

CORPORATE SEX

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Loyd L Fueston, Jr

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The modern liberal societies are extremely effective at raising children to be the sorts of people who could not possibly be happy in any Heaven conceivable under Christian beliefs.

A recursively consistent author,
*To See a World in a Grain of
Sand*

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Part I
Objects of Desire

1 An Unexpected Encounter

Mary Pride was standing at the entrance of her cubicle when she caught movement out of the corner of her right eye. Looking up, she saw Jake Preskile striding towards her. He quickly drew close to her, a grim and determined expression upon that face which had always struck Mary as being so lean and hungry. His hand started to go up in a wave but he quickly dropped it in response to . . . a laugh. Mary realized she had laughed, not in a malicious manner, but in the way she'd often laughed at her father when he had stiffly crumbled to her side to work on a jigsaw puzzle or a picture to be colored.

Jake came up to within a couple of feet of her and smiled as smoothly as Mary would have expected, though she really didn't know him well at all. She'd probably only exchanged a few sentences with him in the entire three years she'd been working at CMBG in New York. And she'd never had a desire for more communication, of any sort, with him. He was a symbol of much that left her weary and discouraged her with her present life. He was a man who seemed at home and even quite happy in the corporate environment.

And then Mary told herself she barely knew Jake and it might well be unfair to consider him to be a well-adapted corporate animal. . .

"Mary," and she heard him speak in a pleasant voice, leaving her feeling still more suspicious. Why was he here? Why would an ambitious creature of the financial world waste his time in the Personnel Department? He looked at her strangely and she wondered if her mask was down, if she were showing her distrust and dislike, and she told herself it wasn't fair to make this flesh-and-blood man into a symbol of all that she disliked about her life and about her environment. The puzzlement was still showing in the wrinkles of concentration about his eyes, but Jake went on to say, "Mr Thornsby and I were talking about the tight schedule we'll be on with," and

he looked about before adding, “the acquisition we’ll be talking about in the meeting upstairs. When I showed him the schedule I’d put together, he told me it puts a burden on you. So I came down here to talk to you quickly before the meeting.” He looked at his watch and then back at her, his face showing once more nothing but calm ambition and confident intensity. There was a hard tint to the baby-blue of his eyes, there was a hardness about the very placement of his prominently hooked nose. His chin was firm in a manner that Mary found displeasing, that is, in conjunction with the entire package.

She motioned down the hallway a short ways. “We can talk in the conference room, behind closed doors. I was leaving to run a couple of personal errands before heading up to the meeting.”

A smile appeared upon Jake’s face, a smile that veered close to being attractively pleasant, a smile that distracted Mary for just a heart-beat before she took a step towards the conference room. Jake didn’t move, and he grinned before she was able to maneuver around him. “Didn’t anyone tell you that the personal life is dead in this brave, new corporate world?”

Mary gave no more than a cursory smile. She stepped to her right and walked past Jake, entering the conference room and taking the strap of her dark-blue nylon briefcase from her shoulder. As she was placing her burden upon the table, she checked out of the corner of her eyes, making sure Jake was at her side before saying, as if to no one in particular, “I’ve always found our generation has the singularly unattractive habit of parodying what is reprehensible about our behavior and our ways of thought.” Immediately she wondered when she had become some sort of Puritan, but the line of thought disappeared as soon as she looked at Jake and saw not anger but interest in . . .

And she remembered that the thought she’d just expressed had not been her own but had rather come from a critical review of the advertisements for one of the television channels which brought back old programs from Mary’s childhood and well before that as well. A shudder passed up her spine, though she was sure she showed nothing on the surface, but then another shudder passed up her spine as she met Jake’s gaze eyeball to eyeball. He’d shown no more than a desire to be pleasant before Mary had made a comment which she had intended to puncture rather than make her suddenly attractive to this corporate reptile. Now she feared she’d awakened a different interest on his part, but she smiled in a manner meant to be neutral and no more than polite. Turning more fully towards Jake

who'd retreated a step to sit down, she told him, "Now we can mention the name of Baxton, Inc. I don't think this room is bugged by any investment bankers wishing to stir up interest in competing bids."

"I was just being careful. I probably have some bad habits, some loose ways of speaking. In the Financial Department, even our secretaries are screened for their willingness to keep their mouths closed. Else we'd be operating in an atmosphere of paranoia. Memos are always flying about which might be useful to..." He paused before saying with precise enunciation, "Investment bankers wishing to stir up interest in competing bids."

Feeling afraid that Jake had been not been speaking sarcastically but rather teasingly, Mary said, "Okay. Am I to give up even a hint of a private life for the next few months?"

Jake shook his head, still staring at Mary as if studying her, and she grew still more afraid that his teasing might have a more serious intent, but he only stared at her in that way for a second or two before shaking his head. "No, for the next few months, I might be giving up my few hints of a private life, though Baxton is only part of that. If the Baxton board tentatively accepts our offer, then you'll be doing a stretch of long days, maybe on-site in Nashua, for a week or two. Mr Thornsby is worried about something, I think the possibility of having to lay off a lot of workers at Baxton. I don't share his worries. Good workers will find jobs, even if they have to move."

Mary glared at Jake for just a second before she picked up her brief-case and put the strap over her shoulder. "I'll clear my schedule for the next couple of weeks. I'll carry out my analyses of the Baxton employment levels, pay levels, and benefit levels and have the results to you and Mr Thornsby as soon as humanly possible." After walking past Jake, she paused at the door and turned to add, "If the acquisition goes through, that is." And she headed off to pick up her laundry, half-inclined to head on for a walk in Central Park rather than returning for the meeting which would take place in...

She looked at her watch and saw that it was already 10:17, only 28 minutes to go before the meeting scheduled at the odd time of 10:45, "Undoubtedly," she told herself, "because of the tight schedule of the important people up in the Financial Department."

2 Intrusions of Moral Thought

After dropping off her clean shirts in her cubicle, Mary headed right up to the executive wing, only three minutes to go before the meeting started. She'd always been in the habit of getting to meetings a few minutes early so that she could organize herself, finding it much easier to concentrate on presentations and discussions if she didn't have to so much as look down to search for her writing pad or her pencil. The timing would have been just right if Jake had not interrupted her on her way out to pick up her dry-cleaning.

So it was that she walked up to the receptionist's desk, hearing herself give out a curt, "Good morning," to Debbie, a pleasant young lady from Long Island; Mary had hired her and then had to coach her through a period of dressing down from the more exotic teenage styles as well as having to get her to tone down her heavy use of make-up. Without another word, Mary scribbled her name on the log and moved on to the conference room, not at all surprised to see she was nearly the last to arrive.

Mr Thornsby, the Executive Vice-president and Chief Financial Officer for CMBG sat at the head of the table, with Jake Preskile at his right hand and his executive assistant at his left hand. Doris Gillespie was a forties woman who'd recently completed her MBA while working full-time as the office-administrator in a large CMBG plant near Austin. Finding Doris' in-house application for an opening in the financial department had been one of the more pleasant moments in Mary's four year-old career as a corporate personnel manager. Doris had not gotten the job she'd applied for, but Mary had kept her in mind and had suggested her to Mr Thornsby a month later when he went in search of a new executive assistant. The two women exchanged smiles and Mary remembered that Doris had been reluctant to accept what seemed to be a menial position until she'd been told that the two previous occupants of the position had moved on to become supervisors

of small but important units in the Financial Department. She'd told Doris, "It's a launching pad rather than a long-term job."

"Good morning, Mary." She stopped walking and looked back to see Mr Thornsby smile pleasantly at her before he dropped his eyes back to some sort of memo or report that he was reading. Though she'd been trying not to look at Jake, she couldn't help noticing he was looking at her, some puzzlement still showing on his face. That wouldn't have been bad except that she thought she detected some personal interest in that expression.

And she took a seat, next to Doris. On the other side of Mary was Maria Cortez, a recent hire that Mary had helped to recruit out of the business school at the University of Miami. Maria smiled and said, "Buenos dias, Mary." And then she winked at Mary. They had a private joke going because of Mary's clowning around with her high school Spanish during the second interview, after the two women were comfortable with each other. And Jake seemed to be still expending part of his attention upon studying her. Leaning towards Maria, Mary asked, "How's your father doing?"

Maria whispered back, "He's going to a rehab hospital for a month or so and then he'll be home. And probably back at his bank shortly after that. The stroke damaged his walking a little, but didn't touch his memory or his speech. He told me, with great determination, that he still expects to dance on Castro's grave."

Mary smiled and turned around just in time to hear Jake clear his throat, undoubtedly on behalf of Mr Thornsby. But the CFO just nodded at the young superstar of the world of high-finance and Jake was off and running:

Well, folks, this isn't the largest acquisition we've worked on recently, but it is one of the more important because we're starting to move our forces into position. Baxton will undergo a severe cultural shock as it stops distributing industrial supplies from a large number of manufacturers and importers and begins to specialize in products from CMBG subsidiaries and allies. But such transitions are pretty common in a modern economy. And we'll be there to help them manage the transition.

Jake continued to talk as Mary's attention drifted to the windows, not that there was much to see out the tinted windows of the seventeenth floor. The October sky was transformed to a rather eerie brownish-gray but it looked as if it were free of clouds. She could see the Statue of Liberty,

a frightening sight since it had once been blocked from view by the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Her thoughts began to drift back to the days when she'd worked behind the counter of her father's hardware store. . .

And she returned her attention to the conference room while Jake was still talking about the schedule, of little concern to her other than the part he'd already warned her about. She glanced quickly at her notes and saw one topic on her agenda which she would have to bring up if Jake didn't mention it. She listened as Jake brought his short discussion of the schedule to a close and asked, "Are there any questions, folks?"

No one made a motion, but the break allowed Mary to look around and to see that the white-board behind Jake had a list of topics to be addressed. Next on the list was funding. And Jake looked to Mr Thornsby who spoke quietly, "I'm sure that everyone knows that our sister corporation, JREI, is bleeding heavily with the real-estate market so depressed in New York City. The Board of our parent corporation, GRF, has laid down the rule that outlays of cash are to be minimized, unless the cash can be generated from Baxton's own assets. Since I am a member of that Board, I was part of the discussions and I know that we have good reason to minimize any outflows of cash. If we didn't need Baxton to complete the puzzle we've been assembling over the past few years, we wouldn't even be trying to acquire that company right now. We *can't* afford to lose out on Baxton." Without saying why it was so urgent, Mr Thornsby looked back over to Jake and nodded.

Mary's attention shifted over to Jake and saw that he was looking at his notes before going on. She raised her pencil, but he wasn't looking at her, and neither was Mr Thornsby. Since the meeting was informal, she spoke even without being recognized: "Will there be significant layoffs? Specifically, should I be planning for severance pay or the hiring of an outplacement specialist?"

Jake shrugged and wrinkled his face in a way that Mary interrupted as a dismissal of the issue. She heard no sound but thought he sighed before returning to his business-like expression and manner. "There are probably surplus workers at Baxton. If we are successful in purchasing the company. . . Yes, Mary, some of those workers will lose their jobs, but good workers can always find a job, even if they have to move to another state."

He had not even finished speaking before Mary Pride felt her stomach muscles tighten. And then she the muscles of her legs and back tighten as if

she were going to try to leap that three foot wide expanse of polished oak. She felt ready to wipe that smug expression off of his face. And a smirk came over Jake's face as if to dare her to do it, as if he had deliberately antagonized her, had goaded her into a moral response or. . .

A retreat. And she didn't wish to retreat, but she felt herself withdrawing as she remembered that Jake had mentioned to her in private that he thought Mr Thornsby might be afraid of lay-offs up at Baxton if the acquisition was successful. She wondered if Jake thought she had deliberately betrayed him, had used his own comment to put a knife in his back in front of his boss and some of his colleagues and subordinates.

Mary felt ashamed but only for a second before she felt her muscles tightening once again. She'd not really done anything wrong and Jake was acting as if he had something to hide. Maybe he had mentioned the subject of layoffs to her because he knew that there would likely be large-scale lay-offs at a time when unemployment was inching up in northern New England. She felt a desire to advance again, right up to—and beyond—the line that she felt Jake had drawn in the sand. She felt her hands gripping the table again, as if she were once more preparing to leap at Jake and slap that smug expression. . .

But she noticed his face was showing more confusion than smugness. She felt herself coming to a boil inside and began to imagine all the people who'd have to go short on Christmas presents for their children, all the people who'd lose their medical benefits—for themselves and their dependents. Her insides were going at a full boil and she realized she must be showing it. The others in the meeting, mostly young staffers from the financial department, were frozen still. At least the ones she could see. Mr Thornsby was out of her line of sight.

Was CMBG's CFO surprised at the sudden eruption of hostile feelings when nothing more than an acquisition was being discussed? Was he wondering about Mary's ability to hold herself under control when she'd been irritated by no more than words. She hoped not; he wasn't in her direct line of report but he far out-ranked her boss, Mr Simpson, the Senior Vice-President of Personnel. She wasn't sure if Mr Thornsby was annoyed or, worse—amused, by the anger she knew to be showing on her face. She couldn't see him at the end of the table without turning her head and she wasn't about to do that. Jake had stopped looking confused and was now staring back at Mary as if he were irritated. She didn't quite blame him. He was a corporate animal and she had threatened his control of a kill because

of her concern for the young ones of that animal he was attacking. And then Mary felt confused. She knew the image she'd used in her mind was far from being a good match to the situation with Baxton and Jake, but she was still sure that innocent people were going to be hurt and suspicious that Jake was cold-blooded about those in harm's way.

And she was starting to feel a little childish when Mr Thornsby's soft voice spoke out: "Jake, please review the projected earnings and cash-flows for Baxton." That command proved sufficient to cause Jake to settle back and break his gaze away from Mary. He reached for a folder in the short pile lying in front of him, but he'd not had a chance to open it before Mr Thornsby spoke once more, softly but firmly, "We'll send Mary to their headquarters in Nashua after the Baxton board accepts our offer. Then, she can get a handle on the programs needed to help the Baxton workforce make the transition."

Thus it was that Mary Pride, distracted by her own silent planning process, barely heard Jake Preskile present several different schemes for buying Baxton with that company's own cash-flow and excess assets, some of which excess assets were buried in overly-generous pension plans or medical benefits. More than that, he was claiming there would be enough money to automate the inventory and delivery systems of that industrial supplier. The first goal for CMBG, Inc, in Jake's presentation, was to avoid putting any money into the purchase of Baxton; the second goal was to minimize the size of that middle-man corporation without at all affecting its gross cash flows or its profits. Properties were to be sold and leased back. Pension plans and health insurance plans were to be reduced to be more in line with current market realities. Though Jake didn't mention it in his presentation, Mary knew that his proposed schemes were variations of the same sorts of financial tricks used by the CMBG executives and a few large stock-holders when they'd bought the company by way of an empty shell of a corporation named GRF, Inc.

"And, so," Jake concluded as Mary Pride began to scribble out plans for her Baxton intelligence gathering activities, "we should aim at delivery directly from the manufacturer to the customer whenever possible, making sure, of course, that a Baxton sales rep is present to remind the customer who got him a good deal and who will be able to maintain good service."

A jolt that was to Mary Pride when she remembered the high percentage of her father's assets that had been tied up in inventory in the family hardware store. Radiator valves didn't exactly jump off the shelves, but

they had to be kept against the emergency needs of a valuable customer or long-time friend or neighbor. It was no big deal for a giant discount hardware store to satisfy emergency demand by holding a few slow-moving items—after all, they formed a small percentage of the worth of those items filling miles of shelves in the stores and warehouses. A nationwide chain could hold back-up stock for slow-moving items in their regional warehouses and thus minimize the risks of too many emergencies running through their stock. Those sorts of draw-downs of stock would not happen everywhere at the same time. She had thought often and with great intensity about her father's problems with his small hardware store. She had come to understand at the gut-level the advantages of a large corporation. A nationwide chain could put up ten large stores to replace 100 small, family-owned businesses and could hold far less total stock in the process, though they could manage to offer far more variety of stock in each of those stores than any old-fashioned, family-owned store could have done.

Family store. . .

So had she thought of it, having readily and happily become accustomed to the idea that she would one day run it. When she'd been younger, her mother had spoken of a desire to have a son who would work with his father and take over the store, but Mary's father had never acted as if Mary would be displaced from her position in the store, helping to stock shelves and sweep floors from the time she could walk about. And the son had never come. The son had never. . .

Hearing some rustling of papers, Mary returned from her memories to see that people were rising and heading for the door. She looked down to see that she had written a couple of notes to herself to check employee availability in the region of Baxton, to check average benefit levels in that region, to. . .

The next line had a dash to mark off a new item, but she had written only the word 'emporium', though she'd written that word four times. And she felt a smile come to her lips as she thought of her grandfather, her mother's father, who had founded the hardware store and eventually turned it over to his son-in-law. Her grandfather had always told her any self-respecting businessman would own an emporium rather than a mere store.

"Well, Mary, I guess you're a little upset with our apparent lack of concern for the Baxton employees." The voice was gentle and calm and Mary looked up, suppressing her urge to smile at Mr Thornsby, who pulled out a recently vacated chair. He was smiling in a way that reminded her

of her grandfather and she had to once more suppress an desire to smile back at him. Yet, he nodded in a friendly manner. She noticed he had prepared to reach out, probably to pat her hand which was resting on the table, but he had suppressed that motion. "I know it's hard sometimes when we do things that seem to be hurting people, Mary. And it's your job to protect people. It's the job of all the people in the Personnel department but especially those of you who are part of CMBG's management." His smile eased off a little before he went on to tell her, "But people who are holding superfluous jobs are being hurt more than helped. For their own good, they need to move on. Sure, if there was a way they could hold those needless jobs for the rest of their lives, they'd have no reason to complain. And a certain percentage of people, at all levels and in all parts of the country, do get away with holding unnecessary jobs and, often enough, they are also greatly overpaid. That doesn't happen often. At least not in our type of economy and our type of political system. The market is allowed to operate and it tends to drive overly-generous companies out of business. Or..." Mr Thornsby's gray eyes looked almost sad, the upwards movement of his hands seemed to Mary to be a bit much, and he told her, "Often a company will be driven into the arms of a suitor which will make it's investment good partly by rationalizing pay-levels and benefit programs and by letting surplus workers go. The system can be cruel at times, but it's certainly far less cruel than any others which have been tried. All other economic systems I'm aware of have left people mired in poverty. And good intentions don't feed children and don't provide medical care for the elderly."

Mary still felt troubled and confused. Perhaps she showed it; Mr Thornsby smiled at her again. It was then that she noticed Jake was lingering at the door to the conference room, but he noticed her noticing him. Throwing her a smile which she couldn't interpret, he then turned and left.

After casting a glance over his shoulder and catching Jake as he turned to leave, Mr Thornsby turned back to Mary and confessed, "I didn't really mean to give you an economics lecture. I'm sure you had enough of those in business school. I'm just assuring you that we are not going to treat the Baxton workers badly. Even if we have to let some go, we will do our best to place them elsewhere or to give them a severance check to keep them going until they find another job." He looked down at the floor between his knees before getting back to his confession, "There are some fine lines we often have to draw in the sand, Mary, and I'm not convinced I've always

stayed on the right side. I know that I've sometimes been dragged over to the wrong side, but I don't think that's the case with the Baxton takeover bid."

Mr Thornsby's shoulder twisted just enough to alarm Mary and she felt herself draw back. She trusted him, she liked him, but she didn't want him to so much as pat her on the hand while she was trying to straighten matters out in her own head. And he reached out but laid his hand gently upon the table, a good six inches short of hers.

"You've heard me talk about my oldest daughter, Cathy." Mary nodded needlessly and wondered if she were showing more confusion at the sudden switch in topics. "She married fairly late. In her early thirties. She married a good man, though her choice surprised me greatly. Karl is a Mennonite Bible scholar of all things. I've had some serious conflicts of opinion with him, but he's a good man and I think he has the same opinion of me, however much he sees me as being allied with the forces of a fallen world." Mr Thornsby drew his hand back and Mary felt tense. She wondered if she should make it obvious to Mr Thornsby that she wasn't about to feel sorry for him. He was pulling off another major business conquest; if his conscience bothered him a little...

But then she wondered what his daughter had to do with either business glory or the impending lay-offs at Baxton. She looked at him and saw he'd dropped his eyes, but then he lifted them and looked at her. "Well, Karl does his best to make me feel welcome and to spray some of his Christian love in my direction. And, as a good Methodist, I appreciate his feelings of charity, but..." He moved his shoulders again, as if about to signal some sort of helplessness he felt. He suppressed that and told Mary, "Little Paul and tiny Katie are being raised by a father whose radical views on non-violence have spilled over to a radical opposition to corporations and large governments and those children sometimes look at me as if..." He took a breath and was silent for a second before going on: "I know Karl would never, never turn them against me deliberately, but somehow..." And this time he went through with the shrug of helplessness before smiling sadly at Mary.

"And the worst of it is... Well, one of the worst parts of the entire mess is all the memories it stirs up in me. All the memories of my days of radical social and economic views when I was at Amherst College and fighting my father's plans to send me to Harvard Business School. I lost the fight and eventually decided that financial management isn't such a bad career and

it is one which can be led in a morally responsible manner.”

Mr Thornsby started to rise as if finished, but then he settled down in his chair again and told Mary, “If you have any questions or doubts about what we’re doing and any concerns about how we’ll be treating the workers at Baxton, feel free to come and see me. I expect to be an awfully busy man for the next few weeks, but I’ll squeeze you in somehow. Maybe it will give me practice for dealing with Karl’s moral criticisms of corporate business methods. And he’ll probably have some specific comments when it hits the newspapers after we go through with this buy-out.”

And this time he did rise and he turned quickly towards the door, avoiding any more eye-contact. As he was walking out the door, Mary suddenly felt guilty for suppressing those smiles.

3 A Friendly Proposition

Mary had reached the entrance to her cubicle and was about to get to work on a more detailed review of the benefit structure at Baxton when she once again caught movement out of the corner of her right eye. Looking up, she saw Jake Preskile once again striding towards her. He quickly drew close to her and smiled, in a manner almost shy, but quickly did a mask came over his features as if he were suddenly uncomfortable. . .

The hard tint to his blue eyes had nearly disappeared, and then she wasn't sure it had ever really been there. He rested his arm upon the wall to her cubicle, but she said nothing. That didn't seem to disturb him, a matter she found disconcerting after the quiet but difficult scene she'd caused in the meeting just fifteen minutes ago. It bothered her further that the busiest, most no-nonsense young executive in the entire GRF empire was standing in front of her, relaxed as if he had all the time in the world, and that time was being offered to Mary, a woman who'd said something, in front of his boss and co-workers, which he could have interpreted as betrayal of a sort.

After a short silence, he offered, "I didn't mean to upset you in there, Mary. I know I just dismissed your question in a cavalier manner but layoffs are a fact of life in modern business and they're one of the reasons for our prosperity. . ."

He reddened a little. "I'm sorry. I didn't really mean to start to lecture you on economic theory. What I meant to do was to apologize. You can't take these things personally. We often speak bluntly in the financial world. When a lot of money is on the line and decisions have to be made fast, we don't always have time to be polite or to take care of the niceties of human relationships." He shifted his eyes as if something had caught his attention, but Mary kept her gaze steady upon his face which seemed to be blushing just a small bit. She didn't say a word and he looked uncomfortable with

the silence, which suited her just fine. But she was starting to feel sorry for him just when he asked, “How ’bout letting me buy you dinner to show there’s no hard feelings?”

Not sure why that would show there were no hard feelings, Mary remained silent for a few seconds as she was working towards the conclusion that Jake didn’t think girls could play as rough as boys, but she realized she was trying too hard to read his thoughts and feelings. And she wasn’t even sure about her own thoughts and feelings! She decided to cut the scene short and spoke in a business-like manner, “*Pedro’s* at seven.” Having made sure there would be no meeting at either apartment, she entered her cubicle, noticing that a smile was starting to form on Jake’s face. Mary was afraid of her feelings of pleasure raised by that smile.

As she sat down at her desk, the piles of papers and personnel manuals relating to Baxton suddenly seemed to be more than a body could review in a lifetime. Or maybe it was more that. . .

Much of the material was likely to lead to decisions she wouldn’t want to be part of. And suddenly her mind shifted back to something that Mr Thornsby had said. He’d spoken of the immorality of keeping superfluous workers on the payroll, and she wondered why it was that so many executives would say such things and then go out and fight to add more workers to their personal empires.

Not sure where that thought would go, Mary tried to return to her work, telling herself she already had more than she could handle and it was quite possible Baxton could turn out to be an even bigger job than she was currently planning for. She looked back at the pile of papers and packages on her desk, wondering if she should requisition one of the outside offices with lockable doors. So far, she had only manuals and summarizations of the pay and benefit levels, but there would be a lot of personal and confidential information showing up if the buyout offer went to the next stage. She’d have information on the salaries of secretaries and vice-presidents, reports of harassment complaints and warnings of bad work habits. . .

She remembered once again that there were real salaries, paid to real human beings, behind all those summary reports with their crisp wordings and their professionally formatted charts. She already suspected that she would have to recommend a cut in pension and educational benefits, and possibly a drop in salary levels in some job classifications. Mary felt her stomach churn as it had not done since those terrible years when she’d watched her mother’s memory and cognitive functions decay.

Shaking off those hellish memories, Mary looked back at the piles of paper on her desk. Based on this preliminary information, she was pretty sure there were excessive benefits at Baxton relative to the current corporate standards. Certainly, Baxton benefits were generous compared to benefits at comparable companies already part of the CMBG family. She also had a suspicion there were too many employees being retained after bad reviews. The policies for time off for funerals and child-birth and vaguely defined family situations indicated too much sympathy for the personal problems of employees. On the whole, she had reasons to believe she would have to make a number of harsh recommendations. She would have no choice if that was what her analyses indicated. After all, as her grandfather had said to her many times, "Honesty is the last refuge of the modern scoundrel." But she. . .

She had no intention of becoming a modern scoundrel.

Then again, "What choice do I have?"

Unsure of how to get a grip on her moral dilemmas, she told herself that it was clear she was morally bound to do her job and to do it efficiently and well.

Wasn't she?

Not able to see past her duty to do the job she was paid to do, Mary Pride put her nose back to the grindstone and soon confirmed her fears that Baxton was being too generous to forklift operators and secretaries. They were paying better than the wages prevailing in that area, and it was hard to justify the education benefits for the non-professional workers. True enough, there had been that forklift operator who had worked through a BS and then an MBA and was now assistant controller. She found a statement that two secretaries had become computer programmers. One file-clerk had used the educational benefits to get an associates degree and she was now the facilities manager for the home-office and Baxton's main warehouse. That was nice for those individuals, but it simply wasn't necessary in the existing marketplace for Baxton to be so generous. Certified computer programmers and people with business degrees weren't that rare, and Baxton shouldn't have to pay too much even for someone with an MBA from an accredited business-school. Graduates of Harvard and Stanford could command good deals, but Baxton had little need for people with those sorts of credentials and graduates of lesser schools had to be willing to grab hold of the first-rung of a corporate ladder.

Someone like Jake had been able to jump right into a high-paying job

at CMBG, with his undergraduate degree in industrial engineering from MIT and his MBA in financial management from Stanford, but Jake, even right out of school, would have been over-qualified for any job at Baxton, except for Chief Executive Officer or Chief Financial Officer. She wasn't sure whether she should feel happy for Jake, or sorry for him. . .

And that line of thought seeming too frustrating to pursue. . .

Trying to get her mind back on track, she looked down at the pad where she'd been writing her to-do list and her open questions and found that her right hand had drifted away and was now doodling upon her desk calendar. *Pedro's* had been written out seven times, five of those with a question mark. What of the other two?

Mary threw down her pencil in disgust as she realized she hadn't been dating much lately. She really hadn't even been going out much with her female friends. Work was filling up her time and. . .

Nothing was really filling her emotional needs, but. . .

She'd been just too damned busy, and this latest project was sure to be an especially exhausting sort of work since she couldn't get it out of her head that her decisions, or her support for the decisions by GRF's executives, could damage families and towns and maybe destroy the hopes of some of those blue-collar workers to enter professional careers.

Thinking that she really did need a night out, if only to keep her work quality up, Mary thought it might also be a chance for her to let Jake know how she really felt about. . .

What? The buy-out of Baxton? If it even happened. The cut in benefits for Baxton employees? Other than a few high-level officers and some of the direct supervisors, that is. Middle-management might find itself in the same boat as the blue-collar workers and the clerical and secretarial workers.

Mary was beginning to hope the SEC or the Antitrust Division of the Justice Department would kill the buy-out, and then she noticed, to her great relief, that people were filing out of the office. Usually, she stayed a half-hour or even a full-hour late. That quiet time was very productive, and the later commute was a lot more pleasant, and it cut down on the amount of work she had to lug back to her apartment. But, she was tired and might be working a lot of overtime pretty soon.

Maybe very soon. Mr Thornsby had mentioned that the executive committee of Baxton's Board of Directors would be meeting that evening, just about the time Mary would be meeting Jake for dinner. Mary smiled at the silliness of thinking of those meetings as being parallel, even the time ele-

ment was no more than coincidence, and surely a man and woman meeting for a friendly date was nothing like corporate executives meeting to discuss the possible consummation of a merger or an acquisition.

At the very thought of the word 'consummation', Mary could feel the blood draining from her face. Then it shot back up and she feared she was glowing like Rudolph's nose. She began to slip some papers into her briefcase and then she locked some especially sensitive papers in her file-drawer, wondering once more if she needed an enclosed and lockable office for the duration of the Baxton project. She decided she'd discuss the matter on Monday with Mr Simpson, her boss.

And then she rose to take her coat off the hook on the small coat-rack she used in preference to the closet out in the hallway. After picking up her briefcase and pocket-book, Mary began her short trek to the elevator-bank, stopping a few feet down the hall to examine her reflection in the glass panels of the department's main meeting room. She saw nothing upsetting in her image and walked on towards the elevators.

4 Travels with Mary

Mary had decided to get some air and had walked down to Lincoln Center, planning to catch a taxi down to the restaurant from there. After walking along Central Park and reaching the southwest corner of the park, she decided to take the subway instead of a cab. A short walk later, she had descended below street-level and was just putting a token into the turn-stile slot when she heard a train coming down the track. She shook her head and wondered if the situation were ironic. . .

“No,” she said softly while pushing through the turn-stile. “I remember Professor Harrison telling us irony had to do with situations that appeared to be one thing and were actually another. Or something like that. A subway train showing up immediately when I have time to waste is a matter of frustration, not irony.” A quick look around showed that no one else had been on the platform to hear her talking to herself, and she wondered why she would have cared if a stranger had heard her speaking under her breath. Wondering why she was all of a sudden wondering about so many routine matters, she headed for the middle car and checked the occupants quickly through the window. There were about ten people on the car, including a heavy-set black woman with two small children. The little boy, no more than four, was trying to squirm out of his mother’s grasp with such energy that Mary feared someone might get hurt. Bruised at least, but children were made to heal from small injuries. She smiled as she remembered her grandmother saying that after examining a scrape or a bump and assuring Mary, “You’ll likely live, young lady, though you might do serious damage some day if you continue your Tom-boy ways.” And then Mary was confused. Something didn’t seem right about her memories and she suddenly realized, at a gut-level, that it would be terrible to end up like her mother.

With all of her mental energies, Mary Pride dug into her memories and,

at first nothing came—as if the very effort to remember kept away any revivification of her memories. She took a seat across the aisle from the woman with the two children and smiled politely before returning to her struggle and then. . .

To her great relief, she remembered:

It was Grandma who'd told her she'd likely live and Aunt Bessie who always dismissed minor injuries with a smile, a kiss, and the statement that children were made so they would heal easily.

And then she remembered her mother, but all that would come was the frantic activity around the oven in those later years of mental problems. She had been always baking cakes. And cookies. And any thing else that would go into the oven without protest. That had actually started before when Mary was still in college. She'd not yet known anything was seriously wrong though she had noticed her mother telling the same story two or three times within a fifteen minute conversation and acting as if she were saying something fresh each time. The real troubles had not come until a bit later, after Mary had graduated from Smith and returned home while she worked towards her MBA at Western New England College. Her mother's serious symptoms of senility had started when she was sixty or so. That had been young, according to her doctor. "Too old for early-onset varieties of Alzheimer's," he'd added, "but too young for the usual age-onset varieties." Mary was somewhat frightened that she was having trouble remembering what her mother had really been like before that long stretch of memory problems developing into more serious cognitive problems.

"Mom, you even managed to outlive Dad, though it wasn't clear you wanted to, not after you had to be put in that nursing home."

"What was that, Miss?"

Mary looked up at the woman who was smiling in puzzlement even while struggling with the boy who was trying to run down the corridor of the subway car. The little girl was curled up and fast asleep alongside her mother. Mary smiled at the sight and then looked up to the mother, suddenly wondering if the woman really was the mother of the children. She could easily be an aunt or a grandmother or a babysitter returning them to their parents.

But she pushed away such questions and replied, "I was just remembering my mother's sad ending. She had memory problems and my father

had taken care of her at home for more than three years after she was. . .” The woman nodded as if signalling that she understood and Mary went on, “And then Dad died all of a sudden of a heart attack. It was just after I had started to move to New York City. I had gotten an apartment down here and was already on my company’s payroll and then I went back to close up my apartment in Hartford when I got the telephone call, just minutes before it was scheduled to be disconnected. And I drove home right away, but my aunt met me at the door to tell me Dad never even regained consciousness. Mom didn’t even understand what had happened and didn’t have a clear idea who that Wendell fellow had been.”

“Wendell.” The woman spoke slowly and with wonder in her voice. “Such a nice name. Your father?” When Mary nodded, the woman smiled at nothing in particular that could be seen. “That was my grandfather’s name, though I never knew him. He died down in Alabama during the Great Depression. Grandma packed up her five children, including my Dad, and got a ride with a minister who was heading up north to see his son at college. Dad said the man, who’d never attended more than an evening Bible school, was so proud his son had made it into Columbia.” Then she winked at Mary before whispering loudly, “Dad always told the story as if he had been a witness but he was the baby in Grandma’s arms.” There was silence for a moment or two, that is—silence other than the groans and grunts of the little boy who was still trying to get moving down the car.

“My son has as much physical energy as his father.” She looked up at Mary and told her proudly, “My husband played pro football for a year. A safety with the Jets, but he wrenched his back badly when he made an open field tackle on one of those 240 pound running backs. The doctors told him. . .” She sighed and left the bad news unspoken. “He makes a good honest living now, though nowhere near what he made that year. And he got one more good payment on his contract after he had to retire. So we’ve got a nice coop apartment just east of Columbia University and he coaches football and teaches history at a high school up there in Harlem.” With surprising agility for such a heavy woman, she turned in her seat and managed to grab hold of her son with both hands. She lifted him, a strong woman she was, and brought him into a tight embrace on her lap. He wasn’t happy about the situation but didn’t protest too much.

“Is he about four?”

“In a few weeks.” And then the woman looked over at Mary. “You really loved your father, didn’t you? You really looked sad when you spoke

about him dying. And unexpectedly at that.”

“I didn’t know my father as well as I would have liked. He was always at the store. I worked there with him. Started before I was even in school. That is, I did things like helping him to shovel snow. I had one of those shovels that take up a tablespoon of snow at a time. And then, when I was a little older, I would stop in after I got off the bus. Sometimes, he would leave the store under the care of one of his workers. He’d walk me home for cookies and milk, and then I’d go back to the store with him, to help stock. Or maybe to just get in his way. And then when I was legal for work, I worked behind the counter.”

“What kind of store?”

“Hardware. My mother’s father had started the store and then had turned it over to Dad even before he had talked Mom into marrying her. She used to joke sometimes that she had to marry Dad to get a share of her family’s business.” The woman smiled politely which was enough encouragement for Mary to add, “My parents had tried to have another child. I was born after they’d been married for nearly fifteen years so I guess that...” Mary paused, wondered why she was about to spill her guts to this woman, and remembered how easy it was to say some things to someone you never expected to see again. “My grandfather had been trying to tell me for years that I was better off forgetting the hardware store and just going to law school or something like that, but I had gotten used to the idea that I would take over the store some day and I had even started to like the idea.”

“What happened to bring you down to New York City? I mean, if you were planning to take over your father’s store”

“Dad was pretty much forced to sell the store, six or seven years before he died. He got some good money for the land from a fast-food restaurant and then he went to work managing the bathroom fixtures department at a *Hardware Central*.” The woman looked sympathetic, though Mary knew she hadn’t told a story of great physical suffering. No words were spoken for a few seconds and then Mary detected motion out of the corner of her eyes. Before she had even realized what was happening, she’d jumped out of her seat and caught hold of the little boy as he was about to skeddadle down the aisle of the subway car.

“Oh, he is a slippery one, just like his Daddy,” and, with that, the woman accepted her son back onto her lap and then looked out as the train was pulling into the 14th Street Station. As Mary was rising and putting

the strap to her bag over her shoulder, she heard the woman say, “That was a nice save, girl. I’ll bet you were an athlete when you were in school.”

After rushing to the door, Mary turned and, though the woman wasn’t looking her way, told her, “Field hockey, but only my sophomore and junior years in high school.” And then she moved on, shortly finding herself walking on the sidewalk not more than five or six blocks from the restaurant, which she’d not been to in a year or so.

Colophon

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