

Ref. Code 21304

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A work of fiction, meant for adults. Read something else if you are not an adult, or are offended by stories with sexual content. Then again, if all you're looking for is in-out, in-out, in-out, you should probably read something else. I welcome constructive comments. Enjoy.

I sat in the doctor's exam room flexing my left wrist and fingers after half an hour of "nerve conduction studies," repeated electrical shocks to my hand and arm while the doctor looked at traces on a display. From many years in electronics, I knew that electrical shocks were to be avoided. Today hadn't changed my mind!

And for all the abuse, the fingers of my left hand still tingled, and my elbow still hurt. I'd mentioned it at work a while ago. Before I knew it, I was hauled before our Ergonomics Inquisition and signed up for a medical evaluation courtesy of our Worker's Comp carrier.

A knock on the door and Doctor Liu returned. She was young, thin, oriental.

"Mister Miller, I understand your employer made some changes to your office?"

I nodded as I finished buttoning my shirt. Not being able to use my left hand really pissed me off, besides hurting.

"My cube? Yeah. They lowered work surfaces, put in a wrist rest for the keyboard, stuck a thing on the mouse that makes it practically unusable, and told me to take more breaks. Unfortunately they didn't do anything about my project schedule."

Doctor Liu smiled and nodded. "And you've been taking anti-inflammatories?"

I nodded. "Naproxen, and using ice packs when I can -- lunch, after work."

"And has that helped?"

I frowned. "Well, I'm not in pain until eleven in the morning, rather than nine thirty, so I guess that's an improvement. What can you tell me?"

She nodded again and sat back. "I'll write up my report and submit it to your insurer. As far as I'm concerned this is clearly work related. Nerve conduction studies show impairment of both median and ulnar nerves. I'll give you a prescription for a stronger anti-inflammatory. We may want to try cortisone injections in your wrist and elbow. I'm also recommending aggressive physical therapy. It would be good for you to take some time off and allow the inflammation affecting your nerves to diminish. Would that be possible?"

I shook my head. "Doctor, have you heard the term 'death march' in Silicon Valley? That should be the code-name for the project I'm on. Oh, I'm one of the leads."

She frowned as she shook her head. "That isn't a good long-term strategy."

I sighed. "Doctor, engineers in the Valley are like shotgun shells these days -- use 'em, cycle 'em out, and load up another. We've been taken over by MBAs ignorant of the laws of physics."

She stood up, a grim smile on her face as she shook her head slowly. "Unfortunately, I understand. They've taken over medicine as well. Let's go to the front desk and get things entered into the all-powerful computer -- people's lives reduced to check-marks on a form."

We walked to the counter and the doctor handed my folder to a woman seated at a computer. Gee, she had a large LCD -- I was still limping by with an old, small in size but huge in desk footprint CRT. She typed things in with a speed that suggested a lot of this kind of work. I wonder how many breaks she got?

As we were standing there, a chubby Latina gal walked by, snapping gum and trailing a cloud of incredibly strong incredibly cheap perfume. It hit me with the subtlety of Monty Python's fish-slapping dance, my eyes watering and my nose burning.

The gal at the keyboard sneezed very hard, repeatedly, as her fingers danced over the keys. She held up one hand in an attempt to shield herself from the olfactory onslaught as she whacked the "Enter" key on her keyboard with the other. She bolted from her workstation, still sneezing rapid-fire as she made her escape.

Doctor Liu pulled me to safety, rubbing her nose, looking back in amazement.

She managed a little laugh. She handed me a prescription form. "Paul, you'll be hearing directly from the therapy provider. Please take care of yourself."

I nodded, took the piece of paper, and stepped out the door. Surprisingly, she followed.

"I need a break," she said, closing her eyes and stretching as she faced the sun.

I managed a smile. "I think it's time to look for a new job," I muttered.

She gave me an inquisitive look. "Really? I'll be right back." She stepped into the office, returning quickly. She handed me a business card.

"I've heard my brother-in-law mention your company. He's an engineering VP -- why don't you give him a call? They're very picky, but looking."

I smiled as I looked over the card. "Thanks, I'll do that."

She shook her head. "I'm living with them -- no way I can afford a house in this area, even if I didn't have med school loans to pay off."

I held out a hand to her. She took it warmly. "Doctor, thank you. I wish you the best."

She managed another smile. "Paul, you too. Take care of yourself."

We headed back to our respective grindstones. While waiting for a simulation to complete, I updated my resume and cover letter. I almost sent it out over the company e-mail system, but used my Hotmail account instead. The IT folks hate web-based e-mail. That put a smile on my face.

A few days later, I got a note at home from the post office that the worker's comp company had tried to send me a certified letter. I gave the comp carrier a call and asked them to fax the stuff to me at work, as I wasn't home to sign for the thing. The twit I spoke to had a hard time understanding that *some* people work for a living, and don't have the time to stand around in post office queues. Fuckwits.

We had a half-day "progress review" meeting, which insured *no* progress. Two good things though: I had cold packs on my wrist and elbow pretty much the entire meeting, and I revised my status statement: the company had been taken over by women with shoulder pads, MBAs, and no tits, ignorant of the laws of physics -- no tits and no sense of humor.

A phone call a few days later. "Is this Paul Miller?" a female voice asked.

"Yes," I answered. Normally I'd answer with, "what can I do for you?" or something of that ilk, but I was flat out of ilk, especially helpful ilk.

"Paul, this is Doctor Ruth Carter. Our office has been selected to work with you on your worker's comp matter. Do you have a few minutes to talk about it, if you're in a place where you feel comfortable talking, of course."

I sighed and put my feet up on the desk. I started another simulation. That would take half an hour or more, more likely more. It should have taken less than a minute, but the machine I ordered a few months ago had been hijacked on arrival. "Sure."

"Thanks, Paul, I appreciate it. Are you still experiencing symptoms?"

I flexed my left hand. "Yup, still a loss of sensation, no real change."

"Okay, that's not uncommon. How is this affecting you otherwise? Psychologically?"

I closed my eyes and rubbed my face. "It's depressing and frustrating, simply put."

"Are you under a lot of stress in your job?"

“Yes, extremely -- in spades, hearts, clubs, and diamonds.”

“And you feel that has resulted in your problem, or intensified it?”

“Oh yeah,” I replied, flexing my left hand.

“And you’re 31?”

“Yup, 32 in October.”

“Paul, we’d like you to stop by one morning fairly soon so we can take blood samples and give you an initial physical exam. Could you do that?”

“Sure.”

“Do you have a girlfriend currently?”

A weird question. “Nope, the job doesn’t come with one,” was my sarcastic answer.

“You feel that’s a result of your current work situation?”

“Oh yeah, in spades.”

We talked a little more. She was going to e-mail me some information. Their office was only a little ways off of my nominal path to work; I could stop by the next morning.

Her office was in a medical suite. The door just had her name, “R D Carter M.D. and associates” with no specialty listed. Even though it was only a little after eight, I was expected. Doctor Carter was a very good looking woman -- tall, athletic. All her staff looked good. I thought I was going to have a problem with their proximity until one of them had me strip and put on the traditional paper-thin gown. I was weighed, measured, poked, prodded, and sampled.

Doctor Carter came back into the exam room. She had a wry smile on her face as she snapped on a pair of thin blue gloves. “I’ve saved the best part for last, I’m afraid,” she told me.

She had me bend over at the waist, feet apart, clasping my hands together with my forearms on the exam table. She told me she was going to check my prostate and get a fluid sample. I felt my balls climbing up into my throat.

There was nothing at all erotic about having this pretty woman stick her finger up my ass! It was definitely uncomfortable, in more ways than one. Even her saying, “Try and relax, Paul,” didn’t help -- talk about mixed messages! But she got her sample on a little glass slide, tossed the gloves, and told me I could get dressed again.

We talked in her office. She wanted to schedule me for more tests and initial therapy, the two would be combined. Okay, when and how long? About three hours, depending, and as soon as possible.

I sighed and told her that was a problem, explaining the death-march at work.

She was understanding. They were quite flexible. We could start at six in the evening, would that work? Well, that's a little early for me to be leaving work these days, but I could do it. Fine, eat a light lunch, nothing after two in the afternoon. We set Wednesday for the first session. She also let me know that everything we did and said was confidential, and wouldn't be reported back to the company or the insurance carrier. That made me feel better. She handed me a consent form for the treatment, which I signed without reading.

I'd been flexing my left hand as we spoke -- it was bugging me, bad. She asked about it, what was wrong. I had this flash I was in one of Connie's meetings, explaining the same damn thing one more damn time. But I remained civil, telling her I had numbness and tingling in my left hand and fingers, discomfort in the left elbow. I'd been using cold packs and naproxen. I told her nerve conduction studies had shown compression in carpal and ulnar nerves. She nodded and scribbled, then asked about digestive problems. Lucky in that respect, I told her; I had colleagues munching antacids, but so far the death march hadn't affected my stomach. Did I ride a bicycle? What a strange question! No! She took more notes, thanked me for coming by, and they'd see me Wednesday.

I gave them a call Monday around four to reschedule. Why? Because an idiot called a review meeting from five to eight Wednesday evening. They'd get back to me.

When I got in to work the next morning, my boss Dale was waiting for me.

"Why are you in so late?" he asked. It was almost ten in the morning.

I picked up a printout from my desk and pointed to the time stamp. "I was here until two this morning. I decided to get some sleep, shower, and change clothes."

He nodded, furrowing his brow. "Why were you here so late?"

I took a breath, but smiled. "Dale, you've heard it before."

He nodded again. "Come with me."

We took over one of the tiny enclosed conference rooms. He closed the door. After we sat down, he frowned. "Human Resources and Legal are jumping on us. It seems you wanted to change a physical therapy appointment?"

I shook my head. I hadn't had any coffee yet. "No, *I* didn't want to change it at all. Some fool called a mandatory attendance meeting that conflicted with my appointment."

“You told Connie you had a conflict?”

“Oh yeah. It has been on my calendar, so she got a conflict message when she tried to schedule the damn thing! But she did it anyway. I even sent her an e-mail because I know she doesn’t hear what I say to her.”

He managed a grin. “Send me a copy?”

“Sure -- I’ll send you a copy of the receipt showing when she read it, too.”

“Good. Don’t attend the meeting tomorrow, not at all -- go to your therapy.”

I nodded. We got up. I found some coffee, and returned to my grindstone.

Wednesday morning I got a visit from Dale, Connie, a suit from Legal, and a gal from HR. Dale looked pleased; Connie as usual looked pissed. Maybe it’s constipation, I don’t know. I don’t care.

The gal from HR lead off asking me what they could do to help in the short term.

I started to tell them I needed a new workstation with more horsepower and memory to run my simulations, and a larger display so I didn’t have to scroll around constantly. Connie interrupted with the usual crap about budget constraints. The suit raised a hand and she shut up. This was fun! The HR gal asked me to put together an order for what I needed. I smiled and dug into a file and pulled out a copy, handing it to her.

She looked it over. She frowned and asked, “This was submitted four months ago?”

I nodded. “Yes, almost five, and my manager, Dale, signed off on it.”

“Then what happened?” she asked.

I smiled and shrugged my shoulders. “Never arrived, or at least not in *my* office.”

Connie got more sour. She knew what happened -- she hijacked it when it came in.

The suit took the sheet from HR. “I’ll track it down.”

We exchanged unpleasantries for a bit longer. They left and I got back to work.

I arrived at the doctor’s office a little before six. Doctor Carter introduced me to Nancy and Sarah, who would be assisting her. They had me visit the loo, then don the customary tie-in-the-back thin gown.

Sarah took me to a different room. I expected the usual sterile, white, and stainless steel routine. The room had diffused lighting, soft colors, and a warm atmosphere. It did have an elaborate looking articulated exam chair, and a lot of equipment, including some I recognized.

Doctor Carter saw me frown. “Don’t worry, Paul -- you won’t feel a thing.”

I frowned again in response.

“Really, I guarantee it,” she told me.

I sat in the exam chair and leaned forward while they put electrodes along my spine and bottom. They also placed electrodes along my left arm and shoulder. Sarah did that, telling me those tests would be done last, and I wouldn’t notice at all. She had a very nice smile.

Then it was lean back and relax. Right. The legs on the thing split -- that was weird. Then they dimmed the lights, and Nancy sat down beside me.

“Paul, I know you’re apprehensive, so we’re going to start slow and easy. I’m going to put a mask on your face and have you breathe slow and easy as we help you relax. Okay?”

“Let’s go,” I told them.

She held a pink plastic mask near my face. A little red light appeared on the ceiling. I tilted my head back to get a better look, but Nancy said, “No, tilt your head back down -- relax your neck. That’s better. It’s okay if you strain your eyes a little. Keep looking at it for as long as you can, that’s good. Now take a deep breath for me, deeper -- deeper -- a little more... Hold it, and when I tell you, let go of everything. Let go and relax ... now...”

I exhaled, trying to let go. The chair thing was surprisingly comfortable. After a few rounds of this, she helped me relax starting at the top of my head. Soon my eyes got real tired and heavy. I couldn’t keep them open any more. It felt so good when I didn’t have to.

Things got strange. I felt like I was drifting sideways, and voices got farther away. I think we talked about work.

I was in a recliner at the beach. The sound of the surf was relaxing and comforting. I didn’t have to do anything but relax. But there were bugs swarming around me -- they were biting me, on my legs and stomach. Then everything faded out.

I woke up in bed to the alarm going off. I whacked it and rolled out of bed, sitting up.

It took me a while to wake up. I checked the boxer shorts I sleep in -- I’d had a wild dream, like a wet dream, of someone giving me the best blow job in the world. God -- I sure thought I’d come! Wild! I remembered the doctor’s visit as I was showering. How the hell did I get home? I didn’t remember much after they put the mask on my face. Nancy’s voice was

great. Just thinking about her voice I felt my shoulders relax. Somehow I knew how to relax better. It felt good. Even the morning traffic didn't get to me.

But damn, I tensed up again as I walked into work. I paused in the hallway on my way for coffee. One of *them*, a woman with shoulder pads, no tits, a frown on her face and a notepad in one hand stormed by, that leaning-forward-purposeful gait, taking us all to Hell in her Gucci handbasket. God... Is that what the company has turned into? I remember when working here was *fun*. From the look on that woman's face, I don't think she knows what the word means.

I got my coffee and headed to my cube. I should bring in juice to drink instead -- it would be better for me than coffee. Turning the corner to the alley my cube was on, I heard the racket of power tools. Then I saw Dale and the suit from Legal standing outside my cube. The racket was coming from inside. I peered over the top and saw two guys moving things around.

The suit said, "Mister Miller, we're having your cube rearranged for better ergonomics and to fit your new workstation. I.T. will be delivering it by eleven. They've promised me it will be all configured, and with all your files intact. But I'm having them leave your old system just in case. I'll drop by after lunch to see how you're doing."

I shook his hand. He walked off, smiling.

Dale was smiling as well.

"If both of you are smiling, someone else must not be. What did I miss last night?" I asked.

He grinned a little more. "Oh, a temper tantrum and some other antics that were cut short by HR and corporate legal."

I shook my head. "I don't want to have to watch out for Connie leaving tire tracks up my ass -- I've got a job to do," I told him.

He nodded. "Don't worry -- you're off the critical path, at least for a while."

That was a surprise! "What happened? Who's in the hot seat now?"

"Well," he said, grinning and looking around to see who was nearby, "It seems *someone* insisted we use a new vendor for our circuit boards, even though we already have qualified ones. She, ah *someone*, put so much pressure on purchasing that they agreed to test out this new vendor with a simpler, less risky board..."

Now I was smiling. "And?"

He shook his head. "Fucking disaster! The good news is that *we* don't have bad boards. The bad news is we don't have *any* boards! We're back to square one on *our* board, and this *someone* managed to piss off our best vendor enough so that they're not willing to move us back

to where we'd been in their queue. Going to cost us around four weeks -- that's on *our* project. Some other people are dealing with shitty boards on *their* projects -- shitty, expensive boards..."

"Sounds wonderful. Glad I missed it."

He turned grim. "But the yahoos upstairs don't have a clue."

"Monkey tree school of management," I told him, sipping my coffee.

"What's that?"

I grinned. "The monkeys at the top of the tree look down and all they see is smiling faces. The monkeys at the bottom of the tree look up, and all they see is...."

I was trying to be somewhat polite -- we worked together for a number of years before he was talked into the dark side, management.

"Yeah, assholes -- that's what I see, at least."

I put a hand on his shoulder. "Hey -- present company excepted. You're doing your best watching out for us and trying to help us get our work done."

"Thanks, I appreciate it. Hey, since your cube is currently trash, I'd appreciate it if you could drop by Derreck -- he's having a clock problem and I think you could help."

I nodded. "Be glad to."

It took us until lunch time, but we got his clock skew problem solved. Sitting in the cafeteria, most of the group seemed to be in higher spirits. Connie stomped by at one point, giving us the glare-of-death, but it didn't work. It was interesting, in fact -- I tightened up for a moment, but did something and relaxed. I took another breath and let my shoulders go.

"Wow!" I said as I walked back into my cube. My old box was sitting in one corner of the office, with a small LCD on top of it. I had a new box, connected to a very large, very nice LCD. Gee, had I seen that system in Connie's office? Even though my new display was far larger, it was only a few inches thick and took up far less real estate than my old, small CRT. Too bad they hadn't replaced the phone -- it was still there, and the message light was flashing.

And the ergo police had a new chair for me, a fancy thing with a mesh seat and back, and more adjustments than one of the scopes in the hardware lab. Two of them helped adjust it to me. Very nice!

New confuser, new chair, old problems. The phone could wait. I spent a while driving the new box. Very nice, very fast! And all my files were present -- I brought up one of my current problems and started working on it.

I was interrupted by someone tapping on the cube wall. I turned and saw the suit from Legal, and the HR gal. I waved them in.

“How are things now?” the HR gal asked.

I smiled. “I’ll show you.” I turned back to the display. “With my old system, especially the old display, to move a gate from here,” I selected part of the display, “to here, I’d have to click a whole bunch of times and either drag things, which was really slow, or go down and click on scroll bars, which was worse. Now I can do it quickly and easily.”

“So it’s easier on you physically as well?” she asked.

I nodded. “Oh yeah -- I don’t have to move my hands as much, and you know when you get frustrated, you tend to grip the mouse a lot tighter. I’ve only been using it for a little bit, but I think it will be an improvement. The chair is more comfortable, too.”

“How about the stimulations you run?” the suit asked.

“Simulations,” I corrected him. “I ran a small one first thing after lunch, and it looks at least thirty times faster -- I still need to reconfigure things, and can probably get more speed. That means I can use simulations in an interactive manner -- as they’re intended -- before I had to start it up, let it run to completion, then look at the results. Now I’ve got enough memory and horsepower to run things interactively, and once I see what I need to see, I can interrupt things, make changes, and continue. That’s going to be a big help.”

“How much of a change in your productivity do you think this represents?” the suit asked.

That was a tricky one. “It’s hard to say right now. I don’t think I’ll be staying past midnight as often, that’s for sure.”

They thanked me, told me to call if I had any problems, and left.

Whoopee -- I could get back to my new, faster, bigger grindstone...

I glanced at the damn phone, its message light flashing, demanding attention. For some reason that brought back memories of growing up, our little dog and the hopping dance she did by the back door when she needed out. I smiled as I picked up the phone. The phone won’t leave puddles on my desk if I didn’t respond to it quickly. I punched the voicemail button, then reached to the side of the phone and turned the ringer volume down as far as it would go.

Doctor Carter’s office had called and wanted me to call back. I could use to hear a friendly voice. I called them.

“Paul, thank you for calling! How are you doing today?” Doctor Carter asked.

“It’s good to hear your voice,” I told her. “I’m doing pretty well. A lot more relaxed, noticing things a lot more.”

“That’s good. What kinds of things are you noticing?”

“I think I’m going to put a little note on my monitor, reminding me to pay attention to my shoulders and my forehead -- I need to pay attention, and relax when I feel my self tensing up.”

“That’s very good. You need to relax.... Relax...”

My eyes closed as she spoke, her voice caressing me, comforting me.

I blinked, looking at the phone. Glancing at the clock, I must have been on the phone ten minutes or so. I remembered talking about some things. I needed to pick something up at their office on the way home tonight, and schedule another appointment for next week.

Wow -- what a trip! I felt a whole lot better; more relaxed, more focused. I turned to my new grindstone and got to work.

I left really early -- before eight! The trio at Dr. Carter’s office was happy to see me. They gave me pills to take, and a CD to listen to when I went to bed a night, even providing the player and headphones.

They quizzed me about my hands, how they were feeling. Not too bad, all in all. Did I have time for some massage work? Sure!

In no time, I was on my back on that weird table with my shirt and shoes off. Someone covered my eyes with a cool, perfumed cloth, they started working on my shoulders and arms, someone was whispering to me to relax... I had weird dreams, floating sideways, voices in the distance, having an incredible erection and a mind-blowing orgasm, floating again...

But when I opened my eyes, my pants and socks were still there. I felt great. We talked some more, and I took off for home, dinner, and bed. Their CD was interesting -- it started out with the sounds of surf, then Sarah and Nancy’s voices, first in one ear, then the other, so confusing -- I gave up trying to make sense of it and I guess I went to sleep.

The rest of the week was pretty good. Connie was on the warpath, but our group seemed protected -- so she gave the software folks hell. My new box worked great; I was far more productive. Dale copied me on a note up his chain, telling folks what a difference it made.

I took pills, and took breaks. Someone scrounged a little refrigerator for me. I kept cold packs, juice, and water in it. The cold packs I used for my elbows and wrists.

As usual, most of the crew was in Saturday. I got a call around four -- Dr. Carter! I think I spoke with her for a while; I’m not sure. I did know I wasn’t going to work on Sunday -- I had an appointment.

I showed up at Dr. Carter's office around one Sunday. For the first time in a long time, I slept in! Usually I "only" spent half a day Sunday at work, catching up on administrivia, reports Connie demanded but wouldn't read, chickenshit like that. I'd learned I had to take *some* time off from work, or I'd burn out. Not that Connie gave a rat's ass. Of course we never saw *her* on the weekends, or much after six in the evenings, either. But thanks to a faster box, I'd met my commitments for the week -- and I wasn't going to change what I'd committed to for the next few weeks, either!

They'd told me to bring shorts for exercising in -- okay, my old blue cotton shorts. We went to a twenty by twenty foot room with mirrors along one wall, cloth-covered mats on most of the floor, exercise balls, covered cylinders they called bolsters. Oh no, I'm in for it now...

But it wasn't bad! Sarah and Nancy were on the floor with me, wearing sweats. It was a mix of moving, stretching, and massage at first.

God, where did things go weird? The way they moved and massaged me, I drifted off to that weird but really nice place. They might have helped, the way they were talking to me, guiding me. It's so strange, feeling them close by, but their voices feeling far away.

We were stretching on the exercise balls, hanging over them, knees on the mat, legs spread a bit, breathing deep and letting it go, stretching, being stretched. I looked over and saw Sarah draped over her exercise ball. Her bottom looked so tasty, so soft, so inviting. I was so hard; I wanted her so much!

The next thing I know we're naked and I'm sliding into her from behind as she's on top of that exercise ball; I held her bottom as she rocked. She backed off it a little, just her head and shoulders resting on the ball as I held her bottom, thrusting into her.

God, so good -- and Nancy was there helping! She talked to me, to Sarah, ran her hands over us -- Sarah made incredible noises, which only made me harder, sliding in and out, in and out, until I grabbed her, trying to push in deeper and deeper as she moaned and pushed against me and as she went noisily over the edge I had a colossal orgasm, pumping into her and collapsing on top of her, still hanging on.

From there on it was delirium -- bodies, breasts, lips, kissing, sucking, squeezing, coming. I ended up on some cushions and bolsters; they gave me a massage from one end to the other, ending with Nancy riding me, Sarah at my head, holding my head, doing something that had me so crazy, coming so strongly, then drifting off sucking on Nancy.

Showering together, drying off, dressing, sitting in Dr. Carter's office. How were my hands and wrists doing? Much better. Had I enjoyed the session? Very much! Would I like to schedule more? Yes, of course! Here's a new CD to listen to at night; see you Thursday evening, and next Sunday.

I went home, had a light dinner, put in the new disc, and crashed.

Monday morning I really knew my attitude had changed. You know things are bad when Sunday night is the worst day of the week -- knowing tomorrow was Monday and you're dreading another week of toil... I was actually looking forward to the week! I was getting things done, in a more rational amount of time, and I had things to look forward to! Wow!

Of course Connie was out to fix that -- review meeting Monday afternoon. I could tell she wanted to whack at us, but Dale shut her up pretty quickly, telling her we were on track and on plan. Maybe having the HR gal in the room helped, I don't know. She sure didn't help Joachim and his software group -- Connie gave them hell, to the point that one of his folks left the room in tears, and Joachim looked close.

Tuesday afternoon I got a weird call from one of our vendors. One of their field sales reps had gotten a call from our company, from a woman. Didn't have her name, but she asked questions about the family of parts (programmable gate arrays) we were using for the project, prices and such. It was clear to him that technically, she didn't know what the hell she was talking about -- all she wanted was price and availability. I had an ugly feeling, and had him conference in the sales guy. I spouted a few Connie-isms at him and he said, yup, that's her. Okay guys, thanks for the heads up. They wanted to know if we wanted to use the cheaper part. Wished the hell we could, I told them -- but *someone* insisted on an enclosure that forced us to use the more expensive package. Well, those would ship on schedule -- we were getting pre-production qualification parts already. I thanked them for the help, and for the heads-up.

One thing the CD at bedtime did for me was kept me from taking work to bed. God, that's an ugly thought, Connie naked in bed. I realized as I examined that mental image it wasn't the body that turned me (or anyone, I expected) off, it was the personality. She was one person I couldn't imagine in the throes of orgasm. Didn't work; couldn't see it. Usually I worked over problems for hours before I got to sleep. But now I slipped on the headphones, hit "play" on the CD, and drifted away on the surf.

Dale knocked on my cube about nine thirty Wednesday, a nasty look on his face. "We need to meet with Connie and Jim," he said.

Jim was the engineering director, two levels above him, one above dear Connie. "What about?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Can't be good news. Don't know."

I grabbed my big binder of ammunition (memos and e-mails) from the shelf. "I'm gonna stop and pee on the way," I told him.

"Good idea."

We visited the men's room.

Some idiot, years ago, decided that “equality” in the workplace was important, and put people in cubicles rather than offices. *Really* dumb. A lot of us have to really *concentrate* on what we’re doing. Cubicles make that very difficult for most of the day. That’s why a lot of us work weird hours -- we need quiet to concentrate and get things done!

We met with Connie and Jim in a cubicle-turned-conference area. Surprisingly, a gal from HR was there as well.

Connie looked nastier than ever.

We sat down and she practically threw a data sheet at me. Did I know about this part, she demanded? Without waiting for an answer, she started on a tirade, that it was a third the price of the part we were using, didn’t I realize that cost was important in this project, and it was also available off the shelf where the part we were using was just being released and...

“Shut up!” I yelled.

She actually paused. “What did you say?”

“I said SHUT UP for a minute!”

I opened my binder, flipping from the front and unlatching it.

I pulled out a memo. “Here’s the memo Peter and I sent you seven months ago with our initial design -- specifying that part, that EXACT part. See here on page two, where it says low cost and currently available?”

“I don’t reme...”

“Shut UP!” I yelled again, flipping to another document in my binder. “Here’s the memo you sent back, telling us what size enclosure we HAD to use. Here’s our reply. Look at the summary -- right here, first page, in black and white, WE TOLD YOU we’d have to use a part that’s three times as expensive and isn’t available yet, as the box you wanted is too damn small to use the standard part! Next page, we detail increased costs for production and test because it’s a new package. New equipment needed for the lab on page three, and pages four through seven showed THREE slightly different designs that would let us use the cheap part!”

“Well, I don’t see what...”

“SHUT UP!” I yelled louder, standing. I pulled out the next memo. “Here’s the note from YOU saying, and I quote, ‘We’ll go with MY enclosure dimensions.’ YOU forced us to use the more expensive part! WE TOLD YOU about the cheap part! WE TOLD YOU what it would cost to use the expensive part! WE GAVE YOU alternatives that would let us use the cheap part, one of them only SIX MILLIMETERS larger! That’s a quarter of an inch! And YOU chose to go with this insane package! IT WAS YOUR DECISION! YOU made this

decision, not me! YOU are not going to do to US what you did to Joachim and his group! YOU, Miss MBA, made this decision, and now the whole damn company has to live with it!"

I was shaking. My heart was pounding. Connie was sitting back, pale.

I had to get the hell out of there. I turned, pushing the chair out of the way. I felt dizzy; I reached for the edge of the cubicle wall, but my hand didn't make it and I started falling...

"Paul, talk to me, Paul..."

I opened my eyes. My head was buzzing and I felt like shit. I was on my back in the hallway, people around me. One of our emergency medical response people was next to me.

"What?" I mumbled and tried to sit up.

She held me down. "Stay there. Do you know what day it is?"

"It's Wednesday fucking morning."

She smiled. I think she's in the documentation group. "Do you know what happened?"

I took a deep breath; something inside told me to relax. "I got pissed off. I got dizzy -- I must have passed out."

She nodded. I heard sirens outside.

"Guess I'm going for a ride?"

Still with a gloved hand on my forehead and one on my shoulder, she said, "I think so."

The paramedics insisted. I got the oxygen mask, but no needles. As they were wheeling me out, Dale asked, "Anyone we should call?" I don't have relatives in the area. "Yeah," I told him. I dug out one of Dr. Carter's cards. "Please call her."

Los Gusanos Memorial Hospital -- blood pressure, blood samples, EKG, head scans, lots of questions, and after the flurry of activity, I'm parked in a room, wired up, a thing stuck in my arm, and a thing on my nose blowing in oxygen.

After a while I hollered that I had to pee. Eventually I got a bedpan.

I was wondering if I'd get something to eat, when Dr. Carter and Nancy walked in.

"Paul, how are you?" Dr. Carter asked, putting a hand on my shoulder.

I had to smile. "Not too bad."

“Oh?” she asked with a frown. “What happened?”

“I told off a twit. Guess I got a little too excited -- I passed out afterwards.”

Nancy managed a slight smile. “But you’re feeling okay now?”

I nodded. “Aside from basic indignities. And not knowing where I’ll be working next.”

Dr. Carter nodded. “All the tests are negative -- you can stay the night, or we can take you home.”

That got my attention. “Let’s get the hell out of here!”

Dr. Carter nodded. “Right away. Nancy?”

Nancy stayed with me. She put a hand on my forehead and started whispering in my ear. Things faded.

“Right away” took an hour. Guess I should feel lucky. We went by work and Nancy picked up my car, following us back to my place.

“I thought Nancy was following us?” I asked Dr. Carter.

“She’s picking up dinner. How does that sound?”

My stomach rumbled. “Pretty good.” I sighed. “So, what happened today?”

She shrugged. “My guess, pretty much as you described -- you got excited, and fainted. No signs of stroke or heart attack; your blood pressure hasn’t changed much -- you should exercise more.”

“Yeah, and reduce stress. Get to bed early. Eat more fiber. Floss. What did I forget?”

She managed to laugh.

We talked for a while until Nancy arrived, with pizza. Sarah arrived a few minutes later, with a portable massage table. Our conversation centered around how I was doing -- I seemed to be better adapted to work, until this morning at least. I told them about the phone, remembering our little dog hopping up and down by the door. They liked that. The phone didn’t run me anymore. While I understood things better, and on one level didn’t let them get to me, I was more aware of the futility and hostility present. It wasn’t survivable long-term. That’s why I’d blown up this morning; we’d been hijacked and were being taken to hell by a clueless twit.

I ended up on the massage table, and they wiped me out. I also ended up in bed with Sarah riding me, curled up in her afterwards and going to sleep.

Another day, another hill to charge. I woke early, alone, but feeling good. For the first time in a long time I was in at work before seven thirty! Usually if I was at my desk at that time, it meant I was a leftover from the previous night.

I'd been thinking about Joachim and his software folks on the way in, the way they'd been pounded Monday. Dug into my binder of memos -- yup, he'd told Connie (and the rest of us) they couldn't do what they needed to do in software alone -- they needed hardware assist. And now I knew how to do it. Thanks to my new confuser, I could see more of the problem at once. Rather than just supplying Joachim and his people raw data, I could give it to them preshifted and transmogrified any way they wanted.

Joachim was an early bird. I popped into his cube and we knocked out the problem in less than an hour. We went to my cube and I revised the logic to my part, ran a quickie simulation, and sent the updates to the server so Joachim and his folks could code against them.

Joachim left my cube with a big smile on his face. I'd saved their collective asses. Damn, I felt good!

Until Dale, Jim, the legal dude, and the HR gal descended on my cube.

"What are you doing here?" Dale asked.

"Saving our collective asses," I told them flatly.

"Let's talk," the legal bozo said, then turned and walked off.

The funeral party followed. I made sure I had my car keys. It looked bad -- we went to a hard-walled conference room on the other side of the building.

"So, am I suspended or something?" I asked as we sat down, the door closed behind us.

Legal shook his head. "Not at all -- we expected you to take some time off, that's all."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Nobody told me that."

Dale sort of smiled. "Why don't you take the rest of the week off? You've got the time."

I made a face. Shit, I had the time -- HR was on my case to take time off; I was maxed out on vacation time. "Death march -- the schedule must be met," I told them.

"What happened yesterday?" the HR gal asked.

I frowned again. She'd been there. Guess they're asking me for my side of things. "It's not what happened yesterday, it's what happened months ago. Peter and I did a first-cut at implementation, as requested, wrote it up, and sent it around. SHE, Connie, came back and demanded we put everything in a *much* smaller enclosure. Peter and I looked at that, and

explained in short, clear words, and then in great detail what it would cost to do that, and gave her alternatives that used cheaper parts and processes. She insisted on the smaller box. Oh, did I mention Peter and I proposed a standard enclosure, and the one she insisted on is full custom and has cost us around thirty five THOUSAND dollars in tooling costs alone?"

The HR gal was giving me questioning looks, so I paused.

"Peter?" she asked.

I smiled, but with a rotten feeling in my stomach. "You must be new. In a 'design review' meeting on the packaging, ah, *options*, Connie kept making really derogatory comments about the alternatives Peter and I proposed. I mean, she could have just said we were doing it her way and left it at that. But no, she went on and on -- demeaning, nasty, childish stuff. Peter excused himself from the meeting, and that's the last anyone saw of him. He left his badge on his desk and walked out. And she damn near did that to Joachim and his team on Monday! You saw that -- was that professional behavior, the way she treated those people? It's the same thing! I looked back and found the analysis Joachim sent her *months ago* -- they don't have the processor power to do what they needed without hardware assist. She told them to work on it anyway. They've been pounding on that problem for months, without success. Then on Monday, she jumps down their throats! Once again, *she knew better*! That's what got me so pissed off yesterday -- she knew better! She's supposed to be the damn decision maker -- she INSISTS on making decisions. We give her all the info -- you go this way, here's what it costs. You go this other way, here's what it costs. She makes a decision, and then blames us months later because it costs exactly what we *told* her it would? This is nuts, folks!"

I looked at Dale. "You remember when this was an *engineering* company? When project managers understood the difference between a BGA and a TQFP? We've been taken over by clueless MBAs, and they're taking us right to hell."

I needed to calm down. I spread my hands on the conference table and tried breathing smooth and slow.

"What do you think we should do about Connie?" the legal beagle asked.

I sighed. "Let's see... She's driven one superb engineer out of the company, sent one to the hospital, reduced our key software people to tears, got others munching antacids..."

"Do you think Joachim will bail?" Dale asked me.

"Nah -- I figured out the hardware assist they need in my sleep last night. I came in early and we did it. I'm just sorry I didn't figure it out a lot earlier, but I didn't have the tools to give me the clues I needed. Gee, there's another favor she's done us -- hijacking the machine I ordered for months. The simulations look golden. Talk to him about the rewrites they need to do, but it's going to free up a lot of clock cycles. He's happy. At least until the next punishment session, I mean review meeting."

I looked to legal and frowned. “Then there’s the chaos she’s caused with our printed circuit board fabrication process. All in all, for the trouble she’s cost the company, I figure it’s time she was made a corporate V.P.”

The HR gal gasped, but the legal guy smiled.

Jim hadn’t said much so far. “You think we’re that fucked up?”

I looked at him and shrugged. “You look at the data and decide.”

Glances exchanged. Dale told me, “Why don’t you go back to your office.”

I stood up, slowly. I took a breath. I was okay, or as good as I was going to get. “Okay.”

Some folks were gathered around my cube. They wanted to know what was going on, and surprisingly, congratulated me for yelling at Connie. That felt good. One guy told me he was bringing me a cricket bat, because, “I’d knocked her for six.” Guess that’s good. Joachim came by, smiling from ear to ear. He gave me a big hug and said his group was going to give me my weight in beer. Oh, could I rearrange some bits? They could shave 12% out of another loop if I could. Let’s take a look...

What he needed was fairly simple; it took longer to get the changes checked in to the version control system than to make and simulate them, thanks to a faster box.

By then Dale and HR appeared, looming at the edge of my cube. No good deed goes unpunished. Joachim thanked me again, told folks that I’d saved their lives, and took off.

Dale was smiling, but I could tell it was forced. “Paul,” he said after sighing, “we want you to take the rest of the week off -- medical leave, so it won’t cost you any vacation time.”

“I’ve got about ten minutes more here -- made another change for Joachim. What’s happening? Did I get us into deep shit?”

He frowned. “No, that’s not it. Evidently one of the company’s insurance carriers called and raised the roof -- your doctor friend. They want you resting for a while.”

Okay. “So what’s happening with dear Connie?” I asked.

His frown deepened. His HR shadow had taken off. “They won’t fucking tell me! I have Janice spying for me -- evidently Connie was called to Building 1 for something.”

B1 was executive staff, the pork palace. “Like I said, she’s V.P. material.”

Dale managed a slight smile, but it was grim. “Not where I work, she isn’t.”

I clicked on the screen to finish checking in my changes; damn, this thing was fast! “There are multiple solutions to that,” I told him sourly.

He nodded. “Yah, I know.” He stood up.

I held out my hand, and shook with him. “See you next week, then. Thanks for trying to insulate us from the batshit.”

“Yah, sorry I haven’t done better.” He shuffled off.

Fuck. Standing in the parking lot, not even eleven in the morning. I had an appointment this evening with Carter. Hmm -- a good place to start. I got my cell phone and gave them a call. Anyone around at this hour?

“Doctor Carter’s service,” a woman’s voice answered after more rings than usual.

“Hi, this is Paul...” I started to say.

“Oh! She’s been trying to reach you! I’ll connect you right away!”

After a bit Dr. Carter came on the line. “Paul -- where are you?”

“Standing in the parking lot at work; I’ve been thrown out.”

“What?”

“Actually, ordered to take the rest of the week off. I gather someone leaned on folks.”

She sighed. “We’re concerned. Listen -- I want Sarah to kidnap you, get you out of town. How does that sound?”

Life was looking up. “That sounds good. What do I do?”

“Go home and pack for a few days at the beach. She’ll pick you up in a while.”

“Okay. I can do that.”

“Take care, Paul -- we’re concerned about you.”

“Me too.”

I headed home and packed for the beach. Probably cool and cloudy this time of year. Should be nice.

I was about to check e-mail when Sarah arrived. God, she looked tasty. It was going to be a good weekend!

“About ready?” she asked.

“Yup. Where are we headed?”

“A little south of Aptos. Did you bring any work?”

“Hell no!”

She laughed. “Good answer.” She went to the kitchen and got a glass of water. She dug in her purse and gave me two pills, a 4-sided blue one, and an orange-ish round one. “Here.”

Okay, I took them. “Let me visit the loo before we leave.”

“A good idea -- I’ll go after you.”

“Ooh -- I’ll use the big bathroom, think I forgot something. You use the little one.”

I used the loo. I’d already packed the toothpaste; I commonly forgot it on trips, which is why I had a drawer full of little travel tubes of toothpaste.

Driving over Highway 17 to the coast, unwinding, getting to be a passenger. I liked Sarah’s smile. Liked the rest of her, too... “So, what’s the plan? Any ground rules?”

“Paul, the plan is for you to unwind. Only one rule -- if you start thinking about work, let me know so I can distract you.”

I liked her smile. We were in for some good distractions...

Heading south on Highway 1, I felt funny, sniffing a bit.

“How do you feel?” Sarah asked.

“A little spaced out, and my nose feels stuffed up.” Hmmm... “Related to those pills?”

She smirked and nodded. “Dr. Carter wants to be sure you relax.”

I smirked back. “I hope I’m not *too* relaxed...”

She raised an eyebrow and smirked, “Don’t you worry...”

“Groceries?” I asked as we turned off Highway 1 in Aptos.

“In the back,” she told me.

We unloaded things into a condo right on the beach.

A little after three in the afternoon, and I was standing out on the porch, eyes closed, feeling and smelling the cool sea air, listening to the wind and surf. Like the every-night recording, starting out with surf, my breath going deep and slow in response, letting go of tension and tight muscles.

A hand on my shoulder. "How are you doing?"

"Unwinding," I said, slipping an arm around Sarah's waist.

"Like to unwind some more?" she offered.

I turned and pulled a warm, soft, woman closer. We kissed in the sounds of the surf, the brisk sea air.

We kissed inside on the bed, rolling around to the sounds of the surf, then sounds of passion. I curled up afterwards, head on her chest, her heart beat mixing with the sounds of the surf. Her voice took me to that soft, safe, relaxing place again, resting in her arms.

Up for a simple dinner. Walking on the beach, kissing on the beach, getting cold on the beach, retreating inside to get warm. A fire in the fireplace, Sarah massaging me, then riding me. Going to sleep in her arms, waking in the morning to her curled up with me. Snuggling, loving, walking, eating, sleeping.

Sunday night working our way up Highway 17, back to so-called Civilization. I sighed and put a hand on Sarah's thigh. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

Her smile looked different, glowing from within. "Oh, you're welcome. How do you feel? What's different?"

"I know how much I need to touch, hold, and be held. Just snuggling is so nice."

She sighed. "I'm so glad to hear that."

She dropped me off. Another hug and kiss outside my door. "We'll see you Wednesday night," she told me.

Back in the house, I sorted the mail. Bills and trash. As I loaded up laundry, I turned on the computer to check e-mail.

Holy shit! I had a job interview at nine in the morning! I replied, saying I'd be there, and I'd just gotten back into town after being gone and away from mail for a few days. God, I hope that works!

Did I have something presentable to wear in the morning? I hadn't done interviews in too many years. Fuck it -- I'm going as I am. Let them see who they're getting.

I was keyed up going to bed -- until I started the CD by reflex. Sounds of surf. Memories of being wrapped up in Sarah.

Eleven thirty Monday morning, a break in a weird interview process. I was worried -- some of these people were just going through the motions. Had I pissed someone off?

Jeff, the ringleader, reappeared. "Ready for lunch? We're going to be joined by the guy you'll be working with."

"Okay, let's go." So far I'd only heard vague references.

We walked out to the lobby.

And standing there with two of the folks I'd spoken to earlier in the day was Peter!

"Sheepshagger!" I yelled out. Peter was from New Zealand. I grabbed him and pounded him on the back.

He laughed. "Glad to see *you* too!"

I rode to the restaurant with Jeff, but rode back alone with Peter.

"Damn, it's good to see you again!" I said for the umpteenth time.

He laughed. "When I saw your paperwork, I told them if they don't hire you, I'm leaving. How are things at the salt mines? I didn't want to ask in front of the others."

I shook my head. "As bad as you could imagine, and then some."

"Connie still her charming self?"

I felt like spitting. "Driving some to tears, and sent one to the hospital."

He shook his head. "Hey, they'll match your vacation time so you don't have to start out at two weeks a year."

"You make it sound like a done deal."

He smiled. "Your choice, mate -- it's your choice. Jeff and I, or Connie."

"Fuck, that's a hard one."

He laughed.

Back at their place, I talked to their HR guy. Told him what I was making, and that it was more important that they meet my vacation time. He didn't think that would be a problem.

Wrapping up with Jeff, I had the feeling I'd be hearing from them by the end of the week.

Puttering at home, fixing dinner. God, walking out on the project, though... Walking out on Connie? Hah! Hopping, skipping, running and laughing out! But Dale, Joachim and his crew, Larry, all the folks. Who'd pick up the slack?

In the immortal words of the Sage, *not my fucking problem!*

I was very glad for that recording when I went to bed. I doubt I would have gotten to sleep without it.

Things were weird Tuesday. People on our project were walking around on eggshells.

I checked e-mail; nothing important. Oh shit -- Thursday was completely booked with a meeting!

"Hey Larry," I called out, hoping he was in his cube next door to mine and not wearing his fancy headphones. That's how he coped with cube life -- Etymotics ER-4 -- wearing those, he couldn't hear his phone ringing right next to him.

"Yeah?" he called back.

"What's this shit on Thursday?" I asked. No agenda, just a conference room.

He wandered in and draped his lanky frame over a guest chair. Big sigh; he shook his head. "You ever think of playing the stock market?"

I know I gave him a weird look. "Say what?"

He gave me the sourest look... "You're so good at predicting the future, you ought to play the market."

"What's happening? What's the deal Thursday?"

"Dale is history -- quit or fired, we don't know. Connie now heads the division, and announced she's running both engineering *and* marketing sides of our project *personally*."

"Oh fuck."

He nodded. "You missed that announcement yesterday -- nothing in writing yet. Thursday is a top-to-bottom review. She told us yesterday she expects us to cut two weeks out of the schedule, oh, and to expect feature 'refinements' as well."

“Oh fuck,” I reiterated. Dale gone?

He nodded.

I looked at the calendar, matching fingers with weeks. “We can’t even get prototype pc boards in that time, let alone production boards!”

He nodded again.

“So is she going to run *us* directly, or install some titless wonder, ah, colleague?” I asked.

I did *not* like the smile he gave me.

“Oh fuck,” I repeated again. I was senior in our group. “She wouldn’t...”

He shook his head again. “That’s the rumor, but nothing solid.” He looked at me over the tops of his glasses. “Given the alternative you mentioned, we’d much rather have you.”

I felt like throwing up... Or... I threw back my head and laughed out loud! When I finally stopped, I dug in my bag and got my cell phone, and Jeff’s card. I walked outside and gave him a call. “Jeff, this is Paul,” I told his voicemail. “I’d *really* like to hear from you as soon as possible.” I left my cell number. I went back to my cube.

Really, really weird... The other folks in our group dropped by to talk about everything but Dale. I tried reaching him at home, and on his freebie e-mail account. No dice.

Actually, had a good meeting with Joachim’s folks. If I slammed bits around a little differently, we could eliminate more code. I looked at things and had to laugh -- what they wanted would *save* me gates! Done! We redid the code and hardware together.

Somebody popped for pizza around seven; I took off a little before nine.

I was tired. Even with the chasm looming before me, I wasn’t freaking out! I showered and went to bed, putting on the latest CD, barely hearing their voices before I dropped.

Driving in Wednesday morning early, I thought strategy... I had an appointment tonight at six. I was going to be there! What would Connie do? Call me into a “meeting” at five, right? Okay, I’m leaving by four at the latest! I left another voicemail message for Jeff, programming his number into my phone as I waited at a stoplight.

Rumors of changes, wild things, but nothing other than rumors, nothing written. Connie hadn’t been seen, nor had Jim or the other high-level managers -- all down at the Pork Palace.

I worked through lunch with the software folks and some of our hardware group, reviewing where we were nailed tight and where we were still flexible.

Even got an audience with John, our analog guru. Our gadget, like most of our products, has an analog front-end, analog-to-digital converters, then fancy digital signal processing. John rules the world from the input connector through the a-to-d converters. He's a genius, been here forever, and I don't understand why the hell he sticks around.

His part of our gadget took up a fair amount of board space but didn't use any weird parts. The layout of his parts, and the traces connecting them is critical. Even though he was essentially re-using one of his earlier designs, John had to work hard to get it to perform in half the board space, and he'd done it.

His stuff was right on the edge of manufacturing margins. He had a couple of tricks he could try to improve noise margins, but that meant revising the printed circuit board layout.

Surprise -- when I was about to leave, he shook my hand and congratulated me for yelling at Connie. I told him I didn't know how much more of her shit I could take. He pointed to a memo pinned to a wall of his cube. I had one just like it -- the note from HR telling us we were maxed out on accumulated vacation time. He told me he was ready to retire at the drop of a hat. When I mentioned I'd be looking for a hat if I were him, he laughed. Then he told me, "Paul, you're too bright and too young to be putting up with this kind of shit. This project is dead; Connie's made sure of it. My advice -- look around, and don't take it seriously." I shook his hand again and admitted I was looking.

And I blew out a little after four, my calendar showing a rescheduled appointment.

I checked e-mail at home, and tried to reach Dale again -- no dice. I took another shower, a long one, dressed comfortably, and headed to Dr. Carter's office.

I really wanted to talk to Dr. Carter about things at work, but that didn't happen. I'm not sure *what* happened. I walked into the office, Sarah and Nancy walked up to me, someone ran a hand up the back of my neck, and I fell into a dream. It was a pleasant dream, a wet dream for a while, then a very soothing dream.

But I woke up and it was Thursday, and I had to go to a meeting. Crap.

Got in about twenty to nine, with the meeting scheduled for nine.

But our area was deserted! Oh shit, she didn't! When I got to my cube, I saw the note taped to my big display -- "8:30!"

I walked to the marketing side of the building and the big conference room. Went in the back -- the room was full, and I had to take a seat in the fourth row.

Connie was droning over a set of months-old powerpoint slides.

As I took a seat, Connie stopped the show. In front of the entire division, she yelled at me for not being around yesterday for a very important meeting, for not being on time, spent another two minutes calling me names, and said she'd deal with me later.

Good fucking morning to you, too! It was all I could do to not laugh out loud!

Tina, one of Joachim's folks, handed me an agenda. "Mandated" project changes at ten. And of course Connie wasn't giving us any of that information ahead of time. Typical.

About nine fifteen my cell phone rang. I grabbed it -- it was Jeff! I stood up and headed for the door. Connie gave me a nasty look, and it was all I could do to not flip her the finger.

"Give me some good news," I told him when I was outside the conference room.

He laughed. "Got an offer letter for you. Where would you like me to send it?"

I walked another five feet and was standing by the marketing fax machine. "Can you fax it, and I mean right now?"

"Sure, what's the number?"

I read it to him from the machine. He told me to hold on. About an eternity, most likely a minute or less later, the fax machine rang and answered.

"Got it yet?" he said on the phone.

"Waiting..." I told him. The fax machine spit out a page. Damn -- cover page.

The other pages came out. They'd upped the money a bit!

"Still there?" he asked.

"You still there at the machine? I asked him, reading back the fax number.

"Oh yeah.

I took out a pen and scrawled my acceptance on the summary page, then fed it to the machine.

"Hot damn!" Jeff said after a minute or so. "When can you talk about start dates?"

"I can start in a week or two, most likely -- I think I need some time to decompress."

"We've talked about that. Did you look at page three of the letter?"

"Ah, not real close, why?"

“We’ll talk about it some more, but we might want you to take a few weeks off to decompress before you start; we’re more interested in you long-term.”

“That’s a pretty amazing thing to hear,” I tossed out, surprised.

He laughed. “Yeah. I know. I like it here, too.”

“I need to get back to a meeting, but thanks for the good news,” I told him.

“Hey! Thank you! We’re looking forward to having you here -- I get to make some people happy today. Thanks again, and give me a call when you’ve got better info on dates.”

“Okay. Thanks.” I pocketed my phone, and put the offer letter into an envelope. Visited the loo before heading back to the party.

Connie gave me another nasty look as I sat down, and threw in a reference to “some people who need to work regular hours.” Fuck you too, sweetie.

It’s customary and polite to schedule bio breaks in long meetings... But only if you give a shit about people, I guess. Ten o’clock came and she didn’t even slow down.

Five after ten and the shit started hitting the fan. I started to take notes, but put my pen back in my pocket. Okay, pulling the schedule in two weeks -- what a clueless twit -- we couldn’t get proto circuit boards in that time, even assuming our current layout was golden!

Holy shit! She was upping performance! I glanced around the room looking for John. Okay, to do that we have to use *much* faster a-to-d parts, the sample clock gets faster, and the sample memory size goes up by a factor of four. Matching the a-to-d parts is going to be a problem. That means a new board layout, with more parts on it.

I felt that nasty feeling creeping into my stomach. I touched the offer letter in my pocket. Not my problem! I could almost hear their voices; I was watching a car wreck happen, but I was *not* in it. Unfortunately, friends and colleagues were.

Connie was in fine form. She brought up a slide with our current layout, which then populated with part numbers and costs for the major components, complete with animation and cheesy, juvenile sound effects. God, I *hate* powerpoint!

She told us this was too big and too expensive and since we were too stupid to see that, *she* had to do the hard work. She brought up the next slide.

Ah, a thing of beauty... To her, probably. Let’s see -- we need four times the sample memory to meet her “improved” specs, so she’s cut the original memory in half! Shrunk John’s analog section something fierce, and what’s this? She’s taken our pair of matched high-speed a-to-d converters, and put in what? I thought I recognized the part number -- a two-channel a-to-d

part about twenty times too slow, and that was with the *old* specs. Oh, and she had the analog section split between the big gate array (the cheap, large part we couldn't use) and the processor.

"That won't work," John called out from the crowd.

"I beg your pardon," Connie said in an icy and very annoyed tone.

I looked around.

John was standing. "That won't work," he reiterated. "You need..."

Connie shot back. "YOU don't understand! THIS is what we are going to ship! And if YOU don't think you can make it work, then I'll find someone younger, cheaper, brighter, and that dresses better to do the job!"

Silence.

John started laughing. He walked up to the front of the room.

Connie cringed and moved back from the table.

John unclipped his badge and tossed it on the table in front of her. "Start looking, honey!" he told her, then turned and walked to the door!

"John!" I called out, standing. "Wait a moment, please!"

He turned and frowned. But, he waited, with one hand on the door.

I walked to the front of the room and plopped my badge on the table next to John's. I looked at Connie. I think she was starting to see the light, and realized it was coming right at her. "Good luck," I told her. "You're going to need it."

I turned my back on her, and on the project. Yes, and on friends and colleagues as well. Call it self-preservation, selfishness, whatever you want.

John smiled and held out his hand. We shook. He pushed the door open.

"You can't quit without notice!" Connie cried.

John stopped halfway out the conference room door. He turned to Connie. "Ever hear of the 18th Amendment?" he replied.

"Thirteenth?" I suggested.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I've got twelve weeks of accrued vacation time," he called to Connie. "I'm on vacation. You've got notice." He forced a smile and waved bye-bye.

I waved to her as well. We exited the conference room, and the building.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I was still keyed up.

“I hope the hell you thought that out,” John said next to me.

I looked at him and put a hand on his shoulder. “I accepted an offer with another company. I hope *you* thought it out...”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Yesterday after we talked, a little bird told me what she was going to do, so I cleaned out my office. I’ve retired.” He looked at his watch. “And I have a lunch date I need to go to! Paul, good luck and keep in touch!”

I had to laugh, watching him skip, jump, and twirl as he made his way to his car. Hope I’ve got that attitude when I’m his age... What the hell -- I laughed, twirled, and hopped my way to *my* car!

I drove about two blocks, pulling into a strip mall parking lot. I shut off the engine; my hands were shaking. I’d done it. Easy or hard, I’d done it. I pulled out the offer letter and read it, really read it, from one end to the other.

I needed to see Dr. Carter, but something told me I needed to call before going over.

Pulled out my phone.

Sarah answered. “Doctor Carter’s office.”

“Hi Sarah, this is Paul Miller. Is Doctor Carter available?”

“Yes -- what’s the matter?”

I blurted it out. “I’m screwed up. I... I don’t know.”

“It’s all right, Paul -- come right over, please!”

I sighed, relaxing at the sound of her voice. “Thanks. I’ll be there in ten minutes or so.”

I walked into Dr. Carter’s office. Sarah came up to me, smiling. I held up a hand. “I need to talk to Doctor Carter. Talk.”

She frowned a little. “Okay... How are you feeling?”

I smiled and opened my arms. We hugged. “Much better, thank you.”

Sarah showed me into Carter's office. I sat down. Sarah closed the door behind her on the way out.

"Paul, what can I do for you? Is something the matter?" Carter asked.

I sighed, still feeling twitchy. "I don't know. Good news and bad news. The good news is that I accepted an offer from another company and quit my old job. I deserted a sinking ship, with friends still on it. The possibly bad news is that the new place wants a pre-employment physical. They..."

She interrupted, "We can take care of that, no problem."

"I'm concerned," I continued. "Will this carpal tunnel thing, the whole worker's comp thing be a problem?"

"Carpal tunnel?" she asked with a frown.

I frowned back. "Yeah -- my damn left hand -- that's what set this whole thing off."

"Carpal tunnel?" she asked again.

I shook my head, wondering what planet I was on all of a sudden.

She pulled up a folder, don't know if it was mine or not. She turned to her computer and tapped on the keyboard, looked, tapped again.

She looked at the screen, at me, and then at the file. "No, it can't be," she muttered, and tapped some more. She started laughing, softly at first, eventually putting her head in her hands.

Eventually she stopped, wiped her eyes, and sighed. "Oh Paul..."

"Like to clue me in?" I asked.

She nodded. "How are you feeling now, in comparison to when we started?"

I closed my eyes for a moment. "Right now I'm screwed up, but in general, a lot better. Oh, I've been through some rough shit, but I've found a better job, I think, and I'm a lot better ... I don't know, a lot better inside. I'm more relaxed, I don't have trouble sleeping, thanks to you, I don't get wound up, especially at shit I can't control. I guess I look at a lot of things differently. You've made a big difference." I flexed my fingers and moved my wrists. "My hands are a lot better, too."

She smiled and nodded. "I think I understand most of it. Let me be sure on this -- you initially went to the worker's comp doctor on a carpal tunnel issue?"

I shook my head. “Yes! For the umpteenth time! This whole thing started when someone at work overheard me complaining that my fingers were tingling, especially my left hand, and hurt by the end of the day. The ergo police sent me to that doctor -- Liu, I think. She ran me through the wringer, said it was work related, and a few days later you called.”

Doctor Carter smiled, still nodding. “Doctor Liu wrote a really scathing letter, saying that your problems were caused by your work environment. She used very strong language, stating that your condition would worsen unless you received immediate treatment and steps were taken to alleviate the workplace issues. Scared the crap out of someone’s insurance carrier, and they got us involved really quick, putting pressure on your employer to change things.”

“Bringing things to a head, and changing, in a weird way, eventually,” I muttered.

Carter shook her head. “I’m pretty sure I know *what*, but not *how*! Nowhere in her diatribe does Dr. Liu mention carpal tunnel!”

I sat back. “I’m confused. What are you getting at?”

“Paul... Let me say that we’ve enjoyed working with you; some of us have really enjoyed working, ah, closely with you...”

I managed a sigh. “Saved my life...”

She shook her head again, still smiling, almost laughing. “I don’t know how to explain it... You probably know our lives, and especially the lives of practitioners working in the worker’s comp area are all but ruled by computers.”

I nodded. “Doctor Liu said it, lives reduced to marks on a form.”

“Well, the reference code for a diagnosis of severe carpal tunnel is 2304. I think that’s an important part of the puzzle.”

“Puzzle? I’m getting more confused by the moment.”

She nodded. “But the diagnosis on the form *we* received is 21304 -- an extra digit. Could have happened anywhere along the line. I’d bet Doctor Liu just ticked a box on a form...”

A dim light went on... I told her about the chemical warfare Latina, and how the data entry gal responded, sneezing spasmodically as her fingers flew on the keyboard.

“That’s it! She entered 21304 instead of 2304! And the rest, as they say, is history!”

I was still confused. “So, what were *you* treating me for?”

She looked at me. “Acute sexual dysfunction, reference code 21304, and according to Doctor Liu, clearly brought on by your workplace, the environment and stress.”

I shook my head. “And I thought I was just lucky...”

She laughed. “Oh, you were! We all were!” She gave me a serious look. “Paul, you *were* so lucky -- we did identify, and work through, some serious issues with you. Because of the complex nature of dysfunction, the interactions of physical and psychological, we do ground-up workups to identify physical and psychological factors, then work with both; they interact.”

“My hand, my wrist, is better.”

“Oh yes, interactions again -- we worked to clear up any issues we found, and as you, and Doctor Liu found, you had nerve compression issues. Those physical issues were adding to, exacerbating the psychological issues. We had to address them to resolve larger issues.”

“I’d say they’ve been addressed!”

Doctor Carter nodded, an intense look. “But we have more work to do -- you said you were feeling screwed up. You wouldn’t have called, come in, unless you needed to.” She pressed a button on her desk phone.

Sarah and Nancy came in. My heart started beating fast as they stood next to me.

Doctor Carter smiled. “I believe you have the rest of the day free, Paul, and we have some issues we need to address. Ladies?”

As I turned to look at Nancy, I felt a hand go up the back of my neck. I sighed as my eyes closed. Sarah’s voice in one ear, hot and close, Nancy’s voice in the other, carrying me off into a dream once more.

Fin

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