“God in Heaven, what happened to that concrete stanchion?” The foreman acted like he couldn’t believe his eyes.

“You told us to take it down, to level it with the floor,” I replied. My stomach tightened with fear. Had we misunderstood the foreman? Had we made some horrible mistake? Would my friend Johnny and I get fired the first day of our summer job at the mill?

Every summer, the paper mill in Chillicothe hired about thirty college kids to cover vacations taken by employees. We were called the Extra Crew, and were assigned to low-level manual jobs all over the mill. When a regular took vacation, the rest of the full time crew would move around to fill in on the various job positions, and then an Extra Crewman would take up the lowest level job to round out the crew. It was dirty, hot work, but it paid well. Most summer days, the mill would be short handed, and an extra crewman could work double shifts of 16 hours straight to earn more money. In the early ‘60’s, a summer’s worth of work in the mill could almost pay for a full year of college.

I was hired the year I graduated from Chillicothe High. My Old Man knew a foreman and he put in a good word. I took the job with mixed feelings. I was working my dream job on WCHI radio, as a disc jockey and newscaster. I worked all the hours I could at the radio station, but that job didn’t pay well enough to build up the old college fund. So I started at the mill. Many days, I’d work the morning shift on the air, then head to the mill for the second shift. Working the 3:00 PM to 11:00 PM shift as a sweat and grime covered grunt brought me back to reality.

On that first morning on the job, Johnny and I were assigned to a maintenance crew. The foreman took us deep into the basement of one of the machine buildings. He told us a new paper machine was to be installed there and that our job was to do some preparation work before construction began. He walked us over to a corner of the basement, to a huge block of concrete, probably six feet square and four feet high.

“This was one of the original supports for the old machine,” the foreman told us. “I want you guys to take that jackhammer and knock it down. Make it level with the floor. Haul the pieces out and pile ‘em over there. We’ll get the debris with a loader.”

He showed us how to use the big jackhammer, and left us on our own. “I’ll be back in a couple a hours,” he called out over his shoulder as he walked up the circular steel ladder that went up to the main machine room.

Johnny and I decided we’d better get our eighteen-year-old butts in gear to make a good impression on our new boss. At about 7:20, I went to work with the jackhammer. It took some getting used to, but eventually the chips were flying. Johnny and I took turns riding the hammer, and shoveling the chunks into a wheelbarrow. By 10:00, we had the block broken into small chunks and hauled outside, and piled for the loader. Then we used the
hammer to make the floor as smooth as our inexperience would let us. That’s when the foreman came back.

“But where in hell is the block? That thing was huge. That should have taken you guys a couple of days.” He took off his “Pulp, Sulfite and Paper Mill Workers” branded cap and wiped the sweat from the top of his balding head.

“Sir,” Johnny said hesitantly, “that hammer is a righteous tool. There’s nothing to that job with the right tools. Besides, we’re new. We didn’t want you to think we were just a couple of goof offs. We need the job.”

I nodded in anxious agreement.

The foreman stood there for a few moments, staring at the smooth place in the floor where the block once stood. Dust hung in the air. There was a steady hum from the big paper machines on the floor above. Finally the foreman turned to us. “Boys, you’re gonna make the rest of us look bad if you work like this all summer.”

He cleared his throat and hawked a glob of phlegm onto the floor.

“We’re union,” he said. “This is our job. We’re here all the time. You guys are just here for the summer. You got to slow down. We’d a stretched this here job out for a day. Maybe two, what with breaks, the hammer needin’ repairs. That kinda thing. Now, you guys get brooms and kind a sweep up in here. Take breaks. Maybe re-pile that concrete. Look busy. But just stretch this job out at least ‘til quittin’ time.” He put his hat back on and turned to go back up the spiral stairs.

Johnny and I just looked at one another. We both shrugged and said, almost in unison, “We’re Union,” and went off in search of brooms.

I’m sure unions had their place at one time. At least, that’s what I’ve heard. My own limited experience with unions just re-affirms my first impression at the mill that unions are the adult equivalent of day care.

I got my orders one Monday to report to Dock 3. That was the railroad dock near the center of the mill, where boxcars containing bags and barrels of starch and chemicals were unloaded. Six of us were assigned to unload a boxcar of fifty-five gallon drums of chemicals. I was the extra crewmember.

I got a wheel cart and started taking the barrels into the warehouse,. After about twenty minutes, one of the old-timers stopped me as I re-entered the boxcar to get another drum.

“Slow down, boy,” he said, gripping my arm. “We got all day. You don’t want to be in any hurry to get this done. The Union’s got a standard time to unload a car like this. Don’t be makin’ us look bad. Let’s take us a break”. 
So we did. The entire crew took a sit-down break, after less than half an hour on the job. I stood there fidgeting, anxious to get back to work. I didn’t want to be branded as lazy by the boss.

Hell, not much chance of that, I discovered. At that moment, I spotted the foreman, sitting on the dock, leaning up against the wall, cigarette dangling, his eyes closed in blissful, unconcerned relaxation.

Right then and there I saw these guys didn’t need any outside help to make themselves look bad. Little wonder unions are called, “the working man’s friend.”

One morning I was the extra man on #2 Coater. It is a block long, state of the art machine that applied a special high gloss coating to the big rolls of paper. Later, they were cut into packages of office bond paper. The un-coated rolls, nearly eight feet wide, and weighing nearly a ton, were suspended on the front of the machine. The paper passed through a coating spray at high speed and then through gas fired ovens where it dried. The coated paper was then wound onto a new roll. It took about twenty minutes to run each roll through the entire process. The finished rolls were placed on heavy wood steel-wheeled wagons as they came off the coater. It was my job to pull those wagons, by hand to an elevator; take it down one level, and to manhandle the huge roll onto a storage bench. The control center for #2 Coater was up a flight of steel stairs near the front of the machine. It was an instrument filled room where the Machine Tender held court. He monitored the workings of the coater from a steel desk and office chair. He was “the Man in Charge.” The Machine Tender was like the captain of a ship.

I was returning from the basement with my wagon, after wrestling yet another roll onto the bench. It seemed like the run would never end. As I trudged across the floor, I heard a voice from above. I looked up. It was Shorty, the Machine Tender on that shift. He motioned me to come up.

I put my wagon in its place near the Coater and started up the stairs. Shorty beckoned me again, with an urgent look on his face. But it was far too noisy in the cavernous coating room to hear him talk unless you were face to face.

I approached Shorty at the top of the stairs. He was just over five feet tall, with a huge soft belly that made him appear even shorter. His Oshkosh coveralls were rolled up at the cuff, exposing white wool socks and steel-toed work boots. His white tee shirt was sweat stained and smudged. A “Pulp, Sulfite and Paper Mill Workers” cap was pulled down to his ears. He stared at me through thick safety glasses.

“Boy,” he shouted over the din of the machine, “run down and tell the foreman to get hisself up here. I got to take me a shit.” He pointed to toward the restroom down on the main floor, then motioned me to hurry up and get moving.
I went down the stairs and spotted the foreman midway down the length of the coater. He was talking to a young man in a sport shirt, carrying a clipboard. I walked up to the foreman, and waited until he turned to me. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Shorty high above, leaning on the stair railing, watching me intently.

“Shorty said to tell you to come up and watch the machine for a few minutes,” I said. “He’s got to take a shit.”

The foreman frowned at me. He winked at the young engineer and told me, “Son, go back up there and tell Shorty he ain’t got time to take a shit.”

I had my orders, I guessed. He was the Foreman. I was just the Extra Crew. I turned and walked the length of the floor, and back up the stairs. I walked up close to Shorty and shouted, “The boss says you ain’t got time to take a shit.”

Shorty’s eyes snapped. His jaw dropped as if he’d been slapped. He stared at me for just a moment, then shouted loud enough for me and the foreman to hear, “A man ain’t got much of a job if he ain’t got time to take a shit!”

He turned, went into the control cab and hit the big red ‘Stop’ button. The huge machine began to wind down. The strand of paper in the oven broke and flamed up inside the fireproof enclosure. Shorty stormed out the back to the door of the cab. He shot me a look of contempt as he marched down the stairs toward the men’s locker room.

The foreman beckoned me down to the floor. “Looks like you got your work cut out for you, son. When that oven cools down, get in there and get that mess cleaned up. We got an order to run.”

I’d heard that old saying, “shit rolls downhill.” Now I saw how it played out in real life. When Shorty took his contentedly in the men’s room, the Boss just rolled it down to me, gift-wrapped. I crawled into that hot oven to clean it out as Shorty emerged from the john looking like he felt one hundred percent better. He and the foreman probably had a good laugh over “that smart ass college kid humpin’ and sweatin’ it out.

Fine with me, I fumed to myself. In another three months or so, I’d be back in class at Ohio State checking out those hot college babes. You chumps will still be here, doin’ shift work, where you “ain’t got time to take a shit.”

Shift work was a new experience. At the mill, all the regular workers rotated weekly to a different shift. Same mind-numbing job performed on a different schedule. They’d work a week on first shift. Then on Sunday, they would work first shift, 7:00 AM-3:00 PM, then “double back” to start the new week on third shift, 11:00 PM-7:00 AM. And so forth, 52 weeks a year.
Extra Crew worked shifts that needed a body. Many times, at the end of an eight-hour shift, the foreman would ask, “They need a man over on cutters. You wanna work another eight?”

But it wasn’t really a question. You turned the opportunity down at your own risk. And it did offer one benefit. Pay for the second eight-hour shift was at ‘time and a half.’ We were young, full of piss and vinegar. Who the heck needed to sleep eight hours every night?

The first night I pulled 16 hours straight was also the first time I’d ever had minestrone soup. I went in at 3:00 in the afternoon. It was second shift at the mill. I’d already done five hours on the air at WCHI from 9:00 AM until 2:00 PM. Then I hot-footed it over to the mill for 8 hours of stuffing reams of paper into boxes. Around 10:00pm, the foreman asked me if I could do another shift. ”Your replacement called in sick,” he said.

Crap. Eight more hours doing this. But, at time and a half, right? Right.

Around 2:30 AM, the lunch wagon came through our department. I was dead on my feet. It was all I could do to stay awake. I’d actually dozed off on my feet at the end of the cutter line, and was jolted awake by reams of paper hitting my feet. I thought maybe some food or coffee would revive me.

Or maybe some soup. Mom was pretty good in the soup department- beef vegetable, great chili. But I’d never heard of minestrone soup. I bought a bowl, along with a salami sandwich. And black coffee. I ate it all in the thirty minutes allotted for “lunch”.

3:45 AM. I was still struggling to stay awake, to keep up with the endless flow of paper, with “20 Weight Bond” printed importantly over the green packaging paper that wrapped it.

That’s when my bowels announced themselves.

Suddenly I was wide-awake. The initial stomach cramps seemed to keep time with the flow of paper. Each time I stuffed exactly twelve reams in a box, folded the top just so, and sent it through the sealing machine, I got that all too familiar cramping.

The Line Chief, at the front of the cutter, controlled the flow of work. The flow of my bowels, on the other hand, seemed under the control of the Devil. I had to get to the bathroom. I could sense an imminent disaster. I was about to lose control of the old sphincter muscle. I had a bad taste in my mouth. What was it? Wait a minute. Ah no. That stupid soup. Minestrone. And spicy salami. And coffee.

I was alone at the end of the cutter line. The noise of the machines drowned out any attempt to shout for help. No one was close enough to signal. I contemplated filling my pants for the first time since diapers. And I hadn’t brought a change of clothes.
Suddenly, I had no other choice. To hell with the 20 Weight Bond. I bolted for the men’s room. An empty stall. Pants down. Blessed Relief. Barely in the nick of time.

Afterwards, I hurried back to my post. “What in hell do you think you’re doin’ asshole?” the foreman asked, “leavin’ the job in the middle of a run?” Red faced, he leaned into my face. Reams of paper littered the floor where I was supposed to be putting them in boxes.

“Sir,” I said quickly. ”I usually have a cast iron stomach, but whatever was in that miserable soup on the roach wagon backfired on me. I had a case of the shits I could write an opera about.” Go ahead, I thought to myself; fire me. I could care. I really could. I’m miserable. Dead tired. My stomach was still cramping. I wanted go crawl off to bed for about a week.

The foreman stared at me, his eyes catching glints of hard factory lighting. Then a slight smile crossed his lips.

“Guess there’s no real harm done. Clean up this mess. Then get you some Alka Seltzer. You still got three more hours to go.”

I thought, maybe these Union guys aren’t so bad after all.

Several weeks later, I got to the mill for second shift. My foreman said “Son, they want you to work over in the coaters today. They got a big order and it’s gonna take most of the night. You’ll probably get stuck workin’ third trick too.”

Great! It was the middle of the afternoon, and I was being sent to my least favorite department. Extra Crew working in the Coating department almost never worked just 8 hours. It was routine to get stuck for 2 shifts.

And the work was heavy. We helped the Third Hand on take a finished roll of paper off the coating machine. Then we helped lower a hollow steel tube, eight feet long and a foot in diameter in place with a crane to receive more paper. The machine never stopped.

Sometimes, the paper failed to take to the new core and paper spilled out onto the floor. Guess who got to collect all that paper and put it in a wheeled bin? Then guess who got to push that heavy bin to the recycling room.

The main part of my job was to help lower the big roll of paper onto a heavy steel wheeled wood wagon, and then take it down one floor and push the roll onto a wooden bench. You pulled the wagon by hand to the elevators, and pushed the roll onto the bench. Each roll weighed 1800 to 2000 pounds. By the time I got back upstairs, another roll was ready to come off. There was no such thing as a break, unless the endless strand of paper broke. But that just meant more work for me, picking up all that paper.
That afternoon, I trudged through the mill to the coating department, cursing my luck. I couldn’t wait for school to start so I could get some rest and away from those stupid coaters.

As I started into the coater room, I saw a small crowd of people gathered around the stairwell that went down one level to the shipping room. The stairwell was next to the big freight elevators. There was a big forklift with a crane parked beside the stairwell. Curious, I walked closer.

“Good Lord! What the heck happened?” I asked one of the guys. A huge roll of paper was lodged in the stairwell. One of the wood wagons was crushed under it. He shook his head. He was one of the full timers. A heavyset man, in bib overalls and white tee shirt. I knew he worked as Backtender on the #2 coater.

“You know that new extra man we got? The big guy. Wears glasses and looks kinda stupid?” He grinned, showing bad teeth. A small dribble of Mail Pouch inched down from the corner of his mouth. He wiped it with the back of his hand.

“We told him to take that wagon with the roll of paper downstairs, and push it off onto the bench. And that’s exactly what he did. Or tried to, anyway. Never dawned on us we’d have to tell him to take the elevator. Hell, he’s a college man. Supposed to be smart.” He continued to shake his head and chuckle. ”What a dumb-ass.”

“You mean he tried to take that load down those STAIRS?” I asked incredulously, looking down staircase. It was probably six feet wide with steel steps, a landing halfway down, and then a 180 degree turn, to continue to the floor below. “Is the guy dead?”

“Naw, he’s okay. Scared shitless though, I’ll tell you that. He pulled that wagon down the first coupla stairs. Then the paper roll started to slide. Lucky for him it wedged before it pinned him to the wall. He’d be deader’n four o’clock. Busted the wheels right off that wagon!”

It took most of the second shift to lift that roll of paper out of the stairwell, but that was left to the maintenance department. It didn’t stop the action in the coating department. I finally got out of there around 5:00 AM. Fourteen hours pulling those stupid rolls, but at least I had the common sense to use the elevator.