

Stories from 013 A

Metal Shops - Physics Dept. - Imperial College

The Blackett Laboratories

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★ The Blind Fish ★

The week of September 21-25 was my first full week working in 013 A and I was there as much as I could be, around my other duties. There are 12 metal-workers in the shop - I make 13. Most are machinists, ^(and instrument-makers) as you would expect in a Physics Lab. Some two-thirds of them (maybe more) are younger than I and most of them ride motorcycles, wear rock-on-roll t-shirts, avidly follow football (soccer), play the lottery and are generally high-skill, blue collar working class ^{Indo,} as can be found on any land on planet earth. In the close quarters of 013 A everyone has their place and is very territorial. People doing different jobs have to share the same equipment, often need a hand from someone else and we have to squeeze by each other in narrow walk-ways between machinery and equipment, often carrying plates of steel, etc. It is rather like living on a boat - you're very respectful of space.

The break-room is no exception. Of course I follow the shop routine (I've broken into new jobs in new shops before), keep my mouth shut and am very respectful of what is an extended family of people who have been working together for a while. I'm just a guest for a few months. So we have a tea-break three times a day: 10³⁰ 'til 11:00, 1⁰⁰ 'til 2³⁰ and 3⁰⁰ 'til 3:30. Lunch seems to be spread out evenly through these three tea-breaks. Everyone has their own place with a few extra chairs right by the door. I sat quietly by the door.

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On Thursday the 24th, when I had finished my cup of tea at 1:30 tea-break, I walked over to the sink and washed out my cup. As I turned to go movement caught my eye in the corner of the room - a fish in an aquarium. I walked over to look into a very small tank (about the size of a micro-wave oven with glass only on the outer face) on a low bookcase, about waist high. The glass face was very dirty - the whole tank was coated in slime - and there was no light and as the top of the tank was covered it was very hard to see in. I bent down to look in and perceived a goldfish about 6" long, about $\frac{1}{3}$ the length of his tank (and about as long as the tank is deep) swimming very, very slowly. As I looked closer through the dirty water I saw that the fish didn't look to good, health-wise: it had slime growing on it and bits of dead skin trailing from its' fins. As I looked more closely I saw there was something wrong with its' eyes; he didn't have any but just wrinkled, withered membranes sunken into the sockets. As I stared at the fish, bent over, through the dirty glass, I noticed that all conversation in the break-room had stopped and it was silent. Then a guy sitting near the fish-tank spoke up. I hadn't met him before. He is nearly my age, has a short beard and is a machinist. "I'll tell you about that fish, mate. I came to work here 14 years ago and the fish was here then. No one knows how old he is. The bloke who had been tak'en care of him had just

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retired so I took over feeding 'him. ' hadn't been here more than a couple 'a months when I came in one morning and no fish, 's tank was empty. I looked close - no fish. So I figured someone had taken him out of his tank so as to clean it. I checked with the maids, the janitors, all the lads in the shop, nobody had moved the fish. So I came back in here and looked again in the tank. No fish. I was thinking some bloke had just taken him when I decided to look behind the bookcase. ' had Freddy there help me pull it out from the wall a bit. There was the fish laying back there black with dirt. I knocked him out from behind there with the broom handle and he was covered all over with hair and dust-balls an inch deep. So I figured it was goodbye fish, picked him up an' carried 'im over to throw him in the trash can by the sink there and as I raised the lid he twitched in my hand. ' can't be' I thought, and he twitched again. ' Walked back over to his tank and dropped him in. 'e sank like a stone to the bottom and lay there. Next morning he was swimming slowly around 'is tank just like you see 'im now. But his eyes had dried out and 'is as blind as a bat. 'e couldn't have been out of his tank less than an hour on the floor an' that was fourteen years ago." As this story unfolded in the silent break room I watched the blind fish moving so slowly about it's tank and wondered what knowledge and insight

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that a fish, clearly having had a 'near-death' experience, and spending fourteen blind, solitary years in a small dirty tank three floors below ground in the workshops of Blackett Laboratory could have.

Well, clearly I had made my first friend in London and I visit it 4 or 5 times a day. The blind fish of the Physics shop.

And being told this story, and listening quietly and respectfully, I passed some test of acceptance with the Lads in the shop. I was assigned my own chair in the break room. It had belonged to one of their mates who retired in February and I was issued my own tea-cup (not one of the generic ones for visitors). It is imprinted with "Property of H.B.M. ^{Pinehurst} ~~(name unrecalled)~~ Prison - do not remove". Everyone assures me it is the real thing but I think they might be pulling my leg.