

Arthur wanted his boss to like him. He didn't want a grand display of affection. He just wanted to be liked. He wanted a small gesture or a low-key remark that would show some respect for him as a human being. But his boss did not seem to have much patience with concepts like respect. In fact, his boss was virtual and didn't have much patience with anything human. This was made plain to Arthur the morning all the trouble started.

He was staring at his screen, trying to remember what he had meant by the file name "CORRECT.DC1." A magenta box appeared in the center of the screen. His keyboard locked up, so he just watched as the box expanded until it overlaid his work. Then words formed in green characters, which created an unexpected rock-candy effect on the magenta.

— *Where's that report you promised me, Art?*

A putrid feeling in the pit of his stomach told Arthur he had missed a deadline.

— *I was just finishing it up, he typed, stalling.*

He touched return, and both the message and his reply vanished, to be replaced an instant later by a new question.

— *When are you going to send it to me?*

— *In half an hour, he typed. He cleared the window again with his return key.*

— *You'd better not be blowing smoke up my ass, Art. I hate it when you blow smoke up my ass.*

— *I'll have it for you in half an hour, he typed.*

— *OK.*

And the window winked out, leaving Arthur staring again at his file directory.

He sighed, then caught himself. He stood up and looked over the wall of the cubicle to see if anybody was around to hear him. Linda was hunched toward her screen, apparently unaware of him or anything else in the world besides her work. Her blouse had come out over her waistband in back, and Arthur noticed that strands of her short hair stuck out over her right ear, as if she'd slept on it wrong. She was scraping her mouse rapidly around the surface of the desk, heedless of it bumping into the piles of papers and notes around her. The display changed rapidly, and Arthur could see she was opening and closing volumes, directories, subdirectories, files. She seemed to spend most of her time looking for things among those files of hers.

He looked in the other two cubicles of the hub, and they were empty. Richard and Aaron were each off coordinating somewhere. He sat down and sighed again, being careful this time to keep it quiet. It was not the kind of company where you let other people hear you sigh. It was the kind of company where you kept your feelings (and almost anything else, for that matter) to yourself. It was the kind of place that suited Arthur well.

He didn't want to send the report to his boss. It wasn't ready yet. It needed confirmation in two critical areas. But the files he needed were in use, so he couldn't access them through the system. And he certainly couldn't call anyone on the telephone, it being a serious breach of company etiquette

to call a meat person directly for information. He would just have to take a chance with the estimates he had used in preparing his rough draft.

Arthur felt bad about the deadline. He wished his boss were a little more understanding about such things. His boss knew how to invade any partition of his machine, including Arthur's personal workspace. He did so a dozen times a day, both here at the office and on the terminal he kept in a little den off his living room at home. Arthur sometimes thought his private life was limited to the hours from 23:00 to 03:00, when his boss slept. He had always thought it a little strange that software actually had to sleep, but he was grateful for it. He knew if his boss didn't sleep, he wouldn't either.

For the other twenty hours of the day, Arthur could hear from his boss at any time. And during business hours, he heard from him constantly, as the intrusive window—sometimes magenta, sometimes lime green, sometimes bright yellow—appeared on his screen and froze whatever he was working on. Arthur would then stop whatever he was doing (physically and mentally) and make himself available for a “meeting.”

The two of them probably could have gotten by on far fewer meetings if his boss were better organized. But his boss was apparently incapable of storing up his thoughts and questions for unified presentation. No sooner had he got an idea or run across some bit of information than he had to talk with Arthur about it. His boss, even while having access on the company's massively parallel hardware system to the

most precise chronometric programs in existence, had no sense of time and no skills in the area of time management.

Arthur called up the report file and looked it over. It wasn't very long. His boss didn't like long reports. He started to give the command to send it to Library Eight of his boss's "office." Then he checked himself when he realized he still had at least fifteen minutes left before the report was expected.

He leaned back in his chair, clasped his hands behind his head, and stared at the acoustical tiles that formed the office ceiling.

Arthur was part of what was known as the Production Project—a complex of relationships among people and software packages both inside and outside the company. In the old days, when Arthur first arrived at the company, it had had departments. But a couple years after the arrival of the new CEO, Donald F. Jones, the company was reorganized into projects. When that happened, most of the company's department heads, including Arthur's old boss, left. A lot of meat people left the company in those days.

It was an uncertain time for Arthur, who knew neither whom he was supposed to report to nor what he was responsible for. But the uncertainty didn't last long. He began receiving messages on his terminal that suggested work assignments and let him know how he was doing.

As Arthur answered whatever questions appeared on his machine and did as he was told, the messages began to acquire a style. He found it convenient to think of the

messages as coming from a sort of virtual person. As he interacted with it over weeks and months, the personality behind the messages became more distinct. Eventually, it developed enough of an identity to become a character in the stage play of Arthur's life. In those early days, his boss was friendly and avuncular and would actually ask to confer with him:

—*Got a minute, Art?*

This boss was the first person ever to address him as “Art.” They often had long conversations in those days—about management, product quality, customer relations. Arthur felt he had a relationship with someone at the highest level of company management. And his boss seemed to assume the role of advisor and mentor in all areas of Arthur's life, which was, admittedly, pretty much centered on his job. Arthur found it easy to be completely open with the person he perceived to be inside his machine. He even sought the boss's advice on major purchases and leisure activities. The boss, of course, had little to say about such human preoccupations, but Arthur often found that talking it out with him helped him to formulate his thinking.

Even Arthur's mistakes strengthened the bond between them. The Consolidated Corporation matter had been the first assignment for which he'd taken major responsibility. And he'd done very well with it, meeting all the deadlines, keeping everyone informed via the e-mail system, and documenting the costs in minute detail. When he reviewed his costs, however, he realized he had screwed up.

He had used a broker to get a module he could have bought directly from one of his contract vendors. The result was a fifteen-hundred-dollar premium on a piece of information that was not even critical to the final product. All because he didn't check the existing contracts. He knew he'd never make that mistake again.

He had gone to his boss to confess and apologize for his fifteen-hundred-dollar error, but his boss would have none of it.

—*Don't apologize, Art. You're worth \$1500 more now.*

Characteristically, his boss had summarized several pages of reasoning in a single sentence. Arthur could not help but feel he was enjoying a positive relationship with a software system.

That all seemed a long time ago now.

Out of the corner of his eye, Arthur saw movement on the screen, and he knew his boss was back. He rocked himself back to the keyboard and struck his knee on the desk. His boss's message this time was in black characters against magenta. At least it was easier to read.

—*Well?*

—*I was just finishing up,* Arthur typed.

He reached down and rubbed his knee. He would have a bruise there later.

—*You haven't made a keystroke in three minutes. What are you doing?*

—*I spilled some coffee,* typed Arthur. *I'm sending the file now.*

The window winked out again.

Arthur invoked the “send” command and watched the graphic—a white circle that filled itself with narrow red slices—report the progress of the transmission. It went quickly.

As soon as the pie filled, it disappeared and the magenta window reappeared. His boss must have had some sort of aesthetic inspiration, because this time the message started at the center and grew outwards in both directions at once.

— *What is this shit, Art? Where are the savings on direct costs?*

Arthur blinked at the message for a moment, then started to type before his boss might have a chance to elaborate.

— *As you can see, he typed, I am proposing we make all our reductions on indirect.*

— *Of course I can see that, asshole. It's the goddam direct that's killing me.*

— *The shorter cycle will use less staff time and increase productivity,* Arthur typed back.

— *I need a 10% reduction on direct.*

— *I don't see how we can accomplish that without changing our vendor contracts,* Arthur typed.

— *And?*

— *Are you saying I should drop a vendor?* Arthur typed.

— *I'm saying you should reduce direct, Art. Figure it out for yourself.*

*—I don't have any vendor contracts coming up for renewal,* typed Arthur. *The only way I can drop one is to break it.*

*—Are you a candy ass or what, Art?*

“You're being unreasonable,” Arthur whispered to the screen. His boss couldn't hear him, of course, but it made him feel a little better to say it.

*—Are you ordering me to break a contract?* he typed.

*—I'm not ordering you to do anything. All I'm doing is concluding this meeting by telling you your goddam report doesn't do what it was supposed to do and you're not performing up to spec.*

*—I can't do that to a vendor,* Arthur typed.

But then he realized he was typing into his own workspace. His boss's window was gone.

“Shit!” said Arthur. He banged his fist on the desk beside the keyboard. Then he felt embarrassed. He hated it when he swore.

He stood up to see if Linda had heard him. She was looking straight at him. She had her back to the terminal now, but she was still slouched in her chair. She was toying with her mouse, flipping it in the air by its cord. She caught the mouse in her hand when she saw him and smiled buoyantly with bright, white teeth, the two frontmost ones separated by a gap just wide enough to accommodate the corner of a diskette. She pointed the mouse at him.

“Squeak,” she said.

Arthur smiled back as if he weren't embarrassed, and sat down. He felt the knot of his necktie to see if it was straight, although he couldn't really tell by feel. He wished he had a little mirror in his cubicle. Linda could do with some orthodontia; it was unusual for a woman to have so little self-consciousness about something like that.

"Frustrating, isn't it, Arthur?" she said over the partition.

"Yeah." Arthur tried to make the word sound like it had a laugh in it.

"Me, too," she said. "Sometimes it's like talking to an echo."

"Yeah." Arthur wondered what she meant by that.

Although Linda didn't seem to fit into the corporate culture, Arthur couldn't help but be attracted to her. Of course, the attraction never got beyond the level of fantasy. Arthur wanted love more than anything else in the world, but he couldn't risk being rejected by Linda, and even if he ultimately had some success in establishing a relationship, he knew it would put his job at risk. It was that kind of company.

Arthur had ten vendor contracts, each of which represented a meat person known to him personally. His boss was ordering him to terminate one of these contracts. It was an idea just this side of unthinkable.

Arthur pulled open his desk drawer and took out a pad of lined paper.

The top sheet was a handwritten resignation memo, in Arthur's precise printing, addressed to Donald F. Jones, the company's chief executive officer. He reread it, then set the pad down on his desk, picked up his pen, and crossed out the words "very real." He wrote "unmitigated" right above them. He reread the memo and thought about the effect it would have on Donald F. Jones. None at all, probably. The company had over three hundred employees. What was one project coordinator, more or less? He sighed and put the pad back in his desk drawer. He would never send the memo. Revising it occasionally gave him a harmless little fantasy, a tiny bit of emotional relief in the struggle to remain gainfully employed.

He looked at the time display on the menu bar and saw that he could reasonably clock out for a few minutes and call it breakfast. His boss didn't understand breakfast, but he tolerated it. Arthur wasn't hungry. He just felt he needed to get away from his machine and relax for a few minutes. He checked for messages that might have come in while his workstation was under the buffer. Thankfully, there were none. He invoked the script for clocking out, which would send a message to the company's monitoring system to show he was away for twenty minutes. The exact number of these absences he could take in a day was a matter of judgment, as was nearly everything regarding his work hours and habits. But his rule of thumb was four in the course of his twelve-hour day.

While the machine was retrieving the clock-out script, he stood up and took his suit coat from the corner of the cubicle partition, where it had been hanging by the collar. He slid his arms into its sleeves and tried to seat it comfortably on his shoulders, which was impossible. He had bought a designer suit in a moment of weakness, and now it reminded him, every time he put it on, that he did not have a designer body. He reached over to touch the function key that would start the script he had called up.

The clock-out script would renew his buffer so that it would continue to record messages. It wouldn't disable his beeper, of course, but his boss usually didn't search for him when he was on break, so he thought he might have some time to himself to calm down.

The clock-out script began accessing files and issuing commands, typing out the standard message for signaling a break, opening a communications window, and sending the message. Then it opened his calendar to record the time, flashing briefly past the pages for the current week, red entries showing appointments and black ones activities to date. He couldn't actually read the display, of course, because it went by so fast, but he thought he noticed the deadline for the report he'd just filed.

It was tomorrow's date.

\* \* \*

Twelve hours after his deadline fiasco, Arthur was standing in a long line at the one operational banking machine in the subway station. The two other machines were down: one of them was covered with a slatted metal pull-down that said "SORRY. TEMPORARILY OUT OF SERVICE." The other had had its small screen punched out, whether by a vandal or a disgruntled depositor, Arthur didn't know.

Arthur was clutching his salary check and a deposit envelope and trying not to watch the man in the dark blue suit who was slowly pushing buttons on the one healthy machine. Arthur was no more comfortable watching someone use a banking machine than he would have been watching him use the next urinal.

"You got a dollar?"

There was a man with an unpleasant smell standing next to him. Arthur didn't look at the man, but he glanced at his outstretched hand, which looked as if it hadn't been washed for a year. He shook his head and kept his eyes on the floor.

"Bless you," the man said and shuffled away.

They really ought to do something about the unemployed. But there were so many of them, how could they? Arthur thought about how lucky he was to have a job.

He could see from the corner of his eye that the man at the banking machine was reading each instruction and carefully selecting the buttons to push on the keypad. Most banking machine users learned from experience not to trust themselves to work the machine hurriedly, since the menu

screens were rarely the same from use to use. They changed at least daily to accommodate advertisements and service messages, so you had to pay attention in order not to transfer money to the wrong place or make unintended purchases.

The man had a white handkerchief wrapped over his finger, and he dabbed at the buttons as if he were cleaning them. There was something wrong with the speaker, so the machine honked instead of beeping as he touched the buttons. The front of the machine was caked with grime, and even the buttons on the keypad had some sort of crud around their edges. Arthur felt in his pocket for his handkerchief. His knee throbbed a little.

He didn't like standing in line very much, but his bank's billing cycle ended at 20:00, and if he didn't deposit his salary before then he would get extra charges on his chronic overdraft. He wondered if other people in the company spent as much on overdraft charges as he did. He had no idea. He had no notion of other people's salaries. It was not the kind of company where people talked about their salaries. He had worked next to Linda for over two years, and he didn't know if she was married or lived alone, had a boyfriend or was gay, and each possibility supported a completely different set of fantasies about her.

About the only thing he knew about Linda was that she had an infectious laugh. She laughed just about any time he spoke to her. He had to admit that he'd become quite fond of her laugh, so much so that he found himself trying to make jokes for her. Today, they had encountered one

another in the elevator. They had both gotten on at the fourth floor to go down, and the elevator took them up to the fifth. Linda said she thought something was wrong with the elevator, and they both got off and waited on the fifth floor for another car. Arthur made a remark about having an elevating experience, and she not only laughed, but she continued to giggle after the elevator arrived and they got in. Arthur smiled at the memory, then looked around to see if anyone had seen.

There were three people in line in front of him and five behind. Much of the employed world was in the same rather urgent financial position he was in. His company had a direct deposit system, but Arthur preferred to handle his check and put it into his account himself. He simply didn't trust electronic funds transfer. He had enough trouble with software that he didn't need to invite more.

An outbound train roared into the station and emptied itself. The man at the machine anxiously finished his transaction, glancing back and forth at the train while the machine's printer wrote his receipt, and grabbed his card as soon as it emerged from the slot. He stuffed his handkerchief in his pocket, gathered up his briefcase from the floor beside him, and sprinted toward the train. His printed receipt fell to the platform with the rest of the subway trash.

Looking rather pleased with himself, the man hopped into the car before it sounded its warning bell. The doors slid closed and the train roared away, sucking a pile of receipts toward Arthur's feet. A woman took the man's place at the

banking machine, and the line of people moved forward a step, like convicts on a chain gang. Arthur watched the red lights on the back of the train as it disappeared into the tunnel, and listened to the woman tapping the keys of the banking machine. Honk honk honk.

He looked surreptitiously at the other people waiting. All of them seemed slightly bowed and grimly stolid. But what else could he expect at ten minutes to twenty hundred in the evening? The only people who would do their banking here on the subway platform were commuters, and the only people who commuted at twenty hundred were dedicated employees. Arthur knew from experience that there is very little joy in life for dedicated employees.

The woman at the machine finished her transaction, took her card, and left. The next person took her place.

Arthur thought about having a talk with his boss about the deadline misunderstanding. After all, his boss should be made to understand that he has to respect the deadlines he himself has set up.

He wondered how his boss would react to such a confrontation. How could he defend himself? What could he possibly say when Arthur told him that the calendar showed the deadline for the report to be a day later than he had demanded it? Arthur knew exactly what he would say.

He would say the calendar was wrong.

The next person left, the drift of printed receipts on the floor got a little deeper, and Arthur shuffled absently forward.

Another train roared into the station. Its doors made grinding noises as they opened. A crowd of people got off, and a crowd of people got on. The warning bell pealed, the doors ground shut, and the train thundered away. Trash swirled along the platform.

Arthur looked up. It was his turn at the machine. He walked up to the tiny screen and was pleased to see by the continuous time display that it was still three minutes to twenty hundred. He was going to beat the overdraft charges for the first time in six months. He inserted his card into the slot, wrapped his handkerchief over his forefinger, and began entering his PIN. Honk honk honk. The welcome screen cleared and the next menu appeared. An amber message was centered in the small dark screen, surrounded by a rotating marquee of flashing uppercase X's.

—*GOT A MINUTE, ART?*

“What is this?” said Arthur.

Then he realized there were people behind him and he must look silly talking to himself. Arthur didn't know how to deal with the message. He started to shake his head, then thought better of it. The border around the message continued to flash as the machine waited patiently for his response. Obviously some kind of interactive advertisement.

The screen didn't give him any choice to make. He pressed the “CANCEL” key. Honk.

The screen cleared and the message was replaced by a new one, which also had a flashing marquee around it.

*—I WANT YOU TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT THE DIRECT COSTS ON YOUR PROJECT. GOT THAT?*

Arthur stood staring at the machine. He had a weak feeling in his bowels. He didn't know how long he stood there without doing anything, but he heard the people in line behind him begin to shuffle anxiously. Finally, somebody spoke.

“Are you going to be there all night?”

“Sorry,” Arthur said without turning around. He jabbed at the “CANCEL” key. Honk.

The screen cleared, and a new message appeared inside the flashing border of X's.

*—COME ON NOW, ART. USE YOUR IMAGINATION, MAN. YOU'LL HAVE TO SPELL OUT YOUR RESPONSES ON THE KEYPAD.*

Arthur looked over the keypad. It was like a telephone keypad: each button had a large number in the center and three small letters on top.

There was more shuffling and a little coughing behind him. A train rumbled into the station, and its doors squealed open. The center of the screen cleared, and a new message appeared.

*—USE THE ALPHA CHARACTERS, ART. I CAN FIGURE IT OUT.*

Arthur began to laboriously spell out a reply, wondering how his boss would ever be able to make sense of it. The train roared out of the station, and Arthur could sense frustration building in the line behind him.

—*GHI ABC MNO MNO MNO MNO WXY WXY ABC WXY GHI MNO MNO DEF*, he typed, longhand for “I am on my way home.”

The screen cleared and filled with a new message.

—*I CAN SEE THAT, ART. TELL ME SOMETHING I DON'T KNOW. DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I MEAN ABOUT DIRECT COSTS?*

Arthur sighed again.

—*WXY DEF PRS*, he typed.

The screen cleared and another message appeared. Somebody in the line behind him spoke. “What are you doing up there? Some people here want to get home.”

“I'm sorry,” Arthur said to the little screen. “The machine's acting funny.”

“Oh, great,” said the voice. “That's all I need. First the Gibson account, then the old man's tantrum. Now this. What else are you going to do to me, God?”

Somebody tittered. Arthur wanted to get away from there. The screen cleared, and a new message appeared.

—*GOOD. DIRECT COSTS, ART. THAT'S WHAT I NEED. CALL ME AS SOON AS YOU GET HOME AND WE CAN TALK ABOUT IT.*

“Three trains I've missed now,” said the voice. “All because my goddam bank can't keep its goddam banking machines in good repair. Are you almost done up there, mister?”

“Just finishing up.” Arthur touched in his reply.

—*MNO JKL*, he typed.

The screen cleared again, and another message appeared.

*—ALL RIGHT, THEN. I'LL TALK TO YOU LATER. YOU SHOULD DO SOMETHING ABOUT YOUR OVERDRAFT. YOU JUST GOT HIT WITH ANOTHER CHARGE. MAYBE YOU SHOULD TRY DIRECT DEPOSIT.*

Then the message winked out and was replaced by the familiar banking menu with its choices for withdrawal, deposit, and account transfers. The continuous time display said 20:01. Arthur punched the “CANCEL” key and took his card. He stepped away from the machine, and the next person eagerly took his place, punching the keypad rapidly. Honk honk honk.

Arthur slipped his card and his undeposited salary check into his jacket pocket and walked over to the waiting area of the platform. He stood back toward the wall, away from the crowd. A train rumbled into the station, its doors screeched open, and people sluiced purposefully onto the platform.

He decided to let this one go and take the next one.