

THE BULLY IN THE HAIRDRESSING SALON

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If you see something, say something” is plastered on signs all over New York City. It’s meant to tell us to report stray parcels that might contain bombs. The same message should apply to bullying.

Bullying is everywhere, not just in schoolyards or on the Internet. And people should intervene.

My first boss, the editor of a small magazine, was a famous bully. Whenever I spoke to former staffers or freelance writers who knew him, they’d drop their voices and say, “How are you holding up?”

Me: “Well, the other day he told me I wasn’t as stupid as I looked.”

Sympathetic Writer or Former Staffer: “Oh that’s terrible. I wish he wouldn’t talk like that.”

Me: “Every night he starts a long conversation, keeping me captive until 11 or so. The next day, he says I’m clogging up the work flow and need to stay later!”

SW: “So unfair. He just doesn’t want to go home to his wife and kids.”

Me: “My hair got wet in the rain and he said, ‘Wet hair is inappropriate in the office. Didn’t your mother teach you how to hold an umbrella?’”

SW: “Arghh.”

Me: “Would you mind saying something to him?”

SW: “Oh, it won’t do any good. I’m really sorry this is happening. Feel free to talk to me anytime. Gotta go now.”

After having similar conversations with several sympathetic bystanders, I understood that no one would help me. I quit.

The next time I was bullied, at another job, I complained to the bully’s boss. She said she’d “speak to him.” He was better for about two weeks and then began collapsing into rages again. I complained about him. He complained about me. The bully’s boss began the process of firing me.

The third time, I talked to lawyers and ended up leaving with a bigger-than-usual severance package. These are the benefits of being older and wiser. (For the record, I’ve had wonderful bosses too.)

This all came back last winter when I encountered a bully in a hair salon and bonded with other victims.

I was anxious about an interview the next day and rushing. I took a yoga class to calm my nerves, got my nails done and walked into a nearby salon I’d never tried. I received an excellent cut from a tall woman with a big bust and a big helmet of black hair and bright red lipstick.

Dashing out, I took someone else’s brown down coat. You know these coats; in cities, you see five to a dozen women wearing them on every block. The year before, someone had taken mine by mistake.

I didn’t notice that I had the wrong coat until three hours later when I found keys in the pocket. Guessing that it belonged to a friend who had stopped by in the afternoon, I immediately emailed her (the fastest way to reach her). She didn’t answer until the next morning, a Friday, when she said they were not hers. Oh, gee, then the great coat mix-up could have happened at yoga, or the nail or hair salon.

My interview was early. I concentrated on preparing for it and to my credit (I think) as soon as my interview was over and I was back in the neighborhood, I walked into the salon and asked a woman at the cash register, “Did anyone report a missing coat with keys in the pocket? I have it!”

It was Friday afternoon; the place was packed with waiting customers. The woman at the register went to speak to the woman who had done my hair and now glared at me. “Why didn’t you call?” she said loudly, so all could hear.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know where to call,” I said. “This was just one place of a few it could have been. I’ll go get it now,” I said.

I returned in 10 minutes. As soon as I walked in, one of the waiting customers whispered to me, “She’s very irritated.” Some scene had occurred in the salon while I was gone. I was ushered

to the back, where the sinks are. She was washing a customer’s hair. She put out one hand for the keys, which I gave her. I put the coat on an empty chair.

“Do you know what chaos you caused?” she said. “Didn’t you notice that the coat was too big for you? Didn’t you notice the keys in the pocket?”

Meanwhile, her hands were on the other woman’s head. I could just imagine the sensations in that woman’s scalp. This hairdresser turned out to be the salon manager. The keys were for the store. She’d already arranged to have the locks changed.

I’m thinking, “Well, I was rushing and spacey and this can be hard on other people.” Another part of me is thinking, “It’s been about 24 hours; maybe you over-reacted?”

But I just kept smiling and said, “Oh, how much did you spend?”

She then said the chain that owned the salon was going to pay for changing the locks, which hadn’t yet been changed. “Well, you don’t need to worry that I’ll rob anyone. I had no idea where the coat even came from until you told me,” I said.

“That’s my decision to make.” (Ah, I might have had the keys copied and returned to rob the salon. Fine.) “I’m a big girl.” She sticks out her bust. “I had to buy another coat!”

She pointed to the coat, which hung in the open closet in the salon. It was more expensive and glamorous than the coat I’d taken by mistake. It had a fur-trimmed hood, it was shiny, and it was long. The new coat was more like mine.

As it turned out, she had taken my coat home and left it there.

The message was clear: I would get my coat back if I offered to pay for the new one she had bought. I said, “When you bring my coat back, we can work out how to handle the cost of the new one...”

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it was too big? What’s wrong with
you? Aren’t you even going
to apologize?”



It took four more visits before I got my coat back. She either wasn't there or was "busy." I kept asking the other hairdressers to ask her to leave it in the salon. But they told me she wanted to give it to me herself. My coat was being held for ransom. And I was beginning to understand that she was less interested in my money than in inconveniencing and humiliating me.

A friend told me to just forget about my coat.

The other hairdressers all shook their heads and smiled sympathetically at me. They knew. They worked for her. I wasn't ready to give up. One day, the moment came. The manager insisted that I go to the end of the salon, down a corridor and up a flight of stairs. I asked, "Can't you bring it down?"

"No," she said. I was afraid of her now.

I followed her nonetheless. Upstairs, she said, "This is my office!" She was not a mere hairdresser; she was a woman with an office. She handed me a bag with my coat. It had been there all along.

She said, "Didn't you notice it was too big? What's wrong with you? Aren't you even going to apologize?"

Yes, if I were more alert, I wouldn't have walked out with her coat or I would have noticed the keys in the pocket immediately. If I had been more selfless, or more organized, I would have taken the time, before my interview, to look for the coat's rightful owner.

Her complaints about me, however justified, were just an excuse. By now, from the comments of her staff, I'd gotten to know her a little. She had a child. She had a husband. Her hours were flexible. Her people—women with accents who came from all over the world—feared her. She was a dark and stormy lady, and the clouds she made from standing in her sunshine interested her most.

I turned around and walked out. I did not run, though I wanted to. I did wonder if she might pick up a large object and bang me over the head. But bullies use words, not objects. She'd taught me a lesson: I would never let myself be bullied again. There was no way I'd give her a cent.

In a 2010 survey, 9% of working Americans said they were currently being bullied on the job, 26% said they had been bullied in the past, and 15% had been witnesses to bullying. That comes to half of the working population. Bullying was defined as "repeated mistreatment: sabotage by others that prevented work from getting done, verbal abuse, threatening conduct, intimidation, and humiliation."

Most of the time, the bullies are unpunished. They win.

Downstairs, the hairdressers each looked up from their customers at me. They smiled when they saw my coat. One woman nodded her head in approval. I laughed. She laughed. The laughter, with a note of triumph, rippled through the salon, while the customers looked on in wonder.

Now, my returned coat isn't just another brown down coat. It's a coat I fought for and a coat that was in the hands of a bully who didn't win.

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