

Workingman

by Larry Strattner

He died in the ditch he dug. One moment he spaded dirt around the pipe, the next he laid on his back.

Sky, framed by the top edge of ditch, faded from cerulean to a lighter periwinkle and winked out. Darkness lasted a moment. There was no pain.

Standing above, looking down at himself in the hole, he recalled hearing of this phenomenon. Disinterested, he didn't hold his own attention long. He turned away to continue on, never one to linger.

For fifty years he worked hard; all his life. Ditches, weather, waist deep water, torches, dripping solder and huge wrenches defined him. Strong, blocky, chiseled in face and body, he wrestled life; took satisfaction when he occasionally pinned it down.

His gnarled, callused hands repaired pipes and soothed and aroused his wife over the same years. He loved her with his heart and his workingman's hands. She meant everything to him yet he sometimes touched other women. He was hard and violent in body and work. Only hard and violent women seemed to banish his occasional darkness.

Cherishing his wife he comforted and spoiled her. She made him human; cared for him, saw to his needs, fed him and radiated constant warmth in which he luxuriated. He counted himself happy.

Two children sprung from their union. Neither was similar to him in temperament or choices. His son, a doctor, far away, tall, fair haired, studious and sober, helped people in need. In the flashing moment of his fall he wished his son near; to help him. He knew, in the same moment, there was no hope.

His daughter taught small children. Third grade, if he remembered. Anything she said to him always seemed remarkably clear and logical. He smiled, wondering if his connection to her had something to do with her skill with third graders.

He lay in the ditch, sinking slightly into the clay; amidst his good deeds and his sins. The leaky pipe coupling he had been digging to

fix continued to dribble. The sun set for him; first behind the edge of the ditch, then below the horizon of the world.

Water rose halfway up around his prone body. It froze in the cold night air. They found him in bright morning, his life served up on a beautiful, square, sparkling plate of ice.

