COVIDream #2



In which the nightly escape from our waking nightmare is sometimes not.

I find myself toiling once again in the corporate world, this time an ominous place focused on cyber security.I actually worked for two hi tech security firms along the way. It was very Blade Runner: all black and grey metals with finish ranging from flat matte to deeply reflective without being at all shiny; black and grey carpet in the usual industrial pattern that is not a pattern; lighting that was more than ample to see and work, but still felt dark; and, that i2b dream staple, the elevator banks that move from place to place of their own volition, and that never seem to take you to the same place twice.

My first day at work. No idea what I am supposed to be working on. I get hungry. Since I don't know anybody – everybody is very standoffish, almost rude about it – I set out to find food alone. There is a very pleasant cafe/tavern next door, or so it seems. Their menu is about 40 pages long, and has lots of lush photos of food that they do not seem to serve. They have a very detailed beer listing, though. However, the joint is part of and for the security company only, and does not serve alcohol during business hours. The company runs 24/7, so, no. I return to HQ, starving, and buy a few chocolatey baked treats and some coffee in the lobby. All the baked treats are chocolate or something else dark, to match the visual aesthetic of the place.

I get on the elevator back to my cubicle. Guy next to me says, “You must be new.”

At last, a friendly voice. Sort of.

“Yes, first day.”

“Go easy on the muffins. That shit will fuck you up.”

Door opens, my new friend disappears. Later, I find out the hard way that, yes, the muffins are laced with amphetamines, anti-anxiety agents, and various other behavioral modifiers.Goody’s powder for the cyber age, reckon. But I was starving, so I tucked right in. Yum.

I exit the elevator in what I think is the right place, but nothing looks like where I was before. My cubicle is an extension of the building vibe: dark, weirdly quiet, and the cubicles are finished in a silken fabric that is almost irresistible to touch, right on the borderline between luxe and creepy. A chair that feels like a massage headed for a happy ending. I also have a fine monitor/speaker system for watching movies – from a company approved list – because, they “don’t mind how you spend your time as long as you get your work done”.

This area is…different. A bank of harsh fluorescence hangs from a drop ceiling with most of the tiles missing. The cubicles are all beige and tatty. Chairs are wobbly, arms missing, cushion bursting out of torn ‘leather’. The biggest difference: nothing but H1-B immigrant workers, mostly Asian or Indo-Pakistani, crammed butts to nuts, wearing headset communicators and staring into old CRT monitors. Typing for their lives. Dressed in black, head to toe. I see a jug at every person’s feet: make-do urinals so they never have to leave their desk. Lots of muffin remains and crumbs. One person notices me and stops working to stare. That disruption in the collective flow seems to make everyone stop as one and stare my way.

“Sorry, I’m lost.”

The only white guy on this floor walks up to me. Black khakis, black polo with embroidered company logo. Same outfit as the H1B folks, but blacker. Earpiece. Phone and taser on his belt. He steers me back to the elevator, which seems to have moved to a completely different place.

“Be more careful next time. This is a security company. No room for errors.”

I get on and press – what floor am I anyway? – 12, why not. The elevator accelerates fast enough to knock me off balance. But it is moving horizontally.Another fixture of 12b dreams: elevators that move horizontally.

I emerge in a different building entirely and on a higher floor than before. Maybe a diagonal elevator? Same aesthetic, but abandoned. Wires hanging from the ceiling, chairs toppled, piles of cubicle pieces. I toss my coffee and wrappers in an overflowing trash can. Very much the setting of the last scene of *Fight Club*. Figure this is not the place for me, so I turn right around to an elevator that is no longer there. Well shit.

Voices in the corridors. I find my way to a cluster of people at yet another bank of elevators. They go quiet. Clearly suspicious and almost hostile. I get on the elevator and hit 7 – that’s my floor! hope I’m in the right building!

I emerge to familiar surroundings. My manager – actually a very friendly manager I worked for years back – sees me and welcomes me back.

“Trouble with the elevators?”

She laughs and smiles. Maybe I’m not crazy. She leads me back to my cube. I take an opportunity to ask about my duties.

“Don’t worry. We’ll get something to you soon enough. Until

then, just watch a movie, or read, or nap. Whatever. It’s just important that you get here on time. Oh, and there will probably be a lot of required overtime. Nights and weekends. Hope that’s okay.”

Now Kate and I worked together for a long stretch at a company that got bought and sold many times until someone finally bought and cut it up for parts and tax writeoffs.

“Kate, this is embarrassing. We’ve had so many owners and name changes, I can’t quite remember the name of the company now.”

“I know, it’s crazy. I forget too. Let’s just call it Hell.”

And she laughs again, tells me to be sure to be onsite when required, and waves.

“You should try the muffins from downstairs. They’re GREAT!”

Weeks pass. Months, maybe years. I still have had no assignments, no work to do. But the pay is good, and I get to watch movies and such. The nights and weekends are pretty damned annoying, but jobs are hard to come by.

Elevators continue to move around, offices and cubicles don’t stay in the same place for long. I never see Kate again. And I eat muffins all the damn time.

One stretch at work goes on for three straight days. I go home exhausted. Our house is a little company bungalow, one of hundreds exactly alike. I find it boarded up with a police notice on the front door. Crime Scene. Do Not Enter. Investigation Site.

With the company logo at the bottom.

I go back to work. Where else would I go? When I get there, I take the elevator to my cubicle. The elevator dumps me out into the gaggle of H1B workers.

Cops in riot gear have a bunch of the visa employees lined up on their knees. Zip tied. Terrified. A couple of bloody noses.

Cop in those wrap around dude bro sunglasses gives me a chilling grin.

“I told you he’d come back to the crime scene.”

They grab me and start reciting all my crimes. Apparently I am the kingpin of a gang of saboteurs working to undermine global security by infiltrating the Company.

The proof? All that time I spent at The Company when I had no work to do, no reason to be there. Tracking my movements, including suspicious wanderings to parts of the complex where I have no business.

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Note: This dream spanned several successions of waking and going back to sleep. Usually I can ‘change the channel’ on my dreams by rolling to another side or the like, but not this time. Any wonder I am always tired?