

The cheap spring mattress of his bed propelled his backpack back into the air with proportionate force to that which he'd used in throwing it down in a bout of frustration. It was of poor enough design that the zipper instinctively undid itself as it flopped over towards the edge of the unmade bed, threatening to allow his third laptop this year to come sliding out and onto the ground in what would be yet another expensive fumble.

It was stopped mid-descent, ensuring that he wouldn't need to go digging into his savings that were best spent elsewhere to pay off the repair, not that he cared, nor was he paying any attention to it. His focus, rather, was on his phone, raised close enough to his eyes to see past the 10:00 PM blur. Where he'd been hoping, perhaps, for word back from his job in regard to a potential promotion that was rumored to be coming his way was only an age-old lockscreen of him hand-in-hand with the ex-something. He'd never taken the time to learn what they'd been, only knowing now that they weren't anymore.

There were over a dozen other notifications, however, belonging to various social media outlets that would go unchecked until the early AMs where he would lie in bed waiting for the latest kick of caffeine to wear off for him to fall asleep. Tonight would be no different a night, he knew, if the cup of Starbucks in his free hand was any indicator.

He set it down on an empty desk, awaiting his laptop on borrowed time to be set up, plugged in, and sent straight to no shortage of tabs and programming windows that made up his job as an IT specialist.

Recently subjected to a string of malware attacks that'd cost the acting IT manager of this relatively prominent tech firm his job, its website and its connected software had been thrown into rampancy. That left this specialist in particular with a unique opportunity ahead of him--there was a vacant position for IT manager needing to be filled, and a proper crisis response could very well see him with a new title and sizable bonus by the time the Christmas season rolled around.

For the last two weeks, his life had hardly been his own, and the recycling bin stacked high with coffee cups identical to the one he sipped from now stood testament to that. Odds were it would continue this way for some time longer, but it would be worth it, he told himself.

A quick swap from contact lenses to glasses later, set for a night of work ahead.

He was thankful for the job that he held. The market was a fierce one at best, and whatever sense of stability could be found was both a godsend for himself as well as for those that the money he made went back to. He didn't mind the studio apartment that stank of the poorly-connected bathroom, the meals that tasted of fridge, nor the 2am nights, the only source of light across the apartment that of his computer screen, staring at lines of code that began to blur into one another as his cup of joe slowly dwindled alongside his eyesight and remaining energy.

He set hard limits for himself. It was the one way he could assure himself that he wasn't pushing himself too far, that he still had some degree of self-control. It was so that at 2am, he shut down his computer, double, triple-checking to make sure all work he'd done had been

saved. So began the aforementioned wind-down routine of him face-to-face with his phone, beneath the covers as he waited for either the caffeine to wear off or for the screen radiation to lull him to sleep. Whichever came first.

He went through his notifications systematically, mindlessly watching the lives of old college friends scroll past as brief stories showing off vacations in distant lands, exciting news about their relationships, be them anniversaries or even the rare proposal, and no shortage of other things of which he knew little. He rarely considered putting himself in their shoes. Beachside walks and tours of the Taj Mahal had never appealed to him as much as they had for others. He took pride in where he was, twenty-four years of age and already making \$80,000 a year with a very likely chance of having a three-figure salary by this time next year.

He continued to go through his notifications, noticing one in particular on his messages that just read, "Mom," implying more than a single message from her awaited him. Opening the thread revealed a series of queries to whether he would indeed be coming back home for Thanksgiving. When last she'd asked, it'd been two weeks away, too early to tell, before then, a month, too early to consider, and now, it was just two days away. He would have responded to say 'he'd think about it,' only he did not wish to concern his mother by sending a message at 2:30 am.

Instead, he warded off the guilt by allowing the exhaustion of her queries to let him finally shut his eyes and fall asleep.

At 7:30 am, he was awake once again, and only twenty minutes later, he was walking out of the lobby of his apartment complex, choosing to neglect his car that sat in the garage and was still awaiting a fix for a blown tire that its owner was too otherwise occupied to pay attention to. It wasn't as though the 2019 Toyota Avalon was an absolute essential to his livelihood, public transport just as capable of filling in the gaps. He then was at his bus stop, anticipating the eight o'clock route with a backpack over his shoulder, bagel in one hand, and wake-up coffee in the other.

While he was more than capable of turning even the most unsavory of spaces into a proper work environment as far as his focus was concerned, he was glad to be back in his cubicle. Here there was a surface that didn't shake as much as his knees did throughout the ride, and a space to set down his cup that wasn't the unsteady bus floor that'd thrown his morning \$4.95 to the floor in an unfortunate mess as he'd pored over saved copies of archaic code that no longer functioned just in order to assess what could be salvaged and copied over and what required summary disposal.

With a new cup at his side now though, work came easily to him. Hours came and went as they did every day for him, neglecting all that came in the way of distractions be them notifications on his phone or invitations to join his fellow specialists for lunch. If it was the task at hand they wished to discuss, he would have been more than willing to partake. He'd come to learn what such "lunches" entailed, however, and knew that when it came to rendering the time spent at the office as productive as it could be, he was better off taking his meals at his desk if not neglecting them entirely from time to time.

It was at some point during the day or other that a passing thought reminded him that he hadn't yet given his mother a deserving response in regard to his potential attendance for Thanksgiving. It was the Wednesday of the week and he had the rest of the day left to come to a decision. His company had provided its employees with the day off should they please to allow for necessary travel arrangements to be made and executed, of which none had yet been planned for him, a decision yet to be made. Instead, he still worked in a near empty building occupied only by those with family nearby, and him.

Anybody else in his shoes would have been using the day for the express purpose of travel, the journey from Chicago to Savannah, Georgia hardly a short one. He told himself, however, that the opportunity had not been wasted just yet, that there still was a chance, if he so decided, for him to make it, if not for lunch, then at least for Thanksgiving dinner.

That remained hinged, however, on the progress he could make here and now, if lines of code would begin to weave together into something that could, in some small part, finally begin to fix that which'd been left in such a state of disrepair.

When 8:45 PM came, the realization that he was only a fraction of a percentage closer to getting their systems up and running again began to sink in. It did not affect him perhaps as gravely as it should have. His work flow had been much the same for the last few months that crisis resolution had been his top priority, and so the general ethos he adopted in this race was one more of the tortoise than the hare.

It was clear though to him during his ride home that he would not be able to be home for the holiday. There was simply too much left to do and far too much left undone. So too did that include another unread message on his phone, now from his sister too, asking to know if he would be home to meet her fiancé and his soon to be brother in law if the date that'd been set was to be believed. He could not find it in him to give a definitive "no," and so left his refusal for the morning that would come after, on the first day of a holiday he knew he could not afford to partake in.

The work flowed as ever it did, only now without an office space to accompany him. It was such that either he was simply more affected by it, or the distractions presenting themselves as notifications on his phone had been increasing in frequency. Constant questions asked of whether he would be showing up or not, if a space at the table should be set out for him, and many others of the kind. He deliberated the responses in his mind, trying with no avail to string together the right combination of words to let his family down softly.

It was at 2:13 am when he realized he hadn't written a single line of code, his mind still on those words he couldn't bring himself to send. He forbade himself from continuing to dwell on a response, and instead put his attention towards making up for the work he'd been kept from, at the screen until 3 am, viewing the act as inconsequential as he didn't have a physical workplace to report to on the morrow.

Though pangs of guilt darted through his mind, he dared not check his phone for the reminder it would bring. He reassured himself though that what he did was in fact for the best.

His family was not one of prosperous past nor present, but if he had any say in the matter, would be one of a fortuitous future. He loved his family and had no qualms with sending a significant fraction of his earnings back home so as to support them whether in matters of mortgage payments, medical expenses, repairs, or any other need that arose. He considered himself a family man in spite of the fact that his family was one that he rarely laid eyes upon, subscribing to the belief that occasionally, to love somebody, you had to be a stranger to them.

He told himself that a missed Thanksgiving now would be one spent next year, in a better home, with a full spread that his mother could be proud of without having to worry of the financial consequences of treating her family. Even so, sleep did not come easy to him, and when he woke on Thanksgiving Day morning at the usual time by instinct even in the absence of an alarm to wake him, he found something of himself missing.

It was a strange enough occurrence that when he went about his morning wake-up routine of browsing his socials for no longer than a quarter of hour before rising out of bed to find them missing. The applications remained installed onto his phone, only that he was brought to a login screen rather than his home page, and was met with a lack of success upon attempting to sign in once, twice, thrice, seemingly no account in his name existing for him to be connected to. He determined the effort was not worth the minimal return as little did actually await him past the login screen: only status updates of those he'd long since severed from his list of priorities. If anything too, it helped him rise out of bed earlier than he normally would have, back on his laptop in record time as ceaseless lines of JavaScript flashed across his eyes.

It was the buzzing of his phone in his pockets that awoke him from his trance, a quick investigation revealing a notification, once more from his mother, asking for the nth time without having received an answer, "Are you going to make it?"

It was already nigh on noon, and the chance to be around for lunch had passed, although perhaps for dinner, it still remained. He knew he would not consider it though, already in the morning in the time before he had received his mother's text, progress had been made, and not simply of the variety that was enough of a justification to keep him working, but enough to elicit something he hadn't felt in his work for so long—pride.

That made it all the more difficult for him when night came, and the dinner window closed, as the remorse he knew he owed his mother over phone would need to be feigned rather than sincerely drawn from the heart. The truth was that he couldn't bring himself to feel shame, only perhaps penitence for his mother, sister and miscellaneous extended family who would feel slighted by his absence. He meant no offense in it, however, which spared him of some of the guilt, and he'd long since passed caring what others thought of him, knowing such beliefs to be baseless.

When met with indifference from extended family, anger from his sister, and despair from his mother, of course, he could not make such views known. He could not tell his mother, sister, and family that he had made a choice he believed best for them, one that would ensure next Thanksgiving's meal would be all the better as he knew they wouldn't understand. Instead,

all he could bring himself to say was that he was sorry, and the cause for his absence was, simply put, "I forgot."

A month would pass.

The IT specialist found his focus put solely on the work that grew to consume his life, little minding the similar strange occurrences that came to present themselves to him. One day, it was that his bus pass was no longer operational, no account seemingly connected to it any longer, a few days later, that a warranty for his laptop that'd been his saving grace no longer was registering as in his possession, and around that time too, that there seemed to be no rewards account that would have enabled his 5th cup of coffee for the week to have been a dollar cheaper than normal.

He considered the occurrences hardly more than nuisances, his attention far more focused on his work that finally seemed to be moving in a direction of immediate progress with expectant return, both for his company as well as for himself.

Work was the only place he allowed himself to place his attention over the next month. The concessions he made with himself were gradual, but nonetheless, impactful. It started as allowing himself to cease his work at 2:30, then in time 3, and after some more time as well, 4. He considered the extra time given to his work worth it as there were, with every passing day, seemingly less things to keep him awake while lying in bed. Whether it was the disappearance of his social media accounts, or in time too, the loss of 3rd party messenger systems, he was beginning to feel more free than ever before. Naturally, so too would come other broken promises made with himself, one instance of them being his daily allotment of caffeine, made quite frustrating on account of the disappearance of his rewards account. Much like his socials, however, he did not deem it worth the time it would take to mend.

These sacrifices were worth the results that ensued however, as progress was being made. The sweat, tears, and exhaustion were finally resulting in something that pride could be elicited from.

The same sentiment was felt across his department, though he couldn't help but believe that they were indulging themselves in premature celebration over their accomplishments. Granted, their website was now publically available once again, albeit plagued by no shortage of errors, namely in terms of unrecovered databases, faulty plugins, and a pending restoration of total functionality.

It was so that he couldn't allow himself to indulge in an office-wide Christmas celebration that was being held only a few doorways from his cubicle, able to hear the revelry that he felt yet unearned. He was sure that, in time, he would gladly join in, but for the moment, there was still much yet left undone. Only a small desk lamp lit his small enclave in the office space while the conference room many halls away was vibrant with life as his employer took on the role of St. Nick, granting the wishes of all so brave as to take a seat atop his lap.

It would be the last day of work for the holiday that those of his company would be present around one another, and many took the chance as one to say their farewells until the

new year game and business resumed as per usual. Christmas bonuses were also to be dispersed at the celebration, though that was far from his list of priorities. He had his eyes on a bigger prize—had for months now, and would settle for little less, and so, was not one to complain when his boss found him by the sole light of the otherwise pitch-black room, knocking on the wall of his cubicle though it was a door, seemingly asking for permission to make his entrance.

The IT specialist looked up, and greeted his superior with a nod that indicated his ability to be interrupted. It was his bonus that was being given, and by no means a measly one—eight thousand dollars, nearly a tenth of his salary, far more than he had expected, but perhaps it was recompense for his hard work, or perhaps it was a preview of what was to come—the bonus that he would come to expect in the near future as head of his department.

He was unaware at the moment, however, that amidst the celebrations, so too had been the naming of the newest IT manager for their company. Selected for grace under pressure, remaining steadfast in their objective, and bringing about stability from disorder, a name was spoken, and it had not been his. It was not news that was easily taken, namely as he could scarcely understand what was being said as the content of the message hardly made any sense.

How could there have been somebody more, or even equally as deserving as he so clearly was? He had put his work before all else, had displayed far more diligence than all others within his departments, but still, it seemed to him, it hadn't been enough.

He tried to ask, and not simply once, but as many times as he could try and fit in the time that his boss lingered by his cubicle, and every time, the answer would be the same non-answer, only stating that it had been close and that it had taken a lot of consideration and that the still-IT specialist's, not manager's, value to the company could not be understated. Perhaps that was what the eight thousand dollar check had been meant to be representative of, but he took it instead as a cushion meant to soften the blow of his own failure.

In spite of all that his employer said, he remained unconvinced that it had been so close a decision, that there had not been some fatal flaw on his part that'd immediately rendered him undeserving of the position. The truth of the matter was that it was his absence from the festivities of the Holiday that were more to blame than anything else. It wasn't so simple a matter as all those being present had written their names and thrown them into a hat so much as his absence was a symptom of a far more severe malady. He possessed a work ethic that went unmatched, but management was a matter of communication as much as it was hard and constant work. On his own, he was a workhorse, a strong one at that, but with others, he was not a team player. He was not a leader.

He did not come to this same conclusion, however, failing to see how such was of any import, and instead, believed it a matter simply of his diligence proving insufficient, the work he'd put in not having been enough.

Nothing he had done had been enough.

He played the good sport, of course, and graciously accepted the bonus, wishing his employer happy holidays as he was left behind alone in an empty office to close up shop for the night. It was no easy task for him to keep it all in as he packed his things and ensured all was stowed away in his building as he left for the night. He did not wish to impede upon the integrity of his place of work that provided for he and his family, nor the bus that, from one day to the next, was responsible for his transportation across the city, but it was upon returning to his home, under his name, that he could hold it in no longer.

The first fifteen-hundred dollars of his bonus would go towards purchasing a replacement laptop for himself as he smashed his own against the wall upon his return to his apartment.

It would have been the wisest decision for him to return home. To take the needed time to reflect on what had gone wrong, as improper attention to his work it most certainly was not. His mind lingered on the latter possibility, however, and elevated it to reality so far as he was concerned. So, he made a decision—to ensure that the new year could be started with a grand display of the fruits of his labor that would perhaps see a reconsideration of his worth.

He deemed it thus a fitting sacrifice to not return home to the holidays, choosing instead to send the remainder of his Christmas bonus back home to his family. For prior holidays, he gladly would have spent the time personalizing the gifts that were sent to his mother, his sister, his aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, and even soon to be brother-in-law accordingly, but those had always been matters that'd required days if not weeks of careful deliberation—time he did not have.

His priorities were elsewhere, focused solely on proving himself as the one most deserving, demanding of himself the second chance to prove his worth. The holiday would pass with the buzzing of his phone as unanswered messages would flash across his screen, demanding to know what had come of him, if he was alright, if he was coming home. So too in the chorus of voiceless queries would those of the ex-something be added.

She was worried, she said. About him. He could not help but notice that where he'd once been in the dual self-portrait of her profile picture was now another man he did not recognize, demonstrating a capability on her part, far exceeding his own, to progress in life. He took it not as such, but rather, an illegitimacy of her intentions, rendering her concerns, so far as he was convinced, immediately without merit. She did not wait for a response that he wouldn't have given regardless to confess that his family had gone to her and asked for her to check up on him to see how he fared. So became he convinced that the universe had manifested itself as a combined obstacle towards that which he strived for—success, progress, acknowledgement of all that he had convinced himself the world revolved around—hard work and an unwavering spirit, unbroken even by the cries of those who claimed to love him.

It was a relief when the buzzing of his phone came to an end, waking on a quiet Christmas morning to find only a single notification on his phone screen, telling him that there was no longer a profile attached to his SIM card. As far as the world was concerned, his number no longer existed, or, at the very least, it was no longer his. It was as though, finally, after days,

weeks, months of prolonged torment, the world had finally answered his prayer, and ridden him of that which had taken so much attention of his away from that which mattered.

The next months would be some of the easiest he had ever encountered. Never before had his mind felt so free of all else that finally, all attention could be put forward on that which was directly before him. It mattered little that the same barista who always served him his morning and evening coffees no longer seemed to have that same look of recognition in her eyes, nor that his bus driver had come to address him as any other passenger, neglecting the nod of familiarity that he had become so accustomed to as they had hardly been matters of import.

Even at his place of employment, it began to feel as though nothing had changed. He acquiesced with the new management quickly enough and fell in line, knowing that in due time, it would be him in that position. He only needed to pay more attention, to work harder, and to give all of himself that he hadn't yet given towards this single, unified objective.

He knew his place, and he liked it that way. He needed not the acknowledgement from his peers who with each passing day, seemed to recognize him less and less, viewing him as almost a stranger though not questioning his place as he went about his work with an unmistakable sense of belonging.

No longer did he work under the self-assured auspices of it being in the name of his family oh-so-many miles away. Now longer did he feel the need to deceive himself into believing that the near-entirety of the paycheck that he sent to them with each passing day was what justified his being here. He required no such external justification as he had achieved an undeniable sense of belonging, of knowing that this wasn't done for the benefit of others, or the benefit of himself even. He did what he did, and labored away with each passing day because it was, simply put, what he was meant to do.

It was an indiscernible amount of time later that he would return to an apartment that would progressively become more bare with each passing day but for accumulating foreclosure papers stamped onto his front door. One with sense would have attributed the gradual decay to a series of small-scale robberies carried out over the course of the last few months, and perhaps the IT specialist with a dwindling sense of self would have asked questions had he not still had with him all that was needed to continue his work—a chair, a desk, and a single lamp in a room devoid of all else.

It was on one of these days that blended with all others surrounding it that he would find, slipped beneath his door, a single envelope, addressed to a recipient of no name, and delivered from an address he recognized no longer.

Contained within was a single image, of a beautiful young woman in a white gown hand in hand with a handsome man in a dashing suit, unlabeled for it didn't need to be. The clarity he felt lasted only a moment, and not a second longer, though it was enough to ensure that his last passing sensation could be one of joy, a fraction of what he could have otherwise felt, but still



more than that which he could ever have hoped to see his life reach on such a path that he had chosen.

To meet such an end there could only be described as a mercy, and it would do well to assume that the single photograph that had somehow managed to disappear along with the unidentifiable IT specialist who had last held it, had been sent by a family that he had long since forgotten.

That was not the case however. The truth was that roughly a thousand miles away, as final preparations were being made for her daughter's big day, his mother had been asked about a foldout chair at the front row that was marked reserved, but was missing a corresponding nameplate. When asked who it had been reserved for, she had truly considered just for whom it had been, but upon drawing a blank in her mind, could only respond in saying, "I forgot."