Brown Boxes

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Abstract

"HELLUVA life, isn’t it? Pick ’em up, set ’em down, but - - - - they keep coming down that damn chute.” Slim picked up another box from the long chute that fell from the top floor of the factory down to the box car where we were working...
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"HELLUVA life, isn't it? Pick 'em up, set 'em down, but they keep coming down that damn chute." Slim picked up another box from the long chute that fell from the top floor of the factory down to the box car where we were working.

"Yeah, pick 'em up, set 'em down, then stack 'em up again. A fine job they said, good working conditions, friendly fellow-workers, modern conveniences. Well, they can shove it." I lifted another box off the rollers on the chute and carried it into the box
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I let it drop on the row that Slim had started.

"Whatta you want—funny stories or handshakes every ten minutes?" Slim threw the ammunition box on top of the one I had just dropped and pulled out a sweat-stained pack of cigarettes. He extracted two, threw me one and lighted his.

"That's pretty good stuff they hand out." He touched the flame from the match to his cigarette and offered the light to me. Blowing out a fine stream of smoke he went on. "Yeah, good stuff. They gave it to me about six months ago."

"You been throwing these boxes that long?" I asked.

"It's good for the arms." He looked at his dirt-streaked arms.

"Maybe I'll fight Joe Louis next week."

"Another one coming down," Slim said.

I could hear the thin, whirling sound the rollers on the chute made as the box moved over them. "Maybe the damn thing will fall off," I offered.

"That's what they got engineers for, to see that they don't. The boxes go just right, ever'thing goes right. They add two and two and get four. You're two, I'm two, together we make four. It's simple."

"Real simple," I said. I felt licked.

Slim pulled up a box and sat down. His sweaty "T" shirt hung loose in front as he put his elbows on his knees. I sat down on the floor and let my back rest against the side of the box car.

"They're workin' slow in the sweat shop this morning," I said.

"Yeah."

"Tired?" I asked. "Big night, huh."

"I'm mighty tired." His voice was even and low. "I'm tired of watching these brown boxes comin' down that chute and listenin' to the wail they make. 'Minds me of a bunch of bawling kids in a nursery asking for attention, pressin' a guy in, always crowdin' yuh."

Another box started to sing as it sped over the iron rollers. It stopped with a short thud as it struck the other box on the rack at the end.

"When were you ever in a nursery?" I asked. "The closest you ever got was when you walked by one." I hoped he'd come back on that one. I'd worked with Slim for about a month now, and we kept a good argument going to break the monotony. He
didn’t snap back, just looked at the floor, and his voice was easy and quiet.

“These damn boxes start a man thinking. I musta put ten thousand of ’em in box cars. They come down that chute one after another, all the same, brown and warm and heavy. You pick ’em up and stack ’em and send ’em down the track. They don’t know where they’re going or why. Boxes don’t hafta think.”

“Where’d you work, ’fore you come here, Slim?”

“On a farm in Kansas,” he answered. “ Raised wheat, lotta wheat, lotta wheat in Kansas.”

“How’d you like farming, Slim? I ain’t never been on a farm. Hard work, is it?”

“Yeah, it’s hard work,” he said. “ ’Cept in the winter when the snow lies on the ground. It ain’t like city snow. It’s white and clean and crunches when you walk on it. Farm’s a nice place in the winter.”

Two more boxes came down. You can tell there’s two ’cause you get two thuds when they hit.

“How’d you come to work on a farm?” I asked.

“I was born on a farm. Seem funny, me being born on a farm?”

“You don’t remind me of a farm, not the smooth way you handle that waitress at Pete’s. Been keepin’ you warm, Slim?”

Another box whirled down and Slim waited for it to hit before he answered.

“She keeps me warm.”

“You must be sick,” I said. “You ain’t acting right at all. If you wanta lay off, go ahead. I can handle this for . . .”

“I ain’t sick.” He lifted his head, and I could see his eyes. He looked like a man who was thinking hard. “No, I ain’t sick. I just keep thinkin’ of that farm and the way the hills roll over each other. It gets lonely on a farm, but it gets lonely even when you got all the people in the world right around you. ’Cept it’s a different kind of lonely feeling on a farm—a man gets lonely ’cause he wants to share his feelings. You feel alive, even if the dust is chokin’ yuh and yuh can’t hold a straight furrow ’cause yuh can’t see the ground. A man feels alive on a farm.”

He stopped talking and a drop of sweat rolled down his nose and dropped off into the dust on the floor.

“A man could get to feelin’ like one of those brown boxes after a while. I’d hate to begin to feel like. . .”
"What the hell do you think this is, the noon hour?" The voice boomed into the car and I jumped up. I knew who it was. The flat, dark face of Carl, the foreman, appeared, as he pulled himself up into the box car.

"Well," he said. "You guys on a strike or sumpthing? There's enough boxes piled up on that rack to start a small ammunition dump." He waved a hand at the chute. "If you jokers haven't got enough to do I could hook another chute onto this car." He directed his words at Slim, who sat looking up at him.

"Well," he said to Slim.

"I was thinking," Slim said.

"Oh, you were thinking. We pay you for thinking, all right. Look, we got lotsa guys that think—you stack boxes. What the hell were you thinking about? It's late for spring fever."

"You go to hell."

"What did you say?" I could see the blood rush to Carl's face.

"I said, you go to hell." Slim got up off the box.

"Why, damn you, who do you think you are? You've been loafing for the last week. This is no old people's home. Here you work or else."

"I just quit. Now you got your 'or else.' Is there anything else you want?"

"Why, you damn loafer, I'll . . ." Carl shut his mouth tight, as he caught the movement of Slim's right shoulder. He backed up fast.

"You're fired, though. Get your money and get out. If it's trouble you want I got some boys outside who can . . ."

"Shut up, I'm leaving now." Slim turned to me and stuck out his big right paw. I could feel its roughness and strength as he gripped mine.

"So long," he said. "Too bad you ain't never been on a farm."

He walked past Carl who carefully watched him but said nothing. Slim dropped out of the door of the car and headed for the main office. Carl turned toward me.

"Well," he said. "You wanta quit too?"

I wanted to say the words Slim had used but they stuck in my throat.

"No," I said. "I'll get those boxes off the rack. I've never been on a farm."