

The Warehouse
by Eric Cecil

It's the year after next, and the men are still missing. Some say that they'll be back. He knows they're gone for good. He's sure that it's the warehouse. He'd first seen it some time ago, during the winter before last. Wandering home after work, he'd decided to take the thruyards, stopping at the edge of a concrete lot. The lot was wide, and deep, and there was a skyway there, a kind of bridge between two buildings. He stood under its shadow and looked at the lot for a moment. Seeing no one there, he walked ahead, entering a gauntlet of warehouses.

In the side of one warehouse he saw a series of shuttered garage doors. The wind rattled them like drums. He walked past them and found a smaller door, far from the entrance of the lot. He knocked to no answer, then tried the knob. It opened under his hand. He entered a dark and cavernous space, the dense shadow of something heaving at his side. The shadow was tall, oppressive. Like a hill, he thought, or a mound. He could not see the contents or makeup of the mound. There was an odor. The smell watered his eyes.

The faint glow of dusk paled at the doorway behind him. It lit the way to other doors ahead. There were three, he saw. All closed. He walked past the large mound, his steps echoing in the room, his hand over nose and mouth, gagging at the smell. He stood before the three doors. The door on the left interested him. He stopped there.

He heard a voice, then, in the darkness. What do you think you're doing? it said. The voice startled him. I'm sorry, he responded. I'm just looking. There was no answer. Just a shuffling noise somewhere near the big mound. A silhouette darted past the open door behind him, blocking out all light for a moment. The moment of total darkness unnerved him. So did the rustling: something papery, whispering. He turned, left through the door behind him, then found his way home in the early twilight.

He told some others at work about the warehouse, but most wouldn't listen. Only one of the men looked at him as he continued talking at lunch. The big warehouses out in the thruyards? the man asked. Was it the one with the skyway? Yes, he said, it was somewhere around there, but it was hard to explain, exactly. It was tough to find your way once you got inside. His coworker nodded and said he'd heard something a long time ago: Once someone followed one of those old tracks that crossed the east side of town, and it took them down to the thruyards and into those lots with the warehouses. They'd seen the garage doors open and saw what was inside.

What was inside? he asked.

I never found out, the coworker said. They would never tell.

No one ever told anyone not to go into those thruyards, but everyone knew to avoid them. And until now, almost everyone did. Everyone left the cafeteria, but his coworker lingered in silence, as if lost in thought. And the next day, there were more questions, and the day after that, the coworker was gone.

He didn't ask after the missing coworker, but the others talked. One said the man was probably hung up on a woman somewhere and would be back in a few days. Another said it was likely a wild tear: drinking, gambling, something of that kind. The coworker would come back, they said. But there was no return. No one seemed to care much as the days went on, and soon he stopped caring, too.

His second visit to the warehouse occurred some months later. It happened just as the first: after work, ambling and almost lost, he stepped into those thruyards and stood at the familiar edge of the lot. There was a gate at the lot now, a tall chainlink fence, and it was closed. He looked through the gaps in the fence. There were men out there spraying down a truck. The truck was big, and it was loud, idling under that skyway that shadowed so much of the area. The men with the hoses stood perfectly still in its darkness. They had their hoses trained on the cargo hold of the big truck. The water throttled the sides of its metal trailer. The sound, he thought, was like tearing. He stood and watched them for a while, then got an odd feeling, as if someone watched him in return. But none of the men with hoses seemed to notice him. He kept walking.

He started asking about the missing man at work, but no one seemed to remember him. Only one of his coworkers stopped to listen. It was a new man there, someone they'd just hired. You said there was someone who worked here and left? the new hire asked. Maybe, he said. Then he mentioned the warehouse. What's a warehouse have to do with a man leaving? asked the new hire. He said, I'm not sure. I just had an odd feeling about it. Then he went quiet.

He noticed the new hire looking at him over the next few days, and when he left one night, the man pulled him aside and asked, Is the warehouse one of those buildings out east? He responded that it probably was, but he didn't feel like talking about it anymore. And then the next day, the new hire wasn't anywhere to be found, and everyone said the same things as before: a woman, some drinking, gambling, or just moved on. People had been doing more and more of that. They just went somewhere and you didn't need to think about them anymore.

Anymore it was hard for him to think about anything. He spent his hours at work just looking at the clock, waiting to go home, and the nights were left to solitude and silence. In the morning he would try to think of reasons to leave the house. When he would call out sick, no one seemed to care. He only cared about the warehouse now. He would bundle against the cold and head south, then east, then find himself in the thruways, milling around those buildings: long, low, the wind

drumming their garage doors. One evening, when he walked by the lot, the men were still there with their hoses, but there was no truck: only the men arranged in a circle under the skyway, spraying into a vast puddle. The puddle was as large as a pond. The men, stock still, aimed their hoses into it.

He thought it was strange, but he didn't say anything to anyone at work the next day. He tried not to talk at all now. He just put in his hours and went home. But not straight home. Often he'd find himself taking the long way there: through all these sidestreets, past the remains of a field at the edge of the east side. And then he'd find himself in the thruways, right at the warehouse.

The truck was no longer there. It hadn't been for some time, he noticed. Soon the men were gone, too, but the frozen damp of their hoses remained. Ice slicked the roadway out front, glazed the driveway that led into the lot. And it hardened the puddle the size of a pond. Through the gate, he could see that its edges were frozen, but its center still trembled under the wind.

One night he decided to climb the chainlink of the gate, all the way up and over, standing in the bitter cold of the lot. It was silent but for the rattling of the garage doors. The wind wrestled through the lot's farthest end, where there was another tall fence, feathered with ivy and shrubs. Harsh gales laughed the ivy and stung his face. He turned toward the skyway between buildings, waiting to see if anything happened there. Nothing did. Nothing stopped him from walking to the massive puddle, stepping onto the ice that thickened its edges. He did not know what drove him to do it, but suddenly he was sliding onto its frozen surface, looking into its center. And when he looked into it, he saw something that couldn't be right: the long pipes, the deep contour of a fender, the doors winging away from the cab of a large truck, submerged and suspended.

He slipped over the ice on his way out and scrambled back up the fence. He ran all the way home. He missed work the next day and the one after. Maybe the whole week. It was hard for him to remember now. It was hard for him to recall how many days it took him to go out there again, but it seemed like the decision was no longer his own: almost, he thought, as if the warehouse decided for him. And the next time he took the thruways there, the fence was open, and the men were still gone, the truck still missing. Under the shadow of the skyway, the puddle the size of a pond appeared fully frozen. He stepped slowly onto its center again, looking into the ice, but he saw nothing of note in its shallows, no visions or impossibilities beneath the darkness of the skyway.

The garage doors shook behind him. He obeyed them this time. He walked past them and stepped to the entrance that he'd used before, all those months ago, the year before last: the smaller door. And upon his return, the smell came again, stronger than he remembered it. He retched, pulling his coat and shirt over his nose and mouth, breath ragged and throat hoarse. He could see the shadow of that oppressive mound to his right, the moon kinking through the

entrance behind to show the three doors ahead. He noted their outlines, just as he saw them last time. Only now one of them looked to be ajar.

A voice called at his side: The left, it said.

He started at the sound of it, but he didn't say anything. He just stood and waited. It was still for several moments.

What's inside? he finally asked.

Go in, the voice said.

He swallowed, coughed through his shirt. Have you seen any other men in here?

Go in, the voice repeated.

There are two men, he said. He stopped, then, and changed course. Turn on the light, he said.

Something cantered and slammed behind him, somewhere on the other side of the mound. It was then silent. It remained dark.

He left without another word. He did not go home this time. He walked the thruways until morning, then went directly to a bus station somewhere north. He bought a ticket to a place outside of town. He'd saved enough money to last him a while, he thought, and would live on that until he could find work elsewhere. But everywhere looked the same to him. The bus drove through endless corridors of warehouses, bounding over bridges bronze with rust. It then skirted hills and dipped into valleys, later entering a new town filled with still more warehouses, lower bridges, more colorless fields, and then another grey downtown the next afternoon. All was one long thruway. He left the bus at the next station and sat on a wooden bench for a while, watching men and women buy snacks from a vending machine. He was not hungry. He decided to go back.

His return trip started much like the ride up north, but he no longer looked out the windows. He looked at the others on the bus instead. They all stared ahead in silence. They knew nothing of the men who were still missing. Maybe, he realized, he knew just as little. He did not know what he would tell his work. I wasn't feeling well, he might say, but I'm much better now.

Now the bus slowed and angled into a turn, jarring over an incline. The engine sputtered, idled. The bus stopped, and he felt rather than saw a shadow overhead, heard heavy rains lashing the windows. But when he finally looked outside, there was no rain. There was the skyway looming above, and the men gathered at all sides of the lot, their hoses trained. The spray rippled and

cascaded over the windows, shivering the image of the warehouse behind. The sound, he thought, was like tearing.