

New Hire

Dave Dryfoos



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Author: David M. Dryfoos

Illustrator: John Balbalis

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NEW HIRE

By DAVE DRYFOOS

Illustrated by BALBALIS

*Very admirable rule: Never do tomorrow
what you can put off until after the age of
forty!*

O

ne thing about an electronic awakener: no matter how elaborate its hookup, melodious its music, and important its announced reminders, when it goes on in the morning you can always turn it off again. Boswell W. Budge always did exactly that.

But there's no turning off one's kids, and thus, on the most important morning of his life, February 30, 2054, Bozzy arose, much against his will, promptly at 0800.

His Sophie, eight and ladylike, merely shook the bed with a disdainful gesture. But Howard, six, masculine, and athletic, climbed right up and sat on Bozzy's stomach. Baby Ralph, of the golden smile, gave Bozzy a big kiss, and Bozzy thus shared the gold, which was egg.

"Did your mother send you in here?" Bozzy demanded, gazing

suspiciously around with one eye open.

"We came because we love you," Sophie answered.

That opened Bozzy's other eye. "Thank you, dear," he said. "You're very sweet or very clever. Now if you'll coax Howard off my stomach —"

"I don't have to be coaxed," Howard announced, sliding to the floor with all the covers. "From now on, you just order me, Daddy. Because you'll be a Senior Citizen tomorrow."

Bozzy didn't want to think of that just then. "Tell your mother I'm up," he said. "And get out so I can bathe and dress."

Sophie minced, Howard ran, Ralph toddled.

Bozzy rose, a pudgy man slightly under average height at six feet two, with blue eyes and thinning brown hair. He was exactly thirty-nine years, eleven months, and twenty-nine days old.

And that was the point. At forty, he would have to go to work. This was his day for job-taking.

He dreaded it.

H

e put the coming ceremonies out of his mind and concentrated on his supersonic bath, the depilatory cream, the color of his outer clothing. It took time to achieve the right shade of purple in the bathroom plastic-dispenser, but no time at all to pour, solidify, and cut the sheet-like robe required for the occasion.

In it, he was the sensation of the breakfast room, handsome as a male bird in spring plumage. Kate, his slender wife, who had been up and at work for an hour, looked moth-eaten by comparison, as if their nest had been lined with her plucked-out down.

"You look very attractive this morning, Kate," Bozzy told her. He gave her an extra-warm kiss.

"Well!" she said. "Quite the gallant today, aren't we? Just be sure you're on time today, darling. Remember what Mr. Frewne had to say about promptness."

Frewne. That overinflated windbag. The obesity who was about to become his boss. Without having worked a day in his life, Bozzy found he hated the idea of having a boss.

"Let's think of something pleasant," he grunted, and thought of breakfast.

He took his place at the table. Kate and the kids had already eaten, so Kate served, while the kids, attracted by his finery, stood off and watched him swallow a vitamin pill, a thyroid pill, and a Dexedrine pill.

Solemnly, he opened the three eggs Kate brought. Each was guaranteed by her to have been irradiated for exactly two minutes and fifty-five seconds, and guaranteed by the grocer to have been enriched by feeding the hens three kinds of mold.

His mouth was full of the third and last one when Sophie asked, "Why do you have to go to work, Daddy?"

The reminder choked him. Gulping, he said, "To support us all, honey. My pension stops tomorrow."

"Yes, but I read in a book where people used to go to work when they

were young."

He was tempted to say, "I *am* young!" but thought better of it. "That was long ago, dear."

"Were people different then?"

"No, but society was. Our Senior Citizens used to be pensioned off, while younger people worked. But when science improved the Seniors' health, they got tired of sitting in corners on pensions and, besides, a lot of them died soon after they stopped working. When it got so that more than half of all voters were between forty and seventy years old, the Seniors voted their pensions to the young, to get educated and raise families on, and nobody's allowed to work till he's forty. Now do you see?"

"Forty is awful old," said Sophie.



H

oward had meanwhile taken his mother's hand. "*You're* not going to work, are you, Mommy?" he asked.

"Not for ten years, dear. I'll be here when you want me, so why don't you go play on the balcony? I've got to get Daddy off and give Ralph his bath."

"I'll bathe him," Sophie volunteered. "You help, Howie. We can make like we're young."

"Don't drop him," Kate warned.

"Clean up the bathroom afterward," added Bozzy.

"Yes, sir," said Howard, for the first time in his life.

The children left, and Kate came close to pour Bozzy his cup of Daystart. He slipped an arm around her waist and squeezed convulsively.

"Darling!" she said, stroking his bald spot. "You're positively trembling!"

"Wouldn't you be, if you had to take over from somebody you like as well as I like Mr. Kojac? And for no good reason, except he's seventy-five and I'll soon be forty."

Kate pushed away from him, frowning. "Sometimes you're so silly, it scares me. You know perfectly well that if you don't take Mr. Kojac's job, someone else will. He'd rather have it in your hands than in a stranger's, and I'd rather live on his income than on a laborer's. So stop moping and drink your Daystart, while I call a cab."

No help in that quarter, Bozzy decided as she left. All Kate could think of was that she'd soon be the wife of a big-shot: the manager—that is, controls setter—of a furniture factory.

Bozzy had never told her how simple the job really was, though he supposed she knew.

You first ordered designs, and then you ordered a poll taken on the designs. A computer tabulated the poll's results and pointed out the design most likely to sell.

You then fed economic data into the same computer, and found out how many units the market could take. You called in the engineers to set up the machines, and the maintenance men to keep them running. In brief, you were errand boy to a bunch of gadgets, with nothing to do but look important.

He was practicing his important look when Kate bustled in and spoiled it by sitting on his lap.

"You're going to do fine today," she said, "and you're going to get off to a good start. I made them show me your cab. It's one of their brand-new battery-electric ones, a sort of mauve that will go with your purple robe. You'll look swell in it."

B

Bozzy was kissing her when the lobby buzzer sounded three long rings.

"There's your cab," Kate said, rising.

He followed her to the living room. Projected on one wall was a picture of the cabman facing the lobby annunciator, fifty-three stories down. The man was tall, fat, and in need of a shave, yet he wore purple tights with pink and green trim.

Bozzy shuddered. "Who in the world concocted that rig?"

"Your wife, sir," the cabman answered.

"It's beautiful," said Bozzy. "I'll be right down."

He wasn't, though. Kate told the kids he was leaving, and they trooped out of the bathroom to say good-bye.

Bozzy could tell Ralph was the one being bathed only because he was naked—all three were equally wet, and equally anxious to embrace their Daddy. He had to make himself a new robe while the cab meter ticked and Kate jittered.

But once started, the drive between balconied buildings and

intervening plazas went fast enough. Bozzy wasn't over half an hour late in reaching Mr. Kojac's apartment building.

The old man waited in the street, looking spare, spruce, and impatient.

"I do wish," he said, easing himself into the cab, "that you had a less anti-social attitude. Now you'll have to claim I delayed you."

"I'm sorry, sir," Bozzy mumbled. "It's kind of you to take the blame."

He thought it was also typical. He had understudied Mr. Kojac for the preceding two years, and felt there was no one else in the world for whom he could have as much respect.

"Actually, sir," he explained, "I was delayed by the children."

"An excuse, Boswell! Whether conscious or subconscious, nothing more than an excuse! Distaste for today's ceremonial is smeared over your face like so much bread-and-jelly."

Unconsciously, Bozzy wiped his cheeks.

Mr. Kojac laughed. "You're guilt-ridden and that's plain absurd. All young men in your position have to go through exactly the same thing. You must simply make up your mind to do what society requires."

"All I can think of is your kindness," Bozzy blurted. "People should replace those they hate!"

"But the understudy system wouldn't work, then," Mr. Kojac pointed out. "You can't learn from a man who upsets you."

Bozzy nodded miserably.



I

n silence, he let himself be carried toward the furniture factory, till Mr. Kojac asked, "Did you bring the stimulants?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Excuse me. I should have offered them sooner." With embarrassed clumsiness, he fished from a pocket in his under-wear the pills required by custom. "Here you are, sir," he said in ritual form. "Big pills make troubles little."

Mr. Kojac smiled. "I don't need any," he said gently. "You do. Take one."

"That isn't proper!"

"No one will know. Go ahead."

He would feel like a fool to take a pill brought only for Mr. Kojac's use. He would feel much more like a fool if he broke down during the ceremony—might even lose his job.

He took the pill, finally, and immediately felt sorry. He was still tense and twitchy when they reached the factory.

As custom demanded, everyone was out of sight. Nobody met them at the gate, or observed their silent progress up the escalator to the personnel office. Noiselessly, through empty soundproof offices, they walked together to the ceremonial chamber.

The door they used was the room's only entrance. It was hooked open invitingly. Within was a small conference table of imitation oak, and six chairs of imitation leather. Ceiling, walls, and floor were plastic sheets in soft, sandy shades that harmonized with the furniture's rich browns.

On the table were four wristlets, four anklets, and two belts, all made of iron links and stamped with either Bozzy's or Mr. Kojac's name. As

he had been told to do, Bozzy picked out and put on his own set while Mr. Kojac rested in the armchair at the head of the table. Then, breathing noisily, he knelt before Mr. Kojac and fastened the old man's anklets.

He rose, grunting. Mr. Kojac held out first the left hand, then the right, while Bozzy put the wristlets on him. Their cheeks accidentally touched while Bozzy fastened the belt. He thought of his father and was irrationally tempted to plant a kiss, as if he were four instead of forty.

He stifled the impulse and shook hands instead.

"Good luck," Mr. Kojac said.

T

he procedure did not call for that remark, and so, for a second, Bozzy forgot what came next. Then, helped by the stimulant pill, he focused his thoughts, crossed the room, and turned a lighted red switch that glowed by the door.

He heard a muffled clank as iron links froze to the magnetized armchair, sounding the signal for his speech.

"Sir," he intoned, "the Company takes this opportunity to express its deep and heart-felt appreciation of the thirty-five years you have devoted to serving the Company, the furniture industry generally, and that great public, our customers."

Without looking at Mr. Kojac, he bowed, turned, went out, and released the catch holding the door open. It closed automatically, and automatically set in motion the rest of the ceremony.

From somewhere out of sight, fat Mr. Frewne waddled over and briefly shook Bozzy's hand.

"You've done fine," he wheezed. "A little late getting started, but that's to be expected. Every-thing's fine—just fine!"

Praise seemed a miscue. Bozzy didn't quite know how to answer.

"Sir," he asked, mopping his forehead, "what about Mr. Kojac?"

"Oh, he's all right," Mr. Frewne said. "Those fumes are fast. We can leave the rest to the undertaker."

He slapped Bozzy on the back and pushed him down the corridor. "Come on into my office, boy. I'll pour you a drink—pour us each one, as a matter of fact. And hand over your iron jewelry, son. You won't need that stuff again for thirty-five years."

—DAVE
DRYFOOS

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