

1

NATASHA'S STORY

When I graduated from college, I immediately had high hopes and dreams for my future. I envisioned myself wearing Prada dresses and carrying Gucci purses as I sashayed into my fabulous corner window office.

Okay, in reality, I knew I wouldn't immediately start off this way, but I at least pictured myself wearing Nordstrom Rack outfits and having a nice cubicle near a window.

After graduating with my MBA from the University of Illinois–Urbana-Champaign, I was unemployed for eight months. Every time I applied for a job, I was told that I didn't have enough experience. But how the heck am I going to get experience if no one gives me a chance?

So after applying to approximately 948 job postings, receiving 230 rejection e-mails and attending ten interviews, I was finally offered a job and took it. Was it the job of my dreams? Absolutely not. But I figured it was a start and I could at least stay there, get a few years of experience, and eventually, move on to something better.

I'm currently a marketing coordinator for Zealous Foundations, which contracts work from nonprofits. The office has around sixty employees. It is the perfect work location—inside the Wrigley Field building on Michigan Avenue in downtown Chicago. However, the

office itself is very drab and boring—white walls, brown carpet, and tall gray cubicles.

As for my job—I feel overworked. As much work as I crank out, it feels like more work is being put back onto my desk. Even though my title is marketing coordinator, my job responsibilities are much more than that. In reality, I am a secretary, a graphic designer, a media planner, a customer service representative, a writer and editor, an advertising sales rep, a travel agent, and an errand runner, all in addition to my regular job duties.

The pay is absolutely horrible—most of my paychecks go toward my \$80,000 private student loan, rent, and living expenses. When I was offered the job, I didn't know much about negotiating for a salary, so when they made an offer, I just jumped at it, but now, I regret it. When I saw what was left of my first paycheck, I had to kiss Nordstrom Rack good-bye and say hello to fashionable thrift stores.

And lastly, my boss, Mark Golden, is the most ignorant, egotistical jerk that I've ever met in my life. He's a little shrew of a man—barely five feet, three inches tall—but most of the things that come out of his mouth are racist or sexist.

Being the only African American in the office isn't easy. I'm usually his target for racist jokes around clients and colleagues. For example, a month ago, I was at a client meeting in which Mark gave me a long list of things to do in front of the client. One of the clients asked whether I would be able to complete all of the tasks on time, and he replied yes. Then, the client commented that Mark was working me like a slave (which I think was inappropriate). Mark joked by saying these exact words: "I guess that makes me her slave master." I saw the client cringe a little but also chuckle, and I was mortified and angry. I would have told HR, but unfortunately, Mark is the CEO's brother, which means he's practically untouchable.

In addition, Mark does little to no work for the company. He comes in late every day. He makes personal phone calls on business time. He uses the business credit card for personal expenses. One of those personal expenses is his mistress—who just so happens to be

his administrative assistant Katya. Katya doesn't do anything. Even though she's supposed to do his personal errands, during the past year, some of her duties have fallen to me while they go to lunch meetings with clients, which is their code for screwing in hotel rooms around the city.

"Naatassha," Mark's nasally voice calls from his office. "Can you come here for a minute?"

Unfortunately, my cubicle is right next to his office, so I walk over and put on a fake smile. "Yes, Mark," I say as pleasantly as I can.

"Could you pick up my dry cleaning this afternoon? I have a gala to go to tonight, and I want to make sure that my tux is ready to go."

I give him a blank stare. "Um...shouldn't Katya do that for you? She *is* your administrative assistant. Plus, I'm in the middle of a big urgent project you asked me to work on."

"Well, Katya is a little busy right now. I'm sure you have a few minutes to pick it up. It's just a block from here. Here's the address." He slides a piece of paper across his desk. "Thanks," he says without looking at me.

I walk back to my cubicle and peek over to see Katya looking at Facebook, laughing her little idiotic head off. I want to crumble the piece of paper and throw it at her head.

I put on my coat, grab my purse, go outside, and angrily punch the elevator button. At times, I wonder why I worked so hard to earn my MBA since I'm just getting my boss's dry cleaning. I know I shouldn't complain. Most of my former classmates think I'm the lucky one because some of them are working at coffee shops or at retail stores. I was fortunate to land an office job on Michigan Avenue. But at times, I wonder, am I the lucky one? Because I don't feel very lucky.

2

DANIELLE'S STORY

I fell in love with Broadway when I was twelve years old. It was my first trip to New York City with my family, and they took me to see *The Wiz*. I fell in love with the story, and I loved Dorothy's character. It was then I realized what I wanted to do for the rest of my life—I wanted to be a Broadway actress. Since then, I acted for every play and musical in elementary school, middle school, and high school.

Every summer during high school, I saved up money to attend the Broadway plays that came to Chicago. I saw *The Lion King*, *Wicked*, *Porgy and Bess*, *Dreamgirls*, and *Rent*. I pretended to be the lead actress in every play that I watched by studying her lines and acting skills. I was extremely excited when I got accepted into Roosevelt University's College of Performing Arts. It was there I perfected my acting skills. I loved the stage and transforming into each character. Every time I stepped onstage, it felt like euphoria. I knew in my heart and soul that this was what I was born to do.

When I graduated with a bachelor's degree in theater, I planned to apply to every theater company in Chicago, New York City, Los Angeles, London, and beyond. I got a few callbacks to audition, but someone else always landed the role. Each time I was rejected, it felt like someone ripped out my heart and stepped on it with a stiletto heel.

After my student loans started to pile up, I knew I had to get a real job or be homeless, performing in the streets. So, I decided to apply to a restaurant to be a waitress. It wasn't the ideal job, but it was only a few miles away from my apartment, and it gave me a flexible schedule so I could attend auditions. While being a waitress is far from the Broadway stage, it was something I could do temporarily until my dream came true.

So now, I work at an Italian restaurant called Rome's Kitchen. It's an upscale restaurant in the heart of the Chicago Loop. Overall, I like my waitressing job. Even though there are a few difficult people, most of the customers are very nice. The majority of our traffic comes during the afternoon, when it's full of nine-to-five professionals having business lunch meetings.

I've found that being a waitress also allows me to use some of my acting skills. Sometimes, I tell my customers that I'm an actress, and they ask me to act out a scene, read a monologue, or sing a song. Every time I perform, I get a bigger tip. In the past, we've had a few directors and actresses come through our restaurant because we're right across the street from the Cadillac Theatre, so I still hold on to hope that one day I'll maybe be discovered. It's bound to happen one day!

"Danielle!" my manager, Annie, yells across the kitchen. "Could you wait on Nate's tables? He's out sick again."

"Sure!" I go and grab my tablet and go out into the restaurant area. My team and I usually split up the restaurant. I have the lower-right tables, while Nate takes the upper-right tables toward the front.

I see a young handsome guy sitting in my section alone. He looks to be either Italian or Spanish because he has olive skin and black wavy hair. I stand back and just stare at him from a distance because he is by far one of the most beautiful men that I've ever seen. He is dressed very casually in a white T-shirt with jeans. He looks to be in his mid- to late twenties.

After I finally break my lingering gaze, I walk up to take his order, and he looks up at me with these sparkling brown eyes. He literally looks like a *GQ* model, and I can't take my eyes off him.

"Hi! Welcome to Rome's Kitchen. My name is Danielle, and I'll be your server today. Can I get you any drinks or appetizers?"

He flashes me his beautiful white smile. "Hi Danielle," he says in a low deep voice, and I almost melt. "I would like a water, but do you have any recommendations for an entrée?"

His gaze is so intense that I almost lose my train of thought. "Um...yes...what do you have a taste for?"

"I was in the mood for a sandwich, but I see you have some delicious pasta dishes," he states. "Which dish do you prefer?"

"Well, one of my favorite pasta dishes is the stuffed parmesan ravioli with our delicious garlic-and-rosemary breadsticks. But my second favorite is our lunch sandwich special, which is a roast-beef sandwich topped with our delicious marinara sauce and mozzarella cheese, along with clam chowder and a Caesar salad," I say as he stares at me the whole time.

He cracks a smile. "Well, that roast-beef sandwich special sounds good. I would like that, please."

I write down the rest of his order and head to the kitchen. As I give the chef his order, I run into my nosey coworker Linda, who is also a waitress. "Hey girl! Who's that cutie you were talking to out there?" she asks.

"I don't know. But he is very handsome."

"You should get his number. You don't see too many of those around here," she replies. The chef announces that my orders are ready, and I rush out to serve them to the patrons. Then, I see that the cute guy's food is ready, and I come out and present it to him.

"Here you go," I say as I set the food down. "Please let me know if you need anything else."

"Thanks...Danielle, right?" he asks.

"Yes." I nod.

"I'm Ryan by the way." He extends his hand, and as we shake hands, I swear I feel an electric shock, or maybe a spark. "Are you originally from Chicago?"

"Yes, I've lived here all my life. You?" I ask.

"No, I just moved here from San Diego last week." He smiles.

"Oh, nice! Welcome to Chicago," I exclaim. "How do you like it so far?"

"I love Chicago. I've always wanted to live here...I'm just learning my way around the city," he says. "It's bigger than I imagined. There are so many restaurants, museums, parks, and beaches. There's so much to do here."

I nod. "It's especially great in the summertime. There are always festivals going on in the different neighborhoods."

"Do you go to festivals...perhaps with friends or a...boyfriend?" he asks, and I feel myself blush. I can sense that he's interested.

"I go with friends or sometimes by myself," I reply.

He nods and rubs his jaw. "That's cool. So, do you know any great restaurants for dinner besides this place?"

"Isn't it a little early to be thinking about dinner? You haven't finished your lunch," I say playfully.

"True. But I would love for you to join me for dinner. Perhaps tonight?" he asks.

Just as I'm about to say yes, I remember that I have an audition later this evening. "No, unfortunately, I'm unable to go tonight, but I am free tomorrow."

I give him my number, and we decide to meet tomorrow at seven o'clock at Navy Pier.

An audition tonight and a date tomorrow? This is the start of a great weekend.

3

 JAYLA'S STORY

Getting a degree is a wonderful accomplishment. The feeling you get after graduation is a mixture of anxiousness and excitement. You hear the commencement speakers talk about “shooting for the stars” and how our “lives have only begun.” After you receive that piece of paper with your name on it that certifies you have a degree, you feel that you’re able to take on the world.

Well, what they don’t tell you is that after graduating, you’re going to experience five emotions. The first emotion is happiness. You feel this on the actual graduation day. It’s a great feeling. After your blood, sweat and tears, you receive your degree that you earned.

I went straight from undergrad into law school. So for the past seven-and-a-half years, I have been in school, busting my behind, making sure I aced exams, writing thirty- to forty-page thesis papers, spending countless hours doing research in the library, and then passing the Uniform Bar Exam (UBE) and Illinois state bar exam. It just felt good to have all of that come to an end and to know that I earned my juris doctor degree and that I could get an attorney position.

The second emotion is hopefulness. This emotion lasts for the first three months after graduation. Everyone congratulates you on your success. You receive Hallmark cards with gift cards or money, and you still feel on top of the world. People will begin to congratulate you, but ultimately, they’ll start to ask, “So, do you have a job

lined up?” If you don’t have a job yet, you’ll reply, “No, not yet, but I feel confident that I’ll land something soon.” The extended answer is that I had been job searching for three months prior to graduating and haven’t been offered anything yet. But overall, you still feel hopeful.

The third emotion is anxiousness. This will happen four to six months after graduation. People will continue to congratulate you on your success, but people will also continue to ask whether you have landed a job. If you say “no, not yet,” you’ll start to get pitying looks. Next, people will start offering suggestions on how to get a job. Then you start to wonder why you aren’t getting a job. Also, some of your friends will land jobs and brag about it on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram, and yet, you’re still jobless. You lower your expectations a little bit because you really want and need a job.

The fourth emotion is despair. This happens after seven to eleven months of not having a job. You’re no longer that a recent graduate. People start suggesting that you go back to school again or take a temp job so you can pay bills. You eventually take a temp job that only lasts a few weeks or months, but you’re still financially unstable. Also, around this time, banks begin contacting you about your student loans to see how they’re going to get their money back. You realize that your degree gave you the ability to knock on doors, but it doesn’t guarantee that those doors will open. You start to feel sad that nobody has hired you permanently yet, and you realize that you might have to kiss your dream career good-bye.

The fifth emotion is desperation. This happens a year after you graduate. You just want anything—your bills are caving in on you, and you don’t care about your pride or dreams.

Well, I’m at emotion five: I’m desperate. I graduated a year ago. I’ve applied to many places—law firms, corporations, nonprofits, retail stores, and even supermarkets. I’ve gotten rejected over and over again. I’ve been on interviews where I’m one of the top two, and the other person was picked over me. It is extremely disappointing to

constantly be rejected, and the real world is definitely not for the faint of heart.

As of now, I live in Boston, where I went to law school. My lease is about to be up next month, and my savings account is down to fifty dollars. I have nothing left except my almost-maxed-out credit cards. My landlord has given me two eviction notices, and I have a week to pay up or move out. I honestly don't know what I'm going to do.

My mom flew in from Chicago today to visit me. While I'm happy to see her, I'm nervous to tell her everything. So, I try to put on a good face when she knocks on my apartment door.

"Jayla, my baby!" my mom screams, giving me a big hug.

"Hey, Mom!" I embrace her back.

She stands back and looks at me. "Sweetie, it looks like you've gained a little weight." I sigh. I'm a stress eater, and my mom reminds me of that all the time. "You know all that time you spend eating could be used for exercising."

"Mooooom!" I whine.

"It's the truth! You know I'm right." My mom is very much a health nut. She exercises every day and is very lean and fit. I, on the other hand, am not. I'm short and curvy. After my mom sees that I'm getting annoyed, she changes the subject. "I'm so happy to see you! How are you doing, sweetie?"

"I'm good. Hanging in there." I smile, trying to look calm.

"Any job prospects?" she asks.

"A few interesting ones, but I'm still job-hunting," I say optimistically.

"Okay. I see. Well, job hunting ain't paying the bills, honey," she says knowingly.

"I know, but I'm going to apply to a few more law firms near New York and DC, to expand my job search outside Boston."

"Okay, but will those jobs pay for moving expenses?" she asks, and it feels like she's interrogating me.

"Yeah, some of them will," I say with confidence.

"Honey, I know that you would like to stay in Boston, but you simply can't afford it. Can you afford to stay in this apartment?"

I dreaded my mom asking that question. The answer is no. "Yes, I have some money in savings," I tell her.

Mom gives me the type of look that can see deep inside your soul to reveal that you are lying.

"Jayla, tell the truth. I heard that you are a couple of months behind in rent and need money." It hits me that my dumb older brother, Warren, must have told her. I tried to ask him for money, and he must have told my mom. I shouldn't have asked him for money. Big mistake.

"Yes. That's true, but I'm going to pay it all this month," I say.

"You don't have any money," she says. "Now, listen, we don't want you to be homeless. Just come home. Live with your dad and me for a while until you get on your feet. Besides, there are some great law firms in Chicago."

I absolutely do not want this to happen. I do not want to live with my parents, and I definitely don't want to live in Chicago. Returning to Chicago was my last resort, and I only took the bar there to keep my options open, just in case I had to move back to Illinois. But it's come down to either living with my parents or living in a cardboard box under a viaduct.

"I can get the movers to come on Friday. What do you say?" she asks.

I nod reluctantly. "Okay," I say, giving in.

Usually, the goal when you become an adult is to move out of your parents' house, not to move out and then return. It's official: my life is moving backward instead of forward.