

Part 1

Jonathan eyed the cheap frame that held up the faded image of a family that wasn't his. He made a face of feigned concentration. After a few moments of only somewhat considerate thought, he declared "Alright Ms. Mintz, that should do it!"

He turned to see a kindly old woman in a plain sundress rounding the corner and tottering towards him with a look of excitement that only kindly old women with not much else going on besides the angle of their picture frames could have. Ms. Mintz strode up to the frame and after a mere glance, almost broke into tears.

"Oh" she started "oh, oh, oh! How lovely! I've never seen it this straight! I didn't think it was possible but you've absolutely saved my beloved centerpiece!"

"Oh it was nothing, just doing my job, mam" Jonathan began, gathering his tools. Or at least, that's what he was doing before Ms. Mintz threw herself at him, dousing Jonathan with praise, wet, sloppy kisses, essential oils, and everything else kindly old women are covered in, all the while babbling unintelligibly about her centerpiece.

"Ahem, I really must be going!" Jonathan said after finally managing to pry Ms. Mintz away from him (it took far more effort than he anticipated to get this 80 lb elderly woman at arm's length), and headed for the door.

"Thank you, thank you, and thanks again!" said Ms. Mintz "I'll be sure to pay your bill in full, for all the money this costs and then some, see to it that you get the tip I send along! Straight N' Arrow are absolute lifesavers!"

"Suuure will!" said Jonathan, sarcasm barely escaping from his lips like the sound of a deflating balloon. He shut the door behind him, and let an exhausted bit of air resembling a sigh escape him. He knew that openly running his mouth in front of the customers wasn't really a good idea but when Ms. Mintz mentioned payment he couldn't help himself.

Yeah, sure, I'll get all that and then some. He mentally grumbled. Straight N' Arrow, the company for which Jonathan was currently employed, wasn't exactly in the habit of letting the profits trickle down to those who, technically speaking, actually do the work. He marched across Ms. Mintz's lawn to the van with the Straight N' Arrow logo blazing the side. Jonathan thought for a minute about jokingly forgetting which vehicle was his, but, considering he was alone, and therefore, no one but him would be amused by this, he decided against it. He climbed in the driver seat of this beast of a vehicle just in time to hear his walkie talkie squawk to life.

"Oi! Johnny! Bossman says it's time to head *straight* back." called the device, in a thick British accent. Jonathan winced at his coworker's choice of words..

"Tagger!" he barked back into the walkie. "The hell does the boss want? He knows I'm making rounds all afternoon!"

"Dunno, he just said it was an important meeting. All *right*?" Tagger emphasized the *right* with a way that only he could, the way that it just so happened to rub against Jonathan's brain like a cheese grater.

After another long sigh Jonathan spoke "Alright, just let me tell the next customer I'm gonna be late and I'll be right there."

"Right then, keep it *square*!"

"I'm gonna kill you."

"Wassat? You cut out there."

"I said I'm gonna *thrill* you!"

"Watch it, Johnny, I'm *straight* don't ya know!"

Jonathan had to remember the company policy regarding destroyed property (the one that said he was responsible for paying for any damaged equipment) to keep himself from hurling the walkie talkie into the nearest deep pond, dark forest, wood chipper, or hornet's nest.

~*~

It was about 30 minutes later when Jonathan pulled into the parking lot of Straight N' Arrow branch 25423244 B. The B was apparently due to the fact that another branch had already been named as such, and the marketing team wouldn't budge on the issue. A 6 story, square, dull gray building that was, he was once told, painted a much livelier shade of coffee-brown that used to compliment the bright green lawn and magnificent sign that graced the front entrance, but which now, according to Jonathan, resembled a prison from some science fiction show he'd once seen on late night TV.

He trudged his way into the building, nodding at the bored-looking receptionist whose name he couldn't always remember (Janice?) and strode down the hall to the large meeting room. There were quite a few meeting rooms on this floor alone, but considering this meeting was called by the boss himself, he simply walked to the biggest one he could think of. He rounded a corner and encountered Tagger pulling a protein bar out of a vending machine. Despite him being hefty, not the brightest, and British, he was the kind of person who never seemed to let the world get him down. Against all odds, he managed to be the only real friend that Jonathan had at his job. He saw Jonathan as he was opening his snack and when their eyes met, Tagger grinned, waved, and greeted him as they met.

"How was the Mintz job?" he inquired.

"She pounced on me and nearly drowned me in her spit." Jonathan muttered, adding a shudder that was only partially for dramatic effect.

Tagger whistled. "Oooh you lucky dog, you get all the birds!"

"Tagger, she's 80."

"And you're picky." He retorted, punching him playfully in the shoulder.

"What's this meeting about anyway?"

"Already told you, I dunno. But if the bossman is calling it, it's probably a doozy."

Jonathan silently agreed. Bossman, in this case, referred to Straight N' Arrow CEO Jack Stubentire III. Jack always reminded Jonathan of someone who stepped out of an 80s drama about the dangers of rampant capitalism and consumerism. Jack's hair was always slicked back, he always wore slacks, suspenders, and a dress shirt, and he always talked about Unions the way one would talk about German dictators during the 1930s. Jack's responsibilities as CEO, as far as Jonathan could tell, mostly involved flirting with anything wearing a skirt, sending the occasional office email about how stupendous it was to be employed by such a generous company, and getting paid the most. Jonathan could never quite figure out how that last one came to be. The point being, if Jack was actually calling a meeting for once, it must be rather important.

Jonathan and Tagger filed into the big meeting room, which was much closer to a lavish amphitheater than any room meant for anything actually business oriented. They took their seats and Jonathan idly looked around as others sat around them.

"Why does this room have *balconies*?" he asked. "And a stage? Who the hell has meetings in a damn playhouse?"

"This room is for trainings and such." chimed in Tagger.

"That doesn't even remotely answer my question. And there's a guy over there selling popcorn and hotdogs!"

"Oh so you would rather have trainings outside in the mud? See, Johnny this is why you don't get paid like the Bossman."

It was at times like this that Jonathan could never be sure if Tagger was being sarcastic, or if there was merely a serious gas leak that affected everyone but him.

The room filled with people. Not many people, as this branch of Straight N' Arrow only had about 30 employees in total. Once again, Jonathan wondered why the need for such a lavish room that could seat maybe 300 people, but only employed a tenth of that. He also questioned the need for 6

entire stories of a building when at best the entire staff could take up half of the first floor. After mulling it over for a moment he decided it wasn't worth dedicating that much brain power to, and continued letting his brain wander elsewhere. The 30 or so people filled the room, idly chatting about whatever mundane thing occupied their morning, and chewing on popcorn and hotdogs. One might think it rude to eat during a meeting called by your employer, but this is what happens when you schedule a meeting smack in the middle of everyone's lunch hour.

Finally, the meeting began. A thin woman with glasses, a ponytail, and a sharp looking suit took the stage, the beaming smile on her face so bright, it could blind you. At this, Jonathan groaned, then he remembered where he was, and coughed to try and pass it off as a frog in his throat. This woman was Nancy Nethers. If Tagger was the type of person who never seemed to let the world get him down despite being hefty, not the brightest, and British, Nancy was the type of person who *actually* never let the world get her down, despite being uptight, prudish, and American. Brown-noser just didn't do it justice, some new word would have to be invented to describe the shade of color her nose looked after she got done with her sycophantic routine.

Nancy stepped up to the microphone standing in the center of the stage, looking so pleased with herself that she looked on the verge of bursting, and spoke.

"Good morning Arrowheads!"

She paused.

A combination of mumbles, grumbles, shouts, and hollers, all trying to articulate some form of "Good morning" arose from the crowd.

"Lovely, lovely," she continued. "I'm so glad everyone could be here today as our wonderful leader, Jack Stubentire III has some important words for us, but before that we will be showing a lovely video provided by Straight N' Arrow corporate headquarters!" she gestured wildly behind her as a screen lowered from above the stage. The lavish tone she used coupled with her ridiculous gestures and her insane ability to speak without appearing to move her lips gave Jonathan mixed emotions of giggling glee and discomfort. Once the screen was fully lowered and Nancy was off the stage, the sound of a large *click* and a *whirr* began. Jonathan recognized this as the sound of an old film projector being switched on.

He leaned over and whispered to Tagger "A projector? We have a stage the size of a damn football stadium and they only have a projector?" Tagger responded with a shrug. The crackling sound of low fidelity mono audio filled the room while the tiny, blurry picture produced by the absolutely ancient equipment came into something resembling focus. An old man with thin gray hair and a nice, dark gray suit filled the screen, sitting on his desk in a pose that someone assured him would make him look relaxed and approachable, but instead just made him look smug and sinister.

"Hi folks, I'm Jack Stubentire."

Jonathan couldn't help but lean over and mutter "Didn't he step out of a window in '73 after his favorite football team lost a game?" Before he could get an answer, the audience around him hissed him into silence.

"The folks in our wonderful Human Resources department asked me to lend a hand in creating this wonderful presentation for you to discuss why Straight N' Arrow is the pinnacle of straightening services. We're on the cutting edge or should I say *straightening* edge of technology," at this, Nancy could be heard snorting with laughter. "and our customer service cannot be beat. We've expanded farther and faster than anyone said a décor straightening company should ever go, and then some. Our customer satisfaction surveys have been through the roof, and worker satisfaction has increased from 15% to 15.5% in the past 15 years alone! We deliver excellent service to our customers in a timely fashion, for an affordable price, and none of that would be possible without the help of all of you. Thank you for your help in achieving our mission, and thanks for your time today. Oh, and good luck to the

Plymouth Pallbearers on their championship game this evening. I'll be watching from the top floor of my penthouse!"

The film ended, the lights went up, and Nancy gave a standing ovation, which turned into an awkward, clap-filled jog, as she ran back up to the microphone. Jonathan couldn't quite tell from where he was sitting, but he thought he might have seen the glitters of tears in her eyes. Though the film had only been somewhere in the ballpark of 5 minutes long, to Jonathan and most of the rest of the staff, it felt like the length of a really depressing, but also really condescending documentary on endangered animals.

After Nancy finally steadied herself and stopped clapping before blisters formed, she proudly beamed at the audience and spoke again.

"And now for our leader, CEO, and might I add, snappy dresser, Jack Stupentire III!" She began clapping again, but had to stop short after yelping and noticing the blisters.

From stage left, Jack Stupentire III entered, wearing his usual, downright stereotypical attire, not even looking where he was going, as he was too absorbed in his phone to even make eye contact with anyone in the room. Some folks in the audience (those less aware or less concerned with the current state of the world) were impressed by this, as surely for *the* Jack Stupentire III to be so absorbed in something he couldn't even raise his head, it must have been something incredibly important. However, these folks were made less sure of their assumption as Jack approached the microphone, which picked up the sounds emanating from his phone, which was a combination of beeps, dings, and other such sound effects one might hear from a mobile game designed to steal all your attention as well as everything in your wallet.

"ahh shit missed the pull" he could be heard mumbling. It was upon this expletive that he finally looked up from his phone.

"Hi folks, so here's the news, this office is being shut down and you're all being let go, effective immediately. There will be no severance." He then returned to his phone, and began walking back stage left, leaving his echoing footsteps to occupy the suddenly empty scene.

There was a moment of silence that seemed to stretch on for an eternity. After that eternity, however, the audience erupted.

"WHAT!?" cried Nancy, as shrill and as harsh as her tiny body would allow.

"Huh!?" said Tagger, his hotdog dropping into his lap.

"FUCK YYYES!" shouted Jonathan, pumping both fists in the air.

~ End of Part 1 ~

Part 2

"What am I going to do?" Tagger groaned.

After Jack's sudden announcement, the mood in the auditorium resembled the combination of a funeral service and societal uprising. Some of the audience members, like Tagger, were sitting around mourning the loss of their beloved employment. Heads in hands and eyes staring into the void, these poor souls apparently lost their only tether to this world. On the opposite end of the spectrum, those who never liked being employed at Straight N' Arrow in the first place saw this as the perfect opportunity to practice their weight training. And since there were no dumbbells present, anything heavy, expensive, and not nailed to the floor seemed to work just fine, and if they happened to forget they were holding something on their way out the door, pity.

"What are we gonna do, Johnny? How are we gonna pay our bills? What about my 401k? How am I gonna- Johnny?" Tagger had looked up from his despair for the first time in several minutes to finally notice that Jonathan hadn't been there for quite some time. Tagger looked around the chaotic scene and noticed Jonathan walking away from him, almost to the door of the amphitheater.

He shot up and shouted "Johnny!"

Jonathan stopped and whirled around, puzzled.

"The hell are you doing, mate?" Tagger shouted, trying to close the distance.

Jonathan looked around at the depressing yet lively scene and returned to Tagger with a look of confusion.

"I'm going home." and so he started for the door again.

"Now wait a minute, wait!" Tagger called again, and upon finally closing the distance between them grabbed Jonathan by the sleeve. "You're just gonna leave?"

"Yup. Sure am." Jonathan said brightly, and continued on. Tagger followed.

"But... but..." he stammered, "don't you even want to talk about all this? I mean we all just lost our jobs!"

Still walking, avoiding various (former) coworkers crying, pulling large bottles from their desks, and stealing paper clips from the equipment closet, Jonathan gave a shrug. "What's there to talk about? He already said no severance."

It was at this point the two had reached the front entrance. Jonathan noticed that the secretary whose name he couldn't always remember (Janet?) wasn't at her desk. She was however, currently in the process of trying to fit her chair through the front door, which was quite hard considering she had stacked a desktop computer, monitor, printer, and several office phones on top of it. Jonathan ran over and opened the door for her, grinning and giving her a nod. She returned this gesture with a grin and a nod of her own and finally got her leaning tower of severance out the front entrance and towards the parking lot. This matter settled, Jonathan and Tagger made their way through the door and continued their conversation.

"I just mean you don't seem all that worried about this, and that's worrying me more than anything. I mean, you got bills don't you? Aren't you worried about how you're gonna pay for things?"

Jonathan stopped and furrowed his brow.

"You know," he began, "it's funny. The only real thing keeping me at that job was knowing I needed it to pay bills... but now that the band-aid has been ripped off, I kinda just feel... calm."

"You're scaring me, mate."

"No I'm not" Jonathan said, refusing to elaborate. "Look, how about this. We just got the rest of the afternoon... and our foreseeable futures... free so why don't we at least make the most of it? How about a trip to Carrie's?"

"Hmm, fine. I guess I could use a drink after all this."

"That's the spirit," Jonathan said, clapping Tagger on the back. He followed this up by putting on his best (but still not very good) British accent. "Off to the pub then, eh?"

“Oi that’s enough of that!” Tagger said with a chuckle. “That’s Brit-face, I’ll have you know.”

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Carrie’s was the name of a local bar that Jonathan, Tagger, and other people not important enough to mention often frequented. It was a particularly unassuming little place, but the drinks were cold and the staff left you alone, so it worked out for most patrons. Jonathan and Tagger were still laughing between themselves over the concept of “Brit-face” when they opened the door.

“Oi barkeep! Two pints for me and me mate!” shouted Jonathan with glee.

The bartender narrowed her eyes at them both and snapped at them.

“I have a name, jackass.”

Jonathan immediately straightened up and composed himself. He often forgot that not everyone he met always understood what passes for his sense of humor. “Erm, sorry Margaret. Two beers, please and thank you.”

“That’s more like it,” she said, already sliding the filled, icy glasses across the bartop.

“Your accent sucks by the way,” she added.

“That’s what I told him!” whined Tagger.

“Yeah, yeah, everyone’s a critic. C’mon Tagger let’s have a seat.”

The two sat down at one of the booths at the back side of the bar, clinked their drinks together and downed a few gulps. The two idly looked around the bar. Besides themselves, there were only a few other people there. Someone was at the bar, their head down on the counter, with a bottle of something Jonathan couldn’t quite make out, but guessed it had to be pretty strong, sitting next to them, half empty. On the other side of their own booth were two old men chatting about something. Jonathan couldn’t make out what they were talking about but was pretty sure it was political since the two looked incredibly furious, yet weren’t actually saying anything that seemed to make any coherent sense. Besides the hushed conversation of the old men, the low volume top 40s music playing over the speakers, and the sound of Margaret polishing glasses, there wasn’t any sound to be heard. And even though it was only 2 pm, the dim lights and thick windows of the bar made it seem like it was practically dusk. It was Tagger who finally spoke up.

“Eerie here, aint it?”

“Yeah,” Jonathan agreed. “I don’t think I’ve ever been here on a Tuesday before 6...”

The not quite silence returned once again. The two nursed their drinks for a bit before Tagger finally said “So you’re really not upset about everything?”

“Yeah, really. I’m quite calm.”

“I think I read somewhere that only people who aren’t calm say that.”

“Well you need new reading glasses.”

“Well that’s all well and good for you but I myself have got kids to think about.”

“What? No you don’t.”

“Cats can be considered children as well.”

“No they- look, just relax all right. All I’m saying is, you and I worked there for like 5 and a half years, and you didn’t even like it all that much.”

“Yes I did”

“Ok fine, I didn’t like it all that much. But more to the point we were wasting our damn time there. Day in, day out, all we did was work ourselves to the bone, for what? We’re damn frame straighteners man! What does society actually lose by having one less Straight N’ Arrow office in the world? Oh woe to all the damn geriatrics who are going to have to break out a level and straighten their own damn frames from now on. And even if you did like working there, look at how they treated you in

the end! I'm kinda glad we got fired. I never had the guts to leave, myself, and quite frankly it's good that someone lit a fire under my ass."

"HA!" shouted a voice in the bar.

The two looked over to the shape slumped over at the counter. It was slowly morphing into a shape that the two actually recognized. It was just quite hard to tell who it was considering their hair was usually in a ponytail, and their face wasn't usually pressed against a bartop counter in utter despair.

"Nancy? Issat you?" asked Tagger

The shape that sort of resembled Nancy Nethers rose from its stool, pushing the hair out of her face, grabbing the bottle, and stomping toward the two.

"You little bassard!" she slurred "You think you got it all figgered out huh?"

Jonathan was beside himself. Getting yelled at by women was not an uncommon occurrence for him, but what made this encounter so remarkable was that he had never known Nancy to so much as raise her voice, much less swear. On top of that, she was a notorious narc. She once threatened to call the police after someone suggested they bring alcohol to the office Christmas party. All that to say, that seeing her with her hair down, half a bottle deep into something strong, and eyes like a really pissed off tiger, left Jonathan more than a little flustered.

"Erm, well I," he stammered.

Nancy took another deep swig from the bottle she was holding, not even bothering to hold it steady, resulting in most of the liquid spilling across her face, suit, and the table the boys were sitting at. After a strong, satisfied gasp, she spoke again.

"You lil punk! You think that jus cus you were a little sad you can juss run your mouth? Som' of us actually liked being there you little shit! Som' of uss aktully sshowed up everyday and did their besst! Som' of us put allll of our shitty feelings aside and worked for a damn living! You didn't like working? You should have fucking quit! Some of us put our whole lives in that company! And you know somthin', they actually treated you right when you did your fucking job!"

At this last point, Jonathan suddenly found his confidence. Before Nancy could belt out another string of slurred speech, he spoke up. "Now hang on a minute! You're making the same points as Tagger! You keep saying that Straight N' Arrow was this great place to work at, that you had all your needs filled, and that your bosses were the most kino crew around, yet here you are! When the time came to let all of us go, they didn't give us any heads up, they didn't give us any severance. Hell, they didn't even say good luck! How can you say they always had your best interest when Jack Stubentire is god knows where, playing on his phone while waiting for his next million dollars to roll in so he can buy another... another... um phone or something while you're both here worried about what's coming next and drowning your sorrows?"

Jonathan saw Nancy's lip tremble a bit, and immediately realized he'd gone a bit too far.

"Erm, I mean, that's just my take on it, don't quote me on anything..."

Before he could even finish that sentence, Nancy had plopped down into the seat next to him, slamming the bottle down with a mighty THUNK next to her. She put her head on the table in front of her, covered her head with her arms, and mumbled through them.

"You don' get it, you little brat. We've got *nothing*. We just went from having stable, full time employment to nothing. Everything, to nothing. I had a 401k, I was up for a promotion, I was going to buy a house someday. And worst of all... I brown nosed that *fucker* Jack Stubentire," here she pronounced Jack's name like one pronounces the name of the person your spouse cheated with. "for nothing. It was all for nothing..."

At this, Nancy's rage subsided, replaced by pure gloomy despair. She began weeping again. At this Jonathan and Tagger, both not all that familiar as to how to treat the condition they only know as "woman crying", awkwardly tried to ignore her cries. After this proved to not be all that effective,

Jonathan tentatively put a hand on her back. When it wasn't immediately bitten off, he began gently patting Nancy's back.

"There, there Nancy. Look I know it sucks now but... look money is important but at the end of the day it's numbers on a page. It never determined your self worth. Your 401k might be gone but there's nothing stopping you from starting another one. And, Jack didn't deserve you anyway. Like I said already, you worked your ass off for him for half a decade and he didn't even look you in the eye when he tossed you out. You don't need him. And... I know I'm trying to be positive but research tells us you were never going to be able to afford a house in your lifetime so maybe that's not a dream worth holding on to."

Nancy sniffled and peeked out from her makeshift foxhole. Tears still glittering in her eyes she said "You have a funny way of trying to comfort people."

Jonathan shrugged, "I try. Look, all I'm saying is, maybe you all need to try and think a little more positively. Straight N' Arrow didn't deserve either of you, but someone else does. Someone who will actually treat you with a little bit of dignity, a little bit of respect for the work you put in every day. And now, you've been given the opportunity, suddenly, to go out there and find them."

Nancy sniffled again, the tears finally stopping, and straightened herself. She now eyed Jonathan with a look of cautious optimism, which also happened to contain hints of a look that showed concern for his mental health. "You're serious, aren't you? You're really that optimistic about this?"

"Um... OK no, not quite, the state of the world kinda sucks if I'm being honest. But what I'm trying to get across is that the world is a big place, and there *has* to be something more fulfilling than working in a damn office every day. There has to be a place where we can at least be *happy* while we're being forced to participate in this god forsaken society. We're three smart adults, we can figure this out."

Tagger and Nancy looked at each other and then back at Jonathan. Finally Nancy sighed. "I guess trying again is at least better than sitting here and wallowing in self pity."

"I dunno, wallowing feels kinda good sometimes" Tagger mumbled.

Jonathan slapped the table and threw on his accent. "That's the ticket! Alright lads, and ladettes, now all we need is action. Polish up your resumes, and start applying for work. Get creative, go door to door if you have to. Don't let yourself be limited by what you've done, the only limit is what you can do! Oi! Oi! Oi!" He raised his glass for cheers, but Tagger and Nancy were far too busy laughing at Jonathan's poor excuse for an accent to lift their glasses.

~ End of Part 2 ~

Part 3

[Three Months Later]

Jonathan pushed open the door to Carrie's with a look of defeat that he only barely managed to hide. Carrie's had become an impromptu base of operations for himself, Tagger, and Nancy as they go about their job hunt. The typical routine at this point was for the three of them to meet up once a week, sometime in the afternoon, declare that none amongst the three of them had made any progress, and then proceed to have a drink, or fifteen. When Margaret saw him walk through the door and their eyes met, they did not even need to exchange greetings. Margaret simply saw him, poured him a drink, and placed it on the counter, in the exact spot she knew he liked to pick it up. Jonathan walked by the counter, scooped up his drink and made his way to the back booth, where Tagger and Nancy were already waiting.

"How was the interview?" Tagger said as Jonathan sat down.

"Terrible."

"Great, let's get wasted!" exclaimed Nancy.

After a few drinks and pleasant conversation, Jonathan's mood had slightly improved.

"It's just so damn frustrating. You do something for half a decade and suddenly you don't have a whole lot of marketable skills. I've applied for everything I can think of, chickpea expert, currency tester, poison food critic, even dental hygienist for god's sake."

"You know about chickpeas?" Tagger asked.

"I minored in them." Jonathan said with pride.

"Well what did you expect?" said Nancy, already three drinks deep. "The job market sucks, and everything is getting automated to the point of absurdity. Hell, I can get my panties washed by robots through an app on my phone right now if I wanted to."

Jonathan and Tagger stared at Nancy for a moment, momentarily dazed. As if instead of talking about the horrors of modern society, she had simply spoken the verbal equivalent of a flash grenade.

"Right... well... yeah times are tough. But we knew that already. They always say it gets worse before it gets better."

"*When* did they say it was going to get better?" interrupted Tagger

"At half past put a sock in it, that's when! Now there's no reason to get bent out of shape, we're three smart adults, we can find employment somehow."

Nancy sighed. "Look Jonathan, I know you mean well, and I know you're not a *complete* idiot but we've been at this for months and you've been *saying* the same things for months. Even you must be feeling a little defeated now?"

Jonathan wouldn't admit it, but Nancy was right. His calm optimism about finding some new career, some new path, some new meaning to his state of being had been eroding over the last few weeks. Every time he left a message on an answering machine, submitted a resume that never got a call back, every interviewer that took the time to see him but not even remember his name (who the hell can't remember the name Jonathan anyway?), it slowly wore away the good spirits that he had suddenly acquired that day three months ago. But he knew that the last thing the group wanted to hear was that the one who filled them with such hope was now succumbing to such awful despair.

The conversation moved and shifted to more positive things, as conversations tend to do. Tagger talked about his cats, George, John, and Ringo, Nancy discussed her collection of death metal vinyls and favorite drinks (in order of alcohol content) and Jonathan was more than content to sit quietly and enjoy this one little moment. This one little stitch in time where for once, things didn't seem 100% fucked (only 99% fucked).

The door to Carrie's opened. Someone walked through it, and approached the counter.

"Hey there, is there someone named Nancy here? I'm looking for her."

The trio sitting in the booth looked up and nearly spat out their drinks in one long, very unhygienic spout. For the person currently at the bar looking for Nancy was yet another person they knew, but never seen step foot inside Carrie's. That person was Jack Stubentire III. Upon following Margaret's pointing finger and making eye contact with the group, Jack put on his fakest smile and strode over to them.

"Nancy!" he proclaimed, with a warmth and kindness so plastic and shrink wrapped, you'd think it just came straight from the bullshit factory. "I'm so glad I found you! I have an exciting opportunity for you!"

Jack sat down in the booth across from Nancy, forcing Tagger and Jonathan to scootch aside. Though with Jack lacking a bit of manners and spatial awareness, he seemed like he was going to sit there no matter whose ass was already preoccupying it.

"Nancy, I have some exciting news. My father is using the leftover funds from my severance package to invest in a new company. We're moving very fast and hope to have new offices up and running sometime next week. And I want *you* to be my Interim Assistant Associate Director! How's that sound?"

Nancy gasped in shock. "Interim Assistant Associate Director? That's like, only two promotions away from being an Associate! Oh did you hear that guys this might just be the chance I've been waiting for!"

Jack finally seemed to notice Tagger and Jonathan pressed against the booth wall and momentarily lost his smiling facade as he examined the two. Deciding that playing nice was the best course of action, the fake smile returned and he stuck out a hand.

"Hi, Jack Stubentire III, you can call me Jacky."

At this, Jonathan bitterly knocked away his hand. "I used to work for you, jackass." he spat.

"As did I... minus the jackass, Mr. Jacky, sir." mumbled Tagger.

Jack didn't seem at all phased by anything that was said, and spoke again.

"Oh, did you now? Hell, come along too then. We need all the people we can, right now."

Tagger's face lit up and he shot up in his seat.

"Really? You mean it? You'll hire us right now? What about interviews and stuff?"

Jack waved a hand.

"Ehh that's for the chumps who aren't getting in on the ground floor. Once we get up and running I don't care what qualifications you have, I know you'll do it and do it you will."

Nancy and Tagger excitedly looked at each other, but Jonathan sat with a frown.

"Ok stop it. Jack, I have a few questions."

"Shoot."

"First of all, *leftover* severance? Everyone who worked for you at Straight N' Arrow didn't get a severance package, but not only did you get one, you had enough leftover to start a new business? How does that work?"

"Heh... well... you know... sometimes you just find coins in the couch cushions as it were."

"Straight N' Arrow went *bankrupt*."

"They were really big cushions, what do you want from me?"

"And another thing," Jonathan continued, "What even is this new business of yours? You didn't say what we would be actually doing."

"Oh I didn't?" Jack replied, genuinely surprised. "I must have gotten ahead of myself, rich minds think fast, or however that saying goes. Get this," he spread his hands wide, allowing his audience to lean in before he started again, "the new business that's going to change the world is... Scrapelnc."

Silence.

"Scrapelnc? As in..." Nancy started this thought, but didn't have any way to finish it.

“Great name right?” Jack said, smiling a smile that was far too pleased with itself. “It’s a play on scrape-ing, as in the act of scraping. Father wanted to call it Stuben & Sons or something but I told him let the idea guy take care of-”

“Excuse me, Jack, another question,” said Jonathan raising a hand. “Scraping... what exactly?”

“Always with the questions,” Jack muttered. “It’s like I’m at a damn shareholder meeting. Always asking the what’s and the how’s and the how’s it gonna work and the who’s gonna pay for it and the ‘I don’t think that’s how physics works’. Scraping, my dear boy, gum.”

“Gum?”

“Gum.”

“Scraping gum... that’s your new business opportunity?”

“Yes, yes, of course. It’s the oldest method of business creation. You see a problem, you sell the solution. People leave gum stuck to every little thing they can find. Dirty little ingrates, the lot of them. So we at ScrapeInc will be the backbone of a clean society. Scraping gum off of any surface, any time anywhere.”

Jack was beaming with a look of delight, a look that made Jonathan roll his eyes so hard he was worried they would get stuck pointing at the back of his head. His eye rolling became shock and horror, however, when he noticed Nancy and Tagger sharing in this look of delight.

“Jack,” Jonathan began

“Oh Mr. Questions has another... question. Go on Mr. Question, what’s your question?”

At this Nancy giggled a sycophantic giggle and Jonathan stuck his tongue out at her.

“My question, Jack, is why exactly someone would pay you to scrape gum off of things when most people already have custodial staff to do that stuff. Even the city pays people to clean up public parks, and that includes scraping gum off of things.”

“That may be true.” Jack retorted.

Another moment of silence.

“Ahem... but?” Jonathan urged.

“But... we... will do it better!” said Jack, his speech growing ever so slightly confident with every word. Nancy clapped with glee.

“Oh I think it’s just wonderful Jack where do I sign?”

“Hold on, hold on!” Jonathan shouted. “Jack, can we have a moment alone?”

Jack rose from his seat.

“Of course, I’ll just slide on over to that nice looking barkeep and see if she can handle a second *job* if you catch my drift.” He winked and waited for someone to laugh at his lame innuendo. When no one did, he turned on his heels and wandered towards Margaret at the bar.

Jonathan leaned in close to the group. “You both cannot be serious. Three months ago that jackass booted you all out on your asses and now you’re eating out of hand like a couple of starving dogs. Don’t you have any self respect?”

Tagger lowered his eyes.

“He *is* offering us jobs, mate. I know he’s a real bastard but... I dunno, what do you think Nancy?”

Nancy took a swig of her drink, staring at the glass as she lost herself in thought. After a time she looked up at Jonathan, a thoughtful frown filling out her face.

“Jonathan... you’re right. I can’t deny that. Jack Stubentire is a piece of garbage. He has no business sense, he’s a complete clown, and when push came to shove he threw us all out and saved himself.”

She took another swig.

“However... there is still the matter of money. Right now we don’t exactly have a whole lot of options. We’ve been searching for months and not one of us has found work. I’m already eating into my

savings as it is. Every cent matters more than ever. Every laundromat bill, every microwave meal for one I get at the grocery store, it all adds up. The way things are now... I could last another 6 or 7 months. Maybe, and I mean *maybe*, I could last a full year before it's all gone. And in 6 or 7 months, I might not get another opportunity like this. If Jack's really going around to people like me and offering them work, chances are he'll fill those positions within the month. And in 6 or 7 months, he's not going to have another offer like this... but I'm still going to have rent to pay."

Nancy sighed.

"I think... I have to take it, Jonathan. I can't share in your optimism. I already can't stand the mental pressure of knowing my savings will be gone someday. What Jack is offering, really, is stability. Temporary stability maybe, but stability nonetheless."

A silence hit the table. Jonathan broke it with a sigh.

"If that's how you feel Nancy... I guess that's that."

They looked over at Tagger, who was trying hard not to meet everyone's eyes.

"It's ok Tagger. I already know you got kids to think about."

Tagger choked back a sob as he looked his friend in the eyes.

He smiled and said, "Cats aren't kids, mate."

Nancy, Tagger, and Jonathan shared an awkward group hug. Awkward because these three adults rarely had any physical contact, and because three individuals hugging across a booth table is quite a challenge. The three of them had grown closer in that booth, drinking and commiserating, than they ever had going to the same office building for 1,825 days (approx).

This tender moment was interrupted by the shout of "FUCKER" and a loud smacking noise heard from the bar. The trio looked up and saw Jack wandering back over to them, rubbing his face.

"How'd that go?" Jonathan asked, smugly.

"She uhh... is not currently seeking employment. Anyways guys, what do you say? Ready to get going on the business adventure of a lifetime?"

Nancy shook her head, pounded back the last of her beer, wiped her mouth and declared, "No, but it's better than sitting here with nothing to do I guess."

Jack snapped both of his fingers into finger guns. "Hey I like the enthusiasm... I think."

Jonathan stood up. "That's a no from me, Jack. Quite frankly, you can go waste someone else's time for another five years."

He turned to his friends at the table.

"Have a good one guys... and don't let this fool push you around."

He waved, he turned on his heels, walked out of Carrie's into the afternoon sun, and closed the door behind him.

~ End of Part 3 ~