

## Free Printer

In the designated give away corner of the apartment's laundry room, waits a chunky, jet black printer. Forgotten plastic glistens beneath the sheen of dust beckoning. Exhausted from the trek home, Nina shepherds a bulging basket of lab coats and clothes into an empty washer. Leaning against the shut door, water churning, the sign in the corner catches her eyes. For closer inspection, she peels off the tape and reads the handwritten letters: *Brand new black ink*.

Only a month into her lease, Nina hesitates wondering if someone really intended the printer be taken. Perhaps, instead, the printer is a communal item similar to the portable clothing racks in the laundry room. Swearing to monitor the room for signs the printer was unjustly rehomed, she scoops the hulking machine into her arms and takes the stairs two at time to her fourth floor dwelling.

Crisscross on the convincing fake wood floor of her apartment, she inspects the machine for the slight that caused the previous owner to discard the hunk. Instead, surprised she finds the top swings open like a jaw to reveal a scanner. Stretching, Nina grabs the lengthy black cord curled behind the printer like a tail and plugs the teeth into the outlet.

Time: 00:00

Date: 00/00/0000

[WIFI: no signal. Error: Low levels of yellow ink.]

Whirring and purring like a small cat on her floor, the printer boots up. Quickly, she dismisses the low ink level warning and proceeds. Yellow is worthless in the ink world. Excited for her ownership to be official, she sets the date and time on the glowing square screen and gives the printer access to wifi. Her laptop and printer now on the same network, Nina sends part of a research article to print. She feeds it paper, and a tray pops out where three warm pages in black ink are birthed into her waiting palms.

Time: 22:56

Date: 22/11/2022

[WIFI: strong. Print job: Three pages. Black and white. Error: Low levels of yellow ink.]

Beautiful. For a free printer found in her apartment's laundry room, she cannot hope for more.

After a month, she buys new paper at Wal-Mart. Sheet after sheet flies out of the printer; Nina prefers to read on paper as opposed to her screen. She reads sprawled across her bed or stretched across two bus seats. The glossy pages are a luxury in her medical school minimalist life. In the future, after four years of school and several more consumed by late shifts and debit, she'll live the dream. Until then all she has is this box of an apartment and a printer. So she prints recklessly. 10 page document? Print. A diagram she could fill out on the screen? Print. A PDF she might never read? Print. Print. Print.

Each time the machine hums to life, she gets a thrill. If she can print, she can do anything. Fuck the university printers. Seven cents a page is expensive. Every time paper spills from its maw, she must decline to replace the yellow ink. The printer rolls its brushes at her rejection. Another time. It's not like she needs yellow ink for her black and white pages.

Until one morning, Nina's running late. Her bowl of oatmeal burns her fingers as she sends another research article to her printer. Maybe, it's because Nina is looking at the bus schedule when she opens the printer, or maybe it's the burn that causes her numb finger tips to slip but somehow when the printer asks her to replace the ink she hits Proceed instead of Cancel. Confused as to why the printer is telling her to open the lid, she tries to go back. The machine won't obey. Frantically, she holds down the power button willing it restart.

Time: 08:45

Date: 23/01/2023

[Yellow ink empty. WIFI: strong]

Immediately, the printer halts her, bleating before the display darkens to reveal:

Yellow ink cartridge empty.

Proceed to replace cartridge.

The cancel button greyed out. Proceed the only option. Frustrated, Nina tries to escape, punching the hollowed shadow of the cancel button regardless. Taunting, the printer holds her research article hostage. When she ignores the question, the printer spins and bings: Cancelled print job. This time the printer doesn't respond to the power button, so she yanks the cord. The screen blinks, shocked, and goes out. The damn printer will listen to her.

"Fucking machine." She shoves the prongs back into the socket. Her glare penetrates the side of the hulking machine; however, the moment the printer stops rumbling the screen displays:

Yellow ink cartridge empty.

Proceed to replace cartridge.

"No one has touched the yellow ink." Nina screams, alone in her apartment. She's only ever printed in black ink. Her curled fingers hit the printer in a jolting movement, but besides the screen flickering once, there is no change:

Yellow ink cartridge empty.

Proceed to replace cartridge now.

Her hand forced, she hits proceed. Like an unpracticed surgeon, Nina follows the printer's cartoon drawings for performing a cartridge-ectomy. Along the seam, she pries open the top and stares into a belly of gears and screws. Nails like scalpels, she extracts the supposedly empty yellow ink. The printer expects a transplant. Nina believes in the placebo. She shakes the container as if it's a vile of blood, then harshly blows along its edges, hoping dust obscures the reading of the cartridge. Without precision, she jams the organ into place and drops the flap closed.

Inside, parts clunk and spin, assessing the surgeon's alterations. The printer isn't fooled for a second.

Time: 09:12

Date: 23/01/2023

[Yellow Ink Empty. WIFI: strong. Nice try]

Class forgotten, a quick Google search reveals helpful tips for dealing with the stubborn machine. She begins with her laptop, uninstalling and reinstalling the drivers for the printer. Annoyed, she waits.

The crazy part? Nothing about the ink levels have actually changed. The printer just believes they've changed. It's a matter of will not truth. When the drivers fail, she alters the settings on the computer to recognize the printer as only black and white.

The pages send, cued in the printer's line, and Nina allows herself to hope. The machine buzzes, but rejects. The printer knows its full colour abilities. Pushing away from her laptop, she kneels in front of the printer like a sinner praying for forgiveness. It makes no difference to the machine, and Nina knows it.

Lips pursed, Nina resolves to be her own God. Insisting to herself that the issue must be solved at the root. Changing things on the laptop would never work because the laptop is not the issue. Surveying her options, she switches between the different screens the printer offers. All of them equally unhelpful. Stupid printer was fine only yesterday. Desperately, madness only a step away, she repeats herself expecting different results.

Time: 09:45

Date: 22/01/2023

[Yellow Ink EMPTY. WIFI: strong. Cancelled print job: five pages. Black and white]

Time: 09:47

Date: 22/01/2022

[YELLOW INK EMPTY. WIFI: strong. Cancelled print job: five pages. Black and white. Just replace the ink]

Nina goes nuclear. Confusion and disorientation are her game. If the ink levels have not changed – and they haven't – then it is mental. She thinks about hitting it like she should the books. Instead, she takes the date and time. Then the wifi. Anything to reset the printer to its prior settings that allowed her to blissfully ignore the dried yellow ink levels. The printer will cave.

Time: 00:00

Date: 00/00/0000

[YELLOW INK EMPTY. WIFI: no signal. Cancelled print job: five pages. Black and white]

Blinded to date, time, and outside connection, still it refuses to produce in flesh the documents on Nina's USB. But if Nina wants to scan something she's more than welcome. All of the printer's non-printing options remain at her disposal. If date or time does not give the printer bearing for ink replacement she must determine what does. A search reveals the possibility of either the ink cartridge counting and betraying (the bastard) how much is "left" or the printer (the control freak) is flashing bright light into the cartridge's bowels each boot up until the ink levels lower enough that the light bounces back.

Once more Nina and her false pretenses prep for surgery. Warily, the printer grants her access to its inner recesses. She gouges out the yellow cartridge, but after flipping it finds no tiny reset button for the cartridge's memory. At the cartridge's bottom, however, a small see-through square shows dark yellow ink as if someone didn't drink enough water and went for a piss. INK! The cartridge, as Nina long suspected, is not empty. The fucking liar. She tapes a dark square of construction paper over the plastic body then shoves the ink back in place.

The printer sputters and churns for minutes. It's not enough.

Time: 00:00

Date: 00/00/0000

[MANIPULATED YELLOW INK EMPTY. WIFI: no signal. Cancelled print job: five pages. Black and white. Stupid Bitch]

Tired, she abandons the crying printer on her floor and catches a bus to the university to pay seven cents a page. Alone, the printer blinks and winks in the dark of her apartment, nursing a wound that remains untreated.

In the coming days, not once does it cross Nina's mind to buy yellow ink. Instead, each day as assignments are finished, essays written, she takes the early bus, pockets loaded with coins and prints at a non-confrontational printer in the university's library. This printer is a pale grey and never complains about ink levels, but it always wants her money. Sometimes, she cuts through lawns to make it from the library to class on time. At night, she sits up at her laptop and reads documents on dimly glowing screens until her eyes water and back hurts from her desk chair. You don't choose the thug life the thug life chooses you.

A month later, Nina realizes she can buy ink. The price for ink is equally as ridiculous as paying seven cents a page (no discount even when you print double sided). The sum an impossible number to have exactly – pennies stopped existing before Nina got her first job. Not that the little machines would even recognize pennies if she slipped them in. The stupid thing doesn't even know what nickels and dimes are. Pennies would fry its circuit.

Shipping included, the lone yellow ink cartridge costs \$26.59. The cursor hovers over the "checkout" button. Nina could go without the ink. She could pay the university's prices; in the end that would be cheaper. In the end, Nina could live with the annoyances of university printing. Early buses, carrying change, all of it manageable. What really irks her is the printer's refusal to live up to its namesake. The balls on this machine to live in her apartment, surf her wifi – surely monitoring her futile internet searches about how to crack its code – staying one step

ahead of her, makes her want to tear the machine a new asshole and print the paper from there. One other time, when she first got the machine she searched for yellow ink out of curiosity and she wonders if the printer's stupid processor remembers that? If it hoped and longed and wanted her to proceed then. So now, if yellow ink is what it takes, she'll do it. If only to have won.

In two days, when Nina returns from school, a package has been shoved through the mail slot on her door. Jammed in earlier by the mailman, she tugs out the tiny box and carries it across the threshold. Using her nails, she slits the box open and pulls out the new cartridge. A blue hat covers the bottom and side of the thin strip that will unlock the printer once more. When she peels back the cap, she reveals the see-through bottom. The inky box is nearly completely black with only the slightest yellow tinge. Maybe the printer hadn't lied.

For the final time, the printer guides Nina through opening the crooked cover. She reaches for the old cartridge and finds it loose in its holster. Chucking the remains aside, she inserts the brand new ink completing the transplant. She expects sparks or magic to erupt from the printer when she seals it back up. Instead, the printer hums and purrs adjusting to the new addition. Compromising Nina gives the printer internet access again, but still withholds the date and time as they rebuild their trust. Buzzing, she sends in a single sheet.

Time: 00:00

Date: 00/00/0000

[WIFI: strong. Print job: One page. Black and white.]

Magnificently, without any hesitation, the tray opens and produces one page. Nina purses her lips, it's a stillborn. Every third line the letters are cut in half. Completely unreadable. A deep breath files into her lungs. This is not a problem. She remembers the printer's cleaning function from her expedition to trick the printer. Two presses later, the machine is whirring harder than ever before. Behind the scenes, the printer blows pressurized air across every cartridge. A moment for self care appreciated. Silence follows and Nina runs another test. Her stomach clenches as she reaches for the newly printed page. Every third line is still faded slightly, but ultimately, Nina considers it a win.

Vindicated, she stands and stares down at the plastic hunk, "Fuck you." Printing was a comfort again. No thanks to the printer in front of her who denied her all printing functions because one colour was out. Holding the brand new black ink hostage until its needs were met. Ridiculous, yet she had caved. Breaking the rule. Never negotiate with terrorists. And she had been terrorized. But no longer.

Returning to her laptop she sends the rest of the document she needs printed. \$26.59 was approximately 379 pages at the university's rate, but she felt priceless now.

Time: 00:00

Date: 00/00/0000

[Red ink empty. WIFI: strong. Cancelled print job: four pages. Black and white.]

No warning. No cancel option. No patience. Replace the cartridge now or never print again. It was a trap. There was a reason you didn't negotiate with terrorists because nothing would ever be enough. If you give into their demands once they know you'll do it again. And the printer just took a new hostage.

Nina sees red. Without consent, she rips open the top of the printer and forces the red ink out of its corner. Brutally, she flips it upside down and stares inside. Dark red ink stares back.

Nina unplugs the monster. In the laundry room, stealing a page from its tray, spots of dried red ink bleeding her fingers, she writes by hand: *Brand new yellow ink*

She leaves out the words "free printer" on her sign. The machine doesn't deserve the title.