

Expiry

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“Two years, then you move up, guaranteed. Just two years.”

He’s the devil, essentially, but Bernard has been out of college for almost three years now and this is his first interview. Two years doesn’t seem that long anymore anyway, and after that he’ll get a raise. It’s a good offer. It would be better if the man offering it wasn’t a personification of evil.

Bernard agrees and is handed a folder of papers to sign. They’re the typical “sign your life away” sort, and Bernard writes his name over and over in all the marked areas.

With the formalities concluded, Bernard is told he will start immediately.

A man who had been invisible before steps up beside him, and beckons for Bernard to follow. The man leads him from the office and into an elevator that keeps going down down past the ground level. They stop at a floor crammed with cubicles, and Bernard is lead silently to his. On the way they pass by rows upon rows filled with corporate zombies, a sight that gives Bernard chills. If he hadn’t been promised that promotion, this is where he’d begin to regret signing all those contracts.

At the cubicle labeled Bernard Wright, the man guiding him stops, points to his desk, and then vanishes around the corner. On the desk designated as his there is a dusty PC and two trays marked IN and OUT, with an intimidatingly large stack of paperwork in the former. Resting on top of his keyboard is a single sheet of paper covered in type. A quick look reveals it to be an outline of his daily schedule. A typical day, it seems, consists of hours of data entry. The sheet also contains instructions for signing into the network, and on how to log information into the database.

Bernard follows them easily after booting up the computer, and the database prompts him to begin filing the information contained within the paperwork to his left. He takes the first sheet off the top and reads it over. Its title proclaims it to be an ‘Expiry Report,’ a name that makes Bernard’s heart beat a little faster, with information on a woman named Janice Garland filled out in black ink, including her age and address. There is also a section for date and time, with yesterday’s date filled in. The last line of information to be noted is marked ‘cause of

death,' with *natural causes - heart attack* listed. Below that is a line designated for an agent signature, with *Clarity Fisher* written in neat cursive.

The rest of the paperwork is the same. All Expiry Reports, all people who died some time yesterday.

Bernard stacks the papers again slowly, the sinking feeling of dismay weighing him down. After putting them back into the pile, he leans back in his chair for a moment of consideration. This is the job, he realizes; filing death reports in a database. For some reason he'd thought there would be more to it, or that it would be different... He'd been prepared to deal with morbidity, had said so in his interview, but he'd been assured that he would not be required to do any field work and thought that things would be okay. No wonder there was an opening.

But it's money. Money enough to pay for the apartment he lives in and to get him by, and in two years he'll be done in the cubicle and move on. On to what, exactly, doesn't bear thinking about, but if he can't handle it he'll find somewhere else. For now, though, money is money and he'll take it where he can get it.

It takes about a month before Bernard becomes efficient at entering the required information. The first four weeks he spends preoccupied by these people. The questions of who they were, who they left behind, what they were doing only the day before when they were still alive and *why* yesterday was their day to die bother him, but worst of all are those three simple words have the power to upset him like nothing before. Their cause of death is the most personal piece of information Bernard will ever know about them, and with each new one he encounters he feels a little heavier, until his fourth week arrives and everything becomes numb.

He has nothing outside work to distract himself with, and in that way the numbness is an improvement. It makes the job much easier, to the point where Bernard can file dozens of reports without actually processing any of the information on them. Inevitably he comes across one with a C.O.D. he's never seen before or someone from a town he's been to and his concentration will be shot, but those occurrences become few and far between until entire days past in a blur of names and locations and deaths.

Bernard passes his two years in a fog of work that takes everything out of him and leaves him with nothing. He is nearly indistinguishable from the rest of the zombies on the floor where he works, and a week before the second year is about to end a scout is sent to observe him.

The report he writes cites the pallid color and overall sunken appearance of Bernard's face, the slight tremor in his hands, the slow, steady rhythm with which he works, and the overall detachedness with which he goes about his day as evidence of his deterioration. Not suitable for advanced office work involving critical thinking or communication, is the verdict. The scout delivers his report succinctly, then offers a suggestion of his own. Their researchers have been looking for a subject with Mr. Wright's profile to test some of their new theories out on. Perhaps he could be of more use there?

After a brief moment of consideration, the devil nods.

"Move him up."