

“Janet, your blood pressure is way higher than it has ever been. What is going on?” asked Dr. Edwards during my exam. I went to see her because I had been feeling dizzy and didn’t know why.

“I am under a lot of stress at work,” I responded.

“If you continue on this path, I am very much afraid you will have a stroke. I am writing for you to take a week off of work. Come back next Friday, and we’ll see if it helped.”

“Is it okay if I finish this week? I need time to prepare things for a sub.”

“Yes, if you promise me you will do nothing school related next week. I mean nothing at all.”

“Promise.”

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I knocked on the door of the principal’s office at H.J. Heinz Academy even though I had been warned by my colleagues never to do this. It seemed best to have a face to face conversation with the principal regarding my upcoming sick leave. I was stunned by the confrontation that followed.

“Mrs. Norris, parents are complaining about you. This is so embarrassing. They are saying that you aren’t grading your students’ work.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. I have had several complaints.”

“That makes no sense. I take papers home to grade every night. I pass out updated grade spreadsheets every Friday.”

“That’s not what the parents I met with this week tell me.”

“So you are taking the word of parents who never return calls and whose children either skip class or are so disruptive they get thrown out of class over *my* word? Why don’t you come in my classroom and see for yourself. I can show you the class spreadsheets I printed last Friday.”

“I don’t have to. I believe what they tell me. You are going to have to do better or you will find yourself with an unsatisfactory rating.”

I bit my tongue hard. I was about to tell the principal what I really felt, but realized that would be a huge mistake, so instead I walked out without even discussing my pending leave. Our union rep mentioned that teachers who were nearing retirement age were being “encouraged” to leave. I had always been idealistic and didn’t really believe all I heard. We are about educating kids, right? My eyes were slowly opening. Public education seemed to no longer be about students, but instead about test scores and budgets. Teachers at the top of the pay scale were especially targeted, in an effort to lower salary costs. If they could get them to resign before they were eligible to retire, they would save on health care contributions as well.

My first class of the day was an absolute nightmare. Two boys got into a physical fight. I had learned not to break up fights by myself, so I screamed for help. A couple of men who worked in the neighboring classrooms broke up the fight and held them until the security guards finally showed up. I finally got the class settled, or so I thought, until two girls on opposite ends of the classroom began yelling and cursing at each other across the room. In my twenty-five years of teaching, I had never had a class as bad as this, not even at the private school for students with emotional disturbance. The end of the school year couldn’t come soon enough.

I couldn’t even imagine this day getting any worse, but it did.

At lunch, I got a text from my live-in boyfriend, Reggie.

“Sorry, I have to cancel our plans for this evening. Don’t wait up.”

I should have let that go, but instead, I called him.

“What’s going on Reggie? This is the third night in a row.”

“Sorry, Babe. I have an evening meeting.”

“Let me guess, it’s with Sheila, right?”

“Well, she *is* my boss. What do you want me to do?”

“Tell her you have plans. I really need you tonight.”

“The deal we’re working on is important. I can’t do that.”

“Well, I thought I was important too. Goodbye Reggie.”

When the call ended, I checked the time. It was 12:45.

“Oh shoot. The kids will be back in five minutes!”

I rushed to the restroom, phone in hand. In my haste, I dropped my new iPhone, right into the toilet. I fished it out, but of course, it was dead. It took all I had not to melt down at that point. Instead of spending the afternoon sobbing, I gave everything I had left to students who didn’t

want what I had to offer. After school, I took about thirty minutes to begin the process of gathering materials for next week's absence.

When I left, I was happy to see the sun shining and the temperature a lovely seventy-five degrees.

*Perfect day to drop the top.* Riding with the wind blowing my hair, and the sun shining on me always lifted my spirits. When I reached the corner stoplight, I noticed a very handsome, well-dressed man standing at the bus stop. As our eyes met, he smiled. There was something magical in his eyes. Before I could take another look, the bus arrived, blocking my view.

"Come on lady, move it!" yelled the driver behind me as he blared his horn.

I was so mesmerized by this man, that I had not noticed the light change. I defiantly sat and watched the bus pull off. I was crushed to see that Mr. Magic was gone. I got the craziest idea I had ever had. Instead of heading home to work on plans for next week, I decided to follow the bus, determined to find out who this man was, and keep the magic flowing.

I followed the bus to the end of the line, but never saw Mr. Magic get off the bus. How could he have gotten off without my seeing him? This was getting even stranger by the minute, yet my obsession with finding him intensified. I had no idea how or why, but I was even more determined than ever to find this man.

I really didn't want to go home and spend the evening brooding over Reggie's absence, or doing school work, so I took myself on the date Reggie and I were supposed to be on. First, I ate at my favorite seafood restaurant, requesting a window seat so that if Mr. Magic happened to pass by, I would see him. While I knew that made no sense, I did it anyway. After dinner, I went to see "The Butler". When I got home, Reggie was still not there. I placed my iPhone in a bowl of rice, and went to bed, locking the bedroom door. When I awoke in the morning, I was surprised to find that Reggie had not come home.

"That double-timer didn't even call," I said aloud.

As I was beginning my rant, I remembered the tragedy with my cell phone. Since I no longer had a land-line, he had no way to reach me. Unfortunately, I didn't remember his number. When I wanted to reach him, I just used speed dial. I didn't imagine he tried all that hard to reach me anyway. If he really cared, he would have come home. I removed my iPhone from the bowl of rice, but found it was still dead. I returned it, praying that a few more hours would do the trick, and got ready for another exciting day at H. J. Heinz Academy.

After a stressful day that at least wasn't as bad as the day before, I left work hoping Mr. Magic would be at the bus stop again. He was. I smiled and waved. He waved back. Again the bus pulled up. Again, he disappeared.

*This is crazy!* I thought, yet I followed the bus, but once again was unable to see him exit. I knocked on the bus door as the driver was beginning his fifteen minute break.

“May I help you miss?” said the driver.

“I was just looking for someone,” I replied.

“Well, whoever you are looking for is not here. This bus is empty.”

My eyes welled up with tears as I stepped away. *What is going on? Who is this man who just magically disappears, and why am I trying so hard to find him? Am I losing my mind?*

I stopped at the East End Deli on the way home and bought myself a Reuben and a bag of chips. I figured I should be there when Reggie came home from work. It was time for a face to face confrontation. As I often do, I turned on the local news to keep me company while I ate.

“Our top story this evening, police are looking for a man who they say poisoned Sheila Brooks at her office last night. Authorities believe that 46-year-old Reggie Smith, who worked for Ms. Brooks, stayed late for a business meeting. Ms. Brooks collapsed and died after drinking a glass of wine that authorities believe was poisoned. An autopsy and toxicology tests are being run to determine the actual cause of death. Mr. Smith is an African-American male, 6’ tall, about 210 lbs. He was last seen wearing a pair of black slacks with a white shirt and tie. He was driving a white 2013 Lexus Coupe. Anyone with information should call Crime Stoppers at 255-8477.

*This can’t be happening!* Tears rolled down my face like water from a fountain. I found myself rocking back and forth and shaking my head like a crazy person. Just then, I remembered that my phone had been in the bowl of rice all day, and prayed it was working again. Finally, I had a bit of luck. I was able to get the phone to turn on, and saw several missed calls from Reggie, and a missed text message. The text read, “You won’t be seeing me for a while.” That scared me more than anything, so I forced herself to sit down and review the voice messages he left.

“Baby, Sheila is dead. I know people are going to think I did it, but I swear it wasn’t me. I don’t know what to do. You are so smart. I wish you would answer so you could tell me what to do.”

“Baby, the cops are looking for me, so I’m not coming home tonight. I don’t know where I will go, but I know I can’t come home. No one knows I’ve been staying at your place, so you should be safe.”

“Where are you? Why won’t you answer my calls? This is my last message. They are probably tracking my calls.”