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I spoke to Abigail over Zoom that week. She looked put together in a collared shirt with her hair pulled back in a bun. Her living room floor, visible behind her, was scattered with plastic toys.

“Thanks for making this time work,” I said, smiling as big as possible to ensure my warmth made it through the computer to her. I'd read about interviewing, and most of the tips suggested you make the interviewee feel at home with questions like, *Are you comfortable? Would you like a glass of water?*

“I just put Zach, my son, down,” Abigail said. “So we should be good to talk for as long as you need.”

“Great. Let's just start with your name, what you do, and how you learned about Sunny Words.”

“Sure,” Abigail said, letting out a sigh, not of exasperation but of pure exhaustion. “My name is Abigail Miller. I work in marketing and live outside of Boston. What else did you ask? Oh, and I learned about Sunny Words through,” Abigail rubbed her temple. “I'm trying to remember. Maybe an ad? On Facebook? Or maybe someone recommended it to me? No, I think it was an ad.”.

“And how long have you had Sunny for?”

“Oh gosh. I want to say, eight months?”

“And how have you used Sunny?” I said.

“Well, as I wrote to you, I feel like I can stay much more connected to my two-and-a-half-year-old, Zach, because of it. I mean, in all honesty – I don't really pay attention to the grades or if he’s on track. Because I work so much, it's nice that when I come home, I can listen back to Zach's day with his grandma or his part-time nanny. I like hearing his voice. And I like that the app tells me when he uses or hears a new word. You know, that’s kind of different than the nanny cams and stuff. It feels like I’m learning something specific about his day. I like thinking about him hearing *dinosaur* for the first time. Or, knowing he used the word *juice* for the first time.”

I took note of Abigail's main points: *Likes that she knows when Zach uses new words. Sunny keeps her connected, even on the busiest of days.* I nodded along, encouraging her to keep talking.

“I think the most challenging part though is that, when I listen back, and I hear him ask his grandma for juice or something like that, I get the notification from the app like, ‘*Zach used a new word! Congrats!’”* Abigail’s voice distorted. I thought it was a connection issue, but then she began to cry.

“And it's just this awful reminder that,” She wiped at her eyes. I couldn’t see the tears, but I could hear them. “That I wasn’t there. I'm sorry, I don't know why I'm getting so emotional. It's just that I'm witnessing my child's life through a fucking app. Excuse my language. I don't mean to swear. And obviously, it's not the toy’s fault that I have to work 50 hours a week and that Zach's dad left last year, but there is this way that it's such a cruel reminder. You know? Like the other day, they sent me this comprehensive report on his language development. And it was like, *Zach is hitting his speech goals*. *He's speaking in two to three-word phrases and asking questions that start with who, what, where, or why, such as* ‘*Where is mommy?’”* Abigail said "mommy," through a sob, her mouth crumpled into a vulnerable shape no one should show to a stranger. She put her head in her hands. “I mean, it told me Zach had asked that – *where's mommy?* – a total of seven times that day. Seven.”

I wanted to look away – leave her to cry alone in her dimly lit living room as her sleeping child lay sprawled out on his back in the other room, his little hands cupped like shells.

“I'm sorry, I really didn't think this was going to happen. I must just be tired from work,” she said. “This is probably so unhelpful for your blog.”

“No, it's ok, I said. I completely understand.” I had stopped nodding as I didn’t want to encourage her to speak more.

I stared at the toy graveyard behind her. I imagined her coming home from work to make Zach a grilled cheese. Afterward, she would slump down on the floor to quietly watch him smack colored blocks together. Then she probably bathed him, read him a book, tucked him in, and set her alarm for 6 a.m. to do it all again.

“Are you a mom too?” She said. She looked both older and younger with her teary eyes. Somehow juvenile and weathered.

“No, I'm not. I just meant that it sounds really hard.”

“Yeah. God, I'm so sorry. I'm sure this wasn't what you were expecting for your blog,” she said again. “I do really like the toy – I think it's a great device. And the app too.”

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I needed to show my boss I had found super-users with compelling stories that we could share on the blog. I needed stories from users that would convert other users. Abigail's interview had been a bust. But I still had Steve. Steve, the voice of the every-parent that lived inside of me. Concerned, thoughtful Steve. I knew Steve, the voice I used to write copy, would speak to parents. While Steve wasn't real per se, he was a stand-in for parents like Abigail. Parents who cared. Who wanted the best for their Zachs. But the difference was that Steve wasn't overworked and tired and guilt-ridden. Steve made you feel good. He was relatable but aspirational. I shared the Steve interview with my boss without trepidation.

“Erin, this is great,” she said. Her eyes narrowing as she read.

“Who is this guy? Where did you find him?”

“The inbox.”

“Awesome. I knew you'd get the hang of it.”

I had created a simple, believable backstory for Steve. He lived in Pittsburgh with his wife, Anne, and their three-year-old son, Alex. He was 45 years old and learned about Sunny through a friend at work. Sunny meant that Steve and Anne could track Alex's development objectively. No bickering about how many words they thought Alex used. They *knew* how many words he used – over 200! And no worrying about if he was hitting his developmental milestones. With Sunny, they knew he was. Steve even shared a heartwarming anecdote about Anne and him sitting on the couch after putting Alex to bed and swiping through their daily Sunny report. They listened to an excerpt of Alex's day, which he had spent with his grandma. Anne and Steve listened to Alex: *I'm gonna pick this flower for mommy and daddy*.

“Can we get a photo of them?” My boss said. “That would be nice for the blog post.”

“Steve is pretty busy,” I said. “So I'm not sure he will respond. But I can ask.”

“Definitely ask. We could use it for social.”

++++

After dinner – a blueberry Greek yogurt and a bag of peanut butter pretzels – I heard Soothy in the yard scolding her little brother. She sometimes used a calm, put-on voice to explain things to her brother – how he shouldn't smash the Barbies into the grass or dig holes too deep. I was sure the voice came from someone, her mother or some other caretaker; an attempt at playing adult, playing stressed. I went out to find them, this time with no prop like the bag of trash.

Soothy was holding a Barbie with a gnawed on head.

“Oh no,” I said. “What happened to Barbie?”

Soothy looked up. “Max chews them. It’s a problem for Barbie and his teeth.”

“Why do you eat Barbie, Max?”

“I…I…” as Max tried to explain his behavior, I realized he was probably around three. Just the age of Steve's son, Alex.

“I…I didn't know it was a Barbie,” Max said finally.

“Sure,” I nodded. “Hey, where are your parents?”

Soothy put her hands on her hips. “Why? Where is your boyfriend?”

*Touche, Soothy*. “Remember, I told you, he doesn't live here.”

“I thought he was coming to visit.”

“He did come to visit. You just missed him. Are they inside?” I said, redirecting the topic back to her keepers.

“Yeah, they take so long to eat dinner. I get so bored.”

I was happy she had dropped the boyfriend topic but made a mental note to respond to Caleb's text he had sent me after the other night. *Hey! I had a good time last night. Do you want to hang out next week?*

Soothy's parents had introduced themselves when I first moved in. Sarah? John? No, maybe Charlie. I tried to remember, but all my brain conjured up was a memory of them standing in the yard, apologetically picking up toys from the grass, explaining it never looked like this.

“Ugh, ya, parents. What are their names again?” I said. I picked up one of Max's trucks from the ground, inspecting it closely so as not to seem too interested in my own question.

“Alice and Joe!” said Soothy, hopping on one foot for no apparent reason.

“That's right, Alice and Joe. I have some of their mail. I'll make sure to drop that off for them.”

Soothy and Max weren't listening, though. The explanation was unnecessary. Max was grinding the gnawed Barbie into the ground, and Soothy was singing a made-up song to a dying shrub.

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Alice and Joe Blecker were so easy to find I had a moment of panic. Was I also this easy to find? Of course, I was, but I hoped no one was looking me up for their corporate blog. They both had public Facebook accounts, so it was easy to find photos of their children. I learned from photos that Soothy's real name was Susie. I also discovered Max's birthday was in March and that he celebrated at the Griffith Park Merry-Go-Round last year. *Happy Birthday to our special boy!* Read Alice’s post of Max smiling on an ornately adorned horse. Since it was his special day, Alice and Joe had taken photos with just him. I wondered if Soothy had been the cameraperson – Alice and Joe's hands clamped around Max's little shoulders, his cheeks covered in blue frosting, fingers balled into clammy fists. I attached the photo in an email to my boss.

*Steve got back to me! Here's a photo of him and his wife with their son, Alex, on his last Birthday!*

Max was the perfect age for this story, and Alice and Joe the perfect stand-in parents. It was totally believable. If they could afford a Sunny Words, they would have wanted one. In some ways, I could imagine them saying exactly what Steve had about the device – it would help keep them connected. If they saw the blog post, they wouldn’t mind me using their photo since they probably generally agreed with what was said in the interview.

My boss wrote back almost immediately.

*cute! can they send one w Sunny?*

My momentary relief was replaced with a low-grade level of panic. Alice and Joe didn't have a Sunny Words*.* I couldn't pull random Facebook photos now. I would have to tell her no. Tell her they didn't have any photos of Alex with Sunny Words. Maybe I could claim they were worried about privacy. But why did they send the birthday photo over in the first place? They had been fine with it originally but were backing out. Didn't want to be featured at all. And what of me? The failed content writer with my one great idea, as Monica had called it. My one idea I couldn't even execute with fake people.

*Yes! Such a good idea! I'll send over the ask!*

I shot back the response before I could digest that I was choosing to do so. I believed in Steve. The voice of the every-parent. I knew this post would do well. It would help parents like Abigail – disheveled, overworked, failing – see that they weren't doing anything wrong. They just had to shift their perspective a little. They weren't missing key moments in their child's development. They were witnessing them through Sunny. Sunny made it so they could have busy lives *and* be there for their kids. Sunny captures the important moments for you. You keep putting money away for college, and Sunny will ensure you hear your child use the word "juice" for the first time.

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The howl was getting worse, almost constant. Low and mournful, I sometimes mistook it for the sound of the freeway outside my window. Then it would break out above the city's noise to find me. I was sure it was coming somewhere north of the house, loudest in my bedroom and quietest in the kitchen when washing dishes. I decided if I invited Caleb over again and he could hear it too, I could let the howl go – just a lonely hound dog two blocks away or a vintage car with a particularly forlorn engine.

He quickly agreed to come over. I questioned why he jumped at my offer. Didn’t he have friends? Other dates? Places to be on a Thursday night?

*I'll cook you dinner,* I texted.

I had planned how the howl would come up. We would be eating pasta carbonara and mid-sentence, he would hold up his finger in pause, dropping his fork.

Do you hear that? He’d say.

Hear what? I’d say.

That, that howl, he’d say.

What are you talking about? I’d laugh, scooping more pasta onto his plate.

Of course, there was a chance Caleb wouldn’t be able to hear the howl at all. Once, I heard a high-pitched ringing sound– almost like an alarm – at a restaurant while eating with an ex-boyfriend. It was distracting and I repeatedly asked if he could hear it. He told me he couldn’t, without looking up from his nachos. I enlisted the waitress. Could she hear the sound? She said she could. She explained, refilling our waters, that women often can hear higher frequencies than men. My ex shrugged.

“I don’t hear it,” he said again.

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I offered Caleb a beer when he came over. He leaned against my kitchen sink, one hand resting on the counter, the other holding the cold bottle.

“Your place is nice.”

“Thanks,” I said, fingering the hole of my own bottle. It felt like he was in the house for the first time.

“You're actually the only person I've had over here.”

Mid-sip, Caleb raised his eyebrows.

“Really? Why?” I could tell he was perturbed, even turned off, by this information.

“I don't know.”

“You should have people over,” he said vaguely. “It's a nice place. The kids are cute,” he said, gesturing towards the yard.

“You saw them?”

“Yeah, they were playing when I walked by.”

I was pleased to know Soothy had finally seen my boyfriend. The whole reason I’d gone on a date with him in the first place was to win the attention of her and Monica. He pointed to a pile of CVS loot on the kitchen counter I had forgotten to put away – a set of fake rainbow-colored eyelashes, a lavender eyeshadow palette, and a long-lasting matte lip gloss.

“What’s all that? You going somewhere?”

“Oh yeah,” I picked up the bag, stuffing it into a kitchen cabinet full of snacks. “I’m going to a friend’s birthday later tonight, so I picked up some stuff,” I said.

“Oh, should I head out then?” he said, putting down his bottle.

“No, no, it’s ok. I won’t go until much later.”

“OK,” he said, giving me a look I couldn’t decipher. He looked closely at my face.

“Does the birthday have a theme or something?”

“No,” I said quickly. “Why?”

“I guess just cause I didn’t know you were into makeup,” he said. “My sisters wear a lot of that stuff, though,” he said, smiling. “No theme necessary.”

We had sex that night. Caleb repeatedly asked if I liked it. I couldn’t hear the howl over the bed creaking and Caleb’s breath in my ear. After Caleb fell asleep, I kept listening. I heard the fridge whirring, an airplane overhead, the soft cry of a child resisting bedtime or some other parental ordinance, but no howl. Caleb rolled over to face me, his eyes closed.

“Hey, weren’t you going to a birthday tonight?” he said, half-asleep.

I stayed very still. “I wanted to hang out with you instead,” I said.

He made a noise of agreement, a click of his mouth, and rolled over. I could do anything to him at this moment. Lick his cheek. Pour cold water on him. Smother him with a pillow.

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In the morning, Caleb asked if I wanted to get coffee as he put on his shoes to leave. He had told me the night before he believed in God as a force greater than himself. I lost interest once he started talking about how camping brought him closer to God, but I realized his good manners came from church probably. I wondered if he had accepted my dinner invitation out of pious obligation and if the coffee invite was only an extension of his politeness. It didn’t matter, I didn’t have time for coffee. I walked Caleb to the door, standing in the frame, looking to see if Soothy was around to see him leave.

“Thanks for having me over,” he said, looking me in the eyes. I leaned over to kiss him. His lips felt dry and firm. We had never kissed outside of preparing to have sex. It felt obligatory, almost like kissing a brother or uncle.

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“We don’t usually send employees Sunny Words,” my boss said. Her face contorted, trying to make sense of my request. “It’s just not in the budget,” she said.

“ I just feel like, if I had one – if I really *was* a user – I’d be able to better speak to users.”

She squinted at me over Zoom. I could tell she was growing tired of me.

“Do you have friends, Erin? Please don’t take this the wrong way. I just know you moved to L.A. for the job and how isolating a new place can be.”

I flushed, blinking rapidly.

“I just care about you. I care about all of you – Monica and Matt too,” she said. “And I worry sometimes. I know Matt has a family, so he has people. And Monica, well, Monica. I’m not sure who she has. But she seems ok. I just know, personally, how hard it was moving to L.A. I was single, and the city was so spread out, especially coming from New York. I just felt really isolated here. For a long time! It takes a while, is all I wanted to say. In case you’re finding it hard here to make friends and everything. I didn’t meet my fiance until like, what, two years into living here? It didn’t happen until I saw a psychic. She told me I’d been an ice fisherman in a previous life. This is like, hundreds of years ago. I’d been left to die by my tribe. I’m not sure why, but it was a really dangerous fishing expedition, and I just didn’t make it. And this death actually took a shard of my soul.”

She paused – nodding as if anticipating my shock. I widened my eyes, matching her head movement.

“The psychic told me I wouldn’t be able to find love, to really be happy, until I let this past life go,” she said. “Then boom, two weeks later, I met my husband Adam. And guess where I met him? An ice rink. I’m not even joking. Anyway, this is all to say, it took time to really find my footing.” My boss’s eyes moved from one side of the screen to the other – as if she had been watching herself or me the whole time. “Where are you from again, Erin?”

“Santa Barbara.”

“Right, that’s nice. Do you see your family a lot then?” She was smiling big.

“Not really.”

“Oh.” Her smile collapsed.

“I mean, I am close with my mom,” I said quickly. “And my two sisters. And my dad. Just not my extended family.”

My boss looked relieved. “Totally, we all have that weird uncle.”

“Totally.”

“Look, Erin, I’m not supposed to do this. But I’ll comp a Sunny for you. I see how hard you’re working. Think of it as a bonus. I know it will help your work. And we really are grateful for you being *you*. And, if you want that info for the physic I saw, just let me know. She really did unblock something for me.”

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The box my Sunnyarrived in looked like it would contain a Waldorf toy – a wool doll or a woven basket. Wooden and nondescript, the container was filled with packing scraps made from natural fibers. I vaguely remembered a presentation about the sustainability of our packing materials during orientation. The Sunny devicewas smaller than it looked in photos. Maybe because it was usually pictured next to babies. It fit easily in one of my hands and looked like a sunflower you’d find in a Pixar movie – butter-yellow petals with a smooth, brown middle. To turn it on, I pressed the center. I knew this because I’d seen our tutorial videos. But also because it was intuitive – the chocolate middle, a round button, asked to be pressed. In person, it reminded me vaguely of a smart speaker with petals. I imagined this was a deliberate choice – if Sunny looked like another familiar device, it was legible.

My Sunny pinged when I turned it, making the sound of a xylophone – like a child had just tapped it with a soft mallet. Once on, it gave off the warm glow of a child’s nightlight.

*Welcome, Erin* read the interface on the app. S*unny provides you with unique insights into your child’s language development.* *Would you like to start recording?* I tapped *Yes*.

I paused to see if I could hear Soothy and Max in the backyard. It was after 6 p.m. They had probably eaten dinner by now – plastic plates of mac n’ cheese and pebbly peas finished with cold glasses of milk. I couldn’t hear them in the yard. I imagined them mentally turned off in front of the television, watching whatever idiotic show children liked these days.

I had heard their parents fighting only once. The clink of dishes and the rumble of the dishwasher mixed with their raised voices. This is what parenthood is like, I had thought. Even your fights have to make sense. The cups still have to be washed and dried.

++++

Taking a photo with Max and the Sunny device was easier than I thought it would be. I simply brought it outside the next day and handed it to him.

“Want to play with this?” I said.

“What it?”

I pulled out my phone, made sure it was on silent, and started taking photos of him holding Sunny. The photos were perfect – he looked engaged and focused. And even better – he was outside.

“Why are you taking photos?” said Soothy. She was standing next to me, watching me furiously click.

“Oh, he just looks cute.”

“Mom says we shouldn’t let people take photos of us. That we have the right to our own privacy.”

I smiled without responding, continuing the photoshoot. Max sat down in the grass, holding the Sunny device.

“What it do?” He said.

“It helps you learn new words,” I said.

“How?” asked Soothy.

“Well, we can ask it to teach us,” I said. “Watch.” In a loud, clear voice, I instructed the device. “Sunny, tell us the word of the day.”

The sunflower glowed in the grass, blinking three times before a crisp, feminine voice responded.

*Today’s word is Cucumber. Cucumber.*

“Cucumber,” Max said.

I couldn’t help but smile seeing Sunny work in real-time.

“Yuck, I hate cucumbers,” Soothy said, sticking her little pink tongue out. “What are you going to do with those photos?”

I had put my phone away, satisfied with the documentation I’d procured.

“Nothing,” I said. “I just like seeing it getting used. Whenever you guys want to play with it, go for it,” I said.

Max had abandoned Sunny – moving on to a hole in the grass he was inspecting with his fingers.

“It’s stupid,” said Soothy. She kept her face straight and her gaze tight on me.

I smiled big at her. “That’s ok – Sunny isn’t for everyone,” I said. “Not every kid finds pleasure in their mind.”

“What?”

“Just that not every kid will like Sunny. Some kids need to be numbed out by screens and stuff,” I said.

She had stopped listening, joining Max, digging her fingers into the grass.

“I have an idea, Max. Let’s get some water from the hose and fill up the hole,” Soothy said in an excited whisper.

I picked up Sunny, remembering it was still recording everything. I hoped Soothy and Max’s vocabulary wouldn’t bring down my score.

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I brought Sunny to bed that night, leaving it on the table next to my window, hoping it would capture the howl. I didn’t need Caleb, I’d use Sunny to prove it was real. I fell asleep quickly, as I always did, but woke in the night to such nausea that I had to rip my shirt off because the weight of the fabric felt heavy on my stomach. Still in sleep, the howl felt almost as if it was coming from the nausea or the nausea was a symptom of the howl. The feeling I needed to puke subsided quickly though, and I fell back asleep to the rock of the howl.

In the morning, I awoke to a notification from the Sunny app. *It’s time for your daily report!* I clicked through the prompts on the app to reveal my grade. *Your child’s language grade yesterday was D*. I felt my tongue heavy in my mouth and my eyes dry. I knew I probably wouldn’t receive the best grade, but a D? Three and four-year-olds got better grades. I had put my age in as the oldest age Sunny allowed – five years old. Beyond that, Sunny wasn’t programmed to track language development. The grade must have been a result of some problem on the backend with the device, some glitch with the hardware.

*Your child used 60% fewer words yesterday than other Sunny users, and 75% of the words your child used were ones a developmentally on-track three or four-year-old uses. Consider engaging your child in regular conversations where they control the flow and topic of discussion. Reading aloud to your child may also help expose them to new words and sentence structures. Individual grades do not necessarily reflect your child’s overall language skills. For best results, ensure your Sunny is always within a two-foot radius of your child.*

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Getting fired was less devastating than I imagined. My boss sent me a calendar invite titled “Your role at Sunny.” Before the meeting, I imagined her offering me a raise or a manager position. Perhaps even telling me I’d be Monica’s new boss.

“Erin, this meeting is to inform you that you’re being let go,” she said, nodding as if in agreement with herself. I realized in that moment, almost instantly, how stupid Sunny was. Over her prepared script – *your role no longer aligns with the company’s goals and KPIs* – I imagined emailing the parents from the inbox. *Dear users, you’re all sick in the head, you depraved souls.*

The toy only highlighted the most pathetic parts of parents. If you wanted to fuck your babysitter, the toy let you get close. If you were an absent parent, the toy made you feel falsely close. If you thought your kid was a genius, the toy could help you brag to your friends. Watching my boss on my screen, I realized I was alone. I was just sitting on the couch.

My email to the parents would read: *You all paid too much for a device that will only make you sicker.* My boss didn’t mention the photos I’d used of Max for the corporate blog, but I knew they were why she was firing me. In a city of close to four million people, my coworker Matt happened to know Max’s parents from an infant music class they had attended when Soothy was a baby. Matt, my imbecile, asleep at the wheel, barely holding on by a thread coworker, had informed my boss that the child on the blog was named Max, not Alex, and he didn’t have a father named Steve.

From there, the story unraveled. It didn’t matter that my boss had previously told me the piece was “the best blog post she had read during her tenure at Sunny” or that she described it as “relatable and uplifting.” Once she realized the people weren’t real, all that mattered was that I’d made up the interview. “You’ll need to return all company property to Sunny Words. This includes your laptop and any other technology we provided you. IT will send you a prepaid shipping box for your convenience. Please return all devices by the close of business next week.”

My boss audibly exhaled as if she had just finished a brisk walk. “Is all of that clear, Erin?”

“Super!”

“Do you have any questions for me?”

“No, I just really appreciated the opportunity to work with such an incredible team on such an incredible product.”

When I got off the Zoom, I felt my phone buzz next to my thigh. It was a notification from the Sunny Words inbox. *I WANT A REFUND !!!* was all the email said*.* I knew who it was from without checking the sender’s name. I couldn’t feel my fingers as I typed back a response.

*Hello Sue, I have tried to ignore your harassing emails. Do you know a real person receives your downright abusive emails? No, you probably never stop to think – who is on the other side of the screen? What are they going through? I will tell you what I’m going through – my mother recently DIED, and while you are concerned with a TOY I am concerned with grieving one of the most important relationships in my life.*

*I have tried to explain this to you, but let me try again: We cannot offer you a refund. You decided to buy this device. You gave it to your nitwit daughter-in-law who lost the charger. I offered to send you a charger for no additional cost. It is not Sunny’s fault your grandchild doesn’t speak at three years old. While I am not a child development specialist, i can tell you that your grandchild 1000000% has developmental delays that need to be evaluated by a professional. No toy that sells itself as an aid in child development will make a lasting difference to your grandchild. Your grandchild needs more help than AI can offer. The toy is basically just used to spy and make people feel bad. Consider yourself, your stupid daughter-in-law and your mute grandchild LUCKY to have avoided this TOY. Please do not respond to this email as I mentioned, I am in a period of bereavement and will be taking time off.*

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Halo paid even more than Sunny. The interviews were easy. When they asked why I left Sunny after only three months, I informed them it wasn’t a good fit. I was looking for a company with more leadership and growth opportunities. They were in an early funding round, up to their eyeballs in work, and took this answer at face value. With no HR or formal hiring processes, to them, I appeared dissatisfied with a less ambitious company.

Adam, the twenty-something who interviewed me, had an easy laugh and sleepy eyes.

“We all do a bit of everything around here,” he said. “We all value mess and flourish when there’s a problem we can really sink our teeth into.”

“Same,” I said, unsure of what he meant.

“The vets we partner with are pretty autonomous, so it’s really just making sure clients get timely responses through the app. They’re going through such a hard time, so promptness is key.” The funding model was unclear to me, but it sounded like the founder, Will, had enough money to make it work. “This is really Will’s passion project,” Adam explained over Zoom. “Once he sold his last company, he knew he wanted to start Halo. No matter what. Watching Skipper die was one of the worst experiences of his life.”

The basic issue Halo attempted to solve was simple. Veterinary expenses, grossly unaffordable for many people, prohibited owners from treating Frisky or Spot’s leukemia or kidney disease. Halo brought humanity and dignity to a stressful, overwhelming, and guilt-ridden process. With Halo, you didn’t even have to leave your house. You could make an appointment with one of the Halo-partnered vets through the app, and a board-certified veterinarian would come to your home to put poor Frisky/Spot out of their misery. No long waitlists or exams at the vet necessary. Halo took pet owners at their word and treated them as the authority – you know what your pet needs and can provide them with the dignity and care they deserve, right from the comfort of your home.

“I saw it first hand with my dog, Ellie,” said Adam, lowering his head. “I wish I’d had something like Halo. She really suffered. And for probably too long.”

“That’s partly why I applied for this job,” I said. “My cat, Princess Sparkles, her heart failed when I’d only had her for a couple of years. I spent a whole night at the emergency vet waiting to be seen while she just cried and cried. And then after all that, they just told me she would have to be put down.”

“And that’s not what she deserves,” Adam said, his eyes widening. “We love to see people who aren’t just passionate about the work, but really understand it on a personal level as well.”

After the call, Adam asked me to send over a reference. Just as a formality, he assured me. I decided to email Monica – I knew my old boss and Matt were off the table, but her relaxed orientation to work in general made me hopeful she’d agree.

*Happy to, Erin,* she wrote back.  *For what it’s worth, I think “Steve” rocked.* I felt my face warm with pleasure. In my attempt to please my former boss, had I actually aligned myself further with Monica? I wrote back quickly. *Thanks, I appreciate it. And yeah… I agree… RIP Steve.*

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The night after I was fired, Joe – Soothy and Max’s father – knocked on my door. He stood on the porch, his hands obscured in his pockets.

“The blog post – I know it’s just work, but Alice was really upset that you used photos of Max.” He refused to make eye contact with me, looking somewhere to the right of my body. At the mention of Alice, I understood what was going on – Joe could give a shit about the stupid blog post, but his irate wife had sent him to do her dirty work. Alice needed Joe to play Protective Dad so she could fuck him quietly later that night with her shirt still on.

“Absolutely,” I said. “I completely understand, and I am deeply sorry for my actions – I should have never got your family wrapped up in my work drama. I really do respect you and Alice.”

Joe nodded without looking away from a dark stain on the concrete porch he was now focused on. “For now, Alice doesn’t feel comfortable with you talking to the kids.”.

I felt like a child being told I couldn’t hang out with my friends. “Oh,” I heard my voice catch. “Of course,” I said, recovering. “I understand.” For the first time Joe looked at me momentarily to confirm what he was hearing in my voice.

“Just for now,” he said, trying to soften the news. “You can still use the yard, of course.”

Alice, that stupid bitch, I thought. “Yes, that makes sense.”

“We know your lease isn’t up for another nine months.” His voice lowered, as if he didn’t want to continue talking. “So, you know, at that point, we,” he inspected the wooden beam that supported the little roof above the porch. He moved his hand along the wood as if studying its integrity. “At that point, we will need to re-evaluate,” he said. “The situation, that is with the management company.”

I wasn’t sure Joe and Alice could actually kick me out since they also rented their house through the same management company I did. Looking at Joe, I felt bad for how spineless and pitiful he appeared before me, delivering news he thought would scare me. I put my hand over my chest to appear affected.

“I understand.”

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I got the Halo job two days after reaching out to Monica. Whatever she said had sealed the deal for Adam and his colleagues. I wrote her back. *Hey, I got the job. Thanks for whatever you said. Would love to buy you a drink as a thank you if you have the time.* I closed my email quickly – I knew she’d never respond. But my phone hummed after just a few minutes. *Mazel, Erin. Let’s get that drink.* Had I successfully pitched myself as Bored Employee to Monica? I stopped myself from immediately responding. Writing her back later would make me appear calm – not overeager or too available.

With Monica’s response in my mind, I felt excited for the future. Anything could happen, I was getting a drink with Monica. Walking to the post office to dutifully return my Sunny laptop, I had a new outlook on the job. *It was actually very worth it, because I met my best friend, Monica*, I imagined telling a nondescript face. *The job sucked, sure, but how much can I complain if I got a lifelong friendship out of it?* I failed to include the Sunny device in the package I sent back. I was sure it was broken – why else would it have given me a D? – so I didn’t think they needed it back. Instead, I buried it in the garden, underneath a shrub I know Soothie and Max liked to play by. If Alice was so afraid of me getting near her children, I’d have to stay close to them another way.

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I met Monica for drinks at the same bar I took Caleb to on our first date. She wore black jeans and a thin, pink silk top that made her shoulders look broad in an exciting way. The shirt didn’t look girlish or prim on her, it had a more ironic effect. Like, haha I’m wearing pink. Her hair looked clean and shiny as always, but her face was free of any makeup – she hadn’t dressed up for me. Arriving before her, I had ordered an 18-dollar bespoke cocktail that came with a dried orange rind and a single, square ice cube. She ordered a Stella, which made my drink immediately seem unnecessarily flirtatious and garish.

“So you really screwed the pooch, as they say, huh?” she said, sitting across from me.

“Oh, with Sunny?” I said, wishing the orange peel would disappear from my drink. “Whatever, I don’t really care.”

“Really? You don’t care? You seemed pretty pro-Sunny when you were there. I was sure you were in it for the long haul.”

I could tell Monica wanted some explanation – wanted my dedication to work to tie back to a belief in Sunny and its mission. My allegiance wasn’t to the company though, but to the driving force of work itself. She wanted me to have some greater goal in life – some thesis on technology. But I just wanted to succeed, to be good. I was a vessel, ready to be filled by every moment and what it asked of me. In a sense, my orientation to life was quite Zen. I didn’t meditate, but I imagined myself like a Buddhist monk – no attachment to the world other than meeting reality. The work itself – a smart toy’s inbox, a shoe company’s Instagram – didn’t matter. What mattered was that I was the perfect person to perform every assigned task, every duty imaginable.

I took the orange wheel from my drink and held it under the table before dropping it on the bar floor. The drink still looked stupid but a little less so now. I shrugged. “I don’t know, it was just a job. It pays the bills, let’s me do other things in life.”

Monica smiled without looking away from me.

“Did you just take a piece of fruit out of your drink?”

“What?”

“Your drink. Did you just drop that orange peel on the floor?”

“I’m allergic,” I said.

“Allergic to *oranges*?”

“Ha-ha” I said. “I’m kidding, obviously. I just don’t like them.”

“I heard about the email,” she said.

“What email?”

“The email you apparently sent a user. Heard it was –” she fingered the label of her bottle, the paper pilling around its neck. “Pretty out there.” Monica was still smiling. I could tell she was loving this.

“Well that woman was totally insane. She would not stop emailing me.”

“She wasn’t emailing you though, she was emailing Sunny.”

“Right, but I managed the inbox.”

Monica didn’t look uncomfortable. If anything, she looked more energized than when she walked in.

“Do you want another drink?”

“Please,” I said.

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“Jesus, what is all this?” Standing over my kitchen table littered with recent CVS items, Monica swayed slightly. I handed her a beer I’d retrieved from the fridge, surveying the cellophane-wrapped items from behind her. She touched the promising products – concealers, tinted moisturizers, contour brushes, identical liquid eyeliners in blue and charcoal, lipsticks in cherry and burnt plum, volumizing mascaras, lengthening mascaras, nail polishes in neutrals and pastels, a box or two of teeth whitening strips.

“Do you actually use any of this?” she said, observing my face, looking for evidence.

“Not really,” I said. “I have way more though.”   
 She followed me to the bathroom, where I opened the mirror above the sink and the cabinet under it to reveal a mini Sephora.

“Oh my god, Erin, this is like, a maniacal amount of makeup for someone who doesn’t wear any,” Monica said, staring at the shimmery packages. “I feel like you’ve brought me to your little back house to kill me,” she said. “Like you’ll put me in a full-beat posthumously.”

“I like pretty things,” I said, grinning at the attention Monica was giving me. I felt more special with each observation she made of my life.

She picked up an eyeshadow palette and rubbed shimmery gold powder over one eyelid. She picked up her beer and stood before the mirror, chugging with one eye covered in eyeshadow. She put the beer down and took a deep breath before applying shadow to her other eyelid.

“I’ll get you another one,” I said.

I couldn’t wait to return to her in my bathroom. Monica. In my bathroom. I wondered if she would spend the night. She could borrow my pajamas. I could make us coffee in the morning. When we woke up, we could talk about our night out. We’d recall how it went sitting in fuzzy robes in the living room, watching *Sex And The City* on the Roku.

When I returned with the beer, Monica had covered her face in more makeup. I looked at my face next to hers – the light that caught my flaws highlighted Monica’s feminine features, even with her cartoonish makeup. My eyes looked tired and swollen – with their characteristic sag underneath. Monica’s face was still and angular. None of her features were exceptional, but together, they coagulated into a face I wanted to squeeze or kiss.

After reading various Reddit threads, I determined many years ago that I was a six. From my research, sixes generally have attractive qualities hindered by one decisively unattractive feature like a big nose or crooked teeth. In my case, I knew it was my droopy eyes. They had always sagged – even when I was a child. In middle and high school, I tried to remedy this – eye masks, chilled spoons in the morning, ten hours of sleep, a low-sodium diet, 64 ounces of water, but none of it made a difference – I still looked like the cartoon dog Droopy.

Monica, on the other hand, was a solid eight – but depending on your taste, a nine. If you’re wondering how to determine who is an eight – probably the most attractive person you saw this month was an eight.