

Sandee Harris

Shredding

My hatred for shopping interfered with my ability to make sound decisions. I didn't have any patience for bargain-hunting, or comparison shopping. This time I knew at least that the shredder that I would buy should be medium-sized and sturdy. When it came to something that I wanted, generally I didn't bother with type, unless it was necessary. I made a bee line to the area with the item, picked up the best-looking one, and bought it, no matter what it cost. I had paid \$800 retail for leather pants from a department store once. I needed something nice and had found it. I would pay whatever the store told me to pay. I had to have an outfit to wear to a birthday party. Friends who knew better scolded me, but I didn't care. The goal was to get out of the store quickly, unless I was on tranquilizers. The day I went shopping for the shredder, I had a hang over.

In the shredder aisle at Staples, I checked the sizes of the ones on the lower shelves. Having located the shredder aisle shortly after arriving, I had this slight luxury of perusing. I had expected to be searching helplessly for the shredder aisle with no sales person in sight.

When a short Spanish woman with orange hair asked if I needed help, I felt further release from tension in my shoulders. This was unexpected – I didn't think the young sales people there gave enough of a shit to actually ask customers if they wanted anything.

“I want a medium-sized shredder. I’m shredding a lot of paper, so it should be good quality.” Then in afterthought – “Of course I don’t want to spend much money.” If she hadn’t been there, money wouldn’t have been an issue. But since she *was* there, I felt, why not mention it.

“The Staples brand is good, and there’s a rebate coupon for it.” I was having a hard enough time focusing after another night of heavy drinking. A rebate coupon? What was that -- exactly? I felt dizzy. This would involve mailing something in -- signing papers. This was too much to absorb.

“Let me go to the register. I’ll show you what we have. I’ll be right back,” she said, walking away -- leaving me. Though this was turning out to be something else, I would wait, with an open mind. It was darker in this aisle than in the others, probably to my advantage. There were bags under my eyes. My skin in the bathroom mirror at home looked green. In this state, I could live in this relatively dim corner of the store more comfortably.

I looked beyond to see my girl, behind the counter at the front of the store, talking to a light-skinned Spanish kid with cornrows. He wore a red shirt, the store uniform. My sales girl wore a dark blue blazer because she had a higher status. I felt more confident about her in this profession -- and she was returning to me from the front counter in good time, no dilly dallying. She held a rectangular piece of paper with a lot of writing on it.

“You mail this in and you get \$20 back,” she said. The shredder cost \$39.99. After the rebate, the shredder would be twenty bucks. It was the store brand -- pretty reputable. The effort was worth it. I trusted my girl in the blue blazer. I walked out of Staples that swampy day feeling some promise for the future at the beginning of my vacation week.

A co-worker once used her two weeks vacation to clean her house. I would never slight myself like that, but decided that it would be fine to use some of that time to shred paper. Papers clogged files in my kitchen file cabinet. There were piles on my desk, a tall, unstable pile behind the computer interspersed with post cards that I

was supposed to be turning into a mural. I only just needed to go to Target for the crafty supplies. But the one across from the projects was always so over-crowded. It triggered my shopper anxiety and gave me heart flutters.

The papers outside of the cabinet were dusty and sticky. While rifling through some of the pages and postcards behind the computer, I saw a couple of flat, dead cock roaches. That wouldn't deter me from making my post card mural. I could just flick those off.

I thought possibly of doing my mural during vacation week. Maybe I'd even go to the beach if I could pry Kenny from his bar stool to drive -- not drunk of course. There would be strings attached, but I could handle it. After the outing I could disappear for a while, hang out in different bars. Kenny was good company, even if he always wanted to be so serious about us all the time. We did the "drunk" thing together well -- he looked after me. He wouldn't let anybody mess with me. For a slight guy, not too tall, he was fearless. But he was a sappy drunk -- too romantic. He wasn't bad looking, I guess, but cigarette, alcohol and drug abuse, gave him some unattractive traits. He was bloated, had a hacking cough, and didn't take care of his teeth. After being suspended from the police force, he managed to stay employed as the manager for some company that hired security guards for office buildings. He did his lunches at the bar in that upper-east side neighborhood.

Usually, all I had to do was tell him I was getting back with Paul and he'd back off. When I looked at him, I saw my own alcoholism. I would distance myself from him to see if I could find any true connection between us. We appreciated the same things in the same way -- songs, TV shows. We had a similar sense of humor. The South Park "Timmy" episode really got us going that night at the bar. It became our drunken catch-phrase. As the cliché stands, we sat at the bar surrounded by swarms at one of those bar birthday parties -- in our own world. He kept saying, "I hate you," because we were such an overwhelming match that night, but with too many drawbacks for me, including the fact that we were alcoholics.

We came from the same neighborhood, went to the same junior high school -- had working-class parents. He was white and I was black, but that didn't matter. He was an "around the way" white boy from a working class neighborhood. I got on well with these types -- not too bourgeoisie or pretentious. There was a connection between us for sure, but there was also a lot missing. The liquor was his character. It was the same for me -- but the hole that I had, I tried to fill with Jack Daniels. He didn't know he had a hole. Besides filling the hole with alcohol, he was intent on filling it with someone to love him. I was looking for me.

There were suns on every day of that week on the weather channel grid, but it would be humid. The weather would cling to me, and I would be reminded that the gene pool I had inherited demanded that I suffer in increments. Among the cool and unbothered, I would sweat profusely.

At least I had air conditioning in my apartment, courtesy Auntie Andi. She was there, always, offering her money, old furniture. Did she think that I was pathetic, a charity case? The last she had heard I was sober. Her favorite niece was making a good effort, a heroic effort. She would do what she could to help. She didn't know that I had given up the idea that I should be sober.

But never once had I asked her for anything. I was prepared to live through my indignities, because I was responsible for my choices, and didn't usually feel victimized, unless I thought about my handicapped DNA, which made it difficult for me to conform -- blaming my parents and feeling victimized because of their poor choice to procreate sometimes worked for me.

I never cared for fashion, for clothes. Clothes were a hindrance. Suffocating. I refused to wear them at home. On that first day of vacation, I started shredding the papers, naked.

Though thrilled at the discount, I had doubt at the twenty dollar shredder's ability to shred. I took the papers around my apartment and made ten piles on the floor, in front of the sofa. For a sense of accomplishment

and order I would shred those first, then do the file cabinet in the kitchen. With the visuals of the piles out of the way, the file cabinet papers would be easier to conquer. The nagging imagery in the background would disappear, with the help of liquor.

At first I drank Amaretto sours. I had never made mixed drinks at home. Usually I went to the bar. While pouring powdered sugar into the glass with the lemon juice and Amaretto, I had fun pretending to be Claudette, the bartender at the Green Lantern – the black, naked version of Claudette.

In morning sun, I set things up in the slight space available on my counter top with the peeling contact paper that had been painted white by the ninety year old tenant before me. It was hard to clean. The substances on there I just accepted as part of the apartment's pre-war charm. Kneading the lemon, I remembered the wooden pullout tray at the center of the counter top that expanded the space. Paul had one in his apartment on Audubon Avenue and knew immediately what that handle I had always ignored was for. I had spent thirteen years in this apartment without investigating – I didn't know the thing opened up into something. It was great for setting up bar.

I had tried waiting for twelve to drink but started at 10:30AM because -- fuck it. It was going to help me to shred. Morning drinking was nothing new, but I was surprised at how quickly the sweet, thick Amaretto went to my head. I was even queasy. Drinking the Amaretto straight out of the bottle might work, I supposed then, as the powdered sugar and lemon were probably the culprits. The vodka in the freezer would be even cleaner, unadulterated and clear.

I took a squat on the sofa with my drink, and as suggested in the extremely small print shredder instructions, I introduced seven pages into the metal teeth of the thing. After successfully shredding several groups of seven pages, I tried for more and was further encouraged by my lovely machine and its capability – I had managed groups

of ten, eleven, and twelve pages. One of the ten piles of pages in front of the sofa had disappeared and I needed to dump the shredder container. I drank vodka from my pink coffee cup, punctuating my moment with a sense of accomplishment. Finally the piles were demolished, emptied into plastic garbage bags.

Done with the pages on the floor, I wobbled to the kitchen and ripped the cheap file cabinet drawer open. A smell like old library wafted into my face, and gave me a wave of alcohol induced nostalgia. I flipped through pages in the manila files encased inside of the alphabetized green Pentaflex folders. I thought of the old days where most of the papers were from, and experienced a warm flourishing from inside.

There were pay stubs from a job I had years ago when I worked with Lucy Schnitker in the American Standard building. The building was brown and gold -- across the street from Bryant Park. They still had shag carpets, but were renovating to update their look. There was one floor there that had a receptionist desk, chair and offices, but no people, as if it had been abandoned. It was a nice view from there of Bryant Park. I wondered who was keeping that dish on the reception desk replenished with candy. There were never people around, but every time I went up there it was full. I discovered the floor one day, just snooping around. It was a great place to masturbate and to take naps. I always grabbed a couple of pieces of candy on the way back down to my floor.

These were the days when you weren't expected to work so hard. The early eighties was another planet. While every decade has its stamp, this was a time that was truly the future and abundance. George Orwell had marked the time indelibly with 1984, so it was preordained. When the 80s finally did come, the MTV videos at that time, new wave music -- the B52s, Lena Lovich -- it all fell in line with reflections of his prescience. People dressed like a bad science fiction movie's version of outer space. I dyed my afro platinum blonde. I wore fuschia lipstick.

At American Standard, Lucy Schnitker and I chatted most of the day. We ordered multi-colored file folders and paper clips. “I like that kind of hair,” she said before I had made my decision to dye my afro platinum blonde. “I think it would look just as good as the regular kind of hair if it was blonde.” I rolled my eyes, and repeated, “The REGULAR kind?” I left it alone, besides in my new role in sobriety, I had decided to temper my need to be confrontational – it was healthier. Lucy didn’t mean any harm. She was just not sophisticated. She had no idea what she was saying. We smoked cigarettes and took naps at our desks in our cubicles in turn, so that one of us could be on watch for any superior looking to put us to work. My boyfriend in Atlanta would call the office just to say “Call me right back,” and I did, so that the company could foot the bill for the call without him paying. At twenty-one and newly sober, I made my plans to go back to college. I did most of my homework at my American Standard job.

I pulled out the rest of the American Standard pay stubs and set them aside for shredding. In other files there were tax forms, old bills, and unemployment check stubs from way before everything was computerized. I lingered on these papers, trying to remember some other things that were happening in my life around the dates printed at the top.

There was an unemployment stub dated June, 1999, the coming of the ‘new millennium’ – ha! I was unemployed between 1999 and early 2000, which would be brief in this post market crash era. I had used the time for writing and for going on a vacation. I wined and dined, danced and passed out, eventually depleting my bank account.

At this time I threw the “false notion” of my so-called alcoholism in the trash after years of sobriety. What had possessed me to get sober at that burgeoning age? Weren’t all young people profligate? Never mind that the young people that I knew were tired of me embarrassing them. There was that incident where I took a bath at a party. We didn’t know the people – friends of friends. The girl who lived there looked at me in the tub barely

awake and asked, “She gonna be okay?” Unfortunately, it was one of the few things I had heard that night, because I had spent most of it in a blackout. Yet I had decided in ‘99 that I had been overreacting when I took that oath of sobriety at twenty-one.

My present stab at drinking was a determination to dull the ‘trauma’ that would eventually kill me if I remained stone cold sober and vulnerable to the sundry harassments of life. It started with klonopin, and that led back to booze – back to the bars.

“Hey, where you been stranger?” I was missed! I sang “What’s New Pussycat” every Karaoke Wednesday at the Green Lantern, Persian lamb boa wrapped around my neck, wallowing on that filthy floor. I never told the bartenders what I wanted. They’d have the double Jack down on the counter upon seeing me come through the door. Sometimes when I finished, Claudette would slide another drink across the counter for me, on the house.

At home with the shredding, I wanted my own little shred party – special -- a way to take the pain out of a chore. The Amaretto idea I got from TV. There was a commercial with a Latino man, the scenery was brown, creamy. The background rippled, like a thick drink being poured into a glass.

I got the idea for putting the vodka in the freezer from a trip to detox. There I learned that alcohol didn’t freeze. So you could have ice cold freezing liquor without any annoying ice taking up space and watering down your drink. At detox, an alcoholic could learn more than just how to stay away from a drink one day at a time. I learned some ways to keep drinking and not get drunk, the pills to take to counteract the effect, and of course there was coke, but you had to take it in the right dosage otherwise you could kill yourself good. At detox, I also learned about the different types of drinks I didn’t have time to cover as a drinker unable to walk and chew gum at the same time. I would get stuck on one or two drinks until someone introduced me to something else. For me it was usually Jack Daniels or tequila and beer at the same time.

But any drink you put in front of me I would drink, rot gut, lint-filled, spilled over a plastic-covered sofa -- as a teenager, I slurped rum off of my girlfriend's mother's plastic-covered sofa when we'd accidentally spilled it.

Wasting alcohol was passing up a grand opportunity, throwing money in the trash. It was the substance that could help you get things done, quieting all the distractions.

Before shredding the papers in the kitchen file cabinet, I thought I should tidy up the plastic bags in the livingroom. I hadn't tied them closed and wanted to line them up neatly for a sense of order. I didn't want to become overwhelmed, and this would help, as I could feel myself losing control. While walking back to the livingroom from the kitchen, I felt dizzy, nauseous, depressed -- disenchanted. Where was I going this week on vacation, utterly broke? Sure I had plans, plans that didn't involve going to the bar everyday with Kenny. But would I be able to bring them to fruition?

How would I begin with that post card mural if I couldn't make it to Target because of my heart flutters? There were classically styled modern renditions, a black sketch of a horse with wings with an olive-colored background. The best was the postcard of a painting by a Spanish artist, with nudes, men and woman, on a platform in the city square. One of the men in the painting had a body and penis resembling those of the man I had brought home from the bar in a blackout -- Ardiel -- from The Canary Islands. In all, I had collected fifteen postcards. It wasn't in my "budget" to buy the supplies to make a mural. I was still paying off debt. The budget was necessary. I had spent all of my money on a bottle of Grey Goose and a twelve ounce bottle of Amaretto. I was shocked to learn that Amaretto was twenty-four dollars. I knew about Grey Goose's exorbitant cost, but hadn't anticipated the Amaretto. Maybe I should make an effort to enjoy myself more, since I'd spent all my money on shred "party" liquor. Forget about making the bags neat. I needed to relax.

And so it was, back to the kitchen, to the refrigerator for more Amaretto. Exhausted from drinking, I was compelled still to swig from the icy cold bottle. Carrying the half-emptied bottle on the way out of the kitchen, I decided to take a nap. That might help give me energy. I was indeed wiped out, very tired. A fleeting thought that I should eat entered my brain, but I didn't have any food. I would have to order it over the phone. That was too much to consider. My lower body was a bag of bricks and my head was disconnected from it, and in a hostile region.

The plastic garbage bags with the shredded paper seemed to be swelling, on the verge of exploding. The dark heavy air in the apartment put me in a stupor. I felt suspended in my little space, held against my will. I watched those black bags. While shredding hadn't been as horrible as I had anticipated, thinking about the task of shredding the papers in the kitchen file cabinet next exhausted me.

I looked at the bloated bags and wondered about Lucy Schnitker from American Standard? Was her life fucked up? Did she ever marry the Palestinian guy? I never did graduate from college. Everybody at American Standard was pleased when I had decided to go back. I rolled my eyes at the bottle of Amaretto.

The little "shred party" I had tried to create was a disaster. I felt a hollowing out from the inside and an echoing chamber filled with my own small voice, straining to reach something unattainable.

I didn't remember when I had collapsed onto the mattress on the floor. I came to and turned out to be a naked and sweaty lump amidst big black bags, body bags, bags filled with elements of me, surrounding me in my state of sorry consciousness.

There was a warbling. My search out of the window for birds ceased once I indentified the tone and meter of a phone ringing. I appreciated the persistence of the caller since I had little energy to walk to the phone. I would have to induce my body to sit straight and stretch up. My blood sugar had dropped. I shook. I experienced the

remnants of a high, a miserable type of high, not euphoria, but a dulling over of my senses in the worst way, a leadening. The voice on the other side of the receiver, an angel.

“It’s Daniel Princeton,” my brother said in mock authority. Using his last name was part of our running gag.

“D-Da-niel,” I responded.

“Mona -- what’s wrong?”

At this I cried. After the embarrassment of crying, I told him I was hungry, but didn’t have any food, and that I had shredded papers.

He commanded, “I want you to do a project.” He sounded like my father, and how the hell did that happen? He was giving me another one of his assignments – the nerve of him, but I so appreciated it now. He was doing it to make me feel useful.

“*Sniff*... kay. What’s the project?”

“I want you to write something for my movie. I’ll send you details -- got it?” My brother had been making films for his independent company. He made furniture -- taught at the local computer center. Why couldn’t I think of some other things to do like my brother -- be independent, industrious? Maybe if I had someone, like he did, to help me, to co-support me and encourage me on, to give me money. That’s what I needed, more money.

I was in an on-off relationship with Paul, a man who didn’t know who he was. He found his identity through women. He had a hard time with the fact that I had started to drink again and went to Alanon, and in alcoholic fashion, I didn’t understand why. But generally, the relationship was two-dimensional. We were connected more by the fear of being alone, than by having anything really in common. He was conservative, someone who looked forward to the pathway outlined by the culture; and he liked Christmas – I did not – a major problem for us

every year. Not only was I a drunk, I was free-spirited. Marrying him would have been to have taken on an object, something to present to people, to let me appear normal. That would have been fine for a while. I realized however, that being with him was speeding up the process of my deterioration. So I began to try saving myself, severing the hold that we had on each other. But I wasn't clear how to repair my life so that I would feel worthy of it. Getting sober did occur to me but I wasn't ready for it yet because I couldn't look at myself too closely.

“O-okay,” I told Daniel. He knew I was drunk. Then, “I’m sorry I’m like this – I’m hungry.” I was surprised that I had allowed myself to appear so helpless to my “little” brother. I wiped tears from my face and rubbed the wetness on my thigh. Daniel wasn't doing any pussy-footing consoling -- maybe a little.

“Get something to eat. Go to sleep, and you'll feel better when you get up. Don't drink anything else today. Drink water!” He nearly yelled – he was always nearly yelling. His voice was full of exclamation points.

After getting my “assignment” from Daniel, I hung up the phone and looked at the mess, at the bags of shredded paper, my life in bags. I had accomplished something positive. Then I remembered that there was oatmeal to eat, no milk, but that was fine, and as long as I focused on Daniel, on the assignment he would give me, I would be fine.