

Outside Thunder Pallets

by Michael Seidel

The toilet paper roll has fallen out of the truck and stopped moving under the axle. Carl, in his blue satin Thunder Pallets jacket, looks like he'll burst as he bends down on the blacktop to retrieve it. He needs that toilet paper roll. Whenever his boss comes over to him and ask him to take the forklift to some unexpected corner of the warehouse, Carl presses the roll to his mouth like a trumpet and says the same thing each time: "Yes, yes, ok."

He looks at it like this: Work is for working. Talk is for talking. Toilet paper rolls were for talking at work.

His boss never looks up from his clipboard when he speaks to Carl, but Carl is always worried that one day his boss's concentration will snap apart and a fury will overcome him; he'll pull the job rug right from under Carl on the spot, then roll him in it bodily and drag him to the curb where eventually he'll get compacted in the back of some city truck. Carl's peculiarity of toilet paper rolls is not covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act — he's looked it up.

But it's still before the shift, and prostrate now on the blacktop under the truck, Carl hears a jovial, "Carl! My man!" and sees soft brown boots. Carl almost doesn't understand what's said or who is saying it, the boss's salutation being so devoid of its usual order-ushering directness.

The toilet paper roll is just out of reach and Carl hits his head on the exhaust as he snugs his round frame out to meet his boss's gaze. He feels the hand of fear go through his back and rattle his spine. And as his lips begin to move in reply, he realizes that no one, not even the finest among us, is anything more than a simple ventriloquist dummy.

What if I've been given the voice of a girl? is the nervous thought that comes to him next.

His beard goes to ice. He moves his knuckles to his teeth.

