

Diversity, Incorporated

Aimlessness, Alabama was a poor city. Split down the middle by train tracks heading in the direction of an old pig iron blast furnace. The city was a cauldron, bubbling out past gerrymandered districts. It was too small to segregate itself, too packed in to be unapologetically racist.

Aimlessness was the kind to close after five and draw the blinds on weekends. Perfect and more than willing to let “Diversity Insurance Companies” eat the landscape, letting linebackers in ill-fitting suits bulldoze two football fields of land just outside of Aimlessness’ downtown area. They’d let everyone go to sleep before selling the rights to every inch of untouched land in the city. The exact amount of money needed to make the transaction was never described, though newspapers speculated that Aimlessness bit on a lowball deal. Still, some politicians were sent gifts in exchange – the first few trees cut down were turned into axe handles, with a given name engraved in gold at the heel.

Diversity then let in applications from across the state, culling healthcare and programming graduates like stalks of sugar cane. The ‘finished product’ looked like a ruined Tower of Babel – obsidian stakes connected by cubicles, boardrooms, and liminal hallways. Diversity had bypassed the Aimlessness zoning law, blotting the sun out of the sky over several housing developments. As Diversity paid fine after fine, the minds of lawmakers and politicians found their sentences trailing off, tongues and morphemes disagreeing. Some of them were so disturbed that they bought new houses and quit.

Moral potholes are easy to patch. The food deserts take orders at dark anyway.

Unmoored from the government, Diversity Incorporated could only paint over so much, but this particular canvas never seemed to be of much importance to Aimlessness elects anyway.

Several winding roads led onto Diversity's campus. At the entrance's futuristic saloon doors was the Diversity Incorporated logo on a plaque: a gold, thin dot bisected by a gray band over the words "Diversity in identity, togetherness in mind."

Michael Constant paid the sign little mind as he gazed out onto the saplings growing back near the main partition's entryway.

Diversity in what?

Constant had just turned twenty-three, running hands through coiled hair that had begun to slide off his head the previous summer. He was hunched over on elbows, pulling his shoulders to his earlobes. By Diversity's measure, he looked inefficiently depressed. He'd been employed for five months, having needed a job out of college and wondering if this was still the one to take. Constant breezed through the rounds of anonymous interviews and two weeks of onboarding, but his caseload slowed him down considerably.

Diversity dealt in life insurance to the tune of several hundred million dollars, specifically to the terminally ill, the elderly and those at risk of aging wretchedly. The President of Diversity spoke of his policies as "realistic" and "aggressively effective" in calmly ushering patients into the next life, unable to make use of money that their children used only to finance frivolous things. In a book written some decades on by Orco Woodwater, he recalled a conversation with the Diversity President in which he described the Bible as "mythological waterboarding," thought to be some sign of a growing distaste with regional culture.

Michael would be unsure of him at their first ‘meeting’, the President being a short man whose hands shook at an early age, who ate salads plain and argued with machinery when it faltered. The President sent every new employee a pre-recorded message, wishing them the best of luck in this current endeavor, meandering around the idea that every Diversity Inc. hire was an effort on behalf of a greater mission for the world. None of those half-hearted-isms pushed Michael through fifteen unique cases in six days, deciding if a burn victim’s premiums should have reduced interest over those of an eighty-year-old with Parkinson’s.

The Parkinson’s patient can’t even contact us. Rosie Marie McDowell. She can’t articulate what kind of help she wants to receive. Diversity got to her through her nephew’s email address.

Her face had been sitting on his computer screen for a week. Michael’s eyes rolled over and stared at the walls of his office, coated in the same null swatch as the outside of the building. His desk was flush with the wall, wide enough to hold Constant’s computer, several monitors, and several pinprick-sized cameras, embedded at the ends. The desk folded out on its left side to form a faceless bed: a single wave interrupted by two mishappen lumps for pillows. A fridge stood, uneasily, on its own, its cords also fused into the enclosure. Constant reached inside and grabbed a water bottle that had slid in from one of the pipes, rubbing numbness into his eyes between gulps.

Everything had been designed according to the algorithmic AI of Diversity, a genius invention by the President. The campus was intimately crafted so that one room led to the next, that everything was in arm’s reach and employees could be as efficient as possible. There were doctors on staff for those that were sick, cafeterias and gyms on every other floor – all changes that had helped Diversity become the top company in the world with regard to product output and worker productivity. In team meetings, Constant had already caught wind of other

employees moving up the ranks, even graduating to become project heads and CEOs elsewhere. Diversity wasn't quick to reveal the science behind their mechanisms, but enough people were already aware of their effectiveness.

The science of living and learning to help others die.

Constant managed to see his monitors light up between the circles in his eyes. A bright gold notification: an email that opened itself. The email was from the head of Diversity Incorporated's Human Relations Department – James. O. Woodwater. His profile picture showed off his rather unkempt beard, loose glasses over beady eyes. The email was a template, with Constant's name swapped into the subject header:

MICHAEL IMMANUEL CONSTANT – SCHEDULED FOR TERMINATION

Greetings MICHAEL IMMANUEL CONSTANT. I regret to inform you, but due to a string of negligence complaints and poor caseload output, your contract with Diversity Insurance Companies, Incorporated will be terminated by the end of the workday today, October 9th, 2004. Attached to this email is an itemized list of complaints to help provide clarity and avoid confusion. Please do not leave your unit until one of our Janitors has been dispatched to your unit. The Janitor will help with unit cleanup and disposing of any effects and property related or belonging to Diversity Incorporated. For brevity, unlock the hatch at the back of your unit and avoid further resistance against the Janitor's directives. I wish you the absolute best in moving ahead with your disposal.

All,

James Orco Woodwater

Head of Human Relations

Diversity Insurance Companies, Incorporated

“Diversity in identity, togetherness in mind.

Termination.

Constant felt both anxiety and relief. A hot tub on cold skin. He'd spent days dreaming up other places to work from the depths of his office chair. The email was to be expected, uniform like Diversity's floor plans – detached like their office staff. Robert had watched the last two weeks dash by, racking up negligence complaints, excreting into dim tubes bolted onto his chair, and distancing himself from coworkers in his unit. The only emails he'd sent in a month were to his mother, hoping he'd be welcomed back by a heart that was as big as his.

It just isn't for me.

He hated choosing life insurance candidates as much as he missed the verdant forests Diversity had replaced. He missed getting lost there as a child. He missed his mother's hands, cupped together and calling for him to run back to their 'secret' clearing. Constant remembered those hands as stone rough. They'd tried to build a treehouse out in this location, failed, and still reveled in the joy of the attempt years later.

When she called, I came.

Absent-mindedly, Michael clicked the email's lone attachment. A file, stamped again from the Human Relations Department, detailing every infraction detected by the Diversity algorithm. It looked like a weekly report, which typically outlined places where employees could improve their workflow, based on actions observed by the desktop cameras. Where the weekly reports weren't supposed to be more than a half-page per week, Constant was scrolling up and down a ten-page document. Several bullet points alarmed him, ordered by level of importance:

- 052004, [employee]: desktop camera detects movement. Viewpoint obstruction detected. Predicted caseload output and employee efficiency – potential decrease of 3%.
- 052204, [employee]: desktop camera detects movement. Reconfiguration detected. Right hand bias removed. Is [Constant] left-handed? Predicted caseload output and employee efficiency is potential decrease of 19%. Propensity for future mistakes observed.
-
- 100704, [employee]: midweek caseload output retrieved. Successive mistakes detected. [Constant] submission sent three minutes after deadline. Inefficiency quotient reached. Human Relations department notified. [Constant] flagged for Janitor cleanup and termination.

“...The hell?” Constant sputtered, speechless. Left-handedness wasn’t anything he could change, not even something that made him that much different from his peers. Constant had perceived himself as creative enough to get by – not the ‘salmon in a swimming pool’ his friends joked he was.

What else did they observe?

The hatch at the back of the room swung open halfway, both of its locks unable to turn in synchronicity. A giant hand fed itself through the gap and turned the locks on Michael’s side. The man had to lower his head to fit into the threshold.

Constant swiveled around to take in sight of the Janitor. He looked like a child sweating through an undersized Halloween costume. Loose ends at the hands and feet were clamped into

black gloves and boots, his dark grey jumpsuit clinging to his body for dear life. The Janitor's face was ashen, scanning the room as he adjusted clumps of hair under his small hat. He walked forward oddly, on the tops of his feet. A small ID badge hung lazily from a breast pocket; Michael couldn't take his eyes off it.

Janitor – McDowell: #02.

Rosie's boy.

The Janitor was glancing around the room, jabbing his feet at the baseboards and in approaching Michael, nearly tripping over loose papers in a heap on the floor.

“Do you intend to resist?” The Janitor said. Every word felt muddy, like he spoke over mouthfuls of ice cream.

“Ahh, umm, no. Don't have many things with me. If anything, I can just get them my-”

“Please stand up from your chair.”

Michael complied, bracing himself against the armrests. Words kept getting caught in his throat. The Janitor was staring a hole through him. Constant tried to get out of the Janitor's way as he approached the desk. “If I can ask,” he stuttered “do you know Rosie –”

The Janitor lunged at him, covering the whole of his face with one hand. The other jabbed a needle full of clear fluid into Constant's neck. The Janitor looked out past the window, sighing as Constant's body slumped to the floor. He disliked looking at that last bit of motion, the unconscious swing towards the floor. It made him feel a kind of sickness he couldn't articulate. There wasn't anything on Constant's face but an aura of confusion stuck in his eyes. The Janitor quickly closed them.

The Janitor wheeled a large cloth cart in to carry Constant's body offsite. He would be cremated, his family notified of his death months later due to an "untimely illness that the staff on hand couldn't contain." He'd be grains of sand on the beach by then. Constant had hated swimming, as the Janitor had found in his case file introduction. The Janitor knew Constant had made a 30 on the ACT, still having to pay his way through college with the stipend from selling his mother's farmland to Diversity. Not much else was necessary to know.

The Janitor stopped at Constant's desk. He'd have to sweep through and erase all of the data from Robert's computer, deleting the internal traces of his connections to Diversity. He paused though, scanning two artifacts just behind Constant's keyboard.

They were two framed photographs.

Introduction, Company Handbook: Personal effects are against company policy for incoming employees. Employees should be looking to start a new life here at Diversity, discarding that which hinders and burdens the mind.

The Janitor replayed those words over and over in his head. A deep chill ran throughout his body. One of the photographs was of pinks, greens, blues, whites, browns, and reds. All mashed together incongruously. It didn't resemble anything the Janitor had seen before. Written in pen on the back was Constant's sloppy handwriting:

Mount Mitchell, with Mom and Alexis. Summer, 2000.

The Janitor had never seen colors like that before. Striking trees bathed in sunlight, with white tipped mountains towering over them in the background. The sky was a gorgeous rose color. The Janitor felt like throwing up.

The Janitor couldn't bring himself to touch the second picture frame. The weak wooden insert didn't contain a photo, but another small note in Constant's handwriting.

Missing - Arizona: family trip with me, mom, and Alexis. Summer 1996. Ask momma for more photos.

The Janitor felt tied in a knot. What lie out in Arizona? What unimaginable hue of orange is cast on those buildings, those highways and parking lots? They were completely removed from the Janitor's reality, mountains and landscapes that didn't feel possible beyond Diversity.

The Janitor tried cleaning through Constant's files, but he lost interest. The remnants of Constant were only more faces the Janitor didn't recognize, cases Constant had poured over, made notes for, given inefficient ultimatums to. The Janitor came upon a woman's face – a Parkinson's patient, just over eighty years old. Rosie Marie McDowell. She was more mountain ranges to the Janitor, another indescribable apparition from a corner of the world he couldn't fathom.

He shut down Constant's computer and rushed out of the room, climbing into an accessway duct and clambering for a few steps until he stopped against the wall. The Janitor couldn't see his hand past his nose there, trying to regulate his breathing until his eyes adjusted to the light.

Diversity Regulation #36 – Janitors may not be allowed to sit or rest for prolonged periods of time in any cubicle or meeting space outside of the ventilation accessways. When rest is needed, press the knees together and kneel back first against an accessway wall.

The Janitor kneeled, watching his knees wobble together, sending tiny reverberations throughout the endless vents and passages. He caught himself staring off into the void, staring at rivets

screwed in the same way each time. His mind shot back to that mountain range. He didn't know if there was an Aimlessness, Arizona – didn't have the mental strength to tell the difference between not knowing and forgetting. He couldn't tell if he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He stayed there, glued to the wall, until a buzzer went off in his earpiece to come and get him.