

BUFFER

Kara Hartzler

(A woman, BETH, sits on a couch grading papers. A coffeepot and a large chair are nearby. The door opens and NORMAN enters, still speaking to several people outside the door.)

NORMAN

No, I don't think it would be a good idea to skip class and go to Pizza Hut for lunch. One can live a full, rich life subsisting on bierocks and little smokies. Trust me, Adam. Quiet down. Quiet down! Turn the volume down!

(He does a motion of turning a knob.)

No, Julia, I will not reschedule your test on Friday so you can leave to visit your boyfriend. Oh, it's not to visit your boyfriend; it's because your grandfather died? Should have thought of that sooner. Hey!

(He does the turning knob motion again.)

You'll get your knife back at the end of the day. If you bring it again, it's going in my tackle box. I'm closing the door now!

(He attempts to close the door. Several arms and feet stick in the doorway, preventing him from closing the door. He bangs on them several times until they disappear.)

Hey, don't lick the glass!

BETH

Hi.

NORMAN

Hi.

BETH

They don't look to be going away anytime soon.

(We hear insistent knocks on the door.)

NORMAN

On our farm when I was growing up, we raised turkeys. I can see a lot of parallels. Packed together in small cages, their little beaks stretched towards the sky, gobbling and squawking for food and attention —

BETH

Knowing that if it rains, many of them will drown out of sheer stupidity.

NORMAN

Exactly.

BETH

Tea?

NORMAN

That'd be wonderful.

BETH

There's some new stuff — Jasmine Mist Green Tea — if you want that. Lots of anti-oxidants and superhero powers.

NORMAN

Why not.

BETH

I'll let you add the sugar.

NORMAN

Repulsed by my sweet tooth?

BETH

Five teaspoons seems excessive.

NORMAN

I'm trying to go head to head with my ADD'ers. Mail sorted?

BETH

Yeah.

NORMAN

(Retrieving a pile from his mailbox)

How was Geometry?

BETH

Alice had to go to the bathroom four times.

NORMAN

All for the purposes of relieving bodily functions?

BETH

No, only twice for that. The other two were for adjusting her contact lens and changing her tampon.

NORMAN

So in a fifty-minute period that's —

BETH

Once every twelve point five minutes, yes, we discussed this.

NORMAN

(Tossing in the garbage)

Catalog, catalog, credit card offer, class fundraising through magazine sales, catalog—

BETH

Although the fact that she once came back to class to retrieve some Kleenex because there was no toilet paper in the stall and then returned could arguably constitute five, which would make once every ten minutes, but she claimed it was a mere sub-action of a greater purpose.

NORMAN

Catalog, newsletter — hey, my name's in it — cheerleading uniforms, catalog, did she check the other stalls for toilet paper?

BETH

I thought it best not to ask. Then it took her eleven minutes to return from one trip because she claimed she was helping a person on crutches go down the stairs.

NORMAN

How noble.

BETH

Isn't it though? Then after class I had to spend ten minutes making cooing noises over Mary Grace's pictures of her stuffed animal collection. And your morning?

NORMAN

The highlights included writing a college recommendation letter for a student who cannot master the difference between your, y-o-u-r, and you're, y-o-u-apostrophe-r-e. There was also a discussion about the senior trip to Washington D.C. in which Randall asked if we could solicit the services of an intern, and then laughed so hard some Mountain Dew came out his nose. Do you have any Advil?

BETH

(Reaches for her purse)

Are the computers back up?

NORMAN

The Mac is.

BETH

I need to enter some quiz scores. Does the Mac have internet access?

NORMAN

No.

BETH

Damn.

NORMAN

Why do you need internet access to enter grades?

BETH

I don't. I just need to check my e-mail.

NORMAN

You have e-mail?

BETH

All right, I need to check my horoscope.

NORMAN

You read your horoscope every day?

BETH

Horoscope, Wellness Scope, Passion Scope, Rainbow Scope . . .

NORMAN

Aren't they just vagaries that could be applied to anyone?

BETH

Yeah.

NORMAN

So . . .

BETH

Even though it could be applied to anyone, it's still good advice.

NORMAN

What advice did it give you today?

BETH

The one in the newspaper said something like, "Today's the day to pack your bags and set out on a course — Lewis and Clark style — towards getting what you want."

(NORMAN opens his briefcase and begins sorting through papers.)

BETH

Is that a new coat?

NORMAN

Yeah. Well, actually it's an old one I dug out of the closet. My regular one caught fire last night.

BETH

Caught fire?

NORMAN

I was playing pool at a bar last night and draped it over the back of my chair. Someone must have flicked an ash on it because I smelled smoke, and when I looked over, the left pocket was on fire.

BETH

Oh my god! Who were you playing pool with?

NORMAN

I almost threw my beer on it, and then I remembered: oh yeah, alcohol, fire. Then by the time I stamped it out, the whole left side was charred.

BETH

That's too bad, I really liked that coat. Who did you say you were with?

NORMAN

This woman. Natosha. One of her friends set us up.

BETH

So how was it?

NORMAN

Fine. Whatever. I grow weary of the whole romance thing. It's just so much more effort I don't want to expend.

BETH

Yeah. So Randall's cruising for his own little Monica Lewinsky?

NORMAN

(Crossing to a cupboard)

Do we still have extra pens in here?

(Puts pens in his briefcase)

Yes, except I keep explaining to Randall that the lure for Monica has to do in part with the power differential. I don't think a woman intent on conquering the highest zipper in the nation would find much use for a horny seventeen year-old junior varsity player with asthma. Nonetheless, he remains in high spirits over the concept.

BETH

You know, in some ways, I envy Monica's naivete. I was driving to work this morning, listening to an NPR interview with one of her high school friends who said that Monica really believed — even before she went to D.C. — that she could win the president's heart and make him leave Hillary. That love — or I guess, sex — could ultimately triumph over politics.

NORMAN

I saw that woman on the *Today* show. So you envy this?

BETH

I think I envy the fervent belief of the young that love will conquer all. Not just of girls — I think even Randall's intern-o-phile thing is a variation on the same theme. That nothing — not power, not money, not status — is enough to hold back the tides of love and lust.

NORMAN

And you envy this notion?

BETH

Yeah. Just the idea that it could happen, instead of knowing it won't. I think there's a significant shift that happens during a woman's life when she stops using separate hand and face moisturizers. I have now reached that point.

NORMAN

(Dumping papers in the trash can)

Do we have any extra trash bags? So what'd you do?

BETH

I turned the radio to Cat Stevens and looked at how dirty all the snow was alongside the interstate. Then I almost fell on my butt walking on the ice in the parking lot. That pretty much did away with the day's romanticism.

NORMAN

(Tying up the trash bag)

Yeah, that'll do it.

BETH

(Pause)

Thanks for calling me back last night.

NORMAN

Oh sure. I didn't want to leave you hanging. What did you want to talk about?

BETH

Are you sure you want to hear it now?

NORMAN

Yeah, I've got another few minutes. Go ahead.

(Stooping to tie his shoelaces)

These things must be waxed.

BETH

OK, Norman, I'm only going to tell you if you sit still for a minute.

NORMAN

Oh. Sorry.

(He sits back and looks at BETH.)

BETH

All right. Here goes. Last night I did supper, cleared the dishes, and then just sat on my couch for fifteen minutes. Not reading, not watching TV, not doing anything, not even listening to music. Just sat. And I thought about my life and being a teacher. I thought about the fact that I'm thirty-eight years old. And I thought about what more I want out of life. And what I realized was, I don't necessarily want true love. I don't believe in true love. I'm not sure if that's a good or bad thing, but I don't. But what I *do* want, what I think would make my life happier at this point, is to have a buffer.

NORMAN

A buffer?

BETH

A buffer. Someone or something to put a cushion between me and the world. To make it a little less intense, to give me perspective on it, to help me laugh at it. It's like when I look in my sock drawer and I find my favorite pair of thick, white cushy socks and I know that for one day my feet won't be damp and cold. And then I'm happy.

NORMAN

So why did you call me? How did you even get my number?

BETH

Information. I called you, Norman, because I think I want you to be my buffer.

NORMAN

Oh.

(Pause)

Why me?

BETH

Because I listened to your message twice on my answering machine. Because I thought of you and tried on two different sweaters this morning. Because I thought about not washing my hair this morning and decided to wash it. These are as close as I get to love these days.

NORMAN

What does being a buffer entail?

BETH

I'm not sure. Probably just being together a lot. We'd have to go through the guise of dating and marriage eventually. But I'm not looking for sex, I'm not looking for love or romance, I don't even have to have a close friendship all the time. Just a presence. A buffer.

NORMAN

A life-long buffer?

BETH

However long you were a buffer rather than something to be buffered from. And you could certainly hold me to the same standard.

NORMAN

OK. Wow, this is one of the odder requests I've gotten from a woman.

BETH

I know. You can certainly take time to think about it, but I'd be interested in hearing your initial reaction to the idea.

NORMAN

Well . . . hmm.

BETH

(Long pause)

Yes?

NORMAN

(Slowly)

I guess what I'm feeling about the whole thing is this.

BETH

Go ahead.

NORMAN

I'm not really at a point in my life where —

(Suddenly, a student rushes into the room.)

BETH

Shit.

NORMAN

Joel, how'd you get in here?

JOEL

I told the secretary it was an emergency and I had to talk to you.

NORMAN

Why do you have to talk to me?

JOEL

Because of this! See, I tied a piece of grape dental floss around a Lifesaver. Now watch!

(JOEL puts the Lifesaver at the back of his mouth and swallows it. A piece of floss still sticks out the front of his mouth.)

Now pull it!

NORMAN

What?

JOEL

Pull the floss!

(Reluctantly, NORMAN pulls the piece of floss until the Lifesaver reappears, dangling on the end of it.)

JOEL

See, I swallowed it, but you pulled it back out. Isn't that cool!

NORMAN

Yeah, it's cool.

JOEL

And it works with any flavor of Lifesaver. And any flavor of floss!

NORMAN

Sure does. What's that white stuff on your hand?

JOEL

Sour cream. That's *another* trick I've gotta show you. But we have to go to the locker room. Come on!

(JOEL grabs NORMAN by the hand and begins to drag him out of the room.)

NORMAN

Joel, I'm in the middle of a conversation. Can't it wait?

JOEL

No, because the cheese gets hard. Come on!

(NORMAN looks back helplessly and a bit longingly at BETH as he's being dragged out of the room.)

NORMAN

We'll talk later.

BETH

Sure.

(NORMAN and JOEL exit. BETH studies her fingernails. End of scene.)