

The Helicopter Story

Ian liked walking through the empty department store he worked at before all the lights and the bad music turned on. No matter the chaos of the previous evening, the displays were always restored to pristine order and the only noise was the light, rhythmic clicking of the magnetic locks on the clothing sensors.

Ian's office was just off the sales floor, through an electronically coded door at the end of a long hallway, behind a few dozen shelves of neatly folded jeans of various washes and colors. Far from a respite from the chaos of the selling floor, the office complex was a cramped line of cubicles with low ceilings and dirty grey carpet. Instead of desk chairs, everyone sat in old, velvet upholstered dining chairs from the home department. Due to his relative seniority of three years, Ian had his own work space but the rest of his coworkers had to jockey for a space to get some work done as the staff outnumbered the cubicles six to four.

The intern was already in the office, sitting in a folding chair, balancing a laptop on her thighs. She didn't have the privilege of vying for a cubicle. She was punctual and ambitious and when Ian would ask her how someone with a near Ivy education could get roped into a gig like this, she would give him the same prepared response she must have given her interviewers as if he was someone to impress. Ian said good morning to her, turned on his computer and grabbed a suit from the shiny chrome fixture next to his desk. He yelled, 'changing' and did so in the blind corner by the mini fridge and the microwave. He didn't like commuting in a suit.

As Ian fixed his tie in his coworker's make up mirror, his boss, Joe, walked in. Typically there was an Adderall energy about Joe that affected everyone in his vicinity but today he entered solemnly and went straight to his private office. When he didn't emerge after a few minutes, Ian

knocked on his doorframe. Even though he found Joe's manic energy intolerable so early in the morning, its absence was concerning. Joe was looking through his desk drawers, trying to find an extra tie. He'd left his house without one and only realized on the train. This was unlike him. Ian offered him a tie from his large collection but Joe asked him to help pick out a new one. Joe smiled weakly at the intern as they left the office, his hands in his pockets.

Joe was of indeterminate age. Although he once showed everyone a clip of an early Prince music video where he was an extra in the assembled audience, he did enough Botox so that he always looked concerned and surprised. When he blinked, it was unnerving like the rapid flutter of an old doll's eyes and he didn't have a single laugh line or crease in his forehead. He was one of the many frightening figures in upper management who were not frightening in their authority but in their representation of a possible future. Together, they looked like an assembly of campy villains in a comic book. Ian was concerned that one day he'd suddenly realize he was one of them.

Is everything ok? Ian asked as they walked over to the tailored clothing area.

Did you watch the news this morning?

Just a glance at the New York Times Daily email but nothing stood out. Why?

There was a helicopter crash in the Hudson River. My friend was just telling me last week that the gift certificate he had was about to expire and he finally booked a tour.

They were standing in front of a row of ties with animal prints all over them. Joe picked up a light green tie dotted with pink flamingos and a light blue tie covered in tiny illustrated octopuses. Ian hated novelty ties but he pointed at the one with the flamingos and Joe put down the other. It didn't seem like an appropriate time for a lecture on style.

I tried calling him last night and this morning, Joe said, but no answer.

They walked over to a register but the machine wasn't turned on yet. You can pay for it later, Ian said. I'm sorry, Joe but I'm sure there are dozens of helicopter tours per day. I run by the waterfront at night and I pass at least 4 helipads.

Ian knew this must have been weighing heavily on Joe if he sought solace in him. Their relationship wasn't tense or uncomfortable but their moods were diametrically opposed and they were busy enough and the store big enough that they never had to spend too much time together. Nevertheless, they worked together for years and had developed an understanding.

What do you think of my tie? Joe asked the intern when he got back into the complex.

It's cute, she said and went right back to her laptop.

He smiled weakly again.

Joe went into his office and Ian stood in the doorway. Joe checked his phone. Even through the botox, the dread on his face was clear. He had a missed call from a friend he had called earlier that morning. Should I call him back? he asked. He often asked questions that seemed rhetorical.

I think you should, Ian replied.

I have that weightless feeling in my stomach.

I'm sure you've had it all morning.

I have to know. Either way I have to know.

Ian stayed in the doorway and watched him take the phone call. It didn't last more than 2 minutes. After Joe and his friend exchanged greetings, Joe silently nodded along with whatever

news he received and Ian watched his body shake and his hand go up to his mouth. He heard the sob in the back of Joe's throat rise up like the wrong note on a clarinet. His initial sob was followed immediately by a heaving sound. His hand was over his mouth as he gagged. The intern got up and stood wide eyed in the corner of the room. Ian grabbed a trash can and held it for Joe as he vomited into it. He cried and fanned himself and paced. The intern was stuck in an unnatural pose, like one of the ash statues in Pompeii or a background dancer in a paused aerobics video. Ian made a motion for the intern to leave. All she ever did was follow them around and he didn't need to take care of her too. He tied the trash bag and put it in the hallway.

Joe took a deep breath and asked about their morning meeting. He started tying his tie again and Ian noticed there were little flecks of vomit between the flamingos.

You can't go to the meeting, Ian said.

Joe assured him he would be fine.

Come with me, Ian said, you gotta clean yourself up.

As Ian led Joe out of the office, he grabbed for his suit jacket but Ian kept him moving towards the door.

The department store they worked in had all sorts of strange storage areas few people knew about. Ian had a brief affair with a woman in loss prevention that knew all the quiet spots to sit and chat. Plus he worked there long enough and went on enough fruitless missions for misplaced inventory that he had most of the place mapped out. He led Joe to the most out of the way bathroom in a cellar by the engineering office so they wouldn't run into anyone.

Joe splashed water on his face then ran into a stall and vomited again. Ian closed and locked the bathroom door. He leaned against the shared three faucet utility sink and listened to Joe

make ungodly sounds. Joe's excessive response made it hard for Ian to feel empathy for him. It was like absently changing the channel and watching someone fall to their knees with inconsolable grief and no context. Ian just wanted to get Joe out of the building and on his way home. He checked his watch - 9:30. He knocked on the stall door. Joe hobbled out and he looked translucent, like a strange salamander you see in a nature documentary. He washed his hands and rinsed his mouth.

Ian watched him in the mirror. Are you ready to go?

Joe looked back at him. I think I can pull myself together.

Joe, look at yourself. You can't work like this.

Joe regarded himself in the mirror. He wiped the beaded sweat off his forehead and took his tie in his hands, noticing the stains he'd left on it. He tried to pick them off and then stopped himself. He washed his hands again. Ian knew he could never convince Joe of anything. He watched him and carefully waited for a flicker of submission. He was prepared to physically escort Joe out if he had to. Joe took his tie off and said he needed to grab something from his blazer first. Ian shook his head. We're leaving now, he said. He put his hand on Joe's back and they walked upstairs, around the fragrance counters and out the employee entrance.

The sun was bright and reflected off of the buildings and the passing traffic. Ian looked down third avenue intently with his hand in the air to catch the attention of the next cab. When he opened the door for Joe, he started to say he would check on him later but Joe looked at Ian and told him he couldn't be alone. Ian wavered but he couldn't argue. He got in the car.

Joe was slumped over in his seat, staring at his hands folded in his lap. He gave the driver his intersection and started crying again.

I can't remember the last time I saw him, he managed to choke out. I've been thinking about it since last night and I don't know.

Joe, Ian said but he had no idea how to comfort him.

I've put off trips. I've cancelled dinners. I wasn't even going to leave. What's wrong with me?

Work is important to you. No one thinks clearly in these situations.

Joe wiped the tears from his eyes and managed a smile at Ian. Thank you for coming with me. I

know this isn't what you expected. You're a good guy.

I'm sorry.

It's over here on the left, Joe said to the driver.

Ian hated going into people's homes. He loved looking into the windows of apartments he passed by but entering an acquaintance's home too early felt too intimate. It shocked him how many people in New York treated their apartments like little purgatories. He was nervous to see Joe's apartment but besides the absurd amount of photos and some framed awards, outnumbering the ones already framed in his office, the furnishing was minimal - black leather, glass, and chrome. It was modern and outdated at the same time like the waiting room of a doctor's office.

Joe went to the bathroom and told Ian to make himself at home, which he found difficult to do.

After some time, Joe returned, rattling an orange prescription bottle with two little pills inside.

It's a friend's Xanax prescription. It's been in my medicine cabinet for at least a year or so. I've never taken one.

Let me see it.

Joe handed Ian the bottle and he shook out the two little pills and noticed that the dose was only .5mg. He put one back and closed the lid.

It's a small dose, Ian said, and it quiets those unwelcome thoughts I'm sure you're having.

I've never taken anything before. Not even a sleeping pill. How long will it take?

Less than an hour and I'll be here if you don't like what you're feeling. He held out the pill to Joe and he considered it for a few moments and then swallowed it quickly.

Joe laid down on the couch and Ian sat on a nearby armchair.

How long have you lived here?

About 5 years. Since I moved back from Chicago. He swung his legs around. I'm so rude. I didn't give you a tour.

That's ok, Joe. Really. Ian didn't get up and Joe laid back down. He started talking about his co-op board and its politics. Ian zoned out and Joe started laughing.

I think I'm starting to feel it, he said. Would you mind grabbing me a blanket from the closet in my bedroom?

Ian found his closet to be surprisingly spare for a man who worked in stores for decades but as orderly as everything else in his life. When he got back to the living room, Joe was turned towards the cushions with his knees tucked up to his hips. Ian laid the blanket on him and looked in the refrigerator. It was filled with bananas, bottled water and key lime pie flavored yogurts. He grabbed a yogurt and ate it standing up, listening to Joe's heavy breaths and watching him sleep. He sat on the armchair across from him and read the news stories about the helicopter crash on his phone. It wasn't the force of the crash that killed the pilot and Joe's friend but a faulty seatbelt. They drowned. When Ian got up to throw out the yogurt container, he noticed a document with the department store's header next to a tiny stack of unopened mail. He took it into Joe's bathroom and sat on the edge of the tub to read it.

It described an incident between a tailor and a customer who was unhappy about a pair of pants he altered. The customer thought they were too short and he thought the tailor's response was insufficient and rude. When Joe went into the alterations room to gather the tailor's side of the story, he saw an empty bottle of limoncello in the trash.

The tailors were sweet old immigrants who chatted and sewed all day, sharing coffee and baked goods. Even though there was no light in the alterations room, they managed to grow long ivy plants they staked around the room and across the ceiling. Ian was always greeted with a hug or a kiss on the cheek by one of the older seamstresses. The department store was open late and Ian knew that sometimes they shared a little wine in the room but he never said anything because he felt that the tailors were of another world and despite the potential inebriation, their work was precise, they'd been doing it all their lives.

Behind the document was a printed email exchange between Joe and the customer in which the customer described how much money he and his wife spent annually at the store and how he expected the situation to be handled. Ian searched the customer's name and discovered he was a unique looking 90's actor who often played sensitive beasts or easily manipulated thugs and had a messy private life.

Ian felt foolish for expecting Joe to defend the tailors. He was a company man. The document was a final written warning and the thought of the poor tailor, unable to defend himself, unlikely to grab a union representative, and unsure of what he was signing or the implications thereof filled Ian with resentment.

His cell phone vibrated and he recognized the phone number as his own office extension. It was one of his coworkers. Apparently, the intern had told everyone what she saw in the morning.

She was so quiet, Ian never expected her to be such a gossip. His coworker asked Ian if he was coming back to work and he said he wasn't sure. She asked what happened and he told her to step outside and call him back from her cell phone so no one would hear their conversation. She objected and said she had work to do and everyone already knew. Ian told her she didn't know the half of it.

Reluctantly, she agreed and when she called back, he told her everything in unsparing detail. He surprised himself with the cruel gossip that came out of his mouth but he didn't stop or apologize. He told her about the vomiting and the sobbing, how he had to lead Joe out of the building and how he couldn't be alone. There was no sympathy for the tragedy that caused Joe to react this way. He didn't even tell his coworker to keep the story to herself.

Ian hung up the phone and went to the living room to check on Joe. His eyes were open but when he saw Ian he closed them quickly and turned to face the cushions of the couch. Joe, Ian said, surprised by how meek his voice sounded. Joe didn't move. He said his name again a little louder. He wondered if Joe heard him through his narcotic haze. He didn't think he had spoken loudly enough from the bathroom for Joe to hear him but maybe his voice rose as he felt the morbid grip his story had on his coworker.

He stood in the center of the living room for a long time considering his cruelest and pithiest statements, glancing at Joe curled on his couch, wondering if his eyes were even closed. Any satisfaction that came from lampooning Joe was instantly erased by how this day would mark their relationship moving forward and how much he would deserve Joe's disdain.

Ian heard a noise at the door and turned to watch an attractive older man open it slowly. He regarded Ian suspiciously and Ian made his best attempt to signal that Joe was sleeping and

they should talk in the hallway but he ended up practically pushing the man out of the doorway. The man introduced himself and Ian recognized his name. It was the man who called Joe earlier. The man confirmed his identity and was concerned that Joe never answered his phone again after he reacted so strongly. Ian apologized and told him the events of the morning with sympathy and concern, as he should have told it to his coworker. Ian told him he was sorry and left without going back inside.

He didn't go back to work. He took the subway home. It was empty in the early afternoon and he leaned his head against the metal armrest and thought about the long morning. Joe probably hadn't heard Ian mock his grief but Ian almost wished he had so he wouldn't have to reckon with his shame privately.