

# THE OLD HEAVE-HO

I'm not a lifer when it comes to jobs, so when my boss told me I was getting the axe, the real shock was how much it stung

BY DAVID HAYES ILLUSTRATIONS BY GRAHAM ROUMIEU

I remember quite clearly the spring morning last year when I was fired. I don't mean downsized, dehired, destaffed, disemployed, displaced, restructured. It wasn't a "resource allocation" or a "save" ("savings," that is, to the department's, and the company's, balance sheet) or any of the other euphemisms invented to describe a process of letting employees go. There was no pink slip, nor a tidy meeting in a private office ending with a settlement offer.

I was sitting at my cluttered desk, hard at work, when the phone rang. It was my editor. We began with some friendly chit-chat about how hard it must be for him, dealing with sizable budget cuts, when he abruptly informed me that he was terminating my contract. He would no longer be signing off on any cheques as of that day. When I asked what he was offering me – since my contract included all the appropriate clauses – he told me that I would be welcome to provide him with work, for which I would be paid on a project-by-project basis. Well, I said, that's a freelance arrangement and perhaps we can discuss that, but we signed a contract: what kind of settlement are you offering? When he began talking about a highly suspect "just cause" to back up the termination, I realized that he wasn't offering anything. Although shocked by the news, being a journalist I had the wherewithal to punch the record button on my tape recorder.

"So, this is the first I've heard of this, the first warning you've given me that there's a problem," I said. "Am I right?"

"Yep. Um, I think that's probably fair. I probably haven't repeatedly brought it up with you."

Was I surprised when the call came? Not really. I had a contract with a business magazine owned by a company that was carrying a debt load in the billions and had, several times, administered "structural reorganizations," a ten-dollar phrase businesses use to describe putting a lot of people out of work to improve quarterly earnings. And it's narcissistic to feel

singled out when more than one million Canadians are let go every year. I can't even blame my boss for targeting me. I was no more valuable than others he'd already laid off – some of them full-time employees of the company, not mere contract staff like me – and his own future advancement, if not his job itself, depended upon making the budget cuts ordered from above. Still, he hadn't handled my firing very adroitly – we judge a person's character not by how they behave when things are going smoothly but by their actions when they're under duress – and terminating a contract without compensation often results

## How many fifty-year-olds do you know who have never been fired?

in wrongful dismissal actions. But if I belabour all the details we'll get into what Dilbert calls "blamestorming." So before you turn the page, that's not where I'm going with this.

I'm hardly a lifer when it comes to jobs; for much of my working career, I've been self-employed. Two years ago, I resigned from a full-time university position that I loved, teaching journalism, when the circumstances changed so much that continuing to work there seemed like a ticket to misery. If anyone should be resilient, I thought it was me. But being fired is different, bringing with it an unexpected loss of self-esteem and a confusing emotional upheaval that I couldn't identify for some time. As it turns out, being fired has been classified by psychiatrist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross as the fifth most traumatic event people can experience in their lifetime, after the death of a child, death of a spouse, death of a parent, and divorce. That helped explain why I'd felt the way I did, but not what I had been feeling.

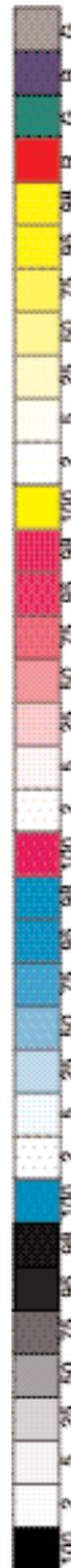
A day or so after the fateful phone call, I spoke to a good friend who works in advertising. After listening to my story, he asked me how many times I'd been fired. Taken aback, I said, "Never."

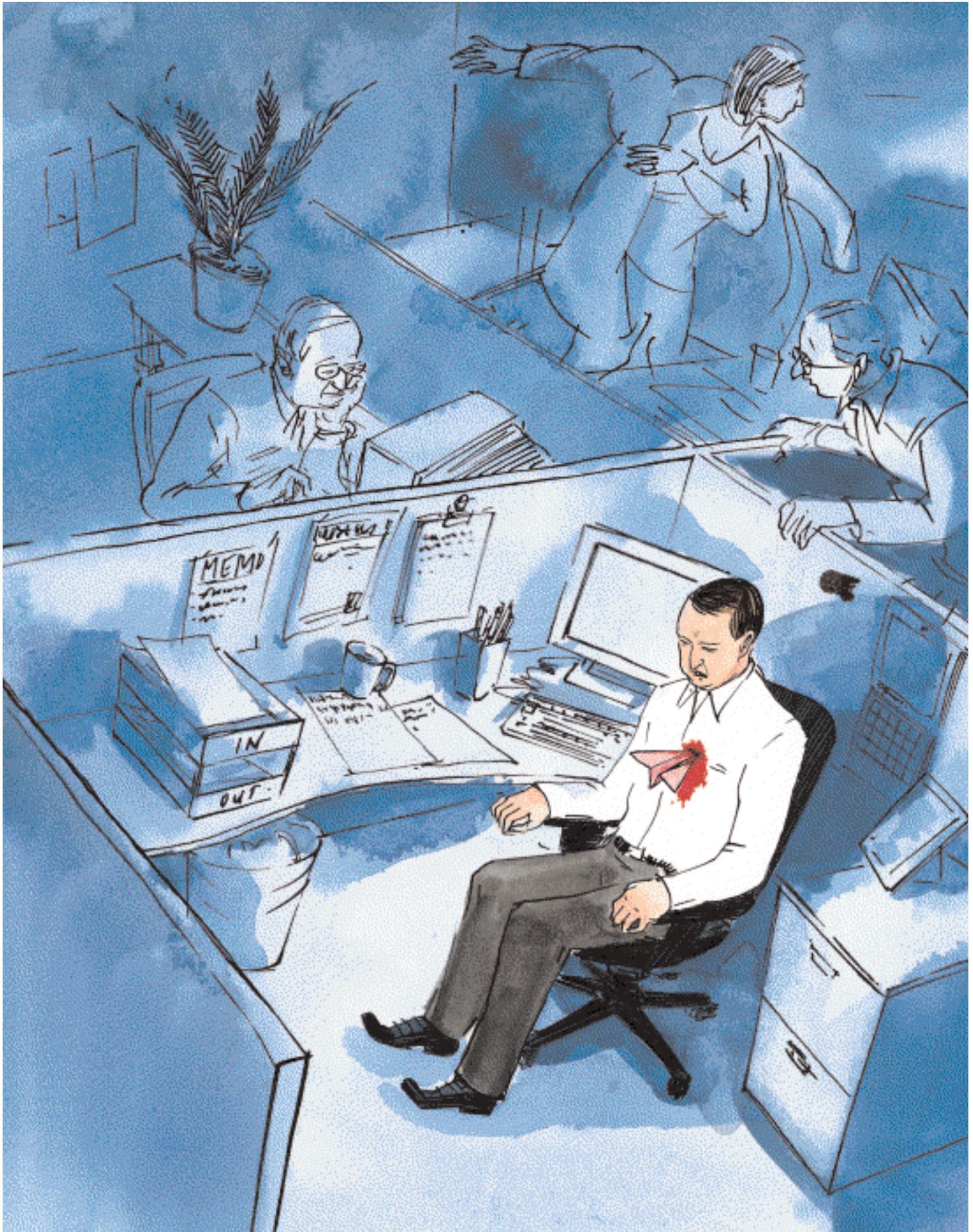
"You mean you're fifty years old and you've never been fired?" he asked, incredulous.

Advertising is among the most volatile of industries, and my friend, who is my age, had been fired three times, and always won respectable settlements. While acknowledging that there are underperforming or disruptive employees who genuinely deserve to be fired, he pointed out that, regardless of the circumstances, it's the way it's handled.

"If your boss sits down and explains to you what went wrong, you can walk away feeling pretty good about the guy who just did it to you," he said, then laughed, adding, "But it's usually some piece of bullshit baloney that really stinks. Because it's usually not about your performance; it's about delivering bottom line to someone at a head office in New York."

Suddenly stories about the newly disemployed seemed to be everywhere. A friend told me about someone in his workplace who had accomplished nothing during his six-year tenure aside from avoiding the axe. Once it became apparent his days were numbered, the fellow became a whirlwind of activity – courting strategic co-workers and superiors, appearing at meetings with file folders filled with impressive-looking, if usually irrelevant, documentation, explaining in detail how he'd significantly contributed to projects on which he'd been conspicuous by his absence. Although the guy was, in the end, offed, he'd managed to stretch it out for months, elevating the kind of desperation we all know and fear to a kind of performance art. If he had devoted a fraction of this energy, creativity, and moxie to his job, maybe he wouldn't have been fired in the first place. And, unlike me, he had received a handsome payoff.





There are so many examples of high-flying senior managers being fired and collecting big settlements that it's hard to keep score. Sooner or later, though, almost everyone ends up hearing about Frank Biondi, Jr., former CEO of Viacom Inc. and Universal Studios, who was fired from both jobs within a three-year period and received a total of \$45-million in severance.

I began feeling a kind of termination envy, wondering whether I had been missing out on an important cultural experience. I also wondered whether everyone else in the world had wrung more concessions out of their employers than I had.

Being fired rattles our concept of who we are. Growing up, my father symbolized work to me. He was a trim man of medium height and build, and I would watch him in the morning, in trousers and an undershirt, shaving with an electric razor. I remember the smell of soap and aftershave, the sound of him pulling on a crisply pressed dress shirt, making a sound like a page torn cleanly from a pad. Downstairs, he sat reading *The Globe and Mail*, eating breakfast. Then he would go out to his Pontiac Parisienne – a sensible luxury car, the Lincoln of the middle class – and drive to his office in downtown Toronto, all before I'd left for school. He arrived home at 5:30 every evening, like clockwork, retired to his den, and read *The Toronto Star*, the sweet smell of cherry pipe tobacco scenting the room.

My father had worked in the paper industry his entire life, first for the Ontario Paper Company Ltd. for nineteen years, then for Abitibi Power & Paper Co. Ltd. for twenty-one more. He was managing Abitibi's mill in Pine Falls, Manitoba, in 1953, the year I was born, when he accepted a senior-management position at the company's Toronto head office, where he worked until he retired in 1969. (Those sixteen years alone were longer than the period the vast majority of my friends and acquaintances have worked at one company today.) He had never been fired or laid off. His only serious disappointment came in the late 1950s, when a younger man was promoted to a job he'd hoped to get. After he retired, he felt so positively about Abitibi that he regularly attended company luncheons for retirees. My father's example influenced me. Even though I chose a path that led to self-

employment, I still expected a measure of stability in my working life.

My firing wasn't exactly a surprise, especially given the company I'd been keeping, but that didn't make it less disruptive. I had recently returned from a holiday in France, celebrating my fiftieth birthday, so I didn't have much of a financial cushion. As the end of the month neared, I had bills to pay even while I was scrambling to find work. A lawyer friend, outraged by my treatment, offered to help me launch a lawsuit. Thus began a tiring eight-month process to negotiate a settlement: legal documents from both sides, offers and counter-offers, and the usual delays that a company's legal representation hopes will result in litigious ex-employees growing frustrated, or running out of money, and abandoning their case.



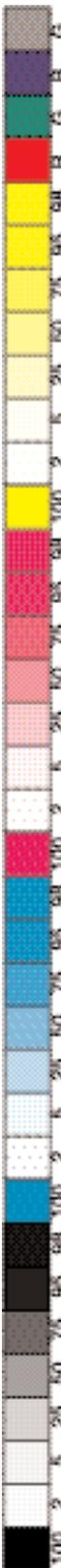
At one point, my former boss suggested – in writing – that I produce the quantity of work I would have produced had I remained in the job and I would be paid the remainder of my contract. My lawyer and I agreed that you almost had to admire an offer so brazen that it didn't acknowledge my contract had been terminated without offering a settlement until the lawyer's letters began arriving, and took into account no penalty for my boss's actions. The next day my lawyer drafted yet another firmly-worded counter-offer.

But what was that unsettling feeling I had, the one I would bury in a chattery barrage of ill will toward my boss and the company whenever the subject came up? If I had that feeling, did that mean others in more precarious circumstances had it even worse?

In Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman, upon being fired, feels that he has failed so totally as a father, husband, and professional man that the modern business world has mercilessly spit him out, like a "piece of fruit." I began reading about people like the woman who, after being fired, avoided eye contact with neighbours and drove to distant supermarkets so she wouldn't run into anyone she knew. And the man who, rather than reveal to his children that he'd been fired, continued driving downtown every morning, killed time looking for jobs and sitting in restaurants, then returned home in time for dinner. Eventually he found a new position and his children were never the wiser.

As my lawsuit moved slowly forward and I found new freelance assignments and began working, I thought about how these stories illustrate shame, an emotional experience so potentially combustible it makes its sibling, guilt, seem like a trifle by comparison. In the working world, for example, guilt is the self-reproach we feel when we stand by silently as a co-worker is castigated, or even demoted, for an error we may have committed. Guilt involves behaviour that causes harm, whether acted upon or thought about, and we feel guilty for not having done the right thing. But there is a solution, a way to make amends, even if it's only a resolution never to do or think anything like that again.

Despite our claims to the contrary, for most of us shame is what we experience when we're fired. (I knew that when I casually told people that "I'm going through a difficult period" or "it's been uncomfortable," I was using euphemisms.) Shame is tied to our concern about the opinions of others; it's about disgrace, and about our sense of self-worth. This is revealed in how we express it. I feel guilty for having done or thought something; I feel ashamed of myself. When we're fired, for example, we believe it comes after our superiors have evaluated us not just as workers but as human beings. (A sample bit of legalese from my former employer, which read to me like a slap to the face: "The Defendant states that by failing to provide the services under the contract the Plaintiff has failed to perform the services contemplated by the contract . . .") No matter how clear the external circumstances, our conclusion is usually pretty dismal: If we were sufficiently



valuable to these people we've been working with for months or years, we wouldn't have been fired. And then, more importantly, it involves what we think our family, friends, former colleagues, and acquaintances think of us now that we've been fired.

People today have much higher expectations for work than my father's generation did. My father had a career, not a calling, and he had enough leisure time to have many of his emotional needs met by his family and community life. Today, people work longer hours, have less downtime, and think about work almost incessantly. Work isn't just about earning a living; in many cases it's the sum of a person's identity. (In my case, the craft of journalism means far, far more to me than just a paycheck.) So, while business has become increasingly less rigid, decisions about every employee's future are governed by the bottom line, and it's not surprising that sooner or later many of us feel betrayed by our work. Being fired is the ultimate betrayal.

To my surprise, a feeling that I eventually realized was shame dogged me for months after I was fired. Identifying it was the first step in working through it, which I began doing with the help of my therapist.

A novelist would end the story here. After being fired, a man lost a lot – financially, emotionally – but although an unjust world meant he never saw a dime of what he was rightly owed, he dealt with the complicated emotions and is wiser now, with a more profound understanding of the human condition. Truth, though, is messier but sometimes more just than fiction. With the help of my lawyer, I eventually received three-quarters of what the company owed me on my contract. That's a good deal more, those in a position to know have told me, than the company would have had to pay out if it had offered a settlement at the time. By then, I'd dusted myself off and re-established a freelance business, feeling a good deal of satisfaction in knowing that, in the end, the company had conceded there had been no grounds for terminating my contract.

As for working through the complexities of shame, it's going to take some time. I'm still pissed off at my former boss for his behaviour, for example, and I'm not ashamed to say it. But although it should have given me delicious satisfaction when I learned last summer that he had been fired by the company, I found myself feeling sympathetic. Welcome to the club, pal. ■

*David Hayes is a Toronto-based freelance writer.*

