

Jason Kennedy

The Sandwich Factory

In keeping with my station in society, and having been rejected by the bowling alley, I took a low-paid job at a sandwich factory. I worked at a sandwich factory where a mad kid worked. He would leer through a hatch and wave a knife at me. One day he ran after my car waving a knife. I figured he wanted to scare me. Or scare and then kill me. I would sit at home in the morning, listening to Joy Division, compensating for the lack of meaning in the coming shift, and wondering if I was going to be killed. And then I would have to have a thought equivalent to, 'Don't forget your hairnet.' Because you had to wear a hairnet, a disobedient blue mesh that embodied your sacrifice to the needs of the company. The hairnets were supposed to be issued at work, but the hairnet box was often empty. And the penalty for not wearing one was so harsh that everyone took hairnets home with them. A fistful of hairnets. And because of this, one manager was constantly saying, 'Where have all these hairnets gone?' as he looked into an empty hairnet box, projecting agitation and concealing confusion. I pictured him at his management training. 'Remember, never look confused. A confused manager is a vulnerable manager. And a vulnerable manager is an inefficient manager. And an inefficient manager is an unemployed manager.' Allowing this to sink in. 'So, a sandwich can come down the line with no filling, but don't you ever let a confused look pass across your face. Instead, use anger, use the face that says, "Someone is going to get fired soon."' And then pointed to a slide projected on the wall. It was a man with three arms. Everyone looked confused. 'By the end of this seminar, you'll be able to look at a picture of a three-armed man without betraying the slightest trace of confusion.'

Packing away, the trainer marks each employee, considering the placement of each checkbox, drinking coffee. Someone always has

to be rated excellent; he always chooses whoever had the best legs. Today it was all men. He marks them all as 'poor'.

There was a woman there named Dot. I am never sure why somebody wants to render a child insignificant by naming them Dot. How about Speck? Smidgen? Nano? Or Dash. The Dots and Dashes could form themselves into an unconscious SOS in the staff canteen. Dot wore her paper suit with a tear and had mastered leaning forward to spill her breasts, transferring them into the nearby male minds. I would think, Don't transfer your breasts into my mind. Each breast is fifty years old, that's a century of breast tissue . . . These pre-decimal breasts made me think of everyone riding around on bicycles, of cobblestones and the first sub-four-minute mile and the Mods and Rockers fighting on Brighton seafront. Dot was a female lech, who had presumably had one of the top teeth at the side removed, so that when she laughed at something about sex, you would see an awful black space where a tooth should be. It was a terrible shame that it was 1994 and Dot lived in the Midlands, as she would've been an excellent pirate, giving blow jobs on the high seas and making all the pirates' sandwiches. But the high seas were a long way away and so Dot gave blow jobs in and around The Embassy, a seedy nightclub she went to each week. I would think all this and then look around, panicked, for the madman at the hatch. Was he there? Waving his knife . . . And then a quick feel around my side and back, checking there was no knife stuck in me. Or stab wounds. There was a guy opposite with terrible skin who always appeared deeply surprised if I spoke to him. Turning three-sixty degrees, saying, 'Hey, is there a knife sticking out of my back?' He had a scared look. I carried on working.

The work was carried out beside a conveyor belt. Sandwiches came along the conveyor belt. Dot was 'on bread', splitting loaves and setting the pace for the other workers. Each of us would be there with an ingredient. If you were lucky it would be lettuce or ham or egg, but if you were unlucky or new, it would be tomatoes. It was after a few days of this job that the tomato dreams began, formally pure, endless tomatoes passing silently, a note of agony sounding through them. The tomatoes were chilled in enormous boxes, pre-sliced. There was undoubtedly another factory

somewhere, the tomato-slicing factory, where similarly bored and unhappy workers attended daily to make sure that enough tomatoes were sliced to satisfy demand. The acid in the tomatoes would bite into the fingers after a while, making them sting, stinging the soul. All kinds of bitter thoughts filled me then. With bread flying past and the constant grasping of cold slices of tomato, the hectoring from any passing manager, and the burning fingers, all the ingredients of a Greek punishment were in place. A whole factory full of workers who would bite your arm off to push a rock up a hill for eternity (so long as you gave us £4.50 an hour and the weekends off). I entertained a vision of one day being rich and hiring a bunch of faded paunchy managers to recreate the myth of Sisyphus in my back garden, as I sat in a director's chair, watching them push boulders up a home-made hill. There'd be conveyor belts, too, arranged confusingly in the manner of an M. C. Escher engraving, so you had no idea which direction the bread and tomatoes and slices of lettuce were coming from.

Locked doors were a feature of the sandwich factory. The managers would lock everyone in if we were behind schedule or there was a larger order than usual. Someone would come back to the conveyor belt and whisper, 'They've locked us in. Locked us in until British Rail have another six thousand ham and egg.' And the word would go round. All the previously very unhappy workers now had the extra knowledge that they were locked in. There were three ways to respond to being locked in. Firstly, no response, keep working at the same rate. Or start working faster, so the work would finish sooner and the doors would reopen. Or finally, accept that you were here till the end, and slow down, collecting more pay. Although overall productivity was largely unaffected by what choices the workers made, the fact we were diverging in our approach now made all sorts of problems appear. And these problems manifested as poorly made sandwiches. Sandwiches with no lid, sandwiches without tomato. Ham and tomato sandwiches with no lid, no ham, and no tomato (in extreme cases).

The locked doors thrilled the madman at the hatch. His red face and ginger hair appeared. And then the knife. He drove a forklift, too. Men who drive forklifts are revered as demi-gods in these factories. You will hear people say, 'A forklift driver gets X' and X is

two and a half times what the other workers are receiving. There is a ‘forklift swagger’ to these men (and occasionally a woman). There is a ‘forklift face’ as they lift a pallet. And there is a ‘forklift arm’, a particularly fast and dispassionate way of spinning the tiny steering wheel, like the wheel on a speedboat. I had no thoughts of attending forklift truck drivers’ school, but other workers were saving up for it. They would sit in the canteen with a little leaflet, dreaming of when they had money enough to take the test. The leaflet was pure seduction: the cover featured a tanned, smiling man in the prime of life, removing a heavy pallet from the top of a stack while a manager with a clipboard admired the process. If there had been bikini women on the pallet, oiling themselves and pulling horny faces, this little group of forklift dreamers would’ve gone straight to heaven.

Dot wanted someone to have sex with me, when I hadn’t left after a week. Most people left before they made it through a week. Dot was concerned that I did not say much, that I didn’t try to ‘get into the girls’ knickers’ and she searched for one who would sleep with me. I had zero confidence with women anyway, but it’s even harder to engage in courtship wearing a paper suit and a blue hairnet. One lunchtime, Dot’s designated girl came over and tried talking to me, smiling and saying hello. But it was no use, she was behind some mysterious pane of glass. I was on my side, with my Joy Division records, my Camus novels, halfway through *Confessions of a Mask*. And she was there in a paper suit and a little cap, smiling. And that’s all there was. Then I heard the words, ‘I love your car’ and I tuned in. ‘What was that?’ ‘I love your car. Can you give me a ride home?’ And that’s what happened, in the dreamlike way it will, where you are always alone and then suddenly you are waiting for someone to change out of their work clothes and come with you. And as we drove away, the madman with the knife ran towards the car. And I pulled away hard as he slashed at the air. The girl looked back, astonished. ‘Does he always do that?’

I brushed it off, careful not to sound unconcerned about violence full stop. I had a reputation for being weird already (simply for being quiet and not looking down girls’ tops), without making it sound like I gloried in casual violence. We drove to the girl’s

house. It was a predictable location she had given, one of the one-word names that designated an 80s housing development, a knife's edge away from council housing. Foxglove, Harebell, Angelica, Sorrel, these bastions of fear and loathing had all been named after plants. And yet there were no plants and no grass spread through the twists of tarmac and concrete, the overflowing wheelie bins and the gutted cars. The houses abused accepted design, standing strange as Easter Island statues, with the front door opposite a concrete shelter for trash and no downstairs windows. Built of unfaced blocks, in a charcoal shade designed to reveal any predisposition to mental illness, they had always scared me. The white Mini stopped and I had no idea what to say. She knew I lived nowhere nearby, so any offer of a ride to work tomorrow would mean a lot more than it might. 'I'll see you at work.' She touched my hand and climbed out.

Later that week I fainted, hypnotized by the conveyor belt. I sat recuperating, the one female manager having been assigned 'tea and sympathy' duty. I could imagine a manager saying, 'Make sure he doesn't stagger into a machine and kill himself. We don't need a lawsuit. When the doors are locked, you don't want them to start escaping chopped up in the sandwiches. They'll all be at it.' And the managers laughing at this.

When I had recovered, I drove home and I never went back.