

Fish Jokes

a short story

by Kate Reed Petty

To start, Anna searches for his name. The search returns 5,881 emails—every single thing he sent her for the thirteen months they worked together. She filters out his work address but his personal Gmail still returns 1,739. Too many to comb through one by one. She can't search by date; she doesn't remember the date. If she's going to find this email, she's going to have to remember the words he used.

She tries "sexy." But she forgets to type "sexy AND" his name, so the search returns every time anyone has ever emailed her the word "sexy" (476 times). When she ANDs his name, the search returns zero; apparently her old boss never used the word "sexy." Anna doesn't remember the exact words he used in the email, but the word "sexy" should have been prominent. Its absence makes her nervous.

She tries "baby" and "beautiful." It was something like that. Something she can forward to her friend Travis, who's considering her old boss for a job and wants to know what Anna thinks of him. Anna doesn't want to explain. She wants to forward Travis the email, which will explain everything.

She tries "sweetheart" and "honey." She remembers there was some word like that early in the email—the salutation, or the first line—that startled her, and she had deleted the email abruptly, like throwing her shoe at a mouse. The email was obvious (although it wasn't enough

to get him fired at the time. She knew what happened if you got your boss fired like that). Later that night, she got out of bed and undeleted it. Later still, she exported her entire work email archive, in case she needed a paper trail. But neither “sweetheart” nor “honey” finds the one.

She tries “alluring” and “gorgeous,” even though they sound fake. What do men actually say? She can only think of clichés. She tries “even though I’m married” and “I know it’s wrong” and “my wife” with no luck.

His email was a cliché, but there was no cliché for her response. When the email first arrived, Anna had no idea what to do; she’d taken her laptop into the glassed-in conference room and hid for hours. The end panel of the glass wall had been cracked (some previous tenant’s drama) and replaced with beige MDF. She sat on the floor with her back to that panel and watched, hiding, as everyone left the office but him. When the cleaning staff turned out the lights she made a dash for it. The lobby was dark, the tropical fish tank washing the room in electric blue. She imagined him sitting in his office, listening for her, and pushed the elevator button a bunch of times as if she could make it speed up. Later she realized he was working from home that day. She searches for “thinking of you” and “dreaming of you” and gets nothing.

They used a cliché when they fired her a few months later: “restructuring.” And another one a few months after that—“pivoting”—when the entire company shut down. She was fluent in all of those clichés; she had laughed out loud when she heard the news about the “pivot.” By then she had a new title, a higher salary. She was glad she had kept quiet and kept her reputation intact.

And now here she is. Three years later, and her friend Travis wants her advice about whether or not to hire her old boss—who was not “infatuated with” or “attracted to” her, who did not have a “crush,” but who had (or who was) something like that.

The boss had insisted on that *something* for a month. Never again over email; he caught her in sandwich shops, caught her wrist in the hall, and kept talking to her in a low voice about that *something* until her polite reluctance offended him and he took everything he'd ever said to her back, with interest. She had never become so disposable so suddenly. The rapid change had disoriented her. She tried not to miss the attention. She used to catch herself in meetings, seeking his eye. She tries “enraptured” and “entrapped” with no luck.

She's not too proud to use a thesaurus. “Alluring” and “appealing” and “charming.” “Fascinating” and “gorgeous” and “pleasing.” She tries “love,” although she knows that's not what the email was about. “Love” turns up 653 emails. He did love that job. Anna loved that job, too. None of his “love” emails make any sense. One of them says: “hey guys hers one I rly rly love.” Anna stares at the email until she notices the resume attached. It's an email about a hiring search, badly mangled, as all of his emails were. She used to text his funniest typos to her friends. “Peeface” instead of preface. “Counted” without the O.

Maybe this is why she hasn't found the email yet.

She goes back to the beginning. She types “swethart” and “sweatheat” and “sweethurt” but her computer keeps autocorrecting. She hits undo, forcing her computer to search for “sweethurt.”

“Did you mean: sweetheart?” her inbox asks.

She searches for “need you” and “want you” and “think about you,” but all she gets is: “hers some ops for flat-rate packs, still need you to check tx?”

She's hit with a sudden fear: What if the email she's looking for is like this one? What if it makes no sense to Travis? She searches for “drink” and “out for” and “join me” and “dinner.”

She gets hundreds of emails of nonsense: "need arts ordr for dinner, unless they plan on eating dum-dum."

For weeks, she'd waited for the elevator in the late blue light of the lobby fish tank, leaving after she was sure he had gone. She was always getting up out of bed at night. Her jaw was always aching from the way she had to smile. She needs an email she can forward to Travis, an email to explain everything. An email to explain it to herself. She remembers, for example, that she kept telling him to stop. But did she ever actually say the word "stop"? If she could search her own conversations, what misspelled nonsense would show up?

She stares at the words, "unless they plan on eating dum-dum," until she remembers that "dum-dum" was one of the fish. Someone had named it "Mystery Dum-Dum" because it was dark purple.

She searches for "dum-dum" and gets thirty-two emails. They were always joking about the fish. Everyone had gotten to name one. There was "David Duchovny" and "Mad Max" and "Bro." The one she named, "Kimmy Gibbler," was actually a whole school of electric red tetras.

She searches for the fish and finds hundreds of emails. Jokes about Bro. Mistakes blamed on David Duchovny. Why can't she remember the email, but she remembers the names of the fish?

Her old boss had named his fish "Anna." It was the bright blue fish with the yellow streak. When someone mentioned Anna, he would say "Do you mean AnnaHuman, or Anna the fish?"

She searches "AnnaHuman" and gets seventy-three emails. A bunch of them are ones that she wrote; she sometimes signed "AnnaHuman" as her own name. Other times she just

signed "AH." They all used their initials most of the time. She spoke the same language they all did.

All of a sudden it's very late. When she sat down with a microwaved bowl of leftovers to catch up on this last batch of email, the summer sun was just setting. Now her apartment is dark except for the blue light of her laptop. In the time she's spent searching, five new emails have come in, pushing Travis's request down. If she does nothing, it will keep sinking; by tomorrow afternoon it will leave her screen, washed out like the tide. She can apologize to Travis at a happy hour sometime, say she's been "busy" or "slammed" or that "things have been insane." The words won't matter as long as she smiles. Her reputation is strong enough to miss an email once in a while. She's AnnaHuman, the good sport. AnnaHuman, one of the team.

She searches for "Anna" and gets five results.

She recognizes them all by their subject lines. The first three are HR forms, from the week she started the job. The fifth is the form she had to sign after they fired her. The fourth is the email she's looking for.

She moves her cursor down and hovers over the subject line, traces the words: "need" and "to tell" and "you" and "this." No one of those words is startling on its own, although the period at the end is strange. When did anyone ever put a period in a subject line? She clicks on the period like an elevator button—just once, and firmly.

She reads the email. It is just like she remembered. Of course the words are unremarkable. They don't really matter; the threat is another language, like a watermark. The email explains everything, but she's pretty sure Travis has never had to learn that language.

Her hands are blue in the light of the screen. Again, like an elevator button—once, firmly—she presses delete.

Then she writes a new email. "Hey, Travis!" she starts. Then, in the language they both speak, she writes that her old boss is "great" or "smart," or maybe even that he is a "good guy." She can't really remember what she's writing. She just knows it is something like that.

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