

The Ubango Toy Company (1959)

by John Laue

My favorite of all my short-term jobs, after I got my B. A. degree from the University of California, but before my six months army service, was working on an assembly line for the Ubango blowgun and dart factory, a maker of plastic toys. This was essentially a line of tables and machines housed in one half of a cavernous warehouse with concrete floors. The blowguns were colorful plastic tubes about three feet long; the darts had three arrow-like fins and rubber section cups on the business ends.

Management for this company, located in Albany, California, three or four miles from the University of California, were two fellows I suspect might have been MBA candidates who'd started it as a demonstration project or experiment. They were not much older than their workforce, which consisted entirely of young people like me and my roommates Charlie, and Chuck. We had applied together and all been hired, a fact that pleased us.

We each were assigned a particular job, some turning sheets of plastic into long tubes, others on machines to mold darts. If

someone didn't keep the pace, product would pile up around his station, a situation affecting everyone down the line. My role in this ongoing drama consisted of picking up two darts, stuffing them into a plastic envelope, stapling it shut along with a short blurb about the company. The work was totally mindless; however I could fantasize and dream while performing these tasks, a somewhat redeeming feature.

We worked day after day at our same small stations, doing jobs we didn't have to think to perform. We were overqualified for this type of work, each with years of college, but the job paid enough to keep us in beer money and help with our rent. We worked happily until management hired a fellow we disliked. We called Richard a *spy* because his job was to speed up production. He did this by sitting at each of our stations, attempting to show us up by doing our tasks faster than we could.

I was near the end of the line, and, when he came to me, I found that not only could I do my job swiftly and efficiently, but I could consistently beat him. No matter how hard he tried, I went faster than he. I'd gotten so automatic with it that I could do the whole thing with my eyes shut, a feat I'd earlier performed for Chuck and Charlie, who'd bet me that I couldn't.

We resented this *spy* so much that one day when the bosses were away, we rebelled. Charlie said, *Let's have a fight!* and sent a dart at me. We each grabbed plastic tubes, hid behind machines, shooting darts at each other as hard as we could. This went on for a half hour or so, reminding me of times in New Jersey winters, when we children crouched behind our built-up forts, tossing snowballs at each other. Richard, the management's man, tried to stop us, but we were having too much fun.

Being hit by a flying dart sounds dangerous, but it was fairly safe --the darts had blunt tips. I did receive a blow or two that left bruises. Chuck got hit in the eye, causing us to stop the action for a while and take care of him. Soon after we resumed the action, both bosses arrived. We returned to the line, feeling satisfied that we'd made a statement. We didn't get our pay docked; I believe the bosses sympathized with us relieving the pressure.

My toy factory job was only one of the times I did relatively mindless assembly line work. I worked with poet Norman Moser collating and binding pages of literary journals he published. And finally there was the short stint I did on a line for assembling reading machines that held open books as a

pointer moved down pages as fast as one set the speed.

Soon after Ubango, I reported for six month's active duty army service. After basic training, I was assigned as a clerk-typist of enlisted men's service records at Fort Ord, California. On a day off, I happened to pick up an issue of *Time Magazine*. In it was a short article about the company. They'd made a deal with a local institution: instead of workers like Charlie, Chuck, and me, mainly students between schooling, they'd hired a complete workforce of people from a local mental facility and said they were working out very well.

John Laue has worked for pay as a dishwasher, liquor store clerk, rhythm, blues, and jazz musician, soldier, driving instructor, county research planner, accounts receivable bookkeeper, delivery truck driver, janitor, floater in a boiler factory, plant nursery worker, flower delivery man, toy factory assembly line worker, newspaper writer, college teacher, high school teacher 20 years (English, Peer Counseling and Driver Education). He even did short stints at the Department of Motor Vehicles and Post Office.