

**Excerpt From**  
**“SPECIAL DELIVERY”**

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Morning. Time: six thirty-one. In the Factory, a plastic whirring; a heating of zero-gravity formed silicon crystallization. A dancing, channeling, digitalized river of information—

FMC INPUT RECEIVED: Sunrise over factory; radiation, heat, information transmitted digitally from sensors located in interior wall thermal insulation blankets to Factory Master Computer (FMC).

FMC INPUT RECEIVED: “Automated Meteorological Station Austin predicts a high of 97 degrees at 4:09 CST, with twenty-percent chance of scattered thundershowers, possibly severe. Humidity stands currently at eighty-six percent.”

FMC OUTPUT TO MASTER INTERNAL CLIMATE CONTROL SYSTEM: “Given heat generated by manufacturing processes and meteorological forecast, in absence of human presence, set cooling to maintain interior factory climate at 55 degrees and six percent humidity...”

Under the FMC’s guidance, ventilation ducts drew in the sweltering May morning air, sieving particulate matter through filtration systems designed to trap pollutants that might foul the factory’s delicate machinery. Mechanical lungs sighed, exhaling clean, dried Freon-cooled currents, flowing over the whirring robotic modules, the mechanized assembly lines—the FMC carefully neglecting to chill the empty hallways, the deserted office/meeting wing that occupied a section of the second floor below eighty-five degrees.

The Factory was a model of efficiency, an automated electro-mechanical life form devoid of human presence. In its twenty-acre expanse, ten-thousand robotic cells comprised its body; the FMC super computer functioned as its brain. Humans came but rarely to the Factory; machines, however, arrived by the hour.

At nine seven, riding silently on electro-magnetic rails, cushioned by magnetism that partially displaced their weight, the latest wave of computer controlled ‘mag-train’ freight cars waited patiently to disgorge their contents onto the Factory’s automated receiving docks. Routed according to content and priority, the huge cars were directed to the loading docks, where specialized caterpillar-tracked ‘loader’ robots pulled goods from the freighter’s attached modular cargo carriers, their steel claws carefully extracting steel, plastic, sheet aluminum, rubber, vats of chemicals, miles of tubing, wiring, and vast tangles of electronic components. Conveyer belts trundled the supplies to warehouse cargo bins, where a single day’s worth of materials—calculated by the FMC to meet today’s manufacturing quotas—would be stored by automated bin loaders in carefully

numbered compartments until use—the bins to be refilled tomorrow with more parts, more supplies to feed yet another quota for yet another manufacturing cycle.

At three minutes past ten o'clock, the first unanticipated event of what would prove an eventful day: a sparrow, eluding the Factory's perimeter pest control system, flew into the loading dock, was exterminated by a gas-wielding robot. The bird fell writhing; feathers melting, skin boiling from neurotoxins. The robot removed the carcass to a refuse bin, drove its caterpillar treads over the stain on the concrete floor...