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The Carpool

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THE CARPOOL

The morning was veiled in clever normalcy. A dusty gray mini-van eased from the parking spot in front of the busy coffee shop and paused for a red light at Paxton Street. Cars of bitter, silent corporate employees with briefcases strewn across their backseats cluttered the town's brick roads. Zombies in suits and skirts crisscrossed the streets, squinting and cursing the ascending sun whose brilliant rays, to them, merely signified another day in hell.

Inside the mini-van, however, festivities were in full throttle. Lisa, the striking new blonde in Accounting and the designated carpool hostess, cheerfully distributed cappuccinos to the anxious passengers who waited impatiently like baby birds for their sustenance.

"Hey, Lou," she teased, "This brew's for you, buddy."

"Give it to me, quick!" he clowned, violently lurching forward from the back of the van to grab the cup, jostling Bob and Marla, who sat in front of him, in the process. "I'm slipping into a coma here!" he announced dramatically. Lou's free hand got stuck in Marla's stiff orange hairdo as he tried to slide back into his seat. "Damn, Marla! What's in your hair? Varnish?" Unable to sit, Lou hung forward, briskly

shaking his entangled hand as he haphazardly tried to sip from his brimming Styrofoam cup. Marla shrieked and jerked abruptly, causing the coffee to splash into her hair

and stream down the nape of her white neck. Obscenities quickly followed; mostly Marla raging about how this type of common behavior was typical of a lowly mailroom supervisor like Lou, or as she hailed him, "King of the Idiots." Bob squished himself against his window and pretended to read a newspaper that he held up high like a barrier against the ridiculous outside world. Lisa tossed her platinum mane and giggled in a high-pitched chirpy manner that usually irritated people, but was easily compensated by her overwhelming beauty.

Carl, captain of this ship until next Monday when they'd evolve to Lou's old station wagon, smiled wistfully at the scene. The coffee drama nearly forgotten, Marla struggled to apply her makeup while Lou needled that her efforts were futile because "cosmetics don't help old hags and they should just accept it." Bill continued to hide beneath his newspaper tent while Lisa bantered excitedly about an upcoming Saks shoe sale, clean sunlight sparkling off her shiny lips. Carl nodded and replied with words like "right," "yeah," and "interesting," as he tried to keep up with everything and

everyone. He stopped in front of Byron Financial Corporation's twenty-seven-story glass castle and theatrically announced, "Okay, ladies and germs, we've reached our illustrious destination - the incredible BFC - where I know we'll each enjoy another day of pure bliss that will, as always, make weekends regretful. Roadside service all the way for you fine people. See ya here at five ten." The bemused passengers tumbled out of the van and headed toward the concrete steps that bordered a flashy gray marble fountain. Marla, oblivious to the large brown stain on the back of her white blouse, jaunted toward the entrance as Lou smirked and pointed, shooting a thumbs-up sign to Carl before sagely following her inside.

Lisa remained a moment and protested, "Carl, you don't have to drop us off in front like this. We can walk from the garage, too. It's not like a little exercise is gonna kill us." Carl grinned and shook his head, "Only the best for you guys. You'd better get going, Lisa. The guys in Accounting probably only show up because of you. BFC's stockholders can't afford a mass employee walkout, you know, so try to be considerate of others in the future." Lisa whapped Carl's shoulder affectionately and exited the van. Jones, VP of Human

Resources, shot an appreciative glance at her derriere as he followed her up the steps and into the massive tower.

Carl drove past the parking garage and continued on another mile before reaching the little park he had discovered early last week. He emerged from his van and gratefully approached a half-full newspaper machine; change in one hand, coffee in the other. Finally, he ambled toward the battered, peeling green bench beneath the inviting oak canopy, about twenty feet from the tranquil pond's edge. Carl prayed that the caffeine would hurry into his tired veins as he reluctantly began the tedious task of dissecting the classified ads.

* * *

That alligator had designs on those ducks. Carl had noticed the gator briefly when he glanced up from the paper several minutes before, but had been too engrossed to pay much attention. Now he caught himself peering at it for probably the fourth time in a single minute. The page he'd been scanning was creased and flapped over from his constant glimpses.

The alligator's path across the pond was infinitely more engaging than the section on Information Services personnel. Hundreds of professionally worded advertisements extended the same self-serving invitation:

Come to us only if you're experienced, educated, prepared to toil endlessly to make us money, and resolved to become an invisible molecule in our galaxy where no one will notice your presence or absence.

The alligator was gaining on the group of ducks at the center of the pond. The mother mallard quacked and floated deftly across the miry surface while her little ones followed in a tight formation. One of the fuzzy yellow ducklings lingered behind, sucking at an organism it had encountered. The gator's mouth opened up like an old pair of first-rate scissors before a swift cut. The duckling failed to notice its precarious position until the shade of the huge mouth's roof darkened its path, but then the teeth crashed down and the alligator sank from view. The mother duck quacked furiously as she escorted her remaining offspring to the mucky grass at the pond's bank.

Carl watched all of this in total horror, his newspaper fallen to the damp ground. He couldn't believe that a living, breathing being - so new to this world - had been whacked right in front of him. Recounting the grisly scene, he wondered if perhaps the duckling had been too slow or overcurious. No, he decided, it had

merely done what it had been taught or what it knew by instinct and now it was toast.

The alligator hadn't resurfaced, and by Carl's watch, four minutes had passed. He shook his head in disgust and kicked the newspaper away from him. The tiny, cottony fellow had stepped out of line so he'd been wiped out. Too hell with "survival of the fittest"; it was too cold a philosophy for Carl. He felt a profound kinship toward that late, unsuspecting creature.

Carl didn't know what he would do now that he was unemployed. He loathed the idea of continuing life as just another suit in computers. He'd paid off his van, but his mortgage - well, that was a long way off. Carl no longer had to make "corporate money" because he didn't need much. A roof, wheels, and interesting people would ensure his happy survival.

Carl thought despondently of his carpool mates. He'd been riding with most of them for a year now, and truthfully, the only reason he even dragged himself out of bed in the mornings was to be around them. They were a *family*, for chrissakes, except for Lisa, who was new, but she was quickly growing on him. Look at Lou and Marla: They had a turbulent friendship, all right, but she had given him sincere advice on how to propose to his

fiancée. Bill seemed unbearably quiet, but he edited all of Lou's memos, and could recommend at least two books on any subject one was interested in. In fact, Bill had almost been upper management, but they decided he didn't have enough "personality" for the job.

"Screw 'em!" Carl yelled to Bill over beers at happy hour. "We didn't want to share you with the real world anyway, buddy. You're too much of a genius for those jerks and they're just pissed you don't wanna play golf with their sorry asses!" Marla ruffled Bill's hair and spoke softly to him as Lou slapped his slumped back soundly before calling for another pitcher in his honor.

Carl didn't want to screw up everybody's plans by telling them the news yet. If no one found out before Friday, he would tell everyone that day on the journey home. He was not looking forward to it.

* * *

By two o'clock, Carl had polished off an oily Italian sub and decided to take a break. He removed his wire-framed glasses and set them down on the bench alongside his necktie and the newspaper, now graced with abundant graffiti. He unbuttoned his shirt a bit, leaned back, and closed his eyes. What could he do that he would enjoy? It seemed a specialized degree was required for any job these days and all of his were computer

related. He guessed that was his punishment for riding the "wave of the future". In fact, Carl wished a tidal wave would spring out of that pond and put him out of his misery, or that the monster alligator would saunter up to his bench for a more substantial meal.

He sat up straight and wiped the sweat from his forehead with a greasy napkin. The sky, the trees, and water were blurry, like multicolored TV snow. This was usually the moment Carl slapped his glasses back on, but he resolved that he was entitled to shun reality for a while. He gazed pensively across the fuzzy water, realizing he was so blind he would probably miss seeing the alligator all together, now. All the jobs in the paper were clones of his former position: code reader and writer stuffed into an unfriendly gray cubicle where even family photographs were prohibited, as they were considered "unprofessional." A flitting image of a hell comprised of endless blazing cubes with Jones as Satan sprang to mind, and Carl chuckled lightly.

A large mass moved at the other end of the pond. Carl put his glasses on and observed that a city bus had stopped at the other end of the park. The stocky driver got out and plopped down on a rickety bench that was directly opposite Carl; only the pool of shiny water

separated them. The driver removed his hat and set it on the bench. He began to eat a sandwich he had taken out of a crinkly brown bag and opened a can of soda. The bus waited nearby like a patient elder, its constant mechanical chugging as natural as breath. The driver stood up, stretched, and strolled around a bit before crumpling his soda can and chucking it back into the bag. Carl had a feeling this guy heard a ton of stories during his day. Hell, he was probably driving around a real life soap opera and didn't even know it.

Then it struck Carl like a cast iron skillet. The driver put his hat on and began walking toward his bus. Carl departed his bench in a flash, his necktie and other articles forgotten. He flew around the pond toward the bus driver, screaming like a frantic woman for him to hold on a minute. Carl laughed gleefully as he sprinted toward the confused man in the muddy brown uniform who waited between the bus's twin folding doors.

