



Mohammed K. Shahzad

DARING CIRCLE

Are you daring enough to explore the cubicle jungle???

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For **Ayesha** – my soul mate
*for my essence of life, for you as you are my love and life
missing you too much on every second of my life*

The author wishes to express his deepest appreciation to
Abi Alhassan Malik Mohummed Abdullah Khan Awan
The Angel On My Shoulder
for his innocent smile and support as not to work me

Mohammed K. Shahzad is the author of *The Fate, IMF Story, Daring Circle, The Financial Meltdown 2010* and *When you Dare to Love Me* all are very popular among the famous readers club of the globe. He also wrote more than dozens books in his native language “Urdu”. Some of his famous Urdu books retrieved as *Pehli Barish Teray Sang, Pehli Barish Teray Bina, Roya Roya, Uljha Uljha, Etnaaf, Laal Mitti, Laxman, Teesra Janam, Jab Dollar Mar Jaye Ga* and *Aalmi Qissad Bazari Ki Kahani*, as the popular stuff of the region. His book *Pehli Baarish Teray Sang* has been awarded as an outstanding stuff in Urdu by Jamila Akhter Memorial Academy of Literature. He also won token of appreciation for Prologue of *Etnaaf*.

Malik Mohammed Kashif Shahzad Awan has written the screen plays for twenty three motion pictures including *Story of Railways* and *The Land of Sands*. He also constructed documentaries like *Stationery Story of Faisalabad* and *Aspiration of MNA Imran Khan*.

He has been involved in writing of four long-running television series and two three hours cinema scope movies. He is the columnist at local newspapers and attended many *Mushairas* across the South Asia. He is the Regional Editor of Punjabi Megazine “*Akath*” and Editor of bimonthly “*Soof*”.

Mr. Mohammed with the loving memories of his beloved wife, young son and family live in Chakwal and Faisalabad. For more about Mohammed K. Shahzad, see his blog at <http://www.malikashif.blogspot.com>

Preface

Writing is very different taste of life as I experienced. It is not easy to commit on the paper in such a way that it would be a story of better taste. I can't be a writer even if I have not the helping hand of my soul-mate and my love, my wife Ayesha, as she always urged me to write. She is used to say;

“Just write, write only for me.”

And it's the true fact that I write only for Ayesha. So the biggest aspiration for this short novel is Ayesha. As I write for her only. My appreciation and thanks is exclusively for Ayesha because without her, it is not possible for me to construct this short novel. Love you and miss you too much Ayesha.

Also my deep gratitude goes for my Hazrat Jee and Ustad-e-Mohtaram, as with the supportive hand of them I did not feel myself alone in this universe.

Also I wish to express my appreciation for their generous assistance to Muhammad Awais Rafique, Mian Asif, Afzaal Jutt, Ali Hamza, Asif Johri, Rabia Riaz and my family as whole (my father, mother, sisters, brothers and nephews) and also to Yasir-ul-Barni.

The AUTHOR

(1)

I know I should actively dread work, but I don't. I feel sort of calm about work these days. I know it's going to be awful, but somehow that knowledge allows me to shut off the part of me that would otherwise find it intolerable. So I arrived at work today and headed to my cubicle just like always.

I often find it hard to answer people who ask, "How are you?" There's this guy, someone whose name I don't know, who asks me this every day as I pass him coming in. "How are you?" How do you respond to that? My typical answer is "Tired," since it's always true, and it's usually a good conversation-stopper. I don't really want to stop and talk about my life to some random person in the hall – and I also don't really want to lie and say, "Oh, fine!" I usually feel like I've made a mistake, though. Am I supposed to say "And how are you?" It never feels like there's enough time; should I stop, in order to reply?

As usual when I sat down at my desk, I checked my monitor's position. Some people don't realize how much of what they're doing is visible when they sit with their back to the door, or even with their monitor only slightly angled to one side or another. I always feel as though someone has moved it in the night, while I was away.

I considered making a sign once again, to hang over my computer, but (again) decided that it would attract even more attention than it would deflect. Every time anyone comes into my cubicle, they say the same thing: "You really like Mountain Dew, huh?" Or some variation of that. I've started answering with "No, I really hate it." It's the 20 empty cans piled up next to my monitor. I'd like to get rid of them but I always feel like people are waiting for me to put them in the trash instead of the recycle bin, waiting to leap on me for breaking the unspoken law: "Thou shalt recycle." I wanted to put up a sign that says "No, I don't like Mountain Dew," which is true, but people would ask me about the sign instead of the cans. Maybe I'll just switch to something else.

In walked Mike. Mike is one of those guys who always seem to have time to do things other than work. I mean, I do too, but I don't make a big show out of it. He sends links around on the mailing list, prints out clever pictures on the color laser printer, and downloads mp3s. I don't know why no one seems to mind this, but he gets away with it all. He also stops by everyone else's cubicle every time he gets a new toy. He seems to have an unlimited toy budget; they're all really expensive and generally sit abandoned on his desk, or disappear back to wherever people like him go when they're not at work, and that's the end of that toy. I think he memorizes web pages on each new toy – so that he can rattle off their vital statistics as though they were guns, or cars.

This time it was a new Nerf gun. I know there's a whole line of them, all with different characteristics and so forth and that Nerf enthusiasts sit around comparing the relative merits of each. I haven't figured out why they care so much, yet. I think when I was about 10 I realized that the person who didn't care about getting wet in a squirt gun fight always won. It's like that moment when you understand Tic-Tac-Toe for the first time, and stop losing, and suddenly the whole game becomes a colorless exercise in futility. I remember trying to invent newer, more complicated versions of Tic-Tac-Toe, but I don't think there's any way to do that with squirt guns. Likewise Nerf guns – since you can't win, what's the point, really?

"Check this baby out," he told me in that smug tone of voice that puts me in mind of car salesmen. "It's got a retractable scope, single or double shot capacity, and side clips for easy reloading. How cool is that?"

I think "How cool is that?" is an annoying rhetorical question.

He said, "Just like the site says – the perfect weapon for sniping in the cube jungle!"

More on that in a moment.

I held up my hands as he leveled this brightly colored engine of death at me. "Whoa. You got me." I tried not to make my contempt too obvious, but there's a kind of flatness in my voice when I try to interact with people like Mike, and I can't tell if it's obvious to them or not.

"Damn straight I do." He had a swagger, the cocky gunman of the Wild West, picturing himself as an action hero, ready to take

down the bad guys at a moment's notice. He did some kind of spinning thing with the gun, some sort of trick that would have been impressive had he been doing it with an actual heavy piece of metal, but with a plastic toy it was much less awe-inspiring. And he ended up shooting the floor of my cubicle with it, which might have been funny, except that he then had to laugh about it and it meant he was still talking to me for much longer.

"See ya around, partner." I know he wanted me to say "Not if I see you first!" We'd had a long conversation about this once. Well, he had. I mostly just nodded. This was back when I had first started working here, and was concerned with making a good impression. So I paid attention as he told me all the right things to say around the office. I was skeptical; I couldn't figure that anyone else would be idiotic enough to say these things he was telling me – among them the 'see you first' comment. And Monty Python quotes. Of course, my expectations of the other people here were far too high. Mike was only typical. I didn't actually mind the Python at first, but something that was funny the first time, in college, lacks the same humor value the hundredth time, in your office. I've gone from a fan of Monty Python to detesting even the name. I wish they'd never had anything released in the US. I wish no one had ever heard of them. People who might otherwise have something interesting to say will spend an hour quoting Python back and forth at one another. Is it a kind of mutual identification? Is it a contest? "Which one of us is the bigger fan?"

At least it was a toy, and not a book. He gets these books of glossy photographs – usually of landscapes or castles or animals – and flips through every single page, showing me the whole thing. I have to nod and pretend to care. That's tough, because it takes so much longer. With his simpler toys all I have to do is look at him for a while and then he goes away.

Off stomped the warrior in the cube jungle. I loathe that phrase. Not just that phrase; I take that back. What I loathe is the whole metaphor. It's the romanticization of the whole cubicle phenomenon, and it's appalling. When I think about my day at work, I don't feel like a 'code warrior' who fought his way through the 'cubicle jungle'. I rarely identify with Dilbert. I don't ever imagine my stupid button-up shirts and slacks as 'office fatigues', and until it was forced down my throat repeatedly by Mike and the whole Operations group, I never thought of mindless programming in terms of military action.

But Mike does. I guess he might even believe it.

Let's face it: cubicles are dehumanizing. If they were actually intended to make efficient use of office space, they'd be taller. Instead they're just the right height for someone walking by to peer in at what everyone's doing. There's no good reason for that except to dehumanize. I spend eight hours a day in my cubicle – sometimes more. I pick my nose sometimes; I sometimes do little embarrassing things that people do when they're alone. Except in your cubicle, you're never alone. It's as though they lowered the height of bathroom stalls to four feet, so you could peek up and over them and see everyone else in the bathroom taking a crap. It's meant to make you aware of everyone else's work as well as your own, and make you aware that you're being watched all the time. Monitored. Half your life is spent without privacy. And that's not romantic, it's not clever, it's not funny; mostly it makes me want to scream. I go to the bathroom a lot, for the illusion of privacy.

And, of course, to do drugs.

Drugs are the only way I've found to make work tolerable. Before I started doing drugs at work, I'd arrive, stare blankly at my computer screen, and slowly the horror would dawn: I was too tired

to stay awake, but too uncomfortable to go to sleep. I was caught in this endless agonizing hell of ennui.

Then I discovered amphetamines, and things got better. Now I go to work, let my eyes glaze over, and wait for an hour or so. I have to wait because I know that they wear off after about 6 or over 9000 hours, and being at work when they wear off is worse than being at work with no drugs at all. Then, when I'm satisfied I've got the timing right, I go into the bathroom, into a stall. I take out the little envelope of crystals and crush them and snort them. Does that make me a bad person? I listen to anti-drug commercials with detached amusement. Give me a job where the morning hours, the hours between 9 AM and noon are not, for whatever reason, the most important hours of the day, and I'll be more than happy to give up my drugs.

Let me explain speed: there's a moment in the day when you're no longer tired from waking up, and you're not yet tired from being up too long. There's a peak. You're alert, you're confident, you're ready to handle anything. Speed takes that brief moment and makes it six hours long. When you're on speed, there's nothing you can't handle. You're competent as you've never been. You're on top of the world, with god-like abilities. You're charming and personable, if you want to be. You think in lightning-like pulses. Everything is easy. You can focus on a task and suddenly it's done. If it's boring and repetitive, you don't notice the time passing. You breathe harder, you feel a little cold, your heart races. The entire world is in your grasp. You feel the hairs all over your body rising, ready, alert, sensing.

So I had this exhilarated rush of tingling to all my extremities as Mike left with his gun, and in a vivid movie-like series of images, I saw myself leaping to my feet and taking that toy away from him and snapping it in two, right in his face. Which I

didn't do, of course. Even if I had a real urge to be violent, he's not worth the effort.

Instead I turned back to my computer and tried to work on a Perl script for a bit; from down the aisle I could hear shouting which was almost certainly Mike stalking Rob in the dangerous wilds of the cubicle jungle. This meant escalation, of course; not that Rob thought he could somehow 'beat' Mike, but rather that he was jealous of Mike's new toy, and would buy one even bigger and more ridiculous of his own.

Oh, my boss just walked in. More later.

(2)

It's the next day now; I'd really meant for this to be some kind of stream-of-consciousness account of working here, but that goal seems now to be pretty unreasonable. I ended up working under very intense micro-management for the remainder of yesterday, and that was that. Anyway, if I really were trying to get the full 'you are there' effect, I'd write in present tense all the time.

Today brought an escalation, as I'd predicted. First of all, Rob showed up in his 'got root?' t-shirt, which might have been funny back when the whole 'got milk' thing started; now it's just sort of pathetic. Mike, of course, laughed like a loon. I wonder how other people get work done while this idiocy is going on? I, at least, have a chemical aid to help me focus on what I'm doing.

Much more irritating: the whole Nerf-gun arsenal arrived today. Mike was, I think, a little overwhelmed by the magnitude of

Rob's gun collection. This guy is a serious nut about the things, apparently. Mike cowered in his cubicle for most of the morning, and only passed around one link to User Friendly.

As an aside, I detest User Friendly. It's garbage. I can tolerate bad writing in a well-drawn comic, and I can tolerate bad art in a well-written comic. I can't take both at once. I can't take reading the same bullshit tech support stories and OS-wars I have to listen to all day long, coming out of the mouths of characters who look like they were drawn by Berke Breathed after a week-long bender involving paint thinner and men named Butch. Mike prints them out and posts them on the outside of his cubicle wall. Dilbert was the rage; Dilbert's passé now. It infuriates me that bullshit like User Friendly is popular while far superior work like Sinfest is relegated to obscurity.

User Friendly is like every other aspect of the geek culture. It's self-congratulatory crap. It celebrates something that doesn't exist – namely, a culture to go with the geek. An amalgamation of Star Wars trivia, X-Files posters, Unix jokes, and Python quotes does not a culture make. All that the proponents of this garbage prove, again and again, is that they're completely devoid of any culture. Yeah, they've all read Microserfs. Have any of them read Byron? Yeah, they all know the words to "Birdhouse In Your Soul" by heart. Do any of them know any of T. S. Eliot by heart?

And what's more, co-opting the term geek is a sad attempt to replicate the feat of gay rights activists who took back the word queer for themselves. By calling themselves geeks, they're supposedly transcending the abuse and mockery and degradation of high school. All that they're really accomplishing, though, is proving that one, they haven't gotten over the abuse and mockery, and two, they're still the same people that deserved to get mocked back then. They still haven't acquired the social skills to cope with

being an adult; parts of them never moved beyond being the outcast in high school.

Once upon a time I was a geek, a nerd, a dweeb, a dork, a loser. Now that I'm all grown up, I don't want to be any of those things anymore. I want to put them behind me. I don't want to continue to identify with a self-image that's as destructive as it is immature. And I don't think that simply claiming the word 'geek' as a positive rather than negative term is sufficient to accomplish these things. Why be proud of my defects? Why not work to change them?

Anyway, that aside was longer than I'd intended. Sometime shortly after lunch I watched Rob go by, crouched over slightly, a large Nerf gun in either hand. He winked at me as he passed the entrance to my cubicle. I looked at him blankly; inside I was sighing. Here it comes.

A few moments later, there were shouts from the next aisle over -- Rob had struck. There was a brief flash of yellow as a Nerf dart arced over the cubicle walls, landing god-knows-where, and then pounding footsteps as a victorious Rob jogged by, headed back to his cubicle. I wondered if the lost darts were just considered casualties of war.

He was breathless and the smell was nasty – a stale funk, like his shirt was filthy and sweating was releasing the rankness of it out into the aisle. Which meant, of course, that I'd be smelling it for the rest of the day. I don't understand people who can't bother to take the 20 seconds that putting deodorant on in the morning requires. There are times when I wear an unwashed shirt to work, sure. And with some deodorant on, it never smells like anything but deodorant. The stuff is cheap and easy to use. Can't they smell themselves? Who wants to be known as 'that smelly guy'?

I also can't understand how someone can get that sweaty from shooting Nerf darts. We're talking a total of ten or fifteen seconds of exertion, when trying to dodge the other person's return fire. I can only assume it was the stress of anticipation, of sneaking up – until he winked at me, Rob had this intense look on his face, like he was in another world entirely.

Later that afternoon, Mike stopped by again. He had a Nerf pistol stuffed into his belt; I guess he thought this was tough looking, having seen people in movies do the same with their guns. I have to agree that a slick, smooth black handgun can look pretty tough. Neon plastic awkwardly crammed into the crotch is not.

"I have to be careful. He's just waiting for me to drop my guard again."

I looked up at Mike, who was nervously glancing down the aisle from my cubicle, to where Rob's little fort was located. Oh, he built a fort – I didn't mention that. He put up a camouflage sheet inside his cubicle. I don't know what that's supposed to accomplish, but it makes his cubicle much more difficult to enter. He has the same boss as I do, but for some reason that sort of thing never bothers the boss when other people do it. I can't go to the bathroom without causing a major crisis with my manager – but Rob and Mike can build forts and run up and down the aisles without fear of reprisal.

So I shrugged and said, "Just don't get me involved. I'm busy today."

Mike had this idiotic grin on his face, which I'm sure he would have described as 'feral' but I describe as 'toothy'. "Well, man, no telling what might happen. Innocents have been known to

get caught in the crossfire." He patted the butt of his toy. "Anyway, did you see that link I sent?"

I had tried once to explain how I felt about User Friendly to him, but it was exactly like I was speaking another language. He just looked at me. I think he figured I was kidding. Now I just pretend I read it, and change the subject.

Like this: "Yeah, I did. Hey Mike, can I ask you something?"

"Sure!"

I wanted to believe that his enthusiasm was typical Mike, but I knew it wasn't. It was Mike responding to me actually interacting with him. Asking him a question. Showing some kind of interest in him.

"Is this what you want?" He looked around in confusion as I tried to find words he'd understand. "I mean, when you were a kid, is this what you saw yourself doing? Do you ever want anything more?"

Mike looked at me, his head sort of tilted to one side. I could see that he was struggling with my question. For a tiny moment I thought maybe I'd gotten through Mike, to someone else. Then he answered. With his barking laugh. "No way! Think about it, man – they're paying us to come in and mess around with computers all day long! This is so where I want to be, you know?"

He clapped me on the shoulder as he turned to leave. "Take it easy, man."

Take what easy?

You know those annoying skits on comedy shows about the obnoxious office worker that is generally despised? Mike's the kind of guy who quotes those skits, thinks they're hilarious, and never realizes they're talking about him.

I think about the question a lot, though. Is this what I saw myself doing? I don't know what I saw myself doing when I was a kid. I guess I just expected adulthood would take care of itself – that life would proceed inevitably from being young to being old, and that things like jobs and cars and bank accounts would assemble themselves – the trappings of being an adult, they'd all just sort of come with the role.

Do I ever want anything more? I don't remember how any longer. I feel like I have all these untapped reservoirs of skill and ability and talent, lurking beneath the surface. I don't know how people get their 'dream jobs'. Do they just fire off email to places that sound like what they're looking for? Everyone I've ever heard of who has a 'dream job' seems to have just gotten lucky. Maybe the difference between happy people and unhappy ones is luck.

An hour or so later – I don't have much of a time-sense while I'm on drugs – this guy, Greg, one of the marketing people, went racing by my cubicle. Jogging. Maybe sprinting, I don't know. No sounds of Nerf activity, so he wasn't chasing someone or running away from them. He was just running. His feet made a dull hollow booming on the floor, which is cheap as it's part of a prefab thrown-up-in-4-months office building. Why was he running? What could possibly be happening in the world of marketing that was so urgent, it demanded that he run? I don't think I've ever had anything happen at work that's so critical I needed to run to take care of it. Maybe he was trapped on the phone and had to take a leak. Even so, I'd think that running would make it worse.

Maybe that's the big difference between the other people here and me. I just can't take what we do seriously. Nothing that's happening at this company is so important that failure to accomplish it is going to really matter. A lot of the people I work with are all so... committed to their jobs. They really matter, these mindless tasks we perform. None of it ever really matters to me. I do stuff, they pay me to do stuff. Are there people who actually profoundly care about debugging badly-written Perl scripts that manage user cookies? Who think about them when they're not at work? Who wake up each morning worried that the scripts missed them overnight? Who can't wait to get in to work so they can get started again?

Or take that marketing guy. My guess is that he just confirmed some minor detail with one of the engineers, and is going back to his cubicle to put it into his report. I could be wrong, but that's the usual reason for marketing people to be over in the Operations area. So he's racing back to his office to write this report. What's going to happen to him if the report is sent off for approval one or two minutes later? What's going to happen to the marketing department? Or the company? Or the nation? Nothing, nothing, nothing. So where does he get the energy to be so enthusiastic about it that he needs to run? How can it matter so much to him?

When I realized I'd been running this monologue over in my head for an hour, I decided it was time to get back to work. I have to maintain at least some minimum level of productivity for my manager to leave me alone. I don't want a repeat of yesterday's micro-management session. The best part about being micro-managed is that it's so patently inefficient. Instead of one person doing the work, two people's time is expended. More than once I caught myself about to say, "If you know how this should be done, why don't you go back to your own office and do it; I'll move on to

something else?" That wouldn't have gone over well, though, and conflict avoidance is something I'm working hard to perfect when it comes to my boss.

(3)

One of the problems with trying to keep a journal like this at work is that it's so easy to be interrupted and unable to continue for the rest of the day. This morning brought new escalation. Mike has some kind of catapult that he's using to periodically lob koosh balls into Rob's cubicle. An hour or two passes, then this dark shape goes soaring through the air. I don't know if he's hitting or not, but I know that Rob hasn't come out of his cubicle yet. Perhaps he's planning something impressive. Something to top the artillery. At least it's relatively quiet.

Of course I spoke too soon. The phone in the next cubicle began ringing. There's no-one in that cubicle, and there hasn't been anyone for over 2 months, as far as I know – if there is someone, they're extremely quiet. This doesn't stop the phone from ringing, though. Once a day, at least, it starts ringing. Today they must have finally shut off the former occupant's voice mail; rather than ringing 6 times as it usually does – which is barely tolerable – it went on for 34 rings. I counted, naturally, because I couldn't very well get any work done while it was ringing. No-one else seemed to notice, or care. Some people can work with distractions, I guess.

Still – 34 rings? I struggled to imagine the person making the call. "Well, that's 30 rings. Maybe he's just down the hall and he hasn't quite reached the phone yet. I should let it ring a few more times. I'm sure he'll answer." I also struggled with the concept of this person, whomever it is, making this call day after day after day, for weeks at a time, and never getting an answer or a call back, and

still calling again and again. "Perhaps," this anonymous caller must think, "he's just out of the office. Perhaps he's not sure of my number. Perhaps he accidentally deleted the 25 previous messages I left. I'd better leave one more."

Shortly after that, a koosh ball landed on my desk, after bouncing off my cubicle wall. I stared at it, stunned and somewhat panicked by the sudden intrusion. After sitting completely motionless for what felt like minutes, I slowly reached out, took the ball, and palmed it. Just in time, too. Mike arrived, breathless, moments later.

"Hey, did you see a koosh come this way?"

"Oh. I was trying to re-aim; Rob came and shot up my cube and knocked over the catapult." He glanced around my cubicle. "Wonder where it went?"

In a flat voice, I said, "I didn't see it."

He shrugged. "I have more. Hey, if you spot it, let me know."

I nodded, and eventually – after a show of peering in the corners near my cubicle – he left.

I turned and dropped the ball in the trash can.

Two more events broke up today's monotony. Naturally, one was retaliation for the catapult-damaging attack; Mike began lobbing 3 balls at a time, on the theory that he might get more than one to land in Rob's cubicle. The other was another Nerf escalation – this time, it was a team from Sales that came by with a small arsenal. They were not as intense as Rob and Mike, moving casually

down the aisle. I'm sure that, had Mike known they were coming, there would have been more of a fight. From the shouts, it sounded like they unloaded several guns into his cubicle. Sprinting away from the volley of return fire, they shouted incoherent war cries. I have a feeling that Operations might consolidate before this new threat.

Oh, and a memo arrived from the Boss. Time sheets are now going hourly; we have to account for all our hours each day. "For billing purposes," they say. I wonder where in the chain of reportage my invented hours become Official Fact. I'm planning to just make some numbers up, but I know that eventually they'll be presented to someone as hard values with real, billable weight. I'd like to think that won't happen until they're shown to the client; I know that it's far more likely it'll happen when my boss reviews them. That's sort of disheartening, since I'm sure I'll be asked to explain the numbers I choose at some meeting, eventually. It's clear that this isn't for billing purposes at all, or else they'd have done it long ago. It's to make sure there's something concrete that the managers can use to harass the engineers. Perhaps it's even secretly an anti-Nerf policy.

I wonder how Mike will report his hours spent adjusting his catapult.

(4)

Another new day and another exciting development at work. Today it's new fire doors, which will seal off parts of the building in case of fire. I wonder if that's legal? I can't imagine that the fire department is terribly supportive of locking employees in burning areas of the building. It will keep the server farm safe, though, and I guess that's the company's real priority.

In today's email, along with 20 or so pieces of spam, came a 'This is ***great***!' from Mike. Except that rather than attach the URL, as he usually does, he attached the whole file. It was another 3 megabyte Star Wars parody. Somewhere out there is someone just like Mike, except with some level of basic Flash skill, and he's spending his days putting together irritating parodies with awful voices and music. I wonder if he has to report his time hourly. I wonder how he reports these little movies. I did a quick calculation: Mike just used up 66 megs of space on the mail server with that mass-mailing. That's assuming he didn't also send it to the other departments – which seems unlikely, given that he's printing out signs that have the word 'Sales' in the center of crosshairs, and putting them up all over Operations.

An addendum to the memo from yesterday – if I spend more than 15 minutes in the bathroom over the course of the whole day, I have to report that, as well. I wonder if I should report it as "Using Controlled Substances". I'd certainly find out who actually reads the time sheets.

I didn't see today's escalation until I walked by Rob's cubicle on the way to the printers. A glassy, baleful eye peered out from the opening. After blinking at it several times, I figured it out – he'd attached a small mirror to the wall. Next to it was a Nerf gun with a long piece of cable attached to the trigger. From behind the camouflage sheet, a sepulchral voice said, "Oh. It's you. I thought you were one of the Sales people. Get out of my line of fire."

Embarrassed, either for Rob or myself, I continued to the printers.

Sales made another strike today. I saw Rob and Mike creeping down the aisle, and heard the hiss of walkie-talkies. The both had headsets on, and were muttering to each other. Shortly

after that there were shouts from the hall outside our cubicle area, and the fire door slammed inwards. Rob and Mike raced past my cubicle, and behind them I could hear the pounding of many feet. Lisa, in the cubicle opposite mine, threw a handful of superballs into the hall, and I heard a voice call "Here they come!" I think that was Javier, who's over by Mike's cubicle. I buried my face in my hands, trembling with frustration, as the Sales people tore into the aisle and began loosing Nerf darts at everything that moved. I didn't see how many of them there were; I just kept my eyes closed as the whirl of Nerf guns filled the air. Several darts hit me; later I found eight of them in my cubicle. There were more shouts, and a thud as someone slammed up against a cubicle wall. Someone was laughing hysterically, and I watched Mina from International Sales tumble on the superballs and land heavily on her large behind. This shook the floor enough to tip over my pencil can, sending dead ballpoints skittering across my desk.

After a few minutes, the noise subsided, and I heard the fire door slam again as the Sales people retreated. There was some amount of cheering and a few 'high fives' — a part of the mainstream culture that was thankfully left behind by said mainstream. Not, of course, by people like Mike, who occasionally describes things as 'sweet' and 'fresh'.

I realized what was happening just in time, and was prepared as Mike and Rob, now firmly allied against the common enemy, appeared in my doorway. Rob, looking grim, just stood there. Mike looked around and said, "Hey, did any of those darts end up in here? We're collecting them to use them against Sales."

I shook my head slowly. "I guess I got lucky."

Rob gave me a look of thinly veiled contempt. I shrugged and turned back to my computer, in a gesture of clear dismissal.

Sometime later they left to continue their search for the extra darts. I tossed some more of the Mountain Dew cans on top of the pile in the trash can, covering the darts I'd thrown away.

I saw that girl outside today, just after lunch. She stands near the back door smoking. She's beautiful. I sometimes wonder what her name is, what part of the building she works in, whether she has a boyfriend. I sometimes imagine going up to talk to her. I don't, of course. What would I say to her? "Hi, I don't smoke, but I do use illegal narcotics!"

(5)

On the way into the building this morning, I was caught between the Operations and Sales people, headed in from the parking lot. Rob had clearly told everyone in Ops that I was a coward and not worthy of being a member of the team; they gave me chilly glares and didn't speak to me. In the elevator, an animated conversation among the Sales people stilled as I entered. I got the strong impression I should have waited for the next one. I wonder if I'm the only person who comes to work because he has to. These people seem like they look forward to it. Gina, the Sales AA, was standing carefully so that I couldn't see the Nerf Bazooka, or whatever it was, that one of the other Sales guys was holding. Probably she felt like she had to defend their Secret Weapon from a probable informant for Ops.

I guess they hadn't heard the news of my cowardice from Rob.

I had over 60 pieces of email waiting for me when I got to my desk. About 40 were spam, but the rest were about the company Christmas party. Attendance mandatory, naturally. There was the

initial invitation, then 6 copies as the CEO's secretary attempted to figure out how to make corrections in Lotus Notes. Then 4 or 5 replies complaining about the date, noting that there was a department-wide all-hands meeting for the Content groups scheduled at the same time. Then three more corrections by the secretary. Then another complaint about the name (because some employees aren't Christians). And to top it off, a complaint about the color scheme used on the invitation email ('not legible enough on my Sun in 256 color mode'). All that was sent between 8:36 AM and 9:07 AM, when I arrived.

Oh, and naturally there was also email, at 9:04, from my boss, asking me to take care of something. Minor, but the purpose of the email was to establish when I'd arrived in the morning (by the time of my reply). I immediately replied to that one with an "I'm on it."

Sometimes I stop and wonder what's magic about 9 AM. What is special about that particular time? Any workday which begins after it is worthless and indicates the employee is slacking off. Why is work performed between 9 AM and noon somehow inherently more valuable than work performed between noon and 5 PM? I think it must be more valuable, because although my boss's departure time varies by up to 15 minutes (earlier or later) than 5 PM, if my arrival time varies by more than 2 or 3 minutes, I'm not showing responsible behavior. And I'm betraying the company somehow, and thus by extension personally betraying my boss. So I can only assume that 15 minutes in the evening is inherently worth less (and thus not a betrayal of any significance), and 5 minutes in the morning is worth more (and thus evidence of an employee on the road to stealing, embezzling, and finally detonating a bomb in the break room).

That's sort of odd, since I know that I don't work very well in the mornings. I'm always too tired. Even when I tweak -- when I'm using speed -- I'm still not very efficient before noon or so.

I can only imagine what my days would be like if I had one of those mythical jobs where I could 'set my own hours' -- come in at 10 or 11, stay until 6 or over 9000; or, if I got all my work done, come in at noon and leave at 4 to go play tennis, or whatever it is the CEO goes off to do with the woman who is not his wife. As long as the work is done on time, I don't understand what the automatic knee-jerk objection is to that kind of schedule.

That's probably why I'm a lowly engineer, and not a highly paid manager.

The girl's name is Tammy. I found this out by accident, because someone else was talking to her as I walked out to my car at lunch to get a bottle of water. It's predictably amusing when she takes her smoking breaks; there's a crowd of engineers that follow her around and hang on her every word. I wonder if she's the type who knows she has complete control over these pathetic excuses for men, and manipulates them ruthlessly? Or perhaps she's innocently unaware of their lecherous interest. It's like watching a princess holding court.

Today's escalation was entirely defensive in nature. Rob crept out of his cubicle shortly after lunch and set something down near the fire door that leads to the stairwell and elevators -- the Sales Department's path into Operations. He'd been huddled over there for about 20 minutes when I walked by on my way to the bathroom. Although he glared at me and shielded whatever he was working on from my traitorous gaze by turning his body to block, I could see that it was a webcam and some cable -- he was splicing something together.

An hour or so later, I saw that he'd set up a monitor at the end of the aisle, and on-screen was a live view of the door. Presumably so that any one of us could see who was approaching at any time. I watched Lisa rig a mirror so that she could watch this monitor from her desk. Rob was explaining to Javier that he'd be hooking the feed into the network once he'd set up the access privileges correctly so that only Ops people could see it.

Mike was meanwhile distributing little clickers — the cheap little metal toys that you squeeze to make an obnoxious clicking noise. For a while the whole room was filled with the sound of clicking. Each of them had the Linux penguin on it. "Left over from a trade show," he said as he handed me one. "Just click it if you spot the Sales people, ok?" His tone conveyed a mixture of his usual can-do gung-ho rah-rah attitude and cautious suspicion.

I was called in to a meeting today to talk about my performance. My boss was strangely hostile through the whole thing, and I sat, quiet and sort of dumbfounded, as he criticized my attitude. "You're an excellent programmer," he said, "but you don't really show the level of commitment to the success of this company we'd like to see." More on that in a second; the main thing is that I saw a Nerf rifle slung over his chair back, and on his screen, a view from the webcam. So Rob had talked to him. That explained the meeting.

I don't understand how I can be a "good programmer" but not "show commitment." Doesn't the first imply the second? If I'm getting work done for the company, and the work is good, and doesn't need too much oversight or correction, and I'm doing it quickly and efficiently — what else does my boss need from me? It's not just him, either; I've gotten this same lecture from two other employers since escaping college. "You're doing a good job but..." How can there be a but if I'm doing a good job?

I knew what was implied in his criticism, though. "You're doing a good job but you're just not like the other engineers, and that makes me nervous. I'd prefer if you'd act and think in easily predictable ways, so that I could feel as though I had more control over you." This was certainly precipitated by my failure to Strike Out Against Sales yesterday. Once again I'd demonstrated that I just didn't care the way the other engineers did — and that eccentricity made my boss uncomfortable.

There wasn't any ultimatum; he was never that obvious. Often he'd have trouble assigning work to people, because he couldn't manage to directly state whatever he intended. It's as though he were in a constant state of covering his ass from any consequences. This made it really difficult to complete projects for him, because he'd never actually assign them, or explain which ones he considered high priority. After the meeting, I didn't really know what he expected of me; I was just supposed to 'get it' somehow.

Sales must be building up for something; they didn't make any overt moves today.

I need to start bringing more drugs to work; I'm doing a lot more speed than I was. I wonder if anyone can tell?

(6)

This morning I found a color printout on my desk. It was a still from *The Godfather* — of the scene where they find the horse's head in bed. Which was so subtle I wanted to scream. Instead I checked my mail, which consisted of 67 pieces of spam (Get the money you need for the holidays! Enjoy Las Vegas without leaving home! Email your ad to 25 million people for only \$99!) and four pieces of actual work email, from a client who had severely broken

the code I'd sent her to integrate her registration process with ours. I watched my code disintegrate over the course of those four messages, from 6:32 AM to 8:44 AM. I immediately started firing email back to her telling her not to touch anything else while I tried to figure out what was wrong.

Her reply came as I was deleting the spam (well, moving it to a filtering script I'd written to block any more crap from those particular spammers, actually). She'd made a bunch more changes, and from what I could see, she'd wiped out their entire user registration database. I had about 5 minutes to grab a copy of our mirror before it, too, was wiped out.

I made it, but just barely. It was only 9:32 but I got up and went to the bathroom to do a line of speed. Even before it hit me I was shaking all over. I'm don't know why; if she'd blasted her database, she would have been fired, I'm sure. I guess I might have been, too, if they decided my code had been at fault, which it hadn't until she'd started messing with it. It was like the infinite monkeys with typewriters. She'd somehow accidentally turned my benign matching routine into something much more destructive. Even so, if they'd fired me, so what?

I'd been washing my face for five minutes, rubbing it until my wrists began to ache, when this thought hit me.

So what?

Unable to pursue it further, I left the bathroom and headed back to my cubicle, where I saw I'd been visited by the Ops team again. They'd left a pamphlet on my chair, and on everyone else's, from what I saw walking down the aisle. It had that look that documents get when you let Word format them for you – outlined,

3-D text at an angle. "Defending Your Department: A Field Manual" shouted up from my chair.

I scanned it as I sat back down, and then tossed it in the trash. Rob's work, clearly. While I tried to rewrite the code I'd sent the client, to prevent her from ever doing something like that again, I listened to the sounds of footsteps outside in the aisle. Someone was walking in circles around the whole area. I had a hideous suspicion, and I had to come up with some excuse to go to the printer so that I could see.

I was right: Mike was walking a patrol, Nerf gun at the ready. He nodded to me without a word, his eyes hard and his grip on the gun tight. I took my printouts and scuttled back to my cubicle. I could tell that he was pleased as hell with his self-defined role as the 'protector' of Ops. I wondered how he could get any coding done while walking patrol. The answer came to me a few minutes later as I was poking at the calendar in Outlook – he'd had all his tasks moved to Rob for the next week, except for meetings he couldn't avoid.

One such meeting was the New Technologies meeting that the VP of Research and Development held monthly. It was that afternoon, and all of Operations was expected to attend. I crammed in as much coding as possible; the problem was that I'd left too much of the actual low-level database stuff in the main body of the script, rather than break it out into separate bits that the customer, however ambitious, would be too stupid to mess with. I got about half of this done before we had to leave for the meeting.

It was pointless, but it always is; I learned that Perl was out, and HTML was out, and Java was out. I wasn't really clear on what was in, but since I didn't have any intention of switching from Perl to anything else, it didn't really matter. Mostly it was an opportunity

for me to get the silent treatment from the rest of the department. And to see Tammy, who was sitting with the Content people. I think she looked my way once, but I'd already turned my bloodshot eyes back to the podium. I wondered if I looked like a junkie.

When we got back to Ops, Rob began swearing. I didn't know what was wrong, but he and Mike entered the cubicle area first, slowly scanning the room. Clearly some warning device had been tripped. We found out not long after that Sales had been in the area, and had taken every single power cable for every computer. Mike was pissed, Rob was pissed.

I was just stunned.

I hadn't saved my work before I'd left for the meeting.

It took us the rest of the day to get cables for all the computers again. I was still speechless, because rather than go over to Sales and demand an explanation, my boss insisted that we simply scavenge cables from storerooms and pretend that nothing had happened. I wanted to shake him, wanted to scream at them – this isn't a stupid little Nerf game! They wiped out a morning's worth of work! Can we please stop playing and start acting like adults?

Rob would have none of that, I knew, and the vicious glares he was shooting around the room, as though someone from Sales or Marketing might be lurking in the room still, were enough to keep my mouth shut. I just started over. By that time it was three, and I knew I'd never get it done today, but that was fine too. My right eye had started to twitch severely, and I could feel a migraine settling in on my skull, gently probing my sinuses to get the pain started.

Tammy was waiting for a ride when I left. It had started to drizzle a little bit, and she was wearing a sweater with the sleeves pulled down over her hands. I walked past her, stopped, turned back to her, and silently handed her my umbrella. Too surprised to refuse, she took it, looking down as though I'd just handed her an artifact from an alien civilization. "Thanks!"

I shrugged. "I don't have to stand in the rain. You do."

(7)

I called in sick yesterday. My boss had a very disappointed and resigned tone to his voice, as though I'd somehow committed some great act of treason. I had, in getting sick, personally wounded him. His automatic "Well, I hope you feel better" was entirely devoid of compassion; it was the response of a man who strongly suspected that I was faking illness to escape work. I have been tempted to do so, but never seemed to have the sick time available. Yesterday's illness was probably psychological, though, or drug related. The migraine never went away, and I was nearly blind for part of the day. Telling my boss that wouldn't have done any good, though; I should have come to work anyway. I think if my leg had been severed and I was in a hospital bed attached to an IV drip, I still would have received the same long-suffering sigh from him. "Is that all?" he seemed to be saying. "Once I came into work after open heart surgery, with the clamps still protruding from the gash in my chest and a team of doctors sewing me up as I closed a deal with a client."

Why do they give us sick time if we're not supposed to use it?

I took the time off nonetheless, and when I came back the place seemed subtly changed. There was a kind of sour smell in the air. I realized after he walked by with a gun in one hand that Rob had taken to sleeping in his cubicle – thus the smell. He hadn't bathed since the day before yesterday. Also, there was a jury-rigged alarm system on the door; as I entered the Ops area a red light started pulsing on the top of the door frame. This brought Mike in moments; he looked me over and then stepped aside, nodding to me. "Good to see you back in the saddle, partner. How was your vacation?"

I turned an expressionless stare on him. "Painful." Why do people like Mike, and my boss, assume that any time spent away from work is relaxing 'vacation'? Weekends are not vacation; they're the minimum possible time for me to recover my sanity after giving someone else 5 days of my life. Sick days are not relaxing and fun.

He laughed, clapped me on the shoulder, and with those pleasantries aside I went to my cubicle and he went back on patrol.

The attack came just after lunch. Sales and Marketing had joined forces, and stormed into Ops with the full arsenal of Nerf and Koosh at the ready. Foam projectiles arced through the air, slamming into cubicle walls. I sat very still, hands on the keyboard, waiting for the inevitable.

Rob roared something incoherent and began flinging superballs down the aisles at the invaders. There were shouts of pain, and scuffling as the attackers took cover against this onslaught. It seems they were prepared; from over the barriers at the far end of the room came several dark round objects which made a tinkling noise as they landed. Baffled, I craned my neck to see what was happening—

A dark shape landed on my desk and exploded.

Sitting amidst the drifting clouds of twinkling light, I wasn't immediately able to figure out what had just happened. My whole body was shaking from tension, and there was a vaguely unpleasant tingling in my extremities and on my scalp. On my desk was a metal ring and a hook.

It had been a Christmas tree ornament. Filled with glitter and confetti.

I just sat dumbly looking at the shards of red glass all over my desk, listening to the sounds of battle as though at the end of a long tunnel. I could feel my head swimming, and as the room grew quiet again, I seized my trash can and vomited into it.

Later that afternoon my boss came by with a vacuum. "You're going to have to clean it up out of your office. It's a safety hazard." I didn't even look up at him. "The glitter, I mean. And the glass. Maintenance won't get to it until tonight, and you can't work with broken glass in your cube."

I took the vacuum from him. "Okay." Somehow I managed to resist letting the obvious answer slip out of my lips: Well, I guess I'll have to go home then, because I'm not cleaning up this damn mess.

(8)

Rob's planned retaliation was somehow still shocking. I'm not sure why I'm surprised by anything anymore. I washed my hair four times but there's still glitter on my scalp, and my cubicle has a sparkling layer of dust over it. When I came into the Ops area, there

were several buckets in the aisle, placed strategically, and Javier and Mike were at the sink by the coffee maker. I glanced in one of the buckets as I passed it. Water balloons. That initially seemed harmless, and it wasn't until I sat down and looked at my computer that it struck me: water balloons.

Rob stopped by a few minutes later, a sneer on his face. "We don't expect you to help, but the least you can do is hold down the fort while we're gone." He gestured broadly with one hand, the other being occupied fidgeting at his belt. "All you have to do is speed dial my pager if they try something while we're out." Behind him, Javier, Mike, two other people whose names I don't know, and Lisa had all assembled. Javier nodded solemnly to me as they filed away.

I can only assume the mission was a success; I sat working on database code while the occasional shout drifted out from behind the fire door. Lisa returned first, and as she scurried back into her cubicle I saw that her face was bleeding. There was a gash above her left eyebrow — a small one, but enough to send a red trickle down her cheek. She grabbed a handful of tissues and started blotting at it, and from where I was sitting I could see the distant look in her eyes.

"Are you okay?" I asked, more out of curiosity than concern.

She looked at me but also through me. I wasn't really registering in her consciousness. "Yeah. Just tripped."

Any further questions were cut off by the return of Rob and the Ops crew, who entered quietly wearing determined expressions. Mike stacked the empty buckets by the door, and there was some

restrained back-slapping and a few muted congratulatory comments. It appeared they'd won. Rob came over to me.

"No problems, I take it?"

I shook my head.

"Good. Thanks." He returned to his cubicle, taking Mike with him to plan the next move.

The mail server had been hiccuping all morning, and not long after lunch, it finally started passing mail around again. I deleted 76 pieces of spam and forwarded two angry messages from a customer who'd gotten my email address somehow and was complaining about broken links on our web site. I don't know who got the 'webmaster' email, but it pleased me to dump problems on someone else for a change.

After my second line of speed for the day, I went for a walk outside, blinking furiously against the sharp light and color. I had an ulterior motive, sure, and there she was. She saw me and waved, so I wandered over. She smoked Camel Lights.

"Hey, I have to get your umbrella back to you. It's over in my car, if you want to walk with me over there." She gestured vaguely at the parking lot.

"Sure." As we walked I glanced over at her. "So why were you waiting for a ride, if you have a car?"

She grimaced. "My boyfriend had the car all day."

"Oh."

I took my umbrella, said "No problem" when she thanked me again, and quietly returned to my cubicle. Her boyfriend.

I didn't get any more work done today, and eventually just gave up even pretending to do work.

(9)

Now I'm writing on an old laptop on the far side of my cubicle. Sales attacked today, and I don't know what's going to happen next.

This morning email arrived (I had to undelete it, as I thought it was junk at first – it came in the middle of 83 pieces of spam) announcing that the CEO and the CTO would be taking a trip to Japan to meet with some client. Most of the executive level staff was going as well. There was going to be a send-off all-hands meeting in the auditorium at 10 AM, and then they were leaving.

The meeting was long, dull, and wholly irrelevant. Two interesting things happened: one, I turned suddenly and saw that Tammy was watching me. Horrified, I turned away. Was I jittering? Two, I saw the sales people with Palms and laptops. They were careful never to look our way. The less disciplined Marketing department was glowering at Rob and Mike with open loathing. For their part, Rob and Mike – and Javier, too – were not looking at the stage at all. They glanced casually around them, their heads and eyes in constant motion. I saw that Rob had something concealed under his coat, which he'd put in his lap. Oh, and I should mention that the smell coming from Rob was extraordinary. Mike had also begun to reek a bit, as I think Rob had talked him into staying overnight to plan.

After the speeches, the PowerPoint presentation, and the polite applause, we filed back towards the stairwell. There was a grunt from behind me, and I turned just in time to see Mira go down, a cry of alarm escaping her. As she collapsed, there was a wooden snap, like a branch in a tree. Rob had a smug expression on his face, and kept walking. Mike hesitated, but also kept moving. I turned back to help her up.

I could see that her ankle was broken, but as I reached down to offer her a hand, someone shoved me roughly backwards. One of the sales guys. "Keep the hell away from her," he hissed. I looked around and saw that all the Operations people were gone, already up on our floor. As I backed away, confused, I met the gaze of Gina, the Sales AA, and saw nothing there but dark and insane hatred. The handle of the door jabbed painfully into my back, and I turned, threw it open, and escaped up the stairs.

I got an impression of what had actually happened when I walked past Rob's cubicle a half-hour or so later and saw the hand-held stunner on his desk. He noticed me looking and quickly swept it into a drawer. I remembered an ad Mike had sent around in email last month, and when I got back to my desk I looked at it. 300,000 volts, legal in 44 states.

Two hours after lunch, Rob had begun to relax. Sales usually made their moves right after lunch, and they hadn't, and it was getting pretty late in the day. He was laughing a bit, convinced that he'd won. I had seen the look in Gina's eyes, though, and I was on edge. I'd also done about twice the speed that I usually do, which made me a bit anxious. So when it happened, I was probably the only one expecting it, although this didn't make me jump any less.

The door burst open, and without speaking the Sales and Marketing people began throwing things into the room. After the

previous experiences, I immediately pushed my chair back into the far corner; this probably saved my life. I heard a heavy thud and a cry of pain from down the aisle, and then something round hurtled into my cubicle and slammed into my monitor. There was a flash, and a sound of breaking glass, and then the acrid smell of burnt plastic. Embedded in the screen of my monitor was a croquet ball.

More thuds, more shouts, and then an enraged Rob came hurtling past my cubicle, a chair raised over his head. The Sales and Marketing people scattered, and Rob hurled it at one of them, striking her in the side. She collapsed, and he shrieked triumphantly at her. I saw most of this, but was still frozen to my seat, listening to my monitor crackle and hiss. One of the other Marketing guys grabbed her, lifted her up to her feet, and kept running.

With the enemy dispersed, my boss came out to survey the damage. I was the only one with a broken monitor. Lisa was bleeding again; she'd been struck in the head. Javier was bleeding as well, from the mouth. I couldn't tell if he'd lost a tooth or just busted his lip. Lots of other stuff had been destroyed, but not quite as extravagantly as my monitor. My boss brought me a laptop from his office.

Looking at this laptop, I began to surface from my daze. Why did he bother giving it to me? Was I realistically expected to code in this insanity? And yet it seems I was, because he also forwarded me email from a client about a presentation next week, noting that he'd like me to 'look this over and put together some kind of rough outline.' One of my co-workers almost killed me; my \$1000 monitor sits destroyed on my desk. There's a little fire burning inside it. And I'm supposed to put together a 'rough outline'.

So I did.

(10)

Today I arrived with a bone-deep exhaustion that threatened to overwhelm me all morning. It took me five minutes of staring at the tiny screen of the laptop to realize I was reading spam. I deleted it, finally, and the other 91 pieces of junk that had arrived in the night. I decided that, although I'd been at work less than an hour, I desperately needed to go outside for a walk. Anything to clear my head.

She was outside, not smoking, deep in conversation with Brad from Customer Service. Brad has that New Yuppie look to him -- casual but also professional, hair tousled in an expensive-looking way, clothing rumpled in a planned fashion. He was smiling a lot, and so was she. I didn't listen to what they were saying, because all I could see was the image of the croquet ball in my monitor. They took the monitor away overnight, with no word on when I'd be getting a replacement.

I thought the two of them were watching me as I walked past them towards the parking lot. I'm not sure where I was going, and had just started to wander; I heard their conversation resume as I got just out of earshot. I wondered when Customer Service might get involved in the fray inside, and whose side they'd take. They hate Ops, but they hate Sales too.

On the edge of the parking lot is a line of trees intended to screen us from the freeway that runs by the building. The muted rumble from tires on asphalt drifted from behind the trunks; they're those tall, thin trees that look like bushes stretched up to a point. Laying my hand on one, I discovered that I was shaking all over. No idea why. I turned around and sat down, looking back across at the building.

Brad had left – whether to his car or back inside, I couldn't tell. Tammy was still there, leaned up against one of the concrete posts, looking out in my direction. Tiny little person. She smiled, waved; I did too, though I don't know if she could see me there crouched in the limp grass. She went back inside.

After a while I began to wonder how long I could reasonably stay out here. How long until I was missed? Eventually my boss would concoct some 'emergency' for me to handle, and send email demanding I get to work on it immediately. He does that often. Our task management system allows him to set four levels of priority: Low, Medium, High and Urgent. Of course, everything is always flagged Urgent. Two weeks ago there was a set of code that we were testing, and in its output there was a spelling error. I'd seen the error a dozen times, kept meaning to fix it, and somehow never got around to it. So he sent out an Urgent task to fix the spelling error.

It's a trend of devaluation of the currency of words. Emergencies should be things like: "We will go bankrupt if you don't fix this." Instead, gradually, the priority of every minor task has crept up, month by month, until now everything is Urgent. It's hard to tell what I should be working on; I think that's the point. It gives my boss something else to harass me about: "Why didn't you do this? It's Urgent, after all." Never mind that I have 10 other Urgent projects awaiting me every morning. Their actual priorities are indistinguishable. 'Urgent' has become a meaningless word. In fact, it's starting to look meaningless to me as I type this.

I've learned to always do any task flagged 'Low' first. Those are the ones that he'll ask me about in meetings. Unfailingly. Perhaps because 'Low' is so rare to see, and thus stands out more on the weekly report.

What would happen if I just sat outside for the rest of the day? I think that it might be hours before my boss caught on that I hadn't been in my cubicle the last few times he dropped by to 'chat' (read: micromanage). After that — what? Well, certainly a stern talking-to at our next meeting. What if I was still out here when our next meeting was scheduled? Would I be fired?

Part of me wants to think that being fired would be a good thing. That somehow I'd be happier. That even if I ended up living on the street, it would be better than coming to this place every day. Part of me rebels against the Puritan work ethic, the demand that we must produce in order to live. That part of me insists that I should be permitted to do whatever I like, and someone should keep me fed and clothed while I do so.

Once, I thought that I was temperamentally unsuited to working; somehow, the switch that other people have turned on that lets them sit at a desk for 10 hours a day was set to 'off' in me. But I realize that it's not the concept of work so much that turns my stomach — it's this specific work that I'm doing. I wish I were good at something other than programming.

After what felt like a few minutes under the tree, but which my watch told me was almost an hour and a half, I headed back inside. I could keep letting my mind run in circles around the idea of just... giving up. I could do that, but it was as much of a dead end as going back and working. I've been unemployed before, and I hate it as much as I hate programming.

Mike and Rob were standing by the sink when I arrived, passing something back and forth. I'd lost almost all my curiosity by then, so I just ignored them and went to my cubicle. They stopped by a minute later, grinning broadly, and I was treated to the results of their handiwork: both had smudged black and gray

greasepaint on their faces. The effect was probably intended to be 'savage hunters' or 'jungle warriors' but instead came across as football players after half-time. I just looked at them, waiting.

"Urban camouflage, man," Mike said.

"Ah." I wasn't sure what else to say. "You do realize that face-paint isn't going to hide you in fluorescent light, don't you?"

Mike's grin widened as Rob produced what looked like the remote control to an old television. Both of them started to giggle, and they stomped off to consult with Javier on something.

I didn't really understand what I'd just witnessed, and was having a lot of trouble concentrating on anything, so I just went back to staring at the laptop.

The rest of the department decided to have lunch in the Ops conference room, but I wasn't hungry, so I stayed in my cubicle — to no-one's surprise. I discovered that all my deleted spam was still sitting in Outlook's Deleted Items folder, waiting for me to send it off to oblivion. Like a death row for email. Feeling like a governor holding the power of last-minute pardons, I started reading it. Spam is a lot of fun once my initial anger at being its target has faded.

I was learning how to purchase THC-free herbal alternatives to cannabis when I saw something move out of the corner of my eye. I hadn't heard the conference room door so it wasn't anyone from Ops. Standing, I could peek over the wall of my cubicle and see the whole aisle — and the guy from Marketing at the end of it, looking carefully into Rob's cubicle.

I didn't know his name but I recognized him — new hire, maybe a month ago. Fresh out of college. I guess he was sort of

expendable to them, or something. I walked down the aisle towards him, not really sure what I was intending to say, and he turned and saw me. His eyes were huge, panicked, like the proverbial deer.

"Um, hey. What are you doing?" I was trying to keep my voice calm — well, more specifically, I was trying not to start laughing at him. He was dressed in office casual: a nice sweater, nice slacks, nice shoes. He also was wearing a headband with a feather tucked into it, and had red stripes on his face. Looked like dry-erase marker to me.

He started to stammer and back up. I wasn't sure where this was going, but he obviously had some ideas. I was ready to shrug and walk back to my desk, having embarrassed him enough, when I saw a dark form rise up from behind the last cubicle at the end of the aisle — right behind the Marketing monkey. Rob.

A few breathless minutes later, and all of Ops was standing around this poor chump in the conference room. He still had a terrified look in his eyes, mixed with disbelief — here he was, 2 months into his first Real Job, and he was duct-taped to a chair in a conference room.

Rob looked smug. He gripped my shoulder. "Good play, alerting us to the little spying bastard."

I'd followed them into the newly-christened detention area, curious and a bit nervous about whatever I'd started by spotting this kid.

Mike looked more serious. "So what do we do with him? What do you think he saw?"

Javier stood near the door, which was now open. Without taking his eyes off the fire door, he called, "He could have seen everything. We can't let him go."

Lisa had that distant look again, her eyes crawling over the kid. "We could kill him."

I laughed, weakly; after a moment the others joined in.

"I guess we keep him tied up for now. Someone will have to watch him," Mike said.

Rob nodded. "I'm here all night anyhow."

So they were going to keep him overnight. "Guys..." I cleared my throat, as everyone turned to me. "Um, you know that this is a felony, right? Involuntary restraint, or something like that..." I trailed off. No-one said anything. They were looking at me as though I were speaking in tongues.

After a few moments of that I just left. I didn't care what they did to the kid. It wasn't my problem. My boss watched the whole thing; if he didn't give a damn, I wasn't going to worry about it.

While I sat there trying to maneuver my fingers around the tiny little laptop keys, I kept replaying the scene in my head. The thing I kept getting stuck at was Mike. "What do you think he saw?"

Well, what was there to see?

It was nagging at me, irritating. Their stockpile of Nerf toys? The makings for more water balloons? Something more awful

— like squirt guns? They were acting like they'd caught a real spy, not a pretend spy in a pretend fight in an office building.

When did a coping mechanism become the problem to be coped with, itself?

I was still gnawing one fingernail and wondering, when a series of sharp cracks broke the silence. I jumped, my hands instantly trembling like leaves, the laptop sliding off onto the floor. I could taste something acrid and sulfurous, a familiar chemical smell. The Ops crew piled out of the conference room; a few moments later, Mike held up a scrap of something. He called out — to me as much as any of the rest of them — "Firecrackers." There was a look of disgust on Rob's face. And possibly disappointment.

Retaliation was in order, but it was clear from the looks on their faces, over across the cubicles, that Mike and Rob were in disagreement as to what should be done. After a while, Rob turned away, stalking back to his cubicle. He'd lost the argument. He returned a few moments later with a paintball gun clutched in his hands. I remembered them from the company Leadership Seminar last year; I hadn't gone, but Rob had. It was his sort of thing. Mike had shown me pictures.

Off trooped the Ops team, leaving Javier behind to look after their prisoner. I watched Javier for a while, but he was intent on the kid, his back to me. After a minute of this, I couldn't stand it any longer. I got up and crept over to Rob's cubicle.

Inside, past the camo sheet, it was dark — almost pitch black after the harsh fluorescent light. The place smelled, too; it wasn't just a sweat and sour farts smell, but something more animal. In the gloom I could see posters on all the walls, pictures of guns, military hardware, planes, tanks. It was like "Cubicle by Guns and Ammo."

The computer had been moved under the desk to make room for a ridiculous array of Nerf weaponry; it was obvious that Rob hadn't been doing any programming for quite a while. Pinned to the back wall, and all over the back part of the desk, were blueprints for the building.

In the back corner was a flat black box, latched and with a lock, about the size of a PC. Embossed on its top was the word "Glock".

I looked at the box for a long time. Then I went back to my cubicle and back to reading spam.

(11)

On my way out the door yesterday, I saw her talking to Brad. She hit him on the arm, playful; he held his hands up in surrender. They were both laughing. I walked past them to get to my car. Halfway across the parking lot, she caught up to me.

"Hey!"

I turned. "Oh, hi!" I could only barely manage to sound enthusiastic.

"I keep seeing you all over the place at work these days." Tammy pushed her hair up and out of her face. "But you never say 'hello' or anything."

"Sorry." I smiled a bit. "I guess I'm just not really very outgoing."

"I noticed." She looked down at her feet, up at me again. "I'm Tammy, by the way."

I introduced myself, and a predictably awkward silence followed.

Finally she said, "Well, anyway, don't be such a stranger." And smiled at me. The well-worn saying didn't make me wince, I noticed.

She walked off, and I just stood there for a bit, a half-smile on my face. Then I went to my car.

This morning, though, I sat through two hours of traffic, and I'd already mostly forgotten the smell of her hair as she turned and made a breeze. The only smell was the smell of Rob, who was lurking in his cave again, letting Mike handle the team for him. Periodically Mike would head into my boss's office and report in. Everyone left Rob alone.

As I passed the conference room on the way to my morning ritual in the bathroom, I saw an ugly new bruise blossoming across the cheek of the kid. He was lolling, half-asleep, and the smell of urine wafted out of the half-open door.

I sat down feeling at once more alert and more nervous, and deleted 104 pieces of spam. I had work to do, and with the laptop I got started on it, but I couldn't help but think of the lost and defeated expression on the face of the kid from Marketing. He had dark eyes, and when he'd first been tied up they had glittered wide with fear and anger. Now they were flat and dead. I wondered what had happened overnight, with Rob. Eventually my typing slowed and stopped. With the soft keystrokes of the laptop, it's not like anyone could tell, anyway. I wonder sometimes if there's someone

who keeps count of my keystrokes. Not enough clicks? Not enough work!

The room got darker. Standing up, I could see Javier and a couple of the other guys with duct tape and tinfoil. Blocking out the windows. They wrapped around the whole floor in a single continuous glassy plane, and I couldn't imagine they'd bought enough tinfoil for everything. But they were only blocking out the ones near Rob's cubicle — to keep people from looking in with binoculars, I supposed. I didn't think anyone was looking in, but I guess it was a possibility.

Rob and Mike were still in their greasepaint camouflage, and Javier had put it on as well. They looked mussed, mostly, and not particularly hidden. I saw that they were all wearing dark clothing, though — black sweaters and slacks. Mike had put on a pair of leather gloves.

He stopped by a few minutes later. "Have you seen Lisa this morning?"

"No. She parks on the other side of the building." I shrugged.

Mike looked towards the doors, with an expression of almost real concern on his face. Then he turned back to me. "Here, you might need this later."

He handed me a mini-maglite. He was a big maglite collector — one of every size. He liked to extol the virtues of the big, 4 D-cell version, as both a light source and a weapon, and more than once he'd demonstrated how cops used them: "First shine the light in their eyes, to disorient them, and then whack, you clobber them with the handle." Always with his big toothy grin.

"Even if you block all the windows, it's not going to be that dark in here," I pointed out. "The lights are all on."

He smiled. "Just keep it in your desk – or better yet, in your pocket."

Two hours later, the fire door slammed open, and Lisa staggered in. Her clothes were torn, she was bleeding, and as she collapsed on the floor she gasped out a spray of blood. One of her legs was twisted at an unpleasant angle. Outside in the hall I could hear another door slam – to the stairwell – and pounding feet. Mike and Javier were next to her in seconds.

From where I was standing by the opening of my cubicle, I could see she needed to go to a hospital. They tried to help her to her feet, and she started screaming. One of her eyes was swelled shut, and I could see her right hand was caked with blood, where her fingernails were torn – from clawing at someone, I guessed, and I also suspected that the blood wasn't all hers.

Rob had come out of his cubicle, and was looking on at this scene without expression. He turned back into his little cave, and I thought about going over to shake him and scream at him. "You see what you've done?" But I didn't, thinking of that black box.

"I'm calling 911," I announced, and everyone looked over at me.

"No you're not." This from Javier, who's a foot taller than I am, and covered the distance between us in moments to rest one hand heavily on the phone. "No way."

"She needs a doctor." I waved towards the door.

"If you call 911, they'll--"

He didn't finish, and didn't have to. I knew what would happen if the police showed up. I knew what would happen if anyone showed up.

From the door, between feeble moans of pain, Lisa said, "No, no cops. No ambulance. Just get me to my chair."

I started towards my boss' office, certain that no matter how much of an asshole he was, he'd step in now, but then I stopped. He was watching everything from the window of his door, and there was a small, but definite smirk on his face. Was it approval? I couldn't tell.

Rob had come back out of his cubicle now, and was advancing on the conference room where the kid was tied up. I wanted to just sit back down and close my eyes, but I also wanted to see how this would end.

Mike intercepted him at the door and they spoke for a while. All I caught was "No. Tonight."

After it was all over, I was still just standing there. I could hear Lisa whimpering periodically from nearby. I could feel my scalp tingle from the speed. I could smell sweat and vomit.

I went outside for a walk.

Tammy was out there, alone, smoking. It's odd that she's almost always downstairs when I go for a walk. I suppose statistically it's not that odd, given how many breaks I take and how long it takes to smoke a cigarette.

"Hey!" She waved and smiled.

"Hi. Can I have one of those?" I pointed at her pack of Camels.

She looked confused, but gave me a cigarette. "Sure. You smoke?"

I lit it from her offered lighter, drew in the hot, greasy smoke, and exhaled in a stale-smelling cloud. "No."

"Bad day, huh?"

"You could say that." I gestured at the building. "Do you think any of this really matters?"

She turned her head, considering. "Well, depends on what you mean by 'matters', I suppose." She flicked her butt into the bushes with a practiced three-finger motion. "I mean, they pay us, and that matters. And someone up there thinks everything the company does is pretty important. So that matters to him."

I thought about how to rephrase it. "Do you think it will matter to you? In the long-term, I mean. Ten years from now, do you think the web page you're working on will mean anything to you?"

She laughed. "No. I don't think my work really matters."

"Then..." I paused to assemble words. "Then why do we do it? We're giving them our time here, which means we're giving them our lives. We can't ever get this time back. It's used up and gone and we're closer to being dead. Why do they deserve it?"

"Because we have to work somewhere." She shrugged. "I'm just marking time here until I move on to something that does matter. Sure, I'll never get the time back, but that's the price we have to pay to do the things we actually want to do."

She patted me on the shoulder -- a gesture not unlike Mike's backslaps, but altogether different in context and in my response to it -- and said, "Time to get back to work. Take care of yourself, okay?"

After she went inside I thought about what she'd said. Why do I have to spend part of my life in misery, in pointless meaningless activity, wasting minutes and seconds I'll never recover, in order to earn time spent doing what I enjoy? It seemed, and still seems, a particularly masochistic calculus of living. And deep down, I didn't really find her answer convincing.

The rest of the day was spent under intense micro-management. Apparently my boss hadn't liked my initial sketching-out of a solution for the client, and wanted to go over it line by line. So we did, for hours. Lisa had lapsed into unconsciousness some time before, and stayed passed out most of the afternoon; Rob and Mike were talking in a corner, looking over the blueprints.

I got up to use the bathroom, and while I was in there I smelled something. After a few seconds I decided it was the smell of cigarettes on my hands and my shirt, and when I'd finished I started scrubbing thoroughly. Although I couldn't be certain, I had a feeling that the others fundamentally disapproved of smoking, and I'd heard rumors of promotions and raises being sidetracked because the intended recipient was a smoker. Pretty much the same deal as with the recycling bins.

In the hall my eyes stung, and blinking to keep my contacts from falling out from all the tears, I pushed through the fire door into the cubicle area--

And behind me there was a mechanical shriek, and the fire door slammed shut, barely missing my heel.

The stinging, the smell -- someone had lit a fire somewhere in the building, and now the doors were all sealed. Rob, Mike, and Javier were standing in a loose group in the center of the cubicles, looking unsurprised. Outside, it was dark.

Mike nodded to Rob.

Calmly, Rob set his black box on the printer table, and opened it, and took something out. I heard an unfamiliar snick-snack, and he strode purposefully towards the conference room. I was still frozen next to the fire door, the howling alarm pounding into my skull. Mike turned to look at me, and in the greenish fluorescent light his eyes shone out of the black mask of his face.

Javier moved towards the emergency exit door and took up a post next to it, leaning casually and looking down at his feet.

From the conference room came a crack, louder than the alarm. Then two more: crack crack.

Rob emerged holding the pistol easily at his side. He wasn't smiling, but he also wasn't frowning or anything else. "Now we do it."

Mike nodded, held up the remote control they'd shown me earlier, and pushed a button. All the lights went out, leaving only the

faint glow of the 'exit' signs, turning the cubicles into faint pale ghosts, and the people as well.

I don't think I screamed in the darkness, but someone did. I was already fumbling in my pocket for the flashlight, and stumbling towards my cubicle. I don't know what I planned to do there, but it seemed the only place left for me to go. I didn't look left but in my peripheral vision I could see a spreading pool of darkness on the floor, black in the green light of the sign, and a spray on the conference room window.

Javier had been waiting for the lights -- he turned, kicked open the emergency exit, and threw something down the stairs. It looked like a can of fixative -- the spray glue that they have in the office-supply cabinet on every floor, but that no-one actually uses. Before the door swung all the way shut, there was a flash and roar of fire, and a billowing red cloud poured up into the stairwell. It reached out through the half-open door, which was still hissing shut slowly, and grasped Javier firmly. He screamed, staggering backwards, and fell down. The door closed, but the room was still lit by the glow of Javier's coat, tongues of flame licking up towards his face. Still shrieking, he rolled across the floor, thumping into the water cooler, which teetered and fell on him. There was a hissing as the fire went out, a smell of charred fiber, hair, and flesh, and a crack as his arm broke.

Mike brushed past me. I could only tell because he hissed: "Get down and stay down."

So I did.

I heard Rob barking orders in a low voice, and flicked on my little light. In the gloom I could see two shapes move to the

emergency door and open it. Smoke billowed in, and they vanished into it. The door hissed back shut a moment later.

I don't know how much time passed between that and the next noises. From the other side of the fire door there was a sharp chattering sound. Like the earlier gunshots, but faster. Guns don't sound like they do in movies. They're flatter and less impressive, and the bullets don't always zing around. The door dented several times, and a piece of the wall next to the handle exploded.

I could hear Javier moaning and swearing, and from outside the room came another gunshot, and then another. Someone screamed.

The emergency lights next to the door came on, weakly flickering.

Underneath me the floor shook. I heard a crash and rumble; below the windows there was an orange glow.

Some of the other Ops guys – maybe 10 in all – had gone over to the conference room, and I could hear them muttering to each other. I got up and scuttled towards them to see. They were kicking the body on the floor. Where the kid's head should have been there was a broken mass of churned meat. I threw up.

One of the guys -- Joe or Jack or something -- looked me up and down, disgust on his face. "Get out of here if you don't have the stomach for it."

Another one laughed. "Yeah, the cubicle jungle is no place for weaklings and women."

Something in my head snapped. I scrambled away, tripping and landing on my tailbone, and crab-like skittered backwards.

I'd just realized that Tammy was out in that somewhere.

In my cubicle I looked at my little envelope. 4 or 5 lines here, easy. I dumped the crystals out and crushed them all on my desk, snorted them all. Not even lines, really, just a big pile. My nose and eyes on fire and running gritty snot and tears down my face, I stood up. The tingling spread all over me.

There were more gunshots. From above, maybe. I headed to the fire door and kicked it. It didn't give but on the second kick the cheaply-made wall crumbled around the latch, where it had been shot.

Outside the door I saw that Marketing and Sales had turned on each other. There were five bodies in all, and the walls and floor were painted dark red. There were guns -- a lot of guns. The emergency light had taken a hit and was shooting sparks in a strobing arc across the hall.

I don't remember climbing the stairs, except for the dark and the smoke. The Content group was two floors up, and it looked like someone had been shooting at the fire door. Deep gouges and dents revealed the glittering metal underneath the anonymous brown paint. I couldn't tell if anyone had managed to get inside. I kicked the door, furious, filled with insane energy -- I might have been screaming, too, but I can't remember. The fluorescent lights flickered briefly, struggling to turn back on. The building shuddered again, and I heard someone shrieking. One long continuous wail: "Pleeeeeeeeeeeee—"

The door gave finally, and the thick smell of greasy smoke and charred meat wafted out. Splayed in front of the door, blocking it from opening, was a corpse. Mike.

He had a gun clenched in one hand, and the left side of his face was missing. Through the blood-clot hole I could see gray chunks of meat; he'd finished bleeding a while ago, it seemed, and the thick black pool was congealing into jelly under his head. He had a grin on his face that seemed to say: Take it easy, pal. Take it easy, partner. Take it easy down here with me.

I walked backwards towards the rows of cubicles, not looking away until the table with the fax machine on it blocked my view of him. The other arm, the one without the gun, was outstretched, fingers curled, grasping at something. I remembered that Content and Sales shared the floor. I wondered where Rob was. I could still hear the distant crack crack of guns. Above me, now, a couple floors up. Something thudded heavily against the ceiling overhead, causing the dying lights to sway.

The wailing alarms cut out, and without the sensory overload I had the wind knocked out of me. The silence was painful to listen to, and I struggled to catch my breath amid the drip noises coming from all around. In the distance the more familiar howl of police and fire trucks sounded. Not much time now.

I ran down the aisles, looking in every cubicle, calling in a hoarse whisper: "Tammy! Tammy!" If there were still people from Sales around, I didn't want to draw them to me. For that matter, I didn't really want to draw any of the Ops people to me, either. No answer, though. I reached the corner of the building, where an office had been burst into, its occupant dragged into the hall and shot. I went inside to look out the window.

Below I could see the main entrance shrouded in flames. Someone had piled ten or fifteen cars up there, and blown them up. The red-orange tongues lapped up the wall, and I could feel their heat on the glass, even from four floors up. Even if the police got here, it would be hours before they got inside.

The sprinkler system came on then, and there were flashes of light as computers running off the backup generators began to short, throwing fans of sparks into the air. I heard a whimpering then, and stepped out of the office to find its source. Down that aisle. Last cubicle.

I saw a shape at the fire door, and froze. Rob. He had a big gun -- a movie-gun, a rifle of some kind. Like the bad guys always have. He raised it, peering around into the semi-darkness. From somewhere in the back of the room there came a shout of rage, and gunfire. Rob dropped out of sight as bullets whizzed back and forth through the air above. I ducked also, moving on all fours to reach that last cubicle.

I found her there. She wasn't dead, but she might as well have been. The bullet had caught her from above, in the chest, and blown loops of intestines out her back. She couldn't move, and her eyes rolled at me. Shock, deep shock. Me too. Whoever had done it had stood over her as she cowered under her desk.

I picked her up as gently as I could, not listening to the wet sliding sounds as more of her slipped out onto the carpet. The bullets stopped briefly, the combatants pausing to listen for each other. Then they started again.

I took the pack of Camels out of her shirt pocket, and her lighter. I lit one, leaned back against the cubicle wall, and listened to her die. The smoke made a reeking cloud around us. Her laptop bag

sat against one wall, and I looked at it for a while as the shots detonated one of the walls of windows, hurling plate glass onto the police cars below. I could smell something -- gas, maybe, or just more smoke. The smoke was getting thick, and the window breaking had started sucking the heated black air out into the night.

Something that felt like a hammer struck my right arm, and I heard the bones pop and snap. I could feel it, but I didn't move. Everything else was tingling. I could taste the speed in my rear brain -- I could see it, like a thousand twinkling little lights, like Christmas lights. With my other arm, I reached out and hooked the laptop and dragged it to me. Shoved its ethernet cable into an open slot under the desk.

I've been sitting writing this email. I knew the servers would still be up. The servers were protected by the fire doors. The servers are invulnerable. I deleted all 181 pieces of spam that had built up and grabbed this file off the network. And I've been writing it; I'll send it to my whole address book, spammers and all. I can hear Rob getting closer. He's gasping a little; I think he got hit before he took the last Sales guy down. I can hear thudding footsteps above -- probably what's left of Marketing approaching. Rob knows I'm here; I've been screaming some. I can smell him. I'm going to wrap this up now; the police have a bulldozer and they're clearing the cars. The fire's roaring away somewhere, maybe near the boiler room. This building is heated with natural gas. I'm not worried. About the fire, or the cops. It's just Rob, Tammy and I here. And you.

- The End -