

She's Got Person-ality

Era: late 1980s

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"I hired her because I thought you needed a little bit of company," my boss told me.

His name was Hayden. That's what everybody at Pressure-Plus called him unless they were talking to him in person. This particular day, he was sprawled in a heavy chair behind his desk, blowing a ring of cigar smoke into the air... a slight paunch, denimmed legs, short-sleeved shirt - not the uniform of a typical Chief Draftsperson.

"I have lots of company, Dick. I don't need another woman around for company."

"You just wait. You'll love her."

"I'm sure I will. But I hope you didn't hire her just to keep me company."

"Why else would I hire her?" His eyes glowed like they always did when he figured he was getting my goat.

I let him have it. The goat, that is. Old goats belong together. "Yes, Dick, but how are you going to cope with two token females?"

He laughed heartily. "She can have half your pay."

"I have no problem with that. She has to start at some wage."

He raised his eyebrows and looked at me darkly for refusing to be put into place. I loved it.

"She has more experience than you did when you started."

"Good."

"Six months drawing vessels. Unfortunately, she's never done design calculations. You can ask Jeff to run her through a set." He swept me from his office with a symbolic flick of his wrist. "I'll bring her to your board as soon as accounting is finished with her."

I gave him my sweetest smile and sauntered back to my cubby-hole. On the way I considered the advantages of another woman in the drafting department. The possibilities were endlessly satisfying, sort of like shopping.

Half an hour later, I met Renée. Hayden introduced us. "She's going to be sitting over at the empty board in front of Jeff," he told me. "Could you get her settled? See she has the things she needs?"

"Sure."

Hayden headed back to his office, kicking up his hooves between the rows of drafting boards... just a kid behind the goatee. Smiles lit the faces of the draftees he harassed.

I turned to the pert little package, knotted in copper-colored braids. "Well, let's see what you need. Do you have some stuff of your own?"

"Oh, I left my brief case out in the car. It's a bit heavy to carry around." She giggled.

"Do you need some help with it?"

"No. I like to carry my own stuff. It's fine now that I know where I'm supposed to sit."

"I can help," a voice piped from behind a nearby board.

"Jeff will help if you need him."

"No. I'll be right back."

While Renée was gone, I searched the supply cupboard looking for an electric eraser, a pencil sharpener, and an extension cord. I couldn't find an electric eraser, so when Renée returned, swinging her brief case, I told her I would ask our secretary to order one.

Her freckles glowed transparently from below a layer of powder. The blue eyes made you glad you weren't color blind. "An electric eraser? Oh good. I've never used one."

I thought about that... a draftsman that had never used an electric eraser. It was an intriguing concept.

Once she was settled, I gave her a design sketch for an inlet separator.

"Jeff, would you show Renée, how to do the design calculations for this vessel? Hayden asked if you would."

"No prob," Jeff said. He whipped out from behind his board, flying high and he didn't even have his pilot's license yet. He was working on it though. He'd told me that just the day before. "Right now?"

Renée, turned toward him, batted her eyes and said, "Yes. I'd like that. I want to do a real bang-up job here."

Jeff's glasses slid down his nose. He shoved them back hurriedly. "I'll just pull over a chair, and we can get on with it."

Within minutes, their two heads were bent over a jointly shared calculator and a set of calculation sheets.

For a while, I daydreamed about having red hair and turning men into invertebrates. Maybe a carrot-orange wig was a good reason to go shopping. In the end, my morbid sense of responsibility drove me back to the contactor that was sitting on my desk.

I hate contactors.

Five hours later, Renée, had finished the drawing and the calculations. Hayden brought them to me the next morning and told me to check them.

"I'm dazzled by her speed," I told him.

"I know what I'm doing when I hire a woman."

"Thank-you. It's nice to be appreciated."

"I wasn't talking about you. You're not a woman."

"My mother thought I was."

He chose to ignore me... headed toward the back of the room. He had a whole drafting department to torment. "What are you doing?" I heard him ask someone, "Growing hair for the blasted thing?" He must have been talking to George Rink who was bald.

I started to check the drawing; yellowed off the data for the vessel name plate, busily compared the drawing to the information on the flow sheet. Renée, had dimensioned the vessel diameter with three different values in three different places. I concluded she didn't understand standard pipe diameters and resolved to give her a chart.

I became a little more anxious, however, when I noticed the design pressure for the vessel was supposed to be 150 psig and the drawing stated 1500. Also, the drawing called for standard wall nozzles instead of the extra heavy nozzles that the code required. Maybe Renée, didn't understand what she was supposed to do with her calculation results.

I walked back to her board and stared at the blank piece of paper she was taping into place. "Hayden gave you another vessel to do?" I queried in my most motherly fashion.

"Yes. This one's supposed to be a contactor."

She seemed pleased. Which told me she was inexperienced and hadn't figured out contactors were worth hating.

"Can I talk to you about this separator you drew?" I laid the blueprint across the blank sheet of paper on her board.

"Sure. Anytime. I like to talk about my work. Do you like the way I lined up all the lettering in my bill of material?"

"Nice. Yes the drawing looks good."

"The fellows in the shop shouldn't have any problem reading it."

"No... unfortunately."

She looked at me in such a way I felt obliged to explain.

"If they could misread the drawing, they might accidentally, build the vessel with the right pipe wall thicknesses." Her eyes grew big and wide. I plunged on. "If we make this vessel the way you've drawn it, it could possibly explode... maybe even probably."

Her chin dropped, lips spread, formed a frosted orange doughnut.

"Let me explain what I mean. If you make a mistake when you're drawing a vessel and I don't catch it when I'm checking and the Boiler's Branch doesn't catch it when they register the design, the vessel could bust wide open during hydrotest. Or even worse it could explode when it's full of gas out in the field. You could kill somebody just by putting the wrong number on this drawing."

Her eyes were like blue bachelor buttons. "Then maybe I should take another look at it."

"Yes. Good idea. While you're at it, you might like to correct the design pressure and change the nozzle wall thicknesses so they match your calculations."

She shook her copper head. "I had a friend who warned me about mistakes. Never draw more in the morning, he said, than you can erase in the afternoon."

"You're okay then. You'll have an electric eraser after lunch. You can get rid of the whole drawing in half an hour if you need to. By the way, how'd you like to go shopping with me tonight? I think there's quite a few things we could teach one another."

Shortly after, Hayden called me to his office. I stood in front of his desk and waited while he finished making a phone call to his wife. They share a meaningful relationship, especially during working hours. When he was finished, he turned his full attention toward me.

"Jeff says you've upset Renée," I was supposed to cringe.

"Pardon?"

"You've upset Renée."

"She was singing the last time I walked past her board."

"Yes. She believes in making the best of a bad situation. I like her and I don't want you to upset her. I think you've been working too hard yourself and need a bit of a rest."

"Does that mean I can take the week off you promised me two years ago?"

"Well no. But I'm going to check Renée's vessels for the next while. We have to get her off to a good start. Besides, I get tired of wandering around managing things all the time. I'm going to do some real work for a change."

"Hey, I can understand that." I had no problem with Hayden checking her drawings. I was more interested in the way she operated. I now regarded myself as an apprentice. "You go ahead and check her vessels."

"We'll leave the contactors for you."

The following morning at two minutes to eight, I stepped out of the toilet cubicle in the washroom and dipped my hands under the tap. With a flourish, Renée, burst into the room. Her hair was hanging about her shoulders in wet soggy strings.

"Just had a shower," she informed me, smiling brilliantly. She began to part her hair into long copper strands.

"How are you this morning?" I asked.

"Great. It's like I told you yesterday. I'm just really glad to be here."

"Oh?"

"Yes. It's really awesome to have this job. I got so fed up with the last place I worked. Those guys thought that because I was a woman they didn't have to pay me what I was worth." She leaned against the counter and looked me in the eye. "... a paltry twenty-three hundred a month. That was all I was asking for. Can you believe it?"

"How long have you been drafting?" I asked.

"Six months. But different people gain different amounts of experience in six months." She eyed her reflection in the mirror and began braiding the long plaits of hair. I thought about that for a moment, compared the twenty-three hundred dollars she was asking for, to my own income, and decided maybe she was divorced from reality.

"I suppose you're right," I murmured trying to be agreeable. "About the experience, I mean."

"Hayden is great," she continued. "We're lucky to have him for a boss. He's a man who realizes what a person is worth."

Then again, maybe I was the one who was divorced from reality.

"Yeh, he's the best, all right. The guys who own the company think he's great. He can squeeze motivation out of a wet ... dish rag." I never was known for my diplomacy. Decided I'd better leave before I tripped over my tongue. "See you in a few minutes," I hollered as the door closed.

When she walked by my board fifteen minutes later, her hair looked like a new copper penny, and it did every morning from that day on... at a quarter past eight. Fifteen minutes after the rest of us started work.

A month later, I stepped into Hayden's office to ask him a question. Renée, was there, chatting him up, and Hayden was enjoying every minute.

"So what do you think you're doing," he asked her, "making your nozzles out of standard wall pipe, you nit-winnie."

Renée, giggled. "Well, I just forgot I was supposed to do a calculation for them."

"Who checked the drawing? How did it get down to the shop?"

"You did."

"Of course, I did. I've been checking all your drawings. All I can say is you're bloody lucky the Boiler's Branch found the mistake."

"You mean you're lucky."

"If you'd just get a couple of things through your head," Hayden reasoned, "You'd be quite useful."

"I thought I was useful already."

"Yeh?"

"... for doing your drawings. If I wasn't here, you might have to use a pencil."

"I use a pencil all the time."

"That red thing?"

"I bleed for you... all over your drawings. Don't you forget it. Now, get back to work."

"Yes... right away, sir."

She snapped a salute then swished from the room. Hayden watched her, smiling indulgently at the door where she disappeared.

"Dick, you're going to upset her."

"Upset her? It's okay if I upset her. I do it for her own good. Somebody has to look after her."

Two months later, I had a little surprise... in the washroom.

"I'm asking for more money," Renée, said as she plaited her braids on Pressure-Plus time.

"More money?"

"Yes, well, I've worked here three months, and I've learned a lot. I think Pressure-Plus should recognize how valuable I am."

"I thought you were pleased with what Hayden was paying you."

"I was when I started, but its time to kick butt. I expect to be paid what I'm worth, especially since I'm a woman. I owe it to my sex."

"Have you talked to Hayden yet?"
"Nope. I'm going to do that this afternoon."
"Good luck." And I meant it.

Renée, was in Hayden's office the following morning when I went in to tell him the spool drawings I was checking weren't going to hit the shop on time.

Hayden was glowering at Renée,. "You just ignored the fact that this vessel is supposed to be designed for -45 Celsius, you nit-winnie-bago."

"Well, I didn't exactly ignore it. I just didn't know what I should do about it."

"Then why didn't you ask?"

"Because I knew you would mark up the drawing when you checked it."

"What if I didn't? What if I missed the problem?"

"The Boiler's Branch checks those things too. I can't help it if I don't understand that low-temp bit. Your explanations need to be a little clearer."

Hayden bared his teeth. "You owe me a bottle of beer. Go make these changes," He handed her the blazing red check print.

Renée, swept out of the room.

"So... are you going to pay her more money?" I asked and winked at him.

"No way!. Do you know what she's asking? Almost as much as I'm making myself."

"Well, she's almost as entertaining as you are."

"What kind of a wage budget do you think I run in this department? You're forgetting. She's supposed to be a token. Here. If you're going to be so obnoxious, check this vessel. Right after you finish the spools."

It was a contactor.

My phone rang at twenty past eleven a couple of hours later... double ring. It was an outside call from our young, handsome, single Boiler's Branch Inspector, Garry Font. At least I had been told Garry was handsome. I had never met him but apparently he had worked in Calgary during the boom years of the eighties, before he accepted his job with the Alberta Government in Edmonton. Our entire four year relationship consisted of phone calls. "I'm looking for Hayden," he said. "He doesn't seem to be in his office, so I thought I'd try you."

"He's around somewhere. What's up?" Garry fed me the details of a query and I promised to phone him back after I checked it out. "How's it going? Busy?" I asked him.

"Great, just great - except I'm buried. But the economy is picking up, obviously. I was just talking to Brian Grant at Smythe Engineering. He's quitting."

"Really?"

"Yeh. That drafting department is a tough place to work. It's hard when you're the only person in the office. If you don't know what you're doing, there's no one you can go to, to ask questions... no one to check your stuff when you're finished."

"Yeh. I know what you mean." Brian Grant had phoned Hayden on several occasions to get Hayden's opinion on some code related matter. "Still, if anybody can handle a place like that, Brian's the one."

"Yeh. But he says this new low-temp code stuff is really getting him down. I've had to send a couple of his things back with low-temp problems. They were already on the shop floor, so the shop foreman was mad. I think Brian takes it pretty seriously."

"It helps a lot when you have a whole group of people to interpret the code," I agreed. "If one person can't figure out what's going on then maybe someone else can."

"You guys have done okay."

"I suppose so."

"I hear Smythe is looking for someone to replace Brian. The pay is good... thirty-five hundred a month."

"Not me. I don't handle boa constrictors."

Two days later, Hayden skulked into my office. His shoulders drooped like a deflated garbage bag.

"She's quit," he told me.

"She?"

"Renée... she's accepted a job at Smythe Engineering and you wouldn't believe what they're paying her."

"You're right. I probably wouldn't." I shook my head. "Do you think she'll last? Good lord. There's no one in that office to check her drawings."

"I agree." He shook his head. "I really hate to see her get fired."

"That's not what's bothering you though."

"What else would be bothering me?"

"You won't be able to torment her anymore. Don't worry. You still have me for a token... and lots of money now. You can give me a raise."

"I'll give you a raise alright." Like I said, he needs someone to torment.

We heard of Renée, several times after she left. A business card showed up in our office two months later. It read, "Renée, Latimer, Manager of Drafting Services, Smythe Engineering." Hayden passed it to me, and shook his head.

"Scary," he said, "Just plain scary."

The following day, I received an unexpected phone call.

"Lois?"

"Yeh."

"This is Renée,. Remember me? I used to work with you."

"Of course. How could I forget? I was really sorry when you left."

"Me too. But what the heck. A new challenge, hey? Actually, I'm phoning for a reason. I was wondering if you could give me the name of the person who sells the nozzle design program you use at Pressure-Plus."

"Sure. You used it yourself, didn't you?"

"Not very much. Hayden wanted to be sure I understood the calculations before he let me on the computer. You know... garbage in, garbage out."

I delivered the details.

"Does the program protect me against using nozzle walls that are too thin? You know - the standard wall plus corrosion allowance requirement?"

"Yeh. The program flags that."

"Good, because the guys at the Boiler's Branch keep bugging me. What a bunch of nuisances; I even have to buy one of them lunch."

"Yeh, it's too bad they don't just design the stuff for us. It would save them a lot of trouble."

Did I say that?

A few weeks later, I phoned her back to find out if she had purchased her copy of the program and if it was working well.

"Yeh. It works great. But I don't have to worry about doing nozzle calculations any more. I taught our estimator how to use the program. Now he does the calculations when he's estimating the job and I just use whatever he figures is best."

"Great idea, great." I agreed.

A couple of days later, I had a call from Garry Font at the Boiler's Branch. On this particular day, he was in a very good mood...a very good mood.

Our work related conversation finished, he informed me, "I met a friend of yours this weekend."

"Who is that?"

"Renée Latimer. I went out to lunch with her while I was down in Calgary. She mentioned your name. She's quite the gal, hey?"

"Yeh."

"She's been having a bit of trouble with the saddles on her horizontal vessels. Zick Analysis, you know? I think we got this one straightened out. My bosses don't like me helping our clients out, but I really felt she needed some advice."

I considered this for a couple of seconds then decided it was time to practice what Renée had taught me.

"I agree," I said. "Nothing is more important than safety. When will you be in Calgary next, Garry? I've been dying to meet you. Maybe we could get together to discuss a few design problems I've been having."

"Do you have an expense account?"

"You must be joking. I'm a token woman."

"Well, your sex is a good recommendation. I'll spring."

And people say this is a man's world.



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