

J. WEINTRAUB

Mr. Vesey Comes to Work

ALTHOUGH HE HAD DIED the previous morning, Mr. Vesey decided to go to work anyway. His wife, of course, tried to stop him. His company had been informed, she told him, friends and relatives had been advised, arrangements had already been made with the funeral home, and she offered all sorts of other plausible reasons as he was buttoning his shirt and knotting his tie. But it was Monday, and he was, after all, the Budget Officer for the Planning and Budget department. Not only were they in the middle of their three-year planning cycle, but his fourth-quarter budget review was due that very same week. He might be late, but considering the circumstances, how could he possibly not go to work, he asked, as he grabbed his briefcase and hurried out the door to catch the 11:40 downtown.

It was a dank, overcast day, and the gray pallor of his skin and the shadows around his eyes drew little attention from the other passengers or from the pedestrians on the street as he left the station to walk the few remaining blocks to his office. Once he arrived, none of his coworkers on the ground floor took particular notice, since news of his death had not yet spread much beyond the Planning and Budget or Human Resources departments. But when he reached the eighth floor, many of his colleagues — as if drawn there by some magnetic premonition — stared at him from the thresholds of their cubicles as he passed. Vesey, of course, attributed the shock and surprise he saw on their faces to the lateness of his arrival. He prided himself on his punctuality, and if he were to be absent for even an hour, he always gave sufficient notice to his supervisor, Mr. Wilson. Understandably, then, he stopped on the way to his office to inform Wilson that he had finally arrived.

“Sorry to be so late, boss,” he said after first tapping on the open door and leaning forward into the room. “Something came up. But I’ll have that quarterly review on your desk before the end of the day,” and he paused there for a moment, holding on to the doorknob for support, awaiting Wilson’s reply.

Wilson, his eyes widening, was unable to respond other than with a brief nod and a weak smile. Vesey would have returned the smile, but since facial expressions had become difficult for him, he settled for a short, stiff bow.

Continuing down the corridor, he encountered Mrs. Richmond, the Office Manager, and after informing her that he was not to be disturbed, he unlocked the door to his office and closed it behind him. Mrs. Richmond

watched him disappear into his office, and then, after staggering a few steps forward, she grabbed the top of a partition to regain her balance. Following several deep breaths, she continued onward, striding slowly and carefully into the restroom, where she promptly fainted, suffering a nasty bruise on her forehead when she collided with a sink on her way down to the floor.

Wilson, after studying the shaft of light slanting in from the corridor for several moments, rose from his desk, shut the door, and dialed Vesey's home number. Mrs. Vesey had called him personally late Sunday afternoon to inform him of her husband's sudden death, and now, before reporting this new development to upper management, he wanted to be absolutely certain he had all of his facts in order.

"I know! I know!" replied Mrs. Vesey, a nervous tremor beneath her voice. "I did my best to stop him, but he just wouldn't take no for an answer. Something about the fourth-quarter review."

"But he's dead, isn't he? Or has there been some sort of mistake or something?"

"There's been no mistake."

"But how can I . . . what can I tell my staff? I've already announced it to them, and I'm sure it's gone well beyond the eighth floor by now. In fact, I sent the bereavement notice down to the Print Shop first thing this morning. People need to know about the funeral. They'll want to pay their respects."

"Well, they'll simply have to make adjustments. God knows, I've had to. I've been calling everyone, telling them the funeral's been temporarily postponed, and I've tried to explain why. But how can I? I can't explain a thing! Fortunately, Simon Brothers has been very professional, very understanding. They seem to know about these things. God knows, I don't!"

The nervous tremor had turned into hiccups, and realizing that there was no point in badgering the widow any further, Wilson again offered his condolences and hung up. But his hand remained on the receiver, and after raising it again to his ear, he dialed the Director of Human Resources.

Mrs. Abercrombie, in fact, was just then about to call him. Through some sort of corporate telepathy, Human Resources was usually instantly aware of any disturbances or unusual circumstances affecting the staff, and the department already had the incident under discussion. Given such short notice, however, they had not yet reached agreement on how to resolve or even to deal with the problem, and Abercrombie could provide little direction to Wilson, who was concerned about the impact of Vesey's appearance on his staff's morale. "Treat him normally," she advised after confirming what she already knew about the situation, "as if nothing unusual has happened. We'll get back to you as soon as possible."

“Sure you will,” Wilson muttered into the dead receiver, and after locking his door, he spent the remainder of the afternoon sulking behind his desk, having no idea of what to do or even what his options might be.

Abercrombie, on the other hand, immediately called the Chief Operating Officer, Mr. Hildebrandt, who reported directly to the Chief Executive. After she briefed him about “the matter of Mr. Vesey,” Hildebrandt informed her that the Chief Executive had just returned from lunch and would be available to discuss the alternatives. “But as you know,” he said, “he likes things boiled down to their essentials and then acted upon at once. I’m reluctant to bring anything requiring a decision to his attention without a recommended course of action. Particularly today, just before his meeting with the Board. Exactly what, if anything, needs to be decided right now?”

Abercrombie reflected for a moment and then replied, “Well, over half the day’s already gone, and there’s a good chance there’ll be no recurrence tomorrow. The Chief should be informed, of course, but I suppose the only decision we need to worry about today is whether or not to move forward with the bereavement notice, which is now ready for distribution.”

“Fair enough,” said Hildebrandt, and a few minutes later he had described the situation to the Chief Executive who, preoccupied with the spreadsheets his secretary had just laid in front of him, did not seem to share Hildebrandt’s concern.

“Where is it now?” he asked. “This bereavement notice.”

“In the Print Shop. Printed and ready to go. We’ve signed off on it for you, but, in view of the situation, you might want to take a look at it.”

“Take a look at it? I never take a look at those things, do I?”

“Well, no, but considering the circumstances. . .”

“Circumstances?”

Hildebrandt was no longer certain that he was being followed closely, but he nevertheless continued down the same path. “Well, as I mentioned before, Vesey apparently was so concerned about submitting the fourth-quarter budget review under deadline, that, despite his condition, he came to work anyway.”

“I would say that was very commendable of him, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, of course, but there are complications.”

“Complications?” asked the Chief Executive, raising his eyebrows and looking at Hildebrandt directly for the first time.

Hildebrandt regretted having used a word that he knew his boss detested, but he persisted nevertheless. “The date of the funeral, for instance, given on the memo is Thursday, but that seems now to be unlikely. Moreover, his colleagues need to be informed of his demise, but if he continues to show up for work, that could cause considerable confusion. And beyond that

there are the financial issues—the disposition of his life insurance, for instance, his pension payments, and the other benefits. . . .”

“Isn’t that why we have a Human Resources department? To deal with such things?”

“Well, yes, but of course in his case standard procedures don’t seem to apply, and. . . .”

“Are you aware that I have to make a presentation before the Board in San Francisco tomorrow?”

“Certainly, I. . . .”

“Do I have to do everything around here myself?”

“Absolutely not!” declared Hildebrandt, seeing that he had reached the limits of his boss’s tolerance. “Just trying to keep you informed, sir,” and he retreated toward the door, his eyes still on the Chief Executive, who had turned away to consult his day-planner. “We’ll take care of everything without further delay,” he added as he exited, even though he could think of nothing better to do than to refer the matter back to Human Resources, which he promptly did.

Abercrombie, who had anticipated this outcome, had alerted her directors, and as soon as the problem was back in her hands, she assembled them in her office. Following the example of upper management, she focused their attention on a clearly defined, obtainable objective, deferring action on more complex issues only if the need should arise.

“Since the working day is almost complete,” she began, “and we’re not sure what tomorrow will bring, let’s take this one step at a time. The Print Shop has been pressing us on the disposition of the bereavement notification. It’s ready for distribution and they need to know what to do with it.”

“Perhaps first we need to define the purpose of such a document,” offered the Director of Development and Training, who also was experienced in long-range planning, “and see how it conforms to the present circumstances. What is it supposed to do and does it meet the current requirements?”

“Good,” said Abercrombie.

“I’ll take a stab at that,” said the Director of Staff Benefits. “I would say that it’s intended to inform the staff of the death of an employee or an employee’s close relative.”

“. . . which, as far as we can tell,” said Abercrombie, “has occurred.”

“. . . and,” added the Recruitment Director, “to inform fellow employees of the date and location of the funeral in case they want to attend or send flowers.”

“But that information,” said Abercrombie, “although available is probably invalid since the funeral is likely to be postponed to a time as yet undetermined.”

“And therefore,” concluded Development and Training, “it would be inappropriate to distribute the memo in its current state, since it is inaccurate and incomplete, and thus incapable of fulfilling all of its intended functions.”

All of the directors concurred, agreeing that the Print Shop should destroy the current memo and that a new one should be prepared as soon as accurate information could be obtained. Abercrombie then adjourned the meeting and her directors filed out of her office, pleased that a consensus had been reached and action was being taken.

But beneath their sense of accomplishment, each of them also felt a lingering uneasiness. Their satisfaction, they all knew, was based on the expectation that Vesey would not reappear, that his presence there was some sort of natural aberration, like a snowstorm in May, unanticipated and disconcerting, but usually gone with the morning sunrise. They were all counting on a return to normalcy the next day, expecting that the incident would eventually be reduced to the stuff of corporate legend—like the job candidate who brought his mother to the interview or the box of hand grenades discovered in the mail clerk’s locker—soon to become apocryphal or, with the passing of time, completely forgotten.

But Vesey did return on Tuesday, shortly after one, wearing the same suit and tie from the previous day. Although he had worked late into Monday evening, he had neither the strength nor the energy then to complete the budget review to his satisfaction. Yet since with only a few more hours of effort, he could bring it up to his usual precise standards, he decided to postpone its delivery to Wilson—who had long since gone home, anyway. (In fact, several staff members were momentarily relieved by Vesey’s arrival. Since no one had seen him leave the night before, there was some concern about what might be found in his office once the door was opened. Wilson waited until his lunch break before asking the Administrative Assistant, Ms. Bronsky—acting in place of Mrs. Richmond, who had taken a day of administrative leave—to call the custodian. But just as he was unlocking the door, Ms. Bronsky fortunately looked up to see Vesey rounding the corner, and she quickly grabbed the custodian by the arm, pulling him safely into an empty cubicle.)

It took Vesey most of Tuesday afternoon to finish his review, and after checking the figures twice, he finally emerged to present the report to his boss. Wilson had, however, again locked himself in his office, and Vesey had to wait outside while he fumbled with the bolt. As soon as the door closed on both of them, the hallway filled with their fellow employees rushing towards the elevators. Although it was still a few minutes before five, they had all been waiting for just such an opportunity to escape the risk of a

chance encounter with Vesey on their way out.

Also monitoring the corridor was Abercrombie, who, upon her arrival on the eighth floor to confer with Wilson, suddenly detoured into the coffee lounge when she saw Vesey waiting outside his boss's office. From there, she could watch the entrance to the elevator banks, and some minutes later, Vesey approached, walking very much like, thought Abercrombie as he came towards her, an arthritic flamingo. When he pivoted towards the elevators, Abercrombie feared that he might fall forward on his face. But using his briefcase as a counterweight, he tottered back and forth and back again, and finally stabilized himself enough to press one of the buttons.

As soon as he was gone, Abercrombie hurried into Wilson's office, where she found him sprawled across his chair, a dazed look on his face as if he were awakening from a coma.

The pages of Vesey's budget report were spread out on his otherwise empty desk. Abercrombie sat down across from him.

"It seems to be very thorough," said Wilson, regaining his composure sufficiently to collect the pages and staple them together. "He always enjoyed doing these things."

"But he's finished with it, right?"

"Oh yes. Checked and rechecked, he said. I'll go through it tomorrow, but I'm sure everything's in place."

"And there's no more reason for him to return to work, right? You've told him that, of course, haven't you?"

"Well . . . not quite . . ."

"Not quite?" She paused, and then raising herself up, she leaned over the desk towards him. "What do you mean, 'not quite'?"

Wilson hesitated, finally admitting with some difficulty, "There's still the three-year plan."

"The three-year plan!" Abercrombie realized that the door was open, and she swung around to close it. Then, turning back to face him, trying to control her voice, she said, "You didn't say anything about that to him, did you? You couldn't have!"

"I didn't bring it up, he did. I couldn't very well lie to him. He knows as well as anyone that it's due in two weeks. It's always due right after the fourth-quarter budget review."

"But suppose he wants to do it?"

"Well, why shouldn't he? He knows the process backwards and forwards, and he's always done such a fine job on it, too. Don't you remember, the Chief Executive himself commented particularly on his work just last year?"

"What are you trying to say?" asked Abercrombie, horrified.

"Well, you don't expect me to do the three-year plan, do you?"

“I expect you to act in a reasonably intelligent manner. I don’t expect you to encourage him to come back to work day after day!”

“I didn’t encourage him to do anything. He volunteered!”

“You could have said no!”

“What was I supposed to tell him? ‘Why don’t you go home and drop dead and get yourself buried like a proper cadaver?’ Does he even know he’s dead? Am I supposed to remind him of that? In fact, I haven’t the slightest idea of what I’m supposed to say to him. I haven’t the slightest idea what my legal obligations are or even what the potential liabilities might be! Certainly, Human Resources hasn’t been of much help!”

“Whatever your legal obligations are or our potential liabilities might be,” said Abercrombie, standing up and opening the door, “I know who will be responsible to senior management if he shows up again tomorrow to work on his three-year plan,” and she left the office without giving Wilson the chance to reply and without, of course, any better idea than he had of what their legal obligations might be.

Vesey did come to work the following day—mid-morning, in fact, shortly after the rest of the staff had arrived. From his stride, he appeared to have lost much of the stiffness in his joints. His knees seemed loose, almost unhinged, and his body sagged forward with every step, as if the shifting of his weight alone were propelling him down the hall. Wilson, on his way to the coffee lounge, met him head-on, and although Vesey’s greeting was pleasant enough, the expression on his face continued to be blank. The night before, Wilson had noticed a dark bluish redness around Vesey’s fingernails as he pointed out certain expense overages and revenue shortfalls on the budget review. Now he saw the same purplish tinge at the tip of his nose and towards the lobes of his ears, and the faint marbling beneath his cheekbones would have convinced Wilson that Vesey had a drinking problem had he not known for sure that he was a teetotaler. A soft puffiness rounded the contours of his face, and his eyes bulged slightly outward, and although the whites were discolored with brown, as if spotted with maple syrup, there was a lively glint deep inside the pupils that Wilson could only interpret as an eagerness to begin his work on the three-year plan.

When he returned to his office, Wilson left the door conspicuously open. He would have preferred keeping it shut, but after having locked himself inside for two days, he realized that he would have to allow his staff some opportunity to express their concerns, even if he could provide neither explanations nor solutions.

As Wilson expected, Jacobson—who, despite his skill as a planning facilitator, often revealed a remarkable insensitivity to the feelings of others—was the first to storm into his office, slamming the door behind him.

“Get rid of him!” he declared. “Get rid of that stiff right now, or there’ll be hell to pay!”

“Now, listen, Harry,” said Wilson calmly, accustomed to dealing with Jacobson’s peremptory outbursts. “How about showing some consideration for the misfortunes of your colleague?”

“Colleague? Who? That!”

“Harry! How can you be so insensitive? Charlie Vesey was your friend, wasn’t he?”

“Him? Friend? No. Never!”

“Sure he was. A month ago you were playing racquetball with him twice a week.”

“Is that it? You want me to challenge him to a game of racquetball? I don’t think it would be much of a contest.”

“No, that’s not what I want. What I want is . . . is . . .” But Wilson didn’t know what he wanted, and he never finished his sentence, listening silently for the most part as Jacobson continued to complain for another hour or so, wandering from Vesey to working conditions to the size of his salary to the lack of nearby parking.

Mrs. DeMarco, however, kept to the point. Her job as a Financial Systems Analyst required her to be exacting and punctilious, qualities which, at least in her case, translated into a certain squeamishness and an excessive concern for personal hygiene.

“I can smell him,” she insisted, “and it’s getting worse.”

“That’s nonsense,” said Wilson. “I’m closer to him than you are, and there’s nothing there.”

“It’s like a dark, sickly sweet aroma,” she said. “The sweet smell of rot.”

“Rather the sweet smell of aftershave lotion,” said Wilson. “That’s all that I’ve noticed,” although he suspected that Vesey was applying heavier and heavier doses of it each day, and whenever Wilson approached the northern end of the corridor, he detected—beneath the thickening perfumed aroma—a stale, dusky odor, like that from a mildewed sock buried in a drawer of freshly laundered linen. Of course, he said nothing about this to DeMarco.

Ms. Riley had similar concerns, these resulting from Vesey’s changing appearance. But Wilson knew that her father, to whom she had been very close, had died the previous month, and there was little he could say to alleviate her distress. “I’m afraid to get up to get a cup of coffee or a drink of water,” she said. “I might run into him, you know, which I’ve done twice, and when I look up into that face with all the swelling and the bruises and the eyes, I can’t help but think of Dad and what’s happening . . . Oh, God!” and she began to whimper quietly into her handkerchief.

Mrs. Richmond, his Office Manager, also broke down into tears, but rather than an expression of sadness, her behavior approached hysteria, deriving not so much from any personal loss but from the profound belief that she was glimpsing the beginning of the end of all things. Earlier that year, Wilson had reprimanded her for distributing religious pamphlets on company property and he wasn't surprised to hear her interpret Vesey's appearance there as a sign of the coming Apocalypse. "The dead rising from the grave," she said over and over again, "the dead rising . . ." and although Wilson pointed out that Vesey had never literally risen since he had not yet been buried, she continued to stammer on about locusts and scorpions and horned beasts and jasper thrones and fiery horsemen and the great day of the wrath of God. Finally, when she collapsed into what Wilson interpreted to be total incoherence, he sent her home.

Yet beyond these visceral reactions, none of Wilson's employees could articulate any valid reasons for Vesey's dismissal. He was guilty of neither theft nor violence nor insubordination nor any of a variety of other infractions that could have resulted in his immediate termination, and since Vesey spent most of his time processing numbers and data and had, in general, limited personal contact with others in the office, no one could claim that his behavior was any different from what it had always been. In fact, Vesey communicated primarily through internal e-mail, and without his messages popping up regularly on their screens, most of his coworkers would never even have known of his existence (although those very same messages—no more sinister than a request for an invoice number or a cost estimate—had now become, at least according to DeMarco, as terrifying as a late-night knock on the door from the Gestapo).

Still, the tension, discomfort, and anxiety provoked by Vesey's presence was clearly detrimental to the conduct of business. But, since Human Resources continued to be of no help whatsoever and Abercrombie was now refusing to return his calls—apparently punishing him for failing to discourage Vesey from coming to work to complete the three-year plan—there was little Wilson could do to reassure his staff other than to say that once the plan was finished, Vesey would probably feel no further obligation to return to work. But the three-year plan was not due for another two weeks.

Unless he delivers it to me early, thought Wilson. *Now that's not such a bad idea,* and after most of the department had left for the day, he walked over to Vesey's office and knocked on the door.

"Yes?" answered a voice, low and hollow as if were coming from inside a cavern.

"Can you stop by before you go?" asked Wilson, leaving the door closed.

“Certainly,” echoed the voice, and a few minutes later Vesey appeared at the threshold of Wilson’s office. Grasping the frame tightly, he leaned forward, seemingly reluctant to enter.

“Come in and have a seat,” offered Wilson.

“I prefer not to,” said Vesey, his voice still a deep rumble, his lips hardly moving as he spoke. “My knees lock and stiffen when I sit.”

“OK,” replied Wilson. “Well, then . . . it’s about the three-year plan. I’ve had to expedite the schedule. A new directive, direct from senior management. I’ll need it by Friday.”

Vesey tried to straighten up, but in doing so he began to sway backward and almost lost his balance before he grabbed the other side of the door-frame and steadied himself.

“Friday afternoon, that is,” said Wilson. “Late Friday afternoon. By the end of the working day.”

“I guess if I work on it through the night . . . and tomorrow night, too.”

“If it wouldn’t be too much of an imposition . . .”

“I don’t think my wife will mind. She’s moved out of the house, you know.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s understandable. But I don’t require much nowadays, and I can always send my laundry out.”

“Of course, since you’ll be working around the clock, Charlie, you can take off on Friday just as soon as you’ve finished, and then you’ll have the weekend, and, yes, you should take the following week, too. You’ll have deserved it.”

“Hmmm,” said Vesey, his murmur like the soft grating of tectonic plates moving somewhere inside him, and then, as he shoved away from the door-frame, he said, “I’d better get back to work then, if I’m to finish under the new deadline,” and he lumbered back toward his office.

“The sooner you finish, the sooner you can take off,” Wilson called down after him, and after slipping on his overcoat and grabbing his briefcase, he quickly left the building, the dark cloud that had shadowed his existence having lightened considerably for the first time in several days.

As soon as he arrived on Thursday morning, Wilson e-mailed his staff and the Financial Services department, informing them that Vesey would be working day and night to complete the three-year plan, and the quicker they supplied him with the information he requested, the sooner he would be finished with his final tasks. He also assured Abercrombie by voice mail that their problem would be solved by Friday afternoon. “He seemed intent on finishing the plan as quickly as possible,” he reported. “But he was so tired,

too, he could barely stand up straight, and I'm convinced that once he's done, he'll finally want to call it quits, to rest in peace."

But despite the immediate response he received from both departments to his fact-gathering, Vesey did not finish by Friday afternoon, and Wilson waited anxiously, less and less capable of doing his own work as the hours passed. It wasn't until early evening that Vesey finally emerged and presented the completed plan to his boss.

It was bound in a polyethylene binder, and Wilson was pleased to see that Vesey had added, for the first time, an executive summary and an index. But at the same time, he was startled by Vesey's appearance. His face seemed to have become even more swollen, and although the purplish tinge at its extremities had largely disappeared, his entire complexion was now darkened by a greenish-yellowish pallor. The stale, penetrating odor that Wilson had sensed beneath the surface of Vesey's aftershave lotion was now filling his office with its stench, and when Vesey handed him the plan, Wilson noticed that two of his fingernails were missing.

"Looks great," said Wilson. "I really appreciate the extra time and effort you've put into this."

"I could go through it line-by-line if you'd like," he said, his voice now sounding as if it were coming from the bottom of a reservoir.

"I'm sure you've done your usual splendid job, Charlie. What's important now is that you get some rest. You've earned it, gone way beyond the call of duty. I was very serious when I recommended that you take off, and I won't be expecting to see you here next week."

"Oh, that would be impossible," said Vesey. "I have no time for that, no time at all."

"What do you mean?" asked Wilson, panic, like a sudden attack of nausea, surging into his throat. "You have to take some time off. Why, just look at yourself! You need a rest. A long one!"

"I'm sorry, but there's still far too much to do. Far too much. Just thinking about it almost suffocates me. It's piling up in there, you see, almost over my head, there in my office," and when he stretched his arm outward, pointing down the corridor, Wilson saw how loosely his jacket and shirt hung from him and how ill-fitting seemed the rest of his suit, bulging out in folds in some places, sagging limply elsewhere, as if the contours of his body had shifted beneath the fabric. "Piling up in there almost over my head."

"We'll bring someone in," said Wilson. "A temp. A consultant. But you just have to take some time off."

"No, no. Simply out of the question," said Vesey. "With all that work piling up in there? How could I ever rest knowing that there's so much to be

done? No, impossible,” and he turned to leave, his labors complete for at least that week.

“Don’t go! Not yet!” cried Wilson, stepping out from behind his desk, reaching out to detain him. But at the last moment, his hand hovering over Vesey’s shoulder, he halted and pulled it back.

“Simply impossible,” said Vesey, continuing down the hall. “But I’ll catch up. Eventually. Don’t worry. Monday’s a new day. See you then. Bright and early.”

Wilson retreated backwards, collapsing heavily into his chair as if flung there by a violent wind. After a few moments of dazed reflection, he dialed Abercrombie’s number, fully expecting to hear again only a recorded message. But she was just preparing to leave when the phone rang, and as soon as she heard the despair in Wilson’s voice, she regretted having picked it up.

“Maybe he’ll just lie down in his bed and stay there,” she said, trying to reassure him after hearing about his latest encounter with Vesey. “Maybe he just won’t get up at all on Monday morning.”

“And maybe the sun won’t come up either! Bright and early. That’s what he said, and he meant it.”

“Calm down. We can discuss all of this on Monday. But in the meantime, maybe we should shut him off, disconnect him. If he doesn’t have access to the network, he won’t be able to get any work done, and that might frustrate him enough to leave.”

“He still has his typewriter and calculator, and he’s very resourceful, you know. Besides, the last thing I want is to have him roaming around the halls, gathering information personally from the staff. You have no idea what kind of condition he’s already in, and after two more days, who knows?”

“Look, it’s too late to discuss this anymore tonight. Stick a note on his desk in case he comes in Monday morning, informing him that senior management is in strong agreement with you and that he needs to take the entire week off, if not more. Moreover, tell him that his three-year plan was just wonderful, the best ever. Maybe he’s just looking for a little appreciation.”

“It won’t work.”

“Whether it works or not, whether he comes in or not, the Chief will be returning from San Francisco Monday morning, and he’ll be expecting a plan of action from us. I’ve already scheduled a meeting with my staff and the General Counsel for ten o’clock in my office. Join us there,” and she hung up the phone.

Wilson followed her suggestion, and when he entered Vesey’s office, he found it to be as uncluttered as ever. The tape dispenser was aligned neatly against the stapler, but at the center of the otherwise empty blotter was an open notebook with a to-do list that seemed to extend for pages. Wilson

taped his memo to the desk, and then he hurried from the office as quickly as he had once retreated from the orchid house at the Botanical Gardens, desperate to escape the lingering heat, the steaming foliage, and the dense, fragrant air.

On Monday morning, Abercrombie had only to see the distracted look on Wilson's face to know that Vesey had again come to work.

"Bright and early," said Wilson. "Just like he promised."

"Have you seen him?"

"No. He arrived shortly after dawn. The security guard let him in."

"How did he look?"

"I don't know, but the security guard's taken the rest of the day off, and now Vesey's locked himself inside his office."

"You're sure he's still there?"

"He just sent me an e-mail. He's working on a new spreadsheet for projecting overhead costs and he needed some numbers from me. Apparently, it's a project he's been considering for quite a while, and now that he's submitted the three-year plan so early, he'll have plenty of time to develop it."

"I'll get my staff together," said Abercrombie, and as Wilson followed her from the reception area into her office, she motioned him to sit on the thickly upholstered leather chair near the door. As her department directors arrived, each of them drew a chair towards Wilson until they were all sitting around him in a semicircle. At first, he didn't mind being so obviously the center of attention, but when they began directing questions at him, one right after the other as if he were a hostile witness in a criminal trial, Wilson objected. "Now just a minute," he said, his voice rising toward an edge. "I don't think I'm the problem here, am I?"

"No, no, of course not," said Abercrombie. "We just want to make sure we've got all of our facts together," and by the time the General Counsel arrived, they had begun to explore possible solutions.

"How about getting him on short-term disability? Just send him home?"

"But that would have to come from him or a physician, wouldn't it? It usually originates from the employee, right?"

"And we'd certainly need medical confirmation."

"We've got the death certificate, don't we? Isn't that enough?"

"He'd never agree," said Wilson. "As far as he's concerned, there's nothing wrong."

"But if the doctor insisted, for medical reasons . . ."

"I fail to see how coming to work could exacerbate his condition."

"Why not just fire him and be done with it!" said the Director of Development and Training.

“Fire him?” asked Wilson. “On what grounds? I wish all of my staff worked as hard and with such dedication.”

“How about his teamwork? That’s part of his performance review, isn’t it? From what you’ve been saying, your staff can hardly look at him, let alone work with him.”

“Even if we wanted to terminate him, we couldn’t just do it. We’d have to put him on a performance track, and that could take at least a month.”

“He’d be a health hazard by then.”

“That’s grounds, isn’t it?”

“We can’t wait that long,” said Abercrombie.

“How about for cause?”

“Like what?” asked Wilson. “Should I plant a controlled substance on him? Maybe a .38 in his desk.”

“Perhaps he can be provoked . . .”

“Now, just slow down,” said the General Counsel, speaking for the first time. “Let’s be careful where we’re heading. I don’t like what I’m hearing right now. In fact, we seem to be coming perilously close to a violation of Title 1 of the ADA.”

“The Americans with Disabilities Act? What, are the dead a protected class?”

“I’ll have to do some research, but the ADA does define the disabled person as anyone with an impairment that limits one or more major life activities.”

“That would seem to cover Vesey.”

“Moreover,” continued the General Counsel, “I find this loose talk about firing him on the spot or provoking him into a terminable incident simply because his appearance is displeasing to some of Wilson’s staff to be personally offensive.”

“Displeasing!” exclaimed Wilson. “He’s decomposing before our very eyes!”

“That sounds like a management problem to me,” the General Counsel replied, “like your staff could use additional coaching or some sensitivity training.”

“Fine,” said Wilson. “Why don’t you arrange the appropriate lunch-and-learn program, and I’ll see that they all attend.”

“Look, this is a serious situation,” Abercrombie reminded them, “and we’re getting absolutely nowhere. We’ve got to come up with something before . . .”

The telephone rang. “Excuse me,” said Abercrombie, and after walking over to her desk and examining the display panel on the phone, she said, “And, speaking of the devil.”

“Don’t answer it!” exclaimed Staff Benefits, one of the younger members in the department.

Her fearful outburst caused Abercrombie to pause for a moment, but then, shrugging her shoulders as if she had no choice, she lifted the receiver. They all watched in silence as she listened without comment, occasionally nodding and growing paler by the moment.

After hanging up the phone, she crossed slowly back toward the group and, stopping behind her chair, she said to Wilson, “I need to advise you that your friend, Mrs. Richmond, has been discussing the matter with our Chief Executive. Apparently she was waiting for him in his office when he returned from San Francisco this morning.”

“Who’s Mrs. Richmond?” asked Staff Benefits.

“She’s not my friend,” said Wilson, his complexion now as pale as Abercrombie’s. “She’s my Office Manager. She’s been very troubled by this whole affair, and there are, as you know, some religious issues with her. I’ve been trying to reason with her but . . .” and now he appealed to the entire group, “Well, you can see what I’ve been dealing with.”

“Weren’t there some rumors about her some years back?” asked the General Counsel. “If I recall correctly, it was with Vesey, wasn’t it?”

“Those were only rumors,” said Wilson. “Nothing to them, I’m sure.”

“In any case,” said Abercrombie, “I’m wanted upstairs. This meeting’s adjourned. I’ll keep you all informed,” and as she headed towards the door, she nodded to the General Counsel, who accompanied her up to the Executive Suite.

Nobody knew how she could have slipped past the receptionist or his secretary unseen, but when the Chief Executive arrived—direct from his redeye flight out of San Francisco, suitcase still in hand—she was there waiting for him, almost lost in the far corner of the massive couch by his desk.

In fact, he didn’t even see her until she rose and was rushing towards him. “Excuse me, excuse me,” she was saying, but the Chief Executive hardly heard her as he retreated in surprise toward the door. Sensing his alarm, she stopped, and after excusing herself once more, she returned to the couch and dropped her head into her hands. The Chief Executive halted, too, and rather than alerting security, he dropped his valise by the door, walked over to Mrs. Richmond, offered her his handkerchief, and sat down beside her.

“You probably don’t know me,” she said, raising her head, her face filled with tears.

“Of course I do. You’re Ms. . . . Ms. . . .”

“Mrs. Richmond,” and as she wiped her eyes and cheeks, she identified herself further as the Office Manager for Planning and Budget.

“Oh?” replied the Chief Executive, now curious, although equally suspicious that he was not going to be pleased by what he was about to hear. “And tell me, Mrs. Richmond, why are you here in my office without an appointment? I’m sure you have a very good explanation.”

“Yes, I do,” she said. “It’s Charlie . . . I mean, Mr. Vesey.”

“Vesey? . . . Vesey? There was something about a bereavement notice, wasn’t there?”

“I don’t know. He’s passed, though, that’s for sure.”

The Chief Executive’s eyes widened, as if he’d suddenly noticed in plain sight an important document that had been missing for some time.

“Then it’s true. He’s dead, yet he’s still . . . still . . .”

“Oh, yes, he’s still here,” and after returning the handkerchief to him, she explained that just as she was settling into her cubicle early that morning, placing her handbag safely behind the electrical outlet beneath the desk, she looked over her shoulder to find Vesey staring down at her. “Those eyes. I swear to you they were black, like an animal’s, and on fire, like carbuncles. And that voice, like from deep inside the pit of hell! . . . He wanted some paper clips. I couldn’t say a thing. I was so afraid he might touch me with those cold fingers of his. I could barely point to the right drawer, my hand was shaking so. He looked like he wanted to smile at me, but I don’t think he could, and then when he bent over the cabinet, I thought I could hear his whole body creaking, or maybe it was just the sound of the drawer opening. But he moved so slowly and when he was walking away, I thought he must be in such pain. . . .” She dropped her head back into her hands again as if to shield her sight from the memory.

“Well, yes,” said the Chief Executive, “we’re doing our very best to resolve the situation. I expect a solution to be in place within the next few hours. In fact. . .”

Mrs. Richmond again raised her head, now staring at him in disbelief. “My goodness,” she said, “there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Certainly, I don’t suppose there’s much we can do for Mr. Vesey personally,” said the Chief Executive, somewhat surprised by the conviction of Mrs. Richmond’s reply, “but there are steps that can be taken to improve the general ambience of the workplace. We have a very capable Human Resources department, and I’m sure that they’re on top of. . .”

“But you can warn them. That’s what you can do, and that’s what I’m here to tell you.”

“Warn them? Who? About what?”

“‘And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them.’”

“Now, just one minute there, Mrs. Richmond. You’re speaking of things

that neither I nor the company . . .”

“‘. . . and they were judged every man according to their works.’ Every man! They’ll listen to you. You’re an important person. A captain of industry! You can warn them so they’ll know what’s coming!”

“Really, Mrs. Richmond, there’s simply nothing that I can do in that respect. We’re simply a commercial enterprise, and it’s not in my power. . . .”

She stood up suddenly. “I should have known,” she said, looking fiercely down at him. “‘And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains!’”

“Now, really, Mrs. Richmond, I don’t think it’s up to us to judge . . .”

“‘Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth!’” and then, as if suddenly realizing that she, too, was an inhabitant of the earth, she fell back into the corner of the couch, her general accusation now a personal lament, and just before her sobbing became uncontrollable, the Chief Executive heard her say, “‘For her sins had reached unto heaven and God had remembered her iniquities, and she shall be utterly burned with fire, for strong is the Lord God who judgeth her.’” Before long her crying had degenerated into a low moan, and she was swaying back and forth on the couch, her arms wrapped around her knees.

“It sounds like she’s come totally unhinged,” said Abercrombie after the Chief Executive had finished describing his experience. “I remember Wilson telling me how troubled his staff had been about her ‘religious extremism.’ I suppose we could look into short-term disability for her.”

“Do what you have to,” said the Chief Executive, “but in the meantime, she’s given us a glimpse into the future.”

“The future?” asked Abercrombie, and she shared a bewildered look with Hildebrandt and the General Counsel.

“You don’t think,” asked Hildebrandt, “that there might be some truth in what she’s saying?”

“I can’t speak for all of humanity, but I can certainly speak for this company, and that’s the road we’ll be traveling down if we don’t deal with this matter at once.”

“I’m sorry,” said Abercrombie, “but I don’t see how. . . .”

“You don’t? Do you have any idea of how much damage was done to Procter & Gamble when some lunatics publicized the fact that their logo was full of Satanic signs, proof that they’d made a pact with the devil? Well, just what do you think will happen to our stock price when Wall Street finds out we employ the living dead?”

“But they certainly can’t blame the company for a fluke of nature like that.”

“Fluke of nature? You mean like plagues of locusts and rivers of blood? Mrs. Richmond is a herald of things to come. But I have no intention of allowing this company to be presumed to be the launching pad for Armageddon!”

“Well, sir,” said Abercrombie, “I’m here to report that we haven’t been idle these last few days. I’ve had the whole department working on the situation, and here are the issues as we see them . . .”

“I don’t give a damn how you see the issues! There’s only one issue as far as I’m concerned, and here’s what we’re going to do about it,” and after the General Counsel agreed that the proposed solution was both reasonable and legal, the Chief Executive ordered Abercrombie to implement it at once.

As soon as Abercrombie returned to her office, she called her staff together again. “I’ll get right to the point,” she said, once all of her directors had gathered about her. “We’re downsizing.”

They all looked around at each other, momentarily wondering if the cuts were to be across the board and if some of them would be missing the following week. “But we were doing so well, weren’t we?” asked the Director of Recruitment. “I thought we’d met all of our profit projections, and . . .”

“It’s Planning and Budget. We’re eliminating the entire Planning and Budget department.”

“But then who . . .”

“Each major department will now be responsible for its own budget and its three-year plan. Since the review for this quarter is complete, we’ll have three months for everyone to get used to the idea and a full year to train department heads on the planning process. The final drafting and consolidation of the plan, formerly the responsibility of Planning and Budget, will be outsourced.”

“But when . . .”

“Today. Now.”

“That’s impossible. How . . .”

“Pull together the files from the merger. Model procedures for all action steps should be there. Most of it’s boilerplate, and with a little tweaking, we should have everything we need. We’ll spend the rest of the week preparing the necessary documentation and the severance schedules.” She turned to her Assistant Director who had been with her during the merger when several departments had been reduced by half. “Alert security. You know how unpredictable these things can be.”

By the end of the day, Abercrombie and her directors had informed the staff of Planning and Budget of their dismissals and seen that all were

escorted out of the building. With one exception, it was not as difficult as she had expected, and a few were even relieved to be released from the tension and the grim anxieties of the last few days. None complained about the severance package, even though some of the particulars were still undetermined, and most were grateful to have the services of a placement firm at their disposal for several months. Only Wilson, whom Abercrombie had always considered a solid and reliable manager, lost his composure, rising from his chair to declare that he had been betrayed. "Why, I've been a team player throughout my professional career," he said, continuing his complaint, "and certainly every day of my life here. I've worked, you know that, long hours, often late into the night. In fact, I built this department practically from the ground up, hired the best and gotten the best out of them, too! We've produced for this company. We've done our jobs!" He insisted that he and his people had always placed corporate objectives first, often to the detriment of their personal lives, displaying loyalty and diligence at every staff level. "Why even Vesey . . . My God, look what Vesey . . ." He stopped, in recognition of what he had just said, finally understanding that he and his staff had been overpowered by a calamitous chain of events far beyond their control, and the storm and fury on his face became as calm and as rigid as the surface of a deep mountain lake. Sinking back into his chair, he listened without further comment as Abercrombie described the arrangements she had been making for him and his staff.

Not until all the other members of Planning and Budget had left the building did Abercrombie pick up the phone and dial Vesey's extension. There was no answer, and rather than leave a message on his voice mail, she decided to deal with him directly, in his own office. Even though the working day had not yet ended, the halls seemed unusually empty as she took the elevator to the eighth floor and turned north down the corridor. She knew how quickly such news circulates and the effect it has on morale, and she supposed that many employees had probably left early to digest the incident and confront their own fragility in the face of corporate reality. But as she walked down this long corridor, she began to sense her own vulnerability, and she wondered if she were making a terrible mistake, approaching Vesey unaccompanied and so late in the day in what appeared to be an empty and isolated corner of the building, to announce to him his dismissal from a job that, perhaps, had meant as much to him as life itself.

Upon reaching his door, she tilted her head close to it and asked in a quiet voice but loud enough for him to hear, "Mr. Vesey?" When there was no answer, she knocked, waited, and knocked again. After several moments more of silence, she took a deep breath and turned the knob. The door was locked, and after knocking once again, she returned to her office, frustrated

that she had not yet completed her task, but relieved at not having to face Vesey, whose condition, she understood, had deteriorated considerably since she had last seen him several days before, lurching towards the elevator banks.

As she was leaving the building, she stopped at Operations to remind them to cancel the electronic keys of the affected staff. She also mentioned that should Vesey appear, he was to be directed immediately to Human Resources.

But he did not appear the following day, and when his office was opened by the custodian, it was, to everyone's relief, unoccupied. Abercrombie later learned that Vesey had called his wife as soon as he arrived home from his final day of work and informed her that he would not be returning to his job for some time, that he felt like he could benefit from a long, quiet rest. As soon as he hung up, Mrs. Vesey called the mortician, who had been waiting for just such a moment, and he accompanied her to the house, where they found her husband lying in bed on top of the blanket, his arms crossed over his chest. He was still in the clothes he had worn to work, but another suit, his favorite one, was laid out beside him, dry-cleaned and pressed. He was buried in it early the next day, following a simple ceremony, with only a handful of friends and relatives in attendance.

Not until a few weeks later, when the offices of the former Planning and Budget department were being dismantled and rewired for the use of Information Services, did Abercrombie remember that a bereavement notice, a courtesy extended to current employees and all deceased persons recently employed by the company, had not yet been distributed. *Oh, well*, she thought, *anyone who cares probably already knows*, and the notice was never drafted.

By late winter, Information Services had settled into the space. With the removal and rearrangement of most of the central cubicles, with the installation of new equipment — more printers, more copiers, more file banks — and the laying of new, brighter carpeting, few traces of the eighth floor's former occupant remained. Only the northernmost executive offices, along the corridor, were relatively untouched, although the one in the northern corner, once occupied by the now deceased Budget Officer, remained vacant until the new Director for Systems Analysis was hired.

He stayed with the company, however, for only a few months, until, finally, he was unable to tolerate the incessant flickering of the fluorescent lights overhead, the garbled voicemail messages, and the regular crashing of his computer terminal. Operations claimed that it was probably all a result of the rewiring, but he still insisted on being moved to another office. When management refused — “He's only been here a couple of months,”

complained his supervisor, “and already he’s making unreasonable demands on our resources!”—he resigned, stating that he had never worked in a more unsettling environment.

Although enclosed offices were at a premium, no one from the department volunteered to move into the northernmost office, and rather than risk the loss of another new executive—thereby fostering the spread of unpleasant rumors and the revival of disturbing memories—senior management decided to reserve the space for storage. This, however, was not an ideal solution, since it was later discovered that all the data on the magnetic tapes being stored there had been systematically erased.

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