him why.

He had those narrow eyes and sallow skin, like he’d never seen the sun, and if he was from south and east of Louisville he probably hadn’t. And I could tell by his accent he was. Listen, I knew this kid. He was me thirty years ago. You narrow up your shoulders and narrow up your eyes, and since everything in the world is new to you, try to look and act like nothing is.

“I’m going up to Hazard,” he said.

I had figured that from his being by the cogway sign.

“My pa works up there at the robot train,” he said.

“Guess you’re going on over Flat Mountain,” he said.

Anybody could tell that from my airlocks. He said it as if it was the most natural thing in the world, but it wasn’t. Not many trucks go over Flat Mountain. Most just go up the cogway to Hazard and offload for the robot train, and come right back down.

“Well, there it is,” he said.

The bottom part of Flat Mountain is the only part most folks ever see. Since it’s almost always raining under the cloud shadow, you can almost never see it from more than ten miles away. We were rounding the old Winchester bypass just east of where Lexington used to be, and from there it looks like a wall of logs and trash and rock,

running almost straight up into the clouds that are always there at 11,500.

I turned off onto the Crab Orchard feeder road, which follows the front twenty miles south and west, then turns in at a ghost town, Berea, where the wall eases off to a little less than 45 degrees. There were about six trucks ahead of me at the cogway, none of them Flat Toppers. I got in line next to a stream choked with old cars and house pieces. It didn't have a name. Lots of these new rivers don't have names.

While we were in line for the cogway I called Janet and the girls from my cab phone and the kid got out. Maybe he was embarrassed by all the family stuff. I watched him walking up and down under the long board shed trying all the candy bar machines. I moved the truck up ten feet at a time and other trucks pulled in behind me. Gravy Pugh came by in his yellow slicker to clip my ticket. "Going up top?" he asked. "Watch out, CD, lobsters got Sanders yesterday."

This is his standard joke. I don't lobster anymore and he knows it.

"Snapped his pecker off," he said, and clipped another corner off my violet Crab Orchard Cogway pass.

The kid climbed back into the truck just as I was flagged to the approach grade. He was shivering. He had left his garbage bag in the truck and it rains about as hard under the board shed as outside of it. When I was his age I had hitchhiked a thousand miles, but this was out west where it never rained in those days. I let the flagman wait while I leaned up over the seat and fished a dry flannel shirt out from under the tools and spare parts. The kid pulled off his T-shirt and wrapped my flannel shirt around him. He could have fit in it twice.

"I hope your pa's expecting you," I said. "You know, you can't go around outside up at Hazard."

"I been up there," was all he said.

The guy behind me was honking but Gravy didn't let him around. The cogway never stops, and there is a certain trick to magging on. The ramp is concrete but it's cracked and crazy tilted, and there's only one stretch where you can make enough speed for a hitch. If you miss, you have to turn down the cutoff and get back in line. I always make it, but I've been doing this run for twelve years.

"Piece of candy?" The kid held out a Collie Bar but since it looked like his entire supper I turned him down. It was getting dark. Magged on, I let the big old KJ idle. With the truck tipped almost straight up, it's better to have the pumps running to keep the air out of the lines.

It’s a long ride up the western front. The Crab Orchard Cogway is slow and noisy, fourteen miles of squeaking, rattling chain. It’s powered by steam generated from the coal and trash that rolled off the lower slopes when the mountain uplifted, helped by the weight of the trucks coming down. Even in the dark I could see them through the rain twenty yards away. I know most of the drivers, even the up-and-backs, or yoyos as we Flat Toppers call them. The mountainside looked junky in the headlights. The lower slopes, from 7,200 to the clouds at 11,500 are overgrown with weeds and weird new ferns and what’s left of the trees—plus whatever else rolled down when the land rolled up. Some say they see giant volunteer tomatoes back in the weeds but I never see them.

The first hundred trips or so, it’s a scary ride. The kid tried to act cool but I knew exactly how he felt. Your truck is tipped back at forty-five degrees, you’re wondering if the mag and the safety under it will hold, and even if it does, what about that clattery old chain? Then every once in a while the chain hauls up short—maybe a truck had trouble unhooking at the Hazard end, or maybe the world is coming apart—and the boards under your tires creak and the leaf springs sway, and the wind howls across the splinters of the trees, because we’re still low enough on Flat Mountain for there to be wind, and you realize you’re just hanging there like a wet pair of jeans on a line.

I popped in some Carl Perkins, the early stuff where he sings like George Jones, and managed to mostly close my eyes.

Then here come the clouds, above 11,500. The clouds make it easier. Thinking I wasn’t looking, the kid unfolded a ten-dollar bill from his watch pocket, folded it up again, and put it away. I remembered hitchhiking and feeling the same way: checking it every hour or so to make sure it hadn’t turned into a five.

At Hazard, you’re still in the clouds but they loosen up as the mountain levels off a little and the cogway ends. All of a sudden there’s noise and lights all around. For most of the trucks, the robot train roundabout is the end of the line. It’s a big semicircular modular building—hauled up since the Uplift, naturally, since nothing of the old town survived. The yoyos unhitch and snake in and unload, load up whatever’s contracted down, and get back in line for the cogway down. No deadheads in this business. Of course there are some loads that can’t wait three weeks for a backed-up robot train, and that’s where me and the other Flat Toppers come in—trucks that go all the way over Flat Mountain.

I figured the roundabout was where the kid’s dad worked, since there’s a lot of hand labor involved loading and unloading, not to mention the guys who jockey the trucks through the line for a few bucks while the drivers are sitting in the Bellew Belle. This is barely a living. They sleep in a pressure shed behind the roundabout.

“This must be the place,” I said.

“Appreciate the ride, mister.”

“CD,” I said. He started to open the airlock and I said, “Whoa. Aren’t you forgetting something?”

He looked back at me, scared, and started to unbutton the shirt.

I had to laugh. “Keep the shirt, kid,” I said. “But you can’t go around up here without breath spray. You’re a mile higher than Everest. Open your mouth.” I sprayed his throat with C-Level and told him to run before it wore off.

Carrying his plastic bag, he hurried out the airlock and into the roundabout.

I drove across the lot to the Bellew Belle. It’s the only diner in Hazard and the drivers call it the Blue Balls. It isn’t airlocked and the revolving door spins on its own from the pressure inside, easing out a continual little cloud of coffee and hamburger steam. Hazard can use it. It’s a cold, dark, nasty place where nobody would live unless they worked there, or work unless they couldn’t work anywhere else.

I wondered if the kid’s dad knew he was coming. Or if he even existed. When I was his age I told folks I was hitching to Dallas to see my dad, who was a police officer. If you don’t lie people will figure you’re a runaway.

Flat Toppers tend to sit together. “How’s the weather down under, CD?” they ask. “How’s the weather up top?” I ask back. That’s our standard joke, because the weather below the western front is always the same—always raining. And of course there’s no weather on top of Flat Mountain. You can’t have weather without atmosphere.

I used the lobby phone to call Janet and the girls again. I was already too high for the cab phone and this would be my last chance until I got back from Charlotte, since satellite calls over the mountain are so expensive. One of the guys at the table told me claws were bringing $100 in Charlotte, but they had to be unmarked because nobody eats road kill. I told him I didn’t lobster anymore anyway.

It was just after midnight and I was getting up to go when the kid came in the revolving door, nursing a bloody nose with the sleeve of my shirt. He had run across the lot without any breath spray.

“Find your dad?” I asked, and he shook his head. He sat down, looking at the french fries the other guys had left on their plates. I bought two hamburgers out of the machine, even though I had already eaten, and acted like I didn’t want one of them. That’s the way you have to do it with a kid like that.

But I had to get going. “I guess you better head back to the roundabout and catch a ride back down the mountain,” I said.

The kid shook his head. He said his mother had got married and moved out of Louisville. He claimed his dad had left ten dollars for him back at the roundabout, to catch a ride across to Charlotte where his grandma lived. I didn’t believe that for a minute. He showed me the same folded-up ten I’d seen him looking at on the cogway.

I said, “Insurance won’t allow me to carry you over Flat Mountain.” This was a lie. The fact is, no Flat Topper’s insured. Not because it’s dangerous, although it can be, but because it’s not a part of any state anymore. It’s not actuarially part of the world anymore, my insurance man says.

“I know exactly where she lives,” the kid says, acting like he hadn’t heard me. He took a yellow piece of paper from his watch pocket and started unfolding it. He was doing good at not crying.

When I was his age, and I was hitchhiking, I had a ten-dollar bill in my watch pocket. That was it. This Mexican guy from St. Louis picked me up. He kept a pearl-handled revolver under the car seat. First time we stopped to eat, I tried to unfold my ten so he wouldn’t see what it was, figuring I knew about Mexicans. And he told me to put it in my shoe because everybody knows to look in your watch pocket. He bought my meals all the way across Missouri and Oklahoma.

“One twenty-one Magnolia Street,” the kid read off the paper, but he pronounced it “mangolia” like an aircraft metal. I could tell he’d never been to Charlotte. I wasn’t surprised. Too high to fly over, too thick to tunnel through, Flat Mountain has split up a lot of families. It’s not like an ocean that took a million years to form. They say it’s even making the days longer, at almost an hour a year, because the bulge makes the Earth turn slower, like a skater throwing her arms out.

Slower days, that’s all we need.

The other Flat Toppers had all left, heading down the Crab Orchard to Louisville and points beyond.

What the hell, I figured. “Let’s go,” I said. “And don’t keep your money in your watch pocket. Everybody knows to look there.”

At 34,500, Hazard would be snowy if the vents off the mountain didn’t keep the clouds half steam. Cold steam. I was half frozen by the time I had finished letting all but eight pounds out of my tires and topping off the oxy and fuel in the injection system. You don’t need an oversuit down so low, but you do need to keep a can of breath spray

handy. C-Level gives the cells enough oxygen to get by, and fools your nerves into thinking you're breathing. I keep a can in my pocket.

"I could have helped," the kid said when I got into the truck. "I know pretty much about trucks." I handed him an oversuit and made him slip it on, even if he didn't want to zip it up. My rig is pressurized at fifty-five hundred and I've never had an accident, but you never know. Stuffed with fries, he went to sleep. I popped in old Lyle Lovett and hit the road, the only road east.

For the first two hours out of Hazard it's nothing but clouds. Flat Mountain's not flat yet and you're riding an eight percent switchback patched together out of old highways.

If you ever saw the original Appalachians from the air, they looked like a rug somebody had kicked, with the ridges like long folds running parallel. The theory was that Africa had bumped into the USA a million years ago and folded them up. The Uplift killed that theory. Now they say that the Appalachians were the wrinkles left when the Cumberland Dome collapsed a million years ago—unwrinkled when it rose up again twenty years ago. They say it's not stable, and it's true: If you get out of your truck you can still feel the ground humming through your shoes. Cold fusion, twenty miles down.

It's funny, the Appalachians are gone but their ghost is in the roads. The route over Flat Mountain is patched together out of the old highways that followed the valleys, running close enough to parallel to make a natural switchback. You back and forth your way up what used to be Pine Mountain, Crab Orchard Mountain, Black Mountain, Clinch Mountain—all humped together now into one gravelly slope, invisible in the permanent fog. Low-range fourth or high-range second gear all the way.

Twenty miles up and east of Hazard there's a little snow belt, which in the winter extends all the way down to the roundabout and the town. This time of the year, though, it's no sooner noticed than gone. Then it gets too high to snow and too high to breathe all at the same time. I came out of the clouds at 2:10 A.M. and it was almost dawn. "Dawn's dawn," Janet used to call it, back when she used to ride with me, before the girls were born. Above one hundred thousand feet the days are nineteen hours long in the summer.

I was tempted to wake up the kid. Behind me and below, in the big mirrors, a sea of clouds stretched two hundred miles. Ninety percent of the atmosphere was below us. You never actually see Kentucky and Tennessee from up here, only their permanent cloud roof. The clouds are pushed in from the west by the jet stream and they pile up like foam along the west front of Flat Mountain for two thousand miles, from Maine to Alabama. It's as beautiful from the top as it is gloomy from the bottom. The clouds ate the whole city of Lexington, not to mention Pittsburgh, and Huntsville, and a hundred

little country towns that nobody remembers anymore, north and south.

I let the kid sleep and popped in Loretta Lynn. For some reason I like girl singers better up on top.

A few more hours of driving and the clouds are hidden under the bulk of the mountain. There's nothing in any direction but stone and sky, bone-white and blue-black. The stars look like chips of ice, too cold to twinkle. It's a hundred below outside and you're at 122,500. This is where if you're looking for landlobsters you start finding them.

The kid woke and sat up, rubbing his eyes. He didn't say anything for forty miles and I appreciated that, because when you're looking at the high top of Flat Mountain there is truly nothing to say. It's my favorite part of the route. It gets flatter and emptier the higher you go. I always imagine it's like Creation must have looked before they got to the plants and animals, and how it'll look when it's all over.

Toward the very middle of the high top I always play Patsy Cline, and if you don't know why, don't ask.

There's no longer a sign of Knoxville. No longer a sign of Asheville. During the eight years of the Uplift, the constant high-frequency vibration from the dome expanding turned the soil to jelly, and most of it ran into the cracks opening in the ground or ran off the mountain in sheets like slow-motion water, taking the trees and what was left of the towns with it. All the way in Nashville, you could hear the mountain groan. The high top looks scoured, with every once in a while a long shallow ditch filled with logs and leftover trash. These ditches are all that's left of mighty forests and cities, and it can't help but put your pride into perspective to look upon them.

The road across the top of Flat Mountain is straight and the slope is gentle, less than three percent, up for forty miles, then down for another forty. The road jogs between old 23 and interstate 40. This is where Flat Toppers can gear up and roll out, to gain back the time they spent sniffing steam at the Blue Balls.

The log ditches are where you look for landlobsters.

"My dad sold one once," the kid said. He was looking hard for one, maybe thinking I would stop to kill it. He didn't know how hard they were to kill.

Your dad must have swapped or stole it off a Flat Topper, I thought to myself, since they never wander down as far as Hazard, though I didn't say this.

"He got a hundred dollars. Said they were descended from other planets."

Actually, the real truth is better. When the Appalachians uplifted, it either proved or

disproved evolution, depending on who you're talking to. One thing it proved was that it doesn't take millions of years for a new species to evolve. The first landlobsters showed up less than six years after the Uplift started, although they weren't nearly as big as the ones today.

"Do you sell them?" the kid asked.

"Used to."

"Wonder what they eat," the kid said.

"Wood and glass." At least they say they eat glass. I've seen them eat logs. They won't eat anything alive, but if they get hold of a man they'll drag him off until he dies and then gnaw him like a dog with a bone.

It's not often you see one on the road. The kid was watching the log ditches off to the side so he didn't see it. I was listening to Dolly sing "Blue Ridge Mountain Boy," a song they don't play much anymore, and I almost didn't swerve in time to hit it.

"What was that?" the kid says as I throw on the brakes. He started zipping up his oversuit and got two zippers jammed. It was the first time I'd seen him get excited and I had to laugh. He thought we were having a wreck. I had my oversuit zipped up and my mask on—it protects your face and eardrums—before he looked in the rear-view mirror and saw what we had hit.

"You don't want to be getting out," I said. I sprayed my throat with C-Level and stuffed the can in my pocket. "Hand me that Boy Scout hatchet from under the seat," I said.

He was watching it in the mirror, gray-white, the color of gravestones, and at least thirteen feet across the claws. I doubted he'd seen one before, alive. Not many people have. "You going to kill it?" he asked. "It's still flopping."

Once you crack the shell, they're dead from decompression, but dying can take all day. I hadn't gone looking for it, but since it came to me—I flipped down my mask and climbed across the kid, since the airlock is on his side. I crossed under the truck and approached it carefully. It was still venting steam out of the cracks in the shell where my truck had passed over it. I had missed all but one claw. There's about sixty pounds of meat under the back but High Top Meat won't buy lob out of the shell. With the hatchet, jumping in, I cut off the one big and four smaller claws I hadn't marked, tossing them under the truck. Since the lobster was dragging itself away from me, toward the shoulder, I turned my back on it. After all that activity, I needed another shot of C-Level, which means lifting your mask for a second. I gathered up the claws and I was about to strap them onto the spare tire rack with a bungee cord when, next thing I knew, the thing had pulled my leg out from under me and was dragging me

toward the side of the road.

It was the tire-marked claw. I should have cut it off and tossed it away. I shouldn't ever have turned my back on it. It had me by the boot and was starting that slow sideways cut even while it pulled, and I knew I was in trouble. He still had six legs, each as big as a fencepost, and he was taking me home with him.

I reached for, but missed, the tire rack. I reached for, but missed, the hatchet. I reached for the big, soft rear trailer tire, even though there's no place to grab it—then I saw two shots crack the lobster's shell. You don't hear shots in a near vacuum. I looked back and saw the kid ducking under the truck from the other side, shooting. Even with the big gloves on he hit it twice more, but you can shoot those things all day long. They're like snapping turtles. I pointed at the Boy Scout hatchet, waving my arms, but the kid was falling. I hadn't left any breath spray for him. He was sealed in his suit and turning blue. But just as he fell he pushed the hatchet close enough for me to reach it.

Thank God for the Boy Scouts. I chopped my foot free, and wearing the claw like a clamp on my leg, dragged the kid under the truck, up the ladder and into the cab. Even inside in the air, he could barely breathe. The fall had knocked his mask loose, and his tongue and throat had swelled up from decompression. Luckily they make a spray for that, too, and I had some in my first-aid kit under the seat. I've had it used on me and it's bad. It puckers you up like eating a green persimmon but it works. It's called GAZP.

I pried the claw off my boot and stuck it up under the seat. When I was sure the kid was breathing, I went back out and got the 9 mm where he had dropped it. The lobster was gone and the claws I had cut off were gone, too, so the whole thing was a waste. I wasn't surprised. They say he eats them.

"Well, kid," I said when we were in gear again. "You saved old CD's butt back there."

"Weren't nothing. You get the claws?"

"Just the one he had me with. It's under the seat. That's that smell." Landlobsters smell like piss on coals until they're decompressed, and then it's gone.

The claw wasn't worth anything because it was tire-marked, but I didn't mention that.

All that talking wore me out, and the kid too, I guess. I looked over and saw he was asleep. I was in high third. On either side of the highway, nothing but miles and miles of stone. It's amazing to me that so many people could live for so long in those little mountains and leave so little sign. Twenty miles farther and the road got steeper, going down. I had to gear down to low fifth. I popped in Hank Senior and the kid

whimpered a little from a dream. At that minute I might have been driving past his great-grandaddy's grave. I could tell from the way he talked it was up here somewhere—somewhere between eastern Kentucky and western North Carolina, northern Virginia, and east Alabama. Somewhere in those endless, wrinkled little hills that got unwrinkled and raised up, and rolled their children out into the world, rubbing their eyes and wondering when they get to go home.

Maybe someday. I read in Popular Science that Flat Mountain is sinking again, at about a foot and a half a year. At that rate it'll only be one hundred thousand years.

From the edge of the western slope you see a snow-white roof of clouds, but from the eastern slope you see what looks like the edge of a giant blue-green ball. You first see it just as the switchbacks start, at about ninety thousand, when there is just enough air to leave a little vapor trail back over the road. Far ahead the sky is not black anymore but dark blue. Then you see it's really the sea. And not just a few miles of it: You are looking halfway to Bermuda from eighteen miles high. From here you can see that the water and the air are two versions of the same stuff.

The roads down the eastern slope are better, probably because the highways were newer, mostly four lanes. The switchbacks are long—forty, fifty miles a swoop. Morgantown, Hendersonville, Bat Cave, just names given to turns anymore, since the towns are long since gone. At Bat Cave (no bats, no cave) the kid woke up, and this time he didn't try not to look impressed. We were far enough east and far enough down Flat Mountain to see the Atlantic coast all the way from Morehead City to Savannah. The Carolina Desert is the color of October woods, red and orange and yellow and brown. It's a fast trip down, with no cogway needed. Here on the eastern slope, the yoyos are muscle trucks, and the robot train roundabout is set in a cold, dry cloudless perch called Shelby, which looks down fifty miles onto Charlotte. There's a good diner there but I just rolled on past and hit the hard switchbacks below 21,500 with my KJ barking like a hundred-dollar hound.

It gets dark early in Charlotte, but it felt good to be down in the air. I unsealed the locks and let the dry night wind run through the cab. There used to be magnolia trees in Charlotte but that was before the Uplift. Now they were just street names, like the towns on Flat Mountain. We found Magnolia on my map, but first I took the kid and bought him supper.

The reason I bought his supper was, I kept remembering the Mexican who bought my meals all the way across Missouri and Oklahoma when I was just a kid. He said he used to hitch, and he even tried to give me a five when he dropped me off, but I shook my head and wouldn't take it. The thing is, when he looked under his car seat later on, his pearl-handled revolver was gone. I sold it in Fort Worth for twenty dollars. I have always felt ashamed of that ever since.

The kid had two black eyes from the decompression but his throat was better, good enough for him to eat. He didn't complain when I paid for his supper. Then I stopped at High Top Meat. I told the kid to wait in the truck. The night broker shook his head when I unwrapped the claw and he saw the tire marks. "Too bad, CD," he said. "I can't buy road kill unless it don't look like road kill."

"How about for dog food?" I said, and he gave me a five.

The kid looked nervous and asked how I'd done, and I lied. "Good," I said. I gave him a twenty and told him it was half the money. He folded it and put it in his watch pocket with the ten.

Magnolia was one of those dirt streets with no sidewalks and little modular houses, all alike. Any one of them could have been his grandma's house, or any one not. "Don't turn in, I'll get out here," he said at the end of the street, gathering up his stuff in a hurry.

"Vaya con Dios," I said.

"What's that mean?"

"Means good luck finding your pa." I never did find mine.

I slept eleven hours while my rig was serviced and loaded. I was halfway up Flat Mountain the next day before it occurred to me to look in the glove compartment for my 9 mm. Of course it was gone. I popped in Crystal Gayle and had to laugh.