The clock strikes 2:30 and the dismissal bell rings. I think to myself, “30 minutes to get to work.” I walk out of the 9 foot tall double black doors of my high school and I start walking. As I walk down the street, I look at all of the parents sitting in the car line waiting for their kids to come out. 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. I take my phone out and look at the time. 2:40. 20 minutes to get to work. I cross the street and walk all the way down to Ballymore Lane. One I get to the corner of the street, I turn right and walk all the way down until the end. I get to the back of “Southwest dry cleaners” and open the back door. I look down at my phone again, 2:50. I am 10 minutes early for work. Great. Another 10 minutes that I’ll never get back.

As I walk from the back of the store to the front, I see the dust bunnies in every corner. Big clumps of grey fuzz surround the floor and all the clothes on the rack. I see pins lying on the ground waiting to be stepped on by anyone who passes. The carpet has dust all throughout it, there’s a tear in every 2 inches from the top and the bottom, the black hard corners are cracked, and they have been for a long time. I pass the table with the desk lamp shining on some 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 is in her 60’s, has piercing blue eyes, short grey and blonde hair, wears glasses, and always wears a sweater that only an old lady would wear.

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

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

We go over the specials that are planned to be picked up and she tells me that business was kind of slow that day.

She then says “oh and one more thing before I leave Julia. The toilet is actually broken for the day. Something went wrong with the plumbing so we have to wait until tomorrow for the plumber to come in and fix it. In the meantime, if you need to use the restroom you can use the one in the back of where Butch and Pete work. Would that be alright?”

“Of course!” I say. What else would I have said? No please don’t leave me alone here again, and this time trapped without access to a bathroom. I’m way too scared to walk into the other one completely alone. I don’t know what could possibly be back there along with who could be hiding back there! Please don’t make me do this I beg of you.

News flash, I did not say that.

She says “Alright good. Well I am gonna get going now. Pete and Butch should be gone for the day. Call me if anything comes up and you need help, I am right around the corner. Now you have a good night, and I’ll see you on Friday.”

Pete and Butch are the owners of Southwest Cleaners. The cleaner’s is divided into two parts: the first part is where they work and clean all of the clothes. It has machines from the back to the front; they almost look like huge washers and dryers. There are shirts and pants hanging right as you walk in the door and all across the ceiling. This part 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. A customer will walk in and either drop of clothes for me to tag or hand me a ticket for their clothes to be picked up.

“Okay thank you! See you Friday Maria.”

“Alright buh bye.”

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 and left to do homework and take care of the customers.

I sit there waiting for a customer, the mail man, someone with a question about directions, anyone. I then get the same eerie feeling I feel every time I work at night. 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 those doors.

Someone opens the front door and I jump from my seat, and realize it is only a customer.

Around 5 pm, I notice that I need to use the restroom, bad. I now have a choice, to hold it for another 2 hours, or go 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 go and use the back bathroom. For all I know, I was just overworking myself and using the bathroom would be just fine. I took a deep breath and bravely start walking to the back. I opened the pale, dusty doors slowly as they creaked into the darkness. I could not see any lights or any light switches, but I can faintly make out what I see in front of me. I slowly passed all of the clothes hanging up on the ceiling and dodge all of the machines that I come across in my path. As I reach a dead end, I turn left and see the outline of a doorway. I slowly walk in through that doorway and try and make out what I see. I see a sink and a toilet, so I know I have finally found the bathroom. I reach for the light switch and switch it from down to up. Nothing. Of course. I took out my phone and turn on the flashlight. I put it facing upwards on the corner of the sink so I could have a little light in the room. Now that I can finally 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, but they are old and faded. The two colors almost seemed like they could blend together from how faded they were. I look up and there are cobwebs on the ceiling hanging as low as where my head was, and there was not a single window in sight.

Frantically, I go to use the toilet. As soon as I touched the rim of the seat, the whole toilet shifted. It moved downward and to the left almost as if it was sinking into the ground.

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

I flush the toilet and the sound of the flushing echoed off of the caved in walls. Holding my ears, looking at all the cobwebs, being surrounded by darkness, I ran out of the bathroom, through the workers workspace, passed all the machines, running into shirts that are hanging on the ceiling, and back to my desk.

I thought to myself “This is the final straw, I have had enough. I can’t work here any longer.”

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

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

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

I told Patty that was fine with me and went on my way, still feeling uncertain of 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 all in the same places, and Maria was standing in the same spot she always was.

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

I say “Just fine, how about yours?”

Maria says “Oh just the same as always.”

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

She says “Sure! What is it?”

I say “My boyfriend actually got me another job at the place where he works on the weekends. However, I would need to commit all my weekends to 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 on the side of a table and trying not to scream in pain.

She then said to me “eeh no I’m sorry Julia. It just 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.

I reply “Okay, I understand.”

She says “sorry Julia. So did you definitely take the other job?”

I told her “Well they told me I could start working there. However, if that job is going to interfere with this one then I can maybe tell them that the job won’t work for me.”

She says “Okay, well let me know what your final decision will be when you have 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 should I try the new job? Would the new job even be worth leaving here? I should have weighed my options before telling the new place I could work there. I should have even talked to Maria before going to the new place. But anyway, back to the question, what in the world do I do now?

A few days pass, and I am still asking the same questions. Finally, I make my decision. I need a change. No more dealing with dark, mysterious bathrooms and breathing in dust left and right.

I know I need to tell Maria right away.

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

She answers and says “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, so I would like to give my two weeks in today.”

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

She then reply’s saying “oh okay! So I will just put you on the schedule for the next two weeks from today and then after that I won’t schedule you anymore, correct?”

“Yes, if that is okay!”

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

“Great thank you so much!”

I hang up the phone and I feel a sense of joy overpower my body. I’m a free woman!

Two weeks later, I am working on a Saturday and it is my final day at the claeaners. One by one customer’s come in with clothes. I greet them happier than usual and I don’t actually mind doing the job and being there today.

The clock strikes 1:00, I am finally finished. I wrap up my phone charger, put away my homework, throw away my snacks, and pick up my keys. As I am walking from the front to the back, I stare at all the items I pass every time I come in here. This is my last time being in here and seeing these things. I peek my head in the owner’s work place one last time. I stroll around looking at all of the dust piles on the ground and on the tables in the back. 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 little sense of sadness. I’m leaving the first job I ever had. I feel sad that I’m leaving for good, and it is an area of my life that I have moved on from. But my happiness of not having to work there anymore overrode the sadness by far.

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

P.S. I just recently heard that Southwest dry cleaners closed down. I’m not sure if this is a rumor or not but I heard it was being turned into a bagel shop. I thought to myself, “Could you imagine if you did not take the other job and you still worked there? You’d be shit out of money!”

Then I thought maybe that was the reason why they never cleaned the dust, didn’t fix the back toilet, and didn’t really mind that I was leaving; because they were shutting down shop soon enough. Either way, I am very happy with my decision to leave that place and I will never, ever, in a million years, work in a dry cleaners again.