

A Cowardly Woman No More

An Excerpt

The first of my three promotion interviews took place in HR, a department with almost a whole floor of its own, and spacious hallways and offices and cheerful side-rooms, not cubicles. It seemed that the first priority of Human Resources was to let everyone know they deserved the right to plush accommodations.

In a cozy little room, very homey, with lamps and a sofa and armchairs, I was met by a senior manager who wanted to make sure my file was current and accurate. Then I was informed what the new salary and benefits would be.

Like I already had the job.

I thought so because that was the way I was spoken to.

I found out from the manager that no one else was being considered for the position. That was a courtesy to me, based on my standing in the company and my number of years with them. My eight years made me senior in terms of length of employment, especially since many employees left their jobs, voluntarily or not, when the new regime began. I also had the feeling from this manager, a woman, that the promotion probably should have been given to me quite some time earlier.

When she left the happy little living room, she was replaced by the man who would become my new boss.

With him, it wasn't a question and answer sort of thing, but a conversation. It seemed to me he had many other things on his mind while talking to me, and now and then he'd lose track of what he was saying. But I felt our conversation was a good one. I'd heard that as a boss, he was decent and fair. He had a reputation for trusting people he supervised to know what they were doing, with little input from him. And he let me know that his boss-ness of me would really be *pro forma*. I'd still be connected to my team. Overseeing the new position had been slotted into his turf, and that was fine, but he already had a lot on his plate.

I walked away with confidence. I was going to keep on moving on.

The second interview was with the man who was that man's boss. I was notified as soon as I arrived on that day that I should go to his office at four. I felt grateful for the extra notice. For the first interview, I only had about an hour to prepare.

So, okay, all good, four in the afternoon.

But at a little after ten-thirty, the boss of my expected new boss showed up in my department's kitchen. He had tracked me there.

I was standing by the counter, trying to decide if I should put the kettle on for tea, or save time by sticking a mug of cold water in the microwave. Besides that, should I go with an herbal? Should I never mind herbal and choose an extra jolt of caffeine? My regular latté, at ten past nine, was far from wearing off. I knew I would need to caffeine up again later on, closer to the interview time. I was always so draggy at four o'clock.

Maybe I made an impression on that boss as someone too day-dreamy to be promoted.

He had startled me, appearing so suddenly, so unusually. High-ups did not in the normal course of things go sniffing out employees in their own areas. I could not think of any other time someone entered the kitchen who was not a member of my department.

He wanted to know, right away, what was up with the plate of candy on the counter? Were they breath mints?

From where he stood, he couldn't see the markings of M&M. I told him what brand they were.

He didn't seem to believe me. But why would I lie about a small round piece of chocolate encased in a candy shell, when he could have picked one up to examine it?

"They can't be," he pointed out. "They're all green."

"It's the chocolate mints kind," I said.

"Where did they come from?"

"They sort of just appear."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a mystery. No one's ever been caught."

"I see," said the boss of my almost new boss. "That platter, is it one of the caterer's?"

"It is. They forgot it after one of our lunches."

Maybe he thought someone in my department had stolen it. Maybe he thought the culprit was me.

Next, to my surprise, he announced that he'd attended a meeting in another section on my floor. He had decided to walk me to his office, seeing as he was headed that way.

For the interview.

It took me a moment to understand the interview was with me, and it was about to happen. I was proud of myself for becoming instantly alert, for rising to the occasion. I was glad to be wearing my nicest black pants, new enough that the pleats below the waist were still pleats without having to be ironed, which I avoided to the point of ironing never. The blouse I wore was one of my best. It was too early in the day for me to have gone outside for a walk, so I didn't have to worry if I was fresh.

His office was only one floor up. He was a devoted stair-walker, he informed me. But would I prefer the elevator?

"Oh, no. I don't need to ride," I answered.

Did he think I was lazy? An avoider of physical movement? Obviously he had never seen me getting in my exercise along the office park pathways. Or he had seen me but took no notice of me, since I was only some random employee, out in the air.

I had never interacted directly with this man before. It did not feel strange to me that he didn't speak to me on the way.

A long hallway had to be traveled before reaching our destination. When we came to the top of the one flight of stairs, he was ahead of me, and held the door open. I thanked him. I stepped into the hall a few paces, pausing for him to catch up.

When he did, he kept going, breezing by me.

Now came my turn to play catch-up. He was fit and vigorous, somewhere in his fifties. He had an inch or two on me in height. He had a long, powerful stride. About halfway there, he glanced sideways, and seemed startled that I was beside him, keeping up. By the look on his face, he seemed to feel I'd done something wrong, that I had broken a rule.

The interview was fairly short. It turned out to be all right, in a mellow sort of way. Would I describe my recent projects? My history with the company? How I'd handle the new position?

I was convinced the company was simply going through the right motions, following protocol, keeping it professional, in spite of making me feel a little weirded out by the unprofessional business with scheduling me.

He didn't rise from his chair at the end of our meeting to shake hands with me. That was due to one of his administrative assistants coming into his office to inform him he needed to join an important video conference, that very moment. That was how I knew the interview was over. I didn't feel slighted, although I should have. I walked away with the sense of a done deal, just as I felt eight years ago on the day I accepted the company's offer to employ me. Like I'd been recruited for a second time.

Yes!

The third, final interview was the shortest, with a very high-up executive who interrupted me several times to take phone calls. He told me that talking with him was a mere formality—he'd heard excellent things about me. It was a bonus to his day he had the chance to meet me!

Two days later, I returned to my cubicle from a routine meeting to find a message from HR, sent just minutes earlier. It was an email from their general address. There was no signature line, no name.

Please would I come to that department, at my convenience?

Which to me was right away. But I made myself sit tight for a while. I didn't want to seem too eager about accepting my new position.

As soon as I arrived on that floor, I found it difficult to make sense of what was going on, like walking into a theater and a film is playing in a language you don't know. And there are no subtitles. And you don't even know what country it's in.

I was steered to the office of a man who was new. He looked to be in his early twenties. I might have been the first employee he delivered a decision to.

He was a smooth talker, wanting me to believe that, at heart, he was a really nice guy. He was casual in his manner, and eager to make it seem he understood the basic fact that there were sides in the company—two sides, them and us. He wanted me to think he was an "us." That the side he was on was mine.

He called me Mrs. Donahue. He complimented me for being a totally terrific asset to the company, a totally solid employee.

And then it was something like, Well, Mrs. Donahue, here's the thing! You're so great in your current position, the company needs to keep you there! It's been decided high up that the job you have now can't possibly be done half as well by anyone else! You are so, so valued!

That was the whole of it. Once again I went back to my cubicle. I gathered my handbag, briefcase, and jacket. I left the building without a word to anyone.

It was midafternoon. I didn't want to show up at home early and have to explain myself. I drove to a park with a pond, two suburbs away from mine. My husband and I used to take the kids here when they were tiny. There used to be ducks.

The kids were enchanted by the ducks. They'd seen pictures of mallards in their storybooks, out of water as well as in, so they knew you couldn't be a waterfowl and not have skinny little legs and webbed feet.

But these ducks were special. There were no legs and feet beneath the surface. There was no wind to propel them. These ducks were happily gliding around because they had magical powers no other ducks possessed.

Who knew how or why they'd come up with that, but who cared? My husband and I developed the habit of never letting them witness a duck coming out onto land, which was tricky, because people were always offering human food to the gliders. We'd turn their heads or just leave. We wanted the magic too.

This day was cool, bright, breezy. I could not believe there was sunlight. I could not believe the whole world wasn't covered in shadows.

I sat in my car and wondered what happened to the ducks, even though I realized I would never be able to find out. I watched people walking around, doing normal things: pushing a stroller, throwing a stick for a dog, conversing in a friendly way on a bench.

I started to cry the moment after I parked there. They were hot, stinging tears, lots and lots of them. I had to turn on the radio to cover the sounds I was making. Then I had to turn on the heater and point the vents straight at me, to dry the top front of my clothes. But by the time I walked into my house, my eyes held no telltale wetness, or redness.

Mom's home!

My husband had made chili, and it was, as usual, unspicy. I didn't like hot, biting seasoning in my food. To the surprise of my family, for the first time ever, I asked for the jar of hot sauce to be passed to me, so I could pour some into my bowl.

The burning sensations in my mouth and throat were worth it, as an explanation for why my eyes were watering. I'd been worried I might burst into tears at the table. I didn't have the energy to invent some excuse why. It was not a possibility to tell the truth.

I said yes when my husband offered to open a beer for me, which normally I wouldn't do. I didn't like what it always did to my gut. But he felt a little beer would be perfect for a novice at fiery food like me, now that I was brave enough to eat some heat.

After a few sips of the beer, I was burping my head off. Some surplus foam or the beer itself starting coming out of my nose, and it was, oh my God, that looks like snot, Mom! Hey, Mom! Hey, Babe! We love you! It's like a party in here tonight!