The clock strikes 2:30 and the dismissal bell rings.

30 minutes to get to work.

I walk out of my high school and start walking. As I walk down the street, my hands are in my jacket pockets, my nose and my ears are beat red, and I feel the wind strike my legs through my leggings.

2:40. 20 full minutes.

10 minutes later, I get to the back of “Southwest dry cleaners” and open the back door. 2:50. 10 minutes early for work. Great. Another 10 minutes I’ll never get back.

As I walk from the back of the store to the front, I see dust bunnies everywhere. Big clumps of grey fuzz surround the floor and all underneath the clothes on the rack. I see pins lying on the ground waiting to be stepped on. The carpet has dust all throughout it with a tear in every 2 inches from the top to the bottom. I pass the table with a desk lamp shining on needles and threads, which have been in the same position as they were 5 days ago.

God, why do I still work here?

I look up and hear the repeated 7 words I hear every time I come into work.

“Hello Julia! How are you doing today?”

This is my boss Maria. She’s been working at the cleaners for decades. She’s in her 60’s, has piercing blue eyes, short grey and blonde hair, glasses, and always wears an old lady sweater.

“I’m doing pretty well, how about you?”

“I’m doing quite well thanks for asking” she says with that old, wrinkly, crooked smile of hers.

She then says “Before I leave, the toilet is broken. Something went wrong with the plumbing and the plumber is coming tomorrow to fix it. If you need to use the restroom you can use the one in the back where Butch and Pete work. Would that be alright?”

Pete and Butch are the owners of Southwest Cleaners.

“Of course!” I say.

What I wanted to say was: Um, no! Please don’t leave me alone here again, this time trapped without access to a bathroom! I’m going to have to walk into the other one, completely alone? I don’t know what could be back there along with who could be hiding back there and please don’t make me do this I beg of you.

News flash, I didn’t say that.

“Alright good. I’m gonna get going now. Call me if anything comes up and you need help. Have a good night!”

“Okay thank you!”

Maria shuts the door, and then I hear that overwhelming sound I hear every time she leaves. Silence. Not one thing is happening in the whole place. I am now alone once again.

The cleaner’s is divided into two parts: the first part is where the owners work and clean all of the clothes which is always dark and silent. The other part of the cleaners is where all of the cleaned clothes are hanging along with the front desk, where I work.

I sit there waiting for anyone to come in. I then get the same eerie feeling I feel every time I work. I look back into the dark corner where the clothes are hanging, waiting for someone to run out from in the shadows. I look around at the white pale doors that separate the owner’s work place from my work place, waiting for someone or something to open them.

Around 5 pm, I notice I need to use the restroom, bad. I could hold it for another 2 hours, or use the owner’s bathroom in the dark, silent, eerie room that I was never brave enough to use before.

My bladder was about to explode, so I knew I needed to use the back bathroom. Maybe I was just overworking myself and the back bathroom would be completely normal.

I took a deep breath and start walking to the back. I opened the pale, dusty doors slowly as they creaked into the darkness. I couldn’t see any lights or switches, but I could faintly make out what’s in front of me. I slowly passed all the clothes hanging on the ceiling and dodge all the machines in my path. As I reach a dead end, I look left and see the outline of a doorway. I walk through it and vaguely see a sink and a toilet.

I reach for the light switch and switch it upwards. Nothing. I took out my phone and turned on the flashlight. I put the light facing upwards on the corner of the sink. Now that I can see, I look down and see more dust on the ground, in every corner, behind the toilet, and next to the sink. The tiles on the floor are pink and green. They are so old and faded they almost blend together as one color. I look up and see cobwebs on the ceiling hanging as low as my head. There was not a single window in sight.

Frantically, I go to use the toilet. As soon as I touched it, the whole toilet shifted downward and to the left, like it was sinking into the ground.

“Get me out of here” I think to myself.

I flushed the toilet and the sound echoed off the caved in walls onto another. Holding my ears, looking at all the cobwebs, and being surrounded by darkness, I ran out of the bathroom, through the workers workspace, passed all the machines, dodging the hanging shirts, and back to my desk.

“This is the final straw” I thought. “I can’t take this any longer.”

I explained the bathroom adventure to my boyfriend, and he said that I should look for a different job. The place he works at was hiring girls for the weekends. He told his boss, Patty, that I was interested, and I was almost immediately hired.

However, Patty told me “You would need to be available almost every weekend, unless you have a planned event and take off ahead of time.”

I lost my breath for a moment and thought “I’m not sure that is okay with Maria.”

I told Patty that was fine, feeling uncertain how to explain this to Maria.

A few days later, I enter through the back door of Southwest Dry Cleaners once more. The dust was in the same places and Maria was standing in the same spot.

She asked once again, “How was your day?”

“Just fine, how about yours?”

“The same as always.”

I looked at her and said “I actually have some news to share with you.”

“What is it?”

“My boyfriend got me another job at the place where he works on the weekends. However, I would need to commit all my weekends there. Would it be alright if I worked every Friday here so I would be able to work weekends over at the other place?”

She looked at me with a crinkled face, almost like she had just stubbed her toe and trying not to scream in pain.

“Eeh no. I’m sorry Julia. It wouldn’t be fair to the other girls if they have to work all weekends and you don’t have to.”

I was afraid of this response.

“Okay, I understand.”

“Sorry Julia. Are you definitely working there?”

“They told me I could start. However, if that job is going to interfere with this one then I may not.”

“Okay, well let me know what your final decision will be when you’ve made up your mind. I need to get going so I’ll see you next time!”

She smiles her crooked smile, walks to the back, and out the door she went.

What do I do now? Should I stay here or go to the new job? Would the new job even be worth leaving here?

I should have weighed my options before agreeing to a second job. I should have talked to Maria before going to the new place.

But back to the question, what do I do now?

A few days pass and I make my decision. I need a change. I can’t dealing with dark, mysterious bathrooms and breathing in clumps of dust anymore.

I build up the courage to call Maria. I picked up my phone, dial her number slowly but steadily, and wait for her to answer.

“Hi Julia! Is everything alright?”

“Yes everything’s fine! I just wanted to call and let you know that I have been thinking about the other job, and I think I am going to take it.”

My hand starts shaking a little bit and getting sweaty. I’ve never left a job before. Is she going to be mad that I’m leaving?

She then reply’s “Okay! So how about I put you on the schedule for the next two weeks and then after that I won’t schedule you anymore?”

“Yes that would be great!”

“Okay, no problem. I’ll do that now and I’ll see you the next time you come in.”

“Great, thank you so much!”

I hung up the phone and I feel a sense of joy overpower my body. I finally feel free!

Two weeks later, I am working my final day at the cleaner’s. Customer’s come in with clothes and I greet them happier than usual. I actually don’t mind being there and working today.

The clock strikes 1:00, I am finally finished. I walk from the front to the back. I see all the items I pass every time I come in here. This is my last run through. I peak my head in the owner’s work place one last time. I stroll around looking at all the dust piles on the ground and on the tables. All of the needles, pins, and threads don’t look so intimidating anymore. I open the back door one last time, and close it behind me. I walk to my car, open the door, and sit inside. I let out a major breath.

As I drive away, I feel this sense of sadness. I’m leaving the first job I ever had. I feel sad that I’m leaving for good and how this represents an area of my life that I have moved on from. But my happiness from knowing I do not have to work there anymore overrode the sadness by far.

I say to myself with a big smile, “I’m done, for good.”