

FREE

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MIDLVL MAG



Mid-Level Management Literary Magazine

Presents
TWO WEEKS NOTICE / HOLIDAY BONUS

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Internal Document 15.6.98.2 - Notice Policy

+ End of Year Activities Budget

As per the report from the last quarterly summit, we continue to review the company's legal position regarding our internal notice policy.

Legal is currently engaged in lawsuits with former employees who did not complete their exit terms, and thus were ineligible for exit compensation. Legal feels we have precedent, as this policy is present in every employment contract, and the various handbooks across divisions. This is considered a cost savings measure. Messaging of this policy remains consistent and all questions from potential and existing employees will be directed to the Human Resources Office.

In this regard, we have seen an increase of 13% in turnover from the past two quarters. Within that 13%, roughly 70% of these do not complete their mandatory 14 day exit terms. This has positively impacted short term earnings and will be presented in the next stakeholders meeting. Division heads must have their reporting numbers accurate two days from now.

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End of year discretionary budgets have been consolidated to meet shareholder profit expectations. Going forward, these funds will be managed from this office. Departmental managers must submit detailed proposals for usage of these funds and will undergo a review process before any allocation occurs.

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As a reminder this is an internal memorandum.

- Office of People and Operations

Jess Brent

Waiting

I made a big deal about leaving the service industry by the time I turned 30.

And I did it. I left the beer soaked night shifts behind and I got a real job – a nine-to-five desk job.

But here I am, now age 37, and I'm following a wiry little woman named Mary Beth around a dark, velvety wine bar ringed with rope lights. Mary Beth moves with the speed and intensity of someone who has possibly dabbled in meth. We're the same age. Both of us were formerly employed by McNellie's, a no-frills Irish pub that flourished into an interstate restaurant group based in Tulsa, Oklahoma, but we worked at different locations, at different times, in different positions. At McNellie's, only service industry lifers get promoted to management. If the restaurant leadership smells ambition on you, say you're pursuing a degree, you stay at the bottom. Mary Beth managed. I stayed at the bottom.

We stop at the well, the bar-side servers' station where bartenders pass drinks to waiters, and Mary Beth taps through a touch-screen computer showing me around Aloha, the point of sale system. I'm familiar with it. Mary Beth is excited to have someone else at the wine bar who shares her level of academic achievement. She has a master's, obtained through an online program, in something like Nutritional Arts which, she tells me, allows her to provide professional assistance to customers trying to decide between the bruschetta and the bisque. I

will find that she primarily uses her degree to dispense well-meaning advice to customers and kitchen staff about the merits, or lack thereof, of vaccines.

Mary Beth hands me an apron and leads me through the swinging door to the kitchen. I'm immediately assaulted by the smell of grease, detergents, and steamy food waste.

My mother always warned me about food service. *It's gross*, she said, with no elaboration. I have to assume she was referring to the back of house operations, where food departs as a garnished meal and returns as trash. It's been seven years since I set foot in a commercial kitchen and the signature smell – wilted lettuce and wet bread - triggers strong feelings of regret. *What am I doing here?* Until recently, I could be found behind a desk, or at the helm of meetings attended by community leaders. I could be found in the chambers of City Hall, in meetings with City Councilors. I'm sincerely hoping no one finds me popping out of this slick-floored kitchen balancing app plates and rolled silverware in my arms.

While Mary Beth goes over the kitchen's features and functionalities – *scrape plates here, stack dirty dishes here, soak silver here, run your own food out, don't forget to pull your tickets* – I unfold my new apron, press it across my belly and tie the strings behind my back. I run my hands over the starchy, tri-pocketed front. Muscle memory sends a hand into the right pocket, where I will store a check presenter as soon as I find one, and my left hand into the left pocket, where I will store pens. With that motion, my mind floods with details of a daily life long forgotten. The sound my apron made as I sprinted up and down the pub stairs – loose change, pens, a phone rattling against my thighs. Endlessly digging into my apron with both hands, searching for lip gloss, a quarter, a pen. A check presenter so thick with cash and credit card slips that it tested the limits of the right-hand pocket. My old apron wasn't starchy and new like this one. It hung heavy on my hips, the seams compromised. It had a hard earned patina of

grease, ranch dressing, and Guinness Stout. For six years, my apron was either tied around my waist or jammed into my purse. It never left my side. I threw that apron in the trash seven years ago, certain that my retirement from the service industry was final.

But now I'm back.

My mother warned me about food service but she sent the wrong message. She told me it was gross, which I took to mean lowly, but what she should have said was: It's fun and it pays well and you might find it hard to leave.

In high school, my first job was at a Barnes and Noble bookstore. When I cross-trained ever so briefly in the adjacent cafe, my mother was quick to remind me that even beverage service was beneath me.

"Ew, no, you don't want to work with food," she said. "Stick to books."

I tried to follow her advice. I didn't return to the cafe. I worked as a bookseller through college then moved to Los Angeles for a job with a non-profit. When I struggled to make ends meet, I picked up odd jobs. I babysat. I organized a rich lady's home office while she laid in bed. I went so far as to work as a stripper at a divey bikini club but I *did not* work in food service. Not until well after college, after I'd been in L.A. for a few years, after I moved back to Oklahoma on a romantic whim and found myself in a quasi-volunteer position at a nonprofit clinic. Only then, did I first tie an apron around my waist.

It started as a side gig – two weekend shifts at McNellie's. But my job at the clinic was just a one-year contract and when it came to an end I wasn't sure what to do next.

So I waited.

I waited at McNellie's.

I waited for a year. Two years. Three...

McNellie's revolved around St. Patrick's Day. On the wood paneled wall between the servers' well and the wait station a digital clock counted down the months, days, minutes, and seconds until St. Patrick's Day. I stood in the well and watched the beer-fueled holiday circle around year after year. It was our biggest day, an enormous street party. We toasted with a pint of Guinness at nine in the morning, then worked as hard as we partied for 18 hours straight. At the end of the night we sat upstairs in a haze of smoke and organized our cash into stacks of hundreds. Each year I thought would be my last. Then I would spend another 365 days watching the clock run down while I waited for beer in the well.

'Waiting' is an accurate term for what servers do. We wait for the rush, bracing for impact. We wait for plates to come up in the window, exchanging colorful comments with the back-of-the-house staff. We wait for our customers to leave so we can turn their tables, urging them along with an impatient-yet-perky: "*Can I get you anything else?*" We wait to get cut at the end of the night, announcing within earshot of the manager: "*My last table is tabbing out!*" The little lulls between the action are the sweet spots where we carve out camaraderie.

Huddled around the host stand at the beginning of a shift, we check in with each other, discuss our kids, our classes, our relationships. In the heat of a hectic night, we respond to cries for help: “*I’m in the weeds, can someone run my drinks to 22?!*” Rolling silverware at the end of the night, we debrief about money we made and bills to pay.

At McNellie’s, we were a crew of mostly women, around 20 of us, and, with few exceptions, we were supportive and caring of each other. We loved the pub and the people who ran it. We loved each other. When I had major surgery a full decade after I left, after we’d all left, it was my fellow pub waitresses who organized a meal train and carried plates full of food through my door every day for a month.

A few years into my tenure at the pub, I enrolled in graduate school. I knew it would be hard to leave the service industry so I made a strategic move in order to wean myself off. When the McNellie’s Group opened a fine dining establishment, I moved to the new restaurant fully expecting to hate it. As a pub waitress, I dressed casually and served casually. At The Tavern, I had to wear ill-fitting oxford shirts and tights under my skirts. I suffered over laborious craft cocktails behind the bar and struggled to remember whether to serve plates from the right and pull from the left.

Once I graduated, I transitioned seamlessly from an internship to a full-time position as a city planner. I resisted the temptation to keep one or two shifts a week for the easy cash flow.

Now that I had the big kid job, I felt it should stand alone as my sole focus and source of income.

I was 29 and half when I put in my notice.

I was excited about my career. I took pride in my work and in my status as a professional. I met interesting people, and together we came up with interesting ideas and solutions to problems. But I soon felt my enthusiasm dwindle. It had been hard running around a pub for eight-hour shifts – I would leave with a body aching for bed. But it was arguably harder to stare at a computer for eight hours a day. I would leave with a bloated belly and fuzzy mind.

At the pub, there was never a question of *what* to do with my time, only the question of *how* to do everything as efficiently as possible. At the office, as long as I was staring at the computer in front of me it seemed like I was working.

At the pub, I watched years fly by on a St. Patrick's day clock. On my desktop computer, I watched each minute trickle by.

At 5 o'clock I would burst out the revolving doors of our office building into the fresh air, free for the last remaining hours of the day. My freedom was hampered, somewhat, by the fact that my paycheck had to be spread out in a thin layer across the entire month.

A series of things happened over the next seven years. In classic millennial style, I quit my city planning job after a couple of years and left the country in pursuit of adventure. When I came back, my partner and I started a small side business and collected a handful of children. I continued trying to lean into the nine-to-five managerial class. I served as the executive director of an economic development non-profit for a few years. Then I took a position at a non-profit co-working space called “36 Degrees North: Tulsa’s Basecamp for Entrepreneurs.” I was hired to serve as the Resource Manager and tasked, specifically, with launching a mentor program for our co-working members.

36 Degrees North was the hippest place I had ever worked and, at the age of 36, I was the oldest person on our ‘team.’ I was Microsoft Office and filing cabinets. They were Asana, Slack, and Google Drive. There, everyone toted their Macbooks around to meetings. The first time I had to present information to our team, I distributed printouts for everyone to review. They looked at the copies warily, like they had never seen paper before. Conversations were peppered with words like “intentional,” “impactful,” and “culture.” We spent a lot of time and effort researching complex, tech-heavy solutions for simple problems.

While I worked on forcing resources upon a group of entrepreneurs who mostly just wanted to be left alone, our Executive Director, Dustin, took a deep dive into organizational dynamics. He was an intelligent and gentle leader, but often overly-cerebral and indecisive. Among the decisions he seemed unsure of were how to execute a mentor program and whether he needed a Resource Manager to do it.

I was let go the day before my mentor program launched, only eight months after I was hired.

Losing my job was a huge blow to my ego but I had plenty of connections I could have called upon for a chance to bounce back. I could have easily slid back into a nine-to-five desk job doing interesting, if abstract, work. The traditional 40-hour-a-week work cycle had been a strain on our family though. When I called my partner from my car to tell her I'd been laid off, hot, humiliating tears sprayed from my face. It was the middle of the summer and, on the other end of the phone, she was carting some combination of our four children between activities. She had a full time job at the community college but her flexible schedule meant that the care and transport of children often fell on her shoulders. She was sympathetic to my hysteria for no more than two minutes before revealing her true feelings:

"I'm so excited," she said. "Now you can help me with all these kids."

Six months later, with my business-running, child-having lifestyle, and unemployment benefits running out, I needed a job that would give me the most amount of money in exchange for the least amount of commitment.

And that's how I ended up following Mary Beth around this velvety wine bar at the age of 37.

I have a lot of feelings about this career change, the dominant emotion being shame. Shame and fear that someone I know professionally, a chamber of commerce executive perhaps, will find me here peddling rosé and cheap cheese boards. I've clearly regressed in life and that's why I picked this establishment – because it's buried deep in a bougie strip mall near the suburbs and I know for certain I will not find a single person I know here.

The drive is long, the money turns out to be terrible, and my co-workers lack both teeth and a basic level of service etiquette. I stand in the well for an entire winter watching my bartender, Alex, devour entire entrees in full view of his customers. I stand in the well impatiently waiting for Alex to return from his fifth smoke break and pour my wine. I stand in the well and watch the heavy wood doors, waiting for customers to breeze through with a cold gust of night air.

I hate every second of my job at the wine bar.

But as I go through the motions of each shift - tapping the Aloha screen to check the time, fiddling with the wine key in my apron pocket, popping maraschino cherries in my mouth to stave off hunger - memories of McNellie's flash through my mind and those memories were glowed with nostalgia for better a time. The service industry had been good to me. Sure, my years at the pub were a wild ride that could be dismissed as a delayed adolescence. True, I bounced around town like a loose cannon but, at the same time, I had my shit together in a lot of ways that didn't hold together once I got my real job. As a waitress, I always showed up to work on time ready to work. Aside from the drinking, I took good care of myself. I went to yoga. I made myself a healthy breakfast every morning. I paid my bills on time. I bought a house while waiting tables. I paid extra on the mortgage every month. I had a savings account. With money in it.

I look back and I realize that the most financially stable and professionally satisfied I have ever been as an independent adult was during my tenure as a waitress at an Irish pub.

One night in early spring, I meet my mom and dad for dinner at an Italian restaurant. While we soak up vinegar and olive oil with our cheesy bread, I work up the nerve to come out to my parents. They know I was let go from the co-working space but I haven't provided a full update of my employment status in many months. With no prospect of returning to white collar work any time soon, I decide it's time to own it. I tell them I got a job at a wine bar. I'm a waitress again.

My parents raised my brother and I in the comfort and security of the suburban middle class. I felt that I was born and bred for white collar work even though my extended family was made up entirely of farmers, truck drivers, and used car salesmen. My parents were first generation college graduates who did the hard work of lifting themselves into the middle class. They picked careers. They stuck with them. College was mandatory for my brother and me; success was expected. Yet we've both floundered and failed to find professional footing. I thought maintaining middle class status would be easy. I thought I would be able to do meaningful work and also afford to pay my bills. I thought meaningful work meant "making a difference" on large scale issues like poverty, women's rights, and economic development. I thought philosophy would be a useful undergraduate degree and was frustrated when I didn't find any job descriptions listing "philosopher" as a desirable trait.

Though my parents have not been known to criticize my life choices (they care less about salary and more about whether or not I have health insurance) while we wait for our pasta I launch a heartfelt defense of the service industry. I share my recent bittersweet epiphany, explain how working at McNellie's was the only time I've felt financially secure.

“I don’t know though,” I sigh and look down at my app plate, tear at a piece of bread. “I still feel like I should have a real job.”

My mom takes a sip of her wine and thinks about it.

“If you do the work and they pay you, it’s a real job,” she says.

Peter Heyns

Job Offer

Job offer: we are happy to inform you that you have been selected after a long and thorough process

For a ~~paint~~ job.

White splotchy

Bay call Colt without contacts. Light switch smack dab

In the middle of your shit.

Compensation starts at the beginning and ends immediately.

Your benefits

Begin day one ~~one day~~.

There was a painter who

Lived in a town where nobody

Needed paintings but

He made a decent living

As a senior manager of marketing operations.

175,000+15% bonus -20% cost-of-living decrease

Minus taxes plus inflation minus

Deflation

Commensurate with experience I would expect you to start living and coming to work and going home from work

Going to sleep

And waking up

And breathing air

And creating value

But in his spare time

They painted the walls of the abandoned line.

Cobalt bathed in moonlight

As the factories shuttered. Mean

Average time spent commuting down equaling. Every kind of space an office

space.

Every kind of time to clean.

Do you have 48 hours to sign and return the sign and return

To the surface and resume

Operating

**Strikethroughs are intentional in presentation of this piece*

Jess Del Fiacco

Subj: Dream Job

Dear [Contact Name],

Sometimes I dream of email! It's not even stress-related, though occasionally the dreams themselves are stressful and I wake up feeling like I worked a double-shift with no overtime to show for it. Usually I'm just there in the inbox. It's a classic Gmail layout, cool-toned and plain. I'm climbing up rows and rows of subject lines, sorting and sending chunks of conversation that feels very real when I'm in it, but reads something like Simlish when I try to remember it afterward.

I'm not proud to be dreaming of labor. Where are my peaceful dream-meadows to frolic in? My long-lost loved ones waiting for a chat over dream-coffee? How do I get in touch with dream-HR?

Its familiarity does grant some comfort, I guess. It's like a job you know you've been at too long, but it's just so easy to do, and the pay is whatever. It's like how sometimes, in the few gray seconds before I open my eyes, I'm in my parents' house. A creak upstairs – someone is making breakfast!

My mind is trying to bring me home via misguided auto-reply. Does that make sense? Let me know if you have any questions – I'm happy to hop on a call.

Thanks so much!

[Signature]

You can unsubscribe from these emails [here](#).

Anna Remennik

Q4 Memo

All holiday team builders will be self-funded this year.

The company spent all the money, the cupboards are bare.

You may think we have billions in assets, and yet -- au contraire!

So all holiday team builders will be self funded this year.

The annual bonus is tracking exactly to trend,

Whatever naysayers in comments would like to pretend.

If you square the last three and take a cube root at the end,

You will see that the bonus is tracking exactly to trend.

We are all one big family, together we flourish and rise!

But a little TOO big, it turned out – so we must right-size.

This is breaking our hearts (we are sure you can empathize)

As we exit some team members till we are back to right-size.

The austerity measures are working — keep doing your share!

We all must pitch in for the company's needs, fair is fair.

Our talent's our critical asset, so know that we care! --

But all of your holidays will be self-funded this year.

Cat Green

Violet

Two weeks before I got top surgery, Violet from work asked me when I was going to get married. I don't know her that well, and I'm only twenty-seven, so I wasn't sure what to say. I laughed. "They'll have to catch me first."

"No, really." We were sitting in a conference room, waiting for the rest of our team to join us. Her smile indicated nothing but friendly interest, though her words had me cornered. "Haven't you and your girlfriend been together for a few years? Have you talked about it, at least?"

I was saved having to answer because Todd and Hannah walked in and commenced the meeting with a new process for filing expense reports. When it was done, I walked back to my desk as Violet trailed behind me. "Did I make you uncomfortable earlier? Are we okay?"

"Yeah, it's fine. You're totally fine."

"Oh, good. I mean, you were the first lesbian to work here and I thought you and your girlfriend were so cute together. I'd just love for you to tie the knot." She's met Dora once, at a holiday party three years ago. I seldom talk about my personal life at work. Also, I haven't identified as a lesbian for almost four years. I'm not sure I ever used the word at work.

“Hey, I have a call with Accounts Payable,” I told her. “I’ll talk to you later, okay?”
For the first time I was happy to be put on hold for an hour with the central finance office.

Violet’s email signature includes her pronouns. The university where we work encouraged everyone to do that about a year ago, and Violet was enthusiastic about it. “It’s good to be more inclusive,” she said to me at the time. “Does it make you more comfortable? Maybe you can put your pronouns on your name plate, too. Would you want that? So people know?”

Violet knows I’m a man, but she still slips, three years after I transitioned at work. It doesn’t help that T has done very little to change my appearance or voice, but given her initial enthusiasm it was disappointing that she never learned how to speak about me.

When I told my coworkers that I would be out for two weeks, and that Hannah would be helping with my workload, Violet sent me an enthusiastic email. Are you going on vacation? Is your girlfriend going with you? You’ll have to share pictures! I didn’t reply.

One week before I got top surgery, Violet hovered by my desk on a Tuesday morning. “Hannah told me you’re getting surgery. Are you going to be okay? Is it serious?”

I silently cursed Hannah, but still smiled. “Oh, it’s nothing serious. I’ll be fine. Thanks for asking, though.”

She gave me a conspiratorial look. “Are you getting—gosh, what do they call it? I know you can’t say ‘sex change’ anymore.”

I willed my phone to ring, or, barring that, I willed the floor to collapse from beneath me. I knew the person whose office was below mine; they wouldn't ask me questions about my medical choices.

"Yeah," I said shortly. "It's gender related."

"I'm so glad the insurance will cover that. How can I help? Can I bring you a pot of soup or something?"

"That's okay, you really don't have to." I turned back to my computer and clicked open an email ad from Mailchimp. I gave it far more attention than it deserved and learned all sorts of things about growing my audience.

But Violet didn't leave. "You've thought about it a lot, though, right? I read this article in the New York Times about a woman—or, I don't know. A person who had that kind of surgery and then really regretted it. And there's no undo button, you know?"

I had a fleeting thought about HR violations and whether this constituted one. "Yep. I've thought about it a lot." I cut the conversation short with "Hey, I have to go ask Todd something about this payment. I'll talk to you later."

One day before I got top surgery it was a Sunday, and I was checking my work email for the last time before I deleted it from my phone for two weeks. I answered a question from Hannah, sent off a payment request form, and then saw Violet's email. It began with general

well-wishes, and then said, I'm very proud of you for being your authentic self. You're such an inspiration to all of us.

I started to type out a response and tell her that I didn't want to inspire anyone, that getting my tits chopped off wasn't a heroic act. I wrote the whole thing and screenshotted it before deleting the draft.

Two weeks after I got top surgery, I came back to the office to find flowers on my desk. The card next to them was signed by everyone in the office. Violet, when she saw me, buzzed over. "Welcome back! We missed you. How are you feeling?" She looked me up and down and her eyes paused over my chest. I wanted to disappear. Her smile was fluorescent. "You look great. How do you feel?"

"Ready to get back to work," I told her with a smile. "I have so much email to catch up on. I'll probably just plug in my headphones and trudge through my inbox all morning." I pulled out my headphones, not quite rude enough to put them in while she was talking to me but hoping to indicate that I really wanted to.

"Well, take it easy. I don't know what recovery looks like for that kind of surgery but make sure you rest plenty. Anything I can do to help?"

"I'm really fine, but thank you for asking."

"I bet your girlfriend is taking good care of you. Maybe you owe her a ring after all this, hm?" She winked at me and finally returned to her desk.

Three weeks after I got top surgery, I quit my job.

Thomas O'Connell

Near Epiphany

It's the first day back at work after the Christmas, sorry *Seasonal*, break and everyone is wearing a new sweater. Janice, Marlene, Ana, Stacey and Denise are gathered in Janice's cube. It seems they all got engaged over the holidays. Rumor has it that Stephanie downstairs in bookkeeping got married. There is silence in Janice's, and then laughter. They've been at it a while, and show no signs of letting up. Not that there's much work to do anyway; most of our clients are still closed. I've spent the morning watching hockey fights on YouTube and deleting Christmas songs I'd ripped to my computer.

Remembering that I want to make a copy of the warranty for a humidifier I purchased, I walk to the copier. A few thin plastic cups sit on a desk, left over from the pre-break party. The liquid has evaporated and the foam from the punch has left spider webs along the insides of the cups. In the copier's output tray, there is a piece of paper. It's a printout of a man's face, presumably taken while his head was squashed between the glass and the copier's lid. The man's eyes are closed and he has a big ol' grin on his face. He looks like the happiest person in the world, full of promise and hope. I can't place him though. For the life of me, I cannot figure out who the man is.

Adriane Quinlan

Career Women

At the restaurant that preys
on what all of the Midwest
thinks Manhattan
thinks Spain is
I listen to two women
pretending to be happy
and make a face at Gabby,
who's listening, too.
Is this too much midriff for winter?
How could someone named Terrance not like you? We like to listen and not act.
These are all legitimate concerns,
my mother would tell clients
and I hear myself saying it to Gabby,
who's crying into the snails we ordered
just to say we ordered snails.
Though who would we have said it to?
It's okay to hate your mother. I can say that, right? Everyone else does
though a professor told me
if you use that excuse, it means
you're the oppressor.
So that was what power was supposed to do: procreate.

My boss the other day said he didn't know until he had a child the love
where you love something so much you want to eat it I was just pretending
I didn't know what it's like to want to eat
everything I've made,
or at least to take a photograph
before it's eaten.
In the bathroom
I check my phone.
My only email is from Petco Pals Rewards which I could never figure out
how to opt out of.

Paul Hostovsky

Quits

Let's call it quits. Let's take
five. No, seven, in honor of
the seventh day. No, in honor
of the cigarette, which takes
exactly seven minutes to smoke
all the way down.

Let's call it a day, a week,
two weeks. Let's take a liquid lunch
and not come back for days, weeks,
months. Let's not and say we did.
I used to say that a lot as a kid:

Let's not and say we did.

It sounded subversive and anarchic.
I was big into anarchy and subversion.
I quit high school and landed on my feet
in a college for creative fuck-ups
on the Hudson.

I quit marriages and landed on my feet
in other marriages.

I'm all for quitting.

Quitting gets a bad rap. The people
who tell you to never give up,
to keep fighting no matter what—
don't you just want to slap them?

A few of them are standing around
my hospital bed right now, saying
to keep fighting. I want to get up
and slap them, one by one, then
hug them, hard, then lie back down
and call it quits.

Paul Hostovsky

Selfish

Bill sure hated to work.

He didn't hate his job, he just hated
to work. And then he got sick
and being sick became his job.

"Going to dialysis three days a week
sure beats going to work," he said.

"Are you serious?" I said. "You'd rather
be sick with renal disease than go to work?"

"I have every other day off," he said.

"I get disability and social security. It's a great
country. I don't do a stitch of work, I just
sit in the dialysis chair all day
and get a lot of reading done. I get to flirt with the nurses.
It's a good life."

But after eight and a half years of it,
Bill had had enough. His vision was going
and his knees were going and his feet
were almost gone. And he didn't want
to end up blind and in a wheelchair, he said.

“So what are you going to do?” I said.

“I’m going to stop going to dialysis,” he said. “It’s the perfect suicide. It’s legal. It’s painless. Come on up to Schenectady and say goodbye to me.”

So I drove up to Schenectady
the day after his last day of dialysis. And I spent the long
weekend with him. Three days of gallows humor
and morphine which he got from the hospice people
just in case he needed it. He didn’t need it
but he wanted to try it.

And he wanted to start smoking cigarettes again because
what the hell, he’d be dead soon anyway.

He was free to do what he wanted to do,
free to eat what he wanted to eat, and free
from the dialysis finally. He was even free from the guilt
that some of his friends and family tried to lay on him,
‘selfish’ they called it. But the guilt got filtered out
like the excess water and toxins the dialysis
had removed when his kidneys stopped doing the job.

And now that his job was dying, “It sure beats going
to work,” he said, taking a long drag on his cigarette,

coughing fitfully for a breathless minute,
then smiling at me boyishly through the tears.

Katy Goforth

Here is My Resignation on a CVS Receipt

I am thrilled to inform you

I am not your
mediocre employee
with a good attitude.

I have

a shitty attitude.

An attitude making people
walking down the office hallway
take a sharp left at the first sight of me.

Don't tell me,

"Smile, it can't be that bad."

Because it's much worse.

No.

I don't want an insulated lunchbox
with the company logo.

I don't need another tumbler
branded by the very people who
have opened the door for themselves.

and locked it shut behind them.

I am thrilled to inform you
I won't take on
any extra work just because
I'm efficient with my time.

In fact, I will suggest that you,
for the first time in your career,
make it happen yourself.

I am thrilled to inform you
I will no longer be attending
the holiday party
with a cash bar.

I don't care
that you will feed my spouse
or one guest
from my household.

I'm contracted
to spend eight hours
each work day with you.
That's eight too many.
My R.S.V.P. is hell to the no.

I ain't coming.

I'm not mediocre.

I might be sitting in this CVS parking lot
in my shitty car
with only the letter "C" from the neon sign
spilling the tiniest bit of light
onto this two-foot-long receipt.
But I'm not mediocre.

It is with great pleasure
that I'm putting you on notice.

Consider this CVS receipt
a receipt full of my shopping list
of tampons and liquid eyeliner
and a single bag of peanut M&Ms,
my personal manifesto.

I'd say more.
But you don't deserve my words
and I've run out of room.

Sarah Jane Justice

Fourteen Days

Day 1.

Adam holds his head high as he walks out of the corner office, ignoring the sheepish fear that attempts to pull him down. His fingers twitch as he winds his way around the cubicles. He wonders if he should tell anyone. The idea of making an announcement leaves him sweating, and he starts thinking of scenarios where he can casually mention it to one of his co-workers. The inevitability of gossip means he would only have to say it once.

Day 2.

A notification alert sounds. Adam sees three heads swivel in his direction with the thrill of petty voyeurism in their eyes. His co-workers glance at each other and crane their necks as he opens the Slack message. The announcement from the boss is decorated with congratulations and confetti gifs that leak passive-aggression into the replies. Adam tells himself that he should be grateful he didn't have to make the announcement himself.

Day 3.

Trawling through his inbox feels like fishing in a lake that everyone knows is empty. Adam thinks about the work he should conclude, the list of tasks he should outline for whoever will claim his desk after he is gone. The preparation for being replaced leads him to imagine himself planning his own funeral. The cubicle is an open casket.

Day 4.

Saturday holds a stranger shade of relief than usual. Adam paces around the house. He watches TV. He avoids all social engagements and calls it a holiday from awkward small talk.

Day 5.

The latter half of the weekend does not feel like a day of rest. Adam irons his shirts and prepares responses for the questions he knows he'll be hearing throughout the week ahead.

Day 6.

"Have a good weekend? Get a taste of what it'll be like to miss us?"

The boss grins like a shark with a secret.

"Not really. Had a steak so good it was hard to taste anything else."

Adam is pleased with his reply, but exhausted by the stress of needing it. He plugs in his headphones as he sits at his desk.

Day 7.

The comments from the boss continue, giving power to similar comments circling the office. Adam steadies himself and works on the art of changing the subject. When his co-workers head his way, he jumps to speak first, providing them with lists of tasks that he will be sliding into their to-do piles. The conversations die down in quantity.

Day 8.

Adam celebrates the half-way point in silence. He scratches a number on a sticky-note with pencil. In his mind, it reads back to him in the voice of a prison documentary narrator. The cubicle changes shape from an open casket to a holding cell. He rubs his eyes and counts under his breath.

Day 9.

The boss's jokes about deserters and sinking ships have become repetitive enough that they've lost the veneer of humour. Without more than an awkward half-laugh in response, the comments are stripped down to their intent. They are criticisms, accusations that never have to be addressed because the man in charge "is only joking". Adam scratches another number down on another sticky note and thinks of the employment reference he can't get around needing.

Day 10.

The end of the work week. The last Friday Adam will spend under this roof. The last unenthusiastic five o'clock beer, laced with the anticipation of going home and putting his feet up. The boss's jokes seem to have dried up, but he still appears to reach for them before shutting his mouth. Adam wonders whether someone has had a word with him, or if he became self-aware enough to realize how they sounded. He suspects the former.

Day 11.

A Saturday spent in preparation for the new job. He goes over the maps, reads the emails, and wonders if it will be at all different from his current day-in day-out existence. He closes his laptop and turns on the TV.

Day 12.

A Sunday spent bracing himself for the last few days. Adam tells himself that he will be strong enough to shut down any more frustrating jokes, kind enough to pretend he will miss anyone from the office, and dishonest enough to convince them he will stay in touch.

Day 13.

The home stretch begins. Adam limbers up before leaving the house. Thankfully, everyone seems to have already gotten the farewell attitudes out of their systems.

Day 14.

There are snacks in the breakroom. At lunch, the boss makes a speech that sounds hauntingly similar to the one he made after the last person quit. He asks if Adam wants to say anything. Adam replies that the boss's speech summed it up well enough. Everyone else appears relieved to finish the paper-cup toast and be done with it. They pick at the snacks and go back to their desks. Adam puts together the last of his handover lists, signs out of his computer, and says the same goodbyes he has said every working afternoon for the last three years. He receives the same half-hearted waves in response and exits the building.

Julie Kinninmont

Exsanguination

It's these new laptops
They said
Totally sustainable! Amazing!
They don't run off electricity
They run off your blood
I'm surprised you're surprised
Everyone is using them!
You don't have to consent of course
I just notice your appraisal is coming up in two weeks
It'd be hard to work without a laptop, eh hahahaha

And so
You arrive at work
Plug your laptop in
Not to the wall
But where your hand touches the mouse
There's a connection
Directly into your artery
Feeding into your bloodstream

The laptop is sluggish to start
Not enough juice
You feel sluggish, too
Sucking at your coffee cup
For energy
Slurping the liquid through the little mouthpiece
Draining the last drops
The laptop shudders to life
Now we're flowing!

Spreadsheets! Emails!
Caffeine
SuckingSlurpingDraining
Your blood
Timesheets! Filing!
Sucking
Data entry
Caffeine
Slurping
More emails
Draining
Your blood
Draining your blood

It's been hours
You feel light-headed, heavy-lidded

For a moment you disconnect from the laptop

The screen goes to black

Energy saving mode

You see your face reflected

Pale, bluish, wan

For a moment you shut your eyes

The world goes to black

Energy saving mode

The laptop beeps

Alert! Low power!

Watch out, they say

You don't want your laptop to die hahahaha

So you plug it back in

Elizabeth McNeill

We Are Emergencies

Kelly tackled the end of the world the way she tackled every business deal. There were potential clients in need of services, and she would be the one to meet them head-on. When the first tsunami wiped out San Francisco, she had her market research team put together a list. When the second tsunami took out LA, she had the guys make their sales pitch. And when reports came in that a third tsunami was barreling down on Silicon Valley, she knew she'd strike it big.

She wasn't targeting California. It doesn't take her talent for forecasting to predict that those rich hippies were goners. She knew that the well-endowed governments out East would throw tax dollars at her with Ol' Big Blue in trouble. But really, it didn't matter who was getting swallowed up in a tsunami this week, or a forest fire next week. The most important thing was timing. She had to anticipate buyers' needs, right when their anxiety tipped them over into her tissue- and contract-filled hands. Emergencies were big business.

She had the guys working around the clock. 2020, The Great Year of Government Spending, taught her that government agencies wanted vendors who worked 24/7/365, girlbosses who could crank through a crisis. She knew what she had to do. At last week's "Sell Your Sale" webinar, she'd told the attendees, "Put in the work, fellas! You never regret a sales call!" Her sales tips were rooted in the toiled soil of America. Now, where did the frozen bacon and canned potatoes that fed this great nation come from? It wasn't from leaning on pitchforks.

Heck, she'd made so much green as the CEO of Roboface the Day that she'd been called Skincare Sales Eve! Give her a craze for AI-generated selfies and she'd plant a goddamn capitalist paradise. An orchard so virile that even grown-man Washington couldn't chop it down. How did she do it? It wasn't from sharing her secrets for free. (Sales Tip: Sell your secrets in webinars and charge \$150 a head!) Kelly had been preparing for the end of the world her entire career.

As Silicon Valley's drowning computer chips sent out sparks in the California night, endangering every hoodied nerd trying to salvage their iLives, Kelly nestled into her pillow. She dreamt of touching the mailman's fingers, his calluses rubbing against her own when handing over the grocery package. Waking refreshed on yet another morning to Chase Your Dreams, she breathed in the faintly charred scent of wildfires in Colorado. It reminded her of steak. She decided to order more food, once the delivery company was back online.

Central Nebraska was a prime spot to watch the action develop. No ocean. No earthquakes. Infrequent twisters, made bearable thanks to the bunker she built with her Roboface the Day severance pay. The Nebraska mornings tasted like warm oak, and she was comforted as she imagined being turned round and round in one of Pigaro's smokers. After heating up some dehydrated coffee and getting dressed in a gray pantsuit, she stood on her porch and scrolled through her feed. Of course, she was ranked first on the site. She spent her 5-9 on outreach. Her competitors in emergency services weren't as prepared as she was, no ma'am. Could Taylor at Certain Survival in NYC boast a secluded bunker, sandy land made slightly darker through Eternal Growth Fertilizer®, a Holy Water Tank®, and a postcapitalism-proof business model? "Ha!" she snorted into the gritty coffee. Amateur.

The guys were living all over the country. (Sales Tip: Manage your risk!) She left the porch for her office and, leaning back into her squeaky plastic office chair, dialed up her secretary. “Matt! Where are we at with Florida?” Florida, she learned, was primed for a sale. A big sale. Kelly’s mouth curled into a smirk as Matt explained that Hurricane Roosevelt was making landfall in Tallahassee. The capital city’s agencies were already releasing increasingly distressed Requests for Proposals: Construction Project Management for Various Road and Bridge Projects. Homelessness and Housing Insecurity Services. Drug and Alcohol Collection and Testing. Hazardous Waste and County Department Waste. Virtual Autopsy Services. Kelly briefly wondered if she’d ever see a palm tree again, then recalled the sun blisters from a childhood vacation on Gainesville Beach. She hoped those Floridians could swim.

Kelly opened her CRM and searched under Location for Tallahassee, the seat of the state’s government purchasing. Filled with caffeinated confidence, she aimed for the big guy himself. The administrative staff had fled the white capitol building, so her call went straight through to the Governor. (Sales Tip: Put yourself in situations others would call luck!) “Heeey! Mark! This is Kelly from We Are Emergencies. How ya doin’?” A shaky whimper, barely audible, came from the speakerphone. “Mark? Mr. Governor?” The line broke off. She inserted the timestamp in the CRM and scheduled a Follow-Up Call for the end of the week, knowing the governor would have to act more put-together for the media tour of the hurricane damage.

On to the next call. (Sales Tip: Make all your sales calls back-to-back, otherwise you’ll never get to them!) Since the city government was apparently in recession today, Kelly turned to the city’s healthcare system. The biggest hospital, Tallahassee Memorial, had made a net profit of \$704,494,918 in The Great Year of Government Spending, so they had money for top-of-the-line emergency services. *There’s no profit in the future without emergency spending*

today! That's what she always said. Kelly closed her eyes and nodded, savoring her golden sales pitch.

"Mark!" She checked her notes. Another Mark? Yes. Another Mark. "Mark! This is Kelly from We Are Emergencies." A snarl: "What the fuck do you want from me?" (Sales Tip: Meet hostility with warmth! That way, you show you don't want to be a pest, you're just being amazing at your job!) "Hey there, Mark, I'm calling to see what kind of services your hospital will be needing for the end of the world." "Oh yeah?! Fuck you to eternity!" The line went dead: Kelly's signal to insert the timestamp. She made a note in the CRM—"Stage of Grief: Anger"—and scheduled a call for the following day, when he'd hit the next stage of grief: bargaining.

Eternity, bargaining—Kelly had an idea. The government and healthcare weren't playing ball. And what major money-maker was left? The church! Driving from Tallahassee to Atlanta on what turned out to be her final sales trip, church after church flanked her car. Heck, it was easier to get salvation on Thomasville Road than it was to get a cheeseburger! More market research was needed. (Sales Tip: Don't be afraid to apply yourself to the keyboard like Special Sauce on a Big Mac!) She giddily opened Safari, only to see that the Internet was now down. Blessed with a genius' memory, though, she remembered that the biggest Revelationist megachurch was in Florida. The building was so large it could be the Civic Center (they have money!) and located in a retreat city (they had rich congregants ready to give unto the Lord!). Kelly was ready for the Lord to give unto her.

"Pastor Jim! Kelly from We Are Emergencies here. It seems you'll be needing some salvation." Nailed it. Out boomed a voice speaking to a congregation of 3,700: "CHILD! DO YOU NOT KNOW THAT THE LORD CALLS YOU? WHY ARE YOU, OH LAMB, CALLING

ME?” “Hi! Pastor Jim! Great to hear from you. I’m calling to offer you our premium emergency services. Act fast because we have a special sale going on today only!” “THE WORLD IS NOTHING COMPARED TO THE GLORIES AWAITING US WHEN WE RETURN TO THE LORD! BLESSED ARE THE DEAD WHO DIED IN THE LORD, THAT THEY MAY REST FROM THEIR LABORS, FOR THEIR DEEDS FOLLOW THEM! THE GREAT AND AWESOME DAY OF THE LORD IS COMING, MY CHILD! WILL YOU LIVE ON AS ONE OF GOD’S CHOSEN PEOPLE?” “That’s the plan, Pastor Jim. I’m living in Central Nebraska. No Hurricane Roosevelt here. But you—” “NO, CHILD! ARE YOU RIGHT WITH THE LORD? JUDGMENT DAY IS HERE! BUT WILL GOD OUR SAVIOR CALL YOU TO HIS SIDE?” “That’s just what I want to talk to you about, Pastor Jim. I’m calling you about, um, Judgment Day to make sure you and your congregants have everything you need. There are supplies you surely haven’t thought about purchasing, plans you haven’t made, and I’m here to offer you and your congregants the best possible Judgment Day services money can buy.” “WHOEVER LOVES MONEY NEVER HAS ENOUGH, CHILD! THE MEEK SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH!” “Pastor Jim, now, I’m a straight shooter, so I’ll come right out and offer you our best deal. Our premium package for an organization your size is usually \$10,000 a month. I’ll offer it to you for a quarter of the price. I’ll even add in free technical support, 24/7/365. How about it?” “AND A SOUL? HOW MUCH IS IT WORTH?” Kelly did some quick calculations and arrived at \$73.46 per month but decided to keep that to herself. “Well, let me ask you a question, Pastor Jim. How much is a soul worth to you? I can keep you and your congregants prepared for the current emergency, and all future emergencies, with a money-back guarantee.” “CHILD! I HEAR THE TRUMPETS OF THE ANGEL! GREAT HAIL AND FIRE AND BLOOD APPROACH! MAY THE LORD BE WITH YOU!” Before Kelly could fumble out “And with you,” her potential client had hung up the phone. Kelly inserted the timestamp and made a note in the CRM: “Good chat!” She scheduled a Follow-Up Call for Monday, when the church counted up congregants’ offerings.

It was nearing midday, and Kelly still hadn't made a sale. Disappointed, she reminded herself that the life of a saleswoman was an endless hunt, and the hunter couldn't predict the exact moment the bunny ran across the road. Discipline, she needed discipline. (Sales Tip: Discipline turns good saleswomen into great saleswomen! You can never be disciplined enough!) She counted "1-2-3-4-5," then threw herself on the sticky linoleum for a 1-minute plank. Rejuvenated after 20 seconds, although guilty for not doing more, she crawled back up to her plastic office chair. In tough times, even the greatest saleswomen needed a model to turn to. So, she quietly raised up a little prayer: "What would Jeff Bezos do?" She didn't have the money to colonize space. Anyways, that hadn't gone well. And she already had the guys working like little bees (R.I.P.), their every second clocked and categorized through a digital surveillance system tracking mouse movement. How else could she strap that mouse to a treadmill and make it run—faster, faster!—until its little legs gave out?

An idea shot through her cerebral cortex more explosively than one of Bezos' rockets (also R.I.P.). She would add to her sources of passive income. (Sales Tip: Diversify your income streams, both passive and active! This allows you to work all the time, even when you sleep! Congratulate yourself on achieving the dream!) Her savvy investments—fossil fuels, cryptocurrency, logging, her beloved Roboface the Day—were one thing, but she could always diversify her portfolio more. Having already gobbled up the most sensible financial investments, the trick here was to identify another way to stimulate propulsive sales from flaccid opportunities.

Kelly allowed herself to look out the window for inspiration, then realized she was only looking at dirt and Holy Water®. Usually, she brainstormed by stomping around the office and spilling her brilliant thoughts as Matt, silently on the call, caught them in a Google Doc. Kelly chuckled as she remembered the old-fashioned word "basket case." Then, she smiled because

her subconscious was beautiful. What she needed, she thought as she squished a foam baseball between her hands, was a basket, something that could hold all of her wisdom for the next generation of saleswomen. She didn't want to host more webinars, which could spin out into endless prep and IT troubleshooting she had to outsource to the guys. (Sales Tip: When calculating unit price, make sure to include even those invisible, personal costs, like the air you breathe and the thoughts you think and the anger you feel when your employees fail you! The client will never ask to see your math!) No more Zoom motivational talks. No more TikTok dances. No more curated Spotify playlists to unleash the Sales Eve in you.

Bored by the view from her window, Kelly turned around and set her hands on the antique mahogany desk. It used to be her mother's, the person who wrote her first CV when she was 10, setting her up for professional success. Would Kelly have become one of America's darling girlbosses without her mother reading her bedtime stories about businesswomen or, when she was a teenager, picking up airport books about "leaning in" to business success? Kelly felt a tear form, thinking of how far feminism had taken them.

And just like that, Kelly saw the new line she'd add to her profile: "Author." Kelly was going to write a book, a book of sales tips. She could crank that out in one afternoon, especially since publishing houses had let go of all their editors and the quality of bestselling publications had slipped achievably low. Yes, she would write the business guide to end all business guides, offering just enough new information that long-time attendees of her webinars would feel required to buy it. (Sales Tip: When giving advice to up-and-comers, always save a secret sliver for yourself! You'll never know when you'll need it! In fact, just keep adding secrets, rest assured that secrets work like compound interest!) This book, like her webinars, would have to be online, since paper had gone extinct. She leaned back in her plastic office chair and envisioned

the new line on her CV, the rapturous reviews in Business Insider and Harvard Business Review, the adoring followers, millions and millions of them...

After eating her last microwaved hotdog, she settled down to write. “Matt! I’m writing a book and you need to type it.” “Yes, Boss. But the, uh, the power has gone out here in Indiana.” “I’m not paying you to complain, Matt!” “Right, Boss. I’ll record it with my phone on Low Power Mode. Do you have a title?” “Of course, Matt. I’m always three steps ahead. It’s We Are Emergencies, that’s a no-brainer. And the very helpful subtitle is: A Guide to Business at the End of the World. We need to ramp up potential customers’ anxiety, so they’ll buy it.” “Clever, Boss. Where would you like to begin?”

Knowing this was the beginning of the end, Kelly looked out the window, this time taking her gaze from the dirt below to the sky above. Viciously gray clouds had settled down low, and she couldn’t tell whether rain was approaching or a twister. Either way, she didn’t plan on leaving her office until she’d narrated We Are Emergencies to Matt and, just as 5 pm struck, triumphantly shouted, “The End!”

Grace Daly

Efficient

He sits across the laminated desktop from me, explaining concepts (in *excruciating* detail) my résumé clearly shows I already understand:

| | | |
|--------------|------------------------|-----------|
| Kaizen | Industrial Engineering | Agile |
| SCRUM | Continuous Improvement | |
| Optimization | Lean 6 Sigma | Fail Fast |

I thank him for the lesson. I smile earnestly.

Then, I continuously improve my jaw so it unhinges like a snake's and swallow him whole, my colon optimizing him until he is his leanest, most efficient self:

A piece of shit.

Kurt Van Ristell

4HL

You can make a living

Doing anything.

May day. The ocean tugs like a magnet,

Black and ice

Cold below the wax of butter,

Churning foam. The sun:

A ball of gas and molten dispassion.

It pulls seashells into stretched

Taffy shadows at set

And daubs gulls, snowblind

White streaks against a cloudless

Summer sky.

The drive home from Brighton

Passes in silence.

Bank holiday. A twenty-four

Hour reprieve from the four

Hour life.

You can make a living

Doing anything

I tell myself.

Max Sheridan

I Got A Social Worker

I got a social worker.

I couldn't afford a psychiatrist, not even an online one, so I got a social worker.

The city sent her last Tuesday.

Her name was Jenna.

There was nowhere to sit in my apartment so we went to the park across the street to discuss my case.

Jenna plumped up her facemask and got her laptop out and placed it on her knees when some guy shrieked really loud. It was like a death throe, or a hoopoe bird. An agonizing screech that stunned even the bums sleeping in the grass.

It began to drizzle.

Jenna asked me if I was planning on starting a family because then maybe I could get some kind of tax break.

I said no.

She looked at her notes again and asked me how the uber driving was going.

I told her I'd been beaten up pretty bad the other day by two other uber drivers. One was named Raoul and the other was a guy they called Dangerous Slim. It was a turf war, I said. They beat me where no one could see it. On my thighs and back and knees.

Jenna said, Oh.

They'll slit your throat for a 50-cent tip, I said.

Jenna said that was horrible.

I changed the subject to college debt.

Jenna brightened up. We'd reached a common theme. Jenna had college debt once. She knew what a psychological strain it could be. She asked me how much more I had to pay off.

All of it, I said. Plus interest on all of it. I hadn't opened a bill since 2008. I think my passport had been revoked.

Jenna said, Oh.

The guy shrieked again. But louder. Whooping. Like an alien had just popped out of his chest.

The drizzle had stopped but a garbage truck had parked next to us and that was more noise and now stink. Three masked garbage men jumped off the back of the truck like diamond thieves. They stared at a heap of garbage by the curb they couldn't parse. Chair backs and game boards and shoes and pizza containers and stuffing and muck. They took one look at the junk and jumped right back on the truck.

I recognized Raoul even behind his facemask. Raoul was the garbage man that told them to jump back on the truck.

I was going to tell Jenna.

Maybe she could get Raoul in trouble now that he was working for the city.

Maybe if I got Raoul fired, I could get his new job.

But then I thought, no, I didn't want Raoul's new job, even if it meant getting beat up for the next 42 pandemics.

Suzy Eynon

Promoted From Within

“Larry wants to see you,” Katherine said, whispering every word.

“Now?” Daisy looked down at her leggings and slip-on sneakers. With each year toward her five-year company anniversary, came decreasing levels of dress code compliance. “I’m wearing pajamas today.”

“You’re fine,” said Katherine, swatting away the thought. “He’s going to offer you a number, but I want you to ask for more.” She reached over Daisy and grabbed from a pile of sticky notes nested by the computer.

“What?” Daisy felt a stab of sweat prick her underarms. She had never negotiated a salary. She always accepted what was offered without further discussion.

Katherine scribbled a number on the sticky note. “You have to interview but it’s more of a formality.”

“Fifty-five?” Daisy said. She saw her cubicle neighbor’s head crest above the separating wall, a nosy mountain, and lowered her voice. “Are you sure?”

“He’ll offer you way less, and then you can settle on fifty.”

Daisy wasn't quick-witted when others were watching, but with Katherine by her side, she could follow the script.

Daisy followed Katherine down the hall to the open concept portion of the building. Departments deemed profitable resided in the sunlit portion where shining silver signs hung from the ceiling, announcing each division. A glow warmed the area where it opened to the atrium on one edge and to a wall of windows on the other. Desk plants grew unfettered, their tendrils pushing aside paperclips and unending pencil cups in their stretch toward the sun. Katherine and Daisy walked to the corner, to Larry's glass-walled office. Daisy had heard whispers about Larry, but because she worked in one of the fluorescent-lit, locked offices she had seen no evidence.

"Oh, hello," he said now, folding down the top of a paper bag he was about to explore.

Daisy felt they were interrupting. She imagined Larry diving into the paper bag, absorbed by its crumbling walls. The bag burst into flames which spread to the desk, across the carpet in a wave of light.

Katherine slid the glass door closed. "Larry, Daisy is here to talk about the position."

"Ah! Yes." He sat behind his desk and used an arm to slide a mound of paperwork to the side. "You've worked here for three years?"

Daisy visualized the sticky note with the number on it. "Almost five years. In records."

"And you're interested in working with us instead? Big change."

“I’d love the opportunity to work more closely with clients,” Daisy said. “I have experience providing—”

“What does your husband think of this? He’s okay with it?”

Daisy shifted in her chair, planting both feet on the industrial carpet dotted with potato chip crumbs. “He’s...fine.” The sticky note in her mind was blank, useless. She wondered why he assumed she was married but her eyes landed on her gold band. Sometimes she forgot she was married because she didn’t see herself from the outside like that. She was singular.

“Good,” Larry said. He glanced at the gaping paper bag.

“Do you have a number for Daisy?” Katherine smiled. A prompt.

“Let’s see.” Larry rifled through some papers but surely there was no document there labeled *Salaries for Employees*. He stopped and said, “We can offer you forty-seven.”

“I was thinking fifty-five,” Daisy said, the number a dare as it left her lips. She felt she was observing the office from outside her body, actors arranged in a diorama. In another version of her life, she floated up from the chair and out the front doors onto the street. She’d spent so much time in and around this building that she did this in her mind – traipse around the block – as she willed herself to sleep at night. She could hear from the safety of her bed the rattle of the monorail overheard. The first time she’d heard the monorail, she thought the sky was falling and hunched in the street mid-crosswalk, like a frightened animal, before straightening herself and continuing to cross.

“Don’t think we can go that high,” Larry said. “But we’ll talk this over.” His hand crept back toward the bag. “I’ll get back to you with a number.”

Daisy lost sight of the sticky note altogether.

He smiled at Daisy. For a moment she thought she saw fangs threatening to slide over his bottom lip, bright white breaking through the split of red. It was the light from the atrium, the midday throb of sunshine enduring through glass, distracting her from turning to run.

Ron Riecki & Sharmila Voorakkara

To Whom It May Concern

To Whom It May Concern,

I regret to tender my resignation, but not really, because I have no idea how a living human does this job for a living or for anything else. The person who did this job before me must have had the mind of a turnip, incapable of boredom or a single thought of any consequence. I would like to inform you that I am designing a homemade Baldacchino Supreme Bed, a curved-canopy bed, a sponge-batted bed, a bed that I will be sleeping in from now on, from home, as I have quit and so I'm going to be lacquered and liquored and really, I'm pretty hammered right now, as a matter of fact. This is not your fault, I realize. But be that as it may, let's just say you can fetch that ball yourself. I am no one's dog. Or maybe I am. A corporate Iggy Pop hacksaw. I'm too drunk right now to poem. I think you took my brain. It's sore now, doomed. I'm bald, iglooed. Included is a photocopy of my lungs. On my birthday, they'll bloom.

Respectfully,

Another Whom

Ron Riecki & Sharmila Voorakkara

Dear Sir/Madam

Dear Sir/Madam:

I'd like to request two weeks off so I can get absolutely shitfaced, so I can forget the fact that this is my life. I would also like an extra three weeks off to get piss-footed, I mean not only drinking the beer but also eating the entire keg. As well as another four weeks off to get vomit-spleened, where I will forget every single obligation I have to my molecules and this pea-brained thesis that keeps us all in chains. Finally, I'd like another five decades off to have my memory cleanwiped so that I won't be a chronic adrenaline mess for eternity but thank you for all the pennies and nickels you shoved down my throat.

I pray God kills your hope too.

Sinisterly,

The Person Whose Last Name You Manslaughtered in Both Spelling and Pronunciation

Avery Gregurich

Following the Bomb Threat at the Grocery Store

we were back to selling again within the hour. one of the first customers said he was a teacher, offered to buy us all

cookies. he was on christmas break. many wanted to know the details, of which few were supplied to us to supply to them, a real

supply chain hold-up never to be unkinked. later that day, someone urgently came to me holding five pounds of grapefruit and said *this one's rotten*,

pointing to the center of the bag for me to see. i tried to save what i could, but it was already such a mess when it got to my hands that

i threw it all away. it was a skeleton crew all night. not many people wanted to clock in directly adjacent the phone where the threat was first

administered. by the time my boss was leaving, it was late and he was tired of his life in assurance. he had said he'd given his son a lego set

of the taj mahal for christmas, so i asked if his son was already done with it. he was wearing his cart-gathering clothes and he said no,

that he had only just started building, that he was working first from the ground up.

Holiday Haute Cuisine?

Holiday heart attacks epidemic

Much as anybody

This cardiac surgeon

Has seen how risk-factor

Gunk can muck up your works.

I remember after Jack (of Jack

& Marion's Deli in Brookline)

Had left Beth Israel Hospital on

My service; another main coronary event

I attended his autopsy

To get good look at how corned

Beef + chocolate eclairs might lay one

Low over a lifetime of food indulgences.

But when Julia Child crashed through the

French double doors into our C.C.U.

Carrying a tray of goodies to butter up

the House officers caring for her hubby

Truth be told, I couldn't resist!

Zoe Davis

Secret Santa 5.30pm

There was nothing secret
About the shoddily wrapped gift
Thrust with a giggle
Into waiting hands
Half past closing
Mouthing 'we're not open'
With accompanying jazz hands
To passers-by
Who try the door anyway
A bit like your luck
At wooing me
With a matching scarf and gloves set
With the wrong initials
Regifted
I assume
With forlorn hope of a raise
Considering I got you a bottle
Obvious in shape but still worthy of an 'Ooooh? Wonder what that is?'
As Spotify adverts blare out on borrowed speakers
Dammit. There goes the tree.
You were supposed to open the bottle at home. And that is not what mistletoe looks like-

Your dead cactus as unwilling substitute.
Forced festive frivolity.
Sharon brought her own buffet.
Vegan, gluten free, no cucumber.
They all want it,
As unlike the rest of the offerings, it isn't
Beige.
Ten quid a head. Notes taken from the till
For pizza, as no one was happy
Except Sharon.
Clatter into an Uber.
Let me shove you in.
Yes, bye.
Wave, bye.
I'll wear it, I promise,
On Christmas Day.

Erica Fransisca

I hereby resign from everything

Dear Love,

Having learnt of the latest developments,

I hereby resign from my position

under your big, ugly thumb,

effective two weeks from today.

During the two weeks, I will try

to purge myself of any fond memories

and sever the cords that tether my heart

to your careless, wandering hands.

I will also work on not calling you

Love anymore, and as best as I can,

stop loving that which is undeserving.

And to arrange for a smooth transition,

I will draw up thorough instructions

- not for my direct replacement,

for she is way too close to home—

my home—the one you wrecked,

but for the one after, and the one after that

because there will always be another.

Now I know, my time in between your lies
has not been productive; it has been
delusion at best,
but still I am grateful for the opportunity
learning how much a heart can break
and still one day mend itself.

Sincerely,

Not yours anymore.

Shannon Clem

Walk Of Shame

There is no
walk of shame
quite like
a coworker
returning your
underwear—

And having your
bag searched
by Loss Prevention
at the end of your shift.

Blair Jockers

The Mentor

Sunday, August 23, 1992

Hurricane Andrew was headed straight for Miami, a monster storm with howling winds and walls of driving rain vividly documented in the television reports as it came ashore in The Bahamas, much bigger than any storm Jack Preston had experienced since moving down from Boston eleven years before. The view of black clouds in the distance from his office in the Cuthbert Incorporated campus in Kendall Lakes gradually disappeared as the maintenance guys rolled metal hurricane shutters down the outside of the plate glass windows. His management team had made sure the factory and office building were safeguarded: Centrifuges shut down, flood dike engaged on the receiving dock, refrigerated inventory moved to an offsite storage facility with a backup generator. The place was ready.

He reclined in a high-backed leather chair and put his feet up on the wide, mahogany desk. Nineteen ninety-two had been a tough year. In January, the family who founded the place in nineteen fifty-nine sold out to a big holding company that required drastic cost cutting to make payments on the debt used to fund the acquisition. Two layoffs had been required earlier in the year, and Jack had just been told to put together a list for a third round on September 9, two weeks away. The rumor mill said the holding company was coming for middle management this time. The guy in charge in Denver, the division that hadn't made money in years, said he expected to be collateral damage soon, but Jack felt secure. Under his leadership, the South

Florida division made money three of the last four quarters, due in no small part to the efforts of the solid management team he'd built during his tenure there.

"You in here?" Ida Johnson, Director of Human Resources, pushed open the door and switched on the light. "We're all waiting."

Jack had brought Ida in seven years before, the company's first and only Black executive. Having her on board looked good when the Cuthbert family came from Sarasota for one of their tightly choreographed annual visits. And, her personal story at the interview was compelling.

"My mother was a maid, her mother was a maid, I was a maid when I was a girl," she said, looking past Jack out the window as if searching for something not yet in view. "My husband Matthew sold insurance, his father did day labor, grandfather the same. We just wanted more for Percy, our son. He's all grown up now, graduated top of his class at Dartmouth Engineering."

She smiled proudly and looked at Jack, returning to the business at hand. "On the tour, I noticed most of your factory floor employees are non-white, and I suspect nobody in management is."

"True enough," he said. "What would you do about that?"

"I saw three open supervisor-level positions posted on the job board out in the cafeteria. I'd start there – first try to promote minority candidates from within, and if that didn't

work, recruit external candidates locally. It sends a message, you know, very important these days.”

He’d hired her on the spot, and she did a fine job, at first, bringing stability to the HR department, after a period of high staff turnover and poor morale. But in the last couple of years, she had developed a habit of making everything into a federal case, particularly since the takeover, and her strident demands for aggressive policy changes that could impact the quarterly financial results had begun to wear thin. After giving her situation some thought, Jack decided that, unfortunately, her name probably belonged on the list of his direct reports to be transitioned out on September 9, two weeks out, a list not unlike those he would soon require each of his management team members to prepare. He’d planned to tell her Monday, give her two weeks’ notice not offered to others, but decided to hold off when the hurricane arrived and threw the place into chaos. He needed a steady hand heading up HR until things returned to normal.

“Coming.” Jack pulled his feet down off the desk and followed Ida around the corner into the conference room where she took her regular seat next to his at the head of the table.

He closed the door and nodded to Bill Harcourt, Director of Operations, who provided an update on security measures put in place during the storm as Jack walked from one plate glass window to the next, drawing down the blinds that provided privacy from the staff area across the hall.

After ten minutes reviewing parking access (none), local area network connections (shut off), cafeteria operations (closed), and air-conditioning (off, except in server rooms and the chillers in the plant), Bill summed up: “Just tell your troops - Don’t come.”

“Thanks, Bill,” Jack said, taking his seat. “Before you guys leave, there’s something else I want to discuss.” Jack leaned forward, touched the side of his chin with his index finger, and displayed one of several facial expressions he’d learned at an emotional intelligence seminar a few years back: *IMPORTANT/CONCERNED*.

He told the team about the layoff – ten percent headcount reduction, with impacted employees to be selected based on an analysis of efficiencies created by the new computer system Cuthbert had finished installing earlier in the year.

Reactions were mixed – deep breaths and folded hands, fearful glances. Ida shook her head slightly and pursed her lips, a blank repose seemingly calculated to wait for any other shoes to drop before she reacted.

“I’m not sure I understand what the new system has to do with it,” Vic Thompson, Director of Engineering remarked.

“Good question, Vic. You need to work with the consultants to create new job descriptions that reflect business processes in alignment with how the new system is designed. Then, compare those job descriptions with the skillsets of the current staff.” *STUDIOUS/PROFESSIONAL*. “And guys, you need to think holistically about our needs, right? Consider things like attitude and motivation. Are they team players? Do they fit in well? Do they have

ongoing health problems that affect their productivity? This is our chance to, well, to *cull* the herd.”

Jack was telling them to construct job descriptions that required skills not possessed by people they wanted to get rid of. Ida knew that, of course, maybe one or two others.

“I thought we were going to retrain,” Vic glanced at Ida, who was looking through the window at the metal panels where the view used to be. “We have some promising interns. They don’t know the new system yet, but...”

“Now Vic, we have a business to run here. We need to step up, make tough choices.”

“We’re doing them a favor, guys,” Bill said, always eager to show he was on board with whatever Jack wanted. “It’s a wake-up call for underperformers, right Boss? An opportunity for employees to improve, make a fresh start.”

“Sure...at another company.”

Ida raised her hand. “Jack, the policy we put in place last year is effective as-is, and is in alignment with Federal EEOC rules, too. Are we re-litigating that after all my team’s work?”

Jack ignored her question and stood up. He knew she’d go along. He might not inspire, exactly, but he still had his finger on the money button.

“I need a list from each of you by the end of the week, storm, or no storm. Now go home to your families,” he said. *GRACIOUS*. “That’s all.”

Jack inched past Dadeland Mall in the Benz, as gusts of wind sent palm fronds soaring in all directions above. When Jack and his ex-wife Katy moved down, they got the retail habit, and the mall became their home away from home. The money they sprayed all over South Florida and beyond over the years was money they hadn't socked away, so he'd be working as long as Cuthbert let him. Katy was gone now, went back to Boston four years earlier, tired of the humidity, she said, and him. "Living with you is exhausting, Jack. You know a lot about a little."

A breathless reporter on the radio announced that Andrew had shifted southwest, and a mandatory evacuation was declared south of Kendall Boulevard, which included him.

He arrived home to a message on the answering machine in the front hall from his daughter Colleen. "It's headed your way, Daddy. Come on up, while you still can. The twins would love having Grandpa here in Lauderdale for a couple of days."

Thirty seconds after the message ended, the power went out. Jack had planned to stay put, ride out the storm, but *stay put* now meant no AC in August, a melted freezer, no cable TV. He packed an overnight bag, cranked the hurricane shades shut over the plate glass window in the den, and jumped back in the Benz.

After waiting in line for forty-five minutes in front of what might have been the last open gas station in South Miami, he filled up the tank and pulled back into traffic, one of over a million people evacuating north. According to the radio announcer, traffic on I-95 was now backed up all the way from Jupiter Inlet, and the turnpike was even worse.

He'd done his best with Ida, Jack thought, inching up the turnpike on-ramp. He had certainly offered her plenty of advice over the years. When she first arrived, he suggested she prioritize relationship building with her peers by going out to lunch with the other directors, rather than eating in the cafeteria with the employees. To project a professional image to the staff, he suggested she wear skirts and silk blouses, not the manly pantsuits she seemed to prefer. She'd been a Vice-President at an insurance company in Jacksonville before coming to Cuthbert, so she should have already known this kind of stuff but, as her mentor, Jack found it necessary to reinforce good habits.

"All things to keep in mind," she'd replied, tactfully.

One hour and fifteen minutes later, Jack passed the Bird Road turnpike toll plaza, heavy rain pounding steadily on the roof, and settled in for the ride.

Sales were down in nineteen eighty-six and nineteen eighty-seven, and the company went into retrenchment mode. At one of their monthly offsite lunches, Jack told Ida her proposed flexible scheduling and employee tuition reimbursement programs were on-hold. She wasn't pleased.

"We no longer overtly discriminate in hiring and promotion, the kind of things we can get sued over, but that's all we've managed to get done here in the three years since I came on-board."

Jack didn't like having to baby his team members. He expected them to take charge, make things happen.

"There's something we might do that could actually save money, though," she added. "Turnover is still high, and a comprehensive training program could groom internal talent, give folks a reason to stay. Promoting from within is almost always cheaper than hiring from the outside."

"Something to think about," Jack said. *CURIOUS*. "Leave a proposal on my desk and I'll take a look."

In nineteen eighty-eight, one of the Cuthbert children decided he wanted to play at being a CEO and reorganized the place. When Jack lost some obscure political battle and was demoted from Division Head to a no-name special project lead, he felt like his career had permanently crested ten years too soon.

His temporary replacement was a kid straight out of school who told Ida to look for evidence of Jack's mismanagement that could be used against him out of context - operational hiccups, failure to hit numbers, failure to deliver reports nobody read anyway.

She refused, went all the way to Cuthbert Junior and threatened to quit. Eventually, Junior got bored and returned to his island in the Bahamas, and when Jack got his job back, he and Ida went to a bar at the Biltmore hotel in Coral Gables to celebrate.

“I heard it was a mutiny.” He held up his drink and winked, and they clicked glasses. “The other managers backed you up. That shows you have their respect.” *MY PROTÉGÉ KICKS IT!*

“Maybe. I work at it, you know. But it gets strange sometimes too Jack, like at that fund-raiser for at-risk kids here at the hotel last year. I was walking from table to table in the ballroom chatting people up while they ate their desserts and one of the managers from accounting asked me to refill his ice-tea.”

“That’s a small thing, Ida.”

“But I’ve been around for four years now, in a highly visible role. I even helped him get a hiring requisition mess-up straightened out, so he had to know I’m not a waitress.”

Jack had confidential lunches with the secretaries of his direct reports, just to stay in touch. Ida’s secretary Amy, the daughter of one of Katy’s friends at the country club, had told him: *Ms. Johnson is going through a divorce. She can be pushy, so I can kind of understand, you know; not that I mind, Mr. Preston. I like my boss to demand the best from me...*

“Now, don’t be too sensitive. You can’t let your home life impact your work life.”

Ida sat up in her chair, nostrils flaring. “It’s not about *me*, Jack. It’s about how the employees see me. They have no idea how many of my proposals end up stuck on... on somebody’s desk.”

“Don’t feel bad, Ida. I know you’re doing your best.”

Ida looked at her watch.

The whole mess with Junior taught Jack something. The family's younger generation wasn't interested in running the business, and three years later, had sold out to the holding company that was now making Jack's life hell. His priority had to be his own survival, hitting the quarterly numbers without making waves, and Ida's big ideas would take a back seat to more pressing challenges.

Traffic came to a dead stop just past the NW41st St exit. The rain had stopped, and the wind calmed down a little.

At one of Jack's lunches with Amy, a month before Andrew came to town, she mentioned Ida was furious about Jack's rejection of the proposed new-and-improved flexible scheduling plan she developed with Bill. *She's super upset. She talks on the phone a lot with the door closed, too. Some people say she's looking for another job. Not me, of course, I never listen in on private conversations.*

At her seventh annual performance review a few days later, Jack asked Ida how she thought things were going.

"Well, these days, I just try to keep the few programs I put in early on from being scrapped."

Everybody wants to be the boss, Jack thought. Executive positions aren't all they're cracked up to be. You never get everything you want.

“I know what you mean,” he nodded, not in agreement, exactly, but to be polite. “The new owners...” *LONGSUFFERING*

She glanced at him and took a deep breath, then they discussed her proposal to enclose the outdoor seating area by the cafeteria with a white picket fence.

The traffic finally broke at NW 106th St. and Jack exited soon after on Okeechobee Rd. He made his way through the driving rain and arrived at the happy chaos of Colleen’s place a few minutes later: kids and dogs jumping around, candles flickering everywhere; heaps of pork chops, chicken breasts and veal cutlets from the empty freezer crammed onto a gas grill on the covered patio out back.

The storm was finally over.

On September 7, two days before the layoff announcement, Jack met with Ida to discuss her future. At first, he made small talk. Bill was retiring and Jack asked her about the search for his replacement.

“Last we talked; I asked you to contact placement offices at MBA programs up north. How is that going?”

“I decided to go another direction. I found a great internal candidate. He’s experienced, has the respect of the folks in the plant.”

She had done this without his knowledge, defied his express directive.

“Who is it?”

“Patrick Hastings. He’s been running Packaging for four years now. You know him?”

“Yeah, he’s the guy who works out, right? Wears a tank top to show off?”

“We said jeans and tanks are okay in the summer months, Jack, as you might remember.”

“You think we need a guy like that in management, mincing around, setting an example for the other employees?” Jack was having trouble hiding his true feelings, lately. *DISTASTE*.
“Does he even have a degree?”

Ida ignored Jack’s subtle reference to Patrick’s sexual orientation. “He subbed for Bill when he had his heart attack last year. There is no one more qualified for this position, Jack. We made him an offer...”

“Not without my approval?” *PULLING RANK*

“...which he accepted. Patrick is the new plant manager.”

“Absolutely not...”

“Jack,” Ida interrupted him, possibly for the first time. “It’s not up to you anyway, not anymore. I thought that’s what you wanted to talk to me about.”

Jack had been at this game long enough to know that some change had occurred involving his role at the company – another special project; a transfer to Denver to clean up the mess there; or maybe, Jack swallowed hard, maybe his own name was on a list prepared by someone at the holding company.

“I’m sorry, Jack. I thought you knew.”

Until he got the real story, Jack decided the most important thing was to retain his dignity. *STUDIED NONCHALANCE.*

“Since you seem to know everything,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “Who’s taking my place?”

Jack had long accustomed himself to Ida’s inscrutable half-smile - not a pleased agreement, or even a questioning smirk; more a knowing grin that suggested she didn’t quite know how to respond...or didn’t wish to.

“Why I am, Jack. I’m the new division head.”

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

MIDLVL MAG would like to acknowledge you, the reader.

I continue to be humbled by the response to the magazine. The concept has resonated in ways that are more sincere and funny and humbling than I could have imagined. That continues to make this project worth it in every way.

I won't try to hide that it is difficult at times, especially as it relates to carving out a space amongst the established, emergent, independent publications. There are so many talented artists, with their own visions of curation, editorial voice, collecting, distributing, branding, marketing, engagement etc., that it can be overwhelming at times.

I have my own ideas, my own sense of presentation and voice that I hope continues to connect with folk as I push this thing forward into the unwritten future. MIDLVL MAG is a genuine part of me, and the expression and sharing of it reaffirms a belief that I have long held. I'll keep saying it until the last person to leave turns the lights off.

Literature matters.

So do you.

- Tim Batson, EIC

POSTSCRIPT

Mid-Level Management Literary Magazine will be going through some changes this year.

Will we still be putting out top-quality literature that explores our relationship with work, life, and the venn diagram of everything in-between? That is a resounding yes! Will we still exist online in a part reality, part fantasy form where we parody office/work life and ourselves, on a psychedelic quest to deconstruct the identities we have shaped and have been shaped for us? Of course. Will MIDLVLMAG still be free and volunteer run. Oh yeah!

So what are these changes we're going through? Well, MIDLVLMAG has revealed itself to be bigger than one person, bigger than just a literary publication. It wants to express itself visually, audibly, and maybe even olfactorily. It can't be contained in a cubicle, and frankly, it never was going to be.

There are irons in fires, and the fires are getting hot! Things we're looking to explore:

- Content collaboration
- Volunteer readers/editors
- "Mixtapes" (?)
- Audio / Visual Wizards
- New Mascot (Smokey is retiring)
- Deconstruction Ad Infinitum

With this in mind, the 2023 schedule we posted via twitter last year will be changing as well.

Keep an ear to the ground, and your eyes peeled. If you want in on this, if you're bold enough to accept a promotion into management, keep writing your stories, keep making your art, and brush up that CV and resume.

- The MIDLVLMAG Team