

HIS legs were outstretched, crossed at the ankles, and perched comfortably on the edge of the desk. "Well?"

Jessica laughed. "Sorry, John, it just doesn't work for you." She backed to the doorway and stood scrutinizing him, so obviously thrilled to finally have a hard-walled office after all his years working in cubicles. She shook her head rapidly, paused and smiled, and shook her head rapidly again before turning and leaving his new office.

"Maybe if I get a big leather chair," he called after her and watched the head shake again. The rapid headshake was the only one of Jessica's several trademark gestures that McCall enjoyed. He made a mental note to ask her to lunch. Easily offended, she could detail long lists of his insensitivities to her after a couple glasses of wine and he dreaded the inevitable, the initial one-on-one discussion of the events surrounding Edgar's murder. Though he considered her a friend and enjoyed her candid, freely offered opinions on a wide variety of subjects, he had always wondered why Edgar put up with her.

Jessica's job title included the word "secretary," yet she considered the title demeaning and was proud she was not a good one. McCall had often witnessed long, boring arguments between her and Edgar Dalbert over what duties she would and would not perform. Occasionally, and to no avail, he had even tried to intercede on Dalbert's behalf. She stubbornly refused to grasp a simple concept. He could only believe she refused, because she was certainly intelligent enough. It was the basic notion that the company could not afford to have its highly paid executives performing menial tasks that a relatively inexpensive secretary could probably do better. "Why do I always have to be the one to reserve the meeting room?" she would ask in all seriousness. "Why can't you stop and shred those documents yourself? You pass the shredder every time you go to the men's room." She would shake her head in disgust at his refusal. He would jot down a note for her next performance appraisal. McCall did not have that sort of patience. He would change her.

Knowing she was not at her desk, he dialed her number to leave a message. "Yes, Jessica," he said, summoning all the inherent power of his new position, "call Advantix and purchase two tickets to tonight's showing of 'Much Ado About Nothing' at Playhouse

Square. You have the number for my company credit card. Oh, and make reservations for two at six o'clock at Piccolo Mondo. Thanks."

He hung up the phone and keyed in his code to listen again to the message Beatrice had left the night before. "Jonathan, I was so happy to hear your voice just now. I was a bad girl and screened you, but you made me feel warm. I'd love to go to the play with you. I'll be famished by then. You must take me someplace elegant for dinner. Pick me up at six o'clock. Good morning, Jonathan." The breathless quality in her tone, the inherent contradictions in her message, and his growing understanding of her psychotic mind enticed him.

Abandoning Dalbert's sitting position, he fell into his own, one foot on the floor, one ankle across the opposite knee, elbows resting on the arms of the chair, Wall Street Journal opened in his hands. Just enough time remained to do the morning reading before a nine-o'clock appointment.

Precisely on time, Bill Washington tapped on the open door. McCall folded the last section of his paper. "Come on in, Bill. Close the door." He had put off meeting about Washington's approaching diversity presentation several times.

"I've got a message for you from Jessica. She said that unless you're taking her to the play, Advantix phone number is in the white pages." He smiled knowingly.

"I took a shot," said McCall, smiling back. "Let's talk diversity."

"Well," began Washington, "my presentation's next Friday, you know, to the management committee. I'd really like to try it once in front of a group first. I haven't said a word, John, but it's all around that you refused to let me present it to the credit department."

"Am I politically incorrect?"

"That's the word," he smiled. "You know, it can't be good for you."

"I know you're really involved in this diversity counsel, and from your point of view diversity is a concept that no one could possibly be against, but . . . I have some information and a perspective that I think you should consider. Now, are you open to discussion or not?"

"I'm as open as you are, John."

"Good, because I'm completely open. Who's going to start?"

"You go ahead."

"The whole diversity issue is a line of corporate bull."

When McCall didn't go on, the shocked Washington asked, "That's it? You think the idea of providing a working environment where each employee can realize his or her full potential is bull?"

"Corporate bull," confirmed McCall.

"So you're saying the idea that this company should provide an environment that encourages and values the differences in its employees is corporate bull?" asked Washington, willing to give McCall another chance to moderate.

"Exactly," admitted McCall.

The normally laid-back Washington was getting angry. He had been defending McCall to his peers. "I guess we really don't have anything more to talk about then, John." He stood and glared down at McCall, giving him one last chance.

"Does this mean you don't value my opinion?" asked McCall.

"How could I?" responded Washington, angrily turning toward the door.

"So you don't value the diversity of my opinion?"

Washington returned to his chair. "Now, that was bull, John. I came in here for an intelligent conversation, not to play games. This is serious stuff."

"I'm sorry about that, but you see what I'm saying. Nobody values diversity, not even you. Companies want the same qualities in all their employees, but they want that homogeneous employee to come in every different color and flavor. Do you think Moon Oil runs all its employees through the same series of training seminars because it values differences?"

Washington took a deep breath. He wanted to understand where McCall was coming from, but there was a part of him, deep inside, which already branded him a racist. "Let's assume for a minute that you're right. Let's say that Moon Oil doesn't want to fully utilize the talents of each and every unique individual to achieve personal fulfillment and business success. Okay. They don't want that. Why're they adopting these diversity programs and initiatives?"

"Excellent question, Bill. Let's think about that. Why are they adopting these diversity programs? First, though, before we figure out why they're doing it, let's figure out who's doing it."

"Who's doing it?"

"It might be easier to figure out why they're doing it if we can figure out who is doing it. Doesn't that make sense?"

"Okay, okay. It makes sense." The question had not occurred to him, but he was preparing to present to the management committee. "Management," he said. "The management committee."

"But doesn't the management committee answer to the board of directors?"

"All right," conceded Washington, "same thing."

"Okay. So Moon Oil's board of directors and the boards of directors of all the major oil companies, in fact just about every large publicly traded company, suddenly values a diverse work force."

"It's good business to get the most out of your work force." Washington allowed his frustration to show.

McCall pulled the Moon Oil Annual Report from his top drawer. He opened it to the Board of Directors. There was a picture of fourteen of the fifteen-member board standing together at the bottom of the page and a paragraph about each one's qualifications and history at the top. Lord Debaughton, of course, was not pictured. He handed it to Washington. "This is who. Now, you're going to tell me that these fifteen white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, fifty- and sixty-year-old men, most of whom have a Lord or Sir in front of their names, value a diverse work force? I mean, they don't even have a token black or woman on the board. Diversity? Get real. They're all wearing the same suit."

"All right, John," said Washington. "Let me try this from another angle. If these fifteen white guys don't value a diverse work force, if they don't really believe it makes good business sense to try to get the best out of every employee, why are they adopting diversity initiatives? And not just them. Why is every large organization you can name doing it?"

"Good. Why are they? We know they, themselves, don't value diversity. If they did, they might elect someone who wasn't the exact image of themselves to the board. So, they don't value it but they're adopting it. Why?"

"You tell me," surrendered Washington.

"Downsizing."

"Downsizing," Washington repeated and paused. "Downsizing? I don't see the connection."

"Well," began McCall. "The one thing people haven't begun to ask about downsizing is, is it right? When the company hired you, didn't you assume that if you did a good job and the company did well that you would always have a job? It used to be that a company only laid off when it was doing poorly. We could accept that. If a company can't sell its product, it has to lay off workers to survive. That's not happening with downsizing. The economy is booming. We're looking at growth in gross domestic product of over four percent this year. No business is failing. Revenues and earnings are going up across the board. You know how many job cuts have been announced by US companies already this year? Six hundred thousand."

"The company never guaranteed you a job for life. If they can do without you, why should they keep you on the payroll?"

"I could go on listing reasons all day. Mostly, it's just wrong. Say you had a business and had your own employees. Those employees are all supporting families with the money you're paying them. Don't you feel an obligation to them? Don't you have a responsibility to keep your business going so you can continue to employ them? Wouldn't you do everything in your power to keep the business thriving and keep paying your people? Or would you spend your time trying to figure out how you could get by with less of them so you could put a few more bucks in your own pocket?"

"What's this have to do with diversity?"

McCall reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a ledger. "I've been keeping track. Let's just look at oil." He flipped some pages. "Exxon, 15,000 jobs, Enron, 5,000 jobs, Arco, 8,000 jobs, Amoco, 6,000 jobs, Unocal 3,000 jobs, Chevron, 11,000 jobs, Mobil . . ."

"Where's this going?" said Washington, uncharacteristically interrupting and picking up the pace of the conversation. "These companies don't exist to support your family or my family. They exist for their shareholders."

"Right. So everything they do is to increase shareholder value, and since their stock price is directly related to earnings per share, they will take those actions that will increase earnings. One way to do that, an unimaginative, short-sighted, and sleazy way, but a way, nonetheless, is to fire employees."

"Right. I'll give you that."

"Okay, Bill. So this board of directors will fire as many of us as they possibly can to increase earnings per share. They don't care about you, me, or their employees in general. They will fire us to increase earnings. You readily admit that?"

"Yes. They're doing it. How could I not admit it?"

"Now, you're going to sit there and tell me that those same people value your diversity? Were you born this morning?"

"Yes!" shouted Washington. "I mean no, I wasn't born this morning, but yes, I do believe they value a diverse work force. So they fire a lot of employees. They still want those who remain to be as productive as possible, and they think the best way for that to happen is through a diverse work force."

"That takes me back to my original comment, bull."

"Tell me then, John. Why are they adopting diversity programs?"

"Take Mobil for example. They've been downsizing for two years. They've cut 17,000 jobs in two years. Three days ago they announced that they're planning to cut forty percent of their remaining corporate staff. Their stock price goes up three points the day of the announcement. The next day, this full-page ad appears in the Journal." Reaching again into his drawer, he pulled out two copies of the ad. Handing one to Washington, he said, "That's a seventy-five-thousand-dollar advertisement."

The ad read "Diversity helps Mobil add shareholder value." Below the headline were six paragraphs of explanation. In McCall's opinion it was six paragraphs of the same bull Washington was preparing to present to the management committee. In Washington's opinion it made perfect sense.

"Don't you see," pleaded McCall, "they're using diversity to help head off a backlash from job eliminations. They're implying they'll eliminate white males in order to achieve greater diversity. Minority groups are the only ones in our society with any protections. If they can silence you by claiming they value your diversity, they can get away with firing thousands of loyal hard-working employees to bring a little more earnings to the bottom line. And they don't have to get away with it for very long. Another year and the downsizings will be pretty much complete. They're using you to buy them that time."

"I don't agree," said Washington in a much more subdued tone. "This ad makes perfect sense to me. Look, since affirmative action, companies find themselves with a wide variety of minority groups on the payrolls. You mentioned the word 'token.' What Mobil is really saying is that they can't afford to keep people on their payrolls who aren't producing. They may have hired certain minorities to achieve the proper percentage balance, but if they can also get those people productive, why shouldn't they?"

"And you believe it's just a coincidence that Mobil happened to come out with a seventy-five-thousand-dollar, full-page ad in the Wall Street Journal expressing their commitment to diversity the day after they announced a massive round of downsizings."

"Yes, I do."

They had reached impasse and sat staring for a minute. "Well, I'll think about what you've said, Bill. You make a valid point. I hope you'll consider what I had to say. And think about this. I've got two people doing your job, you and Jack. If I'm told to fire one of you, I'll fire Jack. Not because you're black and he's white and I value your diversity, but because you're the most capable employee in the department. If he were more capable, I'd fire you. I'll never support any program that asks me to base my decision on any other criteria, and I have very little respect for anyone who would knowingly support such a program."

"That's not what diversity is all about, John."

"Oh yeah. What if you two were equal in every other respect? Who would your diversity counsel advise me to fire?"

"We don't have a simple answer for that. It would depend on the composition of the work force."

"Which is?"

"Predominantly white."

"So your answer is?"

"In this case it would be to fire Jack."

"And your contention is that there are desirable places to work out there with work forces that are not predominantly white? And even if you have identified such a work force, are you planning to make diversity presentations there? Never mind. Let's leave it there and think about it."

"And the presentation?"

"Sorry."

Washington handed McCall a piece of paper and said, "This is the definition I'll be offering to the management committee. We don't know who the author was, but we've found it helps people understand. Will you, at least, promise to read it?" He stood and moved to the doorway.

"I'll read it. I'm sorry we can't agree, but I hope you understand where I'm coming from on this issue. If Moon Oil were not planning another round of downsizings, I'd let you present to the department, no problem."

"So you really have so little faith in this company that you think it's just a masquerade, that they're putting on a facade while they do another round of downsizing?"

"That's what I've been saying, yes. My eyes are open. This is what I see. Look Bill, the concept of diversity can be very valuable if used correctly, if it's used to generate new ideas in a growth-oriented company. Take Reebok, for example. Females in positions of power pushed the idea of aerobics shoes. That idea made millions for them. A white-male-dominated decision process could have never come up with that."

Washington brightened. "That's exactly what I'm saying, John."

"But that's not how Moon Oil and these other downsizing companies are using it. I'm committed to fighting corporate downsizing any way I can. In my view, the diversity issue is merely a device being used by those companies who are unjustly firing their employees." He paused and took a deep breath. "Think about the effect the precedent corporate America is trying to set with these downsizings is going to have in the future."

"I don't follow."

"Say they get away with this round of downsizing. They will have set the precedent that it's okay to fire employees to protect the bottom line. The very next time there's a downturn in the economy or a perceived downturn or even the prediction of a downturn, the first thing companies will do is fire employees. That used to be the last thing they did. And when that happens, it'll be a diverse workforce they fire." He waited but Johnson had never considered the argument and had no response. "Tell you what . . . show me a company advertising the value of diversity and not also downsizing and I'll let you make the presentation."

Washington smiled and pointed at McCall. "You've got a deal."

Both men were glad for the way it ended. Washington figured that, with his connections through the diversity counsel, he could certainly find a company aggressively pursuing diversity and not planning a downsizing. McCall doubted such a company existed. He read the definition Washington left behind, expecting something vague and meaningless.

"Managing diversity is fully utilizing the talents of each and every unique individual to achieve both personal fulfillment and business success. It is like conducting a symphony orchestra -- all of the individual musicians are unique and talented but put together with the right conductor, they produce musical masterpieces."

He was putting it aside, when an angry Jessica darkened the doorway. "What did you do to Bill?" she accused.

"We're fine."

"Fine? Fine? Could you be a worse judge of people? He's going home for the day. What did you do?"

"I wouldn't let him make his diversity presentation, but he understood my reasons and the conversation ended friendly enough."

"He's been defending you all week. You're making him the fool."

"I'm trying to prevent him from making a fool of himself," he argued and added under his breath, "The way I did."

"Everyone else is going to say it even if he doesn't. You're prejudice."

"Prejudice has nothing to do with this. Besides, I have lots of black friends."

She gave him the accusing stare. "You have white friends and female friends. You don't have black friends."