

747s

Fiction • Abby Harwell

“It’s just about who you know. People hire their friends,” Bea says.

Bea is in her fifties. She is rapidly greying, frizzy hair combed down and pulled halfway back. She is the type who will speak to people in the checkout line at the grocery store even if they don’t wish to listen. Bea is telling a story as an interruption to a presentation about the job search and professionalism. Seated around a projector and screen, the other five people in the room give her their attention. The presenter, a young woman, clutches the clicker, itching to move to the next slide.

“For instance,” Bea goes on, “I was in a coffee shop the other day, sitting at a table drinking my coffee. I had applied to a position there as a barista. And I kid you not, as I was sitting there, one of the baristas was speaking to the manager behind the counter about me—that I didn’t have the experience needed for the job. But I do!” She slaps her hand on the table. “The next week I go in for my coffee and they’ve hired a young person. You know, one of their friends.”

“Also,” she adds, “that place has one of the biggest employee turnovers I’ve ever seen. Every month, new people.” Her hands rise in exasperation, and she looks around. The presenter nods as affirmation.

“Yeah, connections are really important,” she says. She clicks forward in the presentation. Everyone looks back to the screen. Bea sits in her chair, hands clutched in her lap.

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It’s late at night, and Bea hunches over her desktop computer in the corner of a dimly lit living room near her fraying couch and scuffed coffee table. She

squints at the computer screen, huffing as the page continues to load.

“Come on, damn it.”

On the screen is an application, which took her an hour to fill out as she clicked through the many question boxes and typed out the answers in a clunky manner. The computer is outdated, and her internet is slow. Applications can take ages to submit, and sometimes, in particularly frustrating moments, the computer goes black, the diligent work she devoted vanishing. Even if she does manage to make it to the screen where she can successfully submit, she knows that the likelihood of a job coming from this impersonal method—one online application in a dumpster of others—is slim. But she feels like she’s trying, and so she persists.

The page is still loading.

She rubs her eyes and releases a long breath, squints at the time on the screen. It’s past midnight. She hasn’t eaten since lunch.

In the kitchen, she finds bread and peanut butter and honey way back in the cabinet and makes herself a sandwich. She takes it out to her front porch and sits there in the solitary plastic chair.

It’s warm, midsummer, and cicadas chatter at each other. Eating her sandwich, she hums and looks out at the quiet street.

A car moves past on the street, churning with the cicadas. What would’ve it been like, she wonders, to have had a husband and children? To have married a man when she was in her twenties and maybe found a job while he worked in a factory or at an office or maybe had some babies. To have gone to the beach together in the summer. To have woken up in the early darkness of mornings and made breakfast together. To have read beside each other in bed at night.

If there were babies, it would’ve been livelier, more tiring. She would have cleaned up toys from the living room floor and tried to clean out food stains from onesies. She would have taken the older ones to ballet or musical theater or basketball. She would have pestered them about using shampoo and soap in the shower. They would have made her laugh with their funny sayings and made her cry with their sweet openness to love and be loved.

Bea finishes her sandwich. The street is empty again. The houses, hunched together, and normally vibrant with activity during the day—people lounging on porches and carrying groceries and kids to and from cars—are still and contained, only streetlights casting notice on them. Blinds closed, lights off. Bea is alone.

She sets down her plate on the porch, brushes bread crumbs from her lap. She sits for a couple more minutes and then goes back inside. At her computer again, she waits. The page is loading. *Any minute now, she thinks. It will be any minute now.*

The minutes unfold on her computer screen clock, and her eyes shudder as she waits for a screen with a button that reads “Submit” where she can send in the application.

The night deepens, cicadas grown bolder and houses stiller, and Bea falls asleep at the computer, eventually dragging herself away to her cramped bedroom and fumbling into her nightgown. She doesn’t remember falling asleep, but she wakes crying from a dream in which she couldn’t buy a ticket for a flight at the airport because nobody would look at her and listen—a dream where she stood in the terminal and watched out the window as the 747s kept lifting off and launching into the sky.