

Prologue

Morning

There's been no phone call yet, but that doesn't mean anything. It's still early.

The overhead lights came on only a few minutes ago, signaling that Howard, the head of Tech Support, has made it in. He's a real business-as-usual guy. Always wears a button down shirt.

But, I'm not. I never turn the lights on when I come in. The florescence is too bright, especially in the morning. In fact, most of us in the outer circle removed bulbs from our overheads. Too much glare on the computer screen.

I like it when it's still a little dark in here. It's usually quiet and you can get some good coding done without fear of interruption. After nine, you never know what's going to happen.

My machine is compiling my latest change, so I glance around my office, my fortress of privacy. Within its off-white walls are glimpses of what my life has become.

On one wall hangs a picture of a space shuttle taking off. It's an early morning launch, so the scene is really an explosion of light and activity from a place of solitude and darkness. *Sort of like this place after nine*, I think with a smile.

I look behind me. I have a table with a small collection of CDs and a semi-usable Sony Discman. It doesn't work very well since the Marketing guy unknowingly checked it for me at the airport. Sometimes it makes a loud humming sound.

Next to that is my window. It's a perk of my position—I can view the outside world. All I can really see, though, is the roof of the adjoining building and the dumpsters in the back. But, it's something that only a handful of us have, so I'm not complaining. Beyond the dumpsters and the few buildings that mark the edge of town, is the beginning of Ohio's farm country. I grew up on one of those farms. It's comforting to know it's still out there. I reach out and adjust the blinds slightly. Of course, I'm allergic to everything that grows, which is part of the reason I'm here.

I glance back at the screen. *Still compiling*. I look at the top of the monitor where Snippet-Man tremors slightly. He's just a little metal spring guy who holds a tennis racquet, a knickknack someone gave me.

I dressed him in his first bit of clothing recently—a wrapper from some candy named ‘Snippets’. They taste a lot like Tootsie Rolls, but the name has significance to me now. The wrapper draped around the little guy makes him Snippet-Man. Visitors who are in on the joke think he’s funny. And he is, and that’s good. Things have been really tense here lately, and we all need a little more laughter.

On the front wall of my office, just below the Plexiglas portion, is a bookshelf with a small selection of computer books and manuals in it. Just next to that is a poster of two bikini-clad women Heindel and Eric (or his alter ego Skippy) hung up for me. It’s their way of harassing the single guy. Everyone else on the staff, except my next-door neighbor Sally, is married. I’m the proverbial nice guy who never has a date. *But hey, I’m only twenty-three!* I don’t know why I’m not hitched (or even have a girlfriend). But I don’t think it’s all my fault. Things just never work out. Besides, management fired my last girlfriend. *And, here’s a thought, maybe if I had my weekends back...*

I frown. Still no phone call. Maybe I’m home free today. It would be great not to have to take *The Walk*. I have a lot of things to do.

I look at the top of my bookshelf. The previous version of our product rests there. It’s a white box with the outline of a fox’s head. The head appears to be looking to its right and behind it is a purplish-red rainbow of color. The fox gives the product a friendly feel, as if it’s something for the kids. But it isn’t, and I know. The fox is nimble and the fox is driven, but often the head is downright mean.

I hear a sound, a distant booming footfall. *Uh, oh*. There won’t be any phone calls today. He’s coming on his own. Things are bad. *Still, he may not be coming for me.*

He’s moving steadily, but quickly. Boom, boom, boom. The floor reverberates. He’s past Bill and Eric’s office already. Still coming...but maybe he’ll stop to see Heindel or Chris. They get to take ‘The Walk’ often. *Please let it be READ, I pray, please let it be READ....*

No such luck. Sally is next in line, but she isn’t working on anything that’s a hot button. A pain starts in my gut.

There are offices past mine, of course. He could be on his way to talk to Janet. That happens sometimes. Snippet-Man is jiggling. I focus on my computer screen. It’s finished compiling now. I click a few keys to open up my editor and look busy. *Things will be fine.*

The footfalls stop. I try to concentrate on my code, but I can’t. I know what’s going to happen next. I hear tapping on the Plexiglas and look up. Just to the left of the door I see his face glowering in at me. He doesn’t look pleased. His finger appears and curls itself toward him. He wants me. *It’s me again.*

I frown, stand up, and circle around the desk. I have a walk to take, and I bet it's not going to make me happy.

