

Plastic soldiers

There were six of us working in the department. Jim, John, Mark, Sylvia, Lucy and me, checking files and making sure everything is alright. It was standard procedure at this point: I would come to work before everybody else and check the movement on the accounts of their clients. If I found mistakes or irregularities, I would go ask the owner of the files to correct it. Otherwise, I hand the documents right to my Boss, Richard Hill. Lucy was always very grateful for my help.

It all looked fine until I found a spelling mistake in John's file. No need to disturb him though, that's something I can fix myself. And so I did. The next mistake was more complex - the sum of the funds donated and distributed didn't match. That's when I need to ask Jim to correct it.

"Hey Jim, you got a mistake here, blah blah blah" - "Sure, just a sec..." - it always went the same.

What do I think of them? I quite like Lucy. And the rest is fine, but they're dishonest people. I don't share their way of life. They don't treat me right, although I guess it could be worse. Could it? Why did I help them? Those files were their responsibility. I didn't have to. I didn't have to make them any favors at all. They didn't deserve my help, did they?

So why did I do it? Most importantly, it was for the company. After all, what would the company do if their files were filled with accounting mistakes?

I got off my chair to get the files to my boss.

It was a day like any other and so, like any other day, I would speak to customers or potential customers about our services.

- Why can't I get a loan? Is there something wrong with my account?
- No, miss, your account is perfectly fine. We're just checking the details and making sure everything is ready to go. Unfortunately, we found that your application does not meet the age criteria of our policy.

Someone like Jim or Jack always would say: "We are sorry, but you are too old". I tried to be more polite than that. I think I might have been the most polite out of our whole department.

Then again, our department was quite small.

- Could I change the phone number that's linked to my account? I lost my phone last Thursday. Here's my ID.
- Absolutely, and what would be your password?
- Maya 1970, it's my dog's name and the year she was born.
- What a beautiful name.
- Oh, thank you.

It's Friday, 12:55. Time for lunch. Jim and John are already heading towards the cantine.

Mark is still having a conversation with Sylvia and Lucy. I didn't like Lucy talking to Mark, since Mark is a bad influence on her. Oh well, there's nothing I could do about it.

The food wasn't bad, but as per usual, it didn't present itself well. I sit next to Jim and Lucy, usually listening to their conversation.

- So a guy comes in, looks all around him, lookin' like a street robber or something, real sketchy. So I don't say anything and just wait for him to do something. I'm

thinking he's gonna shoot up the place. The guy, sits down, looks at me and says: "Is this the info center?". This isn't the info center you moron, stop wasting my time!! I laughed a bit. It wasn't that much about what Jim said that made it funny, it was more about how he said it. I liked his stories.

Still Friday, 13:25 - lunch break is over. Back to work. The whole department got fairly empty - at least for that time of day. Low traffic, not much work.

I thought about how I am going to finish organizing our next business trip. Nothing to think about though, the whole planning is already done.

I noticed a spider in the corner of my office. I saw him slowly moving around, making his web. Does he enjoy his work? Does he also think about all the possible ways his web-making plans could go wrong? Why would he, he's just a spider after all. Does he like his work? Does he enjoy it? I guess he should, since he's doing it. Does he fear his own failure?

A woman entered in my office. I took my eyes off of the spider and looked at her with a smile. I stood up, shook her hand and asked what can I do for her.

- What can I do for you?

The woman looked angry. I wasn't used to people being angry. She scared me.

- I need to move my money to another account. I am sick of waiting, I have no time to spare. Last time I was here you sent me off with nothing. Now I need my money otherwise my husband will keep losing it by gambling.

I remember her now. Apparently, her husband was losing their money by gambling - a difficult situation. She wanted to divorce him and even filled in the papers, although the request was still being processed. She wanted to move all their shared finances to her own account, one that her husband didn't have access to. Unfortunately, since she had no legal right to do so, and her husband as the second owner didn't agree with the transaction, my hands were tied.

I play dumb and ask her for the number of the account and the password.

- As I see here, there are two owners of this account, one being you and the other being your husband. I can't make this transaction without any legal documents or your husband's approval. I am terribly sorry.

The color of her face started to move towards red, she looked even angrier than before. I started shaking.

- How dare you do this to me! I am a single mother! I already have a hard life. I can't afford new shoes for my kids because of people like you! You disgust me!

I can't even imagine how I looked. Most probably very pale.

- I'm so sorry Mrs. Jones.

It was too late to realize my mistake.

- So you **do** remember me you asshole! And you do this to me on purpose! I am going to speak to your supervisor right now! Have a good day.

She left my office. Still shaking, I stood up and ran out of my office.

- I didn't... It's not like that Mrs. Jones.

She didn't even turn.

- Please don't do this. Please no.

I was on the verge of tears. She turned around, with a grin on her face.

- Stop touching me you freak!

She ran. I didn't touch her. Standing there, almost crying, I noticed some of my colleagues looking at me. Disgraced and humiliated, I returned to my office.

It didn't take long for the announcement that Mr. Hill wants to talk to me. After wiping my tears, I felt ready to go to his office.

When walking through the hall leading to Mr. Hill's office, I couldn't help but feel like the whole world was laughing at me. It was a walk of shame. And I did definitely feel ashamed.

My boss was one of the younger ones in his position. He had an expensive suit and a very well decorated office. He was always nice to me.

He was going through the files I gave him this morning. He looked at me and told me to have a sit.

- Let's see, there were complaints about you. Strong ones. You declined service to a mother in need and you tried molesting her and chased her on the hallway. I better hear an explanation. A good one.

I started shaking again. Why was I like that? I didn't want to feel scared. Not right now.

- S-Sir, I didn't... that's not true...
- So you're calling the woman who told me about this a liar?
- N-No Sir, I'm not, it's just I couldn't, I didn't because I-I couldn't.
- What couldn't you? Talk some sense, goddammit.
- H...

I paused. I couldn't speak. The word would get stuck in my throat.

- H-Her account... It had two people as owners. And she wanted to move all the m-money elsewhere... Not possible without agreement from both...
- So you wouldn't help a poor woman just because... just because her husband is a jerk and you listen to him? What's wrong with you?
- N-N-Nothing S-Sir, I just thought...

Voice crack.

- Well then think twice next time. Just kidding, there won't be no next time. I could maybe tolerate you declining service to someone, but with those harassment complaints... My hands are tied. It really is nothing personal, but I'm afraid you're fired. Pack your stuff.

Even if I wanted to say something, I couldn't. I walked out of his office in silence.

After some time of calming down, I started packing my things. My books, sheets, all of it. I put it all in a carton box. Then I started emptying my drawers. Jim entered my office.

- Hey, I heard about what happened, I am terribly sorry.
- Jim, please, go talk to him. Tell him everything. I didn't molest her. I didn't even touch her. You saw that, right? Tell me you saw it.

He stood there for some time. Like he was thinking.

- I'm sorry, but that won't help. I'm sure you understand. It's too late now. Even if it wasn't, I didn't see much really, I just saw her running.

He left, saying goodbye. So I continued packing the stuff from my drawers. And that's when I found these two plastic soldiers.

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The lady sitting next to me on the bench got more and more nervous as I was telling the story. Eventually, she got up and ran away. It was a day like any other in the park, and so, like any other day, people would come and go, constantly exchanging on the benches. An older man sat down.

- And that's when I found these two plastic soldiers.

I took them out of my box and showed them to him. He started inspecting them.

- Oh, I remember those. I used to have those too. I'm sorry, I have to go.

Did he really have to go? Or did he just not want to listen? Why doesn't anyone want to listen?

I looked at my soldiers. Two plastic toys, relicts from my childhood, a time when I didn't have to worry about things. How beautiful those times were. A man my age sat down.

- I remember my childhood very well, like it was yesterday. I'd always wake up some time before I actually needed, eat breakfast and play in my room until I had to leave for school. I played with my plastic soldiers. They were in constant fight against all the other toys. I had some scenarios thought out and I would just execute them with my toys as actors. One time, the two soldiers are sneaking through the jungle to stop the evil teddy bear. But then they get spotted and the toys surround them. The Bear isn't there though, he hides in his evil lair and only sends his puppets to deal with the two soldiers. They are surrounded with no chance to escape. The toys don't know who they are or what they are planning to do though, so they take them for tourists and try kicking them out. But then they grab the toy that approaches them and start shooting at the others. The toys try running, but they are no match for the soldiers' skills and weapons. "DIE, DIE, DIE!", they shout.
- Sounds like a beautiful childhood.

I looked at the man sitting next to me. He smiled, and pulled out his cigarettes.

- You want some?

I don't really smoke. I have always imagined that I never will. I would always hear: "Smoking makes your life shorter". I never wanted to make that trade. I always wanted to live as long as possible. I changed my mind.

- Sure, thanks.

He pulled out his lighter and lit my cigarette. We sat there for a while, smoking.

- Were they in the right though?
- Huh?
- I mean, what did the Bear do that was so horrible it cost the toys their life? And even if the Bear did the worst things imaginable, does that make him objectively in the wrong? If one's actions are for his own good, how can he ever be wrong?
- I have never thought about that.
- Look at it this way. Why did the soldiers do this? Why did they kill all those toys? Well, the answer is simple: they probably got paid a lot. Or maybe they did because they saw the Bear's actions as indisputably wrong? Well then they still did it for their personal gain, but now it's a psychological one. If they just did what was best for them, how does that make them better than the Bear?
- What if the Bear's actions were irrational? What if he killed lots of people without any purpose?

- Then that just makes him stupid. If he didn't gain anything from those deaths, then it makes his actions a mistake. Because what else is a mistake, if not something that doesn't benefit us in any way?

He's right. It's not about who's in the right, it's about who benefits more. Or who loses less. That's the one who won.

- There was one more scenario. It's when the soldiers are finally face to face with the Bear. He tries fighting them first, but he loses the fight. The soldiers have him cornered, but then they get shot by some unimportant puppet of his. They shoot him back and it's fatal for him. Bleeding furiously, they aim their weapons at the Bear. They take the pain like it doesn't affect them at all. Meanwhile, the Bear is scared. He cries and begs, but the soldiers stay still. They shoot him, ending his evil reign.
- They won. Despite having a worse fate than him, the Bear is the one that hurts himself more. He is probably still getting a better life than them, he is the one that is getting a painless death after all. But instead of not giving a shit and laughing in their faces, he cries. How pathetic.
- Yeah, the Bear definitely doesn't handle the situation properly.
- See, that's the problem with the Bear really. If it were the soldiers who were cornered, then even if he tortured them and killed them they would still be the winners. Because they would just laugh at him while he would struggle to cut their flesh. He would be scared to death, while they would get enjoyment of it. That's of course just an idealized look at them. If there isn't anything you really care about, then you can't be hurt.

And that's why I lost.

- I lost my job today.
- You definitely look like someone who lost their job. I assume you are going to tell me the story?

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- And that's when I found these two plastic soldiers.

I pulled them out of my carton box, and showed them to the man sitting next to me.

- So these are the plastic soldiers I heard so much about?

I handed them to him and he started inspecting them. He looked here and there, portraying emotions like each soldier was telling him a story.

- See that one? He has a machine gun on him, and he is without any real protection for his torso, a very vulnerable part of the human body. I'd say that's a guy who really enjoys action, so much so that he jumps in without protection to because he knows that either he kills all the others or the others kill him. He doesn't care about his chances, he just wants to have fun.
- Maybe. Or maybe he knows that his mission is pointless and it doesn't really matter if he wins or not.
- So he wants to have fun in the process.

Now look at the second one. You can tell he isn't the berserker type his pal is. He wears something on his chest, but it's not for the purpose of protection, it's for stealth. He likes sneaking up on people and murdering them in cold blood. He enjoys taking his time.

He handed me another cigarette.

- It was a mistake, all of it. The whole situation was a mistake, and it wasn't the woman's nor my boss's, it was mine.
- Yeah, I definitely agree with you on that one.
- Why couldn't I speak though? What was keeping me from saving the job that I cared about?
- The sole fact that you cared about it. More specifically, that you weren't prepared to lose it. If you were, then you wouldn't make a fool of yourself in the first place. She knew you are vulnerable. And she took advantage of it. But she wasn't in the wrong and you weren't in the right. You could have been hurt and you were.
- Fuck.
- Well said. That's what I'd call the "fuck" of realization.
- Thank you.

I saved his phone number, said goodbye and set off to my house. It was time to learn from my mistakes. There was, however, one more conversation waiting for me.

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- Where have you been all day? Your food got cold, I threw it in the trash. What's that? Have you been smoking? Don't tell me you've been smoking you bastard!

My wife once represented all I ever wanted in life. When I realized that our relationship is one that stops glowing after a few years, it was too late. No, the problem is that I never truly realized, I lied to myself all those years, that the fault was mine, that I was just too tired to experience how she really was. But then I would wake up next to the same disgusting person I saw in the evening. Theoretically, again, the fault was mine. I walked through the torment our relationship was and felt every insult she threw at me. But it weren't the insults that hurt the most. It was the predictability of her mundane existence.

- ARE YOU GOING TO TALK TO ME OR NOT? ARE YOU STUPID OR SOMETHING?

I pushed her away. She started screaming like I was tearing her skin off. Déjà vu.

I took her some time to recover her balance. I went up to the fridge and opened myself a beer. Is this going to benefit me? Let's give it a try. I can live with my mistakes.

- Why are you drinking? HOW DARE YOU DRINK WHEN I TALK TO Y-...

Voice crack. I know that feeling. I know that feeling very well.

- I lost my job.

No emotion, complete apathy.

She didn't say anything. I just saw her face getting more and more angry. When her rage reached murder levels, she rushed at me. Grabbing the beer off of my hand, she screamed and hit me in the head. I fell down.

Laying there, with the alcohol beneath me and blood running from my head, ignoring the pain, I felt free. Free like never before.

- That's it I'm leaving! YOU HEAR ME? I'M LEAVING. MY MOTHER WAS RIGHT. SHE WAS RIGHT ALL ALONG.

I smiled. She saw that, and kicked me. I smiled even more. I won.

After she left, I slowly got up, opened the fridge and got myself another beer.

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- You're doing great.

- That's beautiful work.

I looked at my drawing. It was supposed to be a cat, but its head was so big it took all the space on my page. And the eyes, the eyes were all wrong. It had human eyes. The sitting position was also a nice try on my part. Verdict? I can't draw.

And yet, here I am, being told my work is beautiful. What's wrong with her? What's wrong with my teacher?

- Hey you! Your drawing looks like shit!

They were laughing at me. There were right.

I didn't look at them. I tried walking past them, but I tripped. That's when they started kicking me.

- Those bullies won't be bothering you again.

I got them kicked out of school. Did they deserve it? No idea.

They deserved their fate, because they didn't behave the right way. That idea should have scared me. But it didn't.

It's not me who decides my fate.

It was too late for fear. It was time to accept the truth. There never was a higher order of things. There was only benefit. One could call that the purpose of life.

Die, die, die. Not because you deserve it. Because I want you to.

I always thought I am special. I always believed if I behave well, things will always be good for me. How naive. I am not special. I'm nobody.

I woke up.

My head still hurt. A combination of drinking and talking to my wife I suppose.

Or did I wake up? I felt the pain in my dream as well.

I don't know if any of this is real. Nor do I care.

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I took a shower. My blood began to mix in with the water. I pulled a few pieces of glass out of my head.

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Walking through the streets that I walked through every day, I felt people's eyes on myself.

My elegant shoes hitting the pavement. My suit moving to the rhythm of my steps.

Step by step, passing people heading to work. Seeing their faces.

Step by step, getting closer to my own work.

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The stage is set. The curtain is unveiling. It's my time to shine.

We're all just actors. But we don't realize. That's the *fucking* irony.

No one said anything when I entered my department. Everyone was there.

I stood there, waiting. I lit my cigarette.

Fortunately, it didn't take long for my boss to show up.

- What the hell are you doing here? Didn't you hear what I told you yesterday? You have nothing to do here.

I stood there, smoking. He kept shouting, telling me to get out. He had no idea I closed all the doors leading out of the department. I still had the keys.

- Listen, if you keep standing here, I'm afraid I'm gonna have to call the polic-...

Voice crack. Exactly what I was waiting for. I punched him and pulled out my revolver. Six shots. Better make them count.

Everyone started screaming. I grabbed Dick by his necktie and shot him right in the face. His blood sprayed all over my face. His body fell to the ground. No scream. He didn't even have time to realize what was happening. What a beautiful death.

- Die, die die.

In contrast to Richard's rather quiet death, the rest kept screaming. I aimed my revolver at John. I have never been a good shot, so I moved in close. John was screaming. When I got close enough to realize he soiled himself, I shot him.

I saw Sylvia reaching for the door. She tried running on her heels, but just ended up twisting her foot and falling. Now she was crawling for the exit. I moved in and stepped on her neck. Three.

Jim was horrified. He hid under his desk. Too bad I knew about him. I kicked his desk. Two bullets left.

The last two have locked themselves inside a small kitchen we used to make coffee in. Easy enough.

I tried kicking the door. No use, they kept pushing from the other side. I was running out of time. Can't waste bullets for the lock.

I grabbed one of the office chairs and got to the end of the hall with it.

I started running, gaining speed. The kitchen doors were getting closer.

The door hinges were torn apart from the wall upon collision. I practically flew into the kitchen, and fell right next to Mark and Lucy. I quickly stood up and saw Mark holding a frying pan. Lucy was behind him, absolutely terrified.

He came at me with a swing from the right. I tried jumping away to aim, but I jumped into the wall. He landed the hit, almost throwing me off balance, launching me at the fridge. With confidence, he rushed at me again. Another swing, again from the right. I raised my left hand, blocking the hit, probably breaking my bones. Bought myself enough time to aim. The bullet blew his brain out. One.

I sat there, happy. Lucy, still terrified, couldn't even move. She sat down next to me, crying. I couldn't do it. I couldn't shoot her. I loved her. She was always so nice to me. I hugged her. She smelled of roses.

I eventually stood up.

- I have to go now.

One bullet left. I grabbed my accounting files on the way out. I knew just the person. Before leaving the department, I put one of the soldiers on the floor.

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THE END OF PART ONE