

Don't Leave Empty-Handed

For weeks, Morene Chooster had had the worst head-cold of her life. She was so stuffed in the sinuses, she couldn't use her nose to breathe. The bottom of her nose was chafed crimson, with bits of skin beginning to peel, resembling the crumbs of dried snot, though it was not. Every day that week, she was open-mouthed, and while waiting for elevators, or the coffee to percolate, she had the persona of an awestruck dolt.

Because of the cold, that's how her co-workers would remember her, talking with the mud-thick deep voice of the sick, the congested tones that made you want to back away. She waddled around with a Kleenex box all week, to meetings and the bathroom. The clogged head made her brain processes fuzzy and she had a hard time following the scripted PowerPoint decks of her co-workers. When people asked her opinion about an initiative, she agreed with whatever the last person had said. As she walked around the office that morning, astonished that she still wasn't feeling better, not even a glimmer of hope such as, say, *one* open nostril, she was thinking

about how much healthier she'd feel if someone did her an act of kindness. Brought her a pack of honey-lemon lozenges or offered to transport a cup of soup from the cafeteria to her desk. Where had all her friends gone, anyway? Patsy and Simon and the motherly Dora? She used to have friends at work. Dora had finally thrown in the towel to spend time with her grandkids, and Patsy had been transferred to Billings, the city, not the department. Simon had quit, at least that's what he'd said, sass-back Simon who had scrambled to line up a low-paying job in a non-profit.

Passing her in the hall at that moment was Victor, her boss's boss, a man who rarely spoke to her. He was wearing his usual cable knit sweater vest over an un-ironed blue oxford shirt, and khaki pants that were hemmed short. His glance at Morene was belated, as if he'd just noticed someone in the hall, but he said, "Stop by my office in ten, okay lass?" Victor was Scottish.

"Sure," she said, out of habit of bending to any requests. She continued on to her workstation, a tiny oatmeal-colored fabric box with coffee stains from the previous occupant on the laminate desk top. Last holiday season was the only other time Victor had summoned her. She barely knew the man – even now – and at that time had stepped into his large office almost on tiptoe. He'd handed her a card and looked away, saying "Thanks for all your work," though she was almost sure he didn't know what she did. And she'd have to admit that in the past few weeks, she didn't quite know either, the rules had changed so much and so suddenly. This time, snorting into a tissue wad at her desk, she regarded the request for her presence as nicely coincidental with her wish to have a good deed conferred upon her. Last time in Victor's office, it had been a fifty dollar gift certificate to Amazon.com that Morene had used to buy an oversized hardbound dictionary.

Two years ago, Morene was hired to manage transportation for the company. Under her supervision were the four shuttle busses that carried the workers around to the nine buildings on campus and she interfaced with the state Department of Transportation regarding how many people were carpooling. Co-workers in the Facilities department rolled their eyes and kept doing email when she came barreling down their aisle, sure she would be proposing another bike rack or bus hut, causing unplanned budget overruns.

But then two people were struck down by cars speeding around the campus roads and she was blamed for the white crosswalk stripes having faded into the pavement. For busy crosswalks, she'd gotten approval to install blinking light systems, operated by the pedestrian, but that was a year before the accidents, and the lights had since burned out and she'd forgotten to put in a work order to have them replaced. The people didn't die, for heaven's sake, she reasoned. One was a bearded computer programmer whose white skin indicated he rarely saw the light of day. He probably didn't even know how to use a crosswalk, and he only suffered a broken wrist. Admittedly, his injury did hamper writing software code, but it could've been worse. The other person struck was a Hispanic woman from the cafeteria pushing a cart heaping with packages of dinner rolls. The rolls went flying and she was knocked back into the grass strip along the curb. A mild concussion, and just a commissary worker anyway, it wasn't like the next release of software depended on her. That was when Manny, her boss, told her she'd been "reassigned." Recycling. Compost. Soy forks. Fancy words like "sustainability" and "environmentalism" surrounded her new position.

"This is your chance to get us some positive PR here, lady," Manny said. "We're hurting. Two people hit by cars on campus. The packaging on our software taking up most of the fossil fuel in Rhodesia, not your fault, of course. 6.2 beta software is more infested with bugs than a

Chelsea fleabag, but that's not our fault," Manny said. That had made her laugh. But then she didn't, because she *liked* being the Transportation Diva, as she referred to herself. Being a dumbass pushing your gas pedal to fifty-five through curvy campus roads because you want to show off your newly restored Camaro that reminds you of being eighteen, well, that was not her problem, was it? Stepping off the curb, outside the crosswalk lines, faint though they were, because you're too short to see over your piles of rolls, that was a dumb mistake by a foreigner. Probably even an illegal alien. Why should she be transferred now to *compost*, where they were asking her to consider a food scrap system that involved live worms? She had enough live worms in her mother's garden.

She twirled around in her desk chair, noticing that the plastic arms were encroaching into her sides more these days. In the refrigerator she'd stashed last night's fried chicken leftovers her mother had made and packed for her, and she considered the time it would take to eat a drumstick. Could she get one down, leaning over the sink in the kitchenette, before she had to report to Victor? Did it matter that she craved fried chicken at nine a.m.? She hacked unexpectedly, then blew her nose twice, and from over the panel she heard, "Hey, keep it down over there, will you?"

"Sorry!" she said, raising her voice to make sure he heard her, whoever he was, which brought on another round of coughing, followed by the requisite blowing. Her box of Kleenex with the kittens on it was almost empty.

"Blow in the bathroom!" another voice said. This made Morene think of something dirty she'd read in a book of erotic short stories she'd bought accidentally, but she cast it from her mind and went back to the drumstick fantasy. Her mother had found the book and burned it,

forcing Morene to watch it go up in flames in an old metal wastebasket. Tonight she'd have something to tell her mother about work – whatever it was that Victor was going to give her.

Nine minutes later she was at Victor's door, taking a chance leaving the Kleenex box at her desk, but wadding two sheets into her fist. Inside she saw him talking on his mobile phone, a device he whipped out often for the young men in the department to admire around the microwave. It was a knock-off of the iPhone, and available only in Europe, and somehow Victor had managed to get one “unlocked,” and use it in the States. Morene didn't understand the “unlocked” part, but she didn't mind not understanding. The only small talk the men in her group seemed able to generate was about cell phones, cable sports, and Jawbone headsets. Morene had a three-year-old pink flip phone she religiously carted around in the zipper pocket of her large tote bag but no one called her except her mother.

Victor was looking down at the floor, elbows on knees, with his free hand on his freckled forehead, as if things were vastly wrong. Above him was a coat of arms for Durie, and a sample piece of the clan's tartan, a primary-colored plaid. To the Christmas party last year he'd worn a kilt and there were lots of sideline cracks Morene overhead about if he was wearing underpants. He looked over at the doorway, and seeing Morene, (he couldn't miss her, blocking all the corridor light), held up an index finger to wait.

Into the phone, he said, “Aw, that's a fiddler's biddin.' We have to decide what we're going to say about strategy at the meeting. Are we going to open the kimono?” He sat up in the chair. “Dandy, but let's separate the wheat from the chaff here. I'll socialize this with CRS and Runtime. If DidiCom can't do the work, let's escalate.”

Morene felt like she often did in meetings, that she was a bystander in a foreign-language conference. Just when she thought she'd turned the corner on acronyms, say, finally

understanding that COC stood for Cafeteria Operations Center, or that *taxonomy* was just a fancy name for a name, a new crop would be thrown around without explanation.

Victor didn't say good-bye but tapped the screen and set the phone on a red file folder. Without looking at her, he said, "C'mon in, Marlene. How've you been?" He fussed with his other folders and then looked at her. She stood just inside the doorway. "Morene," she said.

Victor waved his hand like a truce and said, "Of course, of course. I was just talking to a Marlene. Ha-ha. Sit down, certainly."

It was difficult to choose a seat, because Victor's office was set up with a round table and chairs instead of seats directly across from his desk. Would he come join her at the table, or should she swing one of the chairs around to face him? Morene chose a chair at the round table that was closest to the desk and sat down, thankful these particular side chairs were armless. Her back was to the desk. She folded her hands and observed the family photos taken at St. Andrews while she waited for him to join her at the table. Her nose began to run and she wiped it quickly with the fisted Kleenex.

Nothing happened, so she turned around. Victor was sitting back in his chair, a leg crossed, a turquoise file folder open across his lap. A hairless bare calf showed between his argyle sock and tan pant hem. "You ready now?" he said when she turned around, as if he'd been waiting on her.

Morene turned her chair to face the desk. Whatever envelope he was going to give her must be buried in the turquoise folder. "Yes, yes, of course," she said, smoothing her black easy-knit skirt. She'd been coached by a Penney's saleswoman to wear black.

Victor put his index finger on his lips, as if ruminating on the best way to start the conversation, all the while looking at the folder.

“Morene, there’s only one thing to say here, and only one way to say it. We’re going to have to let you go, dear.” He chewed his thumbnail.

“Go where?” said Morene. They’d recently been discussing travel budgets and who would get to attend what conferences. Last month Morene had been dispatched to Lubbock, Texas, for a seminar on cafeteria trays made from recycled milk jugs.

Victor slapped his forehead with his palm and smiled. Then he pointed at her grinning. “You, you, missy, you have a sharp little sense of humor in times like this.” He chuckled some more but Morene couldn’t see what was so funny. She hoped this time it would be Chicago or Tampa.

He continued. “But just to elaborate, things are not doing well in the area of sustainable research and we have to dismiss you from the company.”

“You do know that the first shipment of waterless urinals comes next week, don’t you?” she said.

“Morene, we are still using plastic cups with the company’s logo printed in toxic ink! Things have not moved fast enough.” His phone began to vibrate, scooting across the red folder and sounding like an electric razor. Victor looked at the screen and then tapped it, and put the device to one of his large ears. His eyes focused on his beige wall of company plaques. “Right-o then,” he said. He set the phone back on the file.

Morene could feel her neck blotching pink. Her disappointment at no gift certificate was immense, sweeping over her like a fever. And now her job was being taken away. The image of her mother standing over her at the dinner table and saying “What went on TODAY at work, Mo?” like she did every night, made her slouch in the chair. Her mother was never satisfied with a mumbled generic statement. “How do you think you’ll keep that job if you don’t DO

something, Morrie?” she was fond of saying. Morene began to cry, which made her stuffed nose even stuffier.

His hand held up like a traffic cop, Victor said, “Now, now lass. None of that. We need you to be a good soldier and chin up. I want you to go to your desk. Cindy from human resources has put a Goodbye Box on your desk. There’s a tissue pack in it and a company mug. You go pack it, and mind you, no slipping company assets in there.” He chuckled then, as if this would completely lighten her burden. “We need to keep our Post-Its.” More chuckling. “Dick from Security will escort you out when you’re ready.” He held an envelope out to her, a white number ten business envelope with the company’s name in the corner. “And I’d like to give you this.”

Ah, here it was, even with this bad news, this unbelievable news, they were going to give her a thank you parting gift. Could be Amazon again, which would be fine, or Target, which she could find some use for, or best of all, Nordstrom.

Victor waved the envelope at her. “You know, it’s um, it’s so you don’t have to wait in the mail for your last check.”

Morene could feel the dreaded dry tickle in her throat begin, which signaled a coughing fit, and she swallowed rapidly in hopes of postponing it. She took the envelope with a shaking hand, then dared herself to look at him.

He smiled, not really looking her in the eye, more the forehead. “You’ll be fine. These things happen. You might try the school district, you know, in their bus system. With your transportation experience. They have to hire a number of women each year.”

Morene stood and walked out of the office to her cubicle, clasping the envelope in front of her. She expected to see others along the way, waiting their turn to be dismissed by Victor.

Surely this must be part of departmental cutbacks. She could think of a few people she'd get rid of.

The lime green Goodbye Box was on her desk. On the side was a cartoon squirrel in a skirt, waving. Just as Victor had said, there was a pack of tissue in the bottom, travel size, and a company mug. She felt an urge to throw the mug across the panel tops, where it could smash against the window. But then she realized she could take the mug home and show her mother what she'd gotten today, in praise for all her hard work on the waterless urinals, even though her mother didn't allow the word "urinal" in the house. Her mother would be pleased to hear she'd been invited into the big boss' office to *socialize* initiatives. *The carpet is an inch thick and the desk is rosewood*, she could hear herself elaborate at dinner. And then there was the "bonus" check. Any boss who calls one of his employees a lass must surely be fond of her.

Morene wanted to get her box packed before Dick from Security came. Dick and she had gone out on a disastrous date when she first started, where she had shown her lack of knowledge about the potency of tequila shooters and ended up slumped on the floor of a restroom stall.

She opened her desk drawer to find the neat stack of orange and yellow post-its she harbored and replenished with cyclical efficiency, and put them in the box. Over the panel, she heard a deep voice say, "Where can I find Morene Chooster?"

A young man she didn't recognize appeared by her desk. "I'm Brad," he said. "I'm from Security. I'm...supposed to...um. I'm supposed to see you out." He gestured with his hand like he was leading her to an open car door. He was wearing the dark green security outfit that Morene always thought looked like a park ranger's uniform. He seemed to be near her age, when most of Security was over fifty. He looked at the box she was filling and said, "I'm, uh, I'm really sorry that you, you know."

Morene's nose had stopped running but she ran a Kleenex in brisk fashion across her nose out of habit. "Oh. Thank you for saying so." With one hand, she swept her beanie babies from her bookshelf into the box. "I'm glad you came. I mean, it's nice to meet someone new, since I already know Dick."

"It's only my second day," Brad said. The buttons on his shirt were straining around his large stomach and he had a dark mole on his left eyelid. The shirt's sleeves were too long, but all his clothes were neatly pressed and his sausage-like fingers bore no rings of any kind.

Morene put her jacket on top of the box and lifted it from the bottom. "I think I'm ready," she said.

Brad held his hands out. "I can take that," he said, and he slid the box from her before she could answer.

She followed him down the aisle and towards the exit, glad he took a route that didn't involve passing Victor's office. The kitchenette was on this route, where she could pick up the Tupperware of drumsticks. Maybe Bradley, as she'd already taken to calling him in her head, liked chicken.