

CAREFREE

After years of struggle as student, my skills have finally got utterance. I no longer need to worry about inadvertently displeasing my teachers. I have no teachers here, I only have colleagues and they are displeased only when there is a reason.

Amongst my numerous colleagues, a mention is due about only a few. And really, special amongst the few is Dr. Pushpa. No, no, don't get me wrong, there is not a strand of romance in this yarn.

I have just joined work and Dr. Pushpa is due to retire in a couple of years. It is easy to picture her; think of your favourite aunt. Gentle, graceful and generous would be the keywords in her pen sketch. Sought and unsought advice has always flowed as freely as electric current does across a potential difference. This story has an electrifying performance from her; we shall come back to her later.

It was a bright Monday morning; a kind of morning when one doesn't mind it is Monday. My spirits were light

even after the dreary monthly departmental meeting; it was that kind of a Monday morning.

As I settled in my room for the day ahead, I felt calm and felt strangely comfortable in my chair. I did not know for sure, it could have been the bright sunny winter morning, the scented breeze, but I think it was chiefly because I had no pending work from yesterday.

I have been striving to achieve 'no pending work' status for quite a while now and it took a superhuman effort from my side to achieve it. Not because the work was too much, but because I was too careless.

I often indulge myself with the thought that one day someone will author my biography. What words will he use to describe me? Careless, with a capital K.... oh, sorry, capital C will be written all over it.

I have tried hard to overcome this shortcoming; maintaining 'to do list', setting alarms so that I am not late, requesting colleagues to remind me, using sticky notes... You name it, I have done it. But each time, my strategy comes a cropper. So you can imagine what achieving "no pending work" status meant to me and I indulged myself again, imagining a page in my biography without the dreaded word.

On the other hand, Dr. Pushpa seemed unusually irritable today. At her seniority level, work means delegation and I could safely assume that the cares of the profession were not weighing her down. It must be a private matter, and sympathetic though I was, I didn't want to intrude.

I immersed myself in work and the first half of the workday just whizzed by. I must mention that I did my best to avoid careless mistakes and focussed hard. A lot of practise would be needed before it became a habit, I rued.

However, as the day passed, Dr. Pushpa grew more and more anxious. The colour had largely drained from her face and she seemed to kick up on the slightest provocation like a shy mare that was having her first outing in an Indian marriage procession.

I shrugged and went for lunch in the greasy canteen, where I realised that in spite of all precautions, I had slipped up and forgotten my wallet. I was forgetting my wallet at home with worrying regularity and I hoped that my colleagues would not think that there was a Freudian reason for my carelessness. Could it be possible that unconsciously, I was?

The lunch break did not seem to do much good to Dr. Pushpa's mood. She still bore a worn look. It aroused

much pity, but I felt that my nose wasn't strong enough for poking. I decided to practise carefulness and went back to work.

I have always been an easy victim of distraction, and to practise carefulness at work, I turn my phone off and disconnect the internet. But now, as I slaved on, my mind began to play strange tricks. I had a creepy feeling that Dr. Pushpa was looking at me from the corner of her eyes. I felt that somehow I was the cause of her discomfiture. I quickly ran through the work space events of the last week in my mind. No, there was no reason for me to believe that I had slipped in my duties or dealings to cause her annoyance.

With some effort, I shook myself out of the distraction and forced my mental energies to the work at hand. How hard it is to defeat the devil...

The brightness of the day was now giving way to softer hues of the evening, and with every change in the shade, my confidence in completing another careful day grew.

At 5 pm, I reviewed the day's work with immense satisfaction; no carelessness...

As I picked up my bag and prepared to go, I saw her standing behind me. She looked ghastly; all pale and wrin-

ked. I was overcome now and could not resist trying to comfort her.

"Is anything amiss ma'am?" I asked.

"Is anything amiss with you?" she countered.

"No! On the other hand I have had a very good day." I was a little perturbed now. Did I goof up on some official assignment again? I tried to think, but nothing showed up in the quick scan. I just nodded.

"Now stop acting so smug. Your burden has rested heavily with me and I know that you were playing cool so that I could be outwitted." She was definitely angry now.

So, I had been the cause of her worry today, but I still couldn't figure out what omission or commission had caused it. I think I must have looked really dumb and blank then, for I saw some softness in Dr. Pushpa's eyes.

"This is incredible! You really do not know How careless!"

I apologised and assured her that whatever caused her the trouble was not deliberate. I begged her to end the terrible suspense and in response she pulled a familiar black square out of her bag. It was my wallet! I hadn't forgotten it at home! Apparently, the wallet had fallen off

my pocket in the conference room during the monthly meeting. So neither the bright sunny winter morning, nor the scented breeze, nor the lack of pending work was the cause of the strange comfort in the chair. The comfort was because there was no wallet in my back pocket to poke me.

I thought that I had forgotten it at home and promptly forgot about forgetting. Meanwhile, Dr. Pushpa caught hold of it and decided to teach me a lesson. She was waiting for the right moment, a moment when I would worry about losing my wallet; I would fret about the loss of money and, more importantly, about the loss of valuable documents. That moment of frenzy would provide the right psychological opportunity to drive home her point about carelessness. She had even planned a penalty for the carelessness, a small treat for the colleagues. As the clock ticked by and I showed no signs of distress, alternative scenarios emerged in her mind.

Was I playing cool to test her patience? What if I complained to the authorities and the wallet was found on her person? What if I planned to reverse the practical joke and reported that some money was missing when she returned the wallet?

All these thoughts were bearing her down and more than once she decided to leave the wallet where she had found it. But she knew that there were many opportunists who would lap it up like a jackal gotten lucky with a meaty corpse. All this turmoil had taken a heavy toll on her, and at the end of the day, she could bear it no more.

As relief quickly spread on her countenance, I could not help but extoll the benefits of being ... You know what!!!

