

***J O E   S I X   P A C K***

***HE'S THE  
WRONG  
GIRL***

**“Office Chemistry” by Joe Six-Pack  
A Tales of Transformation Story**



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## OFFICE CHEMISTRY

"Did someone leave their coffee here?" James called out into the office.

He looked around the drab grid of cubicles and got no response. One person gave him a whole half-seconds' worth of attention before going back to playing solitaire on her PC.

"Coffee? Anyone?" James said again. He held up the steaming mug to see if anyone recognized their ownage of this particular steam. "Left on the desk up here." Still no response. "Anyone."

James shrugged and sat down at the huge reception desk. First sniffing the coffee, and then sipping it, he decided it was okay to drink. According to a well-known but unavoidable rule of fate, no sooner had he taken a drink of the coffee than someone came around the corner to claim it.

"Wait! That's..." The look on the man's face was strangely earnest for such a minor problem. "Don't drink...!"

James swallowed and then looked at the man. "I did ask if this was anybody's coffee, Barry."

Barry, a thin man of forgettable features, was blanched. He looked like he wanted to object in the strongest way possible, but he was holding his tongue. James figured it was because he knew he hadn't a leg to stand on for claiming the coffee.

"Where's Sheila? This was for her." Barry said, looking around. "The coffee was for Sheila."

"Sick leave." James explained. "She called in today. Her mother's not feeling well, so she's flying out to spend a day or two with her."

"*Not here!?*" Barry said sharply, as if James were responsible for it. "What do you mean?"

"She'll phone in today for messages." James said, trying to belay Barry's obvious fears. "Meanwhile, I'll be picking up anything that needs attention to."

"That's why you're sitting at her desk!?" Barry objected.

James looked a little nonplussed. "That's why I'm getting some stuff from her email."

"This isn't good," Barry said to himself before leaving abruptly. "Not good."

"Do you want me to give her a message when she calls?" James asked as he walked away. He got no response. "Okay then."

He sat back down in Sheila's chair and began to sift through her email. Not her personal email, but all the business stuff. She was responsible for creating those spreadsheets everyone in the southwest region depended on, and he was going to have to do his best and make them on his own. He didn't like his chances, but he was given little choice.

Sheila was the lynchpin of the office, the most dependable person James knew. She was always at work, always pleasant, and even when swimming upstream against a torrent of requests, paperwork and deadlines, she still came through. All in all, she seemed to know more about running the business than the people who were running the business.

Too bad she was all business. Sheila was only able to talk about office stuff, and didn't seem to even have a thought about life outside it. She was such a

private person. She was someone James could easily see being a decent wife or mother, but Sheila never seemed to have any other life besides the office.

He still liked her and admired her, so he started to get to work on gathering the data for those daily spreadsheets. They'd be due in two hours, and he wanted to come through for Sheila's sake. He didn't want to leave a smudge on her record of dependability. For now, though, he had to man the big reception desk and pretend like he cared about the people arriving in the lobby. But when Sheila got back, and he could tell her everything was okay, he'd enjoy seeing that fleeting smile on her plain, spectacled face. And he'd be satisfied to make her happy for a moment.



Maureen Newell had just popped her head out of her office for a split-second, and just that quickly, her whole day was ruined. "Hello, Barry," she said to the man waiting outside.

"Oh. Hello, Maureen." Barry replied, looking worried. "Did you know James is at Sheila's desk?"

"He's filling in for her today, Barry." Maureen said, loathing the conversation already. Barry was a toad, who seemed to enjoy getting people in trouble. A tattle-tale. "He has my permission to be at her desk."

"Someone should have sent out a memo." Barry said. "At least seven days in advance."

That's what Maureen loved about Barry - there was no problem a pointless, paralyzing rule couldn't fix. "Is there something you wanted to talk to me about, Barry?"

"Oh." Barry said, coming back to his point. "I just got your tea for you, Maureen." He handed over the mug in his hands. "And I wanted to tell you that I respect you."

Maureen looked at him cockeyed. This was so far out of character for him, she could only be suspicious. Ever since he had gotten attached to the Huberson steamroller, he did little else but brown-nose his new boss. Max Huberson was skyrocketing through the company, getting promoted almost every other month or two. He was just a supervisor last year. Now he was vice president in charge of research and development, which made him the head of the division they all worked in. And Barry was going right along with him as his assistant. Maureen hated them both. Not because they were successful, but because they were successful and jerks to everyone.

But that was business for you.

"Thank you, Barry." Maureen said, accepting the mug. She checked to see if the tag hanging over the rim was her usual brand. Surprisingly, it was. "Was there anything else?"

Barry still stood there, waiting for something. "I think relationships are built on respect. Whether personal or business."

"I see," Maureen said, trying her best to end this. But he still stood there. "I'll see you later on," she added. Usually her broader, middle-aged physique and scowling wrinkles were enough to tell someone when the conversation was over. As office manager, she carried that kind of weight.

Barry remained in place. Maureen sighed and turned her back to him, sipping the tea. It was still a little hot. By the time she sat at her desk, though, Barry was gone.

"Shame he couldn't stay for lunch." She mumbled to herself.



At the sink in his bathroom the next morning, James tugged at the long strands of hair that were growing at the back of his neck. "Need to get that cut," he said to himself in the mirror. "Again," he added, remembering his last haircut was just eight days ago. He spied the time and rushed through the rest of his morning routine. Combing through his hair, he found it unusually thick, in addition to long. "Must have not washed it very well," he thought.

He wildly grabbed what he needed, stuffed it all in a briefcase, grabbed a coat and sprinted out the door.



As James hurried into the office to avoid being late, he stopped by the coffee machine for his usual cup a' joe. But the machine was out of order. "Hey the machine's not working," he said to his friend Alex as he passed by his desk.

"Nice tie." Alex replied.

James looked down. In his rush he had grabbed the exact wrong thing. A silk pink tie. A gift from his mother. "Whoops." He said.

"They're takin' the machine out of here today," Alex said, addressing the original issue. "They're gonna replace it. There's a thing about it in your email."

Sure enough, when James got back to his desk, there was an email from Barry, saying they were going to have an outside company provide coffee services every morning. James needed to fill out a form to put in his vote for what types of coffee to be made every day. The top three would be the only types brewed. Yet another victory for executive foolishness.

James wasn't too put off. Anything had to taste better than the greasy weak broth they previously made here. Especially yesterday's stuff. As bitter as anything he'd ever tasted.

"Hello, James. Good Morning," Maureen said, seeing him seated at Sheila's desk. "Don't let Barry catch you sitting here. He'll have a fit."

"God forbid." James replied.

"Nice tie." Maureen said.

"Is everyone going to give me grief about the tie?"

"No, I mean it. I like the tie." Maureen clarified. "Pink's your color. Not a lot of guys can wear it, but you can."

"Thanks. I guess."

"Good morning," Max Huberson said, entering the office. James straightened up a little in the presence of the executive. Maureen, unimpressed, took a sip of her tea.

"Morning." James and Maureen said almost at the same time.

"Morning. How's everybody feeling today?" Huberson seemed a little overly transfixed over Maureen sipping her tea. Then his attention shifted to James.



"Where's Sheila?" He said sharply, seeing James seated there.

"She's with her sick mother." James replied.

"Said she may be back tomorrow," Maureen added, "but she wasn't one hundred percent sure."

"So, James is taking her place?" Huberson said, angrier than he should have been. "And no one sent out a memo?"

Great minds think alike, Maureen thought to herself. Barry and Huberson were really two of a kind and deserved each other. "I told your assistant."

"Barry!" Huberson yelled across the office. "Barry!"

In no time, Barry scuttled his way to his bosses' side. "Yes, Mr. Huberson?"

James and Maureen looked at each other, ready to see a rare, unexpected delight. The boss was going to chew out his assistant. In public.

"Did you know about this!?" Huberson said, pointing at James.

Barry fidgeted for a brief moment. "The information had been recently passed on to me..."

Huberson's face went beet red. "You know how this affects everything, don't you!" He barked. "Of course you don't. You're too stupid."

No one said anything, but Huberson gathered his things and marched off to his office. "I need to have a discussion with you." He was halfway there before adding, "right *now*, Barry!"

James watched the two men close the doors behind them, fighting the urge to go and put his ear to the wall so he could hear it. "Wouldn't want to be him."

He said to Maureen. "Mr. Huberson can be a real animal at times."

"I suppose." Maureen said, sipping her tea. "I just feel sorry for Barry. I respect him." She turned her head back to her office. "Did I just say I *respect* Barry?"



James' attention quickly returned to other matters. He could just see a wisp of hair coming into his field of vision from above his eyes. His hair was just growing out of control, and he needed to get it cut today. At lunch, if he could manage it. But his usual clips place was at the mall, across town, near his apartment. Quickly, he flipped through Sheila's contacts and found the name of her stylist.

"What to do think?" The stylist asked him when she was done. "It makes you look younger, if you ask me."

James agreed. It was cut much like he usually had it, a part on the side and combed over his forehead, but the mass and thickness of this cut did make him look younger. "I like it." He said. He took another two looks in the mirror. This stylist was very good. "Hey, can I set up a regular monthly appointment?"

"How about weekly?" She replied.

"Sounds great." James answered, although he had no real idea why anyone would need to get their hair cut once a week.



It was the first day of the weekend, and James and Alex had gotten together to finish work on the motorcycle James had been working on for the better part of a year. A few more weekends, and it would finally be done.

"This is gonna be one nasty hog, dude." Alex said, wiping the grease off his hands with a rag. "I can't wait to see this screamin' down the interstate."

It had been a lot of hard work. James stood back to take a look at it for himself. It was a huge bike, an '88 Harley Touring with leather saddlebags. It was decked out all in chrome, with a black gas tank that was detailed with flames painted on the side. "It's sure going to be impressive." He said.

"Got that right." Alex agreed. "You gotta let me ride it once and a while."

James sighed and turned to his friend. He wasn't absolutely sure why he was going to say what he was about to say, but it just felt right. "You want it? Take it."

"What?" Alex said, shocked. "Don't fool with your pal, now."

"No, I mean it." James said, scratching his head. "I'm just not into it anymore. I mean, it was a great idea for a project... but now..."

"Now that it's over, you want to start another project, right?"

No, not really, James thought to himself. He had just gotten tired of the idea of driving a bike. It sounded good at one time, but he just didn't see the appeal in it anymore. It just looked so large and dangerous. He would never be able to handle that monster. Best to leave it up to a real man like Alex. "You got me," James lied.

"You're serious, now?" Alex said again.

"Yeah, I've just kinda had my fun with it. Time to move on." He scratched his chest. "Can you take it today?"

"Sure!" Alex said, already seeing himself riding it down the road. "I got my truck. I can take it."

"Good."

"And as soon as it's done, I'll let you have the first go at it."

For some reason, James was also picturing how good Alex was going to look on it, driving down the road. "Don't worry about it. Maybe you can just give me a ride on it sometime."



James sat at his new desk. The reception desk. Well, it wasn't formally his, but he had pretty much claimed it now. Sheila would be back at some point to take back control like only she could. Until then, though, it was his to use. James was sipping some of that delicious new coffee that they were now serving while flipping to the comics page of the newspaper when Maureen arrived.

"Hey! G'morning!" James said, cheerily.

"Morning!" Maureen replied, almost as enthusiastically.

"Wow! Did you get a tan?" James asked.

Maureen's skin was a few noticeable shades darker than it usually was. "You know, it's the strangest thing," she said. "My skin is just darker all over. All I did was a little gardening yesterday, and I got the best tan of my life!"

"Well, good for you, Maureen." James said with a smile. Behind that grin, he was wondering exactly what was causing him to be so energetic all of the sudden. Maybe that coffee had a few extra shots of caffeine in it.



"I like your hair like that." Maureen said, returning the good feelings. She, too, was wondering exactly where all this koom-by-yah attitude had come from. She hated Mondays. Normally she felt like biting the head off a small dog this early in the week.

James rolled his eyes. "I just cut it!" He said, exasperated. It was already coming down over his eyes.

"What, like last month?" Maureen asked.

More like this morning. "It just keeps growing."

Maureen was just in too good a mood to do much but complement. "Well, long hair suits you." She looked James over briefly. "In fact, I love your whole look."

James wasn't aware he had a look. The only thing he had done today was get rid of the tie and roll up the sleeves of his dress shirt. The sleeves were too long on this shirt and they kept covering his hands.

"Morning," Barry said, speeding by the two.

"Good morning, Barry!" Maureen said as bright as day. "It's going to be a great day!" Good God, what has come over me, Maureen thought.

James was massaging his chest through his shirt. "Maureen, do you think swelling in my chest is a bad sign? Do you think I should see a doctor?"

"You know, I was talking to Barry just the other day, and he was talking about his breathing exercises. Did you know he does Yoga? I found that fascinating."

"I mean, they're getting puffier every day. I even think they're starting to look like breasts."

"He does these types of exercises where he breathes in and out deeply to clear his mind. He said it helped him mellow out after a tense day."

"And they're really sensitive. I've put tape over the nipples so they can't keep rubbing against the insides of my shirt. That was driving me nuts."

"Mellow out. What a wonderful phrase. I think that's good advice. I think we could all try and mellow out a bit."

"So what do you think?" James asked Maureen.

"Oh, it's something to think about, that's for sure." She replied. "Anyway, I'll be in my office if anyone needs me."

"Yeah." James said, still poking at his chest. "I should probably see a doctor."



Barry was cringing. He was recoiling. He had just dropped the report on Maureen's desk. The report, which had left Maureen's office crisp and white was now soaked with red ink and had post-it notes exploding from its' pages. What had been all clean and pristine was being retuned as the Frankenstein's monster of in-house reports. And now, Barry was feeling like a weather man, reporting live from the heart of Hurricane Maureen.

"You do *not* honestly expect me *and* my department to be able to get this done by *Thursday*, do you!?" Maureen bellowed. "That is total *bullshit*!"

"We've already committed to Thursday, we can't push it back." Barry said. He tried his hardest to look determined, but his chinless face, balding head and english rim glasses didn't intimidate anyone. "There's no way to extend the deadline any further. Mr. Huberson is already putting himself out on a limb by giving you this much time."

"Mr. Huberson can take his report and *stick it up his ass*," Maureen said. "That brown-nosing sycophant will give us a *reasonable* amount of time to get this down, or I'll go in there *right now* and *ram* these revisions down his *cock-sucking throat*!"

"Maureen! *Please!* We have to get this done!" Barry begged – more for mercy than anything else.

"If I had every person on my staff working *twenty-four seven* until Thursday, we'd only get *half way* there! There's more chance of Mr. Huberson getting *laid* by the Virgin Mary than getting this report done by Thursday!"

Barry was going to give it one more try. "We *have* to do this, Maureen. There's no way out! This *has* to get completed! I'd like to give you alternatives, but there *aren't* any!"

"Bullshit! Huberson called the meeting, he can cancel!"

"That's just going to make him look bad!" Barry objected.

"*Look bad!*?" Maureen bellowed. "Look bad!?" Then she took a breath. And another. And another. She was trying to do those relaxing breathing exercises. "I just need to mellow out," she said to herself, "and treat people with respect."

Barry watched on as Maureen slowly, breath by breath, got her emotions down under control. She opened her eyes again and took another look at the pile. She started to flip through the pages. "The least we can do is try." She said.

"Huh what?" Barry said. Had he heard that correctly? "Uh... Yes. That's all we're asking."

Maureen scratched her chin. "I think if we use all our resources, we can... We'll have it done."

Barry wasn't certain he had just won the argument. He never won arguments.

"Great." He pushed his glasses back up on the bridge of his nose. "Good."

"We just have to mellow out and deal with what fate gives us." Maureen said, a slight smile coming to her lips.

"Work smarter, not harder." Barry suggested.

Maureen's lower left eyelid twitched. But she smiled. "I believe you're right, Barry. That's very good advice."



"This time, just buzz it." James said, resigned to get control of this hair problem once and for all. "Fire up your electric shears and mow that mess away."

The old man who was to cut his hair shook his head like a disapproving grandfather. "You really need to see your barber more often. You can't let it grow out of control like this."

"Yeah." James grumbled, knowing his last haircut was just a day ago. How was he going to budget this? He was paying more for people to cut his hair than he was for utilities.

"It's a nice head of hair, though." The barber commented. "Might as well enjoy it while you can, before it all falls out." He pointed to his own receded hairline as proof.

He would welcome that right now, James thought to himself. He might just like that option.

"So you going to college?" The barber asked.

"I'm thirty two." James replied.

"Oh. You've got a young face, there. Makes you look like a kid."

James looked up into the mirror to take a look. He did look younger. He had assumed it was the hair that was making him look this way. But maybe it was something else. His cheeks were higher than he remembered them, his lips redder and fuller. And his eyes were missing that world-weary appearance he had grown used to seeing in the mirror.

"You sure you're thirty-two." The barber said, skeptically.

"Yes." James said, a bit put off by the question. "I was thirty-one last year, and next year I'll be thirty three."

"Just never grew a beard, I guess." The barber said.

James looked at himself in the mirror again. That was what had been bothering him. He hadn't shaved in days. Why hadn't he noticed? In fact, there didn't seem to be any trace of hair on his face at all. This was insane. And it was the last straw.



"Maureen, I need to take a few hours off tomorrow for a doctor's appointment." James said, coming into Maureen's office.

Maureen was thumbing through a copy of *Vibe* magazine on her desk. She looked up briefly to register with James. "Nothing serious I hope."

"Uh, just... Just going to have something checked out. I'm probably overreacting."

"Mmm-hmm." Maureen was too busy reading her magazine to pay full attention. "Well, good."

"Thanks. I'll make it up with overtime this week, I'm sure. Any word on Sheila?"

Maureen decided to break the hold the magazine had on her. "She's saying it may be a while. Her mom is doing better, but she's going to need to..." Maureen was taking a look at James for the first time that morning. "You're trying something new today?"

James was tired of people commenting on his appearance. His hair was growing out of control, so he had tied it back in a pony tail, with a few loose hairs sweeping across his face he had to brush away every few minutes. And with the problem he was having with his chest, he had decided that wearing his shirt untucked and loose would be the best way to hide the severity of the swelling there. "Can't someone try something new without everyone making a smart remark?" He said.

"I was just going to compliment you on it. I think we should be allowed to dress how we feel. There's no need for a dress code around here. I'm probably going to ask Barry to see if he won't get rid of it."

"That's all I need, to get Barry on my case." James said. "Is it me or is that tan of yours getting darker?"

Maureen checked her arm. "I guess," she said. It didn't seem to be much of a concern for her. "I was going to ask, do you know where I can rent some old movies around here? Some old seventies stuff?"