Animal Culture: Working as a Veterinary Assistant in Hawai‘i

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Abstract

Working at a veterinarian’s office is extremely demanding in terms of emotional involvement, and this involvement ultimately affects workplace dynamics. My aim is to show what a day at the vet’s office is like while also highlighting some of the observations I’ve made throughout the three years that I have been working there. I hope to portray the different kinds of emotions that we, the assistants, deal with every work day and how it is important for each of us to understand these emotions well enough to handle different situations effectively.
The First Year

My first year working at Genki Pet can be described in one word: panic. There seemed to be an overwhelming amount of things I had to learn, and I knew I had to learn them fast to make a good impression on the doctor, who would hopefully be writing my future letter of recommendation.

I remember shadowing the main vet assistant, Stacy, and being constantly scared of what she thought of my bumbling newness to the job. My first task was to observe what she and Dr. Au did in the rooms during appointments. I clutched my freshly-bought notepad and jotted down everything I knew I would forget, paying close attention to where she stood, what she asked, and how she acted. I even learned the whole SOAP format (subjective, objective, assessment, plan) used in taking histories: my first medical lingo! After a couple weeks, she handed me a file and told me, “Here, take the history.”

I froze. I couldn’t remember anything I had seen or heard her do in the past several days. I was so grateful that those clients were being nice about it, because I was standing there sweating for what seemed like forever until Stacy stepped in.

Stacy: (softly) Ask them if Kona’s been okay.
Me: How has Kona been?
Client: He’s actually been coughing a lot recently. Like he’s trying to hack up a hairball or something.
*silence*
Stacy: Ask her when she first noticed it.
Me: When did you first notice him coughing?

It basically went on like that for the whole three minutes we were in there. I felt like a failure. How could my mind not even register how to ask logical questions anymore?

I decided to try harder. I would be the greatest worker anyone had ever seen. My goal was simple: impress Stacy. My fear was that one day I would do something so stupid, so careless, that Stacy would whack me upside the head and call me a moron.
This was probably because she always looked stern. Maybe more pissed off, but I liked to think she was just serious all the time. It really kept me on my toes.

I found out with glee that I excelled at non-verbal tasks. Writing up lab stuff? I could write down what test we were going to do and fill in all the client information on the form like a machine. Centrifuging blood? My skills were unmatched. Writing up stuff on the board? Perfect. Superb, even.

But every time we were in the room, I regressed from greatest-worker-on-the-whole-damn-planet to a deer in the headlights. I guess it was my own fault. I was always the kind of person who liked to sit in the middle of class, didn’t ask questions, and made minimal to no conversation with the people next to me. I was the typical quiet Japanese girl taking up space with my silence. But it was okay, because being quiet made you the “smart” one. Being quiet was safe. I hung out with my friends from high school and had no real interest in meeting or talking to other people.

But that obviously had no place in this clinic, this room, where normal people talked. Now I was at a job where I had to talk to people (who I just met) about their pet (which I also just met) about their problems. I think Stacy felt a little sorry for me, her little mute apprentice, so she taught me how to hold dogs while Dr. Au checked them out. This was probably in effort to make me seem more competent; you can’t mess up holding a dog.

My silence/shyness was a hindrance that had to swiftly be kicked out the door. That was accomplished the day I met Mrs. Tanabe’s dog, the meanest Chihuahua in the history of the world. Dr. Au introduced me to the woman, who was slightly off her rocker herself, as the “newbie” come to meet her dog. She laughed, telling me, “You betta watch yo’ fingahs now, she gon’ chomp ‘em off.” Lovely.

Stacy helped Dr. Au get the little dog out of the bag with minor difficulties and had a firm grip on her head. “Here, hold onto her head,” she told me. As soon as I replaced her hands with mine, the dog freaked. She gave me one glance and started snarling, trying to writhe and squirm her body out of our grasp as her crazy owner just laughed.

“Hold on tight, or she’ll bite both of us,” Stacy warned. I think I was in too much shock to do anything else. It was like a rabid alien had been put into my care, and the
only way to calm the beast was to hold onto its head while the doctor cleaned her ears and looked her over.

After that appointment, my hands were shaking. They were cramped in the position of holding under the dog’s jaw and the back of her head. I didn’t really snap out of it till Stacy passed me later, saying, “Good job. Daisy is pretty hard to handle. Just remember, don’t let go.” Did Stacy just compliment me? Oh my gosh! She didn’t think I was a loser! I grinned pathetically like she had thrown me a bone, then went back to working harder than ever.

These were the veterinary assistants I worked with for the first year of my employment at Genki Pet: Stacy, Niki, Alicia, Alexis, Jess N, Devin, and Jess O.

**Stacy:** Maybe mid to late 30s, tanned skin, skinnier side. She was always stern, but nice.

**Niki:** Year younger than me with a cute face, like an Asian bunny. I recognized her from high school. She was nice, but with an obvious popular-girl personality. She was into talking about bags, nails, and piercings.

**Alicia:** Year younger than me, my height, kind of stocky. She was also from the same high school and liked the dark eyeliner and Playboy bunny necklaces. She started several weeks before I did. We talked sometimes, but it was always about her druggie boyfriend and her sexual encounters with him.

**Alexis:** Several years older, very tall, skinny, blonde model-type. We got to know each other basically by being in the same room.

**Jess N:** Several years older, tall, stocky, smiled a lot. She started a couple weeks after I did, also went to the same high school, and was very quiet. I learned that she was pretty smart academic-wise.

**Devin:** Several years older, blonde hair, blue eyes, clean-cut. Very friendly, but very hard-core Christian. I tried to avoid working with him lest he sneak in the “So have you been to church recently?” conversation.

**Jess O:** Several years older, on the shorter side, with a kind face and a surfer girl tan. She was several years older and we got along great, but she only worked on Saturdays.

These were the non-assistants:

**Dee:** Maybe early 30s, petite, nice. She worked at the front desk.
Steffanie: Probably late 20s, blonde hair, brown eyes. She was about my height but more voluptuous with arched brows and a strong opinion on things.

Laura: Dr. Au’s wife. Tall and thin with reddish brown hair and huge brown eyes. I couldn’t guess her age (older), and her laugh was really loud.

Dee and Laura worked primarily as receptionists, so I never really had much reason to talk to them. The only person I really got to know that first year was Jess O. Even though she was more Jess N’s age, our personalities matched and we talked to each other about all kinds of things. Saturdays were days I started to look forward to, and the eight hours of work didn’t seem so bad anymore with her there to talk to. At least there was one person I didn’t have to feel so inferior to.

One major hurdle during that first year was getting along with the doctor himself. For some reason, I never seemed to be able to even make eye contact with him. He always kind of stalked around, scolded people, and yelled at us to hurry up. But it was important to be able to communicate with him, my boss, so I bucked up and made myself talk to him. First, Stacy made me tell him about the appointment.

Me: Hi, um, so, Fluffy’s in the first room for a nail trim…
Him: What? I hear a little mouse talking. You’re gonna have to speak up, or nobody’s gonna understand you.
Me: Fluffy…
Him: What?
Me: FLUFFY! Is in the first room! For a nail trim!
Him: Okay, that’s better.

I had to choke my voice out to avoid further humiliation, but I got used to it. As time went on, my responses to his questions came quicker, louder, and with more assurance. I even took the initiative to talk to him when there was downtime; I asked him well thought-out questions pertaining to certain cases I didn’t understand, hoping he would notice I was eager to learn and get out of my shell. I even asked him about his experience in vet school, which he seemed to like. I was moving up!
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The Morning Crap

It’s Saturday. I pull open the double glass doors and step into the stale, cool air of the clinic. The bell at the top of the door clinks as it closes behind me. The lone peach-colored bench in our waiting room area casts shadows on our dirty speckled floor, and the scale on the other side looks like it’s starting to lean a little. I head down the hallway towards the swinging wooden door, my heavy-sounding footsteps making Pinkie, Dee’s little white Pomeranian, go into a fit of excessive, high-pitched yapping.

I bend down to greet her. “Hi Pinks! Hi Pinks! Aww, you’re sho cute! Hi hi hi hi!” She jumps around on her tiny little feet, eating up the attention and savoring the fact that she is the first one I always greet.

“Hi Dee,” I say. She waves from her sandwich.

“Hi Ollie, Oscar, Rod, Charlie.” The cats look up, then back down to finish their food. Walking past the cages in the treatment area and into the kitchen, I get a whiff of it—a thick, pungent cloud of stink.

“What the HELL happened in here?! Is that Fugly?? Gross!” I toss my bag in the lower cabinet and plunk my water bottle down on the microwave on the counter above. The greatest way to start the day: a cage full of stepped-on crap. I roll my eyes and grab the scraper, a plastic bag, and the Roccal bottle.

“Oh my GOD, what is that??” Kerri throws her bag in with mine in the cabinet.

“Fugly. It’s always Fugly. You wanna give him a bath while I clean his cage?”

“Yeah, sure. Uuugh, he reeks, too!” She grabs the little pug and holds him out in front of her, plunking him down in the tub. I set to scraping the caked-on crap from the walls of the kennel, flooding it with disinfectant. Allie and Kylie come in a couple minutes later.

“Oh NO.” Al shakes her head at Fugly, who looks pathetically out of the tub while Kerri suds him down again. “It’s gonna be one of those days.”

After Fugly is back in his cage, we take care of everybody else. Good thing we’re pretty empty today: only Neko and Princess. Neko, the grey tabby that’s boarding here, hisses after Allie gives her her pill, then goes on meowing. The little lovebird, Princess, chirps happily from his (it’s a boy) cage as Dee opens the door and pets his head. Kerri
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goest to check the fax machine for lab results, and I go to the front desk to check the schedule book.

“One dental, one dog neuter,” I announce as the swinging door closes behind me.

“Dog dental?” Allie asks, looking over her shoulder from cleaning the cats’ bowls in the sink.

“Yup. Buddy…Murata I think? His owner is the police officer guy. And the dog spay is that little Shih Tzu that came in the other day.”

“Oh…Buddy. He’s okay. The Shih Tzu’s a little schizo.”

“Really? Great…"

The phone in the treatment area rings. Kerri scrambles to get it, but I get there first.

“Hel-lo?”

“Krislyn? Appointment,” Dee says.

Regulars and Royalty

I push past the swinging wooden door and into the waiting room. A small girl and her father look up from the peach bench expectantly, the dad holding the handle of a purple mesh backpack with wheels that’s resting by his feet. I smile at them. The Fujiwaras always come in first thing in the morning every three weeks or so to get Cookie’s nails trimmed. Easy appointment, no problems.

“Hello! Cookie’s here for just nails again today?”

“Yup!” the dad says, “Just a nail trim, as usual.”

I motion them into the first room on the right after I grab their file from Dee at the front desk, then close the door behind me. “So, everything fine? No problems?”

“Nope,” the girl says, peeking into the little backpack housing the brown rabbit. “Alrightey.” I look up at her and squint a little. “Ooohh, you got braces! Cool colors!”

The girl giggles shyly. “Thank you. They’re kinda sore.”
“Yeah, I hated when I had to get mine tightened all the time, too,” I say as I get out a towel and the small nail trimmer from the drawers on the other side of the table. “Well, I'll let Dr. Au know and he'll be right in!”

“Thank you!” she says as I close the door. I love the Fujiwaras.

By now, Dr. Au has come in and checked the board if we finished everything. Kerri has some blood test results ready for him in the tray under the phone, so he calls those owners before taking my appointment.

“Cookie Fujiwara in the first room for toenail trim, no problems,” I say when he gets off the phone. Simple and to the point, just how he likes it.

He doesn’t look up from the notes he’s making in a file, but I know he hears me. I turn to pet Oliver, who takes a swipe at my hand then goes to sit down in the sink. Shaking my head, I turn on the faucet for him. He sticks his paw out under the thin stream of water and licks it from his leg. Weirdo.

Dr. Au gets up and heads for the door, my cue to follow him. He goes straight to the first room, I hand him the file, and he opens the door.

“Goood morning!” he says, loud and clear. “How’s little Cookie doing today?”

“Fine, she’s doing great,” Mr. Fujiwara says.

Dr. Au sits down on the floor and I pass him the towel, the cat scale, and a stethoscope. He turns to zip the mesh of the backpack open and scoops the rabbit out and onto his lap.

“Cookie, you’re such a nice bunny, so soft,” he says, petting her for a bit before placing her on the scale. “One point two kilos.” He goes on to do a quick exam before getting to the nails, saying methodically, “Clean makas, clean nose, teeth aren’t too long, clean ears, my tummy is clean, no mats, nice fuzzy feet…” I squat down to pass him the nail trimmer, then place one of my hands over Cookie’s eyes to keep her calm. He trims her nails with no problems.

“Alright Fujiwaras, your bunny is all ready to go!” Dr. Au places Cookie back in her backpack and zips it closed. “See you in three weeks!” I steer Cookie’s owners to the front desk as Kerri and Kylie herd the two Westies and their owner into the room.
“Al, Shin’s next,” I complain. Al looks up from folding towels by the washer/dryer in the kitchen.

“Ooohh, your favorite person,” she says, patting my back playfully.

“Meh…” I say, grabbing my water bottle. She laughs.

“Ohh Krislyn, she’s not that bad. Don’t worry, I’ll deal with her.”

I’ve never gotten used to that scary Korean woman ever since she told me to go away that one time. I get a small towel and the Roccal to wipe off the scale in the front.

“Good job, Krislyn, good job, now hurry up, she’s here already,” Al says, leaping to the front desk to get the files. I sprint to the back to toss the towel in the wash.

“You already wipe?” Shin asks in her sharp Korean accent, motioning at the scale. Her miniature Schnauzer and Maltese are yapping like crazy from the stroller, and her older Maltese shakes his head blindly in her arms.

“Yes, yes, Krislyn wiped it twice, just for you,” Al says with mock enthusiasm. Shin eyes the scale, but seems satisfied with my cleaning competence. Al carries her miniature Schnauzer out of the stroller and places him on the scale.

“Sixteen point seven,” Al says.

“Wha?? I just weigh Kana yesta day, he not dat hebbby,” she argues. “Weigh him again.”

“OH my gosh, fine, I’ll weigh him again,” Al says deliberately. This time it’s sixteen point eight.

“Wha?? Kana not dat hebbby. Your scale, wrong, he not dat hebbby.”

“FIINE, let’s say he’s fifteen, then,” Al says. “C’mon, let’s go to the back already.”


In the back exam room, Shin tells us she wants the usual: ears, nails, and Oravet for all of them. I put our cleanest towel on the table before she has a chance to order us to, then we leave. For everyone else we usually do the ears and nails, but she only trusts Dr. Au to do it “correctly.”

“Oh my GOSH, she’s a pain in the ass,” Al says as we go to look for Dr. Au.

“She seems to like you, though.”

Al laughs. “Cuz I give her crap all the time, and she thinks it’s funny.”
Kerri pushes past the swinging door hollering, “He’s almost done in the first room!” She runs to get vaccinations from the fridge, draws it up with lightning speed, then speed-walks back to the first room. I watch the front through the small window in the swinging door till I see Dr. Au coming.

Al hands him the files and tries not to laugh. She puts on a straight face and says, “It’s Empress Shin.”

He cracks a smile, then slides the door open.

“Empress Shin,” he drawls, motioning for Al and me to pick up Kana. Shin laughs at the name and nods approvingly.

“Ho, they got new clothes again?” he continues. “So spoiled, these dogs.”

“Yeah, they my bebees,” she says, grabbing the “Prince Charming” T-shirt out of Al’s hands as soon as we take it off of Kana.

Dr. Au does a quick exam of the mini Schnauzer, then sets to work cleaning the ears and trimming the nails. He has no problems wiping Kana’s teeth and applying the plaque preventer, and we put Kana back in the stroller as soon as he’s done. We do the same for little Coco despite her wiggling, then it’s Robbie’s turn.

“He better not bite me this time, now,” Al says, looking over her shoulder at Shin.

“He don’ laik you des why,” Shin laughs.

Al grabs the little white dog out of Shin’s arms and places him on the towel. He shakes his head and keeps his cloudy eyes wide open. Al has a firm hold on his head.

“Bite her, Robbie,” Shin says, loud enough for Al to hear.

“OH my gosh, do you hear what she said?!” Al exclaims at Dr. Au half jokingly.

Dr. Au laughs, but finishes rubbing the Oravet on Robbie’s teeth.

“Robbie too tired today, des why he don’ bite you,” Shin laughs, taking Robbie into her arms again. “You lucky.”

“We’re allllways lucky to have visits by your royal highness,” Dr. Au drawls again, opening the door and motioning us all out. Shin laughs and nods.

“Don’ warry, Robbie will bite you nex time,” she says with a grin.
Work Ethics

After working at Genki Pet for the while, several things puzzled me. I guess you could say these things were my own misconceptions about how things were and weren’t supposed to be in a workplace. Misconception #1 was that we were supposed to treat all clients the same. It’s only fair, I thought, that no client should get better treatment from us than another. Right?

It was definitely clear that this wasn’t the case. I noticed that certain clients got discounts because they had been coming to us for so long or were close friends. These were the people we didn’t need to be so formal with, and they seemed relaxed when they came in. With some clients Stacy joked around and teased sometimes, while with others it was all business. When I was doing appointments alone, I even got close with a funny old woman, Mrs. Coen, who always brought in her lovebirds. She always asked how I was doing in school, what my plans were, etc., and I started to understand that everyone, even me, was biased towards certain people.

Was this unfair of us, though? Did the guy who never smiled or the woman who nagged about the price of her dog’s medication deserve the same kind of friendly, happy service as the rest of them? This ethical dilemma was driving me crazy, so I did a quick online search on the subject and found a book titled *The Elements of Ethics*, by W. Brad Johnson and Charles R. Ridley. “Equal treatment in its purest form implies doing the exact same things to and for all of our clients and consumers,” it said, but “[u]nfortunately, this policy is rigid, legalistic, and insensitive to the unique needs, interests, goals, and aspirations of individuals.” This section was talking about counseling, but it got the point across. “Equitable treatment” was the goal, not equal treatment. I wasn’t doing anything wrong!

I didn’t really understand the extent of this whole “equitable treatment” thing till Hina came in. Hina was a little Shih Tzu who had recently been diagnosed with cancer, and every week she came in was a little sadder than the last. Cancer treatment for dogs is about once a week for about three months, and the effects of the chemo were starting to become apparent. Her hair was thinning, her eyes were tired, and her weak little body had to be carried by one of her two loving owners. Being friendly and happy if the dog has cancer would definitely not be “fair.” That was the end of Misconception #1.
Misconception #2 was that workers could/should not talk about personal things with their bosses. I had been working at the clinic for a few months, and one day Dr. Au asked if I had siblings. Harmless enough question. Then we started talking about my family, what side was what ethnicity, and on and on. It was really weird for me because my view of a “boss” was a distant, all-work-no-play person who didn’t delve into the lives of their lowly workers. Was I even allowed to be talking to him about this stuff? Was he going to fire me because I couldn’t remember my grandma’s maiden name on my dad’s side?

After a few awkward conversations of this nature, I noticed that Stacy talked to Dr. Au a lot about her daughter, how she was doing in school, etc. I felt better knowing that it wasn’t just me, but I still felt a little uneasy about the whole divulging of my life to my boss. Maybe it was because we were around him so much? Our clinic was pretty small, and it’s not like we had a “workers only” break area or anything. But what if he talked about what I said to other people? Was this breaking some kind of privacy rule? Was I reading into this too much?

After debating this with myself for a while, I came to the conclusion that my boss did not want to hit on me. He didn’t want to stalk me, and he didn’t think I was an alien or something. He was a human being, too, and human beings talk to each other. And our clinic was small. It would be weird, I realized, if we all went around not talking to our boss unless it was work-related. That would not be a very friendly, humane thing to do. So I let go of Misconception #2.

Probably the most glaringly wrong misconception was Misconception #3: that working at a veterinary clinic meant you dealt with animals more than with people. Looking back on this notion, I can’t believe how naïve I was to think this was the case. From the very first day of just observing how everybody worked, I was shocked to find that working at a veterinary clinic required the same amount, if not more talking than at a regular doctor’s office!

When I started to actually work, every appointment was kind of like an investigation where we, the assistants, were the leaders. It was crucial for us to know how to ask the right questions in order to receive the right information. If the dog had a lump? Ask them when they noticed it, if it’s gotten bigger, if it’s hard/soft, if it bothers the
dog, if it’s pigmented, and if it’s bleeding. If the bird had watery poop? Ask them about the eating and drinking habits, if it’s still active and vocal, if anything stressful has happened, etc. Good communication was the key to making everything run.

I didn’t realize how crucial communication was until very recently, when my dad found a lump on our dog, Bailey. It had grown to about the size of a golf ball seemingly overnight, so we were all deeply concerned that it could be cancer. This is the chain of events that followed:

1) We found a huge lump on Bailey, who is already a senior.
2) We took him to the vet he’s been going to all his life, who did a FNA (fine needle aspirate) on the lump to see what was in it. The vet sent the sample to the lab to do a biopsy. Lab results usually take about 2-3 days to come in.
3) After a week, we called about the results; they hadn’t received any yet.
4) The original lump got smaller, but we started finding more lumps around the original one.
5) After waiting several more days, we called again. My dad was put on hold twice, and never got back to.
6) I got fed up and called the clinic from our own office, demanding the biopsy results be sent over. They finally sent it over after calling a second time.
7) Dr. Au looked at the results: inconclusive.

I was furious. The rest of my family was furious. We waited for two weeks with no call, no nothing, just to get inconclusive results. If I hadn’t known the usual time span for test results to come in, we would still be waiting! It’s incredibly irresponsible for them to just keep us waiting with no word on anything. What if the lab did find cancer? We wouldn’t have known. Lack of communication, especially in critical situations, is unacceptable. Despite all of Dr. Au’s gruffness, I appreciate the fact that he knows the importance of communication and practices it religiously. He constantly drills it into our heads that we need to be better communicators, and now I know the weight those words carry.
Beer and Bitterness

"Initials of a stranded famous author," Al says to no one in particular. Kylie pulls up a chair and looks at the crossword puzzle.

"RLS? Robert Louis Stevenson?"

"Ohhh, it fits! Good job Kylie, you get a point for that one."

"Yay..." Kylie says, looking up at me and deadpanning a smile.

"But you still get ten points off for spilling coffee on me," Al continues. Kerri laughs from the second room where she's weighing Oliver.

"I didn't!" Kylie laughs, throwing her hands up in protest.

"Kylie," Al says with mock seriousness, "Why dyu have to be such a bully for."

"Oh my gosh!" Kylie says. They both laugh, then go back to looking at the crossword. Kerri and I head to the kitchen to check out the box of pastries Mrs. Miyata dropped off earlier that morning.

"Hey, so did you see the latest episode of Glee?" she asks, taking a bite of a pizza roll.

I take a ham roll out of the box. "Yeah! Oh my gosh, I couldn't believe he kissed Terri! She's so creepy, what the hell!"

"Seriously. Oh my god, and I hate Rachel so much, she needs to shut the hell up," Kerri says shaking her head. Oscar hears us munching and pads over to investigate. "Oh no, here's comes the pig." He reaches up and latches his tiny claws into my pants leg.

"Oh, fine, here," I tell him, tearing off a small piece of bread and putting it on the food container below the corkboard. He leaps on top and licks it up, then looks up for more. Oscar's the only one who eats non-meat things. Charlie, the old Siamese, sneaks up to see what he's missing. I drop a piece of ham for him, which he tentatively licks, then picks it up and runs away to eat it in private. We hear Dr. Au come into the treatment area, so we go out to see what he's doing. He glances down at Al and Kylie doing the crossword, then leans down on the table to take a closer look.

"Custer! Fifty-one down. Battle of Little Bighorn," he says, proud of his contribution. Kerri sits down with one of Dr. Au's small animal treatment textbooks next to the microscope, and I go to the front.
Rodney’s on the bench by the door, his greyish-blue hairs bristling as he watches the doves outside. His tail flicks back and forth, and his green eyes flash at me, then back at the birds. I sit down beside him and scratch his back, which immediately deters his attention, and he closes his eyes and purrs as I resume his bird-watching. After he jumps down to catch more sun, I go up to the front desk to talk to Dee.

“So, how’s this week been? Al said you guys were super busy yesterday.”

“Oh, yeah, Laura was squeezing lots of people in. We didn’t leave till after six, I think,” Dee says, shaking her head.

“Really? Yeesh.”

“What’s everybody doing in the back?”

“Al’s crossword. Hey, I heard Laura bought everybody beer the other day? What’s up with that?”

Dee rolls her eyes and says, “I don’t know… Al asked her, and she’s the favorite.” We both nod. Typical.

The bell on the door jingles, and Mrs. Kanemori comes in with her little long-haired dachshund, Brooke. “Hi! Brooke’s here for her annual!”

“Hello! You can go into the first room, I’ll be right with you!” I tell her. Dee and I sigh, and she stamps the file for me.

**The Princess and the Double-Agent**

In the business world, it’s all about networking: whether it to be to a friend, a relative, or acquaintance you were kind of nice to in class this one time, asking for a “favor” is all you need sometimes to get your foot in the door. Emphasis on family ties and people you know is exceptionally important in Hawaii because it’s so small. Yet, in our culture, sucking up to get ahead is basically looked down upon. Even in a small, private company it’s seen as despicable and sneaky…and it totally works.

But what drives people to suck up? Is it because they feel that their skills alone won’t give them the benefits they think they deserve? Or is it more of a personal thing, where they feel like they need to do everything humanly possible to get ahead?

After establishing a kind of alliance with my fellow coworkers, I was pretty secure in knowing we had each other’s backs. My original notion of boss vs. workers was still a
strong belief, and I could never picture any of my “friends” doing anything sneaky or underhanded. But I hadn’t worked there long enough just yet.

Several months after starting work, I started to get to know Alexis, the tall, model-type haole girl who didn’t work with me that often. She was okay to me, and we talked sometimes. I learned that she wanted to go to vet school, which is probably why Dr. Au had her read articles from the medical journals he received every so often. One time she even revealed to me that to her, Dr. Au was kind of a second father.

This was kind of surprising, because I never really thought about how you could see a boss in that way. I imagined how she must have a hard time getting along with her actual father, like how I felt sometimes, and I really empathized with her. I felt like she had shared a secret with me. Me! This aloof, indifferent girl who acted like she didn’t care about anything or anyone had divulged her secret feelings to me like a friend would. I was thrilled.

But I noticed that my other coworkers didn’t really seem to like her. At first I thought they were jealous of her closeness with Dr. Au, so I was determined to bring her situation to light. But I didn’t really get the chance.

Dee: I can’t believe Alexis got another raise again.
Me: She did?
Dee: Yeah! ‘Cuz she flirts and sucks up to him all the time! So gross.
Me: Does she do that a lot or something? ‘Cuz I don’t really notice…
Dee: Yeah! You know, she gets paid full time even thought she comes in only twice a week. And she gets insurance.
Me: She does?!

My first thought was: How do you flirt with someone you see as your…dad? That’s the grossest thing ever! My mind raced for answers. Maybe she just said that to make me think that…sneaky. I began watching her more closely to see if Dee was right. The next time I came in, Alexis was talking to Dr. Au about his letter of recommendation for her. He started talking about what a “beautiful woman” she was and how “beauty and talent” is rare, blah blah blah. No wonder Dee was nauseated. Maybe Dr. Au was
taking her “special attention” as romantic advances. Gross. But now everything made sense: the money, the cutesy way of acting, the letter of rec. Even Allie, who was the new girl at the time, had several run-ins with Alexis’ superiority complex.

**Allie:** She’s just a bitch. Once she was complaining about how since I started working here, she’s not the “favorite” anymore.

**Me:** Ew.

**Allie:** Yeah, but she thinks she’s above everyone. One time she was like, “I can’t believe we’re the same age. You’re so much more immature.”

**Me:** She said that to your face?!

**Allie:** Yeah! She’s a bitch!

I felt stupid. Why did she even bother feeding me that story about her “second father” and everything? Did she think I wouldn’t find out? I guess I just felt bad about it because I wasn’t really her friend. She probably told me that because she was bored or something. And maybe the distance she created with the rest of us made her think it wouldn’t matter, because it’s not like she’s close with us or anything. That had to be it.

After Alexis left for vet school, the only haole girl at the clinic was Allie. I liked Al. She was cool and more down-to-earth than most of the other people there, and her light-hearted personality was contagious. Work became a lot more enjoyable to come to because it didn’t seem so stiff anymore, so distant and rigid. Her jokes even made Dr. Au loosen up, which we all appreciated. I came to view Al as a friend, and even asked for her opinion on issues in my personal life. Because of this, it was all the more surprising when she started sucking up, as well.

The weird thing was that she was open about it. We knew she was sucking up, she knew we knew she was sucking up, and everybody seemed to be a lot better about it than with Alexis. Wasn’t it the exact same thing? Why didn’t I hate her for it, too? Maybe it was because she was already one of us. Alexis was never really part of our “group,” if you could call it that, and she never wanted to be. Al, on the other hand, was pretty cool with all of us before she started getting all buddy-buddy with the bosses. I
didn’t really notice it because I only worked a couple days a week, content in my happy little we’re-all-friends-here-whee! state of mind.

It was the day that disaster struck…literally. That Saturday morning we heard sirens, and on the radio there was a tsunami warning with the announcer advising people to stay off the roads. But, as usual, Laura said that we all had to come to work. The five of us, Dee, Al, Kylie, Jess N, and me, couldn’t stop bitching about it.

**Dee:** If I can’t go home because all the roads are closed, I am gonna kill her.

**Me:** I know! If that wave hits and we’re still here, I’m gonna be so pissed…

**Al:** She’s so frickin’ stupid. The roads are closed! Does she expect anyone to come in?

We spent about an hour calling everyone with appointments scheduled that day. It was a joke: we were pretty much the only idiots in our entire building complex to be at work in light of the impending tsunami. The usual conversation went like this:

**Us:** Hello, this is [name] calling from Genki Pet. We were just wondering if you were going to come in…

**Client:** You guys are at work? Aren’t they gonna close the roads?!

**Us:** Yeah… [or more sarcastically: Yuup, we’re here!]

**Client:** Oh you poor thing!

**Us:** Yeah…

Dee was pretty much ready to explode when Laura came in…two hours later…lugging a huge bag of her valuables, her birds, and her dogs. We couldn’t believe it. After Laura went to the front, Dee stormed to the back seething with rage.

**Dee:** How DARE she? And she was giving me all this crap about “It’s not gonna flood!”

**Al:** She’s so frickin’ selfish!

**Dee:** Fuck this, I’m going home. Sorry guys, I can’t deal with this anymore.
And she left. I helped her carry Pinks to the car and tried to calm her down, but I was getting pretty mad myself. Why did we have to be here? Didn’t they care about us? I told Dee to just go home and take care of herself, but she seemed especially worried about what Al and Laura would say about her. Why would Al talk about Dee to Laura? Weren’t they friends?

As soon as I came back in the door, I was bombarded with comments like “Dee’s area is fine, I don’t know why she’s still freaking out” and “Is Dee making you freak out, too? Just relax, Krislyn, nothing’s gonna happen” from both Laura and Al. Al, who had just been bitching about Laura, was now taking her side! I was too confused for words, so I just shrugged and went in the back. Laura followed me.

“Don’t freak out, now, Krislyn. If you wanna go home, I’ll take you home, I don’t want you freaking out now.”

It was like she was trying to force the whole “freaking out” thing on me. Yeah, it was only Laura, Al, and I left (she told Kylie and Jess N to go home, and Dee left), but it wasn’t like I was crying in a corner or something. This was probably her weird way of coping. It was just really bizarre, so I humored her and let her take me home.

Local newscasters were giving updates on the waves every couple of minutes, but after a couple hours came an announcement that the main wave that was supposed to hit had only been a couple inches high. I texted Dee to see how she was doing; she was still pretty pissed.

**Dee:** Al just texted me. She said Laura’s sorry for being stupid…yeah right! She probably said it sarcastically. You know they were talking about me the whole time >:-(

**Me:** She’s probably gonna give us flack about going home since nothing happened…great -_-

**Dee:** I think they left at lunch. We shouldn’t care what she thinks! She’s a selfish, evil person. I hope karma bites her in the butt. :|

**Me:** Yeah. That’s gonna be a LOT of bachi after everything she’s done already.
Al’s sucking up scarred our relationship with her, but we knew it wouldn’t stop anytime soon. She would still play both sides, and she would still get “secret” raises we weren’t supposed to find out about. We wouldn’t resent her as much as Alexis, but we definitely thought twice about trusting her. It’s like Edgar H. Schein said about the culture of an organization: “The strength and degree of internal consistency of a culture are, therefore, a function of the stability of the group, the length of time the group has existed […]” She was still part of “us,” just not exclusively.

I think a big part of it was that the rest of us were just too scared to suck up. It wasn’t the Japanese-y thing to do. We feared for the cohesiveness of the group, the collective, too much to worry about ourselves. And it wasn’t like it was Japan, where people needed to suck up to move up. Here, sucking up wouldn’t even be worth the stigma that resulted from it; there’s no solidarity in standing alone.

The Quiet Deceiver

In the beginning, Dr. Au’s wife, Laura, was just kind of…there. She didn’t really do or say anything that hugely affected me, and nobody really talked to her that much except for Dee, since they both sat at the front desk. She was, to me, the boss’s wife, my “other” boss, whose duties were unclear to me. I learned from Dee that she was kind of our “office manager,” and I just assumed she did everything she was supposed to like the rest of us. But that was then.

I’m not exactly sure why she changed so drastically. In the first year nobody really said much about her, and I noticed that Stacy was kind of friends with her and Dee. I always overheard them talking about Stacy’s ex-husband, handbags, and good stores to go to, and the three of them seemed pretty close. It might’ve been because Stacy quit, it might’ve been because we’d had a string of bad workers (like Alicia, who liked to make out with her boyfriend by the front desk and take whiffs of sevoflurane gas in surgery to “relax” in the morning), but Laura slowly went from a friendly, understanding “other boss” to an untrusting, paranoid, “chang” person whose goal in life was to drive everyone crazy.

Now it just feels weird talking to her. She seems normal when we’re all chatting at lunch, but when we’re back at work she goes into a different world. The other
assistants and I do most of our work in the back, so it’s noticeable when she comes in the back to fiddle with things. She’s neurotic in the way she marches past the swinging door, checks the temperature of the A/C, then marches back up front. A couple minutes later she marches back again, opens the drier to feel the still-wet towels, closes it, turns it back on, then marches back up. She does this even when there’s a mob of people to attend to up front, and it never makes sense.

Her behavioral change has also affected her ability to run the clinic. As our office manager, we have to inform her if we run out of something, if something breaks, etc. We write it on the notepad she leaves for us and leave reminders on her desk, but she never gets around to it till Dr. Au is breathing down her neck. This is especially frustrating when we tell her weeks before we actually run out of something; she waits till the last minute anyway and blames everyone else when it gets her in trouble.

(after Dr. Au yells at her about her responsibilities as an office manager)

**Her:** I told you guys to let me know earlier when we were running out of vaccs!

**Al:** I did! I told you like, last week! I put the old one on your desk with a note and everything! It says: LAURA, GET MORE VACCS.

**Her:** Well, I called the company to order more. I don't know what’s taking them so long, I called them a week ago.

**Dee:** (to Al, after Laura goes in the back) She’s such a frickin’ liar, I heard her ordering it on the phone like, half an hour ago.

To me, these blame games were relatively minor until Laura’s niece’s dog, Roxy, had puppies. They were the cutest little scruff balls, and Laura brought Roxy and her three puppies to the clinic every day so we could keep and eye on them. Roxy, who we all had seen since she was a puppy herself, totally trusted us with them, so I went to hold them whenever there was free time. I especially adored the dirty-brown girl, who was content to snooze in my arms instead of roll around with her brothers.

After they were several weeks old, Laura began asking around if anyone wanted to buy them. Most people were interested in the playful, shorter-haired male, so he was claimed quickly. The other longish-haired male was put on hold for another client, so
soon it was only the girl, now named Sadie, who came with Roxy to run around at the office. I loved how she flopped around like the clumsy puppy she was, slipping on the tile sometimes and lying there like she meant to do that. She was so cute that when my boyfriend, Brandon, came to pick me up from work, I brought her out to show him.

“Is this that little dog you were telling me about?” he asked, stroking her soft, but slightly wiry hair as she stared at him from the security of my arms.

“Yeah! Wanna carry her? She’s super calm,” I told him. He put her on his lap. She sat comfortably, looking around at the waiting area, then sniffed at Brandon’s hand as he rubbed her ears.

“You should take her home,” Dee called from the front desk.

“I can?” Brandon asked, excited now.

“Yeah, ask Laura! I don’t think she found anybody yet.”

We discussed it with Laura, who enthusiastically agreed that Brandon should ask his parents about adopting Sadie, then take her home the following Friday. As soon as he got home that Saturday, his plan was to clean the house up, talk to his parents, tell them (especially his dad) that Sadie was nice, quiet, and didn’t shed much, then bring her home. Laura texted me about four days later to check up on his progress:

**Her:** Hi Krislyn, What did Brandon’s dad say about the puppy?

**Me:** He didn’t tell him yet because he’s still cleaning the house.

I thought, “This is responsible of her, checking to see how things are going so that Sadie’s new home is well-prepared for. How nice.” But that did not prepare us for what she texted me just four hours later.

**Her:** Hi Krislyn, Sadie found a home with our friends & client of 20 yrs. I wasn’t sure if Brandon’s dad would let him have a dog.

**Me:** What?! He was just cleaning a lot in preparation, we didn’t know he had a time limit.

**Her:** I wasn’t looking for anyone, she & her husband came in & saw Sadie up front & the next thing I knew she was taking her home.
Me: Aww, okay. It’s just that he asked you if he could take her home Friday, so he was gonna ask tonight.

What did she mean, “Next thing I knew she was taking her home”? She obviously let them! Why the hell would she do that when she told us we could take her home on Friday?! Brandon was pretty pissed, as was I, so at work the next day I asked around about what happened. Dee, who’s usually at the front, had been in the back talking to Al at the time, so she didn’t know about what was going on until Sadie was already gone. But Steffanie was in the front.

Stef: I can’t believe she told you that. She brought Sadie up to show them! The lady didn’t even know about her till Laura was like, “Do you guys want a puppy?”

Me: But…she told me those people like, fell in love with her and everything, so that’s why she let them take her home…

Stef: No. She was totally trying to sell her to them. I can’t believe she had already promised Sadie to you! Oh my god!

I felt dead. I couldn’t believe she could just lie to my face, and when there was a witness no less! Everyone told me to talk to her about it, make her understand that Sadie was mine, so I nurtured my burning wrath till she waltzed in to work. I imagined her dying inside from the guilt of it every time she saw me. It was a great way to make myself feel better, until she decided it was time to talk to me.

Her: So what did Brandon say? (very concerned)

Me: Well, he was really sad, since you told him he could take her home on Friday. He even bought her some bowls and toys already.

Her: Awww. (like I had just told her my dog died or something)

Me: (in a very strategic passive aggressive manner) I guess he has to return everything now. And his dad said yes, you know.

Her: Awww. (very concerned about my imaginary dead dog) Does he want another dog? I can call up breeders and see if they have any puppies, you know!
Me: No, that’s okay. He just wanted Sadie.

Her: (not listening) I’ll go call up my friend and see if she knows any puppies available.

Wow. She gave the dog away, and now she was trying to make it up by finding us another one. Really? She obviously felt guilty about it or she wouldn’t have offered to get us another puppy. Unfortunately, we can’t do anything about it, and I know she’s never gonna change. As long as we work here, we’ll just have to deal with it one way or another.

**Practiced Procedures, Normal Surprises**

“Alright, that was our last appointment,” Al announces.

“Kay, we just gave Buddy the Ami and Oreo the pre-op,” Kerri says, crossing it off on the whiteboard. Kylie and I go to set up for the neuter in surgery (also the second exam room), so Al goes to ask Dr. Au if we should do the dental first. Kylie gets out a surgery pack, gloves, and sutures while I refill the sevoflurane and test the endotracheal tubes. We set up the lights at the right end of the table, and I go to get the clippers.

“Kylieee, you wanna help me hold for the dental?” Al calls.

“Can she carry him? He’s like eighty pounds, right?” I call back.

Kylie looks at me and goes, “Yeahh, I don’t know…”

“Well, fine, we’ll get him on the table, first,” Al says. “But I can’t do the dental with you, Krislyn. We have bad luck together.”

“Why, what happened?” Kerri asks. Al and I look at each other. We tell her about the dental from hell, the timid Italian greyhound that flipped out the moment we tried to lay him on his side. How we were speechless, her holding onto his head and me trying to hold onto his body despite his kicking, screaming, and pissing. How Al had to use her elbow to open the cage door, and how Mischa kept snarling at us after we finally got it closed. She looks at us in disbelief. “Wow…that sucks.”

“Yup,” I say. I help Al lift Buddy on the table.

Large dogs are usually the easiest dentals, so Al finishes in about forty-five minutes. Dr. Au comes to check her work with a technique called “subgingival
curettage.” It’s basically using the skinny, sharp metal curette to remove whatever calculus or buildup is on the tooth under the small overhang of gums. Al gets the go-ahead to polish, so I go to get Oreo. Kerri takes out our masks, and after Al finishes polishing we take Oreo into surgery.

“We’re starting!” Kerri yells to Dr. Au in his office. We lie Oreo down on the table and I hold him while Kerri pre-oxygenates him (since he’s brachycephalic, or a smashed-face breed). After several minutes we knock him out with the sevo. Kerri intubates him and I hook him up to the monitor. Al gets the stethoscope and takes down numbers for starting heart rate and breaths per minute, and Kylie uses the clippers to trim around the surgery site so she can scrub it. Our movements are quick and practiced, and Dr. Au’s main job is to perform the surgery itself. While he works, we monitor Oreo.

“Hey Al, where do you wanna go eat today?” I ask after she finishes giving Dr. Au a new data set recording heart rate, breaths per minute, sevo level, oxygen level, oxygen saturation, color, and capillary refills.

“I don’t know, I’m kinda feelin’ Arby’s today,” she says, putting the stethoscope back around her neck.

“Oh my god, Arby’s sounds awesome! I’m like, starving right now,” Kerri says. We hear loud thump and heavy footsteps above us.

“Krislynnn, your friends are saying hi to you!” Al teases. I make a face at her.

“You know, I was totally fine until I found out nobody has stairs to the attic except us. I hope he doesn’t come downstairs, or I am going to freak out.” I glance at Oreo’s breathing, then lean back against the wall.

“It’s okay, Krislyn, maybe they’re just beings from another dimension. They’re just trying to get home!” Al says, now perched on the counter.

“I don’t care. If I see that man you saw or the little boy they saw next door, I’m still gonna freak out.”

“Ghosts need friends too, you know, Krislyn.”

“Turn the gas off,” Dr. Au interjects. I turn it off, and Al jumps down from the counter. Dr. Au finishes the stitch, then takes the drape off of the unconscious little Shih
Tzu. Kylie reaches for the hydrogen peroxide to clean up the area around the stitches and Kerri runs to take the water bowl out of Oreo’s cage.

“Oreoooo, wake up!!” Al sings as I unhook everything. Oreo keeps snoozing, so Al carries him to his kennel and rubs his body to wear off the sevo’s effect. After a while, the little dog’s eyes open and he gags on the tube. “Gooood boy!” she says, taking out the tube once he’s swallowed. Kerri carries the trash with the bloody gloves and drape to our bin and gives Kylie the instruments to wash. I turn off the oxygen and the SurgiVet monitor before turning off the light and closing the door. *We’re done pretty early, it’s only twelve.*

Dee comes in the back looking for Dr. Au. After he finishes talking to Oreo’s owners on the phone, she says something to him and he immediately gets up and heads to the front.

“Clancy’s owners want to put him down,” she tells me after he leaves.

“Whaat? What happened?”

“They found him lying on the bottom of the cage this morning, barely breathing,” Dee says shaking her head. “Poor thing.”

Our work is quieted as soon as Dr. Au escorts the sad couple to the second exam room. I quickly go in the room to give the teary-eyed couple a new box of Kleenex. She’s cradling the little parakeet in her hands, and her husband smiles at me gratefully. I give him a sad smile back, but leave the room. Kerri gives me a concerned look from the desk, and I see Al getting a tag out from the top drawer. We speak in hushed voices, filling in Clancy’s information on the tag. She puts it in her pocket till the couple leaves.

Dr. Au emerges from his office with a small vial, and we watch as he extracts some of the pink liquid into a syringe. He makes sure there’s no bubbles in it, then goes back into the room. We wait in the treatment area watching the seconds on the clock above the whiteboard tick by, then the door opens. Dr. Au murmurs condolences to the couple as he leads them, now empty-handed, back to the front. We wait a little more till the swinging door closes behind them, then the four of us tentatively peek into the second room.
Animal Culture

Clancy looks even tinier lying in the middle of the steel table. Al takes the tag out of her pocket along with a couple of small plastic bags. She carefully places him in the small box his owners left beside him, and Kerri and I help hold open the plastic bags to put the box in. Kylie ties the tag around the knot in the bag and takes it to the freezer. The whole procedure is silent, and we wander around wiping down counters or just sitting quietly till we leave for lunch at one.

The Many Levels of Heartbreak

When you’re working at a veterinarian’s clinic, death is one of the first things you need to get used to. Animals don’t live as long as humans, and it’s sad when a pet that was healthy and spry one year is coming in to be euthanized the next due to cancer or some other horrible disease. Over the past few years, my coworkers and I all have had our share of deaths we’ve seen; it’s never, ever an easy thing to deal with. But we have to, because it’s our job, and if we have to buck up and hold off a vein for Dr. Au to inject the deadly pink liquid in, so be it. It’s hard.

The worst death I’ve ever had to experience was Cleo’s. Cleo was a cute little calico that loved to have her face rubbed and her head scratched. She was one of my favorite cats, and I loved when she’d come to board with us when her owners went on vacation. But this time, she came in because she’d stopped eating. This wasn’t very unusual: lots of animals stop eating when they’re not feeling well. She would stay with us for a couple of days to be monitored and tube-fed, then go home if she felt better. But she didn’t get better, so her owners gave us the “OK” for her to stay and be monitored a bit longer.

It was a Saturday. We were doing the afternoon feedings, and we took Cleo out on the exam table to help hold her while Dr. Au gave her the osterized cat food. Jess O held Cleo’s chin and the back of her head. Allie used her forearms to hold Cleo’s body while she held her front legs in place. Dr. Au quickly slid the long slender orange tube down her throat and began squeezing the food out. Cleo struggled harder than usual, straining against Allie’s grip and trying to scream despite the tube down her throat. She immediately began choking up the food as soon as Dr. Au took the tube out, then tried
to gulp down a huge breath of air. Her eyes rolled back and her movements slowed. Oh, shit.

“Get her on oxygen. NOW.” We sprang into action, Allie carrying Cleo into surgery while Jess O hooked up the machine. I took over holding Cleo. Allie dashed to the kitchen area to get the nasal aspirator. Jess O and I stared intensely at Cleo and her convulsing chest. Is she…dying? Dr. Au ordered me to hold Cleo’s jaw open, scooping out the liquid food with his fingers. He snatched the nasal aspirator from Allie and tried sucking out more food from her windpipe. More food came out, but she still couldn’t breathe. Her eyes began to glaze over, and her body went limp. Dr. Au threw it on the side.

“Gimme a tube.” Jess O grabbed an endotracheal tube and thrust it into his hands. I watched mechanically as he put the tube in and, with his mouth on the other end, tried to suck out the food that had poisoned her lungs. But Cleo was gone.

In the moment of silence that followed, the realization set in. We were too shocked to move, to breathe, to feel. Dr. Au shook his head.

“Asphyxiation,” he said, defeated, then walked out of the room. We could hear him calling Cleo’s owners, but for some reason that didn’t really matter. Cleo had been in my hands, in our hands, and now she was dead. Beautiful Cleo, that had just moments ago pushed her back appreciatingly into my hands as I pet her.

Jess O sank into one of the chairs. “Oh my god.”

I kept staring at the space in front of my eyes. Al got up to get some trash bags. Dr. Au came back in the room.

“Everybody okay? That was a pretty traumatic experience. Ask Laura if you can go to lunch early…get out of here for a while,” he said. We all nodded, then slowly shuffled out of the room.

Afternoon Chaos

“Oh my god, who are all those people waiting outside?!”

Al and I follow Dee’s eyes out of Laura’s car at Kylie standing among the crowd waiting for us to open the door.
“We’re like two minutes before two! How can we have that many appointments already??” Laura exclaims. We hurry out of the car. Al fumbles in her bag for the keys, and we dash to the back as Dee holds the door open for the rest of the people waiting.

“You’re late,” Dr. Au barks from his office. He never likes waking up from a nap to pandemonium.

I sprint back to the front after dumping off my stuff. I faintly hear Kerri yelling, “I’ll clock you in!” behind me, but I don’t take the time to make sure.

“Hello!” I say, bright and friendly, to the people wheeling in a crate with their tortoise. “Is this Eddy? We can take him to the back!” Al holds the swinging door open for them, and Kerri and Kylie skid around me to take the people with the squawking Eclectus parrot into the first room.

After Dr. Au finishes with the Eddy the tortoise, there’s already three more clients and their pets waiting in the front.

“Why is there so many frickin’ people?!” Al groans, obviously peeved. I shake my head and just sigh. There’s no time to think.

“Hello!” I say, a little more out of breath, “You can bring Brownie to the back!”

It gets worse when Laura suddenly decides to leave to do errands, leaving Dee alone at the front desk to deal with the people paying for their appointments as well as the people coming in to pick up prescriptions or buy food. “What the hell is going on?” I hiss at Dee as she passes me the next client’s file.

“Laura frickin’ told people they could come in even though she knew we were booked! AND she wrote down only two dogs for Nakasone when they said they were bringing all three! And now she’s not even here to deal with it!” Dee spits. I groan in frustration, but put on a smile before approaching another client.

“Hello! How’s Skippy doing? Let’s see how much you weigh today!”

It never ends.

Typical of busy days, we also seem to get walk-ins. Today’s is a Japanese couple with their Shiba Inu. Dr. Au’s still in the second room, so after getting the history for Skippy, I get the Kawasaki file and approach them next.

“Hello! We’re just waiting on a room right now. What is Sachi here for today?”
They confer together quietly in Japanese. I run through possible phrases I kind of remember to say in my head. *Omatase shimashita* (thank you for waiting)…*Sachi wa genki desu ka* (is Sachi okay?)…*I need to study my Japanese more*…

“Sho-t. R..rey-beezu,” the man says, glancing at his girlfriend’s electronic dictionary for confirmation.

“Oh! You’re traveling?” I ask them. *Hikōki is airplane*…

“Yes! Re-tah-n to Japan,” he says slowly, his eyes trying to make sure I understand.

“Oh, okay. Are you going on Japan Airlines?”

“Eh?” He pauses, looks at his girlfriend, then back at me.

“JAL?” I try. *I think that’s how they say it*…

“Ah! Hai! Jaa-ru.”

After I clear up everything with the Japanese people, I take a count of people now in the waiting room. It’s them, Cindy Taylor, who’s petting her long-haired Chihuahua, Daisey, and looking extra pissy today, a couple with their new puppy, and Anderson with his cockatoo. Perfect.

“We’re not gonna have time for those Japanese people, we’re packed!” Kerri says, exasperated, after she comes out of the second room. “And the woman in here with him is asking soo many questions! I’m gonna go out and ask if they wanna reschedule. This is ridiculous.”

“K,” I say, heading to the kitchen to get a food sample for the new puppy. *Please let this be over*…

**Closing Up**

Al sinks heavily into one of the chairs by the microscope.

“OH MY GOD, WORST DAY EVER!” she growls at the ceiling, spinning her chair around with her head resting on the back of it. I scoop Rodney up and take him to the office to put him in his cage. Oscar’s already snoozing in his little bed, and Al stands up to get Oliver. Kerri and Kylie come in the back after finishing their quick vacuum/mop job. Dr. Au turns off the light in his office and leans on the table in the treatment area.

“So, what are you gonna do about your old-fut dog?” he asks me.
“Go over there and yell at them. And I made an appointment next week so you can look at the lumps. I can’t believe they didn’t tell us anything. So mad.”

He nods once, then heads out.

“Ugh, I need a drink,” Al says, dragging her bag out of the cabinet.

I sigh and do the same, tossing my phone and now-empty water bottle in with the rest of my things. Kylie clocks us all out, and we watch Dee as she puts down a puppy pad for Pinks. Kerri grunts as she leans on the wall near me.

“Gonna go out tonight?” I ask her.

“Eh, maybe,” she says, shrugging. “If anything later on tonight ‘cuz I need a nap, like, seriously.”

“Mm. I think I’m just gonna collapse on the couch and just stay there.”

“Yeah. I might not even wake up to go out, haha.”

After Dee gets all her stuff together, I pick up Pinks and we head to the front. Al turns off the lights as we leave, calling, “Good night, everybody!” to the office cats.

We sit on the peach-colored bench in the waiting area and watch the birds outside. Kylie and Kerri leave first, the bell jingling behind them. Al, Dee, and I sit for a little while, waiting till my ride comes. Al picks up Pinks.

“Ooooo, Pinkie!” she squeals, trying to mock the way Dee talks to her dog. “Dance dance, Pinkie, dance dance!” She holds Pinkie’s little body up and makes her legs swing from side to side. Pinks is less than pleased, but we all giggle. Brandon’s car pulls up, so we all stand up to go.

“Bye Krislyn, see you next week!” Dee calls as I head to the car.

“Bye Krislyn!” Al chimes in.

“Bye!” I yell back before I jump in. We all head out of the parking lot, and I look back at the shadows being cast by the bench in the clinic. I lean my head against the window and close my eyes.