

It Matters

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Kimber can't help but feel sorry for herself on her 27th birthday as she crosses the thickly crumbed carpet at a local diner and slides into a booth. She often visited this restaurant with her family as a child, and it doesn't look like much has changed. Without looking at the e-menu, Kimber knows she will order the chicken tenders with extra ketchup and an old-fashioned milkshake. The navy-blue vinyl covering the seat has split and cracked from age, revealing the unpleasant yellow innards, and Kimber can relate. She, too, is feeling particularly old and exposed, and wishes she could go back to bed and hide under the covers.

Even though it's her birthday, she feels anything but celebratory. That's because just six days ago, she was "let go" from her job. Kimber isn't even that upset about the job because she had never really cared for it. Or any job she has ever had. No, Kimber's main goal in life has always been to become a wife and a mother. In fact, growing up, she spent nearly every waking moment planning her perfect wedding, to the point that she became known by the nickname Bridezilla at school. *'Don't try and tell Kimber that it's unreasonable to get a 100-piece band for her wedding. She'll turn into Bridezilla!'*

But still, Kimber has to admit it hurt to be unexpectedly rejected from something she felt was beneath her, something which she was only using as a way to pass the

time until she could start her real life. She always dreamed of the day that she could leave the company to be a stay-at-home mother, but never in her worst nightmares did she imagine that they would leave her.

Given recent events, Kimber is here under protest. Even though she normally enjoys being the center of attention, she doesn't feel she has much to celebrate today. She can't remember the last time she grabbed drinks with friends or did something social. In fact, this is the first time she has left her apartment since parting ways with her company. And she's only out today because Kimber's older sister, Glana, threatened to drag her out in her pajamas if Kimber didn't at least join her for her own birthday dinner.

Kimber knows Glana means well. Together with their parents, they had been the happy, perfect family growing up. With her mother and father, Kimber witnessed true love up close, which made it even harder when her parents died together in a brutal hovercar accident years ago. She was a teenager when it happened, and Glana, being five years older, had become like a surrogate mother. Their relationship changed, and now Kimber is used to taking orders from Glana.

"We haven't seen each other in weeks! Not since you and Larke broke up," Glana had said when she called, making Kimber feel responsible. She's been feeling more than a little anti-social since Larke had unexpectedly called things off a few months ago, leaving her brokenhearted. For as long as she can remember, Kimber has wanted to have what her parents had, and she thought she had found that in Larke.

"I haven't felt like it, Glana."

"Let me take you out for your birthday, at least."

Despite her objections, Glana was adamant that Kimber should not be alone on her birthday, and she had finally relented and agreed to meet her sister.

She spots Glana as she appears at the front entrance, and of course she looks as if she's stepped out of the pages of a high-fashion magazine. All sleek and slim, Glana is put together and proper as always in her sky-blue lycra suit and brand new (but made to look old-fashioned) black blazer circa 2021. The look, which gives off gymnastics tumbler meets businesswoman vibes, is currently all the rage. Meanwhile, Kimber is wearing the first sweater she happened to pick up that morning and a pair of denim jeans that were deemed outdated a decade ago. And it's

only after looking at her sister's perfectly combed mane that Kimber realizes she neglected to run a brush through her tangled brown hair.

"Kimber! It's so good to see you!" Glana approaches with a huge smile and general cheeriness that seem at odd with the rest of the run-down restaurant and Kimber's own mood. Kimber doesn't even bother getting up to hug Glana, instead offering a seated, one-armed side-hug and a hushed hello.

She's happy to see her sister, but she keeps her expectations low. Glana is just as likely to offer sympathy as demands, as she takes her older sister role quite seriously. So instead, Kimber accepts the warm hello and the expected "happy birthday!" greeting, but things quickly turn icy as they order their meals.

"A milkshake? At 11:30 AM?" Glana questions.

"You made me come out here, the least you can do is let me wallow in a milkshake!" Kimber cries, only half-joking.

But guessing from the sudden scowl that has appeared on Glana's face, Glana will not let her wallow in peace. Kimber knows her sister is about to dole out some tough love, the same variety she gave after their parents' accident.

"When are you going to get out of this rut, Kimber? It's your *birthday* for crying out loud," Glana says sternly. The remark makes Kimber turn silent and steely-eyed across the table, so Glana quickly backtracks. "I mean, it's not that you haven't had a rough time recently. I understand that, I do."

"Do you call losing your job out of the blue just a week before your 27th birthday a 'rough time?'" Kimber asks, using giant air quotes to denote her sister's choice of words.

"I'm sorry. I know. And I know it's just one more thing on top of your breakup with Larke. None of us saw that coming, and I know you thought he was the one."

"Four years," Kimber says softly, almost as if to herself, clearly lost in thought. "Gone." She had thought she had it all figured out with Larke, her five-year and ten-year plans coming along nicely. She had already been looking at rings and scheduling her forthcoming pregnancies when instead, Larke had called it quits. Between that and the loss of her stable job, Kimber feels she is watching her dreams wash away on the tides of change.

The two sisters are quiet until the waiter brings Kimber's milkshake. Slurping the rich caramel cream perks her up slightly, but still Kimber can't seem to shake the cloud that has been hanging over her for some time now.

Then, Glana slides a plain manilla folder across the table. The sight of the paper, a rarity these days, immediately makes Kimber sit up taller in her seat. "I got you something," Glana says with a small smile.

"No way," Kimber whispers. "That can't be what I think it is," she is scared to hope.

"It is," Glana says, her grin now reaching her eyes. "I thought you could use a *real* pick-me-up."

What Glana is giving Kimber is sure to be much more than a pick-me-up. All her earlier irritation at Glana is immediately replaced with gratitude. Because Kimber knows, without a shadow of a doubt, that the contents inside this folder will be life-changing and accurate. Not once in the history of LaraTech has the company made a mistake.

The information in this folder must have cost her sister at least several months in wages, as it can only be found and purchased by individuals on the black market. Kimber feels slightly guilty at the thought of her sister depriving her own family, but knows that inside the very nondescript folder, she'll find all the answers to her burning questions.

The name of her future husband.

The dates on which they will meet and get married.

The names and birth dates of all her kids.

Even the date of Kimber's own death.

Basically, the rest of her life will be laid out before her eyes, all thanks to Glana and LaraTech, an enigmatic conglomerate that owns more than half of corporate America. The company is behind everything from pharmaceuticals to marketing, all personalized to a consumer's exact biodata, which they obtain through mysterious, and likely, nefarious means. The information, which LaraTech supposedly has conjured up for every person walking the face of the earth, is usually only available to similarly secretive allies for equally sinister and furtive means. Although there is no doubt that LaraTech is also fueling the black market, selling individuals' biodata at rates so high it's ludicrous that anyone would pay, there is also no proof.

LaraTech originally claimed the technology they developed would stop terrorism attacks and casualties due to natural catastrophes– and they were right. In addition to a much more accurate forecast every morning, mass shootings and suicide bombings stopped the day after LaraTech introduced their future-telling technology to the world. But some want to know *at what cost?*

Knowing all that, the folder excites Kimber. She is so grateful that Glana has once again taken control and is trying to steer Kimber in the right direction, just like she did after their parents' accident when Kimber so badly needed her big sister.

Her mind soars in a million different directions at once while she considers the possibilities of the folder's contents. “Did you look?” she asks Glana, afraid yet more excited than she has been in a long time. She will finally know how many kids she is going to have! She always goes back and forth between two and three, telling herself that she will let her future husband decide.

“I didn't look. To be honest, I was going to, but then I couldn't bring myself to do it. This is *your* life,” says Glana, inching the folder even closer to Kimber. The two sisters look at each other with anticipation, not even flinching as the waitress brings Kimber's tenders and nearly places them directly down on top of the precious folder. After a pregnant pause, Glana can't wait any longer. “Open it!” she says, eagerly.

Kimber's left index finger curls around the edge of the thick paper and flicks it open.

Months later... or is it just days? Weeks? Kimber isn't sure. But she has somehow found herself at the train station. She remembers she sat down in this spot because it felt nice and cool in the shade of the hovertrain waiting patiently above the platform, ready to be filled with passengers, but she can't remember exactly why she came here. Or even where she came from.

But none of that matters because it feels so good in the shade. People in fancy shoes pass by Kimber on their way to planned destinations – work, retail establishments, coffee cafés – but Kimber has nowhere to go and is content to just sit. Recently, she has been living for just the next moment, and then the one after

that. She is sitting here because it feels good, and when it doesn't anymore, she will leave.

After her birthday dinner, she aimlessly wandered around Pierview for a few hours in an effort to avoid her apartment – and, if she is honest with herself, her entire life. She sat down on a bench in the local park, hoping simply to escape her existence by getting lost for a little while. Instead, she started to cry, overwhelmed by her life.

Then, a man sat down next to her, offering her a tissue.

"Thanks," she said. After blowing her nose, she smelled a dubious odor emanating from the man, who wore a greasy smile to match his greasy, unwashed hair and stained all-gray outfit. Despite this, Kimber felt a kindness towards the man for his favor.

"You don't know how much this means to me," she said weakly through her sobs.

"It's not a problem at all, miss. Get some bad news?" He must have recognized the glazed-over look across Kimber's face.

She nodded, gesturing toward the folder on the bench between them.

"LaraTech strikes again, eh? Don't worry, I've been there myself. And in fact, I have something that will help you more than a tissue." From his pocket, he produced a vial of pills that Kimber recognized from the news as FentyContin. "First one is on me."

Even though Kimber had never taken an illicit substance in her life, she could no longer find a reason not to. Might as well get away from here, she thought to herself as she popped the pill in her mouth and swallowed it down into her gullet. The feeling was one of immediate bliss – everything from the gum stuck to the bottom of the bench to the group of people in loud, colorful hues passing by with large signs looked much more beautiful.

Suddenly, her life didn't seem nearly as bad. It almost made Kimber forget about the folder. The man walked with her as she strolled the park, following from one enchanted flower to the next, and when the feeling started to wear off, Kimber found herself selling her smart watch, which also acts as her phone, in order to buy more pills.

After a while, she found herself in the middle of a group of people walking at a similar sluggish and ambling pace, all wearing gray. They welcomed her into their ranks as they all, eyes bulging and minds in ecstasy, pointed out fascinating things to each other – a bird extending its breathtaking wings to take flight, a crack in the sidewalk with a miniscule tree growing out of it, a woman's burgundy hat that floated off her head and into the breeze.

She hasn't been back to her apartment since before that birthday meeting with her sister. Kimber can't reconcile her life now with what it had been before – before Larke had ended things, before her job had let her go, and before she had known the terrible truth about the rest of her life. And she knows that stepping into her apartment will only exacerbate that sickly, anxious feeling. She doesn't want to be reminded of her hopes and dreams that are now permanently out of reach.

She knows that some in her exact situation decided their lives were not worth living, but even that decision is one that is not ultimately theirs to make. Kimber had heard horror stories of people who had tried to kill themselves before their official death date and instead ended up horribly maimed and injured. Going through life in a vegetative state from a hospital bed is perhaps the only fate worse than the one she already finds herself with.

So, without anywhere to go or anything to do, Kimber somehow ended up here, at the train station. She can't exactly remember all the places between the park and now, probably because of the pills. She had immediately gotten hooked, and thanks to companies like LaraTech, FentyContin is easy to find. Someone nearby always seems to have some to spare. The gray group that Kimber now often finds herself with is quite large, their mass wardrobe somehow morphing into one dull but giant ball of varying shades of ash, overcast clouds, and dust mites. Kimber, who is wearing a gray tank top and pair of shorts she borrowed from someone, or maybe found somewhere, knows it is because none of the grays care about their appearance.

While sitting in the hovertrain's shade, Kimber itches underneath her right armpit, the old gray fabric of her shirt irritating her skin. She recalls a time when she carefully picked out her outfits in the mornings and spent time in front of the mirror fixing her hair and makeup before dashing off somewhere important. She lets out a big guffaw at the thought of her young, naïve self, but then breathes in the foul

stench emanating from her armpit. She inches closer to the trash cans in hopes that they will mask her smell, but as people walk by, she becomes aware of their judging glares. Her sadness is starting to seep in past the pleasant fuzziness created by the FentyContin, and Kimber feels just a bit too tethered to her current reality.

She decides it's time for another pill and checks the pocket of the shorts she is wearing, but all she finds is a small piece of lint. She realizes her stomach is rumbling and wonders what lint would taste like, but then reminds herself that FentyContin will take away all her problems, including her hunger. Rising from her seated position, Kimber begins to search the train platform for her new monochromatic friends. They are never that far away. After the news media had gotten wind of LaraTech's ability to essentially know the future, a large faction of the young population who still had uncertain life left to unwillingly live took to the streets, unable to continue to make choices that were predetermined and therefore deemed insignificant. Even such a trivial thing as deciding what to wear in the morning had become an unnecessary chore, thus the mass resurgence of all clothes that were a drab gray.

The color of the grays, which had become the group's unofficial nickname, is starting to make sense to Kimber. She remembers a time when she had crossed the street to avoid them, but now she feels comforted by their presence because she knows at least one in their ranks is always sure to have a supply on hand that can feed her addiction.

A hovertrain arrives on the adjacent platform and emits a large crowd of people, making it hard for Kimber to see if there are any grays nearby. She gets another whiff of herself, thanks to the artificial wind created by the train's hover technology and feels embarrassed that she can't pinpoint the last time she showered, brushed her teeth, or even put on deodorant. Without her smart watch, she doesn't even know what day it is.

After being surrounded by normal people going about their normal lives, Kimber is even more eager to escape the commuters and her daunting thoughts. She puts her head down to avoid eye contact, watching as shoes of all types clear a wide path for her, most likely due to her pungent smell and unkempt appearance.

All except for one pair of high heels, which stop straight ahead.

"Kimber?"

Kimber looks up and is surprised to meet her sister Glana's gaze. She wishes she could turn around and ignore her, but it's too late. Instead, she stands still, resigned, and ready for her sister to start bossing her around.

"Oh, Kimber. Is this what you've been up to instead of answering my calls? Come here, sis," Glana says sweetly, and instead of getting angry, she pulls Kimber into a hug. Kimber thinks she ought to feel ashamed that her sister is seeing (and smelling) her this way, but the emotion that overwhelms her at this moment is sadness. Kimber is so, so sad. She bursts into tears.

Glana steers Kimber onto the hovertrain from which she just departed, and the two sit down at the very back of the car. The train, which was full of people on their way to work just moments ago, is now empty and will soon head back out into the suburbs to pick up the late risers. "Don't you have to go to work?" Kimber manages to ask, but Glana just shushes Kimber's hiccupped tears, ignoring her unkempt appearance and shockingly bare wrist.

Glana takes Kimber to her home, urging her to restore herself with a shower and some real food. Kimber watches swirls of dirt from the park and the train station and everywhere in between nearly clog up the drain. It's not until the water finally runs clear that she steps out of the bathroom and into some of her sister's clean clothes. She passes rows upon rows of happy family e-portraits as she heads into the kitchen and grabs the first hot plate of food she's had in too long. The bacon and eggs taste delicious.

Her sister's house, normally full of shouts and bangs emanating from Glana's twin toddlers or the sounds of her husband, Rask, knocking around in the garage, is silent. Upon their arrival, Glana had shooed everyone away and given Kimber time to collect herself, but now Glana joins her at the dining room table.

Kimber can't look at Glana, her eyes instead scanning the room and finding evidence of a well lived-in and happy home everywhere she looks. The line of e-portraits on the wall flickers every ten seconds, offering quick glimpses of happier times. Toys are piled neatly in a chest in the corner, almost covering a scribble of crayon on the wall above, and the boys' artwork covers nearly every surface.

"Kimber... why didn't you tell me things had gotten so bad?" Glana asks, and though her words hurt, Kimber senses urgency and care, rather than anger, behind the words.

Now that's she's free of FentyContin's hazy effects, the shame of her sister finding her next to the train station trash and now taking such pity on her is too much to bear. Kimber starts to cry. It's all she seems to be capable of doing recently.

"This is all my fault," Glana says as she reassuringly rubs Kimber's back, just like she used to after their parents died. "Clearly that folder has only made things a million times worse."

At the thought, Kimber remembers the folder and starts to cry harder. "Don't worry, you'll never have to deal with Bridezilla again," she says through sobs.

The folder had revealed that Kimber's lifelong dream of getting married and having kids is not to be. And on top of that? Kimber can't even hope for a quick death. Instead, she is destined to live to age 117. She imagines herself as an old woman, likely living in a tiny corner of a nursing home all alone, with no one to visit her. She can't think of anything worse.

Except perhaps a botched suicide attempt.

"Oh Kimber, I know this is not what you planned or hoped for, but it's still *your* life. Do you really want to spend your time on this Earth drugged up and wandering around getting into who-knows-what with who-knows-who?"

"Glana, I have *plenty* of time," Kimber says ruefully through her tears. "90 years, in fact. Let me spend the next, say... decade... wallowing, and then I'll get my life back on track."

It sounds good as she says it, but she knows Glana will have none of it.

As if on cue, Glana simply laughs. "Absolutely not. No sister of mine will become a gray. I've already burned those disgusting clothes you were wearing."

A small spot of Kimber's mind tells her she should feel angry at her sister for this, but simultaneously she feels comforted by her sister's presence. Glana always knows what to do and being with her feels like home.

After a few minutes, Kimber lets her sobs subside and manages to get some control over her shaky breaths. Once again, she's embarrassed at her actions.

"Kimber, I understand this is rough. It's sure to be the worst time in your very long life. But the point is that you have a life, whether you like it or not, and as your older sister, it's my responsibility to be sure you don't waste it."

She seems to be expecting a response, but Kimber's mind is blank. "Glana, I don't know what to do. It all just seems so... pointless."

At that moment, Glana's twins, Kalan and Selta, burst into the room. "Auntie Kimber!" They shout in delight.

"Boys! I told you to go to your room and play!" Glana says firmly, but it's of no use. Kalan asks Kimber to draw hovercars with him while Selta latches onto her left leg, refusing to let go. Their unabashedly joyful presence brings the beginnings of a smile to Kimber's face. She has always loved her nephews dearly, despite their seemingly never-ending energy.

"Can Auntie Kimber sleep over?" Kalan asks his mother loudly.

"I think she should," Glana answers, and Kimber can't miss her sister's pointed stare. She thinks about it and realizes staying here for a while seems like a much better idea than returning to her empty apartment and old life. She catches sight of an e-photo on the wall that's currently showing herself and Glana on Halloween as kids. Kimber is in a wedding dress and veil, and she finds she can't connect with that girl, so full of hopes and dreams.

Glana will be sure that her time as a gray is over, so anything in a new direction is welcome. And besides, who is she to deny her adoring nephews?

"I guess so," she relents. Glana smiles and the boys break out into cheers.

"Boys, go back to your room while Auntie Kimber and I finish our talk."

The boys groan in protest, but Kimber quickly assures them. "I'll draw hovercars with you very soon. I promise."

After they begrudgingly leave, Glana adopts the no-nonsense attitude she has come to wear so well.

"There's just one requirement to stay here," she says, and Kimber raises her eyebrows expectantly. "You have to go to therapy."

"But--"

"Not up for discussion!" cries Glana, who raises her hands to her face in a gesture meant to cease Kimber's complaints. "But you can go to group therapy if you want. I've heard there's a really good support group on Thursday nights down at the church for people like you."

"You mean, people whose lives have been ruined by LaraTech's leaked biodata?" Kimber asks flippantly. She can't help but adopt her old argumentative tone with her sister, even though she's grateful for this second chance.

“Yes, that's exactly what I mean. So why don't you go get some sleep in the guest room, since you look like you haven't slept a wink in days, and then tomorrow we'll figure out how to get your stuff here. And on Thursday, I'll take you to therapy. One day at a time.”

Kimber watches the digital second hand of the clock on the meeting room wall tick up and up, but not fast enough. There are still six minutes left of this god-awful meeting that her sister has forced her to, and her hunger is once again back with full force. She eyes the chocolate chip cookies on the fold-out table underneath the clock and picks out exactly which one she will take: the one with the most chocolate chips. One advantage to not getting married? Not having to try your hardest to look good for a permanently non-existent husband.

Not that Kimber is trying to impress anyone here in the first place. She is surprised to see only two grays in the group of about a dozen that sit around her in a circle. One of them still has the wide-eyed look that Kimber had when she stood in Glana's bathroom washing away dirt just a few days ago. Everyone else seems to be sober and in varying states of sadness, taking turns telling their long tales of woe despite their relatively short lives. No one here could be older than 40.

Finally, the organizer of the meeting declares time is up, and Kimber heads directly for the cookies. She plans to grab one– maybe two– and leave, but just as she is picking out her second, a sing-song voice rings out behind her. “They make the *best* choco chip here.”

Kimber turns and finds the voice has come from a cute, short redhead with her hair in tight braids. She is clearly joking, as they had all watched the facilitator dump the cookies right from a store-bought package into a bowl at the start of the meeting.

Kimber moves aside to give the girl access to the table of food and in return, the redhead smiles. “Thanks!” With one hand deep in the cookie bowl, she extends the other. “Name's Keekee.”

“Kimber,” she says, shaking the girl's hand. Keekee looks fit, but her frame is partially hidden by a bright neon orange sweatshirt and rainbow-print pants. She knows from the outfit that Keekee must be part of the Colors, the small but vocal resistance group that she had seen earlier in the park. The Colors are the exact opposite of the grays – instead of accepting their fate, they fight against LaraTech's ability to ruin the collective future.

"I haven't seen you around here before," says Keekee.

"Yeah, well. I'm kind of new to... all of this," says Kimber, gesturing around her, not quite sure if she just means therapy or her new life.

"Ah. Get some bad news?"

"Yep. How'd you guess?" Kimber rolls her eyes and releases a small chuckle, which almost feels odd passing through her lips. But this setting, among others who all just confessed that their own lives went into a tailspin after they or a loved one obtained illegal biodata from LaraTech, makes her feel even more at home than her sister's raucous and rambunctious dwelling.

"Just a hunch," Keekee says, winking at her in a friendly way. Kimber is somewhat surprised to find that she doesn't hate this conversation with this woman she just met. For the first time since the drug dealer in the park, she feels understood in a way that's hard to describe. "Well, I'm practically an old-timer here, so if you have anything, just ask."

"Thanks," Kimber says, and she is sincerely touched by Keekee's genuine offer. "That means a lot. I've been feeling... aimless recently. Not sure what to do next."

"Coming here was a great start," Keekee says reassuringly.

"I can't take credit. It was my sister's idea."

"Sounds like you have a pretty awesome sister."

"She is," Kimber relents. "I'm lucky to have her, but I have to admit she can be a lot to take. It feels good to be out of her house, even here with strangers. Now I just have to figure out what I'm going to do the next time she gets to be... too much."

"Well, if you want, I know somewhere you can be tomorrow night." Keekee bumps her smart watch to Kimber's new one, courtesy of Glana, and the screen lights up with an address Kimber instantly recognizes.

"You want to meet at LaraTech?" Kimber asks, confused. As the most profitable company in the world, their prominent New York City address – 1111 LaraTech Way – is one of those trivia questions that everyone always gets right.

"There's going to be a protest," Keekee explains, gripping the edge of her neon sweatshirt and playfully ruffling it a few times so Kimber will get the hint.

It will be a Colors protest, she realizes, flashing back to the memory of the colorful people walking through the park with signs.

"You really think LaraTech cares if a bunch of people yell at them outside HQ?"

“Not a chance. *LaraTech* doesn’t care about anything, and they don’t think we should either. They want to take everything away from us, even our passion, our zest for life. But I say that it’s my life, and I can do what I want with it. So, *I* care, and *I* want them and the entire rest of the world to know that I care. And I’m going to make sure they do.”

Kimber thinks that makes a lot of sense. It isn’t for *LaraTech* to decide what she will or won’t do, or what does or doesn’t matter. Those are her decisions to make. Now that she knows her lifelong goal of becoming a wife and mother is unobtainable, it’s up to her to decide what’s next.

“So, will I see you there?” Keekee asks.

“You will.”