CHRISTINE SNEED

FOR EXAMPLE*

. . . THE PHOTOCOPIER.

If called on to produce more than a dozen double-sided copies, it began to overheat, and on its worst days, Jeanie's efforts ended in the abduction of one pristine sheet after another into the machine's inscrutable bowels. There the paper was tightly accordioned, the copier's companionable hum abruptly truncated by the frantic beeping that signaled a jam.

So many gremlins and ghosts inhabited the office and its machinery, each a thief of time and efficiency. Two weeks into this job, she'd started thinking about quitting. Two years later, she still was shuffling onto the CTA every morning at 7:45 at the Harrison stop in her unfashionable neighborhood southwest of the Loop ("You live *there*?" one of the other admins had exclaimed, a look of pity and amusement on her face). She hated her job. Possibly more than she'd hated anything in her life, but she didn't have the guts to quit. It went without saying that she feared poverty, but she probably feared gossip more, craven and ridiculous as she knew it to be. So here she was, spending her days stress-eating candy and mainlining weak coffee under fluorescent lights.

Bender Corp's ailing copier was currently ingesting the double-sided earnings report Jeanie was attempting to coax out of it before the quarterly sales meeting that began in twelve minutes. Stefan, her boss, was only five years her senior, but due to his MBA ("And his male anatomy," the same admin had observed), he made at least four times what she did. She had a BS in sociology, something she tried never to say out loud. Most of the work she did could have been performed by a well-trained seven-year-old. The other two VPs in the office also breezily tossed work onto her desk whenever their own assistants called in sick or were pretending to be overwhelmed, their desks showily covered in stacks of files and three-ring binders and unopened bundles of padded envelopes going nowhere but back to the supply closet when the workday ended.

If she were more irresponsible and less concerned about being liked, she'd leave the groaning and bleating copier to devour itself one faulty cog at a time, its insides clogged with half-digested paper. She'd gather

her fraying messenger bag from the locked drawer where she stowed it each morning at eight-thirty, the key hidden in a magnetic rock clinging to the far corner of her desk's underside. If there weren't a meeting today, no one, she suspected, would notice she was gone, not for at least two or three hours, perhaps not at all.

She wondered how extreme her joy would be if she did leave the over-bright corridors of Bender Corp and subsequently fled the apartment she shared with her roommate Annalisa, whose real name was Barbara. How long before regret and fear ambushed her if she left behind, at long last, the sink full of Annalisa's dirty dishes, her roommate's pink wig, and the black platform flip-flops that shed glitter all over the apartment, the green silk dragon kimono Annalisa had supposedly purchased while high on shrooms during a lost weekend in New York City with a greasy talent agent who turned out to be a con artist, and the red silk thong she'd stolen from Jeanie. When the thong eventually turned up in a pile of Annalisa's unfolded laundry months after its disappearance, her roommate pretended not to know how it had gotten there. Jeanie told her to keep it. You wanted it so badly, you didn't even care that I'd already worn it—but Jeanie didn't bother to say that, because her roommate could only deflect, never accept, blame.

. . . HER EX-BOYFRIEND TREY.

Penny, Jeanie's closest friend, who had left her behind in Chicago when she moved to Seattle after graduation, had advised her never to fall for guys named Kyle, Dylan, or Trey. The name Trey in particular was a red flag because two of the biggest idiots in Penny's high school class went by Trey. It was also the name of the lead singer of Phish, a jam band from the nineties that Penny's pothead older brother loved. Improbably, Jeanie's father had seen them in concert twice, once on an early date with Jeanie's mother whose clearest memory of the night was contracting food poisoning from a falafel sandwich. This was when her parents were only a few years out of college themselves. Years later, when her mother donated all of Jeanie's father's Phish CDs to the Goodwill, she claimed it was an accident. Without a word of rebuke, he had promptly gone out and bought them all again.

Like Jeanie, Trey had stayed in Chicago after college. He haunted the Clark Street beer halls on days when the Cubs were playing at Wrigley Field, and almost as often when they weren't. Game days, the neighborhood atmosphere was low-rent Mardi Gras; Trey and hordes of other guys

grieving for their younger selves would drink themselves into belligerent incoherence in the moldering, smelly bars that clung like barnacles to both sides of the street.

The night after the quarterly sales meeting, Jeanie's phone rang at three a.m., yanking her out of a dream in which she was watching cats eat spaghetti, her heart manic. A month earlier he'd ambushed her in the same way, she picking up the call then as now, too bleary to realize what she was doing, a furious aural river of Trey's drunken invective abruptly hurled into her ear: her perceived failings and pretensions, her two-timing and lying and general misanthropy, her stinginess and absentmindedness and wandering eye—his own crimes recast in his beer-soaked mind as her transgressions.

Never again, she told herself, blocking his number after this second harangue, her neurons firing disastrously, sleep now remote as the moon.

Washing up on her office's hostile shores several hours later, she felt as if she were the one with the blinding hangover.

Stefan smiled at her knowingly. "A horse walked into a bar," he said by way of greeting. "The bartender asked, 'Why the long face?'"

She tried to smile. "Never heard that one before."

"Really?" he said, flabbergasted.

"I wasn't serious, Stefan," she said, straining not to sound sarcastic.

Her eyes felt like someone had thrown sand in them. She'd overcompensated with the blush and lipstick and forgotten to put on deodorant. Despite the hours of sleep Trey's call had robbed her of, the mirror had reported that she looked pretty and perhaps a little woebegone with the imperfectly covered dark circles under her eyes. She'd already started sweating before she entered the office, the mid-July morning air a dense curtain of humidity she had to shove her body through, as if she were trying to run in a swimming pool.

Stefan, however, looked well rested and smelled delicious. His expensive, citrusy cologne was formulated in small batches at an apothecary on the north side of the city, something she'd heard him bragging about to another VP by the Keurig. ("Ninety dollars for half an ounce," he'd said. "Not bad, right?") His shoes and clothes were also expensive, his black hair thick and artfully ruffled. On some days when his internal energy illuminated his handsome face in an especially theatrical way, she sensed the ghostly presence of all the women who'd gone down on him. He had the same look she'd noticed on the faces of certain famous

men, a look that meant too many blowjobs had been bestowed on them with little to no effort expended on seduction. It went without saying that such men rarely returned the favor.

. . . CAR ALARMS.

Annalisa called them earhammers—a cross between an earworm and a jackhammer. Her own neologism, and she was proud of it. She worked as a creative at an advertising firm on Wacker Drive and admittedly had her moments, but Jeanie had trouble admiring a liar and a petty thief, even when admiration might be warranted.

Their neighborhood was often besieged by earhammers, the summer months particularly bad. Other more dangerous nuisances were also a feature of this time of year: feral boys roamed the streets well past midnight, a fact she didn't share with her mother. She carried pepper spray and a whistle, and Annalisa had tried to convince her to keep a pair of brass knuckles in her bag too, but Jeanie had no clear idea how to use them. It would have been hard enough to get them out of her purse while someone was mugging her, let alone break a mugger's nose with them.

According to the Citizen app, which Jeanie tried not to look at every ten minutes when she was at work, car theft was rampant in their neighborhood, with purse-snatching not far behind. She and Annalisa lived on Loomis, a tree-lined street of sturdy old brick apartment buildings, some with bullet-sized gouges in their facades, souvenirs, it was rumored, from Al Capone's minions.

Jeanie's blue Corolla had now survived two winters parked on Loomis, a constellation of newer dents having joined the older ones from its life on the streets several miles south, when she was a student at the University of Chicago. She'd bought the car used the summer before junior year, and her father had given her a Club for it, a black and red metal bar she locked across the steering wheel when she remembered to, which was about 70 percent of the time. Trey had found the device hilarious, calling it ghetto, which embarrassed and infuriated her for reasons she couldn't clearly articulate. If he hadn't been so hot in the sack, she would have dumped him before he had the chance to humiliate her by initiating a drunken threesome with two other Clark Street barflies while Jeanie was in Indianapolis attending her grandmother's seventy-fifth birthday party.

. . . ANNALISA'S MOTHER.

"Is Barbara with you?" asked Mrs. Phillips, suspicion sharpening her otherwise pleasant voice. Barbara/Annalisa's mother never bothered with hello when she called to enlist Jeanie in policing Annalisa's whereabouts.

If Jeanie didn't pick up, Mrs. Phillips kept calling until she did. As often as not, Annalisa was with her, but she'd furiously shake her head and widen her eyes in a pantomime of panicked outrage.

"Hi Mrs. Phillips. No, she's not," Jeanie dutifully lied.

"Do you know where she is? I haven't heard from her in a week."

Most of the time, Jeanie knew it had been no more than two or three days. "I don't," she said. "But I'll let her know you called when I see her."

Mrs. Phillips faltered, doubtless sensing the lie. "Right," she said and hung up.

After Jeanie put her phone down, Annalisa invariably cried, her face flushed, "How many times do I have to tell you to block her number? She's a succubus."

"If something happens to you and I actually do need to call her—"

"Nothing's going to happen to me. Just block her!"

Penny thought Jeanie was a classic self-sabotager—answering calls she knew well enough to ignore, living with someone she disliked, working at a job she also disliked, in a city where she didn't want to live.

"I didn't have the money to move with you to Seattle," said Jeanie. "You know that."

"You could have sold your car," said Penny.

"I worked very hard to get it. I'm not giving it up."

"But you could, if you really did want to move here."

"Or you could move back to Chicago," said Jeanie.

Penny laughed. "Not going to happen. I love you, Jeans, but can't do it."

. . . WRENS.

In the spring and summer before first light, a strident chirping cranked up outside her window and kept on for hours. Wrens, Jeanie's mother, who had a birdsong app, informed her.

Wrens! How were these birds, which likely weighed no more than two or three ounces, capable of making such a relentless, unholy racket for so many hours?

Waking to their obscene pre-dawn chirping, Jeanie felt her own

featherweight significance. These birds, however, had no sense at all, not even an inkling, of their own small role in the neighborhood, in the city, in the world at large. No doubt they didn't care one whit either about how big or small their nest was, how shiny or dusty or mangy their feathers, how long and hard their beaks. All they probably cared about was tricking out a local tree with their raggedy little nest, plucking a few bugs out of the air from time to time, and laying a couple of eggs before it was light's out for good.

How the hell do they keep at it, she wondered, lying sweaty and sleepless as the clock crept from five to six to six forty-five when she heard Annalisa stirring in the next room, after her alarm had blared the first few strains of Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch's "Good Vibrations." Like Jeanie's father, her roommate was smitten with an old, goofy band, this one having shot Mark Wahlberg out of a cannon, he and his smirk somehow ending up in the Hollywood firmament.

Jeanie's own alarm went off a few minutes later with another song older than she was, Dave Matthews' "Lover Lay Down"; she'd first heard it freshman year after being deflowered by a sexy French guy, a junior named Antoine. Afterward, everything felt boundless and possible and heightened. She and Antoine had four weekend sex marathons in his poorly lit but clean apartment on Hyde Park Boulevard; then the school year ended, and he flew home to Villefranche-sur-Mer where his longtime girlfriend awaited his return—a fact he didn't mention to Jeanie until the day of his departure.

Her mother scoffed when Jeanie said that she already felt like an old woman. "You're twenty-four," her mother snapped. "Get out and do some volunteer work. Think about someone other than yourself for a change."

Her mother was a middle child in a brood of eight, eminently tight-lipped and stingy with hugs and encouragement. She had never had patience for Jeanie's unhappiness or for lengthy discussions about feelings. Her father was more open to discussing her feelings and his own, but often it was hard to tell when he was being serious. The last time she was home for a visit, he'd told her he'd made peace with the fact he'd never be a rock star.

"You still have time," he also said. "But for your mom and me, that yacht has sailed."

"Maybe it hasn't," she said, playing along. "Look at Mick Jagger. How old is he now, eighty?"

"He became a rock star when he was twenty. It doesn't happen if you're over thirty."

Her laugh was so loud it startled them both. "You actually think you could have been a rock star?" she said.

He gave her an odd look, half bemused, half wounded. "Why not me?"

OUTSIDE HER WINDOW, the leaves of the maple tree where the wrens lived were drooping from two weeks of temperatures above 90 degrees. The planet was turning into soup, but the birds probably weren't discussing that. *Worms! Beetles! More! Hey! Mosquitos! Gnats! We're coming! For you!* These were the birds' main broadcasts, she imagined, endlessly looping.

In the hallway, she could hear Annalisa trudge into the bathroom and turn on the shower. When she went in for her own shower twenty minutes later, she knew she'd find her roommate's damp towel on the floor and globs of her electric blue toothpaste in the sink. "Proof of life," Annalisa liked to quip. "Sorry, Jeanie. You know I'm a space cadet!"

Sometimes the mess saddened Jeanie more than it annoyed her, her eyes landing on the toothpaste splatters and make-up smudges on the mirror, the glitter from Annalisa's flip-flops in the grout, their commingled hair in the drain. Here we are. It's true. What now.

. . . THE MILLIONS of miles of asphalt cooking the earth, her crush on her boss who she knew would use and discard her if they ever ended up in bed, her upstairs neighbor who had passed out in the stairwell after the Super Bowl (two years in a row, pale beach-ball belly on full display), the sirens wailing past throughout the night, her inability to remember her parents' or Penny's or Annalisa's number after she dropped her phone in a puddle and could not resuscitate it, her loneliness that at times was so paralyzing it felt as if she were trapped in a bathtub full of ice, her self-pity and lack of courage, her mother's eternal look of disapproval, which Annalisa thought was simply her face (possibly the nicest thing she'd ever said to Jeanie), her inability to be someone other than who she was, to know what to do next, to know why she was alive.

*On days when you are particularly overcome by feelings of futility, what, for example, do you believe to be the source(s) of your unhappiness?