

MISS LIBERTY

Any light within the window of floor fifty-two has long drained away, 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.

Now week three at Liam Stalwart Capital Management dredged forward.

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

- *6 AM: Division I soccer practice*
- *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 a 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. 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. 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, before he laughs and covers an eye with his hand. “Well, I’m glad you came to me first, Helena, and I’m also glad you didn’t bring this up in your interviews.”

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, that’s because your resume was amazing, and your... everything else was too.”

“I guess my point is, sir—”

“Call me Vince.”

“Well Vince,” she says, “it just didn’t feel right to me. It doesn’t feel like a value-creating strategy.”

“Ah,” Vince says as he scratches his chin, “not a value-creating strategy.”

“I just thought the idea was to help improve businesses. Not leech.”

Vince leans back and turns his head toward the dark city. Miniature cars and dot-sized pedestrians advance. A constant churn singing in a symphony of entropy.

He waves toward the window. “Helena, look at this. What do you see?”

“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. “Assets, Helena! Assets. You, me, the cars down there, the lights, assets. And some assets generate more profit than others... 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 significant money. And ultimately the purpose of a business is to exploit its assets in activities that will generate profit. Just like an individual, you can either make money or you can’t. You either produce or you don’t. You’re either worth something or you’re not.”

“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, on the edge of the street?”

Helena stands up and leans beside the desk to see it. 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. 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."

Vince swings his head back and his jaw catches the light of his office's fluorescent bulb. "It has everything to do with it. Paper Now 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."

Vince smiles, then unleashes a harsh howl. "You know the problem with women? Sorry to

say it, but you're depreciating assets. Looks are a strong boon, but those start to dip after your twenties."

Helena blinks, then stammers, "What?"

"Tell me: who's more likely to find love, 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!"

"You're disgusting."

"Maybe, maybe. Maybe I'm disgusting. But it doesn't matter if I am or am not. You see Helena, the reason I'm so successful is because I see the world with no filter. I see everything in 20/20, for what it is, how it truly works. None of the bullshit they feed you in school. You're a smart girl. Maybe too smart. The more you think about it, the more you know I'm right. And it isn't fair, but you know it's true. The world's disgusting. No matter how smart you become, how skilled, it doesn't make up the difference between ugly and beautiful. That is just the cruelty of our world, and unfortunately, beauty fades."

"Do you even hear yourself right now? Is this how you talk to all your staff? Is this how you talk to your wife?"

"Oh, no, no. I only mention it to make sure you understand your value. 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 fat 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."

He rises from his desk. “Now Helena, stay. Don’t waste your assets. We both know why you really came here.”

Helena glances down at his crotch. “Fuck you,” she says shakily as she moves to leave.

“Now, now.” He steps forward, then slides 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 behind 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 desperately glances around, then, without conscious thought, she leans forward, grabs the copper statue from Vince’s desk, spins back around, 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.

“Ay, Dios mío. Ay, Dios mío,” Helena whispers.

After seconds of labored breathing, she wipes her tears away and then senses the blood

streaked across her face. She looks at her hands. They are 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 trying to wipe 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.

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