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## THE RUT

By Michael Natale

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I was alive when I got in the car to drive to work today, I was sure of it. But now I think I'm mostly dead. I should have noticed when the parking garage attendant looked at my ID badge, then flicked his eyes curiously back at me. He did it twice, as if the faces didn't match.

"You feeling all right, Mister..." the guard glanced again at the ID, "Mister Crane?"

"Sure," I replied back. Why wouldn't I be? It was just another day at the grind.

The guard handed me the ID and pointed at my face. "You...you've got a little something..."

I glanced in the rear view, and was shocked to see the ghastly image staring back at me. Sunken cheeks, mottled skin, red-rimmed eyes. What was that? Some kind of yellowish pus was leaking from behind one of my eyelids.

Gross!

I brushed it away with my thumb. "Yeah, just tired I guess."

The guard hurried to buzz the gate up. Too quickly, looking back on it, but I was still in the dark at that point. I remember thinking maybe I had caught the flu. Marjorie from Accounting had been in my cube a lot last week, and she'd been out sick since last Monday with it.

Other than the pus thing though, I felt all right. I was a bit tired, even after the coffee, but otherwise I was doing okay. I took the elevator to the fourth floor, swiped myself in, and went to my cube. As my powerbook booted up, I felt another glob of the pus dribble from my eye.

Wiping it away, I snatched a tissue from the box I kept in my cube and cleaned my finger. That was disgusting! I pitched the fouled tissue into the trash, and saw that my laptop had finished booting.

As I logged in, the helpdesk software started up automatically. The queue window appeared and began to list all the open helpdesk tickets. Sixteen new tickets opened since Friday. Don't these people ever go home?

My cell phone rang. March of the Imperial Stormtroopers sounded distant and tinny from my hip. I pulled it from the belt holster and checked the caller ID. Hugh Mossman?

I leaned back in my chair to see the man in the cube opposite me. There was Hugh, on his cell phone, pretending not to see me. I pushed the receive button, staring straight at him.

"Hello Hugh."

"Tommy, this is Hugh, how are you doing?" He didn't wait for me to answer. "Hey Tom, something's not right. I think the network is down or maybe its just Outlook. I've been here a half an hour and I haven't received any email."

Hugh still stared at the ceiling and cradled his cell, as if he were somehow unaware that the IT group shared a cube row with Business Development.

I played along, as always. "Hugh, its seven o'clock on Monday morning. Isn't it possible you just don't have any email yet?"

Hugh would not be dissuaded. "I don't think so. The problem has to be the network. I've been expecting several important emails since Friday, and besides, I always have new messages first thing Monday. So something is broken. When can you have this fixed?"

I paused, staring at Hugh and trying to will him to turn and face me. After all, I was only ten feet away and practically in his line of sight. All he had to do was turn his head. I know that Hugh knew I was right there, staring at him. Hugh resisted my mental kung-fu. "Fine. Open a helpdesk ticket and I'll look into it."

A confused silence issued from Hugh's end of the call. "Yeah, alright. What's the web address to the helpdesk thing again?"

"I'll send it to you," I told him and hung up the phone. I sent him the URL for the web ticketing system via email. A moment later I heard the musical chime from Hugh's laptop announcing that he had new unread messages.

He'd figure that one out eventually.

Sure enough, about ten minutes later, Hugh's phone number appeared on my caller ID again. "Hello, Hugh."

Hugh was happy. "Email is back online, Chief. I just got your message. Thanks! Do you still want me to open a ticket?"

I wheeled myself back out from behind my cube wall and stared at Hugh. He still refused to acknowledge I was there. "Why would you need to open a ticket if the problem is solved?"

Hugh was perplexed. "So no, then?"

"Nope, I'm all set, Hugh." I clicked the disconnect button.

I felt another dribble of something sticky slowly ooze out of the corner of one eye. I stained another tissue with the stuff, and examined it. The stuff was bright yellow and thick, like vanilla

pudding. I sniffed it. It smelled awful, like the liquid that collected at the bottom of the garbage cans in the garage.

I had no idea what was happening to me. I felt fine but this stuff in my eye was making me a bit nervous. The strange part was, my eye didn't hurt at all. I told myself if something was really wrong, there would be pain, and there wasn't any. So that was good, right?

I wadded the tissue into a ball and lobbed it into the trash. I decided to go to the men's room and get a good look in the mirror. Maybe if I could see what was going on I'd feel better.

As I walked down the hall, I felt my breathing get suddenly ragged. I was wheezing and I could feel my right leg drag a bit as I walked. I started to get nervous – first my eye, and now this? My leg felt wooden, like it had doubled in weight in the space of two steps. It wouldn't bend at the knee anymore either.

I shuffled past Bob Lombardi, one of the software developers, and the guy just stared at me like I was on fire or something.

This didn't stop him from asking me a question before I got too far. "Hey, Tom." He sounded hesitant, as if he wasn't sure talking to me was a good idea. "Sorry to bother you, but the bug database was down when I got in this morning. I'm not sure what's wrong, but we need that thing back up ASAP."

I knew what the problem was. The disk array that stored the transaction logs was probably out of space. When it runs out of space, the database goes offline. I'd noticed the drive array had been filling up, and had emailed the backup team about archiving some of the data off before this very thing happened. They ignored me of course.

They always do.

I sighed, and immediately regretted it. I winced with each breath - my lungs suddenly felt like they were being scraped with a cheese grater.

I wanted to explain about the disks to Bob, but all that came out was,  
“GGGgrrrrrrraaaaarrrrrrrrrr.”

Bob’s eyes grew wide and he let out a nervous laugh. His smile vanished completely when he realized I wasn’t laughing. He pointed at my face. “You’ve got something in your eye, Tom.”

I looked at Bob then, and cocked my head. I understood his words, strictly speaking. That is, part of me realized that he was speaking. Sounds came out of his mouth and formed words, and part of my brain understood those patterns as concepts and ideas that should have meant something to me.

But the rest of me ignored all that and instead focused on Bob. He just stood there, all flushed and pink, bursting with the delicious scents and colors of life. His veins shined bright beneath his skin, blood pumping through them at alarming speed. I could almost see it, almost smell it.

My tongue slithered out of my mouth, a fat and bloated worm dragging itself across my cracked lips. “Grrraarrrrrrrrrrr.”

Bob began to back away slowly. “Jesus, you okay Tom?”

I ignored the question. All I could think about was how much I wanted to eat his brain.

That thought brought me out of my haze - what was THAT all about? Quickly I turned and shambled off towards the bathroom before Bob could say another word.

As I shuffled away from Bob, the wheezing grew worse. I was moaning practically with each ragged, forced breath. What was worse, I could feel my skin drying and tightening up all over my body. It hurt like nothing else I’d ever felt. That was bad. Pain meant something was really wrong.

When I finally pushed the bathroom door open and looked into the mirror, the creature looking back at me was a horror. I was a corpse. There was no other way to say it, and no mistaking what I saw.

Black veins ran like spider webs under greenish-yellow skin. I was never a truly thin man, but now I looked practically skeletal. Split and blistered, my flesh was pulled taut over my bones. The same yellow pus that dripped out of my eye leaked from the cracks in my skin.

My eyes were tiny sacs of blood, swimming in hollow black sockets. They practically glowed with a preternatural light. I lifted my hand to wipe away another gob of pus, and saw that my fingernails had grown sharp, and had turned a mottled blackish color.

I realized with sudden clarity that I had stopped wheezing. I had stopped breathing altogether in point of fact.

My mind tried to wrap itself around what it knew instinctively, but refused to accept as truth. I ran through the possibilities, discarding each one as ridiculous. My brain tried to come up with reasonable, logical explanations for what was happening, but couldn't. Nothing made sense except the possibility that I was dead.

How could that be? I couldn't be dead, I thought. Being dead but walking around – well that's not really possible. I think I knew it was true, but couldn't wrap my mind around it. I forced myself to say it once in my head just to see how it felt.

I was dead.

I wound up hiding in a stall for nearly half an hour, trying to come to grips with being dead. In the end, the best I could come up with was that I had died but my body or brain didn't know it yet.

So there I sat, decomposing in a bathroom stall at work.

Suddenly the urgent message alert on my cell began to beep. I fumbled with the belt holster, and nearly dropped it as I pulled it out. They don't make these things for people with two-inch claws.

I looked at the screen. The help desk system had emailed my phone with an urgent ticket. Severity level had been marked “IMMEDIATE”, which meant drop whatever I was doing and go see what was up.

I spun the thumbwheel and highlighted the email, then pressed enter to get the details. The ticket’s subject line was “NETWORK SPEED CRAWLED TO A HALT – CAN’T WORK.” Immediately my mortality problem was forgotten and I felt a wave of angry resentment wash over me. Ever since we enabled the option for end users to open Severity One tickets, I get one of these a week on average.

Two weeks ago, I received a Sev One ticket that read: “Coffee machine’s cappuccino button sticking.” A few weeks before that I got one that said, “Fridge blew a fuse. Lunches are spoiling.” People thought anything that ran on electricity somehow fell to me to fix if it broke.

This message was a real network problem though, and I had to deal with it, despite my new status as the living dead. It was still early. I figured I could sneak in through the side door down the hall and get to Server Lab 1 without anyone seeing me.

I was right.

Only a handful of people at that end of the floor were even in yet. This part of the office belonged to the software developers, and they made their own rules. Most of them worked from home until mid morning and then drove into the office around lunchtime.

I ducked into the lab without being seen.

I fired up the network diagnostics on one of my utility servers and ran a bandwidth utilization test. A few minutes passed, and I saw the culprit highlighted in red on my screen. Jesse Clayton. Ninety-eight percent of the available bandwidth company-wide was funneling right down to his workstation.

Again.

I sat down in the chair in front of the data terminal banks and pressed enter to print the screen. My index finger snapped off at the first knuckle, and lay twitching on the keyboard. I looked at the broken stump of a finger on my hand. No blood pumped out of the ragged hole. It looked like it had been chewed right off.

I picked up the twitching index finger off the keyboard and put it in my shirt pocket. "Great. Just great."

Every day, it was the same thing in this job. Day in, day out I dealt with the same problems. Okay, not quite the same; today I'm a zombie. But otherwise, nothing at work ever changed.

It occurred to me then that maybe that was just the problem. The monotony of my life and career were staggering. Up at five o'clock in the morning. Shower, pack a lunch. Out of the door by 5:30. Drive through at Dunkin Donuts: Large Hazelnut (cream and sugar), cinnamon raisin bagel (as is). Sixty-two minutes to work, ten to twelve hours a day listening to users whine and solving their problems, then back home. Sleep by eleven thirty. Up at 5...

So it went on, over and over. I was in a rut, that much was clear. Hell, I was the Mayor of Rutsville. The Duke of Rutdom in the Kingdom of Rutonia.

Once, I'd even gotten half way to work before I'd realized it was a Saturday. How pathetic am I? I went in anyway and caught up on server maintenance.

Was it possible that I died in my sleep, or even a day or two ago? Could my rotting body be so stuck in this rut that it got up and came in to work anyway? Was I doomed to live on as undead, continuing to do time at this Godforsaken company for the rest of eternity?

It was a good theory. Root cause analysis was impossible though. There were too many unknowns. I couldn't explain the rapid decomposition, or the sudden urge to start eating brains. I also couldn't come up with why this happened in the first place and that was the real showstopper.

I sat and thought about it for a while, and then it hit me. If I was right, then the solution was plain: I had to get myself fired. If I did that, maybe I'd crawl out of that rut. What remained of my body would rot away, and I could rest. Or not. I was a bit fuzzy on that part. If escaping my rut didn't kill me outright, then maybe I could wander away and haunt some graveyard somewhere. Or go into telemarketing. Who knows?

The blinking computer screen caught my eye, and I saw the solution to my problem. Jesse Clayton was probably downloading the entire Sony CD library onto his workstation. The peer-to-peer downloading programs he used sucked as much bandwidth as you gave them, and even behind the firewall, they ate up a lot. I'd talked to Jesse several times about using the company's T1 lines to grow his music collection, but he always went over my head to his boss Derek Miller.

Using the keyboard with a snapped off index finger was a challenge, but I managed. I logged into Jesse's computer remotely and killed the Bittorrent process, and trashed the 20 gigs of MP3s he had on his C: drive. I closed out the ticket, and then fired off a quick email to Jesse asking him to come talk to me for a minute in the Server Lab.

When Jesse entered the lab, I had my back to him. I waited until he walked in and I heard the door shut. I could smell him; smell his flesh and blood even over the sterilized stink that the industrial AC pumped into the room. I felt the acid in my worm-ridden stomach begin to boil.

Jesse immediately started complaining. "Did you delete the music folder off my hard drive? I'm going to go talk to Derek, he'll give me permission to..."

I turned, and the sight of me cut off his words. He backed up a few steps, his eyes wide with horror and his mouth flapping open and closed like a loose door caught in a windstorm. It was trying to work; he was trying to say something or maybe he was trying to scream.

I advanced on him and clamped my hand around his throat and squeezed hard. He struggled and now he was trying to scream, but my grip was like iron. I closed my grip slowly, until Jesse's face turned blue and he collapsed onto the Server lab floor, unconscious.

Then I ate his brain.

I have to say, it wasn't bad. There was less there than I expected – even for Jesse – but what I found in his skull was pretty tasty.

I left the Server Lab, picking hair and bits of bone out of my teeth. A few of my own blackened, rotting teeth came out when I tugged too hard on something caught in between them. I spit them out as I walked. I could feel Jesse's blood and remnants of his brains dribbling down my chin, but I didn't bother wiping it away.

I was trying to get fired after all.

I took the elevator to the 1<sup>st</sup> floor, and went down the hall towards Holly Fulton's office. She was the HR manager, and did all the hiring and firing for the company. I'd been in her office before, and she had posters on the wall explaining sexual harassment policies and outlining safety practices.

I was pretty confident that there wouldn't be a poster on her wall about this. Still, I figured for sure she'd fire me on sight.

And if not, well...I was still really hungry...

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