

Reflections, Inc.

LAURA CARMEN

IT'S IN A STRIP MALL, sandwiched between a dollar mart and a pawnshop. Thirty-five people are waiting outside in forty-five degree weather for the great doors to open at eight a.m. It's intellectual factory work for individuals with a college degree. Oh, that great piece of paper.

Eight a.m. rolls around, the doors creak open, and the surge begins. We've got to get a good seat. There is a lot of conversation going on as though these folks have not seen each other in years. Truth be told, these people are their own breed and travel together in herds. They are never far from each other. And, they all saw each other on Friday. We spill in to the "big" room.

I sit at the end of long table and wait for the festivities to commence. I am lost in my thoughts when I hear, "Excuse me," squeaked behind me. I turn and see a huge, faux leather handbag staring at me. "Excuse me," it says again. This time I see the woman behind the bag and pull my seat in closer to the table. She has two bags and a lunchbox and tries to squeeze in behind me. She hits me in the head but manages, and flops, exhausted, into the chair next to me,

"I'm Joanna," she tells me. "Are you new?"

"Yes, my first day. How long have you been here?"

Joanna has begun to empty the contents of bag one. Paper clips, the colored and regular ones, pens, pencils, highlighters, post-its, and tissues tumble on to the table. "I've been here for seven years." She snorts some snot and begins to empty the other bag. A sweater, a pair of navy socks, mittens, a scarf, and lotion come tumbling out. Then she moves to the lunch box and produces a bag of pepper-

mint patties, a bag of fun size Snickers, Trident, antacid tablets, peanut-buttered saltines, a bottle of water, and a can of Pepsi. She organizes. She slowly pushes in to my space. There is no room for me. I wait for the show to begin.

Ride 'Em, Cowgirl

“Hello, testing...”

“Hello, testing, one, two, three...”

“Hello, can y’all hear me...?” A parrot screech sounds and then a Spock convention, enthusiastic, “Yes, Ma’am!”

“Okay, that’s what we like to hear. So, how y’all this mornin’? It sure is cold... I went to milk the cows and couldn’t get nothin’ from those girls this mornin’.” Laughter.

“Well, my name is Bobbie and welcome to Reflections, Inc.” Bobbie is dressed in a gray leather mini skirt and has fish net stockings on. It is forty-five degrees out and she is about forty-seven. What’s even better is her ample bosom adorned in a green, orange, and red-splotched leather shirt with strategically placed gray leather tassels.

Bobbie talks contracts, pay, and taxes. Then she clicks off to her office, a cow shaped mug in hand, and turns the floor over to Carol.

Hut One, Hut Two...

“Good mornin’ all! I don’t need this sissy microphone. I can reach y’all. Can ya hear me in the back?”

“Yes.”

“Then say Good Mornin’!”

“Good Mornin’!”

“Oh, that’s what I like to hear, babies, that’s what Carol likes to hear.” Carol is as big as a goddamn line backer. She could charge William “The Refrigerator” Perry in a second and win hands down. With one gnarled finger, she could push a Yugo with Rosanne and Tom Arnold, Rosie O’Donnell, and Rickie Lake confined inside.

“As y’all know, here at Reflections, Inc. we have the bottomless coffeepot. It’s free to y’all, but now, y’all listen up.” Carol pauses with a deep, throaty laugh. She sets up the plays. “Now, if y’all gotta have a Pepsi, well, now, they ain’t free.

But we do got the machine and it's fifty- five cent. You get two fifteen-minute breaks and an hour for lunch. Any questions?" Carol has covered the playbook.

"Carol? Oh Carol... I got a question." A six foot black woman with big, twisted purple hair waves her hand.

"Okay baby, shoot."

"Now, do we get both breaks in the mornin'? 'Cause, honey, that shore don't make no sense to me... Does that make sense to you, honey?" She slaps the skinny white man to her right on his shoulder. He tumbles from his seat. "Oooh, honey, did I hurt ya?" She stands and begins to bob her head and suck on her three front top teeth—her only top teeth. "By the way, Carol, my name is LeCretia." She points a long curled and ragged yellow nail to her chest and then swings her daggers in the direction of the skinny white guy who has just gotten settled back in to his seat. He pulls back his head in the nick of time, "And this skinny white honey here," LeCreatia continues, "This here is Denver." I can tell Denver wants to crawl under a rock. "Oooh honey, now say hello to the group. We all gonna be here for some time. Hmmpf."

Denver slowly waves.

The Familiar Flock

After Carol answers LeCretia's question (which, as it turned out, was not so stupid because others were confused too), Carol assigns us to our small teams of six and we all shuffle to our team spot. This process takes an hour. We get into our teams and I look around. Oh shit.

The Troop Leader

"Hi, I am Nancy." Nancy stresses the "a" in her name and has huge teeth. "And I am your team leader." She is freckled and orange like a cat, "Let's go around the table and introduce ourselves. Give the team your name and something unique about your self."

LeCretia's hand shoots up, "Unique?" she puzzles.

"Yes, something special about you," Nancy explains and then commences the exercise. "My name is Nancy and I'm a Girl Scout troop leader." She places her hands in a prayer position and nods to the man next to her.

My Country Tis of Thee

“Hello. My name is Martin.” He says *Marten* not *Martin*. He has a slow but silky smooth Southern accent. “I have been with Reflections, Inc. for fifteen years.” Martin is sporting the whole red, white, and blue patriotic look and has a red fedora to match. A Stars and Stripes bandana adorns his neck. “I like to read books about, huh, the Southwest, and, huh, you know, books about the Northeast, and, huh, well... not really books... more like novels...” Martin’s introduction is growing and Nancy herds him along. He smacks his parched lips and sits.

The Holy Spirit

LeCretia stands.

“My name is LeCretia Jones and I love Jesus, our Lord and Savior. I go to the First Baptist Church down there on Staff Street and, oh child, we praise the Lord! Hum, do we praise the *Lawd*!” She lifts her arms to the heavens and cries, “Thank you, thank you, thank you my sweet Lord and Savior...” She chokes up and sits slowly, taking a tucked tissue from her sleeve and touching it to her snout.

Euclid

“Hello all. I’m Jim. I am working on a government subsidy and my mission is to solve the Rubik’s Cube mystery through a series of mathematical variations and through logarithms.” Jim draws a Rubik’s Cube from his right pants pocket. “This Rubik’s Cube I got at Wal-Mart.” He places it delicately on the table. “This Rubik’s Cube I got at K-Mart.” He slides another from his right pocket, shows the team, and cautiously places it on the table next to the other one. “And this Rubik’s Cube I got at Toys R Us.” He whips this one from the pocket of his sweat jacket, holds it close to his face, sighs, and slowly turns it. “This is the tricky one.” He sits.

Over Easy

“Well, I’m Denver.” Denver does not bother to stand.

“Honey, I thought you were Skinny White Boy!” LeCretia laughs and slaps Denver on his hand. He slowly removes it from the table.

“I’m Denver and there is nothing special about me so...”

“Lawd, Skinny, there sure is.... Humph, just look at that little ass on you. The Lord gave you a nice little ass. Now me, LeCretia—the Lord, Jesus Christ, gave me a big ass. Just look at it now.” LeCretia stands and turns, her dagger nails pointing to her backside, “You could sit a drink on that ass.” She pats Denver on his head. He shrinks down in to his seat. “Now, Skinny, when you lose your Pepsi and you be lookin’ all around, look here at LeCretia’s ass and you’ll find it. It’s like a table. Humph.”

Office Depot

Joanna stands next, wrapping a sweater around her. She turns towards me and coughs a phlegm cough.

“I’m Joanna and I’ve been with Reflections, Inc. for seven years. Well, is it seven?” She thinks out loud to her self, “Is it seven or is it six? Let’s see... Anyway.” She shakes her head to clear the cobwebs, “The only thing I can say to all you new people is... well....” She pauses dramatically and surveys her office supplies. “Make sure you bring pens, pencils, post-its, warm clothes—I always bring an extra pair of socks because my feet get cold first.” She waves a pair of navy socks. “And a snack, you got to bring a snack. I like candy.” She holds up a mini Snickers and displays it to the team. She unwraps it as she sits and pops it in her mouth. She turns to me and breathes in my face, “It’s your turn.”

The Reflector

“I’m Jennifer and I collect porcupines.”

And I am so screwed. My college diploma burns a hole through my bag. I look at these freaks around me and wonder how I could sink so low to work here.

The Crapper Conundrum

We eventually break for lunch and then reconvene in our teams. Lovely Troop Leader Nancy leads us forward as we calmly study our training manuals:

Page 24: HOW TO BE CONCISE

We read,

Avoid drawn-out, rambling, wordy, protracted, extended, lengthy, *and verbose development and movement and ...*

Nancy elaborates, “How to be concise: Avoid drawn-out, rambling, wordy, protracted, extended, lengthy, and verbose development and movement and...”

“Speakin’ of movement, honey, get outta LeCretia’s way!” LeCretia jumps to her feet, stumbles over Denver, and trots to the toilet.

“Well,” Nancy laughs, “She won’t be long; we’ll wait.” We wait for twenty minutes while LeCretia shits. Finally, the vault to the porcelain pitch sweeps open.

“Seewanee,” LeCretia exclaims, waving her arms and flapping her purple leopard print blouse, “Whew,” she wipes her brow on the way to her seat, “That was some scary stuff comin’ outta LeCretia’s ass... Lawd, I seewanee.” She pauses at Denver, “Skinny, you ever got that comin’ outta your fine little ass?”

“No.”

“Oh, honey, ‘course not... Oh Lawd,” She addresses the team. “That was a big ole bucket of KFC... Shoot, child, can’t believe that old white colonel can make some damn fine fried chicken. Now I know I shouldn’t eat the whole bucket, but, humph, it’s some damn fine chicken.” She pauses to suck on her three teeth and laugh, “But LeCretia shore do suffer later... I seewanee, I think I found a bone.” She slaps Denver on the shoulder and sighs, “You shore, Skinny, you ain’t never got that KFC chicken come flyin’ out you ass?”

“Yes.”

It’s still in a strip mall, sandwiched between a dollar mart and a pawnshop. Thirty-five people are still waiting outside five years later in forty-five degree weather for the great doors to open at eight a.m. It’s still intellectual factory work for individuals with a college degree. Oh, that great piece of paper!

Eight a.m. rolls around, the doors creak open and the surge begins. We’ve got to get a good seat. There is a lot of conversation going on. Hey, we have not seen each other in days. We all got together on Friday to watch C-Span so we could see Jim give his Rubik’s Cube presentation to Congress.

We spill in to the “big” room and I take my usual seat. I start to sort my bags when a new face appears beside me.

“Are you new?” I ask.

“Yes, my first day... How long have you been here?” She asks me as I begin to empty the contents of bag one. Paper clips, the colored and regular ones, pens, pencils, highlighters, post-its, and tissues tumble on to the table.

"I've been here for five years." I begin to empty the other bag. A sweater, a pair of navy socks, mittens, a scarf, and lotion come tumbling out.

"Hello, testing... Hello, testing, one, two, three..."

"Hello, can y'all hear me?" A parrot screech sounds and then a Spock convention, enthusiastic. "Yes, Ma'am!" we all sound.

"Okay, that's what we like to hear. So, how y'all this mornin'? It sure is cold... I went to milk the cows and couldn't get nothin' from those girls this mornin'." Laughter.

"Well, my name is Bobbie and welcome to Reflections, Inc." Bobbie has changed her dressing style from all leather to all fur. Today, it's rabbit.

"Good mornin' all! I don't need this sissy microphone. I can reach y'all. Can ya hear me in the back?"

"Yes."

"Then say Good Mornin'!"

"Good Mornin'!"

"Oh, that's what I like to hear, babies. That's what Carol likes to hear." Carol is still as big as a goddamn line backer but now she's got the helmet hair and has recently learned how to ride a Harley.

"As y'all know, here at Reflections, Inc. we have the bottomless coffeepot. It's free to y'all, but now, y'all listen up." Carol pauses with a deep, throaty laugh. She still sets up the plays in her burly fashion. It's great. "Now, if y'all gotta have a Pepsi, well, now, they ain't free. But we do got the machine and it's fifty-five cent."

I lean over to the girl next to me and whisper, "I always bring my own snacks." I tell her as I move to my insulated lunch box and produce a bag of peppermint patties, a bag of fun size Snickers, Trident, antacid tablets, peanut-buttered saltines, a bottle of water, and a can of Pepsi.

I unwrap a mini Snickers and pop it in my mouth as I wrap my sweater around my shoulders. "I'm sorry," I say, breathing in her face, "I'm Jennifer and I collect porcupines." She stares. "That over there is Nancy; there's Martin and Jim; and over there... Do you see the skinny white boy and the large black woman?" I ask. She cranes her neck and nods, "That's Denver and LeCretia. They met right here five years ago. They just got married. He popped the question at KFC because that's when they said they fell in love: over a bucket of chicken."