

2011

In Morning Light

Jessica Leon

CUNY City College of New York

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: http://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc_etds_theses

 Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Leon, Jessica, "In Morning Light" (2011). *CUNY Academic Works*.
http://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc_etds_theses/498

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the City College of New York at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.

In Morning Light

By Jessica Leon

12/07/11

Thesis Advisor: Mark Mirsky

I

The Interview

“Life belongs to the living, and he who lives must be prepared for changes.”

–Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Entering the sales office of Global Enterprise Central, located on the twenty-first floor of a tall building in lower Manhattan, Joyce was shocked by what she saw. There were long, wooden tables where clusters of people, most of whom appeared to be in their twenties, wearing headphones that connected to mouthpieces into which they shouted:

“Steve, do you want value? A direct return on investment? The chance to have your company featured in one of the industry’s leading publications, and dare I say—the one with the best repute? I’ve already spoken with your VP of Marketing, and he’s on board, so all I need for you to do is pull the trigger, and we’ll put your ad on the back cover of our October issue.”

“Bill, you told me that the content was a good fit, right? You said the cover story speaks to the services that your company provides, am I correct? So tell me then, is it just cost that’s holding you back? Because we have discretionary funds for smaller, more niche companies that would allow me to

bring you on board on a one-time basis, and once you see what we can do, you'll be calling *me* up next time."

Some people were huddled under their desks, trying to escape their neighbor's cries; others pitched proudly, hands on hips, jauntily striding throughout the office with fancy wireless headsets that they'd purchased themselves, whereas the new salesmen, the freshmen, looked flustered, out of breath. The voices seemed to blend together, to form one, a cacophonous harmony: united, triumphant.

At 23-years-old, Joyce's only professional experience had been working as a middle school teacher in Brooklyn, and as such, she was unaccustomed to office life, much less a sales office. There had been moments over the past few years when she'd romanticized working in Manhattan, and what it might be like to have a job that would allow her to interact with people her own age. When she imagined it, she saw herself wearing high heels and carrying a brief case. She saw an office with plush blue carpeting and fancy coffee machines, where the supply closets were filled with thick steel ballpoint pens of heavy weight that glided effortlessly across the page and came in a special pouch. When she sat in her crummy classroom that she'd shared with three other teachers, she scraped the peeling paint off the wall with her fingernails, leaving dusty white blotches behind, and looked at her cup of cheap number two pencils with disdain.

Now, she stood in the midst of chaos, listening to the hollers of GEC's staff. "I just closed a deal!" a young man with greasy skin and the jowly face of a bloodhound, exclaimed. Five men in suits gathered to exchange high-fives, their voices roaring.

"Put it on the board, Matt," shouted a short redhead wearing a miniature tie and clunky shoes.

Matt strode over to a whiteboard that took up the expanse of the east wall and added his sale to the week's total. In a shaky print, it read: \$120,000. The office had set a goal of \$150,000 that week. If reached, everyone would be let out early to head over to The White Horse Tavern for a night on the company.

Joyce watched Matt walk towards a large metal gong that looked like a prop out of an Asian game show. With a victorious "Hell Yes!" he swung at it with a wooden mallet, causing the office to let out one collective cheer.

"Office ritual," said a voice from behind.

"Interesting," Joyce replied, turning to face Owen, whose slick blond hair brushed the collar of his crisp navy suit. She thought he look like a soap actor whose name would sound made up and pretentious, like Chester Herringbone, or Winston Sheffield.

"Diamonté, the secretary, told me you were here. Ready for our interview?" he asked in a thick English accent.

"I think so."

The cheers subsided, and the office resumed its steady buzz of pitching. Joyce looked around at the individual faces of the employees. All of the women were striking. One in particular had long waves of black hair, olive skin, and a straight nose. The men, while well dressed and groomed, were less attractive, but they moved confidently, hands in their pockets, laughing at lackluster attempts at humor on the other end of the line.

Earlier that week, Joyce had called in response to a posting she spotted on a job search website, and after a quick discussion with Owen, in which he learned that she was a teacher looking for a change of pace, he told her to come in, bring her résumé if she had one, and abruptly hung up. Enthusiastic that she could line up an interview so easily, she treated herself to a cappuccino and a manicure, then called her mother and told her the news. Her mother, who had loved telling people that her daughter was a teacher, shouted in a voice that sounded like water escaping from a rusty pipe, “Sales! This is what you got a master’s degree for, to work in sales?”

“The world of sales is quite different from that of teaching,” Owen now said, folding his hands behind his back. “Let’s go to my office to talk further.” He motioned towards a small room at the far end of a hallway. Once they were inside, he closed it and told her to take a seat.

It was the middle of August, and despite the air conditioning, Joyce was sweating heavily. She was relieved that the pants suit she wore was chocolate

colored and concealed any dampness well. She had bought it from the junior's section at the department store near her house the previous day. It was pin-striped with a teasing neckline and short sleeves that were puffed and upright like those on a prom dress. She thought it made her skinny arms look awkward and cartoonish.

“Our company owns over forty publications,” said Owen. He began to rattle off a series of statements: “We’re headquartered in the U.K., where many of the managers are from, as you may have already noticed. Every month we host handfuls of international summits in places like Morocco, Cancún, and the Bahamas; we may place you on one of the summit teams, rather than one of the publications, depending on your skill. The summits are where you can make serious money. A company package sells for an easy hundred thousand, so you can imagine the potential for commission.”

He paused to make sure that Joyce understood, and then resumed. “Last year, we had a jump in profit from eight hundred thousand to almost one and a half million. Our New York staff nearly doubled, from forty-six to eighty, not including the managers and higher-ups. And we’re still growing. Soon, we’ll be taking over the office on the floor above. And if we continue to expand at this rate, even that might not be enough space.”

She nodded, impressed. “The staff regularly brings in accounts with contracts ranging from twenty to fifty thousand,” said Owen, “and whether you

make seventy-five thousand your first year here, or one hundred and fifty, well, that's entirely up to you – your work ethic and drive.”

“But the base pay is thirty-five, correct?”

“Well yes, but that's before commission, and we also offer comprehensive benefits, two weeks paid vacation during the holiday season, and the opportunity to win our Christmas Run prize packages, which include paid vacations and flat screen televisions.” Owen's voice maintained a consistent volume, inflection, and tone; he wasn't pushy, but he certainly spoke assertively. He made it sound as if one would have to be a fool to turn down a job at GEC.

“It all sounds great,” Joyce said. “I've been looking forward to being part of a real office, to having a real job – not that teaching isn't a real job, of course. It's just that –” Joyce stammered. “I mean, I was stuck with a lancet, one of those small needles for diabetics, my first year teaching – on purpose. What I guess I'm saying is that I am ready for the office life, and I love the energy here. Everyone is so passionate and excited on the phone.”

“Oh, they are. We're selling a great product. Our most successful publication, *Future Pharma*, is one of the leading b2b magazines in the pharmaceutical industry. We had Ted Wimblebee, the Head of North American Operations for Chase-Cooper, on our last cover. We only work with the best, and that being said, we only hire the best.”

He crossed his legs, folding his hands on his thighs. His thick silver watch sparkled on his wrist, which stuck out a bit from his shirt sleeves. It was covered with hair the color of sand that Joyce wanted to touch with her fingers.

“You know—” Owen started, “I began working for GEC not too long after Spencer Moon, the CEO, founded the company. At the time, I had recently quit playing professional soccer because of an injury.” Owen stopped and considered.

She imagined him in white polyester shorts, his hair held back by a sweatband while he shouted on the field, bobbing and weaving through other players effortlessly.

“Anyway, Nigel took me on board and showed me the ropes. I made the most in sales that year, won the top Christmas prize package, and was able to put down some money on a condo. I’ve been addicted ever since.”

Joyce wondered how successful he’d been as a soccer player. She would go home and try to find pictures of him online. “Being out on the floor, selling,” he continued, “it gives you such a rush. There’s nothing like it.”

“Do you still work as a salesman?” Joyce asked.

“Last year, I got promoted. The company was expanding too quickly and Nigel needed someone to hire and train new people, so here I am. I suppose he chose me, not just for my success with bringing in accounts, but also because we’re friends. I was in a bit of a rut after my knee injury, and Nigel instantly became a mentor. He took me in and let me sleep on his couch my first month

out of the game. We're a real family here. We go out for happy hour every Friday afternoon and plan group outings for the staff every few weeks. Perhaps we'll start a GEC baseball league," he said amusingly. "Plus, everyone who works here is relatively young, which you probably have already noticed."

"Yes," Joyce responded.

"We're looking for energetic, educated individuals just like you. We want to put together a team that can grow as we grow. So what do you think, Joyce? Could you see yourself working here, becoming a part of our family?"

"Yes, I definitely think I could build a future with this company," she asserted.

"Okay," said Owen, as he studied Joyce. "I tell you what. I'm going to give you this. He reached over the desk and handed her his card that, in simple black font read:

*Owen Lawson, Director of Training & Development
Phone Pharma, Inc.
111 Whitehall Street
New York, NY 10005
(212) 862-4123*

"What you're going to do is go home and think about my offer. *Really* ask yourself if this is the place for you. Consider if a life in sales is the best decision."

Joyce agreed, though she was unsure as to why she had to wait to confirm that she wanted the job. “Call me on Monday,” he said, “only after you give it some serious thought.”

“Thank you so much, Mr. Lawson,” she gushed. “I’ll call you first think on Monday morning.” She stood to leave.

“Do think about it,” he said one last time, before escorting her out.

Walking down Whitehall Street, she felt liberated. GEC was an out from teaching. She’d no longer have to deal with bratty thirteen-year-old girls, or grubby, snot-nosed boys who handed her slips of paper with their phone numbers. She settled on a bench to take a sip of water from a bottle and wiped her brow. She took out her phone, along with Owen’s card, and dialed.

“Mr. Lawson? Yes, hi, it’s Joyce – we just had an interview. Oh, I’m doing fine. How are you? Very good. Listen, I just wanted to tell you that I really enjoyed our meeting, hearing the details of the job, and just how much everyone feels as if they’re part of a family, and well, I see no point in waiting till Monday. I know what I want, and that’s to formally accept the position now.”

Was that a sigh on the other end of the line? She must have just heard static, she thought. Owen told her that his secretary would reach out with an official start date, and then he hung up, abruptly.

Nearby, construction workers began drilling into the cement street. Clouds of dust and dirt filled the air, turning everything a bleak shade of gray. As

Joyce started to walk towards the subway station, she caught a whiff of something so pungent, it seemed as if she could taste it in her mouth. “What on earth?” she said aloud. She went over to grab a lamppost and steady herself as she turned her calf sideways to check the bottom of her shoe, and with a quick glance, saw that she had stepped in shit.

II

Training Week

A group of seven trainees were lingering in the seating area near the entrance, making small talk, when Joyce walked in. The men, who looked like boys, wore loose polyester suits, their hair parted to the side or fluffed and ruffled like a poodle with a perm. Brian, a tall, gawky blonde with blue eyes, wore short brown trousers that fell above his ankle, a green blazer, and a shiny plaid tie. He looked like he was from the Midwest, or some other part of the U.S. where Joyce imagined cows roamed the streets and cornfields abounded. He stood slightly hunched, as if he was trying to shrink down to fit into a box so that he might ship himself back home. He offered Joyce a shy smile, which she returned, and then continued conversing about his subway ride that morning, for three of the other trainees had also just arrived in New York and still were adjusting to pushy crowds and the pleading homeless who stalked the hot platforms.

The trainees laughed, tilting their heads back in one fell swoop, letting out a cohesive sigh. Looking on, Joyce found the chuckle cheap, a mere formality, which she abhorred. Born and raised in Brooklyn, she knew the subways like she knew every inch of the twenty-three story apartment building where she grew up.

Back when she was in college she commuted to Manhattan, waking at 5:45 every morning to apply makeup, eat a boiled egg mashed with butter and salt, and take the Q train to Atlantic Avenue, where she'd transfer to the 4 or 5 trains at Union Square. Now, she lived on her own, a few miles away from her family in a one-bedroom apartment in Bay Ridge. Her apartment, not yet fully furnished, was sparse, with a few trinkets and chipped walls that were painted a soft purple.

Standing before the rows of tables and shouting salesmen, the office looked smaller than she remembered—crammed even. A tan Asian with a mustache desperately shouted, “Of course Mr. Livermore knows I’m phoning him this morning! He should be expecting my call. No, this certainly is *not* about advertising. Vivianna, my assistant, fit him into my schedule!”

There were no personal assistants; instead, one secretary served the entire office. Diamonté was a finger-waving pit bull from Queens who snapped at the trainees when they asked for a stapler, and responded to the requests of upper-management with a coquettish, “Of course, honey, I’m here to serve you in any way I can.”

When Joyce approached her desk, opening up with, “Good morning, I was just wondering—,” Diamonté interrupted, declaring flatly, “You wait over there with the other newbies.” She pointed her finger towards Claire, a brunette from Connecticut with fair skin and small lips that formed a straight line across her face.

“Okay—yes, that makes sense. I’m a trainee, and clearly, there are the rest of the trainees, so I should be over there with them,” Joyce said, looking over at a group with which she did not want to be lumped in. The women looked like floating bait, and the men, with the exception of Brian, came off as cockier than their looks merited, with jaunty stances and puffed chests.

“I apprenticed my uncle, who founded a company that sells medical devices,” boasted a redhead in a gray suit and boxy loafers. “If you have any questions as the week goes on, be sure to ask me.”

Joyce was certain that she was better than this group of misfits; first, because she was smarter, and second, because she’d already had a real job, teaching for three years. She scoffed, flashing Diamonté a look signaling the group’s inferiority, but rather than welcoming what was essentially a call for an allegiance, Diamonté raised one eyebrow and said, “Owen will be out when he’s ready for your group.”

Joyce nodded and made her way to an empty chair. The first day of school was only a few days away, and she wouldn’t be there. It’d be the first September that wouldn’t start with a trip to the mall to stock up on number two pencils and five-subject notebooks. There wouldn’t be the comfort of happy face stickers and the feel of old books that Joyce loved. She wouldn’t have to console the smallest sixth grader who showed up to school on the verge of tears, offering him a box of apple juice and a squeeze on the shoulder. There’d be no

camaraderie between her and the other teachers, no recaps of summer vacation in the cafeteria. Instead of decorating her classroom with welcome signs and library charts, she'd merely fill a cup with pens and put on a headset that would keep her chained to her desk until exactly five o'clock, when she'd run home and cook spaghetti.

She was now a trainee, and as much as she didn't want to be part of this oddball crew, as much as she resisted, knowing she was a loner, used to being in charge, comfortable working with children and not adults, she knew that she'd made a choice because she felt that she'd had no other. There was no way to know if her decision to leave teaching and join GEC would pan out, or if it was all one big mistake, as her mother had tried to tell her. She closed her eyes and imagined ringing the gong, making her first huge sale, and for a moment, she didn't hear the shouts of the office, or the nervous chatter of the other trainees, but instead, only the resounding cry of what she'd like to think was her future—one filled with the sounds of congratulatory cries and toasts to her success.

* * *

“Not all of you will make it through training week,” Owen declared brusquely. “But if you pay attention to what I'm going to teach you over the next few days, you've got a good chance in making the cut. Your being here means that I saw potential, but now's the time to impress not only me, but the managers as well.” He signaled to the main floor of the office from inside the small

conference room where Joyce and the other trainees were gathered around an oval table. A whiteboard in front of the room read *How to be a Salesman*.

Joyce wondered what she would do if she didn't make the cut, as she was certain that Owen's earlier offer promised her the job, not another round of interviews. Could she have misunderstood him? She'd spent the past few days imagining her life working in what she considered to be a real office. She'd finally be able to make friends her own age, instead of having lunch with the math teachers who were fifteen years her senior. She'd be able to leave her old life behind, or at least that was what she thought prior to hearing that there was still a possibility that the job wasn't hers.

Waiting for them when they arrived were blue folders, the covers of which had a picture of Nigel Moon, the founder of the company, with a wide grin. "We'll be covering what would take most people years to learn in just one week. This will be, essentially, a crash course in sales. I'll teach you everything you need to know about pitching, studying your product, and how to make the most money possible at this company, and believe me, there are plenty of opportunities for that.

Joyce enjoyed being the student. She eyed the box of glazed donuts in the middle of the table. Brian was hovered over them, blocking everyone's access.

Look at this suit, mates,” Owen went on, rubbing the cuffs of his jacket between his fingers. “This is a four thousand dollar Italian suit, and I have eight of them.” The men in the group eyed each other.

“Let’s begin with the number one lesson of sales—understanding the hierarchy of a company. Simply put, who are you going to need to get on the phone in order to close a deal? Because if you present yourself the wrong way, you’ll be put through to assistants of assistants of sales, or some other inconsequential persons who will *never*, and I repeat, *never* be in a position to sign a contract. Tell me mates, why is that?” He paused to look around for an answer. The redhead raised a pointed finger.

“Yes, Chad.”

“Because that person won’t have the authority,” Chad answered smugly.

“Wrong, he won’t have the budget. It’s not so much about power as it is money. That’s our only concern. Write this down: the person who holds the purse strings is the Cheese. The Cheese, and only the Cheese, has the ability to sign a check. Most often this is the CEO, but in larger companies, VPs of Marketing have their own budgets. The general rule is the larger the company, the lower down you can go on the chain to find someone to pitch. Now open your folders and look at the yellow sheet entitled *Pyramid of Power*. No one here is going to get the CEO of Coca-Cola on the phone. Understand?”

The group nodded.

Owen continued: “Very rarely will you have only one person to pitch. People are social by nature, as well as indecisive. They will always seek out the opinion of at least one other person before committing to an investment. The person whom they’ll go to is called the Kicker. You’ll want to pitch him as well. And why’s that?”

Chad’s hand shot up in the air. Brian tilted his weight on the back legs of his chair, forcing it to tip and nearly fall.

“Joyce, why do we have to pitch the Kicker?”

Joyce tried to think. She was used to calling on students, not being put in the hot seat herself. “Because—” she said, drawing out the word, “if the Kicker is involved in deciding if the company will spend money, he or she has to be knowledgeable about our product so that an informed decision is made.”

“Yes,” Owen responded quickly, “but even more so, the Kicker has to be convinced because he’s going to hear our price and automatically say no, case closed. He doesn’t understand what makes GEC’s reputation pristine. As the best, it’s our job, no *your* job, to tell him. All parties in the decision making process, or DMP, have to be pitched. No deal will go through if one player is missing from the huddle. No exceptions.”

“But what if the Kicker is out sick or on vacation?” asked Ben, a short brunette with the deep voice of a radio deejay.

“Then you’ll phone him on his cell.”

“How will I get his number?”

“Because lesson number two of sales is blagging, or, the art of retrieving personal information via lying.”

Brian’s chair landed with a loud thud.

“Without direct lines and cell numbers, you’ll never be able to reach the Cheese. The schedule of any CEO is hectic; he’ll be in and out of meetings and stuck on phone conferences. You’ll never so much as hear his voice if you don’t call his personal number.” He turned to face the group, his hips jutting forward; he was becoming more animated, enthused, as if he had just discovered a cure. He spoke as if this was all obvious information, anyone would have guessed that getting a cell phone number was necessary in order to close a deal. “You can phone his secretary under an alias, or conjure up a reason as to why it is absolutely imperative that you have his cell number. Then, wait a few days before ringing him to ensure the secretary forgets.”

Joyce considered the idea of fabricating a story for the purpose of retrieving a person’s private information with the end goal being to make money. Owen’s enthusiastic description made it seem like a game, one that Joyce thought she could win.

“Here’s an example. Ring-ring-ring.” Owen positioned an imaginary phone to his ear. “Good morning,” he said in an overly friendly voice, and then nudged Claire on her shoulder.

“Good morning,” she replied.

“I was hoping that you might be able to help me. My name is Elias Wit, Head of Research at Pennsbrook. I’m over in Belgium at the PECO conference, waiting for a meeting with John, but I fear that I might be in the wrong location. I want to give him a quick ring, darling. What’s his cell number?”

Claire hesitated, then said, “I – I can get that information right now for you.”

“The secret,” Owen said, changing his voice from charming, even seductive, to authoritative, “is to go in with confidence. Go in with the mindset that you’re not a salesman from Queens, but a colleague of the Cheese. You have every right to his cell number. You two are on the same level; maybe you’re even a little better. He went to Yale; you went to Harvard. He owns a house in Connecticut; you own a house in the Hamptons. His kids whine at night that daddy’s always at work; your kids cry just as much.”

Joyce nodded emphatically as Owen spoke. She liked the idea of reimagining her identity; that’s exactly what she was doing by quitting teaching—believing that she could be someone else.

“That brings us to the last, and one might argue most important, sales lesson, which is how to get past the gatekeeper.” Owen returned to pacing the room, his body upright, his chest inflated. “Who is the gatekeeper?” he asked. “Anyone?” He walked around the desk, looking at the scribbles on his students’

papers. “The first person you will speak with is the Cheese’s secretary. Before blagging, go in blind. You phone the number listed on the website and ask for him directly and authoritatively. Ring—Ring,” he said, signaling his imaginary phone. “Joyce, pick up.”

“Hello, how can I help you?”

“Morning. Put me through to John.”

“Who’s calling?”

“Elias Wit from Pennsbrook. Is he in?”

“Yes, I’ll put you through right away, sir.”

“Now—” Owen said thoughtfully. As Owen spoke, he kept one hand in his pocket, while the other sporadically clicked the top of a silver pen that he held in the air like a maestro. “If she asks what the call is regarding, what do you say?”

“A business opportunity,” Chad shouted.

“No.”

“A private matter,” Ben offered.

“Wrong. You either say that he should be expecting your call, or you go in with a story that can’t be proved untrue. Pull a name off one of their press releases. For example, Harold Smith from Pennsbrook and I are working together. I believe John’s been in communication with him. Can you put me through? Always end with a question. This keeps you in control of the

conversation. You ask the questions, not her. If you let the secretary get the upper-hand, you'll sink. Then, your only option will be to blag. This is route number one. Get past the secretary without letting her know that this is a sales call, without giving her any identifying information whatsoever. Exaggerate. Charm. Flirt. Do whatever you need to do to get the Cheese on the phone. You define your own boundaries, should you choose to have any." Joyce drew a line down the middle of her paper, cutting the phrase "Pyramid of Power" in two.

Owen went on. "What do you do if she says that the Cheese isn't in? Would you like to leave a message, mates?"

"Tell her you'll phone back," Brian answered.

"That's reasonable, but we're businessmen, we're not reasonable. We have an amazing product to sell, and we have no time to wait till tomorrow. Our publications are flying off the shelves, so if Cheese number one doesn't want to purchase advertising from us, Cheese number two will. In fact, Cheese number two might be ringing *us* on the other line. We tell her it's urgent. This is a matter of money, and what could be more urgent than that? We ask for his cell number. Always ask for his cell phone number. If you can't get the Cheese on the phone, you can't pitch, and that's what you'll be getting paid to do, should you make the cut. Do whatever it takes to complete the pitch. If you come away with nothing else, come away with that."

* * *

Three days later, Joyce and the rest of the trainees strutted into the offices of Phone Pharma, figuring they were now part of the team. They had befriended much of the staff while in the break room, riding the elevator, and entering the lobby. They had familiarized themselves with the neighborhood, discerning which coffee shop offered the best lattes, as well as put themselves on a first name basis with Juan, the young security guard downstairs.

Cockily, they greeted Diamonté as a group. “It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?” teased Chad, as they made their way towards Owen’s office.

“Tomorrow will be better,” Diamonté said. “At least for some of you.”

Joyce thought about not being offered a job at the end of training week. It seemed impossible. She had already become obsessed with the notion of working at Phone Pharma – pitching, selling, and most importantly, ringing the gong. She heard the gong when she showered in the morning, reciting the pitch with newscaster precision in the same manner she used to read the back of the shampoo bottle as a little girl: *Rinse. Repeat. Caution! Avoid contact with eyes.*

She heard the gong as she slurped yogurt while riding the train in the morning, staring at the suited men and women as they marched in and out, catching their glimpses, and then looking away, embarrassed. Her life quickly became a matter of reciting the pitch and not reciting the pitch, practicing her intonation and not practicing her intonation. As the week passed, her determination to get the job grew. She read the pitch in various voices, trying out

different inflections, and mimicking the personalities of her favorite celebrities as she did so.

First, Joyce tried Barbara Walters. She softened her voice, stiffened her jaw, and said the opening lines with slow precision: “Hi John. This is Joyce Little. How are you? Great. Listen, I’m working with Elias Wit, who heads up the R&D Department at Pennsbrook, and he suggested that I give you a call. Is now an okay time to talk? Perfect.”

She sped up, imagining how Oprah might pitch – serious, yet a little over the top. She saw a packed audience sitting before her, waiting to cheer. “I’m the VP of Research here at *Phone Pharma*, a publication that goes out to 36,000 C-level executives worldwide, including Heads of Drug Discovery, Proteomics, and Directors of Analytical Chemistry and Lab Automation. We’re looking to focus on the need for increasing efficiency within the discovery and verification of biomarkers for the feature article of our upcoming September issue, and we’d like to highlight BioCorp as a leading solution-provider. Would you say that’s pretty much spot on with what your company specializes in, John?”

She tried moving as she spoke, gesticulating her arms widely, flailing them like a broken windmill. Though she wore loose pajamas festooned with tiny green elephants, she imagined herself coiffed and sleek in a brightly colored dress. She was Rachael Ray: friendly and approachable. Each line she rehearsed had the goading effect of a cheerleader performing in a stadium. Her already

high-pitched voice shrieked. “What I’d like to offer you, John, is a full-page, full-color advert positioned in the front of the magazine, directly across from our lead feature article.”

Joyce had been used to having to cultivate a personality from the time she spent working as a teacher. “You’re twenty-years-old,” her mentor, Virginia, told her, “and you look sixteen.” She spoke as if this was a choice Joyce made, to stop the aging process. “Imagine yourself older, wiser, and more adult. Never tell the students how old you are, or that it’s your first year teaching. They’ll eat you alive. Pretend that you’re an actress playing a role. That’s the only way you’ll survive.”

Now, Joyce looked at her reflection. She wasn’t sure which celebrity she’d imitate the next day when Owen made the trainees give their first full trial pitch, but she was sure of one thing – she wouldn’t be herself.

* * *

“I’ll set you up at separate tables throughout the office and then call you one by one. After we exchange hellos, you’ll pitch me, then, after we break for lunch, I’ll provide everyone with feedback,” Owen said as he led the group.

“This is your station,” he directed Joyce, and turned to leave. She was at a table with five young, attractive men. The manager, who was chubbier than his team, sat at the head of the table on a tall chair. The men smirked as they eyed Joyce. One of them winked.

“Good luck with your pitch,” the manager said. “We’ll be listening.”

The office was filled with discordant noise of too many salesmen shouting over one another. A tall blonde with a low cut shirt covered her left ear to better hear the man on the other end of the line.

“Don’t the executives you call overhear the commotion?” Joyce asked the manager.

“The phones have noise blockers.”

She closed her eyes and tried to calm her nerves. She was brave, she told herself. She didn’t look fearless or tough, but she was. Her mother had always told her to voice her opinion, stand up for herself, to fight if necessary.

The phone rang.

“Hello,” Joyce said eagerly.

“Hi, this is Owen Lawson.”

“Hi, Owen. How are you?”

“Fine.”

“I wanted to speak with you because I’m working with Mr. Wit from Pennsbrook on a project focusing on drug discovery. Is now a good time to talk?”

“Not really, I was just heading out to a meeting,” Owen said in a dry voice.

“This will only take a minute, actually.”

Joyce kept her pace steady, her voice upbeat. She knew that Owen would try to prevent her from completing the pitch, just as real executives would. “I’m the Vice President of Research here at *Future Pharma*—”

“The pub?” Owen interrupted.

“Yes, we go out to—”

“Is this a sales call?”

“It’s a –” Joyce floundered for words. “I’m VP of—”

“Research,” Owen finished.

“Yes, and I wanted to feature your company in our magazine, highlight BioCorp, really.”

“How much would it cost?”

“I’m going to get to that.” Joyce twisted the phone cord around her hand. Her fingers reddened like cheap carnations. The men at the table stared as they pretended to dial. “Mr. Wit is penning an article about the inefficiencies of biomarker discovery and validation, and what I’d like to do is position BioCorp as the leading solution-provider, giving you a full-page advert that would be in the front of the publication. Now does that seem like a good fit for you?”

The trick was to ask questions that you knew would merit a yes, to get the guy on the other end of the line in an agreeable frame of mind.

“It does,” Owen said, “but how much are we looking at here, darling?”

“The total cost for the ad, which would include the full assistance from my production team, who would essentially act as an in-house ad agency for you, as well as access to our lead generation tool, is 24,500 USD.” Joyce realized she’d skipped the bit about the lead gen tool and how it’d give Owen a chance to see a direct return on investment.

“That’s quite a price tag for an advert. I bought a double-page spread in *Life Sciences Live* last month for 18K. I tell you what. Let me think about it, and if it’s financially feasible, I’ll get back to you,” Owen said curtly, and then he hung up, so that all Joyce could hear was a flat sound that was the dial tone.

* * *

Joyce found herself on her bedroom floor with closed eyes. She was practicing the ancient Tibetan technique known as The Lion’s Roar, the name being self-explanatory: imagining oneself as a lion and roaring with all one’s might. She stretched her jaw, squinted her eyes, and wound up looking like she was trying to pop her ears after landing from a long flight.

She let out a small roar, and thought how she’d rather be a lion than a woman working at GEC, where all of the female staff wore tight skirts and all of the CEOs pitched were men. However, she had been playing into the role of the GEC fem cliché from her very first day, giggling at the male employees’ tired jokes and offering a smile that might have been construed as an invitation.

The feedback that Owen had given her was entirely negative. “You sound overly excited and a bit fake, my dear,” he said. “You might be able to sell makeup or candy, but I wouldn’t fork over twenty thousand dollars of my money based on what I heard today. There’s just no authority in your voice, I’m sorry to say.”

There had been authority in her voice as a teacher, when, on her best days, she could settle a group of thirty-five loud teenagers. She imagined a lion in front of a blackboard, charging a class of students, one of them a younger Owen, his hair slicked back and greasy. The lion snapped his neck and sent his limp body into the air like a doll. She opened her eyes and let out a noise that sounded more like a hungry growl than a roar, and as she did, she became angry, not just at Owen, but everybody who worked at GEC. She felt like she was better than the entire staff: the men who acted like they were still part of a fraternity, and the women whose wicked stares made her feel like she was in a competition that she’d not signed up for, and to make matters worse, she was losing. The more Joyce thought as a lioness, the angrier she became. She was accustomed to excelling at school, and she didn’t like the way Owen quickly labeled her as not good enough.

As she sat on the floor, looking around her room with only a bed dressed in stiff sheets and a dresser, Joyce wished she were younger, back at her parents’ house and eating her mother’s meatloaf. As a teenager, she was in a rush to leave

the small bedroom she shared with her sister. Looking back, maybe it wasn't really that bad – being cramped with her family. Now, there was no one whom she could call for consolation. Her mother would only tell her that she brought everything upon herself. She let out a final roar, a muffled sound that fell flat like something metal dropping in the night, and then she went to bed.

* * *

There was an indescribable serenity in the office in the early morning hours when it wasn't crowded with shouting men and women. Joyce could look out onto the streets and appreciate the view of a city that was so alive: the architecture, the grand buildings that made you feel larger, instead of smaller, like anything was possible. New Yorkers rushed by, weary of one another, as there was no concept of personal space because of the overpopulation; the person who sat next to you on the train pressed his thigh against yours. This was the unspoken relationship between all New Yorkers: a closeness that was unwanted, yet intimate nonetheless.

Joyce stared out onto the streets like a fish in a tank. She thought she'd feel nervous; the rest of the trainees were. Instead, she felt the stillness that comes after anger settles – something closer to acceptance, or insouciance. "How could someone who looks so sweet an innocent have such a vicious temper?" her mother asked when Joyce was younger, after she'd fought with her sister, digging her nails into Abbey's arms and ramming her against their bedroom wall. She'd

lost herself in the violence, forgotten that she was part of a family from whom she'd always felt distant. She'd no longer hear her parents' screaming, or have to wonder what her alcoholic father was going to do next. She was able to release a hurt that couldn't be let go any other way.

“Kim's extension is 301, Joyce,” Owen said as he approached. When you're ready, give her a ring.”

Joyce knew the pitch, knew every response for any reserves that Kim might express. Kim would be a tough sell, having a reputation for being ruthless. She managed the entire office and had sold millions of dollars worth of advertising in her few years at the company. She was a petite Asian woman with perfect features and long hair dyed a deep caramel. She chained smoked and expressed all sentiments of joy and frustration in the same deadpan voice.

“Hi Kim, this is Joyce Little with *Future Pharma*. How are you doing today?”

“I'm doing well. What's this all about, Joyce?”

“I've been working with Elias Wit,” she said, jumping right into the pitch. “As I'm sure you know, he heads up the Research Department at Pennsbrook, and he suggested that I give you a call. We're working on a project concerning biomarkers and the need for increasing efficiency as far as their discovery and verification goes. Is it fair to say that this is what your company focuses on?” Joyce didn't ask a question, but rather offered a statement that was clear and

certain. She was a lawyer giving an opening argument, defending both herself and the publication.

“Yes, but tell me, is this a sales call?” Kim asked flatly.

“I’ll tell you exactly what this is,” Joyce said, as she took a few steps forward, one hand on her hip. “Wit tells me that BioCorp is *the* number one solution-provider for biomarker discovery, and I’m looking to highlight one company out of our sixteen vendors in our September issue that will be entirely devoted to drug discovery. I want to give you a full page ad that my team will help you create. I’m going to couple that with our lead generation tool, which means that I’m going to send you a list of every verified C-level executive from our group of 36,000 subscribers who have specified that they want to receive more information about your company. Now these are Heads of Drug Discovery, Proteomics, and Directors of Lab Automation. Are these the people you generally look to target?” Joyce’s pitch built up momentum as she continued; each word gained force, power.

“It is. But tell me, how much is this going to cost me? Our marketing budgets for the year are quickly dwindling.”

“The full page, full color ad that my production team will assist you with, along with access to our lead generation tool comes in at 24,500 dollars. I’ve got a conference call with Vexx Corp. tomorrow morning and a meeting with my production team at twelve. What I’d like to do is give you a call before then to

see if everything looks good on your end, and when it does, all I need to do is fax over a one-page contract that will confirm everything I've said, and the spot is yours. How does that sound?"

"It sounds great, Joyce."

"Now what's your cell number?"

* * *

The trainees were called into Owen's office one at a time. The others watched through the glass walls, trying to read Owen's lips and expressions. First Ben went in, then Claire. "I'm pitching on the summit," Ben boasted as he came out.

"I'm on the delegate team," Claire said in a lackluster voice. The job of the delegate team was to procure speakers for the summit events. Their commission structure was different from the rest of the staff. As a general rule, they were looked upon as inferior salesmen.

Next, Owen called for Chad, who turned towards Ben and Brian, pounded fists and chimed, "here goes nothing, gentlemen," before heading into Owen's office.

"He's definitely on the summit team with Ben," Claire said. "You guys are so lucky. Kim says you might even get a chance to attend one of the summits. The next one is in the Caribbean."

"I wouldn't mind taking a trip to the Caribbean with Kim," said Brian.

“I don’t think anyone would,” Ben agreed.

Brian Studied Owen’s expression. “What’s he saying? “Chad looks upset.”

Chad’s head hung down like a doll with a broken neck. Owen stood to shake his hand and say goodbye. The whole matter of finding out who made the team seemed to be taking mere minutes.

Chad returned to the group, shocked. He muttered, “I didn’t make it.”

“But how could that be?” Brian blurted out. “You were the best out of all of us.”

Chad shook his head, baffled. “Owen said that I didn’t address Kim’s concerns the way he’d taught me. He said I gave away the price too quickly, and I strayed from the pitch too frequently. I can’t believe it.”

Joyce imagined that Chad had attended private school his whole life, that his family took him on annual trips to Europe and had his polo shirts tailored and sent to his apartment. She was glad that he didn’t get the job. This might put him in his place. She remained quiet.

“They’re probably just looking for a particular style of pitching,” Claire said.

“I’m too good for this gig anyway,” Chad scoffed. “My dad can easily get me a job that I don’t have to audition for like a fifth grade school play. What I

don't need is a sacked soccer player telling me that I'm not good enough. Joyce, you're up next. I'm out of here" he said, then left.

The group fell silent. Joyce would have normally been afraid of failure, but she was too exhausted. She'd woken up early to recite the pitch while eating her usual breakfast of mushy, buttery egg. She'd put on a green face mask at five-thirty in the morning and returned to bed, where she stared at her ceiling and told herself over and over again that she was going to get the job. She imagined herself ringing the gong. Afterwards, Owen would come over to her, give her a kiss, and then she would look into his blue eyes and ask him, "Is your tan real?" The only thing left to do was surrender.

"I don't know how you did it, darling," were the first words out of Owen's mouth. "This has been the quickest turn around by a trainee that I've ever seen. Kim loved you, and to managers said that they'd be happy to have you on their team, Ananda and Helga."

"That's great news," Joyce said with disbelief.

"You're officially a part of the GEC family. Welcome. I'm glad to have you on board."

"Yes. Thank you. Wow. I don't know what to say."

Owen shook her hand, gave her a pat on the shoulder, and opened the door. All that was left to do was to tell everyone the news and celebrate. It was Friday, and that meant that happy hour was on the company.

“Congrats,” Brian said when he stopped her in the hallway. “I’m very impressed.”

“I’m a bit stunned, to be honest,” Joyce admitted.

“It’s great news. It looks like we’ll be working together. You were the only person I was rooting would get it.”

“And why’s that?”

“I like to have a nice view when I work.”

Joyce blushed. If this were high school, she had just made it into one of the elite groups, like cheerleading or the booster club, only this felt bigger than high school because the company was international. Owen was a chic businessman who probably lived in a loft somewhere with exposed metal pipes, and he has told her, Joyce, someone who had worn a dental headgear to bed up until the age of sixteen, that she was the most improved and deserved a spot with the company. Any anger she felt had melted away. The office looked bigger. Brian looked cuter, and Joyce felt different, as if an old skin had been shed.

She made her way towards the bar with her head up; taking big breaths, she felt loose. She was now an official saleswoman. Training week was over. Brian gave her a nudge, and as they left the building, they blended in with the passersby, all of whom were dressed in suits, their eyes forward, not noticing that Joyce had a huge smile on her face, her head up to the sky, not particularly paying any attention to where she was headed.

III

The First Time

“You can’t imagine how good it feels,” Brian said, shoving a hard-boiled egg into his mouth, “making your first sale, it’s such a rush. The last time I felt that excited was when I went hunting with my dad and we brought back over two hundred pounds of meat.” He licked yolk crumbs from his upper lip. “I’ve got a pair of antlers spray painted gold hanging above my bed.”

Joyce let out a sigh. “That’s something,” she said, laying her sandwich on a sheet of stiff wax paper. She was having lunch with Brian again, this time at a small deli with a self-serve bar that offered a combination of Chinese takeout dishes and random foodstuffs like Jell-O and canned pineapple. “I hope I make a sale soon. The longer I go without one, the more I find myself bargaining over the phone. I think the CEOs can sense my desperation. This morning I tried to pitch a half-pager for two thousand, and Heather went berserk, screaming how I shouldn’t be giving it away for free. ‘We’re not prostitutes’ were her exact words.

“She doesn’t like having an attractive female on the team,” Brian asserted. “Don’t worry, it’ll happen when you least expect it, and when it does, we’ll go out for drinks and celebrate.” He shot Joyce a wide grin, which did not altogether repulse her. Sure, he wasn’t subtle, but he had big hands, and she liked the

attention. There was a glint in his eye that stunned her no matter how many times she saw it.

Back at the office, cans of beer and bottles of wine coolers in small carts were being rolled in. It was Friday afternoon: pitch boards were covered in scribbles; the fax machine shook as it rang, alerting every one of incoming contracts, which was followed by the sound of the gong, cheers, and then the swelling tide subsided, and for a brief period there was nothing but quiet exhaustion until the next round; ties rested in piles near the windowsill; half-eaten cupcakes from the bakery next door littered desktops. Young men whose aliases gave them a certain poise and polish during the week sat slumped at their desks, watchful of women, anticipating the night to come.

Outside, New Yorkers in black suits rushed, mindless of passersby, focused only on their destination. An older woman with long hair the color of steel stopped in front of the deli. She looked like either a magnificent witch, a partner at a law firm, or an editor for a publishing company that put out Buddhist literature; Joyce couldn't tell which. Nonetheless, the woman had an air of sagacity that she longed for.

As Joyce stared, she thought about the new life she had made for herself as a salesperson, and she felt inadequate, in between two stages of life somehow – in limbo. She wished that she could fast-forward her life twenty or thirty years and be settled. The prior night, Joyce's mother had given her a half-hour long

lecture on the importance of health insurance. When she asked her daughter if GEC offered her a pension plan and Joyce responded no, her mother broke down and cried: “This is what you want after two years of grad school? You’re ruining your life!”

Joyce looked at Brian’s jaw, which was dotted with soft, blond stubble. He smelled of pine trees, the sort that hung from car rearview mirrors, not the ones in forests. She imagined folding into his body, collapsing.

“There’s something about watching all of these people,” Brian said. “It’s a little trippy, like what’s the hurry? Have you ever tried meditation?”

“My mind is too frenetic for me to put it on pause.”

“I don’t think it’s about putting anything on pause, as much as embracing the spirit of the universe and quieting all of the voices. It’s like people feel this relentless need to speak so much, and it’s just a trigger for anxiety and pressure, especially at our company. We go on and on and on all day, you know what I mean?”

“Sure,” Joyce said without really knowing what he meant.

“That’s why I’m going to quit in three months.”

“What? You can’t quit. We’ve only been working here for a few weeks!”

“I’ve got money coming in. You know the game show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I was on it in May, and I won \$36,000.”

“Are you serious?”

“Completely.”

Joyce couldn't imagine Brian answering trivia questions correctly. It seemed like the sort of thing that only someone with a vast array of knowledge could do successfully; perhaps it didn't call for intelligence, but certainly a varied set of interests outside of hunting and getting high.

“How did you get on that show?”

“I applied online. It was a pretty simple process, actually. I should be getting the check in February. Sure, I'll get less after taxes, but it'll be enough to get me through the rest of the year.”

“And then what are you going to do?”

“I'm thinking about going to Thailand.”

“Oh,” Joyce said, then took a bite of her grilled cheese sandwich, and looked down at her fingers, shiny from grease. She had never left the country.

* * *

The cover of *Future Pharma* was impressive, with a professional layout, and a photo of an industry bigwig offering a toothy smile. When Joyce saw the magazine for the first time, she was surprised by its weight. GEC didn't hire writers, not even for freelance pieces, but she learned, as she thumbed through the

many pages, that the magazine was made up mostly of advertisements or advertorials – advertisements made to look like content.

The first page listed the names of GEC's executives: Nigel Moon, CEO, Ellis Winsworth, Managing Director, Rob Waters, V.P. of U.S. Sales, and Valerie Bernstein, the alias of the Director of Sales, whose real name was Kim Sun.

The names of the individual sales team members, however, were not listed. Left out of the magazine were: Heather Falix, a round brunette with a sweet voice and an unfounded feeling of self-importance; Jackie Morin, a snippy blonde who, Joyce believed, suffered from something akin to small dog syndrome; Jason Weldon, a soft-spoken guy who perfected the art of looking busy, though he rarely ever pitched, and who had a perpetual blankness to him, and Helga Cotswold, the team manager who, had decidedly hated Joyce for no apparent reason.

The *Future Pharma* team was an anomaly at GEC for the sole reason that its members, with the exception of Joyce, had worked at the company for over six months. They had bonded, and in doing so, treated the team as an exclusive club, one whose initiation process was separate from training week at GEC.

“Joyce, we need to talk,” Jackie ordered.

“Okay.”

“You called one of the companies that I’ve been trying to get into.”

“Which one? I mean, I’ve been pretty careful about sticking only to my sections.”

“ JansCorp – yes, they promote themselves as an RFID company, but they also make other products that fall into my sections. You can’t pitch them.”

“But their homepage is dedicated to RFID. That’s their focus. They manufacture a few other things, but what they make money off of is their chain of RFID products, which, according to how we split the manufacturing section, falls into my terrain.” Joyce was baffled. Jackie had allotted her five out of thirteen subsections of manufacturing when she joined the team, and three of those subsections could be clumped together. The list of companies that Joyce could pitch was short, and to make matters worse, no salesperson who came before her had made a deal off of those subsections in months.

“Joyce, I’ve been with *Future Pharma* for fourteen months. How long have you been on the team?”

“I think that’s irrelev...”

“Five weeks, Joyce. You’ve been here for five weeks. Now I’m telling you that you’re crossing into my section, and I’m not going to let it happen. JansCorp is mine, so you’re just going to have to stop talking to whoever it is that you’re pitching over there.”

“Fred Lauer.”

“The CEO?”

“Yes.”

“You got him on the phone?” Jackie asked, partly impressed, but mostly disgusted.

“His secretary gave me his cell number.”

“Well you can pass that right on to me, because JansCorp is mine.” Jackie said and then turned to leave.

“Well I’m glad that you’re here,” Jason uttered meekly from across the table.

“Thank you. That means a lot.”

“Before you came, it used to be me who she picked on. Now I’m home-free.”

* * *

After a trip to the break room, where Joyce drank a beer, built a jelly donut pyramid, and then sunk her head into her folded arms, she returned to her desk and put on her headset. Heather was busy filing her nails. Jason was talking on the phone to his roommate while looking at a picture of his ex-girlfriend that he carried around in his wallet. At a nearby table, Brian was reading an online magazine about taxidermy.

Joyce thumbed through her call-back sheets. Two CEOs who semi-agreed to having another conversation after the initial pitch didn’t pick up when she phoned earlier, and only one remained: JansCorp. She looked over at Jackie, who

was talking on the phone to Nina from the other end of the office. Nina was acting as a spy, eavesdropping on Jackie's chubby ex-boyfriend. "Did you hear who he was speaking to on the phone earlier?" Jackie asked. "I saw this redhead named Louise leave a comment for him online. I'll have to cut both of their throats."

It was fifteen minutes till the end of the day, and Joyce knew this was her last chance to make a deal. She spotted Rob Waters near the fax machine on the other side of the room and quickly walked towards him.

"Hey Rob," she said in a timid voice, clutching her callback sheet, "I hope I'm not interrupting or anything. I was wondering if you could do a callback for me."

"Sure thing." Rob, like most of the upper-level managers, had a British accent. He was short, tiny really, but his confidence made him appear bigger and more attractive. "Is Helga busy?"

Joyce, who had been told by several employees Helga couldn't close a deal to save her life, had already accepted that if she wanted a sale, she'd have to take matters into her own hands. "Yes, and she told me to come find you. I pitched Fred Lauer, the CEO on Tuesday, and he seemed pretty interested. It's a great company. There are a few thousand employees, and he told me that he had been interested in allocating some more money to marketing."

“Well hell then, what are we waiting for? Let’s get our hands on some of his money.”

Rob quickly glanced over the sheet, uttered “RFID,” dialed, then began to pace.

“Hi, put me through to Fred,” he commanded.

Joyce noticed Helga eying her from across the room.

“Hi Fred, this is Rob Waters, VP at Phone Pharma. How are you?” He spoke loudly and quickly, as if he had more important matters waiting for him. “I’m fantastic. I just had a meeting with my editorial team, as well as Joyce, who was in communication with you earlier this week. We had a discussion about JansCorp and bringing you on board for that half-page advert for our issue focused on manufacturing and RFID technology. How do things look on your end in terms of getting that contract signed today?”

Helga was now walking in her and Rob’s direction. She looked upset. Her face crunched up as if she had tasted something acrid.

“Yep, we go out to 36,000 verified C-level executives, and we have a data cleansing team in Bangalore, India that makes sure our circulation is spot on. Oh sure,” Rob said as he paced, “I understand. Certainly.”

Helga’s gaze was fixed on Joyce as she came over.

“I hear you,” Rob asserted. “Well, that’s great news. I’ll have Joyce get that contract right over to you, and as soon as you fax that back with your

signature, it'll be official, and the advert spot next to the Damien Rice article will be reserved for JansCorp.”

“What’s going on here?” Helga asked.

“Joyce just got her first deal,” Rob declared with enthusiasm. “Great job to the both of you.” He touched both women’s shoulders, told Joyce to get the contract out a.s.a.p. and left.

“I can’t believe I just got a deal,” Joyce muttered.

“I know what you did.”

“I thought it was okay. You were busy.”

“I don’t like it, Joyce. I’m your manager. You got lucky this time because we got a deal out of it, but I don’t want you to pull any of this tricky business again, or you’ll regret it. I’m telling you now.”

Joyce remained quiet. She didn’t care if Helga was upset. She knew that Jackie would be even more outraged, but Jackie would always find some reason to hate Joyce, and so it was inconsequential.

When the fax machine rang, Joyce collected the one-page contract that stated JansCorp would be included in the December issue of *Phone Pharma*. There were no details about their positioning in the publication, any contributors, the focus, or other vendors, but it did say that they were to be held responsible to pay \$8,950, and below the small black print was Fred Lauer’s signature – boldly written across the bottom of the page.

As the gong sounded, the room filled with hoots and cheers. Joyce could only hear a faint buzz, like static; it was as if all of the different noises made one grand hum. The frenzy felt like a New Year's Eve celebration; the countdown had ended. The week was over, and the cry of the gong was the end of Joyce's dry spell; it was an initiation and a rebirth. Joyce decided that the next week, she would pitch under an alias. She would now call herself Veronica Web.

At White Horse, the bar where GEC employees met for happy hour, Joyce and Brian toasted with a shot of tequila. She held her nose as she knocked it back.

"It tastes like lighter fluid," she said.

"Maybe, but it gets the job done," said Brian. He had taken off his collared shirt and tie; he wore a green t-shirt on which was picture of a toad with a crown.

"What job is that?"

"It makes things a bit looser."

"I see," Joyce said. She smiled as she stared at Brian. She felt small near him, like he could protect her. She wanted to melt into him and disappear, close her eyes and be someone else. Getting her first deal was proof that maybe she could be.

She leaned in and kissed him. He tasted like salt and alcohol. He shoved his hot tongue into her mouth and grabbed her neck. One hand ran up her thigh, which made her wriggle and move her lips away from his.

“It drives me crazy that I have to see you every day when I’m trying to work.” He began to rub her upper thigh and then place sticky, sloppy kisses on her neck. Joyce tried to move, but his body was pressed against hers, pinning her to the booth. He took her earlobe in his mouth and slowly sucked on it, then dragged his tongue along the inside of her ear.

“You know what, Rob Waters is over there by the bar. We shouldn’t do this here. It’s not right. We have to see these people on Monday morning.”

“We can go to my place,” Brian said. His stubble brushed against her neck, which made her squirm. She knew that she had initiated what was happening, and now that he was rubbing the hand that was behind her neck over her chest, she had begun to panic. Joyce realized that the thought of melting into Brian was very different from the reality; she would drown under him, suffocate.

“I have my period,” she blurted out.

“What?” he asked, stunned.

“I’ve been bleeding pretty heavily all day, and I just get the worst cramps ever. I actually think I better go home and rest. I’m just feeling drained.”

Brian paused, then responded, “I want you to know that I don’t mind if things get a little messy.” He went to kiss her again, burying his face over hers.

She pushed his shoulders back and moved away, “That’s very kind of you, but I seriously think I need to get home. I might even pass out, that’s how bad I feel.”

“But you got me so worked up.” He grabbed Joyce’s hand and rubbed it over his erection, which filled out his pants. “You can’t leave me hanging.” She hesitated; he did trigger an ache that seemed to pull at her, but she wished he were different – gentler, smarter, less of a brute. She wanted him and felt repulsed simultaneously.

“I’m sorry. I really am. I’ll make it up to you. I’ll buy you lunch or something next week.” Joyce grabbed her purse and coat in one quick motion.

“You know what, forget about it. Just go if you’re feeling so terrible,” he said angrily.

“I really am sorry, Brian. You’re a great guy.”

“Whatever. If you’re going to be a bitch, just be straight up about it. Don’t give me this period bullshit.”

“It’s not bullshit, Brian,” she said, heading for the exit. “I feel really dizzy,” she screamed out, and then dashed out and onto the sidewalk, where Joyce finally felt the cool air. She wanted to go home and decompress. New York looked different. A trash can was knocked over at the corner, and trash blew in the wind. A homeless man was slumped on the floor, wrapped in black garbage

bags. She would go home and take a long, hot shower. She suddenly felt the need to get extra clean.

IV

Nine to Five

Jeffrey Franken walked into the office in high spirits. He wore a brown suit jacket that was a few shades lighter than his trousers and a tie adorned with images of small red and white candy canes. His disheveled dirty blond hair was tucked behind his ears, and as he made his way over to the table where Joyce and the rest of the team sat, he attempted to pat it down, pasting the strands that stood upright to his head with the pressure of his hand. Joyce was on hold, and she hung up as she saw him approach: his left foot dragged a few inches behind the right, causing his walk to resemble more of a jaunty hop than a stride; his neck was stiff, forward, seemingly immobile, and along it ran a deep pink scar. He stopped before the team and introduced himself.

“Thank goodness – a guy,” Jackie responded quickly. “I thought we were going to wind up with another female and I would have had to kill myself.” She looked to Heather, who let out a false chuckle for Jackie’s benefit.

“Talk about pressure,” Jeffrey joked, “but it’s good to know that I’m welcomed. To be honest, I’m surprised that I made it through training week. That was something else. Anyhoo.” Jeffrey stopped and looked down at the desk. His expression was thoughtful, inquisitive. He took his time as he spoke.

“How’s everyone doing today?” His inflection reminded Joyce of a country singer talking to the crowd at a concert.

“Fine,” Helga uttered curtly, straightening out a stack of leads. “We’re glad you could join us, Jeff. But business must go on, so let’s not waste any more time. You’re splitting the drug discovery section with Jason. He’ll give you the details. Here’s your headset, a box of pens and some paper.” She handed him the supplies, which he had trouble grasping. Some of his fingers were contorted and curled under. “Have you come up with a pitching name yet?”

“Jack Grace.”

“Jack Grace – very well then. Let’s get on the phone. Show me what you got.”

“Let’s get to it,” Jeffrey said, patting the table cheerfully. He took a seat across from Joyce, opened up his laptop, and then picked up a pen to write something on his pad of paper. He had trouble holding it, as he clutched it between his fingers, which formed the shape of a paw. He held the scribbles up for Joyce to see: *She’s just delightful, isn’t she?*

“What was your first clue?” Joyce asked.

Jeffrey rubbed his chin with his hand as he studied Joyce. His eyes beamed. “How long have you been here?”

“About two months.”

“Do you like it?”

“I’m slowly getting the hang of it.”

“I don’t know if that means you like it or not.”

“It has its perks.” Joyce knew that Heather and Jackie were just a few feet away, eavesdropping, which made her uncomfortable; everything was a show at GEC. She was on stage constantly.

What do you really want to do?” Jeff asked.

“How do you mean?”

“Don’t tell me that you dreamed of selling advertisement space on the phone when you were younger, because if you did, we certainly can’t be friends. I mean, what do you *really* want to do? If you could wake up tomorrow and get paid for what it is that you truly love, what would that be?”

“I’d want to be a writer,” Joyce said. It seemed to her as if the words hung in the air, suspended like in a cartoon, and Joyce could pluck them with her fingers and put them away in a drawer somewhere for safe keeping. Whenever she told people that she wanted to be a writer, immediately, she was met with a discerning look, as if she had said she wanted to join the circus and tame lions for a living.

“I write too.” Jeffrey took a plaid fedora with a brown feather out of his bag and put it on his head, adjusting it so that it tilted slightly left.

“What do you write?”

“Everything,” he said, his eyes widening, eager. “I’m finishing up a book about a group of Native Americans who live in New Mexico, where I’m from. I’m fascinated with their death and burial rituals. Do you know anything about Native Americans?”

“No.”

“They’re a fascinating people. Truly fascinating. I’m going to publish it with some buddies of mine. Then we’re going to sell the movie rights.”

“Good luck,” Joyce said, not knowing quite how to respond.

Jeff tipped his hat forward in a gentlemanly fashion and gave her a smile.

“What’s your pitching name?”

“Veronica Web.”

He thought for a moment. “Ver-on-i-ca Web,” he repeated slowly. “Mrs. Web. Ms. Web,” he hesitated. “I don’t know. You appear too sweet to be a Veronica.” Jeffrey rubbed his chin again like a philosopher, or someone who had read Plato for a college class at the very least, considering. “No,” he confirmed, “I don’t see you as a Veronica at all.”

* * *

It was the day after the World Series Championship. The Yankees had won, and New Yorkers everywhere honked their horns and donned navy and white pinstripe baseball caps. Joyce didn’t care for baseball, but still, she enjoyed

seeing people so excited over something that she considered inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. She'd received a call from her uncle Joey, who was overwhelmed by the results of the game. He choked up with pride while on the phone. "The Yankees are the glue of New Yawk!" he stammered. "This will go down in history. This will be written in the textbooks! You'll tell your kids one day about this game. Oh my." He stopped to take a breath. "Isn't it great to be a New Yawker?" he asked finally. Joyce said that it was, she was dizzy with euphoria, and then said goodnight and printed her leads for the next day. She had a short stack, and most of the companies were based in Europe, and most European smaller companies weren't looking to expand their business overseas.

"In honor of the Yankees' win and because the parade will be taking place today, we are going to take a few hours off to celebrate!" cheered Rob the next morning. It was a casual day, which meant everyone was dressed in jeans, or jogging suits and sneakers. Even the managers looked frumpy. "We'll resume work at one, so make sure you're back here and ready to pitch big. Go Yankees!" Rob hooted one last time in an English accent.

"What a company," Jeffrey said to the table.

The employees charged out of the office, hollering, squeezing into the elevators with businessmen from other companies in the building, who looked at them, perplexed. Most teams traveled together, stopping off to purchase beer for the parade. Jackie, Heather and Helga formed a flock, deciding to go shoe

shopping instead. Heather said in a thick New York accent that the win was awesome, as she left the building with a Macy's coupon and her purse in one hand. Jason attached himself to the group from *Oil & Gas* magazine. He was more excited about enjoying a brief respite from making continual phone calls than the win itself. Jeffrey, who was wearing a Yankees shirt under a beat up pea green blazer and a brown fedora, was always eager to celebrate, and he turned to Joyce and said, "Let's go to The White Horse Tavern. First round on me."

She nodded, for she was overjoyed to have a friend at the company. As they left the building, Joyce told him the office gossip that she had picked up as a result of listening to Jackie and Heather's conversations: how Owen was dating Megan, the most beautiful saleswoman at GEC, how most of the employees were sleeping with one another, even the managers, how there was enough romantic drama going on at all times that the company felt more like a soap opera. Jeffrey listened intently, nodding and interjecting with an "Is that so?" which made Joyce ramble even more.

When they made it to the bar, which was on a quiet side street, she told him how pleased she was that he had joined the team, and in response, he put his arm around her shoulders and said that he was looking forward to getting to know her. They squeezed in through the doorway, huddled close, and into the tavern, which had a group of GEC's employees in the back and several other customers seated up front. The tavern felt off-the-map, as most of the bars on Whitehall

Street were tailored to a chicer clientele who came for happy hour, whereas The White Horse was filled with kitschy decor like leprechaun statues and mermaid lamps; the steering wheel of a ship hung from the ceiling, serving as a chandelier. There was a buffet where large, metal trays of fluorescent yellow macaroni and cheese, tater tots and meatloaf sat. It was a little after breakfast time, and Joyce was still full from her bagel and coffee. Jeffrey filled his plate with mashed potatoes and chicken pot pie.

“I’ll take a Jack Daniels and coke,” he said to the bartender, “and what would you like?”

“Vodka and cranberry, please.”

“Vodka and cranberry for the lady,” he recited in a mock chivalrous tone, then commenced digging into his mashed potatoes. He was incredibly thin with bony shoulders that jutted out in strange angles. His hand held the fork the same way he’d held a pencil, and Joyce watched him with curiosity.

“How’s your first week going?”

“It’s been quite a trip,” he said. A lump of potato fell from his fork and onto the counter. He scooped it up with a piece of pie crust and tossed it back into his mouth. “It’s disheartening that we have to lie in order to make a sale, but it’s a means to an end. There are a lot of things I like about GEC, at least so far, like the employees, and the fact that I’m getting paid to be sitting in a bar with you right now.”

“I know what you mean,” she said. “There’s a lot about the company that is appealing, and I will say that it gets easier—bending the truth—you repeat a lie so often, you begin to believe it.”

“Bending the truth,” he repeated. “I don’t know if I necessarily want that part of the job to get easier. Ya see, I almost died.” He pointed to the scar along his neck. “And once you go through something like that, the truth takes a whole new meaning. You know what Hunter S. Thompson said?”

“No.”

“Truth is never told during the nine-to-five hours.”

“Can I ask you how you how you got your scar?”

Jeffrey put his drink down and let out a breath. “Huh.” He pressed his hand to his chin. “Well, first off, you can ask me anything. I’m an open book.”

Joyce pinched at her nose and gulped her drink.

“I was seventeen years old and on my way to the movies. I remember how dark the roads were. This was in New Mexico. Have you ever been there?”

“No.”

“Well, believe me—it gets real dark at night, and the roads are all twisty and crazy. They can be a real bitch. Anyhoo, I was singing along to Jim Morrison: *Of our elaborate plans, the end.*” Jeffrey cried out slowly. “You know that song?”

“I do.”

“So I’m singing along with my best friend, who’s riding shotgun, and I think I see something on the road. Again, it was so dark. Till this day, I swear something was there: a deer, a dog, a person maybe. Who can be sure now? So I swerve, to avoid whatever it was that I saw—hell, maybe it was a phantom or I was hallucinating—and the car went off the road and into a ditch. The whole thing was wrecked, the new Camaro—a gift from my parents for my upcoming graduation. I broke my neck.”

Jeffrey turned towards the windows and gazed out. He started to hum the Jim Morrison song.

“Was your best friend okay?”

“Alex died,” he said flatly, still looking outside. “Anyhoo—” he refocused his attention on Joyce.

“One of the older men on the reservation I like to visit says that the great river shall flow, and so that’s how I live my life.”

“I’m sorry about your friend.”

Jeffrey dropped his head. “Thank you. We’re here now, though. That much I know for sure. And there’s a lot of great stuff that I got to look forward to.”

“Like what?”

“I’m going to propose to mah lady, Sam, in a few weeks, and once my movie gets off the ground, we’re going to tie the knot.”

“How long have you and Sam been dating?”

“Seven months, but we’ve known each other for years. We grew up in the same town. Our parents are friends. I think our grandparents even went on a date once. After the accident, I started to look at her differently, like the way she eats smores, opening up the crackers and picking the melted marshmallow out with her fingers. I started to notice stuff like that. I began to miss her laugh when she wasn’t around.”

“That’s really romantic,” Joyce said, finishing off her drink. “I can’t say I’m not envious.”

“So you don’t have a Mr. Joyce, I gather.”

“Can’t say that I do. Next round on me.” Joyce waved over the bartender. “We’ll take two refills, please.” The white-haired bartender looked at Jeffrey for approval. He nodded, and the old man filled the glasses.

On the other side of the bar was Brian, cuddled up to Diamonté. Next to him sat Taye, a salesman from *Oil & Gas* magazine. He was incredibly tall and thin, with caramel colored skin and dreadlocks that shot up in every direction. He was the most well-liked person in the office; if GEC were high school, he’d be voted most popular.

When the old bartender brought over their drinks, Jeffrey downed his is one shot.

“Hey Joyce.”

“Yeah—”

“When it goes down, and shit’s crazy – when it’s time for the revolution, I’m gonna call you. I’m gonna give you a heads up because I like you.”

“Thanks, Jeff,” Joyce answered.

“No problem.”

* * *

By one o’clock, Joyce had found it difficult to stand on her own. Jeffrey flung one of her arms across his shoulders, but had trouble lifting her. Taye, who was playing darts with two women, came over to help.

“I got her,” he said.

“I can make it on my own,” Joyce slurred.

“No, I don’t think that’s the best idea.”

“Why don’t you just go back to your ladies?”

“You mean those two—” Taye pointed.

“Yup.”

“They’re not my ladies. Now we’ve got to get you back to the office.”

Jeffrey trailed behind as Taye led Joyce across the street and into the elevator.

“That’s an ugly jacket,” she told a woman with a fur coat.

“We’re sorry,” Taye interrupted. “She’s not feeling well and has been saying terrible things all day.”

The woman shot them a dirty look and turned away.

When they reached the fourteenth floor, Taye had to pick up Joyce and carry her away.

He left her in front of the bathroom with Heather and Jackie, claiming they had some sort of a female duty to help take care of her and that they owed him. Jackie sighed, while Heather said of course she'd help, and led Joyce into the bathroom, where she fell in front of a toilet, grabbed onto its rim and continued to puke and cry simultaneously.

"All I ever wanted was to be friends with you guys!" she wailed. "I don't understand why you're so mean to me! You're so mean to me," she said, gagging on chunks of macaroni and cheese.

Heather turned to Jackie and shot her a look.

Jackie sighed again, and then reached for Joyce's hair, softly pulled it away from her face and gathered into a small knot behind her head.

"We can't let Rob see her like this," was all Heather could say after they washed Joyce's face and showered her with perfume.

"And how do you propose we hide her? Leave her in the closet?" Jackie sneered. They struggled down the log hallway. Joyce's sweater was stained, her skin pallid.

"Taye's nice," she blurted out. "I like him."

"I bet you do," said Jackie. "Now be quiet and let's get back to our desk."

Joyce slept near Helga's feet for the next two hours, under the desk, waking up only to say that her head hurt and swearing she would never drink again. Helga told her that if she ever pulled something like that again, she'd be fired, and gave her a hard kick. Helga had told Rob that Joyce was ill from food poisoning; it must have been the raw chicken wings the rest of the staff was complaining about, which he didn't believe, but nonetheless, he smiled, and told Helga to send her home. When Helga repeated this to Joyce, she muttered that she could do her job. "What do you think, I need *your* help. No thank you! Just let me rest for ten minutes and I'll be fine." She kneeled down on the floor, curled up, and passed out.

As for the rest of the staff, they continued to make calls. Everyone was encouraged to stand, to kick their chairs to the side and pitch energetically. While Jason was hunched over, staring at a stack of papers, the rest of the *Future Pharma* team pitched proudly. Jeffrey, still feeling loose from all of the drinks he'd had that morning, and confident in his knowledge of high-throughput screening and drug discovery after reading an article online, picked up a lead for Johnson Labs. Heather had helped him acquire Jim Johnson, the CEO's, cell number, and it was written on top of his lead in red ink with a large note that had *CALL* illegibly written next to it.

After a few rings, a man with a deep, scratchy voice picked up.

"Yell-ow."

“Good afternoon. Is this Jim by any chance? Jim Johnson?”

“You bet yer socks it is. Who’s this?”

“This is Jack Grace.”

“Hi Jack. What can I do for you, son?”

“Well, I’ve been doing some work with Elias Witt, who suggested I give you a ring about your HTS screening capabilities. I’m working with *Future Pharma*, a publication that goes out to 36,0000, and our next issue will be entirely devoted to drug discovery. I’d love to speak with you about featuring Johnson Labs across from an article that Mr. Witt will be writing for us. Do you have a moment to have talk?”

Jim Johnson said he sure as hell did. He said that just a few hours prior he was just telling his son, Derek, that they needed to do more to promote the company. As it turned out, Jim was planning on spending the next few days seeking out advertising opportunities.

“This is some website ya’ll have set up here, son,” he said. “Now what kind of numbers are we looking at here?”

“For a full page, Jim, we’re looking at 19,500 dollars, and for a two-page spread, it’ll cost you \$24,500, but of course, I will have my production team work with you on getting that together, so essentially, you’ll have your own in-house ad agency.”

“Twenty-four-five, eh?” he repeated slowly, pensively.

A car honked in the background.

“Twenty-four-five,” Jeffrey confirmed.

“And Johnson Labs will get the online content and all that jazz you told me about earlier?”

“You got it, Jim. You’ll have access to our Lead Generation service, providing you the contact information of potential new customers. You’ll be highlighted as one of our sixteen vendors online, and I’ll make sure you get that banner on our website that I told you about.”

“Well hell and horseshoe, son, count me in. Let’s do some business together.”

Jim Johnson had his son fax over the signed contract immediately. Jeffrey didn’t tell anyone until he heard the fax machine ring that he was expecting a contract. He was starting to feel woozy, and he wasn’t sure if he had imagined what Jim had said.

“Jeff, this contract for a double-page spread has your name on it!” Rob shouted.

“I can’t believe he sent it,” was all Jeffrey could say.

“When did you call this fellow, Mr. Johnson?”

“Just about twenty minutes ago.”

“Hey everyone, can I have your attention. Listen up!” Rob bellowed.

“Jeff just closed a cold deal! For a two-pager! And it’s his first week here!” The

office exploded in cheers and screams. Jackie ran up to Jeffrey to give him a hug. Taye gave him a slap on the back and said they'd have to go back to The White Horse after work to celebrate. Diamonté squeezed his rear and told him that he was an official member of GEC. He nodded appreciatively, said thanks, and hopped over to the gong, his right hand pressed to his chest, curved under, a wide grin on his face, and with his left hand, picked up the wooden mallet and gave it an aggressive whack. The gong shook and rang; a high-pitched echo filled the office, the clamor and commotion causing Joyce to roll over. She pressed her palm to her forehead in pain, and began to cry.

V

Tony

“You should have slept with Brian,” Daisy told Joyce over coffee on Sunday morning. “Do you know the ratio of men to women in New York?”

“No.”

“It’s something like one to a million.” Joyce had met Daisy, her best friend, off a website specializing in the formation of platonic relationships for women called *Feminine Bonding*, which, Joyce repeatedly said, sounded like something one picked up in a drugstore aisle.

Daisy shoved a lump of croissant into her mouth. “Of course, not everyone gets married, or finds everlasting love. Look at my mom. My dad died over twenty years ago, and she hasn’t been with another man since. But she keeps busy. She clips coupons. She knits.”

“It’s not for a lack of men. I mean, there are a handful of very attractive and perfectly suitable guys at my job, but nothing seems to be gelling. Take Taye—he flirts with me, but he does the same with every other woman in the office as well. I feel very masochistic when we go out to lunch together. It’s like I’m setting myself up for disappointment.”

“Have you given up on Brian completely?”

“He hates me because of that one night at the bar. Apparently, it’s considered bad form to flirt with a man, kiss him, and then tell him you can’t sleep with him due to your Aunt Flow.”

“A woman should be allowed to have her off nights. Is there anyone at your job who you could picture me dating?”

Joyce fiddled with the purple sugar flowers on her plate. Nearby, women with strollers huddled together, forming an exclusive club. Joyce eyed one of the women. She had a baby on her hip; as she laughed, tilting her head back, her long brown hair reached down her back. Joyce couldn’t help but think how content she looked.

“I think we both should focus on our careers, Daisy.”

“You’re right.” For a moment, the two women sat quietly, the mood between them souring. “I joined a dating website. It’s called *Love Hunter*. I have a blind date tomorrow with a guy named Jim. All of the women on his contact list are Asian. I think he has a fetish.”

At work the next day, Joyce spent a few hours on the phone, and she still couldn’t get a pitch on the board. She thought about lying and just filling in a number one near her name, but the fear of what Helga might do gave her cause for concern.

“It’s not that hard,” Jackie told her. “Just try not to sound like a chipmunk anymore. Your voice is so nasally.”

Joyce reached for the phone and called Panpack, a company that specialized in packaging. A secretary picked up.

“Hello.”

“Hi, can you put me through to Marcus Herring.”

“Who’s this?” the secretary snapped.

“Veronica Webb. I work with Thomas Porter at NorLab.”

A few minutes earlier, Joyce had glanced over a press release announcing Panpack’s new partnership with NorLab. Thomas Porter had been quoted: “This feels like a natural fit. I greatly admire the work that Marcus has done for the pharmaceutical sector.”

“Is Marcus in?”

“Yes, he is in,” the secretary said angrily, “but there’s no way that I’m putting you through. I have caller ID, and I recognize this number. This is another GEC sales call. If anyone from your company phones here again, we’re filing a harassment suit.”

“You must be mistaken.”

“I’m afraid that I’m not,” the secretary said, “and you should be ashamed of yourself.”

When the secretary hung up, Joyce looked around the office for Tave. She saw him hanging around the computers with Diamonté, who was giggling and had her hand pressed on his chest. She looked to Jeffrey, but he was on the phone. He waved.

A few desks down, Joyce could see Tony, one of the managers, reading something. He was older, in his fifties, and incredibly handsome. He wore a single silver earring and a ring on this thumb that, while not in fashion, seemed to suit him, giving him a sense of youth, of rebellion. Typically, he wore black suits with black ties, silver jackets with cowboy boots, and slim fitting trousers that hugged his skinny legs.

Tony pressed his fingers to his mouth as he read from a stack of papers on his desk. When he looked up and spotted Joyce, he winked. He smiled, but only the right side of his mouth tilted upwards, revealing a sharp canine tooth.

Joyce returned the smile and then went back to her stack of leads.

“This is why you can’t get a pitch out,” Jackie said insistently. “You daydream too much. It’s not cute. Get it together.”

Joyce said okay, she would get right on it, and after a few minutes of pretending to dial, found herself looking back at Tony, who was clearly on a pitch, as he paced, his arms gesticulating widely. He looked very serious when on a call; one might think he was a stock broker instead of a salesman. On the phone, he went by his birth name, Anthony, which didn’t suit him.

Joyce waited for the office's coffee break, which was fifteen minutes long, then went over to his table as he was taking off his headset and finishing a conversation with Ben, a salesman on his team.

When Tony saw her, he patted Ben like a child and said, "Once again, good job. Listen, let's finish this talk later, okay?" Ben said that it was fine, looked curiously at Joyce and then back at Tony, and left.

"Did he make a sale?" Joyce asked.

"We've got to convince the Kicker, but I'd say that it's soon to be a done deal."

"Nice."

"I lucked out with such a great team."

"They lucked out with you."

"Thanks," Tony said. He paused to look around the room. Nearly everyone had left. "So how do you like it here so far?" he asked. His right hand was against his hip. His long fingers were moving quickly, jittering, rubbing against each other.

"It's definitely different from teaching."

"That's right, you were a teacher. This must be a whole different world then."

"Completely different."

“Well, if you ever need someone to talk to about it, I’m here to help.”

Joyce had to look up to Tony, who was as tall and thin as Taye. She felt small near him.

“Hey, let me ask you,” he said. “What are you doing for lunch?”

She hesitated, “I, I hadn’t given it much thought. Do you want to have lunch together?”

“I’m grabbing sushi with some of the members of my team, if you want to join us.”

“Oh, right – with the guys from your team.” She said something about how she didn’t like sushi, how it gave her indigestion, how raw fish was weird, and she started to walk towards the door. She tried to open it, but it was jammed. She rocked the handle back and forth, and once it swung free, she shouted out, “I think, I think I should run to the bathroom before break is over. Helga will throw a fit if I try to go afterwards. You know how she is. Bye.”

She ran out, even though she felt silly, even though she wanted to go to lunch with Tony and his team. She pictured herself across from him in a restaurant, trying not to stare as Jake, Gabriel, and the rest of the all-male team spoke about potential deals and took shots of sake. She didn’t want to feel out of place, which being around Tony already made her feel. She was sure that he thought she was too young, and because she felt this way, the thought built up like a mountain that she couldn’t climb.

She went to the bathroom, where she sat on the windowsill and looked out onto the streets. *So many people*, she thought. Nonna, a pretty Indian asked her what she was doing over by the window.

“I just didn’t want to go outside. All of the cigarette smoke makes me a little nauseous.”

“Well now that you’re here, I have some good news to tell you.”

“What?”

“Well,” Nonna said, “You’re never going to believe it, but I got an interview at the UN!”

“Really?”

“I know, isn’t it great? It’s like my dream job. I’m taking the day off on Tuesday to go. I told Rob I was going to see the gynecologist to get a papsmear.”

“The UN as in the United Nations?” Joyce asked.

“What other UN is there?”

“Wow.” Joyce looked back onto the street. Outside, people were on their way to somewhere great, Joyce thought; to their offices on Wall Street, or to their boutiques in Soho, or tourists heading back to their chic flats in Europe. Joyce hopped off of the windowsill and stumbled on her platform shoe. As she tripped, she reached for Nonna’s leg to break her fall. When she stood up, steadying herself on the sink, she said, “Congratulations, Nonna. If anyone deserves it, it’s you.”

* * *

At five o'clock, Joyce fled the building. She was disappointed when she met Rob in the elevator and he tried to make small talk.

"It's really pouring out there, isn't it?"

"I'm glad I didn't forget my umbrella this morning," Joyce answered, not knowing what else to say.

"No, that would have been horrible. You would easily have gotten drenched."

"Easily."

"So how's everything going Joyce, with work, I mean?"

She wanted to say that it was going horribly. She wanted to tell Rob that she was getting screamed at by secretaries, that her teammates were terrible human beings who treated her with nothing but condescension. "Oh, it's going swimmingly, Rob." She nodded her head emphatically. "In fact, I've got a few promising callbacks scheduled for later on in the week."

"That's fantastic. Good work. Bring sure to bring me anything with potential, and I'll close hard for you."

"Will do," Joyce said. The doors opened, and she scurried out, pushing pass people, and pretending not to hear when the security guard told her to have a nice evening. She was wearing so many layers of clothing that she couldn't breathe. She unwrapped her scarf, unbuttoned her coat, and let out an anxious

grunt. When she finally got outside, she didn't mind that it was pouring. She walked to the subway station and descended the stairs. Underground, a homeless woman wrapped in garbage bags shouted, "Can anyone spare some change so that I can get something to eat?" When Joyce threw a few nickels into the woman's cup, she said, "What do you think I'm going to get with that?"

At Union Square, the doors opened, and she got off. She was in no hurry to go home and be alone. An hour later, she was sitting on the floor in the cooking section of a large book shop, with an odd pile of reading material before her: self-help books, a collection of erotic stories, and a comprehensive guide to French cooking.

"And here I thought you were a Brooklyn girl," a familiar voice said.

"I—" She lifted her head to see Tony, who had changed out of his trousers and tie and was wearing a black leather jacket with jeans and a t-shirt. His hair was a bit damp, so that it curled and glistened in silver waves. He bent down to face Joyce, smiled, revealing his one sharp, white tooth, and said, "I was just thinking about you."

"You were?" It was hard for Joyce to form words, as she had created a bubble for herself on the carpet of that bookstore, a fortress of books that she had locked herself into, hid behind, and now Tony had popped it, and she needed a minute to relocate herself, to switch from private Joyce to public Joyce.

“I passed by Blue Umi, one of my favorite sushi places, and thought of what you said earlier about hating sushi.”

She knew the place. It wasn't too far from where she went to college. Outside was a lit blue sign. From the street, all one could see was a dim interior with a long stretch of a bar and a blur of attractive people. The crowd was older, around Tony's age, and whenever Joyce passed, she wondered what the food was like, though she never found a reason to go in. Tony had thought of her today, and Joyce found some sort of strange comfort in that. She could smell Tony's cologne, which was heavy and musky. The silver ring on his hand sparkled.

“I'm certain that if you tried their food you'd love it. Actually, I can promise that you'll love it. And believe me, I've lived in New York my whole life. I know the best places to eat. Have you had any dinner yet?”

“I had some chocolate biscotti when I got here.” She could see the cookie wrappers on the floor near Anais Nin's erotica. She blushed. “But I haven't eaten anything of substance.”

“Are you up for trying sushi? Or maybe the real question is do you trust me when I tell you that you will love it?”

Joyce suddenly felt very small, not in an insignificant way like how she felt at work, but perhaps more like a child who could act out, could jump off a high swing because Tony's presence made her feel like there was a net and he would catch her.

“Yes, I trust you. Just give me a minute to fix myself in the bathroom and I’ll meet you outside.”

“Take your time.”

In the bathroom, she attempted to fix her makeup that had been smudged by the rain. She was a crumpled up piece of painting, soggy with blurred colors. She rubbed some perfume on her neck, adjusted her bra so that the effect of cleavage might be achieved despite the fact that her breasts were quite small, and gave herself one final look over. She was glad that she was wearing a fitted red shirt that made her dark hair and eyes stand out. Tony would find her attractive, and while she wished that she didn’t care, she decided that it was too late and accepted her vanity.

“Which way?” asked Joyce, when she saw him outside.

“We’re heading east,” he answered. “You look terrific by the way.”

“Thanks. You look nice out of work clothes, by the way.”

“I don’t feel like myself in a suit.”

They crossed the street and passed Joyce’s favorite chocolate shop. She told Tony about their chocolate croissants and the bowls of white chocolate soup they served. They passed NYU, and he told her how he’d been a student there thirty years ago. She said she’d loved to see pictures. She told him that she went to school in Manhattan as well. They passed by her favorite bookstore and stopped to look at the \$1 pile they had in small white bookshelves near the door.

Seeing Tony outside of work made Joyce think of the first time she saw her fifth grade teacher outside of the school building for the first time. It was a Saturday morning, and Joyce was in the middle of nagging her mother to let her go camping, along with Abbey and their older cousin Martha. “I’m almost eleven. If I get hit by a car tomorrow, I’d never have known what it was like to sleep in a tent!” This was Joyce’s fallback argument when her mother wouldn’t give her permission to do something – that it would be a shame, were she to die unexpectedly. And before her mother could respond, there she was – Mrs. Pill, in sweatpants, with her hair knotted and up in a clip, right at the end of the aisle, reading the back of oatmeal boxes. Joyce grabbed her mom and hurried to the other side of the supermarket before Mrs. Pill could see them, but it was too late. Even though it was just a glimpse, despite the fact that no hellos were exchanged, Joyce’s mind about her teacher had already changed. When Mrs. Pill directed her to do something that Joyce did not want to do, she remembered her teacher, looking a mess, alone at the supermarket, and shouted rebelliously, “No, I will not put the scissors in the closet, Mrs. Pill!”

Seeing Tony on the street, he somehow became more real. Joyce marveled at how handsome he was. She wondered what he looked like thirty years earlier and became saddened that she could only get to know the more sunken version of someone who must have been an undeniably beautiful person once. She wondered what other people thought of them as they walked together.

He fit in well with other New Yorkers, as he had a stylish, but easy way about him. He moved close to Joyce, crossing the line that one does to share a common space that feels more intimate and their fingers brushed. Joyce moved her hair away from her face and said that she was excited to try sushi. He said he hoped that she wouldn't be disappointed.

“Here we are,” Tony said, opening the door.

“Thank you for bringing me.”

“Of course.”

Tony ordered his favorites, and soon, the table was filled with an array of dishes that Joyce had never tried: ceviches, sashimi tacos, bowls of lobster salad, tuna prepared two ways, scallops, and several different rolls. She was on her second mango and vodka drink, when she asked him about his divorce.

“How did you know?”

“I think I heard Jackie mention something about it. Is it too personal? I shouldn't have asked you. I apologize.”

“No, not at all.”

She looked at Tony's fingers, which were constantly moving. He was always so cool, so smooth, but he was also nervous. He searched for the right way to broach the topic. “I was married for ten years to my high school sweetheart. Now bear in mind that our marriage ended nearly twenty years ago, so I don't hesitate to tell you because the wound feels fresh, but more because it

was such a difficult thing to experience, and women always ask the same questions after hearing the story, and yet they never seem satisfied with the answers. I want you to be satisfied with my answers.”

“What do they ask?”

“Oh, there’s always: why haven’t you remarried? Are you afraid of commitment? Why didn’t you ever have any children? Do you hate babies? I can go on and on.”

“How about we don’t ask each other any questions,” she said coyly.

He gave her another half grin. “That seems fair.”

Joyce helped finish off most of the dishes, raved how delicious each was, and took a shot of sake with Tony, who knew a lot about food. He told her that he spent a large part of his life traveling. He spoke French and Italian fluently and had worked all over the world, as a sous chef, a construction worker, a waiter, and for a blown glass artist. He told her that he came to GEC because he had moved back to New York after breaking up with a woman in Spain.

“Did you love her?”

“Is that a question?”

“I don’t even know why I asked. I’m sorry. I don’t want to know, really.”

“It’s okay,” Tony said, amused by her tendency to apologize. “I did love her, but we were so different. She was insanely jealous. We fought all the time, and I just couldn’t see a life with her. I’ve been in love a few times—what I

thought at the time was real love, at the very least, so I figured the odds were in my favor and I'd fall in love again. I hopped on a plane and came home."

"When you put it that way, it doesn't seem so bad."

"I've come to accept that not everything has to last forever. Some things just feel good at the moment."

"The great river shall flow," Joyce said.

"What does that mean?"

"It's just something a friend told me."

When they finished their meal, they left the restaurant and walked a few blocks to the subway. She talked about her family, and he listened. He asked questions. He laughed. He said something, but a truck whizzed by, honking, and when she asked him to repeat himself, he said it wasn't important. When he told her she was lovely, she said that he was lovely too. He took her hand in his, and instead of pulling back, she let it sit there. She thought of the scar on Jeffrey's neck and rubbed her fingers along his palm. She let herself be carried away like someone floating in the ocean being pulled in by the tides; she had never felt so light.

VI Taking Flight

Joyce watched crowds of people on Wall Street usher forward; step by step, gaining momentum—speedily, and in one sweeping movement—continuous, as if propelled by the same motor. Polished shoes hit the pavement. Women were poised, manicured; men wore jewelry: metal watches, engraved cufflinks, and wedding rings. There was no time to stop and admire the iconic statue of the bull in the middle of the street – the mascot of their lives. The sun was rising, but because it was the end of November, it was relatively dark still. People bustled into coffee shops, packing into lines. They paid, scurried to their jobs in looming buildings, crammed into elevators, and with a few nods and “good mornings,” went straight to their desks, where finally, they stopped and caught their breaths.

Joyce tried to settle in and wind down from her commute. She silently repeated meditations from a book called *Daily Zen: Reach Nirvana on Your Way to Work*. When she got to *I am in an ocean. I am one with the ocean. I am an ocean*, she was interrupted by the bellow of managers: “All chairs in the middle! It’s a chair party! Movement is good for the sale! Still doesn’t sell! Can’t convince while sitting!”

Helga struck a rolled up paper on an employee’s desks. “Up and Adam!” Rob ordered. The managers circled the room like hawks moving in on food.

Tony approached a member from his team and shut his laptop. He looked tired, sunken in. Posted behind him were his team's sales numbers for the week. He was \$22,000 short of the target. "Off your chair," he grumbled to Benny. "I'm not going to say it again."

He walked over to Joyce, who sat defiantly. "No sitting this one out, kid," he said as he drummed the table with his fingers. His eyes seemed to say *I'm sorry, I have to*, but it felt like being rubbed with salve after a branding session with a hot iron rod. Joyce was stricken. There was so much pitching going on at GEC, so many false statements made at all times that words became futile. Her mother had told her not to date any of the salesmen. "They're all full of shit. Whatever happened to that engineer you were dating? I could have seen you settling down with him."

Joyce recoiled to the safety under her desk, building a makeshift fort with her sweater by tucking it under a pile of books and draping it like a tent. She ruffled through a small stack of leads, most of which she'd already called too many times, the secretaries repeating, "No, Jim isn't in, and I don't think he'll be in tomorrow when you phone back."

She could hear Taye on the phone, negotiating price.

"I can work with you, but what kind of budget are we looking at here?"

"Sure, yes—I see. No, that makes sense, Mike."

Joyce could see his shoes through a small opening in the tent.

“I tell you what. I can get you that online banner for \$15,000. We need a company like TronLab on board for our January issue, and I’m willing to dip into my discretionary funds to make it happen.”

Taye had brought it a \$50,000 deal the previous day. “It’s all about confidence,” he’d told Joyce later, when he took her out for Chinese food. “You can’t be timid on the phone.”

“I’m not timid.”

“All I’m saying is, if you’re going to make any real money here, you’ve got to learn how to go into a call with a little bit of attitude. Take Aubrey—she was promoted to manager in three weeks. Why? Because she’s a bitch. It sounds crazy, but I think that in sales, bitch works.”

She pressed her headset to her ear; the office filled with what felt like one pitch, one cry. The same words. Stock phrases: discretionary funds, niche companies, data cleansing team in Bangalore India. She tried to imagine Smith, the Marketing VP who was on the other end of the line: a bulging gut sagging over his trousers as he clicked away on his laptop, half listening. She imagined his office, with upholstered furniture and secretaries named Nancy and Betty.

“Listen Smith, our publication goes out to a qualified circulation of 36,000. Now, that includes vice presidents of microarray research, presidents of sales, and managing directors, all of whom are verified and have opted in to our directory via an online form, on which they’ve specifically stated interest in

receiving calls regarding the latest microarray technology. So let me ask you – are those typically the people whom you’d be looking to reach?”

“Yes, they are, but I’m in no position to purchase advertising this year. Budgets have been set, dear. Funds allocated.”

“If it’s a matter of price, I can work with you, but I’m telling you now that I’ve already got Entron and Wexler on board. Both companies are participating in a round table discussion that will be printed, as well as online. I want to include you in this special issue because I believe that I can highlight your company as a thought leader in microarray research, and because Callex Corp. came up in a conversation I had with Mr. Thomas O’Reilly, President of the Center of Array Technologies & Innovations, at our last conference. What I had in mind was featuring your company directly opposite that article I told you Mr. Reilly is penning for us. Does that seem like it’d be a good fit?”

Joyce felt she had to prove herself knowledgeable about the industry before he would take her seriously. Her voice was childlike, and she knew that he would feel more comfortable entering into a contract with a man. She had to allay fears, pick up the speed and pacing of the pitch, and impart a sense of urgency to get him interested.

“You’ve got him,” Richard Doll, one of the office managers shouted as he rushed across the room. He had been patched into her call from its beginning, listening and waiting for just the right moment to help her with the close.

“Yes, it’s a good fit,” Smith answered, hesitatingly, “but the cost is higher than what we typically pay for an ad in a magazine.”

“Of course it’s higher!” Richard screamed, moving towards Joyce.

“Of course it’s higher, Smith,” she echoed.

“The \$19,500 covers not only the advert, but also that lead generation system I told you about,” Richard dictated, gesticulating wildly as his enthusiasm built and he became more hungry for the sale.

“The \$19,500 covers not only the advert, but also the lead generation tool I mentioned earlier,” Joyce mimicked.

“That will put you in direct contact with people who are looking to invest in microarray technologies.” Richard’s face was inches from Joyce’s. Each of his muscles seemed to tighten, to constrict; his limbs were stiff, and yet his arms flailed like he might reach out at any moment to grab her, and cover her mouth with his so that she might swallow his words. As he pitched, he reminded Joyce of a conman in a pulpit, a seller of indulgences preaching salvation while circulating the donation basket. He was a small man, fragile, like a child who is often sick, whose mother describes his symptoms as “whooping coughs” and “too much phlegm.” Though he was in his forties, he seemed to enjoy conversing with his sales team, all of whom were in their early to mid-twenties, recent college graduates. His face was gaunt, resembling that of a weasel, with a pointed nose

and a small mouth. His thin brown hair was neatly combed to the side like a boy who recently readied himself for the first day of school.

Joyce repeated everything that Richard said, how *Future Pharma* would act as an in-house ad agency for Callex Corp., how there was meeting set for Friday, during which time the vendors on board would be secured, and how it was necessary that they speak beforehand. She was getting better at being coached by Richard, copying his inflection, adding emotions to each statement, following his train of thoughts as if they were her own. Helga had already given up on Joyce, and Richard swooped in, adopting her. He darted across the office to help on a call, or send out an e-mail on her behalf. Tony told her that she needed to practice being self-sufficient, that that was the only way she'd survive at GEC. "What is it with the men at this company and their giving advice on survival? It's like we're stranded on this island. I *did* take a train here this morning. Next, you'll show me how to start a fire using chopsticks and the gong."

"I just don't like how involved Richard has become on your calls."

"But why? He sees potential in me, which is more than I can say for Helga. Isn't that a good thing? He's already helped me close two deals."

"If it's help you're looking for, I'd rather you come to me. I don't think he wants to help you because it's potential that he sees."

"Oh, I see, so he's wasting his time on me because he thinks I'm pretty, not because I'm any good at the job?"

“Joyce, that’s not what I said. I just don’t trust the guy, that’s all.”

The longer that Joyce worked with Richard, the better able she was to figure him out: nuances, movements, gestures, ways of manipulating the person on the other end of the phone, how eager he became as the conversation progressed, the way he inched closer to her the nearer they got to closing the deal. His excitement fed hers, which, in turn, translated into excitement on behalf of the potential client. His zeal for the sale, for money, for the lie, as oversized as it possibly could become, was contagious. On a call, he would become another person. He was no longer Richard Doll, the man with an argyle sweater collection in size small and a Russian wife who only married to become a citizen. No, he was a force, a better version of himself. His phone alias, Dick Haliday, was a man who slept with beautiful women, a man who drove a Porsche and owned a condo, who smoked cigars and ate steak and sausage for breakfast. He was a man who carried a big stick that he shoved into the faces of those who doubted him, faces that resembled those he’d encountered frequently as a child – faces of teasers and people who would tell him “no”; he’d offer his success to them, as a reminder of his size and masculinity. On the phone, Richard took on the role of whomever he wanted to be that day. He was a crook with a dirty smile and a fake laugh.

“Good work with the coaching!” he said once Smith hung up. “We got a call back, and I think there’s a good chance I can close him tomorrow. What else

can we ask for?" Richard wrapped his arms around Joyce, pulling her towards him.

"Thanks," she muttered. She felt his small frame against her, his itchy, ugly sweater. She looked at his face, his wide eyes like a small dog, and pulled back. "I'll put the pitch on the board."

The office was frenzied, filled with voices, people tied to their desks by the chords of their headsets. From the desk at which Joyce sat, she could see the ferry sailing towards Staten Island. As it moved away, it grew smaller, until it was merely an inch in space, a speck in an ocean, that, like Manhattan, didn't stop moving, and Joyce, watching, stood still, mesmerized by its size.

* * *

The managers were older, most of them men. They were effusive, loud; the presence of each individual manager fused into an incorporeal entity; boss, leader, big cheese. They set up their tables like nests in the middle of a jungle filled with wild boar and they were the ones putting the worms and insects into the mouths of their baby birds. Their phones were chord-less, which gave them freedom.

It was lunchtime. Everyone had the same break, one hour to run downstairs and purchase an overpriced salad, another cup of coffee, and smoke a cigarette outside, near the revolving doors at the entrance. Joyce removed the

cover from the container of pappardelle with alfredo sauce that she'd brought from home. Steam wafted upward. She twirled the pasta on a plastic fork.

Richard, who was nearby, sitting at the head of the table, smiled, his slanted eyes squinting. She returned the smile, not sure if she should speak, but thinking Richard wanted a conversation.

“Is that peanut butter and jelly?”

“You betcha,” he confirmed, and then licked his gums. “I never outgrew it, and I don't think I ever will. Some things only get better with time.” He took a sip from his cup of coffee that had been reheated from the morning. “I'm a simple man.”

Joyce nodded.

“I know what I like,” he continued. “Yes, sir-ee.”

He looked at Joyce the way he looked at her while he was coaching; he was looking through her. He was a football player running for a goal, a man searching for an answer, figuring out a tactic, contemplating a prize.

Joyce, unsure of the appropriate response, shoved a heaping forkful of food into her mouth.

“We make a great team,” he continued. “It's a relief to have someone like you at the table.”

“What do you mean someone like me?” she asked, covering her mouth with her hand as she tried to swallow.

“You’re sweet. You work hard. You’re a beautiful girl.” He leaned back in his chair, pushing out his chest muscles like he was preparing to take flight.

“Thanks,” she responded.

“You’re welcome. I’m sure the other men in the office notice as well. I see them making eyes at you while you pitch, the way you take your stance by that wall,” he said, pointing. “I didn’t realize I was being watched,” Joyce said. She half-smiled, and tried to lighten the conversation. She looked around the room. Most of the employees had either left to get lunch, or had hurried off to the bathroom. Tony was alone at his desk, visibly upset. This gave Joyce a small feeling of satisfaction. She let out a giggle loud enough for Tony to overhear.

Richard laughed along. “You have a certain glow.”

“Oh really?”

“Maybe it’s just the way those pants fit.”

Joyce wanted to leave, to go and wash her face, rinse her mouth. The pasta felt sticky on her tongue, thick like adhesive. From her periphery, she could see Tony, shuffling through items on his desk, slamming down pens and flinging empty bottles of energy drinks across the room and into the garbage bins.

“Have you ever dated an older man?”

Joyce tried to speak, but her mouth was filled with the thick pasta. She wanted to spit it out. It had been six days since she went to dinner with Tony. They’d only spoke in passing since—in the kitchen on break, in the elevator

leaving work; he gave her a hug after walking her to the subway, and when she tilted her face upwards to kiss him, stood on her toes to reach him, he looked away. "Take care," he said, and then left. She thought of the chair party that morning, how he commanded her to stand like she was insignificant, like they had no relationship outside of the office altogether.

"No," Joyce said. "I've never dated anyone older."

"That's a shame," Richard replied, shaking his head with disapproval.

Joyce found it difficult to hate Richard completely. While he made her uncomfortable, he was also exceptionally smart. They spoke about books and had discussions about Nietzsche and Hiedegger. He told her that he was an English major as well. He praised her for her good work like a father might.

"Do you want a piece of my brownie?" she asked.

"Don't mind if I do."

Richard nibbled on the dessert like a mouse. His movements were more contained when he wasn't pitching as Dick Haliday.

"You're quite the chef!" he exclaimed overenthusiastically. "My wife is a terrible cook. I buy her those mixes that come in a box, but her cake is always dense. I tell her that I should carry them with me to use as a weapon should someone try to mug me on the subway." Bits of black were in between his teeth.

"These have a bit of chew in the middle like I like."

"It's my mom's recipe."

“Hey—I usually go for a walk in the park the last few minutes of break. Why don’t you come with me?”

Joyce wanted to say no, but she felt compelled. He was the one at the helm, the one with the solutions, if there were such things. She wanted to trust him.

They put on their coats. Hers was violet with a floral print, his a plain, musty gray. She tried to imagine him as a little boy, eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, drinking reheated milk.

“Let’s go down to the park,” he said.

“Okay.”

They moved through the lobby, past the sleek marble and fountain, out onto the streets, where the people rushed by in heavy streams.

“You have to be more assertive on the phone,” he said, keeping his eyes forward, his tone stern. “Otherwise, no one will take you seriously.”

“I’ve heard that.”

“You could put some more weight into your voice, take my lead more when I’m coaching.” Richard picked up speed. Joyce found it difficult to dart through the crowd.

“I didn’t realize I was – passive.”

“This is a rough gig. You need to have thick skin.”

They passed the subway station. Joyce felt an urge to run down the stairs, to go to home to Brooklyn, where she was safe to daydream, to write poetry and sit in cafés with young, attractive people.

“Don’t get down about this,” Richard offered, consolingly. “I’ll help you. We can stay late tonight, if need be.”

She looked past the people, the traffic, and the shopping center, to the ferry that was leaving, the boat that carried hundreds, or maybe even thousands of people in and out of Manhattan every day. From far away, Manhattan looked perfect: the skyline, the idyllic reputation as the city that never sleeps, where anything is possible. All of it made of the motor that seemed to be pushing the people on the streets forward. It was leading her to the park with Richard.

They moved past the restaurants and bars that closed at six o’clock sharp on weekdays, past the food trucks, also referred to as sellers of “street meat,” and found a bench near the water. Richard could act distant, Joyce thought. One moment he was her friend, the next, he spoke only in innuendos, and shortly thereafter, he tried to assert dominance as her boss. He was trying to pull in the reins.

“The only way you’ll make manager is if you follow my lead.”

“I don’t know if I’m going to be at GEC for very long,” Joyce said. “I have goals, dreams.”

“You’re here now. You have to get focused. Think about today. Don’t worry about tomorrow. That’s the first rule of sales. That, and do whatever you have to do to make the sale.”

Joyce shivered, and then pressed her hands together, rubbing them. She lifted them, breathing into her palms, and placed them back onto her lap. Richard reached over to cover them with his own hands. “November in New York. All one wants to do is find some sort of warmth,” he said. Joyce pulled away.

“I can help you with work, Joyce.” His tone lightened, assuming the air of friendliness to which she was more accustomed. “You’re young, I know, not as experienced, but we’ll get you there.”

“I’ll keep putting in the effort,” she said.

“I know you will. You’re a good girl. Hell, if you were ten years older, I’d marry you.”

The trees rustled. It was surprisingly quiet in the park, considering it was in the middle of the afternoon. Richard and Joyce were in a secluded spot, behind tall bushes and trees. Richard’s nose was red and moist. It was too cold to be lingering in the park. She looked at the leaves on the trees before her, the way their branches swayed, danced. She gazed out at the water, the waves, and the one bird that way flying overhead.

“I’m cold. Let’s go back to the office.”

Richard let out a sudden laugh, childish and high-pitched. “Of course. Let’s get back before people start talking.”

Joyce wanted to say that there was nothing to talk about, that she worked hard, and although she didn’t necessarily fit in, she could make a sale just like any other person in that office. She wanted to tell him that the job was temporary, that she wasn’t going to be a forty-something year old salesman, that she’d be better than that—she had received scholarships; she was a teacher. But she didn’t. She thought of the phone cord that kept her at her desk. Words built up inside of her like mountains of trash, tall and rotting. She remained still on the bench, taking in the passersby moving forward, walking quickly, focused on their destinations, and she wondered, just for a moment, where it was they were all going.

* * *

When Joyce got home, she looked at herself in the mirror: her blouse was shiny and low-cut and her makeup had smeared. She didn’t recognize herself. She’d been spending a lot more time getting ready in the morning than she did before she started working at GEC. *I’m wearing this for no one in particular* she thought. *I just want to look good for me.* She read an article in a women’s magazine that advocated females dating themselves as a way of “coping with single life”: “Why not court yourself? Seduce yourself! Take yourself to a show!” According to the article, she was supposed to end the night in lingerie, ravenously eat chocolate cake without any utensils. This was in lieu foreplay.

And so, she penciled in on her calendar; *Tuesday—date with self. Buy chocolate!* She doused herself with French perfume, searched online for opera music and found a clip of *Madame Butterfly*. She didn't know what the song was about, but she opened her mouth wide, and lip synced as best she could. Joyce took off all her clothes, and spun around the living room in frantic circles, stopping to feel and squeeze at her flesh, making sure that her body was real, small pinches waking her up. She imagined Tony—his tan skin, silver hair and white canine tooth that jutted out whenever he gave a half-grin, and fell to the couch, feeling nothing but longing and frustration that ached like an emptiness, like a gaping hole in her very being that left her exhausted.

She'd only slept with three men, all of whom were under the age twenty-five, and she wondered if Tony's body would feel different. Would he leave the lights on, groping at her as if she were a foreign land, some place he visited years before? With terrain more special and beautiful than it actually was? She had joked with Daisy, "What would Veronica Web do?" which now, came to her as more of an answer than a question. She made a fist and pressed her knuckles into her mouth, biting down hard.

VII

The Christmas Run

For Joyce, quitting teaching meant giving up the kitsch and comfort of a homemade Christmas: the sparkle of tinsel, garlands of holly berries and plastic poinsettia tacked along edges of blackboards, windows chalky white with fake snow, felt stockings stiff with glue, and construction paper cards addressed to *Ms. Little, my favorite teacher*. She no longer spell-checked letters to Santa or read poems titled *The Red of Rudolph's Nose*. Instead, at GEC, eighty employees gathered in front of the office to discuss what was deemed by the managers as the best and brightest time of the year – the Christmas Run.

“It’s the Olympics of sales,” Rob asserted. As he spoke, the murmur of the crowd quieted. There was a grandness to his voice that filled the room, buoying up Joyce. “The end of the fiscal year is quickly approaching. Marketing budgets will have to be depleted. Frankly, people are *looking* to spend money.”

Salesmen rubbed their palms together, eager to jump on the phone. The team from *Oil & Gas* magazine rocked back and forth on their heels in unison like Rockettes.

“Now—we’ve got roundtables, double-page spreads, inside front covers, back covers, online banners, and year-long sponsorships. We’ve got lead generation; we’ve got summits to sell—Mexico, Argentina, Thailand and

Singapore. Shoot for twenty-five. Anything less, and you're wasting an opportunity."

Some of the men wore Santa Claus hats. Mack, the least abrasive member of the *Oil & Gas* team, straightened his so that it sat upright, its fluffy white ball of fleece resting on top. Owen, who seemed too dignified for such costumes and refused to wear one, picked up where Rob left off. "This year, the prizes will be bigger—much bigger. The top ten will receive \$500 gift certificates to department stores of their choice." The men hooted, throwing up their fists.

"Also—" Owen waited for the noise to subside. "The person who comes in third place will receive an extra prize—a brand new laptop." The crowd cheered. The new trainees who had started that week eyed one another, amazed.

"The person who comes in second place—" Owen announced, raising his hand in the air, "will win a 72 inch flat screen TV, courtesy of Mr. Nigel Moon." The female employees, who were less verbal about their enthusiasm, sat in awe, jaws agape. "That's just crazy!" Heather said, her mouth full of peanut brittle.

"And finally, the winner of this year's Christmas Run, the person who sells the most advertisement space over the course of the next month, will receive an all-expense-paid vacation to Fiji, where he or she will stay at the Palomar, a five-star, beach-side resort, with a guest, for one week, any time next year."

The office erupted. There was a roar, screams, hi-fives, foot stomping, indiscernible grunts, and the shout of someone saying "Hell yea!" Taye

exclaimed to no one in particular, “That is unbelievable.” Tony nodded emphatically in response to his team members, each of whom warned that he was going to kick ass. Jackie, with a look of disgust, turned to Joyce and whispered, “I don’t know what all the fuss is about. The boys from *Oil & Gas* take it every year. No one else stands a chance.”

Diamonté erased the numbers from the whiteboards lining the walls. “This is the beginning!” Rob shouted. “December first. You’ve got twenty-five days to sell more than every other person standing in this office. There can only be one true winner—don’t forget it,” and with that, all Joyce could hear was the ringing of the gong.

* * *

From the window seat at a small Italian restaurant, Joyce watched people trudge through the streets. Even with slush and dirty snow, Manhattan looked pristine, lit up and aglow. It was the fifth consecutive day that Taye had asked her to lunch. She pushed around the spaghetti on her plate as he told her stories of California.

“Have you ever been surfing,” he asked.

“I can’t swim.”

“How can that be possible?”

“I never go in too deep—just until I reach here.” She moved a flat hand to her neck.

“I can teach you anytime you want. There’s a pool at my gym.”

“Maybe when it gets warmer,” Joyce answered, though she knew she’d never take him up on his offer. It was just one of those things people said, like let’s catch up sometime. The truth was she had already given up on learning how to swim. She was from Brooklyn, where the water was murky and uninviting.

“So—” Taya said, refilling her glass with water. “What made you quit teaching?”

“It’s hard to explain, actually.” There seemed to be a checklist of reasons, one that Joyce revisited when she was unsure if she’d made the right decision. “I keep telling myself that I was looking for a challenge, that I was curious to see what was out there.” She became thoughtful; nearby, the waiter poured a couple of businessmen wine. “But the truth is, part of me felt like I didn’t fit in, and the other part, well, the other part knew that if I stood, I’d retire after working twenty-five years; I’d have a collection of class photos, old summer checks, a pension, and I’d never write the book I keep putting off.”

“That’s a really good reason.”

“Is it?”

“It shows that you like change. You’re spontaneous and brave.”

“Or crazy and full of unrealistic dreams.”

“Either way, it makes me like you more.”

Joyce was glad that Taye had wanted to spend so much time with her. She felt calmer near him; at rest, like she had woken up from a long nap.

“Before I forget,” he said, “every year the office has a huge Christmas party at the Marriot. We should go together.”

“Sounds like fun.”

* * *

The next few weeks, a new energy consumed the office. It was as if a veil had been placed over GEC employee’s eyes, painting everything a rosy hue. People came into work earlier to phone Europe, and stayed later, making calls to the west coast. The gong rang relentlessly: “Mack here just reached one hundred thousand,” Tony shouted; “Nonna closed her second deal this weekend,” Rob said proudly.

“I can’t believe I’m near the bottom of the board with only six thousand,” Joyce mumbled.

“I can,” Jackie said.

Joyce felt guilty for leaving work at five, but she had accepted that she was too far behind to catch up in the competition.

“You’ve still got a few days to make some big moves,” Rob told her in the elevator.

The subways seemed to slow down as it got colder. Joyce blew hot breath into her hands and pressed them to her face. She stepped onto the R train and

crammed between two men with puffy coats and took a seat, her body immobile. Halfway home, the man on her left began to doze off, his head dropping down and falling on her shoulder, jerking back up like a fishing line, before once again, nodding and landing on her.

“Excuse me, sir,” she said, giving him a nudge with her elbow. “Sir, can you rest your head somewhere else?”

“Huh?” The man awoke, disoriented, his face close to hers; his chin was covered in gray stubble. He had a turkey neck.

“I said can you please put your head somewhere else?”

The man squinted, his face seeming to squeeze, sucking itself in like a balloon deflating.

“I’m not a pillow,” she asserted. “Do I look like a pillow? What makes you think that you can just lean on a stranger? What gives you the right?” She thought about how poorly she was doing in the Christmas Run; if anything, she was barely hobbling, crawling towards some imaginary finish line, the New Year, a fresh start. She consoled herself with the thought that this was Veronica Web’s fault, a separate person entirely. This was how she would get through the holiday season, by compartmentalizing her life, her very being if need be.

“I wasn’t resting on you,” the man responded curtly.

“Now *that’s* where you’re wrong,” she snapped. “You were resting on me.” Her voice began to rise as a slight Brooklyn accent emerged. “Do you think

I'm lying? Is that it? I've conjured up some delusional plan, one in which I accuse old men of leaning on me for no apparent reason?"

"I'm not *that* old," was all he could say, still groggy, as he moved his body away.

"If you have to emphasize 'that,' then yes, you are. And you should be ashamed of yourself!" She wagged a finger, shimmied out of her tight spot and rushed off to the next cart as the train pulled into Atlantic Avenue.

* * *

By Christmas Eve, Joyce had decided that it was just as lofty a goal to come in last place in the Run as it was to come in first.

"Veronica Web just doesn't endorse competition," she told Jeffrey, staring into the sink while in the kitchen. Jeffrey crushed tablets of codeine with the back of a spoon and sprinkled the dust into a bowl of oatmeal.

The countdown began at 11:55 a.m. At noon, the winner would be announced, a toast would be made, and everyone would scamper off to ready themselves for the party that night. Once again, people gathered, this time, tired and ready for a break.

"As it stands, Tony is in first place with \$175 thousand; Mack is in second with \$160, and Will is in third with \$143. I would just like to say, as we wait it out these final moments, that I am incredibly proud of all of you. Give yourselves a hand," Rob said.

“I told you,” Jackie murmured to Joyce, “Tony was going to take it. Maybe he’ll bring you to Fiji if you play your cards right.”

“Why don’t you three come to the middle?” Rob motioned. “Tell us what the past month has been like for you.”

Tony patted Mack’s back. He was center stage, which made him light up like a politician. He strode over to Rob, shook his hand and nodded, mouthing “thanks” as people cheered.

“It’s been one helluva month, that’s for sure,” he began. “I guess one thing comes to mind as this whole thing comes to an end, and that is that the Christmas Run really taught me a lot about who I am, the lengths I’m willing to go to, how hard I’m willing to push—whether I’m willing to kiss a secretary’s ass and tell her how intoxicating her voice is, or not. You really see, at least I did, that there are very little boundaries on the phone, and if you’re anything of a scumbag salesman like me, you like it that way.”

People laughed overdramatically, exhausted. Someone cried out, “You’re the man, Tone-ay!” Joyce clapped in a composed and polite fashion. When Tony looked at her and winked, she offered a thumbs up and joined in the shouts of the crowd.

Mack said that his success was a result of tireless devotion, that he had started work at seven , that he made a poster that read: *Congratulations, Mack! You are this year’s Christmas Run Winner!* that he hung above his bed and read

aloud before he went to sleep. He said that if he had to lose to anyone, he was glad that it was Tony, his mentor and friend.

With just a minute to go, Rob looked out into the crowd to find Will, who was missing. “Where is Mr. Doll? Has anyone seen him?”

“I’m here,” someone shouted weakly. Will rushed in, waving a sheet of paper. He slowed down as he approached the group, in an attempt to compose himself and reclaim some dignity for bursting into the room like a child. “I did it,” he bellowed, checking his watch.

“What do you have there, mate?” Rob asked.

“Moxen Corp. finally faxed over their contract for the January and April issues. I have them a double-page spread.” He paused, excited, out of breath, unsure, “for thirty-five thousand.”

VIII

Veronica Web

Joyce slipped on the red satin dress that she purchased the day before. It was more of a costume than anything else, as it felt transformative. It fit perfectly, like a second skin, hugging her feminine figure. As she slid into her shoes, she embraced a new identity, or at the very least, tried to imagine herself differently.

It was late in the evening, and she had to make her second trip to Manhattan that day. The cold air stung as she rushed to the subway. The ride seemed to take longer than usual, or maybe it was just because she was nervous. She listened to Christmas music along the way and thought of how quickly time had passed. Soon she'd have to make a list of resolutions, perhaps join a gym or give up sugar.

When she got to the Marriot, she passed large groups of businessmen and women, all of whom were also attending company holiday parties. She wondered how much money the company was making that Nigel Moon could afford such an extravagant location. As she rode the elevator, she looked at the other women, most of who were older, and examined how they were dressed. She crossed her arms over her chest, embarrassed, and hurried to the floor where GEC's holiday

bash was being held. She handed her coat to a young redhead at coat check, stuck a dollar in the tip jar, and entered the large event space.

Rows of lights hung from the ceiling like curtains. Half of the space was a dance floor with a DJ, while the other half was filled with round tables draped in iridescent green table linens. Waiters worked the buffet and circled with drinks.

“Well, aren’t you shiny,” Jackie pronounced.

“It’s Christmas Eve,” Joyce replied. “Let it go.”

“At least you blend in with the rest of the girls here. You’ll give Nigel over there a thrill for sure.”

“The CEO?”

“That’s him,” Jackie said, pointing. “Fresh from a court settlement. Remember Darla, the girl who quit last month? She filed a sexual harassment suit.”

“It’s not nice to spread rumors,” Richard said as he approached from behind.

“Heather spoke to her on the phone last week. I think it’s safe to say that Nigel is a dirtbag, but you wouldn’t know anything about that Richard, now would you?”

“Jackie, why don’t you go check out the buffet? Richard motioned with a drink in hand. “They’ve got cream puffs. Go on—fill up.”

Jackie huffed, shot Joyce a look, and turned to go.

When she was gone, Richard placed his hand on Joyce's lower back. "You should never take this dress off. We'll make it a company policy that you wear it every day."

"Congratulations on winning the Christmas Run," Joyce said flatly. "That was some entrance you made earlier."

"Granted, I didn't want it to come down to the last minute, but sometimes that's just how these things go. I know I took the office by surprise, but I did win fair and square."

Joyce nodded as she surveyed the room. She spotted Taye near the dessert table with Diamonté, who was feeding him berries. "Well, you did a great job," she grumbled. "Just fantastic."

"I think so too." Richard finished off his drink. His eyes were glazed over. He gave her a creepy smile.

"Joyce—"

"What is it?" Diamonté was dragging Taye onto the dance floor.

"I have an extra ticket to Fiji, and I know that this might sound crazy, but my wife can't take time off from her job, and I was wondering if you'd be interested in going. Free vacation. You and me. I think it would be fun."

In heels, Joyce towered over him. She had the urge to step on him and squash him like the bug that he was. "Richard, don't take this the wrong way," she said, looking over to Tony who was seated at the bar, sipping on a drink, "but

you're an ugly, little man, and I'd rather gouge my eyes out with scissors and then eat them with toast the next morning than go anywhere with you." She jerked his hand off her shoulder. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to enjoy the rest of my night. Happy holidays."

* * *

Tony asked her to join him as she approached. He told her that she looked beautiful, but that she always did. After her fourth drink, she gave the collar of his leather jacket a tug. "I'm sorry about what happened today."

"Don't worry about it," he told her. "Someone once told me the great river shall flow. There's always next year."

"Do you think you'll be working here next year?"

"I'm fifty-five years old, Joyce. Where else am I going to go?"

When Joyce looked into his eyes, what she saw was something gentler than he conveyed to the rest of the people at GEC; maybe it was remorse. It seemed like he had craved something better. "What are your plans for Christmas?" he asked.

"Coca-Cola glazed ham at my parents' apartment in Brooklyn and then I'll probably head back home, where I'll watch cheesy movies and listen to Christmas music."

"Sounds perfectly nice."

"What about you?"

“Christmas isn’t really my scene. I’m not into the Hallmark hoopla. I think I’m just going to lay low.”

“You don’t have any family you want to visit?”

“None that I can stand,” he said, gesturing towards the bartender for another drink. Tony had the air of a little boy, one of dejection that softened him. “Maybe I can come over tomorrow and sing along to *Oh Holy Night* with you.”

Joyce looked down at her dress; her body didn’t feel like her own. It was as if she was astral projecting, watching the scene; she was back on her couch, imagining what it would be like to be with Tony. He looked younger as he sat at the bar. Maybe it was the way the room was lit; maybe it was that she knew he was disappointed about not coming in first place in the Christmas Run. She wanted to console him, or she wanted him to console her. If GEC had taught her anything, it was that it didn’t matter one way or the other. There were so many versions of the truth.

“Cheers,” Tony said, as they clinked glasses and finished their drinks. The *Electric Slide* came on. “I think that’s our hint to go.”

* * *

In a room on the twentieth floor, Tony made his way over a club chair on one side of a king size bed. On the other side was a wall of windows, through which Joyce could see the city; it seemed to sparkle. Out in the distance, things

changed shape. The ocean looked like a blanket of gravel on which one could walk. The Verrazano Bridge looked toy-sized, surreal.

Joyce began to feel as if she was drifting away from the floor.

She sat on the bed, her feet aching and her body floating away like a hot air balloon. She looked at her dress and it was all sorts of colors – blue, green, red, yellow. Tony was Tony, but twenty years younger. He was the Tony who drove single women mad, made them dizzy with excitement, with the promises that intoxicate women, not sex, but commitment – marriage, babies, someone to love them when they wrinkled. The younger Tony was less jaded and cynical. He hadn't been deeply disappointed yet, hadn't given up on his dream of being a successful musician, hadn't been through a bitter divorce with a woman who took his house and made his life miserable for two years.

She stood up and peeled off her dress, bright red like a bowl of strawberries, like the mouth of a child who has eaten too many cherry candies and sticks out his tongue. She went over to him, kissing his forehead, then his eyes, his nose and cheeks. She inhaled the scent of his messy hair, his rumpled jacket, his sweat and musky cologne. His face was from years prior when he was so handsome he made women ache, when he wore his good looks like an insult, cockily. The younger Tony pulled her down on top of him, and Joyce closed her eyes, immersed in a dream.

* * *

In the morning light, the city looked different. Joyce sat by the window, watching the people below, imagining them weary from the excesses of New Years. Certainly, she was weary. She debated the proper protocol as she downed glass after glass of water. Should she get dressed, leave a note by the pillow and go? Would that be too harsh? Might Tony actually be grateful to not have to face her? She looked at her red dress, crumpled on the floor like a chewed up tongue, rubbed her face with her hands and moaned. Tony, a few feet away, snored loudly as he slept like a baby.

* * *

The promise of a New Year was met with disappointment. The next week, after the excitement of the ball dropping, parties, and champagne, resolutions fizzled and fell away like scabs. The joy of the holiday season was over by January, and there was nothing to look forward to that would lighten the harshness of winter. Joyce had resolved to quit GEC by June. She had also resolved to find a roommate and move to Manhattan, where she would get a job in Publishing.

She shuffled papers around on her desk, pretended to dial, and spent upwards of forty-five minutes sending e-mails.

“Can you make it to Vegas this weekend?” Jeffrey asked her.

“This weekend, as in tomorrow?”

“As in, we’re taking a 9 p.m. flight tonight.”

“Who?”

“Sam and I. We’re getting hitched. We need a witness.”

“Wow. I mean that’s great. I’m just shocked, but congratulations. I can’t believe it.” “I’m a lucky man.” Jeffrey took off his fedora and placed it on Joyce’s head.

“It’d mean a lot if you could come support me.”

“Hell with it. Count me in.” Jeffrey gave Joyce a hi-five, told her she could bring a date, and shuffled over to the kitchen for free cupcakes.

At lunch, she sat with Tony in a deli, eyeing the pound of corn beef the man behind the counter was layering on her rye bread. Tony’s eyes were puffy, his cheeks swollen, as if he had a shellfish allergy and had chugged a bowl of clam chowder for breakfast. The day before, Mack had quit and went to work for the sales department at *Village Voice*. Rob introduced Tony to Hugh, who would be joining the team the following week. After calling Tony “old man” and giving Diamonté a slap on her rear, Tony refused to refer to him as anything other than ugly jackass.

When the waitress, an old woman with maroon hair, brought over Joyce’s sandwich, Joyce picked up a slice of pink meat and stared, dangling it in the air.

“Is this raw?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. That’s the color it’s supposed to be.”

“It doesn’t look right. I’m not hungry.” She pushed her plate away.

“You’re going to throw away perfectly good corned beef?” Tony asked.

“I’ll give it to the homeless man outside. The one who begged us for money as we came in.” Behind Tony, Joyce could see a handsome man watching her from the counter. She wanted to return his smile, but she looked at Tony, who was leaned back in his seat, one hand rubbing his temple.

“We should go to Las Vegas this weekend. Jeff’s getting married, and I told him I’d be his witness.”

“That’s a joke.”

“What is so comical about us going to Las Vegas?”

“Joyce, I’m not going to hang out with you with your young friends, especially not Jeff, who works with us. What would I have in common with him?”

“What do you have in common with me?”

“You’re different,” Tony said. The fluorescent lights that hung in the deli made a buzzing sound like a bee trapped in between a window and a screen. “I just don’t see why we have to complicate something that’s going so well.”

“I wish I would have met you thirty years ago,” Joyce blurted out.

Tony put down his sandwich, wiped his mouth and sighed. “Am I a disappointment to you? Is that it? Because I’m not holding a gun to your head here.”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying.” Joyce’s voice was gentle. Somehow, they had reversed roles: she was the mother and he was the child. The morning after they had slept together, Joyce had left to buy breakfast. She poured milk in his coffee, ironed his black shirt, and offered him a glass of water and a Tylenol when he awoke. Now, she reached over to brush her fingers through his thick silver hair. “It’s just—we would have had some life, you know.”

“I know,” he said.

There was no more discussion about their age, or Las Vegas, or GEC for the rest of their lunch. As he ate, Joyce studied the lines of Tony’s face like a painting, memorizing their placement, how deep they ran. He was so handsome, and one day, she was sure she’d want to remember exactly what he looked like.