

PRESENTS

COMPANY POLICY

MID LVL MAG
SUMMER '22 FREE



Mid-Level Management Literary Magazine

Presents
"Company Policy"

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Note From Management

Workday, August 2022

Seattle, WA USA

9am-ish

Welcome to Mid-Level Management Literary Magazine. We are pleased you have accepted the position of consumer and are excited to have you on the team. We have high expectations of you in the coming months, but are confident you will meet and exceed all such benchmarks.

Before you begin, it has been brought to our attention that you had questions regarding “Company Policy”. We’d like to clarify these concerns for you:

- Policy is a drug. It is a bargain with an implacable spirit, an incubus we cannot deny. It is a force we must ward ourselves against. It is a potential that wreaks havoc.
- Policy is a gift. It reveals our deepest feelings, our kindness and mercy. It can be extended to those who suffer without expectation of return.
- Policy is a warning. It tells us everything that it is. It does not forgive. It does not heed.
- Policy is a mirror. It reflects our image, our sentiment, and ourselves. It is a boundary between flesh and emotion. It begs to be crossed; to end the dream.
- Policy is a comedy. It is the absurd, the inane, the hangman's noose filled with smiling faces.

We hope that this has resolved any remaining issues you may have. It should be understood that the above is strictly a summary and not meant to be inclusive of all definitions, intentions, or permutations.

When reading the following collection, management recommends you do so in order of presentation after this note. This will ensure the best experience.

Please enjoy “Company Policy”

- Management, Mid-Level Management Literary Magazine

Yoni Space

Yoni Space. That's the name of this weeklong workshop at which I play assistant. It's not some 1970's *Our Bodies, Ourselves* throwback, The Leader emphasizes, but "a modern harnessing of cosmic Yoni energy." She claims one can access said energy through veganism, burning sacred herbs (but eschewing drugs), essential oil therapy, manifestation, and—surprise—yoni eggs. She stresses the importance of gazing at yourself in the mirror each morning, liking what you see, and saying affirmations to like yourself even more. With her amber eyes and ability to look good with a shaved head, I imagine liking what she sees isn't particularly difficult. She demonstrates this in the mirror at the front of the room, her eyes dancing in their reflection as her disciples drink her in. Predictably, she pulls out her favorite platitude: "Nothing lasts forever," she intones, "but while I'm here on earth, I blossom into my best self." Blossom—she actually says that. Then she directs the group in a "dynamic" yoga practice and encourages participants to "let out any noises that need to be expelled" to make room for their "best selves." They don't hold back, mewling and moaning, and it's repulsive.

Each day, when these devotees lie down for their hour-long final meditation, The Leader lightly rouses those who have paid extra and shepherds them into the back office for private audiences. That she chooses to do this while they're in an impressionable state is no accident. During these meetings, she listens to them kvetch, and more often than not recommends the balm of her merch—essential oils, herb bundles, yoni eggs—sold via her website at exorbitant markups. She's always subtly hawking her bestselling book—that goes without saying. Some claim her powerful stare heals, as it bores into their souls. More like bores into their bank accounts. To her, steady eye contact means money.

At the beginning of the week, she bestows Crystal Names upon the participants. This provides them with a source of pure energy to meditate on, she says—what she doesn't say is that it serves to distinguish them from her. Here is a room full of crystal named-women, but only one Leader. Most of them are insufferable, and the Crystal Names only make it worse. This is especially evident during “Rehydration Breaks” as The Leader calls them, because that's when everyone speaks. Today, while drinking alkaline water (a recent addition to the website), one woman, Amethyst, goes on and on about how she found a stray kitten and nursed it back to health by feeding it kale and kombucha. To me, this all sounds highly improbable, but the others smile and nod like the story is the peak of profundity.

These self-help enthusiasts approach navel gazing like it's an Olympic sport and they aspire to medal, but Topaz is the worst. She's always harping on what “resonates” with her. “Wow, Amethyst,” she says, eyes misting, “that story really resonates with me, because I also found a stray kitten once.” Shut up, who asked you? is what I want to say. But I don't. Instead, I stand at the Rehydration Station and refill her empty glass when she extends it without so much as looking at me. The Leader jingles a chime, which signals everyone to return to their mats for final meditation (and, for some, rather expensive commercial breaks).

These participants are rich, good to go in the material world, but insecure for whatever reason and searching for someone, something, to fix that. That's why the 20 of them are willing to spend \$4000 a pop for this one week with The Leader. The price doesn't even include accommodations or food, just being lectured to and led through various exercises in a glorified dance studio off the side of the highway. With her good looks, air of mystique, and bestseller, The Leader can convince most people of whatever she wants. Here in America, where commodity fetish reigns supreme, those who can are delighted to pay a pretty penny for

anything having to do with her, and she's not afraid to cash in. Blossoming into one's best self doesn't come cheap.

The Leader hits a Tibetan singing bowl, signifying the end of today's session. The participants slowly, self-indulgently rouse themselves, some continuing to let out hums, moans or growls, mewling their bodies around, slowly blinking. It's unbearable to witness, but reminds me I could use a good stretch, myself. Assisting takes its toll in more ways than one. The class files out, bowing thanks to The Leader, a chorus of Namastes, and then it's just us. She fixes her amber eyes on me.

"Quartz," she says, using the Crystal Name she gave me, "Thank you for your assistance today. Ride home?" It's not so much a question as a command.

We walk out shoulder-to-shoulder. I lock up, and we get into her Prius. As she starts to drive away, that's when the transformation begins, as it always does.

"Jacket," she says, and I reach into the back seat, throw off the yoga blanket she uses as cover and pull out her leather motorcycle jacket. Driving with one hand, she snatches the jacket from me and presses the decidedly un-vegan leather to her nose, inhaling deeply. "I've missed you, baby," she says. Then she shimmies into it, spiking my adrenaline as she momentarily takes both hands off the wheel.

Jacket on and with her left hand back to steering, she glances at me sideways and says, "You liked that, didn't you?" while placing her right hand on my thigh and gripping. We've played this game plenty and I do and don't like it, but I like what's to come, so as usual, I say, "Yes."

"You know what to do," she says. "Be a good girl and place the order."

I take out my phone, open my go-to food app, click Repeat Order, and say, “Done.” She smiles, and moves her hand up between my legs. Yoni Space, I think, and almost laugh out loud, but banish the thought so I can focus on her handiwork and enjoy myself.

Shortly after we arrive home, the delivery guy rings the bell. The Leader stays out of sight, and I answer the door and bring the box in, plopping it down in the usual spot on the coffee table.

“Thanks,” says The Leader, who’s still wearing the leather jacket but is now otherwise naked and lounging back on the couch, in the shadows. I open the box’s lid, and she smiles at the family-sized pepperoni pizza while lighting a joint rolled from the weed she had me buy yesterday. Because she has to maintain a pristine public image of her veganism and drug-free lifestyle, it’s my job to procure all forbidden treats, because who remembers assistants? I’m not entirely unattractive but am unremarkable, and standing next to her I’ve always faded into the background. She offers the joint but I shake my head. Tonight I want to stay lucid.

Believe it or not, the alkaline water we drink all day doesn’t exactly satiate, so we descend upon the pizza. Then we languidly pick up where we left off on the ride home, and I repay her for shifting my gears. After we finish, her eyelids start to droop, and I know she’ll be out cold soon. This—pizza, pot, sex, sleepiness—is the part of our life together I like most, because it reminds me of when we first met, before all the bullshit.

We’ve been putting on these workshops, or some version of them, for five long years. When I was 20 and she was 25, we met at the strip club where we’d both just been hired. Prior to that we’d been artists, she a dancer and I a poet, vocations for which cash flow is relatively nonexistent. A need to not starve is what landed us at the club, and as she became a stripper

and I, a server, we bonded. That we were the only single queers working there must've played a role in pushing us together as lovers. Also, neither of us was big into community—family members had either died or were out of commission, and we had both always moved around too much to form significant attachments—until we met each other.

Most of the wealthy men who frequented the club were terrible, but easy to manipulate. We liked their money, but that was pretty much it. Then we got to thinking: what about the untapped market of their wives? One night, while getting stoned over pepperoni pizza, we hatched a plan to start these high-end self-help workshops for women. We came up with the most ridiculous name we could think of: Yoni Space. Oh, how we laughed about it...but the next day I realized she had every intention of following through, and casting herself as guru. Since I didn't have a better idea, I helped her research and prepare. I took self-help books out from the library, read choice excerpts to her, and she made the concepts her own, developing platitudes. Thanks to the Internet, we familiarized ourselves with the latest in alternative wellness trends and their accouterments. Over the course of her dance training she'd learned a few yoga moves, and, with the assistance of YouTube, brushed up on enough terminology to pass herself off as a teacher. She invented her credentials—all the made up masters she claimed to have studied various healing arts under hailed from remote reaches of the world, plus were conveniently deceased. She rehearsed like it was the biggest show of her life, and in some ways, it was. As a dancer she knew how to perform; as a stripper she knew how to read people and deftly direct them to do her bidding while convincing them they were the ones in charge. Her youth, beauty, charisma and chutzpah didn't hurt her cause, and she knew it—the confidence with which she wielded it all was enviable, the hottest commodity. I typed up the written materials for the class, she cast me in the role of assistant, and after a month we were good to go. We held the first workshop across the river in a town where we didn't know anyone. There was no room in the "Leader" persona for inexperience—most importantly, inexperience

wouldn't pay—so we billed it as her “first U.S.” workshop. Much to our surprise, it was wildly successful. The attendees clamored for more Yoni Space.

We've been at it ever since, traveling, staying elusive. When she stripped she always wore long wigs, so her current shaved head is enough to throw off any former club patron who might see her face somewhere and feel a glimmer of familiarity. It's amazing what a change of context can do. Her book, which I edited, doesn't talk about the specifics of her background or give any name other than The Leader—she says she channels her wisdom from a Higher Power, so her earthly human origin is of no concern. As herself, she was just one more hustler trying to make it. As The Leader, she is rich and revered.

Nothing she does is technically illegal, but it should be. I can't believe people continue to go for it. They're hungry for a quick fix, thinking a yoni egg will magically transform their self-esteem, or an essential oil will help them manifest whatever they want. They pay top dollar to bask in The Leader's supposedly healing amber stare. I stop short of calling these people her marks, only because they're so willing. But personally, I've tired of this never-ending game of Follow The Leader. It all started out as a grand joke, but it's gone too far. A year ago when I alluded to feeling stuck, she said, “Maybe there's a blockage in your aura.” I used to be able to tell when she was kidding, but now I'm not so sure, plus don't know if she's so sure, either. When we first began my role-play as assistant it was fun and kinky, but now I think she sees me as little more than an intern with benefits. She still pays me as such, which is to say not at all, but she justifies this through subtle yet pointed reminders that she feeds, houses and clothes us—even the food app I use to buy her contraband pizzas is attached to a bank account she controls. This arrangement leaves me feeling trapped, which she likes and I don't. She may be the face of Yoni Space, but I developed it with her, and I also deserve to profit and enjoy the spoils as I see fit.

Post pizza and coitus, The Leader has passed out. Or rather, Lola has. Funny, people used to think Lola was just her stripper name, but it's her real name—at least, that's what she told me. This is the only time I still think of her as Lola—she even looks like she did when I first saw her in the club's dressing room taking cat naps: naked and curled up under her leather jacket, face nearly guileless, this preposterous existence not yet even a dream. I wonder what she dreams about now. Probably her newest merch, her next big scheme. Other than her schemes, I've come to think of her as empty.

I most likely have a few hours before she wakes up and wonders where I am, so I take my laptop and head to the bathroom. It's the most private spot in the house, and the only one she won't enter without knocking. Little does she know she isn't the only author here—I've already published two books of poetry under a pen name. But this project is far from poetry. It's a tell-all exposé, a candid, snarky account of these workshops and how they came to be, fairly verbatim but with details changed for my legal protection. I started writing anecdotes simply to exorcize them, and the next thing I knew, I had a manuscript, and now, a movie in the works. My agent says it'll be huge, and I agree, I can feel it in my assistant-weary bones. Who knows how far I'll be able to take this thing...next stop: Yoni Space, The Musical! I'll have to leave Lola once she realizes I've done this, since it's not like she's spared—on the contrary, she's the star of the show—but after all these years she owes me, and I deserve to get mine. Hey, nothing lasts forever—she's the one who taught me that. I always used to think she was the grifter in the relationship, but what can I say—I've learned from the best, and I'm ready to blossom.

New Hire

Come dressed for your interview in suit, tie,
pencil skirt; uniform grey or black with a modest heel.
Rainbow lanyard because we prize diversity,
but only if you stop pushing your gay agenda, we're
apolitical, don't you know? Keep your pronouns in your
email signature where they belong. Join the team
where everyone has an opinion, all voices have a chance
to speak. When you're asked to, of course. And don't
count on an acknowledgement or reply within
one business year. What could you have to say anyway?
Your perspective is interesting. Unique. Relegated
to the pile of tokens the company requires we hire.
It won't make its way into policy for another 10 years.
Things move slowly here. Opinions need to be
bubble wrapped, red taped, softened into
palatable bites for senior leadership. They have small
mouths, don't you know? And your ideas are
far too radical to eat. Listen kid, I used to be just
like you. All change-the-world attitude. Dismantle
the system from the inside. It's easy to be idealistic from afar.
Up close, the mechanisms of industry have rusted
with corporate greed, grinding the churn of ideas to a halt.

But maybe you can help. We need your blood to
change things up. Donate it willingly and sign
your contract with a palm of inky red. In a few years
we'll treat you with basic human decency and revisit
your recommendations. Just try not to drink too much
company coffee or you might get lost in the
burnt-out grinds.

Kate Carey

Seminar/colespy

“How did IRA training go?” Beth will say.

saccharine with a smile.

And I will say “ok.”

Because what does she expect-

what does she want-

what can I even tell her-

about the panic in my bones manifesting

on the side of the highway,

the dull ache numbing in my skeleton

the desire to lay on the carpet

in that dirty hotel conference room

or “summit 6” as they called it.

I don’t know how much of this is my head injury

and how much is just the past regurgitating itself up,

silt and pebbles bogged down into

a plastic coke bottle, the layers

of my core-

gravel crust,

molten lava core,

the magma in my belly.

I've got an Associates degree in Liberal Arts
& a Master's in Dissociation.
Guess which one has proved more useful?

Another person leaves this office
& suddenly I'm now responsible for their tasks.
After one afternoon where I barely paid attention
I am now the credit union wide expert on IRAs.
Doesn't seem very good legally to me.
What else can I do but everything they throw onto me
on a begged for \$13 an hour?

Kate Carey

No I don't want to meet with HR for my exit interview

I'm tired of everything.

All the fucks I gave have leaked

out my ears and Viriva I've

given you everything and now I have nothing.¹

Nothing left for you to take.

Soon I will take my leave,

leave your company in shambles at my distance

because let's face it in 5 years I

know most things and there's no written procedure.

I get paid the least of anyone here

for doing 2-3 people's jobs.

I remember I had an interview

at a nonprofit like 2 years ago

and when I listed everything I did here

(and this was 2 years ago, before

a myriad of more tasks were added.)

they said it sounded like my employer

¹ A reference to The Wonder Years' album *Suburbia I've Given You All and Now I'm Nothing*

wanted to be cheap.

Real talk.

A NON PROFIT.

6 wheels, in danger of leaving,

hoping to break the axle off

before the next corner.

Each one of us sending secret signals,

feeling trapped in this microaggressive schism.

This place is the definition of

white male privilege.

The textbook dictionary kind.

I'm so tired of complaining about

you to everyone in my circle.

I'm a much more interesting

person under usual circumstances.

The ways this place has

wrung me out and

I am twisted.

I have bent all ways to go with

your convoluted flow

but I can no longer

fray my own edges

to keep this job.

Circling Back Concerning My PTO

It was hard to wake up after I learned the world would be ending next week. It was all over the evening news, a meteor set to hit the Earth and end life “as we knew it” entirely. Fox News, of course, claimed it was a hoax by some liberal scum at NASA, trying to spite Americans for not caring enough about the climate. CNN was more honest, but tried to be too hopeful about our chances. Social media was a hilarious mess, with tweets and photos making it all into a big joke.

The world was ending next Tuesday, and my first thought was to take a few days off. But when I messaged my boss, she said my request was too late. “All PTO must be approved at least two weeks in advance,” she said, linking me to the employee handbook page. I wished she could show some compassion and wondered why she hired me.

The company did not care that the world was ending. We had metrics to meet and clients to satisfy. “Anyway,” my boss said. “Maybe the media is wrong. Since when do you believe journalists?”

I sat in my home office on the Wednesday before, the last Wednesday ever, opening up Teams on my corporate issued Laptop. I drank tea out of my corporate issued mug and pointedly ignored texts and calls from my mother, who begged me to drive home. At lunch time I made a frozen meal, some pasta I bought from Trader Joes and thought it was pretty good. Next time I got groceries, I would get some more.

When 5:30 p.m. rolled around, I got ready for the gym and went outside. I was disappointed to learn not only was my world ending, but Planet Fitness was closed. I drove home and got out my bicycle, thinking it would be a suitable alternative to the workout video series I had planned to follow.

I biked my usual path, enjoying the birds and plants I passed by. The endless text messages irritated me. As soon as I got home, I checked them.

From mom: “Where are you? Why aren’t you responding?” That one was too much to deal with. I was sure she would claim that was abandoning her by not responding. “You’re my only daughter,” she would say. Give it a rest, I thought.

From my ex-girlfriend: “I wanted to let you know I am still in love with you, just in case you wanted to get together.” She dumped me. Why was she still so obsessed with what I was doing? Some sort of guilt, I guessed.

From my doctor, an automated message: “Our records indicate it’s time for a checkup. To schedule an appointment, please visit our website or call (323) 238-8121.” I called the number and was met with a robot, asking what time I would like to come in. I suggested some time next Thursday.

After all my messages, I found myself drained and fell asleep on the couch watching some Netflix series. In the morning, I repeated the routine of getting on Teams and putting out ‘hypothetical fires’ for my all-important company. And I did this again, for several days, up until Tuesday.

Around mid-day, nearing our final moments, my boss unexpectedly called me to inform me I had been let go.

“You just don’t seem to have the passion the company wants,” she said. I asked if my PTO would be paid out, and she said that was not part of their policy.

“Please mail the laptop and monitor back to us by the end of the month,” she continued. I thought about smashing it in front of her but remembered they would probably take the cost out of my paycheck. After the call wrapped up, I got into the car and drove to the post office, corporate issued merchandise in the backseat.

Of course, as was common at this point, nobody was in the post office. I shoved the monitor and laptop into a mailbox and did not leave a return address. I drove home and laid down on the floor. I called my mother.

She did not answer, and I listened to her voicemail.

“Unfortunately, I am not at the phone right now. But please leave a message and I will get back to you when I can. Okay, bye!” her recorded voice said.

I called again and I kept calling until I wasn’t, anymore.

Vacation Policy

The rules are and will be as follows,
except when they are changed or
circumstances* require:

No open-toed shoes.

I just don't like seeing toes.

They remind me of walking
barefoot on a sun-warmed beach,
which I've never had vacation time for.

No fish in the microwave.

See above. I've never been
to the ocean.

In case of heavy rain,
all overhead lights must be
switched off so I can close
my eyes and imagine the downpour
as waves lapping at the shore.

*For a list of extenuating reasons a rule may no longer apply, please see appendix I6.3.I26a (located in the office in the basement near the water heater, which keeps it tropical, except when it is moved to the box beneath the Ficus on floor 3, for the shade).

An Open Heart

John Denner on the toilet. Forty-four, not manifestly unhealthy, hyperactive. Second wife claims he's busy even in sleep. First wife doesn't give a damn. Five kids lumped into incompatible groups of teenagers and rugrats. Teenagers with first wife. Fully engaged in activities and classes requiring frequent above-and-beyond cash injections. Fencing, ballet, piano, traveling lacrosse team, school trips to Madrid, Rome, Hershey. Rugrats waiting in the wings for tennis, soccer, drama camp. Private school and college for all. Denner stares into an abyss of non-retirement and stingy domestic vacations. Mortgaged for life. Declines to acknowledge, privately or otherwise. Works killer hours. Favorite saying: "You can sleep when you're dead." Teenagers and rugrats know it by heart.

Knock on bathroom door. An oasis, everyone wants in.

"Occupied!" calls Denner.

Phone buzzes in one hand, sports page clutched in the other. Second wife. In the office forty-five minutes and she's calling already. Lets it go to voicemail and fingers the third number on contact list.

"It's Denner....that was definitely a ball...bases loaded. Should have gone to extra innings...I heard the plate ump ate Mexican before the game. He just wanted to get into the clubhouse...did you see him waddling? Yeah, carry it over to tonight...they can't lose three in a row."

IPad balanced on sink. Denner checks email. Phone perched on thigh. Sports page folded on floor, face-up for essential box-score reference. Proctologist has warned about sitting on the toilet longer than needed. Denner needs. Bathroom only place in office he can concentrate. Back at cubicle, three screens and a phone vying for attention. An entire floor of waist-high cubicles stretching into infinity. Like the desert – nowhere civilized to rest the eyes unless on a passing ass or lipstick-and-mascara-daubed face three rows over, or two, or four. Wasteland of distractions. Full focus available only in toilet, no endless expanse of attention-draining vista. Simply gray walls.

Denner takes a second to reflect on the tranquility of the color gray. Battleship gray; reminds him of halcyon days as junior officer aboard unreasonably frigid nuclear guided-missile cruiser USS Arkansas, designation CGN-41. Debauched nights in Subic Bay, Honolulu, San Fran. Nothing especially peaceful in the fond memories.

Another knock on door. Barbarians at the gate.

“Busy!”

No muttering, no raised voices. Most polite in this office. Must be calming effect of endless view from cubicles. Straight out through massive impact-resistant panes, over roofs of lesser workplace citadels, across several area codes and beyond. Phone vibrates on thigh. Second wife again. He should take it.

“Hi, honey,” she says. “How’s work?”

“Brutal.”

“My mother wants to come over tonight.”

“Why?” He searches for coffee. Paper cup on the floor. Most unsanitary, but they clean well here after all others have gone home. Undocumented aliens scrubbing zealously for hours before slipping across bridges and through tunnels in dead of night to overcrowded ramshackle rentals in outer boroughs.

“For dinner?” Sip of warm, black, no-sugar so it’s healthy coffee. “Did you ask her or did she invite herself?” Contains a shake of cinnamon for his cholesterol, a concession to health.

“She wants to bring her chicken casserole.”

No answer means self-invite.

“She can’t come over.”

“Why not?” No petulance. Wife used to his quirks.

“We hate her.”

“It’s my mother.”

“That’s why we hate her.”

“I don’t hate her. You do.”

“As soon as you wise up and start hating her too maybe we can have her over for dinner.”

“That makes no sense.”

Slight exasperation detected.

“It’s makes perfect sense,” Denner says. “To me.”

“But I love my mother.”

“Uh, Uh, I’ve told you about using that word lightly.”

“It’s my mother.”

“And you don’t just go around saying you love your mother all the time, do you? It’s a loaded word – only to be used when you absolutely mean it.”

“I do mean it.”

“You can say I love the Knicks against Miami, with a spread of six. I love Lucky Pantaloons in the 8th.”

Denner picks up sports page, suddenly needing to check who is in the eighth at Aqueduct. “I love the BLT at the Astro Diner. I love Lucy-”

“You can love all that stuff but I can’t love my mother?” wife says, getting angry now.
“What’s wrong with you?”

“She’s a vicious Doberman. You’ve got to keep her at a distance-“

Denner speaking to a void, second wife hung up. Contemplates calling back, decides against it. Let it play out. Phone vibrates again.

“John Denner.”

Customer asking for Willows. Perfectly groomed. Ivy league. Sales leader. Major saleshole. Possibly bisexual.

“Willows is ‘out sick’ today.” Denner performing. “Why? Off for a well-deserved rest. Apparently, he was observed chasing a puppy around the dog park on his lunch break yesterday, trying to smell its breath. Seeking a touch of lost innocence. Yes, it is strange. Pressures of the job. Can I put you in for your standard order? I’ve got it here on the screen. Why don’t we double it with the holiday weekend coming up. Oh, you’re closed on the holiday weekend? Who does that? What? – nothing. Better stock up for Tuesday when the customers come roaring back. Willows said what? Call him on his cell phone? I wouldn’t. Doctor’s orders. No, no ETA on Willows return. Give me a call next week.”

Slurp remainder of rapidly cooling coffee, tongue hunting for life-saving cinnamon. Knob rattles, thankfully no knock. Phone vibrates. Willows. Better take it, head off trouble.

“I know you’re trying to pilfer my clients.” No preamble. Willows’ fraudulent old-world charm discarded to the wind when the chips start tumbling.

“I deny that emphatically,” Denner says. “If you were at your desk you wouldn’t have to labor under that misconception, Willows.”

“I’m at the hospital. *My wife is preparing to have triplets. This afternoon.*”

Triplets. Willows overcompensating. Can’t settle for lone babies like normal people, or even twins like overachievers. Driven to be super-hero even in child production department.

“So you might be out three times longer than normal?”

“Do not call my clients!”

“I don’t need to, they call me. Mr. Reliable.”

“Did you forward my desk phone to your cell?”

“Blasphemy!” cries Denner.

“And stop telling people I’ve transferred to the Madagascar office!”

“I don’t know Willows,” says Denner. “I hear it’s a hotbed of sales activity.”

“We don’t have a Madagascar office.”

“There you go. Who’s going to believe you’ve exiled yourself there then? Gotta go, Willows. Another call.”

“It better not be one of my clients!”

Gladly take second wife’s call now. Can’t be more hostile than the beleaguered Willows.
Triplets. Bloody hell.

“Yes, dear?” Denner calming the savage beast by voice alone.

“I can’t believe you want me to hate my mother.”

Maybe not.

“It’s for your own good.”

“Do you even love *me*?”

Dreaded question. Unable to answer. Must finesse. “We’ve been married four years.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Of course I do.”

“You can’t say the word, can you?”

“Even better than that, I still like you. You don’t get a lot of that after four years together. Genuine like.”

“Hillary warned me about this,” second wife says. Poison darts from first wife. Wives One and Two talk more to each other than Denner does with either of them. Impossible to outflank the enemy in these circumstances.

“Tell your mother to bring the casserole.”

“Thanks for understanding,” second wife says with unusual sarcasm. Didn’t know she had the depth.

“Thank you for your service,” Denner says, apropos of nothing.

Flurry of knocks. Voices on the other side. No longer unfailingly polite. Breakdown of office decorum. One bathroom for entire floor. Poor planning, not his problem.

”What? I’m working. At what? At fricking plumbing.” Denner yelling through door, voice reverberating loudly off sanctuary walls. “Who am I? I’m Otis the plumber. Fixing a clog.” Bang phone three times on exposed pipe.

“Last guy dropped a monster. Jammed everything up. Horrific stench. I’ll be out 30 minutes tops.”

All quiet after that tidbit.

Denner attempts to shake annoying tingling out of left arm. Something relatively new. Product of too much toilet sitting, caffeine, or other issue? Medical concern? No time to get checked. Acolytes of Willows will descend like vultures to pick over and devour remains of customer list if he vacates office for any amount of time. Delay any medical consultation indefinitely. Avoid all patient-type activities. Not like unfortunate father. Dreadful last days in

Midwest pee-smelling facility, underwritten by Denner. Final years lost to dementia, calling down tiled hall in keening voice for someone named Marilyn to come and get him, interspersed with snippets of “Happy Birthday.” Brain tangled and collapsed, other patients glad to see him finally depart, thankful for the silence. Denner’s mother and everyone else in family claiming no knowledge of a Marilyn at any stage of father’s life. Mystery never to be unraveled without application of so-called enhanced interrogation techniques to tight-lipped family and aged drinking buddies.

Denner searches phone contacts. Under tremendous pressure from outside forces on all fronts.

“Rocco? John Denner here. Can I get a table for three tonight?...No I’m not bringing the super-stripper twins...wife and mother-in-law...I’m not a nice guy, that’s why I’m taking them to your place.”

Muted cursing.

“That’s not what I mean. I’m trying to avoid eating my mother-in-law’s chicken casserole...No, it’s not bad. I like it more than her...bring it to you? How can you be tired of your own food...yeah, I’ll bring it but it’s abnormal. First time I bring food to a restaurant...Thanks.”

Quiet again. Denner conducting actual work: E-mails to customers, some his, some copied from top secret document Willows keeps meanly concealed in locked but easily-breached drawer. An online check of precious inventory. Sixteen uninterrupted minutes of pure work. It’ll hold him for the next two hours. Almost time to vacate commode refuge for dreaded wild west of office floor, rife with distractions vying for precious attention.

Email pops up from bastard son in Oakland. Mother a former bartender at officer's club at equally former NAS Alameda. Eyes of obsidian. Hair to match. Tremendous haunches. No contact aside from monthly direct deposit. Son a smart kid, gifted writer apparently, still in high school. Respects Denner's opinion for some reason, against all odds and mores. No local father figure. Spends summers at Denner's. Both wives love him like a son. Wants to know if "A Posthumous Murder" would be a better title than "A Posthumous Death" for a murder mystery story. Defer answer until evening when mind is clear after first tumbler of prized Mosstowie single-malt. Many variables involved. Another college education to finance – stipulated in legal documents filed in state of California, so far away. Might actually be worth it with this one.

Denner standing slowly, conscientiously washing hands, straightening tie, collecting items for dreaded return to cubicle. Sports page and cup to trash. iPad under arm, phone on belt. Striding out of temporary refuge, deflecting glances and stares, squeezing hand and shaking arm surreptitiously to rid of upward creeping tingle. Anticipating pastrami with hot mustard on rye, afterward sneak a cigarette in stairwell.

No sooner seated in hellish work space when visual attained on Martha Iverson, lithesome almost-beauty, striding on approach from cubicle where she resides. Five years younger than Denner, five older than second wife.

"John?"

"Martha." Only Denner sees the irony in this exchange.

"You're good at this stuff." Perching on desktop. "What should I get for my nephew's birthday?"

“Age?”

“He’ll be thirteen.”

“Interests?”

“Other than masturbating? I have no idea.”

“Sports?”

Negative. “Too chubby.”

Denner pondering, problem solving. “Comics?”

Martha considering. “Maybe. It’s the only thing I’ve ever seen him read.”

“Favored nephew or also-ran?”

“He’s about the best of the bunch.”

Denner already stroking keyboard, colorful website replacing spreadsheet on middle screen.

“Collector’s items. Cherished forever, or hopefully not. How much to spend?”

Martha leaning in close to view screen, radiating subtle body-heated perfume. Denner reconsidering self-imposed discriminatory age limits. She points to cover of comic costing more than he would have given her credit for. Brooding masked superhero in overly tight pants.

“About that much. Is that a good one?”

“He’ll be the envy of the other savvy chronic neighborhood masturbators.”

“How do I order it?”

“I’ll take care of it. You can buy me lunch.”

“Yeah, every day for two weeks.” Manicured nails on his shoulder. “Thanks, John. I’ll pay.”

“Know your credit card number?”

“In my sleep.”

Denner inputting pertinent information and signing off. Overpriced comic certain to gain in value winging its way to lurid nephew in time for birthday, appropriately wrapped. Receives semi-chaste kiss on cheek very close to lips and reclines in chair after good deed well done.

Satisfaction short-lived as Denner becomes aware of sweat on brow and running down chest inside shirt. Online comic purchase not strenuous enough to warrant reaction. Nor Martha’s proximity. Tingling in arm replaced with diffused pain of undetermined origin. Rummaging through drawers for aspirin. Willows probably hoarding a supply. Denner up and examining familiar contents of rival’s desk. Finds child-proof bottle, opens with only slight

difficulty, chews three without water. Another under tongue for good measure. Floor almost empty at lunch-time. Denner makes way to elevator bank, intended destination deli one block away. They know him, always proper application of mustard, sandwich efficiently constructed by time he's approaching register, no moment wasted. Walk-in clinic on way to deli. He's passed it daily never bothering with more than a glance at patients in waiting area, on display for all caring to see. Might stop in if no crowd. See what they have to say about situation. Still have calls to make after lunch; baseball or volleyball game to attend this evening, not sure which.

Denner averts eyes from clinic on way to deli. No peek-a-boo today. All goes well with sandwich transaction, Denner standing in line sweating uncharacteristically. All involved too busy to notice. On way back to office he swerves into clinic at last second, trying to shake a tail. Waiting room cleaner than envisioned. Seated behind sliding window, Dominican Dolly Parton in fuchsia scrubs and big puffy hair gazing expectantly, waiting to be informed of malady.

"Jes?"

Denner looking around. Another guy in suit; seated, pale, subdued in demeanor. Older bald man exuding air of jeweler, standing, rumpled shirt and tie, trying to control twitching eye.

Denner turns to Dolly, still waiting. Not here, Denner thinking to self. No. She can't do a thing. Waves a hand in farewell, pivots, and decamps to street.

Back in building, crescendo of pain and perspiration. Bypass lunchtime cigarette, just this once.

Denner exiting elevator, still clutching sandwich, and for unknown reason, heading away from cubicle, toward immense windows with expansive view across river and miles beyond to where he lives with second wife, at this moment probably perched at custom built-in desk in

kitchen expelling vast piles of money in direction of various members of service industry while toddlers kibitz in sunny playroom.

Denner wishing he was sitting at granite counter with cup of coffee pondering delicate slope of shoulders as she slaves over hot checkbook. Continues toward view for reasons inexplicable, flicking fingers sharply downward to expel negativity and pain. Aspirin not living up to expectations. Slight stumble on highly polished light-reflecting marble floor, from which he recovers. Considers bathroom, splash cool water on face. Instead, drawn to windows. Raises hand toward vast luminosity outside. Other hand dropping lunch and involuntarily clutching chest, source of immense, imponderable discomfort. Denner marching forward to face the great emptiness with an open heart.

Daniel J Flosi

*After my manager asks, if the job isn't done
then why are you heading home?*

I reconstruct the day: tell him how the electrical contractor
completely fucked up a run of wire. &

that The Cretaceous period drew to a close, like a curtain,
with an audience. & that I heard that Cambridge

University was constructed around 1208 CE.

But what may surprise you more is that scholars and clergy
mingled & spoke over ales.

I also know that scholars were considered peasants, though
a higher class; meaning they were less likely to sustain

a skull fracture. But for the farmer, the baker, or women

fractured lines tell the story the rose told; the body is a basket weaver,
weaving skeletal stories & the fishmonger's wife sews the seasons.

I know too, how ordinary people, once here, now there,

stand like bricks after the fire, telling the story

of how the house burned down.

But I won't tell him that I also know that I can

derail conversations by telling stories.

Whatever you do, make it count

Jak is doomscrolling.

He hasn't eaten but soon he is going to the store to buy food and a birthday card for his mom. If he doesn't, there will be a scene like last year when there was crying and a slammed door and 'after all I have done for you.'

All the news is bad. No one can believe there's a war, again. He clicks on links telling him it will all be over soon and scrolls past ones about how it won't be over and will in fact expand and contaminate everything everywhere.

There is a thread lots of people he follows have commented on already.

Generation X is weird.

Well, that's a fact, he thinks to himself, opens it and reads.

-

Amazingly both kids are asleep. Maria can't remember a time they both went down for a nap at the same time, without complaining.

Maybe she's cracked it? If that's the case, she can blog about it, set up a group and become a parenting guru.

She goes to the fridge and makes herself a bagel to eat outside.

It's a warm afternoon and the sun makes it more obvious that the deck needs some love. She will have to see to it – paint it or something. If she doesn't, no one else will.

Twitter tells her that her boss, Jak, has commented on a thread about Gen X, writing *lol, this* at the part about how Gen X expect you to send proper emails, with all the words in full.

Jak doesn't know she follows him. She has a fake profile called @Mindy89 through whose eyes she sees what all her millennial colleagues do outside work and also a real one called @MariaMongle where she talks earnestly about the company. She prefers Mindy. She found Mindy's picture in an article about cutting-edge artists in Berlin. Mindy has more followers and more fun and is allowed to express her real views, even about controversial matters. No one ever sends Mindy DMs about how ugly and fat she is. Mindy is definitely not a Karen.

As someone born in the middle of Gen X, she reads the thread with interest. Its main point seems to be that there is a clash between Gen X who like to do things properly and Millennials who like to talk about themselves and their trauma much more than they like to do any actual work. Well, that is how she reads it anyway.

@Mindy89 doesn't like or retweet the thread, and neither does she.

There was a time when she would have read a book whilst eating her lunch. She was less angry then.

Maria puts down the phone to get a book while the sun still shines and the children still sleep.

She tiptoes into her office but accidentally knocks over a bin which falls loudly, waking the kids.

Reading will have to wait.

-

At the store, Jak buys an avocado. (Ha! Only kidding, of course, he doesn't.)

At the store, Jak buys bread and the only card he can find which is not terrible. It has a picture of a cat on it and says 'Happy Birthday! I pooped in your shoes!' which he thinks his mom will appreciate as it is something Maggie their cat is known for.

There isn't anything suitable he can buy as a present so he picks up some chocolates and plans to get flowers later.

Outside the store, he bumps into Alison and Rai who tell him they are having a party that night and he should come over.

"On a Sunday?" he asks, unchaining his bicycle.

"Yes, Mr Corporate," Alison says, he thinks flirtatiously, but who knows, "on a Sunday. Come!"

"I've got a family thing," he says, "but maybe after."

All the way home he considers whether he should go to the party or not. Tomorrow is their team away day and he has planned it for weeks. It is his first one as team manager.

Yesterday he even went to the stationery store and bought post-its in four colours.

When he gets home, he opens the card and writes a birthday message and, remembering the thread from earlier he writes every single word in full.

Even love.

-

The rest of the afternoon is long. Mike is visiting his mom who has early-onset dementia and so it is just Maria and the kids who both want to do entirely different things.

She gets out the art supplies so they can be creative but Max throws them on the floor and cries for his iPad and Maya sits by the door saying 'out, out, out,' in a high-pitched whine that makes Maria want to die or run away like a woman in an Anne Tyler novel.

She definitely won't write a blog about this.

Eventually, she gets both of them in front of the TV sitting quietly with juice boxes and something resembling a lunch but not one you would want anyone else to see your kids consuming, sits down and opens her phone again.

She sees Jak has tweeted a gif of Homer Simpson saying 'Oh I Can't Decide,' and this is related to the question- party on a Sunday night or not?

This is quite shocking to her as tomorrow is their away day. If she was the manager, which of course she isn't, she knows she would be sitting up tonight going over her plan, checking her resources, and probably baking muffins.

She sees that underneath a girl called Alison Ruffkey who describes herself as a writer and thought-dreamer has written, lol dude come.

Party. Always. writes @Mindy89.

One second later @jak_a_thwaites likes Mindy's response.

OK then, thinks Maria. OK.

-

When he gets to his parent's house, Jak's dad is out front cutting the hedge as if he has been lying in wait and maybe he has.

The first words he says are, 'Tell me you got her something?'

This makes Jak remember he forgot the flowers. He waves to try and convey the message yes but not enough, see you in 5 minutes, then turns around and heads to the kiosk.

Behind him, his dad shouts, 'do you need money son?' But he keeps walking as though he can't hear. He is a grown man with a job and a team he manages who look to him for leadership. He has post-its.

It is unbelievable to him how much flowers cost. He buys the smallest acceptable bouquet he can find and heads back to the house. Water from the flowers trickles down his sleeve as he walks.

On the way back he checks Twitter and sees on balance most people are saying he should go out tonight, including Alison and also some hot girl he doesn't know called Mindy - a dorky name but whatever- and he thinks given the last two years of not going anywhere or doing anything it is probably his duty to go.

Maybe Mindy is a friend of Alison's?

His sister Janice arrives on the doorstep at the exact same time.

Janice still lives at home and is hoping to become a writer.

He likes her a lot better now she is his sister. Before, when she was Jonny, she was mostly a douche, but now they get on OK.

Often his dad will say dumb things like, 'Hemingway didn't have to go to college to become a writer,' and in those moments he is definitely on Janice's side. What does his dad know? The man is still on Facebook.

His mum is in the kitchen arranging a plate of cakes.

'Happy birthday, Mother,' he says, giving her the bouquet.

She pulls it towards her chest and he can see there are real actual tears in her eyes.

'Oh, Jak, you shouldn't have,' she says, which is confusing given last year.

He shrugs, embarrassed, and sits down at the table, ready for cake. Just wait until she sees the card, he thinks.

-

There was a time when Maria's career was going somewhere. That time was before the time that is now when she has to leave work every day on the dot of five to make the day-care pickup.

If you are five minutes late you get a disappointed look from the manager. After that, they charge 10 dollars every 5 minutes. None of that is as bad though as the sight of your child sitting alone on the carpet, waiting for you, too distraught to even cry.

The first day she arrived at Mongle she was excited.

This is what the website says under the 'Work with Us' section:

Mongle wants you to bring your whole self to work and has four key values:

- ❖ Whatever you do, make it count
- ❖ Whatever you do, do it with your whole heart
- ❖ Whatever you do, keep the customer in mind
- ❖ Whatever you do, do it as a team

Underneath this is a paragraph entitled 'We Got You' about the benefits you will enjoy including a hot food buffet, on-site dry cleaner, free gym, health insurance, games room and unlimited ice cream.

When she applied for the job, she had to read about ten pages before she worked out what she would be responsible for marketing, and to be honest six months on, she still doesn't fully understand the company's purpose.

This all compared very favourably to her previous role as a stay-at-home mom though, which at the time, she felt enjoyed precisely no benefits whatsoever.

The night before her first day she spent a long time deciding what to wear. Her work clothes had been boxed up since Max was born and when she got them out, they looked like something from a bygone era when pronouns were just something you learned about in grammar lessons. She taped the box up and put it in the car to donate.

In the end, she settled on a pencil skirt and a Uniqlo sweater. Flat pumps. Neutral.

The guy who showed her around was not the one who hired her. Apparently, he had already left since her interview when he had asked her where she wanted to be in five years.

A picture of herself in total solitude flitted into her mind whilst she said, 'Here, at Mongle.'

The new guy is taller and has brought his whole self to work including a vast array of piercings and body art and an unfriendly demeanour.

When he shows her the ping-pong table and ice cream fridge, she tries to make a joke about, all work and no play making people dull and sees him mouth, ok mom, to himself when he thinks she isn't looking.

Luckily the girl who sits next to her is friendlier or she would have left on day one and taken her whole self home to her children and her own on-site unlimited ice cream freezer.

After that, it gets better.

Sort of.

-

'Tell your father about your big away day tomorrow,' Jak's mom says, leaning across the table to pour him some juice.

'Yes Jak, do tell us about your exciting job,' says his sister, mocking his mom's voice the way she hates.

'It's no big deal,' he says. He hates the way they act as if working is a kind of cute thing he does, like a picture brought home from school to stick on the fridge. 'We're just taking time out to think about our goals for the next year and stuff.'

This does the trick. He sees their collective eyes glaze over and the conversation is soon taken over by a mini-argument/discussion about what takeout to get - Thai or Chinese. It ends up being him and his mom versus his dad and Janice, the conversation proceeding down well-worn grooves. Neither side wants to concede so in the end, they compromise and get pizza, because underneath it all, it's what they really want anyway – to sit in the den and eat pizza on their laps like nothing has changed.

When he says goodbye, he sees his mom has tears in her eyes and remembers the parts of the Gen X thread that were kind of sad – the workaholic boomer divorced parents, feeling ignored, not trusting institutions. A lot of that does apply – he's sort of startled to think of his mom as a person who might have feelings.

He gives her a hug and speaks to her directly (like the thread advised). 'Love you, Mom,' he says, heading down the steps 'thanks for everything.'

As he walks away, he sees his parents waving on the doorstep, together, receding into the distance.

Now, it's time to party.

-

The kids are in bed, finally, and with the dishes done and the house quiet, Maria knows this is the time she should get on with starting the blog she has been meaning to start forever or look at courses she could take in the evenings to improve her writing or qualify as a therapist or just something (anything) that would be more meaningful than what she is currently doing.

Yesterday when she was on Twitter, she saw this quote that said,

Why not now go toward the things I love?

And had thought yes, why not.

And she will, soon.

She logs on to remind herself who wrote it (Natalie Diaz), gets side-tracked and sees Jak is at the party.

There is a picture of him – handsome, bearded, awkward – standing between two girls (Alison the thought-dreamer and some other person), smiling and looking happyish.

Clearly, he doesn't care about work, doesn't appreciate he has cruised into management whilst she has remained stuck like a limpet in the lower tiers never to progress. It makes her feel so mad she wants to do something radical.

In the back of the drawer by her bed, she keeps a pack of cigarettes for moments like this when Mike is out of town and her rebel heart just won't beat in tandem with her suburban life. She used to be a party girl. She used to be someone on track to somewhere.

She lights the cigarette and looks again at the picture of Jak and the two women.

As she exhales, outside on her unloved deck, she recognises her rage for what it is.
Jealousy.

They are just so young.

Imagine having the choice. Imagine choosing fun.

Didn't she use to be fun? Didn't she use to Party? Always?

Didn't she use to go to parties in search of things, unaware of what life would be like
once she found them?

Why not now go towards the thing I love?

Why not?

Now?

-

Jak wakes up. Alone.

He had looked around for that Mindy person from Twitter but she wasn't in evidence
and nothing was happening with Alison who was in fact all over Rai who had just split up with
Mads.

The party was OK but whatever it was he was seeking wasn't there and now his head hurts and where he should have enthusiasm for the day ahead, he has a lump of dread. He feels like a walking cliché. The hungover, over-promoted, lame-ass, millennial, douche-bag bro boss everyone will laugh at behind his back.

He packs the post-its, pens and some retro hard candy he bought from Amazon for the team. Everyone likes candy, right? And these are the kind he used to buy when he cycled to the store as a kid you can't buy anymore. Just seeing them makes him nostalgic.

When he finishes setting up the room, he finds the team waiting for him on the sofas and he feels a rush of something a bit like love, which surprises him. After all, they are his team, different as they all are.

'Did you have a good weekend?' Maria from Marketing asks, offering him a cup of coffee from the pot, 'Do anything fun?'

'Not much,' he says, taking the coffee and drinking it even though it is boiling hot. 'It was OK, I guess. My mom's birthday. You?'

'Oh, nothing much either,' she says, sitting down next to him, 'but I'm looking forward to today, to getting started. I think we've got a great year ahead of us. What about you?'

He looks at her, surprised. She's not normally this upbeat, is usually kind of quiet, the sort of person he thinks of as being one of those Gen X sticklers the thread was talking about, judging him secretly for everything, but now she's chatting to him, and being nice.

‘Yeah, totally,’ he says, ‘I think we’ve got a great team and we’re going to make this year count.’ He fist-bumps the air as he speaks, sort of ironically.

‘I hope you’re right,’ she says, as they stand up and walk towards the meeting room, ‘it would be great to really make things happen.’

‘Yeah, well me too,’ he says, holding the door open, ‘and look, whatever else. I promise you, there will definitely be plenty of candy and post-its.’

‘You have post-its?’ she asks him, walking into the room and seeing how he has set it up already with a name card for each of them and a big bowl of candy in the middle that matches the company colours exactly, ‘wow, my favourite.’

-

In the break, Maria goes to the bathroom, sits in the stall and gets out her phone to see if Mike has messaged about how his mom is doing. He hasn’t.

@Mindy89 has a DM. She opens it. It is from Jak. It says ‘hey.’

Something about this makes her so sad that she wants to cry right there and then but the stalls are not fully enclosed and she knows her colleagues will hear.

She feels like in all her life she has never seen anything as sad as this beautiful young man reaching out to a figment of her imagination and she wants to take him in her arms right there and then and tell him – what? That it will all be OK? That he will find love? That one day he too will shackle himself with responsibilities that make him long for these days of uncertainty? She doesn’t know.

All of a sudden, she has a rush of love for Mike and for their home life and all it entails. When she gets home, she will make sure to tell him she loves him. Maybe she will even put on some nice nightwear tonight instead of her vest and joggers?

She closes @Mindy89 down, opens @MariaMongle and writes, 'Amazing team day with the best team around. Thanks to @jak_a_thwaites for making it happen!'

Then she goes back into the meeting room, ready for whatever the rest of the day brings.

-

The away day goes really well.

In the afternoon, he has organised a session where they spend time talking about what they really want from the next year.

'And I don't mean corporate bullshit stuff,' he says to the team, 'I mean really. I want to know what your goals are and how can we all work together to make them happen.' And they surprise him because they do open up and Maria from Marketing starts talking about this thing she saw on Twitter about 'going towards the thing you love,' and how she is hoping to bring more creativity into her work life and this really energises people and they all start talking about the skills they have outside work and the things they love to do and how they can harness these in the team. And he feels good, like maybe he can be a leader, after all.

@Mindy89 doesn't reply to his DM but that's OK. Maybe she's involved with someone else or maybe she's not looking for someone like him now. He knows that you can't tell a lot from a picture and that she might not even really be his type, even if she looks like she is.

He cycles home and thinks about going towards the thing you love and what that might mean for him.

He doesn't know but decides to stop in on his parents on the way home and ask his Mom if she liked the card. And maybe, he thinks, if they and Janice are up for it, they could all hang out and get more pizza.

Jessica Rowshandel

Calibration

Your skin is a uniform. Against the 9am lights
fluorescent tucked into the ceiling tiles
your face must be as clean
as these white walls as the white
roof of the mouth, your bleached cubicle teeth
and quiet snowfall carpet tongue
You must at least be lighter than a brown paper bag
like how we calibrate our neighbors
in the suburbs against the Sun
We believe in diversity, in equity, in inclusion, but
do not get the bag wet, scrub the browning water stains
from the ceiling tiles with the white shine
of your bright bulb body
until the dirt is gone

The Waiting Room

Someone new arrives in the Waiting Room. They take a number and move to find a seat. The newcomer sits closest to the door. This is a smart decision.

A woman nearby eats her fingers one by one. She crunches down in anticipation. Her cheeks are full. Her lips glisten. She refuses to swallow.

Heart rate monitors sound loudly from down the hall. They beep in disunity, producing short and long tones indiscriminately. They are sending out a message, a warning. Nobody listens. Nobody knows the code.

A man pats his pockets in search of car keys. He can not find them. Surely he did not walk here. He can not remember where he was before this. He can not remember who he was with. He can not remember anything but the Waiting Room.

Bored, a child adds to the number of tallies she's drawn on the wall. One of her arms hangs limp by her side. It sways gently as she moves. Her mother checks the date. How long have they been here? Her daughter looks bigger, taller than she remembers. The child's arm, now seemingly longer, still dangles.

A number flashes. Nobody gets up. The number continues to flash brightly, blinding those who look for too long. Still, nobody gets up. The patient is eventually found hiding under the last row of chairs. Patient 99 does not get up. Eventually, someone covers him with a jacket.

The newcomer looks around for someone, anyone to be of help. There are no staff in the immediate vicinity. There are no staff in any visible vicinity. The empty reception desk looks on apathetically, unable to answer questions, unwilling to be of help.

A lone nurse finally appears to whisper something in an old man's ear. The Waiting look on expectantly. The man begins to weep. "Thank you." he says, though he is not thankful. "Thank you." he says, though he does not mean it.

Bradley David

So Much Depends Upon A Rental Car Place *(After William Carlos Williams)*

The young man at the rental car place popped the red hatchback glazed with wax. He invited me to stand in its shade, noticing my forehead disagree with the heat.

It's strange to be wearing shorts in February, I said, and he asked, *Is this an unusual month for that? I've never noticed which weather happens when.*

I'm often outside, I said, and then he asked why. *Gardening has me wearing sweaters in winter*, I said, and then he asked about that. *What do you grow?* he extended a branch. *And how long does it take to grow things like that?* I began to respond when I saw my answer ticking inside him. On the clock doing his job. Asking questions that clear spaces like the ticking of company policies.

But his inquiry was so big and fertile and rich. An opportunity not to be missed. I wanted to give him seasons and seeds and soil. React to my reflex, like when a plant is tapped on its knee by light and warmth and bees. See, how I could have made gardening rhyme for him? Alliterate upon flowers offering sweets to moonlight moths. I could have turned over a new leaf on a play or poem. Right there on Brand Boulevard; what a grand production! Shirts off, we'd chop that old growth parking lot into a fresh farmer's field. And dance? Oh, we would dance. Like puppets on honeyed strings. Pollinated with golden voices. Our tapping heels scuffing out edges and angles. Embarrassing the billboards. Softened by grace, buildings would bow at our feet. Iron

would ore and glass would sand. The L.A. River would spill its concrete. The young man would circle the pumpkin patch, drunk with sunsets on vines; white chickens clearing his path with a chorus of clucking. What a grand vibration of urban reclamation!

I stalled, about to say, *So much depends...*, when suddenly he sent me on my way.

J. Archer Avary

POEM WRITTEN THE NIGHT BEFORE A NEW JOB

'it feels good to live and work again'
says the man, before he starts
the job he hopes to keep
for the duration of his working life
'this time,' he says, 'it just feels right'

let us examine the link
between a kick in the head
and a reset in one's outlook towards
life's luxury items
like an egg fried in butter or
mindless afternoons, tossed by storms
and strong ale
sunshine in a beer garden

'natural fodder for the poetry of life'
says the man, as he ponders work
what it means to trade his time for money
'it feels so good to contribute to society again'
says the man, and it sounds

like what he's really trying to do
is convince himself

Disciplinary Actions May Be Taken To Correct Unsatisfactory Performance

It was Kevin's first day at Chthonic Consulting. He'd met his new boss Theresa ("Call me Tessie"), been initiated into the mysteries of the coffee machine ("don't press the double shot button, it breaks the darn thing") and been given a flier for the company's upcoming vernal equinox party ("it's the highlight of the corporate year"). Now it was time to start learning the corporate rituals. He was eager to see how Chthonic's magickal practices compared with those of his previous company, Talisman.

Kevin was told he'd be working closely together with Rachel, who occupied the cubicle next to his. "We're preparing for our initial meeting with a potential new client, FeriKyno," she explained as she showed Kevin into the company's spacious ritual room. "We're hoping to win a major contract. This ritual enhances the likelihood of that happening." Kevin looked admiringly around the space, which had gleaming white tables arranged in a hexagon. At Talisman, he'd worked in a dingy back room with old equipment. He hoped that one day, if he did well, he'd be allowed to conduct his own rituals here.

On an elegant sideboard stood jars of dried plants and other preparations that were needed for the rituals, next to a selection of tools, including an impressive ceremonial athame in a glass case. Kevin scanned the container labels to see which he recognised. They had *Psilocybe semilanceata* mushrooms, which strictly speaking were highly illegal because of their hallucinogenic properties. But companies were discreet about their magickal practices, and law

enforcement tended to ignore what happened behind closed doors, so long as businesses contributed to the local economy.

Kevin noted they had cordoncillo, which The Harvard Review of Ritual Magick had recently reported was showing impressive results, with the consequence that it was now almost impossible to obtain. Rachel saw him looking at the bottle. “We have our own supply chain. It’s manufactured for us by Amazonian shamans.” Kevin was impressed. Chthonic was obviously operating in a different league from Talisman.

Kevin watched Rachel as she deftly ground a selection of herbs in a mortar and pestle. It was clear she was an expert ritualist. He already sensed he could learn a lot from her. In between steps, Rachel told Kevin about the company’s R&D activities. “The quants crunched the numbers and concluded this particular ritual increases our chances of closing the deal by 9 percent. That may not sound much, but it’s enough to give us an edge over our competitors, and that’s what matters.”

Kevin whistled softly. Nine percent was impressive. Back when the first companies began experimenting with rituals, while Kevin was still in business school, results of 3 percent were already considered good. Of course, not everyone agreed. Most of his professors refused to believe that magick actually worked, let alone that it could boost a company’s bottom line. But in Kevin’s opinion, the results spoke for themselves, and rituals soon caught on among forward-looking businesses. Even while still at business school, Kevin saw it was the future. More importantly, he saw it was *his* future. There was clearly money to be made from magick, and he was in on the ground floor, young and keen, learning as much as he could while others were still scoffing about its effectiveness. Magick was the perfect tool to give him an edge over his peers and advance his career.

Talisman's head magician, Eric Dunbar, saw Kevin's potential and hired him straight after graduation. Within a couple of years, Kevin was in charge of his own rituals and helping to shape the company's magickal practices. He had plenty of success and enjoyed the work, but he was a big fish in a small pond. Five years later, he knew he had to move on if he wanted to advance. Chthonic was the perfect company to take his career to the next level. He'd been interested in working there for some time, so when he heard at a MagickMeetup they were hiring, he jumped at the chance.

His mentor Eric was distraught when Kevin told him he was leaving. "This is how you repay me for all the help I gave you?" But Kevin had no regrets. This was business. You couldn't let personal ties get in the way. At Kevin's leaving party, Eric gave him an intricately engraved silver ring which he said he'd received from his own mentor. "Wear it always," he said. "For protection." Kevin was touched by the gesture and always wore the ring on the index finger of his left hand. It was reassuring to know that, whatever happened, he was protected by powerful magick.

Kevin rubbed the ring with the edge of his thumb as he watched Rachel work. She burned the herbs in a metal bowl, chanting a spell to the Egyptian god of new clients: "*Oh, blessed Hapi, help us acquire this new contract ...*" Some of the phrasing was similar to the invocations Kevin knew, but a lot was different. That was to be expected. Each company put great effort into developing its own spells, which were closely guarded company secrets. Talisman had patented over 50 rituals; in this game, your intellectual property was everything. In his contract, which ran to 20 pages (Kevin had skimmed some of the boilerplate), it stipulated that any spells or rituals that Kevin created while working for Chthonic would remain the property of the company.

“I’ve performed that ritual every day for the last week,” Rachel said once she had finished the rite and disposed of the waste respectfully. “This deal is really important to senior management. We have to make sure it goes through.”

As they left the room, Rachel told Kevin there was someone important he had to meet. “Cameron Stone, our Chief Ritual Officer.”

Kevin nodded. “It would be an honor.” Every company worth its salt had a head seer these days, but Chthonic’s CRO had a formidable reputation. According to a profile Kevin had read in Bloomberg Magick, Stone was one of the most powerful magicians in the corporate world as well as being well-connected in the political scene.

He followed Rachel along the corridor to a glass-walled corner office. She tapped lightly on the door before entering. Sitting behind a pale wood desk in the corner was a man about a decade older than Kevin wearing a smart dark suit, white shirt, and elegant spectacles with transparent frames. Rachel knelt on the floor as the seer got to his feet. Kevin could see they took things very seriously here at Chthonic — nobody treated Eric with that kind of respect — and followed Rachel’s lead. The man stood in front of them and motioned for them to stand. He chanted a few words under his breath and made a triquetra symbol in the air in front of each of them. Kevin felt the sweat break out on his back and he touched his ring to calm his nerves.

“Cameron, I’d like you to meet Kevin Gourd,” Rachel said. “It’s his first day.”

Cameron gave Kevin a firm handshake. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. You’ve come from Talisman, I understand?”

“That’s right,” said Kevin, surprised the seer knew who he was.

“Eric Dunbar is a good guy,” Cameron said. “I hear he has an admirable ritual-to-yield ratio.” He asked a series of technical questions about Talisman’s magickal practices, which Kevin answered as far as he could, referring to the NDA he’d signed when he couldn’t divulge specifics. Cameron studied Kevin’s face intently as he spoke. Kevin had the feeling the seer could look right into his soul.

“Well, I hope you enjoy working at Chthonic,” Cameron said. “Good luck.” He took a vial of liquid from inside his suit jacket and sprinkled a few drops over Kevin, reciting some words in a language Kevin didn’t know. “This should get you off to a good start.”

“I think he liked you,” Rachel said, once they were out in the corridor. “Not everyone gets the protective rite.”

Kevin nodded. “I was surprised he knew so much about me.”

“Well, it’s the seer’s job to know everything,” Rachel said with a smile. “Plus, he was involved in your hiring process.”

“Really?”

“I probably shouldn’t be telling you this, but he did a rune reading that indicated we should employ you and get you to help me with the FeriKyno account. I expect he’ll be keeping an eye on you.” She gave a short laugh that was more like a grunt. “So don’t screw up.”

Kevin looked back at the corner office. Cameron was sitting at his desk studying a pack of Tarot cards arranged in the Celtic Cross spread. His expression was hard to read.

“I won’t,” Kevin said, trying to sound more confident than he felt.

In the following days, Kevin and Rachel worked hard preparing for the meeting with FeriKyno. Rachel performed rituals every day to increase the chances of the meeting going well. Kevin helped her with research into FeriKyno’s competitors in the healthcare sector and worked on the presentation she would give at the meeting, revamping the graphics and tactfully fixing her spelling mistakes. They discussed her proposal for rebranding FeriKyno’s medical devices division in great detail. When there was time, Rachel taught Kevin about Chthonic’s proprietary rituals. There was a lot to take in.

Now and again, Kevin passed Cameron in the corridor and the seer gave him that look again, as if he could read his mind. In the evenings, as he sat drinking coffee in his Jackson Park apartment, Kevin reviewed his notes on the rituals he’d learned and read the latest corporate magick journals to keep up with new developments. He consulted his grimoire on rituals he could do to create auspicious circumstances for the FeriKyno meeting, and stayed up late performing rites.

When he fixed himself an espresso in the office kitchen — the fancy coffee machine was so much better than the cheap one they’d had at Talisman — Kevin made an effort to introduce himself to his new colleagues. Several of them told him how lucky he was to have started in time for the vernal equinox party. “The stars must have aligned for your hire,” one of them said. It sounded like the party was a big deal. The company always hired a grand venue, there was live music and plenty of food and drink. And of course various rituals were performed to mark the equinox and rebalance the company. Everyone agreed it was the event of the year.

“You look tired,” Rachel said the day before the meeting with FeriKyno when she arrived at her cubicle. Kevin had been there since seven, obsessively tweaking the presentation.

“I was up late doing a ritual.”

“What kind of ritual?”

“To make sure the meeting goes well.”

Rachel’s eyes narrowed. “You shouldn’t be doing your own rituals. You’re not experienced enough.”

Kevin bristled. “I was running my own rituals for years at Talisman. I know what I’m doing.”

Rachel smirked. “That was at a bakery chain in a cowpoke town. Now you’re in the big league. This is serious stuff.” She sat down at her desk. “Anyway, you need to make sure you get enough rest. It’s important that you look after your body if you want your magick to work.”

On the day of the meeting, Kevin got to the office extra early, wanting to be ready in good time. He’d ignored Rachel’s advice and stayed up late reviewing the presentation and the rituals, then slept badly because of his nerves, so he was tired and there was a dull pressure behind his eyebrows. Nothing an espresso — no, a *double* espresso — wouldn’t fix, he thought to himself as he headed to the kitchen.

As the coffee machine warmed up, a couple of his colleagues arrived and stood waiting patiently. “You can go first, if you like?” Kevin offered.

“No hurry,” one of them said.

Kevin noticed Cameron joining the line of people waiting to use the machine. They nodded at each other. As always, the seer’s expression was hard to read.

The light on the machine went on. Kevin placed an espresso cup under the spout and pressed the button for a double shot. The machine hummed for a moment, then there was a loud buzzing noise followed by a crunch, and the light went off. No coffee came out. Kevin pressed the button again. Nothing.

It was only then he remembered the warning he’d received on his first day. *Don’t press the double shot button.*

He frantically stabbed all the other buttons on the machine, silently praying to the machinery gods to make it work, but nothing happened. The people in the line sighed, shook their heads, and walked off. Cameron stared at the machine for a long moment. “Very inauspicious,” he muttered as he turned to leave.

It seemed like everything that could go wrong with the meeting with FeriKyno did. Somehow Rachel managed to give the cab driver the wrong address, or he misunderstood her instructions, so they were 15 minutes late arriving. Rachel tried to rush the introductory ritual and ended up forgetting one section, rendering the whole thing pointless.

When the meeting proper started, they weren't able to connect Rachel's laptop to the projector, so they were forced to show the slides on the laptop and the participants had to strain to see them. Then it turned out Rachel had forgotten to download the most recent version of the presentation, which Kevin had put so much effort into, so they had to use an earlier version that still had mistakes in it. Because of the late start, the main decision-maker left before the end of the meeting, and the discussion got bogged down in trivial details, with key points left unaddressed. When the group performed the closing ritual, it felt like they were just going through the motions. And as Kevin knew, a ritual performed without full mindfulness was worse than useless.

"Well that went well," Rachel said mournfully as they left the FeriKyno office.

"Maybe it'll still work out," Kevin said, without much confidence. "Let's perform a purification ritual when we get back."

They did a purification ritual, and a ritual to banish negative energy, followed by another ritual the next day appealing to the gods of challenging circumstances, but nothing helped. A few days later, Rachel's contact at FeriKyno emailed to say they weren't interested in pursuing the contract further. When they told their boss Tessie, she picked up a decorative stone off her desk and examined it. "That's very disappointing," was all she said. Kevin would have preferred it if she'd shouted at them. There was something terrifying about her self-control.

In the days that followed, Kevin had the impression that everyone in the office was talking about the debacle behind their backs. He heard rumors that senior management had been hoping the contract with FeriKyno would turn Chthonic's fortunes around, and were very upset the deal had fallen through. Kevin and Rachel were assigned to separate new projects.

When Kevin saw her, he thought she looked stressed. Even Cameron was lacking his usual poise and seemed distracted.

The departmental secretary, who Kevin had become friendly with, warned him that the management was looking for someone to blame. “You’d better watch out it’s not you,” she told Kevin in a low voice. “Rachel’s been telling everyone it was your fault. And it’s company policy to discipline employees for serious mistakes.”

Kevin asked Rachel if they could meet in the ritual room. “What’s going on?” she asked as he closed the door.

“I hear you’ve been trying to pin the blame for FeriKyno on me,” Kevin said, rubbing his ring with his thumb.

“Well, it *was* your fault,” Rachel said, examining the athame in its glass case. “If you hadn’t broken the coffee machine, the meeting would have gone well.”

“What do you mean?” Kevin felt the back of his neck grow warm. “Half the things that went wrong at the meeting were your fault, and the other things were accidents. It had nothing to do with the coffee machine.”

Rachel shook her head darkly. “You don’t understand how magick works, do you? Everything is connected to everything else. An inauspicious event has knock-on effects even if the relationships aren’t immediately apparent.”

“But if everything is connected, how do you decide what caused what?”

Rachel turned to look at him. “The true magician sees beneath the surface of events and understands deep causality.”

But after a few days, the talk about FeriKyno died down and people went back to discussing the vernal equinox party. Preparations were apparently in full swing. Kevin learned there were going to be some large-scale rituals, one of which would be targeted at undoing the negative energy caused by the FeriKyno meeting. That was good, Kevin thought. A major ritual would draw a line under the event and help everyone to move on. That was one of the positive aspects of corporate magick. It provided a framework that helped a company to process a negative outcome and put it behind them, rather than letting resentment simmer for years like in the old days.

The day before the party, Rachel turned up at her cubicle with two takeout cups of coffee. “This is for you,” she said, handing one to Kevin.

“Hey, thanks,” he said, surprised.

“Listen, I’m sorry about the other day.”

Kevin studied Rachel’s expression. The apology seemed genuine. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Are you going to the party tomorrow?”

Kevin took a sip of his coffee. It was an expensive roast, and Rachel had remembered he took two sugars. “I’m not sure. I still feel kind of bad about the FeriKyno thing.”

Rachel gave him a warm smile. “You should come. It’ll be fun. Take your mind off things.”

Kevin thought about it for a moment. Maybe he should go, show he was a team player. Put the FeriKyno failure behind him. “Sure, why not.”

When Kevin arrived at the party venue, a former bank converted into an event space, he walked into a wall of warm, moist air and loud music. A jazz band was playing on the stage, and servers in formal clothes paraded trays of hors d’oeuvres and glasses of chilled white wine. The room was already half full of Chthonic employees and more people were arriving all the time. Kevin took in the scene approvingly. Talisman could never have afforded anything like this. Switching companies had been the right decision. Chthonic was going places, and so was he. He wished Eric could see him now. He felt a momentary pang of nostalgia at the thought of his former mentor, but he quickly dismissed it. His future was here now.

He spotted Rachel standing nearby and headed toward her, grabbing a couple of drinks from a passing tray. He handed one glass to her and raised his. “To Chthonic.” Rachel clinked her glass against his and gave him a friendly smile. “I’m glad you joined us.”

Kevin and Rachel mingled, chatting to colleagues and helping themselves to snacks from the buffet. There was a buoyant, expectant mood in the room. Kevin could tell the party was already lifting the employees’ spirits. After a few minutes, Rachel said she needed to talk to Cameron about something and drifted off, leaving Kevin to check out the divination tables.

He was on his second glass of wine and about to cast his coins at the I Ching stand when there was the sound of someone tapping on a microphone. The room quickly fell silent. Kevin turned to see a woman he didn’t know standing on the stage, flanked by Cameron and Tessie.

“That’s our CEO,” whispered the woman next to him.

“Good evening, everyone,” began the CEO, extending her arm in a sweeping gesture. “Welcome to our annual vernal equinox party. As you know, this is a time of great power. The rituals that we perform this evening will be especially potent.”

The crowd applauded.

“This is particularly important for our company because, as you know, we’ve been going through difficult times lately. We were hoping the deal with FeriKyno would mark a new start. Unfortunately, it didn’t come to fruition.” Her expression became somber. “It’s important that we mark our failures as well as our successes. Only by performing a suitable ritual this evening can we put this setback behind us.” More applause.

Cameron took the microphone and the crowd hushed in respect. “I’ve spent many hours meditating on what went wrong with the FeriKyno deal,” he intoned. “I’ve concluded that we angered Hapi, the god of new clients, with our hubris. We need to atone for that.” He paused. “This requires a sacrifice.”

A jolt of electricity went through Kevin’s bones. He’d heard of companies performing sacrifices — it was the most powerful magick there was — but he’d never witnessed one. Officially, sacrifices were illegal, but companies could get away with them if nobody found out. Normally sacrifices involved rabbits or chickens, but he’d heard rumors of one blue-chip company sacrificing a goat. He wondered what Cameron was planning. He hadn’t seen any animals, but presumably they were backstage somewhere. He was glad he was there to witness such a potent ritual. A sacrifice would certainly make it a night to remember.

On stage, Cameron produced the ceremonial athame that Kevin had seen in the ritual room. Its long blade glinted in the spotlight. He held it above his head and said various incantations, then lowered it. “Tonight, we are going to sacrifice the person who is responsible for the failure.” Gasps from the crowd. Cameron looked out into the room. “Kevin Gourd,” he said in a low voice.

Before Kevin could process what he’d heard, two strong pairs of hands grabbed his arms. He jerked his head from side to side, unable to believe what was happening. Surely this was some kind of joke? A hazing ritual for new employees? But nobody was smiling. In an instant, Kevin realized his coworkers already knew.

On stage, Cameron was explaining how Kevin breaking the coffee machine had created the negative energy that caused the deal to fail. Kevin tried to pull away but the men holding him were too strong. “You can’t do this!” he shouted. “It’s not right.”

“It’s company policy, I’m afraid.” He recognised Rachel’s voice. She was standing just behind him. There was a touch of sadness in her tone, but mostly she was business-like as she continued. “Here at Chthonic, employees are disciplined for poor performance. You gave your consent when you signed your contract.” She gave her laugh that was more like a grunt. “Or didn’t you read the small print?”

As he was dragged toward the stage, Kevin looked back and saw Rachel nodding in Cameron’s direction. It was then he realized they’d stitched him up.

His arm was held tight, but he could still move his fingers, and he touched his ring with his thumb. Protection, Eric had said.

Kevin was beginning to think the ring didn't work.

*Anxiety Sequence, Pt. I: Fear in Corporate
America / The Cat*

8 a.m., interior, apartment: If the cat dies now I'll have to fit it in the freezer.

This occurs to me somewhere between half-assing a tooth-brushing and pulling polyester pants over unshaven legs. 12 hour days and a twice-daily, hour-long commute have left my hair unwashed for a week. I brush out the more visible flakes.

Checking train times on my phone, it's confirmed: no time. I start to wonder how long I could sustain myself without this job and, based on my bank statements, I calculate about 2.4 weeks.

The freezer is fairly full, but I think there may be room for a deceased cat somewhere between the vegetable medley and the freezer-burned, half-eaten gelato. *Grim*, I think, starving, but glad for the fact that nicotine serves also as an appetite suppressant. *Two-for-one*.

Then, *Fuck*, the time.

9 a.m., interior, open office space: A month ago, I returned from my first vacation since joining this place to find my things had been moved in my absence to the seat that everyone joked was cursed — the last three people who sat there quit within a month. It's a middle seat at a shared table, directly next to the department head. Maggie, who had quit, then returned for more

money, had taken my previous space. IT had had to set up two new workstations to make this happen, instead of just slotting her into the empty cursed seat.

Maggie says, *Gotta do it for the 'gram*, trying to sound ironic as she painstakingly arranges her fast-food breakfast on the windowsill next to her new desk. She says she thinks it's impossible to break one-thousand followers, no matter how artfully she stages her meals.

Across the low polyester-clad partition separating the table, the midwestern redheaded one slams manicured hands next to her keyboard, demanding: *Guess who I saw on the street! Guess!* (It's a celebrity.)

9:02 a.m.: *Email*. One from the department head, sent at 10:16 p.m. last night.

Please explain to me why there are questions missing from the form. This is a mess. Mess has been underlined. I'm putting a one-on-one on your calendar for tomorrow morning, 9am.

I can feel my heart sink, then rise to somewhere in my throat, throbbing. Joints numb, I pull up the file and scour it for missing responses. The only missing field is this: "Fax number"

9:05 a.m.: No one in this office has used a fax machine in at least ten years. We don't actually own one. The meeting I didn't know was scheduled has started without me. I realize how hard it will be to explain in a near-future job interview that I've been fired because of an archaic and altogether absent piece of technology and my failing to include a non-existent number for it on some form.

I pull up my bank account again. I find the assigned conference room. I'm late.

9:10 p.m., interior, apartment. At home twelve hours later, I pray the cat has a long and healthy life.

Socialism In The Workplace

The new hire is introducing himself at the weekly staff meeting. He jogs to the mic with a sort of embarrassed athleticism and then yanks it out of the stand a little too hard, so that a thud coughs out of the speakers. “Hey everyone, I’m Luca,” he says. “So happy to be here.”

He looks like a tech CEO or televangelist. He pauses for effect, waits for the room to settle around him. The muscles of his tanned forearms are visible as he lifts the mic back up to his mouth. He whispers into it. “Can’t wait to meet you all.”

Will misses the meeting so a lot of this sequence is imagined based on the description of his work friend Tracey. “He seems nice,” she says. “But kind of a bro.” Will nods, silent. Sometimes he thinks he might be a bro, though not the kind that Luca is. “Not that it matters.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s the CEO’s son.” She shrugs. They both look out over the office – a series of long desks set in horizontal rows between the parallel windows of their loft space – until their eyes find the door to the CEO’s office at the end of the room. Tracey is about Will’s age, with dark brown hair and a penchant for black jeans and fashionable tops. “I have a meeting,” she says. “I’ll see you later.”

“Ok.” He pulls his phone out and checks his email on it before returning to his desk, where he email his open.

Will has been trying not to use plastic bags. So of course he notices plastic bags everywhere. He buys lunch – which already, unavoidably, comes in a plastic container – and they offer him a plastic bag. He buys a yogurt at the Duane Reade on his way home from the gym and the clerk tries to put it in a bag. “I’m OK,” he says. “Don’t worry about the bag.” The clerk nods. He wonders if it’s policy to put everything in a plastic bag. *What a horrible policy*, he thinks to himself.

The plastic bags are part of a larger shift. He’s trying to be more conscious of his role in the world. Better.

He’s not sure what brought this on. Part of it is that, in spite of the fact that he never pictured himself getting into sales, he has been in sales for six years. And six years is a long time. Not so long that he can’t do something else but a long time doing something that, at best, can be described as useless. Socially, he solves this problem by regularly commenting on the shittiness and hypocrisy of large companies – including his clients. To make himself feel better, he decides to be a part of the solution.

Tracey is putting together a baby pool for Lisa, one of the accountants. Lisa is very pregnant. “What’s the due date?” Will asks. He pauses. “Is that cheating?”

“No,” Tracey says. “But they never come on the due date.”

“Has anyone taken the due date?”

“Yes.” Will ends up taking a week early and a week late between six and noon and six and midnight, respectively. In the pool, each day is broken into four parts and as a result the prize, at last count, is up to \$350. Obviously, a chunk of it will go to a shower gift for Lisa. A committee, led by Tracey, will decide what to get. Over coffee one day Will offers to help – financially, with research, etc. He believes that work should, as possible, be pleasant, and makes a point of supporting coworkers where he can.

There’s a happy hour that takes place a few days before the start of Lisa’s maternity leave (it’s at this event that they give her the gift). Someone breaks into the events budget and makes virgin and non-virgin daiquiris. There’s baby themed bingo and a brief round of company baby trivia. Thankfully, someone knows the name of every single baby at the company. This makes Will happy.

The party goes late and a contingent – about fifteen people – ends up at an Irish pub down the street from the office. Will finds himself wedged between a bar stool and the bar top, talking to Suzanne who also works in accounting. About eight feet away from them but positioned in a way that he’s directly in Will’s line of sight, Luca is regaling a small group with a story from business school. “It was just supposed to be a team building exercise,” the story starts.

“You guys busy?” Will asks Suzanne. She rolls her eyes.

“Always.”

“Yeah,” Will says. “I know what you mean.” They pause, drink. “What do you think of him? He seems... I don’t know.” Suzanne looks at him, her eyes slanted. He doesn’t know how to read the look but, feeling a bit drunk, pushes on. “Weird I guess.”

“He’s funny.” Her brow has furrowed. Maybe. “Really down to earth.”

He’s not a king, Will almost says. Instead, “Yeah I haven’t gotten to spend much time with him yet.”

“Well he’s really nice.”

“I’m sure. I just haven’t gotten to know him yet.”

Will goes home. Sitting on his couch, he swipes on Bumble for a while. He gets a few matches, but none of them message him. He thinks about how easy Luca must have it on the internet, if he even uses the internet. He thinks about how easy Luca has had it in general. He thinks, for the first of what will be many times, that Luca is a fucking prick. He tells himself that he, Will is smarter, but then remembers that Luca went to Yale. He saw that on LinkedIn.

The next day he wakes up embarrassed about the conversation with Suzanne and goes to work. They don’t sit near each other and they don’t run into each other but Will still spends a decent chunk of the day being conspicuously pleasant to show that he’s a team player. He makes two pots of coffee and asks people about their weekend plans. He and Tracey spend half an hour in the office kitchen talking about one of her more difficult clients.

Will's weekend plans involve going to the gym and a birthday party for a college friend. The college friend's girlfriend is throwing the party. Her name is Nicole, and she has made a major effort. There are decorations and a cake. There is nice alcohol. Expensive, nice alcohol and mixed drinks. "She's so nice." A mutual friend whispers to him at one point. She is.

He stays at the party later than he means to, talking to a pair of his friends over Miller High Life. "My boss hired his kid," he says at one point. "He's a total frat boy."

"Lame." His friends say in unison.

"Yeah," he says. There's a pause. He's not sure what to say. He feels somewhat embarrassed to have brought the issue up. Growing up, they would have made fun of people for getting this worked up about non-problems. His friend Mark cuts in.

"We just started working with Adidas," he says. "Which has been cool."

A few weeks go by. Lisa has her baby. They review intern resumes and Will spends a few afternoons on the phone with college students. All of them are extremely confident. They go through their majors and activities and interests in lists that never seem to end. They call attention to the quality of their education and their engagement with it. They talk about their rounded, deep intelligence. Will wonders if he sounded like them. He wants to tell them to pick a different job.

Will's boss has put Luca on one of his accounts. "Find a way to use him," are his boss's exact words. Will tries to give him the tasks he doesn't want to do. Luca doesn't blink. In fact he does a great job. This makes Will's job easier, which makes him happy but also

uncomfortable. He spends a lot of time thinking about the fact that Luca is gaining power and influence.

One Thursday Will goes on a date with a girl he meets on Bumble. Her name is Sandy. Her profile says that she's a teacher and rock-climbing enthusiast. They meet at a bar that's closer to her apartment than his.

"What do you do?" Sandy asks at some point. They've made a long time without falling to the more basic intro questions. The date is going well.

"Sales consulting," Will says. "Basically we come in when people can't figure out how to sell stuff."

Will feels confident. He feels like he and this girl have a connection. So he brings up Luca. "They just hired our owner's kid though. He's not very experienced but he's super senior. It's fucked up."

"Sounds fucked up," Sandy says. "But what can you do?"

"I know," Will says. "It's just wrong though."

"The client loves Luca," his boss says. "They just called me to say how great the work has been." He pauses. "And of course they're still very happy with you."

“Right,” Will says. He’s started to dread coming to work. He dreads it so much that he has trouble sleeping. He finds himself snapping at people. He walks around mad most of the time.

A little while after the conversation with his boss he walks over to Tracey’s desk. “Want to get a coffee?” he asks. He’s been feeling a little crazy since the conversation: paranoid, like they’re trying to push him out. This actually cuts the rage: he’s too afraid to be angry. He’s not sure what he wants from Tracey beyond reassurance that he’s good at his job.

“Sure,” she says. They walk a couple blocks to the Starbucks. As soon as they’re out the door Will brings up the conversation with his boss.

“So apparently they love Luca,” he says. “The bank.”

“That’s great,” Tracey says.

“Yeah,” he says. “But I mean he’s just doing what we were already doing. What I was already doing.”

“Right,” she says.

“They were already happy.”

“I know,” she says. “But it’s good that they like what we’re doing. Maybe they’ll give us some more money.” Will hasn’t considered this possibility. What if they up the budget and Luca gets credit?

“Yeah,” he says. “I don’t know. It just feels like they’re going to give Luca credit. Boss’s kid and all.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Yeah?”

“People know how good you’re at your job,” she says. “Don’t worry about it.”

Will recognizes that it’s become an obsession. He spends huge chunks of the day staring at Luca – their desks are about ten feet apart. The CEO’s son is always spinning his pen on his fingers. His mouth is always open. *He looks fucking stupid*, Will thinks.

He notes, too, the amount of time Luca spends texting. And the dumb look he gets on his face when he’s concentrating, even when he’s not typing. He notices the time it takes him to write an email – in watching Luca, Will discovers that the CEO’s son agonizes over his response to every email Will sends. For a few moments he feels a tenderness towards Luca. Luca cares. Luca isn’t good at everything. Then he reminds himself of all the things the CEO’s son has, all the things he’s been given. He tells himself that this is how the world balances itself –or anyway as close as the world gets to balance.

“He’s kind of just a jackass,” he says to Tracey one day in the elevator. “The more I watch him, that’s what I think.” She smiles but doesn’t respond.

A few days later he finds out that Tracey and Luca have had lunch together. He finds out from the office manager or rather he finds out when he sees them riding the elevator together and asks the office manager if they had a meeting. “Just lunch,” she says.

Will nods and then goes to the bathroom. A cold sweat has settled over him. He places both hands on the counter and stares at himself in the mirror. “Jackass,” he says. “Jackass.”

This, he knows, is his wakeup call. He’s really been cutting it close. People have probably started to sense his loathing, his weird workplace rage. He should be grateful for what he has.

He Gchats a friend of his who tells him the same thing. “Just let it go,” his friend says. “It’s a job.”

Will knows it’s a job. He knows that life isn’t fair. He just thought that his life was going to be fair. Or mostly fair anyway.

He understands that this is silly. He understands that Luca isn’t, in the scheme of the world’s unfairness, much of an issue. But this knowledge doesn’t help so he focuses on whether Tracey will say anything to the boss’s son. She doesn’t, so he lets it go.

Or he almost lets it go. About a week later they have coffee. It’s Tracey’s idea. She’s walking past his desk and asks him. “I’m out of gas,” she says.

They make small talk in the elevator. The whole ride Will feels a lump forming in his throat though he can’t quite place why. The invitation seems genuine. They’re friends.

Halfway through the walk the source of his anxiety becomes apparent when he asks Tracey about the lunch. "So I heard you and Luca had lunch?"

"Where'd you hear that?" she responds.

"Jill."

"Oh." They order their coffees. "Weird," Tracey says after they've finished.

"How was it?"

"He's nice. He said we hadn't gotten to spend a lot of time together and wanted to find out more about what I did."

"Makes sense."

"Yeah. It was good."

"Cool."

"I know you don't like him," Tracey says. She sips her coffee. "But he's smart and nice."

"I like him," Will says.

"Okay," Tracey says. He feels like he should say something else.

"Did you ever think this is where you'd end up?" he asks. "This sort of job."

“I thought I’d be a doctor.”

“What happened?” she shrugs.

“Sometimes I can’t believe that this is all there is.”

The best word for the look on Tracey’s face is stricken. “It’s not-“ she starts. She gestures around her with both hands. It’s an abortive gesture: half started and then immediately stopped.

“Sorry,” Will says. “Sorry.” He makes up a lie. “My dog’s been sick.” Tracey says she understands.

A few weeks later Will’s boss tells him that Luca is going to be taking over their shared account. “We’re giving you a piece of new business that we just won,” he explains. “It’s a good opportunity.” Will doesn’t think so. Will can feel his future at the company shrinking.

He goes on a second date with Sandy. They have dinner at a ramen place. “I love ramen,” Sandy says.

“Me too.”

The meal lasts for a long time. Sandy explains some of the issues she has with her school. “We were founded to do a specific thing,” she says. “But we don’t have the funds. And since we don’t have the funds, we can’t offer kids the opportunities we were supposed to,

which means some of them act out. And then we don't have anything for them. To help them I mean."

"Yeah," Will says. "Yeah." He pauses, spoons some ramen into his mouth. "Jesus that sucks."

He keeps thinking about this on the way home, along with a related thought. The related thought is: *I'm such an asshole.*

This realization doesn't help. Remembering that other people's problems are worse doesn't make his problem seem smaller; it just makes him feel guilty for caring. He tries to force himself to be happy but it doesn't take. He tells himself to focus on his next paycheck. His next paycheck is nine days away.

Will keeps waiting for someone to ask him what's wrong. He keeps waiting to be confronted for his behavior. But no one says anything. "Keep up the good work," his boss says.

"Okay," Will says.

There has to be some way out of this, he thinks. And of course there is, there are other jobs, other places. That's the rational thing to do, the sane thing. Instead he goes to work every day and pictures himself flipping Luca's salad into his face as he eats at his desk. He pictures himself tripping the boss's son as he walks by. He pictures himself screaming at him for using a plastic bag for a powerbar.

None of these things happen. And he doesn't leave either. Things just continue. This is baffling. It's truly baffling that this is the way things are.

Daniel Ridley

*the ceiling is downloading (heaven) - a
mailchimp elegy*

September 18th

Was sent the email [New Events This Week](#)

September 20th

Opened the email [New Events This Week](#)

October 1st

Was sent the email [New Events This Week](#)

December 1st

- Unsubscribed via admin

December 1st

- Admin wrote a note: 'Deceased'

Tuesdays With Monkey Wards

Seven is usually a lucky number but not when I'm the manager and have been number-summoned to the Montgomery Ward men's department. It's supposed to keep us safe, a number instead of a name.

When a desperate cashier calls out that manager number, it means something, or someone is on fire or stealing a fire-pit (Lawn and Garden) or threatening them with a brass fire poker (Housewares) or One (the automotive manager I make out with behind the tires) is busy with a parole-jumping employee cuffed in front of the tires. We are in love partly because he is there and also because he broke the store's satellite Christmas music, the one that alternated between Burl Ives "Baby in the Snow" and Madonna's "Santa Baby" until our ears bled, all in the name of retail love in a store that neither one of us loved.

This time, it's because there's a small non-threatening man who looks pregnant with many still-tagged sweaters under his shirt. Someone from Furniture (Six) has tackled him like they are a football star or auditioning to be Loss Prevention (Nine.) We've had training discussions about what constitutes stealing and that potential shoplifting requires the thief to leave the store, like the man who rolled a rack of leather coats (Outerwear) out the back exit, alarm tags blaring. *This* is only a small man with small sweaters.

After this roly poly man is stripped of his sweater haul, I count them *1-2-3-4-5-6-7* and so on and pile them up for someone else to put away. The small man that gave birth to our new fall knitwear line walks out the front exit into the Food Court. I can see the outline of a

Walkman in his pant cuff and underwear packages shoved in his coat pockets, but I'm too tired to chase him. It's my day off and I've worked seventeen days in a row and slept in the store last night with the other managers because someone (maybe the sweater man) cut the alarm wires and somehow the seven of us 20-somethings were delegated as security guards, taking turns sleeping and staring at the security gates into the dark apocalyptic mall.

On that Tuesday in late-November, I turn around to find two teen cashiers have decided to put on all the not-stolen sweaters all-at-once in some slap happy, high-five each other version of a sitcom joke. I would fire them but they can count money and Friday *is* the day after Thanksgiving, so I need them.

Fold sweaters I say to them and they start counting to *Seven*.

Corporate Loop

The ZYEX, out of deference to its employees,
increased the frequency of private health checks
for stress, fatigue, repetitive strain syndrome, inertia,
depression, lack of ambition and misanthropy,

and so as to finance these complimentary provisions
there needed to be an **increase in the numbers**
of employees discharged or redeployed,
certain **expectations** had to be disappointed

and rules and regulations implemented
such as curtailment of breaks, a ban on mobile phones,
cuts to **subsidies** on canteen lunches
and the introduction of untrained staff members

who had searching questions to ask of the existing staff
and interrupted their **ability** to achieve their quota,
while involuntary overtime led to **higher team attainments**
and the buoyancy, as a whole, of the company

which the **contributions** of individual employees made achievable, resulting in **higher levels** of stress, fatigue, repetitive strain syndrome, inertia, depression, lack of ambition and misanthropy,

and so the ZYEX, out of deference to its employees, **increased** the frequency of private health checks.

The Fault in Our KPIs

Peace was all I had known. My world was a simple 9-5, existing harmoniously in the realm of our cherished sovereign. A world abundant with cyberslacking and smoke breaks. That peace would not last. Our leader's downfall was made reality by those who had the least to gain from his rule. The oracles of his demise—the Accounts Department—plotted in darkness, chronicling our impending collapse in the pages of a Quarterly Earnings Report, exposing our benevolent lord's supposed defects to the Upper Floors.

The powers that be responded unceremoniously; exiling a man who led us to great victories over waning morale and through pizza-party famines. They justified this cruelty with accusations of the worst sales quarter in company history, with claims of unprecedented lows in employee productivity. Their power was absolute. We were subject to their decree. Our leader's end came and we bid him unceremonious farewell; a glum banquet with generic supermarket cake.

Then the Usurper came. The champion of the higher powers; tracker of idle time, architect of hotdesking, and reducer of toilet paper ply. Under his banner of “cost-cutting” and “productivity maximization” the opulence of the preceding reign was crushed where it lay; a few technical revisions in the scripture of company policy was all it took. Those who paved the way for his rise celebrated; reveled in the gore of his ruthless efficiency, rejoicing in the restoration of order and stability. We could do nothing but tolerate our fate; were told to be grateful for the mercy of the Usurper, protecting us from being downsized. We were bound by the tools of our oppression--their KPIs.

I was the last recruit of our departed leader, welcomed into an age of liberty, comfort, casual Fridays, and daily doughnuts in the breakroom. It was all I had ever known, all I ever wanted. When the autocracy arrived, I took up arms with the rebellion, those of us who refused to accept life under this tyranny of our corporate Big Brother.

We fought in the shadows, sowing disorder into day-to-day operations; agents of chaos fighting with periodic-mouse-moving apps and VPN browsers. Some brave folk fought openly, buying idle time by jamming wireless printers with large documents or growing facial hair that pushed the limits of an arcane dress code. The mutiny felt inevitable, our rebellion building a voice that hoped to overwhelm.

But we were no match to the resources of our enemy; we were chattel to them, waiting to be brought to heel. Several rebels were tempted by promises of greater sales incentives and slightly more coverage in dental insurance. Some abandoned our cause claiming they had seen the light: "Maximum productivity is the foundation of workplace fulfillment." An insidious mantra designed to chip away at our plurality, our unity, forcing acceptance of austerity. We were to be cogs in the machine, only moving those above forward. Obscured from the nostalgia of our past lives by the artificial brightness of new, and hollow incentives, we succumbed, one by one, until I was the last.

The Usurper deftly wielded his power, turning my fellow rebels away from our path. The Upper Floors showered him with blessings; bonuses, extended contracts and promotions for his closest subordinates. I had been abandoned, left to the whims of efficiency and record-low expenses. I stood alone in the ruin of what had once been...homely.

In a moment of desperation, I seized an opportunity to delve into dark arts. It would extract a hidden price. A grimoire with the power to dispense anonymous criticism of the Usurpers regime: the Supervisor Review. I should have wielded it with more care, should have seen it for the trap it was, outing me to those who controlled my fate. My downfall was imminent and with it, the rebellion would be extinguished.

A trial was set, and the guillotine readied. It was not publicized as a punishment for my seething review, that would have been considered illegal, and a potential lawsuit. My execution was disguised as a performance review, an anatomic dissertation of my failures to match the KPIs bestowed by the Usurper. One final humiliation to carve open the wound of my pending termination.

Through an unseen miracle, I survived. My head did not roll, and a clemency unlooked for allowed me another 9-5. I was rescued by corporate diversity quotas, my mere existence just putting the company over their threshold. I was saved by the same holy writ that was manipulated by my oppressor: policy. I was deemed an irreplaceable loss, the product of hiring freezes and my disappointing-but-with-justifiable-potential performance. Instead, they branded me, a fallen outlaw now working in a probationary period with “performance-adjusted KPIs”. I was forced into existence as one of them, a white-collar turncoat, the lone iconoclast deprived of his vigour.

In time, I succumbed to their ways, dominated by a fear of the unknown multiverse of job-hunting, a growing appetite for stability that came with passing quarters and the cascading rot of the 5-to-9. I live as a cautionary tale, a symbol for those who yearn for freedom within corporate confinement; a modicum of flexure in a rigid system. To not be bound by the fault in our KPIs.

You're Hired

I. Training

Soft pop – 80's, 90's and early 2000's rock

Sample tested for home improvement purchases.

Huey Lewis and the News' Hip to be Square

seeps between aisles. Patrick Bateman agrees

this soundtrack is perfect for power tools.

My body is accounted for in the training room.

Informational videos drill

characteristics about carpet and stained carpet

pad, carpet pile, carpet conditions, carpet life.

The actor says *carpet* over and over again.

car-

pet

II. Introduction to Sales

I interact with customers shopping car-

pet. An optimistic young couple with

a dog and hope for kids wants car-

pet that will get ruined, suck years

of spills and piss stains and that day dad
throws mom's boiling macaroni
across the house.

A tall moon-burnt woman asks the difference
between laminate and vinyl. She's walked on raw
slab for ten years. Her aging back feels the hard
steps and frantic pacing and constant vacuuming
concrete erosion sands
and cat hair and she
remains.

She explains *the exterior of the house is beautiful, strong,*
brick, the walls, doors, windows, she goes on.

She calls her trauma a *flood that revealed*
a crack in the foundation the builder overlooked.

An ID badge hangs from her neck.

The portrait is a young, sun-tanned woman.

Whatever curse fell her a decade ago
remains.

III. Review the Warrantee

Back in the breakroom

I'm instructed to choose a locker.

The only box left ajar has
the name tag Marvin with

RIP written in thick, black

permanent marker, *You will be*
missed

I think it's a retirement joke
but the longer I stare, the metal gills
tagged in grief graffiti
whisper bad omens.

The *Days Without Incident* clock
remains at ten.

Lucas Burkett

The CEO of Love

(Accessories for sexiness sold separately.)

Is your body a health code violation?

Do snakes lay eggs in-between your toes?

Have you been asked to join the Jean-Paul Sartre

Impersonator Society but you don't know who the hell he is?

Are you lonely?

If so, put that Whopperito down

and count to a billion.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 16.

Are you a billionaire?

Didn't think so.

Steve Jobs counted to a billion every day.

Now, I'm not promising

a yellow Lamborghini stuffed with bikini models by tomorrow.

But follow these easy steps and you too will become the CEO of Love.

1). Cackle like Tom Cruise entering a room.

Any room. Including the bathroom.

2). Stop whining. Nobody cares about your “childhood.”

3). Invest in guns and gorilla meat.

4). Mind powers:

Control your mind.

Control her body.

You deserve it.

(This will destroy you.)

Lucas Burkett

*Billionaire Poetics*²

I'm calling today
to raise awareness
about sad billionaires.

Did you know
a billionaire dies
every 82 years?

#BillionaireLivesMatter
Start the conversation!
Don't loot

a private museum
of lobster
caviar frittatas!

They're saving it
for a special occasion!

² previously published in Clockwise Cat

Stay hungry! Stay foolish!

Stay inside your urinal.

Now bow your head

and beg

the Lord's blessing.

Secret Sauce

A gamey odor settles beneath the smells of fresh paint and chlorine in the lobby, where koi fish swim beneath fountain sprays. I smell the paint first, then the chlorine, then the fresh meat scent, and I accept the first two, but brush off the third.

I make my way to the bank of elevators, which will take me to the fifth floor, where I'll set up my desk and get my employee badge. When the door opens, I step inside. Unfamiliar faces smile, when they see me looking at the stained fabric lining the walls.

"That's from the hot sauce fight," a woman in a tie-dyed T-shirt says. The others around her tell the story of the time they all got stuck in the elevator, with the CEO, and he started a hot sauce fight that was legendary. Laughter follows, then silence, as the doors open, and we file out.

At my desk, a co-worker named Stacey hands me my badge.

"Never take the stairs," she says. "The badge sometimes doesn't work between floors. You'll get stuck in the staircase."

And I believe her.

At lunch, I take the elevator one floor below to join my co-workers in the breakroom. We all sit at one long table, which is lined with bottles of hot sauce. I watch as co-workers open up their sandwiches, containers of pasta, or salad, and douse their food generously with

the condiment. As they eat, it runs down the corners of their mouths, oozing out between bits of food stuck in their teeth. I pour a soda into my plastic cup, hoping to settle my stomach with carbonation.

“Hey, if you want ice, it’s in the freezer there,” Stacey says.

When I open the freezer, I find the ice, but also something gray, somewhat round, but lumpy. Next to it, I find more of these things—absolutely crusted over in ice.

“What’s in here, with the ice?” I ask.

Jake licks his fingers, which drip with hot sauce. “Don’t know. We never figured it out.”

#

When we ride the elevator back up to the fifth floor, Stacey and Jake remind me about the meeting in the conference room.

As I pass by my desk, to get to the conference room, I smell hot sauce on everyone’s breath, but also that gamey smell, which floats underneath everything else: the hand cream someone applies, a spritz of air freshener, the musty odor of the air conditioner. I follow it to the conference room, which is small, filled with oversized, stuffed chairs. We sink into the cushions when we sit down, with our notebooks and pens. We’re supposed to brainstorm a new line of products. The CEO, Braydon, writes the ideas on the board and passes around a bottle of hot sauce. Everyone takes a swig from the bottle. I don’t really want to participate, but the bottle’s thrusting in my face, and I take a drink. The sauce burns my throat. I choke out an idea. It’s not a good one, but everyone cheers and urges me to pass the bottle down, but I

notice that Jake, who has been contributing the most ideas—and his ideas are quite impressive—is slumped over in a chair, and he’s convulsing.

“What’s going on?” I ask Stacey.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” she says, as someone drags him from the couch.

Patricia has also been shouting out excellent ideas, but she’s complaining of a sore, dry throat. She gets up to get some water from the breakroom downstairs, and I follow her. When we arrive, I hear something like a chainsaw coming from the other side of the room.

“Maintenance, probably,” Patricia says. “So annoying. They’re always working on something.”

Patricia chugs a glass of water, and I do the same, but when we get back to the conference room, more people are slumped over in their chairs, convulsing. The dry-erase board is filled with so many ideas, there doesn’t seem to be room for any more. But Stacey’s pumping out ideas like a machine.

“Step up your game,” she says to me. “Braydon needs more, and your job depends on it.” She hands me the hot sauce, which is dripping down the sides of the bottle. Backwash from everyone’s saliva floats on top. My stomach wants to revolt, but I push that instinct down and take a swig. The heat travels right up my nasal passages, burning my eyes, pricking my brain. A cloud seems to wash over me, and I feel nothing. I just rattle off words. They make no sense to me, and my vision goes blurry. I can barely see the marker on the dry-erase board moving back and forth. The room spins, and my body sways, but I’ll be damned if I hit the floor.

“Just give in,” Stacey says.

I continue to fight.

“If you don’t give in, you’ll throw up,” Stacey tells me.

No longer in control of my own body, I succumb to the cloud that envelops me, and the hot sauce comes up—a fiery trickle that swallows me whole.

#

A grating, whining noise startles me awake, and I discover I’m lying on the cold, linoleum floor of the breakroom. Around me, there are barber’s chairs, which look like they’re attached to a retractable pole, just below each linoleum square on the floor. Braydon has donned a smock and is sawing open the head of co-workers, who are passed out in the chairs. He’s dousing their brains with hot sauce.

“That’s where the ideas live, and we vault them for later,” he says, pointing to the freezer. “The sauce—it’s a preservative.”

I try to stand, but my legs are weak.

“Just rest,” I hear Stacey say. “It’ll all be over soon.”

Her blurry form presses up against Braydon, and she’s pushing her hips into his, as they embrace, rhythmically moving their pelvises against one another, gasping for breath as they pour hot sauce all over, lick it off of each other, and my co-worker’s exposed brain.

“Me and Braydon—we’re immune,” she finally says. “Sort of. This sauce does make us produce ideas, but we don’t pass out. The ones who do, get their brains preserved. There’s a lot of turnover here, but a lot of institutional knowledge too, soooo. Yeah.” She looks at her nails and licks her fingers.

Someone drags in more bodies. I want to retch again, but I see a door marked “Exit,” only to remember that my badge, which I still have wrapped around my neck, won’t work between floors. When I might reach the first floor to get out, the door won’t open.

Again, I force myself to stand, only to have Stacey knock me back down, but I do manage to grab a bottle of hot sauce and break it on the floor. Jagged glass points outward as I steady myself against a wall. When Stacey comes at me, I shove the jagged pieces into her throat. She goes down, blood dripping from a gaping wound. She has the nerve to rub hot sauce in it and moan before hitting the floor with a thud.

Braydon, I suspect, has stronger tools to subdue me, but it seems that I’m not even on his radar.

“Jackpot!” I hear him say. He’s opened up Jake’s head, fully exposing his brain. “This one holds the most ideas. I can see them, buzzing about like electricity.” He douses the brain with hot sauce and wraps it in plastic. While he obsesses over the biggest head he’s ever seen, one so massive and ripe with knowledge that the company’s ideas supply will never run dry, I pull the exit door and use my badge to escape. It works on every floor. Until I get to the koi pond lobby. There, I inexplicably slow down, dripping with blood and a longing for spice—and I remember Stacey’s words. That I could get trapped between floors, and this is what she probably really means: The pull is incredible. I actually want to stay. I can taste the sting of

peppers on my tongue, mixed with something crude and vile, and I want more. Reaching into the koi pond, I'm determined to put the fire out, swallowing deeply, sticking my head directly under the fountain, and rushing for the door. When I'm out in the fresh air, which smells of salt water and flowers, I shake out my wet hair, grateful I have half a brain to not get hooked on the sauce.

Annual Review

Employee	Catherine Peterson, Marketing Manager
Supervisor	Kyle Jacobs, VP of Content Acquisition

What skills do you think Catherine brings to the table?

Catherine brings a real enthusiasm to her work. She is highly skilled at giving presentations. She is not easily flustered, even and especially during important meetings.

Kyle

To be honest with you, I hadn't thought much of Catherine before the call with Frank Leonard. I just mean I wasn't attracted to her from the outset. Not that I'd tell her that now.

During her interview, I remember thinking she was a little odd looking. Sort of fish-like. She had a small mouth and these big, bulging eyes. Her head seemed to follow them so when she nodded, I got the impression that her eyes were nodding first. Come to think of it, she looked a bit like God was messing around in Photoshop.

Still, she was qualified as all hell so I hired her.

The call with Frank Leonard was her first real shot. We were presenting Frank with the marketing plan for his crappy little passion project, *Suddenly, Something*. He'd kicked the pilot around to just about every streamer and network until he landed with us. We were scrambling for content at the time after our ratings turned from dismal to disastrous.

The show was terrible, but Catherine's presentation was solid. Frank was out in LA so she had to do it over the phone. Take it from someone who knows; it's way easier to be mean over the phone than in person. Frank had a reputation. We were nervous.

But we didn't need to be. Catherine sailed through it. She talked slowly, confidently. She was funny, she was insightful. Frank didn't interrupt once. Everyone in the room was exchanging impressed glances.

Then came slide 36, out-of-home media buys.

I think I noticed it before she did; a thin red line coming from her nose, dripping towards her mouth. Our offices were so bland. Everything was in shades of black and gray, then, all of a sudden, red. Wet, shiny red coming from Catherine's nose. I pushed a tissue box towards her and rubbed the space above my lip as the room shifted around uncomfortably.

Without missing a beat, I mean seriously, without pausing for even a moment, she stuffed a tissue up her nostril and carried on. Curt Schilling in '04. I couldn't keep my eyes off her. She talked for another twenty-five minutes, methodically switching out a new tissue every time one soaked through.

By the time she reached the last slide, she'd amassed a neat pile of bloody tissues.

“That about brings us to the end, Frank, so we can open it up to questions or comments.”

“Well, I have to say I’m impressed, Catherine. I think you guys really understand the spirit of the show.”

She looked at me — *she looked at me* — and the self-satisfaction in her enormous fucking eyes knocked me out. They were worlds, planets, wheels I couldn’t get off of if I tried.

After the meeting, people filed out and offered her their congratulations. She stood up and collected her things, smirking.

“I think that went pretty well.”

Then she picked up a trash can and slid her hand across the table, wiping away the memory of her bloody achievement. After she left, I fished out a tissue and pocketed it.

How does Catherine contribute to a positive work environment?

Everyone that meets Catherine is impressed by her. She is friendly, candid, and authentic. She sets a strong example for how to go the extra mile.

Catherine

It wasn’t a matter of if, it was a matter of when.

The handicapped bathroom of the Rainbow Room, four gin and tonics in, ended up being our when. But really it started much earlier.

I took to walking home from work those days, relishing the forty blocks and four avenues, remembering the notes, the looks. I wasn't fantasizing as much as I was analyzing. Studying. I knew we'd boil over eventually but for a while I was content to simmer. Arriving home, I'd take a deep breath before opening the door, sure that Aaron would recognize the dampness on my forehead for what it was.

The Rainbow Room. It was upfront season and the network was feeling pleased with itself. We'd managed to convince a few streaming showrunners to join the dark side by handing them a blank check. There was an atmosphere of revenge in the room.

I was more interested in the open bar. And him.

He circled all night, loudly laughing and schmoozing, eyes darting around the party to meet mine. I smiled and nodded my way through office gossip with the other middle management nobodies, without listening to a word. It was a game. A game that ended with his hand in mine, leading me to the bathroom as if we'd scripted it.

Inside, standing closer than we'd ever previously been allowed, I looked at the hair on Kyle's face, fresh and razor sharp. He put his hand over his chin, wiping away a drop of whiskey. The friction of it made a sound, like peeling velcro.

"So."

"So."

And it began.

What challenges has Catherine faced this year?

There's a tough learning curve around here and Catherine has faced that obstacle with resilience and patience. She has earned the trust and respect of those around her.

Kyle

For a long time, Aaron was more of an idea than a reality.

Catherine and I were careful. We used Signal to text, we went out in obscure neighborhoods, we paid in cash. Besides the matter of evading him, Aaron didn't really come up much.

Then, one evening in late July, I was hailing a cab outside the office when I spotted Catherine walking towards a man. She smiled at him, all soft and tired, draped herself around his shoulders, and kissed him. He gently guided her left arm to his waist and they walked like that towards the subway.

It was so, I don't know. Public.

Bumping around in the back of the cab, I watched the scene over and over in my head. There were boring but agonizing questions to be asked. Did she see me? Does she still love

him? What am I to her? Are they still fucking? The trailer for *Suddenly, Something* played on a loop on the small TV screen between me and the driver. It almost made it look good.

I couldn't bring myself to go home to my empty apartment.

Divorce suited me, honestly. I liked living alone. But I couldn't stand the symbolism of it that night. Instead, I went to my neighborhood watering hole and drank six whiskeys in sixty minutes. I woke up the next morning to a laundry list of regrets, the first one being that I used iMessage to text her.

— Hey... what re you doing?

Another hour passed without a response. I tried Signal.

— cat can we talk? I need to hear your voice...

She typed for a while, which I watched. She's an unbelievable texter, Catherine. She could write books.

— Not tonight. At dinner with Aaron's family. See you tomorrow?

I remember slumping off the bar stool a little. I remember ordering another drink. Then I woke up in my bed with all my clothes on. I picked up my phone to inspect the damage, instinctively aware of what I'd done. 37 unanswered outgoing calls. A string of humiliating messages I actually can't bear repeating.

I took a sick day.

What can Catherine do to improve next year?

While Catherine's performance has been excellent, there is room for improvement when it comes to collaboration. She should work on being more open-minded to other people's ideas and delegating more tasks to her team who are anxious to learn.

Catherine

The early reviews of *Suddenly, Something* were abysmal but if we don't host a premiere, then the showrunners blame bad ratings on bad promotion. So we threw Frank Leonard a shitty Hollywood party for his shitty soon-to-be-canceled show.

I needed the break, anyways. Aaron had grown prickly. He waited until I was halfway out of the apartment, Uber waiting, plane tickets in hand, to say something about it.

"I hope you two have fun in LA together."

That was new.

"Two? There's a bunch of us going."

"Should be fun."

"I'll text you when I land."

"No need. I have your location, remember?"

His face was smug and knowing when I looked back at him. A bloated moment passed between us and we just stood there, smiling mildly at each other. Then I left.

Kyle's hotel room was far nicer than mine. The wall to wall windows looked out over the Hollywood Hills, not that I ever saw more than a glimpse of them. As I walked in, he closed the curtains shut and they stayed that way the whole week. We were our own world. A bunker, a secret place.

After the premiere, basking in the quiet, I laid on Kyle's stomach; our outstretched bodies forming a sideways T over the king-size bed.

"I wish I could've been in the room when Frank pitched this show."

"Oh yeah, what would you have said?"

"I would have said, thanks for stopping by, Frank. It was good to see you."

"Cold-blooded."

"It's garbage."

"Variety said it's experimental."

"Failed experiment, I think, is what they said."

I sat up.

"I'm going to be in those rooms one day, you know. Where the decisions are made." "I have no doubt."

I allowed myself a moment to imagine it before sinking my face into his stomach. His skin, warm and smooth against my cheek, dulled the sharper parts of my mind. Quieted it. I had the distinct feeling that I was in exactly the right place.

Is Catherine ready for a higher-level role?

While Catherine shows real promise and clearly has ambitious personal goals, I do not feel she is prepared for a promotion at this time. She has much more to learn before taking on that responsibility.

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