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Polly Wolly Doodle, or My Life as a Secret Agent

by R. Toady

I'd like to take a few moments of your time to talk about my own personal experiences with Library Burnout.

My job as a person working in a library started in March of 1987. I had used up my savings and was desperate for work. When I saw that the Kernetis County General Public Library of the Arts and Sciences was hiring I got right on my bike and pedaled over there as fast as I could to apply, despite my apathy towards books and the written word in general. And I had no knowledge that could with any degree of honesty be said to pertain to either the Arts or the Sciences. I was apparently the sole applicant and they hired me on the spot.

Despite my lack of enthusiasm about reading, the work proved to be so easy that within six weeks I was already feeling bored with my job. To be honest this was actually a record of sorts for me at the time. The longest I'd ever stayed at a job previous to this one was a seemingly eternal nine day stint at the Hammingburg Dunkin Donuts (the one right off the highway, not the one downtown where that girl shot all those people before throwing herself into the scalding vat of donutmaking oil). So, six weeks was quite a victory as far as that goes. My parents were ecstatic and I didn't have the heart to tell them I was ready to move on. Besides, I owed them three months' worth of rent.

What saved me from suffering further burnout and therefore leaving the place was my boss, Mr. Avery Winn, or Number Three as I came to know him. At the end of a particularly dull day of stamping books and saying "that'll be due back in three weeks" he called me into his rather Spartan office in the library basement.

He gestured to a metal folding chair and told me to sit. I noticed there was an identical chair on his side of the desk and he settled onto it with much more grace than his rather hefty frame would have been supposed to possess, perching like

a rather obese pelican. He crossed his plump fingers and, wiggling them once, leaned forward towards me.

"Well, you've been here six weeks now, Joan, and I was wondering how you liked the job so far."

I drew in breath through my teeth. Should I tell him the truth, that the job was almost unspeakably dull and I felt like killing myself or one of the many vapid library patrons who came so cluelessly up to the counter with their arms full of books full of criticism of Mindi Reinhold's poetry, or reference books of 19th century Mongolian fungicides? Or should I play the good employee, strong and silent, never complaining about my lot?

"I'm rather bored, sir," I stated plainly.

He nodded rapidly as if he'd expected just such an answer.

"Yesyesyes, Joanie, may I call you Joanie? Of course you're bored, my dearest Joanie. I would be surprised to hear otherwise. I mean, someone of your intellect... well, I'm not surprised at all that you're finding yourself a little... rather bored."

I just looked at him, wondering what gave. It stated clearly on my resume that I hadn't completed high school. In fact I had failed three admittedly half-hearted attempts at procuring my GED. I knew I was no brainiac. What was this guy getting at?

"Well, I have some good news for you. You see, there is a very special mission I had in mind for you when I hired you." He smiled, a huge smile that exposed tiny yellow teeth. Silver crowns glistened from the dark recesses of his mouth.

He leaned closer and motioned that I should do the same. I scraped the chair a little closer to the desk.

"I need you for a very delicate mission," he whispered. He quietly slid open the top and only drawer of the gray metal desk and pulled out a thick manila envelope.

"You see," he said, "this is not a library at all."



He pushed the envelope across the desk towards me and tapped it with one fat sausage. "And as of this moment, you are not a library assistant. You are an operative for a secret government agency code-named The Dugong. And you will hereby be known as Number Seventeen."

I started to laugh but the look on his face stopped me.

"I know it's a lot to take in all at once," Mr. Winn said, quietly. He smiled. "Take this file home, memorize its contents, and destroy them. Come in to work tomorrow and act like none of this happened. Not all of our staff is made of agents of course, in order to preserve secrecy. There is a code phrase which we agents use to recognize each other." He paused and spoke so quickly I barely heard.

"The secret words are Polly Wolly Doodle."

I couldn't hold it in anymore; I busted out laughing. He smiled and looked down, and I thought I detected a slight blush.

"It sounds a little silly at first, I admit, but that's just to throw off our enemies. So..." He reached his hand across the table and I took it. "Welcome aboard, Number Seventeen."

When I got home, I locked myself in my room and tore into the folder. It was filled with documents detailing what I would be doing at my new job. It was brilliant; I'd be fulfilling all my normal duties as library assistant without any noticeable change in routine. I would still be checking out people's books, checking in and shelving returns, all the while receiving my secret training from Number Three.

He taught me how to tell who was an agent and who was not. Who needed to be reported and who was harmless. I took note of every book checked out and entered them into the computer database so we could track the flow of information in and out of the library. I learned the

secret behind the Dewey Decimal system, how each of the numbers, when added to the numerical value of the subjects they stood for in a deceptively simple formula, became a coded language which we members of the Dugong used to communicate amongst ourselves. Soon I could tell instantly what messages were being passed on, just by glancing at the books being checked out and doing the simple equation in my head. I would take the message and put into a new code before passing it on to Number Three.

As per his wishes I never asked any questions about the organization, and as a reward for my reticence and loyalty, from time to time Winn would divulge a tidbit or two of information. For instance, his job consisted of contacting Number Two on a daily basis, though he'd never spoken with or met him or her personally. No one knew anything or ever spoke of Number One, and some had the view that there was no such person, or that Number One was some type of computer, or program.

It was also speculated that more than one individual sometimes possessed a single number, for instance, that there could be multiple Number Twos, all working in secret locations around the country. This seemed to be corroborated by something that happened to me about a year after I had started the job. A young woman, skinny to the point of anorexia, came up to the counter one day and put four books in front of me. I had never seen her before but she produced a very worn but valid library card and snapped her gum mercilessly as I checked out her books. I was astonished by the message encoded in her choice of books: it read, "Number Seventeen reporting for duty, mission accomplished." I looked at her. She stared over my shoulder at the poster of a large cartoon bookworm saying, "Books aren't for eating, they're for reading!" and drummed her fingers impatiently on the counter.



I had never sent a message back to any patrons, or revealed that I knew they were agents, but something made me feel like I should say something to this, my doppelganger Seventeen. I knew that it was dangerous to do so; that if she reported me, it could mean termination or worse, and when I thought about losing my job I was surprised to realize that I was filled with anxiety at the thought. For the first time, I had a job I really liked, I had found something that I cared about and enjoyed. Maybe someday I would burn out again, but for now, I did not want to get fired. Maybe this was a test. If so, I was about to fail it. I might not ever have a chance like this again.

“Polly Wolly Doodle,” I whispered.

The girl did not react. Maybe she hadn’t heard me. I repeated it, a little louder this time, as I slid the books across the desk to her. She grabbed them with no expression on her face and strode out the door without a word.

The following morning I grabbed the newspaper from the front stoop of my parents’ house and stopped back into the kitchen where the greasy smoke of burning bacon was filling the room as my mother performed her daily heroic attempt to cook breakfast. On the front page was a huge headline LOCAL TEEN FOUND MURDERED IN QUARRY. There was a huge photo of a quarry with a smaller photo of the girl I’d seen at the library yesterday beside it.

When I stepped into Mr. Winn’s office later that morning, hardly surprised to have been summoned there, the first thing I noticed was the pile of four library books sitting on his desk; the same four, obviously, that Number Seventeen had checked out before she’d been, uh, checked out. He smiled and once again gestured to the metal folding chair. He offered me a cup of his weak coffee which I declined.

“Good work, Number Seventeen,” he said. “I’ll be honest with you, Num-

ber Two doubted me when I hired you on, but you’ve proven that you meet the high standards we Dugongs expect of all our agents.” I found myself blushing as I thanked him.



So you see, thanks to Mr. Winn, my job has become interesting and important to me. He saved me from the edge of burn-out by giving my job new meaning and significance, though after all these years I’m still kind of unclear about what it is I really do. I’ve moved up in the agency from Number Seventeen to Number Six, and Mr. Winn says I still have my best years ahead of me. Of course I do have trouble sleeping nights, worrying that some counteragent will get past the security system I’ve had installed at my folks’ place, but the pills help some. And I’m pretty careful; I do my job, don’t ask questions. I don’t think there’s much chance of my getting burnt out any time soon, even if it does seem like it’s the same thing day after day, week after week. The life of a library assistant has proven to be surprisingly rewarding to me and I encourage you all to stick with it. The agency needs us all, each and every one of us. Besides, you never know what consequences there might be if you leave. 

