

*EXCERPT READING SAMPLE: We Missed A Meeting, Alex Auguste*

Everyone seemed so cranky. Bags under their eyes, stumbling into the building with bowls of oatmeal, it seemed no one was on a good frequency this morning. One colleague, who I'd recognized from the 3rd floor even walked in with her hair still wrapped, peeling off the velcro of her headwrap as she entered the building. It was pretty clear that she almost forgot it was even on her head. Even worse was that she wasn't late, yet rushing into the building.

Nothing strange, though. We've all been late-early before, right? Rushing out the house in a frantic panic, telling yourself you should have left 20 minutes earlier. You're panicking because you just know you're going to be late, and suddenly, by some unidentified grace, you arrive 15 minutes early. You're still in a rush, but asking yourself why. Why go in 15 minutes early, when you still only get paid at the hour? Why prolong your time at your desk, when you can milk the grace period? By the way, H.L. Powerman's grace period for everything was 15 minutes.

So, at the 10-minute mark just before our meeting, I decided to check on the Senior Vice President, Junie Bloom. Her office was empty, though. Locked, in fact, with the blinds fully closed. Maybe, I thought, I'd find someone in management like Dustin Branch, or Emily Fay, Skip Russells, Peter Vitale, Susanne Peters, Wiley Robinson, Luanna Scott - none. All their doors closed, all their blinds closed, and then I just felt like I was being played. Was today some company holiday, or was this some sort of prank from management? It had to have been. Or maybe they were up at the top floor watching everyone walk in thinking We need to shape our employees up. That's not what success looks like at 8:15am. I wasn't sure but I was starting to feel bothered at this point.

Before I could walk into the meeting room, the room roared with laughter and cheers, and I could hear one person say:

"Ah, now this really is a room full of niggas!"

My heart dropped into my stomach and the splash hit my lip. It was cold. Why would this idiot think it's OK to be that loud using that kind of language in the office?

"Hey, Richard, seriously, though," another voice said from a seat in the back. "What's going on? Executives are late? Everything cool?"

"I don't ---"

"Man, watch, Hazel from HR is probably headed this way now. We're probably all getting walking papers."

"Shit, sounds like freedom papers to me," a female voice said walking in. At that point I wondered why the same woman walking into the building with her head still wrapped had the gaul to walk into a meeting 15 minutes late and say something like that.

"Maybe it's just a promotion meeting for Richard. Rich, you've been doing a great job lately. Maybe they're bringing you up."

"I appreciate that, but it's probably not the case." The room is simply too empty for a promotions meeting. Catering would be here by now.

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"So, seriously, though," a voice peered in. Her name was Genisha Elliott, from the 4th Floor Accounts Payable team. She had been here for over 9 years - longer than me - and I can sense some serious frustration in her tone. She was extremely tense.

"Richard, have you heard from anybody on management or executive team? This meeting was supposed to start 15 minutes ago, they're well passed the grace period, and I just don't have anymore time for the bullshit this morning."

A murmur went across the room in agreement. My head at this point is swirling. A mix between confusion, and mental exhaustion regarding whatever solution I would have to provide. I could sense it - that my phone would ring any minute now, and I'd have to break news that there's a folder in a room somewhere, and that all these folks were being laid off. Maybe even me, too. That the company was struggling and "looking to go in a different direction". These things happen. 250,000 people can be laid off by one of the world's top global banks, than Powerman is no different. It's coming. The call. 3. 2. 1.

"Aight, so boom!" shouted Chuckie Rowe. His real name is Charles, but he hates that name, and feels like Chuck is too comfortable of a work nickname, so he goes by Chuckie. Only certain people, though, actually call him that.

"If we all get laid off, all we have got to do, people, is file discrimination. You just can't lay off 45 Black people and not have a damn good reason. Ya'll with me on that?"

A stir murmur of agreement, now. At this point Genisha rose up, and walked out. I intended to follow, until she walked back in, looking back. Pierre was walking in now, apparently with something to say.

"Eh, listen," He spoke with a strong Haitian accent, so his "i" always sounds more of an "e".

"Nobody move, OK. Everybody relax, OK. I need ev'rybody to stay here and be relax."

I walked over to speak to him, joined by Genisha.

"Hey, Pierre, you alright? What's going on man?"

"Men, I know something not right. I get here at 6 o' clock, and the parking lot empty. Empty, men. I say 'OK'. You know, maybe Miss Junie not here, or sick. Or, maybe, late. I say 'OK'."

"So, she hasn't came in yet at all today?" I asked.

"At all? She didn't leave any calls or instructions?"

"Oh. Listen. I get here at 6 o'clock. Remember, I tell you that. And the guard before me, Edgar, wasn't here. The kiosk, the tower, the phone empty. No miss call. No voicemail. No cars in the lot. I say, 'OK'. Maybe they let him go, but why they don't call me? Nothing."

"So, you haven't gotten a single word from anybody today?"

"No."

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"Is today a holiday, Genisha?" I asked again.

"No."

"Listen, I know everybody in this room by name. I work here ten years, I know you, I know Genisha, I know Omar over there. Everybody here in this room now, is everybody who came to work today."

Remember, my heart had dropped into my stomach, a cold splash reached my lip, but now my stomach couldn't hold that impact. My stomach collapsed under the weight of 'What the fuck is going on' and sank down to my knees. I suddenly had too many questions and no answers, and my balance was off. Everything was off, and all I could do was palm swipe the sweat off my face in disbelief and frustration.

"What do you mean by 'everybody in this room now is everybody who came to work today'? What does that exactly mean?"

"Richard, I mean I sat there, at the front and nobody came." He lets out an awkward chuckle for validation. "6 o'clock. 7 o'clock. Parking still empty. Not one car. 8 o'clock, and then the cars come. I call my temp agency to see, you know."

For a brief moment, I was confused. Shamelessly, though.

"Pierre, you work for a temp agency? You've been here 10 years."

"Oh, no, I have another job. I say if the company close today, I go to my other job."

The lightest laughter I could possibly give today. It's officially 9am, and today is already my worst day ever at Powerman.

I decided to give the floor a second sweep. Door after door, locked. Blinds closed. Complete silence other than the murmur of voices from down the hall. Even the overhead music system was off. We typically switch between some satellite radio station playing 80's electronic pop - Debbie Deb, Softcell, David Bowie - to smooth jazz. Today, we have just the air conditioner blowing. Again, now I have to make solutions to a problem and I bet I'll never see a promotion for it.

Naturally, I went over to the house audio system to add some music. Maybe not smooth jazz, I thought, but maybe something to keep all our folks here focused on work, and off the distracting thought of why no one else is here. That's what I was thinking. So, I put on some classic soul.

[cues James Brown - Get On Up]

I returned to the room to everybody just calmly seated talking about their weekend, and their morning. I could see feet tapping, heads bobbing.

"Alright everybody, let's make the most of the day. Let's get to our desks until further notice. I'll document whose here and speak to HR as soon as possible, so you're paid for your time just in case anything comes up."

"Richard," Sasha Lambert spoke up. "Why don't we just go home?"

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"Because, Sasha, it's only been 45 minutes, and you don't want these folks to act up, do you? I'll get on the phones as soon as I can and keep everyone up to speed."

Nauseating, to say the least. The questions swirling in my head, the funk in the speakers, the frustration of not having answers. I could've done without this. I could have been home. Isn't that what you always think on your worst days at work?

I walked down to the first floor concierge desk to find the book of contacts. Maybe I'd be able to find a personal contact list and call some of the managers on their personal cells. Maybe they'd overslept, or traffic from that ambulance and police pileup. I don't even remember what side of town they said that was on this morning. It could be anything, but what it better not be is a company holiday. Trying to keep my whits about me, I sat in the chair, pulled out the furthest down drawer and began fingering through the pages of contacts. I know for sure Luanne Scott is usually the fall person and, to be quite honest, she can't hold water so I know she'd know something.

You just couldn't have a regular conversation with Luanne. Any information was too much information. The contact book read "Updated Jun. 16, 2019", which is not bad, but also not great. I tried to remember how many training classes we had brought in in the course of a year, and had hoped it was updated because Luanne joined the company right around October. She was new, but brought enough energy, giggles, and awkward smiles to make you think she had been here since 2015 or something.

Her name was in, but not in order. In fact it had been added at the end of the book on paper. I called.

Hiiiiii! You've reached Luanne Scott, Manager, Team 45 at H.L. Powerman, and I am so sorry you couldn't be reached at this time. If you will, please leave me a voicemail and I will skid-daddle to get right back to ya! Bye now.

"Wow." I hung up.

The list of folks to call began.

Adri Cornell.  
Adrianna Amberly.  
Andres Espesito.  
Cookie Schumacher.  
Delores Plumb.  
Edward Stout III.

The names continued. The calls continued.

Iliana Jameson. I called and surprisingly, the phone picked up.

"Hello!" I sounded excited for a bit.

"Um, hi, This is Iliana speaking."

"Hi, hey! It's Richard from H.L. Powerman ---"

"I'm right outside, I'm so sorry. I know I'm a little late, I'm literally walking into the door right now."

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I looked up, and right on queue the doors pulled up splitting and letting in a splash of sunlight, to reveal Iliana Jameson. An intern, she's been with us for over a year, having graduated from one of the local schools. For some reason, I felt disappointment, not in that she was just the intern, but in the fact that she's Black.