

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Bad Boss *Andrew Stellman*

IT WAS THE MID-1990s. FLANNEL WAS IN STYLE, THE THEME FROM FRIENDS WAS A BILLBOARD HIT, and I was working as a programmer at a small suit-and-tie financial company on Wall Street. I joined as a junior programmer, and by this time I'd worked my way up to senior developer. I'd gained a reputation for being able to get big jobs done quickly. I also had a reputation for speaking my mind, even when it wasn't always the most tactful time to be running my mouth. My boss, Peter, once referred to me as a "loose cannon that he learned to point in the right direction." I had no problem with that.

The dot-com boom hadn't quite hit New York yet, and the company where I worked was somewhat traditional and a little stuffy. It was the sort of company where the title "manager" carried a lot of baggage. Only capital-M Managers got offices, and when someone was promoted to Manager it was a big deal. There was a lot of competition for one of those prized Manager slots. The company had a culture where people went out of their way to be more than a little obsequious to the boss, and there was a bit of a cult of personality around the CEO. I'd heard of someone who had been fired after his first day for referring to the CEO as "the old man" to a co-worker, who promptly reported the gaffe to her boss.

I didn't mind. Despite the suits and ties and stuffiness, I felt that I'd really carved out a nice niche for myself. I got to work with a lot of new technology, and I was getting a lot of work done. Peter trusted me to do my job, and gave me bigger and more critical assignments over time. I definitely felt like I made a difference to the company—the software I built had a big impact on the bottom line. And I was working with a team that I really liked. Everyone got along really well, and I don't remember any major arguments or fights among any of us—at least, not up to this point.

The company was a value-added data reseller: we provided financial data to investment banks. Most of the software I worked on had to do with reading data we got from several of our dozens of data vendors, performing arcane and complex financial calculations, scrubbing the data (usually by comparing it against multiple sources), and sending it off to our clients, who used a custom frontend program to access it. Our little team was only a small part of the company; most of the employees either entered financial data into programs that we built, or worked on the sales team talking to clients.

Aside from me, there were five other people on the team. There were three other programmers: Paul, who had an advanced degree in mathematics and spent his time writing financial algorithms and low-level code; Diane, a really talented GUI designer and a good all-around coder; and Lenny, who'd been with the company for years in the data entry group, and had worked his way onto our team after spending a few years writing scripts for the other data entry people. And there were two testers, too. Ellen was an amazing QA engineer: there were many times that I turned my "finished" code over to her thinking it was done, only to get a heaping pile of bugs back from her that needed to be fixed. Anne was the newest team member, a junior tester that Ellen had taken under her wing.

We all reported to Peter. He'd been at the company since it started. He was a jack-of-all-trades who had wired up the company's first network, negotiated with data providers, configured network servers, Unix boxes, firewalls, and routers, and, because one of our data providers needed it to feed us stock quotes, he even spent an afternoon in the rain strapping a microwave radio receiver to a post on the roof of the office building we were in on the corner of Wall Street and Broadway. I had a lot of respect for him. He worked longer hours than anyone else in the company, and he was always willing to get his hands dirty. And even better, he never made me call him "Sir."

We'd been working on a big project for the past three months. It was an important project for the company: it had to do with reading our clients' stock portfolios, calculating their returns, and comparing them with a bunch of stock indexes. The sales team was anxious to have it complete, because it was going to be a major service that they'd sell to our customers. And the data team wanted it done, too, because it would automate a bunch of the most tedious work that they did. I was the project lead, and had spent weeks talking to the salespeople, data entry group, and senior managers before coming up with the spec, architecture, and database design. Diane had designed the user interface, and now Paul and I were busy building the code. Ellen and Anne were busy building a test plan and test cases, and putting together a pretty extensive set of test databases for us all to use while we were building and testing the code.

Our big project was going pretty well, but things weren't perfect. We'd broken the project into three major phases where we delivered fully functional pieces of the final product, and we were about to deliver the first phase. (Later on in my career, I'd learn about iteration. But this was the mid-1990s, and the best we had at the time was phased releases.) We were just about done with the first phase. There was a piece of the program that the data people would use immediately while we finished the last two phases. And there was one small portion of it that the salespeople were planning to show to clients to prime the pump for future sales.

It was time to demo our work, so I gathered my five teammates into a conference room, and asked Peter to call in Agnes, the VP of the data entry group; the head of sales (who brought his top two salespeople, because they happened to be in the office that day); and the CEO. I proudly demonstrated the software we built, showing them the ins and the outs of it. We were all excited to see the looks on their faces when they saw the software we built. Excited, that is, until we actually *saw* the looks on their faces.

After I was done, there was a long silence. Finally, Agnes said, "Well, that looks great. We'll definitely be able to use it." She didn't sound convinced.

"But...?" I asked.

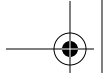
"But, well, wasn't it supposed to read the client portfolios from the network?" she asked.

Ugh. I had no idea it was supposed to read client portfolios from the network. Somehow, in all my discussions with them, I'd missed that point. This was a disaster, and it was entirely my fault. Nobody on the team was making eye contact with me.

The meeting ended at a quarter to four. I took the team out to coffee, my treat, for the rest of the afternoon. We needed a plan. We argued. We went through denial, anger, bargaining, and acceptance. We came up with a plan. We'd bring everyone together for a meeting to really hash out exactly what needed to be built. We'd work with them together. We'd work with them individually. We'd write everything down, and we'd walk through it all with everyone. We'd fix the software. We'd get the rest of it right.

And that's pretty much what happened. We were lucky—the data and sales had a pretty good idea of what they wanted. They really wanted the software done right, and they were willing to sit down with me for days to work through their problems. I took a step back and really tried to figure out what they wanted. I asked a lot of questions.

And I learned from my mistake. I didn't go it alone. No, I got the team involved—anytime there was a question about how the users would work with the software, Diane was there to help us figure out the GUI. Lenny knew the data vendors and their formats really well, and sometimes I needed a translator (since I spoke programmer, and the data people spoke data). And Paul really had a knack for the calculations we needed to do. Ellen and Anne insisted on sitting in with us through most of the meeting. I wasn't really sure what they were doing, but they took a lot of notes and grabbed samples of pretty much every datafile we had to work with. (Eventually they came back to us with a complete test data-



base that made our development job much easier, along with a really thorough set of test cases.)

Two weeks later, it seemed like we were past the problem. The people from data and sales were great—they sat through at least three different walkthroughs, which must have been enormously tedious for them. But I really got the feeling that we were on the right track.

And, more importantly, we were rolling along again with the project. And all six of us on the team were getting along really well again. I must have pulled all five of my teammates aside at one time or another to make sure they weren't mad at me. "Absolutely not," said Anne, when I talked to her. In fact, I got the sense, after talking to each of them, that we were actually somehow closer-knit. It was trial by fire, and we'd survived it.

The only problem was that Peter was becoming a bottleneck for us, and he knew it. We had to pull him into a lot of meetings. There were a lot of decisions that he had to be a part of, especially when it involved pulling people off other work to help plan the project. At one point, he pulled me aside.

"Look," he said. "I just added four new tech-support guys, and they need a lot of my time."

We spent some time talking about what the team needed. He felt that a lot of his job had amounted to being a "negotiator" between us and the other managers. It turned out that he spent a lot of his time "running interference"—protecting us from an almost constant barrage of requests for changes, alterations, and new projects that probably weren't needed. But just as the programming part of his job was getting more and more demanding, so was the IT side. The company was growing, and he'd gotten approval to build a new data center to house our increasingly large network infrastructure.

So it came down to this: Peter said that we needed a full-time manager. We needed to split IT and development into two teams. He'd work with the IT folks directly, and he needed to put someone in charge of the development team.

He asked me whether I wanted the job.

I'd never really thought about management, except that I knew I wasn't really all that interested. "Look, I'm flattered you asked me. But I just don't think I've got the experience to do it."

I could see that he was disappointed. But he didn't push me.

"I'll start looking for a new manager," he said.

Over the next month and a half, Peter interviewed at least a dozen people. He rejected most of them. Apparently, it's hard to find a good manager. Then one day he called me into his office.

Peter said, "Meet Eric."

There's a big guy sitting in front of me. He's easily six foot four, mostly bald, wearing a three-piece pinstripe suit and what looked like a very expensive watch. His tie clip and



cufflinks matched. He definitely looked like he'd fit in with the company's culture, probably better than I did. He was coming to us from one of the large investment banks—he was a vice president at our biggest client, as it turned out. He'd worked with large development teams before, and said that he'd have no trouble with our small team. It looked like Peter had found his manager!

We were all pretty excited. The first person I ran into after meeting Eric was Diane, and she was really happy about it. It turns out that Peter had had Eric talk to her. Eric had told her that he thought she'd done great work, and was thinking about giving her a bigger role on the team (which she wanted). I talked to Paul, who told me that Eric had dropped a few hints that he'd give Paul a big raise at his next review. All in all, we were all pretty excited to get someone on board who might help us keep from repeating the problem that cost us weeks on our big project.

Two weeks later, Eric came on board. They gave him Peter's office—Peter moved to a bigger one that was closer to the IT people. Eric brought in golf trophies and a few awards from his old job at the investment bank. He had a photo of a big boat—presumably his—on his desk in a wooden picture frame with a fancy nautical clock inlaid into it. It looked like a capital-M Manager's office.

Eric brought all six of us into a conference room for a big team meeting.

"I really respect good developers," Eric said. "And you're a really good group of developers. I respect that."

So far, so good. He told us that he wanted to "get out of the way and let you do your job." OK. He talked a little bit about sailing, and how a good captain steers the ship and everyone on the crew did their jobs. He talked about habits of highly effective people. He talked about trust, and wanting to earn our trust.

Then he talked about an executive training retreat at his old investment bank, where they had the VPs go out into the woods with a former Navy SEAL. OK. I didn't quite see where he was going with this. I was never a fan of the sort of "trust falls and group hugs" mandatory corporate retreat, and Eric seemed to really like them. But I was still willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. I looked around the room to see how the rest of the team was taking it all. Diane and Paul looked like they were buying it. Ellen and Anne, less so.

Eric closed out the meeting by telling us that things would be changing. "I'm not like Peter," he said. "I'll show you respect, and fight for you." That was a little weird. I never really got the impression that Peter had anything but respect for us, and I wasn't really aware that he hadn't fought for us in the past (or that he'd needed to). Lenny looked a little uncomfortable. Paul, who usually had a good poker face, was frowning.

I pulled Ellen aside after the meeting. Ellen and I had a really good working relationship. We spent a lot of time talking about software development, trying to figure out how to make things better. A lot of the meetings that I had with the data and sales people to fix

the big project were actually her idea, and they worked really well. What's more, Ellen was generally an excellent judge of character, so I wanted to know what she thought.

"Honestly, I could be happier right now," she said. "Did you notice that he never actually spoke to me or Anne? He only talked about programming. I think he might have a problem with us."

I completely dismissed her. (I've since learned that it's generally a mistake to dismiss things that Ellen says.) I told her, "Look, I'm confident that he's a good manager. We just need to give him a chance." For some reason, I'm often optimistic like that about people, especially about people I report to. This wouldn't be the last time that kind of optimism would come back to bite me in the ass.

Later that week, Eric asked me to come to his office. He sat me down and grinned. He had an unnerving grin.

"I've been talking to the people at the top of the company. They need two things, and they're both top priority. The first priority is an intranet."

"Um, Eric, I'm not quite 100% clear on what you mean by that." We already had an internal network, behind the firewall that connected us to the rest of the Internet. (It was the mid-1990s, so we just had a 56k line.) We had a few web servers running some internal applications on an early version of IIS, and we had some shared file servers. What more did we need?

"I talked to the top managers, and they want more than that. They want a full-scale intranet application, a single launch point for all of our internal applications. It should have a deep menu system. It should be fully configurable. It should let you access every internal resource we have: every program, every file, every piece of data. It should have a database browser, a file viewer, and a message board. And they want you to build it."

OK.

"So what's the other thing they want?" I asked.

"Their second priority is that we expand the team. I had to fight for this one, but I convinced them to add a slot for another developer."

I wasn't sure why he wanted another developer on board. We didn't really have a huge backlog of work. Everyone had enough work to do, but nobody was clamoring for extra software to be built. In fact, I was under the impression that we had the opposite problem: we had enough trouble getting the people from the business side—the salespeople and data people—to take time out of their schedules to meet with us. We already spent too much of our time waiting for them. In fact, I thought that was part of the reason that Peter wanted a new manager for the team.

Clearly, that's not how Eric saw it. "I went to bat for you guys, for the team. I made a big stink with the higher-ups, and after a fight I got them to add another slot for a programmer. That's how I take care of my team."

Over the next few days, I spent about five hours talking to Eric about the intranet. At first, he seemed to have a good idea of what the senior managers wanted. He spent about an hour talking about a “grand plan.” I didn’t quite follow, but I did take a lot of notes. He talked about menus, and options, and databases, and a data browser, and a bunch of other features that would probably take me a good three months to finish.

I got started with the project. But when I went back to my notes, I definitely got the sense that while Eric had plenty of vision, he didn’t really give me a lot of details. So I went back to him and asked for more details. Like the menus—what did he mean by “configurable”? Did he want to configure it using files or a database? Did he want a GUI for that, or was it enough to edit the database or files directly?

Eric’s response was less than satisfactory. “You’re authorized to make those decisions yourself,” he said. Then he said he had to take a call. I wasn’t sure what he meant by “authorized.” I didn’t need authority, I needed answers. Eric didn’t have any. He didn’t answer my emails for the next two days. So I started building the intranet, doing the best I could from my notes. I kept going for a few weeks. Luckily, I’m pretty imaginative, and came up with my own idea of what an intranet would look like for our company. That whole time, I didn’t get much direction from Eric—every time I talked to him, he didn’t really seem to know what I was working on. But when I showed him the progress I’d made, he said he was really happy. Apparently, I was doing a great job and building exactly what he asked me to do.

Well, he was the boss. He was happy. So I was doing my job...right?

A little over three weeks had gone by since Eric had come on board. I was working on building some obscure part of the intranet when Diane knocked on my cube wall.

“Have you met with Eric yet?” she asked.

It turned out that while I got my share of face time with Eric, he hadn’t even had a single one-on-one talk with her. After she finished with the GUI for our big project (which she finished long before Eric arrived), she moved on to a new project for Agnes, the VP in charge of the data entry group. She and Anne had been working with Agnes since then, and about two weeks after Eric came on board they’d delivered the final product.

Over the past week, there were a couple of bugs that Agnes’s team had run into, and Diane fixed them. But other than that, she’d been sitting around without much work to do. She’d sent a few emails to Eric letting him know that she was ready for the next project, but he never responded to any of them. She’d left him a voicemail, which he apparently ignored.

I thought that was weird. There was definitely work for her to do. I was preoccupied with the intranet, so I wasn’t working on the big project. That left Paul and Lenny on it, and they could definitely use her help. Which was great, since she wanted to work on it. It was an important project, and she’d put a lot of work into the GUI design already. But the last time she talked to Eric was when she ran into him in the hallway, and he told her that she

should “absolutely not get involved with it under any circumstances.” That was two weeks earlier, and she hadn’t heard a peep from him since then.

I told her, “Don’t worry, I’m sure there’s just something weird going on. He’ll definitely be on board when we explain the situation to him.”

I was naive. I sent Eric a long email explaining everything. I told him about all the work that Diane had been doing, talked about her valuable contribution to the big project already, and that she was ramped up and ready to go. I made it clear that I had a lot of respect for her, and that it made sense for her to get started on it.

No response. Nothing.

I dropped by his office and knocked on his door. He wasn’t there. Apparently he was out to a long lunch with one of his old buddies from the investment bank. I asked around later, and found out that he told one of the salespeople that he might be able to get our company an “inside track” with that bank. That wasn’t really his job, but I figured it was good for the company, so it must be OK...right?

He was back in his office by a quarter to four. I started to tell him about Diane.

“Yeah, I saw your note. Don’t worry about it, I’ll take care of it.”

Great! But, well, what exactly was he going to do?

“I said, don’t worry about it.” He seemed agitated, and eager to change the subject. Then Eric handed me a thick stack of paper. It contained nearly fifty resumes. “We need to fill that open developer slot,” Eric said. “Here’s a stack of candidates. Go through them, call them up, and find the best ones.” I hadn’t really spent much time going through resumes before. I thought that was *his* job. There was a reason I didn’t take the manager position when Peter offered it to me.

“What about the intranet project?” I asked.

“This takes priority,” he replied.

I decided to drop the Diane issue. I felt bad about it, but it was pretty clear that I wouldn’t be able to do anything about it. I went back to her and told her what happened. She took it well, but still didn’t know what to do. I told her that she should just start working on the big project. There was a piece that wasn’t being worked on, and I had a pretty good idea that she’d be able to handle it. She’d already designed the GUI for that piece, and had a good idea of how the internals needed to work. Yes, Eric told me he’d take care of it. But he didn’t say what he’d do, and I had a feeling that he was just going to leave Diane twisting in the wind. And I was starting to get the sneaking suspicion that Eric might not really care all that much either way. So I told Diane that she should go ahead and join the big project.

“But what about Eric?” she asked.

I told her to let me worry about it. “If he raises a stink, I’ll take the blame. I’ll say that I misunderstood him.” I invoked one of my favorite rules (which, incidentally, I’d learned from Peter): sometimes it’s better to apologize tomorrow than ask permission today. I met with Paul and Lenny, and we all carved out a piece of the big project for Diane to work on. They were happy for the help. Eric may not have cared about the project, but the team did. They were glad to have her on board.

After that meeting, Lenny pulled me aside. “Look, I need you to talk to Agnes.”

Apparently, Agnes had been coming to Lenny at least once every day or two asking for him to maintain some old scripts he’d worked on. That was a problem. When Lenny officially left her department to move over to Peter’s group two years back, Agnes had promised that he wouldn’t have to maintain those old scripts. They had another person who was perfectly capable of doing the job, and we needed Lenny to keep moving on the big project. But Agnes wanted that other person to do “more important” work, so she kept bothering Lenny about those scripts.

That was one of those “running interference” jobs that Eric was supposedly hired to do. And when Lenny talked to him two days earlier, he told Lenny that he was absolutely confident that Agnes would stop. He told Lenny that he’d “ripped her a new one” and promised that would be the end of it. But just yesterday, Agnes came over yet again with another request for a script modification.

Something was definitely weird there. I’d just had a meeting with Agnes a few hours earlier, and she seemed her normal self: smug, overconfident, and generally obnoxious—the same old Agnes we’d come to know and love over the years. If Eric had really “ripped her a new one” then she would have been irritable and cranky instead. (As far as I could tell, Agnes had only those two moods, so she was easy to read.) Instead, she actually went out of her way to point out how well Eric had been doing recently. Things were not adding up.

So I promised Lenny I’d talk to Agnes and see whether I could get her to stop. It wouldn’t be too hard—she wanted the big project done, and I figured that she just didn’t realize that Lenny was an important part of it. I figured that if I put it in that light, she’d agree to back off. And when I went to talk to her, that’s exactly how the conversation went. Lenny was definitely happy to be off script maintenance duty, and we got our programmer back.

By this time, I was spending more than half of my time dealing with hiring a programmer for the slot that Eric fought for. My work on the intranet project had fallen off substantially, because I’d been spending a lot of my time on the phone with recruiters or conducting phone screens for Eric. Not only that, but I was giving assignments to the team, running interference with the managers, and generally doing all of Eric’s job. That left me wondering exactly what he was doing.

After poring through dozens of resumes and talking to more than 10 candidates, I finally found a programmer who would be perfect for the job. I brought her resume to Eric. She was a really good fit: she’d spent 15 years as a programmer at a consulting company, and

before that she'd been an analyst at an investment bank for another 10 years. She already knew the language we were using, and had been building financial software for years.

He looked over her resume for a minute. "*She* graduated from college in 1961. That would make her, what, in her early 50s?" He put a lot of emphasis on the word *she*, in a way that made me very uncomfortable.

"I guess so," I replied. "I didn't ask her age."

"Humph," said Eric. He looked at the resume some more. I watched the minute hand of the nautical clock built into the picture frame on his desk jump. "I'll give her a call and tell you how it goes."

I went back to my desk. Fifteen minutes later, Eric calls me back into his office.

"She's not right for the company."

I asked him to explain himself. He declined. "It's my decision. I'm just not comfortable with some of her, um, *attributes*." I asked him to be more specific. He told me that he couldn't really say any more than that. "You know, it's because of her, well, her age and her gender. It's just not a good match."

I was floored. I know I should have told him that it was blatantly illegal—not to mention personally offensive to me—to reject our best candidate because she's a woman and she's over 50. But I just didn't know what to do. So I walked out of his office, called up the candidate's recruiter to say that we had to pass on her, and went home early for the day.

The next day, Eric told me to clear my schedule after lunch. He'd done a phone screen with one of my second-choice candidates, and now he was coming in for a face-to-face interview. I thought that was odd, since I didn't give Eric any second-choice candidates. He handed me the resume. I didn't remember seeing it before. The guy didn't have all that much experience, but I didn't see any red flags.

The interview was scheduled for 1:00 p.m. At a quarter after, I got a call from the receptionist. She sounded a little giddy, and said something about Elvis arriving for his interview. She was always giggling and cracking jokes. I walked to the front of the office, and sure enough, Elvis was standing there. He wasn't quite the young Elvis—he was definitely a little pudgy—but he wasn't quite the old, fat Elvis, either. He had hair slicked into a mini pompadour, long sideburns (remember, it was the mid-'90s, and thanks to Luke Perry on *Beverly Hills 90210*, sideburns were back in style), and sunglasses.

I brought Elvis back to an empty conference room and did the interview. He'd exaggerated a bit on his resume, but for the most part he seemed to have a reasonable idea of what he was doing. He'd done some programming before, mostly with databases. He'd probably be able to maintain some of the scripts that Lenny had written awhile back, so there would definitely be work for him. When he was done, I dropped an email to Eric recommending him for a junior position.

The next day, there was an email from Eric to the rest of the team announcing that we'd just hired a new senior programmer. He was pleased to let us know that this senior programmer would take over a major part of the big project that Paul, Lenny, Diane, Ellen, and Anne were working steadily on. That new senior programmer ... *Elvis?!*

No, no, that had to be a mistake. He wasn't senior, not by a long shot. And there was absolutely no way that Elvis could handle that job. He could maintain some simple scripts, maybe do a little minor database work. But he had neither the skills nor the knowledge required to take on any part of the big project. I tried to find Eric, but he was out at a long lunch again. By the time he got back to the office, the day was almost over. I told him that I thought Elvis would crash and burn. Eric told me to have some faith. My faith was definitely starting to run thin.

Two weeks later Elvis showed up in the cube across from me. He arrived late, the last one on the team to show up. He was still wearing those sunglasses. He made small talk with the receptionist. (She told me later that he'd hit on her when he showed up for the interview.) We had a team meeting that afternoon about the big project. Paul and Lenny had come up with a plan to try to bring Elvis up to speed. Elvis never showed up.

The next day he told Paul that he'd had a personal emergency and had to leave early. Paul was irritated—he'd spent all morning putting together material for that meeting instead of coding. They were starting to fall behind on the big project, and needed all the time they could get.

Two days later, Elvis didn't show up for work at all. He didn't show up the day after. Eric didn't say anything. He seemed to be acting like nothing happened. Later that day, I ran into the receptionist in the elevator, who told me what happened.

"Elvis failed his drug test, so we had to let him go," she said.

The company had a policy that required all new employees to take a drug test. Every candidate is told about it in the first phone interview. Elvis knew about the test, and had over two weeks to get clean.

"Wait a minute," I said. "I know that one of the IT guys tested positive for pot, and they let him slide."

"Yeah, but Elvis tested positive for coke. According to the test, he did it in the past two days," she said. "Elvis has left the building."

I can't say that I was sad to see him go. I didn't tell anyone about what happened, but later that day I heard it from at least three other team members. Apparently everyone knew about Elvis and his drug problem.

Eric took it all in stride. He handed me another stack of resumes, and asked me to call at least 10 of the people in the pile. This was getting ridiculous. I hadn't had time to work on the intranet project in over a week, and again, Eric didn't really seem to care. So I decided to talk to Peter. I don't normally like going over my boss's head, but I'd been working with

Peter for a long time. I felt comfortable talking to him, and I wanted to get the straight scoop.

“What intranet project?” he asked.

That’s when I discovered that nobody else in the company even knew I was working on the intranet project. I couldn’t believe it—Eric told me that it was a critical project that the senior managers specifically asked for. Peter was in all of the strategy meetings where the senior managers discussed the new projects, and it had never been brought up. In fact, Eric was never even *in* any of those meetings, so there’s no way that he’d have any idea what the senior managers were asking for. Apparently, Eric had decided all by himself that it was a priority, and I’d spent months of my life working on a project that nobody else at the company needed or wanted.

I went back to Eric, who seemed genuinely irritated that I wasn’t on the phone with candidates to replace Elvis. He didn’t really want to hear about the intranet project. He wasn’t interested in the progress, and to be honest, it seemed like he’d forgotten about it entirely. I told him that I could really help Lenny, Diane, and Paul on the big project.

“Look, don’t worry. You’re doing a great job,” he said. “Leave the big project to the rest of the team. You’ve got more important things to work on.”

I wanted to ask him whether “more important things” meant not working on the intranet project or actively discriminating against people on the basis of their age and gender. To this day, I wish I’d had the *cojones* to do it.

I was back at my desk stewing about my missed opportunity to run my mouth, when I heard Eric shouting at the top of his lungs. I peeked into his office—his door was open—and was pretty shocked to see that he was yelling at Ellen and Anne. From what I could hear, apparently there was some sort of emergency with a client’s data.

After the onslaught ended, Ellen and Anne left. Anne was sobbing quietly at her desk. Ellen looked like she wanted to kick someone’s head in. It turned out that there was a problem with a piece of data that one of the bigger clients used. That client threatened to cancel the account. The thing is, both Ellen and Anne knew perfectly well that the problem had nothing to do with them. And not because they’re testers—it wasn’t even that they’d missed any sort of bug. The problem had originated at one of the data vendors that provided the data that we sent on to clients. There was absolutely nothing that we could have done about this. If anyone was at fault, it was Agnes and her data entry group, for missing the data problem. But Agnes was particularly good at avoiding blame, so she came down on Eric. And Eric, in search of a scapegoat, apparently decided to let Ellen and Anne have it.

Ellen and I took Anne out for coffee. She was beside herself. The entire office heard Eric yell at her, thanks to the fact that he’d left his door open (apparently on purpose, specifically to embarrass them). We got her calmed down, but she didn’t get any work done for the rest of the day. She ended up taking the following Friday and Monday off to visit her

mother. She still looked upset when she came back on Tuesday, but at least she was able to get back to work. I asked her whether she was OK.

“Yes, Andrew,” she said. “I’m OK, mostly. I want to see the big project through. I’ve put a lot of work into it. But when we’re done, will you be a reference for me when I’m interviewing for a new job?”

I told her I’d be a reference. I was just glad that she’d be there for the rest of the project.

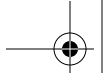
And she was making progress on it. The whole team was. As surprising as it was, everyone on the team seemed truly committed to delivering the big project. I only wished that I could be a part of it, rather than being stuck with doing Eric’s job for him. By now, I was the only person who wasn’t actively working on it. The rest of the team had gotten through the second of the three phases, and this time both the data entry people and the salespeople loved what they saw. Agnes even sent them a congratulatory email, which was uncharacteristically kind of her. They were extremely happy—so happy that they were only slightly miffed at Eric’s obnoxious reply (cc’d to everyone in the company) taking credit for the success.

The company was expanding. When I first arrived, we took up only about half of the 7th floor of the building. Now we took up the entire 7th floor, and had recently signed a lease for half of the 8th floor. This was lucky for the team. They started using a conference room up there, which caused Eric—who routinely complained about having to go up a flight of stairs whenever there was a meeting up there—to stop dropping by their team meetings unannounced and giving long speeches about his time as a vice president at his old investment bank.

Later, Paul pulled me aside. He told me that his cousin worked at the same investment bank where Eric had worked. He said that his cousin was also a vice president, and told him that they handed out vice president titles like they were party favors. The idea, apparently, is that when a small Midwestern customer calls up demanding to talk to someone, they can always be connected with “Vice President So-and-So” who personally handles their account. This is an effective sales tool, because it makes a small customer feel like he’s being treated like a big shot.

That explained a lot. Eric no longer seemed particularly impressive. According to Paul’s cousin, the fact that he was a vice president from that investment bank simply meant that he wasn’t a janitor.

(To be honest, I was starting to suspect that the janitor who cleaned our office would do a better job than Eric. I’d talk to him occasionally when I stayed late working on a project. Despite his prison tattoos, he was a nice guy. His name was Mike. Unfortunately, the building eventually switched to a non-union janitorial company, and he left. The service workers’ union went on strike against the building, and I felt weird about crossing their picket line outside and started using the rear entrance.)



It was about this time that Ellen had her annual review. She wasn't really sure what to expect, since the only interaction she'd really had with Eric by this point was being yelled at. Still, she's always very professional about these things, and she'd been promised a raise at her last meeting with Peter. Unfortunately, as soon as she sat down for her review, she saw something she wasn't supposed to see. Eric had written up my performance review already, and had left it face-up on his desk—and at the bottom, in big bold numbers, was my salary.

It was approximately twice as much as hers.

Ellen had been at the company about as long as I had. She had more experience than I did, with more years in the software industry. Yes, testers tended to make a little less than programmers. But she had really made a difference to the company, and it was outrageous that I was earning twice the money she was earning. This was clearly unacceptable. Ellen wasn't sure what to do, so she picked up the review, turned it over, and handed it to Eric.

Later, she pulled Eric aside.

"Look," she said. "I didn't go looking to find out what Andrew made. But now I know. We both know it's not right that he makes twice as much as I do, and I hope you can do the right thing here." She let him know that she didn't need to be making exactly the same as I was, but that she should at least be in the same order of magnitude.

Later that day, Eric came back to her with bad news. He wasn't going to bring it up with anyone in senior management. And Eric pointed out that we've all seen the statistic about how women don't make as much as men, so she should be used to it.

A week later, Ellen gave notice and left the company.

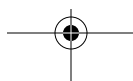
Eric couldn't have been happier. Now he had two openings in his group: the one that he told me that he'd fought for, and now another one to replace Ellen. He handed me yet another stack of resumes to go through.

I went through them. I noticed that there were no testers or QA engineers anywhere in the stack, just programmers. I asked Eric about it.

"Aren't we going to replace Ellen? Otherwise, Anne's really going to have her hands full with the big project."

Eric wouldn't hear any of it. He told me that he had no use for testers, and that one programmer is worth five testers. He said that he felt that the industry didn't really need testers at all, and that we should all just hire interns and even smart teenagers to do testing.

I told him that I thought that he might be a little hasty in dismissing the entire field of quality assurance. He told me to get back to my job. Then for some reason he went off on a long tangent about how he was personally related to a branch of the Kennedy family, that his relatives have a huge amount of money and own the building on the corner of



Broadway and Astor Place, and that he doesn't even need to work. (I stopped myself from asking him why he kept showing up at work, then.)

So I sucked it up, went back to my desk, and started through yet another stack of resumes to see whether I could find anyone to fill the two slots. I spent the next day and a half doing phone interviews and talking to recruiters. Eventually, I found three candidates who seemed to know what they were talking about. I thought they all had a lot of potential. And, just as importantly, I felt that their personalities would be a really good match for the rest of the team.

I was dismayed to find that of those three people, absolutely none of them ended up in our office. Instead, Eric hired Noam and Dustin within days of each other, and without letting me or anyone else on the team interview them.



Noam seemed to be a competent programmer. Eric was very excited about him, because they spent over two hours in the interview and Noam seemed, in Eric's words, "to have a lot of respect for authority." The problem was that while Noam was a good programmer, he was the most argumentative person I'd ever met. He picked fights with everyone: salespeople, data people, his teammates, me, Agnes, Peter; he even got into an argument with the CEO of the company in the elevator. (I'm not sure whether he knew exactly who he was talking to, though I'm pretty sure he wouldn't have cared either way.) Most of his arguments seemed to end up the same way: with him relating a story about how he was an Israeli tank commander on the front lines in Lebanon, and that he got shot at on a daily basis. This always seemed to end whatever argument he'd started.

The stories about Noam seemed to get weirder and weirder. A data person told me that one of her co-workers said he caught him sniffing the seat of her chair one morning. One of the salespeople pulled me aside and told me that they were so creeped out by him that they started calling him "Babies-in-jars Noam" behind his back. The rumors were flying, and none of them were good.

In the meantime, Noam seemed to spend far more time arguing with people than programming, and wasn't actually getting any work done. Luckily, Paul and Lenny figured out early on that they didn't want him threatening the success of the big project. They were able to convince Agnes to let him start maintaining some of Lenny's old scripts. The rest of our team quickly learned to avoid Noam.

Unfortunately for Noam, things didn't end well. One of the receptionists complained to the human resources person that he'd been making inappropriate comments to her about her religion. Apparently, she was a Jehovah's Witness, and Noam got into a big argument with her about the New Testament.

Eric pulled me aside and told me that the "Nazis" above him were making him fire Noam. He told me that he didn't want to do it, and he understood how nervous that would make me and the other people on the team. He seemed to be under the impression that we'd assume that any of us could be fired at any time. He didn't understand that we were unanimously happy to see Noam go.




“Stick with me,” Eric said. “If you make sure you keep your allegiance with me, I’ll make sure I’ve got your back.”


I wasn’t sure exactly what he meant by that.

Meanwhile, Lenny, Diane, Paul, and Anne were finishing up the last phase of the big project, and it was coming out really well. And now that Eric had stopped asking me to review resumes, I could get back to work on it. Ellen was gone, and I knew I couldn’t replace her as a tester. But I needed to fill in where I could, and there was testing that had to be done. So I spent some of my time testing—luckily, she’d left behind a complete set of test cases—and the rest of my time programming. It was great to be back with the team. When we were working together, it was a little like all of the irritating problems that had been plaguing us were left behind in another world. Especially when we met in that 8th floor conference room, where Eric couldn’t find us.

Eric’s other new hire, Dustin, put an end to some of that temporary peace. Everyone else at the office wore a shirt and tie to work. That was the rule—a rule that apparently didn’t apply to Dustin, who showed up in jeans, a hooded sweatshirt, and a wrinkled T-shirt. If that were the extent of the problem with Dustin’s deportment, it might have been OK. But the real problem was that there were other rules that also apparently didn’t apply to Dustin. Rules like showering at least once or twice a week.



Dustin smelled terrible. And, unfortunately, I seemed to be the person that everyone complained to about him. Every single team member—Lenny, Paul, Diane, and Anne—independently came to me to complain about his body odor. So did Agnes and at least two of the salespeople. Unfortunately, when I went to Eric to complain, he didn’t seem particularly interested, and definitely didn’t intend to talk to Dustin about it.



Eric demanded that we assign part of the big project to Dustin. We were in the final stretch of the project, and it was difficult to divide the work. Basically, the only thing we hadn’t started was the online help, so we assigned it to Dustin. He spent the next four weeks working on it. But he wasn’t actually doing anything useful. It turned out that he was trying to do some weird Win32 API trick to add a help option to the Windows menu (the little menu that appears when you click in the upper-righthand corner of a window). There was absolutely no reason to do this—it would have taken about three minutes to add a “Help” option to the program’s main menu. But Dustin really wanted to add it to the Windows menu instead, where no user would ever think to look for it. I asked Eric about it. He said that not only was it fine, but the CEO of the company had, in fact, personally asked Eric for that feature.

Dustin never finished his project. He finally quit to join one of those newfangled, up-and-coming dot-coms. After he left, I looked through his work. There was absolutely nothing of value there. We threw out every line of code that he wrote.

I was more than a little skeptical that the CEO really asked for the weird help system, so I decided to ask Peter about it. Did the CEO really request that feature personally? Peter had

no idea what I was talking about. That was when we were both sure that something was seriously wrong. Eric had been less than honest with us for a long time.

But we didn't really have time to talk that over, because Paul, Diane, Lenny, Anne, and I finally finished the big project. Once again, I called a meeting with Peter, Agnes, data entry group members, and salespeople. And this time, it went really well. There were no awkward "but isn't it also supposed to do *this*?" moments. Everyone got pretty much exactly what they were expecting.

Everyone except Eric. After the meeting, he pulled me aside and asked what I thought about Diane and Anne. Did they really contribute to the project, or did Paul and I do all the work? I told him I thought they were indispensable.

"I talked to Peter," he said. "He thinks the entire team should be outsourced. Don't get me wrong—I think you're great. But Peter is trying to convince his boss and the CEO that there are serious problems with the team. I hate to be the one to say this to you, but he thinks you should all be fired."

I was floored. I'd never heard anything like that from Peter. I couldn't believe I was going to be fired. Eric told me not to worry. He said that he knew he had my "allegiance," and that he had my back. He still knew people at his old investment bank who would hire our whole department at any time.

That was the last straw. I always had a good working relationship with Peter, so I went to him. I told him I couldn't believe that he wanted to fire us and outsource the whole team. I started to make my case.

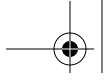
"Andrew, I have no idea what you're talking about."

It turned out that Peter had just talked to Eric, who told Peter that he had thought Diane and Anne were doing a good job. But then he told Peter that after seeing their work on the project, it was *me* who decided that they needed to be fired. And who was Eric to second-guess his top team member?

It turned out that Eric was lying to everyone. He lied to me, he lied to Peter, and he probably lied to pretty much everyone else he talked to. And as if the lying wasn't bad enough, he'd racked up a steady stream of failures from day one: the intranet project, Elvis and his drug test, Ellen and her salary, what happened with Noam. Even worse, that position that he said he'd fought for? There was no fighting. It turned out that when Peter brought Eric on board, he'd worked with the senior managers to add an extra programmer to the team. Eric knew that all along, and lied about it to my face for months.

The next day, Eric was fired.

Later that week I was feeling really guilty about how the team was treated. Ellen was gone, and I was worried that Anne, Paul, Diane, and Lenny were in really bad shape, moralewise. I was worried that they resented me for not doing more about Eric, and I wouldn't have blamed them all for putting in notice. I'd been avoiding them all week,



because I figured they all thought I let them down. I got a call from Peter, who asked me to come to his office.

“I talked to the rest of the team,” he said. “We need a new manager to replace Eric, and every single person said that you should take over. The manager job is yours if you want it.”

This time I said yes.

