

QUIET

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The world was full of stupid and arbitrary rules, that was obvious. She had learned you could break as many as you wanted, as long as you didn't tell anyone. Telling usually led to someone getting all stern and concerned with you, like they were the school principal or something.

The Speech always started with them buttering you up. *You are a very special person. You have so much going for you...* Then they would reach a special exasperation. *Why do you, of anyone, have to resort to this behavior?* They always ended with a threat: *if it goes on, we will have to reconsider your place here.*

You had to nod your head and submit, so they could feel better.

Therefore she was extra careful. She didn't park her car in the Agency lot at night, where it would stick out, but in the lot for the industrial place across the road. She kept only an average collection of clothes in her file cabinets: a windbreaker, long underwear – stuff that any Agency biologist would have for field work. Most of her clothes she kept neat in bins behind the back seat of her car; her few fancy things were hung in her locker in the Exercise Unit. Her PJ's traveled with her, in her gym bag.

She had a PO Box for mail, and her paycheck was zapped electronically into her account. When people asked for her number, she told them she worked

late a lot and it was easier to call her at the Agency. She had another number to give if they kept bugging her, but it was really just a voice mailbox. Ha!

There wasn't much to make anybody suspicious. Of course she was protected by the fact that most people were so stupid they had never even thought someone could live at the Agency.

It had started with roommate trouble. When she got the job and moved to town, she wanted to save cash for a big trip to Asia. That meant sharing a place, which wasn't good. She always got too involved with roommates. Her best bet was renting a room from this sensible, aging woman – a

tough cookie. The phrase entertained her.

"Your work is so important!" the landlady cawed over tea, just after she moved in. "Women today! So modern!" The landlady shook her head like she was amazed. "So, do you have any brothers?"

The question floated between them like a silent bee. The landlady's eyeballs seemed loose in their sockets, like wet olives rolling in cups of dry leaves. The loneliness was seeping out of them.

She answered politely, and her fate was sealed. Like a big bug, the landlady molted. Her hard brown shell cracked and sloughed off, revealing the white and vulnerable creature inside - Mother Smother.

Mother Smother doted more each day. Mother Smother arranged parties with male guests. Mother Smother had political opinions. Mother Smother wanted to know her birthday!

She started leaving the house as early as possible to duck Mother Smother's attentions. She could shower in the Exercise Unit at the Agency. She stayed later and later at work, and found she liked it after everyone went home. Budget cuts had reduced the cleaning crew to one gullible person who was home by 6:30 PM. There were huge expanses of time and solitude. Like a wave meeting the beach, her thoughts would break in a fury, then glide out across the flat expanses of the conference room.

Sometimes they would slip through the doorway and drop into the halls, to collect and run in a deep green torrent. There they jostled and sorted themselves out. Finally they leapt and blurred until the long lines of fluorescent lights became a racetrack, where they flickered and hummed with the smallest expenditure of energy. Amazing!

The Agency was a playground. Everything you needed was there. She could heat up food in the Lunch Room. The Computer Room promised uninterrupted color printing for her maps, impossible during the day. The Quiet Room was key. Created in some long-gone management fad, it was supposedly a refuge for stressed-out personnel - stressed out by how irrelevant they were, she supposed. There was a daybed to lie on. Sound effects tapes of waves transported you. Forest-green blinds made the place so dark it seemed they not only blocked light from the outside, but sucked it in from the room.

It was a creepy place, the Quiet Room. She had never heard of anyone using it. Yet it seemed an outstanding place to crash. She moved in, telling Mother Smother she was going on a long field trip, and thus abandoning her stuff to buglike probing.

Living at the Agency was convenient and satisfying. She got up early, because morning was the dangerous part of her routine. Some employees liked to start early, so they could go home in the afternoon to mow their lawns and conduct the rest of their "lives." She didn't want to run into them and reveal herself. Every time she left the Quiet Room, she changed out of her PJ's into regular clothes.

Dressed, she could say she was working on a deadline.

The only problem was it sucked to change clothes every time she went to the bathroom. She had considered peeing in a pail; she had done that one winter when she lived out at a research station. But here it was more complicated. If the pail got discovered, it would be the talk of the Agency. The pee would alert them! Something unusual was going on!

Her PJ's were the reason for all this trouble, considering she could

have slept in passable clothes. But they were flannel and washed deliriously smooth. They were boxy and compatible with masturbation. A friend had made them. They went everywhere with her. They were her luxury.

When she got up for good, she threw her stuff in her gym bag, crossed the county highway to the industrial place, got her car, and went out for bagels and coffee. When she returned, she parked in the Agency lot and went to the Exercise Unit carrying her briefcase and gym bag with today's clothes inside. Now she looked like a regular Agency nimrod.

During the day she enjoyed her government job. Though when she had first arrived at the Agency, she had been spooked. The Agency was weird and congested; completing the smallest job could take incredible effort. The atmosphere was invisibly heavy, like they were working miles underwater.

The staff were dull and burnished and had low expectations of her. They never had tantrums, or lost it in any way.

She theorized that the invisible pressure forced everything to conform towards a logical, protective shape with a small surface area, perhaps approaching the spherical. She dubbed the staff the Spheroids.

There was no apparent source of the dull and constant force, or reason for the Spheroids' subdued behavior. Agency jobs were as guaranteed as you could get. Spheroids who committed the most outrageous offenses were disciplined with a paid suspension and mandatory free counseling. She tried to think of what you would have to do to get fired - actually do your job? Ha!

She decided to beat the Spheroids at their own games. She scrapped enthusiastically in

bureaucratic turf wars and psych-outs. She scheduled meetings for inconvenient times and moved money artfully between accounts. If people asked her to do something stupid and there was no way to avoid it, she would do it earnestly and suck up to them, just to Freak them Out.

At lunch she went out with the Spheroids and got silly. It was her biggest social contact all day. She poked and joshed them. She spewed lies to see how far she could go before someone called her on it. Sometimes it was like she had to stick them with a cattle prod to make sure they were awake.

There were times it was easier to make a connection, like on a long drive home after a field trip. In a dark car, she could get a Spheroid to talk about practically anything. Sometimes when they confessed, she'd start feeling the freedom and relief of having a friend. There'd be a lifting pressure to tell them about the Quiet Room. But when she got past the outrageous highlights of her life, and down to the murky details, they'd get quiet and uninterested, and she'd stop, unsure. The next day, when they didn't give her any more acknowledgment than an extra wrinkle in their smile, she figured they didn't deserve to know the Truth.

The only lunchtimes she was quiet were the ones she spent with her boss, a silver-haired white male who was the head of this branch of the Agency. He always wore a suit, even on Casual Day, and had skin that looked overly scrubbed, like a German barmaid. He was Chief Shiny.

Eating with Chief Shiny, she waited for him to talk. Her responses felt rehearsed, like she was a Victorian girl playing the piano for some rich suitor.

Occasionally she threw in a dash of cynicism to show she was wise to the Depraved Ways Of The World, but too polite to talk much about it.

When he complimented her work, she beamed inside, no matter how stupid the task had been. One lunch hour he announced he would recommend her for the Agency's executive training program. Chief Shiny was "grooming" her.

She almost laughed, picturing him brushing her like a horse. But that afternoon she sent away excitedly for the application, like becoming an executive was her big dream in life. It was pathetic, what she became in front of him.

It was hard to keep her energy up after lunch. By three or four o'clock she could no longer buoy above the pressure. If she wasn't strong, she would withdraw until she was a lump and a Spheroid. She would think of her Atlas and anger would well up in her.

She had been hired to make an Atlas documenting the history of the Agency's lands. One map would show where and when there had been settlements, another logging, another forest fires, and so on. It was a reference aid for the Spheroids, to save them time and trouble - though some thought the Atlas could cause trouble, by putting too much relevant information into one easy-to-read, and public, volume.

Doing things for Chief Shiny, and doing them so well, left no time for the Atlas. When she had reminded him about it, he explained she was "already doing so much for the Agency, it was okay if the Atlas took a lower priority."

It was like he had ordered her to abandon the Atlas, the only thing that made the Agency bearable. Lower priority projects were never completed. She

decided to take the order literally, and make it "lower priority" - the last thing she did all day. While the Spheroids waited dying for 4:30, so they could leave and pretend to have lives outside, she was glib and getting out her Atlas notes.

It was endless, listening for the last click of the outside door, and the last car driving away. When it was finally quiet, a great wash of relief flowed into her, and her muscles loosened.

She worked carefully, drawing on a digitizing pad. All her lines, notes, and data went directly into a geographical database on the network, which she had encrypted so no one could screw with it. On weekends she went out to the field and double-checked her maps by getting additional information. It was on her own time and at her own expense.

After an hour or two on the Atlas, she headed for the gym. She was amused by the aerobics class, with all the small-town characters moving their funny butts. She even had an acquaintance there, a guy who looked like John-Boy from the *Waltons*. He was the only male in class, and she figured he must have a lot of guts, or be totally clueless. John-Boy had dropped out of engineering school, and lived in a broken-down farm outside of town, designing kites. He was innocent and had a lot of schemes. She would have had a crush on him if it had been a good time to get involved.

She ate out and returned to the Agency, driving by first to double-check for late workers. She parked in the industrial lot and entered the Agency swinging her keys. It felt like home. The only thing missing was a dog.

She'd slip down into the silences like she was diving off a sailboat into a glassy night sea.

Sometimes she went right to the Quiet Room, put on her PJs, and read her book. Sometimes she just stared and thought. Occasionally the phone on her desk, which she could hear from the Quiet Room, would ring, but she never answered it.

If she had more energy, she'd go Exploring. Exploring was her hobby, and it was both fascinating and educational. It involved systematically examining the contents of each Spheroid's desk and computer files.

For example, staff geologist Mr. Tuck (because he was so neatly tucked in) hoarded office supplies.

The discovery was a boon, since it gave her a reliable source of Sharpies, regardless of the situation in the Supply Room.

Ms. Peculiar's desk was covered with a farm of porcelain knickknacks. Elves, honeypots, starfish and happy faces sat in long lines to mock you when you approached with your purchasing request. Ms. Peculiar sat on a pillow needlepointed with a picture of a barn, and was totally dependent on her huge, shy assistant, Doreen. Only Doreen understood the new procurement computer. Ms. Peculiar occupied herself dusting her knickknacks and "training" Doreen, who consequently cried at least once a week. Everyone except Doreen knew that Doreen ran the office.

Doreen should have lived in the sea. She was shaped like a walrus, and as gentle as sea grass waving beneath a child's gaze. On land, Doreen was heavy and awkward. Like a mighty rock balanced on end, Doreen had to stand absolutely still to keep from toppling over for good. Doreen ate lunch alone, reading an old *People* magazine in the Lunch Room.

Mr. Burlyburp, the gruff computer administrator, fashioned himself a "swinger." On his PC, there were renamed and secreted files - a database of pictures of naked people with bars over their eyes, and personal ads to go with them. He was publishing a sex newsletter; the return address was a PO Box. It seemed that Mrs. Burlyburp didn't know. The Kleenex by his desk smelled like ham.

She didn't tell anyone the things she discovered Exploring. The information gave her an edge in staff meetings - no one could make her feel inadequate if she had searched their desk and computer files. But mostly, it made her like people more, to know their faults and secrets. Exploring was her intimacy.

Her feelings about Chief Shiny were made more crazed by his desk. There wasn't anything on top except a phone and a picture of his family, which was so perfect it could have been the picture that comes along with the frame. The most sinful thing inside was a box of chocolate-covered yogurt bars. He had no personal computer she could loot, just a terminal to the mainframe. His file cabinet was the only one she had ever tried to get in and failed. She knew it held boring "confidential" material, but what else? The idea that he might be better at keeping secrets than her filled her with fear and respect. She had no edge on him, could only nod and work compulsively.

When she finally got back to the Quiet Room, she was satisfied. She could get confused about the way other people lived, but Exploring convinced her she wasn't missing much. Most Spheroids ran back and forth between two boxes - work they hated and a home that aggravated. They were forever dreaming of getting the time and money to do what they

"really wanted," but never taking it. She wasn't pretending she had any other life besides work. She wasn't pretending she wanted anything else. The Spheroids didn't know it, but they *were* her family and friends right now. So Ha!

Here she was safe. Here she could puke up her bitterness and when she drank it back down, it made her warm and strong like coffee. There were so many characters to amuse herself with. She usually went to sleep after constructing some entertainment about one of her coworkers.

It'd be fun to tie mild Mr. Tuck to a chair, get him hard, and do him straddle style. Or to take Doreen out and roll with her down a hill, getting lost in all that flesh like some big old blanket. Or sometimes, she imagined sitting with Chief Shiny in the front seat of her car, looking at the rain. He held her and stroked her hair.

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One day Chief Shiny announced he would be working on an urgent project for Washington. He expected people to stay late to help him. She got turned on thinking how they would lean over big tables and pour over figures. She'd make sharp comments and he'd ponder. Good point, he'd say.

All that happened, but she wasn't prepared for the brush-off. Around 7 or 8 he got this generous and fatherly attitude. *I'd better not keep you any longer*, he said, like he was the high school volleyball coach. She insisted she could stay, it was no problem. He joked, booming, *Don't you have a life? I order you to go home!*

She got in her car and started driving nowhere, her stomach twisting. She didn't know what to do, or how late Shiny would stay. For two nights she slept in her car

in a state park campground. The first night was boring, the second full of self-loathing. The third night she was driving around town like some creep ex-boyfriend, peering into windows for signs of life. Her resentment was bloating like a spider bite.

She got attracted to the library, bright and filled with activity. She went inside and looked at the people. Students socialized over homework. Drunks slept in comfy chairs, arbitrary books in their laps. People read intensely - how to get rich quick, how to raise polite daughters in a rude world, how to sue their neighbor. She liked this place. Her spider bite popped and the puss ran out stinking on her skin. She wiped it up with her shirt sleeve, and saw John-Boy, reading *Consumer Reports*.

They talked and his dumb hope and dreams affected her again. From a distance she saw herself trying to be demure. The library was closing, and a little desperate, she asked him out for pie. The pie place closed, and they went to Denny's. She let it drop that she was having trouble with Mother Smother. He offered a place to crash.

She told him stuff she didn't even know she remembered. She spit out all the things she thought were haunting her; and spoken out loud, they seemed petty and simple. She felt relieved. When they parked at his house they were kissing.

Inside, she got paranoid and told him straight out she didn't want him to fuck her tonight - they should just crash. He acquiesced so easily she got all confused and ended up fucking him instead. He was offering some polite goodnight, and her mouth covered his in a fury. Afterwards, she was vulnerable. She ended up telling him where she really lived,

and that he should call her there at night.

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The day after, she was filled with a kind of opalescent emptiness, like she had opened a box and was curious to find there was nothing inside. She spent the weekend field-checking as usual. In her tent, she masturbated furiously, and decided it wasn't a good idea to get involved. The next week she went back to the Agency, figuring Chief Shiny had met his deadline. In the Quiet Room, she worried what to say to John-Boy if he called.

He didn't call for two days, so she decided that night had been it.

An evening of fun, no more, no less. He didn't show up at aerobics, and she decided he was avoiding her. Driving back to the Agency, she worked herself up into a snit.

She parked in the Agency lot; she would march inside, call him, and get it over with. But then calling him would be giving him too much credit, so she put on her PJ's and went to bed. There, her breathing became a bellows that fed her snit into a terrible green flame. She got up and ran to the water fountain. Then she stalked around the Agency, utterly sleepless.

The wide open spaces of the Agency at night had fallen in on themselves. Now they were sullen caverns, a dark museum of failures and betrayals. John-Boy was just another piece to stick in her gallery, apparently. She had to work to breathe properly. She was walking back to the Quiet Room when her phone rang. Her mouth hung open as she ran to pick it up.

Soon she felt pleasantly like a teenager, staring at the ceiling, yapping on the phone, feet up on her chair. It didn't matter what they were talking about, as long as there was John-Boy's fuzzy voice to

warm her. It was like laying back on the pebbles of the riverside, falling asleep in the sun.

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"Talk about casual day," an ugly voice commented, somewhere above her. Chief Shiny and Mr. Burlyburp were standing in the doorway. The clock above them said 6:00. They had apparently been staring at her for several moments. Chief Shiny waved Burlyburp off, took another look at her, and left himself.

She dropped the phone and ran out after them, PJ's flapping. Burlyburp and Shiny were gazing stupefied through the open door of the Quiet Room.

It was all over by noon that day. Shiny started out friendly, joking that everybody knew she worked hard, but now he was *really* concerned she was spending too much time here. He even handed her the perfect excuse. Was anything wrong at home? he asked with a leading tone.

She wasn't going to hand Chief Shiny some crock about domestic discord. She made up something closer to the Truth. Still, Shiny remained good-natured. He noted dryly that he had slept at the Agency a few times, but it was an unacceptable liability, blah blah blah, and from now on she was to work regular hours.

She knew a good deal when she saw it, and accepted. But she felt a bond - he had done it too! She thought that indicating her good intentions might eliminate even the appearance of wrongdoing.

"I was just working on the Atlas anyway!" she blurted out, grand.

Chief Shiny did not wave her off the way she expected. He got a faraway look, like someone he knew had died, and he could not cry just yet.

"I thought I told you that was a low priority," he said evenly.

"That's why I was working on it off hours!" she offered brightly.

Chief Shiny's lips pressed into a tight smile. He looked at her cold, like she was too dumb to realize he was addressing her. She cringed.

"You're very special, you know. You have a lot going for you..." he buttered her up in a distant and exact manner, like he was reciting some ancient code.

Suddenly he grew passionate. "Why do you, of anyone, need to resort to this kind of behavior? This is not the right time for the Atlas!"

He cooled down to finish smartly. "I expect you to rearrange your priorities immediately. Otherwise, we will have to reconsider your place here."

She nodded all submissive, so he could feel better. From the corner gleamed Shiny's file cabinet, full of secrets she would never know.

* * *

She went to Mother Smother's and pretended to be back from her field trip. Mother Smother had been worried about her, out there in the wilderness, and made up a special pie.

Her plan was to quit the Agency in a few months, when she finished saving money for her trip.

Or perhaps she would stick around and help John-Boy with his schemes. His house was full of odd things and boxes, perfect for Exploring. So far, his secrets weren't much different from anybody else's.

At the Agency, she passed by cubicles excited with conversation, and they suddenly got quiet. Spheroids left for lunch without her. Her access to the network directory with the Atlas files was canceled. Since she had encrypted the files themselves, her work on the Atlas was now useless.

She figured Mr. Burlyburp had been the gossip. He deserved a major Freak Out. She typed up an ad for Mr. Burlyburp's swinger magazine, and submitted it according to directions, putting Mrs. Burlyburp's name on the return address.

More for entertainment, she started rearranging the knickknacks on Ms. Peculiar's desk, forming them like toy soldiers into scenes of battles and orgies. This brought out the worst in Ms. Peculiar, who berated Doreen with paranoia and suspicion until Doreen stood begging with arms flailing and torso still, like a mighty tree in the wind. Ms. Peculiar concluded out loud that Doreen was too stupid to pull off anything like that.

Doreen caught her one morning when she was erecting her *magnum opus* - a bacchanal of porcelain flora and fauna. Elves were sacrificing Bambi before their idol: a miniature Dallas Cowboys football helmet, lording all from a pedestal of perfume.

"I thought it was you!" Doreen spurted and stood there puffy and glaring. She silenced Doreen with an aggravated wave and completed the oeuvre. She drew Doreen out into the hall and quickly beat her to the punch - she asked Doreen out to lunch. Smooth move!

They had a great time. She had forgotten it was possible to laugh like that. Soon the dioramas on Ms. Peculiar's desk got even more outrageous. If she and Doreen knew anything about it, they were sure not to tell anyone.