

A Free Breakfast

Part 1

There's this alien in my ear all day long, and I have nightmares about it when I get home. It yaps nonsense about ADS and LY and other combinations of letters and numbers that mean absolutely nothing to me, but supposedly indicate how much money the store is making.

I stand at the front between the cash register and a mirror, and I watch myself fold the same pair of leggings everyday. Neurons fire and my incessant thoughts sound off, like they always do. It's impossible to avoid getting caught up in your head when you spend six to eight hours a day picking up after hordes of shoppers who buy clothes just to throw them away. I often get so angry I want to yell at the apparel, and its excessive variation in color and style.

I usually spend most of my time mindlessly folding and dreaming about the spaghetti I am going to devour when I get home. It'll be so nice to serve myself a large bowl of perfectly *al dente* spaghetti with a hunk of bread and cheese on the side: and to top it all off, chocolate. I'm revolting and gluttonous, but I can't complain, I still have the metabolism of a teenager.

When I see a person approaching, all I hope is that they don't ask me for help. These people that come shopping really have no respect. They show up in their pajamas and demand my undivided attention. What do I owe to someone who couldn't even be bothered to put on a real pair of pants before leaving the house? All I really want is to be invisible here and then to go home with my paycheck, but it seems like they want more than my labor, they want my blood.

Tonight, while I was tidying up the sale bins, I found a strange note at the bottom of one of them. I always thought those bins were endless pits, and we would never sell enough to see the bottom, but the people today were animals. For a moment, I was stupid enough to let myself believe this note was for me, after all, it did have my name on it.

Bella, give us a call if you want answers...or if you just want a free breakfast

978-481-5162

It was definitely peculiar, but I'm sure it just slipped out of someone else's purse. I try to avoid making meaning out of nothing, because that's what it always is: nothing. Strange things happen all the time, and they are not a "sign" of some greater power forging our path. They are just strange things. We live in a disordered universe prone to coincidences.

When I looked down at my watch it was exactly 8 p.m.; time for me to go. So, I took it upon myself to announce over the headset that my shift had ended. Back when I first started working here, I used to stay long after my shift ended, because I would wait for someone to tell me I could go. I used to miss appointments and dates with friends, because I just stayed at work to help customers, and no one told me to leave. Forget it. Now the minute my shift ends I leave, they can't keep me.

I usually queue exactly three four-minute songs for my drive home and then the last song ends exactly as I am pulling into my driveway, but tonight I decided to drive home in silence. I think I wanted to indulge the noise in my head.

I couldn't stop thinking about that small piece of wide-ruled notebook paper that looked like it had been torn out of a third grader's journal. It was addressed to me; I am the only Bella that works at the store. And even if it had just slipped out of someone's purse, it was still an uncanny note: "Bella, give us a call if you want answers...or if you just want a free breakfast." I found it odd it said "us" rather than "me." I mean perhaps if it said "me" it could be someone trying to win their partner back, "give them answers" and treat them to breakfast. But "us" felt creepy. I suppose it could be a job offer, they want to answer someone's questions about the job and if they turn it down, they get a free breakfast out of the deal? But, now that I think about it, no one sends this kind of message on a handwritten note these days.

And if this note is for me, what sort of answers could "they" give me? Who are "they"? I don't want to get ahead of myself, but there's free food involved here.

It was eerie pulling into my driveway tonight in silence. Normally I pull in to the last note of some epic song like *Crazy in Love* or *We are the Champions*. But tonight, the noise I was listening to had no resolution.

Like I said, when I get home I always eat immediately. I don't eat when I'm at work because I find it depressing, so I just starve myself. I hate constraints when I am eating, and there is nothing but constraints at work in that tiny gray break room with only fifteen minutes to have lunch.

I like the comfort of eating at home. I can spread my food out. I have a plate for salad, a bowl for spaghetti, and a loaf of bread that I can keep ripping into until I decide I've had enough. Dinnertime is my most indulgent time of the day.

After my very satisfying meal, I went to my bedroom, closed the door, jumped in bed and opened up my laptop. I felt the blue light beaming on my face. I was tired but the night didn't feel complete without watching a random assortment of late night talk show interviews on YouTube with my favorite good-looking celebrities. Once I felt my eyelids slipping shut I got up to do my nighttime routine: cleanser, to wipe away all the grime of the world, moisturizer, to maintain soft skin, then flossing and brushing my teeth, to keep the dentist happy. It's a simple routine. I like simple. Next, I rolled my swollen body into bed, putting all my devices a safe distance away so they couldn't penetrate my body with their cancerous rays in the night.

Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night, and I think I am at work. I usually freak out that I am at work in my pajamas...or worse, naked. I try to press my stiff body back down into bed and I tell myself: "you should sleep." But often, my delusions take control of me, and I get dressed and start to help the invisible customers in my bedroom. I fold, and I ring people out at the cash register at my desk. Tonight, I found that piece of paper again at the bottom of the sale bin (which in this case was in my purse I had thrown on the floor earlier):

Bella, give us a call if you want answers...or if you just want a free breakfast

978-481-5162

Breakfast sounded like a true dream while I was walking around in a nightmare. I walked over to my phone that was plugged into the wall, and without hesitation, I dialed.

Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring.

"Hello!" said a robotic sounding female voice.

"Hi," I replied.

"Now this wouldn't be Bella, would it?"

"Yes."

"We've been expecting your call!"

"Oh-"

"We left that note for you weeks ago! We were starting to think maybe you would never get to the bottom of that bin!"

"Sorry, but, who are you?"

"We are here to answer any questions you may have!"

"I don't think I understand."

"Well Bella, I work for a very special service. A question-answering service. We seek out individuals, like yourself, and we try to help answer all your questions! Some people pass through life, and they may occasionally think to themselves, "What is the purpose of it all?" but it is more a fleeting thought than an all-consuming humor. Some people just don't have as many questions as others. But some, like yourself, are tormented by the questions. It inhibits your everyday life. It stops you from achieving your full potential. It's like you have blinders on and all you can see is pain and inequity, but no solutions. You have lots of questions: the big questions, or sometimes, the small. You try to make sense of it all, but you have no means to possibly find the answers. We are here to help! We target people like yourself and we try to help lift the weight of these questions off your shoulders."

She spoke like she was a robot, but also she had exceptional timing in her responses. What sort of call service is this? Surely, I must be dreaming. This was all just a part of my worst work nightmare ever. So, I hung up the phone.

I went to the bathroom, and I tried splashing cold water on my face. That usually does the trick to calm me down and bring me back to reality. When I looked in the mirror, I had ghoulish dark circles under my eyes: the mark of an overworked and underpaid retail employee.

Then I heard a vibration. I looked out from my bathroom door, towards my phone, ringing:

978-481-5162.

Fuck, now these people have my number, and they won't stop calling. I picked up.

"Hello?"

"Hi Bella, we lost you there for a moment."

"Please take my number off your list—"

"Bella, please, I know this may all seem very odd to you, but I promise we are here to help."

"I said take my number off your list."

"Well before you go, if you still want that free breakfast, meet us at Double Digit's Diner tomorrow morning at 7 a.m."

"What?"

"You know the one right off route 30?"

I ended the call. I needed to get some sleep. But I had a hard time falling asleep because I kept thinking that my dinner was going to come up. I ate too much again.

Interlude

Sometimes when I have been working too many 6 a.m. shifts I wake up a lot in the night, drenched in sweat, because I am worried I overslept and missed my shift. That has never happened, but it is always a possibility I fear.

So, even though all I wanted was to drift off into a deep, dreamless sleep, I woke up every hour. And every time I woke up I told myself to just go back to bed and not check the time, but I would always stand up, walk across the room and check the time on my phone. This always leads to checking other things, email, Facebook, Instagram, Kylie Jenner's latest plastic surgery...because god forbid I don't know any of this information hours from now when my alarm is set to go off.

It was another sleepless night, and all I could think about was that breakfast date. This is one of those situations where my curiosity could be my greatest flaw. You know they don't say "curiosity killed the cat" for no reason. I hate idioms but I do usually find them to be incredibly informative. My childhood cat died because it snuck into the cleaning supply cabinet and drank the bleach. Poor thing. Cats can't read warning labels.

I knew I would go to Double Digit's Diner, but let's make it clear: I didn't want to.

Part 2

I pulled into the Double Digit's Diner. It was 6:55 a.m. The time passed, and I entertained myself by scrolling through *The Daily Mail*, to read up on the latest royal family scandals, like I give a damn.

It was now 7:15 and I was starting to think I was being scammed. Then again, there was really no way for me to identify these *people* or for them to identify me. I should have thought this through before showing up. But I would say for all the thoughts I do have, the ones that are most important usually get drowned out in the cacophony.

If no one was showing up to give me a free breakfast, at this point I was already at the diner, and I have no self-control when it comes to breakfast. So, I got out of my little silver sedan with only 1 hubcap still attached, and I went inside to have breakfast for one.

The diner was a *classic American diner* with red booth seating. It had that dilapidated diner charm. When I walked in, the hostess up front gave me a funny look. She had the face of a bird, and moved like she was made out of clay.

"Are you Bella?" she said in an alarmingly shrill voice.

"Yes."

"We have a table ready for you."

The claymation hostess pointed to an isolated table in the back of the diner away from the few other customers who I suppose also had time to go out to breakfast on a Tuesday at 7 a.m. On the table, there was a single yellow flower in an empty Campbell's soup can and an old green telephone.

A waitress approached me at the table, and she resembled a raccoon with black and gray hair and huge dark shadows all around her eyes.

"They said to just press one. And your breakfast will be over soon. Let me know if you need anything hun. Ok?" said the raccoon waitress. How did she know I love when people call me hun?

I took my jacket off and sat down in the booth. The cushion was a bit deflated, but it was comfortable enough for me to sink into a slouched position. When I set my hands down on the table, everything was sticky. I tried picking the napkin up off the table to wipe my hands and that stuck down to the table too. The breakfast better be delicious.

She said press one. I suppose there is no harm in pressing one. I mean, it's just one button. I don't even have to dial an entire phone number. That's not a huge commitment, to press one button. I could do that much.

So, I picked up the phone (which was also a little sticky), held it up to my ear and pressed one.

Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring.

"Bella. Good morning! I'm so happy you called" announced the same robotic female voice from last night.

"Yeah, I am a sucker when it comes to breakfast. I mean, I have a hard time turning down anything that's free."

"Well, we certainly hope you enjoy breakfast. I know we didn't leave off on a great note last night, so I wanted the chance to clarify some things about our service. Is that ok with you Bella?"

While the lady was talking, the raccoon waitress put a plate of wonderfully fluffy chocolate chip pancakes in front of me. Whenever I smell chocolate, I become ravenous. All I could think about was the sweet, rich flavor of the cocoa. It's a powerful flavor that consumes your entire being as you consume its entire being. I almost got so distracted by that odor I forgot to reply.

"Yes, that's fine." I uttered after a moment's hesitation.

"Good. I just want you to know that here at our service, we want to help *you*. It's that simple. It's really about shaping our service to best fit *your* needs and make improvements to *your* life. We are for the people. Our associates are all highly skilled at what they do and they are trained based on a *science-inspired formula*. They are regularly evaluated to make sure they are implementing effective methodology to achieve results."

It was hard to pay attention to anything this lady was yapping in my ear while I was stuffing my face with heavenly, butter-soaked pancakes. It was the kind of pancake that, though I was enjoying, it also made me depressed, because I knew they would soon be over and then I would just be left wishing I could go back to the moment when the plate was full in front of me.

She continued. "They all have full access to our library of resources so they are able to quickly find the right and best answer to any questions you may have. Are we shackled by fate or do we have free will? Is there such a thing as soulmates, and do you, Bella, have one? And I know this may seem scary to you. Perhaps you think you don't want the answers. Here we are, all of a sudden, and we are offering the answers to the questions you have been grappling with your whole life, but I promise if we didn't think it would help you, we would never have never left our number for you."

I stopped eating for a moment. This moment was so surreal, I wasn't really thinking about the gravity of what she was offering. Rather, all I could think about since last night was: how did they choose me? What about me made me an ideal target for this *service*, as she kept calling it?

"So, how did you choose me for this?"

"From phone data, of course! We collect data from millions of online profiles, and we use our algorithms to create a shortlist of people who we think would most benefit from the service we provide. Oh- I hope that doesn't frighten you. We don't mean to scare you; we use this advanced technology to help people in need, like yourself, get connected to services like ours."

"But, what about my data specifically?"

"Well, first and foremost, you work in a job you have absolutely no stake in! Your work is completely meaningless to you, and deep down you know it's meaningless to society. That is the number one thing we look for in our candidates! But, to be quite honest, we also saw you ordering books, lots of books... about religion and philosophy and you were watching lots of David Lynch films and Ingmar Bergman. Really gloomy stuff. And it looks here like you were re-watching the entirety of *Breaking Bad* once every couple of months. Most people wait at least a year before a rewatch. You were listening to self-help podcasts and were reading vegan diet blogs. It's obvious on paper."

Their algorithm was right. Of course, it was right...it was my data! I know that every time I open Facebook or YouTube or Instagram there are a million men in polo shirts and Silicon Valley sneakers analyzing algorithms and then throwing my very own online behaviors back at me with targeted ads. Sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn't. But damn, I do have to say, those algorithms are good at what they were made to do. I was having a hard time visualizing what it looked like when this lady and all the other people at the *service* analyzed my data. Her voice was so monotone, I couldn't picture her in my head.

"OK, so now what...?" I inquired of the lady, who I still wasn't fully convinced was human.

"We send in our associate to join you at your breakfast."

"And what if I say, don't?"

"You enjoy the rest of your breakfast alone."

"Send them in." I said without hesitating, really without thinking. It was one of those moments where the words just came out on their own, as if I had no control over it.

Not even a minute, a man in a navy-blue lounge suit and a red tie carrying a brown briefcase got out of a small navy-blue Camry and walked confidently into the diner. Once he reached the front, he moved right past the claymation hostess and headed towards me. As he got

closer I noticed that he certainly wasn't bad looking. In fact, the closer he got, the better looking he appeared. He had a nice full head of dark brown hair, full, pink lips and clear skin. He walked with the gait of a man who never questions anything and always gets exactly what he wants.

He got to the table, unbuttoned his blazer, set his briefcase down on the booth, then took a seat. Before even acknowledging my presence, he flagged over a different waitress, this lady more closely resembled a giraffe and he said:

"I'll take a coffee, black, no sugar. Thank you."

I wanted so badly to continue devouring my pancakes, but whenever a stranger is around I tense up and it makes it hard to eat. Even if I did eat now, it wouldn't taste as good as when I was alone.

"Hello Bella. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Hi. Nice to meet you as well."

I wanted to ask for his name, but I was sweating a little. He was so handsome.

"I am from the service, I'm sure you picked up on that by now. Before we begin, let me introduce myself, just so you can feel a little more comfortable. I've been working for this service for ten years now. I was one of the first associates back when the company was just a small operation. In my free time, I love cooking, I would certainly call myself a *foodie*. I also bike quite a bit and I'd consider myself a fairly accomplished pianist. Would you like to introduce yourself?"

"Well, I mean, I don't have anything too interesting about me. I work at the mall. I guess I'm also a *foodie*, but I don't really like to use that word. I basically just really like to eat food, it tastes good. So yeah, I don't know what else you want to know."

"Wonderful. No, that's wonderful. That's perfect! Lucky for both of us there is more delicious food coming!"

The giraffe waitress approached and dropped off the black coffee for the man and she dropped off a glass of cranberry juice for me. I stared at my own reflection in the black coffee mug and I felt I was falling into the ceramic pool of darkness.

"Thank you" he said to the giraffe waitress as she was walking away. "Now, shall we begin?" he said to me.

"Sure."

"So, I know you already got the whole spiel on the phone: we are here to help *you*. It's all about making sure *you* are satisfied. But look, between you and me, I am one of the highest ranking associates, because I go off book a little. I am a bit of a *rebel*, *some* might say. The company knows it, and they've just turned a blind eye for years, because my method works. And I was assigned to your case because they decided my methods were the best fit to solve the problems that *you* are dealing with, so go right ahead, ask me anything, big or small and I will tell you the truth. No sugar coating. Just the truth."

I was so captivated by this man's face. He had one of those faces with perfect proportions. He had big brown eyes, high cheekbones, a sharp jawline and a few scattered freckles across his nose and cheeks. He was strikingly attractive. The pancakes on my plate meant nothing to me now, I couldn't stop staring at this man's face. I couldn't take my eyes away as he lifted his coffee mug up to his mouth to take a sip with his perfect lips pursed. But something was wrong, no one holds a mug like that. Then I looked again, and I saw his left index and middle finger were missing! How had I not noticed that earlier? I could have sworn he was holding the briefcase and grasping with those fingers on his left hand when he walked in here.

Though, maybe I ate too quickly again and the sugar was affecting my brain. By the time I looked back he had slipped his left hand back under the table. I had my first question.

"What is this service exactly? How did it all begin?"

"Ah, the origin story. I love sharing this one. Our founder is a wonderful and humble man. He is quite old now, so he's not too involved in the day to day activities of the company, but we still keep him in mind in everything we do. In his youth, he worked at a Sahara.com Fulfillment Center loading trucks. He never thought much about life on a grand scale. He would go to work and he would get paid every two weeks. One day at work when he was filling one of the trucks, a bolt came loose on the trunk door and it slammed down on his hand, chopping off his left index and middle fingers. He was rushed to the hospital with his two fingers beside his PB&J sandwich in the cooler he brought his lunch in, but because his job offered, pardon my French, a shit health insurance package, he couldn't afford to have the fingers stitched back on. He said that in the state of that excruciating pain, as he was bleeding out from the two stubs where his fingers once were, he finally had clarity. He quit his job immediately and he started recruiting some of his old co-workers to join him in starting this service. I, being one of those old co-workers. The point of the service is to liberate people who want more than the tedium of

exploitative jobs. So, here we are today, a thriving business, and we have helped countless others awaken from their inevitable fate of being severed in two by the system."

I felt like I was going to be sick. The image of two severed fingers kept flashing through my head. I was repeatedly visualizing blood spurting out of two stumps on a hand and I swear to god this man in front of me had two severed fingers too! I looked down at my plate and I saw blood coming out of my pancakes. I needed to step out. How do you escape this sort of thing?

"I need to go to the restroom" I blurted out again as if I had no control over what I was saying.

I stood up and speed-walked over to what I assumed to be the bathroom, but it turned out to be a supply closet. I really didn't want to have to ask, because I was in such a state, but it looked like I was going to have to.

"Excuse me!" I yelled over to the raccoon waitress on the other side of the counter.

"Where is the restroom?"

"Over there, hun."

She pointed through the kitchen to a red door. So, I carefully stepped through the kitchen, trying not to slip. There was a pungent frying oil odor, I could imagine just cooking and eating all day long, cooking and eating and then cooking some more just to eat all over again.

The odor of bacon and sausage filled my nose. I haven't had meat at breakfast in ages. I am a strictly dinner meat person now. I am trying to be a weekday vegetarian. I want to do my part; you know, for animal rights, and to reduce my carbon footprint.

I reached out for the doorknob on the red door with my right hand. It had the same sticky sensation as the table. Whichever waitress was responsible for cleaning this place was slacking.

I locked the door behind me. It was one of those diner bathrooms with a single framed painting of an Americana landscape hanging above the toilet: in this case it was a beach and a red sailboat. The bathroom was pretty dirty, but not as dirty as I would have expected, considering everything I've touched in this place has been sticky. I stared at myself in the mirror, and I was startled. It was like I had started to morph into the raccoon waitress. I had big dark circles under my eyes. I didn't know what was going on, but I looked insane. My skin was starting to turn the same shade of green as the tiles on the bathroom floor.

I turned the faucet on and started splashing cold water right on my cheeks. If I was having some sort of fever dream, this would definitely snap me out of it. Like I said, cold water

always does the trick. I splashed and splashed until my face reddened. I did this thing I learned from some wellness YouTube video called: alternate nostril breathing. It gives me a head high for, like, 5 seconds.

I bravely walked out of the bathroom, feeling slightly calmer and a lot cooler. When I walked through the kitchen again I couldn't help but look over at the griddle. They were cooking about fifty sausages, right next to where they were making someone else's blueberry pancakes. I couldn't help but think of the diner I worked at when I was 15, and I used to always get complaints about bits of food ending up where they didn't belong. The worst had to be when this devout vegan woman found a piece of sausage in her oatmeal. She took one bite of it and then she ran to the bathroom but ended up throwing up on the carpet (and I know, who the fuck puts carpet in a diner? But my boss did). I was the one who had to clean it up. She gave us one bad review online, and she thought that would tank our whole business.

As I returned to my table, I walked past the giraffe waitress and at a quick glance I thought I saw that her index and her middle finger were missing on her left hand. But then she tucked her hand away in her apron.

I sat back down across from the very attractive man as he was nursing his black coffee. When I looked back down at my plate, for a minute, I saw blood. Then I realized it was just juice oozing from a single blueberry that must've accidentally ended up in my chocolate chip pancakes.

I looked up at the man and I was thinking about how he said he was an accomplished pianist. I could've sworn he said that.

"Bella! How are you feeling?"

"Better." I replied.

"Sorry if that was a lot to tell you at once. I didn't mean to startle you with such a gruesome tale. Perhaps I'll give you a trigger warning next time if the answer contains gore. Sound good?"

"Yes. Ok. I have a question. I thought you said you were an accomplished pianist, so how do you play when you are missing the fingers on your left hand?"

"Bella, I think we should stray away from this topic for now."

"No. I want to know. You said I could ask you anything. So, I want to know where are the fingers on your left hand?"

"Well, let me say, I was a pianist and I loved it, but I had to put the greater good above my personal passions. I had my fingers chopped off, just like our founder. Everyone who joins the agency either lost their fingers on a job, so they found us or we found us or they voluntarily chop off their fingers to stand in solidarity with the founder. Once we take the step to sacrifice a part of ourselves by choice, the system can no longer take that from us against our will."

Right as he was finishing his sentence, the raccoon waitress brought over a plate. She put it down in front of me, and on it was: two pieces of whole wheat toast (burnt and cancerous, just how I like it), two fried eggs, a fried tomato and two...sausage links. Staring at those sausage links on my plate, I was starting to think they weren't sausages. I looked up to the raccoon waitress to say thank you, but she had already started walking away. I distinctly saw her hand before she went back into the kitchen: this time I was certain. She was missing her index and her middle fingers on her left hand.

The man in the blazer interjected, "I would just like to add, if you don't mind, this practice has meaning beyond the performative aspect. Dating back to the ancient Sumerians, a son had his fingers cut off for striking his father. In this instance, we preemptively cut our fingers off so we can slap the father, but they cannot punish us in return."

I was too distracted by this *free* breakfast to comprehend anything he was saying. My plate was taunting me. Free! Nothing is free. These people are literally giving up their fingers for a *free* breakfast. I picked up my fork and knife without thinking and I cut the sausage in half. I shoved one half zealously in my mouth and then the other. I barely chewed before trying to swallow. What was I thinking...

I was instantly sick. This man was sick. This whole fucking world was sick.

"I'm sorry, but I don't want to be a part of this." I said, still trying to get the piece of sausage down. I started to stand up and put on my coat.

"But Bella, we are not like them, we value the humans we work with..."

He droned on, but I was not paying attention to a single word that came out of his mouth. I was staring at the shape of his face, and he started to morph. The longer I stared at him the more I noticed his nose was awfully long. His two front teeth were big and sharp. He looked more like a rat than a handsome man when he smiled. His teeth were stained yellow, probably from all the black coffee he drinks. I felt like I was going to vomit.

"Thank you for the free breakfast. I have to go, you can give my spot to someone who wants it. Please stop contacting me."

"Bella-" he yelled, but I was already heading away from the table.

I walked as quickly as I could through the diner, trying to avoid making eye contact with anyone. My stomach was churning. I couldn't help but notice everyone in the diner was staring at me with their raccoon eyes.

When I made it to the parking lot, I stood in between my car and a black Mercedes-Benz and I shoved my left index and middle finger down my throat. I threw up mostly liquids, but I felt like I exorcised a demon.

Part 3

Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring.

It was 5:45 p.m. and I had to get to work at 6. I'm never late. In fact, I prefer to be 15 minutes early. I grabbed my phone to shut off the alarm. I didn't even have time to check my texts, let alone check Twitter to see which celebrities got canceled today. There were clothes strewn all over the floor so I just picked up what was there hoping it was clean. I chugged the glass of water on my bedside table and it burned going down.

I ran downstairs, grabbed my keys, I hopped into my car, and I drove. Once again, I drove in silence, because I did not have time to make a 3-song queue today.

When I pulled into the parking lot I was still about 2 minutes early. I had just enough time to run up those stairs of the grimy mall back hallways. When I started working at the mall, I found it amusing how the mall is all white tiles, large windows and pop music, and then you step through the door into the maze of back hallways, and it is like a different world. It is dimly lit with bare concrete walls and exposed pipes. In one staircase, there is a vomit stain on the landing. When it first appeared, the dried vomit sat there for weeks until someone finally came to clean it up.

I walked through the door right as the clock turned 6. I hadn't even had time yet to process what happened to me at the diner. I feel like I blacked out, because I was so tired. I must've fallen asleep on the couch as soon as I got home. Good thing I set that alarm to wake up for work. Even if I am not consciously thinking about work, it's always in the back of my head.

Sometimes alarms just randomly go off, because I set them thinking I have to wake up for work, even on my days off.

Today was one of those long, terrible shifts that goes late into the night, a 6-1 (or 2 or 3 or whenever they decide we're done). These are the worst kind of shifts to show up to when you're tired because it's not just folding and avoiding customers, but these shifts involve a lot of heavy lifting. Worse, you HAVE to eat when you work these shifts. I mean I suppose I could starve myself, but then I might literally collapse. They do usually throw us a bone and buy us some cheap, greasy takeout pizza. I have a hard time turning down anything loaded with carbs and covered in cheese.

Sometimes when I tell my friends I'm working one of these overnight shifts, they say: "I didn't know you were open that late!" And I always find it shocking that people seriously think we could be open that late. It's a fancy lingerie store, not a 24-hour convenience. But how do they think the store gets set up to look so pretty? There are no magical elves that come in the night and do it for us: no, we do that for ourselves, through the night into the morning.

The way the back room of this place is organized has never made sense to me. They always put the heaviest stuff on the top shelves so that you need a ladder to reach it. I swear that every time I have to climb up a ladder to take a box down from one of those shelves I fear for my life. I mean, I'm just a small girl, if I take one misstep that box could crush me.

Luckily tonight there were lots of new girls working, green in the world of retail. They were all enthusiastic, bright and young, so they were jumping to volunteer for any task. This tiny new girl with long platinum blonde hair and pink acrylic nails volunteered right away when my manager asked someone to get the mannequin stands down from the top shelf.

I went with her to spot the ladder. I set up the ladder and this small girl climbed up to the top step. She started shifting the box marked "mannequin stands" with her string bean arms, trying to get a grip on the big, heavy box.

"Be careful." I warned her, "It's really heavy."

Then all of a sudden, in the half a second this girl got a grip on the box, the next half she dropped it. In the fleeting moment, I had to process that this giant box was coming down towards me, I hopped back and avoided being hit on the head by a box full of mannequin stands.

"I AM SO SORRY" she screamed.

"It's fine. I'm ok."

"I didn't realize it was going to be so heavy."

That's obviously why I warned her. But whatever, these new girls don't know how to listen.

"Is everything ok?" my manager came running to the back to check on the scene.

"Yeah, we're good. She-uh-" I realized I didn't know this new girls' name.

"I just dropped the box. I didn't know it would be so heavy!" the new girl said frantically.

"Well just be careful next time" said my manager, relieved she didn't have an injury on her hands. Injuries mean lots of paperwork.

"Bella, can you guys get me 2 bust mannequins?" my manager demanded. My manager was un-phased by the fact that her new hire was obviously incompetent.

There I was with this new girl, who almost crushed me with a box and now I had to do my other least favorite thing with her: get mannequins. The thing is, like I said, this backroom doesn't make sense and the way we store mannequins also doesn't. We keep the mannequins in this weird metal hatch where they collect a lot of dust, and they're not very easy to take out. I don't really know what the original purpose of the metal hatch even was, but it is now our kidnapped mannequin closet.

I led this girl over to the hatch, which is elevated about three feet above the ground. I slid up the metal door halfway and started pulling out the mannequin busts. This new girl was just staring at me, I guess she was waiting for me to ask for help, but it was just easier for me to do this myself. She started looking at her long, hot pink acrylic nails and she leaned against the hatch. The minute the weight of her body hit the hatch, the metal door slammed down on my left index and middle finger. My head went blank. I heard a faint scream coming from the girl, but I couldn't really tell what was going on.

She lifted the door up and I looked down, and there lay my dis-attached index and middle fingers. The girl continued to wail and everyone came running to the back room. I couldn't even process what was happening. Blood was everywhere. I started to feel really nauseous. As chaos ensued around me, I felt a buzzing in my back pocket. Instinctively, I reached to grab my phone with my right hand to see who it was, and there on my screen was the number: *978-481-516*.

Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring.

"Bella. It's me. I heard the news. Congrats! You have taken the first step in changing your life!" said the rat man cheerfully in my ear.

There was yelling and pandemonium all around me. I watched as my co-worker ran into the breakroom to grab ice from the freezer while someone else, on the floor holding back tears, was trying to wrap my severed fingers in paper towels.

"What? Sorry, how do you know?" I instinctively replied.

"We have eyes everywhere."

My knees gave out and I fell to the floor.

"BELLA!" my manager screeched in my ear. "We need to get you to the hospital now." She looked down at the girl gathering my bloody fingers. "Your fingers. Oh my god."

As I stood up, I felt a pang in my stomach and my breakfast came right up out of me, hitting my manager in the face. When I looked down, I saw sausage chunks on the ground, surrounded by my blood. Gazing down, I admired my left hand, my new hand, and I looked up at my manager covered in my vomit.

"You can keep them," I told her. "I quit."

"Thank you." I whispered into my phone and then hit *end call*. They may have taken my fingers, but at least I still have my tongue.