

TOKEN MALE



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By Stella Satin

I never gave much thought, until a lot later, on the fact that the national magazine that quoted me and showed a small photograph of me, could possibly have been the instrument of my eventual downfall. I'm still not absolutely sure, but know a lot better than to ask anyone - that's one way of really getting in trouble around here these days. They don't take too kindly to low echelon employees like me asking questions. Okay, in those days, I was flattered to be recognized publicly and thought I was king of the hill. It was only a trade magazine after all – but who was I to complain? Looking back, I can see that it's probably a long story and becomes rather unusual and, in many ways. I may have asked for what happened to me – but that is something that has to be figured out by any individual reading my history.

I was in charge of administration services for Jackdaw productions, a small advertising agency. How I'd landed such a plum job, I could never really figure out, if and when I took the time to think about it. It was most likely that I'd been in exactly the right spot -at exactly the right time. I actually started in the mail room as a lowly delivery boy but, in a few short years, thanks to deaths, resignations, and other strokes of good fortune (for me), I'd reached my exalted position without having to demonstrate much in the way of leadership or knowledge.

I had become extremely well paid and made the point of living accordingly- BMW automobile, house in an exclusive area, well-tailored clothes. Naturally, I never thought of my advancement as being due to luck – I was a very firm believer that every good thing that had happened to me was just simply a part of my own charisma, education, whatever – not that I'd ever displayed such great characteristics. But characters who have arrived by sheer luck tend to be blinded by their own personalities. This I've found to be absolutely correct – and I was no different.

It bothered me that Chris, my wife, wanted to keep on working after we got married. I met her at work – and she was even lower than I was on the totem pole, although I had already started my upward move. After we were married and I made another advancement I kept pointing out that her 'meager' earnings weren't needed and that she should quit and spend

her energies on looking after me, but she wanted to be one of those self-motivated women so paid me no mind. She was deferential of course – as was proper – but still wanted her own way for one reason or another. This was particularly galling as she continued to work in the same firm as myself, and it bothered me that people might think that I needed her money. (In all honesty, we spent to the level that we made, her salary included. One of the reasons that things went so bad, so quickly, was that we were so deeply in debt. If I'm being honest, I also must admit to this as being mostly my fault – I just did not see much sense in applying good management rules to our finances. Hell, hadn't I proved that I was a financial genius by making the salary I was making?)

Another thing that bothered me over time was the fact that she got such terrific reviews all the time. I had never generated that much enthusiasm from any of my bosses, and it became really disturbing to see the quiet girl that I had married, become more and more self-assured at the reviews her supervisors and managers gave her. I did discount this by the fact that, at the lower level, most of her managers were women – and naturally biased. She even started to carry some feminist nonsense back home with her about women being at least equal to men. Naturally, I jumped all over her, but it seemed that I was fighting a constant rear-guard action all the time as she was very opinionated. At the same time, I held a lot of disdain for those views of hers along with some of her bosses – something I probably paid dearly for later on – but as is distinctly obvious, I didn't think too well at that time.

The quote that may (or may not) have started all the trouble, related to a call I'd taken one day. A free-lance writer was writing an article on a new PC graphics package. Normally, to be honest, I'm known as a complete dodo on anything technical. That particular morning though, I'd listened to two young ladies enthusing about the capabilities of that particular new software package in the cafeteria, and had picked up enough knowledge to sound like I knew what I was talking about. I must admit also that it didn't fit with my image to be handing out credit to the girls – so I can't blame the writer for thinking it was strictly my opinion he was quoting when he called. Maybe I should have informed him of my lack of computer knowledge, but I didn't. Needless to say, it was published.

Naturally, most people in the company were surprised to see me quoted in the magazine, but I'm pretty sure that it was well guessed where I'd picked up my 'expertise'. A few were even stupid enough to suggest that I should have directed the call to the people who were actually knowledgeable about the software - or at least give the credit to my sources – dummies! Anyway, I was only too happy to see my name in print - even if only in a trade magazine - and was not about to share the glory with anyone. My photograph – actually a good one? Probably sent me on my way to my current level and position. Matter of fact, if Chris gave me any money nowadays, I'd bet on it.

It wasn't too many months after the interview got published, that the company got sold to some mystery buyer. No one knew who it was, but John Clark, who was the managing director, and a good friend of mine was unexpectedly let go, and replaced quickly by Marjory Thorn - a lady sharp by name, and nature - who was decidedly not a friend of mine. In a sort of desultory way, I started looking for work somewhere else, but couldn't seem to come up with anywhere close to the same salary, so kept working, just waiting for something to happen. To be truthful? I thought that I was just too valuable to the company. Actually thought that if we could just get rid of that bitch Marjory, I might be due for a promotion. Never, ever, thought that an axe could possibly fall on me. Hell, I knew I was lucky! Why would that desert me now? Axe? Never heard of it!

Though in all honesty, fall it did - but all around me, never on MY neck – which simply probably served to strengthen my own opinion of myself.. I couldn't understand what was happening nor, to be quite honest, did I really try. One by one, my friends disappeared - and I started to notice a sharp decline in the number of males around me. As a matter of fact, one day I woke to the realization that I was the only male left, - less than six months after the sale of the company. Chris's smugness became intolerable as she pointed out that the new owners – whoever they were – had finally understood that women were far superior to men as workers. I wanted to reply, but had learned to tolerate her silly ideas – and anyway, she seemed to be much more erudite than me and was becoming very experienced at presenting her notions, so I tended to hold my peace.

During that time, to make my position even more awful and untenable, Chris had received one promotion after another and, all of a sudden actually outranked me. This was too much for my ego and led to the seeming start of my troubles. Again, everything seems to point to my own silliness, but I still believe I was set up

One fateful day, I called Annie, Marjory's secretary, and made an appointment to talk with her. As soon as I got in the door of her opulent office, I walked to her desk and gave her my resignation. She looked at me coldly, then spent a moment on my resignation letter – then contemptuously threw it in the trash!

“No.” She said with finality. “I can't accept this! Go back and get on with whatever the hell it is that you do!”

I couldn't believe my ears and was searching for some answer, until she pointed to the chair in front of her desk..

“Would you stop gawking? Sit down over there, please.” She was distinctly commanding, and I found myself obeying her.

Once I had done so, she looked at me imperiously. “Now, quite honestly Alex, I've never been overly impressed with your work and, if it was strictly you that wanted to leave - I'd let you go in a minute. You have little

or no drive, you're lazy, and you aggravate all of the girls with your nonsensical male macho nonsense! How Chris stands you is beyond me - I'd have put you over my knee long ago - but we feel that your wife is a real comer in the firm....”

I was astonished and aggravated. How DARE she talk to me in this manner!

“What do ...Do you mean? - Put me over your knee!” I said excitedly, half rising from my chair.

“Sit DOWN and behave yourself!” she thundered. “I'd spank you. That's what I mean. If you think I couldn't, just interrupt me like that again! You'll be put over my knee and spanked like a little kid! If you think I can't – or won't – do it? Just try me! Go ahead!”

She smiled evilly as I decided to sit down again pale faced and obedient and then she retorted. “That's more like it! Now just you be quiet and listen! We – the company - want to keep Chris - and to do that, it looks as if we have to keep you but, as of now, seeing you've brought it up, I've decided to put you on special assignment, reporting to me. I'm promoting Mary Sloan into your slot. And, while I'm at it, I may as well tell you something else. You're going to take a major pay cut.” She shrugged, but had a baleful gleam in her eye. “Nothing else for it!” she said happily.

I stared at her but, mindful of her threat to spank me, chose my words carefully. “You're not accepting my resignation. But then you think I'm crazy enough to take a major decrease in my salary? I don't get it. Who the hell do you think you are?”

She smiled sardonically and drew herself up. “Do you possibly think I don't KNOW? I know all about your job hunting activities -and the limited amount of success you've had. I'm also very well aware of your financial picture - you can't afford to leave here. I think that you'd better do as I say!”

I shook my head in disbelief. “If you do cut my wages, I've got to leave. You seem to think you know everything – well you don't. Chris's salary can't carry us...”

“Get it in your silly little mind that when I speak, I tell the truth. You're correct – but only to what you know. Trust me - it will now” she said shortly. “If you consider the new salary I've just been able to swing for her. With bonuses, and stock options, your combined income should exceed your current money by...” She looked at a report lying on her desk, then pulled a small calculator towards her and entered some figures “At least thirty percent! - And that's taking the drastic pay cut for you into account. She'll now be the major breadwinner in your family – and I surely hope that you appreciate her!”

I nearly fainted! I didn't like her words nor her tone but this was fantastic! Our financial position would be better, not worse!

"I don't know what to say..." I started, somewhat gratefully, despite my dislike.

Marjory looked at me impatiently. "Oh shush! You might want to thank Chris for saving your bacon and your ass! If I were you, I'd hold onto that young lady. I think she's going to be your meal ticket for a long time." Her expression changed and she practically cooed at me. "Now. As to your new assignment. I want you to move your things into my outside office - beside Annie. You'll be sharing her cubicle with her - and even though she's just a young girl, don't be getting any stupid ideas about your status - for your immediate information, she'll outrank you - at least until I figure out what to do with you. Is that clear? Have I got through to you?" She was sneering nearly.

I heard her. I had lost my office. I had been demoted from head of administration to some sort of lowly assistant away under a woman who despised me - I was even outranked by her secretary for goodness sake! But still mindful of her threat to physically discipline me, I spoke calmly. "But you don't understand, Marjory. I can't accept this situation. As you describe it. A demotion like that is most embarrassing!"

She held up her hand to silence me. Sneered openly now. "No Alex. It's you that doesn't understand. We want to keep Chris here but realize that it's probably a package deal - figure that we need to keep you here as well, if we must keep her. You leave? Chris might be unhappy and go somewhere else - and that is something we don't want to happen. Accordingly, we don't want to take that chance. But if you're determined to leave?" She thought for a second, came to a decision. "Then we'd have to let her go as well. Then you'd really have problems paying the bills, eh?"

"But this doesn't make sense. You obviously don't like my work - or me. So just on the off chance that Chris might be unhappy you want to keep me on. This doesn't make sense!" I concluded by asking. "Am I the token male, or what?"

She smiled a secretive smile and gave a small shrug. "That's as good as any reason I guess. But why don't you go and move your stuff to where I told you, then once you're finished with that task you and Chris can take the rest of the afternoon off. Think about your position, and talk it over. If she feels as strongly about your demotion as you do, I'll accept both of your resignations tomorrow morning."

She was obviously telling the truth. I could see no negotiating position for me at all. If I stayed, our financial position was assured. If I quit, we would lose just about everything. Dazed, I got up. "Okay Marjory, we'll talk it over and think about.."

She interrupted me again. Pointed an imperious finger at me. “From now on, you will address me as 'Miss Thorn'. Understood?”

I couldn't help it. I laughed. “But everybody calls you Marjory. It's only the really junior employees who call you...”

“You will call me 'Miss Thorn'! Understood? Starting immediately!”

She wasn't kidding! “Yes” I mumbled.

“Stop mumbling! Yes what?”

“Yes Miss Thorn” I said.

“Much better! You can go now. But one thing more. You'll find your timecard in the rack beside Annie's. Start punching in again tomorrow, eight o'clock sharp! You're an hourly employee now. Start behaving like one!”

Totally dejected by this new, humiliating, status drop from managerial staff into the ranks of office girls and suchlike, I started to leave. Before I could stop myself, I heard “Thank you Miss Thorn” emanating from my lips.

“Not bad!” she said approvingly. “Maybe there's hope for you yet! Now go and do as I say!” She then made a point of putting her eyes on some papers, ignoring me as I left the office. Outside, Annie gave me a curious glance – then smiled.

“Tough? Isn't she?”

Meekly, I nodded, still lost as to what Chris and I should do. Headed for my own office.

I cleared my belongings into cardboard boxes, so that I could move them for moving to my new place in fairly short order. I was about to ask one of the hourly people to clean my office out, then realized that I didn't want to chance anything. The idea of telling some lowly hourly paid woman to DO something – then find out that she outranked ME now? Wasn't worth the chance so I just went ahead and did it. Wasn't too happy when Mary Sloan came in and surveyed HER new office. So just pretended that I didn't see her and she left – though I knew damn well she had a major grin at my discomfiture. Just as I finished, Chris came in, looking a little upset. Spoke to me in a most aggravated tone.

“What's this? Marjory's saying that I've to take the rest of the day off, just to talk the situation over with you?”

“That's right! I think we . . .”

“What's to talk over? Are you being silly – or what? They told me what you'd been offered and I consider them very generous. We'd never get a deal like this anywhere else. You can't be thinking of quitting! Are you

crazy?" She overrode me quite rudely and I felt that the girls close by could hear what she said to me quite clearly.

"I'm not, not really" I whispered. "Marjory... I mean Miss Thorn, suggested it. Maybe we should talk it over. It makes sense that we do Chris. I can't figure..."

She was staring at me, disbelief all over her face. "I don't have time for this nonsense! You've been demoted. I've been promoted. Stop whimpering and try to work your way back up again!" She was snapping at me. "There's no way that I want to even give a perception that we've anything to decide. As far as I'm concerned, we're staying here and accepting her deal." Her voice softened a little. "Look. As you seem to be reporting to Annie now, and she drives past our place every night and morning it might be a good idea to get in with her. Get in on her good side. I think she car-pools with a couple of other girls. Why don't you ask her if you can join them, starting tonight? You're on the clock now, Marjory tells me, and I can't work steady hours like that, so I'll need the car and you'd better car pool."

"But Chris, I can't ..."

"Darling?" She was staring at me with her eyes showing that she was getting upset. "Behave!"

Helplessly, I shrugged, admitting defeat. Didn't want a public disagreement. Felt that she was becoming unreasonable, but couldn't see that I was being given much choice.

"Good!" She smiled at my capitulation Spoke to me as if I was her inferior now – and had accepted my change in position. "I'll be home around seven. Have dinner ready for me, eh?"

Later and red faced, knowing that Annie was probably aware of my downfall, I asked her about the car pool. She was delighted. All of the four girls in the car pool that afternoon were young, pretty, and carefree and she felt that having a male in there would give the car more balance – whatever that was. I also got the feeling that as I would have to pay her, she was getting a raise in income – and the change in HER status would be made more evident to the other girls. Along with Annie, there were Agnes, Sandi, and Diana. They were somewhat in awe of me, not knowing of my demotion at first. Annie wasn't too slow in letting them know my new status though, and I became just another junior employee to them in pretty short order. Also, in getting into the car, it had been determined that, as I was the smallest, I got to sit in the middle of the back seat encompassed by women, until the first passenger exited. Almost as soon as we started, I was right in the middle of an intensely female conversation that soon covered boys, lipstick, lingerie sales, that sort of thing. I wasn't sure, but had the strangest feeling that Annie

deliberately steered the conversation into areas that would prove embarrassing for me. Naturally, I tried once to let them know that there was a male in the car and I think that the girls were somewhat embarrassed for a very short time, but Annie quickly let them know what she wanted to talk about – and gave me a look that openly told me not to interfere. After that, the talk reverted to girlish things again – and I sat there, quiet and demure. A quiet passenger in a girl car pool.

Finally, the embarrassment was over and she drew up at my house. I was the second to leave. As I did so, I heard Annie remind me that “Miss Denning wanted her dinner to be ready by seven. To make sure and remind you about that.”

Sandi asked me, with her eyes big and round. “Are you miss Denning's cook?”

Annie tittered. “No silly! Her husband!”

The remaining girls looked at me with new respect. It took a second for me to figure out why. Then it dawned on me. My wife was obviously becoming a power in the land. It was a strange feeling. Let's face it, I hadn't been hobnobbing with any of the clerical people for a long time, but had always thought that they looked on her as my wife. Now it was obvious that I was her husband. Sounds like the same thing, but wasn't really.

If the day had been somewhat of a disaster, the evening didn't improve it any. Not by one iota! Chris got home about seven, just like she'd said. I had been getting the meal ready, but had allowed myself to be distracted by one of my favorite game shows on the television, so dinner was late getting to the table - even with Chris's disgruntled help in having to set the table. I felt funny serving her, but it seemed proper now for some reason. The fact that she sat down and studied a personnel report waiting for me to serve her was also a very good indication of what she was expecting from me. Then I served her and she put the report down. Smiled faintly at me, then saw her plate.

“This what you call a meal? It isn't good enough! In fact I think we'd better come to an understanding right NOW!” she bellowed, looking at the meal in front of her.

“Eh?” I responded stupidly, my mind still on the game show.

She did something I'd never have thought possible of my sweet young wife She took me by surprise by getting up, coming around the table, then grabbing hold of my head, and pointing my eyes towards the plate.

“You call that mess a meal?. Potatoes half cooked, steak burned on the outside- raw inside. Salad missing god-knows what? Looks like garbage!”

For the first time and a little bit of a shock, I was aware of the physical strength my wife had. "I did my best" I complained. "I'm not a cook, you know."

"Well, isn't it time you learned?' She said coldly. "I don't see me coming home every night, and looking at this kind of excuse for a bloody meal." She paused for a second, then continued. "I think I'll have a chat with Edna Mason. She supposedly knows a lot about home economics. Maybe she can train you. But in the mean time? I think you can go and make me a drink. I think there's some munchies I can take to ease the hunger pangs. In the meantime you use what's available to fix that meal up. You don't have time to re-do it. But fix it UP!"

"Oh Chris!" I complained. "This is getting to be too much. I've had a terrible day! I thought we were going to talk?"

She looked at me, and a little tenderness showed. "Alex. For years you've been coasting. How you got your job, I don't know. But get real! You're out in the cold. Marjory has made you and I an offer we can't refuse. I will NOT talk about it – and neither will you! Look at it this way. If we leave, you don't have a job - and not much chance of getting one around here. I can, maybe, get a job. But you know, and I know, that any company hiring me is going to look at what I've made until now. They are not going to look at what Marjory has just offered me. They'll simply at our history – and I don't think she'll try and hide the fact that she's just demoted you if they call her for a recommendation."

"She's a real bitch, that one!" I said venomously.

"You can stop that right now!" she said firmly. "You have pissed her off for a long time. Now she's simply getting some of her own back. I'd suggest you start looking for ways to get on her good side! I find her very business oriented and smart. Time that you started looking up to people like her!"

I looked at her in some shock. She was actually lecturing me!

But she ignored my expression and continued. "There's no way we can keep this standard of living up unless we accept what she's offering. We have to take her offer right now. Maybe, six months or so, we'll be out of this hole. But right now, we've no choice." She gave me another look. "You made this bed dear. Time you learned to lie in it."

She was saying what I was beginning to think, but the knowledge that Marjory was probably going to degrade me in any way possible, was haunting me. I also had more than just a feeling that even Chris was looking at me differently - especially with regard to the cooking. I was only partially correct, as I found out quickly. She had other things in mind for me as well.

“So what's this about Edna Mason?” I asked after I'd used the microwave oven and stove top to make the meal more palatable and we sat having coffee. “You expecting me to cook on a regular basis?”

“Damn right!” Chris said. “And not just cook. You'll be home before me. You're gonna be earning less money than me. You think I'm coming home and cooking your dinner? Think I'm gonna be cleaning house? Think I'm doing the laundry and ironing? If you're thinking along these lines, you've got another think coming! As I said, I'll talk to Edna. I'm thinking of asking her if she could be here tomorrow night - give you some idea of what has to be done in a kitchen.” She was glaring at me again as she listed her grievances on her fingers. “Now, if you've any arguments with what I'm saying, you'd better speak up, because I've had just about all the shit I'm gonna put up with from you!”

“Eh?”

“I don't know if it's true? But I heard pretty solid word that Marjory threatened to spank you? Put you over her knees and pull your pants down? Paddle your ass?”

“She didn't say anything about pulling my pants down!” I mumbled.

She sniggered. “So most of it is true? My god, what sort of pantywaist do I have for a husband? Want to go and tidy up – or should we find out if you're some kind of sissy or not, huh?”

Okay, she was being womanly in a hysterical way but being somewhat cowed by this new dominant nature of her personality, I put up absolutely no fight at all. Meekly, I simply nodded my acquiescence and finished the meal as well as I could, then the dishes and tidied up as she watched television. That night in bed, we made love for some reason very successfully. A major difference though was that Chris was a lot more aggressive than she normally was. I actually had to fight her for the 'top' position. I won – as was natural, but I could sense that I was now locked in some kind of struggle with Chris as to who was top dog in the house. But I felt weaker – less confident, somehow.

The following morning, Chris made sure I was up in plenty of time to make breakfast. Now she was coy and humorously bossy, once again rubbing in what her new position was. “Be ready for Annie now!” she warned me with a smile. “She's your new boss, so make sure you stay on her good side!” Annie picked me up on time. Again, the way it worked out, I was between the two girls in the back seat, and felt myself being drawn into their conversation. Agnes actually told me of a crocheting circle that had recently been formed by 'her, and some other girls' - and said that, if I was interested, they'd be glad to let me join. I was amused, but inwardly flattered by the invitation. Politely, I turned her down. She shrugged indifferently. “You can always change your mind later. It'll give you a good chance to get to know some of the other girls who'll be working with you.”