

Portal Fantasy 1

I sat still and straight-backed, staring in disbelief at my boss as he listed all the ways I had been an utter disappointment to the company over the past six months. I tried to look like I was still present while also imagining I could crawl through a hole and find my way to a better place.

Commented [CS1]: This is a very tense moment—I'd love to have context, to know where she's sitting, what she was doing before, if this was a surprise...it's just very abrupt?

"In all honesty, Cassidy, I don't really know what to say to you at this point. We have much higher expectations for our staff than this," he said as he shook his head. It felt like a performance — Todd Haskins, manager not-so-extraordinaire, playing the part of the team leader who is devastated to find one of his employees is a disgrace to the company name. The problem was I knew that wasn't true. I had worked here long enough to know I shouldn't be on the receiving end of this humiliating lecture during my mid-year review.

Commented [CS2]: nice

I said nothing, afraid I would blow up and start yelling. Worse, I was afraid I might start crying. I'd always promised myself that if I ever cried at work, especially in front of the boss, I would have to quit on principal alone, effective immediately, and possibly leave town. No, there would be no crying at work. Crying is for *after work*, preferably into a bowl of ice cream while wearing my favorite pajamas. Instead of trusting myself to speak, I stared at my fingers. They were dry and cracking around the nails. I really needed to buy better moisturizer.

Commented [CS3]: in...public? Is this, like, a cubicle setting and the performance is for the other employees or is it for her?

Commented [CS4]: Is this meaning to say what I think it is—that crying at work was an acute possibility because of how terrible it is (and, if so, I would LOVE to know more about it)

Commented [CS5]: Funny, still wondering about the above question!

Commented [CS6]: I hope this is intentional—she's a mess? Because of Work? Or because of something else! But those questions aren't quite being posed yet?

"I could understand if you were a new employee," Todd droned on. That man didn't love much, but he definitely loved the sound of his own voice and would talk incessantly if left unchecked. "If that were the case, I could order some extra training for you, maybe set you up with a mentor. I don't know. Something. But Cassie, you've been here for two years. There is no excuse for not exceeding your targets."

Commented [CS7]: ? Aren't targets...where people should be aiming?

I bristled at the use of the name *Cassie*. No one called me that, not since my mother had died, and I didn't care for anyone else using it, especially not someone that I despised. I decided to risk speech, hoping that my voice wouldn't crack. It didn't; it came out sounding far more confident than I felt. "So, what you're saying is that I'm meeting all my targets. I'm doing my job."

"Yes, yes, but barely," Todd said, waving his hand dismissively. "Minimally. I need more than minimal in this department. I need excellence. I need initiative. I need brilliance and dedication and passion. If you can't commit to better every year, every month, hell better every *day* when you show up at your desk then I just don't know how much longer I can keep excusing scraping by with just meeting your lowest acceptable metrics. If this keeps up, we will need to have a serious conversation next time about your direction within this company and your future in it."

I closed my eyes and hoped it looked like I was taking his wisdom in and pondering it, when if fact I was trying very hard to keep my eyeballs from rolling into the back of my head.

"I understand," I said. I didn't. "I'll do better." I wouldn't. "I promise." I promised myself to start looking for another job, for real this time, not like all the other times I had vowed to get out of this place.

"Yes, good," Todd said, typing something into his review spreadsheet. He typed with two fingers, pecking at the keyboard like a chicken looking for bugs, as though he had never used technology until today. It made me want to pick up the keyboard and smash it on the floor. It was irrational, but I kind of felt a little irrational right now if I was being honest with myself.

Commented [CS8]: Awkward?

Commented [CS9]: Nice

Commented [CS10]: nice

Commented [CS11]: nice

“Is there anything else I need to know?” I asked, starting to rise from my seat, praying I could leave.

“No, thank you for your time Cassie, I’ll send you my full report by email for your perusal. You can use it as guidance to work towards your year-end review. I do hope you’ll be showing better results six months from now. I really want to see an improvement by then. I’ve also noted down how often you seem to be gone from your desk for supposed bathroom breaks. Kindly work on reducing those as well, you aren’t being paid to hang around in the bathroom fixing your hair or looking at your phone.” He sighed heavily, the weight of all my terrible failures crushing him. Pity that it wasn’t actually crushing him. That would have been lovely. “I would hate to have to take some sort of unfortunate action.”

“Right,” I said, injecting as much false enthusiasm into that one syllable as I could muster. “Thanks Todd.”

Before he could answer, I raced out of his office and over to my cubicle. I threw myself into my chair and glanced at the time. I still had half an hour to go before I could leave, but with a little luck I could just coast through the next thirty minutes. I knew I should probably at least try to throw myself into my work, even just for the sake of appearances, but after that meeting all I wanted to do was get out of here as soon as possible.

If I was honest with myself, I knew I’d stopped caring about this job ages ago. It wasn’t exactly my passion to answer phone calls from people who needed customer service assistance for their home alarm systems. And it definitely wasn’t my passion to listen to the vast majority of those customers belittle and even yell at me. It never ceased to amaze me that people could be so

Commented [CS12]: this is pretty sexist, right? Is she mad about that?

Commented [CS13]: What...kind of targets would you have in that kind of job??

Also, that changes the shape of this story dramatically—how old is she, is she still in hs or college (it doesn’t seem like it) and who on earth would care about a customer service job?

condescending and treat me as stupid just because I worked in a call center. They'd talk to me like I was an idiot; meanwhile I wasn't the one who had to call for help because I'd locked myself out of my own alarm keypad.

Unfortunately that wasn't exactly the sort of thing you can just say to someone who calls in, not unless you wanted to lose your job. Some days I thought that would be for the best. I'd started this job at seventeen years old, and I'd only meant for it to be a temporary way to earn some money until I could figure out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I hadn't planned on still being here two years later. The only good thing about it was it paid my rent and my bills. Getting fired for telling some rude jerk where to stick their user manual would be satisfying to say the least, but it was also a great way to learn what an eviction notice looks like.

Commented [CS14]: Okay so...college.

Commented [CS15]: Right. I'm confused about what age group we are in. (also...this submission said "portal fantasy" and I'm not getting that at all yet...?)

Despite everything though, I really did do my job as well as I could and it pissed me off that Todd felt like he could write me up in a review for not shooting way past my metrics. I couldn't even think about how ridiculous it was to have anyone comment on my use of the bathroom — was I suddenly ten years old, needing to raise my hand for permission to leave my desk?

I peered over my cubicle walls and made sure no one was looking my way. The last thing I needed was for someone to tell Todd I was goofing off at the end of the day, and frankly I wouldn't put it past any of the people I worked with. The tattling that happened in this office could put a preschool to shame. The coast looked clear, so I pulled my phone out of my purse. I texted my best friend Ginny: *My mid-year review went so well that I'm officially making a LinkedIn account and looking for a new job as soon as I get home tonight!*

I didn't wait for a reply; Ginny was out of town on vacation with her sister at her family cottage and was probably too busy having a good time to see my message. Lately she hadn't been all that great at responding anyway.

I was more than a little envious of all of it. I didn't have a sister — or a brother, even — to go away with and I didn't have a family cottage for long weekend escapes. I didn't even really have a family, not since my mom passed away six months ago. I supposed I technically still had a father but I could count the times I'd seen him on one hand since he'd moved back to northern England when I was only five years old.

I decided to scroll through social media for a bit to kill time until I could start getting ready to leave. I kept one eye on my phone and the other on my surroundings, taking care that no one was coming my way as I checked out everyone's evening plans. As far as I could tell, everyone was doing, well, something. I didn't understand how anyone could be so socially busy on a Thursday. They were even planning out their weekends already. My weekends usually involved a trip to the grocery store and a couple of quiet days at home.

I was rarely invited to anything anymore. To be fair, I often turned invitations down anyway. It wasn't that I didn't like my friends, I just didn't have much interest these days. I had started to feel like a bit of a downer, as though everyone expected that by now I'd have placed my grief over my mother into a box, wrapped it up with a big ribbon, and stuck it on a shelf by now. In the first weeks everyone had been kind and concerned but now it felt like they all expected me to be over it.

Commented [CS16]: Why?

(also....she really isn't very good at her job haha)

Commented [CS17]: I'd love to see this shown to me rather than told?

Commented [CS18]: Aww sad

I wasn't over it. I was, however, over trying to pretend to have a good time as I sat around at a party or a restaurant, laughing and worrying about my hair or whatever else they were chattering about. I'd just stopped going and obviously it only made sense that they'd stopped asking me to come. It still hurt a little though, to see their excited plans and the photos they'd post the next day. Tonight it seemed they were all going downtown for pub food.

"Whatever," I muttered under my breath. "I don't even like pub food anyway. Would it kill any of you to go for sushi sometimes? Or a plain old burger?"

Almost against my will, I pulled up my ex-boyfriend Brad's Facebook profile. He smiled brightly at my from my phone. I rolled my eyes at his new profile photo. It was complete and total cheese. I also knew his face well enough to be a hundred percent sure he had used some sort of editing software to smooth out his dry skin, brighten his eyes, and whiten his teeth. I smirked for a second, visualizing him adjusting the filters just so, with his tongue sticking out a little the way he always did when he was concentrating on something that was slightly vexing to him. The result was this new and improved Brad. Of course, he might say he was new and improved because he was no longer with me.

I still remembered the way he had broken up with me two months ago. "Listen, Cass, I just don't see this going anywhere," he'd said. I should have dumped him first, just for his insistence on calling me Cass when he knew I didn't care for it. "We've had a lot of fun, but I don't think we're permanent relationship material, you know? I feel like we've just hit our natural end. You're great, really, and you'll find someone who's right for you. It's just not me. I need someone I can have deeper conversations with."

Commented [CS19]: Check for sentence structure variation?

Commented [CS20]: Of course she does? Being broken up with isn't something you just skate by, right?

I'd laughed at that. "Really? Your idea of a deep conversation generally revolves around whether you should add strawberry or raspberry jam to your peanut butter sandwiches."

He'd tensed at that point. He hadn't expected me to make fun of him. In his mind he'd probably imagined me breaking down and crying and begging him to stay. "Maybe with the right person I'd have more to talk about. And if I'm being fully honest, I'm just not attracted to you anymore."

Commented [CS21]: awww

My laughter had died then and there. Well, that had certainly explained the dreary state of our romance. He'd apologized profusely for hurting me but made it clear it was over. The entire speech felt like something he'd written down and rehearsed in his mirror at home. At the time I'd shrugged it off as cutting my losses but it had stung badly and sometimes it still did.

I scrolled down his timeline. We had never gotten around to unfriending each other, although it wouldn't have mattered since most of his profile was open to the public. Right now, for example, I was able to take note of the fact that he was going out to see a play with some girl named Beth.

Commented [CS22]: well...they're still friends, so why wouldn't she be able to see it?

"What the hell?" I said. The Brad I had dated for a year did not go to plays. I distinctly remembered him making fun of me for wishing I could go to New York to see Hamilton, telling me that stage productions are so over the top. He never clued into the irony of calling plays and musicals *over the top* while he sat and watched movies that were filled with CGI explosions and bad acting.

Commented [CS23]: I'm not sure why we're going down this rabbit hole right now? There's a lot of (very voicey! Which is good!) telling going on (slightly less good) rather than a scene happening.

It seemed he only felt the need to find some culture and appreciation for the arts after I was out of the picture. Also, Beth? Really? Brad and Beth, how cutesy could your names be?

I had no idea who this girl was, so I clicked over to his friends list and found her quickly — she was the only Beth there. I pulled her up to investigate and pressed my lips together, trying very hard to fight back against the resentment that washed over me.

She was me. I mean, obviously not literally. But she looked just like me. She had the same pale, ivory skin and mahogany brown hair that I had. Her eyes were a deep, dark green like mine. She even had a similar shape to her face. The only difference was her hair was thin and glossy and straight, instead of my mass of tousled waves. I studied her cleavage. Then I looked down at my shirt. I grunted. Okay, maybe there were two differences. Still, if I put on a push-up bra and straightened my hair, then stood next to her, I was sure people could confirm that Brad had a “type.”

“Whatever,” I said, and I threw my phone unceremoniously back into my purse. Good for Brad. “Have a great time. I hope she gives you herpes.” I stared up at the ceiling for a moment, then impulsively snatched my phone again. I went to my own profile and typed up a status update: *Soo glad it's almost Friday! I hope I get a good night's sleep tonight because I'll need all that rest for my TGIF plans tomorrow. I need some advice though — which is better for a night of dancing with a cute guy that asked for my number? A black dress or a red one?*

I scowled down at my own lie. The worst part was that it didn't even sound like a good time to me. All that mattered was Brad might see it and be mad that I'd be going out for a fun night instead of wallowing at home. Which was exactly what I was doing, but he didn't need to know that. I made a mental note to tell Ginny so she wouldn't wonder why I hadn't filled her in on my faux date.

“Hey Cassidy!” I looked up, blinking at Jenna. She sat in the cubicle next to mine. She was only about five years older than me but she acted like she had all the knowledge and experience in the world, and she was management’s favorite pet. We’d all heard rumors of her running to Todd to tell him about anything she thought we were doing wrong. Right now she was staring at me in disapproval and pointing at my phone. “You’d better not let Todd catch you with that out on the floor. You know we aren’t allowed to use them outside of the break room.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” I slid my phone into my purse. “I’d hate to give him something else to add to my review.”

Jenna’s ears practically stood up at that. “Did you get a bad review?” she asked with false sympathy. I could tell it wasn’t sincere because the kindness didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I mean, maybe it’s your own fault. If you’d put more energy into the job you’d get reviews like mine. I did quite well for my mid-year, of course. But you have to work for it if you want it. At some point you need to stop coasting along and be a little more proactive. You know, get a life and all.”

Commented [CS24]: I’m not sure how this connects to the rest of what she said?

Instead of bothering to dignify her with a response, I checked the time on my watch. Five minutes until quitting time. Close enough. Ignoring Jenna’s pointed glance at her own watch, I powered down and prepared to head home for an exciting night alone with my cat Princess and my television.

Great.

I walked out the door without saying goodbye.

Things we like:

- The voice is really great!
- Nice strong emotion in the first paragraph.
- Love this characterization: "He typed with two fingers, pecking at the keyboard like a chicken looking for bugs." I liked that one too, and "manager not-so-extrordinaire"
- The grief she's experiencing over her mother combined with her general social withdrawal is a great starting point for her character arc.
- I liked the line "I closed my eyes and hoped it looked like I was taking his wisdom in and pondering it, when in face I was trying very hard to keep my eyeballs from rolling into the back of my head."
- I like the voiciness of this: "I understand," I said. I didn't. "I'll do better." I wouldn't. "I promise." I promised myself to start looking for another job, for real this time, not like all the other times I had vowed to get out of this place.

Things that might need a second look:

- I'd watch being a little too on the nose? There's a line in here about how the character wishes they could go through a hole into another place and like... this is a portal book, right? Maybe don't do that? Not sure it lands.
 - My thought there was that there was a really good opportunity for a really voicey turn of phrase here. "A better place" tells us nothing about Cassidy. Getting more specific there about what kind of better place could make that line less on-the-nose and actually do some real character work.
- We spent a lot of time hearing our character get berated by this boss but very little time getting to know the actual character? Agreed. She seems convinced that the beration isn't justified, and I really wanted to know why not.
- I wonder if the first pages aren't starting in the right spot? Maybe we start with her taking a call, so we get grounded in where she works and what she does, and then get carted off to that meeting? I thought about this too--I spent a lot of time wondering about really basic stuff, like are we doing this performance review in an office somewhere or at her desk? Not to mention what she does.
- Right now it's just a lot of the main character looking at her phone, musing about her life and the people that are in it but not really, with us. It just feels like a lot of exposition in those early pages. Agreed. Even though the main character is thinking about interesting things, because most of what she is doing is sitting still, this scene feels fairly slow. A possible solution to this could be to take a lot of the exposition we receive here and mete it out gradually over the next few chapters as the real action gets going. Agreed. I would love to be shown some of the things that are told to us in this scene--her mother dying, her current state of hating to go out, her ex-boyfriend, etc. Pages 4 - 6 are almost entirely summary/infodumpy.
- Cassidy seems really hurt by getting such a negative review, but then she says that she's "stopped caring about this job ages ago." I wondered why her perceived poor performance would have such a big emotional impact on her if she isn't emotionally invested in the job. It was kind of funny to have her feel so incensed about the poor work review and then to immediately go pull up facebook... Maybe it's just because I too am at an office job, right now but this actually didn't bother me. If anything it was a little too on-the-nose lol I read this right after work and was like "ah, great, I'm back at work!" hahah
- I wasn't sure why she decided to pull up her boyfriend's Facebook profile.

My reader response is that Cassidy isn't a very likeable person right now. She said some pretty mean things to Brad, she's not warm to her coworkers, she seems to hate everyone we meet in this submission, and she is being a terrible employee. This unlikability works fine if it's intentional, but I might need it lampshaded a little more if so. If not, the save the cat model can oftentimes be a great solution to making an unlikeable or prickly character likeable to the audience. I didn't mind how she feels about work because like, I've been there, but she's definitely catty toward everyone else and I'm not sure they really deserved the treatment? Also, anyone who posts Facebook status updates in 2021 like that . . . well, they're not 19 is all I'm saying.