[PANK]



Fiction
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SIDE EFFECTS MAY INCLUDE

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Someone is defecating on the tiles of a bathroom on the fourth floor of the agency. Everyone is talking about it. The colleagues I like, who I think I could be friends with even if we didn't have work to talk about over drinks, talk about the defecating with the glee of the early days of a revolution. The colleagues I don't like, the ones I can't bear to be in the same conference room with, the ones whose PowerPoint presentations make my right eyelid twitch, talk about the waste elimination with fear, worrying their desk may be next. This emptying of bowels on the floor seems to me like a not unreasonable response to working in this place. But others might disagree.

The first few times someone tells me about the Mad Crapper I assume it's happening in the ladies room and I'm not sure why. For an entire week, this is how I picture the—I want to say "misdeed" or "transgression" but neither of these words is quite right. This is what I see: a thin woman—her Seven for All Mankind jeans pulled down to her ankles where they pool atop her red Toms new-for-summer wedges—is squatting, squeezing out a soft, moist, Benefiber-ed, Dasani-ed, copper roll onto the white tiled floor just a few feet from the stall doors. She has had the patience for a manicure, but I can't quite make out the color of the polish. She's wearing a black top—maybe a t-shirt, maybe a button-down collared shirt. She's pulled her striped cotton thong down with her jeans and I worry, while I'm imagining this *act* (that's the word: *act*), that she won't wipe her ass when she's done and she'll have a smear in her Victoria's Secret. But I can't imagine how she physically gets to the toilet paper while her jeans are around her ankles, so I hit the Stop button on my fantasy.

Soon colleagues are talking about this as a *criminal* act. It's escalated now to an HR-level felony and the stories that hush-zing from cubicle to cubicle have the crime occurring in the men's room. But this sounds wrong to me, and not just because I have this fully developed film of it all happening in the ladies reeling through my brain. This does not seem like the act of a male colleague—one of these guys? No way. So I finally ask for a definitive answer: *men's room or ladies*? The colleagues I don't like are, after a baffled pause, unable to answer the question. It's just gossip to them, they don't care where it's happening. The colleagues I do like, Bobby and Karen, say: *the ladies, of course.* They know, as I do, where the rage lives in this place. And this *is* an act of rage, isn't it? This is anger. Very angry anger.

This ad agency is one of the few humungous ones left, still plodding through the Pleistocene age of TV ads, hoping websites and apps are just ships on the horizon that draw attention for a few moments but will soon pass out of sight. A lot of us work on prescription drug brands, keeping the lights on for the agency when the more mercurial brands of consumer goods decide it's cooler to take their business elsewhere. We're usually a more stable and settled breed of agency employee, taking corporate shenanigans in stride, but we have our limits.

The drugs we market for the pharmaceutical companies make people hurt less, bleed less, eat less, pee less, shit more, sleep more, breathe more, feel more, live better. The drugs have side effects and sometimes they're really extreme and are highlighted in warning text with a black box around it, just to make sure you see it. I once worked on a drug that had *two* black boxed warnings, one for intracranial bleeding and one for something else I can't remember, but after the bleeding brain it doesn't really matter, does it? It was a good drug, the last one available for people at the end of a long terrible road and it helped them live longer, even with their bleeding brains.

The list of side effects intoned in TV ads is called the fair balance (a phrase that lends itself to all kinds of thoughts), and I once worked on a drug that had a fair balance of one minute and ten seconds. That's a lot of TV time, especially when it meant the commercial extended the viewer's trip to the fridge and back for a snack to a full two minutes. And studies show viewers don't even remember these FDA-required warnings anyway. On that same endless-fair-balance drug, we awaited a revision in the language from the FDA. The worst outcome, we thought, would be inclusion of the S word: suicide, suicidal tendencies, something with suicide. Turned out we got the S word *and* the H word. You would think the words *suicide* and *homicide* in a script would give someone pause at the agency before they re-recorded the voiceover track. But it didn't.

Karen waves the bartender over so Bobby can order a refill of tonight's brand of self-abuse. We are in the bar within the offices of the agency that during the day is a coffee-snack-lunch facility and turns into an alcoholic bar on Wednesday and Thursday nights. This no longer seems strange to me, in fact, it seems an incredibly generous and prescient support of agency culture. It's better than an extra personal day.

Karen is an art director who used to be a singer, or maybe she's a singer who works as an art director. Agency work started for her, like it did for a lot of us, as a survival job, an occasional

freelance gig. Then it became a day job, the distinction denoting something I can no longer remember. Then it became a job, the work we did, the work we do, who we are, the thing that replaced who we had wanted to be, who we hoped we were.

Unlike Karen, Bobby the copywriter suffers his workdays as if this is still the thing he does to pay the rent. He's socked away so much dough that showing up to work each day resembles stupidity. The novel he's working on has never had a title and for Bobby this somehow is the reason to remain at the agency, uncommitted to the life of a writer without a schedule. He says when he finds the title, then he'll know it's time to leave.

We are sort of friends, Karen and Bobby and I. And each of us, given the odds in the betting pool I saw posted on the intra-office wiki, could be the Mad Crapper. But we're betting it's one of the bettors.

Someone from HR has overheard Bobby and Karen and me discussing the Mad Crapper while waiting for our Lean Cuisines to finish nuking. We are summoned singly in turn to a small meeting room with no windows or air. The pane of glass in the door has been papered up for privacy or secrecy depending on your point of view. The HR guy crosses his leg at the knee-crease in his Dockers, gently swings one of his bad shoes in a short arc, and gets down to his interrogation.

"If you know, you're required to tell me who is failing to use the fourth floor bathroom facilities as they are intended."

There is so much bureaucracy in this one sentence that I must smile. Now I could be in big HR permanent-record trouble. After about three minutes of HR-speak and a fairly robust staring contest in which I say nothing, the HR guy uncrosses his legs and hunches over his papers in a less-than-nuanced indication that our non-event is over. Before I rearrange my limbs and extract myself from my chair, I feel the need to be both a good and bad employee at the same time and ask: "How do you want me to bill this time?"

"You are an anti-robot goddess and I would kneel before you, but I'm afraid I won't be able to stand up again." This is Bobby—fleshy, bored and loyal—reacting to my exit line with HR as he ploughs a stubby index finger through a bowl of mixed nuts. "I caved. Answered the little twerp's questions, treated him like he had power over me. I'm filled with self-loathing."

We're back in the bar, extending the workday or obliterating it, depending on whether or not you think geography is literal or a figment of your imagination. I've changed desks a few times since I joined the agency—it's one of the ways management makes you feel as if you're accomplishing things—and from where I'm sitting I can see the first desk I ever occupied. The

smell of alcohol causes more than its usual chaos with my memory and the scene beyond the bar doors fades to murk, but I can almost see myself sitting at that desk in those early days. The whole agency smelled then of plastic, metal and paper. It smelled of the future. Now, I smell beery torpor and people going nowhere.

“The HR intern was in the room with us for my grilling.” Karen flashes her expensive teeth, alerting us there will be a sexual element to the story. “He’s adorable, from the South or something. He ma’am-ed me, which made the HR dude twitchy so I decided not to be insulted like he thought I was old.”

“Ma’am means he’s being polite, if he’s Southern.” Bobby knows everything.

“The HR dude just droned on endlessly so I cruised this intern kid like he was the last penis on earth.”

“Do straights say ‘cruise’ now? Can we own nothing?” Bobby feigns sullenness and swirls the wine in his glass, faux-searching for the answer in the Pinot Grigio.

“Can I finish my sex story before you tell your sex story?”

I find myself drifting off and down, away from this moment. Colleagues’ sex stories make me feel awkward—I can never find the balance between being too interested and too blasé. Either I place enthusiastic judgment on every detail or I mutter “whatevs” under yawns—and I never manage to deploy either of them at the right time or in the right manner. After a few moments of berating my own lack of grace, I swim up from the bottom of where my mindlessness has taken me. I look down the length of the bar and meet the gaze of a stubbled, droopy-lidded member of the production department. I give a small awkward sigh of theatrical desire. But no one is paying attention.

I tune back in to Bobby as he is saying, “He’s weird. He takes pictures of his food.”

I assume they are discussing a new suspect in The Case of the Mad Crapper.

“Karen thinks it’s that AAE on the diabetes drug.” Bobby explains it all, knowing I’ve been away. “But it’s a woman. We know it’s a woman.” Bobby doesn’t like going over settled ground. He’s not in shape for it.

“Just because it’s happening in the ladies room doesn’t mean it’s a woman.” Karen is either very sure or very drunk.

“Even if it’s a man, it’s not that guy. He’s too busy with the food photo thing.”

“Does he post them to whatIateforlunchdotcom?” I’m a little intrigued by this—

maybe he's posting before and after photos. It hadn't occurred to me that the Mad Crapper could be some kind of performance artist, but then again I'm more up on corporate culture than the other kind.

"The Mad Crapper is a woman. It has to be a woman. There are so many reasons it is a woman. So forget the sexy HR intern and the diabetes AAE and the food uploads and making hubba-hubba eyes at that guy from Production." This, I realize, has been directed at me. I've been caught being inelegant, again.

"I can wonder who the Mad Crapper is," I insist, "and check out the hotness in our midst at the same time."

I'm a bit miffed at all this because I thought I was the one who was obsessed with ID-ing the Mad Crapper and now I'm getting hassled for not focusing on the investigation. I feel that movie moment coming where the hero or heroine recommits to the quest. Return to Rage, Part II.

"Look, people," this is Bobby making the discussion productive. "HR has bungled the investigation and we have no idea who done what."

Lying in bed in the dark I feel myself sinking down into sleep and then suddenly yanked up to the surface, startled into consciousness. I can't shake the feeling of having fallen into something. I turn in my bed and try to find a cool place to lie. I decide that I will begin my own investigation. I get out from under the blankets and wander the apartment looking for help in my bookshelves. Holding dusty paperbacks in my hands, I wonder if my search for the Mad Crapper will take me, like Miss Marple, to the comfy lobby sofa of a London hotel or if I will find myself travelling up a strange river to face a familiar horror.

On my way back to bed, I pause outside my bathroom, shiny subway tiles lining the walls, hexagonal black and white tiles inlaid on the floor. I'm tempted for a half-second to pull a Mad Crapper on the floor. I could squat, push and produce a small mound of disturbance, but would it have any meaning here in my home, away from the agency, outside that place of regimented false promise?

The next morning the search is on. I am committed to action even as I sit at my desk and apply the analytical mind I reserve for client research reports to dissect the Mad Crapper's operation. For the moment I am not interested in motives but in logistics. How does this thing get done? I look around my desk, MacGyver-like, seeing what I can use. A stapler, Post-Its, pens, PowerPoint decks, a laptop, software programs. Outlook is opened before me with email visible and a calendar filled with meetings. Does the Mad Crapper block off time on her calendar for going to the bathroom? Is one time better than another? Mornings? Tuesdays? *Oh oops, I can't Wednesday at 9:30, I have a conflict.* Does a default reminder appear on her screen, telling her

it's fifteen minutes until she has to go to the fourth floor bathroom? And that's when it occurs to me that she doesn't necessarily work on the fourth floor. This could get complicated.

I text Bobby. He works on the other side of the third floor from me. He doesn't respond. Maybe he isn't the best ally here. I wait. I pick up my phone to call Karen, but I realize I don't know her extension and pushing buttons through the on-phone directory is too time consuming. At this moment, and maybe for only this moment, she seems more like a suspect to me now than a potential sidekick. No meetings for thirty minutes—what to do.

I walk quickly up the internal stairs to the fourth floor, and head to the ladies room, trying to keep my body compact, thinking about core strengthening classes at the gym, and MI:5 and how everyone who works for them moves with such purpose and never carries a purse. I feel buoyant as I slip into a stall and slide the lock and swivel down onto the toilet seat in almost one smooth move. And then I wait for the Mad Crapper.

I have no other pursuit, the way Karen and Bobby do. I go from agency to agency, trying on new versions of myself, learning skills and gaining knowledge so I can go onto the next kind of job in the next kind of workplace, moving sideways, a bump in salary here, a title change there. Slowly I have pulled together a narrative: *It's always been communications in one way or another, it's about telling a story, it's about knowing your customer, it's about getting results for your business, it's about brands, it's about the user, it's about integration, team work, value, learning every day.* One job interview in two decades that didn't result in a job offer. And for what? To prove I could do it, could pass the test, could get the job. And once ensconced in my small Aeron chair in my cubicle with my company ID, proving I was a nomadic global knowledge worker, I could go about showing I wouldn't be bored, wouldn't get angry, wouldn't miss the thing I was missing, the thing I wasn't doing, the thing this job kept me from that I wasn't able to name. But for me it doesn't have a name. I don't sing or write. I seethe.

I'm not thinking too deeply about any of this as I sit waiting for the Mad Crapper to strike. I do wonder how long I'm going to have to wait, maybe miss a meeting, maybe get hungry for lunch. But I'm not thinking, yet, that this is sad or stupid or a waste of time because right now it feels like the most productive thing I've done in years.

Someone comes in. I hear the tap-tap-tap of high-ish heels. What if it's her? Will I confront her? Leap from the stall and assume an attack stance, accuse her, chase her? I have brought my iPhone with me as I often do to pass the time—play a little *Angry Birds*, check my personal email—and now I grip it tight in my hand like a lifeline.

I sense a presence beyond the stall door and hear water running in a sink. Then squirt squirt, dry dry, crumple crumple, toss. And then she's gone.

It's over.

No Mad Crapper. Just a hand washer.

I am exhausted. I frenzied-up for nothing but a big gaping let-down and I want to at least feel disappointed, but I am, instead, filled with greater purpose and a determination to continue my pursuit.

I'm about to reach for the stall lock when I hear someone else enter the bathroom. She goes into the stall to my right and I sense the strong easy breathing of someone relieving herself of yesterday's lunch—using the facilities as they are intended. One less suspect—whoever this is beside me—but I need to identify her to cross her off my mental list of suspects. I time my exit to correspond with hers and we flush and emerge from our stalls in unison. As we approach the sinks I look into the wall mirror and am brought up short to find myself locking eyes with the head of my department—a woman who remains a dense puzzle to me after two years. An awkward exchange of weak smiles amid the slightly fragrant air and then I'm alone. I'm left to dry my hands and wonder what I'm chasing.

"She struck again. But they're keeping it quiet." Bobby speaks through the grin he can't contain. "Fourth floor again. This is just too awesome for words."

Karen and I extract our eyebrows from the ceiling and reform our O mouths into the proper shape to gulp from our wine glasses.

"This woman is a revolutionary and this is a revolutionary act."

"Yes, Bobby dear, I believe it was Karl Marx who said, when you gotta go you gotta go." Karen isn't political.

"I forbid you to not see the rebellion here. Don't worry, they can't fire you for thinking things—at least not yet."

As part of my investigation I have called a psychiatric social worker I encountered during research on a particularly hideous medical condition for which one of my clients was developing a drug. I'm eager to share what I've learned and decide in the moment, for absolutely no reason, that Bobby and Karen are now more valuable as allies than suspects.

"Apparently there's a difference between pooping and smearing—rebellious act-wise." I venture this comment and wait for a reaction.

Bobby adjusts himself on the bar stool and faces me fully. "Oh, you strategist, you. You've been doing research. Do tell."

"How gross is this going to be? Do I need another glass of wine?" Karen leans forward, searching for the bartender.

"Smearing is more about rebelling against authority—like those IRA prisoners on hunger strike. They smeared. On the walls of the prison."

“How can you have something to smear if you’re not eating anything?”

Bobby mutes Karen with a sideways glance and a silent “Really?”

“Actually pooping in inappropriate places is about rage. It has a name, but I forget what it is. I wrote it down, but it was hard to spell.”

“I bet it’s hard to spell. This is amazing. Okay, who is it then?” Bobby is hot to discuss this with me, perhaps sensing my mission.

Each morning now, after I’ve settled in at my desk with my Dunkin’ Donuts iced coffee and Dannon blackberry yogurt, I open Microsoft Outlook to my calendar. I close my eyes and move my mouse in tiny tight circles for a few seconds. Then I open my eyes and wherever the cursor has landed, I set an appointment for myself to lie in wait for the Mad Crapper in the fourth floor ladies room. I set a reminder of five minutes before the appointment and I make the appointment fifteen minutes long—fifteen minutes of transforming anticipation.

I watch people when they’re eating, hoping for clues, assuming meals are just the beginning of the Mad Crapper’s crimes. My colleagues eat a lot of salads from Hale and Hearty or Chop’t, especially in midday meetings, digging into deep round plastic containers, plunging their forks through the forest of mixed greens as they search for cut-up bits of chicken or tuna. They also eat at their desks, dripping soup on their keyboards, trailing crumbs among their pens and paper clips. And they eat standing in hallways, hunched over containers brought from home as they chew, nod and listen to the boss who won’t shut up and doesn’t realize that their underling is actually consuming lunch, on their feet, right in front of them.

I watch people—women mostly but the odd man on occasion in case we’ve all been wrong—enter bathrooms and exit bathrooms. I watch them in the bathroom mirrors, searching for anger and purpose in their faces as we wash our hands and check our make-up.

I have devised an extremely precise methodology to arrive at the identity of the Mad Crapper and I deploy it in bathrooms throughout the agency. My sample population for the study consists of all the females working at the agency who have either less than two years of service or more than five. Studies have shown that the first two years at a company are when employees commonly confront the disappointment of what they have committed to, expressing disbelief and frustration with comments like “I can’t believe I took this offer instead of that one across town” or “Wow, they really snow you in the interviews.” Disgruntled-ness seems to plateau, according to studies, after two years when employees either move onto another employer or settle into a numbing routine. Frustration rises again after five years of same-company employment—and continues to rise yearly—as unresolved grievances build up over time occasionally to the “postal” level. I have also created three attitudinal segments based on late afternoon behavior—when public filters drop and truer inner selves emerge before the second wind of a Starbucks run has lifted spirits. I call these segments Early Ragers, Pissed & Passive and Seething Veterans. My study

has allowed me to narrow down the identity of the Mad Crapper to two women: an associate manager in Corporate Accounting and a copywriter on the airplane account.

I set aside thirty minutes twice a week to follow them. I put on my virtual trench coat and fedora and I tail them, usually the accountant on Tuesdays and the writer on Thursdays. Sometimes they just sit at their desks and I make up some reason to be nearby, chatting with someone, pretending to be on a phone call in a nearby conference room or at a desk lost in reading something I've randomly picked-up. There's a calming effect to being on a stakeout without really looking like I'm conducting surveillance. It's like being there and not being there at the same time. My mind is occupied doubly and yet somehow not occupied at all.

Back in the bar, Bobby orders a full bottle of wine and requests three wine glasses from the bartender, telling us he's done the math, trust him it's cheaper. As Karen and Bobby argue the point, I notice both the accountant and the copywriter leaving the bar, not together, but passing through the doors back toward the cubicles at the same time.

I am up, muttering an excuse to Karen and Bobby, and moving toward the stairs and after the accountant and copywriter. I have to pause at the bottom of the open stairway or they'll know I'm following them. I dawdle, one foot on the bottom step, pretending to have lost my way, looking around for a clue to where I need to be. In my peripheral vision I can see they have cleared the top step. A question flits through my mind briefly: could the Mad Crapper actually be a team? I dismiss this thought and move up the steps, careful—especially in my exuberance— to place the soles of my Nikes precisely so I don't fall through the open stairway.

As I arrive, slightly winded, on the next floor I can see the back of the accountant floating around a corner out of view. No sign of the copywriter. Should I look for her? Who is the better bet? I'm wasting time and the trail is growing cold as I waffle, so I move swiftly to close the distance with the accountant. The corridor is empty. I rush to the ladies room and push open the door, stepping through to where the stalls are. They are empty. I'm running now as I go across the entire floor to the other ladies room and press open that door. Nothing. No one. I walk out onto the floor, past the cubicles, the computer monitors, the aura of plastic and metal making way for me as I go.

When I return to the bar, there is chaos. Bobby is practically howling at the moon in between slurps of wine and Karen is abrim with secret smiles.

"She switched floors." Bobby can barely get the words out, he's so ecstatic. "Right under our noses. Right over there." He points over my shoulder, but I don't have to turn around. I know there's a bathroom behind me, where he's shoving his finger in the air.

"Do you want to see?" Karen rises as if to escort me.

"No," I say. "I'm good."

“Hey, wait. Where’d you go?” Bobby is serious-faced and still. His eyes are sparkling, finding reflection points in the dim light, and he wants a real answer to his question. “It isn’t you, is it?”