

How Cathy Lost Yet Another Boyfriend

A Tale of Corporate Culture

by Wiley Hart

I don't know if I should tell you this story or not. It might lower your opinion of me. But I suppose opinions, especially opinions about dubious cases, are more in your line of work than mine. So why not?

I only got actively embroiled in an April Fool joke once in my life – on April first, nineteen eighty-two – and my feelings about what transpired on that occasion have always been kind of mixed. I'm not really proud of it. But I don't feel too guilty, either. It was all so off the cuff. There was no malice aforethought. One twist just kept leading to another and, before I knew it, the whole escapade seemed to sprout a natural life of its own.

You may recall that I was living then in Minnesota, where one of us outlanders from Canada can blend effortlessly into middle America. My employer was an engagingly chaotic medium-sized software company that was rocketing up the left slope of the bell curve mapping what would soon prove to be its brief but brilliant life cycle. The company's product was a terrific operations control system that ran in big, mainframe computers. The inner workings of that system consisted of over two million lines of program code woven into a gloriously complex network of logical and causal relationships. The best adult toy, let me tell you, that I ever played with.

Anyhow, this company employed a standard allocation of the usual suspects found in the software industry. There were, of course, some pretty high-spirited but acutely creative characters as well as some borderline crackpots, and I guess I was one of each of those.

So, on that fateful morning, I was in my office. Not a big office, mind you, but no contemptible cubicle either. Anyhow, I was scribbling specifications for yet another classy enhancement for our classy software, when Cathy, who was a senior programmer/analyst in our department of design and development,

bounced giggling through my doorway just bursting to share something good.

"Oh, I don't know what I've done," she bumbled, grinning and waving her arms in mock distress. Since I had been engrossed in work for in excess of ten minutes, I was due for a break and was more than pleased to hear her story.

The previous evening, Cathy's girlfriend P. J., who was the office administrator in our finance department, had been babysitting at the palatial home of P. J.'s wealthy Uncle Harvey. Cathy and her current boyfriend had dropped in to keep P. J. company. The house was an immense, high-rolling spread and the little group's running gag for the evening, the joke *du jour*, was that nobody knows what mysterious Uncle Harvey does for a living. Ha ha, wink wink.

Now it was the next morning, April Fool's Day, and Cathy had just finished talking by phone with her boyfriend. This fellow was a recent hire in our documentation support group, which, due to the company's rapid expansion, was located in a rented office a couple miles up the road. I had not met him, but had heard that he used to own, of all things, a shoe store and was a nice guy with a somewhat imprudent predilection for gambling. Funny thing, but I can't remember the guy's name.

Maybe I should mention here that Cathy, while in no way a loose or inconstant person, tended to go through gender relationships at a pretty healthy clip.

Well, during her phone conversation Cathy had just fed her boyfriend a cockamamie story to the effect that Uncle Harvey, whom the boyfriend had never laid eyes upon, had decided to let P. J., Cathy, and mister boyfriend take his private jet and fly to Las Vegas for the upcoming weekend. Why? A rich man's munificent whim, I guess.

Of course, Cathy's wager-junkie boyfriend was suitably ecstatic over this totally bogus prospect. Then Cathy called P. J. and the two of them had a real hoot over it. Then she zipped over to my office because she pegged me – gee whiz, *moi?* – as just the person to help her savor the shenanigan.

I chortled obligingly and heard myself saying, with nothing specific in mind, "You know, before you bring him thumping back to earth, maybe we could perform another iteration of this routine."

Cathy promptly settled into the chair across from me and cocked an eyebrow. She was on board. I dialed my phone, having no idea what I was going to say.

"Hello," I said, "may I speak with [whatever his name was]."

And Cathy's boyfriend replied, "This is [whatever his name was]."

"This is Harvey Jurgenson," I said, doing my best to mix a little rasp into my articulation. I paused briefly and added, "P. J.'s uncle."

"Oh yeah! Hi!" enthused the boyfriend. "Hey, wow, thanks!"

"That's okay. I want you kids to take the airplane and have a good time." The wheels in my head were whirling now. "That's why I'm callin'."

Visions of Edward G. Robinson in *Little Caesar* and Brando doing Vito Corleone, jowls padded with tissue paper, danced in my head. "Nyaah," I thought, "ya can still dish it out, but ya can't take it no more." "Jushtice," the voice in my head wheezed, "you want jushtice?"

"I wantcha t' fly to Vegas," I resumed, "and have lotsa fun. My niece means th' world t' me. So I tell you what. I'm goin' t' give you a thousand dollars just so you can show the girls a real good time."

Sounds of vigorous hyperventilation filled my ear, so I paused briefly again. Cathy, meanwhile, had both hands clapped over her mouth. Her eyes bulged, her chest convulsed silently, and she was tilting precariously to one side.

Gasping for air, the boyfriend collected himself. "Gee, whew, hoo, gee," he panted, "thanks. I don't know what to say. Thanks. Thanks."

"Hey, that's okay, kid. Use the grand for anything you want. Food, shows, seed money

for gambling. Anything. Just make it good for the girls."

"Oh, yes sir, yes sir, I will. Thank you so much." I wasn't sure, but I thought I could hear him tap dancing on his desk. I waited.

"And in return," I said slowly, "I wonder if you would do me [momentary pause] one small favor."

The boyfriend's voice acquired a new, oh-so-slight element of caution. "Why . . . sure. What's the favor?"

"Well," I said, "when you get to Vegas, I'd like you t' deliver a small package for me."

Thirty seconds of stone still silence followed. Cathy was now exerting superhuman effort to contain her conniptions. I was afraid she would fall over with the chair and hurt herself and, worse, produce a wail of hysteria-*cum*-pain that would blow the whole thing before I got his answer. Was this guy ever going to figure out that it was April first?

"Ah . . . er . . ." he finally said, "my boss is coming across the room." His voice gained momentum with each word. "A couple of people are with him, can I call you back?"

Well that, needless to say, would not compute. But, no problem. I was rocking, rolling, and riding in style now. "I'll be movin' around," I said. "I'll call you from my car phone in a little while." This, of course, was in that transitional era after the clickety-click rotary dial but before cellular phones, when car phones were pretty much the prerogative of the rich and occasionally dangerous.

After I hung up, Cathy sprinted into action. Brent, our Vice-President of Consulting Services loved executive toys and had a speaker phone in his office. Cathy zipped over there and, with her usual wilful aplomb, commandeered Brent's deluxe digs out from under him. VP or not, the poor, nonplussed son of a gun didn't stand a chance. He found himself sitting in a corner of his own expansive office while Cathy expertly set up the phones so that my line was conferenced into his speaker phone. Then, at Cathy's invitation, a whole posse of co-workers filed into Brent's quarters to eavesdrop on my next call.

Through my open door I could just manage to see Cathy way up the hall in Brent's doorway signalling me to proceed. I wasn't sure what Cathy had told the gang to expect, but Brent was partially in view in a chair behind her, leaning forward with his forehead cradled in his hand.

Well, you know me. I've always done my best work with an audience. I called the boyfriend back, greeting him to the effect that it was his old pal Harvey again. He began in a way I would never have expected.

"Cash?" he said.

"What?" I said.

"The money. The thousand. It's . . . uh . . . cash?"

"Well, sure. I'm comin' t' the plane tomorrow, t' see you off. I'll give you the envelope then. And [momentary pause] the package."

His voiced dropped into a confidential tone. "Will you just answer one question?" he asked earnestly. "Just one?"

"Certainly!" I replied robustly, sincerely, and straightaway.

His voice grew progressively quieter. "If I do this, how much of a risk am I really taking?"

"Why," I said, with the most upbeat but vaguely menacing inflection I could manage, "virtually none."

"None?"

"Look, people take little risks every day. They drive cars. They cross streets. They fly in jets. You're just one more guy takin' a weekend trip."

"Well . . . uh . . . what's in the package?"

"Some business materials for my associates in Las Vegas. It's a very small package."

"Well . . . uh . . . when I get there, where do I go?"

"I'll give you th' address on a piece o' paper. Just take a cab."

"Well . . . uh . . . what if I get there and nobody's there?"

"Don't you worry," I said knowingly. "Somebody'll be waitin' for you."

"Look," he said with a note of exasperation. "Does the package contain something illegal?"

"The package contains nothing – absolutely nothing – illegal. Look, I want you t' be comfortable. Is there anything else you need to know? Anything?"

He sighed quietly. "No."

"I'm parkin' my car now. I've got a meeting. Time's up, friend. Can I have your answer? Are you goin' t' help me out with this little thing?"

He hesitated for an instant and, then, I swear, he really said this. He said, "Well, I guess you've made me an offer I can't refuse."

I felt like screaming, "It's April first, you sap!" But I didn't. How could I? All those people in the office up the hall were counting on me. I bade him adieu, until tomorrow.

Over the next few hours, various versions of the story of the prank spread around the company, but nobody spilled the beans to the boyfriend.

Right after lunch, Cathy called him to set up a dinner date to "celebrate".

About mid-afternoon, the audio-visual fellow in our educational services group called to report that he had just had a chat with Cathy's boyfriend. His name was Deane Holiday; he went by "Doc". Doc too was a gambling aficionado, and he knew our prize patsy pretty well.

Anyhow, Cathy's guy poured his heart out to Doc, fretting about Uncle Harvey, the forthcoming flight, and the package. Now the Doc-meister was a soft-spoken sort, a cordial, conscientious person, and his next move came as a big surprise. He put his pal through the wringer.

"Are you crazy?" Doc had admonished. "Nevada's one of the worst states. Do you know what they do when people bring in drugs? They've still got firing squads. You're in deep, deep."

"Well, it's small. Maybe it's not drugs," suggested the boyfriend hopefully.

"Right, maybe it's somebody's thumbs," said Doc.

Gratified that he had made his contribution to raising our lad's consciousness, Doc left him stewing.

At about ten that night Cathy called me. Her guy had been a nervous wreck all through dinner. He held his menu upside-down, barely ate, and couldn't concentrate. But he never said a word about Uncle Harvey or the thousand bucks.

Now the girls had cooked up a grand finale. Cathy wanted me to meet her in front of an address across town, where the boyfriend lived. I was on my way.

When I arrived, Cathy, Doc and P. J. were there along with Cathy's brother, Biff. Biff was one of our computer operators. Usually he worked the graveyard shift and ordinarily I did not see a lot of Biff. But, make no mistake, there was a lot of him to see. Biff was one big boy. Built, to quote a great transcendental poet, like a beer truck. And tonight he was all dressed up in a gargantuan three-piece suit with a little package, wrapped in brown paper, in his big, beefy hand.

We hid nearby. Biff rang the bell. Doc, bless him, had brought along top-drawer company recording equipment and wired Biff for sound, so that posterity could forever share the forthcoming historic exchange.

The boyfriend stared stupefied at the behemoth filling his doorway. Biff spoke. Only his mouth moved. His voice was impassive. "Harvey sent me."

"Oh."

"He can't make it tomorrow."

"Oh . . . kay."

"He said to give you this." Biff's arm swung up like a crane. He deposited the package in the boyfriend's tremulous hands.

"And," continued Biff, "he told me to give you one . . . more . . . thing."

Biff's hand plunged into the V of his suit coat, reaching for something. The boyfriend shrank away. Biff's hand reemerged, holding . . . an envelope.

The boyfriend took it without a word, his eyes not leaving Biff. Nobody moved. Nobody blinked.

Biff nodded almost imperceptibly at the envelope. "Harvey said to count it."

"Sure." Cathy's soon-to-be-ex fumbled and tore it open. Ten hundred dollar bills in Monopoly money poured onto the doorstep.

The boyfriend stared at the colorful fluttering paper, unable to fathom its meaning. Then we all jumped forward and Biff led us, thundering "April Fool!"

The poor chump crumpled and emitted a single sob. Not a pretty sight. Anyhow, he quit the company soon after.

Cathy got married late in the next year, about the same time the company went into receivership. I hear from her and a few others once in a while, at Christmas or whenever. They're still out there somewhere, cutting code, cutting capers, carrying on.

You know, I really did learn a lesson from that dubious incident, although I'm not one hundred percent confident I could put it into words. Anyhow, I was younger then and those were the days.