

NEW YORK OBSERVED

# *Wake Up and Steal the Coffee*

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Credit...

Gregg Matthews for The New York Times

I WAS nearly charged with petty theft for pilfering coffee at the illustrious Hippodrome Building. But lest I be judged too quickly, I must convey the sublimity of the fourth floor's coffee machine.

Harry Houdini performed at the Hippodrome, at 1120 Avenue of the Americas near 44th Street. Many of the best and most famous performers of the time appeared there. It was one of the biggest and most successful theaters of its time, capable of accommodating 5,200 people.

After several iterations and a complete interior overhaul, the Hippodrome now features a resplendent two-story lobby of Italian marble, limestone and silver leaf. But in spite of its historic past and grandiose first impression, its best quality is without a doubt the coffee machine on the fourth floor.

Our office (whose floor I will not divulge for fear of legal recrimination) did not have a coffee machine. It had a coffee maker. Although some people might consider this a trivial point, any pencil pusher working in a Manhattan cubicle or office understands the distinction between a coffee maker and a coffee machine.

A coffee maker is a near-medieval contraption that uses primitive semipermeable barriers called filters to capture the grounds while the coffee-infused water passes through. A coffee machine is nothing short of a magic device. A near equal to the voice-activated food synthesizer from “Star Trek,” the coffee machine gobbles up a packet of coffee and in seconds presto! a cup of steaming coffee is produced.

I first caught wind of the fourth-floor coffee machine from a colleague who had a friend on that floor. One day, he approached me and said, “Want to see something awesome?”

“Sure,” I said.

Surpassed only by its coffee machine, the fourth floor is an egalitarian utopia with no central authority. There is no main office, just a wraparound hallway lined with offices, all home to different companies. Because the receptionists work for the floor, they cannot keep track of individuals. Instead, they smile absently as you saunter by.

My colleague led me around the winding corridor until we reached an immaculate kitchen brimming with provisions. Beyond the kitchen was an area outfitted with tables, couches and wall-mounted flat-screen television sets. This was truly a better place.

And that’s when I spotted it.

Futuristic and sleek, the coffee machine offered a plethora of options: Colombian coffee, French roast, Italian roast, hazelnut, French vanilla. But it offered far more than the standard fare. There were several brands of cocoa along with English breakfast tea, Earl

Grey, standard Lipton and an array of herb-infused flavored teas, in case I was feeling particularly New Agey.

I never got to meet that friend from the fourth floor, and eventually he moved to another office, no longer leaving my colleague and me any excuse to go down there. In spite of that, we became well acquainted with the coffee machine.

At first, as with any addiction, we started slowly, taking the elevator down a couple of times a week. Soon, it became a daily ritual. I almost felt as if it was rude not to introduce myself to the receptionists. When I walked those corridors, I eyed their inhabitants arrogantly, even suspiciously, as if they had no right to be there.

EVENTUALLY, we introduced other colleagues to the wonders of the fourth floor. We were traveling in packs now, like marauding bandits, cackling at our easily won spoils.

On one especially raucous outing, I noticed a curious figure, a man in a black suit who had trailed us back to the elevator. I thought nothing of it at the time. I should have known better.

The first warning bell sounded when he entered the elevator with us. It was odd, I thought, that someone from the fourth floor would be taking an elevator up. But the mystery didn't last long.

"You can't keep coming down here and taking coffee," he informed us. "They've got you on video."

At first I thought this man was a territorial employee from one of the companies on the fourth floor, kind of a hall monitor. I later found out that he was one of the building's security guards.

In any case, I debated whether to hand him my cup or dump it in the elevator. I settled on giving him a solemn look that was meant to convey, "I'll dump this in our kitchen; you can count on me, pal." A couple of my colleagues managed barely audible apologies. Pleased with our contrition, the man nodded and went back down.

"You think they really have us on video?" I asked my colleague.

"I don't know," he replied. "I mean, he said they did."

"I don't think they do," I said. "He was just trying to scare us. Where the hell did he come from, anyway?"

“He followed us from the kitchen. I saw him come out of the office when we walked away.”

“So you think he works for the building?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Look, we’ll give it a few weeks, let it cool off. Then we’ll go down, just you and me.”

“Yeah, we told too many people.”

“Yeah.”

An e-mail message sent soon after that conversation put a definitive end to this plan. It was from my company’s general manager, and it went something like this:

“I am appalled and disgusted that there are people in this office who would steal coffee and breakfast from the fourth floor. The culprits have 30 minutes to turn themselves in.”

I heard from multiple sources that the building was threatening charges of petty theft. My colleagues and I turned ourselves in. One person was even forced to write a formal apology. It turned out that it was enough to mollify the building, but we had been sufficiently intimidated that we would never venture onto the fourth floor again.

The jungle of gray cubicles that I inhabit became all the more drab. Work seemed interminable, the coffee on our floor tasteless. There were no more extended breaks, no more jaunts, no more magic.

Eventually, our company purchased a similar coffee machine, but something was off. It had pods instead of the familiar packets, and the machine rumbled profanely instead of whirring elegantly. It was a travesty.

When I’m having an especially bad day at work, I imagine walking the corridors of the fourth floor. I imagine helping myself to the plentitude of its kitchen. And that’s when I realize that there is nothing better than a stolen cup of coffee.