

Powder Factory

The gray light of a June morning sprayed through the cracks of my window curtains. I used to have phone alarms to mark my wake-up time. I used to be anal about waking up early and showing up to school and work an hour before schedule. I still do, but my habits inculcated well, and my schedule remained stolid. I trusted my circadian rhythm to simply wake at 6 a.m., drink high quality black coffee from a misprinted seam pouch via second-hand grocers, triple-s (shit, shower, shave), and drive to work before the morning rush; with only road workers and construction commuters to worry about.

I worked at the Powder Factory for seven years, just about. I'm thankful for the job. Don't flap your gums about this, but I used to be addicted to twee powder. I was a willing worker even then, but living in a flophouse and watching your friends turn to pleasure-seeking rodents took its toll. It was hard to find consistent jobs, even with the college-educated among us. I was fortunate enough to be ejected from temptation after Marv died and we got booted out. None of that old group remained in contact. They either moved midwest, got fifty-one fiftied into asylums somewhere (for a life of government assistance and surveillance), or shifted their eyes from me while gathering carts at a local Vons parking lot.

Anyhow, the Powder Factory wasn't so bad, once you get used to dust suits and fish stink. The detail was easy, but varied enough to keep the brain from rotting: you cleaned the processors and tumblers, rearranged two-hundred barrels of product (between Sections D-to-F), filled records, or drove the forklift. I liked the forklift best. The state only gave a limited number of licenses per year, but our manager didn't care. I've driven illegally as long as I've worked, and had yet to spur an industrial-level Jenga-collapse.

I used to be the only white guy on the floor. Working with Mexicans and Dominicans and Viet was alright. They're confident and had their own shit to do. They didn't gossip or jack off in your face. The lunch station was assembled from our own donations, complete with couches, two ochre tables, a ficus in a bamboo chute pot, and even a cola vendor. We built it up together, but the furniture always came from giveaways; those desperate toss-outs left by apartment rats and wannabe retirees after failed yard sales.

The dart sessions got intense after bi-monthly meetings and a few Modelos in everyone.

Recently, corporate hired another white guy named Terrance. Like me, he's overweight and single, but younger. Normally, I wouldn't care, but he waddled up to me in the middle of work, daily, and stuffed a phone in my face. It always played some bread-and-circus propaganda of some politician or another, complete with CGI eagles eating them or a cacophony of modern meme-slop sound effects. The formatting for these videos had no scrubber or pause abilities, so when he fucked up on timing the playback, he'd say "Wait. Uh. Wait..." and let the entire clip play before looping. Whatever logistically retarded social media app he liked to use was worse than TikTok.

"Uh... These kids were asked where food came from, and they- uh. They said 'the grocery store'. They don't even know it comes from our hardworking farmers and truckers," Terrance said.

"Yep. That's a supply chain," I said. I don't know why I replied aside from knee-jerk formality.

"You hear those farmers in France are still revolting against their state's suits? I hope their president-minister, or whatever, gets hung."

"Oh. I didn't know that. Who's their P.M. again? Why're they protesting?" I asked when I shouldn't've. I was tempting the beast.

Terrance let out a prolonged uuh. He scratched his scalp. I rolled the dice and won this time. I'd seen these stall-outs before while driving cross-country with Grandpa Gene (rest his soul). We once stopped at a gas station in Faith, South Dakota and asked a cottage-cheese phenotype guy for directions. He did the same thing as Terrance.

"Thank you for your time. Have a nice day." Gene said with the tone of handling an emotionally incompatible animal; one you'd play nice with, but never turn your back on while walking away. He then told my young self that whenever anyone replied to a question with mouth sounds and head scratches, you just thank them and get away. "They don't got nothin' for you," he'd say.

"Thank you for your time. Have a nice day." I said to Terrance, started up the forklift again, and putted out of there.

"Things were better when Mr. Nguyen was running the place," Enrique said while eating a tuna salad sandwich during lunch. I nodded but wasn't sure I agreed. In truth, nothing really changed on the floor. We did as we did, and orders kept coming in. The new corporate head-honcho, Mr. Ly, barely introduced himself to our factory's throng of workers and office jockeys. He kept meetings short, at least.

Just then, I remembered something aloud: "Mr. Ly. Have you ever seen the way he slinks around the perimeter during nights? Reminds me of fiends casing a hospital I used to clean, Y'know? Like they're trying to play things cool, but have something heavy on their minds, something ominous."

"I haven't. Never got late shifts. I clock out at four," Eric replied.

I made an affirming grunt. We sat near each other for a while, then Eric continued, "So, what happened?"

"With Mr. Ly?"

"No. The fiends! You don't just start a story and drop it like that. What'd they do?"

"Oh. They'd sweep the place at night and rifle cabinets for pills, even steriles. Never got into my place, though. The watch tower guys get them when I use hand semaphore." I said, then presented Eric with a broad wave of my left arm (to alert the guards and cameras), then an 'okay' sign with my ring finger and thumb (the signal to shoot someone nearby, that they're an intruder).

Eric seemed shocked. I didn't care. I'm used to night shifts. I took a bite into my Payday bar. The protein from peanuts kept me going.

A few days later, I got to work late after taking my cat, Boobert, to the vet. He's doing okay. I wriggled into my full rubbers and sealed filter mask to take on tumbler duty. I scraped the slag of stale powder-crust and made sure the central chamber and feeding pipes were nice and smooth. It's like crawling through the playpen tunnels fast-food restaurants used to have, only it was all metal, and if a co-worker was stupid enough to start the rotors, I'd get mulched by circumferential blades. That's the sole reason why most don't like taking tumbler duty. It's usually delegated as a punishment.

Me? I don't mind it much, but I used to scrape bird shit from dummy airbases. They're abandoned almost all year round, leaving scaffolds and ceilings lacquered in waste. I'd have to lay down and carve it off. The flakes'd fall into my face. I'd imagine it was like painting the Sistine Chapel, but with less mercury.

Time passed. I took my dad to a clinic in L.A. We stopped through four sub-county checkpoints. The watchmen looked bored and overheated in the sunless swelter of the midland plains. Dad felt bad for them, so he relayed some raunchy old semaphore back from his airforce days: 'Look here'. 'Heavy cargo'. 'Caboose'. 'Yes on search warrant'. 'Internal collapse'. 'Lascivious activity'.

The guys got a laugh out of that.

The smell changed around the factory floor, slowly but surely. The fish supplement powders that made the bulk of our factory's trade were replaced by something nearly identical, but spicier. Was it a gardening nitrate? I asked around the floor at lunch and break. No one else knew either. I didn't ask Terrance. He had an answer: one guaranteeably long-winded and wrong. Besides, I already had an earful of him.

"Fucking chinks," he said. "There's proof right here on this GroupPsychosis account. Look! Our kind need to stick together."

I didn't look.

"The Chinese own fifteen percent of the real estate in San Francisco. A random factory inspection, some bad wiring: it led to a secret laboratory where scientists were working on weaponized viruses. It's all right here, under our noses!"

"Terrance!" I said. "You really think you'd be told about anything going on? Your shitty videos are an augmented-reality T.V. show meant to invest you. Do you really look into the sources of this 'footage', or all the hands it goes through? You don't. You can't. You have a double-digit I.Q. You can barely read a label, let alone sort 500 milligrams of product. If you grasped any sort of dark truth, you'd be ignored or killed. Regardless: you are allowed to live. Allowed."

"Our world is entirely made of factions vying for power. Most of them want you, me, or anyone else neutered or dead under some umbrella of interests."

"You're just rolling over." Terrance said after a lump stopped drumming in his throat. He glowed red.

"I'll roll you down the factory floor and fry you in-!" a loud, electronic ping stopped me short of smashing that fucking kid. My name was called over an announcement speaker.

I was told to meet at Mr. Ly's office, personally. He was a Viet-seeming guy with slicked-back hair. Black, form fitting suit. He smiled a lot, but his face creased deeply whenever he turned from me to his computer. He sweetly asked if I'd deliver a truckload of supplemental powder to a distribution plant just past the checkpoint at Sub-County B. I wasn't gonna deny his request, but suffered that momentary relapse of composure one does when their daily routine is interrupted with a new goal. I must've made a face, because Mr. Ly, as if anticipating something, said he looked into my records as a former trucker. He said I was a respectful man of filial piety. He let me know he knew my father was a trucker, and his father (Grandpa Gene), and so on... He assured me I was his perfect candidate, that I was stoic, competent, and talented.

It was a hot night. The roads of Camarillo were the same as Dad described in his time: single lane, surrounded with dirt and shrubs. Miles of strawberry fields. The wind was cold enough to highlight the contours of my body with cold sweat. The company truck I was lent had no damn A.C. I pounded another Lucky Star energy drink, cherry flavor. I missed that shit. It made me jitter worse as I excavated the bodily memories of taking wide turns with the counter-balancing shudders of shifting cargo. I had a bad feeling, likely anxiety, but I couldn't imagine why the powder wasn't properly bagged and packed. For all I know, it was piped into the trailer. It felt like hauling gasoline, where one crash'd spark a big kaboom.

The commuters steered clear of me at intersections, and the ones behind me had to suck it for miles on end. I didn't care. I kept the windows down and bathed in the sea breeze. Tatsuro Yamashita's Paper Doll blasted once again on

the radio's local top-forty station: 95.1. A meridian of fencing rolled onto the horizon, followed by several concrete cubes, with armed ants flowing in and out of them. Eventually, the ants revealed themselves as our state's minutemen and civic-defense. I had plenty of time to take in their stubbled faces as I waited in line. The checkpoint's spotlights marked currently searched vehicles as families and deliverymen and teenage fuck-about were filtered out and drilled with questions, then patted down and bisected by scanners. I felt bad for the guys. They glared at my giant hauler, one almost breaching the checkpoint's height limit. It'd take an hour to look through my powder, especially with their dinky particle scanners. It'd be like scouring Long Beach with a metal detector.

Just then, I noticed a yellow fold of paper slopped out from the glove box. Inside, there was a wrinkled semaphore dictionary left by a former marine. The date was old enough to serve alongside my grandpa! I parsed it and nodded, absorbed with joy. I remembered Dad and Gene always barking about how the old semaphore was more descriptive, with more room for verbosity and specificity. After a few minutes of getting used to the guide's formatting and hand sign infographs, I finally realized how right they were.

The spotlight hit my truck. Everyone in line and manning the checkpoint grumbled and cursed at the gall of a powder-hauling trucker to come and ruin their day with a game of drag ass. I felt it was my duty to give them a little something. I flashed my hands out the window and got to signaling. I translated every roadie folktale and limerick I ever knew: *The Brown Clown*, *The Gay Cow*, *The Battle of New Orleans*, *There's a Skeeter on my Peter*, *Whack It Off*, and the dirtiest jokes my family line could conjure over a film-reel's worth of collective Thanksgivings.

Over the course of twenty minutes, the crowd's anger turned to laughter, or at least amusement at my efforts. The older personnel sprayed their teeth

out with glee, and explained my semaphore to their inferiors in age and intellect.

"That's a good old boy!" an admiral shouted. Civilians hollered with relief as I was let through.

It was a night like no other, where quiet joys were performed and soaked in by a select few, with no cameras aside surveillance. I wasn't a streamer, a slop-video maker. I was not content with mere 'content'. I simply shared what I learned from my family and country with my family and country, and it was damn fine. I dropped the trailer off in the designated lot. No one was there to receive me nor were there glowstick wavers to wave me in. I didn't mind. I knew how to back up, dock, and drive off.

I returned to the powder factory next morning, still glowing from that night. Everything was normal again, even the bad parts: Terrance approached me as if I never chewed him out. He was hysterical.

"Dude! Bro! These uhh. These head-lobbing, goat philandering Muslims bombed a factory in Sub-County B. The whole place's up in flames!" He squealed. He shoved his phone in my face. I couldn't evade the screen this time. A helicopter's view revealed little more than sand and dust and smoke, but a fire indeed blazed from a building somewhere.

I admit it looked familiar, but I told the kid not to push my buttons again. I told him I was in that sub-county just last evening, and there's no way extremists got past some of the strongest checkpoints in the nation. I told him his news feeds were bugged with sensationalist slop, and he should throw his phone away and get an old flippie with no online capacity.

The next day, I relaxed and fed my cat some freshly caught rockfish after a sea trip with my father. Seventy-three people died from a fire at a distribution plant. What a shame.