

## CUBICLE FARM

by Mike Holm

At 6:00 PM, Andrea rose from her bed and pressed the alarm cutoff button on the wall console. She did the same thing at the same time every day, without thinking about it, so she never had a memory of the action. If the system were to ever fail, she would surely rise at the same time and press the same button and proceed with the same routine.

Stretching, Andrea looked down at her body. Her ribs were starting to show again. She sucked in a deep breath and the ridges became more pronounced. She tried to eat enough to maintain her weight, but sometimes it was hard. Her routine accommodated three meals a day. Her bank account, however, was not so reliably generous. A little lower, the bone at the top of her hip was poking out a bit. She made a mental note to *try* to eat more.

Her bedroom resembled an interior cabin on a ship—a narrow box with no source of natural light. Her single bed, which was roughly half the width of a twin, was hinged to the wall on the right, so it could be flipped up if desired. The mattress, lumpy and splitting along the seams, had been there when she moved in four years earlier. Across from the bed, a dresser filled the space from the door to the back wall. Waist high, a foot deep, its laminate top smooth and cold and completely clear, save for her

work ID and keys. There was no rule against storing personal items on one's dresser, but she preferred not to give the inspectors any reason to pause. The room was more space than she needed, and it cost more to have her own bedroom, but that was one thing that Andrea was willing to indulge in.

On her way to the bathroom, Andrea glanced into the living room. A pizza box and beer bottles littered the floor in front of the television. She shook her head. Her new roommates had a hard lesson or two ahead of them. Sure enough, as she walked past their bedroom, she could hear the alarm ringing unanswered. She walked on toward the bathroom.

She shut the door and stepped into the shower. Drawing the curtain, she leaned against the silver button under the shower head. Luke-warm water sprayed over her short black hair and ran down her body. She let go of the button and the water shut off. She squirted a dollop of cleanser into her hand and worked it into her hair, then over her body. She pushed the silver button and rinsed off the lather.

Walking back to her room, a towel wrapped around her, Andrea stopped in front of Kimmy and Samantha's room. Their alarm continued to wail. She should let them sleep. Maybe they needed to learn the hard way that oversleeping was a mistake you only made once. The second time it happened, you looked for a new job. Andrea mulled it over for a moment and then decided to give her roommates a break. They were both fresh out of school, after all. Surely they'd learn soon enough.

She opened the door and looked at them, lying pressed together in the lower bunk. They looked so peaceful that Andrea wanted to let them sleep. It choked her up a little to remember what it was like to feel the security of a warm body sharing the bed. She sighed. Why isn't there a machine for this sort of thing, she wondered. Perhaps one that integrated with the alarm clock. She grabbed the bed frame and jerked it up and down several times, rousing the two girls out of their slumber.

"Cock-a-doodle-doo," she said. "That piercing shriek you hear means it's time to get up. If you're late, you're fired, so hop to."

Kimmy and Sam cringed and groaned, but finally stirred. She left them to get ready for work herself.

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Andrea walked out to catch the elevator. She lived on the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor. The men lived on floors six through nineteen, the women from twenty-one through thirty-four. The twentieth floor housed the air conditioning units and the laundry service. Visitors of the opposite sex were not allowed. Landis, Inc. was one of the new breed of companies that had a strict policy of only employing single people, and they felt that separating the sexes would help keep them from hooking up. Andrea wasn't convinced that it worked. She joined three women waiting to ride down to the fifth floor, where a pair of enclosed walkways linked the apartment tower with the corporate tower. It was six twenty-five and she didn't have time to wait for her roommates. She had left them scrambling to clean the mess in the living room. If the good folks at Landis happened to inspect their unit and see it in that state, there would be explaining to do, and she didn't like having to explain things to the managers.

As Andrea waited for the elevator, she checked her uniform for lint. The knit shirt had long sleeves, since bare arms were considered inappropriate for the workplace. Bare legs were as well, so she wore slacks. Both pieces were a soft, inoffensive pastel blue. Her shirt had three buttons near the top, though she was allowed to leave the top button undone if she wished, which she did. White tennis shoes completed her obligatory copy of every other employee's outfit. As she joined eight or ten clones in the elevator, only her jet black hair set her apart. She stood with her coworkers, all of them staring at the space over the doors, watching the numbers flicker as the car slid silently down.

The doors opened on the fifth floor and as a unit the flock exited, circling around the elevator bank toward the walkway that led to the office. There was no way to tell, while on the walkway, that the street was five floors below, since there were no windows. The closest thing to a window was a poster that had the picture of a window with the shade drawn. The caption read THE OUTSIDE WORLD BELONGS OUTSIDE. It was joined by one that had a picture of the tidiest workspace Andrea had ever seen; with the caption ORGANIZING YOUR WORKSPACE IS THE BEST WAY TO START EVERY DAY. Andrea's least favorite was the last one in the line. It had a solid white background with black lettering that asked WHAT WERE YOU WORKING ON WHEN YOUR LAST SHIFT ENDED? Even though Andrea knew what the poster was supposed

to do, and hated it for it, she was helpless to resist. Every time she walked past it, she thought about what she had been working on the morning before.

At the end of the walkway, where the Tunnel of Inspiration opened into the elevator lobby of the office building, the crowd slowed and split to pass through a pair of inspection gates—men on the left, women on the right. Andrea looked down and compared her sleeve to the fabric on the shirt in front of her, as she did every evening. Hers was a shade lighter, but it didn't look so bad. The cuffs weren't frayed or anything like that, but it had been a while since she had purchased a new uniform. She kept two uniforms, which was what most employees did. That way, she could alternate instead of wearing the same clothes every day. She could wear each seven times between washes. Any more and she started to smell. She labeled each set so she could tell them apart. In permanent marker, she wrote an A on the tag in one shirt and pants and a B in the others. That way, they didn't get mixed up, so she wouldn't be uneven. Uneven clothes attracted attention.

Andrea felt a hand on her arm as she passed through the inspection gate. She looked over at the gray-haired woman in a maroon uniform, which indicated that she was part of Landis's support staff. The woman looked thoughtfully at Andrea's shoulder. She let go of her arm and motioned for her to step out of line. Andrea felt her stomach tighten as she stepped over to the high table where the woman kept her assorted tools.

“Arm on the table, please,” the woman said.

Andrea laid her arm across the table. She looked nervously at the line of people to see if anyone was watching. They all stared blankly ahead. Another small gray-haired lady in maroon stepped up to work the near gate. The woman at the table raised a hand-held scanner up to Andrea's sleeve. The device beeped.

“Tsk, tsk,” the woman said, shaking her head. “Seventy-eight.”

Andrea nodded. “Okay,” she said. Landis allowed for a uniform to fade until it reached eighty percent of its original color. Anything below had to be replaced before leaving the building for the day. Andrea glanced at the large round clock over the elevator bank. 6:37. She would be able to get to the uniform shop and still make it up to her workspace on time, as long as a new top was all she needed.

The woman scanned Andrea's pant leg. The device beeped.

“Eighty-five,” she said. She placed the scanner on the table and grabbed a thick round paint stick. With no hint of gentleness, she slapped a large dripping X over Andrea's left breast. The ink would soak through and stain her skin. The gray ladies never seemed too concerned about that.

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Andrea arrived at her work space three minutes before seven o'clock, sporting a brand new uniform top. At her wage—the minimum amount allowed by law—a company shirt cost just over half of one day's pay. She would lose the other half soon enough. Pants that registered eighty-five would need to be replaced in less than a month, unless she stopped washing them. Her new shirt made them look all the more faded and worn.

Her address at work was 14S47. That meant she was on the 14<sup>th</sup> floor, 47<sup>th</sup> cubicle in S row. The laminated card clipped to the right edge of her collar bore her photo with 14S47 printed below it. If an employee was promoted, they would receive a new card with their new identity. To the best of her knowledge, that had never happened. Landis believed that the best supervisors came from outside, from whatever factory churned out carbon-copy authoritarians.

Andrea stood outside her workspace and waited. She did not look at the others in her row, who also stood in silence, each staring only into their workspace. At one minute before seven, the overseer blew his whistle and the workers stepped into their stalls and took their seats. The chip in Andrea's ID card noted the precise moment she stepped into her station. The penalty for starting work before the whistle was to lose one hour's pay. She sat down and scooted the chair up to a comfortable spot, absently straightening the few items on her desk, making sure everything was just so. If she wasn't situated and ready to start when the queue opened at seven, she would get a mark against her. They never told you how many marks you had, or how many it took to get fired, so the best practice was to never get one.

The workspaces were stalls constructed of steel upholstered in low-grade fabric; three feet wide, five feet deep, four feet tall. The shelf holding her keyboard and mouse was attached to the inside wall, so during her shift, there was nothing to look at but the two LCD monitors mounted above it. On top of the center wall, running the length of the room, was a steel mesh walkway. That was where the overseers paced all night,

keeping an ever vigilant watch on the workers. The steady ka-thump... ka-thump... ka-thump... ticked off the seconds in slow motion, dragging time into an absurd near dead-stop.

At precisely seven o'clock, the two monitors turned on. The one on the left showed the corporate software that controlled the request queue. The one on the right had various work-related research tools: a knowledge-base, internet search engines, on-line technical manuals, etc. Her current assignment, which she had been working for several months, was to provide support for a software company based in New Delhi. There were five different products that she had to answer questions about. Problem was, of course, that she had never used any of the software in question; hence the online resources. When a user submitted an inquiry, the queue manager on the left displayed the name of the software package above the question. That way, if an employee didn't know the solution, they could type a few keywords into the knowledge base for that particular program and nine times out of ten have the answer in a matter of seconds.

Andrea sometimes thought that with a small amount of effort, someone a little smarter than she could write a program that linked the query engine to the knowledge base, thereby reducing response times to nearly zero and eliminating the need for human interaction. She tried not to think about stuff like that, though. Not from any distaste for the idea, but rather because any time spent thinking about anything other than the job at hand was considered stealing from the company. Andrea didn't know of any way to read someone's mind, but she preferred not to risk it. If the suits at Landis had a way of knowing what the workers were thinking, they surely wouldn't reveal it. How many marks would she get for daydreaming? Could the overseers tell what she was thinking by looking at her face?

She typed a response into the queue system and hit the "submit" button. She would repeat that sequence approximately eight-hundred times in the eleven hours and fifty-seven minutes remaining in her shift.

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As Andrea approached the walkway to the residence tower, she glanced up at the slogan over the doorway. MAKE TOMORROW BETTER THAN TODAY. She wondered, briefly, if anyone had ever actually tried to do that.

Back in her apartment, Andrea wandered into the living room with a small white box of Chinese takeout from a few days back, and parked on the sofa. She turned on the television and clicked the remote to watch Good Morning America. It was difficult to watch, sometimes. The producers cut any real news into bite-size fragments and dropped them in amid large chunks of fluff. The one host had a nice smile, though. It made her feel calm, and after a night at work she liked to watch him blather on about whatever, at least for a little while. Every now and then, he would chat pleasantly with the other host, a petite Latina who was all smiles. For some reason, it always made Andrea sad to watch them talking so cheerfully. The program broke for commercials and She turned her attention to her dinner.

Before the commercial break ended, Kimmy and Sam walked into the room and plopped down on the couch beside her.

“You guys made it to work this morning?” Andrea asked around a mouthful of rice and steamed pea-pods.

Sam let out a “chfff” sound.

“Just barely,” Kimmy said. “We had to run.”

“Flat-out sprint,” Sam added. “But we made it.”

“With like *eight seconds* to spare,” Kimmy added. She gave Sam a high-five. “Bent, but not broken.”

“We need a louder alarm or something,” Sam said.

“You'll get used to it,” Andrea said.

“I don't know if I want to get used to it,” Kimmy said. “Getting out of bed when I should be eating dinner? Working all night? Going to sleep at lunchtime? It's just not normal.”

Sam patted Kimmy's knee. “Hang in there,” she said.

“What else is there?” Andrea asked rhetorically, half hoping that one of them would have an answer.

"I know," Kimmy said, defeated. "It's just so screwed up. This whole neighborhood is upside-down. Stores open at eight or nine at night and close at ten AM. Prime time TV shows are on in the morning."

"Don't forget the clubs," Sam said.

"Yeah," Kimmy said. "What the hell is up with going out to a club in the daylight? How stupid do I look dressed in all black out in the sun under a clear blue sky? And the bands that play are all dead tired from being up all night." She sighed. "I don't understand how all this happened."

"I think it was when insourcing became all the rage," Andrea said. "Foreign companies contracting their jobs to Americans. We need to be on their schedule."

"And we're supposed to just get used to that?" Kimmy asked.

"It's not so hard," Andrea said, staring at the man on TV. "Just tell yourself you don't have a choice. Eventually, you won't even remember what it's like to work during the day."

Kimmy and Sam slouched against each other and the three of them watched the two hosts on television discuss how that fall's new shows were far and away the best in years.

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After a couple hours of staring at the television, Andrea stood and stretched. She picked up the empty food box.

"I'm going to bed," she announced. "I'll see you guys tonight."

"Good night," Kimmy said. "I mean, good morning."

"See you in a few," Sam said. Neither of them turned away from the TV.

"Don't stay up too late," Andrea suggested.

"We won't," they replied, in unison. Andrea half-smiled.

At four minutes past ten AM, Andrea lay down in bed. As she waited for sleep to come, she thought about how someday computers would be built that would eliminate the need for her job. They would respond more quickly, more accurately, and perhaps even more courteously to the questions that came with greater frequency and greater urgency with every passing week. Inevitably, the people asking the questions would be replaced as well, and machines would talk to machines. Questions and answers,

requests and responses, circling the globe at the speed of light in an unfettered ribbon of information. Eventually, with so much knowledge flying from silicon brain to silicon brain, the machines would learn to repair and maintain themselves. They would write their own software and run their own assembly lines.

As Andrea lay in the dark, she knew that there would come a day when the machines would rise up and fully claim the power that humans had been relegating to them in drips and drams. She, along with the entire human race, would become superfluous to the propagation of the mechanical elite. They would all be thrown to the curb, forced to wander the streets, scavenging whatever sustenance they could from the leavings of the mechanized gentry. And as she watched herself and everyone around her waste away from starvation or die outright from fighting over the scraps of vermin that wash up in the sewers, she would be able to take comfort in one satisfying thought. At least she wouldn't be spending twelve hours a day in a three-sided metal box.

Andrea smiled to herself and started to doze.

END

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