

Nice Guys Finish Last

“Randy, what is this I hear about you deciding to quit?” said Ann, the head of HR who was on the other end of the line.

I looked out of the window at the pear tree beginning to bloom. This was the first job where I had my own office, a direct phone line, a room with a view--and an employee to supervise.

“Need time to plan a fitting memorial for my mother,” I lied.

She probably didn’t accept this story, because she asked, “Why don’t we talk in my office before you leave?”

“Oh, all right.” I said. “I’ll stop by before heading home.” I had planned to leave quietly. We’d had my farewell party and I already said my goodbyes to everyone in the department.

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Ann and I met three months earlier when we were both first hired to work at the college. I, along with the rest of the new staff, had been introduced to the faculty at the end of their monthly meeting in a hall with a glass barrel-vaulted ceiling. Francine Dubois, the director of the college library, had finished introducing me and there had been a thunderous round of applause. When the hall emptied after the meeting ended, I was beckoned by a blonde woman of imposing stature about five feet ten and three hundred pounds. Even with a name as common as Ann, she looked as though she had stepped out of a Wagnerian opera. Since we were both new hires Ann

regarded me as an equal, although her title, VP of Human Resources, had the same rank as my new boss, Francine.

Ann worked on bringing changes to the workplace, such as when she sent a survey to clerical staff to measure employee satisfaction.

My boss must have intercepted the survey because she summoned all of us with postgraduate Library and Information Science degrees to a special meeting in the conference room. We sat around a long wooden table and read through the list of twenty questions.

Francine sat at the head of the table fuming. “Our clerical staff will never be able to answer these ridiculous questions,” she said. “We have to do it for them.”

I think she was angry that anyone would deign to question the state of satisfaction of any of her staff.

“You’re right. My staff will never be able to answer any of these questions.” Amanda said, knowing that Francine would be retiring in a few years and she was next in seniority.

“What is this new HR person thinking? Sending out twenty- question surveys! Does she think we have no better way to spend our time?” Amanda said loud enough for everyone to see how she could command authority when her time came.

When, we came to the final question, Francine said, “That’s enough. The staff can answer question number twenty themselves. After all, it is their survey.”

Sitting in that room, I tried to keep from laughing by looking at the trees outside the wall of windows. The irony of the unilaterally answered survey was lost on everyone.

When I first took this job, my head expanded with euphoria. During the course of my day-long interview I did a lengthy presentation before the selection committee on how to find reference material and build collections in Business and Finance. During lunch, however, my tie-pin fell into the tomato soup. But at the end of the day, in Francine’s office, it seemed the job was mine. I found everything about my new boss admirable probably because she hired me.

“There is one thing though,” Francine said, before I took my leave that day. “I am concerned that you may have difficulty with the person you supervise. Phylcia’s been in her job a long time. Look, if she gives you any trouble, I want you to tell me.”

Then I didn’t think much of what she said, because I was gazing with awe at Francine’s long and thin Modigliani face. She had jet black curly hair tied in knot at the nape. According to Google she was ten years older than me. She was very tall—almost as tall as me--and had the elegance of a ballet dancer as well as the discipline and dedication of one, also in this she reminded me of my mother. Later, when I learned that she volunteered on Wednesdays at a soup

kitchen and worked in the office most days till eight or nine, my admiration for her knew no bounds.

My window office was down a short hall. The room had a grey metal desk with a computer on it; behind the desk was an upholstered chair. Another chair, across the desk, was for visitors. There were bookcases on two sides of the room and a cabinet near the window. The bookshelves were filled with library related material: red Dewey classification tomes and Library of Congress schedules. On one wall there was a painting of a seascape in translucent blues and cobalt. The window looked out onto the bare limbs of a pear tree. It felt like a safe refuge to me. My mother would have been proud of her son!

My office opened out to a room with cubicles. Phylicia's cubicle faced my door and every time I left my office, I could see framed pictures of her numerous grandchildren on her desk.

My mother had actually passed a little over a year ago; she had been a librarian at the Athenaeum. I had been happy enough at my old job, where I had worked for almost twenty years, although after Mother's passing, I had been ready for a change, especially after her angry eyes looked up at me from her hospital bed as she said, *"You have wasted your education! Wasted it! I had such high hopes for you! Such hopes! If you were mentally incompetent I can understand. You used to be such an exceptional child but now you can barely support yourself!"*

My father had walked out when my mother was pregnant with me. Not long after that my mother went to library school.

I wasn't quite sure about what I was expected to do in this new job. But I had been selected and I presumed I would be directed. The staff at this library was mostly women.

On that first morning of work there was a Welcome banner and a vase of yellow daffodils on my desk. Phylicia, a middle aged woman, with glasses and a perm, arrived carrying an offering of a bowl of chocolate chip cookies. Everyone was awfully good to me. Phylicia, surprisingly, was no problem at all. She told me all I was expected to know and was eager to show me the ropes.

In the beginning I simply put my head down and grappled with my work. I did not attend the coffee breaks or the parties in different departments, but Phylicia brought me doughnuts, muffins, cinnamon buns and relayed gossip. She seemed to want me to succeed.

I looked forward to teaching students how to use Lexis/Nexus and ordering titles for the Economics department as well as finding hard-to-find information in the electronic databases at my command.

Slowly I learned that Francine ruled her staff with an iron fist. There were many unwritten rules: No food in any of the offices; snacks and meals in the Break Room only.

“But we sneak food in,” Amanda, the next-in-line wannabe said with a wink.

In my second week, Francine looked into my room calling cheerily, “Yoo hoo! What are you working on? How is it going, with um, Phyllicia?”

“I’m reading Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory,” I said looking up eagerly. “How supervisors can decrease factors that correspond to dissatisfaction and increase factors leading to satisfaction.” “For Phyllicia,” I mouthed.

“What? Herzberg Theory!” Francine cried in disgust.

A month later, Francine came into my office and asked, “Are you working on that report?”

For the past three weeks yellow Post-it notes had been appearing in my mail cubby. After receiving seven or eight of them, I came to the conclusion that I was expected to prepare a report. I had been sorting through my notes on the Lexis/Nexis class I had to teach later that week.

“Don’t worry about it,” Francine said glancing at my notes. “I came to give you this.” She put her old Lexis/Nexus tutorial on my desk. “Just focus on the report.”

I wanted to show Francine that I could use Excel spreadsheets, but every day more yellow Post –it notes appeared in my mailbox with additional data, and I had to start a new spreadsheet. My computer was somehow not connected to the network, so I worked off a colleague’s computer, saved the data to a disc and took it to my friend Marlene, since Marlene was a whiz at Excel.

But when I showed Francine my Excel chart, she was not satisfied. How was I to know that the cells shifted from Marlene’s computer to my colleague’s computer in the office? Still, I ploughed on. Every day the report was returned with red penciled corrections. So, it was back to a new Excel spreadsheet with more data from Francine to be added in. This process was chaotic, almost as chaotic as driving on unfamiliar roads.

“But I’m using Excel” I told Francine, my voice rising the next time I showed her my work. “I don’t know how the columns keep shifting.” It was plain Francine knew nothing about Excel. I didn’t know too much either, but I certainly knew more than she did.

“I don’t care what program you use. I want a completed report by the deadline given to you.”

After a while it occurred to me that what was expected of me was to complete a report of a budget for periodicals. Surely, this had been done before. I rummaged through the drawers to see what the report looked like from previous years. Instead all I found were Selection Committee notes on the previous candidates for my job. I learned there had been twelve applicants before me. I saw their considerable resumes and the remarks of the Selection

Committee. Apparently, this position had been a bit of a revolving door. My discovery of the Selection Committee notes was like Bluebeard's wife finding the bloody chamber! (It took away some of the shine from my pride in my appointment.) Mysteriously, I found no copy of the budget of previous years.

I soon realized that the interview had been all smoke and mirrors. Maybe the Dean had been breathing down Francine's neck and she had to conjure something out of a hat. Still, for a month my friend Marlene and I labored late into the early hours trying to get the report done, but it was of no avail.

"We have to talk," Francine said at the beginning of my third month, frog marching me to the conference room. "If you are able to complete the report in the next three weeks with no mistakes (which would be a miracle), you may keep the job. Otherwise, you are fired. You've already missed the deadline for the holdings report."

That's because, preparing this budget is like cleaning up the Augean stables, except that it is the same labor repeated twelve times. I wanted to say. I am the miller's daughter who has to spin straw into gold.

"Now you could offer to resign and thus avoid getting fired."

This job had many things wrong with it but I had a view, a private telephone line and I was making more money than anyone in the office other than Francine, even more than Amanda! And there was no driving on the interstate to get to work. Only once did I have to attend training for the holdings report in a distant town on the interstate. Marlene had to drive me. I never tell this to anyone, but I have panic attacks driving on the highway and on unfamiliar roads.

Well, when the day of reckoning arrived, there was no Rumpelstiltskin to help me spin straw into gold. But that day in Francine's office, I pleaded, "Can I please, please keep this job? I will do all I can. Just give me a second chance!"

My pleading sounded despicable even to me, but anything was preferable to being unemployed. I felt dizzy just contemplating the prospect. Francine shook her head in disgust--like a Grand Inquisitor. She gave her verdict, "You will leave at the end of the month."

I couldn't help myself I mimicked Francine. "You will leave at the end of the month!" I put my fingers in my ears and flapped my hands and made faces. I was past caring. I danced round and round crying over and over, "You will leave at the end of the month!" My work is one of the few things I do well. I could not stand this assault on my self-worth any longer. "I don't care! F-f-fuck you!" I said rushing out of Francine's office.

I only felt bad because I had stammered the expletive. In my office, I blurted out everything to my friend Marlene on the phone.

“Is this the first time you’ve been fired?” Marlene asked quietly. “Dude,” she said, “You’re lucky! Most people get fired many, many times.”

What did Marlene know? Marlene is on the payroll of her father’s locksmith business and is a temp worker by choice. *Mother, mother, mother!* My heart cried. *My face was wet. I have disappointed you but I did my best!*

Then I sent in my resignation to HR before I could be officially fired.

Before my final exit meeting Francine, Amanda and I assembled outside the conference room; I had a vision of a cabal with figures in hooded cloaks with bell, book and candle.

Francine said, sinking into a chair in the conference room. “I can catch a mistake a mile away. I just have to look at a document and I can see them. It is just a talent.”

I took a deep breath and composed myself. “At my interview, no one said anything about preparing budgets and compiling holdings reports.” I was squinting because the sun glinted into my eyes.

“There is such a thing as ‘Other duties as assigned by the director’.” She replied drily.

“Well then surely there must have been last year’s report. And what about the year before that? Huh? What happened to them? If I’d had a sample of previous reports there would have been no problem.”

“Previous reports?” Francine appeared confused for a moment, “Amanda?”

“But-but,” Amanda began, “remember what you said, Francine? That-that we’re going to change everything?” She sounded like a stammering petulant child.

“But surely it could not have been so very different?” I hammered away, seeing my advantage. I suspected that it was Amanda who had taken the reports.

Francine ignored my question and asked, “So what are you going to do?”

I had no idea. My old position was no longer available. I felt my stomach tighten.

“I’m applying elsewhere,” I said, airily. “May I give you as my reference?”

“Well, I will have to tell them the truth.” Francine’s lips curved in a withering smile. “I will say that if the job requires attention to detail, he is not suitable.” She narrowed her eyes. “Where are you applying?”

I gave her the wrong information. Actually, that morning I had put in my application at our local library. It would be a small part-time job, an entry level position, but at least it was a job, and surely it would lead to better opportunities. What option did I have? I cannot even strike a nail with a hammer.

My colleagues seemed genuinely sad to see me go. Francine was away visiting her sick father the week prior to my departure, and Amanda, apparently eager to get rid of me, said smugly that I could leave four days before my official last date.

On my last day Phylcia said, “You were my one hope, and now you are leaving.”

“Francine wanted to get you fired,” I said, “but I stood up for you.”

“I know, thank you.” Phylcia said. Then she angrily added, “What do they mean by giving you such a difficult assignment, with you being so new and all?”

I had turned off my office’s fluorescent light and was about to shut the door for the last time when the phone rang. It was Ann.

“You’re coming aren’t you? I’m waiting.”

Carrying my remaining personal belongings in a box, I shuffled down the cement walkway dividing Ann’s office from the college library.

. When I arrived Ann had the ceiling fan on full blast.

“Randy,” she cried on seeing me, “I am so glad you came!” She began opening the windows. “Do you mind?” Ann asked. “These days I’m always hot. I guess change of life is coming on.”

She pointed to a seat.

“Well tell me what’s going on here.” Ann said in her booming voice after she had settled into a chair.

“Well, I quit.” I smiled weakly. “But you already know that.”

“Why did you quit before talking to me?”

“This job is impossible.” My voice was a monotone. “I wish you could just see what I had to go through.”

I was gratified to see Ann taking notes.

This was my time to exonerate myself, prove my worth. I had given twenty years of my life to this profession.

“Data is not meant to be given piecemeal.” I told her. “My computer was not connected to the network. And where’s the training? It took two months before I could figure out what I was supposed to be doing. And what about last year’s report? Where was that? I ask you.” I could hear my voice rising higher and higher. I was almost hollering. My mouth was dry.

Ann’s hand was flying across the page. She looked up avidly. “Go on! The Dean is going to hear about this,” she said, licking her pen.

After I’d finished Ann looked at me and said, “I’m going to show this to the Dean.”

I felt vindicated. I had NOT screwed up.

When I staggered out of Ann’s office the shadows of late afternoon were lengthening. Everything appeared surreal. I had been with Ann for two hours. My head was throbbing. I could feel my pulse in my ears. It was only when I was crossing the parking lot it occurred to me that my venting would get Francine into trouble, and I felt a sense of foreboding: I wondered if talking to Ann was prudent. The only person it would help was Ann. Perhaps I should have kept my mouth shut because it was not revenge, but validation I was after, I only wanted to keep my job. Still, it had felt good to get it all out.

As time went on, I learned that Francine was on many city-wide committees, and that she frequently met with my new director and also upper management at the public library. I ran into Francine once at the entrance to the public library. Her eyes widened when she saw me, and then she stared ahead resolutely.

I threw myself into my new job. In the beginning I shared a desk and a cubicle. Soon I had a full-time job with a desk and cubicle of my own and benefits. Library patrons say, “Randy can find a needle in a haystack!” about my skill in finding answers to knotty questions, or they’d shake their heads in admiration for the books I’d recommended. “Randy is such a sweetheart!” The lady patrons say. And the men would hole up for hour-long chats at the reference desk which made me feel like a bartender. There were no salary increases because of the budget crunch, my boss told me. There were plenty of openings in middle management, so I applied three times. I was ready and waiting to assume the responsibilities of a higher position, but I was never selected.

A few years later, Marlene and I went to the opera to see a production of *La Boheme*. The auditorium was just beginning to fill up. Francine was seated in the same row as us which was the front row of the Upper Balcony.

“My old boss,” I said to Marlene as I was making the introductions as we squeezed past Francine to get to our seats.

“Isn’t this wonderful?” Francine said looking at me (referring to the opera). She had retired she explained and was now able to go to the opera.

“Are you still at the Library?” she asked, leaning across two seats.

I nodded.

“Any higher position?” she hissed.

After a long pause, I said, “No.” I noted the fleeting expression of triumph on her face.

I could now see the reason why I had not been selected for any of the positions I had applied for. I know, one is not supposed to put in a disparaging word about past employees but sometimes all it takes is a gesture, an expression, and body language.

“Oh, uh, speaking of higher positions, did I hear that Ann has become VP of Human Resources at an Ivy League college?” I countered.

Francine’s face twisted in rage. She bent her head abruptly and began to fiddle with her opera glasses.

I leaned back in my seat satisfied. The pebble from my sling had hit the mark.

When I was a little boy, during our annual visits to my grandfather in Dillsboro, Indiana, a cousin--who was the same age as I--would run up to my grandfather, a Methodist minister and a formidable figure, after making sure that I was out of earshot, he would look up at the old man and say, ”Randy says, Grandpa is mad.”

Grandpa was a little hard of hearing. “Grandpa’s Dad? You want to know about Grandpa’s Dad?”

”No, Randy says that you are MAD!” And, he would wait to see what effect his words had on the old man.

Ann had been on even more committees than Francine and despite being junior to her soon pulled more rank and carried more clout with the Dean. Phylcia had heard that the Dean had given Francine a rap on the knuckles, and that my old job had been drastically altered. Ann was flying high, they said, and had even won a state award, and now as VP of Human Resources at such a prestigious college had reached the top of the greasy pole.

My own career is nothing to speak of. I never moved up the ladder and now I no longer hanker for a higher position. I will be up for retirement soon. I have a small pension and social security to look forward to and the efficiency apartment left by Mother. My present salary is only

marginally greater than that of the junior most nose-ringed staff member. Maybe Marlene and I will get together. With her earnings as a temp worker and my modest means, we may be able to scrape together a decent retirement. But then again, I am quite happy with my apartment and the one-cup coffee-maker in the kitchenette, and I like to be undisturbed in my own headspace. In my retirement I will read all 47 novels of Anthony Trollope and sell my Beatles LPs to finance trips to London. Sometimes I wonder about all the knowledge in my head and where it will go when I am no more.

But even now--like a permanent scar on my face--I am burdened by the humiliation of my failure at the only thing I can do well-my job, and I wish I could excise that memory of that office with a window opening to a pear tree, a private phone line and a person reporting to me who brought me all manner of eatables.

THE END