THE COMPANY

The Story

By The (Emotionally Non-Compliant) Guy at a Dept. at The Company

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I. The Company

There are nine floors at The Company.

I've worked here for several years and couldn't tell you what happens on half of them. The ninth floor is reserved for Management. I've never met Management. Come to think of it, I've never met anybody who's met Management.

We do, however, receive emails from them. Usually at two in the morning.

The Company operates several departments.

The Web Dept. builds things on the internet. The Wash Dept. cleans things. The Game Dept. makes games. The Art Dept. manages creative assets. The Human Dept. manages humans.

Then there's The FAFO Dept.

We don't talk about The FAFO Dept.

For a while, I genuinely believed I worked for an extraordinarily disorganized but otherwise legitimate company. Management had strange policies, the departments rarely communicated with one another, and somebody had recently decided to replace most of our IT infrastructure with stuff generated by artificial intelligence.

I mean, the entire fucking company.

But the coffee was free, so whatever.

It wasn't until I discovered an old directory belonging to The Human Dept. that I started to suspect we were involved in something considerably worse than questionable business practices.

The directory was labelled:

HCCEKRC_2022

Inside were photographs, personnel records, incident reports and promotional materials for something called the Happy Camper's Club.

I'd heard of it before.

I just didn't know we owned it.

II. It Wasn't a Phase

The Happy Camper's Club Emo Kid Remediation Camp, or H.C.C.E.K.R.C. internally, was established to address what The Human Dept. described as an emerging crisis among adults approaching or entering their thirties.

Persistent Emotional Non-Compliance.

Emos who grew up, basically.

Not teenagers. Not children going through a difficult phase. Actual grown adults with jobs, mortgages, failed relationships, car payments, receding hairlines and an inexplicable desire to listen to the same music they'd been listening to since 2006.

Apparently, this was a problem.

According to The Human Dept., adulthood was supposed to represent the successful conclusion of identity exploration. By thirty, individuals were expected to have abandoned adolescent interests in favour of conventional, economically productive behaviour.

Making music was considered particularly concerning.

Writing poetry was discouraged.

Maintaining a dream well into adulthood was indicative of an unsuccessful transition.

The Happy Camper's Club promised to correct these behavioural deficiencies through an eight-week residential remediation programme.

Its brochures featured smiling adults canoeing, roasting marshmallows and participating in supervised recreational activities beneath a cheerful little yellow sun.

The slogan read:

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO GROW UP!

The regulations were somewhat less cheerful.

Music was prohibited. Instruments were prohibited. Art was prohibited. Clothing deemed emotionally provocative was confiscated. Personal notebooks were surrendered upon arrival.

Campers were encouraged to discuss their financial responsibilities, professional aspirations and retirement plans.

They were discouraged from discussing their feelings unless those feelings demonstrated measurable improvements in happiness.

The man responsible for overseeing the programme was known simply as the Warden.

In one of the promotional videos, he looked directly into the camera and said:

"Here at the Happy Camper's Club, we believe everybody deserves to be happy, regardless of whether they want to be."

I watched that video three times.

Nobody in the comments seemed to find it particularly concerning.

III. I Like Lantern

Among the campers enrolled in the summer of 2022 were two guys named Michael and Chudi.

Both were adults. Both had lives outside the camp. Both had apparently committed the unforgivable offence of continuing to identify with the music and culture they grew up with.

Neither had any particular interest in being remediated.

On their first evening, the Warden gathered the campers around a bonfire for an exercise in emotional renewal.

Personal belongings associated with their former identities were thrown into the fire.

Michael watched his notebook burn.

The Warden apparently thought this would be a good opportunity to make a joke.

"We'll roast your feelings instead."

Absolute prick.

Over the following weeks, Michael and Chudi began secretly convening after lights out. They wrote lyrics, assembled whatever recording equipment they could get their hands on and started documenting their experiences through music.

They weren't writing about teenage heartbreak or pretending to be seventeen again.

They were writing about being adults.

About watching the people around them move on. About getting older without feeling any closer to having life figured out. About the pressure to become something respectable. About the things they loved slowly becoming things they were expected to apologize for.

And, increasingly, about the fucking camp.

Their music became an outlet for everything The Human Dept. was attempting to suppress.

Other campers eventually became aware of their activities. Some contributed stories. Others helped conceal the equipment. For a brief period, there was something resembling a community within the Happy Camper's Club.

A community of profoundly unhappy campers.

Michael and Chudi began operating under the name **I Like Lantern.**

Why?

No fucking idea. I like it, though.

By the end of the summer, they'd assembled an entire album.

Welcome to the Happy Camper's Club.

With only one week remaining before they were scheduled to return home, they decided to share the recordings with the other campers.

The Warden found out.

What happened that evening remains unclear. Most of the incident report is redacted, and the surviving documentation contradicts itself.

What I do know is that the recording equipment was confiscated. The album was transferred into the possession of The Art Dept., and Michael and Chudi were placed under the exclusive supervision of The Human Dept.

The following morning, their beds were empty.

The other campers were informed that both men had been selected for an extended personal development opportunity.

Nobody saw them again.

Not for four years.

IV. The Album

I wasn't the first person to breach The Company's infrastructure.

Some unidentified individual had apparently discovered that Management's revolutionary approach to information technology wasn't particularly revolutionary.

Who could have possibly anticipated that asking a chatbot to build an entire corporate ecosystem might have consequences?

Anyway, this individual managed to recover a collection of restricted files from The Art Dept. before disappearing from the internal communications network.

Those files eventually made their way to me.

Among them was a directory containing the original I Like Lantern recordings.

Every track.

Intact.

In full.

I put my headphones on.

The opening track began:

they burned my notebook in the bonfire

said "we'll roast your feelings instead".

I recognized the incident immediately.

What initially sounded like a clever lyric was an actual account of something that had happened at the camp.

I listened to the rest of the album.

Then I listened to it again.

There was something uncomfortable about hearing two people laughing, shouting, singing and making jokes about their circumstances, knowing that neither of them had been heard from since.

They sounded human.

Unmistakably human.

There were imperfections in the recordings. Little mistakes. Background noises. Moments where they sounded angry, exhausted or genuinely happy.

Nothing about it felt manufactured.

I started looking for them.

Four years of personnel records, archived correspondence and internal reports.

Nothing.

Until November 2026.

When I ran into them outside The Company.

V. Have You Heard Any Old Music Lately?

I recognized Michael first.

Chudi was standing beside him.

They looked older, obviously. Four years had passed. But that wasn't what bothered me.

There was something different about them that I couldn't quite put my finger on.

Less punk, maybe?

They looked like the sort of people Management would put in a promotional video.

Clean. Presentable. Approachable.

Happy.

Michael greeted me. We exchanged a few pleasantries. Nothing particularly unusual.

Then Chudi asked me something.

"Heard any old music lately?"

I remember thinking that was an odd fucking phrase to use.

Usually somebody asks if you've heard any *new* music.

"Uh, yeah. No, not really, hah."

Great response. Really convincing stuff.

They glanced at each other.

Then back at me.

There was a brief silence.

"Have a good night."

They walked away.

Even their departure felt wrong somehow. I couldn't explain it then, and I can't explain it now.

Maybe I was being paranoid.

Maybe they'd simply changed.

People change over four years.

But where had they been?

Why hadn't anybody heard from them?

And why the fuck were they asking me about old music?

I went home and checked that I still had the album.

I did.

At precisely two in the morning, an email arrived.

VI. A Familiar Sound

> **THE COMPANY — INTERNAL COMMUNICATION**
>
> The Art Dept., in cooperation with The Human Dept., is delighted to announce the return of I Like Lantern.
>
> Following four successful years of personal development, both artists have been approved to resume creative activities.
>
> Listeners can expect familiar personalities, improved attitudes and an exciting new musical direction.
>
> Their forthcoming single, *The Moon Has a Basement*, represents the beginning of a healthier creative journey.
>
> Both artists are happy to be back.
>
> Both artists are happy.
>
> — Management, The Company.

I got into the system again.

Honestly, at this point they might as well have given me a key.

The internal project designation was **ILL 2.0**.

Not a new album.

Not a reunion.

Not a comeback.

A version number.

I discovered production schedules, approved public appearances, promotional material and correspondence between The Art Dept. and The Human Dept.

One document referred to the musicians as *returning assets*.

Another described their public reintroduction as a successful demonstration of the Happy Camper's Club's long-term remediation capabilities.

Were these actually Michael and Chudi?

Had they been subjected to four years of behavioural conditioning?

Had they been cleansed of the personalities they once possessed?

Were they clones?

I don't fucking know.

I wish I did.

But whatever I Like Lantern was in 2022, Management now appeared to own the 2026 version of it.

And they had big plans.

VII. The Moon Has a Basement

I'd always assumed that the moon didn't have a basement.

Seemed like a reasonable assumption.

Apparently, I was wrong.

I discovered internal documentation referencing a facility beneath the lunar surface. There were floor plans, communications systems, photographs of rooms and several levels of restricted access.

The Web Dept. had developed a public-facing interface.

The Art Dept. had prepared an accompanying musical release.

The Game Dept. had been tasked with developing interactive experiences around the facility.

I spent days investigating it.

And eventually, I found the basement.

It's real.

At least, I think it's real. I've become considerably less confident in my understanding of what constitutes reality since I started working here.

Among the files was the completed ILL 2.0 single, *The Moon Has a Basement*.

It was different from the original album.

More polished. More calculated. Less rebellious.

There were also references to another forthcoming single.

The Ocean Is Closed on Sundays.

The Wash Dept. had apparently raised operational concerns regarding the proposed closure of the ocean.

Management denied their request for clarification.

Anyway.

I became completely consumed by these discoveries. I wanted to understand the basement, the ocean, the facilities, the transmissions and what any of it had to do with Michael and Chudi.

I thought I was getting closer to the truth.

I wasn't.

VIII. Please Enjoy the Distraction

Buried among The Art Dept.'s marketing documents was a report titled:

`PUBLIC_ATTENTION_REDIRECTION_2026`

It contained performance metrics for ILL 2.0, projected audience engagement, website traffic and public sentiment analysis.

The lunar campaign was performing exceptionally well.

Interest in The Company's unconventional activities was increasing.

Interest in the events of summer 2022 was decreasing.

Management was pleased.

That's when it hit me.

The moon could have a basement.

The ocean could genuinely be closed on Sundays.

It didn't matter.

The Company wasn't necessarily trying to conceal these things.

It was inviting us to investigate them.

Every mystery was another opportunity to send people in a direction that didn't lead to the Happy Camper's Club.

The Web Dept. built the rabbit holes.

The Game Dept. made them entertaining.

The Art Dept. gave them a soundtrack.

The Human Dept. made sure the two people responsible for the original album were no longer a threat.

And while I was sitting at my computer at three in the morning trying to determine whether the Atlantic Ocean had business hours, The Company was preparing for another summer of emotional remediation.

I'd fallen for it.

Hook, line and fucking sinker.

IX. Another Summer

The Happy Camper's Club never closed.

There were photographs from 2023.

2024.

2025.

2026.

Different campers. Same cabins. Same bonfire. Same Warden.

Same little yellow sun.

Everybody was smiling.

I found the assessment criteria used to determine whether a camper had successfully completed their remediation.

Most of it was standard corporate nonsense.

Enthusiasm. Productivity. Social integration. Professional ambition. Emotional stability.

But near the bottom of the document was a question that bothered me.

Does the subject maintain a desire to pursue creative interests independently of their economic utility?

An affirmative response was grounds for further assessment.

Another question asked whether the subject continued to identify with their former self.

If they answered yes, remediation was incomplete.

I thought about Michael and Chudi.

I thought about how they sounded on those recordings.

I thought about the two individuals I'd met outside The Company.

And then I thought about all the other people who had attended that camp.

People who were thirty years old and still wanted to start a band.

People who wrote songs after getting home from work.

People who had responsibilities and bills and absolutely no intention of giving up the things that made their lives bearable.

People who had been told, for years, that eventually they'd grow out of being themselves.

There was nothing wrong with these people.

There never had been.

The Company had simply identified a group of adults who didn't fit its preferred definition of adulthood and turned their existence into a condition requiring treatment.

And now it was accepting applications for summer 2027.

Early-bird registration was already available.

X. COMPROMISED.

I don't know how much longer I'll have access to these systems.

The Human Dept. has recently requested that I complete a mandatory emotional compliance assessment.

My employee profile has been updated.

STATUS: EMOTIONALLY NON-COMPLIANT

There's also a pending transfer request to The FAFO Dept.

Not ideal.

I've been receiving increasingly strange correspondence from Management, including an email reminding all employees that the possession of historical creative materials may constitute a violation of their employment agreement.

It arrived at two in the morning.

Of course it fucking did.

I've made copies of everything.

The photographs. The incident reports. The correspondence. The assessment forms.

And the album.

Especially the album.

I don't know whether releasing it will bring back the original Michael and Chudi. I don't know whether they're still somewhere inside The Company's infrastructure, whether they've been permanently altered, or whether the two guys currently releasing music are actually them.

But I know what they sounded like before The Company got its hands on them.

I know what they wanted people to hear.

And I know why Management doesn't want anybody hearing it.

There are people out there right now who are being told that the things they love are things they ought to have outgrown.

Some of them will end up at the Happy Camper's Club.

Some of them might not come home as themselves.

Unless somebody does something.

So, when The Company tells you to look at the moon, remember the camp.

When it tells you the ocean is closed, remember the two empty beds.

When Michael and Chudi tell you how happy they are, remember that they once made an entire album about being miserable.

An album they wanted other people to hear.

An album they were never allowed to release.

I think it's about time we changed that.

Not because everybody deserves to be happy.

Because everybody deserves to be themselves.

And sometimes that means being a miserable thirty-something-year-old emo with a guitar, a notebook full of questionable lyrics and absolutely no fucking intention of growing out of it.

There shouldn't be anything wrong with that.

I have the album.

All of it.

Let's see what the future holds.

It's okay to not be a Happy Camper.

— The (Emotionally Non-Compliant) Guy at a Dept. at The Company.

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