

"I can't get enough! Give me more!" Boy, am I glad I did! Here I am, thirty-eight years old, and I'm a crummy plant manager! Isn't that wonderful? I'm really having fun now.

Time to get the hell out of here. I've had enough fun for one day.

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I wake up with Julie on top of me. Unfortunately, Julie is not being amorous; she is reaching for the night table where the digital alarm clock says 6:03 A.M. The alarm buzzer has been droning for three minutes. Julie smashes the button to kill it. With a sigh, she rolls off of me. Moments later, I hear her breathing resume a steady pace; she is asleep again. Welcome to a brand new day.

About forty-five minutes later, I'm backing the Buick out of the garage. It's still dark outside. But a few miles down the road the sky lightens. Halfway to the city, the sun rises. By then, I'm too busy thinking to notice it at first. I glance to the side and it's floating out there beyond the trees. What makes me mad sometimes is that I'm always running so hard that—like most other people, I guess—I don't have time to pay attention to all the daily miracles going on around me. Instead of letting me eyes drink in the dawn, I'm watching the road and worrying about Peach. He's called a meeting at headquarters for all the people who directly report to him—in essence, his plant managers and his staff. The meeting, we are told, is to begin promptly at 8:00 A.M. The funny thing is that Peach is not saying what the meeting is about. It's a big secret—you know: hush-hush, like maybe there's a war on or something. He has instructed us to be there at eight and to bring with us reports and other data that'll let us go through a thorough assessment of all the division's operations.

Of course, all of us have found out what the meeting is about. At least we have a fairly good idea. According to the grapevine, Peach is going to use the meeting to lay some news on us about how badly the division performed in the first quarter. Then he's going to hit us with a mandate for a new productivity drive, with targeted goals for each plant and commitments and all that great stuff. I suppose that's the reason for the commandment to be there at eight o'clock on the button with numbers in hand; Peach must've thought it would lend a proper note of discipline and urgency to the proceedings.

The irony is that in order to be there at such an early hour, half the people attending will have had to fly in the night before. Which means hotel bills and extra meals. So in order to an-

nounce to us how badly the division is doing, Peach is going to pay out a couple of grand more than he would have had to pay if he'd begun the meeting an hour or two later.

I think that Peach may be starting to lose it. Not that I suspect him of drifting toward a breakdown or anything. It's just that everything seems to be an over-reaction on his part these days. He's like a general who knows he is losing the battle, but forgets his strategy in his desperation to win.

He was different a couple of years ago. He was confident. He wasn't afraid to delegate responsibility. He'd let you run your own show—as long as you brought in a respectable bottom line. He tried to be the "enlightened" manager. He wanted to be open to new ideas. If some consultant came in and said, "Employees have to feel good about their work in order to be productive," Peach would try to listen. But that was when sales were better and budgets were flush.

What does he say now?

"I don't give a damn if they feel good," he says. "If it costs an extra nickel, we're not paying for it."

That was what he said to a manager who was trying to sell Peach on the idea of a physical fitness center where employees could work out, the premise being that everyone would do better work because healthy employees are happy employees, etc. Peach practically threw him out of his office.

And now he's walking into my plant and wreaking havoc in the name of improving customer service. That wasn't even the first fight I've had with Peach. There have been a couple of others, although none as serious as yesterday's. What really bugs me is I used to get along very well with Peach. There was a time when I thought we were friends. Back when I was on his staff, we'd sit in his office at the end of the day sometimes and just talk for hours. Once in a while, we'd go out and get a couple of drinks together. Everybody thought I was brown-nosing the guy. But I think he liked me precisely because I wasn't. I just did good work for him. We hit it off together.

Once upon a time, there was a crazy night in Atlanta at the annual sales meeting, when Peach and I and a bunch of wackos from marketing stole the piano from the hotel bar and had a sing-along in the elevator. Other hotel guests who were waiting for an elevator would see the doors open, and there we'd be, midway through the chorus of some Irish drinking song with

Peach sitting there at the keyboard tickling those ivories. (He's a pretty good piano player, too). After an hour, the hotel manager finally caught up with us. By then, the crowd had grown too big for the elevator, and we were up on the roof singing to the entire city. I had to pull Bill out of this fight with the two bouncers whom the manager had enlisted to kill the party. What a night that was. Bill and I ended up toasting each other with orange juice at dawn in some greasy-spoon diner on the wrong end of town.

Peach was the one who let me know that I really had a future with this company. He was the guy who pulled me into the picture when I was just a project engineer, when all I knew was how to try hard. He was the one who picked me to go to headquarters. It was Peach who set it up so I could go back and get my MBA.

Now we're screaming at each other. I can't believe it.

By 7:50, I'm parking my car in the garage under the UniCo building. Peach and his division staff occupy three floors of the building. I get out of the car and get my briefcase from the trunk. It weighs about ten pounds today, because it's full of reports and computer printouts. I'm not expecting to have a nice day. With a frown on my face, I start to walk to the elevator.

"Al!" I hear from behind me.

I turn; it's Nathan Selwin coming toward me. I wait for him.

"How's it going?" he asks.

"Okay. Good to see you again," I tell him. We start walking together. "I saw the memo on your appointment to Peach's staff. Congratulations."

"Thanks," he says. "Of course, I don't know if it's the best place to be right now with everything that's going on."

"How come? Bill keeping you working nights?"

"No, it's not that," he says. Then he pauses and looks at me. "Haven't you heard the news?"

"What about?"

He stops suddenly and looks around. There is nobody else around us.

"About the division," he says in a low voice.

I shrug; I don't know what he's talking about.

"The whole division is going to go on the block," he says. "Everybody on Fifteen is crapping in their pants. Peach got the word from Granby a week ago. He's got till the end of the year to

improve performance, or the whole division goes up for sale. And I don't know if it's true, but I heard Granby specifically say that if the division goes, Peach goes with it."

"Are you sure?"

Nathan nods and adds, "Apparently it's been in the making for quite a while."

We start walking again.

My first reaction is that it's no wonder Peach has been acting like a madman lately. Everything he's worked for is in jeopardy. If some other corporation buys the division, Peach won't even have a job. The new owners will want to clean house and they're sure to start at the top.

And what about me; will I have a job? Good question, Rogo. Before hearing this, I was going on the assumption that Peach would probably offer me some kind of position if the plant is shut down. That's usually the way it goes. Of course, it may not be what I want. I know there aren't any UniWare plants out there in need of a manager. But I figured maybe Peach would give me my old staff job back—although I also know it's already been filled and I've heard that Peach is very satisfied with the guy. Come to think of it, he did kind of threaten yesterday with his opening remarks that I might not have a job.

Shit, I could be on the street in three months!

"Listen, Al, if anybody asks you, you didn't hear any of this from me," says Nat.

And he's gone. I find myself standing alone in the corridor on the fifteenth floor. I don't even remember having gotten on the elevator, but here I am. I vaguely recall Nat talking to me on the way up, saying something about everybody putting out their resumé's.

I look around, feel stupid, wonder where I'm supposed to be now, and then I remember the meeting. I head down the hall where I see some others going into a conference room.

I go in and take a seat. Peach is standing at the far end of the table. A slide projector sits in front of him. He's starting to talk. A clock on the wall indicates it's exactly eight o'clock.

I look around at the others. There are about twenty of them, most of them looking at Peach. One of them, Hilton Smyth, is looking at me. He's a plant manager, too, and he's a guy I've never liked much. For one thing, I resent his style—he's always promoting some new thing he's doing, and most of the time what

he's doing isn't any different from the things everyone else is doing. Anyway, he's looking at me as if he's checking me out. Is it because I look a little shaken? I wonder what he knows. I stare back at him until he turns toward Peach.

When I'm finally able to tune into what Peach is saying, I find he's turning the discussion over to the division controller, Ethan Frost, a thin and wrinkled old guy who, with a little makeup, could double for the Grim Reaper.

The news this morning befits the messenger. The first quarter has just ended, and it's been a terrible one everywhere. The division is now in real danger of a shortfall in cash. All belts must be tightened.

When Frost is done, Peach stands and proceeds to deliver some stern talk about how we're going to meet this challenge. I try to listen, but after his first couple of sentences, my mind drops out. All I hear are fragments.

"... imperative for us to minimize the downside risk . . ."
 "... acceptable to our current marketing posture . . ."
 "... required sacrifices . . ."
 "... productivity improvements at all locations . . ."

Graphs from the slide projector begin to flash on the screen. A relentless exchange of measurements between Peach and the others goes on and on. I make an effort, but I just can't concentrate.

"... first quarter sales down twenty-two percent compared to a year ago . . ."
 "... total raw materials' costs increased . . ."
 "... direct labor ratios of hours applied to hours paid had a three-week high . . ."
 "... now if you look at numbers of hours applied to production versus standard, we're off by over twelve percent on those efficiencies . . ."

I'm telling myself that I've got to get hold of myself and pay attention. I reach into my jacket to get a pen to take some notes.

"And the answer is clear," Peach is saying. "The future of our business depends upon our ability to increase productivity."

But I can't find a pen. So I reach into my other pocket. And I pull out the cigar. I stare at it. I don't smoke anymore. For a few seconds I'm wondering where the hell this cigar came from.

And then I remember.