

## The BOFH-Stories 1995

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### The Bastard Operator from Hell is back ...

So I'm in my office again, reconfiguring the router when the phone rings. Somehow I knew this was going to happen. I'm obviously going to have to change my number (and Operator) YET AGAIN.

I pick it up.

"Start talking."

"Is this the network engineer?"

Sigh.

"Yes it is," I say, resigned to my fate.

I check the phone - there's no corresponding name on caller ID, which can only mean one thing.

"You're new here aren't you?" I ask.

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"Lucky guess. Tell me, how did you get my number?"

"Oh, I just called the helpdesk."

How helpful of them..

"Anyway, I was just ringing to tell you that you've got a problem with the network."

"No," I answer, "no problems here."

"You do have a problem - I can't get my PC to work."

"Let's just look at this logically," I say. "You can't get your PC to work, so I have a problem."

"With the network, yes. It's probably a loose connector somewhere."

Of all the things that REALLY piss me off, the 'loose connector' and 'loose wire' theories TOP the queue. He obviously thinks that my day consists of sitting in a comms room somewhere 'wiggling loose wires' to improve network services. Or that I designed the network by calling up a cable supplier and ordering several drums of CAT-5 and asking for it to be "scattered about the building in a spider web shape".

Next thing I know he'll be telling me that maybe one of the 'bulbs' burnt out on my FDDI ring.

"Hey, maybe one of the bulbs.."

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

"No, it's not that! You've kicked out your patch cable," I say.

"I can't have!" he backpeddles.

"You've kicked out your patch cable."

"No, all the wires are securely plugged into the back of my PC..."

"You've kicked out your patch cable."

"...and they all go to the box in the flo.. Oh, hey! I kicked out the patch cable!"

"Of course you did. It happens all the time. It's because the twisted pairs in your cable get tangled, shortening the effective length of the cable. It's just like the telephone cord when it gets tangled."

"Oh right! I think I read something about that.." he burbles. What a plonker.

"Is there anything I can do to stop it?"

"Well, all you need to do is unplug it from the floor socket and give the cable a really really hard yank. Then all the twisted pairs come into line."

"But won't that damage my machine?"

"Heck no! The connector at the other end is made to pop out when the strain might damage the cable!"

"OK, here goes..."

**CRASH!!**

**"HEY! I PULLED MY MACHINE ONTO THE FLOOR AND A BOARD'S RIPPED OUT OF THE BACK OF IT!"**

"Oh well, you obviously pulled too hard," I say calmly.

**"WHAT AM I GOING TO DO? IT'S MY FIRST DAY!"**

"I don't know," I reply. "It sounds to me like a hardware problem. I'm just a network engineer.."

"But..."

I hang up. It's time to have stern words with the helpdesk. First step, into the comms room to 'wiggle their wires around' and drop out their network. Step two, set their call-forwarding so all their calls go through to the boss.

I pick a floor at random and remote boot both the main and redundant routers.

**REQUEST LINES ARE NOW OPEN!**

Scant seconds later I hear the boss's phone ringing. I'll give the boss about 10 minutes of irate users, then wander round and suggest the helpdesk staff need a lesson on what's funny and what's not. Forwarding your phone to the boss at network failure ISN'T funny. Helpdesk personnel investigating the job market IS.

My thoughts are interrupted by a call on the Red 'Bat' Phone. It's obviously the boss.

"Is this the network engineer?"

"It certainly is, how can I be of help?" I crawl.

"Ah, you've got a problem with your network."

"Have we?" (grease grease).

"Yeah, I guess it's probably a loose wire somewhere.."

Sigh.

He'll have to go..

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell trips up ...**

"So what you're saying is that the network is wide open to hackers?" the boss asks.

The department Brown-Nose nods. I, however, shake my head.

Guess who he believes?

"Well, what have you been doing about these security holes?" asks the boss, now more than a little concerned.

"Ah..."

I consider the topic carefully for almost a nano-second prior to providing my answer.

"Not a thing."

"But our network is wide open. The security implications are horrendous!"

"That is correct," I say. "My much maligned co-'worker' has hit the nail right on the side with his diagnosis of our situation, which I will now attempt to summarise.

"In the unlikely even that someone manages to pick both the seven-pin tumbler locks on one of the comms room doors, bypass the alarm systems and security cameras, then open the locked FDDI cage, or alternatively, smash their way through six inches of reinforced concrete piping buried four feet under a busy suburban road, then tap into our fibre-optic cable without us knowing...then yes, we are wide open.

"However, if as I surmise this is a thinly disguised ploy by the departmental Brown-Nose to edge his way one rung up the perk ladder into a trip to look at new security software, then I believe that our exposure to danger is somewhat overstated."

"Did you say trip?" the boss asks, eyes gleaming.

EVERY TIME A COCONUT!

"Yes," Brown-Nose chips in innocently. "Just to a manufacturer in the US who has some software to quadrupally encrypt data streams while retaining data integrity and not impacting bandwidth."

Of course, as soon as the word 'US' pops up the boss has visions of himself overseeing the 'evaluation' procedure at a convenient beach, staying at the nearest resort because of its central placing.

Right.

Brown-Nose smirks as his dreams of a holiday on the company come to full fruition.

It seems almost a crime to take his dreams and strike them with the iron bar of reality, but network engineering is a dirty job...

"Well, that really does sound like a good idea. However, I believe that there is some quintupally encrypting software with a manufacturer who is presently on a six-week tour of the States that I'd already lined-up a meeting with."

To add to the impact of my statement, I flash a sheet of paper with impressive writing and letterhead as proof. They are not to know that it is in fact from my lawyer who is attempting to defend me from some libellous allegations of an illegal wiretap at my previous workplace (a sordid blackmail allegation completely fabricated by some other employees who were jealous of my six figure salary and my five minute working day).

Flashing the paper at this stage is of course unnecessary, as the boss wants to believe this...

I tip him the 'junket-nod' with:

"Hopefully we'll be able to catch up with them as they had booking problems and had to review their venues and dates."

Now the boss has carte blanche at junket level. His two options are either he goes with Brown-Nose to the States for a brief holiday with a small amount of technical content, or he goes to the States with me, expenses-paid for five weeks, never quite catching the manufacturer, returning home empty handed and still needing to find some encryption software (in other words, up for another junket), no technical content, with the minor danger of alcoholic poisoning.

Choose the first option and Brown-Nose will wilt under their respective inspections.

The Boss smiles. I smile. We both smile.

Brown-Nose sobs - he knows what's on the cards.

"Of course," I say "we don't really want to muddy the waters of purchasing and spread ourselves too thinly in researching this. A small team to concentrate on the hardware should do."

Engage cover-up plan.

"Yes," the boss concurs knowingly, ".. too many cooks and all that. Some technical reshuffle seems called for... I hear there's an opening for a technical consultant in our site maintenance division in Hartlepool."

Tears well up in Brown-Nose's eyes as he contemplates his next five years of gardening and rubbish bin emptying...

"That will do nicely sir. Book the tickets now?"

I try not to think of it as spite, just seeing the job through to completion.

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell gives advice ...**

I'm preparing for a six-week US junket on the company with the boss to look at new comms gear. This means I'm going to have to take on someone to do my job while I'm away.

The ex-office brown-nose applied for the position, but unfortunately he was late for his interview when the lift in which he was a passenger mysteriously blew a control breaker. A pity they didn't discover him till after the weekend, by which time he was a drooling vegetable. It all adds fuel to my argument that I require a larger 'miscellaneous' budget to employ part-time staff to check things like lift emergency telephones and alarm switches.

As far as the job went, within a couple of days I have a 'green and keen' contractor occupying the spare desk. Now to teach him the ropes...

"OK quick outline, we look after every communications entity in the building. And they all belong to me. Not the user. Me. Remember that, it's important!"

"They belong to you." he repeats

"No, never say that. Always say, they belong to 'ME'. You don't want to give the users the idea that comms is something they should get involved in."

"They belong to me. So we look after phones as well?"

"Phones, fire and intruder alarms, intercoms, networks, microwave link, miscellaneous control systems; hell, if they bought semaphore flags we'd probably be looking after them," I say, pointing out the respective chapters in my site management bible.

"How do you get away with it?" he asks.

"Simple. I apply the basic rule of standardisation. Everything gets done in a standard way, and no-one but me knows anything about it."

"It's all in your head?..."

"No, no. It's all copiously documented in that safe over there," I reply, indicating a large armageddon-proof box in the corner.

"Who has access to it?"

"Me."

"And your boss..?"

"He has a key that he likes to think will open it. In actual fact, it's a duplicate of the key to the CEO's wine safe in the basement."

"Does the boss know?"

"How could he. He's not allowed in either area."

"He's not allowed in here?"

"Of course not. He's management and this is a sensitive area. Standardisation, remember. Just mention to the CEO that we have phone-tap equipment and you get a fat security budget to play with."

"Aren't you worried the boss will find out about the key?" my employee asks.

"Not as worried as he'd be when I mention informing the CEO about it. There's been a surprising amount of pilfering going on. It wouldn't look good on his permanent record when he went looking for his next job..."

"What a tragedy. Okay, I've got all that, what do I do?"

"Nothing, I've done it all. Familiarise yourself with the site management bible. It'll tell you all the major problems that could befall us, what to do and who to contact. See that phone on your desk - don't ever answer it, it'll just be some user who's moved his machine and expects the data-sockets to be live."

"That's it?"

"Like I said, it's mostly in the site bible. Oh, remember to put the voice recorder tapes into the fireproof back-up safe!"

"That's in case we have a verbal contract disagreement?"

"No, that's so I can listen to the boss's personal phone calls. Honestly, it's better than 'Days of Our Lives'. Also, never mention the name 'Pooky' or he'll know I'm onto him."

"OK, what if the helpdesk corners me?"

"Hmmm. Well, as I haven't introduced you to them, you've got a week's grace. After that, use the excuse that you can't accept helpdesk calls until you have a username to receive the email so that the process can be tracked by me when I return. That'll buy you another couple of days. Add two more days for documentation on paper and then you might squeeze yet another week or two out if you use the old routine 'log a fault call' - preferably on some ancient noticeboard using the tried and trusted postcard method. Remember to make some number up and write it on the incident board as 'proof'. When you can't delay any more, use the network monitor to drop the CEO's data ports. He has priority and you can kill at least a day 'isolating the failure'."

"What happens if the CEO corners me?"

"Play it safe and brown-nose. Get him a coffee and take him on a tour of the central comms room. When he's mesmerised by the flashing lights, nudge his arm when you open a cabinet door so that the coffee spills through the floor tiles. The master breaker will pop so fast he won't even have time to say 'woopsy'. After that, no-one's going to complain about anything. Got all that?"

"Sorted!"

"Right, get to work."

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell gets non-PC ...**

So I'm in the States with Sharon, the ex-boss's secretary, to check out some new networking hardware and software. The boss couldn't make it after unfortunately having a disagreement with the CEO when the CEO somehow got 'listen-only conferenced' into a telephone call between the boss and the CEO's wife. (The bit about the boardroom table got to him apparently). Being the only other person familiar with the whole deal, Sharon, a young, part-time aerobics instructor and non-subscriber to the motto "Don't screw the crew", was obliged to accompany me.

What a tragedy.

Strangely, it couldn't have worked out better if it were planned. (You know, someone telling Sharon to familiarise herself with only 10 of the 1000 or so documents that pass over her desk every month; someone accidentally tampering with the exchange configuration to allow listen-only conference calls; someone tampering with the exchange to make it auto conference calls to the CEO's home number back to the CEO's private phone that no-one but his secretary has the number to...) But of course, that's ridiculous.

Of course I blame myself. If I hadn't taken the boss for a 'working lunch', bought him 10 pints and mentioned the CEO's wife had a fixation on him, perhaps none of this would have happened.

Sigh. Oh well, at least I did my duty by the firm and made the most of it; difficult though it was. I must remember that at contract renegotiation time.

We book in at a modestly priced hotel - (modest by the standards of the Royal Family that is) and suffer an upgrade in rooms when it is discovered that due to some computing glitch a Mr Babbage and a Mr Pascal have been double-booked in our economy rooms. It's funny the number of times that has happened to me...

I ring my temp to see how he's doing in my absence. The phone rings about 50 times before finally being diverted to talking clock. At least I know he's read my Site Management Bible...

I then ring the boss's temporary replacement from the bar.

"How's it going?" he asks keenly, disguising the fact that he's annoyed at not being here.

"Well, we're having some trouble tracking down the supplier's tour dates, but we figure we'll track them down through computing magazines. Speaking of which, can you wire me another thousand quid for...miscellaneous expenses - the computing magazines, phone calls etc."

"I sure can," he replies amiably. "Of course, you'll be bringing these magazines back with you when you return so our accountant can rectify all this with the bean counters upstairs?"

Sneaky bastard - he's just upset that he didn't get to go and is obviously going to cause problems. Best to nip this in the bud right now.

"No problem - could you make that three thousand quid, the air freight costs are likely to be quite high for the 250 odd magazines..."

"Perhaps that IS unnecessary," he says, thinking about his plummeting operations budget.

"OK. Well I'll get back to you in a couple of days," I reply.

He hangs up and immediately I whip back to my room and dial through to my private modem pool at work.

I wait 10 minutes for the temp-boss to type and print the expense memo, then ethersniff his text and digitised signature on its way to the printer. I quickly bash up another expense report for a couple of hundred quid requesting some 'photographic' magazines from a dealer in Amsterdam appending his home address as the delivery point. I 'accidentally' queue it to print at Bean-Counting-Brown-Nose-Central then logout.

Knowing the religious background of the CEO I expect to find yet another empty desk on my return. Just applying the first law of networking - loose ends are bad, termination is good.

To enhance my job security, I make another phone call to a number that's permanently etched into my memory. In a darkened comms cupboard on the 5th floor, the call is answered by a 'Home Security Dialup Unit' and I type in my pin number. Then type a three-digit code and hang up. The clock starts now.

Six minutes and twelve seconds later the phone rings. The helpdesk has found me which can only mean that the temp-boss has given out my contact number, which in turn must mean the CEO is displeased.

"Something's wrong with the network!" the operator cries.

"I see. Put me on hands-free and tell me what's going on," I reply in a business-like manner.

The earpiece tells me I'm on hands-free, speaking to, if my calculations are correct, the helpdesk operator, the temp boss and the CEO (who likes to be around when major panics are in session to get firsthand knowledge of what the problem really is).

"What's the problem?" I repeat.

"The network appears to be bridged out somewhere in the computer room."

"OK, have you looked at the network topology in the documentation cabinet?" I ask, playing the knowledgeable and helpful network-person to the hilt.

"Your temp's trying to get into his office but there appears to be a lockout on the comms room swipe-card lock."

"Really? It sounds suspiciously like we've dropped a breaker in the distributed UPS Unit."

No-one has a clue what I'm talking about at this stage, but they also don't want to appear ignorant.

"Uh huh," the help desk operator says (probably accompanied by en-masse nodding in the room).

"OK, call the operations room, tell them to open the third UPS cabinet from the left, and they'll find a breaker, number 15 or 16, has tripped. If they reset that, the computer room repeater should come back to life and the door access system should start communicating with the office again..."

Five minutes later I'm back in the bar, with one of the safest contracts since Al Capone was alive. The CEO thinks I know each circuit breaker personally, and that my temp will have to go as soon as I get back. Situation Under Control.

Good networking depends on good planning.

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell is on a devilish buying mission ...**

*The story so far... The Bastard Operator from Hell and his ex boss's secretary Sharon are on a fact-finding mission to the States to check out on some security hardware ...*

Sharon and I have to make the junket look more plausible so I track down several trade-shows for us to go to and pad out our cover story. I use the basic two-step junket cover-up plan:

1. Drop business cards saying I'm interested in everything so I get lots of correspondence when I get back.
2. Sign up for every free subscription and on-site demonstration (to be farmed off to someone once I get home).

I then engage the one-step Make The Most Of It Plan - get to the bar as soon as possible and get freebies and drinks from suppliers.

Later that day at a sales stand...

"..combined with dual, redundant power delivery systems, opto-mode indicators, and rapid install strain relief fixtures"

"So what you're saying is it comes with a spare power cable, a 'power' LED and a bag of cable ties?" I ask.

"Ah well, you're obviously not aware of the full ramifications of system redundancy, hardware stressors and high availability."

"IT'S A BLOODY ROUTER!" I shout. "If the power goes out, it doesn't matter how many spare power cables, lights or cable ties you have, it still stops, you lose your net and get lots of phone calls!"

"Yes, but it does come in a nice black case with eight rubber feet instead of four!"

"WHAT I'M AFTER," I repeat for the fifth time "is an FDDI hub with IMPRESSIVE LOOKING ENCRYPTION built-in. I don't need another router."

"It's a nice router.."

"I don't care, I have routers. I want IMPRESSIVE LOOKING ENCRYPTION!"

"What do you mean by impressive LOOKING?" the guy asks.

"Something that'll fool a technical manager," I reply.

"What about converting everything to lower case?" he suggests, knowing the level of competence of the average technical manager.

"No, no we might get an intelligent one sometime in the future."

"Lowercase and all words spelt backwards?"

"Better.."

"Well, we do have this encryption chip set for terminal servers that we could whack into a hub.."

"What sort of speed would we get?"

"FDDI in."

"And out?"

"96K.. ...on a good day."

"NOT really what I want is it?"

"Well, that would be version one. But we promise that version 1.1 would have perfect performance, no lag, and so secure it'll seem like magic."

"You're lying aren't you?"

"Of course, I'm in sales!"

"What would we really get?"

"Like I said, version 1.1 would have the lot - everything you asked for."

"When would it be delivered?"

"Third quarter."

"Third quarter?"

"2012."

"Thought so. Perhaps we give this one a miss?"

"But it's the only hub on the market with high-speed-opto-interfacing!"

"They all have that - that's what FDDI means."

"Yeah, but no-one else calls it that in their brochures. And you get a couple of bottles of 40-year old scotch with every one as a product endorsement."

"Make it half a dozen with each one and I'll take 10."

Sharon looks a little concerned at this.

"We'll never get away with it," she whispers. "They'll cripple the net!"

"Sharon, Sharon, Sharon," I sigh. "We're never going to use them, that's the key. We'll buy them and mention to the CEO that we'll be able to ensure that absolutely no-one can snoop our networks without being detected. He'll realise that the piece of software he uses to detect the schemers among his junior execs will be compromised, and late one night all the routers will disappear from the storage cupboard to reappear in a landfill somewhere in Bognor."

"You mean the CEO spies on the other execs to protect his job?"

"Of course! I'd be most put out if I'd written that software for nothing!"

"What if he's not snooping any more?"

"Please! Upper management has all the 'filial loyalty' of a piranha infested toilet bowl. And anyway, should that fail I will engage the old-favourite 100 per cent-foolproof kit-destruction ploy."

"What's that?"

"Switch the voltage to 115 and PLUG 'EM IN! Works every time."

"How much do they pay you to think up this stuff?"

"NOT ENOUGH!"

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell wreaks his terrible revenge ...**

The problem with being away on a jolly, sorry fact-finding tour of the States, is that there's a hell of a lot of paperwork to catch up on. Normally, I shove this to one side and if any of the paper pushers upstairs complain they get shown the door swiftly when the CEO receives insulting e-mail from their PCs. It's amazing the rude words the chair warmers can come up with sometimes.

But this time it's different. It's yearly budget time again, which means once more it's time to print the 'Basic Computing' OHPs so I can explain to the technical management committee why we should look at upgrading our network.

I briefly consider not printing the 'This is a BIT, This is a BYTE' slides, but reconsider when I remember that one of the committee avoids lace-up shoes because it takes him an hour longer to get ready for work...

While I'm planning the phone rings. Caller-ID tells me that it's a nasty specimen from Public Relations who just yesterday, as chance would have it, was lucky enough to slip into a parking space that I myself was about to enter.

Lucky is, of course, a relative term, and subject to revision over time. The time is now. I press the 'record conversation' button.

"Hi, network ops," I say.

"I need a PCMCIA net card for my laptop. By Friday, 9am."

Of course it's Thursday afternoon, 3:45pm.

"Ah, equipment purchases must go through your department," I say.

"Then you'll have to loan me one. The purchase order wouldn't go through in time. Besides, it's my personal machine, I've got a presentation to give to the CEO that I've been working on at home."

"Wouldn't it be preferable to transfer all this via back-up floppies to your work machine?" I ask, praying for the desired response.

"Don't be stupid, it'd take me a year to back this lot up. Just get me a card and I'll do the presentation from my laptop tomorrow."

"Well, I've got a ... doctor's appointment right now so I won't have time to configure your machine for the card," I say, giving him the chance to dig a nice big hole. "Also, I won't be in until about 9:30am tomorrow."

"I'll do the bloody configuration!" he growls. "It's not rocket science, despite what you geeks attempt to imply!"

Hole dug nice and deep. Now to work on the edging details...

"I don't know, if you get something wrong, or the card's incompatible.."

**"IT'S A BLOODY PCMCIA CARD. HOW CAN IT BE INCOMPATIBLE!?!"**

The hole is perfection, in fact it looks almost grave-like.

"Well, OK, I'll leave one in the equipment room. But take a network card and not a SECURE-network card. Do you know the difference?"

He's in a lather now and there's no way he'd admit ignorance.

**"JUST LEAVE THE BLOODY CARD OUT AND I'LL PICK IT UP IN THE MORNING!"**

"Well OK.."

He hangs up.

From the 'documentation' safe I pull out the 'special' PCMCIA card and pop it on the desk in the equipment room.

The next day I roll in at about 9:30 in time to be summoned to the CEO's office.

"WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?" he rants.

"About what?" I ask, innocence personified.

"THAT BLOODY EXPLODING NETWORK CARD THAT CARSON IN PR. GOT!"

"Exploding network card? What explo.. Oh dear. He didn't try to install a SECURE-network card in his machine did he? I told him yesterday to be careful about installing and configuring it. They're programmed to self-destruct if someone attempts to override their access parameters..."

"By self-destruct you mean..?"

"Well there's a tiny nitrate charge in them which burns out the circuitry.."

"Or perhaps blows a hole the size of a saucer through the laptop in question?"

"They DID have teething problems with the first batch, which is why I had them recalled to the equipment room in preparation to send them back to the manufacturer. But it shouldn't have been used in the first place. I warned Carson yesterday when he asked, it's all on the voice tapes..."

Much later as I'm watching the name 'Carson, MJ' being removed from the floor directory and 'Carson, MJ' in person being removed from the premises, I can't help but wonder what makes people think they can beat the system.

It's a good system. It's MY system.

I like it.

Now, to complete plans for the budget meeting...

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell wreaks his terrible revenge ...**

After a few days away I always attempt to come in slightly early to catch up. So when I roll up at 11 o'clock I find the place ominously quiet. This could mean two things; either my understudy didn't make it through my time off, or he's been brainwashed by the boss and they're both hidden away staring at the monitor of the closed-circuit BOFH-watching system that they somehow installed while I was away. A quick scan of all the suitable camera points shows that nothing quite so technical has happened (perhaps the boss remembered that it didn't work first time they tried either), so I wait for the knock at the door.

I'm not disappointed.

"Morning, operator," booms the boss as he strides in.

Odd, the boss and I are on first name terms, he usually calls me 'the bastard'.

Hang on, this is a different boss.

"You're probably wondering who I am."

He's on the ball, this one.

"You could say that," says I. "What happened to the previous generation?"

"Nasty business. Installing security cameras or something according to the paramedics. Something went 'bam' and there they both were, all kind of charred and surprised-looking. Still, I'm still around, so look on the bright side."

Nasty. Ah, so they did try the cameras. Lucky I remembered to wire up all the video cable to the three-phase supply.

"While you've been away, we've decided to make a few changes," says the boss.

"We?" (What I really hate is someone trying to change my system).

"We've noticed that the systems around here are slow," he continued, "and that we need some new kit to to keep up with everything. It seems that the new stuff they bought last month just can't cope with all the software we run on it."

For a minute I thought I smelled trouble; but it seems that my clock-chipping exercise paid off. Neat bit of lateral thinking that - buy the box the supplier recommends, clock it down from 133MHz to 13MHz, and wait for someone to reason that they need something ten times faster to do the work. Not only that, but the supplier gets sued for selling us unsuitable kit.

"Really?" I inquire cheerily. "What did you have in mind?"

"Well, we figured you would be in the best position to tell us what to buy, since you're the one who understands the technology."

He's damned right; not just anyone understands how I get the pictures from the stationery store to the TV in the coffee room at that quality, especially with Nicam Stereo sound and zoom facility. "Leave it with me," I reassure him. "I'll see if I can milk a bit more performance out of this lot first." With a bit of luck I can get a couple of thousand a week for a couple of months for 'upgrades' and wind the clock back up a bit every Friday night (that's what they mean by incremental upgrades isn't it?). By the end of it, I'll have enough for that new 52-inch 'console display', which has a wide-screen TV and a built-in satellite decoder. AND The boss will be happy that he's saved a couple of hundred grand.

I sometimes wonder how I get away with it.

Unfortunately that just leaves the more mundane jobs of the day. The e-mail filter is disappointing; perhaps the CEO and the girl from Accounts are starting to catch on and are using code.

I flick through the excuse book. Oh no, not lunar disturbances; who will believe that?

The phone rings. Damn, that was careless, I forgot to have it diverted.

"Computer room."

"Oh, I'm terribly, terribly sorry. Really, terribly, awfully sorry."

That's nice, but perhaps a little less than descriptive.

"Could you elaborate?"

"I just broke the mainframe."

Interesting. We don't have one of those any more. I downsized it to something with faster graphics when Doom II came out.

"How did you do that?"

"I just added an entry to our mailshot with a spelling mistake in it, and now the mainframe won't respond. It's only my second day here and I broke the computer."

"Where are you calling from?"

"Marketing."

It all becomes clear. She's on the segment that's 'accidentally' shorted for the next half-hour. That reminds me, I must put in a random-fault-duration feature before someone notices that I fix every network fault in precisely twenty-nine minutes.

"OK, don't worry. How long ago did you send the entry?"

"About two minutes."

"No problem. Because it's your boss's database, the mainframe contacts an automatic system on his PC which has to confirm the transaction before the mainframe will accept it. As long as you get to his office in the next ...er ... 23 seconds, and pull out the network plug, the transaction won't have had time to get there for confirmation."

"Oh thank you, thank you. How can I ever thank you enough?"

I can think of a few ways, but she's dropped the phone and run for it, and I find myself shouting "It's the yellow wire" to nobody.

I wait for the phone to ring. Given that it's a 20 second run, and a further 15 seconds for her boss to comprehend why a secretary should suddenly barge in and rip out all the wires from his computer I take the opportunity of a quick 'grep' of the FTP log. Ten GIFs and fourteen JPEGs, they'll take a while to download, so I'd better just allocate myself a bigger slice of the Kilostream...it won't do them any harm to share 8Kbps for a while.

The phone rings, three seconds early.

"Computer room?"

"Yes?"

"Can you explain why my secretary just charged in here and wrecked my PC, saying that you told her to?" he demands.

No, surely I couldn't get away with it. He's got to see through it...

"Lunar disturbances."

The sudden aura of sympathy at the other end of the phone tells me I've got away with it again. Not just a pretty face, more a Bastard Astronomer from Hell ...

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell establishes his territorial boundaries ...**

I'm sitting at my desk, reconfiguring my network monitor, when the phone rings. Caller-ID tells me it's one of the consultants in the Bean-counter department on the sixth floor. I pick the receiver up, say "Wrong Number", and hang up.

I know it's a wrong number - mine isn't listed internally. The number that is listed rings through (I believe) to a locked storeroom in the basement. Popular rumour has it that it was once answered... Network Engineering, like a major credit card, has it's privileges.

The phone rings again and I'm getting concerned. Twice in one day is a little excessive.

"Hello?" I ask, not wanting to give any clues away.

"Is that the network engineer?" a voice asks.

This concerns me even more. There's only one person who knows my extension number - that's the system operator, and he knows better than to divulge it to a user. At least, I thought he knew better.

"Yes?" I reply.

"I've got a little problem with my connection," the voice says.

"Call the helpdesk," I reply, and drop the receiver back into its cradle

Yet again the phone starts ringing.

"I already rang the helpdesk!" the voice wails. "They told me to call you!"

Oh dear. There are three things wrong here: one, a user knows my extension number, which means: two, the helpdesk has been talking to the operator again; but more importantly: three, the operator is giving out my extension number to people.

This is not a good thing. If I'd wanted calls, I would have put an advert in a personal column. I'd best get to the very bottom of this before things get out of hand.

"Why did the helpdesk tell you to call me?"

"Because they don't know what the writing on the patch-panels means."

My network monitor is now beeping at me, which brings the concern level into the upper percentiles.

"On my patch panels?" I say.

"No, the ones up here in our section on the sixth floor."

"Yes. My patch panels. The ones I lock away from everyone," I fume.

"Well, I ... "

"Just a minute. One question. What were you doing in the Comms Cupboard?"

"Well, my connection went dead, so I ..."

"So you broke into the Comms cupboard?"

"No, not broke into - the operator gave me the key."

"The ex-operator gave you the key?"

"Yeah."

I grab the phone, go to the inspection window, and get the operator's attention. He exits to the corridor heading in my direction.

"And you've touched something haven't you?" I ask down the phone, knowing the worst.

"Uh ... I ... er"

"You got drawn in by the pretty lights, and you touched something. Don't bother denying it, I know you did, and you know you did. And pretty soon, if I'm not mistaken, most of your division will know you did too. What did you touch?"

"Well, I thought the router might have crashed, so I ... "

"Wait! Another question. Where did you hear the word 'Router'?"

"I read it in a manual that I got at Dil... "

"WHAT?! You've been reading forbidden literature as well?"

"It's not forbidden to read ... "

"Stop! The book was in the technical section wasn't it?"

"Well, it ... "

By this time the operator has arrived at my office and has realised the significance of the tones coming from the network monitor.

"What were you doing in the technical section? You know you don't belong there! But let me piece this together. You skim-read a technical tome, wait for your chance, impress the gullible ex-operator with a host of buzzword lies, then, under the false impression that the router had gone down, rebooted it. Didn't you?"

"Uh ... Yes. Sort of. I didn't know which of the three routers was at fault, so I ... "

"You booted them all didn't you?"

Sure enough, my screen shows the sixth floor as a sea of red.

"Uh, yes. I was just wondering if there's anything else I should've done."

Looking directly at the 'ex' operator, I reply: "Well, come to think of it, yes there is. Usual procedure after causing a major network outage is to collect your personal effects from your desk and work area, not forgetting your coffee mug, then sit in a large open area until security comes to escort you from

the building."

"But I ... "

"Oh, and make sure they don't have to search you for your keys or ID card. I've heard people have nasty accidents that way. Bye now! Oh, and if you've written my extension number down anywhere, I'd advise you to dispose of it carefully."

He hangs up, and I prepare to show our operator why the electric stapler has all those warning signs about keeping the body clear.

---

### **The Bastard Operator From Hell negotiates around 'budget constraints'...**

So I'm at my first budget meeting of the month, which has one and ONLY one purpose - to increase the size of our modem pool by 10 modems.

Small potatoes on the budgetry scale, but it does set a precedent for future meetings, a fact which is never overlooked.

Normally I'd get about a quarter of whatever I ask for (due to 'budget constraints' - ie the technical managers want the latest flashy status-symbol toys), however today I'm feeling lucky for some reason.

"Well, I still don't see what the problem is," Technical Manager One says. "It's not as if the modems are used 24 hours a day!"

"No," I say, "But at peak times they are 100 per cent utilised causing us problems."

"Perhaps our staff should be educated in modem use?" Tech One says smarmily.

The other Tech Managers fall into line with this statement with lapdog-like nods.

Time to play the ace up my sleeve.

"Yes, education is an answer, however it achieves little when modems are in use for excessive periods of time..."

"Meaning?" Tech Two asks, smelling a rodent-type creature in the immediate vicinity.

"Mainly people downloading large files from Internet's Usenet News..."

"Ah," Tech Two chips in quickly, "Perhaps there is a measure of expansion needed."

"...Large downloads," I continue, "Probably picture files of some description."

"Yes yes, I'm sure there's no need to go into extraneous detail on this."

Tech Two interrupts sweating slightly...

"No, you're right," I say, "None whatsoever. But newsgroups are only one problem. There are a lot of heavy image downloads from Web-Sites as well."

Tech One is suddenly fully awake. He knows (as do I) just which sites I'm talking about here and what images. AND what they depict. AND more importantly, who's downloading them...

I continue...

"Of course, should 'budget constraints' require usage statistics from our News host and Web-cache server, I'm sure I can dig up what articles and images were downloaded, when and by whom. In fact one site is getting fairly heavy access by only one user at our site and..."

"Yes, yes. Shall we move along? " Tech One pleads, "I believe you have a valid point and I am fully behind he move to get more modems."

"I would agree," Tech Two adds.

The Technical Lapdogs once more fall into line...

"Certainly," I say, "I think those 15 modems will be most helpful."

"FIFTEEN!" Tech One says "Your proposal was for TEN!"

"True, but on second thoughts, I feel it prudent to leave room for expansion in this area. Don't you agree?"

The moment of truth. Will he fold or not? Better safe than sorry...

"ESPECIALLY if modems are going to be used to access sites that have dubious relevance to the purpose of the company, such as..."

"ALL RIGHT!" Tech One cries, "Fifteen seems quite... reasonable."

I'm out of the meeting a record two hours eight minutes and back in my office in time to hear my phone ringing. What the hell, I answer it.

"Network Engineer."

"Hello is this the Network Engineer?"

"No, I'm sorry this is the Mail Room. Please hold, I'll put you through."

I forward the user to the talking clock and look over the error reports that have accumulated in my absence.

I grab one at random to give the impression of service. I ring the user.

"Hello, Payments"

"Hi, I'm Simon the Network Engineer. I gather you had a problem with telephone call-pickup."

"Yes, I can't pickup the phones in the office like everyone else."

"And you logged this as a Priority One call?"

"Well it's quite important!"

"OK, your problem is obviously an... EEPROM CONFIG CHARGE LOSS."

"Uh?"

"The battery that saves your phone's information is flat."

"But it's just new!"

"Of course. But it's been sitting for months in a storeroom."

"Oh. Should I get a new battery then?"

"No, no," I chuckle, "It's rechargeable! Just whip down to the basement car park and borrow the vehicle jump starter. Put one of the big clips on either side of the battery and press the red button. In seconds your battery will be back to new."

"OK, thanks."

"Don't mention it."

Five minutes later I'm sitting in the comms room by the exchange. One of the line level LEDs glows very brightly for a fraction of a second then goes out.

Some users have it coming. I'm just a delivery mechanism.

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell dislikes his boss's use of foul language ...**

I'm not impressed. The Boss has just said the "C" word, and with no provocation either.

"What did you say?", I ask, still not believing what my ears tell me I'm hearing.

"Oh, don't put on the shocked look. I thought you'd enjoy having a consultant to play with; it'll take your mind off annoying the users."

Me?? Annoy users?

"So when is our new friend coming then?"

"First thing after lunch"

Yes, that should give me enough time.

"And might I ask who ... errr ... 'invited' him?"

"Well, the Finance Director did actually. He's worried that we're open to hacking, and that people might get at confidential and potentially damaging financial information, so it was decided that an outside opinion was the best thing. In fact, the FD recommended this chap himself".

Ah, I knew the bean-counters had to have a hand in it somewhere. I've known for some time just how much they spend on hotels for "one-to-one briefings", but one wouldn't want just anyone to know, would one?

"And how much is he charging?"

The number quoted by the boss closely resembles a telephone number. I wonder ...

No time to lose. First thing is to shift a bit of kit around the building; that doesn't take more than half an hour, so I'm soon on-line with that password I found recently. Ah, just as I suspected ... now, just a quick Email (anonymous, of course) to the Personnel people ...

Just then, the new arrival knocks and waits to be asked before entering. He's obviously come across electrified doorhandles in his career. The Boss strides confidently in after him.

"Good afternoon," spouts the Boss cheerily. I get the feeling it's going to be. "Welcome to our machine room. Let me introduce Simon, our BOFH"

Nice firm handshake, but a little sweaty; he didn't ask what BOFH stands for, so he's obviously used to accepting acronyms he's never heard of without flinching.

"Simon will show you around", adds the Boss. "Can you present your preliminary report to the CEO and myself last thing this afternoon?"

"Certainly. And don't worry about showing me around; I've been in setups like this before".

Oh, no, you haven't ...

He heads off in the direction of the comms room, and I wait for the scream. Silence. Must be wearing rubber-soled shoes ... this guy knows what he's doing.

I busy myself with the tasks of the day, and wonder what he's up to. He certainly seems to be spending a long time in there looking at the firewall, which is reassuring - while he's playing with that, he can't be buggering something else up. I put the coffee pot on, sit back, and watch the CCTV monitor ... now ... all we have to do is wait ...

I remotely drop the main hub from the management console, and the alarm pierces not only the dull hum of the air conditioning but also probably one of his eardrums.

"WHAT'S THAT ALARM MEAN?" he shouts over the alarm.

I silence the alarm with an accurately thrown manual

"WHAT DID YOU TOUCH?"

"NOTHING ... HONEST" - a standard admission of guilt.

Obviously deaf as a post. Nice bonus. I stride into the comms room and grab a bunch of unconnected wires. Okay, they have never been connected to anything, ever, but this is a minor detail.

"So what the hell are these?"

"Pardon?"

"I SAID, WHAT THE HELL ARE THESE?"

"I ... THINK I'LL JUST GO LOOK AT THE REMOTE BRIDGES"

Five o'clock comes, and we're all sat in the CEO's office. Me, the FD, the CEO, the Boss, and our aurally-challenged friend who is shouting his report so he can hear himself.

"... SO WITH SUCH DISORGANISED CABLING AND A SIXTY-GRAND FIREWALL WHICH IS KNOWN THROUGHOUT THE WORLD TO LEAK LIKE A SIEVE, YOUR NETWORK IS FULL OF HOLES. WHOEVER PUT THIS KIT IN IS AN IMBECILE".

The CEO looks at me.

"Well?"

"Well, sir," (creeping usually helps), "I wonder if I might just explain a few facts. First, the cabling arrangements weren't helped by our colleague here and his size-tens; didn't you hear the alarm when he trod on something important? Second, I didn't actually order that firewall".

"So who did?"

All eyes turn to the Boss, who remembers an important appointment and dashes out with panic in his eyes. One down, two to go.

"One thing". I look at the CEO. "How long was our consultative associate in your office for this afternoon?"

"Well, I hadn't seen him before this meeting. Why?"

"Because our active firewall is in that data closet over there," I answer, waving toward a door in the corner of the office, "so unless our friend here had been sitting in your room for a couple of hours or so there's no way he could have evaluated our security. Perhaps he just invented a damning report so we could pay him to 'fix' our security on top of the fat consultation fee. That's fraud, isn't it?"

"But what about the firewall in the comms room?", asks a worried-looking consultant.

"Oh, well, when the Boss ordered it I thought I'd better put it somewhere, even though as you rightly say it's no good at all; after all, he could lose his job for blowing sixty grand on something that just sat in the cardboard box, so I thought I'd help him out. Didn't you notice it wasn't connected to the LAN?"

A few choice words from the CEO, detailing where he thought he might insert the cheque for the consultation fee, and our numbers are again decremented.

BONG!

The silence is broken by the CEO's PC telling him he has new mail. I know this has to be from Personnel (I filtered everything else to /dev/null earlier lest this message get lost among a flood of trivia). I excuse myself, reasoning that I probably couldn't keep a straight face as the CEO inquired of the FD whether he thought that a director who employs a crooked consultant who happens to be married to his sister could possibly stay in office.

As I sit by my console and gaze out of the window, I see our ex-FD drop the contents of his ex-desk all over the car park as Security body-search him for the keys of his company Jag. On-line registers of births, deaths and marriages are a wonderful thing ...

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## **The Bastard Operator From Hell blasts the confidence of the most well meaning souls ...**

It's a slow day network-wise, and for some reason I'm feeling a little like Clint Eastwood ...

"I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, is he monitoring the fourth floor or the fifth? Well, to tell you the truth, in all the excitement, I haven't looked at the screen myself. But, taking into account I have a defined key to invoke a kernel debugger on the server which can erase even the MEMORY of your database process - and the work you've done this morning - I'd like you to ask yourself one question: do I feel lucky? ... Well, do ya? ... Punk! ?" I demand.

I hear the clatter of the receiver on the wall, and in my mind's eye I can almost see the frightened accounts clerk scurrying back to the office to close the connection to the database in an orderly fashion before failover time.

My mind's eye being not what it once was, I flip through my CCTV monitors of the fourth floor until I see a geeky guy, laden with lunch, beating a hasty path to his office.

I click on the security window and deactivate the 'Door Open' knobs on the stairwell.

I almost wish I'd turned the CCTV sound on so I could hear the thud when the door didn't open, but you can't have everything.

Rule 75 of Network Ops: never log a fault on a device from the lunchroom. Especially if your office is up a flight of stairs and on the other side of the building.

I get on with my work, which today is 'fixing' the swipecard door-access machine. Apparently there's some logic glitch that no-one knew about until a particularly annoying sales consultant got accidentally locked in the secure area over the holiday weekend. The poor guy was a drooling wreck when they found him - apparently the sirens and sprinklers were playing up in there too, every 10 minutes.

It all goes to show that you can't be too careful when you don't hold the lift open for someone laden with networking magazines ...

I upload the original swipecard microcode over my specialised patched version, and give the system a clean bill of health. It was obviously a freak hardware problem, and nothing to do with the network whatsoever ...

While I'm in the computer room, a hard drive arrives in preparation for a disk replacement, which means the engineer can't be far away.

Quick as a flash I have the box open, wind a couple of paper clips round the power terminals at the back of the drive and return it to its packaging.

Scant seconds later a pin-striped service engineer arrives.

"Hi, I've come to replace the faulty drive," he buzzes.

I lead him over to the machine with the Fault Status on it and he goes to work.

"Will you be wanting me to have the system shut down?" I ask.

"Oh no, didn't you know, this machine is mirrored and hot-swappable. I just pull the cover off like this."

Clip!

"Loosen these two retaining screws, grab the new disk and ... Hey, did you open this bag?"

"No, it must have been sent like that."

"Oh. It was probably the office when they pre-formatted it."

He has now added 'lying to the client' to his list of sins. Tragic.

He continues: "I get the new drive in one hand, slide out the old drive like so ... place it on the ground like so ..."

Clunk!

"And slide in the new one like so ... and ..."

BANG!

The smell of ozone tells me that both the paper clips and the power supply are no more. Time to play dirty.

"What the hell happened?!" I demand.

"Er, it appears that the replacement drive was slightly faulty, and the extra load may have overworked your power supply."

"You blew up our machine!"

"No, no, it's only a power supply problem. All I need to do is slide the disk out like so, switch the power off and flick this switch to change over the power supplies. Now I switch her on, and ..."

Nothing happens.

"Nothing's happened!"

He hits me with the old engineer special: "That's interesting!"

"Yeah, that's what yesterday's engineer said when he blew the other power supply."

A network loading alarm shakes me awake in front of my terminal and I realise that it had all been a pleasant dream. Ah well, I guess a network engineer's got to know his limitations.

The phone rings, I pick it up.

"I know what you're thinking ..."

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## **The Bastard Operator From Hell maintains his level of bad taste and seeks sweet revenge ...**

It's New Boss time yet again and, because it was caused by politics that I was uninvolved in, I'm worried. Doubly worrying - the official office grapevine (Sharon the ex-ex-boss's secretary) has it that the new boss is a Bean Counter!!!

A new boss is bad enough, as they all want to distinguish themselves by re-arranging the department hierarchy to transform it from a stunted money-soak into a glittering and applauded service division.

But a Bean Counter is bound to be much worse!

Bean Counters have a reputation for reshuffles that are worse than a half-blind, epileptic poker player in a disco.

To get to this position he must have:

- got the CEO completely suckered with his glittering dream, or
- found out that while the interior decorating of the CEO's office cost the company tens of thousands of pounds, the redecorating of the CEO's entire home only cost 47p.

Amazing what you find out when you throw a passive fax-receiver across the CEO's personal fax line ...

It's 9.15am on Monday morning, and the entire department waits with bated breath for the arrival of Gerry, the new commander in chief.

He emerges from the rear stairwell catching half the department lift-gazing - quite a change from the normal clock watching.

Straight away he calls a meeting to discuss his 'departmental economising'.

None of the staff really care, they've been moved around so much in the last couple of years that the walls are on wheels and the room directory is a blackboard. Not even X.500 can keep up.

The meeting trundles along with the usual nightmarish staff regroupings (PC support with the telephone operators; Unix operators with the tea lady, and so on).

Groups are renamed 'Knowledge Units', so everyone gets a warm feeling from the reshuffle shafting they just got.

The meeting takes a turn for the worse as the bifocals of death come to rest on me.

"Simon, as network engineer, you will be invaluable in your position on the help desk. Your co-operation will ensure network fault resolution times drop dramatically ..."

I don't think I need to mention that the chances of me accepting a position on the help desk are so slim that it would make an anorexic Ethiopian on a hunger strike look like Porky Pig.

On the way back to my office I realise that I can make the most of this by rising from the hell I've just been placed in, or by wasting my time in pointless revenge.

I let a coin decide by flipping it ...

Heads.

Revenge it is then.

A freak earthquake shocks the coin to 'Tails'.

Revenge it is then.

'Edge' was so close too.

The way is clear. Gerry has obviously spent a weekend formulating this and will shortly fire a salvo of memos both around the department and up to the Execs.

I dust off my Router Text-Change software (a simple piece of code that simply watches packets go by and occasionally introduces a spelling mistake or adds a zero to the end of a figure), make a few modifications and upload it to the network hardware. To be on the safe side, I upload the duplicator code as well.

Scant minutes later my workstation beeps as e-mail from the boss comes in. A memo confirming the decisions made at the meeting if I'm not mistaken. (Never am. Never was. Never will be.)

I don't need to open the message to know that the 'To:' line has been written with an inventive expletive sequence.

Two minutes later the phone rings. Caller ID returns: 'Big Guy'.

"What the hell's going on with the system?" The CEO growls.

"What do you mean?" I ask, caring and concerned.

"My printer's spewing the same memo over and over and I've been receiving repeated e-mail messages"

"That's not from Gerry is it?"

"Yes, why?"

"Oh, he's probably been playing around with his printer and mail client settings again. I'll sort it out post haste."

The CEO hangs up, and I drop the router out, so solving the problem. Round One to me, I think.

I would ring the Boss, but he appears to be talking to the CEO about something quite pressing at the moment. Perhaps later ...

**To be continued ...**

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**The Bastard Operator From Hell gets his retaliation in first ...**

It's a hot morning and I've forced the security windows open for air conditioning. This has the unfortunate side effect of illuminating a warning lamp on the security desk, but due to a CAD wiring design flaw that was never quite explained, there's only one lamp for the 204 windows on six floors, so it will take about an hour for security to find me.

In the meantime, the Boss has charged into my soon-to-be-ex-office because he noticed me chatting to the CEO this morning and wants to know what it was about ... After last-week's e-mail/print debacle, he's keeping a low profile until his master reshuffle produces the sweet fruit of victory. The Boss's command of small-talk doesn't even extend as far as weather, so it only takes him 10 seconds to get to the point.

"So what did the CEO want this morning?"

"The CEO?" I ask, playing dumb to the limit.

"OUR CEO!" he repeats a little harshly. "You were talking to him outside the building."

"Oh, that CEO," I say. "Well, he was worried that we didn't have sufficient higher-level redundancy."

"Really?" the boss exclaims, eyebrows in flight. "I didn't think he knew anything at all about networks".

"He doesn't," I reply smugly. "You're fired!"

"What are you talking about?" he demands

"Fired. You know, dismissed. Let Go. Terminated. Made redundant!"

"I don't believe you!" He sneers.

"Of course you don't. The CEO DID want to tell you himself, but he owed me a favour ..."

"He owed YOU a FAVOUR?"

"Yes, for bringing that Invoice to his attention".

"Invoice?"

"Yes, from you for those two big-screen TVs you had delivered to your home this morning, filed under 'enhanced communications equipment'."

"I didn't order any TVs!"

I carefully shuffle out some papers.

"So this isn't your signature?" I ask, pointing.

"N ... Well, I admit, it does bear a resemblance, bu ..."

"It should do, it took me a week and two of your souvenir airline pens to perfect!

The paper's even got your fingerprints on it!"

"It can't have! I've never seen it before in my life."

"So you didn't fill your laser printer with paper when it ran out yesterday?"

"I ..."

"That was silly wasn't it?"

"I can't bel ..."

"Believe it. But it's not that bad. If you'd trusted the digitised signature service, we would've had this conversation a week and two pens ago, so at least you bought yourself some time. That's one more week before your mortgage foreclosure notice arrives ..."

"You bastard!"

"In the flesh, the very same, on the job and tampering with your outstanding holiday leave! Oooh look! Isn't that security, looking for you?"

He backs away, straight through the open security windows and down two floors below.

Nothing like a couple of fractures to slow you down at work. Security is, of course, on the scene in less time than it takes to fully reconfigure a 10-slot WAN router over a 150 baud modem. (Not quick, in case you're wondering). The CEO is also present.

"What happened?" the CEO asks.

"Well," I say, "it's hard to say. He was babbling about some order and televisions and things. I don't like to say it, but I think the stress was getting to him. The suicide attempt was just a cry for help ..."

"Not a cry that's going to be answered by this company!" the CEO growls. "He's out of here!"

Good old CEO, loyal to the bitter end! And to think, only this morning he was as cheery as pie when we had that nice chat about his excellent choice of tailors.

They say I play a mean game of poker too.

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell finds a new use for an electric wheelchair ...**

It's a strange Tuesday morning. Despite his unfortunate fall from the window, my Beancounter ex-boss apparently wangled (with menaces no doubt) a job back at Beancounter Central on the sixth floor.

Yesterday, electric-wheelchair-dependent, he initiated an asset audit of the entire department, down to the last router cable. An asset audit of the big stuff alone takes four people about a week to complete, so this is just bloody-mindedness after his tragic misadventure with the roadside two weeks back. Some people just never learn ...

The asset audit is a potential problem. I'm not sure I want anyone finding out about my unique and quite lucrative asset-disposal policy ...

His previous position in our department has been temporarily assumed by one of the technical managers who's done this before. In fact, so many times before that he has two sets of business cards.

Temp-Boss rolls in at about 10am.

"Simon?"

I look up from my Ethernet monitor. "Yup?"

"Have you seen Gerry this morning?"

"Gerry?"

"Your last boss? You know, the one with half his body in plaster, strapped into a wheelchair?"

"Oh Gerry! No, not this morning."

"Strange. We called him about this audit thing and Accounts hasn't seen him."

"Really?"

"No. And apparently they called his home and he'd left at 7am."

"Mmm. Well, I've got no idea. Speaking of missing things, have you seen that SNMP-managed antenna servo set and the Cell-Phone-based SNMP link box?"

He frowns for a bit. "... No."

He thinks for a bit "..What was it for?"

"Well, together we were going to use them to control the direction and altitude of our satlink antenna."

He thinks for another minute. "You haven't!"

"Haven't what?" I ask innocently, secretly surprised at this guy's technical competence and sheer vision.

"Lost them!?"

Once more my faith in the system is restored. Had he said, "SNMP-managed Gerry's wheelchair," I would've had a serious ethical crisis on my hands.

"No no," I say. "I'm sure they're around here. I was just configuring them yesterday."

"Oh."

Topic ended, he looks around for something to fill in the day.

"New game?" he asks, pointing at my laptop complete with spanking new modem ...

"New game? OH! Yes, new game. Very new. A day old. Only started playing this morning."

"What do you do?"

"Well, the object is to manoeuvre the, er, robot through the streets of what looks like Cornwall."

"That's it?"

"Uh huh."

"Not much of a game, is it?"

"I don't know about that. I get a measure of satisfaction out of it. I've been playing since 7am this morning. Especially satisfying when I put it through one of those automatic car washes three times ..."

"Oh yeah! OK, mind if I have a go?"

"Be my guest!"

Five seconds later ...

"Woopsy."

"What happened?"

"Ah, I wasn't used to the controls, I drove it down that manhole thingy and it's disappeared. How do you get a new man?"

"Appoint another accountant as boss?" I suggest, removing the cotton wool from his clouded brain.

His eyes widen slightly as my copious stack of clues adds up in his grey matter.

"You didn't!"

"No. You did. I just watched. 'Witness for the prosecution', you could say."

"But I thought ... You bastard!"

"Don't worry" I say. "They're fairly good about grievous bodily harm these days. You'll be eligible for parole in two or three years as a first offence, assuming it's your first offence. Oh - and only if he lives, of course."

He wastes several lungfulls of perfectly good air burbling on about department loyalty, and so on. I mentally switch off for a bit till the droning stops. He finally notices.

"OK, what do you want?"

"Two new routers, a back-up FDDI hub, and full ISDN to my home, for testing purposes."

"I see ... OK."

"Excellent. Sign here."

"But it's a blank order form!"

"That manhole did look rather deep didn't it ..."

He signs, I smile benignly, he leaves.

Networking is a funny old world ...

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### **The Bastard Operator From Hell spreads peace and good will among colleagues ...**

The season of goodwill is upon us once again, and the endless round of Christmas festivities is just about to start. Gerry, the ex-boss from beancounter control was pulled out of the manhole with only minor injuries to the SNMP servo set attached to the wheelchair. Unfortunately, the casing was slightly damaged by the soapy water from the carwash, but nothing too serious.

I sit back in my armchair, and think about informing all users that they must log-out for vital maintenance work, so Systems can settle down to a serious game of network DOOM II.

I think again, and just finish rebooting the server and changing the log-in script when the phone rings. No caller id shows up. Bad news. I have all the office, mobile and home numbers logged on call-line identification. I pick up the phone.

"Start talking."

"Simon, Gerry here."

"Hi Gerry," I say, matter of fact.

"You won't get away with this you know. I know you remote-controlled my wheelchair. You really are a complete and utter bastard."

Now what's the point of calling THE Bastard Operator From Hell a bastard. I mean, what does he expect? This conversation is going nowhere.

"Stop talking," I say, and place the telephone back gently on the desk. Short but sweet. I like that.

I record the number Gerry rang from on the database. It's the pay phone at the company's BUPA hospital. Some people just never, ever learn ...

I get to work. Christmas is such a good time for dabbling in office politics.

I dig out the automatic phone log on the boss's mobile, and do a quick search for 'I'm sorry darling, but that's the day of the office party'. It's amazing what CTI technology can do nowadays.

I dive into the e-mail and write a simple little rules-based filter. I divert the 'to everyone' memo from office services about the Christmas party straight to me.

Back to Doom II and happiness. Later in the afternoon, I get the e-mail. Office services are sending out a request for Christmas party suggestions. How good of them. The venues are a boat trip or a barn dance on the 14th. What are these people on?

I check Sharon's (the boss's secretary) personal organiser. So far so good.

I send the e-mail on, and all the punters have their vote for their venue of choice. How democratic.

The e-mails come back to me. It appears the majority want the boat trip on the 14th. I add up my version of the totals for office services automatically - I'm helpful like that.

Before forwarding to office services, I also add a little note to say that I'd had a call from Gerry, and thought it would be a seasonal gesture to club together and buy him some flowers, champagne, chocolates, and maybe even arrange for him to get a chauffeur driven limo to take him back to the party - presuming the doctors had finished operating.

I add that I'd prefer it if office services could do the running on this one for me. It's so vulgar to display your charity. Charity suffereth long and is kind, and all that ...

Office services duly receives my helpful e-mail and announces the decision on the Christmas party. They've raised a great deal of money for Gerry, and the venue is to be the barn dance - but as many people unexpectedly can't make the 14th, the date is now the 13th. Unlucky for some.

I wait 10 minutes. Right on call, the boss comes in very pale and tongue-tied. I help him out.

"Problem, guv?"

"Sort of ..."

He pretends to hide the serious nature of the situation. I'd seen how much he'd had to put on his Amex card so that poor Sharon could stay in a luxury hotel in the Mambo King suite on the 14th instead of braving a taxi home. I also knew just how difficult it was to arrange the office party for the same night as his wife's night out with the girls. I almost feel sorry for him, but recover immediately.

"I heard the news. I couldn't believe it either. A barn dance. Still, at least Gerry will be happy."

"Gerry ...?" growls the boss.

"Yes. It was his idea. He didn't want to miss out on the party, so he's ordered a chauffeur-driven limo to take him there on the 13th. And of course, he can join in on the barn dancing from his wheelchair, unlike a traditional disco."

"Chauffeur-driven limo?" exclaims the boss, now back on fine form with the blood running to his cheeks. "I'll kill him."

"No need to do that. The doctors are already on the case."

I hand him the BUPA bill, along with other assorted receipts for champagne, chocolates, flowers and one very, very large telephone bill, which helpfully lists all the 0898 numbers Gerry has called from his hospital bed, as well as the police report citing him for careless use of a wheelchair.

The boss goes through the receipts and says the fateful words. "He's fired."

"But you can't fire a hospitalised man," pushing him that little bit further.

"Just bloody well watch me," says the boss resuming command. "And another thing, can you say there has been a systems error and that we are going back to the boat trip on the 14th. You'll know how to fix it won't you."

No problems. I think I can sort it.