

ENOUGH

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*To Andrew,
this is some first date. I'm impressed.*

Excerpt

Chapter 1

Monday Morning, May 14, 2018

“Oh, so you’re not the caterer?” the receptionist asked again, staring at Sameera reprovingly from under her long false eyelashes. “Are you sure?”

Seeing herself through the eyes of other people had always been a corrosive, unhealthy experience. She was not a courier, someone’s nanny, or any other stereotype concocted to explain the presence of a Brown woman in a corporate setting. Despite the laptop bag slung over her right shoulder and the hipster couture she favoured, her colleagues never thought that she could be — was — their superior.

Sameera Jahani chose her own lens now — an avant-garde millennial, an Iranian Canadian, bold in speech and style. Her wild mane of black hair floated about her unadorned face. Her black eyes shone from under her bushy brows. Her muscular thighs filled out her red palazzos and her underarm hair peeked out from the capped sleeves of her black silk shirt. Sameera was an enterprising marketer, a creative genius, a trendsetter with an impressive number of online followers. But on this day, her first day as manager of the seven-person Web and Digital Communications team at Toronto City Hall, Sameera had reached a roadblock.

“Not the caterer,” Sameera repeated tersely, losing the smile she had adopted during her first response. She looked over the young receptionist’s head, through the glass security doors that divided the beige waiting room from the bustling administrative offices, and willed her liaison to appear. Seated at a beige desk that matched the carpet and the paint, the receptionist clicked on

her keyboard importantly. To avoid grimacing at this gatekeeper, Sameera averted her gaze, examining the collection of home décor lined up on the desk. White-painted wood cutouts of inspirational words flanked portraits of the receptionist and a polished man, both dressed in matching white and blue outfits, in cinematic poses outdoors. *Ugh. How pedestrian*, Sameera decided.

The receptionist stopped typing and continued reproachfully, “Okay, see I expected the caterer to appear right about now and—”

“Not. The. Caterer. Really. Listen, Howard Crawley’s assistant is supposed to meet me here” Sameera paused to look at her watch, “... right now. Can you please message his assistant?”

As usual, Sameera’s tactlessness slowed her progress. The receptionist leaned back slowly and narrowed her eyes, exuding resentment at being rushed. She seemed to be assessing Sameera’s intentions, especially pertaining to Howard Crawley, city manager and overseer of all city employees — tens of thousands of civil servants.

Louder and more slowly than necessary, the receptionist said, “If you’re applying for a job, you have to do it online. On the website. He doesn’t meet with walk-ins.”

Pursing her lips and stifling a groan, Sameera turned away from the receptionist and walked the couple of steps to reach a corner of her beige purgatory. She would message Diane Waverly, the human resources representative whose fifth-floor office she had left minutes earlier after a cumbersome briefing on corporate and personnel policies. Diane had assured her that Howard Crawley’s assistant would receive Sameera at the reception desk on the tenth floor. Sameera kicked herself for not having requested the assistant’s name or phone number. Now, she was at the mercy of the receptionist-cum-surly-gatekeeper, who first ignored her arrival at the desk, then confused her for a caterer, and was now questioning her motives for being there. *Where is the assistant? This is so unprofessional.*

Sameera composed a succinct but neutral message to Diane,

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requesting contact information for Howard Crawley's assistant. There was no use complaining about the obstinate receptionist to Diane since most white people disregarded or denied the microaggressions Sameera recognized.

"Excuse me. This area is designated for ..." the receptionist started. When Sameera did not turn to face her, the woman continued in a jarring soprano, "Excuse me!"

Under the pretence of being on a call, Sameera held her phone to her ear, and then motioned to the phone with her forefinger to silence the receptionist. The woman's interjections subsided but Sameera sensed that she was being closely observed. She continued her charade by oscillating her gaze and nodding sombrely, hoping Diane would respond to her message before the receptionist called for a security escort. *First, the receptionist's an asshole, then the assistant's a no show, and now the HR rep's deserted me. This is not looking good.*

The room felt increasingly warm. Beads of sweat formed under her arms, and Sameera lifted her elbows to avoid causing stains on her silk shirt. She cursed the new organic deodorant she was wearing, having recently given up her antiperspirant in an attempt to accept her musk.

To dampen her worst fear — she'd made another dire career move — Sameera reminded herself that she had accepted a position under one of the most influential people in the public sector, Mr. Howard Crawley. A career bureaucrat at the City of Toronto who had held his current position as city manager for seventeen years, Howard Crawley had wealth, influence, and a trailblazer's reputation for modernizing public programs. This job was her opportunity to propel her marketing career in the public sector. After wasting all that precious time and energy on her last job — a dead-end pet project of a wealthy visionary — Sameera was dedicated to progress at full throttle. She'd learned the hard way that the leadership of an organization sets the tone and pace of its

progress, and from her research on Howard Crawley, she was filled with hope for her professional future. A graduate of the prestigious Rotman School of Management and a member of the exclusive York Golf Club, Howard Crawley was an ambitious man who was well-connected to the cohort of powerful decision-makers in the city. Sameera daydreamed about becoming his indispensable associate.

A brown-clad courier arrived with a loaded dolly, occupying the receptionist momentarily.

Stay focused, Sameera coached herself as she composed another message to Diane Waverly, one tinged with greater urgency, all the while keeping her elbows up to dry out her underarms. *Things don't always go smoothly but they can work out all the same.*

Sameera recalled her uneasy job interview during which Mr. Crawley barely looked up from his phone, even when she mentioned his achievements. The human resource staffers ran the show. Given the city manager's disinterest, Sameera was surprised to receive the job offer. *They chose me. I belong here.*

"Ms. Jahani?" a voice asked.

Sameera turned toward the glass-door entrance of the administrative offices to face a remarkable middle-aged woman of colour, dressed in a flattering pantsuit and carrying a slim laptop.

"I am Faiza Hosseini," she said with a friendly smile and an outstretched hand, nails flawlessly manicured. "It is nice to meet you."

Sameera noted her caramel skin, botoxed lips, breezy blowout, and the hint of a Middle Eastern accent. Ms. Hosseini was the archetypical manifestation of the chic Iranian woman, one inspired by Iranian communities in Los Angeles and achieved through cosmetics and surgery.

"*Salaam, az didane shoma khoshbhalam.* Hello, it is a pleasure to meet you," Sameera replied in Farsi and offered her hand with confidence. Since she had stopped biting her nails, she'd started to enjoy handshakes.

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“*Eh! Irani ast-te.* Oh! You’re Iranian,” Faiza Hosseini said with genuine surprise, taking Sameera’s hand and squeezing it gently, rather than shaking it.

Sameera had recently resolved to declare her ethnicity upon first contact with other Iranians to honour her roots. She was breaking another bad habit of whitewashing her identity. She tried to live authentically, leveraging her experience to connect with others — as an Iranian, a woman of colour, an urban queer, and a technophile.

“*Bale*, yes,” Sameera said, holding herself erect, noticing she felt a tad diminished by Faiza Hosseini’s conventional beauty.

Her collective of aunts and female cousins — cosmopolitan Iranians who had immigrated to Toronto in adulthood — had always been irked by Sameera’s alternative style. The wiry hairs on her legs, the downy hairs above her upper lip, and the bushy hairs that framed her brow were an affront to their hairless sensibilities. These preened and polished women supported a woman’s right to higher education, voting, and abortion, but feminism be damned if it meant Sameera Jahani was going to look like *yeh maimoon*, an ape.

“*Bah bah, khosh amadeed.* Wonderful, welcome,” Faiza said with a radiant smile. “For transparency, let’s use English.”

Sameera noticed that the receptionist was unabashedly staring at them, her brows furrowed and her lips pursed with impatience.

Turning to the receptionist, Faiza said pleasingly, “Sheila, if Howard or Shirley ask, Ms. Jahani is with me.”

Sameera watched from the corner of her eye as Sheila responded with a shrug and then returned to swiping on her phone. The disdainful gesture agitated Sameera, and she looked at the floor to avoid revealing her displeasure — and to allow Faiza Hosseini to save face. Faiza swiped her security badge at the glass doors, and held one open for Sameera. As Sameera stepped into a narrow grey hallway, devoid of decoration, she heard Faiza remind Sheila about

a birthday celebration that afternoon.

"I bought cupcakes from Béb ," Faiza mentioned. "It'll be in conference room 4."

"Yeah, I'll be there," Sheila said, her icy tone warming a few degrees.

"Wouldn't be the same without you," Faiza added and let the glass door close behind her.

Sameera recognized the dicey exchange between Sheila and Faiza. It was as familiar as it was unavoidable and infuriating. Sheila's dismissiveness revealed her perception of power over Faiza despite their jobs. Resentful white people concerned Sameera, and she resolved to keep a distance from power-tripping Sheila.

With her trendy leather roll-top bag over one shoulder, Sameera followed Faiza through a maze of cooled hallways, narrow paths that wound around the core of the building. The conference rooms and storage spaces were nestled in the centre on her left, and every few metres, a gap on the right revealed a set of spacious cubicles pressed against the floor-to-ceiling windows of the modern structure.

"I didn't mean to cause confusion," Sameera explained, half a step behind Faiza to allow room for passersby. "I wanted to contact you when I got here but HR didn't give me your info."

"Oh, no need to worry about that," Faiza answered breezily over her shoulder. "Howard's in a last-minute meeting. His assistant messaged me because she had to attend, too."

"Sorry, I thought you were his assistant," Sameera said, confused. "So, which team do you work with?"

"I lead Program Support," Faiza said, and then paused to point out the location of the washrooms. "There are others but this one's the closest. Anyway, I've worked with nearly every team in City Hall."

Faiza Hosseini is a director. She reports directly to the CM. Why was the director of a core team onboarding a new manager? Was

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it related to their shared ethnicity? Whatever the reason for the match up, Sameera recognized the networking opportunity and hoped that Faiza did not judge her negatively for her bare face and natural hair, as did her mother and aunts.

"Wow, that's great. How long have you worked here?" Sameera asked, trying to sound more curious than calculating.

"Oh ... coming on seven years, soon," Faiza said with a smile but Sameera thought she heard a hint of fatigue. *Or is that agitation?*

"Congratulations," Sameera replied. "I'm surprised you have the time to take me around like this."

"We all try to help out," Faiza said, stopping as a group approached.

The young quartet carried laptops and notebooks, and Sameera assumed they were heading to a meeting. They greeted Faiza with genuine smiles and she introduced Sameera as the new manager of the Web and Digital Communications team. The four business analysts welcomed her to City Hall, and then one asked Faiza about the birthday gathering.

"Yes, in conference room 4. At two o'clock," Faiza confirmed.

"I heard you ordered cupcakes," one colleague probed in a sing-song voice.

"She did," replied his grinning coworker. "I saw the Béb  box in the fridge." To Faiza, he said, "You're such a good office mom."

"Thank you," Faiza said with a gracious smile. "It is my pleasure. I'll join the meeting in half an hour."

Sameera remained composed but she felt disgusted by the behaviour of the thirty-somethings who treated the senior bureaucrat like a matron. *Office mom? Who says that?!*

"And here is Howard's office," Faiza said as they approached the spacious glassed-in room in the corner. "His assistant, Shirley, won't be back for a bit, so we can tour the place."

"Okay, thank you," Sameera said amiably, though she would have happily set to work instead. The ordeal with the receptionist

had drained her enthusiasm to meet anyone else that morning.

* * *

Staring out her tenth-floor office window on Monday morning, Faiza Hosseini acknowledged to herself that she was starving. It seemed to her she had spent her life starving. Her empty grumbling stomach, the accompanying headaches, and fatigue made her question her latest diet but she did not have an alternative way to shed the last ten pounds to reach her ideal weight.

All of the diets — the wheat-grass shots, the no-carb all-protein regime, drinking her meals, fasting all day, or eating only once before 8:00 — had worked to some extent. She'd even lengthened her daily hour-long exercise sessions. Still, the scale refused to budge and Faiza was growing desperate.

Whenever she was at home, her mother insisted that Faiza eat more at mealtime, infuriating her because her mother was also the first to bring attention to the slightest weight gain. Faiza's husband, Robert, insisted that she was as beautiful as the day they had met, eight years earlier in a dentist's office. *Nonsense. He's not the same. I'm not, either. No use pretending.*

She dampened her hunger with a series of deep inhalations, and then resumed working on an upcoming presentation to upper management; it was an equity, diversity, and inclusion — EDI — initiative she had authored on Howard's behalf. The afternoon sunshine across her cluttered desk reminded her of time lost touring the new hire that morning. *Howard owes me another one.* She counselled herself to think positively about her contributions to City Hall, even if an increasing number of her contributions were Howard Crawley's duties — tasks that he either did not want to or could not complete himself, including the presentation at hand.

City Council had tasked Howard to identify key marketing initiatives to improve engagement with marginalized communities in the City of Toronto. Howard had delegated the task to Faiza,

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claiming that public engagement was her forte. She had seen through his flattery, but she had also perceived an opportunity to demonstrate her prowess directly to upper management, a chance to step out of Howard's shadow. The presentation slides — hours of research and analysis — stared back at her. *Come on, just a few more changes. It's almost finished.*

She had arrived two hours earlier than usual in the hopes of completing the presentation, which was scheduled to be delivered at the end of the week. At dawn, when she emerged from her walk-in closet dressed immaculately, her hair straightened and her makeup perfected, Robert had woken briefly to kiss her goodbye. He wished her luck on her presentation, and then burrowed his bald head and long limbs under the duvet for another hour of sleep. Now in his late fifties, Robert had reached the top of the corporate ladder by becoming an executive at a plastics manufacturer, and he was content to reach work at nine o'clock and leave at five, counting down the years to retirement.

Faiza's 69-year-old mother had been sipping weak tea, watching the sunrise, perched on a kitchen stool by the window overlooking the Scarborough Bluffs and Lake Ontario. The two women closely resembled each other, especially in the controlled way they carried themselves. That morning, they had chatted briefly, in whispers. Her mother, called Bibi by her loved ones, had relayed news about Faiza's successful older brother — Firouz, who lived and worked in Boston — and about his two daughters, who were both promising engineering students at MIT — the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as her mother was so fond of saying. Faiza had not admonished her mother for aggrandizing Firouz's most recent accomplishments — a larger mansion and an extended holiday overseas — but she had refrained only to keep from prolonging their conversation, which would have negated her early morning start and made her reach work in a bad mood. Instead, she'd kissed Bibi goodbye and promised to arrive home in time to help with

dinner, immediately chiding herself for making such a promise since she would most certainly be delayed at work.

A soft knock on her office door interrupted her ruminations, and she called for the person to enter. Voula Stavros, director of the Customer Services team, slid into Faiza's office, quietly closed the door, and leaned against it. *She always knows how to slim her waistline. I should get a skirt like that.* With a manicured thumbnail gently nested between her front teeth and a broad smile that clearly guarded some juicy secret, Voula eyed Faiza. Faiza smiled back, ignoring her anxiety and hunger pains.

"Hi, I know you're plugging away at that presentation but I ..." Voula said, inching forward, gripping her own elbows as if to keep from bursting. "Well, it seems that Howard has been up to something."

Oh, dear god. What now?! Like a disappointed parent, Faiza groaned and tilted her head back, and Voula burst out laughing. Over the years, Howard's unsavoury behaviour had been at the root of several personnel issues. His domineering and opinionated attitude, which upper management considered a strength, aggravated personnel and resulted in resignations and long-term leaves of absence.

"What has he done now?" Faiza asked tentatively, rolling her eyes and resting her arms in her lap.

"Well, it seems that Howard has been pressuring HR to create a new tier of management, a level between his and ours, like an assistant city manager," Voula divulged, tucking her skirt underneath as she settled into one of the two seats placed across the desk from Faiza.

Just then, there was another knock at the door. Faiza smiled apologetically at Voula, and then called out, "Come in."

Voula toyed with her phone while Faiza advised a harried manager on how to handle an uncooperative vendor. Grateful for Faiza's suggestions and supportive attitude, the manager left

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minutes later, looking considerably less overwhelmed.

"Another level?" Faiza asked, slipping back to their conversation. "Since when?"

"Apparently, it's been in the works for some time, all hush hush," Voula said, crossing and re-crossing her legs in excitement. "I'm surprised you didn't know about it. I figured you would have told me, if you knew."

In disbelief, Faiza shook her head and stared off blankly. She had heard rumours about organizational changes but in an enterprise as large as the City of Toronto, there were always some changes pending in the name of progress.

"Well, Howard probably thought ... well, he probably wanted to surprise you with the position," Voula pondered, leaning over the desk to perch her chin on her palm. "He can be such a control freak. I mean, it's your job nearly to a tee ... well, the job you do for him, not the one on paper."

Faiza would have never tolerated such frank comments from her juniors or other directors, even though she sensed that the entire corporation perceived her as Howard's lackey. But Voula understood the challenges of furthering her career while reporting to a chauvinist bigot.

"How do you know the details?" Faiza asked, blinking back into the conversation.

"It's posted. Check the site," Voula said, waving her manicured finger at the computer screen. "They posted it this morning. I can't believe Howard hasn't mentioned it to you yet."

"He's been in with the higher-ups all morning," Faiza said over her shoulder as she turned to her computer screen and navigated to the job portal, scrolling through the recent postings.

"Lousy bastard, probably waiting for you to mention it," said Voula, nodding to herself. "Probably trying to get you to admit you've been looking at postings."

Faiza found the posting and skimmed the job description, the

pay grade, and the qualifications. It was an impressive position, offering nearly twice Faiza's salary, and composed of the same executive responsibilities that Faiza had been performing on Howard's behalf for three years. The hunger pangs disappeared, as did Faiza's awareness of Voula's running commentary. She blinked at the screen and leaned in to re-read the qualifications. *This is it. It's mine.* The qualifications matched the bulleted lists on her resume, nearly line for line. *Finally, they realized how much sense this makes. For everyone.* She had never stated her rationale aloud to her superiors. Instead, she made a point to present herself as the perfect candidate for promotion. *I'm a known commodity. Intelligent. Beautiful. Driven. I make them look good.* She smiled as she pictured the pale and white-haired higher-ups flanking her for photos at media junkets; her brown eyes, beige skin, and long dark tresses offered a pleasing progressive face to the bureaucracy.

"Oh, and I met up with Amihan" Voula let that piece of information hang in the air, waiting for Faiza to look her way.

When it registered, Faiza spun toward her, looking shocked and delighted. "You did?"

Nodding devilishly, Voula whispered, "For coffee. Well, she had tea. She took me to the observation deck, upstairs. It was nice, really nice. The view was gorgeous, and there's no one up there, well, almost. And ... she asked me out." Voula bit her thumb, careful not to muss up her lipstick or nick her polish. "This Saturday, lunch. At High Park."

"That's wonderful Vee," Faiza said, sending air kisses. She knew that Voula had been waiting months for the demure auditor to notice her, biding her time, going on disappointing one-off dates. *So exhausting. I hope I'm never single again.*

"Thanks. I'll tell you all about it," Voula said, and then rethinking her words, she added with a smile, "Or, just the PG parts. Anyway, I have to run." She rose and excused herself. "I'm still hunting down that damned infrastructure report."

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"I know, right?" Faiza agreed, throwing up her hands. "You'd think their reports were hidden treasure, that's how deep they bury them. Folders nested in folders nested in more folders."

Voula sighed and shrugged, "Oh, well." Then, her kittenish smile returned and she nodded at the screen, "Go on, then. I know you're dying to get into that."

Faiza grinned back, "Thanks for the heads up. I owe you one."

"One?!" Voula joked as she disappeared out the office door.

Faiza bit the corner of her lip as she perused the posting for her dream job, her chin propped on her hand and her mind racing. *This is it. Howard's finally come through.*

* * *

The minutes were ticking toward nine o'clock on Monday morning and Goldie Sheer was mentally trash-talking the woman in line ahead of her at City Hall. Exhaling, Goldie consciously moved her tongue from one side of her mouth to the other, her teeth clamped. All the while, she spun her phone in one hand and shifted her weight from one gleaming pink sneaker to another. *Fuckin' bullshit.*

This was Goldie's first day at her first job since graduating university, and the woman bent over the counter conferencing with the desk clerk was ruining it. All Goldie needed was for the clerk to announce her arrival to her new manager, Patricia Addington, so someone could collect her from the rotunda. *Shit's fuckin' stupid. Who uses the fuckin' phone? Fuckin' boomers!*

Goldie grew certain that the entirety of her three-month contract as a database administrator would be spent staring at the backside of a woman with nothing better to do than to hang out at the Information Desk like she was at a country club. Forget her aspiration to secure a full-time, permanent position with benefits. Forget her plan to be the perfect employee with all the right answers. Forget her trotting to a meeting, decorating her cubicle,

or seeing a deposit in her bank account. The next three months were going to be spent in line, in the rotunda of City Hall, and Goldie would never raise enough money to move out of her parents' apartment. *Arrgh! Move, bitch!*

With one hand, she examined the texture of her long hair, ensuring her locks remained smooth — the result of an hour-long straightening session. In her other hand, she spun her phone faster between two finger pads and chewed visibly on her tongue. All the while, she considered how her life seemed to be perpetually on standby. She was waiting to be turned on, put to use. All of her plans to live independently, to pay her own way, and establish a career were on hold until she could secure a job with prospects. This opportunity was supposed to be her chance to start life as an employed adult, a unit independent of her parents and mercifully distanced from her two brothers. Yet, here in line, she was again on standby. *Bitch, move!*

The woman in line ahead of her, dressed in a cardigan that reached her knees and in slippers clearly intended for indoor use only, could not see Goldie's narrowed eyes or hear her tapping foot. Neither the woman nor the clerk seemed to notice or even care about Goldie's presence. In the reflection of a glass wall, Goldie occupied herself by reexamining her athleisure outfit: oversized cream shirt, black jacket, navy wide-legged pants, and pink Converse creps. She'd straightened her hair and applied her favourite set of blue eyelashes, though her mother declared she did not need the enhancement. She posted a close-up photo of her sapphire lashes online, and within seconds her friends commented she looked like the gorgeous boy beauty influencer @luisandres. The comments went a long way to lightening her mood.

When listening to the clerk's chuckles became unbearable, Goldie pressed forward.

"Excuse me," said Goldie to the clerk, sounding friendly and apologetic, and leaning to one side as if to side-step a great wall

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that had been concealing her.

The clerk glanced in her direction briefly but returned to her conversation with the cardigan-clad woman, who did not turn even in the slightest to Goldie's prompt. Agitated by the likelihood that she would arrive late on her first day at work, Goldie pressed forward with a little more force.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your conversation," Goldie said, still smiling but stepping directly next to the hunched figure to ensure that she interrupted the conversation.

The clerk, who seemed accustomed to interruptions, stared blankly at Goldie and waited for her to continue with her inquiry. The cardigan-clad woman, who remained hunched over the counter, languidly turned her head toward Goldie. She was not frowning or glaring at Goldie. In fact, the woman's face seemed frozen in a dispassionate state. The cold reception from both women intimidated Goldie and she tried to smile warmly. But before she could ask the clerk to ring Patricia Addington, the woman with her apathetic expression pointed to the sign mounted behind the clerk. It was a display, a directory of the public offices in the building.

"Social assistance is on the third floor," the woman offered matter-of-factly and restarted her conversation with the clerk.

Goldie was confused. She had not slept well the night before, waking every couple of hours to check the time, and her commute had been a half-hour longer than expected because of an obstruction on the subway track. Her anxiety about starting a new job was worsening with each passing minute, and now she felt befuddled by the hunched woman's instructions.

"What do you mean?" Goldie asked chirpily, trying to mask her agitation but the woman and clerk ignored her.

It occurred to Goldie that she had been dismissed, an experience familiar from being young in her household. She had been ejected from many conversations and denied re-entry due to her youthful righteousness and her lack of life experience. Usually, she

walked away because she was too hurt to fight back. This time though, she had to press on. She was desperate to prove herself in this position and finally claim her status as a working adult.

"I need to ..." Goldie said with a quavering voice, leaning over the counter to reinject herself into their space and conversation. "I mean, can you please call up Patricia Addington? She's expecting me."

The clerk continued to stare blankly at Goldie even as she lazily lifted the receiver to make the call. Goldie smiled and nodded encouragingly at the clerk in the hopes of speeding her up.

"Don't call," the woman instructed the clerk.

Complying, the clerk put down the receiver and stared at Goldie, who turned wide-eyed to face the cardigan-clad woman. The script in Goldie's mind had already run out. She had expected the rudeness of the experience but she had not expected overt obstruction. Disoriented, Goldie stepped back and momentarily squeezed her eyes shut.

"What's your name?" asked the woman, stepping forward and grimacing at Goldie.

"Pardon? Why?" Goldie staggered mentally to grasp the shift in events.

She rose to the balls of her feet to look over the woman's shoulder, and she spotted the clerk engrossed in a magazine and disinterested in all else.

"Your name?" insisted the hunched woman, crossing her arms and positioning herself to block Goldie's access to the counter.

"Goldie," she replied, hoping to assuage her interrogator long enough to side-step her.

"No, it's not," sneered the hunched woman as she appraised Goldie from under her drooping lids.

Goldie opened her mouth but could not think of a mature responsive. While she was accustomed to certain reactions to her Iranian name, Golnuz, such as the untoward compliments

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or questions about its origins that caused her to cringe self-consciously, she was irked at being questioned about her nickname. Goldie had been her lifelong moniker, and there were plenty of famous Goldies, so there should be nothing to discuss, nothing to pronounce or spell out.

The woman continued to stare at Goldie, expectantly. "Your actual name?"

Goldie felt like being insolent, pretending not to understand her meaning, but she reserved this tactic for her parents, two people who didn't presume that she was an idiot when she feigned ignorance. With others, Goldie answered the implied questions. There was no benefit to acting aloof or looking inept in the presence of people who had already assumed you were an idiot.

"Golnuz Sheer," Goldie offered, touching her smooth hair for reassurance. "Nice to meet you," she added out of habit. Goldie glanced at her phone. She was ten minutes late on her first day. She glanced at the counter to find it void of the clerk and her heart sank.

"So, why did you say your name was Goldie?" the woman asked in a perturbed voice.

"It is," said Goldie, embarrassed by the stranger's probing. "Goldie's short for Golnuz."

"That's not the same," the woman muttered to herself, pulling her cardigan close.

This conversation is bizarre. This woman is too much. When Goldie spotted the clerk returning to the Information Desk, she quickly sidestepped the woman and rushed to the counter.

"Can you please call Patricia Addington and let her know I am here?" Goldie blurted out, gripping the edge of the counter to maintain her spot in the non-existent line.

The clerk sighed in response but she began to dial again.

"No need, Mary," the cardigan-clad woman declared, and Mary the clerk began to hang up the phone. "I'll take her to Patricia."

Goldie glanced back and forth between the two women but neither looked at her. She felt like a child trying to interject herself in a conversation between adults.

“Do you work with Patricia Addington?” Goldie asked.

“Yes,” said the woman in a voice that implied Goldie was simple. “She sent me down here to get you. Come on, you’re late.”

With a bored expression, the woman wrapped the cardigan about herself, turned, and shuffled toward the elevators. Goldie rushed to catch up, weaving through a group of professionals with lanyards and clipboards. At the elevators, the woman stood with her eyes focused on the elevator floor indicator.

“I’m sorry about the time but I wasn’t late. I was in line behind you,” Goldie explained.

“Don’t worry,” the woman replied, still staring at the indicator. “I won’t mention it.”

Goldie didn’t want to make a bad impression by pressing the topic but she was confused about what had taken place. She probed, “Why did you tell me to go to social assistance?”

Just then, the elevator door opened and it emptied of civil servants and city residents. The woman stepped in without answering, and Goldie followed. A few others boarded the elevator and when the doors had closed, Goldie repeated her question.

“I didn’t know you were the new database admin,” the woman answered, not looking away from the floor indicators in the elevator.

“Oh,” Goldie replied, feeling brushed off by the vague answer. She touched her hair and found confidence in its smooth texture. Trying to gain some ground, she said, “Sorry, I didn’t get your name.”

“Beth,” the woman answered disinterestedly.

Intentionally sarcastic, Goldie asked, “Is that Beth like Elizabeth, or like Bethany?”

“Elizabeth,” Beth replied with a shrug.

ENOUGH

Annoyed that Beth had not picked up on her cutting remark, Goldie added, "Oh, so Elizabeth is your real name."

"Beth," she stated coldly. "My name is Beth."

The elevator jerked to a stop and an electronic bell signalled the opening of the doors. Beth walked out, ungrasping and unfazed, and Goldie followed sulkily. They had arrived in an empty waiting room, carpeted, furnished, and decorated in pastel blue. The room was flanked at each end by a glass door and security console. Beth swiped her security card at the console, and walked through with nary a glance back to confirm whether Goldie was instep.

Goldie was impressed by the security measures and the implication that her work was important and confidential. She wondered when she would procure an access card, but she didn't attempt to ask Beth, who was navigating the hallways quickly, like she was trying to lose Goldie or had forgotten about her.

As Beth led them further into the office maze, Goldie caught glimpses of what could be her future, her life as an adult: a database administrator for the City of Toronto. Pastel blue cubicles personalized with potted plants and framed photos, copy centres with shelves of stationary supplies, and conference room tables covered with laptops and composition notebooks. She vacillated between feeling anxious about her ability to perform the job, her ability to function in a professional office among real adults, and feeling ecstatic about landing a job that required a lanyard, that provided a cubicle, and that supplied her with all the pens she could need.

"Here," Beth said, stopping in front of a glass-walled office with a closed door.

Inside, Patricia Addington's angular figure was leaning in a chair, a phone to her ear. Goldie could not guess her age. She looked to be somewhere in her fifties or sixties, but she recognized expensive taste in clothes and jewellery. When Patricia spotted Goldie, she waved her in with a smile and raised a finger to signal that her conversation would soon come to an end. Goldie waved

back at Patricia, and then turned to Beth to thank her but she had disappeared.

* * *

At the end of her first day, Sameera walked the half-dozen blocks from work to her one-bedroom apartment in the Queer Village. It was an easy urban route that offered her an opportunity to unplug and appreciate the changing season, a mindfulness practice she had adopted. The wellness articles, which she devoured insatiably, encouraged her to observe the present moment, and she began the practice immediately after stepping out of the office. *Oh, there's a cluster of clouds blocking the sun. A flock of pigeons is flying in circles.*

Minutes later, once she had arrived in her own neighbourhood, she realized that her mindfulness had lasted less than a block. At some point, she had glanced at her screen to check for the time, and then continued to mindlessly consume media feeds for the remainder of the walk. *Fuck! This is hopeless. Maybe if I lived in the country ...*

Sameera pocketed her phone begrudgingly as a stream of oncoming pedestrians continued to stare at theirs. The warmer weather had converted patios and perches into communal spaces, packing the sidewalks with plenty of people to observe. Probably appraising the posture and wardrobe choices of strangers was not in line with mindfulness, but it was at least remaining in the present moment, however superficially.

As she was judging nearby footwear while waiting for the lights to turn on Carlton Street, Sameera heard yoo-hooing from somewhere behind her and turned to see handsome Elewa waving as he cleared tables on her favourite patio, The Friendly Bean. During small talk that morning, Sameera had mentioned that it was her first day at her new job, and Elewa seemed to be checking in with her. Sameera smiled and gave a thumbs-up in response. Elewa flashed a toothy smile and returned the gesture before heading