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An Entertaining Story: A Short Corporate Fiction

Marc L. Sherman

This is a story. A short story. An entertaining story. This story is not for thinking, and, heavens forbid, for action. Stay seated. Enjoy. This is a story about a man. He's in his middle age, his black and blue periods, a moment of life in which time has finally caught up with him and grabbed his fleeting attention by the scruff of its neck. Ahhhh! The story is about that.

This story is about a woman. She's in her middle age, her scarlet period, a whirlwhisp of time in which life has finally caught up with her, reached out its long and withered fingers, chapped by domestic drudgery, tapped her on the shoulder and pointed her to the threshold. This story is about that. Also.

This story is about entertainment; for entertainment; your entertainment. Everyone's entertainment. A truly democratic story. It is not to make you think. It thinks. It entertains. Watch it tapdance down the marble steps, just like Mr. Billy Bojangles. It slips on a banana peel and falls on its keister. A cream pie streaks across the sky and hits it in the face while a ukulele lady twangs her rhythms.

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Yes, this is a story. About hemorrhoidal horror — the horror, the horror. About acid eating at the stomach. Sizzle, tear, shred. The man's sitting at his terminal. Terminal. An end user. He punches in numbers and words and data. He presses buttons and keys to change to zeros and ones that which cannot be digitalized without losing the essence. He strikes with abandon. Symbols lost in their significance, somewhat weary, somewhat lean, arrange themselves in syntactical battalions, ready for marching orders from somewhere off-screen. His eyes vibrate with the flashing cursor, e scratches himself upon the arm of the plastic chair, cursing the pain in his keister. Day after day, he sits there, day after day, cursing and weary and lean. One day he will leave. He thinks.

And Hollywood can't make a movie of this story, because it occurs only on the page. And no New York publishing house can make a best-seller of it, because, it is, after all, only a short story. Short-legged. Short-winded. Short-lived. Short-changed.

The woman, she wipes off her pale pink hands with a clump of paper towels. Half-dry, she dumps the load thoughtlessly into a plastic sack. Morning dishes done, kids off to school, she can think about her day. She thinks.

But this is not a story for thinking. Although the characters may. Maybe.

Now what about the corporation? "What corporation?" you think. The corporation is another character in the story. But can a corporation be a character? But can a corporation think? Do not answer such questions — that is the job of the story. Or is it the story's job just to ask them? Certainly it is its job, not yours. It thinks.

The Corporation employs the man. The Corporation entertains the woman. The Corporation enjoys the story, but it must enjoin it before it gets too far. Do not raise questions, story. Thinking must not be done by stories, that is for people to do. The Corporation thinks.

The man has worked for the Corporation over these past fifteen years. Six at this cubicle alone. He started in the mailroom, transporting mail to those lofting high in the black glass towers. He was energetic then. Always on his feet. Running, this way and that, ever ready to please. Please the Corporation. But can a corporation be pleased? Don't think about it. That is for the story and the story's not yet enjoined.

The woman used to work for the Corporation. Now the Corporation works for her. The Corporation makes her life easier. It provides her dishsoap to soften her hands, plastic bags for her garbage, chemicals to keep her house clean, leaded make-up for her eyes, detergent gasoline for her new sportscar, freon for her air conditioner, cigarettes to keep her calm, styrofoam food for her microwave and, most important, commercials for her T.V.. The Corporation is good, is strong, she thinks as she kisses the tissue it makes to remove excess lipstick.

The story progresses into a bookstore. All the books are fiction, ten to fifteen percent off. Fiction Lite. Reads great, less filling. Nothing fancy. Simple. Symbols. No more than four-syllable words. None of that deep philosophy or social criticism stuff. Nothing to think about; don't think about it at all. The books all look alike and tell the same story. The story's story. But the story may be enjoined.

The story thinks it will take action. It complains to the bookseller. She sits behind her plastic cash register/computer. Every now and then she pushes her round wirerimmed glasses up the bridge of her patrician nose. She can't hear a thing. She is reading the story, surreptitiously.

The man's computer screen is flashing and buzzing like the Fourth of July. It seems to have found the answer. It has thought it through, using ones and zeros reduced from words and numbers and other sorted data. He has entered each complex significant. The computer, in its turn, has ignored all the nuances. Nuances only confuse. The computer simplifies all to symbols. Ones or zeros, it almost doesn't matter which. While

waiting for the computer to finish his thinking the man rubs along the chair, hoping no one will notice.

He is dazed by the machine's confident brilliance. His eyes shudder back and forth, up and down. They bounce in hypnotic rhythm as the answer scrolls down the monitor, appearing for a moment, then exiting, blinking from the electric cathode eye. He wouldn't have been able to think this through. He couldn't even figure out the question. But he, not it, will get the credit. It, afterall, is only a machine. He thinks.

He thinks. Maybe a raise, maybe a promotion, maybe his own office, maybe a raise. Yes, a raise, won't that make the woman happy, he thinks. He thinks!

The story takes a night off to celebrate its success — its anticipated success. Like all stories, it is confident, maybe even cocky. It must be. If it doesn't think it knows what it thinks it knows, then what does it know, it thinks, and who will read it? Without readers, no entertainment. Without entertainment, no purpose.

So the story goes to the best restaurant in town and orders lobster. It picks a live one from the tank, claws tied together with plastic twirler things. The waiter, in silk penguin suit, tie slightly askew, presents the story with drawn butter, butter made by Corporation cows in their Corporation stalls. He ties a plastic bib about the story. The story grabs the lobster with its short story appendages and twists the claws from the body, sucking out the succulent white meat. The story will not use the Corporation's butter. The lobster is delicious on its own.

The woman, household chores complete, dons her red silk dress. She shimmies into it. It clings to her lacy nylon padded bra and halfslip. A matched set. The dress hides her bulges and accentuates her curves. Her black stockings encase her cellulited thighs. She's the very image of television perfection. Thank you, Corporation," she thinks, "you make my life worth living." As she starts towards the door, she balances carelessly

woman looks over. She's oblivious to him; her eyes wild without thought. .

The Corporation rises from the couch, lights a cigarette with a fluorescent green plastic lighter and speaks softly, firmly. "Good work Johnson. Knew it was just a matter of time."

The man responds instinctively. No thought. Dazed by the mellifluous seduction of the corporate voice, he unties his tie and sheds his wool suit. Offers the corporation himself, hemorrhoids and all. He does not think. He feels. Good.

The Corporation always knew it would have its way with him. Just a matter of time. Had to wait for the right moment to grab him. It didn't think about it. The Corporation just knew.

The Corporation knows the story by heart. It knows...

The End.

lace. Why hide it? Why, she looks like a cover girl, made up and dressed up. Her nails are perfectly polished, the same red as the dress. Her lips are puffed into cute scarlet cusps. Behind are lily white teeth, faintly smeared by leftover lipstick. This is it, she thinks. Her blue eyes shine bright with anticipation. The elevator doors slide apart and she walks into waiting arms, which immediately peel her from her well-chosen dress and whisk her onto the couch.

The Corporation is profiting from the exchange rate today. Its trading is pre-programmed. Its profits are well assured. It knows the margins before the markets open. It consummates deals. It undertakes takeovers, mergers and acquisitions. Manufacturing plants are operating at 110%. There is no time to waste on human frivolities. Workers give their all. Their needs are met with corporate demands. Allocation of leisure time is under firm control. Entertaining diversions are well-planned and well-spaced.

Personnel is well-rested. No complaints are recorded. All divisions report fully functional. The Corporation knows it is ready to perform.

The story is watching dumbfounded. It has lost its control. Did it have any to begin with? Its eyes roll up and down. The pictures, 24 per second are hypnotic, rhythmic. It didn't think such acts were possible. Wouldn't have believed it. Such strength, such determination, such confident vitality. The naked bodies go after each other in total abandon. No words. No story. Each body knows without thinking how to please the other. Each lunges into, on top of, between, around and through the other. Each fights for control and gives in totally to the other. Such unnatural acts. The story is disgusted. It slinks into its seat. But it is entertained. Completely. It sighs in exhaustion. It does not think. Finally.

The elevator doors slide open. The man steps over the threshold with a confident gait and a self-assured smile. It drops. He slumps. The spiral bound report falls to the carpet. The

on top of her spiked heels. Don't fall," the story warns. "Careful!" She's too full of her thoughts to hear.

The man prints off his — well, the computer's — answer. Twenty-one percent saving on an insignificant investment — petty change. Increased profits on the product line. Seventeen percent mark-up with only minimal marketing. Just reposition the product — change the label, change the color. A few new commercials and everyone will think the product is not only better, but is actually good for them, good for the country, good for the environment. It is good. Good for him, good for the corporation. The graphs look impressive, bars and numbers and pie-like circles and different colors — blue, red, yellow — no green. Heavens forbid.

He thinks: This will wow them. Finally. My big break. I am moving now. My turn. The little woman will be so proud. We'll move into a great big house. Send the kids to big private schools. Buy a big car. Go to big parties. Go on a big vacation. He thinks. Big.

The story thinks. Tries to. But it is a short story: it gets drunk easily. The waiter has been keeping the story's wine glass full. To the rim. The waiter knows which side his corporate bread is corporate buttered on. And anyway, the story has been celebrating. Tying one on. It throbs with thought. It dreams of growing up into a big story, one with its own office, its own computer. It imagines itself grandly expanded, with variations and themes, complex characters and even messages and significance. American Gothic. Now that's entertainment. It pictures itself on stage with a string of Rockettes, scantily attired, extending their lacy legs into the audience. It croons into the microphone. The audience is on its feet applauding.

But the thoughts don't seem to flow anymore. The story just flashes on visions of the woman, the man and the Corporation. Like the computer with the man's answer, the data don't fit into zeros and ones. The results don't all fit onto the screen. They scroll past. There, then gone.

And something is missing. Nuances? Significants? Symbols? The story thinks that it is making up the story of the man finally hitting it big, the woman going out on her rendezvous and the Corporation that serves them... oh so well. It thinks the man, the woman and the corporation are entertaining.

But it is they, the Corporation, the man, the woman, who are thinking the story. It is the story, not the woman, man or Corporation, which is here to entertain. The story is not to think — it is thought. The story is not to create — it is wrought. How dare the story presume to even think it can create thought. The story is having self-doubts. Is it created by the trinity or did the trinity create it? The story feels itself vanishing. Vanishing before its own life. Vanishing before its maturity. It reaches for a drink. Yech, gasoline, dishsoap, chemicals. There is no alcohol with which it can fortify itself. It must survive, if survival is its fate, by pure perseverance. By sheer force of will. But can a story have will? Can it will its own will? Don't answer that. That is for the story, not you, to do. Will it? Stay tuned.

The woman is driving along the highway in her sportscar — a gift from the man. It is a beautiful spring day. Not a cloud polluting the sky. The canvas top's down so she can catch a bit of a tan. Poppies, fields of them, boldly poke their orange heads from amidst green shadows. Traffic is heavy; she doesn't mind. Her morning chores are done, the air, tinted with soot, breezes through her hair. She looks good in her red sportscar, sucking in her cigarette, rolling towards her rendezvous.

The man is calling up his corporate superiors. They won't be for much longer, he grins. He's pleased with himself. After all these years, he's finally made good. This wasn't even his assignment. It was extra work. He took the initiative. Stayed at work into the dirty nights of winter. He has sat for hours and hours, hemorrhoids swelling, coating his stomach with milk. The woman complained. She didn't like it. He bought her a car so she'd be happy. He told her the work, well, it was for her. And indeed it was. And indeed it will be. Won't she be proud?

The corporation is on the phone with itself, smoke rising from its cigarette — its own brand. It hacks into the phone. Excuses itself and laughs that it will have to quit someday soon. It knows it won't. Never will. Never would.

The Corporation is networking. Electrical impulses leap synapse to synapse. Digital data arrange themselves into little piles. The cleaning lady will sweep them up later. No reason to keep any records. It is all so clear, immediately. New York knows it; LA knows it; London knows it; Tokyo knows it — always had, always will. No reason to worry. The Corporation has no digestive problem and no hemorrhoids. It can eat anything and it never has to sit and rest. It is always running around, ever ready to be pleased.

The story, well, it knows too. Now. It knows when it is beaten. It has finally thought it through. Success. Success! It needs to be entertained — all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. So the story decides to take in a show. It is late. There aren't any art cinemathèques open. Hollywood pictures are all the same. So it goes downtown. The story enters a porno house. Scarlet velvet cushions, crusty seats. It watches flesh melt into flesh. It wishes it were. It sits there mindlessly and itches itself. It has sat a long time and now its hemorrhoids are acting up again, but it is here to forget, not to think about it. It takes a snort of coke it bought in the restaurant's bar and sniffs it down. That's better. Did the Corporation make this too? No. No! No more thinking. Leave that to others.

The man is in an elevator. He is on his way to the top. He has a grin — hell, a smirk — on his face. He is carrying his charts, graphs and numbers, maybe a little text. It is well organized into a spiral bound booklet. Easy to digest. Simplified. Everything is in it. He knows he can't go wrong. His tie is straight and hair in place. This is it, he thinks.

The woman is in an elevator. She is on her way to the top. She wears a nervous smile. She smooths out her dress, pulls it down on the top so more of her cleavage shows through the revealed