



30 DAYS-NOTICE
Or, Death of a Saleswoman

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DAY 28

The last time I was on this road, which weaves beneath Kansas City, past dirty brick buildings, half of which appear abandoned, was with Special K.

We were headed to Magic Gadget then, as I am now. Special K was driving our rental car. His eyes, ominous Ray Ban black holes, surveyed the landscape. He pointed out that one side of the road is Missouri, the other Kansas, and that it is a very popular road with prostitutes. When they see a police car, he explained, the prostitutes will go to the opposite side of the road depending on which state the police car is from.

Disappointed, I see no prostitutes. I do, however, find Magic Gadget easily. It is one of the few buildings with cars in its parking lot, a symbol of thriving employment in this depressed industrial underworld.

I push aside my back pain, made worse by two inch heels, my feelings of doubt toward where I might be five years from now, or even 28 days, and give it my all, full stop! Magic Gadget is a key account—the difference between making forecast and making excuses. Magic Gadget has been in the pipeline of Special K and the sales manager before him. We lost the widget business over 10 years ago and have been trying to gain it back since.

It helps that I like Magic Gadget's Decision Maker, though that does not say much. I program myself to like all Decision Makers. They are the purchase order originators, the contract signers and, as with animals, DMs can sniff out dislike.

Marla, the DM at Magic, has a hand painted, chipped plaque on her wall that reads, “She who laughs, Lasts.” Her office is pleasantly cluttered, smells like damp wood and potpourri. I like her style, her easy smile, her booming laugh, even her post-it note dispenser. She is Kansas City born and bred and has worked at Magic for at least a few decades, having started on the production lines, laughing her way up the ranks.

Marla will not go to lunch with sales reps. She makes it clear she is not pleased that we do not offer a rebate for cash payment before net 30 days, that we will not go down further in price, that shipping is not included. She also has a beef with our pallet policy. She says all of this with a warm Kansas drawl. I am entranced.

When there is nothing left to say, when I make it clear to Marla that I understand our biggest competitor offers Magic all of the aforementioned, that I will do my best to advocate for Magic within Widgets, Inc. I head to the freight elevator. On the top floor, the engineering group works in a cramped office with indoor-outdoor carpeting. My eyes burn from the chemicals. They are doing a test run of 2,000 of our Widgets, the impetus for this trip, the centerpiece appointment I built the others around. We chat for a few minutes and head to their factory, one of the oldest and longest running in Kansas City.

I walk the floor, aware that I should be wearing safety goggles and earplugs. No one notices I am in noncompliance, and I am not about to bring it up. All around me, chemicals are blasted into cans, which will hopefully be dispensed by our widget. I imagine a rusted machine part going awry, formula spraying everywhere, burning into my exposed eye sockets. Ralph, my lab contact, is chatting about the rich history of Magic Gadget and the fire that almost gutted it in 1977, and though nodding intently, in my head I am imagining myself blind, upset over the library’s slim Braille offerings, my boyfriend is tenderly applying my eyeliner.

The test run is a success! Our widget operates just as good as our competitor's, perhaps even more so. An unsuspecting worker on the floor tells me a component in our competitor's widget is malfunctioning, causing too many rejects. I nod sympathetically. We are trying to be approved as a secondary supplier, and now we are one step closer. Myself, Ralph, and a group from the lab head to lunch.

Unlike Buyers, lab rats and package designers are always up for lunch. Although they may not be the Buyers, they play an important role as "Influencers." I am accompanied by six Influencers, and we caravan in two cars. Special K would be proud. He is on vacation with his family in Palm Springs, cashing in a year's worth of Marriott reward points, although from the amount of messages I've received from him on my BlackBerry, I wonder if he made the whole trip up.

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Much of downtown Kansas City is being converted into condos. Located in a former warehouse, the deli we eat at has tall ceilings and exposed brick. Over the din and clatter of plates and conversation is the music of Nick Drake, who wrote suicidal lyrics up until he committed suicide. I feel right at home. Even the pickle is as good as Chicago's.

One of the chemists, who has multiple piercings and tattoos, for whom I've crafted an entire secret life—from her days in a rural Kansas meth lab to the intensive rehab program and kindly Magic Gadget manager who offered her a job when no one else would—tells me she met her

husband while participating in Civil War reenactments, that she came to Magic Gadget right after college and got the job before even graduating from a career fair. Her father is a Lutheran minister.

The head of the group, Adam, is obsessed with American Idol. The water cooler conversations I miss by not working in a traditional office take place with customers, except rather than walk away as I might do in an office, I ask Adam questions as if the American Idol semi-final is this wonderful event I do not have access to, and I must understand it only by living vicariously through those who've bravely weathered many hours on their couches witnessing it. We transition to Dancing with the Stars.

After lunch and closing ceremony handshakes, I drop the crew off at the factory and head to a gas station, still nary a prostitute on the desolate, winding road. The three ice teas are not settling, and the urge to use the rest room hits me the moment I begin gassing up the car. I pray for clean facilities, for toilet paper, that there will be no one in the station's facilities when I jam the grimy key into the lock. I am deep breathing, wondering why I have a bladder the size of a chickpea, why I continue to accept refills.

I drop off the rental car, and I am a few hours early for my flight. Rather than try for an earlier flight, as Special K usually does, I hook onto the free Wi-Fi, respond to emails, set and confirm appointments, and start my expense report early, which never happens.

In O'Hare airport at 7 p.m., I spend what feels like a half hour walking the length of the parking garage, dragging my wheeled laptop, suitcase, and sample bag. In a flash of genius, I press the red alarm button on my keychain, and follow the noise to my car. It would have been more genius to have obeyed one of the many hundreds of signs reminding me to write down the location of my car on my ticket when I initially parked, but that's too easy, plus I recall having been in a rush to catch the flight while multitasking on my BlackBerry, thinking "how could I not remember this corner, how big can the rooftop garage section actually be?"

At home, Koji, my cat, scratches at my legs and is whinier than usual.

It is as if he has been alone in a desert for many days, starved of food and human contact—except, in this case, he has had plenty of both over the past 72 hours. My boyfriend lives across the street and has visited Koji multiple times each day, has played with him even more than I usually do, and even allowed Koji to spoon him according to the most recent text message.

The weight of widgets unsold, the stress of an aching back, I lay flat on Koji's domain—a large kitchen area rug—which he prefers over three cat condos. I bought the rug the same day I moved into my apartment, during a blizzard, risking my life driving to the Crate and Barrel outlet. I had desperately wanted to feel “settled” as soon as possible after moving out of the apartment I shared with my ex-husband. Now, over two years later, I look around and am happy to see these four welcoming walls, the refrigerator magnet collection my ex-mother-in-law always thought was tacky, sagging bookshelves, fancy couch I bought with a check from an overtime lawsuit some disgruntled employee thankfully won when he sued my previous employer. It is the proverbial “room of one's own” that I have grown to love for its solitude, abundance of natural light, and killer cross breeze.

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Koji daintily circles my body and, as if getting his anger out regarding my absence, angrily butts his head against my ribs. I encircle him with my arm as he presses his face against mine, his wet nose brushing my cheek. I close my eyes and I know what's coming—the ultimate compliment. When a cat thinks you are one of their own, they clean you. I read this in a reference book I got at a garage sale called *You and Your Cat*, which is the crazy cat lady equivalent to *What to Expect When Your Expecting*.

Koji-san begins licking my eyelid. His tongue is moist, yet feels like sandpaper against my skin. He starts on my eyebrow as I pass out on the floor.

DAY 20

Vendors, vendors, vendors... as far as I can see. Booths set up like science fairs, neat stacks of business cards, colorful tchotchkes. Special K eyes a luggage tag but restrains himself. I tell him to just go for it. He is too mannerly and thinks it would be tacky.

In the soft light of the hotel Special K looks positively orange. His Florida vacation was at least a month ago and he has gained color since then. Someone must've told him he looked good and healthy with a tan, and he ran with it. I wonder how he has time to tan.

We eat buffet style, and obediently grab our plates and join the line. In line I finally meet Dana, the big decision maker, whom I had spoken with once on the phone, briefly. She wears a flowery blouse, a ribbon for a belt, and her entire outfit reminds me of a store on Michigan Avenue called Oilily, which I always think of in my head as "oily."

I transfer my empty plate to my left hand, and shake D's strong, tanned, perfectly manicured hand. She is the type of woman whose purse matches her shoes, her mascara never smudged, her confidence unsettling. She is, of course, super friendly, too. I find myself stammering in her calm and collected presence. "*I like your... Thing,*" I say, pointing to her belt. I actually say "thing." She looks at me sympathetically, confused. "*Belt,*" I stammer, "*Belt is what I meant to say.*"

Special K overhears us and I think is embarrassed for us, for Widgets Inc. and for me, the new hire who after seven or eight interviews with four different people turned out to be a mental case that cannot find the right word for "belt." I have been on Special K's bad side all morning, and this lunch is no exception. Prior to leaving the hotel to pick Special K up at the airport, I had set our cardboard box down on an empty table, marking our territory so to speak. I knew he would

not want our proprietary widgets to sit unattended, so I left them in the box and figured we'd unpack the goods together.

I had sat our box on a table next to an occupied table, bearing a box that shows the logo of another widget maker—in fact, the same one where Special K had worked for at least a decade before making the upward career move to Widgets Inc. I figured since the industry is so tight and incestuous that Special K would know the person representing his former company, and perhaps appreciate my putting the box there.

“You put it next to X?!”

His frustration is visible, and wholly directed toward me as if I am one of his small children.

“We can move it,” I say.

“We will move it,” he corrects me.

There is silence as I exit the airport. I stammer that we are not exactly competitors with Company X. Though both widget makers, we specialize in something they don't do and vice versa. Special K reminds me of one item in which we do compete with Company X on. Ah, the quick-release cap, how could I have forgotten?

Special K sighs and checks his voicemail. He does not like music or the radio. His favorite musician is John Mellencamp. A few months earlier we drove for four hours together in Kansas, with no sound. Such is the soundtrack of our comradeship.

“Do you know how to get back to the hotel?” he asks suddenly.

“I got here, didn't I?” I reply, a bit too snappish. To soften the bite I self deprecate, telling him that doesn't necessarily mean anything. He has a good laugh. We both know the truth in that statement. I can get lost anywhere, even in Chicago.

We return to silence. Since I voiced my hesitation toward the position, there has been underlying tension between us, like a couple facing impending break up but too tired to talk about it, too willing to just get through one more holiday party or family gathering pretending everything is fine. In this case, the holiday is a conference at my largest customer. We have to put a happy face on.

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When we arrive at the hotel, our box had been moved to a far table. Perhaps Company X felt the same way as Special K. We are placed next to a grassroots widget advocacy group. Our products are useful, but there are some people in the world who find self-abusing uses for them, like huffing. Manning the advocacy booth is an elderly man with terrifyingly bad breath, and across from us is a man who greets me like I am his best friend.

“Did ya find it okay?” he asks, winking at me.

“Yes, yes” I say, somewhat embarrassed.

Special K looks at me strangely. Yesterday when I walked into the lobby I was looking for the bathroom. The man noticed my confused look and directed me to the nearest facility. I do not tell Special K I was walking like a crazy person, on a single mission to find a bathroom, a box of samples cradled in my arms and probably swiveling my head back and forth looking for that universal silhouette of a woman in a triangular skirt. I had tried to visit the bathroom at the end

of my meeting at Widget Williams, but it was after 5 pm and CWB only knew the security code for the men's washroom.

Special K and I set up our table and greet the people to our booth. Each time I arrange a widget on the table he corrects me and places it somewhere else. He smooths down the tablecloth and straightens our stack of marketing materials. For the next few hours we talk, and talk, and talk. My business card holder now holds more of other people's cards than my own, which is good, except when I start giving away other people's cards as mine. I see some familiar faces.

As we leave I forget names. Bob is Scott and Scott is Mark. Special K helps me load my car and tells me I should really fly, that I could probably use the extra time to work on my presentation.

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My presentation! Tomorrow is our regional sales meeting, to recap and discuss the 1st quarter. I have not begun my presentation, not even a title sheet, nary a graph. I have been busy talking with customers about a variety of projects, but nothing is recorded, no proof, nada.

"I'll put something together," I promise Special K.

"I know you will," he replies.

Three hours later I check my Blackberry and there is an email from him. His flight was delayed due to the storms and he is still in the airport. There is a storm warning and I am driving through gumball-sized hail near Indiana. My boat of a company car shakes from the force of the water coming down in sheets. Interpol is on full-blast. I should not be on my Blackberry, and wonder if talking is less of a hazard than texting.

Special K and I end up getting back to Chicago at the same time. My back is sore. It is 10 p.m. by the time I unpack, repack my garment bag again, and settle down to work. I am standing at my counter because my lower back cannot handle sitting. My boyfriend runs his fingers down my spine and says I should quit now, before I destroy my lower back.

I create two slides but my eyes blur and sting.

I set the alarm for 3 a.m. I sleep through it, and at 4:30 a.m. my boyfriend shakes me awake. "Didn't you say that you need to do that presentation?"

Yes, yes, I say, thanking him profusely for waking me up at 4:30 a.m. I dress quickly. He helps me carry my bags down to my car. It's dark outside. This is my favorite time of day. I love it when the city sleeps.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aly Hensler works in Chicago as an online advertising sales representative, and enjoys her newish job, which she can perform from the cozy confines of a cubicle. She has authored the text for two photography books published by High Tide Press, and previously worked as a reporter for *The Athens News* and Copley newspapers. She has also written freelance articles for *The Chicago Journal* and *Chicago Reader*. Hensler is a 1997 graduate of Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. Reading is her favorite form of procrastination when avoiding writing. She is reachable at ginandjuiced@hotmail.com.

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