

PART 1

Shirt tie shoes jacket. Here I am. Sitting nervously in a room on the top floor of the office. This is my boss's floor. I am waiting for my superior to come and assess my performance over this last month. My performance has not been good. My performance has been bad.

The assessment room is made of marble and gold. There is a platinum fountain full of champagne. There are gargoyles pointing out from the top corners of the room. The table is covered with fur and has elephant tusks for legs.

Everything in here is prohibitively expensive. That means you are prohibited from touching it.

My boss enters the room. My boss is a little stocky moustachioed man. He is a little stocky athlete and would look great hurling bowling balls around. He would love to throw the bowling balls at human beings. He would love to play rugby with the heads of human beings. He would kick the human heads so far over the goal posts they would never be seen again. He is wearing a little ribbon on his chest that means he is committed to stopping cancer in its tracks.

If he threw the heavy bowling ball at your head you would think before it hit you: great technique.

He sits down.

'Ian, we are here to talk about your performance this last month. Your performance this last month has been terrible. Do you have your Targets and Actuals?'

I bring out a sheet of paper with two sets of numbers on it. One set of numbers is my

Targets. This is a set of very high numbers and percentages. The other set of numbers is my Actuals. This is a set of very low numbers and percentages.

My boss looks at the sets of numbers. He looks at me. His eyes are very big and white. He carefully removes a bottle of red ink and an old fashioned pen from the drawer in front of him.

I think he has lovely and delicate fingers. His fingers look like dancers.

‘Ian. I am going to mark the areas you've under-performed in with this red ink.’

He places the sheet down flat on the desk. He threads his fingers together before cracking his knuckles, then picks up the ink and holds it above the sheet.

He pours the entire pot of red ink over the paper. Red ink pours over the desk and over my shoes and the floor. I look at the red ink soaking into the fur and staining the marble floor. I look at the gold and the gargoyles and the platinum. Anywhere except my boss's face.

I pick up the dripping red sheet and try to take this extensive feedback on board. I make an expression with my hands and face which tells my boss, ‘I am thinking about this and taking it all on board’. I hope my boss can hear the sincere and heartfelt thoughts about changing my life.

I am having the most intense and sincere feelings that any worker has ever had. I am 110% sincere.

‘How do you feel about this feedback, Ian? Do you think that it's fair feedback?’

‘I sincerely think I definitely need to make a change in my life.’ I say, carefully.

‘I think it might be too late for that, Ian.’ He leans forward on the desk. ‘Why do you do this job?’

‘For the excellent pay and fantastic career opportunities.’

‘The money and prospects are only good if you hit your targets, Ian. Have you worked out how much money your basic salary gives you for each hour you work?’

‘No.’

‘I have. You earn £5.60 per hour. You never hit your targets. I always hit my targets. I earn £5.60 per second.’

Targets are a very important part of the job I do and are a very important part of everything outside of work as well. You should hit every target you set yourself. I sell tubes to people who need tubes for carrying fluids from one location to another, using either gravity or a pump. It is important to know whether a pump is going to be used or not. If a pump is going to be used then the tube has to be slightly thicker to cope with the additional pressure. Thicker plastic means mega-bucks-target-smashing-success-power-winner. I am programmed

for success.

Sometimes I lie to people and tell them they need the thicker tubes even when they don't. This is called having a *sales story* or being *creative*. These are technical sales terms so I understand if you don't understand them.

Once, one of my clients found out about my sales story and made a complaint. The company supported me completely and told him I was new and stupid and incompetent and had no idea about tubes and that they were going to fire me.

'The reason you are doing so badly, I think, is your lack of discipline. When I was working at your level I was the most disciplined worker of all time, but I'm no hero and I'd be the first to admit that.'

He is always so hard on himself.

'One thing I am,' he continues, 'is seriously disciplined. I am a disciple of discipline. You lack discipline and have no responsibilities. I have made a bespoke package to teach you discipline.'

He takes out a small grey tube. It is eight inches long and two point five inches across. It is a standard tube. It is worth twelve point eight pence if you buy less than a hundred. It is worth ten point two pence if you buy more than a hundred. It is a heavy duty tube.

'This is a tube. You have to imagine this tube is your baby.'

'My baby?'

'Yes, your baby. What would you like to call your beautiful bouncing baby?'

'Can I just call it Tube?'

'No. You have to call it a real name. A name like Mildred. Call it Mildred.'

'Okay. Hello, Mildred.'

I put my hand on top of Mildred. It feels awkward. I take my hand off her and immediately I want to put it back.

'You have to carry Mildred with you at all times, to understand the burden of having someone totally dependent on you. Whenever you meet people you have to say, "This is my baby, Mildred" so you can understand how embarrassing you are.'

I hold Mildred up in front of my face. I turn her around a few times. I look through her hole. She is one long hole, I suppose.

'How long do I have to look after Mildred?'

'Until you learn about responsibility and discipline.'

Human emotions are so difficult to understand. I feel oddly proud and utterly worthless.

Will she move to the country? Will she start her own business? Will she own a holiday home in the alpine peaks of France?

All of these questions trouble me as I look down at Mildred, looking up at me. Being a father is so god-damn difficult. That's what I am discovering now that Mildred is in my life.

I leave Mildred on her bed and eat some breakfast before work. I am getting into the habit of eating unsweetened muesli for breakfast because of the slow-release energy it provides throughout the day. It's the complex carbohydrates.

I live in a very small flat. There is almost nothing in the flat. Just me and a television and Mildred.

I am halfway through my daily strengthening exercises when my phone makes a noise. I check it. A little envelope is flashing on the screen. Looks like an angry envelope.

DO NOT LEAVE MILDRED ALONE WHILE YOU EAT YOUR BREAKFAST AND DO EXERCISES AND CHECK YOUR MESSAGES. SHE MIGHT SUFFER FROM COT DEATH.

It is from my boss.

I move from the living room into the bedroom. Mildred is lying on the bed in front of me and does not look like she is suffering from cot death.

My bedroom is a tight cream box. There is a door in it. There is a bed. There is a light. Little grey Mildred looks lonely and impatient, lying on the bed. I scoop her up and cradle her out of the bedroom. I am not sure how I am meant to do exercises while carrying Mildred. Maybe this is why a lot of parents are fat.

I sit on the sofa, naked, holding Mildred. I want to put on clothes but I can't, not without putting Mildred down. I want to eat my muesli, but I can't, not without putting Mildred down. I want to put Mildred down. I receive a text message.

DO NOT PUT MILDRED DOWN.

Successful parents manage to balance the needs of their children with their own requirements. I have to come up with an elegant and simple solution that allows me to carry on as normal while knowing where Mildred is at all times.

I shove Mildred under my armpit and look around. I attach Mildred to my chest with sticky-tape.

Now I can relax and eat my breakfast while I watch the morning news.

Being interested in current affairs is an important part of being a grown-up. When I was a child I thought current affairs were very boring. That is why it is so important to be interested in them as a grown-up.

It shows everyone how mature I am.

I'm not interested in comics, or cartoons, or music videos. I just like to make myself watch the news.

I look at the time and notice I am running a little late. This is due to the pressures of being a single father. I throw on my suit and step out of the door. It smells of the city out here, the same smell as my house, the same smell as at work. I walk through the sunshine for ten minutes, dodging the early-morning traffic, then I push through the doors to my office floor.

'Hi guys!'

That's what I think to myself as I say nothing to everyone I pass, keeping my eyes to the ground. I am a real character. The people I work with are intrigued by me. They must think, 'there goes the enigma'.

I don't talk to them much because I feel it encourages an apathetic atmosphere in the office. Business needs to be streamlined and dynamic. Business is money and money is business.

My desk. The launch pad for my assault on high-profile blue-chip companies. This is where the magic happens. If there is anyone out there who needs tubes and doesn't currently have a preferred supplier of tubes, I will do my best to make sure we can, in the future, provide them with all the tubes they could ever need.

My phone beeps as I receive another message.

WHERE IS MILDRED?

I don't know where she is. I think hard. I know where she is.

She is still strapped to my chest. My heart is beating an inch away from Mildred's head.

I need to get her out of there.

The people who work on the same pod as me are looking over and saying hello. I smile at my sales team. I start to sweat. I look at Brian, the most senior person on the desk.

I say, 'Toilet. Ha!'

There are no cubicles available except for the larger cubicle for disabled people. I look around before ducking inside.

I remove my jacket, shirt and tie. I yank the sticky tape away from my chest, leaving Mildred dangling, half stuck to my side. She is covered in sweat.

I should get a papoose.