

PERSONAL DAYS

Ed Park



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P E R S O N A L
D A Y S

A NOVEL



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For my parents

*Well you don't get a town like this for nothing
So here's what you've got to do
You work your way to the top of the world
Then you break your life in two.*

< NEW ORDER >

</>

CAN'T UNDO

Who died?

On the surface, it's relaxed. There was a time when we all dressed crisply, but something's changed this summer. Now while the weather lasts we wear loose pants, canvas sneakers, clogs. Pru slips on flip-flops under her desk. It's so hot out and thus every day is potentially casual Friday. We have cart blanche to wear T-shirts featuring the comical logos of exterminating companies, advertising slogans from the early '80s. *Where's the beef?* We dress like we don't make much money, which is true for at least half of us. The trick is figuring out which half. We go out for drinks together one or two nights a week, sometimes three, *to take the edge off*. Three is too much. We make careful note of who buys a round, who sits back and lets the booze magically appear. It's possible we can't stand each other but at this point we're helpless in the company of outsiders. Sometimes one of the guys will come to work in a coat and tie, just to freak the others out. On these days the guard in the lobby will joke, *Who died?* And we will laugh or pretend to laugh.

The Sprout

In summer the Sprout, our boss, suggests we form a softball team. His name is actually Russell. We refer to him as the Sprout, because

Russell → Brussels → brussels sprouts → *the Sprout*.

No one knows who came up with the name first.

We're incredibly mature.

Also once in a while he has a bit of comb-proof hair sprouting from his scalp's left rear quadrant.

Jonah says it's hard to take the Sprout seriously because he's always using *i.e.* and *e.g.* in his sentences, vigorously but interchangeably, a mark of weak character.

He sometimes gives us little salutes when he sees us in the hall. Lately he's been flashing the peace sign. Sixty-five percent of the time he acts like he's our friend but we should remember the saying

Sticks and carrots

Sixty-five percent of the time is what the Sprout would call a *guesstimate*. He's always breaking things down into precise percentages. He used to be almost normal to talk to, but now he'll ask if we're on *the same page* and say something is a *no brainer*, all in a single sentence.

It's not just the frequency of these expressions but their haphazard use. Last week he told Laars to *think outside the box*. They were talking about which size manila folders worked best. Afterward he said, *Keep me in the loop and let's touch base next week*.

Pru has wondered if the Sprout, a proud native of Canada, is taking a class in annoying American English. His new thing is a variation on *I gave you a carrot, but I also need to show you the stick*. So far this month, he's said it to Pru, to Jack II, to Laars.

So show us already, Pru complains to Lizzie.

The Sprout understands that it sounds a little sadistic, and lets us know he recognizes this menacing aspect, at the same time wanting us to understand that he doesn't actually mean it in that way. Jonah's take on it is that he *must* mean it in that way, or else he'd use another phrase.

A league record

Softball is a morale-boosting carrot that the Sprout most likely has read about in a handbook he learned at that seminar he goes to every March. Morale has been low since the Firings began last year. Pru says *morale* is a word thrown around only in the context of its absence. You never look at a healthy young thing and say, *Check out that spring chicken*, but only use it to describe your great-aunt: *She's no spring chicken*.

Pru has a point. We tend to trust her, with her serious eyebrows and inevitable skeptical *hmmm*. She went to graduate school. We think it was in art history, but maybe it was regular history, the kind without the art.

We decide to give softball a shot. There are eight of us. In decreasing order of height: Laars, Jack I, Lizzie, Jonah, Jenny, Crease, Pru, Jill. We need a ninth, and Jack II happens to bump into Otto, who used to be in IT. He is now working somewhere in midtown and clearly has too much time on his hands.

It might be nice to rejuvenate our comically untuned bodies. Too many of us have been eating bagels at our desks, too many mornings in a row. We look like we've been squeezed out of a tube and haven't quite solidified. Everyone has issues with posture except Lizzie, a corseter's dream.

Laars and Jenny are the only ones who have ever played softball before—Laars at his last job, Jenny

as a seven-year-old. The concept: You try to hit the ball hard but without so much upward arc that someone can catch it. Then you run in a square, or more properly a diamond, making sure to step on each base and not get tagged by someone bearing the ball. There are other rules that we never quite iron out.

Lizzie is having trouble seeing the carrot aspect of the game.

We buy mitts, glove oil, cleats. Laars buys two aluminum bats and two wooden ones. He buys a third kind of bat, a titanium hybrid that looks like a nuclear warhead. Laars can be seen doing push-ups near the storage area, counting off under his breath.

We have jerseys and caps printed with our emblem, a buxom elf winking and holding a pool cue. Jill found it on some Finnish clip-art site.

We prematurely end our season after losing the first game 17–0, said to be a league record. What's left of our morale seeps away. We never see Otto again. All the gear gets returned, except the jerseys and caps. Autumn approaches, the air too cool for the jerseys, but we still wear the hats sometimes.

The cult of Maxine

Maxine never officially joined the softball team but bought a jersey from Jill, cutting the collar to create a plunging V. She still wears it on occasion, even as the weather turns nippy.

Maxine towers over us in her medium heels. She makes us feel like hobbit-folk, with our stained teeth and ragamuffin outfits. With the exception of Laars, we have zero upper body strength. We are moderately proud of our youthful haircuts and overpriced rectangular eyeglasses but that's about it.

She smells great and we are all basically obsessed with her. *It has to seriously stop*, Lizzie says. Crease calls her *aggressively hypnotic* and can hardly bear to be within a twenty-yard radius. He sometimes crosses himself after she passes.

Her hair! Jack II will e-mail, out of the blue. Everyone knows whose hair he's talking about.

Sharing an elevator ride alone with Maxine can be intensely disorienting. We try to avoid it. Several times of late, while waiting for the elevator at the end of the day, Crease has sensed Maxine's approach, her distinctive shoe-clack sending him darting in the other direction. In similar situations Jenny has been known to mumble to herself, giving the impression that she's forgotten something on her desk. Jenny likes boys but sometimes when Maxine is in the room she's not so sure.

Laars says Maxine smells like the exquisite blossom of a rare hybrid fruit that you can only find at this one stall in a market in Kuala Lumpur.

The worst is when you turn the corner and you see her and you want to say *Hi* in a normal way but all that happens is your mouth opens and you make a little croaking sound or make no noise at all. It was Jules, no longer among us, who first identified this phenomenon.

There is so much to take in. Not just her clothes or lack of clothes, not just her amazing hair, but her entire philosophy of being. You can detect an aspect of the beauty queen in her looks and high-gloss appearance, her attention-yanking laugh and borderline moronic statements. But Pru has argued, in the landmark case *Pru v. Jonah*, that she's not only not stupid but definitely more accomplished than the rest of us. We don't know what's on that résumé, but it doesn't matter—she's got that magic, that *spark*, utterly unclouded by self-doubt.

Maxine is on a different track than the rest of us. She entered the office at a higher level and we'll never catch up. By the time we reach her current position—in the event we haven't burned out, drifted away—she'll have scaled even greater heights, afloat on a cloud of boundless confidence and even more tantalizing scents. All of this should be illustrated in the manner of a medieval vision of the afterlife.

Lizzie is lying

Empirically speaking, Maxine's not so hot, according to Lizzie, the nicest of us. This is what passes for dissent in our little group. I seriously don't see the appeal.

In time Lizzie comes to share our fascination, albeit in a different way. For Lizzie what's interesting is the phenomenon of Maxine worship, rather than her actual qualities. She compares it to when we all obsessed over that reality show in which ambitious people our age backstabbed and slept with each other in order to become chefs at an exclusive French restaurant, and then the restaurant turned out not to exist.

Let's not and say we did

Maxine's latest e-mail bears the subject line *Let's Talk About SEX*.

No, moans Pru, dreading yet another sexual-harassment seminar. We never had one before Maxine came to the company. The seminars produce the opposite of the intended effect, making us feel like sex maniacs, but at least they're better than the mental health seminars the Sprout used to hold. *Those* made us depressed, even violent—Laars once punched the wall by the bulletin board so hard that his hand has never been the same. He blames this injury for his subpar softball performance.

Today Maxine makes wanton eye contact with the seminar leader, a lawyer named George. She's wearing a sheer shirt known commonly as *that shirt*. Pru knows the brand and everything.

George looks like he's just come back from vacation and is about to go on another one. His relaxed manner is exhausting to contemplate. All of us secretly wonder why we didn't go to law school, and also whether it's too late.

It is.

The gist of the meeting is that you should never date anyone in the office, ever. You should also b

extremely careful about what you say to someone of the opposite or indeed the same sex. Many seemingly harmless sentences, phrases, even words, and actually individual *letters* can be construed as harassing. Never say anything about what somebody's wearing. Also, just to be safe, don't wear anything too revealing.

We all frown and gaze at Maxine in her flesh-colored mesh number. The hypocrisy, the *everything* is too much.

Jonah says, *Don't we need eros in order for commerce to happen?* in that affected pensive tone he sometimes adopts, a pause every two words.

Do we? Admittedly, it's a stumper. None of us really knows. He sits up straight, strokes his chin in agitation. The tips of his ears go scarlet with rage. He should have been a philosophy professor or a union organizer for sooty paperboys. He says that, by the logic of the seminar, the subject line of Maxine's e-mail constitutes sexual harassment of sorts. He slaps the table—case closed!

The rest of us don't say anything, partly because we're afraid the Sprout is taking notes and will file on us, but mostly because we are getting hungry and have lost the will to fight. Usually at these meetings there's a stack of sandwiches and coffee—what the Sprout would call a *carrot*—and sometimes actual literal carrots. But not today.

Lizzie nudges Pru. The Sprout is in the corner, eyes narrowed in concentration, chin planted on his chest. Jonah's remarks have sent him deep into thought, so deep that he's actually sleeping.

The outside world

As we're filing out, George, the lawyer, asks Maxine, *Grab lunch?*

Just like that.

Two words.

She beams at the prospect. Our jaws fall off their hinges and Crease mimes shooting himself in the head.

Lizzie goes foraging for Claritin and Red Bull. *Does anyone want anything from the outside world?* she asks.

On the way to the drugstore she spies George and Maxine sliding into his car, a silver BMW.

Maxine is gone for the rest of the day. We have all been monitoring the situation intently. Laars says something critical of BMWs, German engineering, the legal profession as a whole. Laars rides his bike to work when he can. Today he wears a faded long-sleeved T advertising a New Jersey swimming pool company, the white letters nearly washed away, a recent flea market find. What could Maxine possibly see in George? Pru points out that George wears a clean shirt, the kind with buttons.

Us/them

Is Maxine one of us? One of them? For the first few months we were under the misapprehension that she was someone's secretary, but then we started getting memos from her, some with a distinct shape-up/ship-out undercurrent.

She might even outrank the Sprout. The subject merits closer, more fanatical observation. Could it be that the Sprout reports to *her*?

Pru tells us how all of the Sprout's issues about working for such a practically mythological creature as Maxine get inflicted on *us*. His lust for her leads to his hatred of us, roughly. His fear of her makes him want us to fear *him*.

As Pru talks, she flowcharts it on a pad, little multidirectional arrows and *FEAR* in huge letters.

The cc game

Against the advisement of George, Maxine will sometimes compliment us on our hair or other aspect of our scruffy appearance. The next day, or even later the same day, she'll send an all-caps e-mail asking why a certain form is not on her desk. This will prompt a peppy reply, one barely stifling howl of fear:

Hey Maxine!

The document you want was actually put in your in-box yesterday around lunchtime. I also e-mailed it to you and Russell. Let me know if you can't find it!

Thanks!

Laars

P.S. I'm also attaching it again as a Word doc, just in case.

There's so much wrong here: the fake-vague *around lunchtime*, the nonsensical *Thanks*, the quasi-casual postscript. The exclamation points look downright psychotic. Laars plays what he calls the *cc game*, sending the e-mail to the Sprout as well. You should always rope in an outside witness in order to prove your competence or innocence. On the other hand, this could be seen as whining.

Maxine never writes back. The Sprout will not get around to Laars's e-mail for a week. He doesn't

like to deal with the petty stuff, though it could also be argued that he doesn't like to deal with the b
stuff, either.

He will study the e-mail for a few seconds, frown, and then delete it.

Stalling

Despite Maxine's scatterbrained management style and seeming incompetence, we can't help but be
caught in her spell. We realize that this is bad. It makes her incompetence seem like brashness, her
haphazard ways a calculated line of attack. The more she does everything wrong, the more she can o
no wrong.

Lizzie still can't use the bathroom if Maxine's in there. If Lizzie happens to see her by the sink,
she'll head into a stall and sit in excruciating, faucet-drip-counting silence.

Jackrub!

Everybody needs a routine. Jack II's thing these days is to drop by your cubicle between two and three every afternoon and say *Who needs a backrub?* Even if you don't exactly raise your hand he latches his mitts onto your shoulders and starts working away. It was nice at first and then it was funny but now it's out of control. His stress-release technique is itself stressful. At the sound of Jack II's voice we automatically tilt to face him so that he can't sneak up and get a grip.

Jackrub! Pru will shout-hiss, a warning signal to all in the vicinity.

Today, to everyone's surprise, Lizzie accepts a Jackrub. She says she did something awful with a calculator: She punched in the Net Pay from her paycheck and multiplied it by 26. The total was so low she was sure she'd dropped a digit, like maybe she had multiplied by 6. *I have to economize, she says, but I've already been economizing.*

Except for the shoes, says Pru.

Lizzie needs a new job, but for now she'll take that Jackrub.

Lots of tension in this room, says Jack II, cracking his knuckles.

The Original Jack

We call him Jack II because there was a Jack before him, now known as the Original Jack. He was laid off during the Firings a year ago and no one's stayed in touch. This nickname-after-the-fact makes us think of him as a whimsical chap, always ready with a wisecrack or droll observation. Actually he was on the dull side and could be a total asshole.

People drop off the radar once they leave the office. Week after week, you form these intense bonds without quite realizing it. All that time together adds up: muttering at the fax machine, making coffee runs. The elevator rides. The bitching about the speed of the elevator. The endlessly reprised joke, as it hits every floor: *Making local stops.*

You see co-workers more than you see your so-called friends, even more than you see your significant others, your spouses if you have them. None of us do at the moment, though there are reports that Jenny's on the verge.

Lizzie has a hunch that Crease was once married. *He has that I Was Married look*, she says. *The blank stare.*

We know each other well but only to a point.

Instant folklore

Laars looks gaunt these days, his floppy hair hanging limp around his temples. More and more he lies for a spell on the pungent but very comfortable maroon sofa he inherited from Jason. *I just need to close my eyes.* He confesses to spending his evenings nursing Scotch before his computer at home, Googling himself until the wee hours. There's a person out there who shares the same name, or names, incredibly enough. Person or persons. He's found himself in Appalachian hiking e-gazettes, antique typewriter societies, and University of Alaska alumni newsletters. *I must destroy them*, he says.

Worse is when he Googles former girlfriends, high school crushes, drunken flings from his first semester abroad. There are more of all of these than you would imagine—indeed, than *he* imagined.

He's good-looking but not that good-looking, says Pru. Lizzie thinks he gets a lot of mileage out of the floppy hair.

Laars's innumerable past dalliances trouble him and he publicly declares a vow of chastity. Who could be imagining things but for a second Lizzie's eyes droop with sadness as he says this.

Alas, Laars is powerless to stop the hunt for figures from his past. He tries to devise searches that will sniff out maiden names and the like. But some people are gone for good, they have vanished, and the string of words he puts into the engine returns the most hilariously useless links: midwestern college soccer squads, science fair runners-up, family trees dipping into the eighteenth century.

He does this all day at work now, too, in between complaining about the pencil sharpener and complaining about the air-conditioning. He's found out a lot about his cousin's ex-girlfriend from Spain. No doubt he's Googled everyone in the office, uncovering secrets nestled in the thirty-fifth screen of results.

Jack II says that when you feel a tingling in your fingers, it means someone's Googling you. Who takes to this bit of instant folklore immediately.

Friendship

Jonah's e-mail sign-off used to read *Sincerely*, then *Sincerely Yours*, then *Cheers*. He disapproves Lizzie's *Best*, let alone Jenny's *Warm best*. He says it's important to set the right tone with your tagline. For a while he used *Thank you in advance for your cooperation*. Lately every e-mail ends with *Your friend, Jonah*.

What if you're not their friend? asks Pru.

The Californians!

Our company was once its own thing, founded long ago by men with mustaches. After several decades it wound up, to its surprise, as the easternmost arm of an Omaha-based octopus. The tentacles eventually detached, or strangled each other, a few of them joining forces, most dying out altogether.

Over time the name shrunk and mutated, changes captured in reams of old letterhead in the closet by Jonah's office. The stationery reads like the fossil record. Syllables disappeared. Ampersands were added and later removed. In the mid-'90s everything was consolidated into a set of five initials, two of which don't actually stand for anything. The vowelless result defies easy pronunciation, even by longtime employees. You say it a different way every time. This quality lends it a daunting preverbal power.

Lately we hear that some Californians want to make us *their* easternmost outpost. We base this conjecture on an opaquely worded one-inch paragraph on the fifth business page of the *Times* that appeared last month.

Think positive, we tell ourselves. There's no reason to believe that a new owner will be any worse than the current one. But when have things ever gotten better?

We know that the Firings were just a taste of what's in store, and like morbid climatologists tracking twisters, we anticipate their return. If something ominous happens—nasty memo, Colfax machine empty two days in a row—we see it as a sign of our new owners' impending arrival.

At these times Pru likes to shriek, *The Californians!*

Jack II thinks the best thing would be for them to come in and clean house, install their own people. He says it's unlikely any of us will survive. *Their mentality is totally different out west*, he says *mean, I should know*. He lived in San Diego for about a year after college, trying to be a comedy writer, despite the fact that he is neither outwardly funny nor humorous on the printed page.

You are here

Our office is located on what must be the least populated semi-wide street in all of Manhattan, a no-man's-land just far enough from two fashionable neighborhoods to be considered part of neither. Wind gets stuck here. At twilight, crumpled newspapers scuttle across the pavement like giant crab

Plastic bags advance in tumbleweed fashion. Sometimes it feels like the edge of the world.

We occupy the middle three floors of a nine-floor building, at the uneasy intersection of two quasi-avenues, which merge without clear signage. Further complicating matters is the abundance of honorary street names for people you've never heard of. Rabbi S. Blankman Street? "Mama O'Sullivan Road? Who were these colorful figures of yesteryear? Cabbies throw their hands up and think of turning in their medallions.

The Starbucks just down the road, uncomfortably situated on a corner between a boarded-up bar and a boarded-up locksmith, looks like a bordello. We call it the Bad Starbucks for its low-impact saxophone music and an absence of natural light combined with doomed, possibly improvised original drinks like the Pimm's cup chai.

The Good Starbucks, two blocks farther in the opposite direction, also looks like a house of ill-repute, but with better ventilation and more freebies, little paper cups of cake.

We're within five minutes of two subway stops, but at such illogical angles to them that we have difficulty instructing people how to get here: *You go left and then cut across the second parking lot, not the one that says PARK.*

To make it easier we tell them we'll meet up by the newsstand right outside the subway station three blocks away. We ask them beforehand, *What will you be wearing?* We describe ourselves: *Glasses, dark shirt.* This could be anybody.

Slice of life

The Bad Starbucks is where Jenny sees her life coach every Thursday at 4. She doesn't think we know but we know.

Laars wonders what the difference between a therapist and a life coach is.

A life coach doesn't have an office and isn't accredited, says Lizzie.

Lizzie has been out of sorts these days, slumping at her desk, leg hopping like a jackhammer. She's between therapists right now. She used to see one way uptown. He was good but the commute was killing her. She'd get there late and then they would spend half the remaining time discussing the reasons behind her lateness.

The real reason she stopped going, though, is because the pizzeria around the corner from his office had raised its prices by a quarter. Her therapist used pizza as an inflation barometer, and set his fee one hundred times the price of a slice, which was now at two bucks, exclusive of toppings.

Jenny later concludes that her life coach uses bagel prices to set her fee.

The grand tour

Sometimes one of us will have a visitor. If it's his or her first time to the building, we'll say, *Do you want the grand tour?* like it's our new apartment. Actually, it's always the guest's first time. No one ever comes back if they can help it, possibly due to overhearing someone like Laars shouting *You are not going to believe the size of this roach.*

After braving or ignoring a sermon from the Holy Roller security guard, and taking the leisurely elevator up, the visitor walks straight into the middle of a labyrinth. Without a reliable guide, he or she can wander vast tracts of lunar workscape before seeing a window. Lizzie remembers her first day on the job: Stepping into this feng-shui-proof layout, heading straight to the bathroom, and crying.

Most of us spend our days at a desk in one of the two archipelagoes of cubicle clusters. The desks have not been at capacity for over a year now, and so we let our stuff sprawl, colonizing adjacent workspaces, hanging a satchel in one, a jacket in another.

A few of us have our own little rooms. Even though everybody could probably snag one at this point, given that staff is dwindling, the Sprout gets very agitated at any such request. *That doesn't work with my comfort level right now.* Better to play it safe. Some of these rooms look out on the back of another office building. We wave to the workers there if our gazes happen to meet, and they wave back. That's as far as it goes.

Jonah has a room with a *door*, but no window. Crease has two desks, on opposite ends of the floor.

The college of noncompetitive running

People put too many things on the bulletin board. Bizarre newspaper items, notices for group shows exhibiting the disgruntled visual expressions of friends of friends, ironically saucy or inscrutable postcards. *Wish you were beer.*

Laars polices this corkboard commotion, giving everything a week before tearing it down. Schedules, announcements, responsibilities: These weigh on his spirit. When Laars started with us—six months, nine months, a year ago?—he was full of pep, but we managed to squeeze it out of him.

Laars occasionally gives off an Ivy League vibe, but he actually went to a small liberal arts college called Aorta or something. None of us have heard of it, a school in the Pacific Northwest that doesn't have grades or even pass-fail. It emphasizes feelings rather than performance. On the website you see pictures of a guy with the eraser tip of his pencil resting on his lip, two girls running noncompetitive—one's wearing jeans—on a weedy-looking track, a white guy with an Afro reading under a tree.

Multiple-desk syndrome

I've got it down to under a minute, says Crease, and as with a lot of what he says, we need a moment to figure out what he's referring to. *Forty-seven seconds.* He means the traveling time between his two

desks. In his mind, everyone is always thinking about him, worrying over Crease minutiae.

Last year Jason got fired, right in the middle of a project. No one saw it coming. Crease, who was not on the same team, was told to take over—*Step up to the plate*, per the Sprout—but was never told exactly what needed to be done. He had to figure it out on the fly. *Baptism by fire*, as the Sprout, and later Crease himself, put it.

With no time to move all of Jason's folders and meticulously organized report bins to his own desk, Crease commuted from one side of the office to the other, doing the Jason work until 2 and his own until he left at 7, at 8, at 9.

When the project was over he started moving his own stuff from his original desk to Jason's—the same model, but with better-greased drawers. Jason had vividly colored Post-its from Japan, exquisite semicircles that he bought on a trip. Crease loved them but used them sparingly because once they were gone, that was it.

After his initial burst of nesting, Crease soon discovered he had more old files than he could easily move, and found himself drifting back to his original home for certain tasks. Now he keeps his Creasedom divided, flitting between the desks several times a day. Each desk has a computer. He logs in as Jason on one, as himself on the other. The commute has become his major form of exercise. He also thinks the division is a good survival strategy: If they try to fire him when he's not at one desk, they might lose interest before they find him at his second home.

It's OK to relax

A while back, the Sprout handed out self-evaluation forms and said, *Help me help you*. We just needed to be as honest as possible. The evaluations would remain anonymous. Some of us, actually all of us, didn't take it seriously enough, writing things like *I enjoy ice cream and unprotected sex*, in a crazy person scrawl. That was when the Sprout had a sense of humor. Jules, when Jules was here, answered entirely in Spanish.

We thought the Sprout had abandoned this exercise but today there's another round. Everyone gets a golf pencil and a three-page packet. This time he wants our names printed at the top. Maxine strolls the conference room perimeter like a strict but hot schoolteacher, like we imagine teachers are in California.

We put a number to everything, 1 to 6, to reflect the strength of our feeling. The statements have a North Korean vibe, affectless yet intense.

I am happy with the way I am treated.

As the workday ends, it's OK to relax.

Jonah is sure there's a law against this sort of interrogation. We all respond the way we think that Californians want us to respond, except Jenny, who misheard Maxine's directions and thought that indicated Strongly Agree.

I feel there are other opportunities for me here.

It's not OK

The self-evaluation ends with an essay section. Maxine encourages us to *be creative*.

A flutter of panic turns into a full-fledged spiritual crisis. We all want to get out of there but no one wants to be the first to leave. All of us except Jill wind up staying for ninety soul-searching minutes, crafting epic texts of dashed hope and toxic cynicism. It doesn't occur to us that this is a bad idea until we put down our pencils, fingers sore from using such antique devices.

Jill leaves her sheet blank and flees before everyone else.

Maybe it was an 8

A month ago Maxine e-mailed us elaborate charts that none of us could decipher. The words were cryptic: *Release, Objective, Orient*. Was this information meant for us? She used five different colors in a rainbow of anxious strategy. She used fonts we'd never even seen, fonts so powerful most of our computers crashed.

Our latest theory is that she's a consultant in deep cover, looking to increase profits by 20 percent before the company is sold to the Californians. We base this knowledge on the fact that Laars saw a pie chart in the Sprout's office, with a green wedge that said 20. We're trying to decide whether that means she wants the profit margin to expand to 20 percent, or that the current margin should increase by 20 percent of itself.

Some of us are not so good at math. This might in fact be *why* we were hired.

It should also be noted that later Laars thinks maybe the 2 was a 3. He didn't get a clear view. *Maybe it was an 8?*

The not-so-funny part of our Maxine theory, based on something Pru overheard: She's going to fire three of us by the end of the year, or possibly the end of the month. Pru stood outside the Sprout's office for a whole minute, listening to Maxine complain about us.

On the human-interest side of the ledger, Jenny reports that she's seen Maxine with the sexual harassment lawyer guy, George, jogging lustily in the park.

Emotional rescue

Jenny says she's heard the Sprout sobbing, the door to his office only partially closed. Jonah accuses her of trying to humanize the enemy.

Maybe he was laughing, says Laars. But we all know that the Sprout's laughing doesn't sound like laughing. It sounds like this:

Hoo-hoo!

Security issues

Crease thinks that everyone is out to steal his limited-edition Japanese Post-its, the magenta and olive and mandarin orange stickies that he inherited from Jason. We like them, but we're not thieves. On the other hand, why should *he* get to keep them all? He and Jason were never particularly close. Crease's desk has no locks and he doesn't feel that his supply is safe. Sometimes he puts them in his satchel when he leaves the building for lunch.

Because

Whenever we sniff a layoff coming, which is always, each one of us thinks, *It can't be me because* _____.

Because I have *too much work to do*.

Because I'm *exploited as it is*.

Because, really, how much money would they save by getting rid of me versus what untold profit my labor/hard-earned know-how brings in?

I mean I'm joking but seriously.

Realistically, no way can it be me.

And then, all of a sudden, it is.

Stay the course

Beware of compliments. You don't want your stock to rise. You want to stay the course. Someone's stock rises and we all feel envious for a couple weeks. Then that person gets axed, or is made miserable that there's no option but to quit.

It happened to the Original Jack, with his dogged work ethic. It happened to Jason, with his complex yet elegant system of Post-it notation. It happened to Jules.

Jonah thinks the preliminary praise is unconscious on the Sprout's part, like a poker player's tell.

The departed send us e-mails after they leave and we forget to write back forever.

Dead letter

Has anyone noticed that the names all begin with J? Pru writes. All the fired people.

Jonah should be very nervous right around now. Same with Jack II. Management will not touch

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