

## Home From Work

by Ice Bear and Pan

“This is ri-gosh-darn-diculous,” I muttered to myself as I sat down at my desk.

At least, it was meant to be to myself. Apparently I wasn't as quiet as I thought, because my manager, Gary, looked up from his computer screen at my words. It made me glad my profanity filter had reasserted itself. Weird, how comfortable I'd gotten letting swear words fly at home, but suddenly, back in the office, I was my own censor again.

“Sorry,” I offered to my department manager over the divider between our desks. Gary is a few inches taller than me, and has red hair that always looks like he's just crawled out of bed. He's... fine, I guess, so far as managers go. Ambitious, which is a mixed blessing. On the plus side, he's responsive to complaints and – so long as I'm getting the work done – tends to leave me alone. When it comes to IT jobs like mine, nobody's in it for love of the game. Just let us do what we need to do and stay out of our hair while we do it.

OK, so Gary didn't mind people talking at him. Unlike me, though, Gary thinks he can talk his way up the ladder. I just want to do my job and cash my check, but my manager thinks he's going places. Maybe he will. I guess. He's not a bad manager. Really, we get along decently most of the time. The only real drawback is that he's... I dunno, pushy? He's always convinced that we can do more, be better, always trying to take things to the next level. Before lockdown there'd been four of us, but the company had tightened its belt, and now we were the only two left in our department. I wasn't looking forward to having all that tryhard resting on fewer shoulders, but that was the gig.

The best part of Gary's ambition is that he goes and attends management courses and the like whenever he can. It means that he'll be gone, sometimes for days at a time. Even during lockdown, he went and enrolled in some persuasive speaking course for middle managers. That's right. The company's *Information technology* manager, the guy whose job is to govern all things coding, used his free time to buff up his interpersonal skills. Typical Gary stuff. I don't know the details (he's not the kind to come back and bore me with everything he learned, thank God), but I'll say this for his little class – it meant we didn't have to have our daily meeting for like two weeks straight, so I got to sleep in every day.

“What's the problem, Carol?” he asked, and I tried to mask my annoyance. Not at him, to be fair – it was the damn policy.

“I just don't see why we have to return to the office,” I said, trying to sound professional. (Emphasis on the 'trying.' I'm not the best at hiding my feelings.) “Full-time hours, back at work? I swear, I was just as productive at home.”

“I hear you. You're preaching to the choir, Carol.” he replied, and it was all I could do not to roll my eyes at him. Ever since that last course, he'd been trying out some kind of empathetic listening thing. Like I said, he hadn't told me exactly what he learned, but it wasn't hard to back

engineer it. He may as well put the steps on a poster on his side of the divider.

- 1) Agree. Nod.
- 2) Acknowledge their complaint without judgment.
- 3) Ask a clarifying question. (Disregard the answer if desired.)
- 4) Offer a solution or a compromise.

He'd tried it on basically every Zoom call, but this was my first time enduring it in person. It made me feel managed in a way his pre-persuasive-speaking-course method hadn't. Still, that fourth step was better than dead-ending with him toeing the company line.

"You must really miss working from home," he continued – without judgment – staring deep into my eyes. That must have been part of the course, too – on Zoom it had been easy enough to just look at my camera instead of the screen, but in person I obviously didn't have that option. Still, I figured I could endure a minute or two of awkward eye-contact. Then I'd just have to remember that I was back in the real world, unable to simply mute myself when I wanted to sigh with exasperation.

"Mm-hmm," I said. Despite being a ginger, Gary had these dark blue eyes. I'd never noticed that before. So dark. It was easy to find myself getting lost in them, nodding as he nodded, waiting for the question that I was sure was going to follow.

"What do you think you'll miss the most?"

There it was, step three. The way he'd locked eyes on me, though, I wasn't counting. In fact, it was strangely hard to come up with an answer; my brain felt languid, like my thoughts were traveling through soup.

"Um, well..." I began, eventually managing, "I guess I miss the, uh..."

"Answer honestly," he pressed. To my surprise, I found myself doing so.

"I miss being able to nap in the middle of the day," I admitted. "And getting to spend all day with my dog. And my husband." My husband shouldn't be an after-thought, but, well, he knew how I felt about our little Molly.

"What else?" he said, and I continued. He'd said be honest. I wouldn't get a solution if I didn't share the problem. Or... something.

"Being able to wear whatever I wanted. Like, not having to dress up..." I gestured at my collared shirt and black skirt. "...every day."

He nodded, and glanced down at my outfit, and it was like the spell was broken. I could feel my thoughts rushing back, at full speed – almost too many at once, like a jumble I'd have to sort out

later.

“Well,” he said thoughtfully, and I knew what was coming next. The compromise. Step four me, Gary. “Obviously we can’t have your dog or husband in the office.”

“Right,” I nodded, carefully avoiding eye contact. I didn’t want to get sucked back into the world’s most awkward staring competition.

“But... I mean, if it really won’t make you less productive, I don’t see why you wouldn’t be able to have a short snooze in the middle of the workday.”

That got my attention. “Really?”

“Mm-hmm,” he said, his eyes locking back on mine. “I mean, we won’t tell management, of course.”

“Of course,” I replied, nodding as he did.

“And however long you spend asleep, you’d have to do that much overtime.”

“Of course,” I said again, blushing slightly, hoping I didn’t sound like a broken record.

“Okay,” he said, clapping his hands. The sudden percussive noise ought to have startled me, but I didn’t even break eye contact even then. “Neville’s old office is empty, I’ll set something up in there.”

With that, Gary walked away, leaving me slightly stunned, in part because I could think clearly again, and in part because I could hardly believe his suggestion. It wasn’t like he’d always been a complete stickler for the rules, but... I dunno, maybe the management course had taught him to loosen up a little. I certainly hadn’t expected my slightly petulant complaint to result in a dedicated nap room. When I’d seen the office the two former IT staff had shared dark and locked up, I’d figured it would be a storage closet, not my personal perk space.

Not that I’d be using it much, of course. Napping at home was completely different; I got to cozy up with my husband Jason, or our dog Molly. And if the time I spent napping was being replaced by extra hours at work... yeah, you can see why that held very little appeal.

Still, it was good to feel heard. And hey, maybe I’d actually use the nap room, on rare occasion. It was nice to have the option, at least.

I’m not what you might call an expert in human nature. That’s why I work in IT, not HR or marketing or anything where you need that thorough understanding of human drives to do your job. 1’s and 0’s don’t complain, don’t want to vent about their morning commute, don’t even drink coffee much less complain when they have to make a new pot. IT problems were just that – problems. You solved them, and then they weren’t problems any more.

People? There were no solutions. Believe me, I see more than enough of human nature through

my daily barrage of bug reports. Or, worse, people who refuse to *file* bug reports and just email me personally with every issue they encounter. (Yes, Leslie, I'm talking about you.)

But when Gary approached me a few days later, I immediately realized what I'd done wrong.

"Hey, Carol. I can't help but notice that you haven't used the nap room...?"

"Oh. Uh..."

I didn't even have a good excuse. Gary had... honestly, he'd gone above and beyond. I'd expected an old couch and a throw pillow, maybe an old blanket from Goodwill that had smelled better days. You know? Something where you could plop down and not feel weird about it.

I should have remembered, though, that Gary doesn't do half-measures. He'd somehow managed to bring an entire futon in (without anyone noticing) and gone full bachelor pad on it. Everything brand spanking new – the futon itself, by all appearances, but the rest of it, too. New sheets, fluffy new pillow, and a new blanket. The thing even had the company logo on it.

He'd shown me, proud as a peacock, and I'd thank him, sincerely impressed. The day after, he'd been excited to show me the drawer full of earplugs and eye masks, too, in case that would help me nap.

I'd expressed gratitude, of course, but... yeah, like I said, napping at work really just wasn't the same, especially if it meant working late to make up for it.

I had barely started to come up with an excuse when, to my relief, Gary provided one.

"I know what it is," he said. "It's the clothing thing."

"Mm-hmm," I nodded. He was staring at me with those deep blue eyes again, and as he nodded, I did too.

"I feel foolish. You told me, and I wasn't listening. Well, I'm sorry, and I'm here to tell you that I get it. Hundred percent. You want to be able to dress like you did at home. Instead of..."

This time, Gary was the one gesturing at my body. Not in an 'I need to file a complaint' kind of way, just indicating my navy skirt, white button-up blouse, and black heels. He didn't break eye-contact this time, however, so I just continued staring at him as he spoke.

"Do you like having to wear all those frumpy, unattractive, uncomfortable clothes?"

I... Did I? It felt like a question I should know the answer to. I tried to guess at the answer from his tone instead. It felt like his implication was clear. "Um, no...?"

"That's right, no. Can't say as I blame you. I tell you what, though. This is a little unorthodox, but our office is far enough away from anyone else. You can really wear anything in our little nook. Just wear your normal work clothes, then change once you get in."

Something about that didn't quite sound right, but Gary was nodding and staring, and so I just nodded and stared back.

"What did you wear at home, when you didn't have a meeting?" he asked. "Be honest."

I blushed. Some days I'd laze around in sweatpants and one of Jason's t-shirts. Other days, especially as it got hotter, I wouldn't wear anything but a pair of panties.

But obviously I wasn't going to tell Gary any of that.

"Most days I wouldn't wear anything but sweatpants and a shirt," I said, staring deep into my manager's eyes. "And some days... nothing but a pair of panties."

"Well there we go," he smiled. "I really want to make your return to the office as pleasant as it can be. On days when we don't have a meeting, you can wear that. Then maybe you'll be comfortable enough to use the nap room."

I didn't want that. I didn't want *any* of that. I didn't want to nap at work, not really, and I certainly didn't want to dress like a bum in front of my manager – much less to strut around the office without a top.

Without even a bra...!

Or... did I?

After all, when Gary had asked me why I didn't want to come back to work... that's what I'd told him. That I missed being able to wear whatever I wanted. He'd been listening after all. He'd heard me loud and clear. That I wanted to nap. That I'd enjoyed the relaxed dress code at home. That I missed my puppy and my hubby.

We couldn't do anything about the last two, but... well, Gary was offering a solution to the other half of my complaints.

But something still felt wrong.

My thoughts were like molasses, so it must have been several minutes that we sat in silence, my gaze locked on Gary's blue eyes as I tried desperately to assemble a thought.

"Won't... won't it be... weird?" Best I could do. The feelings were there, but words... Words hard.

"Not at all!" Gary laughed. "This is for you, Carol. I want you to feel as comfortable here as you did during lockdown. I want to do everything I can to make the transition back to the office easy. If we can let you retain a little slice of home, then let's."

"But..."

The clock continued ticking by as I struggled to get another sentence together. But... something.

But... Um, but... Butt? He would... My butt would be... Hmm. I was close. Maybe.

“I don’t want you to see me in panties,” I finally said, my face red at the exertion. Something was wrong, but it had been enough just to get that thought out. I knew I wouldn’t be able to even start tackling that problem anytime soon.

Gary nodded. I nodded. Nod. Nod.

“Uh huh, uh huh. I can understand you’d feel uncomfortable with your manager seeing you in panties. What specifically about your panties would embarrass you?”

I stared at him, barely able to comprehend the question.

“You’re wearing them now, after all, aren’t you?” He chuckled. I heard myself mirror a hollow imitation of a laugh. Ha. My manager, asking me if I had panties on. It was pretty ludicrous... wasn’t it? Ha.

Gary must have seen me struggling, because after a moment, he offered an answer. “I think I see. I can’t *see* them right now. You’re worried I won’t like what I see if you showed me. Is that it? Is it that they’re not sexy enough?”

He nodded, and so I found myself nodding eagerly as well. “Yes!” That must have been it. I couldn’t think of anything else about my panties that Gary would find off-putting. Like I said, they weren’t lingerie – I would just wear whatever I had lying around.

Not that Jason ever complained.

“Okay, so let’s compromise. You can wear nothing but panties, but no embarrassing granny panties. Only thongs, or lacy pieces. Since the rest of the department is men, just wear whatever you think might appeal to men. Think you can handle that?”

Appeal to men? How would I know? I couldn’t think. What if I had a can’t-think attack like this when I had to choose? I’d stand there all morning staring at my underwear drawer. Jason would come home from work and find me there, contemplating which panties were best for work.

Oh! “I’ll just ask Jason.” I felt good. That had almost been a thought.

The moment I said it though, I saw in Gary’s rich blue eyes it was a bad thought. “Do you always ask your husband to approve of your work outfits, Carol...?”

“No.” Should I? I wanted to ask, but I didn’t want to look stupid again.

“Right, of course not. The company decides the dress code, not our spouses, unfortunately. And since I enforce the company’s decisions, just worry about what panties I’d like. Right?”

It sounded wrong, though. Even wronger than before. “I–”

Gary nodded. I shut my mouth, nodded along. It sounded like a solution, and that was exactly

what I'd asked for.

"In fact," he added, "I'll even help you out a bit. I like garter belts, stockings, that sort of thing."

We nodded together for another minute or two, before he broke eye-contact.

"Great!" he said, strolling back to his desk. "I look forward to seeing them tomorrow."

Right before he sat down, he shot me a grin.

"And maybe then you'll feel comfortable enough to use the nap room!"