

# BROWN PAPER BAG

By Kicki Linnell

Waking up slowly while it's still dark outside. As it is on a winters day. I yawn and stretch, feeling the smooth sheets against my body and think of how my bed is the most glorious place to be. Then I glance at my watch and.... Oh, dear Lord, I've overslept!! Where's that miserable phone with its piercing alarm? I look at my nightstand and there it is, completely dead and not connected to the charger. How on earth could I forget? I dart out of bed like a fireman escaping a burning building and manage to get dressed, drag a brush through my hair and take a pee at a speed that would impress the aforementioned fireman.

Skipping coffee (or any kind of breakfast really), I grab my coat, handbag and keys and run the two blocks on slush-covered sidewalks towards the bus stop. Just as I lean over the curb to spy whether my bus is approaching, I get sprayed from head to toe by a car passing through a large puddle of icy water. Great, now I also look like a homeless cat that just escaped drowning. And of course I have also missed the bus.

The extra ten minutes waiting for the next bus give me enough time to get a mug of scorching hot coffee at the nearest corner store. Although I burn my tongue it's still the tiniest of comforts in this disastrous situation. I find myself thinking that things can only improve from here, because they can't really get any worse. This isn't the way I wanted to show up for work for the monthly review, where everyone at the office meets in the conference room.

I have forgotten that, without a working phone, my bus pass app doesn't work, and I have just spent the last of my cash on the coffee. As I board the bus, I try to explain the situation to the driver. He's a nice guy. I know that not only from frequently riding this bus line, but he also lives in my building. "Shh, I won't tell if you don't" he says with a smile as he lets me pass. I give him a smile of gratitude and appreciate the fact that there are still some good people in this world.

Entering my office building the first person I meet is my boss. What else should I expect on a day like this? He gives me a look of disgust while demonstratively lifting his left arm to display his expensive watch. "Your tardiness is becoming a problem, Miss. What special skill is it you have that allows you to keep different hours from the rest of us?" he asks, the words dripping off his tongue like acid. The truth is that I have been late only once before, but also on that occasion happened to bump into Mr Grumpy as I walked in. "I must say your appearance is a disgrace to this company," he spits out while walking away. Luckily, my work is in impeccable order for the review and it looks like I might not have to be fired. Not today anyway. Thank God it's Friday. I'm definitely going to need the weekend to recover from this horrendous morning.

At five o'clock I leave work with a spring in my step and a now fully-charged phone, looking forward to the weekend ahead, I'm feeling pretty good. Only one more thing to do before I can pour myself that well-deserved glass of wine and kick off my shoes. In a moment of weakness I have already promised my mother that I will shop and prepare dinner for her today, so next stop has to be the supermarket. What can I possibly make that will satisfy a woman who finds disappointment in everything I do? Standing outside the supermarket I go through my mental list of quick and easy meals. The answer is "nothing". She won't be happy unless I make something quite expensive, elaborate and unusual. And I really want this painful event to be over within a reasonable period of time. The solution is staring me right in the face! Next to the supermarket is a Thai take-away restaurant and I make the quick decision that some kind of Thai curry will be the easiest way to get dinner served and my promise honored with the minimum number of complaints from mother dearest.

The Thai takeaway puts its orders in a little brown paper bag since plastic isn't environmentally friendly anymore. Even the actual containers are paper these days. So very woke. This little brown paper bag is now in my left hand as I am about to board the bus for Mom's part of town. My right hand is holding up my phone with the bus pass visible. Next to me, waiting to board, is a young mother with a child in a stroller and another little one on his own two feet. She needs a hand to get the stroller on board and, since I'm a nice and helpful person, I put my little paper bag down for a second to help lift the stroller. Big mistake! The bag quickly absorbs icy water from the pavement and, the second I get on the bus, the bottom of the bag turns to

mush and disintegrates. Two boxes of red curry fall out and splatter everyone in the proximity. The person receiving the lion's share of the very red curry on her clothes is a middle-aged woman with a long fake fur coat and she begins to wail like a fire alarm. "My coat! Look what you you've done, you stupid moron! I'm going to sue you! Do you know how much this is worth?!" Her face wrinkles up in anger and disgust while I scramble on the floor trying to scoop up the mess, apologizing profusely. "I'm so very sorry! What can I do? I think my insurance might cover this," I stutter to no avail. She continues to yell at the top of her lungs. Sweet angel of death, please come and take me right now! A bus full of people staring at me with frowns on their pale winter faces is more than I can handle and I am in tears. The young mother hands me a bunch of baby wipes and I start rubbing the wailing woman's coat, actually only making it worse. The red stain just gets bigger. "Stop it you idiot! Don't touch me!" she screams. More baby wipes are passed around the other passengers in need of getting rid of red stains. Most just look uncomfortable and are probably just thanking their lucky stars it wasn't them who created this disaster. The young mother puts her hand on my shoulder and silently mouths a thank-you, while her toddlers seem to be slightly amused by the excitement. The furious, fake-fur coated woman gets off at the next stop, all the while carrying my details on a card and shouting various threats involving everything from prosecution to involving the police, decapitation and me burning in hell. And this could possibly be mild in comparison to what I have to expect next, arriving at my mother's without the promised gastronomic experience.

"I don't know why I expected you to come and make me a proper meal. Is that too much to ask? It's not the first time you've disappointed me, and I'm sure it won't be the last! Well, I have learned not to expect very much from you, but I thought this was a pretty simple thing to ask for. Just make some food for your poor old mom. Not asking for the world, just dinner. This is what I get in return for sacrificing everything to raise you. You're nothing like your sister. She can at least do what she's asked....." My mother goes on and on about my perfect sister and how completely useless and hopeless I am. The huge disappointment in the family. I have failed miserably at being that sweet girl she can brag about to her friends at the senior center. No university degree, no children, no house, no exotic holidays and, worst of all, I got divorced before giving her any grandchildren. Two major sins! While whipping up some kind of meal with whatever I can find in the pantry, not really a feast just food, I manage to soothe her a bit by talking about how absolutely fabulous my sister is and how she has totally succeeded in life. I'm sad to say that my mother's company is toxic and decide to leave her to have this emergency dinner in the company of the television as it seems my presence merely aggravates her. As I leave her apartment, I briefly lean against her closed door and let out a huge sigh of relief. No doubt my sister will receive a full report over the phone within minutes. Why does this family business have to be so darn complicated?

My little apartment is my sanctuary. I do exactly as I had planned, which is pouring myself a (very) large glass of Chardonnay and slump down on the couch, wrapping myself in a soft blanket. Shoes, coat and handbag are decorating the floor from the front door to the kitchen. I can tidy up tomorrow. Right now, all I need is some peace and quiet. I wish I knew how to meditate. But just knowing that I don't have to get up early tomorrow and rush off to work helps me relax. Don't get me wrong; I actually like my job and I know I'm good at it. If it wasn't for my grumpy boss, it would be absolutely perfect. Now, dinner.... What's in the freezer?

The doorbell startles me. I'm not expecting anyone. I didn't have any plans, did I? Shuffling over to open the door I realize I still look exactly the way you would expect after a day like this. No worries, it'll only be some kid wanting to sell me something for their class trip.

"Hello! I really hope I'm not imposing" It's my bus driver! I'm lost for words. Very unexpected. "I figured you might have had a bad day. I heard the horror story from the boys down at the bus depot. Thought you wouldn't be in the mood for cooking," he continues as he hands me a little brown paper bag from the Thai place. Wow, what a sweetheart he is. I smile and let him in. "You are most welcome" I tell him. "But you know, we have never actually been properly introduced!" He has the most charming smile as he stretches out his hand. "I'm Tim. Nice to meet you". It's too embarrassing to admit that, even though we live in the same building and I've seen him frequently on the bus and around the house, I know nothing about this person. Not even his name! He obviously knows mine, because it's on the door. But I get a good vibe and decide he's not a rapist or serial killer, so I accept the paper bag and usher him into the living room while bringing through the plates and bottle of Chardonnay. Perhaps this day won't end up a complete disaster after all.

