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Only an Accident
By BRUCE MACHART

JUST after lunch break one infernal Houston afternoon in 1995, I slammed the door of the company truck, cranked the engine, and punched the gas so hard that the truck fishtailed onto Jensen Drive. Beside me sat my co-worker Charlie. In his lap, he clenched a blood-drenched wad of paper towels over what had been, minutes before, his left thumb. The severed thumb, packed hurriedly on ice in a cup, rode in the center console.

“No more hitchhiking for me,” Charlie said, deadpan, a shiver running through him.

Just two years before, another pale-lipped co-worker — my good friend Tim — had made the same trip in the same truck for the same reason. The two accidents had been all but identical.

Both men had been using the “slitter,” a mammoth machine used to cut 10-ton rolls, or “slabs,” of rubber conveyor belting to custom widths. Slabs came from the factory measuring 7 feet wide by 1,200 feet long. A customer at a concrete plant might have a gravel conveyor that requires a belt measuring 2.5 feet wide by 200 feet long. The slitter made this simple work. It also made ripping one’s thumb meat off the bone exceedingly possible. Hence the truck rides, the cups of ice, the surgical reconstructions.

In my 10 years selling hose and conveyor belting in Houston, I heard many stories about industrial accidents, and I confess to a guilty fascination with them. There was the sugar refinery laborer who fell asleep in a freight car while taking his lunch break. The man was still asleep when the conveyors above cranked back to life, and he was buried — suffocated — in sugar.

Then there was the grisly story of the debarking drum, which is effectively a giant, spinning, kilnlike pipe into which one puts logs to strip them of their bark. Imagine a machine violent enough to tumble logs clean. Now imagine that machine loaded with a grown man. Who knows how such mistakes are made, but, so the story goes, he was still inside when the machine turned on. He was lost.

I often came back to that word — lost. It implies a certain negligence, a certain culpability, but it also suggests that what is lost might be found again. In those days, I routinely called on manufacturing facilities and mines and sawmills and petrochemical plants, and on company marquees all over town was the following phrase: “___ days since the last L.T.A.” L.T.A. stands for “lost time accident,” meaning an accident that caused an injured employee to miss future “time” at work.

It’s the time that’s lost, but what else? The loss of productivity, the loss of blood, the loss, perhaps, of a life itself. Something twisted in me still wants to make light of it, to imagine, when I hear the phrase “lost time accident,” a collision involving a time machine. And this is true even though I’ve held a man’s severed thumb in my hands.

On that blistering Houston day that smelled of carbon black and blood, the emergency room doctors could not reattach the meat to Charlie's thumb. Instead, they made an incision in his pectoral area and sutured the bony stub of his thumb up inside his chest. In six weeks, they cut it out, new meat and all, and grafted on some skin. It was a "lucky accident" the doctor told us. Had the bone, too, been severed, things would have been far more complicated.

What was notably uncomplicated, for me, was how readily I put the accident behind me. I left Charlie at the E.R., drove back to the warehouse, and fired up the slitter.

I was thinking of all this recently. On Friday, I flew from my adopted city of Boston, where a bomber was on the loose after leaving four people dead and around 200 injured, to my home state of Texas, where a fertilizer plant explosion in a small town called West had left more than a dozen dead and around 200 injured.

That morning, while watching the live coverage of the Boston manhunt, I had also been searching the Web for news about West. In the first hours after the fertilizer plant explosion, many commenters had wondered about the likelihood of foul play or terrorism. But once it was deemed an industrial accident, the hysterical coverage tapered off. We had nothing to fear from West; we could stop paying attention.

We tend to discount that which is accidental as somehow less tragic, less interesting, less newsworthy than the mayhem of agency. Lives have been "lost" in Texas, but in Boston, by God — lives have been "taken."

But this distinction means nothing to the victims or, I imagine, to their families. In Boston, in West, whether by sinister design or by accident, whether on a television-ready stage or hidden away in a rural factory, when people are hurt, when lives are lost, the essential human cost shouldn't be lost on the living.

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