The Follower

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Extract

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1

Peter Wells had never been turned down for a job. He didn't have to work very often, thank God, but when he needed work – and he desperately needed the receptionist job at the Metro Sports Club – he always got hired.

The interviewer, a musclehead named Jimmy, seemed like an asshole from the get-go. He told Peter to wait in his office because he was "in the middle of something." Meanwhile, Peter watched through the Plexiglas as Jimmy hung out by the front desk with another musclehead, the two of them hitting on practically every girl who passed by.

Finally, maybe twenty minutes later, Jimmy came into the office and said, "Sorry about that, buddy, it's been crazy here today," and sat at his desk.

"No problem, man," Peter said, talking the way Jimmy talked, knowing it was a way to instantly connect with an employer.

Jimmy squinted at the résumé for several seconds, and then started looking at Peter's left ear. That was what Peter thought anyway; then he turned and saw what Jimmy was staring at – the skinny dark-haired girl in black bicycle shorts who was bending over doing a hamstring stretch.

"Gotta love Nikki," Jimmy said. "Comes here two times a day – uses machines, does cardio, must spend an hour on the Stairmaster. Phenomenal body but, honestly, she's only

average at this place. People say the best-looking girls are in the Village and the Meatpacking District, but I'll take the Upper East Side chicks any day. Watch the advanced step classes sometime. I mean, yeah, you got some girls who need to lose some poundage, but most of them are total babes. They all starve themselves, that's why. They eat salad and Tasti-Delight for dinner every night, then come here to work off the calories. But, trust me, these chicks could be eighty-five pounds and you'd still wanna fuck 'em."

Peter knew Jimmy would be an absolute nightmare to work for, but keeping the act going he said, "Yeah, she's hot all right."

Jimmy, looking at the résumé again, said, "So let's see. You worked at Body Image in Santa Monica?"

"That's right," Peter said.

"How'd that go?"

"It went well. It went really well. But then they closed down so I had to leave."

Actually, Peter had never worked at a health club in Santa Monica. He'd never even been there.

"And you worked in Mexico?" Jimmy asked.

"Yeah," Peter said, "I was traveling a little bit, trying to figure out what to do, you know? I taught ESL."

Another lie, although he'd lived in Mexico for a while.

"At L'Escuela International de Guadalajara?" Jimmy asked.

"*Hablas español?*" Peter said.

"What?" Jimmy waited, then laughed and said, "Just kidding, man. I took it in high school and my dad's half Puerto Rican, but I can't talk for shit. But that's good – you're bilingual. You should talk to Carlos, trainer works on weekends . . . So you got any more gym experience?"

"Sure have," Peter lied. "In college, I worked in the weight room a couple semesters. Volunteered."

Peter hadn't gone to college, but he doubted Jimmy would start checking references.

"Let's see," Jimmy said. "BA in English at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Looks like you've been all over, huh? Where'd you grow up?"

"Massachusetts."

"Boston?"

"Lenox."

"Oh, that's why I didn't hear a Bahston accent." Jimmy laughed. "So you say you want to be a trainer, huh?"

"That's my goal," Peter said, although he didn't care what he did at the gym. He was planning to work there for a couple of weeks, tops, but he knew he had to show ambition.

"Well, this is a good place to work when you're going for your license," Jimmy said. "We're flexible if you wanna go to school, take classes, whatever. We don't give benefits for part-time, but a lot of people work here start part-time and work their way up to full. But all I've got for you right now is a part-time desk job. You make sure people scan their cards when they come in, hand out towels, answer the phones . . ."

"That sounds good to me," Peter said.

"It only pays nine-fifty an hour."

"Money doesn't matter."

Jimmy looked up, surprised. Peter wished he could take that back.

"I mean, it matters," Peter said. "Of course it matters. I just mean I want to work here to get some more health club experience under my belt so I can become a trainer someday. So it doesn't really matter what I make right now."

"I got ya, I got ya," Jimmy said. "Well, it looks like you've got the credentials and you're a good guy – if you want the job it's yours, man."

"I definitely want it."

"Great. Like I say, I can only give you part-time – morning shift, six to noon – and you gotta work weekends. I can get you extra hours here and there, but I can't get you benefits and I'm gonna have to ten ninety-nine you."

"That's fine."

"You can work out whenever you want and I'll introduce you to the trainers – Scott, Mike, Carlos, Jenny. Man, wait till you see Jenny."

Trying not to roll his eyes, Peter said, "A babe, huh?"

"Fucking smoking," Jimmy said. "When can you start?"

"How about tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow works. Welcome aboard, my man."

Jimmy and Peter shook hands.

As they left the office and headed along the corridor toward the front of the gym, Jimmy said, "So where do you live?"

"Right around the corner," Peter said, "with my girlfriend."

"Yeah?" Jimmy said.

"Yeah, maybe you know her. Katie. Katie Porter?"

"She's tall, blonde, nice shape?"

"Actually she has light brown hair and she's about five three. But, yeah, she has a nice shape."

"Nah, I'm confusing her," Jimmy said, "but if she works out here I'm sure I've seen her around. But that's cool – that's real cool. You got a girlfriend belongs to the gym, you're living close by. So how'd you guys meet?"

"We grew up together."

"High school sweethearts, huh?"

"Yeah, kind of."

The musclehead Jimmy had been hanging out with before was walking by in the other direction.

"Hey, Mike," Jimmy said to the guy. "This is Peter Wells. He's gonna be working at the front desk and he wants to be a trainer."

"Great," Mike said and shook Peter's hand with a very firm grip. "See you around, man."

"Yeah, you, too."

Peter and Jimmy stopped near the entrance to the gym.

"I gotta hit the weights, man," Jimmy said. "When you come in tomorrow you can find me in the office and we'll take care of the paperwork and all that bullshit then. Sound cool?"

"Sounds cool."

"Hey, and you gotta introduce me to your girlfriend sometime."

"I definitely will."

Jimmy went back toward the locker room.

Peter was proud of himself. He'd hung in there, said all the right things, and he'd gotten the job. It was only a first step, but so far everything was going according to plan.

As he zipped his windbreaker, he scanned the main level of the gym. Dozens of overworked-looking twenty-somethings were listening to iPods or watching TV while they worked out on the Stairmasters and treadmills. Peter hadn't seen Katie when he arrived for the interview, and he didn't see her now, either. He exited the health club and headed downtown along Third Avenue, walking fast with his hands in his pockets.