1975

The Imprisoned

Jill Deasy
St. John Fisher College

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The seven o'clock whistle shrilled just as he turned to race up the next flight of stairs. Manny swore and slid through a puddle of spilled coffee on the landing. Dull green factory walls, dismal grey factory stairs, dirty factory floors - he cursed them all. He lost his footing and banged his shin on the next step as he fell. It hurt like hell but he picked himself up and half-walked, half-hopped up the next two flights. Another bad day - and it had barely begun."

Cover Page Footnote
Appeared in the issue: 1975.
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"Bout ready to turn, Manny, get a move on." Joe, one of the maintenance men, clapped him on the shoulder as he came through the door. "What'dja do, ya dumb Dago, trip over your big feet again?" He said it jokingly, as always, but Manny wasn't in the mood for humor.

"Some sonuvabitch spilled coffee. Where's your mop, Miller?" He didn't wait for Joe's reply but limped heavily up the hallway towards the time clock. It clicked just as he yanked his card out of its slot. He swore again and kicked the wall, his knee giving him a fresh sting of pain. Manny shoved his card into the slot forcefully, but it only bounced back with a maddening 7:01 on it.

"That's the breaks." He looked up and found one of the nightshift men waiting to punch out.

"Yeah. Wish I was off now too," Manny muttered. He slid the card into an "in" slot and trudged up the aisle, carrying the now flattened-out paper bag containing his sandwiches.

"Hey, Manny! What'sa matter, your wife too much for ya last night?" A loud guffaw. Manny turned and Matt, the fourth-floor trucker, grinning toothlessly, trundled up the aisle towards him behind a truckload of boxed steel bolts.

"Go to hell, Matt."

"Dontcha wish. Gimme a hand, willya? Somma these are yours, ya know."

Manny set his lunch down against the wall behind his workbench and helped heft several of the heavy boxes off the truck and on to the ramp leading up to the work area. Matt pulled them up with a steel bar he hooked into the sides of the boxes, but Manny used his steel-toed boots, and shoved them up the ramp with one foot, ignoring the dull pain in his knee.

"Thanks, Matt."

"Any time. Where's Wes?"

"I dunno. Talking to Marty, maybe. Hasn't been up here yet." Wes had been Manny's work partner in the factory for four years, ever since Manny had started there. He and Marty drove in together every day.

"You guys making your time?" Manny and Wes were both on piece work. It paid just enough to get by on, if they did the required number of parts.

"Sometimes. Manny shrugged. "We lie on the work reports. They don't know."

"Better watch it. They fired two guys down in Barrels for that last week. Must be checking."

"Anymore good news?" Matt grinned. "Letcha know. Seeya, Manny:"

"Tell Wes to get his ass down here." He watched Matt steer the truck around a couple of white-shirted foremen and sighed. Matt never changed. Just like the whole damn factory never changed. He wore the same grease-stained, baggy green workclothes everyday, the mark of a trucker. The black spots never quite came out no matter how many times the clothes were washed. He looked down at his own spotty brown workpants and shook his head. His T-shirt, fairly new,
didn't look so bad, but nobody noticed, because almost every male machine-worker in the plant wore the same kind of shirt. Picking him up from work one afternoon, Katie remarked that they all looked alike. Mass production, he'd told her. They laughed, even though it wasn't funny.

Katie, fair-haired, big-bellied in her eighth month. Last night he had come home tired, wanting only to do nothing for a while, or maybe go to sleep, but she was in one of her moods again. They sat down to supper in silence, but when it began to rain, the roof of the trailer rattled noisily with a metallic sound. It reminded him of the shop.

"Goddammit!" He slammed a bowl on the table. A white lump bounced over the edge of the table and onto the floor. "Potatoes! I don't care if . . . if the tears back."

She stared at him, her blue eyes red and squinty-looking. "Potatoes! I don't give a damn about the potatoes! Is that all you can think about?" Her voice rose to a scream. "Don't even cook a decent meal anymore!"

"I'm not supposed to strain myself. She was fighting to keep the tears back. "I can't do everything. You want me to do everything! You don't even care if . . . if . . ." She struggled to get up, but her stomach got in the way so she sat back down again. Her shoulders were shaking and her plate was wet with tears.

His anger left him suddenly. "Don't, Katie, don't. C'mon, don't cry." He freed her from her chair gently, took her in his arms. She stiffened, but as he stroked her hair, her body went limp and swollen against him.

"I'm scared, Manny. I don't want it to die."

He rubbed his face in her hair, pressed her to him as much as her stomach would allow. "It won't. Be pretty as you I bet."
husband had found attractive about her. Maybe she hadn't been so fat when she was young, and the wrinkles wouldn't have been there.

"Coffee?"

"For Christ's sake, Manny!" She flipped a button impatiently and the whir of machinery began again. "You should know by now ..." He missed the rest as it was drowned out in the roar of clashing metal.

"Well?" Wes was back.

"She wants coffee. Anybody else?"

"Nope."

Manny picked up the warped metal drink tray and left.

By ten o'clock it was over 100 degrees in Department Forty-Seven. At the end of May when it had really begun to get hot, Wes had brought a thermometer so that they could measure the temperature. By the time Manny had finished his first three hundred bars, the sweat was pouring down his face, getting in his eyes, and his shirt was sticking to his back. He slammed his hammer into the wall angrily and threw a heavy metal pan across the cement floor. It made a streak of grease along the dirty cement and crashed loudly into an empty metal stool. Wes jumped and turned around to face Manny. "What's with you?" He wiped the sweat from his face with a grease-stained cloth.

"Where the hell are those fans they were supposed to repair for us?" He brushed his arm across his eyes, leaving a black smudge on his nose.

"Beats me. Somebody probably took 'em. Anyway, Harry said he'd order some more."

"When'd he say that? Chrismuss?"

"Shut up. He's right up the aisle, talking to Jim Boare. He'll be up here any minute."

"Harry stinks. They all do, I'd like to see them take our places for a couple days. Switch everybody around."

"You're dreaming. Better get to work before you get bawled out."

"Up yours."

Manny sat for a minute watching the repetitive movements of his elbows and the slight juggling of the roll of fat around Wes's waist. He had that same roll around his own waistline, only worse because he weighed so much more. The whole damn place was running to fat. He saw the foreman coming, so he picked up another pan of parts and set it heavily on a wooden stand.

"Manny!" Harry clapped him on the back. "How're we doing on parts? We need a thousand today, so no fooling around, you two."

"We've got three hundred done."

"Need more than that," Harry returned. "You guys better get moving."

"It's hot," Manny informed him. "Hard to work in this heat. We need those fans. Aren't they in yet?"

"Fans! It isn't even July and you guys want fans? You must be kidding."

"It's over a hundred in here," Wes pointed out.

"You're crazy." Harry laughed. "If you guys worked a little faster, the wind from your arms would keep you cool." Still laughing, he pulled a pipe from his shirt pocket and stuffed some tobacco into it. Manny watched him light it and then walk away.

"Bastard!"

Wes shrugged. "Happens all the time."

"That's the trouble with this place." Manny lit up a cigarette, took a few puffs, then shot it on the floor angrily and stubbed it out with his toe.

"You'll survive," Wes told him. "I've been here twice as long as you have and I've survived."

"I'll never stay here as long as you have."

"Where you plan on going? Jobs don't grow on trees, especially if you haven't finished high school. You just gotta stick it out. By the way, how's Katie comin' along?"

"She's a bitch lately. You're lucky you already had your kids."

Wes shrugged. "Maybe. They..."
get pretty wild sometimes, though."

Manny turned his back and began hammering dents out of the steel bars in front of him. Some of the dents were stubborn, the bars wouldn’t gauge. He swung the hammer a little harder until they conformed to regulation size. Feeling the strength and power in his arms, he began hitting them so hard that the steel bent and folded in the wrong places. His back began to ache from the almost-backless chair. He picked up a handful of bad ones and flung them at the steel bars in front of him. Some of them flew off as a spray of liquid forced it upward. The spray caught Manny full in the face. He shut his eyes instinctively and a moment later, felt the sting of pain in his eyelids. It spread over his whole upper face. He cried out with the pain, but Wes was already down beside him with water-drenched towels, muttering “Jesus Christ” over and over. He heard Harriet shrieking, before the intense pain made his mind fuzzy.

“Get him to first aid.” In a daze, Manny realized who the voice belonged to. He turned towards Harry’s face and looked him straight in the eyes. “You bastard!” He spat the words out. It was something he’d always wanted to say, Harry looked away, trying to hide the fear and revulsion in his face. Everyone was staring at him, and face flushed, he retreated down the ramp. “Get him to first aid,” he repeated, “I’ll be down in a minute.”

“Close your eyes, Manny,” someone said gently. He obeyed, exhausted, and let himself be carried down the hall towards the waiting elevator, realizing ruefully that this was probably the only time he would ever get to use it.

Downstairs, the plant doctor ordered that he be taken to the hospital where they would be bet­

The Angle, Vol. 1975, Iss. 1 [1975], Art. 5

"Like shit." He walked past them and lit a cigarette. Smoke floated past Harriet’s nose.

"Manny," she squawked shrilly, "What’s wrong with you? You didn’t do a damn thing all morning. I saw you. How many times have I told you, get your work done in the morning and you won’t have to rush in the afternoon."

"Haven’t seen you breaking any records, Harriet," Manny retorted.

"Wait’ll they fire you! Then you’ll be sorry!" She climbed off the stool and it creaked.

"Wish they would," Manny said. The whistle blew and Wes returned, so he started working again. He heard Wes pick up a pan of parts and bring them to the coloring and acid tanks. A moment later he came back.

"Damn acid isn’t draining. I thought they were gonna un­

glue those drains this week. It was slow yesterday, but today it’s not draining at all."

"Damn Harry!" Manny picked up a towel and dried his sweaty face. The thermometer read 105 now and he could feel every stifling degree. “Told him about it two weeks ago, when the stuff first started clogging. And we reminded him last week and again Monday. The hell with them. Let’s go see what’s clogging the damn thing. Maybe we can pump it out ourselves.”

"If we don’t, we’ll never get those parts out on time. Can’t walk in a puddle of acid. I’ll go find a pump."

"Wait’ll I see if I can figure out what’s clogging it. We might need the big pump, and we’ll have to get a hold of maintenance for that."

"Great! We’ll be stuck with a plugged drain for a week at least." Manny grunted and bent over the drain. “Gimme some gloves, Wes. Gonna take this cover off. There’s a lotta junk in it.”

Wes walked to a battered wooden cupboard and stood on tiptoe to reach up to the top. By jumping into the air, he managed to grab a blackened yellow pair of gloves and pluck them off the top.

"Try out for the Olympics," Manny suggested, grinning. Wes was only five-foot-three and didn’t like being teased about it. He threw the gloves at Manny but Manny caught them before they could hit him in the face. He slid his hands into them and prodded his fingers under the edges of the drain cover. It wouldn’t budge at first so he tugged harder. Wes stood over to the side looking on. "Want some help?"

"No," Manny grunted. "It’s coming."

Suddenly the lid gave under his grip and flew off as a spray of liquid forced it upward. The spray caught Manny full in the face. He spat the words out. It was something he’d always wanted to say, Harry looked away, trying to hide the fear and revulsion in his face. Everyone was staring at him, and face flushed, he retreated down the ramp. “Get him to first aid," he repeated, "I’ll be down in a minute."
happened. "Tell her I'm okay," he added weakly. Wes nodded, trying hard not to show how Manny's raw, red face horrified him.

In a sweat, half-asleep, he woke in the midst of a nightmare. A baby wailed in the darkness. "Karen?" he cried out helplessly. He wanted to pick her up and comfort her, but was afraid he would burn her, his hands were so hot.

A nurse stuck her head in the doorway. "You want something?"

"No," he said, realizing where he was. "Go to sleep now," he said. "I'm still pretty mad, Manny. Harry hardly shows his face lately. Finally cleaned the drain out."

"Sure," Manny said, "they always fix things after something happens. When's the meeting?"

"Day after tomorrow. I'll be in."

"Thanks, Wes. Tell everybody I appreciated their coming in yesterday." Wes grinned. "Just wanted to see how ugly you looked, that's all."

"Up yours. My wife thinks I look sexy."

Wes laughed. "That's 'cause you keep covering up your face with bandages. He picked up his lunch pail and opened the door. "Here comes Katie now. See ya, Sexy." He held the door for Katie and went out.

"Sexy?" Katie settled herself on the side of the bed.

"You do think I am, don'tcha?" He smiled at her, hooking one arm carefully around part of her waist. "They're gonna change the bandages again, Wanne watch?"

"I did it before without faintin', didn't I? You're lucky you didn't go blind, How d'ya feel, anyway?"

"Okay. They give me stuff."

"They fire your boss yet?"

"Harry? Not yet. But there's a meeting Thursday. Wes said everything's good." He poked her gently with his elbow. "How is she?"

"Careful, Manny! She kicked me today. I'm worried. What if she comes early? I wish you were home. I'm scared all by myself."

"Don't worry." He kissed her carefully. "I'll be home any day now."

On Thursday, he was watching a soap opera with Katie when Wes came in, sweaty and tired. Katie touched the "Off" button and they both sat waiting expectantly. Wes sat down heavily without looking at them and watched the cream-colored curtains fill with air, then deflate.

Manny eyed him impatiently. The pills were wearing off and he felt his skin beginning to burn. "For Chrissake, Wes, tell me what happened!"

"We had the safety meeting this afternoon," Wes said slowly. He turned his head and Manny saw the pain in his eyes. "They blamed it on you, Manny. They said you shouldn't've went over without a mask on. Harry got out of it without a scratch."

Manny shot up in the bed, swearing with the pain of his burns and his humiliation. "No! The goddamn bastards! I'll kill 'em! I'll kill 'em all!"

"They wouldn't even listen to us," Wes said. "We tried but they just laughed. There's nothin' we can do!"

"It's not fair," Katie quavered. Manny looked at her swollen stomach, at Wes's angry, helpless eyes, at the damned green hospital walls. The bed across the room was an empty box, an empty incubator... Back at the plant with bandaged hands he was trying to smash the smile off Harry's face and then, his whole body shaking, he put his head in Katie's arms and cried.