

At some point in your childhood, you are threatened that something may be placed on your permanent record. You don't know exactly what this means, but you catch the implication that this will be bad.

This doesn't so much encourage good behavior. Just prevents you from doing anything bad enough to be added to your permanent record.

I wondered who was keeping track of my permanent record. Was it something that my teachers kept track of, or were all entries added by the principal. Did good deeds get put on there too? Could it keep me from getting a job for the rest of my life? Would potential employers turn me away when they saw the mark on my permanent record?

Where was it kept? How often was it updated? Maybe, if I could just find out where they kept it, I could steal mine and make sure they could never put anything bad in it.

Unlike a lot of the things you're told at a young age to keep you from misbehaving, the permanent record is real. But like many things that adults hold over kids' heads, the so many things you won't understand till you're older, your permanent record is more complex and exaggerated than it needs to be.

There's another record, too. One that magically disappears when you turn 18 and you never have to worry about again. You can mark all over that one, just as long as nothing lands on your permanent one.

The thing they don't tell you, the thing some of them don't even know, is that everything, everything goes on your permanent record, and everyone gets a copy.

That time you peed your pants during the school play. It's on your permanent record. That time you were caught masturbating in the locker room. That's on your permanent record. When you ate Sally's cake out of spite, then forgot your security pass next to the empty cake box. That's on there, too.

It would be comforting if there was a person keeping track of everything, tracking it all in a file drawer somewhere. Then you could just burn the place down and not worry anymore. But that's not how it works.

But I pretend it does. I dream that one day I will march into that monolithic building, a gas can in hand. The workers, as pale as the papers they file, will run out, too frightened to speak, as I spray everything around me with gasoline.

"This is OVER!" I will shout as, in slow motion, the match falls. And I will watch proudly outside, the workers quivering in both shock and relief around me, gazing in awe of the blazing, smoky freedom.

This is the dream that has kept me from killing myself so far.

I am the best paid receptionist Brown & Stone has ever had. My official title is Reception Manager. I got the title when one of the accountants questioned my pay rate.

One time, one of the sales assistants asked me how I had managed to acquire my handsome pay rate. I said I was good at negotiations.

I didn't mention those negotiations took place after hours on Mr. Stone's couch in his office. And whenever he needs me to format a letter. Or help him schedule his phone appointments with the large volume kept by my desk. The mammoth of a message book is seldom opened and mostly empty.

I was paid well for my negotiation skills. And a favor.

One night, I ran into one of the mailroom clerks on my way out. Lord knows what they were doing there so late. My blouse was still part way unbuttoned. Her eyes quickly swept over me, and as I watched the comprehension fill her face, I realized that this was going on my permanent record.

I didn't care though. Everyone already knew. It had just been fact with no evidence. This wouldn't change anything. Least of all my paycheck, so it didn't matter.

Nothing these people knew mattered half as much as what I was keeping off the record.

I sometimes wish I were better at deception; better at faking emotions. Then maybe Stone

would have thought I was enamored and wouldn't have noticed my price tag. But I, an exquisitely poor judge of character, saw no harm in revealing my own nature, and he bought me, for what only hindsight can reveal as a bargain price, and there was no backing out of the deal now. Had I really any skill at negotiations, I would have been able to raise my price. But I am not in short supply, so I continue to fulfill his demands.

It was already twilight on a long summer afternoon by the time I arrived at the apartment building. The entry way was small, bright and empty. I always felt like it should be cold, but it never was.

"Hey fawn," said a man, as he came around the corner with an impressive jaw, a heavy winter coat, jeans and work boots. He had a friend with him who had the same sense of style. They both looked out of place, lurking out at me from a conspicuous lack of shadows. The contradictory setting only made the shady characters seem more ominous.

I decided to pretend I thought they were talking to someone else and kept walking at a steady pace.

The man grabbed my arm and said, "You here to visit Stone?"

The fear flooded into my face before I could stop it.

"I don't know who that is," I let my real fear quaver my voice, hoping the thugs would take me as an unsuspecting visitor of some other tenant. I didn't know who these guys were, and I didn't want to know either.

The man stared at me a moment before letting me go.

"Sorry, miss," he muttered. He and his friend held up the wall, glaringly out of place in the prim lobby.

I took the stairs up to the fourth floor. I always did. The elevator ride didn't allow enough time for me to prepare myself for the visit.

You can desensitize yourself to even some of the worst sights; the familiarity serving to dull the harshest details. But I could never become familiar with this scene, because every time I visited, it was worse.

The building was clean, tastefully decorated, and inviting yet empty, the way hotels feel. The polished brass numbers on the doors gleamed in the adequate and purposefully unobtrusive light. The cleaner used on the carpet was the only indication that anyone had ever walked through these halls.

I felt the key in my pocket as I walked toward the door. It always felt like a blunted sharp thing, cold from disuse and meant to stay that way. I opened the door quickly and returned the key to my pocket, not wanting to touch the thing any longer than I had to.

The empty hotel feeling persisted into the apartment. An equally thorough cleaning service, or maybe the same one, had visited here as well. Ambient light from the window was the only thing lighting the room and I had to let my eyes adjust.

Despite the deeds someone may have done, it's still hard to view the slow decay of another living being. It's harder still when you know what they looked like before the decline. The echo of who they used to be rings through; the comparison intensifying the current view.

I was there to report on his status. And to give him enough to stay hooked. I was there to insure the progress of the descent.

I remembered the first time I'd used the key in my pocket. It hung from a red ribbon then, like a gift. I had been sent with the drugs and a lie.

'I hadn't expected him to be there. His father- sorry, stepfather- said that he was away. I worked in his father's office. My apartment was flooded. I needed somewhere to stay.'

He took advantage of a woman showing up at his door. Though, in hindsight, he hadn't done anything but accept my advances. But I didn't pay attention to hindsight; it grated on my conscience.

He'd looked like an underwear model. He was tall and blond and not a fiber was out of place. And I brought lots of drugs I didn't take, but he did. And then I brought less. And then I brought

less. And soon, every time I visited, there was less of him, too.

He sat on the couch in his prop set living room. His eyes were squeezed tight shut, he gripped his knees to his chest and he rocked slightly. Whether emotional or physical, he was in pain; probably both.

I walked over to him, put a smile on, and said the usual line, "I got some. Let's do it now."

It didn't matter that I didn't do any or that we didn't even have sex anymore. It didn't matter that I was dressed in my work clothes while he was wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt that he'd probably put on two weeks ago. He didn't seem to notice. And I was glad, because I don't think I could have had sex with what he had become.

I looked down at him and, not for the first time, wondered what was on his permanent record. Was it rife with the beatings of losers who dared annoy him with their presence? Was it smeared with the guilt others felt after he'd paid them for lascivious acts? Was it a phonebook of women he'd forced to have abortions? Or was he just a guy with a silver spoon and rotten luck? For my humanity's sake, I came to my familiar conclusion: that he couldn't have been anything but a shadow of Stone. Having been raised by the man, it would have been impossible to emerge as anything else. I carefully ignored the fact that, being his stepson, he might not have been raised by Stone at all.

Regardless of how I preserved my conscience, it didn't much matter now. His fate had been sealed. His last moments would be wretched. If he garnered any mercy, he would die sooner than later.

I didn't bother saying goodbye. He wouldn't notice anyway. I just left, closing the door behind me. I didn't lock it, I didn't want to touch that key ever again.

With every step I detached and shut down my heart; filled myself with cold and apathy. It was the only way I would be able to do this without crying. Because I was doing this for myself.

"The bastard stole my money. You can find him in 402," I said to the thugs in the lobby. I surprised myself with the amount of steady control and heavy anger in my voice. I saw them start moving toward the stairs out of the corner of my eye. I walked faster than I should've been able to in my heels. I wanted to be out of the building, I wanted to be blocks away, when the killing started.

God, I won't lie. I won't cheat. I won't steal. Just please let this not be added to my permanent record.

Me and God both know I won't be keeping my promise. But he's better than me, so he fulfills his part of the bargain anyway.