

Another Day at the Office

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The cat yowls and the alarm clock blares, meaning it's time to punch in for the day. A tingling, recently freed arm levers me up from the bed and an elbow sinks into a damp spot on the pillow.

"Ahhh, I've drooled again," I mutter, pulling the earplugs out of my ears. The cat is on the earplugs in an instant, licking at the waxy, salty flavor infused from my ear canal.

"C'mon, grosso," I dictate to the orange furball, unsteadily lumbering toward the shower.

Under the fall of water I stare at the ground until I am reminded to clean myself to acceptable standards by the orange tabby poking its head behind the shower curtain. It's a subtle reminder that standing under a shower like a statue is not normal. Whatever normal is, for these days, I'm far from it.

I towel off and the cat exchanges places with me, hopping down into the tub to explore the transformation made by drips and drops of water. I throw on some clothes, not satisfied that my outfit is quite finished, but it will do. With a toothbrush in mouth, I throw a cobbled lunch into a plastic bag and start running around the apartment to collect my things. The cat does the same. I fly out the door without makeup or styling my hair – who is looking anyway?

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On the road I stare straight ahead like a zombie, my face eerily lit up by the dashboard lights. I curse vehemently at all the other zombies who don't know how to drive. Oh, the joy of another morning. "It will all be better when I can hold that first coffee," I whisper to myself. "Modern

society is not truly alive until the first administering of caffeine.” Easing up my viselike grip on the steering wheel, I pull into the office garage and park. Practically running, I get into the elevator that swiftly pulls me closer to the break room with its pots of brewed coffee.

As I clutch my coffee in one hand, I start up the computer and try to break through the groggy haze still filling my head. “Ohhhhhh,” I moan to myself, “why do I bother getting out of bed?” I feel like one of the protagonists in a sci-fi film where you battle to achieve your objective, die, and then start the same fight again the next day. “Pointless.” I mutter, “What am I even supposed to be doing?” I check email, which is mostly junk and wonder what to do next. I start searching for possible new jobs in the area when the first wave of anxiety hits me. My brain starts going warp speed and attempts to further jangle my delicate nervous system by sowing insidious thoughts, such as, “You aren’t going to make it to a new job before you have a nervous breakdown here,” and “You may never find a new job, and if you do, your anxiety and boredom will come for you there eventually.” I have devolved mentally and am battling my internal Smeagol.

Rubbing my face vigorously and attempting to banish my dark, fruitless thoughts, I start over and focus on what tasks lay at hand. “The problem is I have very little to almost nothing to do,” I tell myself conspiratorially. “Idle hands and all that.” I wonder if I am confusing my analogies and that leads me to wonder if you know when you’ve really lost it. I am starting to doubt it.

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Working on a project for a little bit soothes my unease until I start to get antsy entering data into the spreadsheet. I wander down the hall to my colleague’s office and plop into a chair.

“What are you doing?” I ask hoping for an exciting answer.

“I am working. What are you doing?” My colleague looks up from his papers, tilting his head down to see me over the glasses perched on the end of his nose.

“I was thinking that we only enjoy 10 percent of our lives – the rest is spent working and doing administrative tasks to make enough money to enjoy the 10 percent we get,” I mused sinking into self-righteous gloom.

My colleague guffawed and declared, “You are the biggest non-stoner, stoner I have ever met. If I didn’t know you better I would think you were high.”

“Maybe I could find some peace as a stoner. I should move to Colorado and start a baked goods shop.”

“I think Colorado may be over-saturated in the baked goods department due to everyone else who had that idea,” my colleague smirked at me.

“Grrrrr,” I gritted my teeth, “I just want to do something I enjoy and feel useful.”

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I slouched out of his office and resignedly sat down again at my desk. “What can I do? What can I do?” my mind chanted as I stared blankly at the computer. I cannot remember having such short term focus and bouts of anxiety when I was in high school, college or grad school. “What has become of me?” I thought despondently. I always saw myself being highly successful and driven by my career, now I had a much harder time defining what motivated me and what I wanted from life. I felt like a rug had been pulled out from under my feet. You build the foundation of life on expectations and ideas acquired from childhood and adolescence; when you get to adulthood and find that the foundation is flawed, it’s like starting over and leaves you

floundering. You know, that sink or swim BS they tell you when you're a kid and you're not really listening because you have your whole life in front of you. And then you look up and a quarter of your life is gone. I wondered if there would be a life preserver in the equation or if that was hoping for an easy way out.

Over the past two years at my company I cycle through busy and slow periods, the slow periods coinciding with my 'darker phases'. Busy times, when I am kept active for days or weeks with travel, meetings, working with customers or coordinating, were the periods I felt purposeful and sailed on an adrenaline high. Right now was not a high. Previous slow periods had found me shopping on almost a daily basis to while away the time, that is, until I received an end of the year spending analysis from my bank and saw what I spent on 'personal entertainment'.

Unsubscribing from clothes websites and avoiding flash sale sites was a huge help, thanks to my personally engineered shopping rehab program. Recently, my low was so low and the slow period so slow that shopping no longer retained its appeal and I became frustrated having to look at pages and pages of items to search for something I wanted to buy.

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Meandering to the break room for some water I ran into my manager, who was talking to a person from a different department. As I filled up my water he looked over and threw some words in my direction, "I will meet you at the elevators at 11."

"Ok," I said even though an answer was not required for his attention was back to the other person. I remembered our meeting with counterparts from another company for unofficial benchmarking. Thrilling stuff really, as we were not eating in the cafeteria where I got lunch every day.

As the morning dawdled on and lunchtime drew closer, I felt increasing anxiousness and pressure on my chest. "Was it the fact of having to engage with strangers or drive somewhere with my boss, who always made me feel unsettled?" I pondered. I debated taking a Xanax, a bottle of which always sat in my purse. Not that I needed it (anymore), but knowing it was there was my security blanket. Deciding not to, I drank the rest of my water - what I had come to think of as a natural 'anti-anxietal' - and scurried to the bathroom before heading to the elevators.

I stood waiting for five minutes until my boss walked up chatting with another person on the floor. When the elevator came I jumped in after them like a trained pet and maintained my painted smile in the corner. "Why am I so phony?" I chastised myself, "Why do I always feel like I can't challenge authority or tell someone they are disrespecting me?" I grimaced and my blood burned acid, "So spineless, you are."

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As we got in my boss's vehicle and pulled out of the parking lot my discomfort grew and my mind whirled, trying to grasp at a strand of conversation that would tide us over until arrival at the restaurant. Silence was not an option, as my panicky mind needed occupation.

"So we are going to discuss the procedures they have in place?" I asked trying to skate out into neutral territory.

"Well, I actually want to catch up with Frank, he just moved into this position and formerly worked with my buddy in Dubai," my boss said dismissively.

"Oh," I replied feeling my emotions build into a tight knot in my throat. Struggling to swallow it, push it down, dissipate it, I simultaneously wondered how mortifying it would be if I burst into hysterical tears. The thought sent me into a tailspin of panic.

After a few more stilted attempts to converse, we arrived at the restaurant and shook hands with our counterparts, all whom were older men. "Like I'm not awkward enough already, but now I'm the only young(ish) female." I flashed my bared teeth grin to drive away my contrarian inner voice.

We arranged ourselves around a table and ordered, then began to casually chat. As I calmed down and became more gregarious, I found myself saying something moderately funny. The guy next to me leaned back with a grin and said to my boss, "Did you hear what she said?"

As the whole table listened, my manager replied, "Is she letting her inner trailer park out?"

I wanted to leave, to be anywhere but there. I was suddenly a child being put in its place – to be seen and not heard, made to feel small.

I try, as coolly as possible to downplay the comment. "I don't know what you're talking about - I am always classy and sophisticated." I hate myself for being so defensive. The lunch is over for me, as I retreat into myself and try to bottle up the anger, shame, insecurity and spite, while maintaining a normal expression for the outside world. I subscribe to the philosophy of 'never let them see you get upset' and while it generally makes sense, it has been wreaking havoc on my emotions. My inner dam is at the breaking point.

The lunch disburses and my boss and I drive back to the office in silence. There is no ounce of me left available to make an effort.

"Thanks for the invite," I say lamely to my boss as we part ways after exiting the elevator. At my desk, I take breaths until I can feel my stomach expanding with air and then sinking on the exhale. I am like those elements on the periodic table that are extremely unstable under certain conditions. "Maybe it would be educational to notate what situations make me unsteady." I mentally giggle as I thought about high school chemistry and the time I burned a hole in the table by spilling a heated substance.

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A colleague came by my office then and asked if I could unearth some files needed for a project. "Hard files will be a thing of the past in the next decade," I grumbled to myself as I searched the dates on the exterior of stacked boxes. Finally finding the one I needed, I pulled up a short stepladder and grabbed at the top box on the shelf. As I braced myself to catch the downward sliding box the stepstool tipped from my shifting weight and knocked me onto the floor. Binders, papers, and folders pelted my prone body, while several sharp, pointy ends bombarded my skull. I lay shocked, as if the files had personally affronted me. The self-control I struggled to maintain after slowly being whittled away was severed in a clean stroke. The wet tears poured silently down my face, with no filter, no reserve, and I felt the deep, wrenching sobs only moments behind. I had hurt my ankle, twisting it beneath my other knee, but the indignity of the entire day and past year was worse.

A colleague appeared at the door, beckoned from what I assume was the noisy depositing of files across the floor. "Are you okay?" he asked, eyes filled with the primal unease males experience when females cry.

“I’m fine. Just finishing a bit of filing,” I croaked, tears and snot running freely, while spasming like a beetle on its back as I tried to free my trapped ankle. The mental image of myself on the floor – crying, bent like a contortionist and covered in paper like a fly in a trap – was too much for me and I snorted, laughing hysterically as tears continued to drain from my eyes.

The now truly terrified colleague backed away and mumbled something about going to get help.

I laughed like I would die for another minute and then felt exhaustion settle into my muscles.

Even my brain quieted. Rolling over and flexing my leg, I did a few ankle rotations and decided I could still walk. As I gimped back to my office I gave a nonchalant wave to the colleague who had grabbed another person and was theoretically headed to help.

“Bit of a cleanup on aisle 9,” I told them as I passed.

Sitting down in my chair, I massaged my ankle and thought about the day. It was not yet 3pm. I thought about my cautiousness, fear of saying the wrong thing, and inability to bluntly state what I wanted. Like my body after the file room debacle, I was tired. Tired of being a good sport, a team player, but mainly tired of lying to myself and being too scared to take action. I thought a bit more and wondered if my fall had not jarred an element loose, a part of the brain not used in some time.

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After finishing my daily tasks, I went to find my boss in his office.

“I’d like to talk to you if you have a minute,” I said, making pointed eye contact.

“Sure,” he said.

I closed the door.

“It’s going to be one of those conversations,” he said, slightly raising his eyebrows.

“Yes,” I said and sat across from him. “I would like to give my two weeks’ notice.”

He looked at me for a minute, observing me before replying. “Are you unhappy here?”

I looked at my interlaced fingers and then directly into his eyes. “Yes. I have been for some time.”

There was a pause and he replied, “I have known you’ve been bored for a while. Hopefully you will figure out what keeps you interested. I will let HR know and they will get the paperwork ready.”

“Thank you,” I said and got up to leave. I couldn’t believe it – less than ten words, yet it took years to say and my heart was still racing. I’d been brought up with the terror of unemployment instilled in me. Previously nothing could have been worse than not having a job. Granted, I was not happy about walking away from an income and the search for employment in the current economy. Yet I felt an uncanny lightness as I left work that day, a sense of the possible, and what could still be in store for me in the world. In a word, I had hope.

“The day nothing can change is the day I renounce life,” I told myself, feeling lighter and freer every moment I went further from the office.

I don’t know if a normal person would say what I did today was smart, but I didn’t care anymore. Caring too much what others thought got me here in the first place. Driving down the road with a grin on my face, blues on the CD player and sunglasses on my (puffy) eyes, I told myself, “I’ll take the open road for a while.”