TALE OF TOIL

THE FILING CABINET IS ON FIRE

by Clayton Peacock

Last year, while packing up a damaged Macintosh G3 Powerbook for repair, I took a call on the company cell phone reserved for support issues. It was our CFO, calling from thirty thousand feet. In the background I could hear a stewardess taking drink orders.

"I just spilled juice on my Thinkpad," he mumbled.

"Was it powered on when you spilled?"

"Yes."

It was fried.

"What happened?" I asked.

"The screen turned all sorts of colors. Now there's this awful smell."

In my four years of technical support, I've seen only a handful of laptops sustain a hot spill without total data loss. I told this to our CFO.

"I understand," he said generously. "So long as I still have my email."

I waved away the colleague I'd been helping when I took the call, shoved the receiver into the crook of my neck, and began a speech I find myself giving about twice a week. Email messages and attachments, I explain, are downloaded from the company's mail server to an employee's own machine. This means all email records, such as sent mail and saved correspondence, are stored on the local computer. If the hard-drive on that computer is unreadable, the email is too.

I wait for my cue.

"I thought you backed everything up."

I continue my spiel. We can't back up two hundred machines each night, because of storage requirements, licensing costs, and logistical problems, such as backing up laptops that aren't here. Consequently, company policy is that employees are responsible for their own backups. I refer to the backup policy and step-by-step instructions posted on our internal website. I stop talking.

This fiction that email is forever — recoverable so long as someone knows what they're doing — is half the reason people like me have a job. The other half is breaking the news. It doesn't matter how many times I warn an employee that their data is in a permanent state of peril—90% of them won't back it up. Even if a worker loses a year's worth of email in a disk crash, habits rarely change for more than a few weeks. When they drop their laptop six months later and the disk fails to boot, they become, once again, the blindsided victim.

The problem is much larger than crashed disks. There are plenty of creative ways to lose your data in the digital office. Some of the nastier ones are damaged resource forks (on Macs); unreadable file allocation tables (on PCs); or locking yourself out of the BIOS. The most common, however, is the most psychologically damaging: the corrupt mailbox. This is a phenomenon whereby the more email one saves, the more likely the folders storing that email will fail. It is like saying the more paper you stuff into a filing cabinet, the more likely that cabinet will burst into flames.

In a company of just under 150 employees, I see about three filing cabinets burst into flames per week. Typically the employees leave me a quavery voicemail, then hang up and hunt me down. I've learned to spot them as they speed-walk through the cubicles, heads spinning in a periscopic panic. When they find me they are pleasant, feigning control.

"You're probably busy, but…"

I stare at pupils the size of disk platters.

If there is any hope to be found in the accelerating binge-and-purge cycles of information, it is in these epiphanies following catastrophic loss, when one is most receptive to radical reassessments of the meaning of work.

"My email won't open." The women often put their hand on my arm.

"I'll drop by your cube and take a look," I say. "Just give me a few minutes."

They don't move. "I can't lose my email."

Before I've reached their workspace, they've repeated this half a dozen times, seeming to recite it as much for their sake as my own. By 'I can't lose my email,' they don't just mean "I can't lose my client folders and to-do lists." They also mean letters to family and friends, flirtations with lovers at other jobs, address books, calendars entries, personal memos—in short, the ongoing record of a parallel social life most employees carry on during work hours.

Zoe Noe

This is hardly because workers are slacking off. The expansion of the work sphere into private lives has made socializing while on the job the only way to keep the personal life stirring. Support workers like myself are typically "on call" after work hours, getting interrupted by the obscene rattle of the Nokia cell phone at every conceivable hour because another employee, also working longer than they should, has run into technical difficulties. I've lost count of the number of routine, work-related email threads that begin on a Saturday afternoon, and

by Sunday morning have elicited replies from all half-dozen people on the distribution list. Is this because the employees just happened to be checking personal email on a Saturday night? Or is it because of a perception that work, made ever harder to leave behind with the advent of email and cell phones, never really ends?

Whatever the answer, for many of us in the so-called new economy, a good portion of our private life has shifted to the eminently fragile, work-defined locus of the laptop computer. Despite the daily hauling of the workstation between home and office, despite the scattered files on the desktop with names like "Carla's Chemistry Homework," few of us seem to recognize just how heavily we've come to rely on the machine to manage our private affairs until the inevitable catastrophe occurs. The employee whose computer won't boot is spooked by something much larger and more emotionally charged than the possibility of losing company assets.

I ask the obvious question.

"No." They look stunned. "How do I do that again?"

I give them the second half of my spiel. They fidget. They put their hands on their forehead. They ask about Norton Utilities.

I pop the yellow CD into the drive. I don't tell them that Norton is probably the most overrated software on the market. Instead I lean over to make sure they see the splash screen showing Peter Norton, his armpit on the vents of a monitor gun. Somehow he's a comforting figure.

After Norton is through with its quackery, I take the laptop back to the tech area, where now and then I manage to resurrect an OS without losing the file system, or to rebuild a mailbox without zapping the index. More commonly I waste the morning booting from floppies and running command-line diagnostics. To the victim hovering outside my cube, I call out the increasingly discouraging results. If they ask about professional recovery services—which most workers seem to know about, despite their learned helplessness—I explain that the cost of such remedies is extortionate (as in a couple grand for a single disk) and there's no guarantee of getting the data you need, especially after liquid damage. They nod gloomily. I continue booting from floppies. At a certain point, usually just before lunch, I break the news.

If I've done my job well, the victim is prepared for the worst. Over the course of the morning

Hugh D'Andrade

But what about *my E-MAIL!?!?*

they've learned that plenty of other employees, including their illustrious CFO, have suffered similar accidents, some involving cocktails at thirty thousand feet. I've shared with them evidence of corrupt files and bad sectors and invalid resource forks. I've reassured them that they aren't to blame, even if I determine they dropped the machine. I am employed, in the end, to treat concussive data loss as a basic fact of business. I am the service technician of amnesia.

A guy from sales asks if he should be worried about a new virus. He tells me it's called "HELP WITH PSYCHOTHERAPY," and is supposed to delete sensitive data from a hard-drive, beginning with family email. I explain that such hoaxes have been flying around the Internet ever since Norton Anti-Virus hit the market. He laughs, getting my joke.

I do not tell him that any morning he may hit the power on his Superslim Sony Vaio, a line of laptops which seem to last about six months between critical disk failures, and find himself staring at a DOS screen flashing his data's last words: "OS Not Found."

Employees are as complicit in this fiction as the support staff. No one gets fired for disk failure. So most people conveniently forget just how vulnerable their data is, allowing the false sense of security encouraged by onsite technical support to trump our precautionary counsel. When the inevitable occurs, when Outlook hangs on launch, when a disk grinds and stops spinning, we are the authorized targets of their stages of grief: denial, blame, bargaining, resignation.

Recently I've been tending to an epidemic of sudden death syndrome among Macintosh G3 Powerbooks, traceable to a faulty internal power adapter. On a Sunday morning not so long ago, I awoke to the crying of the Nokia cell at 7:00 AM. The caller, one of our star employees, follows the etiquette of these intrusions by first apologizing for phoning me at home. I've become quite cynical about these apologies. The very availability of an after-hours support line means that most workers, when faced with a glitch they can't solve, will place the call anyway. Half the time the problem is intertwined with some personal conflict on their computer, like a botched installation of Tomb Raider for their kid. I am polite but curt during these calls. While I make a reasonable effort to help, there is nothing I am concentrating on more intently than a way to gracefully hang up.

This time, given the caller's rank, I can't do that. He tells me he's unable to turn on his Powerbook. Still in bed, I walk him through some diagnostics to determine if it's another faulty power adapter. I explain how to remove the battery, how to manipulate a paper clip to reach the reset button on the rear of the machine, how to manually discharge the capacitors. After several such tests, I have my answer.

"It's dead," I say sleepily.

"So what am I supposed to do?"

I tell him he'll need to ship the Powerbook to the main office, so I can remove the hard disk, transfer the data to a spare machine, ship that new powerbook back to him, and return the malfunctioning computer to the Apple Repair Center. I add that it will be about 72 hours before he has a working Powerbook in his hands.

"That's impossible," he says. "I'm on deadline."

I offer to ship the spare powerbook to him first thing Monday morning. The caveat is that I won't be able to transfer any data to the machine before shipping it out.

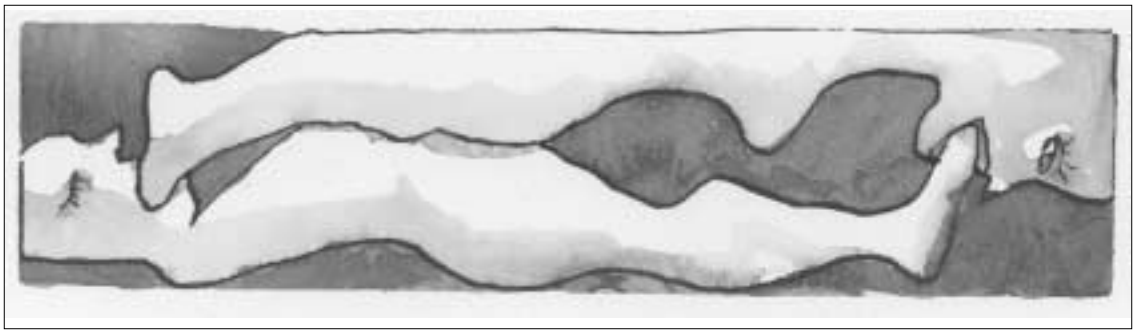
I wait for my cue.

"Will I still have my email?"

I continue.

"Look," he interrupts me, sputtering. "I'll tell you what I want. I don't care if I get a Powerbook, a Toshiba, a Radio Shack special—I don't care. At this point all I want is a computer that works—one that doesn't break down every fucking month."

It's a reasonable request, however unreasonably it may be phrased, and one I hear frequently in the negotiation stage of data grief. But I can't promise anything of the kind. Computers are only getting tetchier, thanks to the insane cramming of parts into the shrinking laptop shell, and to the progressively buggier operating systems that control them. There isn't a portable computer on the market that doesn't have, well, issues. Toshibas have problems with hardware profiles, something that has woken me up dozens of times when employees accidentally boot into an offline configuration. Macintosh Powerbooks, despite their name, ship with the most unreliable power-management chips on the planet. The less expensive iBooks ship with a hard disk Fisher-Price would be ashamed of. IBM's 560 line of Thinkpads, thanks to a "flexible" design, conk out after a few months of "flexing" the motherboard beneath the keyboard, eroding the circuitry and causing spontaneous reboots, usually in the middle of typing, until the machine can't make it past the Windows splash screen without restarting in an infinite boot loop. Toshiba Portèges suffer aneurysms at a system level if improperly lifted from the docking station. The list goes on. Thus to furnish a laptop "that doesn't break down every fucking month" is fucking impossible. I say as much to the



Minna Eloranta

Powerbook victim.

"You mean every laptop is going to break?" he asks.

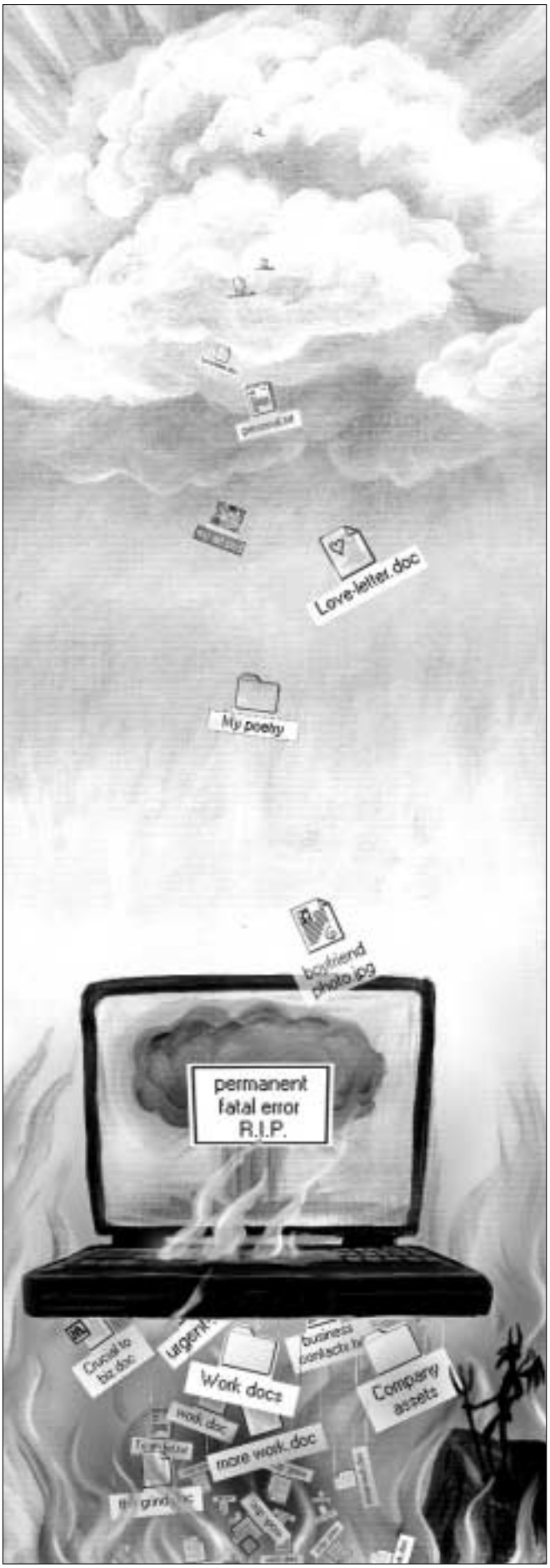
I say, well, yes.

"That's lousy. That's really fucking lousy." Still groggy, I can't tell if he's directing this at me or the computer industry at large. The truth is somewhere in between. To most employees I am the closest thing they know to an actual representative of the computer industry. As such, I become a lightning rod for their disillusionment with technology. Once this anger passes, and an employee is back to banging on a laptop, the rage of these exchanges is forgotten. I return to my spurious role as computer fixer, and the employee to their faith in the machine. It is a mutual deception, on which the business keeps going, my rent paid, my days filled. So why should I kick against the goad?

A former executive was in the habit of leaving his Powerbook at work over weekends, locked on his desk but visible to anyone walking by. One Friday night his cubicle neighbors hosted a pre-weekend drinking party, with sugary cocktails offered to all. A partygoer left an unfinished beverage on top of the officer's corner cube. Over the next 48 hours the mixture ate through the paper cup, dribbling lollipop cocktail all over his machine. By the time he showed up on Monday, the cocktail had seeped through his keyboard and into the metal casing of his hard disk. The Powerbook spun loudly a few times, sputtered, and died within thirty seconds of taking power.

He was initially determined to retrieve his "mission-critical" spreadsheets and subscription records from the disk. I recited the usual warning about liquid spills being especially destructive to data, but went ahead to obtain quotes from specialists in hardware triage. No one would even look at the disk for less than a couple hundred bucks. Assuming the data could be recovered—for which there was no guarantee—the consensus estimate was a couple of grand. The executive finally decided, like so many before him, that the information, on second thought, wasn't so critical after all. "I feel quite Zen about it," he said. A few months later, he quit.

If there is any hope to be found in the accelerating binge-and-purge cycles of information, it is in these epiphanies following catastrophic loss, when one is most receptive to radical reassessments of the meaning of work. It's hard not to feel betrayed by the mixed message of the new economy—information is simultaneously indispensable and disposable—when your entire workspace explodes and everyone's reaction is, "Hey, it happens." Even still, without the cathode-ray reflection of your email routine, you are more likely to notice the crumbs on the keyboard, accrued over a year of taking lunch indoors; or the flicker of the fluorescent lights, now unbearably obscene; or the streaming of the afternoon sun. Are you really working, if your workspace has disappeared? If not, are you therefore *not working*? And if you're *not working* and no one seems to notice, why not leave the building altogether and go do something useful … or fun? ❣



Mona Caron