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True Colors

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True Colors

Fourth text from Mr. Bryant – er, *Kurt* – this morning, “Okay, Laney, I know we went over this, but be sure not to let on about the situation. Be positive. Let Ms. Marquez do her thing.”

Laney Smith-Jonson – thirty-seven, MBA from Stanford, three and a half years with Bryant Industrial – spoons a creamy dressing (Ranch? Italian? Does it matter?) over what the banquet card describes as, “Fresh Spring Greens & Arugula w/ Golden Tear-Drop Tomatoes.” The walls of the Westin Los Angeles Airport Hotel are a clean, crisp beige. Facing Laney and her “fresh spring greens,” standing sentinel next to the conference room is a pop-up poster – the kind that looks like a sort of wind-sail, the kind you see everywhere now... everywhere. Most of the poster is a picture of a buoyant Hispanic woman, arms outstretched like Jesus, the words “What are your True Colors?” arched between her two open palms. She has her hair up librarian-porn style, smiles like a proud mother.

“Bitch.” Laney mutters to herself. She briefly considers flinging a spoon of creamy dressing at Ms. Marquez’s picture and smiles while she mutters again, “Money shot!” The smile stings – her face hasn’t contorted to this in a while – and, for what? Some high school-esque joke? The smile fades, Laney looks at her phone for the time as a man, mid-thirties-maybe-forty, big smile, considers the three salad options... *So fancy!* She hears him say. She rolls her eyes, looks at the iPhone, the time is...

Twenty-four minutes. Over a half an hour left to lunch with the other “conventioners” – like...

“Larry, right? No, no problem. Ha! I was almost finished with that salad anyway. From the Montclair store, right? How’s the...”

Who gives a flying fuck? I don’t care, Larry. Having to carry on this inane conversation is killing some part of me right now. And, shit, I’m not ‘above’ this – I KNOW that! That kills me, too. I chose this. Five years in grad school – for what? For stick-on Avery nametags and having to say for the fifteenth time since breakfast...

“It was a rough quarter for everyone, but we pulled through. Made some cutbacks, obviously. Training, PR, some of the finance guys... but they’ll be back in a month, maybe two. Yeah, Kurt says things are gonna turn around...”

Kurt. Like we play basketball together on the weekend. I had the great misfortune of entering the corporate world when some genius decided it was much better for people in corporations to call everyone by their first name. Brilliant. Now the dipshit twenty-year-olds are cruising around the fourth floor like they know their mouth from their asshole and why? Because Billy, Brian, Zoe, and Jennifer are ‘equals’ with Kurt – the guy drinking himself into oblivion every night because, Larry from Montclair, the company he built from scratch, just the way the video you watched during your orientation told you – just like that, with two hundred bucks and a work ethic that died the first day some asshole strolled in and called him ‘Kurt’ – the company you are so ‘proud to be a part of’ is a week or two from Chapter 11. But yeah...

“Oh, she’s amazing. I booked her from New York and we were lucky to get her, too – best corporate trainer from Trailblazers, probably anywhere really. Oh, you liked

that? Wild, huh? Matching colors – of all things! – to our personalities. It’s so... I don’t know, *revealing*... right?”

Kurt had a plan. One last weekend “team building” event, “And let’s do it in LA, Laney – people love coming out to California and the weather will be just perfect. God knows, damnit, those guys and gals aren’t gonna be able to find a job for months, if not a year. Geeze, a year, Laney – can you imagine?”

“Mr. Bryant, I don’t mean this to be rude, but I don’t really have to *imagine* the scenario – I’ll be one of them.” Laney said this as a matter of fact, not a revelation, or even an accusation. “I think we can get the Westin or the Ayres – but the Ayres is a bit of a drive, so I’ll push for the Westin. As for speakers...”

Kurt waved his hand to stop Laney and pulled out a tri-fold brochure from his jacket, “*This* is who we are gonna get, Laney! I went to see her a few months ago. Get her, Laney – price is not a problem. We can’t be *more* broke, right?”

Laney looked at the back of the brochure, “Mr. Bryant, the Trailblazers are quite expensive. I’ve tried to book them before, for the 2008 event actually. And this True Colors thing is a little old hat, mid-90s stuff. I can probably find most of the material online, do it myself if you like...”

“Absolutely not. Ms. Smith-Jonson, I am asking you, as my assistant, as my event planner, as my trusted employee, to please contact this Ms. Garnet Marquez and book her for the last Bryant Industrial team builder. Will you do that?” It was so unlike Kurt, to be so almost-condescending to anyone, particularly Laney. But Kurt had never lost a company before, had never faced inevitable litigation from disgruntled employees and clients who will blame him *personally* for their own losses – so Laney had taken the last few months with a grain of salt.

“I’ll give her a call.” Two days later, Ms. Garnet Marquez was booked for a speaker fee damn near what Laney made in a year at Bryant Industrial. No discount, no understanding of the company’s situation, no contact with Ms. Marquez herself – just chipper receptionists and sales consultants.

Once again, it seemed like Bryant knew what he was talking about – everyone was eating from Ms. Marquez’s hands, out here discussing their “colors” with one another over Lobster Thermidor stuffed into puffed pastries and bite-size crackers loaded with Kobe beef tartar and wasabi paste (leave it to a hotel banquet planner to march you two decades back in time... serving up the food of a time when Bryant Industrial was booming and Ms. Laney Smith-Jonson had a future).

Larry waves over an over-tanned twenty-something, probably from the Midwest, sporting a pixie cut, big bowl eyes, a summer dress – a fucking *summer dress*... *Jesus, Larry, you were bad enough, but you had to bring Susan over? Really? Thank the Lord – five minute warning. No, Susan, as a matter of fact I’m not a ‘blue’ – you fucking lemming. I could give a shit what you are... of course...*

“Amazing. That *is* totally you – little miss adventure! Or, I guess I should say ‘Miss Orange’ right?”

Adventure. Daring. Risk Taker. Where’s the flip side? Where’s the part that says she’s gonna blow this sad fuck, Larry, because she needs to feel like a risk taker all the time.

“Knowing our strengths and weaknesses is not a magic trick,” Ms. Marquez was all smile and big arms, walking from one end of the stage to the other, pausing for effect, “but knowing *how to use* those strengths and weaknesses, how to use the strengths and weaknesses of *our colleagues*, now, *that*, that just might be magic!” Applause. She waits; these were expected, written into the margins of her notes, “wait for applause.” Ms. Marquez instructs them to read the cards in front of them, “Before lunch we discussed the positive aspects of your colors, but now we want to know the *less* positive aspects, the things to look out for – your weaknesses.”

Laney sits at the Gold Table across from the Oranges, where Susan is waving like an idiot – she’s joined by, no kidding, Billy, Brian, Zoe and Jennifer. Larry is behind them with the Greens, the thinkers, the nebbish white guys and the Asians from accounting, engineering, and design. All the way in the corner is the biggest group, the Blue Table. Kurt is at the head of the table – the guy is the personification of Blue as indicated with fortune cookie vagueness on the cards in front of them: lead with heart over head, sympathetic, likes to give/get approval, peace and calm are essential. Laney considers her card of good and bad features

Gold, huh? That’s totally me – “likes to take control” cause look at how much control I have over my life, you dumb bitch! I’m suffocating in the second row of a ‘ballroom’ fitted with hundreds of chairs, staring at your Power Point and your black pant suit – of which you probably have a dozen, exactly the same black, with a drawer full of complementary tops in varying shades of Green, Blue, Orange and Gold. You’re so very clever, Ms. Marquez from Trailblazers. Weddings take place here. Birthdays, too. I’m here. Almost seven years of my life, an MBA, magna cum laude. Soon to be unemployed.

The last hour went by mercifully quick with a final exercise that felt like musical chairs – what was the point? Who knows – it didn’t matter, people are leaving with big smiles on their face – like they just figured life out, like it all makes sense, now. Laney shakes hands with people mulling about, reminds them that coffee and dessert are available, not to forget their free gift (a tasteful silver watch, selected by Laney herself, engraved on the back: “Thank you for your dedicated service. K. Bryant”). Here comes Larry...

“This was just wonderful, Laney – great job pulling it together.”

“It’s my job, it’s what I do. Thank you, though,” *Why are you stopping to talk to me... again?*

“Hey, I... I’m sorry about earlier. I wanted to talk to you, but Susan saw me...” *You did talk to me, Larry. We talked about stupid shit, about you being “proud to work for Bryant”*

“I was just talking about a bunch of, I don’t know, stupid shit, I guess...”

“Ha!” Laney’s mouth turned up into another excruciating smile. Larry was smiling at her, a sincere smile – nothing like ol’ Garnet Marquez peering over his shoulder, still holding “What are your True Colors?” He was handsome... and *Is he hitting on me?*

“Well, I wanted to see if you might want to go out with me tonight – go explore some of Los Angeles? I rented a car.”

“I know; I did the invoice for it.”

“Is there any part of the operation you don’t have your hand in, Laney Smith-Jonson?”

“Are you keeping track, Lawrence Reynolds, from Bellville, New York?” *Why am I flirting with him? I can't go on a date . What for? A couple of drinks later, I spill the beans about Chapter 11, about Larry from Montclair losing his job. Then I'm stuck in some hotel room watching a grown man cry like a baby over losing his job. No thanks.*

“Are you always on the defense? You know, some people think you're kind of a bitch.”

Did he just call me a bitch? “Excuse me?”

“Not me, I don't think you are – I think you're pretty, a little high strung, but who isn't?”

“As flattering as all of this is...”

“Come and hang out with me tonight,” Larry stands next to the poster of Ms. Marquez, “C'mon, Laney Smith-Jonson, 'what are your true colors'?”

Fine. You asked for it, asshole, “I'm wondering, Larry, what your pick-up lines are gonna sound like when you don't have a rental car provided by the company. Or, better yet, when you don't have a job, when you're checking your email every hour to see if anyone is biting from the hundred resumes you sent out. I am wondering how confident you will be in your, 'you know, you're kind of a bitch' bravado when you can't make the rent on your condo or when you are standing in line at unemployment. Because, a couple weeks from now, Larry, that is what you – all of us! – will be! *Unemployed!*”

A few people have gathered a bit closer, trying to seem like they are not paying attention, but when the word *unemployed* leaves Laney's mouth, the whole bunch of them begin chatting loudly. Larry stares at Laney for a moment.

As if he hadn't heard a thing Laney said, “I figure maybe we could go down to Hollywood – the clean part – and, I don't know, have a drink, get to know each other.”

“Were you listening to me?”

“Oh, you mean, how you freaked out a moment ago – some built-up stuff about being unemployed. That? Yeah. So what about tonight?”

“I'm not kidding, Larry. Bryant is shutting down, Kurt is packing up, retiring on whatever he has left in savings.”

“That's the way it goes sometimes,” Larry smiles at her again, puts his hand on hers, “Tell you what – I will be in the lobby here about seven tonight. Meet me and forget about being unemployed for a few hours... or stay in your room and continue feeling sorry for yourself.”

“Seriously, Larry, I never knew you were so charming.”

“You never knew I was alive – but I'll forgive you for that. See you at seven.”

Larry leaves.

“He's a good looking fellow,” It was Ms. Garnet Marquez.

Jesus, what is up? I can't get a fucking break here, “Thank you so much for coming out, Ms. Marquez. Everyone seemed to enjoy it.”

“And you, Ms. Smith-Jonson, did you enjoy it?” She was the spitting image of the Christ-poster of herself, but her eyes were different, older, more discerning.

“Sure.”

“I've been doing this public speaking thing for more years than you'd think. I bullshit for a living.”

Fuck it, I'm on my way to the poor house anyway, “You're right, Garnet, I didn't like it. I've seen the same thing done for nine, ten years, and it hasn't helped anyone.

Certainly didn't save any of our asses from financial ruin knowing who the hell was a Green or an Orange, did it?"

"Kurt was right, you certainly do get to the point."

"So you met the guy who paid you an exorbitant amount of money to dispense snake oil and voodoo to his soon-to-be welfare-bound employees?"

"Ms. Smith-Jonson, I admire your spirit and passion, but I will not tolerate belligerence for the sake of shock. You are better than that and, I assure you, so am I."

This sucks, "You're right, I'm sorry for being rude. So you did talk with Kurt?"

"Months ago."

"What? Before I booked you? Why didn't *he* book you then? At least mention it to me..."

"He did, in a way."

"I don't follow?"

"Kurt asked if Trailblazers was hiring, but I told him they were not, and that I might even be leaving Trailblazers myself."

"Why? You make a killing – and you're booked solid through 2011."

"Because," Garnet points to her poster, "these aren't my 'true colors' and I want to do something different, make my own training regimen. I am pulling together my team and leaving Trailblazers at the end of 2011."

"So Kurt wanted to work for Trailblazers?"

"No, he wanted you to work for Trailblazers. They won't have you, but, if you like, if you want to take a chance on something new, I can hire you."

What? "What?"

"I just finished an engagement where some crazy employer paid me nearly enough to employ a staff person for a year. There is a catch – you'd have to move to New York."

What? New York? A new job... "I don't know what to say, Ms. Marquez. I am..."

"Think it over tonight and get in contact with me tomorrow. I think we've got a bright future ahead of us, Laney... or, maybe we'll crash and burn! But that's the fun of it, isn't it? It's why we got into business in the first place, right? We're all a little 'orange' you know – those of us who care to live a little anyway."

Larry sits in the lobby of the Westin, nice jeans, a button-down shirt, a nice jacket. He glances up at the stairs every few seconds, almost sure he's completely wrong about her.

J.D. Isip's academic writings, poetry, plays, and short stories have appeared in a number of collections and publications. He teaches American Literature, Composition, and Rhetoric courses for Texas A&M University-Commerce. He is the Editor-in-Chief for the literary journals *The Mayo Review* and *Ishaan Literary Review*.