

HARPER'S

RULES

A RECRUITER'S GUIDE *to* FINDING *a*
DREAM JOB *and the* RIGHT RELATIONSHIP

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PROLOGUE

Since my divorce two years ago, I have become good at resisting men, and I have always been good at resisting headhunters, so when you put the two together, a male headhunter has no chance with me. I know why they call—I am a successful software sales rep with a massive network of clients, and I'm an attractive woman. They want to know if I am happy. Would I like to hear about a dream job? But I don't think much about happiness anymore. So I don't return their calls.

Except Harper Scott.

Harper placed me eight years ago when I was first learning how to sell software, and then again a few years later. He's been a successful headhunter for a long time. He seems to know everyone in my market space and everything that is going on. Harper is connected. But that's not why I return his calls.

"Casey, it's Harper. Do you really think you can get away with this shabby treatment? You don't send funny emails; you don't call. I am seriously considering starting a relationship with you just so I can break up with you and have you know my pain."

I giggled. I'm thirty-four. I thought I left giggling behind.

"We need to talk. Call me. Notice I am not leaving my number. If you don't still have it, a new one is lost."

I told myself to ignore his message. I've been at my job for just over a year, and calling Harper back would mean getting caught up with the drama of interviews and the inevitable subterfuge with my current boss. Why bother?

So I held out. For about four minutes. I got his voice mail, left a message, and a few minutes later his assistant called and said Harper wanted me to meet him at one o'clock at Max's Oyster House the following Tuesday.

As I got dressed on Tuesday morning, I convinced myself that I was trying to make a good impression on the CIO that I was doing a demo for that afternoon. But why was I reaching for the black, form-fitting cashmere sweater and the charcoal grey skirt that even I, as my backside's biggest critic, know hangs and clings in a flattering way? Why am I giving the account the full "I'm very corporate, very astute, and wicked hot" look? I pretended to recall my meeting with Harper as I put my hair up to expose my neck.

I sat in the restaurant for ten minutes before Harper showed. Nothing is more fiendishly calculated than his penchant for making everything seem uncalculated. He must be forty now but could easily pass for younger. Flecks of grey accent his brown hair, and at six feet, he is still at fighting weight—shoulders broad, waist impossibly narrow. My friend Hannah once asked me what he looked like, and I said, "Big in the right places, small in the right places." She understood immediately.

Harper took his seat, folded his hands, placed them under his chin, and smiled at me. He looked him straight in the eyes, the same way I start any meeting, but I didn't know for the

life of me why I was there.

“You’re wondering why you’re here. You’re a busy person, you’re not looking for a job, you’re feeling vaguely guilty about meeting with a headhunter on company time. And yet, it’s so good to see me. Am I right?”

“About everything except the ‘it’s so good to see you’ part.”

“I’m shattered.”

“Bounce back, Harper. I agreed to see you because I’m in town rolling out a demo and because I was curious to see if you had gone to seed yet like most guys your age.”

“And have I?”

“Not quite.”

An impossibly cute, young waitress excused herself for interrupting, took our drink order and told us the specials. Harper asked her how she was doing, and then told her he was a headhunter and when she was ready to start a career she should look him up. I rolled my eyes as she walked away beaming.

“You’re pathetic.”

“Six degrees of separation,” he shrugged. “My network is my lifeblood. You don’t know who she knows.”

“I’m ready for your pitch now, Harper. I Googled you this morning.”

“Isn’t that eerie? I Googled me this morning, too. Any new entries since 7 A.M.?”

Harper’s ego could be a bit much, but then he redeemed himself. He took out his wallet and showed me the latest pictures of his daughter. I raved, because she really was fabulous.

“A teenager already. Has it been that long since you first recruited me?”

“Don’t remind me.”

He leaned back, and I could tell the icebreaking was over. He was here to qualify a prospect that could make him money. I would be well served to keep that in mind.

“So, here’s what my research associate tells me. Nineteen months ago you’re one of SAP’s resident stars. Big territory, established key accounts, and overrides from three direct reports. W2 of over 330K. You leave and end up at an underfunded supply chain company where you’ll be lucky to make 225. It doesn’t add up, Casey.”

“I’m not going on any interviews, Harper. I like my job.”

“Were you sleeping with the boss?”

“What?! John was sixty-three, with yellow teeth and a unibrow.”

“So then, what? It doesn’t add up and you know it.”

I promised myself I wouldn’t share this. A solemn promise, made at my bathroom mirror just five hours ago, now wafting gently out the restaurant’s open windows . . .

“I got divorced, okay? Don’t look at me like that. It’s not *that* shocking.”

“No. What is shocking is that my research assistant missed it. I’d fire her, except that I’d be lost without her.”

“It’s no big deal. We had no kids; we both had careers. We evaluated, we made a choice, we negotiated and distributed our assets, and we moved on.”

“Well, look at you and your stiff upper lip! Did you shake hands and say, ‘Good luck?’”

“We did in fact shake hands. Then he said, ‘Godspeed.’”

Harper leaned back. “He actually said the word ‘Godspeed’? I’ve never been able to work that into a sentence. So you’re fine? No residual sadness?”

“Nope.”

Our waitress bought me some time by asking if we had any questions. Neither of us had really looked at the menu, so we both agreed to the halibut when she raved that it was “phenomenal.” Harper clapped his menu shut. I reached over for my jacket, slipped my Blackberry out, and turned the power off.

“You turn thirty-five soon, right?” Harper said. “So if you’re going to have a family, you need to pick one of the many guys I’m sure you’re dating, shorten the engagement, and abandon all birth control.”

“I’m not focused on that right now, Harper.”

“There are guys, right? You’re beautiful, you’re smart, and you don’t need their money.”

His charms had run their course; I was now officially angry. I started gathering up my things.

“Have your research assistant delete me from your database when you get back to the office, Harper.”

“Two minutes.”

I looked at him with the half querying, half irritated expression I would use on Donald when he left wet clothes in the dryer.

“Give me two minutes,” he said, “and this meeting will have been worthwhile for you whether you eat or not.”

As if on cue, the food came. I couldn’t very well exit while Miss Teen America was warning me the plate was “super duper hot.” I sat down.

He cut his food slowly and didn’t look up while he spoke.

“Thank you, Casey. Answer me this, and remember, I only have two minutes, so don’t overthink it. You traveled 85 percent of the time. He was home, a desk jockey. May I assume he cheated on you?”

Oh, what the hell . . .

“Yes. Apparently for a long time.” I will not cry; I will not turn this arrogant head-hunter into Barbara Walters.

“And if one of your friends knew? If I knew? Would you have wanted to know?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure? It’s touchy. You reconcile and then the friend or friends who told you are the bad guys on the wrong team.”

“So they said. They were wrong. They should have trusted that I would have never blamed them.”

He nodded. “If you ever find out my wife is cheating, let me know.”

“Right after I assure her nobody would blame her.”

He smiled wanly and then emitted a slow, dense sigh.

“You’re getting fired, Casey.” He said it without looking at me. “Tynan is bringing in a new EVP, and he’s going to clean house. Replacing the whole sales force, starting in six weeks. I’m sorry.”

“How do you know?”

“I placed the new EVP. Tynan gave me the search four months ago.”

“And you tell me now?”

“Ethically, I shouldn’t be telling you at all. Look, Casey, your boss was going to get fired, someone was going to get that search. Any new EVP is going to bring in his own people. Because it’s me, you are the only one in the sales force who knows. You have at least three or four months to prepare, plan, and find a job, and it will be better. Because I care.”

I was twirling linguini drenched in pesto sauce with my fork. My stomach felt like it had jumped off a bridge. What was the point of trying to take another bite? I lowered my fork.

“Look, Casey, this is a good thing. You’ll get out before they let you go; you’ve got a track record, leverage. In the long run, this is the best thing that could happen to you.”

“Oh save it, Harper, really. Every time something bad happens to me, I am surrounded by people telling me it’s the best thing that could have happened to me—none of whom, by the way, are personally affected. Donald falls in love with a co-worker’s wife, a woman I introduced him to, and it’s a good thing because he didn’t love me, and now I can find someone who does. The fact that their affair humiliated me at work and made a cushy job untenable—a job that I had killed myself for over a decade to attain— was a good thing because at a new company there’d be no ghosts, no gossip.

“And now that I have picked myself off the floor and established myself, albeit at a crappy company, that, too, is being taken away, and you say it’s the best thing for me. You know what? It’s not. It’s not good that I’m going to be out of a job; it’s not good that I’m not dating; that I only go out to eat for business; it’s not good that I am in sweats all weekend and am addicted to *Court TV* and high-glycemic foods. It is the exact opposite of good, Harper; can you let me have that for just a while? Is that too much to ask?”

“How is everything, you two?” said Miss Teen America.

“It’s good,” I said.

“No,” Harper nearly bellowed, “it’s not. It is the opposite of good, and we would just like to *experience* the food’s opposite-of-goodness for a while. Is that too much to ask?” Miss Teen America withdrew, slightly dazed.

“You’re an idiot, Harper.”

“Yes, but an empathetic, listening idiot.” He gave me the kind of smile that made me want to feel better for *him*, so that he’d keep smiling. My whole life has been spent doing whatever I need to do to keep men smiling.

“So now what?”

“You need to read my book,” he said.

“You wrote a book?”

“Does that seem inconceivable?”

“On getting a job?”

“Writing a simple book on getting a job is not going to get me on Oprah’s couch. It has far more ambitious scope.”

“What’s it called?”

“It’s called . . . I, uh, have decided to call it . . . *Harper’s Rules: The Recruiter’s Guide Finding a Dream Job and the Right Relationship.*”

“You’ve written no such book, have you, Harper?”

“I certainly have, and I find that comment insulting. Now, to clarify, I haven’t written it in the sense of having actually committed words to paper in some structured, organized form.”

“In what sense then, given that tiny distinction, would it qualify as a book?”

“Continued ridicule will take you right off the dedication page. You wanted to hear a pitch, here it comes: I’ve been a headhunter for twenty years. I interview, I evaluate, I dig deep because I need to know how people make decisions. If they don’t accept the job, I don’t get paid. And here’s what I’ve learned:

“There is no difference between making decisions in your career path and making decisions in your romantic life.

“It’s the most natural analogy in the world, and one every headhunter uses. We all know a job interview is like a date; we seek attractive jobs using the same skills we use to find a mate; the best relationships come through referrals; giving notice feels like breaking up; and as you now know, getting fired feels like you’ve been cheated on. Get the premise, or do I go on?”

I found myself remembering previous interviews: how I sized up the staff members I met—how dull or funny they seemed, the office zeitgeist. It was like walking into a party.

“My book is meant for someone just like you,” he said. “You are my target audience. Usually we’re happy in our relationships but our career is in trouble, or we love our job but our home life is terrible, so we gravitate toward the positive reinforcement of one or the other. The problem gets exacerbated because a loved one or a boss feels ignored.”

I put my napkin on the table and folded my hands in front of me. I would have liked nothing better than to shoot Harper down, but my thoughts flashed to evenings on the road, sitting at a Marriot bar with the other road warriors, and how quickly the conversation descended into the ingratitude of a spouse left at home or the unfair expectations of a CEO changing the specs on an order. Given enough alcohol, the talk steered toward the choice of covering each other, just for the night, in the threadbare blanket of a simple sexual encounter. I had never been seriously tempted, but I had felt truly sorry for many of them. Then, near the end with Donald, I had my own horror story. It wasn’t that I didn’t know marriages that worked, but I had to agree with Harper: not too many happy people. I conceded with a nod.

“My book’s ambition is to point out how, if you understand the correct way to get a job and manage a career, the power of the analogous relationship between *whom you love* and *what you do* becomes synergistic and creates a new you: one who is whole—who is real. Wouldn’t it be nice to wake up in the morning and not have to make a distinction between your life and who you pretend to be?”

“Is that how your life is, Harper?”

“This is about you. You need my book, Casey. You need a new career, and you need to stop living without love. The two can be done at one time.”

“If you ever write the book.”

“I believe I’ve just started.”

SHOULD YOU LEAVE OR STAY?

Harper asked me if I was okay, and I told him I was fine, no worries. I went home and it felt like the day the divorce was final.

That day I sat at my dining room table without an idea in the world. I don't mean I didn't know where I wanted to live or if I wanted to remarry; I mean I didn't know if I should sit at the dining room or move to the couch, whether I should sleep, eat, or do laundry. Hannah said, "I know you, girl. You saw this coming at some level, and you've got a plan." But I didn't see it coming. And I didn't have a plan.

Today I took two Ambien, chased them with two Oreo cookies, some skim milk, and another Ambien, and opened my arms to oblivion.

In a couple of days I had decided Harper was just being Harper. I didn't think he was lying but I decided he was taking a few facts, blowing them up, and making a lot of assumptions. My boss had certainly not been acting like he was in any trouble. And how did Harper know that if they did bring in some new honcho he was going to clean house? No, Harper was trying to make a sale and I was just his next placement, wrapped in empathy. And as for his imaginary book being the answer to my work and love problems? Please. Keep the day job, Harper. I went to the monthly staff meeting with the conviction that Harper was to be ignored. Enjoyed, perhaps, but ignored.

My CEO, Michael Tynan, was at the sales meeting; he never comes to sales meetings.

He sat with his arms folded across his chest, and when he interrupted my boss with a shocking declaration that he had a responsibility to reverse our sales forecasts sooner rather than later, I knew in an instant Harper was right. My boss was toast. We were all toast.

In the next four days, I did what any reasonable person in crisis would do—I blocked it out entirely. Every time I got a call, I was grateful it wasn't Harper. I needed some time to sort through everything, though I knew that was the complete opposite of what my therapist would tell me I should do.

"What would you do if you weren't afraid?" she would lean over and whisper, and I would catch a whiff of the cinnamon Tic Tacs she always chewed but never offered. ("I would ask you why you hoard something that costs less than two dollars and comes sixty to a package.") She was right to call me on it. When I found out about Donald's affair with Sasha, I not only avoided confronting him for a week, I held hands with him at the Met's Picasso exhibit for the first time since we started dating. I fear change even more than humiliation.

I would die before ever admitting this to him, but at times like these I miss Donald. F

would stroke my hair while I whined and emoted. He would not try to fix me, but would just nod while I let it all out. Why can't I find the answers without someone touching my hair and why doesn't it work when I touch it myself?

Sitting at home on a Friday evening, I suddenly realized I could trust Donald to tell me what I decided to do sounded right. Immediately the idea of trusting Donald cracked me up and my laughter reverberated through the empty house. My six-year-old Maine Coon, Starbucks, (so named because she turns up at every corner, and is bitter first thing in the morning) ran out of the room, skidding on the hardwood floor like a cartoon tabby.

Then I heard the faint chime of an email arriving, and during the commercial I checked on my way to the fridge.

Harper Scott. Sent with "high importance." The subject line read:

Harper's Rules: The Recruiter's Guide to Finding a Dream Job and the Right Relationship, by Harper Scott.

My instinct said not to open this now. Not after having two and a half glasses of Kendall Jackson chardonnay that I washed down with eleven Fig Newtons and looking like a raccoon because I had rubbed my mascara the way I do when I'm stressed. My instincts told me I should read this after a good sleep, not when vulnerable.

I believe my instincts; I just tend to ignore them. I went to the living room and sat down to read.

The opening paragraphs were vintage Harper:

Author's Note: Now that you have bought this book, it makes no difference to me if you are trying to solve your relationship problem or your career issues; they are one and the same. You can't have a great relationship if you fail at your career, and the greatest job in the world is worthless without someone who can share the ups and downs with you. I have learned how to fix both simultaneously for my candidates and clients.

But first a disclaimer. This book will be useless if you are the type who whines and moans about what people or circumstances in your life have done to you, but who are actually not interested in change—the type who define themselves by their problems and who continue to do the things they already know don't work. If this sounds like you, please return the book and buy *Dating for Dummies* or *What's My Parachute?* For the rest of you, let's go. None of you are getting any younger.

Despite Harper's signature combination of callousness and acumen, I had to ask myself if I really wanted my life to change. Do I get some sort of pleasure out of being unhappy? No, don't think I do. I was happiest when I was happy—I just couldn't sustain it. And right now, with my job, all I'm trying to decide is whether I should cut and run or try to make it work.

HARPER'S RULES Should You Leave or Stay?

It takes little thought and even less courage to leave a relationship that is miserable all the time. The problem for most of you reading this is that *you're not miserable all the time; you're only miserable some of the time!* Some of you will say, "but that's life" and decide to stick it out. Great; that's your call. But some of you will be haunted. In a life this short, isn't it possible to be happy nearly all the time at work and home?

Misery isn't happiness's foe; "good enough" is.

So you need to decide. I will ask you the same questions I would if you were in my office and I was considering representing you as my corporate clients. After you do the homework I'm about to assign, if you decide to stay in your job or relationship, then take the change off the table. Accept that, excluding some unforeseen change, you will be where you are for the rest of your life. It's *okay* to be done with seeking. Embrace it.

But stay away from me, just in case what you have is contagious.

Regardless of whether your primary concern is your personal relationship or your career, answer this diagnostic in terms of your job first, and then you'll see the same rules apply to your relationship. You can do it in reverse too, but it's my book, damn it! Do it my way first.

Time-to-Leave Diagnostic

Q1: Why did you buy this book?

Have you bought other books about changing jobs? When someone leaves your company, do you interrogate them to find out where they are going and why? Do you peruse job boards like Monster or Careerbuilder "just for fun?" How often? Do you get calls on your voice mail from headhunters? Do you return them? Do you find yourself unfocused at work? Have you reworked your résumé even though you're not actively looking?

BOTTOM LINE: If you're acting like you're leaving your job, you're leaving your job. It's just a matter of timing and opportunity. Sometimes we do the right things before we've figured out why they're right.

Q2: Can you pass the "if you were unemployed" test?

If you were unemployed and you had the chance to interview for the job you now have, would you? Or would you be more interested in seeing what else was out there?

BOTTOM LINE: If you are staying at your job just because you are already in it, you should leave. Inert objects stay inert, and so will your career. If fear of unemployment is the only reason you stay, you should leave. We all like easy, but it's not the same as fulfilling.

Q3: Was it ever what you really wanted?

If you made a compromise with yourself when you took your job, your chances of being satisfied by it are slight, regardless of how successful you become at it. Did you take it because you needed quick income? Did you get trapped by convenience? Or did you just make a bad judgment? Maybe your boss left or the company got bought, and the dream is no longer present but you are?

BOTTOM LINE: If none of the original reasons why you took the job are still valid, or you settled for less than you were meant to do, your dream will haunt you until you leave.

Q4: Can we write your eulogy right now?

If you stayed where you are for the rest of your career, are you okay with that? Can we write your eulogy? "She took a job in 2008 at age thirty-four and stayed there until she died at her desk in the fall of 2035?" Picture your tombstone with the two dates and the dash between. Is that okay with you?

BOTTOM LINE: If you know your story is not yet written and at some point you will seek bigger things, you should leave now if an opportunity arises. (Make all big decisions in your life by considering your "eulogy *Cliff's Notes*": If the decision would merit mention in your eulogy, do it. If the decision is one you'd rather people not hear at your funeral, don't do it.)

Q5: Can you pass the Money Aside Test?

If you didn't have your bills and obligations and you weren't the primary income or the single parent, would you still do your job? Would the intrinsic value of the work or the spirit of your co-workers enough to sustain you if you didn't need an income?

BOTTOM LINE: Money is how adults keep score. It counts, but it doesn't keep us happy. If you wouldn't stay at your job if you could put money aside, then you shouldn't stay now.

Q6: How often do you laugh during the day?

Are you a living, breathing, hostile working environment? Do you make annoying, sighing sounds all day? Have your co-workers stopped asking "are you okay?" because they know the answer?

BOTTOM LINE: If you've stopped laughing, quit immediately. Longevity and success is tied to laughter. The average five-year-old laughs 500 times a day; the average thirty-five-year-old laughs fifteen times a day. We lose 485 laughs in thirty years—why? Your career is far too serious a matter to take seriously.

Q7: Do you believe what they tell you at work?

Has your boss or senior management violated your trust? Is there a pattern of being told one thing only to find you were part of the company "spin?" Did a disclosure you made in confidence show up in a press release?

BOTTOM LINE: Everyone lies. It's essential to a civilized society. But there are white lies and there are lies. If you have lost your basic trust in your boss or organization, then you've met an obstacle you cannot overcome. In life and work, love means no reservations.

Q8: Do you love the job but feel uncomfortable in the culture?

Is there a mismatch in the attitudes and values of the people who surround you? Is the way you dress or how you spend your free time

making you feel like you don't fit? Do you ever think that if you could change the culture, the job would be great?

BOTTOM LINE: Cultures don't change. You assimilate or you leave. Relationships that work don't require change on a massive scale.

Q9: Are you staying because they "need you right now" and you "can't do that to your colleagues?" Are you disillusioned but held hostage by guilt?

BOTTOM LINE: Get over yourself. The company will not only survive but flourish with someone new who goes at the job happy and hard. If you're going through the motions, then get in motion—out the door.

Q10: Has your body already told you to leave, but you're hard of hearing?

Are you listless? Eating comfort carbs or not eating enough? Are you having trouble sleeping or sleeping too much? Have you lost interest—in everything? Are you self-medicating with drugs, alcohol, or sex? Does your lower back or neck ache every day? Is sarcasm your first line of defense? Are you aware how unattractive all these are? I don't like you already!

BOTTOM LINE: Pain is your body's way of demanding change, and you need to listen. The second you make the decision to leave, you will feel a lifting sensation, and you will start to come back to yourself.

Don't sit there and nod your head and move on! Answer these questions honestly, and you'll get an overarching feeling one way or another. Either your relationship is broken and you should make a change, or you should decide it's better than you thought and you will stay. Do the work and make the call.

I knew I should go to bed, but Harper had stirred things up and now I was wired. Tired and wired, and a little drunk—and I'm going to try and determine whether I should leave my job. Oh hell, why not? I couldn't get Harper's "diagnostics" out of my head, and I found myself drifting from my job back to my courting days with Donald, to that very sweet and false time every couple enjoys.

Was it ever what you wanted?

No, it wasn't. He wanted to take care of me. He seemed like such a good man, and after a while of the unreliable bad boys who had no aspirations beyond a good time, it seemed like I should be grateful. He wasn't threatened that I made more money than he did. He wasn't funny, but he thought I was funny, which seemed far more important. He was gentle with Starbucks and he not only cooked, he didn't hold it against me that I was helpless without a microwave. Most of all, he was my rock. Nothing could rattle him.

But I never believed it was forever. I would often imagine being with someone else who was spontaneous, who had a mind so fast I could barely keep up, who made me tingle when he touched me. I didn't want Donald to leave, but I didn't want him, either. When I turned thirty and he started to talk about kids, I would change the subject. I would set goals we had to reach before we got pregnant: pay our mortgage down, get the regional sales manager job. I urged him to get his Master's degree. I was willing to make him seem inadequate so I could avoid the reality that he was not the love of my life.

And I never told him; only Hannah knew. When we were in the limousine going to the church on the day of my wedding, she popped champagne, poured us each a glass, and recited our secret toast: "Here's to Donald; he'll be a great first husband."

Can you pass the "if you were unemployed" test?

This one was easy. I was one of SAP's top producers. I was happy—apparently unlike Sasha, the wife of Kevin, our inside sales director; she began sleeping with Donald a few weeks after I introduced them at our company summer bash. I even told Donald to let her play on his side of the volleyball net. I still remember the look on her face when they high-fived after a nasty spike. I think the affair started that instant, no matter when it was consummated. SAP was the big time, the Show. I'm in my prime but back in the minors.

So, you bet if I were unemployed I'd interview again.

And, I suddenly realized, if I hadn't married Donald and I had a chance to date him exclusively or date others as well, I would date others. I would not settle again.

Now I see what Harper is getting at. When you're deciding whether to stay at a job or in a relationship, it's the same qualifying procedure. I put on a pot of coffee.

If you're acting like you're leaving, you're leaving.

When Harper first recruited me, the first thing he said to me was, "I identified myself as a headhunter. Why did you return the call?"

"Come on, Harper, haven't you ever been tempted?"

"Personally or professionally?"

"Either." You want to flirt, bring it.

"Personally I'm tempted this very second," he said. "Professionally, never. I do what I'm meant to do. There is no variance between whom I show you and who I am. I make more money than I am able to spend, try though I may, so I am absolutely safe from someone like me."

"And at what point do you think you could get over yourself a little?"

"That's to be determined. Casey, you should have the same goal: to be unrecruitable. But you're not. There's something missing. You sense I could help, and you're right. I can."

"And yet, personally, you said you're tempted right now. What are we to make of that?"

"Only that you're fabulous."

"Apparently not fabulous enough."

"I love my wife. We have a deal, and I honor the terms. Mutual trust."

If you've lost basic trust . . . you've met an obstacle you cannot overcome.

It was suddenly so clear to me. I wanted to be in relationships where I could trust someone completely and safely: to live, as Harper said, *without reservation*. But in order to trust someone must be trustworthy, and so far in my thirty-four years—well, thirty-five in four months and thirteen days—I couldn't say I had been. I'd been waiting for something better to come along without letting go of whatever stability I had at the time. It was wrong, and I have paid my dues. So why did I feel so loose, so light?

I stood up and paced the room. I wanted to go for a run; I suddenly wanted to kiss someone. I was flooded with hope, as if a syringe full of it were injected straight into my heart. I, having proudly refused alimony, was alone in the world save for a churlish cat. Despite these facts—or because of them—I felt completely in control and sorry for all human beings who were not me.

If you're acting like you're leaving a relationship, you're leaving the relationship.

I get it, Harper, and I now know what I need to do: I am going to quit my job without having a new one! Hurry up Monday, you're holding a good woman back!

HOW TO RESIGN FROM A JOB OR END A RELATIONSHIP

The following Monday I was heading into the office, eager for battle. How does your personal music know what is going on in your life? I remember sitting in a terminal in St. Louis listening to my iPod as I went through my mail. Just as I opened the papers Donald's lawyer had prepared, Bonnie Raitt's "I Can't Make You Love Me if You Don't" came on, and I cried so hard I had to hide in a stall in the ladies' room. Now, Bachman-Turner Overdrive's "Takin' Care of Business" was playing on the classic rock station while I was on my way to quit my job. Just to keep from jinxing it, I turned off the sound system.

The moment I sat at my desk, I took a deep breath and called my boss. I told him I needed to see him as soon as possible about a serious and sensitive matter that could not wait.

I decided to let Harper know. I opted for a text message. "I am giving my notice in less than an hour. I appreciated your email last night, sorry, your 'book.' Try not to gloat. FYI."

Three minutes later my direct line buzzed: Harper's number.

"Did you do it yet?"

"No, in a few minutes. Why?"

"Because you're not going to. That's why."

"Why not?"

"Because you'd be breaking one of the cardinal rules:

Harper's Rule: You don't quit a job until you have another job.

"It's like a commandment. How could you not know that?"

"Why didn't you put that in the chapter?"

"Because it's in the next chapter!"

"And why didn't you send it to me?"

"Because I haven't written it yet."

"Oh, for the love of God, Harper. He's going to be here any minute. I demanded that meeting; I told him it was serious and sensitive."

"Okay, no problem. There are many things you might need to talk to your boss about that are serious and sensitive. Tell him you need time off for elective surgery. Tell him you've decided to adopt a child and you may need to go to Guatemala . . ."

"Harper, your casual lying really scares me."

"But I'm making up lies for *you* to tell. And there's nothing casual about it."

“You told me I was marketable. Why would another company hold it against me that I’m unemployed?”

“Because that’s how it works. Hold on. I’m driving in, and I’m going to pull over before I get killed. I can’t shift and talk with my hands at the same time . . .

“Listen to me. You can’t give notice. You’ll lose all your leverage. It’s not fair, but that’s how it is. Companies believe good people are never out of a job. So if you’re unemployed, then how good could you be? And the longer you’re out, the worse it gets.”

“So then what, Harper, I have to play a game? I have to live a lie in order to get a great job?”

“Now you’ve got it! And, by the way, doing it my way, you continue to get paid. Your wife starts you start living off savings.”

I knew Harper was trying to look out for me, and I knew he was probably right. So how can come so often doing the right thing can make you feel so crummy inside?

“What about your book, Harper? With your logic, no one should ever leave a marriage without having another partner to go to first. You are saying no one will want me now that I’m single and available, that I should have found someone else while I was still married because I was more attractive then.”

“You want to play hardball, Casey? The answer is yes: We want what others have, not what they discard.”

“I seduce the best people from companies and offer their direct competitors a chance to steal them away. That is the thrill of it, the magic. It’s why they pay me. And yes, the same principle holds for relationships. You can be mortified if you want, but the fact is: Most people don’t have the courage to end a marriage—or a job—until they are motivated by the prospect of going to someone else.”

“You should know this better than anyone. Donald sure did.”

I felt a stinging in my scalp, the way you do when you first step into a really cold shower.

I’ve only seen Donald once since the divorce ended. It was by chance at a mall during Christmas time. We hugged stiffly, and as we pulled back, I noticed the Victoria’s Secret bag and he noticed me noticing and shrugged, and we both laughed so hard we had to sit on the bench outside of Banana Republic.

“I hate you, Harper Scott. I don’t think we should speak again.”

“That was a cheap shot. I’m sorry. I was just trying to keep you from making a mistake.”

“I’m quitting my job this morning, Harper. End of story. I think your theory about relationships and jobs does in fact hold; you’re just wrong as to how. I’m not going to deceive my company. I don’t want to take their money when I’m no longer committed. And I don’t want to work for any company that doesn’t respect me for that. And if I am ever again in a relationship that stops working, I am going to be honest, make a break, and free myself to look for someone else. And any guy that doesn’t respect me for that—I don’t want him either.”

“Okay, I’m in,” Harper said. “Take good notes because I’m about to dictate Part Two to you right now. Here’s how to give notice and end a relationship. Ready?”

It was too late. My boss knocked once and then bounded right into my office. Harper was

all over it in an instant. “Say goodbye and act like you’re hanging up, but leave your speaker on.”

He quietly told me to pay attention to the screen because he was going to walk me through this via instant messaging, and he suggested I keep my mouse within easy reach. He told me to relax and trust him. “Now hang up, Casey.”

“Okay, well, I have to go now,” I said, and managed to activate my speaker while hanging up my handset.

I suddenly felt like I was the flight attendant and both pilots were passed out; Harper was ground control assuring me that anyone could land a commercial airliner and that we were not all going to die.

Within a few moments, while my boss and I did the obligatory warm-up, Harper’s first message came across my screen:

HARPER’S RULES How to Terminate a Relationship

Rule #1: Use direct, simple language.

Deliver the bad news within one sentence. Don’t say “I think,” don’t say “I don’t know how to say this,” and definitely don’t say “I want you to know this is hard for me and that it’s not about you.”

My boss was still going on about his daughter’s award-winning crab cakes at the culinary institute she was attending when I blurted out, “I’m resigning. I’m sorry to interrupt, I’m sure they were fabulous crab cakes, but I want you to know I quit.”

Rule #2: Realize this is not an exit interview.

This is not the time to tell him all that went wrong.

On cue, my boss said he was shocked. He asked why I had come to such a decision. I stammered something out about how much I appreciated his mentoring, but this was just a gut feeling I had. “Okay, that sucked. Do I need to script this for you? He is about to ask you what he can do to get you to stay. Here is what you tell him . . .”

As I was trying to read Harper’s message, my boss said, “But your gut feeling must have come from somewhere. Is it about money? I have a lot of flexibility, Casey.”

“Repeat this, word for word:”

There are two kinds of breakups: the kind where you don’t really want to break up but you’re trying to change someone’s behavior and the kind where you just want out. I just want out.

And out it came, word for word. It hit him hard. I realized he knew that the word was out that Tynan had given up on him. “Far be it from me to try to change a woman’s mind. I’ve had two wives and three daughters, and I haven’t been able to do it yet. We’ll miss you,” he said, to which Harper replied, “Oh, gag me. Okay, you’re doing great.”

Rule #3: Never burn a bridge.

Offer two week’s notice. Tell him you will work hard during that two weeks, and you will not disparage the company.

Rule #4: Ask for a written reference and a commitment to give you verbal references on demand.

My boss was more than happy to commit to the reference, and when he said he would tell any VPs of sales that they'd be "foolish not to hire you," I looked over at my screen. "Excellent. You're done. End this meeting. Don't let it go on because he'll try to dig for ways to get you to reconsider."

Sure enough, ten minutes later, my boss was still in his chair, but Harper bailed me out.

Rule #5: Offer to submit, just for documentation's purposes, a written letter of resignation.

When I made the offer, my boss nodded and then almost whispered, "Can I ask you one more question, Casey? Can I have the name of your headhunter?"

"He's a loser," Harper wrote. "Tell him you'll email the contact info, and I'll give you the name of another headhunter who is as big a loser. They'll love each other."

I placed my hand on my boss's hand and quietly and stoically said, "Of course. His name is Harper Scott."

AND NOW THE COUNTEROFFER

The morning after I quit my job, I could find no reason not to go to my gym.

I've been a member of Gold's Gym for three years, and each month they take one hundred and twenty-nine dollars from me, despite the fact that I don't go for months at a time. But I never quit the gym. Knowing they are taking my money every month regardless of my lack of presence is what gives me hope that someday I'll be able to sustain an interest long enough to make it a habit. So here I am again, everyone!

Ten minutes into my ride on the elliptical, my cell phone rang.

"Hi, Harper," I managed, my breath labored.

"Just because you're unemployed, you don't have to take my call during sex."

I explained where he had caught me. "I have two goals, Harper: get a job and lose weight. Of course if I don't get a job, I'll lose weight because I won't be able to buy food. What's up?"

"Tynan is going to ask you to have dinner, and then he's going to hit you with a counteroffer. Lots more money, probably your boss's job."

"So what do I do? I have to hear him out, right? I can't insult him and not go to dinner. I mean, I need him for a reference, too."

Harper laughed. "By tonight I will have sent you chapter three. It will walk you through how to handle the counteroffer."

My concentration was broken by Cute Guy, a Gold's employee, now on the glider next to me. He was pointing to the control panel.

"Sorry," Cute Guy said, "I know you're on the phone, but did you know your machine is off? You've been riding with no resistance." I could hear Harper crack up.

"Oh. Thanks. Would it do any good to pretend I knew that?" And Cute Guy flashed a real, great, genuine smile.

"I can tell you're having a moment. You should have the pages by early evening."

"Okay, thanks," I said. "Does this make me your muse, Harper?"

"Not in the least. I've been thinking about this book forever."

When I got home, there was already an email from Harper:

Your homework assignment before you get tonight's chapter. Answer this question: "Did you ever consider going back to Donald?"

That could wait; it was only my first day unemployed, and you have to pace yourself.

I was about to fade into a nap when the phone rang. Tynan's secretary asked me to me

him the following evening at a restaurant that required a month's lead for a reservation. Suddenly I was wide awake, Harper's question seared into my brain.

Did you ever consider going back to Donald?

Yes, Harper, I did.

When you get divorced in your thirties, and there are no children, and you've only been together a half dozen years, you walk out of the courtroom thinking you may never see your former spouse ever again. You imagine one day reading in the obituaries that your ex had died, and the accompanying sidebar points out trenchantly how he never recovered emotionally from his failed marriage and that he died of heartbreak, penniless and alone, survived only by his ex, who lived a full and remarkable life and is now living in a beautiful house on the ocean, and I mean right *on* the ocean.

It was not in the plan to get a call from Donald four months after the divorce was finalized, especially since he was crying so hard it took me a moment to realize it was him. Big Gerry, as we all referred to his dad, had died that morning. Big Gerry was the kindest man I ever knew. He called me the night Donald moved out to tell me his son was a fool and that he loved me very much.

Donald said he was sorry to bother me but he thought I should know. Then he hung up. I drove to his condo, knocked twice, and opened the door, momentarily thinking this was inappropriate and that Sasha would be furious. I calmed him down and made him tea. I told him what I felt at the time, what I still feel: that all that was good and sweet and endearing about Big Gerry was true of Donald as well. I asked him if there were arrangements he wanted me to make. He said all he wanted was for me to stay a while. We made a meal, we opened wine, and we recounted stories to soothe the pain.

When he mentioned that Sasha was at a family reunion in Sacramento and wasn't coming back for the funeral, I nodded and agreed it was a long flight. And I spent the night. We went to separate bedrooms to play the dance out, but he knocked on the door within a few minutes, he walked toward the bed, and I opened my arms. I knew that I was helping him cheat on Sasha, but all I could think was that I deserved this after all I had been through.

When I woke up, I heard the familiar sound of ESPN's SportsCenter. When Donald moved out, my first act of independence was to get rid of the wall-mounted flat screen Sony in the bedroom and to promise myself to never again sleep with a man who watches sports before bed. And yet the sound was oddly comforting. Donald was already halfway through a bowl of oatmeal. He smiled and handed me a bowl of my own, along with a steaming cup of coffee. This was our morning ritual for our entire marriage. How did we get back here so easily?

"I cooked it. In a pan. No microwave."

"I'll alert the Food Channel."

We ate in silence. He kissed my shoulder. And then out it came.

"Let's stay together through the funeral. It's just a couple of days. I'll pack some stuff and follow you home. Okay?"

"You want to play house?" I asked. And he looked down, as Donald always did when he was gathering himself. And when he looked back up his eyes were wet. He shrugged. And my response came out of me from someplace deep inside, someplace I thought was gone.

“Okay.”

Suddenly I realized the doorbell was ringing. I shook off the groggy nostalgia and found a manila envelope on the ground with a note from Harper.

“You absolutely cannot go to dinner with Tynan without reading what’s inside.”

I tore open the envelope and saw the cover page: “Harper’s Rules: Why You Never Accept a Counteroffer.”

But I wasn’t ready for Harper’s propaganda. I put it down on the dining room table and went upstairs. As I transferred a load of whites from washer to dryer, I found myself drifting back to the week of Big Gerry’s funeral, my after-the-fact performance as Donald’s wife.

The funeral itself was the easy part. I’m cool in a crisis; I think clearly under extreme pressure. As I brought drinks and plates of potato salad to various mourners, as I tipped the hearse driver because no one in the family remembered, I thought for a moment that the real problem in my life is not crisis management, but all that time in between crises, when none of my choices seem as sure or righteous. I realized that sitting in Big Gerry’s living room on the day of his funeral was the most contentment I had felt in a long time.

That night we decided to forego cooking and drive into the city to get sushi. We drank way too much sake. Donald told me how much it surprised him to miss Starbucks and the way she would climb on his chest at night and suckle his neck. Donald started to slur his words a little.

“You want me to drive home?” I asked.

“Where is home, Casey?”

“Sorry—my house.”

“I want it to be ‘our house’ again,” he croaked. “Maybe this . . . is why he died. Maybe it was to get it through our thick skulls that we have to be together.”

I touched his cheek. “He died because he died, Donny. It had nothing to do with us. And what about Sasha? You love Sasha. You threw your world away for her. You had to do that for a reason.”

“Let’s go home,” he said. “We’ll work it out.”

We didn’t last the night. When we walked in the house, Donald nearly let Starbucks out. This is one of my hot buttons and one of my few house rules. Starbucks has never gone outside. Neighbors warned us from day one that there were coyotes in the woods nearby. Donald closed the door just in time, and I tried to tell myself he was out of practice, but the thought occurred: nothing will change if we get back together. He will let Starbucks out one day and I will lose her, and it will be just punishment for not being strong enough to move on.

There were two voice mails on my machine when we got home. The first was Hannah inviting me to a farmer’s market in New Milford on Saturday, and the second, to my surprise and Donald’s shock, was Sasha.

“Hi, Casey, it’s Sasha Kiernan. I’m sorry to bother you at home, but I’ve been trying to get in touch with Donald. I’ve talked to his mom, and she said you left together. This is weird for me to call you, but he hasn’t called me back.”

You’ll never trust him again. You will live your life looking over your shoulder. You will

never be able to love this man without reservation again.

“What is your actual status with Sasha?” I said.

“Technically, we’re engaged.”

“Technically?”

“She has a ring on her finger.”

“If we got back together a year from now, all the things that drove us apart would return. You know that, right?”

“Maybe,” he said. He looked away from me. It was time to wrap this up. I smiled at him, a big friendly smile.

“We don’t love each other, Donny. We have a divorce decree that proves it. We love who we used to be for a short time, a long time ago. When we get scared, it’s easier to go back to what we know.”

I didn’t know when or if I would ever see him again, but I felt at peace with either outcome. I had always heard change brought growth, that it was necessary. I never knew it could bring peace.

The flashback ended when I woke up and realized I had not only fallen asleep on my bed covered with laundry, but had drooled all over a pair of clean khakis. I felt rejuvenated by the memory, and I knew what I had to do. I called Tynan.

“Hi. I’m going to respect your time and avoid all the small talk. I’m not coming to dinner tomorrow night.”

“Has something come up? We can reschedule.”

“No, I am tragically available. But you don’t want to have dinner with me. If you did, it would have happened sometime in the eighteen months I’ve been working for you. You wanted to convince me to stay and make me a counteroffer, but I don’t want to waste your energy or your time.”

“I see. I’d appreciate you paying me the respect of hearing me out.”

Spoken like a man used to getting what he wanted. And the way he said it made me feel unreasonable and feckless. But I knew it was a tactic and that a tactic was all it was.

“I’m not going to stay. Not if you make me VP of sales, not if you double my salary or fully vest my equity. Still want to pick up the check for a fancy dinner? If you do, I’m game; I’ve got nothing in the fridge.”

He laughed, though I could tell he didn’t want to. He got to where he was by knowing when to walk away. He said he admired my “spunk” and would try to find another guest for dinner.

When I hung up, I felt the same peace as when Donald drove off on the night of Big Gerry’s funeral.

Later that night I walked by the dining room table, saw the envelope sent by Harper, and realized I hadn’t read it.

HARPER’S RULES

Why You Should Never Accept a Counteroffer

1. Why did you have to resign in order to get the counteroffer? Why weren’t you worth it before?

2. Where did the money come from? Is it your next raise early?
3. ~~Your loyalty will always be in question.~~
4. Your company will exact revenge by promoting someone else.
5. The feelings that made you want to leave will return once the heat of the moment passes.
6. You will regret lacking the courage to make the change you knew was best for your career.
7. Once trust is broken, it cannot be repaired. Nothing will ever be the same.

Well, well, Harper my friend. Nothing personal, but I figured this all out by myself. Harper was right, though: counteroffers, be they from a self-involved CEO or a heartsick ex-husband are the same dangerous proposition.

I suppose I should have called Harper to let him know my decision and to thank him for sending the manuscript, but I didn't want him taking credit for me coming to terms with things myself. So when he called the next night, I realized he probably thought I caved and went to dinner.

"Hi. Before you freak out, I didn't go to dinner with Tynan. I cancelled."

"First of all, I do not freak out. Ever. Second, I know you're not at dinner."

"How?"

"Because I'm at dinner with Tynan."

"Excuse me? Did he invite you to meet with me, and you never told me?"

"Chill, please. I would never not tell you something like that. What I would do, though, since you weren't good enough to tell me you cancelled, is show up so I could meet you in the parking lot and talk you out of it, or alternatively, walk you through your responses using sign language from across the room."

"I don't read sign language."

"Me either. I was pleased to see you weren't at his table. I'm proud of you."

"I worked through it. Thanks for your help. But now I feel terrible. He was by himself?"

"No, he's got a couple of lackeys here too. I realized you weren't coming, so I walked over and claimed to be sitting in the bar, and knew that he'd invite me. The appetizers were phenomenal, by the way."

"Is there any shame in your body?"

"Not a trace."

"I need to ask you something, Harper. I get all the reasoning behind the dangers of counteroffers, personal or professional. But isn't there ever a time when they work out?"

"Sure. I call them 'Preemptive Counteroffers.' Before leaving any job or person that you once really loved, you go to them preemptively, before quitting or separating, and you explain why you are unhappy, what you need changed. No threat, no blackmail. If they come back to you with an offer preemptively, then they have done so because they are sorry, and it's often right to stay. Make sense?"

"Yes. That's never happened to me in any sense, so I guess it's only right that I'm alone and unemployed."

"It's right for now, baby, but not for long. It's a simple rule:

"Relationships are to be enjoyed, not endured."

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