

PASTORALIA

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• *stories by* •

GEORGE SAUNDERS

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• *For Paula* •

· PASTORALIA ·

1.

I HAVE TO ADMIT I'm not feeling my best. Not that I'm doing so bad. Not that I really have anything to complain about. Not that I would actually verbally complain if I did have something to complain about. No. Because I'm Thinking Positive/Saying Positive. I'm sitting back on my haunches, waiting for people to poke in their heads. Although it's been thirteen days since anyone poked in their head and Janet's speaking English to me more and more, which is partly why I feel so, you know, crummy.

"Jeez," she says first thing this morning. "I'm so tired of roast goat I could scream."

What am I supposed to say to that? It puts me in a bad spot. She thinks I'm a goody-goody and that her speaking English makes me uncomfortable. And she's right. It does. Because we've got it good. Every morning, a new goat, just killed, sits in our Big Slot. In our Little Slot, a book of matches. That's better than some. Some are required to

catch wild hares in snares. Some are required to wear pioneer garb while cutting the heads off chickens. But not us. I just have to haul the dead goat out of the Big Slot and skin it with a sharp flint. Janet just has to make the fire. So things are pretty good. Not as good as in the old days, but then again, not so bad.

In the old days, when heads were constantly poking in, we liked what we did. Really hammed it up. Had little grunting fights. Whenever I was about to toss a handful of dirt in her face I'd pound a rock against a rock in rage. That way she knew to close her eyes. Sometimes she did this kind of crude weaving. It was like: Roots of Weaving. Sometimes we'd go down to Russian Peasant Farm for a barbecue, I remember there was Murray and Leon, Leon was dating Eileen, Eileen was the one with all the cats, but now, with the big decline in heads poking in, the Russian Peasants are all elsewhere, some to Administration but most not, Eileen's cats have gone wild, and honest to God sometimes I worry I'll go to the Big Slot and find it goatless.

2.

This morning I go to the Big Slot and find it goatless. Instead of a goat there's a note:

Hold on, hold on, it says. The goat's coming, for crissake. Don't get all snooty.

The problem is, what am I supposed to do during the time when I'm supposed to be skinning the goat with the flint? I decide to pretend to be desperately ill. I rock in a

corner and moan. This gets old. Skinning the goat with the flint takes the better part of an hour. No way am I rocking and moaning for an hour.

Janet comes in from her Separate Area and her eyebrows go up.

"No freaking goat?" she says.

I make some guttural sounds and some motions meaning: Big rain come down, and boom, make goats run, goats now away, away in high hills, and as my fear was great, I did not follow.

Janet scratches under her armpit and makes a sound like a monkey, then lights a cigarette.

"What a bunch of shit," she says. "Why you insist, I'll never know. Who's here? Do you see anyone here but us?"

I gesture to her to put out the cigarette and make the fire. She gestures to me to kiss her butt.

"Why am I making a fire?" she says. "A fire in advance of a goat. Is this like a wishful fire? Like a hopeful fire? No, sorry, I've had it. What would I do in the real world if there was thunder and so on and our goats actually ran away? Maybe I'd mourn, like cut myself with that flint, or maybe I'd kick your ass for being so stupid as to leave the goats out in the rain. What, they didn't put it in the Big Slot?"

I scowl at her and shake my head.

"Well, did you at least check the Little Slot?" she says. "Maybe it was a small goat and they really crammed it in. Maybe for once they gave us a nice quail or something."

I give her a look, then walk off in a rolling gait to check the Little Slot.

Nothing.

“Well, freak this,” she says. “I’m going to walk right out of here and see what the hell is up.”

But she won’t. She knows it and I know it. She sits on her log and smokes and together we wait to hear a clunk in the Big Slot.

About lunch we hit the Reserve Crackers. About dinner we again hit the Reserve Crackers.

No heads poke in and there’s no clunk in either the Big or Little Slot.

Then the quality of light changes and she stands at the door of her Separate Area.

“No goat tomorrow, I’m out of here and down the hill,” she says. “I swear to God. You watch.”

I go into my Separate Area and put on my footies. I have some cocoa and take out a Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Form.

Do I note any attitudinal difficulties? I do not. How do I rate my Partner overall? Very good. Are there any Situations which require Mediation?

There are not.

I fax it in.

3.

Next morning, no goat. Also no note. Janet sits on her log and smokes and together we wait to hear a clunk in the Big Slot.

No heads poke in and there’s no clunk in either the Big or Little Slot.

About lunch we hit the Reserve Crackers. About dinner we again hit the Reserve Crackers.

Then the quality of light changes and she stands at the door of her Separate Area.

“Crackers, crackers, crackers!” she says pitifully. “Jesus, I wish you’d talk to me. I don’t see why you won’t. I’m about to go bonkers. We could at least talk. At least have some fun. Maybe play some Scrabble.”

Scrabble.

I wave good night and give her a grunt.

“Bastard,” she says, and hits me with the flint. She’s a good thrower and I almost say ow. Instead I make a horse-like sound of fury and consider pinning her to the floor in an effort to make her submit to my superior power etc. etc. Then I go into my Separate Area. I put on my footies and tidy up. I have some cocoa. I take out a Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Form.

Do I note any attitudinal difficulties? I do not. How do I rate my Partner overall? Very good. Are there any Situations which require Mediation?

There are not.

I fax it in.

4.

In the morning in the Big Slot there’s a nice fat goat. Also a note:

Ha ha! it says. Sorry about the no goat and all. A little mix-up. In the future, when you look in here for a goat, what you will

*find on every occasion is a goat, and not a note. Or maybe both.
Ha ha! Happy eating! Everything's fine!*

I skin the goat briskly with the flint. Janet comes in, smiles when she sees the goat, and makes, very quickly, a nice little fire, and does not say one English word all morning and even traces a few of our pictographs with a wet-tened finger, as if awestruck at their splendid beauty and so on.

Around noon she comes over and looks at the cut on my arm, from where she threw the flint.

"You gonna live?" she says. "Sorry, man, really sorry, I just like lost it."

I give her a look. She cans the English, then starts wailing in grief and sort of hunkers down in apology.

The goat tastes super after two days of crackers.

I have a nap by the fire and for once she doesn't walk around singing pop hits in English, only mumbles unintelligibly and pretends to be catching and eating small bugs.

Her way of saying sorry.

No one pokes their head in.

5.

Once, back in the days when people still poked their heads in, this guy poked his head in.

"Whoa," he said. "These are some very cramped living quarters. This really makes you appreciate the way we live now. Do you have call-waiting? Do you know how to make a nice mushroom cream sauce? Ha ha! I pity you

guys. And also, and yet, I thank you guys, who were my precursors, right? Is that the spirit? Is that your point? You weren't ignorant on purpose? You were doing the best you could? Just like I am? Probably someday some guy representing me will be in there, and some punk who I'm precursor of will be hooting at me, asking why my shoes were made out of dead cows and so forth? Because in that future time, wearing dead skin on your feet, no, they won't do that. That will seem to them like barbarity, just like you dragging that broad around by her hair seems to us like barbarity, although to me, not that much, after living with my wife fifteen years. Ha ha! Have a good one!"

I never drag Janet around by the hair.

Too cliché.

Just then his wife poked in her head.

"Stinks in there," she said, and yanked her head out.

"That's the roasting goat," her husband said.

"Everything wasn't all prettied up. When you ate meat, it was like you were eating actual meat, the flesh of a dead animal, an animal that maybe had been licking your hand just a few hours before."

"I would never do that," said the wife.

"You do it now, bozo!" said the man. "You just pay someone to do the dirty work. The slaughtering? The skinning?"

"I do not either," said the wife.

We couldn't see them, only hear them through the place where the heads poke in.

"Ever heard of a slaughterhouse?" the husband said. "Ha ha! Gotcha! What do you think goes on in there?"

Some guy you never met kills and flays a cow with what you might term big old cow eyes, so you can have your shoes and I can have my steak and my shoes!”

“That’s different,” she said. “Those animals were raised for slaughter. That’s what they were made for. Plus I cook them in an oven, I don’t squat there in my underwear with smelly smoke blowing all over me.”

“Thank heaven for small favors,” he said. “Joking! I’m joking. You squatting in your underwear is not such a bad mental picture, believe me.”

“Plus where do they poop,” she said.

“Ask them,” said the husband. “Ask them where they poop, if you so choose. You paid your dime. That is certainly your prerogative.”

“I don’t believe I will,” said the wife.

“Well, I’m not shy,” he said.

Then there was no sound from the head-hole for quite some time. Possibly they were quietly discussing it.

“Okay, so where do you poop?” asked the husband, poking his head in.

“We have disposable bags that mount on a sort of rack,” said Janet. “The septic doesn’t come up this far.”

“Ah,” he said. “They poop in bags that mount on racks.”

“Wonderful,” said his wife. “I’m the richer for that information.”

“But hold on,” the husband said. “In the old times, like when the cave was real and all, where then did they go? I take it there were no disposal bags in those times, if I’m right.”

“In those times they just went out in the woods,” said Janet.

“Ah,” he said. “That makes sense.”

You see what I mean about Janet? When addressed directly we’re supposed to cower shrieking in the corner but instead she answers twice in English?

I gave her a look.

“Oh, he’s okay,” she whispered. “He’s no narc. I can tell.”

In a minute in came a paper airplane: our Client Vignette Evaluation.

Under *Overall Impression* he’d written: *A-okay! Very nice.*

Under *Learning Value* he’d written: *We learned where they pooped. Both old days and now.*

I added it to our pile, then went into my Separate Area and put on my footies. I filled out my Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Form. Did I note any attitudinal difficulties? I did not. How did I rate my Partner overall? Very good. Were there any Situations which required Mediation?

There were not.

I faxed it in.

6.

This morning is the morning I empty our Human Refuse bags and the trash bags and the bag from the bottom of the sleek metal hole where Janet puts her used feminine items.

For this I get an extra sixty a month. Plus it’s always nice to get out of the cave.

I knock on the door of her Separate Area.

“Who is it?” she asks, playing dumb.

She knows very well who it is. I stick in my arm and wave around a trash bag.

“Go for it,” she says.

She’s in there washing her armpits with a washcloth. The room smells like her, only more so. I add the trash from her wicker basket to my big white bag. I add her bag of used feminine items to my big white bag. I take three bags labeled Caution Human Refuse from the corner and add them to my big pink bag labeled Caution Human Refuse.

I mime to her that I dreamed of a herd that covered the plain like the grass of the earth, they were as numerous as grasshoppers and yet the meat of their humps resembled each a tiny mountain etc. etc., and sharpen my spear and try to look like I’m going into a sort of prehunt trance.

“Are you going?” she shouts. “Are you going now? Is that what you’re saying?”

I nod.

“Christ, so go already,” she says. “Have fun. Bring back some mints.”

She has worked very hard these many months to hollow out a rock in which to hide her mints and her smokes. Mints mints mints. Smokes smokes smokes. No matter how long we’re in here together I will never get the hots for her. She’s fifty and has large feet and sloping shoulders and a pinched little face and chews with her mouth open. Sometimes she puts on big ugly glasses in the cave and does a crossword: very verboten.

Out I go, with the white regular trash bag in one hand and our mutual big pink Human Refuse bag in the other.

7.

Down in the blue-green valley is a herd of robotic something-or-others, bent over the blue-green grass, feeding I guess? Midway between our mountain and the opposing mountains is a wide green river with periodic interrupting boulders. I walk along a white cliff, then down a path marked by a yellow dot on a pine. Few know this way. It is a non-Guest path. No Attractions are down it, only Disposal Area 8 and a little Employees Only shop in a doublewide, a real blessing for us, we’re so close and all.

Inside the doublewide are Marty and a lady we think is maybe Marty’s wife but then again maybe not.

Marty’s shrieking at the lady, who’s writing down whatever he shrieks.

“Just do as they ask!” he shrieks, and she writes it down. “And not only that, do more than that, son, more than they ask! Excel! Why not excel? Be excellent! Is it bad to be good? Now son, I know you don’t think that, because that is not what you were taught, you were taught that it is good to be good, I very clearly remember teaching you that. When we went fishing, and you caught a fish, I always said good, good fishing, son, and when you caught no fish, I frowned, I said bad, bad catching of fish, although I don’t believe I was ever cruel about it. Are you getting this?”

“Every word,” the lady says. “To me they’re like nuggets of gold.”

“Ha ha,” says Marty, and gives her a long loving scratch on the back, and takes a drink of Squirt and starts shrieking again.

“So anyways, do what they ask!” he shrieks. “Don’t you know how much we love you here at home, and want you to succeed? As for them, the big-wigs you wrote me about, freak them big-wigs! Just do what they ask though. In your own private mind, think what you like, only do what they ask, so they like you. And in this way, you will succeed. As for the little-wigs you mentioned, just how little are they? You didn’t mention that. Are they a lot littler wig than you? In that case, freak them, ignore them if they talk to you, and if they don’t talk to you, go up and start talking to them, sort of bossing them around, you know, so they don’t start thinking they’re the boss of you. But if they’re the same wig as you, be careful, son! Don’t piss them off, don’t act like you’re the boss of them, but also don’t bend over for some little shit who’s merely the same wig as you, or else he’ll assume you’re a smaller wig than you really actually are. As for friends, sure, friends are great, go ahead and make friends, they’re a real blessing, only try to avoid making friends with boys who are the same or lesser wig than you. Only make friends with boys who are bigger wigs than you, assuming they’ll have you, which probably they won’t. Because why should they? Who are you? You’re a smaller wig than them. Although then again, they might be slumming, which would be good for you, you could sneak right in there.”

Marty gives me a little wave, then resumes shrieking.

“I don’t want to put the pressure on, son,” he says. “I know you got enough pressure, with school being so hard and all, and you even having to make your own book covers because of our money crunch, so I don’t want to put on extra pressure by saying that the family honor is at stake, but guess what pal, it is! You’re it, kid! You’re as good as we got. Think of it, me and your mother, and Paw-Paw and Mee-Maw, and Great Paw-Paw, who came over here from wherever he was before, in some kind of boat, and fixed shoes all his life in a shack or whatever? Remember that? Why’d he do that? So you could eventually be born! Think of that! All those years of laundry and stuffing their faces and plodding to the market and making love and pushing out the babies and so on, and what’s the upshot? You, pal, you’re the freaking upshot. And now there you are, in boarding school, what a privilege, the first one of us to do it, so all’s I’m saying is, do your best and don’t take no shit from nobody, unless taking shit from them is part of your master plan to get the best of them by tricking them into being your friend. Just always remember who you are, son, you’re a Kusacki, my only son, and I love you. Ack, I’m getting mushy here.”

“You’re doing great,” says the lady.

“So much to say,” he says.

“And Jeannine sends her love too,” says the lady.

“And Jeannine sends her love too,” he says. “For crissake’s sake, Jeannine, write it down if you want to say it. I don’t have to say it for you to write it. Just write it. You’re my wife.”

"I'm not your wife," says Jeannine.

"You are to me," says Marty, and she sort of leans into him and he takes another slug of the Squirt.

I buy Janet some smokes and mints and me a Kayo.

I really like Kayo.

"Hey, you hear about Dave Wolley?" Marty says to me. "Dave Wolley from Wise Mountain Hermit? You know him? You know Dave?"

I know Dave very well. Dave was part of the group that used to meet for the barbecues at Russian Peasant Farm.

"Well, wave bye-bye to Dave," Marty says. "Wise Mountain Hermit is kaput. Dave is kaput."

"I've never seen Dave so upset," says Jeannine.

"He was very freaking upset," says Marty. "Who wouldn't be? He was superdedicated."

Dave was superdedicated. He grew his own beard long instead of wearing a fake and even when on vacation went around barefoot to make his feet look more like the feet of an actual mountain ascetic.

"The problem is, Wise Mountain Hermit was too far off the beaten path," Marty says. "Like all you Remotes. All you Remotes, you're too far off the beaten path. Think about it. These days we got very few Guests to begin with, which means we got even fewer Guests willing to walk way the hell up here to see you Remotes. Right? Am I right?"

"You are absolutely right," says Jeannine.

"I am absolutely right," says Marty. "Although I am not happy about being absolutely right, because if you think of it, if you Remotes go kaput, where am I? It's you Remotes

I'm servicing. See? Right? Give him his mints. Make change for the poor guy. He's got to get back to work."

"Have a good one," says Jeannine, and makes my change.

It's sad about Dave. Also it's worrisome. Because Wise Mountain Hermit was no more Remote than we are, plus it was much more popular, because Dave was so good at dispensing ad-libbed sage advice.

I walk down the path to the Refuse Center and weigh our Human Refuse. I put the paperwork and the fee in the box labeled Paperwork and Fees. I toss the trash in the dumpster labeled Trash, and the Human Refuse in the dumpster labeled Caution Human Refuse, then sit against a tree and drink my Kayo.

8.

Next morning in the Big Slot is a goat and in the Little Slot a rabbit and a note addressed to Distribution:

Please accept this extra food as a token of what our esteem is like, the note says. Please know that each one of you is very special to us, and are never forgotten about. Please know that if each one of you could be kept, you would be, if that would benefit everyone. But it wouldn't, or we would do it, wouldn't we, we would keep every one of you. But as we meld into our sleeker new organization, what an excellent opportunity to adjust our Staff Mix. And so, although in this time of scarcity and challenge, some must perhaps go, the upside of this is, some must stay, and perhaps it will be you. Let us hope it will be you, each and every one of you,

but no, as stated previously, it won't, that is impossible. So just enjoy the treats provided, and don't worry, and wait for your supervisor to contact you, and if he or she doesn't, know with relief that the Staff Remixing has passed by your door. Although it is only honest to inform you that some who make the first pass may indeed be removed in the second, or maybe even a third, depending on how the Remixing goes, although if anyone is removed in both the first and second pass, that will be a redundant screw-up, please ignore. We will only remove each of you once. If that many times! Some of you will be removed never, the better ones of you. But we find ourselves in a too-many-Indians situation and so must first cut some Indians and then, later, possibly, some chiefs. But not yet, because that is harder, because that is us. Soon, but not yet, we have to decide which of us to remove, and that is so very hard, because we are so very useful. Not that we are saying we chiefs are more useful than you Indians, but certainly we do make some very difficult decisions that perhaps you Indians would find hard to make, keeping you up nights, such as which of you to remove. But don't worry about us, we've been doing this for years, only first and foremost remember that what we are doing, all of us, chiefs and Indians both, is a fun privilege, how many would like to do what we do, in the entertainment field.

Which I guess explains about Dave Wolley.

"Jeez," says Janet. "Let the freaking canning begin."

I give her a look.

"Oh all right all right," she says. "Ooga mooga. Ooga ooga mooga. Is that better?"

She can be as snotty as she likes but a Remixing is nothing to sneeze at.

I skin and roast the goat and rabbit. After breakfast she puts on her Walkman and starts a letter to her sister: very verboten. I work on the pictographs. I mean I kneel while pretending to paint them by dipping my crude dry brush into the splotches of hard colorful plastic meant to look like paint made from squashed berries.

Around noon the fax in my Separate Area makes the sound it makes when a fax is coming in.

Getting it would require leaving the cave and entering my Separate Area during working hours.

"Christ, go get it," Janet says. "Are you nuts? It might be from Louise."

I go get it.

It's from Louise.

Nelson doing better today, it says. Not much new swelling. Played trucks and ate 3 pcs bologna. Asked about you. No temperature, good range of motion in both legs and arms. Visa is up to \$6800, should I transfer to new card w/ lower interest rate?

Sounds good, I fax back. How are other kids?

Kids are kids are kids, she faxes back. Driving me nuts. Always talking.

Miss you, I fax, and she faxes back the necessary Signature Card.

I sign the card. I fax the card.

Nelson's six. Three months ago his muscles stiffened up. The medicine they put him on to loosen his muscles did somewhat loosen them, but also it caused his muscles to swell. Otherwise he's fine, only he's stiff and swollen and it hurts when he moves. They have a name for what they

originally thought he had, but when the medication made him swell up, Dr. Evans had to admit that whatever he had, it wasn't what they'd originally thought it was.

So we're watching him closely.

I return to the cave.

"How are things?" Janet says.

I grimace.

"Well, shit," she says. "You know I'm freaking rooting for you guys."

Sometimes she can be pretty nice.

9.

First thing next morning Greg Nordstrom pokes his head in and asks me to brunch.

Which is a first.

"How about me?" says Janet.

"Ha ha!" says Nordstrom. "Not you. Not today. Maybe soon, however!"

I follow him out.

Very bright sun.

About fifty feet from the cave there's a red paper screen that says Patience! Under Construction, and we go behind it.

"You'll be getting your proxy forms in your Slot soon," he says, spreading out some bagels on a blanket. "Fill out the proxy as you see fit, everything's fine, just vote, do it boldly, exert your choice, it has to do with your stock

option. Are you vested? Great to be vested. Just wait until you are. It really feels like a Benefit. You'll see why they call Benefits Benefits, when every month, ka-ching, that option money kicks up a notch. Man, we're lucky."

"Yes," I say.

"I am and you are," he says. "Not everyone is. Some aren't. Those being removed in the Staff Remixing, no. But you're not being removed. At least I don't think so. Now Janet, I have some concerns about Janet, I don't know what they're going to do about Janet. It's not me, it's them, but what can I do? How is she? Is she okay? How have you found her? I want you to speak frankly. Are there problems? Problems we can maybe help correct? How is she? Nice? Reliable? It's not negative to point out a defect. Actually, it's positive, because then the defect can be fixed. What's negative is to withhold valuable info. Are you? Withholding valuable info? I hope not. Are you being negative? Is she a bit of a pain? Please tell me. I want you to. If you admit she's a bit of a pain, I'll write down how positive you were. Look, you know and I know she's got some performance issues, so what an exciting opportunity, for you to admit it and me to hear it loud and clear. Super!"

For six years she's been telling me about her Pap smears and her kid in rehab and her mother in Fort Wayne who has a bad valve and can't stand up or her lungs fill with blood etc. etc.

"I haven't really noticed any problems," I say.

"Blah blah blah," he says. "What kind of praise is that? Empty praise? Is it empty praise? I'd caution against empty

praise. Because empty praise is what? Is like what? Is a lie. And a lie is what? Is negative. You're like the opposite of that little boy who cried Wolf. You're like that little boy who cried No Wolf, when a wolf was in fact chewing on his leg, by the name of Janet. Because what have I recently seen? Having seen your Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Forms, I haven't seen on them a single discouraging word. Not one. Did you ever note a single attitudinal difficulty? You did not. How did you rate your Partner overall? Very good, always, every single day. Were there ever any Situations which required Mediation? There were not, even when, in one instance, she told a guy where you folks pooped. In English. In the cave. I have documentation, because I read that guy's Client Vignette Evaluation."

It gets very quiet. The wind blows and the paper screen tips up a bit. The bagels look good but we're not eating them.

"Look," he says. "I know it's hard to be objective about people we come to daily know, but in the big picture, who benefits when the truth is not told? Does Janet? How can Janet know she's not being her best self if someone doesn't tell her, then right away afterwards harshly discipline her? And with Janet not being her best self, is the organization healthier? And with the organization not being healthier, and the organization being that thing that ultimately puts the food in your face, you can easily see that, by lying about Janet's behavior, you are taking the food out of your own face. Who puts the cash in your hand to buy that food in your face? We do. What do we

want of you? We want you to tell the truth. That's it. That is all."

We sit awhile in silence.

"Very simple," he says. "A nonbrainer."

A white fuzzy thing lands in my arm hair. I pick it out.

Down it falls.

"Sad," he says. "Sad is all it is. We live in a beautiful world, full of beautiful challenges and flowers and birds and super people, but also a few regrettable bad apples, such as that questionable Janet. Do I hate her? Do I want her killed? Gosh no, I think she's super, I want her to be praised while getting a hot oil massage, she has some very nice traits. But guess what, I'm not paying her to have nice traits, I'm paying her to do consistently good work. Is she? Doing consistently good work? She is not. And here are you, saddled with a subpar colleague. Poor you. She's stopping your rise and growth. People are talking about you in our lounge. Look, I know you feel Janet's not so great. She's a lump to you. I see it in your eye. And that must chafe. Because you are good. Very good. One of our best. And she's bad, very bad, one of our worst, sometimes I could just slap her for what she's doing to you."

"She's a friend," I say.

"You know what it's like, to me?" he says. "The Bible. Remember that part in the Bible when Christ or God says that any group or organization of two or more of us is a body? I think that is so true. Our body has a rotten toe by the name of Janet, who is turning black and stinking up the joint, and next to that bad stinking toe lives her friend

the good nonstinker toe, who for some reason insists on holding its tongue, if a toe can be said to have a tongue. Speak up, little toe, let the brain know the state of the rot, so we can rush down what is necessary to stop Janet from stinking. What will be needed? We do not yet know. Maybe some antiseptic, maybe a nice sharp saw with which to lop off Janet. For us to know, what must you do? Tell the truth. Start generating frank and nonbiased assessments of this subpar colleague. That's it. That is all. Did you or did you not in your Employment Agreement agree to complete, every day, an accurate Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Form? You did. You signed in triplicate. I have a copy in my dossier. But enough mean and sad talk, I know my point has been gotten. Gotten by you. Now for the fun. The eating. Eating the good food I have brought. That's fun, isn't it? I think that's fun."

We start to eat. It's fun.

"Broughten," he says. "The good food I have brought. Is it brought or broughten?"

"Brought," I say.

"The good food I have brought," he says. "Broughten."

10.

Back in the cave Janet's made a nice fire.

"So what did numbnuts want?" she says. "Are you fired?"

I shake my head no.

"Is he in love with you?" she says. "Does he want to go out with you?"

I shake my head no.

"Is he in love with me?" she says. "Does he want to go out with me? Am I fired?"

I do not shake my head no.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute, go back," she says. "I'm fired?"

I shake my head no.

"But I'm in the shit?" she says. "I'm somewhat in the shit?"

I shrug.

"Will you freaking talk to me?" she says. "This is important. Don't be a dick for once."

I do not consider myself a dick and I do not appreciate being called a dick, in the cave, in English, and the truth is, if she would try a little harder not to talk in the cave, she would not be so much in the shit.

I hold up one finger, like: Wait a sec. Then I go into my Separate Area and write her a note:

Nordstrom is unhappy with you, it says. And unhappy with me because I have been lying for you on my DPPEFs. So I am going to start telling the truth. And as you know, if I tell the truth about you, you will be a goner, unless you start acting better. Therefore please start acting better. Sorry I couldn't say this in the cave, but as you know, we are not supposed to speak English in the cave. I enjoy working with you. We just have to get this thing straightened out.

Sitting on her log she reads my note.

“Time to pull head out of ass, I guess,” she says.
I give her a thumbs-up.

11.

Next morning I go to the Big Slot and find it goatless. Also there is no note.

Janet comes out and hands me a note and makes, very quickly, a nice little fire.

I really appreciate what you did, her note says. That you told me the truth. You a real pal and are going to see how good I can be.

For breakfast I count out twenty Reserve Crackers each. Afterward I work on the pictographs and she pretends to catch and eat small bugs. For lunch I count out twenty Reserve Crackers each. After lunch I pretend to sharpen my spear and she sits at my feet speaking long strings of unintelligible sounds.

No one pokes their head in.

When the quality of light changes she stands at the door of her Separate Area and sort of wiggles her eyebrows, like: Pretty good, eh?

I go into my Separate Area. I take out a Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Form.

For once it's easy.

Do I note any attitudinal difficulties? I do not. How do I rate my Partner overall? Very good. Are there any Situations which require Mediation?

There are not.

I fax it in.

12.

Next morning I go to the Big Slot and again find it goatless. Again no note.

Janet comes out and again makes, very quickly, a nice little fire.

I count out twenty Reserve Crackers each. After breakfast we work on the pictographs. After lunch she goes to the doorway and starts barking out sounds meant to indicate that a very impressive herd of feeding things is thundering past etc. etc., which of course it is not, the feeding things, being robotic, are right where they always are, across the river. When she barks I grab my spear and come racing up and join her in barking at the imaginary feeding things.

All day no one pokes their head in.

Then the quality of light changes and she stands at the door of her Separate Area giving me a smile, like: It's actually sort of fun doing it right, isn't it?

I take out a Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Form.

Again: Easy.

Do I note any attitudinal difficulties? I do not. How do I rate my Partner overall? Very good. Are there any Situations which require Mediation?

There are not.

I fax it in.

Also I write Nordstrom a note:

Per our conversation, it says, I took the liberty of bringing Janet up to speed. Since that time she has been doing wonderful work, as reflected in my (now truthful!!) Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Forms. Thank you for your frankness. Also, I apologize for that period during which I was less than truthful on my DPPEF's. I can see now just how negative that was.

A bit of ass-kissing, yes.

But I've got some making up to do.

I fax it in.

13.

Late in the night my fax makes the sound it makes when a fax is coming in.

From Nordstrom:

What? What? it says. You told her? Did I tell you to tell her? And now you have the nerve to say she is doing good? Why should I believe you when you say she is doing good, when all that time she was doing so bad you always said she was doing so good? Oh you have hacked me off. Do you know what I hate? Due to my childhood? Which is maybe why I'm so driven? A liar. Dad lied by cheating on Mom, Mom lied by cheating on Dad, with Kenneth, who was himself a liar, and promised, at his wedding to Mom, to buy me three ponies with golden saddles, and then later, upon divorcing Mom, promised to at least get me one pony with a regular saddle, but needless to say, no ponies were ever gotten by me. Which is maybe why I hate a liar. SO DON'T LIE ANY-

MORE. Don't lie even one more time about that hideous Janet. I can't believe you told her! Do you really think I care about how she is? I KNOW how she is. She is BAD. But what I need is for you to SAY IT. For reasons of documentation. Do you have any idea how hard it is to fire a gal, not to mention an old gal, not to mention an old gal with so many years of service under her ancient withered belt? There is so much you don't know, about the Remixing, about our plans! Do not even answer me, I am too mad to read it.

Which is not at all what I had in mind.

No doubt my status with Nordstrom has been somewhat damaged.

But okay.

Janet is now doing better and I am now telling the truth. So things are as they should be.

And I'm sure that, in the long run, Nordstrom will come to appreciate what I've accomplished.

14.

Next morning I go to the Big Slot and again find it goatless. Again no note.

Janet comes out and makes, very quickly, a nice little fire.

We squat and eat our Reserve Crackers while occasionally swatting each other with our hands. We get in kind of a mock squabble and scurry around the cave bent over and shrieking. She is really doing very well. I pound a rock

against a rock in rage, indicating that I intend to toss some dirt in her face. She barks back very sharply.

Someone pokes their head in.

Young guy, kind of goofy-looking.

“Bradley?” Janet says. “Holy shit.”

“Hey, nice greeting, Ma,” the guy says, and walks in. He’s not supposed to walk in. No one’s supposed to walk in. I can’t remember a time when anyone has ever just walked in.

“Fucking stinks in here,” he says.

“Don’t you *even* come into my workplace and start swearing,” Janet says.

“Yeah right Ma,” he says. “Like you never came into my workplace and started swearing.”

“Like you ever had a workplace,” she says. “Like you ever worked.”

“Like jewelry making wasn’t work,” he says.

“Oh Bradley you are so full of it,” she says. “You didn’t have none of the equipment and no freaking jewels. And no customers. You never made a single piece of jewelry. You just sat moping in the basement.”

Just our luck: Our first Guest in two weeks and it’s a relative.

I clear my throat. I give her a look.

“Give us five freaking minutes, will you, Mr. Tightass?” she says. “This is my kid here.”

“I was conceptualizing my designs, Ma,” he says. “Which is an important part of it. And you definitely swore at my workplace. I remember very clearly one time you came down into the basement and said I was a fucking ass-

hole for wasting my time trying to make my dream come true of being a jewelry maker.”

“Oh bullshit,” she says. “I never once called you a asshole. And I definitely did not say fucking. I never say fuck. I quit that a long time ago. You ever hear me say fuck?”

She looks at me. I shake my head no. She never says fuck. When she means fuck she says freak. She is very very consistent about this.

“What?” says Bradley. “He don’t talk?”

“He plays by the rules,” she says. “Maybe you should try it sometime.”

“I was trying,” he says. “But still they kicked me out.”

“Kicked you out of what?” she says. “Wait a minute, wait a minute, go back. They kicked you out of what? Of rehab?”

“It’s nothing bad, Ma!” he shouts. “You don’t have to make me feel ashamed about it. I feel bad enough, being called a thief by Mr. Doe in front of the whole group.”

“Jesus, Bradley,” she says. “How are you supposed to get better if you get kicked out of rehab? What did you steal this time? Did you steal a stereo again? Who’s Mr. Doe?”

“I didn’t steal nothing, Ma,” he says. “Doe’s my counselor. I borrowed something. A TV. The TV from the lounge. I just felt like I could get better a lot faster if I had a TV in my room. So I took control of my recovery. Is that so bad? I thought that’s what I was there for, you know? I’m not saying I did everything perfect. Like I probably shouldn’t of sold it.”

“You sold it?” she says.

"There was nothing good ever on!" he says. "If they showed good programs I just know I would've gotten better. But no. It was so boring. So I decided to throw everybody a party, because they were all supporting me so well, by letting me keep the TV in my room? And so, you know, I sold the TV, for the party, and was taking the bucks over to the Party Place, to get some things for the party, some hats and tooters and stuff like that, but then I've got this problem, with substances, and so I sort of all of a sudden wanted some substances. And then I ran into this guy with some substances. That guy totally fucked me! By being there with those substances right when I had some money? He didn't care one bit about my recovery."

"You sold the rehab TV to buy drugs," she says.

"To buy substances, Ma, why can't you get it right?" he says. "The way we name things is important, Ma, Doe taught me that in counseling. Look, maybe you wouldn't have sold the TV, but you're not an inadvertent substance misuser, and guess what, I am, that's why I was in there. Do you hear me? I know you wish you had a perfect son, but you don't, you have an inadvertent substance misuser who sometimes makes bad judgments, like borrowing and selling a TV to buy substances."

"Or rings and jewels," says Janet. "My rings and jewels."

"Fuck Ma, that was a long time ago!" he says. "Why do you have to keep bringing that old shit up? Doe was so right. For you to win, I have to lose. Like when I was a kid and in front of the whole neighborhood you called me an animal torturer? That really hurt. That caused a lot of my

problems. We were working on that in group right before I left."

"You were torturing a cat," she says. "With a freaking prod."

"A prod I built myself in metal shop," he says. "But of course you never mention that."

"A prod you were heating with a Sterno cup," she says.

"Go ahead, build your case," he says. "Beat up on me as much as you want, I don't have a choice. I have to be here."

"What do you mean, you have to be here?" she says.

"Ma, haven't you been listening?" he shouts. "I got kicked out of rehab!"

"Well you can't stay here," she says.

"I have to stay here!" he says. "Where am I supposed to go?"

"Go home," she says. "Go home with Grammy."

"With Grammy?" he says. "Are you kidding me? Oh God, the group would love this. You're telling a very troubled inadvertent substance misuser to go live with his terminally ill grandmother? You have any idea how stressful that would be for me? I'd be inadvertently misusing again in a heartbeat. Grammy's always like: Get me this, get me that, sit with me, I'm scared, talk with me, it hurts when I breathe. I'm twenty-four, ma, baby-sitting brings me down. Plus she's kind of deranged? She sort of like hallucinates? I think it's all that blood in her lungs. The other night she woke up at midnight and said I was trying to steal something from her. Can you believe it? She's like all kooky! I wasn't stealing. Her necklaces got tangled up and

I was trying to untangle them. And Keough was trying to help me.”

“Keough was at the house?” she says. “I thought I told you no Keough.”

“Ma, Jesus Christ, Keough’s my friend,” he says. “Like my only friend. How am I supposed to get better without friends? At least I have one. You don’t have any.”

“I have plenty of friends,” she says.

“Name one,” he says.

She looks at me.

Which I guess is sort of sweet.

Although I don’t see why she had to call me Mr. Tightass.

“Fine Ma,” he says. “You don’t want me staying here, I won’t stay here. You want me to inadvertently misuse substances, I’ll inadvertently misuse substances. I’ll turn tricks and go live in a ditch. Is that what you want?”

“Turn tricks?” she says. “Who said anything about turning tricks?”

“Keough’s done it,” he says. “It’s what we eventually come to, our need for substances is so great. We can’t help it.”

“Well, I don’t want you turning tricks,” she says. “That I don’t go for.”

“But living in a ditch is okay,” he says.

“If you want to live in a ditch, live in a ditch,” she says.

“I don’t want to live in a ditch,” he says. “I want to turn my life around. But it would help me turn my life around if I had a little money. Like twenty bucks. So I can go back

and get those party supplies. The tooters and all? I want to make it up to my friends.”

“Is that what this is about?” she says. “You want money? Well I don’t have twenty bucks. And you don’t need tooters to have a party.”

“But I want tooters,” he says. “Tooters make it more fun.”

“I don’t have twenty bucks,” she says.

“Ma, please,” he says. “You’ve always been there for me. And I’ve got a bad feeling about this. Like this might be my last chance.”

She pulls me off to one side.

“I’ll pay you back on payday,” she says.

I give her a look.

“Come on, man,” she says. “He’s my *son*. You know how it is. You got a sick kid, I got a sick kid.”

My feeling is, yes and no. My sick kid is three. My sick kid isn’t a con man.

Although at this point it’s worth twenty bucks to get the guy out of the cave.

I go to my Separate Area and get the twenty bucks. I give it to her and she gives it to him.

“Excellent!” he says, and goes bounding out the door. “A guy can always count on his ma.”

Janet goes straight to her Separate Area. The rest of the afternoon I hear sobbing.

Sobbing or laughing.

Probably sobbing.

When the quality of light changes I go to my Separate

Area. I make cocoa. I tidy up. I take out a Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Form.

This is really pushing it. Her kid comes into the cave in street clothes, speaks English in the cave, she speaks English back, they both swear many many times, she spends the whole afternoon weeping in her Separate Area.

Then again, what am I supposed to do, rat out a friend with a dying mom on the day she finds out her screwed-up son is even more screwed up than she originally thought?

Do I note any attitudinal difficulties? I do not. How do I rate my Partner overall? Very good. Are there any Situations which require Mediation?

There are not.

I fax it in.

15.

Late that night my fax makes the sound it makes when a fax is coming in.

From Louise:

Bad day, she says. He had a fever then suddenly got very cold. And his legs are so swollen. In places the skin looks ready to split. Ate like two handfuls dry Chex all day. And whiny, oh my God the poor thing. Stood on the heat grate all day in his underwear, staring out the window. Kept saying where is Daddy, why is he never here? Plus the Evemplorine went up to \$70 for 120 count. God, it's all drudge drudge drudge, you should see me, I look about ninety. Also a big strip of trim or siding came floating down as we

were getting in the car and nearly killed the twins. Insurance said they won't pay. What do I do, do I forget about it? Will something bad happen to the wood underneath if we don't get it nailed back up? Ugh. Don't fax back, I'm going to sleep.

Love, Me.

I get into bed and lie there counting and recounting the acoustic tiles on the ceiling of my darkened Separate Area.

One hundred forty-four.

Plus I am so hungry. I could kill for some goat.

Although certainly, dwelling on problems doesn't solve them. Although on the other hand, thinking positively about problems also doesn't solve them. But at least then you feel positive, which is, or should be, you know, empowering. And power is good. Power is necessary at this point. It is necessary at this point for me to be, you know, a rock. What I need to remember now is that I don't have to solve the problems of the world. It is not within my power to cure Nelson, it is only necessary for me to do what I can do, which is keep the money coming in, and in order for me to keep the money coming in, it is necessary for me to keep my chin up, so I can continue to do a good job. That is, it is necessary for me to avoid dwelling negatively on problems in the dark of night in my Separate Area, because if I do, I will be tired in the morning, and might then do a poor job, which could jeopardize my ability to keep the money coming in, especially if, for example, there is a Spot Check.

I continue to count the tiles but as I do it try to smile. I smile in the dark and sort of nod confidently. I try to

positively and creatively imagine surprising and innovative solutions to my problems, like winning the Lotto, like the Remixing being discontinued, like Nelson suddenly one morning waking up completely cured.

16.

Next morning is once again the morning I empty our Human Refuse bags and the trash bags and the bag from the bottom of the sleek metal hole.

I knock on the door of her Separate Area.

“Enter,” she says.

I step in and mime to her that I dreamed of a herd that covered the plain like the grass of the earth, they were as numerous as grasshoppers and yet the meat of their humps resembled each a tiny mountain etc. etc.

“Hey, sorry about yesterday,” she says. “Really sorry. I never dreamed that little shit would have the nerve to come here. And you think he paid to get in? I very much doubt it. My guess is, he hopped the freaking fence.”

I add the trash from her wicker basket to my big white bag. I add her bag of used feminine items to my big white bag.

“But he’s a good-looking kid, isn’t he?” she says.

I sort of curtly nod. I take three bags labeled Caution Human Refuse from the corner and add them to my big pink bag labeled Caution Human Refuse.

“Hey, look,” she says. “Am I okay? Did you narc me out? About him being here?”

I give her a look, like: I should’ve but I didn’t.

“Thank you *so* much,” she says. “Damn, you’re nice. From now on, no more screw-ups. I swear to God.”

Out I go, with the white regular trash bag in one hand and our mutual big pink Human Refuse bag in the other.

17.

Nobody’s on the path, although from the direction of Pioneer Encampment I hear the sound of rushing water, possibly the Big Durn Flood? Twice a month they open up the Reserve Tanks and the river widens and pretty soon some detachable house parts and Pioneer wagons equipped with special inflatable bladders float by, while from their P.A. we dimly hear the sound of prerecorded screaming Settlers.

I walk along the white cliff, turn down the non-Guest path marked by the little yellow dot, etc. etc.

Marty’s out front of the doublewide playing catch with a little kid.

I sit against a tree and start my paperwork.

“Great catch, son!” Marty says to the kid. “You can really catch. I would imagine you’re one of the very best catchers in that school.”

“Not exactly, Dad,” the kid says. “Those kids can really catch. Most of them catch even better than me.”

“You know, in a way I’m glad you might quit that school,” says Marty. “Those rich kids. I’m very unsure about them.”

"I don't want to quit," says the kid. "I like it there."

"Well, you might have to quit," says Marty. "We might make the decision that it's best for you to quit."

"Because we're running out of money," says the kid.

"Yes and no," says Marty. "We are and we aren't. Daddy's job is just a little, ah, problematical. Good catch! That is an excellent catch. Pick it up. Put your glove back on. That was too hard a throw. I knocked your glove off."

"I guess I have a pretty weak hand," the kid says.

"Your hand is perfect," says Marty. "My throw was too hard."

"It's kind of weird, Dad," the kid says. "Those kids at school are better than me at a lot of things. I mean, like everything? Those kids can really catch. Plus some of them went to camp for baseball and camp for math. Plus you should see their clothes. One kid won a trophy in golf. Plus they're nice. When I missed a catch they were really nice. They always said, like, Nice try. And they tried to teach me? When I missed at long division they were nice. When I ate with my fingers they were nice. When my shoes split in gym they were nice. This one kid gave me his shoes."

"He gave you his shoes?" says Marty.

"He was really nice," explains the kid.

"What were your shoes doing splitting?" says Marty. "Where did they split? Why did they split? Those were perfectly good shoes."

"In gym," says the kid. "They split in gym and my foot fell out. Then that kid who switched shoes with me wore them with his foot sticking out. He said he didn't mind.

And even with his foot sticking out he beat me at running. He was really nice."

"I heard you the first time," says Marty. "He was really nice. Maybe he went to being-nice camp. Maybe he went to giving-away-shoes camp."

"Well, I don't know if they have that kind of camp," says the kid.

"Look, you don't need to go to a camp to know how to be nice," says Marty. "And you don't have to be rich to be nice. You just have to be nice. Do you think you have to be rich to be nice?"

"I guess so," says the kid.

"No, no, no," says Marty. "You don't. That's my point. You don't have to be rich to be nice."

"But it helps?" says the kid.

"No," says Marty. "It makes no difference. It has nothing to do with it."

"I think it helps," says the kid. "Because then you don't have to worry about your shoes splitting."

"Ah bullshit," says Marty. "You're not rich but you're nice. See? You were nice, weren't you? When someone else's shoes split, you were nice, right?"

"No one else's shoes ever split," says the kid.

"Are you trying to tell me you were the only kid in that whole school whose shoes ever split?" says Marty.

"Yes," says the kid.

"I find that hard to believe," says Marty.

"Once this kid Simon?" says the kid. "His pants ripped."

"Well, there you go," says Marty. "That's worse. Because

your underwear shows. Your pants never ripped. Because I bought you good pants. Not that I'm saying the shoes I bought you weren't good. They were very good. Among the best. So what did this Simon kid do? When his pants ripped? Was he upset? Did the other kids make fun of him? Did he start crying? Did you rush to his defense? Did you sort of like console him? Do you know what console means? It means like say something nice. Did you say something nice when his pants ripped?"

"Not exactly," the kid says.

"What did you say?" says Marty.

"Well, that boy, Simon, was a kind of smelly boy?" says the kid. "He had this kind of smell to him?"

"Did the other kids make fun of his smell?" says Marty.

"Sometimes," says the kid.

"But they didn't make fun of your smell," says Marty.

"No," says the kid. "They made fun of my shoes splitting."

"Too bad about that smelly kid though," says Marty.

"You gotta feel bad about a kid like that. What were his parents thinking? Didn't they teach him how to wash? But you at least didn't make fun of his smell. Even though the other kids did."

"Well, I sort of did," the kid says.

"When?" says Marty. "On the day his pants ripped?"

"No," the kid says. "On the day my shoe split."

"Probably he was making fun of you on that day," suggests Marty.

"No," the kid says. "He was just kind of standing there. But a few kids were looking at my shoe funny. Because my

foot was poking out? So I asked Simon why he smelled so bad."

"And the other kids laughed?" says Marty. "They thought that was pretty good? What did he say? Did he stop making fun of your shoes?"

"Well, he hadn't really started yet," the kid says. "But he was about to."

"I bet he was," says Marty. "But you stopped him dead in his tracks. What did he say? After you made that crack about his smell?"

"He said maybe he did smell but at least his shoes weren't cheap," says the kid.

"So he turned it around on you," says Marty. "Very clever. The little shit. But listen, those shoes weren't cheap. I paid good money for those shoes."

"Okay," says the kid, and throws the ball into the woods.

"Nice throw," says Marty. "Very powerful."

"Kind of crooked though," says the kid, and runs off into the woods to get the ball.

"My kid," Marty says to me. "Home on break from school. We got him in boarding school. Only the best for my kid! Until they close us down, that is. You heard anything? Anything bad? I heard they might be axing Sheep May Safely Graze. So that's like fifteen shepherds. Which would kill me. I get a lot of biz off those shepherds. Needless to say, I am shitting bricks. Because if they close me, what do you think happens to that kid out there in the woods right now? Boarding school? You think boarding school happens? In a pig's ass. Boarding school does not

happen, the opposite of boarding school happens, and he will be very freaking upset.”

The kid comes jogging out of the woods with the ball in his hand.

“What are you talking about?” he says.

“About you,” Marty says, and puts the kid in a headlock. “About how great you are. How lovable you are.”

“Oh that,” the kid says, and smiles big.

18.

That night around nine I hear a sort of shriek from Janet’s Separate Area.

A shriek, and then what sounds like maybe sobbing.

Then some louder sobbing and maybe something breaking, possibly her fax?

I go to her door and ask is she okay and she tells me go away.

I can’t get back to sleep. So I fax Louise.

Everything okay? I write.

In about ten minutes a fax comes back.

Did Dr. Evans ever say anything about complete loss of mobility? it says. I mean complete. Today I took the kids to the park and let Ace off the leash and he saw a cat and ran off. When I came back from getting Ace, Nelson was like stuck inside this crawling tube. Like he couldn’t stand up? Had no power in his legs. I mean none. That fucking Ace. If you could’ve seen Nelson’s face. God. When I picked him up he said he thought I’d gone home without him. The poor thing. Plus he had to pee. And so he’d sort

of peed himself. Not much, just a little. Other than that all is well, please don’t worry. Well worry a little. We are at the end of our rope or however you say it, I’m already deep into the overdraft account and it’s only the 5th. Plus I’m so tired at night I can’t get to the bills and last time I paid late fees on both Visas and the MasterCard, thirty bucks a pop, those bastards, am thinking about just sawing off my arm and mailing it in. Ha ha, not really, I need that arm to sign checks.

Love, Me.

From Janet’s Separate Area come additional sobbing and some angry shouting.

I fax back:

Did you take him to Dr. Evans? I say.

Duh, she faxes back. Have appt for Weds, will let you know. Don’t worry, just do your job and also Nelson says hi and you’re the best dad ever.

Tell him hi and he’s the best kid, I fax back.

What about the other kids? she faxes back.

Tell them they’re also the best kids, I fax back.

From Janet’s Separate Area comes the sound of Janet pounding on something repeatedly, probably her desk, presumably with her fist.

19.

Next morning in the Big Slot is no goat. Just a note.

From Janet:

Not coming in, it says. Bradley lied about the tooters and bought some you-know-what. Big surprise right? Is in jail. Stupid

dumbass. Got a fax last night. Plus my Ma's worse. Before she couldnt get up or her lungs filled with blood? Well now they fill with blood unless she switches from side to side and who's there to switch her? Before Mrs Finn was but now Mrs Finn got a day-job so no more. So now I have to find someone and pay someone. Ha ha very funny, like I can afford that. Plus Bradley's bail which believe me I have definitely considered not paying. With all this going on no way am I caving it up today. I'm sorry but I just cant, don't narc me out, okay? Just this one last time. I'm taking a Sick Day.

She can't do that. She can't take a Sick Day if she's not sick. She can't take a Sick Day because she's sad about someone she loves being sick. And she certainly can't take a Sick Day because she's sad about someone she loves being in jail.

I count out ten Reserve Crackers and work all morning on the pictographs.

Around noon the door to her Separate Area flies open. She looks weird. Her hair is sticking up and she's wearing an I'm With Stupid sweatshirt over her cavewoman robe and her breath smells like whiskey.

Janet is wasted? Wasted in the cave?

"What I have here in this album?" she says. "Baby pictures of that fucking rat Bradley. Back when I loved him so much. Back before he was a druggie. See how cute? See how smart he looked?"

She shows me the album. He actually does not look cute or smart. He looks the same as he looked the other day, only smaller. In one picture he's sitting on a tricycle looking like he's planning a heist. In another he's got a sour look on his face and his hand down some smaller kid's diaper.

"God, you just love the little shits no matter what, don't you?" she says. "You know what I'm saying? If Bradley's dad woulda stuck around it might've been better. Bradley never knew him. I always used to say he took one look at Bradley and ran off. Maybe I shouldn't of said that. At least not in front of Bradley. Wow. I've had a few snorts. You want a snort? Come on, live a little! Take a Sick Day like me. I had three BallBusters and half a bottle of wine. This is the best Sick Day I ever took."

I guide her back to her Separate Area and push her sternly in.

"Come on in!" she says. "Have a BallBuster. You want one? I'm lonely in here. You want a BallBuster, Señor Tightass?"

I do not want a BallBuster.

What I want is for her to stay in her Separate Area keeping very quiet until she sobers up.

All day I sit alone in the cave. When the quality of light changes I go into my Separate Area and take out a Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Form.

When I was a kid, Dad worked at Kenner Beef. Loins would drop from this belt and he'd cut through this purple tendon and use a sort of vise to squeeze some blood into a graduated beaker for testing, then wrap the loin in a sling and swing it down to Finishing. Dad's partner was Fred Lank. Lank had a metal plate in his skull and went into these funks where he'd forget to cut the purple tendon and fail to squeeze out the blood and instead of placing the loin in the sling would just sort of drop the loin down on Finishing. When Lank went into a funk, Dad

would cover for him by doing double loins. Sometimes Dad would do double loins for days at a time. When Dad died, Lank sent Mom a check for a thousand dollars, with a note:

Please keep, it said. The man did so much for me.

Which is I think part of the reason I'm having trouble ratted Janet out.

Do I note any attitudinal difficulties? I do not. How do I rate my Partner overall? Very good. Are there any Situations which require Mediation?

There are not.

I fax it in.

20.

Next morning in the Big Slot is no goat, just a note:

A question has arisen, it says. Hence this note about a touchy issue that is somewhat grotesque and personal, but we must address it, because one of you raised it, the issue of which was why do we require that you Remote Attractions pay the money which we call, and ask that you call, the Disposal Debit, but which you people insist on wrongly calling the Shit Fee. Well, this is to tell you why, although isn't it obvious to most? We hope. But maybe not. Because what we have found, no offense, is that sometimes you people don't get things that seem pretty obvious to us, such as why you have to pay for your Cokes in your fridge if you drink them. Who should then? Did we drink your Cokes you drank? We doubt it. You did it. Likewise with what you so wrongly call

the Shit Fee, because why do you expect us to pay to throw away your poop when after all you made it? Do you think your poop is a legitimate business expense? Does it provide benefit to us when you defecate? No, on the contrary, it would provide benefit if you didn't, because then you would be working more. Ha ha! That is a joke. We know very well that all must poop. We grant you that. But also, as we all know, it takes time to poop, some more than others. As we get older, we notice this, don't you? Not that we're advocating some sort of biological plug or chemical constipator. Not yet, anyway! No, that would be wrong, we know that, and unhealthy, and no doubt some of you would complain about having to pay for the constipators, expecting us to provide them gratis.

That is another funny thing with some of you, we notice it, namely that, not ever having been up here, in our shoes, you always want something for nothing. You just don't get it! When you poop and it takes a long time and you are on the clock, do you ever see us outside looking mad with a stopwatch? So therefore please stop saying to us: I have defecated while on the clock, dispose of it for free, kindly absorb my expense. We find that loopy. Because, as you know, you Remote Locations are far away, and have no pipes, and hence we must pay for the trucks. The trucks that drive your poop. Your poop to the pipes. Why are you so silly? It is as if you expect us to provide those Cokes for free, just because you thirst. Do Cokes grow on trees? Well, the other thing that does not grow on a tree is a poop truck. Perhaps someone should explain to you the idea of how we do things, which is to make money. And why? Is it greed? Don't make us laugh. It is not. If we make money, we can grow, if we can grow, we can expand, if we can expand, we can

continue to employ you, but if we shrink, if we shrink or stay the same, woe to you, we would not be vital. And so help us help you, by not whining about your Disposal Debit, and if you don't like how much it costs, try eating less.

And by the way, we are going to be helping you in this, by henceforth sending less food. We're not joking, this is austerity. We think you will see a substantial savings in terms of your Disposal Debts, as you eat less and your Human Refuse bags get smaller and smaller. And that, our friends, is a substantial savings that we, we up here, will not see, and do you know why not? I mean, even if we were eating less, which we already have decided we will not be? In order to keep our strength up? So we can continue making sound decisions? But do you know why we will not see the substantial savings you lucky ducks will? Because, as some of you have already grumbled about, we pay no Shit Fee, those of us up here. So that even if we shat less, we would realize no actual savings. And why do we pay no Shit Fee? Because that was negotiated into our contracts at Time-of-Hire. What would you have had us do? Negotiate inferior contracts? Act against our own healthy self-interest? Don't talk crazy. Please talk sense. Many of us have Student Loans to repay. Times are hard, entire Units are being eliminated, the Staff Remixing continues, so no more talk of defecation flaring up, please, only let's remember that we are a family, and you are the children, not that we're saying you're immature, only that you do most of the chores while we do all the thinking, and also that we, in our own way, love you.

For several hours Janet does not come out.

Probably she is too hungover.

Around eleven she comes out, holding her copy of the memo.

"So what are they saying?" she says. "Less food? Even less food than now?"

I nod.

"Jesus Christ," she says. "I'm starving as it is."

I give her a look.

"I know, I know, I fucked up," she says. "I was a little buzzed. A little buzzed in the cave. Boo-hoo. Don't tell me, you narced me out, right? Did you? Of course you did."

I give her a look.

"You didn't?" she says. "Wow. You're even nicer than I thought. You're the best, man. And starting right now, no more screw-ups. I know I said that before. But this time, for real. You watch."

Just then there's a huge clunk in the Big Slot.

"Excellent!" she says. "I hope it's a big thing of Motrin."

But it's not a big thing of Motrin. It's a goat. A weird-looking goat. Actually a plastic goat. With a predrilled hole for the spit to go through. In the mouth is a Baggie and in the Baggie is a note:

In terms of austerity, it says. No goat today. In terms of verisimilitude, mount this fake goat and tend as if real. Mount well above fire to avoid burning. In event of melting, squelch fire. In event of burning, leave area, burning plastic may release harmful fumes.

I mount the fake goat on the spit and Janet sits on the boulder with her head in her hands.

21.

Next morning is once again the morning I empty our Human Refuse bags and the trash bags and the bag from the bottom of the sleek metal hole where Janet puts her used feminine items.

I knock on the door of her Separate Area.

Janet slides the bags out, all sealed and labeled and ready to go.

"Check it out," she says. "I'm a new woman."

Out I go, with the white regular trash bag in one hand and our mutual big pink Human Refuse bag in the other.

I walk along the white cliff, then down the path marked by the small yellow dot on the pine etc. etc.

On the door of Marty's doublewide is a note:

Due to circumstances beyond our control we are no longer here, it says. But please know how much we appreciated your patronage. As to why we are not here, we will not comment on that, because we are bigger than that. Bigger than some people. Some people are snakes. To some people, fifteen years of good loyal service means squat. All's we can say is, watch your damn backs.

All the best and thanks for the memories,

Marty and Jeannine and little Eddie.

Then the door flies open.

Marty and Jeannine and little Eddie are standing there holding suitcases.

"Hello and good-bye," says Marty. "Feel free to empty your shit bag inside the store."

"Now, Marty," says Jeannine. "Let's try and be positive about this, okay? We're going to do fine. You're too good for this dump anyway. I've always said you were too good for this dump."

"Actually, Jeannine," Marty says. "When I first got this job you said I was lucky to even get a job, because of my dyslexia."

"Well, honey, you are dyslexic," says Jeannine.

"I never denied being dyslexic," says Marty.

"He writes his letters and numbers backwards," Jeannine says to me.

"What are you, turning on me, Jeannine?" Marty says. "I lose my job and you turn on me?"

"Oh Marty, I'm not turning on you," Jeannine says. "I'm not going to stop loving you just because you've got troubles. Just like you've never stopped loving me, even though I've got troubles."

"She gets too much spit in her mouth," Marty says to me.

"Marty!" says Jeannine.

"What?" Marty says. "You can say I'm dyslexic, but I can't say you get too much spit in your mouth?"

"Marty, please," she says. "You're acting crazy."

"I'm not acting crazy," he says. "It's just that you're turning on me."

"Don't worry about me, Dad," the kid says. "I won't turn on you. And I don't mind going back to my old school. Really I don't."

"He had a little trouble with mean kids in his old school," Marty says to me. "Which is why we switched

him. Although nothing you couldn't handle, right, kid? Actually, I think it was good for him. Taught him toughness."

"As long as nobody padlocks me to the boiler again," the kid says. "That part I really didn't like. Wow, those rats or whatever."

"I doubt those were actual rats," says Marty. "More than likely they were cats. The janitor's cats. My guess is, it was dark in that boiler room and you couldn't tell a cat from a rat."

"The janitor didn't have any cats," the kid says. "And he said I was lucky those rats didn't start biting my pants. Because of the pudding smell. From when those kids pinned me down and poured pudding down my pants."

"Was that the same day?" Marty says. "The rats and the pudding? I guess I didn't realize them two things were on the same day. Wow, I guess you learned a lot of toughness on that day."

"I guess so," the kid says.

"But nothing you couldn't handle," Marty says.

"Nothing I couldn't handle," the kid says, and blinks, and his eyes water up.

"Well, Christ," Marty says, and his eyes also water up. "Time to hit the road, family. I guess this it. Let's say our good-byes. Our good-byes to Home Sweet Home."

They take a little tour around the doublewide and do a family hug, then drag their suitcases down the path.

I go to the Refuse Center and weigh our Human Refuse. I put the paperwork and the fee in the box labeled Paperwork and Fees. I toss the trash in the dump-

ster labeled Trash, and the Human Refuse in the dumpster labeled Caution Human Refuse.

I feel bad for Marty and Jeannine, and especially I feel bad for the kid.

I try to imagine Nelson padlocked to a boiler in a dark room full of rats.

Plus now where are us Remotes supposed to go for our smokes and mints and Kayos?

22.

Back at the cave Janet is working very industriously on the pictographs.

As I come in she points to my Separate Area while mouthing the word: Fax.

I look at her. She looks at me.

She mouths the words: Christ, go. Then she holds one hand at knee level, to indicate Nelson.

I go.

But it's not for me, it's for her.

Ms. Foley's fax appears to be inoperative? the cover letter says. Kindly please forward the attached.

Please be informed, the attached fax says, I did my very best in terms of your son, and this appeared, in my judgment, to be an excellent plea bargain, which, although to some might appear disadvantageous, ten years is not all that long when you consider all the bad things that he has done. But he was happy enough about it, after some initial emotions such as limited weeping, and thanked me for my hard work, although not in those exact words,

as he was fairly, you know, upset. On a personal note, may I say how sorry I am, but also that in the grand scheme of things such as geology ten years is not so very long really.

Sincerely,

Evan Joeller, Esq.

I take the fax out to Janet, who reads it while sitting on her log.

She's sort of a slow reader.

When she's finally done she looks crazy and for a minute I think she's going to tear the cave apart but instead she scoots into the corner and starts frantically pretending to catch and eat small bugs.

I go over and put my hand on her shoulder, like: Are you okay?

She pushes my hand away roughly and continues to pretend to catch and eat small bugs.

Just then someone pokes their head in.

Young guy, round head, expensive-looking glasses.

"Bibby, hand me up Cole," he says. "So he can see. Cole-Cole, can you see? Here. Daddy will hold you up."

A little kid's head appears alongside the dad's head.

"Isn't this cool, Cole?" says the dad. "Aren't you glad Mommy and Daddy brought you? Remember Daddy told you? How people used to live in caves?"

"They did not," the little boy says. "You're wrong."

"Bibby, did you hear that?" the dad says. "He just said I'm wrong. About people living in caves."

"I heard it," says a woman from outside. "Cole, people really did use to live in caves. Daddy's not wrong."

"Daddy's always wrong," says the little boy.

"He just said I'm always wrong," the dad says. "Did you hear that? Did you write that down? In the memory book? Talk about assertive! I should be so assertive. Wouldn't Norm and Larry croak if I was suddenly so assertive?"

"Well, it couldn't hurt you," the mom says.

"Believe me, I know," the dad says. "That's why I said it. I know very well I could afford to be more assertive. I was making a joke. Like an ironic joke at my own expense."

"I want to stab you, Dad," says the little boy. "With a sharp sword, you're so dumb."

"Ha ha!" says the dad. "But don't forget, Cole-Cole, the pen is mightier than the sword! Remember that? Remember I taught you that? Wouldn't it be better to compose an insulting poem, if you have something negative about me you want to convey? Now that's real power! Bibby, did you hear what he said? And then what I said? Did you write all that down? Also did you save that Popsicle wrapper? Did you stick it in the pocket in the back cover of the memory book and write down how cute he looked eating it?"

"What your name?" the little boy yells at me.

I cower and shriek in the corner etc. etc.

"What your name I said!" the little boy shouts at me. "I hate you!"

"Now, Cole-Cole," says the dad. "Let's not use the word hate, okay, buddy? Remember what I told you? About hate being the nasty dark crayon and love being the pink? And remember what I told you about the clanging gong? And remember I told you about the bad people in the old days, who used to burn witches, and how scary that

must've been for the witches, who were really just frightened old ladies who'd made the mistake of being too intelligent for the era they were living in?"

"You are not acceptable!" the kid shouts at me.

"Ha ha, oh my God!" says the dad. "Bibby, did you get that? Did you write that down? He's imitating us. Because we say that to him? Write down how mad he is. Look how red his face is! Look at him kick his feet. Wow, he is really pissed. Cole, good persistence! Remember how Daddy told you about the little train that could? How everyone kept trying to like screw it and not give it its due, and how finally it got really mad and stomped its foot and got its way? Remember I told you about Chief Joseph, who never stopped walking? You're like him. My brave little warrior. Bibby, give him a juice box. Also he's got some goo-goo coming out of his nosehole."

"Jesus Christ," Janet mumbles.

I give her my sternest look.

"What was that?" says the dad. "I'm sorry, I didn't hear you. What did you just say?"

"Nothing," Janet says. "I didn't say nothing."

"I heard you very clearly," says the dad. "You said Jesus Christ. You said Jesus Christ because of what I said about the goo-goo in my son's nosehole. Well, first of all, I'm sorry if you find a little boy's nosehole goo-goo sickening, it's perfectly normal, if you had a kid of your own you'd know that, and second of all, since when do cavepeople speak English and know who Jesus Christ is? Didn't the cavepeople predate Christ, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Of course they did," the mom says from outside. "We just came from Christ. Days of Christ. And we're going backwards. Towards the exit."

"Look, pal, I got a kid," says Janet. "I seen plenty of snot. I just never called it goo-goo. That's all I'm saying."

"Bibby, get this," the dad says. "Parenting advice from the cavelady. The cavelady apparently has some strong opinions on booger nomenclature. For this I paid eighty bucks? If I want somebody badly dressed to give me a bunch of lip I can go to your mother's house."

"Very funny," says the mom.

"I meant it funny," says the dad.

"I was a good mom," Janet says. "My kid is as good as anybody's kid."

"Hey, share it with us," says the dad.

"Even if he is in jail," says Janet.

"Bibby, get this," says the dad. "The cavelady's kid is in jail."

"Don't you *even* make fun of my kid, you little suck-ass," says Janet.

"The cavelady just called you a suckass," says the mom.

"A little suckass," says the dad. "And don't think I'm going to forget it."

Soon flying in through the hole where the heads poke in is our wadded-up Client Vignette Evaluation.

Under *Learning Value* he's written: *Disastrous. We learned that some caveladies had potty mouths. I certainly felt like I was in the actual Neanderthal days. Not!*

Under *Overall Impression* he's written: *The cavelady called*

me a suckass in front of my child. Thanks so much! A tremendous and offensive waste of time. LOSE THE CAVELADY, SHE IS THE WORST.

“Know what I’m doing now?” the guy says. “I’m walking my copy down to the main office. Your ass is grass, lady.”

“Oh shit,” Janet says, and sits on the log. “Shit shit shit. I really totally blew it, didn’t I?”

My God, did she ever. She really totally blew it.

“What are you going to do, man?” Janet says. “Are you going to narc me out?”

I give her a look, like: Will you just please shut up?

The rest of the day we sit on our respective logs.

When the quality of light changes I go to my Separate Area and take out a Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Form.

A note comes sliding under my door.

I have a idea, it says. Maybe you could say that asshole made it all up? Like he came in and tried to get fresh with me and when I wouldnt let him he made it up? That could work. I think it could work. Please please don't narc me out, if I get fired I'm dead, you know all the shit that's going on with me, plus you have to admit I was doing pretty good before this.

She was doing pretty good before this.

I think of Nelson. His wispy hair and crooked nose. When I thank him for bravely taking all his medications he always rests his head on my shoulder and says, No problem. Only he can't say his r's. So it's like: No pwoblem. And then he pats my belly, as if I'm the one who bravely took all my medications.

Do I note any attitudinal difficulties?

I write: Yes.

How do I rate my Partner overall?

I write: *Poor.*

Are there any Situations which require Mediation?

I write: *Today Janet unfortunately interacted negatively with a Guest. Today Janet swore at a Guest in the cave. Today Janet unfortunately called a Guest a “suckass,” in English, in the cave.*

I look it over.

It's all true.

I fax it in.

23.

A few minutes later my fax makes the sound it makes when a fax is coming in.

From Nordstrom:

This should be sufficient! it says. *Super! More than sufficient. Good for you. Feel no guilt. Are you Janet? Is Janet you? I think not. I think that you are you and she is she. You guys are not the same entity. You are distinct. Is her kid your kid? Is your kid her kid? No, her kid is her kid and your kid is your kid. Have you guilt? About what you have done? Please do not. Please have pride. What I suggest? Think of you and Janet as branches on a tree. While it's true that a branch sometimes needs to be hacked off and come floating down, so what, that is only one branch, it does not kill the tree, and sometimes one branch must die so that the others may live. And anyway, it only looks like death, because you are falsely looking at this through the lens of an individual*

limb or branch, when in fact you should be thinking in terms of the lens of what is the maximum good for the overall organism, our tree. When we chop one branch, we all become stronger! And that branch on the ground, looking up, has the pleasure of knowing that he or she made the tree better, which I hope Janet will do. Although knowing her? With her crappy attitude? Probably she will lie on the ground wailing and gnashing her leaves while saying swear words up at us. But who cares! She is gone. She is a goner. And we have you to thank. So thanks! This is the way organizations grow and thrive, via small courageous contributions by cooperative selfless helpers, who are able to do that hardest of things, put aside the purely personal aspect in order to see the big picture. Oh and also, you might want to be out of the cave around ten, as that is when the deed will be done.

Thanks so much!

Greg N.

I lie there counting and recounting the acoustic tiles on the ceiling of my darkened Separate Area.

One hundred forty-four.

24.

Next morning is not the morning I empty our Human Refuse bags and the trash bags and the bag from the bottom of the sleek metal hole, but I get up extremely early, in fact it is still dark, and leave Janet a note saying I've gone to empty our Human Refuse bags and our trash bags and the bag from the bottom of her sleek metal hole etc. etc., then very quietly sneak out of the cave and cross the river

via wading and sit among the feeding things, facing away from the cave.

I sit there a long time.

When I get back, Janet's gone and the door to her Separate Area is hanging open and her Separate Area is completely empty.

Except for a note taped to the wall:

You freak you break my heart, it says. Thanks a million. What the fuck am I supposed to do now? I guess I will go home and flip Ma from side to side until she dies from starving to death because we got no money. And then maybe I will hore myself with a jail gard to get Bradley out. I cant beleve after all this time you tern on me. And here I thought you were my frend but you were only interested in your own self. Not that I blame you. I mean, I do and I dont. Actually I do.

You bastard,

Janet.

There are several big clunks in the Big Slot.

A goat, some steaks, four boxes of hash browns, caramel corn in a metal tub, several pies, bottles of Coke and Sprite, many many small containers of Kayo.

I look at that food a long time.

Then I stash it in my Separate Area, for later use.

For lunch I have a steak and hash browns and some pie and a Kayo.

Eating hash browns and pie and drinking Kayo in the cave is probably verboten but I feel I've somewhat earned it.

I clean up the mess. I sit on the log.

Around two there is a little tiny click in the Little Slot.

25.

A memo, to Distribution:

Regarding the rumors you may have lately been hearing, it says. Please be advised that they are false. They are so false that we considered not even bothering to deny them. Because denying them would imply that we have actually heard them. Which we haven't. We don't waste our time on such nonsense. And yet we know that if we don't deny the rumors we haven't heard, you will assume they are true. And they are so false! So let us just categorically state that all the rumors you've been hearing are false. Not only the rumors you've heard, but also those you haven't heard, and even those that haven't yet been spread, are false. However, there is one exception to this, and that is if the rumor is good. That is, if the rumor presents us, us up here, in a positive light, and our mission, and our accomplishments, in that case, and in that case only, we will have to admit that the rumor you've been hearing is right on target, and congratulate you on your fantastic powers of snooping, to have found out that secret super thing! In summary, we simply ask you to ask yourself, upon hearing a rumor: Does this rumor cast the organization in a negative light? If so, that rumor is false, please disregard. If positive, super, thank you very much for caring so deeply about your organization that you knelt with your ear to the track, and also, please spread the truth far and wide, that is, get down on all fours and put your own lips to the tracks. Tell your friends. Tell friends who are thinking of buying stock. Do you have friends who are journalists? Put your lips to their tracks.

Because what is truth? Truth is that thing which makes what we want to happen happen. Truth is that thing which, when told, makes those on our team look good, and inspires them to greater efforts, and causes people not on our team to see things our way and feel sort of jealous. Truth is that thing which empowers us to do even better than we are already doing, which by the way is fine, we are doing fine, truth is the wind in our sails that blows only for us. So when a rumor makes you doubt us, us up here, it is therefore not true, since we have already defined truth as that thing which helps us win. Therefore, if you want to know what is true, simply ask what is best. Best for us, all of us. Do you get our drift? Contrary to rumor, the next phase of the Staff Remixing is not about to begin. The slightest excuse, the slightest negligence, will not be used as the basis for firing the half of you we would be firing over the next few weeks if the rumor you have all probably heard by now about the mass firings were true. Which it is not. See? See how we just did that? Transformed that trashy negative rumor into truth? Go forth and do that, you'll see it's pretty fun. And in terms of mass firings, relax, none are forthcoming, truly, and furthermore, if they were, what you'd want to ask yourself is: Am I Thinking Positive / Saying Positive? Am I giving it all I've got? Am I doing even the slightest thing wrong? But not to worry. Those of you who have no need to be worried should not in the least be worried. As for those who should be worried, it's a little late to start worrying now, you should have started months ago, when it could've done you some good, because at this point, what's decided is decided, or would have been decided, if those false rumors we are denying, the rumors about the firings which would be starting this week if they were slated to begin, were true, which we have just told you, they aren't.

More firings?

God.

I return to the log.

Sort of weird without Janet.

Someone pokes their head in.

A young woman in a cavewoman robe.

26.

She walks right in and hands me a sealed note.

From Nordstrom:

Please meet Linda, it says. Your total new Partner. Sort of cute, yes? Under that robe is quite a bod, believe me, I saw her in slacks. See why I was trying to get rid of Janet? But also you will find she is serious. Just like you. See that brow? It is permanent, she had it sort of installed. Like once every six months she goes in for a touch-up where they spray it from a can to harden it. You can give it a little goose with your thumb, it feels like real skin. But don't try it, as I said, she is very serious, she only let me try it because I am who I am, in the interview, but if you try it, my guess is? She will write you up. Or flatten you! Because it is not authentic that one caveperson would goose another caveperson in the brow with his thumb in the cave. I want us now, post-Janet, to really strive for some very strict verisimilitude. You may, for example, wish to consider having such a perma-brow installed on yourself. To save you the trouble of every day redoing that brow, which I know is a pain. Anyway, I think you and Linda will get along super. So here is your new mate! Not that I'm saying mate with her, I would not try that, she is, as I said, very serious, but if

you were going to mate with her, don't you think she looks more appropriate, I mean she is at least younger than Janet and not so hard on the eyes.

I put out my hand and smile.

She frowns at my hand, like: Since when do cavepeople shake hands?

She squats and pretends to be catching and eating small bugs.

How she knows how to do that, I do not know.

I squat beside her and also pretend to be catching and eating small bugs.

We do this for quite some time. It gets old but she doesn't stop, and all the time she's grunting, and once or twice I could swear she actually catches and eats an actual small bug.

Around noon my fax makes the sound it makes when a fax is coming in.

From Louise? Probably. Almost definitely. The only other person who ever faxes me is Nordstrom, and he just faxed me last night, plus he just sent me a note.

I stand up.

Linda gives me a look. Her brow is amazing. It has real actual pores on it.

I squat down.

I pretend to catch and eat a small bug.

The fax stops making the sound it makes when a fax is coming in. Presumably the fax from Louise is in the tray, waiting for me to read it. Is something wrong? Has something changed? What did Dr. Evans say about Nelson's complete loss of mobility?

Five more hours and I can enter my Separate Area and find out.

Which is fine. Really not a problem.

Because I'm Thinking Positive / Saying Positive.

Maybe if I explained to Linda about Nelson it would be okay, but I feel a little funny trying to explain about Nelson so early in our working relationship.

All afternoon we pretend to catch and eat small bugs. We pretend to catch and eat more pretend bugs than could ever actually live in one cave. The number of pretend bugs we pretend to catch and eat would in reality basically fill a cave the size of our cave. It feels like we're racing. At one point she gives me a look, like: Slow down, going so fast is inauthentic. I slow down. I slow down, monitoring my rate so that I am pretending to catch and eat small bugs at exactly the same rate at which she is pretending to catch and eat small bugs, which seems to me prudent, I mean, there is no way she could have a problem with the way I'm pretending to catch and eat small bugs if I'm doing it exactly the way she's doing it.

No one pokes their head in.