

A person is shown from the chest up, wearing a military-style olive green jacket with a high collar and multiple pockets. A red, glowing rectangular armband is visible on the person's left upper arm. The background is plain white.

# **BADGE OF HONOUR**

**BY ADAM SMITH**

## Badge of Honour

Philip woke up at 8:30 in a panic. His badge had gone from green to yellow over a day ago, and it was bound to turn red by the end of today. He knew he had to get out of his house to catch the vaccine clinic before 18:00 but he had a mountain of work to do. And he'd already been at it until around 3:30 last night.

Philip rolled out of bed and switched on his monitors. One for his data management job (shifting insurance files between remote servers), one for his telemarketing job (shilling for a diet pill), and one for his true passion: graphic design. It took all three to afford a place in the city, even a walk-in closet like his. He barely had enough money to have a little fun once in a while, but it was better than the country, where every house is separated by miles.

With his usual hyper-multitasking Philip juggled all three jobs between multiple cups of cheap coffee and the occasional protein bar. His skin was getting a little sallow, not just from the bad diet, but he had barely been outside in 2 weeks. He had to get done in time to catch the clinic.

It was 15:42 and not looking good. The data management was on auto-pilot, Philip's telemarketing quota was nearing 90%, but he was behind on a couple concepts for a client of the graphic design firm he worked for. He zoomed his supervisor, explaining how he was swamped but needed his booster ASAP. His supervisor was not moved, telling Philip he should have planned his time better, and that it's a full 48 hours from a green badge turning yellow until it turns red, plenty of time to find a clinic. Philip tried to explain his closest clinic was just a pop-up run out of a small storefront business with erratic unreliable hours, to no avail. He was going to have to work until it was done.

Philip was itching to fly out of his seat the first moment he could. He sent along the latest versions of his work, dutifully put on his gloves, goggles, and mask, and sped out the door. He rounded the corner of his building only to find the vaccine clinic was gone. The small business had closed its doors for good, and with it went the clinic.

With a not small tinge of panic Philip made straightaway for the subway to go to the massive vaccine clinic downtown. There was always a huge lineup, but it was open late and obviously you were not denied entry based on badge colour. People were looking warily at his yellow badge, which began to feel like it was burning a hole in his arm. He wanted to cover it up, but that would look even worse.

On the subway he managed to find a spot where he could casually block his badge from view. He felt momentary relief as he relaxed, knowing before long he would be at his stop and nothing could stop him getting to the clinic. Then the unthinkable happened: his badge turned red.

At first Philip tried to turn the badge further into the corner he was in, but the red light emitting from the badge was reflecting on the wall of the subway. Philip almost groaned aloud, then caught himself, and glanced around with thinly-veiled panic in his face. The man closest to him saw the red light leaking onto the wall from behind Philip's body. That's when the beeping began.

Apps that detect expired vaccination badges started going off all around Philip. As his face dropped into complete mortification, terrified people moved away from him, like he was a bomb about to explode. At the next stop, two armed guards in protective suits entered the subway car and escorted him off. Philip tried to explain he only just turned red, and that he's on the way to the vaccine clinic downtown, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. Red was red, whether it changed ten minutes ago or ten months ago.

Philip was truly panicked now. He needed to get downtown as fast as possible and it was going to be tough with a red badge. He knew to not even bother with a taxi or Uber. Philip asked his mother, but she had her bridge game the next day and couldn't risk the others getting infected. Philip explained that between how busy work was and how tight money was he had actually been fully isolated for just over two weeks, and he felt fine, there was no way he was sick, he had only been on the subway ten minutes. She just wasn't comfortable taking the risk.

Philip called his closest friend, begging for a ride. His friend was travelling next week and couldn't afford being in close proximity with a red badge this close to his leave date. Philip assured him he could get a PCR test before that time, and have documentation proving that while he was red he was not infected. His friend refused.

Philip took off on foot, but he was hungry and thirsty. He had not expected to get kicked off public transit, and had barely eaten a thing all day while trying to get his work done. He stopped at a large grocery store. They would not let him in. He stopped at the open window of a café. They wouldn't even let him order a sandwich to go. After a few more blocks he tried a small market, but they also rejected him. Philip was so desperate at that point he tried to ask some strangers if they would take his cash and buy him something. They took one look at this badge, peered at his outstretched hand as if the cash therein was radioactive, and walked along. Philip came to a tiny variety store, opened the door, and stopped to see if he was to be rebuffed. The owner saw his badge, smiled at him, and

welcomed him. Then he told Philip it would be double the price to shop there. Philip begrudgingly paid the inflated price and went on his way.

As he travelled Philip had to hear the incessant beeping of proximity alarms. Whether it was the sight of his red badge, or the sound of an alarm, the crowds of people on the street started to part from him like Moses and the Red Sea. Delirious from fatigue and lack of sleep, for a brief moment he looked up and was amused by this, realizing whether he stumbled left or right or sped up, people were reacting perfectly in sync with his movements. Very soon he caught the eyes of those people, and the look of fear they gave him put his eyes back on the ground, praying this would all be over soon.

It was getting late. The vaccine clinic was open long hours, but not all day, and the lineups were killer. Philip started to half jog the way there, but 60+ hours of remote working a week took its toll on one's cardio abilities. The growing stitch in his side was almost painful enough to distract him from the panic-ridden thoughts of what might happen if he missed his booster today.

The central vaccine clinic loomed in sight. Philip breathed a sigh of relief as he saw the entrance; it seemed the lineup was not so bad today. Until he rounded a corner and realized that due to the line getting so long it blocked a laneway the line had been severed, and the other  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the line was wrapped around the building. At least he was finally here.

Temporarily relieved, Philip lined up, ignored his aching legs, and passed the time thinking about nothing as much as he could. Dwelling on the pressure of his jobs, the fact his friends and family felt like mere acquaintances, and that there really was no sense of public trust or benefit of the doubt anymore, was not going to do him any good. He stared out into the street and did the best he could to let his mind drift as the line inched along.

Lost in a daze, Philip was about a dozen people away from the entrance to the clinic when they announced it was closing. They apologized, but volume was just too high and they had already stayed open an hour later than their regular hours and had to close. Philip was beyond crestfallen. He croaked and fell to his knees as the remaining stragglers of the line dispersed. A masked nurse looked at him with a brief moment of pity, then closed the doors and locked them.

Now Philip had no choice but to cover his badge. At night that red glared too brightly, a beacon of infectious threat shining in the night. Covering it was less conspicuous than letting it beam to all onlookers. Except suddenly the light started blinking brightly, flashing between red and white. Philip

did his best to cover it with his hand, but it was so bright his entire hand was glowing, the bones and veins silhouetted against the alternating light of the badge.

Across the street a man with three others yelled at Philip. Philip pretended not to hear and walked faster. The man yelled again, and with friends in tow pursued Philip. The man grabbed Philip from behind and yanked his arm around, asking him where he was going. Philip tried to slip away, but the man gripped him tighter, asking to see his badge. Philip said he didn't want any trouble, he just wanted to be left alone. He whimpered that as long as everyone social distances there's no problem. The man ripped Philip's hand off his badge and all four men gasped at the flashing red and white badge. They'd never seen a badge flash like that. Philip tried to explain he was merely late to get his booster, and that he'd just come from the vaccine clinic but after waiting for hours it closed before he could get jabbed. It mattered not.

Enraged, the man accused Philip it was because of people like him that everyone had to suffer. He and his friends proceeded to beat Philip to a pulp. They kicked his ribs, they punched his head, and they pulled aside their masks to spit in his face. A woman saw the thrashing and yelled out. The men took off as the woman came to help Philip. He was groaning and injured, bleeding on the sidewalk. The woman came to his side, asking if he was ok. Philip rolled over, she caught sight of his flashing badge, and her breath caught in her throat. She stood up, looked around to ensure no one was witnessing her, and then walked away from Philip, not turning a glance his way as she did, as if he never existed.

Philip lay on the ground for a while unmoving, blood slowly streaming out of multiple places on his body. He regained some lucidity and pulled out his phone, only to realize it had been crushed in the melee. He had a brief regret of not springing for more cloud data when he ran out a week ago.

Bleeding and broken, Philip dragged himself to a bench in a nearby park. He lay down, trying only to think of being first in line at the vaccine clinic in a few hours, and not about how he was going to explain to three different workplaces his likely absence in the morning. Wheezing and coughing, he lost consciousness.

In the morning two police officers looked down at Philip's dead body and his flashing badge. The first officer said, "Goddamn anti-vaxxers, always screwing it up for the rest of us." Philip's body was cremated virtually, his mother was the only viewer.

By Adam Smith, 21<sup>st</sup> Century