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"A Faceless Corporation Has Stolen My Cheese."

Once upon a time, there were two humans and two mice who lived in a gigantic, magical maze with - oh, I don't know - maybe six billion other people; and, God knows how many mice.

The two humans were named Al and Fred. Every day of the week...well, every working day of the week...they had been leaving their homes to travel through the maze to jobs where they made cheese. But, they worked for different cheese makers. Al worked for Cheese Valley, a small, local cheese maker. Fred was a level 12 Cheese Ager for CheezKo, the cheese-making subsidiary of EatAmerica, Inc. -- a giant industrial corporation whose main concern has little to do with making cheese; and, a lot to do with producing stock dividends.

Both Al and Fred were very happy. They had been at their jobs for quite some time. They both knew how to make cheese like nobody's business!

Then, one day, Fred was called into a meeting at CheezKo. A man from Corporate in a really nice suit, without any bits of cheese on it, stood in front of all 800 employees. He used a laser pointer to explain the future. "We are going to crush all competition. We'll put every other cheese maker in this country out of business. And, when we do that, you all will get a special reward for your hard work."

"Hard work? What hard work," Fred thought? "I love making cheese, so it's never hard work." But, the man in the suit without any grated cheese on it, continued. "I say hard work, because those of you who are still working for us after today will be taking over for the 600 who are being let go. That mean's whoever is still employed at the end of the day will be doing four jobs instead of just one." There was a gasp -- then total silence. Fred had never heard the cheese factory so quiet. The man in the spotless suit smiled. "This is called 'maximizing efficiency.'"

The news spread fast. And, that night when Al got home from Cheese

Valley, he went next door to see Fred. "I'm sorry to hear about CheezKo," he said. Fred didn't have time to talk. "I've got to get to sleep so I can get up early and do what Jack and Alva did before I do what I do...and then do Grace's job." Al was shocked. "Did you get a raise?" Fred shook his head. "No, but they say the salary cut is only temporary...just until they can get the profits up."

Al felt badly for his friend and tried to console him. But, Fred said, "Don't feel bad for me. Pretty soon, you'll feel bad enough for yourself...after all of us at CheezKo put Cheese Valley out of business." Al went home that evening feeling very bad, indeed.

Weeks passed. Then, one day Al went to work at the little Cheese Valley factory like he had every working day for the last 15 years. But, there were no cars in the parking lot...no cheddar-smelling smoke coming out of the smoke stack. Mr. O'Brien, the owner of Cheese Valley was standing at the front door with a sickly smile on his face as he brushed at the cheesy residue on his suit's lapels. "Hi Al. I have some bad news." Al stopped short. "Bad news?" Mr. O'Brien plucked a larger strand of jack cheese from a spot near his Lions' Club pin and popped it in his mouth. "We've been put out of business by CheezKo."

Al went home and waited for his friend Fred to get back from work. He had a plan. "I'll talk to Fred about getting a job at CheezKo. After all. I have 15 years experience. And, I love making cheese. Maybe he can put in a good word for me." Fred came home very early that day and saw Al on his front porch. "Hi Al. I heard about Cheese Valley. I'm sorry."

Al put on his brave face. "It's just business, Fred. But, I was wondering, could you put in a good word for me at your factory. I love making cheese and I have 15 years experience!"

Fred fumbled for the keys to his front door. "I'm out of work too, Al. Cheezko is going to make cheese in a different country." Al couldn't believe what he was hearing. Fred kept looking for his keys. "Looks like both of us won't be making any cheese -- ever again." But Al wasn't ready to let it go. "I don't believe that. I'll be in the cheese again. You'll see."

And so, they went their separate ways. Al went out into the maze every day and looked for new ways to make the cheese. But, he came home every

day more frustrated than the day before. Meanwhile, Fred was going out into the maze every day, too. But, because he knew how big corporations worked...he decided on a different way to make the cheese. He went to a computer school -- where he could learn new skills so he could find the right part of the maze where people were still making cheese.

And, you know, they both succeeded. Fred became a highly skilled member of the new society. He's now working out of his family room -- selling foreign cheeses on-line on ebay. As Fred says: "This year, with a little luck, my wife will get a raise at her job in the mall -- and we might get to keep our house!"

Meanwhile, Al found a way to remain close to the cheese he loved -- without retraining. Every day, he puts on a paper hat and see-through plastic gloves and can be found at a nearby hamburger chain placing a slice of foreign-made American cheese on a Brazilian-grown hamburger...for one fourth of what he used to make.

The two mice I mentioned at the beginning of this story? They're fine. Actually, they have nothing to do with any of this.