

Work

There are two employee parking lots - one that is far and one that is farther away. You have to park in the one that is farther away because you are late again. Well, not technically late, you may still be able to make it if you sprint. You don't - sprint that it is.

As you walk, you dig in your purse-sack for your badge. When you started this job, they took your picture and made the badge. They also gave you a small plastic necklace so that you can wear the badge at all times. You need this badge to unlock doors and to make sure that you don't get treated like a client. For security reasons, if you are caught without the badge you will be questioned, perhaps denied entrance to the building, or sent back home to get your badge. If you get sent home, the time will be deducted from your vacation time. "Security is everyone's responsibility", so you are supposed to be on the look out for people without badges. If you notice someone without a badge it is your responsibility to report them to Security or deny them access to the building.

You find your badge just before you get to the side door. There is another unfortunate woman still standing at the door with a cigarette dangling from her lips, bent over her purse-sack looking for her badge. She looks familiar to you. Someone

from the second floor maybe. You let her in. The elevator is too slow, so you take three flights of stairs to get to your cubicle. When you log into your phone, you are officially three minutes late.

You log onto your computer. Somehow, there are 10 e-mails waiting for you. You marvel at this. Some time between 4:58 pm yesterday and 8:04 am today, ten people have sent e-mails and some are marked with red envelopes to signify urgency. You open them, but don't read them. You remember the conversation, with your Supervisor, or team coach as they are called, about you not reading nor responding to e-mails in a timely manner. Lisa, your co-worker/team member, showed you how to check whether or not your sent e-mails have been opened.

"These Nazis around here are big on you reading their e-mail. They keep check on when the e-mail was opened and even if it doesn't require a response, they want you to send one. Say, you get an e-mail," she explained farther, "That says something like all employees are now required to move their car every hour on the hour. You have to send back an e-mail that says 'Okay.' This way they can say that you were informed and that you agreed." You started to giggle, but she wasn't joking.

Lisa comes to your cubicle often. She reminds you of someone who recently quit smoking. She chews the splintered meat around her nails and isn't afraid to joke about the 'man'.

Lisa is short and she is always careful to completely step inside the cube, so that people passing in the main hallway cannot see her. If someone passes on your row, then she usually has a stack of papers in her hand to make it look work related.

The cubes are about six by eight feet. Your desk takes one whole wall and over half of the other. You get a file cabinet and overhead shelves. Every once and a while there are debates about the color of the cubes. Your coach says that they're gray. You believe that they're a light brown. It's obvious they're light brown. The desk, carpet, file cabinet, phone, computer, and even the ceiling are all various shades of brown. It gives you the sensation of being covered up. If you step out of the cube, there is a high, rectangle window at the end of the hallway. It's actually across the main hallway and at the end of another set of cubes. Your cube is the center, the nucleus. But if you step out, you can still see the window. A patch of blue in all this brown.

Your phone rings. You say your spiel about a social service dedicated to meeting the needs of those it serve blah, blah...and give your name, but it doesn't matter. The person on the line is used to asking for services. You know this, because they don't bother to explain. "I need help with my water bill. I owe \$300. Do ya'll help with bills?"

You close your eyes as you began to explain, and to question, and try to problem solve. The closing of your eyes helps you concentrate better, it helps you bear it better. The water company had already checked the meter and she has no leaks. The woman doesn't want to go to the main agency that can help her; they make her wait too long. She doesn't want you to call the water company to discuss payment plans. She lives alone, but you can hear someone in the background feeding her what to say. She says that she is totally disabled, alone in the world. She's got to have water like every other human and what are you going to do to help her? Her voice hollows out and you know that your coach is listening in on the call. You ask if you can place her on hold. When you open your eyes, you see your college degree in a Family Dollar frame hanging from a paper clip in the cube's wall. You make a few random keystrokes, because you know that your coach can hear you typing from his cube. You go back on the line. You try to sound patient and compassionate. You offer to call the agency that can help her, but she says no. You ask who is there with her. Silence. A friend, she says. Good, you say, then he can go down to the agency for you. If you have any other trouble, please let us know. She says that he doesn't have transportation, no friends to take him, and no money to ride the

bus. You offer to make a call to an agency that will help with a bus pass.

"I thought that you helped people."

You list their options again. They terminate the call. Later, your team coach says that you missed an opportunity to do a home visit.

"What good would that do?"

He looks at you questioningly. When you turn, you're smiling because he's only interested in improving the home visit count but he'd never admit that.

At lunch, you go to the shopping strip where housewives like to shop. You get a bagel sandwich and eat it in your car. You want to feel like you are outside without the wind. Besides, it's better for people watching. You play the game that you and your college friend made up, but it's not as much fun alone. The game involves making up stories about people's lives. It was how you tried on different lives for yourselves.

There's a woman desperately fighting 60. She's wearing a crushed velvet leopard print jogging suit with gold high heel mules. Her dingy blonde hair is huge and well maintained. She's wearing enough make-up to mask any feeling. It's bright, vibrant make-up to give the impression of joy. Although some would see something sad, you see cleverness. She's been married

a bunch of times, always to someone better and richer. No doubt she was a beauty and her bedroom freakiness probably made it possible for her to have her pick of men. This last husband she will hold onto, because she knows that there will be no others. If he decides to leave her, then she will clean him out. He knows this. She'll ignore his infidelities and he'll show up for social and even family events. Your preacher says that love and commitment will keep a marriage together, but none of these are as strong as money.

If it wasn't for money, you wouldn't need this job. It takes a certain amount of money to live in the manner you want. You consider that if you marry well, then you may ease your burden. But that's a crab shoot, if ever there was one.

A batty client once told you that to lead an incredible life you'd need God, money, and a great love. To lead a remarkable life, you'll need God and some money. To lead a good life, you just need God. If you have none of these, then your just marking time in hell. When asked about her life, "At different times, different ones."

You see a bunch of well made up women pass by. None of them remarkable. You know that they are housewives with kids that are grown or nearly grown. They have no edges. You imagine that they lead lives similar to house cats.

There is a woman different from the others. She is wearing a sharp business suit. All lines and angles, she slices her way to the pharmacy in sure, determined steps. She is picking up birth control pills, vitamins, two types of blood pressure pills, and something to help her sleep at night. She must hurry back to the office there are people to watch and little hoops to set on fire for them to jump through.

A girl passes by pushing twin toddlers in a stroller. She has another child on a leash. He's maybe four. She's wearing jeans and a shirt that says 'I hear voices, they don't like you.' One toddler starts to cry and the other joins in. She peeks at them, but keeps moving. The little boy trips on his leash. He falls down on all fours, but he only whimpers. The mother picks him up and dusts him off. She kisses the palms of his hand. She carries him on her hip and pushes the stroller the rest of the way to the store. You can't make up a story for her, but you hope that it's at least good.

You get back to work late. It seems darker in the building, but it's probably all that brown. One of your team members is sharing a client's situation with the group. He needs ideas, he claims, but what he really needs is to write that he consulted in his notes. We all agree that he has done everything humanly possible. We began to discuss the latest episode of "Friends". None of us watch serious dramas;

they're too long, too intense, too many real problems with fake solutions. We have jobs for that crap.

The Director of Team Coaches walks by and looks at us in a huddle. A couple of team members pass knowing looks. Two scurry back to their cubes. You want to know how the episode ended because you fell asleep. The discussion continues. The coach passes through the huddle on his way to the restroom. He clears his throat. He doesn't like to be the 'man', but it's his job. We shuffle back to our cubes.

You open your e-mails and choose to read the one from the coach titled vacation. Because it's Friday, he has totaled all of your tardiness and it comes to fourteen minutes, for which you will have to turn in a vacation slip. In your last private coaching, he had a printout of all your tardiness. He said that you had the most of the team. You asked if there was a prize for that. There's a second e-mail that says vacation. It's offering one vacation day, if you give blood to the American Red Cross five times in the next 10 months. On your vacation slip, you write 'blood time' in the explanation box. The team's administrative assistant brings it back to you. She steps completely inside the cube. She is perfectly round, so she takes up too much space. She points to the explanation and wags her finger. She grins at you like you are a naughty two year old. She has been with the agency 21 years. You overheard her

talking with another Lifer, as they are called, about retirement.

"I only got to make 4 more years, then I'm out of here."

"I think that I'll make 2 and then buy back my last year. I'm ready to get on with it, you know?"

"Yeah, I know."

Lifers are very careful about the rules. They warn you about watchers and things in writing. They mean well, they want to help you be a Lifer. The trick is to make it your fifth year, then you're vested. Your contributions to retirement will be matched. You imagine that being 'vested' involves a strait jacket. At any rate they got you. People find it hard to leave then, they don't know how any other place works. You don't know if you can make it. You don't know if you want to. You change the vacation slip.

It's the afternoon hours that seem the longest. There are many calls. Two were food referrals. You think that the first person that calls needs it, because they try to tell you their whole life story leading up to why they have no food. The second call is from someone who knows services. You are supposed to get an explanation, but your supervisor has been at lunch for the past two hours and the whys and what fors doesn't really matter. You call the two referrals in. The one that you thought was a novice used the pantry service one week ago and

the experienced one used it 89 days ago. Technically, they're supposed to wait 90 days but you get them to bend the rule. You learn something new everyday.

You never take a morning break, so in the afternoon you can take 20 whole minutes. You put on your walking shoes and walk around the premises. You walk fast. You decide to walk two laps today, because you need to feel things pounding in you. You head back to your cube - late.

You check your e-mails. You open the one that's from your coach titled new policy. He stated that only one person was logged in at 8 am; therefore, the new log in time will be 7:50 am. Please respond by e-mail only.

You realize that you still have your walking shoes on, so you change them, they're in direct violation of the dress code. You stare at the e-mail. You type - The agency's policy states that all employees must be at work by 8 am. Every effort will be made to comply with that policy. He quickly sends you a response. You delete it without opening it.

There is an agency folklore that an employee many, many years ago worked a full day and then at 5 pm, he turned off his computer, stood up at his desk, and said in a loud voice - "I'm not coming back here any more." And left. People, even Lifers, share this story with wonder in their voices. It is told like gossip, but it's clear that he is the hero.

Your clock says 4:59 pm. You can't log out until 5 pm or that one minute becomes a part of your tardiness count. A minute can be a long time. You can think many thoughts, play out many scenarios. You imagine a life for the hero. Did he start a business, go back to school, maybe he sells things at the flea market and paints during the week. You hope that it's incredible. You need it to be. 5:00 pm. You hit the button, stand up, and go home.