

How to Keep Your Day Job

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DO A DRY RUN ON THE BUS A WEEK BEFORE YOU START, at the right time of day, carrying the right amount of stuff, in the stiff uncomfortable black shoes you can't run in. If you don't own such shoes, buy some. Don't get paint on them.

Also, buy a second alarm clock. Set it half an hour early. Promise your boyfriend that you'll turn it off as soon as it goes off, and that you'll get ready really quietly. In the dark if you have to.

You can wear most reasonable clothing to an office; it isn't as bad as all that. Just nothing with paint or an amusing slogan on it, and nothing that makes you look either really attractive or really awful. Probably nothing purple, either. If in doubt, put a cardigan over it.

Smile as you turn off the alarm. Smile on the bus. Smile in the lobby. Smile at your desk.

Put your full name on all paperwork, even though your boyfriend makes fun of your middle name. Accept whatever desk you are given, even if it is in a hallway and someone seems to be asking if that is OK with you. Laugh at whatever jokes you are told, even if they seem sort of mean to gay people. Work hard.

Don't work so hard that you don't take a lunch. The first day, bring something interesting to eat, although certainly nothing with a weird smell, or even any smell at all if you can help it. Then wait and see if people invite you eat with them. Interesting food will give people something to talk to you about if they invite you to eat with them. If they don't, eat your complicated odourless sandwich alone at your desk at 2:30.

Smile in the hallways, even when people don't smile back. Smile at the photocopier, even when it's jammed and smears toner on your cardigan when you try to unjam it. Never smile in the washroom.

Don't do anything that could draw attention. Your goal should be to be anonymously indispensable, like a photocopier that never jams. Examples of attention-drawing activities include: putting up posters for your art show, getting loudly angry at your boyfriend on the phone, falling down the stairs, or crying when someone yells at you.

Use Post-its, all the different colours. Use a mechanical pencil. Use Excel spreadsheets, Internet radio, Google Earth, and a speakerphone. Use XpressPost and bicycle couriers and the colour scanner and too many paperclips. Revel in all that is yours to use, though you don't need or want to.

When you talk about your boyfriend, start saying *partner*, even though you know he would give you a dirty look if he could hear. In an office, everyone is assumed PC and judgey until proven otherwise.

If ever you arrive late, don't say a thing, least of all an excuse. Act like you thought the workday really started at 9:47. But don't eat lunch, as penance.

Do not moan to your partner that you are imprisoned away from your real life, squashed and stifled, unmotivated and underappreciated, stationary and over-stationery'd. He'll only tell you to move the canvases out of the living room if you're not going to work on them. Your partner hates whiners.

Watch your step.

Watch the movie *American Pie*, particularly that girl from *Buffy* with the "This one time at band camp ..." refrain. Avoid becoming the loser who is cool somewhere else, not here, and wants people to believe it. You can talk about your surreal still-lives and your partner's band, but keep in mind: most people don't care. And how cool are you even elsewhere, really?

Even in summer, don't stress about tattoos. Everybody has one now; a butterfly on your shoulder isn't even interesting anymore. If in doubt, put a cardigan over it.

If, because relationships are stressful and his band has been fighting and the summer's been hot, your partner knocks you into wall and it leaves a bruise, a cardigan will cover that too. You might be able to call the Employee Assistance Program, but they probably report everything to management. Nobody likes a whiner.

Do not complain to your colleagues that you are imprisoned away from your art, that your partner is cold and distant, that the photocopier is broken. Your coworkers have problems, too, and will not feel sorry for you. And—remember—nobody likes a whiner.

Your colleagues might not like you even if you don't whine, but you have to pretend they still might. If someone says your clothes are "interesting" because they are "apparently" reversible or that they "can't help but notice" that you are "able to resist" hairstyling products, give them the benefit of a doubt.

If your yoghurt disappears from the fridge, give everyone the benefit of a doubt.

If, at 4:07, a superior finds something that must be completed by the next morning, say you can't stay if you can't stay. Explain that to do overtime, you'll need some notice because you have lots of responsibilities (use the words *overtime* and *responsibilities*—they are more imposing than *work late* and *stuff to do*). If your superior doesn't respond, explain about the show, the workshop, or your partner's desire to have you home by six. Then look sad. Then go sit down and do the work.

Breathe.

If your partner tells you he needs the space to stay out all night, try to understand, but also explain that you feel lonely and worried when he does this.

Then try to be sexier. Then look sad. Then go to bed alone.

If people ask you for things that aren't part of your job, try anyway. If you can't do those things, find out whose job it is and tell him or her to do it. If he or she implies that you are lazy, assure them you are not. If they disagree, go sit down and do their work.

Despite your best efforts, you still might fall down the stairs. That's natural. We are all hurtling through space at alarming speeds and those stiff shiny shoes are without tread and not designed for grip. And life is complicated enough that stairs might not be the first thing on your mind.

Accept the possibility of the fall. To be prey of gravity is to be human. But if falling, do stop when you can. *Don't* be seduced by the freefall, the absence of responsibility from the complications of life, the new angles at which a broken leg can bend. Weigh your body hard on each step until you come to one on which you can rest.

Rest.

It's ok.

Check if you are breathing. You might have stopped, for the pain or the shock of the drop.

Breathe.

Check for breakages: limbs, spine, heart.

Are you breathing? Are you broken?

It's ok. Whatever the answer, it is ok.

Breathe.

Open your eyes, even though stairwells are unattractive places, and

illuminating windows are unlikely. Regard the grey or beige or greyish beige walls. Concentrate on their solidity, immobility, inability to do you any harm ... or help.

Help, or something like it, will come. Heavy footsteps on the landing above you indicate a man with some sense of his own authority. Whoever it is, it's probably no one whose presence can comfort you. You will want your partner, but remember: he doesn't want you, and just signed the lease on a bachelor apartment. You'll want to sob like rock star, or scream like a soccer mom, or curse like a CEO, but don't.

Wait. Wait and see what happens next.

Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Don't cut off your nose to spite your face.

Don't get too big for your britches.

Don't quit your day job.

Wait on your stair, whatever stair you've managed to stop at. Lie still.

No matter who is up at the top of the stairs, don't bother to try to look business-casual, to stop crying and straighten your clothes, tuck your hair behind your ears, to stop being hurt or heartbroken or human. Don't even wipe your face—you'll just smear snot, tears and blood across your nice clean cardigan. Blood stains everything, you know.

What is going to happen happens, and that's, "Hey, you ok?"

Don't let the colloquial diction fool you. This query is not light. He can see blood on your shin, on the side of your mouth from the fall, and the bruise on your collarbone from last weekend. Even the old bruise hurts now. Your calm, even breathing does not obscure the pain. You aren't fooling anyone, you know.

He will probably touch you, on the shoulder or arm perhaps, because the bubble of business-casual propriety has already been breached by injury, tears, snot. And instead of irritated or sexually harassed, you will feel very slightly comforted by this stranger's touch, and then profoundly ashamed of that.

Think about your ergonomic chair upstairs, the strength in your spine.

He'll say something strikingly banal, like, "Fell?"

Something will clog the back of your throat: maybe blood, or vomit, mucus, dignity. You open your lips and nothing pours out, which is something. But no words, either, just the silence of your bloodied lip, a tooth-bitten cut, not internal hemorrhaging. Remember that you've made your own damage.

The man's tie dangles into your eye line, and then he lowers onto your stair. He puts his hand back on your shoulder, and says, "Well, don't fret, I'm on the health and safety committee—I know what to do. We gotta assess the damage." He reaches into his jacket pocket.

Your leg is probably broken, just above the ankle, where the bone is close to the surface. Something there is digging and jagged, you feel it without looking down.

Don't look down.

Fine, if it will make you feel better: adjust your cardigan to cover the bruise, but remember that this man doesn't care.

What he pulls from his pocket is not a splint, bandages, sedatives or liquor. It's a cellphone, just like yours, the one that comes free with the two-year contract.

If you are still woozy from the drop, it might help to focus on something solid and singular. Focus on this man's flushed face, his stubble under the silver cell phone as he presses it to his big flat ear. His voice bounces loud off the hard stairwell walls, "Hey, Steve-o. Gregster here. We've got a faller on the southwest stairs, below three, damage to the ... the fe ... "

You know he wants to say *femur*, because that's the famous interesting bone on television medical dramas. But that's the thighbone. That's not the one you broke.

Watch him think and think. He doesn't *know* what bone you broke. But he comes up with something; he is a man doing his job and he does it ok. "...damage to the shin-bone, plus pretty shaken up. Call it in, wouldja? I'll get'er down. Bring a car ... yep. 10-4. Roger. Ok. Bye now." He does it smooth and fast enough, you have to give credit there.

He meets your gaze. He has swimming-pool coloured eyes. He says, "We have to document this," and you think, suddenly, of all the documents on your desk, things undone. A certain number will never be needed, true, but certain mailings are important, pressing, will be noticed if undone.

You have a headache that could be a concussion. Your lip is bleeding onto your cardigan. You think your right top incisor is loose. And your leg is broken. You feel dangerously close to whining.

There's an invoice that needs to be sent out. You should do it. You probably could do it, if you could lean on this gentleman beside you, or someone. You've been trying to get a hold of your ex-partner all week to give him back the guitar picks and combs and Kerouac of his that you've

found. But you think he's screening, or he's changed his cell number.

Don't be too concerned about what's been left behind.

The phone is still open, silver bright. The man isn't speaking on it anymore. He speaks to you instead. He says, "Hike up your hem, please." Staring into the depths of his chlorinated eyes, you wonder what he means, until he looks down at your strangely-angled ankle, and you understand what you have to do.

You have to.

If you think to say, *tibia*, don't, he'll find out. If you think to ask him how many sick days you are entitled to, don't, you'll find out. If you've been thinking about calling your ex's mother, his bandmates, that Dominion checker he sort of likes, and telling them all of his crimes, don't—they'll find out.

Be a class act. Be the bigger person. Be a model employee.

Pull the cuff of your Gap on-sale dress pants gently, smoothly, away from the jut of bone. Don't worry about making the folds even. Don't worry about what this man, Gregster, is thinking, or seeing, or judging. You are colleagues collaborating on a project, the project of accident documentation.

He is saying, "We just gotta record this, you know, for the accident report." It seems that this is not a written report, though, since he doesn't ask you a single question—not your name or your pain threshold or why you find yourself in this strange, lame building. Not even whether you are single, if there isn't someone who loves you that should be called on the health and safety cellphone. He won't require a word from you, just flick the phone until it's a camera. He doesn't care, and neither should you.

Then, before you fully realize the state of your blood-painted face, your rucked-up clothes, blood-smearred mouth, akimbo angle of your leg and the edge of collar where that bruise might show, he will have taken your picture. Frozen forever, bleeding in the stairwell, in your cardigan.

Don't cry.

Don't even hate him. What else could he do? For you, a stranger with eyeliner running down onto your clavicle, breath all hiccupy, tears tangling your hair, his best emotion is probably only pity. For you in a similar nest of misery last week, your ex couldn't even manage that; only rage. You aren't what he wants, though he thought you were.

Let it go, all of it. You don't really have a choice, anyway. The Gregster is already sliding his palm round your shoulders.

When he says, "Allyoop," push up on your unbroken leg, but let him take as much of your weight as he will. Let your body press into him to keep from falling. It's ok; this isn't sexual, though it's hardly professional. Though he might be blushing as you try to balance, you have no cause to be embarrassed; his job is to help you in this your hour, or week or month, of need.

Don't cry.

Just walk down the stairs.

Don't think about the severity of the breakage, the horror of crutches on public transit, improper stairwell maintenance, or invoice day on Thursday. Don't think about the drawers in your dresser that are empty because he took all his socks and underwear, but don't think about the time he called you a waste of space in front of your brother, either.

The short-term disability, severance pay, gift baskets will all come through to you, just like the forms you filled out so carefully back at the beginning promised. You will wind up with six weeks of full pay before you must return to your overdue-invoice encrusted desk. As the fragments of your tibia slowly knit back into place, so will a lot of things, or at least begin to. In the meantime you have only to hop down the stairs, straighten your blouse, cry if you must but delicately and without snot. Be the person Steve-o expects to see when he brings the car around.

Breathe.

Keep going forward.

You have a job to do.