

Clean Break

ABBY VEGAS

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For my parents.

1

It is my firm belief that I wasn't always a miserable fuck-up. There are people I used to know who would disagree with me on this, and it's getting harder to remember what I was like before everything bad happened — but I was normal once, or close enough to pass for it. Then I was not-normal, and then I sort of vanished. For several years I was putting one foot in front of the other — existing, basically. But I was doing it in grand style.

Friends and acquaintances — well-meaning, mostly — questioned the wisdom of this unorthodox path I'd chosen. *Save your money*, they implored. *Stay in school. Think of the future.* And later: *Let us help you. You don't have to go through this alone.* But I did have to go through it alone, to the degree that I had to go through it at all. A clean break — one weighty blow, fracturing past from present — was the only way forward. There was no future to speak of, so living in the moment was my best-case scenario. Everyone I cared about was gone. In their place was a big pile of money, wholly inadequate in every way but one: it had to be spent.

And I'd had the nicest apartment! A corner unit in a brand-new high-rise building in Chelsea. With a doorman. A mailbox labeled with my name: *Lane Haviland. 22-H.* And a balcony — true, I'd never used it exactly as planned, but the sweeping southern

views of the skyline and the Hudson River had made for some spectacular New York City sunsets. Sometimes, in my dreams, I still lived there.

Which reminds me of another thing I miss, I thought as I eyed the scummy interior of the subway car. Taxis. I'd had to take the subway to the LIRR just to get to the fucking B train from Forest Hills, and I still had a ways to go before I could get myself and my two overstuffed suitcases into my new apartment.

My gaze shifted to an old woman hunched over reading a tattered paperback. Buying books — that, too, had been a luxury, as were all the long, lazy afternoons spent reading them inside that glorious sun-drenched apartment. Whenever I got stir-crazy, I'd book a spare-no-expense trip — Prague and Budapest, Kyoto, a safari in Africa. How cool had *that* been, stepping off a plane in Nairobi and being whisked off to Tanzania to see elephants? I'd do it again in a heartbeat, especially if it meant I could escape this overheated subway car rumbling through the hinterlands of Brooklyn.

Of course the money couldn't last forever. I'd begun the downsizing process early, mindful of my dwindling bank balance and desperate to stretch whatever funds remained a little further. When my phone broke, I didn't buy a new one — instead I dropped thirty bucks on a prepaid flip-phone. These self-imposed austerity measures had bought me a few more months. But ever since I'd given up the apartment and jettisoned most of my belongings, each ensuing living situation had seemed more precarious. Like the cockroach-infested month-to-month studio sublet in the West Village. It could charitably have been called quaint, but I couldn't afford to keep it very long, not even after I caved to reality and found a job. Nothing serious — just dog walking, at first. Then I lucked into a catering gig with a few more hours and a boss who didn't suck.

But even working, cash flow remained a disaster, because living in New York on just shy of two hundred bucks a week is like trying to fill a bathtub with the drain wide open. And that's how I ended up couch-surfing — most recently at my ex-boyfriend's apartment in Forest Hills. His patience started

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wearing thin about two weeks ago.

Ding! That was the P.A. system in the subway car, followed by the oddly upbeat automated-voice announcement: *The last stop will be Brighton Beach.* Yesterday I'd visited there for the first time in my life. I'd met my new roommate, signed the lease, and made sure there really was a balcony as advertised.

I looked out the train-car window at the graffiti-covered buildings by the elevated tracks. Even in the blazing sunlight, the temperature had been well below freezing for several days and that somehow made everything look worse. Dreary. Brighton Beach was technically part of New York City, but at the moment it seemed far away from everything I'd ever known. Maybe that wasn't a bad thing.

It doesn't feel like home.

It doesn't have to be. Not for long.

Maybe. That plan — dropping off this mortal coil — wasn't set in stone. It never had been. But it was never far from my mind.

If I'd had someone to confide in, I'd have told them that the money issues had become way too intertwined with all my other problems, and as such I was tempted to throw them on the giant pulsating pile in the corner and ignore them entirely. Except there comes a point when you can't do that anymore and not be homeless.

Walking down Brighton Beach Avenue under the elevated tracks, I squinted against the cold, dry wind and yanked one of the suitcases over a troublesome curb. I still couldn't believe my luck, finding this sublet on Craigslist. I was getting the master suite in a three-bedroom apartment. The building was gleaming and modern — a little taste of luxury compared to the increasingly shabby apartments I'd been occupying of late. Since I hadn't had money for the deposit, I'd requested an advance from my boss, Randy, who'd handed it over without even asking me to sign anything. "I trust you," she'd insisted, and without consciously thinking too hard about it I knew that I would betray that trust. It wasn't a matter of if, just when. Nothing like a little self-loathing

to make my downward spiral extra enjoyable.

I wondered which of the two roommates would be there to welcome me. I'd met Svetlana yesterday, but Rozaliya hadn't been there — she worked a lot, apparently. All the better. I wasn't interested in making friends. But the apartment door was locked, and no one seemed to be home. Svetlana wasn't answering texts or phone calls.

Shit. I dragged my suitcases down to the lobby and knocked on a glass door that said MANAGEMENT OFFICE. The woman working there was nice enough, but she hadn't heard anything about my arrival. No keys had been left.

I sighed. "Would you mind looking to see if Rozaliya's contact information is in your records? I only have Svetlana in my phone."

"Who?"

"Svetlana Grigoryeva. Penthouse Two."

She shook her head. "Penthouse Two is owned by an older couple. They're away. Overseas."

"I don't understand," I insisted. "I was inside the apartment yesterday. Svetlana showed it to me."

"Well, they're away," she repeated. "They had someone coming in to water the plants every few days. I wonder, I wonder if..." She trailed off.

Suddenly I felt lightheaded. My knees wobbled and the nice lady asked me if I wanted to sit down. "I gave her a deposit," I whispered. "Eight hundred dollars."

"I don't know what to tell you." She had a pained look on her face. "Can you cancel the payment?"

"It was a cashier's check." I had a receipt, somewhere in the two suitcases that held all my worldly possessions. Was Svetlana even her real name? I felt like I might throw up.

The nice lady brought me water to drink in a paper cup. She helped me find the bank's customer service number, and she stood by anxiously as I called to report the stolen check. Then she showed me on her phone where the nearest police precinct was, because I'd need to file a report. She offered to hold my luggage for me. She wished me good luck. I'd need it.

2

I arrived at the Sixtieth Precinct all breathless and agitated, but the uniformed cop manning the front desk seemed in no particular hurry to fight crime. “Wait there,” he grunted, and he gestured to a long wooden bench. “An officer’ll call you in a few.”

I sank down onto the bench and grieved for the loss of my smartphone. How on earth had people dealt with discomfort and ennui before portable screens? There wasn’t even a magazine to thumb through — just pamphlets for affordable cosmetic dentistry, in English and Russian, featuring grinning models with preternaturally square white teeth. The overhead fluorescent lights buzzed. I checked my flip-phone, but no one had called or texted me. Fucking Svetlana.

Eons passed, children were born and men died and still no one called my name. Just as my ass was going completely numb, a powerfully-built man in street-clothes came up by the desk. A gold badge hung on his shirt pocket.

“Haviland,” he announced, and I stood up. He was holding a Dunkin’ Donuts coffee cup, and at the sight of the logo my stomach grumbled audibly. “I’m Detective Jarrett.” He didn’t offer a handshake, just waved me through a small gate and then led me through a maze of cubicles. His back was impossibly wide at the shoulders, tapering down to a trim waist, and his blue dress

shirt was stretched tightly over everything in a manner that suggested he might be wearing a superhero costume underneath.

"Have a seat," he sighed, pointing to a folding metal chair by his desk.

Over the din of the precinct office, I recounted my humiliating story while Detective Jarrett nodded and sniffed and took notes on a steno pad. He didn't seem particularly shocked at Svetlana's treachery, although he did raise an eyebrow at the amount she'd stolen. "Eight hundred bucks," he repeated, shaking his head. "That's a lot of money."

"Yeah." I assumed he was commiserating. I was wrong.

"Why'd you give it over to a stranger you met on Craigslist?" He leaned back in his swivel-chair and stared at me with close-set eyes.

"I was too trusting," I admitted. Inwardly I fumed at his knee-jerk victim-blaming. "You know how it is in New York. You find an affordable apartment, you snap it up right away."

He shrugged his meaty shoulders. He had one of those thick bodybuilder necks and a close-cropped military-style haircut. Big hands with fingers that looked like sausage links. He closed the pad and held up the phony lease I'd signed. "This is evidence. It stays with me. You need a copy?"

"I guess so."

He got up and came back a minute later to hand me a photocopy. Then, without sitting down, he glanced over at a calendar taped to the wall. "Come back tomorrow afternoon to pick up the report. Sorry you had to go through this, Miss..." He trailed off rather than attempt to remember my name.

I sat there stupefied. "Is that it? I mean — is that all?"

He frowned. "Do you have anything else you'd like to tell me?"

I felt my face flush. "Aren't you going to find this woman and get my money back?"

He snorted. I just stared at him, so he sat back down and looked at me levelly. "Miss, I'll tell you right now, you're not getting your money back unless the bank refunds it. You said you called that in, right?"

"Yeah. They said once I have a police report it takes sixty to ninety days for a decision." My voice was tinged with desperation, but Detective Jarrett just nodded. A rational part of me knew that it was pointless to blame the messenger.

"Look, I'm not naïve," I stammered. I know you can't drop everything to go looking for this...this person. But can't you — I don't know, put it into the computer and see if it matches other crimes? I bet she's scammed other people."

He scratched his nose. "I will be referring your case to the Fraud Unit," he replied. "And you're right, she's probably done this before." I felt one last desperate stab of hope. "But listen, Miss Haviland. Focus your energy on the bank." He rubbed one eyelid with his thumb, then leaned back in his swivel-chair until it groaned in protest. "As far as Svetlana's concerned, your money's already gone."

I gritted my teeth. To his credit, Detective Jarrett didn't seem to be particularly enjoying this part of his job — at least not in the typical jaded New York cop schadenfreude way you'd expect. I could detect a glimmer of beaten-down sympathy in his eyes. I swallowed. "Can I ask you a question?" Why did my voice sound so unnaturally high-pitched?

He glanced longingly at his computer screen. "Absolutely."

"Can you help me with —" I paused and looked down at the paper in my lap. "Look, I signed this lease. I'm pretty sure it's bullshit, but I don't know if — I mean, I don't know what the protocol is in this type of situation..."

"That's not my role. It's a civil matter."

I felt a lump forming in my throat. "Right."

He took the paper from me and looked down at it. "It's a phony lease. What's your question?"

The floodgates opened. Hot tears began to trickle down my cheeks. Detective Jarrett looked pained. "I'm really sorry," I choke-gasped. "I just — I honestly don't know what to do." Great heaving sobs. Right in the middle of the Sixtieth Precinct. No one seemed to notice or care that I was having a breakdown, which was oddly reassuring.

"Do you have any friends or a family member you can call?"

"N-no." Another shuddering sob. God, this was so embarrassing.

"Here. Have some water." I took the mini bottled spring water he offered and sipped. *Deep breaths.*

"Tissue?" He held out a box.

"Thanks." I grabbed a handful of tissues and scrubbed at my face. My breathing was returning to normal. Then I hiccupped, which made me feel even more like a prize jackass if that was indeed possible.

"I can refer you to an agency that may be able to help out with the housing situation," Detective Jarrett said, enunciating *the housing situation* slowly and carefully as though its mere mention might cause me to spontaneously combust.

"I don't need—"

"It's just an option. You can decide later whether you want to pursue it." His words had the ring of a well-practiced spiel. I wondered how many hard-luck cases came through here every day.

He offered me a business card: *New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development*. "Thank you," I mumbled, and I stood up. "Really — thanks. I'm sorry. I know you probably have—"

"Wait a sec," he snapped. I looked dumbly at him; he was dialing his desk-phone. He pointed at the chair and motioned for me to sit down, so I did. "Yeah, this is Detective Jarrett with the Sixtieth Precinct," he stated authoritatively. "Who am I speaking with? Okay. I'm here with a woman. She signed a lease yesterday. Got scammed." He went silent for a moment. "The lease is on your letterhead." He fidgeted with his pen. "She lost her money. Says she spoke with a Svetlana Grigoryeva. You know Svetlana?"

I blew my nose, then wrung the tissues into a sodden mass while I hung on every word of the conversation.

"Yeah, well, if you see her, give me a call." He checked his watch. "Listen, maybe you can do me a favor. Miss Haviland here, she needs a place to stay for a couple of days 'til she..." His eyes met mine. "Regroups." I sat up straighter. "You think you can do that?...I'd certainly appreciate it." He drummed his sausage-link

fingers. "Okay. Right. Thank you very much."

He hung up and scribbled something on his pad. "All right, Miss Haviland. Brighton Realty Management. Tell 'em I sent you." He tore off the page and handed it to me along with his card.

I was rendered momentarily speechless. "Thank you — really — thank you so much. I mean it. You're awesome."

"You're welcome, and goodbye, Miss Haviland."

Sitting on the train on my way back to Brighton Beach, I considered my options. It was pretty clear that they were pathetic. Detective Jarrett's suggestion to call a family member had stung especially hard since I had no family, but the fact that I had no friends I could call for help might have been even more depressing.

My stomach growled again, insistently, and I ignored it. *Later.* First I needed to make sure I didn't spend the night sleeping on a park bench. I walked the few blocks to the address Detective Jarrett had given me, which was tucked away in the back of the ground floor of a red-brick complex on Brighton 14th Street. I knocked timidly on the door of Brighton Realty Management. No answer. I knocked louder, then tried the door. It opened into a dark, shabby office that positively reeked of cigarette smoke. An older woman sat at the single desk, which had a computer with the world's grimmest keyboard, an overflowing ashtray, and several stacks of manila folders and papers.

"Yes?" She looked me up and down through Coke-bottle glasses. Her gray hair looked like a Brillo pad and her sweater-set had definitely originated in the Reagan administration.

"Hi. I'm Lane Haviland." I forced myself to smile and offered my hand, which she regarded as though it were a turd. She finally reached out and gave it a limp, cursory shake.

"What do you want?" Thick Russian accent.

"Yes, well, actually." I suddenly felt out-of-breath. "I just came from the Sixtieth Precinct." Blank stare. "The police station." At this piece of news, she glared at me. I stumbled on. "I — Detective

Jarrett said I should come here. I think he called. Did he speak to you?"

"Have seat." She motioned to a small swivel-chair upholstered in stained gray cloth and I sat down. Then she yanked a drawer open and rummaged around in it.

"Excuse me, I didn't catch your name," I said lamely.

She shot me an icy look. "I am Mrs. Pasternak." The desk drawer slammed shut. She took a cigarette out of a pack and lit it. Then she took a long drag and regarded me stonily.

"Well, Mrs. Pasternak, I really do appreciate your taking the time to — to see me." The cigarette smoke was making me feel lightheaded. Perhaps now wasn't the best time to broach the subject of smoke-free workplace laws in New York State.

"I talked with police." She waved her cigarette in the air dismissively. "Heard about your money. Too bad. Lousy criminals." Smoke swirled around her as she took another drag. I coughed.

"I don't want trouble," she continued. "You need place to stay, for a few days?" I nodded. "There is unit." She reached for a binder on a tottering shelf. "On West End Avenue. Few blocks away." She flipped the binder open, then pointed with her cigarette to a floor plan that had been photocopied so many times that the numbers in the room's dimensions were too blurry to read. "Studio apartment." She slammed the binder shut and stared at me. "You will take it?"

"Um — sure," I replied. She gave a curt nod. "How can I ever thank you?"

She crushed the cigarette into the overfull ashtray. "Monthly rent on unit is one thousand fifty dollars," she rasped. "You have job, yes?"

I didn't know how to respond to this — statement? Proposal? — without seeming ungrateful — or worse, souring the deal. "It sounds promising," I said, and I plastered a vapid smile onto my face. "May I see the apartment?"

She opened up a flat metal box, fished around in it, and handed me a set of two keys. "On West End Avenue," she repeated, and she wrote down an address on the back of a

business card. "Basement Unit C."

The stretch of West End Avenue in Brighton Beach where Mrs. Pasternak had directed me was derelict and depressing in the thin midafternoon sunlight, a far cry from the gracious prewar buildings that lined its Manhattan namesake. But as ominous as "Basement Unit C" sounded, it still beat a park bench, probably. I tried to hold this thought in my mind, along with some measure of gratitude, as I turned the key in the lock of a rundown building's lobby.

A staircase led down to a cinderblock-walled basement hallway. It was darker than I would have liked, industrial and slightly grubby, but at least it didn't look rat-infested. Everything smelled strongly of disinfectant. A rough humming noise emanated from one end of the corridor — the boiler, I assumed. The first door I saw was labeled COMPACTOR ROOM; the second, LAUNDRY. Below that, an OUT OF ORDER sign had been affixed to the door with duct tape.

At one end of the hallway were two doors, facing each other. Sure enough, one said BOILER ROOM and the other was blank and padlocked from the outside. I headed back in the opposite direction and found one last door, shrouded partially in darkness thanks to a broken light bulb. The label said SUPER, and in faded, peeling stenciled paint was a large "C".

I rang the buzzer. It sounded inside, but there was no answer. The door was locked. I inserted the second key, turned it experimentally, and pushed the door open a crack. I half-expected to come face-to-face with a vicious attack-dog guarding a meth-lab, but inside it was dark and quiet.

I fumbled around on the wall until I found a light switch. A single naked bulb illuminated the empty apartment — what little there was of it. Indeed it looked more like a prison cell than a living space, with the same cinder-block walls as the adjacent corridor and a too-low, claustrophobic drop ceiling that had seen better days.

I took a step inside. At first I'd assumed the place was windowless, but once my eyes adjusted to the dim light I spied a

small window set high in the wall facing the street, placing it just below ground-level. The glass was so filthy I couldn't see through it, but something was on the other side blocking the daylight — a sheet of plywood, maybe? I couldn't tell.

A Manny Pacquiao poster was taped to the wall. I peeked behind it to see if it was hiding a bloodstain, then opened a set of louver-doors expecting to find a closet. Inside was a midget kitchen — dorm-sized fridge, a single electric-coil burner, and a very small sink. Bracing myself for the worst, I peeked inside the fridge, but it was clean, and empty except for an Aquafina water-bottle. Behind a second door was the world's smallest bathroom with a surprisingly mildew-free shower-stall, along with a toilet and sink jammed in at uncomfortable-looking angles.

"Okay, okay," I murmured out loud, a little breathlessly. It wasn't the Taj Mahal, and I'd have laughed at this get-up in the halcyon days when money was plentiful. But in light of current circumstances, it actually seemed like it could work, at least for the next couple of days until I got something better. I dug out my phone and opened it — zero bars. Of course; it was a fucking basement. So I trudged back upstairs into the lobby.

No one answered the phone at Brighton Realty, so I left a voicemail for Mrs. Pasternak. Then it was time to retrieve my meager possessions. Lugging everything several blocks and then down to the basement sapped what was left of my energy, so I sat down on one of the two suitcases that held the accumulation of my life's detritus and looked around the bare room.

I had no creature comforts. That had been intentional — as my moneyed life had wound down, I'd gotten rid of pretty much everything in the realm of material possessions. There had been a practical reason for this: moving between short-term sublets is easier and less expensive when you can just pick up and go. But I won't lie: another part of it was — well, at the time it had *felt* spiritual. A farewell to the material world as the cash dwindled away. Very Zen. But now I was more broke than ever and I didn't have a bed to sleep on. And I wasn't dead yet.

I was contemplating that last matter in a somewhat gruesome fashion when I heard a knock at the door.

3

"Who is it?" I called out. I didn't feel remotely ready to accept visitors, but I supposed there were worse scenarios — the Brooklyn Boiler-Room Killer. Or my landlady.

"You in there?" It was a man's voice. Muffled.

"Yes?"

"Maintenance. For Lane Haviland." He pronounced it *Have-eee-land*. "Open door, please." Heavy Russian accent.

Well, he knew my name. At least I wouldn't have the life strangled out of me anonymously. I opened the door to see two men standing there. I wouldn't say they seemed hostile. More like bordering-on-annoyed.

"You are Lane?" The guy doing the talking was holding a red toolbox. He had a creased, weathered face, close-cropped hair, and a shiny gold front tooth. I tried not to stare at it.

"Yeah," I replied. "What's up?"

"Scuse me." He pushed past me into the apartment. I gaped at him. Well, what did I expect — white-glove service? Still, it was more than a little off-putting to be shoved aside by a creepy-ass Russian guy with a gold front tooth as he waltzed into my space uninvited. I turned to the second man, who was tall and lean with shaggy jet-black hair. His face was chiseled and pale with a beak of a nose and a stern expression.

“Well, come on in,” I told him.

He grunted and slunk past me to join his companion at the sink. Then he took a flashlight out of the toolbox and said something in Russian: “*Ty chto? Ahuyel.*”¹ It sounded harsh, accusatory, but what the hell did I know? Maybe that’s just what Russian sounded like.

The guy with the gold tooth turned to face me. “Landlord sent us. To connect sink to water.”

“Oh. Well. Thanks for coming out on such short notice.” Good thing I’d done such a thorough inspection of the place.

The gold-toothed man leered at me. His nose was an explosion of broken capillaries, and the rest of his teeth weren’t looking so hot. The tall guy, who was younger — in his thirties, probably — was peering up into the sink base from a crouched position. When he leaned back over the toolbox I spied a scar running down the side of his face. I hadn’t noticed it before; it was the angle of the light hitting him that revealed a pale line that started on his forehead, skipped over his left eye and picked up again on his cheek, snaking down towards his jawline.

There had to be an interesting story there. I indulged my fascination with the macabre a moment longer and wondered what the hell had happened to this guy as I watched him pluck a wrench from the toolbox. Then he wedged his lanky frame into the sink base as far as it would go, all gawky and long-limbed, and suddenly I felt like the World’s Biggest Asshole. Why was I cataloging everyone’s faults? *For fuck’s sake, they’re just doing their job. Relax.*

The two men clanged around under the sink, alternately muttering and snapping at each other in Russian. I let my guard down and decided to test my wildly hopeful hypothesis regarding cell-phone coverage and the apartment’s lone window. It wouldn’t be good for light or a view, but I was hopeful that I could get one bar of coverage — enough to send and receive texts, anyway — if I placed my phone up there.

¹ Translations in Appendix I.

I dragged one of the suitcases over to the window-well and laid it down flat, then stepped on top of it and held my flip-phone as close to the window as I could without touching anything. And it worked! One bar of coverage. The window-well would require a thorough scrubbing with some highly caustic substance before it was fit to touch with bare hands, but I allowed myself to revel in this small victory. I'd be slightly more connected to the outside world, as little as I sometimes liked it.

The sound of running water jolted me back to reality. The two men were packing up their tools, so I walked over to rejoin them. Gold-Tooth turned off the faucet, then leered at me. "Okay?"

"Sure." I nodded stiffly. "Thanks. Is the bathroom water hooked up?"

He grunted an affirmative and glanced around the room. "You have furniture coming?"

"No, this is it." I jammed my hands in my pockets.

"No bed?" Gold-Tooth was incredulous. "You sleep where, on floor?"

I walked over to the door and pulled it open. "Thanks again," I snapped.

Scar-Face, who already had his toolbox in hand, slunk past me wordlessly and lumbered through the doorway. Gold-Tooth stayed, and smirked. "You need job, honey?" His eyes, bloodshot and rheumy and generally disgusting, traveled down the length of my figure. "I can maybe help you out."

"Nope." I looked him straight in the eye and he grinned. I felt everything I'd ever eaten rise up in the back of my throat.

"You sure?"

He took a step towards me, and then suddenly he was *way* too close. Hair-standing-up-on-the-back-of-my-neck close. And I was standing against the wall. "Back off!" I shouted, and my voice sounded oddly loud and hoarse echoing around the concrete room.

He stepped back, still grinning, and shook his head. "Excitable girl."

"*Cho blyaa?*" Scar-Face had suddenly reappeared in the doorway. He glared down at me, then at Gold-Tooth. There was

fury in his eyes. My heart was beating way too fast. More than anything, I wanted a locked door between me and everyone else in the world, starting with these two.

Gold-Tooth shot Scar-Face an annoyed glance, then shifted his gaze to me. “Rent is due Friday. Don’t be late, okay, honey?” He sniffed. “Call if you need anything.” He took one more look around, then walked out.

I shut the door and locked it. What now? Maybe it was time to invest in some pepper spray. Or figure out a way to get out of this hole. I checked my phone for texts from Randy — nothing. I already owed her money that I couldn’t possibly pay back.

I sat down on the suitcase and considered my options. Helping Randy with the catering gigs was okay, but I didn’t see that getting me out of this predicament in any reasonable amount of time. And even once I got my police report, the bank would doubtless take its sweet time deciding whether it should refund my money. If I was going to get out of this dump and repay Randy — in that order — I’d need a real job. Under normal circumstances I’d have recoiled in horror at the prospect. But nothing re-aligns your priorities like a creepy Russian Don Juannabe breathing down your neck.

I glanced down at the suitcase I was sitting on. My old smartphone’s screen was cracked, and its data contract had been an early casualty of the downsizing — but it worked okay in places with free WiFi. And I still had the charger.

I looked around the apartment. Manny Pacquiao stared back from his poster, menacing, ready and willing to punch someone in the face. The day wasn’t over yet. I got up and rummaged around in the suitcase until I found the defunct smartphone. Then I grabbed my flip-phone off the windowsill and headed out the door.

Half an hour later, I had two job leads thanks to Craigslist. The first was a medical receptionist at a Physical Therapy clinic in Brighton Beach. It seemed unlikely that I’d get the job, but it was geographically desirable and the hourly pay was decent, so I emailed them my pathetic résumé and hoped for the best.

The second job was less straightforward — a part-time

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Personal Assistant for a “busy professional” in Manhattan. The ad was worded vaguely, which made me wonder whether it was a thinly-veiled advertisement for a sex worker, but I responded with an earnest inquiry. Then I stared at the ruined phone’s screen a little longer before stuffing it into my bag and heading back to West End Avenue.