

## How Do You Spell Relief?

By Rick Cogbill  
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I almost dropped my Fluke meter when I saw Tooner. “What are you doing at work dressed like that?”



Tooner took the toothpick from his mouth and looked down to survey his loud Hawaiian shirt, Bermuda shorts and flip-flops. “That’s just the point,” he replied. “I ain’t ‘at work’ – these are my holiday duds. I just stopped in to say goodbye t’ the crew.”

I was dumbfounded. “Holidays? Do I know about this?”

Quigley clicked open the calendar on the office computer. “You sure do, Boss. It’s right here, with your initials beside it.”

Basil chuckled as he stirred more sugar into his morning brew. “Looks like you’ve been had, Slim.”

“See ya in two weeks.” Tooner waved as he headed for the door.

“Wait!” I pleaded. “How are we supposed to handle our work load?”

He stopped and held up his hands. “Relax. I kinda knew you’d forget, so I arranged for a fill-in while I’m gone.”

“That must be him now,” announced Basil, pointing out the front window. “So, Toon, what can you tell us about...” He stopped and looked around – Tooner had disappeared.

Before you could say ‘bush-whacked’ our new man arrived flashing a big, toothy grin. “Howdy, folks!” He grabbed my hand and pumped it so vigorously my teeth shook. “Freddy Fill-in’s the name; problem solvin’s my game!” *Well*, I thought, *at least we get someone with a personality for a change.*

“G-glad to meet you, Freddy,” I said, rubbing my wrist. “Um, I assume you’ve got the usual qualifications...”

“Say no more!” Freddy quickly flashed his open wallet around the circle before popping it back into his pocket. “Graduated top of the class back in ’85.” He rubbed his hands together. “Okey dokey; where do I start? Oil change, tire rotation, some new wiper blades...?”

“Ahem.” Basil coughed politely and handed Freddy a set of keys. “I believe you’re taking over Tooner’s role in the area of electronic diagnostics. This Ford has a drivability problem that’s throwing a bunch of soft codes. You’ll find the scanner on the shelf next to the electronic database.”

Freddy gulped, took the keys, and left.

“Interesting.” Basil rubbed his chin. “I’m sure I’ve seen that guy somewhere before...” I shrugged and went back to my office. I had a busy morning ahead of me, cutting some more corners on next year’s budget.

Over the next few days, loud noises and descriptive words flowed in a steady stream from Freddy’s direction. But whenever I stopped by his bay, he had a big smile ready and waiting. “Doin’ fine, Slim; doin’ just fine!”

But Beanie wasn’t buying it. “He’s a moron!” he cried. “Freddy wouldn’t know a TPS from a can of STP! I had to show him where the drain plug was on that last oil change.”

Basil agreed. “When I asked him if he needed a torque sequence for that head gasket job, he said, ‘No thanks; a can of blue paint would be nice, but sequins would be overdoing it.’”

By the end of the week, I called Freddy in for a heart-to-heart talk. “Look, Fred, I’m getting too many customer complaints.” I leaned back in my chair. “That last car was a mess. You installed the headlight upside down, filled the tranny with engine oil, and put the snow tires on the back of a front-wheel-drive car.” I sighed. “It’s not that I doubt you, but I’d like to have a look at your trade license again.”

Freddy looked like a deer caught in the headlights. “S-sure thing, Slim. I’ll just run out to my car and get it for you!” Suddenly I was alone, my office door swinging slowly in the breeze. I got up and went into the waiting room.

“So you read him the riot act, eh?” Quigley chuckled. “Maybe personality isn’t everything. I admit Tooner is a bit touchy at times, but he sure knows his stuff.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I muttered. “Speaking of stuff, I’m just about to double-check Freddy’s credentials.”

“Oh?” Quigley mused. “Would that be *before* or *after* he leaves the parking lot?”

I ran to the window just in time to see Freddy peeling rubber down the street, never to be heard of again. I sighed. “Well, maybe we’re better off...”

A week later, I grabbed Tooner by the lapels as he came through the front door “Toon!” I cried. “Don’t you ever do that to me again! That three-dollar raise you’ve been wanting? It’s yours – just promise me you’ll never leave!”

Tooner took off his greasy cap and slicked back his hair. “Well, thanks, Slim. It’s kinda nice t’ be appreciated!” He whistled a merry tune as he headed off to find a clean pair of coveralls.

Basil came up to me just then. “I’ve got it. Last summer’s staff barbecue!”

I looked at him. “What are you talking about?”

“That’s where I’d seen Freddy before. Only his real name is Lance; he’s Tooner’s brother-in-law from Calgary and he came along to mooch free food. Remember?”

With a groan, I went back to my office to add a few pesos to the staff wages budget. I figure it’s a small price to pay for keeping my techs happy. Secretly, I was impressed that Tooner had managed to scam a raise out of me so creatively, seeing how he’s at the bottom of the totem pole when it comes to imagination. I shudder to think what Basil and Beanie would come up with should they ever pool their creative juices to do the same.

I don’t think my blood pressure can handle it.