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Escape From Corpworld
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THE ONE-ON-ONE MEETING

Aaron was very efficient and had the exit routine down to a science. He had not one meeting-entrance or meeting-exit demerit on his permanent HRN record. He prided himself on being quick on his feet and staying focused, avoiding conversation or interaction of any kind with another person, and with just a few steps he was back in his hive-cube, working. The hive-cubes were fully functional as they travelled back to their docking locations to re-seat in the hives.

The cubicles moved in lines down the throughways elevated slightly above a magnetic strip. Thirty-five across going in either direction.

Aaron's was taking him back to his work area, Section 5E. The ride was slow, what with the clutter of thousands upon thousands of hive-cubes after an All-Hands, but he hardly noticed. No one did. It didn't matter really. As soon as you returned to your workstation your full work facilities were at your disposal. You were back to work and fully engrossed in it. Aaron, reinvigorated by the exciting news of the acquisition, was lost in his work for several moments before that same inviting voice, more female than male chimed in with an announcement regarding break-period augmentations.

It was announced that due to the All-Hands, the mid- and late-day nutrition consumption periods were to be cut down from six minutes to two in order to make up for

lost time. Employees took these breaks twice daily right in their hive-cubes so they could continue to work (though studies had shown they were not 100% efficient while doing so; hence the need to cut down the time allotted for today).

Also today, it would be a purely liquid meal dispensed from a tube in the hive-cube that would lower to the employees' mouths (most normal days it was in fact solids delivered in cylindrical shaped packets via a tubular network; though the Credit charge to employees for the liquid meal was the same as for the solid). By switching to liquid and reducing the total time allotted, the overall process would move along much quicker, saving time and resources. The Corporations were nothing if not efficient.

In addition to cutting down the nutrition consumption periods, the personal waste-disposal period was also reduced. This period, during which employees were given the opportunity to relieve themselves of solids and liquids, typically lasted four minutes, but today was reduced to two. Both acts of relief also took place inside of the hive-cube, with the employee sitting and, of course, still working (though again, as with the consumption period, not at 100% efficiency, studies had shown).

For bladder relief all employees had catheters (external for male, internal for female; both entwined within the fabric of Corporate attire) that hooked right into the disposal module of the hive-cube. For bowel movements, Corporate attire was designed such that a disposal tube could slide into just the right position and elimination could take place (this tube also had a cleansing attachment which sanitized everything up quite handily). All employees moved bowel and bladder at the same time every day, once per day (an optional thirty-second urination period was allowed if the employee wished to pay the extra Credit for it). Laxatives and diuretics could be dispensed via pharma-pumps if necessary. Corporate studies that took a close look at the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in particular, found that leaving personal waste disposal up to an employee, especially of the bowel-movement variety, could result in periods of severe and unacceptable non-productivity.

After noting the message, Aaron was again thoroughly engaged in his work when the voice, more female than male, but not quite either, chimed in once more, "Employee zero, zero, zero, five, nine, seven, zero, three, two, five, nine, zero, zero, two, two, four, nine, Aaron Cogwell, you are being re-routed for your one-on-one meeting with your manager, Senior Manager Tara Carpenter. Thank you."

He had almost forgotten. The meeting. His gut tightened and reflux shot up into his throat. Sensors in his cubicle must have detected this because a clear, hard plastic tube, slowly lowered down. He opened his mouth, wrapped his lips around the straw and a bright blue liquid was dispensed that would snuff out the burning in his chest. Like aloe on a burn. The tube elevated back into the ceiling when he was finished.

The cluttered traffic of the All-Hands had dispersed. With the hallways now emptied, the transit system's efficiency improved and Aaron's hexagonal station gained speed, moving at a pace brisk enough to cause a moderate and quite noticeable breeze.

Soon Aaron could see Senior Manager Carpenter's cubicle turning at a bend ahead, moving in his direction. The two cubicles, traveling quickly but quietly, met head on, stopping within centimeters of one another. Then they each rotated so the openings' faced one another. They connected and a vacuum like hiss could be heard as the bond sealed. The two joined units disengaged from the main lines and slotted into a soffit cut out from the main hallway. Though normally the half-walled openings were on the sides of the cubicles, with the employee facing forward, when two cubicles joined like this the occupants' chairs

rotated and part of the half-walls lifted up and turned horizontally to become a small conference table.

Senior Manager Carpenter sat upright, hands folded, staring directly at Aaron, into him and past him all at once. She attempted (the effort might have been high but the outcome was weak) a smile that was meant to be comforting. Aaron felt cold. Her hair was cut short, blond with black roots. Differentiation of the sexes via appearance had faded to near nothing. Everything, as far as outward appearances anyways, had taken on an androgynous slant. Woman in the business world never wore their hair anywhere close to their shoulders. The only woman that Aaron knew of who did wear their hair past their shoulders these days were actresses or models vying for attention in an entertainment or advertising piece. Never a Corporate employee. She had a sleek and athletic build and wore a grey business suit with black highlights. Her eyes were a cold, pale blue. She also wore eyeglasses. There was no longer a functional use for these ancient tools, at least not for their antiquated initial purpose, but it was considered a fashion accessory that conveyed seriousness and authority, and so had come into vogue recently. They did have practical purposes as well. The glass could display data elements anywhere along its surface. Most people chose to display along the lower and outside borders. Some the upper, but hardly anyone the inside border since it would give the appearance of their eyes crossing when they focused on the streaming elements.

“Good afternoon,” Senior Manager Carpenter greeted him. Another attempted smile followed.

“Hello,” Aaron said in a reserved, nearly subservient tone. He also bowed his head. This was neither customary nor required etiquette. He was doing it without realizing.

“Exciting news today, mmm?”

“Very exciting indeed.”

“Well, enough small talk, let’s get to the meeting, shall we?” and with that she outstretched her arms as if to say the floor was his, but continued on talking anyway. She always did this to kick off her one-on-one meetings. It was routine.

“How is everything?” she asked, with a raised eyebrow.

“Going well. Very well actually.”

“Work/life balance still in check?” she asked, with almost a hint of a motherly tone, strained it was.

“Oh yes. Kate and the kids and I, um we, well we spent our last workend getting lunch and then watched a story vid. It was great actually. Quite relaxing.”

Every corporate employee had an off-term, called a workend, which occurred every 36 days and lasted four hours. This was a blackout period during which work of any kind was banned. It was federal law and the Corporations were in one hundred percent compliance. It was expected that employees would not work during this time (though some tried). It was common for families to order dinner to their residence and watch a story vid, better known in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as “movies”. Standard running time for a story vid was just under 55 minutes, which left nearly three additional hours for other leisurely activities. Employees looked forward to the workend every 36 days, for sure. And every standard four-year work cycle there was a “double” workend. Eight hours of no work.

“Very good. Good.” Carpenter said, satisfied.

She adjusted in her seat ever so slightly and straightened up, then leaned in just a tad. There was a pause as her eyes scanned the bottoms of her eyeglasses, some messaging or other news of some sort must have been scrolling, but shortly her eyes were back on Aaron’s. In fact, now, she removed the glasses.

“I called this meeting to discuss your tardiness this morning, Aaron.” She paused giving Aaron an opening to speak.

“I’m very sorry about that. I take full responsibility and can ensure you that it will not happen again. There is simply no excuse.”

“I appreciate your apology and your taking responsibility for your actions. I do. However, Aaron, this was the second time in four years. Twice in a four-year work cycle! For a total of nearly thirty minutes missed work time! What if every employee decided to be tardy this often? Mmm? It’s unthinkable and quite frankly, *unacceptable*.”

He bowed his head, this time more conscious that he was doing so. Looking at this lap. He had nothing else to say really. Shame showered over him and his self-esteem curled up in a corner, rocking back and forth. He prayed¹ for re-motivation training.

There was silence. Carpenter stared at him but said nothing. She let the silence continue for thirty full seconds. Thirty seconds that felt like thirty minutes. Then Aaron looked up. She continued to just stare at him and he went back to looking at his lap. The shame shower and the silence continued. It was piercing and Aaron could hear his own pulse, quick and loud, as it patted in his ears and echoed in his temples (flub-dub, flub-dub, flub-dub, flub-dub). Carpenter waited another sixty seconds this time (only an employee with her clout in the Corporation could do nothing but stare for this long). Finally she cleared her throat.

This was Aaron’s signal to look up. She smiled again but it contained only artifice. She placed her glasses back on.

“Aaron, this is not easy to say, but here goes: due to your repeated tardiness I’m afraid you will be relieved of your position. Your access accounts and security clearances have been revoked. This is nothing personal, you understand, of course. It is strictly a business decision and done so in the best interest of the Corporation. You were over eleven minutes late Aaron. Eleven minutes! If we tolerated this from everyone, every day, well, just think of the amount of Credits the Corporation would lose.” She looked over her glasses, her demeanor condescending, as she said this last part.

She was correct. Aaron knew she was correct. On the surface, because an employee would stay six times the amount they were late (non-paid of course) it would appear as if the Corporation was making out when an employee was tardy. But the truth was there were a series of operational disciplines, and a cascading of scheduling events and deadlines that were carefully timed and interdependent on one another. Aaron being late and not having his work completed at the expected time could cause hundreds of thousands of tiny delays in other areas of the Corporation. And so, using Carpenter’s scenario of “What if they tolerated this from everyone, everyday?” one could easily see how the Corporations would sustain massive Credit losses, were that ever to occur.

“I understand,” Aaron whispered in a meek and suddenly hoarse voice.

She stood now, signaling the meeting was at an end.

“Aaron, I want to thank you for your effort all these years. Human Resources has indicated to me that your status on the HRN will remain in good standing and that, although

¹ When the modern-day Corporate employee prayed it was a mental incantation of sorts for help from “the man upstairs”. Long ago “praying to the man upstairs” had a much different meaning, and though that meaning was lost to time, the phrase itself had not been. In present day context, by “praying to the man upstairs”, Corporate employees were inwardly appealing to, literally, the man upstairs: the Primary Executive Officer; who had a spacious office on the very top of all Corporate buildings. These “prayers”, as they were once known, were never answered by the PEO of course, but the exercise stuck and the phrase was part of popular culture nonetheless.

your public profile will reflect this action, it will be marked as a neutral dismissal, not a negative one.”

Aaron looked around for something to say but there was only blankness. He was so very grateful for the mark of neutrality.

“Thank you, Aaron, and good luck to you.” She said this last part with a smile, but her face and tone were devoid of sincerity.

There was a hiss and then a popping “dwoonk” and the hive-cubes disengaged.

“It was nice to have worked with you, Aaron,” Senior Manager Carpenter said, as the cubicles rotated away from each other, Aaron’s clockwise, Carpenter’s counter-clockwise. She was already back to work inside hers.

Aaron was on the verge of tears. Throat tight, he swallowed his body’s urge to cry, burying it somewhere down deep. His pharma-pump clicked over and over, dispensing relaxant.

He did his best to collect himself. Cleared his throat and stared blankly ahead. The hallway walls swooshed by in a repeating pattern: panel, panel, panel, window, panel, panel, panel, window, and so on. The screens in his cubicle went to that blank, dull grey and then the main one came alive. “Off-boarding process initiated,” the screen read.

End excerpt