

Killing the Corporate Angel

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They tell you anger is bad for the skin, which is a clever marketing strategy if you think about it. First they ask women to swallow their feelings, then they sell us serums for the stress of digestion.

I was exceptionally good at being pleasant.

Not kind, exactly. Kindness is a virtue. Pleasantness is performance. Pleasantness is a woman saying *Absolutely, happy to help* while her nervous system is lighting small fires in the basement. Pleasantness is smiling on Zoom at six in the morning while someone in all caps asks WHAT IS THIS????!!!! about a slide deck you have already revised twice. Pleasantness is remembering how old a client's daughter is, softening the email, soothing the ego, absorbing the tone, managing the room, taking the note, fixing the mess, thanking everyone for the opportunity.

I had a name for it: the Green & Co. Smile. The face you glue on in the morning and pray will not crack before night.

For years, that smile served me well. It made me legible in rooms full of older men who admired competence as long as it arrived wearing lipstick and emotional moderation. If a man was direct, he was decisive. If I was direct, I needed to work on my tone. If he led, he was strategic. If I led, I risked being "a lot." Corporate life is full of phrases nobody writes down because HR exists, but everyone understands perfectly. *Tone it down. Be easier to work with. Maybe smile more.* Civilization, as it turns out, rests on a woman replying warmly to something that deserves a flamethrower.

And because I was very high-functioning, I mistook adaptation for health.

I was good at my job. Better than good. I would run \$100M projects, calm clients, protect teams, think structurally under pressure, and produce order out of chaos. I could also cry between meetings, wash my face, and come back smiling ten minutes later as if nothing had happened. It is important to understand that women are often praised most lavishly at the precise moment they are disappearing. *So resilient. So dependable. Such a safe pair of hands.* We hear this and think crown. We should hear leash.

By the time I burned out, it felt both catastrophic and overdue. At one point I realized I had put ninety-five percent of my personality into work, and when work began to collapse, there was almost nothing left holding me together.

That is the part of me that immediately responded to this prompt: *You can either be a b*** or get an autoimmune disease.**

Rage goes somewhere – if it cannot move outward, if it cannot become language, refusal, boundary, confrontation, change, then it turns inward. The body has a way of saying what the well-behaved woman cannot. It keeps score while she keeps smiling.

What I had called professionalism was often fear in a better outfit. Fear of displeasing. Fear of being misread. Fear of becoming one of those women people describe in lowered voices as intense, cold, sharp, too much. Women are trained to hear those words as a form of exile. Better to be exhausted than unlikeable. Better to disappear gracefully than to become inconvenient in public.

And yet the self I was trying so hard not to become kept waiting for me.

During shadow work in a theatre workshop, I met a part of myself I had locked away for years. I wrote later: *My shadow is the most hidden part of me. She's sharp, dangerous, merciless. No one loves her, and that only makes her stronger. She doesn't care anymore what others think or how they feel. Her eyes are cold. I think she's tired of being locked away.*

She frightened me.

Not because she was cruel, but because she was free. She was everything I had been taught a woman should not be if she wanted to remain loved, welcomed, employable, safe. She was uninterested in pleasing people who required my diminishment. She was not trying to soften the truth into something more digestible. She was not trying to preserve harmony at her own expense. She was done making herself smaller so that everyone else could remain comfortable.

Virginia Woolf wrote that killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer. Had she not killed her, Woolf said, that angel would have plucked the heart out of her writing. I understand that now in a way I could not have understood it before. The Angel is not only literary. She is professional, romantic, social. She appears wherever a woman begins to edit herself before she has even spoken. She is the reflex that asks, *How can I make this easier for everyone?* even when everyone has made your own life harder without hesitation. She is the polished little voice that calls self-erasure maturity and names suppression grace.

And she is expensive.

She cost me clarity. She cost me health. She cost me the ability to trust what I knew in my own body. She made me think that being agreeable was the same thing as being good. She made me doubt the accuracy of my own anger, even when that anger was the sanest thing I had.

The strange thing is that killing her did not make me mean. It taught me the difference between kindness and compliance, between generosity and self-abandonment, between warmth and the compulsive need to manage everyone else's comfort. It showed me that women are often punished not for being irrational, but for being accurate too out loud. To say *this is too much*. To say *this is unfair*. To say *you do not get to speak to me like that*. To say *my body is not failing me; it is refusing what I kept forcing it to survive*. There is a reason women's anger is so quickly called hysteria. Accuracy is dangerous when a system depends on your silence.

If I write now as though the body is central, it is because it was the body that led me out. Recovery did not come to me as a neat lesson. It came through movement, through risk, through moments of returning to myself in places where performance no longer worked. Theatre. Dance. Friendship. Travel. The sea. And paragliding, especially paragliding, because there is something almost absurdly clarifying about being suspended in open air and realizing that you were never truly afraid of taking up space. You were afraid of what happened to women on the ground when they did.

In the air there is no Angel. There is only attention, nerve, gravity, lift. No one asks you to be softer while you are flying. No one rewards your smallness. No one confuses your strength with a flaw in your character. Up there, force is not unbecoming. It is simply necessary.

What would I write if I killed my Angel in the House?

This.

I would write that women are called hysterical when our feelings become audible, but no one calls it madness that we are expected to absorb indignity with grace. I would write that niceness is often a debt women pay with their bodies. I would write that a smile can become a muzzle so slowly you stop recognizing it as one. I would write that some breakdowns are not failures at all, but interventions. I would write that the self they warned me against was never the danger.

The danger was what it cost to keep her buried.

And if the woman who survives that burial is less pleasant, so be it.

Pleasantness never loved me back.

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