

Panic

When Joe stepped into his cubicle in the morning, he saw that the janitor again cleaned his table, and the red Panic button that was usually stuck on the keyboard was off to the side.

He did not really think this button was any good. You can't really expect much functionality from a piece of plastic that cost \$1. But he always felt that in times of real need, as a last resort, he can always hit the button. It was also a good laugh. And Joe liked a good, noisy laughter.

Since he was not given to panic, he never had a chance to test whether the button worked at all. On the one time he did panic, he was not in the office, nor anyway near. Which forced him to push his way out of a crowded bus with such ferocious violence that he could still hear people complain about it even as he stood on the curbside, shaking, waiting for the distancing bus to explode.

Joe replaced the button in its place – at the top-right corner of the keyboard. Normally, the sticky stuff at the bottom of the button was just enough to hold it. But today it seems to have lost the residual stickiness, and fell off right as he was keying in his login sequence.

Joe looked around. No glue, stickers or tape presented themselves. This was when he saw the white Tipex bottle. He did not remember putting it there, nor getting it from the office supply cabinet. He knew this would be something he'd remember – as with the latest saving measures, the office supply was locked in a cupboard next to the admin office. And a trip to the admin office was always something to remember – especially if the little temp blond was there, and you were Joe, and it was after hours.

If it had or hadn't a right to exist was immaterial now. He needed a sticking substance. He opened it, smeared a thin film on the top-right corner of his keyboard, and set the panic button promptly in its place. Flicking it lightly with his fingers a few minutes later, he was pleased to see that his improvisation worked, and that the button was firmly stuck.

The day passed on. Meetings came and went, and while his project was not exactly on track, no projects were ever on track. Which left him quite unprepared when his boss called him for a chat in the afternoon.

His boss was looking out of the window of his corner office, unusually aloof and detached. Joe felt the slight fingers of worry creep out from his otherwise calm mind.

The boss was short and to the point: "Joe. You know we are pretty tolerant here about almost any behavior. This *is* an R&D operation after all. We expect eccentrics. But we *are* pretty firm on a few things, as you know".

Now Joe was really worried. Did the blond talk?

“Theft is not something we tolerate. You should be the first to know that” the boss said with a hint to the incident where Joe got rid of his former manager, and took his position. “Let’s make it easier for all of us” his boss continued. “Go to your cubicle and collect your personal stuff. Security will escort you out in 10 minutes”.

Joe was still in stupor when he entered his cubicle. What theft? What was his boss talking about? He was surprised to find an empty box ready for him to fill it in. Someone must have been ready for this.

Some of his subordinates were peering over their cubicles at him, trying not to be obvious or meet his eyes, and wearing bewildered and sympathizing expressions. Then he noticed the mocking, sly face of Ruben, his annoying, aspiring developer, looking directly at him.

The last items went into the box. Joe scanned the table to see if he forgot something, when he noted the Tipex bottle.

“For this?!!!” he thought. “For a lousy Tipex I did not even take home? How will I pay the rent now? What will I tell Allison? How will I explain this to the kids?”. Panic hit him so hard he almost fell to the floor.

He hit the button with all his rage.

Ruben’s expression, as he slid into the abyss that was once his cubicle floor was priceless. The short cry of his boss, receiving the same fate, was unheard over Joe’s wild laughter.

The search was abandoned after a week and office life regained their pace. And a corner office agreed with Joe much more than his middle-manager cubicle.

Michael Stahl, 15/Jul/2010 – my version of an Etgar Keret story.