



Ateret Haselkorn writes fiction and poetry. She is the winner of 2014 Annual Palo Alto Weekly Short Story Contest (adult contestants). Her work has been published in *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Literally Stories*, *Mused Literary Review*, and *Page & Spine*. She is a member of the Alabama Street Writer's Group of San Francisco and is working on her first novel. Twitter: @HealthyHalo1

Two Point Oh

A Short Story

By Ateret Haselkorn

Tully dressed as if she hated herself. She was often grouped with Steph and a few other straggling coworkers in this regard. They were either invited to meet with HR or to revisit new employee orientation for a dress code “refresher.” Tully didn’t mind these sessions but resented being grouped with people from whom she felt herself to be very distinct. The important difference between her and Steph was that Steph dressed like she had no respect for the occasion or the work. It seemed that she loved herself and disliked everyone else, a pattern that essentially made her Tully’s inverse.

Tully wore loose corduroy pants that were too long and ran over her old Adidas, causing the hemline of the pants to become ragged. She had a collection of worn, plaid shirts she rotated through, wearing them beneath exaggerated vests that were appropriate for a ski trip. Steph wore mini dresses with sandals, cruise attire at the office, every day treated as a day at sea. Tully was soccer camp for the junior varsity team, Steph was mimosas before a golf outing with a rich husband.

Then there was Rebecca, a stark contrast to them both because of her professionalism. She wore blue blazers over burnt orange shirts that were rather sheer, her chest hidden by a large piece of jewelry those in the know referred to as a “statement necklace.” Tully wasn’t sure what proclamation it made. Hear me roar? I’m hiding a stain? Try and see my boobs, I’ll bet you can’t? Actually, Rebecca’s perfect wardrobe ensembles were something Tully had thought only existed in magazines with an unwritten tagline of “No one can really pull this off, especially not you.” Tully eventually realized she hated Rebecca with a unique form of animosity that most people didn’t usually direct at their manager. The loathing did not stem from the beauty of the clothing or their expense, but their unapologetic nature. Rebecca did not care, or hide, or care enough to hide. Didn’t she know that attractiveness was meant to be

hidden in a professional setting, to be placed under layers of safety and wool?

Tully first realized that Rebecca was beautiful because of her mouth. During Tully's first week with the company, when they met to set her 30-, 60-, and 90-day goals, she noticed that it was odd to hear this information delivered from lips that could have been used to sell lipstick or tooth whitener. If the meeting had been replayed over video without sound, the phrase "I'd like to see you develop your commercial acumen" could have easily been read as "I'd like to lick the whipped cream off this strawberry while the men from IT watch."

After that meeting, Tully began to observe Rebecca more closely. Her beauty was strong enough to not be undermined by the grey and sterile office environment. She wore sleeveless blouses over fitted skirts and high, high heels. She was slender and had hair that appeared chestnut-colored in strong, natural light, but was a deeper brown in the afternoon shadows. Her eyes reminded Tully of green olives. And Rebecca was charming in a fearless way. When she was with the executive team, she did not withhold her humor or sarcasm and her laughter rang confidently throughout the office. When Tully heard it, she shrank into her poufy vest or wrapped her hair around her finger repeatedly, letting it spin off and watching it lose its curl.

The oddity, really, was not Rebecca's presence at a consulting company as opposed to the inside of a style magazine, but her delicious competence at her job. Revenue was projected to drop, bookings were down this quarter and last, but Rebecca spotted new market forces that would have to drive changes in the company offerings. They had to "go two point oh" – a message that Rebecca delivered at the weekly staff meeting while wearing smoky eye shadow that accentuated her green irises without distracting from her other faultless features. She "socialized" the idea. She generated "buy in." She drafted a new type of contracted work and sold it to a client who, at the conclusion of the project, was pleased enough to spend time-and-a-half on the upsell, a second consulting engagement stipulating that Rebecca lead the work.

Tully, who wore no make up and whose wardrobe consisted of bargain items from thrift stores, could not find the catch that

would keep Rebecca from being one of those mythical people who “had it all.” Out of frustration, she made herself busy with Excel files and data analysis. She wore eyeglasses. She stopped bleaching her upper lip.

Rebecca appeared to float through the office. Chick on heels, woman warrior. She flew across the country and back. She earned premier status with two airlines. She bought, and expensed to the company, TSA Pre standing because a woman like her had no time to remove her shoes for the security check at the airport. She was always busy, cell phone always “blowing up,” having to “put out fires,” asking to “touch base next week – I’ve got a layover in Atlanta, will call u then – sent from my iPhone, please excuse any typos.” Mondays on the road, Tuesdays in DC, Wednesdays back in the office and leading the ops meeting, her slender figure towering at the head of the table, her laughter radiating energy.

Tully was told to improve her “executive presence,” her confidence, and her demeanor. In response, she organized the files on the shared drive and color-coded her inbox, first by project name and then by phase.

Men and women in suits came and left the office. Tully greeted them and introduced herself as a data analyst although her actual title was much bigger and broader. They nodded as if this made sense intrinsically and then asked for the door code to use the restrooms down the hall. Tully wrote this down for them on a yellow post-it note before deciding to put it on the white board in red marker for all to see. She got emails from colleagues across the organization thanking her for that, their gratitude communicated humorously with appropriate emoji’s of happy faces and toilets, their written messages containing jokes about Tully’s ability to pre-empt the most important strategic initiatives for the company. She was popular for one day before sinking back into her worn shoes (not her chair) at her standing desk. Steph decided to get a standing desk too, not out of admiration, she still despised everyone, but because sitting was the new smoking and also because she didn’t want to wrinkle her new striped, linen mini-dress from Nordstrom’s.

Rebecca had a regular desk and an office but didn’t need either because she floated from meeting to meeting, her advice needed on

everything. She lit up rooms and the Twitter-sphere with her mere presence. She was promoted and everyone threw a happy hour in her honor. Tully wore jeans that she tried to stuff into her ankle boots but the jeans were so baggy they ended up ballooning out around her calves, making her look like a pirate and a nerd at the same time. Steph wore jeans with intentionally torn knees and a deliberately lop-sided cardigan over a tank top. She was mortified when her shoulder brushed against the white board, wiping red marker onto her sleeve, and ran to the bathroom, the door code easy to recall because it was now transcribed onto her clothing. After the party, Tully helped the admin clean up and carefully rewrote those crucial numbers onto the board.

“Careful, honey,” the admin said. “Once they see you as an admin, you will always be an admin.”

Tully remembered the last time a woman had given her heart-to-heart advice at work. It was at her first job out of college, also consulting, but no standing desks, those were not the rage yet, this company had chairs made from large, plastic inflated exercise balls with backs and arm rests attached to them. Tully had found them strangely erotic, all the bouncing perhaps coaxed a sensation of lust from her body.

The advice had come from an older colleague, not her manager, but someone else who noticed Tully and sensed her unprofessional inclinations.

“Don’t do it, Tully,” she said. She was referring to something Tully often thought of doing at the time. Still, she played dumb.

“Do what?” she asked.

“That,” the woman said, pointing at a male colleague who was seven years Tully’s senior. “You will ruin yourself before you’ve even gotten out of the gate.”

“Ruin myself?”

“All women have at your age is reputation. Sex makes you stupid. Don’t risk it.”

“I don’t understand.” Tully looked down at her red manicure. She had it done professionally so he would notice and he had, saying “Just when I thought the sound of your typing couldn’t get any hotter, you go and do something like that.” He had briefly stroked her index finger with his. Tully had flushed, her sweat

making the back of her thighs, exposed below her skirt, stick to her rubber ball chair so that later she would have to peel herself off in order to stand up.

The woman took Tully's hands in hers. "Young men have potential. Young women have a strong background. Men are up-and-coming, women are responsible. His future remains in front, yours relies on what you've done and what people say you've done. It doesn't matter how well you did in college, it can all be unfastened for you while his stock still rises."

But Tully had not listened and she and the older man had been caught and it had been in the office (not on the ball, that was too bouncy, but on the table in a conference room). Now he was a vice president with a competing firm and she was lurking the halls of her current job, a position that had taken her over a year to find. She wondered who knew her past, who could see her sin, how many had cast her into the bucket of loose women who did not have brains and had to rely on other abilities to get ahead.

After her promotion, Rebecca was in the office more often. People now admired her ability to "delegate tasks appropriately" and called her a natural leader. She framed photos of herself with her friends at the beach and put them on her desk. In these photos she was wearing a pink bikini beneath a loosely knit beach dress. No one in the office seemed to care. Vendors began to appear, hawking their goods and services, making comments about how "a beautiful woman, such as yourself, will appreciate..." anything, really. Somehow this line entered every conversation and Rebecca took it in stride as Tully blushed and Steph checked her Gilt app for deals on massages.

Tully knew what she looked like but she could not stop. At first she thought it was like downhill skiing, the pace of her aesthetic decline building exponentially because of its own gravity, but one day came to realize the situation was more complex. As Rebecca became more perfect, as she added highlights to her hair or hoop earrings to her ensemble, Tully began to take steps back in equal measure, wearing dirty clothes or not showering after the gym. In her mind, Tully became intertwined with Rebecca and saw herself as a picture of Dorian Gray, hidden in Rebecca's attic as her more beautiful self tramped around the office unhindered. The

problem with this analogy was that Rebecca did not seem to have a murderous villain inside of her, no matter how hard Tully tried to find one. Rebecca's reputation was solid – Tully checked all the social media outlets but Rebecca's online presence was as well attended as her person.

Steph tried to speak with Tully. Tried, as in put her iPhone down for a moment to say she had something to give Tully, which turned out to mean forwarding a referral link for spa and beauty services. If Tully used it, Steph would receive a discount on her next purchase; specifically, if Tully got her upper lip waxed, Steph would get five dollars off her next purchase. If Tully went for the “full service package,” the incentives would increase. Steph said she hoped Tully could appreciate the “value she would contribute to the team.” Tully felt like the prized pig at a state fair in the moments before being sold for slaughter. She looked at Steph without speaking, taking in her spray tan and her shaped eyebrows, and then walked out of the building and all the way home.

That night, Tully dreamt she made wild love to Rebecca in the office. In the dream, she did not see Rebecca's body beyond the parts with which she was already familiar, bare arms and legs from the knees down, but felt Rebecca's torso meld into Tully's body perfectly as Rebecca lay on top of her, gazing directly into her eyes while they gyrated. Rebecca leaned forward, her thick hair brushing Tully's cheeks, put her mouth to Tully's ear, and said, in a lewd voice, “Don't forget to integrate your client data with our new CRM tool.” Tully woke up, it was just after three in the morning and she was breathing heavily, her legs wrapped around her twisted blanket, her rainbow-striped alpaca wool sleeping shorts lying on the floor next to her bed. On the bus to work later that morning, a man stood extremely close to her, his hand holding the metal bar above her head, and tried to strike up conversation. Tully stared at him with blank astonishment and then exited the bus early and walked the rest of the way to work. He'd made her think of vultures circling sick prey, detecting their hormonal distress signal from the air and swooping in when the time was right for a meal. As she entered the hallway bathroom, she saw Rebecca at the mirror applying gloss to her perfect lips. It was too late to turn back, so Tully said “hello-how-are-you-see-you-at-the-ops-meeting”

quickly while sprinting into a stall. She was unable to pee knowing that Rebecca stood at the counter. Her lip gloss bore a strawberry scent that followed Tully, inspiring her bladder to constrict as if in an ongoing Kegel exercise.

In the office, Steph came by to check on one client-related communication or another. It seemed that she had splurged on beauty services without getting a discount off Tully's back, or upper lip, as her hairstyle had changed from a blond-turning-to-brown ombre to a reverse brown-to-blond.

"Hey, did you hear?" Steph asked.

"No, what?"

"Rebecca got engaged."

Tully managed to make her face freeze halfway between neutral and jealous shock. She was unable to reverse the trend and force her expression into one of happiness. The end result was the look people have right before they sneeze.

Steph looked at Tully for a moment and then said, "If it were me, I'd be out of here the second that ring touched my finger." After Steph walked away, Tully tried to sit down, realized she had a standing desk a second too late to stop, and landed on her butt on the floor, no bouncing ball chair present to cushion the impact. For two weeks afterwards she had bruises on her rear end that prevented her from sitting on the toilet, forcing her to squat above the commode like a hovercraft.

For her one-year anniversary with the company, Tully was invited to a performance review with Rebecca. Out of dread, Tully went to the women's bathroom to procrastinate being in the office until the last possible minute. She stared at herself in the mirror, taking in her untamed hair, her pale and greasy skin, and noticing that the buttons on her plaid shirt were mismatched with the holes. She heard a subdued but familiar sound – a sob stifled by something, perhaps a Kleenex or a hand. Tully lowered her gaze to the floor and skimmed the tiles until she spotted a familiar pair of high, high heels beneath a stall. Rebecca was crying. Rebecca had reason to cry. Something was wrong, so Rebecca was crying.

Tully tried to picture her smudged mascara as the first crack in Rebecca's perfect exterior. Somehow she could not, but it was not necessary. Tully left the bathroom and walked back to her desk.

On the way, she passed by Steph's workstation, unoccupied. Tully opened Steph's drawer and rifled around a bit.

During her performance review with Rebecca, Tully could not detect any tremors related to what she had witnessed earlier.

Rebecca's make up remained flawless, her feedback was as on-point as her tailored blazer. Tully was to participate in "going two point oh" by bringing her work to "the next level." She was told that her intellect, her project management, and her comfort with a diverse array of topics was appreciated. Still, she was encouraged to experiment with her "client interface." Tully said she appreciated the advice and rose to leave. Pausing, she asked, "Rebecca, can I help you with anything?"

"How do you mean?"

"Just, in general, since you must be very busy with the wedding planning."

"No, Tully, but thank you. It is nice of you to offer." Rebecca turned back to her computer and began composing an email, and Tully left, closing the office door quietly behind her. At home at the end of the day, she sat on her bed, reached into her pocket, and removed Steph's nail file. Slowly, she began to clean herself up.