

Complaint

I have no memory of talking to Jackson, but apparently we spoke on the phone. He knew my name at any rate, and he was unfortunately not pleased with the assistance I had given him. I couldn't remember having had a bad support call, which I recognize as a short-coming on my part. Clearly, I was not as sensitive to the customer's needs as I should have been. Nonetheless, when my supervisor informed me of their decision to let me go, I asked for an explanation. All I was told was that a customer had complained. When I asked who, she said Jackson, which was a slip up on her part, but the name meant nothing to me anyway. So when I asked who Jackson was, she turned red, and trying to recover, said that all I needed to know is that they had received a complaint about me, and that my services were no longer required. She sent me to pack up my desk with our new intern in tow, presumably to make sure I didn't cause a scene. I'm not sure what she expected the intern to do if I did become belligerent, and the intern seemed to be thinking the same thing. His name was Billy, a nerdy young fellow finishing up a Bachelor's in something. He told me his major when we met, but truth be told I didn't think he'd be around more than a day or so, so I hadn't bothered to remember. Ironically, he was the one to see me leave.

As I packed up my desk, I called HR. It was my understanding that an explanation of some kind had to be given when an employee was fired. I had worked there for four years, not terribly long, but long enough that I felt I had the right to know why, specifically, I was being let go. When HR didn't answer, I decided to walk down to their office. Billy followed me, protesting mildly, not having the faintest idea of what to do.

When I walked into the HR office a look of terror swept over Carol's face. Carol was the receptionist. She warned me that she would call security. This surprised me, because Carol and I had always been on good terms, or so I thought. In the most non-threatening tone I could muster I asked if I could speak to Jim, who was the HR rep that I normally met with, when questions of leave time and such arose.

Jim stepped out of his office with hands raised in a pose that was meant to be both calming and defensive. He was trying to calm me down. Which was odd, because I didn't even feel angry, or at least I didn't think I did. I was merely curious.

Neither of us said anything for a moment. I felt awkward, while the others apparently felt very tense. Billy stood behind me in his perpetually befuddled state. When Jim finally did speak, he spoke in supplication, asking me what it was that he could do for me. I asked if he could tell me why I was being fired. He corrected me, by saying "let go." Before I could reply Carol interjected with a touch of disgust, "you know exactly what you did."

I protested mildly, "I honestly don't know. A gentleman named Jackson complained about my service. I would like to know what the nature of his complaint was, so that in the future, I can do better."

Jim's response was conciliatory, but firm, "Jackson complained about your service, and I'm afraid that is grounds for immediate dismissal. I do apologize, but you no longer have a job here. If it's any consolation, we can write up your last check and include the holiday pay you would've earned tomorrow, should you still have been employed here."

The following day was both Friday, my last work day of the week, and a national holiday. If I had been employed through the remainder of the week my paycheck would have included

pay for that day, as though it were a normal work day. I felt that this was very generous of them. I thanked Jim, apologized for any inconvenience I might have caused, and asked them, if it were possible, to convey my regrets to Jackson, for having caused him distress.

Billy and I returned to my cubicle, where I packed up the remainder of my personal belongings, being sure to leave anything that was office property, such as the hole-punch. I had a few snacks stored away in one of my drawers that I wouldn't need. I offered them to Billy and he accepted them, saying that he would take them to his workstation later. Despite the circumstances, it was a pleasant exchange.

As I walked to the elevator I caught sight of a few of my co-workers watching me. Understandably, they were relieved that I had not caused a scene, or rather a worse scene than what had occurred in the HR office that is. Already the memory sent waves of embarrassment through me. Carol stood in the doorway to HR's reception, eyeing me with disapproval. Whatever I had said to Jackson had clearly been inappropriate to say the least. Surely, I deserved to be let go.

Ordinarily, I try not to drink too much. However, I decided that drinking a little bit more than is recommended might be an appropriate response to being fired. At the very least it would give me some release from stress, if only for a short while. To be sure I needed to make plans for the future, and for re-acquiring gainful employment. Rather than being responsible, however, I decided to sit in council with a bottle of cheap whiskey and some off-brand cola. I needed to be thrifty after all.

My hangover wasn't too bad, for which I was grateful. I drank coffee, ate cereal, and searched for jobs online. It was a bad time to be fired, economically speaking. There were very few viable job opportunities in the area.

I briefly gave up on the job search and began brushing up my resume, obsessing over every comma, struggling to walk that fine line between a confident sense of self-worth and outright arrogance. I always find the tone of the resume, and the cover letter, to be the hardest part. What I really wanted to say is please, please hire me. I wanted to beg, and as such most of the time I spent in writing the resume was making sure the desperation didn't come through between the lines, overpowering the façade of calm, self-assurance that I was trying to maintain.

I was reasonably happy with my resume, so I turned back to the job search. The options had not improved within the last half hour. Hoping for the best, I selected a half-dozen jobs to start with and sent in my resume.

Two weeks passed before I was called into an interview. To be honest, it wasn't a job I particularly wanted, but as the saying goes, beggars can't be choosers, and all sayings are sayings for a reason. Whatever they might mean, they're a saying, so they must be true.

It was an office manager job, which out of the many that I had applied for, paid the best, so I knew that I should be happy. The interview went very well. They interviewed by committee. There was a bald, middle-aged man, with a confused expression, a young woman, who was very earnest and clearly trying her best to impress the third interviewer, who obviously had the final decision. The third person was a woman on the cusp of middle age, though she clung with white-knuckle grip to her youth, now through slightly too much makeup and a touch of hair dye, later, or so I imagined was likely, through face-lifts and botox. I shouldn't think such things. My own personality flaws got the better of me. I mustn't judge by appearances, or come to any

conclusions, and truth be told it's best not to notice anything at all. Regardless, sensing where the true power lie, I found myself addressing her, no matter who was asking the questions.

When the interview was over we all stood in unison, laughing at something inconsequential, shaking hands, and I hadn't felt so good since long before I got fired. Indeed, the last time I had felt that good was probably at my cousin's birthday party, a few months before my employment ended, when an old flame had convinced me to drink more than I should and, more importantly, to dance with her. Dancing is something I should never do, however the alcohol and her smile lured me out onto the floor, where I laid all my rhythmical shortcomings bare. We did get to slow-dance to one song, which I hear on the radio occasionally. Whenever I hear it I can smell her hair, the sound somehow triggers my olfactory nerves. It's so difficult to describe smell, despite the fact that it's the most evocative sense, perhaps that's why it transcends language. Her hair smelled clean, vaguely floral, but there was something else there too, something darker, something that reminded me of the forest, I still can't quite place it. Dancing with her was the last time I had felt good.

I was told they would call me the following day with a decision, which they did. When I saw who the call was from my heart began to beat heavily. When I answered, Trisha, the most powerful of the interviewers, asked if it was me to whom she was speaking, using my name of course. I responded that yes, it was indeed me. What I literally said was, "this is he."

Her tone was somber, which immediately filled me with dread, which turned out to be well founded. My heart, which had been so excited for me, slowed until it felt like it might stop altogether, growing heavier with each beat. In checking my references, she had discovered that Jackson had made a complaint about me. She thanked me for coming in and for my time, but in light of the complaint, she could not in good conscience offer me the job. I understood of course, and thanked her for her time, which was much more valuable than mine. We parted on good terms. Unfortunately, employment with their firm was simply more than I had any right to hope for. I realized then that I had shot too high, and had of course, inevitably, fallen short.

In the following weeks, I applied for fast food, garbage collection, custodial work, any job that hitherto I would have considered myself overqualified for. Each position, upon discovering the complaint, regretfully rejected my application.

To save money I stopped eating vegetables, meats, and grains, and switched to instant noodles. I sold everything that I could to help make rent, stopping short of my television, a handful of movies, necessary clothing, and my mattress, I did sell the bed frame though. This, in addition to my existing savings, meant that I had an apartment for another four months. Surely, I could find a job within that time.

Four months passed and still no one would hire me. I considered taking up crime, but I knew I wouldn't be any good at it. Nor did I have any idea where to begin, with shoplifting I suppose. I did steal a pre-made sandwich out of a grocery store deli. I'm not proud of it.

The fifth month passed, and I was evicted. Before becoming homeless I had sold my remaining belongings: the television, the movies, and so on. I bought a cheap backpack where I placed all that remained of my once proud collection of stuff: clothes, what cash I still had, my phone, for my last few weeks of service, and an old book which I kept for sentimental reasons. Thus, on the day of my eviction, I threw the backpack over my shoulders and walked out into the street, not entirely sure what to do with myself.

I wasted no time in finding a shelter to sleep at, I had no intentions of spending the night outside, not until it was absolutely necessary at any rate. I quickly took up a routine of sitting on a park bench all day and sleeping in a crowded shelter at night. I made some friends, and the sisters who ran the shelter were very kind. The food they served was also significantly better than the instant noodles, which I think had started to corrode my intestines. My friends would ask me questions about how I ended up being homeless, but I would quickly change the subject, skirt the issue as best I could, afraid of what they would think if they found out.

Regrettably, and probably inevitably, they did find out. One of my homeless compatriots had managed to secure a fifth of cheap vodka, which he graciously shared with me, which in turn, loosened my tongue so to speak. The gentleman, to whom I told the sordid tale, agreed to secrecy, and in truth forgot it in the haze of his drunken stupor. However, our conversation was overheard, and soon everyone at the shelter knew of the complaint.

The sisters, though understandably shocked, forgave me, as it was their Christian duty. Even so, I still find them looking at me with disappointment. I understand, and ultimately, I agree, they are right to be disappointed. In some small way, I think the embarrassment I feel when I catch these glances serves as a sort of sanctification. Shame is proof that I can be better.

Still, there are times when I think that being fired, being unable to get a job, and subsequently becoming homeless might have been too harsh. This is not the case though, I am merely tempted to think such things. I confessed this to Sister Marguerite one day.

Sympathetically, but with a tone of gentle approbation, she replied “I understand that it can be tempting to think that way. However, if Jackson complained, he must’ve had a very good reason for it.”

Still unsure, I asked “but could there have been a misunderstanding?”

She shook her head sadly, “I don’t see how that’s possible, why would he have complained?”

Despite this affirmation of what I already knew, the thought still bothers me on occasion. It lurks in the back of my mind waiting to takeover if I let my guard down. It doesn’t occur to me all that often, only if I stop and think about my present situation. As such, the obvious solution is simply not to think about it.