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Day in the Life

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Author Bio

Jack Pittenger is a senior History major from Boston, Massachusetts who doesn't want to hear it about 18-1. His interests include rugby, ATO, looking at Steve Tharp's hairline, trying to spot for Meat in the weight room, being a Windex man for the Flippers, and being sworn at by Professor Leebron. His career aspirations include saying he doesn't quite know yet when people ask him what he plans on doing after graduation and getting the fattest Newfoundland the world has ever seen once he has a place that's big enough.

Day in the Life

The rings of the alarm clock pounded at the inside of his head.

Remembering that he had already tried to hit the snooze once, he reluctantly rolled out of bed and allowed his shoulders to shudder as his feet touched the cold floor. Howard Pearlman could hear similar alarms blaring similar tunes in similar rooms all around him; the walls of the tiny studio apartment were like paper. Identical apartments, buildings full of them all lined up in neat little rows inside the left pelvis of a man named Paul. Howard realized that he was already late for work, cursed under his breath, and ran to get into the shower as he threw a couple slices of bread into the toaster and pressed the tab down, hoping that his breakfast would be ready by the time he got out.

Before you talk down to us in other departments, why don't you try to get your own shit together?

He emerged from the shower minutes later wrapped in a towel, inhaling the thick blue smoke as the toaster consumed his well done bread. He ran over to pull the cord out of the wall, but not before his wet feet slid across the linoleum and his knee smashed directly into the handle of one of the cabinets under the sink. He cursed again, throwing the toast into the trash before limping to his dresser. Howard put on his standard outfit, with the khakis he had worn the day before, the blue short-sleeved dress shirt he had worn two days before, and the yellow clip-on tie he had worn every day before. Carefully, he combed his short salt and pepper hair straight back on his head, making a mental note to hit the gym that night as he looked with embarrassment at his torso in the mirror. He walked out of his apartment and down the stairs, nodding to the group of Achilles Heel coworkers who liked to carpool from the building next to his, and continued to his pale blue two-door compact. He got in, started the engine, and carefully pulled out of the small parking garage onto the spinal column of Paul Cornleaf.

The column was always a mess at this time of day, as all of the people in Howard's neighborhood behind Paul's left pelvis had more or less the same commute, up his back and dispersing into the various sectors of the body whenever the guys working the night shift in the brain determined that Paul had slept long enough and woke him up. Howard had one of the longest commutes of them all, as his office at Internal Censoring was located in a wing of the Brain Center, a small cube tucked into the middle of Paul's cerebellum. Howard pulled into the drive-thru coffee shop nestled between the two kidneys, got a large cup with cream and sugar, and carefully merged back onto the column.

Traffic was at a stand-still. Howard gingerly took the top off of the cup and tentatively began to take a first sip. He was instantly jerked forward as he heard his tail lights smash, hot coffee spilling down the front of his shirt and tie. Frantically, he pulled his shirt away from his body as he felt his skin burn, and

angrily looked into the rearview mirror. Pickup truck. Meant only one thing. Bicep guys. Howard had gone to high school with a few guys like that, and their prejudice toward the cerebral guys was legendary. The truck suddenly disappeared from his mirror, only to re-emerge at his side as it shot through a gap in traffic Howard had not even seen, which naturally closed back up the second he put his blinker on.

“Fuck you, Brain dork!” Howard heard fleetingly as the truck shot by him, the last glimpse he saw of it being the worn “I Don’t Brake For Enzymes” bumper sticker on its rear. Howard half-opened his mouth to say something in return, but couldn’t think of anything and of course they were already gone. He pressed his forehead to the steering wheel and sighed, only lifting his head when the traffic behind him honked to let him know the road was beginning to clear up ahead.

He took the exit at Paul’s trapezius and pulled into the parking lot outside the Brain Center. All the good spots up front were always taken by the Ear and Eye guys, as they had to be there the second Paul woke up, lest he think he had gone deaf and blind in his sleep. Howard sighed, and continued to circle the lot. More spots than usual were taken, and he realized that Paul had a test in Psychology today, so all the Critical Thinking guys and some Memory temps had been called in. He gave up trying to find a spot, pulled back into the road, and parked next to a meter, filling it with as many quarters as he could find on the floor of his car. He grabbed his briefcase and trudged towards the main entrance of the Center. He opened the door and saw his boss Pierce was waiting for him in the lobby.

“Pearlman! Where the fuck have you been? We’ve already had Paul tell some broad on his floor that maybe she should throw some makeup on before she talks to him! You come in late like this just one more time, and I’ll move you to the Excretory Division! Final Preparatory line!”

“Sorry, sir, it won’t happen again. There was traffic, and I spilled my coff...”

“Never mind that!” Pierce cut him off, “Just get to work, God damn it!”

Howard shuffled to his office, opened the door, and sat down at the bare metal desk with a small monitor resting on it. His seat was metal with green padding, and besides the desk and chair the only other furniture in the room was a massive gray computer against the rear wall, its hundreds of yellow and red lights blinking rhythmically. Pausing to straighten the poster of a kitten hanging from a branch with “Hang In There!” emblazoned on it, Howard looked to his desk and made sure his Zen garden of sand and rocks was still sitting on his desk next to the blue Koosh ball. He sat down, reached into the drawer of the desk, pulled out a set of headphones and a microphone, plugged both into the huge computer, and put his head into his hands on the desk. Howard’s job was unique within the company. In a conference room a couple of floors above him, whenever Paul had an interaction with another person, the Speech guys and the Information Processing boys would have a meeting and decide what they thought Paul should say. These guys were the cream of the moral crop, Boy Scouts, and thus would always be completely honest with whatever they felt Paul should say to whomever he was speaking with at the time.

Naturally, this was no way for someone to go through life. A person with

no Internal Censoring department would be a oneman emotional wrecking crew, leaving a trail of devastated fat women and acutely self-aware and semi-depressed teenagers with bad cases of acne in his wake. So Howard and the computer formed a defense against this. The guys upstairs would relay down to Howard through the headphones what they had in mind for Paul to say, he would speak it into the computer, and the computer would tell him through the headphones what Paul should actually say. Howard then relayed this to the guys working in the Larynx, and Paul would say the completed phrase. Paul's voice would come through into Howard's office via a loudspeaker tucked in a corner, so that Howard would know the computer's results had been successfully relayed. The monitor on his desk allowed him to see whatever the Eye guys were seeing up top. Thus, since Howard had not been at his station that morning, the computer was not manned, and Paul had told a girl in the dorm hallway that she should put some makeup on when really all he should have had to say was "Good Morning". The Speech and Info Processing guys were incapable of understanding these social graces, though, and within ten minutes of waking up Paul had severely insulted an acquaintance, all because of a little traffic on the spine.

The wall clock directly faced Howard as he sat at his desk. This was really the worst possible location for it, as it constantly taunted him. Every time he looked up it was right in his line of sight to remind him how little time had passed since the last time he checked. It was only 11:33 in the morning, and Paul hadn't said anything since the debacle in the hallway before Howard had gotten into work. He was now tangled up in his Psychology test, so there actually really wasn't a whole lot he could say at the present time.

Paul was a righty, so Denise from the Left Hand was on a break during the hand-written test and came up to see what was going on. Denise was a pretty, short brunette who loved to wear those knit sweaters with the fat, knit Halloween pumpkins or Christmas snowmen. She and Howard had dated for a while a few years back, and things were still just pretty weird between the two. They had both started out in the mail room of the nervous center, receiving, processing, and sending out the thousands of messages that everyone throughout the body sent up to the brain for confirmation. Howard had been promoted, and had broken up with Denise as he felt bigger and better things awaited him. Six years later, he was still stuck in middle management of the Brain while Denise was on the fast track in the muscular system. People were starting to whisper she was up for a promotion to the Right Hand soon.

"Hi, Howard! How have you been? How was your weekend?"

"Um, well, it's Friday, but it was nice. How have you been? Haven't seen you in a while, Denise."

"Oh, I've just been great. They guys who are gonna be in Ambidexterity finally finished their grad school degrees, so I think they're gonna have Paul start working on batting lefty soon so he can be a bigger asset on the intramural softball team."

"Oh man, that's great Denise, I'm really happy for you," Paul said through loosely clenched teeth, jealous of his ex-girlfriend's success. Man, he thought, she looked great. He wondered if she'd been going to that new gym they

just put in over behind Paul's right knee. Howard made another mental note to go there himself after work. He realized nobody had said anything in a while.

"Well, I better get back to work Denise. He's almost done with the test, God knows what he'll say to the professor when he hands it in, so I'll see ya soon. Great seeing you though."

"Yeah, great seeing you too, Howard. You have a coffee stain on your shirt by the way."

"Yeah, I..." Howard began, but she was already out the door. Depressed by the brief interaction, Howard looked down and started playing with the little Zen garden on his desk. It always relaxed him to move the little wooden rake around the rocks, making patterns in the sand that they lay in. It always relaxed him too, which was something he needed. It had already been a hell of a day, he thought to himself as he felt his body get more and more comfortable in the chair.

Howard woke up to Pierce screaming in his face. He could see the clock over his boss' shoulder. 3:35. Fuck.

"Pearlman, I swear to fuck, I am going to can your ass. Paul just told some girl that he likes her shirt because it draws the attention away from her face and to where it really belongs. If I catch you sleeping on the job again, I will personally make sure that you never work in this body again. See how you like working for a nuclear power plant cleaner. Get it together!"

Paul was heading to another class now. Howard was pretty sure it was Biology. As Paul sat there listening to the professor talk about gynecological diseases, Howard got a buzz in his earphones from the guys upstairs. Paul was getting ready to ask a question and they wanted Howard to do his job for once and let the computer check it out.

"Are these issues gender-specific or can they affect men as well?" A voice from the conference upstairs crackled into his headset.

Howard repeated the message into the microphone, and watched as the machine worked its magic, then spit out its revised suggestion into his headphones.

He heard a metallic sigh, followed with "Just tell him not to say anything" as a robotic voice spouted back to Howard.

Howard got on the microphone, clicking a switch on it so as to speak back up to the conference room upstairs.

"Guys, I'm sorry but the computer thinks he's better off just saying nothing at all. It thinks that that's a pretty ridiculous question."

A second passed before the voice replied in the headphones. "OK, great Howard, we'll go with the computer's recommendation. We'll tell the Larynx boys just to sit this one out."

Howard eased back in his chair, staring at the fluorescent lighting as he twiddled his thumbs. He was relieved that he had finally done something right. He inspected the coffee stain from that morning on his tie and shirt, praying that it would come out with a good thorough washing in the sink that evening when he finally got off work. It was a Friday though, and that meant that Paul would probably be out late so in turn Howard wouldn't get in until late. The Internal Censor office was a necessity and Howard had to be around during all of Paul's waking hours.

The Biology class ended, and Paul walked back to his dorm room thankfully in silence, allowing Howard to reflect more on the lost opportunity of Denise. It didn't matter, he thought, he could always ask Wanda in Digestion out on a date sometime. She always smiled at him in the cafeteria. Suddenly, Paul's phone rang. It was his mother. Howard tensed up. These were always the tough ones.

"Hi, Paul!" she started.

"Oh, hi, Mom," Paul replied.

"How have things been? Why didn't you pick up when I called you at 9:30?"

Howard's headphones crackled to life. "I was so fucking hungover I couldn't even see straight, let alone answer the phone," was the word from upstairs. Howard entered it into the computer, and Paul soon replied with "Oh, I'm sorry, I was in the library and had my phone on silent."

"Oh, OK, honey. Paul, I'd really like you to find a nice girl at school. Your brother's getting married soon, you know, and twenty isn't too early to start thinking about your future."

The headphones sounded off again. "Oh, Mom, I meet plenty of girls, and they're all just nice enough, trust me." Howard gasped. Why did the guys upstairs make his life so hard? He fed it into the computer.

"I know, Mom. I'm just looking for the right one and that's not something you can rush. I just want to meet new people right now. I think I'm gonna take a nap though, I love you!"

"I love you too, sweetie. Bye!" Paul's mom hung up.

Howard wiped the beads of sweat from his brow. Any mistakes on his part when Paul was speaking to his mom could get everybody in the body back to Paul's hometown, where they'd be reassigned to bodies that pumped gas or flipped burgers, and everybody knew what that would do to wages and job satisfaction. He had done well, though, and things were beginning to look up today.

He checked the monitor on the desk. Paul was walking down the hallway of his dorm, and once he had opened the door he collapsed into bed. Naptime for him. Howard got up and went to grab a cup of coffee. The Dream guys had it from here, and they didn't have any use for an Internal Censor like Howard. Besides, Paul only talked in his sleep when the Larynx guys were trying to make a little overtime.

He poured himself a fresh cup out of the small machine in the break room. There were a couple other guys milling around, and Howard recognized that all of them were only necessary when Paul was awake and were also enjoying the brief break. He knew only Seth by name, however, and went over to talk to the skinny young kid, fresh out of school and getting his start down the hallway in Blinking. He was raw, but had a reputation for ambition and wouldn't let anybody get in his way in his pursuit for a spot at the Holy Grail: the Cerebral Cortex. They were known throughout the body for their rich mahogany offices, burgundy leather chairs, and prime summer homes on the fingertips of Paul. It was a job to be envied, and a job that there was much competition for.

"Hey, Seth. How's it going?"

The kid looked slightly startled. "Oh, hi, Howard. Things are going OK, I guess. Not much mental effort needed for my work, though, is there?"

"I can't really say. I've never actually checked out the blinking operation."

"Oh. Well, it's basically me standing at a little podium with a red button on it. In front of me are two huge panels so that I can see whatever Paul sees. Every ten seconds or so, I press the red button, and the eyelids come down over the panels, then go back up."

"And that's your day."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, Seth, but that sounds absolutely awful. I don't mean to demean your job, but Jesus."

"Oh, OK, Howard!" Seth suddenly blew up. "Why don't you go ahead and embarrass Paul again by letting him insult two hot girls in one day? Do you know how hot the Blushing guys make it in here when Paul gets embarrassed? I had to change my shirt already today, and I was wearing an undershirt! Before you talk down to us in other departments, why don't you try to get your own shit together? Great stain on your shirt by the way. Looks nice. Let me guess. Pectoral guys? No, had to be the Bicep fellas. Way to stand up to them."

Howard was taken aback. Had he really sunk so low in the pecking order that the fucking *Blinking* guys were giving him shit? He turned and walked out of the break room, too embarrassed and ashamed to say anything back to Seth. Enjoy punching your button all day, buddy.

Out in the hallway on his way back to his office he bumped into Jeff from the Tear Ducts.

"Hey Jeff, what's going on, man?"

"Hey, Howard. What's that stain on your shirt?"

"How're things down at your neck of the woods?" Howard ignored the question.

"Awful, ridiculous hours this week. Paul watched *The Notebook* with a girl the other night, so I had to force out a few tears then, and then it was all I could do to keep the flow going when he watched *Field of Dreams* alone on Monday. Oh, and then he saw one of his friend's puppies cover its eyes with its own paws on Wednesday. That did it for him too. This is getting ridiculous, the guy's really just kind of a cry baby and it's a pain in my ass, you know?"

"Yeah, man, that sucks."

"How about you, Howard? How are things up at Internal Censoring?"

"Could be worse. Pierce is all over my ass about coming in late today and letting Paul make a fool out of himself to that girl down the hall who really only looks hot with makeup on."

"Oh, man. You mean Lisa?"

"Yeah, that sounds right."

"Christ, that was the girl he watched *The Notebook* with. Maybe she won't come around again. I hope not, anyways, it's pretty tough work for us to force his tears out. Thanks for the assist, buddy."

"Yeah, Jeff. You got it. I better be getting back, I think Paul is gonna be waking up soon."

“Yeah, definitely. Take it easy, Howard.”

Howard walked back to his office, and went and sat down at his desk just as the monitor sprang back to life as Paul slowly woke up. Perfect timing. He worked on a crossword puzzle for a bit as Paul showered and sang a little tune as he did so. There was really nothing Howard could do here, either, as the computer had no capacity for correcting song lyrics. The Speech and Information Processing guys upstairs just gave their best guesses on the lyrics to the Larynx crew, and everyone just had to sit in their offices and listen to Paul butcher whatever song he had in mind that day.

Eventually Paul got back to his room and Howard watched with horror as he reached into his refrigerator and pulled out a beer. It was Friday. The exhausted Critical Thinking and Memory guys were burned out from a week of studying and test-taking. They had someone fill out the necessary paperwork so that the Willpower guys could scale back their operation and Paul could make a few mistakes. This would allow the CT and Memory crews to hit the road early, as drinking rendered them useless. This made Howard's life a living hell. He looked at the upcoming night with dread.

The first beer went down pretty easy, and barely began to seep under his office door. He felt bad for the guys down in the Bladder, this sort of night always affected them first and longest. A few more beers and Paul had called some friends over, and now Howard had to get to work making sure Paul didn't insult them too bad as the alcohol began to take hold on all of the other offices. It was about up to the soles of his shoes in his office, and the computer was elevated only about ankle level off the ground. The transmissions from the higher-ups in the conference room were coming quicker and quicker, and Howard worked as quickly as he could to feed them into the computer and get the results back to the guys in the Larynx.

“Hey fat-ass, grab me a fucking beer,” became “Hey, Steve, can you grab me a cold one?”, and “Let's do seven shots!” became “Let's do one shot!”, and the hours became minutes as Howard frantically worked to keep Paul safe and out of trouble as the level of beer and liquor in the office rose and rose until finally it began to touch the computer, which made whining noises and began to hiss and pop as it struggled to continue to work. Finally, sparks flew from it and the blinking lights went out as it ceased to work altogether, to Howard's horror. He frantically looked back into the monitor to see Paul was talking to a cute blonde girl. The beer sloshed around his knees as he sat at the desk, helplessly watching the scene unfold.

“So, what's your major? Being hot?”

“No,” she laughed nervously, “English. What about you?”

With the link to Internal Censoring cut, Howard knew the guys in the conference room upstairs would be talking directly to the Larynx, with no buffer at all. It would be brutal honesty, compounded by the fact that the goody-goodies in the Speech and Info Processing Departments were all light-weights who would surely be buzzed by now from the beer permeating the entirety of Paul's body. They would have no idea what would be acceptable to send to the Larynx pawns. Howard could only sit and watch in horror.

“Well, my major is Psychology. But I think I could ‘declare’ my love for you right now.”

Howard put his head into his hands. The blonde walked away in a huff. The beer in the bottom of the office slowly began to disappear. Howard peeked between his fingers to see in the monitor that Paul was looking into the bottom of a trash can and vomiting vigorously. The beer would soon be gone for the most part. He watched in glee, cheering by himself in his tiny office, as Paul's friends dragged him back to his room on their shoulders and tucked him into bed for the night. The Motor Skills guys couldn't really hold their booze, either, and were always the first ones to go down when Paul was drinking.

Howard was jubilant. The censoring computer was still out of commission, but that was of no matter. The repair guys would come in the night and take care of that as Paul and all of his daytime crew, including Howard, slept. By morning Howard would be able to again regulate what Paul said, and everything would be OK again. He turned off the light in the office, walked to his car, plucked the ticket off of the windshield, and slowly pulled out, pausing only to slam on the brakes as an ambulance flew by, its siren screaming as it took an exhausted Liver crewmember to the infirmary. He pulled out tentatively again, slamming on the brakes a second time as a pickup truck hurtled by, its headlights permeating the darkness on the spinal column of Paul Cornleaf.