

## The Iron City Kids

Al doubled stepped down the hallway, skipped past his office then on towards the conference room. He was late for his staff meeting. At six foot three, a hundred eighty pounds, and blessed without the slightest trace of nimbleness, he was a giant black suit lurching down the corridor. Sheila stuck her head out from his office as he passed. "Phil just called. He wants you upstairs. Now."

"Jeez." He turned to her pedaling backwards, hitting one wall with a shoulder, bouncing back then hitting it again. "Tell Ameer you're still trying to find me. I need ten minutes with my guys. I gotta have enough time to cover a couple things with them. They're all there. Waiting. It'll be fast."

"Won't work, Al. I told Ameer you just got back from the meeting with Store Design. She knows you're down here," Sheila's voice drawn, tired. She had gotten in early, before 6 a.m., in another attempt to get through some of the papers that overflowed her In-Box. It had not gone well. Al showed up at 6:30, called her into his office and started to rearrange the meetings she had planned for his day.

When there was a pause between his moving this and inserting that, Sheila told him about the memo. The only one she had gotten through was another request from Payroll stamped URGENT in big red letters across the top. They asked once again why overtime had nearly doubled for the night crew.

Al had ignored the first one when she put it on his desk two days ago. The second one was nastier, threatening to freeze his overtime budget if he didn't respond ASAP. Sheila had come up with what she thought was a good response and wanted Al's approval.

"I'm telling them it's all due to the cheap paper we've been getting. That it keeps jamming up the laser printers so we have more people spilling into the third shift. You good with that?"

Al almost spilled his coffee on to his lap. "That's great Sheila! Really clever. That paper Procurement gives us is the lousiest crap I have ever seen. Jams up all the time too. Not that they have anything to do with the overtime but still, blaming it on some other area's cost cutting racket is a slick piece of work. Send it out."

That made her feel good for about 20 seconds and then it was back to Al's calendar. When they finished up at 7:30; the lights on Sheila's four-line phone were all blinking. That meant Ameer was in and Phil had changed *his* calendar. Phil was Al's boss and he drove Ameer crazy.

Phil had half a dozen managers that reported to him. His managers hated each other more than they hated him and Phil encouraged both by setting impossible deadlines, fanning rivalries and erratically axing budgets. "Management by Sturm und Drang," he'd say on mornings when things were going particularly well. "Deming had his way, I have mine." Ameer was used to it by now as were the other secretaries. They each spend their day stumbling from crisis to crisis, cleaning up after hallway calamities and muffling screams and fisticuffs that seeped from behind conference room doors.

So it was just another day for Sheila. The lights on her phone would stay lit all day, patiently blinking off and on in counterpoint to the whirling dervishes running in and out of Al's office. In early evening they would finally twinkle out as one manager after another slinked off to anesthetize the terrors of the day in one of the bars on Seventh Street. It was 1977. You could still buy a glass of beer for a quarter.

"Well, shit. Dammit."

He poked his head into the conference room. "I am sorry. I gotta go upstairs. We have to cancel. I put a memo on all your desks this morning about tonight's test time. You need to read it and be ready. If you have any questions, leave me a note and I will try

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to get back to you later today. It's pretty simple – have things cleaned up for the testers by 7 p.m. Start shutting down early if you have to but make sure they have it on time.

“I'll have Sheila get us together tomorrow and we can go over how things went tonight. Sorry. It's going to be one of those days.”

With that he spun and headed back down the hall towards the elevator. Shelia would have told Ameer he was on his way up. It had been a bad night getting the computer schedule out, the meeting with Store Design was a disaster and now Phil was going to kick his butt about something.

Al Morley managed the United Stores Global Data Center in downtown Pittsburgh. United Stores was the second biggest retailer in the American. They owned eight chains of retailers scattered across thirty-seven states. Most were long established stores like Strauss Brothers in New York or Nelson's in Denver or Bingham & Sons right there in Pittsburgh. Two of the newer chains – EZ-Buy and Gold Markets – were big box discounters going after Kmart and Hills. Most people never heard of United Stores but 70% of American shoppers bought something from one of their stores each week.

Phil Moss ran the technology side of the data center – the computer room, the network, all the phone systems, plus a bunch of people who programmed the things. Phil had been with the company four years. He hired Al two years ago. They were both part of a United Stores executive brainchild to centralize each of the individual store's IT organizations into one giant corporate group. Fred Finkelstein came up with the idea four years ago. He was the company's Comptroller and married to Irma Goldman. The Goldmans owned United Stores. Irma's daddy, Murray, was the CEO.

The stores weren't thrilled about having a single computer system run by the home office. Before Fred's consolidation proposal, the store heads pretty much operated their business any way they wanted. Sure, they had to negotiate their annual plan with Murray every January, often a brutal affair with Murray resorting to the Goldman version

of waterboarding until each president agreed to a sales goal they were certain could not be met.

But once it was done, it was done – you gave Murray a glowing sales report each month and he stayed out of your way for the rest of the year. You had twelve months to cook the books, find a disaster to blame on God, or marry a Goldman before you had to settle up with Murray again.

But if headquarters ran the IT systems, then Murray's guys would see the accounts and the inventory and the sales every week. All the magic the presidents used to bamboozle Murray into thinking everything was on plan would be quickly undone. No more fairy tales, no more rabbits leaping from a hat; Murray would have their nuts on the table every month.

Fred was married to a Goldman and Goldman blood trumped even the savviest store guy. So when the store heads heard Fred's consolidation proposal, they fell over each other telling Murray what a great idea it was. Then they quietly worked to sabotage any piece of it they could.

It didn't help matters when Fred hired John Chester to lead the newly formed United Stores Global Technology Group. Chester's claim to fame was automating the Chicago Board of Trade. Before Chester, the Board was doing their puts and calls on little slips of paper that got sucked into pneumatic tubes on the trading floor and blown up five flights to the booking section where three dozen little old ladies transcribed them into ledgers, wrote out transfers, and send wire requests to the owning brokers.

It was 1970 and there were these computer things around. So the Board of Trade hired John Chester to automate the floor and build a network that dialed up the broker's computers directly. John brought his old buddy Phil Moss along to handle the hardware end. Three years later, the Board was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a bunch of ladies took early retirement.

When Finkelstein was looking for someone who could come in and build an information system, he hired Booker & Booker to find the best IT executive around. They came up with John Chester. Chester wasn't crazy about moving to Pittsburgh but Goldman was offering big bucks and a nice stock package. Four years in Pittsburgh would make John a rich man. Chester convinced Finkelstein that computers were computers, buying and selling was buying and selling and there wasn't a whole lot of difference between automating a stock exchange and a national retailer. Unless all the guys who ran the little retailers that made up the national retailer shot arrows at the target on your back. But Chester didn't know that then.

Fred Finkelstein hired John Chester in September 1974. John brought in Moss two months later. By the time Al joined the firm in 1976, the 'computers were computers' had been recognized for the malarkey it had always been. Chester's consolidation plans had become mired in corporate sabotage, broken promises and appalling cost overruns. In year two, John Chester found out that different from the broker/bankers who ran things at the Board of Trade, retailers watched money like every penny was one of their children. Fred Finkelstein knew about cost overruns of course, but he never met one. Chester exhausted his whole 1976 data center build budget in the middle of the year and told Fred over lunch he needed more – like five million dollars more just to make it through the end of the year. It took about 30 seconds for Chester to realize the enormity of his fuckup. Fred's executive charm face with its benevolent smile and beaming eyes, slid into a scowl ominous enough to make Bela Lugosi's skin crawl as the words 'five' 'million' and 'more' tumbled out of Chester's mouth. It took Chester three straight scotches to explain what happened while Fred sipped ice water in silence. "We don't do this at United. Ever," was Fred's only response. Then he got up and left. Chester picked up the check on that one.

John Chester didn't get fired. Fred went to Murray and came back with the five million. But things had changed – Fred started looking at Chester's expenses every week, second guessing his supplier choices, and let the retail store IT guys turn the screws on

him a little harder whenever there was a problem. Murray approved Chester's 1977 plan and budget but he moved Fred to the west coast and brought in his brother Seymour as Chester's new boss. That's when Chester started keeping the bottle of scotch in his lower desk drawer.

So by 1977, John Chester's life was hell. As a seasoned executive, he ensured the heat under his feet burned his subordinates' even worse. Phil's life became miserable and poor Al – the guy who was building this hardware palace (and spending enormous amounts of cash) – poor Al quickly realized what a disastrous career choice he had made. His talent for managing people, a hitherto distinguished record of delivering projects, and mastery of contract law – all were reduced to insignificance soon after joining United Stores. His days were lost to numbing Phil Moss harangues, useless phone calls with peers at the stores, meetings with patronizing vendors and only half disguised smirks from the people who worked for him whenever he walked by. Who wouldn't be depressed?

Al replayed this catastrophe a dozen times a week, especially when he was on the elevator ride from his office on the fourth floor to Phil's on the seventh. As the elevator stumbled up the three floors, he figured today's stink bomb was probably the storage racks. Phil would have got the new orders this morning.

He stepped off the elevator. This was the minor Executive Suite. Chester and Moss had their offices here. Seymour's and Murray's were upstairs. Carpet covered the floor here; better carpet upstairs. Al's floor was graced with the building's original cement painted green.

Amee just nodded to Al to go in. Phil was on the phone talking to someone that sounded like one of the retail guys. His phone voice was slow and friendly but when he glanced up all Al could see was rage in his eyes.

“Goddamn Hooper in Miami! Fuck that guy! Another goddamn month before we can hook ‘em up. And then he will just string it out again in two weeks. Fuckin’ Chester says Seymour’s on Hooper’s side on this one.” Phil had hung up the phone.

“Screw ‘em. Phil. We’re all fucked if Seymour keeps letting the retail boys run wild.”

“Jesus you’d think with all the money he’s spending, he’d be on our side for once.”

“They’re retailers Phil. Countin’ every penny while dollar bills flush down the shitter.”

“Dollars. Yea,” Phil was changing track. “Ok – so no more storage racks Al. You know we don’t have the budget for this. They are cheap onesie-tvosie but you want a hundred more? Christ, come on! I don’t have money for this kind of crap. Why are you just figuring it out now you need DOUBLE the racks you asked for?”

“It’s those damn Store guys Phil – same as before. They drilled holes for the utility lines right in the middle of the computer room floor which cut through all the rebar. Now the right side of the room has about a third of the strength the floor was built for. So I moved the rack closets as far from the utility lines as I could. Then the engineers pull up the floor to take a new tensor sample and guess what? The fuckers had drilled some holes over there too only nobody knew about them. They must have drilled them first just guessing where the real lines would be. Beeker in Store Design says Penn Power moved the lines at the last minute. I figure they never checked.” Al paused to see how this was playing. Phil’s glare had not changed.

“Phil, it’s this goddamn retail mentality again. They bring in Store Design to build a computer room like it’s just another display window at Bingham’s. And they fuck it up. But the fuck up isn’t even on the blueprints they made for us. I didn’t know any of this stuff when I put the equipment closet where I did. Now I need to spread out the racks – can’t stack them more than three high or they will fall through the floor. So I need twice as many racks.”

Phil reached for the phone on his desk, picked it up, and threw it at Al. The phone flew across the room, the hand set and base separating mid-air, then the wall cord snapped taut and they both fell to the ground two feet in front of Al. Last week Phil threw a pen at him; he could still feel the sting on his cheek.

The phone lay on the floor – its whaa-whaa busy tone buzzing from the ear piece. Al stepped over to pick it up and put it back on Phil's desk.

"I gotta have the racks Phil. We need to set up the expansion area next weekend and the network equipment goes in the racks. It's all sitting in boxes waiting to be installed." Al sat down again.

Phil was looking down at some papers on his desk. "You buy the racks and spend the extra two hundred thousand. Then you cut two hundred thousand somewhere else in your budget. I don't care where but you figure it out." Phil scrawled something on one of the papers.

"Phil – that's impossible. It's September. The year is almost gone. How am I gonna cut that much?" Phil had piled one stack of paper on another and was reaching for a third. Maybe Phil was reading them; but Al figured it was just a way to ignore him. Might as well tell him now.

"Phil, one more thing." Phil kept reading. "We had an accident last week in the computer room. One of the guys broke his arm. He hasn't said anything to Personnel yet but if he does, we could have trouble. Just want to you be aware in case you hear about it."

"He broke his arm? In the computer room? How in the hell did he do that?"



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Phil's stink detector had switched on. "It happened during test time last Tuesday. One of the test guys got pissed and lost it. He threw a chair at the wall. Nelson – my guy – happened to be in the way."

Phil put his pencil down and looked straight at Al. Al slid back in his chair in case the phone was coming his way again.

"Were those tester guys drunk again Al? Tell me, were they drunk?"

"I wasn't there Phil. The security guard said the four test guys came in stumbling and stunk of beer. So he says they were drunk. My guys haven't said shit. Not after the ringer they got put through last time for complaining about the test guys. But if Nelson goes to Personnel and Personnel talks to the guard, there's gonna be trouble."

Phil sat back and looked at the ceiling tiles. "Al, this Nelson guy – what's he do?"

"He is just a tape hanger."

"Bright guy?"

"Bright enough to read numbers off a tape label and usually get it hung on the right drive. Not a lot brighter."

"Right Al, right," Phil was still eyeing the ceiling, "listen, I don't want to tell you how to run your department but you know what I'd do? I'd take this Nelson guy aside and I tell him you notice just how good a job he is doing. And I'd tell him about this new, better job that is coming up in a couple of months and how he could be perfect for it. You know?"

"You think I should bribe this guy? Jeez."

“I’m not looking at it that way. Hell you got a huge crew. You always got a place to promote somebody into. There’s ways to make this whole situation go away. Figure something out.”

Al got up and moved to the door. “I will let you know what happens.” Phil was back to the papers on his desk. “No need to Al. You just handle it so I don’t hear about it. OK?”

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Sheila was waiting for him when he got back to his office. “Tooters is looking for you. And your wife called. She is at a gas station off of I-79. She ran out of gas. Here’s the pay phone number at the gas station.”

*Jeez. How could she run out of gas? Like I really need more bullshit now.*

Tooters stuck his head in the office. ‘Five minutes is all I need, Al,’ as he plopped into the side chair.

Rex Tooters managed the testers. It was his guys that came in every Tuesday evening to take over the computer room for two hours testing whatever software they were getting ready to install. Tooters had only been with the company for three months. His predecessor was another guy Moss hired at the same time Al came on. He lasted eighteen months then Moss fired him after another software release schedule got missed.

Tooters was a pushy loud mouth still trying to figure out exactly what the test team was testing though his ignorance did not prevent him from quickly becoming a big pain in Al’s backside. He complained relentlessly about either the lack of test time on the computer or how Al’s staff meddled with the tester’s work. Tonight was test night. Tooters was here for one or both of those reasons.

“Listen Al, you got to get your guys under control. I need my full two hours of time tonight and I can’t have my guys standing around while your people finish up their last minute crap doing this or that. You need to be done by 6:59 p.m. My schedules are slipping. You’re the cause and that’s what I am telling Moss and Chester every time they ask.” Tooters sounded neither angry nor frustrated. He had agreed to widely unrealistic delivery dates in the first place, thinking that would impress Moss. Of course the dates were slipping. Now Tooters was going the motions to shift the blame, hopefully on Al. It was a fool’s game. Moss could care less about excuses. Tooters had already planted the sword he would soon fall upon.

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“Rex, you know how systems work. We shut things down at 6:30 but it takes time for stuff that’s already started to finish. We give you the full two hours. If you get the computers late, you give them back whenever the two hours is up. You always get your time.”

“Well he didn’t last week. We lost thirty minutes because that damn tape hanger broke his arm and everybody stood around pickin their asses till they finally figured someone should take him to a hospital.”

“He broke his arm because your guy threw a chair at him. You and I are both going to be in pretty hot water if this goes down to Personnel. And if it does, your guy is taking the fall. He was drunk and belligerent. This is a goddamn data center not a fight ring. I don’t give a shit what Nelson did or said. You don’t come into work drunk and assault people,”

“Leonard was angry ‘cause your guy was still hanging tapes but he wasn’t drunk.”

“Listen Rex, Leonard walked right past Jason Abbott the night guard, to get into the computer room. Abbott will say Leonard was stumbling about and stinking of beer. It’s in his log.”

“Abbott is a washed up flatfoot that even Bingham wouldn’t let walk the floors any more. He’s got to be near seventy. The store wanted to retire him, couldn’t, so they sent him over here. His word isn’t worth a shit.” Rex’s face was red and getting redder. He had probably joined his boys after lunch at the Rickshaw Lounge as they prepped their test plans over glasses of Iron City beer.

‘Say what you want, but listen: your guys were drunk last Tuesday just like they are drunk every Tuesday. They come in here tonight making a scene and I am shutting down the test period and you and I going to see Moss in the morning. Phil doesn’t put up with shit like this. Push it if you want but your guys have crossed a line.’ Al looked at him the whole time, waiting for something he could dig into. But Rex just sighed and looked down.

“Phil wants to make the dates. He doesn’t give a crap how,” Rex spoke slowly.

“You’re right. But Rex – you aren’t making your dates are you?” Al looked to catch his eyes but Rex was still staring at office floor.

He got up to leave, “Ok buddy. Just make sure we get our time tonight. My boys just want to do their job.”

So much for teamwork thought Al. He glanced at his watch – 5:50. Shit Vicky was at a gas station.

“How did you run out of gas?”

“You didn’t think the fuel gauge was working right? You wanted to see if the little light came on? Why on earth...! I mean, if you thought it was broken, why would you drive it until the indicator...?”

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“Sorry. I didn’t mean to get you more upset. It’s just that...well maybe you could’ve let me know last night...uh?”

“Well we have an important test thing going on here at 7. I can’t leave until it gets going and everything looks like its running, OK? Maybe 7:30; maybe a little later.”

“What do you mean Bobby is still at school?! He’s there now? Well shit.”

“I can’t leave now. Can’t Gloria or someone pick him up? When were you supposed to get him anyhow?”

“At 5? Do you know what time it is now? What’s going on with him now?”

“Now wait. They won’t lock the school up if he’s there. No they can’t do that. Can’t you get a cab or something and go over there now?”

“Where? The Moon Run exit? What were you doing over by Moon Run? Jeez you’re miles from the school.”

“Yea Ok....OK. You were driving. To figure out if the gauge worked. I got it. Jeez.”

“Hey don’t hang up. Vicky!! Vicky!! Shit.”

It was after six. Sheila was gone. He could see the light in Tooter’s office from under the closed door. The bullpen where the testers sat was empty. They were probably finishing off their last round of Iron City at the Rickshaw.

Al walked down to Alex Ranowski’s office. Alex was the department’s ‘Relationship Manager’. That meant he handled the sweet talking to the stores. Alex was a second cousin to one of the Goldmans. He had bounced around United Stores for over twenty years when Finkelstein brought him in from New York. From what Al could see, Alex’s

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main job was schmoozing – travelling across the country from one store to the next, dining a department head, buying drinks for a buyer, sucking up to whatever guy needed sucking up to. But he rarely came to the office so he didn't bother Al.

The office was a mess. There were piles of paper everywhere. Alex insisted on being copied on every piece of correspondence anybody in IT ever sent to a store. But he was never in his office so he never read them. There were reports, printouts, blueprints, stencils, all kinds of junk, stacked anywhere he could fit it in.

Alex liked cigars. Al poked through the desk drawers until he found what he was looking for: lighter fluid. He was in luck – Alex had two cans of the stuff - one half full, another unopened.

Al squeeze the full can over the papers and down the sides of the desk. The nice thing about Alex's office was that the main electrical lines for the building ran through a conduit shaft in the corner of the office. Those were the same lines that caused Al so many problems trying to install the equipment racks.

Al sprayed the second can across the carpet and around the conduit shaft. The smoke, and with luck, the fire itself, would race up through the shaft and into the computer room on the floor above setting off holy hell. By then, Al would be heading towards the parking lot and on his way to pick up his son. An emergency call from the school. What else could he do? Al had thoughtfully brought a book of matches with him.