

White Torture

Minnie was on her own, laid off, collecting food from the church, when she got a phone call from Bartholomew. He wanted to know if she was interested buying timeshare at a local resort. They had a water slide park, he explained, as well as a variety of child-friendly restaurants. Bikes could be hired, golf could be played. Would she be interested in one of his many flexible packages?

Minnie looked at the phone's screen then put it back to her ear. "I'm sorry," she said, "I've absolutely no idea what you're saying."

"I'm happy to explain further, Ms Masondo. At Buckby Resorts, we have weekend packages, mid-week options and the peak periods are certainly not as expensive as –"

"Timeshare. You're selling me this now? Do you even know what's happening?"

Bartholomew cleared his throat. "Things are tricky at the moment, but it's not as if we won't be able to enjoy a holiday again in the future."

"I would say, Bartholo...wait, what's your name again?"

"Bartholomew. Bartholomew Fernandez," he said, his voice beaming.

"Whose even called that," she snapped. His confidence had irritated her – how dare someone be proud at a time like this? Let alone a salesman.

He cleared his throat. "Um, I do actually. Bartholomew was one Jesus's twelve apostles. He was credited with many miracles related to the weight of objects. He was also skinned alive and beheaded for spreading his faith."

"That's awful," she said, remorseful she'd been so brittle. Her emotions were all over the place – one minute she was sad, the next anxious, an hour later, furious. She was usually calm and considered, not the many seasoned person of late. And she respected people – call

centre agents were dismissed with polite thankyou's mindful they were only doing their jobs.

Minnie did not bark at people for having early century first names.

“Isn't it? Punishments during those times were really something to behold.”

“Like what,” she said, surrendering to the ridiculousness of the conversation.

“Oh. Well. One of the oldest is probably rat torture.”

“That sounds nasty.”

“Yes. Basically, a bottomless container was placed on a victim's belly and starving, diseased rats were placed within. Then they would slowly heat the container up. In their panic the rats would gnaw –”

“Oh my God, no. Don't – I get the picture!” Minnie went to the kitchen and switched on the kettle. She sat down at the little table in the middle of the room and fiddled with the empty salt cellar. The floor was sticky, and she tried to remember what she'd spilt but nothing came to mind. Mostly, one meal ran into the next, as did the days and nights. She had no idea when the floor was last washed either. The cleaning service she used hadn't been for two months – that luxury had been one of the first to go. “Are you still there? Barthalama... Oh fuck it. Can I just call you Bart?”

Bartholomew laughed. “Of course. Most people do.”

Minnie sighed. “I've just put the kettle on.”

“Are you managing, Ms Masondo? In this lockdown?”

She lifted her toes up and down, sticking and unsticking. It reminded her of making gummy cobwebs on the back of glue sticks when she was a kid. “As well as I can. I'm on my own you know,” she blurted, “I've been laid off and I'm waiting for my unemployment to come through for this month.”

“Yes, it’s difficult for many.” He had a formal way of speaking, but gentle and kind. He was like Father Sthu – Minnie’s mother’s priest – he always had a smile and mild, sensible things to say.

“How long have you been doing this?” said Minnie.

“This? You mean selling timeshare?”

“No, selling yachts, Bart.” What was wrong with her? Why was she being sarcastic to this obviously kind man? “Sorry. I’m a little tired.”

“No problem, Ms Masondo. The loneliness and the worry. It gets to one.”

She sighed. In eight weeks, she’d spoken to her mother and her friend Charlotte a few times, but she found that she couldn’t manage more than that. Charlotte had invited her to online parties and virtual yoga sessions, but Minnie found the medium exhausting. Talking to a screen with people that froze mid-sentence into a blurry mess and then having to resume the conversation by repeating herself seemed more trouble than it was worth. Anyway, she’d long since run out of money to buy airtime for such events.

“How long have you been selling it?”

“Oh, I’ve only been doing this since lockdown. It’s best to keep busy and I like giving people something to look forward to.”

Minnie laughed. “Oh my God. That’s so funny.”

“I’m glad. One needs merriment every now and then,” he said, sounding a little sharp.

“I just meant...Bart, I’m not laughing at you. It’s...”

He waited.

“It’s a weird...choice. Why not sell hand sanitiser or face masks?”

“Ms Masondo, would you look forward to hand sanitizer?” he chuckled – she must have imagined his irritation. “A holiday offers more joy than germ remover.”

Minnie ambled to her bedroom. It smelled musty and damp. She hadn't changed the sheets in three weeks and sweat had stained her pillow. Towels scattered the floor and a two-week-old energy bar wrapper lay in the corner of the room. As if she needed energy, she thought, deciding not to pick it up.

"You have a point. But you're more likely to sell a face mask than you are timeshare. Most people don't have any money for mid-week jaunts to a hotel right now."

Bartholomew chuckled, wise as an owl. "You are 100% correct, Ms Masondo. I've considered that, but I still enjoy it."

Minnie flopped down on the bed, smelt her armpit, and winced. "Firstly, how is selling anything over the phone enjoyable? People must slam the phone down on you all the time. And secondly, no one is going to buy now. It's silly."

"Perhaps. But I get to talk to people like you. And I'm not doing it for the money."

"So, people don't tap out the moment you start your spiel?"

"Some do, certainly, but some don't."

She rolled onto her stomach and looked at the old Boomtown Red on her nails. She remembered when she'd painted them – the day of her first date with Jayson. She met him through a work colleague, and they hit it off straight away. But when they went out for dinner a week later, she was put off by how often he ran his tongue over his teeth. She hadn't noticed it the first time they met, but on the date, she couldn't ignore it – it was as if he were constantly checking for something. At pudding, she decided Jayson might need psychological help down the line and she didn't want to be the one nagging him to go. The next day, he texted asking when they could next meet and she replied she didn't think it was going to work and wished him well.

When Minnie told her mother how proud she was of her own decisiveness, she howled down the phone:

“Why are you letting potential husbands go because of some teeth thing. This is why you are still single. All this fussiness!”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Ma,” she replied. “It’s clear he’s got a problem. Do you want me to marry problems?”

“We all have problems, my girl. And girls without husbands are an even bigger problem,” moaned Ma.

“Plus, his name is spelt as Jayson with a “y”. You told me to avoid people with silly names because it means they were parented by funny people. How is Jayson with a “y” not silly?”

Ma snorted. “That was only because you were friends with that Mercedes, and she was always doing a nonsense. People and cars should be in different categories or things get muddled.”

“Well then,” said Minnie. “I rest my case.”

Ma would never change. She still supported old school values – things that 27-year old Minnie didn’t – not that she would ever tell her as much. She tried to keep quiet and respect her principles – Ma was a brave, strong Zulu woman who’d worked hard to ensure Minnie and her brother had opportunities. Both had studied after school and had promising careers – until the world got flipped on its head.

“Ms Masondo? Are you still there?”

Minnie started. She’d forgotten there was someone on the other end of the phone. This had happened a lot lately: she’d put a pot on the stove and her mind would wander off until she smelled burning – the same thing had happened twice before.

“Sorry, my concentration moseyed off there. I seem to be losing my marbles.”

“Maybe it’s a bit of sensory deprivation. White Torture is an effective way of gaining truth from detainees and is often said to be more effective than waterboarding.”

“What torture now?”

“White Torture,” said Bartholomew. “A person is placed in a completely white cell with white lighting that doesn’t cast shadow. White floor, white ceiling, white food. The prison guards wear white and have padded shoes so they don’t make a sound. After a while, a person doesn’t know if he’s alive or dead.”

“Jesus,” gasped Minnie. “Who even thinks this stuff up?”

“Agreed, it’s disturbing. But perhaps because you’re on your own and you aren’t getting out much, you’re having a kind of deprivation yourself. In your heightened anxiety, everything is amplified making your mind shut down a little.”

Minnie sat up. “That’s quite an observation, Bart. You seem to know a lot about psychology.”

“Not really,” he tittered. “I read a lot.”

She went to the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror. Her afro was lopsided from laying in the same position on the couch facing the television. Her skin had an oily sheen and there was sleep in her eyelashes. “A black person getting white torture. The story of our lives.”

“Perhaps you should think about going out each morning during the exercise hours. A bit of fresh air could be good if one is feeling a little...frayed.”

Minnie took a bottle of nail polish remover and cotton rounds out of the bathroom cabinet. She went to the kitchen and flopped back into the chair at the tiny table. She put the phone on speaker and began working on her nails.

“Anyway,” continued Bartholomew. “How about I put you on our mailing list and you can decide about the timeshare later. Would that suit?”

“Yeah, can do,” said Minnie. “You’re quite good at this aren’t you? Getting personal and then speeding back to the job at hand.”

Bartholomew sighed. “It’s true I want to sell you timeshare, Ms Masondo. And I can tell you are no fool. But I also think you sound lonely and anxious, so it is no problem for me to talk to you and share a moment. We all feel the same.”

Minnie wiped the last of the Boomtown Red off her pinkie and examined her hands. The poor man was probably as tired as she felt – not that you could tell. But what could she know about anything right now, anyway? Surely everyone felt the same in this mess.

“Alright. I’ll sign up. What do you need to know?”

“Thank you, Ms Masondo. You work at MSAG am I right? We have a rewards program with them – that’s how I got your number. I’ve seen your photo on the website. You look very professional and smart. You are credited as having a university degree.”

“Ja, well,” said Minnie. “I haven’t heard of any rewards program being offered at work. Not that I ever pay attention to that stuff.”

“If you give me your details – address, email – that sort of thing, I can make sure you’re linked to the database.”

Minnie had never bought timeshare and 8 weeks ago, it wouldn’t have featured on her list of priorities. Now, thoughts of miniature golf and cocktails at a communal pool were very appealing. She could take Charlotte, they could play Roulette, meet some guys, and maybe have a little fun.

“...a form, and if you rate me, I get extra commission.”

There she went again – dozing off to another place. “Sorry what was that now, Bart? I’m sorry. I floated off again.”

“I was just saying,” said Bart, “that if you fill in the survey I’m sending and rate me, I get extra commission.”

Was that irritation Minnie had heard? For a second time? She couldn't be sure. Mind you, it must be annoying having to repeat yourself all the time – she could hardly blame him – she'd endured enough Zoom meetings to know.

“I thought you weren't in it for the money?”

Bartholomew chortled – back to his old self. Minnie hadn't spoken to another person in so long, she didn't know if she could rely her own judgement anymore.

“I'm not, Ms Masondo. But a little extra wouldn't hurt.”

She got up and looked in her fridge. A bottle of mayonnaise and bunch of wilted celery lay on a shelf – it was like a scene in a movie. She'd been living off cans of beans, pap and the odd sachet of soup. At first it had been embarrassing, calling the church and asking for assistance. Now, she didn't think twice. What little savings she had were gone and the unemployment her company had organised only covered her contracts and a bit of rent. While most places had given her payment holidays, it was with the agreement she would work the shortfall back on future payments. She didn't see how having to pay off more later was of any use – she was going to come out of this with less money than what she started with. Capitalism never slept it seemed, even when the globe was on the verge of collapse.

“Yes,” she said quickly, conscious she'd gone silent again. “Send me the survey and I'll do it for you. Listen, I'd better take your number down, in case I have questions.”

The line stayed silent.

“Bart? Are you still there?”

“Sorry – got distracted. Catching some of what you have.” His laugh sounded a little thin, but he reeled off his phone number and she wrote it on a serviette and stuck it on the fridge.

She briefly wandered if she should be giving him her address and email, but he was clearly connected to work with the rewards program. She gave him her details and he repeated them back to her.

“Yup that’s it,” she said, munching a stick of celery. “By the way, where do you work when you’re not selling timeshare?”

“Sorry Ms Masondo,” he said. “My cat has caught something. I must go sort it out.” His usual tidy voice had gone an octave higher. Minnie’s skin pricked.

“Hold on,” she said quickly. “I want to know where you work?”

“I’m in IT security. It’s a very small outfit. It’s called, um, Plack Enterprises.”

“Plack Enterprises. Hmm,” mused Minnie, grabbing the serviette off the fridge. “And you say you are in security. What, is that like stopping hackers and stuff?”

Bartholomew emitted a strange howl like he’d heard the joke of the year. Considering his usual thoughtful manner, it felt totally out of place. Suddenly Minnie felt like she’d been invaded by a very cool operator. He knew where she worked, he’d seen her photo, she’d given him her details – he knew her phone number for God’s Sake. Had Ma taught her nothing? What had she been thinking, sharing her life with someone she didn’t know? She knew about stranger danger – Ma had drilled it into her from birth.

She rushed to the window and peered out. The street was bare – not a soul in sight. Not unusual in lockdown, but the desertion spooked her. She wished the person above her would move around – their footsteps often soothed her, and she felt less alone. But she couldn’t remember the last time she’d heard them, and the realisation made her panicky. A lot of people in the complex had gone elsewhere for lockdown because their units were so small. Minnie wished she’d gone home to Ma.

“Bartholomew? I can’t engage with timeshare. In fact, I do not want any correspondence...Hello? Hello?”

Beeps in her ear told Minnie the line had gone dead. She stared at the phone. What the hell had just happened? She ran to the fridge and dialled the scribbled digits on the serviette. *The number you have dialled does not exist.* She jumped onto the internet and typed Buckby Resorts into the search field. The only thing listed was a hotel somewhere in the UK. She looked up Plack Enterprises but there was no such company. Hands shaking, she typed Bartholomew Fernandez in all the social media sites she had accounts with. She scalded the profiles she could access but had nothing to go on. One Bartholomew liked kitesurfing, another archery. Few said where they worked, and none showed an interest in timeshare. Perhaps she would message each one of them. But what would she say? “Hi, did you call you me today? Are you an IT security boffin with an interest in torture?”

She ran to the front door and clicked the double lock. She gave all the burglars bars a tug before shutting the windows tight. She grabbed a knife from the kitchen drawer and ran to the living room. She called the Police and tried to explain her ordeal, but the constable was impatient. “He asked for your details and you gave them to him. It’s not clear what you want us to do.”

She stared at the blank television screen in front of her. Her outline was plump and rumped, her hair a ragged outline on the milky grey glass. About to dial Ma, she realised her battery was almost dead and got up to plug it in.

Then the lights went out. She remembered reading on one of her social media feeds that the electricity utility was in trouble again and load shedding was back. South Africans were used to the power being switched off for four to six hours a day several times a year, but now it seemed like an absurd situation to accept, year in, year out, with no solution in sight.

“It’s not even constitutional,” she shouted into the dark. The sound of her own voice, shrill and shaky, shocked her. She’d never felt so trapped in her life.

Phone in one hand, knife in the other, she sat down again. A siren wailed in the distance. She listened to it until it disappeared and the silence came alive all around her. Her watch read 18:55 pm on the 21st of May 2020. Fifty-six days into lockdown.

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