

Calla Devlin

God Help You If You're the One Who Loves

When Adrienne arrived at work, the office was dark and she navigated her way through the corridors of cubicles like the Minotaur through his maze. It was early, but not that early considering they were wrapping up the issue and the magazine was in the middle of a design overhaul. Light illuminated the far corner, indicating her boss, David Grossner, was in. Adrienne thought that David regarded himself as the most goddamn talented art director in Manhattan. It was too early, in her opinion, for his arrogance.

By the time she reached her desk, her coffee sloshed over the cup's brim and splashed onto her leather bag, her favorite. Adrienne let out a string of curses too loud to keep her arrival secret. She heard his footsteps before his voice.

"Adrienne, good, come into my office. I've been waiting for you."

"Be right there, David." For some reason, she waved as she spoke, spilling more coffee onto her purse and desk. "Shit," she breathed.

She shook off her coat and scarf, dumping them onto the floor. Her message light blinked and she wondered who in production or marketing was pissed at her. Until the past few months, she enjoyed camaraderie at work and prided herself in getting along with her colleagues. However, that had shifted with the economy and she felt as if she endured constant criticism, falling short on project after project. When she flipped on the light, Adrienne saw her reflection in the window, a blurry glimpse that was enough to reassure her that she looked presentable despite another sleepless night.

David stood in the doorway. He was short but handsome with steel gray hair and green eyes. He wore one of his cashmere sweaters—Adrienne thought he must have fifty stashed in his closet, all in jewel tones, each shade emphasizing his eyes. Adrienne walked past him and took a seat on the sofa. He chose a chair across from her.

"Good morning," she said and managed a smile before sipping her coffee.

"It's still night for me," he said. "I haven't gone home yet."

Adrienne paused and examined his clean-shaven face and fresh sweater, a deep blue opposed to yesterday's burgundy. "Was there a problem with the issue?"

"No. The issue was fine. We're putting it to bed today. It looks good; I'd say the year's best. It was the logo that kept me here all night."

The logo. She closed her eyes and cataloged the nine designs rejected by sales and marketing. "They told me to have another design to them by the end of today."

"That was before the publisher got involved. He thinks we're going in the wrong direction and not keeping the branding campaign in mind. He wants a look consistent with the redesign and yours is too nostalgic."

"Wait a minute, David. Marketing wanted nostalgia. They were on this

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vintage retro kick. I believe they said they want to invoke the rich fucking history of the twentieth century. I gave them art nouveau, Modernism, forties domestic, fifties futuristic, psychedelic, disco, and I was almost done with eighties new wave. If they want to go in a new direction, that's fine. Just give me an idea of elements they want and I'll put something together right now."

"It wasn't good work, Adrienne. Pedestrian at best. Also, they said they gave you a new set of concepts, and you ignored them."

She winced. "I haven't seen anything from them since the disco round. I came up with the eighties idea on my own."

"It's too late anyway," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I did the logo. It's with production now. We'll have a mock-up within the hour."

"Wow, all before 7:00 in the morning. So what do you want me to do now? More interiors for the redesign?"

"No, Adrienne. The logo fiasco is on the publisher's radar and he wants accountability. I'm letting you go."

"You're firing me because marketing didn't know what the hell they wanted? Jesus, David, I'm the most talented designer you've got."

He was quiet and looked at her with a trace of kindness. She remembered the holiday party when they, both giddy from champagne, danced together for five songs in a row before stumbling to his loft, kissing the entire way. That night he told Adrienne he wanted to groom her to be the next art director, his successor, a sentiment he repeated each night they spent together.

"I'm fond of you, you know that. But this is out of my hands. I'll give you a good reference. I'm sorry it had to end this way, I really am."

He handed her an envelope with her final check.

She pulled it out and calculated the amount of days they were giving her. "This is it? One week for five years?"

He nodded his head.

"That's cold, David."

On the way out of his office, Adrienne plucked two tote bags, the cheesy kind they gave to new subscribers, to pack up her things. Personal affects cluttered her desk: coffee mug, framed photos, certificates of achievement. She put on her coat and scarf, arranged the bulging tote bags on her shoulders, and shoved her light box to the floor. It didn't smash to bits as she hoped. Instead, the screen split open like a crushed pomegranate, crackling as though it were on fire. Adrienne walked out as David yelled her name.

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The subway was packed but Adrienne squeezed onto the train, her bags padding her like a football player. Two stops past midtown, the train thinned out and she slid into an empty seat. She arranged her bags on the floor and tried to stop shaking. She couldn't believe this. At least they had

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the apartment. And at least Josh had his job. She sat next to an old man, the kind of old that made her scared of living in New York for the rest of her life. He had more bags than she, sheer plastic grocery bags filled with medication bottles and non-perishables. He muttered to himself in what she guessed was Russian. Adrienne tried not to stare at his thick facial features, his bushy sideburns and eyebrows that blended together like a lion's mane.

She closed her eyes and then opened them when she felt him lurch forward. He grabbed a girl, maybe twelve or thirteen years old. The girl's back faced him and he clutched to the hem of her fleece jacket. The girl turned to him. Adrienne tried to meet her eyes, tried to communicate that she would intervene, would protect her. But the girl met the old man's eyes instead, and smiled as he pulled free a piece of scotch tape stuck to the elbow of her sleeve. It was the tenderest moment Adrienne had seen in a long time.

She closed her eyes again, wondering if a stranger would be as kind to her.

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Adrienne dropped her bags to the floor and wished Josh was home rather than playing his regular basketball game with his staff from the restaurant. The dining room furniture towered in a pile in a corner of the living room. At least now she would have time to finish painting the apartment, to find the right shade for the room, something warm. She walked through the kitchen and turned on the light. The bulb flashed and went out—a blown fuse, again, the third time this month. She hoped Josh had finally called the electrician. The surprise made her accidentally knock over the only house plant, a failing fern, cracking its celadon pot. She picked up a broken piece and felt the dull edge with her thumb. She held the ceramic shard against the kitchen wall and decided it was a good color for the room.

Leaving her useless work clothes in a pile on the closet floor, she pulled out an old pair of jeans and sweater from the bottom of the drawer. Heels replaced with well-worn slippers, she padded to the dining room, pausing to pull back her hair into a ponytail. She couldn't get David's words out of her head: *pedestrian, not good work*. Art had been her calling since high school, had earned her scholarships and catapulted her to New York's design scene. It had been a while since she'd been reminded of her modest origins and she felt a familiar shame return. She needed to busy herself and armed with masking tape, Adrienne eased herself onto the floor to cover the baseboards, to guard the wood against dripping paint. Painting was meant to improve the already pristine apartment, a gift from Josh's parents, an unspoken statement that they approved of her. Adrienne had taped three of the room's four walls when she heard the door creak open and the thump of Josh's sneakers hitting the floor. He walked into the dining room and inventoried the tarp on the floor, the buckets of paint lined up in a row, the brushes and rollers laid out next to the paint. Adrienne looked up. She thought he needed a haircut, and his dark hair fell into his eyes, which contained every color possible: blue, gray, green, brown. Adrienne thought hazel didn't come close to describing them. She

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could tell he didn't know whether or not to smile at the surprise of her being home.

"Sick day?" he asked.

"The bastard fired me," she said.

Adrienne sat down on the wooden chair, the one undisturbed piece of furniture in the room, and started to cry.

Josh walked over and when he was close enough, she grabbed a handful of his shirt and leaned her head into his side, her face curved against his thigh. They held that pose for several minutes before she pulled away and wiped her face with her sleeve.

"You okay?" His voice was soft.

She shook her head.

"You were too good for them, Adrienne. You're lucky to get out now."

"Lucky? I was going to be the next art director and no one's hiring. I was lucky to have the job, not to lose it. He basically said I wasn't talented enough."

"You were miserable there. You said the redesign was the last ditch effort before the magazine folded. Come on, this is New York. You'll find another job at a better magazine. Come here." He eased her up from the chair and led her to the living room, to the couch. Adrienne curled up next to him, her legs tucked beneath her. Even though she tried not to, she started to cry again.

"I feel so disposable."

"Adrienne." Josh's tone shifted from reassuring to stern. "I love you. You're talented and beautiful and amazing." He paused and then said, "I always hated your boss, but I thought he was smart. Turns out he's an idiot as well as an asshole."

Slowly, she nodded and then rested her head in his lap.

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Adrienne hadn't left the apartment in days and all of her clothes smelled of paint. After four different attempts to find just the right color for the dining room—not red, not peach, but not orange, something warm in between, she finished the room satisfied. Then she moved on to the bedroom. Josh had left early to scour the farmer's market before his weekly game and she took her time putting the bedroom back together, making the bed and hanging the pictures. The contents of their closets rested in two heaps. She felt compelled to reevaluate every piece of fabric, to take stock and toss out what no longer seemed to fit—not her body, but her life. Slowly, the heap diminished and she realized she was giving away more than she was keeping.

In the three weeks since she lost her job, Josh and Adrienne spent more time together than they ever had before. They had sex in the morning and then went out for leisurely breakfasts. When he was at work, she tried to silence the shaming voice in her head and painted furiously. When they were home, Josh tried to coax her out of the apartment and eat at the restaurant. They spent the first few days as tourists, going to museums and

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matinees. They wandered through the downtown neighborhoods: dim sum and cheap kitchenware in Chinatown, coffee and books in the West Village, handmade paper and pastries in SoHo. She refused to go to midtown or Chelsea, dreading the prospect of running into anyone from the magazine, and headed back uptown when Josh went to work around two in the afternoon, coming home after the restaurant closed.

Before, when she had her job, Adrienne would work late closing another issue. She and David would stay well past eight or nine, making sure the design was consistent throughout the magazine, that the colors were correct, the fonts the right size, the page numbers in sequence. Their mutual attraction had morphed into a professional friendship, but they continued to sleep together after Adrienne met Josh. Their evenings were infrequent and spontaneous. David and Adrienne would hover over her light box, checking that the lines were even and the photographs the best quality. He would kiss her, she would kiss him back, and they would go to his loft. She couldn't pinpoint why she ended it when she did. Things with Josh weren't yet serious, but one evening when David stretched to kiss her, Adrienne took a step back and thought of something her sister always said, wisdom gleaned from one of her many romance novels: In a relationship, there is someone who loves and someone who is loved. God help you if you're the one who loves.

When she finished with her clothes, she tackled Josh's. Adrienne plucked a pair of jeans, an old pair, one she hadn't seen him wear in months, and smoothed the denim before folding them. She heard the paper before she felt it in the back pocket and she didn't stop herself from pulling it out to read it. She didn't know what to expect: a Metro Card, a receipt, a list of wines to taste for the restaurant, a girl's phone number. She didn't expect an old prix fix menu, one from last fall. She flipped it over and saw his neat handwriting, all capital letters, listing ingredients and numbers. Their cost. Then at the bottom, all of them added up to a high figure. Next to it, Josh had written, "total loss."

Puzzled, Adrienne went to Josh's desk, opened the drawer, and ruffled through the files until she found the one labeled "menus." She turned over each one and discovered the same lists, all indicating a loss. Josh was hard at work building up the business, but she hadn't realized he steadily was losing money—a lot of money. She needed to find work; she couldn't burden him with extra stress.

Adrienne folded the rest of his clothes and placed them in drawers and on hangers. She had one last room to paint, the living room. The rest of the apartment was done: the kitchen now celadon, the bedroom blue, the dining room amber, the bathroom lilac. Next, the living room would be the color of sunlight on a wheat field, the color of her hair, a pale gold.

She finished putting away the clothes and crammed her discarded items into a trash bag for Goodwill. She didn't know how long she sat before the phone rang. She couldn't bring herself to answer it, even if it was someone responding to one of the countless resumes she had submitted.

"Hey, pick up. It's me. Come on, pick up." It was Josh. She could hear him dribbling the basketball. "Adrienne, pick up, pick up, pick up." The ball hit the pavement and punctuated each word.

"Hi," she said. "Did you have a good game?"

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"Yeah. I thought we could go out tonight. Hear some music. Everyone's going to see this band. What do you think?"

"I was going to paint today," Adrienne said. "But go ahead."

"You feeling okay?"

"Yeah, I just want to get this done. Is that okay?"

"Yeah. I'll come home though. Love you."

"Me too," she said and hung up the phone.

Before she had time to leave the room, the phone rang again. Josh must have changed his mind, she thought as she picked it up. "It's okay if you want to go. Really."

"Adrienne."

She flinched at the sound of his voice.

"It's David. I'd like to see you if you're amendable."

"Why would I do that?" She tried to stay composed despite the tremor she felt rush through her limbs.

"I feel bad about how things ended. Are you free tonight to talk?"

"I don't know, David. What is it that you want?"

"I want to make things right. Come to my place, say seven?"

She didn't think she could return to the office or even take the train to the familiar stop.

"Adrienne?"

"Okay. Yes. I'll see you then."

She spent the rest of the afternoon painting, but was unable to finish the room before leaving to meet David. He had always had this effect on her, even after she stopped sleeping with him. She felt like a student, a college freshman who just discovered art. He had a way about him, like a mentor, and she couldn't help to defer to him, to rely on his wisdom. This was why, she thought, that they both were disarmed by her refusal to sleep with him again, that they were surprised that it was she who ended the affair.

She climbed out of the cab and buzzed, all the while ducking her head under the inadequate awning to prevent the rain from soaking her hair. The elevator creaked its way up to David's floor and he stood waiting for her, two glasses of wine in his hands, and he offered one to her after she dropped her bag to the floor.

"Your coat?"

She shrugged it off and followed him to the living room, pausing to sip the expensive wine, far superior to even what Josh served at the restaurant. She chose a seat across from him and met his gaze. When he didn't speak, she crossed her legs and grew more uncomfortable with each passing moment. Finally, she asked, "What is it?"

"I regret how things ended. I fought for you, with the publisher. I did my best to keep you but it was out of my hands."

"So you didn't call me to offer me my job back?"

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"That's out of the question. I'm sorry. I want to help though. I have an idea for you and I thought I could arrange a lunch meeting and make the introduction."

When she didn't respond, he plucked his wine glass from the coffee table and closed the gap between them. He sat next to her, too close, and she could smell the tannins on his breath. "Let me help you."

He leaned into her, his face, his shoulder, all contorting to touch her lap and her neck. "Stop it," she said as she pushed him away. Adrienne searched the room for her coat, spotting it draped over a dining room chair. "I don't want your help."

"Don't be like this," he said, completely unfazed by her refusal. "I'm happy to arrange the meeting whenever you're comfortable. You know where to find me."

Adrienne wanted to scream at him, tell him to fuck off and leave her alone, but her mind went blank and the only image in her head was Josh's menu, the one from his pocket, the amount of money he was losing. She met David's eyes; his face composed, almost serene as he returned her stare. She backed away, fetched her coat, and fled the apartment without another word.

Relief filled her when she found a cab with ease, a blessing in the rain, and again when she reached home before Josh. She changed her clothes, washed her face, and brushed her teeth, which did little to purge the lingering scent of David's breath. About an hour later, Josh walked in and his clothes clung to him from sweat and rain. "Here," he said and handed her a bag. "It's your favorite, a Barbera D'Asti. Give me a kiss," he said and she complied. "I need to take a shower and then I'm going to cook you the best meal you'll ever eat in your entire life." He let out a war cry as he left the room.

He was goofy like this when he was in a good mood, when he won a game or a glowing review. It was how he wooed her in the beginning, with mix CDs and slapstick humor and the same tenderness she had witnessed on the subway the day she got fired. It compensated for his competitive nature which kept him late at the restaurant obsessing over menus, although now she knew the cause of his concern. Adrienne pulled out the bottle of wine and put it on the kitchen counter underneath the framed *New York Magazine* review, which named him as one of the hottest emerging chefs in the city. She squinted at his picture as she listened to him shower.

He returned dressed to cook in jeans and an old fan band t-shirt. She lifted her head to kiss him. "I'll paint while you cook."

"You haven't finished?" he asked. "What have you been up to?"

She looked away. "I'm just sluggish today."

In the living room, she picked up a tall roller and emerged it into the paint as evenly as possible before applying it to the wall. The color was lighter than she originally expected. She painted from ceiling to floor, doing her best to create long, even lines despite her shaking hands. She finished one wall and completed another before she heard Josh announce that dinner was almost ready. She dropped the roller into the tray, splashing paint across the tarp.

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He stood at the counter with the open bottle of wine and two glasses. "I didn't know if you wanted to see this, but the magazine came in the mail today. The redesigned issue. Want me to toss it?"

"No thanks," she said. "Let me see it." Adrienne didn't admit that she poured through the mail waiting for the issue to come, waiting to see David's flash of brilliance that saved the magazine and doomed her career.

With his hands tucked in oven mitts, Josh slid the magazine across the counter. Adrienne took a healthy sip of wine, taking in the comforting familiar taste, and flipped it over to see the cover. There it was, her eighties new wave logo and design, in a completely different color palette—jewel tones. "Fucking bastard."

Josh turned from the oven. "What?"

"He stole my design. Wait a second." She hauled over a box and withdrew a work folder.

"Look here." She spread out the identical logo in neon hues.

"You need to do something about this," Josh said.

She nodded in agreement, "Yes I do."

Despite the perfect meal, complete with her favorite scallops, despite their eager sex, Adrienne couldn't sleep. She crawled out of bed and turned on her laptop to scroll through the various designs she had turned in. The file was in disarray as she updated her portfolio for her seemingly fruitless job hunt. She clicked on a document at the bottom of the list, one entitled *DAVID DETAILS*. It wasn't a work document but a personal one, and as she reviewed its contents, she felt queasy with a combination of guilt and fury.

After David had fired her, after he questioned her talent, Adrienne had pulled out her college portfolio. Before she discovered graphic design, she had focused on printmaking, particularly etching. She had loved the feeling of carving into steel plates and then soaking them in acid. The textured layers of color were so specific, a surprise each time, and she reveled in the anticipation of how a print would reveal itself to her. However, few artists earned livings as printmakers so she shifted her focus to the practical and excelled in design. Her earlier work, her series of etchings, rested on the floor in concentric circles reminding her of her early success. These prints had earned her an award and a scholarship. While her confidence remained at a distance, it inched slightly closer. It took some searching, but she found her old tools, the hefty steel needles and carving knives strong enough to penetrate steel. She placed them in her bag.

She had coffee and breakfast waiting for Josh, who woke with a tremendous amount of energy. Despite her lack of sleep, she matched his mood, sipping her third cup of coffee.

"Good eggs," he said. "What's on the agenda for today?"

"Paint store. I just need a few more things. I decided I'm going to call the publisher about the David situation. I have all of the documentation I need to prove that he plagiarized my design. Then I thought I'd meet you at the restaurant later and have dinner in the bar."

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“Ready to join the living?”

She nodded her head. “No more moping around. I have an idea about that.”

“What?”

“What do you think of me working at the restaurant while I look for another design job? I could be your hostess and that would cut down your overhead. One less salary.”

Josh ran his hand through his hair. “Really?”

“Yeah. We could make it a family restaurant for now.”

She could see the relief on his face. “That would be great. We’ve been short staffed and I have the servers working the door.” He pulled her into his arms and kissed the top of her head. “I love you,” he said.

Adrienne wished she had thought of this offer earlier. “I love you, too.”

Despite the chill, she walked to Crowne Paint and bypassed the shelves of high end matte finishes and wandered over to the display of spray paint. Thanks to street art, neon never went out of style and she purchased green, turquoise, pink, black, and white. The cans clanked against each other as she paid the bill and hailed a cab. Trapped in cross-town traffic, she chided herself for taking a taxi, the fare climbing to double digits. She withdrew two pieces of paper from her purse, the DAVID DETAILS document with his security code and the cover of the magazine. Once she was a block away, she said, “Here’s fine. Just drop me at the corner.”

Adrienne liked a door man, the security of having someone there if she misplaced her keys or needed a package delivered. Loft life eluded her. While she understood the appeal of towering ceilings and wide open spaces, she missed the comfort of rooms, of walls and boundaries. She punched in the security code and creaked open the heavy metal door. Once inside, she glanced at the paper and punched a second security number, the one which controlled the elevator. It deposited her on the fourth floor directly inside David’s loft. She closed her eyes and did her best to push away last night’s exchange.

She had never been there during the day and the quality of light took her breath away. Sunlight poured through the enormous windows illuminating the textured concrete walls. Adrienne ran her palm over the southeastern wall and reached to remove the row of framed photographs. Gently, she draped a tarp over the furniture and rug to protect from stray paint. Adrienne began by carving directly into the wall, first with the etching needle and then with the thick knife. Quickly, her muscles ached from the effort and she found herself leaning into the wall to create the pattern she wanted, one which would soak up the paint and create the depth she had envisioned. She painted a white base coat and followed with a bold black outline before filling in the lines with vibrant color. Upon completion, she stood back and assessed the embossed image, over six feet tall and at least twice as wide. It transformed the room, casting a garish rainbow over David’s earth toned furniture. She didn’t know what pleased her more: the thought of the shock on his face or his displeasure over the youthful color scheme.

As she collected her supplies, Adrienne felt as though she were reas-

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sembling herself. David had his job for now but as she looked at her design and compared it to the magazine's cover, she saw its short shelf life, how it would look dated in a few months and once again, the magazine would try to reinvent itself only to eventually close. She was free of that now. Her work here was done.

Calla Devlin Has had short stories published in anthologies and literary journals, including *Watchword*, *Five Fingers Review*, *Visions*, *Square Lake*, *Harrington Fiction Quarterly*, the New College Chapbook Series, among others, and forthcoming in *The MacGuffin*. Her story "Borderlines" won honorable mention as one of the year's most notable publications in Dave Egger's *Best American Nonrequired Reading 2003* and her story "Bird's Milk" was a finalist in *Glimmer Train's* 2009 fiction competition. Most recently, she was included in two anthologies, *Lost on Purpose: Women in the City* and *Because I Love Her: 34 Women Writers Reflect on the Mother-Daughter Bond*.

She is putting the finishing touches on a novel which she plans to submit it to publishers later this year.