

Live Free or Die

It's happening more frequently. Co-workers dog-stepped away from their desks by Clyde and Boomer for a cyber-security infraction.

Angus has been silently keeping track from his cubicle in the corner. Angus notices everything.

“Hands off the keyboard and back away from your desk!” Boomer says to the frightened middle-aged lady. He's rotund and wearing a t-shirt that says “Fortnite - Level Expert”. Boomer enjoys his job.

Angus isn't chatty at work, he keeps his head down and gets the job done. What is this woman's name? Carol? Carol. That's right.

Carol looks completely shell-shocked, she's shaking and doesn't move immediately. Clyde reaches down and pulls her up from her seat.

“Grab your purse, Carol. You clicked on a phishing link. Don't piss yourself though. It was one of our tests. You're just fired, not going to jail” Clyde snarls. Clyde has a snake tattoo on his neck. Clyde also enjoys his job.

“But I... it looked so real. It was trying to order a mug with The Corp logo on it!” she protests, as the two security guards march her down the hall. It’s ludicrous to watch 500 lbs of combined meat removing 130lbs of clerical secretary.

Angus feels anger surging through him, but he doesn’t react. He keeps tapping at his keyboard. In a company that values young inexpensive workers, he’s an aberration. Probably the only 70-year-old in the building.

He worked for The Corp in the early days, when it was a single social media site. Homepage picked up where Facebook left off. It quickly stole users with a friendlier platform and less restrictive posting. Through lucrative monetizing strategies, and dubious funding sources, Homepage started to buy up all the other social sites and rework them. Facebook, Twitter, Snap-Chat, Linked-In, Tinder, P-Interest.... If you posted anything on just about any site, The Corp now owned your info. And they owned a lot. They purchased on-line stores like Amazon and Alibaba. Then they bought controlling interests in discount superstores, pharmacies, banks, innovative car manufacturers and insurance companies.

Angus started as an idealistic iGen (born after the Millennials) at Homepage in 2020 after graduating with his media arts degree. This was just when TV and radio revenues were starting to bleed as the whole world went on-line. Cord-cutting and mass migration to streaming services like Netflix drained viewership at an alarming rate, but there was lots of need for on-line content. Angus became expert at editing fast effective promos for shows and movies. The Corp’s business model called for young cheap workers, but he evaded the downsizing scythe by some combination of luck and skill. Incredibly he was past retirement age but he genuinely loved editing and didn’t want to sit in a retirement condo gossiping with other old folks all day.

A new girl wearing a vintage Rolling Stones t-shirt walks into the open cubicle farm with a human resources rep. She's escorted to Carol's old desk. Carol may be gone, but the content creation team still needs someone to program the new promos, ads, and click-bait lists into the pop-up algorithm.

Angus is distracted by another commotion in the graphics generating area. Clyde and Boomer are at it again, but this time the zip tie cuffs are out.

"No, I didn't mean to enter my password on that site, are you sure they breached the firewall? I can't go to jail! I have a family" the man sobs.

In 2070, Cybercrime is the new terrorism. Population monitoring and omni-present cameras have eradicated almost all conventional crime. The Corp requires employees to be cyber safe and administers random phishing tests. If you fail, you are fired like Carol. If you actually click on a malicious link and let a hostile into the server? Straight to jail.

Angus hears the man's protests from his desk which is hidden behind the photocopier. Because there are environmental restrictions on paper no one uses the photocopier, so it sits dusty and forgotten. Angus feels kinship with the obsolete machine.

He packs up his briefcase as most other employees are heading out for lunch. Being well hidden and leaving early are two of his survival strategies. He starts his work day at 5:00 am and leaves around 2:00 pm. The bigwigs are more likely to be cruising cubical land later in the afternoon.

“Hi! I’m Nancy!” the new girl’s round face peeks over his wall and startles Angus into dropping his wallet. “I came to check out the photocopier, because I’ve never seen one before in real life and I saw you here!”

Angus glares at her. Another part of his survival strategy is to talk to no one. No friends, no distractions.

“I’m the new scheduler! What do you do? I like your spot here! Quiet!”

“It was quiet. I cut promos.”

“Promos! Cooooool. I would totally love you to teach me some time! What do you work on? Have I seen your stuff? I love the view of the lake from the windows!!!”

Angus looks at this babbling intrusion with his best thousand-yard stare.

Rather than back away uncomfortably, like most co-workers do, Nancy alarms him even more by laughing.

“I can tell we are going to be friends! I love old rock n roll, I bet you know a few bands?” she points to his AC/DC t-shirt. Angus wears band shirts paired with black jeans every day. Makes dressing easy. He doesn’t answer her.

“I like you! I can see you are packing up, so I’ll let you get to it! If you are leaving now you must start at like what? The crack of dawn? I can’t wait to get to know you! I totally need a mentor! Bye! Nice afternoon!”

Angus watches Nancy flounce back to her desk and hopes he doesn’t have to talk to her again. Exiting the building he walks back to his condo and decides to take his antique Harley

Davidson for a ride. Little flaps of paper (paper?!) sit under the washer blades of the few gas-powered vehicles scattered amongst the hovercrafts and micro-vehicles. There's one on his motorcycle.

*A place without internet. A place without cell service. A right to privacy. Interested?
Come to our recruitment meeting tonight at the Googletown Library Museum. Back door. 9pm.
Bring this pamphlet, its your ticket in. Live Free or Die.*

Angus cruises aimlessly around the city for hours, drawing stares and few glares from those who think gas-powered anything should be banned. He decides to go to the meeting and rapping on the back door is let in as soon as he hands over his pamphlet.

Descending into the basement of the building, he enters a small room that looks like it used to serve as a daycare. Faded cartoon pictures are on the wall, and maybe 20 people sit in kid-sized chairs. A severe-looking woman talks about a resistance growing in New Hampshire. There is an encampment in The White Mountains, where the old state motto "Live Free or Die" is more than just a slogan. It's a call to action. (Though states and provinces don't go by their old names anymore. The Corp calls anywhere with internet service the Connected Colonies.) She hands out maps and advises anyone interested in joining to travel with CorpCoin gift cards, so they can't be tracked by on-line banking. Take off Fitbits, iWrists, disable your cell phones, and leave portable devices behind.

Angus considers joining as he drives home. He'd received a notice that AI's were going to be installed in every apartment in his building next month. They were going to monitor everything. Health data, fridge contents, probably even his damn bowel movements! How did it get to this? Gen X and The Millennials were the first generations to post every little thing about

their lives. What they ate, where they lived, what sports they liked, who all their friends were, what clubs they belonged to, what stores they preferred, birthdays, anniversaries, tragedies, big life events, even their Fitbit readings. EVERYTHING. Being a member of iGen, his parents had done the work for him. Every moment of his life since birth had been uploaded by his proud folks on Facebook which then became Homepage.

Early the next morning he's at his desk by 5:00am. He's too damn old to go looking for a secret society. Because of electricity saving measures, he has to swing his arms around his head to keep the lights on. They're motion sensitive.

“Good morning! I brought you a coffee!”

Angus just about jumps out of his skin. Besides the odd maintenance man, he NEVER sees anyone this early. Stopping his weird arm flailing he pops his eyes at Nancy standing in front of him with two Tim Horton's cups in her hands. Tim Horton's is one of few businesses The Corp didn't purchase. Buying a hot coffee first thing in the morning is an unbreakable tradition for those who live in the Connected Colony that used to be Canada. This experience can't be sold on-line.

“Here! Drink it before it gets cold! Are you doing morning aerobics?” Nancy asks.

Angus takes the coffee and doesn't answer. She pulls up a chair and starts yakking.

“I rented a condo not far from here, its so nice! I think I am going to work early hours like you, Manager approved! Hey, my favorite thing to do is curl up with my Kindle500 and read any novel I can upload about the past. Can you imagine a world without surveillance?”

“Hey! Old books, surveillance, don’t mention those subjects out loud! It may be early but...” Angus trails off and points to the cameras on the ceiling. “That kind of talk is not approved by The Corp.

Nancy nods wide-eyed and gives Angus a thumb up before she goes to her desk.

She repeats this routine every day for several weeks. She and Angus chat over a coffee and then begin their daily work chores. Angus starts to enjoy his mornings. He even tells Nancy a few stories of his own. He takes her for a ride one day after work and introduces her to the library museum. He eats lunch (at 10:00am) with her sometimes by the lake, away from the monitoring mics and he teaches her to never click a link and always double check websites. Angus has a friend.

He’s editing a new promo for a webinar series on how to welcome your individualized apartment Artificial Intelligence units when he hears Boomer and Clyde having a conversation almost in front of him. He’s not noticed because of the photocopier.

“The test’s going out soon bud, get ready to move. Can’t wait to see what losers get caught up in this ‘un. No jail or firing this go round. It’s load ‘em up on buses and take ‘em straight to the Nickel mines. All that Lithium for electrical car batteries. Time to clean up the mess.” Boomer says.

“Who’d want a free copy of some old book called The Handmaid’s Tale? Even if it is printed on actual paper? We might catch zero rats this time. Though it’s a real link with a genuine Corp address. We’re hunting for them subversive thinkers. It’s going to be fun.” Clyde says.

Angus feels a wave of panic and inches quietly away from his desk. When he is out of sight of the two security buffoons he walks quickly over to Nancy. She looks up at him with a smile.

“Hey! I just ordered one of those copies of Margaret Atwood’s novel! How awesome...”

Angus interrupts “Grab your bag, follow me. Now!”

Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Boomer and Clyde moving towards them.

He grabs Nancy’s arm and starts running with her. His old legs protest, but he promises himself a Percocet later. Boomer and Clyde break into a run after them. They are going to catch up in minutes. Clyde is talking into his iWrist. Probably ordering the doors blocked.

Angus pulls Nancy past the elevators and around the corner. There is a maintenance closet beside the bathrooms and he quickly pulls her into the small dark room.

“Where’d they go?” he hears Clyde say in the hall.

“Have you lost your mind?” Nancy whispers.

Angus shushes her and opens up a big metal door connected to a garbage chute. He points at it and gestures her in. He can hear the sound of kicking at the stall doors in the women’s washroom through the wall.

“They’ll check in here next! Go!”

Nancy hops in the chute and covers her mouth so she doesn’t scream as she starts sliding. Angus can’t lift his knees high enough to get in so he dives head first after her. Behind him he can hear the door of the closet opening and then closing. So far so good.

The ride is dark, smelly, and Angus feels static electricity snapping on his stomach as he rapidly descends the ramp. With a crash, they both land in a garbage-filled bin in the loading dock of The Corp Headquarters. Nancy is gasping beside him, but Angus can't talk or move for a minute. The impact knocked the breath out of him.

“Why am I knee deep in old lunches Angus? Why were those two ugly dudes chasing us?” Nancy asks.

“I told you about the phishing tests, but now they are trying to pinpoint subversive thinkers and remove them. The free book scam was a way to flush out undesirables. I never imagined The Corp would actually stoop to thought policing. Googletown isn't safe for you anymore.”

The two of them peer over the top of the bin to see if the coast is clear. It is so they drop to the ground. Angus pauses a moment until his knees get over the shock of landing.

“We can't go out to the front of the building because they will have guards everywhere now.” Angus says. “We have to get to where my Harley is. I have a plan.”

“If not the front, what's left? The lake?” Nancy says.

“I guess it has to be the lake. We can drop behind the break wall and swim along the edge until we get to my condo. It's actually not that far.”

“Umm, I'm a great swimmer, but Angus you're 70.”

“Wait till you see my butterfly stroke. I was unbeatable at your age.”

The two of them run to the edge of the concrete and slip down one of the emergency ladders without attracting any attention. The nearest door is meters away with the guard at the entrance looking into the building.

Pausing to strip down to their underwear, they tuck the extra clothing behind the ladder steps. Then they breast stroke close to the barrier to stay hidden from any eyes on shore. Angus is gasping with the cold but makes sure to keep his body moving. It takes about 20 minutes to swim to his condo. Shivering and exhausted, they pull themselves out at the boat docking area and walk nonchalantly towards the building. Luckily there's just one morning dogwalker around but she gives them a good stare. Angus and Nancy try to act like being soaked in their underwear is completely natural. They get to the back door and Angus opens it with a biometric hand scan. He thinks they have time before The Corp security discovers they made it off property. Maybe 15 minutes or more before anyone checks their home entrance logs. They might not even bother, why waste resources on employees you are trying to get rid of anyways?

Once in his apartment, Angus gives Nancy a Steppenwolf t-shirt, a cardigan, a pair of black jeans and some scissors to shorten the legs. He grabs Metallica, a sweater and more black jeans for himself.

“Quick cut those to make them fit. Sorry everything will be a bit big. Do you want a pair of my underwear?”

“Nooo, but thanks Angus. What are we doing?”

“I know of a place where they are creating a society without the internet. Without Big Brother always watching. It's a resistance growing in the-state-previously-known-as New

Hampshire. It's about a ten-hour drive from here, we can do it easily on my Harley. Now that you are marked by The Corp, your prospects aren't good."

"No internet?!? Is that like possible?"

"I'm sure there will be a lot of books there. On paper! Trust me, anything is better than shoveling contaminated dirt in a Nickel mine. That's where Clyde and Boomer were going to take you."

After dressing Angus grabs a bunch of CorpCoin gift cards he'd been squirreling away from under his mattress and the map from the severe lady at the recruitment meeting. Nancy wasn't going to win any fashion awards, but at least she was clothed. They quickly left the apartment and hopped double on the motorcycle in the parking lot.

"Angus before we go, why are you doing this? Why are you leaving everything you know to bring me to a safer place? You weren't in any danger."

"Because, you're my friend of course." With that Angus revved the big Harley and went looking for adventure... or whatever comes their way.