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Looking At My Father Peter Markus

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Peter Markus

BLACK LIGHT

For years he had heard his father talk about work, about carbon boils, tape holes, skulls of frozen steel. And he had spent many nights lying in bed awake—nights his father worked the graveyard shift—wondering what it all meant, as if the mill—and the life that went on inside it—was a part of some other world: a world to which he and his mother did not belong. But one day all of this changed. One day he decided to ask his father if he could come inside, if he could go with his father to work, to see what it was like. And his father said he did not see why not, though he would have to clear it first with the plant manager, a tie-and-shirt type of man by the name of Russell Prescott. Which he did. And a date was set for that following Monday. And so, instead of getting ready to go to bed like he usually did at eleven o'clock, listening to the final innings of the Detroit Tiger game, the voice of Ernie Harwell drawling through the dime-sized speaker on his transistor radio, he found himself walking the quarter of a mile upriver with his father, step by step in the darkness of this mid-July night, the sky frosted fly-ash gray with a haze that hung over in the wake of the day's ninety-degree heat. His father did not say anything the whole way there, though as they passed through the black-grated entry gates of Great Lakes Steel, he pushed his hand down into his front trouser pocket and pulled out two tiny tablets of salt: white like plain aspirin. "You think it's hot out here," his father warned. "Just wait until we get inside." And then his father dropped the pills into his hand. And it was true. Inside, the heat made it hard for him to breathe. The hot metal was so bright—it was so black with light—he could barely stand to watch as it drained from the blast furnace down to the thermo ladle waiting below. He closed his eyes, held in his breath. But still he could see the sudden flash of molten sparks showering down, could taste the burn of cooked limestone slag, could feel the callused hand of his father reaching out toward him, taking hold of him, turning him away from the light.