
Mr. Pennyweather

The room was extortionately large, more of an exercise area than a room. The white walls, floors and ceiling seemed rather redundant to Mr. Pennyweather. Almost as redundant as pacing up and down, but his total lack of access to any doors or windows left little else to do, so he continued his pacing. What it lacked in exits it made up for it with its complete lack of corners. It was like walking around on the inner surface of a pill. The architectural style had always bothered him, together with the very nature of rooms where the surfaces were themselves the lights. It created an awful lot of glare. Prolonged exposure usually resulting in a serious headache. The general feeling of confinement the room brought about certainly wasn't helping much either.

There was a hiss, similar to the air rushing out of a leak in an old tire, followed by the main door opening. It closed, however, with a whoosh which had a ring of finality to it, as if the next step was to pump all the air out of the room. In between these sounds a short, balding man of about 50 entered, wearing an out-of-fashion rumpled suit which seemed like it not been pressed since the day it was created. From his appearance, the man had abandoned all the subtleties of impressing people. Holding an equally out-of-date clipboard, the man approached with an air of pleasantry, "Mr. Pennyweather is it?"

"Yes, yes, it is. And you are?" He asked curiously.

"Clement T. Atwater. At your service." The man bowed slightly. The kind of thing one might do if you were tipping your hat. Only in Mr. Atwater's case it merely showed off his bald spot to a less than constructive effect.

As he raised his head, Mr. Pennyweather gave him a stare of trepidation, "Would you be so good as to tell me where I am?"

"Detention, Mr. Pennyweather, detention prior to execution of sentence. We can't have our subjects just wondering around the streets, now can we?" Atwater made a checkmark on the paper. Glancing down at it, Mr. Pennyweather noticed it was placed next to the phrase *Greet subject warmly*.

"Are you my attorney then?" Mr. Pennyweather asked politely. He always addressed people politely. The more serious the situation, Mr. Pennyweather had found, the more politeness was required. He was the epitome of business politeness. He's been an outstanding, if one of the last graduates, of the now defunct Harvard Business School. Where he was well known for his outgoing nature and his slogan, "Don't think action this day, think action this second!"

The little man smiled, displaying a row of crooked teeth which Mr. Pennyweather found oddly disturbing, "Heaven's no Mr. Pennyweather. You're a capitalist, aren't you? The new laws have been streamlined in such cases as yours Mr. Pennyweather."

In a way, Mr. Pennyweather was relieved, he seemed far too cheerful to be a lawyer, “But I don’t understand, there is nothing against the law in being a businessman. This country was built by businessmen. Businessmen represent the highest of ideals of society.”

“Quite so. Making business illegal would be silly wouldn’t it. Not good for society and all.” The little man looked down at his clipboard, “It says you let 524 people go at your company and increased your salary by 1.2 million dollars at the same time.”

“I improved the profitability of the company,” Mr. Pennyweather announced proudly, using the exact same air of authority he had used at the board of director’s meeting. “My salary is contractually tied to improvements in profitability. I adhere to such ethics with strict attention, I can assure you.”

Mr. Atwater was disappointed. He didn’t like it when the subject was oblivious to the nature of the offence. It made his job harder. It always resulted in a lot of explaining being required. “Well, not exactly. You see, releasing employees is not actually increasing profitability, it’s reducing cost. I do like your method though, terminating them by sending an email, most efficient. Saves all that face to face bother, doesn’t it? It would be so nice to get rid of all that in my job, I can tell you. Still some of the formalities must be observed; rules are rules.”

“Well be that as it may, business had taken a turn for the worst, which required drastic measures.” Mr. Pennyweather rang his hands together in what would have been a normal gesture, if there had been any soap or water present.

Mr. Atwater was not in the least impressed, “Yes, well that put you in violation of the Termination for Termination Act of 2084. As your company was still making a profit at the time, this resulted in you terminating employees without cause. You invoked clause 547, permitting those you terminated to choose the method of *your* termination. Death by electrocution, death by firing squad, death by disintegration, death by hanging, death by drowning, death by lethal injection, death by torture or death by beheading.” Mr. Atwater rifled through several sheets of aging yellowed paper, made so by the fact paper hadn’t been manufactured in over 30 years. Everything was electronic these days. Mr. Pennyweather could smell the dust flying off the paper. He had to resist the urge to cough. “Here it is,” Mr. Atwater proclaimed, jabbing his finger into one of the last sheets, “the majority of those who filled out the 547-form selected hanging as your penalty.”

“Is there to be a trial?”

“You’d think, would you?” Mr. Atwater smiled, “but as I said, the law has streamlined in cases such as yours. It reduces all the tedium and cost of obtaining legal representation, the selection of a jury, the messy expense of a building and paying for people’s time. No, in your case, you were convicted the minute you put your electronic signature on the order to reduce the company’s staff. The only leftover piece of business was the selection of a method of execution. We can’t get around that now, can we.” He snickered.

Mr. Pennyweather appeared rather disturbed, “Is the intent to teach future generations a lesson?”

The little man leaned in, as if to slyly share a confidence with a fellow worker, “Heavens no, Mr. Pennyweather, it’s to reduce costs.”

“May I ask another question?”

“Naturally, I’m here to assist you.”

“I not sure I understand your role in this.”

“Goodness me, how could I have been so remis. Terrible state of affairs you know, all this work to be done and so little time. Why someone should fire me for being so forgetful. Too bad you don’t work for the government, hey? Ironic, isn’t it? Let me explain, I’m your executioner.”

Mr. Pennyweather gulped audibly.

“There is just so much to do. Evaluate the subject’s weight and height. Measure the rope. It’s no wonder they gave this up years ago. One would imagine someone would update the law and remove this as an option, but the government is so slow. Then there is disposal of the body, it would be so much simpler if the penalty was disintegration, but then it would eliminate the choice, wouldn’t it? Workers must have the choice after all. I mean they didn’t have any other choice in the mater, did they? I mean when you fired them, wink, wink, nudge, nudge.”

“When is this sentence to be carried out?” Mr. Pennyweather asked nervously.

“Oh, immediately,” the jovial little man replied.

In a thinly veiled attempt to delay the proceedings, Pennyweather asked, “Isn’t there a last meal involved?”

“Right you are, Mr. Pennyweather, such would be the tradition, but they don’t serve breakfast until seven, and I’m afraid you won’t be around that long. The hanging has to occur at dawn, you see. Another one of those nagging traditions. But I do have your cube for you.” Mr. Atwater rummaged around in his jacket pocket and produced a sugar cube. It was covered with what appeared to be cat hair. Seeing Mr. Pennyweather’s distress, he wedged the clipboard under his arm and wiped the hair off the sugar cube’s surface. Blowing the last one off with a puff of air. “I wouldn’t worry too much. It’s not like it’s going to kill you, am I right?” Without further a due he handed it to Mr. Pennyweather.

“This is?” he asked, confused by the sugary presentation.

“Where is my mind going,” Mr. Atwater responded, “It’s your LSD. Pop it into your mouth like a good chap, would you.”

Mr. Pennyweather seemed surprised “LSD? Isn’t mere position of this a crime?”

“Well, yes, but there has to be an advantage to being a condemned man now doesn’t there? Besides what are they going to do to you, give you the death penalty?” The little man waited for him to get the humor, but upon obtaining no response, continued, “This way you’re hardly be aware of what is happening. I understand it’s a rather pleasant way to go.” He nudged Mr. Pennyweather with his elbow, “Be advised, I’m not supposed to tell you this, but there was one gentlemen we had to hang twice. It was a bit of an embarrassment, but he told us he didn’t even recall us hanging him the first time. All to the better I say. If you must go, best not to be aware of what’s going on, don’t you know. Calms the nerves. Now pop that into your mouth. Just let it dissolve on your tongue. That’s the ticket.”

Without knowing why, Mr. Pennyweather put the sugar cube in his mouth. Other than the sweet taste and the slight rush, he couldn't tell any difference. It distressed him, the knowledge he might be immune to its effects. He watched as the little man stood in front of him, checking off things on his clipboard. Mr. Pennyweather hadn't noticed before, the balding man having three hands, but he could plainly make out the third one now. He watched as it crept up the back of his shirt and put a top hat on Mr. Atwater's head.

All at once the top of the hat flipped open and the end of a trombone appeared. The room was filled with music. It was the one thing this room's design had going for it, great acoustics. Little windows began popping up everywhere. Out popped a French Horn here and Violin there. Bizarrely none of the instruments seemed to be accompanied by a musician. They simply played themselves, without any outside intervention. It was all so wonderful and gay. It was like a concert within a concert. Out of yet another door came a tall man in a finely tailored black suit. He entered and crossed to join Mr. Atwater. He looked for all the world like an undertaker.

"How's he doing?" The tall man asked.

Mr. Atwater put down the clipboard for a moment, "He's in the first stage I believe."

Taking out an ophthalmoscope, the taller man shined it into Mr. Pennyweather's eyes "How long until the poison takes affect?"

"Oh, not long now. Fortunately, they take the sugar cube every time. Can you imagine what it would be like if we actually had to hang them? What a mess. Nobody's done a hanging in years."

"It's a lost art," the well-dressed man replied. "He seems to be clutching his throat, is that normal?"

"Towards the end of the experience, the mind always wonders back to the concept of being hanged. I believe, in his mind, he's experiencing it right now."

"How poetic," the tall man announced, "and the purple discoloration, is that part of it as well?"

"No, that's the poison kicking in," Mr. Atwater replied, "it won't be long now."

"We should make our exit then," the dark suited man announced, "We don't want to be here when the incineration process begins." The two began walking towards an open doorway which appeared in the room's walls as Mr. Pennyweather fell to his knees, "What's the last step for the remains?"

Mr. Atwater halted and returned to flipping through his papers on the clipboard, "They're to be mixed in with the next batch of paper to be used to print \$100 bills."

The tall man waved his associate through the open door, "Seems appropriate. Rich man going through the eye of a needle and so forth."

"Quite so, sir, quite so." Mr. Atwater replied as the door closed with a final whoosh.