

TWENTY SUMMERS

"You have a real uphill battle. Management's interested in young talent to take over when the partners are ready to retire. I'm afraid you're not being considered," Terry said, then looked down to take another bite of her salad.

I looked at her in astonishment and noticed that she had something stuck in-between her front teeth. She had just told me that my career had hit a dead-end, but somehow, I focused on the little black speck.

"So you're telling me there's no way I can become a partner?"

"No. I'm not saying that. I'm just saying that management's focus is on the young people." She smiled a nervous smile, the small piece of salad on display, and I debated telling her that she had something in her teeth. Should I let strangers think she's in need of a dentist, or speak up, and maybe embarrass the woman.

"You have something in between your front teeth," fell out

of my mouth before I could stop. It felt good, like I'd gained the upper hand, if just for a couple of seconds.

She leaned down for her purse and removed a small mirror, quickly picking out the offending particle, giving me a curt "thank you".

For the past couple of months, Chuck, my mentor, had been prodding me to push my case for becoming a partner. He was one of the senior partners who would be retiring soon, and he had assured me that now was the time. According to him, all I needed to do was be proactive, talk to the other partners, tell them I was interested, and my path to partnership was assured. I had done as he advised and received not one negative reaction. Yet...somehow I knew that my chances of promotion were not as Chuck believed. Just a feeling. Now, sitting at the lunch table, my situation came into focus.

"You just need to do what you like to do. Go out and meet people, do presentations, bring in new business, and you'll become a partner," Chuck said.

"But I'm already doing that."

Terry was silent.

"I know. You're doing a great job and you like it. So keep it up," Chuck said.

Anger was rising inside of me, and what at the beginning of lunch had started as a trickle, had increased in intensity, and

now, as we rose to go back to the office, was circulating like lava running through my veins.

I really didn't want to work for a small local accounting firm when I took the job with Jones, Kappella, and Swartz, but it was just after 9/11, and the large accounting firm I had worked for had closed its office. I needed a job, and I wanted to move back to Florida. After a couple of months of searching and interviewing, I ended up with three offers, and settled on JKS because I thought my kids would transition better in Sarasota than Miami.

Looking back, JKS probably wasn't the best choice. In the initial years, a partnership opportunity was dangled before me repeatedly. It was a way to get me to do something that I didn't want to do, go the extra mile, and work selflessly for their benefit.

Then, the Great Recession descended upon Florida, and the time came to keep your head down and hold on with both hands to any available job. But, now that sunshine is on the horizon, and the economy has shaken free from the black sludge of foreclosures and bankruptcies, I am considered too old.

I went back into my office but any attempt at work was futile. My mind was spinning on the lunch conversation and my mood was moving into a dark place. Chuck came into my office and closed the door.

"Well, it didn't go like I thought it would," he said, as he sat across the desk from me.

"So I'm too old to be considered for partner?"

"No. I wouldn't say that. I know you think you heard that, but you didn't."

"So you're telling me that I really didn't hear her say that it would be difficult for me to be partner because they're looking at the young people?"

"Yes. She said that, but if you keep on bringing in new business, they'll not be able to deny you."

"That's bullshit. I could walk on water and it wouldn't make a difference."

"No, that's not true."

"Well, I'm tired of being lied to, overlooked, and unappreciated."

"It's not like that. Don't do anything rash. Let me talk to some people and see what I can do," he said, as he stood to leave.

I finished the day, sorting through random papers, trying to appear to stay busy. Thank God it was Friday, maybe the weekend would improve my mood and give me clarity.

Saturday morning came but my mood stayed in the black abyss that it had slid into the day before. I had plans to go to the beach with my best-friend Gina, and thought, maybe the sunlight

and blue water could pull me out of my hole of self-pity.

The day was cloudless and hot, the Gulf of Mexico warm, and the water a brilliant turquoise. A gentle breeze cooled me as I sat under my umbrella and gazed at the beauty surrounding me. I closed my eyes and listened to the sound of the gentle lapping of the waves and the cry of seagulls. The sand under my feet was warm and I could feel my anger subsiding. My mood was finding a foothold to climb-out and enjoy the sunshine.

"You're being quiet today. What's going on?" Gina asked.

"It's my job."

"What happened?"

As I told her about the lunch conversation, I could feel my anger returning. White hot and steaming, it consumed me and clouded my thoughts, giving me feelings of inadequacy and betrayal.

"Don't let them do that to you," she said. "Fuck um. Fuck um all. Go find another job, do something else."

"I probably could get another job but I don't want to start over."

"Then you'll have to change your thinking about the situation. If you stay there, you'll have to make peace with them."

The thought of accepting the treatment I was handed was distasteful, but Gina was right. If I stayed, I'd have to

change, otherwise the anger would eat a hole in me and color my life.

"You need to take control of the situation. If you stay, make it on your own terms. Use them for their money and leave when you're ready. Look past them. Do you really want to be one of them?" Gina asked.

"No. I don't really like them."

"I know. You make fun of them all the time. You'd be miserable with that bunch."

Gina stood up and headed for the water and I watched her go. She was right - I didn't like the partners and wouldn't be happy trying to be one of them. But all my work life I believed if you worked hard and did a good job, you'd get ahead. Life and chance can throw roadblocks in your path. I wanted to be a partner somewhere, but the problem was, I didn't want to be partners with any of the JKS partners.

I closed my eyes and felt the sun on my skin, the warmth caressing and relaxing me, making me one with the sand and water. Bliss. If I close out thoughts of my job, I'm happy. Life is meant to be enjoyed through the little things - the smell of the ocean as the gentle breeze cools, the beauty of a brilliant sunset, and the smile of a loved one.

I was fifty-eight years old. Somehow, the shift from young to old had happened, and it surprised me. I didn't feel old, or

look old, or act old, but yet at fifty-eight, if I was lucky, I had twenty summers. Twenty summers to enjoy the feel of the sun on my face and the sound of the seagulls. Twenty was not much. Twenty seemed finite, an end, a quantifiable number that's familiar. I wanted more. I wanted forty or fifty. I wanted to be starting the journey of life with vast endless possibilities. I wanted a do-over. I didn't like the reality of twenty.

Gina came back from the water, wiping her face dry with her towel, sitting in her chair next to mine.

"Life's too short for this bullshit," I said.

"Then put on your thinking cap and figure something out. Take control of your life and don't be a victim."

"I probably only have twenty good years left and I don't want to be miserable for the next ten."

"Twenty? What are you talking about?"

"Think about it. In twenty years I'll be seventy-eight. Will I be able to enjoy life? Will I even be alive? I want to live my life on my terms and working for JKS is not what I want to do."

"Then figure out if you can quit, or look for another job. Do anything but stay and be miserable."

The rest of the weekend was uneventful and I worked to convince myself to take control of my own fate. Somehow, the knowledge that what was being denied me was not something I

wanted, comforted me, and my mind was busy exploring other options.

Monday morning was overcast and breezy, and the morning commute was hectic, with plenty of snowbirds in large sedans, clogging the highways, not yet ready to make the long trek north for the summer. I settled into my desk, going through the motions of work, with little enthusiasm.

The telephone rang. It was Terry from HR.

"Hi Paula. Can you please come to my office?"

"I'll be right there," I said, my heart beating fast and a light sheen of sweat breaking out on my forehead. Was I ready for this?

Tom, the operations manager, was seated in Terry's office. Not a good sign.

"You can shut the door and have a seat," Terry said, as I stepped into the office.

I sat in the chair next to Tom. He was smug, but Terry appeared nervous, fidgeting in her chair as if she could not find a place of comfort. I was calm, and this calmness surprised me. Sometime over the weekend, Tom and Terry had lost their authority over me. I was not a serf in the kingdom of JKS, I was an individual who had decided not to share their view of the world. They only had power over me if I gave it to them, and I was not feeling charitable.

After sharing the requisite niceties, Tom stopped and shifted to the message he was sent to deliver. "The partners have no enthusiasm for you as a partner at this time."

Terry continued fidgeting at her desk but Tom sat still, head up and lips curled in a haughty expression.

"Well then, I have no enthusiasm to work for JKS any longer. Consider this my notice," I said, as I stood to leave the office.

"Wait," Tom said. "You misunderstood. We don't want you to leave. You have great potential to be partner someday, but the partners have no enthusiasm to promote you, at this time."

"That doesn't work anymore," I said.

Looking down at both Tom and Terry, I wondered how I'd ever wanted to be a part of their organization. It was like being in an abusive relationship - you really don't know how bad it is until you look at it from the outside.

They both looked shell-shocked, eyes wide with surprise. What I did was not an outcome they had considered. A slave can't fire the master and a serf bows to the will of the king.

"Please, let me talk to the partners and see what they can do for you. I'm sure we can work something out," Terry said.

"I don't think so," I said, as I opened the door to leave.

My decision was made and my association with JKS was like a cold, wet coat being stripped off and discarded. I was free. I

could already feel the lightness and warmth of leaving that coat on the floor. I now had freedom to be true to myself, to expand beyond the boundaries that had contained me, to enjoy the sunshine on my face and the sound of the seagulls for the next twenty summers.