



The Levity Bureau

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Dave stared at the food on his plate then at Jenny then back to the food. Was this what things had come to?

The journey to work that morning had been normal. The weather was horrendous as normal. The passengers on the streetcar were all doing normal things on their normal devices. The space on the other side of Dave’s desk, when he arrived at work, was not empty. There was someone sitting there. Dave stared. Who was this clown?

‘Hey Bozo, you lost?’, said Dave.

Bozo looked up. His pale face widened into a grin. He reached over the table, offering a handshake. ‘Howdy partner. Nice to meet ya. Put it there.’

Dave tentatively stretched out his hand and jerked it back as an electric current jolted through his arm.

Bozo laughed and theatrically wiped a tear from his eye. ‘Just kidding, old pal. The name’s Zippy. First day on the job and I’m buzzing. Ha.’

‘What did you say to him, then?’, asked Jenny.

‘I could hardly speak, my arm was hurting so much. Bastard.’

Dave picked up his plate and shuffled through to the kitchen. A lack of appetite was one thing, offending Jenny was something altogether different, so he put off discarding the Slop for now and placed it on the counter in a holding pattern.

Four years in the job. When he joined The Levity Bureau at Central College, everything was brand new. Sparkling. The floors, the screens, the look in his colleagues’ eyes. The brief was simple enough. The data showed that Client Engagement, in order to meet nationwide targets, must increase by at least 2.3 percent. The area lacking, and which appeared to require human input, was the kind of humour used in teaching.

As a late-night TV comedy writer with only moderate and sporadic success, the stability of the position appealed to Dave. A regular income in tough times appealed to Jenny.

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‘Don’t worry about the metrics,’ they said. ‘Don’t think about it. Don’t think. Your job is to find ways of making the lectures funnier. That’s all.’

How could that be all? ‘Look,’ Dave’s boss said (he was always asking people to look at things that weren’t there). ‘The key to this will be getting to know the subjects, so we can find the right kind of humour to fit. A lid for every pot, troops!’

Dave thought the lid analogy was idiotic but didn’t say so. He smiled and nodded and diligently went about his work, all the time picturing the credits appearing in his account at the end of the month.

Dave and his team in Quip Heuristics set to work learning all they could about whatever subject The Brass demanded. One week, it was Mechanical Engineering (engineers do not appreciate absurdist jokes, they quickly found out, but they do love to hear jokes about other types of engineers), then Introduction to Music Production (not everyone loves knob jokes), then a whole month spent learning about Asteroid Mining which, given the fatality rates thus far, called for some gallows humour.

On it went. On it dragged. The monitor wall in the Cavern beneath College HQ blinked awake each morning to stream the lessons. Here they could see the individual impact of their Notes in real time. Engagement, measured through heartbeat, breathing patterns, brainwaves, and eye-direction, could show the impact of a gag, an anecdote, or a knowing expression.

Another team, Comedic Performance, ran workshops for lecturers in being physically funny. Rumour had it they had trained one pathology lecturer to be such a convincing mime that he had run off and joined the circus. What the circus wanted in the way of pathology lectures remained unclear.

‘Are you going to eat that?’, said Jenny eyeing the plate on the counter. ‘Um...’ said Dave and he meant it.

‘What are you going to do about Bozo?’

‘I don’t know. We’re all paid to be funny but... coming to work dressed like that? Is he mocking us? Is that why he’s there, to make fun of the whole department? I wouldn’t put it past The Brass. They do get strange ideas.’

‘Your review is at the end of the week.’

Dave grimaced. The threat of being cancelled was real. But he had a plan.

‘Everyone’s review is at the end of the week. I’m not only thinking of holding on to my job. I’ve got my eye on the boss position. I’ve been working on something. Our Slop days are over, just you see.’

‘Your weak material?’ asked Jenny.

‘It’s getting stronger. Trust me.’

Friday came and the Notes had been passed up. A crowd gathered round the monitors to see the impact of their work. Blown up on the screen, they could see a lecturer standing in front of a collectively yawning auditorium. The subject was Infectious Diseases and she was sweating through a series of memes with diminishing returns. The Memes Team looked on in terror. One of them seemed close to tears.

The focus on the monitors was broken by a creaking sound from behind. The door to The Cavern swung open and one of The Brass came through. It slowly and deliberately clunked its way down the metal stairs to the shop floor, each clanging step echoing off the walls.

Review time. I am here to deliver judgement in person. I can already inform that we must cut 72 percent of the meme team after this performance.

A groan emanated from the Memers.

The lecturer on the screen, oblivious to the fate of the cavern dwellers, bumbled on. She was inexperienced but keen. Dave sensed his moment coming. Infectious Diseases weren't normally funny, but he had delivered an ace for this session. Wait till The Brass sees this beauty.

As she landed on the last slide of her lecture, it contained an image of two baboons, one of which was helping administer drugs to the other. Exactly three students, in an auditorium of 154, let out snorts. Snorts of what, it was unclear. But significantly, they registered on the metric monitor as laughs. A mild success.

'Hehe' said the lecturer, relief in her voice. Dave leaned forward. Now was his moment. This was what he had been working on.

The lecturer smiled. 'Thanks, folks. I'm here all weak.'

Silence.

Fuck!

Everyone turned and looked at Dave. Had he said 'fuck' out loud? 'Come on, that's gold! I'm here all weak. Infectious diseases. Come on!'

A rainbow afro appeared in Dave's peripheral vision. Zippy. Did he have skin in this game already?

'It's a bad audience', pleaded Dave. But The Brass pronounced:

They are not an audience. They are clients.

All eyes turned back to the monitor. The lecturer switched off the projector and started making her way off the stage. Suddenly, she tripped over her own feet and flew in the air, papers scattering everywhere, and landed with a bump.

It wasn't an accident. She had been trained.

The auditorium erupted in laughter.

The metric monitor lit up.

Zippy punched the air and honked a horn in triumph.

Congratulations Zippy! You have a bright future here.

The Brass swivelled its head in Dave's direction.

David! It has been a pleasure working with you and we wish you luck in your future endeavours. Goodbye.

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