

Christopher Dungey

DOUBLE FAULT

HECTOR FRITCH MIGHT HAVE SIMPLY punched in late. On a Friday evening, the absenteeism at Fisher Body-Pontiac was usually so high that his foreman would have kissed him. He'd been indecisive all the way down Route 24 because the late September day seemed like summer. Probably the last of summer. Going into LeRoy's Bar for a quick draft was the final, critical hesitation.

He'd picked up Route 24 after coming west from Celeryville, the air so warm and the light so silken that he held the Comet GT well below the speed limit. A mile south on 24, he wheeled into Mirror Lake Grocery. He intended to eat a snack, have a beer on the way down, and maybe just give a little thought to his participation in this particular night shift.

He didn't have the heart to put spurs to the 302 engine as he slipped back into traffic. A Schlitz Tall Boy rode between his legs in a slender bag. A red-hot sausage and a pickled egg sat in a cardboard tray on the passenger-side bucket seat. The first of three pretzel sticks was clenched in the corner of his mouth like a stogie. He realized that he'd left his coffee thermos at home on the kitchen counter. Another omen.

LeRoy's Bar was strategically located on Baldwin Avenue across from Employee Gate 2. Ten acres of parking lot stretched behind it. Night shift cars baked and pinged as evening fell. Both entrances to LeRoy's were propped open with wedges of wood. A floor fan in the corner behind the pool table stood silent. Only a small, oscillating table fan on the end of the bar churned the dark, stale air. Above it, the television had been muted during the local news from Detroit. Wayne, one of the bartenders, worked on the kitchenette

side. He pulled a chain to turn on a fluorescent light. Fritch soon smelled the browning meat of the chili stick they used to start meat sauce for Coney dogs. This began to displace the accumulated funk of stale beer, tobacco, and day shift body odor.

There were only three customers in the place—two guys he didn't recognize nearly sprawled over the bar but still slurring back and forth. Probably from day shift. Then he saw Curtis Baffle from just up the assembly line in the door glass build-up operation. Curtis studied the juke box. LeRoy Petty sat further back, reading something on his desk. His girth did not quite fit the creaking swivel chair, which protested as he readjusted his buttocks. A stack of long-neck cases decorated the back wall of his small office.

"Fritch! Y'all comin' or goin'?" Curtis turned, cupping a fistful of quarters that he hadn't dropped yet. Conway Twitty "bomp, bomp, bommmmed" behind him.

"Haven't decided," Hector said, lifting himself onto a stool. "Let's see how I feel."

"It's like cookout weather. Bet they hadda shut down for relief."

"Wouldn't wanta spoil that, would I? On the other hand, I don't wanta end up with them paying me on Fridays." He waited for Wayne to notice him.

"Ya'll don't hardly miss no time no ways," Curtis said. "Me, I already got a verbal warnin'. Ya'll decide to go in, you never seen me."

"Goes without saying." Hector could not fathom why Curtis didn't simply go in, build up his door-glass then skip out at lunch. Those guys worked their asses off for four hours then clocked each

other out at the end of the shift. Maybe the first part of the process was too hard or it wasn't his turn to leave.

The bartender bounced down to Fritch's end, wiping his hands with a linen service rag. "What'll it be?"

Hector hesitated. A quick shell or a longneck of Stroh's and some more food to start soaking it up? "You gonna have the Tiger game on?"

"I dunno. They ain't catchin' the Orioles," Wayne said. "Ain't you got any money on the old guy and that woman libber? Big tennis match."

"Oh! I forgot that was tonight. Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs."

"That ol' boy sounds like he's about half a queer his own self," called Curtis.

"Anyways. I think LeRoy wants to watch him whup her ass."

"Well, damn. O.K. Guess I'll have a Stroh's and... how about a bag of that cheese popcorn?" Fritch sighed, his mind clawing for rationalizations. The house payment had been made for the month. Check. They were starting to get some overtime as the '74 models were introduced. Check. Car insurance, though, next week. Three hours overtime already, versus missing eight hours straight time tonight. Would they dare work nine while shutting down for relief? Quality would be lousy. But if they really needed the jobs? He had to think management wouldn't hesitate. They'd bring people in tomorrow or even Sunday to make repairs out in the yard. But something was lurking, something he'd forgotten. When was the house insurance due again?

Wayne brought the beer. Fritch opened his bag of popcorn.