

OFF-BRIM

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By

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Oomph!

Aloft a sky-rise ascribed to a sunrise, a head lay on a dweller's pillow. Aground below his waking window, early dawn found its first accomplices. Afoot and all around the city the early sun made the street lights dissolve and eventually retire to a more pertinent condition of morning. For sake of keeping his independent life afloat, Hugo Rot made his way to work. He pivoted out of his building, making his way to the tram stop. Along the way; many a passer-by could be seen, some jogging, others walking their dogs.

With no time to waste, Hugo acceded to the tram stop. He didn't have to dwell on matters of being late for work for the No7 tram quickly arrived.

The usual pedestrian traffic was congested, and the others boarding the conveyance made for a true crush of the hoy-polloi. It was as if none of those people had a say on things concerning their lives, it was as if someone, an invisible hand cattle-prodded them out of bed, into the streets, and to their jobs.

The summer months were the worst. Granted, the city was less congested thanks to it being the holiday season, but that's not what bothered Hugo Rot. What he did mind was the complete absence of personal hygiene on the part of his fellow commuters.

In the swelter prompted by a merciless sun, the slightest whiff of body odor could be felt, especially in the tram. Even with the windows open, and the AC cranked up, Hugo could still smell them. Their sweaty armpits, the fowl stench disseminating from their mouths, the stale funk of their feet fermented in their shoes.

Luckily, every time he felt he was going to gag from it all, the No7 tram would come to the bridge. There, over the river, the air was cooler, there was even a mild but palpable breeze coming from down below.

It was during those moments that he would get ready for the work-day ahead. Though his job wasn't a complicated one, he mentally prepared for each day as if it were an Olympic discipline. But his preparations were brought to a halt once the bridge was behind him.

Hugo got out on the first stop after the river; glanced back at the water running behind him, and proceeded further on foot. It was quite a walk to the Colporteur newspaper headquarters, but as was always the case he was early.

He passed the Farmers' Market. Needless to say but worth the mention, the irrefutable aroma of meat, fish, and vegetables were to him nothing more than unwarranted replacements for the smells in the tram.

Hence he hastened his pace, advancing ever closer to the office. Stopping at a near-by bakery, he bought a burek, just a bit of grease to tie him over 'till lunch. Rot ate the pastry in full stride. The grease dripped down his chin. Every so often he licked his lips, and was smacking his tongue against the pallet of his mouth along the way.

The morning gallery of characters wasn't amiss. A homeless man was seeking alms, sunbathing his palms, a Gypsy woman with a babe strapped to her bosom rummaged through a dumpster. As a counterpoint to this, there were business women whose skin smelled of vanilla, men in suits and ties all with brief-case in hand.

It was as if no one wanted to be whom and where they were. Perhaps it was one of those mornings in which even their own skin left much wanting.

The closer he got to the city center the hum-and-how was greater. There were more traffic lights, more police patrols, more tourists, and more teenage loiterers with nothing to do. Rot stopped at the last Zebra. The traffic light before him was out of order so the other pedestrians chanced their crossing the street. Reliant on the understanding of motorists, Hugo neared the curb, raised his hand stopping the oncoming traffic.

The young subscriptions salesman finally crossed the street. There was still a tainted mixture of the stench from the tram, and the aromas of the Farmers' Market in his nostrils. Wherever he set foot his senses were set upon by the unholy experience he went through, with no chance of it passing.

It seemed to him that he was branded for the remainder of the day. It was always like this, but he wouldn't yield to the fowl and the rotting of things past. Refusing to become an unwitting participant in 'business as usual' for surely he had aspirations of his own.

But that was the crux of it, almost every soul in the city thought themselves to be deserving of much more. Hugo hoped to acquire something, anything aside from a work-a-day job as a subscriptions salesman. What was that something, he didn't know, on the other hand he was as yet to realize he had no talent to speak of.

He tossed the paper which held the burek he ate into a trash bin. Passing by a shop window he stopped and looked at his reflection. Noticing the grease on his chin he wiped it off with a handkerchief he always carried in the summer to tend to his sweaty brow.

With a full stomach and a traversed road behind him he halted in front of the Colporteur's main entrance, belched a bubble burst in his esophagus and entered the building. Doing away with all the morning pleasantries by greeting everyone he ran into he made his way to the elevator.

Once inside Hugo could tell that the other ones riding with him were journalists. Suddenly, it was the tram all over again. He could smell them reeking of tobacco smoke and yesterday's coffee. He got off on the third floor having received a lung full of stink, and an earful of gossip, neither of which he cared for, but was made to be exposed to by means of the everyday which fell under the category of occupational hazard.

The first thing he did upon gracing the premises of the office was to check whether someone else had arrived. Sure enough, in the smoking room, he found Kaya Kos, the office assistant having coffee and a cigarette.

She was always the first one there. Hugo said he wouldn't be joining her for coffee for he had a cup at home, and it served its purpose.

Rot traversed the carpeted floor of the office, inching ever closer to his work station. Turning on the computer, he looked over the day's to-do list lying on the desk.

It was too early to commence the cold calling. Besides, the others from the Subscriptions Department were just arriving.

He could hear them congregating in the smoking room. The men flocked around Miss Kos, who thus made haste about her morning beverage, putting out a half-smoked cigarette and retiring to her post.

A few of Hugo's colleagues came out to say hi, some of them turning on their desk-tops and returning to their socializing.

But the clock on the far wall struck 9.00, letting Rot know it was time to commence with work.

He opened the Customer Relationship Management program, running over it with a tired, glazed eye.

This was the time of day he dreaded the most – the beginning.

Putting on his head phones, Hugo grabbed the phone receiver as if it were an arm wrestling match. He then dialed the first number on the list, hoping a woman would answer his call. Ever

since he could remember, he had better luck with the fairer sex than with men when sales were concerned. Must've been his voice timbre.

Unfortunately for him the first call he made was, as it turned out, to a pensioner. The old man was obviously lonely and in need of companionship. Hugo immediately portended the remainder of their conversation. The man rambled on about how he reads the Colporteur every day but doesn't need a subscription seeing how it's his morning routine to go out for a brisk walk and purchase the newspaper along the way.

Hugo ended the call after which a much needed inhale was warranted. Having exhaled he took note of the chatter of those around him. Rot conceded his first defeat, but wasn't dismayed to press on. He checked off the old pensioner in his CRM list, and with pen in hand dialed another number.

The pen pirouetted and twirled like a ballerina in his hand. He realized the previous call has taken too much of his time. That was just the thing; he was always in deep thought on how to save time, and on the other hand how not to wonder in his thoughts while on the job.

A woman answered his next call. One of his colleagues patted him on the shoulder on his way to the bathroom, imbued; Hugo sensed he had one foot in the door.

From the outset he began by telling her about the benefits of having a daily subscription to a newspaper as highly regarded as the Colporteur. Hugo spoke of the issues the paper covers, past and current, not leaving out the weekend edition.

That being thus, he made his first sale of the day. Rot knew he had found his form. He typed up an invoice for a monthly subscription to her name and address.

The remainder of the morning was a blur. He recalled a rather unpleasant conversation with an auto-mechanic, another with a president of an obscure company saying he only reads foreign,

specialized magazines, and in closing yet one more with a surly woman who asked him all kinds of questions about who owns the Colporteur, from the benign such as when was it founded, to those pertaining to the president of the newspaper being involved in gun-smuggling. Everything is for people.

Hugo fraternized with only two of his colleagues, Sila Barbarez, and Nemet Sram. When the clock struck 13.00 Sila asked Rot to join them for lunch in a neighboring diner. More often than not, the three of them would eat out, and today was Nemet's turn to treat.

Making their way to the elevator, Sila glanced at Kaya who was busy at her desk. Not knowing with certainty, rather only surmising what his intentions were, she glanced back at him.

Mister Barbarez made his excuses to the remaining two in his company, sending them on their way to the diner, saying he'll join them later.

"Man down."

Nemet Sram said once the two of them were in the elevator.

"Why so surprised? She's all he talks about."

Hugo Rot replied. Once on the ground floor, both men stood in the atrium, cool and pleasant due to the marble lining the floor and walls. After making ready to go outside into the scorching heat they found themselves on the sidewalk.

The asphalt on the street, more precisely near the curb, was wavy and indented from the high temperatures, made able even more so by the weight of the passing vehicles.

Fortunately, their place of gorge wasn't far. They only needed to turn the corner. But what was a short distance in the cooler months now became a true endurance race. Not only was the sun unrelenting in its beaming, but the buildings radiated heat as well.

A caldron of a city, the place was all a boil. Birds were taking dirt-baths at the foot of allotted trees, all with their beaks gaping, gasping for air. Hugo's lungs felt like a fully fired up oven.

Their local of choice was in the street adjacent to the Colporteur's headquarters. Nemet's stomach growled for which he was castigated on the part of Hugo. It appeared Mister Sram didn't have breakfast that morning.

According to Mister Rot, this was an unforgivable oversight which needed to be remedied, and post haste to boot.

So haste was made in their walk as they headed down the street of their diner. Hugo was sweating like a pig, while Nemet was gasping for air.

It was as if all that was left to breathe was vapor and fumes, such was the humidity. This didn't surprise the two for the city sat on two rivers.

At least they were in the shade, traversing one of those little streets, all peppered with parked cars, and what's more important no public transportation in sight.

This made the whole neighborhood not only a bit cooler, but quieter too. The only thing to look out for, according to Mister Sram; were dog off-casts.

As they made their way, Nemet talked about the unconscientious dog owners who didn't clean up after their pets. There was much to say on the matter, no doubt, but Hugo didn't think it to be very appetizing, this in lieu of their meal ahead.

Both men recognized the façade of the local in front. Rot took out his handkerchief one last time before they went in, wiping the scruff of his neck with his head put into a rolling motion as if to give relief from the heat to the rest of his sweat soaked body.

They entered the premises, finding a vacant table for four. Most of the other patrons they could recognize. In all, everyone who lunched there was working nearby. It was quite a pleasant place. There was a counter with a vitrine beneath it. A display case with an assortment of sweets was placed in the corner.

They opened the menus ready to order from an approaching waitress.

“I’ll have the wiener schnitzel,” Hugo said.

“Beans and bratwurst for me,” Nemet gave his order.

The waitress disappeared behind the swinging doors of the kitchen, passing their orders on to the cooks.

It was at this point that Mister Rot criticized Mister Sram’s choice of foods. He claimed beans and bratwurst gives Nemet gas. His fear was he’ll be passing wind all afternoon, which would be fine by Hugo if it weren’t for their having to return to the office.

At this point Sila Barbarez made his appearance. Both of the seated men noticed a skip in his step, and both surmised it had something to do with Miss Kos.

“Did you order?” Sila asked.

“Yes,” Nemet answered.

Barbarez raised his hand, calling for the waitress.

“Just the Caesar’s salad, thank you.”

In their further inquiry into the outcome of Sila’s confabulation with Kaya, both Hugo and Nemet were made in the know that Barbarez and Miss Kos have an evening of dining and entertainment planned for the coming weekend.

A pause in the conversation was instilled once their waitress came to their table, serving them their respective lunches of choice.

“Beans and sausages... At work!?” Sila spoke to Nemet.

“What of it?” Sram asked.

It was then and there that Nemet Sram got the nickname the Fumigator. The reason for this was self-evident. By the by, Hugo came up with the unfortunate personal noun by which he, Nemet, will hence be known to his friends.

Rot explained that the nickname itself resulted from Sram’s noticing and talking at length about dog’s off-casts. Something on which he was made to elaborate by Barbarez.

“Let’s not talk about me,” Nemet insisted.

“Agreed,” Sila said.

They spent the remainder of the meal in spars conversation, focused mostly on eating. It was obvious they were hungry, and the time of their lunch-break was running out.

The thing Hugo loathed the most was the walk back to the office. He thought he was at his whit’s end with that summer.

Sram hailed the waitress one last time, paying the bill upon her arrival. All three got up with Rot staying behind a few paces, soaking up the cool breeze emanating from the air conditioner.

Just as he thought, once he got outside Hugo perceived something akin to melting. There was a thawing of sorts going on in the city, and it seemed only he was privy to it.

The other two made it fine back to the office, but Rot was lagging behind, mustering only so much strength as to rub the back of his sweaty neck with his sweaty hand.

Once on the third floor, Hugo headed straight to the bathroom where he turned on the faucet, plugged the drain, and submerged his entire head under the cool, refreshing water.

So somewhat recovered from the ordeal of an outing for lunch, Rot used the hand-dryer on the bathroom wall to dry his hair. He was bent over, leaning against the wall with one hand and repeatedly having to press the apparatus with the other.

It's hard to make a wet head wetter.

Realizing that, Hugo returned to his work-station; all be it of a somewhat sunburnt nose and cheeks, with droplets of water falling down his forehead.

He continued making calls, some were of a successful outcome; some were not. As he and Sila suspected Nemet was fidgeting in his seat, obviously due to an onset of gas. Luckily for Sram and, more importantly for all those in his proximity, his farts were a cosmic.

Rot was interrupted by Kaya who approached him, saying the Director of Subscriptions and Sales needed to see him in her office.

The young salesman slowly got up from his chair not knowing what to expect, and pace, pace began walking the seemingly endless expanse that was the Subscriptions and Sales floor at the end of which, and right behind the door where Miss Kos was stationed; there was the office of the Director.

Kaya said she was expecting him, so he walked right in. At a rosewood desk, in a leather upholstered chair sat Miss Pirga Hristodulo, bidding him to sit down opposite her.

Doing as he was told, Hugo paid close attention. Miss Hristodulo said the Director was going to be out of town for a business conference the next few days, leaving her in charge. Pirga mentioned, as if by the way, that the Director instructed everyone at the paper to do what she says. She didn't fail to mention Hugo's good results, and moreover, the consistency and diligence in his work. Miss Hristodulo added she chose him, as her most capable salesman, to

run the floor of the Subscriptions and Sales Department, as she'll be busy with other work. It was obvious to Hugo his boss had trouble delegating responsibilities in the workplace.

Rot stood up from his seat. It was then that he saw the whole of her. Pirga was still seated but her chair she moved to the side, it was no longer under the surface of the desk. She was attired with a business suit, and adorned by nylon stockings, showing just a whisper of whimsical lace under her skirt. Miss Hristodulo looked him straight in the eyes and ran the palm of her hand across her outer and upper thigh.

Hugo wouldn't have moved had it not been for her telling him their meeting was over, that it was back to work for him.

Kaya was on the phone at her desk. She didn't notice his blushing; in fact no one could, what with all that sunburn on his face.

Sila looked at him, but thought nothing of it. Nemet glanced in his direction, but was none the wiser. Neither of his two friends knew where Rot disappeared to in the last ten/fifteen minutes, truth be told, neither did Hugo.

Throughout the remainder of the day, all the young salesman could think about was his superior. All else was but an echo of the meeting he had with her.

Hugo Rot began doing what he never had, he began wanting without needing. Otherwise a restrained youth; Pirga brought out something in him, which will not be tamed.

Aware of all this; he knew he wasn't about to start something in his place of business, so all such musings of misbegotten male fantasies he put ad acta for now.

It was time to finish for the day. Pirga Hristodulo had to stay for she was now the Acting Director of the company. She explained the situation to Miss Kos who agreed to work late and help the cause of the Colporteur no matter what.

On the way down in the elevator, a silence was instilled among the three friends. Outside it was as if the sun itself was headed for collapse and a fall from on high.

There was an uneasy feeling in Hugo's chest which he couldn't shake. There was an unnerving wait in Sila's head that could've only been remedied by Miss Kos. And there was sheer upheaval in Nemet's stomach from which, he knew; there would be no recovery until tomorrow morning.

They parted ways not far from the Colporteur building. Hugo directed his gait toward the south bank of the river where there was a tram surely passing, waiting to take him across the bridge.

In the meanwhile, the two ladies left behind in the office were burning the midnight oil. Kaya was placing calls, Pirga was taking calls. There was no letting up.

'Twas a time to toil 'till true for the two of them. Therefore it didn't come as a surprise to Miss Kos that Miss Hristodulo engaged her in a bit of nonchalant conversation.

The Acting Director wanted to know the Office Assistant a little better. And sooner rather than later, through discussing each other's professional careers they began talking about all variety of topics.

At one point Miss Pirga made hot chocolate for the both of them.

"My secret ingredient is rum."

Kaya's boss said. Miss Kos learned a lot about Miss Hristodulo's personal life that evening. She learned, for one, that her superior was no stranger to alcohol. And having drunk her hot chocolate, Pirga grabbed a bottle of whiskey and two glasses from her office cupboard, placed them on the Assistant's desk, and had her make a call to have food delivered to the office.

Pirga made a personal effort – for the whiskey began taking hold – and placed a call to the security guard at the entrance of the building, ordering that the delivery man be let inside and shown to the third floor.

Once the food arrived, Miss Hristodulo became completely loose of tongue. She began praising Miss Kos and everything she did for the paper. Truth be told, Kaya was getting to be giddy of voice, all aided by the powerful disinhibitor.

When finished with their food and drinks, Pirga made a fresh pot of coffee. And so the evening turned into night, the night receded into dawn. It was too early to begin another work-day, and too late to go home.