

First Day, Last Day

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The rain was falling heavily on the train window. I shuffled my wet feet under my seat, trying to hide them from view. I really need new shoes. The man sitting next to me was snoring his head off. He was dressed in a suit and tie. Mum always said people wearing suits remind her of penguins.

I took out my phone and checked on my route again. I tugged on my sleeves and took a deep inhale through my nose. "It's going to be ok Alice" I thought to myself "you got this". I opened my eyes to see an older lady in a grey blazer smile at me. I quickly averted my eyes. What a weirdo. I don't even know her.

The train stopped. More penguins got on the already filled train. People awkwardly shuffled around to make room. I looked up to see an elderly lady leaning on a stick. Taking this opportunity to get away from the snoring penguin, I gently tapped the lady on her elbow and offered her my seat.

Before I caught the train, I dropped by my parents house, hoping my sister had a pair of shoes I could borrow..

"I'm so proud of my little girl. Getting a job in the big city" mum said squeezing me tightly. "Do you really need to wear this stuff on your face? You look just as beautiful without it".

"Mum please" I said pushing her away. "The makeup makes me look more professional".

As soon as the train doors opened in Wellington, the penguins rushed off the train. I couldn't help myself from being pulled into the current. I feel awkward in my oversized jacket. Balancing awkwardly with each step, trying not to get more water to the already soaked shoes.

The office was an older building at the top of Willis Street. I checked my phone, half an hour early. I saw a coffee shop on the corner. Should I buy coffee? isn't that what penguins do?

I checked my account, \$4.93. Rent must have come out already. I walked around the block a few times until I decided it was a socially acceptable time to arrive.

The other new girl, Kelly, was already waiting at reception when I got there. She was wearing the same outfit she wore to our second interview. A thick black blazer over a professional black and pink dress with a large belt. Her blonde hair was tightly pulled back in a ponytail and she clasped a medium sized Calvin Klein bag. Her face showed the anxiety I was feeling.

Kelly saw me approach and smiled.

"I love your top" she said.

"Oh thanks" I replied.

"Where did you get it from, I've been looking for a top like that".

"I, um.. got it as a gift from my mum" I lied. There was no way I could tell Kelly I got it from the dollar section at the Redcross shop in Upper Hutt. What would she think of me if she learnt I brought all my clothes second hand? She nodded.

"I feel so much better starting here with another new person" she said later on after we had sorted out the new employee orientation and were sitting at our new desks waiting for our computers to load.

"Me too. I feel so anxious" I exclaimed. She nodded.

"You get along so easily with everyone here already. I know you're going to fit right in" I was taken aback. I felt a little awkward meeting all the penguins around the office. I worried that I would instantly forget everybody's name and that they were already judging me on my clothes. I felt like they knew I was an imposter. In contrast, Kelly oozed confidence and was already cracking jokes with the other penguins.

"Thanks, I think you fit in really well too". I said back. I sensed someone behind me.

"Hey Alice and Kelly, we are going to get some hot chocolates, would you like to come" asked Belinda, a feisty red headed senior from our new team. I turned around.

"No thanks" I sheepishly remembered my bank account balance. "Um, how about next time?" I said awkwardly. I instantly kicked myself. They are going to think I'm anti-social.

"It's my shout" Belinda said to me.

"Okay I said getting up" maybe a little too quickly. Why did I say yes? why did I say yes so quickly. They are going to think I am a freeloader who only goes out when someone else is paying.

"Um, I'll pay next time" I said looking up at Belinda.

"No worries" she said brushing it off.

Everyone in the office was dressed professionally. Everyone in the office looked like they belonged. Everyone, except me.

Everyday I put on a smile. Everyday I was nice to the other penguins, engaging in small talk (which was mostly about their adult kids who were around my age). But it all felt fake, it felt like I was in a dance. Except no one taught me the steps and I was making it up as I went along.

I was constantly worried that I would say something that would upset a penguin. Or do something that would land me in hot water with HR. I did receive good feedback on how well I engaged with other staff. But I couldn't kick the feeling that this was a lie and I was walking on eggshells.

A few months later I was staring at the back of my food cupboard, willing something new to appear. However, I was only met with emptiness. A lone packet of corn chips sat in the corner. My flatmate gave them to me the night prior. They received them for free from the corn chip factory they work in. These will have to do for lunch today, so I grabbed them and stuffed them into my bag. There is nothing more empty than my bank account balance on payday.

Feeling embarrassed that I only had a bag of corn chips for lunch. I was walking around the office trying to discreetly look for a nook I could eat in. However, it turns out that modern offices with their open floor plans don't have many nooks for poor young employees to hide in. I walked to the stairs. The top floor landing was usually empty. I opened the door and could hear soft sobbing. The person sobbing sounded like they were trying their best to hide it.

I stood on the stairs not moving. Do I see who it is and talk to them? Do I ignore them since they obviously wanted to cry in a place they did not want to be disturbed.

It fell silent. Shit, they must have heard me come in and stand still like a weirdo. I figured it was too awkward not to talk to them. I walked up the stairs.

It was Kelly. Before I said anything, I reached into my bag and got out my emergency Frodo and held it out to her.

"How do you always know what a person needs?" she said between snuffles.

"Would it be ok for me to join you for lunch?"

She nodded. I sat next to her.

"Please don't judge me too harshly" I said pulling out my bag of corn chips. "It's payday and I'm broke".

"Is that all you have?" she asked.

"Yeah" I said. But I'm happy to share".

"Thanks" she said sniffing. You can have some of my sushi. We sat in silence eating for a moment. "I must look like a mess" she said to me.

I looked at Kelly, she appeared way more put together than me. Even though she's been crying.

"You look great, totally professional" I said. She laughed.

"I don't feel like a professional" she replied. "I feel like a total fake". She picked up a corn chip. "My parents say I'm immature and they scrutinise every little purchase I make. Like, I only brought a few new pairs of shoes and some flights to Queenstown for a reunion. Now they are demanding I pay board and put money into savings, I'm struggling a lot".

Kelly always seemed so put together to me. She fit in with the other penguins effortlessly. Seeing her crying on the stairs because she was overwhelmed, like me, grounded me. I had an incorrect assumption that rich people didn't experience the same problems as us poor people.

After work, I stood around the train station. I looked at the time, 5.03pm. I looked down at my phone. Last week my salary went in at 5.13pm, I wonder if I have been paid. I logged into my account to see the same \$2.51 as before. I was getting hungry. I tried again, and there it was. I walked up to the counter and bought a ticket.

From that day I decided to make more of an effort to reach out to Kelly. I was more open and honest about my struggles. The more time we spent together the more I realised we had a lot more in common, even though we were brought up in different worlds. I spent my weekends trying to convince my brother he should try harder at not going to

prison. While Kelly spent most of her weekends at her family's bach on the coast with her boyfriend.

"I really like your oversized blazer" Cassidy, another of my new coworkers said to me at lunch one day.

"Thanks" I said taken aback. "It's um, vintage" I said not wanting to confess it was a hand-me-down from my sister who received it as a hand-me-down from one of our male cousins.

"That's really cool. I try to keep an eye out for cool vintage things when I go op-shopping." She said pointing to her purple flowered shirt. "I got this last Saturday in a lovely little op-shop in Petone."

"Oh that is nice" Said Belinda, sitting next to me. "I got these pants last month. Since then they have become my favourite pants since they are so comfy". I couldn't believe it, people in the office also brought their clothes second hand. I just thought it was mostly people like me who were too poor to buy new.

"I like to go op-shopping since clothing is the second largest contributor to modern day waste". I said. The ladies nodded in agreement.

I began to sit with Belinda, Cassidy and Kelly almost everyday. They were really nice and always welcoming. I realised, regardless of our backgrounds we had a lot of things in common and the lunch table rarely fell silent. We were often joined by other co-workers from different teams.

A few decades later, the rain was falling heavily on the train window. I looked up from my e-book to see a young girl, dressed for work. She was fidgeting with her sleeve. Sitting staunch and alert. The man sitting next to her was in deep sleep. I could tell she was nervous. She reminded me so much of myself when I first got my job. I wanted nothing more to reassure her, tell her that it was going to be ok. I caught her eye and tried to smile reassuringly at her. She quickly averted her eyes.

The train stopped, people naturally flowed out of the way to let more people on.