



• "Ah sir, I am never bored on the assembly line attaching washers 48 hours a week, since I keep my mind constantly thinking of what we must do to increase production to assist in building up the Motherland."

"But Mr. Huang, you earn only six dollars and twenty-five cents a week. Don't you find this a somewhat measly salary for 48 hours of attaching washers a week?"

"Indeed not, sir. I do not work for money. I have all I need; my wants are simple."

"Do you have any particular gripes about your work? Let's face it, Mr. Huang, work can get you pretty mad sometimes. What with bosses and all."

"Ah no indeed, sir. If I have a proposal for improving production, I will make it. But I have no reason to complain, sir."

"Do you have a union?"

"Yes indeed, sir. My dues are ten cents a month and they provide organized physical education and classes in Maoist thought."

"Sounds very interesting, Mr. Huang. Are you aware that workers in Canada and in the United States doing a job just like you are paid about \$300 a week?"

"Ah, your visit to the plant is most welcome, sir. But now I must return to work."

This is a rough approximation of a conversation with an automotive assembly-line worker named Wang Huang who labors in the Chinese version of Detroit, a place actually called Motor City. Motor City is in Manchuria and the primitive, dimly-lit assembly line turns out, in minute numbers, a giant limousine called the Red Flag. It looks a little like a mid-Fifties DeSoto, invariably black and invariably carrying high Party functionaries wearing lumpy brown caps with ear flaps. The rest of the population, as is the case in most of the world, gets around on heavy 1-speed bicycles.

The conversation with Huang was reported not long ago by a correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor*. In the same piece he estimates that the Red Flag, which is practically built by hand, would cost

\$50,000 to produce in the West if the same techniques were used.

But the thing that really got me was the comment by Huang about boredom. The plant, according to the correspondent, was festooned with slogans exhorting the workers to think clean thoughts and to constantly hurl their shoulders to the wheel. I can imagine the scene in a UAW union hall if some guy named, for example, Ike Brodski raised his hand, demanded to be heard from the floor and then proceeded to unload the following:

"Look, you guys. I don't know what all this bitchin' about dough is. I'm getting sick an' tired of it. I don't work for no dollars. All day long in the body plant where I glue in insulation behind the seats, I keep thinkin' on what I can do to help Chrysler. It makes the time go real fast. Which brings up another thing, the subject of Bitching . . . which I hear plenty of among all them slopeheads I work with in the body plant. I got nothin' to bitch about; if I get an idea to improve production, I go put it in the suggestion box. I don't stand around flappin' my gums. An' furddermore, I don't know why this here union don't have no PT programs like we had in the Army. I know a lot of guys right here in this hall with big fat beer bellies that could do with a few push-ups. That's all I'm gonna say about it, except that I move we don't ask for no more raises. We got enuff."

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The best way to turn your  
brain into cream  
cheese is to look at the  
world through  
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safety glasses and  
an avalanche of sound  
”

The ensuing riot would fill hospital emergency wards for miles around. But the scene is pure fantasy. No one in the United States even has the nerve to make a movie about union boobyery. The English have, but then they have had more Labor troubles than a 14-year-old has pimples; it's become a way of life. If you ever get a chance to see it on the late TV movies, watch for a Peter Sellers' masterpiece called *I'm All Right, Jack*. ("I'm all right, Jack" is the equivalent in English slang of "Screw you, Buddy—I Got Mine," which could very well be written into the Union by-laws of at least seven unions of which I personally am a member.) The movie is set in a giant English factory which seems to do nothing but move large boxes around with battery-driven fork-lift tractors. Every fifteen minutes the Shop Steward—Peter Sellers, of course—calls a strike because "The bleedin' front office is doin' it to us again, mates." It is a hell of a

picture. I couldn't help think of it when I read Huang's comments on how he whiles away the time on the assembly line.

I don't care how ideologically pure you are, anyone who has ever worked on some assembly-line job sure as hell knows what boredom is all about. I once spent a couple of years working in a steel mill. I felt like my head was filled with cream cheese and my mind had gone to sleep forever. After a couple of years some guys get so totally drenched in boredom that they take it for granted . . . and don't even know they're bored anymore. They even seem to break out on the other side of some invisible sonic wall of drudgery and begin to enjoy it. I never got there. The mill I worked in operated a full three shifts. The worst of all was four p.m. to midnight, the dreaded Swing Shift. It just seemed like you were always working. The actual physical labor wasn't that much. It was just the endless being there: the cloudy safety glasses, the hard hat and the avalanche of sound.

Probably all of us at one time or another have been bored stiff, but my first taste of it came one summer when I got a job working in a plant that made pianos. I was assigned, for reasons which are still obscure to me, to work in the department where piano backs were made. That's all. Just backs of pianos. Nothing else. You got a big chunk of plywood which you drilled in certain places. All day long nothing but backs. The same holes. The same-sized piece of wood, over and over, the same thing. And in the next department, thirty feet away, five demented piano tuners constantly went *bong bong bong bong bong . . . bing bing bing bing*. Outside, the birds sang; the clouds floated in the summer sky. Human beings played tennis or went to the beach. I drilled plywood and those five maniacs went *bong bong bong bong bong . . . bing bing bing bing bing . . . bong bong bong bong bong*. Every eight-hour day seemed like it took two or three years to pass.

Ever since that time I have felt a great sense of empathy for guys with otherwise human souls who have to spend their lives working on some assembly line endlessly tightening a bolt, drilling a hole or gluing a strip. If it helps Huang to while away the dull hours with beautiful Mao thoughts and dreaming preposterous schemes to further the cause of the Motherland, I say go to it, Huang. But one day, inevitably, one clanging shrill idea will ultimately have to surface: *What the hell am I doing this for?*

And then there'll be no looking back. Huang will get up at the Union meeting with a little speech: "Honorable brothers, I am tired of all this crap about Mao and the Motherland. We do not speak enough of our salaries. Personally, I am. . ."

Then the Motor City in Manchuria will truly be one with Detroit and every Chinese worker will have his Winnebago. And who can blame him? We're all in it together. *Bong bong bong . . . bing bing bing.* •