

Hard Day on the Road
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“Bump and a beer,” stumpy Willard Yorlander bellowed as he slammed through the door of Tubby’s Two, a neighborhood tavern near Eagle.

The owner, Tubby, took down a shot glass and poured a splash of Cutty Sark. “Pabst?” he asked as he shoved the whiskey in front of the county’s grader operator.

“Gawddamn cheap stuff. You readin’ my wallet?”

“Yorly, have you drank anything other than Pabst since those Texans bought the label and started making the stuff again?”

“Nope. It was my daddy’s beer and my daddy’s daddy’s. ’Course that was when it was the *old* Blue Ribbon and a damn good beer. . . . ’Scuse me.” Yorlander elbowed the fellow on the next stool as he reached across in front of him for the dish of beer nuts. The graderman chucked a handful in his mouth and chewed, pausing to spit a particularly hard one out onto the floor.

Tubby stuck a glass under the tap and pulled the Pabst handle. He watched the glass fill, the head foaming up as the beer rose. Tubby let off, then gave it one more squirt.

“You’re in kinda early,” he said as he set the glass next to the beer nuts, the foam sliding down the side and over his knuckles. Tubby’s nose wrinkled. “Don’t mind me saying it, you stink some, Yorly.”

“Tar.” Yorlander tossed the shot back and chased it with a slug of beer. “Gawddamn super had me working on the asphalt crew, laying down patch pavement on County O. Damn hot work.”

“Oh, I’ll bet. Pitching asphalt when it’s near a hundred, you’re lucky you didn’t get sunstroke.”

“Say that again.” The graderman nudged the shot glass toward Tubby. “Another bump.”

“You sure? Mavis’s not going to like it if you come home drunk.”

“Then I’ll stay here ’til I get sober. Another bump, Tub.”

The bartender splashed in a finger’s worth of Cutty. When he saw Yorlander shaking his head, he poured in a second finger’s worth, then a third.

The graderman raked a sleeve across his forehead. “You got the air on in here?”

“Yeah.”

“Damn, it’s hot. Super never gave us a break. ‘We got another mile to do before we can quit,’ he hollers when we complain. Well, we got that done an’ he tells us we got another mile over on M.” Yorlander pulled out a bandana. He mopped his face. “I tell you work’s gonna be the death of me yet.”

He threw back the triple and, as he swallowed, his eyes grew large, as if he’d seen the ghost of his first wife. Before Yorlander could form a word, he slumped forward, upsetting the beer nuts. They spilled onto the floor.

Tubby shook the man’s shoulder. “You done this act before. Come on, Yorly.”

But he didn’t respond.

Tubby leaned down. He squinted into Yorlander’s beet-red face. “Yorly?”

“He all right?” the guy on the next stool asked.

“He don’t look too good.” The bartender put his fingertips on the artery in Yorlander’s neck. “Damn. He was right.”

“About what?”

Tubby looked up at the other fellow. “Work *was* the death of him.”