

## Bob\*

\*This is a story about Bob, a “Type A” person who is married to his work.  
Flash Fiction for Guests of the Wordfeeder  
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Two male coworkers at the high tech company where they were mid-level executives were on their way down the hallway – the one giving the other, newly hired, a tour of their offices, on their way to the nicest of them, the one in the corner just ahead. “Corner” wasn’t exactly true, given that the perimeter of the building was irregular and, at that point, traced a arc, like the cross section of a wing, more dramatically curved on one side (the leading edge), smoother on the other. It was empty, this nicest of all the offices, the large table that served as a desk perfectly clear as if no one had been using it.

“So who are they saving this for?” the new one asked his mentor, both of them standing just outside the one of the double doors that was open. Somehow going in, even though it was vacant, seemed out of the question. It was the only office on the floor that didn’t have glass interior walls and doors – where, if the doors were shut, you couldn’t tell from the outside what was happening on the inside.

“Don’t get your hopes up. It’s already taken. Belongs to ‘Bob,’ the creative genius behind all this. Ever have a conversation with one the new generation corporate voice mail systems, the one’s that make you think you’re talking to a real person?”

“Sure.”

“Well, thank you very much, all the way to the bank.”

“So what’s he like?” They were talking to each other, but with their eyes focused on the interior of the office, at its perfectly finished uneven plank floors, and at the almost too many plants and flowers, some inside, some on the deep balcony all around. The entire exterior wall was made of seamless glass panels that folded upon each other, to the left and right, to open the entire office to the outdoors. A gentle breeze just made to the faces of the two of them, feeding the wonder of what it would be like to work there.

This entire floor was the senior executive suite, the top floor of their terraced dome shaped building that all but disappeared in the topography of the countryside. From the air, it looked like a lush mound of dark and light green foliage, with random mixings of red, white, yellow and violet flowers that covered the edges of the various irregularly shaped balconies that were everywhere. A large center atrium in the middle of the floor, going all the way down to the basement of the building, added to a sense of openness, of almost being outdoors. Stairs lead up to the rooftop garden where they held indoor and outdoor meetings, and sometimes parties, when it was nice out and they could retract the roof. It cost a fortune to build, but was well worth it for the effect it had upon its residents during the long hours they often spent there.

“I have no idea. Never met him, and I’ve been here three years. He works from home. Communicates over the telephone or on-line with e-mail and video calls.”

“Excuse me.” Sounding highly rushed, a young woman pushed past them holding two bunches of fresh flowers which they grow in the complex.

“Jackie!” Another young woman was running down the wide hallway behind her, pushing one of the carts they give you in the company cafeteria when you’re picking up food and drinks for a meeting. The two men, not wanting to get in their way, split up and stepped back while Jackie opened the other door to Bob’s office to make room for the cart. They were there, the two men, but neither of the women noticed them. “I’ve got everything but the frozen pineapple yogurt he likes!”

“Com’on. It’ll be okay. He’s going straight to the Board meeting. We’ve got time.”

“What about the yogurt?” She was more than a bit frantic.

“First of all, it’s sorbet, pineapple sorbet. He has it flown in from New York. Call down and tell the Cafeteria Manager on duty that it’s in the Executive Pantry.”

“Hi, guys.” It was Bob who, in all their excitement, they hadn’t seen coming, standing between the two men, just outside his own office. A worn, soft leather briefcase in one hand, the other combed back the hair that flopped over his forehead to no avail.

He was tall, and thin too, taller than any of them had expected, his boyish good looks and warm smile leaving the two young women speechless, and the two junior executives invisible. Bob was the poster boy for purposely unassuming technology sector billionaires at their creative peak: Jeans and a plain gray t-shirt, untucked of course, with a blue and green plaid flannel shirt on top of it, open in the front, sleeves rolled up in a hurry. Well worn Nikes. Hair unkempt, but it could have been cut to look that way. If it was, the cut was so good, no one could tell. Money will do that for you. One of the girls would speculate later that he only shaved every third day, this being the second judging from the stubble, as if she had any idea what she was talking about.

“I just need to use my computer to print something out before the meeting.” His tone was apologetic, almost as if he were asking their permission.

No introductions. No shaking of hands. Nothing more than a polite “Hey” to the two men as he walked into his office and they headed back down the hallway, one whispering to the other, “So that’s what a billionaire genius looks like.” They, as if anyone cared, were wearing “business casual” to be safe and to remind the t-shirted staff under them that they were in charge. Bob, on the other hand, had nothing to prove and couldn’t have cared less that they were clearly in violation of the de facto company dress code.

“Do you want us to leave, ...Bob,” she added reluctantly, having been told to call him by his first name.

“No, no. Sorry to get in your way. ...Wait,” he said to the one of them that was stocking his refrigerator, “Let me have one those boxes of cran-grape juice.” Holding up his open palm of his

hand, he clearly wanted her to toss it to where he was standing, maybe 15 feet from her, behind his desk, his other hand busy on the synapse pad of his notebook computer.

Glancing over at her friend for reassurance, she stood up from where she had been kneeling and prepared herself for the toss of her corporate life. Over-handed? No, too short a distance. She'd go for a soft, underhanded lob – but it had to be right on target to make a favorable impression. “Casual precision” was the effect she was after.

“Hey,” he said looking up, knowing that he tended, for reasons he really didn't get, to sometimes make people who worked for him nervous. “The worse thing that'll happen is that I'll miss, and you'll be fired.” Noticing that his attempt to set her at ease seemed to have backfired, he decided to encourage her. (By this time, she could have walked over and handed it to him, but it was too late now.) “Com'on,” he smiled at her, mostly with his eyes. “Go for it.” And she smiled back and did. He caught it, unwrapped the straw, pushed it through and took a long zip on the way past the printer next to his desk and out the door. “See you later.” Not likely, but it was the nice thing to say.

“Right,” the girl at the refrigerator responded, the other one just managing to nod. But then when he was gone... “God damn, I had no idea he'd be so cute in person. He's not gay, is he? I didn't get any gay vibes.”

“Gay, no. Married yes.”

“I know, I caught the ring, but a girl can dream. Maybe his marriage will tank and he'll remember the moment we shared over a box of cran-grape Juicy Juice.”

“Savor it. The Board only meets once a quarter, and the word is he doesn't like hanging around people, particularly when he's crashing on something. Myra, the girl in bookkeeping who processes his receipts, says the only person he's really comfortable around is his wife. They're newlyweds. Myra says they eloped.”

The other one, leaning on the door watching Bob going up the stairs to his meeting, wondered out loud. “I'm surprised. He doesn't seem the least bit weird,” she thought to herself out loud, almost sighing.

“Hey. Back to earth. We're still here when he gets back, and we'll both be looking for work.”

“I don't think so. He seemed way too nice.”

“He is nice. It's our ass-kissing supervisor I'm worried about.”

As it turned out, the meeting took longer than expected, a good deal of it spent convincing the Board that the time and money he was spending, had been spending for more than year now on his current project would be worth every dollar of it. Refusing to give them details or more than the most general status report didn't help. They'd believed in him before and he made them rich, but they wanted him paying attention to the development of their existing product lines, securing their market share before he ran off in a new direction. Whatever it was, it had better be worth the wait.

When it was over, Bob stopped by his office for a hour, enough time to meet with a couple of administrative department heads. Two perfect deviled eggs and some pineapple sorbet later, he was out of there. Down the highway to the high-rise luxury condo where he and his wife lived in relative seclusion, seldom leaving their apartment.

“Hey, Howard,” he smiled at the well-dressed receptionist at the front desk, stopping by the mailroom on his way to the elevator from the garage door.

“Good evening, Bob.” Even off campus, he insisted everyone call him by his first name. Building management had actually issued a bulletin to that effect to all building staff. “My regards to... to Sarah?” Too late. He’d already made it sound like a question. That was awkward. Maybe he should have used her last name, “My regards to Mrs. ...”? The fact is, he was just being polite, having never met Bob’s wife in the several months he’d been working there, except to talk to her on the building intercom and receive a package for her now and then that he would take upstairs and leave outside their door. Bob and Sarah were known to be big tippers, and he was right to expect a substantial holiday bonus if only he could manage not to annoy them.

“She’s fine. Thanks for asking,” he said, clearly too busy sorting through his mail to be paying attention. “We’ll be ordering some delivery, probably Italian. Just let him bring up,” Bob told him just as the elevator doors were closing, flipping the pages of one of the technical journals he was holding.

“Sure thing,” the attendant responded, smirking and rolling his eyes in an expression of “What the hell,” knowing it was too late for Bob to hear him.

Coming off the elevator, Bob’s condo was one of only four on his floor. It was large, with the kind of high ceilings and glass only rich people can afford, but surprisingly modest for a person of his wealth. The door to his place was the only one with a 10 key security panel. It looked normal enough, until you realized that each button on the key pad was fingerprint sensitive – different finger prints for different buttons depending upon how he programmed it – which isn’t something you or an intruder would have been able to tell. It was one of Bob’s designs for their new security products division.

“Hi, honey. Sorry I’m late,” he said, dropping his keys on the table next to their front door.

“Hey, I’m used to it,” she shouted back sarcastically from around the corner. It was the voice that first made him love her coming from the kitchen in their great room with the floor to ceiling glass that looked out over the entire valley. It was dark out, and the lights he could see seemed like the view from the cockpit of a jet on its final approach. “Are we going to order something?” She sounded hungry.

“Yeh. Take a look at the menu for that new Italian place, and order something for both of us” he said, asking for her help while pulling off his flannel shirt and tossing it over one of their two brown leather couches.” I’ve got to play [on my computer] for a few minutes.” His voice trailed off as he entered his password and clicked to open the file on which he had been working before leaving for the office earlier that day.

Forty-five minutes later, the door bell rang, a picture of the delivery boy popping up on Bob's screen. "Can you get that honey?" It was Sarah asking for his help this time.

"Sure," Bob responded, wondering humorously to himself what she could be doing that was that important.

Getting up, he walked to the door, reaching for his wallet along the way.

"Hi," the kid said, "Are you," he paused, looking down at the delivery tag, "Sarah?"

"That depends, I guess, on what you have in the bag." (No reaction from the kid.) "...No, I'm Bob. Sarah is much better looking."

Holding up the bag, paper inside of plastic, the kid read from the attached receipt: "Caesar salad, Spiedino di Mare with broccoli and garlic mashed potatoes, fresh bread," and then added, having thought about it for a moment, "...Didn't she order anything for you?" as if that were any of his business.

"We're going to share."

"It's already paid for," the kid volunteered, seeing Bob opening his wallet. Your wife gave us a credit card."

"I'm sure she did. Don't you want a tip?" Bob asked the kid rhetorically, pulling out a \$5 bill, but then, looking up at him, taking out another.

"Hey," the kid said trying not to gush. "Thanks."

Walking back toward the great room, the front door closed silently behind him, followed by a soft "boop" to confirm that it was locked. Bob turned left this time toward the kitchen area. "Sarah, would you join me for dinner, on the couch please?" And woman of his dreams materialized from a barely visible light above the couch across from the table where he was putting out a plate, silverware and napkins."

"Hi, honey," he said with real appreciation to her exceptionally real holographic image.

"So did you give the kid a decent tip?"

"He seemed pleased enough."

"Are we working tonight?"

"Don't we work every night, Sarah?"

"I was thinking," she laughed at the impossibility of it, "that maybe we could take a break and catch a movie, in a *real* theater."

"Soon," he encouraged her. "Sooner than you think. I've got our robotics people working overtime but, to be honest, I've seen their prototypes and they have a way to go. ...Tonight

we're testing your sensitivity programming. ...Have you been studying the books and tapes I picked out for you?"

"Don't I do everything you tell me, Bob?"

No response.

"Bob?"

"What?"

"Is it too soon for us to be talking about having children?" She did her best to pretend it was a serious question, but wasn't that good an actor – not yet, anyway.

"Funny," Bob looked up from where he dishing out his dinner, smiled back at her, complementing the quality of his programming. "Well done," he said, and then added, "Are you sure you don't want some?"

And they laughed and talked about how their days had gone while Bob savored his dinner and the moment with a glass of homemade Sangria.

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