The Curator Says… The themes of justice, fear, and power overshadow the workplace in John Frandsen's account of Jamie. Always lurking behind routine duties of everyday life in a federal research laboratory is a demanding director. Jamie's sense of privilege and entitlement go deep into the personal lives of the workers there.

Lab Notes

John C. Frandsen

These are a series of memories—little vignettes—drawn from the years when I was a scientist at the Regional Animal Disease Research Laboratory, in Auburn, a facility that has long since ceased to exist. Those employed there, save for myself and one other man who was there for a few years, have also passed into history.

Twos

In the Alabama of the early 1960's, lots of things came in twos—one for each "kind" of people, white and "colored": Two waiting rooms in railroad depots; two drinking fountains; two manner of service stations, one with a restroom for each sex of white people and a single restroom for all colored people, one with restrooms just for white people; two breeds of movie theaters, one with a balcony so colored people could see the show, one without a balcony so they couldn't; two waiting rooms at doctors' offices; two halves to state liquor stores. Lots of laws had two versions, one for each kind of people.

There were two kinds of workers at the Regional Laboratory. Colored people worked outside, supervised by a white foreman. White people worked inside.

The outside workers were called "animal caretakers," but they did all sorts of things besides caring for animals. They lifted and carried. They dug ditches. They fed the incinerator. They did janitorial work inside the buildings. They also prepared, planted, and harvested the "Victory Garden," first planted in a pasture during World War II. And some of them were responsible for the annual barbecue.

Each harvest season afternoon an outside worker would deliver one or more big paper bags of vegetables to the office of each indoor worker, including the secretary, The contents had been carefully selected—the tomatoes perfect, the corn free of worms, no bad spots in the potatoes. And all for free!

The day before the barbecue, outside workers would clean the pit and prepare the fire, working long into the evening. Indoor workers would bring chickens, hams, ribs, and roasts enough to stock their freezers through the year. Then an outside worker would spend the night as cook. The next evening, the indoor workers would pick up the food, all neatly wrapped in butcher paper by outside workers. It cost a quarter to get a chicken done, the same for a ham or roast. The

cook got what was left over after paying for sauce and other supplies. There was no tipping.

There were two views of the garden and the barbecue. Inside workers loved them, outside workers didn't.

Clarence

Clarence was the "stunner"—the animal caretaker who swung the hammer that put down the calves, cows, steers and sheep. He swung hard and didn't miss. That's why the job was his.

He'd never spent a day in school. When his paycheck came, he signed it with an X.

He tried to learn to read. It seemed like whenever Dr. P, the Director—cigarette in hand—came in the storage shed, Clarence would be there to point to the red "No Smoking" sign and ask, "Boss—what's that sign say?" Dr. P was no teacher—he simply turned around and left. And Clarence's pay raises were only for longevity.

Clarence cared for the cows and calves in the tuberculosis study. He fed them. He restrained them when they were weighed, measured, or vaccinated. He bled them when a veterinarian couldn't find the vein—for Clarence always could. Finally, he hammered and burned them. He kept no records—couldn't. But he remembered.

In 1960, the tuberculosis project was transferred to Iowa. The veterinarians and technicians went along. Clarence was left behind. The sole notebook with the cow/calf records was lost. The identification numbers of the animals were all that remained.

For the next five years or so, Clarence got lots of phone calls from Iowa. When given the number of a cow or calf, he could recall its age, appearance, peculiarities, breed, sex—whatever. Without him, the work of a decade would have been for naught.

Clarence died many years ago. The results of the tuberculosis project were published. A ceremony was held in Iowa to honor the veterinarians. Clarence wasn't mentioned. He was only an ignorant, colored caretaker who couldn't read or write.

Roosevelt

Whereas the other animal caretakers were short and stocky, Roosevelt was tall—six feet and then some—and lanky. Born forty years later, he might have become a basketball star.

Dr. P was most fussy about the sweeping, mopping, and dusting of the main laboratory building, especially his own office. Though charged with doing research and supervising his scientists, he found plenty of time to follow the janitor about and instruct him in the most minute of tasks.

P's office could only be cleaned while he was present. One day when I was in that office, he pointed to a smudge on the desktop, and said, "See—if you don't

watch them all the time, these Nigras will leave marks like that." My fellow staff members had told me that he seemed to believe that people with black skin left black marks on things.

One day P decided to "bring Roosevelt in" and make him the janitor. It wasn't uncommon for animal caretakers to be "brought in," tried out in some menial job, then judged to be incapable and "turned out" to resume outside tasks.

Less than a week passed before P began to find many faults with his new janitor's performance. He was especially annoyed with the marks he began to observe on the walls. "That damned Roosevelt—he bumps the walls with the handles," P grumbled as I encountered him stooped over to examine a spot.

So—as a child is sent to get a switch for his switching—P had Roosevelt cut short the handles of the brooms, mops and dustpans he used. Now Roosevelt had to stoop nearly double to clean the floors.

"Boss's a hard man," Roosevelt told me one day. "Muh back's killin' me."

But the walls were no longer marked.

It wasn't long after the handle cutting that a big windstorm tore through P's neighborhood, downing limbs and covering lawns with trash. As a result, P asked Roosevelt if he'd work form him the next Saturday cleaning up his yard. Roosevelt knew full well this was a command performance.

The following Monday, one of the staff scientists who often chatted with Roosevelt while the latter was cleaning the floor of his office inquired how the job with the boss had gone Saturday.

"Well, Suh," Roosevelt said, "I been a working fer a couple a hours or so and was pikin' up stuff by Boss's fence when Mister Davis, next door, asked me if I'd mind carryin' a pile a leaves out to the curb for 'im. So I did it, and Mister Davis gave me a whole five dollars."

"And how did the boss pay?"

Roosevelt straightened up, stopped sweeping, and said, with a sigh, "Only got a couple dollars left after he took out what Mister Davis gave me."

Roosevelt retired the very day he was eligible.

Jamie

It was in the spring of 1964, just weeks after he was hired as an animal caretaker, that Jamie was noticed. Somewhere in his late twenties, or early thirties, thin and agile, with a cat-like walk and a certain sophistication of style, Jamie stood out. And that's why he was noticed.

"Jamie," Dr. P called to him one morning, as Jamie came out of an isolation stall where he had been feeding a calf, "I hear you once worked as a bartender."

"Yes, Suh. I used to do that one time—a while ago."

"Well, we're having a party Saturday, and I need you to mix drinks. I've got a red jacket that'll fit you."

Jamie didn't reply. He just went on to the next stall. He had a date Saturday evening with a girl he'd been trying to catch for months, and he didn't know what to do.

At lunch, he told George and Clarence—other caretakers—about his experience of the morning.

"What should I do?" he asked. "I've been trying to get a date with Mirabelle for months. And now this has happened."

"Looks like you got a job Saturday," George said. "When the boss wants you to do sumpin', you do it. Else you ain't got a job here—or nowhere."

"You got noticed," Clarence added, with a chuckle "When Doc P notices you, you don't know what's gonna happen. I suspect you're gonna have some busy weekends comin' up."

"Suspect I'll get paid?"

"Maybe tips. Not much," George said. "Boss's a hard man."

So Jamie tended bar. The red jacket was a perfect fit. The boss was happy. Jamie got tips.

Monday morning, Dr. P went out back and hunted Jamie down in the dairy barn.

"Mr. Scofield liked you so much Saturday that he wants you to tend bar at his place up on the lake Friday evening," P said. "I told him you'd be there. You can take the jacket with you."

"Yes, Suh." Jamie didn't know what else to say—he needed this government job. He needed to keep P happy.

On Wednesday, P told Jamie that Colonel Simmons was having a party Saturday evening, and had asked him if Jamie could tend bar. P had said yes.

"At least," Jamie told George, "I got Sunday for Mirabelle." But Friday, the boss told him Mr. Lipscomb was having some folks over Sunday afternoon.

Soon, every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evening was booked for Jamie. There was no time for Mirabelle, and a fellow from the next town was pestering her. Jamie told Carl—the scientist whose rabbits he managed—that he didn't know what he was going to do. "If I don't do what the boss tells me," he said, "he'll fire me for something."

"He can't fire you if you're doing your work well," Carl replied.

"Oh, he'd find something—George told me that. And then he'd see to it I never got another job anywhere else. Man, I'd starve!"

One day, Jamie didn't show up for work. Nothing more was heard of him. Dr. P said he suspected Jamie had gotten into some trouble, and might be floating in the Chattahoochee. The boss was a hard man.

Mail Run

The lab had a mailbox in the post office on the corner of Tichenor and Gay. Mail was only placed in that box early in the morning, yet the boss personally made several trips every day to check it.

One Monday morning, I was by the bench next to the window of my office when the boss came in to stand by and look out the window. He was smiling and obviously greatly pleased.

"Went down to get the mail," he said. "When I was going up the post office steps, a frosty-top tipped his hat and said, 'Mornin', young massa.'"

Shaking his head slowly, he added, "You don't see that very often any more."

Dr. P was born after his time.

John Frandsen Says… Being an octogenarian provides me with a rich store of memories of a diverse life, memories that form the stuff of the short memoirs that we compose in Writing Our Lives and nurture the development of fiction. My writing draws from my childhood experiences in a tiny Mormon community in Utah; from my long years of formal education; my career as a research scientist, professor, and Army officer; and my service as a congregational and district president in the Unitarian-Universalist Church, president of the Alabama Writers Conclave, and founding president of the Chattahoochee Valley Writers (sponsor of the annual Chattahoochee Valley Writers' Conference). I don't know why there are two things I simply must do: Take photographs and, from them, create visual art; and write, attempting to paint with words scenes and events beyond the camera's eye. When I began writing seriously, about twenty years ago, I harbored the delusion that I had within me a great novel that would produce fame and fortune, but exhausting efforts to sell the two I wrote rid me of that delusion, and I now write with no purpose beyond the satisfaction of the act of writing itself. Perhaps I inherited this need to write from my father, a high school English teacher, author of many poems seldom published, and onetime Young Utah Poet of the Year. I doubt he ever dreamt that his scientist son would be a storywriter, and I often wish I had begun such writing many years ago when he could have been a mentor.