

None of These Will Bring Disaster

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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 or when it is snowing or raining because I don't like to drive in that weather. I know that my coworkers know why I have taken the bus. For a week or so, I tried to schedule my binge drinking around the weather, but I can hardly figure out on which days to bring an umbrella, and I have been known to wear rainboots when it turns out not to rain at all.

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 yesterday's grounds in the garbage and then rinse

the filter out in the sink. 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 out, 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—my memory of the evening is like beads strung out wide across 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 build up spit in my mouth and when I get enough energy, I find two ibuprofen in my purse 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 nearly 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. I rub my fingers in my hair, trying to figure out this problem with the khakis, 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.

The khakis come in one shade of tan, but the same shade has four different names: beige, sand, tawny, coffee. Coffee, coffee. Coffee! I usually drink it black, but this morning I used a sugar packet I had saved in the Duck Sauce Drawer. I do not bother my brain for an explanation of how the sugar has ended up in my hair. On mornings like these, it does not seem an entirely unexpected place to find part of a meal.

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, and 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.”

He 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 in freckles, two well-placed dimples. At happy hour, everyone gathers around him as he tells long, funny stories that employ his hands as a main instrument of humor. He drinks and drinks and never blacks out, which I find very 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, with uncalled for desperation, 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 tasks that just last week were important enough for 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.

LAID 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 to nothing. “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, “our jobs lost us.” He says this in such a serious way that no one laughs.

“Our jobs didn’t just lose us,” I say quietly, “our jobs lost everything.” When I say it, it sounds stupid, and everyone wonders why I would defend the company we are supposed to be mad at. And besides, our jobs haven’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 to 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 reiterate my resume on several websites, which then send me emails with all kinds of useless 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 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 squirrelish. 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 this were the logical 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 the evening is more or less sponsored by Jeffery’s mom, so it is 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.

LAI

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 could have brushed my waist months ago. It is possible that he will never touch me again.

Indian Giver, I think without meaning to. Girls own the evening, but mornings like these make you question what happened at night, make you think it was a dream, make you wonder if you were ever really given anything in the first place.

MORE DAYS

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 logon 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, but it lands carelessly 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.

JEFFERY

He doesn't call.

JOBS, PEOPLE, CITIES

Nothing is ever really yours. I just want something to stick around long enough for me to leave it first.

EVENTUALLY

I have to get out of bed to go to a mandatory session at the unemployment office. I wake up several hours early and get dressed in one of my work outfits. It turns out that this does, indeed, take several hours. I try to eat instant oatmeal, but I can't bite the raisins and I have to spit them out as I go. I start the coffee maker but forget the grounds and end up drinking part of a mug of hot beige water. I put on makeup, but that does not cover the size of my cheek. I tell myself that I could just be one of those people with unfortunate facial asymmetry, but how is that better than having a swollen cheek?

THE UNEMPLOYMENT OFFICE

In a matter of days I had forgotten about people, and it is good to see them again, though I am overdressed. The man to my right is very good-looking, maybe my age or a little older. He's wearing sneakers and jeans that seem ripped from actual wear and tear. "Hi," he says, a slight Spanish accent. He smiles, and I see a black gap on the left side of his mouth where a tooth used to be. I put my fingers to my cheek.

"Hi," I say.

The man leading the meeting is small and grey-haired and hunchbacked. He looks as if he has been caged for a long time. "One place to look for work, during times like these," he says (he says "times like these" a lot), "is a place like this. An unemployment office. That's how I got this job, what? over a decade ago? During the last major economic downturn."

OPPORTUNITY

There is a bulletin board outside the unemployment office that catches my eye. What I see first is a hot pink piece of paper that says, *GUY PROBLEMS? Madame Carolina Can Help*. The paper claims that Madame Carolina was raised with real gypsies. I imagine an earthy bandana tied around her head and large hoops hanging from her ears. In front of her is a crystal ball filled with pink clouds, but Madame Carolina doesn't need it to tell me my problems or what I need to do.

She points her long pink fingers at me and says that if I'm going to be so sensitive, I have to stop sleeping with guys who only have vague, short-term interest in me. I want to tell her that sometimes you don't know, that sometimes it's better than having nobody at all.

My eyes wander to a plain white sheet with pull strips, of which only three remain. The paper says:

Earn Up To \$250

Free Dental Exam

Heavy Smokers Needed Now!

Finally Quit Smoking

New Clinical Trial

The asterisk/italics/centering formatting trio is disconcerting, but I once read an article about a man who, during college, earned money by donating blood plasma and sperm. I rip off a tab.

RESEARCH

I have never smoked anything. I Google things like, "What does it mean to be a heavy smoker?" and "Can the dentist tell if you smoke?" To the latter, sometimes. To the former, I get no concrete numbers, in packs or cigarettes, but instead a lot of websites explaining chain smoking. I haven't put much thought into it, but I've always vaguely imagined that this meant people stood in a row and passed the cigarette on, one to the next, but all it means is that as soon as you finish one cigarette you begin the next, sometimes lighting the former with the latter. I tack the phone number to the bulletin board above the desk that I never use because I use my computer in my bed.

JEFFERY

Finally, I call Jeffery. I have been more or less following him online, but he hasn't updated anything in almost a day. Last I read, he was still playing computer games.

"Hello, Friend," he answers when I call.

"What are you up to?" I ask. "I haven't been out much recently."

"I haven't slept in a day," he says. I wait for an explanation, but he's silent.

"Why's that?"

“I’ve been playing Monopoly for twelve hours straight. Can’t stop until I finish the game.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll talk to you later,” he says and hangs up. I always wished I were the kind of person who could hang up first, but I also don’t want to be the kind of person who hangs up first on purpose, as if it were some kind of power play.

RACHEL

I call Rachel. “You sound sad,” she says. “Come to California. It’s sunny here.” I remind her that I am unemployed, and that New York is far away.

When Ozzie comes home, she has to go.

MAZDAK

I call Mazdak. “Yo,” he says. Sometimes I think Mazdak pretends that those three months never happened between us. These days, when I am around him, I think he even pretends that I am not a girl. “We’re still playing Monopoly,” he says.

“You’re playing Monopoly with Jeffery?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he says.

“Did you get laid off, too?”

“Everybody’s gone, didn’t you hear?”

“We should all go out sometime, like an Unemployment Happy Hour, you know, with the people who used to go.”

“Sure, sure,” says Mazdak. “Tell me when it is.”

“Well, I have to go,” I say quickly.

But hanging up first offers no clear satisfaction.

CARA

There is no one left to call but my mother, so I call CARA, The Cigarette Addiction Research Association, concerning the clinical trial, and they tell me they’ll call back for a pre-screening interview. This makes me feel irrationally sad. I had imagined a receptionist dropping her current task and shouting, “We’ve got one!” to a laboratory full of researchers in white coats.

I wait around, pass time by refreshing my email, but with each refresh I feel a little emptier, and I end up reading through my spam and deleting it piece by piece.

The lady who finally calls back has a voice so husky that for a moment I think she's a man. My plan is to sound sane, yet addicted to cigarettes. When she asks, I tell her that I smoke "nearly a pack a day."

"More specific?"

"Four to a pack a day, probably," I say.

"That's quite a range."

"It's more like, halfway between four and a pack," I say.

"Alright," she says after a pause. "Can you come in for a dental and physical next week?"

Out of habit, I check my calendar. It's as empty as a snow day.

RESEARCH

I am nervous about pretending to be a smoker. Online, I read message boards and how-tos that seem to be written by people much younger than myself. One page explains smoking in seventeen steps, plus twelve tips and thirteen warnings. Apparently, "smacking the pack" is not just some kind of tic among smokers. Also, there are twenty cigarettes in a pack! I feel like I'm reading instructions on how to fold an origami crane.

The people at the deli know me well. They have been eyeing my purchases: broth, soup, yogurt, juice. "You on a diet?" they ask again and again, though I explain that it's a problem with my tooth. This time, when I buy two packs of cigarettes, the manager shouts, "You are trying to lose weight!" as if he has just found me out.

On my stoop, I smack my pack, take a cigarette between my lips, and light it with a restaurant match. I inhale, cough, and try again. I do this several times, until I feel dizzy and kind of nauseous. I notice a woman sitting on a stoop across the street. She is looking at me like I am an idiot. I snub the cigarette out on the steps before even half of it is gone, and promise myself to try again in the afternoon.

It isn't better in the afternoon. I'm just going to have to power through.

MORE RESEARCH

It isn't that hard, I decide a week later. I can do three a day, easy. I feel like an old pro. When I go out on the stoop to smoke, I look for that woman. I imagine she is watching out of a window, and I hold the cigarette in the V of my fingers and tap ash nonchalantly off the side of the steps.

THE DENTIST, TAKE TWO

The dentist says my teeth are doing quite well for a smoker of my caliber. When I ask about my toothache, he says he's not allowed to examine anything else but the look on my face must be pitiful, because he furrows his brow and asks, "Are you okay?"

"Yes. No. My tooth," I say. I am not one of those girls, but things have been going in such a way these past few weeks that I think I am going to start crying.

I chomp on a little piece of sandy paper, and he drills down the fillings in my teeth and then I chomp again. "That's it," he says. "They just weren't quite finished. When they're uneven like that, it's like your whole head is off balance."

I can't believe that's it, but that's it. My headache starts to fade, the tension leaves my jaw. I click my teeth together with a joy I haven't felt in weeks.

WELL-RESEARCHED

How could I have never smoked, not in all twenty-three years of my life? How many hours of work have I spent working, when I could have been on a cigarette break? How many friends might I have made, standing around that ashtray, a happy tingle in my brain? How many times (all of those evening at bars!) have I said no? I must have said no a million times!

With coffee and a cigarette in the morning, I can avoid food until noon. A cigarette after lunch, then one in the mid-afternoon, and one in the evening. I check the time and think about which cigarette quadrant I'm in. It's something like having marking periods, or a job, or a schedule.

QUIT IT! CARA CLINICAL TRIAL: FINE PRINT

To get my \$250 I must: seriously try to quit smoking with the help of a Nicotine patch, fill-out daily craving and mood charts, attend a support group once a week for two months.

Maybe this isn't worth \$250, but I am so thrilled that I've passed the pre-screening, that I don't really care. I feel like I've passed an important exam. I feel important.

SUPPORT

I am overdressed again, wearing slacks and a blouse. Maybe I am pretending I have a job, even though I don't want one. Is there a reason we want something just because we don't have it anymore? Just because there was a moment when we kidded ourselves, when we thought it was ours?

In group, I see the construction worker from my unemployment meeting.

"I recognize you," he says, sitting next to me. "I'm Carlos."

"Hi," I say. "I'm April."

"A month all to yourself," he says. "Ready to give up smoking?"

"Less than I thought I'd be," I admit.

We get our Nicotine patches and a packet of poorly photocopied mood and craving charts that remind me of fifth grade worksheets. The group leader, Nancy, tells us how hard it is to quit smoking. We discuss reasons to stop, personal and otherwise. All of this talk of smoking just makes us all want to go out for a smoke.

OUT

Someone from R&D organizes an Unhappy Hour for the recently laid off. Even the older employees, men and women with families at home, come out and drink. We laugh about our misery and toast each other and argue about résumé formatting, but Jerry, the former head of Logistics, starts crying halfway into his second drink, and we take him out of the bar and pat him on the back and remind him that the company can go fuck itself, that essentially it has already gone and fucked itself, that it's not his fault, that he always was a good boss, that his family will be okay. He gets himself together and comes back in the bar, but his face stays scrunched and he goes home after a fifth or sixth drink, a little wobbly. We shake our heads slightly. Poor guy, we think, wobbling home drunk like that to his family.

All evening I have been surreptitiously supplying my Long Island Iced Tea with vodka from a flask to save money at the bar. I have already prepared my room at home, as I often do before I go out, by clearing the path to my bed, closing my blinds, turning down my sheets, and

putting a glass of water and two Ibuprofen on the nightstand. Today, this took longer than usual, what with my bedside accumulation of coffee cups and cereals.

Jeffery has been standing behind me, talking to Lillie from Logistics. I am smiling off into a corner because I'm drunk, but it's nice that it looks like I've been nursing my drink.

"Smoke break?" I hear Jeffery ask Lillie.

"I'll join you," I announce.

"You don't smoke," says Jeffery.

"You know everything I do?" I say, and follow them outside.

We stand in a circle puffing. Lillie and Jeffery glance back and forth at each other, and I look down to be sure I haven't done something stupid, like left toilet paper coming out of my skirt or spilled liquid down my front.

"What?" I say.

Jeffery shrugs, taps at his cigarette. "What's that?" he asks. I look at my shoulder, where my sleeve has moved up just enough to reveal the white corner of a patch.

"A band-aid?" I say.

"Is that a nicotine patch?" he says, confused, almost annoyed. "You don't even smoke."

I shrug. More glances between Lillie and Jeffery, and I realize this is a smoking circle I was not invited to. I crush my cigarette with the toe of my shoe and return to my Long Island Iced Tea.

IN

I am not very hungover, but I stay in bed most of the day. I stick on a new nicotine patch, limit myself to one cigarette. I do not limit my coffee intake—I make a full pot and find myself shaking by noon. I eat frosted flakes straight from the box, little bits falling into my bed so that I live in a sandbox. The heat isn't working, or is on very low, so I wear a hat and gloves and let the laptop whirr on my lap, but it's impossible to get warm. Even a hot shower fades the instant I get out of it.

SUPPORT

We look like we are in the same gang, with our nicotine-patched shoulders. "How are you doing?" asks Carlos. "I feel insane sometimes! It's hard." I nod in agreement, but feel guilty

because I've already had two cigarettes today. They might kick me out, if I don't seem to be trying. I don't really think I'm trying.

My mood chart worries me. It looks like a cross-sectioned map of a mountain range.

MORE SUPPORT

Even better than group is the bar we go to after. Eventually, Carlos and I excuse ourselves and wander a little around the city until he has to catch his train. "We should go out sometime," says Carlos. "I guess we'll have to do something cheap. Or wait until we have jobs."

OPPORTUNITY

It is nice that I can apply to jobs from bed. I look for the wildest jobs I can find in New York, write witty cover letters, and send them out with vaguely witty subject headings: RE: Mycological Assistant—Mushroom lover with strong morel compass; RE: Doggie Blogger—Aspirational dog owner captures voice of a species; RE: Fact Checker—I've already fact-checked my resume, and I'm your perfect employee. I expect results like I expect lottery winnings.

JEFFERY

"Do you want to come over?" I ask.

"I can't," says Jeffery.

"Do you want to go out?" I ask.

"I can't," say Jeffery.

"Alright," I say.

"Look, I like you a lot. We've been friends for a year, and we'll still be friends. I didn't know this would happen, but things just happen. I'm kind of seeing Lillie."

I hold my breath for just a second. What is it that you have to do to be kind of seeing someone? Why is no one ever kind of seeing me, even when they are? It is as if I'm unclaimable. I tell myself that it is stupid to care, stupid to be mad. Nobody promised anybody anything.

"And you don't want to ruin that," I say. "You want to see where it goes. I understand."

CARLOS

This time, after group, I get plastered. “You okay?” asks Carlos as I sway, looking around for the street I’m supposed to take to my train, but Carlos is wearing a bright yellow shirt that my eyes keep going back to.

“It’s a nice shirt,” I say.

Next thing I know, we’re at my place, and I’m sprawled out on my bed and Carlos is at my feet, untying my shoes. “Hey, drink that,” he says, pointing to a glass of water on my nightstand.

I drink it, then I try to set my alarm—I don’t know why, the days of alarm-setting are long gone. I end up knocking over the entire nightstand. “Sorry, sorry,” I say as Carlos picks up coffee mugs and pens and that cat journal I’ve never used.

“I need to go, April,” he says. “It’s late.”

“Do you need to stay?” I say. “The trains? This time of night?”

“No,” says Carlos. “Thank you.”

“You know what I mean,” I say.

“Not tonight,” says Carlos. “Another time, maybe.”

You never win, I think before I pass out. It’s absolutely impossible to win.

UNDERSTANDING

I sit hunched on the stoop in the cool blue-gray morning, smoking a cigarette and massaging my temples, thinking of Carlos and Jeffery. One thing is for sure—I’m not going to tell Rachel about any of this. If you keep stepping in the same ditch over and over, people stop feeling sorry for you because you’re either an idiot or a masochist.

What I keep saying, it’s not true. I don’t understand. I don’t understand anything about why people leave, and I don’t understand what makes me so leavable. I think this is turning me into a meeker person than I already am, the kind of person who spends relationships spooning coffee grounds quietly into the garbage can, for fear of ruining the peace.

I wonder if it’s different if you do the leaving. Maybe you feel as if you’ve given something away, rather than lost it. Maybe it’s as if it could be yours again, if only you wanted it.

I'm definitely quitting group I decide as I light a second cigarette with the butt of my first. Maybe I'll even quit smoking. Maybe I'll get a job somewhere far away, in some city I've never visited, in some city where I don't know anyone at all.