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Topics About Which I Know Nothing

Written by Patrick Ness

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TOPICS ABOUT
WHICH I KNOW
NOTHING

patrick ness

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We've got so many tchotchkes,
We've practically emptied the Louvre.
In most of our palaces,
There's hardly room to manoeuvre.
Well, I shan't go to Bali today,
I must stay home and Hoover
Up the gold dust.

That doesn't mean we're in love.

The Magnetic Fields

implied violence

1

'Implied violence,' says the boss, 'is our bread and butter.'

He means implied violence is what we sell, which it isn't, we sell self-defence courses over the phone, but the boss likes to think in themes. He's talking to the new girl, Tammy, which sounds American to me. I'll have to ask Percy.

'I don't like to say we need to frighten our customers,' says the boss, looking down at Tammy who is looking right back up at the boss, 'but let me put it this way: we need to frighten our customers.' This makes the boss laugh. Tammy laughs as well, too loud and too long. I look over to Maryam from Africa who meets my gaze.

There are only three of us, now four, who work in this little room, but we all wear nametags. Mine says my name, Maryam from Africa's says hers, and Percy's says his, but I notice that Tammy's says 'Terrific Tammy'. I look back at Maryam. She's noticed it, too. She rolls her eyes as Tammy's laugh just goes on and on.

2

On one side of me sits Percy. Percy is a very large bloke who falls over a lot. 'I have an inner-ear problem,' he says. Percy calls himself my mate.

On the other side of me is Maryam from Africa. Maryam from Africa is from Africa. I'm not sure which part, because I didn't think you were supposed to ask. I'm not sure how to pronounce her name exactly either, because she says it in her accent and you can't really ask her to repeat it. She frowns all the time but is not a mean person and doesn't mind, I don't think, that I just call her Maryam. She must be about fifty or so, but I wouldn't be surprised at anything in a twenty-five-year range above or below that.

The three of us sit in a line facing one wall of our room, Maryam by the door, me, then Percy by the window. It's one long desk with a computer, telephone and headset for each of us, but dividers separate us so we can have privacy to talk to potential customers. Behind us, there used to be only a wall, but now they've put Tammy at a card table against it. There isn't very much room, so Tammy's facing the window, and our backs are facing her side.

Why did they put her in here? There's only room for three.

'There's only room for three,' whispers Percy, but he has to lean towards me to do this and he falls off his stool. 'I have an inner-ear problem,' he says to Tammy and the boss, standing back up. 'It affects my balance.'

3

'Everyone here has a sales quota,' says the boss. 'It's not a bad one, not a very high one, but it's important that you meet it each week.'

Tammy nods. I don't like the way she nods.

'Because if you don't,' the boss puts his face close to Tammy's, 'we'll have to send you to the end of the hall.'

Tammy laughs. No one else does. The boss smiles, but it's not a laughing kind of smile.

'And what's at the end of the hall?' says Tammy, still thinking it's all for fun.

'Only people who don't meet their quota ever find out,' says the boss.

'And no one's returned to tell the tale?' Still smiling, still laughing.

'I'm sure you'll meet your quota just fine.'

Tammy's forehead wrinkles a bit at how seriously the boss says this. She opens her mouth again but then closes it.

'You've already met your colleagues, yes?' The boss gestures towards the three of us on this side of the room. We all nod.

'They introduced themselves this morning when I came in,' says Tammy.

That was only because we were discussing why there was a card table with a new computer, a new phone and a new headset crammed in the corner where Percy used to slide his chair back when he needed a few minutes' break. In walked Tammy. The room was too small not to say hello.

'Boss?' says Percy.

'Yes, Percival,' says the boss.

('Everyone calls me Percy,' Percy said to Tammy this morning.)

'I'm wondering if Tammy's going to be, you know, comfortable.'

'Comfortable?' says the boss.

'Yeah, in that small corner, like,' says Percy, looking at the floor, scratching the back of his neck. 'It's usually three to a room, isn't it?'

'Yes, Percival, you're correct,' says the boss, still with the not-laughing kind of smile. 'It is usually three to a room, but just now we haven't an extra space to slot Tammy in.'

'All the other rooms are full?'

'All the other rooms are full.'

'No one's gone to the end of the hall lately,' says Tammy, already trying to make a joke. No one laughs. Tammy doesn't notice.

'It's only temporary, Percival,' says the boss. 'I trust you'll make our newest sales representative as comfortable as your colleagues made you on your arrival.'

Maryam and I ignored Percy for a week. He replaced Karen, who had gone to the end of the hall. We hadn't really liked her, but we were surprised she hadn't met quota. It really isn't a very high quota.

'Of course, boss,' says Percy.

'Good,' says the boss. 'If you have any questions, Tammy, I'm sure these three will be more than happy to help. I'll let you all get to work.' He leaves without

looking at anyone. Maryam from Africa gives a 'hmp' to the whole thing.

4

'What you have to consider,' I say into my headset, 'is what would a woman like yourself do if an intruder broke in one night when you were on your own with the children?'

'I'd call Emergency Services.'

'What if he cut the phone lines?'

'I'd let my rottweiler do what rottweilers do.'

'What if he'd brought minced beef with poison in it to put your rottweiler out of commission?'

'He's very persistent, this intruder.'

'They always are, madam. I assure you, it's not a laughing matter.'

'I'd spray him with mace.'

'You've left it in the car.'

'I don't have a car.'

'You've left it at your friend's house when you were showing her how to work it.'

'I'd scream.'

'He's taped your mouth while you slept.'

'After he poisoned my rottweiler and cut the phone lines.'

'There's been a rash of similar crimes in your area, ma'am. I'm only reporting the facts.'

'Do you even know my area?'

I check the list. There's no town name, but luckily I recognise the dialling code.

'Derby, madam.'

'Listen, this horror show has been very amusing, but I really must -'

'What if he went for your children first and made you watch?'

'That's not funny.'

'As I've said, madam, it never is. We offer self-defence training for the entire family.'

'My daughter is five.'

'Never too young to learn where to kick.'

'It'd frighten the life out of her.'

'I beg to differ, madam. Knowing a few basic moves might boost her confidence right at the time she's about to enter school. Think about bullies, madam.'

'Five, for pity's sake.'

'Most karate black belts start at three, madam.'

'You're making that up.'

I am. 'I assure you I'm not, madam. One of the major positive points that clients have told us is that the self-defence classes have given them the *appearance* of confidence, and over 90 per cent have never even been forced to use their training.'

'And that's a selling point, is it?'

'An armed world is a safe world, madam.'

'I suppose so . . .'

'Why not make your world a little safer, madam? Why not do yourself and your daughter, no matter how young, the service of being able to face the world with one more resource?'

'Anything to help me sleep at night, is that right?'

'That's right, madam. Couldn't have said it better myself.'

5

'So what exactly is at the end of the hall?' says Tammy.

We're eating our lunches. The company doesn't have a canteen, so we have to eat at our desks. I have a cheddar and ham sandwich that I make five of on a Sunday. By the smell of it, Maryam from Africa has a cold curry. Percy seems to have just pickles. His wife sometimes forgets to go shopping, he says. Tammy has gone outside to the sandwich shop down on the corner and got herself some kind of leafy salad and a fruit drink. We spend all our mornings talking on the phone, so lunch is usually a quiet affair. Not for Tammy, apparently.

'It is what the boss says it is,' I say.

'All he said is that only people who don't meet quota know what it is,' says Tammy.

'Exactly,' I say.

'That doesn't make sense,' she says.

'It is what it is,' says Percy, who has to steady himself with one hand when he looks up to say this.

'Is it metaphorical, like?' asks Tammy.

'No, it's just down that way,' says Percy. He jerks his thumb in the right direction.

'I mean,' says Tammy, openly laughing at Percy, 'that it's just words the boss uses to motivate us. *Implied violence*. Like in our sales pitch.'

'No,' I say, 'it really is just down that way.'

'But that doesn't -'

'You meet your quota, then you never find out,' interrupts Maryam from Africa. Her accent is a hell of a thing, foreign and stern, like being shouted at by a vampire maid. 'Can we eat in silence, please? I hear enough chitter chatter all day long without having my digestion interrupted by nonsense of this sort.'

6

The self-defence classes we sell have no connection with this company. We're just the telesales firm that the self-defence people hired to push their product. I've never been to a class. I've never even seen a brochure. Neither have Maryam from Africa or Percy for all I know. So far, Tammy hasn't asked, and I'll bet it's the sort of thing she would ask about, so I'm guessing that maybe she's seen a brochure or been to a class. It would figure.

7

'Should we invite her to the pub?' says Percy.

'Who?' I ask, though who else could he be talking about?

'Tammy.'

'Good God, no,' whispers Maryam from Africa.

'It's rude not to,' says Percy.

‘It’s rude to ask questions all day,’ says Maryam. ‘If you invite her, I’m not coming.’

‘You never come,’ says Percy.

‘I might today, if you don’t invite her.’

We prepare ourselves for an awkward moment when the day ends, but Tammy just bags up the jumper she’s slung over the back of her chair, waves bye, and leaves.

‘The cheek,’ says Maryam.

8

I bring two pints of bitter and one pint of lager to the table. The lager is for Maryam from Africa. It seems surprising that she drinks lager, but I suppose there’s no reason she shouldn’t. I get the drinks every night, even when it’s just me and Percy, because Percy can’t be trusted to carry anything. He’s all right once he’s standing or once he’s sitting; it’s the in-between that’s tricky, and that includes leaning. The management of the Cock & Cloisters have even barred him from handling small glasses of spirits.

‘Cheers, mate,’ says Percy. Maryam from Africa nods a thank you. Percy and I each take a swig from our bitters. Maryam downs half of her pint in one long, graceful draught. It’s almost beautiful. She dabs her lip with a serviette and says, ‘I don’t like this new girl.’

‘Me neither,’ I say.

‘She’s not so bad,’ says Percy.

‘You say that about everyone,’ I say.

‘You say the boss isn’t so bad,’ says Maryam.

'He isn't,' says Percy.

Maryam looks at me with eyebrows that say 'point proven'.

'And what kind of a name is Tammy for a grown woman?' she says.

'I reckon it's American,' I say, 'but she doesn't sound American.'

'It's South African,' says Percy. 'Short for Tamara.'
We stare at him.

'How d'you know that?' asks Maryam.

'I asked,' says Percy.

'When?' I say.

'On the afternoon break,' he says. 'You were in the loo. Maryam was on the phone to her mum. It was just me and Tammy, so I asked. Polite conversation.'

Maryam hmphs again.

'Hi everyone,' says Tammy, suddenly appearing at our table from the cigarette haze of the pub.

'You left before we could ask you along,' says Percy, fast, before the rest of us even take in who Tammy is.

'That's all right,' says Tammy. 'I'd agreed to meet the boss here anyway.' She points towards the bar, and sure enough, there's the boss holding what looks like a pint of Guinness and a G & T. Maryam from Africa sighs and starts scooting over to make room for Tammy and the boss.

'No need,' says Tammy. 'We're sitting over there with some of the workers from the other rooms. What am I saying? I'm sure you know them better than I do.'

We all look to the corner she's pointing at. From the

silence, I gather I'm not the only one who doesn't recognise anyone.

'Every room is kind of its own little world,' says Percy.

'Of three people?' says Tammy hysterically. Is she on drugs that she's this upbeat? 'Awfully small world, if you ask me.' She punches Percy playfully on the shoulder. He falls off his chair to the green, sticky carpet. 'Oh my God,' says Tammy. 'I'm so sorry.'

'Nothing to worry about,' says Percy, helping himself back up. 'You weren't to know.'

We all hear the boss say Tammy's name across the pub. He still has the drinks. He sees us, but he doesn't come over. That's the way everyone wants it.

'Gotta go,' says Tammy. 'See you all tomorrow.'

'I hope she doesn't have any problem meeting her quota,' says Percy, watching the back of Tammy move away from us.

'She won't,' says Maryam from Africa. 'Probably get the quota *raised*, her.'

'And you're married, Perce,' I say.

'It doesn't mean my eye is wandering if I hope that someone doesn't get sent to the end of the hall,' he says.

'Never gonna happen,' says Maryam, before downing the rest of her pint. It's even more beautiful when she does it this time.

9

'I don't mean to alarm you, madam,' I say, 'but it's a fact that crime rates for Hove are through the roof this year.'

'Uh-huh.'

'With our self-defence course, though, that fact doesn't have to scare you.'

'Uh-huh.'

'In fact, it's not self-defence we're selling. It's peace of mind.'

'You've said *fact* three times in a row.'

'I believe in the product, madam.'

'How much are you asking for it?'

'Can you really put a price tag on peace of mind?'

'*You* obviously have.'

10

Today Tammy's nametag says 'Tammy On Top.' I hear her talking to a customer on the phone behind me.

'Listen, Mrs Rosen,' she says, 'I got your phone number, didn't I? Ex-directory is only a lie that keeps you from getting called by those too lazy to do further searching.'

We're given a list of phone numbers to call every day generated by some marketing firm somewhere. It isn't supposed to have any ex-directory numbers on it. Mine doesn't.

'And if *I* can get it, think how much more information

the malevolent criminal mind is going to find out about you, Mrs Rosen. You. He's going to come after you, and he's going to know a lot more about you than your phone number, I can tell you that. He's going to know when you're alone; when you're in your nightgown; when you make your evening cup of tea and sit down to *The Times* crossword. He's going to break into your house silently. He's going to take your phone off the hook. He's going to come up behind you, and then he's going to silence you. But he's not going to knock you out, Mrs Rosen. Oh, no, he's got better ideas than that. He's going to keep you awake, because before he robs you, he's . . . well, I hesitate to even suggest. I'd hate to give you nightmares.'

In less than another minute, she's got Mrs Rosen, no doubt a widowed pensioner because that's today's target audience, to sign up for the top-of-the-line classes which include advanced jujitsu, proper use of a knife, and night-time camouflage, all for more than what Mrs Rosen will spend on food in a year.

Jesus *dammit*.

11

There's a sheet up on the wall that lists our quotas for the week and our progress towards them. We each write our daily sales numbers in a box beside our name and underneath the day. Tammy's only been here since Wednesday. It's Friday morning. She's already outsold Percy and is only three behind me. The second-to-last sale I made yesterday made me reach weekly quota.

Percy has to sell four more to make it, no problem really, but none of us can believe that Tammy will probably make a full week's quota without even needing to. Tammy is in a meeting with the boss. A new employee thing, we all assume, probably accompanied by many smiles and laughs if Tammy's performance on the quota sheet is anything to go by.

'It's because she's new,' says Maryam from Africa.

'Aye,' I say.

'All that enthusiasm for the product in the first couple of days,' says Percy.

'It'll wear off,' says Maryam.

The company only gives Maryam from Africa the numbers of African women her own age, and her sales are so far beyond mine and Percy's that her quota is higher. She passed it Wednesday morning, but she'll only report passing it this afternoon. If they knew she'd passed it so easily, they'd raise it again, and it's already twice the usual. She takes it easy the rest of the week, a sale here, a sale there. I'd do the same.

Tammy appears suddenly, in the way that we're already trying to get used to, and I notice that the three of us act like guilty children getting caught doing nothing. Her nametag says 'Tammy Triumphant'. She still has that stupid smile on her face, but she seems distracted by something.

'There's some kind of disturbance at the end of the hall,' she says. She walks to her seat, almost talking to herself. 'The boss ended the meeting to go handle it.' We realise she's angry. 'He wouldn't let me come down

and see.' She puts on her headset, already dialling the number at the top of the list. Percy, Maryam and I look at one another. We listen for sounds from the end of the hall but hear nothing. Maryam reaches over from her seat to shut the door.

Tammy's phone picks up. 'I know you're alone, Mrs Wilson,' she says.

12

Ten minutes later, the boss comes in.

'Stay in your office,' he says. His face is set, worried. 'Don't leave, no matter what you hear.'

'What's going on?' says Percy.

'Just stay here,' he says. He looks over at Tammy. She holds his eye for a moment, then raises her eyebrows before looking back to her computer. The boss closes the door behind him. Percy looks at me.

'What's going on?' he says again.

'How should I know?' I say.

'Best to leave it,' says Maryam from Africa.

'What do you mean *Best to leave it*?' Tammy says, spinning round to face us.

Maryam's posture straightens. It suddenly looks like she's a whole lot bigger.

'Exactly what I say, Little Madam,' she says. 'Best. To. Leave. It. Get back to work.' She looks at Percy. 'Some of us have quotas to meet.' Percy turns back to his terminal and starts dialling the next number.

'Aren't any of you curious?' says Tammy, looking at us, exasperated. 'They tell you to avoid the end of the hall, and you just say, *Fine by me?*'

I look at Maryam, who still has her eyes locked on Tammy. I look back at Tammy.

'It's not quite like that,' I say.

'Then what is it like?' Tammy says. 'What's wrong with you? Don't you want to know?'

'Well,' I say, 'the reality of it is -'

'Go look yourself if you're so interested, Miss Missy,' says Maryam.

'Maryam!' I say. Maryam looks at me.

'The woman is not going to be satisfied until she has a look,' Maryam says. 'She is just gathering her courage. Well, I say leave us be with your courage-gathering and just go if you're going to go.'

Tammy takes off her headset. She stands. 'All right then,' she says, 'I will.'

'Tammy,' I say, 'I really wouldn't.'

'And yet you can't, or won't, tell me why,' she says.

Percy is also trying to mouth at Tammy not to go, but he's on a call. It's company policy that you never disconnect a call. Percy over-balances and hits the floor with a thud. 'No, madam, I'm still here,' he says, waving his hands at Tammy to stay put.

'This is ridiculous,' Tammy says. She looks at each one of us in turn, then opens the door and steps out.

13

'I wish you wouldn't have let her go,' says Percy, finally through with his call. It was successful, leaving just three to go to make quota.

'There is no letting involved,' says Maryam. 'A person chooses their own actions. We chose to stay here. She chose to go.'

'She wouldn't have listened to us, Perce,' I say.

'I suppose not,' he says. 'But the end of the hall,' he says to himself, shaking his head as he starts dialling again.

14

Through the still-open door, we hear a distant scuffling, then something that might be a muted voice or it could be the air conditioning malfunctioning like it often does, then a faint crash, followed by a few more crashes, then an uncomfortable high-pitched sound, which again could be the air conditioning.

We all carry on with our calls. Maryam reaches out and closes the door.

15

Much later, the boss comes in. There is a cut across his cheek and a bandage peeking out from his shirt collar. He is walking with a limp, and there is a funny smell.

Without saying a word, he walks over to Tammy's table, folds up her jumper, puts it in her bag, picks it up and leaves. We watch him go. Percy looks at his watch.

'Where did the day go?' he says.

We get ready to leave, and one by one we enter today's sales numbers on the weekly quota sheet, first Maryam, then me, then Percy.

It takes us a minute to realise we've had our best day ever.