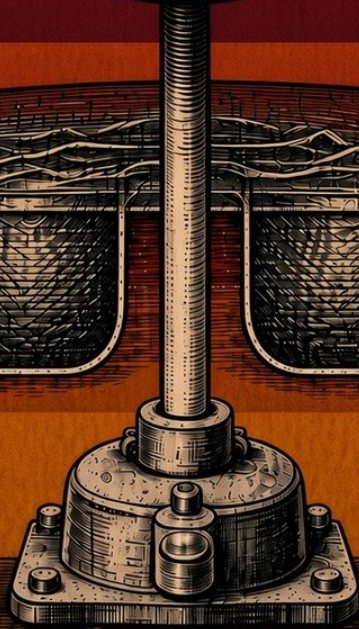
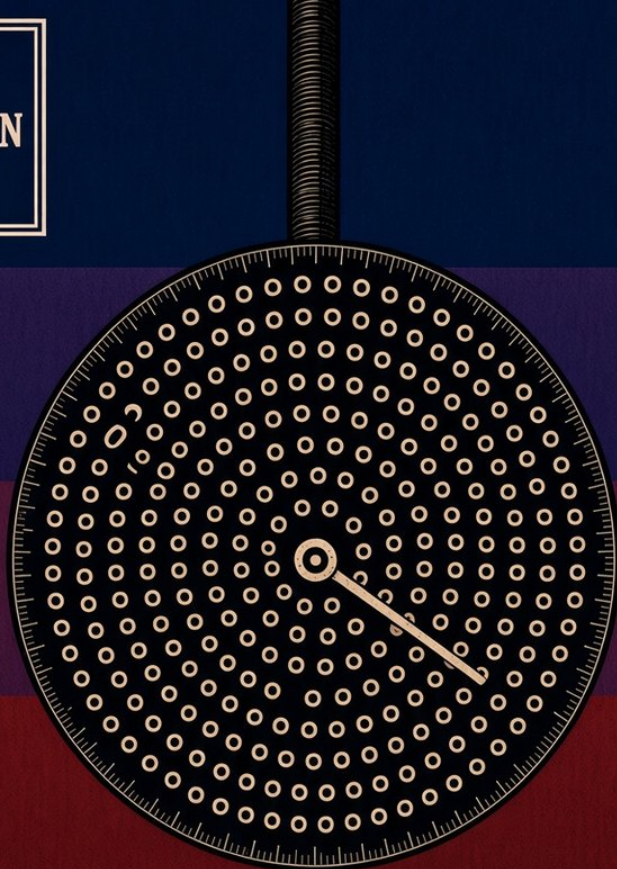


ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 88



HEAD
OFFICE

CHEW Z
A ROYA PUBLICATION

HEAD OFFICE

CHEW Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 88

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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PLATE

SECTION THROUGH FINISHED PRODUCT — GAUGE SAMPLE, ORDER 4,204

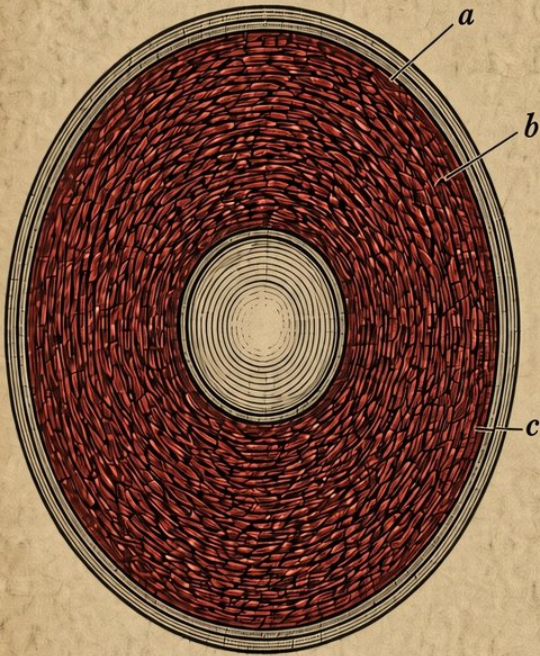


FIG. 1.

TO SPECIFICATION. COLOUR CONTINUOUS
THROUGH SECTION. GAUGE CORRECT.

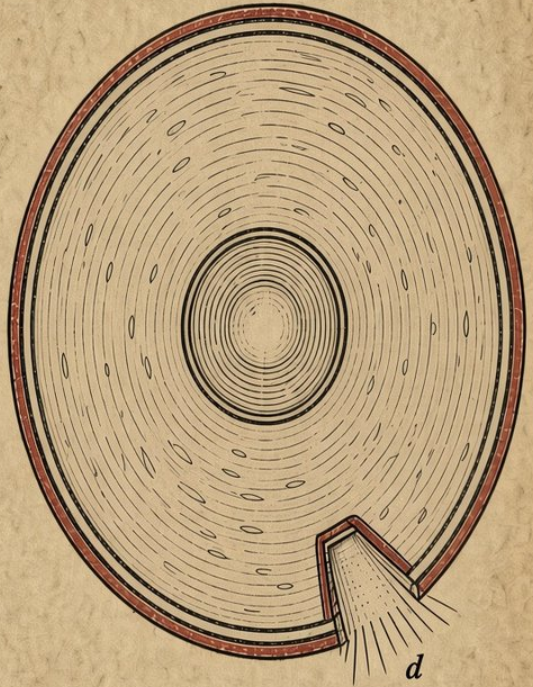
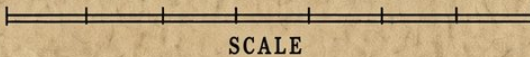


FIG. 2.

SAME ORDER. SAME GAUGE.
COLOUR ABSENT. PASSED.

- a. SHEATH — SURFACE FINISH ONLY
- b. BODY OF SECTION — COLOUR CARRIED HERE IN FIG. 1
- c. CORE
- d. SECTOR REMOVED FOR INSPECTION



SCALE

no query.

SYNOPSIS

A plant on a floor of a hundred thousand runs one product: a fine cable, black to the specification, a centimetre a month, on a line that has never once been wrong.

The orders come down from Head Office. Nobody has been to Head Office. Nobody has had a reply from Head Office. That is the arrangement, and in five years the arrangement has not failed once.

Then a docket arrives at two in the morning. It is a short run of ordinary cable, standard gauge, nothing on it. It has come before — the same number, the same specification, earlier the same evening.

A duplicate. It happens. The correct procedure when it occurs is to run it, because the docket is the docket, and because a plant that starts deciding which of Head Office's instructions are real has appointed itself to a position nobody offered it.

It arrives again at twenty past two.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

There is a kind of damage that requires an event, and it is the only kind most of us have a word for. Something was done. Somebody did it. There is a before and an after and you can put your finger on the join.

That version is real and it is not the common one.

The common one has no event in it at all. Nothing happened. Nobody did anything. There is a man who checks his work twice because he is good at his work, and then three times because the second time did not settle it, and then once more at two in the morning, in the dark, from memory, when there is nothing whatever he can do about it either way.

He is not unwell. He would be insulted by the suggestion and he would be right to be. He is careful, which is a virtue, and he is thorough, which is why they keep him, and the thing he does at two in the morning is the same thing he is paid for during the day, running on after the building has closed.

The trouble is that it is work. That is the whole of what I want to say. It is not worry and it is not nerves and it is not a mood — *it is labour, performed to a standard, at an hour, over and over, by somebody who is trying very hard to get it right.* It costs what work costs. It is done in the dark with nobody watching and it comes out of the same account as everything else.

And nobody is ever sent a bill for it. There is no statement, no reckoning, no afternoon on which somebody sits you down and reads out the total, because the whole of it took place inside one person's head between one and four in the morning and left no mark on anything.

Except one. And it is not a line anybody thinks to read.

Everything here is invented, and there is nobody in it.

I know a man who checks his front door twice. He has never once found it unlocked on the second check. He is not frightened of burglars — he could not tell you what he is frightened of, and neither could I, and we have known each other twenty years.

Nothing has ever happened to him. He will tell you so himself. He says it the way people say it when they have been asked why they look tired.

Chew Z

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I. RATED PACE

1.

I make cable.

I should be more particular than that, because people hear cable and they think of something you could tow a car with, and what we make here would go through the eye of a needle if you had the patience. Fine work. Continuous. One line, one product, no variants: a drawn core with a sheath on it, black to the specification, and it comes off this plant at the same rate it has come off since the day I started.

A centimetre a month. That is the rate. I have done a centimetre a month for four years and I could do it in my sleep, except that we do not sleep, and I will come to that.

You will want to know whether a centimetre a month sounds like much. It does not. I have thought about this and I have decided I do not care what it sounds like. The rate is the rate. Somebody worked it out long before I got here, and they worked it out properly, and a plant that runs above its rate is a plant that is going to have a conversation it does not want to have.

Nobody has ever had to have that conversation with me.

2.

There are a hundred thousand of us.

I do not expect that to mean anything to you the first time you hear it, so let me put it the way it arrives. When an order comes down, it does not come to me. It comes to the floor. Every plant on the floor takes it at the same instant, and a hundred thousand of us start the same job in the same second, and if you have never felt that, I cannot describe it to you except to say that it is the reason people stay in this trade when they could be doing something easier.

We are not connected. I want to be clear about that, because it is the thing outsiders always get wrong. I have never spoken to another plant. I do not know what any of them look like or whether looking is a thing that could be done. But we work off the same clock and we take the same orders off the same wire, and after four years you can feel the floor around you the way you can feel weather.

The north end has been quiet lately. I have not commented on that and I am not going to.

3.

The orders come from Head Office.

I have never been to Head Office. Nobody I know of has ever been to Head Office. It is up and it is somewhere at the front, and beyond that I could not tell you, and I have never regarded that as strange because there is no reason on earth why I would need to know.

They send the orders. We run them. That is the arrangement, and it has been the arrangement since before I was here, and I have never once seen it go wrong.

People new to the floor sometimes ask what Head Office is like. I always say the same thing. Head Office is the reason there is a floor. Somebody up there is looking at something none of us can see, and working out what is needed, and sending it down, and the fact that they have never had to explain themselves to me is a compliment to both of us.

I have never had a reply from Head Office. I have also never sent them anything, so I would not expect one.

4.

ORDER 4,112. Received 09:20. Standard run. Completed 10:20. No queries.

5.

The colour comes up the line.

I want to take my time here because it is the part of this job nobody outside the trade understands, and because it is, if I am honest, the reason I have never wanted to work anywhere else.

The line runs warm. It runs all the time, and most of what comes up it is nothing to do with me — traffic, going somewhere else, none of my business. But at the head of my plant there is a point where the sheath is going on, and at that point, if everything is as it should be, the colour arrives.

It arrives in small quantities and it arrives exactly when it is wanted. It is heavy for what it is. It comes in warm and it goes into the sheath while the sheath is still soft, and then the sheath sets, and after that it is in there for good and nothing in this world will get it out again.

That is the part I would want you to understand if you understood nothing else. *The colour is not on the product. The colour is in the product.* Once it has set, it is not a coating and it is not a finish and it is not an opinion. It is what the thing is made of.

I have been asked what it smells like. It does not smell of anything. I have been asked what it looks like. I have no idea. I have never seen anything and I would not know what to do with the sight of it. What I can tell you is what it feels like arriving, and the honest answer is that it feels like being told you are going to be all right.

That is not a professional way to describe a raw material and I would not put it in a report. But you asked.

6.

The specification runs to eleven pages and I know it.

I am not going to pretend that is an achievement. It is eleven pages and I have had four years. But there are plants on this floor who could not tell you what is in clause six, and one of them is nine metres from me, and I have said nothing.

The whole of it is worth knowing but the part that matters is clause four.

Clause four says the colour shall be integral to the sheath, applied at the point of extrusion, and shall not be applied to the finished product.

You may wonder why that needs saying. It needs saying because a coat of something on the outside will look, to a person who does not know what they are looking at, exactly like the real thing. It will look like it for a while. Then it will not, and by then the product is out in the world doing a job somebody is relying on, and the colour on our product is not decoration. It means something. It tells whoever is handling it what they have got in their hand.

So clause four is not fussiness. Clause four is the difference

between a thing that is what it says it is and a thing that has been made to look like it.

I feel strongly about clause four. I am aware of that.

7.

Now. The trades.

I am going to say some things here and I want it understood at the outset that I have nothing against anybody.

We are the long run. That is what this floor is. A run here goes years — four, five, seven if you are lucky and nothing gets reorganised — and in that time you learn the plant, you learn the line, you learn what the colour does in the cold, and you get to a point where the work is coming off you correctly without you having to stand over it. That is a trade. That takes time and there is no shortcut and anybody who tells you different is selling something.

Then there are the casual trades.

The brow and lash side run thirty days. Thirty days. That is not a run, that is a favour to somebody. They are out before they have learned the job — some of them are out before anybody has shown them where the colour comes in — and they will still stand there and tell you they are in the same industry as me.

They are not. I want to be reasonable about this. It is the same product in the sense that a nail and a girder are both steel.

The beard side I have more time for because at least there is volume in it, but it is coarse spec and there is no finish on the work, and they are on rate rather than quality, and they know it, and it has made them defensive.

And there is a whole class of plant doing the fine work across the arms and the back that as far as I can establish produces nothing anybody has ever asked for, and I have never understood how it is costed.

I had a man from the brow side come round once, years ago, asking about our rota. I gave him what he needed. I was perfectly civil. I have thought about that conversation a number of times since and I do not believe I said anything I would take back.

8.

ORDER 4,117. Received 11:05. Standard run. Completed 12:05. No queries.

ORDER 4,118. Received 13:40. Standard run. Completed 14:40. No queries.

9.

I should explain the rota, because it accounts for a good deal of what you would otherwise find strange about this floor.

You do not run for ever. You run, and then you wind down, and then you are laid off. The wind-down is short and everybody hates it — the line stays warm but the orders stop and you are stood there with a plant you cannot use. Then the layoff, which is longer, and quiet, and during which you are not here in any sense I could explain to you.

Then they bring you back.

Roughly one in ten of this floor is laid off at any time. That is normal, that is planned, that has been the arrangement for as long as anybody knows, and a floor where nobody was ever laid off would be a floor in trouble. I have been through it three times and I will go through it again and it holds no fear for me whatsoever.

Most of us come back.

I have put that sentence down and looked at it and I am going to leave it as it is.

10.

The temples are having difficulty.

I have known this for about a year and I have not said anything to anybody, partly because it is not my end of the floor and partly because I do not think it would be well received.

What I am told is that they are not getting their full allocation of colour. Not none of it. Short. And rather than raise it, which is what a professional would do, they have taken to explaining it — it is the light down there, it is the draught, it is the run of the line, they were always at the end of the run and it has never been right.

I would say two things about that.

The first is that the temples have always been like this. They are a difficult end of the floor. There is a culture down there and it does not come from nowhere.

The second is that if my allocation were short, I would know within a shift, and I would want to know why, and I would find out. I would not stand there for a year telling people about the draught.

I am not without sympathy. I want that noted. But there is such a thing as stamina and there is such a thing as making a career out of a shortage, and I have watched that end of the floor for four years and I know which one I am looking at.

11.

Twice a year, roughly, they come and take the stock.

It is not something we are told about in advance. There is a change in the noise, and a great deal of movement across the whole floor at once, and then the finished product that has been standing out beyond the plant — months of it, in some cases a year — is cut back and carried off.

The first time it happened I thought there had been an accident.

Nobody had told me. That is the thing about the first year in this trade: everybody assumes you know, because everybody has known it so long they have forgotten it had to be learned. I stood there with a year of my work going away from me in somebody else's hands and I genuinely believed I had done something wrong.

It is normal. It is scheduled, in its way. The product goes off to wherever it goes and we start filling the space again, and I am told there is a department that handles it and I have no reason to doubt that.

I will say only this. I have made four years of that cable and I have never once been told what it is for.

I do not require to be told. It is not my business and I do not ask. But if somebody from Head Office were ever down this way, and the moment presented itself, I would be interested.

12.

The best of this job is the nights.

Real nights, I mean, not a quiet hour. Proper nights, when the plant comes down and the line goes slow and there is nothing on the wire from Head Office at all. They are not a break — I want to be clear that we are not paid to sit about — they are a shutdown, and things happen in a shutdown that cannot happen while you are running.

Everything gets warm. The line thickens up. Whatever it is that goes out through a plant during the day comes back in at night, and there is no better way to put it than to say that on a good night you are being restocked.

I do not know who arranges them. It is not us. It arrives like weather and it is the one part of this arrangement that I have never wanted explained.

We get four or five a week, most weeks. Some weeks fewer. There have been weeks with two.

I have never complained about a week with two. I would like that on the record as well.

13.

ORDER 4,204. Received 22:15. Standard run. Completed 23:15. No queries.

ORDER 4,204. Received 02:14. Standard run. Completed 03:14. No queries.

I noticed the number. Of course I noticed the number — I have four years on this plant and I could tell you every docket that came through it this month.

I assumed a duplicate. It happens. Somewhere up there a clerk sends the same thing twice, and the correct procedure when that occurs is to run it, because the docket is the docket and it is not for me to decide which of Head Office's instructions are real.

So I ran it, and it went off correctly, and the plant was down again by twenty past three.

I want to say — because I have gone over this a great many times since, and because I have had every opportunity to make myself

sound better than I was — that I did not think about it again. Not that night and not the following week.

It was one docket, at a bad hour, in an otherwise ordinary month.

I logged it as new.

II. REPEAT ORDER

14.

We are busy.

I have been in this trade four years and I have never known us busier, and I want to put that down at the start of this part because of what comes later and because I do not want anybody thinking I was miserable at the time. I was not miserable. It was the best stretch of work I have ever had.

Volume through the roof. Orders coming down at all hours. The whole floor at it, every plant, every shift, and a wire that never went quiet for more than about forty minutes.

You do not get that in a mature product line. You go years without it. And when it comes, a man who has spent four years running a centimetre a month to a specification nobody outside this trade has ever heard of will tell you honestly that it is a relief to be wanted.

Somebody up there had found a use for us. That is what it looked like from here.

15.

ORDER 4,204. Received 01:50.

ORDER 4,204. Received 02:11.

ORDER 4,204. Received 02:44.

All three run. All three off correctly. No queries.

16.

Night work.

I know what is said about night work and most of it is said by people who have never done any. It is not unhealthy. It is not a sign that something has gone wrong upstairs. It is what happens when a plant is needed at a time that does not suit it, and a plant that is only available when it suits it is not a plant, it is a hobby.

I did nights and I did them well. I want that understood.

What I will say — and this is not a complaint, it is a description — is that a night order arrives differently. In the day the wire comes on and you feel it build and you have a moment to set yourself. At two

in the morning there is nothing and then there is the whole thing at once, the full weight of it, straight into a plant that has been down for three hours and is warm and slow and thinking about something else.

The first few, you come up out of it badly. After that you learn to sleep the way a man sleeps in a chair with his boots on.

We stopped calling them nights around then. There was not the language for it. You cannot call something a night when the wire is on.

17.

I am going to set out my position on queries, because it is the only part of this account where I think somebody might misunderstand me, and I would rather be thought wrong than be thought careless.

A docket is not a suggestion.

Somebody up there has looked at something I cannot see. They have taken a view. They have costed it and scheduled it and put it on the wire, and by the time it reaches me it has been through hands I do not have the standing to second-guess. My job at that point is not to assess it. My job is to run it, to spec, to rate, and to log it.

A plant that starts deciding which orders are real is a plant that has appointed itself to a position nobody offered it.

And there is a practical side to it that people forget. I have no way of knowing what a docket is for. None. I have never known what any of it was for. So on what basis would I object? *I have run this one before* is not an objection. Of course I have run it before — I have run the same item ten thousand times. That is the product. That is the whole industry.

The day I decide I know better than the wire is the day I am no use to anybody.

I have never queried a docket. Four years. Not one.

I have said that to plants on this floor who found it worth remarking on, and I have never understood why they found it remarkable, and I still do not.

18.

The floor started struggling around the fourth month of it.

Not everywhere. But you would feel a plant go quiet nearby and stay quiet, and then the word would come round that they had gone into wind-down. Early. Weeks early, in some cases months, and not on the rota.

I will be honest about what I thought at the time, because there is no point in this account if I dress it up.

I thought: they cannot take the pace.

That is what I thought and I thought it more than once. I thought it about the north end, which had been quiet since before any of this started. I thought it about a plant nine metres from me who had never been able to tell you what was in clause six and who went down in the fifth month and has not been back. And I thought it, God help me, about the temples, who were now not only short of colour but shedding units at a rate that had people talking on every part of this floor.

There is a certain kind of plant, I decided, that is fine while the work is steady and is no use to anybody the moment it is asked for something.

I was very sure about that. I want it on the record how sure I was.

19.

ORDER 4,204. Received 00:31.

ORDER 4,204. Received 01:02.

ORDER 4,204. Received 01:40.

ORDER 4,204. Received 02:05.

ORDER 4,204. Received 03:19.

ORDER 4,204. Received 04:41.

All run. All to spec. No queries.

20.

I want to describe the item, because I think it is the thing about all of this that I have never been able to make anybody understand.

It is not a difficult job.

Two hundred millimetres. Standard gauge. Sheath to spec, colour integral, finish plain, no tolerance on it tighter than anything else we do. If you handed that docket to a plant on its first week they would have it off correctly by the end of the shift, and if you handed it to me I could do it without slowing the line.

There is nothing on it. There is nothing on that docket that is not on every other docket in the book except the number.

That is what I could never account for. Not the hours, not the volume, not the fact that we were doing it at four in the morning. *The fact that it was nothing.* If it were a complicated item, or a new one, or something where the spec had been changed and they were struggling to get it right upstairs, I could have told you a story about it that made sense.

It was a short run of ordinary cable and we made it two thousand one hundred and six times.

I did not know that figure at the time. I want to be clear. I counted it afterwards, and I am going to come to the counting, and the counting is not the part I am ashamed of.

21.

The nights went.

Not at once. It was two a week for a while, then one, then a stretch of nine days with none at all, which I had never heard of and which nobody I could ask had ever heard of either.

I did not mind. I have said that already about weeks with two and I am saying it again about weeks with none, and both times it was true when I said it.

What I noticed — and this is the only complaint I will make in this whole account, so I would ask that it be taken in that spirit — is that the restocking happens at night. Whatever comes back into the line comes back then. That is the arrangement, that has always been the arrangement, and if you take the nights away you have not taken away a comfort, you have taken away a delivery.

I assumed this was known upstairs. It is exactly the sort of thing Head Office would have modelled. There will be a document about

it somewhere with a great deal more thought in it than I could bring, and the fact that they had decided to run us hot for a period meant they had a reason, and the reason was not mine to have.

That is what I told myself and I would tell myself the same thing again.

22.

The first thing that was actually wrong was the timing.

Not the quantity. The quantity was correct — I checked it, and I checked it the way you check something when you are hoping to be able to stop thinking about it. Full allocation. Every gram of it.

It was arriving late.

Only slightly. A second, perhaps two, behind where it should be. The sheath is going on and the colour ought to be there and it is not there and then it is. Nobody would see it in the finished product. I could not prove it to you now and I could not have proved it then.

But I have stood at that head for four years and I know when the colour comes in, the way you know a footstep in a corridor, and it was late, and it went on being late.

I thought about the temples then, for the first time in a way that was not contempt.

Then I thought about something else, because the wire came on.

23.

ORDER 4,204. Received 02:14.

Same as before. Same as the first one, four months earlier, to the minute.

I noticed that too.

24.

Here is the counting.

I had the numbers. That is not remarkable — every plant has its numbers, the log is the log, you write down what you ran and when

you ran it and that is the job. What was remarkable, or what I thought was remarkable at the time, is that I sat down and added them up.

Two thousand one hundred and six runs of 4,204 in eight months.

And I want to tell you what I felt when I saw that figure, because I have had a long while to consider it and I have not been able to make myself feel differently about it in retrospect.

I was proud.

Two thousand one hundred and six. On a plant rated for a fraction of that. Not one rejected, not one out of spec, not one late off the line, and I had done every single one of them myself with no fuss and no assistance and no queries.

I thought: there is not another plant on this floor that could have carried that.

I thought: somebody should know.

And then I thought about the fact that there is nobody to tell, and I went back to work, and I am not going to pretend that the second thought spoiled the first one. It did not. I sat with that figure for most of a shift and it was the best I have ever felt about this job.

25.

I composed a query once.

I want to be exact about this because it is the closest I ever came and because I have gone over the wording more times than is reasonable.

It went:

From plant, this floor. Ref. order 4,204. This order has been received on two thousand one hundred and six occasions in eight months and has been run to specification on every occasion. No fault is reported and no assistance is requested. The plant wishes only to confirm that the repetition is intended, and to be advised whether any part of the schedule requires amendment.

That is a good query. That is a query written by somebody who knows the trade. It reports the facts, it makes no accusation, it asks for nothing except confirmation, and it leaves the whole of the

decision where the decision belongs.

I did not send it.

There were three reasons and I have never been able to decide which of them was the real one.

The first is that I did not know where to send it, and finding out would have meant asking, and asking is a query.

The second is that I could not think of a way to write it that did not, somewhere underneath, say: *I think you have made a mistake.*

And the third is the one I would rather not put down, so I will put it down. I had just done two thousand one hundred and six of them without a word. Sending that query would have meant admitting that at some point in those eight months I had started to wonder — and I had not wondered on the first one, or the hundredth, and to raise it now would have been to say that there was a number at which I stopped simply doing my job.

I did not want there to have been a number.

So there was not one.

26.

The colour came short in the ninth month.

Not much. You would not see it. I would not have seen it myself if I had not spent four weeks standing at that head listening for a footstep in a corridor.

Short, and late, and then correct again the next morning, and then correct for eleven days.

I put it down as a one-off. That is what you do with a one-off — you note it, you watch it, and you do not go making a case out of a single reading, because a plant that raises an alarm every time a figure moves is a plant nobody believes when something is actually wrong.

I noted it. I watched it.

And I would like to say, since this is the last part of this account where I can say it and be telling the truth, that I was not worried.

Not then. Not for a good while after.

III. SHORT SUPPLY

27.

It stopped on a Tuesday in the tenth month.

Not tapered. Stopped. The sheath went on at eleven minutes past nine and there was nothing at the head, and I held the line for as long as a line can be held, and then I ran it dry because the alternative was to stop the plant, and a plant does not stop.

Two hundred millimetres of it came off me that morning with nothing in it at all.

I stood over that and I will tell you exactly what I thought, which was: they will have this sorted by the afternoon.

28.

It was not sorted by the afternoon.

I ran the rest of that day dry and the whole of the next and I did not miss an order, did not drop below rate, and did not put a single unit out that was wrong in any way I could correct.

That is not nothing. I would like somebody to understand that it is not nothing. Any plant can make good product when it is being supplied. What we did that fortnight — and it was not only me, it was most of this floor by then — was hold the rate and the gauge and the finish and the tolerance on a line with the colour missing out of it, and there is not one of us who was thanked for it or asked about it or, as far as I can establish, noticed.

The product was correct in every respect except one.

29.

Clause two.

The sheath shall be black to the standard.

Seven words. It is the shortest clause in the specification and it is the first one they teach you, and I had been putting out non-conforming product for nine days before I let myself write that sentence down.

I want to explain what that means to somebody who does not do this work, because I think from outside it sounds like a technicality and from in here it is the only thing that has ever mattered.

Our colour is not decoration. I said that in the first week of this account and I meant it then and I mean it more now. The colour tells whoever is handling that cable what they have got in their hand. Somebody down the line — I have never known who, I have never known what for — reaches into a run and takes hold of a thing and knows from the look of it what it is and what it will take and whether it can be trusted.

And I was sending them out white.

Correct gauge. Correct finish. Correct in every particular a person could measure with an instrument, and wrong in the one particular that a person would actually use.

I did not stop. I want that on the record before anybody else puts it there. I knew what I was shipping and I shipped it, every hour, to rate, for months, because the docket was the docket and the alternative was to stop the plant, and because stopping the plant would have been a decision, and a decision would have been a query.

There is a version of me that stopped the line on the ninth day and stood there until somebody came.

I have thought about him a great deal. He would have been wrong. I want to be clear that under the arrangement as it stands he would have been entirely wrong, and that everything I know about this trade says I did the correct thing.

I have thought about him a great deal all the same.

30.

ORDER 4,204. Received 01:38.

ORDER 4,204. Received 02:14.

ORDER 4,204. Received 02:51.

ORDER 4,204. Received 03:30.

All run. All to rate. Non-conforming to clause two, as noted, on all four.

No queries.

31.

I rationed.

Nobody told me to. There was no instruction and no procedure for it and as far as I know it had never been done on this floor, because it had never needed doing.

What came up the line after that Tuesday came in traces. A little on a Thursday. Nothing for four days. A little more. Never enough for a run — never a tenth of enough — and my choice was to put a trace into every unit, where it would do nothing and be seen by nobody, or to hold it and put a proper allocation into one unit in fifty.

I held it.

That is why, if you were to go through a year of my output very carefully, you would find the odd one in there that is correct. Full colour, right through the sheath, to the standard, indistinguishable from anything I made in my first four years.

One in fifty, then one in ninety, then one in about three hundred.

I have never been able to decide whether that was a professional decision or a sentimental one. I told myself at the time that a small number of conforming units was worth more than a large number of nearly-conforming units, which is true, and which is also exactly the kind of thing a man says when he wants to keep one good thing going.

32.

Head Office started sending things.

I want to be careful here because I have heard how the floor talks about this and I do not want to be part of that.

There were consignments. They came up the line, they were not the colour, and there was no covering note. There is never a covering note — I have said that already about dockets and it is more true of this. Something arrives, it is not what you were expecting, and there is nothing on it to say what it is for or what you are supposed to do with it.

So you run it. What else would you do.

The first lot did nothing. The second lot did nothing and tasted of something I have no word for. There was one in the spring that made everything difficult for about a fortnight and then stopped coming. There was a period of about nine weeks when four different things arrived in rotation, and the floor had a theory that they were being tried against each other, and I thought that was probably right and I still think it was probably right, and none of them did anything at all.

I kept every one of them. That is to say I have a record of every consignment that came up that line, with the date and the hour, and if anybody from Head Office ever wants to know what we were sent I have it and it is in order.

Nobody has asked.

33.

I am going to defend Head Office, and I am going to do it here, at the worst point of it, because doing it later would be easy and doing it now is the truth.

There will be a reason.

I do not know it. I am not entitled to know it. But I have been on this floor four and a half years and in that time every single thing that has come down that wire has been correct — the rate was correct, the spec was correct, the rota was correct, the two collections a year were correct — and a body that gets it right ten thousand times running does not suddenly stop knowing what it is doing.

Somebody up there is looking at the whole of it. I am looking at one plant. From where I stand this looks like a supply failure, and from where they stand it is very likely a decision, and the difference between those two things is the difference between a floor and a business.

They will have modelled it. They will have weighed the colour against something I cannot see and found that the something matters more, and if I knew what the something was I would probably agree with them.

That is not loyalty talking. I want that understood. That is

arithmetic.

34.

Some things about this plant that I have never had explained and have stopped expecting to.

The whole works moves. It has moved every day I have been here. I understand that a large operation may be sited somewhere that moves and I have no more to say about it than that.

Water comes down. A great deal of it, warm, from above, at fairly regular intervals, with something in it that smells of nothing that grows anywhere. It goes over everything and then it stops. The floor calls it the wash and nobody has ever suggested it is a problem.

Twice a day something comes across the whole floor with regular teeth in it. I could not tell you what it is for. It is not unpleasant. It goes one way and then the other way and then it is gone.

Voices arrive through the structure rather than through the air, which I am told is normal for a building of this construction.

There is no light. I mention it only because I gather there is such a thing.

35.

ORDER 4,204. Received 02:14.

Two years, near enough, to the minute.

36.

I have not mentioned the temples in some time.

They are gone, most of them. Not laid off — gone the way a department goes when it has been quietly wound up and nobody has issued a notice. What is left down there is running white and has been running white longer than any of us.

I said a number of things about that end of the floor in this account and I am not going to go back and take them out. They are what I thought. I have never seen the point of an account that only contains the parts a man comes out of well.

What I will say is that they were first, and I took that to mean they were weakest, and I have since had to consider the possibility that being first and being weakest are two different things which happened, in their case, to arrive in the same order.

I have not taken it any further than that.

I have a plant to run and it is running, and there is nothing to be gained from a plant standing about revising its opinions.

37.

In the second summer, the wire went quiet.

I want to set this out carefully because it is six days and I have spent longer on those six days than on the whole of the rest of this account.

It started on a Saturday. There was an order at nine, standard, nothing on it, and then nothing. Nothing at eleven. Nothing at two. I ran the rate off the standing schedule because that is what you do when the wire is quiet, and I assumed a fault, and I waited to be told.

Sunday: nothing.

And on the Sunday night we had a proper night. The plant came down and the line went slow and thick and warm and it stayed that way for hours, and I had forgotten. That is the thing I want to put down. I had genuinely forgotten what one was like. I had been telling anybody who would listen that I did not mind and I have gone back through this account and I have not taken those parts out either, and they were true when I said them, and they were true the way a thing is true when you have never been given the chance to find out.

Four nights in a row. Four.

And on the Thursday, at the head, with the sheath going on —

Some colour came in.

Not the allocation. Nothing like the allocation. A trace, and late, and gone again inside the hour.

But it came in, and I put it in the sheath, and there is two hundred millimetres of cable somewhere in this world with a Thursday in it.

I did not say anything to anybody. There was nobody to say it to and I would not have said it if there had been, because there is a way that plants talk when something like that happens and I have never liked it and I was not going to be the one doing it.

I ran the Friday and the Saturday on the standing schedule.

I was — and I am putting this down plainly because I have not put anything else down plainly in this account — I was very happy that week.

38.

On the Monday the wire came on at 06:50 and there were four before noon.

By the Wednesday we were back to the hours.

I would like to be able to tell you that I understood what I had lost, or that I made a note of it, or that I did anything at all differently afterwards.

I did not. I had a plant to run and it was running.

The colour did not come again for a very long time, and when I say a very long time I want to be precise about it, because precision is the only thing I have ever been able to offer anybody: the colour did not come again in any quantity I could put in a sheath for one year and seven months.

By then everything was different, and I had stopped listening for it, and something else had started happening to the stock that I have not told you about yet.

IV. SURFACE FINISHING

39.

The colour came back.

I am going to give that its own entry because that is what it deserved on the day, and because I have never in this account written a sentence I was happier to write.

It was a Saturday. There was a good deal of activity outside the plant — more than a collection, a different kind of noise, and it went on for the best part of an hour — and when it was done the stock standing out there was black.

All of it. Every metre. The whole of the run I had put out white over a year and a half, sitting there correct.

I did not understand the mechanism and I did not care. What I understood was that somebody had gone through the whole of it and brought it back to standard, and that meant it had been looked at, and that meant somebody up there had known the entire time.

I said in this account, at the worst of it, that there would be a reason. I want to point at that. I did not know what the reason was and I said there would be one, and I was not being loyal, I was doing arithmetic, and the arithmetic was right.

That was the best afternoon of my working life.

40.

ORDER 4,204. Received 01:44.

ORDER 4,204. Received 02:14.

ORDER 4,204. Received 02:58.

All run. No queries.

I noted at the time that the schedule had not changed. I thought: they will get to that.

41.

The new run came off white.

I want to describe how long it took me to accept that, because I do not think a person outside this trade would credit it.

Four days. Four days of standing at that head with no colour

arriving, putting out white cable into a yard of black cable, and telling myself that the supply would be along in a moment, that they had done the old stock first because that was the priority, that a plant which had waited a year and seven months could wait until Thursday.

By the Friday I had to write the sentence down.

The stock outside is black. What is leaving the plant is white.

Two facts. Both mine, both checked. And the whole of the rest of this account is what happens to a plant that has to sit with those two facts and work out what they mean.

42.

It is on the outside.

That is what it took me a fortnight to get to and it is one sentence long.

Whatever was done to that stock on the Saturday was done to it out there, after it had left me, from the outside in. It has not gone through the plant. It has never been near the head. It is sitting on the sheath the way water sits on a surface it cannot get into, and if you went at one of those units with anything at all you would find white underneath it about as deep as a thought.

I could tell you how I know. It would take a while and it is trade detail and there is no reason for you to be interested. The short of it is that the colour on that stock and the colour I used to put into a sheath are not the same material and were never made by the same people.

They have coated it.

It looks correct. From any distance at all it looks entirely correct.

43.

The colour shall be integral to the sheath, applied at the point of extrusion, and shall not be applied to the finished product.

Clause four.

I set that out in the first part of this account and I will not apologise for setting it out again. I said at the time that it needed saying

because a coat of something on the outside will look, to a person who does not know what they are looking at, exactly like the real thing.

I would like it noted that I wrote that before any of this. I was not clever. It is in the specification. It has been in the specification since before I was on this floor and it is there because somebody, a long time ago, saw exactly this happen and wrote seven lines to stop it happening again.

And I want to say what I actually felt, because I have been honest in the rest of this and I am not going to become tactful at the end.

I have been shipping non-conforming product for two years. I have said so. Clause two, every hour, on my own plant, with my own hand, and I have set out my reasons and I stand by them and I would do it again.

And I have never once been as angry about that as I was about this.

I have gone round and round it. The best I can do is this: what I did was a failure to meet the standard. What they have done is a decision to look like it. Those are not the same thing, and a trade that cannot tell them apart has no business calling itself a trade.

That is my position and I would put it to anybody.

44.

I do not know who did it.

I have thought about this more than is useful and I have got precisely nowhere, and I would rather put down the nowhere than invent something.

It was not this floor. We could not have done it if we had wanted to — we have no access to the stock once it is out, and we have no material that behaves like that, and no plant on this floor could coat anything.

I do not believe it was Head Office. I want to be firm about that. Head Office wrote the specification. Head Office has sent me ten thousand dockets in five years and every one of them correct. A body that writes clause four does not then go out and break clause four, and anybody who says otherwise is telling you more about themselves than about Head Office.

So it was somebody else. Somebody outside the arrangement entirely, who has access to the finished goods, who was not notified to us, and whose work is now standing in a yard with my product underneath it.

That is the part I keep arriving back at.

Whoever handles that cable at the other end — whoever it was all along, the one I have never known anything about — is going to reach into that run and take hold of a thing and see black, and they are going to think that black came off my plant.

It has my rate on it. It has my gauge and my finish and my tolerance on it. It is my work, all the way down, and there is a coat of somebody else's opinion on the outside of it, and there is no mark anywhere on that unit to say which part is which.

I have made a good product for five years and there is now no way for anybody to tell.

45.

I composed a second query.

It was three lines. It said that non-conforming finishing was being applied to this plant's output by parties unknown, that the plant had not been notified, and that the plant requested confirmation of who had authorised it.

I did not send that one either.

The first time, in the eighth month, I did not send it because sending it would have meant admitting there had been a number. I have set that out and I have not softened it.

This time was different and it is worse.

I did not send it because the stock outside is black.

That is the truth of it. If I raised it, and I was right, somebody might stop. And then the stock would be white again, all of it, out there where anybody can see it, and I would have been the plant that reported it.

I would have been correct. I have never in five years been more correct about anything.

I would also have been the one who took the black away.

So I said nothing, and it is still going on, and I have not raised it since and I am not going to.

46.

Every six weeks.

That is the cycle and you could set your rota by it. Six weeks of it standing out there looking correct, and then the join starts to show — because I am still running, you understand, that is the thing people miss, I have not stopped for a moment — and what comes off my plant is white, and it comes out from underneath.

So there is a boundary out there that travels. Black at the far end, white at the near end, and a line between them that moves a centimetre a month, which is my rate, which is the only honest thing in the entire arrangement.

Then there is a Saturday, and the noise, and it is all black again.

I watch that boundary come out of the head. Every month a little more of what I actually made, and then it goes.

I have started to think of it as the only record anybody keeps of this plant, and I have had to stop thinking of it that way, because it is not a record of anything if somebody paints over it every six weeks.

47.

Two things I heard through the structure this year, neither of which was anything to do with me, and both of which I am putting down because I said at the start that I would put down what there was.

In the spring, a voice said something about the colour of something having gone. There was a reply I could not make out. I assumed a consignment.

And at a collection — I have not mentioned that collections happen differently now, in a chair, with a good deal of talking, which I gather is a change in procedure at that end and none of my business — somebody said that it suited.

I do not know what suited. I do not know who was being spoken to. It is not a phrase you hear on this floor and I made nothing of it at the time, and I am only setting it down because it is the only thing

anybody has said within my hearing in five years that sounded like an opinion about the work.

There was a laugh after it. Then whoever it was moved off.

You get that all day in a building of this construction. I stopped attending to it years ago.

48.

Where I am now.

The plant is running. It has never stopped and it has never dropped below rate and there is nothing wrong with it that anybody could find with an instrument.

The colour has not come in any quantity for a long time. There is the occasional trace and I still hold it back and I still put a proper allocation into one unit in — I have stopped counting what it is now. It is a long way past three hundred.

The wire is heavy. It has been heavy for four years. 4,204 has now been received and run to specification eleven thousand and forty times, which is a figure I worked out on a slow morning and which I have not told anybody, because there is nobody, and because I know how it would sound.

It is still a two-hundred-millimetre run of standard gauge with nothing on it.

The floor is thinner than it was. The north end has been dark for years. The temples are gone. There are two plants near me that went into wind-down before the second summer and have not come back, and the arrangement is that most of us come back, and I have looked at that word most a great many times.

I am fine. I want to be clear about that, because I have read this account through and I can see that a person might take a certain impression from it.

I have a plant. It runs. That is more than a good many on this floor can say.

49.

I have thought about whether there was a point at which somebody

should have said something.

I have decided there was not, and I would like to set out why, and then I am going to stop, because there is an order due at two.

Nobody on this floor knew anything. That is not an excuse, it is the situation. I knew my rate and my spec and my log. I did not know what the item was for, or who received it, or what the colour told them, or why the schedule changed in the tenth month, or what happened in the six days in the second summer, or who comes on a Saturday. Not one plant on this floor knew any of that and not one of us was ever going to.

And Head Office had the whole of it. Every order, every rota, every consignment, the specification itself. Whatever this is, it is on their side of the wire, and it always was, and a plant that starts trying to run the business from the floor is no use to the business or to itself.

So there was nothing to say. There was never anything to say. There was a wire and there were dockets on it and there was a plant down here that ran every single one of them exactly as it was written.

I would want that in the record, if there is a record.

Five years and two months on this plant. Eleven thousand and forty of one item and I could not tell you what a single one of them was for.

Not one late. Not one out of gauge. Not one refused.

Not one query.

GLOSSARY

The casual trades — Eyebrow and eyelash follicles, whose growing phase runs about thirty days against the scalp's two to seven years. The contempt in which they are held is universal, sincerely felt, and without foundation.

Clause two — That hair is supposed to be brown.

Clause four — That the colour is supposed to be in the hair rather than on it.

The colour — Melanin. Delivered into the growing hair by pigment cells resident in the follicle. Drawn from a finite reserve that the follicle has no means of measuring and every reason to assume is replenished.

A consignment — An over-the-counter preparation sold on the claim that it prevents or restores hair colour. None has been shown to do so, and the marketing of several has attracted regulatory action. There was no covering note because there was nobody to write one.

The floor — Approximately one hundred thousand follicles.

The gauge, the rate, the finish, the tolerance — All correct. All correct throughout. Not one of them ever varied by an amount anybody could measure.

Head Office — The brain. Has never visited the plant, sent a representative, or replied to correspondence. The plant is not aware that Head Office is the origin of every order it has ever received, or that the two of them are the same person.

The join — Roots.

The layoff — The shedding phase. About one follicle in ten is in it at any time, and most return. The plant is correct that this is normal and correct that it had begun happening early, and does not connect the two.

The line — The bloodstream.

Night work — Rumination between one and four in the morning. The plant experiences it as unscheduled demand and as evidence that business is good.

No queries — The plant's own summary of its working life, entered after every order, for five years and two months, eleven thousand and forty times.

The north end — Where it had already started before the account begins.

Order 4,204 — One thought, thought eleven thousand and forty times in five years. Its content is not recorded anywhere, and on the evidence of the specification it was run to, it was unremarkable.

The plant — One hair follicle.

A query — Asking.

A repeat order — The same thought again.

Restocking — Sleep.

The six days — A holiday. Hair colour has been documented to return when stress is lifted, and to do so in synchrony across several hairs on the same head at once. The window in which this can happen narrows with age. It was open at the time.

Stock collection — A haircut.

Surface finishing — Hair dye. Applied to finished product only, from the outside, every six weeks, by parties the plant was never notified of.

The temples — Where it starts.

The wash — Shampoo.

The wire — Whatever Head Office is doing.

A plant on a floor of a hundred thousand makes black cable to a specification it can recite from memory. It has never missed a rate, never shipped out of gauge, and never in five years queried a docket.

The orders come down from Head Office. Nobody has ever been there. Nobody has ever had a reply.

In the tenth month the colour stops arriving up the line. The plant keeps running, because the alternative is to stop, and stopping would be a decision, and a decision would be a query.

Two years later somebody comes on a Saturday and paints the finished stock.

Not one late. Not one out of gauge. Not one query.

