

DONNIE WORTHLESS

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Donnie Worthless was standing outside the maintenance shop at Overlook Ridge apartment complex, smoking a cigarette and wiping dog shit off his shoe. It was still before sunrise, so he couldn't tell if he had gotten it all off, but he decided it was good enough and headed into the shop. The gray walls and concrete floor had cobwebs in every corner. Against such a backdrop, the oversized wooden desk was out of place in the center of the room.

Someone should take you out of this place, Donnie thought as he walked over and put his hand on the desk. He took off his coat, draped it over a filing cabinet, then walked back and sat down at the desk. He leaned back in his chair and let out a sigh. *I just have to make it through one last day,* he thought.

Donnie looked at the clock; it was 6:50 in the morning. Peter, Donnie's boss, would be showing up soon. Overlook Ridge required constant upkeep, and as its maintenance tech, there was a lot to do. An older guy with sleepy eyes, rosy cheeks, and a long gray beard, Peter looked a lot like Santa Claus. He had worked at Overlook Ridge for fourteen years, and Donnie was very fond of him. Over the year that Donnie had worked with him, Peter had taught him everything he needed to know about maintenance. He also mentored Donnie in religion. For a long time, Peter and Donnie met at work an hour early to study the Bible together, but over the last month or so Donnie had been finding ways to avoid the early study sessions. The fact was that Donnie didn't believe in Christianity anymore, but he didn't know how to explain that to Peter.

Donnie reached into a drawer and pulled out a leather-bound Bible. He placed the Bible on the desk, and opened it to Ecclesiastes. He leaned back in the chair again and closed his eyes. *Just one more day,* he reminded himself.

When Donnie heard Peter's truck pull up, he sat up and stretched out his arms. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, leaned over the desk, and started reading the first verse his eyes could find. *Just one more day.*

"Good morning brother," Peter said as he walked into the shop. "Got here early, eh? Spendin' a little time in the Word, I see." Peter beamed at Donnie.

"Mornin' Pete," Donnie said, "Don't know about *good*, but it's mornin' anyway."

Peter hung his coat on a hook by the door, and walked over to the desk, "Whatcha reading there?" He peered over Donnie's shoulder, "Oh—King Solomon."

"Yep, my favorite book from the Old Testament." Donnie smiled.

"Not Genesis?" Peter asked.

"Have I said Genesis before?"

"No, but I always figured that would be your favorite."

"Oh . . . well, it's a good one for sure. But I like Ecclesiastes better—it's more relatable."

Donnie could see that Peter was thinking about what he'd just said, and Donnie wasn't much in the mood for follow-up questions, so he got up and grabbed a bucket and shovel from the corner of the shop. "I'm gonna go do the grounds."

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One thing Donnie especially hated about the residents at Overlook Ridge was their tendency to let their dogs shit everywhere without picking it up. *Fucking people*, he thought. Donnie was only halfway through the grounds and had already filled a five-gallon-bucket one-third of the way with fist-sized chunks of hardened shit.

He sat on a bench in the central courtyard and lit a Marlboro. Just as he leaned back to relax, his phone began to ring. It was Peter, asking him to come back to the office. Delilah, their boss, wanted to see him.

Son of a bitch, he thought, *I avoid her for weeks, and—of course—today she wants a meeting.*

When he got to the office, Peter was already there. He was talking to Delilah, and she was smiling—smiling! *Haven't seen her smile for a month*, Donnie thought; he walked into the office, and sat across the desk from Peter and Delilah.

"Well, boss, we're all here," Peter said. Donnie found it amusing to hear him call someone thirty years younger "boss."

"Yep, we're all here." Donnie looked right at her. "But, *why* are we here?"

"You're here because I said so," Delilah snipped back. She sat back in her chair with one arm folded over her chest and twirled at her fake blonde streaks.

Peter looked uneasy; he glanced at Donnie and then Delilah. "Actually, Donnie," he said, "we're here to talk about you."

Shit, what did I do? Donnie thought. "Oh? Did something happen?" he asked.

Delilah took a slow breath, "No, Donnie, nothing like that. We want to talk about getting you promoted."

Donnie didn't know what to say. *Does this change anything?* he wondered. Delilah and

Peter were both looking at him in expectation, but Donnie could not think of what words to use. Peter's face became quizzical, and right when he was about to speak, his phone rang. He answered it and walked over to another corner of the office.

Donnie and Delilah sat there without looking at each other. Donnie used his index finger to trace the lines in the wood on Delilah's desk. He wondered if the wood was even real or if someone had just stained it that color and burned the lines in as an effect. "So, a promotion," he said.

"Yeah," Delilah looked at him from the corner of her eye. "Despite everything else, you're a good employee. It's been a year, and you deserve it."

"Despite everything else," Donnie repeated.

"Yes," she said, "despite everything."

"So, I'd be getting my own property?"

"Yep—in fact, there's one downtown with a position open right now."

He looked up and locked eyes with her. "Maybe I don't want it," he said.

"Why wouldn't you want it?"

Donnie looked back down at the desk, "Because, maybe I do want it."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Not to you," Donnie looked back up. "A promotion would be good. More money, less hours—there's nothing wrong with that. I could actually get some sleep, maybe even have time for a social life—it'd be a chance to live more comfortably . . . I want that a lot."

"Exactly," Delilah said, "so take the damn promotion."

"No," Donnie said, "I can't do that. I want to take it—and that's exactly why I won't."

"Bullshit," she said, "why are you even here if you're not going to move up? I'm sick of you, Donnie. You don't make any sense. You want to break up with me out of the blue, fine. But you don't get to stay here forever as a reminder. Take the fucking job and get off this property!"

Peter hung up the phone and walked back over to the others. "Donnie," he said, "we got a work-order to do. Bathroom fan went dead."

"All right, Pete. I'll meet you in the shop." Peter walked out of the office, and Donnie trailed behind. Before leaving, he looked back at Delilah and said, "I'm quitting today. Consider this my 6-hour notice."



Donnie knocked on the door to apartment 207 as Peter walked up behind him with a small ladder and the keys to the unit.

"No need to knock," Peter said, unlocking the door and opening it wide. "Nobody's home."

Donnie followed Peter into the unit and climbed the stairs to the third floor. "Hallway or Master bathroom?" Donnie asked.

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"Master," said Peter.

Peter handed Donnie the ladder and Donnie handed Peter the toolbag. Donnie set the ladder in the middle of the bathroom and began to dismantle the fan while Peter pulled out tools and a new motor.

"You know, Donnie, I've been thinking about Ecclesiastes since this morning." Peter pulled at his beard while he thought. "Tryin' to figure out why it's your favorite."

Donnie knocked some dirt loose when he unscrewed the motor from the mount, and he caught some of it in his eye. "Damn it," he said. He rubbed at his eye, and squinted towards Peter. "I told you Pete—it's relatable."

"I remember," Peter said. "But how? Most of it's Solomon lookin' back on a life we can't possibly relate to. I mean, in ways we can, but not to the extremes that he went."

Donnie twisted the motor off the mount and pulled it out of place along with the fan blade.

"Yeah," Donnie popped the blade off the motor's shaft. "Maybe the experiences are unrelatable." He tossed the motor into the bag. "But the experiences don't really matter to me."

Peter pulled a new motor out of a box and handed it to Donnie, "I don't follow."

"Pete," Donnie said, "look at this fan blade." The blade was a cylinder, and on all its sides, there was a thick layer of dirt and lint. "How long you think it's been since anyone looked at it?"

"Don't know," Peter replied. "Years, probably."

"Right. That means for years now, the blades have been covered up, so it probably wasn't sucking much air." Donnie studied the fan closely, "But nobody noticed it. They'd come in, turn on the switch, hear the motor humming, and assume everything was working fine." Peter looked at Donnie curiously; he was trying to understand where this was all going. "You see, Pete, that's why I like Ecclesiastes. I can't compare to Solomon's experiences, but that isn't the point. The point is

that he reflected on them. He didn't just assume everything was fine—he investigated." Donnie banged the blade against the sink, and rinsed it off before sliding it onto the new motor. "That's what I'm trying to do Pete—I don't want to live life unexamined." Donnie replaced the motor, screwed in the light, put back the face-plate, and collapsed the ladder. "Does that answer your question?"

"I guess," Peter said.



After lunch, Peter received a call from another property. The maintenance supervisor there had gone home sick, and they needed someone to come help for the rest of the day. Peter went, and Donnie was left unsupervised. He spent the next several hours napping in a chair in the shop. When Delilah found him, she was so annoyed that she pushed him out of the chair.

**"I DON'T WANT
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Donnie got up off the floor and spun around. Seeing Delilah, he relaxed himself and went back to sit.

"Are you kidding me?" Delilah shoved him into the chair. "What are you doing?"

"Sitting."

"No shit. Why aren't you working?"

Donnie pulled a stack of work-orders from a drawer and dropped them on the desk. "I have been. The work-orders are up-to-date, I did the grounds this morning, and Peter would kill me if I started a project without him . . . so, I'm sitting."

Delilah stared—probably trying to think of a new complaint. "Fine, then. Sit."

"I am."

Delilah turned and marched toward the door. She reached out to grab the handle. Before leaving, she stopped. Her shoulders started to relax, her back seemed to untighten, and she slowly faced Donnie. When she spoke, her voice was only a whisper. "Why are you quitting?"

Donnie thought to himself: can he even answer that? Yes, it's simple: he didn't like this job. The longer he stayed, the harder it would be to leave. There would never be a better time to quit than right now—even if right now wasn't such a good time. But there was more to it. This wasn't just an isolated decision; it was the tail end of a trend.

If you look at it like that, maybe it's Delilah's fault—when I started working here, everything was perfect; life made sense, and I didn't have to struggle that hard to maintain—

If not Delilah, he could blame Peter. Peter was the one that showed him the natural progression of Christian thought after all.

I didn't have to think; I had a religion that formed opinions for me or maybe Christian thought was fine; maybe if Delilah didn't pull me astray, I'd be living a happy, thoughtless life—right or wrong doesn't matter, the effects were real, so who's to say that the whole thing wasn't real—no, it wasn't Peter; it wasn't Delilah; it was me . . . it'll always be me.

"Why are you quitting?" she repeated.

Donnie put his hand on the desk. The old leather Bible was still lying there. He thought about asking her if she'd ever read it but decided the conversation would last too long. "I don't want to lie anymore," he said.

"About that?" she asked, pointing to the Bible.

"Sure," he said, "Among other things."

Donnie picked the Bible up and tossed it into a corner. The way it landed made him think of old black-and-white horror films: a thick leather book leaning on a gray wall with cobwebs holding it to the corner.

He stood up and walked to the far side of the desk and started sliding it towards Delilah and the door.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

Donnie ignored the question and instead said to her, "Grab that end. I need help getting it to my truck." The desk was more awkward than heavy, so the two of them had no trouble getting it loaded into the bed of his Chevy.

"Where are you taking it?" Delilah asked.

"Goodwill." Donnie threw a strap over the top and started winching it down. "About as close to a fresh start I can think of."

"You're not keeping it?" she asked.

"Keep it?" He hopped down from the bed of the truck and started walking towards the driver's door. "No, I don't want it."

Before he could open it, Delilah caught him by the arm. "If you're not going to keep it, why take it at all?"

"If I don't, it's only a matter of time before Peter paints it gray." Donnie got in the truck and started it up. He rolled down the window and added, "Can't let him ruin it like that."

He drove away without saying goodbye.