

It wasn't that she didn't like her job. More accurately, it was a matter of missed opportunities. Bianca Simmons had at least twenty minutes every morning to think about her life choices on the way to the frozen vegetable factory where she worked. After college, she had needed a job to support herself and her younger sister, Elicia, and keeping the books for Dicken Frozen Vegetables just happened to be available. She was tasked with the job of providing for Elicia when their parents died tragically in a car crash on the way to Bianca's college graduation, and Elicia, being just sixteen, had needed someone to depend on until she went to university.

"I'll take this job, for now, to keep you in school, and then when you turn eighteen and receive your college fund, I'll move on," Bianca assured her sister. True to her word she worked at the frozen vegetable factory until Elicia could provide for herself, but after, she never sought a better job. Small and mild, she was not one to reach for the stars. Bianca had even been told that by her few friends.

"Vegetables suit you, B," her friend Rosie had said not unkindly.

"Maybe you're just not the type to make it big," her weather reporter friend Molly offered.

She didn't think they were wrong necessarily. She was good at her job and never had any complaints from her boss. It was just that she was worried about the alternative life she could've had if she had taken another job, earned a different degree, or if her parents had never passed away. Elicia, with her big blonde hair, blue eyeshadow, and narrow shoulders had high ambitions after graduation, and now she was the most sought-after lawyer in their city. Bianca couldn't drive down the street without seeing a billboard showing off her little sister's anatomically beautiful face, one so different from her own. In her younger life, Bianca had cursed the genetics that had gifted her mousy, brown hair, a weak chin, and a slow metabolism, but through the years she had learned to accept what she had. She wasn't unpleasant looking but had never been anything like Elicia.

Arriving at Dickens Frozen Vegetables, Bianca's workday began. Most days it consisted of sitting at her tiny desk in her tiny office next to the factory. The office was the size of a large closet and only allowed space for her desk, chair, and two filing cabinets. On the northeast wall, was a small window that let in weak Minnesota sunlight in the mornings and a view of the dismal clouds in the afternoon. Being adjacent to the factory had once irritated her due to the noisy hum of equipment packaging their inventory, but now she noticed that it was harder to concentrate without the familiar noise. Along with tracking the cash flow, analyzing the company's financial strength, and planning for the next fiscal year, Mr. Dickens had turned Bianca into a sort of glorified secretary and repeatedly gave her jobs such as sorting through the mail and answering the phone. It was regrettable considering she had graduated top of her class.

This particular Thursday, however, things changed. After her daily contemplation of life in the car, she arrived at work a few minutes late. That rarely happened, but the neighbor's dog had escaped into her yard and she had struggled to get it back under the fence. Mr. Dickens didn't mind though as long as she brought him his coffee.

"But don't let it happen again otherwise you're going to have to bring me a bagel with my coffee," he chuckled to himself, sending a spray of spit.

She resented him for his sexist behavior but had to get on with her day, so after dropping off his purposely lukewarm coffee, she sat down at her desk. Bianca always checked the mail first. Normally she received letters about the company and frozen vegetables as a whole, but this morning, a letter caught her eye. It was handwritten and yellowed, and the edges were fuzzy with wear. On the front, it was addressed to Ms. Bianca Simmons and contained no return address. Nervous about surprises, Bianca shoved it in her top desk drawer. She was not used to receiving anything out of the ordinary and something told her this letter was extraordinary. It

worried her. The rest of the mail was normal, but the mystery of the handwritten letter nagged at her throughout the rest of her workday.

At five o'clock on the dot, Bianca said goodbye to Mr. Dickens and drove to Rosie's Place, her favorite diner. Every week she met to talk, but mostly listen, to her little sister.

"Hey, Bianca!" Rosie, the owner of the diner, greeted her best customer. "Fries and a shake?"

Bianca smiled and nodded. This was her safe place and often she would sit in one of the red leather booths for hours on end. As she waited for her fries and Elicia's arrival, Bianca glanced around the diner. Over the years, it had gotten considerably shabbier. The walls were in need of a paint job, chipped areas revealed the ugly beige color underneath, and there were cracks in the leather seats. As Rose placed Bianca's fries and shake in front of her, Elicia walked in and sat across from her sister.

"Hey, how are you doing?" Bianca acknowledged Elicia as she dipped some fries into a small cup of ketchup.

"Not too bad, busy, but fine," Elicia said snagging a fry.

"Get your own," Bianca said amiably, "Honestly, I'm a bit shaken by a letter I received at work today."

"Oh?" Elicia replied quizzically.

"Yeah, it was the strangest thing, it was yellow and old-looking, and addressed to me." Elicia looked up from the menu. "Is that not normal?" Elicia asked. "For something to be addressed to you? Do you think I should just get fries or a burger?"

"Burger," Bianca answered. "Yeah, normally everything is sent to the company. I just didn't like anything about it, so I stuck it in my drawer."

"You weren't even a little curious?" Elicia scoffed and beckoned Rosie over to their

booth.

“Nope, it could be something really bad.”

“Cheeseburger and coke please, Rosie. Thanks!” Elicia turned from Rosie back to Bianca. “Oh, come on, just take a chance for once! You need to get out there and see what the world has to offer.”

Bianca was tired of hearing her sister act like she was cowardly and changed the subject.

On Friday, she was ready for the weekend to begin. It had been a long and tedious week and the sun hadn't shone through once to lift her spirits. Once again, she went through the motions of the morning and this time she was not late. Hanging her coat up on the hook behind her door, she let her gaze fall on the stack of mail piled on her desk. Could it be? There, resting on the mail about frozen vegetables, sat the letter. Bianca rushed to her desk and tugged open the top drawer. It was empty except for a few candy wrappers and pencils. The letter had moved. Curiosity finally overcoming fear, she reached for her letter opener, and timidly slid the thin knife through the paper.

“Dear Ms. Bianca Simmons,” it wrote. “By now you will have found out what to do with your life. You probably have a job and a house and hopefully, satisfaction that you survived the hell that was your childhood.”

That she could agree with.

“I'm writing to warn you about your future. If I know anything about you, you're probably sitting at a desk half-heartedly doing your job without anything exciting or daring to look forward to.” Bianca frowned at that. Just last week she had won two tickets from a radio contest. She was not going to go, but she could have gone. That was somewhat exciting.

“You need to take action now. Your life is going to end soon. Do you really want to die

not knowing how many red lights you can run before going to jail?”

Bianca didn't want to know that. She did not want to go to jail, but she couldn't deny the fact that this letter shook her to the core. How did this person know her so well? And was she going to die so soon?

Bianca took action.

First, she shredded the letter along with the envelope through the mechanical shredder. Striking a match very carefully, she burned every shred until all that was left was a pile of smoking ashes. Then, she took the ashes and flushed them down the toilet for good.

Satisfied with her work, Bianca marched into Mr. Dickens's office.

“Patrick,” She stunned herself. She never used anyone's first name unless they were family or extremely close friends. “I'm quitting.”

“Okay,” Mr. Dickens yawned slightly. She had woken him from his mid-morning nap. “See you next week.”

“You don't understand, I'm quitting for good,” Bianca struggled to keep her balance. The magnitude of this idea was finally hitting her. With an unsteady whip of her hair, she turned to leave but gravity got the best of her and she collapsed to the floor.

Bianca awoke in a rock-hard hospital bed, so hard that she wondered if it was made of stone. The room containing the bed was cramped and a curtain divided the room concealing the other side. Bianca got up from her bed and quickly tugged at the curtain, afraid at what it might reveal.

“Hello, there,” a small and frail man lay in the bed on the other side of the room. “I've been waiting for a roommate!”

“How long have I been here?” Bianca was worried she had been out for weeks.

“Oh... not long, they brought you in here about an hour and a half ago I think,” He looked

ancient and the skin on his face was so thin it was almost translucent. "How are you feeling?"

Bianca wasn't sure. This was all very confusing. "Fine, I think, what happened?"

"Apparently you took a little fall and then they brought you here because you hadn't woken up yet."

"Well, I'm fine now, so I guess I'll be going..."

"Hey, that's fine with me. Can I just ask you a question?" The old man looked at her with gleaming and unnerving eyes. "Would it be possible for you to do a little favor for me?"

Bianca wasn't sure, but she had decided after receiving that letter that she needed to take more chances.

"Sure?"

"I need you to go to my pal Jim at the TV station and tell him I couldn't get Gladys to come. They don't let me have a phone here, and someone needs to tell him before it's too late," The old man smiled freely.

"Well, I guess I don't have much else to do," Bianca considered the fact that she had quit her job and had no standing obligations. "I'll do it as soon as I leave." She answered the old man but saw that he had already fallen asleep.

Nervous and slightly confused, Bianca checked out of the hospital. The TV Station was right in that part of town so, after a quick ride in a Taxi shaped like a boat, she arrived at the door of the studio. There was a doorbell on the side of the door that instructed to ring and not knock, but on closer inspection, Bianca noticed that the bell was broken. Timidly, she knocked on the door.

"Gladys! Thank goodness you're here, I was beginning to get worried." A tall man the size of Goliath opened the door. He wore a tight gray T-shirt and jeans, and to Bianca's surprise, no shoes.

“Oh! You’re mistaken, I’m Bianca,” She struggled to correct the man who wouldn’t stop talking. He led her through a maze of cameras and doors that eventually ended in front of a door labeled wardrobe.

“Go to Wardrobe right away, Sydney is a nervous wreck. Ready for the big game?”

“What? What game?” Bianca was frozen solid.

“The quiz show,” The man sighed in an exasperated manner. “Have you forgotten you hold the world record for the smartest woman alive? Hurry up now; we don’t have all day!” He pushed her into the room and shut the door with a condemning slam. This was turning out to be an extraordinary day, one that Bianca was not prepared for. Ever since she had received that strange letter, things had gotten progressively more bizarre.

“I’m telling you, I’m not Gladys!” Bianca told everyone within earshot, but they were either too preoccupied with their job or they didn’t care. In a blur of powder and glitter, she was transformed into what was apparently TV ready. Never in her life had she worn so much make-up.

“Much better,” the bare-footed man had returned. “Sydney will take you onto the stage where the crowd is waiting for you. This is a tremendous day!” Bianca shuddered with fear. How was she supposed to answer questions on TV in front of millions of people? Oh, if only she hadn’t agreed to help the old man from the hospital. It was all that letter’s fault!

The studio’s stage was ablaze with a thousand lights and situated in what seemed to be a large football arena. The roar of the crowd sounded like rumbling thunder and deafening music was blasted from speakers. The man, who Bianca could only assume was the host, stood in the center announcing the show’s guest.

“Ladies and Gentlemen! Let me introduce to you the one and only Gladys Johnson!”

Sydney pushed her onto the stage, stunning Bianca like a deer in headlights.

“Welcome to the show, Gladys! I think I speak for all of us here tonight that we just can’t wait to see you show us your magnificent brain!” The host flashed a huge smile at Bianca, which to her looked like a menacing tiger baring his teeth before the kill. This was all very overwhelming for her. “Would you like to say something to your adoring fans?”

“H-Hello, everyone,” Bianca stuttered. The roar of the crowd grew by several decibels at the sound of their beloved genius.

“Great! Now you know how this game works, don’t you? With every wrong answer, the pedestal on which you’re standing will rise, and, if you answer incorrectly too many times, you will be forced to jump off into a net just a few inches above a pool of alligators.”

Bianca glanced down and noticed the pool containing the thrashing animals. How had she not seen that before?

“That shouldn’t be a problem for you though, Gladys!” The host continued. “Let’s get started with our first question,” This one sentence shook Bianca to the bone. Never in her life had she experienced such knee-trembling fear. The fear of being found out as an imposter was almost worse than not being able to answer the impossible questions.

“Here we go! What Indian mausoleum was called a ‘teardrop... on the cheek of time’ by Nobel Prize in Literature laureate Rabindranath Tagore?”

Did this man speak English, Bianca wondered? She was head of finances at Dickerson’s Frozen Vegetables, she never had time to learn about anything else! After minutes of seemingly deafening silence, Bianca answered.

“The Tomb of Cyrus?” She knew as soon as she uttered the words that she was wrong.

“No, I’m very sorry, Gladys, and extremely surprised! This was a warm-up question!” The host looked at her with curious eyes. Up, up, and up the pedestal went until she was fifteen feet off the ground. Bianca understood that if she didn’t get the next question right the whole world



would riot.

“What geothermal Icelandic site has the same name as a 1980 movie?” Bianca shook her head.

She was a goner.

“Inferno?”

“Wrong!” And up she went fifteen feet higher.

And on it went. The crowd booed with each wrong answer, and Bianca shook with fear as she ascended into the sky. Question after question she answered wrong, and eventually she could barely see the ground. Each person in the audience looked as though they wanted to see her fall to her death, but then again, they were so far away she couldn't quite tell. If this is what she got for trying new things, Bianca was happy to stay at her mundane job with her noisy factory sounds.

Finally, the host asked her the final question.

“In printing, it's the color black. In chemistry, it's potassium. In baseball, it's a strikeout. Which letter is it?” Bianca couldn't even fathom answering it correctly because the nerves, height, and wind this high up were more than she could handle.

“Oh, I'm not sure!” She cried out painfully. As soon as she let out her condemning answer the ground began to shake and the roar of the crowd overtook any other sound.

“Jump, jump, jump!” The crowd chanted away.

With a terrified look over the edge, Bianca shut her eyes and accepted defeat. A single step of the pedestal would end this terrible reality.

The wind was surprisingly soft as she fell towards the chopping alligators. It felt almost as if she was dancing among the clouds, not plummeting towards certain death. With a sharp thud, Bianca landed on the net. Why was the net so hard? And where were the sounds of the

crowd and the vicious chopping of the alligators?

Bianca opened her eyes.

“Finally, you’re awake!” There, exactly where she had left him, was Mr. Dickens. She was still in his office! “You scared me for a bit, I was just about to call an ambulance over, but you look just fine now.”

That she doubted.

“I was out this entire time? I didn’t go to a doctor or anything?” It had all felt so real.

“Nope, you were sleeping like a baby,” He offered a hand to help her up.

The lack of concern that he had had when she was out cold on the floor angered her. She could’ve been dead or severely concussed and he didn’t even bother to call an ambulance!

The anger pressured her into her next sentence.

“I’m still quitting,” She teetered on her unsteady feet.

“Yeah, I figured,” He sighed and shook his head. “We’ll miss you dearly.”

“Oh, save yourself the breath, you’ll be just fine,” She patted him on the shoulder and left the room. Despite being absolutely terrified, her dream had persuaded her to make some changes in her life. Bianca still had decades in front of her, and for once, she was excited to see what it had to offer. All it took was a letter to set her on the right path. The letter! Where had it come from and who had sent it? Her phone interrupted her inquisitive thoughts.

“Hello?”

“Bianca? This is Elicia,” Her lovely, successful sister. “I didn’t want to tell you, but I’m afraid that if I don’t tell you, you’ll continue to ignore it.” Elicia paused.

“Go on, I’m listening,” Bianca was intrigued.

“That letter you received was from me. Well, not from me really, you when you were a kid. I think you were smarter back then,” Typical Elicia had to get in that snide remark. “You

wrote it and gave it to me in case you ever got into a rut, and I think now was the perfect time to send it.”

All of a sudden it all came back to Bianca. She had written the letter! It had been so long ago that she had forgotten all about it.

“Thank you,” Bianca whispered. “But how did it move from my drawer?”

“Well, after you told me that you had shut it in the drawer, I called Mr. Dickens and asked him to move it. He was a bit confused, but I guess he did it after all. I just hope that it will help!”

Bianca hung up the phone. She was determined to make it help. If she had learned anything from her trip to the TV Station of her conscience, it was that she could do anything. Even jump into a pool of alligators. As she got into her car, she glanced quickly at herself in the side mirror. When had she put on so much make-up?