**Worker’s hands**

by

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Translated by Lucy Moffatt

Trygve was woken by the sound of the municipal snowplow clattering its way up the road. Its headlights bathed his bedroom in a dull, white light. He spent his first waking minutes at the bedroom window. The snowflakes glowed in the darkness and for a moment he felt that childish joy you often get with snow – especially the year’s first fall. The alarm clock started to ring and he switched it off without taking his eyes off the road, which would have been snowed in by now if it hadn’t been for the snowplow. It was Monday and he’d spent much of the Sunday dreading having to get up early. Tone whimpered. She’d turned over onto her stomach, and was sleeping with her arms under the pillow. Trygve wondered if it was good for the baby. It was probably a stupid thought. She was only two months gone and you couldn’t even tell she was pregnant. Trygve closed his eyes and caught a yawn with his hand. He stretched out on the bed again and lay there listening to Tone’s snoring. More than anything else in the world, he longed to lie down under the duvet and snuggle up close to her, but he had to get up.

He was stiff. Two days wasn’t enough time to recover. The job had got tougher now Christmas was coming. Production was stepped up in the holiday seasons. Several temps had been taken on lately and rumors were going round that the brewery would start up the night shift again. It was difficult to keep up with the new temps, but Trygve knew what it was like for them. He’d worked harder in the beginning himself – he’d given it his all so he’d be allowed to stay on. For almost a year, he’d put up with two-week contracts. The pay had gradually gotten better, and last time he’d been given a month contract. Tone had been relieved.

“So you’ll get enough to tide us over Christmas at least,” she’d said, giving him a hug. Trygve was pretty certain he’d have work up until New Year, but winter and spring were always quiet periods. He went into the bathroom. Washed his face and got ready. Found his working clothes and got dressed in front of the mirror in the hallway. In the bedroom, he heard Tone sit up in bed.

“Just go back to sleep,” he said.

“Don’t you want some coffee?”

“I’ll make it, just go back to sleep.”

But she was already getting up, reaching for her dressing gown and wrapping it around herself. Trygve followed her out into the kitchen, where she put on the kettle and took out his thermos cup. He took the packed lunch he’d prepared the night before out of the fridge and put it in his jacket pocket. Then he lit the stove and ate two slices of bread, which he buttered on the breadboard.

It was nearly half-past five when Geir came driving into the yard. Trygve saw him from the kitchen window. Tone had taken up her regular seat at the kitchen table, the one nearest the stove.

“Hi Dad,” said Tone as the kitchen door opened and Geir came in.

“Up a bit early, ain’t you?” he said, as he put his own thermos cup down on the kitchen table. He rubbed his hands together, shivered and asked if they had any coffee.

“Only instant left,” said Trygve.

Geir sighed, but picked up the cup and gave it to Trygve.

“You doin’ alright?” asked Geir, sitting down beside Tone and putting an arm around her shoulders.

“Fine,” she said. “Just a bit tired.”

“Back to bed with you, then” said Geir, taking the cup from Trygve. He took a sip, swallowed and started to cough. He carried on coughing until he was red in the face. Trygve picked up some kitchen roll from the counter and put it down in front of Geir, who began to tear off sheet after sheet.

“You all right, Dad?” asked Tone.

Geir didn’t answer. He leaned back in his chair, struggling for breath. Tone got up.

“Oh my God, Dad,” she said. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just a bit tight,” he said, pressing a palm to his chest.

“It really was about time you gave up smoking,” said Tone.

“You ready?” said Geir.

He got up, patted Tone on the shoulder and went out into the hallway. Trygve picked up his thermos cup, hugged Tone and followed Geir out into the snow.

“You want the seat-warmer on?” asked Geir as they were getting into the car.

Trygve said he did and put on his seatbelt. The Volvo had been idling in the yard, and it was warm.

“We’ll be late,” said Trygve.

“Yeah, but we’ll blame it on the snow,” said Geir.

“I really didn’t feel like getting up today,” said Trygve.

Geir nodded and took a pack of Rød 3 tobacco from the glove compartment. He laid both arms across the steering wheel and rolled himself a cigarette while Trygve rubbed the sleep from his eyes. Geir put the tobacco on the dashboard, lit his cigarette and said, “Don’t you go telling Tone about this, OK?”

Trygve didn’t answer. “New Year’s resolutions are made to be broken,” Geir had said, lighting up a cigarette with shaking hands outside the Spar in Osedalen early in January – he’d managed to hold out for five days. Trygve had been working at the brewery since the previous December. It’d soon be a year now, and Geir had been driving him there and back all that time. He worked at the power plant and they had to take the same route. Geir had also let them move into the empty house in Jomås that he’d inherited from his father, so they’d still be able to put aside a bit of money after Tone lost her temporary job at the nursery school. He’d said they could start paying rent once they both had jobs.

Geir took a long drag on his cigarette and then the coughing started again. He stepped on the brake. The car stopped with a jerk. He stubbed the cigarette out in the ashtray.

“You okay?”

Geir opened the car door and spat out into the snow. He sat there for a while before starting up the car again.

“It’s emphysema,” said Geir.

Then he shook his head to himself and stared straight ahead at the road. The wipers were going at top speed to keep the windscreen clear.

“Anything they can do?” said Trygve.

“No, but I’ll have to give up smoking,” said Geir.

When they got to Stoa, Geir started coughing again. There was a gurgling in his chest and when he breathed it sounded like the noise the wind makes when it blows through the rickety walls of a barn. Geir drove in through the brewery gates and parked the car.

“Ain’t you goin’ to tell Tone?” asked Trygve.

“Dunno. She’ll have to deal with it sooner or later, but I want to tell her myself,” said Geir. “So keep your mouth shut about it, alright?”

“Alright,” said Trygve.

“Have a good shift, then” said Geir.

“Alright,” said Trygve again. He didn’t know what to say, so he just nodded to Geir, opened the car door and waded through the snow to the main entrance.

According to the clock on his mobile, he was ten minutes late. Trygve clocked in and ran down the corridor, through the bottling area and into the sorting area. He could hear the sound of bottles clinking and the drone of the electric trucks as they buzzed to and fro. He could just turn around now, go out through the barrier and wait for a bus. He could tell Tone he felt ill – but he didn’t want to worry her. In high school he’d skipped class a lot, but he’d never missed a single hour at the sorting plant. He’d been in the right place at the right time. Two truck drivers had gone off sick right after he’d started and the brewery had sent him on a truck-driving course. He’d paid for the license out of his own pocket, the same way he’d paid for his steel-capped boots and work clothes – only permanent employees got given work clothes.

“We expect a hundred and ten per cent,” Steinar from the recruitment agency had said, but Kåre, the warehouse boss, had just come out of his office with a cup of coffee and pointed towards one of the sorting tables.

“They’ll show you what to do,” he said.

“They” were mostly temps, unskilled Norwegians and Europeans who were waiting for their qualifications to be accredited in Norway. There was an engineer from Latvia and an architect from Poland. There were also two mechanics from Lithuania and a teacher from Romania. Two of the Norwegians he worked with had got halfway through teacher training but the rest of the temps were people like him: people who’d dropped out of high school, or gone to work straight from junior high. “A job’s a job,” his mother used to say. She’d worked as a cleaner for the municipality and was proud of it. This wasn’t the job Trygve had pictured for himself when he was at high school in Arendal, but things hadn’t exactly gone the way he’d pictured them there either. He hadn’t felt at home with general studies. His classmates from junior high had all chosen vocational studies, but he’d known deep down this wouldn’t suit him. He didn’t know anything about cars or mechanics. He wasn’t clever with his hands either, not like a lot of his other friends. He liked watching films and TV series, and had spent a lot of his youth in his room with horror films and PlayStation. Trygve had found it difficult to make new friends in Arendal, and he hadn’t liked his German and gym teachers. Even as a kid he’d been big, and at junior high he’d put on even more weight. Gym had been tough at high school and one time in the showers after Trygve had ended up going out on a long jog, a boy from Hisøya had laughed and said he was in the wrong shower room.

“Your tits are even bigger than Leonora’s,” he’d said and the others had laughed.

Trygve stopped going to gym. He gave up German too. The teacher kept making him come up to the front of the class to conjugate a verb or read aloud. The same day Trygve stopped going to German classes, he’d gone up to the staff room and asked Hagen to stop picking on him in class.

“I’ll work hard, I just get so nervous when I have to stand up in front of the others.”

Hagen had listened to everything Trygve said and afterwards he’d said it was important for all of them to work hard and that Trygve had a lot of catching up to do.

Next class, Trygve was the first person to be called up to the front.

Trygve found himself a pair of work gloves. They were dry and rough and full of holes. He pulled them on and went over to the other temps, who’d already started work. He flexed his hands, clenched them into fists and punched them together like a boxer. His mother always used to boast about how his father had worker’s hands.

“That’s the way a man’s hands should look,” he’d heard her say. She’d commented on Trygve’s hands the last time he’d been for a visit, studying them from across the kitchen table. Then she’d taken them in her own hands, held them and stroked a finger over his rough palms, saying in a proud voice that now he had worker’s hands.

The red plastic trays of 1.5 liter bottles were driven in on a forklift truck and set down in front of the sorting table. The pallets were stacked four high and each one held eight trays. Trygve’s job was to lug them over to the sorters. Every tray held 24 unsorted bottles and the people lining the table had the job of sorting them into different types. The bottles had to be placed in crates and then loaded onto pallets. When he wasn’t driving a truck, this was where he stood.

“You’re big and strong,” the boss had said on the first day, and that’s the way it had been. At that time, last year, the pallets, which were stored outside, had been full of ice. The soda bottles were frozen solid to the base of the red trays and it had only been a matter of minutes before his gloves were soaked through. He remembered how relieved everybody at the warehouse had been when spring arrived. It was around that time he’d noticed the muscles that had popped up on his upper arms. He’d lost weight too. More than ten kilos.

The empty bottles that had to be sorted had been standing outside overnight. There was snow everywhere. On the bottles and the trays. It fell onto the floor and melted into the dust from the pallets. After just 20 minutes, Trygve was wet straight through. He took off his work jacket and chucked it over to the side of the sorting table. Then he went and got himself some dry gloves. The skin on his fingers was soft and wrinkled, the way it gets after a long bath, and his T-shirt was clinging to his skin. Back at the sorting table, he saw his boss, Regine. A chubby redhead in her late forties. She made a winding motion above her head with her index finger – a sign that had turned out to mean things were going too slowly.

“Get a move on,” she said.

Regine had apparently worked there forever and according to a lot of the permanent staff, she was hard to keep up with when it came to bottle sorting. Trygve thought that must have been before she became a boss and he became an employee, because there were long intervals between the times he saw her sorting. She had other things to do. Now and then she’d grab a pallet jack and shift some pallets, but it wouldn’t be long before she’d have to answer a telephone call or go to a meeting.

Mantas, one of the mechanics, had taken over while Trygve was getting dry gloves.

“Thank you,” said Trygve in English.

“OK,” said Mantas and smiled at Trygve with his coffee teeth.

For a moment, Trygve thought about asking him if they could switch places, but then he thought Regine might have a thing or two to say about that.

“Break time,” shouted Regine. “Come on!”

She wound her index finger above her head again. Trygve and the others stopped what they were doing. There was a long queue for the little bathroom where they could wash their hands, and by the time Trygve was finished, the break room was full. He had a choice between sitting on top of a soda crate shoved up against the wall or going outside. So he went out to join the smokers and bummed a cigarette off Rune, who worked the multi-packer.

“Didn’t you quit?”

“Yeah, kinda,” said Trygve.

He tried not to think about Geir’s cough as he lit his cigarette and drew in the smoke. Trygve had stopped at the same time as Tone, who’d thrown her pack of Lucky Strike into the stove the minute she’d found out she was pregnant earlier in the fall. As far as he knew she’d managed to keep it up. He leaned his head against the brick wall and closed his eyes as he smoked. People complained about the snow and how wet they were getting, but when Regine came out and lit up a Salem beside them, the talk died down.

After lunch, Trygve tried not to look at the clock. He’d found that whenever he managed to disappear into what he was doing, the time flew by – especially if he was able to give the job a sense of urgency. Now and then it worked, and when he looked up from the sorting table at the clock above the door into the break room, he would find that most of the others were on their way across the room to wash their hands and clock out. Other times, he’d look up only to find there was still over an hour to go, maybe more. Trygve put on his ear protectors. The batteries were flat, so he couldn’t listen to the radio, but it was good to shut out the noise: the pallets hitting the floor, the bottles clinking or being smashed. The hum of the electric trucks and pallet jacks buzzing about the warehouse, and the nagging mechanical sound of the pallet carrier over by the bottle-sorting area.

Trygve lifted yet another tray down from the pile of empties. No sooner had he emptied four pallets than the truck driver came back with four more. His legs were aching, so he went into the toilet and sat down on the lid. The john was the only place you could sit down without anyone noticing. He checked his mobile, taking care to hide the time with his thumb. Tone had sent him a message: all it said was “Miss you.” He missed her too, but everything had got so difficult. He was going to be a dad, but he had no education, no driving license and he might find himself out of a job at any moment.

The first thing he saw when he came out of the john was Steinar from Kelly. All the temps had gathered in a circle around him over by the sorting table. Steinar stuck out like a sore thumb, standing there dressed in a suit, white shirt and dress shoes.

Steinar turned around and looked at him.

“Ah, so that’s where you got to,” he said.

Trygve nodded and joined the others.

Trygve had first met Steinar at a café in Arendal. The local newspaper, Agderposten, had published an article about Kelly Services and Steinar had been in the newspaper talking about all the jobs that were available in Aust Agder County at that time. Trygve had called Steinar and Steinar had invited him to a meeting. Then, like today, Steinar had showed up in fancy pants and shirt, while Trygve had been wearing jeans and a hoodie. He’d felt underdressed then and he felt the same way now.

“Efficiency is the key,” said Steinar. “You are our face in the outside world, and if you fail to deliver what we’ve promised, it reflects badly on us. Do you understand?”

Some of the temps nodded and said Ja or Yes. Others just looked at each other and shook their heads. Steinar continued and Trygve noticed that he didn’t look any of them in the eyes. His hands were in constant motion; he used them to hammer home his words. His fingers were white and smooth.

“If you’re running late, if you oversleep or fall ill, you must call – both me and the brewery. It’s up to us to get somebody new in if you can’t make it.”

Trygve could see Regine in Kåre’s office. They were talking and laughing together, but he could also see that they were keeping an eye on the group of temps and the gesticulating man from Kelly.

“Any questions?” asked Steinar.

“Is there more work?” asked Mantas.

“Yes, JA!” said Steinar and clapped his hands together. They weren’t worker’s hands.

“We are working closely with management and, apart from the fact that people aren’t calling in when they’re running late or are ill, they’re pretty pleased.”

“We get new contracts?” said Mantas.

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Soon. I’m leaving my card in the break room – many of you appear to have lost it. Call me if you’re ill. It isn’t good enough to send an SMS and it isn’t good enough to call the brewery. You have to call me,” said Steinar, then reached for the jacket he’d hung over the handle of a pallet jack.

Steinar thanked them for their attention and urged them all to put their backs into it – a hundred and ten per cent! Then he went to the shift manager’s office and Regine opened the door for him.

“Everybody back to work!” she shouted.

For once, Trygve managed to get all the trays in front of him loaded onto the table before there was a truck in sight. The last trays were passed up the sorting table and the bottles were taken out and put in crates. Trygve sat on the sorting table. His back and shoulders were aching. He thought to himself that he needed to switch with somebody. He caught himself almost looking at the clock – it couldn’t be long now. He was dying for a smoke too, but he didn’t plan to start up again.

Regine came running up.

“What’s going on here? Are there any more empties on the way?”

“Aren’t there always?” said Trygve.

“Have you told them it’s empty here?” asked Regine.

“No.”

“Do you any idea how much time gets wasted when people just sit around this way?” said Regine. “What d’you think would happen if everybody took a break like this? It’s inefficient.”

The truck turned up with four new pallets and Regine had to move to make way for the empties.

“Come on now. There’s still a whole half an hour to go,” she said, winding her index finger above her head.

The parking lot was teeming with red cheeks and runny noses. People were sweeping snow off the windscreens of idling cars. Trygve saw Geir’s grey Volvo parked over by the barrier at the entrance to the car park.

“Good shift?” asked Geir as Trygve got into the car.

“Good enough,” said Trygve. “This snow’s a pain in the ass.”

They drove up to Osedalen and Geir stopped the car outside the Spar. Trygve bought some bread and milk. Potato chips, soda and a big chocolate bar for Tone.

“You trying to fatten her up?” said Geir when Trygve came back with the chocolate bar sticking out of the plastic bag.

“She gets all these cravings nowadays,” said Trygve and Geir chuckled.

They spent the rest of the drive up to Jomås listening to the radio while Geir smoked.

“Do you wanna stay for supper?” asked Trygve when they stopped in the yard.

“No, I’ll fix something at home,” said Geir.

Trygve thanked him for the lift then watched Geir drive down the gravel road and disappear amid the snowdrifts. When he got inside, Trygve headed straight for the shower. Over supper, Tone talked about her sister. They’d spoken on the phone earlier in the day. Silje was studying Economics at Oslo University and would soon be finishing her third year.

“She don’t get it, that I want to be a mom,” said Tone. “She says I’ve got my whole life ahead of me and I should get myself more of an education. She said I’ll be a loser if I don’t. She said loser parents have loser kids.”

Trygve ate his food. The potatoes were floury, just the way he liked them, and the sauce was thick.

“Her and Anders might move.”

“Where to? Back down south?”

“No – Anders got a job offer, before he even finished his degree. They’ll be living right in the middle of Oslo.”

“OK,” said Trygve. “Great.”

“Yeah,” said Tone. “Anyway, she don’t know what she’s talking about. She’ll never be a mom. She don’t even like kids!”

After supper, Trygve slept on the sofa, while Tone watched a home improvement show on the TV. The family on the screen had been shown round their new living room by a smiling TV presenter. The couple had both started crying when they saw how great it was now, and Tone had started crying too. That was the last thing Trygve remembered. When he woke up again, it was half-past one and the room was cold. Tone had gone to bed. He followed her in, got into bed and set the alarm. It felt as if only seconds passed between the time he fell asleep and the moment when the alarm rang again and he had to get up.

It took more than half an hour for him to feel like he was even halfway awake. Standing at the sorting table, he could see that Regine thought things were going too slowly, and she kept coming over to check if he was working. After a while, she came over and reminded him he had to pick out all the water bottles – Farris and Bris. After half an hour of trying to keep the sorting table full at the same time as he did the sorting, he had to pass the water on to Mantas.

Things went better once he didn’t have to focus on the water bottles and could just load the trays onto the table, but after a while Regine came back again.

“What did I tell you about the water bottles?”

“Fine,” said Trygve. “I’ll get them.”

Before he clocked off he went into the break room, and picked up one of Steinar’s business cards.

On Wednesday the first two hours were better. The empties they were sorting had been stored inside overnight, so the ice and snow had melted, and the bottles and trays were almost dry. Trygve’s clothes were still dry when he took his first break, but when he came back, a truck driver was unloading four pallets of empties, all covered in snow.

“Weren’t there any dry ones left?” asked Trygve.

“Not any more,” said the driver.

Trygve pulled his soggy gloves on again. He brushed the trays free of the snow that lay across the bottles like a lid. The other temps shook their heads, and he heard them groan and swear, but before Trygve could even get started on loading up the sorting table, the driver came back.

“Come here. I’ve had an accident out back,” he said.

Regine followed Trygve and the five other temps at the sorting table out to the rear of the warehouse where the empties were piled high. One of the towers of pallets filled with soda crates had tipped over and thousands of empty bottles lay scattered in the snow.

“Pick it all up,” she said, before disappearing back into the warehouse. Trygve pulled the zip on his jacket all the way up to his chin and squatted down in the sea of bottles. After a while, he had to stick his hands in the pockets of his work pants to warm them up. The wind blew snow into his eyes and the cold ripped at his cheeks. He looked around and saw all the other temps, bent double and soaking wet in the snow, each bowed over his own soda crate. Mantas had tied a scarf around his face. Nobody said a word; all of them just worked as quickly as they could to dig empty bottles out of the snow.

That afternoon, Tone talked about the bedroom they were going to fix up. It had to be painted before the baby came, but they’d have to wait until they knew if it was a boy or a girl, she said. Trygve swallowed down his food and leaned back in his chair. His body was aching, especially his shoulders, back and hands. Tone smiled at him.

“You’re so handsome when you come in from work. A real working man! You got a new contract?”

“Not yet, but Steinar says we’ll get it soon.”

Trygve lay awake, looking at the clock. If he went to sleep now, he could still get a good three hours, but he couldn’t do it. All he could think about was the wet trays and the clock that seemed to stand still. At half-past four, he went out into the kitchen and got Steinar’s card. Afterwards, he went back to bed and waited until it was six o’clock.

Steinar answered the phone and Trygve said he had a sore throat and a headache. He was careful to make his voice sound hoarse and even threw in a couple of coughs for good measure. Trygve caught himself pressing his palm against his forehead when he lied about his headache, just as if Steinar could see him standing there in the dark hallway.

“Alright, then. Get well soon; let’s just hope this doesn’t cause problems for the brewery,” said Steinar.

Geir was standing on the doorstep smoking when Trygve opened the door to him.

“You oversleep?”

“No – I’m not feeling so good,” said Trygve.

“Yeah?” Geir looked at him.

“I got a sore throat and stuff,” he said, waving his hand in front of his throat.

“Make sure Tone don’t catch it, then.” said Geir.

“I don’t think it’s catching,” said Trygve.

Geir took a drag on his cigarette.

“I just can’t face it today,” said Trygve. “Don’t go telling Tone.”

Geir nodded.

“You want to come in for a bit?” asked Trygve. Geir nodded and went into the kitchen with him, without saying anything. Tone was sitting at the kitchen table when they came in. She’d put the kettle on.

“Why ain’t you dressed?”

“Oh,” said Trygve with a cough. “I called in sick.”

She got up and felt his forehead.

“It ain’t a fever,” he said. “I’ve got wet so often lately. My throat’s sore.”

“You didn’t say anything about it before,” said Tone. “Did it come on all of a sudden?”

“Nah. He’s been talking about it for a few days now,” said Geir, waving his hand in front of his throat, just like Trygve had.

“Sore throat – right?”

“Yeah,” said Trygve. “That’s right.”

“It smells of smoke in here. Dad! You swore you’d quit!”

Geir didn’t have time to answer before Trygve coughed and said, “I had a smoke before he turned up.”

“You?”

“Yeah, I had one left. I found it in the drawer when I was looking for the Kelly card.”

“But we gave up!” she said, shaking her head.

“Yeah, I’m really sorry,” said Trygve, as Geir vanished into the hallway, shutting the door behind him.