NOT MY DESK

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by Christopher C. Livingston

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ISBN

**Introduction**

I am led down a hall, around a corner, and finally, into a cubicle where a desk sits, waiting for me. On the desk is a computer, some folders, and a blue vase containing flowers look like they died when I was still a young boy. There is a small clipping of paper taped to the computer monitor, just below the screen, that says:

*For where your treasure is, there will be your heart also – Matthew, 6:21*

The screen itself is displaying a message of wisdom too, in the standard marquee style, sideways-scrolling text:

*Take each day as a new challenge, never stop trying, believe in--*

That’s all I can take before I have to yank my eyes away, to instead gaze upon the several yellowing Cathy comic strips, clipped from the Sunday papers and tacked to the cubicle wall, each exactly identical in regards to the last panel, which leaves Cathy frazzled, her hair in disarray and her tongue sticking out.  Ack.

I look to the other side of the desk, where there are some binders, a stapler, and an Anne Geddes greeting card that shows a picture of a nude infant on a bed of roses, its face crinkled in either extreme joy or magnificent [pain](http://www.annegeddes.com/popupCALgalleryNAV.cfm?year=93&month=6). The file cabinet is covered with magnetic poetry, magnetic fruit, and a magnetic statue of David wearing one of several magnetic outfits. The computer’s mouse has a little cozy that makes it look like a real mouse. There is a beach ball in one corner. The cubicle has a shower curtain. There is a large poster of Daniel Day Lewis. Approximately four hundred and sixteen photographs of the same two cats.

"Well, this is your desk," says the woman who brought me here.

I look at her, then down at the desk again, my eyes finally coming to rest on the well-worn paperback copy of Chicken Soup for the Soul.

This is *not* my desk.

It all began with a visit to what I’ll call the *Pseudonym Temp Agency*, which I picked out of the phone book the way a man picks out perfume for his wife: completely at random. When I got to their office, I was put through a battery of tests. I had to do simple math problems, word problems, typing, numeric keypad entry, push oddly shaped pegs through their corresponding holes, identify various smells, and wrestle a surprisingly frisky chimpanzee.

Once finished, I had to wait. I was worried because I hadn’t done very well on the typing or any of the keyboard stuff, and the chimp had gotten off a few elbow drops and given me an embarrassing wedgie. After I waited, a woman came out and took me to her desk, and I had to tell her how great I was. I didn’t want to, particularly, but she really insisted. She said things like, "Tell me how great you are."

After I told her how great I was, she typed it into the computer. Then this other guy she worked with came over and said there was a position open at Port of Portland right away. I said I would like to take it, so we rushed through the rest of the paperwork. The woman asked me if I knew how I did on the tests, because the receptionist hadn’t given her the keyboarding results. I told her I did great. She didn’t ask about the chimp.

Once I reached Port of Portland, I headed to the 13th floor, and told the receptionist who I was.  She punched a few buttons and picked up the phone.

"Your temp is here," she says into the receiver.

Just like that, I’m a temp.

Kind of weird, really.  I only called the agency yesterday afternoon, and today I have a job.  Just a few tests, a quick look-over to make sure I'm okay, and they send me to work. Where I'll get paid.  People who don't know me, sending me to work for other people who don't know me, for money.   I thought it would be harder than this.

Cathy, the woman who brought me to the desk, shows me the computer I will be using and how to work the phones. I’m instructed to rub alcohol on a headset and jam an uncomfortable hunk of plastic into my ear. I will primarily be answering phones. Secondary duties will include staring out the window, staring at the wall, and trying to remember what to say when the phone rings.

There’s a computer system that lists all the employees, their titles, and telephone extensions. Port of Portland manages the airports and docks, so I start getting calls from people who want to ship freights overseas and from people who left an umbrella in the airport. I transfer their calls to the places where people can tell them how much shipping costs and where to find their umbrella. Most people call in asking for a specific name, and I try to type it in to the computer to get their extension. It is times like this (and maybe only times like this) that you begin to realize how hard it is to spell people’s names. Plus, the phone connection is really scratchy, making everyone who calls sound like they have a small field mouse stuffed in their esophagus. Even when they spell the names, I have trouble figuring out who they want to talk to. An average call goes something like this:

"Good morning, Port of, um, Portland."

"Yezz, Mrzz Gezzozzldzz."

"I’m sorry?"

"Mrzz Gezzozzldzz."

"The last name again?"

"Gezzozzldzz."

"Ah, could you spell it for me?"

"Gzz, ezz, zzz, zzz, ozz…"

"Perhaps a bit slower?"

"Gzz. Ezz. Zzz. Z-"

"Oh, yes, here it is. Gezzozzldzz. One moment."

I then transfer them to Human Resources, or Airport Terminal Services, the docks, a local bakery, Cairo, etc., and hope they never call back. They usually don’t.

I work at Port of Portland for a few hours on Monday and all day on Tuesday. No one ever comes into the office except for the wacky mailroom guy, who comes in several times an hour and jokes and kids and laughs and who I eventually want to punch in the throat. Other than that, it’s a pretty uneventful job. It pays $8.25 an hour, and the woman I work with, Cathy, says I did very well, and she would request me in the future. She even checks the little box on my timecard that says, "Excellent."

My first temp job is over, and I have survived.

Wednesday morning, I get a call from the temp service guy, Todd. He asks if I want to work today and I say, "Sure", which is a lie, because I want to go back to sleep.  I wonder if this is how it’s always going to be. No real notice of when or where I am going to work. I had kind of hoped they would have my next assignment the night before, rather than the morning of, but perhaps this is because I am new.  Still, he says it pays nine-fifty an hour, a considerable increase from yesterday, and I want to get some experience. I am told to be at U.S. West, a long distance company, "as soon as possible."  I yawn and tell him I'm on my way.

About four hours later, I walk in the office building in southwest Portland. I see an empty reception desk and, on it, the same Anne Geddes card as I did in the Port of Portland office. Naked baby, roses.  I meet a woman who tells me I am filling in for the receptionist, who is out sick. Filling in for sick people, I realize, will soon be my forte. I also begin to wonder how sick they were when they left their desks the day before I show up, and what sort of contaminated keyboards I am running my hands over.

I am given extensive phone training ("There’s the phone") and plopped at the front desk. I have a sheet listing everyone’s extension and voice mail numbers, so I figure it shouldn’t be too difficult. There is also a dry-erase board that has all the employees names on it, and a little checked box to indicate if they are "in" or "out" of the office. Every single name is listed as "out", which I suspect is not true since I can see several people in the office. I decide to make my own list of who is at the office today, which is difficult because people keep walking in or out without introducing themselves.

The phone begins to ring. The first caller asks for someone named J.D., who, of course, does not have a listing on the sheet for any extension or number. I think for a moment that J.D. may not even be an employee, but then I spot him or her on the dry-erase board listed, of course, as "out," so I stutter into the phone a bit, then hit a series of numbers and buttons that, remarkably, connects the caller to his own dishwasher. My job done, I sit back and proceed to copy the games from the receptionist’s computer onto disk, to take home. I decide I will continue this practice in the future, and soon I will have a vast array of games on my own computer. This will be my "thing."

A few calls later I am a nervous wreck. The phone system here has recently changed, so no one has the extension that the callers ask for and everything is a mess. I seem to constantly bumble the transferring, and when I eventually get the call through, I can hear the employee, to whom I have just transferred the call, begin the conversation with: "Hello? Hi. Oh, Heather’s out sick today. Yeah, sorry, we’ve got a temp. Uh-huh. Sorry. Well, he just started. No. Sorry about that. I know, I know. Well, it was a last minute replacement. Yes, I know. Sorry. Yes, it is annoying. I hate that too. They just sent him over. Yes, I want to kill him as well. Yep. With a big knife. Uh-huh. I understand. We hate to lose your business. I’ll tell the boss you’re pulling your multi-million dollar account. Yes. Because of the temp. Right."

Nothing seems to be simple. I get a call for the director of the office; a big muscular guy I know for certain is in the office, because I just saw him seconds ago. I transfer the call to his desk and the readout on my phone tells me that he has "gone home." I walk back to his office and see him picking up his phone and dialing. I tell him he has a call. He stares at me a moment, then slams down his receiver with enough force to shatter the phone into one million pieces. Grabbing a new phone from his desk drawer, he quickly plugs it in and picks up the line. I get the feeling I have done something wrong.

People keep going into meetings without telling me what to do with their calls, and most calls are "urgent" and "important" and people need to speak directly with other people who are always on another line, so I wind up with several lines on hold, which the phone does not like at all, and subtly indicates this by shrieking at me.

I go on my lunch break. There’s deli next door, and looking over the list of sandwiches and salads, I finally select a pack of cigarettes.   It has been almost two months since I've smoked, and my third day of temping already has me clawing open the pack and fumbling with the matches.

I spend most of the rest of my break wandering around looking for someplace to sit. It’s very warm out and I eventually sit in my car with the AC on.  I start thinking about all the other jobs I’ve had. I remember how I didn’t like any of them at first. The first day was always the worst, because I never knew anyone, and no one would talk to me, and I didn’t know what I was doing. I think that’s what temping is. A whole string of first days. A career of first days.

I’m not sure this is a good thing.

After lunch I return to the office. Kathie, the woman who has been covering the phones while I was gone informs me that everyone is at lunch, and she herself will be leaving shortly. It would be a great relief to be here alone, with no one to make me nervous.  The first thought that enters my mind is, "Why are they leaving me alone here?  They don't even know me.  I could steal all the computers, or set the place on fire, or..."

It occurs to me if everyone left, I could take off my clothes and be naked in the office. I figure this would be a bad idea, but it would be fun. To be in some weird office I’ve never been in before and probably will never be in again, completely naked. More fun than copying games. It could be my new "thing," getting naked at each temp job. Of course, it could cause problems.

Todd: "Hi, this is Todd at Pseudonym Staffing. Can I help you?"

Office manager: "Hello, yes. Regarding the temp you sent over…"

Todd: "Oh, yes. Christopher. One of our best! That boy knows how to wrestle a chimp!"

Office manager: "Yes, well…"

Todd: "How’s he working out? Good on the phones, strong typist?"

Office manager: "Yes, his phone skills are fine. Well, not really, but…"

Todd: "Yes?"

Office manager: "Well… he’s naked."

Todd: "Naked."

Office manager: "Yes. See, we all got back from lunch, and—"

The day continues to suck. The main boss, the muscular fellow, who could easily beat me up, just came and stood behind me for several minutes. People do this all day. They just stand there because the fax machine is right there, but of course it feels like they're standing there so they can stare at the back of my head.  I know it's what they want to do. Just stare at my head to make me nervous.

Anyway, then I screwed up a call, and told the big huge man that he had a call, but he picked up the wrong line, apparently someone I’d left on hold for a very long time, because I heard him apologizing about me.  I wonder if I should start apologizing to the callers in advance.  Just pick up the phone and say "Sorry, this is Chris, to whom may I misdirect your call?"

Something good finally happens in the afternoon: I help some women figure out something on their computers. It was very easy and I did it in about two seconds so it looks like I know a lot about computers. This happens just after I disconnect the huge giant powerful violent man from his call for the eighteenth time. I’m having bad luck with this fellow! Due to my ineptitude on the phone, he’s missed several calls, lost thousands in the stock market, his wife has left him, he’s been accused of fraudulent practices in Haiti, and he’s contracted three social diseases. Golly! If only I could figure out the phones!

Well, this day is all but over. Everyone has left, save two nice people, so I am relaxing. If I can figure out how to fax my time card in, I might even get paid for my day of hell. The big boss signed my timecard and thanked me, then went out to his car and shot himself through the head. He neglected to check a box on my timecard, the one that says "Excellent." Well. I think attention to detail is an important trait when it comes to managing an office, but I guess that’s just me. What do I know? I’m just a temp.

As I walk to my car, relief washes over me, not just because the day is over, but because it is over.  I never have to come back here again.  Ever.  Maybe this temping thing is okay.  A lot of first days, but not that many second days.  Or second weeks.  Or years.

Two and a half days of temping. It seems much longer. I have a lot to think about while I drive home. I park my car and start walking towards the apartment, and I wonder if I will again be awakened by the phone ringing, be directed into some foreign office with strange people and unfamiliar phone rituals. As I dig my apartment key from my pocket, the chimp from the interview leaps from his hiding place above the door, screeching, and latches onto my neck.

After I thrash him soundly, we share a cigarette.

Part One: Temporary Insanity

**Fired**

For a temp, the advantages of smoking are threefold.  You look cool, you smell simply fantastic, and it provides you with an excellent means of socializing with the strangers you work with. This last presumes, however, that you happen to be one of those odd people who actually enjoys the company of other human beings.

I certainly don't, and as such, I often find myself walking around corners or hiding behind pillars or climbing trees or ducking into open sewer ducts to enjoy a solitary smoke.  At my current job, however, I appear to be the only smoker.  In the entire company.  This seems a bit unusual, as the building contains about two-hundred employees, but each and every day I'm out in front of the building, alone, puffing away.  Each and every day, that is, until I am told not to smoke in front of the building anymore.  If I must smoke, I am told sternly, I should do it around the side of the building by the company cafeteria, where there is one of those free-standing, cylindrical, pebble-covered ashtrays.  I must, frankly, so I do.

And hey!  There's even a little bench nearby.  So I can sit in solitude, read, and gradually kill myself in the pleasant sunshine without interruption, with the exception of the occasional employee coming or going through the side door.  Seems like a good deal to me.

As the week passes, I slowly come to realize the downside of being the only smoker at a particular company, namely that all of the cigarette butts in the ashtray are yours by default.  This is only a problem if you happen to be slacking and taking eleven breaks per day, which I happen to be doing.  Suddenly, I become very self-conscious about the whole thing.  What if my supervisor walks by the ashtray in the afternoon, and sees nine butts in there?  She'll know I'm abusing my allotted breaktime.  Hmm, this is no good.  I decide I'd better take fewer breaks and cut back on the whole smoking thing.

Ha ha!  No.  I actually decide I just need to get rid of the butts somewhere other than the ashtray.  This itself may turn out to be a challenge.  I can't pitch them into the parking lot because, being the only smoker, it will again be obvious who is responsible.  I suppose I could bury them somewhere, but with my luck, the gardener will decide to plant a new shrub right where I chose to hide my filters, and he'll unearth the whole mess before I'm done with this assignment.

Luckily, a solution presents itself.  The standing ashtray is not just an ashtray after all!  I have cleverly spotted a round hole in one side.  It must double as a trash can.  I decide that if my butt-count gets too high during the day, I'll dispose of the evidence in the trash.  Perfect.  My intensely paranoid delusions (that everyone is watching my every move as if they had nothing better to do with their time) have been soothed.  Problem solved.

Incidentally, the reason I'm able to take so many breaks is that the entire building consists of marketing people, and marketing people are always in meetings with each other, drawing on oversized pads of paper and pretending they actually have useful lives.  About the only thing I do is schedule these meetings for them, which only takes a few minutes in the morning, and create PowerPoint presentations for them, which only takes a few minutes in the evening.  A few phone calls, a couple pie charts, and the rest of the day I'm just a tourist in flavor country.

Hell, I even start having my lunches out there, on the bench, which I've come to think of as my bench.  Next to my ashtray.  In my sunshine.  Sure, employees come and go through the door, maybe say a word or two to me, but no one ever stops or sits down.

Today, I head out the side door, eat my lunch, and enjoy a smoke, noting that there are already four filters present from my morning's dalliances.  So, I grind my cigarette out in the ashtray, pitch the butt into the little trash-hole, and sit down to read for the remainder of my lunch break.  It's a simply beautiful day.  The sun is shining, the birds are chirping, there's a nice cool breeze blowing, the smell of smoke in the air... ahhhh.  Splendid.  Although.  I'm not.  Actually.  Smoking.  Right now.

I look up from my book and note, with no small amount of horror, that smoke is POURING FROM THE TRASH HOLE IN THE ASHTRAY. Oh no!  No!  Oh no no NO!  Fire.  FIRE!  FIRE THERE!  THERE FIRE!  ME DID!  ME MAKE FIRE!!

Genetic memory, and I mean total genetic recall, kicks in.  I am suddenly rocketed back along my genetic bloodlines, back through generations of my predecessors, back through time and history, to come upon a very hairy ancestor of mine.  He squats down in the earth with a hunk of wood between his feet and another in his hands, and rubs them together (the pieces of wood, not his hands and feet) for perhaps hours, until he, too, realizes: ME MAKE FIRE!!  And although we both feel an electric charge, a cold wash of adrenalin, and goose-bumps raising on our flesh, for him it means he is about to settle happily down and enjoy, for the first time in his life, a cooked hunk of wooly mammoth meat, while for me it means I may have begun a deadly fire that will char-broil a couple hundred marketing people.  Man, I could probably get a fine for doing that.

As well as my distant genetic past, my immediate genetic future springs to life before my eyes.  The building evacuating.  The fire trucks arriving.  Dozens of big burly men pouring out of the trucks like clowns.  Hoses, ladders, news helicopters, eyewitness accounts... and me.  Me, on the news, stammering apologies above a graphic reading: "Temp; Careless Smoker."

Luckily, I have an excellent instinctive response to crisis, so I run away just as fast as my little legs will carry me.  ME RUN AWAY!  But wait!  I can't run away!  Shit, I'm the only smoker in the damn building, it'll be obvious who started that fire.  And I haven't gotten my timecard signed yet.  Plus, y'know, people could die and stuff.  I have to put it out.  And I shall!  ME MAKE FIRE STOP!!

I dash inside the building and into the company cafeteria.  There are two employees sitting at a table with their backs to the window.  Behind them, I can see the column of smoke rising.  Cripes.  They look up at me and I nod casually, although I am so filled with adrenalin that my head bobs up and down so quickly it probably looks like I'm viciously head-butting an invisible attacker.  I walk past them to what I hope will be my salvation:  the water cooler.  The only cups, I notice, are those little conical paper ones that hold about a teaspoon of water.  Although I'd prefer to drag the entire water jug outside, it might appear a little odd to the folks sitting there, so I settle for filling up two of the pointy paper cups and walk back to the door.  I want to run but force myself to walk, though I shuffle my feet so quickly I practically start another fire on the carpet.  Once outside, I dump the pitiful amount of water into the trash, then crumple up the paper cones and toss them in, then stand there for a moment, wondering why I've just thrown paper cups into a trash fire.  This is just a guess, but it's probably because I'm a complete idiot.  ME IDIOT!

I speed-walk back inside for more water, and find that, yes, there is only one little paper cone left.  I fill it to the brim, slide across the cafeteria floor like Gumby, giving another reassuring power-nod to the folks sitting by the window, dash outside, and daintily spritz the fire again.  Making sure to hold onto the tiny dunce cap this time, it's back inside at forty miles per hour for another three droplets of water.  I repeat this about six or seven times, and then stop, because on the last trip one of the guys in the lunchroom asks "What, you putting out a fire or something?"

"HA HA HA HA," I say loudly.  Not actually laughing, but saying the words "HA HA HA HA."  I can only hope the Doppler effect made it sound a little more convincing.  At any rate, the fire seems to be safely smoldering.

Of course, a wet, smoldering fire, as you might guess, produces a hell of a lot more smoke than a cleanly burning one.  But, what can I do?  I sit down on the bench (the muscles and tendons in my body so rigid that it takes a few seconds for me to even bend properly to accomplish this) and await my fate.  The smoke is literally pouring out, thick and gray, and the wind is whisking it in a swirling column up into the sky.  You can probably see it for a mile.  The stink is awful; there must have been a cat or a possum or a wooly mammoth in that trash can.  Someone is bound to notice.  Someone will see.  Someone will come out of the building or return from lunch, and I'll be caught, lectured, ridiculed, shunned, docked, fired, arrested, or forced to create a PowerPoint presentation on fire safety.  That final thought almost causes me to flee on foot again, but I doubt I could even straighten my legs at this point.  I just sit there, whimpering softly, and wait.

But no one comes.  No one enters or leaves.  The smoke, after what seems like several plodding centuries, dissipates.

I stay out there for at least an hour past my lunch time, just staring at the ashtray, until I am completely certain the fire is out.  The rest of the day I am a nervous, sheepish wreck.  I'm an idiot.  I just want to go home and have a drink and put the whole thing behind me.

ME IDIOT.  ME WANT GO HOME.  ME WANT HAVE DRINK.

And, y'know, a cigarette.

**E-Maul**

Monday:

To: All employees(8:31am)

Subject: Moving Boxes

For those of you expecting moving boxes, they will be here this afternoon.

Thanks,

Chris

I write and send this e-mail to every employee of the Association of Neighborhoods on the instructions of my superior, a woman named Kathi. I am working for the A of N for a week, during which a large percentage of the company will be relocating to offices across the street. By the end of the week the entire office of about two-hundred employees will need to be packed up and ready to go.

I am pulling reception duty, but I also will be the center for moving information in what will no doubt be a confusing and frantic time. I am not worried, however, because the people I am working with seem well informed and the lines of communication in the office are so well structured as to be nearly telepathic in nature.

(Laughter subsides)

Ah yes. A fine idea. An entire company is moving so they bring in a stranger to coordinate it. Sometimes I wonder what the hell people are thinking.

Someone comes walking up. "Hi. The moving boxes will actually be here this morning," says Someone, who I think I met earlier but I’m not sure. "I saw you sent an e-mail."

"Oh. Well, Kathi told me they’d be here in the afternoon and that I should send an e-mail about it."

"No, they’ll be here this morning. Can you send another e-mail so people can get an early start?"

"Sure."

To: All employees(8:51am)

Subject: Moving Boxes

Correction: The moving boxes will be here this morning.

Thanks,

Chris

Hours slowly pass while random employees harass me about the lack of boxes. "Why aren’t the boxes here? The e-mail said they’d be here!"

"Yes... someone told me they’d be here."

"Who?"

Passing the buck is second nature to me, but it’s harder when you don’t know the name of the person you are trying to blame.

"Uh... Someone. Mr. Someone, I think his name was."

One o’clock. Boxes! Finally! A whole lot of boxes. Stacks of them. Stacks and stacks and... stacks.

"Where do you want these?" the delivery guys ask.

Where indeed? Where the hell can I fit these? I don’t want to clutter up the lobby. I run back and check the mailroom. Looks like there’s space behind the copier and against the wall. I show the delivery guys where to put them.

Kathi walks by. I happily point out the boxes. "Send out another e-mail," she says. "Make sure you tell everyone they’re in the mailroom."

To: All employees(1:19pm)

Subject: Moving Boxes

The moving boxes have arrived. You can pick them up in the mailroom.

Thanks,

Chris

By the time I’ve sent the e-mail out the delivery guys have finished. I sign their clipboard and sit down. One less thing to worry about.

Someone walks up, the same Someone, in fact, that told me the boxes would be here this morning.

"I see the boxes arrived," Someone says. "But you can’t keep them in the mailroom. I think it’s a fire hazard stacking them up against the copier like that, and besides, it’ll block people from the extra paper."

"Oh," I say. "Where should I put them?"

"The supply room down the hall. The key is in your desk."

Great. Now I have to lug a thousand boxes into the tiny supply room, which is roughly the size of a tiny supply room, only smaller. All this while watching the phones and the front desk.

An hour later, exhausted and smelling like sweat and boxes, I am finished. I collapse in my chair and retrieve the 18 or so cranky messages from the voice mail. About this time people begin to show up asking where the promised boxes are. After all, they’re not in the mailroom.

To: All employees(2:32pm)

Subject: Moving Boxes

The moving boxes are now located in the supply room down the hall from the

mailroom.

"The supply room is locked! How am I supposed to get in there?" a woman screeches in my face.

To: All employees(2:44pm)

Subject: Moving Boxes

If you need a key for the supply room, please see me at the front desk.

Chris

Kathi re-appears a moment after I have sent the last message. "We’re going to keep the supply room unlocked until the move is over. It’ll just be easier."

To: All employees(2:48pm)

Subject: Moving Boxes

The supply room will be unlocked for the rest of the week. No key is needed.

It seems like the matter should be settled. The boxes are here, they are accounted for, and everyone knows where they are, and can access them. The end.

"I can’t get into the supply room! It’s filled with boxes!" Another shrill, harpy-like woman. The place is lousy with them.

"Ah... ah... what did you need, maybe I can get-"

"I need a pen!" she says, brandishing a pen at me.

To: All employees(2:59pm)

Subject: Moving Boxes

The subject has been brought up that the boxes are blocking access to the supplies in the supply room. As an alternative, may I suggest taking the elevator to top floor, opening a window, and jumping out of it.

Thanks,

Chris

Okay, I don’t really write that one. I just give the woman all of my pens, splash her with holy water, and send her on her way. But another matter soon erupts.

"Where are the labels?"

Labels?

"There are supposed to be labels. For the boxes."

I call Kathi. She says she’ll call the box company and get some labels sent over. They should be in tomorrow morning, she says.

To: All employees(3:02pm)

Subject: Moving Boxes & Labels

For those of you looking for labels, they will arrive tomorrow morning.

Thanks,

Chris

Mr. Someone shows up again a few minutes later. "I’ve got the labels," he says, handing me a thick envelope. "They were on my desk all day. I’m surprised you didn’t ask me for them."

I still don’t know who this guy is or why he is determined to destroy my life. Glowering, I snatch the labels from him.

To: All employees(3:11pm)

Subject: Moving Labels & Boxes

The labels have been located. They are in the mailroom with the boxes.

To: All employees(3:12pm)

Subject: Moving Labels & Labels

Correction: The labels are in the *supply* *room*, not the *mailroom*. With the boxes.

Sorry.

Kathi arrives momentarily. She holds the labels in her hands and shakes them at me. "You can’t keep these in the supply room," she says.

"Why?" I almost scream.

"They need to be given to the move coordinators for each department. They will allot them to the employees."

To: All employees(3:18pm)

Subject: Boxing Labels & Moving

The labels are no longer in the mailroom with the boxes. They are now in the possession of the move coordinator for your department.

Thanks,

Chris

To: All employees(3:19pm)

Subject: Boxing Movies & Ladles

Correction: The labels are no longer in the *supply room* with the boxes. They are *not* no longer in the *mailroom* with the boxes. They were *never* in the mailroom. Well, the *boxes* were in the mailroom, briefly, but the *labels* never were.

Thanks,

Chris

Despite astronomical odds, Monday actually ends. Shoulders slumped, ego battered, I slink off to catch the bus. I can only imagine what the average employee at the Association of Neighborhoods thinks of me. And another thought hits me as I take my seat next to the man with the rat on his shoulder: it’s one thing to get numerous e-mails from some dope scattered throughout the day, but what about someone on vacation? Those e-mails will be stored in their system. What will it look like when they finally open their e-mailbox and get them all at once?

Probably something like this essay.

Tuesday:

When I get to my desk in the morning, Someone is waiting for me. He is smiling.

To: All employees(8:05am)

Subject: Moving Boxes & Labels

We are out of boxes. Someone told me there will be more arriving tomorrow morning, or this afternoon, or possibly yesterday evening. They will be located next to the labels (which will not be there) in the mailroom or maybe the supply room, which will not be locked but for which I will have the key.

To repeat: At this very moment in time, right now, we are out of boxes.

I hit send just as the delivery man steps out of the elevator with an armload of boxes.

Another day begins.

**Going Down**

It's Wednesday morning and I arrive for the third day of my current temp job. Five or six people get on the elevator with me, we all punch our respective floor buttons, and begin to rise. The bell rings and the doors open, and I step out.

Sometimes when elevator-riding, I just get out when the door opens, regardless of what floor I pressed.  In this case I get out on the fourth floor, one level below my intended destination.  Were there not a crowd of people already in the elevator, no doubt looking at the back of my head as I stand there, and also an entire office of strangers who have looked up from their desks and are staring at me, I would simply jump back into the elevator before the doors shut, and ride up to five. But I cannot do this, of course: I would look like a fool. So I just stand there while the elevator closes behind me and takes itself, and the uncaring bastards inside, to the next floor.

I have to do something. I confidently turn right and begin walking with the air of a man who has important business here on the fourth floor, and lo and behold, I am saved! A drinking fountain! Right in front of me! Actually, I have walked halfway past it and am forced to execute a sharp yet completely believable and casual looking ninety-degree right hand turn, and then I bend over and take a drink from the ice-cold waters of the fountain. Not only does this give me a reason for being on the fourth floor (for everyone knows the water on the fourth floor is the tastiest in the building), but as I drink I have also cleverly given myself time to plan my next move.

My lips are numb and my stomach swollen with water when I finally leap back into action. I can't wait any longer; my first plan (an earthquake swallows the building and therefore relieves me of my embarrassing predicament) has failed to come to fruition. I can't drink any longer either, due to the laws of nature. I stand upright, wincing at the stiffness of my back, and then spot my salvation. The stairs! Of course! I lurch, stomach gurgling and body temperature a full ten degrees lower, into the stairwell. I've done it! I made a mistake on the elevator yet covered it with the cool nonchalance that has become my trademark. I'm certain nobody thought anything unusual about a guy getting off the elevator, drinking from the water fountain for thirty-eight minutes, then stumbling into the stairwell.

 Bloated yet happy, I climb to the fifth floor and my plan dissolves as I spy a combination-code panel on the fifth floor door. Ruin.  I was never given the combo.  Defeated, I uncomfortably descend the stairwell back to ground level. The fourth floor door has a code panel too, but even if it didn't, I just can't picture going back in and waiting for the elevator. People might think I was weird.

Reaching the first floor, I leave the stairs and ride up in the elevator again. It opens on four and I press myself flat against the side of the compartment to allow someone to get off and for no other reason than that.

Moments later on five, I go straight to the office restroom. There's an awful stink in it. I mean, abysmal. Breathing through my mouth, I get rid of a great deal of fourth floor fountain water, wash my hands, and perform some other non stink-producing activities. I do these things as quickly as I can, not just because I hate smelling stinking smells (although I do), but because I know exactly what is going to happen next. And since I am me, and since this is my life, just as I am leaving, it happens: a man I recognize as the big boss of the office walks in to the restroom.

His nose immediately wrinkles and his face blanches as he gets a whiff of the smell, and then he looks accusingly at me. I want to explain the situation or defend myself, but what can I say?

"I didn't make that stink" or "Boy, it sure is stinky in here due to someone other than myself who was in here previous to my own presence in the lavatory" both reek of guilt, pardon the pun. So I just dart out of the restroom, knowing that the big boss, having a million other important responsibilities, will immediately return to his office and conduct a conference call with all of the office managers, to discuss the foulness of my stank. Into the office files goes my name, followed by the word stinkyboy, which is faxed to all the major business in the hemisphere.

The end of the week. I'm finishing up a game of FreeCell when my boss approaches. "I wanted to talk to you," she says, "about the awful stink you made in the restroom." Actually, she asks me about my ambitions and career goals, and suggests I come with her to the Human Resources Department. "I can show you around, and introduce you to people," she offers. "Maybe you can find some job prospects."

"Sure," I say. "Thanks."

"Let's go," she says. "Human Resources is on the fourth floor."

"Oh, you know what?" I say. "I've already been there."

**“T” is for Temp**

**A Not My Desk Mystery**

It was a gray, blustery day in the city.  The cigarette smoke was torn from my mouth like the jet-stream of Cessna Skyhawk.  Except that a Cessna Skyhawk doesn't have jets, it's a turboprop.  So that doesn't really work.

I'm a temp.  It's what I do. But it's not all I do.

I also steal office supplies.  But that's not all I also do.  I also make analogies that don't really work.  But I think we just covered that.

But I also also solve murders.

Call me a P.I.  Call me a sleuth.   Call me a gumshoe, because I often step in gum.  I step in dogshit a lot, too, now that I think about it.  If they ever want to find life on other planets, they should just drop me off in a spacesuit, and within thirty seconds I'll have stepped in some steaming alien scat.  I step in things.  It's what I do.  Also.

But I'd stepped into something bigger and squishier than I ever had before at my current temp job.  I'd stepped into a little something called...

...murder.

His name was Brett Worthington.  He was young, 23, and a high-level executive.  His net worth: $790 million.  He had been found strangled in his enormous office at 2:26pm this afternoon.

Strangled.  So, I knew the how.  Now I needed to know the why, and the who, and the how.  Oh, wait, I already knew the how.  Oh, and when I say who, I'm referring to the killer, not to Worthington, since I knew him.  He was the dead guy.  So, to sum up, I needed to know the why and the who and the how -- ah, I did it again.  Man, I need coffee.

I examined Worthington's neck.  He'd been strangled by someone possessing freakish strength.  But not freakish brains, provided I'm using "freakish" as a synonym for "abundant" or "ample".  The killer, in his haste, had left evidence.  Whoever had killed Worthington had done it with copier toner on his hands, as evidenced by black smudges on Worthington's neck.  I knew that when I found the toner... I'd find the killer.  Provided he was still hanging around with the toner, that is.  I can't imagine why he'd be doing that, but it would really help me out if he was.

I questioned Worthington's secretary, one Janet Nonnenmocher.  After I asked her a few preliminary questions, and made fun of her name for a bit, I asked her what she knew about the murder.

According to her, she last saw Worthington standing in his office at 2:14 that afternoon, practicing his golf swing while discussing his stock options in a loud voice over his cell-phone headset.

Poor bastard.  He was just asking to get murdered.

She said she'd received a call from Marketing, and that a temp was on his way over to deliver some PowerPoint presentations.  She had left her desk shortly to retrieve some e-mails Worthington has asked her to print out.

Yeah.  He was begging for it, definitely.

When she came back, the presentation was on her desk and her boss was dead.

I scowled.  All signs pointed to the temp.  I hated to see a fellow temp get mixed up in something like this, but still, I had a job to do, and that job was typing up stuff for a guy with carpal tunnel syndrome.  But who the hell wants to do that crap?  I headed over to Marketing to pick up the trail.

I examined the desk the temp had been sitting at.  Uncomfortable chair, no space for his jacket or backpack, his computer monitor facing the office so he couldn't possibly check his e-mail or play FreeCell during the day... sure, that would have made him mad... but what was it that pushed him over the edge?

I tried to put myself in the killer's head, like the detectives do in the movies.  The frustration, the discomfort, the isolation... I knew it all too well.  Plus, he'd had an incident with the copier that left him with toner on his hands.  That always pisses me off.  As I thought about this tense loner, this temp gone bad, a picture began to form in my head.  It was a picture of Christina Ricci wearing nothing but my black mesh Mets Jersey.  I filed it away for later.

Then, I spotted it.  There.  In the trash.  And suddenly it was all clear.  The temp's supervisor had bought a big, greasy, onion-covered burger for lunch, eaten half of it, and chucked it in the trash, right next to where the temp had to sit all day.  The smell of onions and congealing cheese and grease, wafting up at him all afternoon... it was the final straw.  I'm not saying he had a right to snap and kill someone.  Okay, I am saying he had a right to snap and kill someone.  But he should have at least gotten his timecard signed first.

I was close, now.  I had evidence.  I had motive.  I had a watch that read 4:58pm.  Damn, I had a bus to catch.  The case would have to wait.  I don't miss syndicated reruns of The Simpsons, murder or no murder.

On the way out the door, I got my timecard signed.  Then I stopped in the restroom and washed the toner off my hands.

**Printer of My Discontent**

Temporary, my ass. I feel like I've worked here forever.

I speak of my current job at an environmental control office, which has been extended to a period of three weeks, the second of which I am now plodding through with a dull expression and a lackadaisical attitude. My work here has not become even slightly more interesting, and I spend a great deal of time sending e-mail to employees I don't know in hopes they'll write me back.

This is done under the pretense of a supposed mistake: I send a random employee a file via e-mail and attach a note asking them to look it over and get back to me. A few moments later, I send them another e-mail asking them to disregard the previous e-mail, explaining that I had made a mistake, I had meant to send it to someone else, and I apologize, blah, blah, blah. This clever ruse is perfect for ensnaring unsuspecting employees into sending me an e-mail that says something like: "Hey, no problem." Or, "It happens to the best of us." Or maybe, "That's okay, these e-mail systems can be tricky, why don't we become friends and e-mail each other several times throughout the day, thereby forging a relationship that does not require actually meeting each other and providing you with something to do when you're not entering data into Pollution Control Facility Certificate forms."

I've applied this brilliant technique several times, though so far I've gotten only one response, which read: "Message Undeliverable." I think it's a good start. If I can figure out who Sys.Admin is, I'll have a brand new friend.

Obviously, I'm a bit lonely here. Without a phone, I find I actually miss talking to random idiots, and only one or two people a day come near my cubicle. Even then, it's usually just to hunt for a binder among the thousands that surround my desk.

After I take a break, a man gets on the elevator with me on the first floor and says "Hi." Eager for even meaningless small-talk, I return the greeting while nonchalantly leaning over and pushing every single floor button to prolong the ride and therefore increase the chances of a lengthy conversation. After a long, slow, jerky ride up to 14 he gets off without having said another word to me and looking annoyed for some reason. I ride back down to 5 alone and confused. How could I have handled that better?

I have spent the rest of the day manipulating data for an twenty-two page report, the subject of which is not important (at least, its not important to me), and now, finally, I am finished. I press the print button and stroll over to the printer to collect my masterwork and hand it in to the boss, who will hopefully allow me to spend the rest of my day trying to figure out how to change the icons on my computer into amusing cartoon characters.

The printer I use is down the hall, and boy, is it a beauty. It has several paper feeds, including one for letter sized, legal, fancy letterhead, and envelopes. Its also amazingly fast, prints with outstanding quality, and is almost completely silent when running. I’ve gotta hand it to the designers, they’re geniuses! They should get some kind of award or something.

The printer is also in the center of the office where there is usually a collection of dorky office guys who stand around with their hands in their pockets, peeking over the cubicle wall of the one cool guy of the office, and trying to engage him in conversations about cars or the cool guy's girlfriend. The cool guy I have never actually seen, because he never leaves the cubicle, preferring to actually work, I suspect, unlike the dorky guys, who stand around all day doing what I just said they do.

Today, however, there are no dorky guys to be seen, for the obvious reason that in their place are standing a collection of power guys. I call them power guys because they radiate the stuff, and spend most of their time in the conference room that has glass walls so you can see how important and powerful the power guys are when they are having a conference.

In case you’re wondering, this is not all extraneous information, designed to take up space and segue into another amusing tale of office mishaps. No. This is completely relevant information designed to take up space and segue into another amusing tale of office mishaps.

So I walk down the hall to my destination, warily eyeing the power guys and hearing the big beautiful printer warming up and getting ready to betray me, which it does immediately, by printing my carefully scrutinized and meticulously formatted twenty-two page report entirely on envelopes.

Envelopes, for those of you who don’t know, are cleverly folded and glued bits of paper that you put ordinary sheets of paper into. In order to fit the ordinary sheets of paper into the envelopes, you generally need to fold the sheets into thirds. What I’m getting at here, basically, is that envelopes are about one-third the size or an ordinary sheet of paper, and that for every one page of my report, the printer will need to discharge three envelopes. By employing a scientific calculator, we can arrive at the conclusion that the printer will crank out exactly sixty-six envelopes, over a period of time that is beginning to seem equivalent to the Age of Enlightenment.

Do I need to explain my hell? Do I really? My report is being printed on envelopes. With a gang of power guys just inches away, I feel fresh perspiration begin to trickle down my back. What should I do? Can I run back to my computer to stop the printing process, or will I find that the entire document has gone through? And when I get back, will the power guys be ankle deep in envelopes, each containing a third of a page of my report? What if, while I’m casually walking down the hall at forty-five miles per hour, they start looking at the envelopes? What will they say? Nice margins? I don’t think so. No, I can’t leave, I can’t allow them to see what a complete and utter moron I am. My heart yearns for the dorky guys, if only they were here, we might all be able to share an annoying, honking laugh over this. But power guys never think this kind of thing is funny. Power guys are the embodiment of pure evil.

I am beginning to worry, because hours have passed and the envelopes are still coming out. Ka-chunk. Ka-chunk. Why, when you print envelopes, does the printer make such a loud noise? Is it really necessary? Whoever designed this printer should be shot. Its slow as hell and damn noisy. Power guy number three is looking at me, I know it, probably wondering if I am planning to mass-mail the entire Asian population. Power guys would never normally even so much as look at me, but I think, like some animals, they can instinctively smell embarrassment.

Now the stupid rotten doody printer is running out of envelopes. I can’t believe I actually have to refill the envelope tray. I compare it to a situation where someone is shooting at you, and you helpfully offer them a handful of bullets. But what else can I do? If I just let the tray empty, the printer queue will stack up behind my document and the entire office will be unable to print until someone feeds in some more envelopes… and then my secret will be out. Nor can I turn the printer off, because any printing jobs that are waiting will be erased.  I wonder how I can yank the cables out of the wall, pick up the printer, throw it through the fifth-floor office window, and make it look natural.

Finally, finally, the last envelope has been spat. Gathering up the twenty-two inch stack of envelopes in straining arms, I head back to my desk. A thought enters my head, and I walk instead to my bosses office. "Here’s the report," I screech, dumping the sea of envelopes onto her desk and floor. "Need it mailed anywhere?" Then I bray freakish laughter.

Actually, I don’t do any of that. I just go back to my desk and work out a chart of all the recycling bins in the office, and how many envelopes they’ll each hold.

**See Spot; Run.**

I was flipping through a copy of Sports Illustrated while waiting to get a haircut, and I read an article about sports team mascots, like the San Diego Chicken and the Phillies Phanatic.  Apparently, these folks get paid quite a bit to don furry, huge-headed costumes and run around the stadium, annoying fans, players, and officials, and I thought, hey, why not me?  I'm small enough for the costumes, and I often embarrass myself in public anyway.  This way, I'll be getting paid, plus no one will be able to tell it's me.

Then I remembered:  I've already done it.  Sort of.

Years ago, I worked at a Barnes & Noble bookstore.  Every weekend, the supervisor of the children's department (or "juvie section," as it was lovingly called), would have a book-reading for the kids.  Children would pour into the store and someone would read a picture book to them and give them juice and cookies, which is fun for the kids and prepares them for similar events they will be subjected to years later, when they are confined to a retirement home.

Every so often, a costumed character (Clifford the Big Red Dog, Madeline, etc.) would attend these readings as well.  This was not a paid, professional costumed character, mind you.  The company owned these costumes and would send them from store to store for special events, and some random, unsuspecting, height-challenged bookseller would be forced to don the costume and make merry with the ankle-biters.  I'll give you 46 guesses who was tapped to play the role of Spot during the second week of his (the bookseller's, not Spot's) employment.

The Spot costume had a few separate pieces to it.  There was the body, which had a big padded tummy and went from the neck to the ankles, including the sleeves.  There were big furry gloves, and big furry feet that went on over my shoes.  And, there was the head, which was big enough to block three lanes of traffic.  It had an adjustable plastic strap inside that circled my own cartoonishly large head, kind of like what you find inside a construction hardhat.

According to the Sports Illustrated article I read, the people wearing the huge heads generally peer out through the character's gaping, happy mouth, which can be a danger to your eyes if a fan punches you in the kisser, which many apparently do.  I didn't have that problem, since Spot didn't have a mouth.  Spot had eyes, but they were above his huge yellow nose.  My human head was more or less inside Spot's nose, so to look through Spot's eyes, I had to look up, meaning I could only see the ceiling and the tops of my taller co-workers' heads.  It's disconcerting enough walking around wearing giant feet (ask any clown), and it doesn't help if you can't actually see them.  As a result, I wouldn't really be able to lope around the store like a real dog, I would have to be led around the store, like, well, a real dog.  I also wasn't sure how easy it would be to interact with children without actually being able to see them, unless, of course, someone took the time to attach them to the ceiling of the store, something you generally need a permit for.

I was told it was time, so I gathered my nerve, hitched up my stomach, and walked straight into a wall.  A couple of employees came over to assist me, and with one holding each hand, I was slowly led out onto the sales floor and toward the children's section in the back.  There were some cheers as I approached the unseen throng of kids, an excited chatter from the unseen throng of parents, and several fluorescent lightbulbs that needed changing in the ceiling.  Spot, the very opposite of a seeing-eye dog, had arrived!  Hi, kids!  Wherever the hell you are!

I felt little arms around my waist as happy children began to hug me, and I turned, trying to locate the tiny bodies I couldn't see.  My elbow connected solidly with something hard, which I presumed from the resulting cry to be a child's skull.  "Oops," I said, forgetting that I wasn't supposed to talk.  I waved my hands around slowly in front of me, seeking mops of hair to good-naturedly tousle, miscalculating and jabbing another child in the eyes with my big, furry fingers.  More arms linked around my legs and I pitched forward, backhanding some poor, trusting kid across the mouth as I tried to keep my balance.  I decided to stop moving, and hesitantly tried out a tender hug, only to find that I was tenderly hugging one of my co-workers, and then, even more tenderly, a *Sweet Valley High* spinning display rack.

"Time for the story!" someone blessedly announced, and I took a step forward, my knee encountering a small, soft, vulnerable stomach.  I winced and stepped backwards, wishing I could apologize, and stepped on another child's foot.  At least, I think it was a child's foot, it could have been a child's neck for all I knew, a child I had knocked over and incapacitated with a swinging forearm or elbow.  I felt like Godzilla, a blind, spastic, apologetic Godzilla, unleashed upon a Tokyo full of china.

With the help of about a dozen of employees and several volunteers, I made it to the tiny little chair I was assigned, and awkwardly planted my big fuzzy ass on it.  The story began, and I found that while sitting, I could actually see some of the children through the eyes in the top of my head, provided I leaned forward far enough, as if Spot were suffering some sort of intense abdominal distress.  I tried to act excited about the story as it was read and the pictures were shown, but this was difficult, since I was having to fend off a young boy who seemed intent on pulling off one of my feet.  I also saw that none of the children were even looking at the book that was being read to them.  They were looking at me.  Enthralled.  Devoted.  As Spot, I was a God unto them.  I was their Tom Cruise, their Madonna, their Barry Bonds, their Tony Randall.  They knew I probably hung out with Snoopy and Odie and that I never returned Fred Basset's phone calls.  I was, for the first and probably the last time in my life, "cool."  I was the shit.  They'd tell their friends about me later, over milk.  They loved me.  I could have led them anywhere, to war, to freedom, even to the ends of the earth, if the phrase "Follow me to the ends of the earth, kids," could be transmitted in mime with giant furry three-fingered hands.

I also realized I didn't know what to do with myself.  I was trying to emulate an incredibly happy dog, but how to do so without causing injuries to my rapt yet fragile audience?  I wanted to wag my tail, but since my costume butt was four times the size of the chair it was precariously resting on, it seemed a bad idea to frantically wiggle it back and forth.  I could wave my arms around, but I'd never heard anyone say "You can tell how happy a dog is by how much he waves his arms around."  I gave a few thumbs up, and clapped my paws (in surprise and delight) to my big hollow nose a few times, which made a big hollow thumping sound.  I also did the "I'm a champion" gesture, where you clasp both hands and move them back and forth on either side of your head, which no champion has ever done in the history of the universe.  Since my colossal nose prevented me from getting both hands around the sides of my head, the clasped-hands arm-moving bit might have come off as something a little crude.

This Spot book must have been written by James Michner, I surmised, as it seemed to be going on for hours.  The little boy who was tugging at my costume foot managed to pull part of it off, revealing my black Reebok sneaker, as I saw when I put Spot's head between Spot's legs, which was the only way I could see the sitting child and probably made the audience think that Spot was engaging in the sort of personal hygiene dogs do when you have company.  The boy looked up at me curiously, and I tried to playfully swat his hands away from my foot, missing and slapping him in the forehead because, weighted down by my cavernous head, I almost fell forward off my chair at the same time.  I fumbled to get my foot back on, a difficult task since I was wearing big gloves, working around a large padded gut, and couldn't actually see my foot unless I stuck it out straight, which made it impossible to reach as well as severely increased my chances of kicking a small child directly in the face (I think you need a permit for that, too).  At any rate, it didn't signify the behavior of a happy dog as much as it did the behavior of a dog with a considerable mental handicap.  It wouldn't have been so bad if the book was about Spot getting caught in a bear trap and trying to free his foot, as my actions might have appeared more relevant to the plot.

The story ended, finally, so I got out of my chair with all the grace of a woman late in her third trimester and waded back into the crowd of adoring children, generously dispensing head trauma, delivering fond blows to the midsection, and completely mowing down some of the slower kids with my adorable yet dangerously ungainly body.  Parents swarmed in to take pictures, and once more, tiny arms encircled my waist and legs while little hands yanked at my gloves and clutched dangerously close to Spot's personal regions.  I had a somewhat odd moment when I realized that I was actually smiling for these pictures, which was pointless due to my face being obscured by a giant yellow dog head.  I guess old habits die hard.

Most of the parents and children were filing out and heading for the emergency room, and I was led to the front door, where I waved goodbye in what I hoped was the direction of the parking lot.  Then, feeling I'd had enough, I was pulled into the back room by my co-workers to shed my canine wardrobe, and I returned, red faced and sweaty, to the front desk to sell books.

Something seemed wrong as I re-entered the sales floor, helped people find their books, rang up sales, and answered the phones.  Then it hit me.  The kids were now walking right by me without a second glance.  No one wanted to hug me or hold my hand.  No one wanted to take a picture with me.  No one wanted anything but to know where the latest Clive Cussler book was or to get something gift-wrapped.  I was no longer a celebrity, the star of a series of books that taught children how to read.  I had no child army to lead, no prepubescent acolytes to faithfully do my bidding.

Just a half-hour of adoration, and I already missed it.  I missed the rapt attention, the unconditional love, and the blinding fame.  Most of all, though, I missed the small children, and especially the gift of being able to punch, kick, and step on them, and get away with it.

**My Biggest Fan**

Sweltering.  Just way hot today.

These days, California is having rolling blackouts, due to the "power crisis."  Everyone has been told to do their part to conserve energy, particularly businesses.  Some seem to be taking it seriously, as I noticed while passing a Walgreens drugstore this morning.  There was a a sign in the window, declaring:

*Walgreens is conserving energy...*

***SO THAT THERE MAY BE ENOUGH FOR ALL***

Well, thanks, Walgreens, although you could have been a little less, I dunno, dramatic about it.  I mean, that makes it sound like small children in Djbouti are sitting glumly in their mud huts, when suddenly -- aaaaahhh-AAAAHHHHH!!!! -- all their appliances and television sets and air-conditioning units miraculously come to life, all thanks to Walgreens.

Anyway, we're not supposed to have to worry about this here in Alameda, the Jewel of the East Bay, because we actually have enough power to get by.  Alameda Power & Telecom never deregulated, and rates have not gone up like they have in most of the rest of the state.  Sure, for a while we were still subject to blackouts, but it was kind of like we're just playing along, humoring the rest of the state, kind of like when you play hide-and-seek with a really young child, one who doesn't know how to hide worth squat, and attempts to conceal himself behind, say, a bicycle rack or chain-link fence.  Anyway, recent restructurings in Alameda's Power Management Doohickybob have all but ensured that we won't even be affected by blackouts at all anymore.

Still, some businesses are trying to conserve, most noticeably the construction office I'm working in this week.  This effort by my employers is admirable and stupid.  This is a tiny little office, and they could have everything in here plugged in and running 24/7 and not so much as wobble the needles.

But someone got it into their pointy little head that we should conserve here at the office, so lights are constantly being switched off while people step out of their offices, even for just a moment, and rather than run the AC, windows and doors are opened, which is somehow supposed to keep things cool, an interesting theory since it's completely sweltering out.

I've sat here all day in a coma, both from the heat and lack of caffeine, because I dare not drink any hot coffee since I'm already uncomfortably warm.  My shirt is stuck to me, my pants are stuck to me, and since my job consists of calling architectural firms all day, the phone is stuck to me, specifically, my face.  Insects have taken advantage of the open doors and windows, and fly lazily all over the office, until the heat even gets to them, and they collapse and get stuck to me.

No one else seems to care about the heat.  The token big sweaty guy is sweatier (and stinkier) than ever, and he's not even complaining.  I'm not complaining either, not in so many words, although I make it a point to pick up a folder and flap it at my face whenever anyone walks by or talks to me, and I make noises like "phew" and "jeezsh" and "fhoo" in hopes they'll pick up the hint.  If there isn't a folder within reach, I'll grab anything to fan myself with.  A moment ago, I used one of those small-sized Post-It Notes.  I even fanned myself with a pencil at one point.  But my visual clues fall on deaf eyes.  I am the only one who this heat seems to be getting to.

Well, I've had enough.  It's time to take a stand.

I go into the construction shop and get a floor fan.  It's one of those big industrial deals, mounted on a heavy steel base.  I grab hold and pull, feeling my shoulder do something interesting as I try to pick it up.  I have to settle for dragging it alongside me, using my leg to help push it along the carpet.

Everyone watches as I struggle to move it through the office.  Fine, fine.  Let 'em watch.  They've driven me to this, in fact, I'm glad they're watching.  This'll get my point across.

After about five minutes of strenuous and awkward struggling, I get to the room I'm working in, completely burning up now from the effort, and try to find somewhere to plug it in.  The only available outlet is behind the door, and due to the incredibly short electrical cord that invariably comes on these things, I wind up having to stretch it more or less taut in front of the doorway.

I smirk when I realize that anyone entering the room will trip over the cord.  Fine, fine.  Serves you right for making me sweat.  My smirk slowly vanishes when I realize that that, let's face it, the person most likely to trip over it will be me.  I'm a spaz, and my odds are not improved by the fact that the lights in the office are out and I'd be stumbling around in pitch-darkness anyway.

Still, I'm willing to take the chance.  Besides, I can't not go through with the fan-plan now: everyone saw me dragging the thing through the office, it would look stupid if I didn't turn it on and use it.  I notice at this point that I've gotten sawdust on my pants; the fan is covered in it from being in the shop all the time.  I brush it off, or try to, but it's sticky and goopy, there's some kind of residue on it, some industrial adhesive or compound or whatever construction companies use to stick houses together.  I struggle with my pants for a while but give up and pretend it doesn't bother me.  *Hell, I got lots more pants at home,* my casual shrug informs my audience.

I turn on the fan, which goes, "rrrrrrRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR"

In the confines of the office, it roars like a hovercraft propeller.  Jesus, it's loud.  I peer at the dial, thinking it must be on the highest setting, but it's actually on the lowest.

"RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR"

It still seems to be powering up to full speed, getting louder and louder.  They must have known how loud this fan was, why didn't they say anything during the five minutes it took me to wrestle this thing in here?  Bastards.  Well, fine.

Over the din of the fan, another noise can be heard.  I turn and see that papers and plans and printouts are being brutally yanked from desktops and walls and bulletin boards and thrown all over the room.  Dislodged pushpins sail through the air like bullets as papers are yanked free, a small, framed picture on the desk tilts forward and then falls with a clack.  Not to mention the sawdust and sticky construction residue that was on the fan blades, it mushrooms forth, filling the swirling air with tiny, sharp, sticky particles.  Well, maybe some of the flies will be impaled, anyway.  Besides, I ain't turning this sucker off and dragging it back.  No way.

"RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR"

Kay.  Great.  I slowly sit down at the desk amid a storm of papers and flying wood chips, a frozen smile on my face.  Yes, this is just what I wanted.  Nice and cool now!  No problem!  'Zactly what I was hoping for!  I can get back to work!

Fighting the hurricane-force gales, I reach over and pick up the phone, dialing an architectural firm.  At first, the receptionist on the other end can't make out what I'm saying to her over the clamor, and then she can't make out what I'm shouting to her.  I finally just scream "Thank you!" and hang up.

Huh.  Maybe the fan wasn't such a hot idea.

**“A” is for Agent**

**Another Not My Desk Mystery**

The phone rang.  It was my temp agent.  She had a job for me.

Something was wrong.

I'm a temp.  It's what I do.  I also solve crimes.  Lately, what with the faltering economy, there had been more crimes than jobs, and lately, what with my schadenfreude, the crimes had been more pleasant to work on.

So, I was more than a little surprised to hear my temp agent offer me an actual position.

"It's only ten minutes from your house," she said.  "And, it pays well.  They won't expect anything from you.  You can wear jeans.  Occasionally, you may be asked to judge bikini contests. You don't have to be there until 11am every day.  And, you'll get all the cookies you can eat.  The address is -- YAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGG!!"

"How many A's in that?" I asked.  But there was no reply, just a click on the other end.

I hung up.  Looked like I had a case.  A case of the munchies, because all that talk about cookies had gotten me hungry.

It looked like I had another case, too.  A briefcase.  But that was nothing new.  I'm not even sure why I mentioned it.

In addition, it also looked like I had another other case, as well.  A case of... murder.

I hopped on a bus and told the driver to take me to the agency.  The driver reminded me that it was a bus, not a cab, and told me to stop hopping.  Fine.  We'd play things her way.  For now.

At the agency, I went up to my agent's office.  She was dead, all right.  Someone had strangled her with the phone cord.  On the wall, someone had written in blood, "Nice directions."

Underneath that, also in blood, it said, "What I mean by that is, temp agents are notorious for giving poor directions to temps for their assignments.  So temps spend a lot of time wandering around in frustration.  Which is why I killed her."

All signs pointed to a temp as the suspect.  Sad, but at the same time, amusing.  And before you think I had anything to do it, let me say I did not.  I'm not saying I didn't want to kill my agent.  I'm not even saying I never tried to kill her.  On several occasions.  She was wily, this one.  But she had let her guard down, and now she was paying for it.  In blood.  Oh, and in death, too.

I needed a list of temps whom she had assigned jobs for, so I walked into the Staffing Manager's office.  He was asleep on the couch.  Asleep?  Or dead?  No, asleep.  I wasn't surprised.  Not once, in all my years working for this agency, had I been able to get this guy on the phone.

I kicked the couch, and the Staffing Manager, Rick, looked up at me blearily.  Then he shot bolt upright, straightened his tie, and started blabbering at me.  "Sorry!  Sorry!  Welcome to the office!  Can I get you some coffee?  A bagel?  Some orange juice?"  He grabbed a bottle of O.J. from his desk and shoved it into my hands.

"Relax," I told him.  "I'm not a client.  I'm one of your temps."

"Oh, jeez," he said, grabbing the juice back from me.  "What the hell do you want?"

I told him I needed the list of temps my agent had been assigned.  He shuffled around in his papers, tossed me the list, and went back to sleep.

Typical.

I scanned the list.  There was one name that rang a bell.  I'd have to give this temp a visit.  I checked the address.  I knew the area.

Another bus ride later, I kicked open the door to the temp's apartment.  No one was home, it seemed.  The place was in disarray, it looked like someone had tossed the apartment.  Then it dawned on me.  This was my apartment.  No wonder that name had looked so familiar.

Then something else dawned on me.  I flagged down another bus.  I gotta remember to get a transfer this time.

Rick looked up blearily at me.  Oh, wait, I used blearily last time.  Ummm... groggily.  "Now what is it?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing.  I just need a question answered.  But it's a big question.  You know what I'm talking about."

He looked at me.  "How did you know I killed her?" he asked.

"Simple.  She was strangled.  But the message was written in blood.  So, whose blood was it?"

"It was--"

"That was a rhetorical question.  You seemed a little... tired, which is odd, since your job doesn't actually require you to do anything."  I picked up the bottle of orange juice from his desk and shook it.  "You have orange juice, a common beverage given to those who have recently given blood.  My guess is, you drained your own blood for the message, felt weak, and decided a nap and some O.J. would get you back on track.  Am I right?"

He didn't reply.

"That one isn't rhetorical."

"Oh.  Yes," he said.  "But I cleverly designed the message so it would seem like a temp wrote it!"

"Maybe a little too cleverly.  Temps are vague, lazy, and horrible at explaining things.  They would never leave such a concise message.  Something you, a staffing manager, would know, if you had ever talked to one or knew anything about them or dealt with them or thought about them.  So, before when I said 'Maybe a little too cleverly,' I really meant 'Not really all that clever.'  It was sarcasm."

"I see."

"Oh, and also, earlier in the story, I mentioned that she had let her guard down, and she wouldn't do that if a temp had been in her office, since temp agents hate and distrust their temps."

"I think everyone reading this gets the point."

"So," I said.  "I just have one question left that needs answering."

"Is that question... why?  Why did I do this horrible thing?"

"Of course not," I said.  "I couldn't care less.  The question is, what's the address of the job she was giving me when you killed her?  Sounded like a sweet assignment."

After obtaining the address from Rick, I had gotten on another bus, ready to start my new assignment.  Sadly, by the time I got there, they had filled it with another temp.  They just couldn't wait for me.  I explained to them I had gotten lost for three hours, but they didn't seem to care.

Rick had given me the directions.

Nice directions.

**Pencils Down**

Today I have an interview at a company that makes calling cards, those plastic cards you can get when you open a bank account or buy a stereo, that give you five minutes of free calls. After the five minutes have been used, I guess you throw the cards away or something. But hey, five minutes of free calls sounds like a good enough reason to mass produce millions of plastic, non-biodegradable cards that will stack up in our country's landfill like so much... sorry, I don't mean to preach. But why not just mail everyone in the country five bucks? Better yet, why doesn't everyone in the country mail me five bucks? What the hell is the matter with you people? Come on, it's only five measly bucks! (I am writing this as if I have a nation-wide distribution instead of just six people. It makes me feel better, okay?)

The office is a great deal further away than any of my previous jobs, and not accessible by train, so I am not too concerned about getting the job. In fact, the realization that I don't particularly want the job sets me at ease. I'm usually a bundle of nerves in an interview, dry-mouthed and sweaty-palmed, and as a result I generally make a poor impression: that of a shaky, malnutritioned quasi-human with poor verbalization skills and an odd habit of leaping out the nearest window if the interviewer turns his or her head. Today, though, I feel better. I don't want the job, so why should I care? Why should I be nervous? With no desire to work here and no expectations, I can remain calm, cool and collected, and easily come across as the extremely talented, almost terrifyingly smart, and, well, let's face it, drop-dead handsome individual that I am... which would probably guarantee me the job... which I don't want... so maybe there's a small flaw there.

But hey! If they offer the job, I can always turn it down, and if I do it with enough arrogance they will wonder what they could have done wrong to offend a charming guy such as myself. I mean, whoever they eventually get to fill the position would forever be in my shadow, or in the shadow of my legend, The Perfect Guy For The Job. Yeah. The six of you know what I'm talking about.

Anyway, the point I am making is that for the first time in my life, I feel confident walking into an interview. I arrive in the small office, barely managing to fit my confidence in the door with me, 'cause it's so huge and plentiful, and meet one of the women, named Cathy, who I'm supposed to interview with. She seems nice as I give her my resume and we exchange greetings. My greeting is, like, ten times more confident than hers. Maybe fifteen times. No, ten. About ten. Ten to twelve.

"Before we begin the interview," Cathy says, "you'll need to take a few tests."

Tests? Perfect! The way I feel right now, I could ace any little pathetic exam with my confidence tied behind my back (although it would take a vast amount of rope to do so, given the sheer enormity... well, you get it).

"It's pretty easy," she says. "You'll just have to answer some multiple choice questions."

I read the directions and it seems pretty straight forward. The sample question is "How many days in a week?" The choices are a) five, b) one, c) Dick Van Patten, d) seven. The paper is kind enough to supply the answer: "Trick question: the answer is not listed. The correct answer would be: Terry "Hulk" Hogan ."

This should be a piece of extremely confident cake. At the bottom of the page, I notice, is another paragraph. It says: "You will have one minute to answer as many questions as you can. You will probably not be able to answer them all, because you are probably really stupid. Do not begin until your instructor... um, instructs you to."

"So, do you understand the test?" Cathy asks. "Pretty easy, right?" I notice that she is brandishing a large and, I must admit, somewhat menacing stopwatch. Menacing in the way that it is about the size of a microwave oven, and has far more buttons than a stopwatch should have. It also has the look of one of those stopwatches that actually alters time, makes it run faster or slower according to its own selfish and evil needs. I'm guessing it will be running, um... faster during this test. But wait, what is this? Nervousness? It can't be! I'm Confident Boy! I don't care if I get this-

"So here's a pencil," Cathy says.

"Uh-"

My eyelid twitches almost imperceptibly. My confidence has spotted an interesting leaf in the parking lot and doesn't seem to be paying attention to what's going on.

Not that it matters. I don't want this job, so what does it matt-

"Ready?"

"Uh-"

"GO!!!" she shrieks, depressing a button on the stopwatch, a button so big it takes both her hands to move it. The stopwatch, instead of chirping out one of those harmless if slightly annoying "beeps," emits a resounding toll of doom, like a clock tower in a Dracula film.

"GO-GO-GO!!!" Cathy screeches, or perhaps it is merely her first cry rebounding off the walls of the office. I am suddenly charged with electricity, not the good kind of electricity that makes you feel energetic or excited or ready to take on the world or lift an automobile off a small child (or perhaps place an automobile on a small child, depending on your personal views of small children), but the bad kind of electricity that makes you feel like your genitals have been hooked up to a car battery. Not that I've ever done that. But I imagine it would feel like this: I can't move, and if I could move, it would only be to lean forward and vomit.

Somehow I manage to lean forward and, instead, open the booklet, which reveals a single column of multiple choice questions. It doesn't look too daunting: I imagine it would take me less than a minute of real time, but at least three and a half hours of evil stopwatch-speeded-up time. The fact that I can't quite remember how a pencil works, exactly, isn't helping things either.

1) How many weeks in a year?

Weeks in a year, weeks in a year, how the hell should I know? I frantically choose: b) New Orleans.

2) What is the second month before June?

Second month before June, lets see... January, March, April... wait, forgot February. January, February, March, October, Thursday, Libra... I- I don't know! I just don't know! I choose: a) Choco-riffic

3) What color is something that is green?

What am I, frikkin' Einstein here? Green? What the hell is green? I make a smudgy mark in the answer box, the equivalent to a written whimper.

4) Define Planck’s quantum principle. The idea that light (or any other classical waves) can be emitted or absorbed only in discreet quanta, whose energy is proportional to their frequency. At least some of them are easy.

5) Look behind you! A bear!

Oh my God, it's a bear! A bear! Help! I... wait, there's no bear behind me at all! Confound this test!

The test goes on like this, only worse, until the stopwatch fires off a cruise missle to indicate that a minute has elapsed. I sit back in my chair, completely shaken, my shirt sopping with sweat, my confidence somewhere in Cape Horn by now. Amazingly, I did manage to answer all but one question. A line of text at the bottom of the page reads: "I didn't think so. Stupid."

"Now the next test-" Cathy begins.

Another test. I don't believe this. This one is an exercise in comparing numbers. There will be two columns of numbers, and I am supposed to look at the numbers in the first column and determine if they match the numbers in the second column. If they match, I am supposed to make a check mark. If not, leave it blank. Again, I am given an example.

33    33 (check)

34    34 (check)

35    96637 (don't check, stupid.)

Pretty simple.

"GO-GO-GO-GO-GO!!!"

I tear the booklet open as the stopwatch sounds another air-raid siren. What I see are pages and pages of columns. Four minutes for this test. I dive painfully in to the first set of numbers.

6    6

Well, they look the same. But are they really? It could be a trick. If this test thinks I've forgotten the bear incident, it's severely underestimated me. I stare at the first number, then scrutinize the second.

6    6

Wait. Wait a second. That second six is not a six at all! It’s an inverted nine! Ha ha! Did this test really think I wouldn't notice something so obvious as that? That's one box I won't be checking!

Time for the second set. The first column shows a '94', while the second shows a detailed drawing of a walrus wearing what appears to be mid-1800's style dress. Well... I'll come back to that one...

The third set of numbers look like this:

402    420

Different! Ha! Easy! Wait! No! I mean, they're the same numbers. Just in different order. So, really, they're the same. Right? In my panicked state, I can't remember what sort of differences I am supposed to be looking for. Different digits? Different order? Blast! I quickly turn back to the instructions page, yet the test has some sort of molecular control over the ink on the first page, and all the writing has merged into a single blob that spells out S...T...U...

I don't need to read the rest. Or do I?

P...I...D.

Nope, I didn't.

I can feel the seconds ticking away much faster than your normal, average, non-hellspawned seconds do. I suddenly realize that in the first question, that first six might also be an inverted nine, which would mean that they are the same… but then again, that second six is starting to look like a real six… Now I've changed my mind a few times, checking and erasing and checking and erasing until there's just a ragged hole in the paper, through which I write a check on the desk with my shaking pencil.

Next row.

45    45    45

What the hell is this? A third column? Damn this infernal test! Did the directions say anything about a third column? I flip back to the front page. The ink has rearranged itself, this time to say: This sucks, doesn't it? It sucks worse than when you are filling out a job or bank application, and you get to the address part and you put the city, state, and zip code in the box marked City before you notice that there are separate boxes for the State and Zip and then you don't know if you should cross out the State & Zip and write them in their correct boxes or just leave them where they are, or don't cross them out but write them in their correct boxes anyway which is less messy but still looks really stupid 'cause now you've written them in twice.

I have to agree. This is much worse than that.

I decide that I need to take some action, so I start crying in a really pitiful way, but it's too late: my eardrums squirt blood as the Satan's Stopwatch fires a sonic boom off to indicate that my four minutes are up.

I didn't get offered the job.

I don't even remember how the rest of the interview went.

I was too nervous.

**The Hot Seat**

I am working this week in the accounting department of a large company. Lame. I don’t know what I was thinking, taking an accounting job. Numbers have never been my thing, really... I mean, I still count on my fingers. And if I want to count to twenty, I have to take my shoes and socks off. To count to twenty-one, well… you know.  I have to use my calculator.

I don’t know what you were thinking. Perv.

I get back from a record thirty-seven minute break and notice that my in-box is overflowing with a huge pile of boring work. I let out a deep, mournful sigh, but unfortunately, I neglect to open my mouth during this act, and, as a result, the sigh is forced out through my pressed lips. If you've ever sighed through pressed lips yourself, you will notice that the air escaping and the flapping of the lips, against their will, sounds remarkably like a long, loud fart.

Making a farting noise with your mouth is not always a problem; often, you can even get a few laughs from such an sound. Of course, you can also get laughs by actually farting, but unless you are surrounded by close friends or loved ones, I wouldn't recommend it. You might get a few titters, but for the most part, people won't embrace the event the way they would about, say, a joke involving a rabbi and horny muskrat.

Most of the time when farting in the workplace there will be only silence, which is the worst reaction of all, not just in terms of embarrassment, but in the uncertainty factor. Did they hear? Do they know? Will they tell? The next several minutes will be spent self-consciously searching the faces of those present for any clue that they heard the offending emission.

Anyway.

I make this noise with my mouth, this loud fart noise. I am not alone; the woman I share the office with is sitting at her desk with her back to me. This is bad. If she did hear the mouth-fart, she definitely didn't see the manner in which it is produced, which means she probably will go ahead and assume that it came out of the offensive end of my torso (okay, the more offensive end of my torso) and not my mouth.

This is one of those lame situations wherein one can't say what one really wants to say: a simple statement that would clear everything up. I can't simply say, "I didn't fart, that came out of my mouth," or "That was a sigh, it just sounded like a fart." It's just not possible to say that to someone you don't know very well. The way I see it, I only have one option. I must show her that the fart noise came from my mouth.

This is going to be difficult, I know, because she is still not facing me, and I'm not certain that a barrage of fart noises coming from directly behind her is going to make her turn around. If she is an extremely polite type of person, she may pretend not to notice. She also may simply bolt from the office, in which case I'd have to follow her while making the fart noise and, well, you can just imagine the phone call to my agency ("He was doing what?").

I relate this to similar situations while growing up. When you were in school with your friends and someone would make a fart noise (either genuine or otherwise), denial was your best option, and when it failed, you would blame your friend. If your friend came up with the impenetrable "Did not!" defense, you might have to change tacks and say: "Uhh... it was my sneaker, scuffing the floor." Then you would proceed to scuff your shoe continuously and on various surfaces until you could reproduce the sound accurately. This could take hours.

Luckily, it's only 10:30. Hours, I've got. I make the noise again with my mouth, frrrrrrpp, but she doesn't turn around.

I make it again, frrrrrrrrrrp, a bit louder and longer, but she still won't turn around. I figure she must hear it by now, and either knows that it's a mouth-fart and won't turn around 'cause she doesn't care, or thinks it's a real fart and won't turn around because she is terrified.

This isn't going to work.  Suddenly, I strike upon an idea, and proceed to turn the fart-noise into a song.

Frrrp-de-drrrp, drrrp-de-brrrp, frrrrp-a-frrrp-drrrp.

She still hasn't turned around, but I decide to stop. By now she must either know that it wasn't a real fart, or think that I am an extremely rude yet immensely talented young man.

Right on both counts.

Other than making fart noises, my talents lie in fidgeting a lot. I drum my fingers, click my pen, tap my feet, and engage in other activities that probably drive people in the vicinity out of their minds. I just can't help it. It gets worse when I am trying to concentrate. Today I am trying to remember how to handle this particularly vexing series of invoices, vexing in that they contain numbers, so my fidgeting is in full swing. Since my hands are occupied with all the damn counting, I am indulging in some foot and leg fidgeting, my specialty, swinging my feet and kicking the bottom of my office chair with my heels.

My boss enters the office along with a few other people, who begin speaking with the woman I share the office with. I'm glad I actually have some work to do so I can look busy, instead of having to fake it as usual, although they're talking about numbers which is seriously throwing me off.  I kick my fidgeting up a notch to compensate.

While kicking away at the bottom of my seat, my right heel connects with the lever that controls the height of my office chair. The chair lets out a loud hydraulic wheeze and jolts downwards, trapping my leg between the seat and the foot of the chair.

Now I'm sitting there, about a six inches off the ground, my eyes level with the top of the desk, my leg stuck under me.

I grab the lever and try to pull it up, but it's no use. To make the chair rise, I need to stand up or at least take my weight off the chair seat. Unfortunately, I can't stand up, because my leg is pinned.

I'm always glad that people are around when these things happen to me.

Unfortunately, I think the situation is going to have to get worse before it gets better. I'm going to have to roll onto the floor in order to get my weight off the chair seat.

I can't believe the kind of negligence that is rampant in society these days. Don't they test these chairs in the factory? Didn't someone notice that if you pull your legs way up under the seat, you could hit the lever the lever with your heel and trap your foot and look like a dork? I reach down an desperately try to shove my foot out of the way but it is stuck fast. Wait! There's another lever! Right next to the first one! I pull the new lever, hoping it some sort of ejector lever or at the very least, a self-destruct lever that will cause an explosion that will destroy the building. All that happens is that the seat-back reclines, so that in addition to sitting a few inches off the floor, I'm now also staring at the ceiling.

Well, I'll be damned if I am going to roll onto the floor in front of a bunch of people. Summoning all my strength, I yank my leg out from under the chair, losing a few layers of skin in the process. My shoe comes off and clonks onto the floor, but I manage to get my leg free and stand up. I bring the chair back to its normal height, pick up my shoe, and sit down again. Forgetting that the chair-back is still tilted to a thirty-degree angle, I almost topple over backwards, but manage to catch my knee under the desk drawer, which creates a sound, in my opinion, like someone smashing their knee into a desk drawer, only louder.

My performance complete, I stick my wounded foot back in my shoe and leave it untied. If I bent over to tie the laces I'd probably knock myself unconscious on the edge of the desk.

"What happened?" the paramedics would say.

"I think he had a seizure or something," my boss would say. "He was flailing around in his chair!"

"Hmm. Any early warning signs? Previous indications?"

"Well," my office mate would offer, "he was farting pretty bad earlier."

**Chairman of the Bored**

I'm excited! The person training me today looks just like Jackie Chan. I decide not to mention this to her.

Like most inanimate objects in the known universe, the coat-rack in the office hates me. After picking it up, re-hanging my coat (and everyone else's), and shaking hands with a woman whose name I immediately forget, I am shown to a desk and introduced to the woman who looks like Jackie Chan.

Jackie Chan is pretty much my biggest hero, so I think its understandable that I get a little overzealous and immediately launch a flying axe-kick over the desk at the woman. Actually, I don't, but I want to. I figure that if she looks like him she can probably fight like him, too, right? We could battle all over the office, me using the Snake Technique and her using Crane (or perhaps Scorpion). At least that's the way life at the office should be. Interesting, fun, with lots of kicking. But no, she's just a woman who is going to train me, and there will be no Kung-Fu fighting in the accounting department today.

I am going to be working at the invoice desk for this swimwear company, and it is a long-term position, lasting until March. I decide that if I like it, I will probably take it, since it is only about a half-mile from home. I don't know much about accounting, other than that... well... okay, I don't know anything about accounting. I think it has to do with money.

As with all the jobs I take, I have arrived with a jacket, tie, vest, and dress pants. Jackie informs me that I'm overdressed.

"It's casual attire here," she tells me. "You don't need to wear the tie and jacket and pants and all that."

"Great!" I say, elated.

"I think you misunderstood me," Jackie says the next morning as I arrive. "When I said you didn't need to wear pants, I meant dress pants. You do need to wear some sort of pants."

How embarrassing. Luckily, it is a swimwear company, so I slip into some Speedos until lunch, when I go home and get some jeans.

I must admit, when I learned that this was a swimwear company, I somewhat expected to see lots of women in bikinis around the office. So far, I have seen only zero, and I am quite disappointed. No kicking, no women in scanty swimwear. And I have to wear some sort of pants. This job is just wracked with disappointments.

Jackie is going to be training me most of the week, and I don't get her desk until she leaves. I am given a small corner of a cluttered table that supports her large, circa-1947 computer. This will be my "work area." It amounts to a space about the size of a napkin, and in this space, I am supposed to look through piles of invoices, sheaves of these yellow slips, and reams of these other pink papers that are kinda smelly. Sometimes I write on these papers, and other times I staple them together. Sometimes I do both, and even staple white slips on these things and put them in piles.

I feel I am getting a firm grip on this accounting business.

In all fairness, this job is actually okay. I haven't screwed up anything too badly (yet) and I have plenty of free time to stare out the window at my car. Someone on the phone actually told me I had a great voice, which is nice to hear, yet is also a sign that the phone system is truly in need of repair. My only real complaint so far today is that I am $312 in the hole in computer solitaire.

I've finished the work that was supposed to last me all day, and now I have nothing to do. All the mail has been delivered, so there will be no new material on my desk until tomorrow. Since it's still early, I ask my superiors if they have any projects or tasks I can work on for the rest of the day.

Ha ha. No, I'm just kidding. I sit there and do nothing while trying to make it look like I'm doing something.

This is going to be kind of tricky. I’ve been busted playing solitaire twice already this morning, so I figure I’d better lay off it for a while. People are always in and out of this office, so I can't read a book or magazine without being noticed. This is going to be a challenge.

I'm going to have to amuse myself with the objects on my desk that I use during my workday. All I really have is an adding machine, a pen, a stapler that has the words Do not remove from copier! printed on it, a white-out dispenser, a phone, and some paper clips.

After an hour of staring blankly at these objects, I have come up with some highly amusing and challenging games.

ADDING + SUBTRACTING = FUN!!!

Using the adding machine, add up some numbers! Try to guess what they will add up to! You can also subtract one number from another, which usually results in a smaller number(!).

Another game with the adding machine is where you guess how many 9's you can fit on the display before you run out of room!

DRAWBACK: You can only play the 9 game once.

THE EMPIRE STAPLE BUILDING

Take a handful of paperclips and try to stack them into a tower on top of the stapler. The taller the tower, the higher it will be! And you'll be high on fun!

E.T. PHONE NOME

Use the office phone to call Nome, Alaska! Area code 907! It's free!

TIP: Other cities in Alaska will work too!

PEN-DULUM

Take a ballpoint pen, and click it so the point pops out and you can write with it! Holding the pen at the other end between two fingers, swing the pen like a pendulum over piece of paper! As the pen brushes across the paper, it will make a series of hard-to-see lines! It’s fun!

DISCLAIMER: Game is not fun.

THE CLICK-TRICK

Click your ballpoint pen on and off as fast as you can for an hour or until you get painful thumb cramps! Whee!

THE GAME WITH THE WHITE-OUT

Do something fun with the White-out!

TIP: Don't eat the White-out!

A few hours pass and I still have no more work to do. The day is just dragging on and on. I decide to do something dangerous, something that could end my celebrated and lucrative career as a temp.

I decide to take a nap.

I know, I know, not only is it extremely stupid, it's also extremely difficult. But I'm tired of stacking paperclips on the stapler (my record is thirteen! Pretty good, huh?) and I think I can pull it off. My desk faces away from the door, so no one can see my face. The woman I share an office with doesn't usually talk to me. If I can prop myself into some sort of awake-like position, I might be able to have a quick snooze.

First, I take a few invoices and position them in front of me, as if I am working on them. Then I kind of lean over them and prop my head up with my arm: my elbow on the desk, my chin resting on my hand. It's not too uncomfortable, really, and from behind I'll appear that either I am intensely studying a very tricky invoice or that I am sleeping.

The main problem is that I have a rather large head and a rather small arm. It's like trying to support a basketball with a golf club: very difficult to balance. Whenever I manage to doze off, my head sways in one of several possible directions, which jolts me awake. From behind I now appear that I am either trying to take a nap or that I am drunk.

This dozing is not working very well, and I can't get more than a few moments rest before my huge, swaying head wakes me and I have to open my eyes and reposition. I seem to have found a good spot to put my elbow, and manage to drop off again, but this time my elbow slides to the left and I am jolted awake again. When I open my eyes, I notice that someone is standing next to me.

It's my boss.

I groggily yet quickly spring into action. I sit up straight and lunge for the nearest office implement, hoping to appear busy. I manage to grab the stapler and I yank it towards the invoice in front of me, trying to ignore the thirteen paperclips that shower over me, clattering noisily onto the desk and floor. As I randomly staple some paper together, I look over at my boss. "Hi!" I say in a voice that sounds so alert that anyone hearing it would instantly testify in court that the speaker could never have been sleeping at work. "What's up?"

My boss is standing there, flipping though some papers. She isn't even looking at me. I don't think she noticed that my eyes were closed.

Whew. I feel really stupid and somewhat ashamed. Boredom has led me down a dangerous and bewitching path. Obviously, I need to rethink this napping business. It seems clear that I need is some sort of early warning signal. Something to let me know when someone has entered the office. Maybe I could spread something crunchy on the floor, like broken glass or M&M's, something that makes noise when someone walks on it. Maybe I could hang some bells from the doorway that people would hit with their heads when they walked in. One thing is certain, I need to figure out something quickly.

I'm getting sleepy again.

**Notes From A New Assignment**

I’ve been working a string of short-term jobs lately, and finding that I’m having trouble keeping track of all the details. So, I started a diary. Here's a log of the day's activities.

8:15am - Oops, I'm early.  Don't have to start until 8:30.  Sorry, uh... you'll just have to wait with me on the street corner, I guess.

So.  Uh.  How are you?

Chilly one this morning, huh?  Yep.  Pretty, uh, chilly.  Yeah.

8:30am - I enter the building, leaving you and your horrible conversational skills behind.  I meet, oh, let's call her Linda, just to be different.  Linda is extremely nice, though very timid and laughs nervously after every thing she says, which means, sadly, that I will soon want to kill her.  Her laughing nervously after everything she says means I have to laugh, too, so she's not made more nervous by me not laughing.  And I don't like laughing unless something is actually funny.  I grow tired of this sort of thing.  Quickly.

8:36am - I am shown around the floor I'll be working on, and introduced to a few people.  Uh-oh.  My Tempy Sense starts tingling immediately.  That can only mean one thing:  Danger!  (Although, there was that one time it meant:  Syrup!  That was weird, man.)  I see major problems ahead.  There is a high degree of coolness radiating from all the admins.  And I don't mean coolness as in the Fonz, I mean coolness as in Mary Tyler Moore in Ordinary People.  The folks here are just chilly, and when they smile, their mouths smile but nothing else on their faces do.  Their eyes stay dead and lifeless, their noses look completely grouchy.   And moments later, I know why!

The floor is divided in half.  One half is called the "bay side", as you can see the San Francisco Bay from the windows on that side of the building.  The other half is called the "lake side" because you can see a lake.  I've learned that anytime a floor of a building is divided, and the sections named, the people in one section will eventually start to hate the people in the other section.  It's just natural to start referring to people in their other section by their section name, for instance:  "Oh, Sally?  She's a lake-sider."  And once you've got a label for someone, the hate just blossoms.  (That is not an attempt at some sort of societal message, I promise, although if I did attempt some sort of societal message, it would probably look exactly like that.)

8:40am - Looks like I am to be filing at this job.  A lot.  A whole lot.  Ech.

10:35am - Ugh.  Filing is ouchy.  Still, there are some lighter moments.

One of the files is named OMG Financial Management Subgroup.  OMG! D00dz yuor Financial Management Subgroup totally r0xors PLZTHX LOL!

Another file is named Points of Service Workgroup, and it's generally referred to as "POS Workgroup".  POS, to me, has always stood for Piece of Shit.  I just can't see it any other way.  And every time I have to stick something in that file, I just picture a quick conversation between two guys on their way to their respective workgroups.

Guy #1:  Hey, how's your workgroup?

Guy #2:  Eh.  It's a piece of shit.

Guy #1:  Ha ha ha!  Man, Guy #2, you crack me up.

Guy #3:  Hi.

Guy #1:  Oh.  Sorry, Guy #3, we can't include you in our conversation.

Guy #3:  Oh.  Um.  O-okay...

Guy #1:  Don't take personally.  It's just what it says up there.  "...a quick conversation between two guys..." y'know?

Guy #3:  Oh, th-that's fine.  \*sniffle\* I'll just... go.  I'll go find some other website to have a conversation on... don't... don't worry about me.

Guy #2:  Aw, see?  Here we go with this shit again.

Guy #1:  Hey, it's not his fault.  Don't take it out on him! (scuffles with Guy #2)

Guy #4:  OMG!

Whoops!  That one kinda got away from me.  But this is what happens when I file all day.  Mind wanders.

12:30pm -  Lunch.  Absolutely nothing interesting happens worth writing about.

1:50pm - Linda uses the word "project" to describe the task I am about to undertake:  sorting office supplies.  It seems the office supply company sent over too much stuff... and SOME has to go BACK.

I feel that if I had a suspenseful musical sting to accompany that (like DUNH-DUNNNH), it would sound more exciting.

Also, it would help if Linda would spice up the conversation a bit.  Like this:

Linda:  (frantically) Chris!

Me:  (growls) Not now, Linda... not... now.

Linda:  But Chris... they sent over (pause)  TOO MANY SUPPLIES!

Me:  Damn them.  (shakes head, eyes glistening)  Damn. Them.

Linda:  Can you sort out what we need to send back?  If you have time?

Me:  (dramatically)  Time... time.  Something... (voice cracking) something we don't have...

Guy #4:  OMG!

3:45pm - It's so quiet in this office.  No one talks to anyone, really.  The executives have shown up after a long meeting, and they talk to each other, but none of them even so much as look at the admins.  It's really eerie.  This entire office is a seething cauldron of angst, mistrust, and hatred that is about to boil over.  At least, I hope it boils over, because otherwise, this is going to be an incredibly boring job.

3:50pm - My boss leaves for a meeting across town, and I promptly go outside to smoke for an hour and ten minutes.

5:00pm - Time to go home!  Not a bad first day, I guess.  I've definitely had worse.

Linda:  (suggestively) And you've never had better, right, Tiger?

Me:  Isn't that sexual harassment?

Linda:  Nope.  It's 5:01.  You're off the clock.

Me:  Damn.  Damn.

**Go Fish**

A non-profit that manages an orphanage in South America has hired me for the day.  I've worked here before, actually, in October, when I was brought in for a week to create form letters and do mail merges for them.  This time, they called my temp agency and asked for me by name.  Fools.

They're located in downtown San Francisco, in a beautiful old office building that I'm completely in love with.  The place has a lot of character and twice as much marble.  Marble floors, marble walls, marble pillars, marble fixtures... everything gleams and glows.  The staircases are wide and sweeping, even the elevators are ornate and classy.  Walking through the halls at the end of the day, one can almost see the ghosts of the past bustling by:  men in fedoras and overcoats, all heavy smokers, heading home with a nice buzz from their three martini lunches and the scotch from their office wet bars.  The secretarial pool with their beehive hairdos and seamed stockings, all heavy smokers, gabbing around the water cooler or perched over their typewriters.  Desks are huge, squat, wooden behemoths, uncluttered by the computers and fax machines that dominate the offices of today.  Outside, solid iron cars honk and jockey for parking spaces, while hippies carry signs and chant for the end of the Vietnam war and Native Americans scan the horizon for buffalo.  Overhead, a pterodactyl swoops and cries in search of a mate while the Black Plague ravages Europe and Mt. Vesuvius  rumbles ominously.

Okay, I may be mixing up my time periods a bit, but you get the idea.  It's a building simply oozing with history, and a pleasant place to roam around while neglecting my duties.  Hell, even the bathrooms are awash with character.  It's an honor to crap here.

Ruining it all are the people I'm working with.  Frankly, they're dopes.  I don't know how they organize and run an orphanage in a foreign country, but I'm hoping it's done with a bit more sense than this particular office is handled.  For instance, soon after I arrive, UPS delivers a box.  A few minutes later, the guy who runs the place walks over and stares down at the box on the floor.

"What's this?" he asks.

His wife, whom he works with, comes and stands beside him, also scrutinizing the box.  "Did somebody order something?  Office supplies?"

"It can't be the new calendars," the guy says.

"Oh!  The calendars!" his wife says.

"No, no, the box is too small."

I should point out that neither of them make any effort to, y'know, open the box.

"Oh.  Joe, did you order office supplies?"

Joe comes over.  "No, I went down to Office Depot for the supplies this morning.  I don't know what this is."

I'll give Joe some credit for being proactive here, as he hunches down and peers closely at the box.  He's not opening it, either, but he's getting his face closer to it, which is, well, something.  That's about as charitable as I can get, however, because I'm about to snap and start screaming "JUST OPEN IT!  JUST OPEN THE BOX YOU DAMN HELPLESS BOX-CONTENT SPECULATING-ABOUT GOONS!"

I can't help picturing some little Peruvian street urchin staggering into the orphanage, bathed in sweat, his clothing in tatters over his skeletal frame, and collapsing to the floor in painful spasms.  And then the crowd gathers around him.

"Huh.  Wonder what's wrong with him.  Malaria?"

"Could be dehydration."

"No, he doesn't seem to be hallucinating at all.  My guess would be malnourishment."

"You think so?  Look at the way he's clawing at his eyes.  Gotta be hallucinations."

"But he's not clawing very *hard*..."

I have a pair of scissors, but not trusting myself with them, I wait until everyone has drifted away from the Box Of Infinite Mystery to go over and open the damn thing.

But guess what?  Even I don't open the box!  I have a reason not to, though, because I notice that it has been delivered to the wrong office.  It's not even theirs.  Cripes.

A note about the people who own this non-profit:  they're religious.  The non-profit is religious.  Everything is religious, including the form letters I'm creating today.  They're asking for money, hoping to raise $175,000 by Christmas.  This is fine with me.  I have no serious objections to starving children being fed or given X-Boxes or whatever the money goes to.  It is a little weird, however, creating correspondence that ends with "God be with you" or "Grace and Peace," and the letter itself is peppered with mentions of the Lord.  In fact, as I discover, He is given credit for the money they've raised so far.

When I worked here in October, a donation letter was created and sent out, stressing the importance of this non-profit raising $300,000 by the end of the year.  This letter I'm working on now is the second attempt, as they have fallen short of the mark.  The letter is being sent to exactly the same 1,500 churches and ministries and organizations and individuals that received the first letter, including those who have already given money in response to it.

And, right in the middle of the new letter, there's a sentence that says "God has provided us with a generous amount of money so far, but we're still $175,000 short..."

Wait a second.  God has provided?  How about the people that got the last letter?  They're the ones who wrote $125,000 worth of checks, aren't they?  Sure, in the mystical, omnipotent sense, God has provided everything, including the money, but still.  Give the generous people you are repeatedly bombarding with mail some credit, willya?

Once the new letters are printing (on letterhead and toner provided by God), I'm asked to help prepare for a board meeting, which is taking place the following morning.  Fifteen booklets need to be put together, and each booklet is to be comprised of about twenty different sections.  The best way to tackle something like this, as anyone with a brain not made of dryer lint will tell you, is to put a single booklet together, and then copy it fifteen times.  So long as the original booklet is done correctly, you've got no problems, and if you need more, you still have the original to copy from.

My supervisor has a better idea, however, for certain values of the word "better."  He prefers I make fifteen copies of each section of the booklet, and then put together fifteen booklets.  This will ensure that there are fifteen chances that something will be put together wrong or left out.

Well, he's the boss.  So, I've got my twenty sections in twenty stacks of fifteen copies each, all lined up, in the exact order they're going to go into the booklet.  I'm ready, though not all that willing, to make fifteen passes over the table and get these things done.  My supervisor, however, wants to make things easier on me, so he goes over the stacks, putting a Post-It Note on the top of each, numbering the sections for me.  Since the stacks are already in order, his notes read like this.

Sec. 1, Sec. 2, Sec. 3, Sec. 4, Sec. 5, Sec. 6... all the way to Sec. 20.

Um, okay.  Thank you.  That's very helpful.  Not only are there numbers on things that are already in order, but instead of swooping over the table and slapping these sections together, I now have to take from the bottom of the stacks, or, even worse, remove and then replace the Post-It Notes from the top of the stacks each time I pick up a section.  That's going to be an unnecessary pain in the ass, so, while he watches, I go through the stacks, removing the notes and placing them on the table above each section.  I hope this won't offend him, and this way we can pretend he's still helping.

But no.  He has to ask why I'm removing the Post-It Notes.  Well, shit, I'm not getting paid to be mindful of his feelings.  I tell him I don't need them, since everything is already in order, and to pull from the bottom of the stacks is going to slow me down.  It's always hard explaining the concept of "I want to go home soon" to people who don't care when they go home.

He's still hovering and staring and standing in my way, so I grab the bathroom key and head for the john, that charming room of solitude.  I stand at the urinal, whizzing and taking deep breaths, hoping my supervisor will have retreated to his office by the time I get back.

Plink.

Oh, good, I've dropped the bathroom key into the urinal.  These aren't your modern urinals, where everything drains out while you're doing your business, mind you.  These are like little wall-mounted toilets, with a good three inches of water sitting in them.  Plus, you know, my own freshly-dispensed water.

For once, I'm alone when something like this happens to me.  Ghosts of men in fedoras notwithstanding, the bathroom is empty, and after hemming and hawing for a few minutes, I finally stick my hand into the urinal and get the key.  Okay, fine, I don't hem and haw at all, I just stick my hand in immediately and pull the key out.  Hey, at least it's my pee.  I wash my hands and the key, dry the leather key ring off under the blow dryer, and head back to work.

Once there, I start putting together booklets as fast as I can, my back cramping up as I hunch over the table.  Halfway through, my supervisor comes back with a booklet in his hand.

"I've put together a booklet, as kind of a master copy," he says.  "So you can see what order everything goes in."

Instead of pulling a picture off the wall and smashing it over his skull, I thank him.

*Dude*, I tell him, in my head.  *Everything is already in order.  You've also already labeled everything pointlessly.  Why, now, would I need yet another example of what order things go in?  Go away and let me finish this before God provides you with a concussion.*

In response to my mental command, or perhaps anxious to get back to stroking the piece of felt in his office, he leaves again, and I get back to work.  It doesn't take me too long, and soon I've got my fifteen booklets in their fifteen slipcovers and I'm done.

Only, I'm not.  Because for some odd reason, I only have fourteen booklets.

I can accept that I may have somehow accidentally made only fourteen copies of one or two of the sections, but all of them?  Nuh-uh.  That's when it occurs to me.  His master copy.  He took the sections for his master copy off my stacks.  Of course.  I debate asking for the master copy back so I can leave, but the idea of explaining how him taking a copy of everything has left me one copy short makes me tired all over my brain.  I undo one of the booklets, jam it into the copier, and make my fifteenth copy.

"You know," he says, coming back out of his office, "I think I want to label the sections, like, with numbered tabs."

"Okay," I say.  *A good time to mention this might have been while I was putting the damn things together, so I wouldn't have to take them all apart again, but whatever.  You're obviously only on this planet to make my ulcer bleed, and I can accept that.*  "Where do you keep the numbered tabs?"

He looks at me quizzically.

So, there I am, sitting down with Post-It Flags, numbering each of the twenty sections of each of the fifteen booklets, by hand.  Writing numbers on the flags, sticking them on, one by one.

It's eight o'clock by the time I'm done.  I'm two hours into overtime, which is time-and-a-half pay, so at least there's that.  I wearily rise, and walk to my supervisor's office, expecting him have some other ridiculous request, like that he wants a header added to each page or some section moved, which would require another round of Post-It sticking, but much to my relief, he says I can go.

"Thank you," he says, "for your hard work."

*Oh, don't thank me*, I think.  *Thank God.  I know I am.*

**Lame-O™**

I get the call this morning at about 10:30 from my agency:  It seems Wham-O™, maker of the Frisbee®, is in need of a Receptionist©!  Just for the afternoon, anyway.  The rate I'm offered is abysmal, plus, it's over in Emeryville, which is a pain since I'll have to take a bus, a train, and then another bus, and they want me there by noon.  All for a mere four or five hours of work.  Still, it's Wham-O™!  I gotta go!  I gotta!

I guess the agency figures I get up every morning at 6:00am, eat breakfast, shower, shave, get fully dressed for work, and then sit by the phone, because they always seem mildly surprised that I'm not quite ready to dash out the door when they call.  Still, I tell them I will do my best to be there by noon, I hang up, stick my head under the shower, gouge the crust out of my eyes, slap on some clothes, and then dash out the door.

The bus ride to the train is uneventful, but at the train station, there's only one working ticket machine.  I fidget and groan while I wait in line, as the people in front of me, confronted by the baffling words "INSERT MONEY IN BIG SLOT" over a BIG SLOT, gawk helplessly, unsure of how to purchase a ticket.  Finally, it's my turn, but just as I cram a ten-dollar bill (I didn't have any singles) into the machine, my cell-phone rings.  Multi-tasking, I push "GET TICKET" with one hand while flipping open the phone with the other.  It's my agent on the horn.

The ticket pops out just as my agent informs me that Wham-O™, as it turns out, does not need a receptionist for the day, after all.  Crap.

"So, you can go home, or if you're already on your way, you can still show up there, and they said they'd find something for you to do."

I'd really like to go home, because the phrase "we'll find something for you to do" holds about as much dread for me as "I don't like the looks of that pulsing tumor attached to your spinal column."  On the other hand, I want to see Wham-O™!  Plus, I need the paycheck, especially since I just put ten bucks on my train ticket.  So, I tell her I'd still like to go to work.

About twenty minutes later, I get off the train and try to find the correct bus to take me to the office.  It's about 11:45, so I figure I still have a good chance of getting there by noon.  Not that that's really important, I guess, since they don't need me.  The bus arrives, and as I'm stepping on board, I ask the driver if she goes down Christie Street, where Wham-O™ is located.

She shrugs.  "Mmm... yeah," she says, as if she just decided it might be a possibility.

You have to be careful when bus drivers are like this.  They may have no idea if they go down the street you ask for, or more often, they know they go down it, but the shrug means "eventually."  They omit the fact that you may get there faster on another bus, or a bus going in the other direction, or by walking on your hands.  Chances are, they'll get you to your street, but only after they've driven you, for hours, to all sorts of awful places first.

Luckily, this doesn't happen!  We get to Christie Street just fine.  So, um, I guess you can just ignore what I just said.

I get off the bus and look at the address I've written down:  7401 Christie.  The building directly ahead of me is 7907, so I start walking.  About a quarter-mile later, Christie Street dead-ends at a massive construction site.  The lowest number I've passed:  7600.

Huh.

I back-track, thinking I must have missed something.  I walk almost all the way back to the bus stop, then turn around, baffled, and head back towards the construction site again, hoping it will either be magically gone, or at least that they'll have erected some new buildings, possibly one of them numbered 7401.  No such luck.

Well, maybe the road continues on the other side of the site?  I dunno.  It must.  I skitter past several large signs warning me of "Falling Debris" and "Massive Head Injuries" and "Dynamite Explosion Zones" and "Surly Construction Workers".  I ponder the idea of being lost on the way to an office where I don't even need to be in the first place.  It's absurd.  And here I am, risking grave injury from falling objects and dump trucks driving in reverse and big, sweaty men?  For a job that doesn't even require me to show up?

Finally, in the middle of the construction site, I break down and call my agent again.

"You don't see the building?" she asks.

"I don't think they've built it yet," I tell her.

"It shows up as a valid address," she says.  "7901 Christie."

Gah.  "I had it as 7401."

"Well, it looks like somebody can't read their own handwriting!" she laughs.

I don't laugh.  It's a 4, plain as day.  She gave it to me wrong.

So, I head back, blisters forming on my feet by this point, and sure enough, there's 7901 and Wham-O™(!), about twenty feet from the same bus stop I arrived at almost an hour ago.  It's now nearly 1:00pm.  How embarrassing.  I'm an hour late for a job I don't have.

I walk in, and meet the woman who had initially placed the temp order, and then cancelled it.  Our conversation is brief, brisk, and quite cheerful, for some odd reason.  It goes something like this:

"Hi!" I say. "I'm Chris, the temp you don't need today!"

"Hi!" she says, "I'm Cathy!"

We shake hands.  We're pleased to meet each other!

"Do you have anything for me to do?" I ask.

"Not really," she says.  "Do you want to just go home?"

"Okay!" I say. "Nice meeting you!"

"Nice meeting you too!" she says.

We shake hands again.

Well, hell.  Not a bad job, really, if you think about it.  I didn't screw anything up, I didn't have to deal with phones or customers or paperwork.  Sure, I didn't get a chance to loot the office, and what a great office it would have been to loot.  It's Wham-O™!  Sure, I didn't have time to make friends, but I didn't have time to make enemies, either.  And, dammit, it was nice meeting her.  All in all, it's been the best temp job I've ever had.

"Hey, the next time you don't need a temp," I say to Cathy as I head out the door, "Please keep me in mind!"

**The Information Superhallway**

Here's the set-up.  I'm working as a receptionist/admin for a wireless company, which has recently taken over the fourth floor of a new office building.  The place is mostly vacant, many of the forty or so offices and cubicles on the floor are empty and there's not a whole lot of furniture.  As a matter of fact, I sit at a lunch table in the hallway.

Yes, a lunch table.  Remember the tables they had in the cafeteria in middle-school?  Or the kind you see in flea markets?  Those horribly ugly dark brown particle-board things on wobbly metal folding legs?  I sit at one of those.

In the hallway.

Did I mention there are forty or so empty offices and cubicles?  I thought so.

Best of all, the lobby, where a receptionist would normally sit, is completely empty, and, it being a lobby, it's considerably roomier than a hallway.  Which is where I'm sitting.  In a hallway.  At a lunch table.

This alone means I spend most of the day wanting to kill myself, and hey!  We haven't even gotten to the stupid part yet!

Since the lobby is empty, the company doesn't want visitors coming up in the elevator and wandering around the building, which they would have to do since there is no one in the lobby to greet and/or direct them.  So, and here's where the fun begins, they have it set up so visitors can't get to the fourth floor of the building without someone to help them.  See, the elevator is locked off, and only someone with a special magnetic ID card to swipe past the sensor can get the elevator to go to the fourth floor.  Visitors naturally don't have a magnetic card; I do.  So, the procedure is this:

The visitors reach the door to the building, where a sign tells them to press the intercom, which buzzes incredibly loudly at my stupid table in the hallway, which gives me a fatal heart attack.  When I recover, I press my intercom button, and ask if I can help them.  They say something like "I'm here to see Bob" or "I have a delivery" or "I'm here about the hyena's penis" or whatever.  It doesn't really matter what they say, because through the intercom, it sounds like "GZZZKZTTTT HTZTHHZGGHHHTT ZHZTZTHZTZTZ."  They could be saying "I'm here to fix the elevator, because it keeps plummeting into the basement, killing all the passengers," and I'd respond with "I'll be right down in the elevator!"

And right down I go.  I get into the slow-moving elevator, ride it down, go through the downstairs lobby to the door, let the visitors in, and ride up in the elevator with them, engaging in awkward conversation and using my magic card to allow us up to the fourth floor.  Most of the conversation directed at me, I should add, revolves around what a stupid set-up this is, and it's delivered in a tone that implies it's all my fault.

This morning, all I did was ride the elevator, because we had separate visits from 1) FedEx, 2) Airborne, 3) UPS, 4) USPS, 5) Office Depot, and 6) about a half-dozen other assorted vendors and visitors.

Naturally, I can't sit there all day waiting for the intercom to buzz, so what happens when someone downstairs pushes the button and I'm not at my table?  Does the stupidity fail?  Nope!  A great deal of thought, incredibly stupid thought, has been put into this stupidity, and they came up with this:  give the temp a special pager that will vibrate when the intercom goes off!  He can clip this to his belt and carry it around with him, so no matter where he goes in the building, if someone needs to be let in, he can run back to his lunch table and yell into the intercom and then run to the elevator again!

This pager is about the size of a mass-market copy of Stephen King's bestseller, The Tommyknockers, and vibrates with enough force to bruise anyone in the vicinity.  It goes off at the same time the intercom buzzer does, so if I'm at my table, I'm both startled into unconsciousness by the noisy buzzer, while, at the same time, my pelvis is rattled into splinters by the pager's vibrations.

So, if you happen to stop by an office building tomorrow, and you see a miserable dip sitting at a lunch table in a hallway or dashing towards an elevator while vibrating so hard he's a blur, that's probably me.  Maybe, and I'm just tossing out ideas here, that instead of using the current stupid plan, they adopt a new plan, known as the Less Stupid Plan, where they simply move my ridiculous lunch table into the lobby, unlock the elevator, deep-six the intercom, and put the pager somewhere it can't do anyone any harm.  Mars, maybe.

I might suggest this myself, but I've had several fear-induced heart attacks and all the teeth have been rattled out of my skull, so it would probably just come out as "GZZZKZTTTT HTZTHHZGGHHHTT ZHZTZTHZTZTZ."

Do you ever find yourself in this situation?  You're visiting a place of business for some reason, either to meet with someone or deliver something.  You're walking up to the building, and there's an intercom on the wall outside the door.  A sign posted next to the intercom explains that to reach the business you are looking for, you'll need to activate the intercom and speak to someone, who will come down from the fourth floor and escort you up in the elevator.  You may enter the building and wait in the lobby until this person comes downstairs.  Of course, you don't know what any of this means because you're from outer space!  Uh-oh!  What now?

Simple!  Just follow these easy tips on how to (and how not to) use the intercom system, and a disgruntled temp will be right down to escort your lame ass up in the elevator!  Okay?

Remember, it's an intercom, not a doorbell, and you're an adult, not a hyperactive child.  Just push it once and wait a moment.  Just because YOU can't hear the buzzer through four stories of brick, doesn't mean it's not going off!  Probably in some temp's ear!

On that note, no matter how many times you press the button in rapid succession, a food pellet will not appear.  You may indeed have many things in common with a rodent, but even a cocaine-addicted lab rat would have stopped hammering on it by now!

You might not realize this, but the temp can't SEE YOU through the intercom system!  It's audio only!  So, you may be required to SPEAK INTO IT at some point, instead of just standing there waving or whatever the hell you're silently doing down there!

Employees -- We realize that you sometimes forget your access cards, and need to be escorted upstairs.  But don't just press the button and then walk into the building to wait for the temp.  Remember, while you're standing inside, the temp is screaming through the intercom, asking who you are!  But you can't hear him, because you're already inside!  Do you see?  Do you see the problem?  Do you?

The intercom button activates a shrill buzzer.  That's what the button does.  Therefore, don't HOLD DOWN THE BUTTON while you're TRYING TO TALK TO THE TEMP.  It makes it IMPOSSIBLE FOR HIM TO HEAR YOU OVER THE BUZZER.  If you're buzzing while you're talking, all he gets from you is "Hi, th-BZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ-ng?"  Just press it ONCE, then speak normally.  OKAY?  WE ALL ON THE SAME PAGE HERE?

The intercom is also not a telephone.  Don't ask something like "Is Jim there?"  The temp has no idea what to say when you ask that.  "Yes he is, shall I put him on the intercom?"

Maybe this is foolish, but if you've used the intercom, and you're waiting for them temp to come down, it might be, well, considerate if you don't ride up with someone else in the meantime.  After all, the temp is running his short little legs down the stairs to come get you!  And he tires easily!  Maybe you could wait for him!  Because if he doesn't see you in the lobby, he'll wander around looking for you for a while, not knowing you've gone up with someone else.  This makes him sad.

When you press the button, your DNA is not transported up to a computer that will tell the temp who you are.  I know it's hard to believe this, and I hate to keep harping on it, but you'll actually have to remember your name, and say it into the intercom.  Good luck!

Last week, I [wrote a piece](http://www.notmydesk.com/archives/archive92492801.html#stu) about how stupid the office I work in is.  They've got the elevator locked off, requiring the thirty or forty daily visitors we get to buzz my desk (table) on an intercom system, and then I go down four stories to let them in.  I was initially told this was because we don't have a functioning lobby, and this was the only (and most stupid) way to prevent visitors from wandering cluelessly around the building.  I regarded this, again, as stupid, as anyone would, provided they possess actual brain cells, which my co-workers apparently do not.

However, and I am not in the least surprised, they have topped themselves.  A woman I work with mentioned offhandedly that the system was actually set up that way to provide extra security from terrorists.

My response to this was, and I quote, "Gluh?"

Apparently, I am this company's first, last, and only line of defense against terrorism.

Now, as a temp, I'm fairly open-minded with my job descriptions.  I mean, I've shown up at jobs after being told they needed someone with WordPerfect skills, only to spend my entire week moving office furniture or cleaning machine parts.  And do I ever complain?  Hell yes.  Constantly.  But usually just to you guys, not to my actual employers.

Still, I have a few comments on the matter of being an unwitting terrorist deterrent that I may have to bring up to the people I work for.  Such as:

1) Gluh?

2)  If you're worried about security, hey, you might want to hire, oh, I dunno... a SECURITY GUARD.  These are people who are too crazy to be cops or Marines.  They live to hassle people and hit them over the head.  I'm a temp, and a timid one at that.  Even nuns shove their way in front of me at the grocery store.  I may not be your guy.

3)  Okay.  If you're bent on putting me in charge of anti-terrorism, you should, you know... like... MENTION IT TO ME AT SOME POINT.  Not knowing that I'm supposed to be keeping an eye out for terrorists this past week has more or less resulted in me not keeping an eye out for terrorists this past week.  I haven't been screening people.  No one has been frisked.  Body cavities have gone woefully uninvestigated.  People more or less buzz up and say "Let me in," and I buzz down and say "OK."

4)  Now.  Even if I had been briefed on the whole anti-terrorist plan, what, exactly, am I supposed to be doing?  Conducting interviews and background searches?  Reading minds?  Drop-kicking suspicious couriers?  Clinging to the top of the elevator so when people enter it, I can drop down on them, shrieking, like some sort of hysterical, malnourished cougar?

5)  As far as I can tell, even if I spot a terrorist (terrorists being easily identified by their T-shirts reading 'Terrorist', or the more popular and humorous 'I'm with Terrorist --->') I am completely helpless to prevent them from entering the building.  I'm a twerp.  A mildly handicapped fourth-grader could incapacitate me with nothing more than a spastically unfurled yo-yo.  What chance do I have against a well-trained psychotic commando?  It seems to me that under the current plan, the only difference in outcome if terrorists should invade our building is that I will be killed on the first floor, slightly before everyone else, instead of being killed on the fourth floor, at the same time as everyone else.  I don't know about the people I work with, but I don't find this thought particularly comforting.

6)  You shouldn't keep your temps in the dark.  We're resourceful.  I mean, we manage to get paid for not doing any work, so you should pick our brains for ideas.  I might have my own suggestions on how to protect the building, you know.  I suggest that the best way to be safe is simply to unplug the intercom all together.  That way, no one gets in and I don't actually have to move all day.  Hell, I could do that from home!

7)  GLUH???

In closing:  You want me to spear-head your anti-terrorist program?  Fine.  Just give me a heads-up, willya?  Let me know.  Ask for my input.  Give me a bazooka.  Call me by a cool nickname, like SERGEANT STRANGLEHOLD or DOCTOR STRONGARM or CAPTAIN GROINWHOMP.  Stuff like that.

And how about another couple bucks an hour?  Peace of mind don't come cheap.

**“I” is for Invoice**

**Still Yet Another Not My Desk Mystery**

You know me.  You've seen me around.  You've probably smelled me.  You may have even hired me at some point.

I'm a temp.  A temp who solves crimes.  Sometimes, however, the crimes... solve me.  That's actually not true at all, but it sounds kinda cool, so I'm going with it.

I guess I should have said: sometimes the crimes find me, as one did this sultry October afternoon.  (Again, not true; it's October, so it isn't sultry at all, but it just sounds better).  I'm sitting in my office, working on The Case of the Stuff In The Fridge That Is Probably Too Old To Eat But Possibly Not, when suddenly, there's a knock at my door.  I reflect on the fact that knocks at the door are always sudden, I mean, how can they not be?  What could you precede a knock with to make it less sudden?  I guess you could announce "I am preparing to knock" before actually knocking.  That might work.  Anyway, it doesn't matter, as a sudden (!) kick sends the door flying open, and a large man dressed all in black lumbers into the room, brandishing a huge scimitar.

"Is this about the rent?" I ask.  His answer comes in the form of a swing of the blade at my head, which I nimbly duck under.  At least, that's what I'll tell people later, since the only reason I am able to duck is because my knees give out in fear.  I scramble away, shrieking like a toddler, my hands groping for something, anything, that I can use as a weapon.  Stapler, paper weight, empty whiskey bottle... anything!  Ah, here we go, a TOS-1 220mm Multiple Rocket Launcher.  I turn and blast my attacker into red glop.

Hm.  Someone was trying to kill me.  Not unusual in my line of business:  I'm a temp, after all.  But who?  And why?  I go through the remains of the attacker's clothing.  I suspect someone has hired this would-be killer, and I find proof in an invoice in his wallet.  It reads:

For The Services of Killing Christopher Livingston With a Huge Scimitar: $13,500.00

Paid By:  Joe Reynolds, Soron Industries

Hm.  Well, now I have the "who" behind the hit.  But what about the "why?"  I read the next line.

Comments:  Hit ordered because he temped for me for six months and never did any work.  That's why.

Well.  Now I know the who and the why... um... crap.  What kinda mystery is this, anyway?  That leaves the where, the when, and the how.  Well, here, just a second ago, and with a huge scimitar.

I poke a cigarette into my mouth.  This mystery has too many questions. Answered questions. I don't like it.

Could be a frame job.  Maybe this Joe Reynolds is innocent, just a pawn in this little game of Yahtzee.  I reach for the phone, grinding my cigarette in the ashtray, which is somewhat foolish since I hadn't actually lit it.

Reynolds answers on the first ring, and I identify myself.  "Oh, hey, Chris. Huh, I guess the assassin I paid to kill you with a huge scimitar didn't actually kill you.  That sucks."

I slam the phone down.  I know everything about this case, now.  Well, that might be enough for some detectives, but not for this one.  There must be more answers to find.  Er, no.  Questions to find.  I grab my coat, determined to leave no stone unturned in finding some vital clue that doesn't lead anywhere.  Some evidence that will make this case harder to understand.  That one final puzzle piece that just doesn't fit at all.  It was time to find out the word on the street.

I know him only as "Diamond Dog."  You know how these streetwise sources are... shady and mysterious.  And I needed a little mystery right about now.

"Well, well," I say, sliding up to him. "If it isn't Diamond Dog. How are the "mines," pooch?"

"Excuse me?" he says, turning to face me.

"Just wondering if you've dug up any valuable "rocks" lately," I say. "How about it, Dog?  Got any "gems" for me?"

He sighs. "Look, do we have to go through this every time?  My name is Albert."

"Sure, sure, Dog, I understand. Keeping it on the down-low, I get it."

"Uh, yeah. Anyway, how can I help you?"

"The same way as always, D.D. Just tell me what the word on the street is, and maybe this portrait of Benjamin Franklin," I slip him a folded bill, "will find its way into your pocket."

"Look, I'll say this again. This is a Kinko's. I don't know anything about the word on the street. If you need something copied or bound, I can do that for you, otherwise, I'll need to help the next customer."

He handed my bill back to me.  "Also, that's George Washington," he adds.

Since Dog wasn't playing fetch, I left, making a mental note to find more helpful and cryptic sources in the future.  It was clear I had only one option left: to stake out Reynolds' office.

I sit and wait for hours outside the building, drinking cheap coffee, eating fast food, letting the trash pile up around me.  Finally, I spot Reynolds.  He hops into his SUV and speeds into traffic, and I follow, losing him in a matter of seconds since I'm on foot.  Well, that's okay.  I know where he's going.  Wait.  I... I don't know where he's going.  I have no idea!  Finally, after searching for hours, I've found a question I don't know the answer to!

"Where was Mr. Reynolds going?" someone asks from behind me.  I turn and see two employees leaving the building.

"Oh, he was going home, to his house at 1517 Canyon Drive," the other employee answers.  I leave while they're discussing the easiest route there.

A few hours later, I confront Reynolds' in his dining room.  "Surprised to see me?" I ask as he looks up from his dinner.

"Well, no, you me called a little while ago when you couldn't find the street."

"Yeah, well..."

"And then again, when you couldn't spot the house number."

"I know, but--"

"And then when you couldn't find the dining room."

"Okay, fine."

"And then you cooked me this dinner."

"Yes, yes, that's all well and good.  But do you know why I'm here?"

"Yeah, because I tried to have you killed for being on my payroll for 6 months and not doing any work."

"Right." I fix him with a gaze. "But before I call the cops, there's one little thing I don't quite get."

He waits.

I stare him down.  "There's... one little loose end I've got to wrap up."

He waits some more.

I glare at him piercingly. "There's one little question remaining."

He goes out to a movie, comes back, and keeps waiting.

I look at him in a way that is different than the other ways I've looked at him previously.  "You, uh, need any office help this week?"

**In Security**

"Hi, could I speak with Christopher, please?"

"This is Chris."

"Christopher, are you available to work Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday?"

"Yup."

"Okay!  Great.  It's just answering phones at a front desk, pretty easy.  I do need to mention, though, that the office may be a little… well, they recently lost a co-worker to suicide.  Do you think you'd be able to deal with that?"

"Yeah... I mean, I'm sure I can handle it."

"Of course you can!  We know you can, in fact, that's why we called you for this job!"

I'm speaking to a temp agent I've never met (the agent who interviewed me was laid off a while ago) at an agency that has given me a total of two assignments since I signed up about six months ago, and I'm being told that they called me specifically because they believe in my ability to competently perform in an office where the atmosphere might be a bit, well, morbid.  I guess I'm supposed to feel flattered (although "We heard the word 'suicide' and thought of you!" ain't exactly making me blush with pride), but it sounds to me like they've been having trouble filling the position, it being Thanksgiving week and all.  I've got nothing else on the calendar, though, so I accept the assignment, and I do have to say, it's nice of them to let me know ahead of time what I'll be dealing with.  I've said it a million times before:  temp agencies always leave out some important detail when they call me in for assignment, but this time, they're actually preparing me.  It's a Thanksgiving miracle!

It also sounds like it will be somewhat of a downer of a Thanksgiving week.  Ah, well.  Temps can't be choosers.  At least I'm just filling in for someone on vacation, and not for the person who killed himself.  That would be a little too weird, even for a temp with a renowned knack for dealing with grief-stricken strangers, as I suddenly appear to be.  Time to update the resume!

As I do before all my temp jobs, I take a moment to make a mental checklist of everything I'll be needing.  Not what I'll be needing to bring, since I always bring a timecard, a book, and my surly attitude, but what I'll be needing to steal.  At home, I'm low on toilet paper, sugar packets, Sharpie markers, AA batteries, and 1.2GHz Pentium III Sony VAIO Notebooks.  I should be able to scarf up at least some of those over the next few days.  What I really need, though, is a new mouse, since my left-click button isn't real keen on clicking anymore.  If there's a supply closet or a vacant office (which it seems there will be), I'll see if I can nab myself a mouse.

This job is on the outskirts of town, by the railroad, a small office with maybe fifty people in it.  The front door is locked and I need to be buzzed in by a very nice woman named Katherine, who shows me around a bit and introduces me to a few people.

"This is Chris," she says.  "He'll be answering the phones at the front desk, and just... pretty much just being a presence up front for us."

A presence, eh?  I've never heard myself described that way.  As I straighten my shoulders and rise to my full, towering five feet, seven inches, I'm sure I'm quite the presence.  Ominous, imposing, a veritable Cerberus of the cubicles, the very cubicles I'm covertly scanning for items on my shopping list.

I'm shown my post in the lobby.  "You will probably have to buzz a lot of people into the building," she says.  "We just had this security system installed, and people may be forgetting their access cards or not have them yet.  You can let delivery people in, UPS, FedEx, and the mailman, but everyone else will need to show you their ID badge.  If someone doesn't have a badge, or if you're unsure about anyone, come find me immediately."

Ech.  I hate overly security-conscious places.  This office makes furniture for their company's main office facilities.  It's a friggin' cabinet shop.  Why do they need to screen everyone who comes to the front door?  Are they afraid of some knobs and hinges being stolen?  Is the Columbian Cartel making a play for control of the particle board market?  Here I was hoping I could devote the day to doing crossword puzzles and stuffing stolen goods in my backpack, but now it seems I will have to look up from time to time.  How tiring.  At least I know what they don't:  the real thief is already in their midst.

Luckily, traffic in and out of the office is sparse, the phone doesn't ring often, and no one asks me to do anything but sit there.  When someone does call, they generally know the name of the person they're looking for or the extension they need, so it just becomes a matter of pressing buttons.  No one here asks me to do anything or gives me any work, so I play games online, read e-mail, and download the usual gang of chat programs.  The few people who actually talk to me just say hello and maybe introduce themselves, but that's about it.  Everyone seems very withdrawn, quiet, thoughtful and, well, depressed.  They are constantly asking each other, "Are you okay?" and "How are you holding up?"  I guess this co-worker must have been close to them.

One of the women who works near my desk tells me that she will be back in a few hours.  "I'm going to therapy," she says.

Well, therapy is definitely nothing to be ashamed of, but I'm not used to people announcing it as if it were a smoke break or trip to the bank.  I don't know what to say other than "Bye," as "Have fun!" and "Yeah, I gotta get me some o' dat!" don't seem particularly appropriate.

I walk into Katherine's office to ask her when I should take lunch, and she's sitting completely still, her eyes staring blankly at her computer screen.  I knock on her open door, and it still takes her a moment to notice me.  She tells me I can go to lunch whenever I'd like.

"Okay.  Is there anything I can do in the meantime?  Any copying or faxing or anything?"  I ask, breaking my cardinal rule of never asking for work.  Thing is, I'm pretty damn bored and the day is just dragging.

"No," she says.  "I think we're okay, and anyway, it really just helps us to have you up there."

In the afternoon, I buzz in a printer repair guy.  I always feel bad for printer repair guys, because as standard practice, no one ever knows which printer he is supposed to be repairing, least of all him.  Someone goes off to determine which printer is broken while the guy stands by my desk.

"Hey," he says loudly in broken English.  "Dis where hass-a-jess were?"

"What?"

"Hass-a-jess?" he says.  "Dis where dat guy took hass-a-jess lass week?"

"Uhh..."  What the hell is he talking about?  "I'm... I just started here today, I have no idea what you mean."

He is called away then, as the faulty printer has been located, and I sit there, wondering what he was talking about.  What the hell is hass-a-jess?  Haagen-Dazs?  Someone took some ice cream?

Lozenges, maybe?  Someone took some cough drops?

Hostages?

Someone took... hostages?

My tiny brain finally starts to make some faint whirring noises.

*pretty much just being a presence up front*

*we just had this security system installed*

*if you're unsure about anyone, come find me immediately*

*really just helps us to have you up there*

*I'm going to therapy*

Oh, balls.  I get online, and start looking through the local news from last week.  And then I find it.

What my temp agency told me:  they recently lost a co-worker to suicide.  Yeah.  Close.  Real close, guys.  Bang up job.

First of all, this was not a co-worker, this was a former co-worker.  And "suicide" is perhaps the understatement of the year, because, according to the article, this former co-worker, upset and angry over losing his job, burst into the building with a gun.  Burst through these very doors I'm sitting in front of, the ones that are now locked except when I decide to open them for somebody.  He then threatened two dozen or so of these people at gunpoint, these people I'm working with now.  He eventually released them, and as they were fleeing the building they heard the gun go off as he shot himself in the head.  Police swarmed into the area around the building, blocking off the streets, while a handful of employees hid in a conference room for hours, not knowing where the guy with the gun was, fearing for their lives.  A SWAT team finally got them out.

I really need to turn on the local news once in a while.

And my temp agency really needs to be severely beaten about the collective head and neck with a burning porcupine.  Surely, they knew the details.  And surely, they don't know me.  These poor people wanted a presence at the front desk while the regular person was away.  Only five days ago they'd had a gun shoved in their faces.  And my agency sends *me*?  These people wanted the Incredible Hulk doing reception duty.  Bruce Lee.  Conan the Barbarian.  What they got was a sleepy pipsqueak who, quite frankly, has let everyone into the building who asked to be let in, without doing much in the way of screening them.  When this job is over, I've got half a mind to head straight over to my temp agency, walk right in their front door, and turn in my time card *without* wishing them a happy Thanksgiving.  That's how upset I am.

With my new information, I take my security job a bit more seriously, even drawing angry remarks from an employee's husband, whom I keep outside for almost five minutes, doing everything but a rectal exam on him before someone else finally buzzes him in.   I can now also clearly see that the people I am working with are not just depressed or saddened, they're shell-shocked and traumatized, and I assume the therapy that was mentioned was arranged for all of them by their human resources department.  They stared down the barrel of a gun held by an enraged man.  They felt shock and terror.  Their lives flashed before their eyes, or, infinitely more likely, their deaths did.  Seeing someone run into the building with a gun, I would have figured I was dead, too.  Disgruntled current or ex-employees, storming a building with a gun or guns, picking specific targets or random ones, killing one or two or four or five or more, and then killing themselves… it happens everywhere and we all know how it goes.  Bloodbath followed by suicide.  And worst of all, most horrifying of all, is the fact that I can't steal anything from these people now.  It's just plain wrong to swipe a roll of TP or a handful of Sharpies.  They've lost enough, and even I have a conscience.  Plus, I don't see a mouse I really like anywhere.

At the beginning of my second and last day (I'm told they're closing the office on Friday and I won't need to be there), they inform me they'll be closing at noon but will pay me for the whole day.  Nice of them.  One of them women even gives me a goodie bag, containing a mini tool kit, a flashlight, a few pens, a compact umbrella, and not one, not two, but three small teddy bears, wearing tiny t-shirts with the company logo on them.  Sure, none of these are on my list, but sometimes, you have to take what you can get.  They've been pretty giving, and I'm pretty thankful, so I guess the theme of the holiday is upheld.  And I'll be even more thankful if I can remember to stop on the way home and buy toilet paper.

**Stinging in the Rain**

Today is my last day at the California Teacher’s Association, a two-week temp job that has proven to me both the value of a good education, and that teachers are absolutely retarded and evil.

The office is located in Oakland, a city I am beginning to find, well, a little alarming.  The other morning I parked my car, got out, and then watched as a SWAT team swarmed around me and into a hotel across the street.  Not a couple cops, but an entire SWAT team.  With machine guns and everything, just like in the movies.

I told my supervisor about it when I got to the office, and he said "Oh, you shouldn't park there.  That's a crack hotel."

Crack hotel?  I've heard of crack houses, but never a crack hotel.

I wonder if they have non-smoking rooms.

But back to the job.  Here at the C.T.A., we only deal with teachers who have problems, such as missing paychecks, overcrowded classrooms, and the inability to complete a coherent sentence. I understand that people can get very upset and agitated when they have an issue that is not being dealt with in a timely fashion, but some of these teachers are downright hysterical. One woman has come in every day this week, growing more and incomprehensible on each visit, until today, when I think her synapses all fired at once.

"-and my problem is just being ignored because for years this principal has been treating me like I don’t know what but I’m used to being treated differently because I’m a headstrong woman I mean at UCLA I was the first woman to wear pants and they had to chase me around the campus but this school and-it-was-I mean I don’t like to rabble-rouse and I mean don’t rock the boat but my rights are being complet-"

Here she takes a huge breath.

"-ly ignored and I know it’s because I’m a feminist and I know that men feel threatened by a woman with a brain but this principal I’m considering bringing in an attorney because I need some representation and I made some flyers and posted them everywhere because it’s become a matter of the government’s interference into the schools on a state level and the only prob-"

She sucks in another deep breath, and I take the opportunity to slyly chew off one of my hands, providing myself with an excuse to leave.

"Oops! I seem to have chewed off my own hand," I say. "Be right back."

Her lungs full, she looks around for someone to continue babbling at, and just then, the postal carrier arrives. He is doomed.

"-ably a matter for the courts right now because-"

She continues for, no lie, fifteen minutes, only pausing when her lungs become empty. She spews her flood of words at anyone who comes into range, not bothering to start over or determine if the person actually works here or not. It’s really kind of disconcerting to think that she works with children.  Of course, I find most children to be erratic and incomprehensible as well, so maybe it's a good match.

Since the SWAT incident, I've been parking much further away from the office, somewhere that seems a little safer, outside a crack retirement home about five blocks from the office.  I'm on my way back after lunch now, and I'm soaked, as it's been pouring rain all week and I have no umbrella.

I am beginning to notice a social barrier, not dissimilar to the smoker/non-smoker rift that exists in this country. This occurs to me as I am hurrying along the sidewalk in the downpour, feeling big drops of rain hit my head, and feeling bigger drops hit me from the edges of the so-called protective awnings and canopies above the vandalized store fronts.

I hate awnings. I mean, let's be honest: sure, they keep you dry while you stand under them, but as soon as you try to step out, bam! You get a tennis ball-sized drop of water right down your collar or on your glasses from the edge of the awning, where it has been clinging gleefully, just waiting to drop on you. And I know this has happened to everyone, because they told me. I'd also like to know what scientific principle explains why the drops of water from the awnings are always ten times colder than the actual rain.

Anyway, I am moving along the sidewalk as fast as I can, and ahead of me are three guys with big umbrellas, walking side by side. The sidewalk is only so wide, and their umbrellas keep them farther apart from each other than they would normally walk, even though guys walk far apart anyway so people won't think they're gay (and don't even get me started on how guys sit when they go to the movies together).

So, I can't get by them without going into the street and getting killed by a bus or gunfire from a passing SWAT team. And they're just taking their time, walking incredibly slowly, under their huge umbrellas, preventing me from passing or reaching "safety" under the next awning. Totally inconsiderate, I think.

And lest anyone think I am being unfair to the male umbrella-carrying population, a few blocks later I am behind two women in the same situation. Can't pass, and they're walking very slowly, and then, get this, they stop and hug. While they hug, their umbrellas stick way out on both sides, preventing me from dashing by, so I have to stop and wait, in the pouring rain, for this show of affection to cease. As I stand there dripping, I figure, "Well, they're probably going their separate ways and won't see each other for a while, so sure, why not have a hug."

No. They start walking again, together. They weren't even saying goodbye or anything. I have to get extra wet because one woman probably said something like, "Cindy, your hair looks so good today," and the other probably said, "Oh, Cheryl, you're soooo sweet!" And then they both said, "Hug!"

Tomorrow I am going to inch along the sidewalk holding an umbrella the size of an above-ground swimming pool, stopping every few feet to hug.

Even if I'm alone.

Even if it’s not raining.

I only have about two hours left until I'm done here. This job has been somewhat of a downer because, being school-related, they have no budget, and therefore no cool stuff to steal. It’s a challenge locating a few staples or a Post-It note, let alone enough to load my pockets with. I mean, the floor of my car has more office equipment than their whole supply closet. I don’t even have a computer, just some weird thing people keep calling a "typewriter." I can’t get it to work, because someone apparently stole the mouse. Ha ha. I am young.

There’s a nice older man who works there, Todd, who I’ve helped out from time to time during the week. I like Todd, he seems capable but a bit absent minded, and helping him out beats trying to wrestle teachers to the ground and inject them with sedatives.  Todd leads me over to his file cabinets. "Okay," he says. "What I want you to do is this."

He opens two half-empty drawers, and starts pulling files out of both of them.

"I basically want you to take these files," he says, pulling out the files, "and put them in this drawer," he puts them in the drawer, "and then take these files," he takes out some other files, "and put them in this drawer," and he puts them in the other drawer. "So, just, basically moving these files into that one" he says, again pulling out more of the files, "and those files into this one," and he puts the files in the drawer. "So, these in here," he demonstrates again, pulling out the remaining files, "and those in there," he says as he finishes the task completely.

"Let me know if you have any questions." He walks over to his desk to work on something else.

I do have a question. But I don’t ask it. I just stand there by the file cabinets for about ten minutes. Then I say, "Done!"

He gets me started on another task, which involves taking files that are stacked on the floor, sorting them by name and district, and putting them in a empty drawer. This is a huge task, as there are hundreds of files, and I don’t know how he expects me to get them done before the end of my last day.

As I yank the drawer open, it comes completely apart in my hand. Long metal things slide out of the side and fall in a clatter on something that can only be described as my foot, causing what can only be called immense pain.

It takes almost an hour just to get the drawer fixed, and by fixed I mean "still broken but not evident unless anyone tries to open it." Of course, I still have to organize the files and load them into the drawer.

There’s only an hour left before I’m done with this job, but luckily I am experienced in these types of things, so I kick into high gear, shove all the files in the broken drawer in random order, ram it shut, get my paycheck signed, and split.

That’s the great thing about being a temp. You can just shove some crap in a drawer and run away forever. You don’t have to deal with the day, a few weeks or months down the line, when someone will open the drawer and actually try to find something. There’s no stammering and shame as you try to come up with an excuse for such a poorly done job, you’re already across town, screwing up someone else’s office. Chances are, five other temps have worked there before or since, there’s no way they can single you out and rat on you to your agency.

If I ever write a movie about temps (blockbuster! you’re thinking) I know what the first scene will be.

I’ve seen this in dozens of movies: it’s nighttime, there’s an office, dimly lit. A window slides open, a thief (or our hero, the private detective) creeps inside, dressed in all black. There is a click and a small circle of light dances over the walls to a desk, then a file cabinet. He pulls the drawer open, flips through some perfectly alphabetized files, finds the one he wants immediately, sets it on the desk, takes pictures of the contents with a little camera, and then he’s gone, silent and stealthy.

My movie would have a scene like that, only when the thief/hero opens the drawer, it falls apart and metal things land on his foot. Then he begins searching through the files, but they’re horribly out of order. There seems to be no system to these files, even random placement doesn’t account for how jumbled and chaotic they are. After three hours of searching, he finds the file he needs, but the contents are only a copy of the "Kirk vs. Picard" list office workers love to hang in their cubicles. Frustrated, he goes through another cabinet, then another, hours pass, the sun comes up, and the thief is finally forced to flee, unfulfilled, much like the audience, who has sat and watched some guy look through a cabinet for three hours.

Don't worry.  If there's a sequel, I'll add a SWAT team.

**Nothing 'Bout The Truth**

Wednesday morning I get a call from my temp agency at about ten minutes to eight.  Can I be in San Francisco by 9:30 to work for the leasing office of a luxury apartment building?  For a one-day assignment?  Dress business casual?  Not drool on anything?

There's more, but I don't really hear it.  I'm kind of asleep.  Still, I stumble into the shower, put on the least-wrinkled outfit I've got, and head to the address I've been given.

I arrive on time and get my instructions, which wake me up a little bit more.  Basically, I'm asked to spend the day lying to people.

The deal is, these luxury apartment buildings generally cooperate with each other in the spirit of gouging the shit out of tenants and keeping their rental rates sky-high.  However, the company I'm working for has begun to suspect that their competition is keeping secrets from them (gasp!) and may be offering better rent than they claim and including a free month for people who sign a twelve month lease, thereby stealing new tenants.  This is where I come in.  My task is to go around to other luxury apartment buildings in downtown San Francisco and pretend I'm looking to rent a one-bedroom apartment to find out what sorts of deals are being offered.

We're talking apartments in high-rise buildings.  In San Francisco.  We're talking monthly rent of over $2000.  Obviously, I can't go in there saying I'm a temp.

"Tell them whatever you want," the woman says.  "Tell them you're a hot-shot lawyer.  Tell them you're a marketing executive.  Tell them you're a rock star.  Whatever, just have fun!"

I'm standing there in my faded black pants and my frayed green button-down with my beat-up old leather backpack.  My breath smells like coffee and Camel Lights.  There are probably things stuck to my eyelashes.  I don't think I can tell them just anything.

Still, it promises to be an interesting day.  And a tiring day, as I will be on foot and, looking at these addresses, I've got a lot of ground to cover.  I have seven luxury apartment buildings to visit and about seven hours to do it.  The nice thing, it seems, is that I'll be on my own all day.  No one looking over my shoulder, no boring spreadsheets or sticky desktops or phones to answer.  Doesn't sound too bad.

I set up a few morning appointments, leave my cell phone number with a few other places so they can call me to arrange afternoon meetings, and head out the door.  As I wander toward the first apartment complex, I try to come up a with game plan.  I need a good lie.

I've been asked to mystery shop in the past, but it's always been for retail stores, and it's always been at the request of the corporations that own the retail stores.  They do it to spy on their employees, to ensure they're providing acceptable customer service.  Are they being polite?  Helpful?  Considerate?  Patient?  More importantly, are they pushing the things the corporate executives want them to push?  As a shopper, am I being asked to sign up for a discount card?  Am I being offered 10% off the day's purchases for starting an account?  Are sales and specials being shoved down my gullet until I want to kill somebody?  Good, that's apparently the goal.

I reach my first luxurious target around ten o'clock, a five-building complex about two blocks from the bay.  I've decided I'll stick as close to the truth as possible, and tell them I work at a dental school I actually used to work at.  I know the address and the names of the faculty and feel I could speak convincingly and at length about the place, but in order to manage the paycheck I'd need to afford an apartment in the city, I decide I'll say I'm the executive assistant to the Dean and have been for five years.  And, you know, maybe say I also do a lot of freelance writing on the side.  I should be able to pull that off.

After filling out a card with my name, address, and phone numbers, I meet the leasing agent, Sarah, and she offers me coffee.  I inform her I'm looking for a one bedroom apartment, and I'd like to see what she's got to offer.  Sarah is very pleasant and funny, and we hit it off right away.  We chat as we walk through the courtyard, and I tell her where I'm from and what I'm pretending to do for a living.  It seems to be going really well.

The apartment is nice.  Small, but nice.  I get the price from her, and find out they're offering two months free rent if I sign a lease before the end of the month.  I get the square footage, inquire about what else is available, fulfilling my covert duties, but mainly, I just talk.  Some truth, mostly lies, but it's a fun conversation we have, covering politics, our childhoods, backgrounds, and the differences between living on the East and West Coasts.

I take some brochures and her card and head on to my next appointment.  So far, so good!  I'm actually enjoying myself.

At the next place, I'm offered more coffee and a donut, too, and I gladly accept both.  It had been a long uphill walk to reach this place, and I've still got a long way to go today, but if this free coffee keeps up I should be able to keep my strength.  The agent at this building, Bruce, shows me around.  We look at the on-site gym, the pools and Jacuzzis, the entertainment room for parties, the video conferencing room for meetings, and finally, the room for rent.  It's nice, a lot nicer than the first place.  I get the required info, but mainly, Bruce and I talk about baseball.  I lie a little more, telling him I split club level seats at PacBell with a guy I work with.  I blather on about all the freelance writing I've been doing, and tell him I have a weekly humor column in nine newspapers nationwide, though I hope that will increase in the coming days.  We chat a lot.  It's fun!  And it's a pack of lies!

I hit another place before noon, getting some cookies and juice and bullshitting my ass off, throwing in a fictitious freelance copywriting job I have (mostly brochures and ad copy), then head to lunch.  My feet are starting to hurt from all the walking, but I'm having so much fun lying about myself that I don't care.  I even do something I've never done as a temp:  I have a working lunch.  While I eat, I transcribe the notes I've taken.  Wow.  Pretending I'm a hard worker has apparently made me a hard worker.

Even walking through town, I feel different.  Telling people how successful I am has made me actually feel successful.  Pretending I can afford these places has made me feel wealthy.  I seem to be buying my bullshit as much as everyone else.  None of the leasing agents have looked at me like I can't afford these apartments.  No one has expressed any doubt about my stories.  I'm sticking close enough to the truth to be able to lie quickly and convincingly, without hesitation, and little details are popping out of my mouth when I need them.  Hey, I'm a great liar!

And even people I don't talk to buy my lies.  Aren't people on the street acting differently towards me?  Cloaked as I am in this fictitious success, this phantom wealth, this fake confidence, aren't men parting for me on the sidewalk?  Aren't more people smiling as they pass?  Is it my imagination, or are women looking at me differently, even hungrily?  Yes, it's my imagination.  Especially that cute, curvy brunette who rips off my clothing and pleasures me on the hood of a parked BMW.  That part is definitely my imagination.

Now, it's off to a super swanky apartment tower, and I'm excited because I've always wanted to live in a tower.  These places will be nicer, they'll have views of the city and the bay.  I've already learned that a tiny apartment with a view will cost a lot more than a large apartment without one, so I'm going to have to beef up my fictitious resume.  And, if I'm going to pretend to be richer, I'm going to have to pretend to be snobbier.  My plan is to be skeptical and act unimpressed with whatever they show me, to see what I can get them to offer in the way of signing bonuses.

My plan falls apart when I step into an empty apartment on the 23rd floor of the tower.  It's an enormous apartment with huge windows overlooking the Bay Bridge.  Spacious, and with a view.  Holy shit.

"Holy shit," I say.

Terri, the woman showing me the unit, laughs.  I don't laugh.  I almost cry.

This place is beautiful.  Stunning.  I can only imagine how the view looks at night.  I walk toward the windows, and it takes me a long time to get there; the apartment is narrow, but deep.  There's a little outdoor patio, and I step onto it, feeling the cool breeze blowing over me, staring in wonder at the San Francisco Bay and the miniature sailboats zig-zagging their way across it.

Holy shit.  I want to live here.

I spend a long, long time wandering around the apartment.  Way too long;  I'm going to be late for my next appointment, but I don't want to leave.  To Terri, I seem to really be mulling it over, and sadly, I really am.  I'm picturing my stuff here.  Ah, screw that, I'm inventing stuff I don't have and picturing that stuff here.  The money I'm pretending to make is definitely enough to afford this place, what with the book deal I invented on the ride up in the elevator.  Terri asks if I'd like to leave a deposit, and I think about my checkbook, deep down in my ripped and scuffed backpack.  Not my real checkbook, mind you, my pretend one.  My pretend checkbook that contains checks that wouldn't wind up in orbit over China the second my pen hit the paper.

Holy shit.

I'm eventually off to my next appointment, somewhat in a daze.  My feet are aching, now, as they take me away from the place I want to spend the rest of my life, the life I don't actually, honestly, lead.  I'm headed to another tower that's even taller and no doubt more expensive.  I'd better invent myself some more money, stat.

Well, this tower is like the last one, only about five times as nice.

"So," Lucy, the leasing agent, says, "I see you've checked off on the form that you make $80,000 dollars a year."  She looks at me over her glasses.  "Do you have supplemental income?"

$80,000 a year isn't enough for a one bedroom apartment in this building, apparently.  Cripes.

So, I tell Lucy about my three-book deal with Viking Penguin, and we talk books for about twenty minutes.  There are other authors living in the building, she informs me.  She can't say which ones, of course.  I tell her I might know some of them, since I've also been ghost writing for a couple of fairly well-known authors for the past six years.  I can say which ones, of course.

Lucy and I get along great.  She's adorable, and though I'm usually nervous and dorky around attractive, outgoing women, I feel really comfortable around her, like I've felt with everyone I've met and lied to today.  We chat and laugh for almost a half-hour before even taking the elevator to the 40th floor to view the apartment.

The apartment.  Damn.  I didn't think I could beat the view of the last place.  This is a corner unit, with huge windows in two walls.  The late afternoon sun splashes across the hardwood floors, bathing us in orange light.  The city looks beautiful.  I can see the financial district, Nob Hill, Alcatraz, and way, way over there, shrouded in fog, the Golden Gate Bridge.

There is a nice, wide wooden ledge around the inside of the windows, and Lucy and I sit and gaze out over the city.  I can't even begin to pretend I don't love it.  "It's perfect," I say.  And it is.  I spend the next half hour staring dumbly out the window while trying to explain to Lucy why I won't put down a deposit on this admittedly perfect apartment.

It's approaching 5:30 as I make my way painfully back to the people that hired me to lie all day.  My feet, well, I'm pretty sure I'm walking on stumps by this point, judging from the alternating dull throbs and sharp, stabbing pain from my lower extremities.  My cellphone informs me it is dying and I shut it off, sympathizing completely.  I don't have any more appointments today, anyway.  I walk into the leasing office I began in this morning, exhausted both from walking and telling lies, and present them with my information.

As I bend over to unzip my bag and get a timecard, I drive my forehead into the corner of the reception counter with a nice meaty thukk.  I'm stunned for a second, and I feel blood spill down my forehead and onto the bridge of my nose.  It makes my feet stop hurting for a moment, anyway.

My timecard signed, I head back out on the street and waste no time in immediately stepping in gum.  I turn my phone on, which survives long enough to inform me that my temp agency had called while it was turned off, and then the battery dies completely.  I rush around on aching feet, my head dripping blood, until I find a payphone in a bar.  I use the last of my change, change I'll no doubt need for the bus a while later, to return the call, only to find that they'd given someone else the assignment since they couldn't reach me.

Hm.  This all seems very familiar... oh, yeah, I'm back to being me.  Gone is the wealthy, successful writer with a book deal and season tickets.  As soon as the flood of lies had stopped, I was jarringly myself again.  Broke, jobless, unlucky, bleeding from the head, and with a wad of gum stuck to my shoe.

My feet blistered and my legs aching, I finally arrive back in town, across the bay from all those beautiful views.  All that awaits me at home is my crummy apartment with its view of a thrift store and donut shop, made even crummier now by the life I had glimpsed.  Depressing.  I can't even climb the stairs to my apartment, it's so damn depressing.  I head to the bar on the corner for a drink instead.  Men don't part for me on the street.  Women, even in my imagination, don't look at me hungrily, or at all.

I sip my drink, feeling the warm throb in my gut and the cold blood drying on my forehead, and think about the day.  It had been fun, for the most part, a lot of fun, and I start to wonder why.  I'd been talkative with strangers -- intelligent, chatty, attractive strangers, the type I normally can't talk to without first absorbing copious amounts of booze.  Why had it been so easy today?  Because of the lies?  Because I was playing a part?  Because I wasn't being myself?

No, I think that's wrong.  I was being myself.  I was witty and charming, and I can be both under the right circumstances.  When things are going my way, when I'm happy, I get confident and outgoing.  When I feel good about myself I stop being so sullen and shy and talk to people.  I did that today, and though it was through an impenetrable curtain of lies, I never stopped feeling like I was still being myself.

I think I had fun because I got to be successful.  Because the bright, promising future everyone seems to think I have was instead the bright, promising present.  Because the things I dream of were there, not just in my head, but out there, not dreams at all but facts, as far as anyone else knew.  Like I said, even I bought my bullshit.

Yeah, I'm pretty sure I was myself today. The lies just helped me relax enough to think quickly and gave me the confidence to untie my tongue.  But I was myself, I was me.  And, if not me, then at least the me I wish I could be.

**Key To The Shitty**

So, to stave off my filing duties today, I started reading everything I was supposed to be filing.  I know, reading it doesn't sound much better than actually filing it, and it wasn't, for the most part.  Until I found... it.

Okay.  The company I am working for has a number of facilities, and over the course of the next five or six years, they will be building more facilities.  One way to insure that these new facilities are planned and built well is to inspect and evaluate the existing facilities.  So, some people go out to these old buildings and poke around in order to create a report, a report I came across today.  A report titled: "Key Findings."

There are some basic things you might expect in this report.  For instance, poor planning may have led to the creation of a conference room without enough room for a large department staff to meet in, or possibly a copier room with not enough counter space to collate documents, hallways without ample lighting, delivery bays with low clearance, the sorts of things you've probably encountered in the building you work in.  Things that annoy everyone, but cannot be rectified since the place has already been built.

Thus, you can see the usefulness of the Key Findings report.  By finding out the problems before the new place has been built, a great many of them can be avoided.  This isn't rocket science, of course, but if you dig a little deeper into this report, as I did, you'll find something fairly amazing.

A typical entry will display the details of the fault in the existing facility, and then add the "Lessons Learned" to state (fairly obviously) how this can be avoided the next time around.  And I (sort of) quote:

Amenities Room  
Amenities Room did not include drawers for utensil and condiment storage.

Lessons Learned:  Amenities Room should include drawers for eating/serving utensils.

Okay.  Duh.  Basic stuff there.  Let's move on.

Reception Area  
Pencil drawer under desk does not leave enough room for knees to be placed comfortably if chair height is adjusted.  Reception Desk is also too deep to comfortably pass papers across; a lazy susan is used.

Lessons Learned:  Reception desk should allow enough knee space so chair height may be adjusted for proper comfort and ergonomic positioning.   Desk should not be too deep to pass papers across.

So.  Now we're peering at pencil drawers and scrutinizing desk dimensions.  Good.  Good.

Corridor  
This corridor is 164 feet long and alcoves (for art or plants) were not provided.  Corridor is long and sterile, lacking softness and interest.

Lessons Learned:  Adjustments to the hallway can create a feeling of warmth and alleviate an institutional feeling with the use of soft or tone-on-tone colors, artwork, special lighting, and by breaking up long corridors with alcoves.

Who the hell ever thinks about a corridor?  It's a freaking corridor!  Damn, these guys are thorough...

Public Lav  
The spout on counter mounted soap dispensers does not project into the sink bowl.  The end of the spout stops short of the bowl and is 1 inch above sink rim making it difficult to insert hand and dispense soap.

Lessons Learned:  The spout length on counter mounted soap dispensers must be coordinated with the sink size.

Now we're getting somewhere.  They're in the bathroom, noting the problems with the soap dispensers.

Do you see?  Do you?  They're in the bathroom, noting the problems with the soap dispensers.

I.

WANT.

THIS.

JOB.

I need this job.  I was born for this job.  I could bring meaning to this job, and this job could bring meaning to me.

Just think.  I would get paid to bitch.  To criticize.  To look at things and find fault.  To investigate, evaluate, and HATE.  My God.  I need this.  I need to be able to walk into a building and immediately begin passing judgment on everything in my sight.

To find everything.  Lacking.  In something.

And not only that, but to be paid to do it!  My reports would be hundreds of pages long, I feel.  Nothing would be safe.  Potted plants, keyboard trays, bulletin boards... nothing.  And not just the bulletin board, but how the bulletin board was hung, and by what, and the condition of the cork on the board, and the things hanging on the board, and the things holding the things hanging on the board...  I would find something wrong with all of it.  The facility that was built after my report was handed out would be perfect!

And if it wasn't, well, I'd just pay it a visit with my humongous clipboard in hand.

Of course, pessimist that I am, I already see some drawbacks.  First of all, I assume much of the information in the report is gleaned from the staff who inhabit the building being reviewed.  Do I really want to listen to a bunch of secretaries bitching about their pencil drawers and light fixtures?  Even for pay?  I don't think so.

The other problem would be:  could I turn it off, this critical eye?  I once did continuity for television, and I had trouble not doing continuity after getting in the habit, would this be any different?  Would my everyday life be affected?  Would I be able to, say, meet a dog on the street and not find fault with him?

Dog  
Dog met on street is not happy enough to see me.  Tail not waggly enough, does not slobber convincingly, nor does he appear to be my best friend.  Bad breath.

Lessons Learned:  Dogs met on street must be overjoyed at being pet by me and must respond positively to words such as "Who's a biggie wiggie woogie doggie?  Who is?  Who is?"  Altoids must be administered before dog attempts face-licking.

What about (and this is purely hypothetical) if I went on a date?

Woman on Date With Me  
Woman on date with me does not throw herself at me within the first five minutes of first meeting me but instead wishes to make hours of conversation.  Much money spent plying her with drinks that could be spent elsewhere, such as at baseball games and on honey barbeque wings.  Once inebriated, woman insists I give it to her "hard" and "all night long."  Woman is obviously confusing me with someone who has more (or some) sexual prowess.

Lessons Learned:  Woman on date should instantly drag me off to bed without the need for talk/money spent.  Once there, she should be aware that I can only give it to her clumsily and for a duration of 25 to 45 seconds, maximum.  Lower woman's expectations or possibly subcontract more durable replacement(s) for all-night giving-it-hard-to duties.

Hell, I might even turn my scathing gaze upon this very website.

Notmydesk.com  
Site colors displeasing to eye.  Daily updates not presented daily as claims indicate.  Self-deprecation grows repetitive (see above (and current)).  Entries often end with "See you tomorrow" or other such cop-outs.

Lessons Learned:  Only allow blind people to read website.  Stop claiming to update daily.  Do not deprecate self so much, you pathetic, short, balding asshat.

**We Interrupt This Essay**

So, I went to work this morning.  Did some filing.  Took a smoke break around 10:30am.  Went back upstairs, and did some more filing.  It was really lame.  Around 12:30, I went out for lunch, and th—

\*WE INTERRUPT THIS BORING ESSAY IN ORDER TO PROVIDE A MORE EXCITING VERSION.\*

Around 12:30, I went out for lunch, and was suddenly grabbed by strong hands and forced into an alleyway.  Shoved against a wall, I was roughly spun around to find myself looking down a gun barrel.

"You're a temp here, right?" the ugly man with the gun demanded.

"OH JESUS PLEASE DON'T KILL ME SIR!" I wailed pathetically.

"Answer the question."

"OH NO PLEASE I DON'T WANNA DIEEEE!" I shrieked, feeling my bladder let go, completely soaking my pa—

\*WE INTERRUPT THIS EXCITING ESSAY IN ORDER TO PROVIDE THE SAME EXCITING UPDATE, BUT WITH MUCH LESS WUSSINESS\*

"You're a temp here, right?" the ugly man with the gun demanded.

"Didn't your mother teach you it's not polite to point?" I asked coolly, knocking the gun out of my face.

The ugly man glared at me.  "Well, from now on, you temp for the mob.  Got it?"

I lit a cigarette as if I were unimpressed.  It wasn't hard.  "How are the benefits?"

"The benefits," he growled, cocking the pistol, "are that I don't blow your brains out."

"Go ahead.  Don't need 'em anyway," I said, blowing smoke in his face.  "I'm filing all afternoon."

"Listen, you punk," the ugly man with the gun said, "I'm—

\*WE INTERRUPT THIS EXCITING ESSAY IN ORDER TO PROVIDE SOME SEXINESS\*

"Listen, you temp stud," the beautiful woman with the gun said, "I'm putting you to work right now... on me."

She let her trench coat fall to the ground, exposing her smooth, supple body, barely covered in a lacy black negligee.

"But I'm on my lunch break," I said, gazing at her through the smoke of my cigarette.  "That'll cost you extra."

She pressed herself against me.  "Consider it overtime, because that's what I'll expect from you.  Overtime."

"Oh, I dunno," I said, "I don't think I can do overtime.  See, I don't last long in bed.  At all.  It's, y'know, kind of a problem I have, and, um... well, I just... I think it's from being insecure or something, see... I j--

 \*WE INTERRUPT THIS EXCITING, SEXY ESSAY BECAUSE SOME WUSSINESS HAS APPARENTLY CREPT BACK IN.  GODDAMMIT.\*

"Overtime," I said.  "Not a problem.  Show me the clock, baby, I know where to punch it."

"I just hope you-- oh my God!  Dinosaur!  Over there, a dinosaur!" she screamed.

"Dinosaur?"

\*DINOSAUR?\*

"Follow me!" I yelled, grabbing her hand and running from the alley, as the claw-footed Deinonychus raced toward us, gnashing its powerful jaws in ravenous hunger.

"Quick, onto my magic carpet!" the woman with the gun cried.  "We'll be safe if we can only reach the moon!"

We leapt onto the carpet together, uttering Migglebee's Chant of Wonderous Flight in unison, and—

\*OKAY, I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON HERE.  CAN WE GO BACK TO THE EXCITING ESSAY WITH SEXINESS?\*

We collapsed onto the carpet together, pulling at each others clothing, limbs entwined, while I wept and offered preemptive apologies for failing to please her, as I knew I surely would.  She to—

\*OH, RIGHT.  FORGOT THE WUSSINESS HAD INVADED THAT ONE.  BACK UP ANOTHER STEP OR SO, PLEASE\*

I collapsed onto the ground, begging the man with the gun not to kill me.  "OH NO PLEASE DON'T A-SHOOT ME IN THE FACE NOT MY PRECIOUS FAAAAAAACE—

\*CHRIST.  LET'S JUST GO BACK TO THE FIRST ESSAY\*

After lunch (I had Wendy's), I went back to the office, did some more filing, and came home.

Kind of a boring day.

With a dearth of temp jobs out there, it's becoming clear I need to find new ways to practice my craft.

(My craft is temping, in case that wasn't clear.)

Companies are being picky about the temps they'll hire these days, insisting on personally interviewing them, rather than simply accepting whatever random, glassy-eyed, troglodytic chowderhead the agency sends over, as they used to.  This has certain chowderheads worried, and looking for other options.

(The chowderhead in question is me, in case that wasn't clear.)

Luckily, I think I may have found the answer.  This afternoon, while taking my morning constitutional, I had an idea.  I saw this fellow who had set up an easel near my apartment, and was standing there painting a picture of a nearby building.  I see these artist types every so often, sometimes painting pictures of lakes or trees or historic streets.  In addition to the painters, I sometimes see people practicing Tai Chi in the park, or doing that thing where they have a stick in each hand, and they use the sticks to whack a third stick in circles without letting it hit the ground.

So, my first thought was that I could just go out and temp!  Outside!  Near a lake, or perhaps in a park or courtyard.  If people can paint, Chi, and whack in public, why can't I temp?  I could set up a little desk with a little phone and a little keyboard and a little page-a-day calendar, and just get to work!  File things!  Forward calls!  Mislabel folders!  Take breaks!  Knock off early!

Then again, simply temping near a pond or in a copse of trees isn't exactly going to be profitable, which led to my second idea:  It's time to take my temping to the streets!

(My second idea was that it's time to take my temping to the streets, in case that wasn't clear.)

Lots of people these days can be seen hard at work on our nation's streets.  There are performance artists, street-corner poets, and disheveled people trying to raise your interest in religion by screaming bible passages at you, but if you ignore all those freaks, you'll see people playing guitars in train stations and playing harmonicas in stairwells, and others juggling or dancing or singing right out on the sidewalk, always in front of dollar-filled cups or guitar cases.

These street artists are folks who are not discouraged by a lack of regular paying gigs, a lack of performance halls, a lack of interest in their work, or a lack of talent.  They're just out there, working their craft and making money.  Why not me?  I figure if I sit at a desk on the sidewalk or in front of a store and perform my temping duties, such as filing or typing or napping, and someone comes by and drops $18 into my coffee mug every hour, I'll be all set!

You may be thinking, "Gosh, what a great idea!", in which case I'd like you to e-mail me whatever great idea you're currently thinking about, because mine clearly sucks.  No one is going to walk by and drop $18 into my cup.  I doubt I'd even get a parking validation or a slice of cake from Cathy's birthday party.  I mean, there's no Cathy!  And no party for her!  Still, there are ways I can improve my cash intake by being, to use the street vernacular, "proactive."

At one time or another, you've probably driven through a large city and, while stopped at a traffic light, had your windshield cleaned by a friendly and energetic street person, right?  I could do something like that, only instead of washing your windshield with grayish water and an old shirt, I would reach in through the passenger window and quickly organize the spare change in your ashtray, or alphabetically file all the papers in your glove compartment.  If the light was long enough, I could bring you coffee, answer your cellphone for you, proofread the words printed on your side-view mirror, schedule you a tune-up and oil change, or arrange a conference call or luncheon with the people in the next car.

(The people in the next car are Phil and Nancy Cummings from Commack, Long Island, in case that wasn't clear.)

But wait, there's more!  Door-to-door temping, why not?  Kickin' it old school!  People used to make a living going door-to-door selling vacuum cleaners and encyclopedias, so why don't I pick up where they left off?  Actually, I already have, I'm broke and jobless.  But wouldn't a stay-at-home Mom or Dad find it empowering to have someone tidy up their cluttered desks and balance their checkbooks for them?  Who couldn't use someone around to enter the contents of their fridge into a spreadsheet, and wouldn't an extra pair of hands make forwarding those Inspirational-Thought-of-the-Day e-mails to your children and relatives a whole lot more efficient?

Yes.  Definitely.  I think door-to-door temping is the wave of the future, and I will be riding that wave on the surfboard of innovation, while wearing the swim-trunks of facilitation and getting the sunburn of progress.  And while I may be exaggerating just a tad, and while maybe not everyone needs a temp working in their home, at the very least, I should be able to find work answering the kitchen phone for somebody.

"Hello?  Yes, hi.  Yes, Mrs. Alexander would love to gossip with you about who that tramp Melissa Leary is dating these days, but she's a little tied up with a diaper-change right now... I could pencil you in for 4pm, right after her trip to the drugstore and before she folds the laundry."

Wouldn't that be useful?  I think so, and so I'm off to hit the streets.

(Oh, and Melissa Leary is dating me.  In case that wasn't clear.)

Is there anything nicer than a cold beer, a comfy hammock, a patch of sun-dappled shade, and a baseball game on the radio?  Top researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, after spending years exploring myriads of possibilities, have determined that the answer is yes.  There are, as it turns out, two things that are indeed nicer.  One is when MIT Head Research Administrator Dr. Gilbert Madison actually decides to eat a couple Altoids and not breathe his stupid garlic breath all over them all freakin' day long while they're trying to work, dammit, and the other is, as they put it, "beaucoup cleavage."

Topping the list of things not nicer than the beer/hammock/shade/baseball combo are: when you cut your bagel unevenly and it gets jammed in the toaster, Applebee's Restaurants, ingrown hairs, Donal Logue, genocide, sit-ups, and awkward segues into temping stories.

Speaking of which, I went and signed up with another temp agency this morning.  The routine is just about always the same, what with the paperwork, the interview, the more paperwork, the testing, the rest of the paperwork, the orientation video, the post-paperwork wrap-up, and then the revelation that they haven't had any new job orders in weeks and that you've just wasted your entire morning.  Then you fill out a few forms and you're done.

This time, however, there wasn't really an interview.  Usually, they'll want to talk to you a bit, find out a little about you, what you've done in the past, what kind of work environment you enjoy, and generally get a feel for the type of person you are.  They didn't do that at this agency, which was fine with me, because it doesn't matter the slightest whether you enjoy fast-paced, high-energy offices or sleepy little Mom & Pop operations.  They will plant you at the same sticky customer service desk wearing the same headset with the broken volume-control whether you describe yourself as a "people-person" or not.

Today, however, in lieu of an interview with an actual human being, I was given a "Personality Test" by the computer, which presented me with a series of about fifty statements, on things like workplace conduct, personal preferences, ethics, morals, ideals, sexual fetishes, etc.

Basically, it stated things like "Some employees find it easy to steal from employers, because most employers look the other way when it happens."

and:

"There are some circumstances in which it is conceivable that an employee may miss work without calling in to notify their employer."

Under each statement, there were five buttons:  Strongly Disagree, Disagree, In Between, Agree, or Strongly Agree.  Although I'd never taken a test like this for an agency before, my veteran temping instincts kicked in and I decided right at the outset exactly how I would handle this test.

My friend, who was signing up at the same agency simultaneously, scored a 95.  I scored slightly less.

"A FIVE?" the woman processing me said.

"Is that bad?" I asked, the stupidity of the question probably dropping me down to a negative 17.

She gave me a look, which I can only describe as "a look", and handed me the results, which were divided into two parts.  The first part showed my attributes, a list of two qualities that I can't even remember, because the second part, labeled "Areas to Explore", or in other words, "Areas in Which Chris Is A Total Fuck-Up", displayed a list of about 37 items.  I wasn't surprised that I hadn't passed with flying colors, considering my strategy, but I hadn't expected to completely fail with one pale, smudgy, badly-limping color, either.

My strategy, in case you were wondering, and let's face it, you were, because you're fascinated with me, was as follows:

First of all, Charles Manson could get a perfect score on this test, if he wanted to.  It was pretty obvious how to answer these things, namely, to strongly disagree with everything that might paint you as a lackluster employee, while strongly agreeing with things like "When I have completed my work, I go looking for more" and "I am always cheerful, no matter how stressful my job is."

My strategy did not allow for that, because my strategy called for honesty.  I'm not sure why my strategy called for this, frankly, and I'm really going to have to sit my strategy down and have a talk with it in the morning, and find out if it has been doing drugs and what sort of crowd it's been running around with, because my strategy should really know better than to fiddle around with this honesty crap by now.

I had also decided that both of the "strongly" buttons were right out.  If I agreed with something, I agreed with it.  I saw no need to modify it with "strongly."  And didn't the presence of "strongly" before "agree" seem to imply that to simply "agree" meant to "weakly" agree?  I was not appreciative of them implying that when I just plain agree with something, it is in a half-hearted manner, so I chose to ignore the "strongly" buttons, and furthermore, I didn't think that... boy, this really made sense to me while I was taking the test, somehow.  Crap.

Now, I'm not a rebel.  I'm not trying to rock the boat or the vote or the tree or the hizzouse.  But I don't like sucking up, and I don't like being led around by a computerized test.  It's obvious how they wanted me to answer, and I'm sure they'd be thrilled if I reprogrammed the test to add a buttons labeled "By Golly I Sure Do Strongly Agree Very Strongly, Darn Tootin' You Betcha!" and "My Good Holy Lord In Heaven, I Would Never, Ever So Much As Think Of Taking A Slightly Longer Lunch Because My Boss Was Away, And Anyone Who Would Do Such A Thing Is Not Worthy To Pass Through The Digestive System of a Diseased Hyena."  Bah.  Bah, I say!

So I failed, and spectacularly so.  It was made worse by the way the computer parsed my answers, because in my "Areas to Explore" results, agreeing to a statement like: "Some employees find it easy to steal from employers, because most employers look the other way when it happens", while certainly honest, would print out as my result: "Feels it is easy to steal from employers."  This is not an exaggeration, this is what it really said.

I also agreed with things like: "There are some circumstances in which it is conceivable that an employee may miss work without calling in to notify their employer."  My logic was, if I had 3rd degree burns over 90% of my body or if I'd had my belly ripped open by a distressed mandrill, or if I was, you know, DEAD OR SOMETHING, it was conceivable that I might not call them.  The result on the printout took none of my brilliant logic into account, and read something like: "Feels it is not necessary to call when missing work."

Ah, well.  I was honest.  Fuck them.  Strongly.  I handed her back the results and said "I stand by all my answers!"

She seemed amused by my response, at least, and said she'd submit me for two positions, and that I seemed professional, and capable, and my other test scores were great, and she would keep me in mind, and that she'd call me soon.

Honest!

Drawn And Quarterless

In a past life, I was probably someone who was amazingly honest with people.  Too honest.  I probably used the phrase "Yes, that outfit makes your butt look big" only slightly less often than "Wow, your child is exceedingly ugly."  I probably offended everybody with my tell-it-like-it-is nature, and perhaps I was able to handle the inevitable thrown fists or hurled daggers or crudely sharpened mammoth tusks (I'm not sure how long ago this past life was) that were jabbed at me as the result of my brutal honesty.

The karmic result is that, in the life I'm currently slouching my way through, I am: a) physically unable to fend off so much as a partially paralyzed seven year-old, and: b) completely incapable of telling lies.

Believe me, I have no personal objections to lying.  In fact, I should be good at it.  I'm creative, have a good imagination, possess nearly no morals whatsoever, and do a lot of stupid things that I should keep to myself.  It's just this:  I never manage to pull off a lie without some sort of hitch.

So, the other morning, I'm waiting for the bus, and I decide to buy a newspaper from one of those square metal vending machines you see on street corners.  I pop a quarter into it, pull the creaky little spring-loaded door down, and remove a paper from the top of the stack.  As I do this, a rather huge, angry looking guy comes up to me, and asks if I have a quarter.  Demands, really, that I have one.  For him.

"No, sorry, I don't.  Do you want a paper?" I ask, holding the vending machine door open for him.

"No, I need it for the bus," he snorts, as if this should have been obvious to me.  He glares at me expectantly, perhaps thinking that I should have checked with everyone in the vicinity, making sure they had ample coinage for the bus before squandering my last quarter on something as frivolous as a newspaper.  Then again, perhaps he's thinking that he could crush me into a disc the size of a quarter and feed me into the coin-intake slot on the bus, which he probably could.

"Oh.  Well, sorry, I don't have one."  He keeps staring at me, looking extremely mad, and I start to worry.  Is he going to beat me up?  Mug me?  Can I outrun him?  I hesitate, keeping the newspaper-vendor door open, thinking that if he makes a move, I can always jump onto the spring-loaded hatch, which would then snap upward and propel my tiny body onto the safety of a nearby rooftop.

Finally, he looks away disgustedly, and shoves his huge fists into the pockets of his bomber jacket, which is flecked with the blood and tissue of small, timid, harmless pipsqueaks like me.  Okay, his jacket isn't actually flecked with blood.  That's not true.

But neither is the fact that I don't have a quarter.  I have several, in fact, along with a couple dimes and nickels, in my backpack.  But I need them for the bus as well, not just for today but for all week.

So, I've gone and lied, and this always where the problems start.

I release the spring-loaded hatch of the newspaper vendor, which slams shut.  At the same moment, I feel an intense, jarring pain in my ears.  This is because as the door slammed shut, the locking bit snagged on the cord of my walkman, yanking the tiny earphones out of my ears.  If you've ever caught the cord of your earphones on anything, the kind of earphones that you actually stick into your ears, you know exactly what I mean.  It hurts enough to snag the cord on a stationary object, like a doorknob, and here I've snagged it on a piece of metal traveling at roughly 413 miles per hour.

Ouch.  The real problem, however, is that now the cord is stuck in the door of the vending machine, which is closed and locked.  As I rub my sore ears, I realize just how big a problem this is, since, although I have another quarter and can easily feed it into the machine, open the hatch, and get the cord out, I can't use that quarter while the big angry man to whom I've just lied about the aforementioned quarter is standing there, angrily, two feet away and facing in my general direction.

Cripes.  Am I going to have to abandon my earphones?  I try wiggling the door, I try pulling the cord, I try whimpering, but nothing works.  To make things worse, as I am hunched over, trying to slide the cord out, my backpack slips off my shoulder and hits the ground, making a noise I'd describe as:  "CHINGLE!"  It sounds as if every single bit of change I owned decided to gather in the same pouch and have their own little mosh pit.

Despite my change doing its best to broadcast its existence to the big angry man, he doesn't seem to notice.  He's watching the bus approach, and I relax for a moment, thinking, "Okay, he'll get on the bus and I'll be free to use my quarter."  Then, of course, the whole reason he asked for a quarter comes flooding back, along with the realization that I need to get on the bus myself, and I start jerking and yanking the cord like mad.

Finally, I decide to do a little pantomime, wherein I search the pockets of my backpack, in what I hope appears to be a rather hopeless fashion, with a look on my face that indicates: boy, what a futile search this is, as I'm positive I don't have any change in here, but I might as well look, 'cos you never know, right?  And then:  Lo!  What is this? my expression seems to say.  Do mine eyes deceive me?  Has fortune, in all Her wisdom, smiled upon me this day?  A quarter, I do declare, in my very sack, wherefore earlier there were but naught!

It's hard to get all this across with just facial expressions and body language, mind you, and it probably appears to any bystanders as though I'm having a major stroke.  Still, I persevere, finishing it all off with what I hope is a convincing double-take, as if I had just given up but then spotted something, my neck turning to the left and then snapping back hard enough to loosen a few fillings.  My eyebrows jump in surprise, as if a couple of eager fishermen had snagged them on the end of their hooks, and then I slowly produce the quarter in stark amazement.

My little pageant seems to have been for naught, because Angry Guy has begun stalking the other way down the sidewalk, possibly looking for an armored car to upend and shake vigorously until a quarter rolls out, so I just stick my quarter in the machine, yank the cord free, and hurry onto the bus.

So, once again, as always, I am horribly punished for fibbing.  I just hope I enjoyed that past life, the one I'm paying for now, and I hope karma will ease up on me in the next one.

'Cos I can't handle much more of this.  Honestly.

**The Temp That Time Forgot**

After chiseling my message on the stone tablet, I fasten it around the neck of the orangutan and give him a gentle push towards the customer service department. He scratches his privates for a moment, lets out a hoot, and scampers away in the direction of the engineering division.

I sigh. The office I am working in this week is a bit behind the times, technologically speaking.

I’m working for the city's sewer division. As receptionist, I'll be answering the smoke-signals, distributing crude drawings and pictograms, and sorting the dung and moss that comes in through the mail. Okay, perhaps I am exaggerating a bit, but they have some really antiquated equipment, software, and phones here, and it's the only city office that still accepts livestock as payment for sewer connection fees.

It's going to be one of those jobs. Lots of calls from the general public, hundreds of employees’ names to remember (while trying to forget the hundreds from previous jobs), and yet no actual work to do. There might be the occasional odd job such as taking a delivery over to City Hall or reassuring the employees that, regardless of what they've heard on the Talking-Box, the Earth is indeed flat.

This office really is out of date, and it's apparent in nearly every task I am given and every question I am asked.

"Can you see if a conference room is available?" Cathy, an engineer from Development Systems asks me. "Johnson botched the Mid-County sewer assessment project. He says the guy in Abacus Payable fouled up the figures, but we think he's possessed by evil demons, so we're going to flay him alive."

"Let's see," I say, flipping through the ancient, leather-bound book. "The River-God Room is free until the Sun-Hangs-Low-In-The-Sky. Then Marketing has it for a meeting."

"I don't think that's enough time," she says. "Let's see... tear off Johnson's skin, boil his eyes, the purification ritual... no, we'll need a room at least until The-Moon-Rises-Above-The-Treetops."

"Well, the Great Bear-Spirit Room is available until The-Rooster-Crows-Once."

"Perfect! And that's right near the breakroom and excrement-holes, too!"

I'm really bored. At my desk is a sign-up sheet for a Soft Tissue Injury Prevention class. It seems the entire office will be relocating to a cave across the street next month, and the Safety Department wants to make sure that no one hurts themselves carting their boxes and rocks and stuff around. I notice that only a handful of people have signed up for the class, so I wind up the phone and call the guy in charge to offer my recruitment services.

"I can write up some sort of motivational memo," I offer. "Maybe people just aren't aware of the class."

He grunts in the affirmative so I set out to create a memo that will make soft tissue injury prevention sound interesting and important.

After a few hours of staring at a blank screen, I throw that idea away and instead write this:

SOFT TISSUE INJURY PREVENTION!!!

Has this ever happened to you? You're at a party, surrounded by people who are all talking about how to prevent injuries to soft tissue. You'd like to participate but you realize you don't know all that much about soft tissue injury prevention!!!

Well, kiss this social faux pas good-bye, because this month you can be the envy of all your friends and neighbors by attending the Soft Tissue Injury Prevention Class!

The class will cover these exciting topics:

1) Soft tissue

2) Injuries pertaining to soft tissue

3) How to prevent injuries pertaining to soft tissue

4) Soft tissue as a metaphor in post-Reconstructionist literature

5) Your soft tissue and You: A bond of trust

6) How to spot soft tissue from quite a long way off

7) Some other stuff about soft tissue

And much more! So sign up now and receive a free six-month subscription to Soft Tissue Digest and a Soft Tissue Manä Action Figure with Cartilage Gripâ (limited supply)!

I add the class schedule and some serious words about injury prevention to the bottom of the memo and head to the copy hovel to make 1 million copies. I feel this is probably a mistake because I have just started this job and I don't know if people will think I'm a total dope, or perhaps this is a company that takes their soft tissue very seriously. Then again, I need something else to write about because you can only make fun of the low-tech qualities of an office for so long (about twelve-hundred words, hopefully).

Surprise of surprises, there's a paper jam. I open the copier and see the gnome, his face bathed in sweat, yanking at the spool of parchment. "Fixed in a minute," he spits, inadvertently knocking over his flasks of ink and quill pens. I close the copier door and wait. I'd better not mention that I need them collated, three-hole punched and bound with twine. The copier-gnome has a quick temper.

A little later, a man is here to pay his sewer bill, so I turn towards the hallway and imitate the sound of a premature female buffalo. Nothing happens. "No one is answering," I say. "They must all be on other calls."

I'll have to do this myself. Consulting my parchment, I make change for a goat and two hens. "Here's three grubs and a shiny rock," I say. "Do you need a receipt?"

By now, my memo has hit the mail-slabs of every employee on the floor, and so far, I've gotten no reaction. Maybe no one thought it was funny. Maybe they have relatives with no soft tissue of their own and are deeply offended. Perhaps its my imagination, but I seem to be getting dirty looks from one or two of the secretaries and some of the serfs.

A guy named Todd shows up a few moments later. "Is this where I sign up for the soft tissue class?" he asks.

I hand him the clipboard and sit there glumly while he searches through his zebra-skin for a writing implement. I guess no one got the joke or just didn’t find it funny. Why did I put out such a stupid memo? Now everyone in the office will think I'm even more of a dork than they already thought I was.

"By the way," Todd says, scrawling an X across the papyrus, "when do I get my action figure?"

He laughs. I feel a little better.

The week is about over. Friday afternoon brings a lull in phone activity and the usual hurrying of the employees to catch the early ox-cart back home. All in all, this isn't such a bad place to work. Most of the people are nice and I think its cute how they run and hide when it rains. I suppose someday soon a bold explorer will enter these shadowed halls, ambition in his heart and a Windows 2000 upgrade under his arm, and pull this office boldly forward into the sixteenth century. It will be somewhat of a shame, I think, for this place to lose its old-world innocence, and it would most definitely be a shock to its fragile eco-system.

But I suppose that's called progress. Or perhaps a better word would be... evolution.

**Part Two: The Field Guide**

The Boy Scouts have a saying: "Be prepared." The Girl Scouts also have a saying: "Would you like to buy some cookies?" These are two radically different credos, and one heavily outweighs the other. I mean, you’ve got one group tying knots, learning bird calls, and eating moss, and the other group walking around looking adorable and going home with their pockets stuffed with cash. So I subscribe to the Girl Scout philosophy, as well as their newsletter and steamy full-color calendar. That’s just a joke, but the Girl Scouts obviously have a better head for business. I know I can’t help but buy a couple dozen boxes of macaroons when their stretch limousine pulls up to my door, and it has nothing to do with their hired thugs grinding their boots into my spine. I love macaroons, truly, despite my life threatening allergies to them.

So, while I’m not overly concerned with preparedness, I’ll just briefly go over a few things you should know while getting ready for your first day of work. Most of this is elementary stuff, and you will probably be very insulted that I included some of it, and will no doubt close this page and go back to looking at internet porn.   Don’t say I didn’t warn you.

Attire

Your agency will probably give you some guidelines about how to dress and look, and I’m certain you wouldn’t have made it through the initial interview if you were a total slob, so just a few pointers and then we’ll move on.

Step one: Buy some clothing.

Step two: Wear it.

Step three: Repeat as necessary

Okay, okay, you took all the trouble of visiting this page, so I guess I could say a bit more about clothing.

There’s a saying that goes "The clothes make the man." This is an incomplete statement. The entire saying goes "The clothes make the man extremely uncomfortable." The reason the end of this statement has never been heard before is that the original speaker was wearing a tie that was cutting off his oxygen, and passed out before he could complete his thought.

I hate ties. I hate "slacks." I hate jackets. Unfortunately, they are a must-have in the professional office world.

Before I start (or rather, continue) complaining about professional attire for men, I must admit that I really have nothing to complain about. Men in general have no legitimate gripe when it comes to clothing, for women have to deal with far more serious horrors. High-heels, hose, make-up, brassieres… the list goes on and on. And while I haven’t had the occasion to wear these garments (not to work, anyway), I can sympathize if not understand. I mean, how can women be expected to squeeze into those tiny, narrow shoes and walk around balanced on their toes and pointy heels? How many outfits must they buy as to not repeat anything in a two-week period? And how much does all that stuff cost, anyway? I mean, a guy can buy a few pairs of pants, four or five shirts, a jacket and a couple ties, and be set for an entire decade. White shirts and dark pants don’t go out of style. Women, on the other hand, are subjected to trends and in/out phases that require them to buy entirely new wardrobes every few months. The poor dopes.

Anyway, back to men.

I gotta recommend a vest. Vests are great. If you’re wearing a vest, you can take off your jacket and still look professional. Missing a few buttons or got a pesky bloodstain on your shirt? Is your tie falling apart, or you can’t tie it so the thin end is shorter than the thick end? Wear a vest and no one will be the wiser.

Vests come in all sorts of different colors and patterns, and you can button it up for that professional look or unbutton it for the cool and casual look. On business casual day, wearing jeans, a shirt and a vest leave you with that "I’m relaxed but still at work" look that so many Christians died trying to achieve.

I have nothing to say on the subject of ties, because I apparently have no taste. I wore a tie to work one day, and I admit that it wasn’t the best looking tie in the world, but you’d think I had been wearing a picture of myself clubbing a baby harp seal around my neck, the flak I got. Sheesh.

Grooming

Women: For the most part, I don’t have any notes to give you. As a gender, you seem to be doing just fine on the grooming front. My only suggestion is to take it easy with the perfume. It is not a sealant. You do not need seven coats. Just a whiff is all. Just a trace, if any. There’s a little something called the Geneva Convention that outlaws gas weapons, and some of you women are dancing up to the line. It’s a fine intention to want to smell good, just leave us with a few functioning nose buds, or whatever you call them.

Men: Okay guys, crowd around. It’s time to take a solemn oath. Promise me that once a week, you will go into a well lit bathroom, stand in front of the mirror, tilt your head back, and look directly up your nose. I mean it, fellas. It’s time we took on the responsibility of having well-groomed nose hair, and by well-groomed I mean non-existent. Some of you are walking around looking like you’ve got Gene Shallit stuffed up there feet first. Go out, right now, and buy a nose-hair trimmer. They don’t cost much, and while it may be initially frightening to stick a piece of machinery with rotating blades up your nose, you will get used to it. And if you don’t want to commit to that, you can do a halfway decent job with a pair of those little scissors. And now that I’m on the topic, you may want to check your ears, too, and I don’t just mean the older guys. I am only in my twenties and my ears have already convinced themselves that just listening to stuff is not enough of a task for them, so they have gone into hair farming.

Also, and this is for everyone, let’s watch that breath, people! Brush in the morning, mint after lunch, maybe some gum… come on, people, let’s snap it up out there!

Your Stuff

I love those movies where there’s a spy or commando, and he or she has a neat kit filled with stuff like wire cutters, detonators, grappling hooks, global positioning indicators, lock-picking devices, and, of course, the cyanide pill. As a temp, you may sometimes feel like one of these daring spies, because you will encounter a great deal of people you would like to kill. There, however, the similarity ends, because you really need very little in the way of equipment to survive. I do recommend the cyanide capsule, however, though not for you. Don’t get me wrong, you will entertain thoughts of suicide, and quite frequently, but I think the poison capsule is better spent on that guy from accounting with that stupid moustache and the Hyundai and the habit of saying "Gotta get me some of that!" when an attractive female employee walks by.

Don’t you?

A pen

Get yourself a nice pen. Always keep it with you. And when I say nice, I don’t necessarily mean expensive. Chances are, someone will walk away with it at some point, so keep it simple but make sure it writes well. Believe it or not, Papermates are higher quality than most of the pricey pens, and easy to replace. Be aware: if you have a decent pen and give it to someone to write with, many of them will comment on it, and you will have a little conversation, such as:

Person: "Nice pen."

You: "Thanks."

Not too painful. You can deal with it, I’m sure.

I realize that keeping a pen handy is generally much easier for guys than women. Men, while generally not having breasts, have a breast pocket built into their dress shirts. Women, generally having breasts, don’t have the breast pocket. Boy, is that irony, or what? Huh? I bet you’ll never look at shirts the same way again!

So while men can zip their pens right out of their pocket, women have it tougher. Pulling a pen from the depths of a bag or purse just doesn’t have the same flourish, and you probably don’t carry your purses around with you at work anyway. In this case, I would advise keeping the pen in a spring-loaded wrist-mounted ejection device, ala Moonraker, to make your pen not only a readily available writing implement, but also a potentially deadly offensive weapon.

A Briefcase

I guess you can get a backpack too, but I think the briefcase looks a little more professional. And I don’t necessarily mean the kind lawyers carry around, or the ones they use in the movies to carry cash in. I have a black canvas one that is pretty nice, and keep in mind you may have to cram it in a drawer or under a desk at your job so flexibility is a plus.

Never leave it out in the open. I don’t care where you’re working, no matter how swank or high security, offices get robbed all the time. Personally speaking, three offices I have worked in have been burgled, during daylight hours, when everyone was at lunch except for me, and I had all the keys, and the next day I showed up to work in a private helicopter, but that’s all circumstantial! You can’t prove a thing!

Cellphones

Well, if you’re gonna have a pager, Mr. Fast-track, you might as well flush any thoughts of privacy right down the loo. Get a cellphone, so not only can people bother you while you’re at the movies, but you can call them back immediately and have a loud annoying conversation right at the climax of the film. If you feel a burning glare on the back of your head, that’s me.

Business Cards

Yeah. Right. Start giving people a little card with your phone number on it. Great idea. See, the single benefit of temping is that once you’re done with the job, you never have to see these people again. Now, why would you want to give out your phone number? So they can call you? Invite you to lunch? Offer you a permanent job?

Then again, I guess that’s what most people want. To have lunch and get a permanent job. Well, whatever floats your boat. If you want to have a social life and steady pay, I guess business cards are a good idea. I mean, everyone has them. People hand them to me all the time, and look them over, thank them, and put them in my wallet, and then later use them to pick my teeth, clean between the keys of my keyboard, squash small insects, etc.

Daily Planner

Again, something I cannot entirely relate to, because I don’t really have "appointments." My day planner, if I had one, would be completely blank. I would feel silly writing in things like Go to work on every weekday, I mean, I know I have to go to work. I know that at the end of the month my rent is due. I know I haven’t gone to the dentist for six years. Why should I write this stuff down?

Of course, as I have said before, a lot of you have active lives and family gatherings and meetings and dates and friends, so a planner may be useful. However, there is a problem that needs to be addressed.

I’ve known a lot people with those planners, and when they lose them, they totally freak out. It’s a lot of fun to watch. Why do they get so agitated? Because everything is in there. Every little detail of their lives: appointments, phone numbers, receipts, names… if you lose your planner you are screwed. I am in no such danger because I don’t keep all my eggs in one basket. Some of my stuff is in my briefcase, some in my wallet, some on the desk, under the bed, stuffed into magazines on the coffee table, on the toilet tank in the bathroom, inside the fridge, in the mailbox... Sure, this makes it hard to find things, but even if I lose, say, my coffee table, it’s only a small fraction of things I need to replace. You may be saying, Yes, but what if your apartment burns down? No problem! There’s enough stuff on the floor of my car to keep me in business.

Office Supplies

Don’t need ‘em. You’re going to work in an office! Everything you need is already there! Just load up your pockets when you leave!

A lot of temping books will give you lists of things to carry, like staplers, notepads, calculators, paper clips, rulers, dictionaries, tape, etc. But this stuff will be there already. Don’t use your stuff. Use their stuff. Do you bring condiments and utensils to a restaurant? Do you bring Band-Aids and morphine to the doctors office? Do you wear pants and shirts when you go clothes shopping? You do? Oh.

The only time I’ve encountered an office supply shortage was when I was working for a teachers union in California. Here was an office with no budget whatsoever, so I would have felt guilty swiping stuff, even if there was any stuff around to swipe. It was a challenge locating a few staples or a Post-it note, let alone enough to fill my bag with. I mean, the salad crisper in my fridge has more office equipment than their whole supply room did. I didn’t even have a computer, just some weird thing people kept calling a "typewriter." I couldn’t get it to work, because someone had apparently stolen the mouse. On top of that, I kept breaking things. Everyday I would break something different, and I’m not talking about a pen or a ruler. I broke their postage machine, an entire file cabinet, one of those huge three-hole punch gadgets, and two pairs of scissors. I felt really guilty since they didn’t have the budget to replace them. I even started a list of all the things I’d broken, thinking I might write an essay about it, until I realized that carrying a list titled "Things I’ve Broken" with several hundred dollars worth of office equipment jotted on it was probably a bad idea.

At any rate, don’t bog yourself down with needless supplies. Generally, the office will have what you need, and if they don’t you can just get creative. Can’t find a paper clip? Gum will hold that report together! Need to measure that new desk? Your hand is probably several inches long! No calculator to determine the monthly sales average? Just guess!

Other Gear

It’s not just office-type stuff you need to concern yourself with. Remember, you left home this morning and won’t be back for another nine or ten hours. God, it’s depressing just thinking about it.

Reading Material

While you may be filling in for someone of importance, you may not actually be doing important things. Particularly on the short-term assignments, they don’t like to take the time to fully train you, they just have you do a few routine tasks. Therefore, most of your time there will be spent staring at something. You might as well plan ahead and bring something to stare at.

Bringing actual books might not be the best idea. Particularly if you answer phones all day, you might find it difficult to really get into The Brothers Karamotzov or The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich. However, some lighter reading may suit you well, such as Atlas Shrugged or The Yale Shakepeare. No, just kidding. Stick to Grisham, A.A. Milne, or something written by a Spice Girl. Or print out some stuff from this website and read that!  And make sure you laugh really loud while reading it and say things like "What a great website!" or "This website is perfect for everyone I know!"  And while you’re at, try to work my website into every single conversation you have with everyone.  Thanks.

Magazines are also a good thing to bring with you, because any you might find in the break room or lobby will have cover stories on a new sensation called steam power or on what a promising band A-ha is.

If crossword puzzles are your thing, bring some along. I myself went through an entire book of New York Times puzzles in a single day. I even got a few of the clues.

And remember, just because you work with people, doesn’t mean you have to talk to them. Nothing says go away like a book. It’s not foolproof, as anyone who has ever tried reading on an airplane will tell you, but generally, people are less inclined to invite you over to their lunch table if you seem engrossed in a book.

Now, you don’t want to bring anything too mainstream, such as Clancy, Cornwell, or, God forbid, John Gray, because a lot of people you work with will have read them, and will want to talk to you about it. On the other hand, you don’t want to bring anything too weird and freakish, like Lovecraft, Bret Easton Ellis, or the Bible, because, while most people will keep their distance, those few that do approach and want to talk to you will scare the living crap out of you.

Try not to bring a book with an inconspicuous cover, because people, being very curious, will want to know what it is that you’re reading. Make sure the title is visible, but not particularly exciting. Books with names like I Think Joe Found a Quarter or These Socks Are Mine. Stay away from popular genres, like legal thrillers or self-help books, because they will invite conversation. Stay away from books that are currently movies, because they will invite conversation. Stay away from anything Oprah has recommended, because they will invite the worst conversation imaginable.

To hedge your bet I’d recommend any book about a well-known serial killer, and while reading it giggle regularly. If someone does approach, just look at them and say, real quiet, "Ohhh… you’ll be perfect."

Food

You are guaranteed two breaks and a lunch during the day, but I was once guaranteed a desk job and wound up wearing a hairnet. A lot of these jobs require that someone relieve you when it is your break time or lunch time, and a lot of these relief people are capable of escaping into other dimensions when your stomach starts rumbling. Bring some food.

I never bring food, because I am always too busy hitting the snooze button in the morning to get up and prepare myself a snack. I don’t know if you do this. The alarm goes off, and I think I can probably do without making myself breakfast, so I hit the snooze. It goes off again nine minutes later, and I figure my shirt and pants don’t need to be ironed, so I hit it again. By the time I get up, I’ve decided I don’t need to shower, brush my teeth, go to the bathroom, put on socks, catch my bus, and of course, make myself a snack to bring. And when I’m sitting there at ten-thirty in the morning, my hair greasy and awry, my eyelids crusted with goo, my clothing wrinkled and mismatched, watching my co-workers gaily warp into other dimensions, my stomach rumbles its familiar tune.

The snooze-button. Friend or foe? I cannot say.

**Temporary Insanity**

It can really make you nuts, this temping business. You have the same sort of problems that everyone working in this day and age does, only more. Here you are, being dropped into different environments with different people and different responsibilities, and it really takes its toll. After all, the first day on the job is the hardest, and you’ve got several first days on the job every single month.

This portion of the website is designed to give you some tricks and tips for dealing with common office problems that everyone has to face, as well as those that are unique to temping. Don’t thank me, just lavish me with expensive gifts and wads of cash.

Remembering Stuff

Temping is tough on the brain. You are often plopped right into a large company with hundreds of names and the faces that go with them, and you will have to commit them to memory over a very short period of time.

You may have heard about something called photographic memory, where someone can just look at something and have that image perfectly preserved in their head forever. My mind works exactly like that, with the one small difference that I immediately forget everything.

So its a good idea to develop some memory tricks in order to help you remember all these employees who will run by and yell "I’m expecting a package, call me when it gets here!" and then are gone, leaving you to wonder just who the hell they were. While you may have indeed met this person at some point, it was probably during a mass introduction on your first day. You were probably brought into a large conference room containing no less than two thousand people, and your escort said, "Everyone, this is Chris. He’ll be working in Marketing this week. Chris, this is: Bob-Jim-Steve-Alice-Sue-Alan-Joan-Mike-Tony-Diane-Sally-Steve-Jaunita-Tito-Frank-Harvey-Matilda- (breath) Steve-Skip-Steve-Phil-Jean-Joan-John-Jen-Jeff-Georgia-Nancy-Steve-Steve-Steve-Ron-Ben-Karen and Sam."

So you need to come up with some way to memorize these people.

My Mom always said a good way to remember someone’s name when you meet them is to repeat their name back to them.

"Hi, I’m Steve."

"Hi, Steve."

Well, this is a nice theory and probably effective for someone with an actual functioning mind. But my brain is so busy storing all the dialogue from the Die Hard movies that it takes a lot more hammering to make anything stick.

"Hi, I’m Steve."

"Hi, Steve. Nice to meet you, Steve. Steve, I’ll see you around, Steve. Your name is Steve, Steve."

Steve now thinks I am planning on stalking and dissecting him. So, while I probably won’t forget his name for the next three or four minutes, I haven’t exactly made a good impression.

I know what you’re probably thinking. What about ID Badges? Don’t most companies require their workers to wear ID badges at all times when in the office? Yes, but few employees will wear their ID badges at all. And for those that do, there are still problems to consider:

Most men tend to wear their badges clipped to their belts. Most men don’t feel too comfortable when you are squinting at their crotches as they are trying to get their parking validated.

Most women wear their badges on cords or "lanyards" around their necks. Most women don’t appreciate it when you stare at their breastular regions when they are picking up their UPS delivery.

Most ID badges are very small and most employees are extremely nervous and fidgety. On the off-chance that someone is wearing a badge over a non-offensive region, their caffeine-riddled nervous systems will not allow them to stand still enough for you to read their name off it.

So what can you do? Ideally, you should affix large, bright red label to each employee that states their name and position in eight-inch letters. Preferably worn on both the front and back of the employee, this label would also have a small electronic device attached to it that would announce the name of the employee every five seconds (for those instances when the employee is facing you sideways). And since I’m imagining things, why not a radio transmitter affixed to the ear of each worker, which transmit their coordinates back to the central computer you had at your desk. And to top it off, a small implant in the base of their necks through which you would be able to deliver a powerful yet not permanently-damaging shock into their cerebral cortex.

Okay, okay. Can we come back from dream-land please? Thank you. The only real solution is to come up with some memory tricks.

The way the human brain works is… well, to be honest, I have no idea how the human brain works. But it is my understanding that memory works better if there is some connection between what you’re trying to remember and something else you already know.

For example, if you meet someone named Alan Baker, and you want to remember his name, just think: Every time I see that guy, I will think of muffins, because a baker bakes muffins. See how it works? Muffins, Baker. Simple. So the next time you see him, you’ll think: Muffins. And then you’ll think, Why am I thinking about muffins? And you’ll think, Because I’m hungry. And where do I go when I’m hungry? To the grocery store! And what do I find at the grocery store? Shopping carts! And what’s always in the bottom of my shopping cart? Old, wet, coupons for baby food! And where are babies most of the time? Behind me in the movie theater! Which makes me think of stale popcorn, which some Native Americans thought contained spirits that were released when the popcorn popped, and remember in Raiders of the Lost Ark when those ghosts were zipping around and that one guy’s face melted, like a candle, which reminds me of the time when the power went out and I didn’t have candles, so I used that flashlight that had something sticky on the handle, which brings to mind that time I stepped in gum on the way to the dentist, and my dentist looks just like… Joe Don Baker! That’s his name! Joe! Now, what’s his last name…?

Forgetting Stuff

No, this isn’t a joke. Forgetting stuff is an important part of temping. In fact, it may be the most difficult part of temping.

Here’s the problem. Let’s say you work for a week at an office with one-hundred employees. No... make that... one-hundred and four employees. You struggle all week to get their names and faces burned into your brain, and by Friday afternoon you’ve got just about everyone committed to memory.

But then what? You’re done. You don’t need to know these people anymore. So you have to forget them.

If you’ve ever tried deliberately forgetting something, you know it’s impossible, because you have to remember to forget it, and by remembering to forget it you are remembering it even more. The worst part is this now-unwanted knowledge will interfere with your performance at your new job. Say someone asks you which department Alex Sanders works in. Easy! Accounts Payable. Wrong. There was a Sanders in AP at your last job, but the Sanders from this job is in Accounts Receivable. So you’ll get them confused and wind up looking like a total idiot and everyone will hate you and call you names and pants you.

My advice? How can you forget this useless information? Time, I’m afraid, is the only proven method of forgetting. So I’d allow two to three years between temp jobs, just to be safe.

Stress

A recent nationwide poll has shown that the leading cause of stress in working temps is stress. Stress can cause such side-effects as headaches, stomach pain, hostage situations, and poor work performance (Another factor that can cause poor work performance is being a poor worker).

There are volumes of literature on the subject that detail a number of ways to deal with stress, such as taking deep breaths, listening to soothing music, or enjoying a nice hot bubble bath. I for one get extremely stressed out on a regular basis. I have taken deep breaths to the point of blacking out, with little or no effect (except for blacking out), music doesn’t do a whole lot for me stress-wise, and I have never worked at an office with a nice hot bubble bath available to the employees. So I have come up with my own formula for stress relief in the form of screaming at the top of my lungs.

Screaming is great. And I’m not talking about going to some isolated location or anything. I’m talking about right at your desk. In the middle of a particularly annoying phone call, during a meeting, while being harangued by your superiors, etc. I guarantee that if someone is stressing you out and you start screaming, they will stop stressing you out and will, in fact, probably never speak to you again. For added effect, you might try grabbing their lapels and shaking them until their teeth rattle.

If screaming doesn’t do it for you, you may have a serious stress-related condition, so I would recommend immediately calling your doctor and asking him where the closest liquor store is. I suppose you could ask anyone where the nearest liquor store is, but I was going for a surprise ending in the previous sentence. Anyway, despite the bad press booze is getting these days, there’s nothing like it for the stressed out Temp. Crack open a beer, toss back a shot, or go on a five day drinking binge and wake up in a different state wearing an nurses uniform. Booze is good food.

And remember, don’t drink and temp. It’s a deadly combination that may result in injury or even promotion.

Sexual Harrassment

Remember when "harassment" used to be pronounced just like it was spelled? Now it’s pronounced "harris-ment," much in the way that Uranus is pronounced "your-a-niss." And why? Because when you say any word that has "ass" or "anus" in it, children tend to giggle.

Well, sexual harassment is no giggling matter, kids, and by the way, if you are trying to stop children from giggling, adding the word "sexual" in front of a word with "ass" in it, even if you’ve changed the pronunciation of the latter, isn’t gonna do you much good.

Sexual harassment can happen to just about anyone. Take this fellow temp I know, a guy named Liam. He told me he was on assignment once and had a bad case of hiccups all morning. He’d tried drinking water and holding his breath, but to no avail: his hiccups were echoing all over the building and the employees were enjoying a good chuckle at his expense. He was in the copy room at one point, hiccupping away, when a female employee walked in and waited beside him for his job to finish. He stood there, miserably hiccupping, and she suggested several means to rid him of his affliction. Finally, she told him a sudden shock might stop his hiccups. Then she lifted her top and flashed her breasts at him.

Now, I tell this story to bring up an important point. Nothing cool ever happens to me. You know, there have been dozens of occasions in which I’ve been in the presence of women and gotten the hiccups, and not a single bare bosom has been offered up. It’s depressing. And this guy Liam isn’t really better looking than I am or anything, I mean, he’s kind of a dork and you should see his hair, it looks like a family of squirrels live in it. I won’t even mention his breath.

But is what happened to Liam sexual harassment? I have no idea, because I have done absolutely no research on the subject, other than watching the movie "Disclosure" starring Michael Douglas and Demi Moore. In this movie, Michael Douglas plays a guy who has a beautiful wife and family, and has a beautiful boss who proceeds to take off most of her clothing and crawl all over him. Some guys have all the luck! If you stop watching the movie there, it’s the happiest happy ending in movie history!!!

But if you watch the rest of Disclosure, you can determine three things:

Sexual Harassment isn’t about sex. It’s about power.

Virtual Reality did not take off like everyone thought it would.

When you see people in movies clapping, sometimes they’re faking it.  Right towards the end of the movie, there’s this scene where everyone in the room is clapping, only they’re just pretending to clap. See, the sound of real clapping will often interfere with the other sounds the filmmakers may be trying to capture, such as singing or farting or, as in this case, talking.  Therefore, the actors pretend to clap and they put in the clapping sound later.  Michael Douglas himself is the worst offender in this particular scene, his clapping is completely unbelievable. He’s hands don’t come within a good three inches of each other! Jeez! I mean, I don’t want to slam Michael Douglas or anything (literally or figuratively), I think he’s great. Without a doubt, he is in the top five of all the actors in the Douglas family.

Um. I think I got a wee bit sidetracked there… let’s see… bosoms, Michael Douglas, clapping… ah!

What is sexual harassment? The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission defines it thus:

Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitutes sexual harassment when submission to or rejection of this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment.

Make sense to you? I hope so, because I got lost three words in.

So.  Sexual harassment is humiliating, degrading, and most of all, illegal. Remember:

The victim as well as the harasser may be a woman or a man.

The victim does not have to be of the opposite sex.

The harasser can be the victim's supervisor, an agent of the employer, a supervisor in another area, a co-worker, or a non-employee.

The victim does not have to be the person harassed but could be anyone affected by the offensive conduct.

Unlawful sexual harassment may occur without economic injury to or discharge of the victim.

The harasser's conduct must be unwelcome.

There was one time when a woman I was working with began speaking to me in a rather candid way about sex, specifically, about the two of us having sex. She started off by mentioning that our supervisor, a male, was constantly coming on to her, questioning her about sex, and so on. She was very upset about this, so as she was leaving for the day, I walked out with her to take my break and see if she wanted me to do anything about the situation. Once outside, she began complementing me on my looks, then proceeded to tell me that, while she was not attracted to our supervisor, she would be more than happy to "lay with" me. She said I looked "tight" and "trim" and would be willing to have sex with me (well, she used a naughty word) right then and there. We would have "beautiful children" she said. This is about two minutes into the conversation.

Now I was in a bit of a bind. The fact that she was coming on so strong cast doubts on her story about our supervisor harassing her. At the same time, I did want to believe her, because although she was very, ahem, outspoken, it didn’t mean that she was a complete liar, and if our boss was harassing her, it was a very serious thing indeed. And, far more serious than even that was the fact that we would not, repeat, definitely not have beautiful children. She was not attractive and, well, I ain’t no prize myself. There should be a law against people like the two of us breeding, but they’d better enact it fast because this tramp probably hit on every schmoe on her way home.

And hey… you’re lookin’ pretty fine today.

**The Job That’s Right For You[[1]](#footnote-1)**

For you newcomers, here is a listing of some of the most common jobs there are in temping. If you have minimal office or clerical experience and a rather bare résumé, these are probably the sort of jobs you’ll be placed in right out of the gate. If, on the other hand, you’ve got years of training, experience with a vast array of computer and other office equipment, and a professional résumé, well… you’ll probably wind up doing this shit too.

The Receptionist

A popular job for the temp just starting out, an old stand-by for the experienced temp, and mountain of despair and confusion for both. About fifty percent of my temping experiences can be chalked up to receptionist positions, and its no easy ride. The strange thing about working reception is that whether it’s your first job and you have no experience, or you’ve been temping for years and you’ve seen it all, it’s still a job that is going to whip you across the back like a belt lined with fishhooks. Metaphorically speaking.

Announcing Calls

This is the worst part of being a receptionist. Especially in smaller offices, certain employees may want you to announce their calls. That means when a call comes in, you have to get their name, put them on hold, call the person in question, tell them who it is, find out if they want to talk to the caller, and then either connect the two calls or take a message or put the call through to voice mail. Pain in the ass? You bet, particularly when you have five other lines flashing, people waiting in the lobby, and the person you are trying to reach isn’t at their desk.

The other problem with this is that connecting calls can be tricky on foreign phone systems, and when you’re a temp, everything is foreign. There’s usually a confusing process that includes specific numbers, different buttons, several consoles, and sometimes even chanting. Sometimes a guide or set of instructions is provided for you, which is very helpful but not always life-saving. A specific example is the time I was answering phones for a large engineering firm. There was only one guy in the entire firm who wanted his calls announced, but he still managed to ruin the entire job for me.

The phone system was a bit old but had been thoughtfully designed by Nazis. To connect two calls you needed to pick one line up, hit 4, press pound, hit 77, pick up the other line, hit 9090, press this greenish button, flick the lights on and off a few times, activate a elaborate pulley system... and so on. Needlessly complicated, time-consuming... but I had it all written down on paper, so I was capable of successfully performing the procedure.

A call came in that afternoon for Bob Hall, the one gentleman for whom I was to announce calls. I got the caller’s name, which was Alan Greene, and put him on hold. I picked up a free line and called Bob.

"Bob," said Bob.

"Hi. I have Alan Greene on the line, would you like to take his call?"

"Yeah, okay."

Fine. I was doing well. I reached for the paper with the long list of instructions.

"Alan?"

It was Bob, apparently thinking I had already connected them.

"Alan? Alan? Hello? Alan? Alan? You there? Alan?"

"Uh, I haven’t-"

"Alan? Alan?"

"I haven’t connected you yet," I said. "Just a moment."

"Oh."

I hit the first button in the sequence.

"Alan? Alan? Hello? Alan?"

"Just a second," I nearly snapped at him, fumbling with the keys.

"New receptionist," was the last thing I heard him mutter before I finally connected them.

This happened a few more times throughout the day, and every time I got a call for him I became a nervous wreck. It was the same each time. I’d tell him he had a call and he’d immediately start calling the persons name, as if I could instantaneously transfer the guy. I’d say, "I’ve got Jim on the line." And then I’d hear this: "Okay, put him throughJim?Jim?Jim?Jim?Jim?" I don’t know what he was used to, but the former receptionist must have had a few extra fingers or something.

At the end of the day I got another call for him. This time I would be ready. I put the person on hold, got the paper out, and ran through the operation a few times in my head. I poised one hand above the console, flexed it a few times, then called Bob.

"Bob."

"Hi. Dave Smith on the line for you. Should I put him through?"

"N-"

I became a flurry of fingers, hitting buttons at a speed far greater than I thought was possible. By Golly, he’d be connected with his call so fast he wouldn’t even...

N-? What did that mean? Was he... was he saying No?

Accepting deliveries

This is the worst part of being a receptionist. Parcel services and bike messengers will constantly be dropping off enormous boxes for people that may or may not actually work at your office. Often you will have to lug the parcels to people’s offices because they never pick them up themselves.

You may also begin to notice the frequent birthdays of your fellow employees, and some of them may seem to have multiple birthdays within the same week due to the ridiculous amount of flowers that are delivered almost hourly. I don’t have any personal hatred of flowers or anything, but when they are sitting on your desk, people have a tendency to stop and coo and fawn all over the bouquet. They will of course want to know who they are for, and will not hesitate to ask you even while you’re on the phone or trying to sleep. This may be worse for you if you’re male, I’m not sure why... I guess guys just don’t feel comfortable sitting up to their foreheads in roses or tulips.

When you actually have to deliver the flowers to the employee’s desk, she will thank you in such a passionate way that makes you feel as though the flowers were from you, personally. This can make you feel anywhere from extremely uncomfortable to highly aroused, depending on the employee, your sexual preferences, and whether or not you’re wearing silk boxers.

Another note: florists, despite their names, do not only deal in flowers these days, as you will surmise when, along with the flowers, several enormous balloons arrive at your desk. One side of the balloons is a cheerful birthday message, while on the other is a highly-reflective surface reminiscent of taut, shiny tinfoil. You know the ones. How many hours have I had to sit at a desk, forced to stare at my huge, distorted head reflected in the back of one of those balloons? I cannot say.

Dealing with Visitors

This is the worst part of being a receptionist. When you work at the front desk of many offices, you not only have to handle phone calls but vendors, contractors, messengers, and family members of the employees. This is where you run into one of the two major drawbacks of wearing a telephone headset. If you don’t actually have a phone in your hand, visitors and people in general won’t realize you’re on the phone and just start talking to you.

The other major drawback is having a hunk of plastic jammed irretrievably into your ear canal.

Vendors, by far, will cause the most amount of problems. For some inexplicable reason, they are taught something called cold-calling, where they just drop by without an appointment and ask to meet with someone. I’m not sure why they call it cold-calling... maybe because when they do it you want to call someone to kill them and make their bodies cold, ‘cause, you know, when you die, your body gets... cold... and... okay, that was lame.

This one time I was working a desk for a long distance company and a vendor came into the office. He looked (and I hope I’m not making any major stereotypical observations here) like a Mafia goon. He had lots of rings, an expensive looking suit, slicked back hair, and since I was on the first floor I could see the silver Lexus he had stepped out of.

He asked to see Cathy, who I knew to be one of the office managers. I called her up.

"Oh God," she said when I told her who was here to see her. "I don’t have the time. Tell him to come and see me in a few months. After Thanksgiving."

I was a bit surprised, I mean, he looked somewhat important. I relayed the information and he seemed shocked.

"I don’t understand," he told me. "You have my product. I just need to clean my product and give you some updates. How can I do that if Cathy won’t see me?"

I had no idea, and I wasn’t sure why he needed to clean his product. I figured that maybe he sold printers or some sort of electronic equipment. He made it sound very important.

By this time the phones were ringing and I started to answer them, but he wouldn’t leave. Every time I had a few free seconds he would start in on me again. How was he supposed to do his job? He was being shut out of the loop. He was being ignored. He needed to keep his product in working order.

He wouldn’t go away and there were other people beginning to fill up the lobby. By now I was trying to give him subtle messages that I wanted him to leave (such as drawing little pictures of him being decapitated on my blotter) and he finally got the hint. He tossed a business card on the desk and left the office in a huff. As his car screeched out of the parking lot, I glanced at his card. Turns out the guy was a rubber stamp vendor. Rubber stamps. No wonder Cathy wouldn’t see him. Who the hell cares about rubber stamps? And he needs to clean them? What sort of expert labor would that require? A few swipes with a Kleenex? And that’s called product maintenance?

I’m not one to judge an entire profession on the behavior of one representative, but vendors are total losers. I hate them all. You should too.

Callers With No Sense of Humor

I try to be sympathetic. If you’re working for a large company with lots of branch offices, or, God forbid, a city office, chances are that by the time a call reaches you, it has been through several switchboards and a handful of receptionists. So the caller may be understandably frazzled, and not at all in good spirits. Say the wrong thing to them and, even if it’s well intended, they may simply explode.

An example. I was working for the City of Portland, and I got a call from a woman who wanted to know the location of our offices.

"It’s the Portlandia building, downtown. Fifth Avenue," I told her.

"What streets is that between?" she asked.

"That’s between Fourth and Sixth," I said.

It was only a joke, and I quickly assured her I was kidding and gave her the correct cross-streets for our address. There were a few moments of chilly silence on her end, then:

Ka-boom.

Man, this lady tore me a new poop-chute, and what’s worse, since she was asking what our location was, it meant she was heading downtown to visit the office and I’d have to deal with her again.

So never assume anyone you talk to has a sense of humor. Just give them the facts and get off the line, because there are people out there who can mortally wound via telephone lines.

Another problem with callers is their apparent inability to quickly write down anything you tell them. I don’t know what the deal is, but it can take up to three hours to give someone a phone number. The conversation goes like this:

"Hi. What’s Todd’s number?"

"It’s 823-734-"

"Wait. Wait. Okay… Eiiiiigght….

"Yes. 823-73-"

"Wait. Wait. Eiiiiiggghhht…. Twwwwwoooooooo…."

"3…"

"Threeeeeee…."

"7."

"Wait. Eeeeeeee….. Seeeeeevvvvvveeeeennnnnnnn…"

What could be taking this person so long to take down a phone number? Is he writing the numbers, or carving them out of alabaster? I really makes you wonder how long it took them to dial the phone in the first place.

This is the worst part of being a receptionist.

The Office Assistant

Also referred to as "Departmental Assistant" or "Administrative Assistant," this is a fast-paced, exciting and important position in any office. You will endure heavy responsibilities such as sorting the mail, accepting mail and sorting it, removing mail from a box or container and arranging or classifying it in such a way that becomes sorted, and taking unsorted printed matter and applying a manual organizational process that will result in a conclusion in which the aforementioned printed matter is in a fashion whereupon it is no longer unsorted.

You also have to get lunch.

Sorting the Mail

There are a few procedures you should probably know about. For instance, what happens if you get mail for an employee who is not in your department? What are you gonna do? You gonna cry? Baby.

Sorry, I was having a bad day when I wrote this.

The correct procedure in this situation is to look up the employee in the company directory, which was last updated in 1804, cross out the address on the envelope, write in the new address, and drop it back in the mail. When this mail is received at the department you have forwarded it to, the assistant at that end will cross out what you have written, re-write the original address, possibly scribble Not Here!!! on the envelope, and send it back to you. Within a few weeks the envelope in question will be completely covered with scribbles and scrawls and nasty notes, while the employee in question, who is probably sitting just a few yards from either of you, will probably never receive his airline tickets, and you and your counterpart will have formed a lasting, hating relationship.

Clerical Tasks

No, you don’t have to wear robes and chant. But you will have a number of secretarial duties to perform. This is where you will truly begin to see how the inner workings of a professional office closely resemble the lower planes of Hell, with the exception that Hell probably has better carpeting.

Simple, simple tasks will be dragged out and distorted until you can no longer remember what it was you were originally trying to do. Something as basic as updating a phone list or modifying a conference room availability chart will last for weeks, involve hundreds of phone calls, countless approval sessions, and a Brazilian forest’s-worth of wasted paper. The problem is that the inner-office chain of command has grown so intricate and detailed that no one on the lower limbs dares make a decision without consulting those higher up, who of course have those above them, who have those above them, and even they who appear to be nearest the zenith still have miles of branches above them, through which one cannot even glimpse the very sky.

Well, that may be a bit dramatic (not to mention grammatically unsound). But it’s true.

This, for you, can be incredibly frustrating. Any little bit of work you begin, no matter how trivial, will take forever. And I’m not exaggerating. It will take… forever. In twenty billion years, when the sun finally goes supernova and the Earth plunges into it, that phone list I started updating at U-Haul’s corporate office will be at last consumed by the flames, along with the post-it note, still stuck to it, reading: Have Stan look at this before distribution.

While you’re busy working on assignments that will never, ever be fully completed, keep in mind that every office has its own little rules, preferences, and guidelines. Don’t ever think you can use a template or format similar to one you used at your last job. Here, it’s different. And while you might simply be typing up a sign that says WET FLOOR, your supervisor will have specific instructions on your choice of font, width of margins, type of paper, and color, size, brand, number, and spacing of pushpins. And we’re talking about a simple sign, here! Just imagine what it would be like if you had to produce a travel itinerary or group e-mail! And hours later, while you’re stepping over the three injured, writhing employees who have slipped and fallen on the wet floor, you’ll think: Does the president of the company really need this faxed to him in Singapore for approval?

Getting Lunch

I’m not really going to go into this. You have to get lunch for people. It sucks.

**The Executive Assistant**

Congratulations!  If you've made it to this level, you're no ordinary temp.  You see, this is different from the other jobs mentioned in the [Jobs](http://www.notmydesk.com/guide/jobs.html) section, mainly because the Executive Assistant doesn't answer to an entire department.  Instead, you work for just one person.  You don't have to cover the front desk while the receptionist is at lunch, or make sure everyone in the office has signed Sylvia's birthday card, or answer the Marketing Department's phones while they're at their weekly team-building/Satan-worshipping retreat.  You've climbed the ladder beyond such menial tasks, now you only have to work for one person.  Just one.  One single, solitary, impatient, overblown, egomaniacal, small-minded, self-important jerk.

Again, congratulations!

Getting People on the Phone

It doesn't sound like much, but this task can be particularly annoying.

When you're an "important" person, you don't call people yourself.  It just doesn't seem important enough.  So, your boss will refuse to dial his own phone, instead having you do it, while he sits in his office doing nothing.  Once you have reached the person he is trying to reach, you tell this person who you are, and then tell them your boss would like to speak to them.  Then, you put them on hold, call your boss, tell him you have the person on the line, then connect them.

Not a big deal, really, but it can get more complicated when the person your boss is having you call is also an "important" person, or at least deems himself such.  When you call, another executive assistant will answer the phone, then put you on hold while she calls in to her boss... and then the trouble starts.

Boss A (your boss) wants to assure himself that he is more important than Boss B (the guy you are calling).  Therefore, when Boss B comes on the line, Boss A would like him to hear the voice of Assistant A (you), and then have Boss B wait on hold while you transfer the call.  However, Boss B would like it very much if Boss A comes on the line while Assistant B (Boss B's assistant) is on the line, because that will prove that he (Boss B) is more important.

Depending on how rabid this rivalry is, and how loyal Assistant A and Assistant B are to Boss A and Boss B, respectively, what follows is a stand-off between the two assistants.  Neither will want to transfer each other in to their bosses.  Neither will get off the line.  It can take hours for the actual call to go through.

How is this avoided?  Simple.

You're a temp.  Who gives a shit about what your boss thinks?  Just transfer the assistant in without announcing the call and get back to playing Minesweeper.

Being Called A Secretary

Particularly if your boss is on the older side, you may find yourself being introduced as his "secretary" quite a bit.  I don't really know how other people feel about this, but it makes me feel a little funny.  When I think of the word "secretary", I think of typewriters, and intercoms, and most of all, Jane Hathaway, Mr. Drysdale's assistant on The Beverly Hillbillies.  Please.  No young, hip, happening guy wants to have that image associated with him, and neither do I.

Not that Miss Hathaway wasn't attractive, or anything.  Hell, she was downright sensual.  But it's the whole "I'm really the one who runs things" sort of idea that I cringe from.  When I was an Executive Assistant, I didn't run anything.  Hell, I didn't even do anything.

And I certainly didn't know anything.

Knowing Everything

This is severely annoying.  When you're just a garden-variety Office Assistant, no one really expects you to keep track of everyone you work for.  HA HA HA!!  Of course they do.  But people are certainly more understanding if you can't keep tabs on everyone and everything.  HA HA HA!  Oh, man, that's another good one.

But this is a whole new level of knowing everything.  If your boss is not around, people will expect you to know where he is.  If you don't know where he is, they will expect you to know when he'll be back.  And if you don't know when he'll be back, people will expect you to KNOW EVERYTHING HE KNOWS.  They will expect you to answer their questions, solve their problems, and alleviate their concerns.

In short, and this is a major responsibility, and you will need to be prepared to speak on your boss's behalf.

Have fun.  Wreak havoc.  Destroy lives.

And please, let me know what happens.

Taking Dictation

I can actually provide an example of this one, with something I posted a long time ago.  [Check this out](http://www.notmydesk.com/memo4.wav).

(It isn't live, it isn't Memorex, but it CAN HARM YOU.  BEWARE.  You will need to have your speakers on, and it's kind of a large sound file (.wav), so it may take some time to load.  If you'd like to see the page it was originally posted it on, [you can click here](http://www.notmydesk.com/misc/sigh.html).

The Help Desk

Are you a generous, patient person? Do you enjoy assisting people in need? Does it make you feel good about yourself if, as a result of talking to you, another human being’s life is made easier? Well, working at a help desk will cure you of these afflictions in a few short hours. Just spend a morning talking non-stop to confused, frantic, irritable, and generally non-intelligent people, and you will want to push a nun in front of a moving train.

There are numerous varieties of help desks. Many are of a technical nature, some are customer service-based, and others involve assisting company employees with their needs. All are centered around a philosophy of pain.

Technical Help

You have to know what you’re doing to handle this job, because people will be calling you with specific technical questions about computers, such as:

"How can I use a photograph of my pet Dachshund, Snoodles, as desktop wallpaper?"

"How do I adjust my solitaire settings for Vegas scoring?"

"If I accidentally spilled half a can of Surge into my keyboard, what will happen?"

"It’s asking me for my password, what should I do?"

"What is my password?"[[2]](#footnote-2)

Yes, all of your computer training has been for naught. Your situation will be comparable with sending in Stephen Hawking to teach preschool (meaning, you wouldn’t really need someone with all of his vast knowledge to teach a class of four year-olds. Plus, the kids would probably play on him).

You’ll probably be very helpful at first, but the lack of challenges will begin to affect you. I mean, how many times can you answer a call about a broken printer, only to find that it’s out of paper? How many times can you be frantically told that someone’s computer is broken, when it’s just that they’ve forgotten to turn on their monitor? Not many, and soon you won’t even be personally visiting the employee, but instead, over the phone, giving them one of the replies listed below:

"The network is down."

"The little computer goblin must be sick."

And (all together now) "Turn it off, and then on again."

One fun thing to do is to send random employees an e-mail stating that the e-mail is not working. See how many replies you get that say: "Will you send me an e-mail telling me when the e-mail is working again?"

Company Support Line

A great job if you can get it. The position exists at a company’s headquarters, and handles nation-wide employee concerns regarding company policy and technical support. The only qualifications for this position is that you never answer the phone.

Now, you’re only human, and a temp at that, so no one will expect you to get the hang of not answering the phone right away. Out of reflex, you might pick up a ringing phone during your training stage, but don’t feel too embarrassed about it: you can still avoid helping whoever has called. If you do happen to accidentally answer the phone, you should

a) supply incorrect information, or

b) supply no information whatsoever

Supplying incorrect information may sound easy, but it can be tricky. If someone’s computer refuses to print out a closing report, for example, and your suggestion includes a ritual involving a set of left-handed golf clubs, a moist Shetland pony, and six pounds of carrot shavings, they may be suspicious. And often times the person on the phone will insist that you stay on the line while they try out your "solution." When your fabricated instructions fail, they will be able to yell at you. The best thing to do is explain to them that the process will not work unless the phone is hung-up. Tell them the pony won’t do the special dance if the phone line is open or something equally preposterous, I mean, what are they going to do, ask for your superior? You’re a temp!

Happily, there are many ways to supply no information. The most effective is to put the person on hold for two hours, then disconnect them, and when they call back, disguise your voice so they don’t know it was you. Another is to listen to the employee’s problem, inserting the occasional "Uh-huh" and then transfer them to an random destination (Jiffy Lube, a cheese factory, Peru).

Customer Service

Let me be the first to admit that I have a real bug up my ass about this one. If you get a job in customer service, you’re going to hear something like this from the person who is training you: "Smile! People can hear if you’re smiling over the phone!" This is absolutely true. You can hear a smile over the phone. But so what? Since when did smiling equal good customer service?

The basic thing to remember is, people who call customer service aren’t always happy. Sure, some of them may be very happy. Apparently there are some freaks out there who are always happy about everything. Some people may be neutral, maybe just looking for information or needing some questions answered. But others will be people with problems. People with problems aren’t generally happy. People with problems don’t want you to be happy either. What people with problems want is for you to solve their problems. Now.

My own personal philosophy is that it’s important to match the customer as far as attitude goes. If you get a caller or customer that is happy and bubbly and perky, sure, go right ahead and be happy and perky back, in fact, you’ll probably find it a very natural, easy thing to do. If someone is neutral, well, you can be happy and smile then too, no harm done, or you can be polite and neutral right back, also no harm done. But what if you get an angry caller? Well, you need to match them, too. I’m not saying be angry. But be serious. They don’t want to hear a smile over the phone. They want to hear you taking them seriously. Listen carefully to them and don’t waste their time with a lot of nonsense talk. If you can solve their problem, do it quickly, if you can’t, promise them you will find out who can. Customers with problems want speed and competence more than anything else. And if you can’t help them at all, and this is really important, definitely don’t be happy. Nobody likes bad news from someone who is smiling. A smile in the case of bad news makes you seem callous, uncaring… evil.

Sorry, I realize there are basically no jokes in this section (there are jokes in other sections.  Really). I guess this is just something I feel very strongly about. Not customer service, per se, but this whole sort of "smile" attitude that I keep running into. It’s a foolish idea that a sunny personality can make anything seem better than it is. You know, I could slap a bright coat of paint on my car, but it would still be the same piece of leaking, sputtering, malfunctioning garbage underneath.

I was not smiling as I wrote this.

Data Entry

The lowest of the low. Holy God, is Data Entry boring. It’s repetitive, mindless, tedious, and just plain dull.

I kinda like it.

On a very short term basis, and I’m talking about maybe a week, tops, Data Entry can be a nice diversion from the average office job. I mean, you come in, you sit down at a computer, and you hit buttons. You don’t have to learn much beforehand, you don’t have to answer phones or meet people, you don’t have get caught up in the strife and confusion and politics of the office… you just hit buttons. The only drawback is that this will slowly and surely drive you completely insane, which is why I would only do it for a very short time.

When you first begin, you will have to pay close attention to what you are doing, as with any other sort of job. You will be overly cautious, making sure you are in the correct field, you have the correct number or date or whatever you are entering, and you will have to concentrate a great deal. This is the "good" phase of Data Entry. It’s still new to you, and therefore, mildly interesting. You will not be bored or confused, and although you are working slowly, you will probably not make any mistakes. This will last for about two hours.

As the day goes on, you will begin to work faster. You will have memorized how many times you need to hit the tab key to get into the correct field, and will spend less and less time on each entry, and you will even be able to think about other things. This is the "great" phase of Data Entry. You know what you are doing, and although it may start to get boring, you can now let your mind wander to other subjects, such as sex or guns or whatever you violent perverts like to think about. You may make a few errors from time to time, and have to rein in your thoughts, but this is perfectly normal. This will also last about two hours.

At some point during the day, you will realize that you have been staring at something, such as a number seven, for approximately three hours. You will have no idea what this seven means to you, or to your job, or to life in general. It may seem slightly familiar, and you may suspect is has some personal relevance to you, but try as you might, you will not be able to figure it out. Around the same time, you will find that your eyes are burning, your head is swimming, you will notice a sharp pain in your back and a dull ache in your arm. On the up side, you will make no errors, because you will not be working, you will just be sitting there in a stupor.

This is the "really crappy" phase of Data Entry, and it will last for the remainder of the job. Sure, you may experience the "good" phase briefly in the mornings, and on Mondays, you might even slip into the "great" phase for a few minutes, but you will find that the crappiness overwhelms you quickly. So, like I said, only accept Data Entry if it’s a short term position, if you really need the money, or if you are some sort of mindless drone who can deal with this sort of thing.

Another tip I can give you is in regards to your breaks. Usually, you will get a fifteen minute break in the morning, and then one in the afternoon. My suggestion is this: Instead of taking a full fifteen minute break, take several five minute breaks. And by several, I mean about two hundred. Seriously, it might help to take your eyes from the screen every hour or so and focus on something far away, such as a tree, or a distant building, or the exit sign that points the way out of this place forever run run run!!!

Jeez, did I actually say I kinda liked Data Entry? Just goes to show, never believe what I say at the top of a page.

Deskless Jobs

Let’s say you’ve never worked in an office before, don’t have a lot of experience with computers, and aren’t all that confident in your typing skills. Don’t sweat it! You can still be a temp, because there is more out there than just desk jobs. Most temp agencies, even those that advertise that they are office-based, place temps in positions that don’t require clerical expertise, such as shipping clerks, electricians, assemblers, construction workers, lab technicians, maintenance, and janitorial work, just to name a few.

No office skills? Don’t worry! You can still work! You can still be a temp! Your life can still suck!

I know what I’m talking about, for I‘ve had my share of non-desk jobs. I had just joined up with a new agency in Oakland, one that even had the word "office" in the title, I’d aced four computer program tests, kicked butt on the typing test, and had a solid interview, instantly forming a rapport with my agent. And, for whatever reason, they refused to place me behind a desk.

My first deskless job was at a computer company, and I was supposed to videotape some presentations. It didn’t sound too bad, and I had done a lot of camerawork in high school and I’m always chosen to tape my family’s weddings. I arrived at the office and set up, and was told the reason I was taping this in the first place was that several executives were out of town, and wanted to see the presentation when they got back. I initially hoped I would be able to simply point the camera, turn it on, and promptly go to sleep. It didn’t happen that way.

There was a class of about eight people who, I was told, would be giving notes and feedback during and after the presentation, and I was supposed to put them on camera while they were talking. There were slides to be shown also, and the presenter, a rather new-age looking woman, told me she moved around a lot while speaking, so I’d have to take pains to make sure she was on screen at all times. Also to be taken into consideration was that I had not been given a chair, just a tripod, and the camera, not I, would be sitting on that.

The presentation was, in a word, dull. It was all technical jargon, and jargon specific to a particular, in-house software product, so I had no hopes of understanding what was being said. It was like being in a classroom where a bunch of Germans were being taught Russian: I neither understood the language that was being taught, nor the language it was being taught in. All this amounted to me becoming extremely bored, which is quite a dangerous thing on its own, not to mention the fact that I was operating a video camera.

I started thinking about little ways to make the presentation more visually appealing, and my creative streak, while really little more than a smudge, began to awaken. Take the speech the woman gave on user access codes in order of priority and rank. I thought her point about the software recognizing various levels of access according to historical database functions would best be punctuated by the camera slowly zooming in on, say, her left nostril, until it completely filled the screen. And the stuff she was saying about automatic debugging of search codes? I thought the viewer would appreciate a little drama there, by way of slowly tilting the camera to the left, which would give the impression that the speech was taking place on the Titanic during her final hours. And for the end of her moving dialogue on the SQL features of version 3.1’s trace data function, I figured a slow pan across the room coming to rest on that one guy digging in his ear would make a really powerful statement.

During the feedback session, as per my instructions, I was turning the camera at whoever was talking. However, they all seemed to be talking at once. Not to mention that the tripod I was using was meant for still cameras, so it shook, jerked, squeaked, and shuddered anytime I had to move the camera, which was constantly.

I was located in the exact center of the room, with the presenter in front of me, and the eight students all around me in various parts of the room. Anytime someone had a question or comment, I had to swivel around and find them with the camera. Often, by the time I got focused on them, they had stopped talking and someone else on the other side of the room had started, and I had to yank the camera around again.

So, large portions of the tape would no doubt consist of nothing but dizzying pans followed by quick, jerky shots of people not talking. At one point the chattering was so frenzied I was simply whipping the camera around every time I heard a noise, even when one woman sneezed. I am pleased to say, I caught her second sneeze on tape, and almost in focus. The exec’s should be pleased.

Later, they started projecting slides, and I got a bit of a break because I could focus on the screen for minutes at a time. However, I noticed a new problem. Through the viewfinder, I couldn’t really make out the stuff they were projecting onto the screen, because the lights in the room were on. Luckily, I knew from my high school days that there was a way to change the amount of light that entered the camera, and I quickly found the button labeled "back lighting." I looked back through the viewfinder and pushed the button. The lighting didn’t change at all but the words:

HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

appeared at the lower edge of the screen.

Oh, crap, I thought. I squinted again at the side of the camera. Just below the back lighting button was one marked "Titles." I guess it had been pre-programmed with a festive message in the event someone happened to be taping a birthday party, which is a common use for these little cameras. I, however, was not taping a birthday party. I was taping a computer software training seminar for some absent executives. So, when they watched the tape in their big, expensive office, they’d see the words

HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

appear on screen during the feedback session of the Javascript presentation, over some unreadable slides. Worse, I didn’t know how to turn the birthday greeting off. I pressed the "Titles" button again, and peered back through the viewfinder.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

thankfully, had vanished. Now it said:

IT'S A BABY BOY!

I pressed "Titles" again and again, wincing at each new cheerful proclamation as it replaced the previous one:

OUR WEDDING

HOW PRETTY!

AT THE ZOO

HI GRAMPA!

until finally, the larder was empty and the titles vanished completely.

Then, there are some jobs that you know from the very beginning are going to just outright suck. Take my second job from the Oakland temp agency. They sent me over to the Coca-Cola Bottling Company. I’ll cut to the chase: the first thing the guy said to me when I arrived was: "You’re gonna need a hairnet."

I’m not getting down on hairnets, or people who have to wear them at their jobs. It’s just that I had signed up to do office work, and the agency had told me to dress business-like, so I assumed I would be doing something that didn’t require a hairnet. So I stood there for a moment, in my jacket, tie, slacks, and shoes.

Then I stood there in my jacket, tie, slacks, shoes, and hairnet.

"Earplugs, too," the fellow told me.

I miserably screwed some yellow foam into my ears, then followed him, briefcase in hand, hairnet on hair, onto the factory floor.

"Boy," he shouted over the incredible din of millions of cans of Coke whizzing around, "you shouldn’t have worn a white shirt! Didn’t they tell you were going to get dirty?"

"No," I said. They didn’t tell me about the hairnet either, but he probably knew that.

The job turned out to be doing inventory of machine parts. Within minutes I was sweaty, grimy, and deaf, plus I was wearing a hairnet. I also was pissed. And I was wearing a hairnet. I stood there in a noisy, dirty, incredibly hot factory, wearing a hairnet, counting grease-covered machine parts, few of which were labeled. Those I couldn’t identify I created names for on my inventory sheet. I counted bolts, screws, joints, sleeves, valves, nipples, grommers, torques, fromps, brombels, hromppers, and geefs. I didn’t care. I did the worst job I could, because they made me wear a hairnet. To call me grouchy at this point would be like calling Ed Gein socially awkward.

I had one small measure of joy when something went wrong on the Coca-Cola can schleeper-shloover. I was coming back from a break, walking through the factory, and hundreds of cans suddenly went sailing off the assembly line, through the air, and onto the factory floor, creating foamy explosions everywhere. Burn, baby, burn, I thought as alarm bells sounded while the whole works grinded to a halt, and I took off my hairnet and waved it around in glee, feeling like the kid from Hope and Glory when his school gets bombed into oblivion by the Nazi’s.

It looked to me like Coke would go out of business right there, but the whole assembly line was back up and running within minutes. Anyway, it wasn’t really Coca-Cola I was angry with, it was my agency.

All in all, the hairnet job wasn’t too bad, I guess. The factory was pretty cool, with all the automated machinery, the three-story towers of billions of shining cans, the forklift operators zipping here and there at frightening speed, missing each other by inches but never slowing, like some sort of choreographed musical number. Sometimes they would drive in reverse down the rows of pop, toting huge stacks of bundled soda which would completely obscure the forklifts and drivers, giving the illusion that the crates were moving themselves around the factory, turning corners, deftly avoiding obstacles, all while hovering silently just inches above the floor.

So, I guess I’m glad I didn’t take my revenge by tampering with one of the gloopmer bearings or cutting some of the wires of the flow-mo-mometer, thereby destroying the factory and the Coca-Cola industry with it. After all, I personally consume four hundred and twenty-six gallons of Coke per month. And I know I’ll never find one of my hairs in it.

One-Day Jobs

There should really be a special name for temps who get called into one-day assignments.  Like, "Minutemen" temps or "Snapshot" temps or "Here Today, Gone Tomorrow" temps or "Holy Lord God Does This Ever Suck" temps.

The two main problems with one-day temping seem a little contradictory at first:

1)  The jobs only last one day.

2)  The jobs often last much longer than one day.

This conflict can be explained by the third problem:

3) They don't pay dick.

Starting with the first one, which wouldn't be that big of a problem were you to get five one-day jobs a week.  Unfortunately, the actual number usually hovers somewhere between zero and two, and a couple one-day jobs over the course of the week isn't really gonna keep you rolling in the Ramen. One-day jobs are generally doled out to new temps who need a little test run so the temp agency can ensure they aren't drooling imbeciles.  Or, more reasonably, to ensure that at least they're the kind of drooling imbeciles who don't mess their pants at work.  Often.

Then again, temps who have been with an agency for a long while might start getting one-day assignments as well, which can mean the agency isn't really thrilled with their work and only throw them the other temps' leftovers.  If you've fallen out of favor with your temp agency, this is usually how they let you know.  Phase Two of the "we don't like you anymore" message involves never returning your phone calls and the occasional drive-by shooting.

And what's worse, as I said, these short jobs often get extended.  Almost always, in fact.  So, while one-day jobs suck, when extended past the one day, they suck even more.  You might not mind being called to file a Proctologist's invoices for a single day at a low rate, but you probably won't be happy when Dr. Colonfinger keeps you on another day.  And then another.  And another.  There you'll be stuck, making lousy money doing boring work for a guy who pokes around in people's butts, with your agency wanting to keep their client happy by not assigning you to another, longer, better-paying assignment, should one come along.  The impetus to finish the one-day assignment in one day is always strong, due to the fear of missing out on something better, but the faster you work, the more impressed the client will be with you, and the more crappy work they will give you.  Also, try not to shake hands with the doctor.

Another problem:

4)  You never get any advance warning.  (As opposed to, what?  Getting warned afterwards?)

One-day assignments are usually the result of someone calling in sick for the day.  They call their boss at 8:00am, their boss calls the temp agency at 8:15am, your agency calls you at 8:30am.  And they want you there, wherever there happens to be, at 9:00.  Earlier, if possible.  This sucks, because:

4a)  You were sleeping when the phone rang, and:

4b)  No matter how fast you get there, you won't get a full eight hour work day.

Calls for longer-term assignments may also come just a half-hour before the job is going to start, but it's not as much of a priority to get there immediately.   If you've got a solid month of work ahead of you, it's not a big deal to miss a few hours at the start of it.  But with these one-dayers, you want to work every minute you can, so you'll dash off, unshowered and unshaven and smelling like an armpit, to some horrible job which pays horrible money, and not even a full day's worth of it, no less.  That is, until it gets extended and you get stuck there.

There are some good things about one-day temping, though:

1) Sometimes, one-day assignments are the result of some office manager procrastinating on some huge project until the last day, when he suddenly realizes he won't finish it on deadline.  So, he calls in one or more temps to work like dogs (or, perhaps some other, more hard-working animal, like the amazing and delightful Weaverbird) until it is complete.

Oh, wait, that's another bad thing.

Still, it can be somewhat nice to be around other temps who are just as unhappy as you are.  For instance, I was once called in to do a day of data entry in Berkeley.  Once again, I wasn't given the full details of the assignment... the exciting details!  My temp agent didn't mention that I'd be working in the famous, much celebrated, world-renowned Coldest Goddamn Office On The Friggin' Planet!  Yeah, when you have to spend an entire day punching keys, it's a good idea to make sure your fingers are frozen like fishsticks.

The data entry was a big project, tallying the attendance records of students at a local tech school.  I wasn't alone there; they had brought in a total of five temps in an effort to get three months worth of attendance records up to date in the course of an afternoon.  It was stressed to us just how important it was that this data be entered correctly.  That students who were present on a given day were marked "Present" and those who were absent marked "Absent."  This was important.  There could be no mistakes.

Sat down in front of our computers and spreadsheets, shown the 'P' and 'A' keys, again told how important it was that our data entry be flawless, we were then asked, every five minutes, if we were done yet.  How much longer would it take us?  Would we finish by three?  By four?  Would it take us until six?

We didn't know.  How could we know?  We'd be finished when we were finished.  But this brings us to about the 94th bad thing about one-day assignments:

94)  The companies who hire one-day temps are cheap.

They're cheap because the pay is so low, but it goes beyond that, because they want to get you out just as soon as possible, so they don't even have to pay your insultingly low rate for a full day.  Well, the full day is truncated already since you didn't get called until 8:30, but they don't even want to pay you for a full partial day.  They want you in, they want you out.

I wanted out, too, so I punched my P's and A's as fast as I could manage without snapping my bone-chilled finger off at the knuckle.

A common theme running through these ultra-short assignments is the complete helplessness of the people who work at these places.  Oops, wait.

437)  People at these one-day jobs are completely helpless.

Sure, people everywhere are helpless, but it seems so much more pronounced at one-shot assignments. At one point during the day of this data-entry job, the office manager walked over to the printer, paused, and then crowed: "Does anyone know how to fix the printer?  It says it's out of paper!"

All over the office the keyboard clicking stopped for a moment, which delighted me, as I pictured my fellow temps all cringing and snickering.  Also pleasing was the fact that no one answered.  I chortled silently to myself, my breath forming clouds of condensation in front of me, and then I snapped an icicle off the end of my nose and continued stubbing my numb digit against the two keys I was permitted to.

Absorbed Into The Department

One more word about jobs, and then you can go lie down for a bit.

Absorbed into the department. Ah... the sweetest words to ever vibrate the eardrum of a temporary employee. Nothing, and I mean nothing can compare with finding out that your current assignment is being "absorbed into the department."

Allow me to explain. There are a number of reasons that you may be brought in to temp at a particular company. I’m not talking temp-to-hire here, I mean a true temporary position. Your agent will say "They need you for two weeks." Period. You get your end date when you get your start date.

You may be there to fill in for someone on vacation, no big deal. You may be there to fill in until they find someone else. You may be there because Jones is having surgery to remove a painful armpit fungus. In all of these cases, either an employee will be returning, or will be eventually replaced.

However, there are instances when an employee is leaving a particular job, and the job itself will then cease to exist altogether. The present members of the workforce will then take over the responsibilities of the transferred or retired or deceased or whatevered employee. The position itself will be absorbed into the department.

Rejoice, fair temps, rejoice, for this is what temping is all about. Your workload? Almost non-existent: remember, the staff will be taking as much off your hands as possible, preparing to assume the tasks themselves. Training? Little to none: why train you when you’ll be doing minimal work? Responsibilities? Ha! The desk you are occupying won’t even be there after you’re gone, and during your stay people will come and clean it out for you. Your freedom...? Limitless.

Come in late, leave early, stretch those breaks like taffy. Stroll about the office, whistling, hands in your pockets. Catch up with old friends via e-mail, or even better, with free (free!) long-distance phone calls. No longer will your lunchtime be a quick bite and some hasty flipping through a magazine. Take in a movie. Have a few beers. Go home and sleep. And most of all, dear temps, make each day count. Be as lazy and irresponsible on this job as possible, friend, for they do not come very often, and they do not come any better.

Other Temps

In the larger offices, no doubt, you will run into other temps who are, if I may be so hip, just here for the now.  Emotions will mingle at times like these, and depending on who you are and who they appear to be, you may experience a number of conflicting feelings.

1. Camaraderie

Hey, the faces may not be familiar but you’ve immediately got something in common: you’re toe-to-toe on the bottom rung. When two people meet and find out that they’re both temps, they will probably both break into a knowing smile. It’s like if you’re vacationing in, say, France, and you meet an American. Suddenly you share roots, a common bond, even if you’re nothing alike. If you are in a particularly rough or trying office environment, you might even spontaneously embrace and burst into tears (also known to happen in France).

Probably the next bit of information to be exchanged will be the name of the Temp service you work for. Even if you’ve never heard of their service, you will still say: "Ohhh... I’ve heard they’re good," and they will say something similar about yours.

This is about as far as I’ve ever gotten in this feeling because a few things invariably happen at this point. First of all, the other person always seems much happier than I do, more enthusiastic and excited to be there. They seem like they really love it and all the things promised by the (other) temp literature are coming true for them. Now, they may just be so used to being asked about temping and lying about how much they like it, but there is a small chance that this, for them, really is their dream job. This can often lead to:

1. Jealousy

Why is he so happy? Why does he get to work on the fun side of the building? Why does he get invited to the bar for drinks after work? Is he making more money than I am? Is his temp service better than mine? Is he making more friends than I am? Is his tie nicer than mine? Why does everyone know his name already?

This sort of thing leads straight to:

1. Competition

Here we’re getting into dangerous waters. Particularly for me or others like me, competing with fellow temps is not just a bad idea, it’s also pointless. I never even wanted to find permanent work at any of the companies I temped for, so why bother competing? I really don’t know. But in between games of FreeCell, I would start to wonder: Is he better than I am? Does he do a better job? Are people saying: "Boy, I wish Chris the Temp was more like Jimmy the Temp"?

Right about then, I’d start working harder, doing my best to get everything right, being pleasant and personable, arriving early and working late, and being the all around most helpful and competent temp there ever was. I would get complements on my work ethic, job offers galore, and praise from the highest levels, yet beneath it all I would feel cheap and worthless, because I had betrayed my fundamental being. I had put my petty jealousies ahead of my laziness and apathy, and I could never feel good about that. Welcome to:

1. Bloody Hatred

Well, you had to get there sooner or later. You may begin to hate the other temps you work with. Why? Because by being better than you they make you look bad, by being worse they make temps in general look bad, they get more attention, they seem genuinely happy, they smell, they look a lot like some kid who beat you up once... all are valid reasons to hate them. The common thread you once shared has since frayed and snapped over weeks of growing unpleasantness, or been neatly clipped in two by some singular incident, remark, or sidelong glance. While you might feel compelled to to stab them in the back or otherwise ruin their reputation and chances of permanent hire, you shouldn’t take any such action unless you are certain you can get away with it.

All of this aside, chances are you will make friends with some of your fellow temps, and even after you or they have left the assignment, you may continue to see them around town or keep in touch via company or personal e-mail. I myself have kept company with a large number of temps, both on the job and in seedy bars, and in times both wonderful and trying, they have always been there with an ear to scream in and a shoulder to lean drunkenly on. Still, the corporate world is much like a battleground. There are casualties. Alas, so many fine, honorable temps are no longer with us, and I would like to take this time to pay my respects to the fallen.

One more thing to keep in mind is that temp agencies usually offer bonuses for recruiting temps. In this time of prosperity, it seems that there are jobs galore and not enough temps to fill them, so may agencies will pay to if you send a warm body their way. Tell a friend to sign up with your agency, and if they list you as their referral and work forty hours or so, you’ll get a nice fifty to a hundred bucks. So cash in on your friends, that’s what they’re there for.

First Daze

It seems that every temp I meet these days is on their first assignment.  That's cute.  They've never done this before, don't know what to expect, really, and it always occurs to me that I should impart some of my hard-earned wisdom to them.  Then it occurs to me that I have no hard-earned wisdom.  Then it occurs to me that I don't even have any lazily-earned wisdom.  Then it occurs to me that they are much better looking than I am, and I begin plotting their demise.

Any-hoo, I've assembled a little blather of info that every temp should know before he or she starts their first day of temporary employment.  I'm going to stretch this out over two days, to make it look like I'm working harder on this than I really am (and that's a tip in itself).

AGENT

First, a word about your temp agent, the person who will find you temporary positions at crappy companies. The basic principle you need to understand about your agent is this: your agent hates you. This simple fact will come to answer many of the questions you will soon have, such as:

1) Why did my agent only give me ten minutes notice about my new assignment?

2) Why didn't my agent inform me that I would need specific skills at my new assignment, such as the ability to operate a local area network or a forklift?

3) Why did my agent kick me extremely hard in the groin area?

See, it all makes sense now.

INTUITION

Even with few or no details, you know a lot about the job you will be doing. Namely, that it sucks. Let me say that again, because it is somewhat important. Your job sucks.

How do you know this, even before you enter the workplace? Well, if the job was great, someone else would be doing it, wouldn't they? Oh, sure, your agent said someone was out sick for the day, but you know they are just home watching TV, completely healthy. They just hate their job. Sure, the receptionist is on maternity leave. Well, why did she get pregnant in the first place? Hmmm? Because she wanted a child? Come on, people, even an idiot can see through this simple ruse. Her job sucks so much that she'd rather produce smelly, shrieking offspring than show up for work. First thing to remember: if it was a good job, the person you are replacing wouldn't leave in the first place. You should intuitively know this about any position you have been called to fill.

Note: If your agent describes the office or business as "high-energy," you know its really going to suck.

LOCATION

Directions have undoubtedly been given to you by your agent, who makes bets with fellow agents about who can get their temps the most lost. When they call you in the morning, they will speak incredibly quickly, never repeat their directions the same way twice, and often give you helpful descriptions such as: "It's in a tall building downtown."

Note: If they use the term "business park" hang up and go back to sleep.

PUNCTUALITY

Unless you enjoy sitting around in a dark lobby at dawn with a receptionist who was born in the mid-eighteenth century, I would suggest taking your time in the morning. Arrive one to two hours late. If you show up right when people are arriving to work, they will not have time to drink coffee and play computer solitaire, instead having to show you where the food-caked company microwave is and explain the quirks of the toilet in the men's room. They will resent this intrusion into their morning rituals and will make you share a cubicle with a guy who has chronic gas.

CONTACT

You will have the name of your contact person, also given to you by your agent, which means the name will be wrong. The person you ask for will not be there, will be out sick, or most likely, not even exist in the company at all. I suggest asking for "Todd," because every company has at least one and he's more than likely the jerk will have to share an office or desk with anyway. He may or may not have gas.

INTRODUCTION

You will be introduced to roughly six hundred thousand million people, all who look alike and have similar sounding names. "This is Melody, Melanine, Melinda, Melissa, Marlena, Myrlene, Madeline, and Todd.

DESK

You will be shown to a desk. They may even say, "This is your desk!" But make no mistake: This is not your desk. I cannot stress this fact enough, mostly because I named my friggin' website after it.

Don't look at the yellowed Born Loser comic strips tacked to the wall, don't read the fortune-cookie fortunes taped to the computer monitor, don't drink from the mug that has INSTANT HUMAN:  Just add coffee!!! stenciled on the side and whatever you do, don't look at the Anne Geddes cards of infants dressed like eggplants.

It will be difficult, believe me, I know. But you must resist or you may suddenly feel that you deserve your own desk, one you can decorate with pictures of your family or your pets or your pet's family. Your own desk where you can tack up a letter your nephew was forced to write, thanking you for the reindeer sweater you sent him for Christmas, or attach the magnetic statue of David you can dress up in different magnetic outfits, or display Todd the accountant's latest wacky e-mail joke of the day (he's so funny!).

A desk where you can change the computer screensaver to say things like Are we having fun yet? or Is it Friday yet? or Can I go home yet? A desk you can crawl under and say, "There's that darn pen!" or "There's that darn invoice!" or "There's that darn petty cash I accused Johnson of stealing that led to him being fired and the subsequent hostage situation!"

A desk where you can label the trashcan Suggestions or stand one of those revolting troll dolls or hang that wacky photocopy of Todd's face (he's really funny!). And if you can do all that with just a desk, just think what you can do with your own cubicle! Why, you can hang a colorful shower-curtain over the entrance or keep a beach ball in it or cover the walls with pictures of George Clooney or Nicole Kidman or Shar-Peis (they're so cute!). You can post cartoons from Dilbert's page-a-day calendar, since you're the only one in the office who has one. You can get mad when someone borrows your chair because you've set the armrests to the height you need. You can have a gumball machine. Magnetic poetry. A coffee warmer. A nose pencil sharpener.  A cover for your mouse that looks like a real mouse(!). You will begin to live, and not just work, in your cubicle, and the next thing you know you will be retiring with full benefits and a fat 401-K, and building your dream house in southern California.

And no one wants that.

TRAINING

Once you arrive at your new position, you will be "shown" what to "do." The person training you will assume, since you've been there for three minutes, that you know absolutely all the information about the company's policy and history, that you have your own password for the computer, and that you know your way to "Skip's" office. You won't know any of this. You won't even know who "Skip" is, or whether or not he has an office. Or chronic gas.

EQUIPMENT

Find out where the photocopier is, and avoid it at all costs, because it hates you. It can sense temps, and you will be able to hear it's paper jamming and crunching as soon as you approach. Of course, advances in copier technology have fixed this problem, so some of the newer models will instead silently jettison their toner supply in the middle of your copy session. Good advice: If you need to copy a document, just take it back to your computer and retype it.

COMPUTER

Your computer hates you too. Maybe you should just recopy it with pencil and paper.

PENCIL AND PAPER

Why take chances? Just throw the document away and, if asked, tell them you gave it to "Skip."

BREAK ROOM

Also known as the Seventh Level of Hell, the break room is to be avoided at all costs.  It is drab, dull, smells like stale popcorn, and invariably filled with women discussing, at full volume, how their teenage children just aren't doing as well in school as they could be.  Also, if you're lucky, a television made in the 1930's broadcasting, at full volume, Jenny Jones (show #311A:  My Girlfriend is a Lyin' Hootchie-Mama!!!).

LUNCH TIME

For reasons we've just covered, don't eat your lunch in the break room.  Run away.  Visit the local café or patisserie where you might enjoy a light repast of turkey, sliced electron-thin, on crumbly, multi-grained bread with sprouts, sunflower mustard, and carrot shavings.  Wash it down with a thimble of mineral water or, if you're feeling risqué, a small bottle of Hawaiian Red Nectar Raspberry Cream Wheat Honey Ale.  It's only 23.65 (no dollar signs on this menu), served promptly to your table, which has the surface area of a cufflink, in just three short hours.

Smug: It's What's For Lunch.

AGENT (Part II)

At some point during the day, your agent will call you to see how you're doing.  You may hear some snickering in the background as you lie and tell your agent the job is fine and you like it a lot.  If you do mention a problem or personality conflict, your agent will inform you cheerily that the last temp they placed there is still undergoing trauma therapy, and that they will have someone to replace you in no less than six weeks.

**Reinterpreting the Sociological Factors of Impression Management and Emotional Labor**

No, no, just kidding about the title. But this section is different. And by different, I don’t mean that it’s better written, or that it contains useful facts, original observations, or intelligent, thoughtful humor. In those terms, it’s just the same crap you’ve been reading.

However, it is devoted to the other end of the temping spectrum: the companies that hire temporary employees as part of their workforce. I know, I know, you’re thinking how wonderful it is that I include both perspectives here, that I am very open-minded in telling both sides of the story, but to be honest, it’s just that I realized it would increase my target audience and thus boost web traffic to my site. Yes, my eyes have gone blind with greed and self-indulgence. At any rate, it’s going to be a short and poorly researched section.

Temps, you may want to skip this section, because boy, am I gonna tear you guys a new one.

How it Works

Some companies are really big. Others are not so big. Some are kind of medium sized. You could probably make a graph of the sizes of different companies, if you wanted to. But all companies have a few things in common: a rapidly changing financial market, a high degree of employee turn-over, and a guy in engineering named Jerry who has huge sweat-stains under his armpits even in December.

Often these companies find themselves in an awkward position. An employee has decided to leave the company for one reason or another (usually for something very self-centered like having a baby or being severely mauled in a bear attack) and they (the company) need to fill the position quickly and at low expense. See, the cost, and more importantly, the time of advertising, interviewing, and hiring people off the street can be enormous. Plus who wants street people in their office? Street people are stinky.

Luckily, they have someone to turn to: the temp agency. The agency takes on the task of doing the interviewing and evaluating for them, forming a pool of fast-learning, capable people that can be inserted into the workforce with minimal training and expense. Then, realizing that three people don’t really constitute a pool, they hire some marginal people like yours truly to beef up the ranks.

The company will give them a description of the position they need filled and the skills required to perform it, and the temp agency will go through their files to find the temp best suited for the job. Then they go through their files again, looking for a temp who can at least partially perform a portion of one of the requirements requested, and lives somewhere near the company in question. Then they go through their files again, sweating freely now, and send the first temp who answers their phone in a somewhat comprehensible manner.

So you, company of indeterminate size, may not exactly be getting the best person for the job. Whereas yesterday you had a talented, resourceful, veteran employee, today you have some dipshit, fresh out of tenth grade, who was hired because he promised the agency he would work on his drooling problem.

This is where you will face a creative challenge, namely, putting this troglodyte where he can do the least amount of harm.  I know!  Let's have him answer the phone!

Placing Your Temp

The person who answers the phone is an important part of any business. For a potential client, it is their first interaction with your company, their first impression, and a big part of their decision-making process when choosing someone to do business with. At least that's what I get told a lot, usually in a threatening or condescending tone. I find this thought somewhat terrifying. It means that I, and others like me, may be responsible for making your company dozens of business connections and thousands of dollars in deals. Or, perhaps to be more accurate, losing your company dozens of connections and thousands of dollars.

As an example, take what happened to me at this one company I temped for (it might have been yours!).

I had just started working at the front desk, and hadn’t really paid attention to the phone operating instructions, mainly because the woman training me had really nice breasts and I was imagining us running off to Hawaii together. After she left me at the desk, alone, broken-hearted, and vengeful, I realized with some alarm that I had no idea how to transfer a call. To top things off, when the phone finally rang, I suddenly got these really loud and painful hiccups.

I picked it the receiver and said: "Good afternoon, how may I dir-HICCERP-ect your call?" There was a very long pause, during which I said: "HICCERP." The person then hesitantly asked for the head retail manager, and with one more loud, diaphragmatic emission into the phone, I connected him to voicemail of a Guatemalan dry-cleaning business.

So, we see that having the wrong person answering your phones can indeed be deadly for your company. To ensure that you have only the most highly-trained, professional personnel answering your phones, simply follow the instructions below when placing your temp:

1. If your temp is me, make sure you don’t place me anywhere near a phone.
2. If you do place me near a phone, don't let me answer it.
3. If you do let me answer it, make sure the person who trains me is not even remotely attractive.
4. Also, make sure I am not chewing anything at the time. Chewing sounds on the other end of a phone line can be absolutely revolting for your client, and making your clients sick is not good for business. Once I was eating a cookie when the phone rang, and within ten minutes, large, burly men were removing all of the furniture and equipment from the office.
5. Finally, If your temp is someone other than me, than read the book they’ve written and see what it says to do. This book is about me. ME!!!

So, what can you trust your temp to do? Well, you can trust him to make long distance phone calls, to steal office supplies, and to access pornographic websites through your internet connection. And I’ll stand by that guarantee.

Am I being too hard on the temps? I guess so. Seriously, temps can be creative, consistent, and dedicated members of your workforce. Let’s examine each of those qualities and determine how to bring them out in your temp.

Creativity

Want your temp to be creative? Just ask him to fill out his timecard. You’ll be astounded at his inventiveness. I also guarantee that excuses for lateness are worth keeping track of, as you will hear tales from temps that have as yet unheard of medical problems, are involved in hostage situations on a weekly basis, and have at least eleven ill grandmothers. Hiring a temp is like entering a magical wonderland of absolute [bullshit](http://www.notmydesk.com/misc/campage.html).

Consistency

There’s nothing like a temp for consistency. Yes, you’ve told Chad several times that the document goes face-down in the fax machine. Yes, you’ve taken the document and demonstrated it for him. Yes, you’ve stood there and made him do it over and over, you’ve hired an outside vendor to create a large, flashing neon sign that says Faxes Go Face Down, Chad and hung it directly over the fax machine. But Chad, without fail, without doubt, will consistently put the fax in face-up. And your boss will call you from Malaysia and thank you for faxing him yet another set of blank pages, which he’s sure the foreign conglomerate will accept in lieu of a contract. Boy, is your boss a sarcastic bastard. I don’t know how you stand it.

Dedication

Finally, dedication can easily be found in your temps in the form of nicotine. A temp who smokes will think nothing of walking down thirty-eight flights of steps to smoke a butt if the elevator is out. Or if the elevator is just slow, even. Walking back up is an altogether different story.

Hopefully, company of indeterminate size, this has provided you with some information that you will find useful and that will keep you up nights. Sorry, company. I myself have learned a great deal from writing this, namely that I feel no guilt, despite the speed and ease with which I turned on my brethren. Sorry, brethren.

**Don’t I Hate You From Somewhere?**

I was recently glancing through one of my temping books.  Like most of the others, this book makes temping out to be an exciting and diverse career choice, and attempts to prove this by citing specific examples, such as the fact that temps, nomads of the workforce that they are, have the opportunity to meet hundreds of different people over the course of dozens of jobs.

I agree and disagree with this.

Yes, you'll work dozens of jobs. Yes, you'll meet hundreds of people. But you won't meet any different people. You'll just meet the same ten or twelve people hundreds of times.

I've been there. I've met them. I've written them down.

With few exceptions, here are the people you will find in any and every office in America.

The Boss

Name: Bob (always)

Height: Intimidating

Nature: Inherently evil

Positive traits: Will never speak to you

Negative Traits: Will walk by when you're doing something embarrassing, such as scratching yourself, repairing your tie with a stapler, or weighing your arm on the mailroom postage scale

Identifying Features: Pockmarks for that extra-evil look

The Boss's Secretary

Name: Gloria; Susan

Age: Old

Arrives at: 4:30 AM

Complains about: Everything

Choice of Calendar: Infants dressed as tomatoes

Superpower: Can mess up any book or movie title, no matter how simple (M is for Burglar; The Man Who Doesn't Have Any Face)

Will miss work for: Rubber Stamp-Art Convention

The Receptionist

Name: Dottie; Terri

Size: Large

Likes: Personal phone calls

Confused by: Computers

Offensive strategy: Knows everything about everyone

Defensive Strategy: Smells like cooked meat

Weakness: Fabio paraphernalia

Obnoxious Comment Guy

Name: Frank; Chuck

Habits: Will make stupid comments with no signs of remorse

Weapon of choice: Repetition

Upon walking into a crowded break-room: "Hey, it's a party! Why wasn't I invited?"

Upon being in an elevator with someone with food: "If the elevator gets stuck, will you share that?"

Upon seeing you:  "Working hard, or hardly working?"

Latest addition:  "WHASSSSUP?"

Refers to coffee as: Regular or Unleaded

Object he should be beaten with: Bat; big rock

Aka: Guy Who Will Never Know the Touch of a Woman

Perky Gal

Name: Kaitney; Kaitlyn; Kim

Aka: Katie-Bear; Kimmy

Attitude: Seemingly inconceivable happiness

Shrill/Not Shrill: Shrill

Musical Equivalent: The B52's

Your first impression: "Boy, she's happy."

About a week later: "No one should be that happy, dammit."

What you'll feel guilty about: Wanting to punch her

The Guy Who Hates You

Name: Dan; Lee

Identifying expressions: Scowl; glare; frown

General Vibe: Hatred

How much he hates you: A lot

Why he hates you: Unknown

Mood on bad day: Angry

Mood on a good day: Seething

Who he's nice to: Everyone but you

The Incomprehensible Foreign Person

First name: Ixhyl; Bing-Chon

Last Name: Hndjaaadjhalli; Ng

Calls himself: Joe

Where he's from: Unknown

What he does: Unknown

Just what the hell he's saying: Unknown

The Weird Girl

Name: Pigeon; Moon

Drives: Original VW Bug

Attire: Flowered dress; boots

Glasses: Horn-rimmed

Smokes: Cloves

Reads: Auras, palms, Rumi

Instructs others on:  Desktop Feng-Shui

Religion she'll constantly remind you she participates in: Pagan

Shaves armpits: Maybe, maybe not

The Mom

Name: Jean

Number of kids: Unknown, possibly thirty

Intelligence of kids: Too high to calculate

Favorite topic: Guess

Favorite Holiday: Bring Your Kids To Work Day (observed daily)

Is:  Always leaving work to drive them somewhere

How she gets away with this: I don't know

The Babe/The Stud

Name: Michelle/Brad

Genus: Fox/Aryan

Has nice: Scent/Hair

Has really nice: Breasts/Car

Has bad: Scruples/Personality

Likes: Zima/Golf

Scores: More than you/Way more than you

Dislikes: Women/Intelligent Women

The Religious Guy

Name: Craig; Dave

Favorite item of clothing: Jesus cap

Devoted to: The Lord

Hates: His wife; His kids; Minorities

Generous with: Tickets to religious events; advice

Medical background: Has diagnosed homosexuality as a disease

Favorite saying: "I'll pray for you."

The Guy You Can't Respond To

Name: Harvey; Hank; Hal

Similar to: Obnoxious Comment Guy, only nicer

Habits: Will make a friendly statement in passing that is impossible to reply to, such as:  "What's the good word?"

Your only possible reaction: Smile; shrug

Walks: Away before you can respond

P.S.: What the hell is the good word, anyway?

The Grubby Mailroom Girl Who Makes You Uncomfortable

Name: Beth; Deb

Appearance: Well, grubby

Routine: Has no desk, is constantly using yours

Location: A little too close to you

Goal: To invite you to lunch

Technique: Asks you several times daily from a distance of two millimeters

Danger: Can spot lies

Is: Very direct

Is not: Keen on washing, apparently

Scattered Species:

The Guy in the Elevator Who Nose-Whistles Louder than the Philharmonic

The Woman With The Incredibly Amazing Body and the Incredibly Hideous Face

The Guy Who Walks Backwards Down the Hall While Carrying on a Shouting Conversation With His Pal and Bumps Into You While You're Carrying Something Heavy

The Woman Way Too Into Astrology

The Guy Who Raps his Knuckles on Your Desk Each and Every Time he Walks By

**Two If By Bus**

Unless you're lucky enough to work from home (and let's face it, you're not), you've got to get to and from work, five days a week.  Your commute can be frustrating, time-consuming and expensive, but on the other hand, it can be annoying, costly, and aggravating.

The commute for my current job involves my car, the train or sometimes the ferry, a bus, and the occasional rickshaw.  It puts a dent in the wallet, and takes about an hour and a half, one way.  So, round trip, that's three hours a day, which works out to fifteen hours a week, and whatever fifteen times four is per month (I'm sure it's a lot).  All that extra time and money certainly warrants some serious thought and discussion, but instead, let's look at a couple pages of goofy website shit.

The Car

I can't really think of anything to say about commuting by car, so let me tell you about my spider.  He used to live in my side-view mirror.  He'd spun a perfect little web over it, and he even knew to hide behind the mirror when I started the engine, to avoid getting blown off when I reached speeds of seventy miles per hour backing out of my parking space.

I often marveled at him and his web.  The web itself was quite durable, and even when a strand or two would become damaged, it was always perfectly fixed the next time I got in my car.  One morning after a heavy rain, his entire web was gone and I feared the worst, but that evening, as I staggered drunkenly to my car to drive home, the web was back and looking just as magnificent as always.  I got quite used to him, my little spider pal.  He provided companionship, and gave me a reason to look at my side-view mirror from time to time.

At some point, this clever, industrious little spider got inside my car.  And now he must die.

Now, every morning, there is an intricate network of webbing over my seat, steering wheel, gear shift, and old McDonalds bags.  I have to claw through it to sit down, and often while I'm driving, a strand will stick to my face and I'll frantically have to paw it off, because there's nothing more gross and creepy than a strand of spider web looped over your ear or stuck to an eyelash.  Maybe he is doing me a favor, catching and eating any small insects that live in my car, or perhaps he is hoping one day I will become stuck, and he will inject me with venom and drain my body of blood, like Charlotte did to that pig in that book, remember?  That was cool.

If you can commute by car, best of luck.  I love to drive but hate traffic, particularly when it's in front of me talking on a cell phone.  Sure, I know, I could make things easier on myself by not hitting the snooze button sixteen times every morning, by setting out clean work clothes the night before, by leaving a few minutes earlier, and other time saving yet absurdly unrealistic suggestions.  All I'm saying is, it's hard enough driving a stick-shift ninety miles per hour while drinking coffee, smoking a cigarette, putting on a tie, and clawing spider webs off my face.  And you people driving the speed limit and braking for obstacles, such as traffic signs and tornadoes, are not helping.

The Bus

I have a secret.  When you get on the bus, and start walking towards the back, if you're not holding onto the rail when the bus starts moving, you will be thrown off your feet.

I am the only one who knows this.  I know I am the only one who knows this, because I spend every single bus ride watching my fellow passengers, airborne and with a surprised expression on their faces, sailing towards the back of the bus.

I don't know why this is such a hard concept for people to grasp.  I could understand if it was someone who had never been on a bus before, which I suppose sometimes it is.  But it's not just the rookies, it can't be, because it happens to everyone.  They don't hold the rail, and the bus takes off, and they either fly into the air, or stumble forward, or slam into someone, usually me.

It's sort of like a social equalizer, in a way.  No matter who gets on, a young professional, an old vagrant, a mother with a pair of infants, a construction worker, a policeman, an Indian... they all became a tangle of limbs in the back of the bus.  Dividing lines are erased.  It matters not, their color, their creed, their sexual ambiguity... They're all the same.

They're morons.

It was funny, at first.  I would sit in my seat, eagerly awaiting the next passenger.  I would smirk and shake my head at their foolishness as they started down the aisle, then duck as they flew overhead.  It was like my own private show.

After a while, as with most things in my life, it became less amusing and more annoying.  What the hell was the problem with these idiots?  I started seeing the same people doing the same thing, people who rode the bus every day, like me.  Did they have no collective memory?  Did they have no common sense?  And why did they always, always look surprised?

Now, the annoyance has turned into something else.  Something horrible.  It started with the old man.

One afternoon, halfway through Chinatown, the bus was stopped for what seemed like a very long time, its door open, waiting for something.  After about ten minutes, a small, fuzzy white head came into view.  An elderly gent with gnarled, arthritic hands and a cane was making his way onto the bus.  Slowly.

A football season passed, and he finally made his way to the top step.  The doors creaked closed in a shower of rust, and the old man began shuffling toward the back of the bus.  The bus itself did not move because the light was red, and I've been told the bus drivers have started paying attention to these things.

I watched the old man.  He had hooked the cane over his forearm and was creeping down the aisle, his hands held out shakily in front of him, legs wobbling unsteadily, his jaw doing that thing that old guy's jaws do.  I began getting sick, because that jaw thing grosses me out, and then I began getting nervous.

Come on, old man, I thought, move it.

He hobbled past several empty seats, still not bothering to hold onto anything.

The traffic light perpendicular to ours turned from green to yellow.

Hurry, old guy.  Get the lead out. And enough with the jaw, already.  The driver gunned the engine, his hands tightening on the ridiculously big steering wheel.

The old man still moved toward the back of the bus, getting closer to me and the great beyond with every step.  Not much closer, since his feet only shuffled about a half-inch at a time, but closer nonetheless.

The other traffic light turned from yellow to red.  Ours turned green.

I could picture the scene in my mind, the bus lurching forward, the frail old man being thrown to the floor of the bus in a pile of broken hips.  What a nightmare that would be for the man, his already crumbling life shattered by a nasty spill.  I could see it all happening, right in front of me, so I did what anyone with any decency would have done.  I slid over from my window seat to the aisle seat and leaned forward, arms out, so he wouldn't be able to sit next to me.  He looked like he smelled.

No, seriously, I would be devastated if he fell and injured himself.  We were late enough as it was.

At any rate, he was saved by one of his ilk, another doddering old crone, this one outside the bus, who had waited, in fine doddering-old-crone-fashion, for the light to have almost changed before crossing the street.  So, our bus was held up a few moments further by the senior citizen shambling uncertainly around in the road, while our driver exhibited his patience and understanding by holding down the horn and screaming creative obscenities.  Meanwhile, our old man found his way into a seat in time to avoid being launched out the rear window, where no doubt he would have landed on another old person, since the city is apparently infested with them.

Since that incident, I worry.  I sit and worry, white-knuckled from gripping the railing as I watch people board the bus.  I worry about these passengers, both young and old, both quick and slow, both smelly.  Yes.  They never bathe, and they never, ever hold the rail.

The Train

All aboard!  Let's take the train to work!  Toot-toot!

Boy, that cheerful stuff takes it outta me.

The train is a popular choice for commuters, as it is fast and often goes underground, or in some cases, under large bodies of water, which is always disconcerting to me.  I mean, just carrying one of those gallon jugs of water from the supermarket to my car leaves me panting and shaking with fatigue, and not just because I am pathetically weak.  Water is heavy.  And here I am on a train, going underneath a whole billion trillion million gallons of water.  All of that weight, pressing down on the tunnel... it just seems like it will bust through the walls and flood the tube and we'll all drown or be electrocuted by the third rail or whatever.  It's enough to take my mind off the huge mouth-breather that is reading the newspaper over my shoulder.

I like the train for the most part; it is probably how I get to work the most often.  Someday I even hope to sit down on the train, although thus far I have not had the opportunity.  The problem is this whole chivalry thing.  A seat will open up, and while I am pretending to look around for a woman to offer the seat to, someone else slips in and takes it.  Pretending to be a gentlemen is seriously hampering me, yet I continue to do it because I was raised to believe that if you are kind to women, sometimes they will sleep with you.

The real problem with the train, commuter-wise, is that it's on a track.  So if there is some obstacle, say a broken down train or slow-moving old person on the track, everything stops.  Your train, the trains behind and in front of you, all of them.  And there's nothing you can do.  It's not like the movie where Keanu Reeves makes the train go really fast to smash through the wall and run over Sandra Bullock (I think that's what happened in that movie anyway, but I'm not sure because I had given my seat to a woman and was then forced to sit behind someone with a large head).  The point is, one little problem on the track, and you're going to be late for your temp job, which might not be a tragedy now that I think about it.  On the other hand, if you're riding the bus and something is in the way, often the bus can go around it, or you can get off, or Keanu Reeves can make it somehow jump over the obstacle and onto Lawrence Fishburne.

Whoa.

Now, in Japan, they have something called the Bullet Train, which travels at 300 kilometers per hour, which, if I've calculated correctly, is approximately 185 stones per fluid decabushel.  Pretty fast!  Because of their advanced technology, those lucky Japanese commuters will reach the obstruction on the tracks much faster than we will.  While our train is just pulling away from the station, they're already sitting motionless on the track, reading their newspapers backwards and experiencing the onset of claustrophobia.

And am I the only person who actually goes to work on Friday? The first four days of the week the train is packed, but on Friday it's virtually empty. Last Friday morning the entire passenger load on the train consisted of myself and a small squirrel, and even he got off at the mall.

The Boat

I have the good fortune to commute by ferry if I so choose, and not a day goes by that I don't appreciate it.  Well, okay, most days go by without me appreciating it, in fact, I complain about it almost constantly.  But it's about the best way I know of getting to work.  It's relaxing, they have coffee and donuts in the morning, a full bar in the evenings, and you can even sit up on the top deck and smoke.  It's never so full that you can't find a seat, and the gentle rocking motion will help you to either catch a few extra winks or cause you to empty the contents of your stomach over the side.  Also, since you are on a boat, you might also get to use the words "Poop Deck" at some point.  Heh. *Poop*.

We got the news one morning that a whale had wandered into San Francisco Bay, and halfway through the commute, we all got to see it.  It appeared off the starboard side of the boat, submerged, and them came up right in front of us.  It was really magical.  We watched in wonder as the huge, graceful creature surfaced, it's great black body glistening in the morning sunlight, and a sigh went up from the commuters as it dove again, magnificent tail sending sparkling droplets of water high into the air, and then we all smiled, feeling closer to nature, as the proud, mysterious creature was churned into bait by our propellers.  Well, come on, what were we supposed to do?  Slow down?  We're on our way to work here.  Outta the way, you ungodly giant fish!

The boat is a little expensive, but I think it's worth it.  Of course, there's only maybe two boats per hour, so you really have to be on time.  If you miss it, you've got a significant wait for the next one.  Forget any ideas you have of running for the boat and making a spectacular jump from the gangplank onto the Poop Deck (snort!), it's not gonna happen.  You're not Keanu Reeves, you know, and if you are Keanu Reeves, thanks for reading my book.  I have a great idea for a Bill & Ted sequel, by the way.

The Bike

Yeah, I'm sure riding a bike to work is real healthy and environmentally friendly and all, but you bike people are in my way.

The Feet

You pedestrians are in my way.

The Carpool

If someone ever asks you to carpool, they will say something like "Hey, do you want to carpool to work?  We need a third person, and I know we live in the same area."  You will notice that the tone of their voice will drop towards the end of the sentence.  This is known as the Doppler Effect, and this will occur because you will be running away from them at incredible speeds.

Don't carpool.  Jesus, isn't your life bad enough?  I mean, you have to work with these people, do you really want to see them first thing in the morning?  I know it's a lot cheaper than any of the other options, but if you carpool, you give up a lot of freedom.  Chances are you won't be able smoke, stuff donuts in your face, pick your nose, dig crust out of your eye, or try to kill that damn spider with a club made from the petrified remains of a Whopper meat patty.  The radio will be set to that station with the wacky morning program, the one where they do wacky things like call some lady at work and pretend to have such a heavy accent that she can't understand them (wacky!).  And if you happen to work in San Francisco, you know that the carpool lane now requires at least sixteen people per vehicle.  It just isn't worth it.

I have only carpooled once in the past few years, and it was with strangers.  I had just missed the bus to my ferry, and a car pulled over.  A lot of people these days cruise for extra passengers so they can use the diamond lane, often forcing people into their car at gunpoint.

It worked out quite well, actually, because both the driver and other passenger were incredibly attractive women, whom I hit upon in my usual fashion, by saying absolutely nothing the entire ride.  I did have the foresight to say something witty and memorable when they dropped me off, which was "Thanks!"  I know they're still thinking about me.

No matter how you commute, try to do it safely.  Is there anything more depressing than listening to a traffic report in the morning, and hearing about a fatal crash during rush hour?  You always know it was someone their way to work.  On their way to a job, just like the rest of us, only this person died.  Co-workers wondering if he's late, or maybe he was a temp, and they're wondering if he flaked.  They'll get the news at some point or another, and they'll think I drive that same route every day.  It could have been me.  And it could have.  So, be careful out there.  Most jobs I've had aren't even worth getting up for, let alone going down for.

Did that sound dirty?  Damn.  I was trying to be poignant.

**Not Your Desk**

As a temp, you'll be making your living inhabiting a series of desks that belong to other people.  You will sit at people’s desks in their absence, do their work, in essence becoming them for a few days, a week, a month. When they return, you will go and fill in for someone else, sit at their desk.

This has a certain gun-for-hire appeal, a nomadic sort of charm to it, and it can be interesting to sit at a stranger's desk, to see what they have chosen to place around themselves, presumably objects and belongings that make them feel comfortable, items they feel best reflect their personality, or at least the personality they want others to think they have.

But like everything else in the world, there are good things and bad things about sitting at someone else's desk.  And, like everything else in this book, I'd like to focus on the bad things.  Every cloud not only has a silver lining, but also the potential for dumping softball-sized hail on your unprotected cranium.  Take a seat and get ready to flinch.

First of all, you will be subjected to the other employee’s comments when they see you sitting at the desk of their absent co-worker. Highly original witticisms such as "You don’t look like Cathy!" or "What have you done with Steven?" or "Muriel, you’ve changed!" will assault your eardrums on an hourly basis.  I have developed, much to my shame, a polite laugh to deal with such encounters, rather than my instinctive reaction, which would be to lay my head on the desk and sigh mournfully.

What usually comes next is an inquiry about where the employee I’m replacing is. The person is usually on vacation, at a doctor’s appointment, or stuck at home with a projectile-vomiting Jack Russell Terrier, but I grow weary of telling everyone the same thing and am often tempted to make up more interesting stories.

"Tod is having a painful groin fungus removed," I’d love to say just once. Or maybe, "Janet seduced a grade-school boy and can’t make bail."  Of course, "He's dead" is the one I'm most tempted to give, but it seems needlessly cruel, so I generally stick with "He's dying" instead.

Answering someone else's phone isn't fun either, as callers will be completely baffled by the fact that you're not the person you're filling in for.  From their level of incredulity, you'd think they'd dialed their phone and been instantaneously teleported to Pago Pago in the middle of the Polynesian Basket Festival of O Le Tala I Le 'Au Uso (a confusing festival even if you're expecting it).

What's worse, sometimes the caller doesn't even question the fact that you may not be the person they were trying to reach.  Many times I've picked up the phone, saying "Hi, this is Christopher, can I help you?" only to hear "Hi, Janet, this is Ralph, can you fax me the new updates?"

Of course, these are all just minor annoyances when compared to the real problem of sitting at a desk that's not yours.  In order to drag this out a little bit, let’s look at a hypothetical situation.

Let's say you have trained for years and years to be a lifeguard. You can swim like a dolphin, you know dozens of lifesaving techniques, you have a great tan, you’ve had had all the brain matter removed from your head (I base this on repeated viewings of Baywatch), and you are ready for action. The only problem is that there are currently no lifeguard positions open at the beach near your home.

You wait and wait, and finally a call comes in. It seems that Chad, one of the senior lifeguards, has taken ill with a slight case of death, and will be out for a few days. Can you fill in?

You jump at the chance. This will be a great opportunity to show everyone what you can do. The next morning at the crack of dawn, you head down to the beach and meet the Administrative Assistant Supervisor of Coordinated Lifeguard Support Services (or whoever it is that is in charge of lifeguards).

The supervisor shows you the beach. He points out the ocean, and the numerous people whose bloated corpses you will no doubt be fishing out of it later in the day.

Then he hands you (and this is the important part) a pair of sand-caked, sweat-stained Speedos. "Put these on," he says.

You don’t want to put them on. You don't want to touch them.  You wouldn’t even want to set fire to them, for fear of accidentally inhaling the fumes they would produce.

"These are Chad’s bikini swim-trunks," the supervisor tells you, apparently mindless of the hair and grime stuck to the offensive scrap of material. "You are filling in for Chad, so you have to wear his thong."

Sound revolting? Well, welcome to the life of a temp. No, you don’t have to wear another man’s snug-fitting swimsuit, but you will have to sit at someone else’s desk. Trust me, it can be just as disgusting.

After all, people live at their desks. Sitting at someone else’s desk is like going to a stranger’s home and crawling into their bed. Desks collect hair, crumbs, dust, and sticky substances you don't even want to speculate about. If it were your own desk, your own hair, it wouldn’t be any big deal, you just brush it aside and tuck into your microwave burrito. But when its someone else’s... well... its disgusting. It’s like sitting down on a public toilet and feeling someone else’s butt-warmth.

Here are some of the delights you might find at "your" desk:

1) cups or mugs with petrified lipstick on the rim

2) "scrunchies" with hair in them

3) mascara caked eyelashes

4) the socks and tennis shoes women wear instead of heels while commuting

5) little stuffed animals that stare at you with bright button eyes until you go crazy

6) partially-full coffee mugs supporting as yet-undiscovered bacterial life-forms

7) the ear-piece of a phone headset with... with... well you know what stuff is on it.

8) Greeting cards displaying children dressed as asparagus

9) food stuck between keyboard keys

10) electric nosehair trimmer

11) trimmings of the aforementioned trimmer

12) lots of unfinished work (not disgusting, but certainly annoying)

So it can be pretty gruesome. Not to mention the fact that you will often be filling in for someone who is out sick. That means the day before, they were coughing, hacking, blowing their nose, and then using their keyboard and phone. So you need to be concerned with disgusting stuff you can’t even see.

You may get strange looks if you insist on boiling every single office implement you use but trust me, its worth it. I mean, you might think that swabbing something with alcohol will do the trick, but it probably won’t. There are only two other choices: wrapping yourself from head to toe with some sort of air-tight rubber garment (which I do every Friday night anyway) or just chilling out and dealing with it. After all, you probably eat at Arby’s. What kind of disgusting crap do you think goes into your burgers?  You know, I can’t believe you’re getting so worked up about a little dirt. Jeez.

**Turn Your Head and Temp**

I know it's tough for you temps out there.  Your head has been hurting.  Your knees have been aching.  You've had that hacking cough for six years.  You seem to be missing one or more of your limbs, and frankly, you're concerned.

The roughest part of temping, other than the bone-wrenching despair and the mocking from your peers, is the lack of medical benefits.  Normal people with medical benefits don't get this.  Going to the doctor costs them nothing, they have a ten-dollar co-pay for prescriptions, they relax in lush, spacious waiting rooms filled with interesting and up-to-date reading material... they have it easy.

But what about when you get sick?  Or hurt?  Or let's say you just want to meet a doctor?  All of that comes out of your own pocket.

Well, I'm starting a new service in this book, just for temps, listing some common symptoms, diagnoses, and remedies.  It's free, you don't have to sit naked on crinkly white paper, and best of all, a doctor won't jab you with one of his instruments (this may be a drawback, actually, if you want to meet a doctor for this very purpose).

So, "step" right "in", the "doctor" will "see" you now!

Symptom: Tiny popping sounds in ears

Diagnosis:  Patient has soap bubbles in ears, the result of trying to shower in 14 seconds.  This is insufficient time to fully rinse body of soap or body-care products.

Remedy:  Patient should not hit snooze button four or five times in the morning, to allow time for proper showering.

NOTE:  Patient has some toothpaste on chin, too.

Symptom:  Gurgling and cramping in stomach

Diagnosis:  Patient has not eaten since consuming an un-microwaved Chicken & Cheddar Hot Pockets since breakfast at 2pm Sunday afternoon.

Remedy:  Patient should not hit snooze button four or five times in the morning, to allow time for a proper breakfast.

NOTE:  Patient should not consider the remaining 1/8th of the Hotpockets and half a can of warm Mr. Pibb a proper breakfast.

Symptom:  Feelings of loneliness and depression

Diagnosis:  Patient is a social outcast due to slovenly appearance, such as horribly wrinkled pants, skirts, shirts, or blouses.

Remedy:  Patient should not hit snooze button four or five times in the morning, to allow time for proper ironing of clothing.

NOTE:  Patient should not attempt to hold shirt or blouse tightly against body and rub fabric really hard and fast with hand, hoping the friction will act as a makeshift iron.  This will not work.  At all.

Symptom:  Burning sensation

Diagnosis:  Patient is on fire due to hastily smoked and discarded cigarette.  Cigarette exited car window, but flew back in due to high velocity winds caused by driving 800 miles per hour.  Cigarette is now trapped between patient's back and driver's seat.

Remedy: Patient should not hit snooze button four or five times in the morning, to allow time for safe and leisurely nicotine intake.

NOTE:  Smoking may actually be bad for patient in other ways, such as when patient tries to remove cigarette from mouth, cigarette filter gets stuck to bottom lip and fingers slide up cigarette and are burned by lit tobacco.

Symptom:  Sleepiness

Diagnosis:  Patient is sleepy.

Remedy:  Patient should hit the snooze button four or five times in the morning to allow time for extra sleep.

NOTE:  This symptom is listed simply for a twist ending for this bit.  This twist ending may cause feelings of nausea and disgust in reader.  Before reading this twist ending, please consult your doctor.

Short vs Long Term Temping

See you Monday!

Just kidding.  I guess I can provide some examples.

There is a huge difference between short term and a long term assignments.  Short term assignments tend to be shorter in duration, while long term assignments wind up being somewhat more lengthy.

See you Monday!

Again, I jest!  Oh, I am a card.  Seriously, let's take a look at the many pros and cons of short & long term jobs.

Short Term, Pro:  It's Always Friday

You arrive.  You work.  You leave.

It's that simple.

No responsibility.  No pressure.  No hassles.  No pants.

Short term temping is the ultimate weapon in the fight against the system.  You refuse to play by the rules, to submit, to conform.  People won't understand it.  Parents will hate it.  But you'll love it.  You'll show up on Monday just like everyone else, yet you'll leave on Friday altogether differently: for good.  You'll stroll on out of there, leaving the others behind, leaving them trapped in their cubicles and offices and unsatisfying careers, wondering just who you are, just what makes you so free, and just how you managed to completely fuck up their filing system in one short week.

It's a permanent Friday, baby.  Can you dig that?

Short Term, Con:  It's Always Monday

Of course, there's a flip side to constantly ending jobs.

Constantly starting new ones.

Every week or so, it's back to square one.  New places, new faces, which to some of you might sound like an adventure, but to others is an absolute nightmare.  Constantly surrounded by strangers, heading into company and companies unknown, being evaluated, judged, and breathed on by creepy departmental administrators.  Apprehension as you arrive at a foreign building, hesitation before you open the front door, revulsion as you see the tacky carpeting, depression as you realize you won't have an internet connection.

For those of you with regular jobs, jobs you’ve been at for years, jobs you know inside and out… why are you reading this anyway?  Huh.  Well, since I’ve got you here, just imagine getting up every Monday morning and realizing: "I don’t know what I’m going to be doing today. I don’t know if I’ll be working, and even if I am working, I won’t know what I’m working on or where I’m working on it. Someone I don’t know will plunk me in a chair and start pointing out all the things I don’t know, which, at that point, is everything, since I know nothing."  Sound like fun?  It ain't.

You will be surrounded by strangers every single day.  You'll have to pretend to like them every single day.  You'll have to prove you're worth what they're paying for you every single day.

It's not easy.  It's downright hard.  Every single day.

Long Term, Pro:  Security

Forget about wondering where your next paycheck is coming from.  Forget about lying in bed Sunday night, wide awake, nervous, listening to the prostitute snoring beside you, wondering if your temp agent will call Monday morning, where they will send you, what they'll pay you, and if it will be enough.  Long term temping is just like a regular job.  Some companies will keep you on for years.  You will grow too valuable for them to replace.  You will become just like any of their other employees, only you'll still have that aura of freedom surrounding you.  A simple grumble of dissatisfaction will have them wondering if you're going to ditch, have them groaning about bringing in another temp and starting from scratch.  Companies get nervous when a temp has too much information.  They've invested a great deal of time in you, and will try to make you happy.  They will fight to keep you on board.  Who knows?  They might offer you a permanent position.

Long Term, Con:  They Might Offer You A Permanent Position

Well, for a lot of temps, this is the whole idea behind temping.  But for true temps, permanent temps, this is to be avoided at all costs.  And even if the money is good, or as we temps from the hood say, the "bank" is "phat", there's a whole other host of problems to consider when taking a permanent job.

Remember your first week?  When you didn't quite know what you were doing?  When things were a mess from the previous employee?  Well, now that's your mess.  Little errors you made or corners you cut months ago will come back to haunt you.  Chances are, your training and orientation were glossed over when you started.  You were just a temp, there was no need, and no time, to show you everything.  Now that you're perm, however, you have to know everything.  They will expect it of you.

When you find yourself cursing whoever fucked up that filing system, and suddenly realize it was you, you'll know what I'm talking about.

The other problem with being offered a permanent job is not taking it.  Your co-workers will not understand why you would turn down benefits and true job security.  They will pressure you, they will not take "no" for an answer, and you will run out of reasons to pass on the offer.  They may be offended.  They may, quite possibly, become "pissy".

And that be whack.

Short Term, Pro:  Social Studies

Social?  Anti-Social?  Short term temping can work in favor of either personality type.

If you don't like people, you don't have to get to know them.  There's really no time for them to bug you about joining them for lunch, invite you to attend baby showers, or ask you to marry them.  You can avoid office politics and the rumor mill.  You may be surrounded by people, but with some practice, you can keep them at arms length:  too far for hugging, close enough for punching.

On the other hand, some of you may enjoy new people.  Some of you may make friends quickly, welcome conversation, and feel completely in your element among strangers.

Freaks, all of you.

At any rate, short term assignments will provide you with ample opportunities to make new friends, and you'll walk out of each assignment with a fistful of phone numbers and a heart full of love.

Short Term, Con:  CA$H

Since most of you are greedy and materialistic, let's think about money for a sec.  Short term positions pay notoriously less than long term ones, mainly because the sort of job you get in a short term assignment will be fairly uncomplicated.  After all, if you're only going to be there a week or so, the job won't require much training, explanation, or motor skills on your part.  No one is looking for someone to direct the public relations office for a week.  What they are looking for is someone to insert binder dividers into the accounting archives, something they would bring in a monkey to do if they weren't worried about all the screeching and carelessly-deposited feces.  So, they won't pay a lot.

If you are scrimping and pinching to get by, short term temping may be an impossibility.  There may be times when the only job available is extremely short term, such as a few days or even a few hours, and your paycheck that week will be about enough to cover bus fare and a bottle of Jack.  Sometimes, of course, that's all you need.  But other times, you'll lament the rate of pay, and may be forced to take longer and more steady assignments.

Miscellaneous Pros & Cons:

Let's say you've got to work this week, but you have a doctor's appointment or a wedding or a stalking opportunity on Thursday.  Well, a company may not want to hire you if they know you'll miss an entire day in a one-week assignment.  So, in order to take one day off, you may have to take a whole week off, and that can be tough on your bank account.  Ever tried to pay the rent in loose change?  Me neither.  No one does that.  It's just silly.

On the other hand, it's quite easy to take a day off if you're long term.  Hell, they will probably even pay you for it, as well as holidays and possibly even vacation time.  You are far more likely to get little bonuses and perks as a long term grunt.

If short term temping will do anything for you, however, it will keep you alert.  Let's face it, a lot of these jobs out there are boring, mindless affairs, and moving around, learning new things, hell, even taking a different bus can help keep your attention.  Short term temps don't stagnate, they stay fresh and alert.  Long term temps may find themselves getting bored, slacking off, falling into routines.  Time passes so quickly, and you don't want to look back on the past two or three years and see only one crappy job.  You want to see dozens of crappy jobs.  Don't you?

Of course, there's more to it than the examples listed above.  I'm quite sure many of you will go out with friends tonight and sit around a table in a coffee shop, intently discussing the pros and cons of short & long term temping until the wee hours, and come up with far better examples than I have.

On the other hand, maybe it's simpler than all that.

Long Term, Pro: People remember your name.

Long Term, Con: People remember your name.

Mental Illness

Every temp has those days where they wake up in the morning, look blearily at the alarm clock, and say, "Hmmm.. nope.  Not today."  (Just check out the [tempcam](http://www.notmydesk.com/misc/campage.html).)

For me, that only happens about four or five days a week, and I usually ignore it.  Then there are the days where I actually am sick, which I also ignore.  Temps don't get paid for sick-days, unless they're long-term temps, which, generally, I am not.  So, I wind up going into work.  Gotta bring home da benjamins.

Still, sometimes, I just can't do it.  I can't go in.

The problem is... making the call.

I wish I was one of those people who can just do that.  Just pick up the phone, call in sick, hang up, and go back to sleep.

But I've got this weird paranoia/guilt thing happening.  I think that a) they won't believe me, and b) I'm doing something wrong by lying.

So, the process usually goes something like this:

6:00am

Alarm goes off.  Wake up. Hit snooze.  Go back to sleep.

6:09am, 6:18am, 6:27am, 6:36am

Repeat.

6:45am

Alarm goes off.  Now, I'm late. Bordering on being really late.  Too late to catch the ferry, and if I don't leave soon, there will be no parking at the train station, so I'll be even more late.

Decide to call in sick.

This is where most people would go back to sleep, wake up when they know someone will be in the office, call in sick, and go back to bed again.

6:46am

Start obsessively rehearsing what I'm going to say.  Lying in bed, I start talking to the ceiling.

"Hi... it's (cough cough) Chris.  Yeah, not feeling too good.  Got a (cough) cough."

or (gravelly voice) "Hi, it's Chris... my throat is killing me.  Think I need to stay home."

or (pathetically weak and miserable voice) "I think I have food poisoning.  My stomach feels awful."

The first problem with rehearsing is my voice loses its normal morning scratchiness, so any attempt at sounding truly sick becomes completely phony.

7:11am

The second problem is, and this shows just how completely lame I really am, I start to acquire whatever symptoms I am claiming to have.

It's true.  If I'm claiming I have an upset stomach, my stomach actually becomes upset.  If I'm going to say I have a migraine, my temples start throbbing.  Sore throat?  By 8:00am I can hardly swallow.

It's guilt, plain and simple.  I feel so bad about lying, I actually become sick.  On the other hand, I may just be the biggest method actor on the planet.

This is why I don't call up and claim a family member has died.  I'd have to go out and kill one.

7:49am

Panic!  The lying won't work!  If I leave now, I can still sorta almost make it in time to explain being late!  Get up!  Go!!

Calm down.

Rehearse.

8:01am

Now, I am officially late.  I squirm guiltily in bed, picturing everyone else arriving at work.  In about five minutes, people will start looking for me.

Rehearse some more.

8:15am

Call in sick.

The actual call is quite traumatic for me as well, because I never reach a secretary who will just take the message.  I always wind up getting the boss.  The boss, who never, ever answers the phone, somehow decides to answer on this particular morning.  So, add nervousness to paranoia and guilt, as I forget which symptom I decided on, try to make my voice sound scratchy, and over-explain the hell out of why I won't be in today.

"Yeah, um, (cough), I, I'm not feeling so well, I'm kinda sick, with my stomach, I (groan), think I ate something bad and my head hurts, feeling a bit, (cough) you know, phlegmy, and, uh, blind, can't see, erm, yeah, (moan), and uh, there's blood, um, seeping out of my, (hiccup), ears, so, you know, I, um, probably won't, uh, (gag), be in until, like, 10:30."

Yes.  More often than not, I completely wuss out and just go in late.  And even if I do stick to my guns, I have to pretend to not be feeling well the rest of the week at work, since I've made up such a remarkably afflicting disease, much too distressing to be gotten over in a 24 hour period.  Not to mention, I spend the day off feeling guilty and experiencing whatever symptoms I invented.

Pretty pathetic, huh?  For a day off, an unpaid day off, I spend a week suffering a feigned illness.

I hope no one else goes through anything like this.  I know the regular, permanent employees I work with every day have no problem calling in sick, or going home sick, because they do it all the time.  And a lot of the temps I have known do it all the time.  I once filled in for a temp who was sick, who was filling in for an employee who was sick.

It makes me sick just thinking about it.

(cough)

Literally.

**Part Three: Life, And Other Disasters**

**In The Kitchen With Chris**

(What follows is a written transcript from the popular cooking show, "The Temporary Chef," which airs Sundays on The Food Network.)

INT: Tiny, cramped, messy kitchen.

ANNOUNCER V.O.:  It's Sunday afternoon at 2:38pm, and that means it's time for...

AUDIENCE: (silence)

ANNOUNCER V.O.:  That's right!  It's time to cook breakfast with Chef Chris!

CHEF CHRIS, BLINKING, SHUFFLES INTO THE KITCHEN, WEARING BAGGY PAJAMA BOTTOMS AND AN OPEN BATHROBE, A CIGARETTE DANGLING FROM HIS LIPS. HIS HAIR IS A MESS AND HE IS UNSHAVEN. HE SQUINTS AROUND UNCERTAINLY.

Chef Chris:  Whut.  Uh.  (coughs)  Uh.  Uh.  (muttering) Where the (bleep) are my (bleep)ing glasses... (bleep).  (coughs) (scratches butt)

AUDIENCE: (scattered, hesitant applause)

Chef Chris:  (bleep).  Oh, uh, right.  Breakfast.  Okay.  Umm... lessee what we've got in the fridge.  Looks like I got... eggs... bacon... and bread.  Man, how long has that milk been in there? (coughs)  Okay, I guess I could make a (bleep)ing omelette and bacon and uh... whadyacallit.  Toast.  And coffee, (bleep), I need some (bleep)ing coffee.

CHEF CHRIS STARTS COUGHING UNCONTROLLABLY AND STAGGERS OVER TO THE STOVE.  HE TURNS ON ONE OF THE BURNERS AND LIGHTS HIS CIGARETTE WITH THE OPEN FLAME.

Chef Chris:  Okay.  (another coughing fit).  Okay.  Hi.  Okay.  So, we'll start the bacon first, since I think that takes longest.  And you'll see I have two frying pans here, one big and one kinda small, and they're both... mostly clean.  So, we'll turn on the burners under them... nope, wrong ones... okay.  Now, we'll open the package of bacon.  Remember, when you buy bacon, buy high quality bacon.  If you go to some cheap (bleep)ing grocery store, they'll have cheap  bacon that is mostly fat, like this bacon is.  So, buy better bacon than I do, because this bacon is almost entirely white.  Okay, I'm cutting the package open with, ah... this knife, and now I'm peeling some slabs of bacon off, and they're kind of ripping because they're all stuck together.  And I've got (bleep)ing bacon fat all over my hands now.  Great.  Great start.  Where are my (bleep)ing glasses?

CHEF CHRIS DROPS THREE FATTY STRIPS OF BACON INTO THE SMALLER FRYING PAN AND THEY START SIZZLING.

Chef Chris:  That looks gross.  And they don't really fit in the pan.  Okay, let's see.  I guess we'll break the eggs into a bowl... a bowl.  Um... I don't have a clean bowl.  But I have a measuring cup, we'll use that.

CHEF CHRIS BREAKS THREE EGGS INTO A MEASURING CUP AND STIRS THEM WITH A FORK.

Chef Chris:  I think you're supposed to add some water to make them fluffy, but I dunno.  I guess I'll do that.  Oh, I need to start the coffee, too.  Oh, and (bleep), I gotta butter the other pan.  Do I have butter?  I don't think I have butter.  Oh, there's a tiny sliver.

CHEF CHRIS PUTS THE TINY SLIVER OF BUTTER IN THE LARGE PAN AND SLIDES IT AROUND WITH A BUTTER KNIFE.

Chef Chris:  Okay, that's all the butter.  I don't, uh, I don't know what will go on the toast.  Maybe some jelly, although I think it's pretty old.  Anyway, we'll pour the eggs into the big pan now, and when you do this, make sure you don't spill a bunch of it over the stove like I just did.  And don't have a couple bags of old clothes piled up in front of the stove because you keep forgetting to drop them off at Goodwill.  Because then it's hard to reach the stove, and you have to lean way over and you spill your eggs all over the (bleep)ing place. Also, I don't think the bacon is cooking right, because the pan is too small and the ends are sticking out.  So, I'm just gonna cut them in half with... where'd I put that knife... okay, a different knife... while they're frying and OW!  OW AGHHH OW (bleep) OW!

THE BACON IS SIZZLING AND SPITTING.

Chef Chris:  OW!  MOTHER(bleep)ING (bleep) (bleep)ING (bleep)!  HOLY (bleep) (bleep)ING H. (bleep) ON A TREADMILL!  (bleep)! Okay, here's a tip, don't cook bacon with an open robe or you get boiling fat splattered all over your (bleep)ing stomach.  (bleep).  Okay, I'm turning down the heat on the stupid bacon.  Agh, the coffee, I have to get that started.

CHEF CHRIS PUTS COFFEE AND WATER INTO THE COFFEE MAKER.

Chef Chris:  Okay, we've got that.. oh, (bleep), the (bleep)ing eggs are boiling!  What the hell.  Ach, I turned up the heat on the eggs instead of turning down the heat on the bacon.  Okay, I need a spatula... a spatula... ah, who am I kidding.

CHEF CHRIS USES THE HANDLE OF A MEAT-TENDERIZER TO UNSUCCESSFULLY FLIP THE EGGS AROUND A LITTLE.

Chef Chris:  I gotta add something to the omelette.  Some things are good to add, like ham, cheese, uh, mushrooms, stuff like that, which I have none of.  Mushrooms are gross anyway.  Um, (bleep), the stupid eggs are all in pieces so I'll just make them scrambled.  Whatever.  I guess I should start the toast now.

CHEF CHRIS PUTS TWO PIECES OF TOAST IN THE TOASTER.

ANNOUNCER V.O.:  Um... Chris?

Chef Chris:  Okay. Okay.  Now, uh...

ANNOUNCER V.O.: You might want to do something about the bacon there.

Chef Chris:  Shut up, (bleep)face.  I see it.  The bacon is spraying fat all over the place, so... I think I'll drain it.  Draining is a big part of cooking, or something.  Now, you can't just pour fat down the drain, you have to pour it in a can or something.  I don't know why, but you do.  So, OW!  OW (bleep)ing (bleep).  Okay, I don't have a can, so I'll hold the bacon with... where's my fork... okay, another fork, and pour the grease into this coffee cup.  Swell.  Okay, the bacon is back on the stove, and the eggs are kinda burning, so I'll stir them a little with... (bleep), I just had a fork, what did I do with it?  I just (bleep)ing had it.  Okay, a new fork.  I've used like 500 utensils already and I don't know where I keep (bleep)ing putting them.

ANNOUNCER V.O.:  The toast should be done.

Chef Chris:  Dude, shut up.  I know.  The toast should be d-- ah, the toaster wasn't even plugged in.

ANNOUNCER V.O.: (bleep).

Chef Chris:  (bleep).

AUDIENCE:  (bleep)ing (bleep).

Chef Chris:  Ah, so, we'll just have regular bread.  Is there any butter left at all?  Okay, I'll use jelly.  There's only a tiny bit way down the bottom of the jar, so I'll use yet another stupid (bleep)ing knife to get it out.

AUDIENCE:  (coughing)

Chef Chris:  The (bleep)ing bacon is burning.  (coughing) And the eggs are burning.  (bleep).  I'm, uh, turning all the burners off.  Oop, wrong knobs again.  Okay, heat is off, and I've opened a window.  (bleep), the whole place is filled with smoke, great.  Uh, I'm going to... spread jelly on the toast.

ANNOUNCER V.O.: Bread.

Chef Chris:  Bread, whatever.  This is a good time to mention that counter-space is important in any good kitchen, which is why this kitchen sucks and why I'm having to spread jelly on my bread on the window sill.  Gah, why does everything have to finish at the same time?  Eggs and bacon are done and the coffee is done.  I'm going to pour my coffee, now, ah, (bleep)!  Forgot I'd poured bacon fat into that coffee cup.  Okay, here's another cup.

ANNOUNCER V.O.: That's a wine glass.

Chef Chris:  Do you want to do this?  Do I come into your announcer's booth and tell you how to do your job?  Shut up.  Now, some sugar.  Some... huh.  I bought the wrong kind of sugar.  This is confectioner's sugar.  Well, that's great.  Why don't they (bleep)ing make the (bleep) (bleep) (bleep)ing boxes look (bleep)ing different, those (bleep)ing (bleep) (bleep) (bleep)ing (bleep)s?!?  Well, it's still sugar, how bad can it taste, anyway.  Whatever.  I'll stir it with a spoon... or, no, no clean spoons.  I'll just use another knife, why not?  Okay, the food.  Um, I don't have a plate... a plate... okay, here's a lid to the frying pan, I'll eat out of that.

AUDIENCE:  Are--

Chef Chris:  Don't start.  Don't even (bleep)ing start with me, audience.  Don't.  If I want to eat out of a (bleep)ing frying pan lid I'm gonna.  Okay, I'm dumping the eggs in, and using the four-hundred and sixty-(bleep)ing-seventh clean fork in a row, and getting the bacon.  Wait, I'm supposed to wipe the grease off with a paper towel or something.  Do I have paper towels?  Oh, screw it.  Okay, I-- ew! Ew!  Ew!  Ewwww!

ANNOUNCER V.O.:  What?  What?

Chef Chris:  I dropped some egg on the floor and I just stepped on it with my bare foot.  Ugh, (bleep), that's gross.

AUDIENCE:  What a pig.  This is pathetic.

ANNOUNCER V.O.: Can we wrap this up?  Please?

Chef Chris:  Yeah.  Okay, see?  Here is... the.  The meal.  And, um, you, too, can make this.  At home.

CHEF CHRIS HOLDS HIS FRYING PAN LID UP TO CAMERA, SHOWING THE BURNED, DRIED OUT SCRAMBLED EGGS, THE GREASE-SOAKED FATTY BACON, AND MUSHY UN-TOASTED BREAD SMEARED WITH CHUNKS OF OLD JELLY OF AN UNDETERMINED FLAVOR.  HE ALSO HOLDS UP HIS WINE GLASS FILLED WITH COFFEE AND CONFECTIONER'S SUGAR.

Chef Chris:  So, there it is.  This is why I don't ever do this.

ANNOUNCER V.O.: Just do your tagline, jackass.

Chef Chris:  I have a (bleep)ing tagline?

ANNOUNCER V.O.: Yes.  Don't you remember it?

Chef Chris:  Dude, I've got egg on my foot and the kitchen is filled with smoke.  It's gonna smell like bacon in here for months.  You do the damn tagline.

ANNOUNCER V.O.:  Fine.  That's it for the Temporary Chef, folks, and always remember, that, uh... (bleep).  What is the tagline, anyway?

AUDIENCE:  (bleep) this.  We're outta here.  (leaves)

ANNOUNCER V.O.: No, wait, I... I remember, it's uh...

Chef Chris:  Do I actually have to eat this (bleep)?

ANNOUNCER V.O.:  Yes.

Chef Chris:  Fine.  (bleep).  (bleep).  (bleep).

ANNOUNCER V.O.:  What now?

Chef Chris:  Um.  I'm out of forks.

**Prefontpain**

It’s a beautiful evening as I step outside my apartment building. At ten-o'clock, the streets are dark, lit only by traffic signals, street lights, and the glow from the handful of shops that are still open. There’s a strong ocean breeze from the west and I inhale deeply, savoring the fresh, clean, cool air. It’s truly the perfect evening for a nice long jog, I decide, as I take a thoughtful drag on my cigarette and plan my route.

I decide that I will jog in a square-type pattern, heading west for fifteen minutes, then turning north for another quarter hour, then east, then south, bringing me back to my front door in an hour, just in time for Antiques Roadshow on PBS.

This square pattern is a master stroke, as far as I'm concerned.  As weeks pass and I keep up the regiment, the square will grow larger and larger as I cover more ground in less time. And speaking of time, it’s about time I started getting in shape. At age twenty-eight, I’m past the point of developing some unhealthy habits; I’m now close to perfecting them. Plus, I really haven’t been jogging much at all over the past, oh, twenty-eight years or so.

So, tonight I dug out a pair of sweatpants, which I found in a box filled with other stuff I never use, like a bottle of multi-vitamins and a Bible. I threw on a sweatshirt, clipped my walkman to my waistband, and hopped around a little bit. The hopping served two purposes; first as a bit of a warm-up exercise, and second to make sure that my walkman, which was assembled in 1934 and weighs about 70 pounds, would neither drag my sweatpants violently down to my ankles, nor fall off my waistband and crush my foot.

Since my sweatpants have no pockets, I stick my apartment key in my sock, and some folded up dollar bills in my waistband, just in case I want to stop for some Gatorade or a Big Mac on the way home. Big Mac? I meant salad.

I'm healthy now.

I know a lot about jogging from an informed source, that source being the schmuck behind me on the bus last week, who wouldn’t shut his hole about it the entire commute. But he harped on the importance of stretching before jogging, as to avoid muscle pulls, strains, and serious injury. My main concern, however, is to avoid looking like a complete jackass. I know that anytime I see anyone stretching, I think "What a dork!" I’m not going to stand out here in public and do that thing where you pull your foot up to your shoulder blades, and those deep knee bends. It’s bad enough that I’m out here in sweatpants. So, I decide to just start out walking, and progress to jogging once I feel my "muscles" have warmed up. I flick my cigarette into some old newspapers and head west.

Moments later, I am passed by a jogger. Then two more, heading the other way. And here I am, walking. Talk about looking like a jackass. I throw the power toggle on my walkman, and start to jog.

The first fifteen minutes are a dream. I run smoothly, strongly, fastly. My stride is long and even, my breathing easy, in through the nose, out through the mouth. I feel my heart rate increase and hold steady. The cool air blows through my hair as I pass a jogger heading in the opposite direction and give her a knowing nod.

We jog. We’re joggers.  It's what we do.

Helping me along is the sound from my walkman, in the form of a heavy-techno-dance-industrial-metal-gangsta-rap clamor, that sounds like a cargo plane full of cutlery crashing into a sheet-metal factory. The lyrics are surprisingly poignant and inspiring: "You better run, run, ya muthaf\*\*ka, ‘fore I f\*\*k your a\*\* up, ya c\*\*ks\*\*ker, run…"

After fifteen minutes, I make a right turn, and slow to a walk. I feel great. I feel healthy. I picture my future, running in 5k and 10k runs, then entering a marathon. Jogging to the store.  Jogging to work. Jogging to the drive-in theater, then jogging home and getting my car and driving back, since it's a drive-in theater. Cross country jogging.  Jogging the Iditarod.  Running will become my life for the first time since grade school, when Billy Wacholder used to chase me home every afternoon, yelling "Pansy! Pansy!"

Years-old suppressed rage washes over me, and I begin to jog again, picking up the pace further. Full out running.  Running like the wind.

I remember hearing about something called "Runner’s High." A feeling, as reported to me, that’s better than sex. I think I can feel it coming on… I’m feeling lightheaded. Even a bit dizzy, giddy. My heart has stopped pounding and begun fluttering. My legs have gone from feeling warm and strong to something akin to unstable, quivering rubber. My healthy perspiration has become a torrent of cold sweat. I feel my Runner’s High. I feel… like crap.

I stumble to a walk, and a sudden stitch in my side almost makes me double over. I can’t seem to catch my breath. My heart hammers in my chest like a woodpecker who’s in a real rush to peck a hole in some wood. Judging from the pain, someone has apparently snuck up behind me and jammed a barbed pool cue through my right knee.

Fifteen minutes! Time to make another right turn!

I stand on the darkened corner, hunched over and gasping. What the hell am I doing? Whose idea was this, anyway?

I start walking again, my side convulsing and my knee cramping up. No way. I’m never going to make it back. A half hour of brisk jogging translates to at least three days of slow shambling.

I stop a moment, considering my options.  I could wait until daylight and flag down an ambulance.  I could start crying.  I could give up my current life and just live here, on the corner, in my sweatpants.

The square plan is pitched. I have altered course and am now making a triangle, cutting through people’s yards and driveways in an effort to connect two points with a straight line. My limping gait causes my walkman to pitch wildly, the heavy iron of the casing beats painfully against my shaking thigh, the tape slows and speeds up with each shudder of my body: "ruuUUUnnn… muuUUuuth... aaa... ffff\*\*kerrrrr…"

My apartment key has slid down into my shoe, where it digs cruelly into my foot with each step.  The intense, grating pain blessedly takes my mind off my cramping muscles.

As I force my way through someone’s hedge, I suddenly feel like an idiot.  How could I be so lame? How could I be so foolish? I could have stuck with the square route, it would have increased my chances of catching a cab.  At least if I manage to keep this new course, I will run into a McDonalds, where I can get a soda. Maybe some fries. A Big Mac sounds good right about now.

My six bucks are still safely tucked into my sweats, and they are, as one would imagine, sweaty. Gross. I can’t go into McDonalds and hand currency drenched in belly-sweat to some poor kid behind the counter.  Of course, at this rate I’ve got about two hours before I actually reach the place, so I hold three bills in each hand, and wave them around while I limp past someone’s garage. Well, it’s kinda like exercise, and they should be dry by the time I get there.

I cut through a darkened parking lot, and find myself suddenly in the midst of a group of teens. The kind of teens you don’t want to run into in a darkened parking lot, while limping severely and waving cash around with both hands. In nature, this scene would be similar to a gazelle encountering a pack of cheetah, while dragging one leg and pouring barbecue sauce on itself, and waving cash around.

The teens are quite polite, actually, both sparing my life and not mugging me. One even lets me bum a smoke.

I stagger out of some bushes and I’m on Park Street, a few blocks from my apartment. I miscalculated: McDonalds is a few blocks in the other direction.  Never mind the Big Mac, I think I have some beer at home that will do the trick.

A good hour has passed since I set out on this blighted journey. The once healthy sweat is now like a sheet of ice, coating me and chilling me to the bone. My glasses are fogged and askew on my face, my shoes are muddy from walking through someone’s freshly-watered garden.

The streets, meanwhile, are suddenly alive with activity. The traffic signals are like spotlights. People are everywhere.  The shops, seemingly all of them, are brightly lit. By the looks of things, the Attractive Yet Critical Women of Alameda Organization is holding a march, for dozens upon dozens of gorgeous women line the streets, just looking for men to stare icily at.  They're in luck, for here I am, stinky, whimpering, shivering, and limping along the sidewalk in full view.

I reach my door, kick off my shoe, dig the key out of my foot, and begin the three-hour climb up to my apartment.

I think I'm through with jogging for a while.

It just doesn't seem too healthy.

**A League of My Own**

Had a weird little moment today.

I was taking a walk this afternoon, and I passed by a baseball field where a Little League team was practicing.  Kids, probably eight or ten years old, were shagging fly balls, fielding grounders, and turning double plays against imaginary runners.  I sat down on the end of the bleachers and watched for a bit, and at one point, a ball rolled over in my direction.

I picked it up, one of the coaches saw me, raised his glove, and I threw him the ball.

Right then, I had this little flash in my head.  I knew, I just knew the coach was going to catch the ball, look at it in his glove, then slowly raise his eyes to look at me.

"You got a good arm, kid," he'd say.  "Show me that again."

I'd pick up another ball, and fire it to him.  By now, the whole team would have stopped practicing to watch me.

"Yeah," the coach, a burned-out, middle-aged guy whose marriage was on the rocks, would say.  "A real good arm.  We could use a guy like you."

And I'd join the Little League team.  I'd be their star pitcher, the kid (well, 29 year-old) with the amazing arm but no control.  But the coach could spot hidden talent, and even though he sometimes wondered why he bothered with this team, he knew deep down he could make us winners.

See, the rest of the team would have problems, too.  Wacky ones!  The centerfielder, a round kid nicknamed "Chubs", would stand in the outfield with a glove in one hand and sandwich in the other!  Can you believe it?  The second baseman, Danny, was afraid of ground balls!  There would be a kid with a great swing, Darryl, but (get this) he would always close his eyes during the pitch, so he wasn't hitting anything.  The brains of the team, nicknamed "Einstein", was skinny and wimpy and wore thick glasses, and he was always on about the physics of baseball, calculating trajectories and angles and insisting he could teach everyone to hit better through science (but we never listened to his advice, natch).  The twins, Craig and Greg, were indistinguishable, and the coach was always getting them mixed up!  That was about all they did.  And there was the stuck-up rich boy, who had an immaculate, specially tailored uniform.  He refused to ever slide into a base, for fear of getting dirty, and often could be seen talking into a cell phone!  And there would be one tiny kid, perhaps named "Pip", who was meek and timid and scared of his own shadow.

Of course, there was a girl on the team as well, but everyone was skeptical about her, since she was a girl.

Oh, such a rag-tag team of misfits!  The coach had his work cut out for him!

And everything was building up for the big game, the last game of the season against the best team in the league, comprised of much bigger ten year-olds.  Big mean ones who mocked us at every opportunity.  We hated them.

As a team, we'd get better.  During a montage set to popular music, we'd see Chubs comically trying to get in shape, doing awkward calisthenics and standing in the outfield, a stick of celery in place of his sandwich, doubtfully nibbling it and making faces.  Danny would be cured of his fear of grounders, probably by being tied to something and having tennis balls hit at him until he overcame his fear.  Daryl would learn how to keep his eyes open at the plate, perhaps by having his eyelids held open with tape (or perhaps something less brutal).  Everyone would finally listen to Einstein, and he'd lecture us in front of a chalkboard covered with formulas and problems and diagrams, and wouldn't you know it, everyone's hitting would improve!  Einstein would nod in satisfaction and pat his calculator.  The twins would be given big name tags, so the coach could tell them apart.  That's about all that would happen with them.  The stuck-up rich kid would have his cell phone stomped on by someone, but he'd pull out a back-up cell phone, and we'd all throw our hands up in exasperation.  The girl on the team would make some dynamite plays, while the boys watched in awe and gradually began to accept her (possibly someone would get a crush on her, though not me, because that would be disgusting).  Little Pip, sadly, would not improve his game or become more assertive, despite our best efforts.  And the coach would start to patch up his marriage.

Still, the big game would not go well, as everyone fell back into their old, bad habits.  The coach would have had a big fight with his wife the night before, and he'd snap angrily at us.  We'd get pounded, at least until the ninth inning, when the coach would spot his wife in the stands, because she had forgiven him and had come to watch the game.  Coach would then give us a big, touching speech, and then we'd go out and kick some butt.  Chubs would run out a deep fly ball, the rich kid would slide to score an important run, Einstein would calculate the odds of the next pitch being a changeup, and hit for a double, and Pip would come in to score, barreling (in slow-motion) into the opposing catcher, a kid twice his size, who was blocking the plate and who would drop the ball.

And I would somehow find a way to strike out their best batter, leading our team to victory.  The fat kid would do a funny dance.  The girl on the team might kiss one of the boys on the cheek, the one who had a crush on her, and he'd fall over in a faint.  The coach would hug his wife and spin her around.  The twins would high-five each other.  That's about all they would do.  And we'd try to carry the coach on our shoulders, falling in a big comical pile, which would freeze-frame.

Well.  None of that happened.  When I threw the ball to the coach, the throw was short and wide, and he had to kind of run to the side and catch it on the third bounce.

It's just as well.  The sequel would have sucked anyway.

**A Hyena Ate My Dingo Baby!**

Ah, the nature documentary.  Ever since I was a kid, I've loved them.  The subject rarely matters; they could be about lions or elephants or fish or birds or snails or bacteria.  Whatever, they're cool and interesting, and they're always narrated by someone whose voice manages to be soothing and reassuring, even as he describes a) something's belly being torn out by something else, b) a fish swimming up the anus of a sea cucumber, or c) regurgitation.

My favorite types of documentaries are those about baby animals, who are followed around by camera crews until they either reach adulthood (the animals, not the crew) or are eaten by hyenas (the animals and/or the crew).  We are warned early on in the show that many of the young animals will not survive the difficult winter/summer/migration/layoffs ahead, and that sucks, because the little animals are extremely cute, and we love them.

And, hey, what's the deal with those hyenas, anyway?  They're such dicks.  No matter what documentary you're watching, the hyenas will show up and try to kill the subjects, particularly the extremely young and vulnerable subjects.  Lion cubs, tiger cubs, antelope, uh... cubs.  Alligator cubs, bird cubs, bacteria cubs, whatever, the hyena will show up about halfway through and try to eat them.  I recently watched a show about dolphin cubs, and right in the midst of some playful underwater frolicking, a hyena shows up in full scuba gear, paddling over to threaten the safety of the young.  I'm starting to think that the camera crews just bring a hyena with them, in a sack, and when it looks like things could use some jazzing up, they release it.

I haven't seen a documentary about hyena cubs yet, but I bet some hyena tries to eat them, too.  If there is such a documentary, it should be called "Hyenas - The Assholes of the Wild."

Anyway, as the animals progress from extremely cute babies to unlawfully cute young adults, there's always a period where they are shown wrestling and playing and grappling with each other.  We learn that it's more than just cute behavior, though, for at this point, the narrator will unerringly say something like "But this playing serves more of a purpose than it may seem.  The cubs are learning valuable skills they will need later as adults."

It's true, too.  Playful wrestling as cubs translates into ripping the belly out of something as adults, which we see near the end of the show, right before the narrator blames me for the shrinking habitat of the lion/bear/dolphin/mitochondria.  But he blames me in a soothing voice, so I don't mind.

Still, when I hear about this play-as-survival theory, I always think about my childhood, and try to determine if I learned anything during playtime that has helped me later in life.  After some calculating, I have broken down my past playtime activities into categories, and the percentage of time I engaged in each of them:

Running Around Pretending I Could Fly And Project Power Beams From My Hands Like A Superhero:  64%

Getting My Ass Kicked By Bigger Kids:  30%

Blowing Bubbles In Milk:  4%

Smashing Matchbox Cars With A Hammer:  2%

Hm.  Well, I don't see any of these activities being beneficial to my adult life, except perhaps getting my ass kicked, which has prepared me for the psychological and spiritual pantsing I get on a daily basis at work.  Still, it might not qualify as play, because in no way did I, nor do I yet, enjoy it, so I may have to rethink its inclusion here.

In retrospect, my childhood should have been spent like this:

Pretending to Fix Copier Jams:  59%

Waiting for A Make-Believe Bus:  28%

Explaining to My Imaginary Co-Workers How To Save Something To Their [A:] Drive, For The Fiftieth Fucking Time:  10%

Learning to Smile Politely:  2%

Running From Hyenas:  1%

**The Cow Says: Boo**

So it's Halloween, or whatever.  Not much of a holiday anymore, if you ask me.

From the looks of things, most of the festivities have already taken place, as they do these days, on the Friday night preceding the 31st.  I still find it a little weird.

When I was a kid, Halloween was Halloween, no matter what day it fell on.  Sure, it was cool when it was a Friday or Saturday, but if it wasn't, no matter.  Traditions were upheld.  We still dressed up in costumes we made ourselves, and watched as people tried to figure out what we were supposed to be (the most heartbreaking comment I got was when I was dressed as a medieval knight, a costume I had slaved over, and someone asked me where my spaceship was).

We still went door-to-door for candy in strange neighborhoods, sans parents, firing apples back at the houses stupid enough to distribute them.  Toothbrushes and pencils?  As Halloween goodies?  \*Snap\*  Add to the pile at the bottom of the driveway, move along.

We went to that one house, where they left a big bowl of candy on a chair outside the door with a sign that said "Just Take One!" and just took many, many more than one, then ran away when the door flew open, because the owner had been watching through the peephole.  Why standing at the peephole all night is somehow easier than answering the door a few times an hour, I don't know.

Still, the spookiest Halloween I ever had came as an adult, not as a child.  It was about four years ago, when I was living in the hills of Marin County in California.

My friend Dave had invited me to a Halloween party, so I got dressed up as a pirate, hopped into my car, and started the drive down the long, narrow, winding dirt road that led from the house.

I had to stop, as I often did, for the cows.  The neighbor had a herd of cattle that grazed all over the top of the hill, and they were milling around that night, about thirty of them, although as skittish as they were, they quickly fled from my headlights. I drove on.

About halfway down the hill, I saw another set of headlights approaching, and stopped my car.  The road was so narrow that only one car could fit on it at a time, and the rule was, the person coming up would make way for the person driving down, the logic being that it was a lot easier to back down the steep hill than up it.  This was still an often tricky maneuver, particularly at night, particularly this night, because there wasn't even a moon out.  The sky was completely covered with clouds, so the only light was from our headlights, which were currently pointing into each others eyes.

This car didn't seem to be making way for me.  We sat there for a minute, playing stationary chicken, and finally out of impatience, I turned my wheel to the right, gave it a little gas, and suddenly felt my car tilt about 45 degrees to the right.  I heard a grinding, scraping noise, followed by the not-unfamiliar sound of me cussing my brains out.

My car had slid halfway into the drainage ditch.  It was lucky this hadn't happened another hundred feet down the road, because there the ditch widened into somewhat of a canyon.  As I sat there in horror, the other car squeezed past me, and as I shouldered my door open and clambered out, I saw that it wasn't stopping to help me.  Its taillights disappeared at the top of the hill, leaving me in darkness.

Thanks!  More cussing followed, including a suggestion that the driver engage in an unlikely, perhaps impossible, act of masturbation.

My car was stuck.  The right front tire and the rear left tire were in the air, the bottom of the car was sitting firmly on the edge of the road.  I could rock the car back and forth just by leaning my weight on it.  I rocked it back and forth for a while, but it wasn't as much fun as you might think.

Well, this was somewhat of a problem.  I was about a half-mile from the top of the hill, where the house was, and about a half-mile from the bottom of the hill, where nothing was, nothing but the road leading to town, which was another five miles away, and in the town itself was nothing, since it was a nothing sort of town.  It seemed like the best idea was to head back to the house and call Triple-A.

I glumly searched my car for a flashlight, glum mostly because I knew I didn't have one.  I'm not one of those "prepared" people who "think ahead" and "do smart things" like "have flashlights in their cars".  So, I pulled up my pirate pants, and started walking up the hill.  On the winding road.  In total darkness.

I stumbled off the path several times, generally into the ditch, sometimes into the bushes, and once into what I described at the moment as a "fucking bastard hole".  Finally, after about forty-five minutes of careful shuffling, the ground seemed to level off and I was on top of the hill.

I started making my way towards what I hoped was the house, although it was so dark I couldn't see anything, not even my hands in front of my face.  I knew this because I tried it, actually standing there while slowly waving my hands in front of my face.  Nothing.

Then: something.  A sound.  Not so much a sound as... a snort.

The cows.

I stood there a few moments, and heard another snort, followed by another, this last one about three inches from my left ear.  I had forgotten about the cows, and now I was surrounded by them.  In pitch darkness.

Now, I've never found cows to be particularly intimidating or fearsome.  The cover of a horror comic will never read "SURROUNDED BY COWS!"  Cows just aren't scary.  They always seem docile and slow and good-natured.  I had spent a lot of time tramping around the woods and fields on the hill, and when I would walk near the cows, they'd generally avoid me.  Like when I had driven up to them an hour ago: skittish.  Nothing to get alarmed about.

But at this moment, I was pretty goddamned alarmed.  Skittish is not a characteristic to be desired in a group of 1,200-pound animals that you are standing in the midst of.  Especially when one of them, the biggest, meanest one (in my fevered imagination, anyway) started pawing the ground.  Or hoofing the ground, I guess, although that doesn't sound right.

I'd seen Bugs Bunny.  I knew that when the bull starts pawing the ground, it means he's about to charge into the anvil Bugs has behind his cape.  I didn't have an anvil.  I'm not one of those people who "have anvils in their cars".

I was going to die, and I could already see the headlines:  DEAD PIRATE FOUND TRAMPLED BY CATTLE

All I could see was them finding me the next morning.  A dead, crushed pirate, lying in a field up on a hill.  I imagined a great many pirates died from shark bites and the like, but I doubted one had ever been killed by bovine-related violence.  It just didn't happen.

Slowly, I inched my way through them.  I could hear cows breathing on all sides of me.  They were nervous, I could tell, and I felt sure they could tell I was nervous.  Cows can sense fear.

There were more snorts.  I could hear the shifting of immense bodies.  The frightened flicking of an ear.  Death was mere inches away, and She was slowly chewing Her cud.

Needless to say, I somehow made it through the cattle alive.  They didn't stampede, I didn't wet myself, a tow truck came a few hours later and somehow pulled my car free, and I didn't wind up as a just another (yet somewhat interesting) statistic.

Still, though... my life was never the same.  I think those cows put a curse on me.  I can't enjoy a glass of milk or an ice-cream cone without hunching over and passing explosive gas (although this may having something to do with being lactose intolerant).  And sometimes, late at night... particularly this night, All Hallow's Eve... I think I can hear a distant mooing.

Might just be my neighbor though.

He's a little weird.

As The World Churns

I was thinking about butter the other day.

And not just butter, but things in general.  But mainly butter.  Butter, as it often does, started the thought process.

How did we get butter?  I mean, sure, it seems like an obvious thing nowadays, but centuries ago some guy or gal had to make the first batch of butter, and like many things on this wonderful planet, I don't understand how it could have first come about.

To get a solid grasp on how butter is made, I did a couple searches on Google.  Basically, it's like I thought:

Step One:  Get milk from some big, smelly animal, like a cow or Chris Penn.

Step Two:  Let it sit for a couple hours, until the cream separates from the milk.  DO IT!

Step Three:  Take the cream and churn it for, like, a really long time.  At the very least, a half-hour, at the most, like, a week or so.  You have no life anyway, admit it.

Voila.  Butter.  There's a little more to it, like separating the buttermilk and creating marketing synergy and whatnot, but that's mainly it.  And please, for the love of God, don't send me an e-mail fully explaining the process of making butter.  I'm not entirely interested in the finer nuances of butter-making;  my main concern here is how someone came up with the concept in the first place.

Step One I can understand.  Get milk from a big disgusting animal.  Someone probably noticed baby animals drinking milk from the Mommy animals, and thought, "Hey, I'm gonna get me some of that to drink, too.  No little baby animal is gonna be drinking stuff that I could be drinking instead."  This is not a generalization, this is exactly what they thought.

Step Two, letting the milk sit, sure, I can see how that happens.  You bring the milk in, you put it down for a while, possibly because you're preoccupied with something, such as chopping firewood, shunning your children, crapping in the street, fending off dinosaurs, or whatever else people in olden times used to do.

It's Step Three that gets me.  The whole churning thing.  Here's the conversation I picture:

Person:  "Hey, lookit.  The cream separated.  What should we do with it?"

Other Person:  "I dunno.  Maybe, uh... maybe I'll churn it or something."

Person:  "A-ight."

Fine, so, someone decided to churn it.  I guess I can accept that.  Maybe they tried other things, like mashing it with a hammer, rubbing it on themselves or others, smoking it, reading stories to it, and a multitude of other applications with a discernable lack of success.  Gotta get around to churning eventually.

But it's not like you can just churn it for five minutes and get butter.  You have to churn it for a while, a really long while.

Person:  "It's been twenty minutes.  Anything happen?  With the churning?"

Other Person:  "Nope."

Person:  "What now?  Should we try planting it?  Or maybe worshipping it?  Should we trade it to the Sumerians or the Hittites or the Mohawks, or whatever people are around in these olden days, whenever they are?"

Other Person (with crazy look in his eyes):  "No... no.  I... I think... I think I'm gonna keep churning it."

Person:  "Whatever, dawg."

That's what gets me.  He keeps churning!  Why?  What would keep you churning when nothing seems to be happening?  Whatever the reason, he got butter.

It all seems so random, and really, who knows what other cool stuff hasn't been discovered yet?  Like, say I take a bunch of carrots, put them in a sack, and swing 'em around over my head.  Who knows what might happen?  They might turn into gold!  You don't know!  No one has tried!  And, say I swing them for twenty minutes, and nothing happens... doesn't mean I should stop!  Maybe it requires me to swing them over my head for sixteen hours.  We just don't know.

And why not apply churning to everything else?  Ever churn grass?  How about Q-Tips?  I didn't think so.  Maybe you get something wonderful if you churn salt or mittens or Peter Graves.  How about puppies?  Can you honestly tell me you've churned puppies?  For over an hour?  You'd figure you'd just get a lot of dead, churned puppies, but you might get something cool, like a motorcycle or heat-vision.

There's no end to the things we haven't tried.  Maybe keeping acorns in your nostrils for six days will make you irresistible to women!  Maybe hopping up and down on a plate of oatmeal all night will cure baldness.  Maybe if you visit this website daily, articles of an intelligent and worthwhile nature will appear!

Try it!  You never know!

“Customer Nervous”

It’s rare that I go shopping anymore. Don’t get me wrong, I shop all the time, online, but I don’t go shopping more than once a month, if even that. The reasons are twofold: first, online shopping is much easier, generally cheaper, and doesn’t require that I put on pants to do it. Second, in response to the popularity of online shopping, stores have made great efforts to retain their customers with cheery salespeople, bonus offers, and discount clubs. These efforts, unfortunately for everyone involved, are so incredibly annoying they convince me to avoid the stores altogether.

Salespeople have always been pushy, but since the internet shopping trend took off, they’ve stepped up their game to an entirely new level of wanton aggression. If they even notice me approaching their store they begin firing off questions with the intensity of a World War II destroyer crew spotting a kamikaze pilot. “Hi there! How are you today? My name’s Kim! Whatcha looking for today? Need help finding anything? Everything is thirty percent off! I’m right here if you need anything!” All this before I’ve even gotten out of my car.

Clothing stores are particularly bad, as they appear to be employing a minimum of twenty-seven hyper, talkative salespeople per customer. I have no idea how the store can turn a profit: the medical insurance alone must cost them billions unless, as I suspect, they grow their salespeople in giant tubes in a secret lab, employ them for one day, then simply destroy them after the store closes each night.

Annoyingly perky, they speedwalk around the store, all of them wearing headsets for reasons I still can’t fathom. Is this NASA mission control or is it The Gap? Each and every one of them inquire as to how my day is going and want to discuss my plans to purchase something. It’s hard enough to find adult pants that fit my dwarfish body without having to constantly engage in small-talk with a bunch of preternaturally cheerful clones.

On the rare occasion that I’m left alone long enough to actually find something I’d like to buy, that doesn’t mean I’m actually allowed to buy it. You’d think the first lesson they’d teach salespeople would be that if customers are interested in forking over money, let them. Alas, instead of accepting the wad of bills I’m waving, they ask if I have a store credit card. I don’t? Am I aware that I’ll get an additional five percent off if I apply for one? I’m not? And so on.

If I’m buying shoes, they ask if need some socks. If I’m buying pants, wouldn’t I like to see the selection of belts? Buying a jacket? How about some gloves? Buying a hat? How about some hair?

One video store has gotten particularly bad. While attempting to buy a birthday present for a friend, I was told of their special offer that day only – I could buy five more DVDs and only pay for the four most expensive ones! As tempting as that sounded, I declined, and again tried to pay, at which point I was asked if I wanted to subscribe to Entertainment Weekly or Sports Illustrated. Six weeks free!

I explained that I just wanted the one DVD. Then I was asked if I wanted to give them my e-mail address so they could send me special offers. I declined, explaining that if I want to get bludgeoned with unwanted offers, I’d just visit their store again.

One bookstore, Barnes & Noble, has developed an especially annoying approach to ignoring the bird in the hand and desperately lunging for the two that may or may not be in the bush. They have a club. Anytime I try to buy a book from them, the cashier informs me, “That’ll be $17.50… unless you have a Barnes & Noble Member card, which will save you 10%.”

“Oooh!” I’m apparently supposed to squeal, jumping up and down and clapping my hands in glee. “What’s that, and how do I get one?” I already know, in fact, because they tell me every goddamn time I buy as much as a fifty-five cent bookmark. If I pay them $25, the pitch goes, for the next year I’ll get 10% off my purchases there.

When I tell them I’m not interested, I often get a little pitying headshake, as if to say, “Okay, whatever, man… I tried to save you money, I really did, but I guess you’d rather throw your money out the window. I did what I could.”

Well, I tell you what, Barnes & Noble. If your deal is so good, here’s a counter-proposal – you give me $25, and then I’ll give you permission to overcharge me ten percent on all my purchases for a year. What's that? Doesn’t sound like such a great deal now, does it?

If you change your mind, I’ll be at home. Shopping.

As a discerning television viewer, I select the programs I watch with a very strict set of criteria. First, if it’s a critically acclaimed show with a quality cast, solid writing, and comes with the recommendation of at least three close friends, I’ll give it a try. I’ll also watch it if it happens to come on when I can’t reach the remote control without getting off the couch. It was the latter circumstance that led me to a recent showing of “Celebrity Fit Club”, a program where overweight celebrities try to shed some extra pounds. As I watched these supposedly “fat” contestants fall subject to repeated embarrassment, relentless mockery, and humiliating challenges, I became enraged. Sickened, even, at the very concept of this show. How dare they? How dare they call these people celebrities? I’ve never heard of any of them!

Ross Mathews? Cledus T. Judd? Kimberley Locke? Sure, they’re fat, but who the hell are they? We seem, as a society, to be throwing around the word “celebrity” pretty loosely these days. I don’t know if it’s due to a decline in entertainment that we’ve taken to desperately flinging the word at anyone mildly noteworthy, hoping it will stick and thus make them actually entertaining. Maybe it’s that the true celebrities have become so self-conscious of their image that they never do anything daring or interesting, so we look to the lower, stupider ranks of the famous to fill our desire for scandals and lust for schadenfreude. Whatever the case is, with each passing year it takes less and less effort to be labeled a celebrity. Sometimes just dating someone famous will make you famous. Other times, being the child of someone famous will do. There’s even a show about the daughter of the ex-wife of one of OJ Simpson’s lawyers. That’s why she’s famous. She’s the kid of an ex-wife of a lawyer of a football player who killed some people. OJ did all the hard work and she’s reaping the benefits!

It’s the same with another show I watched called “Dancing with the Stars”. (This time, I had the remote firmly in my grasp but the batteries seemed to have died.) This program invites “celebrities” to cut a competitive rug with professional dancers as their partners. The names of the celebrities will dazzle you: Lisa Rinna! Josie Maran! Albert Reed! Helio Castroneves! Truly, such a gathering of stars has not been witness since the Milky Way first spun forth from the Big Bang. Is this really the best we can do? Is this the most famous our stars can be? I checked online to see who will be the stars of this show next season, and it’s the guy who cleans Madonna’s pool, someone who thinks he once saw George Lucas in a Starbucks, Jamie Farr, and me.

Like all the great, timeless mysteries of our culture, this celebrity mislabeling problem can probably be traced back to pornography. “Porn Star” is a label that, as far as I can tell from an exhaustive amount of selfless research, can be applied to anyone who appears in any porn film in any capacity whatsoever. This is a travesty to an industry that survives on its credibility. I mean, if a film is called “All Anal Amateurs”, how can the participants still labeled as stars? If I can’t trust that these are true anal amateurs, can I trust anything else about this film? I’m even starting to doubt that the pizza delivery man really forgot to wear his pants. Secondly, carelessly throwing around the label of “star” takes away from the genuine stars of the pornographic arts, the hard working women who have slaved for years over a hot mattress to provide quality entertainment.

I think we need to demand more of our so-called celebrities. You can’t simply be famous for being famous, you have to actually do something. Don’t get me wrong, it’s great that you’re the daughter of a man who got a murderer off, but you can’t just stop there. Earn your fame – actually murder someone. Maybe just try to murder someone. If you can’t swing that, then date a murder. Or at least dance with one.

**McSilence**

I have a one day job in San Francisco, and while considering my lunch options, I finally settle on Delfina, a charming restaurant nestled in the Mission District that splendidly integrates Californian ingredients with a superb knowledge of Italian cuisine.  But what to eat?  It's definitely a toss up between the grilled fresh calamari with warm white bean salad and the liberty duck leg confit with grilled torpedo onions.

No, really, I go to McDonalds for a "Big N' Tasty."  Only $1.00!

I get two.

Fast food restaurants in big cities are a little different than they are in the burbs.  The main "dining" area sometimes only consists of a few stools or tables, but there is often overflow seating, either upstairs on the second level or downstairs in a basement dining room.  At this McDonalds, it's a basement.  I grab my delicious and inexpensive paper-wrapped artery hardeners and head down the stairs, taking a seat in the crowded, windowless room.

I've brought the book I'm currently reading, but I didn't notice when I grabbed it this morning that I only have two pages left. It looked like there were more, but it turns out the last thirty pages or so are sources and chapter notes and all that boring shit no one ever reads.

So, I'm left to eat my lunch and stare either at my disappearing Big N' Tasty (not that big, nor tasty) or other people.

I choose other people.

It's an odd thing, I realize after a while. Here we are, about thirty-five of us, crammed into this basement section of the restaurant. No windows to look out, nothing on the walls, just seats, tables, and human beings in close proximity. And no one is talking to anyone. Only one or two are reading the newspaper.  No one is even looking around, except for me.

Stick thirty-five dogs in a room, and there will be barking, scampering, urinating, and the inevitable sniffing of butts. There will be biting and fighting. There will be, within minutes, fucking. Same goes with probably every other species out there (substituting hoots or grunts or chirps for the barks, of course). Well, fish would just flop around and die, I guess. Still, there would be interaction with most other types of creatures, a lot of it, the finding of mates, the choosing of sides, and lots of wrassling and snapping until the pecking order has been decided upon.

And here we are, people, the most advanced and intelligent life-forms on the planet, sitting in silence. We've built cities and launched spacecraft and created languages.  Why don't we say something? Why don't we (except for me) even look at each other?

I'm not much of a talker, but it hits me.  That guy sitting over there could be my best friend. He's not, but he could be, for all I know. If a conversation started, who knows?  We might hit it off. We might be friends for the rest of our lives. Surely, someone, somewhere, met their best friend in a fast food joint. If you asked enough people, "Where'd you meet your best friend?" someone would eventually say "At McDonalds."

That woman over there could be the love of my life. Sure, she's in her mid-70's. And I think she might have a glass eye.  But so what? It's possible!

Take this one fellow with the hat and team him up with me, and maybe the connection of our two brains and thoughts and ideas and intelligence and backgrounds would be the perfect combination to start the most successful business in the history of the country. Why not? Ask enough business owners how they got started and eventually one might say, "Well, I met this guy in a McDonalds, and a couple years later we started a business."

How did you meet the people in your life? Through childhood, school, work, friends, neighbors. But there must be some people you know, and know well, who you met randomly. In a bar, on a bus, at a park, a show, maybe even a fast-food restaurant. Maybe McDonalds. When you met them, did you think "Hey, this is my new friend?" Did you become friends immediately?  Of course not, but it had to start with a word, a sentence, a greeting, a "Nice to meet you" or a "Got the time?" or a "Hey, how is that new Spicy McChicken Sandwich, anyway?"

Ask enough killers where they met their victims, and eventually one will say "I met him in a McDonalds."

That guy. The one who could be my best friend. He could be my worst enemy, instead. We could wind up hating each other. Possibly. Fist-fighting. Knife-fighting. Destroying each other's lives. Who knows? The two of us meeting could set off a chain of events that would find us, decades from now, trying to kill each other with .50 caliber Browning M2 machine guns in Chilpancingo, Mexico on New Years Eve. While dressed as penguins.  You never know.

Why don't we talk? Why don't we say anything? Why do we just sit here, quietly munching and staring at our meals? There could be friendships and families founded from right here, right now.  There could be drama, just waiting to unfold.  Two of us could have a child who would have a child who would have a child who would cure cancer, or possibly invent an exciting new kind of pretzel treat.  And we're sitting here doing nothing about it!

Of course, we’re affecting each other’s lives anyway, by not talking. Take the Asian guy finishing off his fries over there.  By not engaging him in conversation, I’m affecting his life. If I were to talk to him, he might walk out of here a few minutes later than he would otherwise (or earlier, considering my conversational skills and that my mouth is full of Big N' Tasty) and might miss (or catch) his bus and then be too late/early to randomly meet the love of his life/his worst enemy. Or, hell, the bus could just run him over.  By not talking to him, I'm not setting events in motion, and thereby allowing other events to be set in motion, instead.

I hold his life in my hands, right now. Go ahead, Mr. Asian Fry-Finishing Person. Take your time. Take your time while I sit here, controlling you like a puppet. Chew slowly, savor those fries, they could be your last. I own your future. I decided what comes next. You are my temporal bitch.  A word from me, or two words, or no words, could alter your future, or not alter it, as well as the future of your children, and their children, if my silence even allows them to be born.

You can affect people all over the world by doing nothing. In fact, you do. You can shut yourself off from the world for a day, a week, a month, and still wreak havoc with people’s lives. By not stepping out your door, you don’t bump into people. You don’t draw their looks, don’t get in their way, don’t remind them of something, don’t make them think they’ve seen you somewhere before. Which leads to other thoughts, hesitations, decisions, actions, impulses. Which leads to different futures. By not taking up a seat on a bus, someone else sits, takes a load off, feels that much less unpleasant for being on a bus that smells like unwashed feet. They have a better day. They make a different choice, later on, than they would have made if they’d had to stand.  Maybe get that promotion or surprise someone with flowers or are kind to a stranger.

Maybe two people fight over the seat and have shitty days as a result. Or someone sits next to their future best friend. Or their future wife. The person who will someday get them a dream job or loan them money or invent something with them.

Maybe they sit next to their future killer. Or victim.

You leave a hole everywhere you don’t go.

Asian Guy, my puppet, finishes up and leaves, walking into whatever future I've made better or worse by not interacting with him.  I'm his puppet, too, of course, and the puppet of everyone else here and elsewhere.  We're all puppets, our strings stretching back in time to the Big Bang.  Whatever set that off.

Now, however, I’m not satisfied to passively influence the lives of others. I want to see it happen, make it happen. I'm already sad I didn't aggressively interfere with Asian Guy's life.  I want to say something to someone, strike up a conversation, or, more likely, I want someone to say something to me. Sure, I know the chances of establishing a life-long, life-changing friendship with someone in this room is slim, but not as slim as eventually winding up in a death struggle with one of them in Mexico. And I don’t really think I could have hot sex with the woman in her 70’s. Not with that glass eye, anyway.  Yeesh.  But still. You never know.

But I just sit there, looking around, and I wish something would happen in all the silence, and I wish someone would say something, do something, change something, and a then woman sitting nearby reading a newspaper suddenly laughs out loud, and she screeches "Oh! They found Winona Ryder guilty of shoplifting!" and then she looks around at everyone, waiting for someone to say something, and then she looks at me, and sees me looking at her, and she laughs again, and she says "Guilty!" and I look at her, and then I look down at my burger, and I think, *Oh, shut up.*

Extra stuff

Staffing Manager:  "I've got an assignment for you!"

Me:  "Great!"

Staffing Manager:  "It starts Monday!"

Me:  "Great!"

Staffing Manager:  "It's from 11-2 on Monday and Tuesday!"

Me:  "Oh."

A piddling two day assignment?  And not even two full days?  I shouldn't even waste my time with it.  But, I'm broke.  Beggars, contrary to popular belief, can be choosers.  Temps, or this temp, at least, can't.

Me:  "So, just three hours a day?"

Staffing Manager:  "No, four.  Four hours a day."

Me:  "11-2 is three hours."

Staffing Manager:  "Oh... is it?  Oh, yes, it is."

Me:  "But they have to pay me four hours minimum per day, right?"

I already know this to be true, but I was kind of waiting for her to mention it.

Staffing Manager:  "Oh... yes..."

Me:  "They do know that, don't they?"

Staffing Manager:  "I don't uh... let me call them back and check."

Crap.  I shouldn't have opened my mouth.  Now, the staffing manager will call them, and say something like "Do you realize that you have to pay him four hours minimum, and that you only have him scheduled for three?"  Something she should have asked them when they called in their order, but she obviously miscounted the hours or was simply unaware of the rule.  Pretty much par for the course for a staffing manager.

When she does call back, they've changed my hours from 9-1.  Typical.

Anyhoo, I go in both days.  Monday, I work 9-1, as scheduled, but Tuesday, being the efficient bastard that I am, I finish up at 11:45.

Supervisor:  "Well, I don't have anything else for you, so we'll just let you go at noon."

Me:  "Okay."

Supervisor:  "So, a nice three hour day for you today!"

Me:  "Ah... yes."

God.  Damn.

Now, I know my supervisor knows about the four-hour minimum.  She must.  The agency called her about it, and she changed my hours specifically because of that call. But she's still trying to pull one over on me.  It's rare that someone as cynical as I am can be surprised at someone's petty behavior, but I am.

See, here we have a marketing director.  Someone who probably makes about $200,000 a year.  And, here we have a company that probably pulled in several hundred million in profit last year.

And they're trying to screw me out of a measly hour of pay.

Bastards.

I fill out my timecard with four hours for the day, put on my jacket, grab my bag, and walk into her office.  She looks at my timecard and pauses.

Me:  "You did know that you have to pay me four hours minimum, right?"

Supervisor: (unconvincingly) "No, I really did not know that and had no idea about that rule and am just hearing it for the first time this very second."

Liar!  Liar!  Liar!

See, this ticks me off.  If she really didn't know, I would have mentioned it when she told me she I was done for the day, and I'd have offered to do some filing, or asked if other departments could use me for an hour.  But I know she knows, and that's why I didn't mention it until I'd had my timecard ready and my jacket on and my bag over my shoulder.  If she can pull an hour's work out of her ass, I'll be happy to do it, but I'm not going to give her a head-start.

She can't think of anything for me to do, so I leave.

It takes the bus an hour to get me home.  Knowing I'm getting paid for that hour makes the ride a little more pleasant.

Whoo!  It's always exciting when I hit a new low in terms of either personal or professional life!

Today, I had a one-day assignment at a property management office in Oakland, my favorite town.  At about 4:30pm, my supervisor said to me:

"Why don't you get out of here?  Go home early."

"Okay," I agreed.

"Oh, and let me know if you have a timecard or something, because we're not paying you."

"I'm sorry?" I asked.

"Well, we're not paying you, so let me know if I have to sign something."

Up until this moment, my supervisor had been a completely intelligible person.  Nothing she said didn't make sense.  This, however, didn't make sense.

"I'm sorry," I repeated.  "You're not paying me?"

"No, we're not paying you.  You're working here for free today."

After some discussion, she managed to get her point across.  It wasn't that I wasn't getting paid, it was that they weren't paying for me.

See, it was 'Free Wednesday' at my temp agency.  Rent a temp for the day, pay nothing.  My agency would pay my rate, the client wouldn't pay a dime.

This, I find, is humbling, and not a good sign for those in my line of work.  Available temp work has gotten so meager lately, agencies are having to compete with each other, offering discounts, free days, and, yes, even coupon deals.

At one of my recent jobs, I picked up a fax from a rival temp agency that read "Present this coupon and get eight free hours off your next temp order!"

Anyone else feeling like a Happy Meal toy?

It's simply not a good sign if your strongest selling point is 'Buy one get one free.'  I'm starting to feel like a prize in a scratch-off game.  The only way this could be more of a blow to my dignity and self-esteem would be if I actually had any dignity and self-esteem to begin with.

Anyone want to adopt a temp?

How about two for the price of one?

Part of the problem with temping is constantly being immersed in foreign surroundings.  But all it takes to make a temp feel more comfortable is the sight of something familiar.  Here's a few things you will find at every temp job you take.

The Pile: The pile is present in every copy room, and consists of a huge, unsorted mound of paper of different sizes and colors.  It comes into existence because at least once per day, someone will make a copy of something on colored paper, but neglect to put white paper back in the copier.  So, the next person comes along to make a copy, and out it comes on colored paper.  They angrily yank the colored paper out of the machine and plop it down on a shelf or countertop, thinking that it's not their job to put the paper back where it belongs.  The Pile knows this.  The Pile grows.

The Tiny Sliver of Cake in the Break Room - This phenomenon may also appear as the Chocolate-Chip Cookie Cut in Half or the Single Grape on the Plate.  For whatever reason, employees can never take the last bit of food.  One factor may be, and I'm not pointing out any specific gender here, that some people think if they eat an entire cookie by themselves, they will immediately put on 40 pounds.

The Crumpled Dollar Bill in the Desk You Sit At - It's always there, at every single job.  Sometimes it's jammed into a plastic cup filled with paperclips, but generally it will be in the top drawer, off to the left under all the pennies.  As soon as you see it, take it.  Might as well.  Eventually, you will take it anyway, usually to spend a fruitless half-hour trying to feed it to the soda machine.

The Ugly-Ass Pink Coat Hanging in the Closet -   No one will claim it.  No one will toss it.  Presumably, someone once wore it to work.  Whose it was, no one knows.  Not even the Pile.  But there it hangs.  And damn, is it ugly.

The Little Black Mark on the Toilet Seat in the Restroom - When you first see it you think the worst, so you use another stall.  But day after day, it remains.  You know, deep down in your heart, that it can't possibly be what you think it is, because the restrooms get cleaned every day, but you can't bring yourself to take that chance.  You will never sit on that toilet.  Ever.

See?  Aren't you feeling right at home now?

Knock-Knock.

Who's there?

A temp.

A temp who?

A temp that you've hired to replace a permanent employee.

How can you tell if a temp has robbed your house?

There's probably some stuff missing.

Why did the temp cross the road?

There's not enough information to sufficiently answer that.

How many temps does it take to screw in a light bulb?

One.

Three temps walk into a bar.  They have some drinks and hang out for a while, then go home.

What's the difference between a condom and a temp?

That should be fairly obvious.

There once was a temp from Nantucket.

He temped for a while, then was hired on permanently.

What do you call 5000 temps jumping out of a plane?

I don't know of any airship that could hold that many people.

Why did the temp throw his clock out the window?

Possibly the clock was broken, or had angered him in some way.

Leaving work, I stop to hold the door open for a slow, lumbering man who is digging around in his briefcase.

At that precise moment, the timeline of the universe skews off into a tangent.  In an alternate reality, I do not wait.  I do not hold the door open for 30 seconds while the man slowly makes his way to the door.  In that alternate reality, the alternate me lets the door close, and heads to the bus stop.

The me of this reality, on the other hand, stands there waiting, and when the lumbering chump finally makes it to the door, I head off to the bus stop as well, 30 seconds behind the alternate reality me.

The alternate me passes an extremely attractive woman, the same woman I pass almost every day after work.  Being ahead of me, he has a chance to smile at her before I do.  I, on the other hand, am not given the chance until thirty seconds later, and when the moment arrives, a gust of wind blows my tie up into my face.  I claw at it with my left hand, in which I'm holding my Zippo lighter, and in doing so, take a nice chip out of my sunglasses.  By the time I get the tie out of my face, she is past me.  Of course, the gust of wind hits the alternate reality me too, perhaps even blowing his tie up into his face, but by that time, he has already lit his cigarette and replaced the lighter in his pocket, so he doesn't chip his glasses.  Perhaps he has burned a hole in his tie, though.  I hope so, because I am starting to dislike him.

The alternate reality me gets to the bus stop and boards the bus that is just arriving, while I lag behind, seeing the bus but missing it, because I have also missed the traffic light that the alternate reality me managed to make.  I cross when the light is green again, but the next bus does not come for a full twenty-five minutes.  While I stand there, dealing with the crazy man who begs me for a cigarette, and then attempts to tie his shoe without bending over, doing this one-legged hopping thing which leads him to bump into me and push me back into a fence, the alternate reality me is riding along on his bus in comparative luxury.

When my bus finally comes, jam-packed with commuters, I climb on.  Across town, the alternate reality me is climbing off his bus, making it home in time to watch The Simpsons rerun, while I ride along, squished in between a hippie and a talkative and clearly insane British woman.

I get home a half-hour later, and brush elbows with the alternate me, who is on his way out.  During a commercial break, he has discovered that the leftover chicken we had planned to have for dinner is no longer edible, information I have yet to discover.  Once I do discover this, I head out as well, but am stopped at the door by the superintendent of my building, and roped into a half-hour conversation, due to his not being able to speak English and due to my not caring what he has to say anyway.

Far behind my dimensional twin, now, I get dinner, answer e-mail, do laundry, always encountering little snags that he does not, further extending the ever-widening gap between us.  He gets to bed a full hour ahead of me, sleeps longer and better than I do, and arises refreshed and ready to tackle his day.  Sure, we are in sync again, but I am much grouchier.  I will tolerate less than he will today.  It will take much less to put me in a foul mood.  His camel is unburdened, while mine's spine is already creaking, a straw away from traction.

Of course, he is blissfully unaware of me, while I can think of nothing but him.  What will his future be like, simply from not holding that door open?  Brighter, more promising than mine?  Will he achieve goals I fail to reach?  Will he obtain happiness that I am denied?

And hell... what did he write about in this update?

It's good for a temp to get back to his roots once in a while.  Like an skilled assassin practicing with his old, primitive weapons, a temp should retrain himself from time to time.  At least that's what I'm telling myself since all my agency had for me this week was a receptionist position.

I haven't been a receptionist in years.  Doesn't look like much has changed, though.  The phone still rings and people with indecipherable accents are on the other end.  The chair is still specifically aligned for someone with freakishly abnormal posture.  There's still a huge clock on the desk, with a bright red digital readout, reminding me that it's only 8:17AM.

I've been here for two hours when a woman rushes into the lobby.

"I'm expecting a package containing BGS-447T forms from Jimmy Laylerhagen at CWTDS this afternoon, but it's addressed to Laura Topplemeyer or Susan Jimmlewhacker.  But Jason Whumplehumper has been trying to get his hands on it to give it to Patty Dropplehopper from Fleeple Boobleloppers office. If you see it, call me right away!"  Then she runs off.

Uh, fine.  Who are you?  And, um, wha?

Yes, the employees are the same, too.  Despite the fact that I look nothing like the tall pregnant black woman I'm replacing, they seem to think I'm her.  It's as if I've been there for years, the way they rattle off names and procedures they seem to think I have intimate knowledge of.

The good thing about this job is that I really don't have to do anything but sit there and answer the phone, which only rings when my mouth is full of candy, which I get from the big bowl on my desk.  My only other real responsibility is to refill the bowl when I've eaten all the candy, which happens about twice a day.

When the phone rings while my mouth is full of candy (in this case, banana taffy) I have two choices.  I can dry-swallow the mouse-sized lump of candy and pick up the phone, or I can take the glob of candy from my mouth and hold it in my hand under the desk, which is what I choose to do.  Banana taffy is to be savored, not hurriedly swallowed in glob the size of a fist.

The only problem is if someone tries to hand me something while I'm on the phone, such as the postal carrier, who arrives at just this moment with a double armload of mail.  One hand holding the phone, the other holding a yellow, saliva-drenched wad of sugar, I motion with my head for her to leave the mail on the desk.  She doesn't seem to understand, instead holding out the huge bundle of mail for me.  Cradling the phone between my shoulder and ear, I try to take all the mail with one hand, the non-candy holding hand, but can't manage it all, and it starts spilling over the desk.  The phone, which lives for moments like these, starts ringing on the second line.

As I'm struggling to keep the mail from spilling onto the floor, another employee walks up and peers over the desk at me.  I know what she wants.  She wants her mail.  Never mind that it just arrived, and hasn't been sorted.  Like I said, I've done this before.  There's always the one employee who will walk up while you're chin-deep in mail, and ask "Is there anything for me?"  and you have to go through the whole stack once just looking for that person's name, while they stare at you impatiently.

Well, it ain't gonna happen unless I have both hands free.  Sadly, I flick the glob of taffy towards the wastebasket, but it has begun to harden on my fingers, and I miss the shot.  It hits the floor and rolls somewhere.  Sad.  And...

Baffling.  Because I never find it.  I look everywhere for the taffy glob a little later, but I can't see it anywhere.  Must have rolled a good ways back under the desk somewhere.

Someday, hopefully years from now, when the company is moving to larger (or smaller) accommodations, they'll uproot the desk and there will be a withered, faded, hardened yellow stone for them to briefly puzzle over.

I may only be temporary here, but I'm leaving my mark.

About the only positive aspect of my current job is that since I work with a lot of editors, there's a chance one of them might have some publishing connections.  So, when I see one of them, I try to chat them up a bit and see if I can work the fact that I'm a writer into the conversation, which is tough, because generally the only time I see them is while I'm standing in their offices, getting chewed out over all the grammatical, spelling, and style errors I've made on my latest project.  It's probably not the best time to point out I'm a writer when someone is splashing red ink, Jackson Pollock-like, all over my writing.

So, talking to them in their offices is out.  There's always the hallways, although it's hard to casually mention that I'm a writer to someone briskly walking past me in the opposite direction.  It's like trying to hit on a jogger.

That leaves the elevators.

The elevators in the building are being worked on, so only one of them is functioning at a time, and it's slow, jerky, and filled with dust, despite the big, heavy, padded, industrial work blankets that line the walls of the compartment.  Since I work on the twelfth floor, I spend most of my breaks and lunch hours waiting for the elevator to arrive, as does everyone else, including the editors.

My big break finally comes when I spot an editor waiting for the elevator on the first floor.  I stand next to her and we start talking a bit, and she asks how long I've been a temp, where else I've worked, and if I'm in school (grrr).  Standard stuff.

The elevator arrives, and we get in.  She asks where I live, how I get to work each day, what I had for breakfast, my feelings about campaign finance reform, everything but THE QUESTION.  I'm worried because we're halfway to the twelfth floor now, and I'm running out of time.

Then:  "So, what do you do besides temping?"

Yes!  She asked!  The trap is bait!  The bait is set!  Something is something!

"Well, not much.  What with work and my long commute--"

At this point, it kind of registers in my head that the elevator seems to be getting darker.

"--and all, I don't have a lot of extra--"

It is getting darker.  Are the lights dimming?  Am I going blind?  Whatever, it's not important.

"-- time, but my real interest is--"

I find out why it's getting darker all of the sudden.  It's because one corner of the huge, thick, heavy, padded industrial work blanket has become unhooked from the top of the elevator wall, and is SLOWLY CURLING DOWN OVER MY HEAD.  Slowly, that is, until I notice it.  Then it pounces, falling on me completely.

As I struggle with this huge, dusty blanket, which has the thickness and mass of a queen-size mattress, I hear a ding!, and by the time I get the damn thing attached to the wall again, I'm covered with dirt, the editor has stepped out, and impatient people are streaming in.

Well, I missed my chance.

But at least I got to write about it.

I'm working at an environmental engineering firm this week.  Do you know what environmental engineering is?  'Cos I've been there three days and I still don't have a clue.

Whatever it is, I think it's probably evil.

I'm in charge of word processing, and I got handed a document today, the original text of which listed information about six soil samples from a contaminated site.  Lots of scary phrases were crossed out in red pen, like "over acceptable limits" and "quantities in excess of" and "untreatable levels found" and "simply excavating the site will not prove effective."

The "six" soil samples became "two", the contamination was heavily downplayed, and most of the deadly sounding chemicals were omitted.  Recommendation:  excavation of site.

It was kind of unsettling.

The next document had the words "site was extensively flooded" crossed off, and written in was "site was tidally influenced."

Tidally influenced?  If a big wave of sewage washes over your home, I guarantee you won't call the EPA and tell them your home was "tidally influenced."

Some other terms I expect to see changed this week:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| groundwater poisoned | = | flavoring added |
| toxic mutation | = | evolutionary encouragement |
| raw sewage fumes | = | appetite suppressants |
| radiation contamination | = | mood lighting |
| cancer causing agents | = | creamy nougat |
| maximum toxicity levels | = | happy bunnies frolicking |
| pesticide degradation | = | uh... Look over there!  An ELF! |

Sometimes, temp jobs can be incredibly boring.

Sometimes, imagination is the only weapon a temp has.

And sometimes, it's simply not enough.

I had this assignment one time where my sole purpose was to enter, um, tax credit certificates for... uh... pollution control... something or others. I don't really remember what it was, to be honest, but it was dull.  Most of it seemed to be descriptions of the pollution control facilities of various industries, farms, and plants in the Portland area. Some of these terms and devices sounded very science-fictiony to me, and as I worked I began to invent a story from the strange terminology I punched into the spreadsheet; a futuristic tale that sprang forth from the technical jargon...

Every word printed in bold below is an actual term or name in the pollution control biz.

Nelmor Granulator drew his laser pistol and fired at the horde of Horiba Nox probe robots that were surrounding him. The probes were the latest inventions of Nelmor's arch-nemesis, the evil scientist, Freffner Varag. This morning Nelmor had learned of Varag's evil plot to conduct illegal multiple clone retrofits on the citizens of Kellobilt City, and Nelmor was determined to stop him. Dropping his ineffective pistol, he drew his Spire Z-Mixer Plasticating screw gun and blasted away, but it was no use. Looking for a means of escape, he spotted a 7CDL11 Cycloblower parked next to a self propelled diesel stack wagon not far away. Leaping onto the Effluent lift station he rose quickly to the 600th floor, then back down to the 1st (with a short stop on 12 to look at handbags), in an attempt to elude the probes. The lead robot, however, was a Model APNA-305E, and easily saw through his ruse. Nelmor was bitch-slapped into unconsciousness by the robots and taken to Varag's secret hideout in a Micropole baghouse.

"Won't talk, eh?" sneered Freffner Varag.

Nelmor was lashed to the hopper loader of an FG metal separator (it was actually fairly comfortable, considering).

"Well," Freffner snarled, "perhaps a taste of the Bottom Plow will make you talk!"

Nelmor's heart went cold. The Bottom Plow! Oh no! Nelmor had once been tortured with a rear chopper, but that was nothing compared the dreaded Bottom Plow! He wouldn't be able to walk for weeks!

Suddenly the wall crashed in and a lone figure came into view through the particulate matter (or, dust). It was Norkot Maxgrind Hammermill, Space Adventurer!

"Norkot Maxgrind Hammermill!" Nelmor and Varag exclaimed together.

"Yes, I am Norkot Maxgrind Hammermill!" said Norkot Maxgrind Hammermill.

Okay, okay, maybe the story sucks. Maybe it was just a solid waste of time.

But just show this story to a pollution control engineer and he'll chortle until he wets his feces-smeared hip-waders.

Tomorrow, finally, a comparison of short & long term temping.  Probably.

Temping Prospectus

5-1-01 - April Wrap-Up on the Temp Network!

Don:  All right!  This is Don Thompson, along with Jim Traynor, here to give you the Temp Network April Temp Wrap-Up!

Jim:  That's right, Don!  The first month of the temp season is over, and it's been a rough start for most of our temps, to say the least.

Don:  Ha ha!  Got that right, Jim.  Failures left and right, some disappointing starts --

Jim:  A few veterans not performing to their full potential, and a few rookies just in over their heads...

Don:  Exactly, exactly.  Anyway, let's get started!  Jim?

Jim:  Okay, here we have Edward Lewis, a rookie from Ohio State, just starting his first full season of temping.  Hot prospect, but clearly fizzled his first two weeks at a Wal-Mart Corporate office.

Don:  Now, Lewis is a Manpower Temp, and with Manpower's payroll and national exposure, they often recruit the youngest and hottest new temps.

Jim:  I should just jump in here, and explain to the viewers, that when we say "hot", we are by no means talking about looks or physical attractiveness.

Don: No, no absolutely not, no.  We can see that Lewis is not even remotely attractive.

Jim:  Even at 6' 1", and with a fairly sturdy build, the ladies are simply not interested.

Don:  Well, look at that face.  Goober.

Jim:  Exactly.  Still, his looks are the least of his problems this spring.  He attacked his first temp job with a lot of enthusiasm, but he paid the price.  Constantly offering to help out, he wound up fetching lunch several times, and by chatting with a couple of the elderly administrative assistants, or "lifers", he was forced to join them for lunch.

Don:  The officials had to charge him with an error for that one.  Most disappointingly, he was talked into carpooling with, uh, let me check my notes... a mother of three, as well as a stamp-enthusiast from accounting.  He's just... he's just bending over backwards, afraid to say "no" to anything at this point, Jim.  He's just over-eager, really pressing at this point.

Jim:  Also, Temping Prospectus reports that he is the last stop on the carpool, so he must be crammed in the back with lots of sticky toys and the child seat.  Let's hope his numbers improve in May, or it could be back to grad school for him.

Don:  Or a permanent job!

Jim:  Ha ha!  Right!

Don:  Okay, here we've got Luke Osata, a major player from Japan, huge, huge temp over there.

Jim:  Definitely.  Seven years temping in Japan, and now on his first April in the U.S. of A.

Don:  He was picked up in a trade by OfficeTeam, who sent Shel Daniels over there.  Shel, we hardly knew ye.

Jim:  Shel's having a tough time in Japan.  Doesn't speak the language, and, last we heard, isn't enjoying his sleeping tube or his all-fish diet.

Don:  Not at all.  Anyway, Osata is definitely going to waste with OfficeTeam.  He has Word, Excel, Access, and PowerPoint skills, not to mention his Sys Admin experience...

Jim:  Two years.

Don:  Right, right, and tremendous HTML and VRML skills, but OfficeTeam has placed him at an Oakland School Board office, and they have him stuffing envelopes eight hours a day.

Jim:  Even if he's picked up elsewhere, those papercuts are really going to hurt his timing.

Don:  Don't rule out general bitterness and bone-wrenching depression, either.

Jim:  And here we have Andy Walsh--

Don:  Oh, man.

Jim:  Andy Walsh, although he insists everyone call him Andrei.

Don:  This guy... man, well, no one is really surprised.

Jim:  Absolutely not.  A total drip, he's using temping as a way to avoid a full-time job, which isn't unusual, except for the fact that he's claiming that his poetry will suffer if he is permanently employed.

Don:  Or even temporarily employed!  So it seems, anyway, as he only worked 3.5 days the entire month.  Picked up on waivers by Express Personnel, he turned down four of the first five assignments they gave him!

Jim:  Everyone knows you have to take the first assignment, even if it's crap.

Don:  Everyone but this pseudo-beatnik!  What a pinko.  Brings up his poetry to anyone within earshot, and passes out flyers for his readings at local coffee bars in the Seattle area.

Jim:  Refuses to do phone work, I understand, on the basis that "Telephones project voice, but not meaning, and not understanding."

Don:  I want to hit him.

Jim:  Quit his first job after a day, because he felt the company represented corporate America at its worst, it says here.  I think it was a small law firm, so that doesn't even make sense.  Managed to stay with his second assignment for 2.5 days, but only because it was an Environmental Bureau.  And then he got canned because he kept screwing up on the fax machine and leaving early for his Shiatsu class.

Don:  Pathetic!

Jim:  Okay, over to Women's Temping now!

Don:  Allison Keeler, six year veteran, specializes in long term assignments.  A pro, truly the best of the best.

Jim:  She's been pretty much everywhere, and done it all, but she is slumping bad this spring.

Don:  She sure is, Jim, and I think you just summed up the problem.  She's done it all, and has acquired a tremendous ego in the process.

Jim:  Well, we can't be too hard on her.  She relocated to Boston and started with a new agency, and they simply won't trust her with executive assistant level assignments yet.  But you can't blame them for that.

Don:  I may disagree with you there, Jim.  She's not willing to start off answering phones and working reception again, and I don't blame her.  She has solid references and they really need to place her somewhere she can excel.

Jim:  She definitely needs to be more patient though.  And references aside, she has long, fake, pink fingernails and is a horribly tacky dresser, and it would be tough for any agency to trust her right off the bat.

Don:  Well, I guess we just have to agree to disagree on this one, Jim!

Jim:  Shut up.

Don:  And here we have Emily Walker.

Jim:  Wow, what a disappointing start, truly.

Don:  Absolutely.  She's a great temp, 2nd year, SUNY Binghamton grad, very capable, talented, possibly a bit shy, but that works in a temp's favor most times.

Jim:  Definitely, yes.  Keeps them from getting too close to the perms, and from getting invited to luncheons and baby showers.  But, while shy, she's not standoffish nor disagreeable.  Still, she's hurting this spring.

Don:  Big time.  She got jammed into a customer service gig the first two weeks, which is tough enough, but now she's sharing a cubicle with a large, red-haired British woman who smells like meat.

Jim:  It's been a bad month, but hopefully she will recover.

Don:  Our one success story this spring seems to be Rachel Cain.

Jim:  I'm with you there.  She is having an astounding April.

Don:  Baffling, to say the least.  Because she seems to have no office skills whatsoever.

Jim:  Not a one.  I don't think she's familiar with even the most simple of computer software.  Her scouting report says her typing speed was clocked at about 16 WPM.

Don:  Yet in her first week she was promoted to Executive Assistant for the Director of Marketing, one Brett Carson, 45, divorced, and she has been allowed to take every Friday off this month.  She also gets to take Carson's car out when she needs to get her hair done or run errands.

Jim:  Rumor has it, she'll be getting an expense account and rate increase before long.

Don:  Well, I can't explain it.  I guess she just has a great personality.

Jim.  That's all I can think of.

Don:  Or it could be her tits.

Jim:  Right.  Stay tuned!  We'll be back after the break with the injury report and the box scores!

Picture this, if you will:  You are a temp.  You get a temp job, and at the office, on every floor, are two big kitchens.

In each kitchen?  Two big honkin' refrigerators.

And, in each fridge, ALL THE ICE CREAM YOU COULD EVER WANT TO EAT.

And it's FREE.

Pick a flavor! Vanilla, Chocolate, Strawberry, Rocky Road, Mint Chocolate Chip, Cookies 'N Cream, Cookie Dough, Butter Pecan, Almond Praline, Cherry Vanilla, Banana Split, Strawberry Cheesecake, Pistachio, Rum Raisin, Double Chocolate Fudge, Butterscotch, Coffee, Chocolate Walnut, Banana Fudge, Coconut Almond Fudge... the list is endless (well, not this list)!

And it's all FREE!

And, of course, if you don't want ice cream, there's always about twenty different flavors of frozen yogurt!  Also FREE!

And, of course, if you want a little something on your ice cream, they've got plenty of whipped cream for you to add!  Completely FREE!

And, of course, if you're lactose intolerant, like I am, then this perk is completely wasted on you!  DAMN!

So.

When my agency called me about my latest job, they told me what my responsibilities would be, what sort of skills I needed, who I would be working with, how long the job would last, and the usual sort of info.

But every temp knows, it's not what they tell you, it's what they leave out.  In this case, it was some important information about my supervisor, a guy named Tod.

When Tod came down to meet me at the front desk, the first thing I noticed were these braces on his wrists.  The braces had velcro straps and ran from his palms to his forearms.  They are, he told me, necessary, because he is suffering from severe carpal tunnel syndrome, and possibly tendonitis, in both arms.

"You're going to have to be my hands," he said.

And I am.  I'm his hands.

My job consists of sitting at his desk, in front of his computer, using his keyboard and mouse, while he sits or stands next to me, telling me what to do.

Exactly what to do.

All day.

At any job, there is a period like this, and it usually lasts at least a few minutes, sometimes a few hours.  This is just the training period, however, and once you're up to speed, they leave you alone, you forget everything, and start surfing the web.

I am not being trained.  I am being his hands.  All day long, I listen to this:

"Click there. Now click there.  No, there!  Click that!  Widen that cell.  Click that button.  No, the other one!  Mouse over to the left.  Now click that.  Scroll up.  Save as.  Highlight that part.  No, not that part, that part.  No, that part!  Click that!  Open this up.  Drop the menu down.  Now highlight that part.  No, the other part.  Hm.  That's wrong.  Close that.  Okay, open that other one.  Not that one, oh, wait, that's the right one.  Hm.  Drum your fingers on the mouse thoughtfully for a minute.  Okay, now stop.  Open that.  Open it and minimize it.  Click that.  No, that!!  Hey, there's Suzy. Wave to Suzy for me.  No, not like that!  Wave harder.  Where did you learn how to wave?  More wrist action!  Not that much wrist action, are you gay or something?  Never mind, she's gone now.  Back to the database.  No, the other database.  Click that.  Save it.  Open that file.  Click it.  Now move it.  Click there... no, THERE!  THERE!!!  Scroll down.  Open that thing.  Click it.  My leg itches, scratch it.  No, the other leg.  Scratch it!  No, there.  Higher!  Not that high, are you gay or something?"

And so on.

This will all end badly.

Actually, I'm not sure who this is worse for.  It must be frustrating for a guy to not be able to use his hands, and have to sit there giving explicit instructions for every single mouse-click.  Whenever I have to train someone on the computer (even though I'm a temp, it happens a lot), I'm only able to give them so many instructions before I want to slap their hand away from the mouse and do it myself.

On my side of things, it's annoying enough having someone look over your shoulder, let alone look over your shoulder ALL DAY.  While barking orders.  And when he takes a phone call or talks to someone, there's nothing I can do since I haven't been trained.  So, I just sit there like a vegetable until he is done.  Sometimes I sit there for almost an hour, unless he needs me to gesture or something.

I had a thought today, between clicking the thing (no, the other thing) and scrolling down (no, not that far), that we were in Fantasia.  He was Mickey Mouse, the Sorcerer's Apprentice, and I was a broom, the lifeless, mindless drone he puts into action.  Maybe, eventually, he will set me in motion, and I won't stop.  I'll keep clicking.  And scrolling.  And clicking.  And saving.  And scrolling.  And clicking.  And nothing will stop me, until the Sorcerer (or the Director of Human Resources) comes back and fires me.

Anyway, place your bets on who will snap first.  I'm too slow for him, and he's too annoying for me, so it's gonna happen.  At least I'll see it coming, I mean, he can't strangle me without his hands.

And I'm his hands.

My current assignment.

(Um... What follows is a fairly long, unfunny, completely pissy work-rant, which I generally try to avoid here.  But this time, I'm just gonna go ahead and do it.  I need to vent.  If you're not interested, that's quite alright, there will be lighter stuff here next week).

A couple of weeks ago, I mentioned that I was working for a guy, Tod, who was suffering from carpal tunnel syndrome, acting as his "hands", sitting at his desk, clicking what he told me to click, clicking how he told me to click, and clicking when he told me to click, for seven hours a day.

Demeaning?  Sure.  Stressful.  Extremely.  That's why I took the vacation from the site, because everything I tried to write about the job was coming out laced with anger and bitterness and it was just plain unpleasant.  You'll see what I mean below.

And it was only getting worse.

Tod, you see, started developing annoying new habits, such as grinding his teeth with a lovely skkkkrrreeeeeek skkkkrrreeeeeek sound, right into my ear, and, more recently, gesturing at the monitor with a sharpened pencil, the point of which, since he was sitting or standing right behind me, would come within a few inches of my face and eyes on a regular basis.  A little nerve-wracking.  At one point he was jabbing at the screen while clutching a piece of paper, and the edge of it was zipping past my face at an alarmingly close proximity.  I was having nightmares about sustaining a papercut in my eye.  Visions of Un Chien Andalou.

His constant monologue of "Click there.  Click there. Click there," got worse, too, as he started becoming even more specific.  If he needed an e-mail attachment opened, instead of saying "Open that," he'd say "Okay, right click on that attachment.  Now choose Open."  And if I opened 50 attachments in a row, he's still give precise, explicit instructions on how to do it.

Also, whenever I would print something, a little network window would pop up (telling me that the document had printed) with a "Close" button on it.  Just a button that said "Close."  No other buttons, no other options.  "Close."

What would you do if confronted with such a window?  I'm guessing you would click "Close."  In fact, you'd have no other choice, other than let the window remain there for the rest of your life.

Tod didn't seem to think I would click "Close," because every time that window popped up, he would tell me to click "Close."  Every.  Single.  Time.  No matter if we spent an hour printing things.  For a while, I tried to beat him to it, to click it before he told me to, but I gave that up and just sat there, acting stupid, waiting for direction.

And those are just a few examples.

At the same time, Tod was growing less and less happy (and he was, when I started there, a fairly cheerful guy), as his carpal tunnel got worse and worse and the company seemed to want to do nothing about it.  Last week, he told me they were trying to transfer him to Chicago, and early this week, he told me they were trying to transfer him to Denver.  Sounded to me like they were trying to make him someone else's problem.  The guy was in a bad situation, and it got even worse when his boss told him that he had to keep a detailed log about what he did all day (such as noting time and duration of phone calls, files worked on, e-mails sent, etc.).  This is generally not a sign that your employers are happy with you, and Tod became absolutely miserable.

Imagine that, me feeling sorry for someone other than myself!  Weird!  But it didn't last long.

Tod began having me compose clandestine e-mails to co-workers, asking them to meet him somewhere so he could fill them in on the latest indignities he suffered.  He did this a la Woodword and Bernstein, sorta, by writing on a piece of paper what he wanted me to type into the e-mail (then instructing me to click the "Send" button, of course), so people in adjoining cubicles wouldn't overhear.  Even more fun, he would sit there, sometimes for minutes, clutching his hands and muttering under his breath, while I sat staring into space and trying to figure out just how I had gotten myself into such an uncomfortable situation.

Besides these ulcer-inducing circumstances, being Tod's helper monkey (as my friend Anderson put it) was not turning out to be particularly lucrative for yours truly.  Tod had a lot of therapy sessions and doctors appointments, and I would be forced to leave early or come in late, cutting into my hours.  Not that I wanted more hours, because I despised the job and it was slowly killing me, but I have rent and bills to think about.  So, I told Tod last week that he needed to guarantee me at least 35 hours of pay, regardless of whether I actually worked those hours or not.  Otherwise, he should have my agency send a part-time temp over, and I could move on.  He wholeheartedly agreed, and promised me 35 hours, and said he understood if I felt a need to find a new assignment.  No problem.

So, this Monday afternoon, Tod told me he'd be taking Tuesday off, and I didn't need to come in.  He's sorry, but he can only pay me for a half-day.  Hooray.  Way to keep a promise, dick.  I went home, called my agency, and told them this would be my last week.

Thursday morning, I showed up for work.  Tod seemed incensed that I was quitting the assignment (my agency waited three days to give him the news for some reason, maybe because they suck), and acted all pissy and sarcastic and stormed away from the desk.  About an hour later, he told me I was done.  That's it.  He sent me home at 10:30am, paid me for three hours on Thursday (the minimum, he said), and told me not to bother coming in Friday.

Fine, fine.  Whatever.  The pay isn't worth it.  I'm broke, but I'm finished there, and I'm glad.  It's over.

The end.

Thursday afternoon, the phone rings.  It's my agency.

Shortly after sending me packing, Tod resigned, they tell me.

The company apologizes for his behavior, they tell me.

The company is offering me Tod's job, they tell me.

Man.  You can't make this shit up.  It's not over.  Just when I think I'm out, they pull me back in.  But hey, at least I won't be a monkey anymore.

1. is not in this section [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It’s probably “Snoodles” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)