

## Sheepskin

Evangellica's baby blanket burned a hole through her purse as she entered her office for the first time. It was just a green scrap, cut out years ago, and it embarrassed her that she still found comfort in it. She counterbalanced it with a more professional good-luck charm: a polyester pantsuit she wore like armor. It saw her through her MBA, and now it would see her through her first day at Eco Fashion Solutions, as long as she didn't sweat right through it. She got her degree to do good in the world. EFS was a good cause. Focusing on how right everything was, she sat at her cubicle and did what any good supply chain manager would do on her first day. She familiarized herself with everything in the company's supply chain.

The shipping records from the past few months all checked out. It was linen—Summer wear. She focused on all the little number codes representing all their buildings. The brick and mortars had shipments every other week, and the warehouses for online shopping updated their stock almost daily. She was getting into the rhythm of it, sorting out the underperformers from the good sellers, when her eyes drifted over to the product column. Evangellica was halfway through the fall inventory preparatory shipments, and the spreadsheet cell told her EFS was gearing up to launch vegan leather jackets in a few weeks.

She frowned. August was lasting longer every year. If they launched these as scheduled, it'd be too hot for anyone to wear them. Was the first product launch during her employment going to be a flop? She reached down absentmindedly for her purse, but then a hand landed heavily on her desk and made her jump.

"You're the new manager, right? How are you settling in?" Mr. Veblen, EFS's CEO, had stepped into her cubicle.

"Oh, it's—It's alright. A lot of different locations to keep track of, but that's what makes things interesting, right?" Evangellica smiled as she willed Mr. Veblen to go away. Her leg bounced, and under her desk her arm snaked its way to her purse, continuing the search for that comforting scrap of fabric.

“You sure? You look like you have something on your mind.” Mr. Veblen’s hand stayed perfectly still on her desk. Evangella cracked under the gentle neutrality of his face.

“I saw the vegan leather shipments,” she blurted. Mr. Veblen’s eyebrows raised slightly.

“Is something wrong with them? I’ll have to talk to—”

“I think the timing is wrong,” she cut him off. She felt heat rising up her neck and hoped desperately it didn’t show. Mr. Veblen was still waiting for her to explain herself. She swallowed.

“Fall is later and warmer every year. I think—I think launching in October would be better.” Mr. Veblen didn’t respond for several seconds, and Evangella withered in the silence. His expression didn’t change, but all the gentle plasticity in it left. His face had become stone.

“Your outfit suits you well,” he commented out of the blue. “Though, is it polyester?”

Evangella nodded, fingers twisting in her hidden pocket. Mr. Veblen clicked his tongue.

“A shame. Every wash puts a little more plastic in our bloodstreams.” Evangella’s stomach churned at the thought, but he continued.

“Don’t even get me started on everything that went into it’s production, I don’t want to bore you with oil drilling factoids on your first day. I’ll be getting out of your hair now.” He stepped out of her cubicle, and she had just let go of the tension when he ducked his head back in.

“An October launch sounds great. Consider it done.” Without anything further, Mr. Veblen strode away from her desk and moved on with his day. Evangella dwelled on their conversation well into the night.

Before Evangella had worked a full month at EFS, there was a day where she came in wearing an organic, American-made denim shirt. She rubbed her scrap of fleece between her fingers to stop worrying about her clothes being too casual for the office. It was Friday.

Sales were up, she noticed. She could sympathize. The dog days of summer made it easy to think about the burnt-out husk that would be left at the end of global warming. She always came back to one image, straight from an episode of *Captain Planet*: a couple dressed head to toe in black sun

protection, looking over the dry, barren soil of what used to be a corn field. She almost wishes she saw horror movies as a kid instead. At least those weren't real.

"Hello again," Mr. Veblen said as he invited himself into her cubicle. "It's been a while since we last spoke."

"Ye-Yes, it has been." Was she getting fired? Why was he here? It wasn't her one-month anniversary-Was it someone else's anniversary? Was she being fired for forgetting someone's birthday?

"I like the shirt. Organic cotton?"

Evangella nodded, relieved. She added, "American made."

"Ah," Mr. Veblen said. Evangella's hand snuck its way to her purse as her stomach sank, anticipating something.

"I have to admit American made has the lowest transportation impact, but the vast majority is made with prison labor."

"It is?" Evangella whispered.

"Yes. It's extremely rare to find a case where the inmates are paid anything even approaching reasonable wages."

"I-I had no idea!" This was it, she was getting fired for going against company ethics. "I swear, if I had known, I-I wouldn't-"

"Of course you didn't know," Mr. Veblen said. "They aren't exactly forthright with that information."

"So-So, uh..."

"I admire the effort, Evangella." He reminded her of her first grade teacher. "Put in a little more research next time, alright?"

"A-Alright." Mr. Veblen waltzed out of the office, and Evangella clutched her blanket scrap until her heart rate calmed down. After work that night, she dove headfirst into that research.

At about the six-week mark of her employment, Evangella arrived in a linen ensemble. It was relaxed yet elegant, and she had researched extensively to make sure it was made under good conditions. It was appropriate for the September heatwave, to boot. She only had to touch her blanket once to settle into her work.

When Mr. Veblen wandered through the bullpen, he stopped by her desk to chat, as he had every time she had tried new clothes.

“Hey! How’s the jacket shipment going?”

“Everything’s on time,” she answered. Sure, she was in the middle of rerouting trucks to make sure all their stores had something to sell, but it would all be on time once she was done.

“Good to hear! I see you got new clothes again,” Mr. Veblen said.

“Yes. Linen.” Surely, she got it right this time.

“Linen is lovely, but the fossil fuels burned getting it all the way here from Europe, well...” He left his sentence dangling in the air. Evangella dug her fingers into her palm, scrap fabric stuck in her grip. She blinked her eyes clear. She swallowed, and steeled herself to ask a question.

“What am I supposed to wear, if everything so far has something wrong with it?”

“You work at a very good clothing company, you know. Some very stylish options are about to hit the stores.”

“You mean I should wear the company’s clothes?”

“Of course! Why not?” Grinning, he reached into his jacket and pulled out a coupon. “Here, since you’re a good employee and since I’ve enjoyed our conversations. Seriously, why couldn’t you wear EFS apparel?”

“I thought it would be gauche,” she admitted. Mr. Veblen laughed slightly. After a moment’s hesitation, she decided he was laughing with, not at, her.

“You worry too much, Evangella. Don’t. I’m always happy to give you advice.”

After two months at EFS, Evangella walked in wearing their vegan leather jacket and red rayon blouse like badges of honor. It was just barely cool enough outside in the morning for the jacket to be comfortable, and once the office's air conditioning hit her it didn't matter. It was the first day of work where her blanket was not in her purse—Granted, it was in her jacket pocket instead, but feeling the slight bulge of fabric at her side was enough comfort that she didn't have to touch it at all.

She ran into Mr. Veblen at the elevators.

“Good morning, Evangella,” he greeted. “I see you've finally taken my suggestion.”

“Good morning, Mr. Veblen. I finally had time to go shopping.” Evangella stood almost proud as they waited for an elevator to pick them up.

“You know,” Mr. Veblen said off-handedly, “our vegan leather is made largely with plant matter. Pineapple, if I understand correctly. But it still has to be bound together with plastic.”

Plastic? “I thought we didn't—We didn't sell synthetics?”

“Eh.” Mr. Veblen seesawed his hand, like his words hadn't just left her light-headed and clammy.

“The rayon, too,” he continued. “They grow a tree monoculture for the cellulose, which isn't a habitat for anything. And did you ever wonder how they make rayon? Fabric from trees and bamboo and whatever scraps they can find? It's chemicals. Good old wood-melting chemicals. The manufacturing is shockingly similar to polyester fabric, from that point. We don't even have the copyright for the closed-loop manufacturing process. The lawyers have it on the docket, but—”

“Why?” Evangella choked out as he took a breath. The elevator arrived. They entered it, silently, and let the doors close behind them. Mr. Veblen didn't press the button for his floor.

“Why do you keep telling my what's wrong with my clothes if there's no right answer?” Her eyes were swimming, and there was no way he couldn't see her frustrated blush. She pressed on.

“Why do you run a company that sells clothes you see so many problems with? Why is nothing the right choice?! Why is there nothing we can do for the planet?”

“Because I’ve given up hope.” Evangella wiped her face to look up at him. All the corners of Mr. Veblen’s face were pinched downwards, but he forced a smile through it.

“I’ve seen just how many problems there are over my career–In the clothing industry alone. I couldn’t handle knowing anything outside this narrow sphere. There’s nothing we can do to fix it in time. The world is dead.”

“How can you say that? How can you be sure?” She needed proof. She was going to throw up. If there was no hope to fix anything, how could she–?

“I have proof.”

“What?”

“There’s proof in the basement of this very building,” Mr. Veblen said. “It’s a bit outlandish. I think you would understand, though. You try so hard. If you see this, you can give up the fight.”

Her head spun. Evangella leaned against the wall of the elevator. She took a deep breath.

“Okay.”

“Excellent,” Mr. Veblen beamed. He fished a quarter out of his pocket, and used it to pry open a panel beneath the floor buttons that was so flush to the wall it was invisible. With the panel gone, there was one new button, labeled basement. He pressed it, and the elevator began moving.

Her badge of honor was heavy on her shoulders now. She huddled into the jacket and shoved her hands in the pockets, worrying at her scrap of fabric. The nails of her other hand dug into her palm. The elevator doors opened, and she hurried after Mr. Veblen.

They walked out into a large concrete room, lit by bright florescents overhead. Mr. Veblen led her past a small collection of desks and computers, sectioned off by windows and a glass door. His shoes echoed as he began descending a set of stairs. Evangella followed, eyes down to keep from tripping over herself. She needed to look: she couldn’t hold the railing and her scrap of blanket at the same time. The staircase doubled back on itself before they reached the bottom of a concrete pit, like a

drained swimming pool. When Mr. Veblen stopped moving, she barely noticed in time to not run into her boss.

“Here it is,” he said, voice almost reverent. Evangella looked up and saw white. A massive wall of white wool, curving softly at its crest far above her head. Her gaze followed its length, and caught on a furry limb—two, one lying atop the other—leading to a gargantuan cloven hoof. Her stomach clenched.

“What is it?” she asked faintly.

“The corpse,” Mr. Veblen replied.

Her head snapped up to him. Her knuckles were white around her scrap of fleece.

“We’re just staving off the rot for as long as we can. Letting people think they’re making good choices helps, I think. It definitely helps them.”

“This can’t be real.” Evangella swallowed, valiantly fighting down a retch.

“It’s very real. Touch it.”

Evangella didn’t move. Mr. Veblen grabbed her wrist and pulled it out of her pocket. He squeezed until she dropped her safety blanket.

“I said touch it,” he repeated. He let her hand go.

Shaking, she stepped up to the corpse of the world. A sheep, of all things. She put her hand on its fleecy underbelly and was surprised to find it was warm. And firm, like a pregnancy.

“See? It’s real,” Mr. Veblen assured her.

Evangella felt a heartbeat. Something thumping against her hand, at the very least. The wool was so thick it was hard to tell.

“It’s real and dead.” Mr. Veblen’s voice was steady and constant, like a loud metronome. How could he be wrong? It had to be her own anxious heartbeat. It was just her own pulse in her fingertips. When she pulled her hand away and pressed her index to her thumb, she could convince herself the tempo matched.

“We can at least keep people happy until the end, can’t we, Evangella?” Mr. Veblen asked. He had dropped her blanket on the floor.

“Yes, sir,” she said. He led her back up to the offices. She left the world in its pit.