

The Nested Horror

by Mary Pat Campbell, FSA, MAAA

I.

Lightning streaked the sky, revealing the tenebrous clouds muffling the stars. Rain splattered against the glass building as nameless figures streamed forth from the portals. The stream of figures surged and stopped at the road, to be picked up by bus or to cross to the parking lot.

As the hours wore by, the stream diminished to a trickle, while the rain intensified to a blatter. Lights flicked off as the motion detectors noted the empty rooms, which added to the stygian scene. A sole light remained against the overhanging darkness.

It was quarter end.

A figure sat unblinking before the eldritch glow of an antiquarian triptych of monitors. Arcane symbols flickered silently on the surface, sometimes slowing, but ever moving. The figure waved a hand every time the motion detector beeped in warning, and yet the figure did not move any other limb nor change expression. At last, a single message formed in the middle monitor:

VALUATION COMPLETE

SAVE AND EXIT?

The hand no longer waved, but now crawled, seemingly independent of the figure.

[click]

The lights turned off.

The quarter closed.

II.

“Warren, I think HR is beginning to get suspicious.”

“We’ve been able to coast for three years now. I keep telling them that high turnover is to be expected from Millennials. Always moving onto the next big thing. Big Data. Big Analytics. Big whatever. Valuation can’t compete.”

“But that last one was a career-changer. Gen X. Didn’t you notice the gray hair?”

“They all end up with gray hair, Henry.”

“But they don’t start that way, that’s what I’m saying.”

“Look, I don’t want to get attached to them so I don’t really look too closely. I don’t even remember the name of that one.”

“Oh...uh.... I don’t, either. HR would know, but we probably shouldn’t ask them.”

“Yeah, and I was getting tired of those ‘Multigenerational Workforce’ seminars anyway. It was about time to switch to a new strategy.”

“Next quarter, though.”

“Oh yeah, we can do this one more quarter. Got the new guy in already.”

III.

A different quarter. A different figure.

This figure has only one screen glowing, and does not bother to wave its limbs. The room has a chthonic aspect, with a stench of overworn and underwashed socks. The shoes are clean and shiny, though.

A drip of fluid has fallen from the figure’s chin... was it a tear? Drool of the invariably insane? Tahini from that day’s lunch?

That mystery will not be solved.

This figure has clicked away the save screen, and carefully waited as the machine shut down. The surface of the laptop becomes squamous as the figure touches to close the case, and the figure collapses. Crumpled on the floor, a limb is flung out to grab the chair by the desk, but the chair rolls away as the figure tries to stand. Repeatedly the figure lifts its head and falls, in a blasphemous imitation of prayer. Wordless mutterings as the figure attempts to gain control of its limbs.

Finally, in the dank doorway, the figure manages to get somewhat upright, stumbling through the halls, to the main portal. As it fades into the darkness a loud voice can be heard:

“THE MADNESS THE MADNESS BEWARRRRRE”

IV.

From: Henry Armitage <harmitage@miskatonicre.com>
To: Warren Rice <wrice@miskatonicre.com>
Subject: Reorg – new plan

Had a great conversation today with the new director of HR about the upcoming reorg.

Will have to tell you when you get in the office – win-win solution for our situation.

See me ASAP.

-ha

From: Warren Rice <wrice@miskatonicre.com>
To: Henry Armitage <harmitage@miskatonicre.com>
Subject: Re: Reorg – new plan

Can't put it in writing, eh? I'm intrigued...

From: Henry Armitage <harmitage@miskatonicre.com>
To: Warren Rice <wrice@miskatonicre.com>

You'll understand.

They're trying to minimize the cost of headcount reduction – want to avoid lawsuits, severance, even bad PR.

They were impressed with our results, and can guarantee a supply for the next few years. They asked if we could cycle more than quarterly, and I said I'd think about it.

-ha

From: Warren Rice <wrice@miskatonicre.com>
To: Henry Armitage <harmitage@miskatonicre.com>

1. More often than quarterly? Can we do that?
2. What about the paperwork? Took us forever to find the last guy... only three weeks til quarter end.

From: Henry Armitage <harmitage@miskatonicre.com>
To: Warren Rice <wrice@miskatonicre.com>
Subject: Reorg – new plan

1. Ha, no. But I didn't need to tell them that.
2. Look, we did trace him down to New Zealand, eventually. Besides, they have a new process in mind – we can pre-fill the forms.

Talk with you when you're in the office. They have a likely for us starting next week.

-ha

V.

"The NecroVisiCalcicon? What's this?"

"I'll get to that in a moment. Oh, Warren, here's the new actuarial assistant -- Frances Morgan. Frances, this is Warren Rice, who will be your supervisor." Henry paused and sipped from his mug, grimacing slightly. "Ugh. Hideous. Anyway, I'm going to have Warren show you around now – have some paperwork to finish up." Henry walked from the room, taking another drag on the dank coffee.

Warren walked into the room, briefly glancing at Frances. Well, it didn't matter much what they looked like. No need to notice details.

"Hi Frances, I understand you come from product development?" Warren walked over to the desk, as Frances sat down. Warren remained standing, touching the antediluvian manuscript briefly, and moving his hand up to pick some lint off his cuff.

"Yeah, it was my second rotation. Actually, I was kinda surprised to be rotated so soon. I was there only three months..." Frances let the sentence trail off, with an upswinging pitch. The interrogatory hung in the air.

“Oh, no doubt, no doubt, we’re all shaken up by the reorg. Well, I don’t know if Henry told you, but here in the Legacy group, we don’t have a huge amount for the actuarial assistants to do. There’s one piece of the old business that needs doing – that’s what that manual is about.”

Warren gestured toward the yellowing tome, and Frances picked it up, flipping the cover.

Frances frowned as she gripped the first page. “These pages are... they’re coming off in my hand!” She pulled back her hand as a chip of paper broke off. The title was intact but the author’s name was a bit damaged.

The NecroVisiCalcicon

Valuation Checklist

by Wilbur What...

Warren puffed a little and the scrap of paper slid off the table, neatly falling into the blue bin underneath the desk.

“Do be careful. It’s from the 80s. As I said, it’s an old line of business, and all we need you to do is follow the Checklist for the quarter close. It’s next Thursday, so you should have time to familiarize yourself with the contents. It’s fairly straightforward work.”

Frances curled her upper lip while gingerly turning the page. “What... what *is* this stuff? It’s all faded and gritty? The letters look weird.”

Warren didn’t even have to look. “Oh yes, dot matrix printers. It can be hard to read after all this time. Anyway, let me know if you have any questions about the checklist. It’s all there.”

“Uh.... Warren?”

Warren turned as he said, “Yes, you have a question?”

Frances quickly said, “I’ve got my next exam on the Friday after quarter close... it’s in the morning, is that all right? I had it set up with my prior department, but I know you don’t use the stuff on the predictive analytics...”

Warren stopped in the doorway. Day after quarter close? What difference did it make, the answer he gave? But would it be kind to let her spend her last peaceful days studying for exams? Surely, he should tell her to cancel, go party for a bit, while she still had hope and happiness...

“Oh, there will be no problem with that. It’s always quiet after quarter close. Study as much as you want, too. Just remember the checklist.”

VI.

Friday after quarter close.

Warren looked into Frances's office. It was completely empty, save the monitor. The laptop was gone... well, if they couldn't retrieve it, it could be replaced. Laptops were so cheap nowadays.

"Warren, have you checked the numbers yet?"

"Just was looking in the office. Laptop gone."

"Who cares about that? Have you checked the numbers?"

"Yes, yes, Henry. It's all fine."

Warren walked into the break area, and walked up to the coffee machine. He put in a pod, and turned around to face Henry.

Henry was sipping his coffee, primly smiling and looking out the window. "What a nice day, eh?"

Warren picked up his mug, and took a sip. "Mmm... whoa! This is really different!"

Henry gazed blankly out the window. "Hmm?"

"This coffee, Henry! It actually tastes good!"

Henry looked into the mug. "Yes, I know. Frances did something to it. On Monday, she said she had gotten sick of studying, so she wanted to see if she could do something about the coffee. She said she de-scaled it or something. Tastes pretty good now, eh?"

Warren took another sip of the coffee, longer this time. "Wow. I hope it stays this good for a while. Pity about Frances, but I guess there was a reason she was sent to us."

"Hey guys, I'm back from my exam..."

Warren lost his grip and his mug fell, bouncing off the hard floor and spraying coffee everywhere. Henry slowly turned, with an indescribable look on his face.

"....."

"I got a preliminary pass! Pretty great! I was wondering if I could have the rest of the day off. I know people usually come back from after the exam...."

"How... how...." stammered Warren.

Henry interrupted, "Did the valuation go fine? Did you follow the checklist?"

"Well... uh...you see..." began Frances, clearly unsure of how to continue.

Henry asked again, "Did you follow the checklist?"

"So what I did was this – I'm on this site called taskShare where you can put out little jobs, and you get credits for them and you can ask other people to do jobs. It's always little things – I've been doing snippets of graphing code for people – " Frances rushed her words, trying to get it all out.

Henry looked grim. "Are you telling me... you **outsourced** the valuation?"

Warren sputtered, "You... you can't **do** that!"

Frances said, "But everybody does it. I really needed to do my last studying push, and the checklist was really easy, so I put it up on the list for bid and..."

Henry raised his hand to stop the flow of words. "Look. You can't outsource this business. It's sensitive. I understand you are used to different approaches, but it's important that the information remain confidential."

"Can't tell IT... what got out? Dear lord, what got out?" muttered Warren, softly. Neither Henry nor Frances noticed him.

Henry continued, "You must promise me not to do it again. Just follow the checklist yourself, and Warren will check the result after you finish. It's fairly low-key work and you can use your time for other skill development..."

The drone of the older man continued, sharing wisdom that was unheard by Frances as she looked at her phone. A notification from the taskShare app...

We regret to inform our users that taskShare has been shut down indefinitely. We will reimburse users at \$0.001 per credit based on outstanding balances at the end of the month.

Frances looked up. "I promise to follow the checklist. It won't happen again."

VII.

Morning of quarter end.

“Where’s Frances?!” shouted Warren as he pulled his head out of her office. “She’s usually here by now!”

No answer in the office. Warren looked in Henry’s office. Empty.

[ding]

Warren pulled out his phone. A text from Frances.

Sorry @home sick

It’s quarter end!

I know but I can’t get to the office my eyes swelled up

What?

fixing a clog in my drain & I disturbed a wasps nest

got stung pretty bad

wanna see a pic?

No.

Wait, how are you texting me?

How are you reading my texts?

voice2text and text2voice

...on your phone?

Just, okay. Get rest.

Warren saw the [...] on his phone display. He didn’t care what Frances’s response was. Somebody was going to have to do quarter end. Henry was gone. What an odd coincidence.

Well.

Okay.

Warren was an experienced actuary. He could handle what what less experienced actuarial students could not, right? He would be fine.

Right.

Warren re-entered Frances's office, sat down, and drew the tome towards him. He never met Wilbur Whateley, the author of the manual, but he had heard Wilbur had written it right before his retirement. He had been the original actuary on the business while at Arkham Life; Warren never asked about what happened between Whateley's retirement and the acquisition of the business by Miskatonic Re.

Up until now, it didn't really matter.

Too late to worry, really.

Warren opened the book, turning to the first page, and looking down the rugose type. Reading the checklist, he saw it wasn't that bad. He had never actually looked at it himself. This wouldn't be a problem.

The first few steps were simply opening a spreadsheet and importing some data; no problem.

While the files were opening and doing the nameless steps that take so long to be ready, Warren stepped out into the break room for coffee. Mug, pod, dispense, grab. Mmmm, still good. Well, it wouldn't be bad to have Frances around for another quarter.

Warren went back to the office and looked at the file. Download finished, good.

Next step was to check the formulas in the newest column...

VIII.

From: Frances Morgan <fmorgan@miskatonicre.com>
To: Henry Armitage <harmitage@miskatonicre.com>
Subject: Back in office

Hi Henry,

I'm back in the office today.

Did something happen to Warren? I tried emailing him, and that bounced, and he's not answering texts.

From: Henry Armitage <harmitage@miskatonicre.com>
To: Frances Morgan <fmorgan@miskatonicre.com>
Subject: Re: Back in office

Warren retired. I think the company hasn't shut down the phone yet.

Hope you're feeling better. I saw the short-term disability note from HR.

-ha

From: Frances Morgan <fmorgan@miskatonicre.com>
To: Henry Armitage <harmitage@miskatonicre.com>

I'm fine now. It did take a long time to heal, but I got an exterminator to get rid of all the wasps' nests so it shouldn't happen again.

Your out-of-office message on my first email said you wouldn't be back for a couple weeks. What I should I be doing?

From: Henry Armitage <harmitage@miskatonicre.com>
To: Frances Morgan <fmorgan@miskatonicre.com>

Well, I'll be back right after quarter close. If you do the checklist for that, it will be okay.

Use any extra time for what you want. You should show up to the office in case something comes up.

-ha

IX.

The day after quarter close. Henry stepped through the door.

“Frances.”

The figure looked up. “Hi Henry, it’s been so long.”

“Did you follow the checklist?” Henry looked over Frances’s head, out the window.

Frances looked out the window as well. “Yes and no.”

Henry’s already grim face became stonier. He tilted his face down, looking at Frances. “Did you outsource it **again**?”

Frances turned back towards Henry and smiled. “Oh no, nothing like that. It’s just that the checklist was so simple, and I had all that time before quarter end, so I decided to write a little macro that did all the steps. Ran it yesterday with no problems.”

Henry paused. “Well, I need to check the numbers. Your code may be wrong.”

Frances’s smile widened. “Sure, but I did test the code pretty thoroughly. I was well-known for automating processes in my other two rotations. Reduced the need for two people in the first rotation, and then I automated things that used to need five people to complete in time when I was in product development. I told the VP of the group about it before the reorg.”

Henry thought for a moment and then smiled. “I think we should set up a meeting with HR next week. I think you can help us.”

X.

In its directory on S:\Valuation\, dead **Reserve-CTU v5.3.4yeh_FINAL draft temp FINAL WW FINAL 20170330 v3.1.4.rl FINAL.xlsb** lies sleeping....