



*a novel by*  
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## ONE



On the day of his boss's retirement party, Pulpy Lembeck took a taxi to work.

When he got out he thanked the driver and gave him a two-dollar tip, well over the one-dollar tip he and Midge usually gave taxi drivers, which wasn't very often because normally they took the bus.

'Cheers, bud,' said the driver, who seemed like the kind of man Pulpy would've gone out with for a beer if he went out for beer with men, which he didn't. He and Midge mostly stayed in, just the two of them.

Pulpy walked into the welcome area of his office and said 'Good morning' to the receptionist.

'Uh huh.' She nodded without looking at him.

'Cold out there.' He stamped his boots on the bristly welcome mat.

She glanced up from the stack of paper she was hole-punching. 'It's winter.'

'You're right about *that!*' Pulpy opened the closet to hang up his coat, and frowned a little when he saw that it was full.

There was a new coat in there, a shearling one that was taking up a lot of room.

‘Did you sign Al’s card yet?’ said the receptionist. ‘There’s a card going around that I picked out. It’s got a mountain on it, with sunlight. It says “Happy Retirement.”’

‘I have to think of something to write.’ Pulpny folded his own coat in half and laid it on the floor of the closet, near the back. ‘It’s a great card.’

‘Yeah, I’m good at picking them. The trick is finding the balance between thoughtful and sentimental. It’s like when you’re doing a cake.’ She fitted another sheaf of documents into the punch and banged her fist down. ‘There’s a fine line between sweet and too sweet.’

He shut the closet door and smiled at her. ‘How was your weekend?’

‘It’s Friday.’

‘Right! You’re right. I just couldn’t remember if I asked you what you did – did I ask you?’

‘I went to the winter fair. Does that sound familiar?’

‘No.’ He squinted and rubbed his chin. ‘No. I don’t think you told me about that. So I guess I didn’t ask you.’

‘I guess not.’

‘Sounds like fun. The winter fair. My wife and I are going there this weekend.’

‘I went with my boyfriend and he played the fish game but he lost, so I didn’t get a fish.’

‘Those fish games can be hard.’

She twisted her mouth at him. ‘What do you know about fish games?’

Pulpny shrugged. ‘Not much. Just that they’re hard. It’s all about luck.’

‘It’s not about luck, it’s about skill. He spent a bunch of money on a bunch of tries but he didn’t win. He lost. He’s a

loser.' She brushed some stray hole-punch confetti onto the floor.

Pulpy watched her fingers flutter over the shower of small paper dots. 'Where'd you get the retirement cake?'

'There is no cake.' She reached for a box of elastic bands. 'Al hasn't asked me to get one yet. He's cutting it close if he wants something good - if I don't go soon all they'll have left is the remainder cakes. And you have to give advance notice if you want a personal message iced on. People don't think about these things.'

'Cutting it close, ha,' said Pulpy. The receptionist looked at him, and he cleared his throat. 'What do you know about the new guy who's coming in - anything?'

'Just that he's somebody from a big building.' She pulled out an elastic band and started stretching it. 'That's all I can tell you.'

He puffed out his cheeks and slowly let the air go. 'I guess it's going to be different.'

'Al's leaving, I'm staying. That's about it. And it's about time he retired. The other day he's standing here, waiting for me to do something for him, and he looks at my international garden calendar. And he looks at this month's garden and says, "Is that your garden?" And I say to him, "No, that's a calendar with pictures of gardens in it." And he says, "Oh. Well, it's a really nice garden." And I say, "That's why it's in the calendar." But he still kept on about how much he liked my garden.'

Pulpy blinked at the bright rows of flowers for February, growing someplace warm in the world. 'I'm sure he was just trying to be polite.'

'Do you really think that?' She snapped the elastic band across the room. 'I don't know.'

On the way to his cubicle, Pulpy stopped outside his boss's office and peeked in.

Al was at his desk playing with his animal figurines, which had come from his garden at home. 'The wife wondered where all her nature statuettes went to, so I had to go out and buy her new ones,' he'd said to Pulpy when he first brought them in. 'I like them. They give my office a fresh, outdoorsy feel.'

Pulpy liked them too. He stood there in what he hoped was a casual way, watching while Al pranced his miniature deer up and over his in-tray.

Finally, Al looked up. 'Pulpy! There you are. Can I see you a minute?'

Pulpy smiled and said, 'You certainly can!'

He walked into Al's office thinking about taking Midge out for dinner that night to celebrate. They could go to that fancy surf-and-turf under the hotel. Neither of them ate fish but it was the most expensive restaurant in the area. They could get steak. Or chicken stuffed with something.

'Have a seat.' Al nodded at the old couch in front of his desk. 'You coming to my thing?'

Pulpy sat. 'Yes.'

'Good.' Al put down his deer and picked up his camel, and toyed with its hump. 'Will Midge be there?'

Pulpy made an apologetic face. Weeks ago, on their way home from Couples Ice Dance Expression, he'd asked Midge if she wanted to come.

'Oh, Pulpy,' she'd said, flushed from the laps they'd done around the rink, 'I wish I could. But I think I'd see Mrs. Wings everywhere, and that would just be too much for me.'

'I miss her too,' he'd said, and she'd kissed him.

'I don't think Midge can make it,' Pulpy told his boss.

'Well, that's understandable.' Al was wearing a shirt with little acorns all over it.

'Those are nice acorns,' said Pulpy.

‘Huh?’ he said and looked down. ‘Oh, yeah. The wife picked it out. You know wives.’ Al pointed the camel at him. ‘Keep up the good work, Pulpy. Because good work is what you do, and I want you to know I recognize that. As a matter of fact, it’s high time I showed you that recognition.’

Pulpy leaned forward. ‘It is?’

‘Anybody home?’ A large, rectangular head poked around the doorway then, grinning big teeth at them.

‘Dan!’ said Al. ‘Come on in!’

Pulpy looked up at the tall man who’d just stepped into his boss’s office, with his broad shoulders and expensive suit.

‘Pulpy, this is Dan.’ Al spread his arms wide, and then romped the camel across his desk. ‘All of this will be his on Monday.’

‘All of what?’ Dan extended his huge hand to Pulpy. ‘I told him, he better take that couch when he goes! I’m bringing in chairs. I’ve got chairs that will put that couch to shame.’

Pulpy moved his own, less impressive hand up to be shaken. ‘Nice to meet you, Dan.’ He winced as the other man compressed the soft meat of his fingers.

‘Pulpy, eh?’ said Dan. ‘What is that, a nickname?’

‘He drank a lot of orange juice in college,’ said Al.

‘Ho-ho!’ said Dan. He winked at Pulpy. ‘Didn’t we all!’

Pulpy didn’t know what to say to that.

‘Dan and his wife are new in town,’ said Al. ‘They just moved in.’

‘Fresh on the scene!’ said Dan.

‘Well, then, Dan and I have a few things to talk about, Pulpy, so if you’ll excuse us –’

‘Oh. Sure.’ Pulpy stood up, and Dan sat down.

Dan shifted around on the couch. ‘How do people *sit* on this thing? Nice meeting you, Pulpy!’

‘Thanks,’ said Pulpy. ‘You too.’

‘Orange juice, ha!’

‘Ha.’ Pulpy’s knuckles still hurt from the handshake, but he waited until he reached his cubicle to massage them.

Pulpy sat at his desk and spread his hands out on his blotter. ‘Blot,’ he said in a quiet voice.

He looked at the few fair hairs on his fingers and wished there were more of them. He pulled out his keyboard tray and felt the bottom of it graze the tops of his thighs. He decided again to call Building Maintenance to ask them to fix that.

Pulpy pushed the keyboard tray back in, a little harder than he needed to.

Pulpy Lembeck had once been Brian Lembeck. He’d gotten the nickname in college, during lunch in the cafeteria. As he brought a glass of orange juice to his lips, some smart aleck said loudly, ‘So you like orange juice, hey, Pulpy?’

The rest of the table looked at Brian, and he shrugged. His silence apparently signalled his agreement, and the name Pulpy stuck fast. Pulpy didn’t mind – it gave him a story to tell.

The receptionist’s workstation was in the middle of the welcome area, with the white spiral staircase to her right. To her left were the communal photocopier and paper shredder, and the hall to the staff washrooms and then the staff kitchen, which contained a fridge, a microwave, a toaster, a bulletin board, and a table and two chairs.

The receptionist scrutinized Pulpy through her glasses as he came down the steps at lunchtime. ‘Going to lunch?’

He nodded.

‘What’s the weather like out now?’

‘I’m not sure,’ he said.

‘You’re not *sure*?’

‘I just came from upstairs.’

‘You have windows up there, don’t you?’

Pulpy glanced at the big window by the front door. ‘You’re right,’ he said. ‘We do.’

She wheeled her chair backward, gripping the edge of her desk with one hand. ‘I’m going to take a course.’

‘What kind of course?’ He opened the closet door and peered inside. There were other coats on top of his coat now, so he was going to have to dig.

‘It’s a performance-improvement seminar. The flyer came over the fax, with the registration form on it. I can sign up any time – it says spaces aren’t limited. Al said I could go. But not because I need to improve my performance. Just to expand my knowledge base.’

‘That makes sense.’ He crouched down to sift through the heavy pile of leather and wool. ‘When is it?’

‘It’s in two weeks. It’s called “Be An Exceptional Receptionist.” The flyer says, “Receptionists today must be eager envoys for their workplace.” And that’s very true. “Front-line staff” is what they call people like me, who deal with the public. I am the face of this company.’

He stood up with his wrinkled coat and nodded. The receptionist had told him her name a few years ago but he’d forgotten it, and he couldn’t bring himself to ask her again. The small, brass nameplate on her desk said ‘Secretary.’ But she didn’t like that term.

‘See here.’ She showed him the flyer, a smudgy fax page full of bullet points.

Pulpy’s eyes went to the registration part at the bottom, but she hadn’t filled in her personal information yet.

‘It talks about creating a “Samaritan pretense” that wins people over as soon as you meet them, and it says the course will emphasize the potency of positive diction, or how to say “no way” with an “okay.”’ She folded the paper neatly and tucked it into one of her drawers.



Pulpy watched the receptionist's hair while she did this; it didn't move. He liked the bushiness of it. She'd secured it at the top with a sharp-toothed metal clip. 'Sounds good,' he said, and headed for the door.

'It certainly does.' The receptionist crossed her arms. 'Two weeks.'

'How was the cab ride?' said Midge when Pulpy called her from the food court.

'It was okay, but I don't think it did any good.' His fingers skimmed over the number pad on the pay phone. 'Al didn't even mention the promotion this morning.'

'He didn't? Well, there's still the whole afternoon, isn't there?'

'There is. He's got his thing this afternoon, though.' Pulpy expelled a long breath. 'I think maybe he forgot.'

'Oh, Pulpy,' said Midge. 'How could he forget?'

'I don't know, he was busy. He was meeting with the new boss. I met him too - I shook his hand.'

'Did you shake it hard? Powerful men like a firm handshake.'

'I think so, but he shook mine harder. Anyway, I'm going to pick up doughnuts for the thing. Maybe when Al sees the doughnuts he'll remember about the promotion.'

'Maybe Al will tell the new boss to give it to you.'

'Hmm,' said Pulpy. 'He *was* telling him something.'

'See, there you go!'

He relaxed a little. 'How far did you get on your route?'

'I did about fifty leaflets, and that's with Jean's selective targeting method. She calls it looking for the best *candle-date*, ha! Like candidate, but with candles! She's a funny one, that Jean.' She paused. 'You know what would be fun?'

'Tell me,' he said.

‘A hobby! One that we could do together.’

Pulpy had the metal pay-phone cord in his hand, and he bent part of it into a U-shape. He held it like that and squeezed it together a few times. ‘We’ve got ice dancing.’

‘Ice dancing isn’t a hobby, it’s exercise. I was thinking something musical, because you used to like music so much.’

‘That was then,’ he said.

‘Oh, hush. I want to see more of that side of you. Your creative side.’

‘I don’t have a creative side.’

She giggled. ‘Tell that to the bedsheets!’

‘Midge!’ But he smiled.

‘Then I got thinking about those keyboards that already have music programmed in. They’re very smart, the keyboards today. They’re very intuitive machines. We could play backup to a song!’

‘Keyboards cost a lot of money, Midge.’

‘Not when they’re on sale! I’ve been scanning the flyers and I found one that’s very reasonably priced. I picked it up because they said supplies were limited. Listen!’

Pulpy pressed the hard circle of the receiver against his ear and heard *Plink! Plink! Plink!*

‘Hold on,’ she said. ‘It gets better.’

When he got back to the office, the receptionist said to him, ‘You notice anything missing from my desk?’

‘Um ...’ Pulpy looked at her mug, her eraser dish, her magnetized paperclip holder, her tape dispenser, her pen-and-pencil cage, her hole punch and her stapler.

‘Water,’ she said.

He glanced from side to side. ‘You don’t have any.’

‘That’s right. Receptionists can’t drink water because do you know why? Because we can’t leave our desks, that’s

why!’ She leaned forward. ‘The flyer for my performance-improvement seminar says, “A little hydration goes the distance.” Think about that when you think about all of us dehydrated receptionists.’

‘All right,’ he said.

‘Tea doesn’t count, though,’ she said, and took a loud slurp from her mug, which showed a cartoon duck dressed like a secretary. It had drops of sweat flying from its head and was wearing glasses that were comically askew. In its wings the duck held a pencil, a phone off the hook and several loose documents in disarray. The caption underneath read ‘Not another crisis ... my schedule’s full!!!’ She wielded the mug at him. ‘I can relate. When it comes down to it, it’s just me and the duck,’ she said, ‘against the office. How was your lunch?’

‘It was nice, thanks.’

‘Well, mine wasn’t. I was sitting reading my book at the kitchen table, and then Cheryl from Active Recovery comes over and says, “Do you mind if I sit here? Don’t let me interrupt you.” And she *sat down*.’

‘Cheryl’s nice.’

‘Nice. She put me on the spot. “Don’t let me interrupt you,” she says. What does she think I’m going to do, sit there and read while she eats her lunch? I hate that there’s two chairs. If there was only one chair there would be no problem.’

‘It’s a big table.’

‘Not big enough,’ she said.

‘So that ought to do it,’ said the man from Building Maintenance that afternoon. He stood up and put his hands on his thick hips.

Pulpy sat in his chair and pulled himself toward his desk. He slid out the newly adjusted keyboard tray. ‘It’s still doing it,’ he said. ‘The bottom of the tray. I can still feel it on my legs.’

‘Huh.’ The man pulled the front of his shirt away from the roll on top of his jeans.

‘That’s why I called Building Maintenance. That’s why I placed the call.’

‘Relax, fellow, relax. Let’s see what we’re dealing with here.’ The man got on his knees again and crawled under the desk to examine the tray-docking device. ‘Oh yeah, I see it. Now I see it.’

‘They let you wear jeans?’ said Pulpy.

‘Uh huh. At the start we had to wear suit pants, but then I said to Al – I was the one who said it – “I’m not getting down under desks and wearing suit pants because do you know what it’s like under there? It’s dusty as hell down there. Unless,” I said, “you want to buy the suit pants *for* me.” That shut him up like a clam. So now we wear jeans.’

The man’s rear end wiggled as he worked. Pulpy looked away.

‘That ought to do it.’ The man stood up again. ‘Give her a go.’

Pulpy got back into his chair, and something on the man beeped. Pulpy jumped a little.

The man from Building Maintenance glanced down at his pager, then back at Pulpy. ‘That’s me. Mind if I use your phone?’

‘Go ahead.’ Pulpy pulled out the keyboard tray and the man picked up his phone. Pulpy frowned. The tray was lower now.

‘Yeah?’ said the man into the receiver. ‘It’s Davis here.’

He pushed his knees up and the tray rattled and clicked. He put his knees down and felt the edges of the tray pressing hard against his thighs.

‘It’s Davis, I said. Yeah.’

‘Um,’ said Pulpy.

‘So what’s the call? Who’s calling?’

Pulpy tried to get his hands in between his legs and the keyboard but there wasn’t enough room.

‘Over there? What’s their problem? Do you even know who you paged? You paged me, and I’m Davis.’

‘You did it the wrong way,’ said Pulpy.

Davis didn’t acknowledge this. ‘Okay,’ he said into the phone, ‘so you do have the right guy, because that’s me. There’s also Richards, but he’s off today. I’m the one who’s on, and I’m Davis.’

Pulpy sighed and sat there with the tray on his legs.

‘Yeah. Yeah. I’m on my way.’ Davis put the phone down. ‘So you’re all set here, then?’

‘Well, actually –’

‘Do you know what they said on the other end there? They didn’t even know –’ Davis shook his head. ‘People are ignorant. They don’t even know who they’re calling when they call. I had to tell them, can you beat that?’ He hitched up his jeans and headed for the door.

‘So –’ said Pulpy.

‘It was good meeting you, fellow,’ said Davis. ‘You need that tray looked at again, you just give me a buzz. You know where I live.’ And he winked.

‘I guess I do, yes.’

Davis gave Pulpy a quick salute, and then he was gone.

Pulpy looked at the empty space where the man from Building Maintenance had been standing, and he pushed the tray back in again.

Pulpy went to the Coffee Island on his break.

‘Hi,’ he said to the girl behind the counter. ‘Roco-Coco, please, and a dozen doughnuts.’

‘Sorry, we’re all out of the R-C.’ She shoved aside the leaves of the inflatable palm tree by the cash register. ‘That’s always the first kind to go. Every morning. I told my boss, “Buy more Roco-Coco. They all like that kind.” But he keeps

on buying the same stock every month. He doesn't listen to me.'

'But you're the one dealing with the public,' said Pulpy. 'You're the front-line staff.'

'Exactly! *You* know what I'm talking about.' She shook her head and her ponytail flew. 'I can do you a Bongo Berry, how does that sound?'

'Sounds good.' He watched her manoeuvre around the palm tree to pour his coffee and pack his doughnuts. 'Why don't you move that tree somewhere else?'

'I tried. He moved it back. Bosses - what can you do? That'll be six-seventy, please.'

'You said it.' Pulpy handed her the money. 'Bosses.'

'What about them?' said a voice behind Pulpy.

'Uh-oh,' said the counter girl.

Pulpy turned to see Dan waving at him from the cream and sugar.

There was the cream-and-sugar side, or the milk-and-sweetener side, which was where you ended up if you weren't fast enough. Pulpy was never fast enough.

He watched Dan wielding the carton of half-and-half amid the throng of clerical staff that always encircled the coffee fixings, their shoulders working as they stirred.

Dan emerged with his mug held high. He was wearing the bulky shearling coat Pulpy had seen in the closet earlier. 'Whew! You gotta be a bull in there!' he said, jerking his rectangle head back at the circle.

Pulpy gave a half-shrug and looked down at the dark liquid in his Styrofoam cup, already turning cold.

'You should get yourself a proper mug,' said Dan. 'Bulls need real mugs.'

'I guess they do.' Pulpy found himself nodding.

Dan's mug was red with white lettering. 'Back off - it's early,' the mug said. Pulpy wondered if he drank out of that

mug all day. 'The mug makes the man,' said Dan. 'Think about that.'

'I'll bring one from home one of these days,' said Pulpy.

'Just take one from the staff cupboard. Make it your own.'

'But what if it's somebody else's?'

'Whoa now. Bulls don't think that way, do they?' Dan took a sip of coffee and swallowed hard. 'The secretary even has her own mug. If *she* has a mug, *you* should have a mug.'

Pulpy noticed the single crease down the front of each of Dan's pant legs, how crisp that was. He looked down at his own pleats. Not so crisp.

'I'm bringing in my wife, Beatrice, to keep an eye on that secretary. See how she does things. I want you to meet her, my wife. She'll be there this afternoon.'

'She sounds nice.'

'Oh, she's nice all right.' Dan nodded at Pulpy's doughnuts. 'Those for the thing?'

'Yes.'

'Nice. You married?'

'Yes.'

'You bringing her?'

Pulpy swirled his black coffee. 'She's not feeling well.'

'That's too bad.' Dan took a slow sip from his mug. 'I'll see you back at the office.' He nodded at the coffee fixings on his way out the door. 'Now get in there!'

'So I have to tell you that, oh boy yes, this has certainly been a really good experience for me, being in this place with all of you.' Al smiled at Pulpy and his fellow employees from the podium at the far end of the boardroom.

A few paces to Al's right, Dan smoothed the arms of his suit.

Pulpy was standing at the back, near the doors and the food table. His box of doughnuts had been placed next to the

vast expanse of ‘Happy Retirement Al!’ cake and a large bowl containing bottles of water and juice.

‘But heck, that doesn’t mean I should have to *work* here, does it? Ha!’

Everyone in the room laughed, except for Dan. Then he gave a belated ‘Ho-ho!’ that reverberated after the other laughs had died away.

‘The way I see it, everyone’s too focused on business and spending these days,’ said Al. ‘And all these people are watching this reality tv, but I’m at the point where I’m ready for my *own* reality, you know?’ He blinked at the assembled workers.

Someone near the back shouted, ‘We love you, Al!’

‘Well.’ Al’s smile widened. ‘I’m going to miss all of you, very much.’

There were a few scattered ‘Awws,’ and then Al had to raise his voice as the room burst into applause. ‘But business and spending are still the reality at *this* office, and now with Dan here at the helm there’s no telling how far you’ll go!’

‘We’re going to pick up where you left off, Al, that’s what we’re going to do!’ Dan stepped over and put an arm around Al’s shoulders, and the room fell silent. ‘Hello, everyone, I’m Dan. And let me be the first to reassure you all that although I may be new in town, I am certainly not new as far as knowing what my responsibilities are, and where they lie.’

‘Psst, Pulpy, over here.’

Pulpy turned his head, and Roy from Customer Service handed him a piece of cake on a small paper plate. Pulpy mouthed ‘Thank you’ and took it before he realized that the usual time for cake cutting and distributing was after the speeches, and that Roy probably wasn’t supposed to be doing this now.

‘I also like to help,’ said Dan. ‘I did a lot of helping at my previous job, and as a result I made some really good friends



there and we still communicate. Workplace camaraderie is key. It's key to everything.'

Pulpy's piece of cake appeared to be chocolate with some type of nuts in it. He'd gotten the exclamation mark on his frosting.

Roy was handing out forks now. Pulpy debated accepting his.

'I used to work in a building that had mirrored glass. Mirrored glass, and a lot of floors. And windows everywhere.' Dan was alone at the podium now – Al had moved away.

'Pulpy?' said Roy.

'Oh,' Pulpy whispered. 'Thanks.' He took the fork.

'I would look out those windows and think, "There's a whole world out there." And then I'd think, "Hey, there's a whole world *in here*." And that is what we're all about.'

All around him, Pulpy's co-workers were eating. He speared a hunk of cake and brought it to his lips.

'Just a side note – I'm sure you've all seen the refreshments on the back table,' said Dan, and Pulpy raised a hand to cover his bulging cheeks. 'There will be cake, and drinks, and doughnuts, after we're done up here. But first I'd like to say a little something about teamwork and mutual respect.'

Pulpy ducked behind the crowd to finish chewing.

Dan's speech went on for another half-hour, and when it was over Pulpy headed for the men's room. On his way there he passed the receptionist at her desk, stapling.

'Why aren't you in the boardroom?' he asked her. 'There's cake.'

'Hold on,' she said. 'I'm collating here.'

He waited while she stapled two sets of papers together, and then she looked up at him. 'I wasn't invited. That was my first introduction to the new boss. "Hi, I'm Dan, your new

supervisor. Oh, and by the way, we need you to cover the desk during the retirement function.” Yeah, thanks. Plus I’m supposed to know when they’re doing a cake, because I always pick them out. What kind is it? Is there any filling?’

‘It’s a chocolate one,’ he said. ‘I think it has hazelnuts in it.’  
‘Nuts aren’t a filling.’

‘Well, they’re inside somewhere. I heard.’

‘A filling is like cream. Or jelly. Is there jelly?’

Pulpy shook his head. ‘No one said anything about jelly.’

The receptionist frowned. ‘I’m supposed to know when they do a cake.’

‘I’m sure it was some kind of oversight.’

‘Yeah.’ The receptionist resumed her stapling. ‘I’m sure it was.’

Pulpy nodded and hurried down the hall, his tongue digging at a bit of hazelnut in one of his molars.

‘Pulpy, this is my wife, Beatrice,’ said Dan at the party that followed the speeches. The party was also in the boardroom, except there were balloons now.

‘Hi, Beatrice.’ Pulpy shook Dan’s wife’s hand and her long fingernails jabbed into his palm. She was wearing a sleeveless top covered in buckles that seemed to have no practical purpose.

‘Hi ... Pulpy?’ Beatrice had dark, chin-length hair that was mostly straight, with a few strands jutting out in various directions. The effect unsettled him.

‘It’s a nickname,’ said Dan. ‘Isn’t it great?’

‘What does it mean?’ she said, and at the same time she looked Pulpy up and down, starting at his feet.

Pulpy’s hands flattened out and he pressed them to his sides. No one had ever looked him up and down like that before. ‘It’s to do with orange juice.’

'Ah.' Beatrice nodded, still looking.

'How'd you like my speech, Pulpy?' said Dan.

'Oh, fine. It was a fine speech.'

'People were already eating the cake, can you believe that? They'd eaten half of it before Al walked over with the special knife.' Dan frowned. 'I said they'd get cake. I said they'd get it at the end.'

'It was a delicious cake,' said Pulpy. 'I heard.'

'Beatrice picked it out. She knows how to pick a winner, ha!'

Beatrice rolled her eyes. She pointed her doughnut at Pulpy. 'These are *really* good. Dan says you brought them?'

'Oh, well, it's nothing. They're just doughnuts.'

'Mmm. Well, they are *yummy*.' She licked some powdered sugar off her bottom lip and popped the last bite into her mouth.

Pulpy's eyes widened a little and he quickly turned to admire the shiny red 'You Made It!!' balloons taped up in the corners of the boardroom. Then he took a deep breath and looked back at Dan. 'I don't think the receptionist got an invitation to this.'

'That's the way it goes,' said Dan. 'Somebody has to cover the desk.'

'Maybe she didn't want to come,' said Beatrice.

'But she should've been invited,' said Pulpy.

'Must've been an oversight.' Dan shrugged. 'I told you I'm bringing Beatrice in, didn't I?'

'We'll get things sorted out,' said Beatrice.

'We're doing an overhaul,' said Dan. 'I like the way that sounds.'

Pulpy noticed that one of Dan's big square hands was clamped around a plastic water bottle and his other hand was just opening and closing around nothing. 'Overhaul?'

Beatrice made a face for him, squishing out her lips and shaking her head.

Dan chuckled. 'Beatrice is calling it a makeover but I'm going with overhaul. Overhaul says everything we need to say.'

'What, uh -' Pulpy's voice hitched, and he swallowed. 'What do you need to say?'

'Hey, there's the man of the hour!' Dan waved across the room to Al, who was kissing his wife under some of the balloons and a banner that read 'Congratulations Al! Relax, Enjoy, Celebrate!'

'Oh, will you look at that,' said Beatrice. 'Old and still in love.'

'Pulpy has a wife,' said Dan.

'Do you now?' Beatrice said to Pulpy. 'Well, just look at you - how could you not?'

'Um,' said Pulpy.

'So what do you say, Pulpy?' said Dan. 'Are you excited about the regime change? Out with the old and all that?'

Pulpy looked at his old boss frolicking under his decorations. He'd written 'Spread your wings and fly!' in Al's retirement card, hoping it would jog his memory, but Al hadn't opened the envelope yet and by the time he did, he wouldn't be in charge anymore. 'In with the new,' he said, and blinked in the glare of Dan and Beatrice's white grins.

When Pulpy got home, Midge had the fireplace video going.

He stood in front of their small TV set and watched the flames dance across the screen, and then Midge was behind him.

'I pulled the space heater up,' she said. 'For added effect.'

Pulpy looked down at their little square heater pushing orange warmth out of its criss-crossed wires.

'It's a new video. I had to buy a new one because the last one was wearing out. Even with the head cleaner.'

'It looks the same,' he said.

‘That’s the best part! You can’t tell.’

‘It’s a good video.’

Midge took a step back. ‘Don’t say video.’

‘What? But *you* said video.’

‘Not once we get into it. Once you get into it you have to pretend.’

He nodded.

‘Did you eat? Because I bought this new product – it’s a way to make a whole meal all in foil. And then you just throw the foil away afterwards with no fuss and no scrubbing!’

‘Sounds good,’ said Pulpy, ‘but I had a bunch of doughnuts.’

‘Sit on the rug with me,’ she said. ‘I’ll play you something.’

They sat on their rug and Midge pulled their new electronic keyboard out from under the coffee table. She frowned down at the array of buttons along the top, then pressed one. A mournful string of notes drifted out of the tinny speaker.

‘That’s not a very happy song,’ he said. ‘I usually think of keyboard music as more uplifting.’

‘That must be the dirigible. The man at the store said there was one in there. Dirigibles aren’t supposed to be happy.’

‘I think you mean a dirge,’ he said.

‘Yes, yes, a dirge. What did I say?’

He smiled. ‘You said a dirigible. A dirigible is a boat.’

She flung her hand at him. ‘Oh, you music people with your music knowledge.’

‘I’m not a music person,’ he said. ‘I work in an office.’

‘If you make music and you’re a person, then you’re a music person. Here, let me find you something more tinkly.’ She ran her thumbs over the keys. ‘It played the prettiest ballad earlier.’

‘That’s okay,’ he said. ‘I believe you.’

‘Look at me, I’m hogging it!’ She lifted the keyboard and put it in his lap. ‘Go ahead – experiment!’

Pulpy felt the weight of the keyboard on his legs, and thought of Dan, and Dan’s wife, who along with Dan was going

to do an overhaul. He put the keyboard on the floor. 'I guess I'm just not feeling very musical right now, Midge, I'm sorry.'

'Oh.' She slid the keyboard back under the coffee table. 'Well, that's okay.'

They watched the fire on TV together for a while and then he said, 'Al never said anything.'

Midge moved closer to him. 'Oh, Pulpy.'

Pulpy stared at the embers. He felt tired and soft. 'How could he forget?'

'And the new boss didn't say anything?'

'He said some things, but not about the promotion.'

'Well,' said Midge, 'I bet it's only a matter of time.'

He looked at her hopeful face and imagined he could see the yellow glow reflected there. 'You're warm,' he said, touching her arm.

'It's because of the fire,' she said, and her hands rose up and flickered in the light.

'**H**mm,' said Pulpy at the winter fair the next day, 'those fish games look pretty hard.'

Midge put a hand on his back. 'You can do it, Pulpy.'

'I don't want to disappoint you.'

'You won't.'

So Pulpy lined up and paid for his ping-pong balls, and lobbed them.

The first two missed, but the second two landed with tiny splashes in two small fishbowls with rainbow-coloured gravel and startled goldfish inside.

And Midge said, 'You did it, twice!'

Pulpy smiled. 'I did, didn't I?'

She hugged him. 'You can take one to work and I'll keep the other one at home with me. I'm going to call our home fish Mr. Fins.'

They went home after that and when they got in the door Midge said, 'It'll be nice for you to have a fish at your desk. He'll keep you company.' Then she said, 'Now let's make out like banshees.'

'What does that mean?' said Pulpy. And he stood there holding the two fishbowls until Midge took them from him, one by one, and placed them gently on the coffee table.

'It means,' she said, 'that you do things to me and I scream.'  
'Well,' he said, 'let's get started, then.'

The next morning Midge said, 'I think you should take my Candle-Brations catalogue to the office with you today.'

'You do?' said Pulpy.

The alarm hadn't gone off yet and they were still lying under the covers, staring at the ceiling. Mr. Fins and Pulpy's fish were side by side in their bowls on Midge's night table, swimming.

'I got thinking last night that this new boss of yours could be a great new opportunity. All you have to do is show him the catalogue, and then he'll tell his wife about it - does he have a wife?'

Pulpy nodded, thinking of the up-and-down look Beatrice had given him.

'So he'll tell his wife about the candles and the wife will get excited about all the candle deals I can offer her and then she'll tell her husband to give you the raise!'

Midge's eyes were all lit up, and Pulpy imagined she had a couple of her candles in there, the Cinnamon Dreams maybe, or the Towers of Mint. 'Hmm,' he said, 'I don't know how to sell candles, though.'

'You don't have to *sell* them, you just have to *show* them. Then it's my job to burn it and earn it!'

'But I'm just not sure -'

Midge kissed his forehead. 'And you should wrap a blanket or a towel around your fishbowl on the way to work, so it doesn't freeze.'

'Okay,' he said, and the alarm went off.

'What's that you got there?' asked the bus driver when Pulpy stepped onto the bus. He was hugging the fishbowl to his chest and squeezing Midge's catalogue under one armpit.

'A fish.' He looked at the crowd ahead of him. All the seats were taken.

'Who carries a fish around in weather like this?'

'That's why I wrapped his bowl in a towel. So he doesn't freeze.'

'You better hope it doesn't. Move up the bus, please.'

He took a few steps and stopped when the bowl nudged someone's back.

'Keep going. I need you on the other side of the line.'

Pulpy looked down. 'What line?'

The driver sighed. 'I need you on the other side of that line or else this bus doesn't leave the station.'

'Get on the other side of the line!' one of the seated passengers shouted.

Pulpy shuffled another step along and the swaddled fishbowl pushed into a teenager's backpack. 'Sorry,' he said.

The teenager sneered at him.

'Here we go!' said the driver, and started the engine.

The bus lurched forward and Pulpy stumbled backward, dropping the catalogue onto the floor of the bus and spilling water from the fishbowl. The bus stopped.

A rumble of discontent rose from the other riders.

The driver looked at Pulpy. 'Once more and you're off. I cannot abide fish water on my vehicle.'

'I tripped,' he said.