I

Ads are, unfortunately, just a part of modern life.

Human history is plagued with a lot of these little sorts of idiosyncratic annoyances, each tailored to how far technology had advanced up until that point. In medieval times, people had to deal with like traveling musicians and the royal horn blowers interrupting their peasant-ass lives. In the Wild West days, there were snake oil salesmen traveling town to town trying to peddle their piss in bottles as cure-all ointments. Even back in the early days of modern civilization, you used to have to stop watching whatever show you were hooked on to deal with like, five whole minutes of companies trying to sell you something.

But in the year of our lord 2070, advertisements that were beamed *directly into your brain* was easily the most maliciously passive annoyance that plagued modern society.

“God fucking *dammit* McAfee you’re supposed to be better than this!”

Tapping on the side of her curly red melon, Valsi’s method of percussive maintenance was considerably more gentle when the technology was inside her own head than when she was dealing with some poor unsuspecting terminal that was just Trying Its Best™. But seeing the popups not just in her peripheral but in her foreground was enough to make her tap a little harder. It wouldn’t do much, but it made her *feel* better to hit something that wasn’t performing at ideal performance. Even if it was her own noggin.

“The minute I get that raise I am *so* upgrading to Pro…”

For now, the ads were gone. Valsi had no doubt in her mind that they’d be back, of course. But at least she could finish getting dressed without any interruptions. They popped up every few hours or so, or every time she had to reboot her crappy HUD.

Which, unfortunately, could get accidentally forced into restarting should it get too jostled around.

“UGHHHHHGODDAMMITTTTT”

While this hadn’t been going on for *too* terribly long, it had been enough of an annoyance that Valsi was about ready to rip the HUD out of her head manually. If she hadn’t needed it for literally every aspect of her life, professional and social, she just might have done it too.

*TRY THE NEW TRIPLE STACKER DELUXE™ AT BOBO’S™!
Just $15.99\* with this coupon! Look here to activate!
price does not include taxes or fees.* ***sandwich only.*** *does not apply to combos.*

“This actively makes me *not* want to eat at Bobo’s.”

Valsi grumbled to herself, standing in her apartment and able to see a good majority of it from the foot of her bed. With her hands on her hips, surveying the pitiful bounty that her mid-level corpo job had made for her in her piddly-ass apartment with two windows and a desk, the would-be ladder climber was reminded that she couldn’t exactly afford to be picky about where she could and couldn’t save creds.

“…fine. But only because I’ve been craving a burger anyway.”

*OFFER ACCEPTED!
Check your inbox for more exclusive offers, @BDEValsi!*

“I’m literally already regretting this.”

— — —

Sitting at a greasy fast food joint wasn’t exactly how Valsi *liked* to spend her free time. But unfortunately, it was simply the most affordable way for her to have a social life.

Clubs were too expensive, window shopping just reminded her of all the nice shit that she couldn’t afford, and where else was there to go after that? The library? The art gallery? What kind of boring utter anon lives their life that way? She and her friends might not have had the most disposable income in the world, but at least she hadn’t stooped to *free* entertainment.

Besides, the booths at Bobo’s™ were free for two hours, as long as you bought something. That was plenty of time to get caught up over lunch.

“Did you skip breakfast or something?”

“I always skip breakfast.”

“Okay, but do you always gorge yourself on shitty fast food like you haven’t eaten in a week?”

The Triple Stacker Deluxe™ was quite a gorge indeed. Three patties high with two slices of cheese between each slab of all-American Grade-C meat and loaded with toppings like jalapenos and cheese curds, just looking at it was enough to make some people green around the gills. A more unappetizing meal you would be want to find, but at the same time at least it gave you some bang for your buck. Whenever Valsi went anywhere *else* in the city, thrice less food had almost always costed her twice as much in credit.

“I know you think this crunchy granola shit is cute, but I’m out here trying to save money.”

Valsi had said it gripping either side of her gargantuan burger, cheese and sauces and grease dribbling from the nooks and crannies of her medium-cooked gut bomb. Even looking at it now, Valsi would admit that it didn’t exactly conjure up the most flattering images of what she’d wind up doing to her toilet later.

“For those of us who don’t cosplay being poor, clipping coupons is a necessary evil sometimes.”

“So is heart disease, apparently.”

“Shut *up* and let me eat my Triple Stack.” Valsi rolled her eyes, “Gawd, why’d you come if all you were gonna do is bitch the whole time?”

Renesme rolled her eyes and shifted on her HUD to check her messages while Valsi practically unhinged her jaw to take her first bite of burger. Warm, slick liquid ran down from the corners of her mouth, a combination of all that went into the sandwich to give it its signature Bobo’s™ taste, dripping onto the make-believe butcher’s paper below.

And, you know… it wasn’t half bad.

Not the best food she’d ever eaten before. Definitely not her favorite. But for getting it at $5 off, this burger was a pretty good deal.

A *really* good deal.

Valsi’s synapses tingled as more offers from Bobo’s flooded in, courtesy of the little burger bodega’s complementary wi-fi.

“Shit… I might have to start coming here more often…”

II

The view from Valsi’s office might have been mandated by the Corporate Suicide Prevention Act of 2059, but it was one that she had learned to enjoy. The tallest of the tallest buildings could go up into the clouds, where you couldn’t see shit. But down here, overlooking the city, was Valsi’s preferred way to actually *look* at things. Back in the days of old videos, people would have *killed* for this kind of view.

“Suck it, past peasants.”

Her office didn’t leave a lot of room for her to spread her metaphorical wings. There was enough space for a desk, an opening for her to get behind it, and *almost* enough room for her to lean all the way back. And sure, a 10-hour workday crammed into her little office wasn’t *ideal*—but at least she got an hour lunch break.

*100ct CHICKEN STRIPS AT PINK’N’STUFF™
We’ll save you a plate—Accept Offer?*

“I *literally* just got back from fuckin’...”

Valsi didn’t finish her sentence. The elevator ride down had taken a good five minutes, not to mention hoofing it across the parking lot to Mr. Tones’ Bar & Grille®, waiting for her order to finish cooking, and then *another* five minute elevator ride up. She didn’t have time for this bullshit. Her break was almost halfway over, and this would be the only time she actually got to *eat* until she got home tonight.

“Mrphmm… mrph…”

Using one finger to wipe away the avocado and chicken juices, Valsi suckled on the primordial ooze that dripped from her indulgence before washing it down with something a little more appetizing. The upcharge from Medium to Large size was well worth having enough to wash down the TexMex.

“…phukk.”

Valsi took her feet off the desk as she spied her Floor Manager making his rounds throughout the office. Officially, he was on his break too. But even the most newbie corpo could tell that he had his eyes peeled for decorum, behavior, and promising habits from those whom he oversaw. So in order to “curb anti-corporate habits” he regularly made his rounds throughout the office to spook them out of any malcontents.

Especially those who kicked their feet up on their desk, like Valsi.

“Enjoying your lunch, Miss Nesbitt?”

Officious little prick.

“Mm! Yuh!”

Valsi’s brown cheeks were stuffed full of food seconds prior to his tapping on the window separating her office from the rest of the floor, his voice carrying seamlessly in through her HUD. By the time he had spoken to her, she had only swallowed about half of it.

“You didn’t bring your lunch today?”

“No, I uh… borp… decided to go out again today.”

“Uh-huh…”

The way that he said that always made her nervous. Uh-*huhhhhh.* Like he was holding his tongue until he could find a way to say whatever judgmental bullshit had popped into his head in corpospeak. Not *everyone* got flown over from China because of company connections, and if *this* was how all their managers acted, then she was *glad* that she’d been passed up for that transfer opportunity.

Didn’t do much for her foot-in-mouth disease though.

“Yeah, you know, with groceries being as high as they are right now—”

“I hope that wasn’t a dig at your salary.” He cocked a black eyebrow in the most harmless, but most afflicting sort of way possible for a man of his stature and svelte build, “…you *do* know that I’m not the one responsible for how much you’re earning every month, right?”

Shit.

“Shi—I mean *sure!*” Valsi overcorrected to the point of obviously fake chipperness, “No, I… I make plenty! I just, uh… wanted to treat myself is all! A little comfort food is all!”

Her manager looked her over once again, seemingly satisfied with her answer. His arms folded behind his back, he moved on wordlessly to voyeurize the next mid-level corpo slave, leaving Valsi to resume her lunch break.

Just without her feet on the desk.

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“Goddamn. Shitty. Fucking. *Lines*.”

It was nine at night by the time that Valsi finally returned home. Her bouncy red curls had flattened slightly over the course of her workday, and she’d covertly removed her belt at some point after her lunch break. Not like she needed the damn thing anyway—her fucking pants were so fucking tight that she didn’t think she could get a finger in to flick the bean if she wanted to.

“My apartment complex is in the same fucking complex as Dinko’s, what the *fuck* am I doing getting home a half hour late because some greasy-ass fucking teenager can’t—*ughhhhhhhh”*

Valsi turned her HUD to silent and adjusted her Online Presence to Private so she could eat her fast food in peace.

She hadn’t been lying earlier. It really *was* cheaper for her to eat out every meal during times like this. Since this latest Gas Hike, groceries had gone up to nearly twice the price. And that’s after they’d stabilized a few years ago at about half and again the price before. Until those clowns in Congress managed to reign this shit back in, Valsi forsaw a *lot* of fast food in her future…

“Not that I’m complaining.”

Getting to eat out had oscillated between being a luxury and a necessity at various different points in Valsi’s life. All these ads were annoying as hell, but at least they were helping her budget. The more that she clicked on them, the more ads and coupons and offers got sent her way. She (and probably everyone else who wasn’t a geriatric) had spent so long tuning out advertisements that she had almost forgotten that they *did* have their uses. Especially when it came to saving money.

“Popups might be annoying as hell, but at least I’m saving money.”

The mid-level corpo plopped down in her desk chair, fired up her HUDTV, and leaned back with her chicken sandwich.

“Eatin’ good too.”