

Miss Liberty

Any light within the window of floor fifty-two has long drained away into the city's tunnels and pavement cracks, day melted into evening, when Helena leans her cheek into her fist. The monitor's glow scratches at her nose. She blinks. It is then she first notices her head's ache.

Last fall: the grueling, seven-round interview. In the spring: the carefree graduation. Tassels turned, caps catapulted. The summer: a backpack trip through Europe featuring a brief but unforgettable tryst with Otto, a stout German boy with golden hair born of and living in Sulzfeld's countryside who, in his broken English, confused "love" with "luffa". And September: a rushed move to the city from a school built of ivy and ivory.

Now week three at Liam Stalwart Capital Management dredged forward.

School life always had order, cataloged carefully in her meticulous agendas:

- *6 AM: soccer practice* (she had qualified for both academic and athletic scholarships)
- *9:00-12:00 AM: Class*
- *12:30 PM: Lunch*
- *1:30-4:30 PM: Class*
- *5:00 PM: Another practice (usually)*
- *~6:00-9:00 PM: Game time (sometimes)*
- *11:30 PM: Pass out (unless it's the weekend, of course)*

Liam Stalwart has turned out to not be so different in its exacting demands, only slightly more stale:

- *6 AM: Wake up*
- *7:30 AM-1:00 AM: Work. Excluding Saturdays. Eat lunch at the desk*

But Helena is the positive grinder; she does not mind the work too much—it pushes her mind to move. Still, she wishes it could have involved more motion of the feet, but she understands why that is not possible.

Her friends say she is perfect. She has been told by several individuals, independently and in a variety of contexts, "Everyone who meets Helena loves her." So elevated, she has made it to a status to be referred to in the third person. Her smile is bright; she fills those around her with joy; she turns heads wherever she goes but retains her humility. She calls her mother every day. Her father's bellowing "Golazo!" could be heard at every one of her goals since she was nine. She has left behind a string of boyfriends all of whom still dream of her deep into the night but never with any malice or contempt, only longing. She let them down softly enough.

All of which makes it the more unusual that, at 11:34 PM on a Monday night, seated in her cubicle and bent over a thick CRT monitor, Helena is frowning.

She catches her dark reflection in the monitor. The frown does not sit right. She shakes herself out of it, rises, stretches, and glances around. All that remains in the forest of cubicles is her and her monitor's dim light stinging her eyes. *Time to go home.*

She picks up her briefcase and heads for the elevator, before she stops.

Down the hall another light faintly calls. Vince Robertson's office.

Helena bites her lip. An internal debate commences. Vince is the Vice-President of their group. Handsome, tall, with thick, strong hands. Like a skyscraper condensed into a man. She's only seen him a few times—a handful of meetings. She told the other first-year analyst, Emma, that she liked him. He had a propensity to flip from being completely serious to cracking jokes about either his wife or his thinning hair, and Helena admired that balancing of work and fun. Emma said he was just weird.

Lingering in the hall, Helena realizes she probably will not have another chance to talk to him one-on-one. She could never discuss the matter while her manager, Matteo, is in the building.

She takes a deep breath and thinks about what her father would tell her to do. The answer is obvious. *The right thing.* She walks approaches the slightly ajar door and knocks a single time.

From behind the door, a surprised, "Yes?"

"May I come in?"

"Sure."

She pushes the door open and takes a seat. The office's volume sets in. Vast, compared to her cubicle kingdom.

"It's Helena, right?"

She glances at the glass wall behind Vince. How the city's lights colors cut through the night and fuse against the glass. So far above the earth, the streets look like strings of white Christmas lights, the traffic signals providing the greens and reds and yellows.

Helena smiles and eases into the chair. "Yes, it is," she says. "Thanks for remembering."

"No problem." He smiles. His jaw resembles a rectangle. "I never forget the name of someone on the team."

He leans forward and grabs a green object from his desk which fills his entire hand. He begins to twirl it. "Now, what brings you here?"

Helena opens her mouth to speak but pauses. "What's that?" She points to his hand.

Vince stops his groping. "Oh this?" He raises the green object for Helena to see. "It's a knickknack. A model of Miss Liberty, fully copper and everything."

He knocks it, face-first, against his desk twice and it produces two thick clangs,

echoing through the office.

“Someone once gave it to me... I forget who. It was a long time ago. It’s followed me ever since.” Leaning across the desk, he holds it out to Helena. “Check it.”

She carefully takes ahold of the model. Tracing it through her fingers, she caresses its delicately crafted two green eyes staring at her. Then she gently pokes her tablet, crown, and torch. “Sharp.” Each edge digs into her fingers’ skin, nearly cutting through the boundary of skin. “She’s quite thorough,” she says as she hands it back.

He takes back the miniature, gripping her around her robe. “Yes, it is.” Then he places her back on his desk, her head facing away from him and instead toward the night.

“Sorry about that. I play with it sometimes. It’s a tic, I guess.” He smiles again. “Now what brings you here so late?”

“Well when I saw you were still in, I wanted to make sure to bring this up to you.”

Vince’s brow furrows. “What happened? What’s wrong?”

“Well it’s not a big deal...” she stops herself. “No it is kind of a big deal. I just don’t think we should be treating a client like this.”

Vince glances behind her. “Maybe we should close the door.”

Slowly Helena rises, peeks out into the thin crack into the empty hall, and closes the door.

“Okay,” Vince says, returning to its original joviality as he leans back into his chair. “Now break it down for me.”

“Well... do you remember that small paper business that Matteo has me working on? Paper Now?”

“Ah yes, the paper people. Such lovely paper people. Not that small of a business, mind you. Been around for a long time. Did three-hundred million last year.”

“Well, I was interested in why we were interested in them. They look terrible on paper. Bad balance sheet, unprofitable for last few years. I didn’t think there’s any good reason to think we’d be able to turn them around.”

“Just noting here, their balance sheet is fine, but go on.”

“So I asked Matteo, why the acquisition? He said, ‘What’s their credit rating?’”

“And what’s their credit rating, Helena?”

“Well, I looked it up and I told Matteo AA+. He said, ‘Bingo.’ That got me all confused, so I asked him what he meant. He rolled his eyes and said, ‘Do they teach you anything at school? We’re working into the private equity business. They’re still debt friendly. We’re going to load them up, squeeze out a fat dividend, then set them free. Maybe they’ll make it.’”

“I said, ‘What? Like a vampire?’ Then he snapped his fingers at me and winked and said, ‘Double Bingo,’ and walked away.”

Vince looks at Helena hard for two seconds and covers an eye with his hand. “Well,

I'm glad you came to me first, Helena."

Helena quickly adds, "I don't want to get Matteo in trouble. It just felt like an odd strategy for the firm, that's all."

"Yes... odd strategy." He speaks slowly as if the words drip out of his mouth, nearly slurred. There is only the city's ever-present hum between them.

"I suppose, sir," she finally says, "it just doesn't feel right to me."

As he stares at her, his focus concentrates; his gaze seems intense to Helena, as if his eyes could suddenly swallow her. He blinks. "Call me Vince."

"Well Vince, I thought the idea was to help improve businesses. Not leech."

"Leech..." he murmurs as he scratches his chin. He leans back and turns toward his window, examining his dark city. Miniature cars and dot-sized pedestrians advance. A constant churn singing in a symphony of entropy. "You, in particular, bring a lot to this firm, Helena. New thoughts, new... vibrancy." He waves at the window. "Look at this. What do you see?"

She thinks for a moment. "Cars, people, lights."

"Yes, but what are they?"

"I don't know what you mean."

He flicks his head, facing her straight on. His green eyes dance while shadows tightly embrace the sockets around them. His irises seem to have a glaze over them, as if enchanted. "Assets, Helena! Assets. You, me, the cars down there, the lights, assets. And what do assets do?"

"I'm really not sure where you're going with this... Vince."

He claps his hands together. "Let's think of businesses. One has a collection of talent and machines that produce modern treasures—computer chips, complex software, so forth and so forth. Others have ancient tools that inefficiently circulate paper, a dwindling commodity. For the latter, we must get creative to make profit. And ultimately the purpose of a business is to exploit its assets in activities that will generate profit. This is fundamental."

"That's a little simplistic, no?"

He pushes his chair back further and points at the glass, down to the street. "Look. Do you see that little guy? Way, way down there, working along the edge of the street?"

Helena stands up and leans beside the desk to see it. A faint heat emanates from the bulk that is Vince Robertson's body. Down on the block, a speckle of a man sweeps the street.

"You see him?"

"Yes."

"Good. That's Guillermo. Last week was his sixty-second birthday. A handful of us gave him a cake. I say goodnight to him most days when I head home late. He's the

friendliest guy you'll ever meet. Always greets me with a wave and a smile. But here's the thing—what are Guillermo's skills? What are his *assets*, his value? He doesn't have an education. Can't do basic arithmetic. He can barely even get out a sentence of English. All he has are his arms, hands, legs, and feet. And so, you see, he is not very valuable, unfortunate for Guillermo. He can't produce much, not in this world. He can, however, sweep streets, and is, as a result, justly compensated. That's Paper Now in the digital age."

"That seems like a little cruel of a way to put it."

"A little cruel, maybe. What would you suggest? Should we pay him as much as you?"

"No, but I don't see how that has to do with anything."

He looks up at her as she returns to her chair, his jaw catching the light of his office's fluorescent bulb. "It has everything to do with it. That firm is worth what it's worth. Nothing we want, nothing they want, emotionally, will change that equation. The market will do what the market will do with it. It's our job to extract as much value as possible in that environment. That's our role. We assess opportunities, assess assets, and take action."

"Yes," Helena says slowly, "but don't you think we could create more value by working with them? Isn't that the point of us?"

Vince laughs and scratches the back of the Lady Liberty figurine. "The point of us? Maybe that's 'the point of us,' as you put it, in some cases. But the point of us, above all else, is to make money."

A quiet falls over the room. Helena scratches at a sudden itch on her leg. The day's weariness hits her all at once. She sighs. "I'm sorry," she says, "I should go. Get some sleep for tomorrow."

Vince quickly says, "Nell... Can I call you Nell?"

Helena hesitates. "I'd rather you not."

"My apologies, my apologies." He waves his hands while he smiles with a feverish grin. "It has been a long day. Tell me, *Helena*, what would you suggest we do instead?"

"I'm really not sure. This is why I came to you."

"Humor me, *think*."

She collects her thoughts. The night's coolness has set in. Her legs have gone numb. "Maybe we can define a business by its assets. But I remember my grandmother scolding me when I was young and scared and screamed when a beggar reached out with a burned hand. She told me to respect the dignity of all people. And businesses are just collections of people... There is some requirement of dignity, especially when they are entrusting us, specifically, with their life."

"And I have seen swathes of livelihoods lost like pennies dumped into the trash because a CEO wanted to hit one juicy quarterly incentive... You speak very beautifully."

Your education did go far.” Vince smiles, stifling a yawn. “Let me stretch for a moment.”

He stands up and turns the corner of his desk and paces a bit, his powerful feet making the floor moan. Helena stares at the figurine on his desk, how his shadow flutters about her. “You know, Helena, you are endowed with great assets. You know that?”

“What?” she stammers. Suddenly the room feels far smaller than when she first entered.

“I think this may be a case of you not realizing where you stand and how that compares to the rest of us. You’re brilliant, athletic, and let’s be honest, gorgeous. It is easy for you to have lived on the high ground. But business is not about that. *Life* isn’t about that. It’s dog eat dog, survival of the fittest. Remembering that may help you keep things in perspective.”

“I’d rather you not talk about me in that manner. I’m going to leave now, goodnight.” She rises and as she does, Vince takes a deft step closer to the door.

“Not yet,” he says slowly. “Not yet. If you were going to come so late, we need to finish this.”

Helena hesitates while Vince bites his lip. He is swaying. “I wish I didn’t see everything in 20/20, Helena,” he says. “I really wish I didn’t. I wish I could keep that bullshit they feed you in school in mind, I really wish I could. But I can’t. The reason I have been so successful is because I see the world with no filter. And that is painful, painful. It is painful to not be able to live in a fairytale, to understand the abject cruelty of the engine that fuels the world under our feet. At least it makes us a lot of money, right?”

“Do you ever consider that you’re the one who’s blind?”

His face briefly stiffens, then bursts back into emotion. “No, unfortunately no. The world’s disgusting! Take the difference between how the world treats men and women. I’m sorry to say, but women are treated like depreciating assets. Looks are a strong boon, but those start to dip after your twenties. Tell me, who’s more likely to be treated better: a rich but wrinkly old wench or a penniless twenty year old goddess? You know the answer. Guys on the other hand? It doesn’t really matter much if we start losing our hair or our gut balloons. It’s remarkable! As long as we keep breathing and making more money, we’ll be all right. Our value just grows and grows. Appreciating assets, for sure. It’s a real shame. If only we lived in a better world... the one we paint for the children.”

“I think you are talking about how *you* see the world and that’s disgusting. Please step away from the door,” she says with her voice shaking.

“And beauty fades...” Vince trails off, his head nodding slightly. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I only mention all that to ensure you understand your value.” He nods. “How *special* you are. My whole job is understanding value. And you are so valuable! Don’t you see? Look—compare yourself to Whitney. Old, wrinkly Whitney. And that other intern... the bigger one... what’s her name? Emmie! I’d almost say you’re more valuable

than me, but even the value of an attractive woman's beauty has its limits.

"Please move away from the door," she says nearly whispering.

"Not yet, Helena... stay. Don't waste your assets. We both know why you really came here."

Helena glances down at his crotch. "Move!" she yelps as she approaches the door.

"Now, now." He steps gliding through the room faster than Helena thinks he should be able to with his size. She smells the whisky in his breath.

He has snaked before her. "Just relax," he whispers.

Time freezes for Helena. Goosebumps erupt across her body. She feels a hand slide onto her left shoulder and another underneath her right breast. A shuddering wave of nausea roils down her spine then bursts in rapid beats within her stomach.

In the middle of a shaky breath, she takes a step back and bumps against the desk. He lunges at her, grabbing ahold of her left arm. She desperately glances around, then, without conscious thought, leans back, grabs the copper statue from Vince's desk, and plunges it torch-first into the side of his neck.

It goes deep. She pushes it deeper. Torch-arm-crown-head, all engulfed.

He drops his hold on her and ambles back, and she pulls the model out of the wound. She hesitates, glances into his shocked eyes, then stabs once more, this time in the center of his neck. The torch tears open his Adam's apple.

He gurgles, trying to speak but failing. He weakly holds shaky hands over the gashes. The effort proves fruitless. The flow begins with a trickle through the cracks between his fingers but quickly becomes a pour. It drips down his arms and shoulder, turning his white collar red. It does not cease.

He spits out blood. He stumbles, falls.

"Oh god," she whispers.

After seconds of labored breathing, she wipes her tears away and senses the blood streaked across her face. She looks at her hands. Red, so red. She swallows her cries. She looks away the gasping body, away from the pool of blood staining the carpet, and grabs papers on the desk, rubbing her hands upon them, desperately wiping the blood away until only the driest traces remain.

There she stands, shaking, panting, until she forces herself to stop. She presses her fist into a ball and closes her eyes. *Guillermo still has a working heart*, she thinks. *That's got to count for something.*

She peeks one final time at the leaking man. The statue has slid out of his neck and sailed down a river of blood, ending up on his chest. She faces straight up, resting. The two women stare at each other.

Lady Liberty's eyes are tinted red.