

O.A. LINDSEY

EVIE M.

Today I phoned and had a cup of coffee, created/distributed a handful of B-20s, then phoned and had a cup of coffee. We ran out of powder creamer, but there were creams from McDonald's in the break area mini-fridge, which I just disinfected. Around 4:40, I decided to cruise hyperlinks until close. There was something about the President, and news that a small plane had crashed somewhere in Illinois. A sullen pop diva will guest-star on a Thursday night prime-time. It's sweeps. Her crimson mouth was parted in the photo, and for an instant I couldn't help but picture myself ejaculating—I guess. Accurate or not, I felt despicable, and quickly went to scrub my hands. I must remember to remember her name, to purchase her recordings. I drove home.

50 Home, where the shows are on. Between five thirty and seven: utter contentment. The reruns allow me to nod off for a few and then rejoin any story without worry. They showed these same shows in the women's barracks, and again at base camp, and you could even watch them at forward operations. Usually a nap, followed by a quick Swiffering of the apartment, will help me to unwind before the new episodes come on at seven. I know everything, until the new episodes come on, at seven.

Today, though, someone had called and the red light blinked. No one ever calls. I was terrified to check the message, so I did not, and then did not sleep.

Back to work. Somebody left the coffee machine on all night, so the break area smelled burnt, and the pot had a veneer of tar-stuff on the bottom. I picked it up and looked into it, considered scrubbing it, considered smashing it into the brushed-steel sink, my knuckles grinding the shards, but then put it back and trod down the long hall to another break area, where I poured a cup. There were pyres everywhere in the desert. There was plenty of powder cream, here. Near my partition, a thin clerk shrugged his shoulders at the scorched pot. His khakis were wrinkled from having been worn too many times without a wash. I told him about the other break area, but he just stared at me. I told him there was plenty of cream.

Later, my supervisor stood at the edge of my workspace and flashed his perfect, glazed teeth. It made me nervous, which I think he enjoyed. Enjoys. He's younger than I am but doesn't act it. He told me he's been listening in on my customer calls, and that I needed to master the Art of Inflection. Told me that I had a lovely voice, but that if I didn't sound interested in our product, I could not expect anyone else to get interested in it. Could I? Huh?

At lunch, my hands and face were filmy from a French dip. I finished half of it before I had to rush to the bathroom to wash. There was only an air dryer, so I used toilet paper to pat myself and ended up with tissue pills all over my chin. After that, I drove through McDonald's for coffee. I asked the woman for a handful of extra creams, and she glared at me as if I were the cause of something awful, like a tumor. She spoke into a headset, then slammed the window. As I pulled away, my exhaust made a grumbling sound, like rocks tumbling in a pipe, like the collision of track gears on an M113A3 personnel carrier. I simply cannot afford any extra expenses, car repair or anything. I put the car in park and sat in the lot, rubbing my thumbs against the corrugated thimbles of cream, rubbing and rubbing until another headset person knocked on my window and ordered me away.

Supervisor came by again. He stood over my shoulder, breathing through his nose. At some point, I had to turn and look up at him. His smile made me feel like a schoolgirl humiliated by her teacher. (I was given remedial teeth-brushing lessons after the red pill polluted my mouth.) The Art of Inflection, Evie, he said to me again. He then squeezed my neck, kneaded it, and walked off. I spent the rest of the day refreshing my inbox. Someone sent a joke e-mail that showed a fat cartoon woman in black lingerie. Her beet-red nipples were spilling over the top, and her vagina was bisected by the panties. A stick-thin bald man dressed only in an undershirt and with a small, limp cock said that Victoria's secret was out: models were one thing, but nobody's *wife* looks good in these outfits. It wasn't funny. I sent it on to my account reps.

The red light was a message from Helen—I finally checked; I had to sleep. We broke up because she took a job elsewhere. Maybe this wasn't the end of the world, but it wasn't so goddamn good either. The thing is, we sat Indian-style on the wooden floor in her empty living room, the window light gentle and lemony, the moving trucks already gone, and she promised that *she* would hang in there if *I* hung in there.

I have to stop thinking about it—her—now. If you heat an individual serving (two) of Rich's frozen glazed donuts for 29 to 42 seconds, they'll be as hot and fresh as fresh. We had this little bitch dog in the desert, this black and white mutt that found us, just wandered into camp out of nowhere. We fed it chunks of dehydrated pork patty and whatever from our MREs, and someone named it Sheeba—that name, my god I hated that name. Growing up I'd never been allowed to have a dog, so I gave it every leftover from my meal packet, gum and salt and powdered cream and everything, and it began to sleep under my cot every night, and I'd dangle my hand down there on its ribs for as long as I could stay awake, and . . . And you'd pat it—her—Sheeba, and puffs of dust would fly from her fur, it was so funny, so dirty, and once she was outside the compound berm, out there in the sand, pawing at a beetle, springing back from a tiny bug or something, crouching on her front paws and growling at it like a puppy, and a few of us laughed and then went in the tent, and some guys from the motor pool took bets and shot it. Her. It depends on how frozen the donuts are. You can tell they are ready when they are spongy but not hard as you test them with the tines of your fork. Then: stop. Any longer in the microwave and the dough seizes up, and the glaze will coagulate. I know this.

Supervisor's teeth are only clean on the front. He uses those grocery-store whitening strips instead of going to the dentist. I want to tell him about his yellow side-teeth. Wanted to tell him today when he smiled and told me to remember—told me twice—that Annual Evaluations are upon us.

I was sitting on the floor next to the copier. I can't bear it when the copier spool gets dry because of too much usage. It's precarious, because you'd think you could just re-lubricate the plate glass with a wipe of oil, like greasing a cookie sheet. But you absolutely *cannot* put an abundance of copier oil on it, or it won't feed right. Just a film, a light au jus. Unfortunately, if you're out of copier oil and still have to bundle stapled and sorted sets of product logs for supervisors with white front teeth, you know that this will take your entire day: press the green button, get through (at best) one set, deal with the jam. Repeat repeat repeat. Empty Duplicator. Replace Last Two Originals In Document Feeder. Repeat repeat repeat. Close Document Feeder. Repeat. It kills you after about an hour. Finally, you just sit on the floor, dying over the fact that if you wait for the repairman to arrive and re-lubricate, your ass is over. Annual Evaluations are here.

Home again, though I can't seem to break off. The D-20 is for requisition and the B-20 is for back order and the Service Order is for the copy machine and the T-sheet is for time off and the PTO sheet is for paid time off and the P-sheet is for parts order and the O-sheet is for order in stock. I've seen this episode a thousand times. I know all the dialogue by heart. Helen called again, and her voice is... She hopes I'll call her back, hopes I'm still talking to the counselor woman at the VA. The box says that in seven and one-half minutes my sirloin steak will be perfect. Yet I know the mashed potatoes will be icy in the middle. It will take a precise balance of extra microwave and stirring to get them just warm enough to eat without completely ruining the steak. I realize about six minutes in that I am going to kill myself. At seven minutes, I determine that I will not die with the guilt of making anyone feel bad. I must start writing my notes.

The potatoes are not done. The extra minute ruins the sirloin.

Father—

I cannot begin to describe how sorry. My action is against everything you believe, and I know.... I think of your lifetime behind the desk, in the office. Honor and strength and poise—and you never once complained. I love and envy you. I am not strong. I am not obliged. I am not...

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Jesus Christ, the shows are on.

You must adore digital cable. The search options have revolutionized me and everybody. Technology marches, no matter. You can be groped inside the hot metal gut of a troop carrier, or you can see things die and see pieces of dead things. I promise you it will not affect the remote control. Though I forgot to write down the name of the pop singer, with digital cable I can see into the future, and I will find her. This is amazing. She will come back.

Supervisor *yelled* at me today. So close I could smell his cologne. He barked that I wasn't "into it" the way I needed to be. Sandalwood. In consequence, I couldn't finish my first note, to my father. What if everyone counted on someone else to locate the clerical errors?, he demanded. What if everyone produced reports whose pages crinkled because of a stupid copy jam? What if the whole damn order of things broke down?

Before he escorted me into his office, I was thinking about the salty taste of frayed baseball glove. After the Little League coach lets you on the team

but still won't play you—save once, two innings in right field—things get quiet. In the corner of the dugout, wrapped in chain-link, your cleats sucking into mud and mangled seed husks, sometimes you chew on the leather strips that welt your glove. Dad realized things real early, and he showed me how to field with two hands, how to keep my elbow up when I was batting, and above all how to always run over and back up the throw on any given play. We knotted my hair under my ball cap. He said hustle was supreme, beyond even talent or background. I was going to revise my note to him from those principles of ambition, of compassion. I want him to know that I believed in them, that I learned.

Inside the supervisor's office is an L-shaped hardwood desk and a plastic *Ficus benjamina* in a dark wicker pot. He has no windows, but he does have three titanium-white walls and a white drop ceiling and fluorescent overheads and one glass wall that faces the general office. On the wall behind his desk is a diploma for Business Administration, alongside a membership certificate for Sigma Alpha Epsilon, and a Kiwanis Club award and a Young Entrepreneurs Intramural Softball group photo.

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As he screamed, I stared past him, to those certificates—at least, until he yelled the words “copy machine,” at which point I made the mistake of snapping focus. I then remembered my baseball glove and realized how fucked everything was. He says they're also going to check and see who's doing what online and deal with that, pronto. He left the mini blinds open, and the office could see everything. I thought of Helen, who, when she worked here, would have been waiting for me in the break area. I guess he saw my eyes start to water, because he eased his tone, said something about everybody's respecting my time in the service and all, etc. This prattle allowed me to again focus on the certificates. I have got to finish my notes immediately. I have got to finish my notes.

She called four times. She's coming into town this week and *really wants to see me* and says *I need to stop worrying*. Her box-dye auburn hair is dry to touch. Her eyelids sag and have tiny folds. I wonder if I should add her to my list of notes. Dad, Mom, Carla and Ray, and Helen. Maybe. What can I say? Can I say that she shouldn't worry about those road-to-nowhere veins on her legs? That I feel like I'm breathing under the ocean when she's around? I don't know. *Just call me back*, she says. The shows are on in seven

minutes, and I've got a broccoli and cheddar that must sit for 120 additional seconds before the cellophane can even be removed.

Mother—

How difficult for you. Chocolate milk on the yellow sofa? Sabotaged cotillion? But you taught me so much. I'm sorry I was. I am proud at least that you would be proud of my home. Perhaps you can...

Heart-red, quivering sun on white talc sand. Crimped emerald blade of fern. Chocolatey plowed earth. Ice sheet blinding, sunlit snow traversed by knotted tree shadow. Salty gray ocean smashes rocky shore in fall.

The phone on my desk rings. I pray it is Helen. I answer, and our West Coast rep screams that I was supposed to get a boxful of promos to Brendel's, then asks where the hell they are. I tell him that I sent them two-day; he yells at me and calls me a dumb asshole for not overnighting. I tell him that the Employee Handbook says No Overnight Packages Are To Be Sent unless either A) an error has been made by the supplier's (our) end of things, thus causing a delay in shipment, or B) the recipient provides his or her personal shipping account code for forward billing. He tells me that I should fuck the Employee Handbook, because as I very well know, Brendel's sells approximately twenty-nine percent of all of our merchandise to all of the United-fucking-States, and that if product sales and revenue and placement like that is not important enough for overnight promos, he'll suck my dick. We fall silent. Seconds later he says, Well, you get my point anyway, Evie, then tells me he's calling my supervisor and hangs up.

These phrases are no kind of note for Helen. I'd been looking at the nature photos on my screen saver, desperate to list something pure.

On the way into work, the gravelly sound beneath my car broke into roar. The front end shook, and the gas pedal mudded. I made it into the lot, hazards flashing, and told my supervisor I had to take my car to the dealership service shop immediately. (Only the dealership service shop requires annual certification of every mechanic.) He said that this was not a company problem and that I had to do it on my own time. I called him Sir and reminded him that the dealership service shop would not be open on my own time until Saturday, and that I was sure the car wouldn't make it that long. He told me that I should look for a ride from a co-worker. Or rent a car.

I had to sit down. I had to sit down as he took the last of the coffee from our station and then walked away, leaving the empty pot spitting on the machine. I could almost *feel* myself on the shoulder of the tar-stinking road, choking on the emissions of commuters, all of them able to get home and watch the shows. I can't stomach the hot smells of anyone else's car. I won't ride in someone else's baby-seated, taco-wrapped, cola-ringed, faded-upholstery, dust-caked vehicle. And my rent is due and my cable bill is due and my phone bill is due and my insurance is due and my water bill is due and my gas bill is due and my electricity bill is due and I have to get to my VA appointment and I have to buy some dinners, and there's just no way. No way I can let my goddamn car die before I'm through writing my notes.

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After a nap and a Swiffer and a brief hang-up on Helen's answering machine, I turned on the oven. I enjoy "rooster" sandwiches, though without the tomato or lettuce that they always slop on at restaurants. Breaded chicken patties on a white hamburger bun, with cheese, a seep of mayonnaise, mustard, and maybe ketchup, are mine. I realized as I sucked in the gas blast that I was missing the Season Finale. I ran to the television while the oven hissed. Hit myself in the stomach, then below. It was already six minutes into the half-hour program! I ran back to turn off the gas, waved my hands around to chase the excess. Hit myself again. Bun crumbs on the linoleum had to be wiped. I turned the oven back on, preheated, put the patties on a nonstick tray, and slid it in.

At the climax of the program, the phone rang. I couldn't answer. Helen told the machine she was coming into town and wants to talk about how she screwed up both our lives and wants to change that and to please take a deep breath, and did I ever think about her suggestion that I get a cat?, and . . . I realized that I would be dead before she gets here, and more directly that these were my final finales. I pressed Volume Up on the remote.

The middles of the patties were uncooked, and strings of chicken slag lodged in my teeth. I ended up throwing most of the rooster away, then waited for the commercials and rushed to the bathroom to vomit. As a child, I learned that you must flush the toilet to get low water before vomiting, to minimize backsplash.

Conversations swirl beyond my partition, but none of them cover the first six minutes of the finale. The clerk with the dirty khakis is kicking the door of

the copy machine. I have got to get a two-day package together for Brendel's before close of business. I have got to finish my notes. I have got to finish my notes.