

Pip Adam

If You Work Late Enough, Eventually It's Early

Sharona looked at her phone. Even in her hand, so far from her ear, she could hear his answer message kick in. She hadn't been able to get through to Danny all afternoon. He probably didn't want to know anyway. She looked at the big empty space of the workroom. The lack of boxes. She was probably just ringing him to get some assurance, probably just to hear his voice and the confidence in it, or maybe just to remember that she thought he was an idiot. So she could remember that it didn't really matter. Because it didn't, not really. No one would die if the clothes didn't arrive in time for the photo shoot. 'It's not brain surgery,' she told herself, out loud.

She swiped through her emails, just to check—again. The manufacturer had promised her that the boxes would be there by 5pm. It was nearly 9. She looked at the mess of clothes hanging on the rack against the back wall. Danny had called her from the production meeting that morning. He'd decided they couldn't wait, they'd shoot the new collection tomorrow. Sharona had made a small noise about maybe they should wait until the clothes arrived. That's what he would have called it when he spoke to the photographer in his apartment where the meeting was happening. 'Sharona's making a small noise about waiting until the clothes are here, but it'll be fine. They're due tonight.' Then he would have said, 'She of little faith,' and laughed, with the photographer and the stylist. Sharona would have laughed too, if she'd been there and young like them, and someone else was the 45-year-old pattern-cutter, downstairs in the workroom, making small noises about the clothes not being here yet.

The workroom was nice when it was quiet. She'd sent everyone else home at 6, with the understanding that if the clothes arrived and were bad and she needed them, she'd call everyone back.

She looked again at the clothes on the back wall. They could

use those. They weren't the real samples. The real samples were in Bangladesh, but they could use those ones. The ones that were left here. The ones she'd used to work out how to make the proper samples that were sent to Bangladesh so the factory could see how to make the clothes that were supposed to be here at 5pm in boxes. The clothes that would probably need pressing and some slight tailoring for the models whom she hadn't seen or measured yet but would, tomorrow about half an hour before the shoot. The clothes that weren't here yet, but, Danny believed, would be and when they were wouldn't have anything wrong with them and could be lifted out of their boxes, pressed and hung, and go straight to the shoot which was at 9am and fall onto the models like they were God-made. 'He of little faith,' Sharona said to herself. She didn't want to move any closer to the clothes on the rack because she knew they couldn't use them. She knew they wouldn't work but she couldn't quite face that. Not yet.

She looked at her phone again. The courier would come soon and if the courier didn't come, say the courier didn't come by 10, she'd call the others and they would make another set of samples, like the ones that went to Bangladesh. The ones that were in Bangladesh now. She wound through Facebook. She hated it so much. She flicked back to Twitter. It gave her a special kind of sickness. It felt like watching too much porn. How you start with the graze of a breast, an ecstatic look, then move to embraces, hands on waists, then before you know it you're looking at fisting Vines. Oozing and warmth. She swiped over to Tumblr. It wouldn't be the first time she'd masturbated in the office. It probably wouldn't be the last. Sometimes she wondered if that was why she sent the others away. She wondered if this was the only reason she stayed, so that she could masturbate late in the dark. She'd had sex with people in the workroom as well. It was so sad. She'd see them, they'd see her, they'd maybe know her, the younger ones. She wouldn't want to take them home, she'd bring them here, then she'd fake a call or a text and say, 'My boss is coming.' And some of them would say, 'Can I meet Danny?' Girls loved Danny. They had this idea that he could see them in a way men who didn't

make women's clothes couldn't. Maybe he could. Maybe.

Her phone rang as she was winding through images of women tied and suspended, most of them in high heels.

It wasn't Danny. It should have been Danny. He'd organised a shoot for less than twelve hours from now and he had no clothes. It would cost him a fortune if he had to cancel it. It was Duey.

'Are you coming?' Duey and Carla were cutting the models' hair at the salon Duey worked at.

'I'm um. I'm . . .'

There were two boys in the shoot, they needed haircuts.

'Have the clothes not arrived?' Duey was laughing now. She could hear Carla too. 'Carla wants to know, "Have they not arrived yet?"'

'Um,' Sharona was laughing now.

'Carla wants to know, "Have you eaten?"' he said.

'Um.'

'Carla wants to know, "Is Danny there?" One of the models hasn't shown up. Carla says, "Danny's phone is off."'

'Um. Yeah.' Sharona looked around the workroom. 'Yeah. Nah.'

Duey talked away from the phone, 'Sharona says, "Yeah. Nah."'

Carla shouted in the background, 'Come and eat with us, Sharona.'

Duey said, 'Carla says, "Come and eat with us, Sharona."'

'Are you at the shop?' Sharona asked.

'If you work late enough eventually it's early,' Duey said.

Sharona nodded, feeling like he could hear it.

'But we only have one boy,' Duey started again. 'Did Danny say anything about the other boy? He's not shown up. Carla needs to cut his hair.'

'I should probably wait here.'

'Carla says, "Don't stay there." She says, "The courier will call."'

'Sometimes they don't,' Sharona said.

'Are you masturbating?' Duey said.

'Not yet.'

Duey said, 'Carla says, "Don't let her stand us up for her hand."'

'I better stay here,' Sharona said, rocking her head from side to side. 'Cause they don't always call.'

'And you want to come.'

'And I want to come all over this place.'

'Carla wants to know, "What should we do about the boy?"'

'If it was me, and it's not, but if it was me, I'd bring everything to the shoot tomorrow. You might have to cut it in the studio.'

'Is there a basin in the studio?'

'Yeah.' Sharona was turning a photograph over and over on the tall, heavy table she cut things out on. It was a 10-by-12 print of Brett Anderson wearing a leather jacket, shirtless, with a silver, huge-linked chain around his neck. His hair was one length, just above his shoulders. It had been tucked behind his ears and the front had been worked up and over so it was almost a quiff. Next to that was a publicity still from *Poison Ivy*. A 17-year-old Drew Barrymore stood outside in front of a rack of autumn-hued dresses. Her hair was cap highlighted and permed; blown out to a frizz. She wore blue denim jeans cut off to shorts, a black biker jacket and under that a sheer mauve top and a lace bra. Danny had asked Sharona to get some leather samples. He liked the energy of the photos he said. Hard and soft.

'Carla wants to know, "What about the hospital?"'

'They've got an art department.' In a fair world someone would be running about after Sharona. She'd be the one missing twelve hours before the photo shoot of her clothes. They called her a pattern-cutter but everyone knew how much she was doing. It was evident the minute you talked to Danny. It was evident from the lack of sketches and the way he kept sending down emails full of words and photos. Other people's photos. Other people's youth readymade for the next season. Drunk one night, she'd shouted this all at Duey who reminded her that Raf Simon didn't sketch either. 'That's different,' Sharona had spat and filled her glass again, balancing—cigarette, bottle, indignance.

'Oh. So not a real hospital?' Duey said.

'No.'

'Okay. Well, we might go then. Do you want us to bring you something to eat?'

'Um. Nah. The courier'll be here soon.'

'Or they won't,' Duey said.

'Or they won't.'

'Or they will and they'll catch you wanking.'

'Or they will and they'll catch me wanking.'

'Goodnight Sharona,' Duey said.

'Goodnight Duey. Say goodnight to Carla for me.'

Away from the phone again, he said, 'Carla, Sharona says, "Goodnight."' Then back, mouth close, snuffled slightly, 'Sharona, Carla says, "Goodnight."'

She hung up. Carla and Duey didn't normally think of her. But when they had a job together they did. They'd been tight, in the nineties, in the nightclubs, when June and Carla were apprentices and Sharona was at polytech. Then Carla had gone away. And June had become Duey in plain sight, slowly, week by week. Perhaps Carla was the glue. Sharona would see Duey out and they'd talk and have fun but they never quite arranged to meet each other anywhere on purpose, it was always by chance. They'd gone and done different things. So that by the time Carla was back, eyesore and weird skinned—like she'd been underground for years—they had different lives, they were much older. 'There's a huge difference between 18 and 28,' she heard herself say once. Some of their friends had kids. Sharona had a kid, well, she'd given birth to a kid but she didn't have it, 'about my person,' she'd joke. 'Not with me.'

She'd left early on. Like six weeks in. It was awful. She didn't like it at all. It was like the second the small girl took her first breath someone pushed Sharona off a cliff and she just flailed from then on. There was no control in it. She was expecting to be back at work in three weeks but it was useless. The baby needed her for everything.

Sharona had left in an early, dark morning, after a fight. Billy had run out to the car, baby in his arms, screaming at her. Then finding her in the car with the engine on, he'd lowered his voice slightly. Wouldn't she stay just for the next feed? Wouldn't that be fair? Just until the shops opened so he could get some formula? Sharona had looked at the baby and then at him and she knew it was a trick. Her

at 18, all experienced up on the baby thing, said to herself at 18, all ready to run, 'If I do this, they'll depend on me forever. It's best if we start the way we intend to carry on.' And she'd driven off. It was her car. They hadn't pooled their resources. They were still splitting the bills down the middle like flatmates, it was an easy extrication. He could keep the baby, she would take her car. In her head, when she thinks about it now, nearly 30 years later, she must have thought she'd be able to just pop back for her clothes later. That he'd get over it. That it would just be a door that would stay shut. That she didn't owe anyone anything.

From here she could see how wrong she was. From here, the place after the family support claims, the money Billy demanded, the judgements people made, the watching of the shambles he dragged that little girl up in and the awkward coffees with someone who hated you so much for not liking their baby-version enough to stay. Like really the coffees were only for that, to show Sharona how much their daughter hated her and so that Sharona had to sit across the table from something that reminded her of how much she had perhaps got it wrong. But not really, it was never going to work. Sharona looked at the empty space where the boxes should be. Maybe she could have made being a mother work. She had made it work. That tiny thing, screaming tearless in the dark, cold morning, it wouldn't stay away, it got bigger and louder, and Billy didn't go away either, he just got weirder and older and sicker. He'd just married a 25-year-old. Sharona had seen the pictures on Facebook. In his lounge. He'd been sick. He always had people around him who felt for him, it defined him, bringing up a small girl on his own. Having a teenager when most people were just starting to breed. She'd given him that. He would have gone. She was sure of it. It was like a game of chicken, she'd pulled out first and he'd won. Sharona swiped away the naked women and checked in case she'd missed a call. She hadn't missed a call.

Carla had been away for it all and June was gone. So they didn't get together much anymore. But when they were working together and when a model didn't show up and when Danny had his phone

turned off, they'd call Sharona and have her on about masturbating because they knew how much she loved porn and how busy she was and the awful choices she made in sex partners. And probably, Carla and Duey knew it should be her and not Danny with the label and the apartment and the success and that it was all a trick of fate and money and privilege and that on nights like this, sitting waiting, looking at women come all over each other they probably knew that she thought about what would have happened if she'd stayed and looked after the baby. About how, that now she was 45, six or so years of not having any control, not being a person, looking after a baby, how it really wasn't much. How those years she thought she was giving herself by leaving, to work, to make something, how they looked just as wasted as if she'd stayed. How it hadn't really given her what she thought it would. How she really didn't have anything. And then her phone rang and it was the courier and he brought the delivery up to the workroom and with the open blade of a large pair of scissors Sharona opened a box and taking out the first shirt, she could tell, they were perfect.