

Higher than Usual

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Perkins came up to me and he was grinning from ear to ear, his eyes dancing with an unexpected madness that made me take a step back and look at him suspiciously.

"We've got one of them," he told me gleefully.

"One of what?" I asked, bewildered.

"One of *them*," he said, as if that explained it. "Cheeky sod from Accounts came upstairs and tried to get a coffee out of our vending machine. Can you believe it? Out of *our* vending machine."

He was holding a plastic coffee cup and I wanted to sniff it to make sure he wasn't having a caffeine overload.

"Are you feeling all right?" I asked.

He nodded, still grinning, and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "The lads have got him in the toilets. They're giving him a damned good thrashing. That'll teach him to come up onto our floor. Accounts will think twice before they mess with *us* again."

He turned and stalked away, leaving me confused and shaken. I'd have to have a word with someone about him. I didn't want to get him into trouble or anything, but there were limits. If he had a drink problem, the company would try to help him. There were groups he could join. . . .

As soon as I reached my desk, my phone started ringing and I forgot all about Perkins. It was a busy morning and I only managed to grab a coffee myself around eleven. I glanced at my newspaper while I sipped the foul stuff, wondering whether I'd be better off drinking paint solvent.

The rest of the day was fairly uneventful. I think I had fish for tea when I went home. Later on that evening, however, I remembered Perkins and what he'd said about the chap from Accounts, because I heard on the TV news that a body had been discovered near our office building. A *mutilated* body. The

on-the-scene reporter said graffiti had been painted, in blood, on the alley wall. That made me frown, but it was only one of several news items that caught my attention. Apparently there had been a rash of incidents across the city, serious assaults, acts of mindless violence, arson -- incidents that seemed nothing out of the ordinary when taken individually, but when viewed together spelled something else entirely.

But I was too tired and my head was too sore to guess what the something else might be. I switched the telly off and decided to turn in early.

As I lay in my bed drifting off to sleep, I heard the crash of breaking glass from somewhere down on the street below. People shouted and screamed. Police sirens yowled like cats in the distance. A car alarm blared for a very long time before someone finally did something about it.

I hadn't bothered to set my clock alarm, so I didn't open my eyes until well after eight. I'd slept badly, having had some pretty awful nightmares. I showered and dressed, and decided to skip breakfast. No appetite.

My phone rang and Jane gave me dog's abuse for standing her up the previous night. A dim memory surfaced. We were supposed to have met for dinner. Her shrill voice made the earpiece rattle. I hung up, paused for five seconds, then took the phone off the hook in case she called back.

It was a dull kind of morning, gray clouds, drizzling rain, the kind of weather that gives me a headache. The drive to work was anything but uneventful. I saw a couple of cars lying abandoned at the side of the road with their doors open, but didn't stop to take a closer look. Burglar alarms were ringing in every street but nobody seemed to be bothering. Some of the shops I passed had had their windows smashed during the night. I'd slept right through all the excitement.

I'd nearly reached my office building when some idiot ran out in front of me. I hit the brakes, missing the bloody fool by inches. He snarled wordlessly and shook his fist at me, then limped across the street and into a doorway. He'd been carrying something under his other arm. I wasn't sure what, exactly, but it looked as though it had blonde hair. He crouched down with his back to me, concealing whatever he had. Curiosity tugged at me, but common sense said I should stay in the car. Besides, it was none of my business really.

I drove into the office car park a couple of minutes later. The car park was half-empty, which was unusual so close to nine o'clock. I wandered inside, nodded good morning to Donna, our ever-happy receptionist, and received a very frosty look in return. Who'd kicked *her* out of bed?

When I stepped out of the lift, Perkins was standing there waiting for me. His

shirt was splattered with blood and there were deep scratches on his face. He looked awful. Worse than awful.

"Where have you been?" he snarled, and I backed away from him, along the corridor. This time he advanced, keeping pace with me and jabbing his finger against my chest.

"Wh-what are you talking about?" I asked, aware of heads popping up to watch us.

"Accounts ambushed us downstairs. We could have used your help. But you were nowhere to be found." He drew himself up and glared at me, his face twisted. His hands were balled into fists. "Aren't you one of us?" he demanded.

I did my best to smile, but failed. At that moment I knew Perkins didn't have a drink problem; he was barking bloody mad.

"Of course I am," I assured him. "I'm sorry I wasn't there. I slept in this morning, I must have just missed it. I'm sorry, Perkins. Really I am."

His eyes blazed for a moment, then he seemed to regain some measure of control.

"All right," he said, "it's not your fault. You didn't know what was going on. Those swine are going to pay. We're going to get them after work today. They outnumber us, but we're going to get them, you'll see."

He turned and marched off. He was joined by two blokes from the office across the way, who fell in on either side of him like a military escort. Queer wasn't the word for it, but as long as Perkins wasn't bothering me, I didn't care. I knew a chap in Personnel, or Human Resources as they called themselves now. I'd have a quiet word with him. . . .

I arrived at my desk just as Harris stood up and swore, turning the air blue. Apparently he'd experienced some sort of glitch with his terminal. Maybe the system had gone down again. "Bloody sysops!" he shouted. He snarled and threw his plastic coffee cup across the room. It struck the window and left a brown stain on the venetian blinds, but did no real damage.

You get days like that. I smiled and sat down at my desk and checked my terminal, expecting it to be hung up like his, but it was working okay. What was Harris's problem? Maybe he'd just made a mistake, hit the wrong key? But he'd blamed it on the sysops, the university graduates who worked on the top floor. They all wore wire-rimmed spectacles and pretentious pony tails, which was their

way of thumbing their noses at the old dodderers like us who had to use their crap bloody software and to hell with how we felt. Harris continued to curse them, not letting up for an instant. I wondered what it was all about. Harris was a steady man, not the type who was prone to cracking up. He snatched up his phone and punched a four-digit internal number. "You smug bastards! I'll get you for this," he shouted, and thumped down the receiver, shaking his entire desk. No prizes for guessing who he was calling. Some confused sysop upstairs must be rubbing his ear.

No one made any comments or jokes or told Harris to calm down. As I looked around the office I saw that our co-workers were wearing various expressions of anger and disgust. Directed, not at Harris, but at the sysops on the top floor.

For no particular reason I tidied up my desk and left work early that day. The wonderful thing about flexi-time is that if you build up enough hours you can have a short day whenever you want, and take time to unwind and enjoy life. When I reached the ground floor entrance I stopped for a moment to allow my eyes to adjust to the afternoon sunshine. The gray skies and rain had vanished; it was going to be a lovely day.

The sound of rapid footsteps made me turn around quickly. Two men slid to a stop and regarded me with baleful eyes. Their white shirts were torn and filthy. It looked as though they'd both had nosebleeds.

"Yes?" I said, looking from one man to the other. "Is there something I can do for you?"

It was as if they recognized that the lunacy that gripped them hadn't affected me. They retreated back into the building without saying a word. There was no sign of the usual security guard, and Donna wasn't at the front desk either. The door that led to the private bathroom Donna used when nature called lay ajar. Was that a naked leg I glimpsed on the tiled floor? I turned and left the building. It was no business of mine; I'd already signed out, and I was on my way home.

Traffic was surprisingly light, which pleased me, and there was hardly anyone on the streets. I began to wonder if it was a public holiday and no one had bothered to tell me about it. I stopped at the corner shop to pick up some milk and bread and a tin of cat food. I picked up a shopping basket and began filling it with groceries. When I finally had everything, I went to the counter and waited, but no one was serving. I couldn't see anyone in the back of the shop either, although there was an odd smell. I stood there for a full minute, but no one came out. So I put my foot through the glass panel below the cash register. That felt better. I pulled out my wallet, dropped two ten-pound notes onto the counter and stormed out. Let no one say I am not an honest man.

Reaching my apartment building near the river, I parked in the street and climbed

the four flights of stairs to my floor. I always use the stairs rather than the lift because some days it's the only exercise I get. I fumbled with my door key and was about to go inside when I noticed the unmoving shape at the end of the hallway. Curiosity got the better of me this time. The shape turned out to be a teenage boy, wearing an imitation leather jacket, dirty jeans, and Nike trainers.

The door behind me opened and Mrs. Rosebud, who had celebrated her 80th birthday the previous month, smiled at me. But it wasn't her usual friendly smile -- more of a feral grin. Her eyes blazed with the same kind of madness I'd glimpsed in Perkins, Harris, and the two blood-spattered men I'd met as I left the office.

"He tried to rob me," she cackled, and closed her door again, but not before I saw the cricket bat in her hand. She'd told me her late husband had played for Yorkshire. The bat was covered with blood. She'd used it to beat the teenager to death. Well, she could clean up the mess, too.

I didn't eat anything that night because I wasn't really hungry. I cleaned the cat's dish and put out fresh food, but the ungrateful beast never appeared. The phone emitted an irritating noise so I put the receiver back on the cradle. The winking red light told me I had messages. I wasn't really in the mood, but I played them anyway. Jane gave me more abuse for hanging up so rudely. Later, she apologized for shouting at me and said we'd sort it all out tonight. Her third and final message said she'd forgiven me. I threw the phone across the room and tore the wire out of the wall. She'd *forgiven* me. For what?

After it got dark, I turned on the TV. The news said there was rioting in the streets again, worse than it had been in the morning and afternoon, with rival gangs fighting it out, sometimes to the death. Only they weren't rival gangs, not really. They were just people from various buildings and streets, clashing with people from other buildings and streets, for no particular reason that anyone could think of.

I turned the TV off again and sat in the dark, seething.

Jane came to the door around nine. She banged and shouted through the letter box, but I didn't answer or get up. After a while she went away. Good. I had other things on my mind.

Police sirens filled the night and I tried my best to get some sleep, but I couldn't. I kept thinking about Harris, and those bloody sysops screwing up his terminal.

We won a decisive victory against Accounts and cheered as the broken, bleeding survivors scuttled back to their offices, leaving their dead behind.

Perkins had fallen in the final moments of the great battle, defending our vending machine with his life. We carried his body back to our office and laid it reverently across his desk. Perkins was a hero. We all wept hot, sad tears when I placed the broken chair leg he'd used to brain the Accounts manager across his chest, and folded his arms over it.

I was leader now. It was up to me.

Accounts had been dealt with, so we turned our attention to the sysops on the top floor. Our terminals had gone down for the last time. We climbed the stairs, knowing they would be alerted if we used the lifts. We silently spilled out into their territory and advanced toward the computer room.

A cry went up. We rushed forward and grabbed the sysop who'd seen us. He disappeared under a tidal wave of bodies, his screams becoming fainter and fainter as he was beaten to death. Other sysops tried to stop us, but we drove them back into the computer room, destroying their equipment as we advanced. Some sysops got out through a fire escape door and we chased them downstairs, but when they reached the car park they ran for it, like the cowards they were.

Just as we were about to go back inside our building, we were ambushed by a bunch of clerks from the insurance office across the street. It was a brutal fight, but we saw them off, inflicting heavy losses. I noticed afterwards that some of the survivors from Accounts and a couple of sysops had joined us to fight against the insurance clerks, but we didn't attack them this time. Instead we accepted them -- after all, we were all from the same office building.

We'd hardly had time to enjoy our victory when residents of the old folks' home on the corner hobbled toward us on their walking-sticks and frames, their toothless mouths twisted with frenzied hatred. One of them nearly took my head off with her frame. I wrestled her to the ground while she tried to claw my eyes out. Youth won over experience, but only just.

Then we were attacked by a mob from the next street, and the funny thing was that people from other buildings in our street, whom we would have fought and killed if not for the arrival of the mob, joined with us against the common enemy. The battle spilled into another street, but then we all stopped fighting each other and rallied together against a screaming horde that came south across the river bridge, looking for blood.

But that was all right, too.

In fact, it was exactly as it should be.

The city is burning now and the fighting is still going on.

I just heard on the news that the same thing is happening all over, spreading across the country like wildfire. A group of scientists suggested it was an engineered virus that affected the brain's behavioral center, and I listened because I wanted to hear more, but the newsreader was stabbed by a weather girl from the studio next door. The studio floor manager and the news director carried her away, kicking and screaming. I don't know what they did with her.

I switched to another channel, where another expert was talking about the higher than usual number of UFO sightings reported worldwide. He was interrupted by someone else who tried to equate the increasing violence and mass suicides to solar eclipses of unprecedented intensity. They rolled around on the floor trying to strangle each other, while a third expert blamed it all on fluoride in the water supply.

Blah, blah, blah. Theory after absurd theory, delivered by idiots who know nothing.

Can't anyone see what's important? Those slugs from the north side are massing to attack us again, but we're going to kill them all this time, no one is going to escape. The river will run with blood, will become choked with their corpses.

The bleeding has stopped and I can see out of my left eye again. I'm going back out there to rejoin my troops. Bless Mrs. Rosebud for taking care of Jane while I tend to my wounds. I really couldn't have faced speaking with her again.