

None of These Will Bring Disaster (excerpt, full story in short story collection project)

WORK

I often come into work with sunglasses on, having taken the bus. I take the bus when I am still drunk in the morning. I know that my coworkers know why I have taken the bus.

The people at work used to gossip about everything. Once I overheard someone in Merchandising whisper, “God, I think I can see her butt cheek” as I walked by in a skirt of apparently questionable length. I doubt this was true, but I’ve worn bike shorts under my skirts ever since.

Nowadays, I could stumble off the bus with sunglasses, a cane, and a seeing-eye dog, and I don’t think anyone would notice. The gossip has turned from individuals to the company as a whole. *The Wall Street Journal* says we’re going bankrupt, and the people at the top are nervous. We’ve had two massive rounds of layoffs. Human Resources is nearly extinct. The room on the second floor where they once worked looks like Pompeii.

After a few days of mourning, we pillaged the area for the best monitors and mice. In a drawer, I found a set of nice pens and an empty journal with cats all over it, plus two dollars in quarters.

HOME

Why did my roommates leave? I can’t help but think that if I had done better, they might have stayed. Rachel and I have been friends since the beginning of college, and I like her boyfriend Ozzie, too. I am easy to live with. I am quiet. Once, Rachel called my cell to ask where I’d been all day. “Here,” I answered from the desk in my room.

Then again, there are things I could have done better. I have a coffee machine with a reusable filter. Each morning, I would dump the previous day’s grounds in the garbage, then rinse the filter in the sink to wash out whatever remained. Rachel once yelled at me for the way the grounds stuck in the sink for days, mostly in the bottoms of unwashed dishes.

I tried to tap the grounds hard into the garbage can so I wouldn’t have to rinse the filter in the sink, but I was afraid Rachel would be annoyed by the noise. So, each morning for a year, I spooned the grounds into the garbage can, then scrapped the dregs out with a paper towel and carefully washed the spoon.

LIVING ALONE, PLUSES

Once again I rinse the grounds right into the sink. I save time, and I save money on paper towels.

WORK

Today I wake up too early, before the alarm, and sit in the shower in a daze. Trying to remember the evening is like collecting beads from a broken necklace. I make coffee (I have increased from four cups to six, then two more when I get to work). I get dressed in slow motion, put on my

sunglasses, check the calendar to be sure I have no early meetings. I curl up in a ball on the bench at the bus stop. I find two ibuprofen in my purse, build up spit in my mouth and swallow them.

The way to my cubicle feels extra long today. I have to walk this way so I don't pass I.T. —I am trying to avoid having feelings for people I am not supposed to have feelings for.

"You're a crazy girl," says my friend Jeffery when I finally slump into my chair. Jeffery begins telling me about the end of the night, assuming I've forgotten, but he abandons his story mid-sentence when he hears there are donuts in the kitchen.

The style guide I'm working on is wonky. I know I will be here until midnight sorting it out. We lost half the merchants in the last firing. There's a problem with the khakis. They come in one shade of tan, but the same shade has four different names: beige, sand, tawny, coffee. I rub my fingers in my hair, trying to figure out what to do about this, when something plip-plops from my hair onto my desk. I look for the source of the noise — it is a miniscule, clear grain: sugar in the raw.

Where did this come from? And how did it get in my hair? What else is in my hair? What did I do last night that resulted in sugar being in my hair? I wish Jeffery had finished his story. I rub my fingers in my hair while thinking about this, and two more sugar crystals fall onto the desk.

CORRECTION

I may have made myself seem more promiscuous than is accurate, although there have been a handful of questionable acquaintanceships with coworkers, all of which began with me drunk and ended several weeks or months later with me in tears. Now that I live alone, I can cry loudly and wildly and walk around the apartment with my face puffed red.

I tell the guys that I understand. It seems unfair of me to handle it any other way. I give them reasons that they cannot come up with themselves. "You are still emotionally tied up in your previous relationship," I say. "We're coworkers, after all," I say.

Sometimes, they will take me out to dinner after. It is a terrible thing to do. They leave me with good memories. I think of them as kind, upstanding men.

Rachel thinks otherwise. "He's a real jerk," she'll say through the phone from her new apartment. "He took you to dinner out of guilt. He wants to be sure there aren't any scenes to handle, that everything at work continues to run smoothly."

"But he paid," I say.

"Why do you let people walk all over you? And where did you get the crazy idea that everyone is *nice*?"

JEFFERY

We talk frequently in the employee kitchen and sometimes visit one another in our cubicles. He's from R&D, Research and Design, not I.T.. According to Rachel, I have to stay away from the

men in I.T.: “Good at logistics, bad at feelings,” she tells me. “They smell low self-esteem like dogs smell fear, and then they use it to their advantage. And don’t tell me how they don’t mean to do it. It doesn’t matter what they *mean* to do. All that matters is what they *do* do.”

Jeffery is the kind of person that glows on a resume or when he’s in the center of a room. I am always surprised by our friendship, as if at any moment he’ll realize that we’re nothing alike.

He is tall and thin, with jet-black hair, brown eyes, and a boyish face—cheeks dotted with freckles, two well-placed dimples. At happy hour, everyone gathers around him as he tells long, funny stories, his hands flying through the air. He drinks and drinks and never blacks out, which I find admirable and a little disconcerting. He’s very competitive at work—he will not throw you under the bus unless you belong under the bus, but if you belong there, that is where he will throw you.

LIVING ALONE, MINUSES

It is lonely, even if you work fifty-hour weeks. What I want, desperately, is for someone to sit next to me for a moment and hold my hand and say one kind thing I didn’t know was true.

WORK

We know what is coming. We wait in our cubicles like scared animals. We play a lot of minesweeper and solitaire. No one cares anymore about the problems that just last week were important enough to require sixteen hour work days, like identical tan khakis with four different names. We have no idea what we will do when we are released into the wild. We will probably play a lot of minesweeper and solitaire.

LAI D OFF

“I understand,” I tell my boss, patting him on the shoulder. “There was nothing you could do, and it’s just a job anyway.” We hand in monitors, telephones, hard drives, things we had forgotten didn’t belong to us. We pack the rest—photographs, calendars, snacks. I have spent so much time here, I feel as if I’m moving out of a home, but I remind myself that I’ve moved out of homes before, and it’s worse than this.

There are twenty of us standing in a circle in the parking lot, holding the evidence of our employment in cardboard boxes and plastic grocery bags. We look like ex-lovers cast out from apartments that were never ours in the first place. We hug and cry and say goodbye and shift our boxes. Jeffery stands with a giant computer monitor at his feet—he has gotten it through security by employing his hearty, boyish smile.

Out here, his smile fades. “We didn’t lose our jobs,” says Jeffery, but he doesn’t look up to engage the audience, he just kicks at a stone that plink-plonks down the yellow line of an empty parking space, “they lost us.” He says this in such a serious way that no one laughs.

“The company didn’t just lose us,” I add, “the company lost everything.” Everyone stares at me, annoyed, as if I don’t comprehend what’s happening.

Besides, it isn’t even true—the company hasn’t quite lost everything, not yet—I.T. is still employed to close things down—this includes Mazdak and Dan, two men I personally know can tie up loose ends.

UNEMPLOYMENT, DAY ONE

As a kind of anti-memorial to corporate life, I do not get dressed, nor do I get out of bed, for the first half of the day. During the second half of the day, I check my email, file for unemployment, make a dental appointment for a date before the insurance runs out, do the math on my finances. It turns out I can live a long time like this, alone in my room, never getting dressed.

DAY THREE

I have now seen this season’s entire roster of Academy Award nominated films. I have started and finished my final twelve-pack.

DAY FOUR

I watch a PBS documentary about Napoleon. My heart breaks for him when he gets exiled to Elba. It breaks a second time, and more thoroughly, when he gets exiled to Saint Helena.

DAY SIX

All of this free time, and the sink is still crowded with dishes. I find myself spooning coffee grounds into the garbage can without even noticing I am doing it. I have not seen or heard from a single person, except for the automated machine at the unemployment office, in six days. What have I been doing? I faintly recall a stream of movies and spaghetti. I am hunkered down, saving money like in my college days, but with much less to do.

DAY EIGHT

I call Rachel, but she doesn’t answer. I call Ozzie. I call Dan, Mazdak. I suppose it is a weekday. I call Jeffery. He answers. He has been playing computer games on his new monitor. He has purchased a beanbag chair that is almost as large as his bed. He has been drinking two blueberry slushies per day. I thought he’d be regulating his spending, but he seems unconcerned with both finances and future employment. His unconcern makes me realize that I have not spent much time looking for a job.

In between minesweeper and solitaire, I troll the internet for employment opportunities. Opportunities? There is nothing I want to do, but I will need money again one day. I regurgitate my resume on several job-search websites, which then send me emails with all kinds of useless job-hunting tips. Still, it makes me feel good to get emails. I wish they spaced them out more over the day, so my inbox would never read 0.

DAY TEN, MORNING

Today I wake to the alarm—I have a Pavlovian reaction of intense hatred, and then I remember that I do not have to go to work. I dress in the kinds of clothes people wear when they leave the house, and then I go to the dentist. The dental assistant is so friendly. The dentist himself is friendly. His teeth are white. I think of the shades of white his teeth might be called if they were pants: snow, milk, ivory, ghost. I like the soft feel of his gloved finger on my gums. He fills two cavities—it is nice to have a person so close to my mouth, even if he’s holding a drill.

DAY TEN, AFTERNOON

My head hurts, and my jaw is tired as if I have been chewing bagels and gum for days on end. My left cheek becomes fat, like a squirrel’s packed with nuts. I can’t eat spaghetti, so I buy yogurt at the corner deli and try to eat it without moving my mouth.

DAY TWELVE

Jeffery comes over out of sheer boredom. His lips are stained blue.

“Maybe you should eat something else?” I suggest.

“Nah,” he says. “I don’t like to cook.”

“My mom’s pissed,” he tells me, sitting in my computer chair and spinning around.

“What happened?”

“She doesn’t want to be paying my bills again,” he says, as if your mom paying your bills were the unfortunate but inevitable result of unemployment. He could be any of the people I went to college with. He could be none of the people I grew up with. He could be sixteen with those immature expectations, with that face, that dimpled smile.

It occurs to me how much I remember about the past twelve days. I have not been going to happy hour; I have not been blackout-drunk; I have not been getting laid.

NEVERMIND

Sometimes bars actually deter me from drinking—they’re so expensive—but this evening is more or less sponsored by Jeffery’s mom, so it’s not even ten before we’re stumbling back to my place, Jeffery saying, “You need to go to bed. You need to stop drinking. You can knock them back. Even if you were a guy it would be impressive.” But he’s slurring his words, and I’m suspicious of how he never blacks out. He is either a sneak, or part alien, or a freak, or lucky, or he might actually know his limits.

When we get back to my place, I say that I need to eat something.

“I thought you couldn’t? Your tooth?”

“Nothing hurts when you’re drunk, not until the morning, anyway,” I say and pour myself a bowl of cereal that tastes better than Thanksgiving dinner.

Jeffery helps me into bed and then sits beside me, his hand on my arm. “It was really fun hanging out with you tonight,” he says. He looks at his watch even though there is a giant clock right next to my bed. “God, I have to take the train back home, I guess.”

I don’t like how impressed guys are with themselves when their lines work, as if girls are idiots, as if we don’t know what’s going on.

L A I D

The sun slants through the blinds, my leg is covered in thin, bright strips of light so that it looks as if it’s been cut into slices. My head hurts a little, but it’s hard to tell how much of that is hangover and how much is tooth. My teeth feel as if they take up my entire head. Jeffery brushes his hand over my waist softly, and a moment later he is up, dressing, and I know exactly how this will go. “Coffee?” I ask anyway, just in case. “You sleep,” he whispers.

He is already far away, the way they are afterwards when they’re afraid you’ll want too much. It is as if his hand brushed my waist months ago. It is possible that he will never touch me again.

Girls own the evening, but mornings like these make you question what happened at night, make you think it might have been a dream, make you wonder if you were ever really given anything in the first place.

M O R E D A Y S

I never thought that I’d be the kind of person who spends days on end in bed, but, then again, I used to think I wouldn’t be the kind of person who got drunk on weekday evenings. As with most things I never thought I would be or do, staying in bed turns out to be very easy. The key is to position the essentials about you in a convenient way. I have my electronics: computer, cell phone. I need the computer to log on to the New York State Unemployment website. I have to fill out a little form that says I am looking for work, and then they put money into my account.

I have provisions, too: water, walnuts. The walnuts are not ideal, because my tooth still hurts and I can only eat them by sucking on them. On the plus side, they don’t really need to be refrigerated. I would go to the dentist (a different one), but like everything else, the insurance is gone.

In the middle of my second day in bed I make a mistake. The heat is haphazardly controlled by the landlord, and my window is not close to my bed, so when I get too hot, I throw off my sweater, and it lands dangerously far from the bed. Later, when it gets cold again, I crawl out onto the floor on my hands, with my thighs still on the bed, stretching as far as I can. My mission is a success, but my arms are tired, and I am glad to inch my way back into bed without ever having put my feet on the ground.

J E F F E R Y

He doesn’t call.

(END EXCERPT)