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Conveyor Belt

George Mahon
Denison University

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CONVEYOR BELT

BY GEORGE MAHON

It was raining as I stepped off the bus. The gray light of dawn was just beginning to filter through the blanket of clouds that hung in the sky. I stepped onto the curb, avoiding the refuse and filth of the city slowly floating towards the drain. When I reached the plant I turned and walked up the stairs that led to the loading platform.

I saw Vic sitting in his usual place, and waved at him. He flashed me a toothless grin in reply. I entered the plant. The odor of ammonia gas cut my breath. I hurried past the whirling machines and the gargantuan control board with its numerous switches and buttons, then down a flight of stairs. I groped in the dark for the handle on the door and entered the locker room. Another more pungent and nauseating odor hit me. I stepped over to the corner where the toilet stood. Someone had neglected to flush it. I pulled the plunger and walked over to my locker and began methodically to pull on my boots, sweat shirt, and jacket. Putting my gloves in my pocket, I rose and walked up and out on to the loading platform.

Vic was still sitting in the same place. "How was the day off?" he asked, his seamed face stretching into a grin.

"Good enough," I replied.

We sat until the first truck came, then we went into the store-room. I put on my gloves and pulled up the collar of my coat to keep out the cold. We began to pull the huge blocks of ice on to the conveyor belt that took them out to the platform. After a while the heat began to drive the cold from all but my fingers and toes. A little later even they were warm. Vic came over to me.

"That's all for this one. You wanna rest for a couple of minutes?"

"Yeah, might as well. I'm warm now."

Vic walked over to a cart filled with bags of crushed ice and sat down.

"This hand, she never gets warm," he said, pulling his right glove off. "You see this?" The smell of alcohol was strong on his breath as he leaned toward me and held out his hand with its fingers bent and the thumb flattened so it looked like a pink soup spoon.

"I caught her in the rollers in the belt. See how she's bent. I can't straighten them fingers out. She's always cold."

"Co-ld?" I said—and I could have kicked myself for shivering right then.

"Cold! I mean cold, boy . . ."

Just then a call came for more ice, and we went back to the conveyor.

About an half hour before lunch, the men up in the cubing department came down the stairs. First came Tom and Vito, both quiet, nearly to the point of sullenness. They were followed by Hank, a thick, heavy joweled, almost neckless man of about fifty. The five of us sat down on the stairs to wait for the lunch whistle to sound.

Vic started rubbing his bad hand. "What if Frank should see us up here? I don't think he'd like it."

"Don't worry about Frank," Hank burst in. "He can't do nothin' to us. Ain't that right, Tommy?"

"I'm cold," replied Tom without taking his eyes off his shoes.

"Yer cold! Yer always cold. I'm telling you they don't make men like they used to. I remember in the old country I used to have to walk miles through the snow to get to school. My food was just bread and potatoes. Ain't that right, Vic?"

"Yeah, but you always got plenty of potatoes."

Hank went on, "You would just touch a piece of fish to the bread so you would get a little of the taste of fish on it. Right, Vic?"

"Yeah, but like I said, you always was full of potatoes."

Tom looked up from his shoes. "And what you full of now?"

Hank laughed. "Vic, he's fulla whiskey. I bet he was in a tavern all day yesterday, and it being a Sunday, too."

"Why shouldn't I be in a tavern? You think I go to church or something?"

Vito looked up. "I used to go to church. I liked to listen to the choir. There was this one girl that could really sing. Just like an opera lady. But she died or got married or something and the choir was never the same without her. That's when I quit going to church." Vito looked at Tom. "Like I said, I just quit."

"Boy," Tom said, "the one job I wouldn't want to have is a priest. Those guys really have it rough. They can't do nothing."

Hank leaned far over the stair railing. "You think not, huh. Those boys aren't as holy as you think. I heard that one of them was caught . . ."

The door to the storeroom opened. It was the foreman.

"Hello boys. Getting ready for lunch?"

"We was just going out," answered Hank. We all got to our feet and moved out the door.

The afternoon was short and went fast. As I left the plant I waved to Vic and Hank who went the opposite way. I turned and walked toward the bus stop. It was still raining and the sky was completely overcast. I could tell it would rain for the rest of the day. I looked down in the gutter. There was a tangle of leaves being pulled by the current flowing along the curb. Every once in a while the leaves would catch on a rise in the street and seem to fight the water, but they were eventually swept from sight. I turned in the street, and saw Vic and Hank several blocks away. The rain distorted their images and they appeared to float as if they were walking in water. I ran to an awning, for it had begun to rain harder.
