

The Fateful Night

Six point four, six point four! The words rushed down the line at the speed of sound, generating a wave of ecstatic roars. The shouting meant that the shift would end early, after six hours and twenty-four minutes, instead of lasting the full ten hours. Everybody would be able to go home at twenty-four minutes past midnight, rather than four in the morning. Liberated from the line three and a half hours early! Hooray!

“Oh oh,” said experienced Fordmates, “there are some nasty disasters in the offing. There’ll be plenty of long faces tomorrow. There’ll be hangovers and soul-searching.” Those ones were cheering too, because going home early is nothing to sneer at, but not because they’d be heading home. They were too experienced to make that mistake. They would go to the Union hall for a beer or two, maybe a game of poker. In that sanctuary, they would survive any potential calamity, and head home when it would be safe, say about half past three. It seldom happened that a shift was shortened by as much as three and a half hours. Maybe some key car parts were missing, maybe the line went down for major repair, maybe somebody spilled a dangerous chemical. Who cares, what counts is that everybody can go home.

The guys cheering loudest knew nothing. They had no idea. Naive hearts, they hadn’t yet come home to find their bedroom empty, or else containing one surplus chap. The seasoned ones, those who had, or who had heard of such accidents, knew that an early send-off had probably caused more divorces than any other single reason. Mind you, at Ford, as at any other automotive plant, the rate of divorce was already quite high, well above the average for the general population. Yes, cheating on a partner was the banal reason, though participants had always found the experience much more existential than banal. Cheating looks banal in all kinds of comedies and farces. In real life, cheating

tends to end in tragedy, if occasionally with a touch of comedy. For most Ford guys and their wives or girlfriends, infidelity was anything but banal.

Of course, such situations were hard to keep secret. Sooner or later the lid would blow off and cause discussion and evaluation on the line. Some situations became part of line lore. Take the case of John who found his wife *in flagrante* with some guy, and the sight drove his adrenaline level so high that he grabbed the guy, lifted him almost over his head, and was preparing to throw him through the patio door, but, at the last moment, the terrified wife managed to slide the door open, so the guy flew out without crashing through glass. In the darkness, it was possible to catch a glimpse of his naked butt disappearing over a hedge into the neighbour's backyard. He didn't see his clothes and boots following him. It was not known how he made it home without them. The wife was so overawed by her man's feat that she suddenly saw him in a completely new light and regarded him anew, with genuine admiration, respect, and a hot surge of love. Which didn't help her one bit, because in the next moment she herself was flung out onto the patio. John closed and locked the door, had couple of beers to dilute his adrenaline, and went to bed. The wife was outside until morning. Luckily for her, it was May, and even though she was wearing only a bracelet and a wedding ring, she paid for her adventure with just a runny nose and a serious cold. John had so much grown up in his own estimation that he was magnanimous in the end. She understood, once and for all, that his adrenaline was no laughing matter, nothing to mess around with. In their case, the episode actually strengthened their marriage. They're still together.

Such a positive outcome was not the result for Ernie. During his first ten years on the line, he managed to accumulate a permanently sore back, tendinitis in his elbow, and the early stages of carpal tunnel syndrome. Unfortunately, his wife liked unusual, even acrobatic positions in their love making, while his preferred position was lying on his back and letting her do the work. What was she to do?

What was he to do? Well, she found a solution, a guy who wasn't physically damaged because he didn't work at all, got by on welfare. Ernie managed to throw the guy through the door despite his sore back. Literally. Only the hinges and some splinters of wood were left in place on the frame. A few minutes later a suitcase containing his wife's things went out through the same hole. Ernie rejected all apology, every attempt at reconciliation, saying, over and over: "I grant you what you long for. Enjoy your life with the welfare bum."

A similarly embarrassing situation held a surprising twist for Ted. He used to be a shy guy who hadn't quite completed his journey from adolescence to full manhood. He felt that everyone he met was better looking, smarter, stronger, more decisive than him. He felt that he should probably apologize right and left, while in company, just for existing. When he became a Fordmate, the magic of the position earned him a girlfriend, but, alas, he couldn't be at home to entertain her as long and as well as she would have liked, so she had to find an additional boyfriend. For the previous three years Ted had worked on installing brake rotors. Grab a couple of rotors, one in each hand, bring them to the frame with a swinging move, install one, then the other. Around twenty-five pounds to be lifted every minute. Three years of that had built him up. Now, in his own bedroom, he found himself standing face to face with a naked man a couple of inches taller than himself. Before taking the job at Ford, Ted would have tried fighting with words. Now words didn't come, and he didn't search for any. Repeating the swinging motion that over the years had turned his muscles into steel, he swung. The stranger went down for the count and did not regain consciousness until after he was dragged out and left lying in the hallway. Couple of inches taller, but a softie. When he woke up, his clothes were in a heap nearby, all but his socks and shoes. His car keys were also missing. He had to walk home barefoot. In November. For the longest time, Ted basked in the memory of dispatching the intruder with a single punch. He lost

his girlfriend that night, but became a man. Since then, he hasn't been lacking in girlfriends. Indeed, now he can choose.

It was not known by males on the line if this kind of mishap also occurred to their female colleagues. Probably yes, such is human nature. But the women are more secretive, and if they share similar humiliations at all, then it's only among themselves. Their stories haven't yet made it into Fordlore.

It must be quite interesting out in the streets on nights like those just described. A minor Halloween with strange figures sneaking along walls, crouching in shadows, not daring to walk on sidewalks, often making their way through backyards only, since they're naked, or insufficiently dressed, nursing a dripping, bloody nose or swaying at each step after a heavy hit in the head or hobbling after a few kicks in the butt or sore all over after a thorough thrashing. More than one such philanderer had to sneak right across town: plenty of time to let his passion cool off, plenty of time to sort out what behaviour is appropriate and what is over the line. Ford workers are proud folks. They are often hit-happy, and not to be messed with when physical prowess is called for. It might be a good idea for plant officials to give the police early notice, on early shut-down nights, that a few weird individuals might be on the loose, some of them guilty of indecent exposure in public places.

Some of the unfaithful women blamed the Ford plant for their indiscretions. To some degree, that might have been justified. To have a husband leave for work at six in the morning and come back at six in the evening (the other way around during night shift), and for that man to need at least eight hours of good sleep to replenish his energies so as to be able to keep on working – that was not a schedule to be envied. When such situations persist for six or eight years, marital and fatherly duties may be shortchanged. Time is lacking, energy is lacking. After ten hours on the line, few Dads feel like going for a skate or playing basketball with the kids. Of course, many husbands are distressed that they

can't do better. Who wants to just vegetate next to beloved wives wanting to live life to the full? Of course, those men feel like spoilsports.

They all knew they had to be very frugal when it came to spending their energy, as every last drop was necessary for long-term success on the line. The line, after all, was what grounded the family. The men had deep knowledge of how merciless the line was in its demands. They more or less had to accept its influence on their home lives. Not having experienced the line themselves, their wives lacked this knowledge. Even when they had enough imagination to understand what kind of beast the line was, they were likely to reject any notion that it should be allowed to reach into their family. They often accepted the weekly paycheck as a given, but rejected the domestic cost of that check, arguing that Ford had hired their man for work, and nothing but work, and had no business reaching out into their household. An unpleasant, almost a no-win situation. Some wives succumbed to the pressure early, some later, though most managed to make the best of a difficult situation.

There was one wife who never let her man forget how foolish, even guilty, he was to be working for Ford. She complained that Ford left him no energy to entertain her, that he was falling asleep at night instead of frolicking with her till morning, as he used to do pre-Ford, that he didn't want to pedal with her on a Saturday bike ride of a hundred kilometres, and, generally, that he was not as much fun as he used to be. Beating him up with Ford was her obsession. She served him a Ford reproach with every meal, every walk, every episode of lovemaking, every cinema trip. Every time he left for work, she reminded him that, once again, once more, he was leaving her alone. No wonder the fellow was confused, and unable to figure out what his wife was thinking when he discovered a naked man in his bedroom who looked somewhat familiar. In fact, the man sharing his wife's embrace was another Fordmate, but from the opposite shift. Sometimes, Fate chooses strange pathways.

During one fateful night, the one we have come to now, there was a man who wanted to know, one way or another, for sure, how things stood. His name was Jordan. He was the kind of man who punches first, and only then asks what's going on. He was hotter by nature than most, took a more radical view of life, was more than a little bitten by jealousy. Craving a bit of excitement, he often went to a bar – not to drink, but to work as a bouncer. On three Saturday nights, his General Foreman had appeared in his pub and joined him at a table. A few beers later he began flirting with Jordan's wife. He had a reputation as a ladies' man, and even though Jordan's wife hadn't seemed to return the flirtation, one could never be sure. And today, the flirter wasn't at work. Coincidence? Maybe. Jordan drove home slowly, passed his house with headlights turned off, found the General Foreman's car parked not far up the street. Jordan kept going, parked within sight of the car, turned off the engine, reclined his seat so the car would look empty, turned on the radio and lit a cigarette. He waited for about an hour, now knowing for sure. He smoked another cigarette to soothe his nerves and give his wife time to take a shower before he kicked her out, and then moved back to his own driveway.

As soon as the shift began the next day, a fascinating bit of rumour spread throughout final assembly with the speed of a bush fire: Jordan has brought a gun to work. He's going to shoot the General Foreman. No one ever knows the origin of such information, but this tidbit probably came from Jordan's buddy who works on line eight. Jordan had stopped there for a little chat on his way to the frame line. The word is that he patted his bulging pocket and said, "I'm gonna finish the bastard off." At least that's what the friend from line eight said later.

In a few minutes, nobody along all the lines was talking about anything other than the shooting of the General Foreman. In all this noise, would the shot be heard? When was it likely to happen? Would they stop the line afterwards? Will they let us go home again? The crew divided into two, more or less equal, sides. The more radical side was of the opinion that the General Foreman deserved to be

shot because he had poached where he should not have. You should leave married women alone, especially the wives of your subordinates. Besides, they argued, the General Foreman wouldn't be missed since he was a jerk who treated his workers as beasts of burden, yelled at them all the time like some drill sergeant. The more lenient side offered the opinion that, true, nobody would be sorry for him, but, after all, it's not right to shoot somebody... certainly not in the plant. Had Jordan shot the bastard on the spot, right in his own bed, an attorney could turn the shooting into a crime of passion, but this would look like premeditated murder, and it would be a shame to lose Jordan. According to them, the whole affair should be concluded with Jordan beating the shit out of the General Foreman, giving him a thrashing thorough enough to require long-term hospitalization, to be finished off with a mighty kick in the family jewels. With a steel-toed safety boot.

As minutes ticked by, the tension increased. Was that a shot? Yes? Not yet? I didn't hear anything. What break is Jordan on? Is he going to shoot the guy face to face, like in western movies, or from behind some big box? Face to face might still be interpreted as a crime of passion. Where is the General Foreman anyway? Has he shown up on the frame line yet? Is he avoiding that line at any cost, even if his absence were to stop the whole final assembly? Still nothing? has Jordan changed his mind? Damn it, man, don't leave us hanging, let's hear some bang bang.

Police! Police are here! The latest news sped along the lines. Two cops in uniform and full gear, and at least four plainclothes men. It looked like two of them might be concealing rifles under their coats. Quickly, but trying not to be conspicuous, they were moving towards the frame line, taking different aisles to surround Jordan. How did they learn about his intentions? Who called them? How did they know how to find Jordan's work-station? Would there be a shootout? Jordan was a tough guy, he wouldn't go down easily.

Of course, the police, uniformed or not, had no way of taking the line telegraph into account, not to mention express info delivery via forklift drivers. Everybody knew about them the moment they set foot inside the plant. Everybody had time to hide his beer or joint. If Jordan had wanted to, he'd have had plenty of time to sneak out through the back door. But he didn't hide. He kept on quietly working, just as if a bunch of policemen with live ammo in their guns were not closing in on him.

The tension was reaching unbearable levels. A shooting in the plant – now there's something new. Maybe even a shootout on the frame line. It would make front page news, get the plant talked about on TV. It would become a true legendary event. Now, everybody was on tenterhooks, waiting for the first shot. Everybody except Jordan. He was quietly, rhythmically working. Grab the brake caliper, carry it to the frame, position it and hand-start the bolts, tighten them with the gun hanging above. Go for the next caliper. No nervousness in his moves, no trembling in his fingers, no sweat on his brow. Innocence incarnate.

Finally, they had him surrounded. The two in uniform ran at him while the plainclothes men drew their guns to cover the charging cops. But before the police could reach Jordan to pacify him by clapping him in handcuffs, he turned, smiled, and raised his arms in a gesture of surrender, indicating that he had no weapon and no intent to resist. They took him down and handcuffed him anyway, and thoroughly searched him. They found no firearm, no weapon at all. The line stopped until the supervisor fetched a substitute for Jordan, who was led to the supervisor's office for questioning. The tension in the plant deflated like a punctured Zeppelin. The plainclothes men conducted a minute search of Jordan's work station, starting with a twenty-minute-long examination of his lunch box. Then they poured out all the boxes of bolts to make sure no gun was hidden underneath them. They removed several layers of calipers to empty that basket. They summoned a forklift guy to lift the palette bearing the caliper basket to make sure no handgun was taped beneath it. Having found nothing, they extended

their search in ever-widening circles. They interrogated more and more people. No, ever since the start of the shift, Jordan had been behaving quite normally, hadn't left the line for a second, was working the exact same way he always does. No, they'd seen no alcoholic beverage. Jordan wasn't one of those who fortified themselves with beer on the line. Anyway, this plant is supposed to be making cars, you're interfering with its smooth operation and threatening product quality. Stop your silly games and get lost.

In the meantime, the two uniformed cops were grilling Jordan in the office. An exhaustive search of his person had revealed nothing but a handkerchief, a pack of tobacco, a pipe, a small Swiss army knife, matches, car keys, and a wallet. That was all. No gun, no ammo. Yes, he bore a grudge against the General Foreman, who he suspected had tried to get into bed with his wife. No, he had no proof. If he had proof, he'd divorce her immediately, throw her into the bugger's arms, wish him the best of luck with her. No, he doesn't own a pistol, a revolver or any other firearm. He doesn't need one, either for self-defense or attack. What did he mean by that? "Simple. Look at that pipsqueak of a foreman – about 175 centimetres, eighty kilos after dinner and six beers, more fat than muscle. And look at me – 190 centimetres, a hundred kilos of nothing but muscle. The line trained those muscles. Take a look at those calipers, heft them. Even if the pipsqueak pumped iron in a fitness centre three times a week, he wouldn't be lifting as much as I do in a single shift. Do you really think I'd need a gun to deal with him? One blow on the top of his head with my open palm would drive him knee deep into this concrete floor. If I hit him with an uppercut, he'd crash into the ceiling before landing flat on the ground. And if I smashed him with a really serious right hook, he'd be sweeping this aisle all the way down to the end, then he'd be crashing through the wall. You'd have to resuscitate him out there in the parking lot. What would I need a gun for? Guns are trouble. I have a good helping hand at the end of a strong arm powered by a strong shoulder. So far, it's never failed me."

They grilled him for more than two hours. The same questions posed again and again produced the same answers. Jordan was indefatigable. After all, he was happy enough to sit and rest, take a break from work on the line. Finally, the police had to concede defeat. They had nothing, they'd failed. They had to apologize to Jordan, remove the handcuffs, release him. They'd been acting in good faith, on the basis of info they had received. From whom? They couldn't share that kind of confidential information. Perhaps somebody had played a prank on them, a practical joke that might have ended with real bullets flying. There are all kinds of people out there, you know. They'd be taking a closer look at their informer.

Two of the plainclothesmen kept Jordan under discreet surveillance for the balance of the shift, all the way until four in the morning, in case he did have a gun hidden somewhere and would go to retrieve it now. Nothing, nothing, nothing. At the end of the shift they had to close the case.

Jordan never spoke about what really happened that night, so scuttlebutt on the line again came up with two possible versions. Some believed the gun was imaginary from the get-go, a trick, a bluff to scare and intimidate the General Foreman. If that was so, the psychology worked marvelously well. The guy never again had another beer in Jordan's bar. As far as was known, he never again looked at Jordan's wife, even though she became available after Jordan divorced her. The other half, folks of a more romantic bent, sorry that the shooting hadn't occurred, claimed that the gun really had been brought into the plant, and that it was Jordan's wife, fearing for her paramour, who'd called the police. She knew Jordan's fists were graveyard lethal, so why the gun? Nobody could figure that out. But never mind who alerted the police, thanks to the system of early warning on the line, Jordan had plenty of time to slip the gun into the frame on which he was just installing a caliper, and in this way got rid of the gun by sending it on down the line. If that was what really happened, the romantics entertained the hope that the gun is now spending its days and nights in the frame of a police car.