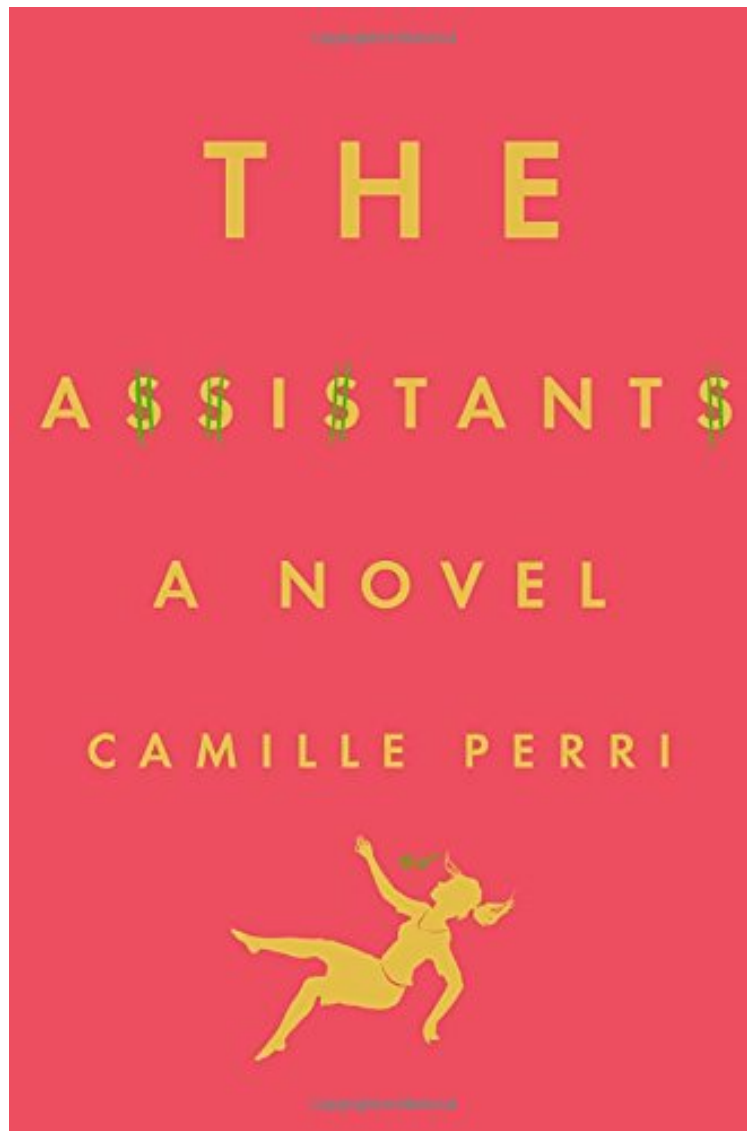


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The Assistants

Camille Perri

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Camille Perri : The Assistants before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Assistants:

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful. I loved this bookBy Jana R.I loved this book. It was a quick and easy read with a fun story-line. It's not serious literature, if that's what you're looking for, but it will keep you entertained the whole way through. While you might not agree with the girls and their actions, you can totally see how this could happen. It all started innocently enough. And, with our ever increasing gap between the haves and have-nots, it's an entertaining piece of revenge.2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Funny and fast-paced and funBy

Theresa Alan “This was not a lifestyle that suited me. I am in no way an adrenaline-seeker. I’m much more of an irritable bowel syndrome kind of gal, really.” In *The Assistants*, Tina Fontana works for the CEO of a mega media conglomerate—nine satellite TV networks, 175 cable channels, forty book imprints, forty TV stations, and a movie studio. Her boss, billionaire Robert, expenses everything and pays for nothing, while 30-year-old Tina is drowning in a student loan debt. When she pays with her own credit card to buy out the entire first class of an airplane for Robert, who has to deign to fly commercial instead of his normal mode of flying on a private jet, the expense is comped but she gets a check for the total—almost the exact amount she owes on her student debt. When she decides to cash the check and gets away with it, but is later found out by Emily in accounts, another assistant swamped in student loans, she’s blackmailed into helping Emily to cover her own butt. This spirals out of control, to hilarious effect. Author Camille Perri could have made Robert a one-sided villain and Tina a snarky and embittered underpaid worker, but she didn’t. It’s a statement about the haves and have nots—the wealthy pay nothing—including taxes—while the poor are dinged for every penny. All the main characters are well-rounded—flawed but likeable. The novel is funny and fast-paced and fun. 9 of 10 people found the following review helpful. Interesting plot, unbearable language. By likestoreview I wanted to give up on this book after reading 1/3 of it. I found the plot clever, but I was overwhelmed by the over-use of metaphor. For every clever one, there was several that were silly or even in bad taste. I sat down to write this review when I came to "...popped my blackmail cherry..." followed by a really gross description of another type... I think the author is trying too hard, and could simply cut out many of her metaphors. For her second book, maybe a simple statement could be a statement?

The debut novel that J. Courtney Sullivan calls “addictive, hilarious, and smart. It’s 9 to 5 for the student loan generation” and *Publishers Weekly* describes as “if the characters from HBO’s *Girls* were capable of larceny and blackmail.” Rule #1: All important men have assistants. Rule #2: Men rule the world. Still. Rule #3: There is enough money. There is so much money. Tina Fontana is a thirty-year-old executive assistant to Robert Barlow, the CEO of Titan Corp., a multinational media conglomerate. She’s excellent at her job and beloved by her famous boss—but after six years of making reservations and pouring drinks from bottles that cost more than her rent, the glamour of working for a media company in New York has completely faded, but her student loan debt has not. When a technical error with Robert’s expense report presents Tina with the opportunity to pay off the entire balance of her loans with what would essentially be pocket change for her boss, she hesitates. She’s always played by the rules, but this would be a life-changer. As Tina begins to fall down the rabbit hole of her morally questionable plan, other assistants with crushing debt and fewer scruples approach her to say that they want in. Before she knows it, she’s at the forefront of a movement that has implications far beyond what anyone anticipated. Featuring an eclectic clan of coconspirators, a love interest far too handsome to be trusted, and a razor-sharp voice full of wry humor, *The Assistants* is a rallying cry for the leagues of overeducated and underpaid women who are asking themselves, How is it that after all these years, we are still assistants?

“Perri’s debut is reminiscent of the golden era of early-aughts chick-lit... The characters’ millennial concerns—overwhelming student-loan debt, underemployment, loneliness in a world of hyperconnectivity—ring true, making this a winner for readers who long for the return of light, clever novels with young, professional women at their center.”--Booklist, starred review “Attention readers fed up with their jobs: call in sick tomorrow and dive into this [crackling] debut... Perri’s writing is quippy and the pace breezy... enjoy the sweetness of plotting revenge over cocktails (expensed, of course). You’ll feel better after reading, promise.”--Kirkus s “If the characters of HBO’s *Girls* were capable of larceny and blackmail, they could be the main characters of Perri’s sharp first novel... Perri has a gift for the glib one-liner, and reserved Tina and glamorous Emily make for a great pairing, resulting in a smart and fresh novel.”--*Publishers Weekly* “Anyone who has ever been an assistant will appreciate Camille Perri’s funny, honest, 100% relatable (and did I say funny?) debut novel about a band of exploited, entry-level strivers who even the score with their billionaire boss in the most ingenious way. After a long day at work, this is the book you’ll want to pick up—and, after reading it, you’ll never look at an expense report (or your colleagues) in the same way again.”--Elisabeth Egan, author of *A Window Opens* “With an incredible sense of humor and an eye for detail, Perri perfectly captures what it’s like to assist a high-powered boss. *The Assistants* is addictive, hilarious, and smart. It’s 9 to 5 for the student loan generation.”--J. Courtney Sullivan, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Engagements* and *Maine* “Camille Perri’s *The Assistants* is a hilarious romp through the world of corporate greed and the people who assist them. It’s also a great story of criminal redemption. It was a blast from start to finish.” —Lisa Lutz, author of *How to Start a Fire* and *The Spellman Files*. “*The Assistants* is wry, thoughtful, and funny as hell. I read through the night with a huge smile on my face as lovable Tina Fontana and her raucous band of disenfranchised assistants wreak some Robin Hood-style havoc on their corporate overlords. I had no idea income inequality and grand larceny could be this much fun! I’m so glad Camille Perri did.”--Eliza Kennedy, author of *I Take You* “This delicious page-turner is a rallying cry for everyone squandering their 20s in thankless servitude to those who will never share the wealth—unless someone cleverly forces their hand.”--Nicola Kraus, co-author of *The Nanny Diaries* and *How To Be A Grown-Up*

“Full of not-so-harmless fun and intriguing characters, *The Assistants* is a rallying cry for the leagues of overeducated and underpaid women who wonder, perhaps daily, why they’re still assistants.”--Domino.com “This isn’t exactly the stuff fluffy romances are made of—it owes more to Robin Hood, or maybe Bonnie and Clyde, if Bonnie left Clyde in the car and distributed her spoils among her friends... *THE ASSISTANTS* is an economic fable, a story of class warfare dressed up as chick lit... Powerful people of the world, take notice: The assistants will have their revenge.”--BookPage “[A] raucous debut novel... It’s great fun, and Perri freewheels enough millennial savvy, parenthetical asides and clever repartee to give *Girls* a run for its money... Just sit back and let a smart, funny writer entertain.”--Shelf Awareness “Reminders of the 1990s movie *Office Space* are present, with a millennial, feminist reboot... a fun, modern twist on a Robin Hood story.”—Library Journal “Assistant Tina Fontana and her cubicle coconspirators hatch a scheme to hijack their boss’s expense account to pay off their student-loan debts ... but soon their plot takes on a life of its own.”—Cosmopolitan “Fact informs fiction in *The Assistants*, a fantasy-fulfillment novel for all the underpaid workers who make important people’s worlds go round, by former *Esquire* assistant Camille Perri.”—Elle “An insanely fun ride that is as hilarious as it is smart.”—Popsugar “So well-written, so clever, so smart, and just so much fun... [the plot is] so delicious, and there’s something really modern about [it].”—Reading With Robin “A timely debut novel that is poised to become this decade’s *Devil Wears Prada*... Perri’s sympathetic portrayal of the plight of overeducated, underpaid millennial women gives depth and resonance to this entertaining revenge fantasy.”—BookPage’s “9 Women to Watch in 2016” “Hilarious and fun... As [Tina and Emily] become more involved in their robin-hood like scheme, they realize that something has to give at some point, and it’s only a matter of time before the cat is out of the bag. The ending is not what I expected, but it’s great! ... Well done, Camille.”—Librarian Laura’s Great Reads “A pretty unflinching but also damn fun (Funflinching? No.) look at wealth and power in the twenty-first century.”—BookRiot “A scoop of pure, vindictive fun - especially if you’ve ever had an assistant job.”—Bustle’s “7 Adult Books for YA Readers” “[A] fun romp about the modern workplace.”—Levo’s “9 Must Read Books That Will Make Spring Better” “With a sharp and funny voice, Camille Perri has written a Robin Hood tale for the assistant set and drilled deep into one particular stream of income inequality that resonates with, I’d wager, just about everybody who graduated from college in the last ten-fifteen years. If you’ve ever been an assistant to somebody who couldn’t tie their shoes without you, but who made exorbitant amounts more than you - especially if you’re a woman in that role, although as a guy who has been there, I think all gender orientations will find something meaningful here - then this one is worth it.”—Raging Biblioholism “Romantic comedy might be on life support at the movies, but the genre is alive and well in Camille Perri’s debut novel ‘*The Assistants*’ ... Although ‘*The Assistants*’ is basically a terrific piece of entertainment, the book explores a real national crisis situation.”—The Connecticut Post “[A] fun, smart Robin Hood tale for the millennial generation.”—Real Simple’s “Best New Books to Read This Month” “With this debut novel, Perri gives the world the call to arms for an entire generation strapped down by debt, to the underpaid and under-appreciated. Hilarious and stylish, this sly and subversive debut should be read by those about to go into the real world, and those of us stuck in the mire of it already.”—Vol.1 Brooklyn’s “May 2016 Book Preview” “*The Assistants* is as witty as it is fun, and is the perfect almost-summer read.”—Signature Reads’s “Required Reading for May, 2016” “If you’ve ever been an assistant, this book will give you a thrilling wave of vindication. With unexpected friendship, a romantic twist, and a unique perspective on the financial divide, this novel is a supremely fun romp through the corporate world.”—Bustle’s 17 Best Fiction Books for May “Ugh, working for someone else. That acerbic blend of poverty, humiliation, and rigidity that makes me run-run!-to books in search of mental reprieve. *The Assistants* was the perfect escape, and packed with hilarity and heart... Charming and clever, Perri’s debut novel is the perfect escape from your own work woes.”—Bestbookgrams “A great vacation read.”—Mad Book Love “Anyone who’s ever struggled to pay down a student loan and make the rent on that rat-infested apartment will savor this wry, keenly observed debut.”—People “Five pages into reading *The Assistants*, you know Perri has a hit on her hands... ‘Nine to Five’ meets ‘*Thelma and Louise*’—except nobody dies at the end, rape is student debt and nearly every woman we meet is a survivor.”—The New York Times Book “‘*The Assistants*’ isn’t only about a corporate embezzlement job that quickly gets out of hand, it’s also a story about some people taking privilege for granted while others face the skyrocketing price of a college education. Although Tina’s actions aren’t justified, the book does provide a way to open a dialogue about women who are overeducated, underpaid and still in the role of an assistant.”—The Associated Press “[A] sly debut.”—Newsday “A frothy debut.”—O, The Oprah Magazine “This is pure fun... Camille Perri uses a bright, savvy style... to deliver a serious message about income inequality and student debt.”—Good Housekeeping “This delightfully wry debut from former *Esquire* and *Cosmo* books editor Camille Perri is equal parts satire and modern-day Robin Hood tale. And if you’ve ever worked too hard for too little while the people above you are rolling in bank... well this is a book you’re going to adore.”—Refinery 29’s “12 Books to Read in May” “*The Assistants*, is outstanding. It’s often hilarious, always engaging, a page-turner and more fun than any job... a great read for anyone who likes a funny, smart, enjoyably tense novel.”—Narrative Species “This is a fast, fun read, sure to appeal to any woman who feels stuck in a job that doesn’t utilize her education, skills and ambition.”—Book Bitch “This read is ‘*Ocean’s Eleven*’ meets ‘*The Devil Wears Prada*,’ and it’ll go fast.”—The Skimm *Cosmo.com’s 15 Perfect Beach Reads for 2016* “A raucous revenge fantasy... Reading *The Assistants* is like

getting Elizabeth Warren a little drunk and talking about income inequality—serious subject, livelier delivery.”—Kirkus (cover story)*Hello Giggles' #1 Beach Read for 2016*"This is the book you'll see peeking out of every beach bag. In the vein of "The Devil Wears Prada," it's populated with overworked, underpaid assistants in the New York media world." —The Tennessean's "15 Hot Reads for Your Beach Bag"*The Knot's Hot New Summer Books for 2016* "[A] smart and snappy satire, which blends a timely theme with strong character work. If you loved The Devil Wears Prada or last year's Dietland, don't miss this one"—Bookpage's "Editor's Pick 2016 Beach Reads" "Wickedly funny."—Vanity Fair*Glamour's Best Reads of Summer 2016* *Vogue.com's 24 Summer Reads to Pack for your Next Beach Trip* *Huffington Post's 21 Recommendations For Anyone Who Wants To Read Books And Chill* *Money.com's 7 Money Books You'll Actually Want to Read This Summer*"The Assistants is fun, fast-paced, and full of heart."—Vulture*Vulture's 20 Fun Novels to Read at the Beach**Refinery29's Best Books of 2016 So Far* "Fun. Easy. Great beach read, or an 'I'm too tired to think' read, or a 'how am I ever going to pay off these student loans' imaginative fun." – Chicago Tribune's ChicagoNowThe Assistants is the story of an underdog...It highlights the shades of gray that can be encountered in life and proposes that the concepts of "good" and "bad" are not necessarily written in stone." --The Oklahoman"A fun joy ride of a novel that is smart and funny." –POPSUGAR *POPSUGAR'S Best 2016 Books for Women* One of Roxane Gay's 2016 "Fun Books That Were Fun""Camille Perri has written a novel of sweet revenge that goes out to every woman who's worked for incompetent men for too little and too long." --Thrillist"This quick-paced look at excess, wealth, morality and revenge is very much a true New York story." --am New YorkAbout the AuthorCamille Perri is the author of The Assistants. She has worked as a books editor for Cosmopolitan and Esquire. She has also been a ghostwriter of young-adult novels and a reference librarian. She holds a bachelor of arts degree from New York University and a master of library science degree from Queens College. Perri wrote the first draft of The Assistants while working as the assistant to the editor-in-chief of Esquire.Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.Prologue You've probably heard of my former boss. And even if you haven't heard of him, he has influenced you, I promise. Ever watched the all-day news or seen a big blockbuster summer movie? Him. Do you read the newspaper? What about one of those glossy magazines with magenta cover lines like Dirty Talk Hot Enough to Make His Boxers Combust? Him. Odds are, if you exist in the modern world, Robert owns all or a portion of the media you consume. He hovers around number thirty-five on the Forbes billionaire list. I was his assistant. All important men have assistants. That's the first principle I want you to remember. Do important women also have assistants? Yes, of course. But men rule the world. Still. That's the second principle I want you to remember. Men still rule the world. Not because this is some feminist manifesto, but because it's a simple fact essential to how this all started. And that's what everyone wants to know—the reporters, the bloggers—what they all want to know is how we did it. How Did Two Little Girls Outsmart the Most Powerful Man in New York? That was the Upworthy headline. I'm thirty years old; Emily's twenty-eight. My five feet four inches on tippy-toes brings down the average, but Emily is a solid six foot something in heels. Not so little. What Upworthy meant was "powerless." A BuzzFeed story read: Modern-Day Robin Hoods Look More Like Charlie's Angels. They Photoshopped us into swimsuits and put guns in our hands. Gothamist dubbed our network the Secretary Sisterhood of Thieves! (Exclamation theirs.) Rumors, all of it. Internet chatter. No one knows for sure what actually happened. So, let me make this perfectly clear. It wasn't stealing, really. And it was almost by accident that we discovered just how much money there was out there for the taking. That's the third principle I want you to remember. There is enough money. There is so much money. Chapter 1 Here's how this whole mess started: Robert had to be in LA for a big meeting with his West Coast Titan Corporation execs and his Boeing's engine had the gall to malfunction. "Tina!" he yelled from inside the soundproofed glass cube of his office. Robert isn't a yeller by nature, but he had no other choice in order to overcome the soundproofing, forcing his voice to travel through his open office door. I knew it was my name he'd called by the tone. We each had our own tone. If it had been his deputy he'd wanted it would have been a gruff monosyllabic bark; for his senior editor it would have been a throaty holler; his executive producer called for a higher-pitched squawk. My skill at deciphering these subtleties was critical because it was my job to fetch whom-ever he called. When he wanted me, his voice dropped to a quieter bellow that bordered on a plea. It was a more intimate sound because with me Robert's needs were always personal—he had an upset stomach and required TUMS, he'd forgotten a birthday and needed a last-minute gift, or he couldn't for the life of him figure out how to upload this new software onto his iPad. Robert's vulnerable call for me was a daily assurance that I was essential to the success of this castle of a man—a man whom half the world considered to be a monster because they could never come within ear-shot of understanding him.In less than a second I was at his desk, notepad in hand. Behind me a wall of flat-screens flashed the news being broadcast by Titan and its so-called competitors. Robert had the uncanny ability to devote a small portion of his gaze to each screen simultaneously. In all he owned nine satellite television networks, one hundred seventy-five newspapers, one hundred cable channels, forty book imprints, forty television stations, and one movie studio. His total audience reached around 4.7 billion people, which came out to around three-fourths of the population of the entire globe. But the news was his baby. He was never not watching it, analyzing it, shaping it. That's why he situated his office at Titan News headquarters, where he could keep close watch not only on his wall of flat-screens but also on his journalists. A man as powerful as Robert could have hidden himself anywhere, pulling at

the strings of the world from a lounge chair in the Seychelles, unseen by his employees—but he needed to be here at the center of it all, at the hub. Our office didn't look like a newsroom that you'd imagine from movies or TV drama series. The floors below ours were more like that—the broadcast, print media, and digital newsrooms, each of which could have easily passed for something out of *The Matrix*. And there was an entire floor of flashy studios used for our non-stop news coverage and thrill-a-minute opinion shows. But our office on the fortieth floor was far less exciting, just row after row of desks and cubicles. Still, we were the brain of the whole operation, the source from which all orders trickled down. Titan's chief editors and all of Robert's most trusted deputies had desks on our floor so Robert could pull them into impromptus with the business leaders and celebrities he met with—and so he could foster relationships between them and the political-party representatives (yes, from both parties) who came to lobby him. I guess what I'm trying to say is, what the fortieth floor lacked in flash it made up for in influence. Robert had his shirtsleeves rolled up and was rubbing his dark-haired head with both hands like he always did when he was upset. For a man his age, Robert had a surprisingly full, thick head of hair, which he attributed to a hearty diet of smoked meats and aged bourbon. "I need to be on the next flight to LA," he said. "And have them bump the seats around mine." Robert made requests like this as if he were ordering a pastrami on rye at the corner deli, or in his case, maybe braised brisket on a roll. "You're flying commercial?" I asked. "Don't get me started. The Boeing died and they tell me there aren't any jets available for the rest of the afternoon. Can you believe that shit? Not one. I used to be somebody in this town, you know that?" In the six years I'd worked for Robert, not once had he ever flown on a commercial airline. I glanced at the clock. In order for him to make the LA meeting on time, he'd have to be on a flight in the next two hours. "And make sure they comp me," he said. "The airline?" What amounted to buying out half of first class on a flight that would be leaving almost immediately, Robert wanted for free. And he expected it to be done as simply as saying "hold the mustard." "Okay," I said. Robert brought his hands down from his head, placed them flat on his desk, and looked at me amiably with his big brown eyes. "Thank you," he said. That's something people who haven't met Robert can't understand—his graciousness. They see a seventy-year-old media tycoon accused of evading every tax and law imaginable to expand his multinational domination. They see a sinister businessman accused of single-handedly making a mockery of news journalism. They see a one-percenter with a "Don't Mess with Texas" bumper sticker on the back of his Mercedes. But actually, Robert's a very nice man. So I called the airline, used my executive voice, and politely explained our crisis situation. "You do understand this will cause a great disruption to our other first-class passengers," the phlegmy-voiced woman on the phone said. "But because Mr. Barlow is such a valued customer we're happy to accommodate him." She sounded like one of Marge Simpson's chain-smoking sisters. "Thank you," I replied, perfectly mimicking Robert's amiability. All sweetness and light, Robert always said. That's how you have to talk to people, all sweetness and light, but tough as stewed skunk. She clicked away on her keyboard. "The total fare will come to nineteen thousand, one hundred forty-seven dollars." I had the urge to gasp. That was a high enough figure to make flying in a private jet sound fiscally reasonable. "Ma'am?" I said. "I do understand this is terribly short notice and you're going to great lengths to accommodate Mr. Barlow's sizable request, but I was wondering if it would be possible for this fare to be complimentary." Silence. "Hello?" More silence. Then laughter, then the clearing of mucus, then finally—"You've got to be fucking kidding." "Excuse me?" "Who does this guy think he is?" "Ma'am," I said again, which always made me feel slightly Southern in spite of my New York roots, and also a little bit like an asshole, "did you just curse at me? I'd like to speak to your man-ager immediately." "There is no way we're comping Robert Barlow," she said. I glanced at the time and then at Robert's desk. He'd already left for the airport, unable to even fathom that his request would be denied. Jesus, no wonder he never flew commercial if this was the treatment he got. Asking to fly for free or not, where were these people's manners? "Fine," I said. "We'll pay the fare. But as soon as I hang up this phone I'm filing a complaint with your customer service department." "Credit card number, please." I recited Robert's corporate Amex number from memory as obnoxiously as possible. Two seconds later the woman replied, "I'm sorry," like she wasn't sorry at all. "That card's expired." "Impossible." I could hear her grinning through the receiver. "That card is expired." Shit. Fine. How could I be losing this battle of wills so terribly? I fished through my bag, found my wallet, pulled out my own credit card, and read off the number. Titan didn't allow assistants to have corporate cards, so it was my personal card that I had to use. "One moment, please," she said. I listened to her breathing, which sounded like Darth Vader performing an anti-tobacco PSA, and then she came back with: "I'm sorry. That card's also been rejected. You've exceeded your credit limit." I pretty much set myself up for that one. None of my credit cards had a limit over eleven thousand dollars. "Can I split it be-tween two cards?" I flipped through my wallet. "No," she said. "No?" "No." "I would seriously like to speak to your manager immediately," I said. "I'm not even kidding now." "Okay, fine. You can use two cards." My nemesis was growing bored of sucking the life out of my day; I was obviously harshing her mellow disengagement. "But this isn't customary. I'm doing you a favor." "I appreciate that," I said, because at heart I'm a total weakling. I read off the number to my second credit card, got "one moment"—ed again, but—at last—tragedy was averted. I hung up the phone and took a deep breath. Of course I filed an expense report the moment I received an e-mail confirmation for the fare. Twenty thousand dollars was half of my yearly salary. People often assumed I made more as the assistant to one of the richest, most powerful men on the planet, and I let them. It was less

humiliating that way. Maybe there was a time when “executive assistants,” also known as “secretaries,” were “taken care of,” but those days are long gone, at least in the media industry. They went out with lunches at the Four Seasons, smoking indoors, and the existence of the middle class. Every assistant I knew made under fifty K a year. But the new hires made only thirty-five K, so it wasn’t really my place to complain. You know how sometimes when you call to order something over the phone, like plane tickets, let’s say, a recording might come on just before a real person answers that says, This call may be re-corded for quality assurance purposes? Well, my call with the hater from the airline was one of those lucky calls. I’d never filed a complaint the way I threatened to; I’m way too lazy for that sort of thing. But a few days after the incident, I received a call from the airline’s head of customer relations apologizing for the “confusion” of the attendant on the phone. She’d been “let go,” I was told, also known as fired. The airline retroactively comped Robert’s flight and they were sending a gift for his troubles. “Would Mr. Barlow enjoy a bottle of good red wine?” the groveling woman asked. “Why, yes. Yes, he would.” Things like this happened to Robert all the time. Before I worked for Titan, I never realized that very rich people didn’t pay for stuff. (Let’s call that rule number four: Very rich people don’t pay for stuff.) I was so naïve. This sucking-up from the airline would have at one time struck me as shocking and unbelievably unfair, nonsensical even. Why wouldn’t a billionaire have to pay for something a poor person would absolutely have to pay for? But I’d grown used to it in the past six soul-crushing years, so it no longer fazed me. I immediately filed the whole incident under forgotten, went home, watched some Netflix, and fell asleep ignoring the unpaid bills piling up on my kitchen table, per usual. A few days later I was g-chatting with Handsome Kevin Hanson from legal (that’s what every female in the office called him, or just Kevin Handsome for short) while shoveling spoonfuls of Pinkberry into my mouth. I was enjoying an intense brain freeze coupled with the rush I always experienced while chatting with Kevin, when Billy the mail guy (aka “Patchouli,” on account of his stinking to high hell of the stuff and dutifully passing it on to all of our parcels) dropped a white, hippie-infused envelope onto my desk that read: Travel Entertainment Reimbursement. Suddenly I remembered. I signed off g-chat, made sure Patchouli Billy was at a safe distance, and then sliced open the envelope with my silver letter opener. And there it was. A crisp green check in the amount of \$19,147 with my name on it. Of course. My credit cards were billed. My credit cards were unbilled. But T E had already filed the claim. I’d already been approved for the reimbursement. I couldn’t stop looking at that beautiful, blossoming number. Nineteen thousand, one hundred forty-seven dollars. It was so much money to me. It was nearly, to the dollar, the exact amount of my student loan balance, and I’d been struggling to pay that down for almost a decade. (Thanks for nothing, NYU.) I folded the check in half, then in half again, and shoved it deep into the black-hole darkness of my bag. Later, I would recognize this as the moment that I faltered, my pivotal turn. But at the time it seemed innocent enough. I would just, you know, bring the check home and then tear it to shreds. Sure, I could have torn it up right then and been done with it, but I wanted to look at it some more first. To sit with it in my moldy one-bedroom Brooklyn apartment, with its leaky roof and rats in the walls. I needed to take the check home to bed with me, for just one night, before discarding it. So I did. One night then turned into a week that I slept with that gorgeous green-patterned piece of paper on my nightstand, weighted down by my half-empty orange pill bottle of Lexapro. Then I had a nightmare that one of the rats in the walls made it into my room when I wasn’t home and ate the check, so I weighed it down with a mousetrap instead. Not one with cheese in it, just the trap, set and ready, cocked like an armed security guard. While gazing into the check’s fine crosshatched surface, I’d let my eyes go soft and compose scenarios of cashing it and then being caught. What would I say? Oh, that check? Didn’t I cancel that? I’d never intentionally take money that didn’t belong to me. That’s just not how I was raised. Which was true. I was raised Catholic by what they call old-school Italians. (Or what Robert in his native Texan twang would call Eye-talians.) My parents were the kind of people who favored the vengeful, Old Testament God over the more forgiving, non-violent version from the “Americanized” (their word) New Testament. My father would threaten to cut off my pinky finger himself for a lesser offense than stealing. But then again, wasn’t my angry Geppetto of a dad’s most favorite phrase God works in mysterious ways? What if this was that mysterious way? And didn’t I “secret” this exact type of scenario when I read that self-help book *The Secret*? Twenty thousand dollars, I remember saying to the universe. That’s all I need. It’s not that much money, but for me it would be a life-changer. Nineteen thousand, one hundred forty-seven dollars was pretty damn close to twenty thousand dollars, and only a fool would refuse an accurately answered prayer from the universe. Before long, I found myself becoming absentminded. I would catch myself leaving the house without shoes on or forgetting where I put my keys. I was this close to brushing my teeth with hemorrhoid cream when I realized what was going on. I was in love. I’d fallen in love with the idea of not having student-loan debt, and all the swooning and fantasizing that accompanied love was making me scatterbrained. While drinking a cup of coffee or riding the L train, I’d slip into daydreams about how my life would change for the better if I let myself keep the reimbursement money. I could have savings, I thought. I could start hoarding my money in one of those things they call a savings account. All at once I would become less anxious and more generous. Maybe I’d get a dog—one of those adorable new mixed breeds, like a Cheagle. Maybe I’d start going to the gym with all the extra time I’d have not debating between eating the slightly off leftover burrito in the fridge and splurging on some groceries from C-Town; between getting the cavity in my molar filled and having that funky paramecium-shaped mole on my back looked at. And, sure, I could get one more wear out of this pair of socks before I go to the Laundromat.

And look at this sheath of aluminum foil, it's still good as new, I'll just give it a little rinse. No. No more of that. Instead, I could be living the good life of enjoying dire necessities and bountiful comforts. I could pay my phone bill and go to the movies on the same day. The next thing I knew, I'd come to in Canarsie. This is the last stop on this train. Everyone please leave the train. Something had to happen. I had to rip up that damn check! Okay, fine, I told myself. I'll do it. Back in the safety of my bedroom now, blinds drawn, check in hand, I was poised to end this thing once and for all. But maybe I would just, you know, take a picture of the check first. Not a selfie or anything, just a snapshot. And not the kind that disappears thirty seconds after you take it, or whatever—just an old-fashioned photograph, to remember the check by. And then I remembered that app on my phone, the one where all you have to do is click a photo of a check and—poof—it's de-deposited into your bank account. Damn you, technology. Technology made it so easy to deposit that check, I could have done it by accident. It wasn't an accident—but it could have been. First I had to open the magical check-depositing app and log on with my username and password. Then I had to snap a picture of the check's front and the check's back. Make sure the entire check is inside the box and touch the camera icon when you are ready. Was I ready? No, but the novelty of this process was so fascinating that I continued on anyway. Depositing a check with my phone? Who knew I'd ever see the day? It was just unreal enough to feel imaginary. It wasn't an accident when I logged on to my student-loan account either. But that was the cunning whimsy of technology at work, too, because if I actually had to leave my house at any point—or even just sit down at my desk and write out a physical check, and stuff that check into an envelope, and walk that envelope to the mailbox to mail it—I don't think I could have done it. But quietly typing alone in my dark bedroom felt so innocuous, so anonymous, and even potentially undoable. There's something devastatingly permanent about dropping a letter into a public mailbox, isn't there? The way the envelope is in your grasp one minute, and then it's gone, followed by that heavy metal lash of the door. You open the door again just to make sure, as if in the history of all letters there was ever one that didn't make it down. And then there's that split second of panic. Did I remember the stamp? The return address? It's too late now. But just clicking Send? There would always be Cancel. Edit/Undo. I stared at the words on my computer screen—Pay in Full—for a long time before making the decision. Earlier in the day, Robert had had an argument with his wife about whether the peppers growing in their garden were jalapeños or habaneros. He turned out to be wrong, so he had me run out to buy her the diamond bracelet she'd had her eye on from Tiffany. Total cost: \$8,900. So \$19,147 was roughly only two lost arguments to Robert. And it wasn't even his money, was the thing. It was the Titan Corporation's money, and Titan had billions—literally billions and zillions of dollars. Could anyone really blame me for not giving this minuscule-to-them-yet-life-changing-for-me amount of money back to the Titan Corporation? It had already been three weeks since the reimbursement check was issued to me, and nobody had missed it. Nobody had missed it! Meanwhile, I could have fostered a family of Cambodian children for what I was paying in interest alone on my student-loan debt each month. One click. Pay in Full. That was it, that was all it took, and it was done. I was free.