

BRAD WEBER

Red Rubber Balls

THE MORNING SUN GIVES the promise of a warm day, but the cold wind has different plans. I have to hold my coat closed as I climb out of my car, fallen leaves whipping around my feet.

I stand in the parking lot for a moment, looking at my office building. I work in one of those commercial parks that line the outskirts of the suburbs. The building is two stories of white concrete, and beside it is a six-story glass cube and down the street is much of the same. Behind my building is an elementary school.

Inside the reception area you're greeted by a loud red-and-blue carpet that draws your eyes along the floor to the semi-circular reception desk against the far wall. Behind that hangs the chrome lettering that reads "Gamtek Solutions." To the left is a doorway that leads to the boardrooms and executive offices, the way to oak tables, leather chairs and endless corporate meetings. On the right is a frosted glass door with a small security-pass reader. This leads to the employees' area.

As I head toward this door I say "good-morning" to Patti the receptionist.

She looks up, smiles and says, "Hello."

I pass through the glass door, and as I do I glance over my shoulder and see that Patti is playing solitaire on her computer, as usual.

The carpeting here changes to a more functional design. The room is a vast hall, a sea of grey cubicles stretching out in a grid pattern. Fluorescent lights bathe everything in a soft, factory-approved glow. What natural light that does peak through is first filtered through the managers' offices that line the outer walls.

I pass by the novelty gumball machine that sits just outside my cubicle. Someone's idea of bringing "fun" to the office. I sit down and begin the day.

Midway through the morning a reminder pops up on my computer screen telling me it's time for my Daily Status Update Meeting with my manager, Dave.

I stand in the doorway of Dave's office and he's in his normal pose, hovering over his keyboard and staring at his computer screen. He's wearing a wrinkled white shirt and his yellow-and-blue striped tie, which is usually third in his rotation, and a quick reminder that it's Wednesday.

He sees me at the door and motions me inside. "Did you bring the updated sheets on the annual budget?" he asks.

I pull some pages out of the stack I'm holding and hand them over.

"Great. We've got that meeting this afternoon with James. We really need to nail these numbers down and get him on board with the fact these Corporate expense targets just aren't realistic."

"No problem." I flip a few pages. "But I want to point out that I'm still using some pretty basic calculations on the new LeMay Project."

"That's fine. It's a high-profile project with Corporate but it's not really that big in terms of our business. We don't need to focus on it."

Good. I barely even understand the project. I feel like I've just thrown some numbers onto a page, and I know Dave hasn't spent the time to actually review them in detail.

Dave starts scanning the pages. The sun is shining through his window and it draws my attention outside. Dave's office is at the back of the building and looks out onto the yard of the elementary school. It must be recess time as I watch the kids whirl about the yard in their bright red-and-blue fall jackets.

Children's laughter.

One-two-three

Not it! Not it!

"Would you look at that?" Dave's voice breaks through my thoughts.

"Sorry!?" I quickly say, trying to focus back onto the papers in front of me. "It might be a spreadsheet error."

"What? No. I mean, would you look at that?" I see that Dave is also looking out the window. "Wow, do you remember that?"

"Hmmm," is all I reply, not sure where he's going.

"Do you remember what it was like being a kid? You didn't have a care in the world, no worries." Dave continues to stare out the window and I'm not entirely sure if he's talking to me anymore. "It kind of makes you wonder when it all ended. One minute you're running around playing games and then suddenly you're poring over budgets and making mortgage

payments.” He trails off a bit and then just sits there in silence for a second. He shakes his head and then leans forward in his chair. “Ah well, you have to grow up sometime, and this budget problem isn’t going to fix itself.”

An hour later Dave is content we’ve done all we can. I rush back to my desk as I have a ton of other things to do. This budget process is taking up all my time and I have two other projects I’m dealing with, not to mention the work I am actually getting paid to do.

I took the job after university. It was something to get me started while I figured out what was next. I picked things up quickly and my bosses were impressed with my work. The better I did the more money they gave me, and the more work they piled on. I can’t pinpoint exactly when I felt the need to come in on Sundays to catch up, or when working past seven became the rule rather than the exception.

There’s a cranking sound outside my cubicle. I see Stanley from five cubes down feeding a coin into the gumball machine. Sometimes the machine spits out more than one gumball, and I watch several slip through Stanley’s beefy fingers and bounce onto the floor. Red and blue gumballs twirl around each other across the carpet.

One-two-three

“Lunch?” Dennis says startling me. He’s standing beside my cubicle. “You going for lunch?”

I watch Stanley scoop up the stray gumballs and then I look over at Dennis. “I don’t think so, I’ve got a ton of stuff to do. I’m just going to eat at my desk.”

He drags out his words. “Commmme onnnn...”

“Seriously, I’ve got a meeting with the VP Finance at two today.”

“We’ll just take a short lunch, like half an hour.” He knows I’m waver- ing so he presses on. “Lets go, we need to leave now to get a seat before the crowd hits.”

I sigh. “Fine, let’s get going.”



We arrive just in time to beat the rush as the cafeteria quickly fills with people right at twelve o’clock. It isn’t long before Chris shows up at our table to join us.

“So what’s going on?” Chris says, smiling.

“I’m fine. He’s busy.” Dennis replies as he starts on his lunch.

“You’re not still working on that project are you?” Chris chides.

“Which one?” is all I reply.

Chris relishes the fact I'm always busy, and he always leaves at 4:30 pm.

Chris blurts out, "I really don't think I could do a threesome."

Erupting in laughter, Dennis spits out, "Where did that come from?"

"You know, I was on the Internet last night and it got me thinking. I just don't think I'd have the energy. I mean, it seems to be this big fantasy, but I just don't think it's for me." Chris then picks up his sandwich.

Dennis chimes in. "You know, I've thought about the idea of two sisters. But how realistic is that. Sure, from my standpoint it might be cool. But what sisters would be interested in that? I can't even think about the idea of being in the same room naked with my brother."

Chris laughs. "Not only would the girls have to be interested in a threesome, but they'd also have to be willing to do it with their sister, too. Never gonna happen."

I can't stop looking at my watch. What are these guys even talking about? And Chris is supposed to be in HR.

"What, nothing to add?" Chris looks at me.

"Don't mind him," says Dennis. "He's just cranky 'cause he's got a meeting with the VP Finance this afternoon."

"You shouldn't worry so much," Chris says. "You're starting to stress me out. Besides, it's just a job."

"I know," I say.

But that's the thing; it's not anymore. It used to be just a job when I left at five o'clock and when I wasn't checking email over the weekend. It was just a job when I still went out, when I did things after work. But now it's become something else.

I sit there and listen as Chris and Dennis blather on about some new topic. After another ten minutes I finish eating and leave saying I have to get back to work.



Two o'clock rolls around and Dave and I head to our meeting. We walk out of the frosted glass door back into the reception area. I look over at Patti's computer monitor. Solitaire. We follow the red-and-blue carpet down the hallway toward the boardrooms.

Inside the room James, the VP of Finance, is seated at the table along with the General Manager and several other people. We sit down and exchange pleasantries as I pass out my spreadsheets to everyone.

Shuffling the papers in front of him, Dave begins. “We wanted to get everyone together to discuss next year’s targets in the budget. So what we’ve pulled together are some schedules to help illustrate the numbers I’d been discussing previously.”

James the VP leans back into his chair and moves some of the pages under his fingers, “That’s sounds great, Dave, but let me interject. What I really want to focus on is the LeMay Project.”

How did I not see that coming?

Dave slowly says, “Okay...”

I look over to the window and sigh.

Not it!



Having sweat through my shirt, the meeting finally ends and Dave and I slink out the door.

“Well,” I comment, “that didn’t go as planned.” I shift the files I’m holding from one hand to the other.

“You’re telling me.” Dave shakes his head. “So we’ll need to get James those LeMay Project numbers by tomorrow morning.”

“Sure thing.”

Dave and I separate. On the way back to my desk I pass by Mark, another analyst in my group.

“Oh hey,” Mark smiles at me. “I’ve been meaning to ask you, did you bring back that movie I leant you?”

I snap my fingers, “Yes I did. I just forgot it in my car. I’ll go grab it.”

Outside the wind is still blowing hard. I’m standing beside my car with the door open. I hear a smack beside me, followed by a thwump, thwump, thwump. Something bounces off my leg. I look down and there’s a red dodge ball at my feet. I set the files I’m still holding down on the front seat of the car and bend down to pick up the ball.

“Hey, mister, over here.”

I roll the ball around in my hands. It’s cherry red and made of hard rubber with a slightly stubbly texture. It’s almost the exact same as I remember from when I was in school.

“Hey, mister, over here.”

I look over at the schoolyard. All activity seems to have stopped. The children are lined up behind the fence staring at me. I look down at the ball and then stare back at them.

“Mister—the ball!” a boy yells.

I take one step forward, holding the ball close to me. I'm then reminded of spreadsheets and flowcharts and that I need to get back to my desk. I look down at the ball and lob it high into the air over the fence. I turn and grab the movie off the dashboard and rush back to the building. The sound of playing and laughter resumes from the schoolyard.



I look at my watch and it's 5 pm. The office is almost a ghost town. Just like *The Flintstones*, the end-of-the-day whistle blows and everyone leaps out the window. I, however, still have a mountain of work to finish. Time drags on and I never notice the sun going down. I only take ten minutes for a vending-machine supper.

The next time I look at my watch it says 9 pm. Just one more thing to finish and I should be able to go home. I reach to grab another file but can't find it. Where can it be? I had it with me at the meeting. Then I realize, I'd forgotten it in the car when I went to get Mark's movie

Outside it's gotten rather cold. The streets are empty and the night has that quiet feeling.

My car is the only one left in the parking lot. I pick the files up from the front seat, but before I close the door I pause. I feel the wind beating against my back. In the quiet of the night I hear a creaking sound from behind me. I turn around and look back into the schoolyard. There is one central light in the yard, and underneath it is the playground's swing set. The swing-seats sway in the breeze.

Children's laughter.

Hey, mister, over here.

I start walking toward the schoolyard: off to the side is a gap in the fence that lets the kids take a shortcut through the back. I pass through the gap and walk over to the swing set.

My hand runs over the chain of the swing. It's slightly rusty and cool to the touch. My other hand relaxes and the file folder falls from my fingers. Pages spill out and the wind picks them up and blows them into the night.

I twist around, with my back to the office building, and ease myself down into the seat. The wind blows through my hair and whistles in my ear; it's cold, but I don't feel it. I gently sway back and forth and look up into the night sky. I think I can almost see the stars.