

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

SIMPLEXITY

KILEY
REID

Author of *Such a Fun Age*

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Yumi Parr used the last and largest bathroom stall on the empty floor below Simplexity Design. She'd only been employed there for six and a half weeks, but early on, Yumi discovered this faithfully vacant bathroom, and now confidently used it when she had to go for more than five minutes. But today, with her shorts around her ankles and her cell phone in hand, Yumi began to hear footsteps.

A woman's voice said, "Are you gonna go?"

Another voice said, "Absolutely not." The bathroom door opened. These voices belonged to business designer Paige Keener and business strategist Gianna Abdul. Yumi held very still and thought, *Shit shit shit*.

"I don't know why she even said that." Gianna's voice skipped off the bathroom tile.

"She would literally never just 'get on a bus' or whatever she said you should do," Paige said. Yumi could tell that Paige was leaning over the sink and inspecting her reflection: prominent collarbones, dark brown hair, and big, orthodontia'd teeth. "And what does she expect?" Paige went on. "Like you're just gonna spend fourteen hours in Boston and then come back to work? Hard pass."

Yumi thought of forcing a cough or flushing the toilet to make her presence known, but if Paige and Gianna had smelled the light stench, they'd know that it belonged to her. And despite the fact that they, like everyone else, had light stenches of their own, it seemed rude and awkward coming from Yumi. There was only one of her and two of them.

Yumi did not recognize the coworker about whom Paige and Gianna were gossiping. There was a bit of movement, but still, no one went to use the toilet. Yumi assumed that Paige was retying her chambray shirt around her waist, just above her tight jeans, as she'd seen her do this many times. It seemed as if the two women just wanted to get away from the office, and that they would be leaving the bathroom soon. This was what Yumi told herself, but just in case, she carefully raised her feet so as not to be seen.

"I can't go anyway," Gianna said. "I'm gonna end up sending my own proposals. I have, like, six of them, and there's no way I can get them on Denise's desk by four."

Paige turned on the faucet. “Wait, you’re actually gonna go down to UPS?”

Gianna said, “Probably? Maybe I’ll do TaskRabbit?”

“No, no, don’t do that,” Paige told her. “They take forever. Why don’t you just ask Yumi to do it?”

Yumi’s chin went down and into her chest. She listened to Paige pump the soap dispenser.

Gianna said, “Really?”

“Yeah? I’ve had her deliver a package before.”

“She’s a project coordinator, though, isn’t she? It’s not like I’m on a project.”

“Well . . .” Paige finished washing her hands and turned off the water. “I reconcile my receipts but I’m not in accounting. And isn’t ‘project coordinator’ just like”—she snatched a paper towel—“a catchall for bitch work?”

Gianna laughed and said, “I have no idea.”

“Same.” There was a small bang as Paige opened the trash can with her heel. “But I told Emilio that if he didn’t give me an assistant, I would take one for myself.”

“Good for you.” Gianna opened the bathroom door and her voice curved into the hallway. “Okay . . . also? Why does this bathroom always smell like shit?”

Yumi listened to their booties go up the stairs in unison. She waited a few minutes before she flushed the toilet and zipped her shorts. In the mirror, she ruffled her black bangs against her forehead.

Aside from Yumi, there were seven Asian employees (out of sixty-four) at the product and industrial design agency Simplexity New York. Three were Chinese, one was Korean like Yumi, and three split their time between New York and their hometowns in Singapore. But unlike Yumi, none of them lived in Washington Heights, none of them had white fathers, none of them were gay, and all of them were designers. They wore muted colors with delicate jewelry, boxy shirts and dresses, and they often stayed late with beers nudging their laptops. They said their eyes hurt from coding or leather-making classes, and they’d been to places like Toronto to visit old

friends from design school, or to restaurants that served tapas and cocktails opened by people they knew.

Yumi didn't do any of these things, and if she ever did have tapas, she didn't know it at the time. When Yumi told anyone that she worked at Simplexity, she watched them assume that she had her own website, and that she'd designed it. That she stayed in Airbnbs more often than hotels. That she conversationally knew another language, or that, in high school, she was a reluctant but obvious choice for class valedictorian. Yumi wasn't any of these things, but while she hadn't found a way to imply the contrary, she'd also stopped trying. She welcomed the impressed response and raised eyebrows she received when she said she worked at Simplexity. Sometimes, people who had only heard the name asked her what exactly Simplexity did, and she'd say, "It's a product and industrial design agency." But then she'd quickly ask the other person what they did for a living because she wasn't exactly sure what products Simplexity had industrially designed. There were no products on display; the office was high ceilinged and white and stark, aside from what looked like random toys for adults that appeared on counters and tables: Nerf guns, Slinkies, remote-controlled cars. It seemed as though the time to ask and clarify what Simplexity actually *did* had come and passed with Yumi's first day. The website didn't help. It said Simplexity did things like cultivating, innovating, processing, navigating, and creating change through . . . design.

Yumi's last job was in catering, and before that she did administration at a public school front office, and before that she did filing for her dad. Before that she went to a state school in North Carolina—not one of the two good ones but the one in Asheville—where for three years she highly considered joining one of the two Asian American student-led organizations, but something or nothing always stopped her. Before her senior year, after spotting one of these groups smushed into a corner booth at a TGI Fridays, nine students eating from a large plate of what looked like wet nachos, Yumi stopped considering attending altogether.

One of Yumi's roommates was dating a guy who had until recently worked at Simplexity. He wanted to quit his job as a project coordinator and do this thing where he walked across America raising money to buy milkweed for monarch butterflies, and Yumi had been looking for a job that offered better pay and benefits. After a recommendation and two interviews, Yumi became Simplexity's new project coordinator. Her job

consisted of setting up meetings and tours at factories and museums, ordering catering and supplies for large client meetings, and prepping meeting rooms with water and workbooks for interviews and surveys. Her role didn't seem vital to what Simplexity did, whatever that was, but she didn't hate it at all. In fact, she'd been surprised at the pride that she took in placing Post-its squarely in the middle of visitors' guides, with Sharpies and pens on the side, waiting there like cutlery. Sometimes she did in fact deliver things for people; she instantly remembered the moment Paige had said to her, "Yumi, can you help me? I'm in a bind." And Yumi had helped her, gladly. But delivering things for individual people, or serving as a personal assistant, had never been in her job description.

When she wasn't setting up for events, Yumi had also been surprised by how much freedom she had to do whatever she wanted. On a Friday afternoon with four project teams on the road, Yumi once created four Spotify playlists with over twenty songs on each. In a green Herman Miller chair next to a cork-sealed wall and an enormous ficus tree, Yumi shopped online for two hours. Each item of clothing in her digital shopping bag had block letters on the front. One said *SLOWJAMS* and another said *RIOT*. Before heading home for the day, Yumi purchased a denim vest, and an oversized shirt that said *BIRDS*.

But, it was still possible—Yumi considered—that while she had more free time than she had anticipated, her job was *not* easy, and hardly a catchall. And it was not mutually exclusive that Paige could misinterpret Yumi's role at Simplexity *and* be a huge bitch with too many teeth and too little face. Paige and Yumi were both twenty-eight years old, but to Yumi, the distance between them (their alma maters, their salaries, their philosophies, their waistbands) seemed terribly far apart. On the way back to her desk, as she passed the unlimited snack station, the living plant wall, and two designers racing on go-karts made from rolling ice coolers, Yumi pretended to be on her cell phone, and tried to bring her heart rate back down to standard.

Martha would know what to do.

Martha was the executive assistant to Simplexity legend Emilio Frank (Simplexity cofounder, TED Talk giver, and Ina Garten's personal cell phone number possessor). She did many of the same things that Yumi did (she ordered lunches, made dinner reservations, and summoned Ubers), but Emilio adored her. Martha was protected by his approval, her easy attitude,

and the surprisingly deep quality to her voice that seemed to distract coworkers in the middle of asking her for favors. Martha had somehow become a person who fixed broken staplers and was still invited to the weddings of high-level coworkers. At the standing desk behind Yumi, Martha never sat down. She hung Post-its written out with tasks at the edge of her desk, and it reminded Yumi of diners where short-order cooks quickly reviewed what meals needed to come up next. Martha had hundreds of long dark braids, and a very small enchanting gap between her two front teeth. They'd been to coffee once, and one time, Martha emailed Yumi with a link to a T-shirt that said *REMEMBER?* The subject line said, *You probably have this already but still.*

Martha would know, Yumi convinced herself, what to do about Paige Keener. Yumi wanted to step in now, and not later, and change Paige's view of her role. She didn't want other people in the office to see her as a personal assistant, but more than anything, she wanted someone like Martha to confirm that saying Yumi's job was a "catchall for bitch work" was an extremely bitchy thing to say.

But it was nearing 4:30 p.m., and Martha was nowhere to be found. She wasn't in any of the phone booths or in the greenhouse or in the kitchen, where a weekly happy hour was beginning to take place. But in the hallway, as Yumi passed the *Simplexity* haircut sign-up, she spotted Martha's name. The two bottom slots read *Paige 4:00, Martha 4:30*. Yumi paced upstairs to the covered roof space where sun came in through shiny plexiglass.

But when her feet hit the faux grass on the sunny roof deck, Yumi saw the back of Paige's head, not Martha's. Kendra, the Thursday on-site stylist, was brushing tiny tips of hair off Paige's shoulders.

"Okay, your trim is done . . . ," Kendra said. "But you're taking Martha's spot again, right?"

"Mm-hmm." Paige nodded. "Just a blowout with a little bump at the bottom."

Kendra asked, "Going anywhere fun?" and Paige said, "Meh, kind of." Yumi backed out of the space.

The stairwell was empty, so she took her time. Yumi leafed through the haircut sign-up sheets. All the previous weeks were left underneath and in chronological order. Every Thursday for the past three weeks listed *Paige 4:00, Martha 4:30*. Upstairs a blow-dryer began to roar.

“So how are you doing so far?” Tamsin handed the barista her Simplexity credit card but kept her eyes on Yumi. “You’re probably like, ‘I’ve been here for weeks!’ but I guess I haven’t had the chance to ask you.”

Whenever Yumi got coffee, she went to the Starbucks across the street where there was typically standing room only and the baristas wrote *Unique* on her cup, but for their 3:00 p.m. Friday coffee date, Tamsin led Yumi down a smoky side street. A hidden, rickety elevator dropped them off in a wooden space with grainy light, dramatic but fake chandeliers, and potted snake plants along the windowsills. When Tamsin came in, the girl behind the counter said, “Hey, beb.” Tamsin did a one-finger wave and said, “Hey, sister.”

“Yeah, I like it a lot,” Yumi said. They took a table, and Tamsin held her tea with both hands. “Thanks for meeting with me so quickly.”

Tamsin Getty had wide hips, slippery brown hair, and aggressively blue eyes. She was the Culture Team Coordination Lead at Simplexity New York, and she sent out emails every Friday afternoon with pictures from the previous week that she’d taken on her phone, or what she referred to as *Joy Bombs*. Minutes after Yumi had emailed Tamsin asking if she had time to chat, Tamsin had replied with a Google invite titled *Yumi & Tamsin Connect!* When Yumi accepted, she saw that Tamsin’s calendar was peppered with these types of meetings. It was Tamsin Getty who originally brought haircuts to Simplexity.

The night before, on her train ride home, with her hands wrapped around her backpack straps, Yumi felt like a complete idiot. Of *course* Martha didn’t get haircuts. Martha had braids. Denise Hawkins, the receptionist with the short Afro, also didn’t get haircuts. And Jordana Medley didn’t sign up for haircuts either, and not just because she shaved her dark head bald. Out of sixty-four people, there were three Black employees at Simplexity New York, and eleven company-wide. Yumi knew this because she’d perused the company roster the night before on her bedroom floor. She also discovered that while “Everyone at Simplexity is a Designer” (this was posted in neon washi tape across the kitchen wall), none of the Black employees had this word in their titles. Denise Hawkins was a small and puffy twenty-two-year-old, and when she wasn’t behind the front desk, she was turning her back to the room and answering a small cell

phone, saying, “Simplexity, this is Denise.” And Jordana Medley was a proofreader, in her midthirties, who wore huge earrings made out of beads and wood.

It was enough that Paige used her title to avoid responsibility, but using the texture of her hair was a step too far. This was becoming one of those moments Yumi had read about or seen in movies: she didn’t know what to do, but she knew she needed to do something. Haircuts at Simplexity needed to be redesigned.

She smiled across the table at Tamsin. “I got to see the Portland studio before I came here.”

“The Portland studio is fucking gorgeous.” Tamsin appeared disgusted as she said this. “Every time I’m there I’m texting my boyfriend like, umm, we should get married *here*.”

Yumi took her lips away from her cup. “Oh wait, are you engaged?”

“No,” Tamsin laughed. “I’m just a freak and always on the lookout for spots.” Tamsin ducked her head and displayed all of her small white teeth in a very adorable cringe. Yumi had seen this face from other women at Simplexity, when they broke off a chunk of a muffin in their fingers but placed the rest back on the catering cart, or when their glasses left pools of condensation on a table. It wasn’t exactly an apology, but a grown-up and very cute display of shame.

“What about you?” Tamsin asked. “Are you seeing anyone right now?”

This was how her last meeting went. When Yumi asked her business leads if her cell phone would be covered by the company, they ended up talking about the dating apps Yumi was on, but they never discussed her cell phone bill.

“No, I’m single. But . . . Tamsin, I’m going to be really awkward right now,” Yumi said. “I wanna make sure I bring something up. And I don’t want to punk out ’cause I’ll be mad at myself all day.”

Tamsin’s eyes went wide with concern. “Ohmygod, absolutely,” she said. She crossed her arms and leaned forward on the table. “I’m distracting you. I’ll totally shut up.”

“No, no . . . ,” Yumi laughed.

“No, go for it. What’s on your mind?”

Yumi told Tamsin everything about the haircut situation. She was careful as she mentioned Denise, Jordana, and Martha, and how they never

received haircuts, and she constantly circled around an apology. “I’m not super knowledgeable about these things but . . . Martha and Paige might have an arrangement . . . And maybe I’m being a bit too PC . . .” The more she blamed herself for this situation, the more it seemed that Tamsin understood.

As Yumi spoke, Tamsin nodded, “Exactly,” shook her head, “Totally,” and pursed her lips, whispering, “Right right right.” To Yumi, Tamsin was very Simplicity, in the things she wore and in the words she used and in the way she laughed without making a sound. But for a moment, maybe her first since she was hired at Simplicity, Tamsin’s reactions seemed to confirm that Yumi Parr also had something to say.

“Basically, I want to make sure they’re included.” Yumi smiled as if she were attending a wake. “Like, it would be different if I gave up *my* spot, you know? ’Cause I could actually use it. But Paige benefitting from the fact that Martha can’t participate doesn’t feel right. And I just want to make sure we’re designing experiences that are meant for everyone.” Her last sentence rolled off so easily that Yumi caught herself thinking, *Ooh, that was good.*

Tamsin breathed into her shoulders and said, “Wow. Okay.” She reached across the table and pressed her fingers into Yumi’s arms. “First of all?” she said. “Thank you so much for being so real with me and bringing this up.” When she released her hands, little red ovals were left in Yumi’s skin. “I honestly wish more people were as transparent and brave as you were just now. And this is a perfect example of how like—I’m not perfect.” Tamsin placed her hand beneath her sternum. “Neither is my team. And sometimes I’m so inside of my own little world that I forget to consider, like, ‘Hey, is Denise left out of this?’ or like, ‘Hey, Tamsin, are you being intentional about the haircuts we’re providing?’ And the last thing I want to do is miss out on an opportunity to build trust. Man . . .” Tamsin winced once again, but this time the embarrassment was a bit more tangible. “I feel like such a dummy about this.”

“No, I know you would never do that on purpose—”

“No, I so appreciate you saying something.” Tamsin’s stare went soft. “And the good thing is . . . everything we do is a prototype. Sometimes we miss the mark and it’s not perfect, but I really feel like we can fix this. Do you want to brainstorm with me a bit?”

Before Yumi answered, Tamsin bent down to her oversized tote that read *HUMAN BEING* across the side. She pulled out two Sharpies and four Post-it stacks. “God, I’m so glad you brought this up. I think you would be an amazing thought partner in this.”

“I don’t think . . . umm.” Yumi hesitated. She’d been prepared to deliver this information to Tamsin, but she hadn’t considered being a part of the solution. “I just don’t want this to be a thing for Martha, Denise, or Jordana.”

“Oh *God* no,” Tamsin said. “No, I would hate to put them on the spot. I’ll definitely make sure it’s private and all our bases are covered.”

“Okay, cool,” she said, but the approval Yumi felt while speaking had turned into a tiny panic. She slowly reached across the table for a Sharpie and removed the cap, but she had no idea what to do with it.

“Okay . . .” Tamsin laid out a map of Post-its on the table, one at the top and six neatly underneath. “So what exactly is the ask here?”

Yumi made a squeaking sound from the corner of her mouth. One of the chandeliers above her reflected in the window, and she squinted into the light. “I’m sorry, what’s the what?”

“So the challenge to solve for”—Tamsin wrote *Haircuts* on the purple Post-it at the top—“is making haircuts available to the entire studio.” Underneath *Haircuts* she wrote *inclusive* and *accessible* in bullet points and swirly cursive.

Yumi folded her arms beneath her chest and said, “Right.”

“Did you have something in mind already?”

“Well, this might be a bit obvious, but . . .” Yumi scratched her eyebrow with her middle finger. “Is it possible to just, like, *give* Denise, Martha, and Jordana the funds not being used on them? Like a little bonus? So they can get their hair done on their own?”

Tamsin’s eyes narrowed and she said, “Hmmm,” for what felt like a very long time. For a moment, it seemed as if her gaze was hitting the back of Yumi’s skull, or she’d just remembered that she’d left her straightener on. Yumi sucked her bottom lip.

“So I totally see what you’re saying . . . ?” Tamsin said. “And the Culture budget is expandable, but haircuts are a component of the *full* compensation package at Simplexity. So it’s not meant to come in the form of a ‘paycheck’ or a ‘bonus’ or anything like that. It’s wellness centered and we want to keep those activities in-house, you know what I mean?”

Tamsin had said the words *paycheck* and *bonus* as if they were weak philosophies. Yumi felt like she'd said a bad word, but she didn't want to ask why. "Right, right," Yumi said. "That makes a lot of sense."

"But you know what?" Tamsin laid her hands palms up on the table. "It doesn't have to be haircuts, though. Let's find an activity that fits into a spa-day theme."

"So . . . would manicures work?"

"Okay, that's a really good idea, but we've actually tried it before." Tamsin pouted and her eyes became big. "We tried to do a nail station and it was so cute—we called it Mani-plexities—but the roof was booked and the smell was just too much."

"Ohhh," Yumi said. "I didn't even think of that."

"No, exactly," Tamsin said. "This is so one of those things where it's really hard to make everyone happy. But what about . . ." She tapped her Sharpie on the edge of the table. "Acupuncture? Well, I don't know. Does acupuncture involve a strong odor?"

Yumi saw the women at the next table look over at Tamsin's very sincere question about the smell of acupuncture. She took a sip of her coffee. "I'm not really sure."

"I'm gonna write it down just in case."

Yumi crossed her legs beneath her. She reached down to feel the raw skin behind her ankle, where her shoe had rubbed the flesh, and she wondered, *How many more ideas until we get to stop?* Was this the kind of situation where they called it quits after a few minutes? Would they not return to the office without a unanimous answer? If Martha were here, how would she explain that she was kind of done brainstorming? Yumi had plans to make chili and watch the previous Sunday's *Game of Thrones* with her roommates as soon as work was over. She really didn't want them to start without her.

"Could we maybe bring in Kurt for more massages?" Yumi asked. "Not as intense as the usual lie-down ones he does on Tuesdays, but like, quicker chair massages?"

"We could ask him!" Tamsin grabbed a yellow Post-it and wrote down *Chair Massages*. "Ohmygod, wait," she said. She placed her fingers at her temples. "I think I have a good one. When I hired Kendra, I remember she said something about *head* massages."

Yumi raised her bottom lip in intrigue. "Oh, that's interesting."

“That could be an option, right? And I know Jordana *loves* massages.” Tamsin wrote down *Head Massages* on a purple Post-it and underlined the word.

“Actually—” Yumi thought. “I’m pretty positive Martha always gets one, too.”

Tamsin kept nodding. “I can have my team call Kendra? Did we just solve this? Is that a good idea?”

“I mean, yeah. I would get one,” Yumi laughed. Yumi loved massages. But then she wondered, *Will I have time to get one?* Would Paige be so bold as to put down Martha’s name if there was an option for Martha as well? Or would she enjoy a blowout *and* a head massage while Yumi cleaned out her file cabinet and organized her in-box? “I don’t know, I just . . .” Yumi tried to find the right words. “I still want to make sure it’s super clear that this is a thing for *everyone*, without giving anyone a slap on the wrist, you know?”

“You’re so good, yes.” Tamsin nodded with her whole chest and grabbed another Post-it. “I can definitely mention it in my Weekly Wrap-Up and make sure people get the hint.” Tamsin took her Sharpie and wrote down *For EVERYONE* on a gridded Post-it.

“But you know what?” A wistful expression settled onto Tamsin’s face, and the freckles around her nose became pretty in the sun. She balanced her jaw in between her thumb and fingers and smiled as she spoke. “Well, it’s just so funny because . . . on one hand, I’m always so surprised by how people respond to opportunities. And there are always things I would never think that I would have to say, like, ‘Hey, guys, make sure everyone gets a turn! This is a nice thing we’re offering everyone and it’s not a weekly friggin’ blowout!’” She laughed. “But then on the other hand, I want to make sure that you and I are coming into this with curiosity, especially because Martha and Paige may have a preexisting relationship that negates all of this. And the thing is”—Tamsin turned her head to the left, as if she were making sure there was nothing other than a wall behind her—“in confidence, Yumi, I think that my tendency is to over-index the ethnic implications of a situation, when really, at the end of the day, wellness is wellness, you know what I mean?”

Across the table, Yumi’s tongue was burnt from drinking her coffee too soon, and her crotch was hot and sweating beneath her. Yumi wished she could stop time and ask, sincerely and without judgment, *Do you practice talking like this? Did you take a workshop? Do you have an app on*

your phone? The way she sat, the way she spoke, it was as if Yumi were watching Tamsin appear in an ad or commercial advertising her own tote bag.

Yumi nodded as Tamsin collected the Post-its from the table. If she'd said what she was thinking, it would have been something like *What the heck does "wellness" even mean?* Instead she said, "Yeah, sure. I was about to say the same thing."

"You feel me." Tamsin winked. She placed the Post-its into her notebook and said, "Okay, yay! That took like, two seconds. You killed it, Yumi."

"Yeah," Yumi said. "That was so fast."

Later that day, when she returned from the bathroom, a tiny white card had appeared on Yumi's desk. She sat down, quietly picked it up, and opened it between her knees. The cover featured black and white balloons floating in a sky, and a beaming brown dog attached and floating with them. *Yumi*, the inside started.

I'm so glad we got to connect today. Thank you a million times for your honesty and grace in light of a tricky challenge. I'm so glad you're here, and I know the rest of the studio feels the same way. I can't wait to see what you will accomplish. I know you'll rock it out!

Have a great weekend! —TG

In the year she turned eight, Yumi had a birthday party in the back room of an Uno's Chicago Bar & Grill. Afterward, her mother bought her thank-you cards to fill out and give to her guests. The cards were done like Mad Libs, and all Yumi had to do was complete them with the information her mother had written down (the child's name, the gift given, and why she liked it), but Yumi didn't fully understand how the blanks worked, and she didn't think to ask. A few came out ineptly endearing (*Dear **Evan**. Thank you for the **I Design Geo Set**. I like it because **cool***). But most of them were hard to decipher (*Dear **Mario**. Thank you for the **coming to my party**. I like it because **bracelets***). Eight-year-old Yumi sealed the envelopes, because this was her favorite part, and her mother slipped them in the mailbox.

The next week, Yumi stayed late at Simplexity every evening, and on Wednesday morning, she came in so early that the coffee was still being made by a yawning Denise. Two teams needed her help with parental consent forms and collecting materials for a Design Day in Baltimore. Yumi had no idea what the consent forms were needed for, but she didn't care. The additional support she gave came with exciting interactions with her coworkers—an engineer taught Yumi how to make glass circles on the laser cutter, a graphic designer told her that she loved her name. But this week—her best at Simplexity so far—and these genuine exchanges with coworkers who were funny and nice were often cut short by frequent requests made by Paige Keener.

On Monday, Paige asked Yumi to order a working lunch (Yumi could bill it to *New York Business Development* and set it up with the nice plates in conference room 4). On Wednesday she needed a reservation (Luca's. The table by the back window. Yumi could bill it under *New York Leadership*). And on Thursday, as Yumi joked with the HR reps who sat in front of her, Paige placed three small packages on her desk (two were going to clients and one was going to London, and Yumi could just bill it to *New York City*).

Yumi sealed the shipping label onto the last box. Paige's handwriting on the other side caught her attention. She flipped it over across her lap and read *It's Your Birthday!* and then *Cake Cake Cake Cake*. Yumi dipped her laptop screen down and typed the name on the package into LinkedIn. The future recipient had worked at Simplexity four and a half years ago. She now worked as *Mom to Two Crazy Kids*.

What bothered Yumi most was the fact that she actually didn't mind taking care of packages, organizing supplies, or stacking portfolios in the storage room. Yumi knew that her job entailed what many people would consider bitch work—this had never been a deterrent—but she could have never anticipated a coworker actively trying to make her their bitch. (Yumi wondered if thinking this made her sexist, because that wasn't how she meant it at all.)

As she sealed the label on Paige's gift, Yumi heard the happy hour bell ring. It was 4:30 p.m., and if there was any time for her to attend, it was now. She now had coworkers to talk to and moments in the week to

reference. But as she made her way down the hall toward the kitchen, the haircuts sign-up sheet flickered in the stairwell in an air-conditioned draft. When it settled against the wall, Yumi read *Paige 4:00, Martha 4:30*.

Upstairs, on the roof, in a charmed and caramelized afternoon blaze was Paige, bent over at the waist in a tall office chair, appearing asleep or possibly dead. She'd unbuttoned her blouse and Kendra had moved on from Paige's head to her neck and shoulders, making deep, swooping dips with her shiny, oiled hands. *I'm swamped, I'm so sorry, can I give these to you to go out by today?* This was how Paige had asked Yumi to mail her packages.

The door behind Yumi creaked and Paige blinked awake. "Oh, hey," she said. "You all good?"

"Oh," Yumi said. "Yeah, they're all done."

"Sweet." Paige rubbed the sides of her nose with both hands. Then she rebuttoned her top. "You're a lifesaver, thanks, Yumi."

Kendra asked, "Just a blowout then?"

"Mm-hmm." Paige reached into her back pocket for her phone. "I told myself no heat this week but . . . whoops."

Downstairs, inside the Simplexity bathroom and above a long concrete trough sink, Yumi became so angry she felt she might throw up.

A product designer named Ellen entered behind her and said, "Oh, hey."

Yumi smiled beneath a tissue as she blew her nose.

"You coming to happy hour?" Ellen asked.

"Oh, no. Well . . . ?" Yumi took a breath. "Actually, yeah. I'd really like a beer."

Yumi did have a beer, but only after she had a glass of what the Culture Team called a *Thurs-Bae Cocktail*. The drink was gin based but it tasted more like lemonade, and as Yumi laughed at a joke she hadn't fully heard, Tamsin squeezed her shoulder and said, "They're so good, right? Let's get you another."

One designer complimented Yumi's blunt bangs. Another asked about the best food in the Heights. Yumi answered just fine, but she struggled to focus. She imagined Paige's hair the next day, the sporty ponytail she wore on Fridays, and the striped weekender bag she kept under her desk, ready for an early departure to someplace that ended with *Bay* or *Ville*. She imagined Paige politely asking if Yumi could do her taxes, or buy her a box of tampons, or book her IUD insertion. How—*How?!—*was it not implied

that if you have time to get a blowout *and* massage, you have time to mail your own fucking packages?

In the Simplexity kitchen, Yumi's gaze went smooth. Her shoulders and back felt as if they were in the arms of a warm, unending hug. As her need for justice became thick on her skin, so did the realization that all of her coworkers were extremely attractive. She had to do something about Paige, to save them all, and she had to do it now.

Down the hall and near reception, through glass-paneled walls, Yumi spotted Martha leaning over a conference table meant for twelve. A glass of wine was half-full at her right. She was carefully compiling documents and securing them at the top-left corners with a massive industrial stapler. Yumi pushed the glass door.

"Hey. Do you have a minute?"

"Well, hey," Martha said. "You never stay for happy hour. Yes. Keep me company."

The door closed slowly behind her, and Yumi placed her back to it. She held her beer in both hands. "So, actually . . ." She looked up to the ceiling. "Well, this might be super awkward, but . . . well, it just kind of involves you a little bit maybe."

Martha looked up and said, "Really?" She seemed both surprised and impressed. She stapled another packet, set it in her finished pile, and sat down in a black rolling chair. "Uh-oh. What did I do now?"

"Oh, it's nothing like that," Yumi said. "Well, I guess it's more of a question. But I was just wondering, do you ever sign up for haircuts with Kendra?"

Martha reached for her wine, half laughed, and said, "No."

"Okay . . .," Yumi said. "Does Denise?"

"Hmmm." Martha twisted her lips. "I highly doubt it. If she did I'd be very impressed with Kendra. Denise!" Before Yumi could stop her, Martha leaned back and knocked on the glass wall separating herself from Denise at reception. Denise hopped off her chair.

"Don't worry," Martha said to Yumi. "Denise is super chill."

Yumi had been prepared to combat injustice in front of Martha, but not anyone else. She smiled as Denise popped her head into the room. Denise's lip gloss sparkled as she whispered, "Is it a party in here?"

"Pretty much," Martha said. "We have a question though. Do you ever get haircuts?"

Denise stepped inside and shook her head. “My sister cuts it for me,” she said carefully. “Why? Oh shit.” Denise looked to Yumi and her stare became concerned. Once again, she took her voice down to a whisper and asked, “Did Kendra fuck up your hair?”

“De-nise!” Martha scolded. “She obviously didn’t fuck up her hair.”

Denise held her hands up in surrender in front of her collarbones; one of them held the reception desk cell phone. “She seemed sad,” Denise said. “Why are you sad?”

“No, I’m sorry.” Yumi grabbed her drink. She would have stood up quicker, but she suddenly felt dizzy. “It’s cool, never mind.”

“No, no, wait,” Martha said. “I feel like I know what you’re getting at and you should say it.”

Yumi took a breath. Two sets of brown eyes waited for her to continue. Like Tamsin, everything in them was assuring her that whatever it was, whatever she had to say, it was important, and there was nothing to be afraid of.

“Well, yeah. Okay.” Yumi encouraged herself with a nod as she stared at the table. “If I’m wrong you can just tell me, but it seems pretty lame that there’s a studio experience here that isn’t exactly . . . open to everyone.”

“Ummm, yes.” Denise reached and gave Yumi a sincere high five. She looked at Martha, laughed, and said, “We’ve probably had this conversation like eighteen times.”

“Yeah, it’s really nice hearing someone else say it.” Martha took a sip of her wine. “It’s not the first time something like that has happened here either.”

Yumi sat back in her chair and brought her beer to her lips. She spread her legs, feeling powerful and relieved. “Doesn’t that bother you, though?”

There was a buzzing from Denise’s right hand. Denise turned to face the corner of the room, lifted her cell phone, and said, “Simplicity, this is Denise.”

“Well.” Martha wavered. “Yes and no.”

“I’m sorry, you have the wrong number,” Denise said. She clicked the call off, and turned back around.

“First of all, haircuts on the roof just gross me out,” Martha said. “They do barbecues up there. It’s kind of disgusting. But it bothers me more that when they actually try to make things inclusive, they don’t even think to ask us.”

“Ohmygod, exactly,” Denise said. “That email from Tamsin was fucking rich.”

“Right?” Martha said. “Someone obviously said something to Tamsin about haircuts being more inclusive and her solution was like—*head massages!* So stupid.”

Yumi swallowed. She placed her hands in prayer on her right leg and folded her left leg on top. “Yeah, I saw that and I was like, ‘What?’”

“Okay, this is really weird,” Denise confided, “but whenever I get massages from Kurt, he always goes straight for my head. And I think he’s trying to prove that he’s not afraid to touch my hair and I’m like, *no thank you*. I’d like to walk out of here not looking like Buckwheat so please chill out and do more of my lower back.”

“Thank you,” Martha laughed. “Like—I just spent two hundred dollars on my braids but yeah, Kendra. Please loosen ’em up for me with a nice, relaxing head massage.”

The right side of Yumi’s right eye twitched. Behind her, Jordana pushed the door open, looked at Martha, and said, “You almost done or do you need help?” Yumi began to sweat in the space between her breasts.

Martha glanced at her stack of papers and stood once again. “No, I’m just being lazy. But wait.” Her eyebrows went up as Jordana came in and helped herself to a sip of Martha’s wine. “J, quick question. Did you just *love* your head massage today? Was the service to your liking?” Denise began to laugh at Jordana’s face, which warped into a cartoonish disbelief.

Jordana bent her body at a dramatically slanted angle. “Girl, please. That mess is too much.” As Jordana organized the last workbook, she said, “How you gon give me a head massage at two p.m. in my place of work? Imma grown-ass woman and you wanna grease my head up at my job? It’s ridiculous.”

“I mean”—Martha raised her eyebrows and sat on the table’s edge—“I’d pay big money to see that happen.”

“Gimme the money and I’ll let you do it yourself.”

Denise sat in the rolling chair. She touched Jordana’s calf with the tip of her shoe. “Yumi brought it up,” she said.

Jordana stapled the last packet, and the sound made Yumi jump. “Good for you,” Jordana said. “Get woke to this place now and you’ll be better off.”

“Martha, I dare you”—Denise took her index finger and placed it beneath her chin—“to sign up next week and be all like, ‘Hey, Kendra! Just a little off the top, please.’”

“I’ll do it,” Martha jeered back, “if you tell Tamsin that you don’t feel included in the studio culture.”

“Ohmygod, I’d rather die,” Denise snorted. “Jordana has to play too, though. Jordana has to cry to HR and say she wants to file a complaint about Kendra.”

“Did you two just have a stroke?” Jordana grouped the booklets in her arms. “Haircuts . . . please. I ain’t saying nothing to nobody about no damn haircut—”

“I could say something!” Yumi almost spilled her beer as the words left her lips.

The room went very quiet.

At the other side of the table, Denise, Jordana, and Martha looked as if they were posing for a family portrait. Martha balanced adorably on the table’s edge. Denise sat with her hands in her lap. And Jordana stood behind them, the matriarch of the family. The three women appeared as if the flash had just gone off, and they all were holding back a sneeze.

Jordana said, “Excuse me?” and Denise slowly swiveled her chair 180 degrees to the left. She lifted her cell phone and whispered, “Simplexity, this is Denise.”

“Because, yeah!” Words began to gush out of Yumi’s mouth. “It’s fucked up that you guys aren’t included in something meant to, like—the incorporation of the whole studio. And you guys should be able to bring your *whole* self to the office—er—studio, and that means your hair or your . . . head skin, I mean, your head . . . you know? ’Cause yeah, I could *totally* go to HR and be like, hey. This shit needs to be shut *down*.”

Denise—her eyes still on Yumi—whispered into her phone. “Mm-hmm,” she said. “I’ll transfer your call.”

“Wait, *what*?” Jordana’s head dipped even lower.

“Oof.” Martha winced. She slid down into a chair and rolled it up to the table. “I admire your offer but . . . you’re playing with fire here.”

“Hold up, hold up, is this a thing right now?” Jordana looked at each person in the room, seemingly realizing what she had walked into. “Okay . . . girl?” She narrowed in on Yumi. “You better not say *nothin’*, you hear me?”

“Jordana, *chill*,” Martha said over her shoulder. “Listen, Yumi, we try to lay low in terms of luxuries around here. It’s really dumb, and you’d think they’d be better about it, but it kind of is what it is.”

“But it shouldn’t be, though, right?” Yumi talked with her hands. “And I know that the person who isn’t being, like, relegated in a . . . marginalized fashion is the one who should say something, to like . . . advocate on behalf of the person or . . . persons.” Yumi knew if she looked down, her chest would be an amber shade of pasty mortification.

“Like I said, it’s a really kind offer.” Martha placed her hand on the table. “But you don’t have to worry, because that’s not your job.”

How was Martha actually this nice? There was a diplomatic quality to her tone and a tenderness in her hand on the table that made Yumi quite furious. “Did you know that Paige puts your name down every week on the haircut sign-up sheet?” she said. “Every week. She’s up there for an *hour*, taking your spot that you don’t even get to have. How is that fair?”

Jordana and Denise looked to Martha.

“Hmmm,” Martha said. “Okay. I can definitely see how that looks. So Paige did ask me if she could do that once a few weeks ago. Well, actually, no, that’s not true, I *offered* . . .” Martha’s eyes went small as she looked upward and recalled the conversation. “She said she wanted to get a trim and a blowout, and I said she could put my name down. And no, I didn’t know she was still doing that . . . but I can see how she would think that it was an alright thing to do.”

Denise chuckled, bit the side of her red thumbnail, and said, “That is so Paige.”

Jordana’s voice reclaimed the room. “K, you know what? Ain’t nobody care about Paige. You need to be cool and *let this go*. I’m not shy, okay? I have no problem speaking up when I need to. And when you’re not mad anymore, we’ll still be Black and we’ll still work here.”

To Yumi’s knowledge, Jordana was the only other lesbian in the studio, and as she sat in the heat of her rant, Yumi thought, *Wait wait, no no no no*. She set her beer on the table and tried to close her mouth, but whenever she did, she felt like she might cry. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “Something like that would really bother me and—”

“A lot of things bother me!” Jordana said. “Shall I make you a list?”

“I think it bothers all of us,” Martha said. “You’re not wrong. But it’s just not worth it to make *this* thing the big deal when there’s unfortunately

lots of other stuff that should come first.”

A few seconds of silence passed over them. Denise—who seemingly realized it was her turn to speak—raised a hand in surrender. “I just answer the phones.”

Yumi sat back in her chair and said, “Okay.”

“Mm-hmm. Okay nothin’.” Jordana walked toward the door. “You know what *would* help? If you got some got-damn better headphones so the entire studio didn’t have to listen to whatever it is you’re dancing to in your head.”

Denise covered her mouth, and Jordana left the room.

As tears spilled onto Yumi’s shirt, the black and white one that said *TURNT*, Martha stood up and said, “Yumi, let’s go for a walk.”

Martha took Yumi to a park a few blocks from Simplexity where men bent on rugs in prayer and women organized paper and plastic. There were a few people in button-down shirts, ties, and pencil skirts on the benches surrounding the park, eating salads on top of their laps, staring at their phones. A mother and child passed in front of Yumi. The child raised her hands and said, “Why don’t I get one?” Yumi and Martha sat down on a bench.

“You’re a very pretty crier,” Martha said.

Yumi wiped her nose with the rough napkin Martha had handed her on the way over. She looked up and said, “I never cry. I feel really, really stupid right now.”

“You’ve been here since April?” Martha asked. “Then yeah, it’s about that time.”

Yumi forced a laugh.

“Okay, so . . . here’s the thing.” Martha reached forward and hugged her bent leg. “I gotta be real with you and say that I’m not mad at the Culture Team.” She slumped. “I’m mad at Simplexity for not making minority employment more of a priority here, but the Culture Team forgot about us because there’s only three of us, and *that’s* the big-picture problem. Do you see what I’m saying?”

Yumi held on to the back of her neck and nodded.

“And . . .” Martha placed her braids in a loose hold at the side of her head. “Right now I’m trying to only get good at things that I actually want to be good at. I’m not trying to be good at explaining Black hair to white people, but I am trying to get better at illustration and Photoshop. Does that make sense? You should find your focus, too. The things you wanna take away from this place. Also, my legs are kind of hairy right now so don’t look at them.” Martha placed a hand beneath her pants and covered the stubble on her ankles. “Do you know what I’m saying, though?”

“Yeah, I do.” Yumi stared at her feet and wiped her face a final time. “You’re so right. I just feel dumb. Oh shit,” she said. “I left all of my stuff at my desk.”

Martha waved a hand at her. “I can go grab your stuff and bring it down. But can I say something else really quickly?”

Yumi folded her hands and looked up.

“It is completely in your right to tell Paige no.”

Humiliation resettled into Yumi’s chest, and she looked down from Martha’s eyes to the moon shapes at the base of her nails. Not only had she been caught, but it seemed almost silly that Yumi had been so afraid to stand up to someone so tiny, who was only two months older. And for a moment, looking back, Yumi truly couldn’t tell or remember if what Paige had said about her job had even been *that* bad.

Martha went on. “So, Denise is a perfect example. She was going crazy with people giving her packages to mail at the end of the day, so she made a four p.m. deadline and she stuck to it. Some people were mad, but then they got over it. And sometimes she helps people out if they’re in a bind, and sometimes she doesn’t. But it’s up to her, and you can make it the same way for you. If people ask you to do something ridiculous or something that isn’t your job, just say, ‘Hey, I’m so sorry, but unfortunately I have too much on my plate at the moment.’ Done and done.” Martha brushed her palms against each other with two tiny claps. “That’s all you need to say. And . . . just so you know . . .” She grinned. “It’s common knowledge that Paige can be a bit of a monster. And between you and me”—a gossipy flare went into her eyes—“Paige has to go to monthly chats with HR about how she ‘shows up in the community.’” Martha put air quotes around these words. “And she always ends up crying. Every time.”

Yumi sat back and laughed. “I can’t picture that at all.”

“It’s very strange and not as rewarding as you’d think it would be.” Martha made a face as if she’d tried something sour. “Like myself, Paige is *not* a pretty crier.”

Yumi took a deep breath. She realized that she was nearly sober. “How are you so good at this?”

“You mean, good at Simplexity? Well, I have no life so there’s that,” Martha sighed. “I text Emilio more than I text anyone else, and I haven’t had sex in five months, sooo yeah.”

Yumi made a face that made Martha laugh so hard that she bent over onto her legs. Yumi kept it going and whistled lightly, pretending that five months without sex seemed like a long stretch of time.

The next day, Yumi arrived sporting new headphones that encased her ears in black squishy foam. This was the first big purchase she’d made with her Simplexity salary. The total came to \$332. The headphones had a noise-canceling function that—when she closed her eyes—made her feel like she was floating deep in outer space.

The headphones hung loosely at her neck as Yumi arrived at her desk. Martha, standing up at hers, was organizing several Post-its on the top of her laptop. Her eyes were sharply fixed and her fingers moved quickly.

“Is that your to-do list?” Yumi asked her.

Martha sighed. “I like to call it ‘All the things that will literally kill me.’”

“Yikes. Good luck.”

“Thanks,” she said. Then Martha looked up, and tapped Yumi’s headphones with the end of her pen. “These are really cute.”

Yumi’s headphones worked so well that, an hour later, she didn’t hear Paige whispering her name. Paige had to tap Yumi on the shoulder, and her fingers were just as birdlike as Yumi imagined they would be. She slipped her headphones off and said, “What’s up?”

“Hey, sorry. I like those headphones by the way.” Paige bent in placation and urgency. “Can I bother you so fast to make some visitor-guide packets?”

The night prior, Yumi had mentally prepared for this moment. In the line at Best Buy, on the train, before she fell asleep, and once out loud with

her roommates that morning. She didn't think she'd use it this soon, but here it was. Yumi twisted her hands underneath her desk. "Oh man, I'm so sorry . . .," she said slowly, "but unfortunately I have too much on my plate today."

Paige stood up abruptly and brought her heels together. She looked as if she'd fallen asleep on the couch, and had just woken up in her bed. "Oh, no problem!" She looked into the space above Yumi's eyes. "Just checking your availability. Thank you, though."

"Yeah, no problem."

As Paige clicked out of the space, Yumi struggled to calm the buzzing in her ears. For possibly the hundredth time since she'd been employed at *Simplexity*, Yumi told herself, *This will get easier*.

But five minutes later, Paige's heels made a return. Behind her desk, in between herself and Martha, Yumi listened to Paige coo, "Martha, my love."

Yumi clicked the noise canceling off. She didn't turn around, but she could hear it in her voice that Paige was definitely touching Martha. Maybe on her elbow. Possibly at her waist. "Two things," Paige said. "First, wanna do me a favor? I just need four super fast visitor-guide packets wrapped up for a workshop."

In the time Paige had searched for someone, she could have completed at least two out of the four bundles that she needed so badly. Yumi grinned into herself. She would never be like this. She'd never ask people to do things that she could do herself. And starting today, she wouldn't entertain people who did, no matter how much saying "no" turned her stomach inside out.

But Martha didn't use her crafted phrase of rejection. Instead, Yumi heard Martha take a Post-it, exhale through her lips, and say, "You are the worst. Gimme twenty minutes."

Yumi's mouth dropped open as Paige breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you, by lunch is fine," Paige said. "Okay, and second, what are you doing tonight?"

Yumi listened to Paige set her laptop next to Martha's and add her name to a digital guest list. Paige would be attending a drawing night at Etsy that evening—because remember that project *Simplexity* did with Etsy last year? And lots of big-time illustrators would be there, because "Martha,

you draw, right?” Didn’t Martha help out with the holiday party posters? Yeah, those were really fun.

It wasn’t the point at all, but somehow on top of what felt like a prompt betrayal, and a realization that advancing in a career came with strict rules and an even stricter knowledge of when to break them, Yumi couldn’t help but wonder, *Wait, Etsy? But how . . . What does Simplicity do?*

Yumi listened to Paige tell Martha that she could make some really cool connections there. She turned her headphones back on, but now that she was attuned to them, she could still hear their voices. Paige was just going for her friend and the booze, but it would be fun to hang out with Martha and connect outside of work. And yes, Martha could definitely wear what she was already wearing. If anything, she’d be overdressed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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