

Bridge Freezes Before Road Surface

by Michael Fine

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It was a goddamn full size 4x4 1500 Dodge Ram with a 5.7 Liter, 390 Horse V8, extended cab and every option under the sun. The damn truck was so powerful that in four-wheel low it felt like you could climb a wall. Collins had a six-ton winch on the front, so he could flick a switch and pull a goddamn tank out of a ditch. The truck had a bed liner so you could carry anything you wanted and there was rust preventative on the undercarriage so the damn truck was just never going to rot. Ten-year power train warranty. Able to leap tall buildings at a single bound. You sat in the damned truck and you felt like you owned the world.

If only the rest of life were so secure. Every day, Bruce Collins drove down Plainfield Pike and across the long bridge over the reservoir to his office in Cranston. *Bridge Freezes Before Road Surface* said the sign on the bridge, and every day, he had to ask himself what the damn sign meant, what it was telling him to do. Every day he passed the same engineering building on his left, the one without any cars or signs of life, and every day Collins wondered what they do there and how *they* pay the bills. Every day he passed the blinking yellow light at SuzyQs, and every day four different putzes in cars got to the intersection at the same time and just sat there, each trying to decide who the hell goes first. Every day Collins drove past the landfill, under Route 295, past Walmart, and across Atwood Avenue. Every single blinking day. Same routine. You drive to work. But you just don't get anywhere.

His shop and yard were just off Plainfield Street in a crappy neighborhood, which meant he could afford the space he needed to store materials and park trucks. His shop was close

enough to the crappy parts of Providence, Johnston, and Cranston that the lowlifes who worked for him could walk or take the bus to work if one of their crappy cars died. His crew still showed, most of the time, even when one of their girlfriends threw them out and they had to sleep on the floor at one of their buddies' places. His crew stumbled in every morning pissed off, hung-over, or drugged up. Collins didn't care. Hung-over, sick-as-a-dog, sick, sick and tired – none of that mattered as long as they could crank a roofing shovel, haul shingles up a ladder or get behind a nail gun. It didn't matter whether they were awake and alert. It barely mattered whether they were alive or dead. Breathing. He needed them breathing and able to bull shingles up a ladder. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else.

There ain't much you can do in a recession besides park the trucks, lay people off, and wait it out. At his peak, in '07, he had fifteen guys working, five trucks, and could run six or seven jobs at once – and even with that crew, he ran three weeks behind. Then, Collins spent all *his* time bidding the work, and he never got near a roof. Now it was just him and John. They'd call in one more guy when they had a roof to do, and that meant Collins was up on the roof-jacks again, bulling those damn hundred-pound bundles on his back like a mule.

Even so, Collins spent more time sitting than he did working. There was no work. Nothing. Nada. Zero. Zilch. He tried golf once just to kill time but who the hell can hit that damn ball? After 6 weeks, he put the oldest truck on Craigslist. There was rent and child support. He could live off the trucks for a year or two if he had to, selling the trucks one after the next, if it weren't for the payment on the Ram. That payment made it all too damn tight. And

you can't run a roofing business without work trucks. Can't make a living without tools. He could live without the Ram. Might have to.

He hit Route 116 and went south, then turned right on Route 12. Out into the woods. At least there was still work to bid. A little work to bid. Once in a while.

This one was a pittyshit job for some lawyer who lived in the woods. It was a reproduction old colonial house set back from the road that looked like a museum. They raised alpacas behind straight eight-foot fences. Everything was post-and-beam, wood clapboards and cedar-shake roof-shingles. Brass lanterns that must have cost a thousand bucks each for porch lights. A copper weathervane.

Cedar-shake roof. They wanted hand-cut shakes. You can't nail-gun the damn things – they're too irregular. Have to hand-place and hand-nail them. Nice to be able to afford it all in a recession. Nice to be able to afford anything at all.

The house looked old, like from the 1700s or something. The roof was about 11 pitch and had three chimneys needed flashing -- but at least the roof didn't have a lot of other garbage on it – no skylights and no dormers, so they could be in and out in a week – strip it in a day and a half and shingle it in two to three days, leaving a day or two for rain.

This wasn't his usual kind of job. Collins liked asphalt shingles and flat industrial roofs. But these people wanted their roof done quick, done inside ten days, and they were willing to pay extra for someone who could turn the job around fast. They also wanted a completion

penalty – get it done on time and you're good, run past the completion date and they knock off five percent a day. But that wasn't a problem if you plan the job right. The money was good, and he had ten days to get in and out.

Plenty of time.

The people seemed pretty fussy. That was a possible headache – but that's what mechanic's liens are for, lawyer or no lawyer as the home-owner. And at least cedar shake isn't as heavy as asphalt. Collins was too old to be scrambling up and down ladders. Too damn old. Knees were going and he could sure feel his shoulders hurt every time he lifted a bundle of shingles. Working made his left shoulder ache like someone was trying to twist it off. Nothing was like it used to be.

But the job was straightforward enough, and it would let him make the payment on the Ram this month. Low-ball to get this one. Let's face it. He needed the work.

Yes they could start tomorrow. He headed back across the reservoir to his office and yard in Cranston. He would work with John tomorrow to get them started. They could pull in Brian or Jack for the next two or three days and wrap the thing by the end of the week.

It was November. There was frost on the still green grass in the morning and a glaze of ice on the road just after sun-up when he left his house the following day. The leaves were almost all off the trees, although the oak leaves were brown and most were still attached, and there were still a few yellowing ashes and a few yellow-and-red maple leaves hanging on the bottom branches, their color reflected in the shimmering reservoir, which itself became a pale

yellow as the sun rose, the sun first pink and then pale yellow and then orange behind the trunks and tops of now barren trees.

As he drove over the water, Collins organized the day. The Ram barreled up the hill on the far side of the bridge without straining, the way a great blue heron flies over a lake, flapping its wings twice and then gliding over the surface of deep green and reflected blue. Staging and shingle shovels. Roof jacks and tarps. He could order shingles at lunch. One truck, two guys, in and out. They'd take a work truck. The Ram would stay in the office yard. Too bad he had to drive into Cranston at all.

The first day went okay. Tarps down, staging up. Then came the roof itself.

Collins hadn't used a roofing shovel in years. There is an art to it. You jam the toothed handle of the shovel under a row of shingles, the teeth find their way between the nails. The nails get shoved by the force of your thrust into the crotch of the blade until the blade is stopped by the nails. There is a lever on the back of the blade - a ridge of steel five or six inches below the blade - that gives you lift when you drop the handle. You drop the handle hard, with the same kind of force you'd use to pump air into a tire, pushing the long, white ash wooden handle down with your arms and back. The lever on the back of the blade multiplies the force and a whole row of shingles pops off the roof together, often lifting a row or two above them, and sometimes the force sends the nails flying into the air, the nails and shingles letting go together with a groan. Then you move over and jam the shovel into another row. It's got a rhythm - jam in the shovel, pump the handle down, hear the groan as the old shingles let go, shake the shovel free, and move

to the next row. The shingles rain down from the roof like falling snow. The pumping of the handle against the roof is like rowing a boat, pumping a handcar down a railroad track or lifting an anchor, the work rhythm of men who have lived by the sweat of their brows and the strength of their backs for generations, for as long as anyone can remember.

His shoulder started to ache on the third row. Left shoulder. Throbbing, like it was being crushed in a vice that wouldn't let go. That was funny. He was right-handed. He used his right hand and arm to jam the shovel under the shingles and to push down, prying those shingles loose, so it didn't slow him much. He didn't use his left arm or shoulder at all. Maybe he'd pulled the left shoulder when he loaded the staging, or when he threw the two-by-twelves into the truck, the boards that sat on the staging and were now under his feet, supporting his weight.

By the fifth row, he had to take a break. Not like him. He told John to keep working. The shoulder hurt too much, and Collins felt really tired, like he need to lay down and take a nap.

Head spinning a little, he climbed down from the staging, and sat on a rock in front of the house.

It was cold enough for him to see his breath. This was a south-facing roof. They hadn't exposed the roof boards yet, but the roof was about three years past the point it should have been replaced, so a few of the roofboards were rotted and needed replacing. The thin pale-yellow sun was well over the tree-line now, its weak light casting long shadows on the roof. The brown

leaves rattled in the woods behind the house, and Collins felt chilled, although his left shoulder had loosened up. There was a thermos of coffee in the truck. He decided to sit in the truck for a moment and have a cup of something hot. Too bad it was the work truck because the springs in the seats were shot, and the seat collapsed under his weight. The Ram would have been heaven right then.

Then he went back to work.

The shoulder was aching full-time by the time they were ready for the first row of roof jacks. It was a wrenching pain that just wouldn't let go. Collins was having trouble thinking. He couldn't see straight. He was sweating. The skin on his face was waxy and he was short of breath.

John looked at him and lit a cigarette. "You look down for the count, boss."

Collins shook his head.

"We got a roof to do. Got a mortgage and a truck payment, and I got to pay your ass. Throw me the tape. Rafters are on 24-inch centers. Let's try nailing the jack into a rafter and not into outer space this time, how about?"

John nailed while Collins kept him supplied with the rusted blue-metal roof jacks. Then he started handing up more two-by-twelves. By the third two-by, the shoulder was worse than it had ever been. Still, he couldn't quit. Wouldn't. The mortgage and the Ram.

But by the fourth two-by, he knew he was done.

They put an IV into his arm just after a woman sitting in a tiny cubicle behind a desk that held a computer had asked him a hundred questions, looked at his insurance card, and made him a blue plastic bracelet. They took him to a chair where they took his blood pressure and temperature. Then they brought him to a big room that had too much light, where lots of people were working in an island of computers, a room ringed with people on gurneys. Each gurney was surrounded by a white fabric curtain.

A woman pointed to a blue johnny that lay on the gurney and told him to take off his clothes.

A woman in a white coat – intern? resident? nurse? something else? – came in, asked him a bunch of questions, most of which didn't have anything to do with his shoulder, and then left. A thin black man with a moustache came in a few minutes later, put some stickers on his chest, and ran an EKG. The woman - what-ever-she-was - came back, looked at the EKG and got a serious look on her face.

“Sit still,” she said, as if Collins was about to take a walk half-naked.

Then there were three people – two women in white coats and a man dressed in green – standing at the foot of the gurney, murmuring to each other as if they didn't want Collins to hear what they were saying as they all looked at the EKG.

“We are going to admit you to the hospital,” said one of the women, the second woman to come on the scene, who was shorter than the first woman and wore her jet-black hair in a bun. “You need a heart catheterization,” said the man. “You're having a heart attack.”

Collins looked at them.

“No.” he said.

They all looked at him like he was crazy.

“No catheterization.” Collins said.

“Look, you are having a big heart attack. That means your heart muscle isn't getting oxygen. Your heart muscle is dying right now, right in front of us. If we don't fix this right now, you can die. You will die. Maybe today. Maybe tomorrow. Soon.”

“The hell with that. I've got a roof to finish. By next Wednesday. How long will this catheterization thing take?” Collins said

“The heart catheterization will take about an hour – longer if we need to put in stents -- little metal tubes to keep the arteries open. That can take a couple of hours. Then three or four days in the hospital. You can be back to work in a month once the stents mature.”

“A month? The hell with that too,” Collins said. “Just a goddamn month. A month is nothing to you. It’s everything to me. No way. I’ve got a mortgage and a truck payment to make. I feel fine now. Thanks for your help and concern.”

“Your truck payment isn’t going to matter if you don’t get this fixed *now*,” the short woman said.

“It won’t matter to you. It matters to me. I’ve never missed a payment on that truck. Don’t plan on missing one now.”

“You understand that you will probably die in the next twenty–four hours if we don’t intervene now?” the man in green scrubs said, his voice rising.

“I understand that everyone dies of something sometime, and I got a mortgage and a truck payment to make and dead men don’t make truck payments.”

The three people who had been standing at the foot of Collins’s bed had inched forward and were now standing next to him. The man in the green scrubs stood on his right. The shorter woman with the pinned back black hair stood on his left. The first woman, who had long blond hair and glasses, stood near the foot of the bed on the left. They had him surrounded.

“You won’t survive the night if you leave here now,” the woman with the pinned up black hair said, speaking slowly and clearly as if Collins was either deaf or not a native speaker of English.

“Look, I get what you people are telling me loud and clear,” Collins said. “You think my heart’s had it. Loud and clear. You’re the experts. But I’m sitting here and talking to you, and nothing hurts, so from my perspective I’m good to go. You have a right to your opinion. I thank

you very much for your concern and for all your good deeds. I'm the one with a life to lead and the mortgage to pay."

"You'll have to sign a form," said the second woman on the left, the one with the blond hair and glasses, who had first looked at the EKG and told Collins it was trouble.

"I'll sign whatever goddamn form you want. Can I go home now please?"

"To each his own," the man in the green scrubs said, shaking his head. The three people moved away from the gurney as the curtain that they closed behind them waved in the breeze of their wake.

John picked up Collins in the work truck and drove him back to the shop. Then Collins drove the Ram home.

It was almost midnight. The night was clear and cold. A rain had come through just after dark -- a quick drenching rain that come in from the ocean and left the road puddled and wet. Then a cold wind blew the clouds away. Now the sky was clear. There was a low yellow moon, and as Collins crossed the reservoir, that moon was reflected in the still cold water. He could see both the moon and its reflection at once.

Collins stumbled into bed, more tired than he had a right to be. He set his alarm for 6 AM.

There was a hard freeze over night. Collins awoke before the alarm, stumbled out of bed, into his work-clothes, and into the Ram. He felt hung over. But he was still alive, God-damn it. So much for doctors,

The cold air stung on his face. As he gunned the engine and pulled the truck out of his driveway, his shoulder began to ache again.

There was ice on the road near his house. The first ice of the coming winter.

It didn't all add up. They tell you to work every day, so you work. They tell you to pay your bills on time, so you pay your bills. You do the best job you can at life. And life happens anyway, regardless of what you think or what you want. And there is little enough pleasure in any of it.

Collins saw the sign, the one he drove by every day, the one that said *Bridge Freezes Before Road Surface* as the truck came down the hill. Who cares when the goddamn bridge freezes? All of life is frozen, and nobody gets out of life alive.

The road was empty and the roadbed near the reservoir was dry.

Collins hit the gas. The truck shot out onto the bridge over the stretch of road that snakes over the water.

There was a long patch of road glazed with ice in front of him on the bridge.

The Ram was strong. Collins was strong, as strong as he had ever felt in his life. Fuck the goddamn doctors.

The vice grip on Collins' shoulder spread to the rest of his chest and took his breath away.

They want your car payment on time, and your child support on time, and they want their roof done when they want it done. There isn't anyone but you yourself, and there isn't anyone to pick up the slack. They keep you tied down so there isn't any pleasure in any of it, outside of driving the damn truck, and that isn't much pleasure at all.

Before he hit that stretch of ice, Collins hit the gas again. The hell with all of them. And all of it.

The Ram hit the ice, went into a full skid, slid into the guard rail, mounted it and went airborne over the water.

Then the Ram rose above the earth in a perfect arc. It circled the reservoir, gliding like a great blue heron, and then it climbed into the perfect dark blue clouds of November, headed south.

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