

How Deep the Robot-Hole Goes

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‘Gentlemen, ladies,’ proclaimed Devin Hallsey. ‘Give us one more year. We crossed the Rubicon together this very day last year and have reaped rewards because of it. As we have demonstrated successfully over the past twelve months, human managers are now obsolete.’ He paused for effect and raising his voice, declared, ‘Just one more year, and you will be able to declare this meeting the last management conference in history!’

He stood up and spread his arms like a prophet as the applause swelled. I could see in his eyes the smug grin he longed to display, barely contained from spilling onto his smiling face. I felt a sudden longing to strangle that gloating self-satisfaction out of him, a satisfaction born from the thought that he had won. The problem was, he had.

‘Please! I’m begging you here!’

‘No, Mr. Davis. Your request has been officially declined. If you protest any longer, your file will contain a report of insubordination.’

‘But –’

‘Your break time is exhausted. Please return to your duties immediately. Have a productive day at the company.’

Muttering mutinously to myself, I hastened towards my office. I call it an office for want of a better term, as it was somewhat halfway between a room and a cubicle, squashed between a storeroom on one side and an unused conference room on the other. Both the location and its state was demonstrative of the value they placed on an employee such as myself.

As I paced towards it, my anger cooled a little, allowing me to clear my head. Four times, I thought to myself. Four times I’ve had a request for a meeting with the “higher-ups” turned down. How many times would I have to try, I asked myself pointlessly, as I hurried past co-workers all rushing into their own offices. Reaching my office, I quickly logged on to my terminal, my harried mind nowhere near thoughts of work. ‘You are four minutes late’, announced a cool voice. ‘Please make sure it does not happen again. This is your second warning.’ Cursing under my breath, I began my tedious job, questioning myself whether I should stick with this at all. However, I knew, deep down within myself, I would never quit. I had had more than my share of the experience of unemployment and had no desire to return to it. I let out a deep sigh and restarted my work.

The day wore on, as I struggled to keep my concentration on what I was doing. During my half hour lunch break, I went down again to the “Meeting Room”, and put in another appeal for a sit-down with any superior in the company. It took almost twenty minutes to complete the entire request form. Having done this four times already did not make it any less frustrating to complete the task. The complexity of a simple application form conveyed a rather ominous message that workers were not encouraged to ask for meetings with anyone inside the company. Depressing as it was, I tenaciously filled out the form and hurried back to my office, not wanting to get another warning for being late. Three punctuality warnings would imply a heavy reduction on my already measly bonus.

As soon as I logged back on, I was surprised to see a message from the company waiting for me. Maybe I'm finally getting some results, I surmised. Elated at the thought, I opened it, only to freeze at its contents. *Your service for the company is appreciated*, the first line read. Having had many friends go down the company's drain, I didn't need to read the rest of the letter. They can't do this, they can't do this, they can't do this, I thought, my mind a blur of fear. Fear turned to rage when I noticed that I had been given only a week's notice. Springing out of my chair, I rushed to the server room, hoping to force the issue, to threaten them into withdrawing my pink slip. I logged on, and located my manager, codenamed "Cera". The hated artificial face filled the screen and greeted me, 'Mr. Davis, you should be at your terminal, working.'

'This is a mistake, right? Right? Tell me you messed up!'

'Can you tell me what you're referring to, Mr. Davis?'

'There's a message for me that I'm fired! It's a joke, right?'

'I'm afraid it's completely accurate. Your performance has been on the decline for the past few months and we've to let you go,' it said, entirely devoid of any inflection.

An icy spike went through my heart as it occurred to me that I was probably being shipped home because of my fifth request for a concourse. Determined to not let them get away with it, I yelled, 'Is this because I asked to meet with my superiors? I deserve an explanation, I've worked here for over four years! The least you can do is to let me explain myself to someone!'

'Mr. Davis, there's no need to raise your voice. As for meeting with your superiors, you seem to have forgotten that I am your superior, and as such, I have full authority to dismiss anyone under my supervision. Your work rate is slacking, you have been given multiple punctuality warnings and your recent internet history is a cause for alarm. I have it on record here that you have made several internet searches from your home computer with intent to gain access to and disturb company hierarchy. This is more than enough grounds for your dismissal.'

'No, I only –'

'I see here that you have four days of leave accrued. Why don't you take the rest of the day off?' After a brief pause, it said, 'This will be our last meeting, Mr. Davis. We wish you the best for your future.'

I barely heard those empty words fall on my ears. Recognizing only that I was being firmly ordered out, I turned tail and marched robotically out of the room. In no mood to go back to my office, I made it to the vacant elevator and asked it to take me to the ground floor. I literally ran to the main entrance and burst out into the afternoon sun, breathing in deep gasps. Chest heaving, I turned back and gazed at the bold name of the company poised high above the ground. Looking at it, I decided on two things. One, I would find out why I had been kicked out of my job so crudely. Two, I was going to drink till I passed out tonight.

The late evening found me sitting in a barstool with a whiskey in front of me. Absentmindedly nursing the perspiring glass in my hands, I glanced around the room. It was a quiet kind of place, with a little or no music, filled with people who wanted to be left to themselves and their drinks. This melancholic environment suited me just fine, which was why I frequented the Trickling Tap.

'Drowning your sorrows?'

A reluctant glance to my right told me that a small, middle aged woman had seated herself next to me. Grinning at me as though she had asked the most humorous question in the world, she ordered another whiskey for me and one for herself.

‘What do you want?’ I groused.

‘Can’t someone just buy a miserable man a drink anymore?’ she asked, a smile still on her lips.

‘What do you want?’ I repeated, more forcefully this time.

She heaved a sigh, then said, ‘You’re not the first one to get fired for asking the wrong questions, you know.’

Dizzily trying to marshal my concentration, I growled, ‘How the hell do you know I’m fired? It happened just this afternoon!’

‘I still have a few friends at your company, you see. It was in their evening memo and one of them informed me.’

‘Who called you?’

‘Calls by the employees are monitored, you know that better than most. We have to meet in person, which is the only way the machines will never know. Any other way, and my friend would be sitting here right next to you,’ she said, taking a sip from her glass and grimacing at the taste. ‘And I’m not telling you his name. Protecting my sources and all that.’

‘This is all very interesting, but I really don’t want to talk about the company anymore, okay?’ I wanted to get rid of her as soon as possible, so I could return to numbing my thoughts with alcohol. I turned away from her and took a deep swallow from my glass.

‘Don’t you want to know why you were fired, Mr. Davis? Why they denied your requests? I know you have the right suspicions, but don’t you want me to confirm them for you?’

Focusing on her again with difficulty, I grudgingly admitted I did. Pushing my drink away, I waited for her to speak.

‘I know you were there at the Last Conference, six years ago. You were with your fellow graduates from management school, were you not?’ She continued, not waiting for my nod. ‘I was there too. We managers listened with growing horror as the politicians and CEOs applauded. Even though we had an inkling about what was going to happen, we were powerless to stop it. If the workers’ unions had been on our side, things might’ve been different. Then, the Hallsey Act was introduced.’

She seemingly resisted the urge to shudder, lost in thoughts of what might have been. I knew about all this, nonetheless, I listened raptly. She snapped out of her reverie and said, ‘We were all fired. Not all at once, you understand, they were too sly for that. No, it was staggered. Besides, the Hallsey Act had put an end to unions, so no one was even able to protest properly. And they had the firing bonus too.’

The firing bonus was a term I recognized. It was a rage back when I was still in management school. The companies called it Employee Dismissal Compensation Package, but everyone knew it as the firing bonus. The company gave a sum of money to the employees let go. In exchange, the employees could never ask why they were being fired or sue the company for wrongful termination. Quid pro quo.

‘Why did you allow it to happen? We all recognized the harm it would do!’ I blurted out with accusing eyes.

‘What you don’t realize is that they had everyone on their side. The economy was in shambles then. Hallsey promised everyone that they could save it from collapsing. The companies went for it as they could save a huge amount of money in the long term by cutting out all the managers. The workers were promised large bonuses if they agreed to work with the robots. Not that they had much of a chance otherwise. Work was hard enough to come by as it was, and anyone who disagreed would have no chance to get a job. He also promised freedom from harassment, bigotry and favouritism, as the machines can’t like or dislike anyone. The politicians, well, you know how they are. All in all, everyone thought it was the step forward. No one wanted to stay in the past.’

I absorbed all of this, thinking back to the day of the Last Conference. I could still recall the words, vividly.

‘What people didn’t realize was that they were stepping into economic slavery. Every single aspect of the workers’ lives, both real and digital, is scanned, consolidated, quantized. Your job title is, forgive me, was Knowledge Worker, but its meaning has been perverted from what it was supposed to be. There’s no privacy or even respect for the workers anymore, look what they did to you!’

‘Why was I fired, then? I did my job reasonably well, why did they kick me out?’

‘You asked questions, right? They can’t have that. They don’t want people to focus too much on the fact that they’re working for machines. The reason that none of your appeals were granted is that there are no human superiors to you, except for your company’s board. And no company wants to publicize the fact that there are more machine codenames in the company’s roster than that of human employees. That’s the reason you were fired, you were drawing too much attention to that.’

My stomach clenched when I realized how stupid I had been. No wonder I had been ousted. I had unwittingly been trying to upset their delicate balance and I had paid the price for my indiscretion. Struggling to control my emotions, I looked back at her green eyes. She was watching me with a quiet empathy, seeming to understand the anger and hopelessness I felt. Laying a gentle hand on my own, she continued, ‘You’re not the first one to feel this way, nor will you be the last. Help us, help us set things right.’

‘What things! The machines are better, you said so yourself! They have everyone’s support and there’s nothing you or I can do to change that. Companies think about profits and the machines give them that! No one can change the way people think.’

She waited patiently for me to complete my outburst, as though she had sat through it a dozen times already. Speaking firmly, she argued, ‘It’s not an easy task to accomplish, but there’s a chance that we can convince people that the current system isn’t working as well as they’d hoped. We can’t roll back the machines, I know that. Not entirely, anyway. But we can persuade them that management isn’t dead, that our principles are still effective even in a changed world that we are not liabilities. The machines just use gross calculations for any target they set, they don’t have a model for human subtlety. Overall income might’ve increased since their introduction, but how many innovations have we come up with? How many start-ups have been successful? The machines never give any freedom to their workers, they just measure success by how much of the work assigned has been completed, not how it has been done so. Those questions are being deflected, they’re just concentrating on telling people how much money they’ve made. Just macroeconomics. Well, macroeconomics is just economics now. Unless we do something.’

‘What do you expect me to do? I’m just one worker who got fired! You say you have friends who’ve been exposed to the same treatment I have. Why don’t you ask them?’

‘I know your record, Mr. Davis. Before you got the carpet pulled from under your feet, you were among the top 5% of your school. I’ve read what you wrote back then against the Hallsey Act. Effective in your school, wasn’t it? You made all your peers aware of what it portended.

‘That was years back! I’m not sure I can even write properly anymore! Anyway, what does that have to do with anything?’

‘You said, quite rightly, that others are on our side. We have friends lobbying for the abrogation of the Act, vying for union formation, worker privacy and so on. But we need a public offensive. We need people like you to write about what happened to you inside the companies, how stifling it was. Believe me, you aren’t the only one. But we need a push on all fronts. Hallsey did that to us, we need to do the same. Write your story, and I’ll make sure it reaches every network in the world.’

My head clearing finally from the haze of alcohol, I comprehended that she had finally answered the first question I had asked her. She was asking me to pen an article and put my name on it, which would earn me a lifetime embargo on having a job. However, I did want to do something, anything to hurt the system which had robbed me of hope ever since the time I was graduated.

‘I’ll think about it,’ I told her, thrusting back the stool as I stood up. ‘No matter what I decide, thanks for talking to me. It’s more than what anyone’s done for me in a long time.’

Smiling warmly, she said, ‘You’re welcome, Mr. Davis. You know, I think you will write. I think you need that outlet right now. I’ll be here in two days, at the same time. I’ll see you then.’

‘You never told me your name.’

She suddenly grinned like a mischievous teenager. ‘Really? Then call me Alice. Good luck!’

I never went back to the office.

Like Alice had predicted, I did write my story. I poured my heart into it, the betrayal I felt when the Hallsey Act was introduced, the misery of working towards incentives and goals set by an authoritarian machine, the despondency of being fired for trying to understand my own company. The name Alice gave herself inspired me title the story ‘How Deep the Robot-Hole Goes’, in parody of Alice in Wonderland.

I have done what I can, I thought, elated and exhausted at the same time. Maybe we can change the world, maybe we cannot. But I have done my part and others will do the same. Sleepy eyed, I thought that Alice was perhaps the best manager of us all. She had made me work to my best, and hopefully others to theirs.

For the first time in years, I fell asleep with a smile on my face, with a half forgotten quote swirling around my fuzzy brain, “The conventional definition of management is getting work done through people, but real management is developing people through work”. And that was why Alice was better than any machine could ever hope to be.