

Grumpily, Dougley Norman trudged into Sweet & Sour Chinese Cuisine. The waiter asked him, "How many people sir?" "Oh, I'm not here to stay. I'm not into Chinese food. I just need to get some takeout. Here," he sighed, handing him a list. Flashing him a confused look, the waiter left to alert the kitchen. Dougley found a fortune cookie on the corner of the table, and snatched it. A little hungry, he broke it in half and greedily devoured the stale snack. Finishing the last bits and pieces, he shook off the crumbs to identify the message on the white strip of paper. Excitedly expecting a positive note to cheer him up after his horrible day, he instead saw the words, "Your life is in danger. Say nothing to anyone. Leave immediately." Confused, he flipped the message to see if there was a Chinese word to learn or an assortment of numbers. He always loved expanding his vocabulary and buying lotto tickets. But it was blank. There was just the message. He carefully reread the ominous slip of paper. He looked around to see if it was a prank. But people were nonchalantly waiting in line for food and the restaurant was crowded as usual.

Soon the waiter came back with the order in a plastic bag. "Vegetable Lo Mein and a small white rice to go." Dougley took out a \$20 bill and signed the receipt, but accidentally forgot the bag on the table. He was too anxious to go home and find out what was wrong. Squishing the paper into his jean pocket, he ran out of the restaurant with a worried face.

On the way home, he wondered, "What can this possibly mean? Fortune cookies are supposed to be encouraging and supportive, not threatening." He was used to reading notes, such as "You will have a pleasant surprise" or "Your dearest wish will come true." A true believer of these messages, he was intimidated and worried that everything was suddenly in jeopardy.

"Here, I thought my day couldn't get any worse. Once again, I was wrong," he complained. By chance, he almost slammed into another car while running the tail end of a yellow on the way home. Worried about what was going to happen next, he decided to live that day as if it were his last. According to the message, it was possible that he might die today. Or tomorrow. Either way, he was certain that his life was not safe.

Opening the door to his apartment, he walked in and plopped himself on the couch. Grabbing the TV remote, he turned on his favorite show, National Geographic.

Screaming from the other room, his girlfriend, Desiree Johnson, impatiently questioned where her Chinese food was. Unable to hear, Dougley continued watching his show, intrigued by the meerkats on the screen. Desiree stomped out from the room, snatched the remote from his hand, and muted the TV. "Doug, can you not hear me? I was screaming for hours and hours." Astonished, Dougley replied, "Oh, sorry. I couldn't hear." Desiree scoffed. "Whatever. Anyways where's my Chinese food?"

"Oh, right," he said. Desiree stood there, tapping on her foot and yelled, "What do you mean? Do you have the food or not?" He explained, "Sorry Des. I walked into Sweet & Sour Cuisine and I ordered what you wanted. I had to wait there for a couple of minutes and I found this fort--" Before Dougley could finish his sentence, she picked up her purse and walked right out the door. "I'm tired of this Doug. I asked you to get my Chinese food as usual, and you can't seem to get it right. We will talk later about this," she screamed.

Just about to stop her, Dougley sat back down and sighed. He thought, "Why am I putting up with this? She's treating me like trash and I'm her 'boyfriend'?" Then on the other hand, he assured himself, "No. What am I saying? I'm lucky to have a girlfriend like her. Who has a 25-year-old girlfriend at the age of 40? Also, I'm not quite the attractive type. I was always called 'Dopey Dougie' in high school." After finishing the episode of National Geographic, he climbed in his bed and went to sleep, dreading work the next day.

"Ringggg, ringgggggg," the alarm clock clanged. He slowly sat up in his bed and rubbed his eyes open. Lazily dressing himself in the same baggy overalls he had worn yesterday, he trudged out the door with his car keys.

Since he had read the fortune cookie's message, Dougley had been suspicious and paranoid. On his way to work, he looked left to right many times, in order to ensure no one was trying to kill him. He pinched himself to make sure he was alive. No matter how unsatisfying his life was, he still didn't want to die.

He took out the message, which he had stashed in his pocket, and read with a clear mind, "Your life is in danger. Say nothing to anyone. Leave immediately." It was still the same threatening note. Dougley knew he could die anytime without notice. Today could be his last day. He would never know.

With that in mind, he stomped into his workroom in the factory. He'd always hated his job. Whenever his colleagues asked him where he worked, he hesitated and quietly mumbled, "A No.2 pencil factory." Then they laughed and asked, "Wait, what? Like for standardized tests?" Mumbling some more, he walked away.

His high school classmates had graduated from the likes of Columbia, Duke, Georgetown and Cornell and had gotten jobs at decent companies. They were flying to New York for internships. They sometimes got to fly overseas for meetings. But Dougley Norman was working at a pencil company, checking the quality of the pencils every day.

Filling in the Scantron bubbles, Dougley heard his name being screamed over the loud speaker. "Dougley, come to my office. Now," was the menacing announcement. Carefully lifting himself from the chair, he got up and dragged his feet to his boss's office.

When he entered, his boss, Walter Walters was sitting with his legs casually propped on his cluttered desk. "I'm here," Dougley whispered. But Walter continued reading his newspaper. "I'm here Mr. Walters," Dougley spoke up. Then Walter peeked and said, "Why are you here. I didn't call you here." Not knowing what to say, Dougley answered, "I thought you called me here. If not-" Walters suddenly burst into laughter and said, "Of course I did! I was joking you imbecile. Loosen up."

His cheeks turning red, Dougley lowered his head. "Oh, okay. Sorry Mr. Walters." Then Walter stood up and yelled, "I'm not Mr. Walters. I've told you a million times to call me 'W squared'!" Uncomfortable with the nickname, Dougley said, "Okay. Anyways why am I here... W squarrrred?"

"Okay. Back to business. I don't think you're doing your work correctly. You come in late many times and you have a frown on your face whenever I have the misfortune of seeing you. Is this work not enjoyable for you?" Walter sarcastically asked.

"Umm... I have some other things going on at home, I guess. I'll work on that," Dougley muttered quickly. "Also, stop mumbling. I can't understand you. If you keep on coming late in the mornings then I'm going to have to rethink your position here. You know I'm trying to stick up for you, Doug, but I gotta admit it's hard to go to bat for such a doofus." Worries ran through Dougley's head. "Oh no! What if I lose this job? I won't be able to pay for my rent or my girlfriend's tuition."

Then, the fortune cookie message flashed in his head. "I'm in danger. So why not? Today may be my last day. I might have to leave tomorrow." Stepping forward from the doorframe with newfound confidence, Dougley spoke, "Mr. Walters, I'm done with you trying to pick fights with me over nothing. You've called me into your office every day for the past month. It shouldn't matter to you if I smile or scowl when I'm doing my job. If I do my job correctly, that's all that is important. Also-"

Walter interrupted, "Are you kidding? I am your boss. If you keep on talking like this, I will have to reconsider your-" "I wasn't finished. Also, you always complain that I come to work late in the mornings. I come before any of the workers or even you. So stop lying and making up reasons to reprimand me. Then you always threaten me that you have 'reconsider' my job. Go ahead. 'Reconsider' my job. I haven't gotten a promotion in the 15 years I've been working here while three new employees have already gotten two promotions in the last two years," he ranted. After taking a breath, he continued, defiantly, "If you want to fire me, then do it right now."

Dougley experienced an overwhelming sense of empowerment, which was a brand new feeling for him. He said the words he had to say and the confrontation felt amazing. He had always been ignored and interrupted when he was talking. He would make sure that would never happen again. As Mr. Walters sat with his mouth agape in shock, Dougley turned to the door and said, "Actually Mr. Walters, I quit. Have fun finding someone else who will put up with your nonsense." He ripped off his name tag, threw it over his shoulder and left.

He got in his car and peacefully drove home, not sure of what he had just done but happy about it nonetheless. When Dougley walked into his house, he knew he wouldn't have any money to pay his rent, but for some reason, he just didn't care. He wouldn't be alive to get evicted, anyway.

Turning on the shower faucet, he found the water was brown and cold. Then he walked over to the TV, and when he attempted to turn it on, it kept flickering and buzzing. Frustrated, he headed over to the freezer to grab a pint of his favorite ice cream, Ben & Jerry's Late Night Snack. Grabbing the container, he realized, to his disappointment, that it was mushy and liquefied. That wasn't the only thing that was melting and thawing unexpectedly. All the foods in the freezer and refrigerator were

spoiling. Annoyed, he picked up his phone and called Andy Dill, his landlord. If it were his last day on Earth, he wasn't going to take this standing down.

First it went straight to voicemail. But today, he was done with politeness and leaving messages hoping for a callback. He knew Andy would lie and make excuses. The second time, it went to voicemail again. Dougley was going to try until he got a hold of him. The third time, Andy picked up with a groggy, annoyed voice and rasped, "Hello. What is it and who is it?" Dougley responded, "Andy. It's Dougley Norman. I live in 4B. My shower won't turn on. The water is disgusting and freezing. My TV won't turn on and if it does, it's only for 1 second, then it goes off again. The freezer and refrigerator are broken and the food in there is spoiled now. I need you to fix this. I'm not going to deal with it anymore."

There was silence on the other end of the line. "Okay. I guess, Dougley. You have to pay your rent. I haven't gotten it yet," Andy lied. Dougley yelled, "What? My rent? I paid my rent a week ago. I handed it directly to you. Andy, stop acting like you didn't get it. You have done this for the last five months and it has to stop. If you continue with this game that you're playing, I'm reporting you to the police."

Startled at how Dougley was blustering, Andy quietly said, "Oh okay. Sorry. Yeah, um, I guess I'll come up and take a look. Bye." Andy hung up the phone. Dougley had taken a 180-degree turn. He was a completely different person, and he loved it.

Once again proud of what he had just done, Dougley patted himself on the back. "Live today like there's no tomorrow," he had read once. He never believed it until yesterday, when he came out of the restaurant with the fortune cookie. It empowered him.

Soon, he heard a opening of the door. Desiree strutted in and didn't greet him when she saw him. She went into the den and screamed, "Oh, Doug. By the way, the tuition fee is due in a week." Dougley thought, "All Des talks to me about is her tuition and the money I have to pay for her cosmetology school. Why am I really doing this?" Then he spoke, "No Des. I won't be paying for your tuition anymore. It's not my responsibility and I'm through with the way you've treated me for the past year we've been 'dating.'" Shocked, Desiree complained, "Wait. Why are you being like this, Dougie Wuggie?" Dougley continued, "No, I'm not the Doug you know. You don't know me. You

haven't taken time out of your day to talk to me or even ask me how my day was. All you talk to me is about your school tuition or order me around to get you food. Yesterday, you stormed out of here because I forgot the Chinese takeout on the counter. I do so much for you. But what do you do for me, Des?" he asked.

Hesitating, Desiree was unable to speak. Dougley cut in and said, "Exactly. You don't do anything. A relationship goes both ways. One person can't do all the work. I've always felt that you've been using me for what little money I have from the very beginning. Until now, I've been scared to speak up. But you know what? No one is promised tomorrow, especially me. So Des, I think it's time for us to break up. I'm tired of the way you treat me and talk to me. I hope your school goes well, but we're over. Bye Des. You can come back tomorrow to pack your things." Then he led her out the door.

Dougley felt a surge of relief. Three burdens had been lifted off his shoulders. He finally felt in charge of his life and it was all thanks to the fortune cookie. He grasped the crumpled white paper in his hand and flattened it out on his palm. He would never forget this day.

Then he went back to Sweet & Sour Chinese Cuisine to get some takeout. He'd never liked Chinese food and he thought today would be a perfect time to give it another chance. He walked in and before he could be escorted to a table, a waiter stopped him. He was the same man that had gotten him the food the previous night. He asked, "Hi. I may be wrong but I was just wondering, were you the customer that ordered Vegetable Lo Mein and steamed white rice last time?" Dougley answered, "Yes. I left it here by accident. Sorry." The waiter smiled and led him to a table where Dougley could browse the menu. When his appetizer of fried pork dumplings arrived, it came with a fortune cookie. Curious, he cracked open the fortune cookie and read, "Obstacles are not permanent. You will be happy and live a long life."