Incident in Black and White

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in Black and White

HE FOLDED the time schedule in half and then in half again, jammed it into a hip pocket and stepped wearily through the doorway into the night. Humid summer air pressed heavily along rails that swarmed off into blackness; his feet moved automatically, feeling their way over memorized rails and ties, his mind growing fuzzy. He sensed the clatter and crash from within the round house dim as he plodded in a tight, dark capsule across the railroad yard, seeing only a vague circle of rails around him, the red and green signal lamps that marked switches punctuating the night. From the west end came the rumble and whir of Diesels as they fumbled among box cars rank with cattle and sheep. He drew his mind back through the night to the crunch of gravel beneath his shoes and looked ahead to the white blotch of light that was the yard office building. As he walked the square brick building shuddered forward from the darkness and assumed a twisting, shifting shape against the night. His shoulders swung loosely as he stepped over the outline of a rail and he felt the wetness of his shirt drawn across his neck. A pungent, sweaty odor clung in his nostrils, and he clenched at his shirt in back and pulled it out from his skin, feeling the moisture grow cold along his spine. As he glanced over his shoulder the round house began to dissolve. It vanished, leaving the dusky glow of its windows suspended in nothing, the earth and the air fused in featureless blackness. His mind drifted ahead to the yard office, to the dank, foul clerks in the bright, close room, their feet propped up on desks as they waited noisily for cattle and fruit to come thundering down the main track—mindlessly snorting and chuckling through obscene stories. Perhaps he loathed them; he was no longer sure.
Their minds were stagnant and shallow; they were mired to the earth and did not realize, had never thought to struggle. They would live, reproduce, grow old, die and would be replaced by others like them—having seen nothing, thought nothing, said nothing. They would lie beneath life, beneath grass, carrying out the ancient routine of those who had gone before them and of those who would follow—a marble marker their only achievement. Yet he understood somehow and was terrified; there was a power in their stagnation, a blind, ruthless cunning—an animal strength that pulled all they touched down with them.

He had looked upward and imagined that the dark, roiled clouds had descended and thickened. The full moon’s outline, discernible but a short time before, had given way to diffuse, muddy glow. His toe caught on the last rail and he lurched helplessly forward, his bare elbows skidding over the gravel. He lay still and closed his eyes slowly, suddenly not wanting to rise. His elbows hurt. The pain was acute. They were probably bleeding. But he knew that he could fall no further. There was a panic; if he did not soothe his wounds, if he did not touch them, he might forget the pain and never care to rise again. He would lie silently, a hollow shell against the earth.

But a thumb of noise jutted forward from the distant mumble and whirl of the West end, sending faint vibrations along the ground and through his body. He turned his head and watched the Diesel rumbling toward him, its Cyclops-eye unfolding the rails before it, then rose indecisively and continued on to the yard office, dabbing at his elbows with a handkerchief. He hesitated but did not look back, his fingers loosely grasping the door knob, and followed the engine as it screeched around a gentle curve in the rails... then thundered away diagonally across the yard. The brass knob turned easily, its spring grown weak under the wrench of many hands, and he went in.

The yard master was slumped in his swivel chair, his thick, lumpy trunk bulging against the arm rests, staring emptily across the desk at a calendar on the wall. Michele entered the tiny closet of an office and shut the door behind
The yard master jerked his head around and looked dully at him from beneath bushy brows. "Oh," and he frowned faintly at having been startled. "Well, when do they expect the first one from the East?" He grabbed at the frayed stub of his cigar and twiddled it between meaty fingers.

Michele unfolded the schedule and walked over to the desk, handed the sheet to him and thrust his hands into hip-pockets. "According to this list, it should come in at about three-thirty, but it was delayed just outside of Chicago and probably won't get here until five or so."

"Oh, dammit, that's going to throw everything off." He dashed the cigar furiously to the floor and stamped on it. "The others will be on time, won't they?" He glanced up from the schedule, his massive forehead furrowed along ancient creases.

"Yes, the others will be on time."

His forehead relaxed and the anger drained from his eyes. Michele watched the man's face settle, the taut muscles along his jaw sinking beneath puffy flesh. He held the schedule out to Michele. As the boy reached forward an elbow brushed lightly against his shirt and left a smudge of blood. The man noticed the stain and chuckled quietly when he saw the raw elbow. "Now what happened there," he said gently, motioning at the crimson flesh.

Michele turned his elbows inward and looked down at them. "Nothing much; just tripped over a rail."

"Looks kind of nasty to me. Better go rinse off the dirt. Scrapes like that become infected easily."

"Yeah, I guess I'd better. I didn't know it was that bad. Doesn't hurt much, really."

"No, if they're bad enough they don't hurt much."

Michele smiled awkwardly and took the schedule, feeling suddenly a deep sympathy for the man. He had watched him before, had seen how he stared pathetically at the calendar, marking off days. Perhaps he had once loathed the cramped minds around him; perhaps he had struggled against them. Michele recalled the photograph of a young man that the yard master carried in his wallet, the young man who had wanted to go to college, the young man with
the alert, sensitive face who had wanted to study medicine, but hadn't the money, the young man in the greying yard master's wallet who found a job as a messenger boy, his eyes fixed upon an aspiration... but grew old and became blind.

He turned quickly and went out into the hall, quietly shutting the door behind him. The yard master glanced at his watch and looked up at the calendar, an old habit from which all meaning had long since vanished.

The shouting and coarse laughter waxed stronger as Michele walked along the hall toward the main office, his foot-steps rising in hollow rhythms from the floor boards. As he turned the bend in the corridor, there came a shrill shout from within the main office. A stout, muscular clerk dashed through the door, yelling and waving a pornographic folder above his head, and stumbled across the hall into the Men's Room. Another came rushing after him. "Hey, you dirty bastard! Where ya going with my pictures?" He flung himself against the swinging door and plummeted in.

Michele had started back and was standing motionless at the bend in the corridor, listening to the shuffling and epithets from the Men's Room. He walked cautiously down the hall and entered the main office through a door that was never closed. Pete, at the far side of the room, was absorbed in telling the office stories of his conquests in St. Louis. The clerks, slouched in swivel chairs, their feet propped upon desks strewn with comic books, nodded and snickered in approbation. Michele picked his way self-consciously between the desks and tossed the schedule before Pete; he took a pencil from his shirt pocket and corrected the arrival time of the first train, forcing his mind beyond the room, outward into silent darkness. He must not listen to them or see them or admit that they existed. If he allowed himself to accept them, they would drag him down until they were all and he forgot all else. He thought of the yard master in his constricted office — sitting in silence behind a perpetually closed door; in silence now, but too late for it to matter.

Pete's thin, distant voice itched in Michele's ears — the rasp of insects gnawing dry, brittle bones, and he could not
hold it out. "Then there was this tall, red-headed bitch..." Michele turned to leave. "Where ya goin', pal?"

"What? Oh, I've got to go rinse the dirt from my elbows. I skinned them on the way over here."

Pete scanned him momentarily, his parted lips suggesting a sneer. "Come on and sit down for awhile. You should join our little group more often."

Michele squirmed inwardly. "Well, I really should rinse..." A sharp, quick explosion interrupted him. The clerks jerked their heads around and stared through the north wall—mentally scanning the tangled skein of the Harlem district that clung along the yard. There was another, somewhat near and louder. The clerks grinned at one another. Pete jumped up and ran past him. "They're at it again," he shouted hungrily and disappeared through the door way. The clerks bleated and followed close behind.

Michele stood bewildered in the center of the room, suddenly afraid but not knowing precisely why. He walked uncertainly from the office, down the corridor and out into the yard. The clerks had lined the wire-mesh, barb-top fence between the worlds—passing popcorn, pointing loudly through the fence and across the dust street that cringed along it at a dump shack with drawn shades and dim light within. A crowd of Negroes, outlined in the crimson glow of a nearby tavern beer sign, milled about in front of the house. They were silent and moved slowly, aimlessly. Michele came up behind Pete, his eyes following the churning of the crowd.

A siren whined in the distance. Moments later a squad car Shouldered its way into the world of crimson glow, raising a haze of dust as the driver accented urgency with the brakes. Dark, featureless men jumped mechanically from it, slamming the doors with finality. They rushed into the restless mob and commanded their way through. "Everyone go home! We'll take care of this! Everyone go home!" And they instinctively registered irritation that "people are always gettin' outta line." The dark shroud murmured and unravelled into tight knots, exposing a

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Art Section

We are bringing to the reader another form of art via the medium of printing. The printed word and the printed picture both being a form of communication are brought to the reader in one magazine.

Fred Kammeier’s “Dancing Bears” is a good example of abstract art achieved by using a pallet knife for texture effect.

“Land of the Free, Home of the Brave” by Ron Baker is a pictorial which is explained by the artist.

Art Johnson’s “Follow the Leader” is an interesting exercise in line symbolism that tells a complete story in itself.

A landscape by Pat Martenson employs spacial grouping to achieve a subdued mood.
Composition, balance, harmony and many other design elements are essential to good art. But I believe good art must also communicate. This communication need not be obvious nor intended as such but it must exist for the observer.

Ron Baker,
One of the most important sketch techniques is that of exaggerating the light and the dark spaces done on the cover and in this scene.
sprawled figure lying face-down in a thick pool of its blood.

A disheveled woman in a loose robe, shrieking and sobbing at the body floating in illusive neon shadow, was hustled down the rickety porch steps and into a swell of hands reaching to comfort. And the clerks filed through her chained brain, taking notes, leering at the sores... then they were back at the fence and forgot. The squad car bore her away from their eyes and into others, its desolate siren outbidding her hysterical sobbing.

A long white ambulance, its siren dying, glided in behind it. White, featureless men jumped mechanically from it, examined the corpse, lifted it on to a stretcher, and bore it away to the solemn ritual and to the notoriety of the front page. And the black and white routine sailed off to another edition.

Pete, his finger desperately clutching the mesh, wild-eyed face pushed up against it, called to a short, frail Negro who had lingered in conversation and was now alone and about to go his way. He had taken several steps and halted hesitantly, then walked, limping slightly, to the fence.

“What happened over there?” excitedly.

“Guess she got fed up with men comin’ in every night,” vaguely, nervously. “Guess when this guy came, she went kinda crazy. Shot ’um in the stomach inside the house and then shot ’um in the head when he tried to get away.”

Pete turned his head, his face contorted in a smirk he wanted everyone to see, and whispered something to a clerk beside him.

“Just outta high school, I guess,” and he shook his head solemnly, engrossed in seeming sad. His voice became confidential and secretive, and he moved closer to the fence to hold the clerks’ attention. “Guess her father’s drunk alla time. Told ’er she gotta git and make ’er own way. Guess she wanted to be a secretary or somethin’ but couldn’t get no job ’cause she’s colored.” And he had turned white and had blond hair because he was talking about “them” to the white clerk with the blond hair and he was different from “them.” But the clerks were finished with him and turned away to talk amongst themselves and forgot about him, and
then the clerks were "them" and he went limping down the dust street.

The clerks were returning to the yard office, laughing and shouting to one another. Pete turned and leered at Michele, his rough, craggy face drawn into an ugly grin. "Goddam niggers live like savages," and he chuckled to himself. "Sure give it to 'im, didn't she?" His eyes narrowed viciously. "Why, that whole end's rotten with whores. Government should crate 'em up and send 'em back where they belong."

Michele studied his savage eyes, disbelieving the animal cruelty he saw there. He tilted his head back in disgust and followed the dingy clouds' turbulent boiling across the moon, struggling not to hear, fighting to rise from the filth he felt gushing upward in the well of his mind.

Pete grunted in amusement. "Whatsa matter, pal? Stomach weak? Better git use 'ta it. Happens all the time." He turned noisily on the gravel and chuckled as he walked toward the yard office.

Michele shut his eyes tightly and felt his heart leaping in its cage. His body sagged feebly. He wanted to rush away into the gentle blackness — away from everything, everyone, but he was weary and could not move. Faint images of the Negro prostitute, of the dulled, thick yard master fluttered in his closed eyes — then blurred and sank as silt sifted down. It was no longer important; he could not struggle more. Thin tendrils of thoughts blundered aimlessly through the murk of his brain. There was nothing; he was nowhere. He felt the dead, unreal people crowding in and pressing him downward... And he could not move.

—Dennis Ruffcorn, Ex. '56