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Joseph Heller

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JOSEPH HELLER

A DELL BOOK

Published by

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Dell Publishing Co., Inc.

I Dag Hammarskjold Plaza

New York, New York 10017

A portion of this book appeared in *Esquire*.

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Dell ® TM 681510, Dell Publishing Co., Inc.

eISBN: 978-0-307-80361-0

Reprinted by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

First Dell printing—February 1985

v3.1

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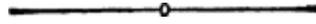
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# I get the willies

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I get the willies when I see closed doors. Even at work, where I am doing so well now, the sight of a closed door is sometimes enough to make me dread that something horrible is happening behind it, something that is going to affect me adversely; if I am tired and dejected from a night of lies or booze or sex or just plain nerves and insomnia, I can almost smell the disaster mounting invisibly and flooding out toward me through the frosted glass panes. My hands may perspire, and my voice may come out strange. I wonder why.

Something must have happened to me sometime.

Maybe it was the day I came home unexpectedly with a fever and a sore throat and caught my father in bed with my mother that left me with my fear of doors, my fear of opening doors and my suspicion of closed ones. Or maybe it was the knowledge that we were poor, which came to me late in childhood, that made me the way I am. Or the day my father died and left me feeling guilty and ashamed—because I thought I was the only little boy in the whole world then who had no father. Or maybe it was the realization, which came to me early, that I would never have broad shoulders and huge biceps, or be good enough, tall enough, strong enough, or brave enough to become an All-American football player or a champion prize-fighter, the sad, discouraging realization that no matter what it was in life I ever tried to do, there would always be somebody close by who would be able to do it much better. Or maybe it was the day I did open another door and saw my big sister standing naked, drying herself on the white-tile floor of the bathroom. She yelled at me, even though she knew she had left the door unlocked and that I had stumbled in on her by accident. I was scared.

I remember also, with amusement now, because it happened so long ago, the hot summer day I wandered into the old wooden coal shed behind our redbrick apartment building and found my big brother lying on the floor with Billy Foster's skinny kid sister, who was only my own age and even in the same class I was at school. I had gone to the shed to hammer the wheels and axles from a broken baby carriage I had picked up near a garbage can and use them on a wagon I wanted to make out of a cantaloupe crate and a long plank. I heard a faint, frantic stirring the moment I entered the dark place and felt as though I had stepped on something live. I was startled and smelled dust. I smiled with relief when I saw it was my brother lying on the floor with someone in the sooty shadows filling a far corner. I felt safe again. I said:

“Hi, Eddie. Is that you, Eddie? What are you doing, Eddie?”

And he shouted:

“Get the hell out of here, you little son of a bitch!” And hurled a lump of coal.

I ducked away with a soft moan, tears filling my eyes, and fled for my life. I bolted outside into the steaming, bright sunlight in front of my house, where I scuttled back and forth helplessly on the sidewalk, wondering what in the world I had done to make my big brother so angry with me that he would swear at me like that and hurl a heavy lump of coal. I couldn't decide whether to run away or wait; I felt too guilty to escape and almost to

frightened to stay and take the punishment I knew I deserved—although I didn't know for what. Powerless to decide, I hung and quivered there on the sidewalk in front of my house until the enormous wooden door of the old shed finally creaked open toward me and the two of them both came out slowly from the yawning blackness behind. My brother walked in back of her with a smug look. He smiled when he saw me and made me feel better. It was only after I saw him smile that I noticed the girl in front of him was Billy Foster's tall and skinny kid sister, who was very good in penmanship at school but could never get more than a seven on a spelling, geography, or arithmetic test, even though she always tried to cheat. I was surprised to see them together; it had not entered my mind that he even knew her. She walked with her eyes down and pretended not to see me. They approached slowly. Everything took a long time. She was angry and said nothing. I was silent too. My brother winked at me over her head and gave an exaggerated tug to the top of his pants. He walked with a swagger I had never seen before and knew at once I did not like. It made me uneasy to see him so different. But I was so grateful for his wink that I began wiggling with happiness and excitement and began giggling at him almost uncontrollably. I was giddy with relief and started jabbering. I said:

"Hi, Eddie. What was happening in there, Eddie? Did something happen?"

And he laughed and answered: "Oh, yeah, something happened, all right. Didn't something happen, Geraldine?" And, smirking, nudged her playfully on the arm with his elbow.

Geraldine pulled away from him with a quick, cross smile of annoyance and moved past both of us without looking up. When she was gone, my brother said:

"Don't tell Mom."

He knew I wouldn't if he asked me not to.

Later, when I began to visualize and dwell upon (I still do fantasize and dwell upon the episode when I look back, and I look back more and more often now) the many weird, scratchy, intense, intimate things that probably *had* happened on the floor of that coal shed that day, I was amazed and almost marveled out loud at the idea of my big brother joined in sex with Billy Foster's skinny kid sister, who was even a few months younger than I was and had big teeth and was not even pretty.

There was so much more I wanted to find out then about him and her on the floor of the shed, but I was never bold enough to ask, even though my brother was normally a mild-mannered, helpful person who was very good to me while he was alive.

Today, there are so many things I *don't* want to find out. I'd really rather not know, for example (even though my wife and I feel obliged to probe), exactly what kind of games are played at the parties my teenage daughter goes to, or what kind of cigarettes are smoked, or what color pills or capsules are sniffed or swallowed. When police cars collect, I don't want to know why, although I'm glad they've arrived and hope they've come in time to do what they've been called to do. When an ambulance comes, I'd rather not know for whom. And when children drown, choke, or are killed by automobiles or trains, I don't want to know which children they are, because I'm always afraid they might turn out to be mine.

I have a similar aversion to hospitals and the same misgivings and distaste for people who know who fall ill. I never make hospital visits if I can avoid them, because there's always the risk I might open the door of the private or semiprivate room and come upon some awful

sight for which I could not have prepared myself. (I'll never forget my shock in a hospital room the first time I saw a rubber tube running down inside somebody through a nostril stained with blood. It was tan, that tube, and semitransparent.) When friends, relatives, and business acquaintances are stricken with heart attacks now, I never call the hospital or hospital room to find out how they are, because there's always the danger I might find out they are dead. I try not to talk to their wives and children until I've first checked with somebody else who *has* talked to them and can give me the assurance I want that everything is no worse than before. This sometimes strains relationships (even with my wife, who is always asking everybody how they are and running to hospitals with gifts to visit people who are there), but I don't care. I just don't want to talk to people whose husband or father or wife or mother or child may be dying, even though the dying person himself might be someone I feel deeply attached to. I never want to find out that anybody I know is dead.

One time, though (ha, ha), after someone I knew did die, I braced myself, screwed up my valor, and, feigning ignorance, telephoned the hospital that same day to inquire about his condition. I was curious: I wanted to see what it would feel like to hear the hospital tell me that someone I knew was dead. I wondered how it was done; I was preoccupied and even titillated by this problem of technique. Would they decide he had died, passed away, succumbed, was deceased, or perhaps even had expired? (Like a magazine subscription or an old library card?) The woman on the telephone at the hospital surprised me. She said:

"Mr. \_\_\_\_ is no longer listed as a patient."

It took nerve to make that telephone call, it took *all* my nerve. And I was trembling like a leaf when I hung up. Certainly, my heart was pounding with great joy and excitement at my narrow escape, for I had fancied from my very first syllable, from the first digit I dialed, that the woman at the hospital knew exactly what I was up to—that she could see me right through the telephone connection and could see right into my mind—and would say so. She didn't. She just said what she was instructed to say and let me escape scot-free. (Was it a recorded announcement?) And I have never forgotten that tactful procedure:

"Mr. \_\_\_\_ is no longer listed as a patient."

Mr. \_\_\_\_ was dead. He was no longer among the living. Mr. \_\_\_\_ was no longer listed as a patient, and I had to go to his funeral three days later.

I hate funerals—I hate funerals passionately because there is always something morbid about them—and I do my best to avoid going to any (especially my own, ha, ha). At funerals I do have to attend, I try not to speak to anyone; I merely press palms and look over my shoulder. Occasionally, I mumble something inaudible, and I always lower my eyes, the way I see people do in movies. I don't trust myself to do more. Since I don't know what to say when somebody dies, I'm afraid that anything I do say will be wrong. I really don't trust myself anymore in any tight situation whose outcome I can't control or predict. I'm not even happy changing a fuse or an electric light bulb.

Something did happen to me somewhere that robbed me of confidence and courage and left me with a fear of discovery and change and a positive dread of everything unknown that might occur. I dislike anything unexpected. If furniture is rearranged even slightly (even in my office) without my prior knowledge it is like receiving a blow in the face or a stab in the back. I dislike everything sudden. I am angered and hurt by surprises of every sort; even those surprises that are organized to bring me pleasure always end with a leaden aftertaste.

sorrow and self-pity, a sensation that I have been planned against and exploited for somebody else's delight, that a secret has been kept from me, that a conspiracy has succeeded from which I was excluded. (I am not the easiest person to live with.) I loathe conflict (with everyone but the members of my household). There are many small, day-to-day conflicts with which I am simply unable to cope any longer without great agony and humiliation: disagreement with a repairman who is cheating me out of service or a small amount of money, or a conversation of complaint with one of those blankly elusive people who work in the business offices of telephone companies. (I would sooner let myself be cheated.) Or the time the mice got into the apartment before I became a minor executive with my company and began earning enough money to move out of the city into my own home in Connecticut (which I hate).

I didn't know what to do about those mice. I never saw them. Only the cleaning woman did, or said she did, and one time my wife thought she did, and one time my wife's mother was almost sure she did. After a while the mice just disappeared. They went away. They stopped coming out. I'm not even sure they were really there. We stopped talking about them and they seemed to be gone, and it was just as though they had never been there at all. They were baby mice (according to all responsible accounts) and must have squeezed their way through the small squares in the grille covering the radiator. I didn't mind the mice too much as long as I didn't have to see or hear them, although I would often catch myself listening for them and occasionally believe I did hear them. But they gave my wife the creeps and kept her in a constant state of fright. She wanted me to do something about them.

So every night I had to set traps for them. And every morning, while my wife and children watched fearfully over my shoulder, I had to open each of the closet and cupboard doors, peer behind each of the sofas and beds and corner armchairs, to see what new and ugly surprise was lying in wait for me to help launch that particular day. Even no surprise was a shocking surprise. It bothered me to have my family standing around staring at me in such a grave absorption and suspense, because two of my children are high-strung and insecure to begin with and were already scared enough. My other boy has brain damage and doesn't know anything. And I wasn't so sure even then that I liked my family well enough as a group to want them pressing upon me so closely in such a tense and personal situation.

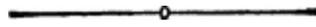
I never knew what I would find when I opened the doors to inspect my traps or looked behind the furniture, stove, or refrigerator. I was afraid I would catch the mice and find them dead in the traps and have to dispose of them. I was afraid that I wouldn't catch the mice and that I would have to go through the same repulsive ritual of setting and inspecting the traps night after night and morning after morning for God knows how long. What I dreaded most of all, though, was that I would open a door in the kitchen and find a live mouse crouching in a dark corner that would hesitate only long enough for me to spy it and then come bounding out past me beneath the thick, rolled-up magazine I always gripped in my sweating fist as a weapon. Oh, God, if that ever happened. If that ever happened, I knew I would have to make myself hit it as hard as I could. I knew I would have to force myself to swing at it with all my strength and try to bludgeon the poor thing to death with one solid blow, and I knew I would fail and only cripple it. Then, as it lay there before me still struggling on its smashed and broken legs, although I would not want to, I knew I would have to raise the heavy magazine and club it again, and then again, and perhaps then again, until

had killed it completely.

The possibility of finding a live mouse behind every door I opened each morning filled me with nausea and made me tremble. It was not that I was afraid of the mouse itself (I'm not that silly), but if I ever did find one, I knew I would have to do something about it.

# The office in which I work

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In the office in which I work there are five people of whom I am afraid. Each of these five people is afraid of four people (excluding overlaps), for a total of twenty, and each of these twenty people is afraid of six people, making a total of one hundred and twenty people who are feared by at least one person. Each of these one hundred and twenty people is afraid of the other one hundred and nineteen, and all of these one hundred and forty-five people are afraid of the twelve men at the top who helped found and build the company and now own and direct it.

All these twelve men are elderly now and drained by time and success of energy and ambition. Many have spent their whole lives here. They seem friendly, slow, and content when I come upon them in the halls (they seem dead) and are always courteous and mumbling when they ride with others in the public elevators. They no longer work hard. They host meetings, make promotions, and allow their names to be used on announcements that are prepared and issued by somebody else. Nobody is sure anymore who really runs the company (not even the people who are credited with running it), but the company does run. Sometimes these twelve men at the top work for the government for a little while. They don't seem interested in doing much more. Two of them know what I do and recognize me because I have helped them in the past, and they have been kind enough to remember me although not, I'm sure, by name. They inevitably smile when they see me and say: "How are you?" (I inevitably nod and respond: "Fine.") Since I have little contact with these twelve men at the top and see them seldom, I am not really afraid of them. But most of the people I am afraid of in the company are.

Just about everybody in the company is afraid of somebody else in the company, and sometimes think I am a cowering boy back in the automobile casualty insurance company for which I used to work very long ago, sorting and filing automobile accident reports after Mrs. Yerger was placed in charge of the file room and kept threatening daily to fire us all. She was a positive, large woman of overbearing confidence and nasty amiability who never doubted the wisdom of her biases. A witty older girl named Virginia sat under a big Western Union clock in that office and traded dirty jokes with me ("My name's Virginia—Virgin for short but not for long, ha, ha."); she was peppy and direct, always laughing and teasing (with me anyway), and I was too young and dumb then to see that she wasn't just joking. (Good God—she used to ask me to get a room for us somewhere, and I didn't even know how! She was extremely pretty, I think now, although I'm not sure I thought so then, but I did like her, and she got me hot. Her father had killed himself a few years before.) Much went on there in the company too that I didn't know about. (Virginia herself had told me that one of the marriage claims adjusters had taken her out in his car one night, turned insistent, and threatened to rape her or put her out near a cemetery, until she pretended to start to cry.) I was afraid of open doors in that company too, I remember, even when I had been sent for by one of the lawyers or adjusters to bring in an important file or a sandwich. I was never sure whether to knock or walk right in, to tap deferentially or rap loudly enough to be heard at once and

command admission. Either way, I would often encounter expressions of annoyance and impatience (or feel I did. I had arrived too soon or arrived too late).

Mrs. Yerger bullied us all. In a little while, nearly all of the file clerks quit, a few of the older ones to go into the army or navy, the rest of us for better jobs. I left for a better job that turned out to be worse. It took nerve to give notice I was quitting, and it always has. I rehearsed my resignation speech for days, building up the courage to deliver it, and formulated earnest, self-righteous answers to accusing questions about my reasons for leaving (that neither Mrs. Yerger nor anyone else even bothered to ask.) I have this thing about authority, about walking right up to it and looking it squarely in the eye, about speaking right out to it bravely and defiantly, even when I know I am right and safe. (I can never make myself believe I *am* safe.) I just don't trust it.

That was my first job after graduating (or being graduated *from*) high school. I was seventeen then—that “older,” witty, flirting girl under the Western Union clock, Virginia, was only twenty-one (too young now by at least a year or two, even for me)—and in every job I've had since, I've always been afraid I was about to be fired. Actually, I have never been fired from a job; instead, I receive generous raises and rapid promotions, because I am usually very alert (at the beginning) and grasp things quickly. But this feeling of failure, this depressing sense of imminent catastrophe and public shame, persists even here, where I do good work steadily and try to make no enemies. It's just that I find it impossible to know exactly what is going on behind the closed doors of all the offices on all the floors occupied by all the people in this and all the other companies in the whole world who might say or do something, intentionally or circumstantially, that could bring me to ruin. I even torture myself at times with the ominous speculation that the CIA, FBI, or Internal Revenue Service has been investigating me surreptitiously for years and is about to close in and arrest me, for no other reason than that I have some secret liberal sympathies and usually vote Democratic.

I have a feeling that someone nearby is soon going to find out something about me that will mean the end, although I can't imagine what that something is.

In the normal course of a business day, I fear Green and Green fears me. I am afraid of Jack Green because my department is part of his department and Jack Green is my boss; Green is afraid of me because most of the work in my department is done for the Sales Department, which is more important than his department, and I am much closer to Andy Kagle and the other people in the Sales Department than he is.

Green distrusts me fitfully. He makes it clear to me every now and then that he wishes to see everything coming out of my department before it is shown to other departments. I know he does not really mean this: he is too busy with his own work to pay that much attention to me, all of mine, and I will bypass him on most of our assignments rather than take up his time and delay their delivery to people who have (or think they have) an immediate need for them. Most of the work we do in my department is, in the long run, trivial. But Green always grows alarmed when someone from another department praises something that has come from my department. He turns scarlet with rage and embarrassment if he has not seen or heard of it. (He is no less splenetic if he *has* seen it and fails to remember it.)

The men in the Sales Department like me (or pretend to). They don't like Green. He knows this. They complain about him to me and make uncomplimentary remarks, and he knows that

too. He pretends he doesn't. He feigns indifference, since he doesn't really like the men in the Sales Department. I don't really like them, either (but I pretend I do). Generally, Green makes no effort to get along with the men in the Sales Department and is pointedly aloof and disdainful. He worries, though, about the enmity he creates there. Green worries painfully that someday soon the Corporate-Operations Department will take my department away from his department and give it to the Sales Department. Green has been worrying about this for eighteen years.

In my department, there are six people who are afraid of me, and one small secretary who is afraid of all of us. I have one other person working for me who is not afraid of anyone, not even me, and I would fire him quickly, but I'm afraid of him.

The thought occurs to me often that there must be mail clerks, office boys and girls, stock boys, messengers, and assistants of all kinds and ages who are afraid of *everyone* in the company; and there is one typist in our department who is going crazy slowly and has all of *us* afraid of *her*.

Her name is Martha. Our biggest fear is that she will go crazy on a weekday between nine and five. We hope she'll go crazy on a weekend, when we aren't with her. We should get her out of the company now, while there is still time. But we won't. Somebody should fire her and nobody will. Even Green, who actually enjoys firing people, recoils from the responsibility of making the move that might bring about her shattering collapse, although he cannot stand her, detests the way she looks, and is infuriated by every reminder that she still exists in his department. (It was he who hired her after a cursory interview, on a strong recommendation of the woman in the Personnel Department who is in charge of finding typists and sending them up.) Like the rest of us, he tries to pretend she isn't there.

We watch her and wait, and pussyfoot past, and wonder to ourselves how much more time must elapse before she comes on schedule to that last, decisive second in which she finally does go insane—shrieking or numb, clawing wildly or serene, comprehending intelligently that she has now gone mad and must therefore be taken away, or terrified, ignorant, and confused.

Oddly, she is much happier at her job than the rest of us. Her mind wanders from her work to more satisfying places, and she smiles and whispers contentedly to herself as she gazes over her typewriter roller at the blank wall only a foot or two in front of her face, forgetting what or where she is and the page she is supposed to be copying. We walk away from her as far as we can, or turn our backs and try not to notice. We each hope somebody else will do or say something to make her stop smiling and chatting to herself each time she starts. When we cannot, in all decency, delay any longer doing it ourselves, we bring her back to our office and her work with gentle reminders that contain no implication of criticism or reproach. We feel she would be surprised and distraught if she knew what she was doing and that she was probably going mad. Other times she is unbearably nervous, unbearable to watch and be with. Everyone is very careful with her and very considerate. Green has complained about her often to the head of Personnel, who does not want to fire her either and has contacted her family in Iowa. Her mother has married again and doesn't want her back. Martha has ba

skin. Everyone resents her and wishes she would go away.

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The company is benevolent. The people, for the most part, are nice, and the atmosphere, for the most part, is convivial. The decor of the offices, particularly in the reception rooms and anterooms, is bright and colorful. There is lots of orange and lots of sea green. There are lots of office parties. We get all legal holidays off and take three days off with pay whenever we need them. We have many three- and four-day weekends. (I can't face these long weekends anymore and don't know how I survive them. I may have to take up skiing.)

Every two weeks we are paid with machine-processed checks manufactured out of stiff paper (they are not thick enough to be called cardboard) that are patterned precisely with neat, rectangular holes and words of formal, official warning in small, black, block letters that the checks must not be spindled, torn, defaced, stapled, or mutilated in any other way. (They must only be cashed.) If not for these words, it would never occur to me to do anything else with my check but deposit it. Now, though, I am occasionally intrigued. What would happen, I speculate gloomily every two weeks or so as I tear open the blank, buff paper envelope and stare dully at the holes and numbers and words on my punched-card paycheck as though hoping disappointedly for some large, unrectifiable mistake in my favor, if I do spindle, fold, tear, deface, staple, and mutilate it? (It's my paycheck, isn't it? Or is it?) What would happen if, deliberately, calmly, with malice aforethought and obvious premeditation, I disobeyed?

I know what would happen: nothing. Nothing would happen. And the knowledge depresses me. Some girl downstairs I never saw before (probably with a bad skin also) would simply touch a few keys on some kind of steel key punch that would set things right again, and it would be as though I had not disobeyed at all. My act of rebellion would be absorbed like rain on an ocean and leave no trace. I would not cause a ripple.

I suppose it is just about impossible for someone like me to rebel anymore and produce any kind of lasting effect I have lost the power to upset things that I had as a child; I can no longer change my environment or even disturb it seriously. They would simply fire and forget me as soon as I tried. They would file me away. That's what will happen to Martha the typist when she finally goes crazy. She'll be fired and forgotten. She'll be filed away. She'll be given sick pay, vacation pay, and severance pay. She'll be given money from the pension fund and money from the profit-sharing fund, and then all traces of her will be hidden safely out of sight inside some old green cabinet for dead records in another room on another floor or in a dusty warehouse somewhere that nobody visits more than once or twice a year and few people in the company even know exists; not unlike the old green cabinets of dead records and all those accident folders in the storage room on the floor below the main offices of the automobile casualty insurance company for which I used to work when I was just a kid. When she goes crazy, her case will be closed.

I had never imagined so many dead records as I saw in that storage room (and there were thousands and thousands of even deader records at the warehouse I had to go to once or twice a year when a question arose concerning a record that had been dead a really long time). I remember them accurately, I remember the garish look of the data in grotesque blue ink on the outside of each folder: a number, a name, an address, a date, and an abbreviated indication of whether the accident involved damage to property only (PD) or

damage to people (PI, for personal injury). Often, I would bring sandwiches from home (baloney, cooked chopped meat with lots of ketchup, or tuna fish or canned salmon and tomato) and eat them in the storage room downstairs on my lunch hour, and if I ate them alone, I would read the New York *Mirror* (a newspaper now also dead) and then try to entertain myself by going through some old accident folders picked from the file cabinets at random. I was searching for action, tragedy, the high drama of detective work and courtroom suspense, but it was no use. They were dead. None of the names or appraisals or medical statements or investigations or eyewitness reports brought anything back to life. (The *Mirror* was better, and even its up-to-the-minute true stories of family and national misfortunes read just like the comic strips.) What impressed me most was the sheer immensity of all those dead records, the abounding quantity of all those drab old sagging cardboard file cabinets rising like joined, ageless towers from the floor almost to the ceiling, that vast, unending sequence of unconnected accidents that had been happening to people and cars long before I came to work there, were happening then, and are happening still.

There was a girl in that company too who went crazy while I was there. She was filed away. And in the company I worked for before this one, there was a man, a middle-management executive, who went crazy and jumped out of a hotel window and killed himself; he left a note saying he was sorry he was jumping out of the hotel window and killing himself, that he would have shot himself instead but didn't know how to obtain a gun or use one. He was picked up off the ground by the police (probably) and filed away.

I think that maybe in every company today there is always at least one person who is going crazy slowly.

The company is having another banner year. It continues to grow, and in many respects we are the leader in the field. According to our latest Annual Report, it is bigger and better than any year than it was last year.

We have twenty-nine offices now, twelve in this country, two in Canada, four in Latin America, and eleven overseas. We used to have one in Cuba, but that was lost. We average three suicides a year; two men, usually on the middle-executive level, kill themselves every twelve months, almost always by gunshot, and one girl, usually unmarried, separated, or divorced, who generally does the job with sleeping pills. Salaries are high, vacations are long.

People in the company like to live well and are unusually susceptible to nervous breakdowns. They have good tastes and enjoy high standards of living. We are well-educated and far above average in abilities and intelligence. Everybody spends. Nobody saves. Nervous breakdowns are more difficult to keep track of than suicides because they are harder to recognize and easier to hush up. (A suicide, after all, is a suicide: there's something final about it. It's the last thing a person does. But who knows with certainty when a person is breaking down?) But nervous breakdowns do occur regularly in all age and occupational groups and among all kinds of people—thin people and fat people, tall people and short people, good people and bad people. In the few years I have been in charge of my department, one girl and one man here have each been out for extended absences because they broke down. Both have been fixed and are now back working for me, and not many people outside my department know why they were gone. (One of them, the man, hasn't been fixed too well, I think, and will probably break down again soon. He is already turning

into a problem again, with me and with everyone else he talks to. He talks too much.)

In an average year, four people I know about in the company will die of natural causes and two-and-a-half more (two men one year, three the next) will go on sick leave for ailments that will eventually turn out to be cancer. Approximately two people will be killed in accidents every year, one in an auto, the other by fire or drowning. Nobody in the company has yet been killed in an airplane crash, and this is highly mysterious to me, for we travel a lot by air to visit other offices or call on customers, prospects, and suppliers in other cities and countries. When regular, full-time employees do go on sick leave, they are usually paid their full salary for as long as the illness lasts (even though it may last a lifetime. Ha, ha), for the company excels in this matter of employee benefits. Everybody is divorced (not married though). Everyone drinks and takes two hours or more for lunch. The men all flirt. The women all respond, except for a few who are very religious or very dull, or a few very young ones who are out in the world for the first time and don't understand yet how things are.

Most of us like working here, even though we are afraid, and do not long to leave for jobs with other companies. We make money and have fun. We read books and go to plays. And somehow the time passes.

This fiscal period, I am flirting with Jane. Jane is new in the Art Department and not quite sure whether I mean it or not. She is just a few years out of college, where she majored in fine arts, and still finds things in the city daring, sophisticated, and intellectual. She goes to the movies a lot. She has not, I think, slept with a married man yet.

Jane is assistant head of the Art Department in Green's department. There are only three people in the Art Department. She has, like the rest of us, much time in which to brood and fantasize and make personal phone calls and kid around with whoever in the company (most of whom want to kid around with her. She has a tall, slim figure that's pretty good and a clogged duct in one eye that makes it dribble with tears. She wears loose lamb's-wool sweaters that hug the long points of her small breasts beautifully. (Often, my fingertips would love to hug and roll those same long points of her small breasts just as beautifully, but I know from practical experience that my desire would not remain with her breasts for long. They make a convenient starting place.) Her good figure, prominent nipples, and clogged tear duct give me an easy opening for suggestive wisecracks that cover the same ground as those I used to exchange with the older girl Virginia under the big Western Union clock in the automobile casualty insurance company (the company is still in business after all these years, at the same place, and probably the clock too is still there, running, although the office building is now slated to come down), except that now I am the older, more experienced (and more jaded) one and can control and direct things pretty much the way I choose. I have the feeling now that I can do whatever I want to with Jane, especially on days when she's had two vodka martinis for lunch instead of one (I, personally, hate vodka martinis and mistrust the mettle of people who drink them) or three whiskey sours instead of two. I could, if I wished, take her out for *three* vodka martinis after work one day and then up to Red Parker's apartment nearby, and the rest, I'd bet, would be as easy as pie (and possibly no more thrilling). I can make Jane laugh whenever I want to, and this, I know, can be worth more than half the game if I decide I seriously do want to play, but *I'm* not sure either whether I mean it or not.

Probably, I should be ashamed of myself, because she's only a decent young girl of twenty

four. Possibly I should be proud of myself, because she is, after all, a decent and very attractive young girl of only twenty-four whom I can probably lay whenever I want to. I have her scheduled vaguely somewhere ahead, probably in the weeks before the convention when I will be using everybody in the Art Department a great deal.) I don't really know how I am supposed to feel. I do know that girls in their early twenties are easy and sweet. (Girls in their late twenties are easier but sad, and that isn't so sweet.) They are easy, I think, because they are sweet, and they are sweet, I think, because they are dumb.

On days when I've had two martinis for lunch, Jane's breasts and legs can drive me almost wild as she parks her slender ass against the wall of one of the narrow corridors in the back offices near the Art Department when I stop to kid with her. Jane smiles a lot and is very innocent (she thinks I'm a very nice man, for example), although she is not, of course, without some sex experience, about which she boasts laughingly when I taunt her with being a virgin and denies laughingly when I taunt her with being a whore. I make teasing, rather mechanical and juvenile jokes (I've made them all before to other girls and ladies in one variation or another) about her eye or sweater or the good or bad life I pretend she is leading as I lean down almost slaving toward the front of her skirt (I don't know how she can bear me in these disgusting moments—but she can) and gaze lecherously over the long stretch of her thighs underneath, even though I know already I would probably find her legs a little thin when I had her undressed and would probably describe her as a bit too skinny if I ever spoke about her afterward to anyone.

I think I really do like Jane a lot. She is cheerful, open, trusting, optimistic—and I don't meet many of *those* anymore. Till now, I've decided to do nothing with her except continue the lascivious banter between us that tickles and amuses and encourages us both. Maybe her face and her figure are a little too good. I used to like girls who were tall and heavy, and slightly coarse, and maybe I still do, but I seem to be doing most of my sleeping these days with girls who are slim and pretty and mostly young. My wife is tall and slim and used to be very pretty when she was young.

The people in the company who are most afraid of most people are the salesmen. They live and work under pressure that is extraordinary. (I would not be able to stand it.) When things are bad, they are worse for the salesmen; when things are good, they are not much better.

They are always on trial, always on the verge of failure, collectively and individually. They strain, even the most secure and self-assured of them, to look good on paper; and there is much paper for them to look good on. Each week, for example, a record of the sales results of the preceding week for each sales office and for the Sales Department as a whole for each division of the company is kept and compared to the sales results for the corresponding week of the year before; the figures are photocopied on the latest photocopying machines and distributed throughout the company to all the people and departments whose work is related to selling. In addition to this, the sales record for each sales office for each quarter of each year for each division of the company and for the company as a whole is tabulated and compared to the sales record for the corresponding quarter of the year before; along with this, cumulative quarterly sales totals are also kept, and all these quarterly sales totals are photocopied and distributed too. In addition to this, quarterly and cumulative sales totals are compared with quarterly and cumulative sales totals\* (\*estimated) of other companies in the

same field, and these figures are photocopied and distributed too. The figures are tabulated in stacks and layers of parallel lines and columns for snap comparisons and judgments by anyone whose eyes fall upon them. The result of all this photocopying and distributing is that there is almost continuous public scrutiny and discussion throughout the company of how well or poorly the salesmen in each sales office of each division of the company are doing at any given time.

When salesmen are doing well, there is pressure upon them to begin doing better, for fear they may start doing worse. When they are doing poorly, they are doing terribly. When a salesman lands a large order or brings in an important new account, his elation is brief, for there is danger he might lose that large order or important new account to a salesman from a competing company (or from a competing division of this company, which shows how complex and orderly the company has become) the next time around. It might even be canceled before it is filled, in which case no one is certain if anything was gained or lost. So there is crisis and alarm even in their triumphs.

Nevertheless, the salesmen love their work and would not choose any other kind. They are a vigorous, fun-loving bunch when they are not suffering abdominal cramps or brooding miserably about the future; on the other hand, they often turn cranky without warning and complain and bicker a lot. Some sulk, some bully; some bully and then sulk. All of them drink heavily until they get hepatitis or heart attacks or are warned away from heavy drinking for some other reason, and all of them, sooner or later, begin to feel they are being picked on and blamed unfairly. Each of them can name at least one superior in the company who he feels has a grudge against him and is determined to wreck his career.

The salesmen work hard and earn big salaries, with large personal expense accounts that they squander generously on other people in and out of the company, including me. They own good houses in good communities and play good games of golf on good private golf courses. The company encourages this. The company, in fact, will pay for their country club membership and all charges they incur there, if the club they get into is a good one. The company seeks and rewards salesmen who make a good impression on the golf course.

Unmarried men are not wanted in the Sales Department, not even widowers, for the company has learned from experience that it is difficult and dangerous for unmarried salesmen to mix socially with prominent executives and their wives or participate with them in responsible civic affairs. (Too many of the wives of these prominent and very successful men are no more satisfied with their marital situation than are their husbands.) If a salesman's wife dies and he is not ready to remarry, he is usually moved into an administrative position after several months of mourning. Bachelors are never hired for the sales force, and salesmen who get divorced, or whose wives die, know they had better remarry or begin looking ahead toward a different job.

(Red Parker has been a widower too long and is getting into trouble for that and for his excessive drinking. He is having too good a time.)

Strangely enough, the salesmen, who are aggressive, egotistical, and individualistic by nature, react very well to the constant pressure and rigid supervision to which they are subjected. They are stimulated and motivated by discipline and direction. They thrive on explicit guidance toward clear objectives. (This may be one reason golf appeals to them.) For the most part, they are cheerful, confident, and gregarious when they are not irritable.

anxious, and depressed. There must be something in the makeup of a man that enables him not only to *be* a salesman, but to *want* to be one. Ours actually *enjoy* selling, although there seem to be many among them who suffer from colitis, hernia, hemorrhoids, and chronic diarrhea (I have one hemorrhoid, and that one comes and goes as it pleases and is no bother to me at all, now that I've been to a doctor and made sure it isn't cancer), not to mention the frequent breakdowns from tension and overwork that occur in the Sales Department as well as in other departments, and the occasional suicide that pops up among the salesmen about once every two years.

The salesmen are proud of their position and of the status and importance they enjoy within the company, for the function of my department, and of most other departments, is to help the salesmen sell. The company exists to sell. That's the reason we were hired, and that's the reason we are paid.

The people in the company who are least afraid are the few in our small Market Research Department, who believe in nothing and are concerned with collecting, organizing, interpreting, and reorganizing statistical information about the public, the market, the country, and the world. For one thing, their salaries are small, and they know they will not have much trouble finding jobs paying just as little in other companies if they lose their jobs here. Their budget, too, is small, for they are no longer permitted to undertake large projects.

Most of the information we use now is obtained free from trade associations, the U.S. Census Bureau, the Department of Commerce, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, and the Pentagon, and there is no way of knowing anymore whether the information on which we base our own information for distribution is true or false. But that doesn't seem to matter; all that does matter is that the information come from a reputable source. People in the Market Research Department are never held to blame for conditions they discover outside the company that place us at a competitive disadvantage. What is, is—and they are not expected to change reality, but merely to find it if they can and suggest ingenious ways of disguising it. To a great extent, that is the nature of my own work, and all of us under Green work closely with the Sales Department and the Public Relations Department in converting whole truths into half truths and half truths into whole ones.

I am very good with these techniques of deception, although I am not always able anymore to deceive myself (if I were, I would not know that, would I? Ha, ha). In fact, I am continually astonished by people in the company who do fall victim to their own (our own) propaganda. There are so many now who actually believe that what we do is really important. This happens not only to salesmen, who repeat their various sales pitches aloud so often they acquire the logic and authority of a mumbo-jumbo creed, but to the shrewd and capable executives in top management, who have access to all data ought to know better. It happens to people on my own level and lower. It happens to just about everybody in the company who graduated from a good business school with honors: these are uniformly the most competent and conscientious people in the company, and also the most gullible and naïve. Every time we launch a new advertising campaign, for example, people inside the company are the first ones to be taken in by it. Every time we introduce a new product, or an old product with a different cover, color, and name that we present as new, people inside the company are the first to rush to buy it—even when it's no good.

When salesmen and company spokesmen begin believing their own arguments, the result is not always bad, for they develop an outlook of loyalty, zeal, and conviction that is often remarkably persuasive in itself. It produces that kind of dedication and fanaticism that makes good citizens and good employees. When it happens to a person in my own department, however, the result can be disastrous, for he begins relying too heavily on what he now thinks is the truth and loses his talent for devising good lies. He is no longer convincing. It is exactly what happened to Holloway, the man in my own department who broke down (and is probably going to break down again soon).

“But it’s true, don’t you see?” he would argue softly to the salesmen, the secretaries, and even to me, with a knowing and indulgent smile, as though what he was saying ought to have been as obvious to everyone as it was to him. “We *are* the best.” (The point he missed is that it didn’t matter whether it was true or not; what mattered was what people *thought* was true.)

He is beginning to smile and argue that way again and to spend more time talking to me than we want to spend listening to him. My own wish when he is buttonholing me or bending the ear of someone else in my department is that he would hurry up and have his nervous breakdown already, if he is going to have one anyway, and get it—and himself—out of the way. He is the only one who talks to Martha, our typist who is going crazy, and she is the only one who listens to him without restlessness and irritation. She listens to him with great intensity because she is paying no attention to him at all.

Everyone grew impatient with him. And he lost his power to understand (as he is losing this power again) why the salesmen, who would come to him for solid proof to support their exaggerations and misrepresentations, turned skeptical, began to avoid him, and refused to depend on him any longer or even take him to lunch. He actually expected them to get by with only the “truth.”

It’s a wise person, I guess, who knows he’s dumb, and an honest person who knows he’s a liar. And it’s a dumb person, I guess, who’s convinced he is wise, I conclude to myself (wisely), as we wise grownups here at the company go gliding in and out all day long, scaring each other at our desks and cubicles and water coolers and trying to evade the people who frighten us. We come to work, have lunch, and go home. We goose-step in and goose-step out, change our partners and wander all about, sashay around for a pat on the head, and promenade home till we all drop dead. Really, I ask myself every now and then, depending on how well or poorly things are going with Green at the office or at home with my wife, or with my retarded son, or with my other son, or my daughter, or the colored maid, or the nurse for my retarded son, is this *all* there is for me to do? Is this really the *most* I can get from the few years left in this one life of mine?

And the answer I get, of course, is always ... Yes!

Because I have my job, draw my pay, get my laughs, and seem to be able to get one girl or another to go to bed with me just about every time I want; because I am envied and looked up to by neighbors and coworkers with smaller salaries, less personality, drab wives; and because I really do seem to have everything I want, although I often wish I were working for someone other than Green, who likes me and likes my work but wouldn’t let me make a speech at the company convention in Puerto Rico last year, or at the company convention in Florida the year before—and who knows I hate him for that and will probably never forgive him or ever forget it.

(I have dreams, unpleasant dreams, that relate, I think, to my wanting to speak at a company convention, and they are always dreams that involve bitter frustration and humiliation and insurmountable difficulty in getting from one location to another.)

Green now thinks I am conspiring to undermine him. He is wrong. For one thing, I don't have the initiative; for another, I don't have the nerve; and for still another thing, I guess I really like and admire Green in many respects (even though I also hate and resent him in many others), and I know I am probably safer working for him than I would be working for anyone else—even for Andy Kagle in the Sales Department if they did decide to move me and my department from Green's department to Kagle's department.

In many ways and on many occasions Green and I are friends and allies and do helpful and sometimes considerate things for each other. Often, I protect and defend him when he is late or forgetful with work of his own, and I frequently give him credit for good work from my department that he does not deserve. But I never tell him I do this; and I never let him know when I hear anything favorable about him. I enjoy seeing Green apprehensive. I'm pleased he distrusts me (it does wonders for my self-esteem), and I do no more than necessary to reassure him.

And I am the best friend he has here.

So I scare Green, and Green scares White, and White scares Black, and Black scares Brown and Green, and Brown scares me and Green and Andy Kagle, and all of this is absolutely true because Horace White really is afraid of conversation with Jack Green, and Johnny Brown, who bulldozes everyone around him with his strong shoulders, practical mind, and tough outspoken mouth, is afraid of Lester Black, who protects him.

I know it's true, because I worked this whole color wheel out one dull, wet afternoon on one of those organizational charts I am always constructing when I grow bored with my work. I am currently occupied (as one of my private projects) with trying to organize a self-sufficient community out of people in the company whose names are the same as occupations, tools, or natural resources, for we have many Millers, Bakers, Taylor Carpenters, Fields, Farmers, Hammers, Nichols (puns are permitted in my Utopia, else how could we get by?), and Butchers listed in the internal telephone directory; possibly we'd be a much better organization if all of us were doing the kind of work our names suggest, although I'm not sure where I'd fit in snugly there, either, because my name means nothing that I know of and I don't know where it came from.

Digging out valuable information of no importance distracts and amuses me. There are eleven Greens in the company (counting Greenes), eight Whites, four Browns, and four Blacks. There is one Slocum ... me. For a while, there were two Slocums; there was a Marjorie Slocum in our Chicago office, a short, sexy piece just out of secretarial school with a wiggling ass and a nice big bust, but she quit to get married and was soon pregnant and disappeared. Here and there in the company colored men, Negroes, in immaculate white or blue shirts and very firmly knotted ties are starting to appear; none are important yet, and nobody knows positively why they have come here or what they really want. All of us (almost all of us) are ostentatiously polite to them and pretend to see no difference. In private, the salesmen make

jokes about them.

“Know what they said about the first Negro astronaut?”

“What?”

“The jig is up.”)

I am bored with my work very often now. Everything routine that comes in I pass along to somebody else. This makes my boredom worse. It's a real problem to decide whether it is more boring to do something boring than to pass along everything boring that comes in to somebody else and then have nothing to do at all.

Actually, I enjoy my work when the assignments are large and urgent and somewhat frightening and will come to the attention of many people. I get scared, and am unable to sleep at night, but I usually perform at my best under this stimulating kind of pressure and enjoy my job the most. I handle all of these important projects myself, and I rejoice with tremendous pride and vanity in the compliments I receive when I do them well (as I always do). But between such peaks of challenge and elation there is monotony and despair. (And I find, too, that once I've succeeded in impressing somebody, I'm not much excited about impressing that same person again; there is a large, emotional letdown after I survive each crisis, a kind of empty, tragic disappointment, and last year's threat, opportunity, and inspiration are often this year's inescapable tedium. I frequently feel I'm being taken advantage of merely because I'm asked to do the work I'm paid to do.)

On days when I'm especially melancholy, I begin constructing tables of organization from various standpoints of plain malevolence, dividing, subdividing, and classifying people in the company on the basis of envy, hope, fear, ambition, frustration, rivalry, hatred, and disappointment. I call these charts my Happiness Charts. These exercises in malice never fail to boost my spirits—but only for a while. I rank pretty high when the company is analyzed this way, because I'm not envious or disappointed, and I have no expectations. At the very top, of course, are those people, mostly young and without dependents, to whom the company is not yet an institution of any sacred merit (or even an institution especially worthy of preserving) but still only a place to work, and who regard their present association with it as something temporary. To them, it's all just a job, from president to porter, and pretty much the same job at that. I put these people at the top because if you asked any one of them if he would choose to spend the rest of his life working for the company, he would give you a resounding *No!*, regardless of what inducements were offered. I was that high once. If you asked me that same question today, I would also give you a resounding *No!* and add:

“I think I'd rather die now.”

But I am making no plans to leave.

I have the feeling now that there is no place left for me to go.

Near the very bottom of my Happiness Charts I put those people who are striving so hard to get to the top. I am better off (or think I am) than they because, first, I have no enemies or rivals (that I know of) and am almost convinced I can hold my job here for as long as I want to and, second, because there is no other job in the company I want that I can realistically hope to get. I wouldn't want Green's job; I couldn't handle it if I had it and would be afraid to take it if it were offered. There is too much to do. I'm glad it won't be (I'm sure it won't be).

I am one of those many people, therefore, most of whom are much older than I, who are

without ambition already and have no hope, although I do want to continue receiving my raise in salary each year, and a good cash bonus at Christmastime, and I do want very much to be allowed to take my place on the rostrum at the next company convention in Puerto Rico (if it will be Puerto Rico again this year), along with the rest of the managers in Green's department and make my three-minute report to the company of the work we have done in my department and the projects we are planning for the year ahead.

It was downright humiliating to be the only one of Green's managers left out. The omission was conspicuous, the rebuff intentionally public, and for the following four days, while others had a great, robust time golfing and boozing it up, I was the object of expressions of pity and solemn, perfunctory commiseration from many people I hate and wanted to hit or scream at. It was jealousy and pure, petty spite that made Green decide abruptly to push me off the schedule after we were already in Puerto Rico and the convention had gotten off to such a promising start, and after I had worked so long and nervously (I even rehearsed at home just about every night—to the wonder and consternation of my family) on my speech for the three-minute segment of the program allotted to me and had prepared a very good and witty demonstration of eighteen color slides.

"Stop sulking," Green commanded me curtly, wearing that smile of breezy and complacent innocence he likes to affect when he knows he is cutting deep. "You're a rotten speaker anyway, and you'll probably be much happier working the slide machines and moving projectors and seeing that the slides of the others don't get all mixed up."

"I want to do it, Jack," I told him, trying to keep my voice strong and steady. (What I really wanted to do was burst into tears, and I was afraid I would.) "I've never made a speech at a convention before."

"And you aren't going to make one now."

"This is a good talk I've got here."

"It's dull and self-conscious and of no interest to anyone."

"I've prepared some fine slides."

"You aren't going to use them," he told me.

"You did the same thing to me in Florida last year."

"And I may do it again to you next year."

"It isn't fair."

"It probably isn't."

I waited. He added nothing. He is so much better at this sort of ego-baiting than I am. It was my turn to speak, and he had left me nothing to say.

"Well," I offered, shrugging and looking away.

"I don't care if it's fair or not," he continued then. "We're discussing an important comparison at this convention, not a college commencement exercise. I've got to use what little time they give us on the program as effectively as possible."

"It's only three minutes," I begged.

"I can use those three minutes better than you can." He laughed suddenly, in the friendliest, most inoffensive fashion, as though nothing of consequence had just happened, letting me know in that arrogantly firm and rude manner of his that the argument was over. "You must understand, Bob," he bantered (while I thought he might actually throw an arm around my shoulder. He never touches me), "that this ambition of yours to make a little

speech is nothing more than a shallow, middle-class vanity. I'm as shallow as you are, and the middle class as the best of them. So I'm going to take your three minutes away from you and cover you and your department in my own speech."

You bastard, I thought. "You're the boss," I said.

"That's right," he retorted coldly. "I am. And you've already received more than enough attention here for an employee of mine. I want to make certain that nobody in this company gets the idea you're working for Andy Kagle and not for me. Or that you're doing a better job in your position than I'm doing in mine. Do you get what I mean?"

I certainly did, then. Green was reasserting his ownership of me publicly by demonstrating his right to treat me with contempt. And in his own long (rather self-conscious and pedantic) speech to the convention, he "covered" me and my department in a single aside:

"And Bob Slocum and his people will help, when you feel you really need them, provided your requests are not unreasonable."

And that was all, even though the two projects I had prepared for the coming year were the real high spots of the whole convention. Everyone was enthusiastic about them, even executives from other divisions of the company, who were there as guests and observers. Several asked to meet me and expressed the wish for work of similar kind and quality in their own areas of the company. I could have had a grand, triumphant time that week if not for Green (Green's?) kicking me off the schedule. The salesmen, who would have to use these projects in connection with their own work, congratulated me over and over again and never stopped slapping my back as they drank their whiskey in the evening and their Bloody Marys at breakfast in the morning (although some were already implying that they would want to discuss some modifications with me for their own purposes when the convention was over and we were back in New York). And even Arthur Baron, who is boss of us all in this division, drifted over to me on the terrace of the hotel during one of the twilight cocktail parties to tell me that both my projects were the best of their kind he had ever seen and would probably be very useful.

Arthur Baron, who is tactful and soft-spoken, addressed his comments to Green, who was standing beside me on the terrace because he does not like to be seen standing alone. (I was Green's roosting place for the moment, while he took his bearings; and I knew he would wait for me to someone more important as soon as he spied an opportunity. At crowded social or business gatherings, Green never leaves one person unless he has someone else to move to.) Green laughed quickly and gave all credit for the work to me; then he promptly diminished its importance by declaring he had not even seen any of it until that same afternoon (which was not true, since his criticism and suggestions all through the previous two weeks had helped enormously, and nothing had been included without his inspection and approval.) Green went on to observe, with another pleasant laugh, that the excellent response to something prepared by me without his knowledge or assistance all went to prove what a superb administrator he was. (All I was able to get in to Arthur Baron was a mumbled:

"Thanks. I'm glad.")

"The only legitimate goal of a good administrator," Green continued affably, smiling directly at Arthur Baron and excluding me from his attention entirely, "is to make himself superfluous as quickly as possible, and then have no work of his own to do until he is promoted to vice-president or retires. Don't you agree?"

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