

The Last Straw

> Note: This is a chapter excerpted
from my novel, *The Labor of Sleep*. <

Even with his headphones on, Will heard the sound, the esophageal scrape of throat-clearing, turned and saw Dinah standing behind him.

“I need to speak with you.”

Will removed his headphones and squinted at her like he was trying to recall where he’d met her before.

Her right forearm swiveled out, usher-like. “In my office,” she said and strode away.

Dinah closed the door and gestured for Will to take a seat.

“This has gone on far too long,” she said. “It’s no longer acceptable.”

No reaction from Will; he was looking beyond, taking in the view from her sixth floor window.

“You know what I’m talking about, don’t you?” Dinah picked up a manila folder from her desk and opened it. “Consistent pattern of tardiness. Increased absenteeism. Wearing headphones in office after repeated warnings. How many times have I told you about the headphones? Sending emails critical of administrative policy. Falling asleep during staff meeting.”

She paused, leaving a gap for him to exculpate himself but Will sat there impassively, which only stoked her exasperation. He looked distracted, as if he still had headphones on and was trying not to miss something, election results or a traffic report.

“Fine,” Dinah said, “if you can’t be bothered to defend yourself then you leave me no alternative.”

From his seat he could see clear across the valley to the Duquesne Incline, the trolley car descending

the hillside, looking from this distance, like a maroon caterpillar inching down a tree trunk.

Dinah spoke matter-of-factly: "I'm submitting a recommendation for you to take a drug test. It's in your best interest. And since you refuse to communicate, I honestly don't know what else we can do here." She tore a sheet from a memo pad with a clinic's address and phone number scribbled on it.

"I'm going to call the clinic today. If an appointment is not made within 24 hours it will be viewed as a refusal. Refusing to submit to a drug test will result in your termination. Understood?"

She stood up and walked to the front of her desk to hand him the memo. He stared at her outstretched hand holding the slip. Could he just deny the reality of the whole situation? Refuse to acknowledge it and maybe it would go away? Dinah folded the slip and slid it into his shirt pocket.

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Even for the creative, there are a limited number of ways to tell your wife you've just been fired. There is quick and decisive: pick up the phone this instant and say, "I've just been fired but let's view this as an opportunity." There was easing into it, diplomatically: take her out to dinner, wine and dine her. After a lovely meal and enchanting conversation, he could volley his perplexed gaze between the check and his Visa card, then say, "You know, I'm glad we had this evening together. It will be ever so pleasant to reminisce as we embark upon the new austerity." Or minimize the shock with nonchalance: as the alarm clock rings in the morning, turn to her drowsy brow and ask, "Did I mention that I'm no longer employed with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania?"

He paced around the apartment like a petty thief nerving up for his first break-and-enter when he saw that Lila had left him an opportunity. Earlier she

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mentioned that she got two free tickets from a colleague at work to see Trina Levine but they had to go tonight.

The name Trina Levine hadn't clicked with Will.

Lila explained. "Susan brought one of her CDs into work. She's sort of folksy. Sings and plays guitar. Writes very funny songs."

Her description had Will picturing a Birkenstock-wearing, peasant dressed, gray-haired Earth Mama leading a sing-along of *Kumbaya*.

"'Funny,' you say. As in Lily Tomlin-funny or Joan Rivers-*not*-funny?"

"I don't know, just funny, as in ha-ha. I heard one hilarious song about narcissistic men."

Aiming for a laugh himself, Will walked over to a mirror and gazed into it, primping his hair.

"I fail to see the humor in that," he said.

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The Last Straw was a nightclub-cum-coffeehouse in Shadyside that featured folk, acoustic, and singer-songwriter acts along with unexceptional food at exceptionally high prices. But a core clientele was loyal to the entertainment, and an intimate main room with clear sight lines to the stage made "The Straw" very popular with a certain crowd.

When they arrived Will was surprised to see that the place was standing room only. What did all these folks know that Will didn't? Since they had "reserved" tickets they managed to get a seat at a table. Fifteen minutes later a freckled fellow with an orange beard and Argyle sweater vest greeted them and apologized for "not being able to serve any alcoholic beverages this evening." Something about "bureaucratic red tape" and not filing their serving license renewal paperwork in time meant that they could not serve any alcohol for 24 hours.

"Beer?" Will asked, "You can't even serve beer?"

“We have an excellent non-alcoholic lager that’s very popular.”

Non-alcoholic lager. The very notion struck Will as too absurd to consider.

“Wine? You must have wine,” Will was starting to sound panicky.

“Yes sir, but unfortunately we can’t serve it until tomorrow evening.”

The solution was simple enough to Will: postpone the concert till tomorrow evening. That would be best for all concerned, performer and audience alike.

“We also have a very tasty white wine with no alcohol,” the bearded one offered.

A white wine with no alcohol. Will was thinking, *Do you have an aphrodisiac that renders you impotent? How about an anesthetic that intensifies pain?* But he said, “Just give me a fucking iced tea.”

“Excuse me?”

“ICED. TEA.”

“Iced tea it is. And for the lady?”

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Will made it through the first set but was exhausted from the effort. He’d been trying to gauge Lila’s impressions but they weren’t easy to read. She clapped after each song but it looked more polite than enthused.

He wondered if he should broach the topic by suggesting they go somewhere else for some grown-up drinks, then go home and fuck like animals, but....asking her to cut out after just one set might look desperate, so he stared at his watery and nonintoxicating iced tea.

Trina Levine came back onstage and made a crack about The Last Straw being dry that night. “My stuff sounds much better when you’re drunk,” she quipped.

“Hear! Hear!” Will muttered.

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Somewhere in the middle of her second set Trina announced that it was time for one of her props. She rummaged through an open footlocker onstage and cast aside a motley assortment of clown gags: a preposterously oversized bra, a day-glow fright wig, an empty bottle with three black XXXs on its white label. Then she pulled out a monstrous foam phallus and waved it around the stage.

“Not now, maybe later.” She shoved it back in the footlocker and reveled in the laughter.

“Ah—here’s what I’m looking for,” she said, and pulled out a press photographer’s camera circa 1950s, the kind with the massive handle grip and the stainless steel bowl flash pan.

“I used to have this boyfriend,” she said. “Talk about narcissists!”

A cannon of applause exploded. People all around the room stood up and pierced the air with whistles, cat calls and *woo-hoos*.

“I should have clued in the first time I took a picture of him.” She kept up the stage banter while she adjusted her guitar to an open tuning and clamped on a capo. “Before I took the picture, he said, ‘Wait, let me fix my hair.’ I couldn’t believe it. He went and preened in the mirror, then came back, every hair in his ridiculous mullet perfectly in place, then said, ‘OK, now you can take the picture.’”

Titters from the audience. She retuned her low E string down a step, all the while not missing a beat with her in-between-song banter.

“When we finally broke up, we did that pathetic thing all couples do in the end: split everything into two piles, yours and mine. What’s the one thing he asks for before he walks out the door?” It’s a rhetorical question of course, all for effect, she doesn’t give the audience a chance to guess before she answers, “His pictures! He wants to keep every goddamn picture I ever took of him!”

The audience is eating it up.

“Can you believe it?” She shouts, then strums the opening chord of “Narcissus” and the crowd goes wild.

She’s slung the prop camera around her shoulder and steps off the stage among the first rows of tables.

*Narcissus—
staring at the mirror
blowing yourself sweet kisses*

Trina went through a few verses, some people in the crowd singing along. She worked her way in among the tables, then stopped.

“Do we have any photogenic men in the audience tonight?” She asked. A mix of laughter and groans responded.

She swung her big camera by the strap then raked the tables with it.

“Here’s a sharp lookin’ fella,” she said. The spotlight had tracked her over to a table where a guy with a frozen grin squeezed his partner’s hand, who was all smiles.

Trina slung the clown camera in his face and fired off a blinding flash. “When you’re a big star just remember who gave you your first break, kiddo.”

*Narcissus—
silly of me to think I could be your Mrs.*

Trina worked her way farther from the stage, deeper onto the floor. “C’mon ladies,” she hollered, “turn on your radar and help me nail the hunks here tonight.”

A whistle peeled off in the corner and a woman in tight white pants stood up and waved her arms. A broad-shouldered guy in a blue and red rugby shirt sat next to her; he was looking down at the floor and shaking his head no.

Trina followed the spotlight over to them. The woman in the white pants took her partner by the

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hands and pulled him up to face the music. The audience applauded when the guy—all six-feet-six of him—stood up for a full display.

“Hubba-hubba!” Trina purred. “This model comes with all the extras! Let’s see if the face looks as promising as the shoulders.” She aimed the camera at him and fired off another flash. “OK, he’s no Brad Pitt but what he lacks in looks he makes up for in grade-A beef.”

*Narcissus—
if I leave you alone and all by yourself
will you finally get your wishes?*

Will had been figuring out an escape route, as if he knew a madman had smuggled a bomb into the place and it was a matter of time before it blew. He’d been charting the fastest bee line to the front door, the quickest route to the Men’s Room, the emergency rush to the fire exit out back.

He was calculating Trina Levine’s progress around the floor and figured he was safe as long as she stayed on the opposite side. There were moments when he thought maybe he should sidle off to the Men’s Room as a precaution, make like suddenly he had to drain all that insipid iced tea, anything to avoid Trina poking that ridiculous camera in his face. Because tonight was no night to be in the spotlight. Another night maybe, but tonight? No way. Not on the very day Dinah sharpened her axe for him. Not tonight when he’d already choked earlier in the day when Dinah asked him to defend himself, to explain his erratic behavior of the last several months and all he could do was sit there like the village idiot. Not tonight of all nights. If he’d had a few beers, then OK, maybe it would have been more amusing. But right now it felt like the audience was doing all the work and Trina Levine was just exploiting that, and frankly, he didn’t feel like working just then. He went out to be with Lila, to have a few drinks, relax, have a

good time, and then ease her into the news of Dinah's ultimatum and how that could only mean trouble. He sure as hell didn't plan on participating in an improv comedy performance.

He stood up to put some distance between himself and Trina Levine's approaching microphone when the spotlight swung like an axe and chopped off his escape route.

"Hold it right there partner, what's your big hurry?" Trina grilled him.

Will stopped dead in the beam like the proverbial deer-in-the-headlights.

"You're not going for a drink, buddy 'cause there's none in the house." This got a laugh.

Will took a step to the side, but like in a maximum security prison, the spotlight followed.

"Ah-ah-ah," Trina chastised. "You can't just sneak away when I'm talking to you, no sir." The audience was glued now. Many must have wondered if this guy was part of the act, an actor playing the role of the poor schmuck, put on the spot and starting to freak out.

Will wished he could torpedo her annoying shtick right then and there, kill the whole act by saying something like, *I'm gonna puke!* But under the glare and heat of the spotlight his dry throat seized and all he could croak was "Men's Room."

The crowd roared with laughter, now certain that this panicking fool was part of the act.

"Aw—wittle boy has to go pee-pee?"

The crowd was in stitches now. Will was sweating. He took a step forward but the spotlight was grafted to him.

"Hey ladies," Trina said, "up close this guy ain't half-bad." Whistles. Cat-calls. "Mind if I take your picture," she asked, "for posterity's sake?"

"No pictures," Will heard himself say into the microphone and shielded his face with a raised hand, inadvertently making himself look like a minor

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celebrity bedeviled by paparazzi.

“No pictures,” Trina shouted, “this guy really is a celebrity!”

The crowd was getting hysterical. Trina hoisted the camera and aimed it at him. But he wouldn't play along with the gag and tried to walk around her. Trina did a cut-and-feint and blocked his path. She shoved the camera in his face and triggered a blinding flash. The look on his face was so desperate, so awkward and ridiculous in that frozen instant: the history of embarrassment captured forever as the audience climaxed in ecstatic laughter.

Trina switched from camera to microphone and said, “There, what d'ya think of that Mr. Hot Shot?” and flopped the mic in Will's face.

As if the mic was a loaded gun, reflex made Will straight-arm its business end away from his face. But the speed and force of his thrust jabbed the microphone right back in Trina Levine's face. Brandished like a pistol a second earlier, the mic backfired: it struck her square in the mouth, split a lip, chipped a tooth, and sent a gusher of blood spewing from her gums. The audience, Lila included, gasped.

Before Will could process what had just happened, a guy dressed in black and built like a Pittsburgh Steelers fullback slammed his ham hock fist onto Will's shoulder and collared him like a scruffy kitten. As the shift manager and several wait staff ran out with ice and towels to tend to Trina Levine's bleeding face, the bouncer dragged Will to the rear exit where he yanked the receiver off a wall phone and punched in 911.

“Assault at The Last Straw. Lots of blood. Get EMS and a squad car over her now!” He barked the address then slammed the phone down. With one hand he held Will by the collar, with the other, he pretzeled Will's right arm behind his back.

Lila had made her way past the commotion on the

floor to find Will restrained under the bouncer's heavy hand. She was speechless from the spectacle that just went down. Will looked defeated, surrendered to the realization that there was no way he could ever explain what had just happened, why he did what he did, what had gotten into him.

Two short bleats from the cruiser's siren announced the cops' arrival. The bouncer dragged Will out to the parking lot and told the first officer out of the car, "This asshole whacked a woman in the face with a microphone. She's inside, needs first aid, bleeding like crazy."

The cop gave Will the once-over, needing to know if he was drunk, crazy, on drugs, a danger to himself or others or all of the above. "What's your story?" He asked Will.

"It was an accident. A horrible misunderstanding. I didn't mean to hit her. She shoved this damn microphone in my face and I pushed it away." Will didn't sound drunk or crazy and he didn't look like much of a threat.

The cop told him to stand on one leg and count backwards from 100.

"I'm not drunk. They're not even serving tonight. OK: 100, 99, 98...."

"Alright, get in the back seat," the cop said, and strong-armed Will into the squad car. Then he turned to Lila. "Who are you?"

"I'm his wife. It's true, it was an accident, I've never seen him do anything like this before."

The cop gave her a protracted look and said, "Are you prepared to make a statement on his behalf?"

She glanced at Will, cramped in the back seat. In the dark she couldn't see his face. "Yes," she answered.

"OK, get in."

Will had never been arrested, and hoped he was

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not about to be. But he was sure that at the very least, the evening was ruined and they'd be held a long time and have to answer a lot of questions.

He was surprised when Lila climbed into the back seat alongside him. This was his fuck-up, why were they dragging her into it? If things were getting rocky before tonight, what about tomorrow? Is that when she files for divorce?

What are the signs of a panic attack? He wondered because it just occurred to him: on top of everything else, he was holding a dime bag of Tiffany's weed in his jacket pocket. If he gets frisked (had he watched too many cop shows?), it's strike two. Was he holding enough for a felony? A misdemeanor? But even if he had only a tiny roach on him, it—coupled with the fact that he had just cold-cocked a woman in a night club—would not help his plea.

Do these cruisers have cameras installed in them? If they don't, he figured, he had about ten seconds to slip that dime bag out of his pocket and into Lila's purse, which they wouldn't be looking at since she hadn't done anything wrong. But if they do have cameras in the car, then he realized, he was truly fucked.

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