



Booth

Volume 5 | Issue 12

Article 2

12-13-2013

Worth Holding Onto

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Recommended Citation

Bogart, Julie (2013) "Worth Holding Onto," *Booth*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 12 , Article 2.

Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth/vol5/iss12/2>

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Worth Holding Onto

Abstract

I get to the unemployment office at 8:15 a.m. It doesn't open until 8:30, so those of us who've arrived early wait outside, eager for the security guard to unlock the doors.

First in line are three people who seem to know one another, co-workers, perhaps, who've all been laid off together—it's November of 2008. Everything has crashed.

Keywords

nonfiction, unemployment

Cover Page Footnote

"Worth Holding Onto" was originally published at *Booth*.



December 13, 2013

Worth Holding Onto

Nonfiction by Julie Bogart

I get to the unemployment office at 8:15 a.m. It doesn't open until 8:30, so those of us who've arrived early wait outside, eager for the security guard to unlock the doors.

First in line are three people who seem to know one another, co-workers, perhaps, who've all been laid off together—it's November of 2008. Everything has crashed.

The two women in the trio talk at, rather than to, the man. "She was with him for *one year*," the louder of the two women says. "She's been with you 14 days."

"Mm-hmm," the other woman agrees.

The man gets out a "Yes, but—" before the loud woman cuts him off. "You just don't want other men having a piece of her thing," she says.

"That's right," the man says, "I don't."

Loud Woman explains why this is unfair. "You'll be out spreading your thing around," she says, "'cause that's what men do. But she gets one call from her ex, and you're all, 'You can't see him.' That ain't gonna work, man. You're holding on too tight. And that's not a road you wanna go down."

The other woman murmurs her agreement. Round and round they go, the man with his weak protests, the women with their sage advice and ominous warnings. It has started to rain, so we're huddled next to one another now, under the awning. The defensive man stands to my left, his hands jammed into his pockets. A small, round woman with a cane stands to my right. Another man braves the raindrops. Those of us who aren't part of the conversation have no choice but to listen.

I smile and nod when the loud woman speaks—I can't help myself. The man turns to me, his eyes wide. "You agree with them?" he asks.

I shrug and smile back. He shakes his head, though he's smiling, and concedes that the loud woman may have a point.

"If you want her, let her do her thing," the woman reiterates. "If she wants you, she'll come back."

"Okay, okay," the man says. He is worried now, no longer self-righteous. What if he ruined his chances with this woman?

We are a varied bunch, those of us in line, though all smart enough to arrive early—white, black, blue collar, white collar, everything in between. This is my third day of unemployment, my first time in an unemployment line. Only a week earlier my company had announced its losses—\$1.6 million—and ours—30 jobs. I had spent the previous day making failed calls to this unemployment office, unable to get through.

At 8:30, not a minute sooner, the security guard lets us in. A police officer checks IDs and distributes nametags as if we are at an alumni event. *Hello, My Name Is Julie. Please Give Me Money*. The security guard ushers us through the metal detector.

"Get in line and stay behind the green tape," he barks, pointing to the strip of green on the worn, gray carpet. We are obedient and do as he says; the days and weeks leading up to this morning have beaten us down. Inside this ugly, bureaucratic office, we are quiet, defeated.

The woman behind the desk, who appears a little beaten down herself, hands me a form and a tiny scrap of paper. "Fill this out and put it in the bin," she says. "Write your Social Security number down on that paper." *And then get out of my way*. She doesn't say this, but her tone implies it.

I sit in the waiting area, across from the defensive, now worried, man. The loud woman and her back-up singer are in a different area of the office. He is all alone now with his thoughts. Though there are plenty of seats, a white woman wearing the kind of sweater I associate with elementary-school teachers—embroidered children and apples and leaves—sits down next to me. She gives me a closed-lip smile. I seem safe to her. I return the favor, because we're all in this sinking ship together, but I wish she weren't sitting so close.

The worried man stares into his open flip phone. He notices me watching him and asks, "You good with texting?"

"I'm okay," I say, wondering if texting is really a skill, or something you can be good at. "Sure."

"Can you write a text for me? I'll dictate."

I shrug and walk across the room, settling into the seat next to him. The sweater woman looks up, surprised. She frowns, as though she can't fathom why I'd be so receptive to this stranger's request. *We're on a different planet, lady*, I want to say. *Look around. In this office we are all the same. We are all in need of help.* But instead I smile at her.

The worried man hands his phone to me and starts to compose his message. "I'm sorry I got so angry with you," he says.

His phone is old, and I can't find the T9 key. "Hold on a sec," I tell him. He waits while I fiddle with the buttons. So much for being good at texting.

I turn to a young man sitting a few seats away. He looks well-groomed and corporate. I know that he, too, overheard the earlier conversation, though he pretended not to.

"Can you help me?" I ask. "I'm being an idiot and can't figure out this phone."

He sits up straighter in his chair and says, "Okay." I return to my original seat, and the corporate guy moves into mine. He has no problem writing the text, and the worried man dictates to him the longest text message in the history of text messages. I worry that it won't go through, but say nothing.

I'm sorry I was such an ass. Of course you can have dinner with anybody you want. It's just that I want a relationship with you. But I'm willing to wait if you need more time to figure things out. Call me whenever you want. I'll be here.

As he waits for the corporate guy to catch up, the worried man glances at me.

“Wow,” I say, “you must really like this woman.”

“Trust me,” he says, “if I didn't, I sure as hell wouldn't be doing this.”

We laugh. I find his neuroses and his earnestness comforting. He has just lost his job and his income, and yet all he can think about is a woman he's known for two weeks.

Now the corporate guy is smiling, too. The worried man reads over the message. “Okay,” he says, “send it.”

For a moment I wonder how my life has led me to this moment: unemployed and broke, alone and dispensing romantic advice to a complete stranger.

But then my name is called, and a government employee brings me back to her cubicle. I ask her how she's doing, and her hard exterior softens a bit. She's worked here twenty years, she tells me, and she's never seen it this bad. “Yesterday, people were sitting on the floor,” she says. “We had to start turning them away. It's been hard, Julie.” I like that she uses my name; it makes me feel as though we care about each other.

She explains the claim process, highlighting two numbers on a brochure she hands me: Call this number and create a pin; call this number every week to file your claim.

“Take care, honey,” she says as I leave.

“You, too,” I say, and I mean it. “Hang in there.”

I pass by the waiting room and grin at the worried man. “Good luck,” I say, referring to the woman he loves.

“Thank you,” he says. “You, too.”

As I step outside, I imagine him with his girlfriend, a woman so amazing, so wonderful, so worth holding onto that she drives a man to ask for help from down-on-their-luck strangers. That she makes him feel less down on his luck. In my picture she is perhaps too good to be true. But I want this for the worried man. In times like these, I think, at least one of us deserves that much.

Julie Bogart's work has appeared in the *Southeast Review*, *Center: A Journal of Literary Arts*, *Paradigm*, and *Boston's Weekly Dig*. She has an MFA in creative writing from Emerson College and lives and works in Boston, Massachusetts.