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Freedom

by MaryPat Campbell

Work finishes on Friday. She's been looking forward to this for at least two years. No more leaving home at 06.25, no more late or cancelled trains to Waterloo Monday to Friday before dawn.

She has planned this meticulously. They don't know how nervous she is, how she wakes at 4am most mornings to the sound of her heartbeat, the colleagues who tell her they wish they were her. She worries though, when they make the slightest hint that she won't be part of their world any more, it leaves her feeling left out, not on the inside any more. No monthly pay packet, no office gossip, no bonus landing in her account every Christmas.

Some days she's optimistic, telling people of her plans to go to university, how scared she was of the application, and how successful she was in getting a place. She doesn't tell them how she worries she'll be thought too old, how making friends among the hoards of 19 year olds might be difficult. At weekends she stays in bed late and sleeps her way out of a gnawing sense of not being somebody any more. She thought she loved the idea of not getting half-hourly emails from management, but now she's not so sure.

She tells people that she's having a career change, that this is what she's always wanted, not to waste her life in the shiny glass and concrete of a corporate firm in the city. In response, some of her colleagues sit up a bit straighter, sniff the air a bit too sharply, and then she thinks she's gone too far. Her colleagues after all, are staying put, wearing their corporate suits and taking home their corporate salaries every month, just like she did, until now.

She knows she's better than them, more ambitious. If they're sniffy about her success, that's their problem. She knows she is competitive, wants something better, more worthwhile for herself. But on those sleeping late Sundays, she wonders how it will really be to leave the job she's worked at for the last eight years. She ought to feel optimistic and happy to be leaving.

She imagines bumping into one of her colleagues six months from now, strolling along the embankment at lunchtime. She with her new companions, chatting easily about the seminar they've been to that morning, her colleagues hurrying back up the river to the office with a wave and a hurried "Hi, let's catch up sometime!". She longs to feel superior and that she's made the right decision, longs to see her colleagues' envious looks at her new found freedom.

Will she be happy, or even content? She wonders if there are never really endings, happy or otherwise. You end one phase of your life and begin another. In her case, she will start again in a new and challenging world, becoming a student for the first time aged 38, but without a corporate suit and salary to match.