

Working to Rule at American Motors: **An excerpt from Tino Scalici's fictional novel about American Motors**

When the foreman, Alan, doesn't respond to a grievance workers take things into their own hands.

I knew what was coming. Hell was coming.

—“We never responded to Alan and Sandy’s thing last Friday.”

Paul sipped his coffee, took a big stretch, and refocused his attention on my surly grin.

—“She file a grievance?” I asked.

—“Yep.”

—“And?”

—“Nothing.”

—“There’s a big fucking surprise. So it starts?”

He shrugged.

Everyone nods and smiles. Alan was about to have a very ugly day and he didn’t even know it yet.

The bell rang signaling the assembly line would roar to life in about thirty seconds. The first person I saw was Julie. She was primping in front of a mirror next to her job, pulling on locks of her hair, studying her profile, first the left side and then the right.

—“Hear about Sandy last Friday?” I asked.

—“Uh-huh. A motherfucker do that shit to me, he better watch his motherfuckin’ back, know what I’m sayin’?”

I knew. Julie was not a woman to be trifled with.

—“You look pale. Are you sick?” I asked.

—“I do feel a bit ill, now that you mention it.” She slammed her fist into the little call buzzer located above her job, signaling she needed to go to sick bay for some sort of medical treatment.

Alan walks up.

—“Morning Julie, whaddya got?”

—“Good morning, Alan. I think I’m going to throw up. I need a pass to sick bay.”

—“Are you shitting me?”

—“No sir.”

—“Three others are on their way down right now! Can it wait?”

Julie puked on his shoes, lifted her head and smiled. She ran her gloved hand across her lips to remove the little chunks of vomit still dangling from her teeth. She really does have a great smile.

—“Holy Mother of God!” I was making all manner of gesticulation. A little bundle of vomit, coffee and egg formed a bad obstruction in my throat.

Alan pressed the little button on his two-way radio to contact his superiors and housekeeping, all the while making spastic gestures himself. The smell was atrocious.

—“Oh my God! Oh my…” Alan couldn’t even finish his sentence. His ironclad intestinal fortitude broke expelling the contents of his stomach all over the concrete in front of me.

—“Jesus! Horg! Horg! Hoooooortrrrrrgggghhhh!”

—“Holy shit, Alan! Be a man for the love of God! I’m trying to work here; can you do that somewhere else? Get my union steward. I need to file a health and safety grievance,” I said.

He brought out a little white hanky from his shirt pocket to wipe his mouth. Still spastic, he began to walk back to the office. He looked confused and hurt and sick. This made me happy. I looked over to Sandy, who was smiling from ear to ear. This made her happy as well.

—“I’ll write you a pass. Just give me a minute.” Alan said. He threw up in his mouth.

I was inconsolable. I couldn’t even catch my breath or work or anything from the laughter.

—“Holy God! Julie, are you all right? Aren’t you going to do your job?”

—“I think there must be some sort of virus going around.” She smiled. “I ain’t working in all this puke.” She turned off the line and collected her things and walked over to the picnic table until

her pass was ready.

Through the corner of my eye, I could see Alan feverishly attempting to produce a pass in the blue glow radiating from his computer terminal. I noticed he still had his little white hanky pressed to his lips. He would look up at the line through the glass and then look back. The line and then back. He was barking into his radio. The pure and naked epileptic beauty of his wild arm, leg and head gestures was a thing to behold. He noticed the line was off and that Julie was at the picnic table. He shot up and threw open the door.

—“What are you *doing*?” He begged.

—“I ain’t working in all that shit; you can kiss my black ass.”

I could see the tension building in his jaw, as the muscles expanded and contracted with every second of lost production that passed. His superiors were screaming at him through his radio, confirming what we already knew. Alan was a *failure*. Nearly an hour has passed and only twenty-three units were built. Not good. He came over next to where I was working and pulled the little cord that hung overhead to start the line again.

—“What are you doing Alan? Think you might want to put a man on that operation before you turn the line on?” I asked.

—“I’ll call it in for repairs. Just do your job.” He said.

—“Ten-four, captain.” I smiled as he walked away. Actually, he didn’t walk. He ran. There was another stoppage down the line on break caliper install. Paul was the operator on break caliper install.

—“Whaddya got?” Alan cried as Paul was struggling with a caliper.

—“I can’t get this fuckin’ plunger loose. I need help! Here, grab this end and pull!” No luck. The line was still off as Paul went looking for a hammer that was locked up in the repair station. Alan stood there looking toward the ceiling for answers. There is no wisdom in the ceiling today.

—“You got a key for this fuckin’ thing?” Paul asked.

—“Fuck that caliper! Turn the line back on!” Alan was livid.

—“I need a key. I can’t fix the caliper without a hammer and I can’t get the hammer unless I have the key.” His eyes were wide and his grin magnificent as he reached out his hand to Alan. He was making “gimme” motions with his hands as Alan just stood there saucer-eyed.

Meanwhile, a replacement still hadn’t come to Julie’s operation. I couldn’t do my job without that first operation being completed. I turned off the line again. Paul and Alan were still chatting when I saw Paul motion over to me, again with that wonderful grin. Alan turned his eyes toward me, teeth clenched in a mad fury.

—“Hey guy, we need to get someone on that job *pronto*.” I said.

—“Tom is on his way, why, what’s up?” He asked as he pulled the little cord.

—“I’ve let a few units go.” I smiled.

—“How many?”

—“Thirteen.”

—“*Thirteen?*”

—“Uh-huh. You’re lucky I turned it off when I did.”

Resignation was setting in now. Maybe I should say something.

—“Maybe you’re just not cut out for management.” I smiled. He never even looked up at me.

—“There’s no shame in it. Watching people work and surfing the internet for ten hours a day has really done a number on you.”

Tom walked up with a cup of coffee in his hand.

—“How you doing, Boss?” Tom asked.

—“Will you *please* get on Julie’s job?”

—“Sure thing, Bubba- since you asked so nicely.”

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a little white package lying on the floor about six inches from where Alan was standing. At this point, he hadn’t noticed it as he was busy scanning up and down the line for the next catastrophe which was scheduled immediately. The line stopped with more angry chattering emanating from Alan’s radio.

—“I’m on my way over now,” he said as he walked down to where batteries are installed.

—“What’s up, Bubba?” Tom asked barely able to hide his grim satisfaction.

—“Another beautiful day at American Motor Company, living the dream, baby, living the dream.”

The line started again, but only for a moment or two.

—“You know why they call it the American Dream?” Tom asked.

—“No, why?”

—“Because you have to be asleep to believe it.”

The line went down. This time it was muffler install.

—“I would fix that muffler problem if I wasn’t tied down to this job,” Tom smilingly said to Alan who was in a near catatonic state, rubbing his temples and arguing with some invisible person.

Alan was talking with himself. He was going take it up the tailpipe for the rest of the day.

I picked up the little white package that was laying on the floor.

—“*Syrup of Ipecac- induces vomiting.*”

—“Holy shit!”

—“What is that stuff?”

—“It’s an emetic. It’s used to induce vomiting.”

Smiles all around.

—“Jesus, Mary and Joseph! Tom, whaddya got?” Alan asked.

—“I had to place a call to the rep.”

—“*Excuse me?*”

—“Yeah, sorry about that. Someone turned the line up. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you Alan? Why in hell you think all this crap is going on? We can’t keep up.”

—“They never said anything to me about any line speed increase.”

—“I have a feeling there’s a lot of things they don’t tell you, Alan.”

—“I hate this place,” Alan said.

A call came through on his radio. A car was stuck at the top of an elevator which carried units from the plant’s body department to the paint department. Alan stopped the line himself this time by pulling the cord above Tom’s head.

—“I need your help, Tom.”

—“Sure thing, Boss.”

I watched with glee as Alan unlatched the lock on the red safety gate leading to the elevator shaft to free a part from the conveyor, an incredibly dangerous move, while Tom manned the power switch.

—“Whatever you do, Tom, don’t let go of that switch! Alan will be turned to ground beef if you let go!” I laughed.

Tom gave me a devilish grin. He would not let go. As much as he despised Alan, nothing could pry him away from that switch, not even the Hand of God.

The line went down again at break caliber install, where Paul was busy at work. All his stock came crashing to the ground. He was signaling to Tom he needed help. Tom just stood there and smiled and shook his head at Paul, all the while pointing to his left hand that was manning the switch.

There is no way he would abandon that switch.

—“I got it. Turn it on, let’s go.” Alan reemerged from the elevator with a twisted wire in his hand.

—“Damned wire was caught in the chain.”

—“Alan, no bullshit, I told you the line speed has increased. You wanna keep pullin’ shit outta that elevator for the rest of the year? Get someone down here. People can’t keep up. Someone’s gonna get hurt.”

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