

The Sweetest *Swisher*

Alarm: 5:00 AM

Slap Snooze: Twice

Seminar Location: Moreno Valley

Conference Title: Our Company Bullshit Grows! (*my interpretation*)

Presentation Methods: Poor Mic Control, PowerPoint Abuse, Odd Metaphors

Knowledge Gained Today: Nothing...Nothing

Freeways Home: 60 → 215 → 91 → 710

The company president behind the stage podium ends the day to a standing ovation; I clap twice and politely duck toward the door. No, colleagues, I don't want to sit around and shake hands, split dinner and gossip. Instead, I drop my lanyard in the recycling bin and get my parking validated. But as I pull out this lot, I see what awaits me for the next three hours as cars on the freeway overpass budge forward...stop...inch forward...break lights.

I'm hungry, depleted. Up the street is a 7/11 and I yank a hard left against oncoming traffic—honk back. Now I have to wait in this ridiculously long line to pay for my coffee and sandwich because some homeless guy won't stop haggling for a discount.

The cashier says back to him, "Sir, hotdogs are purchased *with the buns*."

"But that's the thing," the bum says. "I don't want two hot dogs. I want two buns and ketchup."

"No hotdogs, no buns, sir."

Quarters, dimes clink the counter.

"How much for one then?"

"Get out."

“It’s for my son.”

“Leave now or I’m calling the cops!”

“But I need to feed him!”

The serenity prayer under my breath is not working. I squeeze my leather wallet, shake my head. My blood pressure is rising and I feel dizzy, possibly on the cusp of a second heart attack.

“Here,” I interrupt, waving my payment card in the air. “Give him the goddamned hotdogs or whatever the hell—I’ll pay—just keep this thing moving.”

Everyone turns as the bum comes approaches me in a cloud of BO. He’s double-fisting the hotdogs and slurs with heavy beer breath: “G’bless you. You fed my lil man today.”

He sways out of 7/11 and I remember my broke days while raising Bryce. When I was really strapped, we’d visit the jetty and I made a game of finding leftover bait on the rocks. Sometimes we’d fish for hours and catch nothing, not even a nibble, and I’d carry him home with my pole to eat cereal for dinner.

I still have my eye on the bum. He stops on the corner across the street and downs the first hotdog. Then, with no kid around, he eats the second one and wipes his mouth before entering AM/PM. I haven’t even had the chance to pay for his hotdogs and he’s outside again eating chili cheese nachos with sliced jalapenos. While he sips his soda, I want to run over and throw my coffee in his face...*to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to...*but the last customer is ahead of me and I calm down.

The young man before me is buying an energy drink. He has thick hair, jean shorts and chain wallet. Looks about twenty-two, twenty-three. But now my ears pique from hearing him ask for strawberry Swishers. I haven’t smoked one of those in years, decades. I see the kid bop

out the door and toss the pack to his girlfriend. She squeals from the passenger side and, cute as a button, kisses his cheek. He's all grin and baseball cap.

"Let me get a Swisher, too," I say.

"Single or pack?" the cashier asks.

I loosen my tie and untuck my shirt out the door. Before I settle into my silver sedan, I search around the parking lot as if my wife might materialize from our kitchen—Jen would wag her finger and recall my doctor's orders. Now I sit behind my tinted windows but rather than push the engine button, I uncover the cigar. Back in the day, the manufacturers would have wrapped it inside clear plastic, not this pink cellophane stuff, but as I slide its brown skin under my nose, I know they haven't changed what matters.

The lighter pops and I inhale from the Swisher's sugary tip. I breathe out and that sweet scent rushes me back decades...freestyling on a summer balcony...her brown thighs...those crazy-green eyes...

Noelani.

I'd met Noelani over thirty year ago when we served tables across the bay from the Queen Mary. I remember the morning she submitted her application because I had just left Bryce with his mom and I was brewing decaf in the side station when Chauncey dropped a lemon from the slicer.

"*Damn,*" he whispered. "This bitch is fine as a—"

The busser barged through the double doors. He dropped the silverware caddy on the steel counter

"You see that?" he said. "You see that!"

To this day, Chauncey's nickname—*The Sampler*—sticks to my memory because he snagged anything that landed on his plate, including a German tourist with narrow hips and knuckled throat who only took it doggy style. But the busser was this sometimes-smooth Latin dude (even if he slept with his cousin supposedly) so I peeked around the corner toward the front desk. And standing there by the sushi bar was this dime with warm skin tone, green eyes and jet black hair. The kitchen window began to popcorn with white hats and the host did a double take so hard he could've filed workman's comp.

The manager accepted her resume and invited her to a seat. While she interviewed, I studied the plumeria print of her skirt, her thick thighs forcing those poor flowers into bloom, the kind of thighs women fret about in the mirror but men love to squeeze beneath tabletops.

“Bad chick,” Chauncey said.

“Illest,” I said.

“She Filipino?” the busser asked.

“Hawaiian,” I said.

Noelani laughed and we spotted her canines. Big as molars.

“Nuh-uh,” Chauncey grunted. He scrubbed the air around his mouth. “Her grill is jacked. I can't do chicks with all this messed up.”

“But you'll smash a fat chick under the pier?”

“I'm saying,” he said.

“You're fired,” I said.

The manager shook her hand and the chase was officially on.

The Sampler wasn't the lead trainer so on Nolani's first day, he wasn't the one sitting in

the break room all alone with her, close enough to glide a pinky over her wrist. But my heart sped with nerves and free espresso while my vision hopped from the stacked booster seats to the metal lockers, from the Employee of the Month frames to the empty kegs.

“You okay?” she said.

My parched tongue loofa’d my mouth.

“Hung over,” I lied, and cracked open the training manual. “First things first, slip-resistant shoes, black socks, wristwatch and wine key.”

While reviewing the restaurant’s history, I built the courage to lift my gaze onto Noelani. But each iris before me shifted a sea of grassy paint strokes which shored up the occasional fleck of sunshine; immediately my plain browns hugged the training manual below as if rescued by a safety float. Eventually I breathed easier during the restaurant tour because she was not in my direct line of sight. However some of the other guys who introduced themselves clasped her hand for too long as if they were suddenly drowning in her eyes and needed to be pulled up for air.

In the pantry, Noelani and I sampled crab taquitos, lobster stuffed salmon, macadamia crusted mahi. For dessert, we shared the crème brulee and I was caught off guard when the tip of the chocolate spoon slid past her lips followed by a moan.

“Good?” I said.

She tilted back her head, the thin muscles in her caramel neck swallowing. “This is the best thing I’ve ever tasted!”

Afterwards, we carried our dishes to the scullery and a dab of the sweet custard remained on her mouth. My black apron saved me from major embarrassment.

For the remainder of the afternoon, I felt like the trainee. I forgot ingredients, lost my reading place and dropped my pen like it was jello. Even the zit on her earlobe looked precious

to me. As soon as Noelani went home for the day, I went to the freezer by myself. With no one else around, I unzipped my backpack and stuffed in a quart of milk for Bryce.

That night, I microwaved dinosaur-shaped nuggets. My son had recently outgrown the wooden highchair I stole from work but since he'd tip back in his new plastic seat, I taped *Chef Boyardee* cans to its legs. His mom was out for the night bartending. We only saw each other between shifts.

The divorce was recently finalized yet all those fees left us thin on cash and unable to move out of the apartment. Every time I thought I was close enough for a deposit, my car needed break pads or Bryce's tuition was due and it was just like Snoop said: "If it ain't one thing, it's a motherfucking 'nother."

Bryce dipped a pterodactyl into a ramekin and said, "Wha whrong, Daddy?"

"Tired."

He bit its left wing, the torso, then its right wing.

"Whan to whatch Elmo-pa-woo-ah?"

No matter who watched Bryce, he had to watch *Elmopalooza*.

"Later," I said.

"When mommee comin home?"

"Drink your milk."

"Can I have i'creem?"

Dishes stood in the holder. She washed, I put away.

"Finish those raisins," I said. "Mommy said you didn't poo today. You gotta poo, dude."

He chomped off the head of a Tyrannosaurus Rex.

“Dad-dy?” he said.

“Boy...what?”

“Can I sleep on cowch witchu?”

After we showered together, he ate mint chip on my couch and watched his favorite show. Never the kid to sing along, the closest he’d get was to move his lips. But sometimes, I’d hear him whispering this one chorus under his breath: “Be yourself...Easy as A-B-C...Can’t be no one else...Just happy to be me!”

For the sake of Noelani, I should have listened to Elmo.

When I saw her the next day at work, I already knew I had struck out. But between quizzing her on table numbers and entrée pairings, I found out she had played college volleyball until a torn ACL—surgery, rehab, all that—stopped her career short yet she was only a year away from becoming an elementary teacher.

I told her I liked snowboarding and she shook her head.

“What about skiing?” I said.

“I like those sports but I don’t like mountains.”

“Mountains?”

“Yeah, they’re pretty much a phobia,” she said. “There’s some special name for it but all I know is that when I drive through them, I breathe funny and want to close my eyes. Or say they’re in a magazine, I whip the page.”

I thought about my own hang up. For whatever reason, I couldn’t carry Bryce along the edge of a high surface for fear my arms would involuntarily throw him.

“That’s weird,” I said.

“Did you see that movie about that airplane that crashed into a mountain? The one where the survivors had to dig their dead out the snow to eat?”

I nodded, even though my movie knowledge consisted of *Elmo’s World*, *Bedtime with Elmo*, *Elmo’s Potty Time*.

“My teammates freaked when the passengers cut off frozen chunks from their dead friend’s ass,” she added. “Meanwhile I was in the theater the whole time covering my eyes, thinking, ‘Oh my God. Those mountains are ginormous!’”

But she was deep into Hip Hop like me and knew more than the average guy. Noelani had been to more live shows than I owned burned CDs because while growing up in Hawaii, she would help her brother carry crates into house parties across the islands. He never spun for radio stations but instead cracked into the Vegas circuit, banking six-figures a year without a high school diploma. I was beyond in love with her because at that time—turn of the 90s—to find a nonblack girl who understood Hip Hop was the equivalent of a woman marrying a man who hates sports but just *loves* musicals.

Noelani certified her training and while everyone else was drinking their tips away at the pub, we were in her car head nodding to break beats and arguing which mattered most in lyrics: skill or emotion. While rifling through her CD visor, she passed a picture of her brother in his backyard holding a Corona. She pointed at everything around him bartered from working private gigs—patio, fence, pool. But I kept looking at him, staring at his face. In comparison to Noelani, he was pale. I was scared he might be sick.

“Your bro looks,” I said, “lighter than you.”

“We’re hapa haole.”

“Happy who?”

Noelani's incisors showed. "Hapa haole means we're mixed. My mom's from the main island but my dad's German. That's how I got these." She batted her gems then slid a CD into the dash. As I listened to her brother scratch, my finger pads rubbed the top of my knee. He had fast hands and was big into dancehall.

Looking back now, I should have mentioned my situation to Noelani right then and there. But at twenty-one, to admit you're a divorced parent, and still live with the kid's mom, borders on disclosing cancer. When do you tell? If you lay your cards flat during the first conversation, they fold up and—*pyung!*—ditch you on the dance floor holding the empty drink you just bought them. I had made that mistake before and vowed never again.

During one of our private kickbacks in the empty parking lot, I was determined to tell Noelani about Bryce. But who knew we'd turn her windows foggy for the first time that night? Still, the thought nagged me as I nibbled on her lower lip. I pulled my hand out from beneath her sweatshirt.

"What's up?" she said, adjusting her strap.

"Something I want to say real quick."

I looked deep into her eyes and there was no denying the fact that my five-foot-four dream girl had revealed herself. But just as I was about to come clean, I lost my nerve in the sheen of her hair, black as a record. Like you could run your fingers through it to sample every track in her heart: the quiet slow jam, the up-tempo R&B cut, the underground classic.

Instead I said, "There's a party Friday night. Wanna go?"

In full uniform, I told Bryce's mom I had picked up a night shift then drove to the gas station to change into my jeans. While the night hid the melted crayons on the floorboard, I

stuffed the car seat in the trunk and picked up Noelani.

As soon as we entered the party, smoke hit us in the face. Nicotine clouds hovered beneath the red ceiling bulbs because the host wanted everyone to smoke so he could adapt to European clubs for his upcoming trip.

But the first thing Noelani said was, “I can’t be in here.”

“Too much smoke?”

She grabbed my arm, stared at the carpet.

“I hate cigarettes too,” I added. “Might as well inhale cardboard.”

“Get me out.”

I scanned the room. The high schoolers near the bookcase coughed like crazy but the pros in the hallway puffed three with no problem.

Then I saw it. Above the couch. A painting of the Catalina Islands.

“That’s not a mountain,” I told Noelani. “It’s like our Hawaii.”

She shut her eyes, clamped my forearm. I placed her hand inside mine and guided her to the balcony.

“Trouble in paradise?” Chauncey said.

Outside, the balcony was narrow: two lawn chairs, a string of white lights, *Sublime* stickers on a cactus pot.

“Need a drink?” I said.

She cracked her knuckles.

“Hold tight,” I said.

I coursed back through the party where the smoke was chewy as the pot brownies disappearing from the kitchen counter. I stirred two vodka-crans and tasted my finger, wondering

when to tell Noelani about Bryce. In a year, I wanted to move in together. The three of us would watch *Elmopalooza* from a comfy futon and eat raw cookie dough. I added more vodka.

I couldn't have been away no more than two minutes and guys surrounded Noelani like guys. But one mention of the magic brownies and the balcony cleared.

"Uhhh!" Noelani said, followed by a sip. "That guy who was sitting here, Breathasaurus, melted my mind when he bragged about his hundred-dollar tip. I had to lift my arm and smell my deodorant."

She pulled a pack of strawberry Swishers from her purse and we traded drags on the girly smoke. I chuckled because I had never lit one up before without gutting the tobacco and relining the belly with weed. But I'd given up on herb back when Bryce was born; I needed money in the worst way then.

We ashed that first one and the sweet scent blended into the warm night. My buzz was settling in and everything began to stand out. Noelani's face was neon green from a text and while her chin was down, I stared at her shiny brown shoulders jutting out her tank top like a bonus pair of small titties. She kicked her pink suede Pumas on the stucco banister, jean shorts dangling white threads and the only thing to distract me from the turtle inked on her ankle was the low banister, easy enough to step over. I wouldn't have dared held Bryce on that balcony.

"My old team is in town for a weekend tournament," she relayed, her fingers attacking the little letters. "You have to meet them!"

First the friends, then the family.

"No doubt," I said. "Your cup looks low."

As I stood up, I touched her left shoulder. Just had to. When I got back with the half-bottle and carton of cranberry, we turned our lawn chairs to each other and started to freestyle.

At work, she and I had scribbled rhymes in our server pads trailed by *dot-dot-dot* for the other to complete. They were about anything, dumber the better. She had this one about an obese momma in a muumuu tucking lard pancakes in her armpit like a pantry. Then, the rhyme hit a corner and we went back and forth about a drunk drowning in the Pacific Ocean while downing a six-pack of Pacifico.

But since we were freestyling for the first time, we resorted to the simple style of Southern rap with everything ended with *'err*.

Noelani's went: "I wave my Swisher in the *'err*. Like I just don't k'*'err*. So please don't st'*'err*. Or you might get sc'*'err*'d."

Noelani caved her hands around her mouth to kick the cutest beatbox but her bare thighs between my jeans tripped my tongue.

"That was wick-wick-whack," she teased, her fingers flicking across invisible wax. "Wickawick-*whack*."

She giggled like a girlfriend with a secret and inhaled the Swisher, the skin on her clavicle sinking deep. Her smoke drifted toward the pier where diehard fishermen huddled beneath lampposts. The sliding glass door wiggled behind us while people grooved in clumps with the bass line. The foggy red light gave the room a soupy appearance, as if our coworkers were shifting in a bowl of Manhattan chowder, and for all I cared, they could have been in Manhattan staring up at us on giant screens because at that instant, the time to tell her had presented itself.

"Noelani," I started, "I'm feeling you to a deep degree and—"

A fire truck turned the corner. Lights spinning, siren blaring.

An upstairs neighbor had thought the complex was on fire.

Party over.

Noelani nor I could drive but the warm night was perfect for a stroll. With a corner-mall next door to the party, we were a hop, skip and a *Jack In The Box* from the beach. Curly fry scent in the air, salty winds passed through palm trees to melt the ice inside our red cups.

We held hands mitten-style, my thumb stroking her palm, as we journeyed beneath a sliced moon toward the bar. Upon arrival, her friends—and future bridesmaids—would bear witness to our fingers interlaced.

But up to that point, I envisioned Noelani holding way more than just my hand because her maiden name was horrible to the ear: Hortchenberger or Hitlervragen. During the previous brunch shift, her face squinted as she landed Mimosas on her tray. Hurrying off to a large reservation, the ocean glistened around her form while she listed the cuts at the carving table. And the whole time I was standing behind a computer, imagining her as Bryce’s kindergarten teacher, his small classmates greeting her in unison: “Hell-lo Miss-es Va-len-te!”

We were blocks from the bar as my knuckles slid down the moist lanes of her hand. A full squeeze and I said, “Can I tell you something?”

Noelani nodded as I explained the whole thing. My practiced words spilled out like cereal.

But then, she let my hand go.

“You-are-a-committed-father,” she said. Her drunken lisp had vanished and sounded more like a robotic telemarketer. “That-is-great-to-hear. Very-honorable-of-you.”

Bla bla bla, yadda yadda, yeah—I’d heard it all before.

She walked ahead of me but stopped at the door to the bar. She turned and said, “James,

this is like...weird. You have this whole other world to you I never knew about.”

I found a barstool while Noelani hung out with her teammates. I plunged quarter after quarter into a Trivia machine I’ve never been good at, hoping like hell she would come to her senses and introduce me to her friends. Next I know, it’s last call. And what did I see ahead in the mirror? A reflection of Noelani grinding against a guy who was Brazilian beach player in town for a weekend tournament. Wearing a zipped up Adidas sweatshirt, he was probably my height in seventh grade and square in the shoulders as a pool table. To top it all off, they were next to a Coors Light poster and Noelani was oblivious to the Rocky Mountains stretched to the ceiling.

Now I’m no wise man but I found out firsthand that Long Island which slip out of drunk hand always make long puddle.

Chauncey agreed to pick my drunk-ass up since I promised to buy him a turkey sandwich at work. Rolling down PCH on the drive to his place in Huntington Beach, I shoved my head out the window and screamed my love for Noelani.

“You’re retarded,” he complained. “Other oceans, other motions.”

“You don’t understand,” I blabbered. “You don’t understa-*a-a*-nd!”

In his apartment, Chauncey guided me into his bathroom. I wobbled in the dark and splashed the tile so I plopped down on the soaked seat and peed that way. I tried to focus, but my mind replayed the worst part of that night—my kisses stolen by another guy.

I then teetered from the toilet and landed in the bathtub. Hot pee drenched my jeans. I shoved the shower curtain from my face and yelled, “Fuck Noelani! That snaggletooth bitch!”

“Quiet!” Chauncey said, flipping the brightest light ever. “Don’t wake my roommate.”

After that night, Noelani and I stopped scribbling to each other. No more hangouts in her

car either. In fact, she quit months later and I skipped her bon voyage party. Heard it was fun—luau theme, beer pong—but I was busy checking off school supplies at the ninety-cent store for Bryce's first day.

I decided to be straight up with girls from that point forward. Either they'd be down to date a guy with a kid or they wouldn't be so on my second date with Jen, I explained, "Okay, here's my deal."

She listened intently as Noelani had, even more so. Yet for a moment, I lost track of my thoughts as everything unfolded before my eyes: boy tells girl about son, boy loses girl, after girl after girl after girl—enduring a scratch in his life's record—until his son turns eighteen and marries a sweet girl before dear old dad can.

I stopped talking and braced for Jen's rejection but instead she told me about her daughter close in age to Bryce. We tied the knot years later and became known to friends and family as the downsized Brady Bunch.

My phone's ringing now. It's Jen's on my caller ID.

"Long day," I answer.

"I picked up a rotisserie chicken," she says. "Want me to pack lunch for tomorrow?"

"Sure," I say near whisper. The cigar is heating my fingertips. "All right."

"And I bought avocados for that guacamole you like with Tapatio."

"Good."

"I know it's been a long week for you but Sunday will be fun."

i'm quiet, clueless as to what was on Sunday.

"It'll be Father's Day," she reminds me. "Hey, you okay?"

“I hate traffic.”

“Roll down your windows and stay awake. When you get here, I’ll light the massage candle and open a bottle of vino.”

After I get off the phone with Jen, I roll the cigar between my fingers and take a final puff. I flip the nub onto the cement and while holding the smoke deep within my lungs, my mind slips back to that balcony...Noelani...the drinks...the salty air. My chest burns and I blow the smoke against the windshield then sip my coffee, knowing that was my last Swisher ever, and start the engine with a nod.

I blend back into the traffic.