

It's Rush Hour

A long trip getting past the high-school where kids cross the street in the morning slowly. We need air in the low tire. But it makes first sense to pick up the empty gas can. We see road workers with steam blowing out their nostrils, their faces red. The spread out hay and black plastic hides the new road for ten days. It would crack otherwise. Ours is a tire center.

At the garage, we load hoses, jackhammers, picks, shovels, two-by-fours, hammers, nails, black plastic wrap, bars, broom, flat shovels, oil, dry gloves, a gas can, electric cords, saw, level, square, rulers, pencils. The hay we'll buy later.

Florida. Hawaii. Jamaica. Manilla. At least there's heat coming from the heater now.

We bottom out into the gas station going a bit too fast. Fill the tank, the gas can, the tire. Pay in cash. Ask for a hand-written receipt. Dated. We're back on the road.

Rush hour traffic all the way up the north side. The soon-to-be tire center crouches, waiting to be finished. Wind howls through the cab and, for just a second, I think of the Northwoods, the Klondike, tundra. I remember where I stashed them now. My undershirts. In that unpacked bag of clothes. After six months I should have gotten to it. No excuse for laziness.

We smell exhaust stuck in stop-and-go traffic. The cars take days to go by. I just don't think about it. Small cars greyed with salt. Some vans, not like mine. Vans with windows and no rust. Signs painted on the side for church groups. Transportation for the elderly. Hasty's Auto Transport Service -- Wheelchair Equipped. Not like my van. Mine has a lot of rust and no windows.

A long line of cars ahead of me and a few trucks. A line of cars and trucks equally long behind me. This is what Stevie, my brother, said about it. He said, "Look. My relationship with Jenny. (She was his girlfriend.) Got fucked up because of that fat pig. Because of the way he fucking acts, you know? Because of the way he makes you think. You know what I mean? When

he pulls that baby shit routine of his. I tried to talk to him about it. You know what he told me? He said, 'I gave you life. I don't owe you anything else.' Well, I say he's full of shit. So what do you think?" He was asking me. He wasn't looking at me. I said, "You're right, Stevie. You're right. He's full of shit." "Then what are you going to do about it?" he asked. He looked at the road. "You're gonna work for that fat slob the rest of your life?" I had driven him from the airport home. For Thanksgiving, he flew in from where he was going to school in California. "No," I said, "no. As soon as I can, I'm getting the hell out of here." "When?" "I don't know," I said, "as soon as I can."

Big Avenue. We turn east. Red-faced walking men and women blowing steam from either sidewalk. I forget myself once staring at a woman waiting for the bus. When I hear the horns behind me, I know it's a green light.

At the Uniroyal tire center-to-be nobody's there. It's too cold, I think. Nobody's coming. Then Pop's getting out of his car. He's parked right behind the van. A big brown leather jacket and fedora. He tells the dog stay inside the car. The dog barks. "Forgot her sweater," he explains.

Pop asks me where are the excavators. "How do I know?" I shrug. Without the air compressor, we can't do anything. So with my brother I wait in the cold out of the van. I mean the van out of the cold. Just a slight breeze where the side doors are rusted out.

Inside the van, there's not what I'd call a lot to talk about with Stevie. We're not that kind of family. "What's her name again?" "Allison," he says. "Quit foolin me." "I'm not foolin you. Her name is Allison." "I thought you said her name was Jenny." "That was before. Now it's Allison." "You in love with this Allison?" "No. I loved Jenny a little. Now I'm just playin the field." "Good," I say, "you're too young for all that relationship bullshit." "You got that right. Took me long enough to figure it out too." I say, "Learning takes time." "Yeah? Well, what the fuck do you know about

it?" "I know plenty," I say, "believe me." "Yeah? Like you know about this job being the last one till spring, right?" "Don't get on my case," I say, "you're not here to tell me what to do."

The excavator just drives up in his machine. No truck. No trailer. Just the one-foot bucket sitting like the fat man promised at the bottom of his half-yard barrel. The driver jumps out. Gives my Pop a handshake. The truck wouldn't start. "They didn't plug it in," he explains. "Guess they forgot to read the weather reports. Fucking cold ride getting here. Let me tell you. In that open cab." He pulls a large ball-pein hammer out of his cab. He changes the bucket on the big arm of his machine from the standard two-foot hoe, which is too wide, to the one-foot hoe like the fat man promised. He reminisces with Pop about the 1976 Mitchell Field Fiasco in which he cut the power cable and accidentally the whole airport plunged into darkness. I wonder would he joke like that if Pop had been at fault or him. "Get fucked," said Pop's insurance man to the Chief Engineer. "Look where this cable's drawn." He said. Pointed to the specs. "Get fucked!"

A big cold wind comes right off the Pick-N-Save Warehouse Foods parking lot. Overhead, there's a roof, but no walls. We won't get any sun, but plenty of wind. I envy the excavator. He can sit and stay warm in his cab all day with the heater blasting. But the operators tell me their backs and kidneys get fucked up from always bouncing around. I shake his hand. Then I'm back inside the van watching him to set up dig.

"Study Math," Stevie told me, "you were always good at Math in high school." "It's boring," I told him, "besides, it guarantees nothing." "At least it's a chance. What have you got now?" "I've got a chance," I said. "Yeah?" said Stevie.

I remember driving him. I forget where from or where to. While he was in college, I always chauffeured him around. He didn't have a car. I said, "You know Pop thinks you're gonna be like a retirement fund for him." "Yeah," said Stevie, "and I think it's great. I'll get back at him for all

the shit he dealt me. I can just see him calling me on the phone, begging money. 'Call me next week, Pop.' That's what I'll say. And the thing is, he's stupid enough to call. Who knows. He may never figure out what next week means. It'll be beautiful. I can't wait."

Pop drags me from the van and the sweat I've already worked up sends a chill through me. I jump in the hole with a square shovel and start knocking the bottom flat. The ground is easy digging and warm with the hole out of the wind. My feet are warm. I'm working fast. The one-foot claw reaches out and sets its teeth down just ahead of where I'm standing. The hoe scrapes the floor of the hole into ridges and I knock them flat with the shovel again. Then the dump truck drives up pulling the trailer. The driver jumps out, shoos me out of the hole, jumps in where I've gone with a shovel in his hand. "I heard you were froze up!" I shout above the machine's engine. "Different truck!" he shouts back, pointing.

The same black delivery man as usual drives up with the air compressor. I was warm in the van. Now I'm cold. "You need some extra hose? You sure you don't want another hammer? I brought a hammer just in case. I got the ticket right here." He waves the pink ticket. "I'll mark it down. Just tell me do you need anything." We need the air compressor. In no time, we hook it up. It keeps killing -- the engine -- so I leave the choke out a little.

The stuff's worse than I thought. It looked brown, rotten, not just wet. It turns white as soon as I hammer it. Dust blows into the air. It doesn't want to break. And it won't break. Then I feel the bit suck in and I know it's stuck. The release mechanism is wired shut because it's broken. We have to break the ninety free with the sixty.

My brother nudges my shoulder. "What should I do?" he yells. "Wait till I break some out. Then get the pieces out of my way. I have to see what I'm doing."

Stevie got his break when Shackleford told Pop to fire him. Shackleford was the foreman

on a big job we did for the city in 1979. Stevie worked with Pop part time, and part time as a mechanic in an auto center. Shackelford thought he was fucking off when he spent three straight days trying to fix the engine on our compactor. Shackelford was a tall fat black man who always talked about Arkansas, his home state. "Little Rock," he'd say, "Arkansas. Land of opportunity!" This he blurted out in a really pissed off voice and then he laughed. "No fuckin jobs worth a damn in Little Rock, Arkansas." Pop lost \$30,000 on that job, in the first place because he underbid it, and in the second place because he spent too much time drinking during the day and not supervising. Pop fired Stevie on Shackelford's word. Secretly, I was proud. I thought I had him by the ass. Pop hated Stevie and always badmouthed him. For about six years, I was the favorite. But Stevie, he made up for it. Once he got in school, he studied like a madman. He got into med school and then Pop loved him all over again, probably more than he ever loved anyone, except maybe Joey.

Stevie stands in front of the hole full of broken pieces. I holler, "Clean it out!" "You don't have to yell!" He gets down, starts throwing rocks out of the hole on his hands and knees. I yell, "Not that way. Get a shovel." One thing's for sure. That Allison really picked a winner in Stevie. Back comes Stevie with a shovel.

Pop's old, fat and slow, so if he works it's never hard. He supervises. Does the paper work. He watches from inside his car with the dog next to him. At times, he leaves the car to check if the trench is too deep.

The machine finishes the long trench. I finish breaking on the first of two short runs which later the machine will dig trenches out of.

"One-thirty. Why don't you guys have lunch?" Pop stamps his feet, blows into his gloves. When you first step out of a warm car, you really feel it.

Stevie's hacksawed four of the six rods stretched across the trench. He cuts one side just so the machine won't jam a tooth when it digs there.

We walk to the Burger King up the block. We clean up, order trashy food and sit. Already Stevie's jacket is open. That's smart. It lets the cold out. I tell him to bring salt. We're sitting right next to a bunch of teeny boppers. Their boom box. Talk of crack. I tell them to cut their fucking noise. They call me redneck. Turn up the volume. Laugh. They know I can't win. They own this place. They pay the manager's salary.

I remember Pop begged me to come back to him. First the detox center. Its antiseptic smell and metal staircase. Then the front stoop of the halfway house, the old drunks sitting on it. Men with big noses chewing on the ends of stogies. Smokestained yellow walls, and cramped corridors. Pop smiling, probably for the first time in his life. "Your mother said she'd like for us to start working together again. What do you say? Soon as I get out of here?" Just up the street was Marquette University. There all the rich boys learn to be doctors and lawyers. But I'm just bullshitting myself. Look at Stevie. He'll get his MD in two years. I could have done the same thing.

Our sweat freezes. Our heads bow into the wind. We walk back across the parking lot to the job site. Only three hours left of sunlight.

The truck's gone to the dump. The trailer leans on a woodblock up toward the back of the parking lot. A stripped-up pile of asphalt crouches, too tired to move. The machine's been busy over lunch. Now it digs where I just broke out.

I start fast breaking again. Stevie's in the trench catching pieces as they fall. "Stevie," I say, "get out of there. What if I drop the hammer on you?" "But the pieces?" "Leave em. There'll only be a couple more anyway."

I lean the hammer against my legs, feel how hot it's getting. "More oil in the hose. And while you're at it, fill the gas tank."

I spit. Wipe the dust off my glasses. Blow my nose. The excavator sits in his cab, takes a bite from a sandwich. With his other hand holds open a paperback. The truck drives up and the driver jumps down, carrying a plastic sleeve of PVC. I walk over to the excavator who rolls down his window. "Did you hit the sewer pipe?" "From the angle, I don't know how I could have missed it. I couldn't see anything." "We better pour today." "Yeah. Your old man says there's an inspection tomorrow." "You think that pipe will do the trick?" "No problem. It's standard operating procedure. Just don't let the city catch you, or you'll get all kinds of shit about it." "You need to get that grate off?" I say, pointing to the sewer grate. "Yeah. We already tried it. It's froze up tight. Your old man went to get a sledgehammer and a pick." "I got a chain in the van. Maybe you can pick it up with the hoe." "Naw," he says, "I don't want to tear it up." "Good luck," I say. "It's not my problem," he says. There's no use arguing. If the city decides to stick it to us, it's not coming out of my paycheck. Or Pop's.

My hands go numb on the hammer. I bend back my fingers one at a time so they'll move again. I can't feel the Kleenex in my left hand. It's covered with chalk dust oil smudges and all torn up, but I use it anyway. Then I hear what sounds like someone striking a gong. Pop's changed into his work jacket. The fedora is gone, replaced by a stocking cap. He hits the sewer cover several times with a sledgehammer...nothing. The hoe tries to lift the cover with its teeth. Then he hits it several more times with the sledgehammer. Each time it makes a sound like someone striking a gong. I see his car parked once more in back of my van. The dog is gone. He's taken her home.

The cement truck arrives with nine yards. They finally pry the grate off. The driver of the dump truck is on his knees, fitting the sleeve into place. Pop comes and takes Stevie back with him

to help pour. I see Stevie disappear into the van, then re-appear with the vibrator and an extension cord.

I put down the hammer on the slab, scrape the hole clean with a flat shovel. Now I miss Stevie. My hands are blistered. It hurts to grip the shovel. And switching jobs, I feel the cold more. The excavator waits for me, parked right at the end of my trench. I take off my gloves and bite the blisters open, spit out the taste of sour pus. They hurt a lot when I first do this. But if I don't they'll hurt too much later on for me to grip.

Pop gives me a break at the hammer. He asks me to get the re-bar out of the warehouse. "Just lay them on top where we just poured," he says, "I'll come back and cap it off later." I see the driver of the dump truck work the chute signaling the cement driver ahead. Stevie follows him with the vibrator.

The only way inside is to circle around to the front door. As I pass the sewer cover, I see it's cracked in four places. If the inspector asks me tomorrow, I'll tell him it was that way when we got here.

Inside, it's warm and smells of sour milk. I weave my way up and down the corridors. At first it was a dairy. Then it became a warehouse. Now it has offices also: a dentist, a cabinet maker, New York Bagels, soon a Uniroyal tire center. Rumor has it New York Bagels is failing. The hall is brightly lit with clean tile and fresh paint on the walls. But there's a padlock on the large door to the storeroom. I have to go see that cranky old son-of-a-bitch maintenance man. I run downstairs. Find him in the basement. He fumbles with the keys, limps. Matching his stride, half of me enjoys the rest. The other half wants to pick him up and run him to the service elevator.

"Tomorrow," he says, "I'm coming in early. If you want to leave your tools here overnight, you won't have to worry." "That's O.K.," I tell him. "But it makes no sense for you to have to bring

your tools back and forth every day." "That's the way the old man wants it," I tell him. "What the hell you guys doing here for anyway," he says, "in this weather? You should have been here two weeks ago." "We do the jobs in the order he gets the contracts." "Well, what if those footings freeze? We'll make you tear them out, you know." "That's our problem," I say. He asks how we're going to do the rest of the job. The floor. The trench drain. I tell him to ask Pop. That's what Pop told me to say.

I pry the old four-by-six board up from where it's being used to jam shut the old door to the loading dock. Block the door open. I can only take two rods at a time. Balance them between the doorway and shelves piled high with tires wrapped in red and white tape. The rods bend in the middle and wobble up and down as I walk. They are number fours, twenty-two feet long. The job takes ten rods. I make five trips.

Pop caps off the long stretch, points to where the cement truck driver -- a different driver than the last one -- should wait for us. I break and the dump truck driver cleans out the hole. Pop stops me. Hands me a personal check out of his wallet. Tells me to get the hay. "I can't now," I say, "it's rush hour. I can't get through traffic." "I called," says Pop, "they're only open until five-thirty. You better go now. We'll finish here. Take Stevie with you to help load."

I drive three miles-per-hour on the freeway. I take the first off ramp and use the side streets. The trip to the South Side will be slow, but the trip back will be much faster. The van is getting warm inside. I begin to relax. Then I wander.

Pop said nothing. Stared at the T.V.. Reached down and scratched his dog's belly. "Well?" I said. "Well what?" "Well it's payday." "You mean you expect me to pay you after five and a half hours of fucking off?" "Oh Christ, Pop." He said, "No. You oh Christ." He struggled out of his chair. Stood swaying a little over me. So fat, he couldn't hold his balance. He looked me over, then

said, "You rented the trailer. Right?" I nodded. He said, "Then how come it took you three and a half hours longer than it should have?" "What?" "You heard me." "Pop, for Christ's sakes." "All you had to do was make one lousy trip." "It was three trips, Pop." "Now, why was that?" he said, putting his hands on his fat hips. Bending toward me. "Pop," I said, "I couldn't haul five-hundred bricks and all that scaffolding at one time. I would have broke an axle." "Oh bullshit!" "No," I said, "it's not bullshit. Pop, you never do what I do, so how do you know how long it takes for me to do it? You say I'm fucking off. Well I'm not. And I've been working for you what. Ten, twelve years? In all that time, do you honestly believe I'd ever try to cheat you out of one dime?" "Chuck," he said, "the simple fact is I've been sitting here all day waiting. Wondering whether or not you'd get the scaffolding back to Rental World before it closed. I even called them at twelve-thirty. And they said they hadn't seen you. You weren't there at two-thirty either when I called back. You did finally get there didn't you?" I said, "I would have told you right away if I hadn't." "Well, so what am I supposed to do? It cost me a total of eleven hours today for a job that should have taken six." "Oh Christ, Pop," I said, "look. If that's the way you feel about it, just dock me three hours pay, O.K.? I'd rather lose the money than listen to you scream your fucking ass off every time it takes longer than you think it should." "And what about Stevie?" Pop said. "Am I supposed to dock his pay too? Do you think he'd agree to that?" He waited for an answer, then said, "No. I didn't think so." He walked into the dining room and picked up his jacket off a chair. He called his dog. "Well," he said, "I'm going to the bank now. If you want to wait. I'll write you a check when I get back." Then he left. I thought, "So that's it. He makes me wait like he waited." I sat in Pop's chair watching T.V. for forty-five minutes. Then I saw two pens, his clipboard and a stack of papers on the T.V. table by his chair. On top of the papers was a bill to Miller Colourplate for \$15,000. I figured he cleared about three grand off that job. And while I busted my ass for three weeks earning the

money for him, he did nothing but sit and watch T.V. with his goddam mutt. I was so mad I swatted the T.V. table into the air. The table top broke apart from its stand and sent everything on it flying. I turned to leave while the last of his papers fell to the floor.

Stevie yells at me and I narrowly miss a kid on a bike. The kid hollers through his ski mask. I want to stuff his backpack down his throat. We stop at a red light. I hear my name and the red light has changed to red-flashing. The only garden center in town with ten bales of hay left will be closed at five-thirty.

I date the check. Fill in the amount. Pop's signed it. But the only reason I can figure for him already filling in the name of the garden center is he doesn't trust me. In front of the counter person it's embarrassing as hell. Watching him look the check over because there's two different types of handwriting. A dated receipt. I throw the last bale into the van and slam the back doors.

I have to use my lights now, but this is good. The lights from the other cars keep me awake. But it's getting colder. The wind chill was seven below this morning. It's colder now.

On the freeway, there's no traffic going north. To my left, three long rows of headlights. In the side mirror, the red lights in three long rows.

"Chuck," Stevie says, "I almost forgot to tell you. We didn't have the family get together last week, you know. For Thanksgiving? Well, what I mean is. Me and Mom. We picked names for everyone out of the hat, you know? You wound up with Joey. Mom said he wants a color printer for his computer. She saw a nice one at Radio Shack for \$169. She says if you put fifty toward it, she'll make up the difference." "Why should I?" I say. "Oh, Chuck. It's Christmas." "Yeah?" I say, "what difference does that make? That son-of-a-bitch already has a shitload more than I'll ever have. And make up the fucking difference? Just like her to kiss his ass!"

Pop and the truck driver look like ghosts in the machine's lights. We open up the van. Pull

hay bales out the back. Pop calls me back to hammer. Goes to help Stevie spread hay. "Wait!" I say. Take out my pocket knife and throw it to him. "Stevie always forgets his."

When I look up the machine's lights blind me. The truck driver taps my shoulder, says, "Let Dave in here to clean things up a bit." I stand back. This is risky, but a lot faster.

When the black man drives up, I signal to him to wait five minutes. On the last rod, Dave rolls his window down. "Just saw it partway. I'll break it off with the bucket." The dump truck driver saws it partway. Dave clamps the teeth under the rod and pulls. I see the rock pinned between the teeth and the rod, but I'm too tired to think about it. The rod snaps. The rock goes flying. Dave's windshield shatters like a brittle old leg. Dave shrugs. All he has to do now is dig one short trench.

I help the black man load the air compressor. Argue with him. He claims the sixty is his along with one length of hose. He should know they're all our tools. But maybe he just wants to see if I know. When I show him there's nothing on the ticket but the compressor, he says, "I'm sorry you're right," and leaves. I pile the tools up where we'll see them until we're finished. Pop pours the last trench and the excavator and driver pick up the last of the broken concrete and dirt. In the streetlight, I see the excavator's sitting in the cab, framed by broken glass. His heavy breathing blows steam as if from a pipe. My brother and I set aside two bales of hay for when Pop's finished. I pull up the van beside the pile of tools. Start loading. Leave the engine running. Finished, I slam the side door. Jump in behind the wheel. The driver of the cement truck washes out in a pile of gravel at the back of the parking lot.

I go say goodbye to the dump truck driver and the excavator. "We'll beat the cops home," says the excavator. Their truck's overloaded with the trailer and machine behind it. I imagine a cop writing them out a big three-hundred dollar citation for a Christmas present.

My brother hops in the cab. We're headed out. Tomorrow there's a lot more shit to do. But

who wants to think about it?

At the Big Bridge, we wait behind a long line of cars in the dark. Past the orange steel who knows if the water is still out there, or steam even. "You know what, Chuck?" "No what." "I think we ought to kill him." "Kill who? Pop?" "Sure," says Stevie, "why not?" "How about because I don't want to end up a houseboy to some whole fucking cell block." "Awe, chill out, Chuck. I'm only kidding. It's just fun to think about, you know?" "Yeah. I know. I thought of it myself." "Oh yeah? How'd you think you'd do it?" "Oh, I don't know. Cyanide. Or maybe shoot him with his own gun." I laugh. "There's a type of poison that comes from a shellfish that the C.I.A. uses. They say you can't detect it." "Yeah?" "Sure. I read it in Time." "Jesus," Stevie says, "it's too bad we don't have some of that stuff." "Naw," I say, "just think how Mom would feel. I don't think you'd like it too much hearing her whining all day long." "I guess you're right," Stevie says, "besides, you never know. He's so fat. He might kick off any time now all on his own." "I kind of doubt it. He's so mean. I bet he outlives both of us." "Yeah," Stevie says, "he'll work us to death. For sure." We both sit for a while listening to the fan blowing hot air into the cab. Stevie asks, "So this is it, heh? I mean, after we're done with this job. We're shutting down for the Winter, right?" "That's what he says." "I'm not coming back at Christmas to work."

We park. Go inside. Pull off our boots in the hallway. In the kitchen, there's Mom and the dog waiting for us. And Pop.

Roast beef, mashed potatoes with gravy, peas and carrots, salad, bread and butter, Coke. "I felt sorry for you guys working so hard in the cold all day." "Thanks Mom." "Did you have a good day?" "All day, Mom." "I was so worried. All I could think about was you guys. How you must have been freezing. Did you get done everything you wanted to today?" "I think so, Mom. I think we did pretty good." "That's good," says Mom. "Maybe tomorrow it won't be so cold

outside." Pop says, "It's supposed to warm up." I say, "I sure hope so." "Oh, by the way. Did Stevie mention my idea for Joey's present?" "Yeah." "Well? What do you think? Is it a good idea?" "Yeah, sure Mom. Anything's fine."

After dinner, I drive home. Finish my bath. Dry off. In bed, I scramble for the pillow in the dark, all crushed down and smelling from sweat. I need to do laundry. For the first time all day, I think of her. Almost disappeared now. That beautiful girl who stands on the corner and keeps wearing heavier and heavier clothes, waiting for the bus. I know I'll dream soon. Right away, my arm shoots off the side of the bed. Gropes in the dark making sure the alarm is set. Now I can sleep.

End.