

# Join Us

## Sam Upton

### Chapter 1

Two taps on the top and a smack on the side. Nothing. Another smack on the side and a long shake. Nothing. After eight years and two months, there's no response. No light, no sound, no sign at all that this was once one of the best domestic coffee machines in the world.

I look around the kitchen, searching for an alternative. Three-year-old tea, a sachet of instant decaf coffee, Fair Trade hot chocolate, none of which is the ideal 7am pick-me-up. Finally, I decide on a glass of flat cola – full of amino acids which are good for the stomach lining someone once told me. I think they meant alkali.

The cat walks in, sensing something is wrong. 'It's OK,' I say. 'We've only run out of coffee.'

The cat turns around and walks out. I take the oily black liquid into the front room and stare out of the window at the bus stop opposite. There's already a long queue.

Today is Friday. Friday is the best day of the week – not because it's the closest to the weekend, but because it's the quietest. When you work in customer services for a global broadband giant, you really appreciate the quiet. Quiet means not trying to understand the broken logic of whoever's on the other end of the line. It means not having to fight the rising swell of self-hate when a half-hour consultation ends in the words: 'It's the button marked 'On''.

The cat walks back in. She only does this because she knows it's time for me to leave. So I put down my glass, grab my bag, walk the five paces it takes to get from one end of my apartment to the other, and open the door. I point at the cat, cock my thumb and give an exaggerated wink.

‘We’ll talk later, yeah?’

‘...’

The tube is only half full, which I take as a sign that things are going my way. I sit down, pick up a discarded newspaper and settle in for the 20-minute journey. Two minutes later, all feelings of calm and relaxation evaporate into the twice-recycled air.

A small, middle-aged man sits next to me, bulging out of his budget grey suit. Furiously beating his fingers on a laptop and letting out regular sighs, he’s radiating stress and anxiety which quickly spreads through the carriage. One by one, people start giving away their work-mode tics: looking at watches, re-reading reports, checking silent phones. It’s like a corporate version of the Mexican Wave.

Every now and again, the man stops hitting his keyboard just long enough to reach down to the carriage floor, grab a coffee cup, take a sip and replace it. Tap tap tap tap tap tap, sip... Tap tap tap tap tap tap, sip... Tap tap tap tap tap tap, sip...

And so it goes on, until I’m actually starting to enjoy the calming quality of the sequence. Soon, the tube begins to slow down and the man snaps his laptop shut, gathers his papers and stuffs them into his briefcase.

All packed, he grabs his coffee, stands up and moves towards the doors. But there’s a problem: he’s forgotten something. Lying on his seat is a pen, which he spots, then leans over to grab. But as he leans over, the coffee cup leans with him and half the contents pour out and splash right in the middle of the dark, patterned upholstery.

Until that point, I was watching him with detached amusement, but as soon as the first drops hit the seat, I feel a wave of panic. Once he steps onto the platform, this

seat will become my responsibility and the repercussions of his clumsiness will fall upon my shoulders.

Now I'll have to warn everyone about to sit down next to me about the wet seat. If I don't, they'll sit down, soak their clothes and blame me for not telling them. If I do, I'll be the official seat-warning man, having to explain to everyone that gets onto the train for the next ten stops exactly why they shouldn't sit there.

A young man sitting opposite stares at me with a small grin. He knows. Pride now dictates that I can't even get up and move to another carriage. The train slows again, heading towards a packed platform of commuters. Five seconds, four seconds... I have to make my decision. Three, two... Suddenly, I get up, move quickly towards the opening doors and jump off onto the platform. I've no idea where I am and even less when the next train is. But wherever it is, I'm not sitting next to a wet seat. I feel assertive and proud. I took control of the situation, made my decision and followed it through.

'You wanker.'

'Well, what would you have done?'

'What anyone else would – sat behind a paper and ignored it.'

'That's no way to behave. You have to take responsibility.'

'What responsibility did you take? You ran off!'

'Yes, but it was my decision to run off.'

I'm standing in a small kitchen making myself an organic carob 'Coffree'. Company rules state that every 90 minutes I have to take a seven-minute break, which starts the second I leave my workstation. If I exceed my total breaks by over four

minutes in any given day, whether for refreshment or toilet, my pay decreases by a pound per second.

Standing behind me, as I put the second spoon of beige gunk into my branded mug, is Geoff Jones, one of the few people I talk to at work and a man completely free of any form of self-awareness.

‘It was your decision to run away from a situation that could have brought about the terrifying scenario of you actually interacting with a fellow human being.’

‘It wouldn’t be just one human being,’ I reply. ‘It would be at least ten. Someone new would try to sit there at every station and I’d have to say exactly the same thing to all of them. Anyway, that’s not fair. I talk to people all the time.’

‘People that ring direct from the land of the clueless don’t count. Even then you let them talk too much and end up listening to their life stories or talking them down off a ledge.’

This much is true. I have an aversion to interruption and have steadily built up a reputation for tolerating some of the more demanding customers. One elderly man once rang up to see if I could find his lost keys, while another wanted to know what his son would like for tea. I failed with the first (‘Why would I leave them in the door? Fucking big help you are’) but came up trumps with the second (‘We’ve never even heard of casserole in a can. What a great idea!’)

The man-on-a-ledge incident was just over a year ago. I was just about to finish my shift when a call was put through from ‘Andy’ in Bracknell. He sounded fine as we chatted about the best way for him to send emails on his mobile and how tough the average phone is. I guess alarm bells should have begun ringing when he asked how high up he could go and still receive a signal.

‘As high as you like,’ I cheerfully replied. ‘You might not want to go too high though as you may start to interfere with low-flying aircraft!’

It was meant as a light joke, something we’re taught to throw in every once in a while to put the customer at ease and keep them calm before telling them there’s nothing we can do. But as I said it, a tremendous roar came through the headset

‘What the hell was that?’ I spluttered, once the roar had subsided.

‘A low-flying aircraft,’ replied Andy. ‘I’m standing on the roof of my office.’

‘What are you doing there?’

‘I’m thinking about jumping off. But I’m not 100 per cent sure about it, which is why I rang you. What do you think?’

‘I think you should get down, go back to work and enjoy your life.’

‘Why?’

This bit was easy and entirely non-scripted. ‘Because no matter what your problems are, at least you’re not spending 12 hours a day slowly having any enthusiasm for life sucked out of you by solving a series of staggeringly stupid IT problems, following screen prompts that take all personality or free thought – the one thing you have left to cling on to – away from you.’

‘At least your wife hasn’t left you.’

‘I dream of having a wife,’ I reply, warming to the theme, ‘even if it means that at some point in the future she would leave me. In fact, I would probably spend most of my time with my wife expecting her to leave me, making every moment up until that point even more precious.’

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re young, your life could improve at any moment. I’m 54 years old, stuck in a one-bedroom flat with little hope of getting my life back on track.’

“Little hope?” I answer. “Call back when you have no hope. At least you’ve lived your life, know what’s happened and have a fair expectation of what’s to come. I’m in a constant state of anxiety, never knowing how my life will turn out – just as bad or worse. Let’s face it: if I was on the fast track to personal success, I wouldn’t be sat here talking to you. Besides, I live in a bedsit. An extra room would mean the world to me.”

As our conversation went on, it quickly become a competition. Soon, people in my office started listening in, enthralled by this gladiatorial battle of whining. Ten minutes later, after every aspect of his miserable life was examined and thrown back as being nothing compared to mine, Andy interrupted me.

‘Jesus! I give up!’

‘What, you’re going to jump?’

‘Of course not. How can I jump after talking to you? I’ve just had a masterclass in self pity. If you can’t top yourself with your wretched life, what hope do I have?’

‘Great. Is there anything else I can help you with today?’

I was hailed as a hero, had my picture in the local paper and had to spend 30 agonising seconds being applauded by the entire workforce at that month’s ‘Company Catch-up’. More worryingly, I also received a message from my team leader that said he was keeping an eye on me, saying I was ‘360-degree management material’.

An alarm goes off in my pocket. To make sure I don’t incur any company ‘taxes’, I set my mobile to go off once my break minutes are up. I walk back to my workstation, log in and a call comes straight through.

‘I’ve just spilt some curry sauce on my keyboard. Will it still work?’

I stare at the lines on my screen, seeing if I can make out the shape of a rabbit.

‘I got the sauce from Asda. Does that help?’

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