

The Trainee
By Civil_Act_2392

Every morning I walk by the coffee shop and have to stop. It's the smell. It gets you. Right in the nose, like a bullet to the head. I always say "Hi, how are ya?" and "Good morning" to the lady at the counter. I order a latte with oat milk, like a hipster from the 20's. 'Course it's not real coffee beans anymore. Kenya got too hot, and don't get me started on what happened in Columbia. So they put the smell in there now, artificial and all. Probably made from cat piss for all I know. But I still love it.

At 20 credits a cup it's a kick in the balls before you get to work. I don't know why we all still do it. You can make coffee at home, you know and it'll only cost you like 6 per cup for the good stuff, and only 2 for the bad ones. But then you have to get your own reusable and that costs 100 credits, and by the time you've bought artificial sweetener, made the water and bought the cheap stuff from the supermarket, because of course that's what you chose, you realise you forgot to wash your cup, and you'll be late for work. And so it's 8:45 am and I am at the gates of the building housing our offices, big disposable cup in hand, smell drifting up to my nose, looking up at the dull, perma-grey chemical skies, knowing it'll be the last time I see 'em for a while, breathing in that little bit of dust that's always there on the edge of sight, and thinking it was better before the Industrial Revolution. They probably had real coffee then.

The gate's open at this time of day and I walk on through, with a little nod to the security guard. They've got their own booth with a screen and a computer and a chair and nobody bothers them. They should put a coffee machine in there. Even without one it honestly looks like a better gig than I've got. 'Course I'm not likely to get shot for just doing my job typing some keys on a computer and checking in with people. It's the ones on the other end of my computer who face that risk.

I tap my card on the reader, thinking of the germs as I do. Most places use retinals these days. The little mini-gate opens on up and I step through. The reflections of the ceiling are on the ground, making the floor look like it has orbs of light dotted about on the ground. This place is clean, I think to myself, as I step on towards the

elevators. Floor 7. I tap again on the elevator and hit number 7. There's a couple of people in with me but our eyes never meet. I don't really know what they look like and I'm not going to try to find out. As we go up I think I'd like to take a sip of coffee now but I think of the germs and I don't. I get out first, the others going on up to the financials. Fancy.

The doors open and the colour scheme changes to greys and soft, dull whites. Those kinds of whites are not bright enough to smack of a doctor's office, so they don't offend the eyes or the mind. Don't want to remember being in to see a doctor and getting a test. Don't want it to be confirmed. Don't want to have to wait in hospital lines. Wait for your number. Don't want my temperature taken. Don't want to remember. So I'm not going to. The whites are nice, like the cream on the inside of a donut. They soothe me as I walk the halls and turn the corners.

I get to my department area at 8:51 am and walk past cubicles of grey and probably faces of grey to where our team is based. The team leader, the guy I'm supposed to be learning from, is already here. 'Mornin' I say as I take off my bag and put it on the desk and get to work, not actual work, but the prep of taking out a small laptop, putting in cables here and there. Hooking up to the machine. What a life. The coffee I've had to put clear to one side for now to avoid spilling it as I empty the contents of the bag onto the desk, including the mouse, antiquated as it is. It'll still be hot enough, I reason, in the time it takes me to do all this.

By the time I log in it's 8:57 am and I hope my inbox is under ten deep. Twelve. Manageable. Most of it is company stuff, administration of the company and its valuable employees. An upcoming charity event that I will regretfully not be attending. A donation is made automatically from my salary each month, so it's not as if I'm the devil. I figure it's good enough. I take a sip of coffee. I click on to the next email. This one's from the team lead. An invite to a meeting for the next bit of training we're supposed to get. He'll be leading the meeting. I and the other trainees will be taking notes and listening. The call's at 9:30 am. Perfect. That's just enough time to get rid of these emails, finish my coffee and put it in the recycler.

“Operating Procedures Under Extreme Stress” says the invite title. And under that a short description “Co-Piloting in critical situations is tough. We need to know how to react when the chips are down. When team members are falling, we cannot seize up. We must go on. The techniques learned in this training call and the subsequent materials we’ll give you to read, as well as the tests we’ll put you through, will prepare you for the day when it’s you and your Jockey in that heart-stopping mission-critical moment.”

On the call I see the faces of five other trainees and the team leader. Martin. He’s about forty-five. We get along, on the surface. Below that, it’s a whole other story. I know he knows about my uncle. And I know he thinks this is why I got this job, why I was put in this position. He doesn’t think I deserve this. He doesn’t know I deserve it. He doesn’t know I know what he’s trying to do to me. So we listen and we take notes and after the call we read through the materials and we do the tests. The simulations are basic but get the point across. They don’t have the full suite of software that we’ll have when we’re a-go. But “it is what it is”. I hate that phrase. I pass the tests.

Later on, at around 11:49, just when I’m thinking about getting a second cup of java, Martin pulls me aside. I, outwardly happily, inwardly irritatedly, accept his request for a quick conversation. We step into the hall with white reflected tiles and then into a glass meeting room. Gotta hide the expressions in there. Everyone can see.

He starts talking. “Now look, I know what the training says you should do and for the most part it is correct. But there’s training, and there’s experience. And they don’t always match up. This stuff it says about taking a deep breath, referring by memory or on your side view where quick refs are located, to the procedures, the training, trying to keep your emotions calm before issuing commands, it’s not what I find works. I believe there’s a heightened state of being, of reaction times, that comes with adrenalin, and with accepting the emotions your body produces in the moment. And going with them. Really going. And I think you have what it takes to be a really good Co-Pilot.”

He smiles. I hate it.

“So what I’m telling you is to trust yourself. Let those emotions flow through you. In that moment when it really hits the fan, ignore the procedures. Do what you feel is

right. Don't take a deep breath. Dive right into it. Get uncomfortable." He pats me on the shoulder. Doesn't he know about the germs? I'm going to throw out this shirt when I get home. He gets up, says 'let's get back to work' and leaves the door open as he exits the meeting room. His words are poison under a thick layer of well-sounding cream. This is one of the things we've so far been trained not to do. Emotion. Judgement. Clouded. He thinks I'll soak up this bull. He really has no idea I'm on to him. That he's trying to end my time here. My career. Before it even starts. Uncle. What did you do? Team Leader Martin. Man, what a piece of work. I go get a coffee.

Months go by. Martin keeps feeding me bits and pieces from his own repertoire that undermines the formal training we get from the Department. I can see that snake-like look in his eyes when he talks to me. It's getting harder to ignore. Thoughts of him creep into my life after work when I go home and sit alone in my empty apartment. I buy a new coffee machine. It doesn't help. The coffee "beans" are still impure. Contaminated. Like me. But there's no way around it. I love coffee. So the machine sees plenty of use.

It all comes to a head when we're on a mission. Oh yeah, I forgot to mention: I'm a full Co-Pilot now. Some grunt named Mike is my Jockey. He's actually a nice guy. I was there watching when he went back and pulled a wounded teammate back under heavy fire. He'll probably get promoted out of my purview soon for that. He listens to the information and recommendations I feed through to him just fine. He responds politely with a 'yes sir' when it's safe to do so.

But we're in some deep mess when a car bomb goes off in the streets of Damascus. It's an ambush. As part of a peacekeeping force protecting a high-value technocrat, who's gonna bring some technology that'll purify the water, get the crops growing again, get rid of the chemicals in the ground, Mike has to put his life on the line whenever it is required. The explosion knocks Mike back prone onto his ass. There's debris and shortly, screaming. Then, gunfire.

"Get up!" I say. He says nothing. I send a short bolt of electricity into his helmet that will hit his head. Standard operating procedure. I hear his moans and see the view

change from blue sky to grey smoke and coffee brown and beige. Through the display I see about four hostiles with more probably out sight.

“Four visible hostiles Mikey. Two behind the white van at 10 o’clock. Two on the second floor of the store. Armed with rifles. There’s a house behind you at 5 o’clock for cover. Get up.”

No response from Mike. My palms are sweaty. Operating Procedures Under Extreme Stress. Co-Piloting in critical situations. The techniques learned in this training, as well as the tests we’ll put you through... take a deep breath, refer to your side view... back to the procedures, the training, keep your emotions calm before issuing commands. Trust yourself. Emotions may flow through you. At that moment, ignore the procedures. And Martin. Martin in my head.

“GET UP. NOW Mikey, NOW.” No response. “Mikey, Mikey, Mikey, if you don’t get up right now you’re gonna die.” Saying this is not in the procedures. Neither is screaming it. In my peripheral, I see a few colleague’s heads jerk upright for a moment, before they go back to their screens. “Mikey, stand up. Get up, and get to the back. Go to the house behind you. Your team is dying Mikey. Go. Or I’m going to fly to Damascus and kill you myself.” I can see droplets of spit on my screen.

From the side of my eye I see Martin heading my way through the grey cubicle maze. Screw him. Then I hear heavy breathing in my headset, and a grunt, before the camera lurches again to blue, beige, blue and beige again. And orange, dancing unpredictably, with black and grey following its movements, going up.

The camera swings around to the house and Mikey heads over there. Amid gunfire and screams, the sound of a rifle being readied.

“Mikey, two on top of that old shop on the left, 10 o’clock. Wait.” Mike is hiding behind the wall of the shop.

Martin’s at my desk, he’s not said anything yet though.

“Now.”

Mikey pops out, and in the camera’s view a rifle is seen raised up. Some blunt sounds and the camera jerks, then steadies. Some more blunt sounds and the camera jerks again. When it steadies again the two hostiles on the top of the old shop are gone.

“Now get to your team. I’m sure you can hear them on the comms so you can locate them just fine. Don’t worry about the ‘crat, he’s in his armoured truck heading back. His meeting will be cancelled and he’ll be pissed off. There are six other hostiles in the area. Jason and Grant are down. Get to them, get them out and get outta there.”

After the mission, I tear off my headphones, which are slick with sweat, and throw them on the desk. Turn around to go to the bathroom and jerk back as I notice Martin’s still there. I’d completely forgotten.

He says “You did good. Believe me. That was not easy. To advise under the threat they were facing. Mikey did even better. He’s a legend now among his crew. But that’s all thanks to you, of course. You know, you kind of went off script. It’s all there in the logs. Management’s freaking out. On the one hand, the kinds of things I’ve been trying to get you to do will get you fired. I didn’t think you’d actually... go... that... that far... I thought you maybe saw through it. I thought you knew, maybe. Knew about ... well, uh, it doesn’t matter. They *worked*. The things you were doing there.

Mikey went further than anyone on his team. His reaction times... it was like you guys had some connection there for a moment. I don’t know how to explain it. Watching it on the screens. My bullshit, it worked. Huh. I figure they’ll either fire me, and promote you, or fire us both. That’s if they don’t kill us first.

Oh hell, look at me rambling. They’re gonna want an explanation, a thorough look at why security didn’t pick up the threat of that explosion, and when it did, what happened that allowed such unprecedented levels of performance. Captain Carter called central command. They’ve called a meeting. We better prepare for it.”

Martin turns around, starts walking, and says, “come on, let’s go get some coffee.”

[The End]