

Cringe Magazine

It's not taboo, it's real.

Issue 2, Winter '25

From the Editor

Welcome back. Last summer, when we first started this magazine, we had to laugh at ourselves. Who reads magazines these days anyway? Apparently, you do. Our first issue ran out of print, and as word of mouth spread and we got our first set of reader responses, it became clear that we are a voice that people want to hear.

Cringe is about things that make people uncomfortable. But these are the very things that people wonder and are secretly fascinated about. These are the thoughts we have when we are alone. Nowadays, there is so much information available online, but a lot of it is artificial, airbrushed, or polished to the point of perfection. Cringe is *real, raw, from the source. Nothing that is true is taboo.*

We aim to be true to our roots and keep things the way they used to – in paper. For now, we will stick to a limited worldwide publication. Please tell your friends to subscribe (details at the back).

The winter chill has had us thinking morbid thoughts. We've uncovered a suicide note from a plant manager in China. We are extremely grateful to John Speedman's wife, Sarah, for sharing it with us as a reminder of the plight of American blue-collar workers who have relocated to developing countries. Our globe-trotting work columnist, Liz Harris, continues to report on the lives that people lead at work, this time on the world's oldest profession. Finally, we take a look at some people who are asking the question that everyone is afraid to ask these days – will we all be out of jobs?

In the meantime, sit back and enjoy reading about the lives of people on the verge.

Best,
Rashida Lewis
Editor-in-chief

Nowhere But Out

On April 26, 2024, Sarah Speedman walked into the bedroom she shared with her husband John in Dongguan, China, and found him lying on the floor, a bullet shot through his mouth. She also found this suicide note on their bed.

My dear S,

I'm sorry that I had to go this way. I know what you're thinking – why would I ever think of doing this? How about Michael and Bella? How about you? Don't you worry honey. I've taken care of everything. Atty. Chau will contact you shortly. Everything will be all right. I've saved enough money to take care of you and the kids for long time.

You see, I'm tired honey. Really, really tired. Tired of the life we're living here in Dongguan. I know it was my idea too to move to China from Ohio. I know that there are no jobs for people like me in the United States anymore. It just seemed like a good, clean break, you know? Everyone was leaving anyway. It was either leave or keep waiting for months to get another job while our bills piled up. I know we both tried, but those jobs at the wind turbine factories and photovoltaic plants never did last very long. So much for the Green Revolution! We knew it wouldn't work but no one listened. All this mumbo jumbo about green jobs helping the economy... when we should have paid attention to what happened to Spain!

What's good for the environment is good for the economy, they said. Well that is the biggest lie ever told. You don't have to be a genius to figure that out. It's common sense. Wind power, the most popular form of renewable power, is at least twice as expensive as coal power. Of course! Factor in maintenance and building costs to hook those windmills up and your costs go up. And how about those biofuels that consume more energy than they produce? They haven't perfected that technology yet but the government insists on repowering the country with these renewable resources. Their solution? Government subsidies. And whose money are those subsidies coming from? You guessed it, all the poor American workers are paying higher taxes in order to create these jobs. But something can't be had for nothing.

Of course, the sad part is that we could see it coming. We were fine for the first five years, until the money dried up and the subsidies stopped and the plants were forced to close down their operations and relocate to China, where they could keep their costs down. And what would I do then? How could we afford to have me go to college, take up one of those shiny new environmental courses that will not land me a job anyway, just like millions of other Americans like me. No, you were right, there was no place for us in America. Here in China they're sensible enough to know that coal is still the most economically effective means of power. Here, they care about lowering costs and maximizing profits, and it's good for their economy and for us too.

At least here in China, I can manage a plant and not worry where my next paycheck will come from, and you can keep getting paid teaching English to our neighbors. At least we have a house and you don't have to worry about foreclosure. The kids seem to be adjusting well in high school. I never thought that Michael would do so well, but look where he is now. Who would have thought he would be class president? And Bella... she is so beautiful, our daughter. She looks exactly like her mother.

And you have always been beautiful, and still are to this day. You look so happy organizing all those parent teacher parties in school. All the parties you throw here at home, those wine glasses your mother handed on to us after we got married that you said we never had an occasion to use – now it seems there's always an occasion! You are the belle of the ball, my dear. You are a star, no doubt about it.

But me – I don't belong here. In fact, I don't know where I belong anymore. Not in America, where there is no need for people like me. And yes, not here either. I'm glad I was able to build a life for us here, but the truth of the matter is that I'm not happy. Even after all these years, I still feel like a foreigner. At work, they think I don't understand their Chinese, but I do – they think I'm a white sonofab*tch who's come out of nowhere and are telling them what to do. I can try to be like them, but I'm not and will never be. And all these young teenagers... they tell the public that they've since improved working conditions in Dongguan, but they pay people like me big bucks to shut up and tell the media that everything is good and that those reports of physical abuse and overwork are false. Of course people will listen to a guy like me. After all, wasn't it us Americans who started whining about work-life balance to begin with?

Sorry to keep ranting. Sorry for a lot of things, for the fact that I've been a mess these last two years. I'm sorry for my drinking, and sorry for not being with you during all those parties. I think that you're better off without me, and you and the kids will find a way to go on. My time has come. If you find me alive, please don't try to revive me and let me be. I am finally at peace.

Love, J

Xxx

The World's Oldest Profession Gets a Facelift

Liz Harris

Prague, Czech Republic - Nikki (not her real name), is packing her favorite Annick Goutal perfume in her small, black Samsonite spinner. Next destination: New York City. In her bag is the Next Generation Kindle, two chiffon dresses, sandals, shirts, and a pair of jeans. She's also packed a few Haruki Murakami books, dog-eared from reading. Her client: A popular Australian American virtual psychiatrist who lives in the Upper East Side.

"They call us whores, prostitutes, hos, whatever," Nikki says, "but we are really Experience Workers. Many people know this, but few will admit that they are stressed by the demands of the virtual workplace, and by the virtual world in general. They are forced to be more creative, produce more in less time, and this is all because work and life are no longer separate. So a lot of people want to be unplugged for awhile and relax." She is surprisingly articulate. "We are not vapid people here. I believe in what I do," she adds. "Men like to wine and dine me, but what they really want is someone to join them in experiencing life outside of Second Life." Her client is an avid fan of Murakami, and she'd spent the last week reading Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*, and claims she's become a fan herself, after reading *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*. Her client needs a break. "He's a psychiatrist but he needs a shrink himself. I'm like his psychiatrist. He says there are many more freaks online than in the real world."

Although she lives in Prague, Nikki belongs to a worldwide club called Unplugged, an escort service that caters exclusively to clients from the wealthy and powerful. Only on its third year of operation, Unplugged started on a shoestring budget but now has projected yearly earnings of \$25 million. Unplug's owner, Lola Gunn, attributes the company's success to market conditions and the quality of her employees. Gunn says that they are offering a unique service. "It's entertainment at its best," she claims. "We offer not just physical but intellectual and emotional stimulation. There is nothing like satisfying one's actual senses. Nothing tops it, not even the best virtual creation." She says that her business proposal got scoffed at, despite the fact that laws against prostitution have been relaxed around the world and was told repeatedly that the escort service industry was dying - people had since taken their pleasures online.

Hearing Gunn's personal story, one would not wonder how she ended up in this business. Ivy league educated, born to wealthy parents in New Hampshire, Gunn was "traditionally married - I mean married in the real world" to a venture capitalist. Things turned sour when her ex-husband started spending much of his time online, and although they had a deal that "what happens online stays online", her husband told her one night that he had fallen in love with someone he had never met physically but had regularly collaborated with on Second Life. He wanted a divorce. Gunn regularly plugs herself in Second Life,

but says that the virtual world “has now become the real world – full of stress, problems, and bad things. It used to be an escape. Now it’s something we need to **escape** from.”

She was devastated, but now says that without this painful experience, Unplugged would never have been born. “We need to become people again, to experience life as flawed, wonderful, breathing human beings”, she says. “Nowadays it is not uncommon for someone to be working 20 hour days in the virtual world. Because there are less physical limitations, because you can create more, there are more expectations. When Senator Michelle Obama proposed her Work-Life balance bill, people laughed. There is no such thing as work-life balance anymore, only work-life integration. Technology has just enabled us to work even harder than before.”

Unplugged hires men and women out of college or graduate school, and Gunn herself interviews them to make sure that they are a fit. Because she offers competitive compensation, and believes in a ROWE (Results Oriented Work Environment) where her employees just need to keep at least 10 regular clients throughout the year, competition to get into Unplugged has increased during the last year. In addition, her employees get something that few other companies now offer – a chance to really enjoy life. “They go wine-tasting, they try the zip line in Costa Rica, or ski in the Alps – how many people get the chance to do that these days, as part of their jobs? People have become boring. We need to get them out of their homes.”

Preparing for the End

Automation, hyper competition and crowdsourcing, AI: we be out of a job sooner than we think.

Sloane Williams

Bank Phillips has been saving money and hoarding goods for the past five years. In his Southern California basement lie rows and rows of canned goods, vitamins and over the counter pills, bottled water and clothes. He's prepared to withdraw his 401k even if he is penalized. Bank thinks that, "assuming there will be a reliable water source nearby," he has enough food to last him a year – free, and enough money to last him "maybe 10 years" while the government figures out how to provide for people like him. Call him paranoid, but maybe Bank is right to be worried, and most of us probably would need to – we could be out of a job soon, never to work again.

The Industrial Revolution introduced mass labor, and the Information Age introduced specialization and knowledge workers. Technological advances since then have created robots to automate the most menial tasks. Nowadays, people like Phillips (a software developer) earn their living by taking part in crowdsourcing projects. What Phillips is finding is that the crowd is getting bigger, and he is getting a smaller piece of the pie. "So many people out there are willing to give out services at such a low rate that it's a wonder that companies even pay for anything anymore," he says. "Fifteen years ago, we were worried about things like workplace flexibility and work life balance. Companies took stock and realized that they did not need to keep up with the grievances of permanent employees and started hiring contractors instead to increase profits. Freelancing became a norm. But now there are so many talented software developers, and with the minimum jobs available to humans and not ferreted out to robots, you bet that there's always a bidding war for the brightest talent at the lowest cost." He adds that soon, work, as we know it, will be free.

It's a dark future that we can picture all too clearly, but some of us choose to be optimistic. Karen Spencer, another software developer, disagrees with Phillips. "There will always be something humans can do that cannot be replicated by AI," she opines. "We are creators. Our creativity, our passions, our empathy – none of these can come from non-human forms." And how about the so-called Hubots, those robots that have been designed to show and experience true emotions? Spencer bristles at the thought. "These are merely simulations of the actual human emotions. And besides," she adds, finally relenting, "the government will take care of us... somehow."