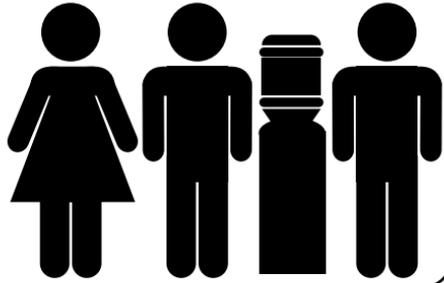


2 Aftershock



Wednesday, June 22 (continued)

My life has become a cross between a low-budget '80s film and a game show. “Hey guys, I’m in charge, and you need to pack your bags for a trip to ... your new cubicle, centrally located nowhere near your current location!”

I’m back at my desk, breathing heavily and waiting for everyone else to return from the basement. Standing among what seemed like millions of business people at the meeting was bad enough. I realized they were all staring at me. I thought maybe I had a stain on my shirt, or possibly I had forgotten to remove my clown nose/eye patch combo. When I found both in my pocket, I realized there must be another reason.

As they filed into the cattle-herding elevator, I waited for the punch line. “Hilarious, guys,” I was ready to shout. “You really had me going, with the all-hands meeting and everything. You pulled an epic prank on the new guy. You should have seen my face ... you really got me good. Guys?”

But I never had the chance. Apparently, this wasn’t “The Office” version of “Candid Camera.”

“Jason, I’m really sorry for you,” said some guy who I assumed was the ringleader of the prank. “When they made the announcement, you were the first person I thought of.”

Do I know this guy? I wonder whether he has a crush on me, or whether he just talks to all of the new hires like this. I don’t remember ever meeting him, but somehow, he knows my

name.

They just kept filing into the cattle herder, so I took the stairs. At least staircases don't move abruptly the minute you start walking up or down them, outside of some mystical wizard world.

I stare at my computer while the others return and gab voraciously about the announcement. I still can't if it's a good thing that my cubicle sits right in the middle of the Mettle universe, as nearly all sounds within 50 feet reverberate off the metal shelving to my right.

I overheard someone saying that most of us will receive acceptance letters for jobs in Cincinnati. Does that include me? I've been here eight days; the programming language of choice (Java) is one I've never used; and I know absolutely nothing about this place's internal financial processes. OK, I do know a little about accessing servers, updating web pages, and using the code repository. And I'm a master at checking the logs.

But if I had to do any of this stuff by myself, I would either crash a server or accidentally remove \$54 million in assets from some poor soul's account. And where are all of the funds stored, anyway? I'm still in search of the money vault.

"Jeff, you're meeting with Sally next," says Chris, our supervisor, as everyone hovers around Jeff's cube. Why are people always there? And for what possible reason? I'm starting to suspect that Jeff, when I'm not looking, hands out beer and doughnuts.

As our boss, Chris commands the floor, but it's clear that he's not even sure what to say. He's fairly young (maybe mid-30s), and seems to be a good enough guy, but through my limited time, I've talked with him maybe three times. I assume he stays busy, though I'm still trying to learn everyone's names and not blow up my computer. Perhaps he guards the money vault.

"So newbie, what do you think about all of this?" says Barry, smiling as if he just won a hot dog eating contest. I don't

know what Barry's facial responses mean, so I can only wonder whether this is an expression of cleverness or deception. I peg Barry to be a man of many faces, most of which are covered in condiments.

"Who the hell is Sally?" I say.

"She's Chris's boss!" Barry says with a pat (more like a whack!) on my back and a sinister laugh. He reminds me a bit of Batman's primary nemesis, the Joker, although I don't remember the comic book version wearing glasses or the same short-sleeve polo shirt that has gone through the laundry 1,024 times.

Barry would make a decent prototype for today's Java programmer: He's got a full backlog of computer science knowledge, he's white and in his early 40s, and he's never short of confidence when it comes to his capabilities. He even took a math class in college that my mom taught. I theorize he was the type of student who attempted to impress the chicks with his enormous ... knowledge of fractals.

"It doesn't seem like they'll offer me a job," I say. "They could easily just have someone up there and not have to worry about moving me."

"But this isn't going to happen overnight," Barry says. "It will be months before we move. I bet they'll want you to come along."

Barry might be right. It would be sensible to keep me, especially because I'm already here and working. But Northern Lineage could have just waited another two weeks to fill my position. Then again, it took Mettle a month and a half after my interview to offer me the job. The people here seemed cool enough, so I took the position with the idea that after a month or so, I could always start looking again. Or join the circus.

Either way, I should have waited to stop trimming my facial hair, just in case I need to climb back into the bearded woman outfit.

Jeff returns from his meeting with Sally, and like maggots

on a dead rat, other coworkers return to his cube to gossip. He's carrying a folder that contains an acceptance letter, a Northern Lineage mission statement, and quite possibly discount oil change coupons in Cincinnati. Ken jumps in and rifles through the materials.

"This is all you got?" Ken says. "Did they give you a timetable about when the move will occur? Did they ask you what your likelihood of moving would be? Did they tell you about your bonus?"

Ken already has begun to theorize his optimal plans for the move. Ken, the half-Japanese metrosexual of the group, is not holding back his inquisitive mind and conniving demeanor today. He's the type of person who would complete thorough research about a decision, analyzing every possible angle to determine the best possible action and feel confident about the choice.

And the next day, he would change his mind.

While Ken looks through the materials to find answers, Jeff picks up the single piece of paper that remains on the left-hand side of his desk.

"It's all covered here," Jeff says. "But I can't let you see this offer sheet. You'll see yours soon enough. We have until August 15 to make a decision ... a decent chunk of time from now. The bonus looks good. They are really bending over backward for us."

Jeff does his fair share of worrying, too. Besides the goatee and the age discrepancy (Ken's 42, while Jeff is 26), the difference between Ken and Jeff is that Jeff makes decisions fast and allows ample time to change if other prospects become more acceptable.

"Come on, Jeff, share the offer sheet with the crowd," Barry growls. But as Barry reaches for the paper in Jeff's hand, Jeff turns his chair away. Of course, that doesn't stop Barry from moving closer and putting Jeff in a headlock. Jeff doesn't seem interested in wrestling, so he pushes Barry away.

Fortunately, with no title belt on the line, Barry's playfulness subsides, and he steps back.

Meanwhile, Don must have heard the commotion and drifts over.

"Isn't this great?" Don beams. "We get to move to Cincinnati!"

"Maybe for you," Ken says. "Why are you so happy?"

"I just got one step of the process out of the way," Don says excitedly. "I'm closing on my house here next week. So I was planning on finding a new place. I guess I'll just have to start looking in a different neighborhood."

For the most part, Don keeps to himself, although he stands out in our circle because he's a few inches taller than the rest of us. Occasionally, he throws himself into whatever conversation is occurring, usually taking a harsh stance on the opposite side of the strongest arguer. He could be an intelligent and effective debater, but much of the time, people just nod as he speaks. Everyone assumes he isn't finished talking. But this time, he is.

Usually Diya ignores Don's diatribes, but for whatever reason today, she joins the party in Jeff's workspace.

"Hey Diya, where have you been?" Barry says.

"I have been working," Diya says. "There is so much to get accomplished, and I don't have time to sit around and discuss the inevitable. Maybe tomorrow will be different."

"Of course tomorrow will be different," says Don, turning away from the crowd. "Tomorrow will be the first full day we know we're going to Cincy!"

"Why is he so happy?" says Diya, staring cautiously at Don as he strolls back to his desk.

"Dude wants to move," Jeff says.

Don seems to be alone in temperament, but I haven't quite mastered a read on Diya yet. She is overtly immersed in her work, and maybe she doesn't think too much about the change of venue with the company. The only thing I really know about her is that she's a crazily attractive Indian woman, which I

haven't seen in any previous office job.

Chris appears, trying to slip into the group unnoticed, which is always difficult when you're in charge.

"Jason, you're next up with Sally," says Chris, and then he disappears, back doing whatever he is usually doing.

"Where is this lady's office, anyway?" I ask. No one responds. I'm not sure whether they don't know where the office is, or whether their sullenness about the work predicament is starting to affect their ears. Maybe fun has been outlawed and replaced with mandatory limb amputations.

"I'll show you," Jeff says. The others disband as Jeff and I trek toward the office of this fabled Sally. It isn't difficult to find; she has a corner office, as expected, opposite of our work area. As I approach her door, one employee leaves, looking glum, while another enters gingerly. I notice Chris sitting inside.

"Good luck," Jeff says.

Upon hearing Jeff, the floor secretary tries to start a conversation with him. I wonder why all the people look as if they have been diagnosed with multiple terminal illnesses. I can't imagine people here always look so sad. The first few days seemed like a joyous place; I mean, there weren't carnival rides or orgies spontaneously breaking out, but the place appeared to be harmonious.

Sally's door opens, and the exiting employee doesn't appear too distraught. Chris beckons me to enter.

"Jason, this is Sally," says Chris, flipping through papers I assume will end up in my possession. He hands the papers to Sally.

"Good to meet you," I say, standing to shake Sally's hand. I feel like Socrates trying to strike up a conversation with the guy who eventually gives him the hemlock.

"Sorry we have to meet for the first time under these terms," says Sally. I wonder what "terms" she means; we haven't negotiated terms yet. Maybe I missed the fine print in

my job contract, which spells out a list of conditions that I must fulfill, including something to do with a protractor and a baby seal. Am I still under full warranty?

She hands me the folder, but before I can review it, she continues.

“Honestly, if we had known about the move, we probably wouldn’t have hired you.”

I don’t hesitate to respond.

“I’m glad you didn’t know,” I say, noticing the offer letter that awaits me in the grab bag of material. “Still, I’m fortunate to have this opportunity.”

Neither Sally nor Chris has much to say after that. They waltz through the motions of explaining the offer and the August 15 deadline. I’m slightly paying attention, as I’m still stuck on Sally’s comment about the whole not-being-hired bit. It’s difficult for me to believe a person in that position would not know about the relocation. Then again, I haven’t been here long enough to comprehend the organizational communication between Mettle and the mother ship.

I leave the meeting and hurry back to my workstation, but just about everyone has left for the day. It’s 4:45, and apparently, the announcement has put enough emotional strain on the employees that they have to leave work early. Jeff is still pounding away on his computer.

“Oh, there you are,” Jeff says. “Do you want to stick around and help me with this build?”

The build, Jeff acknowledges, will be an integral part of my job. Because numerous updated code files need to go on the website, we have to take all of the newest ones in the code repository, make copies in various locations to test, and then deploy them to the live server. The build is sort of like a briefcase that contains every single file for the website. Each time there are changes, all the files need to be stuffed into the briefcase and then emptied into the correct directories on the server. I can’t tell yet how complex this is, but I doubt I’ll be able to

offer Jeff much assistance.

“So what happened in the meeting?” Jeff says.

“They are offering me a position in Cincinnati,” I say.

“I told you! I think just about everyone got an offer.”

Jeff turns back to his computer. “I’ll give you a ride home so you don’t have to catch the bus.”

Awkward silence. And keystrokes.

“Everyone took off in a hurry today,” I say, waiting for Jeff to show me the steps in building the website.

“Yeah, it’s ghostly in here,” Jeff says. “I suspect there will be many more days like this, when people start jumping ship or just not doing anything. Do you have plans for the weekend?”

“I’m just going to visit a friend ... actually, it’s a blind date in Cincinnati. Pretty weird timing, especially if I end up moving.”

“I have to finish my basement. That sucks ass.”

I’ve overheard Jeff discuss his basement work. Jeff must love all types of building assembly. I wonder if he was the one who started those silly “Under construction” animated graphics on partially completed websites.

“I doubt we do many more website builds before the move,” Jeff says. “They probably want to hold off most of the maintenance. Besides, most people won’t want to do any work. I mean, it was dead today at 4:30.”

“So what do you think Northern Lineage will want us to do in the meantime?” I say.

“At this point, the best thing for us to do will be to lie low and wait to see what happens.”

Saturday, June 25

It’s tough to think about a major life decision with William Howard Taft staring down at you.

First, the guy is huge. How many former presidents had the nickname “Big Lub”? Second, this isn’t a normal U.S. presidential statue, as the plaque that accompanies it highlights

Taft's time as the 10th Chief Justice of the United States.

"Hey, um, Big Lub?" I imagine myself saying. "I know you're busy and all hanging out with the pigeons, but I have a bone to pick with you. I started this job two weeks ago, and they want me to move to that building right over there. I don't live anywhere near here, but gravity seems to be pulling me toward it. Hello, Big Lub, are you listening? Can you at least give me a tip on who has the best chili in town?"

I'm on my blind date. It's really not going that well. The girl is nice enough, maybe the type I would have gone for in college ... fun, bubbly, and visibly interested. Instead, I'm talking to a dead president about a major career decision. Shit, I hope she didn't think I called her "Big Lub," or I might end up in the water.

Why am I even here with this girl? I'm in no hurry to find a match in Cincinnati. I have two upcoming dates in Louisville, and I recently met one of my sister's East Coast college friends. But I keep thinking about Diya, although she's not even available, right? We've emailed each other a few times, and I don't know anything about her personal life.

If I think about Diya, does that mean I'm contemplating work or girls or how many toppings I can legitimately add to a single serving of chili?

"You need to do what you feel is right," the girl says, as I wonder if Taft played the piano much before being buried in a piano case.

"I just haven't been at this job long enough to know what 'right' is," I say.

"You will know," the girl says. Is she serious? Or is she trying to turn this into a *Casablanca*-esque ending? It is true that we are just a few miles from the airport. "With these types of things, you always know."

I know close to jack shit about what I will do. But whatever you want to call it — the job hunt, the moving game — it looks as if I'll be playing it again.

