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ON AND ON

Spud Johnson

On Swing Shift

EVERY DAY when I drive to work in the middle of the somnolent California afternoon, after having had a leisurely breakfast and a leisurely lunch, shockingly but comfortably close together, out on my sunny terrace, I think what a wonderful time to be tooting off to a job—devoting to it only the hours I had often in the past dedicated solemnly to a cocktail and dinner party.

(Every afternoon, that is, except when it was really hot, during a few August and September weeks—then, I admit, I thought it was an outrage, with sweat tickling down my ribs and the heat sitting on me heavily like a fat Japanese wrestler who has not had to use any of his fancy tricks at all, just had to push me over and sit on my stomach; then, it is true, I had to think furiously about the trip out from New Mexico in January, when it had been frigid, even in the desert.)

But generally it's mild and sleepy, with the interminable cardboard bungalows, every one a Home, floating past me in a middle-westerner's dream of ever-blooming roses and never-needed central heating; a kind of love-song of peace and plenty, punctuated every block or so with real estate offices, looking exactly like the other bungalows, roses and all, except for large signs saying "Horace Brain, Choice Walnut Grove Homesites," and small, very discreet ones assuring you that the place is "Open." Their blackboards listing tempting morsels of cardboard and thin top-soil are not, however, a distinguishing feature, for even the Homes have blackboards announcing "Rabbit Fryers," "Brown Eggs," "Pigs—Potatoes—Pomegranates."

One of my favorite signs, in front of a cunning, vine-draped, what in English novels would doubtless be called a "semi-detached villa," for a long time advertised a "Steel Roll-About Bed," which fascinated

me with its attendant imaginative picture of extreme and unstable discomfort. Yet presumably someone finally bought it. Another has an arrow pointing suggestively down a lane, with the simple inscription: "Rhode Island Red Rooster." I always slow up at that corner, hoping to catch some little red hen surreptitiously scuttling along the road, with self-conscious backward glances.

Actual arrival at the factory is no less idyllic and rural than the landscape en route. There it is, an Italian hill-town, or at least a reasonable facsimile; a sort of WPA mural of one painted against the gray-blue sky. Forests of low, clustering artificial trees (and how interesting, by the way, to watch an artificial tree grow, sprouting, unbelievably, from a telegraph pole, with two-by-four branches); whole fields and hillsides of open-meshed wire matted with gray-green, paint-gummed chicken feathers; and little white, red-roofed houses perched on these fake hillsides. Great aluminum birds circle around like rooks, yet seldom, thank God, settle in the tree-tops, as they might be expected to.

And all the time, as you approach this fantasy, you realize, with a kind of wonder, that you're going to spend the next eight hours in labyrinthine tunnels *inside* the hillside—a Carlsbad of an Aladdin's Cave in which giant Rocs are being hatched from enormous eggs, sat upon firmly by both the Army and Navy.

There, alas, the illusion ends. A whistle blows, sunshine is blotted out, supplanted by millions of fluorescent tubes which make a dead gray light that transforms even buxom wenches into perambulating corpses. The din rises like a flood: mallets beating on metal, machines grinding, motors whirring, saws shrilling, wheels rushing over unyielding concrete. . . .

A little white-haired old lady, incurably optimistic, and with a disease perfectly described by my favorite word, logorrhea, who has been given to me "to train," shouts in my ear: "Isn't it a *lovely* day?" I look at her as though she had gone stark, staring mad. *Lovely day, indeed! Where?*

"Now I told you yesterday how to do this," I say, severely, trying to drag her back safely into unreality, "and now you go and do it all wrong again. Please listen to what I'm saying and try to register."

"Yes, yes, yes. You're right. You're right. I know. I know. Now I won't make a single mistake today. My father always said—he was a dentist and everybody in town just loved him. He had so much work

that he just couldn't do it all, but when he got an assistant, they wouldn't let the assistant inside their mouths *at all*—they would just sit and wait for my father—they just loved him. ° And now he's dead and gone. I was just thinking a while ago when I was sweeping out: Well, if my father could see me now, sweeping the floor in a factory, he'd turn over in his grave. But I guess a lot of people are doing things they never thought they would. You know that sweet little girl with the blond curls—she's from Kentucky and she told me she used to have a colored maid—she just never had to turn her hand before. . . . ”

“Yeah, I know,” I mutter, “I saw her turn her hand yesterday. It was pathetic. Too bad it wasn't her ankle.” And the only thing I can do is to leave the place—my own office, too.

An outcast, I climb over a truck piled mountain-high with long boxes of metal, just in from the dock; I step on a piece of tubing on the other side and slide into the paunch of the man who has just circum-ambulated the table saw.

“Where's Store 80?” he asks, grabbing me.

“There ain't any. They only go up to 55. Maybe you want Building 80.”

“Maybe I do. Is there a man here named Tom?”

“Three. Which one do you want?”

“I don't know. I'm looking for this number.” He holds up a grimy piece of paper with scribbling on it.

“That's funny,” I say grimly; “so am I. It hasn't been seen for weeks. They think it's sabotage. Follow-up says the reqs haven't been cashed, but our files show it was cut October 10th and sent to Punch Press—but Punch Press hasn't even got a card on it.”

“Well, the tool was checked out on the 8th, came back in on the 12th, was checked out again on the 15th on Lot Replace 17—but I'm only interested in Lot 16.”

A girl rushes up to us with a dazzling smile. “Could you tell me who the floor dispatcher is for this section?”

I fix her with a cold stare. “I am.”

“Oh!” (As though she's been given a present.) “I'm sure you can help me. I want this order filled right away. It's Critical. Awfully. And we have to catch the Bakersfield truck at nine.”

“Well, you go over to that tall man with the slightly bald head and act frightfully helpless. Tell him you've only been working here a week and you don't know *what* to do; that they told you to get this

order, but everyone's so *gruff*. Then say, 'Goodness, what big muscles you have!' After that you can smile at him, but *don't* forget to look and act helpless."

This bit of wisdom off my chest, and having assured the Bakersfield plant of its much-needed parts absolutely on time, I press resolutely onward over another insurmountable barrier of fresh stock blocking the aisle, dodge a swift, silent electric "pony," then a brutal looking, evil smelling gasoline "goose," almost get hit in the head as Vince drags a heavy bar of brass out of a nose-high bin, and finally reach a table piled like a garbage dump with cellophane-faced envelopes, stuffed to bulging-point with blue-prints (or, as Bill calls them, "picture papers") and each attached to a strange-shaped piece of black metal labeled with red paint. Here I burrow like a hungry dog, searching for number 65,7017-33—and doubtless would spend the rest of the night at it, if I weren't interrupted almost at once by a purring feminine voice:

"Spuddy, could you get this job working at once, please? It's Critical. Awfully. Newspaper item and all that sort of thing. It'll be a shut-down tomorrow." Then, as she sees my scowl and hears my growl beginning to take its usual shape, she adds brightly: "My! Isn't that a pretty necktie? Where did you get it? I do like nice neckties; you seem to have such a lot. You *will* be a lamb and push this for me, won't you? You're so good at it, even though you always say you haven't got time. I'll be back in about an hour."

. . . And then, unaccountably, another whistle blows. We've only just come to work, but already it's six o'clock and the first smoking period. As I fill my pipe and walk out of the western door, the sunset strikes at my face like that brass bar out of the nose-high bin. The dusk is rich and lush and has already begun to change the outside of the factory, the cluttered dock, the high walls slashed across with lights, into a wierd modern painting of strange shapes.

As I look back into the false daylight of the interior, the long corridor behind high white pillars slowly fills with a motley throng of strangely attired people, gathering in little groups to talk and laugh and smoke as music drifts down on them from the loudspeakers in the ceiling. I suppose it's mainly because of the stately pillars, but it always reminds me of a palatial ballroom, suddenly invaded by Labor. And I must say, in spite of overalls and aprons, not even plumes or tiaras could be more stylish than are celluloid face-guards when pushed up carelessly askew above rugged and dignified workmen's heads.

Later, the supper-hour, then the second rest-period at 1:30—and the final exodus in the middle of the night, these again have that wonderful impact of contrast between the outer dark world of peace, and the inner illumined cavern of war—a thing which I'm sure the Day Shift has no inkling of. By the time dusk comes, They (we always speak of the Day Shift with slight condescension as "They") are having a drink in a pub or a bath in a tub, and have washed the factory all away; so that the night has lost its value as a purge, and they use it to go out of, not into. They go to the movies and promptly to bed, so they can wake at dawn and get safely into the factory again before the sun is above the morning mist-bank.

But We, the Swing Shifters, have the night all around us like a mothering wing. We eat out under the moon and are healed. We watch the lights swimming in the mist, the searchlights making magnificent triangles in the purple sky, the bridge, hidden in darkness, spanning an unknown sea.

And, at the end, instead of the brassy afternoon sun in our eyes, only the red glow of tail-lamps in a long procession ahead, and a cool, black night wind fanning our tired temples all the way home.