Punch Card

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Abstract

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Harold walked briskly down the long corridor. His regular and clearly enunciated footsteps tick-tocked ahead and behind him. The sound rebounded from the concrete floor and walls; institutional gray, easily cared for; which provided the necessary hygienic environment for the several thousand humans who lived there. The echoes of his walk were broken only by his passage at regular intervals past the doors of small rooms on either side of the corridor; broken slightly by the closed locked doors and more by an occasional open one. He walked on. He was looking for the room of the section chief and was confident of finding it.

Harold was confident of everything. He was one of the young men, numerous in themselves but only a fraction of the general population, who had been hard-working and bright enough to earn an admission to The University.

As he walked, Harold checked his progress by the numbers on the doors he echoed past. From time to time he read the computer punch card in his hand by the not-quite-adequate light from the domed ceiling almost as if to reassure himself of the certainty and sanctity of belonging to The University.
Harold stopped at the door of the chief of the section. He looked once at his punch card, then knocked and entered. He gave the section chief his card and stood quietly, feet together and hands at his sides, while the chief placed the card in a small computer-register. The chief checked out two sheets, two blankets, a room key, and a pillowcase to Harold, registered on the machine with the punch card, and gave him directions to his room. He returned Harold’s card after looking at it curiously a moment and sent him off.

The trip to this room had begun two days ago at a rail station in Harold’s home city where he had said goodbye to his parents. The University had a firm policy against parents arriving with students. It caused unnecessary use of transport facilities and the nuisance of emotional separation scenes. The process of maturation was well-conducted by The University without tiresome interference from parents who were a reminder of a part of each student’s life that was too sentimental for his own good.

When Harold had arrived at the small city near The University, he had waited for the shuttle bus to the grounds proper to fill. The bus was a dull gray utility vehicle with vertical guard rails over the windows. It was driven by a stolidly competent man of about fifty who wore a gray uniform with a black tie tucked into his shirt. After the bus had filled and begun the run to The University, the passengers had unanimously gazed out at the monotonous bulges of the countryside. Harold had found the guard rails annoying but supposed they were necessary for passenger safety. When the bus had passed through the alternating strips of plowed, smoothed, earth and thick brush which formed the only fence around the school grounds, the passengers had gotten their first sight of The University. It had been an impressive thing to see for all of them, even for the driver who knew it well.

The University lay in three sections. The bus entered from the highway, turning north toward the center section which held the academic and administrative buildings. The other two sections were opposite duplicates of each other, like left and right gloves. These were the women’s and men’s dormitories, on the east and west respectively. They were
laid out in neat and regular patterns of long central sections with wings spurting out at right angles. The dormitories were seven stories high and designed for easy expansion as needed. Each had its own exercise yard in a center open area. The buildings were all connected with sidewalks running in straight lines and at angles to each other, ninety and forty-five and sixty degrees, following the lines of the shortest student trip between buildings. There were no curves to whirl and sweep across the slopes or through the groves of trees to distract one from the paths leading to knowledge.

After getting settled in his room, Harold looked at his map and walked across the campus to The University book store where he selected and chose for this course or that one, checking books and lab equipment off against list and list. The articles he took were credited to his punch card at the checkout stand. He carried them with effort and reverence back to his room and put them away on the assigned shelves. Then he went to the dormitory dining hall and ate a nourishing meal which had a comfortable tastelessness to it.

The next day was the first day of classes. Harold awoke confident and the day was one of the best of the fall style. He breakfasted after showing his punch card to the monitor at the cafeteria line and gathered his textbooks and notebooks, pencil and pen, his slide rule and other machinery. Then he walked a long last mile of corridor to his first class still carrying his card because it was required for identification whenever needed at The University.

A glass-cased bulletin board held a notice stating that the first meeting of all sections of that class would be held in room 220 and teacher and room assignments would be made there. Harold lost his way once and was a little late in getting to the assembly room. When he arrived, there already was a sizeable group of students waiting.

Just as he entered, a short, neatly dressed man who was partially bald rapped on a lectern for attention with the aggressive air of some men who lose their hair. As a result, his entrance caused some stir. The group already there dropped their attention from the short man and turned as one head on a single neck of one organism to look at him. The group took an expressionless inventory of him as the heads turned;
They just looked one moment, no more, at this one who came late, who disrupted and flouted the pattern. Then turned back to the short man again, click!

The short man himself did not differ basically in his reaction, only in being authoritative and assured. Click! Look. Click!

As the short man turned his gaze downwards to the papers and cards on the lectern in front of him, Harold, who had awakened confident, took the seat closest to himself and waited, holding safely to his books. The short man called off names as though he were picking them up, examining them, holding them before the group for its response just as he picked up, examined, and held the cards in his hand. After each name and response, the group looked comfortably at itself and at the short man. As he clattered the cards into neatness preparatory to clamping them together and taking up some other material, he beamed at the students and asked offhandedly,

"Is there any one whose name I did not call?"
"Yes, sir."

There was suspension of all animation. The student who answered was not conspicuous and he did not have the look of one who makes trouble, either by intention or by accident. He was actually quite alert in appearance. Seemingly he was one who would fit in quite well with the scheme of things. Harold was all of these.

"What is your name?"
"Harold, sir."
"Why isn’t there a card for you?"
"I don’t know, sir. I... I have my master punch card here... I don’t..."
"Go to room 1, Main Hall."

Harold picked up his books and started toward the door. One of his books slipped out of his hand and fell on the floor with a flat, unnaturally loud smack. He turned when he stooped to pick it up and said, looking at the group and at the short man,

"I have my card right here... right here. In my pocket. Here..."
"Room 1."
He walked down a long corridor. His footsteps echoed regularly ahead and behind him. He passed doors with small glass panels in them through which he could see classes in session, where rapt student gazes were fixed on brilliant presentations by learned, kindly, teachers. It wasn't right! He had worked hard; he should be in there with the rest. Somebody had made a mistake. He had his card; it was the ultimate authority for University attendance. Didn't it register you for a room And pay for books? And meals? The short man had misplaced or lost Harold's card.

The people in room 1 would know what to do about this. They probably would just make a phone call. Then he would be all right. His footsteps echoed louder now and closer together. It all would turn out to be some kind of mistake and somebody would be in a lot of trouble for it. Now his sweater was damp under the arms and his books were hard to hold, more slippery than they should be in their plastic covers. It was a good distance to room 1. It would probably be better if he got there quickly. That would be proof of his blamelessness. Now it was of terrible importance to Harold to get to room 1. The short man might get there before.

He began to run.

The Hearse Driver

by Neil Howard

Old man, bent and odorous,
Shuffle a weary walk
Down the corridors of age.
Try to remember names
Of faces, add faces to names,
Then accept the gift of senility.
You who never had youth but
Only dreams and forgotten
Nightmares—wait here
With hands clasped in rigid
Anticipation of release.
I will return for you,
Soon.