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The Ivy Chronicles

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1. The Girl from Park Avenue

Konrad insisted that everyone be at his desk by 7:45 A.M. No exceptions. It would be sexist, he said, to cut the mothers on the team any slack. Easy for him to say. He had a stay-at-home wife and two full-time nannies to handle his family's morning drill. You know, we each have one. In my case – walk the dog, dress the kids, make breakfast, rinse the dishes, supervise brushing, flossing, and bed-making, look for lost homework, load up backpacks, while at the same time getting myself out of bed, showered, dressed, made up, and out the door.

The race continues on the street: grab a cab, drop Sir Elton at doggie day care, and deliver the girls to their overpriced early-bird program. If I've gotten this far by seven, I'll have just enough time to sprint to the subway at 86th and Lex and shoot down to Fulton Street. Finally, jump off the train, drop a dollar into the PLEASE FEED ME I'M HUNGRY lady's cup, zip into the building, dash toward my elevator bank after a quick stop at Starbucks for coffee light, two Sweet'n Lows, and a bagel to go, and declare victory if my butt hits the chair and the clock hasn't struck 7:45.

Technically, my unemployed husband could have

handled the morning routine. What I mean is, it would have been *physically possible* for him to manage it if he didn't insist on sleeping until 9:00. Yeah, I know. I should have been tougher. But trust me, it was easier to handle it myself than fight the battle. Cad had been unemployed for eight months. A derivatives trader at Bear Stearns, he was fired after betting wrong on Russian government debt. Still he persisted in living like nothing had changed. He would have hired someone for the A.M. job, but given our financial state and the fact that neither of us spends enough time with the girls, I couldn't agree. Plus, let's face it, what man takes charge of the morning marathon? Yes, of course, there are exceptions, perhaps in a parallel universe, but not in my world.

On this particular day, I *just* wanted to snuggle back into my warm Duxiana bed with its heavenly feather duster and yummy down quilt, the bedding I'd acquired at ABC Carpet and Home for the price of a small car. Mmmm, that would feel delicious. Already I'd completed the usual routine while also swinging by Duane Reade for the glitter hairspray Skyler and Kate wanted for Chanukah. It was 7:47 when I arrived at the twenty-first-floor offices of Myoki Bank, where I was a vice president of some stature. It felt like I'd already put in a day.

The lights turned on automatically when I walked into the office. Hanging my coat on the hook inside the door, I recalled the sacrifices I'd made to earn the privilege of a door instead of a mere cubicle. For the past six months, I'd been assigned a critical project, code name 'Bull Chip' – which had me working until 9:00 or 10:00 P.M. through the week and several hours a day on weekends. I skipped my six-year-old's birthday party to supervise systems testing.

I spent half my vacation solving Bull Chip problems that no one else could handle. I missed my fifteen-year business-school reunion because two team members quit suddenly and Konrad insisted I stay in town to hire replacements. But this project would turbocharge my career and land me the promotion I deserved, so it would all be worth it.

As I took the buttered bagel out of its brown paper bag, a flash of white and pale yellow centered squarely on my chair caught my eye. It was a memo with a Post-it attached, placed where it was sure to get my attention:

SEE ME ASAP – KONRAD.

Konrad was my profoundly ambitious, chemically depressed boss. One of those golden corporate boys with a professionally choreographed smile, a speaking coach, a driver, and an assistant for his assistant's assistant – all paid for by the company because Konrad's time was so valuable. Unlike his peers, who were merely soap-opera-star handsome, Konrad was so stunning he took your breath away. Just imagine the best features of Brad Pitt, Pierce Brosnan, and Robert Redford combined into one perfect package, punctuated with a trademark Brioni bow tie. That was Konrad, the blond-haired, blue-eyed Adonis who had graced the covers of Myoki's annual report for the last seven years. Behind his back, his direct reports called him the Face. We were sure he had 'posed' his way to the top.

The note was giving me the willies. This was irregular. When Konrad wanted me, his songwriter-secretary just called with a summons. 'Ivy, Konrad wants to see you right away. Can you drop eeevvverything and fly up to sixty?'

'Has he taken his meds?' I would ask. None of his direct reports dared to face him until he'd had his daily Wellbutrin. It paid to know what you were up against.

'I'm not sure, but Ed left in tears.'

Hearing this, I would postpone. Today, however, there was merely the note, attached to a memo from whom? My eye scanned the heading:

MEMO TO: Konrad Kavaler
FR: Drayton Bird
RE: Reengineering recommendation

Konrad, it occurs to me that with the $5MM we've each been charged with saving, we could help each other by cutting Ivy Ames's department and merging it into mine, creating a 'Center of Marketing Excellence.' My team is handling the same function as hers, but on an international basis, so they are up to speed. You could eliminate her position plus two direct reports, saving $700M in salary, benefits, T&E, real estate, etc. We could replace her Iowa call center with telemarketers in India, saving another $2.5MM. We've dissolved my acquisition group, so I'm down 26 heads and $7MM in expenses. I've got the talent to manage the combined function and the budget capacity to absorb the cost. It would be a win-win for both of us.

Let me know your thoughts.

Oh, shit, I thought.

I sat, swiveled around, and took in the spectacular view of New York Harbor that I hadn't noticed in months. My face burned and my heart beat so hard it hurt. Nonchalantly, I placed the brown paper bag on my face and hyperventilated, hoping no one saw. *Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.* I chanted silently, trying not to cough as I inhaled the airborne Sweet'n Low particles floating in the sack.

The phone rang. My stomach lurched, settling somewhere between the upper chest and throat. I turned to answer, noting on caller ID that it was songwriter-secretary. 'Konrad wants to see you now,' he emoted. 'He says you should bring the memo.'

'I'll be there. Has he taken his pills?'

'I dispensed them myself. He's very upbeat today.' He pronounced 'very' so it sounded like 'varrry.'

Five minutes and two elevator banks later, I was in Konrad's office. He ushered me over to the living-room area and gestured to the artificially weathered brown leather chair reserved for visitors. Damn. If I'd known I was going to see Konrad, I would have dressed better. Juxtaposed against his pinstriped Hugo Boss suit and red bow tie, the Persian rugs and the original Chagall, I was hopelessly outmatched.

'Look,' he said, wasting no time on small talk, 'I got that note from Drayton this morning and I want your input before I action it. What are your thoughts?'

Think quickly. Think quickly. Say something smart.

'It's a ridiculous idea,' I started.

Too defensive. Re-laaaax.

'The international practices are completely different from

the domestic ones. Just because we both run "marketing" functions doesn't mean we "market" the same way.' I made quotation marks in the air with my fingers each time I said 'market.' What a nimrod.

'Plus,' I continued, 'he hires trainees who don't know their ass from their elbow. My staff are experienced professionals. If anything, we should merge *his* department into *mine*, let *me* run the show, and we'd save just as much for Myoki.'

'I'm not sure what the answer is,' Konrad said, 'but he has the beginning of a good idea. Cascade your objections to Drayton and see what the pushback is. Recommend who should run the show and how we can downsize. I have to save five million and you could be a hero by serving up some heads.'

Just what I've always wanted to be, I thought miserably. *An unemployed hero.*

Drayton's landgrab threatened my very existence at Myoki, but I had to pretend to cooperate. That's the first rule of survival in a big corporation: Always act like you support your enemy's proposals, while behind his back do everything you can to kill his plans and, if possible, him. 'That sounds great, Konrad. I'll call Drayton right away,' I said in a faux-enthusiastic voice.

By the time I got back to 21, my heart was beating normally again. I was thinking about the fourteen months of severance I'd get if they fired me. I could take time off, lose twenty pounds, learn to program TiVo, maybe take some classes at the Kabbala Center.

I dialed Drayton's extension and he picked up, always a surprise with caller ID. 'Drayton,' I asked, 'how's Bea?'

Bea was his seven-year-old daughter, who played regularly with my Skyler. They both attended Balmoral, the holy grail of girl's schools in Manhattan. I would never have taken Drayton for such a slippery fish. Just last spring, Cadmon and I had attended the birthday party he threw for his high-maintenance wife, Sassy, at the Palace Hotel. He'd arranged for the grand ballroom to be transformed into Times Square on New Year's Eve. There were neon signs, subway turnstiles, caricature artists, actors playing homeless people. Sassy dropped the ball at midnight. Michael Crawford performed Broadway hits. Instead of forty candles, Drayton commissioned forty birthday cakes baked by Manhattan's most celebrated pastry chefs. Cad and I had reciprocated a few weeks ago by taking Drayton and Sassy to dinner at Le Bernardin. At the time, I thought the four of us had really clicked.

'Oh, Bea's brilliant. Thank you for asking,' Drayton said. He was English. 'She's looking forward to her birthday party next month. Will Skyler come?'

'Of course,' I answered. 'Sassy said you're having a dance party, right? It sounds fun.'

'It will be,' Drayton said. 'We just booked Clay Aiken.'

'Clay Aiken does birthday parties for eight-year-olds?'

'Normally not. But Beatrice's godfather is the president of his record label, so he arranged it. Nothing's too good for our little angels, now is it?'

'No, no, nothing's too good . . . hey, I uh saw the memo you wrote Konrad. I like your idea. But I think there may be ways to consolidate without eliminating any senior positions. Anyway, Konrad suggested we get together and game-plan a merger of our departments.'

'Ab-so-LUTE-ly,' Drayton said in that annoying insincere way English people speak. 'I want to sort this out straight-away. The problem is, I'm lit-rally walking out the door for a three-day off-site. Then on Thuuursday, I'm off to London for the week*end* to visit my father. He was just diagnosed with heart disease.'

'Oh, my God! That's awful,' I said, pretending to care. 'My mother had heart disease, too. She died last year.'

'Yes, well, thank you,' Drayton said. 'I'll be back in a week. Let's tackle the issue at 1:00 on the fourteenth and we'll winkle out a solution that aligns both our visions.'

'Right,' I said. *Whatever that means.* 'But do me a favor and don't work on it till we get together. This should come from both of us.'

'Ab-so-LUTE-ly,' Drayton promised. 'Next week then. Cheerio.' Cheerio my ass. Drayton hadn't lived in England for the last twenty years. We say 'goodbye' in America, Drayton, in case you hadn't noticed.

With their 'finest place to work' initiatives, diversity councils, on-site gyms, and touted (but rarely used) sabbatical programs, large corporations might give one the impression that they're bastions of fairness and compassion. They're not. Asking an employee to come up with a reorganization plan that includes his own demise happens every day. Once you become a vice president in a big company, they expect you to be a grown-up. I hate that.

'Bonnie,' I said to my assistant as I put my coat on, 'I've got a meeting with the agency uptown. I'll see you this afternoon, or maybe tomorrow, depending on how long this takes.'

I went to Barneys.



The next morning, I felt strangely calm about my predicament. Cadmon, a former master politician in the corporate arena, convinced me that I could turn this thing around. I came up with an ingenious scheme to do an end run around Drayton. While he was in London caring for his sick father, I would jockey for control of his department. Everyone knew Drayton was a lightweight, while I was the acknowledged powerhouse. This was just the turn of events I needed to get a bigger department than ever, a raise, an office on 60. I was optimistic, almost giddy with the thought.

Walking to my desk, I noticed, once again, white paper with a yellow sticky on my chair.

SEE ME ASAP – KONRAD.

The attachment appeared to be some sort of report. Damn.

I sat at my desk and began to read:

MEMO TO: Konrad Kavaler
FR: Drayton Bird
RE: Reengineering Recommendation

Glad to hear you support my recommendation regarding merging your marketing function into mine. Spoke with Ivy Ames yesterday and she thinks it's a brilliant idea. I took the liberty of developing a roll-out plan – outlined below.

Also attached are proposed new org charts as well as P&Ls showing the savings to be derived from the merger. Finally, I met with HR, and severance packages for Ivy and her direct reports will be forwarded to you by 10:00 A.M.

If you're in agreement, let me know. I'd suggest we announce ASAP so we can hit the ground running after the new year, but of course, it's your call.