

Cubicle Farm #666

by Misti Rainwater-Lites

Lice was going around. Head lice, pubic lice. Arnold scratched his scalp with manic fingers and then he scratched his balls with even more manic fingers. The musak version of "Chinese Rock" dribbled from the speakers. The lukewarm Pepsi was flat. Arnold sipped the Pepsi from the can and stared at the stuffed animal porn on his computer screen. The purple unicorn was his favorite. As Arnold unzipped his jeans a hologram of his mother appeared in his cubicle. She was the size of a cucumber. She floated above the dust mite lousy keyboard. "Please, hon," she pleaded, "think of the children." Arnold banged his head against the keyboard then crumpled the not yet empty can of soda in his hand.

"You gave me crabs," Tiffani drawled. Arnold did not turn around to face his drunken handicap stall fling. The stench of her dollar store body spray assaulted Arnold's nostrils.

"You could have gotten crabs from any number of Twinkly Toed Technology employees. No offense, sugar muffin, but word on the street is you give more play than a ping pong ball."

"I see you scratchin' your head and your balls. I know you're the one. You owe me fifty dollars for the ointment."

"I just spent my last fifty on a scratch card. You're out of luck. Go bark up another tree."

"I'll give you bark. I'll give you bite. I'm going to sue you for sexual harassment."

"I made a video. I've got proof. You called me 'baby' and clawed my back."

"Bastard."

Fifteen hours later Arnold stood in line for the installation of a new ennui chip. There were no windows only beige walls and buzzing fluorescent lights but Arnold could sense the rain outside, the rain and the cement and the wads of gum and mounds of moose shit. *I'm going to break out. I'll find a way to project myself to the*

other side. The rain is better than this. My brain is getting fuzzier. I've got to fight it. I've got to figure out the code.

"There is no code," Bot #333 told Arnold with a grin as she implanted the ennui chip in his neck. Her teeth were white. Her hair was the color of wet straw. Arnold fantasized about stabbing Bot #333's synthetic eyeballs with a pencil. There were no pencils. No pencils, no pens, only keyboards and glue sticks. Arnold kept a stash of glue sticks in his single drawer. He didn't know why. The ennui infiltrated each bloated blood cell. Arnold found himself in the cafeteria sitting across from Fred. Fred's monologue was the same. It never varied, not by a single monosyllable.

"It would be nice to leave. It would be fun to go. I dream still of the beach. I dream still of the sun. The rain, too, would be a good change. These walls are not kind. These walls are not good for my mind. I do not mean to rhyme. I am not Poe. I am not Seuss. This juice gives me joy. I like this juice. The boss likes for us to drink this juice. This juice gives us hope. We can get through. This day will not end. To go on is a good thing. I should be glad. I am glad. I am glad. I am glad. I am so glad."

The boiled cabbage gave Arnold gas. He excused himself. Fred smiled and continued to speak his monologue for an hour, a nauseating loop. The nausea pervaded but Arnold could not throw up. He finished the cabbage. He drank the juice. He thought of nooses and guns and carbon monoxide and trains and vodka and anxiety medication. He scratched his head and his balls. He returned to his desk. There was a sign on the computer screen. DO YOUR WORK, MINION. Arnold typed letters and numbers with numb fingers. The musak version of "Psycho Killer" trickled from the speakers. The song was interrupted by an announcement from Boss Bot. His oily baritone boomed its authority. Arnold shuddered.

"All minions will meet in the media room for a PowerPoint slideshow in precisely eleven minutes. The consequences will be dire should you fail to attend. You will sit attentive and unobtrusive in immaculate silence as you absorb the essential knowledge.

Pertinent topics such as sanguine assimilation, relentless camaraderie and choleric hygiene will be presented in primary colors. Attendance is mandatory. Attendance is mandatory. Attendance is mandatory. After the presentation there will be a social event in the basement. You will be expected to mingle with your fellow minions and learn something new about each other. You will be expected to turn in a twenty page report by noon tomorrow about the knowledge you acquired. The report is mandatory. Consequences will be dire if you turn in mediocre work. Enjoy the rest of your day. All hail ennui."

The joke was old. The joke had never been funny, would never be funny. Joy was not an option but neither was escape. Arnold banged his head against the keyboard. A hologram of his cousin Gerald appeared beside the stapler. The hologram was the size of a baby carrot. "You should have loved harder, man. You should have bought your wife those gourmet chocolates. You should have paid for your kids' college education. You should have visited your parents more often. You shouldn't have masturbated to free online porn so much. You shouldn't have collected those stupid stamps. You should have had a worthier hobby. You shouldn't have wasted your money on so many stupid vintage action figures. You should have gone to Fiji and Lima and Guanajuato. You should have danced naked in the rain."

Arnold spit on the stapler then threw it across the room. He ripped the black and white photograph of Robert Crumb from his cubicle. He put the photograph in his mouth. He chewed and chewed and chewed. He could not would not puke. When Arnold was seven he saw a giraffe shot at the zoo. At the time Arnold had felt sorry for the giraffe. He had dropped his ice cream and cried beyond consolation. Arnold wanted to cry now but he could not. He unzipped his pants and Fred appeared, smiling and speaking his encouraging loop.

