

WHIRLIGIG

by
Ed Griffin

Whirligig. I like that word. Once I said it a thousand times.

I said 'Whirligig' when Mr. Tom came out of his office to show me what my job was at Sunshine Rehab. My name's Eddie. I'm twenty-three. I'm retarded.

Mr. Tom wore a silk shirt and nice looking gray slacks and he had a fat gold chain around his neck. He was about fifty and he had the fanciest watch I ever saw.

Whirligig.

Mr. Tom took me to the production line and he pointed to the two wings of Sunshine Rehab's production line, then to where the two lines joined. "We need a good man here, Eddie. It's a bottleneck."

Sunlight from the window caught the big diamond ring on his hand. It was the biggest diamond I ever saw.

Whirligig.

"You've got to tape the packages, Eddie," Mr. Tom said. "Nobody's been able to keep up with the rest of the line. They..." he waved his hand at the other retarded people on the line... "they pack the boxes of soap much faster than anyone can seal them. Like I said it's a bottleneck. Cuts down production. Makes us look bad with the government."

One side of the line put little cakes of soap into small plastic bags. The other side packed sample bottles of liquid soap into a clear case. Then a girl took the bags of soap from one side and the clear case from the other and put them in a gift box.

Mr. Tom showed me how to tape the gift box and put a sticker on it that said 'Courtesy of the Daisy Fresh Soap Company.'

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Mr. Tom put his hand on my shoulder. "We're lucky to get this big order from Daisy Fresh. Each of the people on the line gets two and a half cents for every box we pack and Sunshine gets twenty cents per box. Do a good job, Eddie. If we can't get the boxes sealed up, nobody gets paid. We're counting on you, Eddie." Then he left.

Whirligig.

I used to work at Cottage Grove Rehab, but I didn't do good there. They make party favors out of paper. I stared at the wall and said "Whirligig" all day. It was at Cottage Grove I said 'Whirligig' a thousand times.

I looked at the girl next to me putting everything in the gift boxes. She wore her name on her sweater: Susan. She was about my age and she was pretty. I decided she was going to be my girl friend. She was retarded too.

Once I said retarded 365 times, one for every day of the year.

Whirligig. I started working. Susan smiled at me and I knew for sure I was in love with her. I started to seal the boxes fast. Tape, tape, Daisy Fresh sticker. Tape, tape, Daisy Fresh sticker. Faster and faster I went. Somebody up the line shouted out, "Nice work, Mr. new man. Finally we get paid."

When I finished fifty boxes, Susan told me I had to put a green marker over the boxes, so Daisy Fresh could count them easier. "Put a marker in after every fifty boxes," she said. "But don't worry. I'll tell you when you reach fifty. I can count good."

By eleven-thirty I had a whole skid done. Mr. Tom came in and told me I was doing great. Then he went into this room right next to the end of the line.

Pretty soon I heard talking and laughing coming from the room at the end of the line. I stopped taping and walked over to Susan.

"What do they do in there?" I asked.

"That's the staff lounge. That's where Mr. Tom and the two secretaries and Mr. Bert, the fork lift operator, have lunch. It used to be part of the line, but Mr. Tom had a temporary wall put in."

"Is that where we eat?" I was getting hungry.

"Oh, no. All of us..." Susan motioned to the twenty or so retarded people on the line..."we eat on some picnic tables in the locker room."

I went back to work until noon then I asked Susan if I could eat with her and she said yes.

I was in love with her. I decided my new word was going to be 'Susan.'

At one o'clock we went back to work. I could still hear Mr. Tom and the others talking and laughing in the staff lounge, but I didn't pay any attention. I wanted to work.

Tape, tape, Daisy Fresh sticker. Tape, tape, Daisy Fresh sticker. "That's fifty," Susan would say and I'd put in a green marker. Four green markers and I had a skid done. Mr. Tom came in at four o'clock and called for attention. "I want you all to know that because of our new man, Eddie, we've finished three skids today. That's six hundred boxes and fifteen dollars for each of you, in addition to your money from the government."

Everybody clapped and said, "Nice going, Eddie."

"You're a good worker, Eddie." That's what Susan said.

The next day I went even faster. Tape, tape, Daisy Fresh sticker. "That's fifty," Susan would say and she'd smile, then another fifty, and another. When the day ended we had four skids done. Everybody got twenty dollars.

We did four skids the next day, and the day after that. On Friday we almost did five skids.

Friday afternoon we lined up outside the staff lounge. One of the secretaries had a table in the doorway and she paid everybody. I took a look at the staff lounge when I got near the front of the line. It had a wall that rolled back. There was just one other table in there with four chairs around it.

As I was walking away with my money, Susan came up to me. "You're the best, Eddie," she said.

"No," I said, "you're the best. You never make a mistake counting. You could be a secretary someday."

"Do you think so?" She smiled. "I'd like that."

I went home, but I could hardly wait for Monday. On Monday we finished up the skid from Friday and did five more. It was the same on Tuesday. On Wednesday I went to get a drink of water by Mr. Tom's office and I overheard Mr. Bert,

the fork lift operator, complaining to Mr. Tom. "We got no more place to put these skids," he said. "The truck from Daisy Fresh don't come till next week."

"I know," Mr. Tom said. "I'm going to stop the line in the afternoons. We'll have rehab sessions. And I've got an emergency request in to the government for expansion money."

I hate rehab sessions. Social workers come and tell us how to live in an apartment and open a bank account. Over and over, the same thing.

I went back to the line and told Susan what Mr. Tom said. Susan was sad, too. "If only there was someplace we could put the skids," she said.

I went back to work and I kept thinking about where to put the skids of boxes, then it came to me. Boy, I must be getting over being retarded. I figured the problem out and I figured out all the complications. We could roll back the wall to the staff lounge and store the skids in there. Mr. Tom and Mr. Bert and the two secretaries could eat their lunch with us in the locker room. There was plenty of room in there.

At four o'clock Mr. Tom came in and called for quiet. "Please sit down," he said. "I have an announcement to make. We're going to have afternoon rehab sessions for awhile."

"Wait, Mr. Tom," I said. "I've got an idea." I stood up. "My idea is to use the staff lounge." I walked over and pushed the temporary wall a little, showing everybody how it rolled back. "You and the other staff can eat with us. We don't mind, do we?" I looked at the others on the line and several of them joined in. "Sure." "Eat with us."

Mr. Tom waved his big diamond hand at me and laughed easily. "Come on back and sit down, Eddie. Let me finish this announcement. You're a great kidder."

Mr. Tom went on to tell us about the social workers that were coming. He never said a word about my idea.

The next morning I snuck into the staff lounge and paced it off. It was 15 paces one way and 12 the other. The skids were 2 paces each way. I went back to Susan and asked her to help me figure out how many skids we could get in the staff lounge.

Susan got a piece of paper. "We have to find the area," she said. "You multiply 15 by 12 and you get 180. Then each skid - let's see that's 2 x 2, that's 4, - you divide 4 into 180 and..." she got excited "...we can get 45 skids in the staff lounge. 45!"

Susan is very smart.

I took her paper and I went to Mr. Tom's office. One of the secretaries was in there and the two of them were laughing.

I knocked.

Mr. Tom broke off his laugh and the secretary got up. "What do you want, Eddie?"

I went in. The secretary brushed past me on her way out. "You know, Mr. Tom," I said as I sat down, "Susan could be your secretary. She's very smart. Look." I handed him Susan's figuring. "She figured out that we could get 45 skids in the staff lounge. Please, Mr. Tom. I like working here a lot. I like making money. I'm saving up to buy Susan a stereo. She says she'd like her own stereo."

Mr. Tom rocked back and forth in his big leather desk chair for a minute. "Regulations, Eddie," he said finally, "regulations. The staff has to meet together to make important decisions. It's a lot of responsibility running a rehab facility. We use the staff lounge to talk things over."

"But..."

Mr. Tom got up, came around his desk, and took me by the arm. He pulled me up gently, put his arm around my shoulder, and walked me slowly to the office door. "Eddie," he said, "you've done a great job here. Just keep it up. Now you'd better get back to the line."

I went back and told Susan what Mr. Tom said. Everybody on the line stopped working. They all listened to me. Nobody likes rehab sessions.

One older guy got mad and slammed his fist on the table. "Let's eat our lunch here on the line," he said. "Let the staff have the locker room."

Suddenly Mr. Tom walked in and saw us not working. He got mad. "Now, listen, you have to work. I've asked the government for emergency help to expand and that's the end of it. Eddie, I want to see you in my office."

I went to Mr. Tom's office and he bawled me out. He said I was a trouble maker and I was interfering with the rehabilitation process.

Whirligig.

I went back and told Susan what he said. She said everybody should talk it over at lunch.

That's what we did. We talked it over at lunch in the locker room. Everybody said they wanted to work, they didn't want to be rehabilitated by the social workers. They said I should go in and talk to Mr. Tom again and tell him how everybody felt. Some people said the staff could eat with us, but after a while they decided the old man was right and from now on we would eat our lunch on the line and give the staff the locker room.

Right after lunch I knocked on the door of the staff lounge. One of the secretaries came to the door and got Mr. Tom for me. "What do you want, Eddie?" he asked. He looked pretty upset that I bothered him.

"Everybody wants me to say..."

Mr. Tom shook his head. "We'll talk about this tomorrow. The social workers are here now." Mr. Tom moved aside so I could see the social workers, a man and a woman sitting at the table with the two secretaries and Mr. Bert. "You'd better get ready for rehab now, Eddie."

Mr. Tom closed the door and I stood there for a minute. I was mad. Then I heard a great burst of laughter from the staff lounge.

Whirligig.

The next morning everybody wanted to know if I had talked to Mr. Tom yet. "No," I said. "I'm going now."

"Good luck, Eddie," Susan said. "You're the best." She was wearing a sky blue sweater. Sky blue's my favorite colour.

I knocked on Mr. Tom's door. "Come in," he said. "The door's open, Eddie. I was expecting you."

I went in and sat down. Susan was on my mind. "How about Susan?" I asked. "Are you going to make her a secretary?"

Mr. Tom smiled. "Eddie, we have two good secretaries now. Maybe sometime in the future. But that's not what you came here to talk about, is it?"

"No, Mr. Tom. Everybody wants me to say that the staff can have the locker room. We'll eat on the line. Everybody wants to work."

Mr. Tom laughed easily. "That's nice of you, Eddie, but sometimes the government people come to inspect us and we can't serve them lunch in the locker room, now can we?"

"But it's..."

"Just hang on, Eddie. I talked to your social worker last night and she agrees you need a more active placement. Things are going to be a little slow here until we finish our expansion. You're being transferred back to Cottage Grove Rehab."

Whirligig.

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"But the bottle neck... and Susan. I..."

"It's all settled, Eddie."

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