

The florescent light flickered again as the our men sat silently around the chipped wooden table. The steam had stopped rising off the paper cups of coffee.

“Well, it seems we’re at a stand still,” Detective Daniels said. He was a short man, balding with a few scraps of hair grown long and combed over.

“I suppose we are,” Larry replied. “My client has nothing to say. He’s the hero in this situation and the fact that you can’t see that is appalling.”

“Hero is quite a stretch here,” Daniels said.

“There’s a man dead — killed,” Detective Marrow interjected. She was tall with long brown hair. Pretty enough to stand out in the sausage festival of a police station, but otherwise plain looking.

“Along with that, a widowed wife and a lot of questions around what really happened.”

“You know what happened,” Larry said. “You have the statement from the widow that corroborates my client’s statement. I don’t even understand why we’re still here. He should be out on the steps getting his fifteen minutes of fame with the reporters.”

“You know we can’t do that until we fill in a few holes,” Daniels said.

“Well we’ve said all we’re going to say so if—”

“How is she?” Phil finally spoke up and interjected.

He was wearing a set of clothes Larry had brought for him, but they were before all this had started so they hung baggy on him. Phil too, was balding, but not as badly as the detective. Everything about Phil was average. He was 5’7”, brown hair, hazel eyes. Even with the weight he had lost, was still soft around the middle. He was somewhere in the middle of his forties, and the age was showing across his face and body.

Larry immediately jumped in, putting his hand on Phil's arm. "We've said everything we need to say here."

Phil ignored him, locking eyes with Marrow.

She sighed.

"About what you would suspect. She's distraught. Sobbing, screaming. Her husband is dead after a pretty violent incident and she's got just as many questions as we do."

"You think I could talk to her?"

"Phil!" Larry all but screamed.

"And why would you want to do that?" Daniels asked.

Phil just shrugged.

"Just to check on her. See if she's ok. See if—"

Phil trailed off.

"See if what?" Marrow asked, her eyes narrowing a bit.

"Ok," Larry said, pushing back from the table and standing. "That's all we've got to say for now. Are you going to hold him or not? You need to decide because we're leaving otherwise."

Phil stayed seated, his eyes staring into what was left of his coffee. Daniels and Marrow ignored the lawyer and kept their eyes on him.

"I just want to make sure she understands—"

"Phil!"

"— why I did what I did and —"

"Stop!" Larry grabbed his clients arm and jerked him back. The chair screeched across

the floor and Phil almost toppled over backwards.

Phil jumped to his feet and jerked his arm out of his lawyer's grip.

"Get the fuck out!" he screamed.

"What?" Larry said incredulously. "Phil you have to have a lawyer."

"The hell I do," Phil said, his voice still at a high octave.

Larry paused for a few seconds, forcing his breath to slow. He leaned in.

"Phil, a man is dead. This is—" he glanced at the detectives, "they're thinking murder."

"Exactly," Phil said. "I can't do this anymore. It's been weeks. *Months*."

At this the detectives exchanged confused glances, but remained quiet.

"It's not fair to Mary. She needs to know what happened. I have to tell the truth."

At this Phil pushed his chair back up to the table and slumped into it.

"Phil—" Larry started, but Daniels cut in.

"So what you're saying is you are refusing counsel?"

"Yes," Phil said.

Marrow stood and opened the door. She motioned to Larry.

The lawyer stood, looking around at the three people in the room, still unsure of what just happened.

"Get out," Phil said, just above a whisper.

Larry's face turned red, but he remained silent. He buttoned the jacket on his suit, picked up his briefcase, then left the interrogation room without another word.

Marrow slowly retook her seat, then her and Daniels waited. Their combined decades of experience allowed them to know now, of all moments, was not the time to talk.

Phil pushed the cup of coffee back and forth in front of him, careful to make sure the bit in the bottom didn't slush out onto the table.

"Ok," he said. "I'll make you a deal."

He picked up the cup and held it in front of him.

"Get me a refill and promise me five minutes with Mary afterwards, and I'll tell you everything that happened."

#

The beginning of this whole thing may be the most embarrassing part. And trust me, there's a lot of embarrassing stuff to come. But it's just how stupid the thing that kicked off everything was.

First, you've got to understand the pressure I'm under. I've got two kids in college. My girl is smart enough and got a few small scholarships, but my boy — the sports science major — well, I was paying out of pocket for him. Then the mortgage and the cars and all the other middle class bullshit. And my wife, Ruth, keeps jumping from one new multi-level marketing "business" to another. The most recent is the monogrammed purses. But she's probably given up on that one too. She's had a few more important things on her plate as of late.

Maybe I should give my son a hard time about majoring in sports science. He's doing something he loved. Me, other hand, majored in business so I could make money. I landed a job with Blue Cross straight out of college making way more than my buddies. I needed the money too because I had student loans that were coming due and dating Ruth long enough that I needed

to start looking at rings.

You start making money, you get great insurance, you buy a house and car to match. They should really warn you about that first job out of college. It's a siren call. But instead of ship wrecking and it all being over, you get caught in a never-ending whirlpool that you can't escape from.

Twenty-three years later, I'm in middle management, making six figures and spending most of my fifty hour workweeks sitting in meetings where the person up front is literally reading the nine bullet points that are on the slide. Why do we have to fucking sit through this? Can't you just send us the slides?

But no. This is my job. I sit in meetings. I watch people read power point slides, then I go back to my office and answer emails.

This particular day, it was a Thursday. I remember that because I hate Thursdays. Everybody else got excited about the end of day on Thursday because it was just one more day until the weekend. But they had amnesia because I knew what the weekend was really about. It was mowing the grass, running errands, doing dishes, working on the budget, and dreading going back on Monday.

So I get home on Thursday, and I see it as soon as I park get out of the car.

There's a pile of dog shit in my yard.

When you're a homeowner who has been in the nice neighborhood for fifteen years and at the beginning of Spring your neighbor, who you don't really know but seems nice enough, sticks a for sale sign in the yard, you know it could be trouble. We live on a third of an acre, which is a nice size. Big enough where you have a buffer to the other houses, but small enough

where it doesn't take half a day to mow the grass.

The one thing I don't love about the setup is how close my driveway is to my neighbor's on the left. The left if you're looking at the house from the road.

It's too close. I end up having to wave at my neighbor far too often because we make eye contact because we're too close. And it's always a bit awkward about where I should stop mowing the grass. I want to just do half and be done, but then I feel like an ass leaving half of this skinny strip of grass high while my side is low so I usually end up just cutting the whole damn thing. I also have a pretty strong belief that my neighbor always waits until I cut my yard (and therefore the strip of grass between our driveways) before he cuts his just so he doesn't have to cut that strip. Ruth thinks I'm crazy, but I've actually tested this. Twice I waited a week past when my lawn obviously needed mowing before I finally gave in and did it. Both times, that fucker mowed his grass the next day.

Anyway, it's May. The for sale sign has been down for over a month and Ted and his wife Janie have moved in. Now it's not about who cuts the middle strip of grass (Ted actually did it already which is nice). Now it's about their fucking little Maltese (they named that poor dog Button) that keeps shitting on our side of the strip of grass. It's clear where their property ends and mine begins. There's that little valley there where the rain runs off, and the shit is clearly on my side of the strip. Not to mention, the whole strip of grass is only a couple of yards wide so it's basically shared space.

Ted doesn't care though. This was the third time I found shit there since they had moved in just a week before. The first time, it was on their side of the grass, so, ok, whatever. It's technically their yard. But the last two times. It's clearly been on my side.

I went into the house, into the mud room, and pulled out the milk carton we use to stuff the plastic bags from Walmart into so we can use them later. I must have sighed or muttered to myself because Ruth called out from the other room. She said “Hi” and that she was finishing something up but would start dinner soon.

I didn’t respond and just went back out with the plastic bag in my hand. I tucked my tie inside my shirt as I walked towards the spot. I turned the bag inside out on my hand and grabbed the turds. They were still warm.

I looked up at their house as I was standing and pulling the bag right side out. Ted was standing in their big bay window, his shirt was off and he had a beer in his hand.

I swear, the man must not own any shirts. Probably because he liked to make sure everyone could see all eight of his abs. So he stood there, watching me clean his giant German shepherd’s shit out of the grass. And that mother fucker.

He smiled.

Then he waved.

#

It’s the timing on all of this stuff. I think that’s what’s so weird about all of this. I had picked up Ted’s dog’s shit those couple times before. It had pissed me off, but I got over it.

It was the fact that the day after he waved at me I overheard Carl and Matt talking at the office. I was in our break room making coffee. One of those simple chores that takes about thirty seconds. Drop in the filter, rip open a new packet of coffee, pour it in, then hit the button. We even have one of those coffee makers that has the water line running directly to it.

So, yeah, thirty seconds. I’ve timed it a couple times. And it doesn’t matter how many

signs we put up about how, if you take the last cup of coffee then take the thirty seconds and make a new pot for the next person. It doesn't matter. At least once a day I go into the break room and the coffee pot is empty. I've read the management books. You need to serve as the leader. Show people how you want them to act.

Which is why, that day I was still in the break room when Carl and Matt came in. If someone had just refilled the fucking pot of coffee, we wouldn't be sitting here having this conversation. I wouldn't have heard Carl and Matt discussing the article that Carl had found and then forwarded to Matt.

"That's crazy man," Carl said. "I still can't believe you can do that."

"No it's true man," Matt responded. "It's scary as shit though."

I looked up.

"What are y'all talking about?" I asked.

"It's this crazy article Matt sent me," Carl said. "It's about how if you don't have good security on your router, anyone can hack in and start accessing everything on you network."

"Like, everything," Matt added. "Your email, your browser history, your Netflix account. They can track everything you do online, which means if you log into your bank account, they have access to that now too."

"Who's doing this?" I asked.

They shrugged.

"Hackers I guess," Carl said. "This was about one guy in particular, but he had a code name or something to remain anonymous."

Matt snickered.

“Probably some fat son of a bitch that can’t get a date and likes spying on his hot neighbor.”

“What was the name of the article?” I asked.

“Why?” Carl asked. “Need to do some hacking?”

Maybe.

“Ha, right,” I responded. “Since if I could hack into a router and take over computer systems I’d be stuck managing you two asshats.”

They laughed.

“The title was something about hackers and routers and privacy,” Matt said.

“Google it, I’m sure you can find it,” Carl added.

Matt chucked his straw he used to stir his coffee and copious amount of creamer into the garbage. Both of the men left.

I hit the final button on the coffee maker, grabbed Matt’s straw off the top of the garbage and dropped it into the recycle bin, then stepped out into the hallway.

The giant Beakman Insurance Group stood out in gold against the wall the beige wall. I walked down the hallway, waving and nodding to anybody that made eye contact with me.

I manage twelve people in my division and they are all on my floor. It doesn’t take much for someone to get offended and start telling everyone else what an asshole you are. I always try to be nice and polite to everyone under me. It makes my life easy in the long run.

I made it back down the hallway to my office. It was a corner office. Big windows. It was nice to be out of the cubicles and out of the tiny windowless offices. It only took fifteen years.

I dropped into my chair and sighed. I pulled up my calendar, hoping to see a canceled

meeting, but no luck. I checked the clock. I had about five minutes until the weekly managers meeting. This is the one where all of the department heads got together to report on their wins, losses, and what they needed feedback on. It lasted most of the afternoon every week and was a complete waste of time.

You learn pretty quickly in these meetings that Rob Segar — he's the guy that runs the Indianapolis branch of Beakman — says he wants honest feedback and critiques along with brainstorming ideas. But it's not the case.

The first Tuesday after I got my promotion I was in on this meeting. I was excited. New job. New responsibility. A dozen people reporting to me. This was before I understand that if you have twelve people with soul crushing jobs that work for you, they will, in turn, crush your soul.

But that first day, Rob had given this rousing, motivational speech.

“You ten are my team. You are my top guys. This branch would fall apart without you,” he had said. “And I think you all are brilliant. There's no reason we couldn't come up with the next big idea in our industry. Something that would shake it at it's foundation.”

Then he opened a brainstorming session. Everything went quiet. I couldn't believe it! Here was this opportunity to pass around ideas. We could make a difference in our branch. Maybe if our ideas took off we were in for another promotion or maybe even getting our own branch.

I raised my hand.

Rob chuckled.

“No need to raise hands Phil, just toss them out.”

I nodded, cleared my throat.

“It was just a thought I had while I was down in the bull pen. Something I wished could have been implemented for us.”

Sasha — the only woman in the room — shot me a look. I realized now she was trying to warn me, but I didn’t know her well enough then to pick up on that.

“There’s a lot of stress down there and pretty high turnover. It might save us some money if we invested a bit in some culture training and feedback forums. Make them feel heard and that they can give us input.

“That’s not really what we’re going for here,” Rob said.

“Well I just thought, if we could make their lives a bit easier maybe—”

“Phil, look, I get that you just got in here, but helping out the bull pen isn’t exactly revolutionary. When I’m asking for new ideas, I’m not asking for bullshit, touchy feely nonsense. Let’s try a little harder, ok?”

I’m sure my face was beet red. I realized why nobody was talking. They had probably each tried to speak up before and gotten shot down exactly the same.

These meetings had become a lot of reporting on how great everything was going in each department, a bit of reporting on things that were next, and that was it. The rest of the time was Rob pontificating about the office, how we need to be better, and trying out whatever bullshit tactic he’d read in whatever bullshit book he’d picked up in the latest airport bookstore.

When it didn’t work, it would always turn into some kind of bitch session about us and the company.

I sighed again. Five minutes until the meeting started. I already had my cup of coffee, so that means I had four minutes left at my desk.

I pulled open a browser on my PC and waited for Google News to load. Then I typed in “hacker breaks into router bank account netflix email” and hit return.

The first item to popup was a Huffington Post article titled “Is your computer safe? This hacker says he can steal your money and see your browser history.”

I clicked on the article and sipped my coffee as I scanned through. The hacker’s name was CRYP70N1C — definitely a fat twenty-six year old that masturbated five times a day to anime porn — and the interviewer basically just transcribed whatever he said. I was pretty skeptical. Who knew if any of this was true.

Then I got to the meat of the article. I set down my coffee and read word-for-word how the interviewer had reached out because *she* had been hacked by this cretin. He had emailed her a Word Doc with her bank account numbers, email password, and how much of her credit card debt was from shoe purchases.

I went to stand up — it was time to head to the meeting — but froze at one of the last lines.

“It’s pretty easy,” CRYP70N1C said through his voice changer software. “Anyone with a bit of computer savvy could figure it out.”

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That night I made my first mistake. I’d figure out how to clean it up later. I learned a lot about this eventually. But that first night I didn’t know what the hell I was doing.

I’ve gone over and over this moment in my mind. I want to say that I was just curious about the article I had read. I was curious if I could really figure out something as technical as what CRYP70N1C described.

When I'm honest with myself though, I knew what I was doing. I mean, I didn't know the end of the road I was on. Or how far down that road I would find myself. But it wasn't just about me figuring out if I could pull it off. If I could actually hack into a router.

I wanted to see if I could hack into *his* router. I didn't really have any clear ideas of what I would do once I was in there. I honestly figured I would not actually be able to do it. Maybe it would be funny if I was able to and shut down their internet or something. Maybe put a virus in his computer or something. That was it. Just something to get back at him a bit.

That night Ruth and I were on the coach watching TV like we always did before bed. Well, we were both on our phones while the TV was on and we were half paying attention to another episode of *The Office* that we had seen a dozen times already. You know when you've seen a show so much that even if you aren't watching it, your subconscious knows the show so well that you automatically laugh at the funny parts?

I was Googling around about how to hack into routers. This was the first mistake. I was on my phone, logged in as me, leaving a digital trail behind me. I tried to go back and delete everything later, but you know how it is. There's no way to actually delete anything for good. Everything you've ever done on any internet enable device has been tracked and stored somewhere. The only thing you can really control is if they can track it all the way back to you.

But I didn't know anything about this then. I was just Googling around. Again, I thought it would be a lark if I could actually do it, but figured that the article I read was probably mostly bullshit.

Once Ruth fell asleep, I decided I needed to switch to my desktop. The stuff I was finding was getting pretty technical and trying to follow it on the tiny screen was annoying.

I rustled Ruth awake, walked her upstairs, then sent her into our bedroom with a promise that I would be in shortly. I walked down the hallway, cracked the doors of Milly and Mark's rooms to check on them, then went into my office.

I softly closed the door and turned on the soft lamp that sat on my desk. I paused for a second then went back and pushed the button on the doorknob to lock the door.

I'm sure Ruth knows that when I'm up late on my computer I'm jacking off to porn, but we never talk about it. She doesn't ask, and I don't tell.

Ten minutes later I had cleared the fog and decided to get back to why I came in here in the first place. I started to close down the incognito window I had opened, then stopped. I usually only used this so my pornhub searches and finds wouldn't be sitting in the history folder. While it would be mildly embarrassing for Ruth to catch me looking at porn. It would be horrifying for her to know the actual porn I was looking at. But then thought it might be good to do the same when I'm trying to figure out how to hack into my neighbor's router.

I know now that, while this hides what you do from your computer, your internet provider is still tracking where you go and what you do, but it was my first step in covering my tracks.

That's what's so amazing about this stuff the deeper I got into it. There's always a way you can be tracked and there's always a way that you can hide your tracks.

I started pulling up the searches and articles that I had found on the couch and began diving in. Pretty quickly though I realized that I wasn't going to learn how to do this on CNET or Wired or some random blog.

Breaking into your neighbor's router was technically a crime. At the time though I

thought of it like stealing cable used to be or even stealing your neighbor's wifi. Yeah, you shouldn't do it, but it's not like they are going to lock you up for it.

However, you aren't going to find articles on CNET or Wired or some random blog on how exactly to steal your neighbor's cable and wifi. Because it's illegal.

So you have to go down into the basement of the internet. The part that's shrouded in darkness and full of people that aren't actually people. The only thing I can think of here is *The Matrix* and how Mr. Anderson was actually Neo. Once you are digging into the depths of Reddit and 4Chan and anonymous areas of the internet, you start finding really interesting stuff really easily.

I found several posts detailing in step-by-step instructions exactly how to login to a wifi hotspot even if it had a password on it.

The first thing I had to do was figure out which wifi network was theirs. This was pretty easy since they had just moved in next door, so their network was the newest one added. Also, it was called NETGEAR which means they were just using the default settings.

According to the instructions, this was a good sign.

From there, I followed the directions on how to download free software online that will allow you to do what's called a "brute force" attack on the router where it just tries lots of different passwords — hundreds a second — until one finally works.

What was weird about this moment is I wasn't even nervous about it. There wasn't a lot of excitement or anything. I still figured it wouldn't actually work. I had only been at it about a half hour. There was no way it would actually let me in.

But just a few seconds later, the computer dinged that it had figured out the password.

That dumb asshole had set his wifi password to “pa\$\$word” and left the router’s administrator password as the default “password.”

CRYP70N1C was right. Anyone can do this. I thought it would take me a few weeks of tinkering to figure this out, if I even could then. Instead, it was a half hour and from what I could tell, I now had access to everything internet related going on in Ted’s house.

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