

An Unemployed Demon

by [Antoni Campese](#) (January 2025)



The Disquieting Muses (Giorgio de Chirico, 1918)

The whole air is full of souls. We call them daemones and heroes, and it is they who send dreams, signs, and illnesses to men; and not only men, but also to animals.
–Plato

Matthias shuffled along head down in the cold, dirty sleet, kicking a pile of stinking refuse out of his path, as squeaking imps and fantods scurried away. Another lovely day in Hell, he thought.

As he trudged his way along the grey street, he pondered his predicament—but isn't that Hell, one vast predicament? His hatemate had left him a considerable time ago because he had been unable to find a suitable position. "Get a job, any job." as she put it in her gratingly plain way. In fact he hadn't worked for years. He ruminated on the continuing crisis—ah, how had all his problems started? It had been so long. Since time didn't exist as such here, it was damnably hard to tell the years and centuries apart. He did remember a few key details, however: damned because of a botched confession.

"Technically incomplete," a petty hellish functionary squawked, stamped his papers, then had him filed off to a smelly bolgia. This left him quite confused. He had gone to the confession booth with a list of sins, spelled them out rather fastidiously, and did his penance. But what he had apparently failed to do—and he only learned this much later from a demon master sergeant who told him purely to increase his torment—was to repent fully in his own heart. He had to admit he had not fully let go of a few resentments.

Ah yes, he had meant to get around to that forgiveness thing, but he still felt there were damned good reasons to feel justified, and had meant to have a talk with the priest about why he was in the right. Be that as it may, he reflected, that

had been over two centuries ago in Alives time. Ah, well, perhaps it was time to stop ruminating about it and focus on matters at hand. For now, he had to get through this rain of frozen emeta. Only another three blocks to go. He could almost see his goal in the distance: the Department of Nefarious Employment. Its sooty stone edifice rose a hundred stories into a mist of black smog.

The facility looked just like any other soulless office building in the Alives world. A fashion that quite caught on with the Alives, by the way; the successful initiative of a group of architecturally trained demons—they called it Modernism, apparently. But he had to get to his appointment, for it was serious indeed. He had not been assigned a soul to tempt for—now he remembered—over twenty years. It makes no sense, he thought. There are more Alives now than at any other time in history, and yet it seems harder than ever to procure a position tempting or tormenting one of them. He entered the elevator and the operator asked for his floor, but the operator, a wretched larva, had tremendous difficulty operating the controls, as he had only the merest hint of digits to work with.

Matthias watched the poor grublike creature and wondered what this soul might have done in his lifetime to come to this. Perhaps he was merely a lazy worker whose carelessness might have led to the detriment of others. Or perhaps it was what the person had not done: a lifetime of apathy and indolence left this soul undeveloped. All Matthias knew for certain was that the larva could only slither about, and was quite sweaty and flatulent.

The ancient cables groaned as the elevator rattled its way to the 87th floor. They stopped with a bounce every few floors to let in more odious demons, then lurched upward again. The elevator gradually filled with a rotten, fleshy stench. As he breathed through a kerchief, Matthias was inspired with a theory: his problems came down to the sheer incompetence of

this bureaucracy. Otherwise, how could a demon of his calibre fall to such a state?

Finally he exited. Sadly, he was no stranger to this place and its drab walls. He knew the routine all too well—make your sigil in the book by the fearsome guard, and take a crumpled ticket with your number. He drew 3277. Numbers were called out: “Now serving number 823.” As usual it would be a long wait.

He sat in a drab green waiting room with peeling walls and crumbling ceiling, filled with empty chairs. He appeared to be the only one present. No matter what chair he took, a faceless servitor came out and requested politely that he sit in his assigned seat. This assignment was never explained, so he took a new seat, was moved again, and this went on throughout the day. There was little else to do but look around. Tacked up on the walls were many posters with inspirational messages such as “Abandon all hope, but don’t let it ruin your day,” “We find work for idle hands,” and “Spread a little darkness wherever you go!”

Toward the end of the day his number was called, and the servitor led him into a small office. At the desk sat a dollopy, toadlike personage. One articulated eye rose above horn-rimmed glasses and examined him closely.

“My Name is Ms Kakkel; I’m your caseworker. Have a seat.”

Matthias looked around. “There are no chairs.”

“Well, just stand then. I’ll get to the point, Mr Matthias. You’ve been out of work for 23 years. What’s going on? Don’t you want to work?”

“Now see here, Miss: quite the contrary, I have been looking for something suitable in my area of practice, that is, Induction of Despair, with a speciality in Ennui.”

“We don’t get much call for that sort of hoity-toity stuff nowadays. Why don’t you tell me about your actual experience—work history and such.”

“Ah yes, allow me to elucidate. Before my current dearth of employment, I had a prestigious position at the Ministry of Despair. I worked in Despair Induction, apprenticed with the best. In fact we introduced the concept of the “corporate morale event,” very successful among the Alives. After forty years or so, I transferred to a small but elite department where we specialized in Melancholy & Ennui. Few demons are trained in this area. I’ve studied the works of Baudelaire assiduously, don’t you know ... I’m considered rather an expert in the field.

“And as for achievements, well, you see the 99 scarlet stars on my CV. As the record shows, I engineered an impressive 99 attempted suicides. You may think you see before you a drab salaryman, a workaday Biedermeyer demon. But I was nominated for promotion to Cacodemon 4th Class, and from there, who knows? There are your Shadows, Shades, Lance Corporeals, Petty Demons, Master Demons, and Oberdemons, but Cacodemon is a commissioned rank. And whereas a line demon afflicts people with humdrum doubts, anxieties, depressions, setbacks, and obstructions, a Cacodemon does the heavy lifting. It is the Cacodemon who causes mass madness and imposes oppressions. And demonic oppressions, my dear lady, are no fun and games. Devilish concentration is required, and I might add, truly nefarious effort.

“But then one day, without explanation, I was made redundant, as they say—although how my irreproducible talents can be considered redundant is incomprehensible. Yet here I am, reporting to this drab office. Such is the fate of an artist.”

As he related his sad history, Ms Kakkel’s eye pods had drooped, gradually settling onto the desk. They suddenly retracted into her head. “Fascinating,” she said, shuffling

his file. "Something we all have to accept, Mr Matthias, is that the work world is always changing. We might have developed excellent skills in one area, but the workplace might have, um, moved on." She looked at a tattered reference book. "Now, Ennui, I haven't seen anyone working in that specialty since the early 19th Century. We're not supposed to ask your age around here, but is that when you departed the mortal world?"

"It was indeed around that time, as I recall." He sighed. "Everything was more ... romantic then."

"Well, there you are." said Ms Kakkel. "Face it, times have changed. Souls aren't as sensitive as they used to be." She took on a cheery tone of voice. "All you need is to gain a new set of skills!"

"But really, that's not what I had in mind..."

"Nonsense. We got some great apprenticeship programs. Have a look at these brochures. Go over to that meeting room over there. I'm going out with the girls. We're hitting that new bistro where you feed on the souls of greedy executives. Just like sushi, yum."

The meeting room was a dank windowless chamber with moldy concrete walls and a bare bulb. Matthias took the seat closest to the light and began flipping through the glossy brochures. They detailed all manner of spiritual torments; it all seemed quite glamorous. Lust—that had always been big, and was now hotter than ever—so of course everyone wanted to get in on it. But it was like acting, only a few made the big time; you had to have talent, and salaciousness was simply not his thing. Gluttony had certainly expanded, for there was no stigma about it at all now. But where was the fun in that? No challenge there—a true artist such as he would be bored in a few months. Then there was Anger—now that held possibilities: Hate, Bitterness, Resentments of all kinds, even Rage had a certain

romantic appeal. He could certainly see himself cultivating the more, shall we say, simmering resentments. He decided to ask about it.

Ms Kakkel returned, ushered him back into the office and asked if anything interested him. He showed her the brochure on Anger and said he found it rather appealing. In particular, he thought he might be able to apply his artistic talents to the field of Rage. "Wrath, as we named it back in the day."

She replied, "Anger. Good choice; really never goes out of style, but seems there's a spike nowadays." She looked through her files. "Now, since you're new to this, I'm going to send you to see an expert for coaching. A very successful demon in this field. Name is Phlurx. Here's his address; you tell him I sent you."

Matthias found the address, a grand manse in a tony bolgia. He knocked and an obsequious, reptilian servant led him into a richly appointed study. Plurx sat in a violet and gold velvet chair. He was fat with a beaky nose and keen sharp eyes. He dismissed the servant: "That will be all, Slithers." Then he turned to Matthias. "Phlourxomenos Hexopopolopoulos, but call me Phlurx for short. What can I do for you?"

"The thing is, sir, Ms Kakkel at the unemployment office sent me here for coaching."

"So you want to break into the big time, son? Rage and Anger, what? Well, you've come to the right place. Have a seat.

"I haven't always been what you see before you. I used to be a skinny little bird, brought up dirt poor in the most retched bolgias of Hell. What drove me was a burning desire to make something of myself, to make my mark. I saw demons all around me hitting it big, and I couldn't figure it out. I got a job sweeping the floors at a big firm that traded in rage juice.

“One day the boss and the barrel master tasted a new shipment that came in to the warehouse. I was cleaning a row of shelves right behind them and overheard their conversation. The barrel master pulled the bung and sank a long dipping spoon into the keg. He poured the juice into two small glasses and sipped it. They swished it around in their mouths and spat. “Remarkable! Some of the best I’ve ever tasted,” said the master. The boss agreed: “It’s true what they say—the best juice comes from the kindest people. They hardly raise their voice, but everyone gets angry once in a while, and when they do ... superb!”

“Then they moved on, leaving me alone. I went over and saw they had left the glasses on the barrel. A little juice remained in one of them. I had been a teetotaler up till then and had never tried the stuff; but seeing their reaction, I became quite curious. I looked at the tiny bit of liquid—it was the most beautiful ruby color, glinting the light of distant fires. I downed it. My entire being was filled with its savor, but more than that, I burned with peppery rage, then I felt sorrow on the palate, smooth and buttery; then a long melancholy finish after. Overcome with feelings I hadn’t felt in centuries, I passed out.”

“After that, I was obsessed with striking a rich vein and coming up a gusher. I looked everywhere for a prospect, in the worst neighborhoods, the barrios and slums of the Alives. Here and there I would hit pay dirt, but it was small potatoes, for these people were the worst of the worst, and what else can one expect of the depraved? After a few years I ended up with very little.

“I found myself living in a shabby flophouse, eating whatever scraps I could get for my pennies. I had hit rock bottom and would take any chance I could get. A month or so later I was drinking in a cheap saloon and I met an old prospector who was about to retire. He was selling off his old grubstakes. None of them were particularly good, as he had mined the good ones, but he took a liking to me and saw I was in a hard spot. He

let me have one of his claims for a bottle of Melancholy.

“He was a flinty old demon, hunched over, with skin like a crumpled paper bag, and he told me in a thick Scottish accent, ‘I be straight with ye sonny, gonna be a long shot. But I tell ye sure, I always felt this ‘un would pay off big. Mebbe the muuther lood.’”

“The claim was a shopkeeper in a small town. A quiet man, he was known for being even-tempered and even bland. Above all, he had never been known to lose his temper. Such an emotionless creature seemed a terrible prospect for Anger. But it was my only option.

“I took up residence in the man’s body for years and observed keenly, looking for weak points, any way I could provoke a fruitful response. One day a woman came by the shop and said something to him. It had to do with his wife, a passing, trivial remark really, nothing more than gossip. But it had an insinuating tone to it, and I saw everything inside him light up around me. It heated up inside, veritably glowing hot, and the catacombs of his mind were stultifying for days. During this time, I found rich veins of juice seeping here and there. I collected as much as I could and tasted it. It was of the very best quality. I realized that this was the one vulnerability of this stoic; if anyone insulted his family, but especially his wife’s integrity, he became incensed. So I worked on him in this way, magnifying here and there whatever doubts he might have, rubbing with sandpaper and washing with vinegar, to make him feel as insulted and humiliated as possible.

“But then, recognizing his poisonous feelings, the subject took to praying every day, and this made his mind inhospitable. It filled with unbearable light, painful to the eyes and making rest impossible. I fled the comfortable camp I’d made, retreating further and further, until I had no choice but to take the form of a fungus and hide out in the

nail of the little toe for thirteen years.

"I then waited vigilantly for an opportunity to seize the victim with rage. I set to work, passing the time by preparing gutters, downspouts, and barrels to collect the juice, should it ever flow.

"Eventually, the same woman was conversing in his shop and he overheard a bit of vicious gossip, this time about his daughter, and the man flew off the handle. He chased her out of the shop and threatened her in the street. The whole thing blew over, but people saw it, and his reputation was never quite the same. People regarded him with a hint of fear, for he was a good man but physically imposing, and though he never hurt anyone, they knew the magma of his rage lay sleeping just below the surface.

"When that happened, rich garnet juice flowed out of every duct and pore. Juice flowed into the elaborate system of gutters and pipes and overflowed the barrels. Then it was followed by thick syrupy Regret. There was more than I'd ever need for myself, so I went into business as a juice merchant. Just on the basis of that one lucky strike.

"So the moral, my boy—if there be one—it's the tough cases that yield the gold. With persistence, you can make your subject yield many times over; mine was particularly difficult. It depends on the individual's temperament.

"Come to think, that story makes me thirsty. Let's sample a wee dram now." A velvet hose with a bell-shaped horn dangled nearby. He seized the horn and called for his servant. "Slithers! Bring us two of the Rage—the '57."

The obsequious lizard slid in silently, holding a silver tray with two tiny snifters. Phlurx, suddenly agitated, huffed "Well put it down, man, put it down—don't take all day!"

Matthias took a glass and regarded it; it was filled with a

murky garnet liquid. He held it to his nose and took in the bouquet. It was fragrant and floral like roses, but suddenly he had the most violent feelings, his skin felt electric and his bones set on fire. He whiffed the heady juice again and was filled with visions of havoc. In his mind he returned to his former office with a bat or club and smashed everything and everyone in sight. Horrified by this phantasm, he shook his head and set the drink down.

He looked over at Phlurx and saw that sweat had broken out on his brow and his hand shook, juice sloshing around in the snifter. "Really something, eh? Well, bottoms up." he downed the glass in one gulp. Phlurx twitched and seemed to change from a dowdy, flabby old capon to a bird of prey. With a predatory glint in his eye, he seized the servant by the throat, and with a twist of his his beak, instantly snapped the head off. Then he stomped the body and proceeded to gut the lizard with his talons and ate the organs. Slithers was consumed in the blink of an eye.

Plurx turned to Matthias and said, "There you go, my boy, drink up!"

Matthias put the glass down. "Excuse me, but I must decline, sir; I'm afraid I've sworn off hard drink."

"It's an acquired taste, for sure. But you'll come around. Milquetoasts don't make it big, old boy." He noticed Matthias' distress. "Oh, don't worry about Slithers. He'll be back as soon as he's shat out. A politician of some stature, as I understand; constantly feeding on the people's substance and crapulating upon them. Now he is the one eaten and defecated. Ha! Poetic justice, what?"

"And what of you, sir?"

"Ah well, my fate is that I have to eat the vile creature every day." He belched loudly. "That's what comes of gluttony, as they say: The very sin is its own just dessert, and one is

rewarded in abundance. And I'm afraid I've become quite, eh, attached to drink. I must have more and more. But admit it, you felt something, eh?"

Matthias had felt something, to be sure.

Phlurx continued: "Well, come now. All that notwithstanding ... you see, my boy, anyone can emulate my success, even you."

"But," Matthias inquired, "How would one make an application for such a position? What licenses and certifications are needed?"

Phlurx laughed. "In this business you don't ask permission. You are your own man."

Matthias was still at a loss. "I still don't quite understand. Where does one go to find a good prospect?"

"It is not a matter of place. Just travel the world of the Alives and nose around. The trick is to find the richest prospects. They are the people who act nicely, always overly polite, but who are seething underneath. You must observe, my boy. After a while you develop a real sense for the thing."

Matthias was dubious. "I don't know, sir. I'm more the slow and steady type. It seems a bit like gambling."

"Well, there's the fun in it! You look like you could do with a bit of spice in life. Chin up; it might seem daunting, but you're independent, a prospector of sorts. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have business to attend to. Guts churning and all that. Do show yourself out. Slithers will rejoin us shortly, but he won't be presentable for polite company, I'm afraid."

Matthias left, feeling rather stunned by the encounter. Unsure what to make of it, he wandered around a bit and ended up at his favorite mud shop, ordering a hot mug of mud. He sat at a

wobbly table, feeling skeptical and somewhat dejected. He didn't see how he could make this approach work—it really wasn't what he had in mind. He was looking for job security and this would be more like living in a casino. It could take years of hermetic waiting for one lucky strike.

He wandered over to the bulletin board and idly browsed the notices: "Tormentors and tempters needed," and the like. Then he saw a notice for an open house at the Ministry. Could it be? Were they short on talent? Serves them right, I dare say. But he reflected what an opportunity it would be to observe what kind of work is currently needed there, and from that he could glean a strategy for getting rehired. He felt a surge of confidence and indignation, thinking: if I returned, they'd be glad to have me back; in fact, they'd have to ask twice. I should insist on having my title reinstated, possibly with a promotion. But first things first. I need to show up and be presentable, and wait, have I brought my CV up to snuff? So many things to do all of a sudden. He went home, got himself ready, and on the posted day, boarded the bus for the Ministry.

As he walked into the lobby it all seemed strangely familiar, as if he had just returned from a long holiday. There was the security guard asleep in his rickety chair, covered with cobwebs. The limp plants in the lobby with dead leaves strewn about them. The water cooler half-filled with brackish pondwater.

He took the elevator down to the 66th subfloor. The doors opened, and at first he felt as if he walked out once more to just another day at his former office. Gradually though, he noticed changes. The wooden corridors had been torn out and replaced with low, fabric-lined partitions. Sitting in these cramped spaces he saw the lowest grade of subdemons: Larvae, Lumpenbolds, and Grylloi. He was especially dismayed to see interoffice memos trafficked back and forth by shuffling mud Golems.

He asked a passing Gryllus if it could direct him to the Department of Ennui. The small creature replied that it had never heard of it. Matthias explained that he used to work in this office, and was here to visit his former associate, Sludge. "We were quite influential back in the day."

The Gryllus recalled that there was an office in the back for old projects. "Follow me," it said, and waddled on. Despite how sleek and modern everything had become, Matthias found it bleak and draining. He felt oddly uncomfortable walking through the long liminal space between the partitions. Perhaps this was why such design had been imposed on the Alives, to demoralize them. He shuddered as they left the modern section of the office and entered an older, shabbier area.

The corridor narrowed, then became a dank passageway that led to the boiler room. All the service pipes in the building seemed to converge through this area. In a corner of this room, behind the boiler, he saw a hunched figure at a desk. "Is that him?" asked the Gryllus. Matthias squinted, and saw that it was indeed his old friend and mentor Sludge. "Yes," he said with stunned sadness, for the old demon was a shadow of his former self.

"Sludge?" He approached the desk, and noticed that it was fiery on the boiler side and clammy on the other side, a moldy wall lined with seeping drain pipes. "It's me, Matthias, your protege. Do you remember?"

The old demon blinked. "Who?"

"Matthias, sir. Well, it has been a while. How long now? Must be over 50 years. But I say, it is good to see you."

Sludge pushed up his bent spectacles and squinted for a better look. "Matthias? I thought you were dead." He cleared his throat. "Hem! Hem! Well then. Good for you, you escaped this hellhole."

"I must say, Sludge, I would have expected you to be Director General by now. What are you doing here?"

"Alas, my boy. Sad times, sad times. I am sorry to say none of us got the promotions we deserved. New management waltzed in, I'm afraid—with 'modern' ideas. Oh yes, Modern Architecture went well enough. Quite brilliant. Performance Art—superbly bad, a real triumph. But they didn't stop there. They had to clear us out—'efficiency,' they call it. Said our techniques were antiquated."

"The gall!" rejoined Matthias. Just then their conversation was interrupted by roaring flushes and terrifying screams from the drain pipes.

"Oh, that nonsense again. The high and mighty, always falling from grace, don't you know. We won't be able to talk here; let's go out and have a cup."

They wended their way back to the main floor and into the kitchen area, where Sludge poured two cups of stagnant mud. "I handle the work of the entire team now." he explained. "Ennui, Alienation, Revulsion, et cetera, I own it all. What they now call "despair" isn't real Despair; it's just boredom, a cheap throwaway product, nothing like the real thing. Self-loathing, which I was really fond of, has been replaced with this risible 'self-esteem'."

Matthias replied, "I recall you trained me on self-loathing during my apprenticeship. It's a lost art. Sad what's happened. I've been reading about it in the papers. Self-acceptance and self-celebration—what twaddle. How the geniuses downstairs plan to capture souls that way, I cannot say."

"No demand for real Despair these days, my boy. It's all about this newfangled sex thing. Got the kids completely mixed up; they put all their chips on gender and ethnic identity, and when they find out that's not what it's all about, they melt in a heap."

They walked out of the kitchen past the cubicles. Sludge motioned to rows of smart-looking demons working at glowing screens. "You see, my boy? All Engineers in the Lust Department. The fastest growing field."

Matthias grumbled, "Ah, I've read about that too. They are obsessed with this silly new idea that they can pump lust through a kind of calculation engine. How someone could be seduced by a glorified abacus is beyond absurd. It shall never catch on."

"Indeed," said Sludge, "Gone are the days when we tempted hale young people with stout beliefs. We had to work like the Dickens to derail them!"

Matthias sighed. "What's become of Hell, Sludge?"

Then he took his leave and left the building. He stood on the corner in a cold putrid sleet, waiting for the bus. He realized it had been a mistake to return, and he felt a slow yet endless feeling of sinking into a void. He had to find something else to do.

Matthias sat in his best chair at home, the ratty one with sagging springs, so he simply sank deeply into a kind of cocoon of thoughts. He didn't bother to turn on the lights; he sat in the grey ambient gloom as it was eternally dusk outside. The phone rang and he started suddenly—he wasn't expecting anyone to call. It was Ms Kakkel. "Good news!" She slobbered excitedly. "Mr Phlurx has found you a grubstake."

"A grubstake? What do you mean exactly?"

"It's a legal claim—an awesome prospecting opportunity; you won't want to pass it up."

"I hadn't expected anything to come of that conversation, to be perfectly frank. But all right, what would I need to do?"

“No experience necessary; Phlurx’s agent will set you up. Of course, the cost will be 20,000 Crowns. And there’s my finder’s fee, 1000 Crowns.”

“Finder’s fee? Is that legal?”

“Legal? Are you simple? This is Hell. Look, do you want the gig or not?”

Matthias understood that he’d have to take out a loan to pay for the claim. He also realized it would be a long shot, and he wasn’t the gambling sort. But he didn’t have many options. Any options, really.

After paying up, Matthias met Phlurx’s agent, who led him to the grubstake. The claim was a small Japanese restaurant along a shabby stretch of Route 1 north of Boston. He was shown a dark corner to lurk for prospects. There he was to wait for someone to leave chopsticks upright in their bowl. In Asian tradition, this was an invitation for haunting and possession. Matthias protested that Asians would be aware of this taboo and therefore unlikely so lax—even if the superstition had any validity. But the agent assured him it happens all the time, and when it did, he could “wreak havoc,” then left him to it. Matthias hung in the shadows for weeks. He felt his only hope was to wait for a naive Westerner to commit the faux pas.

One evening a doughy fellow with a coarse neckbeard cradling a smooth babyface took a seat at the sushi bar. He ordered a large number of items and talked up the chef, who politely nodded. “Aw man, I sure missed this good stuff,” he said, stuffing nigiri sushi down his gullet. Errant rice crumbled and fell onto his stained t-shirt. “You don’t got a job, you can’t eat sushi.” Then he ordered an udon bowl. Matthias could barely watch as he slurped up the squiggly wet noodles splattering his beard and shirt. “Finally landed a job; pullin’ the big bucks, yessir.” He paused for air, eructed loudly, set the bowl down and tossed the chopsticks inside. He

began fiddling with a small electronic object.

While the young man twiddled his thumbs over the glowing tile, Matthias saw his chance. He wasn't sure exactly what he was supposed to do, but he took a run at the man and found himself sucked into an earhole.

The mortal's soul was like a bleak, unkempt apartment. The plaster walls were scratched and cracked, and the blinds were all askew. It was barely furnished with tattered furniture, but expensive electronics filled the air with the most unclean images. Matthias sat on a dirty torn sofa and tried to collect his thoughts—surely this was a step forward!

Now it was time to act. He wracked his mind for ways to tempt this soul. What to do? Of course his specialty was Despair, but clearly this individual was constantly distracted with every entertainment and vice. He might try Rage, as Phlux had advised—he pulled the notes from his pocket: “Build gutters, set out barrels, and wait for rage,” it said. What manner of advice was that? It made sense when Phlux said it—now here he sat in a dump of a soul, worse than Hell to be quite honest. Now don't panic, he thought, perhaps, perhaps ... the young man shall have a comedown from his emotional crest, or a hangover, or at least indigestion. That's it, I shall wait it out.

Matthias lay on the musty, stained sofa for an indefinite time, but he found no rest. Vile images poured in from the ubiquitous devices and overwhelmed his senses. Neither could he capture the slightest real emotion. When the young man twiddled a device, the ceiling leaked, and Matthias rushed to put out buckets to catch the dribbles. But the juice was the weakest he'd ever seen, and it had no nose. He didn't even want to taste it.

To make matters worse, he found he was not alone. Over time, dozens of other low demons silently passed through the rooms. The young man's devices had apparently invited them in.

Matthias was not sure how long he spent inside. Finally he could take it no longer. He ran down the hallway, up the stairs, and jumped out a window. He found himself flying out of the same ear, flung back into the dark corner of the restaurant. He left the place, ran across the street, and dove into a nearby pond to cleanse himself before returning to Hell.

Matthias spent the next several months away. He felt there was no point in looking for work, so he collected unemployment payments and exiled himself to a remote island. To be specific, it was actually a waste dump surrounded by foul water, but technically it was an island. The accommodations were quite reasonable, and he finally had the opportunity to embark on the literary pursuit he'd always dreamed of: a book of diabolical poetry.

He made his way down the precipitous winding path to the post box. He was just dropping off the 57th manuscript this morning. He collected a sheaf of pink rejections when he saw a yellow envelope from the Office of Nefarious Employment. He wondered what they could possibly want from him now. As he stumbled up the path, he tore it open and read the notice: "You are urgently called into the employment office due to a significant change in status." While intriguing, it offered no further detail.

He made the long trek back to the office, hoping that the reason for his trip would hold up to the vague bureaucratic language. After all, the letter had not said anything about a job offer. When he entered the office, not only was Ms Kakkel there, but also her superior and another person whom he didn't recognize.

"Yes, I'm here because I got this notice. Can someone explain what this is about?"

The tall, horse-headed director cleared his throat and neighed in a rather annoyed tone: "It appears administrative errors were made in your Judgment, so your case is being reevaluated."

"Reevaluated?" said Matthias. "Wait, what about my job search? I'm still working with Ms Kakkel!"

Ms Kakkel flattened into the corner where she stood; it was a remarkable how her bulk blended right into the wall.

"Kakkel has been taken off your case. You'll work with an agent from the other side." The director gestured toward the stranger sitting in the guest chair, an Asian man in a saffron robe, khaki pants, and dusty sneakers.

The monk stood up to greet Matthias with a slight bow. Matthias nodded awkwardly.

"We'll leave you to it then," said the horse brusquely. Kakkel peeled herself off the wall and they hurriedly left. They seemed terrified of the little man. Matthias was not impressed; in fact, he found the monk rather shabby.

The monk gestured to Matthias to follow; they passed through a door and entered a white space, vaguely luminous and seemingly without walls. The monk handed Matthias a file. "I see here in your record many red stars. Would you be so kind as to explain?"

"I'd be glad to," said Matthias. "Here you see an unbroken string of 99 red hearts. Scarlet signifies despair resulting in attempted suicide. Black signifies despair resulting in death, whether by murder or suicide. I had hoped that my 100th star would have been black; it would have been a crowning achievement. Nevertheless, few demons can match my record."

"Perhaps, tell me about one you were especially proud of."

"But of course!" Matthias said eagerly. "One comes to mind—the

case of a very sensitive and artistic young girl. She sought beauty in the world, but despaired of all the suffering and perfidity she saw around her. She was so disappointed with the world that she began to contemplate suicide. I was present in her room as her sketches and paintings became darker and darker, and her journal entries gloomier. It was most fortunate I was assigned her case, because as an artist I could relate to her, and I encouraged her to keep on expressing herself. I told her that she was talented and the world didn't deserve her; and to persevere in her dark vision. But strangely, the more she explored this and created art, the more resilient she became. Her long walks in the cemetery, which were formerly morose retreats, became deep contemplations on nature and on life, I suppose. I was rather surprised. She seemed to find a secret place inside, something I hadn't counted on."

He sighed and smiled ever so slightly.

"Why did you smile?" asked the monk gently.

Matthias straightened in his chair. "Of course I was not pleased, how could I be? Very disappointing case! Would have been a great tragedy."

The monk remained silent. Matthias paused, then went on.

"But you see, then she changed. Subtly changed. After I suggested she express herself in art, she began to wander in the wrong direction. It was a miscalculation, I admit. Being an artist, I suppose I was biased ... but I'll never make that mistake again! It was as if a spark of life had been breathed back into her, a flaming azalea among the gravestones. She never did go through with it, and lived a long a fruitful life, in fact."

The monk looked at him silently and intently. Matthias had no idea what all this nonsense was about. It certainly wasn't going to get him a job. He waited for the monk to speak, then

blurted, "What do you want me to say! That she killed herself? Why I failed to get my black star? How is that my fault? These humans are so fickle, who knows what they want!"

"Jurgen Matthias Frutiger, as it reads here..." the monk explained, "It seems serious mistakes were made in your case. I simply want to talk with you and clear up the matter."

"This Herr Frutiger you speak of was some other person who lived many years ago. I do not know him."

"Very well," said the monk. "So, Matthias, would you take a moment and consider whether you might have influenced any of your subjects?"

"What do you mean?" asked Matthias.

"Your cases are all very similar, changing their minds at the last minute, as if someone intervened."

"Ah yes, I always felt I was so close with my subjects..." he said, "A sense of 'almost' always haunted me. A hundredth, a black heart, would have been the capstone to my career."

"So many of them. Perhaps someone ... dissuaded them."

"Perish the thought! I, sir, am an artist of evil, I assure you."

"An artist you may be, but I do not think you are as evil as you presume."

"How dare you, sir! My record of evil speaks for itself! I am evil, rotten to the core, really ... bad! If you need a reason for inefficiency and failure, look no further than this damned bureauacracy!"

The monk replied calmly, "I tell you, the problem is not them, or even you. You are not who you think you are. You simply do not belong here."

“And yet here I am!”

“Ah...” continued the monk, “As we mentioned, mistakes were made. There is a discrepancy in the records. You claim you have 99 hearts. But our records show that you have in fact 100 hearts, beginning with a black heart.”

“What black heart?”

“You have probably forgotten—it is your own.” Matthias was speechless. The monk closed his eyes and said, “Let me help you understand. Take a deep breath.” Matthias inhaled reluctantly.

The monk said, “You think you are in Hell, but this is not the real Hell. You are merely inside your own darkness. You simply have no awareness because you have busied yourself with the acquisition of prizes. Now close your eyes, let out your breath, and listen:

“Sometimes in moments of darkness, we make mistakes. We surrender to delusions of mind. Your mistake was despairing and not fulfilling your real purpose. That is the greatest sin, for which you find yourself here.”

Matthias sat, eyes closed. Then it came to him like someone else’s dream, and he spoke: “Yes, it’s coming back now ... so far away... I had gone off to a high rugged area in the Alps to write a great literary work ... but something happened—a terrible rejection, perhaps jilted—I lost all hope. I abandoned my writing. I took a long walk away from all people. I went up to the edge of a high rocky crag and looked over. Not meaning to jump, but for the dark thrill of it. The precipice beckoned—one leap, and all my troubles would be over in a flash; how seductive it seemed at the time! I was only contemplating it, like a fool ... Perhaps I slipped. I remember nothing after that.”

“Yet all is not lost.” said the monk.

Matthias looked at him. "How so?"

"Your case was regrettably mishandled. Since it was re-evaluated, it is felt that you atoned by helping others, 99 times over."

"Impossible. I've been judged and there's nothing to be done."

"It is not quite so. However, you cannot simply ascend—you will have to take another spin on the wheel."

"The wheel? What wheel?"

"Come with me," said the monk. He led him out of the building and they took the long rickety bus ride to a deserted terminus at the edge of the city. The streets ended and they trudged through barren, polluted fields, then climbed a high ridge ending in a bluff. The monk gestured off into the distance; in the gloomy, perpetually overcast sky, a brilliant spot of light came into view; Matthias was shocked that he had never noticed it before. "What is it?" he asked.

"The great wheel of life," said the monk.

The light grew closer and closer, until it became a terrifying spiral of myriad galaxies and shining spokes of eons. It was fearful to behold, and even after closing his eyes, he became dizzy thinking about it. "I cannot bear to look at it!" Matthias exclaimed.

"Still," said the monk, "You will have to decide, or spend eternity here." He took his leave, and said "Remember, you can return here at any time. The chance to leave is always open to you."

Matthias returned to his island of trash to scribble away, but it wasn't the same. He thought he had finally obtained a modicum of peace, and now his encounter with the monk had

shattered it all. He had to do something else, even the most simple task to keep him busy. He went into the city again, bought a paper, and visited his usual mud shop.

There, sitting in a corner nursing a cup of dirty liquid was old Sludge. "My boy!" he waved. "Over here."

Matthias ordered the special: brewed Kenyan dirt with dried gecko droppings, and went over to the table where his old mentor sat.

"Dear boy, where did you run off to?"

"A self-imposed exile, you might say, Sludge. Working on a personal project."

"Look here," exclaimed the old demon, "Since you went into hiding, things have been looking up! Budgetary priorities, constantly shifting as the desert sands, don't you know. Here now, this was just posted—in our old department, no less! How about that?" He handed Matthias a sheet of paper.

"Very well, Sludge, let's have a look at it." He took the much-abused paper, which had obviously been grabbed off a bulletin board. He had to hand it to the old bird, he had the eagle eye for office machinations and seized opportunities with sharp talons. No doubt why he had lasted for centuries. As he read, he felt a thrill of both excitement and disbelief. How could it be, after all this time, a chance to return and reinstate his former status?

The position appeared to be very low level. It was rather vague about responsibilities, listing only the most generic description of the job. However, it had quite the title: 'Undersecretary to the Chief Intern'.

He objected: "Not sure, Sludge, sounds like it reports to an intern."

"Not just any intern, my lad, the Chief Executive Intern. It's

practically a C-suite position.”

Matthias sniffed. “What is that you’re drinking, Sludge?”

“Fine Pennsylvanian clay with a shot of kerosene, as is my wont.”

“Bit early in the day for that.”

Sludge returned, “But just think, lad, we can build up our little department again, bringing mortals to despair, just like our salad days.”

The mud had stopped bubbling and was just at the temperature he liked. Matthias pensively sipped the loamy, fragrant mud. Fact was, he considered, he didn’t have much choice, did he? He’d tried just about everything and come up empty-handed. And here it was—a prospect to get in again. At the bottom rung, true, but a fresh start. Regardless, it didn’t seem to matter. It certainly was a seductive idea; this opportunity was something he’d yearned for all these years.

Matthias showed up at the office on schedule. He had put on one of his best work suits. It had always fit perfectly, and yet today it felt like cardboard. He kept tugging at his collar and adjusting his tie. The office looked absolutely white—not a clean white, but a sickly, sterile, subtly demoralizing white. The oil lamps had been replaced with harsh fluorescent lights that hurt his eyes. The floor had been sectioned off into cubes, like a rat maze.

Through this maze emerged his new supervisor, Ms Phlegma. He felt uneasy as he shook her pod; not just because her grip was like the passing of a slug, but because he had never worked for a lady demon.

She showed him around the office. Gone were the well-worn desks, creaky chairs, papers strewn about, the long logs of

vice devotedly inscribed for each sinner. To him the piles of work had always signified an office hard at it—evil in progress, even if not fully realized.

Neatly dressed demons flitted from desk to desk, perpetually gathering for meetings. Where were the familiar faces, Mr Undying-Worm, Mr Necrotic, the office jesters Spleenwell and Halitose?

Ms Phlegma debriefed him on his duties. “First thing each day, we have a stand-up.”

“Stand-up? What’s that?”

“We meet in a room and ... stand up.”

“I see.”

“We all give a status report on our work, and then express any feelings we have.”

“What kind of feelings?”

“We share our feelings of discomfort, especially if anyone is hostile or making us feel unwanted.”

Matthias looked around. “You do realize we are in Hell, right?”

“Mr Matthias, if I might say, things have changed considerably since you last worked here. Now, as for your duties—”

Ms Phlegma led him to a row of gigantic filing cabinets, opened a drawer, and pulled out a folder. It was stuffed with a motley pile of old papers. “What we need you to do is to take these old documents and transcribe them to the new format. Take the file to the transcription area, over here—” She showed him a small cubicle wedged between the cabinets and the corner. “After you transcribe the old files to the transcriptor, just put them in the archive bin.” She pointed

to a slot in the wall.

“Transcriptor?”

“Yes, it’s pretty simple. Ever used a typewriter? Same idea. She pressed a button on the top of the machine, leaving a shiny smear. The screen slowly lit up. There you are!” She shoved the file into his chest. “Why don’t you start off with this one and see how far you get by lunchtime?”

Matthias squeezed into the narrow cubicle and wedged himself into the chair. It was the size of a child’s school desk, so he sat low with his knees up high. He lay the hefty file folder on the desk. He had never actually used a typewriter, although he knew what they were, and hated the idea. He felt they sucked the soul out of one’s writing.

This contraption seemed even more intimidating. He looked at the screen; a small green square blinked, as if winking at him. He tentatively pressed a key, and a character appeared on the screen. The square continued to blink, green and soulless. It occurred to him that so many mortals had to use these things now. It seemed unfair, like starting Hell prematurely.

He opened the folder and leafed through the documents, feeling the rich texture of the old parchment. Here now! These were the treasured old Bills of Sin for each mortal, beautifully illumed parchments that talented demons had worked centuries to produce. He proceeded with a kind of reverence. Reading the old records was rather a joy.

He pecked the texts in, letter by letter, slogging through for what seemed another sentence of eternity, when a mug slammed down on the desk. “My boy, so good to see you here again.” It was Sludge; he had brought over two mugs of steaming mud.

“My word, Sludge! What is all this nonsense?”

“Indeed, dear boy, so many changes ... Back in the day we’d have

old Fistula roaming about with a rusty flail—now there was a devil of a supervisor! These cupcakes wouldn't make it to mud break under his stern claw."

Matthias nodded and took a sip from his mug. He had forgotten the thin, acrid brew that was office mud; more like gutter sludge, but it brought back a hint of camaraderie. He swallowed and said, "My boss said we meet every morning and talk about our feelings, for Beelzebub's sake." Matthias gesticulated in a sweeping motion, sloshing mud from his mug. "What do they even do here?"

"The marketplace has changed, my boy. These days all the trade is in petty transgressions based on Greed and Lust. Of course those vices are never going away, but the strategy is all about scams and traps, tawdry five-and-dime stuff—no art to it, mind you."

"How far we've fallen," Matthias bemoaned. "Just look at this accursed contraption!"

"What's that?"

"It's apparently a device for transcribing written materials into electric characters. Not sure I understand all the details, but it's simple enough to work."

"Really..." mused old Sludge. "How's it going so far?"

"Well, at least I get to read the old Bills of Sin. Look at these."

"Not too shabby." Sludge picked up a parchment and examined it. "Ah, I remember these. Made damnation a veritable art, eh?"

"See, I read each document and type it into this pile of junk where it's recorded. Who knows why. More make work, I suppose."

“Not sure, my boy, I believe it has to do with removing the beauty and soul from all things. Part of the master plan, don’t you know.” He stepped away. “Well, nose to the grindstone and all that. Tally ho.”

The rest of his day dragged on. The work was tedious enough, but the machine constantly interrupted him, wanting to correct his spelling, and complained about his use of archaic, obscure, and sexist language. All that kept him going was reading the lovely old Bills of Sin. Each told a tale about the soul, presenting the observations of angels and demons and cogent arguments about the progression of the spirit. As a writer, he appreciated each text as a drama, a window into each soul; he pondered the lives they had led, and how comically or tragically they had chosen their own fate.

When it was time to go home, his head felt swollen, stuffed with uncomfortable scenes from work. He really thought he’d return to the office and feel right at home, but he realized he’d been terribly naive. He tossed and turned in bed.

The next day started out without incident. He eased into several documents and was even able to deal with the cantankerous machine. He pored over an ancient Bill of Sin, the record of a Byzantine bureaucrat, arrogant, greedy, officious, vain, and thoroughly corrupt. In other words, a perfect fit in today’s offices of power. Vice is much the same in all ages, he reflected. He heard someone approach and he looked up over the parchment. A couple of well-dressed demons introduced themselves—one tall, green, and scraggly, the other stout with bulging eyes and a fangy underbite.

“I’m Pustule, but call me Pusty.” said the tall one.

“Fredrash,” offered the stout one. “Or just Fred. We work in General Turpitude.”

"Sounds engaging!" said Matthias. "I bet you root out some truly foul deeds."

"Oh, it's pretty humdrum." shrugged the fat demon, hands in pockets. "People lack imagination. Same old stuff every day."

"Surprised they didn't stick you in the Lust department, old boy." said Pusty. "They're up to their eyeballs in licentiousness."

"Not my sort of thing, really." Matthias demurred.

"Old school, eh?" said Fredrash. "Lust is where it's at, old boy. Oughta dip your toes, see what bites!" The young demons chuckled luridly.

"My field is Despair, actually." Matthias explained. "In fact, I used to work here years ago, with Sludge. You probably know him."

Pusty said, "Ah yes, that dusty old pterodactyl. He tells everyone how important his work is, yet no one has the faintest clue what he actually does!" they chortled.

"Give him credit though," Fred interjected, "He should have been filed off centuries ago, but he's a survivor!"

"We call him 'Old Peliquare'," quipped Pusty. "Sort of an affectionate moniker."

"Yeah, he's harmless." said Fred. "They stuck him in a back corner so he doesn't get in the way."

Matthias sat speechless.

"Looks like they have you on the old transcriptor," observed Pusty. "No one wants to use that piece of junk anymore."

"I'm not enjoying it, that's for sure." Matthias admitted. "But I get to read these remarkable old Bills of Sin." He handed one over.

Fredrash examined it. "Wow, what an old chestnut..."

"Get a load of these dusty old megillahs!" remarked Pusty. "I've seen pictures of these in my classes. But what use are they now? Should have been chucked years ago."

Matthias explained, "They have to keep a digital record of everything, apparently. So I enter everything into this machine, and then put them in the archive bin here."

"The archive bin—" They snickered. "Of course."

Matthias was puzzled at their response, but they suddenly flitted off. "Well, we won't keep you from it, old boy."

Fred added, "Tell me about it, Pusty! I have a pile of afflictions stacked from my desk to the ceiling. Toodles."

Matthias sat flabbergasted. The situation was even worse than he thought. He'd assumed Sludge was held in some esteem, but quite the opposite held true. It was quite upsetting. But he wanly returned to his work, thinking there was at least an anchor in that. He worked his way through another parchment, proofread the text, and satisfied himself that it was duly recorded. But when he turned to drop the document into the bin, he noticed his hand trembled. He put his face close to the slot—intense heat toasted his cheek, and a waft of burning forests and bodies filled his nostrils.

Horrorified, he turned from the slot and realized what he had been doing.

All feeling drained out of him. He gazed at the foreign surroundings, the ugly whiteness of the office in the harsh light, everyone a stranger, going about their pointless, alien tasks. What was he doing there?

He picked up the accursed machine and hurled it onto the floor, where it broke into many pieces. He shoved each piece into the chute and walked out.

He wandered the streets aimlessly. He had nowhere to go.

How little the Ministry valued them—him, his mentor Sludge, the old team. They had approached the tempting and torment of souls as an art, and now—all their work for naught!

He recalled the years he pined to return to the Ministry, like a fool. He never should have come back. His eyes stung, but at the same time, he began to feel a strange gratitude, for he was never meant to be there.

At that, he felt all these burdens lift from him, and a clarity came upon him. He caught the bus to the edge of town and ran through the fields toward the bluff.

Standing at the edge, he scanned the skies; slowly the heavy clouds broke, and he could see the terrifyingly glorious vortex of souls in the vast distance. He stood at the edge, too frightened to leap, but with nothing to turn back to. In despair, he cried out:

“Such is the fate of an artist! All my wrongs are forfeit, all my complaints rendered moot—for the beautiful sadness I treasured is no more than a wandering cloud, and I am born again.” And he hurled into existence.

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Antoni Campese writes about technology and spirituality. He resides in Williamsport PA and is currently collaborating with his friend Carl Nelson of Magic Bean Books on an upcoming collection of stories.

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