

Permanence

By Valerie Fioravanti

Enza doesn't need to be here. She hates staff meetings, believed consulting would free her from sitting through the new and old business, long hours spent shifting in her chair, pretending to take notes. She glances from the young geniuses playing Doom under the table to the systems engineers – entrusted with the task of making genius run smoothly in the real world – compulsively squeezing the shit out of their stress balls. There is a clear age divide between them. The geniuses are all in their twenties, generally less than five years out of college. That seems to be the standard timeframe for starting businesses of their own. Jason himself only needed three years. He has already launched and sold two other companies. Enza and Jason are the only people at this meeting in their thirties. The systems engineers are all forty and above. They service an industry that values youth and genius. Technology has grown too rapidly for them. One day Enza may have a stress ball of her own.

The room is filled with product giveaways, from coffee mugs to mouse pads to those necessary squeezies. Even her thermos is a freebie from Ezone Technologies. She takes a long, last drag of her smoothie and wishes the drink could be self-replenishing. Maybe she can find a larger thermos at the trade show next week. The theme is always bigger and better.

She's here to write one manual, and she already knows the timetable for the

product launch, both in real and preferred time. It's basically done – weeks ahead of schedule, so she'll get her bonus – but she's sitting on the final changes, quietly collecting potential offers. Jason wants her to stay on and oversee the promotional campaign, which requires a more permanent commitment. This is why he includes her in all the meetings. After fifteen years of friendship, he should know she hates enforced stillness. She wants to leap from her chair and scuff a soft-shoe shuffle across the tabletop and out the door. She distracts herself from this compulsion by jotting down the company names that go with all the visible logos in the room. Her list is a who's who of the technology biz, and she's already collected a paycheck from more than half of them. If she continues consulting, she'll eventually take meetings with them all. The thought inspires a long, audible yawn that dominoes around the table.

“Any questions?” Jason asks. The room is so quiet you can hear pens doodling. “Okay, let's go get some drinks.”

As everyone files out, Jason taps Enza on the shoulder. “You coming?”

“The manual's still not testing well with the user groups. I want to stay here and work through some of the language with Todd, if that's okay.” Todd designed the software. He is her technical expert.

Jason shrugs. “Todd's yours for as long as you need him.” He punches Todd on the shoulder as he leaves. “You make sure she joins us when you're done. Sean only gives us free drinks when we bring our girl around.”

Todd sweeps the papers from the table with his forearm and lunges for her shoulders. It is a gesture she imagines he read about somewhere, probably on the

internet. She arches away from him, just out of his reach. "The door barely hit him on the ass," she says.

Todd tries to massage her shoulders, but she wants to hold on to her tension. "You live for the thrill of getting caught."

Enza moves from the table and throws herself into Jason's leather chair. "We're fighting, remember?"

Todd comes up behind her, gives the chair a hard shove and it spins. He believes she likes anything fast. "You just went out of your way to be alone with me."

Enza wedges her feet against the wall, ending the spin with a hard jerk. "We have a job to do."

"I don't even know why you're so mad at me." Todd's cell phone rings. He winces at the sound.

"I wonder who that could be?" Enza walks the length of the table and picks up the phone just as it stops ringing. "I bet the beeper goes off in thirty seconds. One mississippi, two mississippi, three...oops, she must have that whole sequence on speed-dial."

"I don't need to call her back," Todd says.

"Do it, or she'll just start the whole thing over again in ten minutes."

Todd reaches for her wrist. This time she doesn't resist. "You make me feel things she never could."

"Get rid of her." Enza's voice is softer than her words.

"I get rid of her, and she gets hurt, eventually you get rid of me, and then I get

hurt." Todd looks at the floor as he says this. His foot taps out the rhythm of his words.

"And obviously, I have no feelings, so I can't get hurt." Enza wants to wrench her hand away, but she doesn't have the will or the energy. She can't tell which.

"That's not it at all." His two fingers trail between her wrist and elbow.

Enza shifts away from him. "Why don't you take me seriously?"

Todd pushes forward in his chair, lays his head against her thigh. He has trouble staying close to her without touching. She likes that about him.

"Why don't you want to work here permanently?" he asks.

"What has that got to do with anything?"

"Everything." He kisses her finger, then lets her hand fall to her side. "I plod through my life and you flit through yours."

"Great, you're a bore and I'm a flake," she says, although she feels the truth in his words. Todd followed Jason from his last venture, when it was time to form a company of his own.

"You make me want to be crazy, but I'm not – not enough to keep you interested for very long."

Enza stands, brushes the creases from her skirt. "Now you're not taking yourself seriously." His attitude could earn him a stress ball, too.

The phone rings again and Enza tosses it to Todd without a word. "Hello."

"I'm meeting with the consultant now. I can't talk."

Enza imagines having lunch with Patrice, or better yet, high tea. They could sip weak Earl Gray from toy-like cups with matching saucers, pinkies at stiff attention,

followed by a bite of those crustless sandwiches cut in fours while Enza reveals that Todd refers to her – his patient, trusting girlfriend of five years – as the Starfish.

“I said, I can’t talk...I don’t know. Late. I’ve got to go now. Bye.”

He shuts the phone off and drops it into his briefcase, then sinks his lips into the small of Enza’s neck. “I don’t want to work tonight.”

Enza is still sipping tea, trying to imagine Patrice’s response. She shrugs him off. “I’m going to the bar.”

The company drinking spot is an old Irish pub with red velvet barriers outside. Jason pays the owner a monthly fee to get his employees out of line and past the bouncers’ selection process. They get to drink next to starlet wannabes and brag they’re on the guest list. Jason claims changing bars has increased morale and doubled productivity. He has stacks of simpering cover letters from the graduating classes of RPI, Cal Tech, and MIT, and is beginning to believe he’s as cool as they think. Jason says he learned marketing and promotion from watching her package herself through the years. Enza’s not sure she wants the credit.

Enza arrives with Todd, and Jason squeezes her in next to him and sends Todd off to the other end of the bar, where the rest of the designers try to mingle with the crowd. Todd’s chin rests against his beer mug, sulking. He wants recognition that Jason will never give him until he leaves. When she’s alone with Todd, she finds him eager to please and easy to be with. Around others, particularly Jason, he reveals a lack of social

maturity. She wants to discuss this, to help him, but has resisted this reformist impulse thus far. Her life is certainly no example, and Todd has qualities she admires. He's worked for Jason longer than she's worked for any company. Or stayed with any man.

"Manhattan," Sean mutters, as he clears off the bar in front of Enza. "Who the fuck drinks Manhattans anymore?" Sean precedes the era of the \$10 martini and is openly contemptuous of the pub's current popularity, but he likes Enza. He likes to hear her stories about being a bartender in the Caribbean, is considering going down there himself. It makes Jason crazy to listen because she quit her job at Andersen to do it, back when they were on the same work team, fresh out of college. Jason forgets she was on the verge of being fired. Enza found a way to use her tech skills peripherally, but she was an incompetent systems analyst and a mediocre programmer. This Jason also forgets.

"Can you believe this guy?" Sean cocks his head at a mild-looking man with slicked-back, receding hair and a too-bright blazer.

"Mid-lifer," Enza says. "He's leasing a Porsche and seeing a shrink for the first time."

"I don't need your analysis, just tell me how to make the fucking drink."

"What happened to the cocktail book?" she asks.

"Someone filched it."

"Don't tell him till he promises to give us free drinks for a week," Jason says.

"How many millions did your last company sell for?" Enza asks.

"Whose side are you on here?"

“The working man’s,” Enza replies. Banter is the cornerstone of their friendship.

Sean smirks. “I’m jacking the prices next time you come in.”

“Ask him if he wants rye or bourbon.” Enza climbs on her stool and steps onto the bar. A cheer goes up from the crowd, but she ignores the call to *Dance, baby, dance* from a drunk in a \$5,000 suit. The scene below distracts her. The bar is known for its range of clientele, the unusual mixing of the business and entertainment worlds, but there is no homogeneity here. Separate but equal reigns, a policy that suits some sects more than others. Todd is the only member of his group who isn’t flirting. By his indifference, he is the only one likely to attract any interest.

Sean takes her hand and helps her down, then throws a rag at her head. She wipes away her footprints. “Bourbon,” he says, “And all your drinks are free tonight.”

Enza lines up the bourbon, vermouth, and bitters. It feels like such a neat, clean task. “You haven’t charged me for a drink since the second night I came in here.”

“I never charge people I like for drinks.”

“That’s a bad policy for a bartender.”

“Not around here it ain’t.” Enza’s sigh is surprisingly heartfelt. She gives the drink one final shake before she pours. Sean eyes the martini glass and says, “The olives are on the second shelf on your left.”

“This baby tops off with a big red cherry.” Enza is amused by how proud she feels. She tries to remember the last time she felt this good at work on a project. She can’t. Bartending wasn’t so bad, and she did end up with the best tan of her life. She’s not exactly sure why she came back, except that she was tired of being asked, “So what

do you do, *really?*” It seemed only artists could be bartenders, so she quit that, too.

Sean plunks a cherry in the glass and takes off down the bar, muttering, “Fucking pansy-assed drink.”

“You look awfully comfortable behind that bar,” Jason says. “You’re not planning another kamikaze career change, are you?”

“If you know what you’re doing, pour me a stout.” Todd takes possession of Enza’s empty seat.

“See, now you’re stuck behind there,” Jason says.

Sean puts two shot glasses on the bar. “Name your poison.”

“Do I really have to?” she asks. Sean pulls the Cuervo off the shelf. She lifts Todd’s glass and refills it with Bud Light, then sprinkles her hand with salt, licks, and swallows.

“I wanted a stout,” Todd says.

Sean snaps the dishtowel in his hand. “Lady knows what she’s doing behind the bar.”

“Drink it down, Todd,” Jason says. “You’re not going to win this one. Enz is having too much fun reliving her misspent youth.”

“Misspent?” Enza drops the lime wedge in the trash. “Want to compare regrets?”

“When were you a bartender?” Todd asks.

“What regrets do I have?” Jason asks, his fingers picking at the buttons near his chest as he sucks at the last drops of gin in his glass. She pours him another, neat, the way he likes it.

"Your three ex-wives would be a start, I hope." She hands Jason his drink and pours herself another.

"How many men have you barreled through in the last ten years?"

"When was she a bartender?" Todd says, louder now.

Enza shrugs. "I never married any of them." She tops off her drink and then his, a bottle in each hand.

"That makes you morally superior?"

"I don't make promises I can't keep." She tries to clink her glass against his, but he cocks his arm back out of reach.

"When was the last time you made a promise to anyone?" A woman in a beige suede jacket backs into Jason's arm, spills his drink on them both.

The woman takes the glass from him and places it on the bar. "Jason, I'm so sorry. I was looking for Todd and I didn't see you." Todd stands up. She leans into him and pecks the side of his mouth. "I knew you'd be working in *here*." She says to Enza, "Bud Light, please."

Todd slides his glass to Patrice. "Geez, don't you think she's a little overdressed for tending bar?"

"What do you mean?"

"Does she look like a bartender?" Todd says.

Patrice points to Enza. "She's standing behind the bar."

Enza offers her hand. "I'm Enza." Patrice's eyes squint to dimes as her forehead creases.

"The consultant." Todd's voice suggests her confusion is idiotic.

"Ooo-ahhh," Patrice crows. "I guess I just assumed you were another guy."

"You thought Enza was a guy?"

"You can never tell with foreign names." Patrice takes off her coat and drapes it over the bar. She is small and tidy. Sean moves the peanuts away from her coat, out of Enza's reach. "Hon, will you get me a stool so I can squeeze in?"

Jason offers his, and Todd goes off to get another. As Enza watches him, Sean says, "You two have a lot of chemistry."

"He's got a girlfriend," Enza squeaks.

"I do?" Jason says.

"We're just good with the comebacks," Enza offers, relieved.

Jason, who's switched to beer, sips his lager. "We've been good at other things, too." He winks. He must be drunk. Jason is ultra private about his life.

"What things?" Todd returns with only one stool. Enza hoped he'd bring her one, too.

Sean says, "I don't believe you."

Jason reaches over the bar and tucks a stray strand of hair back behind her ear.

"Back me up."

Enza never told Todd she slept with Jason. Once or twice. Maybe five times, tops. Absolutely no more than a dozen. "I've known him since college," she says, as if this explains everything.

Sean pours Jason a triple shot, and he abandons his beer with a satisfied sigh.

The look Sean gives Enza makes her squirm. If he finds out about Todd, she'll be a paying customer again. She goes to pour herself another shot and the tequila bottle's empty.

"Todd and I went to college together, too." Patrice is holding Todd's hand, and his two fingers move back and forth between her wrist and elbow. Enza doesn't know if Todd is trying to hurt her or if that's just the natural thing to do when a woman – any woman – holds your hand. Enza jilts the tequila and pours herself some gin.

"Are you from Iowa, too?" Patrice asks Enza. Jason winces. He has long since cast off his farmboy accent and quaint Christian phrases, just as Enza shed her street slang and high hair.

"Are you kidding?" Jason outs her with glee. "She's a Brooklyn girl. Stuck out like a sore thumb at Kenyon."

"But I love Brooklyn! All those brownstones, and it's so family friendly." Patrice seeks Todd as she says the word *family*. Jason gestures for a refill and Enza tops off both their glasses.

"Family friendly," Enza repeats with a snort, but what she feels is more like wonder. She cannot imagine her old neighborhood as that kind of place, even though her parents once thought of it in exactly that way.

Patrice's eyebrows furrow, but the gesture of her smile remains. She seems afraid to discover Brooklyn has gone out of fashion.

"She's not from that Brooklyn," Jason says with authority, although she has never brought him there or discussed her former life with him. "She's from the other

part, the one that's more like...early Bruce Springsteen."

"Oh," Patrice says. She looks into her drink to avoid facing Enza, who finishes the gin.

Sean scrutinizes her. She is sandwiched by empty bottles. "I love having my life reduced to a pop star's hungry years."

"Springsteen is a rock legend!" Jason insists.

"Where did you meet these schmucks?" Sean flips the empties behind the curtain under the counter.

"College."

"Big mistake," he replies.

"Sometimes I think so." Enza massages her temples. Tequila and gin do not mix. "I'm going to take off."

Sean lifts the bar top and lets her out. Jason says, "I'll walk back to the office with you, give you a voucher so you can call a car."

"I'm going to have to go, too," Todd says, cocking his head at Jason. "Boss doesn't only pay me to drink."

"Just have one more drink with me." Patrice leans across Todd to attach herself to Jason's arm. "I never see him."

"Fine by me." Jason detaches Patrice and drapes his arm around Enza, who leans in to him as she watches three Todds bristle. Jason's weight is heavy on her shoulders, makes her knees want to buckle.

Enza weaves as she walks. Jason is also unsteady. Leaning in to talk, they bump

heads, knock themselves off balance. She props herself against the building, although the entrance is only a few yards away. The crescent moon swings in the sky above her. Jason is next to her, but he slides down the wall and sits on the sidewalk. Before she can stop herself, Enza joins him there. He owns the building, after all. The ground feels more solid, and the street life settles into a gentle sway. She looks at Jason, who appears spooked by the lights of an oncoming taxi, and she can't see how they've gained much since college, beyond shirking their identities for fun and profit. Jason could start and sell a dozen companies and Enza can work for every business in the city, but they both just seem to be slogging their way through another day.

Enza squeezes Jason's hand. He says, "Come home with me tonight."

Enza laughs. She uses the wall for leverage to pull herself up, helps Jason do the same. They manage to walk slowly inside. It isn't the first time the ground's gone lurchy on them.

In the elevator, Jason kisses her. She lets him. He was a band geek in college, played the clarinet. Strong lips. In fact, his whole mouth is a gift. She wonders if he still plays.

The elevator doors open and three of his programmers step in. Jason blows into her eye. "Is it out yet? I don't see it anymore." Enza closes her eyes, wishes she just grabbed a taxi outside the bar. When she opens them, Jason is gone. The others hold the door for her, their eyes trained on the gum-stained carpet.

Enza calls for a town car, waits on the sofa in the lounge. It's after ten, but half the employees are still here working, mostly after a spell in the bar. There are over a

dozen cots in the supply closet, and the programmers sleep here two or three nights a week. She thinks Jason's hiding in his office, but she refuses to go check. Her buzz moves on, makes room for an early hangover. She takes two tylenol and two advil between a dozen paper cones of water from the cooler, but the blood vessels above her eyes and along her scalp keep constricting.

The elevator door bings and opens again. Todd and Patrice stroll off. Caught in the halogens together, they seem more like brother and sister. Same dirty blond hair with just a bit of curl, the pale skin with the same blue-veined tinge. "Jason still here?" Todd asks.

Patrice sits on the sofa with Enza, smiles brightly.

"I'll check if he wants to share a cab with you," Todd tells Patrice.

"I live a few blocks from Jason," Patrice says. "Do you still live in Brooklyn?"

"I'm house-sitting in the Redbank area. Jersey."

"My big boss lives around there. Todd and I went to a barbecue at his house last spring. *Really* fancy, and the town's kind of artsy, too. You don't expect that from Jersey, you know?"

Enza bobs her head, makes nice as she admits that tea with Patrice would only be a bore. "That's right, Todd said you worked for Joe."

"You know him?"

"I introduced him to his wife. She's a children's book illustrator. He's with her on tour. It's their house I'm watching."

"Wow, you know them all, don't you?" Patrice says.

"I've been around a while."

Todd and Jason return. "How can you *not* tell me that she's living in my boss's house?" Patrice shakes Todd's arm, then holds on. "I hope we have a place like that someday." She puts her hand on Enza's shoulder. "You're so lucky."

"It's not mine," she replies.

"I'll drop you off," Jason tells Patrice. "That way, I know Todd works tonight."

Jason kisses Enza on the forehead. "Get home safe." He's still a bit wobbly. "Walk Enza down when the car gets here?" he asks and Todd nods. Todd gives Patrice a chaste peck, and Patrice and Jason leave.

Enza's been up all night. She shifts from her right side to her back, rotates to her left, plumps her pillow, turns on her stomach, then sits up and lets her eyes adjust to the dawn. She stares ahead absently, the sharpening light no comfort as the objects around her become firm and detailed. From the bedroom's cloud décor, to the glistening koi pond outside the glass terrace doors, to Todd drooling on the pillow next to hers, she is tired of living with only borrowed things.

Last night, when her car arrived, Todd walked her downstairs and got in the back seat with her. She didn't argue. When they arrived at the house, she hoped the hot tub would appease her sore head. Jason had left her unsettled. The pulsing water jets only exacerbated this feeling. She leaned in as Todd kissed her, but it wasn't Todd she wanted. She broke away from him, then slowly hiked the temperature until he left her

to boil alone. When she came to bed, he was sleeping. Or pretending to be. Either way, she was grateful.

Enza gets out of bed but her body resists leaving. Her joints ache and her face feels dry and tight, like it does after a mask has dried away all impurities. She shuffles into the kitchen and tries to drink a glass of water, but the liquid doesn't leave her mouth. She can't force herself to swallow. She opens the fridge, pulls out yogurt, spirulina, orange juice, takes the ice cubes and frozen bananas from the freezer, and prepares her daily smoothie. She pulls the tequila from its hiding place in the flour tin, but realizes she can't bear the sound of the blender right now. She leaves the mixture as is and drinks straight from the bottle. Something she promised never to do before lunch. She has many rules about drinking, tries to stick to them as best she can. When she fails, she tells herself this is only one of many codes she can't follow.

Enza sits and drinks in the formal dining room, away from the cozy brightness of the breakfast nook nested in the warmth of the big bay window. The kiss in the elevator still bothers her. Jason's cowardly exit bothers her even more. She drains her glass again, but alcohol does nothing to repress romantic cravings. She pushes the glass away, and goes over her plan for work, ticking off things she needs to accomplish before she leaves. If she puts in a full day – a real full day – she can move on, gain some distance from Jason.

She reaches for the glass again and drinks. Pours another. The job offers she currently has are only more of the same. She can find another gig – she is good at things that cause other people trouble, like standardized tests and job interviews. She tends to

accept offers, instead of seeking out something more desirable. This habit has left her confused about her own needs.

The phone rings. Enza lets the machine pick up. "Enza, hi, it's Patrice. Jason gave me your number last night and I figured I'd try to catch you before you left for work, but I guess you're all workaholics down there. Anyway, I just wanted to say that I enjoyed meeting you last night. There aren't a whole lot of women in the industry, you know? I don't know if you're working the same late hours Todd is every night, but maybe we could get together and have dinner or a drink sometime. Anyway, maybe I'll try you later at the office when I call Todd. Bye."

Todd appears in the doorway. He has the sullen look of a teen about to be punished. "Get that?" she asks.

"She knows," he says, fidgeting with the vertical blinds, as if Patrice was out there watching. "Why else would she call you?"

"I'm guessing ambition."

"Patrice isn't like that." Todd picks up the bottle, puts it down again without a word.

"Fine, you're screwed. Confess, tell her it's all over now and beg her to forgive you."

Todd goes into the kitchen, comes back carrying the smoothie mix. He takes a long sniff and drops the jug in front of her. "Dispensing with the niceties, I see."

Enza yawns. Her most sacred drinking credo is no one should ever know how much or how often. Another rule for the recycle bin.

"It's hard to hide tequila breath from the man you kiss in the morning," Todd says, when she fails to respond.

"I'm going to take a very long shower, give you a head start on leaving." Enza dumps the smoothie mix in the sink, runs the garbage disposal.

He is right behind her. "I'm sorry, I was being a jerk, but...Patrice...she has lunch with my mother every couple of weeks."

"You're right, Todd. She's not at all ambitious." Enza needs that shower, takes the stairs as quickly as her crotchety body will allow.

Enza's office is packed. She has two boxes filled, but is determined to leave with only one. The manual is ready. All she needs is for Todd to agree, sign off his approval, but he's stalling. He thinks she's hurt over Patrice showing up at the bar last night and calling her this morning. Enza doesn't correct him. She doesn't feel much of anything, but she's willing to keep that to herself. It's hardly a point of pride.

"Are we going to talk at all?" he pleads. He puts his hand over hers. If someone comes in, it might look like they are both reaching for the mouse.

"What would be the point?"

"You knew I had a girlfriend," he says. "It's not like I lied to you."

"And you still do," she says. "You don't lose here."

"Why are you rushing this? It's going to look weird."

Todd starts to run his fingers along her arm, and she jerks away. "Jason knows

me. I come. I do the job. I go.”

As if on cue, Jason ducks his head in. “I heard a rumor you were packing up. Are you done?”

“It looks like we’re finally finished with this thing.”

“That right, Todd?”

“She’s the expert.” Todd’s eyes are wider, show more hurt than she expects.

Jason squeezes his shoulder. “Let me talk to her.” Todd leaves, looking backward. Jason takes his seat. “You have that look in your eye. You’re not going to supervise the campaign are you?”

“No.”

Jason rises from his chair, shuts the door, and returns. “Maybe that’s good. I know I got spooked last night, but I think I want us to take a shot—a real shot, I mean.”

Enza takes his speech in, but not really. The words seem to bounce around in her brain, elude meaning. “What do you think?” he asks, too quickly. Or not. Maybe more time has passed than she thinks. Being with him is a thing she has wanted since college. Their friendship, in all its variations, has endured, and he is her best friend, if only by default. But it is their similarities, not their differences that Enza fears. She knows the permanence Jason clings to is only *temporary* respectably disguised. She thinks of all the times they connected briefly. His restlessness matches hers. He simply refuses to admit it.

“I’m dying here,” he says.

Enza opens her mouth. Shuts it. Questions herself. Rethinks her answer. Changes

her mind. Feels a quick and easy sense of progress. Changes it back again.

“Well?”

Enza strokes his cheek, knows it is too small a gesture for the regret she feels. “I think I’d see more of you as your employee.”

He backs away from her. “That’s harsh.”

“I know.” She tries to look at him. “But it’s true.”

Jason’s head hangs below his shoulders. Now he’s quiet for a long time. Too long. “It’s still harsh,” he says. “Leave the manual with my assistant. I’ll look it over tonight and messenger your check tomorrow.”

She watches him leave, then stacks the boxes on her chair. She can’t bear to stay long enough to weed through her things. She walks the manual over to Jason’s assistant, calls a car, and decides to wait for it outside. She carries the boxes out to the elevator, her chin holding the top box steady. The receptionist pushes the button for her, says, “See you tomorrow,” before the doors shut between them.

Enza waits for her ride in the same spot she stood last night with Jason, her back against the side of the building, shifting as the weight grows heavy in her arms.