

Save the Blue Copies

The buying office was in an old fitting room on the fifth floor, behind the registers in Women's Petites. When she first got promoted to assistant buyer, Claire was disappointed to see it – in some spots, there were still tarnished brass hooks on the wall, where sales staff had once hung carefully selected garments for customers to try on. After almost a year, however, she had grown used to it. The mismatched metal desks, the office chairs in various states of disrepair, the low-level haze and stink from the cigarettes that Lynn insisted on smoking at her desk – all were part of her everyday routine now. Taking the train in from her Evanston apartment, the long walk from the station to save the \$3 cab ride, and finally approaching from State Street, the majestic building coming into view, the iconic green clock on the corner – from the outside, all was grandeur and elegance.

Inside the office, however, all was business. At this point in January, most of the buyers were in New York for market week, their assistants left behind, scrambling to get merchandise in for the upcoming Field Days sale. Claire, however, had confirmed all her deliveries with the warehouse before she left the office late on Friday. She didn't want anything getting in the way of her plans for Super Bowl '86. She had been in a state of high excitement the entire week, barely able to concentrate on getting Martha the reports she needed for her New York appointments. Instead her head buzzed with anticipation for Super Bowl Sunday and the huge party she would be attending at the Ultimate Sports Bar. This was the event she had been looking forward to for months, even years. And the game did not disappoint – the Bears were dominant, and long-suffering Bears fans celebrated exuberantly, Claire among them. As a lifelong fan, she was still basking in the victory when she got to work on Monday morning.

She entered the office, cheeks pink from the cold, opened her mouth to rehash the Bears' thrashing of the Patriots, and was promptly shushed by Lynn holding up a finger and gesturing to the phone.

"Jeez Manny, don't lie to me again." Claire heard the sharp intake of breath that signaled Lynn's first Virginia Slim of the morning. "Are the dresses on the goddamn truck or not? Because if they're not, you're going to have to air them in today and eat the cost. Martha will be back from New York on Friday and she's going to kill me if your stuff isn't here."

Lynn paused for a minute to listen to whatever Manny's excuse was, rolled her eyes, and stubbed her cigarette into the tray on her desk, already overflowing with butts stained with her trademark tangerine lipstick. She glanced at Claire, rolled her eyes, and gave the finger to the phone receiver. "Gotta go, Manny. Call me later with the routing numbers."

She slammed down the phone and turned to Claire. "Damn garmento," she proclaimed, using their term for the garment vendors they dealt with day in and day out. She yawned and took a sip of the Diet Coke on her desk. "God, I stayed out way too late last night. Wasn't that a great game?" Before Claire could launch into her enthusiastic recap, Lynn cast her eyes around the office. "Where are the boys?"

“The boys” were Michael and Richard, assistants to Sandy, the Petites buyer. They shared the office space with Claire, Lynn, and Martha, the dress buyer – each team had the equivalent of a row of four fitting rooms, separated by a vestibule-like area that had once been the original entrance to the fitting room area. Back in the day, the vestibule had likely been framed by an elegant festoon of draperies and furnished with a gilt-edged three-way mirror and a pedestal in front of it. Now they entered through a flat panel door wallpapered to match the walls of the Petite department and hung their coats on a battered coat rack in the entry way.

The boys had been a team for several years, and although they bickered and teased each other unrelentingly, they actually worked well together, and both were experienced and skilled at their jobs. Richard focused on petite sportswear, while Michael handled petite dresses; because of that, Claire and Lynn frequently collaborated with him to ensure that the petite selection closely mirrored that of Misses’. Michael was a tall, rangy man, with what Lynn referred to as a “porn star mustache” – full, bristly, but meticulously trimmed. He had been a kindergarten teacher in his home state of Indiana, before outraged parents discovered his sexual orientation and demanded his dismissal.

“I resigned before I could get fired,” he disclosed to Claire early in their friendship. “I got in my Toyota and drove to the nearest civilized place I could find. Got a job selling socks, and never looked back.” Here he shrugged his shoulders, tossed an imaginary boa over his shoulder, and retreated to his fitting room office to run monthly markdown reports. Claire had wanted to ask him more about it, to learn how he felt about leaving his profession, his hometown, his family. She hesitated a minute in the doorway, but Michael didn’t raise his eyes from his desk. Clearly, he didn’t want to talk about it. And she didn’t want to intrude. So she let it be, but she didn’t forget about it. Maybe she would find a chance to bring it up some day when they weren’t racing a deadline, whenever that might be. Because despite his flippant manner, Claire was not so sure that he never looked back. In fact, she was certain that he carried a piece of his hometown with him everywhere, and that he looked back more often than he wanted anyone to know. These were things that Michael may not have spoken about, but she suspected they were never far from his mind. She thought back to the day she returned from a rare Walnut Room lunch to find him at his desk surrounded by a mountain of Laura Ashley floral print.

“Redecorating?” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

“For my niece. Seventh birthday,” he replied matter-of-factly, and turned his attention to the curling tape emerging from the adding machine on his desk. Claire hadn’t even known that Michael had a niece, or siblings, for that matter. As much time as they had spent together, it had somehow never come up. She paused a moment in the doorway, thinking about how that pink rose bedding with ruffles and eyelet trim would create a dream bedroom for a little girl; and about exactly how big a chunk that purchase would take from an assistant buyer’s paycheck. He would be eating ramen for the last week of the month, or scrounging appetizers from the complimentary Happy Hour buffets at the commuter bars on State Street.

So yes, Claire knew that Michael was kind, and maybe a little sentimental. He was also screechingly funny. She pictured him lying on the dingy office carpet, belting out “My Funny Valentine” in an

attempt to lure her to the female impersonator show at Baton Club after work one night. A few weeks later, on her birthday, he presented her with a hand drawn card captioned "To My Bitch Goddess" decorated with a pencil drawing of her in her new Country Shop plaid skirt and faux pearls.

"Bitch?" she questioned.

"Oh NO – bitch GODDESS," he emphasized. "I worship at the altar of your blunt cut bob and unchipped manicure." And then he laughed and pulled a Mrs. Field's cookie with an unlit birthday candle from the middle drawer of his rickety metal desk.

On that birthday, her 25th, Claire recognized that people perceived her as smart, perhaps, but also young and a bit naive, with a lingering aura of "college girl" about her, even three years out. She knew her appearance – her preppy wardrobe, her freckles, her honey-colored hair with no layers or highlights – gave her a conservative look, especially by fashion industry standards. She really didn't see herself that way, and in fact felt flashes or annoyance when her office mates apologized for swearing in front of her or abruptly stopped their conversations when she entered a room. She just didn't feel like she needed to explain herself to them, or change the way she dressed, or spoke or lived, for that matter, just to make sure people at work understood her fully. How far did she need to go to make sure they really knew her? She was still a work in process. Everything about her was evolving, and as she dated different men, or traded out her silk blouses and pleated skirts for Norma Kamali dresses or brightly patterned sweaters; as she traveled out of the country for the first time, and got used to living on her own, she didn't feel like she had to always be explaining herself to everyone. She didn't want to feel like she was on display, or an object of amusement or interest or ridicule for the people she saw every day. She kept a little part of herself for herself, and as a result, sometimes she felt like her guard was up when she was at work. She shared some things with Lynn, and they socialized occasionally after work – Happy Hours, concerts, exercise classes and occasional movie nights. But it was with Michael that Claire most frequently let her guard down. Whether it was him teasing her about her undecipherable filing system, or bonding over their mutual hatred of Lionel Richie, Claire felt most like herself around Michael. He brought out a side of her that felt truer than the "work self" she presented at the office, even prompting her to climb onto her dented gunmetal desk and belt out "Paradise by the Dashboard Lights" when he challenged her to a lip sync contest with his rendition of "Like A Virgin." When Lynn declared her the winner, Michael bowed and conceded, and the three of them went up to the 9th floor candy department and raided the Frango mint sample box to mark her victory.

Richard, his officemate, was a bit more reserved, sporting a trademark bow tie and favoring navy blazers with brass buttons. But even he succumbed to Michael's teasing, usually in regard to his ongoing and unwavering commitment to beauty treatment experimentation. "Mmmm, highlights again?" Michael would muse, cocking his head. "Getting a little brassy, I'd say," causing Richard to run to the hand mirror hanging from the one of the brass hooks and rake at his roots in horror.

Claire smelled a fresh Virginia Slim and turned to face Lynn. "I have no idea where the boys are," she replied. "Maybe still out celebrating the Bears victory?"

Lynn snorted. The boys made it clear that they were not into sports – although they both frequented the Charlie Club on Michigan Avenue, they always made air quotes when they reported they were headed there to “work out.”

“Well, maybe Michael is visiting his boyfriend. Isn’t he still dating Nico from Argenti? It’s been a while now.”

Claire thought about it. Michael went out a lot, and with a lot of people about whom he never provided details or even names – but he had been talking about Nico, who worked at Argenti Silks in New York, for a while now. It was hard to tell if they were together, because they were so rarely in the same city, but they seemed like a good match. And although they hadn’t discussed it, Claire was happy to see Michael in what appeared to be a longer-term relationship with someone who might really understand and appreciate him.

“I haven’t seen Nico in a while,” she said to Lynn. “Is he still covering Chicago?”

“I don’t know,” Lynn replied. “We can ask Hilary in the staff meeting tomorrow.” Hilary usually had the scoop on what was going on in New York. “But right now, let me get Manny under control and then let’s go out to Contempo and see if they got any new stuff in.”

“Sure,” Claire replied. Here was the biggest reason the assistants were frequently reduced to living on ramen, Happy Hour buffets, and yes, dinner dates, by the end of the month – the 30% employee discount. When the buyers were in town, they had to shop on the fly, between trips to the sub-basement to look for new shipments or the sales floor to check on markdowns; but when the buyers were away for market week, they were able to relax a bit and indulge what had brought them to the store in the first place – their love for fashion.

“I’m in,” she said. “As long as we can talk about Walter Payton while we shop.”

Lynn smirked, and picked up the phone to call another garmento.

Tuesday was, if possible, even colder than the day before. The winds off Lake Michigan sliced through the city, and in the Loop, the skyscrapers lining the streets created urban wind tunnels that stung the faces and burned the lungs of the commuters hurrying to their offices. Still, Claire arrived determined to attend the Bears victory parade she had read about in the Tribune on the train ride in.

“Starts at 10,” she reported, as she dropped the paper onto Lynn’s ash-shadowed desktop. “We can go to the staff meeting at 9 and be out there in time to see the trophy go down State Street.”

Lynn glanced at the front page. “God, no,” she replied. “The wind chill is 32 below. I mean, look at you. Your nose is still running, for Christ’s sake. Not a chance.”

Claire rolled her eyes, but she knew from nearly a year of sharing an office with Lynn that she had very little chance of changing her mind. Fine, she thought, I’ll go alone. She just had to get through the staff

meeting, and it should be shorter than usual with most of the buyers in New York. Hilary Green, the suit buyer, had remained behind, so she would be running the meeting while the Divisional Merchandise Manager was at market week. Hilary was acting like this was a great honor, practically a promotion – but the assistants all knew that the reason she wasn't in New York was that she was badly overbought, and she had no money to spend. If Midwestern career women didn't start buying pin-striped menswear suits quickly and in large quantities, Hilary was in trouble. Privately the assistants all thought Hilary was badly off base. Fashion was shifting quickly toward contemporary labels and "lifestyle" designers like Ralph Lauren and Perry Ellis. Still, she had her ear to the ground in both Chicago and New York, and Claire was eager to ask her about Michael and Nico.

"Nico from Argenti?" Hilary gave a small shake of her head, just once, closed her eyes for a second and pursed her lips. Uncharacteristically softly she said to Claire "He passed away last month, Claire. I'm sorry. I thought you knew."

Claire went silent and looked intently at Hilary. After a moment, she found her voice. "No, it can't be.... Hilary, are you sure?"

Hilary nodded. "Yes, I'm positive. I can't believe Michael didn't tell you. It's so awful to lose another one."

Claire knew what she meant. They were literally losing men. Men were disappearing from their professional world, not one by one, but in groups, in droves, in a long slow parade. It had begun gradually, quietly, floated on whispers from Africa. But as more facts came to light, the numbers of sick and dying men in the fashion world seemed to rise in direct proportion to the new information and the swelling panic as the disease took root in the U.S. First on the coasts, now firmly in Chicago, from the Gold Coast to Boystown and up the North Shore – last year the Fashion Director, a married man with two children, had resigned for "personal reasons" and just weeks ago, the Director of Licensing at Perry Ellis, and his long-time partner, had passed away in a private hospital in Manhattan.

Claire's heart ached for Michael, and she longed to comfort him over his loss – but despite how close she felt they were, they had never spoken openly about his relationship with Nico, or the disease. She suspected that he kept some things back from her, and his teasing about her pearl necklaces and sorority sisters was only partly in jest, and probably served as a barrier to speaking as openly as two people who spent virtually every day together should be able to speak. She resolved to change that – she pictured him back in his battered desk chair, and saw herself walking into his office and saying – what? She wasn't sure yet, but she would figure it out.

She swallowed and gathered up her reports, looking around for Lynn, but she had fled the meeting the minute it ended, no doubt for the smokers' lounge. Hilary touched her shoulder in sympathy, and left the room, and Claire headed back to her fitting room office. Methodically she layered on her scarf, boots, coat, hat, and gloves.... perhaps the bone-shattering wind chill would numb her, as she didn't want to be feeling what she was feeling.

She pushed her way through the main doors onto State Street and stepped directly into the massive throng, craning her neck to get a partial glimpse of the trolley bearing Jim McMahon and Walter Payton. The bus was barely moving, as the streets and sidewalks were packed so tightly with fans and spectators, it would be dangerous for the parade vehicles to exceed single digit speeds. She had hoped that the crowd would serve as a barrier to the wind, but it swirled unrelentingly through the concrete canyons and cut sharply through her layers of outerwear and wool blazer and skirt. The cheering was loud and intense; she smelled beer, and could that be whiskey? It reminded her of St. Patrick's Day, but she thought this crowd might even be bigger. Makeshift confetti poured out of the open windows of the banks and offices in the Loop, and God help them, there were Bears fans with painted faces, shirtless and dancing in the streets. If she squinted, she could see Mike Ditka in his trademark mirrored shades, holding the Super Bowl trophy; but as she focused on him, she did not feel the thrill she expected. Instead, she felt only the cold. She turned and fought her way back into the store, not lingering in first floor Cosmetics as she often did, but instead heading quickly and directly back to the fifth floor.

The cold snap did not let up at all, and when Claire pushed through the doors of the store on Wednesday morning, she could feel nothing at all in her feet and did not trust herself to run up the dormant escalators as she usually did. She joined the lines at the elevator banks, shifting her purse and briefcase so she could yank off her hat and gloves and begin to adjust to the dry indoor heat. The 100-year old building had marble floors and a Tiffany dome ceiling, but it also had a prehistoric heating system, and staff members cursed their dry hair and scaly hands all winter long.

She disembarked on Five and made her way through the eerie quiet of the store before opening – it felt like a completely different place when unlit and empty of salespeople and customers. She used her key to open the camouflaged office door, stepped in and flicked on the lights. The ancient and unflattering fluorescents took a while to warm up, light levels and a soft humming increasing incrementally over the span of a few seconds. Claire was now used to both. The answering machine was blinking so she hit that switch as well, hearing the beep and then Richard's high nasal voice. The beginning of the message was all static but eventually she made out "totally snowed in, up here in Shitsville, Minnesota...trapped with my parents...will probably eat my left arm if I can't get out tomorrow. Claire, be a doll, and run my inter-store transfers up to the GMM for approval. If I don't get some merch from this store to Dallas today, my Field Days will be a bust. Thanks, Love – oh, and don't forget to save the blue copies," followed by another beep signaled the end of the message. Claire rolled her eyes and crossed over to the boys' office. Richard's desk was pristine, and she found the transfer request centered on top of the blotter (blotter! Who had a blotter?). She took it over to her desk and put it on the corner with her own transfers and a markdown overage report, both of which required an executive signature, and vowed to get in all up to the GMM before lunch, since he had a reputation for sometimes not making it back to the office until 3 or 4:00 – if at all.

Mid-morning, and the office was uncharacteristically quiet. Lynn had called and pleaded a dentist appointment, Richard was of course snowed in, and still no word at all from Michael. Claire looked up from the purchase orders she was sorting – turn in the white and pink copies to the departmental office, file the yellow ones, and save the blue copies. For what, none of them were sure, but in every buying office, there was a huge bin overflowing with blue copies just waiting to go ---- somewhere. When she first joined the buying team, and Richard was training her, in meticulous detail of course, she asked him why they held onto to the blue copies and what they were going to do with them. “I’m not sure, but we’ll get around to figuring it out someday,” he told her. “They’re not going anywhere.”

She stretched, looked at her watch, and grabbed the paperwork that needed GMM signatures. Now was as good a time as any. The store was officially open now, and although the crowds were sparse in the unrelenting winter, at least the escalators were turned on. She rode the three floors up to Eight on the ancient wooden conveyers, questioning as always how long it would be until they gave out entirely.

The General Merchandise Manager’s office was located on the east side of the Eighth floor, and it was most definitely NOT a converted fitting room. The GMM was rumored to be a personal friend of the Field family, and his suite of offices was in a newly renovated section of the floor that used to house Books before VCRs came along and they were relegated to a corner in the basement. Claire passed through Linens and Housewares, pausing to admire a display of artfully arranged birch picture frames, before she stepped into Electronics. Before her, spanning the remaining length of the eighth floor, were forty televisions, of all sizes and formats, stacked from floor to ceiling. All were turned on, all were tuned to the same channel, and on all of them, simultaneously, the space shuttle Challenger was exploding. Again. And again. And yet again.

As she made her way down the aisle, slowly, numbly, in shock, the voice of the announcer rose sharply. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the Electronics department manager using a remote control to raise the volume. “Cape Canaveral...Christa McAuliffe.... Seventy-three seconds....” The floor began to vibrate under her feet as the volume increased, but the words barely penetrated. She pushed open the door marked “Employees Only.” She crossed the threshold onto the plush silver carpet of the executive offices. She put the documents into the “For Signature” box on the secretary’s desk. She did not wait, as she usually did, to see if they could be signed immediately. Instead she lowered herself into one of the plush armchairs reserved for guests, a seat that Richard had expressly warned her was forbidden to staff. She sat with her hands on the arms of the chair and breathed, forcing herself to focus on the intake and output of her breath. She waited until the rhythm returned, until her hands lost their tremor, until the roaring in her ears receded. Then she rose from the chair, pushed back through the door and walked again through the aisle of televisions. This time the manager was using his remote to turn them all off, the screens now black and silent.

Thursday morning, the weather broke slightly – although the temperature still had not risen above freezing, the wind died down and kept the wind chill at a bearable level. The walk to the store from the train station felt little more than brisk, and Claire felt a bit less numb than she had the day before. She

came in through Cosmetics as always, climbed the silent escalators up to Five, and found the office door open, lights blazing and humming, Virginia Slims haze in the air, and something else – an overlay of musky cologne. Richard.

“Hey, you made it back,” she called to him as hung up her coat and waved at Lynn, who was of course on the phone.

“Ugh! I thought I would die up there, if not from the sub-zero temps than from straight up boredom. Did you get my transfers in?”

“Yes, of course I did. And yes, I saved the blue copies. They’re on your desk.” Claire expected a thank you, or some comment on her new blouse, or even more complaints about the provincial state of Minnesota, but when she stuck her head into his half of the office, she saw Richard staring blankly at his reflection in the hand mirror hanging from the brass hook. He caught her eye in the mirror and set his mouth, breathing in as he turned to look at her.

No, no, no. Claire turned away.

“Claire.”

She froze in the doorway. Her shoulders dropped.

“I’m sorry I haven’t had a chance to talk to you all week...” Richard was uncharacteristically hesitant, and Claire knew, of course she knew, what he had to talk to her about.

She lowered her head. “He’s not coming back, is he?”

She saw Richard shake his head, shifting his perfect highlights just a bit. She heard Lynn lower the phone, for once placing it gently in its cradle. She smelled the smoke, she took in the buzzing lights, she felt the floor vibrate under her feet, and when she looked at the beat-up metal desk and the empty chair, she wondered why she had bothered to save the blue copies.