

AUSTIN

**THIS CAN'T BE GOOD**

Austin stands in the doorway of James' office.

—Hey, he says. —Tanesha said you wanted to see me?

—Oh, says James. He takes off his glasses, rubs them with the corner of his shirt.

—Yeah.

James swivels in his chair to face Austin; he interlaces his hands and brings them up to his lips. Then he leaves them there for a long time. Austin waits a moment, then puts on a listening face—he raises his eyebrows and smiles faintly, to indicate that he's waiting, ready for whatever it is that James has to say.

—Why don't you come in here for a second? is what finally comes out of James' mouth.

—Um, OK, says Austin. What he thinks is *this can't be good*. He takes a step into the office, leaving behind the safety of the doorway. —It's just that—he crooks a thumb over his shoulder—I've got this group; I shouldn't leave them for too long—

—I won't keep you for more than a minute, James says. —I just received some news and I thought it was important to let you know right away, so you can begin to plan appropriately. Why don't you have a seat?

Austin sits. —What does this have to do with? Austin says.

—Well, James says. —I'm sure you're aware that the budget crisis has strapped the resources of some of the city and state organizations that fund this center.

*Shit*, Austin thinks. —Yeah, he says.

—We'd been asked to submit a revised budget, James says, —and Tanesha and I, this spring, we worked on a budget proposal which made some cuts across the board. We tried to cut only that which was nonessential. Certain supplies which could be viewed as *luxuries*. Our goal from the outset was to retain all of our personnel and programs. But as I'm certain you know, the Center has always operated on a shoestring budget. There simply aren't that many nonessentials to

cut. But we submitted a proposal which would have represented some modest reduction in our operating costs, a budget which we felt reflected our willingness to go along with the general spirit of cutting back.

He holds up a sheaf of papers, and then lowers it back to the desk again.

—I just learned that our revised budget has been rejected. We've been asked to cut another 25% of our operating costs.

—Twenty-five? repeats Austin.

—It's an enormous sum, really, says James. He rubs his eyeglasses on his shirt again. —We've got a very short time in which to figure out how to make these cuts. Very little can be said for certain right now about what we'll be able to retain. But at this stage in the proceedings it looks like we'll be unable to continue funding the A/V program.

—Ah, says Austin. —I see.

—I'm sorry about this, James says. —I wish it could be different.

—I get that, says Austin calmly. —I know it's not your fault.

—So what it looks like is that you'll be able to continue through the summer session, but at this time it doesn't look like the Center will be offering a fall session, or any sessions at all next year. If the economy picks up then maybe in fall of 2004 we'll be able to reinstate the program. If that happened, and you were interested in returning, we'd love to have you back—you're great with the kids, and your work has been a great contribution to the work that the Center does—

He continues on in this vein for a bit. Austin just sits there. He's numb. Dread-making thoughts jumble around in his brain but the situation doesn't feel real enough for any of them to truly grip him. Not yet. He's sure this will happen later, like tomorrow, when he needs to pay July's rent. \$950 and no roommate to split it with anymore.

It's then that a thought comes through the noise. Loud and clear. And the thought is this: *OK. Minneapolis it is.*