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You must be at least this tall ☥ to read *MISManaged*.

This book is dedicated
to the memory of
the first writers in my life

My Parents

whose
persistent bad example
left me stranded
on
the garden path
of
Literature

Before it all happened, I worked at Ultimate Plastics. You may not have heard of Ultimate Plastics, U.P. or UP as we Uppians used to call it. But we were very much a part of your life. We made Mordecai, the monkey that came in Toasty-T's cereal boxes. But that was just our most visible presence. We made knobs. In fact, we were known for knobs. Sometimes we would say that and pronounce the silent starting consonants. Kuh-nown for kuh-nobs. We made drawer knobs and doorknobs and the little buttons on your food processor and your DVD player. If it had knobs, chances were good we knobbed it.

My own part at UP was in MIS, the Management Information Systems Department. My name was Bernard Buller. My name, as I write, is Bernard Buller. But my name, like so many things in this narrative, would change before it all ended. I held the position of Senior Software Engineer. This exalted title only meant that I was a programmer, but being a programmer at UP was nothing to sneer at. I had played a big part in the software revolution at UP, the one that put state-of-the-art information-gathering and -processing solutions on every desk in our fifteen-story corporate headquarters. I was part of the programming team that created Ultimate Plastics Application Systems Software, the acronym of which is pronounced "you pass," just in case you get the wrong idea. UPASS was a feature-rich, easy to use, multi-tasking, modeless, voice-activated, holographic desktop, comprising thirty-five or forty applications, most of which actually worked.

When I say applications, I don't mean in the limited sense. A/P, A/R, G/L. UPASS took care of those, of course. But we looked beyond that for cutting-edge technologies to

create enterprise solutions to problems that didn't even exist yet. Take the physical plant itself, the UP headquarters. Every light, outlet, appliance, door, window and piece of plumbing in the building communicated with our main utility server using Holistic Office Building Network Online Base Software or Hobnobs. Hobnobs kept the temperature at the proper level, provided air circulation and flushed the toilets. It turned on the water for you to wash your hands and the electric dryer to dry them. You may have experienced toilets that flush themselves, but those are just done with local sensors. Hobnobs fed into UPASS and UPASS was a computer. It not only flushed the toilet, it remembered that it flushed the toilet. It had a full history of every toilet, urinal, faucet, hand-dryer, door and window in the building. And it had full security features, so if it was ever necessary to require a password to flush the toilet, Hobnobs could do the job.

UPASS also took care of the elevators, and it was a bug in EMU, or Elevator Module of UPASS, that I was working on that day, the fateful Monday morning before all the other fateful days that followed. EMU included synthesized voices that announced the elevators. The up voice was female and the down voice was male. The programmers dubbed the voices Shemu and Hemu and had them make announcements like, "An up elevator will arrive in thirty seconds" or "A down elevator will arrive in two minutes" or "This floor is currently not being serviced by elevators." When we demoed the system, our CEO pointed out that all the elevators at UP are UP elevators. He had a point. More importantly, he was the CEO. So we modified the announcements to say an UP up elevator or an UP down elevator, which was correct, but sometimes confusing to visitors.

The EMU bug made all the elevators stop, as if it was an elevator strike. Nothing could get them to move except rebooting the EMU server. All the programmers looked into it at one time or another, but the problem eluded us. It only happened a few times a week, so it wasn't a huge deal. We

had a backup system called stairs. Though sometimes Hob-nobs would lock the doors to the stairwells at inappropriate moments.

Then I developed a theory. I'd noticed that sometimes Hemu's announcement started in the middle of Shemu's announcement, and when that happened, Shemu's voice changed subtly and sounded sort of frosty. Nobody programmed that in, so we didn't know how Shemu knew she was interrupted. When Shemu interrupted Hemu, he just talked louder. It seemed likely to me that Shemu's umbrage might be the cause of the elevator problem. So we had only to teach Hemu some manners by coding in a loop to delay one announcement if another was in progress.

My boss, Harry Hackensack, had asked me about my proposed solution to the elevator problem. This was the original Harry Hackensack, not any of the ones who followed, one of which was to be me. Or two or more, depending on how you look at it. Harry asked me for a programming time estimate. I made up the usual numbers and printed them out and took them to his office. He wasn't there. I sat down at his desk to scribble a note on my printout, but before I had found a pen, Roscoe Tootle walked in.

Roscoe Tootle was UP's CEO, a man universally admired and respected not only at UP, but in the business world generally. He exuded leadership. He was manly, confident, handsome, sartorially perfect. The grey streaks that ran through his hair added wisdom but not age to his appearance. He would have been the ultimate CEO, but he had one imperfection–his voice. When he opened his mouth, the effect was ruined. All the sartorial splendor, the perfect physique, the chiseled features, the grey-streaked hair–it all faded to insignificance beside the preposterousness of that squeaky, scrapey voice. He sounded like a sick chicken who's been sucking a helium cannister.

"Hackensack," he screeched. "You're fired!" He gave me a sharp look, then added, "Clear out now."

"But Roscoe," I said hesitantly, "you can't fire me."

"I can fire anybody I goddamn well please," he yelled, throstling into the upper octaves. "After all, I am Roscoe goddamn Tootle, the CEO of UP. I've decided to fire you and appoint..." He stopped and pulled a card out of his pocket. After referring to the card, he went on, "I'm going to appoint Bernard Buller as your successor."

"But Roscoe, I *am* Bernard Buller."

"No you're not. He's going to be you, but you're not going to be him."

He turned on his heels and left me in confusion. It seemed he had just promoted me to head of the department, and he had also just fired me. Or had he? And he had fired me first and promoted me second. What could it mean?

While I was puzzling on the matter, I heard the crackle of static that always precedes an announcement over the company intercom. A moment later, Roscoe's scrivery voice ended my confusion when he announced:

> Attention all Uppians. Harry Hackensack is no longer with UP as of this instant. I, Roscoe Tootle, have appointed Bernard Buller to assume the post of MIS Manager. However, we are contractually obligated to keep Harry Hackensack at UP, so Bernard Buller will henceforward be officially known as Harry Hackensack. Unofficially, it doesn't matter what you call him. But officially he is Harry Hackensack.

That pretty much settled it. I leaned back in Harry Hackensack's chair and looked around his office that was now my office. It was bigger and more private and prestigious than my cubicle. I liked it. "Cool," I said to myself. I liked the way Harry had positioned his desk at an angle in the corner, leaving space behind it that was completely useless. It also left him sitting with his back to the door. I felt the position of the desk was a statement by Harry, saying

that he had an office so big he could waste space. I'm not sure what having his back to the door signified, but I knew it signified something and added to Harry's stature as a manager. And now to my stature as a manager. "Cool," I said again, and this time I said it out loud.

I liked it, but I didn't know if I liked being Harry Hackensack. After all, I had always been Bernard Buller. Not that I was so crazy about the name Bernard. I had frequently fantasized about having a snappy nickname. I had even gone so far as to venture to a couple of people that they might refer to me as Bullet. I wanted to have someone in meeting say, "We'll give that problem to the Bullet. He'll take care of it." But that never happened. And now I was Harry Hackensack, which just doesn't have the zing of something like Bullet.

Someone tapped at my door, and I looked around and saw Chip.

"Say..." He pointed a finger at me, as if to be sure I knew the meaningless comment was addressed to me.

Chip Matters was an Applications Programmer, according to his job description. He was a sensitive soul of seventeen, a boy with a heart of gold and a mind attuned to all the intricacies of a telephone exchange, and these two disparate qualities got him into big trouble. You see, nothing distressed him more than cruelty to animals, and when he read that NASA kept a colony of pigs that they planned to use in experimental rockets, he decided to get back at them in the only way he knew how: he hacked their computer. He assumed he could find some digital switch that would free the pigs. As it turned out, the whole pig thing had been one of those web myths. But Chip didn't know that, and he ranged through the NASA databases, searching desperately for the pig release switch, and as he searched, the FBI followed. As a condition of his ten-year probation, UP was required to severely restrict his access to telephone lines to the outside world. We called him an Applications Programmer, but his business knowledge doesn't extend much fur-

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ther than ordering pizza, and that only for a small group.

"Come on in, Chip."

"Wow. So it's true." He looked around the office, gauging the veracity of it. "This is really great. I never felt like Harry liked me. The old Harry. I'm glad I'm working for you now." He stopped and looked puzzled. "If you're Harry, does that mean that you don't like me any more?"

"No, Chip. I'm not really Harry, I'm just officially Harry. You don't even have to call me Harry. In fact, I'd rather you didn't."

"I don't feel right calling you Bernard. Maybe I should just call you Boss."

I nodded. Not quite as forceful as Bullet, but I liked the ring of it. "Okay, Chip. Boss it is."

Having received that approbation, Chip felt comfortable enough to come all the way into the room. "I guess you'll get to keep Harry's computer. That's a Pontiff." The Pontiff was the successor to the Cardinal, the machine that I and the other programmers used. "Dual Placenta 680 processors. This sucker screams." Chip stroked the monitor on my desk appreciatively. "Hey, now that you're Harry, you'll need all his passwords. You want me to get them for you?"

"That's okay, Chip. I think it would be better if I got the network people to do that kind of thing."

"Sure, Boss."

He was disappointed, but a manager has to set standards.

Chip went on his way, and I continued getting used to my new milieu. Harry's office was a kind of mustard yellow. My cubicle had been in a room that was also a shade that you might call mustard yellow. But Harry's office was the shade of the expensive French mustard that the yuppies buy, and my cubicle was more the color of the little dab of mustard on the end of a squeeze bottle in a fast-food place. I liked my new mustard better.

I decided to call my wife Jeanie and tell her about my promotion. Jeanie was a lawyer with the firm Halcyon,

Hardcastle and Dumpster. Her job kept her very busy, and I knew I'd probably have to leave her a voice mail, but I got lucky and she answered.

"Jeanie, I just got made MIS Manager."

"What does that mean?" she asked in a tired voice.

"I manage the whole MIS Department."

There followed a moment of silence, as if someone important had died. "Bernard, I've heard of people rising to their level of incompetence, but I've never heard of anyone being promoted right through their level of incompetence. You can't be MIS Manager."

"Yes, I can," I answered.

Jeanie sighed. "Why couldn't you just stay a programmer?"

"I could have. I would have. But this just happened. You've always said I should have more ambition."

"I used to say that. Before I realized that you aren't really... Ambition doesn't suit you."

"Well, I'm MIS Manager whether it suits me or not. I would have thought you'd be happy for me."

"I'll be happy if it works out. Let's don't argue, okay? I'm not in the mood."

"Okay. But you need to know that if you call me here, you can't ask for me."

"What are you talking about?"

"You have to ask for Harry Hackensack."

"For God's sake, Bernard, what sort of drivel are you spouting now?"

"You remember Harry Hackensack. My boss. I've mentioned him to you before."

"Well what of it?"

"I'm him now. Officially. You have to ask for him to get me. Or actually, you're asking for me, but you have to use my official name."

"I don't get it. What is your official name?"

"Harry Hackensack."

"How can your name be the same as your boss's name?"

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"I am my boss."

"Bernard, are you feeling all right?" Jeanie asked. I wanted to tell her that I felt great, but I heard the sound of people coming into her office and rushed conversations, and then Jeanie said, "I have to go."

"Okay, but if you call me..." But she had already hung up.

I put down the phone and looked up to see that I had another visitor.

Unlike Chip, Muffie Masters knew business applications from top to bottom, but you could never tell her that, as the word "bottom" might have led her to believe you were thinking of hers. Besides being an excellent programmer, she's also very up-to-date on the statutes and cases involving sexual harassment, and she likes nothing better than to share that information with members of staff. And unfortunately, her bottom is quite shapely, to say nothing of her...top.

"Come on in, Muffie."

She passed through the portal. The outfit she had on was her usual one: jeans and boots and a scoop-neck top, the scoop delineating a boundary not unlike those on the edges of old maps. Here lies the end of the known world. Venture not beyond this point at peril of your life.

"So, you've moved up in the world, Bernard."

"I have."

"I wonder why."

"I wonder the same thing myself. But I think we can trust Roscoe to know what he's doing."

She scowled. "Of course. He certainly knew what he was doing when UP acquired a majority interest in International Lever."

She referred to an unfortunate incident in UP's history. "Everyone thought that the Lever levers were a good product," I said.

"I didn't," she replied drily. "But no one asked me. Good luck on the new job."

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"Thanks," I said as she disappeared.

Still unsure of how to proceed as a manager, I began to sort through the drawers of my new desk. I found that Harry had been very organized. Everything seemed properly labeled and put away. I decided to leave it all as it was for now, except for the items on top of the desk. I had to make a visible presence in my new office with my own desk accessories. Then I realized that there wasn't much point. Harry had a stapler and staple remover; so did I. Harry had a little thingee that held paper clips; so did I. Harry had a Mordecai the Monkey; so did I, but his was yellow and mine was green. I actually liked his better.

The only one of Harry's possessions that would have to go was the small, framed picture of the woman that I assumed was his wife. It was just a snapshot, and not a very good one. I leaned close to get a better look. She hadn't smiled for the picture, which had been taken on a beach with the blue ocean visible on her left. She wore a one-piece bathing suit and a man's white shirt. She used the shirt to try to hide the fact that she was overweight, but she had a pretty face. She looked a lot like my wife Jeanie, though only in the face. Jeanie was lean and mean. Actually, a few years earlier she'd been as hefty as the woman in the snapshot, but she'd gotten into exercise and joined a gym and taken up a lot of martial arts stuff that I found a little scary, but it took off the extra pounds.

As I examined the picture, another visitor intruded into the room. I knew immediately that it was Symon. He always gave the feeling of intrusion, even if he was going somewhere that he was welcome. Symon Symple was our Database Administrator. He handled our Hepplewhite II database with the skill and delicacy of a magician producing rabbits, but he liked to make trouble. Nothing delighted him more than a practical joke or a dirty one. With his broadly smiling, innocent face, he beamed at you like a Boy Scout, but he would make a double entendre out of the most single and pristine comment. Oddly enough, he was very popular

at UP. He was considered something of a card. He favored outlandish socks, which he never hesitated to show you. One day they would display something childish like Mickey Mouse, and the next day they would show dozens of copulating rabbits.

"Hello, Symon."

"Bernard. So you made it to the top, you calculating son of a bitch. You sure had everybody fooled." He gave me a goofy smile, and I sadly realized that as MIS Manager, Symon was now my problem.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"You know what I mean. We all just took you for another geek only interested in writing code. We didn't realize you had 'ambition.' Say, you want to see my socks?"

"Actually, Symon, I'm sort of busy."

"You're not busy. You're a manager. You used to be busy. Before you got ambition. Look." He put a foot on my desk and pulled up his pants leg. "I heard a voice telling me to wear these today. I didn't know why, but now I do."

The sock had a picture of a bomb exploding, one of those cartoon bombs that look like bowling balls with a fuse. The bomb on Symon's sock had just gone off, and the bowling ball was flying apart and there was a caption with the word "Boom."

"Very nice. I'm glad to know that it's a voice that picks out your socks. I always worried that you did it yourself."

"Are we still having staff today?" he asked, obtrusively leaving the foot on my desk, the bomb sock clearly visible.

"Staff?"

"Staff meeting. If you're going to manage, you have to learn the lingo. Our usual meeting is at ten on Mondays. Me, Muffie, Bob and Harry. Harry always had Chip come in to take notes on the agenda and all. To keep him out of trouble."

"Yes. Staff will proceed as usual."

"Good. I like a nice formal staff meeting. It's a great way to start off the week." He took his foot off my desk and

brushed his pants leg, as if it had gotten dusty. Then he left without saying goodbye.

I sat back in my comfortable manager's chair and wondered what Roscoe Tootle had wrought.