

## Lessons Learned

The box of maple bars in the middle of the conference room table was a harbinger of doom. Someone tapped its smeared plastic window and said, "I see Jesus." Muncie opened the box, dug out a bar, and took a bite. The sugary grit felt good between his molars. He didn't give a shit about omens.

The mood was somber. Kitty, Muncie's manager, read the official reduction-in-work-force, or RIF, announcement. Muncie looked at Peterson who looked at Chambers who looked at Muncie. The engineers knew each well and Muncie could detect a slight quiver around Chambers' right eye. It was their third RIF in eighteen months.

Kitty, sweet Kitty, did her best to soften the blow, but the sanctimonious sound of *at stake* and *sacrifice* and *restructure* made Muncie want to puke. In the Greer Engineering days, old man Greer would dock himself during a layoff. Now, thirty five years later, The Xenix Corporation, a resoundingly successful Fortune 100 company, reveled in kicking people out the door. The situation was perverse.

Muncie thought about his work and team. They designed the rear pump actuator for the thrust cylinder of a tunnel boring machine. He held three patents and was the team lead. Besides his engineering colleagues, two data analysts, a

staff analyst, and four support associates, middle-aged women dubbed *The Hen House*, rounded out the team.

Muncie liked everyone. Kitty had done a good job keeping the right people, so far. He especially liked Karen Simons, the staff analyst, a funny-as-shit half-Chinese millennial, whose black boots and movie-star smile kept everyone cheerful. He expected the hens would take it in the shorts this time; the engineers were down two from a year ago.

Kitty finished her speech and invited questions.

Peterson raised his hand and asked, "What happens if we begin to lose money, robots?" He waved his arms like the chubby robot from *Lost in Space*.

"I don't know," said Kitty, "but I'll ask." She scribbled a note and Chambers cracked his knuckles.

A hen asked, "What does disruption mean."

"I have those sometimes," said Peterson, snickering.

Kitty scowled and made another note. "It's when a company does something radical that changes the competitive landscape, like when Dyson built his vacuum. Remember that? Now all vacuum cleaners have a centrifuge."

"Why don't we just say, 'make something better'?" asked Chambers.

"That's not it," said Kitty. "It's more than that."

"Is it? Really?" asked Muncie.

"I don't know," said Kitty.



On his way home from work that night, Muncie stopped at the store to buy some Pinot Grigio for his wife Patrice. Patrice was a nurse and her hospital was

cutting staff too. The Muncies were financially stable, but had happily spoiled their kids over the years and were playing catch up. Trump's inevitable gutting of Obamacare added to the household angst.

"You'd think we could catch a break," cried Patrice, when Muncie told her the news and topped off her wine.

"You should try some pot, honey," suggested Muncie. "Peterson says you can eat it now, cookies, candy, even cracker spreads."

"Yuck," said Patrice. "I'll stick to the Pinot."

Later that evening, while Muncie watched Monday Night Football, Patrice looked up from her knitting and said, "I'm tired."

"Then go to bed, honey," said Muncie as the Jets quarterback threw another interception.

"No, I'm tired here." She drew a circle around her head with her finger.

"Then get more exercise," said Muncie.

"Aren't you tired, Jim?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm tired. But be quiet. I'm watching the game."

"How tired?" asked Patrice.

"From here-to-the-moon tired," said Muncie, wondering what had gotten into his wife.

"I'm going to bed now," said Patrice, staggering to her feet.

"You might want to lighten up on the Pinot," said Muncie.



The next day at work was hectic. Five change orders arrived at once, each requiring an individual triage. A hen was sick and Peterson had physical therapy, so Muncie got stuck with most of the work. As he stood at his desk zooming in and out of CAD images, Chambers exclaimed, "Well that sucks."

"What sucks?" asked Muncie, warily. Chambers could be melodramatic.

"Kitty's email. Chad Thomas, that guy in service engineering, his kid died in a rock climbing accident yesterday."

Muncie checked his email. Sure enough, it was true. He searched the Internet and found the story. A seventeen-year-old boy had fallen 300 feet while descending Williams Ridge and had died on impact. His climbing partner, a girl, was able to reach the body and had spent the night on the ridge, before climbing out the next morning for help.

That's a hell of a way to spend a night, thought Muncie.

The email concluded, *The entire Xenix family extends its deepest sympathy to the Thomas family.* Muncie clicked the little x in email's corner more aggressively than usual.

Muncie tried to imagine how Chad felt. He recalled meeting Chad's son, Charley, a few years back, during a bring-your-kid-to-work day. Chad was a decent guy, even-keeled and heads down. Recently he and Muncie had discussed colleges in the cafeteria bathroom.

Muncie checked out the Internet again. A blog article described Williams Ridge as an easy climb, but its official web site listed it as a challenging twenty-seven pitch sport climb, pre-bolted for less-experienced climbers.

Muncie knew that climbing was a technical and rigorous sport. He tried not to think about Charley's fall. He wondered how many times he had tweaked the same part's design and if any of his actions had ever saved anyone's life.

Suddenly the mundaneness of his work paled next the enormity of Charley's accident. Zoom and rotate, zoom and rotate. He did the same thing, day in and day out. He wondered if Charley's accident could have been prevented. Lessons learned were a big part of engineering, but the lessons always seemed to come too late.



That Friday, during happy hour at Lucille's, Muncie saw Karen with a girlfriend, and waved them over to the engineers' booth. The girlfriend slid in next to Muncie, her thigh touching his. Karen draped her arm over Peterson's shoulder.

"I like that," said Peterson in mock affection.

"Don't get used to it, big boy," said Karen.

Everyone joked around for a while and they ordered more beer. Soon the discussion turned to weekend plans. Patrice was hosting a baby shower, so Ridley Scott was calling Muncie's name. Chambers had nothing and the women had party plans. Peterson was seeing a play called *The Aliens* by someone named Annie Baker.

"I just saw that," said Karen.

"What did you think?" asked Peterson.

"Do you like lots of talking?" asked Karen, sucking some foam off the top of her pint.

"Not so much."

"You will. The entire play takes place in an alley behind a coffee shop. A couple of guys, kinda losers, spend the entire time sitting around and talking."

“What happens?” asked Peterson.

“Not much,” said Karen.

“Why’d you go see it,” asked Chambers.

“Why do I come to work?” asked Karen. “It’s something to do.”

“What do you make of work these days?” asked Muncie.

“Well, you guys know I’m headed to the top, right?” Karen joked.

“Yeah, yeah. What do you really think?” asked Chambers.

“I think you guys do great work and should all receive medals. Gold, silver, and bronze.” She tapped each engineer with an imaginary wand and they laughed.

“Seriously,” continued Karen. “I’ll be lucky to last another year. You guys are fun, but the pay sucks compared to other companies. My roommate makes twice what I do, same degree.”

Karen was right, thought Muncie. Xenix was a crappy place to work. At one time, loyalty mattered, but not anymore. Now employees were treated like widgets instead of people. He would have pushed on years ago, were it not for his own inertia and a quaint notion of commitment.

Muncie drove home a little woozy. A Prius cut off his truck at a four-way stop and he bit his tongue. Then, at the next intersection, a jay walker gave him the finger, and he went blue in the face, his questionable mental health on full display. For the rest of the way home, all he could think about was Charley scampering up Williams Ridge with the girl.

Muncie parked in the garage and went inside. He kissed Patrice goodnight and headed straight to bed.



The RIF victims were announced the following week. Their team lost a hen and a data specialist. The hen, Becky, had been around forever and chose to leave immediately instead of waiting out her sixty days. When Becky's goodbye card came around, Muncie wrote, "Good luck with your new adventure," although her situation hardly sounded like an adventure. She was a widow and her father had Alzheimer's.

Kitty bought a small sheet cake and quickly organized a retirement party in the conference room. Ten to twelve people dropped by to say goodbye and disappeared fifteen minutes later. Becky and Muncie left staring at each other.

"What's it feel like?" asked Muncie. "At least you've got your pension."

"I hate getting rified," said Becky. "And why me? I'm a freaking rock star. You should see my performance reviews."

Muncie liked Becky and how she had always tried to dress nice, even though they all sat on their butts all day. She was reliable as hell, too. Once Muncie had stopped by her cube late in the day and noticed *Today is the First Day of the Rest of Your Life* written on a small white board. He didn't believe in little sayings or positive thinking or being cheery to make yourself cheery, but he didn't begrudge it in others. He inserted *short* in front of *Life*. The next day, Becky had scratched out *First* and replaced it with *Last*.

They had a good laugh over that one.

Muncie licked sugar crust off his white plastic fork. Becky sighed, covered the cake, and said, "All mine." She stared at Muncie, trembling slightly, and tugged at a thin gold necklace. She nodded at a glossy Xenix poster of smiling young people that said, *Our Employees are our Most Important Asset. You Make all the Difference.*

"Did you ever notice the word ass in asset?" she asked.

“Do you want some more cake Becky?” asked Muncie.

“You betcha,” she said.



A month after Charley’s accident, Muncie ran into Chad in the bathroom. They stood side-by-side washing and drying their hands before Muncie spoke.

“I’m real sorry about your boy,” he said.

Chad shrugged. “At least he went out doing what he loved,” he said.

“I’m not even going to ask how you’re doing,” said Muncie. “I’m just real, real sorry.”

“Thanks, Jim,” said Chad. “See you around.”

That evening after dinner, Muncie was checking his Facebook feed, when Chad’s name came up as a suggested friend. Muncie clicked the invite. A couple minutes later, Chad’s acceptance came back.

Muncie stared. He felt immediately more connected to Chad than he ever had at work. The intimacy and silence of their new bond thrilled him.

Later that night, he crawled into bed and draped his arm over Patrice’s waist. The hum of her CPAP machine sounded like a giant lung. He opened his eyes in the dark and admired his wife’s soft form. Soon his eyes began to hurt and he shut them.



The engineers got new CAD software, version 13.00015-B, and Xenix sent them to a three-day training event led by a Frenchman. Muncie preferred an older version. The newer versions were less useful and more complex.



An hour into the first day, bored out of his mind, Muncie asked if he and his fellow engineers could jump ahead.

“Non. All of you. You must do it,” said Frenchy, enjoying his authority.

The engineers muttered and ignored the instructor and jumped ahead anyway. Life was too short for such nonsense.

Muncie played around with the software training object. It was an electrical assembly that integrated hundreds of teeny-weeny wire bundles. The object reminded Muncie of an exhibit of a human nervous system he had seen, an entire electrical network sandwiched between two clear panels. He remembered standing nose-close and tracing each individual strand to its literal end, where it petered out to nothing.

Muncie zoomed in to inspect a wire. Then he zoomed out. The assembly shrunk to the size of a blob. He zoomed in again and pushed a slider to simulate electricity. Hundreds of wires burst, too much heat. Muncie made a note.

When the class finally ended, Muncie scored the survey as low as possible, except for Frenchie, who got a negative zero.



Chad Thomas’s first Facebook post about Charley arrived in Muncie’s newsfeed at 8:37 on a sunny Saturday morning. He was in his pajamas at the kitchen table drinking light roast coffee. He preferred dark roast, but it gave him the runs now.

There were four photos: a grade school portrait, a homemade ceramic mug, a silver document seal, and a triumphant shot of Charley raising his fists atop a summit.

“Jesus,” muttered Muncie as he examined the photos.

For the past few weeks, Muncie had tried and failed to push Charley from his thoughts. Sometimes he saw Charley's face as he toppled backward, no screams, death masks, or terror, just a surprised expression, like one might have when examining a blemish or lump in the mirror. He often saw Charley land, not on a rock or outcropping, but on a gymnasium floor, a place where a trust fall might occur, somewhere without a blue sky.

Muncie had also been dreaming about falling himself. After each dream ended, he awoke feeling oddly powerful, as if he could control gravity. He vainly hoped Charlie had felt something positive in the end, a glimmer, an insight, something.

A long post accompanied Chad's photos. Muncie poked *continue reading* and words ran off the bottom of his phone's screen.

He closed the post without reading it and wondered why he and Chad couldn't just talk? What had happened to real conversation? Facebook isolated everyone and everything and turned discourse into itchy little confessions, overwrought exhortations, or vague calls to action, share, re-post, trash, read later. Did anyone ever read later, wondered Muncie? He thought about un-following Chad but didn't.

For the rest of the day, Muncie was distracted. At the tire store, the clerk asked for his name and he said "fine". At the golf range, he knocked slice after slice into the netting. At the grocery store, he bought Patrice's favorite food, whole Dungeness crab. Then, later at dinner, while alternating between sourdough bread knobs, crabmeat morsels, and gulps of wine, the broken shell pile began to depress him. As he gathered everything up and headed for the garbage, Patrice barked, "Hey, I'm not done yet," so he told her to clean up herself.

There was no explaining it.

At 1 AM, after tossing and turning for a few hours, Muncie finally read Chad's post:

*Hi Charley, Dad here. Your Grandmother came over last night for dinner and brought your favorite meat balls. I can still remember the first time I mashed one of those babies up when you were a baby. Mom told me it would be too spicy, but your face lit up like a pumpkin. Grandma isn't doing very well right now, so we got out some of your photo albums for a look-see. That seal is from your Jr. High School diploma. She wanted me to take a picture, since your high school graduation is coming up soon. Another picture, the one from Mt. Pintaro, you emailed from the summit. Later you told me that Megan had taken it. I chuckled when I saw it, because I knew how much you liked her and wanted to look cool. It's the red bandana. Megan is home from college and stopped by. We played a game of Yahtzee in your memory. She said she really did like you. I think about you everyday son. Mom is doing well, all things considered. We gave your climbing equipment to Walter. His family doesn't have much money. I miss you every day. Talk more soon. Love, Dad.*

87 people had liked the post, a combination of sad and happy faces, hearts, and other emoticons. Nobody had commented. Muncie touched *Like* and the counter displayed his name next to the counter.



The next week on Tuesday, the engineers had just come back from lunch, when Kitty stuck her head into their area and asked to speak to Peterson. Muncie stood on his tiptoes and glanced over the top of his cube divider. Sure enough, Bill Luce, Kitty's boss, was sitting in the conference room. Luce seldom appeared and never during the middle of the day.

Fifteen minutes later, Peterson returned from his impromptu meeting visibly upset.

"Gonna say anything?" grunted Chambers.

"What's there to say," said Peterson.

"Are they giving you a package?" asked Muncie.

"C'mon," said Peterson and led the guys back to the conference room, where he explained that Karen had accused him of sexual harassment and that Human Resources was investigating. She had also threatened to sue Xenix. After today, he would be on paid administrative leave, until the investigation ended and he knew his fate.

The three men sat in stunned silence.

"What did she say you did?" asked Muncie.

Peterson wouldn't answer.

"You gotta say it, right now," demanded Muncie.

"She says I touched her appropriately. She also says I harassed her."

"Did you?" asked Chambers.

"What does it matter," cried Peterson. "She said I did. She's always snuggling up to me at Lucille's and talking about her problems. Once she asked me if she should do breast reduction surgery and I said I thought it would be nice."

"Nice?" said Muncie. "You thought it would be nice?" He remembered the times his gaze had lingered on parts of Karen's body, parts that she seemed to appreciate herself. He might as well be on the complaint too.

"Did they mention anyone else? Tell us what to say. We've got your back."

"Tell them whatever. That was the strangest meeting of my life."

"What happened?" asked Muncie.

“After Luce told me, he asked if I knew what part of a person’s body I can legally touch at work.”

“Legal?” asked Chambers.

“Yeah. He demonstrated on Kitty. It’s the shoulder.”

“No way,” said Chambers.

“I was sitting down. He and Kitty stood face to face. Then he reached out and touched her shoulder with his fingertips and she touched his. He’s a lot taller, so she had to stretch. They were staring into each other’s eyes. It looked like a weird salute.”

“So, there was space between them,” said Muncie.

“Of course,” said Peterson. “But it still felt sexual as hell.”

“How’d you touch Karen,” asked Muncie.

Peterson stood next to Chambers and gently wrapped an arm around his waist.

“That’s it?” cried Muncie. “There’s gotta be more.”

“She said I left it there a little too long,” said Peterson.

“Any witnesses?”

“A couple of hens I guess.”

“I’m gonna complain too,” joked Chambers.

The investigation into Peterson’s behavior began the next day. Kitty told Muncie and Chambers to cooperate with the investigator. They both mentioned Lucille’s, but nothing else, because there was nothing else. After Muncie’s interview, the investigator asked him to sign an iPad with his finger, which didn’t feel very binding.

Kitty hired a temp to fill in for Peterson. Troy, a Caltech PHD and CAD software expert, looked like a young David Bowie and had half-dollar size gauges in his earlobes. He was twice as productive as Muncie and Chambers.

Down the hallway, Karen was acting like Peterson had gone on a long vacation. Muncie wanted to talk to her, but worried it would look suspicious, so he waited. Then, one evening while leaving work, he saw Troy kissing Karen in the parking lot.

The next day he confronted Troy and said, "You're playing with fire. I shit you not."

"Get a grip," said Troy. "I play by my own rules, old man."

Muncie suppressed the urge to stuff Troy's gauges down his throat. Chambers intervened and sent Muncie to the factory floor to cool off. He walked around for a while and chatted with some of his favorite foremen. He stepped into a design lab. The technicians were huddled around a 3-D printer watching thin white plastic strands spin themselves up into an ovoid shape.

"What is it?" asked Muncie.

"A lemon," someone said.

"A lemon?" asked Muncie. He squinted and watched the bumpy skin form.

"Why a lemon?"

"It's a test. Don't get so bugged," said someone.

"I'm not bugged," said Muncie, "just astonished. A freaking lemon."

When he got back to his work area, Troy and Chambers had left for the day. Muncie got on the Goggle Earth and looked at Williams Ridge again, searching its soft shale surfaces, its breadth and reach, for clues. A half hour later he was still looking.



Chad Thomas continued to post photos of Charlie, greeting cards, trees, favorite foods, admired DVDs. Muncie found that he could now read the words without wanting to die himself. He showed a couple to Patrice, who said, "That's so sweet, what a great dad."

Muncie wondered out loud if Chad had really been a great dad or if he was trying to make up for a lack of good-dadness with the posts.

"God you're cynical," admonished Patrice. "Why can't you just accept things at face value? It's part of his grief process, not an exercise in truth. You feel like you feel when you feel it."

"But we're always being tested," said Muncie. "I can judge if I want to, so lay off. We're judged at work, by society, by our families, even by dogs. Life comes with judgment."

"But you have no evidence," said Patrice. "You'd never say what you just did, if Chad were here to defend himself."

"I guess I can't explain it," said Muncie. "But look at Peterson. He's going through hell," said Muncie.

"Peterson is dead to me," said Patrice. "I never liked him. He's slimy. I hope he gets canned."

"That's unfair. You don't even know what he did," said Muncie.

"I know," said Patrice.



A few days later, Muncie ran into Karen in the parking lot and they chatted.

"Did you really threaten Troy?" she asked.

"I didn't threaten him. I advised him. About you. Look what you did to Peterson."

"And what did I 'do' to Peterson?"

"How about you tell me," said Muncie.

Karen was silent. Muncie could see her referencing her lawyer's instructions.

"Don't worry," said Muncie. "This is just between you and me. Old friends."

Karen began to rock back and forth on her heels.

"If anyone asks, I will deny it," she said. "Peterson and I went out. A few times." She placed her index finger on her lips.

Muncie was suspicious. Karen was making stuff up now.

"He didn't say anything to us," said Muncie.

"Of course, he didn't. I told him not to," said Karen.

"So, he didn't touch your ass at work," said Muncie.

"He touched way more than my ass," said Karen.

"But why?"

"Because his wife found out."

"So why punish him?"

"I'm not. I'm punishing her. You don't screw with your husband's girlfriend and expect a free ride. Okay, him too. He led me on."

Muncie was struggling to keep up. "So, Peterson broke up with you and now you're trying to get even. You must have really liked him."

"Not really, but I have daddy issues," said Karen.



“You know Peterson could lose his pension.”

“I hope he does,” said Karen. “He and his wife can eat gruel for the rest of their life.”

Muncie tried to draw a diagram in his head connecting the dots. He didn't understand. He knew Karen to be sane and calm, but there was something else bubbling up underneath. Was it a generational or personality thing? All he knew was that the world had just gotten less safe. Hurt was coming at him from all directions.

“So, why tell me?”

“Because I want someone besides Troy to know. And don't mess with him. He knows Tai Kwon Do. He'll kick your ass.”

“Friends?” asked Muncie, reluctantly sticking out his hand to hedge his bet.

“I guess,” said Karen and they shook.

When Muncie got home that night, he opened his email and read a note from Peterson saying he had been exonerated and would return to work the next week.

The next day, Muncie wrote a resignation letter, printed a copy, and tucked it in his top desk drawer.

When he told Patrice about it, she said, “You're not ready.”

“What if I am?” asked Muncie.

“You're not,” she said.



Peterson returned to work full of piss and vinegar, crowing about his victory. Karen dropped by to say she had been promoted and would be moving to Plant 7 to manage ten people. The new Kitty, thought Muncie. Peterson asked Muncie to take

some pictures of him and Karen together. On the final snap, Peterson stuck out his tongue.

“Why?” asked Muncie later.

“It was after that play, *The Aliens*,” said Peterson. When the second act begins, one of the main characters is dead, but you don’t know it until halfway through. Boom. The playwright killed the guy during intermission. You think he’s alive and then he’s not. And then it hit me. I don’t want to die during intermission. I want to fuck Karen Simons. It was all I could think about. Dumb, huh?”

“I guess so,” said Muncie. “Why is it called *The Aliens*?”

“It’s their old rock group from high school.”

“So, the play is about memory,” said Muncie.

“Yeah, memory, I guess,” said Peterson.



The next day Muncie officially resigned. He sent an email to Kitty and then walked a printed copy out to the factory HR service center. It was the only place in the entire building where he could talk to a live person. It had always bothered him that he had never met the Xenix board of directors or CEO face-to-face. He wanted to test them, to see if they were honorable like Greer.

The woman in the service center read his letter and said, “Thirty-five years. Wow, that’s a long time. Bet you’ll be having a heck of a party.”

“Nope,” said Muncie.

No way in hell he was going to suffer through another pathetic sheet cake or doughnut box.



The next day Muncie went for a drive. The day was sunny and, as his truck ascended deeper into the mountains, the air cleared and the peaks brightened. At mile marker 407, he turned off the freeway and drove seven miles up a gravel road to Williams Ridge. He parked next to the off-season barrier, climbed over it, and kept going.

He couldn't see the ridge, but knew it was out there, hidden behind the trees. He remembered a web site that had listed the fifty ways you could die descending down a mountain. All the warnings involved mental errors – thoughts of love, relationships, or sex, the longing for it or the memory of it. He wondered if Charley had been thinking about his female companion when he died. It was an unfair accounting, the list, thought Muncie. Who can presume to know what someone is thinking the moment before they die, accident or not?

When he got to the ridge's base camp, Muncie drank some water and looked up. The flatness of the lower levels surprised him. He was expecting something more treacherous. He tried to mentally calculate the slope and sine of each switch-backing plane. Higher up, the ridge steepened. Sunken bolts marked the path forward.

Clearly, hundreds, if not thousands, of people had successfully scaled Williams Ridge without perishing. Why Charley? There would never be an answer.

Muncie shielded his eyes and looked at the sky. He imagined Charley's rope falling from nowhere, landing on the ground, and coiling back on itself, freed from its owner. He had never climbed anything, ever. He thought about trying to scale the ridge up to the first bolt, just to honor Charley, and decided it would be utterly stupid to attempt such a thing without gear, people, or knowledge. It was a different decision than he might have made as a young man.

Muncie sat down at a nearby picnic table, opened his backpack, removed two cube-shaped white boxes, and opened them. The first contained a huge cupcake

with purple frosting inscribed with the name Jim. He ate it slowly while sipping water. When he finished, he sucked purple frosting from his fingers.

Muncie opened the second box. Its inscription was simpler, the single letter C. It was for Charley and the girl, whose name he didn't know. He removed it and set it in the center of the picnic table. Patrice had done a nice job.

Muncie walked back down the gravel path toward his truck. It was getting dark. He thought about the second cupcake. Soon, a bird, raccoon, or possibly a bear would eat it. Soon it would be gone.