

Thursday at the Office

by Richard Brown

DAVID JORDAN

EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH

MARCH 2007

David looked at the plaque sitting on top of his computer monitor and wondered if he'd even touched it since he'd placed it there. He picked it up and brushed off six years' worth of dust into the wastebasket on top of the mustard-stained sandwich wrapper, ripped-up Lotto ticket and crumpled invitation to the department's annual team-building exercises.

Glancing at the royal blue jacket hanging off his chair, which didn't match his navy blue pants, David realized that he hadn't bought a new suit since Sy Syms went Chapter 11. He pondered his off-white Van Heusen shirt, a little worn at the elbows, and rubbed his necktie, a whimsical tie-dyed Jerry Garcia design that was frayed around the edges, and estimated that the company's CEO probably spent more on a pair of cufflinks than David had spent in the last two years on clothes.

He looked up at the rows of desks, all with the computer monitors and phones in the same place, their neatness marred by the folders stacked haphazardly, proof of people's ability to create chaos where uniformity is expected. Suddenly, soft muzak began, and all the monitors showed the company logo fading in, indicating the beginning of the chairman's webcast.

"OK, everyone," said David. "Time to set your BS detectors on stun."

"Good afternoon," said the well-dressed, gray-haired man on the screen above the words "Jerome M. Harris, CEO." "As you have undoubtedly heard, today we are officially announcing our merger with Prestige Industries. We believe that the synergy between the two companies will provide wonderful opportunities for our employ..."

“Yeah, right,” snorted Megan, the fortyish bespectacled brunette who sat at David’s right, behind a desk prominently featuring a photo of her two small children next to a sticker that read, “Insanity is Inherited: You Get It from Your Kids.” “The only opportunity being provided is to update your resume before your job gets shipped to India.”

“Oh, come on,” argued Jason, the neatly coiffed young man who sat behind David and drove a leased Lexus with a bumper sticker that he claimed was a Mandarin symbol for “prosperity” but was rumored to actually mean “impotence.” “The company has lots of opportunities for advancement. Just look at Mr. Harris. He started in the company stock room and look at him now.”

“Right,” laughed Megan. “The only reason he advanced is because he married the daughter of the VP for Sales.”

“Actually,” said David, “he knocked her up out of wedlock. Better for the VP to get him a high-paying management job than to have to support his grandchild.”

“Don’t worry, Jason,” added Megan. “Mr. Harris has an unmarried daughter. I’m sure you can meet her if you start sneaking out to the Hamptons every weekend.”

“Nope, I heard she plays for the other team,” said David. “I guess Jason will need to find a different path up the corporate ladder.”

“Man, you guys are way too cynical,” said Jason.

“Listen,” said David. “Let me tell you what I’ve learned after fifteen years in this hellhole. Corporations are more dependent on manure for their growth than a farm. When you’ve...”

“Hey, guys, keep it down,” said Sam from the front of the office. “Harris is getting to the part where he says how much he respects the employees.”

“During this period of consolidation,” continued Mr. Harris, “I’m sure you will appreciate our need to keep our financial obligations in check and our business expenses under control. It is ...”

“That means no raises again this year,” spat Megan. “I guess I’ll be sewing patches on the kids’ jeans again.”

“That also means,” said David, “that they won't be able to build that new corporate headquarters. No, wait, they still are.”

“Bastards,” growled Megan.

“Heck, I'd settle for no raise,” said David. “It's better than no job. We know Prestige's office jobs were all outsourced, so you can bet your last dollar they'll be the employees kept, not us.”

“They haven't made any decisions yet,” declared Jason. “You're all jumping to conclusions.”

“Tell me,” said David, turning to face Jason. “Are there unicorns in your world?”

“We consider our employees to be stakeholders in our success,” declared Mr. Harris. “And it is important...”

“I don't know who's holding a stake, but it sure isn't me,” said David. “And whoever's holding that stake is probably about to run it through my heart. I mean, what the fuck am I gonna do...”

“We really need a swear jar here,” muttered Jason.

“...because my daughter is heading off to college next year. How am I going to pay for tuition with an unemployment check? That barely covers our mortgage.”

“There's lots of other opportunities,” said Jason. “If ...”

“I swear,” growled David. “If you say, ‘When one door closes, another one opens,’ I'm gonna jam your pinkie in the pencil sharpener.”

Harris' voice continued to sound throughout the office. “We consider our employees to be the most important resource our company has, and it is part of our mission to treat each and every one of you with dignity and respect because you continue to uphold the highest standards of ethical behavior. It is our belief...”

“Hey, Dave,” yelled Jerry Nelson, opening the door to his manager's office and approaching David's desk. “I've got a problem that needs to be fixed ASAP.”

“Can't it wait until tomorrow?” asked David. “Because after the webcast, I've got a conference call that's going to last from 3 to 5, and I'm ...”

“Well, then you'll have to stay late to work on it. Joseph McPherson's account got reported to the credit bureaus as deadbeat and we have to remove it.”

“I don't have anything to do with that. The computer does that automatically when the customer is 180 days delinquent. Then a file is ...”

“Isn't there a manual override?”

“Well, yes, but I can't process it unless I receive a signed form CR-37 ...”

“Forget the CR-37. McIntosh is a big shot, a golf buddy of Harris.”

“A buddy of Harris and he can't pay his damn bills?”

“I don't know,” said Nelson. “Maybe he's got a gambling problem, maybe his ex hired a shark as her divorce lawyer. Don't know, don't care. Just fix it.”

“The rules say I still need a signed CR-37.”

“I hear the Unemployment office has very uncomfortable chairs,” growled Nelson.

David sighed, muttered “sure, whatever” under his breath, watched Nelson stomp back into his office and close his door a little too forcefully, then spat a quiet “asshole.”

“If it makes you feel any better,” whispered Megan, “I hear Mrs. Nelson has outsourced his marital duties to their Guatemalan landscaper.”

David giggled, although he was sure that Nelson was too much of a cheap bastard to hire a landscaper.

* * *

SEARCH FOR ACCOUNT M C P H

As he brought the account up on his computer screen, David thought back to the summer job he'd held at 18, between his high school graduation and his freshman year at college. He'd operated a machine that processed the company's mass mailings, perforating each page, which he would then stuff into pre-printed envelopes. It was mind-numbing work — much more so than the work he was doing now — at almost minimum wage in an office without air-

conditioning. However, David realized that he looked back upon it fondly. Near-minimum wage was wonderful to an 18-year-old kid — enough to put gas in the car so he could take his girl out for a movie and McDonald's (if he'd had a girl, which he usually didn't). Even better, it was temporary — after ten weeks, it would be over, and David would be off to the university, preparing to change the world.

Today, he was painfully aware of each tick of the clock — if he didn't hear it, he could always see the time advancing, at a snail's pace, on the bottom of his screen. Now he just hoped to be performing this tedium for another twelve years until he could retire and enjoy his golden years.

That was his best-case scenario. More likely, he would lose his job when the merger was complete, bringing instability at the moment he needed stability the most and forcing him to start over at the moment when his energy was beginning to flag. He had long ago given up on changing the world; he was afraid he would also have to give up on the golden years. It wasn't that summer job that he remembered fondly, he realized; it was that sense of hope.

* * *

Shoving some papers into his leather briefcase with the worn handles, David heard the “I'm Too Sexy” ring tone and picked up his cell phone, which read 6:22 p.m, with “Incoming call: Deborah” underneath.

“Hey, Deb.”

“Honey, you're still at work?”

“I'm just turning off the computer and heading out. Had to research a little problem but I couldn't get around to it until after 5:00. Fifteen years in this place and it never gets easier. Freaking meetings and conference calls up the wazoo. Barely had time to pick my nose.”

“Yeah, I had a busy day at work too. Listen, on the way home could you swing by the supermarket? I want to grill burgers for dinner but I'm out of tofu.”

“Ugh. Tofu burgers? Tofu tastes like ass.”

“Like you've tasted ass. You've barely tasted pussy.”

“Oh, come on, that's not true. I'll prove it tonight.”

“Yeah, sure, Casanova, you'll be asleep on the couch by 10:30. Whatever, just pick up some tofu.”

“Can we at least have fries with it?”

“You know we can't. Dr. Goldman says we have to get our cholesterol and weight down.”

“Jeez, at least I used to be able to grab a danish or bagel in the morning with my coffee, until the cheap bastards here shut down the cafeteria.”

“That's exactly why you have to lose 15 pounds, smartass. And it wouldn't hurt to cut back on the coffee.”

“What's the point of living an extra twenty years if I spend it eating bland crap?”

“The point,” said Deborah, “is to live long enough to see your grandchildren grow up.”

“So I can take them out for Tofu McNuggets?”

“Nothing wrong with teaching them healthy habits early.”

“What is Doc Goldman, 98 pounds soaking wet? To her, we're all fat tubs of goo. She probably thinks salad dressing is a decadent luxury. I want to find a doctor who's fat and smokes cigarettes. He'll think I'm the picture of health.”

“Enough with the jokes, Shecky. Don't forget, you really need to do Ashley's FAFSA tonight.”

“Oh, shit,” said David. “I was hoping to watch the Knicks game.”

“Well, you're the financial guy. I don't even know where our tax information is kept.”

“Everyone says doing that form is a freakin' pain in the ass.”

“You could always skip it,” she said. “Then we can pay full price for her college tuition.”

“Ha. We could afford to do that for one semester. After that, we'd be living in our car. I don't know what we're gonna do when I lose my job.”

“If,” said Deb. “*If* you lose your job. We'll make it through.”

"Yeah, that reminds me. I need new glasses. Y'know, the ones with rose-colored lenses."

"Hey, while you're out, could you pick up a bottle of Zinfandel? We can take it to the Petersons' tomorrow."

"The Petersons?"

"Yeah," said Deborah. "It's Jack's birthday. Don't you remember they invited us for dinner ...?"

"Crap, I forgot. Does this mean I'll have to spend the whole night hearing about his goddam stock portfolio?"

"Probably. They're doing much better than we..."

"That's because they don't have any fucking kids!"

"Calm down, Da..."

"Wait, if we're at the Petersons', who's going to feed Max?"

"Oh, he'll be sleeping over at Matthew's house. They'll probably play video games and eat junk food all night, like all 13-year-old boys."

David sighed. "Can I join them? I remember when I was his age I couldn't wait to be an adult so I could do whatever I wanted whenever I wanted. Be careful what you wish for. Turns out I had more freedom then. My calendar is so crowded now with appointments and obligations that I don't have room to scribble obscene messages in the margins."

"I just remembered. He can't stay up all night because he has a soccer match the next morning. You'll have to pick him up early and drive him because I have to take Buddy to the vet."

"But I was going to pick up Dad at the home and take him out for lunch."

"Take your father to the soccer game instead. He'll enjoy spending time with Max."

"Why? He can't even remember Max's goddamn name!"

"Oh, and you'll have to drive me to work tomorrow morning. The check engine light came on, and I want to drop the car at Frank's to get it looked at."

"Jeez, another thousand bucks down the drain."

"You never know, it might be something minor."

“Right, and pigs might fly. Let me go now. If we don't stop yakking, I'll never get out of here on parole. See you in a few, hon.”

“OK, bye. Don't forget the tofu.”

“Yeah, I wrote myself a note, ‘Buy ass.’”

David shoved his phone in his pocket, logged off the computer, grabbed his briefcase and trudged toward the office door. Glancing back, he noticed that Sam and Martha were still toiling at their desks.

“Night, guys,” yelled David.

“G'night, Dave,” said Sam, while Martha gave a quick wave without turning around, keeping her concentration focused on the green numbers on her monitor.

After taking the elevator to the ground floor, David walked out into the nearly empty parking lot, approached his sensible Honda Accord with 92,000 miles on it, and discovered that he couldn't open his door because someone had parked their steroidal SUV next to him and apparently believed that white lines were merely a suggestion. David sighed, unlocked the passenger door, tossed his briefcase on the recently vacuumed floor mat and climbed awkwardly over the console, almost goosing himself with the emergency brake. Settling into the driver's seat and buckling his seat belt, David opened his driver's side door, banged it hard into the side of the SUV, closed the door and backed out of the parking spot.

“How many hours have I planted my ass on this vinyl seat?” he wondered as he neared the lot's exit. “Let's see, if you assume 40 mph, then 92,000 divided by 40 is, holy shit, around 2,300 hours. That's like 100 full days I've spent with my cheeks planted here, most of it spent making this same goddam trip.”

The radio, preset for 97.5 WHTZ The Hits You Remember, was playing the Talking Heads, and David began singing along:

“Same as it ever was, same as it ever was.”

Even before he signaled for the entrance ramp, David could see that the cars on the Cross-County Expressway were still bumper-to-

bumper and he exhaled a long sigh. Jesus, he thought, rush hour keeps getting longer and more congested.

"You may say to yourself, my god, what have I done?"

As he merged into the slow-moving traffic, David took a quick glance at the drivers of the surrounding cars, men and women of various races, shapes, sizes and degrees of neatness. A couple of them were chatting on their cell phones, one gray-haired guy with a receding hairline looked like he was also singing along to Talking Heads, but most of them were just staring blankly straight ahead at the Expressway logjam. David wondered how many of them were heading home to a spouse's loving embrace, their children's rambunctious horseplay, their dog's sloppy wet tongue. He wondered how many of them were headed straight from a stressful job toward an acrimonious household or outright loneliness.

David saw a gap open up in the left lane, a chance to move ahead in traffic, but as he signaled a lane switch, he noticed that the truck behind him had already zoomed into the lane, cutting him off. The other driver flipped the bird when David glared at him, but David just muttered, "Yeah, yeah, you'd better have a fucking naked woman waiting at your front door to be in that much of a hurry."

Springsteen came on the radio. David perked up and began singing.

"Tramps like us, baby, we were born to run."

David took his hands off the wheel for a moment so he could play air guitar. The driving rhythm made him imagine he was 21 again, cruising down an open highway at 70 mph in a convertible with the top down and a hot and horny blonde by his side. Trying to forget that when he had been 21, he'd been driving a Dodge Colt with the rear bumper held on by duct tape and hadn't known any hot and horny blondes, David glanced at his dashboard and saw that he was only going 10 mph. Oh well, he thought as he put his hands back on the wheel, someday I'll buy myself a convertible, maybe when I'm done paying for college. No, wait, Deb will see the car and ask, "Did you get a dick transplant too?"

Twenty minutes later, David exited the Expressway and after driving a couple of blocks, pulled into the A & P parking lot. He dashed inside, past the prominent displays of potato chips and soda, past the alluring bakery aroma of pastries and pies, and found the refrigerated aisle, where three lonely packages of tofu sat next to drab bags of pre-cut lettuce. Grabbing one, David shook his head and thought, "So this is what it's come to," and headed for the checkout aisle.

The cashier, a pleasant-looking black teenager wearing a nametag that read "Rhonda," was quickly scanning items while the bagger, a squat teenaged boy whose jeans stubbornly refused to stay around his waist, tossed items haphazardly into plastic bags. The customer, looking at neither of them, barked into her cell phone, "Do you believe that bitch actually called me? ... Yeah, the teacher... I told her, look, when I send him off to school, he's your problem, not mine."

David suppressed a groan, glanced at the tabloids on the rack — who was Gary, who cared if he was cheating on Cindy, and if they didn't need last names, why had he never heard of them? — and wondered what were the odds of a meteorite striking the A & P at that very moment.

"\$43.27," said Rhonda, and the customer reached awkwardly into her purse with one hand to grab a few bills while holding her phone to her ear with her shoulder.

"I have half a mind to go complain to the principal," she said, not noticing that the bagger had tossed the jars of pasta sauce into the bag on top of the bread, "except he's a worthless piece of shit too." With her four bags now in her shopping cart, the customer walked off without ever having looked up once.

If Rhonda or the bagger had clubbed her in the head with her cucumber, thought David, that customer would have never been able to pick them out of a lineup.

"You workin' this weekend?" asked the bagger, as Rhonda rang up the tofu without glancing at David.

“Nah,” replied Rhonda. “I’m goin’ on a tour of the State campus. I won’t be applying until next year but my parents want to get the process started before it’s too late. That’ll be \$3.29.”

David handed her a five-dollar bill and while Rhonda was making change, the bagger asked her, “Decide on a major yet?”

“Nah. Maybe education. I wouldn’t mind being a teacher. But I might go for psychology ‘cause I like helping people. Dunno yet.”

David remembered that when he was her age, he planned to write the Great American Novel, doing for white middle-class suburbanites what *The Grapes of Wrath* had done for the Okies. Now the only time he picked up a pen was to sign a check for the minimum payment on his Mastercard. A lot of good that B.A. did him. He had chosen the boring route because it was safer. People always do.

When David returned to the car, he tossed the bag containing the tofu on top of his briefcase and started the ignition. However, he didn’t back out of the parking space but just sat there, with the motor running, staring blankly at the windshield for a minute. Finally, he turned off the engine and dashed back inside the store. He found what he was looking for, rang it up in the self-checkout line to avoid human contact, and hurried back to the car.

Sitting alone in the driver’s seat of his Honda Accord, with the headlights off and the doors locked, David pulled the cheese danish out of its plastic bag and took a big ravenous bite. Crumbs tumbled down onto his navy blue pants and off-white Van Heusen shirt, a little worn at the elbows, onto his leather briefcase with the worn handles on the recently vacuumed floor mat, and onto the lonely package of tofu, but David didn’t care as he took another bite, and another. He closed his eyes and moaned with pleasure, letting his taste buds savor the soft dough and the creamy cheese.

It tasted delicious.

