

May 1, 1:30 p.m.

In office

My mother will not let me off the phone. I'm not going to make it to the museum. Also I'm about to be late for my two o'clock.

The Language of Paying Attention to YOU (Strand Bookstore, used-book section, \$1.25) says I'm supposed to write down everything that annoys me in a sharp little notebook, with neat ruled lines, the better to stay on-task, or something.

It also says that I'm supposed to "give myself permission" to be annoyed, since this helps "clarify my goals."

Day one of diary: starting out frustrated.

Mama is still talking to me. I can hardly get a word in edgewise. Why am I not used to this by now?

Oh. I'm supposed to *report* the things that annoy me. Here's the conversation, almost verbatim. (Mama and I have the same one every week. I can practically write it from memory, except I don't need to, because it is happening *right now*. *TLPAY* says that writing annoying stuff down "takes away its power." I'll try anything.)

ME: Marty Wu speaking.

MAMA: Well, aren't we professional.

ME: Hi, Mama.

MAMA: What are you doing?

ME: Working, Mama, like everyone else is. (*Looks at watch; actually about to scoot off for lecture at museum.*)

MAMA: Aren't you important!

ME: Well. I *do* have a lunch appointment I need to get to soon. (*Sees self as lady who lunches and then goes to lecture, only without lunch.*)

MAMA: What kind of appointment?

ME: (*caught unawares*) Uh. Uh. Just a sales thing.

MAMA: Too busy to explain to me, I guess.

ME: No, Mama. Just... it's hard to explain.

MAMA: Is it one of your "clients" again?

Oh, I know. I know. It's impossible to hear air quotes. But from Mama, anything is possible.

ME: Well. Kind of.

MAMA: (*switching to English so she can—what, berate me in two languages? I don't know*) You know, you maybe catch one of those clients, marry him, be rich woman, never have to work.

ME: I *like* work, Mama.

Marginal lie here. I like *some* work. *Some* men at work. But not this work especially.

MAMA: Well! Work isn't everything. (*Sighs.*) At least you leave that illustrator job you had before.

ME: I liked it there.

MAMA: You never go anyplace, no promotion.

ME: (*at a loss for words*)

MAMA: Wait a minute. You not taking time off to go to that museum again, are you? You spend way too much time at museum, that's why you never go anywhere to begin with. Everything you do is waste of time, everything, everything! I so ashamed of you. Did you know, whenever my friends ask what you do for living, I must say I don't know? You buy friends, you know, that's what people who work in advertising do. On television, they never talk about people in advertising. They talk about editors and writers. Why can't you be one of those? At least then I hold my head up high.

ME: Well, that's why I took this job. To try and make you happy, so you wouldn't seem so unhappy. And also so I could make enough money to quit in a blaze of glory, and then open up my own little costume shop, just like in the old movies, and so maybe you can tell your friends that I own a little shop on 18th Street, right next to the bookstore, and you can come visit and have tea with me some days.

No, just kidding. I did not say that. But *TLPAY* also encourages daydreaming and writing down of pipe dreams, so I thought I'd write down what I really wanted to say. And anyway, Mama has shifted seamlessly into Taiwanese, is yelling much more fluently now, and my head hurts. (Taiwanese always

sounds urgent. I don't know why I never noticed this before. Maybe it's because we don't have verb tenses.)

I never actually get to say these things out loud. But Mama is always yelling. No one knows why, although we've tried to ask. Dad didn't know, I don't know. I only know that stopping her—or even trying to stop her—is even harder than having to sit through the yelling. At least I can, um, meditate my way through the yelling (*Meditation for Morons*, on-street bookseller, \$1).

Okay. I am not going to make it to the lecture. I have a little over a half hour to get to the 2:00 appointment. Which takes half an hour to get to. Why? Why does MediaStar have to be so far away? All the way across town, from my glossy offices here at *Retirees' Review*—Third to Lexington, Lexington to Park, Park to Madison, Madison to Fifth, Fifth to Sixth, oh god, still Sixth to Seventh and Seventh to Eighth—fuck! I'm never going to make it.

Oh. Oh. *The Language of Paying Attention to YOU* says I should not agonize over things I cannot change.

But I'll tell you what. I'm definitely allowed to agonize over the fact that I'm still on the phone with my mother. And probably I'm allowed to agonize over the fact that I'm not going to get to that lecture on time.

And I'm most certainly allowed to be angry that it's the last time this particular expert on fashion and Impressionism will be speaking. (I can't believe how dorky that looks when I write it down.) Oh, Met Museum! Why? Why can't you offer these lectures in the evening, when normal people go? Why do you always think it's little old ladies who lunch who want to attend these lectures?

Some of us are young, up-and-coming costume designers—I mean, advertising account executives with pipe dreams—who want to see these things on our lunch hours.

Boy, I'm firing on all cylinders: *TLPAY* says I'm supposed to write down my aspirations, things that annoy me, and that I'm supposed to give myself permission to be whatever I want to be. Maybe I wasn't supposed to do that all at once.

Mama is still yelling, even though I haven't said a single word back to her yet. The clock is ticking down, and now,

not only do I not get to go to the lecture, I also am going to be late to see Chris.

I have to get out of this job. I won't last much longer.

I really hate this notebook, by the way. What the hell is the point of a notebook with lines? How do you imagine anything, in a notebook with lines?

Oh, good, she's hung up on me. Gotta jet. Chris is supposed to give me a huge deal, and my review's next week.

May 2, 2:17 a.m.

At home

So very, very late. But cannot get to sleep. Feel as if have screwed things up so badly; must tell someone. Jody out partying and probably met some guy at party and so is probably indisposed—well, anyway, I called her earlier tonight and her phone went right to voicemail, which is Jody's equivalent of the sock-on-the-doorknob—you know, code for "I'm busy with someone right now and really more interested in him than I am in talking to you."

Anyway. So here's what happened. After Mama hung up on me, I quick quick threw everything in my bag and then grabbed my coffee cup, which had been on my desk for, oh, four days and was therefore more coffee yogurt than coffee anymore, and therefore needed to be brought to the staff kitchen sink *pronto*. Then I bolted out the door.

And then. Wouldn't you know it. Stafford was right there, like the brick house he is, blocking my way. Crash! Sploosh! Glop! All over both our suit jackets.

Stafford. Stafford is so put-together. Drives me nuts. Even when we were dating, he would always sit there, looking like a smug, fat cat (except Stafford is *not* fat; Stafford is gorgeous and cut, with pectorals like bowling balls), while I dashed around and got ready for work. Even now that we're broken up, he never fails to make me feel so *not* put-together. It's like a talent.

Like, how come his collar points always look so neat? How come he always has an extra suit, no matter how many nights he's been out on business? How come he always knows just what to say to people? Argh!

Anyway. Stafford. Standing in door. Now covered in coffee-yogurt mess, just like me. Except he's just standing

there, and he only says, “Oops!” while I flap and fling yogurt stuff around and smear it into my lovely worsted wool and manage to get some on our office carpet.

Feh.

Stafford. Glances only once at his own messy suit coat and then at mine, and says, “Here,” and unbuttons my jacket for me and takes it off. Folds it in on itself, wipes his fingertips on a somehow-not-messed part, straightens my collar, and says, “There. Just go like that. I’ve always liked that blouse on you. You’ll be lovely. Seeing Chris, are you, today? The Irving Liquors account, is it?”

(The British accent makes everything sound better than it is, doesn’t it? Stafford could drop the eff-bomb fifteen times in a row and it’d sound like Keats.)

“Yeah. Yeah. Seeing Chris.”

“Okay. Good. That’s almost a ringer; I’ve seen the way he looks at you. And remember, we should schedule your review for next week. How’s next Monday? First thing?”

“Yeah. Yeah. That works.” I sound like a parrot, but that’s mostly because I can’t believe what I’ve just heard: Stafford actually thinks I’d use the fact that Chris may like me to earn the pages toward my quota for next year’s issues.

“Right. So breakfast Monday for your review. And Marty . . .”

“What, Stafford?”

Stafford is really close now, and I’m remembering what it was like to wake up next to him: Nice, but always with a little frisson of—I don’t know, uncertainty? Impending doom? Ugh.

“You need to close this thing. You’re not the only one with a ton of pressure on, you know.”

I’m remembering why we didn’t make it past four months of dating. Aside from the whole his-taking-me-on-to-work-for-him thing.

“I hired you out of the blue, as you know,” he says now. It sounds like he’s on a roll, and I’m trying to exhibit some body language that says *I need to go*, but he ignores me. “No one would have ever guessed an illustrator would make a great salesperson, but you do have such a way with people. We invested a ton in you, and we’re expecting a lot back, aren’t we, love?”

Oh! Plummy vowels, rolled around in the mouth, leisurely, before they finally come out, all Eton and right-side-of-the-tracks. It's no wonder most of the world listened for so long, even if they were constantly being threatened, which I'm beginning to figure out is what's happening here.

I have to work to hold his gaze. (I think, if this were the movies, Stafford's gaze would be labeled "gimlet," or something.) "I'm pulling my weight."

He shakes his head and drapes my jacket over his arm. He's still standing there, dripping coffee mess, and he's still talking to me.

"Takes more than that in this world, sweetie. You know that. But close this deal and I'll consider us even, okay?" He winks, and finally steps back.

I narrow my eyes. "Bite me, Stafford," I say, and "You weren't ever *that* good in bed."

No. No, I don't say that. I tell him I'll close the deal, don't worry.

Okay. So then I'm bolting across town, wondering exactly how I'm supposed to close the thing. I mean, I *like* Chris. But I'm thinking he may not have the clout I need to close it. I'm asking him for a three-, maybe four-page deal, which will meet my quota, for sure, but Stafford sounds like maybe he wants more, and what the publisher wants, he'd better get.

By the time I get there, I'm late, sweaty, and annoyed. I mean, not too much more than usual with this job, I guess, but it's not the best way to start a meeting. It's probably more honest to say that I'm frazzled. Really, really frazzled. If I had curly hair, like Jenny in the sixth grade, whose curly hair I wanted so badly, I'd have been a hot, frazzled, *frizzy* mess.

Fortunately, I have limp Asian hair. Not as big a deal, except I know I've sweated right through my top, so I stand outside for a while, in the unseasonal heat, and hope to cool off.

I get into the lobby. It's still middling warm in there. And in the elevator too. But then I reach the sixteenth floor, where Chris's office is. A wall of air-conditioning hits me and my body makes a, um, *pointed* remark, if you get my drift.

And wouldn't you know it. Chris is hovering there, at the reception desk, where he's totally not supposed to be.