

CHEAP LABOUR

By

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Gerry hates Tony. The feeling is mutual. After twenty years working on the same truck unplugging sewers they have reached an unspoken *detente*. Gerry drives and smokes and drinks coffee. Tony unplugs the sewers, smokes, and drinks coffee. When they get where they're supposed to be going, they know the drill and each does their bit without a word shared between them. Gerry puts out the signs. Tony gets the tools ready: shovels, chipping hammer for breaking the clay and asbestos pipe, and hand rods for snaking the blocked pipe. If Bert gives them a backhoe Gerry swamps and Tony does the repair. Tony is a wizard with the rods. There's different heads to break loose the blockages: a corkscrew for roots, an arrowhead for grease, and a trowel for bellies in the pipe. Tony is so fast, once the pipe is opened up, he can get the rods through, clear the blockage and be eating a sandwich in the ditch before you know it. (Lung cancer takes Tony in 1993, but he never got sick from whatever stuck to his fingers).

It was soon after I was rehired in the summer of 1978 that the Waterworks crews were between projects, so as the most junior Ditchpig I got shuffled off to work with Gerry and Tony. Hollywood howled when he saw me trudging down the ramp to Gerry's van, between the two like a death row prisoner escorted to his final appointment. Gerry unlocked the van and grunted as he pulled himself into the driver's seat. Tony waited for me to stow my gear behind the bench seat. I was to sit between them. No problem. I propped my boots on the dash and waited for Tony to climb in after me. Gerry reached over and swatted my feet off the dash. He shot me a warning

look from beneath thick, sandy eyebrows, then lit a Camels plain as Tony slammed the sliding door.

Gerry backed out from the ramp, unwinding his window to hork up a wad of phlegm from the gravel deep of his lungs. The van rolled out the north gate and headed toward Mountain Highway. I suspected our first job was in Lynn Valley but didn't ask, and neither volunteered any information. The pair had been partners since before I was born. If asked, all three of us would agree I had nothing of value to add, work-wise. Instead of turning toward the mountains, Gerry made a right and the van lurched south, toward the Second Narrows Bridge that linked North Vancouver with Vancouver. Another right turn near the Venice Bakery warehouse, then a third right put us back at the yard, near the south gate. This gate opened into the Stores compound. (It remained unfenced for another twenty years, even as the theft rate increased as there was no control over who entered, loaded up their vehicles, and rolled away). Gerry drove between the rows of concrete pipe, catch basin grates and jumbo blocks until he reached the manhole sections. In exchange for a dozen beers and a stack of *Hustler* mags, Gerry convinced Don and Gary to stack the manhole barrels a shade higher than the top of the van, thereby hiding the truck from curious eyes in the office. Once neatly tucked behind the barrel sections, Gerry killed the motor. I rose, thinking we were going to load grade rings, or a concrete donut, but another scowl from Gerry stopped me cold. I sat down and waited. And waited. Gerry lit another cigarette. Tony opened his thermos and filled his cup with coffee. Thermos capped, he lit one of his Portuguese unfiltered cigs. Gerry rolled down his window-again- and spat. Then he rolled up the window and poured himself a cup of coffee.

“Anything I can do?” I squeaked, breaking the long silence.

Neither answered, or even looked my way. I pressed my spine into the bench seat, arms crossed, breathing through my mouth on account of the thick smoke filling the cab. The only sound, besides the odd slurp, was when Gerry farted, adding to the near-toxic atmosphere. They'll tell me when there's something to do, I told myself, even as icicles of fear filled my chest. What if George finds us? Or if Bert wanders into the yard, like he did sometimes, and sees the truck nowhere near where he sent it.

Ninety minutes passed, the slowest of my life, interrupted only by the slurping of hot coffee and the occasional fart. Nobody came down the alley. Noone called us on the radio. I stared through the stained windshield at a blue sky dotted with ragged, gray clouds, wishing I was back with the Ditchpigs on some muddy, nightmare water leak. Anything would be better than this suspended animation. Then, with a weary sigh as if the weight of the world was upon him, Gerry put away his coffee cup, rolled down the window, spat, tossed out the butt of his fifth cigarette and started the engine. Tony repeated the ritual on the passenger side. The van rumbled to life. The tools hanging in the back clattered in their hooks as the truck backed out of the alley. (Gerry had pulled the wires on the back up alarm, so as not to announce their presence). The van exited the south gate and made a series of left turns until we drove through the north gate, two hours since our original departure. We entered the yard in the company of several other trucks returning for morning coffee break. When the truck wheezed and died Gerry turned and looked me in the eye.

“Now you can get up,” he said, sliding from his seat, his thermos tucked under his arm.

“Maybe ask George if he got work for you tomorrow,” Tony said. “You're not cut out for what we do.”

“But we didn't do anything,” I whined, “so how would you know?”

Gerry paused halfway up the ramp. “What we do is much harder,” he said.

“But they pay us to work, not sit around,” I protested.

Tony spat. “Fuck you, the work always gets done,” he said.

“So keep your mouth shut and everything will work out fine,” Gerry said, moving close enough to poke me in the ribs with a thick finger.

George appeared in the doorway to the barn. “Lance is going home sick,” he growled, as if anyone taking sick leave was taking money directly from his bank account. “Grab your stuff and finish the day with Larry.”

“Thanks,” I said, overjoyed. I loaded my gear into Larry’s truck, a smaller version than Gerry’s milk wagon.

After coffee Larry drove west, into the hills above Delbrook. He didn’t talk much either. We pulled up to a house mid-block. Water streamed down the steep driveway, emerging from beneath a row of cedars.

“We got a leak to fix. By hand,” Larry said. “Grab a shovel and a bar.”

I did as I was told. I lay the tools on the wet grass. The service box had been painted flame red: Chuck’s calling card. Larry remained in the truck. “Better take your lunch kit and gear, you’re gonna be awhile.” The truck engine coughed back to life. Larry lit a cigarette, coughed and hacked.

“See you after lunch, Backwash,” Larry said. “You better have that service ready to repair by the time I get back.”

I watched his truck vanish down the street. I turned to the muddy boulevard that would be the focus for the rest of my day and sighed. I wondered if maybe tomorrow George would stick me back with Gerry and Tony.

The End