

Dan Wiencek

**The
Final Report
of the Smell
Committee
and Other Stories**



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and Other Stories

By Dan Wiencek

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The Final Report of the Smell Committee

TO: The Board of Directors

FROM: Mr. A.V. Jascowitz
Mr. B. Sykes
Mrs. E. Drake-Avilas
Mr. T.S. Holm
Ms. T. Burke

BACKGROUND

On Tuesday, September 8, 2012, Joseph Schultz reported a strong, musky odor near his workstation in the payroll department of the Dubuque office. Schultz claimed that he had begun to notice the smell days earlier and had assumed it would dissipate of its own accord. Instead, it had grown increasingly palpable and had begun to significantly impact his ability to work. Facility Services investigated and noted a “faint” odor, which they traced to some old food in the nearby kitchenette. That weekend, the refrigerator and all fixtures were cleaned vigorously, and the issue seemed to be resolved.

The following Monday, September 14, Schultz reported that not only had the smell not been eliminated, it had actually grown in strength; he claimed he could now smell it in a radius of 20 feet from his workspace — a distance that encompassed nearly a quarter of the building’s third floor — and that its character had changed from a simple food-related odor to a fouler, more pungent stench altogether, one that Schultz described in a garrulous stream of emails as a “stink of death” or “what hatred must smell like.” Several of Schultz’s coworkers began reporting the smell on their own, attributing it variously to paint, cleaning solvent, new carpeting or other prosaic sources. In response to the volume of complaints lodged with Facility Services, a professional steam-cleaning service was contracted to clean every square foot of the payroll department. This operation was performed on September 22, again to no avail, and the payroll staff reported to work the following day to find the smell had returned undiminished.

With no options apparently remaining, Facility Services had little solace to offer Schultz or his colleagues, who resorted to their own methods to attempt to restore comfort to their workspace. Payroll Director Dot Freidburger organized a floor-wide effort to improve the work environment, with employees bringing in, at their own expense, a variety of air fresheners, air purifiers, potpourri sachets and other similar items. These invariably proved ineffective: potpourri turned dry and brittle within a few days; a potted ficus plant took on a peculiar chalky texture before crumbling into dust; and chemical air fresheners either had no apparent effect at all or else made the odor worse. Freidburger and her colleagues abandoned their efforts, and no further attempt was made by the employees to combat the smell.

Several emails from this period subsequently reviewed by the Committee reveal instances of poor work performance, unusual behavior or cognitive difficulties whose

potential severity went unrecognized at the time. Payroll Specialist Amelia Beakman filed a quarterly Paid Time Off Usage Report that actually consisted of a thousand-word description of an erotic dream; she later claimed to have included the material through a simple cut-and-paste error and was not disciplined. Several employees were cited for failing to report to work, explaining later they had confused the day with Saturday or Sunday, though one in particular claimed, with no lack of embarrassment, that she had forgotten she was employed by the Company at all. Formerly outgoing men and women were observed to become quiet and withdrawn, and several emails sent to Human Resources took on an ominous cast. “I can’t sleep at night,” one employee wrote, “because all I think about is having to come back here and work in this smell.” Another wrote, “Do something. If you don’t, somebody will. This isn’t any kind of a threat. But you don’t understand how people are feeling here.”

Whether Joseph Schultz arrived at work on the morning of October 8 knowing it would be his last day both on earth and as a Company employee is impossible to say. He had evidently grown convinced that the smell emanated from a corpse buried in the floor beneath his desk, and that if he disinterred it and buried it properly the odor would finally be expunged. Through the service elevator he brought up to his workspace an axe, a chain saw, a crowbar and a small hydraulic jackhammer. He also had with him one hundred yards of rope and several rolls of heavy tape. Immediately he began using these tools he was confronted by building security, whom he captured and took hostage with the threat of a 9mm pistol that he had also carried in with him. Five other people tried to intervene, and all were captured and quickly bound with rope and tape. Efforts to reason with Schultz proved futile, and he was regrettably shot and killed by a police sharpshooter. Before his death he had succeeded in ripping up more than 30 square feet of flooring; naturally no corpse (other than Schultz’s own) was found within, and the smell — though largely unnoticed in the midst of the crisis — remained undiminished.

Schultz had been undergoing numerous personal hardships in the last weeks of his life, including separation from his wife and son and an overwhelming sense of impending disaster that had taken a heavy toll on his relationships and commitments. That these circumstances were almost certainly the direct result of prolonged exposure to the smell was not immediately apparent; they did, however, provide the media with a convenient context in which to frame Schultz’s actions. Schultz’s breakdown was seen as a simple instance of a disgruntled man going over the edge, and while his colleagues spoke of the strange smell to numerous reporters and media correspondents, these references found little traction and quickly died away. Schultz’s family was paid an undisclosed settlement, and the third floor employees were temporarily relocated to offsite facilities. The affected section of the third floor of the Dubuque office was converted into storage rooms, grief counselors were called in, and it was in the hope of bringing the story of the smell to a final close that the Board first convened this Committee on October 26, 2012. As we know, of course, that was not to be the case.

INITIAL INVESTIGATION

The Committee’s work began on October 29, when the five members, accompanied by consultants from Airborne Laboratories, convened in the Dubuque office for the first time. The smell in the enclosed section of the third floor was immediately palpable, the Committee members variously describing it as “fetid,” “cloying,” “vile,” and “blistering”;

several of the Committee noted its peculiar tendency to change character, so that at one moment it seemed redolent of, for example, stagnant milk, before abruptly changing to resemble the odor of boiling sweat. The Airborne Laboratories personnel were more conservative in their appraisal, agreeing only that “there’s something there all right,” and taking numerous samples of both the air and the remaining carpet. The Committee agreed that the smell was detectable in an area encompassing approximately 300 square feet; tellingly, it had already seemed to penetrate beyond the area that had been cordoned off for storage following the Schultz incident a few weeks previously.

Following this site visit, and while Airborne Laboratories conducted its analysis, the Committee maintained close contact with the staff of the Dubuque office. By this time the offsite departments had been reinstated on the third floor and the smell had become a daily subject of conversation, with nearly every employee claiming to be in some way affected by it. Attempts to mask the smell through the burning of candles and incense were firmly quashed on the grounds that such activities violated the codes regulating fire in the workplace. Email records provided by Human Resources reveal a distinct pattern of insubordination, sagging morale, and inexplicable behavior emerging during the late fall within not only the Payroll group but in Benefits Administration and IT, groups that adjoined Payroll on either side. Three employees with spotless records were terminated for committing unprovoked acts of violence on their coworkers; others began to exhibit strange tics and compulsions, such as eating copier paper or hoarding coffee mugs from the various break rooms. Assistant systems analyst Richard Ogle grew convinced that a small, imp-like creature named “Freexis” had come to live inside his mouth and was “stealing his words” before he could speak them, while payroll specialist Nancy Lascar lost the ability to see the color brown. Overall, the Committee collected 53 individual complaints, warnings or pleas to take some kind of action on the employees’ behalf. With no data as to the smell’s nature, the Committee offered what assurances it could, confident that the Airborne Laboratories report would provide a clear way forward to addressing the crisis.

That report, when it was delivered on November 18, proved disappointing; Airborne Laboratories could not identify any extraordinary impurities within either the atmosphere or the flooring of the Dubuque office, and its written summary suggested only that the odor stemmed from some natural cause and that a thorough cleaning of the office’s HVAC system would prove sufficient to eliminate it. Despite the expense (as well as the Committee’s private misgivings regarding the efficacy of this approach), the procedure was authorized and scheduled to be carried out by Airborne Laboratories on December 2.

It hardly need be pointed out that the cleaning, while masking the smell for a few hours, proved ineffective; moreover, confirming a pattern the Committee had begun to observe, the odor seemed only to gain in intensity in the days following, as though mustering an olfactory counterassault. By mid-December, the complaints and expressions of alarm had returned to, and soon surpassed, their previous abundance, mitigated only by the uncommonly large number of employees who took time off in preparation for the Christmas holiday. More alarmingly, similar complaints began to filter in from select employees on the second floor. At this juncture, the Committee drafted a memo, which it presented to the Board and the division presidents on December 22. An excerpt follows:

Notwithstanding the difficulty encountered in trying to isolate and identify this odor, it is imperative that the Board recognize the threat it presents to the company's operational status, its shareholder value and its perception by the media and the public. Furthermore, the disruption caused by the smell may – indeed, almost certainly will – lead to further episodes of ill health, poor work performance and even violence, any of which would leave the company exposed to potentially ruinous legal action.

This memo was formally discussed by the Board on January 5, 2013, with Committee members Holm and Drake-Avilas called upon to deliver testimony in person. The Board determined at that time that, with an unexpectedly soft fourth fiscal quarter and two lawsuits pending against the Company alleging criminal negligence for the violent outburst of Joseph Schultz, the Company did not have the financial resources to close the Dubuque office and relocate the staff. The minutes of the meeting further record that several Board members were openly skeptical of the Committee's conclusions, accusing the members of being variously "alarmist" and "crackers." As an interim solution, the Board authorized the Committee to work again with Airborne Laboratories on a plan to eradicate the smell, and requested a follow-up report to be presented at the Board's next meeting in February.

Working closely with the members of the Committee, Airborne Laboratories formulated a proposal to attack the smell by means of ozone purification. This procedure entailed hermetically sealing the entire building and rendering the atmosphere temporarily unbreathable, and so was scheduled for Saturday, January 9. Committee members Jascowitz, Sykes and Holm were on hand to personally inspect the results. On touring the building, the atmosphere of which still reeked with ozone, the Committee members could not detect any trace of the smell and pronounced the cleaning procedure a tentative success. However, in contrast to what Airborne Laboratories now alleges in its countersuit against the Company, the Committee did not formally consider the contract fulfilled and insisted on a waiting period of one week to ensure that the odor had indeed been eliminated. The answer, of course, came far sooner than that.

The Dubuque staff reported to work the following Monday as usual, and, true to every Committee Member's fears, emails from distraught employees quickly demonstrated that the smell was returning – once again, even farther in its range and more crippling in its effects. In addition to the unwonted aggression previously observed, there came baffling neurological symptoms: synesthesia, the sudden loss of the sense of taste or touch, the inability to perceive the passage of time (several employees were observed staring at their computer monitors for hours, convinced later their minds had only wandered for a few seconds), and a peculiar form of aphasia that left employees mechanically opening and shutting their mouths without actually speaking. By Thursday of that week, the Committee was informed that many employees had simply ceased coming to work with no explanation. Of the employees who did remain, their productivity took a calamitous turn for the worse, and the affiliates that depended on their output quickly raised the alarm. With revenue targets for the quarter under serious threat, the Board scheduled an emergency meeting for Monday, January 18. At the Board's request, the Committee traveled to Dubuque to make a personal

inspection of the office, interview staff and provide the Board with the information it needed for its deliberations.

CONFRONTING THE SMELL

It was with a deep sense of dread and foreboding that the Committee met at the Dubuque office on the morning of Friday, January 15, equipped with several digital cameras and recorders, as well as professional-grade painters' masks and goggles. On entering the lobby, the Committee observed that the reception desk was unstaffed and that the main lights had not been turned on. A heavy, unsettling silence hung in the air, along with, it was quickly perceived, the smell. To a person, the Committee were taken aback to discover how powerfully the smell had rebounded from the last assault on it, and aghast at how its character had changed: whereas in June it had been fundamentally recognizable — that is, despite a baffling propensity to change character, it was nevertheless analogous to smells perceived in ordinary life such as sweat, vomit, ammonia or hog fat — at this time it had taken on an aspect altogether mysterious and repellant. It seemed to occupy the air like a solid mass, assaulting the nostrils and throat with a metallic abrasiveness. To say that it smelled “like” something else was no longer possible, so confused, contradictory and revolting were the sensations it invoked; it sapped the will, turned one's thoughts febrile and disjointed and left one the impression of having been invaded by something malevolent and fiercely determined. For a period of several seconds — but which, subsequent investigation has shown, actually lasted nearly an hour — the Committee was frozen, unable to move or react. Our stasis was broken by Committee member Burke, who struck herself repeatedly in the face with the butt of her camera before turning and fleeing out of the building. The remaining members quickly donned gas masks, which provided a small measure of relief. Freed from the smell's strange narcotic effect, the Committee decided that, notwithstanding the panic of Ms. Burke, it should fulfill its duties, and we proceeded out of the lobby and into the suite.

Before proceeding to the third floor, we went to the second to visit the Marketing, Advertising and Sales departments. There the devastation was not so far advanced. Though many staff had evidently refused (or been unable) to report to work, more than half of the employees were at their workstations attempting to perform their jobs. However, the strange symptoms that had been reported by Human Resources were in full evidence. Associate Marketing Director Claudia Shipton met the Committee stripped to the waist and covered in crude body paint she had evidently applied herself; she greeted us warmly if somewhat distractedly and seemed to have no awareness of anything amiss with her appearance. Two employees approached to inform us that a strange smell was making it difficult for them to work. When we assured them that we were aware of the problem — our goggles and masks evidently having gone unnoticed — one employee nodded, punched the other in the ribs and calmly strode away. Several staff members were observed staring at their computer monitors, out the window or simply into empty space; attempts to rouse them from these trances were ineffective. It was more than an 30 minutes after arriving on this scene that the Committee learned, through several staff members whose senses had not become completely impaired, that the employees on the third floor had begun, late the previous night, to barricade themselves from the other floors, blocking off the elevators and securing the stairwells

from intruders. At this point, the Committee members discovered that none of their mobile devices could reach a Wi-Fi or other wireless network. Unable to report our findings thus far, we nevertheless decided to continue our investigation, and set about finding our way to the third floor.

As we had been told, the stairwell doors had been shut fast. Trying the elevator as a last resort, we found it in perfect working order and proceeded immediately to the third floor. The doors opened to reveal a pile of tables, computer hardware and disassembled cubicle parts that had evidently been set aside for the building of a barricade, which was subsequently abandoned or forgotten. The elevator opened mere feet away from the area that had been cordoned off earlier that summer, and the smell was staggering in its effect. It seemed to soak into clothing like steam from a sauna and lay caustically on the skin, and the masks provided almost no protection. We turned away from the area and set out for the Payroll department.

On first glance, the third floor appeared to be abandoned. Cubicles had been partially torn down, dragged away and the pieces inexplicably dumped. As we began our circuit of the eerily quiet space, we continued to note signs of employees abandoning their jobs along with, it seemed, the customs and appurtenances of civilization. Computers were opened and hollowed of their internal components, the empty cases hung from the walls like trophies. In one corner, a mound of bagels had been erected on a desk, apparently as some form of offering. A window bore the word MOUTHBREATH written in what appeared to be correction fluid. Carpet was torn up and left in tatters; handbags and briefcases were strewn about, their contents abandoned and trampled underfoot. A 2012 calendar, recognized as having belonged to network analyst Peter Grossman, was found with all 365 days crossed out in red ink.

Having surveyed half of the third floor with no human contact, the Committee discussed the possibility that the employees had fled, or simply refused to come into the office. Nearly stupefied by the overpowering thrall of the smell, we continued in a fog of dull, bleary passivity, and rounded the northeast corner to complete the final leg of our survey.

The Committee there found itself confronted by the haggard, desperate forms of the remaining employees: nearly twenty in all, gathered in a loose group at the end of the aisle between two rows of cubicles. They stood stiff and unnatural, their bodies contorted as though anticipating blows that might come from any direction. At the sight of them the Committee froze; then the group began to shuffle towards us. Viewing the scene through thick goggles, the smell now having overwhelmed all remaining senses, we could only watch helplessly, like victims in a nightmare, as the group inched toward us, their feet bare, their faces set in fierce determination yet devoid of any apparent thought. Though they plainly saw us they seemed not to recognize us, despite several of the party being close friends with various members of the Committee. On and on they came, horribly silent but for the hiss of breath through their open mouths; we stood helplessly, rooted in place, with a mounting sensation of panic we were each of us powerless to act upon. Closer and closer still — we observed through the haze of our terror that the employees all bore signs of injury to their noses or nostrils: some appeared to have hacked at them with scissors or letter openers, while others blocked their nasal passages with tissues or scraps of food, or attempted to burn or scald them.

Only when the Committee was surrounded by mute, grasping forms did the spell of panic finally break, but by then there was nowhere to run. The group seized us with surprising strength, and then a man we recognized as Jim Katsolikos, Director of Sales (Western Division), who had evidently assumed a role of leadership, stepped forward. Thinking he was about to speak, we were surprised when his mouth opened with no sound emanating: he opened his jaws and clomped them shut in irregular intervals for several seconds. Then he reached out and tore the mask from each Committee member's face.

Now, with all protection gone, we experienced the smell in all its terrible grandeur. On the first unfiltered breath the cells of the nose and throat became swollen and unbearably sensitized, while the senses of sight, hearing and touch seemed to become hopelessly confused and entangled, as though a giant, noisome hand had closed over our heads. Dimly we were aware of screaming, vomiting and pleas for mercy, scarcely conscious that these came from we ourselves; every opening and pore of the body felt assailed by an unbearable foulness. We sensed ourselves dragged, our captors overpowering our struggles, around the corner where we had been walking, toward the storage room that had been built around Joseph Schultz's workstation earlier that summer. Our stunted eyes caught quick glimpses of men and women whose faces were twisted with savage purpose, at some moments appearing to be complete strangers; there might at one moment appear to be a mere handful, the next moment a multitude, their harsh breaths the only sound apart from our own cries and pleadings. Mr. Katsolikos unlocked the door to the storage room with a key worn around his neck, and we were roughly thrown inside into darkness, the door shut and locked behind us.

It is at this point that this report may no longer observe the conventions of a typical narrative. The surviving Committee members, interrogated closely after the fact by authorities (to say nothing of our own consciences), have no memory of what followed apart from random and diffuse impressions. Although the interior of the storage room lay in total darkness, the Committee found, after immeasurable time lying supine and helpless near the door, that it was possible to navigate the contours of the space by scent alone: we could actually smell rather than see stacks of banker's boxes lining the walls, distended and drooping as their cardboard structures disintegrated under the assault of the odor. Only a few dozen had evidently been placed before the smell dissuaded anyone from entering the space again. At the center of the room was Joseph Schultz's workspace, its furniture removed, the hole he had created in the floor covered by a large sheet of pressboard.

In that space, bereft of nearly all sensation, time and reason released their grip. It is impossible to say with certainty what actually happened and what is simply shared delusion — the distinction may well be irrelevant. At one point the Committee members crawled in an endless orbit around the hole in the floor, over brittle carpet that gave way under our fingers, breathing in high, keening rasps through our open mouths. The space above us might suddenly seem to be cavernously high, the stench that had come to define our very existence rising like an ancient tree into the unseen heights. Just as suddenly the walls would close in, the Committee members instinctually huddling together lest we be smothered. A Committee member pleaded for help, certain he was drowning; another imagined herself with perfect clarity back at her family home in Ohio, happily living out her later years surrounded by family and friends, and was later

found to have gnawed off her own thumb. Each elapsing second seemed to hover in the air, lingering with malevolent relish. Days rushed past in a shrieking blur. We starved, froze, tore desperately at each other, lay on the floor as helpless as rags, sweated as though being roasted alive. We hated and were terrified. Thousands of eyes seemed bent on us even as we felt ourselves as lonely and desolate as the last people on earth. All we knew was the smell.

Unfortunately, the audio recordings captured by Committee member Holm on his handheld digital recorder are marred by a persistent clanging noise that, though inaudible to the Committee on site, is loud enough to make them useless in reconstructing what happened. However, one section documenting the Committee's imprisonment in the storage facility has been salvaged after extensive filtering and digital cleanup; it is transcribed below.

JASCOWITZ: Where is everyone? Where's everybody gone?

SYKES: I can smell ...

JASCOWITZ: I can't find anything.

DRAKE-AVILAS: Mmm, lemonade. I'd love another glass. *[Giggling]* It makes my lips yummy-numby!

[Several seconds of muffled knocks and silence]

JASCOWITZ: Ssh! Be quiet! I think they're coming back for us. It's gone *[inaudible]*.

SYKES: No one was meant to smell this. I can smell — I can smell everything.

[Recording is switched off for unknown length of time, then switched back on.]

HOLM: Oh god. Keep it a secret. No one must ever know about this — no one must know.

DRAKE-AVILAS: Where does Nana keep the biscuits? I thought I saw ants in the kitchen, on the stairs leading up to the kitchen.

[Several minutes of silence and faint background noise. An unidentified COMMITTEE MEMBER sobs briefly, then falls silent.]

HOLM: *[Singing]* Would have been better for us both, had we never ...

DRAKE-AVILAS: It would kill Mother, absolutely strike her dead.

JASCOWITZ: Can you just reach out to me? If I can feel you I know we'll be all right.

[A clicking noise, possibly of a Committee member's jaws, is heard for several seconds.]

SYKES: I can smell the past. The dust of the pyramids. The last block going into place, the sweat and the hot breath in the sun. The waves on the Nile. Oh my god —

HOLM: *[Singing]* In this wide, wicked world, ever met ...

JASCOWITZ: Keep it maintained. There are 10 of them out there at least. *[Pause]* I — I want to go home. I don't want to breathe any more.

DRAKE-AVILAS: It's all right sweetheart, see, there's a chicken wing left for me.

JASCOWITZ: We mustn't. Doesn't anyone feel that? We mustn't go down there. It will all come apart if we do.

SYKES: CHRIST JESUS, I CAN SMELL EVERYTHING!

HOLM: *[Singing]* Oh I'm thinking tonight of my blue eyes ...

DRAKE-AVILAS: Sure they're boney, that's what makes them fun to eat! Do you have enough milk, sweetie?

HOLM: Does anyone smell anything? There's a funny smell here I can't place. Does anyone smell anything?

JASCOWITZ: I think if we go up to the third floor we'll get our answers. Who brought the targets? Are the *[inaudible]* where we left them?

SYKES: I can smell your heart ... I smell the cells of your body. Like tiny ant mounds, trillions, beyond counting, humming and vibrating with life. The only real life inside you. Atoms. Atoms inside atoms. I smell it. I smell it. Put your hand ... *[inaudible]* Yes. I smell it.

HOLM: Where the hell has everybody gone?

DRAKE-AVILAS: Good grief. Ants, all right. I thought so. Where does Nana keep the boric acid?

[Several minutes of thumping/knocking sounds, accompanied by muted gagging. Based on subsequent interviews with the survivors, authorities speculate that this is MR. HOLM strangling MR. SYKES to death.]

DRAKE-AVILAS: Auntie Jane makes the best barbecue sauce. *[Loudly sucks her fingertips]*

HOLM: The board is heavy, but it's not secure. Maybe we should *[inaudible]*.

[Approximately half a minute of silence]

JASCOWITZ: *[Sniffing loudly]* Anyone else smell that?

[Recording ends]

AFTERMATH

The events that followed the Committee's visit to the Dubuque facility are known all too well, and while there is little that this Report can add to the official record, some instances of inaccurate or hyperbolic reporting may at least be corrected.

The fire that consumed the Dubuque office on Friday night was not, as is popularly claimed, ruled an arson. One of the investigators, speaking anonymously to newspapers, claimed that the destruction of the building was so rapid and so complete that only the use of a chemical accelerant could account for it. In fact, the official report on the incident notes that no known accelerant was detected in the arson team's tests, and thus the fire has been officially ruled an accident. Contrary to rumors posted on several web sites, no human remains — indeed, no identifiably organic material at all — were found in the ruins.

Although scurrilous sources in the media attempted to blame the fire on the Committee, police records show unambiguously that surviving Committee members Holm, Jascowitz and Drake-Avilas were found wandering, disheveled and completely incoherent, near John Deere Road on Route 52, more than six miles from the office building, shortly after the fire is believed to have started. Being unable to account for ourselves or even affirm our identities, the Committee members were taken into custody at the state-operated psychiatric facility for observation. A complete inventory of each Member's personal possessions was made, and no unusual smells or chemicals were noted on any item of clothing or equipment. Finally, it is untrue that the Committee, having witnessed firsthand the depredations of the Dubuque office, refused to cooperate with investigators. Medical records made available to the authorities confirm that the three Committee members required several weeks of hospitalization before our memories began to return and we could make some sense of what we experienced; we submitted to interviews with investigators as soon as cleared to do so by our attending psychiatrist.

It may be said, with justification, that the Committee failed in its task to identify and eradicate the smell and so shares a large portion of blame for the state in which the Company now finds itself. Having been named in nearly a dozen lawsuits, lost three quarters of its market value, become the target of local and federal investigation and seen the resignation or suicide of a dozen members of senior management, the Company stands at the brink of dissolution and ruin. Yet our labors, however they may be judged, were performed at a terrible price. Owing to their pending lawsuits, this Report will not address the claims of Ms. Burke or of the family of Mr. Sykes. Mrs. Drake-Avilas has, as was reported in the February 16 issue of the *Dubuque Telegraph Herald*, fled her home and family and at this writing remains missing. Mr. Holm has pleaded not guilty by reason of mental defect or disease to the murder of Mr. Sykes, and Mr. Jascowitz has already undergone one cosmetic procedure to repair the self-inflicted mutilation of his nose and nostrils.

As of this writing, over 3,000 people known to have had some contact with the smell (including Mrs. Drake-Avilas and nearly 100 employees from the Dubuque office) are missing or dead. Reports of a foul, ineradicable odor continue to emerge in an ever-widening radius from the Company's gutted headquarters, now covering some 60 square miles and spreading like a noxious, invisible wildfire. Every attempt to counter it, as the Committee predicted to authorities, results in the smell returning with even more force and severity. People are being daily struck mad or turned violently against one another, or else abandoning their homes and loved ones and fleeing for their lives. Emergency workers and National Guard troops brought in to help the ailing populace are leaving their posts and returning home, or else simply vanishing. Given the terrible strength of the menace that was unwittingly released in the Coney Acres office complex, we feel it may be fairly asked what a volunteer Committee of five mid-level managers could do to even understand such a force, let alone somehow blunt it or turn it back.

Thus this Report, though unfinished, must end. No expert who spoke to the Committee, no test or experiment conducted on its behalf, could give a satisfactory answer as to the smell's nature, origin or purpose; no Committee member could advise authorities as they strove, and continue to strive, to avert an unspeakable cataclysm.

In conclusion, the Committee quotes the final email sent by Joseph Schultz to Human Resources on the night of September 7, 2009:

It will spread. It will billow over hills and fields and they will blacken and crumble. It will seep into cracks and nest there foully, bringing the slow drip of ruin, the nightmare of corrupted breath. It will burrow into the wind and cling to the dust. It will smell.

It will smell everywhere.

Respectfully,

Andrew V. Jascowitz

On behalf of:

Brendon Sykes (dec.)
Ellen Drake-Avilas
Thomas Stanley Holm
Tracy Burke

The Next 30-Day Song Challenge

Post one song each day to your Facebook wall for 30 days.

1. A song you play solely to annoy your spouse
2. A song you would want played at your disbarment hearing
3. A song that makes you churlish
4. A song that fills you with a nameless dread
5. Your favorite sea-shanty or prison work song
6. A song that comes to mind when you hear the word "concupiscent"
7. Your favorite obscure song that you trot out to prove you were into a popular band way before anyone else
8. A song you used to have as your answering machine greeting back in the Eighties
9. A song that was forever ruined for you when you discovered your mother also liked it
10. Your favorite song about architecture
11. A song you would have wanted to hear in the last scene of *The Sopranos* other than "Don't Stop Believing"
12. A song you can no longer listen to after seeing its title tattooed on some douchebag's arm in a sports bar
13. Your favorite song by a band with three or more consecutive vowels in its name
14. Your favorite song combining Phrygian modality with lyrics about fucking
15. A bad song you were introduced to by someone who said, "it reminds me of you"
16. A song you would like to take back in a time machine and play to Vlad the Impaler
17. Your favorite song by a woman whom you suspect has some really hot piercings
18. A song played by your cousin in his shitty bar band, the one that still plays "Sex on Fire" in every goddamn set
19. A song you would use to corrupt a child
20. Your favorite song by an artist who used to be cool before she had kids
21. Your favorite song by an artist who used to be cool before he cut his hair
22. A song you would sing to stave off madness while sealed in a sensory deprivation tank

23. A song you would like to beat the shit out of someone to
24. Your favorite song by an artist you dislike not for their music, but for their profound moral failings
25. A song you would like to have the shit beaten out of you to
26. A song you would play to clear a house infested with spiders
27. A song that sounds orange to you
28. Your favorite song from a band you once pretended to like in an attempt to get laid
29. A song you hated in your youth but which you have now come to like, and which now serves as a painful reminder of how adulthood has robbed you of everything that once made you vital and interesting
30. A song you would like to freeze to death to

A Groupon Copywriter Issues His Ransom Demands

Save a Dozen Lives in Three Easy Steps Chicago

The word "kidnapping" actually comes from the court of pre-Revolutionary France, when marauding noblemen would don kid gloves and nab commoners right off the streets, scooping them into their carriages and force-feeding them croissants and heavy cream. As for the poor bastards lying here in the Groupon offices, they're probably thinking a croissant wouldn't be so bad right about now, that anything would be an improvement over being trussed up like a hog by an obviously disturbed person with a neckbeard, a sawed-off shotgun and a MacBook Air, a person who I want to assure you is quite willing to shoot the face clean off any or all of these hostages unless the following demands are met:

1. Like cigarettes in prison, the size of your yacht and those bead strings they hang over pool tables, money is a handy way to keep track of who's winning and losing in life's ongoing Darwinian struggle. It can also be used to buy accordion repair training, stuff an extremely expensive scarecrow or perhaps save the lives of a dozen quietly sobbing office workers, their hands slowly turning purple as the ropes binding their wrists cut off their circulation and placate the otherwise vengeful and jealous hemp gods. So go ahead and deliver one million dollars in used twenty, fifty and one hundred dollar bills, financing my new life on the lam and depriving a pica-stricken bank employee of an illicit snack.

2. Before the invention of the automobile, loose wheels careened freely through the streets, bowling over helpless pedestrians and making horses rear up in fright. Help to avert bouncing, circular chaos by providing a brand-new, fully fueled automobile with four securely fixed wheels, as well as a police scanner and dark tinted windows. Said auto should also have sufficient room to accommodate two bound and gagged abductees, who will be released only when I'm certain I'm not being followed by law enforcement, TV news crews or hostage fetishists.

3. In addition to providing a valuable way to rid the world of old tin cans, firearms can bring families together over a mutual loathing of clay pigeons or a shared passion for earmuffs and tinted safety glasses. They can also, when delivered to the foyer of the Groupon offices in sufficient quantities, aid in the escape of a copywriter who once had dreams of being the next Thomas Pynchon but who now has written so many absurd come-ons for restaurants, hair salons and health spas that he is all but incapable of expressing a thought without resorting to nonsensical metaphors or made-up history or some other labored exercise in smirking hipster bullshit. Do you know I keep a notebook under my pillow just in case I wake up at three in the morning with a new euphemism for tanning bed? Yeah. You do now. That's why you're going to deliver two revolvers with five hundred rounds of ammunition, a hundred 20-gauge shotgun shells, a ballistic vest and a gas mask. Also supply six fragmentation grenades, suitable for thwarting pursuing FBI agents, enticing shrapnel collectors or removing sugar glider infestations.

Bring the cash and weapons to the sixth floor of 600 W. Chicago Avenue and leave the vehicle parked outside, the engine running and the doors unlocked. No tricks, snipers, double-crosses, voodoo hexes or skunk eye. Follow these instructions and these twelve people will go on living, dutifully recycling oxygen for trees and robbing the funeral industry of sought-after revenue for many years to come.

In a Nutshell

Fed-up Groupon scribe demands money, escape vehicle and weapons, as well as renewed sense of dignity and purpose, in exchange for lives of twelve hostages

The Fine Print

Expires in two hours, at which point one hostage will be executed, followed by another hostage for each additional hour these demands are not met. Limit 1 per order. Valid only for option purchased.

We Apologize for the Error in Filling Your Order

Dear Valued Customer,

As the chairman and CEO of BuyAbsolutelyAnything.com, I wanted to take a moment to personally apologize to you for the extreme inconvenience that resulted from a mistake in fulfilling your recent order.

I have conducted an extensive internal investigation into this matter, and could find no satisfactory reason why our fulfillment system substituted your original order of a case of Nev-R-Die D-Cell Flashlight Batteries 12-Count (KI139809) with a Live African Bull Elephant (WL897189). I further understand that the animal arrived dead in its shipping crate, and that it had actually been dead for some time, evidently long before it was dispatched from our warehouse. This was traced to fraudulence on behalf of our supplier and you may rest assured that our relationship with this supplier has been terminated and a strongly worded letter of opprobrium sent.

Of course, we realize it takes more than a strong letter to correct a situation of this magnitude. It is one thing to say that a dead elephant was delivered to one's doorstep; it is quite another to have to deal with the consequences. I can only imagine the horror — I believe no other word will suffice — on opening the crate and being confronted with the carcass, a once-majestic beast surrounded in a blinding cloud of flies, its skin rippling with the movements of dozens of rats that had occupied the husk as though it were some ghastly putrefying mansion. I do not doubt that your children continue to have nightmares about it, nor that it raised a host of questions about life, death and the laws of nature that you had had no expectation of addressing for at least several more years. Furthermore, our customer service team "dropped the ball" in processing your return, and while the laws for transporting animal remains are admittedly obscure, that is no justification for our failing to retrieve the crate for eight days. I understand your homeowner's association levied numerous fines against you and our legal department is currently reviewing your claims in this manner.

I further want to assure you that the anti-Semitic graffiti on the interior of the crate was in no way the doing of BuyAbsolutelyAnything.com and that we addressed this with the aforementioned supplier. Finally, please accept my apologies regarding the behavior of the delivery driver. We use this courier service on millions of deliveries a year and they are normally the picture of reliability. That your driver was intoxicated and repeatedly challenged your family to "step up and see if you can take" him is so far beyond the realm of what we typically experience from this firm that I am at a loss to explain it. Sometimes misfortunes come together in a "perfect storm" and that seems to be what happened in your case.

With that said, what is BuyAbsolutelyAnything.com going to do to rectify this situation? Here are the remedies I have personally instructed our Customer Service team to provide:

You want Nev-R-Die D-Cell Flashlight Batteries 12-Count (KI139809)? You've got them! I am shipping you a complimentary order of batteries this month, and the month after that, and the month after that. In fact, I will ship you an order of Nev-R-Die D-Cell Flashlight Batteries 12-Count (KI139809) free of charge every month for the rest of your life, and every month for the rest of your children's lives and of their children's lives as well. Your family will enter the 22nd century never having known the inconvenience of being without a fully charged flashlight, by which time a superior alternative to alkaline batteries should be well established.

Are you familiar with the German concept of *schadenfreude*? This word describes the pleasure one naturally feels at the misfortune of an enemy, and while we at BuyAbsolutelyAnything.com like to consider ourselves your friends, we understand why you might hold a different view. That's why I've ordered a company-wide program of mortification and abasement, effective beginning today. I will spare you the details — the document I distributed this week runs to three single-spaced pages — but let me give you the 10,000-foot view.

First of all, you have likely already seen the apology blimp I dispatched to your residence; it will hover there for a full thirty days, cycling a series of "we're sorry" messages on its illuminated sign. Every BuyAbsolutelyAnything.com employee was required to memorize and recite a litany of self-abuse that leaves each man and woman in no doubt about the severity of this transgression and his or her role in it. The Customer Service representative in charge of your case was terminated and her work space and computer ritually destroyed. The temperature in the BuyAbsolutelyAnything.com offices cycles without warning between sweltering and freezing; chairs and desks have been replaced with cheaper, ergonomically punishing office furniture reclaimed from a former Soviet military base; and employees are subject to random emotional and psychological assaults from a squad of hooded ex-CIA operatives given license to roam the building at will. Our IT department will be sending you a link to a private web portal featuring live feeds from our internal security cameras, allowing you to watch these efforts in action. This program will continue for a year and a day, at which point the executive team will evaluate its efficacy. During that time, rest easy knowing that the emotional trauma you suffered, that sense that the entire universe was arrayed against you, is now being visited a hundredfold on the architects of your misfortune.

Lastly, I may or may not have ordered further compensation that I am legally barred from discussing or even acknowledging. For instance, it is not impossible that the attractive courier sent to hand-deliver this letter is in fact a prostitute who is performing an expert, wildly creative act of fellatio upon you even as you read these words. It is even possible, though not legally provable, that she was instructed so far as to time your climax to occur just as you are reading the following paragraph:

Remember, at BuyAbsolutelyAnything.com, we do anything it takes to keep you satisfied. Absolutely Anything™.

Sincerely,

Marie Levy-Marston
CEO, BuyAbsolutelyAnything.com

Suit for Hire

In these uncertain economic times, your firm needs every kind of advantage on its side — not merely a strong balance sheet and efficient supply chain management, but a potent psychological edge. You need someone whose very presence communicates strength and competence to employees, partners and competitors alike. You need someone like me.

I am a suit.

I will sit at a conference table or at an elegant luncheon, in my suit, quietly radiating calm, authority and steely reserve. Leaning back in my chair at the appropriate angle, my fingers curled under my chin, I will take in everything said around me, nodding or simply fixing the speaker with a respectful and attentive gaze. At meetings, I will take notes on a legal pad tucked into a rich leather portfolio, using a Waterman pen with my initials engraved on the barrel. My handwriting is bold and angular, stylish while still preserving legibility, and you will notice how decisively I underline my major headings.

At no point will I pull out a Blackberry and begin typing on it — I do not own one, and my Louis Vuitton briefcase contains no laptop. (I am available with an optional laptop-bearing assistant; please speak to me for details.) Instead you will find a region-appropriate copy of *Crain's*; my Kindle; several neat file folders containing documents of obscure but impressive purpose; a pair of Prada men's sunglasses in a black leather case; a Netflix envelope, sealed and ready for mailing (*Ratatouille*, I explain with a smile; my daughter loves anything Pixar, and we ought to just buy the movie for all the times she's seen it but we don't like to use the TV as a babysitter); and my portfolio and pen, should I not be working with them.

I may, in a lighter moment that illustrates my humanity and approachability, show you a photo of my wife and aforementioned young daughter on my iPhone. Their names are Marisol and Kendall, respectively. I will humbly thank you when you tell me how beautiful they both are and then make a self-deprecating remark about my daughter inheriting her looks from her mother. We will both know I am lying; I am a gorgeous man, with captivating hazel eyes, unblemished skin and a jaw like the prow of a yacht.

I will politely deflect all other inquiries into my background and history. As far as you are concerned, I am a man from nowhere, a blank slate, an abstraction made flesh. (I am available with a full background, including university associations and professional organizations, for a modest upgrade charge.)

My suit itself? Contemporary and elegant, with a cool slate-grey hue, stylish lines that accentuate my physique (I work out rigorously and have a resting pulse rate of 45) and a subtle texture to the weave that you may well find yourself admiring during our many conferences, in moments when I happen not to be speaking. My silk tie is custom-

made and tied in a flawless, bullet-hard Shelby knot; other knot styles up to and including a full Windsor can be accommodated on request.

As far as my handshake is concerned, I have a grip like a tiger shark's jaws and can split walnuts between my fingers — did I not assure you that I work out? In addition to my full regimen of cardio, weights and resistance training, I also study Jeet Kune Do, the fighting system devised by the late Bruce Lee. This training allows me to precisely attenuate my handshake to communicate fellowship, encouragement or menace as appropriate to the situation. Without even speaking I can assure the lowliest hourly employee that I am firmly on his or her side; let a supplier know that he is in for toughest negotiation of his life; or so frighten an opposing counsel that his balls shrivel between his sweating thighs like a puppy cowering before a rolled newspaper.

As we work more closely together over the days and weeks, you come to appreciate the awesome intellectual resources I can command, along with my willingness to put them completely at your disposal. Soon I will begin finishing your sentences for you, and then speaking your thoughts before you have a chance to utter them. Days rush by in a blur as achievements you had previously dismissed as impossible suddenly appear tantalizingly close. You notice I never appear nervous and rarely blink. Dimly, you begin to understand that I am capable of doing, and actually may have done, terrible things. You will be grateful I am on your side.

My fingernails are immaculate, my hair perfectly in place. My wristwatch is rated to a depth of 400 fathoms as well as the vacuum of space. My shoes glisten like the hood of a black Ferrari. And I can be yours for a surprisingly modest fee. After all, what price is too high to surpass your ambitions, redraw the competitive landscape and leave your opponents broken in the dust? Contact me today for a quote.

(References available upon request.)

Tasting Notes of the Fall Meeting of the Northwest Illinois Scotch Whisky Society

Glen Brae 9 Year-Old

A peaty, smoky, slightly caramel nose gives way to discordant tones of apple, clove, cedar, and introspection. While some of the members present were delighted by its lightness and busy frivolity, your Secretary found it a disquieting dram, apt to give one thoughts of licking an exposed chair in a bus station, or happening upon a nude self-portrait one had no memory of ever taking.

Redpinnock 15 Year Diabolic Reserve

This notorious Speyside malt rarely makes its way overseas, and the Society was truly privileged to be able to sample it this summer. Does this whisky — distilled in casks lined with human skulls, tended to perfection by a master distiller who is rumored to be over 200 years old and completely mad — live up to its reputation? And how! A nose of peat, gravel, rainwater and bone scarcely prepares you for an explosive palette of oak, cherry, blood and iron, leveling off with a strong note of human fear. I don't mind revealing that this whisky had an extraordinary effect on those in attendance: Mr. Rossini found himself reliving a harrowing childhood incident involving his Boy Scout troop, while Ms. Kreisler began to spontaneously recite what the members eventually identified as the Anglo-Saxon poem "The Dream of the Rood," a work she claims to have neither read nor heard of before.

Drumnadrochit Single-Cask 12 Year-Old

Despite some tantalizing rumors from our brother chapter across the pond, this is not a whisky at all, but an expression of untempered seawater larded with plant detritus and industrial refuse and allowed to mature, if that is the word, in a "cask" formerly used in the recycling of diesel oil. Further examination determined that the label was printed on an ordinary desktop printer, and that the signature it bore gave a clue to its true provenance. We salute the members of our Edinburgh chapter for another hearty jest at our expense. Such members, being devoid of ordinary human feeling, will no doubt delight to hear that Mr. Evans became violently ill after sampling this libation and was later found to have ingested a nearly invisible plastic filament that became entangled in his lower intestine. We wish Mr. Evans a speedy recovery and hope he is discharged from the hospital in time for next season's tasting. We wish our Edinburgh brothers and sisters slow, lingering deaths.

Weesleekit Cask Strength (No age statement)

This unassumingly named, and now exceedingly rare, Eastern Highland malt packs quite a "wallop" — as the whisky world learned to its horror last spring, when a stray spark in the bottling plant set off an explosion that demolished more than half of the distillery and claimed dozens of lives. It will be the better part of a decade before the

distillery is rebuilt and once again bottling; until that day, savor every drop of this pale, bold, exceedingly powerful dram. A nose of smoke, butane and lots of alcohol sets the stage for a taste that makes up for its complete lack of subtlety with a memorable attack across the palate. As this whisky numbs the tongue within seconds and renders all but the hardiest connoisseurs insensate with drunkenness, it made an ideal conclusion for the evening, which soon gave way to an exuberant revelry rarely to be found at our gatherings. Those photos of the event suitable for public viewing may be found posted to the Society's website.

Hannoch 18 year-old; Glen Skye Masters Choice 14-year Reserve; Bogmannon Sherry Oak 10 year-old; Windex cleaning solvent (no age statement); Diet Rite Cola (canned September 2013); Dasani bottled water (expires February 2014)

Empty bottles of the above libations were discovered in the morning following the members' enjoyment of the Weesleekit Cask Strength; however, as no member can recall consuming them, a report on their merits will have to wait for a future tasting.

My Day, Had I Been a Character in a Kung Fu Movie

9:03

Arrived at office. Changed shoes, stopped at coffee machine and chatted with copywriter about her sons, one of whom is returning to live with her.

9:07

Entered office of Ran Bao-tu, Senior Creative Director and kung-fu master of unmatched skill, nobility and judgment, for morning conference only to find room in shambles and Master Ran lying sprawled on floor, severely beaten and on the brink of death. Cradled master's head on my knees, imploring: "Who did this?". Marshaling last ounce of strength, master weakly named Bai Tiao-man, leader of rival kung fu school Cobra Whisper, as his assailant. Master then croaked final breath, dying.

9:08

Swore revenge in the name of my ancestors on Cobra Whisper and its contemptible, craven master, Bai Tiao-man.

9:09

Began catching up on email.

9:19

Sent Outlook meeting request challenging Bai Tiao-man to combat to the death at 5:00 pm. Request was promptly accepted.

9:30

Met with members of Media, Production and PR teams to coordinate efforts on new brand rollout scheduled for next month. Received numerous condolences and expressions of sympathy on death of Master Ran.

10:18

On way to water fountain, chanced upon my counterpart in Marketing at Cobra Whisper, who disgraced Master Ran's good name with vile falsehoods and insults. Confrontation quickly escalated into combat. Fight ranged throughout Accounting and Human Resources, ending in front of vice president's office, where I finally bested my

opponent with rapid combination of Crane Plucks Eggs from Nest and Swift Tiger Pounce.

10:22

Stood out in lobby alone, silently mourning Master Ran, a single stoic tear streaming down cheek.

10:30

Met with Associate Vice President to discuss upcoming product launches. Before adjourning meeting, AVP warned me that my skills were not sufficient to defeat rival kung fu master in battle. Referred me to Chief Creative Officer, rumored keeper of Sword of Hands, the deadliest of all kung fu styles.

11:10

Sent Outlook meeting request for appointment with CCO at only time available: 4:45. No reply forthcoming; received an email from secretary saying that CCO was in meetings all day and 4:45 appointment could not be guaranteed.

11:30

Impromptu memorial service for Master Ran in break room. Bai Tiao-man, accompanied by several direct reports, brazenly attended service, laughing derisively and promising to swiftly bring death to me and to our school. Melee promptly broke out. In rash fit of anger, rushed Bai Tiao-man intending to strike him down. Rival master quickly parried my enraged and wild kicks and blows. Though a fiend with neither honor nor courage, he nevertheless easily knocked me to the ground, laughed and confirmed our meeting for 5:00 p.m.

12:15

Lunch with members of Public Relations and Media Development. Discussed strategies for facing Bai Tiao-man and split large platter of nachos.

1:20

Met with members of Marketing, IT and Web to discuss ongoing rollout of new CMS. General agreement that initial schedule was too aggressive and so several milestone deadlines were revised. Unexpected comic relief arose when Fang Nu-rong, Associate Product Manager and office nebbish, attempted to put away several wooden folding chairs and quickly found himself entangled in them, crashing and clattering about the room to much suppressed laughter and rolled eyes.

1:45

Worked at desk on drafts for several upcoming marketing pieces. Thoughts invariably went back to earlier years, when I chose to pledge my loyalty to Ran Bao-tu over mother's objections. Remembered leaving home for last time, watching through window of bus as mother wept to see me go, father standing behind her, gruff and implacable, his emotion visible only in the sorrowful cast of his jaw.

3:20

Googled "Sword of Hands." Found links to several demonstration videos on YouTube but was blocked from viewing them by company firewall. Also surreptitiously followed several BuzzFeed links and checked fantasy baseball team standings.

3:39

Spoke by telephone to CCO's secretary. Was assured I was "pencilled in" for 4:45 conference.

3:41

Delegation of several direct reports visited me in office to ask me not to fight Bai Tiao-man. Though a worthy pupil of Ran Bao-tu and a winner of several regional awards for excellence in advertising copywriting, I was assured my kung fu was no match for that of Bai Tiao-man, and that I could not hope to master the Sword of Hands in time to defeat him. Calmly assured my colleagues that if my only remaining service to Ran Bao-tu was to die in the defense of his honor, I would consider such a death eminently worthwhile.

3:56

Team designer and student of kung fu Ma Xia-hui came to office to flatly inform me she could not allow me to face Bai Tiao-man and bring even greater ruin and disgrace to our school. To my astonishment, she presented the Crane at Eventide stance, a clear invitation to combat. At first I offered no defense, refusing to raise a hand in anger at a fellow pupil and colleague of several years' standing. It became clear that though Ma Xia-hui fought reluctantly, she was nevertheless in deadly earnest, striking swiftly and with great power. After twice enduring blows strong enough to knock me to the ground, as well as the destruction of a new iMac and several items of office furniture, I rose and counterattacked with a combination of Drunken Beggar and Tiger's Shadow on the Leaves. With the fight with Bai Tiao-man heavy in my thoughts, I resolved to bring the duel to a swift conclusion and felled Xia-hui with Executioner's Hood, tempered to leave her unconscious but alive.

4:15

Called into impromptu meeting to discuss revisions to a campaign slated to start several weeks hence. Even with client's repeated objections that our approach was "too sophisticated — we're not selling BMWs here," my thoughts strayed to my imminent confrontation with Bai Tiao-man. Though I knew I would bring honor to the duel, I could find no way in which I might prevail against Bai or restore our school's shattered reputation. Teammates appeared reluctant to look me in the eye, and client admitted she hadn't read most of the draft copy I had supplied her, saying it simply hadn't "felt right."

4:26

Received request for meeting tomorrow regarding upcoming healthcare campaign. Responded with "Accept Tentatively."

4:31

Returned to cubicle and began preparing status report for all ongoing projects, to assist my colleagues following my inevitable death at the hands of Bai Tiao-man. Ma Xia-hui, recovered from our battle, appeared and promptly fell to her knees, begging my forgiveness. I assured her she was not at fault and hoped that, as the leader of our school following my demise, she would continue to uphold the integrity and values of Master Ran. Choking back tears, she hoarsely thanked me for the honor of fighting and creating award-winning direct-mail and point-of-sale advertising at my side. My own emotions nearly overwhelming me, I replied that the honor had been mine, and turned back to my screen, lest my tears betray me.

4:45

Entered team shrine for solitary meditation prior to fighting Bai Tiao-man. Lit incense cones in tribute to my ancestors and to Ran Bao-tu, asking all those who watched over me for the strength to fight with honor and courage. A shadow darkened the altar; it was the team secretary, informing me that the Chief Creative Officer, Wu Xuan-ke, would see me. I looked at my iPhone and saw that it was 4:53.

4:54

With no time to spare and fear getting the best of me, I pleaded with Venerable Master Wu to teach me anything he could of the Sword of Hands, surely my only hope of escaping death at the hands of Bai Tiao-man. He smiled. "Master Bai's weakness is not in his arm or his fist, but in his thoughts. Your late master, the honorable Ran Bao-tu, has already given you all the skills you need to defeat Bai Tiao-man and the blackguard arts of Cobra Whisper." When I related my earlier disgrace at his hands, he raised a finger. I fell silent. "He who cannot recall the lesson when it is needed most is a poor student. And according to your annual performance reviews, you are an excellent student indeed." A soft chime emanated from his MacBook Pro on the desk in front of

him. He folded his arms and looked kindly upon me. “And now I believe you have a meeting to attend.”

5:00

Arrived at the Executive Board Room to find Bai Tiao-man waiting for me. He was alone. He expressed frank surprise that I would have the courage to face him in the end. Like all of Bai’s utterances, it only further revealed him as a man to whom honor and respect were alien. The time for words had passed and I did not dignify his craven taunt. I assumed Crane at Eventide. He laughed and took a further opportunity to slander our school’s good name and to promise that it would die with me this afternoon. He went so far as to take no defensive stance at all, simply waiting for the first blow which, as the challenger, it was my duty to strike.

Enraged at the panoply of insults I had endured at his hands, I lashed out with Crane Catching Pebbles, and was easily turned aside; I responded with Spider at Compass Points, and he struck me a blow that sent me sprawling across the hard oak conference table. He laughed, still having assumed no posture of defense. I rose and we circled, a sneer playing across his thin lips. There was no hesitancy in his movements, no telltale wavering of concentration; he was like a solid wall, impervious to my arts. Determined to break his mocking demeanor, I struck with Firefly Dagger and landed a stinging blow to his sternum. His anger flared and he howled and came at me with arms like pistons, brushing aside my defenses and striking me hard in the chest. Again, I lost my footing, and my head struck the floor and rang with the blow.

I rose, my feet unsteady beneath me. Bai now stood in the Venom Brood stance, his fingers bent like fangs of oak ready to strike me down. My attack was clumsy and obvious. He struck my side and my throat, then haughtily kicked my weakened legs out from under me and I fell yet again.

Fear overtook me as I lay on the blue and gray carpeting, and I struggled to remember some words of my master, anything that would bestow the clarity I needed to prevail. Bai circled near me, fully alert and ready for me to engage him again. I hauled myself to my hands and knees. I saw blood ooze from my mouth onto the carpet. My wounds throbbed with a pain that rippled throughout my body. In an instant the scene around me dissolved and I was in Master Ran’s office, in precisely this posture, having just failed a combat trial in one of my annual performance reviews. He had knocked me to the ground again and again, and this time ordered me to remain on my knees.

“Do not get up,” he said, “until you know why you get up — until you can engage the opponent with thoughtfulness and purpose. Let the enemy come on like the black storm, his heart knowing only rancor and destruction. It is a fool who fights the rain storm. Fight not on the enemy’s terms, but on your own. Face your enemy with honor where he is dishonorable, courage where he is cowardly, mercy where he is cruel. Where he rushes headlong, looking only for the quick path to victory, you must see the blow that is yet to be struck. Look not to the lightning strike, but to the dark clouds that are its portent.”

In an instant the vision had passed and I was back in the conference room, bleeding and stiff with pain. I had not fully understood the lesson that day. But now, facing my own black storm of an enemy, I knew what I must do.

I rose to my feet but assumed no stance. I looked at Bai Tiao-man and for the first time I pitied him — pitied his shrunken heart and his coldness, his pleasure in the weakness and failure of others. I saw how his own lost honor haunted him and drove him to destroy the good and noble wherever he met them. Bai unleashed another taunt, but his words had lost their force. I raised one hand in a parrying stance, a posture one would adopt in facing a novice. In fury he lunged and I stepped beyond his reach. Again he lunged, and again, each time coming within a hair's breadth. He saw cowardice, for that was what he looked for; and I saw the simple crudity of his attacks, their single-minded dullness. He struck out with great power at that which most easily presented itself. I knew then I could defeat him, and my pity for him grew.

I stepped within his reach and parried his attacks with the Bending Reed form — a form useless for counterattack, but my enemy's frustration mounted, as I had known it would. His blows grew wilder, and I could now read them in his face before he threw them: now was the subtle flicker of eye and mouth that betrayed the opponent at war with himself. I struck with Fist of Hummingbird and he staggered. There was fear in his eyes now as the specter of defeat entered his mind for the first time, fed on itself and grew larger. Now would he be at his most dangerous — and his most vulnerable. I closed on him with the Hundred Eels Fists, giving him no room to counter, and his will broke. He gave ground and I advanced, diverting his desperate blows and choosing my attacks for maximum effect on my opponent's mind and body. He cursed me helplessly, unable to see how he himself had given me the key to his defeat. He was now mine to finish. I struck with Hungry Oak and sent him to the floor.

“Why continue?” I asked, with what I sincerely hoped was a note of kindness in my voice. “Has there not been enough death today?”

I watched the struggle of emotions play across his face, his fear and rage and pride combating for dominance. I had little doubt which would be the victor, but honor demanded I offer him a final choice.

“No,” he spat at me between heaving breaths. “There is not quite yet enough death today, little pupil.” He lurched to his feet and came at me one last time.

He was still fast, still powerful, but his will had already surrendered. I was ready with Executioner's Hood, and I felled him.

5:18

Returned to my desk to find Ma Xia-hui waiting for me. Her demeanor was dignified but I read the joy in her eyes. We embraced without embarrassment. She asked if Bai Tiao-man still lived.

I laughed. “Our school still lives. Our honor still lives. Whether Bai Tiao-man still lives is for him to decide.”

5:19

Changed response to tomorrow's meeting to "Accepted." Shut down computer and left for the day.