

If you have ever, sir, been through the breakup of a romantic relationship that involved great love, you will perhaps understand what I experienced. There is in such situations usually a moment of passion during which the unthinkable is said; this is followed by a sense of euphoria at finally being liberated; the world seems fresh, as if seen for the first time; then comes the inevitable period of doubt, the desperate and doomed backpedaling of regret; and only later, once emotions have receded, is one able to view with equanimity the journey through which one has passed. My doubt and regret came rather quickly, as they so often—in my experience of our species—tend to do, and when I boarded the subway to report for duty at Underwood Samson for the last time, I was in a state of shock similar to that which one undergoes when one has witnessed one's knee twist impossibly but has yet to feel any pain.

Not—please understand me—that I was convinced that I had made a mistake; no, I was merely unconvinced that I had not made a mistake. I was, in other words, confused. Nevertheless, my pride compelled me to attempt to appear unaffected by the unexpected sadness within me. I did not permit my gaze to linger on the imposing reception area—which struck me now as reminiscent of the gleaming facade of some exalted and exclusive temple—or on the spectacular view from our windows; I did not permit myself to pocket a box of my business cards, elegantly printed proof that I had once been selected from among hundreds to be here. I simply let myself be led by the pair of security guards who stood on either side of me, watched as I placed a limited number of clearly personal possessions into a small cardboard box, and then escorted me to human resources for my exit conversation.

This was surprisingly brief—stern and dauntingly formal, but without recrimination—and once the requisite forms had been signed and data relevant to performance-enhancing indicators gathered, I was told that Jim wanted to speak with me. He was wearing a dark suit and a dark tie—funereal colors, I thought—and he looked under-slept. “You really screwed us, kid,” he said. “I know,” I replied. “I am sorry.” “I’m not a big believer in compassion at the workplace,” he went on. “I didn’t think twice when it came to firing you. In fact, I wish I’d done it a month ago and saved us the headache you’ve given us down in Valparaiso. But,” he

paused, “I’ll tell you this. I like you, Changez. I can see you’re going through a crisis. If you ever need to get something off your chest and you want someone to talk to, call and I’ll buy you a beer.” My throat constricted; I could not reply. I nodded slowly, a gesture not unlike a bow.

After leaving Jim’s office, I was marched to the elevator bank. I realized how deep was the suspicion I had engendered in my colleagues over these past few—bearded and resentful—weeks; only Wain-wright came over to shake my hand and say farewell; the others, if they bothered to look at me at all, did so with evident unease and, in some cases, a fear which would not have been inappropriate had I been convicted of plotting to kill them rather than of abandoning my post in mid-assignment. The guards did not leave me until I was outside the building, and it was only then that I allowed myself to rub my eyes with the back of my hand, for they had been watering slightly.

You must remember that I was only twenty-two and this had been my first proper job; at such an age and in such a situation events have an emotional resonance that is perhaps exaggerated. In any case, I felt as though a world had ended—which, indeed, it had—and I made my way to the East Village on foot. I imagine I was a rather odd sight—a distraught and hirsute Pakistani carrying an unmarked box through the center of Manhattan—but I do not recall receiving any untoward comments from passersby; then again, I was in all likelihood too preoccupied to have noticed.