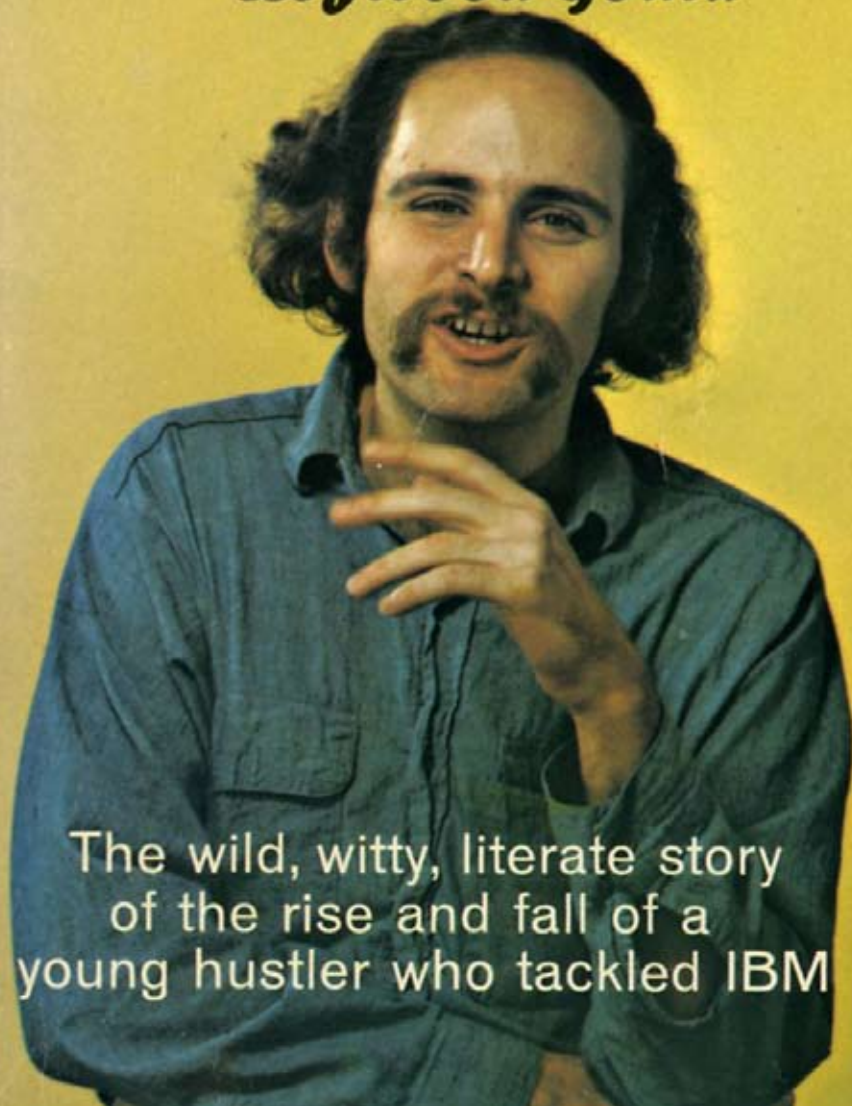# Corporation Freak

Heywood Gould

The wild, witty, literate story
of the rise and fall of a
young hustler who tackled IBM

Cool, Merciless,
Super Smart—

THE CORPORATION FREAK

This is a witty, wise and brilliantly funny true record of what happens when a hopeful young revolutionary invades the corporate jungle. The pay was generous, the work easy, and his colleagues decent at the Advanced Systems Development Division of IBM— America's technocratic giant. So why did Heywood Gould leave? And why do so many of the country's brightest and most creative young people reject corporate enticements? Was the corporation freak really an undercover provocateur working from within to undermine the system, or was he genuinely interested in the subtle distinctions of office size and executive comportment? When the comfortable crewcut ensconced within IBM's maternal walls confronts the hairy individualist-hustler at the water cooler, on coffee breaks, at top-level closed circuit TV meetings, and around the sexy secretary's desk, verbal bombs explode into one of the zaniest and most enjoyable reading experiences of today.

Corporation Freak
HEYWOOD GOULD

TOLMITCH PRESS

PROLOGUE

In the spring of 1968, I was hired as an audio-visual consultant by the Advanced Systems Development Division of IBM. My assignment was to write the scripts and design the visuals for a series of filmstrips that would be part of a very futuristic computerized educational system. The fee was generous, the work tolerable, and all my colleagues decent and dedicated. But after six months as a member of the corporate technocracy I fled the high pay and perquisites vowing never to return.

The circumstances that led to the formation of this drastic resolve were neither tragic nor oppressive. I did not find IBM an Orwellian horror; if anything it more than lived up to its reputation as a concerned corporation. Its employees were obsessively sincere, and with a few exceptions, quite humorless; but they certainly weren't hopelessly downtrodden. Neither were they quite as secure as IBM'ers are supposed to be. They cloaked their anxieties in a kind of cynical anomie that is quite fashionable among corporate employees, the coffee break pessimism of men who are ashamed of their ambitions and ill will.

In spite of the vapid benevolence of the IBM environment, the comfortable salaries, the extravagant benefits and the priggish sense of destiny which pervades the organization from the top down, I found the relationship between the corporate entity and its employees quite frightening. I emerged with the simplistic but inescapable conclusion that large organizations which employ many people to perform diverse functions are unnatural entities. The maddening absurdity of their internal machinations numbs the spirit, cripples the intellect and distorts the moral sense of their employees. The fulfillment of the individual and the success of the organization are irreconcilable. One must profit at the other's expense, even in the case of IBM where both extend themselves to accommodate each other.

In retrospect, I realize that there was no better place to be in the spring of 1968 than the sprawling, one-story fluorescent maze that was the Advanced Systems Development Division. Outside, the country was going mad. Columbia University was overrun, Eugene McCarthy was trying to make up his mind, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy met their fate in the same irrational manner that hundreds of thousands of Americans met theirs that spring. Summer came and the riots at the Chicago convention forced honest citizens to choose between two equally repugnant brands of lunacy; bras were burned; acid was dropped; the Great Sexual Revolution was everywhere, but no one could find it. Pundits of the left issued daily jeremiads that the arrogant Empire of Amerika was in its death throes. Liberals called for a dialogue. Rhetoricians of the right were mute with rage. They gasped and reddened, unable to speak. Their candidate, a slouching, sweating, lachrymose failure, who had been

driven from public life six years before, rode back into town on his spavined nag called "experience" and promised to save their world. Nobody believe him, nobody liked him. He won by a landslide.

It stayed cold through March and early April that spring. It is a delicate and perhaps pointless irony that as the spring sun reasserted its primacy over the frozen earth in the process of rebirth that has long been our most stirring poetic metaphor, a wintry siege of blood and pessimism laid on the land. At IBM, home of eternal hibernation, we knew nothing of the change in seasons. The newspapers were frightening, but television gives catastrophe such a homey tinge, and besides, we all had the evidence of our own lulled senses to disprove the cries of doom. Business was booming as usual; the IBM 360 is impervious to human tragedy. Tedium reigned supreme. Our employer (affectionately dubbed International Big Mother by its happy muzhiks) saw to it that our composure wasn't disturbed. There were bomb shelters in the basement, security police by all the doors, piles of Hershey bars and peanut butter and cheese crackers in the vending machines. In a conflagration of any sort there can be no better place than IBM. When the Apocalypse finally comes I plan to hie to the nearest branch and demand sanctuary.

Why then did I find myself going slowly, irretrievably insane within IBM's maternal walls? My friends congratulated me on my good fortune, my colleagues seemed adequately adjusted

to their plight. None of them could understand my vision of the nightmarish near future that the example of IBM so clearly indicated. For a while I felt like a man running frantically about screaming "FIRE" while everyone else sits absorbed in their newspapers. Something in me was violently repelled by what I saw and did at IBM. I went to work there infatuated with the idea of becoming a power in the communications industry. Nine months later I left in an overwrought, prophetic state, vowing to stay away from such lucrative, painless jobs at the cost of languishing in direst poverty, a vow I have kept to the astonishment of everyone, especially myself. Am I a madman or just a corporation freak? That is a sincere question, not a song title. I shall now attempt to reason my way through my experience at IBM to an answer.

"A sucker is born every minute,
but there aren't enough hustlers
to keep up with the population
explosion."

<div align="right">--P. J. Patchouli</div>

A HUSTLER IS BORN

I grew up in the Fifties. The thirty-odd million people who shared that experience now know all there is to know about me. For the benefit of those who didn't and don't, I'll continue.

The Fifties weren't lively, but they were distinctive. Flat-chested spinster schoolteachers frightened their charges with threats of murderous North Koreans crawling stealthily down the tree-lined streets of America. There was a President who said, "I don't know about that," instead of, "I want to make this very clear." The counter-culturists wore flannel shirts, drank wine and dug Bird and Dylan (Thomas, not Zimmerman). Herbert Philbrick was a hero, not a pig. Joe McCarthy was the Demagogue of the Decade. He was a much purer soul than Spiro, the current titleholder. You would never catch him on the golf course with a known communist like Bob Hope. It was white bucks and butch haircuts versus leather jackets and elaborate pompadours, which we in New York used to call Tony Curtises, Rheingold versus Bud, Abbott and Costello versus the Wolfman. Boys couldn't wait to get their draft cards so they could swagger into neighborhood bars for a drink. Girls paraded the streets with pin curls in their hair under the impression that they looked sexier that way.

It was the decade of the urban street gang, Elvis Presley, I Love Lucy and Orval Faubus. Television was the culture machine, extruding fads once or twice a year. Boys were "cute," girls had "good personalities"; everybody went in the Army, got married and had kids. Davey Crockett was the King of the Wild Frontier.

I am a child of the Fifties. My boyhood heroes were Duke Snider, Hopalong Cassidy and Frankie De Carlo, one of the "big guys" in the schoolyard who was on his high school basketball team and always chose me to pick up games. In 1956, when I was fourteen, I read 1984, and was stunned as only an adolescent can be by a work of art. There was a biographical note in the back about Orwell. It was written by a man who had known him, and described his courageous losing battle against tuberculosis. I imagined Orwell, lean and intense, making self-deprecating jokes as he coughed blood into a handkerchief, and the slender, young girls, who always surrounded him, swooning with maternal sympathy. Henceforth, my only ambition was to become consumptive and haggard, spitting blood into a handkerchief. I wanted to become a writer too, but that was secondary. When I learned that Franz Kafka had also been a sick man, and Dostoevsky an epileptic, the die was cast. The plain, healthy boredom of my existence was an affront to the artist in me. I created a garret in my head, sparsely furnished, cold in the winter, hot in the summer with roaches and bad food and an abusive landlady. Next door there was an artist's model with a wracking cough, whom I would nurse back to health. Of course we never made love, my model and I. Sex was only conceivable with those older girls with tight skirts and sweaters whose vapid smiles and trivial chatter made my knees tremble with unhappy desire. My model and I just took turns getting sick and nursing each other back to health. First she ran her cool fingers over my fevered forehead, then I fed her soup

from the seemingly inexhaustible supply in my fantasy kitchen. That is a sample of Fifties romanticism, which died abruptly when Eisenhower blew the whistle on the "Military-Industrial Complex." I blame him for a lot more than that.

As a boy I was a liar and a cheat. Obviously, I'm not ashamed of this, or I wouldn't reveal it. I cheated in school, lied to my parents, teachers and friends. I made up stories about myself to enliven the terrible tedium of my background. When I was seventeen I had two sets of friends under two assumed names. I'm not blaming Eisenhower for any of this, of course. He was around at the time, but he would never have understood.

Sex was a big problem of the Fifties. One lusted from afar, in crowded subways, in the incredible concupiscence of an overheated classroom, at parties where the girls dressed up and never looked as sexy (there's a Fifties word) as they did in their everyday clothes. The most fleeting contact with any area of the female anatomy from the kneecap to the upper lip was productive of torrents of ecstasy. After dates and parties the boys would get together and compare notes.

"I copped a feel."

"Did you get bare tit?"

"No but I soul-kissed her."

"Frankie dry humped Diane in the schoolyard."

"Oh, I don't believe it. I don't believe it."

"He did. I swear."

"How come it's always the other guys who get lucky? How come it's never me?"

Perhaps the definitive metaphor for childhood and adolescence in the Fifties is the boy with his nose pressed to the candy store window, forlorn and sick with longing, wondering just

what he had to do to get inside. The Swinging Sixties smashed that window into a million tinkling pieces. It was no longer a question of becoming, but of what to do when you became. The pursuit of sexual gratification gave way to the search for "meaningful relationships." The anomie of affluence turned to desperation, and hundreds of new life-styles were born. Irreconcilable subcultures floated like globs of fat in the proverbial Melting Pot. We were all asking for trouble, and we got it.

Things happened quickly in the Sixties. I had scarcely shucked my coating of naiveté when I became jaded and cynical. I spent one year in college, nine months in Europe and four years dodging the draft. I worked by way from copyboy to reporter on a major New York newspaper, and after two years quit to finish a novel, which I hadn't started. I played poker, went to movies in the afternoon and got fat. Then I awoke, as if from a long, fitful snooze; Rip Van Winkle with a wife and a son. Wedding money, savings accounts and poker winnings were exhausted, and I had to become a provider. I bore the bourgeois burden as if I'd been doing it for years, but all the while I was scheming to beat the system. I became bitter and secretive. I lay awake nights going over every detail of my past life, trying to remember where I had gone wrong. My memories affronted me. I had lived in my imagination until it was no longer healthy to do so, and now I was facing reality. I needed the big score, but despaired of ever getting it. Then IBM came into my life.

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