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Shift World

by Wayne A. English

The old timers said the year was 2098. Nobody knew for certain no more. Didn't matter nohow. It was 22:00. Time to go to work. Ten PM for them higher ups still allowed to talk that way. I could be out on the street now. Any earlier and I'd get beat up by the damned second shift patrols. Never could dodge 'em all. Too damned many of 'em. Too damned many of everybody. Everywhere crowded, crowded all the time.

It was bitter a cold January night. Full moon, not a cloud in the sky, and windy. Cold, bitter cold. I'll freeze every step of the way to the powerhouse. Us third shifter's got no bus or train, we got not much at all. Just a tiny room, lousy food and 12, or 14 hours a day of work. Every day.

To keep me mind off the cold I'm thinking bout them folks at the powerhouse. The only one who treated me good was Ted. He treated most every body good, good as he could, real good when he was able. And he didn't need to neither. He was a full fledged rotating shift worker. Damn! Imagine that! Being needed and able to work any shift, any shift at all! And working 'em all. To talk to whoever you want, get married even. What ever that was. Why I even heard tell he was able to have kids. Always wondered if that was true, there is only so much a body can believe. Any shift, any shift at all! Can you imagine that? Being so important, knowing so much that you are in demand on any and every shift! Only the best can claim that. And not many of them.

Like other thirds, I'd been on third shift all my life. Born to it they say. Got assigned to the electric power. Most of them I had come in with was dead, or so bad hurt they couldn't work no more. Don't remember much before the government come for me. Not much at all. Don't know where I come from or from who. They take care of that. You don't know nothing after they

get done with you. Least ways you ain't supposed to. Me, I remember some. Can't say to nobody just what. They would just come and get me again. Fix me good. Maybe even end me.

I remember me mom and me dad. I do. Just a little. I used to come into the kitchen and there they'd be having their arms around each an other, they would. Me dad telling her how much he loved her. I'd run in an he would scoop me up like I didn't weigh nothing, nothing at all. Then we'd all hug each other. After the government took me, well it took some time for the memory to come back. I remember me dad's watch and its ticking and all. He would let me hold it when I was going to sleep. I'd hold it close. I sure do miss him and me mom. Got me a watch almost like it, can't tell you how though. 'Cause it ain't allowed to own nothing. Ticks real good it does. Makes me cry to hear it at night cause I miss me mom and me dad. Miss 'em awful. Wish they never took me from them, wish I was a first or a second shifter, wish I wasn't so damn cold 'n hungry all the time. Wish a lot I do. Wish I had me a friend, most of all. Got to get to work. Being late ain't allowed. Ain't nothing allowed no more.

A blast of cold air froze me to the bone. Me old jacket was about used up.

"Hey, Bub!" Ted said, as I came in half froze.

"Good evening, sir." I said, cause I saw the other supervisor, Two Face.

"Get your gear and see me on the operations deck," Ted continued, "The Number Four circuit is out of service, locked out at the breaker. We'll have your high voltage switching instructions ready shortly, mostly done I hear. That right Mr. Face?"

"That's right," Two Face said, all polite like.

Face was a bag of vomit. He was all polite but would talk Ted down behind his back. Ted knew it too, we all did.

"Yes sir," I says, "Number Four sir. I'll be there directly sir." And Ted smiles at me and nods his head knowing that I won't give Face no cause to cut my rations again.

"Bub, see that you have your cold weather gear in good order," Ted said, "See the storekeeper and draw replacements for anything that's wore out. And see to your protective gear and tools as well."

I could have kissed his feet.

The powerhouse storeroom, like everything else, weren't never closed. Me getting new clothes an gear burned Face bad, though he never showed it. He hated me, hated all third shifters. Thought we weren't fit to live. Heard him say so myself. Truth be known Face would have loved to write me up again. If he did it would cost me two days rations and I would be moved farther from the powerhouse. Clear to the edge of Town. That would be bad, terrible bad. But Ted had given me what I needed most, a direct order to get new clothes, tools, and

protective gear. And right in front of Face. There was no way Face could have the storekeeper cheat me. Face would never take Ted on direct. Face didn't have the guts to take on Ted, wasn't his way no how. He was a back stabber that one. Good at it too. He didn't come by the name 'Two Face' for nothing.

The number Four was an old 23,000 volt circuit and pure misery to work on because it had underground cable, overhead wire strung on poles, and all kinds of automatic equipment. When it went out we needed people at the power house to see to its breaker, underground crews, linemen to patrol the overhead, and special trained technicians who could see to the automatics. That's why it was left for Ted. No matter what shift he was working he got the nasty stuff, and tonight, so did I. Me, 'cause a third getting killed didn't mean nothing. Him, 'cause he knew the equipment inside out. Lucky for me Ted was on tonight because he made sure nobody got hurt. Working for Two Face on the Four was something you might not do twice. If you take my meaning.

The electric industry was not what it used to be. That's why the circuit could be left off for a day, two, or even longer. When the circuit failed all the customers got their lights back in the blink of an eye as the automatics plugged them into another source of power. Some customers complained that their computers lost data I heard tell. So what? Who gives a damn about them and their data when you're freezing in the dark on the third, you got an empty belly, and 23,000 volts just a few feet away. Besides they should have switched over to fuel cells like everyone else. Damn those things! Damn fuel cells! Killing my job! What will become of me without the electric power? I was barely surviving as it was. Why, I hear tell there are crews out west actually taking the electric system apart. No more need of it. No customers left. Just fuel cells. The old timers say there was a time when the electric system was everywhere. I don't believe it though. One of 'em says he heard from his grand daddy that they used to be poles on every street with wires attached bringing electricity to every house. Power plants were making power and shipping it all over the world. And workers who worked cause they wanted to. Nah, I don't believe it for a minute. Don't believe a word of it, who would be stupid enough to believe that? Who would want to work here?

“Come on in, Bub.” Ted said. “No one here but me.”

I entered the operations deck.

“You got some better clothes, I see.”

“I do sir. Thank you.”

I never forgot that night, never forgot what Ted did for me. He treated me good for no reason.

A couple of years later I was working with Ted again. I had come to trust him. We were alone on the operations deck.

“Ted, can I ask you some stuff?”

“Of course you can, anything Bub, I'd never rat you out.”

“Is there any way for me to move over to the second shift?” I blurted this out before I knew what I was saying. I could be disciplined terrible for even thinking this.

“I knew you would ask me that sooner or later,” Ted said. “There is only one way I know of, cause I did it. Didn't know that did you? That's why I look out for you thirds the way I do. Used to be one,” He said, with a sad smile.

“It's not much of a chance,” he continued. “But it's all you'll ever get. It takes guts, you got to know the electric system, and you got to act when the time comes. Can't plan it, got to wait for it, then act quick. If it never happens, or comes along when you are not working, that's that. You're a third forever. Want to hear more?”

I nodded, eyes wide, heart pounding.

“What I did was catch a supervisor about to make a mistake. If we did what he wanted to do we would have cooked one of our 23,000 volt power transformers and killed some people.”

“So the story is true?” I said.

“It's true.” He said grimly. “It's true. I was on the operations deck and the supervisor on duty was about to energize the substation 23,000 volt bus while grounds were being removed. He would have killed the grounding crew. I jumped in, almost had to fight with the man. Right in front of management, I didn't care, I wouldn't let him kill those people. He got reassigned. I got promoted. The rest is history. And as a result every supervisor in the company just can't wait to flush me down a rat hole. Why do you think I have the reputation I do? One mistake and I'm back on the third. Your friend, Mr. Face, you call him 'Two Face,' I believe, is just waiting for me to make a mistake. He's got a long wait, I do not make mistakes. And neither do you. If you did you would never have lived this long. I've watched you run your crews. No body gets hurt when you're on duty. Well, that's the only way I know.” Ted said finally. “Its not pretty, but that's how it lays out. Question is, do you have the guts to take on supervision? You got to seize your chance with both hands. It's all or nothing. You know the rules.”

I didn't say anything. My mouth was dry and my head hurt. It hurt a lot. Just having this conversation was a violation of every rule, every regulation, everything. It was punishable. Punishable! And yet Ted was trusting me. Trusting me with his life.

“You need a couple of things to come together,” I heard Ted say. “First, you got to catch a supervisor in a mistake. Second, you need to have a manager on deck or the situation must be so

serious that you know a manager will find out the truth. That means that some big piece of equipment, or a lot of customers, or, better yet, a real important customer has got to be involved so management will notice. That's it."

"That's it! That's it! I could be disciplined, starved, killed even." I blurted. My eyes bugging out of my head.

"You want off the third or not? I never said it was easy. Takes guts, technical savvy, and luck. Specially luck."

Later, in my cold little room, I watched some well fed fat man on my favorite television show, "Government Knows Best," tell me how lucky we were to live in our three shift society. I was wondering if he ever worked 23,000 volts in the freezing cold? And I knew. Knew I had to try. What did I have to loose? I was smart enough to know no one retired from this sort of life. Starting today I would watch, learn, and wait. I would find a reason, any reason, to visit the operations deck every day. I needed to know more, much more. If I could get access to the tech manuals I could learn a lot fast. And the manuals were on the operations deck.

I now looked on me work with Ted differently. He never made nothing wrong. So I would watch him, learn from him, and learn the electric equipment. All of it. Not only the stuff I worked on but the entire system even the automatic stuff.

Over the next couple years Ted taught me plenty and not just the technical stuff neither, but about management and the other supervisors too. We even talked about personal things too. He even told me what marriage was. I couldn't imagine living with a woman. Why, what would I say to her? Me being so shy and all. The notion of having someone to talk to was real nice though. I'd be real gentle with her like daddy was with momma. I'd hug her every morning in the kitchen. Every morning, I would. And wild flowers, why I'd bring 'em fresh every day, would pick 'em myself. I would, honest. Ted didn't have any kids. The government sterilized him when he was ten. Same as me.

I learned, watched, and waited. What else could I do?

One day I thought I had my chance. Two Face was on the operations deck with Mr. Price, the company president, and Ted. I was looking for a technical manual for some new automatic equipment and listening to every word they said. Face was running his mouth and Ted and I both knew it. All I had to do was speak up. Ted was real quiet leaving me an opening, but he wouldn't let this go much longer. Now I knew what Ted meant when he said it takes guts to go against management.

"No, Mr. Price, turning off those two big power transformers won't save the company a cent. I wish it would." Face said, not knowing nothing.

“Pardon me, Mr. Price,” I said. “But that ain't quite true. Mr. Price, I'm Bub. Turning off two of the three transformers will save the company money. And quite a bit. You see sir, these transformers are among the largest we got and the excitation current used while they're working could be saved, with a saving of money. These transformers are big sir. I'd say you could save 3000 dollars a month for each transformer, sir. That's a lot of money at the end of the year, sir.” “Is this true, Mr. Face?” Price asked, dollar signs in his eyes.

Now it was Ted's turn.

“Absolutely Mr. Price” Ted said, not giving Two Face a chance to answer. “If you like I'll have Bub make some calculations. We can have some accurate numbers for you by the end of the week.”

“Excellent, Ted. Yes by all means make your calculations and give me a written report.” Price said, “And thank you Bub, I appreciate your input. Keep up the good work.”

“You are very welcome sir, I'm right pleased to help out.” I said, with a smile.

Yes sir, Mr. Price you are very welcome, ain't every day I get to make Two Face look stupid and make points with management.

We made our report. Ted got a real nice letter, and me, I got nothing. What a surprise. I was still on the third, walking five miles twice a day, and eating lousy food. Price, well I hear he made out just fine. What a surprise.

Things went back to normal. The only good thing was that Face stopped hounding me 'cause he had a new job. He got to calculate when to turn off and on the 23,000 volt power transformers. It left him no time to bother us thirds. And best of all his calculations had to be right 'cause the billing department was watching. So Face left us alone. If he screwed up he would be working third and he damn well knew it.

My chance would come later and Mr. Price known' me would help.

One night we lost the Four circuit supplying 23,000 volts to our biggest industrial customers. The automatics did not work as they should have and our customers were totally out of power. I mean totally. This had not happened in a long, long time. This was bad, bad, incredibly bad. 'Cause when the power went out they were machining a casting for a space station. A space station! And it was ruined. Ruined! If that weren't bad enough they also lost power to a glass making furnace that was curing the heat shield to some top secret government thing or such. Them customers and the government was screaming mad. Which had all our executives, especially Mr. Price, very, very, scared. Fuel cell salesmen was climbing all over our customers. And for the first time our customers was listening. If this wasn't bad enough Two Face was right in the middle of it. Ted was not on the operations deck. Where was he? This all

happened just about 10 minutes before I walked in the door from what my crews told me on the way to the operations deck.

Two Face was talking to Price. “This is the circuit we lost,” Face was saying, as he pointed to the Four on the big wall map. “As you can see it feeds the industrial section of Town.”

Face was only here now cause he took the shift to cover for a friend. Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy. I was only sorry that Ted was his relief. Ted could handle this. Two Face knew this and was anxious for Ted to show up. He was killing time, running his mouth and not getting anything done.

Yes, Two Face wanted to dump this on Ted so bad he could taste it.

“Yes, yes, but why did the automatics fail?” Price asked totally incredulous. “There must be a reason. Any chance this can be traced back to us? Did we do something, anything, to cause this?” He sounded scared. If this was our fault it could cost us our remaining big customers and that would be the end of us as a producer of electric power. Or, we would be forced to pay for their losses and that would be the end of us. Then Price and all his first and second shift buddies, and us thirds too, would have No Productive Work, and we all knew what the government did to folks who had No Productive Work to do. We would all be relocated as NPWs and nobody ever heard from nobody that ever got relocated as an NPW. So Mr. Price was sweating plenty. 'Cause he weren't hearing no way out.

“Well, this section of underground cable is old and engineering refuses to replace it. They keep saying they're gonna eliminate the entire circuit and don't want to spend the money to upgrade it. They been saying that for years Mr. Price. It's energized at 23,000 volts and the insulation weakens and finally fails. When the insulation fails the circuit's protective equipment kills the power, else the failed cable would destroy itself. As to the reason for the outage, we just don't know where the fault is or what caused it.” Face said, evading the question of the automatics.

Face knew that talking to Price meant that he was not doing his job. Operations was responsible for coordinating the overhead patrol, getting the storeroom informed, moving the underground crews, and getting the special trained folks into the field. When the operations deck don't do its job, no one else does theirs. Operations makes the decisions, directs the crews, coordinates everything. And right now everybody was waiting for orders. Two Face kept talking and talking, but getting nothing done. Where was Ted anyway? It was not like him to be late. It was not allowed. No matter who you were. I kept my mouth shut and stood out of the way. This was a bad situation rapidly getting worse and I wanted no part of it.

Face was looking real nervous. The thought of customers totally out of power scared him

plenty. The pressure was tremendous and soon, real soon now, even that twit Price would realize that his precious Mr. Face was not doing the job. I figured that Face had a few more minutes before Price caught on. That's when Ted walked in. He didn't look real good. I figured it was the pressure.

"What have we got, Mr. Face?" Ted got right to the point. He could see we were in trouble and that nothing was being done.

"Four's locked out," Face said, "automatics failed, the entire circuit is dead, customers totally out. We have not begun work yet, of course, and don't know where the trouble is."

"OK, have you started an overhead patrol?" Ted asked.

"No, not yet." Face said, because it never occurred to him.

"Get that started." Ted said.

"Bub, is your underground crew ready?"

"Yes sir." I said. We was always ready. Didn't have no choice. Ted knew that. What was he up to?

"OK, put on your grounds and then energize the cable."

"What!? We can't do that. You could kill somebody and maybe destroy something. You don't mean that, Ted." I insisted, not believing my ears.

"Do what you are told you damn third shift trash! Do it now!" Ted roared.

"No sir, I won't. What's wrong with you Ted?" I insisted, my blood turning to ice. What was going on here I wondered? The best supervisor in the company giving idiot orders like that.

"What's the trouble here?" Price demanded.

"Ted is mistaken sir, he's telling' me to do stuff that's just plain wrong. Wrong Mr. Price, and I won't do it. We could kill people and wreck more equipment." I said, none to softly. I thought my heart was going to blow right out of my chest. I had just refused a direct order. I could be disciplined for that.

"Face is that right?" Priced demanded.

"Ugh... Ugh... yes, yes. It is sir." Face stammered, knowing he would have to take over now.

"Face, you're in charge, Ted you're relieved. Please leave quietly." Price said.

Ted left.

"Mr. Price, Bub here knows the underground let him help me out. . . ."

"Are you crazy? You want a third shifter to help you? You! A fully qualified rotating shift supervisor?" Price said, with a look of horror in his eyes.

"It's not that sir, Bub's a good man, third shifter or not. In this situation he can do us more

good here running the underground crews. You do want the power back on don't you? Or would you rather we become thirds shifters as well?"

Having Face state his worst fear shook Price to the bone. Having me work with Face was nothing compared to Price losing his first shift executive status.

"Bub, you now work for Mr. Face." Price said with fear in his voice now knowing Face couldn't cut it alone.

"OK, sir." I said, "Mr. Face, how about I get going on the underground while you organize the overhead crews."

"Do it." Face said.

So that's how it went. The overhead crews found the trouble right quick. A tree limb came down on some 23,000 volt overhead wire shorting out the circuit and causing the breaker to open. The crew removed the limb and notified Face. Then Face had the breaker closed our customers had power again.

After the power was restored Face did not need me so I checked the automatics to find out why they failed to work right. The automatics had been sabotaged. They had, and that's for sure. I found 'em turned off. That's right, intentionally disabled. There ain't but a handful of people that could do that, you know. Those controls ain't exactly simple. I turned 'em back on.

The next day we had a big meeting. My report was that the automatics were found in perfect operating order, all switches on, with the appearance of full functionality, as the engineers would say. I recommended to management, and the engineers, that the controllers should be changed out and tested. Nobody said anything different or even questioned me. Everybody was off the hook.

Ted did not show up for work the next day so I went to see him at his apartment.

"So you made the second shift," Ted said, as he invited me in. He looked terrible.

"Yeah. Why did you do it Ted? You know what they could do to you."

"We never had this conversation, Bub, if one word gets out I'll call you a liar. Right to your face if need be."

"There's no need to talk to me like that Ted. I'd never rat you out."

"Bub, Price is so happy he doesn't care what happened. And Face? You saved his hide. Everything you needed was in place. A serious problem, management, and you risked nothing. Face asked for your help and the president of the company authorized it."

"But ..." I started to say.

"I'm dying Bub." Ted said, his back to me, pouring straight whiskey. "My heart; nothing they can do. I've got a few weeks, maybe a month."

All I heard was that my friend, my only friend, was dying. And in those words was the answer to my question. Ted did it for me. To leave me better off after he was gone because he would not be able to help me any more. Would not be able to protect me from the likes of Face.

“So you're a second shifter; better food, a warm place to live, maybe even a girl friend.” Ted said, turning with the drinks.

Seeing the look on my face, the drinks forgotten, he put his hand on my shoulder saying, “Its Ok, Bub. Its Ok.”

– The End –

About the Author

Wayne A. English is an award-winning author who has published five books and many articles, short stories, and poetry locally, nationally, and internationally. You may see his work WayneAEnglish.com. Wayne spends most of his social media time on X (Twitter) @waynean (<https://x.com/waynean>).

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