

OUR TEMPORARY SUPERVISOR

I have sent this manuscript to your publication across the border, assuming that it ever arrives there, because I believe that the matters described in this personal anecdote have implications that should concern even those outside my homeland and beyond the influence, as far as I know, of the Quine Organization. These two entities, one of which may be designated a political entity and the other being a purely commercial entity, are very likely known to someone in your position of journalistic inquiry as all but synonymous. Therefore, on this side of the border one might as well call himself a *citizen* of the Quine Organization, or a Q. Org national, although I think that even someone like yourself cannot appreciate the full extent of this identity, which in my own lifetime has passed the point of identification between two separate entities and approached total assimilation of one by the other. Such a claim may seem alarmist or whimsical to those on your side of the border, where your closest neighbors – I know this – are often considered as a somewhat backward folk who inhabit

small, decaying towns spread out across a low-lying landscape blanketed almost year round by dense grayish fogs. This is how the Quine Organization, which is to say in the same breath my homeland, would deceptively present itself to the world, and this is precisely why I am anxious (for reasons that are not always explicit or punctiliously detailed) to relate my personal anecdote.

To begin with, I work in a factory situated just outside one of those small, decaying towns layered over with fogs for most of the year. The building is a nondescript, one-story structure made entirely of cinder blocks and cement. Inside is a working area that consists of a single room of floor space and a small corner office with windows of heavily frosted glass. Within the confines of this office are a few filing cabinets and a desk where the factory supervisor sits while the workers outside stand at one of several square 'assembly blocks.' Four workers are positioned, one on each side of the square blocks, their only task being the assembly, by hand, of pieces of metal which are delivered to us from another factory. No one whom I have ever asked has the least notion of the larger machinery, if in fact it is some type of machinery, for which these pieces are destined.

When I first took this job at the factory it was not my intention to work there very long, for I once possessed higher hopes for my life, although the exact nature of these hopes remained rather vague in my youthful mind. While the work was not arduous, and my fellow workers congenial enough, I did not imagine myself standing forever at my designated assembly block, fitting together pieces of metal into other pieces of metal, with a few interruptions throughout the day for breaks that were supposed to refresh our minds from the tedium of our work or for meal breaks to allow us to nourish our bodies. Somehow it never occurred to me that the nearby town where I and the others at the factory lived, traveling to and from our jobs along the same fog-strewn road, held no higher opportunities for me or

anyone else, which no doubt accounts for the vagueness, the wispy insubstantiality, of my youthful hopes.

As it happened, I had been employed at the factory only a few months when there occurred the only change that had ever disturbed its daily routine of piece-assembly, the only deviation from a ritual which had been going on for nobody knew how many years. The meaning of this digression in our working lives did not at first present any great cause for apprehension or anxiety, nothing that would require any of the factory's employees to reconsider the type or dosage of the medication which they were prescribed, since almost everyone on this side of the border, including myself, takes some kind of medication, a fact that is perhaps due in some part to an arrangement in my country whereby all doctors and pharmacists are on the payroll of the Quine Organization, a company which maintains a large chemical division.

In any case, the change of routine to which I have alluded was announced to us one day when the factory supervisor stepped out of his office and made one of his rare appearances on the floor where the rest of us stood positioned, in rather close quarters, around our designated assembly blocks. For the first time since I had taken this job, our work was called to a halt *between* those moments of pause when we took breaks for either mental refreshment or to nourish our bodies. Our supervisor, a Mr Frowley, was a massive individual, though not menacingly so, who moved and spoke with a lethargy that perhaps was merely a consequence of his bodily bulk, although his sluggishness might also have been caused by his medication, either as a side effect or possibly as the primary effect. Mr Frowley laboriously made his way to the central area of the factory floor and addressed us in his slow-mannered way.

'I'm being called away on company business,' he informed us. 'In my absence a new supervisor will be sent to take over my duties on a temporary basis. This situation will be in place tomorrow when you come to work. I can't say how long it will last.'

He then asked if any of us had questions for him regarding what was quite a momentous occasion, even though at the time I hadn't been working at the factory long enough to comprehend its truly anomalous nature. No one had any questions for Mr Frowley, or none that they voiced, and the factory supervisor then proceeded back to his small corner office with its windows of heavily frosted glass.

Immediately following Mr Frowley's announcement that he was being called away on company business and that in the interim the factory would be managed by a temporary supervisor, there were of course a few murmurings among my fellow workers about what all of this might mean. Nothing of this sort had ever happened at the factory, according to the employees who had worked there for any substantial length of time, including a few who were approaching an age when, I presumed, they would be able to leave their jobs behind them and enter a period of well-earned retirement after spending their entire adult lives standing at the same assembly blocks and fitting together pieces of metal. By the end of the day, however, these murmurings had long died out as we filed out of the factory and began making our way along the foggy road back to our homes in town.

That night, for no reason I could name, I was unable to fall asleep, something which previously I had had no trouble doing after being on my feet all day assembling pieces of metal in the same configuration one after the other. This activity of assemblage now burdened my mind, as I tossed about in my bed, with the full weight of its repetitiousness, its endlessness, and its disconnection from any purpose I could imagine. For the first time I wondered how those metal pieces that we assembled had come to be created, my thoughts futilely attempting to pursue them to their origins in the crudest form of substance which, I assumed, had been removed from the earth and undergone some process of refinement, then taken shape in some factory, or series of factories, before they arrived at the one where I was

presently employed. With an even greater sense of futility I tried to imagine where these metal pieces were delivered once we had fitted them together as we had been trained to do, my mind racing in the darkness of my room to conceive of their ultimate destination and purpose. Until that night I had never been disturbed by questions of this kind. There was no point in occupying myself with such things, since I had always possessed higher hopes for my life beyond the time I needed to serve at the factory in order to support myself. Finally I got out of bed and took an extra dose of medication. This allowed me at least a few hours of sleep before I was required to be at my job.

When we entered the factory each morning, it was normal procedure for the first man who passed through the door to switch on the cone-shaped lamps which hung down on long rods from the ceiling. Another set of lights was located inside the supervisor's office, and Mr Frowley would switch those on himself when he came into work around the same time as the rest of us. That morning, however, no lights were on within the supervisor's office. Since this was the first day that a new supervisor was scheduled to assume Mr Frowley's duties, if only on a temporary basis, we naturally assumed that, for some reason, this person was not yet present in the factory. But when daylight shone through the fog beyond the narrow rectangular windows of the factory, which included the windows of the supervisor's office, we now began to suspect that the new supervisor – that is, our temporary supervisor – had been inside his office all along. I use the word 'suspect' because it simply was not possible to tell – in the absence of the office lights being switched on, with only natural daylight shining into the windows through the fog – whether or not there was someone on the other side of the heavily frosted glass that enclosed the supervisor's office. If the new supervisor that the Quine Organization had sent to fill in temporarily for Mr Frowley had in fact taken up residence in the office situated in a corner of the factory, he was not moving about in any way

that would allow us to distinguish his form among the blur of shapes which could be detected through the heavily frosted glass of that room.

Even if no one said anything that specifically referred either to the new supervisor's presence or absence within the factory, I saw that nearly everyone standing around their assembly blocks had cast a glance at some point during the early hours of the day in the direction of Mr Frowley's office. The assembly block that served as my station was located closer than most to the supervisor's office, and we who were positioned there would seem to have been able to discern if someone was in fact inside. But those of us standing around the assembly block to which I was assigned, as well as others at blocks even closer to the supervisor's office, only exchanged furtive looks among ourselves, as if we were asking one another, 'What do you think?' But no one could say anything with certainty, or nothing that we could express in sensible terms.

Nevertheless, all of us behaved as if that corner office were indeed occupied and conducted ourselves in the manner of employees whose actions were subject to profound scrutiny and the closest supervision. As the hours passed it became more and more apparent that the supervisor's office was being inhabited, although the nature of its new resident had become a matter for question. During the first break of the day there were words spoken among some of us to the effect that the figure behind the heavily frosted glass could not be seen to have a definite shape or to possess any kind of stable or solid form. Several of my fellow workers mentioned a dark ripple they had spied several times moving behind or within the uneven surface of the glass which enclosed the supervisor's office. But whenever their eyes came to focus on this rippling movement, they said, it would suddenly come to a stop or simply disperse like a patch of fog. By the time we took our meal break there were more observations shared, many of them in agreement about sighting a slowly shifting outline, some

darkish and globulant form like a thunderhead churning in a darkened sky. To some it appeared to have no more substance than a shadow, and perhaps that's all it was, they argued, although they had to concede that this shadow was unlike any other they had seen, for at times it moved in a seemingly purposeful way, tracing the same path over and over behind the frosted glass, as if it were a type of creature pacing about in a cage. Others swore they could discern a bodily configuration, however elusive and aberrant. They spoke only in terms of its 'head part' or 'arm-protrusions,' although even these more conventional descriptions were qualified by admissions that such quasi-anatomical components did not manifest themselves in any normal aspect inside the office. 'It doesn't seem to be sitting behind the desk,' one man asserted, 'but looks more like it's sticking up from the top, sort of sideways too.' This was something that I too had noted as I stood at my assembly block, as had the men who worked to the left and right of me. But the employee who stood directly across the block from where I was positioned, whose name was Blecher and who was younger than most of the others at the factory and perhaps no more than a few years older than I was, never spoke a single word about anything he might have seen in the supervisor's office. Moreover, he worked throughout that day with his eyes fixed upon his task of fitting together pieces of metal, his gaze locked at a downward angle, even when he moved away from the assembly block for breaks or to use the lavatory. Not once did I catch him glancing in the direction of that corner of the factory which the rest of us, as the hours dragged by, could barely keep our eyes from. Then, toward the end of the work day, when the atmosphere around the factory had been made weighty by our spoken words and unspoken thoughts, when the sense of an unknown mode of supervision hung ominously about us, as well as within us (such that I felt some inner shackles had been applied that kept both my body and my mind from straying far from the position I occupied at that assembly block), Blecher finally broke down.

'No more,' he said as if speaking only to himself. Then he repeated these words in a louder voice and with a vehemence that suggested something of what he had been holding within himself throughout the day. 'No more!' he shouted as he moved away from the assembly block and turned to look straight at the door of the supervisor's office, which, like the office windows, was a frame of heavily frosted glass.

Blecher moved swiftly to the door of the office. Without pausing for a moment, not even to knock or in any way announce his entrance, he stormed inside the cube-shaped room and slammed the door behind him. All eyes in the factory were now fixed on the office in the corner. While we had suffered so many confusions and conflicts over the physical definition of the temporary supervisor, we had no trouble at all seeing the dark outline of Blecher behind the heavily frosted glass and could easily follow his movements. Afterward, everything happened very rapidly, and the rest of us stood as if stricken with the kind of paralysis one sometimes experiences in a dream.

At first Blecher stood rigid before the desk inside the office, but this posture lasted only for a moment. Soon he was rushing about the room as if in flight from some pursuing agency, crashing into the filing cabinets and finally falling to the floor. When he stood up again he appeared to be fending off a swarm of insects, waving his arms wildly to forestall the onslaught of a cloudy and shifting mass that hovered about him like a trembling aura. Then his body slammed hard against the frosted glass of the door, and I thought he was going to break through. But he scrambled full about and came stumbling out of the office, pausing a second to stare at the rest of us, who were staring back at him. There was a look of derangement and incomprehension in his eyes, while his hands were shaking.

The door behind Blecher was left half open after his furious exit, but no one attempted to look inside the office. He seemed unable to move away from the place where he

stood with the half-open office door only a few feet behind him. Then the door finally began to close slowly behind him, although no visible force appeared to be causing it to do so, however deliberately it moved on its hinges. A little click sounded when the door pushed back into its frame. But it was the sound of the lock being turned on the other side of the door that stirred Blecher from his frozen stance, and he went running out of the factory. Only seconds later the bell signaling the close of the work day rang with all the shrillness of an alarm, even though it was not quite time for us to leave our assembly blocks behind us.

Startled back into a fully wakened state, we exited the factory as a consolidated group, proceeding with a measured pace, unspeaking, until we had all filed out of the building. Outside there was no sign of Blecher, although I don't think that anyone expected to see him. In any case, the grayish fog was especially dense along the road leading back to town, and we could hardly see one another as we made our way home, none of us saying a word about what had happened, as if we were bound by a pact of silence. Any mention of the Blecher incident would have made it impossible, at least to my mind, to go back to the factory. And there was no other place we could turn to for our living.

That evening I went to bed early, taking a substantial dose of medication to insure that I would drop right off to sleep and not spend hour upon hour with my mind racing, as it had been the previous night, with thoughts about the origins (somewhere in the earth) and subsequent destination (at some other factory or series of factories) of the metal pieces I spent my days assembling. I awoke earlier than usual, but rather than lingering about my room, where I was likely to start thinking about the events of the day before, I went to a small diner in town which I knew would be open for breakfast at that time of the morning.

When I stepped inside the diner I saw that it was unusually crowded, the tables and booths and stools at the

counter occupied for the most part by my fellow workers from the factory. For once I was glad to see these men whom I had previously considered 'lifers' in a job which I never intended to work at for very long, considering that I still possessed higher hopes of a vague sort for my future. I greeted a number of the others as I walked toward an unoccupied stool at the counter, but no one returned more than a nod to me, nor were they much engaged in talking with one another.

After taking a seat at the counter and ordering breakfast, I recognized the man on my right as someone who worked at the assembly block beside the one where I was positioned day after day. I was fairly sure that his name was Nohls, although I didn't use his name and simply said 'Good morning' to him in the quietest voice I could manage. For a moment Nohls didn't reply but simply continued to stare into the plate in front of him from which he was slowly and mechanically picking up small pieces of food with his fork and placing them into his mouth. Without turning to face me, Nohls said, in a voice even quieter than my own had been, 'Did you hear about Blecher?'

'No,' I whispered. 'What about him?'

'Dead,' said Nohls.

'Dead?' I responded in voice that was loud enough to cause everyone else in the diner to turn and look my way. Resuming our conversation in extremely quiet tones, I asked Nohls what had happened to Blecher.

'That rooming house where he lives. The woman who runs the place said that he was acting strange after - after he came back from work yesterday.'

Later on, Nohls informed me, Blecher didn't show up for dinner. The woman who operated the boarding house took it upon herself to check up on Blecher, who didn't answer when she knocked on his door. Concerned, she asked one of her other male residents to look in on Mr Blecher. He was found lying face down on his bed, and on the nightstand were several open containers of the various

medications which he was prescribed. He hadn't consumed the entire contents of these containers but had nevertheless died of an overdose of medication. Perhaps he simply wanted to put the events of the day out of his mind and get a decent night's sleep. I had done this myself, I told Nohls.

'Could be that's what happened,' Nohls replied. 'I don't suppose that anyone will ever know for sure.'

After finishing my breakfast, I kept drinking refill after refill of coffee, as I noticed others in the diner, including Nohls, were doing. We still had time before we needed to be at our jobs. Eventually, however, other patrons began to arrive and, as a group, we left for work.

When we arrived at the factory in the darkness and fog some hours before dawn, there were several other employees standing outside the door. None of them, it seemed, wanted to be the first to enter the building and switch on the lights. Only after the rest of us approached the factory did anyone go inside. It was then we found that someone had preceded us into work that morning, and had switched on the lights. His was a new face to us. He was standing in Blecher's old position, directly opposite mine at the same assembly block, and he had already done a considerable amount of work, his hands moving furiously as he fitted those small metal pieces together.

As the rest of us walked onto the floor of the factory to take position at our respective assembly blocks, almost everyone cast a suspicious eye upon the new man who was standing where Blecher used to stand and who, as I remarked, was working at a furious pace. But in fact it was only his hands that were working in a furious manner, manipulating those small pieces of metal like two large spiders spinning the same web. Otherwise he stood quite calmly and was very much a stock figure of the type of person that worked at the factory. He was attired in regulation gray work clothes that were well worn and was neither conspicuously older nor conspicuously younger than

the other employees. The only quality that singled him out was the furiousness he displayed in his work, to which he gave his full attention. Even when the factory began to fill with other men in gray work clothes, almost all of whom cast a suspicious eye on the new man, he never looked up from the assembly block where he was manipulating those pieces of metal with such intentness, such complete absorption, that he gave no notice to anyone else around him.

If the new man seemed an unsettling presence, appearing as he did the morning after Blecher had taken an overdose of medication and standing in Blecher's position directly across from me at the same assembly block, at least he served to distract us from the darkened office which was inhabited by our temporary supervisor. Whereas the day before we were wholly preoccupied with this supervisory figure, our attention was now primarily drawn to the new employee among us. And even though he filled our minds with various speculations and suspicions, the new man did not contribute to the atmosphere of nightmarish thoughts and perceptions that had caused Blecher to become entirely deranged and led him to take action in the way he did.

Of course we could forbear for just so long before someone addressed the new man about his appearance at the factory that day. Since my fellow workers who stood to the right and left of me at the assembly block were doing their best to ignore the situation, the task of probing for some answers, I felt, had fallen upon me.

'Where are you from?' I asked the man who stood directly across from me where Blecher once stood on his side of the assembly block.

'The company sent me,' the man responded in a surprisingly forthcoming and casual tone, although he didn't for a second look up from his work.

I then introduced myself and the other two men at the assembly block, who nodded and mumbled their greetings to the stranger. That was when I discovered the limitations of the new man's willingness to reveal himself.

'No offense,' he said. 'But there's a lot of work that needs to be done around here.'

During our brief exchange the new man had continued to manipulate those pieces of metal before him without interruption. However, even though he kept his head angled downward, as Blecher had done for most of the previous day, I saw that he did allow his eyes to flash very quickly in the direction of the supervisor's office. Seeing that, I did not bother him any further, thinking that perhaps he would be more talkative during the upcoming break. In the meantime I let him continue his furious pace of work, which was far beyond the measure of productivity anyone else at the factory had ever attained.

Soon I observed that the men standing to the left and right of me at the assembly block were attempting to emulate the new man's style of so deftly fitting together those small metal pieces and even to compete with the incredibly productive pace at which he worked. I myself followed suit. At first our efforts were an embarrassment, our own hands fumbling to imitate the movements of his, which were so swift that our eyes could not follow them, nor our minds puzzle out a technique of working quite different from the one we had always practiced. Nevertheless, in some way unknown to us, we began to approach, if somewhat remotely, the speed and style of the new man's method of fitting together his pieces of metal. Our efforts and altered manner of working did not go unnoticed by the employees at the assembly blocks nearby. The new technique was gradually taken up and passed on to others around the factory. By the time we stopped for our first break of the day, everyone was employing the new man's methodology.

But we didn't stop working for very long. After it became obvious that the new man was not pausing for a second to join us in our scheduled break period, we all returned to our assembly blocks and continued working as furiously as we could. We surprised ourselves in the performance of what

once seemed a dull and simple task, eventually rising to the level of virtuosity displayed by a man whose name we did not even know. I now looked forward to speaking to him about the change he had brought about in the factory, expecting to do so when the time came for our meal break. Yet the rest of us at the factory never anticipated the spectacle that awaited us when that time finally arrived.

For, rather than leaving his position at the assembly block during the meal break that the company had always sanctioned, the new man continued to work, consuming his meal with one hand while still assembling those metal pieces, although at a somewhat slower pace, with the other. This performance introduced the rest of us at the factory to a hitherto unknown level of virtuosity in the service of productivity. At first there was some resistance to this heightened level of dedication to our work to which the new man, without any ostentation, was leading us. But his purpose soon enough became evident. And it was simple enough: those employees who ceased working entirely during the meal break found themselves once again preoccupied, even tormented, by the troubling atmosphere that pervaded the factory, the source of which was attributed to the temporary supervisor who inhabited the office with heavily frosted windows. On the other hand, those employees who continued working at their assembly blocks seemed relatively unbothered by the images and influences which, although there was no consensus as to their exact nature, had plagued everyone the day before. Thus, it wasn't long before all of us learned to consume our meals with one hand while continuing to work with the other. It goes without saying that when the time came for our last break of the day, no one budged an inch from his assembly block.

It was only when the bell rang to signal the end of the work day, sounding several hours later than we were accustomed to hearing it, that I had a chance to speak with the new employee. Once we were outside the factory, and

everyone was proceeding in a state of silent exhaustion back to town, I made a point of catching up to him as he strode at a quick pace through the dense, grayish fog. I didn't mince words. 'What's going on?' I demanded to know.

Unexpectedly he stopped dead in his tracks and faced me, although we could barely see each other through the fog. Then I saw his head turn slightly in the direction of the factory we had left some distance behind us. 'Listen, my friend,' he said, his voice filled with a grave sincerity. 'I'm not looking for trouble. I hope you're not either.'

'Wasn't I working right along with you?' I said. 'Wasn't everyone?'

'Yes. You all made a good start.'

'So I take it you're working with the new supervisor.'

'No,' he said emphatically. 'I don't know anything about that. I couldn't tell you anything about that.'

'But you've worked under similar conditions before, isn't that true?'

'I work for the company, just like you. The company sent me here.'

'But something must have changed at the company,' I said. 'Something new is happening.'

'Not really,' he replied. 'The Quine Organization is always making adjustments and refinements in the way it does business. It just took some time for it to reach you out here. You're a long way from company headquarters, or even the closest regional center.'

'There's more of this coming, isn't there?'

'Possibly. But there really isn't any point in discussing such things. Not if you want to continue working for the company. Not if you want to stay out of trouble.'

'What trouble?'

'I have to go. Please don't try to discuss this matter with me again.'

'Are you saying that you're going to report me?'

'No,' he said, his eyes looking back at the factory. 'That's not necessary these days.'

Then he turned and walked off at a quick pace into the fog.

The next morning I returned to the factory along with everyone else. We worked at an even faster rate and were even more productive. Part of this was due to the fact that the bell that signaled the end of the work day rang later than it had the day before. This lengthening of the time we spent at the factory, along with the increasingly fast rate at which we worked, became an established pattern. It wasn't long before we were allowed only a few hours away from the factory, only a few hours that belonged to us, although the only possible way we could use this time was to gain the rest we needed in order to return to the exhausting labors which the company now demanded of us.

But I had always possessed higher hopes for my life, hopes that were becoming more and more vague with each passing day. *I have to resign my position at the factory.* These were the words that raced through my mind as I tried to gain a few hours of rest before returning to my job. I had no idea what such a step might mean, since I had no other prospects for earning a living, and I had no money saved that would enable me to keep my room in the apartment building where I lived. In addition, the medications I required, that almost everyone on this side of the border requires to make their existence at all tolerable, were prescribed by doctors who were all employed by the Quine Organization and filled by pharmacists who also operated only at the sufferance of this company. All of that notwithstanding, I still felt that I had no choice but to resign my position at the factory.

At the end of the hallway outside my apartment there was a tiny niche in which was located a telephone for public use by the building's tenants. I would have to make my resignation using this telephone, since I couldn't imagine doing so in person. I couldn't possibly enter the office of the temporary supervisor, as Blecher had done. I couldn't go into that room enclosed by heavily frosted glass behind

which I and my fellow workers had observed something that appeared in various forms and manifestations, from an indistinct shape that seemed to shift and churn like a dark cloud to something more defined that appeared to have a 'head part' and 'arm-protrusions.' Given this situation, I would use the telephone to call the closest regional center and make my resignation to the appropriate person in charge of such matters.

The telephone niche at the end of the hallway outside my apartment was so narrow that I had to enter it sideways. In the confines of that space there was barely enough room to make the necessary movements of placing coins in the telephone that hung on the wall and barely enough light to see what number one was dialing. I remember how concerned I was not to dial a wrong number and thereby lose a portion of what little money I had. After taking every possible precaution to insure that I would successfully complete my phone call, a process that seemed to take hours, I reached someone at the closest regional center operated by the company.

The phone rang so many times that I feared no one would ever answer. Finally the ringing stopped and, after a pause, I heard a barely audible voice. It sounded thin and distant.

'Quine Organization, Northwest Regional Center.'

'Yes,' I began. 'I would like to resign my position at the company,' I said.

'I'm sorry, did you say that you wanted to resign from the company? You sound so far away,' said the voice.

'Yes, I want to resign,' I shouted into the mouthpiece of the telephone. 'I want to resign. Can you hear me?'

'Yes, I can hear you. But the company is not accepting resignations at this time. I'm going to transfer you to our temporary supervisor.'

'Wait,' I said, but the transfer had been made and once again the phone began ringing so many times that I feared no one would answer.

Then the ringing stopped, although no voice came on the line. 'Hello,' I said. But all I could hear was an indistinct, though highly reverberant, noise – a low roaring sound that alternately faded and swelled as if it were echoing through vast spaces deep within the caverns of the earth or across a clouded sky. This noise, this low and bestial roaring, affected me with a dread I could not name. I held the telephone receiver away from my ear, but the roaring noise continued to sound within my head. Then I felt the telephone quivering in my hand, pulsing like something that was alive. And when I slammed the telephone receiver back into its cradle, this quivering and pulsing sensation continued to move up my arm, passing through my body and finally reaching my brain where it became synchronized with the low roaring noise which was now growing louder and louder, confusing my thoughts into an echoing insanity and paralyzing my movements so that I could not even scream for help.

I was never sure that I had actually made that telephone call to resign my position at the company. And if in fact I did make such a call, I could never be certain that what I experienced – what I heard and felt in that telephone niche at the end of the hallway outside my apartment – in any way resembled the dreams which recurred every night after I stopped showing up for work at the factory. No amount of medication I took could prevent the nightly onset of these dreams, and no amount of medication could efface their memory from my mind. Soon enough I had taken so much medication that I didn't have a sufficient amount left to overdose my system, as Blecher had done. And since I was no longer employed, I could not afford to get my prescription refilled and thereby acquire the medication I needed to tolerate my existence. Of course I might have done away with myself in some other manner, should I have been so inclined. But somehow I still retained higher hopes for my life. Accordingly, I returned to see if I could get my job back at the factory. After all, hadn't the person I spoke with at

the regional center told me that the Quine Organization was not accepting resignations at this time?

Of course I couldn't be sure what I had been told over the telephone, or even if I had made such a call to resign my position with the company. It wasn't until I actually walked onto the floor of the factory that I realized I still had a job there if I wanted one, for the place where I had stood for such long hours at my assembly block was unoccupied. Already attired in my gray work clothes, I walked over to the assembly block and began fitting together, at a furious pace, those small metal pieces. Without pausing in my task I looked across the assembly block at the person I had once thought of as the 'new man.'

'Welcome back,' he said in a casual voice.

'Thank you,' I replied.

'I told Mr Frowley that you would return any day now.'

For a moment I was overjoyed at the implicit news that the temporary supervisor was gone and Mr Frowley was back managing the factory. But when I looked over at his office in the corner I noticed that behind the heavily frosted glass there were no lights on, although the large-bodied outline of Mr Frowley could be distinguished sitting behind his desk. Nevertheless, he was a changed man, as I discovered soon after returning to work. No one and nothing at the factory would ever again be as it once was. We were working practically around the clock now. Some of us began to stay the night at the factory, sleeping for an hour or so in a corner before going back to work at our assembly blocks.

After returning to work I no longer suffered from the nightmares that had caused me to go running back to the factory in the first place. And yet I continued to feel, if somewhat faintly, the atmosphere of those nightmares, which was so like the atmosphere our temporary supervisor had brought to the factory. I believe that this feeling of the overseeing presence of the temporary supervisor was a calculated measure on the part of the Quine Organization,

which is always making adjustments and refinements in the way it does business.

The company retained its policy of not accepting resignations. It even extended this policy at some point and would not allow retirements. We were all prescribed new medications, although I can't say exactly how many years ago that happened. No one at the factory can remember how long we've worked here, or how old we are, yet our pace and productivity continues to increase. It seems as if neither the company nor our temporary supervisor will ever be done with us. Yet we are only human beings, or at least physical beings, and one day we must die. This is the only retirement we can expect, even though none of us is looking forward to that time. For we can't keep from wondering what might come afterward – what the company could have planned for us, and the part our temporary supervisor might play in that plan. Working at a furious pace, fitting together those small pieces of metal, helps keep our minds off such things.