

attention!!

Editor's note: This week's attention!! column was written by Douglass Michael White, Class of '88, about a month before he died in a construction site accident on August 4, 1987. The story is fiction.

Ignorance is bliss. I came to that conclusion one summer long ago. Oh, I had heard it often enough before then, but sometimes it takes a little concrete evidence to really drive a cliché like that home. I was certainly in the right place to find such evidence, if you'll pardon the pun. You see, I was working in a concrete plant that summer before my senior year of college. We made concrete panels to be hung on the outside of office buildings.

My father was the superintendent of the plant, and for the last few summers he had managed to find something to keep me busy. I usually looked around a little at the beginning of the summer before I fell back on the job my Dad offered me. The work was hot and dusty, the hours long, and I would have liked to think of myself as being more independent at that stage of my life, but I could never seem to find anything that could match the five-odd dollars an hour I could earn working for him.

So I paid my dues for the first two summers, tying steel and slogging through wet concrete with a rake, thankful for the money I had to spend when the school year rolled around and only half joking about how much I hated what I was doing. God gave me a brain, I figured, and I wasn't doing anyone any good by turning it off every summer.

I got my chance to leave it on during the last week of the third summer I spent at the plant. One of the supervisors went on vacation. The guy had twenty years of

experience under his belt, and I was asked to fill in for him for the week he was gone. Twenty-five men called me "boss" that week, even if it was halfway jokingly. It was a good feeling. To have someone put that kind of trust in you can do wonders for a twenty year old's ego. Now I know what you're thinking. A little nepotism goes a long way, right? To be perfectly honest, the men were divided into three crews with a separate lead man for each. All I had to do was let the lead men know what had to be done and in what order, and they were supposed to take care of the rest. It's not like anyone was asking me to make multi-million dollar decisions or anything. As long as everything was running smoothly, all I had to do was stand back and watch. There were even other supervisors running around whom I could go to if I had a question. It sounds like the kind of summer job that only a relative could find for you, but in my own defense I think I ought to add the fact that we put better numbers on the board that week than they had for the previous three. I suppose some people just have a talent for standing around and watching others sweat.

They hired a lot of men that summer. The economy was terrible, but the company had managed to bid low on several jobs. Too many. The size of the work force doubled in just the short time I was there. It wasn't until that last week that I had time to notice some of the men that began new lives that summer. Most came from across the border, in Mexico. Few had marketable skills. Fewer still could afford to be choosy about the kind of work they would take.

The Maestro found himself in this position. El maestro is,

I gather, the Spanish equivalent of a high school teacher, but here this guy was, sticking out like a sore thumb in a concrete plant from the first day. His clothes looked too new, his curly grey-tinged hair too neatly trimmed. Every time I noticed him he was leaning on his rake, staring wistfully off into space. I asked one of the men I had become friendly with about him, but all he could tell me was that the guy was a terrible worker. He thought it was beneath him to be doing that kind of manual labor, but for some reason he felt that his opportunities were greater as a laborer in the U.S. than as a teacher in Mexico. So he did what he was told, but carelessly. Sometimes, the man I was speaking to told me, you just have to get tough with a guy like that. He would either respond, or he wouldn't last very long.

I watched him work. His mind was obviously elsewhere. I thought of all the years of education he had gone through, the knowledge he had accumulated, only to wind up sweeping floors for a living. The experiences of his lifetime had in no way prepared him for this kind of work. I found it easy to sympathize with him, though I had yet to speak a single word to him. For the last three summers I had had the same far away look on my face as I trudged through the long hot days. I knew what it was like to feel as though you had earned far better.

School became my salvation. Each fall I could take my earnings and escape for another nine months, secure in the knowledge that my efforts were getting me closer to the day when working with my hands would mean sitting behind a typewriter. But what did the Maestro have? All his education had gotten him

nowhere. What dream could he possibly have to sustain him? What goal could he set to get himself through another day?

I told my father what I had learned that day. Perhaps I hoped that he could find work more suited to the Maestro's skills. I don't know. I just knew that for some reason it scared me to think that his plight might someday be mine. I couldn't bear to see him give up completely. Maybe it was just too easy to see myself doing the same.

Dad told me that situations like this weren't as uncommon as you might think. He once had a Mexican lawyer working for him as a laborer. He could simply make more money breaking his back in America than he could by following his chosen profession at home. They eventually had to lay that guy off. All his education had left him with absolutely no talent for working with his hands. I remembered how clumsy the Maestro had looked that day, and hoped he would learn quickly.

The summer ended without my getting a chance to ever speak to the Maestro. I made my escape cleanly, and got away with enough money so I didn't even have to work over Christmas. I thought of him from time to time, though. Whenever I

was feeling particularly lazy about an assignment, his face came to me. I thought of how hard he had worked to find himself no better off than when he had started. Was everything I did really worth it? I hoped so.

That Christmas vacation, I was sitting at home with my parents, talking about old times. The subject of work came up, and I mentioned the Maestro. A funny look came over my Dad's face. "There was an accident," he told me, "not long after you left. A crane was carrying a panel through the bay. That idiot didn't pay any attention to the bell on the crane. He just stood there, right in the path of the panel. Anyway, you remember the problems we were having with the lifters pulling out of the panels during stripping. Well, they let go just as the piece was going over his head. He looked up at the last second, and was crushed trying to hold back ten tons of concrete."

He wasn't an idiot, I thought. He was too smart for his own good. The idiot doesn't have any trouble keeping his mind on the boring task. The idiot never worries about the world around him, he just accepts. I could picture the Maestro trying to hold back the giant concrete slab. No. He never could accept. Quite frankly, neither can I.

Editor's Note: This attention!! page will be used each week as a forum for you, our readers. We encourage you to submit any original work that would be suitable for publication in At Ease.

Pictures should be black-and-white shots that are unique either in content, angle or technique. Columns, essays or poems should be no longer than 500 words, and should relate to an unusual experience, a new perspective on a common experience, or just about anything else you want to share with our readers. Please don't send us your gripes, complaints, or sermons on heavy-duty issues — send those to the Battalion's Opinion Page.

Don't forget to put your name and phone number on anything you send us. Then just drop it off at the Battalion, Room 216 of the Reed McDonald Building. Be sure to specify that it is for At Ease.