

## Monday night

**T**en o'clock Monday night. Richard Pemberton was a worried man.

Outside his office window, the lights of a thousand tall buildings punctuated the night sky—the stone canyons of the business district never sleep. As he gazed down at a scene so

familiar he hardly noticed it any more, he wondered how many offices in those other buildings contained men and women doing exactly as he was doing now—worrying.

Looking around him, he saw the trappings of success. His office, on the top floor of one of the tallest buildings in the city, was bigger than many a small apartment. Its elegant furniture and expensive art made it clearly a fitting space for the leader of a successful corporation. The discreet matte-finished brass plate on his door read, “Richard Pemberton, President and Chief Executive Officer”.

He had done a good job since taking office two years ago. The company’s reputation in its field was well established, and under his leadership it had grown on the strength of several new and innovative product lines. The financial picture over the past two years had looked rosy, and all three groups of stakeholders—shareholders, clients and employees—had reason to be pleased.

But now that picture was a little shaky. Sudden and rapid changes in the economic climate had affected his company as they had many others. Substantial cost savings were essential, and everyone was pushing for large staff cuts. Everyone, that is, except the CEO.

Richard hated the idea that good people had to be victims of what he devoutly hoped and believed was a temporary dip in the company's fortunes. They had worked hard and contributed to its success, and he felt certain they would be needed again when business picked up. But in the meantime, they would suffer, and he didn't want to be the instrument of their misfortune. What he needed was an alternative—another way of cutting costs drastically.

With his brain churning as it had done for hours, he hardly noticed the soft knock on the door and the quiet entrance of the cleaning lady. She pushed into his consciousness, though, when she walked straight across the

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wide expanse of expensive carpet to his desk, carrying her bucket and mop carefully and clutching a feather duster under her arm. Laying down her cleaning accoutrements, she stretched out her hand and introduced herself! “Hello, I’m Annie.”

Startled by this unusual turn of events, Richard instinctively responded, “Hello Annie. I’m Richard. Aren’t you a little late this evening? I don’t usually see anyone when I stay this late.”

“Oh no,” said Annie, smiling, “this is just about the time I’m usually most needed.” Puzzled by her reply, but too polite to ask what she meant, Richard said nothing.

Hoping to discourage further conversation, he looked down at the papers in front of him and frowned as the numbers told the same old story. But Annie was not to be easily dismissed. “Yes,” she said, “it’s usually about this time that they have worried so much they don’t know where to go from

here.”

Intrigued in spite of himself, Richard asked, “Who do you mean by ‘they’?”

“Oh, Presidents and other top folks. There are only so many ways you can look at a problem after all, and if they haven’t come up with an answer by this time they are usually pretty worried. I can see you are.”

“I can’t deny that, Annie,” said Richard, wondering as he said it why he didn’t just ignore the woman and hope she would leave him alone. Annie smiled in a knowing way, and he had the uneasy feeling she knew exactly what he was thinking.

“Why don’t you tell me what’s on your mind?” she invited. While he couldn’t help thinking how ridiculous this was—sitting here discussing business with the cleaning lady—something in her expression made it feel quite natural. Before he knew it, he was telling her all about the company’s setback and the resulting financial dilemma. As he talked about his

reluctance to fire any of his employees, his sincerity was unmistakable. He talked of his strong desire to find an alternative way of substantially reducing costs so that none of his people would find themselves jobless.

“If I fire all these people it will disrupt their lives and hurt their families,” said Richard with a frown, “and it’s not even a good business decision. For one thing, we will need people again later because I know business will come back up—and the good people will already have been lost to another company—but we won’t even realize a true saving because it costs money to fire people. By the time we pay mandatory legal costs, as well as severance to those with contracts, we would still be far below what we need to save. Not only that, but it’s just a one-time saving—what happens if we take some time to recover? We can’t fire everybody!”

Annie had listened in silence as he put his troubled thoughts into words. Now she surprised him once again.

“Please listen carefully and, just for a short time, try to suspend your disbelief,” she announced. “I may look like a regular cleaning lady, but I’m really something quite different. Instead of cleaning up offices, I help clean up problems for deserving people like you. Will you trust me?”

Richard couldn’t understand why he was going along with this, but something in Annie’s eyes compelled him to take her seriously. He found himself agreeing to trust her.

“Switch on your computer,” commanded Annie. Instead of its usual start-up routine, his up-to-the-minute 23-inch flat monitor gradually came to life and a picture swam into focus. Richard recognized one of the meeting rooms just down the hall from his office. Before his bewildered eyes, the door opened and in came Dave Brighton, his Vice-President of Corporate Development, followed by Janice, his assistant. As Janice began to put coffee and donuts out on the table, Dave’s direct reports wandered in, as well as a number of more junior

members of the department. “I recognize this,” cried Richard in amazement. “These people are there for the weekly update meeting on our new Internet marketing subsidiary. But that meeting surely took place earlier today—I think they usually meet on Monday mornings.”

Instead of answering, Annie reached out and took his hand. Without understanding why—heck, without understanding any of this!—he stood up and followed as she approached the computer. She lightly touched the screen with her feather duster.

Immediately a buzzing began in his head, followed by a burst of bright light, and he felt himself drawn forward by an irresistible force—right into the computer screen! A split second later, the stunned CEO found himself standing with Annie in the meeting room, by the side of the door, watching everyone take their places.

Sensing his alarm, and recognizing it from previous

experience, Annie released his hand and said, “Don’t worry. They can’t see or hear us, but we will be able to watch and listen to the whole proceeding. I think you’ll be surprised at what you learn.”

