

LIFE ON THE LINE

A Short Story By Paul Sheeky

First you take a large brown box from position B2 and put it onto your designated workbench. Then you take one of the small blue boxes out of one of the large brown ones (there are ten blue in each brown), and open it. Then you take the unit out and plug it into the computer which registers the connection with a message that reads, "Connection Established". When this disappears from the screen you press F4, change the switch on the unit from A to C, then press F5. After putting the unit back into the box, you take out the red manual (which you put into a separate box which must be sealed and replaced when it has one hundred manuals in it) and replace it with a green one. Then you reseal the small blue box and put it into a different large brown box (it has a special sticker on the side), which, when full, you then place in position B3.

This is my new job.

For a while it seems like a reasonably good job; not too dirty, not too noisy, not too complicated; a walk in the park. The supervisor seems okay. In fact he's particularly cheerful, a wide grin constantly lighting up his brown face. The other employee's appear to be nice too. I can't really talk to them while we're working because the workstations are too far apart, and I haven't spoken to any of them during a break yet (mainly because they all go outside to smoke and as I don't I stay in the canteen), but we nod at each other as if we've been pals for years. But after the first couple of hours (which are okay because you're concentrating on not making a mistake), the phrases mind-numbing and spirit-crushing start to creep into your consciousness, and you start to get the idea that only people in desperate situations (as I am) actually agree to do this job. You know, the kind of people that like to have a roof over their heads or enjoy eating occasionally. Or those with two grand overdrafts and student loans to pay off. Those kind of people.

The mindless monotony of the job does have it's advantages however. The job is so soul-destroyingly simple that it is easily possible to think of numerous exciting and exotic things while doing it. This, I have found, is the way of making the day go faster. It's true that this is simply wishing my life away, but what alternative have I. You either change circumstances you can't adjust to, or adjust to circumstances you can't change. I couldn't change these

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circumstances, so I adjusted, and began to think about what to think about. My initial ideas were typically masculine and I looked around to see whether any of my colleagues (who were mostly female) were suitable fantasy objects. In a word, no. The ones nearest to me were a scrawny old woman who had curly blue-white hair, an enormous woman that I didn't dare picture naked and a girl of about twenty who was kind of attractive in a kooky way, but had green teeth which kept on popping into my mind whenever I imagined kissing her. So I spent much of the first day simply observing my surroundings in as much detail as possible, noting the size and shape of the cavernous warehouse and how the angle of the sunlight through the broken window high above to my left changed throughout the day. The workbench in front of me was covered with the bored musings of those that had come before me, so I occupied myself by reading them, as I moved box from box and pressed a few computer keys. It worried me slightly that someone had scratched 'help' in large capital letters.

Using my artist's perception (I've just finished a Degree in Fine Art), I carefully noted the colours and shapes of the warehouse, imagining transferring the reality of my working life into the fantasy world of paint and canvas. This carried me through to the end of my eight hour day and, after declining the offer of overtime, I went home with joy in my heart and the love of freedom tearing at my breast.

Take a large brown box from position B2 and put it onto your workbench. Take one of the small blue boxes out of one of the large brown ones and open it. Then you take the unit out and plug it into the computer, "Connection Established". When this disappears you press F4, change the switch on the unit from A to C, then press F5. After putting the unit back into the box, you take out the red manual and replace it with a green one. Reseal the small blue box and put it into a different large brown box, which, when full, you place in position B3.

I love to paint. Unfortunately, imagining painting is not quite the same as actually doing it, so my detailed observations of the warehouse soon tired me and I had to think of something else to think about as my hands carried out their automatic routine. After rejecting art theory as too pretentious and politics as too annoying I stumbled upon the idea of compiling top ten lists of my favourite things. This line of enquiry proved most fruitful and I spent most of the next few days thinking about my favourite books, paintings and films.

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I also made an effort at talking to some of my colleagues by joining them outside during break time on the pretext of getting some fresh air (although with all the smoke around this was hardly the case). However, every time I said something to one of them, the only reply I got was a grunt or a nod, as if they weren't really listening and that I was somehow intruding. At first I thought it was because I was a stranger and that they somehow took offence at the fact that I had been to university, but then I observed that they didn't really speak to each other either, except to make some banal comment on the weather or ask for a light. I still continued to join them outside however, as any escape from the crushing emptiness of the warehouse was most welcome.

Large brown box from B2 to workbench. Small blue box from large brown box, open it. Remove unit and plug into computer, "Connection Established". Press F4, change switch on unit from A to C, press F5. Put unit back in box, then change manual from red to green. Reseal small blue box and place in different large brown box. When full, place large brown box in B3.

Towards the end of the first week, I decided to ask the supervisor what it was I was actually doing as I thought this might give the whole enterprise some sense of meaning, so when he came around to take the box of red manuals away (to where I don't know), I ventured the question.

"TOS enabling", he said through his perpetual grin.

"Toss enabling."

"T. O. S. TOS."

"Oh, TOS", I said comprehendingly, even though I didn't have a clue what he was talking about. I thought it best to let it go. I didn't want to ruin that enormous smile of his. Plus I had the sneaking suspicion that he didn't know what it meant either.

By this time I'd already got through my top ten records, television programmes, places I'd rather be, women, famous people, computer games, alcoholic beverages, things to do on a Sunday and numerous others. In fact, it was becoming excessively difficult to think of things to compile, so I did the obvious thing and did a top ten of top ten's. Unfortunately this didn't take me very long. I looked around at my surroundings in the hope that they might spark some interesting chain of thought. They did. Observing my fellow employees, I found that they did the job with a perfect, rhythmic regularity. There was a constant

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pace at which they opened the boxes and took the units out, plugged them in and pressed the keys. Perhaps if I tried to do the same, the day would be over quicker. So I tried to absorb myself completely in the rhythm of the task, let the repetition take over. But it didn't work too well as my mind kept wandering onto thoughts like "Why am I here?" and "What have I done to deserve this?". The answer of course being that I've had a few years of happiness, doing something that I enjoyed doing, and now I had to pay the price. But how long a sentence had I been given? Did three years of Fine Art at uni come with three years of TOS enabling? Or was the judgement more severe? 10 years? 20 years? Would I ever get out of here?

The question was answered by the five o'clock bell ringing and, like one of Pavlov's dogs, I rushed to get my stuff and get out, eager to enjoy two days away from this place. On the way out, the supervisor asked everyone if they wanted to do overtime on Saturday, and to my surprise everyone did (except me, of course). They must be really desperate for money, I thought as I walked outside into the dying day.

Brown box from B2 to workbench. Blue box out of brown, open. Remove unit, plug into computer, "Connection Established". Press F4, switch unit A to C, press F5. Unit back in box, manual from red to green. Reseal blue box and put in different brown. Full brown box to B3.

Monday morning. Is there anything worse. Stood at my workstation, same old routine, again and again and again. At least there was one consolation. As the weekend was filled with a great deal of alcoholic comfort, my mind was too fuzzy to think about how bad this job actually is. So I just sleep-worked through the morning, my hands on automatic, finally fitting in with the rhythm.

But after the lunch break, and a few cups of coffee, my brain started to wake up, and the sheer pointlessness of the job came crashing down on me. Then the cycle of negative thoughts dragged me down even further. "It's all my own fault for spending too much." and "You deserve this for being so reckless and free" like anchors weighing me down. I needed to break the loop or I'd drive myself mad and start believing myself, I had to think of something else, occupy my thoughts so fully that I could forget where I was, what I was doing. It was then that, out of the blue, the old Buck's Fizz song "Making your mind up" popped into my head. Ordinarily I would feel sickened by such fluffy pop rubbish, but now my

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overwhelming feeling was of relief. The negative loop had gone, replaced by an annoyingly happy tune, a tune which I took great pleasure humming for the next half hour or so, by which time it had begun to drive me even madder than the negative thoughts. So I picked another tune. Then another. And another. After a while I found that I could lose myself completely in the tune, or rather in the act of humming, the tiny, tickling vibration on my lips. In fact, I was concentrating so much on the humming that I almost didn't hear the home time bell. Time had flown by. Four hours gone and I was hardly aware of any of it. This was just the thing to make the job bearable. Now tomorrow wasn't something to get too depressed about.

Brown box from B2. Blue box out of brown, open. Remove unit, plug in, "Connection Established". Press F4, switch A to C, press F5. Unit back in box, manual red to green. Reseal blue box and put in brown. Full brown box to B3.

By the middle of the week I realised that the thing to do to make this job bearable was to clear my mind completely; I had to think of nothing. Then I remembered something that a friend had told me about meditation, and how it's really about switching off conscious thought and entering into a direct relationship with the world. That sounded just the thing, but how to achieve it? At first, I tried thinking of a blank white piece of paper. This worked for a short while but, being an artist I couldn't stop myself from mentally drawing on it, which made me more depressed as I really wanted to draw in reality and couldn't. So then I tried humming again, but this time keeping to a single note (the famous "Om"). Although it took some time to master, I found that by concentrating on the vibration in my throat, I could almost switch my mind off completely, without it affecting my work which by now had become second nature. In fact, by concentrating on the physical nature of the job I began to find it quite pleasurable. Just moving the boxes and touching the keys became less like work and much more like something quite enjoyable.

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Brown box from B2. Blue box out of brown. Remove unit, plug into computer. Press F4, switch A to C, press F5. Back in box, manual red to green, reseal box. Blue box into brown. Brown box to B3.

During the rest of the week I became better at switching off. My hands moved to the rhythm. My mind blank. I got so good at it that I could think about nothing all day long. Even when I went for a smoke at break time I found that concentrating on inhaling and exhaling I could keep my mind blank. Even the large greyness of the warehouse seemed to help me switch off.

When the supervisor came around and asked us for overtime, I saw no reason why not, as this job is so easy and quite enjoyable. So I began to stay behind when everyone else did, and also volunteered to work weekends. All I would have done otherwise is watch TV, so why not make some extra money.

Brown B2. Blue, brown. Unit, computer. F4, A-C, F5. Unit, box. Manual red-green. Reseal. Blue, brown. Brown B3.

It takes some getting used to, but this is actually a very enjoyable and rewarding job. It's simplicity is it's strength. Why else would people be queuing up to do overtime? Like everyone here, I'm very happy in my work, and can't wait until Monday morning rolls around.