



SWITCHEROO

Wes Wolfram heard the patter of running feet in the hallway and looked up to see two boys zip past the door. A moment later one of them reappeared. He made a racing engine sound when he ran into the office and a screeching tire sound when he came to a stop in front of the desk. A serious sugar high bugged his eyes as he stood panting across from where Wes sat.

The kid was Wendell Aarp, president of Say it with Pins. Or so the nametag on the chest of his juice-stained T-shirt said. Really he was Aarp's son. It was Take Your Child to Work Day at Say it with Pins' corporate headquarters, and the children wore pinback tags with their parents' names and job titles on them. Aarp wore a half-dozen buttons in addition to the tag. The grownups had let the kids adorn themselves with misprints, and one of Aarp's buttons said "World's Greatest Dud." Another said "Peabody High Schol." Wes wore a schol button and one that said "Service with a Smite!" His nametag identified him as Joseph Jones, from accounting. He'd made up the most unmemorable name he could think of to help give himself cover for the job.

Aarp squinted at Wes's tag and said, "Joseph Jonethhh?" He sprayed spit. The braces on his teeth had a lot of work to do before they closed all the gaps. "You be me and I'll be you!" He unpinned his nametag, leaned across the desk and swapped it for Wes's. Wes let him because he was the president's son. "There," Aarp said when he was done. "If anyone asthk you jutht thay. . ." Somebody raced past in the hall. Aarp screeched off in

pursuit, leaving Wes to wipe spit from his face.

He leaned back in the springy office chair feeling ancient compared to the kids running around the building. He'd told Jeannie earlier that he was tired of his work. They were going through their morning routine and he said it was getting harder to keep up with the children. "It takes a toll," he grumbled, looking at himself in the bathroom mirror. He examined some wrinkles around his eyes and patted his receding hairline. His combover had grown quite elaborate lately, but he wouldn't have to bother with it that day. The Say it with Pins job was casual dress, so he'd be wearing a baseball cap with his T-shirt and jeans. But the wrinkles. . . He opened Jeannie's jar of face cream, leaned close to the mirror and smeared some of the goop beside each eye. He'd been using it for a week but it was too soon to tell if it was working. As he rubbed it in he wondered how much longer he would be able to maintain the appearance of an eight-year-old. His height wasn't an issue—he'd reached his full growth as a midget years before—but masking the mileage was another matter.

A sing-along broke out in the conference room down the hall. It took Wes a moment to identify the howl as "Row Row Row Your Boat" because none of the oars were hitting the water at the same time. He sighed. Imitating a kid could be exciting, but for every police sting operation he took part in there were twenty jobs that were a grind to get through. Like the one the day before. He'd worked a twelve-hour shift at a big department store. They were losing lots of merchandise, so they hired him to watch for shoplifters. He pretended to be a kid wandering around while his mama tried on clothes. It was agonizingly tedious. After eleven hours and fifty-five minutes the only person he'd caught was a woman who kleptoed some socks. But then he got lucky. In the confusion of closing

time he saw a man at the jewelry counter swallow a big diamond ring. He was arrested but Wes hadn't received his commission on the recovered loot yet. The police couldn't force a laxative on the thief, and the store wouldn't pay until nature took its course.

The crowd in the conference room launched into "This Old Man" and Wes went back to work. He returned the folder he'd been looking through to its place in the desk's file drawer. Then he tried the computer but it was password protected. Going back to the drawers, he rifled through pencils, paperclips and rubber bands. He wasn't sure what he was looking for. One of Say it with Pins' vice presidents had hired him to find an embezzler. "It's somebody high up," she said. "We could catch him with an audit, but it would be better for the company if you could just quietly find some physical evidence." She said the following Friday would be the best time for Wes to go through the executives' offices. "It's Take Your Child to Work Day. Nobody will notice you in the confusion." Wes told her he wouldn't know what to look for and she said, "Oh I'm sure you'll find something."

When he first described the job to Jeannie she said it sounded like the veep was trying to frame somebody. Wes hadn't thought of that but realized she was right, and he decided he wouldn't look very hard for evidence. Auditors could root out the truth. That morning he brought up the job again and Jeannie said, "It'll be like a game of Clue." Her chin was resting on his shoulder so she could check her makeup in the bathroom mirror. She was only five foot one and short to most people, but to Wes she was a copper-haired Amazonian beauty.

"What'll be like a game of Clue?" he asked. "The hunt for the embezzler?"

"Yes. And my guess is that the vice president

did it, in her office, with a Swiss bank account.”

“You make my job too easy. So what are you doing today?”

“Same ol’ same ol’. Put in the hours and then get caught up on the important stuff at the water cooler.”

Jeannie was a systems analyst for a computer company that had offices scattered around the country. Wes met and married her when they were both in Houston, then she was offered a transfer to Austin. She really wanted the job, so Wes told her he wouldn’t take no for an answer. He needed to make a new start anyway. A lot of the work he did was school related, and it had gotten to where he couldn’t go anywhere in his free time without bumping into kids from his alma maters. And parents get upset when they see their children talking to a midget with a five o’clock shadow, so it was off to Austin.

The group in the conference room began bellowing “Old MacDonald had a Farm.” Wes finished at the desk and went around the office checking cabinets and shelves. He still wasn’t sure what he was looking for, but the girlie magazine he found hidden in a company binder wasn’t proof of embezzlement. Not that he could see at least, and he flipped through it twice searching for clues before he moved on.

The hallway was empty. He headed away from Old MacDonald’s oinking pigs, toward a break room near the elevators. He needed a cup of coffee.

He passed a stretch of cubicles. The kids at the computers in some of them made him think of the fourth-grader he’d met a couple weeks before while on a school job. Her name was Delores Flores. She was probably the smartest child with a computer that he’d ever come across. He sat next to her at the back of the classroom, and one afternoon she yawned and said she needed a nap. She

tapped at her computer's keyboard and a moment later their teacher's phone made a little siren sound. She asked the class to give her a sec so she could take an important call. It turned out that Delores had hacked into the phone, or rather into the security company that had an alarm communicating with the phone. The alarm notified the teacher that her house was on fire, and she ran off to save her cat. The class got a recess and Delores stretched out on a bench on the playground. Before she closed her eyes she smiled at Wes and said, "I think I'll call this . . . Operation Cat Nap."

Delores liked to present herself as mature beyond her years, but one morning when she unzipped her backpack Wes saw a pair of Barbie dolls peeking out at him. Delores noticed and got upset. She zipped the pack up and said the dolls were her sister's, but the lie wasn't convincing.

The next day she told Wes that she'd hacked into the school's computer system and made an interesting discovery. She grinned and said, "I think I'll call you Operation Tungsten."

"I don't know what you mean," he said.

"Didn't they use to call tungsten something else? Didn't they call it . . . wolfram?"

Wes realized that she'd learned his real name wasn't Lazlo Pink. He felt flustered but kept his head and said he still didn't know what she meant.

She winked at him and said, "You owe me for keeping your secret, Mr. W," and then after that she giggled whenever she called him Lazlo.

In the break room he found a pot of fresh, hot coffee. The real kind, not decaf. He poured a cup and blew on it as he stepped to the door.

A boy and girl ran past in the hallway. A couple doors down they encountered a man who stopped the boy and checked his nametag. "You're not him," he muttered and let the kid go. Then the

man saw Wes and came toward him.

Wes sipped coffee and studied the guy as he approached. He was skinny, maybe thirty-five, and wearing baggy-kneed slacks and a too-large dress shirt. At first Wes thought he was bald, but when he got closer he could see that he wore his blonde hair cut short.

The man reached Wes and leaned down to look at his nametag. "Bingo," he said. "Come with me, son."

"I'm on break. You want a cup of coffee?"

"No. And you shouldn't drink that. It'll stunt your growth." He took the cup from Wes, stepped into the break room and set it on a table. Then he said, "Let's go," and prodded Wes ahead of him out the door.

He rested his hands on Wes's shoulders and steered him down the hallway and around a corner to the elevators. He pushed a button, and when a car arrived he steered Wes inside. Wes wasn't worried. He figured Wendell Aarp, the president of the company, had sent the man to look for his son.

"My name's not Aarp," he said as the elevator's doors closed. "He switched our nametags. My dad's name is. . ." It took a moment to recall the bogus name. "Jones. Joseph Jones." The man didn't respond and Wes said, "Fine. Mr. Aarp can straighten things out."

Wes was surprised when the man didn't direct the car to the building's top floor. That's where Mr. Aarp's office was. Instead they went down. Wes thought they must be going to the parking garage. Aarp was probably ducking out early and had arranged to have his son brought to his car.

But the elevator didn't stop at the garage. It continued on to the basement, and when the doors opened Wes was steered down a hallway to a door marked "Janitor." The man pushed it open but it hit something and stopped halfway.

He prodded Wes into the room. It was small, dank and dimly lit by a single fluorescent tube overhead. Nobody else was there. Wes was about to ask what was going on when the man closed the door behind them and said, "You can sit in that chair."

Wes's eyes weren't accustomed to the light yet, and he squinted looking around. Cardboard cartons were stacked two deep and a half dozen high against one wall, and against another there were metal shelves crammed full of cleaning supplies and clutter. A kitchen area with a sink and small refrigerator was in a corner. Clutter seemed to have flowed down onto the top of the fridge from one of the shelves, then from the fridge down onto a desk butting up against it. The only chair in the room was behind the desk. Wes went to it and sat.

The man sat on a cot. It was what had prevented the door from opening fully. "No one will bother us here," he said as he took a cell phone from his pocket and speed dialed. He held the phone to an ear and when his call connected he said, "Yes, hello, this is Colin Massey, calling for my wife. Oh. Well, can you ask her to call me when the meeting's over? Thank you."

Wes watched the man, Massey he said his name was, put the phone away and lean forward to rest his elbows on his knees. He looked at the floor between his feet and began wringing his hands. He seemed quite agitated, and for the first time Wes felt a bit of concern. What if he'd been kidnapped? Ransom cases could go wrong in a hundred ways, so he would have to be careful. But he needed to find out what was going on.

"Excuse me," he said in his most innocent child's voice. "Are you the janitor, Mr. Massey?"

"Huh?" Massey looked sideways at him, scrunched his face in thought, then snorted. "You

got my name from the phone call.” He reached up over his head and patted himself on the back. “Way to go,” he said, talking to himself. “Why not give him your Social Security number while you’re at it?” He looked at Wes again and said, “No, kid, I’m not the janitor. I don’t have a job.”

“So are we waiting for the janitor?”

“No. He won’t be in for a while.”

Massey gestured to a calendar that was on the wall near the desk, then he went back to staring at the floor and wringing his hands.

Wes looked at the calendar. A picture labeled “The Great Dismal Swamp” was above the fold. The photo showed enormous cypress trees rising from black water and disappearing into gray mist. A well-notated calendar page hung below the fold. The scrawl in that day’s box said the janitor wasn’t due for a couple of hours.

Wes still didn’t know what was going on. He would need to probe more deeply. And like a child would.

“Are you . . . What do they call it? Are you kidnapping me, Mr. Massey?”

Massey shook his head. “No, I . . . I don’t think so. Or yeah, maybe. Hush up. I need to think.”

Wes sat quietly for a moment, then he got up from his chair and went over to the shelves to look at things. It’s what a bored kid would have done. There were boxes of scrubbing pads and rubber gloves, and up high one that said “24 Count.” Twenty-four what? He reached up and tugged at the box. Something on the top shelf wobbled. A handheld steam iron tipped toward him.

The iron seemed to fall in slow motion. It came closer, and closer, and then a blur came in fast from behind.

Wes heard the iron hit Massey before it clattered to the floor. The man had darted over from the cot to shield Wes with his body. And he got

thumped with an iron for his trouble. He staggered back and reached up to feel the top of his head. When he took his hand away there was blood on the fingers.

“What the hell?” He looked at Wes. “Are you okay, son?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. But you’re bleeding. Why don’t you sit down?”

Massey returned to his place on the cot and Wes went back to his chair. He noticed a box of Kleenex beneath the cot and pointed it out. Massey used a tissue to staunch the blood coming from the wound. Wes waited, fiddling with a stapler on the desk, then when it looked like Massey’s bell had stopped ringing he said, “So why’d you bring me here?”

“Huh? Oh, it’s a long story.”

“We have time.”

Massey squirmed but didn’t take his hand away from the tissue. “You wouldn’t understand,” he said, but he seemed to want to talk.

“Try me,” Wes prompted, and it was like opening a floodgate.

“Well I . . . I drive a forklift at the Say it with Pins warehouse in Dallas. Or I did. The foreman fired me two days ago and I couldn’t believe it. I mean, all those years . . . Yesterday morning I didn’t know what to do, so I pretended like nothing was wrong. I helped my wife get the kids ready for school, and I dropped them off, but then I couldn’t go to work. And I couldn’t go home. My neighbors would have seen the car in the driveway and said something to my . . .” Massey went back to wringing his hands. The tissue remained stuck to the top of his head. “So I decided to do something today. I need that job. And there’s no one at the warehouse that will stand up to Biggs.”

“Who’s that?”

“The foreman. Dominic Biggs. He’s the one

that fired me. So I drove down here to see your dad. I thought that if I could just talk to the president of the company I could. . .”

He wrung his hands harder. Somewhere in the ball of fingers a knuckle popped.

“Go on,” Wes said.

“Well, when I got here, it was crazy with all you kids running around. And I couldn’t find your dad, so I came up with the idea to snatch you and. . . I don’t know. I mean, if somebody took one of my kids I’d do anything he said. That’s all I was thinking. Or no, I wasn’t thinking. I’m sorry kid.”

He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees again. Wes realized it was a sitting fetal position. Massey wanted to curl up and escape, but he couldn’t. He cradled his face in his hands and began to sniffle.

Wes didn’t know what to do, but he supposed that Massey hadn’t eaten much lately. Among his other problems he was probably suffering from low blood sugar.

“Do you want a snack?” he asked.

“Huh?” Massey looked up, wiped his eyes with the back of a hand and said, “Sure. Whatever. There should be something in that fridge.”

Wes went to the refrigerator and saw a honeybun in cellophane on top of it, next to a coffee maker. A cup of mud and a honeybun would pick them both up, so he began looking for coffee grounds.

“Let me,” Massey said as he moved Wes aside and pulled the refrigerator’s door open. He dug around and found some vegetables. Wes grabbed the honeybun, but Massey took it away and gave him a carrot. “This’ll be better for you,” he said.

Wes felt a flash of irritation, but then he thought of how Massey had been looking after him. He gave him a healthy snack instead of junk food; he took his coffee away earlier and warned

that it would stunt his growth; and he'd shielded him from harm even though it meant getting whacked with an iron. All of that added up to a good man watching out for someone he thought was a child.

Massey returned to the cot and Wes returned to his chair. They sat chewing their carrots. The tissue that was stuck to the top of Massey's head hung to one side like a floppy little party hat.

"Why'd the foreman fire you?" Wes asked.

"So he could hire a replacement that will pay him a kickback. None of us oldtimers will do that, but the new hires do. It's the only way they can get the job. I'm the third driver that Biggs has replaced."

"But he had to have a reason to fire you. Something he could put in your file." Wes knew he was running a risk of sounding too adult by displaying a knowledge of termination procedure, but Massey didn't seem to notice.

"Oh, he always has a reason. And he's crafty about it. He writes us up for nothing and tells us we have one strike, then two strikes, and then when he fires us for strike three he can back it up with paperwork. I got fired for safety violations that never happened, but it's his word against mine."

Massey chucked the nub of his carrot into a wastepaper basket and popped another knuckle. "I need that job. My kids, my wife." He began to sob. "I can't even hold onto a job driving a forklift." He reached for the box of tissues under the cot, found it was empty, and plucked the one from the top of his head. He used it to blow his nose.

Wes tossed his carrot and said, "I might be able to help you."

Massey looked at him and dabbed at his eyes with the bloody tissue.

"Help me? How?"

“Well, I’m not really a kid. I’m a midget and I make my living by . . . troubleshooting.”

“Troubleshooting? Midget? I don’t understand.”

Wes took out his wallet, took out his private investigator’s license, and went to Massey. He held the card up for him to read and said, “I’m a juvenile impersonator. Say it with Pins hired me to look for an embezzler. Maybe I can help you while I’m here.”

Massey didn’t respond. Wes put his license away and went to the kitchen corner to fix a pot of coffee. Massey watched, then after a moment he said, “Way to go, dummy,” talking to himself again. “You can’t even get a hostage situation right.”

“Forget about me being a hostage,” Wes said. “We’ll pretend this never happened. And I mean it when I say I might be able to help you.”

He got the coffeemaker going, then while it rumbled and dripped he flipped through the pages of the wall calendar. The past was heavily notated but the future not so much, and the backing pictures showed mountains and valleys and deserts. But the Great Dismal Swamp was the most interesting of the photographs. It drew Wes in with visions of snakes cutting through dark pools of water bottomed with bones. A human skull was turning its eyeless face to him when he heard the coffeemaker sputter to a finish. He found a clean mug, filled it and returned to his chair at the desk.

“You really are a grownup,” Massey said. “You move like one. I should have seen it before.”

“You had other things on your mind.” Wes took a sip of coffee and smacked his lips. “Ah, yes. Just what I needed. Now I can focus.”

He sipped coffee and thought. He puzzled over the pieces of Massey’s problem. How could he undo what had been done to the man? He asked Massey what Biggs’ job had been before.

“Before he became foreman? He drove a

forklift, like me.”

Wes sipped his coffee. Steam rose through his sinuses, caffeine scratched through his veins, and then the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. He had a solution, if he could get somebody to hack into Say it with Pins’ computer system. Jeannie might be able to do it, but Wes couldn’t ask her to jeopardize her career. So maybe. . .

“Got it,” he said as he set his cup on the desk. Massey was back in his fretting position, elbows on knees. Wes told him he knew someone who could help, then he searched his phone for Delores Flores’ number. They’d swapped contact information before he left the school job. He found the number and texted Delores to call him as soon as possible. Then he went for more coffee.

As he filled his cup Massey’s phone chirruped. Massey sat up and checked it. He said it was his wife, but he didn’t feel like lying to her just then. He activated the speaker and they listened to her leave a message. “I’m returning your call, honey. Sorry I missed you, but I’ll see you at home later. Can you stop by the store and pick up some asparagus? Love you.”

Massey put the phone away and said, “Great. On top of everything else I have to eat asparagus tonight.”

Wes settled at the desk with his coffee. He sipped and waited for Delores to call as he listened to Massey pop knuckles. When his phone rang he put the call on speaker.

“Hi, Delores.”

“I’m calling for Lazlo Pink,” she giggled.

“Ha ha. I’m glad you remember me.”

“I’d never forget Operation Tungsten. But hurry up. I’m in the bathroom but I only signaled for a number one.”

“Okay. I need somebody to hack into a company’s computer system, and I figure you’re the

one for the job. The company is called Say it with Pins. Its headquarters are here in Austin.”

“I think you forgot something. I don’t owe you, you owe me.”

“I didn’t forget, but I really need help on this and, well, you’re the best person I know with computers.”

He waited, hoping the flattery would work, but she didn’t respond.

“Plus,” he said, “I saw a Thumbelina Barbie the other day. She might be looking for a new home.” He’d seen the doll in an antique shop that Jeannie dragged him to the previous weekend.

After a short pause Delores said, “Fine. What do you need?”

“For you to break into the Say it with Pins system. I can look around and get you some numbers off the computers to help breach the . . .”

“No need,” she interrupted. “I’m already in.”

“That was fast.”

“Not fast enough. Time’s running out on my number one.”

“Okay. I want a man named . . . wait a minute.” Wes held his phone toward Massey and asked him to spell his name.

Massey looked dubious but spelled, then Wes told Delores that Massey was having a problem with his boss. He held the phone out again so Massey could spell Biggs’ name.

“Okay,” Delores said after a moment. “I have both their files here. What do you need?”

“For them to switch jobs. Starting Monday Biggs goes back to driving a forklift, and Massey becomes the foreman.”

Massey waved a hand. “Hold it. That’s . . . that’s crazy. Biggs won’t allow it.”

“I think he will,” Wes said, “if we let him continue at his current rate of pay. You got that, Delores? Biggs switches to the forklift but keeps his

foreman's pay." To Massey he said, "He'll be mad about losing the kickbacks, but who's he going to complain to? And he'll keep quiet if he thinks payroll forgot to downgrade him."

Delores asked how much Massey should make as foreman.

"Bump him up to whatever Biggs is making now. Oh, and delete any records of Massey's firing. You should see something about three strikes."

Delores said, "Done, done and . . .done. Anything else?"

"Sign Wendell Aarp's name to this. He's the president of the company."

Wes spelled the name and Delores said, "Okay. As of now Mr. Massey and Mr. Biggs have officially switched jobs. I'll call this . . .Operation Switcheroo. And you better not forget Thumbelina. Do you know what'll happen to you if I don't get her?"

"I'm afraid to ask, but what'll happen?"

The sound of a commode beginning its flush came over the phone. The sucking roar rose in volume and was about to crescendo when the call cut off.

Wes hung up and Massey said, "Are you . . .are you sure that will work?"

"Yes. Delores is really good with computers."

Massey shook his head, then once again he asked, "Are you sure that will work?"

"Yes. Stop worrying. Just show up for work Monday and play it like you heard. Pull Biggs aside and say that somebody in human resources called and told you about the change. He'll be mad, but he'll keep quiet when he finds out about the pay. Now get out of here. Go home and spend the weekend with your family."

They shook hands and Massey left. Then, as Wes was preparing to go back upstairs, he decided that Take Your Child to Work Day could carry on a bit longer without him. He poked around the room,

exploring. He opened one of the boxes in the stack against the wall. It contained a thousand buttons that celebrated “The Class of 3019.” More misprints. But another box held a thousand perfect little smiley faces. They were round and bright yellow. Wes pinned one next to the nametag on his shirt and took another to the calendar. He pinned it on the picture of the Great Dismal Swamp, high up between two huge cypress trees. It looked like some wildly optimistic sun was smiling down through the great dismal mist.