

The worst part about the day I hit rock bottom was how blindsided I was. One moment, my Life Plan was perfectly on track, and the next, in one horrible swoop, everything imploded like a skyscraper stuffed with dynamite. *Boom.*

The hellscape day started off infuriatingly ordinary, which honestly just pisses me off. At the very least, there should have been warning signs. A heads-up. An ominous feeling. *Anything.* Here's how it went: I woke up at 5:00 a.m. like usual, ate my bland oatmeal, had coffee, scrolled the news, briskly walked on a treadmill at the gym while listening to an audiobook on optimizing productivity, answered emails from my phone, and added several items to my to-do list. Then I showered, blew out my shoulder-length brown hair, put on a tasteful and professional amount of makeup, got dressed, then was out the door by 6:30 a.m. As I walked to work, I remember stupidly thinking my life was pristinely going according to plan. I was smug. Smug! Steadily climbing the professional ladder, I had just been granted a promotion at the global consulting corporation I'd been working at since I graduated from Stanford. A couple weeks ago, we'd finally returned to the office after a year and a half of lockdown, and when we did, I had a brand-new title and role: Senior Project Manager.

My boyfriend, Josh, was going to propose soon, I could feel it. It was in my—no, *our*—Life Plan. Then, in two years or so, we would buy a house, split the down payment, and settle into the predictable, comfortable life I'd always dreamed of. No surprises. No risk. Security, dependability, safety.

The only thing out of the ordinary that morning was the fact that Josh was still asleep by the time I left our apartment. He never slept in, and I made a mental note to ask him about it later. Maybe he was coming down with something.

The walk to work was only ten minutes, but by the time I got to the office, I had already shed my light jacket. It was September in San Francisco, and the weather was unpredictable. When the sun peeked out from the clouds, it started to scorch. I was in black slacks, sleek tennis shoes, and a white button-up rolled to the elbows. My daily uniform.

In the elevator up to the twelfth floor, I answered more emails and when the doors opened, I was satisfied to notice I was the first person to arrive. The floor was quiet and the lights clicked on automatically as I walked. My office was tiny and lacking personality, but it was "a room of one's own," as they say. Before this promotion, I had an open-concept cubicle. Now I had a door, *and* a window that overlooked the city.

Pulling up my calendar to see my schedule, I noticed my boss's boss had requested a one-on-one for late afternoon. Quickly, I accepted it, but I wondered what it was about, since I typically didn't have much interaction with Francine Rosso.

A text then came in from Josh.

you left already? on your birthday? i wanted to make you breakfast. happy birthday, babe!

thank you! have a ton of stuff to do today, so wanted to get ahead of it.

come home early. let's go to dinner tonight and celebrate. it's the big three-oh!

we really don't have to. it's all good!

come on, charlie. let's do something special. i want to take you out.

i've got a busy day. i'll see what I can do.

I didn't want to go out for my birthday, considering I made a habit of ignoring this day altogether. When your dad leaves the day before your tenth birthday party without saying goodbye and you foolishly think he's going to come back the next day, and he doesn't, and, in fact, he *never* comes back—that might kill the birthday spirit for you once and for all.

Like usual, I wanted to stay at work until eight, eat the meal I prepped this weekend (grilled chicken, brown rice, and broccoli—balanced, easy, and devoid of choice), and fall asleep watching a comfort show like *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*.

While I was answering more emails, my little sister, Benny, and my mom both called me, and I ignored them. Who called someone at 10:00 a.m. on a Tuesday anyway? Only they would do that, forgetting that most people have real jobs. They lived in Los Angeles and seemed to exist on an entirely different planet. I'd been tragically born into a family of optimists who trusted the Universe had their back, and regularly consulted with tarot cards and astrologists about what to do next, leaving every single thing up to chance and luck. The delusional gene had not been passed down to me, so you can only imagine the black sheep I was, working in corporate America, having a 401k, job security, a savings account. The rest of the morning and afternoon passed in a frenetic blur of emails,

meetings, spreadsheets, and a quick salad at my desk for lunch.

By the time I looked up, my eyes were burning and it was time to meet with Francine. She was on the twentieth floor with the rest of the C-suite and their spacious offices. Even though I had just received a promotion, I coveted that level. It always struck me as fascinating that whenever I hit one milestone, I was already hungry for the next one. My accomplishments never felt like enough, so I figured I just needed to work harder.

After a smooth elevator ride, the doors opened to a long desk and behind it was the receptionist, Chris, a blond twenty-two-year-old guy fresh out of a good college.

“Hi, Charlie,” Chris said. “Francine is ready for you. I’ll buzz you in.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

There was a sterile, shiny white door with no knob practically camouflaged into the large wall and when the light buzz sounded, I pushed my way through. The massive space was so quiet I could hear my shoes squeaking on the linoleum as I walked. The floor was surrounded by windows, giving a nearly complete view of San Francisco. It was minimalistic and lifeless, but I enjoyed the order of it, the lack of nonsense or frivolity.

Francine waved me into her office in the far corner. She was wearing a cream blazer over a black silk shirt and her red hair was a bit wild and curly. She looked strangely out of sorts, not as put-together as the last time I’d seen her a couple weeks ago when the offices reopened.

We said our hellos and then Francine’s face dropped, along with my stomach.

“I don’t know how best to say this, Charlie, so I’ll just say it,” she began. “We have to let you go.”

My mind instantly was loud static, heat rising across my chest. I was certain I’d misheard her.

“Wait, what?” I asked, laughing uncomfortably. There was no possible way I was being fired. They had *just* promoted me. For seven years straight, I’d worked tirelessly for this company, first in and last out every day, no vacations, no sick days. I had done nothing *but* work since I got hired here straight out of college. This job was my entire life.

“The pandemic really changed things,” Francine said, her tone apologetic. “You’re not the only person being laid off. We need to do a thirty percent cut for our shareholders.”

“But I work twelve hours a day. I work on the weekends. I’ve never had a bad performance review.”

Francine had the decency to wince. “It’s not about your performance,” she explained. “You’re a great employee. It’s your role. We’re absorbing it.”

“Can I have the role I had *before* my promotion, then?” I asked desperately.

"I'm sorry," Francine said. "But, no. This is final. We're giving you a severance package. You should take a vacation. Enjoy some time off."

"A vacation?" I scoffed. "I don't want to go on a vacation. I want to work."

"There's nothing I can do." She shrugged uncomfortably. "My hands are tied. We're in a whole new world now, Charlie. Everyone is feeling it."

"I don't want a whole new world," I said, laughing. "I was fine with the old one."

"The pandemic didn't change you?" she asked, her voice dropping.

"Not really," I said.

"Oh." Francine started shuffling through a neat stack of papers to her right.

"Did it change *you*?" I asked a little nervously. Francine and I did not talk about personal matters, ever. We hardly even talked at all.

"I don't know," she said. She fidgeted and tucked her hair behind her ears, not quite meeting my eye. "Don't you ever wonder what we're all working so hard for?"

I reeled back. *No, Francine, I've never once wondered that.*

"No," I said. "It's just what you're supposed to do. You grow up, get a job, and work hard at it."

"But . . . why? What's the point?"

I was dumbstruck by the question, especially coming from someone at such a high level in a role I aspired to one day have, but before I could think of any kind of answer that made sense, she waved her hands in front of her face and said, "Never mind. Forget I said anything. I'm just in a mood over all this stuff. I hate laying people off."

"Okay," I replied, because I felt like I was floating, or drowning. What was I going to do now? All the work I'd put into this company and they drop me, just like that, as if I meant nothing at all? The promotion I'd been grinding for—*gone*. So much for job security!

"I'm sorry this is happening, but I really think you should take a vacation. You deserve one, Charlie. You work too hard."

I work *too hard*? Isn't that what they'd always asked of me? Wasn't that what I was told would be the only way for me to get ahead? Now my devotion to this job was suddenly "too much"? Before lockdown, this company used to keep a list of people who left at five on the dot. They overtly celebrated "loyalty," which was just another word for "prioritizing work above all else." I had done everything they'd asked of me, and more.

This was the thanks I got? Take a vacation? Fuck off and goodbye? Francine stood up from her chair and motioned for the door, leading me out, and I walked robotically, not quite comprehending what was happening.

“HR will email some forms that you can sign digitally,” she told me. “You’ll also get information on your severance package and I’ll write you a great recommendation letter.”

“Okay,” I said tonelessly.

“Try to enjoy some time off, Charlie. Have some fun.” “Okay,” I repeated.

The quiet of the C-suite floor wasn’t nearly as comforting as it had been twenty minutes earlier. I swayed on my feet and almost fell over before I righted myself, shook my head once to get my bearings, and headed back to the elevator with resolve. *I’ll be fine*, I told myself. *I’ll be completely fucking fine.*

My office now felt suffocating. Mind numb, body moving on autopilot, I gathered up my paltry number of personal items. I had very few people to say goodbye to. Before the pandemic, I had colleagues and we’d get lunch together, go to happy hour, complain about our bosses, but almost all of them had quit or been laid off at some point. Most of them hadn’t wanted to return to the office when it reopened.

They probably had lives outside of work, wanted to stay remote. Not really a thing I could relate to.

Francine had encouraged me to take time off? *Have some fun*, she said, like it was so easy.

Fun?

Fun was not really on my list of values.

It was still light when I left the office. Disoriented, I ambled out of the high-rise and started walking back to my apartment.

When your job is your entire identity, what the hell happens when you lose it?

**FROM CHARLIE QUINN LETS GO by Jamie Varon.  
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