

Eight Lane Lament

by Stephen Egbertson

Christ, its great to be back on the road again, thought Jerry, as he settled back into the driver's seat of their shiny new "Pete" and glanced over at his partner, Chuck. Chuck glanced back, caught by Jerry's gaze.

"C'mon now, who was it, you turkey?" He caught Jerry's cheshire-cat grin. Jerry's thin face and large brown eyes opened up, and exploded with uncontrollable mirth. He was barely able to choke out the one word, "Trixie," before erupting into gales of laughter. Chuck stared back in disbelief, recalling, in vivid detail, this particularly pretty and promiscuous memory. "Good Lord, I forgot all about her." Chuck responded sometime later. "Good thing I stayed home this time. Janey woulda killed me."

The cab filled with hilarity as the endless road slipped effortlessly under the eighteen-wheeler. Jerry and Chuck, each in his own way, recalled the carefree, rollicking days before they had ventured into their trucking partnership. All their lives they had shared everything except the same parents. They were more than friends; they were more than brothers.

This had been their first real vacation in the twelve years they worked together. There were a couple of good years, and some good luck had made permanent the joint ownership of the brand new Peterbilt. Their close relationship had done the rest. Attending the fifteenth reunion of their high school class was the highlight of Jerry's week. Chuck had stayed home with his wife Janey, and their sons, Mark and Jerry. As close as they were, the separate vacations underscored the very different natures

of the two friends. Chuck was a quiet and settled man. Jerry was wild and free.

The hilarity died down, Jerry stretched and lit up another Lucky Strike. "Was she as good as before?" Chuck asked.

Jerry giggled back, " Fat, married, six kids." Chuck stared back in disbelief.

"But, to answer your question, she's better'n ever!" Hysterical laughter filled the cab, drowning out the snick-swish of the wipers across the large windshield.

"You skunk!" was all that Chuck could manage.

Chuck wiped his brow and blinked, as he rolled down the window. He felt a bit dizzy and uneasy, and wanted some fresh air. But, he did not want a face full of cold rain. Minnesota was almost gone.

"You O.K., Chuck?" Jerry asked, blue-grey smoke drifting from his nostrils. He reached over and stubbed out his cigarette.

"You look tired. Lemme spell you a little early. Climb in back and get a little sleep."

"I been feelin' a bit shakey since St. Paul. Everything feels all closed up." Chuck said, as he leaned forward and wiped the windshield with a grey, smudgy cloth from the dash. "Gotta Windex this windshield next stop," he said, as he removed the heavy film from the window.

"How was little Jerry's birthday?" Jerry asked. "Did he like the present I sent?"

"Did he ever!" Chuck replied. "He down-right ignored the bike we got him, along with everything else. He kept askin' when you were gonna come by."

Jerry reached into the pocket of his faded denim jacket, and shook out another Lucky. "He's a great kid, Chuck. Y'know, I'd be a Heller with any of my own, but with your two guys - well, that's somethin' else."

Jerry was too wild and crazy to have a family of his own, and he knew it. His close association with Chuck's family was all that stood between him and a jail, or probably something worse. It kept him toned down just enough.

Chuck nodded in reply, and looked at his friend, swallowed, and shook his foggy head. The "Pete" slowed and pulled over. "G'ettin' awful close in here. Take her awhile, will ya?"

"Sure thing."

Chuck climbed back into the sleeper compartment, reached up and opened the vent, then settled his two hundred thirty pound frame into the mattress. This dizziness and weakness were new to him. He was a big man, an athlete, and had never been sick in his life. The past week had been a trial, especially because he did not want to alert Janey's suspicions. Their time together with the boys, and their love, was too precious to waste on such matters. Still, Chuck was on unfamiliar turf, not feeling well, and he was concerned. They were due home the day after tomorrow. He promised himself that he would look into it then. As Chuck drifted off into sleep, the last thing he heard was the click of Jerry's lighter up front.

The big truck rolled west, deeper into South Dakota. Jerry sat up front behind the big wheel, thinking about Chuck, not liking this apparent illness at all. He remembered the time Chuck drove clear across the state of Ohio, to be with him at his father's funeral. Another tractor trailer rushed past and honked. He vowed to drag his partner to a doctor when they got back to Topeka.

Jerry tossed the butt into the gutter with a wide, graceful, smoking arc. *Swish-that's two*, he thought. He then entered the hospital lobby, tired and strung out. He'd made the trip to Ammarillo alone. It was a bit more of a trip than one man usually made, but United Produce was a good customer, and with Chuck laid up with all those tests, well, Jerry's devotion to Chuck was just that way.

He ambled through the well-lit, pale blue corridor and set his course for the wide desk at the intersection. A small, thin woman looked at him, without recognition at first. She was distracted, pale and drawn.

"Jerry?" Janey rushed at her husband's partner.

"It's Cancer, Jerry!" she buried her face into Jerry's shoulder and began another round of uncontrolled weeping.

"Never sick in his whole life! Now it's Cancer! How can that be, Jer? How?" she pleaded.

The sudden and unexpected nature of this news stunned Jerry, and it was a long moment before he reacted. He took Janey by the arm and gently led her over to a row of chairs lined up against the wall.

"Slow down, Janey, easy now. There's gotta be some mistake here. Now, just what did the doctor say?"

Janey composed herself, and like a schoolgirl trying to remember some memorized lesson, her eyes unfocused and she looked past Jerry.

"They did some tests which showed lung cancer. Chuck needs an operation. ...and... and some other kind of treatments. Lung Cancer, Jerry, he don't even smoke!"

Jerry shook his head, not sure of what to say, or even believe. But he knew that this young woman by his side needed some help. Instinctively, he knew that he might be in trouble as well.

"It'll be alright, Janey, whatever's gotta be done, we'll do it. It'll be fine, Chuck will be O.K., I promise." Jerry tried to console her, not quite believing it all himself.

"Whatever this is, it's gonna cost a fortune" was Janey's next concern.

"What will I do? We got no insurance for this."

"Look here," Jerry replied, "We'll worry about that later. I got some money put away, and the truck is worth something towards a loan, or something. We'll work it out, whatever it needs."

Jerry stood in the doorway of the hospital room and saw Chuck sitting up in the far bed. Chuck looked the same to him, the same thick brown hair, pale blue eyes, with all two hundred thirty pounds of him looking as fit as ever. He strode past the three other sickly-looking patients and sat by his partner's bed.

"You saw Janey?" Chuck asked him.

"Yeah," Jerry replied. "Look Chuck, I'll take care of her. You don't worry at all. Just take care of you're gettin' better."

Jerry looked down at Chuck's body, under the sheets, and then looked back up at his face.

"How can you have cancer, Chuck? You never been sick a day in your whole life. You never even smoked none!" Jerry paused and shrugged expansively. "Hell, I'm the one should be in that bed, not you. All that smoke fillin' that cab all these years-it's all mine! Not yours! I smoked it all, not you! Smokin' causes cancer, don't it? Why you, then?" Jerry was struggling to come up with an answer that made sense to him.

At this point, Jerry needed some stabilizing, and reached into his pocket for his Luckies. Chuck raised his hand to stop his friend, Hold on there, amigo, you can't smoke here. It's alright by me, but the nurses'll have a fit."

Jerry sheepishly replaced the pack of cigarettes, as Chuck went on, "I got it figured out, Jer, look here. You're right, I never smoked at all, and I feel pretty good now. So somebody could have screwed up the tests."

Jerry looked doubtful, Chuck continued, "Probably though, it's a mild case, and this operation and a few treatments will clear it all up."

This sounded more reasonable to Jerry. "You say you feel pretty good? Better than that Seattle trip?"

"I'm a little tired, that's all. They've been pokin' and stickin' me so much, I don't get much sleep."

"You look fine," Jerry said, willing his best friend back to health, succeeding in convincing himself, as well.

"The doctors say I'll be feeling pretty bad, once the treatments start. Then there's that operation. But, hey! I'll lick this easy."

Yes, there was the talk of further treatments. Those bastard doctors wouldn't even tell the truth to a dying man. Jerry closed his eyes with all the force he could muster, wrinkling the skin around his face, trying to squeeze the burning from them. He stopped after the hurting eclipsed the burning.

Chuck was dead and Janey and the boys were back in Houston with her mother. "I'll take care of it," he had told her. He'd take care of it all. "It'll-be alright, you'll see...I promise!"

Jerry lit another Lucky off the glowing tip of the last, and sipped his drink. Maybe she had believed him. He hoped that she hadn't. He didn't know and it hardly mattered now. He knew now that he was saying all that for his own benefit. He was alone now, cruising down his own Interstate of loneliness. The road ahead seemed to be swiftly narrowing, like the one in those old Roadrunner cartoons. Pretty soon, he would be smashing into the painted tunnel entrance. Ha! Ha! Yucks for the Saturday morning TV freaks.

Jerry couldn't believe that being alone could feel so bad. There was a hollowness, a hunger in the pit of his

stomach. He was alone, and darkness was closing in on him, shutting off all of his escape routes.

Jerry sat at the bar with only his head, shoulders, and his hands illuminated by the cone of smoky light around him. Darkness had him pretty well hemmed in by now. Where to go, what to do- who cares? His eyes still burned. This loneliness was great; it was an ultimate punishment. This was so much better than death. Death ends the pain. It was a kind of release. Chuck doesn't hurt anymore. This lonely pain never ends. Yes, it was the perfect punishment. But, punishment for what? Punishment requires guilt. For some reason, deep in his soul, far from his awareness, Jerry did not want to go very far in this direction. He gulped down his scotch and signaled for another.

The bartender grabbed the bottle from the shelf and ambled over in front of Jerry. He saw a grizzly, lean, red-eyed drunk. Not a mean drunk, just tired and beaten. He'd been in that seat all week, it seemed.

"Where you going from here, pal?" the bartender asked, holding the bottle away from the glass. Jerry looked up at this intrusion and saw that the price of another drink would be the right answer.

"M' truck," he managed to answer.

"You planning to drive away from here?" the barkeep asked, narrowing his eyes.

Jerry shook his head. "Unh, Unh. ...Nope. Parked unner th' Interstate, th' overpass." He gestured to somewhere beyond the darkened corner of the barroom. The bartender poured the drink and pulled another bill from the wet pile in front of Jerry.

'Under the Interstate," Jerry muttered. It's gettin' cold. Jes' me an' my truck, ..gotta go somewheres soon."

He thought of the astronauts, strapped into the smoking rocket, all alone at the end of that big Roman candle. See ya at the other end. You hope. He pictured the poor slob being strapped into the electric chair, or standing on that trapdoor with a noose for a necktie. All alone now, see ya nowhere, chump.

Punishment needs guilt. Jerry explored the source of his pain, probing among the naked nerve endings. Chuck died of lung cancer. He never smoked, drank, swore, or fornicated. "He was clean, man!" Jerry shouted silently. "I was the carouser, the hell-raiser. I don't have no family. I smoked six fuckin' packs a day. I shoulda died of cancer, emphysema, cirrhosis, or whatever, years ago. Jesus Christ!! Sonofabitch!!"

Jerry was silently weeping now, tears running down to the point of his chin. The barkeep tried not to look, wondering why he was glad that this wretch was alone at the bar.

"Surgeon General, my ass!" Jerry thought, "where does Chuck's dyin' put all your goddam warnings? Smokin' don' cause cancer, you asshole. I smoked my lungs all hollow, an' all I got was alone. How come? An' what's all this bullshit about sidestream smokin'?"

Jerry's head silently thumped onto the bar. The bartender looked up at the clock and noted that it took almost an hour less for him to pass out this night. It was better just let him sleep it off.

THE END