

3. ANTISOCIAL DISTANCING

I was *not* happy.

"Okay, what's it doing *now*?" I asked, suppressing a groan. Why did these things always crop up at the worst possible time? Bad enough to have someone's computer stuck in an endless cycle of failing to apply and failing to roll back a Windows update, but when they were adamant that they needed *that* particular machine *right now* 'cause they had a meeting with a client in ninety minutes and their presentation was on it...

"Still spinning." I could hear the tension in her voice. The feeling was mutual, but mine had more to do with keeping myself from mentioning that it wouldn't even be an issue if she'd just saved the dumb thing to her directory on the office fileserver as per our policy. That was the hell of it: we could write up all the policies and "best practices" we wanted, for Bryce to tout to prospective clients, but if people didn't take them *seriously*, what good was it!?

Of course, it didn't help that modern software "helpfully" assumes it knows where you keep your files better than you do and requires extra steps to save things anywhere else; and whosever fault this was, it changed nothing about the current situation. We were already an hour into this, and I was gaming out whether it wouldn't be faster to drive out to her house, pop the SSD out of her work laptop, and pull the file off it than to go through another four or five boot cycles as she grew increasingly frantic...

"Oh," she said suddenly.

"Huh? What's up?" I asked nervously. It didn't *sound* like a bad "oh," but any time you're flying blind on phone support and something you can't see changes, there's that little jolt of dread.

"I think it worked this time."

I tried to hold back the rush of relief, lest I jinx it by getting my hopes up. I did *not* want to have to slog through lunch-hour traffic for this, even the milder post-pandemic lockdown kind. "It's booting the rest of the way?"

"Um, it's asking for my password."

"Okay, go ahead and log in." I muted myself and let out a long, heavy sigh. If we'd gotten this far, we should be fine; even if she couldn't log in for some reason, with it finally booted I could grab her stupid document with our remote-management tool and, I didn't know, set up the presentation on her home PC or whatever. This was manageable; it'd be okay from here...

"It's not there."

I bit my lip. "*What's* not there?"

"My PowerPoint. It's not there!"

I'd jinxed it. Damn it all, I'd jinxed it. I began running through the options in my head, but I wasn't optimistic; we didn't back up workstations since everything was supposed to be kept on the server, we didn't have licensing for any live-undelete software worth a damn, and the odds of me successfully walking a junior partner at a lobbying firm through using offline file-recovery software over the phone were, to put it mildly, not great.

Okay, stay calm, I told myself, but it didn't help much. There was really no way around this; I'd always hated doing abrupt, spur-of-the-moment runs to client sites, but now I had to wonder if either of us were carrying something that might turn the other's life upside-down to boot...

At least it wasn't the senior partner. He got bent out of shape *enough* over things like his Outlook calendar taking forever to load because he had fourteen million appointments on it, and had no qualms about making our lives hell until they were resolved to his satisfaction. If *he* got turned into a cat-woman after a site visit he'd demanded, I had no doubt that (s)he'd be screaming for our heads.

Alright, so I'd have to drive out there. That'd probably take about forty minutes, leaving me a half-hour or so to recover the file, put it on whatever she had handy, and get it set up for the presentation. I'd need a disk caddy, my laptop, my screwdriver/bit set...and a mask, now...

"Oh," she said.

I was afraid to ask - had things somehow gotten *worse*? "...What?" I said, after a moment's hesitation.

"I found it."

"Uh, you did?" I tried not to let myself get too preemptively grateful, lest I jinx it again.

"It was in Roscoe's share. He wanted to give it a once-over yesterday."

Okay, never mind gratitude; maybe I'd skip straight to tearing my hair out. *The whole TIME!?* I groaned, internally; I wasn't even going to bother asking why she'd *removed* it from her share rather than making a copy. "Oh, that's great," I said, keeping my emotions clamped down and my voice polite and pleasant, trying not to hiss it through clenched teeth. "Was there anything else I could help you with?"

"No," she said, a bit curtly. "I *really* need to get going."

I rolled my eyes; it wasn't like I *wanted* to have long personal chats with clients, but it always rubbed me the wrong way when they acted like they couldn't get off the phone soon enough after getting what they wanted. "Sure thing. Have a good one!"

Well, at least *that* was over with. I took off my headset and let out a *long* sigh, feeling myself deflate like a balloon. I pulled up the IM client, wanting to vent to my coworkers, but I was leery of letting too much bile spill out over company channels, even if they were purely internal.[°] I took my lunch hour instead; I usually waited 'til later in the day, but the queue wasn't bad right now and I needed a break after all *that*.

[°] (I had no reason to suspect that Bryce actually monitored what we said in private chat, but once, on a particularly aggravating call, I'd added a *you stupid cow!* not very under my breath after hanging up, and it'd become office lore among my coworkers; it didn't take long after cooling my head to realize that that'd probably have gotten me a talking-to if we weren't in separate offices.)

I punched out, went into the kitchen and set my leftovers reheating, and slumped into the recliner, trying to open YouTube on my phone for soothing ambient audio or something, but I was too close to Parker's apartment to have functional reception; based on all the geegaws he wouldn't stop telling me about, he might have two or three streaming services running in different rooms, plus the "smart" fridge, "smart" faucet, "smart" coffeemaker, "smart" lights, "smart" door, "smart" treadmill, etc.[°] (Plus all the videoconferencing he was doing these days...)

[°] (He'd yet to mention it, but I wouldn't've been surprised to find "smart toilet" on that list.)

Honestly, I thought, I should set up an induction coil by the wall and harvest energy off him; if I made a tinfoil hat and wore it around the house, it'd probably *glow*. At least the cable hookup was in the master bedroom, so I could connect my computer directly and mostly circumvent the problem (aside from some light chatter on my work headset;) I hardly left the room anyway, lately, except to get food...

The microwave beeped, and I grabbed my lunch, poured a glass of milk, and retreated to my room, then donned my headphones and put on some music to chill out to while I ate. I thought about logging onto my usual MUD, but I was still too frazzled to properly get into it. I ended up browsing idly back through webcomics I'd already read instead, brooding slightly.

It'd almost been *fun* working from home, for the first week or so. I sure as hell didn't miss the commute, and it'd been easier on the Bug as well as saving me a pile of gas money; I could wear whatever I wanted outside of meetings and not feel weird; heck, if I didn't have to get up on-camera, I didn't even need to wear pants. And like 85% of my job was remote work anyway,[°] so it wasn't like it was an inconvenience. If it weren't for Bryce's insistence on client face time, I could've done this from the get-go and been no less productive...

[°] (10% was meetings.)

...except, well...it was kinda starting to drive me a little bit crazy.

Not in a chasing-the-neighbors-with-a-meat-cleaver way, but when I wasn't focused on anything specific, I increasingly got either twitchy and restless or bored and listless. I'd reflexively refresh webpages I'd just checked, fire up Minesweeper when I'd just rage-quit a minute before, get up and prowling around the apartment briefly before returning to what I was doing - or I'd sit there staring into space for minutes on end, start reading or working on things I'd meant to catch up on before losing all motivation a little ways in, *et cetera*.

Work helped a bit, in that it gave me something to focus on. I'd put in much more overtime than usual recently, just to keep myself busy - the automated-alerts queue had never *been* so clear, and in the middle of tax season our clients at the accounting agency appreciated me manning the phones after-hours - but that was hardly ideal; I didn't *want* to spend my whole life on the clock, and Bryce had gotten annoyed when my last paycheck posted. But what *else* was I supposed to do with my time? Socialize?

...It wasn't like I actually *wanted* to, but knowing I wasn't *supposed* to fraternize gave a weird sort of allure-of-the-forbidden to it. I knew it was one of those irrational counter-urges, and not what I really wanted, but sometimes I'd get to feeling a particular *kind* of twitchy and restless, and I worried that one of these days I was just going to tear out of the house and run manically down the street, accosting random strangers to say hi and ask how they'd been and what they were up to...

...and probably catching and spreading the virus across the whole neighborhood in the process. Was this how it *got* you? Had it evolved to exploit a design flaw in the fundamental human animal? *CVE-2020-0123, description: Human beings are cripplingly dependent on other human beings for social interaction and will engage in erratic and risky behavior if left isolated for too long. Affected versions: Freaking everybody, apparently.*

God, this couldn't go *on*. I *had* to figure out some way to keep myself busy, to engage my brain when I didn't have work to focus on and my usual reflexive time-killers weren't cutting it. I needed a *hobby*...besides the ones I already had but was getting bored of. Something that interested me in the abstract, but that I'd never really done before...?

My fingers skittered antsily across the keyboard as I turned it over in my mind. By the end of my lunch hour, I'd followed a half-dozen stray thoughts across whole chains of Wikipedia articles, opened a handful of Amazon listings, checked out several different introductory videos on YouTube, and-

It was when I opened up yet another new tab that I saw it. I'd forgotten to disable the suggestions page they'd added with the last browser update, and one of the preview thumbnails showed a map of the country - one dotted with fuzzy little splotches of red, like a Petri dish. I didn't have to look to know what it was, but I found myself clicking the link anyway; I found the view controls for the map, zoomed in on the state, the region...no. Not here...not yet.

I stared for a long minute, reflexively refreshed the page a couple times; then I closed the tab, set the browser to open up a blank page from now on, and tried to focus on what I'd been doing. Through the wall, I could hear hissing and spitting as two of Nicole's cats voiced their disagreement over something. This wasn't wildly unusual, but I felt myself twitch just slightly.

Not yet...