



Dry Frugal With Death Rays

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Published: 2008

Type(s): Short Fiction, Science Fiction

Source: <http://futurismic.com>

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The ergonomic cubicle gel came up to Sal's chin. Five hours of immersion had left the pads of his fingers wrinkled and slimy. He couldn't wipe his eyes without making it worse. It was the most important morning of his life, and he was stuck in his cubicle corral with a computer that insisted he wasn't.

"And you've looked, right?" Tech support asked, clearly siding with the computer on this one. "At the latch? You've tried turning around and looking *to see* whether it's open or closed?"

"Yes," Sal said. "I've looked." He tried emphasizing the urgency with his arms. In training videos, they iterated how body language carried over into the voice, even though Sal found sloshing around in gel more distracting than helpful on client calls.

A relaxed safety harness—running just taught enough from the stuck ceiling latch to chafe Sal's armpits—prevented drowning no matter how long he was stuck there or how often he needed to rest his head on the viscous surface of the gel. So he was in no *immediate* danger, although everybody's cheerful agreement on this last point was enough to give him pause.

"Have you *tried* to go through it?"

"Go through the glass?" Sal said.

"Sure, sure. Like a bird. Maybe someone's just cleaned the latch, and it's hard to tell whether it's open or closed."

"Ah. I can see how that'd be helpful if the computer said it was *closed* and I was convinced it was *open*, even though the opposite is true. Thank you."

"Sure, sure. Anything else we can help you with?"

So Sal spent the morning banging on the insides of the ceiling glass, when he should have been trying to sell lavender-lined smokestack pipe to factories. Or—and this was just one of those crazy ideas that hemmed him out of the promotion pool—he should have been at the hospital with his wife Bethany, delivering their brand new daughter on this, most important of mornings.

He tried to get his fellow salespeople on the phone to help. But when the lines chirped low to indicate an internal call, even Sal would like as not assume it was a manager and let it drop to voicemail. The importance of seeming busy was second only to sales numbers at Lavender Yes, LLC.

What shouldn't have been so important was *who* eventually freed Sal from his cubicle. It was Geneboy, on his way to the cafeteria at exactly noon. Geneboy, with his perfectly dry hair and clothes even after soaking for four hours in his own flavor of gel. Geneboy, the managerial favorite not only because he sold the most lavender pipe and never answered internal calls, but also because once, two years ago, he convinced some Indiana town to pass an ordinance requiring all commercial factories to be outfitted with Lavendar Yes product. The townspeople were mellower, thanks to the calming, unprovable effect of lavender-scented smog! Crime rate was down in ways that were impossible to measure! Sure, sure! All was wonderful in that progressive, one-factory community, thanks to their annoyingly arid Geneboy.

But that was all fine. It meant nothing to Sal, who still had that appointment to welcome his daughter into the world. He swallowed his pride (along with a bitter drop of the clear gel), pulled himself up by his harness, and pressed his face against the cubicle glass. He pointed to the exterior latch for Geneboy's benefit.

Geneboy's eyes flashed across Sal's, but the drier man did not stop to help his colleague at this time. No, he walked right past the latch, practically stepping on Sal's face in deliberate aloofness. On the big whiteboard at the hall's end, he marked four sales under his column for the first half of the day. Then, and only then, he returned to Sal's cubicle. His smile was shiny and recessed behind that chiseled chin.

"Was that you phoning?" Geneboy said. He kicked open the latch without bending down. "Man, *I figured* it was you. Thought you wanted to talk about movies or some other stupid thing."

The mold of cubicle gel jiggled as Sal pulled himself up, out, and into the hallway. He grabbed his towel from the rack. He ran his fingers through wet hair that stuck leech-like to his skull.

"When have I ever wanted to talk anything with you?" Sal said. Conversations with Geneboy were less often initiated by Sal than they were thrust upon him.

"Well," Geneboy said, "you're always going on about something, Paul."

"It's Sal."

"What's this now?"

Sal slouched his neck forward. He was ten centimeters shorter than Geneboy, but slouching made him feel like he at least had a choice in the

matter. He pinched at his soggy slacks where they stuck the worst to his thighs. He felt self-conscious maneuvering his towel around his clothes and body, trying not to brush against Geneboy in the process.

"You've been stuck like that all morning?" Geneboy said. He shook his head in an exaggerated manner, letting his bouncing dry locks breathe. It was soft and vibrant even under the dull halogens of the hallway.

Sal tried to think of the magic words that would make Geneboy go away sooner. The subject of his wife giving birth was to be avoided at all costs; it sounded like a long conversation in his mind.

"Yeah," he said. "But it's fine. Everything's fine now. Yeah. Thanks."

"What an opportunity to focus, huh? I bet you hunkered down and moved a truckload of lavender this morning."

"Actually, I've been trying to get out of there this whole time."

"Man," Geneboy said. "When someone hands you the ball like that, you gotta run with it."

"I guess so."

"Me? I don't wait for someone to hand me the ball. I live every day like I'm quarterback."

Sal tried to think of an equally compelling football-related answer. But he was needed at the hospital, and he felt like a drowned rat, the way his shirt clung to his arms and chest and back. There wasn't a dry spot left on his towel, yet he could still feel the gel dripping from his crevices. His ears had the worst of it. This wouldn't have been such a bad job, except for his ears.

Yet somehow *Geneboy* never let the morning's work soak in. His shirt, as always, was crisp and dry. It was as though Geneboy not only brought a change of clothes with him to work each day, but also had time enough to shower and primp between exiting his cubicle and bel-lowing his morning triumphs in the hallway.

Doris and Peter came by to mark their own sales on the whiteboard. Sure, their shoes slogged along the hallway floor, but they, too, managed to avoid the complete drenching which caused Sal so much discomfort. They noted Geneboy's banner morning. They congratulated him. Doris called him "a champion." Not "champ." There was no ass-slapping or friendly punch in the arm here. There was only awe: awe for her champion.

Geneboy shrugged in exaggerated modesty, but kept his shoulders square with Sal's.

"Man, it's like you're the waterboy," Geneboy said.

"Good one, Geneboy," Doris said.

"Yeah," Peter said, laughing. And then to Sal: "How are you like the waterboy?"

"That's great," Sal said. "Look, I gotta go."

Geneboy waved him away as he strutted back to the whiteboard. He marked another sale.

"Forgot about Cincinnati," he said. "How could I remember Dayton and forget Cincinnati?" He threw his head back and laughed. His hair couldn't have moved more deliberately had each strand been individually choreographed.

Doris giggled.

#

Sal stood in the calm dark of Bethany's hospital room where he held the tiny frame, the tiny lump, of his daughter for the first time. She was just this little person's face wrapped in a white blanket. The soft scent of sandalwood wafted in through the vents. It was no lavender, but the superficial effect was roughly the same. His wife faded in and out of sleep on the bed.

Their daughter's name was Juniper. She was lighter than Sal expected her to be. They'd prepared meticulously, even putting aside Juniper's entire college fund before trying for a baby. But it was only now, when she fit so snugly in the cradle of his elbow, that he thought he might actually be able to handle this thing called fatherhood.

Still, she was so fragile. The lines beneath her eyes gave her a tired, world-weary look for someone but a few hours old. Sal wanted to place her in a cradle filled with infant gel until she was eighteen, to protect her from anything and everything the world would put against her. But their pediatrician recommended against that. It was safe in the short term, but the longer Juniper was shielded from real dangers—real pressures of life and, yes, gravity—the harder it'd be for her in the long run. Didn't they want their daughter to grow up healthy and strong?

"We can't all be quarterbacks," Sal said to Juniper. It's what he should have said to Geneboy, if he hadn't been so flustered, so wet, and so late. Peter and Doris might've appreciated the response. They were probably

just as annoyed as Sal was with Geneboy's perfect sales record and his perfect hair and his stupid town ordinance.

"Good one, Sal," they would have said. And then, after Geneboy moped away, leaving a trail of shame not unlike Sal's cubicle gel footprints: "How did that feel, to tell Geneboy off like that? I bet that felt good." They would call him a champion.

"Or maybe someone else could be quarterback if you weren't always hogging the ball," Sal said a bit louder. Juniper opened and closed her mouth slightly, like she was chewing on something. Sal checked her lips for any runoff gel that might've dripped from his face or fingers.

"What'd you say?" Bethany murmured from the bed.

"Nothing," Sal said. "Just work stuff."

"Geneboy giving you a hard time again?"

"It's fine."

"What happened?"

Sal wanted to tell her about the stuck latch and about how Geneboy and the perpetual wetness sucked away at his confidence. But he felt like he'd had this conversation before, if not with his wife twice a week, then with his parents back in high school. This of all afternoons was not the time to draw associations between Bethany and his mother.

"It's nothing," he said. "Just happy to be here."

"Love your enemies. That's the best way," Bethany said.

Sal pictured himself emerging at his lunch hour, soaked with gel, and giving dry, perfect Geneboy a great, big hug. It made him smile, this hypothetical victory.

Sal sat in the chair next to Bethany's bed. It gave him no comfort. The gelless pressure of the seat pushing up on his butt-cheeks pulled his focus from his wife and daughter. He tried to ignore it. He ran a finger along the hem of Juniper's face, where strands of dry, curly hair poked out from the blanket.

"Yeah," he said finally. "We have more important things to think about anyway."

There was a knock. A doctor asked to speak with Sal outside. Bethany adjusted her bed into a sitting position. Sal passed Juniper to her, like she was his little football, a football made of porcelain. He followed the doctor into the hall.

Sal hadn't met this particular doctor before, so he said: "I'm Sal. Bethany's husband."

"That's fine," the doctor said. He nodded and kept looking around the hallway, anywhere but at Sal's face. His hair was short and dry, but Sal imagined the work required a lot of standing around, a lot of pressure on the joints. "Just wanted you to know that we used the resistance room for the delivery."

"Okay," Sal said.

"It's actually the anti-resistance room. But that's a mouthful, so we call it the resistance room. It's the only one in the hospital."

"Wow," Sal said. "Thanks."

"Usually people reserve it. But it's fine. Nobody else was using it."

"I guess it would've been awkward if someone else *was* using it, huh?"

"*Usually* people reserve it," the doctor said again. "It's got these massaging things."

"That's great," Sal said. "I wish I could've been there."

"No, it's fine. But if you see an extra charge on your bill, that's what that's about." The doctor rolled his eyes, like he wanted to dissociate himself from whatever those crazy billing people were up to now.

"Okay," Sal said. "But wait. We didn't *ask* to use the resistance room, did we?"

"Well, it's a little late now. I mean you've already used it."

"But you can't charge us for something we didn't authorize."

"Ah well," the doctor said. He shrugged. "Water under the bridge."

"I should hope so."

"I'll let you get back to your family. You have a beautiful daughter there."

"Thanks," Sal said. "Thanks so much."

"But if you see an extra charge on the bill, that's what that's about."

#

"What I should have done was compare him to an auto mechanic," Sal said a week later. "They can't get away with replacing your steering cylinder and then charging you for it. Not if you didn't authorize the repair." He wiped a cafeteria napkin across his brow, where cubicle gel from his hair had collected.

"That's a great idea," Peter said. He took his own napkin and dabbed the top of his pizza. The cheese grease collected in the napkin, turning it shimmery and translucent.

"No, I'm talking about—"

Geneboy walked by. "Hey, man. Sal. I heard you scored Youngstown. How'd someone like you score Youngstown, eh?" He offered Sal his hand.

Sal clenched his jaw before attempting to smile through it. He felt the need to apologize for so cruelly shattering Geneboy's expectations by selling sixty feet of lavender to a pesticide factory notoriously resistant to adopting the pipe.

But to apologize would be to deny this small victory he'd just made for himself, the prize of which apparently included Geneboy finally learning Sal's name. So he just said: "Thanks." He shook Geneboy's hand.

Geneboy quickly pulled away from Sal's slippery grasp. "Hey, man. You're dripping all over me."

"Sorry." Sal always wiped his hands thoroughly before lunch, but his shirtsleeves—still drenched at the cuffs—were like leaky faucets positioned above his palms.

"Man, we should call you 'Soggy Sal.'" Geneboy wiped his hands with three paper napkins from Sal's table. He crumpled the used napkins into little balls and tossed them back at Sal's plate. One of them landed in a pile of ketchup.

Sal looked at Peter, and then back at Geneboy. "Well," he said, "we can't all be quarterbacks."

"What are you talking about?" Geneboy said.

"Yeah, I don't get it," Peter said.

"Nothing," Sal said.

Geneboy strutted off, shaking his head. The back tuft of his hair swung back and forth, like a thousand miniature fingers wagging in disapproval.

"Okay, I gotta know. How does he stay so dry at work?" Sal said. "I've tried those hair-bootie things. They always leak for me. Maybe my head's just a weird shape."

Peter stared at Sal's forehead for longer than Sal was comfortable with, and Sal felt the telltale tickle of a drop of gel (or sweat; it could've been sweat) inching down into his eyebrows.

"Or," Sal said. He cleared his throat. "Maybe he doesn't use cubicle gel at all?"

"Has to," Peter said, giving his full attention back to his pizza. "Liability stuff."

"Then how's he do it?"

"Heat ray," Peter said. He took a bite of pizza, then stopped chewing suddenly. "Wait, you didn't know?"

"No. Heat ray? Is that in the bathroom?"

Peter laughed. "No way they're gonna buy us a community heat ray. Too expensive. Nah, you get it at Mangadgets."

"And it just dries you off? How much is it?"

"Like half our salary before commissions," Peter said.

"Wow. That's... ridiculous," Sal said, even though Bethany wasn't around and it was probably only when Bethany was in earshot that it *would* be ridiculous.

"But it makes sense for Geneboy."

"Why's that?"

"He's a bachelor, for one thing. Why would someone like us pay that much to dry off faster?"

"Yeah," Sal said. "Mangadgets, huh?"

"Forget it," Peter said. "You can't afford it. And if you're thinking of using it to get a little extra strange on the side, then you *really* can't afford it."

"I'm not thinking of getting a little extra strange on the side," Sal said.

"Hey," Peter said. "None of my business."

#

Sal found Mangadgets between the YMCA and Dotty's QuickChurch in Northburg Mall. He found the heat ray in a display case in the back of the store, next to the night-vision party games.

The heat ray was a handheld device. A white cylinder, beveled at the end like a flashlight and small enough to fit in his pocket. And the price was astounding: two-thirds of his salary. Either the price had gone up

since Peter last checked, or his base salary was just the latest conspirator against Sal's confidence.

He cleared his throat for the saleswoman's benefit. "How flexible is this price?"

The saleswoman had been leaning forward over a display case, but presently she straightened. She was a stiff young woman with red hair, close-cropped and flattened with enough product to seem perpetually, intentionally wet. But somehow that worked for her. She wore a leather corset with very little give. Her nametag read: "Roberta."

Roberta shrugged. "There's. Also. Tax?" She sounded like she was hyperventilating. Even when she didn't speak, her shallow breaths came out like gasps.

"Are you all right?"

"It's against. Store policy," Roberta said, "To complain. About uniforms."

"Ah," Sal said. "Sorry. So... do you have any *cheaper* heat ray models?"

Roberta looked him over. He'd spent an extra fifteen minutes toweling off after work. He wasn't going to go soggy into a high-pressure sales opportunity. His hair was messy, but dry. His clothes were wrinkled, but gel-free.

"Dry frugal. Eh?" Roberta said, raising an eyebrow. She put her fist to her mouth as though she needed to cough but couldn't get enough breath behind it. "Tell you what. You know about. Microwaves. Right?"

"I don't need a microwave," Sal said. Who did she think she was dealing with? Bait-and-switch tactics were for trainees. "I need a heat ray."

"That's all. Heat rays are. Low-powered. Microwaves."

"Doesn't sound very safe," Sal said.

"Perfectly. Safe."

She looked both ways and pulled a string on her back, as though she was a beer-fetching, wind-up robot, like half the other products in the store. As she let go of the string, her leather corset loosened. The top of her cleavage dropped down a few centimeters.

"Oh?" Sal said. He struggled to maintain eye contact throughout the exhalation.

Roberta's shoulders relaxed. She straightened again with a smile, and then spoke effortlessly: "That's why heat rays are so expensive. You pay

for the safety. It's like how wireless signals between your dishwasher and fridge are actually just microwaves at the low-powered end. You know all about that, right?"

"Okay," Sal said. It did sound vaguely familiar, but he wasn't going to lower his guard so easily. Nor was he going to get in the habit of saying "yes" so early in the negotiation. He was a professional. "Okay" was all he was prepared to put on the table at this juncture.

"Then you've got your heat rays. They're more powerful, but safe, right?"

"Y... uh huh," Sal said.

Then you've got your commonly-known-as microwaves for cooking food and the like. Then you've got your death rays."

"Death rays?"

"Yeah, high-powered, concentrated microwaves. For cooking people, if you know what I mean."

"No," Sal said, though he worried that he did.

"But death rays have these low-powered settings. And at that low end, death rays are exactly the same as heat rays."

"Exactly the same?"

"No, not exactly. But you know what I mean."

"I do," Sal said, even though he didn't.

"So? What do you think?"

"What do I think about what?"

"Look, I'm not allowed to highlight how a death ray is a third of the price of a heat ray," Roberta said. She leaned forward, making it harder for Sal to maintain eye contact. "It's against store policy. See?"

"Yeah, but how can it be so much cheaper if it's more powerful and can cook people?"

Roberta waved her hand in dismissal. "It's a whole safety thing."

"So the death ray isn't safe?"

"Perfectly safe." She looked over Sal's shoulder and giggled.

Sal followed Roberta's eyeline. A twelve-year-old boy wearing large sunglasses bumped into a display case full of airplane-safe watches.

"There's an OLED in those glasses," Roberta said.

"Ah," Sal said.

She whispered: "The OLED shows porn."

"So," Sal said. "If it's perfectly safe, then how again is this a death ray?"

"Right. Yeah. It's safe except for that part."

"I'll have to think about it." Sal inched his way towards the entrance, expecting Roberta to stop him at the last moment. But she didn't move from behind the counter—didn't even watch him go. And he was so busy half-peering over his shoulder that he tripped over a beer-fetching robot ferret on the way out.

#

It was three months after Juniper was born before Sal got Bethany's delivery room doctor on the phone.

"Look here," Sal said. "Let's say you're an auto mechanic."

"Okay. But I'm a doctor."

"But let's just say. And you replace my steering cylinder without my asking."

"I wouldn't do that. I'm a doctor."

"Yeah, I know that. Let's just *say*, okay? It's an analogy. Now, I'm not obligated to pay for that new steering cylinder, am I? If it's added to my bill without my consent?"

"Depends. Does this mechanic get to keep the steering cylinder if you refuse to pay for it?"

"Wait," Sal said. "In this analogy, the steering cylinder's the resistance room you charged me for. It's not the baby."

"I wouldn't know anything about that. This analogy isn't working for me because I'm not an auto mechanic."

"But an analogy..." Sal began. "I don't know how to continue this conversation."

"Well, thanks for calling."

But when the explanation of benefits from his insurance provider came, the resistance room turned out to be the least of Sal's problems.

It said: "THIS IS NOT A BILL" next to "AMOUNT YOU OWE" next to a staggering number that was far, far above his deductible, and much closer to the amount they'd set aside for Juniper's college fund. Hidden a few pages later, it listed the reason for denial of coverage: "preexisting condition."

Juniper was six months old before Sal got an appeals correspondent from the insurance company to get back to him.

"How can my wife's pregnancy be a pre-existing condition?"

"Was she a Blue Light member before she became pregnant?"

"We've been members for five years," Sal said. "Our baby was born this April."

"So was she a Blue Light member before she became pregnant?"

Sal began to move his arms around, for all the good it would do over the phone. "Yes."

"Well, everything seems in order. But I'm afraid our appeals procedure is limited to 180 days. This really should've been taken care of earlier."

"I've been calling and writing letters for months," Sal said. "This is the first response I've ever gotten."

"Well."

"Ever!"

"Well, I'm not sure what you want me to do now. You already have your baby."

"I want you to *pay the claim!* I want you to *pay the hospital!* So their collections people will leave us alone!"

"Yeah, I'm just not sure what you want me to do. It's like you're harboring all this rage for something that happened so long ago."

"But it's *still* happening! I *still* haven't been able to get you people to pay the claim!"

"I don't appreciate that 'you people' remark, but if you'll calm down then maybe we can talk about this."

"But..." Sal stopped himself. He lowered his arms. Maybe the insurance correspondent could guess what he was doing with his hands after all. "Okay. Sorry."

"Now, I don't think we should have to pay for something we didn't authorize. I mean if you were my auto mechanic..."

He paid what he could. And on his way home from work, Sal spent the remainder of Juniper's college fund on a death ray.

#

Bethany wasn't happy about the purchase, in no small part because she'd planned to use Juniper's college fund for an Alaskan cruise. Also:

she didn't like guns in general, and especially didn't want one in the house now that they had a child. And also: the rechargeable battery in the gun wasn't user-replaceable, which these days should have been a no-brainer.

"But it's not a gun," Sal said. "It's a death ray."

"That's even worse," Bethany said. "How do you expect to teach Juniper about firearm safety if your gun can only be used to kill people?"

"You want me to teach her about firearm safety? But you hate guns. You're all about loving your enemies."

"I knew you'd throw that back in my face."

"Look, I'm going to keep it away from June entirely."

"Well, I should hope so," Bethany said. "Now are you going to be home Saturday? She has a playdate with the Heller girl."

"Isn't June a little young to have a playdate?"

"Just planting seeds. It's more for us parents to meet than for them at this point," Bethany said. "Unless you don't want us to have friends because you're planning to shoot everybody with your death ray."

"No, that's great. Friends are great."

"You know we're more likely to use it on ourselves than on a burglar."

"But I *plan* to use it on myself," Sal said.

"Well, I should hope so."

#

Sal emerged from his cubicle at lunch time, feeling confident already after making two morning sales. He left his towel on the rack. Even the whiteboard could wait. He slogged directly to the bathroom, and stood in front of the mirror.

If the heat ray looked like a pearl-white flashlight, then the death ray was a big blue banana. Sal held it like he might grip a handgun—if Bethany had allowed such things—but the "trigger" was at his thumb instead of at his forefinger. The settings knob was on the side. It felt lighter than something with "death" in the name should feel. It felt like one of Juniper's plastic toys.

He set the death ray on the lowest setting and ran it over himself like he was spraying his whole body with De-Germ. His shirt dried quickly. The cubicle gel dissolved within seconds, leaving his skin tingly in the wake of the invisible ray. When he let it linger momentarily longer in the

nooks of his elbows and inside his shirt collar where excess gel collected and congealed, he thought he saw the surface of his skin bubble.

But in five minutes, he was as dry as any quarterback. And with practice he was sure he could cut that time in half. The only sign now that he'd spent the morning submerged in gel was how his hair stuck up and out every which way. And he was a little itchy.

"You've got to shape it before it dries," said Peter. "Like when you get out of the shower." Peter had entered the bathroom at the end of it. His smile admitted how impressed he was.

Sal nodded, though he never did do any shaping when he got out of the shower. He just let it fall flat. And Geneboy's hair wasn't stiff like this. There must have been more to it.

"I'll figure something out," Sal said. He was excited enough that he considered skipping lunch and getting right back to the phone while he had momentum on his side.

"My turn?" Peter said. He held out his hand.

Sal tried to think of how to amicably ask his friend to contribute to the cost of such an expensive device, if he wished to share its benefits. When no unselfish argument came to him, he reluctantly moved to hand it over.

Just then, the bathroom door opened. Geneboy walked in. Sal snapped the death ray back. He tried to cup and hide the banana-shaped device in his hand.

"Looking sharp there, man," Geneboy said, probably forgetting Sal's name again. Then he saw the death ray. He narrowed his eyes. "That's not a heat ray, is it?"

"Sort of," Sal said. "Yes."

"That's not a new model, is it?" Geneboy said. "Lemme see."

"That's all right. Maybe later."

Geneboy stared at his hand. Sal inched it away from his line of sight. Geneboy looked past him, to catch the death ray's prominent reflection in the bathroom mirror.

"Well, good for you, then," Geneboy said. He ran his hand through his dry, relaxed hair, winked at himself in the mirror, and left the bathroom.

"My turn," Peter said again. Sal handed it over, but didn't feel good about it.

Peter ran it quickly over his body. He took off his glasses and microwaved them separately. Just before he finished, Sal came up with a non-confrontational way to suggesting cost-sharing.

"You know," Sal said casually. "The batteries aren't user-replaceable. There's a finite number of times I can charge this thing." He shrugged. Always best when the client thinks something's his idea.

"Cool," Peter said. His hair looked tidier than Sal's, even with his widow's peak and bald spot. He handed the death ray back to Sal, straightened his collar, and looked himself over one last time. "Lunch?"

Sal had the single best sales afternoon of his tenure. Every click of the phone was another notch closer to a debt repaid or an Alaskan Cruise less irresponsible an idea. He couldn't remember feeling so confident, so capable, until a manager knocked on his ceiling latch. Sal didn't want to emerge from such a streak, but what could he do? It's not like he could direct the guy to voicemail.

"It's come to my attention you might have brought an incendiary device into the office environment," the manager said, without meeting Sal's eyes.

"Huh?" Sal said. He was soaked. He alternately wanted to reach for his towel and to forgo the towel for the more effective bathroom and death ray.

"Your death ray," the manager said. "You can't have that here."

"It's on the lowest setting. It's just like a heat ray on its lowest setting."

"Yeah, but you can't have that here. You can't bring that to work anymore."

"Geneboy put you up to this?"

"Look, it's a safety thing," the manager said. "Someone gets hurt, they could sue the company. That's the whole reason for the cubicle gel."

"But we're in the hallway now," Sal said, thinking quickly. He was still dripping from the afternoon's work, but he felt drier than he was, like how Geneboy probably felt all the time. "I could slip in the hallway because of the gel. What's to stop me from suing if I *don't* use the heat ray?"

"I understand your concern," the manager said. And the next day, they required all employees to sign statements about how the removal of gel from shoes and clothes were the exclusive responsibility of individual employees.

And no death rays.

#

For another month, Sal agonized over what to do with the death ray. It wasn't worth losing his job over, but as a cheaper, "trial version" of the work-safe *heat ray*, it had demonstrated how the more expensive item might be worth the financial risk. The confidence that the lunch-hour dryness had given him now had an actual monetary value in the commissions he'd made in one afternoon. No guarantees, but just a hundred afternoons like that over the next few years, and the heat ray might pay for itself.

And by the time Juniper was of college age, he might even be able to pay for that. And then her birth. And then an Alaskan cruise, and then Bethany might become a little less passive-aggressive with him in front of the Hellers.

He returned to Mangadgets.

"It's. Been. Used," Roberta said, her corset again at regulation tautness.

"Just once," Sal said.

"Hey, I don't. Want to. Know about it."

Sal stared at her blankly. Then he got her meaning.

"No, not as a death ray. I mean it's been used as a *heat ray*. On the lowest setting, like you said."

"I'm sure. The cops. Have heard that. Before."

"But I want to buy a more expensive item. I want to put it towards an *actual* heat ray."

"I don't get. Commissions on. Exchanges," Roberta said. "May I. Interest you. In some. Pornlasses?"

#

Sal did his best with artificially boosting his own confidence at work. He kept three towels and a blow dryer on the rack above his cubicle. He went to sleep thinking about verbal retorts if so-and-so said this-or-that in the same way that others went to sleep thinking about what they'd do with their lottery cash if they scored the jackpot. He won every verbal exchange in his mind, and others were always around to witness those victories, to ask how Sal felt, and to bet that Sal felt good.

In real life, he did his best. And it was two years before Sal had to come clean with Bethany about how he wasn't able to pay the hospital

debts or the increase in health insurance premiums due to erroneous claims, and how he'd probably never be able to take her on that Alaskan cruise she went to sleep thinking about every night. He expected they'd need to declare bankruptcy by the end of the year.

"If you know it's Geneboy who messed with you," Bethany said calmly in bed, "then why don't you do something about it?"

"Like what?" Sal said.

"It's not like you have a death ray or anything."

"Um."

"What about replacing his heat ray with your death ray?"

"They look too different. And that could kill him."

Bethany shrugged.

Sal looked at her. At first, he'd congratulated himself on choosing to acknowledge the status of their finances on a night when she'd taken a night-time antihistamine. She was, in fact, more agreeable than he'd hoped. But Sal never would have guessed that she'd respond to his confession by suggesting *anybody* should get shot with death rays, much less *somebody other than Sal*.

"Thought you were against guns," he said.

"It's just you spent all that money, and you're not even going to use it?"

"I'll think about it," Sal said. He pictured Geneboy calling him "Soggy Sal" and dwarfing his sales numbers one last time. He pictured the insurance assface denying his claim, and Roberta refusing to take back the cursed blue banana. At the end of each mental image, he added the zap of the death ray at full power. He did feel justified, he had to admit. Justified and illegal. And sick to his stomach.

"Oh, and would you do something with those sunglasses of yours?" Bethany said, turning out the light. "The Hellers are bringing Pearl over tomorrow."

"They're just sunglasses," Sal said.

"I didn't say anything."

#

The next morning, Geneboy's jacket hung helplessly above his cubicle corral. Below, Geneboy talked to a client and swam around in the gel, less quarterback than water ballerina.

Peter said: "Think it's in there?"

"Something that expensive? Would you risk taking it into the gel with you?"

"Don't know that I'd leave it up here either," Peter said. "Not saying anyone here's the stealing type."

"Of course not."

Sal searched Geneboy's jacket. In the left interior pocket, he found a small leather case containing the heat ray and three candy-flavored condoms.

"Dibs," Peter said. He grabbed a grape condom and put it in his wallet. He nodded at the heat ray. "So, you're just gonna take it? You're okay with that?"

"I don't think I can get away with that," Sal said, though it was *living with* getting away with it that bothered him more. How did winners manage to do it, anyway? How did they live with what it took to succeed? "I'd rather just break it. Or turn it on and aim it at Geneboy while he works."

"Is that safe?"

"Perfectly safe. That's why it's so expensive."

"What will it do?"

"Over a few hours? Through the walls? It'll probably give him a rash or something." Sal tried to sound casual about it, but all he could think about was the possibility of skin cancer. Cooking people.

"So you gonna do it?"

"Maybe." Sal watched Geneboy's constant movement, and wondered whether there wasn't more to this body-language-over-the-phone thing than he thought. Should he take swimming lessons, maybe? Was that the secret? Geneboy did have good form.

He put the heat ray back into the leather case. He put the case back into Geneboy's jacket pocket.

"Maybe after lunch," he said.

Peter tapped the new condom-bulge in his wallet. "My thoughts exactly," he said.

Sal sold nothing that morning. He was so distracted by the phrase "cooking people" that kept popping into his head that he almost listed it

as a potential benefit to clients in place of one of the more dubious lavender talking points.

But he never got to return to Geneboy's cubicle. His wife called at eleven.

"You need to come home now," Bethany said.

"Why?" Sal said. He just needed to make one sale that day and he could reasonably leave Geneboy alone. One little victory was all it would take to replace that stomach-sick feeling with something more agreeable, to feel a tad less like background in the more successful lives of others.

"I can't talk about it over the phone," Bethany said.

"Sure you can," Sal said. "I can hear you just fine."

#

Pearl was in the basement. On the floor of the living room, Juniper was playing with her dolls. They were bigger than the dolls Sal usually saw her playing with. She was two-and-a-half years old. She didn't seem aware of what she'd done.

"She's going to need therapy," Bethany was saying.

"What about Pearl's mother?" Sal said.

"She'll probably need therapy, too."

"No, I mean: have you called her?"

"Not yet. You think I should?"

"Yeah," Sal said. "Where's the death ray now?"

"In our c-l-o-s-e-t."

Juniper looked up at them. She rolled her eyes. "I know how to spell 'sex,' okay? Jeeze."

"She just keeps saying how she was tired of Pearl winning all the time," Bethany said.

"How can you win at dolls?"

"Who knows?"

"You call," Sal said. "I'll watch her."

"What do I say?"

"I don't know."

Bethany kissed Juniper on her forehead and went into the kitchen.

"How are you, Junebug?" Sal said, after a deep breath.

Juniper held a doll by its tiny feet. She stuck it out toward Sal. Its synthetic hair tickled his nose. "Smell this."

The doll smelled like burnt plastic. Sal took it from her gently. He set it on the couch.

"Do you know what happened to Pearl today?"

"Yup. She was winning, but not anymore."

Sal slid forward off the couch, and sat on the carpet next his daughter. He left a gelatinous trail on the cushion that could have belonged to a snail. He looked at the doorway to the den, where Bethany was crying on the phone with the Hellers. Juniper picked up another of her dolls.

"So. How did it feel?" Sal said into his champion's ear. "I bet it felt good."

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