

BREAKFAST FOOD FOR THOUGHT

by Steve Barancik © 2006

True story.

It's 1985. I'm 24, two years out of college. It takes place in a grocery store. But first let me set it up.

I just spent four years in college, unable to muster an interest in anything. I got an Economics degree, because it only took seven classes to complete the major, and most of the teachers didn't require attendance. So why did I go to college? Not to have fun, because I wasn't very good at having fun. No, I went because my parents said a college degree would be good for me. 18 years old, 20, 24, and I'm doing things that are good for me. Oh boy, do I hate myself.

Got out of college, didn't have a job. I moved back in with my parents, but it wasn't like before college. My friends all had jobs, and my allowance wasn't going as far as it used to. Still, I had my mother's exercycle and my parents now had CNN. The hours just melted away.

My father decided it was time for me to get a job. I considered every job within a five minute radius of my parents' suburban Chicago home. I didn't see myself as a commuter. I didn't want to waste that kind of time.

So I got me a job in telemarketing. Five dollars an hour. Doesn't sound like much, but in today's dollars...that's nearly six. I'm selling Credit Card Protection in a room full of 16 year old stoned high school students, 60 year old alcoholics freshly fired from their former employ, and 80 year old social security paupers with delayed onset Alzheimer's. I'm the cream of the crop. I'm the lone chimpanzee in canine obedience school. You wanna keep your credit card safe from the elements? I'm your man.

I'm so good they make me a supervisor. Now I walk the phone room floor telling the 16 year olds and the 60 year olds how to be more like me. The 80 year olds, I just try to remind them they're not talking to their sister Gladys.

I make sure that when the poor prospects say, "No," my telemarketers don't take "No" for an answer. I make sure they ring their little bells in their tiny cubicles when they make a sale. When no one's making sales I ring the bell I've got hidden in my pocket, so my suffering subordinates will think other people are making sales and they've got to keep up. They say if everybody did one good deed, the world would be a better place. Are they kidding? If everybody did one good deed, it wouldn't make up for half the damage I'm doing here every single night. The only reason someone buys this unnecessary service is if we succeed in completely misrepresenting it.

But who cares?--I'm the boss! My slaves are selling so many suckers that they build me a branch office, and this borderline criminal enterprise starts to look like the career I was supposed to be pursuing. I move out of my parents' house and into a featureless apartment just down the street from my new phone room. No commuting for me; I've still got my principles!

I decorate my new abode with all the intelligence and flair you'd expect from a second-string offensive tackle at Oral Billerts University. I buy carpet *remnants*. I buy a

red light bulb. I order myself a full-sized bed over the phone--then discover, when they deliver it, that a full is about half the size of a queen.

I keep it.

Yeah, I'm Mr. Romance. Of course, my career is in telemarketing, which means we work when you don't. My work day starts at four in the afternoon and ends at midnight. Except Saturdays and Sundays, when we work mornings. So when people my age are working, I'm masturbating. When people my age are having safe sex, I'm making the world safe for Mastercard.

It gets so the single mothers, fallen cheerleaders and bleached blond hairheads who work for me start looking pretty good. But I've got principles...or at least I don't want to louse up my lousy job by dating the dingbats who work for me. I decide they're off limits until they quit...or maybe...just...until...

I fire them!

After all, there's no shortage of former employees. Either they develop morals and they quit or they're no good and I can them! Have I mentioned that I'll hire anyone? After all, you never really know who's gonna be good and who's gonna be lousy, and everyone who's good quits anyway. So I hire and fire with all the moral forethought and karmic concern you'd expect of a third-world dictator. Or Halliburton, for that matter.

Have you ever fired someone and asked them out at the same time? It's a challenge! "Listen, Candy, I'm worried this job is working out...for you." It's actually easier than it sounds. First you lower the self-esteem, then you take advantage of it.

Let me tell you about one of the women I fired. I mean dated. I mean fired and dated. Yvette was 23, gap-toothed, cute as a button--and the only woman in a men's ice hockey league. She was in her fifth year of Junior College. Yvette believed in credit card protection because she so thoroughly misunderstood it. She struggled mightily to make the customers understand it as incorrectly as she did. She thought she was doing the work of the saints. She even thought she was well paid for it.

No one knew whether this chick was stupid or just out of her mind. I found that attractive.

To Yvette's credit, she knew she was different. She explained that when she was four, a car hit her and she flew head-first into a fire hydrant. This was supposed to put people's minds at ease. She used concentrated banana extract for perfume. She smoked, drank, swore and snored like a longshoreman. She would fall asleep at work and call it a seizure. We went out so long that I rehired her two more times. She begged; she was practicing at home.

This was my girlfriend.

So yeah, the grocery store.

Yvette had hockey. I send my crew home at 10, do paperwork till midnight. I start walking home, but then I remember I'm out of cereal. I'm not just a creature of habit, they're the habits of a former librarian collecting workmen's comp for job-related stress. Do you think I could conceive waking up in the morning and *not* forcing down a bowlful of All-Bran®, maybe just stumbling across the street and snarfing a doughnut? No, that's the kind of crazy thinking that could lead to "irregularity"--which, to this day, I'm still not sure precisely what it is.

So I go to the grocery store. The place is nearly empty. When the stockboy says, "Good evening" with discernible diction, I do what I usually do--I offer him a job.

The party that is my life never stops.

I go to the cereal aisle. I opt for Grape Nuts®--after checking the fiber content--because they're on sale and at 24 I'm already worrying about an underfunded retirement.

The picture on the box assures me that it will be like eating gravel. After all, if it's not as unpleasant as All-Bran®, it's pBillably not doing any good.

Now I make my way to the Dairy Department. Naturally, I pour skim milk on my cereal--no fat, no sugar, just the sickly thin blue-white shadow of milk that will keep my bones in perfect telemarketing condition.

It's on my way to the calcium funhouse that I nearly bump carts with a face from my past.

I went to high school with Bill Bonham. Bill was Dick Gephardt blonde, but good-looking, and with eyebrows. Boy, this guy knew how to have fun. Me and my Jewish buddies hung out with his Viking crowd because of all the loose blonde stoner girls in his crowd. Of course, every time I was able to lure a drunk Viking vixen into a side room, she suddenly became as sober as a nun and nearly as sexual. It was like the daughters of Thor could smell the Jew-boy on you. That's what I associate Bill with: blonde girls with entire football teams on their reputational resumés suddenly remembering either their virtue or their curfew.

So we meet there, Bill and I, at the back of the store, in one of those awkward acquaintances-having-to-act-like-friends situations, catching up five, six years after the last time we saw each other. "What are you doing?," "Where'd you go to college again?," all that stuff. I'm engaging in the conversation--I guess--but the real dialogue is going on in my head, where the contents of Bill's shopping cart has set off a diatribe of withering self-hatred.

What Bill has in his shopping cart has caused me, unexpectedly and unforeseeably, to examine every aspect of my pathetic life. Bill's cart, like mine, contains only a single box of cereal.

Bill...has a box...of Cap'n Crunch®.

What the hell is wrong with me? My job is to get people to annoy people! I date women too stupid to telemarket. Every night I hear the words "Credit Card Protection" spoken twelve hundred times! I have fired so many low-level employees that I no longer feel safe eating at local fast food restaurants. My girlfriend is retarded. I no longer see my friends. My apartment is square, but my carpet is pentagonal. I have a 10" black and white TV I took from my parents' attic. I have a religion that neither promises nor threatens an afterlife. My God, I still listen to REO Speedwagon!

And to top it all off, I eat cereal that is completely indiscernible from its own box!

And why? Because life is so doggone good that I want it to go on forever? Because a solid stool is one of life's great pleasures? Do I think there's going to be a low cholesterol award at my 10th high school reunion?

These are the questions wreaking ruin on my sense of self as I make pleasantries with Bill. I don't know how I was able to keep talking but somehow I managed. He couldn't tell that I wanted to kill his spirit and inhabit his body...while somehow retaining my own SAT scores.

Well, the conversation ended and we bid our adieus, and I realized the saddest thing of all: I didn't even have it in me to put myself out of my misery. It didn't matter whether the rat poison was in cleaning supplies or hardware, or whether there would be

any nutrition information on the label. It's true: most men lead lives of quiet desperation (though the average Jew's desperation might be more whiny than mute). I was doomed, by nature and nurture, to be that which I was and would always be.

Or was I?

I looked up at the dairy case. There was *more* than skim milk. There was 2%...there was whole...there was half and half! Well, half and half, that's crazy. There was whole! I opened the dairy door, resolute and proud, and grabbed a carton of whole milk.

Then I u-turned, back to the cereal aisle, my confidence growing with each step. I put the Grape-Nuts® back on the shelf. I surveyed only those cereals with cartoon spokespeople, and of those, only ones with visible sugar granules and colors not occurring in nature. I settled upon Froot Loops®. Toucan Sam looked back at me from the box. The smile on his face seemed to say, "You're doing good, kid."

And I was. I didn't need that cruddy job or that lousy apartment. There were women out there without residual brain damage. I could afford color in my television and carpet of my choice. Drunken viking girls were not beyond my reach.

I marched to the checkout line. Bill was right ahead of me. The cashier scanned Bill's cereal.

It was a box...of Special K®. Can you believe it?!! Bill wanted to be...more like me!

He smiled back at me sheepishly. I stood in front of my cart so he wouldn't see the swap I had made.

"I guess you gotta grow up sometime," he said.

I gave him a big thumbs up.