

Another Eight-Hour Day

The daily grind

Frank Bill

8:15 A.M.

The SCP warehouse sits in the west end of Louisville, Kentucky. A working-class area where blacks and whites survive amongst the worn brick and potholed streets. Wearing a scuffed blue hardhat, the SCP warehouse chief tells me, “Don’t know what kinda game he’s playin’ but I’m tired of it.”

I’ll call him Paul, not his real name. Like most of the guys I work with, Paul’s a white dude. He found God two years ago. He has an anger problem. His complexion is similar to raw bratwurst. He’s bulldog-jawed with stubble. He’s fuming at the tanker of Polyethylene glycol (Peg for short), over forty thousand pounds of a raw material for the Associative Thickener plant that’s been sitting across the street next to the north warehouse since 7:30 a.m. in the unloading pit. Because there are three of us in the warehouse, we rotate the responsibility of unloading it. Paul believes it’s the other warehouse operator’s turn, but it’s not. It’s Paul’s turn.

It’s my week to run the warehouse office, a 12 x 12 room constructed of a drop ceiling, cement block walls, big screen TV-sized glass windows and tile floor. The office sits in a corner behind me in the football field-sized south warehouse.

At 8 a.m., Monday thru Friday, whoever runs the office will check the backlog on his computer for add-on shipments. Call truck lines for inner city pick-ups. Get paperwork printed out so the two operators running the warehouse floor can pull shipments for the next day.

It’s Paul’s week to work the floor. Meaning he’ll help the other operator haul finished material from the line-up across the street, load finished product or unload raw materials from tankers for the Associative Thickener plant or from railcars for the clay plant.

“He unloaded one last week, when you were off.”

Talking to Paul when he's aggravated is like talking to a wall—right now.

“I did the last one. I've had a bad week. I don't need this today.”

“We had two Peg trucks last week. The second one came when you were off. I'll unload this one.”

“It's not your turn.” He snaps. Gets on my scratched and beat Toyota fork truck. We only have two in our area, Goose's and mine. Paul revs down the dock ramp, across the rutted street and into the north warehouse. Passing the other operator. They don't acknowledge each other.

The other operator, Goose, drives through the open bay on his fork truck. Across the cracked floor carrying a pallet of plastic wrapped material that's about four feet tall and four feet wide. He's bringing it from the line-up, material being produced by one of the two plants that run twenty-four hours a day. He'll place it in one of the rows that line the right and left sides of the warehouse. There are close to thirty on each side.

Stopping, his back to me, he swivels around on the idling fork truck. He wears a gray hard hat turned backwards, baseball-sized number 3 in its center, union and University of Kentucky stickers on the sides. Shaded safety glasses hide his eyes. He has a neatly trimmed goat-tee. He's a die-hard UK fan, bleeds blue. He asks me, “He not gonna unload that Peg truck?”

Standing outside the office, I step toward him and say, “He thinks it's your turn.”

“Didn't you tell him I unloaded the last one?”

“I did.”

“What'd he say?”

Before I can answer, the warehouse phone rings. Sounds off like a horn. Bouncing from the insulation-padded ceiling that hovers 30 feet or better over ahead, down to the solid nicked floor and tin walls that are lined with webs of gray dust.

Turning around, I walk to the open bay door where a grit-covered phone is mounted. Irritated, I answer. “Warehouse.”

“Hey.” It’s our warehouse manager. I’ll call him Art. “Tell Goose we got a Peg truck that needs to be unloaded.”

Four or five years ago, rumors floated around about getting bought out by our competitor. Fearing pay cuts and higher costing insurance, union cards got passed around. We got bought. The union was voted in. The warehouse manager, and all other managers for that matter, are non-union. Art’s management. Sits in his office, in the north warehouse across the street.

All three of us know the truck is here. It was in the pit when we arrived this morning.

“He knows.” I say. “It’s not—”

Art has already hung up. I wanted to say “rocket science.” Art is the guy who always worries about his job. When his boss wants something done, regardless of how important the job we are doing is, he expects us to drop it. Do what he needs done. This is our daily deck of cards. Miscommunication. Butting heads. Fifteen minute break. Start over till lunch time.

8:45 A.M.

Phoning the Associative Thickeners plant manager, I ask which storage tank George wants the Peg pumped into. George gives me the tank number. It’s not empty. Tells me, it’ll take a bit.

I hang up the phone. We have a two-hour window to unload the Peg before we get charged extra. It’s called “the marriage.” The truck driver has never delivered to us before, needs to be told where to drop his trailer. Hook up his pump to unload the Peg. I grab my safety shield and leather gloves. Walk across the street. Rattle the driver’s maroon door with my palm. He’s a black dude. More than likely from Mississippi or Louisiana as the company that delivers the Peg is located down south.

“Wanna step out,” I say, as I turn, point to the knee-high rock wall that protects the pit in-case of a spill, “you need to get as close to the wall as possible. You’ll need all the room you can get after you

drop your tanker and pull up beside it.”

He tells me. “Ok.”

The pit is wide enough for two semi’s to sit side by side with trailers attached. The driver appears starved, wiry built. Walking alongside his chrome tanker to its rear, our reflections expand like we’re in a funhouse of mirrors.

After showing him how far he needs to back up, he pulls the tanker forward and guides it in. The airbrakes sound. I chalk the rear tires. Check the temperature gauge on the other side of the tanker. Two hundred ten degrees. It’ll start to set up at 160. We’re good. It’s boiling.

At the pit’s rear, I check our feed line. Make sure the line isn’t blocked. Opening the nitrogen valve, I try to blow nitrogen through the feed line to the Associative Thickener plant, which is a good 100 feet away. The pressure gauge doesn’t drop. There’s a plug.

To my left, Paul comes out of the north warehouse’s rusted side door.

I tell him about the plug.

He tells me, “I got it. I misunderstood what you said.”

9:10 A.M.

Resting my arms across a white countertop that separates Art from me I say, “Look, they’re good workers, but I’m tired of being in the middle when they get pissed off at one another.”

“I know. I just had knee surgery. Had to walk all over the place to find Paul. I—”

Art’s about 5’7”. Gray stubble on the sides of his tan head with much less in the center. He had curved legs, bad. Everyone joked about him being bowlegged. Before his surgery, guys would tell him he’d be 6’ tall after the procedure was finished.

Waving a hand he says, “You don’t need to hear this. I’m having a meeting with them.”

9:30 A.M.

I'm talking to Art about a shipment when Paul bursts in behind me. "Peg driver's hose just blew."

It's as if someone just cut the oxygen off in the office. There are no alarms for this. Just reaction.

Fretting, Art stands up and asks, "Where's the spill kit?"

Eyeing Art like he's ten kinds of stupid, Paul says, "You got it back there in one of your cabinets."

Art drags out a box. Carries it from his office to the north dock. Drops it on the flat surface.

These things happen maybe once a year. When they do you gotta be on your toes, remember the protocol. Get the spill contained. Cleaned up. Report it to the safety manager. Make sure nothing goes to the city sewer, especially if it's hazardous. If that happens OSHA gets involved. But Peg isn't a hazardous material.

Paul and I grab several long blue absorbent socks from the box. They're called Pig Socks. They create a wall, will dam the flow of material. Taking them out the side door, to the pit, we form a square barrier beneath the feed line but around the sump that's covered by a stainless metal screen. Peg will hardened quickly. If it gets into the sump, it'll be similar to peanut brittle and make the pump useless.

Looking at the truck driver's hose, it's laying ripped open with Peg rivering out of it. Creating a huge sticky puddle of donut glaze outside of the Pig Socks.

Walking back in the side door, Art's wearing a Dallas Cowboy's hardhat with ear muffs the color of Mountain Dew. He's on his Blackberry reporting the spill to our safety guy. Sounding rushed, he asks me, "Anything get in the sump?"

"Maybe two gallons."

Out in the pit, the driver says, it's not his fault. There must've been a blockage on our end.

In the side door of the north warehouse, we have a touch screen to choose the correct tank to pump the materials too. We monitor

the tanks as they fill up. And Paul tells the driver, “You pumped two thousand pounds into the tank before the line busted. You were running your pump too fast.”

We’re worried about whose fault it is. A report will have to be written, detailing what happened. Art tells me, “Get the camera, we need pictures. Email them to me.”

9:45 A.M.

After grabbing the digital camera from the south warehouse, I snap pictures of the spill from different angles. The sun is working its way up over the city, turning up the heat. My clothes are starting to stick to me.

We’re not even two hours into another eight-hour day. Trucks need to be called for outgoing shipments. Material needs to be brought over and inventoried. Shipments for tomorrow need to be pulled, the Peg truck still needs to be unloaded. Other than the spill, this is a normal workday in the SCP warehouse. Listening to men bicker about their duties like infants over toys, I’m always the ref and the counselor, ready and waiting for my fifteen- or thirty-minute break and another cup of coffee.

