

Harold Ostrich was the most ordinary of men: ordinary in appearance, ordinary in habits, ordinary in ambition, ordinary—or rather something less than this—in intelligence; all of which made him the typical modern American and a successful businessman.

During the weekdays he always woke up at the same time and in the same way: seven o'clock in the morning and to the sound of his alarm clock radio. The alarm clock was set on a dresser opposite his bed so that he would have to get up to turn it off. It was set to go off only on weekdays. On those mornings the first thing he heard was a voice announcing a news story or perhaps a traffic report. Depending on how long he lingered in bed, he might also hear a commercial or two. For the last several weeks a new one for an insurance company had been running. It started out with a happy jingle—happy, laughing children's voices singing—and then an adult's voice dubbed over the tinkling music with the sage counsel: "Everyone knows life has its ups and downs, but it's important in the best of times to prepare for the unexpected. Here at Klumper Insurance we're ready to help you overcome anything life throws at you. Call us: our rates are low and our benefits are among the best in the industry..."—and it was usually at about this time, as the voice announced life insurance rates for non-smokers in their forties and fifties, that Ostrich got up, went to the radio, and shut it off.

This morning as usual the first thing he did was take a shower, not without first looking at his tired face in the mirror. His eyes shifted up to his hairline; he no-

ticed that the scalp was showing through a little in a way it never had years earlier. Age, of course. He considered however that as he still had a rather full head of hair at forty-three years of age it wasn't likely that he was going to go bald any time soon, and that was something of a relief. Then again, there were certain wrinkles about the eyes, a certain sagging about the jowls, and if he put down his chin low enough a second one appeared beneath it. Age, of course. Ostrich shook his head and frowned but did not seem overly concerned about any of these things because he was a sensible man and knew that, first, he was still relatively young, and that, second, only people who were lucky grew old. He turned on the hot and cold water faucets of the shower and adjusted the flow of each till the water was comfortably warm, then took off the boxer shorts in which he slept and got into the shower.

An hour and a half later he had left his apartment, gotten into his car, and was driving to work. In the interim he had eaten his breakfast and dressed in his business attire of slacks, a white shirt, and a tie. Though he rarely wore it he always brought along a matching jacket just in case "something came up" during the day—some flash meeting with a client, say, or an unscheduled lunch with an executive higher up on the corporate ladder. As he drove his luxury sports car he had the radio turned on low, listening to music, sometimes humming along. The drive to work took him about twenty minutes. One of the roads he drove along had many traffic lights, which were frustratingly mistimed so that half of them turned red just as one approached them. Thus he often pulled up alongside other drivers on this road. Sometimes he would pull up alongside a car driven by an attractive woman who was also on her way to work. He would look over to her and (like most men) have an immediate, reflexive, instinctive fantasy about meeting her

and having an intimate encounter with her. Of course most of the time these women didn't give a second thought to the driver beside them. And yet now and then one did give a thought to him;—did look back at him;—did (after turning to him, seeing his interest in her, and at once returning her eyes to the road before her with a stiff and artificial intensity) understand and freely indulge in the meaning of that moment. But by then the light had turned green, and everyone zoomed ahead,

Harold Ostrich worked for GSC Worldwide, Inc., one of the largest and most prestigious investment companies in the world. Its thirty-five story office tower dominated the area of the city in which it had been built. His office was on the 21st floor. This morning, as every weekday morning, he got off the elevator, opened the glass doors stenciled with the company's name and logo, and entered the reception area, saying "Good morning" to the two receptionists there, then proceeding to another set of doors accessed by his card key and which gave way to the floor proper.

It was a vast space on either side of which were the glass-walled offices of middle managers such as himself, and in the middle of which ranged rows of desks occupied by "lower-level" staff: "analysts," "associates," secretaries, and those holding miscellaneous administrative positions;—a pecking order definite and known to everyone here, though to an outsider it would have been impossible to tell who was who. There they all were, the men in white shirts and ties, the women primly dressed, dutifully on time at their desks and already working. Several people stood about discussing business with each other and several others were holding papers as they walked briskly to someone's desk or perhaps to an early meeting. The sounds of printers softly whirring and telephones trilling filled the air. These sights and sounds

filled Ostrich with the warm, reassuring sense of the well-known and grateful; it was the atmosphere he had known all his working life, the one he had made his way in so successfully, the one that was his home away from home. As he neared his office he looked over his coworkers with a sense of comfortable admiration. He had known most of them for many years and regarded them all as skilled, specialized, smart people dedicated—as he was—to the important work of high finance.

His office was small and glass-walled like the others on this floor, and when he reached it he saw that his secretary, Yolanda, was already sitting at her desk a few feet outside his door. She bade him good morning and told him that he had no calls and that his calendar was free today. Ostrich nodded, glad he had nothing immediately to do; he wanted to grab a cup of coffee and relax a few minutes before starting the day. He entered his office and sat at his desk, entering his password on the computer and, as it logged onto the company's computer system, glancing up now and then outside the glass wall of his office. He saw that Yolanda was already looking at herself in a handheld mirror, holding it up with her left hand as, puckering her lips slightly, she raised her right hand to her hair and adjusted it here, there, everywhere. She did this at least twenty times a day—a habit picked up from her younger, prettier days when she had lived in constant anticipation of meeting a future boyfriend. She struggled to maintain an image, both to herself and the world, of slender, kittenish femininity. But those days were long gone. She was thirty-five years old and already age was putting on her frame a certain plumpness increasingly stubborn against any of the fad diets she went on throughout the year. She was an avid consumer of popular culture. When she wasn't busy with work she was surfing the Internet looking at celebrity gossip sites. She knew everything there was to

know about which celebrity was dating whom, or which were marrying or getting a divorce, or which had bought a new mansion, or who was worth how many millions of dollars. Otherwise she was on the phone talking to friends and relatives—animated conversations about who had gotten into a fight with whom, or who had a new boyfriend, or who was getting married, or who was throwing a birthday or anniversary party. In short, the poor dear hadn't a serious thought in her head. Ostrich often wondered how she had been hired, for GSC Worldwide was a prestigious firm and prided itself in hiring (as it made a point of saying in its publicity statements) “only the best.” Little did he know that Yolanda had an Associate's Degree in “Administrative Sciences”;—a title whose emptiness had resonated impressively in the empty heads of the Human Resources people who had hired her. Yet whether she had gone to college for four years or four minutes wouldn't have mattered so long as she came in on time, could type, take messages accurately, and schedule appointments;—all of which she did to Ostrich's satisfaction.

Sometimes he kept his door open just so that he might, with his very good hearing, catch her talking to yet another friend about celebrities or telling them about a sale at one of her favorite shoe stores. He would smile to himself and sometimes chuckle: it was all so silly, so foolish, and yet it was rather innocent and even charming in an empty-headed kind of way. He always felt a little sorry for her too because she talked a lot about the dates she had gone on and how they hadn't worked out—how the guy, invariably, was a “jerk.” She obviously wanted to get married. She obviously wanted to marry well so that she wouldn't have to work and could spend her days talking about celebrities, buying clothes, and applying makeup.

“Good heavens, the man who marries her!” Ostrich

would think, already pitying whoever that might be. For he suspected that however harmless Yolanda was, however entertaining her chatter might be in small doses, any man who had to listen to her day after day and year after year would eventually jump off a bridge.

After he logged into his computer he checked his emails. There were a dozen of them. Half of them were company-wide announcements about upcoming projects and the departments they pertained to. One of them was a birthday announcement for one of the top executives and detailed his “exciting accomplishments” at GSC. Ostrich read it with interest and was duly impressed. As a matter of etiquette, he tapped out a few lines of congratulations and emailed it to the man in question. He imagined the day when such a notice would be sent out about his birthday and how he too would receive hundreds of congratulatory responses. He also thought of the executive offices on the 34th floor. They were the only ones that were really private, whose walls were opaque, whose dimensions were spacious, whose furnishings were plush and comfortable. Harold Ostrich anticipated the day when he would have such an office, such a mark of prestige. —Yes, it was all something to work toward.

A few minutes later he was leaving his office to walk down the hall to the company kitchen.

“I’m going for some coffee,” he told his secretary. “Want some?”

“No thanks.”

Ostrich walked down the office floor and made a left into a small corridor leading to the kitchen. Two other employees, Todd and Martin, were already there, standing before the coffee machine as it emitted clicks and grinding noises in preparation for brewing the next cup. They were “Information Technology” people who sat at a row of desks along the far end of the office. Todd was a

skinny man in his thirties who, when he walked, bobbed his head back and forth like a chicken. He wore oversized glasses and had he tendency to smile vacuously or to stare intensely as though he were never sure how to react to people. No doubt his lack of social skills had driven him into a field where he could count on the predictable behavior of machines. As for Martin, he was fifty years old, fat, red-faced, brisk, a man who hated his job but kept it because it wasn’t hard and paid well. They said hello to Ostrich when he entered the kitchen and took up a paper cup to await his turn at the coffee machine. Their small talk turned to the weekend and what they had done. Todd had taken his young children to the movies—a cartoon of two painfully long hours—and reported how some brat of a kid somewhere behind him had thrown a wad of chewed bubble gum that had hit him in the head and stuck in his hair. See that chopped-up part of his hair at the back of his head? That’s where he had had to cut it out. As for Martin, he had entertained his wife’s in-laws, and had had to put up with his father-in-law’s endless babble about politics. And yet as “bad” as their weekend been, their demeanor and tones of voice became lugubrious when they said that it had been too short—that weekends always were—and that here they were again, at work.

Ostrich sympathized with them over the return to the office, but in this he was disingenuous—merely playing a part that he knew was expected of him. In fact he had never thought his job was an infringement on his personal life, though he recognized that most people felt that way about theirs. But then again (his thinking went) most people didn’t have his kind of important career. They weren’t, like him, a “key player” in the world of high finance. He was responsible for helping to craft multi-million dollar deals with some of the largest companies in the world. In just the last two years he had

been instrumental in forging three of the largest deals in GSC Worldwide's recent history, and even now he was working on the PowerFrost Industries project, which could be worth tens of millions of dollars. The success of that deal would again confirm his reputation as a "key player" (Ostrich liked to use that foolish term in thinking of his professional self) in the financial services industry.

There is an aphorism, "Give me a child at seven and I will show you the man," but this mistakenly presupposes an evolution of character that does not really take place, or at least is not apparent, till adolescence. This was certainly true in Ostrich's case. He had always been a "good" boy but by the time he was a teenager he was remarkable for what his parents, and people his parents' age, admired as his unexceptionable behavior. He had been an excellent student. He had loved school and respected his teachers and later his professors. He had studied hard and was meticulous in doing his homework. He had always been among the "first" in his class and the school authorities had held him up as an exemplar of—if not scholarship—a dutiful meeting of expectations. Moreover he had indulged in none of the risky behavior of other boys his age; he had never smoked or drunk or tried a drug; his personality was averse to risky hijinks. When he got his driver's license he had had no desire to go fast, and had never stayed out late. Though not especially popular in high school he had been voted "Most Likely to Succeed," his fellow students having recognized in him a type that was bound for "success." In those days he hadn't been sure what his career would be and he had waffled among several impressive and lucrative ones: a doctor, a lawyer, a politician. In the end he had decided to go into business, and in particular into investment banking. And so a student of business, of the exacting and invariable science of commerce and numbers and profit and loss, had Harold Ostrich become. After

high school he attended Wharton and graduated with an MBA. Five months later he had landed a job in a small but well-respected firm.

His twenties had elided into his thirties. He went through several jobs, always learning, always gaining experience, each new job a step up in prestige and salary from its predecessor. Then, when he was thirty-three, he landed a position with GSC Worldwide. The size and complexity of the organization guaranteed the possibility of advancement to the highest and most lucrative offices. He did his job well and with all the drive of an energetic and determined young man. It was nothing for him to put in sixty, seventy, even eighty hours a week for months at a time. Those of his colleagues as young as himself often griped about the long hours, and often questioned themselves and others about whether they had made the right decision in going into this profession. They were willing to work hard, they said, but this simply wasn't reasonable, wasn't practicable; it left them no time for themselves; it was robbing them of the best years of their lives. To their complaints Ostrich would only shrug his shoulders and say, "Well, that's the way it is—if you want to get ahead, you have to do it." As his young colleagues fell by the wayside—as they resigned their jobs in order to accept less onerous positions at other firms, or took up wholly different lines of business—he held fast; doggedly pursued his work; read reports till his eyes burned; analyzed spreadsheets till his mind turned into a mush and he was incapable of a coherent thought; remained at his desk till the wee small hours of the morning, then went home to get no more than four or five hours of sleep before returning to the office on time in the morning to plunge again into the tedious diligence of his work. In this way did he become one of corporate America's Chosen. In this way was he marked by his superiors as a true company man, as

someone who was "serious," who was "committed," who "produced," who could be counted on. He was duly rewarded with large bonuses and regular promotions. At thirty-six years of age he had been promoted to "Senior Vice President."

—"Senior Vice President"! Few three words in modern English comport themselves so gravely, so weightily—make such a deep impression on the general mind. Certainly Ostrich was only too ready to tell people his title and to hand out his business card on which it was printed. What he never told people—what he hardly told himself—was that in a company as large as GSC Worldwide, with its offices in major cities around the world, there were some two-hundred other Senior Vice Presidents. As pleased as he had been with the promotion he knew it was only a stepping stone to the next, really exclusive position of Managing Director, or MD. There were no more than a dozen of them in the whole company, and it was a position of great privilege, power, and financial reward. He had been working toward it his whole life. He anticipated a promotion to that level any year, any month, now. And from there, where the real power, the real money was, it was but a short jump to becoming perhaps the next Paul P. Doberman.

Who was Paul P. Doberman? He was the current Chief Executive. But he was much more than that. Over the years he had established a reputation first as an economic then as something of a political pundit. He regularly appeared on television news programs and was interviewed on the radio or in magazines. The major media outlets were always eager to get his opinion about an upset in the stock market or the economic and social implications of some foreign political crisis. Everyone in the country had heard about him and on account of his frequent television appearances most people knew what he looked like. In more heroic and intelligent times such