

Work Breaks

By

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“You look even worse than you did yesterday. How'd you manage that?”

The reflection of his blimpy torso loomed behind me. I tried to stare through it so I could focus on my snack choices: Hostess Donuts, Pop-Tarts, Cheez-Its, Sno-Balls, Pretzels, Doritos, Oreos, Funyuns, Cheetos, and Mrs. Freshley's Jumbo Honey Buns, which were large, greasy atrocities covered in nasty ejaculations of frosting.

He stood there and waited for my answer, but I kept quiet, so he went on rambling. “You're my only scanner,” he said. “And when my only scanner isn't doing his job, it's a problem. The thing is, it's such a *simple* job. I mean, here's your job – you take papers from this desk,” he began acting out my duties, “you run them through *this* machine, then put them in a pile on *the other* desk. It's what you've been doing for three months now. That's it. Now how in the hell can you not handle that?”

That may have been true, but what the hell did that have to do with how I looked? It seemed he was moving from one gripe to another without a reasonable segue, and moreover, his voice was loud enough that people in the office surely could hear him. That irritated me. What, I wanted to ask, did his *Middle Management for Dummies* handbook say on proper employee motivation? Did it say to invade people's personal space and talk to them like they were four years old?

When I again refused to answer him, he realized, perhaps, that he'd gone too far. "Look," he said in a lowered voice, leaning toward me a little, "I'm not saying you can't do the job, and I know sometimes we all stretch out our breaks, show up late, slack off here and there. *I get that*. I just need you to contribute a bit more to the team. Okay? The way you'd been doing before the start of this week. What's happened to you, man?"

I turned around.

I could see a vague reflection of myself in the thick lenses of his glasses. Behind these lenses, his eyes had a lifeless, sharkish quality. While staring into them, I

pondered his questions and tried to envision how I had come to this low point.

Only one tenant in my apartment complex wasn't some young kid right out of school: a crusty, frizzy-headed old lady who lived by herself and was about four times the age of every other tenant. She liked to putter up and down the sidewalk with an aluminum walker that had tennis balls for stumps. This was her routine – take a couple steps, rest, look around, smile at nothing, repeat. Essentially, she was no different from any old lady with a walker. After seeing her enough times I became curious over what her deal was, and one day I decided to talk to her. I had just put in another draining day of work, and she, as usual, was moving along the sidewalk at a glacial pace. When I approached her she looked up and smiled, as if she wasn't the least bit surprised to see me.

“Hello there,” I said.

“Hello!”

“How are you?”

“Fine,” she said, “I'm just fine!”

I stood there, nodding.

“Okay,” I said, “well, see you!”

That was our first conversation.

In the days that followed, whenever I saw her I'd say hello. One time, she initiated some chitchat about the weather. I hung around awhile and cut her off when I'd had enough, and she didn't seem to mind. We began to have more conversations; soon, chatting with her became part of my routine. We'd talk about the empty units, the squirrels that ran around everywhere, the economy, homeless people that you couldn't go a block without running into. It got to the point where I'd find her waiting for me when I got home. One day I ran into her after a particularly brutal day at work. An important title document had been mangled and I had to take the blame, even though it was the machine's fault. In a foul and exasperated mood, I spilled my guts to her and confessed my administrative misery, my cubicle monkeyhood, my overall feelings of depression and uselessness. In response, the old lady said, "Your situation isn't an uncommon one. Don't get too down. There are plenty of ways for you to make money without having to work in an office."

"Oh yeah?" I said. "Like what?"

"Well, it's up to you to find out," she said. "But one thing I've heard is, lots of folks make money grabbing stuff people leave out with the trash."

"They do what?"

“They scavenge to get by. You ever heard of a thing like that? In my day we called that opportunity, you know.”

“Scavenge to get by,” I said thoughtfully.

“That’s right.”

“Do you think you could milk something like that for \$1,500 a month? Consistently?”

“I’m not sure,” she said. “But people leave stuff out all over the city. You never know when you might find a real treasure.”

“How do you know all this?”

Instead of answering that, the old lady told me the real hotspot was a place called the Fabulous Forties, named – quite unimaginatively – after a section of Midtown where the streets numbered from 40 to 49. The Fabulous Forties, she said, comprised a few dozen blocks and was the most upscale part of the city, aside from gated communities. She said the best time to venture out was in the pre-dawn hours, which, to me, was a sign I could give it a try without disrupting my regular schedule.

The next morning I made my way to this alleged junkster’s paradise. On the way down J Street I passed closed bars, dark office buildings, gas stations, an empty 24-hour diner. The topography soon morphed into something more upscale and residential; places of business

faded away and were supplanted by freshly paved streets, well-kept foliage, and giant houses. At 40th I made a right and ventured into the Fabulous Forties, as if 39th and 50th streets would be filled with nothing but empty trashcans and waddling possums.

Even in the copper glow of the streetlights, I could see the opulence of the neighborhood: trimmed lawns, orderly flowerbeds, expensive cars in driveways. In one front yard I saw a palm tree with a metal band around its base, which prevented vermin from scurrying to the top and nesting.

After a few blocks' worth of barren sidewalks, I came across a clutter of objects that, upon closer inspection, turned out to be a desk, a lamp, and a dresser.

I pulled over and turned off the lights. But before I got out, though, beeping sounds emerged behind me, and then came blinding lights that made my side and rear-view mirrors gleam. A mechanical roar dwarfed the sound of my idling engine. In the rear-view mirror, I eventually made out a garbage truck.

Since my lights were off and my truck was black, or maybe because the driver was even groggier than me, the truck came too close and scraped mine, with a sound so

loud I expected the door to bend inward and crush my rib cage.

When it stopped a few yards up I panicked, executed a three-point turn and got out of there. This was bad luck, I thought, while driving away and checking my rear-view mirror. The scrape would put me a few hundred in the hole, and I'd probably broken the law by leaving. What if they'd taken down my license plate number?

Given the shortness of the excursion I arrived to work on time, but in my preoccupied state I forgot coins for the vending machine. On top of that, I pulled into the parking lot at the same time as one of the big bosses, who saw the garbage truck's paint on my side door, which was the same shade of green as that of his sports car. He frowned at my truck, looked at his car, looked at me, then walked away, not holding the door when he reached the front entrance.

The next morning started off a little better. I got up without having to hit the snooze on my phone alarm, and outside, the air wasn't as icy as it was the previous day. Visibility, however, was low due to a thick blanket of fog. With the previous day's incident in mine, I was hyper vigilant as I drove down the street.

Three blocks into my search, I spotted two objects of about the same size. When I got closer, I made out a television and mini-refrigerator.

I stopped the truck. Looked behind me. Coast clear.

The refrigerator was dirty and covered with stickers; when I opened the door a foul, carrion-like stench burst out, as if the thing had been left unplugged for several days with a dead animal inside. Wincing, I shut the door and went to the TV. Before I could really look it over, strange thwacking sounds began coming from up the street. I stood and turned toward the noise.

A paperboy emerged from the fog.

“You people still ride bikes?” I said as he passed.
“Or did you lose your license?”

He grabbed a paper from his bag and pelted me in the ribs with it, then rode off, chuckling.

“Hey, goddamn it!”

I picked up the paper and threw it after him. The paper side wound into the fog and vanished, then I heard a *thwap!* then an “Oww!” followed by clanging metal.

Immediately, I ran to my truck and drove off.

Frustrated over a second fruitless morning, I trudged through the workday wondering how I could avoid

these setbacks, if I already had a reputation in the Fabulous Forties that would require I do my exploring elsewhere.

The third morning I hoped would be the turning of a new leaf. I got up with ease, and this time my stomach wasn't gurgling from the early start. Outside, clear skies prevailed. I went down to the Fabulous Forties in a relatively optimistic mood.

On the very first block I saw some stereo equipment stacked beside a row of black trash bins. Just as I started checking the equipment out, one of the bins toppled over, and its lid popped open. Out came bulging trash bags, lawn trimmings, a few beer cans that clattered noisily onto the sidewalk and made me look around.

A large raccoon appeared from behind the mess. It stared at me for a brief moment before hissing and brandishing its fangs. I backed up and lost my footing at the edge of the curb. As I went down, my chin struck the pavement. Hard.

Examined myself in my rear-view mirror, I saw my face was all scraped up, and bleeding. The wound stung already. Feeling the sharp, pulsing pain, and watching my adversary enjoy the spoils of his victory, I lost enthusiasm to do anything but leave. When I got home and took a

shower, even the slightest touches of water spray were like lava on my face, so I had to go to work unshaven.

The next day, the sky was clear, the air warm enough that I cruised the Fabulous Forties with the heater off and my windows down. This, I thought, had to be the day I found something, or I'd just have to admit scavenging wasn't for me.

After cruising around for awhile and finding nothing but empty sidewalks, I smelled a skunk, which I soon discovered in the middle of a lawn. Not far away was a tricycle and some other things I couldn't quite make out.

I pulled to a stop and waited for the skunk to wander off.

And waited.

What the hell? Was it dead, sleeping, defecating? I didn't know what to do. I couldn't exactly go up and scare it; smelling like skunk spray would be even more difficult to explain to my boss than a scraped chin, unshaven face, or late arrival.

As I sat there, a beat-up El Ranchero came by. The car slowed, and some gnarly old dude with ratty gray hair peered out at me. A bunch of stuff was in the bed of his car, all of which looked valuable: two TVs, a bike, a computer

monitor. After an appraising stare at me, and a brief glance at the green paint on my door, he smiled and drove off.

I looked back at the lawn.

A bunch of pinecones were scattered across the sidewalk. I got out, picked one up and threw it at the skunk. The pinecone sailed long and hit the front door of the house; when it did, the skunk sprinted across the lawn and vanished into a row of bushes. Then a light came on in the house.

Godammit, I thought, this shit was getting predictable. This time though, I ran over to look at the junk. Almost everything there was regular garbage, but the tricycle looked new, so I grabbed it, threw it in the bed of my truck and drove away. I cruised the neighborhood for a little while longer but didn't see anything else worth picking up. AS I drove, I began to wonder if I was getting up early enough, if I *could* get up early enough.

“We just need you to do this simple job,” he said. He had grown even angrier because I still hadn't answered him. “You know, in times like these, people are lined up around the block for a chance to make \$15 an hour. And here you are, half-assing your way right out of the door. Right out of the door!”

I put my coins into the machine, pressed the number for Pop-Tarts, and watched the metal coil spin until the package came forward, tilted, and dropped. My Pop-Tarts did several somersaults on the way down, then fell to the bottom with a thud.

When I took the package out and opened it, I found the pastries in shards.

I turned and showed him.

“Look at this!” I said. “Why do you people put the Pop-Tarts at the top? They can’t handle the fall from up there. Now I can’t even toast them. That’s frickin stupid, bro. You wanna improve this office? Huh? Tell the vending machine guy to put the animal crackers and fruit snacks at the top, not the frickin toaster pastries!”

He looked down at the Pop Tarts, then up at me, then shook his head and walked away. I took my broken snack back to my cubicle, with nothing on my mind but salvaging the rest of the workday.

Back at the apartment complex, the old lady, predictably, was out front puttering around on her walker. When I got closer she smiled, and as usual I saw two

reflections of myself in the lenses of her enormous sunglasses.

“So,” she said, “did you go treasure hunting this morning?”

“Yep.”

“How'd it go?”

“Didn't find much.”

“Oh, that's too bad.”

I smiled and looked into the courtyard.

“You know,” she said, “while you wait for things to pick up, you can save money on food by getting farmer's market leftovers, or going to bakeries for old pastries.”

“Old pastries, eh?”

I took a step away from her.

“So what are you going to do?” she said.

“Get a new job, I suppose. Or stick with this one.”

“No,” she said, “I mean are you going to keep hunting?”

“I'm not sure.”

I started to leave.

“Hey,” she said, “did you find anything interesting? Anything at all?”

She was leaned forward on her walker. This confused me. Why did she care so much? I had no idea if

she was concerned over my well-being, jerking me around, living vicariously through me, or if there was something else I couldn't quite see.

“Well,” I said. “Frankly, what I did or didn't find is none of your business.”

The big smile left her face. Instantly, I felt a surge of guilt.

“But if you want to know,” I said, with confidentiality in my voice, “I'll tell you what I found.”

I paused, waiting for her reply.

“What?” she said. “What did you find?”

“Out there,” I said, “I found a bunch of shit that I used to get for free.”

