

David Crouse

Code

MY OFFICE did not look like my office. I had asked the department secretary to redecorate it while I was on vacation, and she had filled it with hanging plants. All the green made me nervous. The increased feeling of responsibility depressed me. The plants would die and it would be my fault.

Still, it was good to be back, better than being at home, where life's only choices seemed to be the noise of the television or a serene, suburban quiet that made one feel like something *horrible* was going to happen. When I had parked my Explorer in its familiar reserved space that morning, I had felt relief more than anything else, to be back where I belonged. I had even bought a new shirt—blue gray, to match my steely resolve—and modest shoes.

The sun was strong and high in the east as I walked to the building, and a cluster of little birds hopped around the parking lot mechanically, pecking at the grit near the empty handicapped spaces. My travel thermos still contained half a cup of surprisingly good coffee, and if I wasn't full of love for any particular individual, I was at least spilling over with good feeling for mankind in general. Living seemed a good idea.

"You look great," the security guard at the front desk said as I was signing in. The day before I had sprawled out on a lawn chair in the yard for a couple of hours, so I'd at least have a healthy glow.

"Where did you go?" he asked. I wondered if I had just returned from a better vacation than I had originally thought.

"Europe," I said, in an attempt to be impressive and ambiguous at the same time.

"Europe," he said thoughtfully. With one word I had opened a gap between us, a distance he could be amazed by or get indignant about, depending on his mood.

“Yes,” I said. “Next year I’m planning to go to Asia.”

“Wow,” he said, “that would be something,” and he turned around the logbook and inspected my signature, as if he could find some clue to my success in the fat curves of my name.

Guldeck and Cranlan met me at the elevator. “Hey,” Guldeck said. “If it isn’t you.” He pointed at me with a thick finger, holding the elevator door for the crowd—tastefully dressed people who looked something like me. They sprayed the same juices under their arms and worried about the same things when they looked in a mirror at three in the morning. Except—and this was a very important difference—they were not me, were they? Sometimes I didn’t even feel like me.

As we jockeyed for position and I smelled their colognes and perfumes and aftershaves, it passed my mind that maybe there was someone in the crowd who could be better at being me than I had been. Then I thought of my empty house, with its cheese-encrusted pizza boxes and half-empty photo albums, and realized that there was probably someone out there right now doing just that.

“I thought you weren’t due back until next week,” Guldeck said. He was a large, excitable man who had a way of making those around him feel rushed. Often, I had heard people complain about how they couldn’t think straight in close proximity to him. He had the rough fingers of a construction worker, someone who spent his time gripping and lifting.

“That’s true,” I said, “but some issues came up with a particular project. Things I had to address personally.”

“No substitute for the hands-on approach,” Cranlan said, and he laughed quietly to himself, as if in disdain of such a simple idea. He did this often, I noticed—summarized someone else’s words with a half-sarcastic chuckle, a study in economy and control, a barely audible noise that could make you feel inadequate at a near-childish level. I would have added the technique to my repertoire if Cranlan had not mastered it so completely that it seemed almost inseparable from him.

The elevator reached the fourth floor, the crowd reshuffled, and the three of us pushed into the hallway. “You should know,”

Guldeck said. "We have a situation."

"It's another reorganization, Michael," Cranlan said. "I haven't seen it, but there's a list of names going around, circulating at the top levels."

"A list," I said.

"Exactly right," he said.

"Of the soon-to-be dead and wounded."

"We've missed your flair for the dramatic, Michael."

We entered the company's executive kitchenette, where we stood around the lunch table. I knew each of us was wondering who would be the first to reach for the tray of pastries at its center, giving up his self-control and enabling the rest to do the same. Guldeck opened the microwave and scraped at a brown splotch with his pen. "I've been dreaming about that list, you know. But I can't read the words."

I picked up a small circular shape with a swirl of gray-purple at its center and held it out to Guldeck. "Relax," I said. "Have something to eat." He eyed the pastry suspiciously.

"Damn it," he said. "Is it too much to ask to get a decent raspberry danish? Where do they get this stuff?" He began to lift and inspect various pastries, looking them over with contempt. Cranlan was now picking apart a chocolate donut, as a way to avoid eating it. A habit of his, I had noticed, his own nervous way of keeping trim. Each day he left a pile of donut rubble behind for the cleaning crew to throw away.

"Whose responsibility is this?" Guldeck asked. He pointed his thumb over his shoulder at the wall behind him. "What's-her-name? I bet it's what's-her-name. She should be the first one to get the chop-chop."

"No," I said. "Not her."

Guldeck said, "I was in at seven yesterday. To get a head start on the day, you know? And I still didn't get a raspberry one. The tray was out here, but the raspberry ones were gone."

"Maybe there weren't any to begin with."

"Bullshit. I know they exist. I've seen people walking around eating them. I've seen you walking around eating them." A fleck of spittle had formed on his lip, shimmering as he talked.

Cranlan smiled. “I bet they were enjoying themselves, these hypothetical people with their hypothetical pastries.”

“Considerably,” Guldeck said. “Much more than I am right now, eating this fossil.” He set it back on the edge of the tray, two bites in the side. Cranlan picked it up and tore it in half, scrutinized its underside, which was dark and moist like the surface of some light-sensitive sea plant.

“Have a lemon-filled,” I said. “They’re okay.”

“I don’t want okay, Michael. I don’t think I should have to settle for just okay. I Stairmaster for forty-five minutes every night just so I can get away with eating this kind of stuff, and I definitely want it to be better than okay.” We stood there, studying the small mound at the center of the table, amazed at its architecture. Then we pulled away from it, one by one, and I went to my office and tried to ignore the plants.

After about three minutes of staring at paperwork, I picked up the phone and punched in the extension for building supply. As the phone rang on the other end, somewhere down in the bowels of the building, I took a seat on the corner of my desk, the pose of a man accomplishing things. “Hello,” I said. “Natalie?” It was Natalie. I had forgotten how good it was to hear her voice, and I forgave her instantly for not returning the calls I had made to her home phone during the last couple of weeks.

“I have a question for you,” I continued. “I’d like some new furniture for my office. I was thinking about an uncomfortable chair. Simple and traditional. I need to feel stoic.”

“We just sent you a new chair two weeks ago,” Natalie said. I looked around my office—the bookcase littered with books owned by its previous occupant, the three teal-colored file cabinets along the back wall, the imported Indian carpet my wife and I had bought what seemed like years and years ago. I saw no such chair.

“And by the way, Michael,” she said. “You said you had a question. What just came out of your mouth wasn’t a question. It was a statement. People are always calling me up and telling me they have a question, but what they really should say is that they’d like to make a statement.”

"I'm sorry. I don't want to be part of your problems, Natalie. I want to be part of the *solutions* to your problems."

"Why do you need this chair? What are you doing that's so important that it demands that I drop everything and rush a chair over to you?"

"I have my fingers in a lot of different pies right now."

"Because I hate to say this, but I've heard rumors."

She was referring to the memo, of course, and my subsequent absence from the office. The memo had appeared one day in my office mailbox, folded authoritatively once, across its middle, and signed by a Vice President of something important. It explained in simple but tersely affectionate language that the entire company would be more-or-less hibernating for most of June, and that this would be an ideal opportunity for me to get some much-deserved downtime.

"I don't want to know," I told her, although I did. I had heard rumors too. The building throbbed with them.

"What are you working on these days?" she asked. "I mean, before your leave of absence. What were you working on?"

"Various things," I said. "Various important things. And it was a vacation. I went to Europe. But before Europe, before my vacation, I had my fingers in a lot of pies. This one project in particular keeps arriving on my desk. I add to it and then it comes back and then I take stuff away."

"You're saying that its weight fluctuates."

"I'm saying that it has reached the pulsing stage. It is moving in and out. It's breathing."

"Frankenstein."

"Right. It's around here somewhere. I expect to see it momentarily, unless the plug has been pulled on the whole thing, which is a distinct possibility. As you know, I'm a little removed from the process right now."

I lifted myself off the desk and walked to the window, where I played with my blinds, opening and closing them: small rhythms and repetitions, like an awkward attempt at semaphore. From my office I could sometimes see people in the next building. Ours was the nicer building, a full four stories taller, with a

cafeteria on the ground floor.

“I’m wondering what the point of these conversations is,” Natalie said. “People are beginning to talk.”

“I see. A question of propriety. I have a corner office. You work in the supply room.”

“That’s right.”

“The Capulets and the Montagues.”

“Exactly.”

“Regardless, I think you should go out to lunch me today. With a bunch of us. Safety in numbers. You can tell me what you’ve heard in the rumor department then. I’ll buy you a drink. I’ll tell you the rumors I’ve heard.”

“That’s very nice of you,” she said, and I could tell she was interested in what I might know, and afraid too, should this information involve her. But she was too polite to say anything. I had noticed before that these two emotions—politeness and mild fear—seemed to charge the atmosphere in every corner of the building, like the soft buzz of fluorescence. “What about my chair?” I asked her.

“That’ll have to go through channels.”

“Maybe I’ll just buy a folding chair and bring it in.”

“I wouldn’t do that. You’d be stepping on some toes.”

“Yeah?”

“Some very powerful toes.”

“I can’t believe that,” I said.

“Well, maybe, maybe not. But it’s bad form for someone in your position.”

“What is my position?”

“I’m not sure, but it’s obviously essential.”

“That’s true,” I said. “You know how when you were a kid and you asked your mom how the fridge or the car worked, and she said there were little men in there, turning the gears?”

“I guess so.”

“Well, I like to think of myself as one of those little men.”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” she said. “But I do know that a folding chair could be misconstrued.”

I squeezed my lips with my left hand until they puckered.

Sometimes when talking on the phone I found myself playing with my face, absorbed in the soft give of my skin. "I have to go now," she said.

"Think about lunch," I said, and I touched two fingers to the phone and killed the connection. I felt a little giddy, although I didn't know exactly why. I picked up a folder off my desk and skimmed the contents as I paced back and forth. Not much of it registered, other than the four neat columns of numbers, but it was something to keep my eyes and hands occupied.

I tried to get something accomplished, but I kept thinking about the blankets and pillows on my couch. I had left the lights on upstairs, so that it would look like someone was home already when I drove up the street in the evening. The bed was unmade, and had been for weeks, for months. Had it ever been made? This seemed to be an enormous problem, and the solution had been to sleep downstairs—on the couch, on the back porch, or on the kitchen floor. I explored the house, and touched my cheek to places it had never touched before. I suppose I was trying to find a way to relate to it. I was wondering if it remembered me.

I had forgotten to flush the toilet. I was sure of it.

Through the closed door, I could hear the department secretary talking in the outer office. "Yes, he's in," she was saying, "but you can't speak with him. He's brainstorming right now." I thought about playing racquetball or shooting hoops or harassing someone in the Midwest about a late package. I kicked off my shoes and flexed my toes. I loosened my tie and stretched, then did a couple of half-hearted deep knee bends.

Brainstorming. I liked the sound of that. It seemed to elevate my life to an exalted state, as if I were a quirky genius daydreaming of flow charts, brooding over some sliver-sized number's sixth decimal place. I took off my socks and slid my bare feet through the carpet. Then I balled up one of the socks and practiced throwing it at the waist basket, keeping count in my head.

The first four shots went wide, the second three fell short, but the three after that entered the circle of the can with a soft thump. I stopped and unbuttoned my shirt to my stomach, slid

my belt from around my waist and slung it over the back of my chair. I shot a few more times from further away, trying to release and retrieve the sock as fast as possible.

My breathing grew a little harder now, a little deeper. I bent over with my hands on my knees and inhaled through my nose, in what I considered to be a virile way. I took time to snort and hawk and swallow. The back of my neck felt warm.

I took off my shirt and draped it over the back of my chair with the belt, then retrieved the sock-ball from the corner of the room. It hit the wall above and to the right of the trashcan. I moved toward where it fell on the floor, but stopped halfway there and double-backed, unbuttoning my pants. I folded them on my desk. I put my underwear in the bottom drawer of my file cabinet, where I kept spare manila folders and graph paper.

After four more shots the ball hit the rim of the can and plopped inside. I pumped my fist. I threw some left-right combinations at the air. I picked up the phone and punched-up the first extension that occurred to me, leaving the sock there, in what had become its rightful place.

“Hello,” someone said.

“Foster,” I said.

“This is *Schwartz*,” he said.

“Exactly,” I said, “just the person I wanted to talk to.”

“Is that you, Michael?” he asked.

“It’s me,” I said.

He snorted. “It’s good to have you back.”

“It’s good to be back.”

“What can I do you for?”

“Well, I was wondering if you’d heard.”

“Heard what?”

“You know. The rumors.”

“I have. I’ve heard different things from different people. Most of it seems a little far fetched.”

“Regardless.”

“You’re breathing very heavily, Michael. I have a very obscene phone call kind of feeling going on here, you’re breathing so hard. You wouldn’t be having a heart attack?”

“Nothing like that,” I said.

“Good,” he said. “That’s very good. I’m pleased to hear it.”

“Can you reiterate what you’ve heard?” I asked him. “I’d like to match up my facts with your facts.”

“It’s a purge. All departments. All levels. The company is sticking its finger down its throat. Are you having lunch out today, by the way?”

I looked at my wall clock. It was almost time to eat.

Most of the booths at the restaurant were empty. The bus boys had just begun to set the places for lunch, and the waitresses were talking at the bar. I immediately felt reassured by the familiar particulars: the wide wooden chairs, heavy silverware, and solid cloth napkins of a good steak place.

I noticed one of the bus boys, younger than most of the others. He moved from table to table, wiping away the soft scab of dried tomato from around the lip of the ketchup bottles. “We’d like a table,” I told him when he was close to us, and he nodded and walked away, still holding his red-stained napkin.

“We’re early,” Schwartz said.

“There is no such thing,” I said.

We were half-whispering, as if we had just entered a church between mass hours to get out of the rain. We moved to the center of the room, to our usual table. A waitress met us there.

“Your lapels aren’t buttoned,” Schwartz said.

“Thanks,” I said, and stood there, fiddling.

A small man appeared at the entrance. He held the door open with his shoulder, not in and not out, and at first I thought that maybe he was going to turn around and leave, but then he saw us, and waved, and we waved back. “Barnes,” Schwartz said. “Look at how short he is. I always forget how short he is.”

“The strange thing is, how he can find a suit that’s a size too small when he’s so small himself? It seems like you’d have to expend some effort to do that.”

We took turns shaking hands, then found our places. “I’ll have a rum and Coke,” I told the waitress as I was pulling out my chair. “As strong as legally possible. Just a little splash of Coke.” I

made a circular gesture with my hand. “In fact, just wave the Coke bottle above the glass. That’ll do.”

She looked at Barnes, then Schwartz. “The same thing,” Schwartz said, “except with less Coke.”

Barnes opened the menu, looked it up and down. “I’ll have the chicken Parmesan, and a ginger ale.”

Schwartz leaned forward, both arms on the table. “We’re just ordering drinks, Barnes.”

I nodded. “Generally we order drinks, then unwind for fifteen or twenty minutes. Then we order the food. Then we wait for the food. Then we eat the food.”

“Pacing is everything,” Schwartz said.

By this time Guldeck and two people I didn’t know had come in and dragged the nearest table over to ours, getting a couple of nervous stares from the other patrons. As he sat down, Guldeck reached across me for an ashtray. “Hear the latest?”

“No,” I said.

“Accounting,” he said, and he tapped the ashtray against the table in a staccato rhythm, as if clicking out Morse Code. One of the people I didn’t know drew his finger across his throat and made a sound like an incision being made. Then he looked at me and smiled, as if I should know him. Guldeck was ordering drinks. He was ordering lots of drinks.

“I guess I saw it coming,” Schwartz said. “They’ve had their head up their collective ass for some time now.”

Barnes pointed at me with his fork. “Speaking of which, how’s your particular project coming along? I heard a date had been set.”

“They always do that,” Schwartz said. “They set a date. They change the date. They change it again. Nothing is fixed. Don’t worry about it.” He slapped me lightly on the shoulder.

I held up my empty glass. The waitress saw me from across the room and she began the long walk over. I kept my eyes on hers as she narrowed the space, the glass still raised above my head. Something about the moment seemed peaceful, almost profound, and I did not want it to end.

Guldeck was talking now. “That entire project has become our

personal Viet Nam. We should just pull out and cut our losses.” His glass seemed mismatched to the size of his hand. I wondered if he played football in college. He took a long sip and scowled into his lap. “You can feel good bourbon in your extremities. That’s the main thing I look for.”

He touched the waitress, holding her there with his touch as he emptied the glass. Then he handed the empty to her. So did I. She looked from face to face to face. “Anything else?”

“Give everyone one more of whatever they’re having,” Guldeck said, and he made a circular motion with his hand, indicating the bunch of us. A few more people had squeezed in around the table. Large plates of appetizers had appeared, nachos and honey-glazed chicken wings. “I have an important meeting this afternoon, you know,” Guldeck said, to nobody in particular. “I have to balance my body chemistry.” He gazed into the golden brown of his glass, which caught the light in a way that was almost hypnotic.

I pulled one of the appetizer plates close to me, then tugged a nacho loose from the coagulated cheese, taking small, careful bites. “You’re preparing. You’re mentally girding your loins.”

“That’s what I’m doing. And that’s what you should do too. I think Cameron Wassermann from marketing is sitting in on this thing, and you know how he can be.”

That was the first I had heard of Wassermann being involved in that afternoon’s meeting. And my own involvement came as an even bigger surprise. “Good luck,” someone said, and there were small guttural sounds of agreement from everyone.

I offered to buy the next round; it was something I figured I should do early, before more people arrived. The group was big enough now that the conversation had split into three or four smaller huddles. “Damn the youth of America to hell,” someone was saying at the end of the table. Was it a joke? I wasn’t sure.

Barnes was leaning over his plate, sawing his chicken into neat squares. “You know, I invested a lot of time in that project independent of anyone else,” he said. No one seemed to hear him. By this time there were ten or eleven of us around three tables pushed end-to-end. Guldeck kept insisting on buying

drinks for people and threatening to punch them if they refused. Someone suggested that we sing sea chanties. It seemed in keeping with the overall mood.

Schwartz had his arm around my shoulder. "You know what I love?" he asked. "I love the atmosphere. There's this last supper kind of thing going on. That kind of feeling, you know? That kind of I-don't-know-what." He laughed and lifted his glass to his mouth, although it was empty.

"Please," I said. "No ironic observations."

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I guess I didn't like your reference."

"To the last supper?"

"That's right. Crucifixion gives me the willies."

"The whole death thing."

"Yes. That's right. The whole death thing."

"The icy hand on your heart. The black void."

I turned to talk to the person on my left, but he was talking to the person on his left: something about how useless pennies were, like our pinkies, and we were evolving out of a need for either, and was it just a coincidence that the two words sounded so much alike?

I turned back to Schwartz. "I didn't go to Europe."

He straightened up, and seemed to sober. "I know," he said, and he smiled. He was drunk again.

"I hate vacations. All that being alone with yourself. All that contemplation. It's claustrophobic." I noticed that he was eyeing my glass, and I slid it to him. "I'm a depressing drunk, I guess." He finished the drink for me, and burped a thank you. "I can't stop thinking about that list," I said. Guldeck's words, sort of, but now they were mine. I looked over at him.

He had his elbow on the table now, open hand ready to grip and arm-wrestle the first taker.

"I should go," I said. "I've been waiting for Natalie, but she's not going to show."

"Cranlan didn't make an appearance either."

"That's right. I wonder what happened to him?"

Schwartz shrugged, and we both stood. "Can you drive?" I

asked him. He was tending toward one side, as if he were standing on a bad leg.

“Not really,” he said.

I threw some money at the center of the table. “Me neither.”

“We’ll flip a coin and cross our fingers,” he said, and he took an awkward step to the door. For some reason I was feeling pretty good again. Something inside me had shifted. It was like that.

On the way out I collided with the busboy, who was still cleaning ketchup bottles. A streak of red splattered across my chest, and I stood there, arms wide apart, looking down at my shirt. “I’m shot,” I said, and I staggered, although I didn’t exactly mean to, and everyone laughed.

As soon as I got back to work I went by Cranlan’s office and knocked on the doorframe. When nobody answered I stepped inside, moving deliberately, one hand on the wall for balance. Someone else sat behind Cranlan’s desk, a small gray-haired man turning the pages of a pocket dictionary. Cranlan’s bulletin board, which had previously been blank except for his business card tacked in one corner, was now covered with clippings from the comic pages: a confusion of boxes and word balloons. A squat mini-fridge stood in the corner in place of Cranlan’s empty bookcase, a bowl of apples on top. “Where’s Cranlan?” I asked.

The man looked up, startled, watery-eyed. “What?”

“Cranlan.”

“Um.”

“Never mind,” I said, and I left.

Four or five people were gathered around the copy machine in the hall, pressing buttons, opening doors, peering inside. “Jammed,” one of them said to me, as if asking for help, but I kept walking. I headed to the restroom, where I bent over the sink and splashed cold water on my face.

From one of the stalls I could hear the gasps and spurts of someone violently upchucking.

I tried cleaning my shirt with a wet paper towel. The ketchup spread and faded to pink. A large, pale stain didn’t seem to be that much of an improvement over a small, dark one, so I stopped scrubbing. Instead, I tightened the knot of my tie, took my pen

from my shirt pocket and clicked it in and out, in and out, something to keep my hands busy while I listened. The noise from the stall gradually subsided and Guldeck appeared at the sink next to me, looking pale except for the top of his balding head, which glowed baby-red. We both stood there, looking into the mirror. “Damn,” he said. He took a small bottle of mouthwash from his pocket and began to gargle and spit.

I spoke to his reflection. “You’ve heard about Cranlan, I assume.”

He swished, puffing one cheek, than the other.

“We can’t afford to be sentimental, obviously,” I said.

He tilted his head back, leaned forward, and dribbled green liquid into the sink. When he was finished he took hold of his lips and curled them back so he could inspect his teeth. “You know,” he said, “something about the suddenness of these things seems correct. Almost Darwinian. It’s like watching one of those nature documentaries.”

“It’s like itself,” I said. I had pulled off my tie and was unraveling the knot, starting from scratch. “That’s what it reminds me of. When I first came in this morning I looked around and took a deep breath and said to myself, ‘This reminds me of being back at the office.’”

Guldeck was halfway to the door. He turned around, walking backwards, and raised his fist in salute. “Onward and upward.” The door closed behind him, and I turned back to the mirror. Guldeck would be gone by the end of the week, I realized, once some higher up understood the incongruity of having him walking around without Cranlan, his opposite number, Yin to his Yang, Laurel to his Hardy. I picked up his forgotten bottle of mouthwash and put it in my pocket.

I followed him into the hall, where we moved in separate directions. I glanced repeatedly at my watch without really noticing what time it was, a reflex action that made me look determined and efficient. Or nervous and fixated, either or both, I didn’t know. I was holding my tie in both hands now, stretched taut like some kind of weapon. I had no idea what time the teleconference began. I could have been twenty minutes

later or an hour early. I stopped in the middle of the hall, trying to orient myself.

Someone I didn't know pointed down the hall. "It's that way," he said, but how did he know what I was looking for? And who was he anyway? "Right," I said, although I didn't move. The floor swayed beneath me in a soft ripple, like the wake from a far away boat. Then, with a surge of will that seemed almost superhuman, I began to walk in the direction he had pointed.

Cameron Wassermann shook my hand at the door, then stepped aside and waved his arm dramatically, motioning me to enter. He wore a Hawaiian-print T-shirt, untucked around his ballooning waist. Both of his Docksidiers were untied. I half-expected him to be holding a glow-in-the-dark tropical drink. There were two types of sales people, I had decided long ago: the hungry younger ones, moving toward vague vice-presidencies and company cars, and the spent older ones, moving toward retirements and multiple strokes. Cam was definitely part of the latter group.

"Michael," he said. "You look like absolute hell."

"Thanks."

"How was your vacation? I heard that you went to Europe."

"Yes."

"Did you like it?"

"Loved it."

"And your wife and kids?"

"I loved them too," I said, and we both laughed, although at different jokes. He was still double-gripping my fist. I wanted it back.

Still laughing, he grabbed Guldeck by the wrist and pulled him over to us. "Michael, I'd like you to meet Ken Guldeck, our director of..." He turned to Guldeck, voice trailing off.

"Intercorporate Situations," Guldeck said.

"Director of Intercorporate Situations," Wassermann said, and the smile returned to his wide, sun-dried face. I shook Guldeck's hand vigorously.

"Pleased to meet you," I said. "You have quite the reputation." It seemed strange to be talking to someone who would likely

end up as a casualty. The feeling was there as I shook his hand, the sense of being close to extinction, and not wanting it to rub off on you.

“Sorry I’m late,” Barnes said as he came through the door. He was wiping his forehead with his handkerchief, a gentle, cultivated gesture that made me want to grab him in a headlock. “I was moving Schwartz’s computer over to my office,” he said. “You should see the software he has on that thing. Versions of software that haven’t even been released yet. He must have had some contacts.”

“The past tense,” I said.

“That’s right,” Wassermann said. “You didn’t hear?”

“No,” I said.

“They canceled his password about an hour ago. He can’t access a thing. If he put change in the candy machine, it would pop out the coin return.”

I crossed Schwartz’s name off the mental list that was floating somewhere in the back of my mind. We moved to sit down the table, where blank pads of paper and pencils with new points were set at each place. “Take a second,” Wassermann said. “Get your heads in order. Visualize an optimal situation, an hour from now maybe, once we’ve done what we have to do.” He was eating a danish now, from who-knows-where, and he was licking sugar-paste from his fingers. I suppressed the urge to lift a pencil like a dagger and hurl myself across the table. My heart was a sieve and my negative emotions were dirty water.

I pictured a room in San Francisco with four people much like us sitting around a table much like ours, a balance that seemed important, even essential: two groups at either end of the country, arranged with the beautiful symmetry of Greek pillars or tensed football teams. That was the main satisfaction, I think, in a meeting like that. Yelling and hearing the echo of your words come back to you, the connectedness of those disembodied voices haggling and joking and coming to agreement.

Wassermann clicked the speakerphone button at the center of the table. We made the introductions, eight names and titles. At that moment it seemed that whatever happened in that next

hour would resound with the clarity of something that mattered. I wanted to drop to the ground and do push-ups. I wanted to double-up and be sick. That's the feeling which always passed over me just before a meeting, only for a moment or so, before time seemed to catch and move forward again, like a skipped gear. "Have you looked at the demo?" Wassermann asked.

"Excuse me?" they asked.

"The demo," Barnes said. "Have you had a chance to look at it?" He raised his voice and enunciated each syllable. "You know. The demo. The demo we mailed you." As he repeated himself the word seemed to recede, becoming hazy and vague, like music playing in another room.

I took a pad of paper and wrote, "It's like he's visiting his grandfather in the rest home." I slid it over so Guldeck could read it. He smiled and nodded, scratched something back.

"Axed," it said. Next to the word he drew what he probably intended to be a small axe, although it didn't look much like one. I turned the page and drew a large question mark.

"Effective Friday," he wrote, in jagged letters.

"The demo," a voice said. "We have a few questions about that."

"What kind of questions?" Wassermann asked.

"Serious questions. For instance, we were wondering about this pallet shift we were getting. We called your tech support people about that. And the directory logic. Those are two of our major concerns." I noticed then that Barnes was crying, a slight wetness around the eyes that I would have passed off as a cold or allergies if not for the quiver in his lip. "We were also wondering about importing files. There seems to be a serious bug in the methodology there."

"Bug?" Barnes said. "That's a feature."

"It looks like a bug to me," one of them finally said, after a long pause. The delicate balance was shuddering, threatening to break.

Barnes half-stood, as if he wanted to head off somewhere, but wasn't sure where to go, and leaned toward the speaker. "You're using the software incorrectly. We've gone over this before."

“We have talked about this. A number of times,” the first voice said. “That’s why it’s so upsetting.”

“It is upsetting,” Barnes said. Agreement of a sort. Then another soft pause. Then nothing. They had hung up the phone.

Barnes was standing, staring at the wall, motionless. Wassermann had his head back and eyes closed, as if listening intently to the single note of the dial tone. I imagined someone gently scrolling through the network directory, and noticing unfamiliar names that should have been deleted, people fired long ago. Small markers in two columns, names and dates. Cemetery neatness. I thought of a person moving through the voice mail system, punching ones and twos, rooting deeper and deeper, from stem to stem, and finding ghost-messages from people who no longer existed here, except as a dim image in the company-brain. My happy voice, saying please leave a message and I’ll get back to you.

“I have to be somewhere,” I said.

The department secretary wasn’t at her desk, and neither was her coat, which she always kept on the back of her chair, in case the air-conditioning happened to get too cold.

I found a post-it note stuck to my terminal saying that the vice president of something wanted to see me. I didn’t recognize the handwriting. A cartoon in the upper left hand corner showed a fat orange cat sleeping in a hammock, an image that seemed completely incongruous; the more I looked at it the more sinister it became, and I had to force myself to put it down. I fished my socks out of the wastebasket, put one in each pocket, and headed toward my destiny.

I bumped into Natalie in the hall. She was holding a Xerox box packed with odds and ends: papers and folders, a framed photograph of her Cocker Spaniel, a baseball she would toss from hand to hand when having a bad day. “Walk with me,” I said, without stopping, and she moved up alongside.

“Did you hear?” she asked.

“I heard,” I said.

“Where are you going?”

“This way,” I said. “I’m going this way.”

“What?” she said. “Where?”

“Outside. Then to my car. After that I’m not sure. Maybe far-away. Faraway would be good.”

I had reached the elevator. A young boy was holding the door for me, a bike messenger dressed in ripped jeans and retro-sheik wraparound sunglasses. “Come with me,” I said to her. She looked at her box of things. I thought of the empty closets in my house, the unread newspapers, the bed that seemed to grow wider the more I looked at it, the vast spaces to fill.

“You know I can’t,” she said.

The kid smirked and sniffled and looked as bored as a person could look. “Fine,” I said, and stepped into the elevator. The kid had already punched up the ground floor, and the doors closed behind me. I turned to him, pointed at his sunglasses. “I’ll give you fifty dollars for those.”

By the time I was outside I had broken into a run across the parking lot toward my Explorer, clicking off my alarm as I went. I slid the air-conditioning to full, gunned the engine once for effect, and moved past the guard post, going twice the speed limit as soon as I passed the yellow-painted speed bump. I glanced to my left when I reached the stop sign at the exit of the industrial park, accelerating into the turn with the kind of relaxed intuition that comes from doing something again and again. As soon as I rounded the corner I slipped the car into fourth, then fifth, letting my hand linger on the stick shift, feeling the vibration of the engine that seemed to be focused there. I sped up more, just to experience the change of sensation against my palm.

In five minutes I had reached the main road, which was clogged with four o’clock commuters getting a headstart for home. A few cars were turning around on the highway on-ramp, driving up over the curb and across the neat grass strip that separated the two roads. I tapped the dash with both hands, keeping awkward time to the song on the radio, and we lurched forward, merging with the main flow. There was something almost biological in the way the cars clung together, bumpers almost touching bumpers, like cells held together by invisible

strands. The radio played a dance song, slinky-sweet, turned so low I could only hear the muffled drums and some semblance of a person.

The traffic picked up speed just slightly, past a truck with blinkers flashing. I imagined the insides of each vehicle, a thousand synchronized pieces of metal sparking and clicking: a seemingly simple thing turned frighteningly complex. I turned the radio louder, punched up an all-news station. I reclined my chair, leaning my head back so that I felt as if I were sitting dreamily in a dentist's chair, letting some drug work itself through me. There was a busy, ant-like desperation in the way the cars tried to narrow the space in front of them. People leaned on their horns if someone else grew lax and let the car in front gain too much distance. We all have to work together here, seemed to be the general consensus, like it or not.

"It's a real battle out there this afternoon," the traffic reporter was saying. "It's congested. It's constipated. It's complete entropy." I looked to my left, out the window, and I could see a helicopter circling in the distance. I wondered if the man on the radio and the man in the helicopter were the same. My foot moved to the brake and I heard a sharp honk from behind me, then a second, longer this time. I slapped my horn twice in reply, and then held it for a third, until the person off to my right leaned on his. Two more horns behind bleated out together, then another one ahead, and another and another: sporadic bovine noise, instinctive call-and-response.

When I closed my eyes I couldn't help but picture the line of cars as a procession of clumsy animals, starved and half-lost, migrating blind to an unknown destination. "Bumper to bumper," the reporter was saying. More horns were beginning to sound from further away, until we were all joined in making that beautiful, aching music.

I opened my door and stepped out into the breakdown lane, into the shiny bits of glass, as fine and delicate as broken beach shells, and the sand and road grit and shredded tire rubber. I had never noticed these things before. The person in the car next to mine turned her head and stared. I didn't stare back. I was taking

off my jacket. I was taking off my tie. I was straddling the guardrail, and then I was scrambling down the embankment. In passing, I remembered that my car engine was running, that the driver's side door was swung wide open like a single wing.

The stones pinched at my feet as I walked, and I wondered if the woods were surrounded by highway, like a small island. The trees were getting thicker, and I had to duck under branches. A wet leaf, the shape of an arrow head, was stuck to my bare chest. I was cold and warm at the same time. Except for my boxers, I was now as naked as an elk. Then they were off too. I clutched them in my hand and then dropped them to the ground. I was making a trail, I think, for others to follow when they went over the edge too.

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