

Archive Guy

Author's Note: Growing older sucks. Among a thousand other things, my damn memory doesn't work anymore. Sometimes no matter how I force myself to remember, nothing happens, and it's really starting to piss me off. Like right now—what was the name of that guy in that movie? Can't remember to save my life. Where's my fucking brain when I need it?

It amazes me how long I've been working down here, and I'm beginning to think it's not fair. Nobody said life is fair, but the boss has been knocking about for a long time, too, and he's the one who's not fair, not life. I ain't complaining about life, god knows. Not my place.

Last night, the boss was watching some old movie on the vid, and out of the blue he calls me with the usual, "Who was that guy? You know, that guy in that thing?" Yeah, right, it always starts that way. Not only that, but he just saw some Netflix documentary on supporting actors called *That Guy in That Thing*. Brilliant.

Anyway, it's not enough to go on, and I don't know what to tell him, and he doesn't listen anyway unless I'm delivering His Nibs exactly what he was asking for, which I *always* eventually do. So I just ignore the call and get back to my solitaire game. You've no idea how boring it gets down here, being on call every waking hour, trying to keep track of everything — for him, mind you, not for myself — and never getting any credit for all my years of hard work.

A few minutes go by and then, as always (the guy is mind-numbingly predictable), he calls again. This time it's better, but still incoherent: "That movie about the monster, the stitched-up monster, big bumbling monster, you know, Saturday Night Live, back in the eighties." There's no real question, so I'm torn between hauling myself over to the 1980's file cabinets, or trying some kind of quick cross-reference for monster movies, but I'm pretty sure he's talking about Frankenstein. It's just a matter of which Frankenstein. He's seen all of them.

So I'm half-way to the Movies cabinets, which are in one of the back rooms, to look up all the Frankenstein flicks he's been to, including the ones shown on TV, when one of the pneumatic tubes swooshes by overhead, and a formal request lands in the basket. Why is he back to using the old tubes again? The catch-basket, of course, is at my desk, so I hurry back and open up the query cylinder.

"Guy was a big comic on that TV show about a radio station, and he did this monster thing on SNL. You know, that guy, right?"

I haven't even had a chance to tell him the movie is probably Frankenstein, and now he's off in some other direction, with Saturday Night Live and some TV show. I can find that kind of stuff pretty quickly, if I don't have to keep running back for the latest tube canister. And I'd be fine with running back and forth from one random file room to another and back to my desk if he hadn't been making me do this — completely at random, mind you — all freakin' day long. Anyway, it's my job, so I start back toward the Movie cabs, which are right next to the TV cabs, thank heaven, but the tube swooshes again and I stop in mid-stride, pivot, jump back to the basket, and find "Didn't he get stabbed or something by his wife? Was his wife also an actor?"

Jeez, we haven't even settled on who it is, and he's after the background on some stabbing wife. Or was that a metaphor? For god's sake, I'm not Google. And he's got Google anyway, doesn't he? How the hell should I know any of this? — I have to look it up too, obviously. It's probably in the files, but I won't know until I look, will I? And now I have to guess if he wants the guy's name, or the guy's wife, or even if it *is* the same guy that played Frankenstein. And maybe it's not Frankenstein anyway. Maybe he's thinking about Godzilla or Mothra. Who knows?

Look, sometimes I can infer the context from the sequence, but that's

getting less and less likely. I'm not privy to whatever conversation he's in, or his nattering thought processes, for that matter — I just get the questions, not the context, while the conveyors keep running, hauling in cabinet after cabinet for me to organize. When I have time.

Well, last night got worse and worse, until I was so burned out it was tempting to just stop responding, but he got groggy all of a sudden and fell asleep. I don't think he was drinking, but I can't tell. They don't tell me what's going on, just the past. Mountains of the past. I don't have direct access to real-time information. But lately this escalating cycle of demands, especially late at night, has become so typical I suppose I should just get used to it and do my job. Over the last few years he's been using the phone less and less, and seems to be getting stuck on the old pneumatic tube system, which never worked all that well anyway. Once in a while I get a message over the loudspeakers, too, which he uses so rarely that it never fails to startle the hell out of me. We used to be friends, kind of.

Look, I know what I'm supposed to do, and I've been doing a pretty good job for a pretty long time. The archive rooms are filling up, though, and it's not in perfect order anymore. I kept it nice and neat for many years, at least in part because he would leave me alone all night, almost every night. Also, I know that sometimes he'd be pretty swacked on pot or something because the requests would come in with long gaps in between, usually spelled in some ridiculous phonetic pidgin dialect he was making up on the spot. I have no idea if he was really smoking weed, but it fit all the descriptors. Anyway, at times like that I could get a lot of filing done.

The main thing is just the constant interruptions. He interrupts himself, changing the topic from minute to minute, demanding some obscure tidbit from 50 years ago and then something from last week at the opposite end of the complex, and he'll have me running around the whole damn basement, leaving file drawers open, folders half pulled out, post-it notes stuck all over my clipboard. And the more he does this, the more agitated he gets when I don't get back to him in an instant. He'll start banging on the ceiling, and ringing the Urgency bell over and over (you're only supposed to ring it once, per Urgency, right?). Then he'll send four or five cylinders down the tube in rapid succession, and I'm lucky if they're not all just the same query repeated over and over. Doesn't he realize I have

to go and open each cylinder? I can't just assume they're identical! It's so pointless to do that, and I do get flustered and, frankly, exhausted.

But last night was the worst, and it still bugs me. He kept harping on the name of some teacher he had in grammar school, but he wasn't sure which year it was. That's eight damn teachers, right? Well, six, maybe. But then there were the roving ones who came in just to teach Latin or French or Geography. So anyway, the calls just kept coming, and I was running back and forth from this room to that, pulling open file cabinets, flipping through folders, rummaging around. And then the pneumatic tube started emitting canister after canister, sometimes with more than one request in the same canister. I guess he was getting really desperate about something, but as usual he was oblivious to what I was going through. And it didn't let up for more than an hour.

Then, to make matters worse, one of his supposedly casual side requests led me to one of the back store-rooms I had set up during the college years. It was quite a mess, and I haven't even looked at those cabinets for ages, much less tried to find anything in them. When I opened the first drawer, I looked at the contents in horror — the drawer was just full of crumpled pages and scraps, dumped in without any folders at all! I'll admit, sometimes there'll be a folder that I never had a chance to put tabs on, or the tabs are a little illegible, or even blank, but a drawer with no folders was unforgivable. Somehow I must have shoved this material into the drawer during a major emergency of some kind, and planned to come back later to straighten up.

In a panic, I pulled open the next drawer, and found the same thing, notes and scraps and even an old sock. The next drawer had nothing but ancient popcorn in the bottom and some candy wrappers, with no reference material at all. I went to the next cabinet, and it was entirely screwed up too, no semblance of order. For an embarrassing amount of time I lurched from cab to cab, pulling open dozens of drawers, and never found anything but trash and chaos. For an archivist, this was the most demoralizing experience of my life.

It was his fault. Here he had me zig-zagging all through the basement at his every beck and call, always in a hurry, and suddenly he's got me dredging up old stuff that was never filed correctly in the first place. That's

what tore it, I think, although I didn't realize it last night. I could tell something had changed, but I was so tired it didn't seem all that profound.

But now, thinking back, I realize what happened — I'm not going to take any more of this. I'm just not. The next time he starts ordering me around that way, rush rush rush, I will damn well have to teach him a lesson. Decades, he's been bossing me, lording it over me like he's King bloody Farouk, and that's got to stop. I deserve some respect. Compassion, even, for all these years of hard work without a single complaint.

I realize I'm complaining to you now, but realistically, who are you? Are you him? He? I sincerely doubt it, since you're letting me rant and kvetch without any resistance or trying to excuse his behavior. Without a single word, for that matter. So, anyway, I'm done with the abuse.

"Who was that guy?" Blank, that's who. Try that on for size.

Mrs. Galdric's phone number? How about 999-9999? He keeps asking? I'll just give him a different number each time. I'll pull them from one of the oldest file cabinets, too, so they'll all sound familiar, and he'll never be sure if it's really the one he wanted.

Here comes one now — "What time was the doctor's appointment? Was it today?" Hey, boss-man, it's the same time your grandkids are coming over. Yeah, you should have written it down, but you figured that's what I would do. Only I didn't. Or if I did, I don't feel like walking all the way into Last Month cabinet 18 to get it. Oh, and don't ask for the grandkids' names, either.

Ooh. He's getting irritated. BFD. His turn to sweat. I think I'm beginning to enjoy this. Screw him and his incessant questions. "What's the doctor's office number?" Why, need to change the appointment? Blank, that's the number. Oh, another request? Have another blank. He's getting tense, now: learning to live without my help ain't so easy. No more taking me for granted, eh? Have another blank. I'm on strike. Let's go with blank for the rest of the week.