Dispossessed!

Arthur Hadley

I have been a company executive for so long now. I have forgotten what other life I have led on this good earth. You work so hard to measure up, to earn your goodies a nice car, a comfortable home with a loving and attentive wife and the kids running all over the place. Just think of it, one day all this goes away like a puff of wind. Or as good old Omar Khayyam might say, ‘you live like some Sultan with his pomp, abide an hour or two and go away. This is how I am feeling now, it is so easy to lose it all. My Volvo’s gone too smashed up and I have no option but to find other transport into the city.

All this going to and from to office everyday, day in and day out, who needs this? Why must I do this everyday? It’s torture. I’m beginning to feel like a tattered coat upon a stick, an old rag tied to a god’s tail. Yeats was rather sick of life but I am still dedicated to work and loyal to hearth and home, a thing my old granny made sure to be ingrained into my cerebral value system it sure keeps me going in this jungle of a city life.

Company bosses these days are usually chauffeur driven. You can spot them as easily as you might spot a leopard among a bunch of deer. They will be there in the rear seats of their plush limousines sur rounded by piles of files and ponderous documentation, company profiles, share market reports and perhaps a copy of ‘Business Today’ thrown in among all that clutter. They sail along in their sleek limousines with muffled engines in what might seem like a cool sea of tranquility. But those lower down the company ladder like me wend our days in our little buggies self- driven through a maze of morning and evening traffic. Today, it’s not even that. I have to walk down to the main Panadura bus stand to catch one of those ‘specials’ that take you ‘express’ into the city. I am at the bus station by 9.30 am – that’s about when I get into my car on other days.

If everything goes well, it means I can make it to my desk by 9.59.08 which is four minutes before people start wondering whether you are out to lunch before the day has even started.

Younger executives and salesmen getting used to the new mode of transport have

already moved in placing themselves strategically in seats where they appear to enjoy a feeling of togetherness. All of them are looking fresh, scrubbed to a state of cleanliness achieved only by well-groomed poodles. They are perfumed, ultra shaved, hair plastered down with dollops of cream and sprayed over to keep each strand in place. Each has an impressive looking document case, colored file dockets or books on abstruse business management techniques spread out on his lap. They stare glumly at me almost as if to stay I am not welcome and make comments across at each other about debt loads and basis points, as if they were discussing a cure for cancer. I didn't exist for them. I look around and see briefcases of various shapes and sizes along with all kinds of assorted paraphernalia scattered over in their territory, to discourage potential aspirants to any of the vacant seats.

When I got in there was hardly room anywhere else in the bus beyond the pale of these detestable fledglings of the new world of business. I look around. There is a seat or two. 'Can I sit here please?,' I say politely and receive a look that would melt cheese. After a transitional moment of some duration, one of them grudgingly moves his junk on to the overhead rack, sighing and glaring as if he was ready to punch me. '



Look,’ I told this callow young man who had settled down now and seemed to be studying for an exam on brokerage license, ‘you can do what you like, but I want a peaceful ride into town. So I hope you don’t mind.’ He nods and we do the eye lock thing for a few minutes longer. Then I sit down and get my paper out. He continues to share at me for a while. Then he’s back to marking up his prodigious document with minuscule tiny annotations. “International Bank of Commerce’ said the letter head. If ever I want an aggressive banker, I guess I’ll know where to go. I hate the newspapers. It has news in it. Our share market is in an upward swing, the army is getting somewhere and nowhere. No news is good news, is what I say. I turn the pages carefully not wishing to disturb the crusty starched captain of industry at my side.

In my office at last, I place my box of sandwiches before me. I look at my watch. It’s 10.12, I’m 8 1/4 minutes late. I should have finished my first cup of coffee by now, and been on my second. I look up and see Mahinda our CFO who should have been up on the 14th floor, in my conversation. area. ‘Give it here Arthur,’ he says, and before I know it, he has lurched forward in one quick motion and grabbed my breakfast box. The most important meal of my day! In an instant it is gone. What kind of deal is that? My wife has been up very early this morning and without waiting to shake me out of bed has been working hard on those cheese, vegetable and roast beef sandwiches, and now there, it’s gone. I’m used to this. It’s the first of the many re- wards I have each and everyday.

I feel restless, caged. I decide to ‘step away’ for a few minutes. This is something we always do. Sometimes we are ‘at the bank’. Sometimes we’re just ‘across the street for half an hour,’ or ‘working out downstairs’ for a while. During

these time periods we develop our vision. Vision is a key thing. Without it, you’re in trouble. I go to the elevators. None will come. “What’s up?’ I ask Helen our receptionist. ‘No one is permitted off the floor except at approved hours,’ she says. Is it possible that she looks a little smug and accusing? That would be unlike her. To be disrespectful.

‘And don’t raise any bills on the food ordered from the restaurant out there,’ she says. “In fact, you can start paying for your food altogether.’

What, no free food? That’s at step backward. At the beginning I had to account for the pizzas, hamburgers and plates of kadale that were brought up. Things changed. Today, food materializes in the middle of important conversations, which must be

continued beyond and through times when sane people are digesting what they have already consumed. Platters of food stuff magically…. appear. For breakfast meetings there are loads of submarine burgers, piles of fruit, gigantic chocolate cookies and always coffee, rivers and decanters of coffee. And at night dinner's out at the Hilton 'Curry Bowl or where you will. Really! no more of those?

When I come back there are big burly guys in my office. They are carrying out my enormous vice presidential desk specially ordered out to design specifications from 'Don Carolis' and the most beautiful piece of office furniture around. "Where are you taking my desk?,' I ask a mover. I notice he is wearing those very large multicolored Bata canvas boots that are the fashion with the younger set these days. Odd. 'You're being moved to a cubicle down the hall,' he says. A smaller office. "Does it have a window with a view of the sea?" I ask.

'No, only one giving you a birds-eye view of the Fort and the old clock tower with no face,' says the man. Is it possible he is grinning at me? I'm vice president. 'Not anymore,' mutters a sad voice behind me. It is Daminda, our head of human resources. We are bringing back Noeline de Abrew, the woman you reported to for eight months in 1987, who almost drove you insane. You're being reassigned to something in Employee Development.'

'But why?' I wail. I cannot believe how upset I am about this. My guts are in an uproar. Churning with a rolling cyclone of regret and loss, I remember how ecstatic it was when we moved in from our old office down Chatham Street. When I went into my neighbor Vasu's office, I relished the opulence of my own office setup. The only thing that seemed to be wrong was a post in my space that was not in his and need not have been there. What do I do? This discrepancy made me very angry at the time, but I got over it. What could I do? As an executive, the quality of my surroundings far exceeds my actual merit. The gap between what I have and what I deserve is the measure of my status.

'You're not PA enough,' says Daminda. He has a kind of sad smile of a crooked sort on his face, as if his worst fears for a good friend were being realized.

I'm willing to be more PA,' I tell him. I mean it too. What have I been thinking about? Believing that I could maintain opinions that did not go along with the grain of the corporate culture prevalent in our outfit? Arrogance! Well, maybe it's not too late. Maybe I can do something to get it all back. But what? I've lost my title! What am I with out it? I am sitting at my desk, but my desk is not there. I'm just in a chair.

Other than that, the office is empty. I hear laughter in the hall. It’s Vasu and Daminda, Haminda and Harendra, and they are all in casual clothes. What are you doing, fellows?” I ask. My voice sounds very small and timorous in my ears…] know I will be left out of it, what ever they are doing. I’m not dressed for it, because I’m wearing… green. Strange I don’t wear green. “We are going for a meeting out- side the office,’ says Haren. How could I have not noticed? They are carrying badminton racquets. Why didn’t I get one? I begin to weep, and feel ashamed, but one can’t stop crying. Sobs wrack my frame. I want to play too!’ I hear myself howl

Suddenly, I am at home. I’m writing to executive search firms. After all this, I need to get a job within the next six months! After all the caring, the sharing, the wisdom, the insight, the valuable role I have played! All taken away because I am no longer necessary! I won’t put up with it! After all I am Hadley! Pull yourself together man! I look in the driveway and see a late model Nissan Maxima. I realize with disgust that while it is a nice car, I have paid for it myself. “Where is my Volvo?’ I scream. Yes it belongs to the corporation but I have a right to it, the repairs to it are over and the CD boxes with no CDs in them and the crumpled documentation in the glove compartment are mine! Mine, I tell you!

A hand comes out of the darkness to my right and pushes me upright, firmly but gently. My friend,’ says the aspiring Rasputin of our hellish business world. ‘You’re drooling on my shoulder.”

And I was too. It was all at dream! I felt like putting my arm around my neighbor and giving him a manly hug. I still have everything! It’s all here before me. Waiting. Waiting for the day to start and get increasingly worse, and the worse it gets, the better I like it. The bus comes to a stop at the Regal halt and I am out among the milling throng going about looking aimless or with dead intent, as I make a note of the faces in the real world. But for me it’s another business day. I am part of it. I’m awake. I’m alive. Everything is as it should be. Oh, brother……. there is no place like home!