

IT was an ordinary afternoon at the plant. Sector 7-G had taken delivery of a consignment of some sort of hazardous substance; nobody really knew what it was or what they were supposed to be doing with it, but everyone was too proud to admit it. So they all got on with the task of unboxing the stuff and setting it on the conveyor belts that would take it to the parts of the plant that apparently had staff who knew what they were doing (the rumours were long-established but still unconfirmed). There were probably procedures surrounding the handling of this sort of toxic material, but the safety inspector had commenced his lunch break at twelve and it was still only three, and on top of that Wednesday was donut day, so everyone knew he would be unreachable for some time. Not that he would have been able to provide a great deal of guidance anyway, but everyone was always hopeful that he would one day live up to his job title.

Neither did Mr Smithers seem concerned when he came around to check on them in his little cart, doing the daily rounds that he sometimes carried out accompanied by the boss and sometimes alone. “Good work, everyone,” he said, ignoring the trails of glowing plasma that streaked across the floor, and the fact that more than one of his employees appeared to be foaming at the mouth. “Leonard, Carlson, I need to talk to you for a second.”

Lenny was all too happy to take a break from handling the mysterious substance – he could feel the skin on his hands

beginning to burn off – and stepped back so he could talk to Mr Smithers. He glanced at Carl as his co-worker did the same: Carl seemed unsurprised by the intrusion, but then nothing seemed to faze Carl. It was usually impossible to tell what he was thinking: he was infuriating like that.

Smithers seemed nervous, in a way that he normally was only when in the company of Mr Burns. He tapped his clipboard distractedly with a pen, and then spoke. “I have a job for you,” he said. “Mr Burns is in the market for a new bed, and he needs some willing victims, uh, volunteers, to go downtown and get one for him. He specifically requested” – he looked down at the clipboard and sighed – “two of his ‘uranium monkeys’ from Sector 7-G. And our observations show that the two of you appear to have one brain cell each, rather than one between you.”

“I don’t know,” said Lenny sceptically, always quick to spot when he might be being taken advantage of. “What’s in it for us?”

“You’ll get the rest of the afternoon off,” Smithers pointed out. “And Mr Burns will reward you with his fleeting gratitude for approximately twenty-two minutes, after which point we’ll pretend none of this ever happened. Oh, and you’ll have the use of the company credit card – for the assigned task only, of course.”

Lenny exchanged a surprised glance with Carl. *Moe’s*, he was thinking. *Moesmoesmoesmoesmoes*. Carl was clearly hav-

ing the same thought: for once, he was easy to figure out. When he blinked, the word *Moe's* was practically imprinted on his eyelids.

"Sounds like we could do that," said Carl slowly, calmly.

"Uh-huh," Lenny agreed.

"Great," said Smithers, and produced a folded piece of paper from his front pocket. "Here's the list of Mr Burns' criteria. Be aware that if any one of these is not met, you may find that your jobs are suddenly considered non-essential. And here's the credit card. If you spend it on beer, we will know."

"Yoink!" said Lenny, eagerly taking both. "We gotcha, Mr Smithers. We'll do a great job! No two uranium monkeys more reliable!"

The two of them headed out to the parking lot, Lenny clutching the card in a vice-like grip that he believed to be appropriate given the great power he now wielded. "So, how much beer are *you* gonna drink tonight?" he asked Carl.

"So much beer," said Carl reverently. "So, so much beer."

"Amen to that," said Lenny, and the two of them got into his car. Carl's had been put out of action about a year ago following an incident involving a family of ducks and a two-litre bottle of soda, and although he'd had it fixed not long afterwards, Lenny had been giving him lifts to work ever since. He had to get up an hour earlier every morning to make the round trip to Carl's place, but he didn't mind.

“Stay on the lookout for a bed store,” said Lenny as he drove into the centre of town.

“You got it,” said Carl. “Ah! Found one!” Sure enough, there was one right in front of them; Lenny had never seen it before; he suspected it was just like all those other stores that opened up in Springfield, seemed to have been there for ever, and then vanished again without a trace in a matter of days. But that hardly mattered. He pulled into the parking lot. The store was called *Beds! Beds! Beds! And Also Couches*, with the last three words written in minute letters underneath the first three.

They went inside. “Man,” Carl remarked. “This many beds is making me feel sleepy.”

Lenny looked down at Mr Burns’ list of extremely specific criteria. “Oh boy,” he said. “Looks like we’re gonna have to test every single one of these beds. OK, I’ll start on this side of the store, and you can start on that side?”

“Sure,” said Carl.

Lenny headed towards the first bed, lay down, and fidgeted around a bit, trying to work out whether it would meet Mr Burns’ specifications. It wasn’t too bad, he thought, but who knew. He rolled onto his other side, found Carl lying right beside him, and jerked in surprise.

“Hey, Carl,” he greeted him calmly, when the initial shock had passed.

“Hey,” Carl replied, and said nothing more.

“Uh ... what are you doing?” said Lenny, once he realised no explanation was forthcoming. “I’m already testing this one.”

“Oh, right,” said Carl. “Guess I didn’t see you.”

That guy really needs to get his eyes tested, Lenny thought as Carl got up from the bed and walked away. He stood up himself and tried the next one. It seemed no different from the first. Once he looked up, he realised Carl was lying next to him again.

“Hey, Carl,” he said for a second time.

“Hey,” Carl replied.

“Uh, you know I was meant to be doing this side of the store, right?” said Lenny uncertainly. “You were supposed to do the other side.”

“Ah, gotcha,” said Carl. “Get my left and right mixed up sometimes, sorry.” He wandered off.

The third time it happened, Lenny wasn’t even surprised anymore. “Hey, Carl,” he said.

“Hey,” said Carl. “Thought you might want a second opinion.”

“Uh, yeah, I guess,” said Lenny, feeling Carl’s warm breath against his face: they really were lying very close together. “So, what do you think?”

“Soft,” said Carl appreciatively. “Decent bed. Plenty of room.”

“You think Mr Burns would like it?” said Lenny.

“Guess he would,” said Carl noncommittally.

They climbed into the fourth bed at about the same time. “This one seemed big enough for two,” was Carl’s explanation in response to Lenny’s questioning look.

“Sure, but they all are, aren’t they?” said Lenny.

Carl shrugged.

Remarkably, Carl got into the next bed on his own. Lenny looked down at him for a moment, and then joined him.

“Oh, hey,” said Carl. “Miss me?”

“Seems like this is what we’re doing now,” said Lenny, avoiding the question.

“Cool,” said Carl. “I’m sure Mr Burns will appreciate it. We can test them better like this, right?”

“Sure,” said Lenny. He shuffled around a bit to try and get a feel for the bed, but it seemed his heart wasn’t in it anymore. All the beds were basically the same, and it was hard to concentrate with Carl so close to him.

“You know what?” said Carl.

“What?” he replied.

“I kind of like this,” said Carl. “Being in bed with you.” His expression was as inscrutable as ever; Lenny, on the other hand, suddenly felt his face growing extremely warm.

“Uh, yeah,” he managed to stammer out. “I guess I kind of like it too.” He paused. “Actually, I like it a lot.”

“Yeah, me too,” said Carl, shuffling nearer. Lenny looked into his brown eyes. There was a darker patch in the left one that he’d never been close enough to see before. Carl blinked

slowly, and Lenny watched as his eyelashes swept over his eyes, and then looked down at his nose, and his mouth – and he was going to go further, to his chin, but he was suddenly very interested in Carl’s lips for reasons he didn’t quite want to articulate –

And those lips moved forward and brushed against his own.

Before Lenny had even registered it, Carl had drawn back again with a grin. “Let’s get the bed and get out of here, huh?” he murmured.

“You wanna go to Moe’s already?” said Lenny, unable to disguise his disappointment.

“Uh, I don’t think I’m that interested in Moe’s right now,” said Carl. “There’s actually another bed I’d like to try.”

“Oh yeah?” said Lenny.

“Yeah,” said Carl meaningfully, and Lenny realised what he meant. “Right,” he said. “Let’s get one of these –” and he got up, trying not to appear unduly hasty, and flagged down a passing sales assistant. He paid for one of the beds in the vicinity – he didn’t even think it was one they’d tried, but right now, there were many things he did not care about, and this was very much one of them. After arranging for the bed to be sent to Burns’ mansion, signing off on the company credit card without even the merest frisson of glee, he rejoined Carl at the exit.

“So, your place?” said Carl, smiling brilliantly.

“Sure,” Lenny replied, and they walked back out to the car, both unable to hide their delight.