

## Headcount Reductions

By David Moss

Bentley glanced inside Crube's office as he passed by, then doubled back and came inside, closing the door.

"This isn't easy to do, Roger."

Days later, Crube still couldn't recall what came next without a chill of shame, a violent shaking of the head, as if he were trying to bludgeon the memory into dust. He could have listened impassively or sneered at the faked sympathy on Bentley's face. A simple clenching of the fists and a step forward would have scared the lunch out of the slick little errand-boy.

What he did instead, after waiting deferentially for Bentley to finish explaining why they were letting him go, he looked up from the ground and said, "Please, Andy, please don't do this."

Down the hallway, past the gauntlet of averted eyes, into the lobby, the receptionist saying, "Going to lunch, Roger," which she would recount later with pity in her uncomprehending beast's eyes, beneath those blue stenciled eyelids, telling everyone how she had no idea - she thought he was taking an early lunch. How could she have known? Poor man, poor Roger. The elevator taking him down to human resources as people emerged from their offices to shake their heads sadly and whisper in solemn tones that in a few hours would melt into laughter and sneering sarcasm. The human resources director taking him through the forms, telling him to take them home and sign them at his leisure, as if he were too shaken to sign them so soon after the shock. Shoving her pity back in her face, speaking in a carefree, gregarious voice, as if at a party, "Why save it for later? What's the big deal? I'll sign right now." Then leaving for good, resisting the urge to turn and shout, "Why the fuck are you standing up behind your desk while I'm walking out? Go back to writing your e-mails about peoples' employee anniversaries and cars parked illegally in reserved spots. You used to be a secretary, don't you forget that."

Walking past the rows of reserved spaces, slowly, calmly, so anyone who might see him couldn't say later they'd seen Roger Crube walking unsteadily, finding his car and driving out of the parking lot.

He wasn't sure what day the two policeman showed up at his house. The light was fading, he remembered that. Since it was December, the sun still setting before five, it must have been around four thirty.

He could see the stub-nosed one looking over to where the bowls and pots sat unwashed on the kitchen counter and felt a surge of gratitude that he took it all in without disgust.

"Mr. Crube, we were wondering if you could tell us where you were last night?"

Dark hours after they left, he lay on the sofa, still gripped hard by the uncertainty of how he knew what happened the moment the tall, sad looking one asked his question. They never mentioned Bentley's name once the entire time they were at his house.

When Crube didn't answer the question right away, they both stiffened, the stub-nosed one raising his chin in the air as if aroused by the scent of fear.

He finally managed to say, “I was here, in my house, I ordered Thai food, from Thai Café on Pico, they’ll have a record of that,” realizing that pouring out all this information made it appear like he was desperate, with something to hide, but unable to stop himself.

“You ordered Thai food. What time was that?” The tall, sad looking one asked this question too. His partner, incredibly, was watching the muted TV they hadn’t asked Crube to turn off.

“About seven.” The slobs at Thai café wouldn’t have saved his receipt, but they could match the order to the amount and the cash register might time stamp transactions. As he raced through these possibilities, his mind burned with an alertness that felt almost like power.

“You came back with your Thai food?”

“They delivered it.”

“They delivered it and you ate it.”

“Yes, I ate it.” His inflection said *ate* as opposed to other things a person might do with food. A half-hearted attempt at a joke, which was something a man filled with guilty fear could never pull off. The police either didn’t notice or they chose not to acknowledge it.

“What did you do after that?”

“I fell asleep.”

The snub-nosed one turned away from the TV and jotted something down. The tall, sad looking one looked down at his shoes.

Crube felt a hot flash of rage. They assumed he was lying. They were both swollen with pride over their deep understanding of the shameful human species. They’d been there five minutes and already they had the audacity to group him in with the lowlifes and liars they patiently set their traps for every day.

His rage began to amuse him. It almost made him laugh. Out of pure blind luck they happened to be correct. He was lying. Not out of fear of them, or because it was his nature. He had no choice in the matter. Because the truth was he wasn’t really home last night. The truth was he was crouched in the bushes outside Andy Bentley’s house.

After they drove away, their flashing light drenching his living room in blue, he went to the LA Times site for confirmation. He found the article on the metro page. Andy Bentley. Stabbed in his kitchen with his own knife. Found by his girlfriend just after ten when she got home from dinner with friends. Pronounced dead immediately.

Crube tried half-heartedly to float the possibility that he was getting his nights confused. God knows he’d been there often enough these past few weeks. But no. He was sure he was there last night because he remembered the internal debate. The Thai food had made him tired. A drowsy tired on top of the feverish tired he always felt lately. He almost didn’t push himself off the sofa cushions. Then the other part of him pulled out the trump card, the memory of himself, looking up, saying in a shaking voice, “Please, Andy, please don’t do this.” And the corners of Bentley’s mouth, spreading outward into a smile. Crube burned with shame and hatred at the memory. He had no choice but to go.

The funny thing was, unlike the voice mail messages, he hadn’t accomplished anything yet by spying on Bentley. He’d found a cluster of bushes about ten feet from the plate glass window outside Bentley’s living room. Some nights Bentley would sit

there watching TV. If he wasn't watching TV, he only walked through the room once or twice, usually while talking on the phone. One night a branch jabbed Crube in the back. Shocked, then roused by the pain, he crawled out of the bushes and up to the outer corner of the window. He sat there, ear pressed against the cold glass, as Bentley marched in and out of the room, talking on the phone. Crube heard snippets of dull conversation and that was it. He was struck by the futility of his visits and vowed then and there to find a more productive way to take his revenge, but for whatever reason he'd kept returning faithfully almost every night.

Once Crube convinced himself he was in the bushes outside Bentley's house last night, he turned to the problem looming behind everything. How had he known the moment the tall, sad looking one asked his question that Bentley had been killed? The logical and reassuring answer was he understood they were probing for an alibi, which they would only do if they suspected him of committing a crime and what crime would anyone think he had a motive to commit other than the murder of Andy Bentley?

He pressed his burning face into the rough waffle fabric of the sofa cushion. He'd spent so many waking hours fantasizing about killing Bentley. He set up the scenes meticulously. If one detail didn't belong, he went back and re-built the entire scene in his mind. In one of those scenarios, he crept out of the bushes, walked through the unlocked door to the porch adjacent to the plate glass window and then through the door that led to the living room. Bentley was moving lithely over the cream carpet, his glowing blue headset attached to his ear, talking with the breezy arrogance Crube knew so well. He turned and his eyes shone with the terror of a man who knew his sins had finally caught up to him. Crube didn't use a knife in this scenario. Two unforgiving hands around the neck was all it took.

But this was only one scenario, one of many. Crube didn't remember leaving the bushes until he went home last night. He didn't have the slightest trace of recollection of entering Bentley's house and how could he have gotten in anyway? The two doors were only unlocked in his imagination. Here it was, almost twenty-four hours afterwards. Pieces of memory, shattered by the trauma of the act, would reassemble slowly over time, wouldn't they?

He rolled off the sofa and ran into his bedroom and threw all the clothes out of the hamper. The gray tee shirt and Kirkland blue jeans from yesterday didn't have the slightest dot of a dark stain. Bentley would have fought back. He checked over his arms then ran into the bathroom and turned on the light. No wounds anywhere. He read through the news story on the computer again. He opened and closed his right hand, seeing if there was any muscle memory of grasping a knife.

Then he was blindsided by a horrible thought. Did somebody see him crouched down in the bushes and set him up to be the fall guy? This was baseless paranoia, and just when he'd begun to think his mind had gone back to working crisply and efficiently. Nobody could have seen him there unless they followed him from his house. If someone wanted to make him their fall guy, the idea would have come from the messages he'd left on Bentley's voice mail. How many had there been? They weren't friendly messages. A few of the ones he'd left when he was drunk might have been construed as threatening. Yeah, "I'll crush your grinning skull with my bare hands like a walnut in a nutcracker," probably qualified. Crube laughed out loud and pounded on the sofa cushion as he imagined Bentley's smiled collapsing in fear as he listened to that one.

It would have to be someone at the office. They'd chosen their fall guy wisely. Crube heard the jokes. The Postmaster General. "If Roger Crube ever gets laid off, I'm calling in sick that day."

Most of them had witnessed the incident with the cake. It happened almost a year ago, before Bentley had gotten the first of his two promotions, when Crube was still technically his superior. It was toward the end of the workday. Everybody in the office was anxiously awaiting the latest sales numbers. There was a shout and Shawn Kentner from research came running down the hallway waving a piece of paper in the air. "They're up! They're up! All over the country they're up!"

Everyone was herded into the kitchen for cake and ice cream. The celebratory yelps were muted by the kitchen door. Sitting in his office, door closed, Crube could picture the scene in his mind. Executives lounging carelessly on tabletops, a dutiful secretary handing out pieces of cake on little paper plates with white plastic forks. High-fives exchanged each time one executive passed another. But if the pieces of cake were only handed out to people who had had something to do with the sales increase, they could have sent the cake right back to the bakery and there wouldn't be a single piece missing.

He despised these people for the way they so effortlessly feigned camaraderie. Camaraderie was something he had never been able to feign, and God knows he'd paid for this shortcoming. Upper Management sensed he could see past their expressions of glazed civility and into their own dark hearts. McKenna, when he talked to him, would always look away - maybe at the ground, maybe at his desk, maybe at the wall behind him, but always away. This started the very first day they met, right after the introductory handshake. Crube remembered the scene vividly. Him breaking free from the handshake pre-maturely, McKenna looking down and staring at his hand in horror as if Crube had just slashed at it with a butcher's knife.

As he was sitting there at his desk, he felt a sudden cold clammy chill, like he'd just walked into a cave. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Andy Bentley walking toward his office, carrying two paper plates of cake. He came right up to Crube's office, stopped outside the doorway and handed Crube one of the plates.

"Here you go, Roger, you earned it."

Crube took the plate as if in a trance and stood rigid as a statue as Bentley turned and walked back the way he came.

Next thing he knew he was running down the hallway, holding the cake in front of him like it was a plate of toxic waste. Bentley was up ahead now, just outside the door to the kitchen. He must have heard Crube coming because he stopped and turned around and stood waiting with an expression that was both quizzical and cheerful.

"So you've decided to join the celebration after all. It's only fitting. We owe it all to you."

"If I wanted a piece of cake, don't you think I could've gotten one myself?"

Bentley blinked his eyes rapidly, as if he'd just walked into bright sunlight.

"If I wanted a piece of cake, don't you think I could've gotten one myself?"

Crube said again.

"I think you're capable of anything you put your mind to, Roger," he smiled.

"I knew cake was being served in the kitchen and, knowing that, I chose not to come to the kitchen. So doesn't it stand to reason that I didn't want any cake?"

“Maybe I wasn’t applying logic as rigorously as I should have,” Bentley said in a bantering tone, as if they were engaged in a little friendly one-upmanship.

“‘Here you go, Roger, you earned it.’ That’s what you said. Here you go, Roger, you earned it, as if you were the one in charge of doling out the rewards.”

“Everybody was having a good time in here. I didn’t want you to miss out.”

“You didn’t want me to miss out? You?” Crube practically spit out. “I didn’t realize you were running the show now.”

“Come on, Roger, bring your piece of cake inside, join the celebration,” Bentley said, pushing open the door.

“Look who’s here,” he called out. “Ben, you were doing some pretty funny impressions earlier and Marty told me a joke that really made me laugh out loud. But none of you guys can hold a candle to the stunt old Roger pulled on me just now.”

Even whispered conversations came to an abrupt stop.

“I just brought Roger a piece of cake in his office. Next thing I know, he comes tearing down the hall and catches up to me outside the kitchen and says…” and Bentley gestured to Crube with both arms, giving him the honor of repeating what he’d said.

“Come on, do it for them, Roger. Ah, he’s too modest. Well, I can’t do it justice but I’ll try. Roger pretended to be furious that I brought him a piece of cake. ‘If I wanted a piece of cake, don’t you think I could’ve gotten one myself?!’”

Everybody laughed.

“That’s great,” someone shouted.

“And he didn’t even crack a smile when he said it. You guys think he’s all business, but he’s got a festive side that won’t quit. Oh, it was priceless. The whole time he had this look of fury like he was a raging lunatic.”

Bentley turned to Crube and began applauding slowly, appreciatively, until everybody else joined in.

“I don’t know about the rest of you,” Bentley shouted over the applause, “but I’m not going to be the poor fool that tries to follow up that brilliant performance with a joke of my own.”

Crube pulled his arm back and whipped the plate of cake against the wall like a Frisbee. As he walked out of the kitchen, the sound of the applause came crashing off the tile floor, the kitchen walls, pounding him from every direction. He made it out the door and gasped for air.

“Brilliant,” he heard Bentley say, “brilliant. The guy’s a natural born showman.”

Crube’s temples throbbed at the recollection. Any one of those people high fiving in the kitchen could have pegged him as their fall guy in some vaguely imagined future scheme. But only the voice mail messages qualified as preludes to murder. The police didn’t come just because Bentley had fired him. They came because Bentley reported the messages to HR and the bureaucrats there notified them.

Crube’s thoughts flashed to Trish, the woman who’d been fired the same day. She’d called him at home. He’d forgotten all about that. She’d called to tell him she was let go too, as if they could bond in their humiliation. He’d been struck dumb by her missing shame. He was polite and made sounds of sympathy but he got off the phone as soon as he could. Now, one thing she said was coming back to him. Bentley told her it was just a budget-cutting move ordered by McKenna, a headcount reduction in McKenna’s words. Victor McKenna, Executive VP, head of the media department. He

was on the executive committee. If threatening calls were reported to HR, he'd know about them.

Re-imagining the cake scene, he could see Victor McKenna sitting there, a tablefull of lackeys around him, drinking the scene in like the booze he obliterated himself with every day at lunch.

McKenna observes the lunatic, tells himself lunatics are good for pinning crimes on, especially when their unbalanced rage is directed at the man you want dead. So he sets things in motion. He orders the man he wants dead to fire two people, knowing the lunatic will be one of them. The lunatic abides by his nature. He makes threatening phone calls. He throws in some bonus instability by stalking Bentley outside his house.

All very nice. Too bad Andy Bentley was Victor McKenna's golden boy. McKenna promoted Bentley twice within the span of a year. He'd given him a reserved parking space, probably doubled his salary. People couldn't understand. They knew Bentley was a suck-up, but for McKenna to fall for the act like that? "What does Bentley have on him?" people would joke.

Jokes emerged from truth. You couldn't explain the two promotions from performance. McKenna didn't appear to like Bentley. Crube even recalled during meetings, glancing over at McKenna, being shocked by the menace in his eyes when he looked Bentley's way. So what did Bentley have on him? Something worth killing over?

Crube pushed himself off the sofa. "Your reasoning should be exhibited in the circus," he said to himself savagely. McKenna a murderer? Victor McKenna, with hair the color of the best family silverware.

The trail of memories and sensations led Crube back to the bushes, not last night, an earlier one, the night the branch jabbed him in the back. Dampness from the dirt seeped through his pants and chilled him. Bentley was pacing in and out of the living room like some kind of caricature of a life force, head lowered, yammering away on the glowing blue hands-free phone. The shock from the branch sent Crube crawling out of the bushes, through the open space, where his dark form could easily have been visible, and up to the window. The fierce cold of the glass shocked him. Bentley was finishing up with some breezy flirtation. A long silence. Crube could hear his own pulse throbbing in his ear.

Then Bentley began marching and talking again. "Why hello? Of course you could. Of course. I understand that." This tone was different, sneering, mock deference, that's what it was. "And now I have a question for you. Is Donna Yarls having fun yet?"

The underlying meaning of the references floated through Crube's mind at the time, but he hadn't bothered taking the two ends of the thoughts and tying them together. Donna Yarls had been in the headlines of the industry trades on and off over the past year. She was one of the top executives at a rival agency who'd been accused of fraudulently over-billing the client. Eventually it went to trial and she was actually sent to jail. "Are we having fun yet" was McKenna's inane pet phrase. He ambled down the hallways, poking his head into offices and cubicles, saying it with a grin and a pat on the back, oblivious to the cringes and grimaces every time he said it.

Say what you want about Bentley, he would never utter a clichéd phrase in earnest. He had far too refined a sense of mockery. In fact, that's what Crube assumed at the time, that Bentley was ridiculing McKenna to one of his friends at work.

But what if he'd been speaking to McKenna, tossing his pet phrase back at him as a threat? There had been whispered speculations about billing improprieties. But the whispers floated through the hallways one week and died out. The relationship with the client seemed as secure and stable as ever. But suppose there had been improprieties. And Bentley had discovered them and was using them to blackmail McKenna. That would explain "Is Donna Yarls having fun yet?" It would explain the two rapid promotions. It would explain the unguarded look of raw hatred Crube was sure he'd seen in that meeting.

Who knew when those policeman would decide they'd allowed him to stew in his own guilt long enough and come back to make their accusations? Crube turned onto his stomach to push himself off the sofa, but the cushions absorbed all the force and he rolled onto the ground. He got up and went out to his car.

"I'm here to see Victor."

McKenna's wife was model tall, and the way her cheekbones curved back made her face look like a shield.

"Can I tell him who's here?"

"I don't know, can you?"

Shoes pounding on marble floor. "Crube? Roger Crube?" The bluff fraternity reunion voice scraped raw.

The wife hovered in the hallway behind McKenna, lecherous with curiosity. Crube had come prepared for the man of action. He waited for McKenna's rush to the phone to summon the police. Instead, McKenna said, "I'll be right back, Darling" over his shoulder and walked outside and closed the door behind him. They stood beneath the shadows of wind-bent palms. "Well," he said.

"Well," Crube replied.

"You put a lot of good years into the company, stellar work that never went unnoticed, and that's why I'm about to say what I'm about to say," McKenna tripping over himself in his reflexive groping for meaningless boardroom phraseology.

Crube laughed and slapped his hand violently against his thigh.

McKenna's lower lip twitched, as if he were the one receiving the blow. He re-gathered himself. "As you may or may not know, Andy Bentley was murdered last night. The police came to the office asking about you. I told them you were an outstanding employee, gave us all we could hope for."

Crube shoved his face up close to McKenna's and gave his best bulge-eyed deranged stare. "You're trying to steal my thunder, Victor, why are you trying to steal my thunder?"

McKenna took a hesitant step back.

"All these years, what I endured from that little punk Bentley, I take my revenge and you dare to take it away from me by telling the police I didn't do it."

McKenna twisted his lips sideways, wringing out the healthy American blood.

"You're in the circus now." Crube laughed.

"Well, I thank you for your visit, Crube. I'm sure you can find your way home."

Crube swooped around in front of McKenna. "Are we having fun yet? Is Donna Yarls having fun yet? How about Andy Bentley? Is he having fun yet?"

Just like that, Crube knew what the eyes of McKenna the corpse would look like. Such a cool and profound truth he had to share it.

“I know what you’ll look like when you’re on display in the funeral parlor. Don’t worry. It’s very respectable.”

McKenna gave Crube the steely, cocksure executive stare he’d mastered over the years. “You murdered him, Crube. You just admitted it. He fired you and you murdered him. I’m surprised they haven’t arrested you yet.”

Crube jabbed his open hand forward, stopping inches in front of McKenna’s mouth. “Did you really think I was going to stay in my clump of bushes all night? I came in through the door to the balcony. I was surprised to find it unlocked, but it was. I went inside. I followed the noise down the hallway to the kitchen. That’s where you and Bentley were. Bentley was on the ground, you were standing above him, holding a knife.”

McKenna looked back toward his house. He lowered his head, rubbing the outer corner of his eyebrows. He shifted his gaze to the houses along the street. “The Jenkins’ live there,” he said, seemingly to himself. “I like living next to the Jenkins’.”

“The Jenkins’ won’t lose you to LA County prison if you do what I tell you, Victor. The police didn’t really talk to you, did they?”

McKenna shook his head in slow motion. “HR.”

“HR told the police about Bentley firing me and gave them copies of the voice mail messages I left.”

McKenna kept nodding.

“Bentley could prove you were over-billing the TopCo client. But it went beyond that, didn’t it? He could prove you were personally pocketing the money.”

McKenna jerked his head away petulantly like he was in junior high. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Listen to me, you worthless old fool, if I tell the police it was you who killed Bentley, they might not believe me at first, but they’ll start checking things. They’ll see if the evidence from the scene matches you. They’ll show pictures of your car to Bentley’s neighbors. They’ll want to know where you were last night. Maybe that trophy wife of yours won’t be in a big hurry to lie for you. Maybe she wouldn’t mind having the house to herself.”

“Bentley knew. He threatened me,” McKenna whispered.

“When did you decide I’d be the guy to pin it on? Was it the day I threw the cake?”

McKenna stepped back, maybe out of fear that the next punch wouldn’t be a phantom one. “You were the natural choice. That day confirmed it,” he said.

“You told Bentley to fire two people, knowing I’d be one. You thought I might do something unstable, but I bet you didn’t count on those voice mail messages. What a stroke of good fortune. Bentley reported them to HR and you found out about it?”

“I’m on the executive committee.”

“How did you know I’ve been stalking Bentley?”

“I went to your house once to see if you had a routine. I followed you here. I saw it was something you did regularly.”

“And you gave the police an anonymous tip I was outside Bentley’s house last night.”

“Yes,” McKenna said.

“They were just at my house. They asked me where I was last night. I lied and told them I was home asleep. When they come back, I’m going to admit I was lying. I’m going to tell them I was really right here, outside your house, stalking you because of the headcount reductions you ordered. You’re going to confirm that. You’re going to tell them you saw me and chased me away. It’ll give you an alibi too.”

McKenna was staring silently at the Jenkins’ house, re-gathering his strength. Crube braced himself for a counter-attack. But instead he said in a frayed voice, “If you were here stalking me, why didn’t I call the police and make a complaint?”

“You’re a hard-as-nails executive. It takes more than a deranged former employee to spook you.”

McKenna gave a wan smile as if Crube had given him a sincere compliment. It stirred his resistance. “Why do I need an alibi? I’m not a suspect.”

“How did you ever get your position? It’s insurance against me ever changing my mind and giving you up. I’ll never risk losing my alibi. Oh, one more thing, Victor. I want my job back. I also want a reserved parking spot and a VP.”

McKenna stood up straight and extended his hand. “We could use a good man like you. Welcome aboard, Roger.”

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