

Shit May Come And Shit May Go, But A Good Tarpaulin Can Last Forever

by Tony Hightower

I'm a bad friend. Hey, at least I know it.

I was supposed to help Dave lay his new roof this morning, but I know Dave. There was no way he was gonna be ready. You know the kind of person who asks you to help them move, and when you show up on the Saturday morning just before the truck gets there, you find them making coffee and lounging on their couch watching cartoons, having not even started packing their house? The truck will be there in fifteen minutes, and they don't even have boxes to throw stuff in, let alone an order in which to put things into those boxes so they'd have one scintilla of a chance to be found at the other end? A half-dozen friends of theirs have shown up, and it's only after they're all there that the guy even thinks to go out & get donuts for everyone and make a fresh pot of coffee, because what was going to be a few hours' work looks like it'll now last deep into the night, and that's if everyone's lucky, and when does the truck have to be back by again, exactly?

You have any friends like that? Well, yeah. Meet Dave.

At least I hadn't committed completely to helping him this morning, or so I thought. He had sent out an email yesterday afternoon asking if anyone wanted to help fix his roof, and it was only then that we realized that he'd been one of the houses that was hit. He assured us he was fine, but he had a three-foot-wide bullet-hole of a skylight now, and tomorrow was his only day to patch things up before he fucked off to his next gig, chasing tornados or

doing some film shoot someplace, I used to pay attention but I never do anymore. I'm a bad friend. In my face, out my ear. At least I cop to it.

I woke up about 10 that morning to the vibrating of my phone, and the vague sensation that it had been vibrating for a while before I woke up. Whaddyawant, I'm asleep, time is a wash, I'm not a Metallica song, fergodsake. Four text messages and a voicemail. I cycle through the texts:

- HEY TOM, YOU COMING THIS MORNING? GET 2 COFFEES 4 ME & CHUCK? THX.

- LINDA JUST GOT HERE, SO GET ONE MORE. THX.

- YOU COMING? IT'S JUST ME & LINDA HERE, & WE NEED AT LEAST ONE MORE.

- LINDA JUST BAILED. DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT NOW.

Ah, so Chuck bailed too. Now I feel bad. This is the worst part of being one half of an unreliable friendship. Nobody involved wants it like this. It just happens. Someone blows something off, someone else forgives it, then tat for tit and verse visa, and one day you're sitting on your couch, missing someone's wedding because you thought it was still Thursday and they didn't mention it to you anyway, but you're still bee-eff-eff and don't let nobody tell you different.

I look at the voicemail, and decide against listening to it until I've finished waking up.

Coffee in the maker from yesterday is great with a few ice cubes, and I flip on the TV, because it's there. The President said something, there was a bombing somewhere, lots of running yelling people, it happens, forecast is for cold & sunny, well that's a welcome change. And the "plane debris" thing at the top of the hour. What a nice clean euphemism for such a filthy thing. Debris. Right, CNN. Not even "fecal matter" or "human waste." "Debris."

That was Dave. All that sewage in Dave's house. Damn.

I always thought it was an urban legend that pieces of frozen shit fell out of the sky after being ejected by some plane. I had no idea that that actually happened, and that it would land in Dave's place,

of all the places in the world for a 767 to take a midair dump. Even he seemed more bemused by it than freaked out. Less likely than being struck by lightning, and possibly the worst way to die ever. At least Dave wasn't home at the time. Karaoke night. He's never home on Fridays if he can help it.

I called Dave. "Hey."

"Hey! Where are you, man?"

"Sorry, I overslept. How's it going?"

"Kinda the same. The landlord brought the shingles this morning, and I have nails. you coming?"

"You still doing this thing?"

"Yeah, I have to. The D.O.T. cleaners left a shit-ton of footprints all over my place, and there's gonna be rain again tonight, and I don't want any more damage to my stuff, you know? I have to get these things up today." His stuff. His precious stuff. I'll be packing that shit for him one morning soon, I just know it. That shit. I can't say that in front of him. I hope he hasn't been traumatized. He was fearful enough as it was. I can't say that. I'd be freaked out too if a quarter-ton ice-spear of frozen turds turned my *pied-a-terre* into a *grotto du merde*. "You coming?"

"Yeah, alright, I'll be right over. How's the smell?"

"Not too bad, actually. More like bleach than shit. I'm grateful for that. Could be worse. It could have hit the bedrooms or the bathroom instead of the living room."

"Alright. You have any extra wood to reinforce the ceiling?"

"The shingles should cover it."

"No no, you need something to put the shingles on. They're not going to float in midair."

"Well, we can do that some other time. Let's get the outside done and then we can fill in behind it later."

"You *sure* that's not important?"

"I'm sure it is, but we're doing what we can today, not the whole job. Fuck, I've never done this before."

"Me neither, but you can't nail the shingles to each other across a huge hole in your roof. What are you going to put the tar on?"

"Tar?"

"Tar. To waterproof the shingles. There's no tar? ... There's no tar." I had to think. Someone had to think. "Is the landlord helping you with this?"

"He's got a roofer he knows, but he won't be back till next week."

"Well, you're not getting anything done today. I'm telling you now."

"What do you mean?"

"Okay... okay. Here's what you do." As if I knew. "Go to the hardware store and get yourself a tarpaulin more than big enough to cover the hole. I'll be over in a couple of hours, and we're going to secure the tarp with rocks and whatever heavy shit we can find... Sorry, I didn't mean to say 'shit.'"

"What? Oh. Don't worry about it. I didn't even notice."

"Well anyway. You do that and then get the landlord to fix this thing himself. It's his house. You just live in it."

There was a long pause. "There are a lot of shingles to put up."

"No kidding. And you and I don't have a clue as to what to do."

"Hey, I know how to put up shingles."

"Maybe, but you don't know how to fix a roof. Did Chuck know what to do?"

"He'd done it once before, apparently."

"Is he around today?"

"Naw, he went Upstate with his wife this morning. He forgot he had something going on, a wedding or something."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. "Chuck. Fuckin' Chuck."

Dave laughed too. "Yeah, fuck that guy. So you coming over or what?"

"Alright. I'm coming over, but just to pick you up. We're going straight to the hardware store."

I ended the call, and typed out a text message with the month and year, in the distant future, when I thought the tarpaulin would finally be replaced by a completed roof, and then I immediately closed it, unsent.

