

## The Helicopter Story

Ian never got into the office early but his train arrived as he walked onto the platform and switching lines after a few stops was just as seamless. He liked walking through the empty department store before all the lights and the bad music turned on. Two days in a row, a serious conversation was punctuated by the blithe lines of a pop song and the obnoxious synthesizer melody that accompanied it.

His office suite was just off the selling floor behind an electronically coded door. An L of cubicles and two private offices - one for his boss and the other for the restaurant manager who was sweet but talked to herself incessantly.

The intern was already in the office sitting in a folding chair and balancing a laptop on her thighs. She got paid hourly. She was always early. Ian signed onto his computer and while he waited for it to load he grabbed one of his suits from the shiny chrome fixture next to his cubicle and after yelling changing he did so in the blind corner by the mini fridge and the microwave. As Ian fixed his tie in his coworker's makeup mirror, his boss came in and dropped his brown bag cart bagel breakfast on his desk. Any of you watch the news this morning?  
I don't have a TV, Ian said and the intern shook her head.

Joe, Ian's boss, was of indeterminate age. Although he once showed them 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 smooth but surprised. When he blinked, it was unnerving like an old doll's eyes. He was one of the many frightening figures in upper management who were not frightening in their authority but in their representation of the future. Together they looked like Batman's assembled villains and just like that dysfunctional caucus, their united narcissism blinded them to the fact that a penguin was being cheeky with a crocodile and a clown.

The strangest thing, Joe said as he exchanged his running sneakers for his loafers and started tying his tie, there was a helicopter crash in the Hudson river. My friend was just telling me last week his certificate was about to expire. I tried calling him last night and this morning but no answer from him or his husband.

Just as the words came out in his usual adderall rhythm, his phone vibrated loudly on his desk. Oh, it's him, he said. His tie, light green with a pattern of pink flamingos, was still askew. Hello? Jordan. No. He screamed and just as quickly as a sob emerged, he heaved. His hand was over his mouth. The intern got up and stood wide eyed in the corner of the room. Ian grabbed a trash can and held it for Joe. He cried and fanned himself and paced. The intern was still in an unnatural pose, stuck like one of the ash statues in Pompeii or a paused workout video, her jaw low, her mouth twisted, and her eyes wide in a sort of bubonic grimace.

Joe took a deep breath and asked about the 9:45 meeting. He started tying his tie again and Ian noticed there were little flecks of vomit between the flamingos. You're not going to the meeting, Ian said.

I'm fine.

Just come with me. As Ian tried to lead Joe out of the office, he tried to grab his suit jacket but Ian kept him moving towards the door.

The department store they worked in had all sorts of cellars and strange areas few people knew about. Ian led Joe to the most out of the way bathroom in a cellar by the engineering area so they wouldn't run into anyone.

Joe splashed water on his face. Then he ran into a stall and vomited again. The bathroom was disgusting. There were never any paper towels in the dispenser, the shared three faucet sink was rusting and often clogged and the toilets were set abnormally close to the ground and strangely close to the stall door. Ian checked his phone. It was 9:30. Joe was still in the stall and there was no service to text the intern, which is why Ian sometimes escaped to this dungeon lavatory. He knocked on the stall door and when Joe came out he looked translucent, like a strange salamander you see in a nature doc.

Ian still had to argue with Joe to get him to go home. He made him imagine how embarrassing it would be if he threw up or spontaneously started crying in the middle of the sales floor. Ian promised he would get him out of the store without running into anyone and Joe made a joke about how concerned he was with Ian's knowledge of hidden spaces. He took it as a good sign.

When they got to the office, their big boss was struggling with the door code. Ian called it out to him and he smiled. I can never remember the override, he said. Ian let him in and they went into Joe's office.

Take as much time as you need, the big boss said as he left.

I don't trust that guy one bit Joe said when the big boss left. Who called him?

Probably the intern. I don't know. We have to go. It's 9:50. We have a 5 minute window before anyone notices us. Let's go.

Ian led Joe through the men's socks and underwear section and around the fragrance counters. After they left through the employee entrance, Ian walked Joe to the corner and hailed a cab. When he opened the door for Joe, he started to say he would check in on him but Joe looked at him and told him he couldn't be alone. Ok, Ian said and got in the car.

Joe was slumped over in his seat, staring at his hands folded in his lap. I don't trust that man, he said again.

Ian was staring out the window. He wondered if there was anything pressing he had to do. I don't trust any of you, really. Joe turned towards him, his hands still folded. You remember

when you fired Liz and we could all hear you fire Liz because your voice travels through the vent. You told me you didn't.

We're not supposed to announce it.

Why don't you trust him?

He started crying again. I don't even see my friends anymore.

You do all take this a little serious for what it is.

Work is important.

You're right.

I don't know if I would have left today.

Of course you would.

I've cancelled trips. I've cancelled dinners.

Joe, relax.

I don't remember the last time I saw him. He started sobbing. I've been thinking about it since last night and I don't know.

You're a good friend.

It's over here on the left, he said.

Ian hated going into people's homes. He loved looking into the windows of apartments he passed by but entering an acquaintances home too early felt too intimate. Mostly, he hated trying to suppress any feelings of judgement that would inevitably arise like when he dog sat for a coworker and realized they never bothered to discard the row of brittle brown plants on their windowsill or when he visited a friend who was 33 and slept in a twin size bed.

Joe lived on the third floor of a brownstone. Besides an 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 a waiting room at a doctor's office.

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

Joe returned with a bottle of Xanax. I've never taken one before.

What do you have to drink?

In the freezer.

Anything else?

Just what's there.

Ian grabbed a bottle of vodka from the freezer and poured two glasses. I always found this combination effective. He handed Joe a glass.

I'm not much of a drinker.

You could use a vice or two. Ian took the vodka down in one gulp. Joe had only taken a tiny sip and his face contorted in the same expression as Ian's. The whole thing, Ian said. Joe coughed wildly and his eyes filled with tears. Ian opened the refrigerator but there was nothing but shelves of key lime pie yogurt. He poured water into another glass and handed it to Joe. Did you take the pill yet?

Not yet.

Well, another one then. He poured two glasses.

I can't, really.

One. Two. Joe put the pill in his mouth. Three. They both swallowed the cold vodka and filled their glasses with water.

How long will it take?

Half an hour maybe.

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.

I didn't think people did that in New York. There's never much to see. 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 got a yogurt from the fridge. He 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 their department store's header next to the bananas and a tiny stack of unopened mail. When he looked closer, he realized it was a disciplinary document, a formal reminder, and he took it into Joe's bedroom to read it.

He sat on Joe's bed and looked over the piece of paper. In the first section of the document were a series of empty fields for standard information like name and length of tenure. Below that was another empty section titled Standards and below this was a synopsis of a situation Ian found familiar. It described an interaction Ian had with a customer who was unhappy about a pair of pants he altered. He thought they were too short and Ian told the man to stop yelling at the tailor and then to stop yelling at him. He felt like shaking Joe awake and slamming the paper on the coffee table but he took a deep breath, remembered why he was in his house and pocketed it.

His phone rang and he recognized the phone number as his own office extension. It was his coworker. She asked if he was coming back and he said he wasn't sure. She asked what happened and he told her to step outside and call him back from her cellphone. She objected and said she had some stuff to do and he reminded her he was with their boss. 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 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. Ian 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.

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 doorframe. The man introduced himself and he recognized the name Jordan. It was the husband of the man who died in the crash. He explained to Ian how he delivered the news earlier and was concerned Joe never answered his phone again after he reacted so strongly. Ian apologized and told Jordan the events of the morning as he should have told it to his coworker. Jordan thanked him and told him he could leave now. He didn't wake Joe to tell him he was leaving. There was a small chance Ian's absence would make Joe question what he may have heard and Ian just wanted to feel bad for what he'd done.