



'IT'S A LONG TIME SINCE  
I'VE READ A NOVEL  
SO PAINFULLY FUNNY,  
OR SO ABSURDLY TRUE'  
CRAIG BROWN,  
MAIL ON SUNDAY

Then  
we  
Came  
to the  
End

The title is written in a large, orange, cursive font. Interspersed among the letters are several small, grey, isometric illustrations of people moving furniture. Some people are shown carrying boxes, while others are pushing or pulling sofas and armchairs. The figures are rendered in a simple, black-and-white style.

**JOSHUA FERRIS**

'THE COMEDY DEBUT OF THE YEAR' *SUNDAY TIMES*

Then We Came to the End

by

Joshua Ferris

Copyright © Joshua Ferris, 2007

All rights reserved



Penguin Books Ltd

This is a limited extract from Then We Came to the End

To find out more please visit [www.penguin.co.uk](http://www.penguin.co.uk)

## You Don't Know What's in My Heart

WE WERE FRACTIOUS AND overpaid. Our mornings lacked promise. At least those of us who smoked had something to look forward to at ten-fifteen. Most of us liked most everyone, a few of us hated specific individuals, one or two people loved everyone and everything. Those who loved everyone were unanimously reviled. We loved free bagels in the morning. They happened all too infrequently. Our benefits were astonishing in comprehensiveness and quality of care. Sometimes we questioned whether they were worth it. We thought moving to India might be better, or going back to nursing school. Doing something with the handicapped or working with our hands. No one ever acted on these impulses, despite their daily, sometimes hourly contractions. Instead we met in conference rooms to discuss the issues of the day.

Ordinarily jobs came in and we completed them in a timely and professional manner. Sometimes fuckups did occur. Printing errors, transposed numbers. Our business was advertising and details were important. If the third number after the second hyphen in a client's toll-free number was a six instead of an eight, and if it went to print like that, and showed up in *Time* magazine, no one reading the ad could call now and order today. No matter they could go

to the website, we still had to eat the price of the ad. Is this boring you yet? It bored us every day. Our boredom was ongoing, a collective boredom, and it would never die because we would never die.

Lynn Mason was dying. She was a partner in the agency. Dying? It was uncertain. She was in her early forties. Breast cancer. No one could identify exactly how everyone had come to know this fact. Was it a fact? Some people called it rumor. But in fact there was no such thing as rumor. There was fact, and there was what did not come up in conversation. Breast cancer was controllable if caught in the early stages but Lynn may have waited too long. The news of Lynn brought Frank Brizzolera to mind. We recalled looking at Frank and thinking he had six months, tops. Old Brizz, we called him. He smoked like a fiend. He stood outside the building in the most inclement weather, absorbing Old Golds in nothing but a sweater vest. Then and only then, he looked indomitable. When he returned inside, nicotine stink preceded him as he walked down the hall, where it lingered long after he entered his office. He began to cough, and from our own offices we heard the working-up of solidified lung sediment. Some people put him on their Celebrity Death Watch every year because of the coughing, even though he wasn't an official celebrity. He knew it, too, he knew he was on death watch, and that certain wagering individuals would profit from his death. He knew it because he was one of us, and we knew everything.

We didn't know who was stealing things from other people's workstations. Always small items — postcards, framed photographs. We had our suspicions but no proof. We believed it was probably not for the loot so much as the excitement — the shoplifter's addictive kick, or maybe it was a pathological cry for help. Hank Neary, one of the agency's only black writers, asked, "Come on, now — who would want my travel toothbrush?"

We didn't know who was responsible for putting the sushi roll behind Joe Pope's bookshelf. The first couple of days Joe had no clue about the sushi. Then he started taking furtive sniffs at his pits, and holding the wall of his palm to his mouth to get blowback from his breath. By the end of the week, he was certain it wasn't him. We smelled it, too. Persistent, high in the nostrils, it became worse than a dying animal. Joe's gorge rose every time he entered his office. The following week the smell was so atrocious the building people got involved, hunting the office for what turned out to be a sunshine roll — tuna, whitefish, salmon, and sprouts. Mike Boroshansky, the chief of security, kept bringing his tie up to his nose, as if he were a real cop at the scene of a murder.

We thanked each other. It was customary after every exchange. Our thanks were never disingenuous or ironic. We said thanks for getting this done so quickly, thanks for putting in so much effort. We had a meeting and when a meeting was over, we said thank you to the meeting makers for having made the meeting. Very rarely did we say anything negative or derogatory about meetings. We all knew there was a good deal of pointlessness to nearly all the meetings and in fact one meeting out of every three or four was nearly perfectly without gain or purpose but many meetings revealed the one thing that was necessary and so we attended them and afterward we thanked each other.

Karen Woo always had something new to tell us and we hated her guts for it. She would start talking and our eyes would glaze over. Might it be true, as we sometimes feared on the commute home, that we were callous, unfeeling individuals, incapable of sympathy, and full of spite toward people for no reason other than their proximity and familiarity? We had these sudden revelations that employment, the daily nine-to-five, was driving us far from our better selves. Should we quit? Would that solve it? Or were

those qualities innate, dooming us to nastiness and paucity of spirit? We hoped not.

Marcia Dwyer became famous for sending an e-mail to Genevieve Latko-Devine. Marcia often wrote to Genevieve after meetings. “It is really irritating to work with irritating people,” she once wrote. There she ended it and waited for Genevieve’s response. Usually when she got Genevieve’s e-mail, instead of writing back, which would take too long — Marcia was an art director, not a writer — she would head down to Genevieve’s office, close the door, and the two women would talk. The only thing bearable about the irritating event involving the irritating person was the thought of telling it all to Genevieve, who would understand better than anyone else. Marcia could have called her mother, her mother would have listened. She could have called one of her four brothers, any one of those South Side pipe-ends would have been more than happy to beat up the irritating person. But they would not have understood. They would have sympathized, but that was not the same thing. Genevieve would hardly need to nod for Marcia to know she was getting through. Did we not all understand the essential need for someone to understand? But the e-mail Marcia got back was not from Genevieve. It was from Jim Jackers. “Are you talking about me?” he wrote. Amber Ludwig wrote, “I’m not Genevieve.” Benny Shassburger wrote, “I think you goofed.” Tom Mota wrote, “Ha!” Marcia was mortified. She got sixty-five e-mails in two minutes. One from HR cautioned her against sending personal e-mails. Jim wrote a second time. “Can you please tell me — is it me, Marcia? Am I the irritating person you’re talking about?”

Marcia wanted to eat Jim’s heart because some mornings he shuffled up to the elevators and greeted us by saying, “What up, my niggas?” He meant it ironically in an effort to be funny, but he

was just not the man to pull it off. It made us cringe, especially Marcia, especially if Hank was present.

In those days it wasn't rare for someone to push someone else down the hall really fast in a swivel chair. Games aside, we spent most of our time inside long silent pauses as we bent over our individual desks, working on some task at hand, lost to it — until Benny, bored, came and stood in the doorway. "What are you up to?" he'd ask.

It could have been any of us. "Working" was the usual reply.

Then Benny would tap his topaz class ring on the doorway and drift away.

How we hated our coffee mugs! our mouse pads, our desk clocks, our daily calendars, the contents of our desk drawers. Even the photos of our loved ones taped to our computer monitors for uplift and support turned into cloying reminders of time served. But when we got a new office, a bigger office, and we brought everything with us into the new office, how we loved everything all over again, and thought hard about where to place things, and looked with satisfaction at the end of the day at how well our old things looked in this new, improved, important space. There was no doubt in our minds just then that we had made all the right decisions, whereas most days we were men and women of two minds. Everywhere you looked, in the hallways and bathrooms, the coffee bar and cafeteria, the lobbies and the print stations, there we were with our two minds.

There seemed to be only the one electric pencil sharpener in the whole damn place.

We didn't have much patience for cynics. Everyone was a cynic at one point or another but it did us little good to bemoan our unbelievable fortunes. At the national level things had worked out pretty well in our favor and entrepreneurial cash was easy to come

by. Cars available for domestic purchase, cars that could barely fit in our driveways, had a martial appeal, a promise that, once inside them, no harm would come to our children. It was IPO this and IPO that. Everyone knew a banker, too. And how lovely it was, a bike ride around the forest preserve on a Sunday in May with our mountain bikes, water bottles, and safety helmets. Crime was at an all-time low and we heard accounts of former welfare recipients holding steady jobs. New hair products were being introduced into the marketplace every day and the glass shelves of our stylists were stocked with tidy rows of them, which we eyed in the mirror as we made small talk, each of us certain, *there's one up there just for me*. Still, some of us had a hard time finding boyfriends. Some of us had a hard time fucking our wives.

Some days we met in the kitchen on sixty to eat lunch. There was only room for eight at the table. If all the seats were full, Jim Jackers would have to eat his sandwich from the sink and try to engage from over in that direction. It was fortunate for us in that he could pass us a spoon or a packet of salt if we needed it.

"It is really irritating," Tom Mota said to the table, "to work with irritating people."

"Screw you, Tom," Marcia replied.

Headhunters hounded us. They plied us with promises of better titles and increases in pay. Some of us went but most of us stayed. We liked our prospects where we were and didn't care for the hassle of meeting new people. It had taken us a while to familiarize ourselves and to feel comfortable. First day on the job, names went in one ear and out the other. One minute you were being introduced to a guy with a head of fiery red hair and fair skin crawling with freckles, and before you knew it you had moved on to someone new and then someone after that. A few weeks would go by, gradually you'd start to put the name to the face, and one day

it just clicked, to be wedged there forever: the eager redhead's name was Jim Jackers. There was no more confusing him with "Benny Shassburger" whose name you tended to see on e-mails and handouts but hadn't come to recognize yet as the slightly heavysset, dough-faced Jewish guy with the corkscrew curls and quick laugh. So many people! So many body types, hair colors, fashion statements.

Marcia Dwyer's hair was stuck in the eighties. She listened to terrible music, bands we had outgrown in the eleventh grade. Some of us had never even heard of the music she listened to, and it was inconceivable that she could enjoy such noise. Others of us didn't like music at all, some preferred talk radio, and there was a large contingent that kept their radios tuned to the oldies station. After everyone went home for the night, after we all fell asleep and the city dimmed, oldies continued to play inside the abandoned office. Picture it — only a parallelogram of light in the doorway. A happy tune by the Drifters issuing in the dark at two, three o'clock in the morning, when elsewhere murders were taking place, drug deals, unspeakable assaults. Crime was down, but it had yet to be rendered obsolete. In the mornings, our favorite DJs were back on, playing our favorite oldies. Most of us ate the crumb toppings first and then the rest of the muffin. They were the same songs that would play throughout a nuclear winter.

We had visceral, rich memories of dull, interminable hours. Then a day would pass in perfect harmony with our projects, our family members, and our coworkers, and we couldn't believe we were getting paid for this. We decided to celebrate with wine at dinner. Some of us liked one restaurant in particular while others spread out across the city, sampling and reviewing. We were foxes and hedgehogs that way. It was vitally important to Karen Woo that she be the first to know of a new restaurant. If someone

mentioned a new restaurant Karen didn't know about, you could bet your bottom dollar that Karen would be there that very night, sampling and reviewing, and when she came in the next morning, she told us (those of us who didn't know about the other person's knowing about the new restaurant) about the new restaurant she'd just been to, how great it was, and how we all had to go there. Those of us who followed Karen's suggestion gave the same advice to those of us who hadn't heard Karen's suggestion, and soon we were all running into one another at the new restaurant. By then Karen wouldn't be caught dead there.

Early in the time of balanced budgets and the remarkable rise of the NASDAQ we were given polo shirts of quality cotton with the agency's logo stitched on the left breast. The shirt was for some team event and everyone wore it out of company pride. After the event was over, it was uncommon to see anyone wearing that polo again — not because we had lost our company pride, but because it was vaguely embarrassing to be seen wearing something everyone knew had been given to you for free. After all, our portfolios were stuffed with NASDAQ offerings and if our parents had only been able to buy us outfits from Sears, we could now afford Brooks Brothers and had no need for free shirts. We gave them to the Goodwill or they languished in our drawers or we put them on to mow the lawn. A few years later, Tom Mota exhumed his company-pride polo from some box of clothes under his bed. Likely he found it when the Mota chattels were being divided up by order of a judge. He wore it to work. He had worn the polo along with the rest of us on that polo-wearing day, but his life had changed dramatically since then and we thought it was an indication of where his head was at that he didn't mind being seen in a shirt most of us used to wash our cars. It really was a very handy cotton. Then Tom wore the same shirt the next day. We wondered where

he was sleeping. On the third day, we were concerned about his showering. When Tom passed an entire week in the same polo, we expected it to give off an odor. But he must have been washing it, and we pictured him bare-chested at the Laundromat watching his one polo turn in the dryer, because his wife wouldn't let him return to his Naperville home.

By the end of the month, we figured out finally it had nothing to do with Tom's divorce. Thirty straight days in the same corporate polo — it was the beginning of Tom's campaign of agitation.

"You ever going to change out of it?" asked Benny.

"I love this shirt. I want to be buried in it."

"Would you take mine, at least, so you can switch off?"

"I would love that," said Tom.

So Benny gave Tom his polo, but Tom didn't use it to switch off. Instead he wore Benny's on top of his own. Two polos, one under the other. He approached the rest of us and solicited our polos as well. Jim Jackers grasped at any opportunity to ingratiate himself, and soon Tom was walking around in three polos.

"Lynn Mason's starting to ask questions," said Benny.

"Company pride," said Tom.

"But three at a time?"

"You don't know what's in my heart," said Tom, pounding his fist against the corporate logo three times. "Company pride."

Some days green was on top, some days red, some days blue. Later we found out he was the one responsible for taping the sunshine roll to the back of Joe's bookshelf. He was responsible for many things, including changing everyone's radio stations, making pornographic screensavers, and leaving his seed on the floor of the men's rooms on sixty and sixty-one. We knew he was responsible because once he was laid off, the radios went unmolested and the custodians no longer complained to management.

It was the era of take-ones and tchotchkes. The world was flush with Internet cash and we got our fair share of it. It was our position that logo design was every bit as important as product performance and distribution systems. “Wicked cool” were the words we used to describe our logo designs. “Bush league” were the words we used to describe the logo designs of other agencies — unless it was a really well-designed logo, in which case we bowed down before it, much like the ancient Mayans did their pagan gods.

We, too, thought it would never end.

Enter a  
New  
Century

# 1

LAYOFFS — TOM'S FINAL HOUR — JANINE GORJANC'S TRAGEDY —  
THE DOWNTURN — DRASTIC MEASURES — THE DEBATE OVER TOM —  
CREEPY PICTURES — THE STORY OF TOM MOTA'S CHAIR —  
WALKING SPANISH DOWN THE HALL — SANDERSON — TWO E-MAILS —  
THE STORY OF TOM MOTA'S CHAIR, PART II — THE PRO BONO  
FUND-RAISER ADS — LASTIVE ACID — LYNN MASON

LAYOFFS WERE UPON US. They had been rumored for months, but now it was official. If you were lucky, you could sue. If you were black, aged, female, Catholic, Jewish, gay, obese, or physically handicapped, at least you had grounds. At one point or another we have all been deposed. We plan on being deposed for Tom's suit — we have no doubt there will be one. Though he has no grounds unless asshole has been added to the list. And that's not just us talking. His ex-wife *hates* the guy. Restraining order. He can't see his two young kids without supervision. She moved to Phoenix just to get away from him. We wouldn't call him an asshole without having reached a very high consensus. Amber Ludwig objects to the specific designation because she has objected to profanity since becoming pregnant, but really there is no other word, and her objection is really just an abstention.

When Tom found out he was being let go, he wanted to throw his computer against his office window. Benny Shassburger was in there with him. Benny wasn't like a great friend of Tom's or anything but he was the guy who on occasion would have lunch with Tom and then report back to the rest of us. Word spread fast that Tom had been laid off and naturally Benny was the guy to go

down there. He said Tom was pacing in his office like a man recently jailed. He said he could picture what Tom had looked like the night he went to the Naperville house with the aluminum bat and the authorities were called to restrain him. We had never heard that story before. Right there and then we had to stop Benny from telling us the story of Tom's final hour so he could first tell us the story of the aluminum bat. Benny was shocked we had never heard that story; he was sure we had. No, we never had. "Get out of here," he said. "You've heard that story." No, we hadn't. This was always how these conversations went. So Benny told us the story of Tom and the bat and then he told us the story of Tom's final hour. Both were good stories and together they killed a good hour. Some of us loved killing an hour of the company's time and others felt guilty for it afterward. But whatever your personal feelings on the matter, you still had to account for the hour, so you billed it to a client. By the end of the fiscal year, our clients had paid us a substantial amount of money to sit around and bullshit, expenses they then passed on to you, the consumer. It was the cost of doing business, but some of us feared it was an indication that the end was near, like the profligacy that preceded the downfall of the Roman Empire. There was so much money involved, and some of it even trickled down to us, a small amount that allowed us to live among the top one-percent of the wealthiest in the world. It was lasting fun, until layoffs came.

Tom wanted to throw his computer against the window, but only if he could guarantee it would break the glass and land on the street below. He was under his desk removing cords. "That's sixty-two stories, Tom," Benny said. And Tom agreed it was a bad idea if he couldn't break the glass. If glass didn't break they would say Tom Mota couldn't even fuck up right — he didn't want to give them the satisfaction of *that*, the bastards. We were the bastards he

was referring to, in part. “But I don’t think it’ll break the glass,” said Benny. Tom stopped tooling around with his computer. “But I gotta do *something*,” he said, sitting back on his heels.

We lacked that kind of urgency. Our building was on the Magnificent Mile, in downtown Chicago, on a corner a few blocks from Lake Michigan. It had tones of art deco and two gilded revolving doors. We shuffled up the stairs toward the revolving doors slowly, afraid of what awaited us inside. In the beginning, we were let go in large numbers. Then, as the practice was refined, one by one, as they saw fit. We feared ending up on Lower Wacker Drive. Unemployed, we would be unpaid; unpaid, we’d be evicted from our homes; evicted, we would end up on Lower Wacker, sharing space with shopping carts and developing our own winterized and blackened feet. Instead of scrabbling for the addition of “Senior” to our current titles, we would search the alleyways for smokable butts. It was fun, imagining our eventual despair. It was also despairing. We didn’t really believe we would be honked at from the Lexuses of our former colleagues as they drove down Lower Wacker on their way home to the suburbs. We didn’t think we would be forced to wave at them from our lit oil drums. But that we might have to fill out an unemployment form over the Internet was not out of the question. That we might struggle to make rent or a mortgage payment was a real and frightening prospect.

Yet we were still alive, we had to remember that. The sun still shone in as we sat at our desks. Certain days it was enough just to look out at the clouds and at the tops of buildings. We were buoyed by it, momentarily. It made us “happy.” We could even turn uncommonly kind. Take, for instance, the time we smuggled Old Golds into Frank Brizzolera’s hospital room. Or when we attended the funeral of Janine Gorjanc’s little girl, found strangled in an empty lot. It was hard for us to believe something like that

could happen to someone we knew. You have never seen someone weep until you have witnessed a mother at the funeral of her murdered child. The girl was nine years old. She was removed at night from an open window. It was all over the papers. First she was missing. Then her body was found. To watch Janine at the funeral, surrounded by pictures of Jessica, her family trying to hold her up — even Tom Mota's heart broke. We were outside the funeral home afterward, in the parking lot speaking somberly to one another, when Tom began to beat on his '94 Miata. It didn't take long before everyone noticed him. He hit the windows with his fists and let out terrible cries of "Fuck!" He kicked the doors and the tires. Finally he collapsed near the trunk, wracked with sobs. It was not unreasonable behavior given the circumstances, but we were a little surprised that Tom appeared the most affected. He was sprawled out on the funeral home parking lot in his suit and tie, sobbing like a child. A few people went over to comfort him. We assumed in part his behavior had something to do with his ex-wife taking his kids to Phoenix. One thing we knew for certain — despite all our certainties, it was very difficult to guess what one individual was thinking at any given moment.

We believed that downturns had been rendered obsolete by the ingenious technology of the new economy. We thought ourselves immune from things like plant closings in Iowa and Nebraska, where remote Americans struggled against falling-in roofs and credit card debt. We watched these blue-collar workers being interviewed on TV. For the length of the segment, it was impossible not to feel the sadness and anxiety they must have felt for themselves and their families. But soon we moved on to weather and sports and by the time we thought about them again, it was a different plant in a different city, and the state was offering dislocated worker programs, readjustment and retraining services, and

skills workshops. They'd be fine. Thank god we didn't have to worry about a misfortune like that. We were corporate citizens, buttressed by advanced degrees and padded by corporate fat. We were above the fickle market forces of overproduction and mismanaged inventory.

What we didn't consider was that in a downturn, *we* were the mismanaged inventory, and we were about to be dumped like a glut of imported circuit boards. On the drive home we puzzled over who was next. Scott McMichaels was next. His wife had just had a baby. Sharon Turner was next. She and her husband had just purchased a house. Names — just names to anyone else, but to us they were the individuals who generated our greatest sympathy. The ones who put their things in a box, shook a few hands, and left without complaint. They had no choice in the matter, and they possessed a quiet resignation to their ill-timed fates. As they departed, it almost felt to us like self-sacrifice. They left, so that we might stay. And stay we did, though our hearts went out to them. Then there was Tom Mota, who wanted to throw his computer against the window.

He wore a goatee and was built like a bulldog, stocky, with fore-shortened limbs and a rippling succession of necks. He didn't belong where we were. That's not condescension so much as an attempt at a charitable truth. He would have been happier elsewhere — felling trees in a forest, or throwing nets for an Alaskan fishery. Instead, he was dressed in khakis, drinking a latte on a sectional sofa, discussing the best way to make our diaper client's brand synonymous with "more absorbent." That is, when we still had our diaper client. After deciding not to throw his computer against the window, Tom fixated on his magazines. He said to Benny, "Benny, man, you gotta get my magazines from Jim. That fuck's had them two months. I'm not leaving here without them — but I can't go

out there. I don't want to have to see anybody." When Benny told us that, we felt pity for Tom. Of course Tom would not have wanted that. He would have spit our pity back in our faces. Nobody wants pity. They just want to get the hell out of there, out of sight, to alleviate the sting of ridicule, and then they want to forget about the entire miserable experience. They can't do that walking the halls to retrieve magazines. Benny returned to Tom's office ten minutes later with back copies of *Car and Driver*, *Rolling Stone*, *Guns and Ammo*. Tom was sitting on the floor of his office, winding his watch. Benny said, "Tom." Tom didn't answer. "Tom?" said Benny. Tom continued to wind his watch. Then he stood, opened a desk drawer, and pulled out one of the corporate polos he used to wear many days in a row. The blue one (Benny's) and the green one (Jim's) were also in the desk drawer. Tom took off his button-down and put the red polo on. "They think I'm a clown," he said to Benny. Benny replied, "No. Nobody thinks you're a clown, Tom. They got you by the balls, man — everybody knows that." "Hand me those scissors," said Tom. Benny said he looked behind him and saw a pair of scissors on Tom's bookshelf. Benny told us he didn't want to hand scissors to Tom. "They think I'm a clown," Tom repeated as he walked over to his bookshelf and grabbed the scissors himself and began to cut into his nice pleated slacks at the knee. "What are you doing, Tom?" asked Benny, with an uneasy chuckle. He was still holding Tom's old magazines. He watched as Tom cut all the way around with the scissors until the trouser leg fell to his ankle. Then he started working on one sleeve of the polo, on the opposite side to the cut-off trouser leg. "Tom," said Benny. Tom's tan-lined arm was soon visible all the way to the shoulder. A tattoo of barbed wire snaked around his biceps. "Tom, seriously — what are you doing?"

“Will you do me a favor,” asked Tom, “and cut a hole from the backside of my shirt?”

“Tom, why are you doing this?”

Sometimes drastic measures were called for. There were occasions when someone needed to get into a car with a package and drive all the way out to Palatine to the FedEx station that had the latest drop-off time *in the state* just to guarantee the arrival of an overnight delivery. A new client pitch due Monday meant a full week of one o'clock nights and a few hours of sleep on random sofas on Sunday. It was called a fire alarm, and when one came along you had to drop everything. There was no going to the gym. Theater tickets were canceled. You saw no one, not your five-year-old, not your marriage counselor, not your sponsor, not even your dog. We feared the fire alarm. At the same time, we were all in it together, and we could be taken by surprise, after five days of grind, by the transformation of the team. Eating takeout, laughing around a cubicle, putting our minds together to solve something hard — five or six days of that and there was no immunization against the camaraderie. The people we worked with, with all their tics and pieties and limitations — we had to admit it to ourselves, they weren't all that bad. Where did *that* come from? Whence this *friendliness*? “‘The love flooding you for your brother,’” said Hank Neary, quoting something or other. He was always quoting something or other and we hated him for it, unless we were in the middle of a fire alarm, in which case we loved him like a brother. That love would dissipate in a week. But while it lasted, work was a well-spring, a real source of light, the nurture of a beloved community.

Then the downturn came and there were no more fire alarms. No speeding out to Palatine, no one o'clock nights, no love flooding us for our brother.

Benny went down the elevator with Tom. With his clothes cut to shreds, Tom looked like someone washed up on shore after a shipwreck, tattered and clinging to a single plank. His shoes and socks were off, left inside the office with the abandoned magazines, the Kmart portraits of his kids, and the discarded swatches from his trousers and polo.

“What are you going to do?” asked Benny.

“What do you think I’m gonna do?” Tom asked rhetorically, just as they had reached the lobby. “I’m gonna find a new job.”

“No,” said Benny. “I mean right now. What are you doing right now?”

They exited the elevator. Tom had emptied out the pens and pencils from a mug he kept on his desk and that empty mug was now his only possession. Tom stopped in the marble elevator bank and watched for the descent of the other elevators. “You ever read Ralph Waldo Emerson?” Tom asked Benny. Benny didn’t know where to stand. He told us he didn’t know why they had just stopped in the elevator bank. “What are you planning to do, Tom?” “Listen to what Emerson said,” said Tom. Tom began to quote. “‘For all our penny-wisdom,’” he said, “‘for all our soul-destroying slavery to habit, it is not to be doubted that all men have sublime thoughts.’ Did you hear that, Benny? Did you hear it, or you need me to repeat it to you?” “I heard it,” Benny replied. “They never knew me,” Tom said, shaking his head and pointing up at those bastards. “They never did.”

The first elevator arrived, and lunchgoers from the law firm emerged. Tom held his empty mug before them. “Help out the unemployed?” he asked them, shaking the cup. “Hey, help out the jobless?”

“Tom,” said Benny.

“Benny, get the fuck off me! — Help me out, guy, please? I just lost my job today.”

And that was Tom’s final hour.

We heard it from Benny just after he told us the story of how Tom arrived at the Naperville house with an aluminum bat when he knew the children were at the grandmother’s and everything deemed legally “Tom’s” in the divorce settlement, everything that was “Tom’s” and could be smashed or shattered with an aluminum bat, suffered Tom’s swing until the authorities arrived to subdue him.

Amber Ludwig, who had the compact, athletic body of a seal, with very small hands and dark, closely set eyes, said she feared Tom was going to return like you hear on the news and open fire. “No, seriously,” she said. “I think he’s come undone. I don’t think he was ever *done* to begin with.”

Amber wasn’t showing yet but everyone already knew. She was debating an abortion but, to Larry Novotny’s great disappointment, looked to be leaning against it. Larry would have to decide what to do about his wife, who had just had a child herself not that long ago. We felt sorry for Larry, who worried the curved, finger-smudged bill of his Cubs cap endlessly that spring, but we also thought it was pretty obvious that he should have kept his pecker in his pants. We felt sorry for Amber, too, but as everyone knows, it takes two to tango. We just hoped they weren’t doing it on our desks.

We asked Amber if she really, honestly thought Tom capable of a bloodbath.

“Yes,” she said. “I wouldn’t put anything past him. He’s a madman.”

We tried to convince her that that sort of thing happened only in factories and warehouses, and then only on the South Side. A

debate ensued. Was Tom certifiable? Or was he just a clown? What was that at Janine's little girl's funeral, when he wept and continued weeping even after we got to the bar? Wasn't that proof the guy had a heart?

"Okay," said Amber, "okay, but what do you call standing on the heating vent and mooning the swimmers from his office window? What was that?" she asked.

She was referring to the Holiday Inn rooftop pool Tom's office looked down on, and Tom's tendency to get right up to the glass with his butt cheeks. Hijinks! we cried. Fun! That's not insanity. Amber was outvoted. We knew Tom. We knew Alan Glew, Linda Blanton, Paul Saunier. We knew Neil Hotchkiss and Cora Lee Brower and Harold Oak. They weren't any of them coming back here with a nightmare in a backpack. They had been let go. They packed their things. They left us for good, never to return.



IT WAS A SURPRISE to everyone when Janine came back. Of course it was understood she could come back whenever she wanted. We just didn't think, given all she had gone through, that coming back here, resuming the old routine — how could that ease her suffering? But maybe it was exactly what she needed, something to take her mind off it. She looked older, especially in the eyes. Her blouses were all wrinkled. Her brown hair was flat and dry where before she had styled it every day, and some days she smelled bad. Her first day back, she thanked us for the flyers. Lynn Mason had had the idea of printing up flyers when we heard that the girl had gone missing. Genevieve Latko-Devine, arguably the kindest and sweetest among us, drove out to North Aurora, where the Gorjancs lived, to get a photograph of Jessica. She returned to the

office by noon with a fourth-grade school portrait. We scanned it, loaded it onto the server, and began to build the ad.

Genevieve was at the computer doing the work. Jessica was a plain girl with fair hair and pale skin and an unfortunately crooked smile. We told Genevieve that Jessica was getting washed out.

“What do you want me to do about that?” she asked.

“Let’s work on her,” said Joe Pope. “Drop her into Photoshop.”

We worked on Macs. Some of us had new Macs, some had high-powered notebooks, and some unfortunate souls had to pedal furiously under their desks to keep a spark running through their extinct models. We made layouts in QuarkXPress; all our image manipulation we did in Photoshop. Genevieve dropped the image of the girl into Photoshop and started playing up the girl’s hair and freckles. We took a look and everyone agreed she was still getting washed out.

“Try making this area here darker,” said Joe, circumscribing the girl’s face with a finger. “God, your screen is filthy,” he added. He removed a tissue from her box and dusted it. He took a new look. “Now she’s more washed out than ever.”

Genevieve tried a few things. We looked at the girl. Joe shook his head. “Now she looks sunburned,” he said. “Bring it back some.”

“I think we’re losing sight of what our ultimate goal is here,” said Genevieve.

But we feared that if she was washed out, people would look right past the flyer.

Genevieve didn’t lack for more suggestions. “Pump ‘MISSING’ up a little,” said Jim Jackers.

“And play up the \$10,000 reward,” suggested Tom. “I don’t know how, just . . . use a different font or something.”

“And you have some kerning issues,” Benny reminded her from the sidelines.

We all wanted to help. Genevieve worked on it another hour, tweaking this and that, until someone recommended that she fix the little girl's smile to be less crooked. Jessica would look prettier that way.

"All right," she concluded, "we're officially through here."

That afternoon we ripped color print after color print and scored them in the mount room. Several of us drove out to North Aurora and spent the evening posting them — in the public library, the YMCA, the entrance aisles of the grocery stores, in the Starbucks and movie theaters and in the Toys"R"Us, and on all the neighborhood telephone poles. Three days later she was found in an empty lot wrapped in plastic sheeting.

We put up bunting and had cake for Janine's return. Next day Joe Pope found her crying in front of the mirror in the men's room. She had gotten confused and gone through the wrong door. It was rare to get news by way of Joe Pope, since he didn't talk to many people, so we probably shouldn't have known that he found Janine in the men's room. But he did talk to Genevieve Latko-Devine, and Genevieve talked to Marcia Dwyer, and Marcia talked to Benny Shassburger, and Shassburger talked to Jim and Amber, who talked to Larry and Dan Wisdom and Karen Woo, and Karen never met anybody she didn't talk to. Sooner or later everyone found out everything, which is how we came to know that Janine was not over her grief, not by a long shot, because she had gotten confused and wandered into the men's room. We pictured her at the sinks, holding on to the marble ledge for support, her head downcast and her tired eyes shedding momentous tears, oblivious to the urinals in the mirror. After her return, she almost never spoke at lunch.

We talked about Janine wandering into the men's room. No one thought it should be kept a secret, but we were careful not to

ridicule the event or turn it into a joke. A few of us did, but not many. It was obviously a tragic thing. We knew about it, but how could we possibly know the first thing about it? Some of us discussed the matter to break up the routine, but most of us used the information to explain why she was quiet at lunch. Then we filed the incident away. That is, until Janine started bringing pictures of Jessica into the office and placing them on the credenza and the bookshelves and hanging them from the walls. The pictures crowded in, elbowing each other for room. A hundred pictures of her dead daughter in the seventy-five square feet of her office. The three on the wall facing her were the most mournful things we'd ever seen. It was also downright creepy. It got to the point where we tried to avoid entering her office. When we were forced to, for some pressing item of business, we never knew where to rest our eyes.



ON A TUESDAY IN MAY at twelve-fifteen in the afternoon, Lynn Mason scheduled an input meeting. We gathered in her office to be a part of it. Input meetings made us happy because they meant we had work to do. We worked in the creative department developing ads and we considered our ad work creative, but it wasn't half as creative as the work we'd put in to pad our time sheets every Monday morning since layoffs began. An input meeting meant we'd have actual work that would make our time sheets less intimidating the following week. But some of us didn't like input meetings when they were scheduled for twelve-fifteen. "That's when most of us — hello? — go to lunch," said Karen Woo. Lunch for Karen was a sacrament. "Why not schedule it for eleven-fifteen?" she asked. "Or even one o'clock?" Most of the rest of us just thought, no big deal, so lunch comes an hour late. "But I'm hungry," said

Karen. She didn't seem to have much sympathy for the fact that Lynn Mason had just found out she had cancer and might have other things on her mind. Besides, Lynn could schedule an input whenever she wanted — she was a partner. “Of course she *can* schedule an input whenever she wants,” said Karen. “But *ought* she? That's the question. *Ought* she.” Many of us thought Karen should consider herself lucky to still have a job.

While waiting for Lynn to arrive, we killed time listening to Chris Yop tell us the story of Tom Mota's chair. We loved killing time and had perfected several ways of doing so. We wandered the hallways carrying papers that indicated some mission of business when in reality we were in search of free candy. We refilled our coffee mugs on floors we didn't belong on. Hank Neary was an avid reader. He arrived early in his brown corduroy coat with a book taken from the library, copied all its pages on the Xerox machine, and sat at his desk reading what looked to passersby like the honest pages of business. He'd make it through a three-hundred-page novel every two or three days. Billy Reiser, who worked on another team and walked with a limp, was a huge Cubs fan. He had a friend who installed satellites. They gained illegal access to the roof, secured a remote satellite in an out-of-the-way place, and situated it so that the signal beamed off the next-door building into Billy's office. Then Billy's friend set up a television under his desk, mounted at an angle so if Billy was sitting just a foot back in his chair, he could look down and see the picture. When it was all through, he had two hundred stations and could watch the Cubs even on away games. We gathered down there in limited numbers when Sammy Sosa was going for the home run record. The problem was Billy was worried someone would find out about the satellite, so every time Sammy hit a homer and we cheered like mad, we got kicked out.

Tom Mota had been laid off the week before Chris Yop told us the story of his chair. Yop said he had been cleaning off his desk when he looked up and found the office coordinator standing in his doorway. Our office coordinator smelled of witch hazel and carpet fiber, had a considerable mole on her left cheek, and never said hello to anyone. It was rumored that, like an ant, her back could bear the burden of something several times her body weight. She stood in Yop's doorway with her arms crossed, leaning against the doorjamb and peering in at Yop's bookshelves. She asked if they were Tom Mota's. "So I say to her," Yop said to us, "'Tom Mota's? What, those?' 'The bookshelves,' she says. 'Are those Tom's?' 'The bookshelves? No,' I say, 'those aren't Tom's. Those are mine.' 'Well, someone took Tom's bookshelves out of his office,' she says to me, 'and I have to get them back.' At this point, Tom's been shitcanned, what? a day? This was last Tuesday — I mean, the body's not even cold yet, and she's standing in my doorway accusing me of stealing? So I repeat to her, I say, 'Those aren't his bookshelves, those are my bookshelves.' But then she walks into my office, right, get this. She walks into my office and she says, 'Is that his chair? Is that Tom's chair you're sitting on?' She's pointing at it, right. She thinks it's his chair. It's my chair. Those are his bookshelves, sure. I took them out of his office when he got shitcanned and brought them down to mine. But it's for damn sure not his chair. It's my chair! So I say, 'This? This is my chair. This chair is mine.' And she says, she walks into my office and stands very close to me, she says, she's about a foot, maybe two feet from me, she says, pointing at my chair, 'Do you mind if I look at the serial numbers?' Now, who knew about this?" he asked us. "Who knew about these serial numbers?" None of us had ever heard anything about serial numbers. "Yeah, serial numbers," Yop continued. "They keep serial numbers on the back of everything. That

way they can track everything, who has what and what office it's in. Did you know about this?"

We let him go on about the serial numbers because his outrage was typical of the time. Chris was a nervous man, and as he spoke, his whole face seemed to quiver. His animating hands shook a little, as if battling a caffeine dip. He had encouraged us to call him Yop because it made him feel younger, cooler, and more accepted. He kept his graying hair long, so it curled up near the ears, but age had thinned it on top. He was married to a woman named Terry and on weekends he played bad rock songs for a seventies cover band. He was always asking everyone what they were listening to these days. We considered it half-noble, half-pathetic when passing his office to hear some new rap album issuing from his CD player, when everyone knew what he really wanted to be listening to was *Blood on the Tracks*. We listened to his story about Tom Mota's chair from various locations in Lynn's cluttered office. She had a glass-top table and a white leather sofa and we hung in the doorway and leaned against the walls, killing time while waiting for her. Karen Woo kept looking at her watch and sighing because Lynn was running late to her own meeting.

"I was like, 'Serial numbers?'" Yop continued. "And she says, she's standing behind me, right, she says, 'Have a look.' So I get off my chair, I take a look — serial numbers! On the back of my chair! 'Where'd these come from?' I ask her. She doesn't answer me. Instead she says, 'Can I borrow a pen?' She wants to borrow a pen so she can take down the serial numbers! I'm thinking, what sort of fascist organization — 'Hello?' I say. 'This is my chair.' But she's not paying any attention to me — she's taking down the serial numbers! Then she goes over to the buckshelves, she starts taking down the serial numbers on them and she says, 'And what about

these buckshelves?’ Now I’m in a fix, because I lied about the buckshelves, sure, but I’m telling the truth about the chair. I could give a *shit* about the buckshelves. Take the buckshelves. Just leave me my chair.”

We told Yop he meant to say *bookshelves*.

“What’d I say?” he asked us.

We told him he was saying *buckshelves*.

“Buckshelves?”

Right — at first it was *bookshelves*, but then he started saying *buckshelves*.

“Listen, don’t pay any attention to me,” he said. “That’s just me getting my words wrong. The point is, take the bookshelves. Just leave me my chair. It’s my chair. ‘But are they *yours*?’ she asks me. It’s a moral question for this woman, whose they are. So I say, ‘Yeah, they’re mine, but you take them, okay. I don’t want them anymore.’ I don’t want them anymore? Who wouldn’t want those bookshelves? But I don’t want to lose my chair — my *legitimate* chair, so I say, ‘Go ahead, take ’em.’”

We didn’t want to interrupt him again, but we felt the need to remind him that it was her job, as the office coordinator, to keep track of office furniture and the like.

Yop ignored us. “What is that she has on her wrist?” he asked.

Yop was asking about the office coordinator’s tattoo. It was of a scorpion whose tail wrapped around her left wrist.

“Now why would a woman do that to herself?” he asked. “And why would we hire a woman who would do that to herself?”

It was a good question. We assumed he knew the joke.

“What’s the joke?” he asked.

The scorpion was there to protect her ring finger.

“Let me tell you something,” he said. “That’s funny, but that

ring finger doesn't need any protecting. But okay, whatever — she's just doing her job. How we *ever* hired a person with a scorpion on her wrist is *far* beyond me, but okay, she's doing her job. But that's my legitimate chair. It's *my* chair. She takes my chair, that's not her mandate. So she says to me, she says, 'Why would you offer me your buckshelves if, as you say, they're really your buckshelves? I don't want them if they're yours,' she says, 'I only want them if they're Tom's. All of Tom's stuff has disappeared and it's my job to get it back.' So I say, trying to act all innocent and unknowing, I say, 'What all did they take?' And she says, 'Well, let's see. His desk,' she says. 'His chair, his buckshelves, his —'

We apologized for interrupting, but he was doing it again.

"What's that?" he asked.

Saying *buckshelves*.

Yop raised his arms in the air. He was wearing a ratty Hawaiian shirt — the hair on his arms was going gray. "Will you *listen* to me, please?" he cried. "Will you all just please hear what I'm trying to say? I'm trying to tell you something really important here. *They know everything!* They knew everything we'd taken! So what choice did I have? 'You can have the buckshelves, okay?' I say to her. *Just don't take my chair.* 'But are they *Tom's?*' she asks me. *That's* what's important to her. She wants to know, 'Did you take these buckshelves from Tom's office?' And that's when it hits me. I'm going to get shitcanned just because I took Tom's buckshelves."

*Bookshelves!* we cried out.

"Right!" he cried back. "And for something as simple as that I'm going to get shitcanned! Hey, I have a mortgage. I have a wife. I'm a fucking professional. I get shitcanned this late in my career, that's it for me. It's a young man's game. I'm too old. Who's going to hire me if I get shitcanned? I see no alternative but to come clean, so I say to her, 'Okay, listen. These buckshelves, right? I'll

get them back down to Tom's office. I promise. I'm sorry.' And she says, 'But you're not answering my question. *Are* they his? *Did* you take them?' So you *know* what I'm thinking at this point. I've tried to be somewhat honest with her. I've tried to tap into something human and feeling in her. But it's not working. She ain't nothin' but a bureaucrat. So what I say is, I say, 'All I know is, they were here when I came back from lunch.' And she says, she looks at her watch, she says, 'It's ten-fifteen.' And I say, 'Yeah?' 'Ten-fifteen in the morning,' she says. 'You took lunch at, what? Nine-thirty?' Then she points at the buckshelves and she says, 'And I guess all these bucks just appeared when you came back from lunch, too, huh? Your nine-thirty lunch?' And I don't say anything, and she says, 'And what about the nice chair you're sitting on? That suddenly appear out of nowhere, too?' And I don't say anything, and she says, 'I'll be back after I've had a chance to crosscheck your serial numbers. I would suggest that if those are Tom's buckshelves you have them back in his office pronto. And the same goes for anything else that belongs to Tom.' And that's when I say to her, 'Hey, hold the fuck up, missy. What do you mean, *belongs* to Tom? Nothing belongs to Tom. Tom just worked here. Nothing *ever* belonged to Tom. Nothing belongs to *anyone* here, because they can take it away from you like *that*.'" Yop snapped his fingers. "Listen to how she responds," he said. "'Uh, sorry, no,' she says. 'I'm afraid all of this belongs to me.'"

Yop threw out his hands in supplication and his eyes bulged out. He expected us to be outraged that the office coordinator would say a thing like that, but the truth was, it didn't surprise us at all. In a way, it did belong to her. She wasn't going to be laid off. Everyone needs an office coordinator.

"Oh, I was so fucking irate," he said. "*Nothing* gets me more than the petty-minded people around here who have just *this*

much power, and then they wield it and they wield it until they have TOTAL control over you. And now she's going to check her serial numbers and find out that I have Ernie Kessler's old chair."

Wait a minute. It wasn't his chair?

"From when he retired," Yop said, in a calmer voice. "Last year."

We couldn't believe it wasn't his chair.

"It is now. It *was* Ernie's chair. From when he retired."

We felt deceived. He had given us the impression that at the very least it was his chair.

"It *is* my chair," he said. "He rolled it down to me. Ernie did. I asked him for it and he rolled it down to me and he rolled my chair away and put it in his office. When he retired. We just swapped chairs. We didn't know about the serial numbers. Now that I know about the serial numbers, I'm thinking, That's it for me. This office coordinator, she's going to tell Lynn I took Tom's buckshelves — and that I took Ernie Kessler's chair, too, even though he gave it to me. So what choice do I have? If I want to keep my job I have to pretend it *is* Tom's chair and roll it down to his office! It's not his chair — somebody else has Tom's chair — but last week, that's exactly what I did. I rolled Ernie Kessler's chair down to Tom Mota's office after everyone had gone home. I had to pretend it was Tom's chair, and for a week now I've gone on pretending, while I've had to sit on this other chair, this little piece-of-crap chair, just so I can avoid getting shitcanned. That was my *legitimate* chair," he said, his fists quivering in anguish before him.

We didn't blame him for being upset. His chair was a wonderful chair — adjustable, with webbed seating, giving just a little when you first sat down.



THE AUSTERITY MEASURES BEGAN in the lobby, with the flowers and bowls of candy. Benny liked to smell the flowers. “I miss the nice flowers,” he said. Then we got an officewide memo taking away our summer days. “I miss my summer days even more than the flowers,” he remarked. At an all-agency meeting the following month, they announced a hiring freeze. Next thing we knew, no one was receiving a bonus. “I couldn’t give a damn about summer days,” he said, “but my bonus now, too?” Finally, layoffs began. “Flowers, summer days, bonuses — fine by me,” said Benny. “Just leave me my job.”

At first we called it what you would expect — getting laid off, being let go. Then we got creative. We said he’d gotten the ax, she’d been sacked, they’d all been shitcanned. Lately, a new phrase had appeared and really taken off. “Walking Spanish down the hall.” Somebody had picked it up from a Tom Waits song, but it was an old, old expression, as we learned from our *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*. “In the days of piracy on the Spanish Main,” Morris writes, “a favorite trick of pirates was to lift their captives by the scruff of the neck and make them walk with their toes barely touching the deck.” That sounded about right to us. In the song, Tom Waits sings about walking toward an execution, and that sounded right, too. We’d watch the singled-out walk the long carpeted hallway with the office coordinator leading the way, and then he or she would disappear behind Lynn Mason’s door, and a few minutes later we’d see the lights dim from the voltage drop and we’d hear the electricity sizzle and the smell of cooked flesh would waft out into the insulated spaces.

We would turn at our desks and watch the planes descend into O’Hare. We would put our headphones on. We would lean our heads back and close our eyes. We all had the same thought: *thank god it wasn’t me*.

Jim knocked at Benny's doorway. "You seen Sanderson around lately, Benny?"

"Who?"

"Sanderson. Will Sanderson."

Benny still didn't know who Jim was talking about.

"Come on, Benny. Sanderson. With the mustache."

"Oh, right," said Benny. "Bill Sanderson? I thought his name was Bill."

"His name is Will," said Jim.

"I haven't seen that guy around for . . . weeks."

"Weeks? You don't think . . ."

They were quiet.

"Sanderson," said Benny. "Man oh man," he said. "They got Will Sanderson."

— — —

A FUN THING TO DO to let off steam after layoffs began was to go into someone's office and send an e-mail from their computer addressed to the entire agency. It might say something simple like "My name is Shaw-NEE! You are captured, Ha! I poopie I poopie I poopie." People came in in the morning and read that and the reactions were so varied.

Jim Jackers read it and immediately sent out an e-mail that read, "Obviously someone came into my office last night and composed an e-mail in my name and sent it out to everyone. I apologize for any inconvenience or offense, although it wasn't my fault, and I would appreciate from whoever did this a public apology. I have read that e-mail five times now and I still don't even understand it."

We knew who did it. There was never an apology. Jim knew who did it because he was one of us, and Jim confronted Tom

Mota about it. This was some months before Tom walked Spanish. What do you think Tom did? Tom told Benny about the encounter at lunch, about how Jim's fury was off the charts, and how Tom egged Smalls on to hit him. "Smalls" was Tom's nickname for Jim, though both men were about the same height. "Come on, Smalls, you little fucker, *please* hit me," Tom told Benny he told Jim, and how funny it all was. We were only into our third month of layoffs then. Jim never left the office again without closing out of his e-mail program.

Tom's e-mails were not always antic provocations — sometimes they were earnest and came from his own computer. We were amused by his sincere tone and his talk of man's infinite worthiness. These heartfelt, long-winded missives, of sentiment wildly clashing with Tom's real-life behavior, were laughably inappropriate, schizophrenic in tone and content, and always welcome respites in an otherwise ordinary day. He was written up for their profanities and for composing them on company time, because he had the balls to send them not only to all of us, including Lynn Mason, but to the other partners as well — always organizing the send-to list according to seniority, an unspoken rule. He also cc'd the accounts people, the media buyers, project services, human resources, the support staff, and the barista manning the coffee bar. "I passed a bad night last night," his final e-mail in this vein began. The subject line read, "I Consign You and Your Golf Shoes to Lower Wacker Drive." "The tomatoes in my garden are not coming out," he continued. "Maybe because I only have the weekend to work the garden, or maybe because the garden keeps getting mowed over by the goddamn Hispanics who tend to the grounds of the apartment complex I've been living in since the state forced me to sell my house in Naperville and Barbara took the kids to Phoenix to live with Pilot Bob. Do I have an actual

garden? The answer to that is a big fat no, because the goddamn woman in the property office won't listen to reason. She keeps insisting that this is a *rental* property, *not* your backyard. Flower borders, that's all we want, she says. So the goddamn Hispanics go out and tend the marigolds along the borders. But do you understand, I'm talking about fat, ripe, juicy, delicious red tomatoes that I want to grow with my own two hands through the bountiful mystery and generosity of nature! That dream ended when Barb started sleeping with Pilot Bob and we gave up Naperville. Anyway, would I like a garden? YES. Matter of fact I would like a farm. But at the present moment I'm afraid all I have is apartment 4H at Bell Harbor Manor, which is neither a harbor nor a manor and contains NOT ONE SINGLE BELL. Which one of you wizards came up with the name 'Bell Harbor Manor'? May your clever tongues be ripped from their cushy red linings and left to dry on pikes under the native sun of a cannibal land. Ha! I will be called into the office for that one but I'm leaving it, because what I'm trying to get at here is that I'M NOT SURE ANY OF US KNOWS just how far we have removed ourselves not only from nature but from the natural conditions of life that have prevailed for centuries and have forced men to the extreme limits of their physical capacity in order simply to feed, clothe and otherwise provide for their families, sending them every night to a sweet, exhausted, restorative, unstirred, deserved sleep such as we will never know again. Now there's Phoenix, and airplanes to get you there, and Pilot Bob who can take care of EVERYTHING, though he probably doesn't even know how to mow his own lawn. But don't forget, Bob, and all you Bobs out there, that 'Manual labor is the study of the external world.' I believe that to be true. Now, the question you're all probably asking yourselves is, what is he doing then, Tom Mota? Why is Tom wasting his days in a car-

peted office trying to hide the coffee stain on his khakis? How is he any better than Pilot Bob? Unfortunately, I don't think I am any better. I'm not studying the external world. What I'm doing is trying to generate a buck for a client so as to generate a quarter for us so that I can generate a nickel for me and have a penny left over after Barbara gets what the court demands. For that reason I love my job and never want to lose it, so I hope no one reading this finds me smug or ungrateful. I'm only trying to suggest that as we find ourselves in this particularly unfortunate, misconstrued, ungodly juncture of civilization, let's not lose sight of the nobler manifestations of man and of the greater half of his character, which consists not of taglines and bottom lines but of love, heroism, reciprocity, ecstasy, kindness and truth. What a bloated bunch of horseshit, you will say. And good for you. I welcome you to shoot me up close in the head. Peace, Tom."

Not long after hitting send, Tom was let go, and if not for the paltry severance, we might have been inclined to think that his was not another in a series of layoffs, but an outright firing. But the truth was, Tom was probably in the pipeline already. His e-mail just hastened things along, the way pneumonia can spell doom for a cancer patient.

— — —

LYNN MASON WAS STILL running late to the twelve-fifteen meeting on that Tuesday in May, so Chris Yop continued telling us the story of Tom Mota's chair. That very morning he had looked up from cleaning his desk to find the office coordinator standing in his doorway once again, arms folded. "So she says to me," he said to us, "I see you put Tom's buckshelves back.' So I act totally ignorant, I say, 'I'm sorry, I don't know what it is you're talking about,' and I go back to cleaning my desk, but she's not leaving, so I look

up again and she says, ‘And I see you no longer have his chair, either.’ So I say, ‘I would appreciate you not harassing me anymore. There are rules against that sort of thing in the employee handbook.’ And she says, ‘You think I’m harassing you?’ And I say, ‘Yes. And I don’t appreciate it.’ And she says, ‘Well, maybe we should take it up with Lynn.’ And I say, ‘I would welcome that,’ and she says, ‘What are you doing right now?’ and I say, ‘Well, unlike some people, I’m trying to get some work done. Some people actually generate revenue around here, you handjob.’ I shouldn’t have said that — I was just, you know, pointing out the difference between an office coordinator and a copywriter like me who generates revenue. So she says back to me, ‘Oh, sure, I understand how *incredibly* important you are, how everything would just *crumble* all around us without you, but if you wouldn’t mind, will you follow me, please?’ And I say, ‘Follow you? Follow you where?’ And she says, ‘Lynn would like a word.’ ‘What, now?’ I say. And she says, ‘If you can pull yourself away.’ And I say, ‘She wants to see me *right now?*’ She doesn’t say another word — just motions for me to follow. So I get off my chair, that piece of crap — I mean, my ass is like on Novocain on that thing — and together we head down to Lynn’s office. I mean, what choice do I have? If she’s telling me Lynn wants to see me, what choice do I have?”

We asked Yop how long ago this was.

“Maybe an hour ago,” he said. “So we go down there. I’m not going to lie to you. My heart’s going. I’m forty-eight. This is a young man’s game. Who’s going to hire me if I get shitcanned? I don’t know Photoshop. Some days, I don’t even understand Outlook, okay. You know me and the e-mail. I get shitcanned, who’s going to pay me what I deserve? I’m an old man. I get paid too much. But I gotta go down there. The office coordinator goes in first. I follow her in and close the door. ‘Okay,’ says Lynn. And you

know how she can lean forward at her desk and look at you like she's about to carve your skull out with her laser eyes? She says, 'Now what's going on?' The office coordinator comes right out of the gate — first, I stole Tom's buckshelves. 'Where's the proof?' I cry out. I mean she's not letting me talk. 'Huh? Where's the proof?' I ask. She doesn't answer. Then she tells Lynn I've been harassing her. Me harassing her! I can't believe my ears. But what she doesn't say a thing about, not one word about — she says *not one word* about the chair. The whole point is the chair! That's the reason we're here! I was trying to protect my chair. So I say, 'What about the chair?' And she says, you want to know what she says? She says, 'What chair?' What do you mean, what chair, right? So I say, 'Come on, what chair. *The* chair. My chair.' And she says, 'I don't know what he's talking about, this chair.' To Lynn she says this! She denies there was ever a chair! So I say, I'm so pissed off, I say, 'COME ON, WHAT CHAIR! You know what chair, goddamn it!' And there's silence, and then she says, 'I'm sorry, Lynn. I don't know what he's talking about.' And I say, 'YOU GODDAMN WELL KNOW WHAT CHAIR! She knows what chair, Lynn! She tried to take my chair away from me. My *legitimate* chair.' So there's silence, and then Lynn says, 'Kathy — Kathy — did any of you know her name was Kathy? She says, 'Kathy, can you give Chris and me a minute please?' So 'Kathy' says of course and Lynn says, 'Can you shut the door, please, Kathy?' and 'Kathy' says, 'Sure,' and we hear the door close, and my heart's going, you know, and Lynn says, 'Chris, I'm sorry, but we're going to have to let you go.'"

Yop stopped speaking. He shook his lowered head slowly. There was silence. "I was speechless," he continued after a while. His voice had dropped. "I asked her if it had something to do with Ernie Kessler's chair. She says no. She says it has nothing to do

with Ernie's chair. 'Because I don't need Ernie's chair,' I tell her. 'Honest — I've been sitting on one of the cheap plastic ones for the past week and it's fine. It's a fine chair.' And she says, 'This has nothing to do with Ernie's chair.' I can't believe it. I can't believe what she's telling me. So I say, 'Is it the mistakes? Because I'm getting better,' I tell her. 'It's how my brain works sometimes,' I tell her, 'but I'm getting better. Most of them get caught when we run spell-check anyway. I know it's not ideal in a copywriter, I appreciate your patience,' I say to her. 'But I am getting better.' And she says, 'It's not the mistakes, Chris.' 'So what is it then?' I ask. 'It's nothing personal,' she says to me. 'It's just business.' 'Is it because I make too much money? Is that it?' And she says, 'No, not exactly.' 'Can I maybe take a cut in pay?' I ask. I'm asking her, 'Can I take a pay cut and stay on?' 'It's not exactly the money, Chris,' she says. So what the hell is it then, right? 'Now, listen,' she says. 'We're going to give you a month's severance, and COBRA will cover your health benefits through the year. It's really nothing personal,' she says. She keeps saying that — it's nothing personal, Chris — so I figure it must be something personal. 'So what is it then, Lynn?' I ask her. And maybe my voice cracks a little. 'If it's not personal, what is it?' 'Chris, please,' she says. Because by now I'm breaking down . . ."

We asked him what he meant by that.

"I started crying," he said. "It wasn't just the job," he added. "It was the whole feeling of being me. Being old. Thinking about Terry. Not having a kid. And now, not having a job." He and his wife had tried to conceive for years, and by the time they gave up, they were considered too old to adopt by the agencies. "I was thinking about having to go home to Terry and telling her I'd been shitcanned. I didn't want to cry," he said, "god knows, I just got overcome. I put my head down, and I lost it for a minute. I just

wasn't in control. So, you know, I had to leave. I never cried in front of someone like that before. I couldn't stick around. 'Come on, Chris,' she says to me. 'Come back. You're going to be fine,' she says. 'You're a fine copywriter.' This is what she's saying to me while I'm being shitcanned. I haven't talked to her since."

We couldn't blame him for being upset, but it would be just like Yop, tough-acting Yop, to give up the chair he fought so hard for just like *that* if it would save his ass, and if that didn't work, it would be just like Yop to beg for a cut in pay, and if that still didn't save his job, Chris Yop would be the one among us to break down. Tom Mota wanted to throw a computer through the window; Chris Yop threw himself at Lynn's feet.

Just before Lynn showed up, fifteen minutes late for her own input, we asked Yop what he was still doing here.

"I don't know," he said. "I can't go home, not yet. It doesn't feel right."

But should you really be *here*? we asked him. In Lynn's office?

"Well, Lynn and me," he said, "we didn't get a chance to finish our conversation. I broke down. I left. You guys don't think I should have to *leave* leave, do you, when we didn't get a chance to finish our conversation?"

No one replied — meaning, well, yeah, Yop. You should probably leave.

"I don't know," he said, looking around. "This meeting's been on my calendar for a long time."

— — —

ALL TALK TAPERED OFF when Lynn finally arrived. When the time came to get down to business, we got down to business. We didn't fuck around in input meetings. We fucked around before them and sometimes we fucked around after them, but during them,

there might be the occasional wisecrack, but otherwise we were solemn as churchgoers. Any one of us could be let go at any time, and that fact was continually on our minds.

Lynn Mason was intimidating, mercurial, unapproachable, fashionable, and consummately professional. She was not a big woman — in fact, she was rather petite — but when we thought of her from home at night, she loomed large. When she was in a mood, she didn't make small talk. She dressed like a Bloomingdale's model and ate like a Buddhist monk. On the day of the twelve-fifteen she was dressed in an olive-hued skirt suit and a simple ivory blouse. What you really admired about her, though, were her shoes. As aficionados of design, we — the women among us especially — sat in awe of their sleek singularity, exquisite color, and contoured elegance, marveling at them as others might the armrest of a chair by Charles Eames, or the black wing of a Pentagon jetfighter. Each pair — and she must have had fifty of them — deserved their own Plexiglas display case at the Museum of Contemporary Art, next to that polyethylene thing and those neon signs. We had never seen anything so beautiful as those shoes. When someone finally got up the nerve to ask her what brand they were, no one recognized the name, leaving us to conclude that they were made by boutique Italian designers who refused to export their product, but which Lynn's friends picked up for her on their international travels, because everyone knew Lynn never took vacation.

When she entered, disrupting Chris Yop at his story, she was carrying input documents fresh from the copy machine; a scent of toner trailed behind her. Without a word she set the copies on her desk and began to collate them, moistening her finger and thumb and stapling the sheets together and passing the packet to Joe, who sat immediately to her right. "Stapler on the machine's broken,"

she explained. Joe passed the document to his right, and it wound its way to Karen Woo, who was seated farthest from him. Lynn stapled a few minutes more, then stopped to remove her leather heels. “Why does it feel like I just walked in on a funeral?” she asked, finally looking around at us. No one said a word. “I hope it’s nobody I know,” she added. She went back to collating and stapling.

Our information had come from reliable sources but it was only the barest details. Her surgery was scheduled for the following day. The tumor had invaded her chest wall. She was going in for a full mastectomy. We had questions for her — was she scared? did she like her doctors? what were her chances of complete recovery? But she had not yet said a word about it to any of us and we knew nothing of her state of mind. We might have wondered why she was at work the day before. She needed to get her priorities straight, we thought. But then none of us ever had our priorities straight. Each and every one of us harbored the illusion that the whole enterprise would go straight to hell without our individual daily contributions. So what was this fantasy about straight priorities, this dream that would never be realized? Besides, what else should she do but carry on? We had to think that by coming into work the day before surgery, she was refusing to let the specter of death distract her from the ordinariness of life that could very well be both a comfort and an armament to someone diagnosed with breast cancer. She was exactly right to come into work the day before. Unless she should have stayed at home and ordered in and played with her cats on the sofa. It was really not for us to say.

Without so much as a word about Chris Yop’s presence among us, the input documents got handed around. Everyone took a copy; Chris Yop took a copy, too. Did he really plan to sit through the entire input meeting though he was no longer an employee?

Lynn took her jacket off and flung it over her chair, sat down, and said, "Okay. Let's get this funeral started." She began to read from the input document. When we turned the page, Yop turned the page. It was hard to concentrate on anything else. There was Lynn, reading from the input document, and then there was Yop reading from the input document, and the one had just fired the other, but there they both were, carrying on as if nothing at all had happened. Maybe she hadn't noticed him? Maybe she had other things on her mind?

Our project turned out to be pro bono. The agency had donated our services to a popular breast cancer fund-raising event sponsored by the Alliance Against Breast Cancer. Our job, Lynn explained, reading from the input document, was to raise awareness of the event and to boost donations across the country. We would be doing so by advertising in nationally distributed magazines and on the backs of cereal boxes.

We had to wonder, was this just a bizarre coincidence? We thought she might finally say something to us about her diagnosis. We watched her, but she never wavered from her steady reading of the input document. She gave no indication that this project was different in any way from any other project. We looked around at one another. Then we looked back down at the input document. When she was through, she explained a few extraneous matters, and then she asked us if we had any questions. We told her it sounded like a great project, and we inquired how we happened to get involved. "Oh, I know the committee chair," she replied. "I've been saying no for two years and I just didn't have the energy to say no anymore." She shrugged. Noticing something in the corner of her eye, she turned and picked lint off the shoulder of her blouse. "Any other questions?" No one said a word. "Okay," she said.

“Funeral’s over.” And with that, we all got up and left her office. Yop almost made it out into the hall when she called him back in. “Chris,” she said, “can I have a word with you, please? Joe,” she added, “get the door on your way out, will you?” Yop turned back, downcast and hesitant. Lynn got up to draw her blinds. Yop walked back in, the door closed, and that was the last we saw of them.

We set off for our offices and cubicles, immediately leaving them again to gather in small clusters, in doorways and print stations, to discuss the almost surreal pro bono project we had on our hands. During the input she had asked us to envision a loved one being diagnosed with the disease — a wife, a mother — so that we could really sympathize with cancer sufferers and design a more effective communication. Well, *she* had the disease. If someone could give us insight to sympathize with the sick for a more effective communication, who better than she? And yet not a word. Everyone knew she was a private person. And we had a reputation for gossip. We didn’t expect that she would just come out and announce that she had cancer. But she was also a very dedicated marketer, and in that respect, it was perhaps odd, despite her sense of privacy, that she did not extend herself to help us better understand the horror of a diagnosis, for example, or the misery of treatments, if understanding those things were necessary for coming up with a better ad. We didn’t know if we should believe that she just happened to know some committee chair who had pestered her and pestered her until she agreed to donate our time.

She had a command of business politics like no one we had ever known. In 1997 she quarreled with Roger Highnote. He departed, and our lives improved dramatically. She was an enemy of the lowest common denominator. The cardinal rule of advertising has always been, make your communication dumb enough for an

eighth grader to understand. Lynn Mason's mentor, the fabled Mary Wells, had the fabled Bernbach as mentor, and Bernbach once said, famously, "It's true that there's a twelve-year-old mentality in America. Every six-year-old has it." Like Wells and Bernbach, Lynn respected American intelligence, and a lot of good had come from it: the talking llama campaign, the Cold Sore Guy spots. Sure, she was the one walking everyone Spanish down the hall, but she hadn't walked any of *us* Spanish down the hall yet — that was an important distinction.

Lynn Mason was also scrupulous as hell. Once Karen Woo and Jim Jackers were redesigning the packaging for a box of cookies made by a big conglomerate who later broke our hearts when they left us for another agency. The box was standard stuff, overanimated with recognizable cookie characters and catchy little phrases like "Chocolicious!" and "Dunkable!" in colorful arching fonts. These mandatories had to stay; they had become scripture in the client's thick red binder of branding guidelines. So Karen and Jim's job was pretty simple — they were just being asked to find some way to play up the cookie's nutritional value. In an increasingly health-conscious and weight-wary world, every cookie box was doing it. So Karen wrote some copy for one of the panels that spoke to the importance of niacin and folic acid. Then she went down to Jim's cube and stood over his computer while instructing him to write, in a smallish font near the bottom of the front of the box, "0 g of Lastive Acid." Jim did as he was instructed.

"What's lastive acid?" he asked.

"Not something you want in your body," replied Karen.

They took the box down to Lynn, who looked over the changes. Practically everything was the same except for the copy box on the side panel discussing the good effects of niacin and folic acid, and Lynn was happy with that until she came to the part

that read — and here she stopped reading silently and began to recite out loud — “‘And our chokolicious cookies contain zero grams of lastive acid, making them the health-conscious choice for totally dunkable snacking.’ What is lastive acid?” she inquired.

“I thought it was like a, you know,” said Karen, “something unhealthy.”

“But what is it?”

“Sounds terrible, whatever it is,” said Jim.

“It’s probably not something you want in your body,” said Karen, “from the sound of it. Lastive acid. Sounds like it would stay with you longer than the formaldehyde.”

Meanwhile Lynn had gone searching through the input document provided by the accounts people. “I don’t see anything about ‘lastive acid’ in here,” she said, gazing at Karen.

“No, I came up with it,” said Karen.

Lynn’s face, which had aged into the early years of her forties with little modification of her cool detached beauty, was architecturally designed for such outrageous confessions. Her high cheekbones kept her eyes buttressed from the collapse of a disbelieving brow, her nearly crow’s-feet-free eyes never gave way to an off-putting squint, and her mouth, flanked on both sides by a single parenthesis of a gently etched laugh line, remained in perfect equipoise when presented with revelations that would have provoked in lesser professionals fallen jaws of slackened disgust or a steady stream of rebuke. She simply gazed across the desk at Karen and asked soberly, “You just made it up?”

“Well, not the part about there being zero grams.”

“Karen,” she said — and Jim told us later that the only show of irritation she allowed herself was to pull her chair closer to her desk and to place two fingers at her left temple.

“I was trying to think out of the box,” explained Karen.

“I . . . myself, Lynn, I didn’t know . . .” Jim stammered.

Lynn shifted her focus briefly to address him. “Jim, will you excuse us for a minute, please?”

It was this sort of thing that showed us how Lynn had developed over the years a moral principle that guided her in the practice of advertising, which she abided by with strict authority. We respected her for it and wanted to live up to those high standards. Whenever we did something thoughtless or dull, or when we didn’t perform at the level we had hoped to on one project or another, we would, in our own individual ways, try to hint to her that we were just as disappointed in ourselves as she was while implying that we were making every effort to improve. Failing, perhaps, to pick up on these subtle apologies — not wanting to advertise our shortcomings, we rarely came right out and admitted them — she usually didn’t respond, but when she did, her communiqués were brief, inconclusive, and often bewildering. She might leave us a voice mail that said, “Forget about it,” or drop an e-mail that said only, “Don’t worry so much — Lynn.” We spent hours trying to decode these simple messages. We went into other people’s offices, demanded they stop what they were doing, and conscripted them into the ceaseless political labors of puzzling out her woefully inadequate responses to our pleas for reassurance. “Don’t worry *so much?*” we asked each other. “Why not *at all?*” We wanted to ask her directly but no one dared, except Jim Jackers, whose insatiable demand for confirmation that he wasn’t a hopelessly unreformed boob sent him into Lynn’s office with the regularity of therapist appointments. Where she found the time, and why she had a soft spot for Jim, were mysteries on the order of her gnomic e-mails, and someone’s absurd suggestion that she might be just as receptive to any of the rest of us if we only had the nerve to knock at her door was dismissed as sadly out of touch.

So she wasn't going to say anything to us about her diagnosis. We were disturbed and upset and at a bit of a loss. We wanted her to open up, if only for ten minutes. What were we here for if not, on occasion, that? Just work? We hoped not. Yet we got nothing. Not even for the sake of a better ad. We still had no official word that she would be out of the office while recuperating from surgery. Officially, she'd be in all week, and when the time came, we'd be expected to show her ad concepts for what she had sold to us as a pain-in-the-ass fund-raiser she had been pestered into doing against her will.