

Nine-Pepper Chili

We were half a dozen men with kids and wives and bills, dreading to go home before quitting time. Not wanting to get drunk the way Bill Cruse and that crowd had started off to do.

Margo's filled up for lunch while we sat clenched together like a fist, accepting refills in the corner by the big window. We put our hands around white china mugs, tipped creamer and sugar into coffee. There wasn't one scrap of food on that table. No one had the stomach for it.

Jim Bowers had spent twenty minutes telling why B&J didn't need us anymore. We'd stood grousing for another ten in the parking lot. We were free at eleven in the damn morning. Heck, I didn't even want coffee, but I sure wasn't ready to carry this bomb home. Blow up my life.

Afternoon sun put shadows onto the table at an angle we weren't used to. I kept my mouth shut, as usual, nodding through talk about unemployment and food stamps and third shift.

The guys didn't need to know I was an intruder into the middle class. I'd stayed out of gripe-fests about who'd had it hard as a kid. My Old Man was so frustrated, he'd punch out any one of us for a stupid mistake. I had the pity contest won, hands-down, but I wasn't ready to pick up any trophy for it. I was grateful and a little guilty to fly under the radar.

"Hell, third-shift would drive my wife crazy."

I glanced at Pete. He had no idea about crazy. If I knew someone at Bradley's like he did, I wouldn't be sitting on my butt at the diner. I'd have applied for that job by noon.

The Old Man would kick my ass for being so stupid. I set us up for big trouble. I saw my hand on the page like it was somebody else's, signing us into sixteen thousand dollars of extra debt. *Joe Vardemann*, it wrote. *Stupid Jerk*.

Wish to God we'd stuck with our plan.

"Can't live on third. I tried it once. I managed when I was twenty, but it wasn't normal."

"It's not good for a family. Hey, I got to get to those Saturday morning soccer practices." Talk bounced to kids and sports. Ricocheted away from unemployment and need.

Worry griped in my stomach. Soccer practice, hell. Was I the only guy who realized that Middle Class can slip away from a family? We only had six payments to go when I talked Karen into the new kitchen.

Middle Class could end for me. I knew about missing payments and losing property, and the hell that went with it. I wouldn't let it happen. Couldn't let it happen.

How the hell could I tell Karen I'd lost my job?

At least I'd never have to own up to the Old Man. All afternoon I flinched from glimpses of his face coming at me mean and low, ready to back-hand me.

Margo's cleared out around two. People with jobs had to get back to work. The paper coasters in the saucers were ringed with coffee circles. We called the waitress back one more time. Promised a big tip. Just before three o'clock Bill Simms pushed his chair back. "Well--" he tossed a dollar onto the table. Everyone took his cue and grubbed quarters and bills and dimes out of their jeans pockets.

I didn't meet anyone's eye. It might show that I know how vital money is in hard ways the rest of them hadn't lived through.

After I turned the key I just sat for a minute, jaw clenching. I didn't usually dread going home.



Joe came through the back door with two bags of groceries and a sober look that I hadn't seen in seventeen years of marriage.

"What's all this? You shopped?"

He thumped a bag onto the floor in front of the refrigerator and pulled out a package of pork chops. "Yeah, I picked up a few things." He moved the mayonnaise to make room on the second shelf. I pulled a box of ziti out of the other bag, and a can of tomato paste. I stopped. I glanced at the clock. Three forty-seven. He shouldn't even be home yet.

"What's going on, Joe?" I busied myself filling the kettle.

"Well, it's like this," Joe cleared his throat. He didn't say anything more. He kept his eyes on what he was pulling out of the bags. He held up a jar of jalapeno slices but he didn't meet my look, didn't tell me how he figured I'd use those peppers. His eyes flickered from the label to the shelf and back to the bag.

I waited. I pulled the lid off the tin of teabags and fetched milk and sugar. Joe cleared his throat again when the kettle boiled. I sloshed water into two mugs. Finally I gave him a nudge: "Joe—"

"Yeah." He knew he had to tell me. "Yeah."

"Joe, what happened?" I picked my mug up for warmth. For something solid to hang onto.

"I've been laid off!"

"Laid off!" Suddenly our sparkling new kitchen looked too big. Very luxurious and not sensible. I sat my mug down with a clunk. "With your seniority?"

"They're moving to Mexico." He shook his head. "Just like that."

Oh my god. Our mortgage payments were only a little bigger than last year, but now they went on for years. Oh, god.

When Joe and I started counting down the payments, the house actually looked different--proud sitting there on the corner, almost paid in full. What all could a redirected house payment buy? A

couch. Tickets to London, if we shopped early. We'd poured everything into the house, working to get that mortgage paid off. And we almost did it.

What we wouldn't be paying out looked like a fortune. Maybe *that* was the problem. We thought we had a fortune to play with.

But no. We hadn't gone crazy. We were pricing airline tickets when Joe looked around at the old wallpaper. I'd followed his eyes to the boxes of pasta stacked against the microwave table. I knew what he was thinking. I'd been imagining that new kitchen for years.

I tried to ignore it. Went back to my list of bed-and-breakfasts--but the idea of the kitchen expanded around me. Before long we were looking at blueprints instead of travel brochures.

Turns out, anything we spent that summer on fish and chips and high teas would have been too much. But that trip would have cost several thousand of what we didn't have to pay out, not sixteen that we *owed*.

That kitchen was everything I wanted: hardwood floor, butcher block. We joked: a new kitchen would inspire me. I'd look out over the herb garden from my computer nook and write a truly brilliant article on basil. I'd quit my part-time job at the nursing home.

Good thing I didn't.

That summer Joe felt heroic. I planned a before-and-after article for *Working Mother*. We were secure. Our plan had worked. Our kids were good. Editors liked my ideas. We could decide whether to pay the house off or improve it.

Would it have ruined some huge cosmic plan if we'd had a little time to enjoy it? Even three months--*one season* to feel really good?

But we didn't get any time. Straw still littered the yard. The herb garden was only a plan.

Joe's worried look pulled at me. "Things will work out, honey." Because of who we are. Because he's a hard worker. I laid my hand over his.



The old registers ticked with heat just before sundown. Karen offered another mug of tea and I took it. Light stretched onto the carpet from the dining room where Ben and Amy did homework. I ran my finger down the Help Wanted ads. Nothing on first shift. Just one job, and every one of the guys at B&J looking at the same paper, circling “*experienced machinist, 2nd shift.*”

The house around us felt fragile. “So you’re out of work?” Ben dug his hands into his pockets. I appreciated his concern.

“How can they do that?” Amy came to the door with her Biology notebook.

“I don’t know. But they did.” I folded the paper. “We’ll be okay.” But there was a freight train load of bills on the track. Rounding the bend, headed straight for us. We were quiet that evening. I was ready for bed when the kids went upstairs. Ready to stop worrying about what to do.

Karen jumped when the phone jangled in the dark. “It’s okay.” I caught it on the second ring. A call before dawn smacked of emergency.

“Hey, Joe. It’s Frenchie.” Frenchie Boulineau’s a junkyard dog: lean jaw, growth of dark beard smudged with grease. A hard glitter to the eyes and a way of sidling up to things, like he’d just as leave shy away. In a small town things get around and Frenchie had a knack of turning a profit any way he could. It was a nervy call, at a couple minutes before six.

He laughed. Said, “I figgered you’d be sleeping in.”

“Yeah, that’s right.” I didn’t laugh with him. “Got the easy life, now.” I shook my head. Karen closed her eyes again with a little frown.

“Saw you guys in at Margo’s. Looks like you need a job. You got a chauffeur’s license, ain’t you?” Said he had an International just waiting for a driver. He wouldn’t ask a fee to use the truck. We’d split the pay from the loads I hauled.

“That way, no matter even if things are slow, you’ll have something at the end of the month.” Loads were paying fair out of GM and around. He’d get me started. “I’ll recommend you to the company I’m signed on with.” Frenchie paused, dragging on a cigarette. “Drive her awhile. See how she feels. See how you like the business. No commitments. I just need that damn truck on the road.”

Karen drew her knees up and cozied her back against me. The narrow stripes of her nightgown curved along her hip.

“I’ll think about it,” I said into the phone. “Give you a call.”

“Who *was* that?” She yawned.

“Guy says he might have work for me.” I snuggled behind Karen and she pushed that smooth satin back against me. “Nobody important. I’ll call him later.”

“That’s right, you’re not going to *work*, are you?” She turned to me. “I don’t go in till noon. The kids won’t be up for,” she looked at the clock. “Forty-five minutes.” She raised her eyebrows. “You know what?” Her look pulled me back under the quilt.

Breakfast was like a weekend. The kids caught waffles out of the toaster. I browned sausage I’d splurged on to prove I was still providing. It was all very Leave-it-to-Beaver, as long as I kept my mind off money. After they left for school, we finished the dishes and I chased Karen back upstairs.

She pulled her scrubs on at eleven. “Hey, I could take this for awhile.” Pink brings out the color in her cheeks. She had some extra color that morning, and a sparkle to her eyes, too.

“I’m worried, too.” Karen looked at me in the mirror. “But you’ll find something.”

I was glad she felt that way, but I was flat-out serious. I had to find work. I left before she did. Strange to be out in the thin sun of a weekday, like skipping school. Alarm bells went off in the back of my head every seven or eight minutes.

I was at work on the farm before I could remember. Had my first paying job when I was fourteen. I don't understand not working. The Old Man wouldn't have understood signing myself into debt for a new-tiled floor and French doors. My stomach turned over again. He'd've had something to say about that skylight.

Frenchie was in his shack that backs up against the railroad tracks. Ghosts of machinery past filled the yard. Dust hung in the grit-filtered sunlight, wavering on the current of his cigarette smoke while we talked.

I didn't know the first thing about trucking.

"Companies like Janus are go-betweens. They hook up drivers who lease on with them with producers like Spicer to get loads to a receiver on the other end--say GM or Ford. Or from a cannery to a big warehouse that sends food to grocery stores."

Worry grabbed at my guts.

"They pay good. Janus carries insurance on the truck, arranges the load and all. They take a thirty-three percent cut off the top." Frenchie cracked the door and spat into the gravel.

"Load pays fifteen hundred, that's a thousand to us."

"A thousand!"

"Yeah. Then we divvie it up. The guy with the road tax, the license and repairs to pay for, that's me, he gets seventy-five percent. The driver keeps two hundred and fifty of that thousand, but see, he

don't have the responsibility. Takes a guy two days to earn two fifty. He turns around and hauls another load. It's not hard work. If you like it, you keep doing it. If you don't--hell, you get out."

I said I'd think about it, but the fact I already had a chauffeur's license looked like a plus. I pulled onto the tarmac of Coleson Drive with a shiver of excitement curling up around the edges of queasy worry in my stomach. Frenchie's offer was only a stop-gap, but it was better than just being flat out of a job.

Didn't want to get into trouble the way the Old Man did on that god-forsaken farm. I had to start bringing in money quick.



"I talked to that guy who called this morning. He's got," Joe cleared his throat again. "A truck sitting still. He needs a driver for it."

What does this have to do with us? I thought.

"Frenchie says guys make good money." He sounded cheerful, but Joe was nervous, too. "He says this isn't the best time of year to start. Trucking slows down when places close for Thanksgiving. Sometimes they don't get back to full production till after Christmas. But I need time anyway. I need to get to know the ropes, see."

"But can you just climb into a truck—an eighteen-wheeler, right--and take off?" It was still hard to believe we were back to owing thousands, and Joe without a job. "Is that legal?" My mind skipped like a needle across an old record, back to planning a trip and building up the savings account.

"I have my chauffeur's license. Remember, B&J wanted me to be able to haul machines and parts? That's what it took."

A truck driver. What does that mean?

“The good thing is, I can do it for awhile, keep looking for a better job. In the meantime the house payment’s made. He says guys are making real money. Depends on how hard a driver’s willing to run.”

Nights away, lots of driving.

“We don’t have to decide right now. I’ll call him on Monday.”

Ben had never really paid attention to what Joe did all day, but he climbed up into the International. Joe said double-clutching came natural after years of farmer-shifting the old Ferguson. He listened to the whine of the engine and eased her into gear.

Frenchie watched. Nodded. “I’ll call Janus. Tell ‘em I signed on an experienced driver.” He grinned. “You’re set to go.” Joe wheeled over the speed bumps and backed her through the white lines. It was a strong mix. Excitement and worry blended with leaf mold and diesel fumes.

We were awake before the alarm went off on Monday. We sat at the truck stop to make our second big decision of nineteen ninety-three. I pushed corned beef hash onto rye toast and watched trucks slide past the smudged plate-glass windows. Men tramped out into the lot with Styrofoam cups and packets of nuts. I looked at Joe again. He’d *be* one of those guys.

It was alarmingly simple. Frenchie called the company he drove for. Got the truck leased on and added Joe to his insurance as a driver. Joe packed the old green overnight bag with jeans and underwear and shaving gear. Frenchie had a load lined up by afternoon. Joe climbed in and chugged up the street with a wave and a toot of the air horn as he rounded the corner onto Jackson Street.

And that was that.

I stood in the drive waving. I resisted the urge to jump in the car and follow him out to the highway where he’d be sucked into the stream of traffic. It was as important as a first day of school. The cream and blue stripes of the International flickered between houses. They grew smaller like

ribbons above the tips of Amy's paintbrush braids. Frenchie was already looking for a load heading back, but Joe might be gone all week.

I walked up the back steps with both hands pressed to my mouth, steeling myself against emotion. Not fear, exactly, but a recognition of importance. This is why I cry at weddings. It's that couple. All their hopes. The knowledge every woman carries that even a good marriage goes through hard times. Joe driving away from me in the dusk felt that big.

The kitchen looked like a stage. Like there wasn't really anything on the other side of the wall. Okay, that might have been partly because I hadn't figured out where the philodendron looked best. I scooted it back against the new cabinet and narrowed my eyes, but it was no good. I couldn't--and it didn't feel right to--distract myself with sun through the skylight when I couldn't make myself believe I wouldn't see Joe in the morning. Or the next morning.

After the kids went to bed the house was quiet. The night was very dark.

I've figured out since what I almost recognized that night: we were trying out a new recipe for life. Experimenting with ingredients. Tasting to see what worked. What we had before was a basic pot roast: well-tried, seasoned with salt and pepper, drenched in rich gravy. What we concocted was exotic and daring. Maybe even dangerous. It was nine-pepper chili.



I was careful about passing, and following distances, but once I got her through the gears, driving the International wasn't much different from a car. The trailer followed fine. Didn't even feel it most of the time.

Double clutching and downshifting weren't a problem, but backing past other trucks in lots--*that* was scary, especially after I clipped another guy. Like a cat's whiskers, the mirrors on a truck stick out beyond the parameters. I was backing in slow, watching the trailer. There was a dull *ping* and the

rattle of falling metal, and there I'd taken the mirror off a white Freightliner. The Old Man didn't say much--just "*Jee-sus!*"

I owned up to it, sorry as hell. When he heard how new I was, the guy had a look at his door to be sure I hadn't damaged the truck. He let me pay for the mirror and let it go at that. Thirty bucks was a chunk of my pay, but it was worth it.

I worked my way up into Wisconsin. Strange to have Chicago between me and home. Phone calls were my life-line. Frenchie had agents' numbers, and loads. He told me where to go, when to be there. On Thursday he said I should check out sleeper rooms. "They got some in Belgium, close to where you're delivering. They're cheap and clean."

Renting a room was usually a family thing, or a fling. Still, it was only fifteen dollars. Not staying in the sleeper was worth something. A shower, after three days, was worth more.

There was a second-class community feel--a boarding-house civility in the stark common room at the top of the narrow stairway. The TV was hands-off. No debating what to watch, no flipping through channels.

A man came in and flopped onto one of the couches. He didn't stretch out the way a guy would at home, just crumpled into the corner. Another driver tramped through with a towel across his shoulders, trailing the wet smell of soap through the stale windowless room.

I got over feeling guilty quick enough. The room was cheerless. Utilitarian. Bed, nightstand, rack for clothes. No window there, either. When I laid my clean self down between clean sheets after three days of that sleeper stale with cigarettes and diesel, I forgave myself.

I turned out the light. I was earning money. Frenchie told me the gross pay. I whittled it back to my share. Maybe he thought I wouldn't do the math. Just as I drifted off, I felt the Old Man nod. I'd done the right thing. I was bringing in money.

The highlight of that first week was when I faced firsthand the idea that two trucks could wind up in the same space.

I was keeping up with traffic through construction in Milwaukee, getting the hang of it, but the lanes narrowed. We started to thread through sharp bends. I flinched. I tapped the brakes while the loaded trailer behind me pushed me faster than I wanted to go.

There was a rip. Something skittered along the length of the trailer. I looked over to see what it was, and the spot mirror was gone. Just a blind spot where it should have been. Beyond it, the dark eyes of the bearded driver next to me.

He reached for his CB. Thumbed the mic. “You gonna stay in your own lane, driver, or what?” He was in *my* lane, but I didn’t say a word. Running that close at sixty miles an hour made my stomach go cold. I watched his tires ease back across the flashing white lines and didn’t let my imagination run. I dropped back. Stayed away from passing for awhile, and stopped quick to replace that mirror.

I thought *I* was the dangerous driver on the road. Turns out, guys out there could come into my lane—at sixty miles an hour—and blame *me* for it. I could almost hear the Old Man: “Goddamn sonofabitch.”

My old man was the scariest person I’d met in my thirty-eight years. He’d had it tough, and he passed it on to us kids rough and mean. I grew up standing back from him. I’d seen him take my brothers out with a fast hard fist for bringing the wrong wrench or taking too long to bring the right one.

He might have had Little Man’s Disease, or it might have been the way the farm wouldn’t work. Either way, I had tremendous respect for him, tempered by the wisdom of fear. I figured out pretty young just how far that wiry arm of his could reach, and took a step back from that in case of a lunge.

The Old Man had an opinion on everything, a judgment for every action. Twenty-three years off

that farm and I still saw life through a split screen—what I’d just done and what maybe I should have done. What mistake I might soon be paying for. I took extra precautions, followed the rules, kept my nose clean, and held onto Middle Class.

If trucking could keep us afloat, I’d do it right. I spent part of Saturday morning backing into spots at the high school, keeping in mind: it wasn’t a painted line I needed to worry about but a truck, a wall, the reinforced edge of a concrete dock waiting to bite the corner of the trailer.



When Joe called to say he was on his way home, my urge to feed him was almost manic. “I want you to have a home-cooked meal.” Chicken and dumplings? A chocolate fudge cake? A pie. I thumbed through cookbooks. Ran across town for sour cream and green onions. I tore the kitchen up, cooking. Put it all back together again by the time Joe’s first safe-home meal scented the air.

The table was set, the meal ready.

“Gosh, that smells good!” Ben dipped a spoon into the broth—Mmm! When will Dad be here?”

“I’m not sure. Soon.” The meal had kept me focused, but suddenly I was jumpy. I ducked into the bathroom to run a brush through my hair. No need for blusher—My cheeks glowed. I was adding a little eye shadow when Joe’s Oldsmobile slid up the drive and into the garage.

“He’s here!”

It was pure Norman Rockwell, that homecoming. Joe’s hug took me off my feet while the ladle in my hand hung down his back. Pots steamed on the stove. Ben grinned from the doorway.

“Man, you look good!” Joe held me back, grinning. He took a deep breath. “And what *smells* so great?”

After dinner, Joe was pleased to cuddle, ready to flirt.

“Give me those.” He raised his eyebrows and nodded at my feet. Oh, his lap. Oh, the lotion,

warmed between his palms. Who knew how tired the arch, how needy the instep? He rubbed and rubbed. “I’m not done. This is relaxing.”

When he finally wound down, I was hazy with pleasure. Joe toppled over against me and nuzzled his head into my neck. “Oh, sweetie...” We were snuggled together when Amy came in.

“Look at all this food!” She looked up from the fridge when we trundled out to the kitchen, blinking and holding hands. It was true. There were bowls and casseroles, and that pie.



“Okay, you been bumming around Illinois and Wisconsin.” Frenchie slapped me on the back. “You ready to do some real work? I got a load of canned goods going out to Long Island. Eight hundred miles. You got thirty hours to get there.” He pulled a face that said *We both know it don’t take no thirty hours to drive eight hundred miles*. “It’s good pay. I’d take it myself, but you got some gravel in your belly now. You up for it?”

I said I guessed I was.

Eight hundred miles with no chance to get home. I rolled down the window. Fall air poured in, cool and full of the earth. I watched the night unfold. Ohio rolled past. Towns showed as scatterings of lights off in the distance.

I wanted to talk to Karen. Watching the moon get bright, seeing stars pop out is something we do together. But she was asleep by the time I’d relaxed enough to enjoy it.

I crossed out of Ohio at one-thirty in the morning, working to keep my eyes open. Pennsylvania gave me hours to think about the other end of the trip. Running on the big highways is like driving anything else. The hard part was still coming.

I found oldies and sang along while the engine worked hard through those hauls up the mountains and backed off on the way down. My eyelids felt as gritty as the floor mat while I shifted

and fought off sleep.

In the dark hours before dawn I made Bald Eagle State Forest my goal. I stayed awake calculating distance and time. It was still dark when I pulled into a truck stop, thinking of home. Figuring whether to order griddle cakes and sausage first, or head straight for the john.

The smell of bacon and potatoes set my stomach rumbling. I nodded to the waitress on my way through, like she knew me. I guess she knew any guy walking in before dawn would want coffee, because she was filling a mug for me when I came out of the men's room.

I sopped up eggs with the last scrap of toast and watched the sunrise begin. I took one more hit of coffee before I went out to the truck.

When I finished my log book the windshield looked like a big movie screen filled with the undersides of clouds changing colors. Karen would be in the kitchen, calling upstairs to the kids while the big pale moon faded out. About the time the sun would have been in my eyes I stripped off my shirt, hit the sack and slept hard for my full eight hours. When the alarm went off at three, that second long day of driving stretched ahead with the big city to negotiate at the tired end of it.

Traffic tightened after I crossed the Delaware River. I stayed in my lane. Watched tail lights. Took care to leave distance. Cars darted like fish wriggling into that space. I'd laughed at Daisy on the farm wading through kittens, picking up her big feet like she was scared to put them down. That's what I was. A big dumb dog moving faster than I wanted to, protecting a swarm of kittens that didn't even know they were in danger.

It was a long trip. Frenchie wasn't so smart saying it wouldn't take thirty hours. By the time I fueled up outside of Paterson, New Jersey, I was ready to flop into that sleeper. I concentrated on the two hundred fifty dollars that was my twenty-five percent of me and Frenchie's sixty-six percent. It was more than half a week's pay.

Long Island is a hell of a place for narrow streets. About the third bridge I went under, I had time to read the clearance sign. It said the height of that bridge was twelve feet eight inches. I didn't know a lot about trucking, but I knew the trailer behind me was thirteen and a half feet tall.

I was going to hit that bridge.

My heart grabbed. I tried to get the rig out to the center where maybe, just maybe I could slide through. No time to brake. Almost took out a Volvo in the middle lane. The driver gave me the finger when he fishtailed out of there.

I braced for the impact, the scream of metal against concrete. Then I was out on the other side.

Come to find out, all the clearance signs in New York State read one foot less than the bridge's actual height. Jesus "--Christ all-frigging-mighty!" the Old Man finished for me

I pulled into Waldbaum's at midnight. When I climbed down from the cab my knees almost buckled, but I hopped along, trying not to look inexperienced. I'd made it through the knot of highways, crossed the George Washington Bridge and the Throgs Neck. I was ready to hit that sleeper again after my first long haul.

The dock was a tangle of men working hard. Two forklifts buzzed in and out of long aisles stacked high with canned goods. I swung the trailer door open and looked around to see how other drivers were doing. Up and down the dusty dock men tore shrink-wrap off of skids and re-stacked cases of green beans and carrots and mixed vegetables onto other skids.

Guy next to me caught my eye. He was grizzled and bloodshot. I took a step toward him.

"What's the deal? They re-stack the stuff?"

"Gets re-stacked," He didn't stop, just grabbed another case. "But ain't no 'they' that does it. We do it. You're responsible for your load. They want it stacked four high."

I looked into the open trailer. Front to back, cans stood six high inside plastic cocoons, fifty-

three feet long and two skids wide. It looked big as a barn full of cow shit. I could just about hear the Old Man advising me to get my ass into gear.

“How do we do this?”

“Grab you one of them hand jacks.” The man slammed another case of green beans onto the third tier of the skid he was filling. “If you can find one.” He put both hands at the small of his back and straightened. Blue plaid flannel strained across his belly. “Between the two of us we might be able to hang on to one, if we keep it busy.”

I walked along the front of the row of aisles. There must have been a hundred docks, with a truck backed up to almost every one of them and a little guy--even big guys looked little in that place--coming in and out of it, lugging cases of cans, rushing back into trailers. About halfway up the dock I spotted a hand jack sitting idle.

I picked up the pace. Unloading that trailer was going to be tough when I needed rest, but at least I could get started on the job. I was closing in on the jack when a big guy with a limp moved fast between me and it. He grabbed it.

“*Hell* you do!” A thin man wearing a Cimmaron cap scuttled out of the back of his truck with a case of beets and thumped them onto the nearest skid. He reached for the big guy, but he was moving slow like he’d been on his feet a long time. He missed grabbing the guy’s jacket by three inches. “Git your hands off that, you sombitch! That’s mine!”

The big guy moved fast, wheeling the cart ahead of him. “Ain’t no more yours than mine! I got to get this load off!”

The thin guy looked like he’d bust the big guy’s head if he thought he’d get away with it. He jerked his work gloves off. Looked around mean and slow. Put me in mind of the Old Man, except I could get away from this guy. I looked away quick and ducked down an aisle.

At the end of it, busted and bleached skids laid in heaps. I grabbed one in each hand. I’d need

more skids to put my load onto than it had come in on, but this would be a start.

The building was long as a city block and filled with men moving goods from their trailers to the dock, or carrying skids, or just standing, looking weary as heck. The knot in my stomach loosened when the driver next to me wheeled a skid out of the back of his truck on a pretty little jack, but he shook his head when he saw the skids I was lugging.

“Those won’t do you no good,” he said. “This is food. It has to be on new wood.”

“New wood?”

“Yeah, at least new-*looking* pallets.” He swerved the jack to place the skid alongside the row he’d made on the dock.

“Well, where do I get those?”

He shrugged. “Wherever you find em. They ain’t many. I’m about out.” Up inside the trailer leaned two bright pallets. “You’d best have some ready when I’m done with these, or we’ll lose this jack.”

I was the new kid at a tough school. I was wandering around with my eyes wide open looking up at skyscrapers. It was up one aisle and down the other and out at the far end, looking for pallets. Guys actually came to blows over clean ones when a few could be found. It was alley fighting over the jacks. The Old Man shook his head: “Crazy bastards.”

I finally found a haphazard stack of clean wood. I grabbed two pallets and walked away quick. I needed more than there were in the pile. If someone else found them they’d be gone before I could get back for even two more. Tired as I was, at least I could get started on the next leg of the job.

“Man, what is this? Why don’t they have what they need to get us unloaded?”

“Here, put these back in here. Some guys’ll grab a clean pallet off another trailer.” He gave the fresh wood a shove. “Just keep it out of reach, that’s all. The company has what *they* need. They need enough grunt workers to get just enough of this shit off our trucks.”

He'd started his line of pallets as far from the trailer as he could at a white line painted on the dock. He filled up the space back toward the mouth of the trailer. I did the same.

"That's right, you daren't cross that white line there. That's a crime around here." He limped a little. "You cross that sacred line, they'll make you move every blessed one of them pallets. But yet if you start unloading close to the truck you might run out of space before they get to you. Then you sit and wait. You might never get out of here."

"They don't want this stuff in the warehouse? I was told to get here fast." I wadded a section of shrink wrap into a loose bundle and tossed it into the trailer.

"Hell, they don't care how fast you hurried to get here. They can only sell it so fast, see?" He leaned over the dock and spat. "It's always in a hurry to get here. Always a royal pain getting out. You see them two fork lifts? That's it. Ain't no more. There's a hundred trucks to be unloaded here. More on the way, all of *them* in a rush. One of them two forklifts will get to you sooner or later. You be ready for him when he gets to you. You'd best look grateful, too. He could just turn around and leave you sit." He fixed reddened eyes on me. "Ain't no skin off his nose if you sit."

I re-stacked every can. Waited for the dock foreman and the forklift driver and paperwork. I managed not to fight over pallets. It turned out to be a thirteen-hour day. By the time I was done at four am. on Wednesday, sunrise on Tuesday outside of Bald Eagle State Forest looked like the far end of a tunnel.

At five I paid for a shower in a Seventy-Six. Walked out into the shelves of fuel additives and pressure gauges, two-for-a-dollar hotdogs and road atlases carrying the soft feel of clean socks inside my work-boots. That homey feeling in a public place added to the sense that I'd stepped into an alternate reality.

Karen's voice at the other end of the line did sound a world away when I called at six-fifteen. "I'm finished. I'm ready to sleep." She said I sounded tired. "Yeah, I am." I didn't have the energy to

tell her about it. “I’m okay. I’m just gonna fall into this sleeper.”

But first I had to call Frenchie. “I’m taking a break. I’m about ready to haul something back.” I gulped coffee.

“You are, are you? You ain’t calling it quits?” Something told me he knew just how hard this load would be. “Okay, so grab a few hours of sleep. Be in Edison by two pm. I found a load that’ll get you back to Ohio.”

His expectation questioned my ability, my toughness, my resiliency. It touched some farm-tough resistance in me. I wanted to live up to that challenge. If Frenchie thought I might quit, I didn’t want to. I never quit on the Old Man, and I wouldn’t quit this, just because it was rough.

There was a lot to learn. I was geared up to learn it. I took that long quiet ride out of New Jersey and good riddance to it. Pennsylvania. Ohio. I was busy with the next leg of the trip, a fuel stop, traffic, avoiding contact with other trucks. The adrenaline rush of tight turns and narrow docks designed in the forties or fifties for little old Ford trucks.

It started with that call to Frenchie, this feeling I should accomplish what someone else expected me to. Frenchie was the kind of guy I usually stayed away from. I’d come to find that he was a lot like the Old Man.

I should have recognized that.