

## **5. Marjorie**

Marjorie looked at herself in the mirror and let out a breath. Whew. She had done it. Thank goodness. Another day, another successful look at herself. No sense of panic or disgust. No painful desire to just look away, away, horrible, horrible, anything but this! Nope, not at all. Just a pure, uninterrupted sense of calm and satisfaction. Just like every morning since the day she'd been born.

She looked herself up and down, just to feel that sense of satisfaction for a bit longer. She was well worth looking at, she decided. Just the right weight. Just the right height. "Well-proportioned," you could say, which she decided in her case was a euphemism for slightly heavy on top, slightly light in the middle, nice and lengthy around the bottom half, and curves in all the right places. She looked fabulous. Just like she had every day of her adult life.

She looked herself right in the eyes. It was effortless. She didn't look away. Her eyes were the most beautiful part of her, she thought to herself. At least, that's what all the men told her. She suspected, mostly from their glances at the other parts, that this might have been another... euphemism, but it didn't matter: what they said was true, even if they didn't mean it. Such deep, pure, blue eyes. The windows to the soul. Looking into someone's eyes, you could tell... you could tell... everything about them. You could tell if they had secrets, or if they were being totally honest with you. She didn't look away. She kept looking, straight into her eyes. If someone could look straight into your eyes and tell you something, you knew they were telling the truth.

"I'm a good person," Marjorie said to her reflection, and didn't flinch. "I would never do anything that could hurt anyone." She smiled, and it lit up her whole face. See that? She'd held her gaze the whole time. Her eyes looked just as honest as before. And it was a real smile. There was no look of pleading, or helplessness, or guilt - so it must be true.

Marjorie sighed. Thank goodness. Because she really wondered, some days.

Marjorie was the Executive Vice President of Marketing for the SquidG Corporation.

...

Bah, stuck in traffic. There must have been another accident on the bridge again this morning. She was going to be late for her meeting. And an important meeting it was, too - not only was she going to have to explain to Mr. Chan, the founder of China Burger, why she couldn't sell him SquidG Fries anymore - but it was also her job to get him to switch to SquidG brand cleaning supplies. Not an easy set of discussions to have in the same meeting. But it was hard to get a meeting with Mr. Chan.

She'd been waiting over a month for this one chance. It would have to do. She'd think of some way to make it all work out - she always did.

She looked at her reflection in the rearview mirror. Effortless. Perfect.

...

Marjorie pulled into a parking spot, double checked the address. This was the place, all right. But she was supposed to be at the *head office* of China Burger - this was just another restaurant, and not a very special one at that. That didn't make any sense. Well, whatever. If this is where he wanted to have the meeting, then this is where they would have the meeting.

She shut off the engine, got out of the car, straightened her outfit. Nothing too risque today - she knew Mr. Chan liked things conservative. She'd had a lot of research done on him well in advance, and she'd studied it all carefully. Unlike many of his Chinese compatriots, he didn't have a problem with women in business - which was lucky for her, although of course she had male subordinates she could have sent in her place if it were otherwise. He was unmarried, had no children, and kept two pet goldfish named Yin and Yang. He had immigrated from China only a few years ago, easily sliding through the immigration system because of his then millions, now billions of dollars. He was astonishingly stingy, and nobody could figure out what he did with those billions of dollars a year in profits - but he sure didn't spend it on fancy houses, fancy clothes, fancy vacations, or - she reached the building and pulled open the door - or, God forbid, improving the decor of his restaurants.

She walked toward the front counter, amazed at how busy the restaurant was: there was a lineup almost out the door. She wondered how she was going to find Mr. Chan in this zoo, or if he was even here. Maybe this was all some kind of sick joke.

Everywhere she looked in the restaurant, men smiled and winked at her, occasionally eliciting kicks or angry looks from the women they were supposed to be with. She still had it, she guessed - but if anyone who ate at *this* kind of place thought they had any chance with her, they were living in dreamland.

She glanced up at the menu. Hmm - "Squidgee fries" were still listed, though misspelled, presumably to avoid trademark licensing fees. This guy was slick. But the fries shouldn't be on the menu anymore - they'd been discontinued. Seriously, Mr. Chan, there's saving money on menus, but then there's plain customer satisfaction: why say you've got it if you don't? You'll just tick people off.

Just then, she noticed a short, stout Chinese man waving at her from the back room, the one with all the cooking equipment, trying to get her attention. He didn't look much like a multibillionaire... right, so he fit the description perfectly. That had to be him. She waved back and smiled.

"Mr. Chan! It's so great to finally meet you!"

He came out of the back room and gave her a little bow. "Miss Marjoree! You very late! If you my employee, I fire you! Ha ha!"

"Ha ha! Oh, Mr. Chan, you're such a kidder! I'm really going to have to watch my step with you around!"

"Come here! I show you my office! China Burger my greatest creation!"

"Mr. Chan, is this really your head office? Your chain has over 600 restaurants. Do you really need to personally work in one of them?"

"I bring back Chinese work ethic from China! Everyone, no matter how important, must share in work! That is why China Burger successful, other burgers crushed!"

"Ha ha, well, I'm sure you'll crush them all, that's really a winning attitude, sir. Of course, it's not all communism around here, is it? After all, you have billions of dollars while your employees mostly get paid below minimum wage because of your special government exemption, right?"

Mr. Chan looked a little confused, then brightened. "But of course! Like I say, I bring back Chinese work ethic! China Burger run just like China, only less bureaucrats! Ha ha!"

"Ha, yes, well, I'm sure the 'corruption at the highest levels' business model will fit in just fine here in America. I'm honoured to meet such a forward thinker. I'm sure our companies can do great things together." She caught a glimpse of her reflection in an "employee of the month" plaque - this month it was one Philia Dobson - and stopped to take a careful look. Still effortless. Good. That was a sign to press forward. "So anyway, Mr. Chan, I need to talk to you about SquidG Fries. I know China Burger used to be one of our biggest consumers of that product line."

"Used to be! Ha! We still sell them now! We find huge containers on black market, super cheap!"

"But I was assured by our accounting department that we had recalled almost all... oh. I see."

"But we still run out soon! Customer love squidgee! When you deliver new squidgee friiies?"

"Well, you see, we stopped..." She looked around nervously. My, this was awkward. Wait a minute... she looked around again, a little more carefully. People were *still* winking at her. With just the one eye. Over and over again. And it wasn't so much a wink as a... She gulped. Oh. Maybe she didn't still have it after all. In a panic, she pulled out her makeup kit.

"Miss Marjoree, you okay? You look pale."

"I... I'll tell you in a minute." She looked desperately into her makeup mirror and saw her face. Well, yes, it was a bit pale. But it was her face. And she was looking right at it. Right into her eyes. Just like always. She took a deep breath. Whew. Thank goodness. "I'm okay. Just a little... makeup emergency." She pretended to touch up her lipstick.

"Ha ha, you gwai-lo, so concerned about your looks! This why China Burger successful, other

burgers crushed!"

"Ha ha! Oh, Mr. Chan, you're so ambitious! All the women must fall in love with you instantly."

Mr. Chan's smile broke for a moment. "Well, no. No time for women, too busy with crush other burgers. Very loneleee at top."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't --"

"Never mind! Nobody remember Mr. Chan, everybody remember China Burger! And everybody remember squidgeee friiies! When you make more?"

"Well, that's the thing. The government says we can't --"

"Miss Marjoreee, look around! Everyone here - everyone come for squidgee fries! Tasty squidgee is taste of China, but no scary! Better, cheaper, but don't worry, not real squid! Ha ha!"

"Ah, yes, that's our slogan. But the thing is --"

"Miss Marjoree." Mr. Chan looked right at her, and spoke very seriously. "You no have squidgee fries, very bad. You have squidgee fries, very good. Simple, yes? Now, tell me what you have."

"I... I... well, let me show you the samples of our latest product." She pulled out the box of SquidG cleaning supplies and opened it. "See? It's --"

"Squidgeee friiies! Ha ha! You big joke! You scare Mr. Chan! Very brave!"

"Ha ha, well, yes, it's a funny story, but actually they're not --"

"How much?"

"Uh --" Oh dear. This wasn't getting any easier. "Well, they're ten cents a pound."

Mr. Chan gasped, then broke into a huge grin. "Ten cents! Much cheaper than before! You lower squidgee price! Now China Burger even more crush other burgers! Ha!" With that, he got up and started to do a little dance.

Marjorie pulled out her makeup mirror again, looked into it intently, and then set it down on the table in front of her. She was going to need some real-time validation if she was going to get through this.

"Mr. Chan," she said, then glanced down. So far, so good. "Mr. Chan," she said again, "these cleaning supplies are not certified for consumption and are known to cause --" He was still dancing around, not paying the least bit of attention to her. She looked down at her mirror. Still good. She spoke faster, and enunciated maybe a bit less clearly. "I have to tell you that you absolutely mustn't feed these cleaning supplies to anyone. SquidG Fries were removed from the market because they're horrendously unsafe and cause very weird side effects when consumed in large quantities. It so happens that Ultra-Absorbent SquidG Wipes are exactly the same as the old SquidG Fries, but they aren't approved, and to be totally honest with you, they've recently been explicitly *disapproved*, for human consumption by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and more than fourteen other regulatory groups worldwide." She

stopped, looked into her mirror, and smiled. Perfect. Mr. Chan was still dancing around, and hadn't heard a single word. She spoke more loudly. "So, do you still want to buy them?"

"Yes! Yes! Ten cents! Ha! Miss Marjoreee, come dance with me!"

She looked down at her mirror, sitting on the table; admired her beautiful, clear, deep blue eyes for a second. She was a bit surprised at how easy it was. Well, that was that: another good day's work. She allowed herself a little jig with Mr. Chan.

Copyright (C) 2006-2007 by Avery Pennarun